

CLIVE CUSSLER



AND DIRK CUSSLER

Arctic Drift



A Dirk Pitt® Novel

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Arctic Drift
by
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PROLOGUE

Passage to Death

APRIL 1848
VICTORIA STRAIT
THE ARCTIC OCEAN

THE CRY RATTLED THROUGH THE SHIP LIKE THE howl of a wounded jungle beast, a mournful wail that sounded like a plea for death. The moan incited a second voice, and then a third, until a ghoulish chorus echoed through the darkness. When the morbid cries ran their course, a few moments of uneasy silence prevailed until the tortured soul initiated the sequence again. A few sequestered crewmen, those with their senses still intact, listened to the sounds while praying that their own death would arrive more easily.

In his cabin, Commander James Fitzjames listened as he squeezed a clump of silver rock in his hand. Holding the cold shiny mineral to his eye, he swore at its luster. Whatever the composite was, it seemed to have cursed his ship. Even before it had been brought aboard, the mineral carried with it an essence of death. Two crewmen in a whaleboat had fallen overboard while transporting the first sample rocks, quickly freezing to death in the icy Arctic waters. Another sailor had died in a knife

fight, after trying to barter some of the rocks for tobacco with a demented carpenter's mate. Now in the last few weeks, more than half his crew had gone slowly and inexorably mad. The winter confinement was no doubt to blame, he mused, but the rocks somehow played a role as well.

His thoughts were interrupted by a harsh banging on the cabin door. Conserving the energy needed to stand and answer, he simply responded with a raspy, "Yes?"

The door swung open to reveal a short man in a soiled sweater, his ruddy face lean and dirty.

"Cap'n, one or two of 'em are trying to breach the barricade again," the ship's quartermaster stated in a thick Scottish accent.

"Call Lieutenant Fairholme," Fitzjames replied, rising slowly to his feet. "Have him assemble the men."

Fitzjames tossed the rock onto his bunk and followed the quartermaster out the door. They stepped down a dark and musty passageway, illuminated by a few small candle lanterns. Passing the main hatchway, the quartermaster disappeared as Fitzjames continued forward. He soon stopped at the base of a tall pile of debris that blocked his path. A mass of barrels, crates, and casks had been strategically wedged into the passageway, piled to the overhead deck and creating a temporary barricade to the forward compartments. Somewhere on the opposite side of the mound, the sound of shifting crates and human grunts resonated through the mass.

"They're at it again, sir," spoke a sleepy-eyed marine who stood watch over the pile with a Brown Bess musket. Barely nineteen, the guard had a dirty growth of beard that sprouted off his jaw like a patch of briar.

"We'll be leaving the ship to them soon enough," Fitzjames replied in a tired voice.

Behind them a wooden ladder creaked as three men climbed up the main hatchway from the orlop deck below. A cold blast of frigid air surged through the passageway until one of the men tugged a canvas hatch cover in place, sealing it shut. A gaunt man in a heavy wool officer's jacket emerged from the shadows and addressed Fitzjames.

"Sir, the arms locker is still secure," Lieutenant Fairholme reported, a frozen cloud of vapor rising from his mouth as he spoke. "Quartermaster McDonald is assembling the men in the officers' Great Cabin." Holding up a small percussion-cap pistol, he added, "We retrieved three weapons for ourselves."

Fitzjames nodded as he surveyed the other two men, haggard-looking Royal Marines who each clutched a musket.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. There shall be no firing except by direct order," the commander said quietly.

A shrill cry erupted from behind the barrier, followed by a loud clanging of pots and pans. The sounds were becoming more manic, Fitzjames thought. Whatever abominations were taking place on the other side of the barricade, he could only imagine.

"They're turning increasingly violent," the lieutenant said in a hushed tone.

Fitzjames nodded grimly. Subduing a crew gone mad was a prospect he could never have imagined when he first signed on for the Arctic Discovery Service. A bright and affable man, he had quickly risen through the ranks of the Royal Navy, attaining command of a sloop of war by age thirty. Now thirty-six and in a fight for survival, the officer once referred to as "the best-looking man in the Navy" faced his toughest ordeal.

Perhaps it was no surprise that part of the crew had become deranged. Surviving an Arctic winter aboard an icebound ship

was a frightful challenge. Bound for months in darkness and unrelenting cold, the men were trapped in the cramped confines of the ship's lower deck. There they battled rats, claustrophobia, and isolation, in addition to the physical ravages of scurvy and frostbite. Passing a single winter was difficult enough, but Fitzjames's crew was coming off a third consecutive Arctic winter, their ills compounded by short rations of food and fuel. The death of their expedition leader, Sir John Franklin, earlier only added to the fading sense of optimism.

Yet Fitzjames knew there was something more sinister at work. When a bosun's mate tore off his clothes, climbed topside, and ran screaming across the ice floes, it could have been marked down as a single case of dementia. But when three-fourths of the crew began yelling in their sleep, staggering around listlessly, mumbling in confused speech patterns, and hallucinating, there was clearly something else at play. When the behaviors gradually turned violent, Fitzjames had the afflicted quietly moved to the forward deck and sequestered.

"It's something on the ship driving them mad," Fairholme said quietly, as if reading Fitzjames's mind.

Fitzjames started to nod in reply when a small crate came hurtling off the upper reaches of the barrier, nearly striking him in the head. The pale face of an emaciated man burst through the opening, his eyes glowing red under the flickering candlelight. He quickly squeezed himself through the opening and then tumbled down the face of the barrier. As the man staggered to his feet, Fitzjames recognized him as one of the stokers for the ship's coal-fired steam engine. The stoker was shirtless despite the freezing temperatures inside the ship, and in his hand he wielded a heavy butcher knife taken from the ship's galley.

“Where be the lambs for slaughter?” he cried, holding up the knife.

Before he could start slashing, one of the Royal Marines countered with a musket stock, striking the stoker on the side of the face. The knife clanged against a crate as the man crumpled to the deck, a trickle of blood running down his face.

Fitzjames turned from the unconscious stoker to the crewmen around him. Tired, haggard, and gaunt from an inadequate diet, they all looked to him for direction.

“We abandon ship at once. There is still more than an hour of daylight left. We will make for the *Terror*. Lieutenant, bring the cold-weather gear up to the Great Cabin.”

“How many sledges shall I prepare?”

“None. Pack what provisions each man can carry but no extra equipment.”

“Yes, sir,” Fairholme replied, taking two men with him and disappearing down the main hatch. Buried in the ship’s hold were the parkas, boots, and gloves worn by the crew when working on deck or while exploring away from the ship on sledging parties. Fairholme and his men quickly hauled up sets of foul-weather gear and dragged them to the large officers’ lounge at the stern of the ship.

Fitzjames made his way to his stateroom, retrieving a compass, a gold watch, and some letters written to his family. He opened the ship’s log to the last entry and wrote a final notation in a shaky hand, then squeezed his eyes shut in defeat as he closed the leather-bound book. Tradition would dictate that he take the logbook with him, but instead he locked it in his desk atop a portfolio of daguerreotypes.

Eleven crewmen, the sane remnants of the ship’s original complement of sixty-eight men, were waiting for him in the Great

Cabin. The captain slipped into a parka and boots alongside his crew, then led them up the main hatchway. Shoving aside the top hatch, they climbed onto the main deck and into the elements. It was like stepping through the gates of a frozen hell.

From the dark, dank interior of the ship, they entered a blistering world of bone white. Howling winds hurled a trillion specks of crystalline ice at the men, peppering their bodies with the force of a hundred-degrees-below-zero windchill. The sky could not be distinguished from the ground, nor up from down, in the dizzying vortex of white. Fighting the gusts, Fitzjames felt his way across the snowbound deck and down a stepladder to the frozen ice pack below.

Unseen a half mile away, the expedition's sister ship, HMS *Terror*, sat locked in the same ice sheet. But the relentless winds reduced visibility to just a few yards. If they should miss locating the *Terror* in the ravaging winds, they would wander around the ice pack and die. Wooden marker posts had been planted every hundred feet between the two ships for just such a contingency, but the blinding conditions made finding the next marker post a deadly challenge.

Fitzjames pulled out his compass and took a bearing at twelve degrees, which he knew to be the direction of the *Terror*. The sister ship was actually due east of his position, but her nearness to the magnetic north pole produced a deviated compass reading. Silently praying that the ice pack had not materially moved since the last bearings were taken, he hunched over the compass and began trudging across the ice in the targeted direction. A rope line was passed back to all the crewmen, and the party proceeded across the ice field like a giant centipede.

The young commander shuffled along, head down and eyes glued to the compass, as the frigid wind and blowing snow

stung his face. Counting a hundred paces, he stopped and peered about. With an initial sense of relief, he spotted the first marker post through the cottony swirls. Moving alongside the post, he took another bearing and proceeded to the next marker. The string of men leapfrogged from marker to marker, clambering over uneven mounds of snow that often rose thirty or forty feet high. Fitzjames focused all his energy on the journey, shaking off the disappointment of abandoning his ship to a contingent of madmen. Deep down, he knew it was a matter of survival. After three years in the Arctic, nothing else now mattered.

Then a deep boom shook his hopes. The sound was deafening, even over the howling winds. It sounded like the report of a large cannon, but the captain knew better. It was the ice beneath his feet, layered in massive sheets that moved in a rhythmic cycle of contraction and expansion.

Since the two expedition ships had become trapped in the ice in September 1846, they had been propelled over twenty miles, pushed by the massive blanket of ice called the Beaufort ice stream. An unusually frigid summer kept them icebound through 1847, while the current year's spring thaw had materialized only briefly. The ravages of another cold spell again made it doubtful that the ships would break free over the coming summer. In the meantime, a shift in the ice could be fatal, crushing a stout wooden ship like it was a box of matches. In another sixty-seven years, Ernest Shackleton would watch helplessly as his ship the *Endurance* was crushed by an expanding ice pack in the Antarctic.

With his heart racing, Fitzjames increased his pace as another thunderous crack echoed in the distance. The rope in his hands grew taut as the men behind struggled to keep up, but he refused to slow. Reaching what he knew was the last marker pole,

he squinted into the tempest. Through the blasting swirls of white, he caught a brief glimpse of a dark object ahead.

“She’s just before us,” he shouted to the men behind him. “Step lively, we’re nearly there.”

Moving as one, the group surged toward the target. Climbing over a rugged mound of ice, they at last saw the *Terror* before them. At one hundred and two feet, the vessel was nearly identical in size and appearance to their own ship, down to the black-painted hull with a wide gold band. The *Terror* barely resembled a ship now, however, with its sails and yardarms stowed away, and a large canvas awning covering her stern deck. Snow had been shoveled up in mounds nearly to the rails for insulation, while the mast and rigging were coated in a thick layer of ice. The stout bomb ship, as she was originally designated, now looked more like a giant spilt carton of milk.

Fitzjames boarded the ship, where he was surprised to see several crewmen scurrying about the ice-covered deck. A midshipman approached and led Fitzjames and his men down the main hatch and into the galley. A steward passed around shots of brandy while the men shook the ice from their clothes and warmed their hands by the cookstove. Savoring the liquor as it warmed his belly, the captain noticed a beehive of activity in the dim confines, with crewmen shouting and shoving stores about the main passageway. Like his own men, the crew of the *Terror* were frightful souls to look at. Pallid and emaciated, most of the men fought the advanced ravages of scurvy. Fitzjames had already lost two of his own teeth to the disease, a vitamin C deficiency that causes spongy gums and bleeding scalp. Though casks of lemon juice had been carried aboard and rationed regularly to all the crew, the juice had lost its efficacy over time. Combined with a shortage of fresh meat, the disease had left no

man untouched. And as the sailors all knew, left unchecked, scurvy could eventually prove fatal.

The captain of the *Terror* presently appeared, a tough Irishman named Francis Crozier. An Arctic veteran, Crozier had spent the better part of his life at sea. Like many before him, he had been drawn to the search for a passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific through the unexplored regions of the Arctic. The discovery of the Northwest Passage was perhaps the last great feat of seaborne exploration left to conquer. Dozens had tried and failed, but this expedition was different. Armed with two Arctic-ready ships under the command of an enigmatic leader in Sir John Franklin, success had been all but guaranteed. But Franklin had died the year before, after attempting a dash for the North American coastline too late in the summer. Unprotected in the open sea, the ships became trapped when the ice closed in around them. The strong-willed Crozier was determined to lead his remaining men to safety and salvage glory from the failure that was lying before them.

“You’ve abandoned the *Erebus*?” he asked Fitzjames pointedly.

The younger captain nodded in reply. “The remaining crew members have gone out of their heads.”

“I received your earlier message detailing the troubles. Most peculiar. I’ve had one or two men lose their wits for a time but have not experienced such a mass breakdown.”

“It is damned perplexing,” Fitzjames replied with obvious discomfort. “I am just thankful to be off that lunatic asylum.”

“They are dead men now,” Crozier muttered. “And we might be as well, soon enough.”

“The pack ice. It’s fracturing.”

Crozier nodded. Pressure points in the ice pack ruptured frequently from the underlying movements. Though most of

the fracturing occurred in the fall and early winter as the open seas initially froze, the spring pack was also witness to dangerous thaws and convulsions.

“The hull timbers are groaning in protest,” Crozier said. “It’s right upon us, I’m afraid. I’ve ordered the bulk of our food stores moved onto the ice and the remaining boats put off. Looks like we are destined to give up both ships earlier than planned,” he added with dread. “I just pray the storm blows out before we have to vacate in earnest.”

After sharing a measured meal of tinned mutton and parsnips, Fitzjames and his men joined the *Terror*’s crew in offloading provisions onto the ice pack. The thunderous convulsions seemed to lessen in frequency, though they still bellowed over the blasting winds. Inside the *Terror*, the men listened to the unnerving creaks and groans of the ship’s wooden timbers straining against the shifting ice. When the last of the crates was placed on the ice, the men huddled in the murky interior and waited for nature to deal its hand.

For forty-eight hours, they anxiously listened to the fickle ice, praying that the ship would be spared. But it was not to be. The deathblow came quickly, striking with a sudden rupture that came without warning. The stout ship was pitched up and onto its side before a section of its hull burst like a balloon. Only two men were injured, but the destruction was beyond any hope of repair. In an instant, the *Terror* had been consigned to a watery grave, only the date of her interment left to be settled.

Crozier evacuated the crew and loaded provisions into three of the remaining lifeboats, each affixed with runners to help navigate the ice. With foresight, Crozier and Fitzjames had already hauled several boats topped with provisions to the nearest

landfall during the past nine months. The cache on King William Land would be a welcome asset to the homeless crew. But thirty miles of rugged ice separated the weary crew from land and the stockpile.

“We could retake the *Erebus*,” Fitzjames suggested, peering at the masts of his former ship rising above the jagged crests of white.

“The men are too spent to fight each other and the elements,” Crozier replied. “She’ll either find her way to the bottom like the *Terror* or spend another wretched summer icebound, I have no doubt.”

“God have mercy on their souls,” Fitzjames muttered under his breath as he took a final gaze at the distant vessel.

With teams of eight men harnessed to the heavy lifeboats like mules to a plow, they trudged over the uneven ice floe toward land. Mercifully, the winds settled, while the temperature climbed to near zero. But the exertions required of the starved and frozen crewmen began to break the body and the spirit of every man.

Tugging and shoving the burdensome loads, they reached the pebble-strewn island after five torturous days. King William Land, known today as King William Island, could hardly have been a less hospitable place. A low, windswept landmass the size of Connecticut, its ecosystem supported a bare minimum of plant and animal life. Even the indigenous Inuit avoided the island, recognizing it as a poor hunting ground for the food staples of caribou and seal.

None of this was known by Crozier and his men. Only their own exploratory sledge parties would have told them that the land was even an island, disputing the common geographic belief of 1845 that it was a finger of the North American continent.

Crozier likely knew that, and one other thing. From where he stood on the northwest tip of King William Land, he recognized that he was nearly a thousand miles from the nearest civilization. A meager Hudson's Bay Company trading settlement located far to the south on the banks of the Great Fish River offered the best hope of rescue. But open water between the southern tip of King William Land and the mouth of that river, some one hundred and fifty miles away, meant that they had to keep dragging the cursed boats with them across the ice.

Crozier rested the crew a few days at the stockpile, allowing a temporary reward of full rations to boost their strength for the arduous journey ahead. Then he could wait no longer. Every day would count in the race to the Hudson Bay settlement before the autumn snows began to fall. The seasoned captain had no illusions that the full crew could make it that far or anywhere close. But with luck, a few of the heartiest men might make it in time to send a relief party to the others. It was their only chance.

Once again hauling the boats foot by foot, they found the shoreline ice less imposing. But the bitter reality quickly set in that they were on a death march. The physical rigors of unending exertion in the biting cold were too much for the malnourished body to bear. The worst agony, perhaps more than frostbite, was the sense of unquenchable thirst. Since their portable gas stoves mostly depleted of fuel, there was no efficient way to produce fresh water from the ice. Men desperately stuffed snow in their mouths to melt a few drops, then shivered with cold. Like a caravan crossing the Sahara, they fought the vestiges of dehydration along with the other ailments. Day by day and one by one, men began to wither and die as the contingent marched south. Shallow graves were dug at first, but then the dead were left on the ice as all energy was conserved for the migration.

Cresting a small snow-covered ridge, Fitzjames held up his hand and stopped in his tracks. Two sledge crews of eight men apiece staggered to a halt behind him, letting loose the harness ropes attached to a wood-planked pinnacle. The heavy wooden boat, packed with food and gear, weighed over two thousand pounds. Transporting it was like dragging a rhinoceros across the ice. All of the men fell to their knees to rest, sucking deep breaths of icy air into their starved lungs.

The sky was clear, showering the landscape with bright sunlight that reflected off the snow in a blinding dazzle. Fitzjames slipped off a pair of wire-mesh snow goggles and walked from man to man, offering words of encouragement while checking their extremities for frostbite. He was nearly through the second crew when one of the men shouted.

“Sir, it’s the *Erebus*! She’s free of the ice pack.”

Fitzjames turned to see one of the seamen pointing toward the horizon. The man, a yeoman’s mate, slipped out of his harness and began scampering toward the shoreline and onto the ice pack.

“Strickland! Stand where you are!” Fitzjames ordered.

But the command fell on deaf ears. The seaman slowed not a step, stumbling and careening over the uneven ice floe toward a dark smudge on the horizon. Fitzjames adjusted his gaze in the same direction and felt his jaw drop. Three leagues distant, the black hull and upright masts of a large sailing ship were clearly visible. It could be no vessel but the *Erebus*.

Fitzjames stared for several seconds, barely breathing. Strickland was right. The ship was moving, appearing to drift clear of the ice pack.

The startled commander stepped to the pinnacle and rummaged under a bench seat until locating a folding telescope.

Training the glass on the vessel, he readily identified his former command. She looked like a ghost ship, though, with sails furled and her decks empty. He idly wondered if the crazed men below even knew they were adrift. His excitement at seeing the vessel was tempered when he studied the surface area around the ship. It was unbroken ice.

“She’s still locked in the pack ice,” he muttered, noting that the ship was moving stern first. The *Erebus* was in fact encased in a ten-mile-long sheet of ice that had splintered from the frozen sea and was drifting south. Her survival prospects had improved slightly, but she still faced the risk of pulverization from rupturing ice.

Fitzjames let out a sigh, then turned to two of his fittest crewmen.

“Reed, Sullivan, go retrieve Seaman Strickland at once,” he barked.

The two men rose and charged after Strickland, who had now reached the ice pack and was disappearing over a large hummock. Fitzjames peered again at the ship, searching for damage to the hull or signs of life above deck. But the distance was too great to observe any detail. His thoughts turned to the expedition’s commander, Franklin, whose body lay packed in ice in the depths of the hold. Maybe the old bird will yet get buried in England, Fitzjames mused, knowing that his own prospects of making it home, dead or alive, were looking quite thin.

A half hour passed before Reed and Sullivan returned to the boat. Fitzjames noticed that both men stared at the ground, while one of them clutched a scarf that Strickland had been wearing around his face and neck.

“Where is he?” the commander asked.

“He broke through a snow-covered lead in the pack ice,” re-

plied Sullivan, a ship's rigger with plaintive blue eyes. "We tried to pull him out, but he went under before we could get a good grip on him." He held up the frozen-stiff scarf, showing all they had been able to grasp.

It was no matter, Fitzjames thought. Had they pulled him out, he would have likely died before they could have got him into dry clothes anyway. Strickland was actually lucky. At least he got to die quickly.

Shaking the image from his mind, Fitzjames shouted harshly to the somber crew, "Back in the harnesses. Let's get the sledge moving," dismissing the loss without another word.



THE DAYS PASSED WITH growing strain as the men trudged south. Gradually, the crewmen broke into separate parties, divided by their physical stamina. Crozier and a small party from the *Terror* blazed a path down the coastline ten miles ahead of everyone else. Fitzjames followed next but was tailed several miles behind by three or four groups of stragglers, the weakest and sickest who could not keep pace and for all practical purposes were already dead. Fitzjames had lost three men of his own, forging ahead with only thirteen to haul the heavy load.

Light winds and moderate temperatures had given the men hope for escape. But a late-spring blizzard turned their fortunes. Like an approaching veil of death, a black line of clouds appeared to the west and rolled in with a fury. Blistering winds blasted across the ice pack, pounding the low island without mercy. Buffeted by the winds and unable to see, Fitzjames had no choice but to turn the boat turtle and seek refuge beneath its wood-planked hull. For four days, the winds pounded them like

a mallet. Imprisoned in their shell with scant food and no source of heat but their bodies, the emaciated men slowly began to succumb.

Like the rest of his men, Fitzjames drifted in and out of consciousness as his bodily functions slowly shut down. When the end was near, an odd burst of energy surged through him, driven perhaps by a dying curiosity. Climbing over the bodies of his comrades, he slipped under the gunwale and pulled himself upright against the exterior hull. A brief respite in the gale winds let him stand unmolested in the elements as the fading light of dusk approached. Peering over the ice, he forced himself to look one more time.

She was still there. A dark projectile scratching the horizon, the *Erebus* loomed, creeping with the ice like a black wraith.

“What mystery hath thou?” he cried, though the final words left his parched lips in barely a whisper. With its glistening eyes locked on the horizon, Fitzjames’s dead body wilted against the pinnacle.

Across the ice, the *Erebus* silently sailed on, an ice-encrusted tomb. Like her crew, she would eventually fall victim to the harsh Arctic environment, a last vestige of Franklin’s quest to navigate the Northwest Passage. With her disappearance, the saga of Fitzjames’s mad crew would be obscured from history. But unbeknownst to her commander, the ship held a greater mystery, one that over a century later would impact man’s very survival on the planet.

PART I

Devil's Breath

≡ 1 ≡

APRIL 2011
THE INSIDE PASSAGE
BRITISH COLUMBIA

THE SIXTY-FOOT STEEL-HULLED TRAWLER WAS what all commercial fishing boats ought to look like but seldom did. Her nets were stowed neatly on their rollers, the deck was free of clutter. The boat's hull and topside were absent of rust and grime, while a fresh coat of paint covered the most weathered areas. Even the boat's worn dock fenders had been regularly scrubbed of grit. While not the most profitable fishing boat plying the northern waters of British Columbia, the *Ventura* was easily the best maintained.

Her shipshape appearance reflected the character of her owner, a meticulous and hardworking man named Steve Miller. Like his boat, Miller didn't fit the bill of the average independent fisherman. A trauma doctor who'd grown tired of patching up mangled auto accident victims in Indianapolis, he'd returned to the small Pacific Northwest town of his youth to try something different. Possessing a secure bank account and a love of the water, commercial fishing had seemed the perfect fit.

Steering the boat through an early morning drizzle now, he wore his happiness in the form of a wide grin.

A young man with shaggy black hair poked his head into the wheelhouse and called to Miller.

“Where they biting today, skipper?” he asked.

Miller gazed out the forward window, then poked his nose up and sniffed the air.

“Well, Bucky, I’d say the west coast of Gil Island, without a doubt,” he grinned, taking the bait. “Better grab some shut-eye now, as we’ll be reeling them in soon enough.”

“Sure, boss. Like, a whole twenty minutes?”

“I’d say closer to eighteen.” He smiled, gazing at a nearby nautical chart. He cinched the wheel a few degrees, aiming the bow toward a narrow slot dividing two green landmasses ahead of them. They were cutting across the Inside Passage, a ribbon of protected sea that stretched from Vancouver to Juneau. Sheltered by dozens of pine-covered islands, the winding waterway inspired comparisons to the scenic fjords of Norway.

Only the occasional commercial or tourist fishing boat, casting its lines for salmon or halibut, was found dodging the Alaska-bound cruise ship traffic. Like most independent fishermen, Miller chased after the more valuable sockeye salmon, utilizing purse seine nets to capture the fish near inlets and in ocean waters. He was content to break even with his catches, knowing few got rich fishing in these parts. Yet despite his limited experience, he still managed a small profit due to his planning and enthusiasm. Sipping a mug of coffee, he glanced at a flush-mounted radar screen. Spotting two vessels several miles to the north, he let go of the wheel and walked outside the pilot-house to inspect his nets for the third time that day. Satisfied there were no holes in the mesh, he climbed back to the bridge.

Bucky was standing by the rail, forgoing his bunk for a cigarette instead. Puffing on a Marlboro, he nodded at Miller, then looked up at the sky. An ever-present blanket of gray clouds floated in an airy mass yet appeared too light to dispense more than a light drizzle. Bucky peered across Hecate Strait at the green islands that bound it to the west. Ahead off the port bow, he noticed an unusually thick cloud rolling along the water's surface. Fog was a common companion in these waters, but there was something peculiar about this formation. The color was a brighter white than that of a normal fogbank, its billows heavier. Taking a long drag on his cigarette, Bucky exhaled deeply, then walked to the wheelhouse.

Miller had already taken note of the white cloud and had a pair of binoculars trained on the mist.

"You seen it too, boss? Kind of a funky-looking cloud, ain't it?" Bucky drawled.

"It is. I don't see any other vessels around that could have discharged it," Miller replied, scanning the horizon. "Might be some sort of smoke or exhaust that drifted over from Gil."

"Yep, maybe somebody's fish smoker blew," the deckhand replied, his crooked teeth in a wide grin.

Miller set down the binoculars and grabbed the wheel. Their path around Gil Island led directly through the center of the cloud. Miller rapped his knuckles on the worn wooden wheel in uneasiness, but he made no effort to alter course.

As the boat approached the cloud's periphery, Miller stared at the water and crinkled his brow. The color of the water changed visibly, from green to brown to copper-red. A number of dead salmon appeared in the crimson broth, their silver bellies pointing skyward. Then the fishing boat chugged into the haze.

The men in the wheelhouse immediately felt a change in

temperature, as if a cold, wet blanket had been thrown over them. Miller felt a dampness in his throat while tasting a strong acidic flavor. A tingling sensation rippled through his head, and he felt a sudden tightening in his chest. When he sucked in a breath of air, his legs buckled, and stars began to appear before his eyes. His pain was diverted when the second deckhand burst into the cabin with a shriek.

“Captain . . . I’m suffocating,” gasped the man, a ruddy-faced fellow with long sideburns. The man’s eyes bulged from his head, and his face was tinted a dark shade of blue. Miller took a step toward him, but the man fell to the deck unconscious.

The cabin started to spin before Miller’s eyes as he made a desperate lunge for the boat’s radio. In a blur, he noticed Bucky sprawled flat on the deck. With his chest constricting tightly, Miller grasped at the radio, scooping up the transmitter while knocking over some charts and pencils. Pulling the transmitter to his mouth, he tried to call a Mayday, but the words refused to leave his lips. Falling to his knees, he felt like his entire body was being crushed on an anvil. The constriction tightened as blackness slowly crept over his vision. He fought to stay conscious but felt himself slipping into the void. Miller struggled desperately, then let out a final deep gasp as the icy hand of death beckoned him to let go.

≡ 2 ≡

CATCH IS ABOARD,” SUMMER PITT SHOUTED TOWARD the wheelhouse. “Take us to the next magic spot.”

The tall, lithe oceanographer stood on the open stern deck of the research boat, dressed in a turquoise rain jacket. In her hands, she reeled in a polypropylene line wrapped around the spool of a mock fishing pole. The line stretched to the end of a guided rod where her prize catch dangled in the breeze. It wasn’t a fish but a gray plastic tube called a Niskin bottle, which allowed seawater samples to be collected at depth. Summer carefully grabbed the bottle and stepped toward the pilothouse as the inboard motors suddenly revved loudly beneath the deck. The abrupt propulsion nearly threw her off her feet as the workboat leaped forward.

“Easy on the acceleration,” she yelled, finally making her way into the cabin.

Seated behind the wheel, her brother turned and chuckled.

“Just wanted to keep you on your toes,” Dirk Pitt replied. “That was a remarkable imitation of a drunken ballerina, I might add.”

The comment only infuriated Summer more. Then she saw the humor in it all and just as quickly laughed it off.

“Don’t be surprised to find a bucket of wet clams in your bunk tonight,” she said.

“As long as they’re steamed with Cajun sauce first,” he replied. Dirk eased the throttle back to a more stable speed, then eyed a digital navigation chart on a nearby monitor.

“That was sample 17-F, by the way,” he said.

Summer poured the water sample into a clear vial and wrote down the designation on a preprinted label. She then placed the vial in a foam-lined case that contained a dozen other samples of seawater. What had started as a simple study of plankton health along the south Alaska coastline had grown in scope when the Canadian Fisheries and Oceans Department had gotten wind of their project and asked if they could continue their assessment down to Vancouver. Besides cruise ships, the Inside Passage also was an important migratory route for humpbacks, grays, and other whales that attracted the attention of marine biologists. The microscopic plankton was a key to the aquatic food chain as it attracted krill, a primary food source for baleen whales. Dirk and Summer realized the importance of obtaining a complete ecological snapshot of the region and had obtained approval to expand the research project from their bosses at the National Underwater and Marine Agency.

“How far to the next collection point?” Summer asked, taking a seat on a wooden stool and watching the waves roll by.

Dirk peered at the computer monitor again, locating a small black triangle at the top of the screen. A HYPACK software program marked the previous collection sites and plotted a route to the next sample target.

“We have about eight miles to go. Plenty of time for a bite

before we get there.” He kicked open a cooler and pulled out a ham sandwich and a root beer, then tweaked the wheel to keep the boat on track.

The forty-five-foot aluminum workboat skimmed over the flat waters of the passage like a dart. Painted turquoise blue like all National Underwater and Marine Agency research vessels, it was fitted with cold-water dive gear, marine survey equipment, and even a tiny ROV for underwater videotaping. Creature comforts were minimal, but the boat was the perfect platform for performing coastal research studies.

Dirk swung the wheel to starboard, giving wide berth to a gleaming white Princess Lines cruise ship headed in the opposite direction. A handful of topside tourists waved heartily in their direction, whom Dirk obliged by wagging his arm out a side window.

“Seems like one goes by every hour,” Summer remarked.

“More than thirty vessels run the passage in the summer months, so it does seem like the Jersey Turnpike.”

“You’ve never even laid eyes on the Jersey Turnpike.”

Dirk shook his head. “Fine. Then it seems like Interstate H-1 in Honolulu at rush hour.”

The siblings had grown up in Hawaii, where they developed a passion for the sea. Their single mother fostered an early interest in marine biology and encouraged both children to learn to dive at a young age. Fraternal twins who were both athletic and adventurous, Dirk and Summer spent much of their youth on or near the water. Their interest continued into college, where both studied ocean sciences. They somehow ended on opposite coasts, Summer obtaining an advanced degree from Scripps Institute while Dirk garnered a graduate degree in marine engineering from New York Maritime College.

It was on their mother's deathbed that they first learned the identity of their father, who ran the National Underwater and Marine Agency and shared the same name as Dirk. An emotional reunion led to a close relationship with the man they had never known. They now found themselves working under his tutelage in the special projects department of NUMA. It was a dream job, enabling them to travel the world together, studying the oceans and solving some of the never-ending mysteries of the deep.

Dirk kept the throttle down as they passed a fishing boat headed north, then pulled up a quarter mile later. As the boat approached the designated target, he killed the engines and drifted over the position. Summer walked to the stern and rigged her fishing line with an empty vial as a pair of Dall's porpoises broke the surface nearby and eyed the boat with curiosity.

"Watch out for Flipper when you cast that thing," Dirk said, walking onto the deck. "Beaning a porpoise brings bad karma."

"How about beaning your brother?"

"Much, much worse." He smiled as the marine mammals ducked under the surface. He scanned the surrounding waters, waiting for them to resurface, when he noticed the fishing boat again. She had gradually changed course and was now turning south. Dirk noted that it sailed on a circular course and would soon bear down on his own craft.

"You better make it quick, Summer. I don't think this guy is watching where he's going."

Summer glanced at the approaching boat, then tossed the water vial over the side. The weighted apparatus quickly sank into the murk as a dozen feet of loose line was let out. When the line drew taut, Summer jerked it, causing the inverted vial to flip

over and fill with subsurface water. Reeling in the line, she looked toward the fishing boat. It continued to turn in a lazy arc barely a hundred feet away, its bow easing toward the NUMA vessel.

Dirk had already returned to the wheelhouse and hit a button on the cowl. A honking blast erupted from a pair of trumpeted air horns mounted on the bow. The loud bellow echoed across the water but incited no reaction from the fishing boat. It continued to turn lazily toward a rendezvous with the research boat.

Dirk quickly fired up the engine and shoved the throttle forward as Summer finished pulling in the water sample. With a quick surge, the boat knifed to port a few yards, then slowed as the fishing boat edged by just a few feet away.

“Doesn’t look like anyone is on the bridge,” Summer shouted. She saw Dirk hang up the radio transmitter.

“I get no reply on the radio,” he confirmed with a nod. “Summer, come take the wheel.”

Summer rushed into the cabin and stowed the water sample, then slid into the pilot’s seat.

“You want to get aboard?” she asked, gauging her brother’s intent.

“Yes. See if you can match speed with her, then bring us alongside.”

Summer chased after the fishing boat, following in its wake, before pulling up alongside. She could tell that the fishing boat was traveling in ever-widening circles, then looked in alarm at its projected path. A widening arc along with a peaking flood tide was driving it in a loop toward Gil Island. In just a few minutes, the boat would reach the fringe of the island and rip its hull out on the rocky shoreline.

“Better act quick,” she yelled to her brother. “She’ll be on the rocks in no time.”

Dirk nodded and motioned with his hand to bring the boat closer. He had scrambled onto the bow and hunched with his feet over the low side railing. Summer held steady for a moment, getting a feel for the other boat’s speed and turning radius, then inched closer. When she pulled within two feet of the other boat, Dirk leaped, landing on the deck beside a net roller. Summer instantly pulled away, then followed the fishing boat a few yards behind.

Scrambling past the nets, Dirk headed straight for the fishing boat’s wheelhouse, where he found a scene of horror. Three men were sprawled on the deck, a look of agony etched on their faces. One of the men stared through open, glassy eyes and oddly clutched a pencil with a frozen hand. Dirk could tell by their gray pallor that the men were dead, but he quickly checked for pulses all the same. He noted curiously that the bodies were unmarked, with no visible blood or open wounds. Finding no signs of life, he grimly took the wheel and straightened the boat’s course, calling Summer over the radio to follow him. Shaking off a chill, he anxiously piloted the vessel toward the nearest port, silently wondering what had killed the men lying dead at his feet.