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# CLIVE CUSSLER

AND CRAIG DIRGO



# GOLDEN BUDDHA

THE FIRST NOVEL FROM THE *OREGON FILES*

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Golden Buddha  
by  
Clive Cusler with Craig Dirgo

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# Cast of Characters

## THE CORPORATION TEAM

JUAN CABRILLO: Chairman of the Corporation

MAX HANLEY: President of the Corporation

RICHARD TRUITT: Vice President of Operations  
for the Corporation

## THE CREW

(in alphabetic order)

GEORGE ADAMS: Helicopter Pilot/Operative

RICK BARRETT: Assistant Chef/Operative

MONICA CRABTREE: Supply and Logistics  
Coordinator/Operative

CARL GANNON: General Operations/Operative

CHUCK 'TINY' GUNDERSON: Chief Pilot/Operative

MICHAEL HALPERT: Finance and Accounting/  
Operative

CLIFF HORNSBY: General Operations/Operative

JULIA HUXLEY: Medical Officer/Operative

PETE JONES: General Operations/Operative

HALI KASIM: Communications Expert/Operative

LARRY KING: Sniper/Operative

FRANKLIN LINCOLN: General Operations/  
Operative

BOB MEADOWS: General Operations/Operative

MARK MURPHY: Weapons Specialist/Operative

KEVIN NIXON: Magic Shop Specialist/Operative

SAM PRYOR: Propulsion Engineer/Operative

GUNTHER REINHOLT: Propulsion Engineer/  
Operative

TOM REYES: General Operations/Operative

LINDA ROSS: Security and Surveillance/Operative

EDDIE SENG: Director of Shore Operations/  
Operative

ERIC STONE: Control Room Operations/Operative

## THE OTHERS

THE DALAI LAMA: Spiritual Leader of Tibet

HU JINTAO: President of China

LANGSTON OVERHOLT IV: CIA Officer who hires  
the Corporation to free Tibet

LEGCHOG ZHUREN: Chairman of the Tibet  
Autonomous Region

SUNG RHEE: Chief Inspector of the Macau Police

LING PO: Detective with the Macau Police

STANLEY HO: Macau billionaire and buyer of the  
Golden Buddha

MARCUS FRIDAY: US software billionaire who  
agrees to buy stolen Buddha

WINSTON SPENSER: Crooked art dealer who  
attempts to steal the Golden Buddha

MICHAEL TALBOT: San Francisco art dealer who  
works for Friday

# Prelude

*March 31, 1959*

The flowers surrounding the summer palace of Norbulingka were closed but ready to bloom. The park-like setting of the complex was beautiful. High stone walls surrounded it, within the walls were trees and lush gardens, and in the center was a smaller yellow wall, through which only the Dalai Lama, his advisors and a few select monks passed. Here were tranquil pools, the home of the Dalai Lama and a temple for prayer.

It was a sea of order and substance centered in a country in chaos.

Not far away, perched on the side of a hill, was the imposing winter palace of Potala. The massive structure seemed to step down the hillside. Potala contained over one thousand rooms, was populated by hundreds of monks and dated from centuries before. There was an imposing orderliness to the building. Stone steps led from the mid levels of the seven-story palace in an orderly zigzag downward and then stopped at a gigantic block stone wall that formed the base of the behemoth. The precisely laid stones rose nearly eighty feet into the air.

At the base was a flat stretch of land where tens of thousands of Tibetans were assembled. The people, as well as another large group at Norbulingka, had come to protect their spiritual leader. Unlike the hated Chinese who occupied their country, the peasants carried not rifles but knives and bows. Instead of artillery, they had only flesh, bone and spirit. They were outgunned, but to protect their leader they would have gladly laid down their lives.

Their sacrifice would require but one word from the Dalai Lama.

Inside the yellow wall, the Dalai Lama was praying at the shrine to Mahakala, his personal protector. The Chinese had offered to take him to their headquarters for his protection, but he knew that was not their true motive. It was the Chinese from whom he needed protection, and the letter the Dalai Lama had just received from Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, the governor of Chamdo, held a truer picture. After a discussion with General Tan, the Chinese military officer in command of the region, Jigme was certain the Chinese were planning to begin shelling the crowds to disperse them.

Once that happened, the loss of life would be horrific.

Raising from his knees, the Dalai Lama walked over to a table and rang a bell. Almost instantly the door opened and the head of the Kusun Depon, the Dalai Lama's personal bodyguards, appeared.

Through the open door he could see several Sing Gha warriors. The monastic policemen lent a terrifying presence. Each was over six feet tall, wore a fearsome mustache, and was dressed in a black padded suit that made them appear even larger and more invincible.

Several Dogkhyi, the fierce Tibetan mastiff guard dogs, stood on their haunches at attention.

‘Please summon the oracle,’ the Dalai Lama said quietly.

From his house in Lhasa, Langston Overholt III was monitoring the deteriorating conditions. He stood alongside the radio operator as the man adjusted the dial.

‘Situation critical, over.’

The radio operator turned the dial to reduce the static.

‘Believe red rooster will enter the henhouse, over.’

The operator watched the gauges carefully.

‘Need immediate positive support, over.’

Again a lag as the operator adjusted the dial.

‘I recommend eagles and camels, over.’

The man stood mute as the radio warbled and the green gauges returned to a series of wavelike motions. The words were out in the ether now; the rest was out of their control. Overholt wanted airplanes – and he wanted them now.

The oracle, Dorje Drakden, was deep in a trance. The setting sun came through the small window high

on the wall of the temple and cast a path of light that ended at an incense holder. The wisps of smoke danced on the beam of light and a strange, almost cinnamon smell filled the air. The Dalai Lama sat cross-legged on a pillow against a wall a few feet from Drakden, who was hunched over, knees down, with his forehead on the wood floor. Suddenly, in a deep voice, the oracle spoke.

‘Leave tonight! Go.’

Then, still with his eyes closed, still in a trance, he rose, walked over to a table and stopped exactly one foot away. Then he reached down, picked up a quill pen, dipped it in ink and drew a detailed map on a sheet of paper before collapsing to the ground.

The Dalai Lama rushed to the oracle’s side, lifted his head and patted his cheek. Slowly, the man began to awaken. After sliding a pillow under his head, the Dalai Lama rose and poured a cup of water from an earthenware pitcher. Carrying the cup back to the oracle, he placed it under his lips.

‘Sip, Dorje,’ he said quietly.

Slowly, the older man recovered and pulled himself to a seated position. As soon as the Dalai Lama was sure the oracle was on the mend, he walked over to the table and stared at the ink drawing.

It was a detailed map showing his escape route from Lhasa to the Indian border.

Overholt had been born into his career. At least one Overholt had served in every war the United

States had fought since the Revolutionary War. His grandfather had been a spy in the Civil War, his father during World War I and Langston the third had served in the OSS in World War II before switching to the CIA when it'd been formed in 1947. Overholt was now thirty-three, with a fifteen-year history of espionage.

In all that time, Overholt had never seen a situation quite this ominous. This was not a king or a queen in peril, not a pontiff or dictator. This was the head of a religion. A man who was a god-king, a deity, a leader who traced his lineage back to AD 1351. If something did not happen quickly, the communist scourge would soon be taking him prisoner. Then the human chess match would be over.

In Mandalay, Burma, Overholt's message was received and forwarded to Saigon where it was transferred to Manila, then over a secure underwater cable to Long Beach, California, then on to Washington, DC.

As the situation in Tibet continued to deteriorate, the CIA started to assemble a force in Burma. The group was not large enough to defeat the Chinese, just large enough to slow them down until more heavily armed ground troops could be brought to bear.

Disguised as a front company named Himalayan Air Services, the armada consisted of fourteen C-47s: ten that could drop supplies and four that had just

been converted to first-generation gunships. This force was augmented with six F-86 fighters and a lone, fresh-off-the-assembly-line Boeing B-52 heavy bomber.

Alan Dulles sat in the Oval Office, puffing on his pipe and pointing out the situation to President Eisenhower. Then the CIA director sat back and let the president think for a moment. Several minutes passed in silence.

‘Mr. President,’ he said at last, ‘the CIA took the liberty of arranging a first-strike force in Burma. If you say the word, they’ll be airborne in an hour.’

Since his election in 1952, Eisenhower had faced the McCarthy hearings, the first advisors into Vietnam and a heart attack. He’d had to order ten thousand troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce integration; witness the Soviets take the lead in space; and have his vice president stoned by hostile crowds in Latin America. Now Cuba had a communist leader only ninety miles from US soil. He was weary.

‘No, Alan,’ he said quietly, after a pause. ‘I learned as a general that you have to know how to pick your fights. We need to stay clear of this Tibet situation right now.’

Dulles rose and shook Eisenhower’s hand. ‘I’ll notify my men,’ he said.

In Overholt’s command post in Lhasa, the ashtray on the table near the radio was filled with the stubs of unfiltered cigarettes. Hours passed, with only the

confirmation that the radio transmission had been received. Every half hour, Tibetan messengers delivered intelligence. Visual reconnaissance reported that the crowds outside the palaces near Lhasa were growing minute by minute, but the messengers were unable to take an accurate count. Tibetans continued to stream down from the mountains, armed with sticks, rocks and knives. The milling mass would be cannon fodder for the well-armed Chinese.

So far the Chinese had taken no action, but the reports mentioned troop buildups on the roads leading into the fabled city. Overholt had seen this same scenario unfold five years ago in Guatemala, when a crowd supporting the anticommunist rebels under Carlos Armas had suddenly sparked. Chaos had ensued. Forces under President Jacobo Arbenz had begun to fire into the crowd to restore order and, before dawn broke, the hospitals and morgues had been filled to capacity. Overholt had organized the demonstration and the knowledge clouded his mind like a shroud.

Just then the radio crackled.

‘Top Hat negative, over.’

Overholt’s heart skipped a beat. The planes he sought were not coming.

‘Papa Bear will okay sweeping the path if critically necessary during extraction. Advise on departure and subsequent travel, over.’

Eisenhower said not to attack Lhasa, Overholt thought, but Dulles has agreed to cover the escape

out of Tibet on his own, if it came to that. If he worked things right, Overholt thought, he wouldn't need to put his boss's ass on the line.

'Sir?' the radio operator asked.

Overholt was jarred from his thoughts.

'They're expecting a reply,' the operator said quietly.

Overholt reached for the microphone. 'Acknowledged and agreed,' Overholt said, 'and thank Papa Bear for the gesture. We'll call from the road. Closing office, over.'

The radio operator stared up at Overholt. 'Guess that's that.'

'Break it all down,' Overholt said quietly, 'we'll be leaving soon.'

Inside the yellow wall, preparations for the Dalai Lama's escape into exile were moving at a blistering pace. Overholt was cleared past the guards and waited to be seen. Five minutes later, the Dalai Lama, wearing his black-framed prescription glasses and yellow robes, entered the office in the administration room. The spiritual leader of Tibet looked weary but resigned.

'I can tell by your face,' he said quietly, 'no help is coming.'

'I'm sorry, Your Holiness,' Overholt replied. 'I did all that I could.'

'Yes, Langston, I am certain you did. However, the situation is as it is,' the Dalai Lama noted, 'so I have

decided to go into exile. I cannot risk the chance of my people being slaughtered.'

Overholt had arrived expecting to use all his powers of persuasion to convince the Dalai Lama to flee – instead he found the decision had already been made. He should have expected as much – over the years he had grown to know the Dalai Lama, and he had never seen anything that made him doubt the leader's commitment to his people.

'My men and I would like to accompany you,' Overholt offered. 'We have detailed maps, radios and some supplies.'

'We'd be glad to have you come along,' the Dalai Lama said. 'We leave shortly.'

The Dalai Lama turned to leave.

'I wish I could have done more,' Overholt said.

'Things are as they are,' the Dalai Lama said at the door. 'For now, however, you should assemble your men and meet us at the river.'

High above Norbulingka, the sky was dotted with a trillion stars. The moon, only days away from being full, lit the ground with a yellow diffused glow. A stillness, a quiet. The night birds that normally warbled their haunting songs were silent. The domesticated animals inside the compound – musk deer, mountain goats, camels, a single aged tiger and the peacocks that ran loose – barely stirred. A light wind from high in the Himalayas brought the scent of pine forests and change.

From high on a hillside outside Lhasa came the chilling scream of a snow leopard.

The Dalai Lama scanned the grounds, then closed his eyes and visualized returning. He was dressed in trousers instead of robes, a black wool coat instead of a cloak. A rifle on a sling rode on his left shoulder, and an ancient ceremonial thangka, an embroidered silk tapestry, was rolled up and hung over his right.

‘I am ready,’ he said to his Chikyah Kenpo, or chief of staff. ‘Have you packed the icon?’

‘It is safely crated and guarded. Like you, the men will protect it at all costs.’

‘As they should,’ the Dalai Lama said softly.

The two men walked toward and through the gate on the yellow wall.

The Chikyah Kenpo was holding a large, jeweled, curved sword. Sliding it into a leather scabbard on his belt, he turned to his master. ‘Stay close.’

Then, followed by a cadre of Kusun Depon, they passed through the outer gate and slipped into the crowd. The procession quickly made its way along a worn dirt path. Pairs of Kusun Depon stepped to the rear and waited to see if anyone followed. After seeing no one, they moved forward to the next pair of guards, who remained until the coast was clear. Hopscotching their way along the path, the guards made sure the rear was covered. To the front, pairs of warriors assessed any danger ahead. Finding it clear, they continued their progression. A handcart containing the icon followed the procession, pulled by a large

monk. Hands firmly on the poles, the monk raced along like a rickshaw driver late for an appointment.

Everyone was trotting and the sound made by their feet was like muffled clapping.

The sound of water came with the smell of wet moss. It was a tributary of the Kyichu River. After the party made their way across a series of stepping-stones, they continued quickly ahead.

Along the far bank of the Kyichu River, Overholt stared at the radium dial on his watch, then shuffled his feet. Several dozen Kusun Depon who had been dispatched hours earlier were tending to the horses and mules that would speed the escape. They stared at the blond-haired American with neither malice nor fear, only resignation.

Several large ferryboats had brought them all across the water, and now the boats were tied up again on the far shore, awaiting the arrival of the Dalai Lama. Overholt caught a quick flash of light from the far bank, signaling it was safe to cross. In the moonlight, he could see the boats quickly being loaded, then minutes later heard the sound of the oars slapping the water.

The lead boat slid on to the pebbled beach and the Dalai Lama climbed over the side.

‘Langston,’ he said, ‘did you leave the capital undetected?’

‘Yes, Your Holiness.’

‘All your men with you?’

Overholt pointed to the seven men that made up his command. They stood off to the side with several footlockers of equipment. Reaching the opposite shore, the Chikyah Kenpo climbed from the boat and assembled the lead troops on to horses. Long spears draped with silk banners were placed in the troops' hands. Earlier, their steeds had been covered with ceremonial blankets and adornments. Then, like the honk of a goose on his way south, a sound of a muted trumpet filled the air. It was time to leave.

Overholt and his men were helped on to horses and lined up following the Dalai Lama. By the time the sun rose the next morning, they were miles from Lhasa.

Two days into the journey, across the sixteen-thousand-foot Che-La Pass and over the Tsangpo River, the group stopped for the night at the monastery at Ra-Me. Messengers racing on horseback caught up with the party and brought news that the Chinese had shelled Norbulingka and machine-gunned the helpless crowd. Thousands had been killed. The news cast a pall over the Dalai Lama.

Overholt had reported their progress by radio and felt relieved there had been no need to call for help. The route had been expertly chosen to avoid any conflict with the Chinese. He and his men were exhausted, but the hardy Tibetans pushed on without pause. The town of Lhuntse Dzong was behind them, as was the village of Jhora.

Karpo Pass, the border with India, was less than a day's ride.

And then it began to snow. A blizzard with howling winds and low clouds hunkered down over Mangmang, the last Tibetan town before the Indian border. The Dalai Lama, already exhausted by the journey and stressed by the knowledge that many of his countrymen lay dead and dying, took ill. His last night in his country was torment.

To ease his journey, he was placed on the back of an animal called a dzomo, which is a cross between a yak and a cow. As the dzomo climbed the side of Karpo Pass, the Dalai Lama paused to glance at his beloved Tibetan soil one last time.

Overholt pulled closer on his horse. He waited until the Dalai Lama glanced his way. 'My country never forgets,' he said, 'and someday we will bring you back home.'

The Dalai Lama nodded, then patted the dzomo's neck and steered it into exile. To the rear of the column, the monk pulling the cart containing the priceless artifact braced his legs as he crested the pass and started down the grade. The six-hundred-pound weight, so heavy on the climb up the pass, now wanted to run free. He dug in his heels.

# I

## *The present day*

Eight in the evening. From out of the south, like a dark insect crawling over a wrinkled blue tablecloth, a tired old cargo ship pushed her way through the Caribbean swells toward the entrance of Santiago Harbor on the isle of Cuba. The exhaust from her single funnel drifted in a blue haze under an easterly breeze as the sun settled below the western horizon and became a ponderous orange ball magnified by the earth's atmosphere.

She was one of the last tramp steamers, a cargo ship that traveled the sea anonymously to the exotic and far-flung ports of the world. There were few left in operation. They did not follow a regular shipping route. Their schedules depended on the demands of their cargo and its owners, so their destinations changed from port to port. They coasted in, unloaded their freight and sailed away like wraiths in the night.

Two miles from shore, a small boat slapped over the rolling sea, approached the ship and swung around on a parallel course. The pilot closed on the rust-streaked hull as a boarding ladder was thrown down from an open hatch.

The pilot, a man in his fifties with brown skin and thick gray hair, stared up at the ancient ship. Her black paint was faded and badly needed to be chipped away and repainted. Streams of rust flowed from every opening in the hull. The huge anchor, pulled tightly in its hawsehole, was completely covered by corrosion. The pilot read the letters, barely discernible on the upper bow. The weary old freighter was named *Oregon*.

Jesus Morales shook his head in amazement. It was a miracle the ship hadn't been scrapped twenty years ago, he mused. She looked more like a derelict than a cargo carrier still in service. He wondered if the party bureaucrats in the Ministry of Transportation had any idea of the condition of the ship they had contracted to bring in a cargo of chemical fertilizer for the sugar and tobacco fields. He could not believe the ship had passed maritime insurance inspection.

As the ship slowed almost to a dead stop, Morales stood at the railing and the pilot boat's bumpers squeezed against the freighter's hull. Timing the crest of a wave as it lifted the boat, Morales leaped agilely from the wet deck on to the boarding ladder and climbed to the hatch. It was a function he performed as often as ten times a day. A pair of crewmen were waiting beside the hatch and helped him up on the deck. The two were both burly-looking individuals, and they did not bother to smile in greeting. One simply pointed toward the ladder leading to the bridge. Then they turned and left Morales standing

alone on the deck. Watching them walk away, Morales hoped that he'd never have to meet them in a dark alley.

He paused before climbing the ladder and took a few moments to study the upper works of the ship.

From his long experience and knowledge of ships, he judged her length at 560 feet, with a 75-foot beam. Probably a gross tonnage around 11,000. Five derricks, two behind the funnel and superstructure and three on the forward deck, stood waiting to unload her cargo. He counted six holds with twelve hatches. In her prime, she would have been classed as an express cargo liner. He guessed that she had been built and launched in the early 1960s. The flag on her stern was Iranian. Not a registry Morales had seen very often.

If the *Oregon* looked shabby from the waterline, she looked downright squalid from her main deck. Rust covered every piece of deck machinery from winches to chains, but the hardware at least appeared to be in usable condition. By comparison, the derricks looked as if they hadn't been operated in years.

To add further insult, battered drums, tools and what could only be described as junked equipment were scattered around the decks. In all his years as a harbor pilot, Morales had never seen a ship in such filthy condition.

He climbed the ladder steps leading to the bridge, past bulkheads with flaking paint and portholes whose lenses were cracked and yellowed. Then he

paused before finally swinging the door open. The interior of the vessel was as bad, if not worse. The wheelhouse was dirty, with the scars of cigarette burns on the counters and on what had once been a polished teak deck. Dead flies littered the window sills, the smell assaulted his nose. And then there was the captain.

Morales was greeted by a great slob of a man with an immense stomach that sagged over his belt line. The face was scarred, and the nose so badly broken it slanted toward the left cheek. The thick black hair was plastered back with some kind of greasy cream and his beard was scruffy and stringy. The captain was a cacophony of colors. His eyes were red and his teeth yellow-brown, while his arms were covered with blue tattoos. A grimy yachtsman's cap sat perched on the back of his head and he wore dingy coveralls. The tropical heat and the humidity on the non-air-conditioned bridge made it obvious to Morales that the man had not bathed for at least a month. Any dog worth his salt would have tried to bury the man.

He extended a sweaty hand to Morales and spoke in English. 'Glad to see you. I'm Captain Jed Smith.'

'Jesus Morales. Pilot for the Harbor Office of Santiago.' Morales felt uncomfortable. Smith spoke English with an American accent – not what he'd expected on a ship of Iranian registry.

Smith handed him a packet of papers. 'Here's our registration and cargo manifest.'

Morales merely cast a brief glance at the docu-

ments. Officials on the docks would study them more closely. His only concern was that the ship had permission to enter the port. He handed back the packet and said, 'Shall we proceed?'

Smith waved a hand toward a wooden helm that somehow seemed terribly old-fashioned for a ship built in the sixties. 'She's all yours, Señor Morales. What dock do you want us to moor at?'

'There are no docks available until Thursday. You will have to anchor in the middle of the harbor until then.'

'That's four days from now. We have a schedule to meet. We can't sit around for four days waiting to unload our cargo.'

Morales shrugged. 'I have no control over the harbormaster. Besides, the docks are full with ships unloading new farm machinery and automobiles, now that the embargo has been lifted. These have priority over your cargo.'

Smith threw up his hands. 'All right. I guess it's not the first time we had to twiddle our thumbs waiting to unload.' He gave a broad, rotten-toothed grin. 'I guess me and my crew will just have to come ashore and make friends with your Cuban women.'

The thought made Morales's skin crawl. Without further conversation, he stepped over to the helm as Smith called the engine room and ordered half speed. The pilot felt the engine's vibrations through the deck as the tired old ship began to make way again, and he aimed her bow toward the narrow entrance of

Santiago Harbor, which was bordered by high bluffs that rose from the sea.

From offshore, the channel that led inside to the bellows-shaped harbor was invisible until a ship was nearly on top of it. Rising two hundred feet atop the cliffs on the right stood the old colonial fortress known as Morro Castle.

Morales noticed that Smith and the members of his mangy crew standing on the bridge seemed interested in the defenses that had been dug into the hillside when Fidel Castro had thought the United States was going to attack Cuba. They studied the gun and missile emplacements through expensive binoculars.

Morales smiled to himself. Let them look all they wanted – most of the defenses were deserted. Only two small fortresses maintained a small company of soldiers to man the missile emplacements in the unlikely event an unwelcome vessel tried to enter the harbor.

Morales threaded his way through the buoys and steered the *Oregon* deftly around the twists and turns of the channel, which soon opened into the broad, ball-shaped harbor surrounded by the city of Santiago. The wheel felt strange to him, though. The odd feeling was barely perceptible, but there nonetheless. Whenever he turned the wheel, there seemed to be a short lag before the rudder responded. He made a quick but very slight turn to starboard before bringing the wheel back to port. It was definitely there, almost

like an echo, a two-second delay. He did not sense sluggishness from the steering machinery, but rather a pause. It had to come from another origin. Yet when the response came, it was quick and firm. But why the hesitation?

‘Your helm has an off feel to it.’

‘Yeah,’ Smith grunted. ‘It’s been that way for a few days. Next port we enter with a shipyard, I’ll have the spindles on the rudder looked at.’

It still made no sense to Morales, but the ship was entering the open part of the bay off the city now, and he pushed the mystery from his mind. He called the harbor officials over the ship’s radio and kept them informed of his progress, and was given orders for the anchorage.

Morales pointed out the buoys to Smith that marked the mooring area and ordered the ship brought to slow speed. He then swung the stern around until the bow was facing the incoming tide before ordering all stop. The *Oregon* slowed to a halt in an open area between a Canadian container ship and a Libyan oil tanker.

‘You may drop your anchor,’ he said to Smith, who acknowledged with a nod as he held a loudspeaker in front of his face.

‘Let go anchor!’ he shouted at his crew. The command was answered a few seconds later by the rattling clatter of the chain links against the hawsehole, followed by a great splash as the anchor plunged into the water. The bow of the ship became hazy from

the cloud of dust and rust that burst from the chain locker.

Morales released his grip on the worn spokes of the wheel and turned to Smith. 'You will, of course, pay the pilot's fee when you turn over your documents to the harbor officials.'

'Why wait?' snorted Smith. He reached into a pocket of his coveralls and produced a wad of crinkled American hundred-dollar bills. He counted out fifteen bills, then hesitated, looked into Morales's shocked expression, and said, 'Oh, what the heck, suppose we make it an even two thousand dollars.'

Without the least indecision, Morales took the bills and slipped them into his wallet.

'You are most generous, Captain Smith. I will notify the officials that the pilot's fee was paid in full.'

Smith signed the required affidavits and logged the mooring. He put a massive arm around the Cuban's shoulder. 'Now about them girls. Where's a good place in Santiago to meet them?'

'The cabarets on the waterfront are where you'll find both cheap entertainment and drinks.'

'I'll tell my crew.'

'Good-bye, Captain.' Morales did not extend his hand. He already felt unclean just by being on board the ship; he could not bring himself to grip the greasy hand of the obnoxious captain. Morales's easygoing Cuban warmth had been cooled by the surroundings and he didn't want to waste another second on board the *Oregon*. Leaving the wheelhouse, he dropped

down the ladder to the deck and descended to the waiting pilot boat, still stunned at experiencing the filthiest ship he had ever piloted into the harbor. Which is just what the owners of the *Oregon* wanted him to think.

If Morales had examined the ship more closely, he might have realized it was all a façade. The *Oregon* rode low in the water because of specially fitted ballast tanks, which when filled with water lowered the hull to make it look as though it were loaded with cargo. Even the engine tremors were mechanically staged. The ship's engines were whisper-silent and vibrationless.

And the coating of rust throughout the ship? It was artistically applied paint.

Satisfied that the pilot and his boat had pulled away from the *Oregon*, Captain Smith stepped over to a handrail mounted on the deck that did not seem to serve any particular purpose. He gripped it and pressed a button on the underside. The square section of the deck on which Smith was standing suddenly began descending until it stopped in a vast, brightly lit room filled with computers, automated controls and several large consoles containing communications and weapons-firing systems. The deck in the command center was richly carpeted, the walls were paneled in exotic woods and the furniture looked as if it had come straight from a designer's showroom. This room was the real heart of the *Oregon*.

The six people – four men and two women –

neatly dressed in shorts, flowered shirts and white blouses were busy manning the various systems. One woman was scanning an array of TV monitors that covered every section of Santiago Bay, while a man zoomed a camera on the pilot boat as it turned and headed into the main channel. No one bothered to give the fat captain half a glance. Only a man dressed in khaki shorts and a green golf shirt approached him.

‘All go well with the pilot?’ asked Max Hanley, the ship’s corporate president, who directed all operational systems, including the ship’s engines.

‘The pilot noticed the delay in the helm.’

Hanley grinned. ‘If only he’d known he was steering a dead wheel. We’ll have to make some adjustments, though. You speak to him in Spanish?’

Smith smiled. ‘My best Yankee English. Why let him know I speak his language? That way, I could tell if he played any tricks over the radio with the harbor officials as we anchored.’ Smith pulled back a sleeve of his grimy coveralls and checked a Timex watch with a badly scratched lens. ‘Thirty minutes until dark.’

‘The equipment in the moon pool is all ready.’

‘And the landing crew?’

‘Standing by.’

‘I just have time to get rid of these smelly clothes and get decent,’ said Cabrillo, heading toward his cabin down a hallway hung with paintings by modern artists.

The crew cabins were concealed inside two of the cargo holds and were as plush as rooms in a five-star hotel. There was no separation between officers and crew on the *Oregon*. All were educated people, highly trained in their respective fields – elite men and women who had served in the armed forces. The ship was owned by its staff, who were stockholders. There were no ranks. Cabrillo was chairman; Hanley, president; the others held various other titles. They were all mercenaries, here to make a profit – though that did not necessarily rule out good works at the same time – hired by countries or large companies to perform clandestine services around the world, very often at great risk.

The man who left the cabin twenty minutes later did not look like the man who'd entered. The greasy hairpiece, scruffy beard and grimy coveralls were gone, as was the foul smell. So was the Timex, now replaced with a stainless-steel Concord chronograph. In addition, the man had dropped at least a hundred pounds.

Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo had transformed himself from the grimy sea dog Smith to his true self again. A tall man in his forties, ruggedly handsome, he stared through pixie-blue eyes. His blond hair was trimmed in a crew cut and a western cowboy-style mustache sprouted from his upper lip.

He hurried down the corridor to a far door and entered a control room perched high inside a vast

cavern in the hull amidships. The three-deck-high moon pool, as it was called, was where all the *Oregon's* underwater equipment was stored – diving gear; submersibles, manned and unmanned; and an array of underwater electronic sensors. A pair of state-of-the-art contemporary underwater craft by US Submarines – a sixty-five-foot Nomad 1000 and a thirty-two-foot Discovery 1000 – hung in cradles. The doors on the bottom of the hull slid open and water flooded in until it was level with the outer waterline.

The remarkable ship was not what she appeared from her exterior. The outer decks and hull were disguised to make her look like a rust bucket. The wheelhouse and the unused officers' and crew's quarters below were also kept in a slovenly condition to avoid suspicion from visiting port officials or harbor pilots.

Cabrillo entered the underwater operations room and stood before a large table showing three-dimensional holographic images of every street in the city of Santiago. Linda Ross, the *Oregon's* security and surveillance analyst, was standing at the table lecturing a group of people dressed in Cuban military fatigue uniforms. Linda had been a lieutenant commander in the navy when Cabrillo had sweet-talked her into resigning and joining the *Oregon*. In the navy she had been an intelligence officer on board an Aegis guided-missile cruiser before spending four years in Washington in the navy's intelligence department.

Linda glanced sideways at Cabrillo as he stood

quietly without interrupting. She was an attractive woman, not a head turner, but most men still considered her pretty. She kept her five-foot-eight-inch, 130-pound body in firm shape with exercise, but rarely spent extra time on makeup or hairstyle. She was one smart lady, soft-spoken and greatly admired by the entire *Oregon* crew.

The five men and one woman standing around the detailed 3-D image of the city listened intently as Linda ran through the last-minute instructions, using a small metal rod with a light on the end to point out their objective. ‘The fortress of Santa Ursula. It was built during the Spanish–American War, and after the turn of the twentieth century it was used as a warehouse until Castro and his revolutionaries took over the country. Then it was turned into a prison.’

‘What is the exact distance from our landing to the prison?’ asked Eddie Seng, the *Oregon’s* master of subterfuge and director of shore operations.

‘Two hundred yards less than a mile,’ answered Linda.

Seng folded his arms and looked thoughtful. ‘We’ll be able to fool the locals with our uniforms going in, but if we have to fight our way back a mile to the docks while herding eighteen prisoners, I can’t guarantee we’ll make it.’

‘Certainly not in the condition those poor people are going to be in,’ said Julia Huxley, the *Oregon’s* medical officer. She was going along on the raid to care for the prisoners. A short woman, large bosomed

with a body suited for wrestling, Julia was the congeniality lady of the ship. She'd served as a chief medical officer for four years at the San Diego Naval Base and was well respected by them all.

'Our agents in the city have arranged for a truck to be stolen twenty minutes before you leave the prison. It's used for hauling food supplies to the hotels. The truck and a driver will be parked one block from the workers' maintenance shack situated on the wharf above your landing dock. He'll drive you to the prison, wait, and return you to the dock. From there he'll ditch the truck and ride home on his bicycle.'

'Does he have a name? Is there a password?'

Linda smiled slightly. 'The password is *dos*.'

Seng looked skeptical. 'Two? That's it?'

'Yes, he'll reply with *uno*, one. It's that simple.'

'Well, at least it's concise.'

Linda paused to flick a series of switches on a small remote control. The images of the city dissolved into a 3-D interior diorama of Santa Ursula Prison without its roof, revealing the inner rooms and cells and their connecting passageways. 'Our sources tell us there are only ten guards in the whole prison. Six on the day shift, two in the evening and two from midnight until six in the morning. You should have no problem overpowering the two on the station. They'll think you're a military unit come to transport the prisoners to another secure facility. You're scheduled to gain entry at ten o'clock. Subdue the two

on-duty guards and release the prisoners, then return to the submarine and make the ship by eleven o'clock. Any later and you jeopardize our escape out of the harbor.'

'How so?' asked one of Seng's team members.

'We're told the harbor defense systems are run through an operational test every night at twelve. We've got to be well on our way to sea before then.'

'Why not wait and go in after midnight, when most of the town is asleep?' asked a member of the landing force. 'At ten o'clock, the local citizens will still be stirring around.'

'You'll cause less suspicion if you don't sneak around the streets before dawn,' she replied. 'Also, the other eight guards are usually out on the town in the local bars until early morning.'

'You're sure about that?' asked Seng.

Linda nodded. 'Their movements have been watched and clocked for two weeks by our agents in the city.'

'Unless Murphy's Law rears its ugly head,' said Cabrillo, 'the release of the prisoners and the escape should go smoothly. The tough part comes when you're all on board and we have to sail out of the harbor. The minute Castro's harbor security forces see us pull up anchor and turn down the channel for the open sea, they'll know something is wrong and all hell will break loose.'

Linda looked at Cabrillo. 'We have the weaponry to knock them out.'

‘True,’ Cabrillo acknowledged. ‘But we cannot fire the first shot. If they strike the *Oregon* first, however, we’ll have no choice but to protect ourselves.’

‘None of us has been told,’ said Seng, ‘who exactly we are breaking out of jail. They must be important or we wouldn’t have contracted for the job.’

Cabrillo looked at him. ‘We wanted to keep it under wraps until we got here. They’re Cuban doctors, journalists and businessmen who opposed Castro’s government, all highly respected men and women. Castro knows they are dangerous if they are free. If they reach the Cuban community in Miami, they can use it as a base to instigate a revolutionary movement.’

‘Is it a good contract?’

‘Ten million dollars if we deliver them to US soil.’

Seng and the others around the holographic display smiled. ‘That should add a tidy little amount to everyone’s nest egg,’ he said.

‘Doing good for profit,’ Cabrillo said with a wide grin. ‘That’s our motto.’

At precisely 8:30 P.M., Seng and his small force boarded the *Nomad 1000* along with the two crewmen who would pilot the sub and guard it during the operation. The sub looked more like a luxury surface yacht than a submersible. Capable of running at high speeds on the surface with its diesel engines, it was battery powered beneath the waves. With a speed of twelve knots underwater, the *Nomad* could dive to a

thousand feet. The interior was designed to hold twelve people comfortably, but Cabrillo had had her configured to carry three times that number tightly packed together, for missions such as this one.

The entry door was closed and sealed, and the craft, secured by a large sling, was lifted by a crane into the center of the moon pool. The operator looked into the control room and was given the descent signal by Cabrillo. Then, slowly, the large craft was lowered into the black water. As soon as she settled, divers removed the sling and were carried upward to the surrounding balcony by the crane.

‘Radio check,’ said Seng. ‘Do you read me?’

‘Like you’re in the same room,’ Linda Ross assured him.

‘Are we clear?’

‘No ship movement and only three fishing boats are heading out to sea. At thirty feet, you should stay well below their keels and props.’

‘Keep the coffee on,’ said Seng.

‘Bon voyage,’ quipped Cabrillo.

‘That’s easy for you to say,’ Seng came back.

A few moments later, the lights inside the Nomad blinked out and it vanished into the dark water of the harbor.

The pilots of the sub relied on their Global Positioning System to set them on an exact course for the section of the city docks that was their destination. Detecting the pilings by their laser monitoring system,

they were able to slip between the stern and bow of two container ships unloading cargo and maneuvered their way amid the giant pilings. Once under the wharves and out of sight from anyone above, they surfaced and closed the remaining gap using a laser night-penetrating camera that magnified the city lights filtering beneath the pilings.

‘Floating maintenance dock dead ahead,’ announced the chief pilot.

There was no hard check of weapons or survival gear. Though they all carried concealed handguns, they wanted to look like a small security unit moving through town without any menacing designs on the citizens. Their only inspection was to make sure their uniforms looked neat and presentable. The combat members of the team had all been members of the Special Forces. They were under strict orders not to commit mayhem unless it was absolutely necessary in order to save lives. Seng himself had served on a marine recon team and had never lost a man.

No sooner had the Nomad gently bumped against the floating dock than Seng, followed closely by his team, exited the sub and headed up the stairs to a little house that sheltered the dock and maintenance workers’ tools and small equipment. The door was easily unlocked from the inside, and Seng, with only a brief look to see if anyone was standing nearby, silently motioned everyone to follow him.

The lights of the cranes and the ships they were unloading lit up the dock like daylight, but luckily the

exit door was opposite and the team formed in the shadows. Then, in a column of twos and marching in cadence, Seng led them to the end of the dock and around the warehouse.

His watch said 9:36. Exactly twenty-four minutes to arrive at the front gate of the prison. They found the truck nine minutes later, parked under a dim dock light beside the warehouse. Seng recognized it as a 1951 Ford delivery van that looked like it had passed the two-million-mile mark years ago. In the gloom he could make out lettering in a fancy red script on the side of the fourteen-foot cargo body. It read GONZALES FOOD PURVEYORS in Spanish. The driver was visible only by the glow of his cigarette.

Seng walked up to the open window, hand on his Ruger P97 .45 caliber automatic with suppressor, and said quietly. *‘Dos.’*

The driver of the truck exhaled a cloud of non-filtered cigarette smoke into the cab and replied, *‘Uno.’*

‘Pile in the back,’ Seng ordered his team. ‘I’ll ride in front.’ He opened the passenger door and slid on to the seat. There was no conversation as the driver crunched the worn-out transmission into gear and drove off the dock into the city streets. Every other light on the boulevard running along the bay was dark, either because the bulbs had burned out and had never been replaced or to conserve energy. After a few blocks the driver turned on to a main street and headed up a slight grade toward San Juan Hill.

Cuba’s second largest city, Santiago was in Oriente

Province and had been the island's capital in the seventeenth century. Surrounded by hills with coffee and sugar-cane plantations, the city was a maze of narrow streets, with small plazas and buildings of Spanish colonial architecture bearing hanging balconies.

Seng remained silent, concentrating on scanning the side streets and studying the numbers on his portable GPS to make certain the driver was heading in the right direction. The streets were mostly empty of traffic, except for fifty-year-old cars parked along the curbs, and the sidewalks were filled with people simply out for an after-dinner stroll or sitting in bars that reverberated with loud strains of the Cuban beat. Many of the stores and apartments above had paint that was faded and chipped, while others were coated in vivid pastel colors. The gutters and sidewalks were clean, but the windows looked like they had rarely seen a cleaner and a squeegee. For the most part, the people looked happy. There was much laughter and occasional singing. No one gave the truck a second look as it passed slowly through the main downtown section of the city.

Seng spotted a few men in uniform, but they seemed more interested in talking with women than watching for a foreign intrusion. The driver lit up another foul-smelling cigarette. Seng had never smoked, and he leaned further against his door and turned his face through the open window, lifting his nose in disgust.

Ten minutes later the truck reached the front gate

of the fortress prison. The driver pulled past and stopped fifty yards down the road. 'I will wait here,' he said, in almost perfect English. They were the first words he had spoken since the dock.

Seng read him like a book. 'Educator or doctor?'

'I teach history at the university.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't be long. The truck will look suspicious if it sits here past midnight.'

'We should be out before then,' Seng assured him.

Seng climbed out of the truck cab and peered up and down the street cautiously. It was empty. He rapped softly on the cargo doors. They opened and his team dropped out and joined him on the brick-surfaced street. Together they marched as a unit up to the front gate and pulled the bell cord. A ringing could be heard in the guard's office behind the gate. In a few minutes, a guard came wandering out, rubbing his eyes and temples. He had obviously been asleep on duty. He was about to tell the intruders to go away when he recognized Seng's uniform and insignia as a colonel's and he feverishly opened the gate, stood back and saluted.

'Sir, what brings you to the fortress this time of night?'

'Colonel Antonio Yarayo. I was sent by the Ministry of State Security with this team to interrogate one of the prisoners. A new investigation has turned up a suspected United States spy operation. We believe they have information which could prove useful.'

‘Pardon me, sir, but I must ask you for the proper papers.’

‘As a good soldier, Sergeant,’ said Seng officiously, ‘well you should.’ He handed the guard an envelope. ‘Why aren’t there more guards on duty?’

‘There is one other who watches the prisoners’ cells.’

‘Hmm. Well, I see no reason to stand out here all night. Take me to your office quarters.’

The guard immediately ushered them into a barren office that contained only a desk and two chairs. A photo of Castro, taken when he was a young man, hung alone on one wall.

‘Who is the officer in command here?’ asked Seng.

‘Captain Juan Lopez.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He has a girlfriend with a house in the city. He will be back at nine o’clock tomorrow.’

‘How very convenient,’ Seng said as if bored. ‘What is your name?’

‘Lieutenant Gabriel Sanchez, sir.’

‘And the name of the other guard on duty in the cells?’

‘Sergeant Ignez Macco.’

‘Please check the documents so we can get on with it.’

The guard sat down at the desk and pulled some paper out of the envelope. Seng moved behind and removed a small gun from his pocket as Sanchez

stared blankly at a pair of comic books. He looked up. ‘Colonel, I don’t under –’

That was as far as he got before Seng shot a tiny dart filled with a tranquilizer into the nape of his neck. Sanchez looked at Seng oddly before slumping unconscious over the table.

Seng threw a roll of duct tape to one of his team. Every move was so well rehearsed that he did not have to give orders. Two men took the tape, bound the unconscious guard, searched his pockets – finding an unusual round key – and then stuffed him in a closet. Another man went to work carefully rendering the security alarms and communications equipment inoperable.

As they rushed through the passageways and tunnels and down stone steps to the cells below, Seng knew where he was within a foot, thanks to the holographic image of the fortress that he had committed to memory.

There was no desperate hurry, but they could not afford to throw away time. He could see now why only a few men guarded the entire facility. The walls were massively thick, and there was only one entrance in and out of the dungeon cells far below street level. The only way a prisoner could escape was the way the team from the *Oregon* had come – from the outside. A string of lightbulbs lit the passageway. The ceiling was very high, but the space between the walls was very narrow. The steps finally ended at an

enormous steel door with the thickness of a bank vault. A TV camera stared ominously at Seng and his men. This was the tricky part, he thought, as he inserted the odd-looking key into the steel lock. Seng prayed that the key would do the job without a code being demanded.

His fear was confirmed when he turned the key and a buzzer could be heard from the other side of the door. A minute later a voice called through a nearby loudspeaker, 'Who goes there?'

'Colonel Antonio Yarayo, State Security, with an interrogation team to question the traitors.'

There was a pause. Seng didn't wait for a reply.

'Open up. I have the authority and necessary documents. Lieutenant Sanchez would have accompanied us, but he said he was not allowed to leave the front gate unguarded. Sergeant Ignez Macco, is it?' Seng held up the envelope. 'If you have any questions, I have your service record in my hands.'

'But sir,' the voice of Macco pleaded, 'if the door is opened before eight o'clock in the morning, alarms will go off in the State Security office at Fort Canovar.'

'I ordered Lieutenant Sanchez to turn off the dungeon alarm,' Seng bluffed.

'But sir, he cannot do that. The door is on a separate system that is wired to the security commandant's office in the city. It cannot be opened until eight o'clock in the morning.'

It was one more obstacle to overcome, but not totally unexpected. Seng was betting that the security

officers would think the alarms were malfunctioning and call the fort to check it out before sending a squad of security police.

Macco fell for it. A few seconds later, the big steel lock clacked and the bolts that extended from the door into the framework could be heard withdrawing from their slots. Then the massive door swung open silently and smoothly. Sergeant Macco stood at attention and snapped a salute.

Seng wasted no more time on niceties. He aimed the tranquilizer gun at Macco's throat and squeezed the tiny trigger. The guard's eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped to the stone floor like a sack of sand.

The dungeon was not a state-of-the-art prison. The rusting iron cell doors had been hung in the late nineteenth century and still required the large antique key chained to Macco's belt. Seng ripped the key and its ring from the guard's belt and began opening the doors. As soon as the first door was swung ajar, Julia Huxley rushed into the cell to check the condition of its inhabitant. Seng's team helped by assisting the shocked prisoners, who feared the worst, into the dungeon's passageway.

'Five are in no condition to walk up the stairs and on to the street,' said Julia. 'They'll have to be carried out on stretchers.'

'Then we'll haul them on our backs,' replied Seng. 'We don't have enough bodies to carry five stretchers.'

‘These poor devils think we’re going to execute them,’ said a tall, ruggedly built team member with red hair in a buzz cut.

‘We haven’t got time to explain!’ snapped Seng. He knew that the security officials downtown were wondering why the dungeon alarm in Santa Ursula had been triggered at this time of night. They were certain to call and find the phones down. How soon they would send a squad of men to check was anybody’s guess. ‘Julia, you round up those who can move on their own two feet. The rest of you men carry the ones too weak to walk.’

They moved off, almost having to drag the poor, suffering Cubans out of the dungeon and up the stairs, every team member with a Cuban over one shoulder, their free arms braced around other prisoners who could barely manage the steps. Julia brought up the rear, supporting two women and whispering encouraging words whose meanings could only come through in her soothing tone – she knew only enough Spanish to order a margarita.

Climbing the winding stone steps was a torturous exertion for the weakened prisoners, but there could be no turning back. Any capture now meant certain execution. They struggled up the steps, chests rising and falling, lungs gasping for air, hearts pounding. Men and women who had long ago given up hope now saw an opportunity to live normal lives again, thanks to these crazy people who were risking death to rescue them.

Seng could not afford the time to sympathize with their plight, or look into their gaunt faces. Any thoughts of compassion were fleeting. Sympathy could come once they reached the safety of the *Oregon*.

He concentrated on pushing them all toward the main gate, keeping his mind cold and logical.

At last the front of the column reached the guard's office at the gate. Seng stepped cautiously out on to the brick street. There was no whisper of sound or any sign of vehicles or people. The truck was right where they'd left it.

The team carrying those too weak to walk were huffing and puffing now and soaked in sweat from the tropical humidity. Warily, Seng studied the darkened street and buildings through his laser night binoculars. The area was clear. Satisfied, he hustled everyone through the gate and shoved them roughly in the direction of the truck.

He rushed back into the office and checked the guard. He was still unconscious. He also spotted a red light on a console beside the desk. The alarm had indeed been activated when they'd opened the dungeon door. The phone began to ring, and he picked it up and snapped in Spanish, '*Uno momento!*'

Then he set the receiver down and dashed out the door.

The rescue team and the freed prisoners were crammed into the cargo bed of the truck like Japanese workers during rush hour. The driver shifted the weary old transmission into gear with a brief metallic

grind, and the truck leaped forward. The streets were as before, the auto traffic thin, while Cubans were enjoying a balmy evening outside on their balconies, sitting at chairs and tables on the sidewalks or drinking in the cantinas, dancing and singing.

Seng cocked his ear out the window and listened for any sound of alarms or sirens. There came only the strains of music in the night air. The harshest sound came from the truck's muffler, which seemed to be coming loose from the engine header pipe. The rattle of the exhaust soon drowned out the city noise. He saw Cubans glance at the truck and then turn away. Loose exhaust pipes and rusted-out mufflers were common on the old cars that traveled the streets of Santiago. The city's inhabitants had more entertaining thoughts on their minds.

The truck driver drove maddeningly slow, but Seng knew better than to push him. A truck casually taking its time through town would arouse no suspicion. After what seemed an hour, but was only fifteen minutes, the driver pulled up alongside a warehouse dock and stopped. A quick look up and down the deserted dock and Seng began goading everyone toward the maintenance shed. The five-minute journey to the shed was uneventful.

Their luck still held. The only activity was centered on the two cargo ships unloading their big containers. Though still apprehensive, Seng finally began to relax. He motioned them through the door of the maintenance shed and down the wooden stairs. In the dark-

ness he saw the vague shape of the Nomad sub's pilot, standing on the floating dock and helping the Cubans on board. The other pilot was down below, packing them tightly inside the narrow confines of the Nomad's main cabin.

When Seng and Julia Huxley, the last to board, climbed on to the sub's upper deck, the pilot quickly cast off the mooring lines, looked up briefly and said, 'You made good time.'

'Get to the ship as fast as this craft can take us,' Seng replied. 'We couldn't help setting off an alarm. I'm surprised Cuban security forces aren't already breathing down our neck.'

'If they haven't tracked you here,' said the pilot confidently as he closed and sealed the hatch, 'they'll never guess where you came from.'

'At least not until the *Oregon*'s found missing from her assigned anchorage.'

In seconds the sub was dropping beneath the surface of the dark water. Fifteen minutes later it surfaced inside the moon pool of the *Oregon*. Divers attached the hook and cable of the big overhead crane, and the Nomad was lifted delicately until it was even with the second deck and moored to the balcony. Huxley's medical team was waiting along with several members of the ship's crew to help the Cubans to the *Oregon*'s well-equipped hospital.

The time was three minutes past eleven.

A thin man, his hair white before his time, recognized Cabrillo as an officer and walked unsteadily up

to him. 'Sir, my name is Juan Tural. Can you tell me who you people are and why you rescued my friends and me from Santa Ursula?'

'We are a corporation, and we were contracted to do this job.'

'Who hired you?'

'Friends of yours in the United States,' answered Cabrillo. 'That's all that I can say.'

'Then you had no idealistic purpose, no political cause?'

Cabrillo smiled slightly. 'We always have a purpose.'

Tural sighed. 'I had hoped that salvation, when it came, would come from another quarter.'

'Your people did not have the means to do it. It's that simple. That is why they came to us.'

'It's a great pity your only motivation was money.'

'It wasn't. Money is simply the vehicle,' said Cabrillo. 'It allows our corporation to pick its fights and to fund our charity projects. It's a liberty none of us had when we were employed by our respective governments.' He glanced at his chronograph. 'Now if you'll excuse me, we're not out of the woods just yet.'

Then he turned and left Tural staring after him as he walked away.

Eleven seventeen. If they were going to make a run for it, now was the time, thought Cabrillo. The alarm had long been answered at the prison, and by now

patrols were certainly roaming the city and the countryside in search of the escaped prisoners and their rescuers. Their only link was the truck driver, but he could not provide any information to the Cuban security forces, even if he was captured and tortured. His original contact had made no mention of the *Oregon*. As far as the driver knew, the rescue team had come from a landing party on another part of the island.

Cabrillo lifted a phone and called down to the Corporation's president in the engine room. 'Max?'

Hanley answered almost immediately. 'Juan.'

'Have the ballast tanks been pumped dry?'

'Tanks are dry and the hull is raised for speed.'

'The tide is about to turn and will swing us around. We'd better leave while our bow is still aimed toward the main channel. As soon as the anchor comes free, I'll set the engines very slow. No sense in alerting any observers on the shore to a sudden departure. At the first alarm or when we reach the main channel, whichever comes first, I'll enter the program for full speed. We'll need every ounce of power your engines can give.'

'You think you can get us through a narrow channel in the dead of night at full speed without a pilot?'

'The ship's computer system read every inch of the channel and the buoy markers on the way in. Our escape course is plotted and programmed into the automatic pilot. We'll leave it to Otis to take us out.' Otis was the crew's name for the ship's automated

control systems. It could steer the *Oregon* within inches of the intended route.

‘Computerized automated controls or not, it won’t be an easy matter to race through a tight channel at sixty knots.’

‘We can do it.’ Cabrillo punched off and hit another code. ‘Mark, give me a status on our defense systems.’

Mark Murphy, the *Oregon*’s weapons specialist, replied in his west Texas drawl, ‘If any of them Cuban missile launchers so much as hiccup, we’ll take them out.’

‘You can expect aircraft once we’re in the open sea.’

‘Nuthin’ we cain’t handle.’

He turned to Linda Ross. ‘Linda?’

‘All systems are online,’ she replied calmly.

Cabrillo set the phone in its cradle and relaxed, lighting up a thin Cuban cigar. He looked around at the ship’s crew, standing in the control center. They were all staring at him, waiting expectantly.

‘Well,’ he said slowly, before taking a deep breath, ‘I guess we might as well go.’

He gave a voice command to the computer, the winch was set in motion, and the anchor slowly, quietly – through Teflon sleeves the team had inserted inside the hawsehole, which deadened the clank of the chain – rose from the bottom of the harbor. Another command and the *Oregon* began to inch slowly ahead.

Down in the engine room, Max Hanley studied

the gauges and instruments on the huge console. His four big magnetohydrodynamics engines were a revolutionary design for maritime transport. They intensified and compounded the electricity found in saline seawater before running it through a magnetic core tube kept at absolute zero by liquid helium. The electrical current that was produced created an extremely high energy force that pumped the water through thrusters in the stern for propulsion.

Not only were the *Oregon's* engines capable of pushing the big cargo ship at incredible speeds, but it required no fuel except the seawater that passed through its magnetic core. The source of the propulsion was inexhaustible. Another advantage was that the ship did not require huge fuel tanks, which enabled the space to be utilized for other purposes.

There were only four other ships in the world with magnetohydrodynamic engines – three cruise ships and one oil tanker. Those who had installed the engines in the *Oregon* had been sworn to secrecy.

Hanley took proprietary care of the high-tech engines. They were reliable and rarely caused problems. He labored over them as if they were an extension of his own soul. He kept them finely tuned and in a constant state of readiness for extreme and extended operation. He watched now as they automatically engaged and began pushing the ship into the channel that led to the sea.

Above in the command center, armored panels slid noiselessly apart, revealing a large window on the

forward bulkhead. The murmur among the men and women gazing intently at the lights of the city was quiet, as though the men manning the Cuban defense systems could hear their words.

Cabrillo spotted another ship leaving the harbor ahead of them. 'What ship is that?' he asked.

One of the team pulled up the list of ship arrivals and departures on his computer monitor. 'She's a Chinese-registered cargo vessel carrying sugar to Hangchou,' he reported. 'She's leaving port nearly an hour ahead of her scheduled departure time.'

'Name?' asked Cabrillo.

'In English, the *Red Dawn*. The shipping line is owned by the Chinese army.'

'Turn out all the outer lights, and increase speed until we are close astern of the vessel ahead,' he commanded the computer. 'We'll use her as a decoy to lead us out.' The outer deck and navigation lights blinked out, leaving the ship in darkness as she narrowed the gap between the two vessels. The lights inside the command center dimmed to a blue-green glow.

By the time the *Red Dawn* entered the ship's channel and passed the first of the string of marker buoys, the darkened *Oregon* was trailing only fifty yards off her stern. Cabrillo kept his ship just far enough back so that the Chinese vessel's deck lights would not cast their beams on his bow. It was a long shot, but he was betting the silhouette of his ship would be mistaken for the shadow of the *Red Dawn*.

Cabrillo glanced at a large twenty-four-hour clock on the wall above the window just as the long minute hand clicked on to 23:39. Only twenty-one minutes to go before the Cubans' defense systems test.

'Following the *Red Dawn* is slowing us down,' said Linda. 'We're losing precious time.'

Cabrillo nodded. 'You're right, we can't wait any longer. She's served her purpose.' He leaned over and spoke into the computer's voice receiver.

'Go to full speed and pass the ship ahead!'

Like a small powerboat with big engines and a heavy hand on the throttles, the *Oregon* dug her stern into the forbidding water and lifted her bows clear of the waves as her thrusters erupted in a cloud of froth, creating a vast crater in her wake. She leaped down the channel and swept past the Chinese cargo ship less than twenty feet away, as if she were stopped dead in the water. The Chinese sailors could be seen staring in stunned disbelief. Faster and faster with each passing second she raced through the night. Speed was the *Oregon's* crowning achievement, the thoroughbred heart of the vessel. Forty knots, then fifty. By the time she passed Morro Castle at the entrance to Santiago, she was making nearly sixty-two knots. No ship in the world that size could match her speed.

The beacon lights mounted high on the bluffs were soon little more than blinking specks on a black horizon.

\*