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# CLIVE CUSSLER

and CRAIG DIRGO



# SACRED STONE

A NOVEL FROM THE OREGON FILES

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Sacred Stone

by

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# Prologue

Fifty thousand years ago, and millions of miles from Earth, a planet was twitching convulsively to herald her destruction. The planet was ancient but her eventual demise had been cast from the start. She was an unstable orb with poles that constantly shifted polarity.

The planet consisted of rock and magma with a metal core. Over the countless eons since it had formed and cooled, an atmosphere was born. The gaseous layers were comprised of argon, helium and some hydrogen. Life was born on the surface of the planet – a low, base form of microbe.

The planet never really had a chance to develop complicated life forms. The microbes consumed oxygen molecules to multiply, keeping the surface and atmosphere barren of cells that could evolve. The planet's surface rock turned into superheated liquid mush as each revolution around its sun drew it closer toward the fiery furnace. The planet revolved not in a spin around her axis like Earth, but rather in an ever-increasing barrel roll as the poles shifted, and the melted rock surface began to spread like lava from a volcano.

Each hour, each minute, each second brought her

closer to her sun, and she gradually shed her skin as if the hand of God were scraping her surface with a wire brush.

The stellar dandruff that was cast into the atmosphere reached the edge of the gaseous envelope and was turned white-hot by the sun, bursting with the force of a thousand nuclear bombs. Sucked back to the surface by gravity, the reentering projectiles ripped more of the fragile crust away. More and more of the crust dissolved.

The doomed planet had only a short time to live.

As the protective covering was lost to space, the inner metal core temperature continued to rise and the orb inside began to spin. Large cracks in the surface spread and fractures formed, releasing larger and larger chunks of molten rock into space. And all the while the planet's metal core grew with incredible intensity. Then, all at once, it happened. A massive slab of rock on the side closest to the sun gave way. The poles shifted one last time and the planet began spinning wildly.

Then she exploded.

Millions of metal orbs flew into space, their molecules rearranging themselves as they melted like solder under a flame. A lucky few made it past the gravitational field of the sun. Then they headed on a long journey into the deep reaches of space.

Tens of thousands of years had passed since the unknown planet exploded, scattering its remains into

the universe. From a great distance the approaching debris appeared blue. One piece became a finely detailed orb. Many fragments had been sucked toward the surfaces of other planets in space, but this one traveled farther than the rest and eventually came to rain down on a planet called Earth.

The single metal orb entered Earth's atmosphere on a low trajectory from west to east. She split in the ionosphere and calved off a smaller spherical orb of pure metal. The mother meteor came in along thirty-five degrees latitude. At this latitude, it was dry and arid. The baby, lighter and smaller, was pulled farther northwest, heading toward the sixty-second-degree latitude, where the surface was covered with a layer of ice and snow.

Two different environments of the same planet brought two different results.

The mother and her molten metal re-formed into a glowing orb after spitting out her young. She came over a coastline then streaked across a barren desert in a decaying trajectory. Blasting high above the sand, rocks, and cactus, the one-hundred-yard diameter, 63,000-ton nickel-iron projectile slammed into the earth, carving a one-mile-diameter crater in the dry soil. Clouds of dust headed skyward, then began encircling Earth. Months would pass before all the fallout filtered back to the earth.

The baby was pure and silver-gray. The action of the initial explosion and the molecular rearrangement while traveling through space had formed a perfect

sphere that appeared like twin halves of geodesic domes locked together. Traversing farther along the planet, she slipped through space quietly, her smooth surface meeting little resistance from Earth's atmosphere, with none of the anger and rage her mother had contained. She dropped lower and lower, like a golf ball with a topspin.

Soaring over the shoreline of an island capped with ice, it was as if she was being pulled to the earth by a magnet. Her diameter was but eighteen inches, her weight a hundred pounds. Drifting lower until she was only ten feet over the snow and ice, she lost her forward speed as gravity brought her down. Her heated metal surface melted a track in the snow and ice similar to a ball rolled by a child to make a snowman.

Energy expended, her heat dissipated, she came to rest at the base of an ice-covered mountain.

'What hath hell wrought?' the man asked in Icelandic as he poked an object with a staff.

The man was short but formed of layers of muscle that signaled years of hard work and labor. The hair on his head and the thick beard that grew from his cheeks was a brilliant red like the fires of Hades. Thick white furs covered his torso, while his leggings were constructed of sealskin lined with sheep's wool. The man was prone to fits of rage, and truth be told, he was not far removed from a barbarian. Banished from Iceland for murder in the year 982, he had led

a group across the cold sea to the ice-shrouded island where they now resided. During the past eighteen years he had built a settlement on the rocky coast and his colony had survived by hunting and fishing. In time he had grown bored. The man, Eric the Red, began longing to explore, to lead, to conquer new lands.

In the year AD 1000 he set out to see what lay inland to the west.

Eleven men accompanied him at the start, but some five months into the expedition, with spring coming, there were but five remaining. Two had slipped into crevasses in the ice, their screams still coming to Eric as he slept. One had slipped on ice and bashed his head on a rocky outcropping. He had twitched in tormented pain for days, unable to see or speak until he blissfully died one night. One had been taken by a large white ursine when he ventured away from a campfire one evening in search of a freshwater stream he swore he'd heard nearby.

Two had been taken by disease, suffering racking coughs and fevers that convinced the remaining survivors that evil forces were lurking nearby and stalking. As the expedition party thinned, the mood greatly changed. The elation and sense of wonder that compelled the men at the start had faded, replaced with a sense of doom and fatalism.

It was as if the expedition was cursed and the men were paying.

'Hoist the ball,' Eric ordered the youngest man in

the expedition, the only one to have been born on island soil.

The teenager, Olaf the Fin, son of Olaf the Fisherman, was apprehensive. The strange gray orb rested on a rocky outcropping as if placed there by the hand of God. He had no way of knowing that the object had descended from the sky some forty-eight thousand years before. Olaf approached the orb cautiously. Everyone in the party knew of Eric's penchant for violence; in fact, everyone on the icy island knew his legend. Eric was not asking – he was demanding – so Olaf did not attempt to disagree or argue. He merely swallowed hard and bent down.

Olaf's hands touched the object and he found the surface cold and smooth. For the briefest of instants he felt his heart miss a beat – but he continued on. He attempted to lift the orb but found it too heavy for his expedition-weary arms.

'I'll need help,' Olaf said.

'You,' Eric said, motioning to another man with his staff.

Gro the Slayer, a taller man with light yellow hair and pale blue eyes, took three steps forward and grabbed one side of the orb. Both men used their back muscles and lifted the orb to hip level, then stared at Eric.

'Make a sling from the tusked one's skin,' Eric pronounced. 'We will take it back to the cave and build a shrine.'

Without another word, Eric set off across the

snow, leaving the others to tend to the discovery. Two hours later the orb was safely inside the cave. Eric immediately began planning an elaborate enclosure for the object he now believed had come directly from the gods in the heavens above.

Eric left Olaf and Gro to guard the heavenly body while he returned to the settlement on the coast for more men and material. Once there, he learned that a son had been born to his wife in his absence. He named him Leif in honor of the spring season, then left him with his mother to raise. With eighty more men and tools to excavate the cavern where the orb was hidden, he set off north toward the distant mountain. Summer was near and the sun was visible around the clock.

Gro the Slayer turned on his pelt bed then spat some loose fur from his mouth.

Rubbing his hand across the bearskin, he watched in surprise as the fur balled up in his palm. Then he stared at the orb in the dancing light of a torch placed in the wall.

‘Olaf,’ he said to the teenager sleeping a short distance away, ‘it is time to rise and face the day.’

Olaf rolled over and stared toward Gro. His eyes were red and bloodshot and his skin blotchy and flaking. He coughed lightly, sat upright and stared at Gro through the dim light. Gro’s hair had been shedding and his color was all wrong.

‘Gro,’ Olaf said, ‘your nose.’

Gro raised the back of his hand to his nose and saw the red of blood. More and more often he had found himself with a bloody nose. He reached down and tugged on a painful tooth. It came out in his fingers. He tossed it aside and rose to his feet.

‘I’ll cook the berries,’ he said.

Stirring the fire, he added a few sticks from their dwindling supply then retrieved a sealskin bag containing the red berries they boiled to make a bitter morning drink. Walking outside the cave, he filled a dented iron pot with water from the stream of a nearby melting glacier, then stared at the marks scratched on the wall outside the cave.

Two or three more marks and Eric the Red was due to return.

By the time Gro returned inside the cave, Olaf was standing, dressed in his lightweight leather pants with his shirt laid on a rock nearby. He was scratching his back with a stick, and the skin was flickering to the ground like the first light snow of a new winter season. Once the itching had subsided he slid his leather shirt over his head.

‘Something is amiss,’ Olaf said. ‘Both of us are becoming sicker as each day passes.’

‘Maybe it is the foul air inside this cave,’ Gro said quietly, placing the pot on the fire.

‘I think it is *that*,’ Olaf said, pointing to the orb. ‘I think it is possessed.’

‘We could move outside the cave,’ Gro said, ‘and erect a tent for living.’

‘Eric ordered us to stay inside the cave. I fear if he returns and finds us outside we will feel his wrath.’

‘I looked at the marks,’ Gro said. ‘He is due to return in three sleeps – no more.’

‘We could take turns watching for his return,’ Olaf said quietly, ‘then hurry back inside before he catches us.’

Gro stirred the berries in the boiling water. ‘Sudden death or slow sickness – I think it best we avoid what we know will happen for what might or might not.’

‘A few more days,’ Olaf said.

‘A few more days,’ Gro said as he placed an iron dipper into the pot. He filled a pair of iron bowls with the berry liquid and handed one to Olaf.

Four marks on the entrance of the cave later, Eric the Red returned.

‘You have the racking cough,’ he said as soon as he saw the condition of the men. ‘I do not want you to infect the others. Return to the settlement but take up residence in the log house to the north.’

Olaf and Gro set off to the south the following morning – but they never reached home.

Olaf went first, his weakened heart simply giving out three days after the start of the journey. Gro didn’t fare much better, and when he could walk no more he made camp. The furry beasts came soon

after. What wasn't consumed immediately was spread about by the carnivores until it was as if Gro had never existed at all.

After watching his two men disappear into the distance, Eric gathered the miners, engineers and laborers he had brought from the settlement. He cleared a spot in the dust on the floor of the cave and began sketching his plans with a stick.

The plans were ambitious, but a gift from heaven should not be treated lightly.

That day the first parties began to map out the cave. In time it would be learned that the cave stretched nearly a mile into the mountain and the temperature increased as the cavern ran downward. A large pool with freshwater was located deep inside, with stalactites descending from the ceiling and stalagmites rising from the floor.

Groups were sent to the coast to locate long poles of driftwood to construct a series of ladders up and down the passages, while others carved steps into the rock. Intricate doors were fashioned from slabs of rock that pivoted on balanced hinges to hide the object from others who might seek her power. Runic carvings and statues were hewn from the rock, and light was reflected from the few openings where fresh air entered the cave. Eric supervised the work from the settlement on the coast. He visited the site rarely, letting the vision in his mind be his guide.

Men came, worked, became sick and died, only to be replaced by others.

By the time the cavern was finished, Eric the Red had decimated his population base and the settlement would never recover. Only once did his son, Leif, see the glorious monument.

Eric ordered the entrance sealed, and the object was left for those yet to come.

# PART ONE

# I

Lieutenant Chris Hunt rarely talked about his past, but the men he served with had gathered a few clues from his demeanor. The first was that Hunt had not grown up in some backwoods hillbilly haven and used the army to see the world. He was from Southern California. And, if pressed, Hunt would volunteer he was raised in the *Los Angeles area*, not wanting to disclose that he grew up in Beverly Hills. The second thing the men noticed was that Hunt was a natural leader – he was neither patronizing nor put on an air of superiority, but neither did he try to hide the fact that he was competent and smart.

The third thing the men found out today.

A chill wind was blowing down from the mountains into the Afghanistan valley where the platoon under Hunt's command was breaking camp. Hunt and three other soldiers were wrestling with a tent they were folding for storage. While the men were bringing the ends together longways, Sergeant Tom Agnes decided to ask about the rumor he had heard. Hunt handed him the side of the tent so Agnes could fold it into halves.

'Sir,' Agnes said, 'rumor has it you graduated from Yale University – that true?'

All the men were wearing tinted ski goggles but Agnes was close enough to see Hunt's eyes. A flicker of surprise, followed by resignation, flashed quickly. Then Hunt smiled.

'Ah,' he said quietly, 'you've found out my terrible secret.'

Agnes nodded and folded the tent in half. 'Not exactly a hotbed for military recruiting.'

'George Bush went there,' Hunt said. 'He was a navy pilot.'

'I thought he was in the National Guard,' Specialist Jesus Herrera, who was taking the tent from Agnes, said.

'George Bush Senior,' Hunt said. 'Our president also graduated from Yale, and yes, he was a National Guard jet pilot.'

'Yale,' Agnes said. 'If you don't mind me asking, how did you end up here?'

Hunt brushed some snow from his gloves. 'I volunteered,' he said, 'just like you.'

Agnes nodded.

'Now let's finish breaking down this camp,' Hunt said, pointing to the mountain nearby, 'and head up there and find that bastard who attacked the United States.'

'Yes, sir,' the men said in unison.

Ten minutes later, with fifty-pound packs on their backs, they started up the mountain.

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In a town where beautiful women abound, at age forty-nine Michelle Hunt still caused men to turn their heads. Tall, with hazel hair and blue-green eyes, she was blessed with a figure that required neither constant dieting nor endless exercise to appear trim. Her lips were full and her teeth straight, but it was her doelike eyes and flawless skin that gave the strongest visual impression. And while she was a beautiful woman, that was as common in Southern California as sunshine and earthquakes.

What drew people closer to Michelle was something that cannot be created by a surgeon's knife, honed through dress or manicure, or developed through ambition or change. Michelle had that thing that made both men and women like her and want to be around her – she was happy, content and positive. Michelle Hunt was herself. And people flocked to her like bees to a flower in bloom.

'Sam,' she said to the painter who had just finished the walls in her art gallery, 'you do such nice work.'

Sam was thirty-eight years old and he blushed.

'Only my best for you, Ms Hunt,' he said.

Sam had painted her gallery when it had opened five years before, her Beverly Hills house, her condo in Lake Tahoe and now this remodel. And every time she made him feel appreciated and talented.

'You want a bottle of water or a Coke or something?' she asked.

'I'm okay, thanks.'

Just then an assistant called from the front of the

gallery that she had a telephone call, and she smiled, waved and began to walk away.

‘That’s a lady,’ Sam said under his breath, ‘a lady.’

Walking to the front of the gallery, where her desk faced out onto Rodeo Drive, Michelle noticed that one of the artists she represented was coming through the front door. Here her amiability had also paid off in spades – artists are a fickle and temperamental lot, but Michelle’s artists adored her and rarely changed galleries. That and the fact that she had started her business fully funded had contributed greatly to her years of success.

‘I knew today was going to be good,’ she said to the bearded man. ‘I just didn’t know it would be because my favorite artist would be paying me a visit.’

The man smiled.

‘Just let me take this telephone call,’ she said, ‘and we’ll talk.’

Her aide corralled the artist toward an area with couches and a wet bar off to one side. As Michelle slid into her desk chair and reached for the telephone, the aide took the artist’s drink order and a few seconds later began packing ground espresso into the machine to draw him a cappuccino.

‘Michelle Hunt.’

‘It’s me,’ a gravelly voice said.

The voice was one that needed no introduction. He had swept her off her feet when she was a young woman of twenty-one, freshly arrived from Minnesota, seeking a new life of fun and sun in 1980s

Southern California. After an on-again, off-again relationship, necessitated both by his inability to be bound to a relationship, as well as his frequent absences for business, she had borne his son at age twenty-four. And though his name never appeared on the birth certificate – nor had Michelle and he actually lived together before or since – the pair had remained close. At least as close as the man allowed anyone ever to come.

‘How are you?’ she asked.

‘I’ve been okay.’

‘Where are you?’

It was the standard question she asked him to break the ice. Over the years the answers had ranged from Osaka to Peru to Paris to Tahiti.

‘Hang on,’ the man said easily. He stared at a moving map on a forward wall near the cockpit of his jet. ‘Six hundred and eighty-seven miles from Honolulu on the way to Vancouver, British Columbia.’

‘Going skiing?’ she asked. The sport was something they had enjoyed together.

‘Building a skyscraper,’ he answered.

‘You’re always up to something.’

‘True,’ he noted. ‘Michelle, I called because I heard our boy has been sent to Afghanistan,’ he said quietly.

Michelle had been unaware – the deployment was still secret and Chris had not been able to disclose his destination when he’d been dispatched.

‘Oh my,’ she blurted, ‘that’s not good.’

‘That’s what I thought you’d say.’

‘How’d you find out?’ Michelle asked. ‘I’m always amazed by your ability to ferret out information.’

‘It’s not magic,’ the man said. ‘I have so many senators and other politicians in my pocket I’ve had to buy larger pants.’

‘Any word on how it’s going?’

‘I guess the mission is proving harder than the president envisioned,’ he said. ‘Chris is apparently leading a hunter-killer squad to locate the bad guys. Limited contact so far – but my sources claim it is cold and dirty work. If he doesn’t contact you for a while, don’t be surprised.’

‘I’m afraid for him,’ Michelle said slowly.

‘Do you want me to put in a fix?’ the man asked. ‘Have him pulled out and sent stateside?’

‘I thought he made you agree never to do that.’

‘He did,’ the man admitted.

‘Then don’t.’

‘I’ll call you when I know more.’

‘Are you going to be down this way soon?’ Michelle asked.

‘I’ll call you if I am,’ the man said. ‘Now I’d better go – I’m starting to get static on the satellite line. Must be sunspots.’

‘Pray our boy is safe,’ she said.

‘I might do more than that,’ the man said as the call ended.

Michelle replaced the receiver in its cradle and sat back. Her ex-beau was not one to show worry or

fear. Still, his concern for his son had been palpable and personal. She could only hope his worry was misplaced, and that Chris would come home soon.

Rising from the desk, she walked toward the artist. 'Tell me you have something good,' she said easily.

'Outside in the van,' the artist said, 'and I think you'll like it.'

Four hours after sunrise, one thousand feet higher up the ridge from the camp where they had spent the night, Hunt's platoon met a determined enemy. The fire came from a series of caves just above and to the east. And it came all at once. Rifle fire, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, handgun fire rained down. The enemy dynamited the mountain to create rock slides, pelting the ground below, and they had mined the ground where Hunt's troops sought refuge.

The enemy's goal was to wipe out Hunt's team all at once – and they would come close.

Hunt had taken refuge behind a series of boulders. Bullets were ricocheting off the rocks to all sides, sending chips flying through the air and striking his men. There was nowhere to hide, no way to advance, and their retreat had been cut off by a rock slide.

'Radio,' Hunt shouted.

Half his team was twenty yards ahead, another quarter ahead and to the left. Luckily, his radio operator had stayed close to the lieutenant. The man edged toward Hunt on his back to protect the radio. For

his effort he received a wound to his kneecap when a bullet grazed his raised knee as the man pushed himself closer. Hunt dragged him the rest of the way.

‘Antencio,’ Hunt shouted to a man a few feet away, ‘take care of Lassiter’s wound.’

Antencio scurried over and began cutting away the radio operator’s pants. He found the opening was not deep and began to wrap a bandage around the knee as Hunt flicked on the radio and adjusted the dial.

‘You’re going to be okay, Lassiter,’ he said to the radio operator. ‘I’m going to get us some help in here posthaste. Then we’ll have you medevaced.’

The fear in the soldiers’ faces was obvious. For most of them, as for Hunt, this was their first time in battle. As their leader, he needed to take control and form a plan.

‘Control, Control, Advance Three,’ Hunt yelled into the microphone, ‘need positive support, grid three zero one eight. Taking heavy fire.’

‘Advance Three,’ a voice said immediately, ‘report situation.’

‘We’re pinned down,’ Hunt said, ‘and they have the high ground. Situation critical.’

Hunt glanced up as he was talking. A dozen bearded men in flowing robes were starting down the hill. ‘Get some fire up there, men,’ he screamed to the forward half of his team. A second later a volley of shots rang out.

‘Advance Three, we have a Spectre two minutes

out and inbound. Four whirlies – two carriers and two gunships – will be off the ground in three. It'll take them another ten minutes to reach your site.'

Hunt could hear the whine of the massive propeller-driven gunship racing up the canyon miles below them. He peeked over the rock to see eight of the enemy still advancing down the hill. Raising himself, he shot off a rocket-propelled grenade. A whoosh then a thump as the charge flew through the air and ignited. He followed up with a volley of automatic weapon fire.

'Advance Three, acknowledge.'

'Advance Three, affirmative,' Hunt yelled into the microphone.

Where there had been eight there were now just four. They were only twenty yards from his forward team. Hunt swiveled his bayonet and locked it in place. The forward team seemed paralyzed. They were young, unseasoned and about to be overrun. A mortar landed close to the boulders and exploded. The area was showered with powdered rock and dust. From higher up the mountain another group of the enemy started down the hill. Hunt stood up and started firing. He sprinted the twenty yards ahead to his men and met the advancing enemy head-on.

Three's a charm, and that's how many Hunt shot dead in the gut. The last one he bayoneted, as his clip was empty. Taking his sidearm from his holster, he finished the man off, then slid to the ground, replaced his clip and rose and started firing again.

‘Back it up, men,’ he shouted, ‘behind the boulders.’

Two by two his men retreated to the relative safety of the boulders to the rear, while the men remaining kept fire on an advancing enemy. The enemy was high on distilled poppy, misplaced religious zeal and the narcotic khat leaves they were chewing. The slope was red with the blood of their fallen comrades but still they advanced.

‘Advance Three,’ the radio squawked.

Antencio reached for the radio. ‘This is Advance Three,’ he said. ‘Our C.O. is away from the radio, this is Specialist 367.’

‘We’ve located a B-52 at another target,’ the voice said. ‘We’ve diverted her to assist.’

‘Affirm – I’ll tell the lieutenant.’

But Antencio would never have a chance to relay the message.

Only Hunt and a grizzled old sergeant were left at the forward site when the AC-130 arrived on station. A second later a wall of lead began pouring from the 25-, 40- and 105-millimeter guns that poked from her sides.

The sergeant had seen a Spectre live-fire before and he wasted no time. ‘Let’s back it up, sir,’ he shouted to Hunt, ‘we have a few seconds of cover.’

‘Go, go, go,’ Hunt said, yanking the sergeant upright and pushing him toward safety. ‘I’m right behind you.’

The Spectre crabbed sideways from the recoil of

her firing guns. A few seconds later the pilot pulled her up and out to turn and make another pass through the narrow canyon. As the gunship ended her turn and lined up for her second run, seven of the enemy still advanced. Hunt covered his sergeant's retreat.

He killed five of the enemy with a combination of a rocket-propelled grenade and a concentrated field of fire. But two made it close to Hunt's position. One shot him in the shoulder as he turned to retreat.

The second one slit his throat with a wicked-looking curved knife.

Starting down in the dive for the fire run, the pilot of the AC-130 saw Hunt being killed and radioed it to the other aircraft. Hunt's troops saw it as well – and the sight removed their fear and replaced it with rage. As the AC-130 lined up for the pass, the troops rose and charged another wave that had just left the cave and was advancing downhill. Pushing forward as a team, they reached their fallen leader and erected a protective circle around his body. They waited for the enemy to advance, but as if by magic, or sensing the fury of the American troops, the enemy began to turn and retreat.

Twenty thousand feet above them and less than ten minutes from the target, the pilot of the B-52 flicked off the microphone and replaced it in its cradle.

'Did you all hear that?' he said quietly on the intercom to his crew.

The plane was silent save for the drone from the

eight engines. The pilot didn't need an answer – he knew they'd all heard what he had heard.

'We're going to turn this mountain into dust,' he said. 'When the enemy comes for the bodies, I want them to need to collect them with a sponge.'

Four minutes later the helicopters came for Advance Three. Hunt's body and the wounded were loaded in the first Blackhawk. The rest of the soldiers, heads hung down, climbed into the second. Then the helicopter gunships and the AC-130 began raking the hillside with a fury of lead and explosives. Soon after that the B-52 came calling. The blood flowed down the hill and the enemy was obliterated. But the show of force came too late for Lieutenant Hunt.

In time, only the need for revenge would remain to mark his passing.

And it would be years before that played out.

The *Oregon* sat alongside a pier in Reykjavik, Iceland, tied fast to the bollards. The vessels in port were a mishmash of both workboats and pleasure crafts, fishing boats and factory trawlers, smaller cruisers and – unusual for Iceland – a few large yachts. The fishing boats supported Iceland's largest industry; the yachts were here because the Arab Peace Summit was currently in session.

The *Oregon* would never win any beauty contests. The five-hundred-plus-foot-long cargo steamer appeared to be held together mostly by rust. Her upper decks were littered with junk, her upper and lower hull were a cacophony of mismatched paint, and the derrick amidships looked as if it might tumble into the water at any moment.

But the *Oregon's* appearance was all an illusion.

The rust was carefully applied radar-absorbing paint that allowed her to slip off radar screens like a wraith, the junk on the decks only props. The derricks worked fine; a couple operated as intended, a few were communication antennae, and the rest flipped away to reveal missile-firing pods. Belowdecks her accommodations rivaled the finest yachts. Opulent staterooms, a state-of-the-art communications and

command center, a helicopter, shore boats, and a complete fabrication shop were inside. Her dining room rivaled the finest restaurants. Her sick bay was more akin to an expensive hospital suite. Powered by a pair of magnetohydrodynamic propulsion units, the ship could run like a cheetah and turn like a bumper car. The ship was nothing like her outside appearance indicated.

The *Oregon* was an armed, high-tech intelligence platform staffed by highly trained people.

The Corporation, who owned and operated the *Oregon*, was comprised of ex-military and intelligence operatives who hired themselves out to countries and individuals needing specialized services. They were a private army of mercenaries with a conscience. Often secretly tasked by the US government to perform missions because they were outside the scope of congressional oversight, they existed in a shadowy world without diplomatic protection or governmental acknowledgment.

The Corporation was a force for hire – but they accepted clients carefully.

For the past week they had been in Iceland providing security for the emir of Qatar, who was attending the summit. Iceland had been selected for the meetings for a variety of reasons. The country was small, Reykjavik's population was only around 100,000, and that helped with the security concerns. The population was homogeneous, and that made outsiders stand out like sore thumbs, which added to the ability

to detect terrorists intent on disturbing the peace process. And lastly, Iceland claimed to have the world's oldest elected parliament. The country had been involved in the democratic process from centuries past.

The agenda for the weeklong meetings included the occupation of Iraq, the situation in Israel and Palestine and the spread of fundamentalist terrorism. And while the summit was not sanctioned by the United Nations or any other world governing body, the leaders in attendance realized that policy would be formed and courses of action decided.

Russia, France, Germany, Egypt, Jordan, and a host of other Middle Eastern countries were attending. Israel, Syria and Iran had declined. The United States, Great Britain and Poland, as the allied liberators of Iraq, were there, as well as a host of smaller countries. Nearly two dozen nations and their ambassadors, security, intelligence operatives and handlers had descended on Iceland's capital city like a swarm of mosquitoes in the night. With the city's small population, the numerous spies and security people were as obvious to the citizens of Reykjavik as if they had been wearing bikinis in the freezing cold weather. Icelanders were fair of skin, blond of hair and blue-eyed – a hard combination to fake if you are trying to blend in with the locals.

Reykjavik was a city of low buildings and brightly painted houses that stood out against the snow-covered terrain like ornaments on a Christmas tree.

The tallest building, Hallgrimskirkja Church, was but a few stories high, and the plumes of steam from the geothermal springs in the area that warmed the houses and buildings gave the landscape a surreal appearance. The smell of hydrogen sulfide from the springs tainted the air with a slight rotten-egg odor.

Reykjavik was clustered around the year-round ice-free port that housed the fishing fleet, the mainstay of Iceland's economy. And, in contrast to the country's name, the winter temperature in the city was actually milder than New York City's. The citizens of Iceland are both extremely healthy and seemingly happy. The happiness can be traced to a positive state of mind; the health, to the abundance of local hot springs pools.

The Arab summit meetings were taking place at the Hofoi, the large house now used for city functions that had also been the site of a 1986 meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. Hofoi was less than a mile from where the *Oregon* was docked, a convenience that made security an easier affair.

Qatar had used the Corporation in the past – and they enjoyed a mutual relationship of high regard.

Out of respect for the Christian participants of the summit, no meetings had been scheduled for Christmas day, so belowdecks in the galley of the *Oregon* a trio of chefs was putting the finishing touches on the coming feast. The main course was in the oven – twelve large turduckens. The turduckens were a treat

to the crew – they were small deboned chickens stuffed with cornmeal and sage stuffing, inserted into deboned ducks with a thinner layer of spice bread stuffing, which were then stuffed inside large deboned turkeys that had been lined with an oyster and chestnut stuffing. When the carcasses were carved, the slices would reveal a trio of meats.

Relish trays were already on the tables: iced carrots, celery, scallions, radishes and julienne zucchini. There were bowls of nuts, fruits, and cheese and crackers. Trays of crab claws, raw oysters and lobster chunks. Three kinds of soup; Waldorf, green and gelatin salads; a fish course; a cheese course; mince, pumpkin, apple and berry pies; wine; port; liqueurs and Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee.

None of the crew would leave hungry.

In his opulent stateroom Juan Cabrillo towed his wet hair, then shaved and splashed his cheeks with bay rum aftershave. His blond crew cut required little maintenance, but in the last few weeks he had grown a goatee, which he now carefully trimmed with a set of stainless-steel scissors. Satisfied with his work, he stared in the mirror and smiled. He looked good – rested, healthy, and content.

Walking into the main cabin he selected a starched white shirt, a finely woven lightweight gray wool suit tailored in London, a silk rep tie, soft gray wool socks and a pair of black, polished Cole Haan tassel loafers. After laying them out, he began to dress.

While knotting the red-and-blue-striped tie he did

a last check, then opened the door and walked down the passageway toward the elevator. A few hours ago his team had learned of a threat to the emir. A plan was now in place that, if successful, would kill two birds with one stone.

Now if they could only locate the stray nuclear bomb that was missing halfway across the globe, the year could end on a positive note. Cabrillo had no way of knowing that within twenty-four hours he would be traveling across a frozen wasteland to the east – or that the fate of a city by a river would hang in the balance.