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CLIVE CUSSLER

WITH PAUL KEMPRECOS

A novel from the NUMA® files

THE NAVIGATOR

A KURT AUSTIN ADVENTURE

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The Navigator
by
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C H A P T E R

1

BAGHDAD, IRAQ, 2003

CARINA MECHADI WAS INCANDESCENT with rage. The young Italian woman threw off sparks like a Roman candle as she surveyed the rubble that littered the administrative offices of the Iraqi National Museum. Cabinets had been overturned. Files were scattered as if they'd been caught up in a whirlwind. Desks and chairs had been smashed to splinters. The vindictiveness of the destruction was appalling.

Carina unleashed a withering outburst that dissected the parentage, sexual orientation, and prowess of the vandals who had wreaked such senseless havoc.

The wave of blue language washed over the young U.S. Marine corporal who had been hovering protectively nearby cradling an M4 carbine in his arms. The only two Italian words the marine knew were *pepperoni* and *pizza*. He didn't need a lexicon to tell him that he'd witnessed a display of razor-edged invective worthy of a long-shoreman with a sore back.

The muscular language was all the more amazing considering its source. Carina was a foot shorter than the marine. The battle gear

the military people had insisted she wear made the slender woman appear even smaller. She looked like a turtle too small for its shell in the borrowed flak jacket. The desert-camouflage uniform was meant for a small man. The helmet that concealed her long sable hair sat so low it almost hid her cornflower blue eyes.

Carina noticed the marine's astonished grin. She blushed with embarrassment and brought her tirade to a halt. "Sorry about that."

"No problem, ma'am," the corporal said. "You ever want to be a drill instructor, the Marine Corps would be glad to have you."

The heat faded from her dusky face. Full lips that seemed better suited for seduction than for swearing widened in a broad smile that revealed perfect white teeth. With the fire in her words extinguished, her voice was low and cool. Speaking with a slight accent, she said, "Thank you for the offer, Corporal O'Leary." She glanced at the rubble at her feet. "As you can see, I'm quite passionate when it comes to this sort of thing."

"Don't blame you for being pissed—" The marine's cheeks flushed and he glanced away. "Excuse me, I mean for being *mad*, ma'am. Hell of a mess."

Saddam Hussein's elite Republican Guard had set up a defensive position in the eleven-acre museum complex in the heart of Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris. The Iraqi troops had run for their lives in the face of the American advance, leaving the museum unguarded for thirty-six hours. Hundreds of plunderers had rampaged through the complex until they were chased out by the senior staff.

The Republican Guards had shed their uniforms and burned piles of identity cards in their hurry to return to civilian life. In a last gasp of defiance, someone had scrawled DEATH TO ALL AMERICANS on a courtyard wall.

"We've seen all we need to see here," Carina said with a grimace.

With Corporal O'Leary trailing a few paces behind, she plodded out of the administrative offices. Her leaden-footed gait was only

partly the fault of the army boots on her feet. She was weighed down by a feeling of dread at what she would find, or *not* find, in the public gallery, where the museum's prize holdings were exhibited in more than five hundred display cases.

The walk down the long central corridor only served to heighten her fears. A number of sarcophagi had been cracked open and statues decapitated.

Carina set foot in the first gallery and the air involuntarily escaped from her lungs. She wandered from room to room as if in a daze. Every case looked as if it had been vacuumed clean.

She entered a gallery that had held Babylonian artifacts. A portly, middle-aged man was bent over a smashed cabinet. Standing next to him was a young Iraqi, who raised his AK-47 when they entered.

The marine brought the carbine to his shoulder.

The heavysset man looked up and stared through thick lenses at the marine. There was disdain rather than fear in his eyes. His glance shifted to Carina and his face lit up in a fourteen-karat smile.

"My dear Miss Mechadi," he said with undisguised warmth.

"Hello, Dr. Nasir. Glad to see that you're all right." Carina turned to the marine. "Corporal, this is Mohammed Jassim Nasir. He's senior curator here at the museum."

The marine lowered his weapon. After a pause to show that he had not been intimidated by the American, the Iraqi did the same with his gun. They continued to eye each other warily.

Nasir came over to clasp Carina's hands in his. "You shouldn't have come so soon. It is still dangerous."

"*You* are here, professor."

"Of *course*. This institution has been my lifeblood."

"I understand completely," Carina said. "But the area around the museum is secure." She nodded toward her marine escort. "Besides, Corporal O'Leary is keeping close watch on me."

Nasir's brow clouded over. "I hope this *gentleman* is a better guard

than his friends were. If not for my brave colleagues the disaster would have been total.”

Carina understood Nasir’s anger. The American troops arrived four days after the museum’s curators had told the commanders about the looting. Carina had tried desperately to have them move in sooner. She had waved the UNESCO identification card hanging around her neck under the noses of the American officers only to be told that the situation was too fluid and dangerous.

Carina saw no use arguing over who was to blame. The damage had already been done. “I’ve talked to the Americans,” she said. “They said there would have been a bloody battle if they came in earlier.”

Nasir shot a drop-dead glance in the marine’s direction. “I understand. They were too busy guarding the oil wells.” The unsympathetic expression on his nut-brown face suggested that he would have preferred bloodshed to looting.

“I’m as sickened as you are,” she said. “This is terrible.”

“Well, it’s not as bad as it seems here,” Nasir said with unexpected optimism. “The artifacts taken from this case were minor items. Fortunately, the museum had put together a contingency plan after the 1991 invasion. The curators moved most of the artifacts to safe rooms known only to the five most senior museum officers.”

“That’s wonderful, Professor!”

Nasir’s sunny mood was short-lived. He tugged fretfully at his beard. “I wish the rest of the news were as good,” he said with a doleful note in his voice. “Other parts of the museum did not fare as well. The thieves looted the greatest treasures of Mesopotamia. They took the sacred vase and the mask of Warka, the Bassetki statue, the ivory of the lioness attacking the Nubian, and the twin copper bulls.”

“Those objects are priceless!”

“Unlike the petty thieves we chased out of the museum, the peo-

ple who removed the more-valuable antiquities were sophisticated. They bypassed the Black Obelisk, for instance.”

“They must have known that the original is in the Louvre.”

Nasir’s lips tightened in a grim smile. “They didn’t touch *any* copies. They were very organized and selective. Come, I’ll show you.”

Nasir led the way to the aboveground storage rooms. The shelves lining the walls were empty. Dozens of jars, vessels, and shards littered the floor. Carina kicked away an army uniform.

“The Republican Guards spent time here as well,” she said. “Any idea of how much is missing?”

“It will take years to assess the loss. I’m estimating around three thousand or so pieces gone. I wish I could say that was the worst of it.”

They walked into a gallery that displayed Roman antiquities. The professor pushed aside a corner shelf to reveal a hidden door whose glass paneling had been smashed and steel grate bent back. He fumbled in his pocket for a candle and a cigarette lighter. They descended the narrow set of stairs to metal doors that were wide-open, with no sign of forced entry. A wall sealed the space beyond the door. The concrete bricks had been pried away to make a large opening.

They climbed through the opening into a hot and airless room. An acrid stench assaulted their nostrils. Footprints on the dusty floor had been cordoned off with yellow tape placed at the crime scene by a team of investigators.

Carina glanced around. “Where are we?”

“The basement storage area. There are five rooms down here. Few people in the museum even know this place exists. That’s why we thought the collection was safe. We were wrong, as you can see.”

He moved the candle in an arc. Its yellow light fell upon dozens of plastic fishing boxes thrown willy-nilly around the room.

“I’ve never seen such absolute chaos,” Carina whispered.

“The boxes held cylinder seals, beads, coins, glass bottles, amulets, and jewelry. Thousands of items are missing.” He brought the candle over to dozens of larger plastic boxes that lined the walls. “They didn’t bother with these. Apparently, they knew they were empty.”

Corporal O’Leary surveyed the wreckage with a street fighter’s eye for entrances and exits. “If you don’t mind my asking sir, how’d they know how to find this place?”

Nasir’s heavy features drooped and he gave a glum nod of his head. “You Americans aren’t the only ones who have reason to be embarrassed. We suspect someone on our staff with intimate knowledge of the museum alerted the thieves to this room. We have fingerprinted our staff, except for the head of security, who has not come back to reclaim his job.”

“I was wondering why I didn’t see any evidence of the door being forced,” Carina said.

“The thieves came into the basement the same way we did, but they had forgotten torches or never expected they would need them.” He picked up a piece of burned rubber foam. “They used this material from upstairs for torchlight. The stuff burns quickly and the fumes would have been terrible. We found a set of keys on the floor. They probably dropped the keys and couldn’t find them. They missed thirty cabinets with our best cylinder seals and tens of thousands of gold and silver coins. I’d guess about ten thousand excavated artifacts are missing. Hundreds of boxes were left intact, praise Allah.”

They filed through a doorway into a larger space filled with antiquities of every size and shape. “These are objects that were given a preliminary identification and were to be absorbed into the main collection as work allowed. Some have been stored here for years.”

“The footprints lead in here,” Carina said.

“The thieves evidently thought there was something of value

in this room. We would have no way of knowing until we go over our inventory. We are far too busy trying to retrieve more precious items.”

“I heard there was an amnesty,” she said.

“That’s right. It has somewhat restored some of my faith in human nature. People have brought in thousands of items, including the mask of Warka. I expect that objects will continue to be returned, but, as you know, the most valuable ones are probably in the possession of some wealthy collector in New York or London.”

Carina sighed in agreement. The thefts had been carefully planned. The invasion took weeks to gear up. Unscrupulous dealers in Europe and the United States could take advance orders for specific objects from rich clients.

The antiquities business had become almost as lucrative as drug trafficking. London and New York were the main markets. Stolen antiquities from illegal excavations in Greece, Italy, and South America were often laundered through Switzerland, where objects can gain legal title after only five years in the country.

Carina stood in silence amid the empty boxes, apparently lost in thought. After a moment, she said, “Perhaps I can speed up the amnesty process.”

“But *how*? We have spread the word far and wide.”

She turned to the marine. “I’ll need your help, Corporal O’Leary.”

“I was ordered to comply with any request you asked for, ma’am.”

Carina spread her lips in a mysterious smile. “I was *counting* on that.”

C H A P T E R

2

THE PAVEMENT SHOOK UNDER the treads of the twenty-five-ton Bradley Fighting Vehicle, warning of the troop carrier's approach long before it rumbled into view. By the time the vehicle had turned the corner and rolled down the boulevard, the man who'd been making his way along the deserted storefronts had slipped into an alley. He ducked into a doorway, where he would be invisible to the vehicle's night vision scope.

The man watched the vehicle until it disappeared around another corner before he ventured from the alley. The thud of bombs that had presaged the advance of the American-led forces had stopped. The rattle of small-arms fire was constant but sporadic. Except for the firefights that ensued as the invaders mopped up pockets of resistance, there had been a pause in the battle as the coalition and the remnants of the defenders considered their next step.

He passed a defaced statue of Saddam Hussein, and walked another ten minutes until he came to a side street. Using a penlight that cast a thin red beam, he studied a city map, then he tucked the map and light back into his pocket and turned down the street.

Although he was a big man, several inches over six feet, he moved through the pitch-dark city as silently as a shadow. His stealth was

a skill he had developed through weeks of training at a camp run by former members of the French Foreign Legion, U.S. Delta Force, and British Special Ops. He could infiltrate the most heavily guarded installation to carry out his mission. Although he was adept in the use of a dozen different methods of assassination, his weapon of choice was the crushing strength in his large, thick-fingered hands.

He had come a long way from his humble beginnings. His family had been living in a small town in the south of Spain when his benefactor found him. He'd been in his late teens and working in a slaughterhouse. He enjoyed the work of dispatching everything from chickens to cows and tried to bring some creativity to the task whenever he could, but something in him yearned for greater things.

It almost hadn't happened. He had strangled an annoying coworker to death over a petty argument. Charged with murder, he had languished in jail while headlines made much of the fact that he was the son of the man who had been Spain's official garroter back in the days when strangulation was the state-approved method of execution.

One day, the man who would become his benefactor arrived at the jailhouse in a chauffeur-driven car. He sat in the cell and told the young man, "You have a proud and glorious past and a great future."

The youth listened with rapt attention as the stranger talked about the family's service to the state. He knew that the youth's father had been put out of work after the garrote machine was retired in 1974, how he had changed his name and retreated to a small farm, where the family pursued a pitiful, subsistence living, and died, penniless and brokenhearted, leaving a widow and child.

His benefactor wanted the young man to work for him. He paid off the jailers and the judge, gave the grieving family more money than the dead chicken plucker could have earned in a hundred lifetimes, and the charges against the young man disappeared. He was sent to a private school, where he learned several languages, and,

after he graduated, he was trained in military skills. The professional killers who took him under their wing recognized, as had his benefactor, that he was a talented student. Soon he was being sent on solo missions to remove those who were selected by his benefactor. The phone call would come with instructions, the mission would be carried out, and money would be deposited in his Swiss bank account.

Before coming to Baghdad, he had murdered an activist priest who was stirring up opposition to one of his benefactor's mines in Peru. He'd been on his way back to Spain to meet his benefactor when he got the message to slip into Iraq ahead of the American invasion, and there he had taken up residence in a small hotel and made the necessary contacts.

He had been disappointed to learn that his assignment was not to kill but to arrange for the removal of an object from the Baghdad Museum. On the positive side, however, he had virtually a front-row seat to the invasion, with its resultant death and destruction.

He studied the map again and grunted with satisfaction. He was minutes away from his destination.

C H A P T E R

3

WITH ELECTRICAL POWER OUT in the city, Carina had a hard time finding the squat concrete building in the older section of Baghdad. She had been there once before, in daylight, and not in the middle of a war. The building's windows had been boarded over, giving it the aspect of a fortress. As she strode up to the thick wooden door, she could hear the pop of small-arms fire in the distance.

She tried the heavy cast-iron handle. The door was unlocked, and she pushed it open and stepped inside. The gauzy glow of oil lamps illuminated the faces of men hunched over backgammon boards and glasses of tea. The thick choking smoke produced by dozens of cigarettes and water pipes had taken only a slight edge off the sweaty odor of unwashed bodies.

The low murmur of male voices halted, as if a switch had been turned off. Although most of the unshaven faces were cloaked in shadow, she knew that she was the target of hostile eyes.

Two figures detached themselves from a dark corner like creatures crawling out of a swamp. One man slipped around behind her, shut the door, and cut off any possible escape. The other man confronted her head-on. Speaking in Arabic, he growled, "Who are you?"

His breath was foul with stale tobacco and garlic. Resisting the natural impulse to gag, Carina stood to her full five-foot-five-inch height. "Tell Ali that Mechadi wants to see him."

Female assertiveness had its limits with Arab males. An arm snaked around her neck from behind and squeezed tight. The man standing in front produced a knife and held it so close to her left eye that its sharp point was a blur.

She croaked out a feeble call for help.

The door opened with a crash. The arm relaxed around her neck. Corporal O'Leary stood in the doorway, the muzzle of his carbine pressed against the base of the door guard's skull. The marine had heard Carina over a walkie-talkie tuned to the same channel as the one clipped to her vest.

A Humvee was parked across the street. The vehicle's top lights were on, and those inside the teahouse had a clear view of the long barrel of the M2 machine gun mounted on the vehicle's roof. The gun was aimed at the door. A squad of marines stood in the street with rifles in attack position.

The marine kept his eyes on the man with the knife. "You okay, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, rubbing her neck. "I'm fine."

"Crash course I took in Arabic didn't teach me how to tell this guy I will splatter his brains around the room if his friend doesn't drop the knife."

Carina did a rough but effective translation. The knife clattered to the floor, and the marine kicked it out of reach. The thugs almost tripped over themselves as they retreated back into the murk that had spawned them.

A voice called out in English from behind a curtain at the back of the teahouse.

"Peace be upon you."

Carina responded to the traditional Arabic greeting. “Peace be upon you, Ali.”

A man emerged from between the dingy sheets of cotton that served as curtains and wove his way around the close-packed tables. The light from the Humvee fell on his pudgy face and fleshy nose. A circular knit cap covered his shaven head. His NEW YORK YANKEES T-shirt was too short for his ample body, exposing his hairy belly button.

“Welcome, Signorina Mechadi,” he said. He clasped his palms together. “And to your friends, the same.”

“Your man was about to stick a knife in my eye,” Carina responded. “Is *that* how you welcome guests?”

Ali’s small, cunning eyes surveyed Carina’s body and lingered on her face. “You’re wearing a military uniform,” he said with an unctuous smile. “Perhaps he thought you were an enemy soldier.”

Carina ignored Ali’s comment. “I want to talk to you.”

The Iraqi scratched a scraggly black beard that had bits of food caught in it. “Of *course*. Let us step out back and have some tea.”

The marine spoke up. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“I’ll be all right.” Carina surveyed the room. “I wouldn’t mind some insurance, however. As you can see, Ali’s place doesn’t attract the finest clientele.”

The corporal grinned. He poked his head out the door and gave a wave. Several marines piled into the room and took up positions along the walls.

Ali held aside the grubby curtains, opened a metal door, and ushered Carina into a room bright with electric lights. A generator purred in another part of the building. Richly colored rugs covered the floor and walls. A television screen connected to an exterior security camera showed images of the street outside the building. The Humvee was clearly visible.

Ali gestured for Carina to take a seat on a platform piled with large velvet cushions. He offered her tea, which she refused. He poured a glass for himself.

“What brings you out for a visit in the middle of an invasion?”

She met his question with a hard gaze. “I came from the national museum. It’s been looted of thousands of antiquities.”

He lowered his glass in midsip. “That’s *outrageous!* The national museum is the heart and soul of Iraqi’s cultural heritage.”

Carina laughed out loud at Ali’s feigned shock. “You should have been an actor, Ali. You’d easily win an Academy Award on that line alone.”

Ali had learned his acting skills as a professional wrestler. He had even wrestled in the United States under the name of Ali Babbas.

“How could you *think* I’d be involved in a heist like that?” He still used some of the American slang he had picked up from his wrestling days.

“No antiquity of value moves in and out of Iraq without your connivance or knowledge.”

Ali had established a worldwide network of procurers, dealers, and collectors. He had cultivated the Saddam Hussein family, and was said to have acquired many objects for the collection of the psychopathic sons, Uday and Qusay.

“I only deal in *legal* objects. You can search the place if you want to.”

“You’re dishonest but not stupid, Ali. I’m not demanding the return of the minor artifacts. They’re useless for museum purposes without reliable provenance.” She drew a piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Ali. “I want these objects. There’s an amnesty. No questions asked.”

He unfolded the paper with his thick fingers. His lips widened in a smile.

“I’m surprised you don’t have the Brooklyn Bridge on this list.”

"I already own it," Carina said. "Well?"

He handed the paper back. "Can't help you."

Carina tucked it back in her pocket and rose from the cushion. "Okay."

"Just *okay*? You're disappointing me, signorina. I expected you to be your usual pit bull self."

"I don't have time. I have to go talk to the Americans." She headed for the door.

He called after her. "The Americans will have their hands full trying to get the power and water back on." Carina kept walking. "They left the museum unguarded. Do you think they care about a petty thief like me?"

She put her hand on the doorknob. "I think they'll care a *great* deal when they learn of your ties to Saddam Hussein."

"*Everyone* in Iraq had ties to Saddam," Ali said with a guffaw. "I was careful to leave no record of my dealings."

"That doesn't matter. The Americans have had itchy trigger fingers since 9/11. I'd suggest that you vacate this building before they target it with one of their smart bombs."

Ali vaulted from his cushion and lumbered over. The sneer had been replaced by an expression of alarm. He reached out for the paper. "I'll see what I can do."

Carina pulled the list out of reach. "I've raised the ante. Make your calls now. Don't tell me that the phones are out. I know you have your own ways to communicate. I'll wait while you call your people."

Ali frowned and snatched the list from her hand. He went over and reached under his cushion and pulled out a portable radio. He made several calls, using innocuous language that didn't betray their purpose. After the last call, he clicked off the radio and set it down on the tea table.

"You will have what you want within forty-eight hours."

“Make it twenty-four hours,” Carina said. “I can find my way out.” She opened the door and flung a final taunt over her shoulder. “You should stock up on your supply of flashlight batteries.”

“What do you mean?”

“While the idiots you hired were floundering around in the dark getting their fingers burned, they missed thirty cabinets with the museum’s best cylinder seals and tens of thousands of gold and silver coins. *Ciao.*” She gave a light laugh and disappeared through the curtains.

As Ali slammed the door behind her, a rug hanging on the wall pushed aside and a man stepped through a doorway into the room.

He was tall and powerfully built. His cherubic face seemed out of place with his cruel physique, as if his close-shaven head had been attached to the wrong body. Although there was plenty of room for his features on the broad face, eyes, nose, and mouth were squeezed close together, creating an effect that was childlike and grotesque at the same time.

“A formidable woman,” said the man.

Ali spat his words out. “Carina Mechadi? She is nothing but a UNESCO busybody who thinks she can push me around.”

The stranger glanced up at the television monitor and smiled mischievously as he watched the Humvee drive off with Carina and the marines. “From what I heard, she did exactly that.”

“I survived Saddam and I can survive the Americans,” Ali said with a fierce grin.

The man shifted his gaze back to the Arab. “I trust your difficulties won’t endanger the matter we were discussing before she interrupted our negotiations.”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s been a glitch.”

The man moved closer until he loomed over the Iraqi. “What *sort* of glitch?”

“The *Navigator* has been sold to another buyer.”

“We ordered its removal from the museum, and paid you in advance. I came to Baghdad to close the deal.”

“A buyer has come forth with a higher bid. I’ll return your deposit. Perhaps I can persuade the buyer to part with the object, although the price is likely to be greater than the one we discussed.”

The man’s gaze seemed to drill through Ali’s skull, but he maintained his smile. “You wouldn’t be holding me up for more money?”

“If you don’t want to make a deal, tough.”

Ali was still fuming over his confrontation with Carina. His anger had dulled his street smarts; otherwise, he might have sensed the menace in the quiet tone when the man whispered, “I must have the statue.”

For the first time, Ali noticed the disproportionately large hands that dangled from long, powerful-looking arms.

“I was just giving you a hard time,” Ali said with a toothy smile. “Blame it on that Italian bitch. I’ll call the warehouse on my hand radio and have the statue sent over.”

He started toward the sitting area.

“Wait,” the man said. Ali froze in midstep. The man’s grin grew even wider as he picked up the pocket radio Ali had left on the table. “Is *this* what you’re looking for?”

Ali lunged toward the seating platform and slipped his hand under a cushion. His fingers closed on the grip of his Beretta and slipped the pistol out from its hiding place.

The man moved with the swiftness of a hunting cheetah. He tossed the radio aside, grabbed Ali under the chin from behind, and twisted his arm. The pistol dropped from Ali’s hand, his body bent backward like a horseshoe on an anvil.

“Tell me where to find the *Navigator* and I’ll let you go. If you don’t, I’ll snap your spine.”

Ali was a tough man but not a particularly courageous one. He needed only a few seconds of exquisite pain to convince him that no piece of art was worth his life. “Okay, okay, I’ll tell you,” he gasped. He spit out a location.

The man stopped twisting his arm. The pain eased up. Ali’s hand drifted down to the dagger in his ankle sheath. As soon as he got free, he’d carve this creep like a pig. He never got the chance. The man’s free hand joined the other under his chin and the fingers began to squeeze. The knee came up at the same time and dug into the small of his back.

“What are you doing? I thought we had a deal,” Ali said, barely able to get the words out.

He was almost unconscious when he felt a dull snap. The grip on his chin loosened. Ali’s head lolled on his chest like a rag doll’s and he slumped to the floor. The man stepped over the still-twitching body and pushed aside the hanging rug that hid a back door to the building. Moments later, he disappeared in the maze of alleyways. It took him almost to dawn to make his way back to his hotel. He stood in the window, watching the smoke rise over the wounded city, and made a call on his satellite phone.

His benefactor’s mellifluous voice came on the phone immediately.

“I’ve been waiting for your call, Adriano,” he said.

“Sorry for the delay, sir. There were unexpected difficulties.”

Adriano described every detail of his encounter with Ali. His benefactor would know if he were lying or shading the truth.

“I’m very disappointed, Adriano.”

“I know, sir. I was under orders not to let the *Navigator* fall into anyone else’s hands. This seemed to be the only way.”

“You were absolutely right to follow orders. It is important that

we find the object first. We have waited nearly three thousand years. A little more time won't matter."

Adriano breathed a sigh of relief. He had been trained not to feel pain or fear, but he was well aware of the fate of those who displeased his benefactor. "Do you want me to try to track it down?"

"No. I'll try to go through international channels once more. It's becoming too dangerous there for you."

"I've made arrangements to leave the country through Syria."

"Good." There was a pause at the other end of the line. "This woman, Carina Mechadi, may prove useful."

"In what way, sir?"

"We shall see, Adriano. We shall see."

The line went dead.

He grabbed his bag and closed the hotel-room door behind him. He planned to meet an oil smuggler who had promised to get him out of Iraq. In accordance with his standing orders to leave no trace of his passing, he would, of course, dispatch the man to Allah once he was safe across the border.

He smiled as he savored the prospect.

C H A P T E R

4

FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA, THE PRESENT

THE RED CORVETTE CONVERTIBLE swung off the road, with its stereo speakers blasting salsa music like a Tijuana jukebox on wheels. The car breezed along a driveway that ran past a Victorian mansion and lawns which looked as if they had been clipped with manicure scissors. Joe Zavala pulled his car up in front of an ornate boathouse built on the banks of the Potomac River and was about to slide out from behind the steering wheel when he heard the gunshot.

As a brilliant designer of undersea craft for the National Underwater and Marine Agency, Zavala ordinarily carried nothing more lethal than a laptop computer. But his years working for NUMA's Special Assignments Team had taught him the wisdom of the Boy Scout adage to be prepared. Zavala reached under the car seat, his fingers closed on a quick-release holster, and his hand came out with a Walther PPK handgun.

He got out of the car and made his way around the boathouse, moving with the stealth of a deer hunter. Pressing his back to the ex-

terior wall, he edged his way to the corner and popped out into the open, gun extended with both hands and ready to find a target.

A broad-shouldered man dressed in tan shorts and white T-shirt was standing on the riverbank with his back to Zavala. The man held a pistol down by his thigh and was inspecting a paper bull's-eye pinned to a tree. A cloud of purple smoke hung in the air. The man slipped a pair of ear protectors off his head just as Zavala stepped on a twig. He turned at the snapping sound and saw Zavala creeping around the corner with the gun clutched in his hands.

Kurt Austin, Zavala's boss on NUMA's Special Assignments Team, grinned and said, "Going on a turkey shoot, Joe?"

Zavala lowered the gun and walked over to the tree to inspect the hole that had been punched slightly off the center ring of the target.

"You're the one who should be hunting turkeys, deadeye."

Austin removed his yellow protective shooting goggles to reveal blue eyes the color of coral under water. "I'll stick to stationary targets for now." He glanced at Zavala's pistol. "What's with the SWAT team imitation?"

Zavala tucked the gun into his belt. "You didn't tell me you'd turned your expensive riverfront property into a shooting gallery."

Austin blew the smoke away from the pistol barrel like a gun-fighter who'd beaten his opponent to the draw.

"I couldn't wait to try out my new toy at a shooting range."

He handed the flintlock dueling pistol to Zavala, who inspected the walnut stock and the engraved octagonal barrel.

"Nice balance," he said, hefting the weapon. "How old is it?"

"It was made in 1785 by Robert Wogdon, a London gunsmith. He fashioned some of the most accurate dueling pistols of his day. You test a dueling pistol by dangling it down at arm's length. Then you bring it up quickly and hold it just long enough to check the sights and squeeze off a shot. It should be right on target."

Zavala aimed for another tree and clicked his tongue to simulate gunfire.

“Bull’s-eye,” Austin said.

Zavala handed the pistol back. “Didn’t you tell me your pistol collection was complete?”

“Blame it on Rudi,” Austin said with a shrug. Rudi Gunn was the assistant director of NUMA.

“All he said was to decompress after our last assignment,” Zavala said.

“You make my case. Idle time is a dangerous thing in the hands of a collector.” Austin ripped the target off the tree and tucked it into his pocket. “What brings you to Virginia? Run out of women to date in Washington?”

Zavala’s quiet-spoken charm and dark good looks made him much in demand on the Washington dating scene. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly in his trademark smile.

“I won’t say I’ve been living a monk’s life because you’d never believe me. I stopped by to show you a project I started months ago.”

“Project S? You can fill me in while we work on a couple of beers,” Austin said.

He put the shooting gear in a bag, wrapped the pistol in a soft cloth, and led the way up a staircase to a wide deck that overlooked the river.

Austin had bought the boathouse near Langley when he was with a clandestine undersea unit of the CIA. The purchase was beyond his budget, but the panoramic view of the river had closed the deal, and he got the price down because the boathouse was a wreck. He had spent thousands of dollars and countless hours transforming it from a run-down repository for boats to a comfortable retreat from the demands of his job as director of the Special Assignments Team.

Austin got couple of cold Tecate beers from the refrigerator, went out to the deck and handed one to Zavala. They clinked bottles and

took a swig of the Mexican brew. Zavala took a sheet of computer paper from his pocket, placed it on a table, and smoothed out the folds with his hand.

“What do you think of my new wet submersible?”

In a wet submersible, the pilot and passenger wore scuba gear and sat on the outside of the vehicle rather than inside an enclosed cockpit. Wet submersibles commonly echoed the shape of their dry counterparts, with propellers at one end of a torpedo-shaped vehicle, the pilot at the other end.

The vehicle that Zavala had designed had a long, sloping hood, tapering trunk, and a wraparound windshield. It had dual headlights, white, so-called cove panels on the side, and a two-toned interior. The submersible had four thrusters instead of wheels.

Austin cleared his throat. “If I didn’t know this was a submersible, I’d swear it looked like a 1961 Corvette. *Your* ’Vette, in fact.”

Zavala pinched his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “This is turquoise. My car is red.”

“She looks fast,” Austin said appraisingly.

“My car can do zero to sixty in about six seconds. This is a little slower. But she’ll move out on or under the water and handles the curves as if they weren’t there. She’ll do everything a car can do except peel rubber.”

“Why the departure from more, uh, conventional submersible models, like the saucer, torpedo, or bulbous shape?”

“Apart from the challenge, I wanted something I could use on NUMA assignments that would be fun to drive.”

“Will this thing work?”

“Field trials have gone well. I’ve designed a complete vehicle transport, launch, and recovery system too. The prototype is on its way to Turkey. I’m going over in a week to help out with an underwater archaeological dig of an old port they found in Istanbul.”

“A week should give us plenty of time.”

“Time for *what?*” Zavala said, suddenly wary.

Austin handed Zavala a science magazine that was open to an article describing the work of a ship that lassoed and towed icebergs threatening Newfoundland oil and gas rigs.

“How would you like to join me on a cruise to Iceberg Alley?”

Zavala scanned the magazine article.

“I don’t know, Kurt. Sounds mighty cold. Cabo might be more appealing to my warm-blooded Mexican American nature.”

Austin gave Zavala a look of disgust. “C’mon, Joe. What would you be doing in Cabo? Lying on the beach sipping margaritas. Watching the sun set with your arm around a beautiful señorita. Same old same old. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Actually, my friend, I was thinking of watching the sun come *up* as I sang my señorita love songs.”

“You’d be pressing your luck,” Austin said with a snort. “Don’t forget, I’ve *heard* you sing.”

Zavala harbored no illusions about his singing voice, which tended to be off-key. “Good point,” he said with a sigh.

Austin picked up the magazine. “I don’t want to push you into this, Joe.”

Zavala knew from past experience that his colleague didn’t push; he *leaned*. “*That* will be the day.”

Austin smiled and said, “If you’re interested, I need a quick decision. We’d leave tomorrow. I just got the okay. What do you say?”

Zavala rose from his chair and gathered up his submersible diagrams. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Where are you going?”

Zavala headed for the door.

“*Home*. So I can pack my flannel jockstrap and a bottle of tequila.”

C H A P T E R

5

NEAR MA'ARIB, YEMEN

DOWN THERE, MISTER, is tomb of queen.” The wizened Bedouin jabbed the air, his bony finger pointing to a fissure about a yard wide and two feet high in the side of the pockmarked limestone hill. The rough-edged layers of strata above and below the opening were like lips afflicted with a bad case of trench mouth.

Anthony Saxon got down on his hands and knees and peered into the hole. He pushed aside thoughts of poisonous snakes and spiders, unwound his turban, and pulled off his beige desert robe to reveal long pants and a shirt. He flicked on a flashlight, probed the darkness with its beam, and took a deep breath.

“Down the rabbit hole I go,” he said with a carefree jauntiness.

Saxon dove into the opening, wriggling his lanky six-foot frame like a salamander, and disappeared from sight. The passageway sloped downward like a coal chute. Saxon experienced a claustrophobic moment of panic when the chute narrowed and he pictured himself stuck, but he shimmied his way through the tight squeeze with the use of creative finger-toe coordination.

To his relief, the passageway widened again. After crawling for about twenty feet, he popped out of the chute into the open. Mindful not to bump his head on a low ceiling, he slowly stood erect and explored his surroundings with the flashlight.

The bull's-eye of light fell on the mortared-stone-block wall of a rectangular space about as big as a two-car garage. There was an opening with a corbeled arch about five feet high on the opposite wall. He ducked through the breach and followed a passageway for around fifty feet until he came to a rectangular room about half the square footage of the first.

The dust that covered every surface started him on a coughing fit. When he recovered, he saw that the room was bare except for a wooden sarcophagus that was tipped on its side. The lid lay a few feet away. A vaguely human form swathed in bandages from head to toe was half tumbled out of the ancient casket. Saxon cursed under his breath. He had arrived centuries too late. Grave robbers had stripped the tomb of any valuables hundreds of years before he was born.

The sarcophagus lid was decorated with a painting of a young girl, probably in her late teens. She had dark, oversized eyes, a full mouth, and black hair tied back from her face. She looked vibrant and full of life. With gentle hands, he rolled the mummy back into the case. The dissected corpse felt like a dried bag of sticks. He righted the sarcophagus and slid the lid back on.

He ran the flashlight beam around the walls of the tomb and read the letters carved into the stone. The words they formed were in epigraphic Arabic of the first century A.D. Off by a thousand years. "*Crap,*" he muttered.

Saxon patted the sarcophagus cover. "Sleep well, sweetheart. Sorry to disturb you."

With a last, sad glance around the tomb, he followed the corridor

back to the chute opening. He grunted his way through the tight spot and pulled his dust-covered body out of the hole into the hundred-degree heat. His pants were ripped, and his knees and elbows were scraped and bleeding.

The Bedouin had an expectant expression on his dark face.

“*Bilqis?*” he said.

Anthony Saxon responded with a belly laugh. “*Bilked*, is more like it.”

The Bedouin’s face fell. “No queen.”

Saxon recalled the portrait on the sarcophagus. “A princess, maybe. But not my queen. Not Sheba.”

A car horn beeped at the bottom of the hill. A man standing next to a beat-up old Land Rover had one hand in the car and the other waving in the air. Saxon waved back, slipped into his desert robe and turban, and led the way down the slope. The man blowing the horn in the sandblasted vehicle was an aristocratic-looking Arab whose upper lip was hidden under a luxuriant mustache.

“What’s up, Mohammed?” Saxon said.

“Time to go,” the Arab said. “Bad people come.”

He brandished the barrel of the Kalashnikov automatic rifle toward a point about a half mile distance. An oncoming vehicle was kicking up a dust cloud.

“How do you know they’re bad people?” Saxon asked.

“They *all* bad people around here,” the Arab said with a gold-toothed smile. Without another word, he got behind the wheel of the car and started the engine.

Saxon had learned to respect Mohammed’s skill at keeping him alive in the Wild West atmosphere of Yemen’s backcountry. Every chieftain in the area seemed to have his own private army of brigands, and larceny and murder in his heart.

He slid onto the passenger seat. The Bedouin piled into the back.

Mohammed mashed the accelerator. The Land Rover kicked up dirt and sand. As the driver ground through the gears, he managed somehow to steer and hold on to his weapon as well.

Mohammed kept checking his rearview mirror. After several minutes, he patted the dashboard as if it were the neck of a trusty steed.

“We’re okay,” he said with a wide grin. “You find your queen?”

Saxon told him about the sarcophagus and the mummy of the young girl.

Mohammed jerked his thumb at the Bedouin in the backseat. “I told you. This son of a camel and his village are all crooks.”

Thinking that he was being praised, the Bedouin displayed a toothless grin.

Saxon sighed and shifted his gaze to the barren countryside. The locale changed, but the scene was always the same. A native con man would tell him in excited tones that the queen he was looking for was literally beneath his nose. Saxon would make a hair-raising crawl into the middle of an ancient necropolis that the con man’s forebears had looted hundreds of years before. He couldn’t count the number of mummies he had encountered. He had met a lot of nice people along the way. Too bad they were all dead.

Saxon dug a few riales out of his shorts pocket. He handed the coins to the delighted Bedouin and declined the man’s offer to show him another dead queen.

Mohammed dropped the Bedouin off at a cluster of desert tents, then he drove to the old city of Ma’arib. Saxon was staying at the Garden of the Two Paradises Hotel. He asked Mohammed to come by the hotel the next morning and they would decide on his plan.

After a hot shower, Saxon changed into long cotton slacks and shirt and went down to the lounge, his mouth feeling as if he’d swallowed a pound of desert sand. He sat at the bar and ordered a

Bombay Sapphire martini, and the drink's astringent sweetness washed the grit out of his throat.

He chatted with a couple of Texas oil company rednecks. A second martini revived his spirits, until one of the oilmen asked him what he was doing in Ma'arib.

Saxon could have responded that it was the last leg of a doomed quest to find the fabled Queen of Sheba among the ruins of old Ma'arib, the city that was said to be her home base.

He said simply, "I'm here to test the waters."

The oilmen exchanged puzzled glances and then broke into hearty laughter. Before they headed back to their quarters, they bought Saxon a third martini.

Saxon was at that wonderful point where all brain activity was clouded by an alcoholic haze when an elderly bellhop shuffled into the bar and handed him a sheet of hotel stationery with a brief message scrawled on it:

I believe I can introduce you to the man of the sea. If you are still interested in meeting him let me know soonest.

He blinked the blurriness from his eyes and read it again. The sender was a Cairo antiques finder named Hassan, whom he had spoken to by phone before coming to Yemen. He scrawled an answer at the bottom of the note and handed it to the bellhop with a tip and instructions to arrange transportation for a morning departure. Then he ordered the first of several pots of strong black coffee and buckled down to the job of getting sober.

C H A P T E R

6

ZAVALA HAD HIS DUFFEL BAG packed and was ready to go when Austin swung by the former library building in Alexandria, Virginia, that his friend had converted to a bachelor pad with a southwestern flair. The two men caught a morning Air Canada flight, and their plane touched down on the tarmac at St. John's, Newfoundland, late in the afternoon, after a stop-off in Montreal.

A taxi took them to the busy waterfront, where the two-hundred-seventy-foot-long *Leif Eriksson* was tied up. The forty-six-hundred-ton vessel was a brawny ship, less than five years old, its hull reinforced for protection against the punishing North Atlantic ice.

The captain, a native Newfoundlander named Alfred Dawe, knew when their flight was coming in and was waiting on deck in anticipation of their arrival. As the men came up the gangway, he introduced himself and said, "Welcome aboard the *Eriksson*."

Austin extended his hand in a bone-crushing grip. "Thanks for having us, Captain Dawe. I'm Kurt Austin, and this is my colleague, Joe Zavala. We're your new iceberg wranglers."

Dawe was a compact man in his fifties who liked to brag that he'd been born in a place with the forlorn name of Misery Cove, and

that his family was so dumb they still lived there. Schoolboy mischief lurked in his clear blue eyes, and he had a dimpled grin that came easily to his ruddy face. Despite his self-deprecating humor, Dawe was an accomplished skipper with years of experience running ships in the cantankerous waters of the Northwest Atlantic. He had often encountered NUMA's distinctive turquoise-hulled research ships, and knew that the American agency was the most highly respected ocean exploration and study organization on the globe.

When Austin had called and asked to go on an iceberg cruise, the captain had checked with the ship's owners for permission to have guests aboard. He'd gotten a go-ahead and called Austin back with the date for the ship's next departure.

Dawe had been eager to meet the two men ever since Austin had faxed him a copy of their résumés. Austin had wanted Dawe to know that he and Zavala were not landlubber dilettantes who'd need constant watching for fear they'd fall overboard.

The captain knew about Austin's master's degree from the University of Washington, his training as an expert diver proficient in a variety of underwater specialties, and his expertise in deepwater salvage. Long before former NUMA director James Sandecker had hired Austin away from the CIA, Austin had worked on North Sea oil rigs and with his father's Seattle-based ocean-salvage company.

Zavala's curriculum vitae said that he was an honors graduate of New York Maritime College, a skilled pilot with hundreds of hours on, above, and under the sea, and a brilliant engineer with expertise in the design and operation of underwater vehicles.

Given his guests' impressive academic credentials, the captain was intrigued when he met the NUMA engineers in person. Austin and Zavala came across more like gentlemen swashbucklers than the scientific types he'd expected. Their soft-spoken manner couldn't mask a barnacle-like toughness and a brass balls brashness that was only partly tempered by their veneer of politeness.

His guests were obviously rugged physically. Austin was over six feet tall and around two hundred pounds, without an ounce of fat on his sturdy frame. With his broad shoulders and powerful build, the brawny man with the mane of prematurely gray, almost-white, hair looked like a one-man wrecking crew. His chiseled face was deeply tanned from constant outdoor exposure, and the ocean winds and sun had given his skin a metallic burnishing. Laugh wrinkles framed intelligent, coral-hued eyes that calmly gazed out at the world with an expression that suggested nothing they saw would surprise them.

Zavala was a few inches shorter. He was flexibly muscular, and he moved with the catlike lightness of a matador, a holdover from his college days when he had boxed professionally as a middleweight. He had earned his tuition with a devastating right cross–left hook combination. With his movie star good looks and athletic build, he looked like the male lead in a pirate saga.

The captain showed his guests to their small but comfortable cabin.

“I hope we haven’t crowded anyone out,” Austin said as he tossed his duffel on a bunk.

Dawe shook his head. “We’ve got a crew of twelve on this cruise—two short of our normal contingent.”

“In that case, we’ll be glad to lend a hand,” Zavala said.

“I’m *counting* on it, gentlemen.”

Dawe conducted a quick stem-to-stern tour of the ship, and then they went up to the bridge, where he gave the order to get under way. The deckhands cast off the mooring lines, and the ship steamed out of St. John’s harbor. After passing between Fort Amherst and Point Spear, the most northeasterly spit of land in North America, the ship headed up along the Newfoundland coast under layers of slag-gray clouds.

Once the ship hit the open sea and settled on its course, Dawe turned over command to his first mate and spread a satellite photo out on a chart table.

“The *Eriksson* delivers food and equipment to the drilling rigs in the warm months. From February to July, we’re looking for big stuff floating down from Baffin Bay.” He tapped the photo with his forefinger. “This is where most of our North Atlantic bergs originate. Got around a hundred glaciers in West Greenland that turn out some ninety percent of the Newfoundland icebergs.”

“How’s that translate into the actual number of icebergs?” Austin said.

“I’d guess that about forty thousand medium-to-large bergs calve in Greenland. Only a fraction of that total comes this far south. Between four hundred and eight hundred make it to Iceberg Alley, the area forty-eight degrees north latitude off St. John’s. They drift for around a year after calving, and then they pass through the Davis Strait into the Labrador Current.”

“Smack into the great circle shipping lanes,” Austin said.

“You’ve been doing your homework,” Dawe said with a grin. “Yep. That’s where the trouble starts. You’ve got a steady flow of ships between Canada, the States, and Europe. The shipping companies want the voyages to be short and economical. The ships pass just south of the boundary of all known ice.”

“Which is where the *Titanic* discovered *unknown* ice,” Austin said.

Dawe’s genial smile dissolved. “You think a lot about the *Titanic* when you’re out here. It’s a constant reminder that bad seamanship can fetch you a one-way ticket to Davy Jones’s locker. The *Titanic*’s grave is near the Grand Banks, where the Labrador Current meets the Gulf Stream. There’s a twenty-degree water temperature difference that creates fog that’s as dense as steel wool. The ocean circulation in the area is pretty complex as well.”

“That must make your job hair-raising at times,” Austin observed.

“I wish it was something I could put in a bottle for bald-headed men. A berg can wander around the ocean like a drunk on his way home from a bender. North Atlantic icebergs are the fastest moving in the

world. They'll travel up to seven knots an hour. Fortunately, we've got a lot of help. The International Ice Patrol makes regular flights. Passing ships keep tabs on icebergs, and the *Eriksson* works with a fleet of small spotting planes hired by the oil and gas companies."

"How'd you get into towing?" Zavala asked.

"We tried using water cannon to move bergs. That works with 'growlers,' chunks of ice about the size of a big piano. There isn't a hose big enough to move a five-hundred-thousand-ton mountain of ice. Towing them to warmer water seems to work the best."

"How many bergs do you actually lasso?" Austin said.

"Only those that are headed for an oil or gas drilling platform. Two or three dozen. Once a ship hears about a berg, it can adjust its course. A five-billion-dollar world-class rig doesn't have that option. The floating platforms can move, but it takes time. There was a near collision a few years ago. Berg wasn't sighted until it got about six miles from the platform. It was too late by then to tow the berg or evacuate the platform. The supply boats pulled it off at the last second. The berg went right over the wellhead."

"With all the surveillance, I'm surprised the berg got that close," Austin said.

"As I said, their course can be erratic, depending on shape, size, and wind. That one snuck by us. We'll be keeping any eye out for a big lunker that disappeared in the fog after being sighted a few days ago. I've been calling her Moby-Berg."

"Let's hope that we're not Captain Ahab chasing white whales," Austin said.

"I'd prefer a white whale to an iceberg," Dawe said. "By the way, did I ever tell you why Newfoundlanders like to drive in winter?"

Austin and Zavala exchanged blank looks at the odd shift in conversation.

"The snow fills in the potholes," Dawe said. He laughed so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks. The captain had a seemingly

endless supply of “Newfie” jokes that poked fun at his heritage. The jokes continued through dinner.

The *Leif Eriksson*’s cook served up a meal that would have been worthy of a five-star diner. As Austin and Zavala dug into rare roast beef, canned green beans, and garlic mashed potatoes, covered with a layer of thick gravy, the captain unleashed his joke repertoire on his captive audience. Austin and Zavala weathered the barrage of marginal humor until they could take it no longer and excused themselves to turn in.

When they climbed to the bridge early the next morning, the captain must have felt sorry for them. He dispensed with the jokes and poured them mugs of hot coffee. “We’re making good time. We’ve seen a lot of growlers. That’s our first ‘bergy bit.’ ”

Dawe pointed to an iceberg floating about a quarter of a mile off the starboard bow.

“That’s bigger than any burger bit I’ve ever seen,” Austin said.

“It’s nothing compared to the stuff we’ll see later,” the captain said. “It isn’t considered an iceberg unless it’s nearly twenty feet above the water and fifty feet long. Anything smaller is a bergy or growler.”

“Looks like we’ll have to learn a whole new vocabulary out here,” Zavala commented.

Dawe nodded in agreement. “Welcome to Iceberg Alley, gentlemen.”