

THE SINGER
FROM MEMPHIS

ALSO BY GARY CORBY

The Pericles Commission

The Ionia Sanction

Sacred Games

The Marathon Conspiracy

Death Ex Machina

THE SINGER FROM MEMPHIS

Gary Corby

**SOHO
CRIME**

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First published in the United States by
Soho Press, Inc.
853 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Corby, Gary.
The singer from Memphis / Gary Corby.

ISBN 978-1-61695-668-4
eISBN 978-1-61695-669-1

1. Private investigators—Greece—Athens—Fiction. 2. Nicolaos (Fictitious character : Corby)—Fiction. 3. Diotima (Legendary character)—Fiction. 4. Herodotus—Fiction. 5. Egypt—History—To 332 B.C.—Fiction. 6. Greece—History—Athenian supremacy, 479–431 B.C.—Fiction. I. Title
- PR9619.4.C665 S56 2016 823.92—dc23 2015037548

Interior design by Janine Agro, Soho Press, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Helen

. . . because you can never dedicate too many books to your wife.

THE ACTORS

EVERY NAME IN this book is a genuine one from the classical world. Some are still in use. To this day there are people named Nicolaos. It's also the origin of our Nicholas.

Other names you might already know because they belong to famous people, such as Herodotus and Pericles.

But some names from thousands of years ago are unusual to our modern eyes. I hope you'll say each name however sounds happiest to you, and have fun reading the story.

For those who'd like a little more guidance, I've suggested a way to say each name in the character list. My suggestions do not match ancient pronunciation. They're how I think the names will sound best in an English sentence.

That's all you need to read the book!

Characters with an asterisk by their name were real historical people.

Nicolaos
NEE-CO-LAY-OS
(Nicholas)

Our protagonist

"How do you get off a rotating crocodile?"

Herodotus*
HE-ROD-O-TUS

A would-be author

"My plan is to set down in writing the history of the wars between the Hellenes and the Persians, so that the deeds of men will not be forgotten in time."

Diotima* DIO-TEEMA	Wife of Nico	“Dear Gods, what is it with you men?”
Inaros* IN-A-ROSS	Prince of Libya	“Send me an agent, a man of cunning and resource.”
Pericles* PERRY-CLEEZ	A politician	“It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”
Charitimides* CARRY-TIM-EED-EEZ	Admiral of the Fleet	“I’m aware of this scheme of Inaros’s. I think his idea is crazy. You’ll probably get yourself killed.”
Kordax CORD-AX	Captain of Dolphin	“We had a minor problem.”
Markos MARK-OS	An assassin	“Don’t go looking for any moral high ground, Nico. You won’t find it.”
Djanet JANET	A singer	“You have to hate the camel more than he hates you.”
The Tjaty JATTY	Head of the Public Service of Egypt	“This is the Public Service. We never take competence into consideration.”
The Blind General	King of the beggars	“Of course I was a General, you dolt! If I had been a Lieutenant then I would be the Blind Lieutenant.”
Maxyates MAX-E-ATE-EEZ (Max)	A Libyan with unusual fashion sense	“My tribe are the descendants of Troy. I am proud to call myself a child of Hector.”
Tutu TOO-TOO	An embalmer	“Now please relax while I demonstrate how we’ll remove your organs.”

Alekto
AL-EK-TOW

A mercenary captain

“I seen a lot of men die in a lot of ways, and you know what? Not a single one of ’em looked happy.”

The High Priest of
Amun

Chief priest of the
Oracle at Siwa

“The God says these things. We generally find that they turn out to be true.”

The Chorus

Assorted Egyptians, sailors, pirates, beggars, soldiers, crocodiles and some angry camels.

TIMELINE

THIS TIMELINE LISTS the battles and intrigue that lead up to *The Singer from Memphis*.

You don't need any of this to enjoy the book, but if you'd like to know how the Egyptians, Persians and Athenians ended up in a three-cornered war, here is sixty-nine years of treachery, invasion, rebellion and murder.

526 BC

Amasis, the second-last native Pharaoh of Egypt, dies after a long and successful reign. His son Psamtik III takes over. Unfortunately, Psamtik proves a terrible leader.

A Greek military advisor to the new Pharaoh defects to Persia. His name is Phanes. Phanes advises Cambyses, the Great King of Persia, how best to invade Egypt.

525 BC

A Persian army arrives in Egypt, with Cambyses and Phanes at its head.

The ensuing battle is very close, but eventually the Egyptians break and run. They retreat to Memphis, the capital of Egypt.

Cambyses sends an ambassador to Memphis, down the Nile by boat, to ask Psamtik to surrender on terms. Psamtik has the ambassador torn limb from limb, then orders the entire crew of the boat murdered.

Taking that response as a no, Cambyses orders the attack. The Persians thrash the Egyptians.

Psamtik's aggressive approach to diplomacy has not endeared him to his conquerors. His daughter, and the daughters of the Egyptian noblemen, are led away to spend the rest of their lives as slaves. Psamtik's son and two thousand young noblemen are led away to be executed. Psamtik himself is spared for a few months, then executed when he agitates against the new rulers.

Egypt is now a province of the Empire, with a Persian as governor.

490 BC

Persia turns its attention to Greece. The Athenians, outnumbered almost ten to one, face a Persian invasion on the plain of Marathon.

The Athenians thrash the Persians.

480 BC

The Persians try again. They invade Greece with the largest army the world has ever known.

The Greeks unite and beat the Persians. This is the war that included the last stand of the 300 at Thermopylae, and ended with the famous sea battle at Salamis.

For the next twenty years, the Athenians and Persians are locked in the ancient version of a cold war.

458 BC

The Egyptians rebel against their Persian overlords. They are led by a prince of Libya, a charismatic and highly competent man named Inaros. Inaros claims to be a descendant of the last true Pharaohs.

457 BC

The Athenians send a force of two hundred triremes to assist Inaros and the rebels. The Athenians are only too happy to help, because a Persian army pinned down in Egypt is an army that can't be invading Greece.

The Egyptian/Athenian allies win an enormous victory, during which the uncle of the Persian Great King Artaxerxes is killed.

The survivors of the Persian territorial army hole up within the White Fort in the capital, Memphis. It's the same place where Psamtik held his last stand, sixty-nine years before. The Persians send home for reinforcements.

The rebels now hold all of Lower Egypt, except for the capital.

Everyone knows that when the Persian response comes, it will be vicious. Not only do the Persians need to recover Egypt, a very rich province, but they must avenge the death of a senior member of the royal family.

Inaros must reduce the White Fort, take the capital, and consolidate his grasp on Egypt before the Persian relieving force arrives.

456 BC

A man named Herodotus chooses this moment to visit the war zone that is Egypt. He needs to do some research for a book he's writing.

Thus begin the strange events of *The Singer from Memphis*.

THE SINGER
FROM MEMPHIS

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

"MASTER, THERE'S A man at the door who wants to see you. He says his name is Herodotus."

I looked up from my cup of wine. The house slave stood over me, awaiting my instructions on what to do with the visitor.

I relaxed on a dining couch, under the stars in our courtyard, on a fine evening, in the quiet company of my family. I had no wish to be disturbed. I especially didn't want to be disturbed by a stranger.

"I've never heard of him," I said. I turned to my wife and asked, "Honey, do we know a Herodotus?"

My wife, Diotima, lay on the dining couch beside mine. She looked up from the wax tablet on which she scribbled notes, because she had taken it into her head to write a book of philosophy. Diotima chewed on the end of her stylus while she thought about it.

"Never heard of him," she said.

I turned to my younger brother. "How about you, Socrates?"

He was reading a scroll. He tore his attention away long enough to say, "No." Then he returned to his scroll.

The slave spoke up again. "Master, the man says he's from Halicarnassus."

Ah, that explained it. Halicarnassus is a city far away, on the other side of the Aegean Sea.

“He’s a tourist to Athens then,” I said. “Give him directions to the *agora* and tell him to go away.”

“But Master, he says he has work for you!” the house slave said.

That made me sit up.

“Then why in Hades couldn’t you say so at once? Show him in.”

THE VISITOR SAT opposite me, in our *andron*, the room at the front of the house reserved for male guests, which I also used for business. He had a glass of wine in his hand and a bowl of olives by his side. He sipped the wine but ignored the olives. I studied him closely, because it is always wise to know a client, or a potential client.

Herodotus was a man not much older than myself. He could not have been more than twenty-six. He wore a beard of a conservative cut, which oddly he had ringleted in the Persian manner. His clothes were of fine linen. He wore the ankle-length chiton of a gentleman who had no need of manual labor to earn his living. Yet his sandals were of the heaviest workman leather, and his feet showed the sort of calluses that you would expect to see on a veteran soldier.

The overall effect was a man who was both young and old, Greek and Persian, rich and poor. This man, I decided, cultivated contradictions.

I asked our visitor what I could do to help him.

He said, “I require an escort for my safety. You were recommended to me.”

I am the only private agent in Athens. I was used to hearing requests like this. I had once gained some notoriety when I protected a woman who sought a divorce. Her violent husband had proven a genuine threat. Yet it seemed

odd to me that a healthy man like Herodotus should admit he couldn't defend himself. Nor did he look like a coward. I asked the obvious question.

"Do you have any enemies?"

"None," Herodotus said. "But where I am going, I will require protection nonetheless."

"And where is that?" I asked.

Herodotus set down his cup. He leaned forward, and said, "I want you to be my personal escort when I travel to Egypt."

I was startled. What Herodotus proposed was a very long journey. I knew right away that I would have trouble avoiding this commission, even if I wanted to. Diotima loved to travel. Besides which, my wife was a philosopher, and Egypt was the land of ancient wisdom.

There was only one problem. I voiced it.

"But there's a war on there."

Everyone knew about the war. The people of Egypt had risen up against their Persian overlords. When the rebels had called for help, Athens had instantly dispatched a fleet of two hundred *triremes* to assist our new friends, because anyone who kills Persians can't be all bad. We'd done enough of it ourselves, when the Persians had attacked Hellas thirty-five years before. Now there were three armies roaming across the land of the Pharaohs.

"Yes, precisely. That's why I need the escort," Herodotus said.

"Sir, I'm a private agent, not a small army."

"But it's you I need," Herodotus said earnestly. "If you are with me, then I'll have a safe passage through any territory controlled by the Athenians. The Egyptians are your allies and I am a Hellene; they will not trouble us."

"What about the Persians?" I asked.

“My native city might be Hellene, but Halicarnassus is a client state of the Persian Empire,” Herodotus said. “I am technically one of their citizens. Thus with you to escort me, I will have safe passage everywhere.”

I thought about it for a moment.

“Where do you want to go in Egypt?” I asked.

“Everywhere,” he said simply.

“The place is bigger than all of Hellas!”

“Everywhere that I reasonably can,” Herodotus corrected himself. “You need to understand that I am embarking on a noble course, for I am writing a book.”

I wasn’t impressed. “Isn’t everyone?” I said, thinking of Diotima in the courtyard, scribbling away.

Herodotus looked at me strangely. “This is a book of . . . *histories*, I suppose you would say.”

“A book of inquiries?” I repeated.

“Just so.” Herodotus nodded.

“You’re a playwright then,” I said.

“No,” Herodotus said. “The stories I’ll be telling are all true.” Herodotus spoke more quickly, with excitement. “My plan is to set down in writing the history of the wars between the Hellenes and the Persians!”

He spoke as if I should instantly recognize the genius of this idea.

After a short pause I asked, “Why bother?”

“So that the deeds of men will not be forgotten in time,” he said. “This conflict between us and the Persians is the greatest war since the Trojan. It deserves to be remembered.”

I had my doubts. Why would anyone care about our war more than any other? But that wasn’t my problem. “Let me see if I understand. You want to go to a war zone, not to fight, but so you can write about it?”

“You understand,” Herodotus said, unaware that with those words he brought his sanity into question.

“How did you hear of me?” I asked. I wanted to know what person thought I was crazy enough to do this.

“You were recommended, as I said before,” Herodotus told me. “I was speaking to your head man here in Athens—”

“Pericles?” I said, surprised. Pericles had never in his life done a man a favor that didn’t have something in it for himself. The mention of Pericles made me instantly suspicious.

“Yes,” Herodotus said. “I met Pericles the other night, at a symposium. I told him of my plans and asked his advice. Pericles said you would be just the man to lead me around Egypt. He was most helpful.”

“I’m sure he was.” I rubbed my chin. “Well, Herodotus, I thank you for your proposal. To travel to Egypt is a long undertaking. I’m sure you understand that I must think on this. Does it suit if I give you my answer tomorrow?”

“That would be wise.” Herodotus nodded gravely. He indicated my cup of wine. “I recommend that you get drunk tonight.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?” I asked, for though I thought his advice sound, it did seem a little unusual.

Herodotus said, “I merely suggest to you the custom of another land. In Persia, when a weighty matter is to be decided, the men consider it first when they’re drunk, and then again when they are sober the next morning. If their plan seems good when both drunk and sober, then they proceed with it.”

I had lived among the Persians. Not once had I ever seen them do such a thing.

“Thank you for your advice, Herodotus,” I said, showing

him to the door. "I will give this assignment every consideration."

What I didn't say was that first thing in the morning I would be at Pericles's house, to find out what he was up to.

THE MISSION

I WAS AT THE door of Pericles's home before Apollo's rays had touched the city.

Pericles was already awake. The most powerful man in Athens had more work to do than any other three men combined. His first words when I walked into his office were, "*Kalimera*, Nicolaos. I've been expecting you."

"*Kalimera*, Pericles." I asked Pericles what he had intended when he sent Herodotus to see me. I finished with, "Do you want me out of Athens for some reason?"

"Not out of Athens, but in Egypt, yes," Pericles said. "I will explain. The thing is, Nicolaos, we have a situation, and this fellow Herodotus has given us the perfect opportunity to deal with it. We've received a request from our allies in Egypt." He handed me a scroll. "Here, read this. It came by boat not ten days ago."

I took the scroll and sat down on the couch opposite Pericles's desk. It was the comfortable old dining couch that had been placed to catch the sun that streamed through the window overlooking the courtyard. I sat without being invited, as I always did when I visited, and Pericles took no notice. I was struck by the easy familiarity of it all. How many years had I sat in this room, from time to time? Five now, I realized, counting back. Five years since my first commission.

The first time I sat in this room, I had been half-terrified.

Now familiarity—and Pericles’s habit of landing me in the raw end of every crisis—had reduced me to this assumption that I was free to take my comfort among the rich and powerful, though I myself was neither.

The scroll had been written in a firm hand, in good Greek. The message said:

Inaros son of Psamtik greets the Athenians and says this: the war against the Persian proceeds well. Together the Egyptians and the Athenians have won a great victory. Most of Lower Egypt lies in our hands.

The enemy has retreated to their stronghold within Memphis. It is their final chance.

There was more, but I looked up at Pericles. I said, “This is a status report. Who is Inaros?”

“The leader of the rebels,” Pericles said. “Inaros inspired the uprising. He raised the native army. If it weren’t for him, there would be no rebellion. Oh, and he’s a Prince of Libya.”

“Libya?” I said. “I thought the rebels were Egyptian.”

“They are. Inaros is a Libyan prince who claims to be a descendant of the last Pharaoh.”

“That sounds doubtful,” I said. “Is it true?”

“Does it matter?” Pericles countered pragmatically. “The man is causing trouble for the Persians, and that’s good enough for me. Read the next part. It concerns you.”

Inaros says this: the battle for Memphis will be a formidable task. In the south of the city lies the White Fort. It is almost impregnable. The Persian holds this fort with all the strength that remains to him.

The fort can be reduced by starvation. But that takes months or years, and the Great King of the Persians will certainly send another army before then. The fort can be taken by assault, in a glorious battle. Such enterprises are risky, as all men know.

There is a way to reduce the Persian's hold without a great battle. Send me an agent, a man of cunning and resource, someone I can trust, as I could trust no Egyptian in this matter. Do this, and Memphis shall fall, and the Persian shall be driven from Egypt.

Thus speaks Inaros to the Athenians.

That was the end of the message. I put it down and said, "So Inaros wants an agent. What does he want the agent to do?"

"He doesn't say," Pericles said.

"I noticed that," I said unhappily. I had little doubt who Pericles would nominate to be this agent of cunning and resource.

"Obviously the Prince of Libya wants you to represent him in some delicate matter," Pericles said.

Inaros had used the same word we would for a commercial agent, or someone delegated to act on another's behalf. It could mean anything from negotiating to buy a house, to arranging to have someone killed. There was no way to know. I also didn't like that part about Inaros not being able to trust an Egyptian. I asked Pericles what it meant.

"I don't know," he admitted. "However there's something else you need to hear. We've had word that another agent has been sent to Egypt. The word is that this man is a Hellene, but a Hellene who works for the Persians."

This job was getting worse every time Pericles opened

his mouth. I said, "So just as Inaros has asked for an agent from us, the Persians are sending their own man."

Pericles nodded. "Whatever's happening down there, it's important."

"How did you hear of this?" I asked.

"A source from within the Persian Court," Pericles said, somewhat evasively. "We have friends there—visitors to Susa and the Great Court—sometimes they hear things. One of them wrote to us with this news."

"There's a traitor among the Hellenes then," I said.

"Not necessarily." Pericles shook his head. "Many Hellenes are legitimately members of the Empire. Those who live in cities on the far coast of the Aegean, for example."

"Do we know who the agent is?" I asked. "His name? His city?"

"No."

I suddenly caught the drift of Pericles's argument.

"You think this Herodotus is the Persian agent!" I exclaimed.

"He might be," Pericles said. "Think about it, Nicolaos. Herodotus comes from Halicarnassus. It's a city on the other side of the Aegean Sea. It's under Persian sway; he could hold Persian sympathies. Consider that at the moment he arrives in Athens, on his way to Egypt, we hear of an enemy agent dispatched to that very same destination."

"It could be a coincidence," I said. "Many traders travel to Egypt."

"Yes, that's why I deliberately sought out this man Herodotus, to judge for myself, when I heard he was in Athens and enquiring about Egypt."

"Then the coincidence of you two meeting—"

"Was no coincidence," Pericles agreed. "I arranged

for a friend to invite Herodotus to a symposium that I would be attending. I made a point of speaking to him. The moment he said he needed an escort, I suggested you. Thus if Herodotus is an agent of the Persians, I've planted on him an agent of the Hellenes." Pericles smiled a sneaky smile. "As I said before, it was too good an opportunity to pass up."

This was typical Periclean convoluted thinking. Pericles thought he was smarter than everyone else. The fact that he was right did nothing to make his devious schemes any less worrying for the people who had to execute them. If Herodotus was an agent of the Persians, then Diotima and I would be in mortal danger every moment we were with him.

"This is important, Nicolaos," Pericles said. "All eyes are turning to Egypt. All armies, all strategies are concentrating there. There's certain to be a major decision in that country. I don't know what it will be—there are too many factors, too many chancy options—but whatever happens will change the future of every city and every nation of civilization."

Pericles's words strangely echoed Herodotus himself when he had said he wanted to go to Egypt to record the great deeds of men.

"Your mission, Nicolaos, is to go to Egypt, talk to this Inaros, do whatever he wants, within reason, and report back to me on what is happening down there."

"What of Herodotus?" I asked. "What if he proves to be the Persian spy?"

"Then kill him," Pericles said.