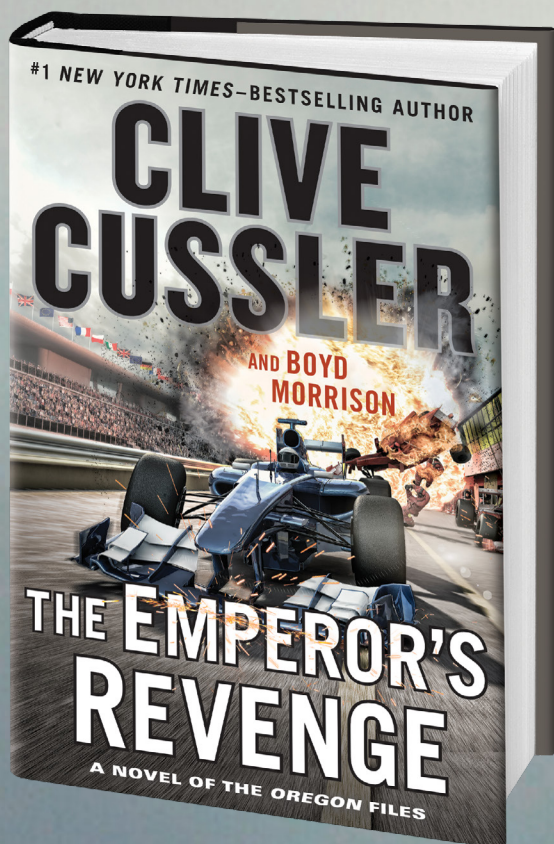


CLIVE CUSSLER

THE EMPEROR'S REVENGE



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The
EMPEROR'S
REVENGE

PROLOGUE

ST. HELENA
APRIL 28, 1821

Lieutenant Pierre Delacroix cursed himself for his overconfidence. He had taken a huge risk by sailing into the predawn twilight, hoping to get just a few miles closer to the rocky cliffs on the north side of St. Helena before sunup. A British frigate, one of the eleven guarding the remote island, appeared around the coast and turned in their direction. If his submarine were caught on the surface in broad daylight, the mission to free Napoleon Bonaparte from exile would be over before it began.

Delacroix lowered his spyglass and called down through the hatch. "Prepare to dive the boat!"

Three men quickly lowered the sail in the gusting wind. With the bright sun at his back, Delacroix took one last look at the approaching frigate before ducking below and closing the copper hatch. His nostrils flared at the rank odor of fifteen men packed together inside the cramped quarters.

"Did they spot us?" asked Yves Beaumont, a frown creasing

his forehead. Though he kept his voice calm, his eyes flicked incessantly toward the closed portal, betraying his anxiety. The experienced alpinist had nonchalantly stood on ledges at heights that would cause normal men to faint in fear, but the idea of submerging inside the confines of a hollow metal and wooden tube terrified him.

Delacroix had no such claustrophobia, one reason why he was the perfect man to lead the mission on the world's first operational submarine.

"We'll know if they've seen us soon enough, Monsieur Beaumont."

They'd also soon know if the sub would be able to withstand submerging in the open ocean. It had been built based on designs American engineer Robert Fulton had used to demonstrate the concept of submarine warfare to Napoleon's naval staff. Delacroix named his fifty-foot-long update *Stingray*.

Since casting off from the schooner that had towed the technically advanced vessel within sixty miles of St. Helena's shores, the *Stingray* had sailed under cover of darkness. So far, the voyage had been uneventful, and the copper-clad oaken hull remained watertight.

Now it was time to find out if the harbor dive tests that the *Stingray* had passed with flying colors were matched by her performance under the high seas.

"All hatches sealed, Lieutenant," said Ensign Villeneuve, Delacroix's second-in-command. "The snorkel is closed and tight."

"Ready on the ballast pumps."

The sub's two engineers prepared to work the manual pumps that would force water into the empty tanks. The rest of the twelve-man crew was in position to operate the crank that would

turn the propeller at the rear, while Delacroix held the stick that controlled the rudder. Beaumont and their second passenger, who wore a black mask at all times to keep his identity secret, pressed themselves against the hull to stay out of the way.

With a deep breath as if he were preparing to plunge into the ocean himself, Delacroix said, "Dive the boat."

The engineers cranked the pumps, and in a few minutes water began to break against the two windows in the *Stingray's* viewing tower. The wood of the vessel creaked as it adjusted to the pressure pushing against it on all sides.

"It's not natural to be in a boat underwater," he heard one crewman murmur, but a sharp glance from Delacroix silenced him.

He waited until the external line attached to a float indicated they were submerged twenty feet below the surface, then said, "Hold here."

The engineers stopped pumping. The *Stingray* held steady and the creaking ceased.

Now all they could do was wait. Except for an occasional cough from the crewmen, the *Stingray's* interior was eerily quiet. Even the reassuring sound of water lapping against the hull was gone.

By now, the sun had fully risen, providing enough light through the inch-thick windows in the observation tower under the water so that a lantern was no longer needed to illuminate the sub's interior. They should now be able to remain underwater for six hours before needing to either extend the snorkel tubes or surface for air.

Two hours into their vigil, a shadow passed over them. Delacroix, squinting through the window, could just make out the hull of the frigate not a hundred feet away, her sails shading the

sub from the sun. All movement inside the submarine stopped as the crew waited for an attack, looking up at the ceiling as if they could see through it to the threat above.

Delacroix's eyes were glued on the frigate for any clue that it was tacking in their direction. Instead, its course stayed straight and true. In a few minutes, it was out of view. Out of extreme caution, Delacroix waited another three hours before ordering the snorkel to be extended.

With their air supply renewed, they remained submerged until darkness fell. The *Stingray* surfaced to a night illuminated by a half-moon. Delacroix was pleased to see that no lights were visible.

He turned his gaze to the jagged cliff of Black Point close by. The northern face rose five hundred feet above the sea. He'd been training for months with the mountaineer Beaumont, but seeing the rocky crag in person made him doubt the mission for the first time.

Beaumont joined him in the hatch and nodded as he viewed the steep cliff.

"Can we climb it?" Delacroix asked.

"*Oui*," Beaumont replied. "It's not the Matterhorn. And it will be easier to climb than Mont Blanc, which I've ascended three times."

Instead of this covert infiltration, Delacroix would have preferred a full-on invasion of the island, but he would have needed three dozen warships and ten thousand men to have any chance at success. The garrison of twenty-eight hundred soldiers and five hundred cannon protecting a single prisoner twelve hundred miles from the nearest land made Napoleon Bonaparte the most well-guarded person in world history. It probably would have been easier to abduct the King of England.

The crew tumbled out onto the deck, inhaling the fresh air. They lowered cork bumpers around the edges of the *Stingray* to keep it from being dashed on the outcroppings and dropped the anchor.

Delacroix looped a large coil of high-strength fishing line over his shoulder, and Beaumont did the same. They hooked a safety line between them. More than a thousand feet of rope was piled on the deck, along with a contraption that looked like a child's swing.

With a nod, Beaumont stepped onto the nearest rock and began climbing. When he was ten feet up, Delacroix followed. They methodically climbed the cliff face, detouring when they needed to avoid a particularly sheer part. Beaumont proceeded with seemingly little effort, pausing only to give Delacroix some rest. Just once did Delacroix slip, but the safety line prevented him from plummeting to his death.

Normally, Beaumont would take forty minutes to climb five hundred feet on his own, but Delacroix's inexperienced pace meant that the ascent took more than an hour.

When they reached the top of the cliff, Beaumont hammered an iron bolt and ring into the rock. He then attached a pulley, tied both coils of fishing line together, and looped the line over the pulley before anchoring it with a metal weight painted bright yellow. He tossed it far over the side to make sure it would extend all the way down to the water next to the sub. Delacroix spotted no ships on the horizon, so he waved a small flag to signal the crewmen to hook up the rope to the line.

When they received a signal in return that the rope was attached, he and Beaumont hauled up the fishing line over the pulley. The heavy rope snaked up the cliff. When it reached the top, they signaled again.

With two hundred pounds of the masked man muscle added to the weight of the rope, progress was agonizingly slow. After ten minutes of backbreaking labor, Beaumont held the rope fast while Delacroix heaved the masked man over the edge and helped him out of the wooden swing contraption, called a bosun's chair. A separate board was lashed behind for Delacroix to stand on while it was being lowered later in the evening.

"Doesn't he ever talk?" Beaumont asked, pointing a thumb at the masked man.

"He's paid not to," Delacroix said. "Just like you were paid to bring me up here. Now your job is done, and I thank you."

"So who is he?"

"You'll never know," Delacroix said, and jabbed a stiletto into Beaumont's neck. The alpinist went rigid, his eyes staring in confusion and disbelief. He slumped slowly to the ground.

Delacroix shoved twenty pounds of stones into the pack on Beaumont's back. Using his foot, he nudged the mountaineer's corpse over the cliff at an angle to avoid hitting the submarine below. The crewmen would see the tumbling body and the splash, and Delacroix would tell them that Beaumont had slipped and fallen. Now there was one less witness to worry about.

"Come," Delacroix said to the masked man as they began their arduous three-mile trek inland. Delacroix's companion followed dutifully behind without a word. Barren rock slowly gave way to lowland scrub brush and then thick forest.

By midnight, they reached the edge of the Longwood estate, the sprawling manor house where Napoleon was being held prisoner. It was in the dreariest part of the island, miles from Jamestown, the only port. The isolation was intended to be part of the defeated emperor's punishment, but it also played into Delacroix's plan. Because it was so inaccessible, the guards were lax

and let Napoleon roam wherever he wanted as long as he did not head toward town.

The sole road to Jamestown lay on the opposite side of the estate, as did the main guard shack and barracks. The guards didn't even bother with a random patrol of the grounds, a carefully tended garden comprising a mix of native gumwoods and English hardwoods.

Using the trees as cover, Delacroix and the masked man were able to reach the house without raising an alarm. Delacroix had memorized the floor plan and guided them to the nearest door.

At this late hour, the house was still and dark. Delacroix navigated noiselessly through the halls until they reached the bedroom they were looking for. Delacroix eased the door open and crept inside, followed by the masked man. He instructed the man to remove his mask, then struck a match to light the bedside lamp.

The occupant of the bed stirred at the sudden light.

"We've come for you, Your Majesty," Delacroix said.

With a start, Napoleon Bonaparte sat up in bed. He was prepared to shout for assistance when he saw Delacroix's companion.

He could have been Napoleon's twin brother. Same balding head, same diminutive height, same Roman nose. Even though Delacroix had been expecting this moment, the sight of them together still took his breath away.

Napoleon squinted at his doppelganger and said, "Robeaud?"

"It is I, Your Majesty," the double said in a pitch-perfect imitation of the emperor's cadences.

François Robeaud had served for many years as Napoleon's duplicate, appearing at events when the emperor chose not to and allowing Napoleon to stay out of harm's way when he feared

an assassination attempt. His existence had been known only to a select few, and it had taken years for Delacroix to track him down in debtors' prison, where Robeaud had been incarcerated ever since his benefactor had been captured by the English.

"Who are you?" Napoleon demanded, turning to Delacroix, who saluted smartly. His heart pounded at meeting the military mastermind who had conquered a continent.

"Lieutenant Pierre Delacroix, Your Majesty. I served under Commodore Maistrail aboard the *Neptune* during the Battle of Trafalgar." The *Neptune* was one of the few ships to escape the decisive naval engagement that made Lord Nelson a hero to the British.

Napoleon narrowed his eyes at the mention of one of his country's worst defeats. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"I mean to spirit you away from this island, Your Majesty. I have a fleet of eighty warships waiting for your command back in France."

"Then why did you not attack the island to free me?"

"Because the officers will follow only your orders. They will not risk fighting the Royal Navy unless they know you've been liberated."

He stared at Robeaud. "And Monsieur Robeaud? Why bring him to this godforsaken island?"

Delacroix nodded at Robeaud, who took a flask from his cloak. He unscrewed the cap, looked at the opening for a few long seconds, and downed its contents.

Delacroix took the flask and tucked it in his coat. "Not only did Robeaud volunteer to take your place, he agreed to swallow that arsenic in return for money to settle his family's debts. He will be dead in a matter of days, but his family will be well off for the rest of their lives. The physicians that the English recently

sent to take your personal doctor's place do not know you well enough to recognize an impostor."

Napoleon slowly nodded in appreciation of Delacroix's tactical acumen. "Very good, Lieutenant. I see that you learned well from my example. If the British knew I had escaped, the squadron of ships guarding St. Helena would chase us down before we got thirty miles out to sea."

"Exactly, Your Majesty. Now we must go."

"Go where? How are we to escape?"

"I have a submarine waiting at Black Point."

Napoleon's eyes widened. "You mean Fulton's strange vessel actually works?"

"Come with me and I'll show you."

Robeaud donned the nightclothes and got into bed while Napoleon dressed in one of the military uniforms that the British had allowed him to keep.

"I insist on retreating with the honor of a soldier," he said. Napoleon picked up a book by the bedside. He tore several pages from it, tucked them in his tunic, and replaced the book. The cover read *L'Odyssee*, with Greek letters below the title. Homer's *Odyssey*.

When Delacroix gave him a puzzled look, Napoleon said, "The pages have sentimental value to me."

They snuck out of the estate the same way Delacroix and Robeaud had entered. Napoleon was in poorer health than his replacement, so the journey back to the coast took longer. They reached the cliff top with only a couple of hours until sunrise.

Delacroix tossed one end of the rope over the side so that the submarine crew could catch it, then readied the bosun's chair. When Napoleon saw how he was to be lowered to the water, he initially refused. Delacroix reminded him that the bosun's chair

was the way officers were hoisted onto naval vessels while they were at sea, which quelled the emperor's objections.

He took a seat in the chair while Delacroix stood on the operator's board behind him as he held on to the rope to steady them. When Delacroix signaled with three quick tugs on the rope, the crewmen below started playing the rope out that wrapped around the pulley at the top of the cliff. Napoleon sat erect, trying to retain as much dignity as possible in such an awkward position.

With only an hour remaining before dawn, Napoleon and Delacroix alighted on the deck of the submarine. The crewmen hauled the rest of the rope down as they stared with mouths agape at the legendary leader. When the rope was reeled in, all that would remain of their escape would be the inconspicuous bolt and pulley at the cliff top.

They shoved away from the cliff and retrieved the cork fenders. They would sail as far from the coast as they could before daylight and then submerge.

"Congratulations on your success, Lieutenant," Napoleon said. "You will be highly decorated for this daring raid. Now, when we rendezvous with our frigate, I expect we will make straight for our fleet to—"

Delacroix shook his head. "There is no fleet."

The statement was met with a look of disbelief. "No fleet? But you told me we had eighty ships at our disposal."

"I said that so you would come with me willingly. This is a secret mission. No one must know you've escaped. Ever."

"You expect me to skulk away like a thief in the night, leaving an impostor in my place? No! How am I to retake my rightful position as emperor? I must announce my illustrious return to power. I refuse to flee my prison like some common criminal."

"You no longer have any choice in the matter."

Napoleon slammed his fist against the submarine's conning tower. "Lieutenant Delacroix, I demand to know what your intentions are for my rescue!"

"You misunderstand, Your Majesty," Delacroix said, and nodded to a sailor holding a set of iron shackles. "We did not come to this desolate place to rescue you. We came to kidnap you."

ONE

ALGERIA PRESENT DAY

Towering dunes and rocky crags stretched as far as the eye could see, baked by the harsh midday sun. The IL-76 cargo plane, now three hours out of Cairo, had been flying a zigzag pattern across the Sahara according to instructions.

Tiny Gunderson turned in his pilot's seat and blinked in confusion when he saw Juan Cabrillo standing behind him.

Normally, Juan sported short blond hair, blue eyes, and a tan complexion like the native Californian he was, but today he was disguised as an Arab native, with dyed black hair, brown contact lenses, skin darkened even further by makeup, and a prosthetic nose to alter his appearance.

"For a moment, I thought you were one of our other passengers," Tiny said.

"They're busy down in the hold, checking their gear," Juan replied. "They look a little nervous. A couple of them have never skydived before."

“Well, they picked a doozy of a place to learn. I haven’t seen so much as a road for the last thirty minutes.”

“They want to make sure no one beats us to their target.”

“Fat chance of that happening. We’re nearing the latest checkpoint. I’m going to need the next set of coordinates.”

“Then my timing is impeccable,” Juan said. “Our client just gave me this. He said it’s the drop location.” He handed Tiny a piece of paper with a set of GPS coordinates. Tiny plugged the new numbers into the Russian jet’s autopilot computer, and the four-engine plane began banking in that direction.

“We should be on-site in ten minutes,” he said. “I’ll open the rear door two minutes before the drop.”

Juan nodded. “What’s our fuel status?”

“No problem. I’ve got eight more hours of flight time.”

“Remember,” Juan said, “they won’t leave the landing zone until you’re out of sight, so hightail it as soon as we’re away.”

“Like I’ve been bit in the butt, Chairman. Have a good fall.”

Juan smiled. “Keep in touch.” He left the cockpit and took the stairs down into the cavernous hold.

Four pallets occupied the center of the hold. Three dune buggies were packed nose to tail, their parachutes piled on top and their rip cords attached to the plane so they would be triggered automatically when dropped.

The dune buggies were Scorpion desert patrol vehicles sold as surplus by the Saudi Army, with their armaments removed, of course. It had taken a day to refit them with the .50 caliber M2 Browning machine gun and 40mm Mk 19 grenade launcher that were usually mounted on the chassis. Now they could take on anything, short of a tank, and, according to their clients, the weapons weren’t going to be just for show.

The fourth pallet, the same size as the dune buggies, was still under wraps at the front of the hold. It wouldn't be joining them on this drop.

Juan strode toward the six men gathered near the rear door. All of them were elite soldiers of the Saharan Islamic Caliphate, a terrorist organization hoping to build a fundamentalist state that would span the entire width of North Africa.

The leader of this particular group, a brutal Egyptian named Mahmoud Nazari, who was suspected of several attacks on tourist groups, had made it known that he was trying to gain access to weapons of mass destruction that would aid in his goal to become the ruling caliph. The NSA had intercepted a conversation between him and his benefactors in Saudi Arabia that he needed funds to make an incursion into Algeria, where he could obtain such weapons.

Although the type of weapon was never specified in the call, the threat was taken seriously, and the Corporation had been tapped to take on the mission to discover what Nazari was looking for.

Juan stopped in front of the group. Nazari, a thin man with a heavy beard and dead eyes, showed no emotion whatsoever. He said in Arabic, "How long until our jump?"

"Less than ten minutes," Juan replied with flawless Saudi Arabian inflection. He also spoke Russian and Spanish fluently in various accents, but he'd never been able to master Arabic in any other dialect, so his backstory sold him as a Jihadist from Riyadh.

Given the atrocities Nazari was thought to have committed, Juan got a bad taste in his mouth every time he had to talk to the terrorist. When Nazari bragged about slicing off an infidel

civilian's hands during one of his attacks, Juan nearly threw him out of the plane's door without a parachute, but the mission to find the WMDs was too important to indulge his urge.

"How far do we have to drive once we land?" Juan continued.

"You'll know when I tell you. Now, complete your preparations." Juan hadn't been expecting an answer, but he would have seemed suspicious if weren't curious about the mission.

"Yes, sir," Juan said, forcing himself to say the words with a convincing tone of feigned respect. He pointed at the warning light above their heads. "That will flash red when the rear door opens. Stay behind the yellow line on the floor if you don't want to get sucked out. The light will change to amber a minute before the jump, then green to signal the jump. The pallets will go first, then us. Understand?"

"We went over this in the preflight briefing," Nazari said with clear disdain. "We're not simpletons." His men, who busily rechecked their harnesses and static lines, didn't seem bothered by the reminder.

"Of course," Juan replied. "I didn't mean to offend. I'll see you on the ground."

Juan left them and headed to the front of the cargo deck. The only reason he cared if they made it to the ground intact was so they could lead him to the target. It had been a challenge to get them to trust him to the degree they had, which was why this operation hadn't been tasked to U.S. Special Forces. As good as they were, infiltration wasn't their specialty, and the CIA had their own limitations.

Juan had created the Corporation to do work the U.S. government couldn't engage in directly. Plausible deniability was the rule. His stint as an agent in the CIA had made it clear that there were plenty of those types of operations needing to be carried

out through the Corporation. Juan had offered to take on the risks, for which he and those in his employ had been well compensated. Side jobs supplemented their income when work from the CIA was scarce, but Juan never took on a job that he didn't feel was in the best interests of America.

This mission certainly fit the bill.

It had taken weeks of secret meetings to gain Nazari's trust enough to be hired for the mission. He required a clandestine insertion into the southern Algerian desert, fifty miles of rough terrain from the nearest settlement or oasis. The dune buggies had only enough fuel to get them from the drop to the target and then back to civilization, which was one of the reasons for the aerial insertion. The other was because they weren't supposed to be on Algerian soil. The *Oregon* was already positioned at the port of Algiers to smuggle them out of the country. Tiny Gunder-son, the Corporation's fixed-wing pilot, would return the chartered IL-76 to its owners at the end of the mission. Originally, the operation was to take place three days from now, but Nazari had suddenly shortened the time line for unknown reasons.

Juan found Eddie Chen verifying that the pallet tie-downs for the dune buggies were tight. As lean and sinewy as an Olympic gymnast, Eddie was another veteran of the CIA and the Corporation's chief of shore operations. Though he was fluent in Mandarin, he didn't know any Arabic, so he hadn't mixed with Nazari and his crew. Juan told them that Eddie was a freedom fighter from Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world. Luckily, they hadn't recognized that Eddie was actually of Chinese descent.

"How are our friends doing?" Eddie asked, and smiled when he saw one of them wrestling with the line that would pull his rip cord. "Some of them look a little green."

"I just hope they hold it together until they jump," Juan said, shrugging into his parachute rig. "Tiny will have a fit if they toss their cookies and he has to clean up the mess before he returns the plane. Are we set?"

"Everything checks out. We're good to go."

"Where's Linc?"

"Just took one last trip to the head," said a basso voice behind Juan. He turned to see Franklin Lincoln, carrying his chute in one hand and two AK-47 assault rifles in the other as if they were toys. The gargantuan African American, with a head as smooth as a cue ball, handed Juan an AK-47, one of his least favorite weapons. He took it reluctantly.

"Don't blame me, Chairman," Linc said. As a former Navy SEAL, he would have much rather been carrying a more state-of-the-art weapon, too. "Remember, we're trying to fit in." Linc's cover was that he was a Nigerian who had joined the struggle to fight the Western infidels.

Intel said that it was unlikely that Nazari and his men spoke any English. Juan had told Nazari that he, Eddie, and Linc had only English as a common language, since they were supposed to be from Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Nigeria. Still, Juan kept his voice low when he could just in case the intel was wrong.

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Juan said. He secured the rifle to his pack.

"Any word yet on what our target is?" Eddie asked.

"Nada. Nazari's not the sharing type. I'm not even sure his men know." Juan tapped his watch, and voices suddenly popped into his earpiece. He could hear Nazari as clearly as if he were standing next to the terrorist. So far, the minuscule microphone transmitter that Juan had installed in the liner of his harness hadn't yielded any strong intel.

“But they have done everything we’ve required,” Juan could hear one of the soldiers telling Nazari.

“I don’t care,” Nazari said. “We can’t take that chance. Once they realize what we’ve dug up, they may change their minds about—”

At that moment, the rear door lowered, letting in a blast of air that garbled the sound so much that Juan could only catch of a few snippets of the remaining conversation.

Juan, Eddie, and Linc didn’t waste any time finishing the drop prep. Everything was ready when the amber light flashed.

A minute to the drop.

“We’re going to have to keep on our toes once we reach the target and recover whatever it is they’re looking for,” Juan said, his eye on Nazari at the other end of the hold. “I’m pretty sure I just heard that that’s when our client plans to kill us,” Juan said.

Linc smirked. “Lovely.”

Then the green light blazed, the dune buggy pallets neatly slid out the back one after the other, and Juan led the jump out over the desert, waiting a mile below.

TWO



MONACO

Henri Munier would never admit to a soul that he couldn't stand motor sports, not when he was the president of a bank in a country with the world's most famous auto race. Many of his biggest clients were Formula series drivers who lived in Monaco to take advantage of its reputation as a tax-free haven. They would be appalled to learn that he thought their sport was obnoxious and boring.

He couldn't help cringing as he drove his new customized Tesla electric SUV passed the Monaco Grand Prix turn known as La Rascasse. The morning race of Formula 3.5 cars was nearing its end, the sleek race cars' high-pitched engines whining as they rounded the corner and revved to full speed. The SUV's windows did little to block out the incessant shriek.

And it would only get worse. The main Formula 1 event, featuring the most advanced race cars on earth, would take place

later in the afternoon. The race was one of the few Grand Prix events run on city streets, and Munier hated the disruption to Monte Carlo traffic, for the six weeks before and the three weeks after, as the course was constructed and then taken down.

He had no intention of attending the race and getting stuck feigning interest in it for two hours. As he did every year, he took the opportunity to accept an invitation to one of the lavish parties thrown on the multitude of mega-yachts squeezed into the harbor, many of them with a perfect view of the racecourse. He'd sent his wife and two daughters to sunbathe on the beach in Antibes so he could enjoy the weekend by himself.

This year, he'd scored the most sought-after invitation in town. One of the largest yachts in the world, the *Achilles*, had tied up along the harbor's longest berth, and the decadent bashes visible on her decks had been the talk of the city all week. The host, Maxim Antonovich, had sent a gilded invitation for Munier to be his guest, and the banker suspected the reclusive billionaire wanted to talk about stashing a substantial portion of his holdings in Credit Condamine. Perhaps he was even considering becoming a citizen.

Munier wouldn't mind combining a little business with his pleasure.

He stopped at the end of the pier closest to the *Achilles* and stared at the massive vessel. Even though Munier was accustomed to the trappings of wealth, it was like no other yacht on the water.

At four hundred feet, she wasn't as long as the largest mega-yachts, but her width was unsurpassed. The main body of the superstructure sat astride gigantic twin hulls, which would give the ship impressive stability even in heavy seas. The interior

space had to be double that of other similar-length yachts, and two huge pools and a hot tub on the top deck were the settings for many of the parties. The rear deck had room enough not only for a helicopter landing pad but for a hangar as well.

The bone-white yacht had been built in secrecy, so many of the features were only rumors, but it was thought to have a submarine and a defense system to ward off rocket-wielding pirates. Munier wouldn't be surprised if it did. Ever since the luxury yacht *Tiara* had been boarded off the coast of Corsica in 2008 and robbed of a quarter million in cash, yacht owners had been going to greater and greater lengths to protect their vessels.

When he got out of the car, a light breeze ruffled Munier's pima cotton shirt and silk slacks as he walked toward the *Achilles's* gangplank, where he was greeted by a lovely young blond woman flanked by two huge men in suits guarding the entry from passersby. Dressed demurely in tailored trousers and vest that nonetheless showed off her slim figure, she glanced at the tablet computer she held before addressing him in perfect English.

"Mr. Munier," she said with a glowing smile, "my name is Ivana Semova, Mr. Antonovich's personal secretary. Welcome to the *Achilles*."

He shook her hand and said, "I'm thrilled to receive the invitation. His reputation as a generous host is well known. Will I have a chance to meet him while I'm aboard so I can thank him in person?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Antonovich has requested your presence in the forward drawing room. If you'll follow me . . ."

She led him up the gangplank and then a series of stairs to the main outdoor deck. Dozens of bathing beauties in skimpy bikinis cavorted with men of all ages and physiques, some in the pool,

some on plush chaise longues. Thumping electronic dance music, only slightly more tolerable than the race car engines' whines, blasted from speakers hidden throughout the deck.

When they went inside and the thick doors closed behind them, the music was instantly muted to a barely audible hum. The clip of Ivana's Louboutins was occasionally deadened when they whispered across Persian rugs.

"Here we are," Ivana said as they entered another elegantly appointed room, this one with a huge mahogany desk at the far end. The high-backed chair behind it was facing away from Munier so that he couldn't see its occupant.

He thought that this must be Antonovich's way of making a dramatic introduction. He'd only seen grainy photos of the reclusive billionaire, who was in his sixties, with a paunch, thick salt-and-pepper curls, and a port-wine birthmark on his left cheek that was the shape of a scimitar. Antonovich had made his money the old-fashioned way: he'd bought up many of the most valuable mineral deposits in the Caucasus Mountains when they were privatized. Since making his fortune, he'd supposedly channeled funds into political operations that opposed the Kremlin, leading to a paranoid lifestyle.

Munier waited for the billionaire to reveal his presence.

Nothing happened.

Ivana tapped on her phone, paying no attention to the awkward silence.

Munier cleared his throat. "Will Mr. Antonovich be joining us soon?"

"Just a moment," she replied, but Munier didn't know if that meant he'd be there in a moment or that she needed a moment. At the bank, Munier would be the one to keep people

waiting, but here he remained quiet despite his growing annoyance at the delay. If nothing else, he wanted to go out and join in the revelry.

A door at the far end whisked open and a short, muscular man stalked in, accompanied by two others, an Indian and a pale man with ginger hair, both of them athletically built. The diminutive leader had a stippling of close-shaved black hair that was balding in spots. His nose looked as if it had been broken in a couple of fights, his thin lips turned down in a tight frown, and a burn scar that started below his left ear and disappeared beneath the collar of his shirt. Despite his brutish appearance, charisma seemed to flow from him in waves.

He came to a stop in front of Munier and appraised him without saying a word.

Munier decided he'd be the one to break the ice. "Mr. Antonovich, what a pleasure it is—"

The man barked a laugh that ended abruptly.

"I'm not Antonovich. My name is Sergey Golov, the captain of this vessel." His accent wasn't thick, but it was definitely Slavic. "Have a seat, Munier. We have some things to discuss."

Though he was confused, Munier did as asked. He expected to be offered a cocktail, but none seemed to be forthcoming.

He glanced at the still-turned chair and then at Ivana, whose smile had vanished. "I was under the impression that Mr. Antonovich would be here."

She shook her head.

"Antonovich isn't coming," Golov said. "I asked you here."

Munier grinned halfheartedly. "I appreciate you inviting me to the party. Is there something I can do for you?"

Golov chuckled and took a seat across from Munier, leaning

his elbows on his knees. The Indian and the redheaded man stood behind him, stone-faced.

“A party . . . Right,” Golov said. “Yes, I invited you to a party, but it’s not the kind you think.”

Munier adjusted his seating position, suddenly uncomfortable with the situation. “What do you mean?”

“Mine is more like a raiding party.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re going to help me rob your bank. Today.”

Munier blinked several times, trying to make sense of what he just heard. Then a smile tickled the corner of his mouth. “You’re joking, right? This is some kind of gag. Did Georges Petrie put you up to this?” Petrie, the vice president of the Credit Condamine, was known for his elaborate pranks.

“No joke, Munier,” Golov said, all traces of his smile gone. “Do we look like fun-loving people to you?”

Munier’s heart hammered against his sternum. “I suppose not.”

“You see, the biometric locks in your bank can only be opened by you.”

Petrie’s fingerprints and retinal signature could be used as well, but Munier didn’t correct him.

“And, of course,” Golov continued, “they’ll only work while you’re living and breathing. Chopped-off fingers and plucked eyeballs only work in the movies. We know the latest readers sense active blood flow.”

“Why should I help you?”

“I will kill you right now if you don’t.” To emphasize his point, his men drew pistols from their jackets and held them casually at their sides.

Munier tried to gulp, but he discovered that his mouth had dried up. "So, I help you and then you let me go free?"

"You're not a stupid man, Munier. You've seen our faces. It couldn't be helped because of what we're planning. We can't leave witnesses, so I think it's clear you're not going to make it out of this alive."

"Then . . . Then what possible reason could I have to do what you say?"

Golov nodded at Ivana and she glided over with the tablet. She tapped several times and then turned the screen to Munier.

He gasped when he saw the image.

There were his wife and two daughters, playing on the beach, making sand castles.

"Show him," Ivana said into her phone.

The image shifted so that Munier could see the pistol that the cameraman was holding.

Munier had the urge to scream a warning to his family through the screen, but Ivana took the tablet back before he could.

"You're a monster," Munier could barely utter to Golov. He looked at each of them. "All of you are monsters."

"Believe me," Golov said. "We didn't want it to come to this. Still, I've done worse."

A desperate thought seized Munier. "Georges Petrie! You can take Petrie! He can get you in. Just don't hurt my family." His throat caught in a sob. "I swear I won't tell anyone."

"No. You're our only option."

"But Petrie—"

"Unfortunately, we already tried him," Golov said. He nodded at the Indian, who went over to the desk chair and spun it around.

Until that point, Munier had held out hope that there would be some way out of this, that he could come up with a solution. But now he knew he had no choice but to do what they said.

It wasn't Maxim Antonovich that had been hiding in the chair, as he'd thought. Staring back at him were the unseeing eyes of Georges Petrie, his tanned forehead marred by a bullet hole.

THREE



ALGERIA

As he descended, Juan could see more clearly the rock outcroppings that jutted from the giant sand dunes at irregular intervals and he hoped that none of the dune buggies had made a hard landing on any of them. Since there were nine men and only three seats on each buggy, a bent frame or broken axle would leave at least three of them stranded in one of the harshest environments on the planet.

Juan knew who would draw the short straws, if it came to that. Nazari wouldn't hesitate to leave them behind, especially since he seemed to have his own way out of Algeria if he planned to kill Juan, Eddie, and Linc.

Juan floated down right next to his team, but the untrained Egyptians had landed all over the place in heaps.

With his chute cast aside, Juan climbed the nearest dune to survey the location. The sun was scorching. His headscarf kept a little of the heat at bay, and he was happy to have the latest

lightweight ballistic fabric sewn into his clothes instead of the Kevlar body armor that soldiers lugged around.

“There are the Scorpions,” he said, pointing at the desert patrol vehicles that had landed in a line in the adjacent dune valley. “Get ours detached from the chutes and pallet.”

“What about you?” Eddie asked.

Juan saw Nazari closing on two other Egyptians to their left. One of the men was lying on the ground, writhing in pain.

“I’m going to see what happened to him. Come pick me up when you get the Scorpion ready.”

Juan walked carefully down the slope to keep from starting a mini-avalanche. The loose, fine-grained sand made for slow going, and driving over it would be tricky.

He reached the injured man at the same time as Nazari. He was one of the inexperienced jumpers. His face was contorted in agony.

The man attending to him turned to Nazari and said, “His lower leg is broken. He landed on that rock and his leg buckled.” He nodded to an outcropping beside them, although the unnatural angle of the man’s shin made the explanation unnecessary.

Juan felt a familiar twinge at seeing the gruesome injury. He had lost his own leg below the knee in a battle with a Chinese gunboat. He’d grown accustomed to the prosthetic limb he wore, so much so that Nazari would never suspect he wasn’t a two-legged man, but the phantom pain of the missing leg never fully subsided.

Juan bent down to examine the damage. Then he looked at Nazari. “Both the tibia and fibula have snapped. We’ll have to set it and then fashion a splint. He won’t be able to walk on it, so he’ll either need help or we’ll have to get him some kind of crutch.”

“You’re sure?” Nazari asked.

“I’m not a doctor, but I’ve seen this kind of injury before.”

Nazari nodded. Without another word, he drew his pistol and put two rounds into the man’s head.

Juan leaped to his feet and stared at Nazari and the 9mm SIG Sauer in his hand.

“We don’t have time for all that,” Nazari said calmly. “He would just be a hindrance.”

The other man jumped up, and it seemed as if he were about to make a big mistake by taking a step toward Nazari.

“He’s now a martyr,” Nazari said to his soldier. “As we all eventually will be. We couldn’t take him with us, and leaving him here to die of thirst would be cruel. Get our Scorpion prepared to go. As I said, we don’t have much time.”

The soldier stepped back, took one last look at his comrade, and ran toward the buggies.

“He doesn’t understand like you and I do,” Nazari said to Juan. “I can see it in you. We’re both alike.”

Juan nearly shuddered at the thought. “How is that?”

“We both are willing to do what it takes to accomplish the mission.”

Before Juan could respond to the insult that Nazari meant as a compliment, Eddie and Linc arrived in Scorpion 1, with Eddie driving and Linc on the .50 caliber in back. The 200-horsepower engine growled as it pulled up next to him. The only thing that distinguished it from the other dune buggies was the small “1” stenciled on the side.

Eddie looked at the corpse and said, “What happened?”

“Our client was just showing me his resolve,” Juan said. Nazari’s eyes didn’t betray any understanding, but they regarded him coolly.

Juan climbed into the front passenger seat behind the 40mm grenade launcher and donned the helmet Eddie handed to him.

Scorpion 2 showed up a few moments later and Nazari got in.

When the third dune buggy was ready, Nazari led the way, peering down at a GPS unit as they drove up and over dunes and around the bigger rocks.

Nazari had ensured they would be far from the drop zone when they reached their destination. Thirty minutes into their drive, Juan spotted the glint of sun on metal in the distance, shimmering in the heat rising off the sand.

“Is that a mirage?” he asked. The helmet-mounted communication system linked Juan to Eddie and Linc only.

Linc, who was higher in his seat in the back, said, “I don’t think so, but I can’t make out what it is.”

Nazari must have seen it as well because his Scorpion adjusted course and accelerated toward it.

“Must be our target,” Juan responded.

Eddie goosed the throttle to keep pace. When they got within four hundred yards of the object, its shape became apparent.

It was the bright aluminum tail of an airplane. Although it showed signs of weathering, it seemed to be in decent condition. Juan suspected that it had been buried by the shifting sands and was only recently uncovered by a storm. Wandering nomads loyal to Nazari’s cause must have reported it.

“That looks like it’s been here a while,” Juan said.

The tail section was big enough to be part of medium-sized passenger plane, but Juan could soon make out a new detail.

Not only did the rear part of the fuselage have no windows but it sported the familiar Stars and Bars roundel of the United States Air Force.

“That’s either a cargo jet or bomber,” Juan said. He squinted

at the tail. The black numbers stenciled on it were faded but still visible.

52-534

“Linc?”

“I’m on it,” Linc replied. He surreptitiously checked a database about WMDs he’d downloaded to his handheld tablet computer and plugged in the number to see if it matched any known missing planes.

Less than ten seconds later, Linc said, “I got it. Serial number 52-534 is a B-47 strategic bomber that went missing in 1956 on a transatlantic flight to Morocco. It was part of a four-plane formation that was supposed to rendezvous with a tanker for refueling, but when they came out of some heavy overcast, this one was missing.”

“They must have had some kind of equipment malfunction and gone off course,” Eddie said.

Juan assumed he now knew why Nazari had hired them to come all this way, but then he tilted his head in thought. The B-47 was designed to carry ten-thousand-pound thermonuclear weapons over the Soviet Union. But if this plane had gone down in a controlled enough manner to take it hundreds of miles off course and come to rest relatively intact, the pilot must have jettisoned that heavy load before attempting his landing. Even if he hadn’t, this expedition didn’t have the equipment to carry such a tremendous load, and no one on Nazari’s team had the expertise to dismantle a nuclear bomb. It couldn’t be what they were after.

“Was it declared a Broken Arrow?” Juan asked, using the term for a missing nuclear device.

“Yes,” Linc said as they pulled to a stop next to the tail. He

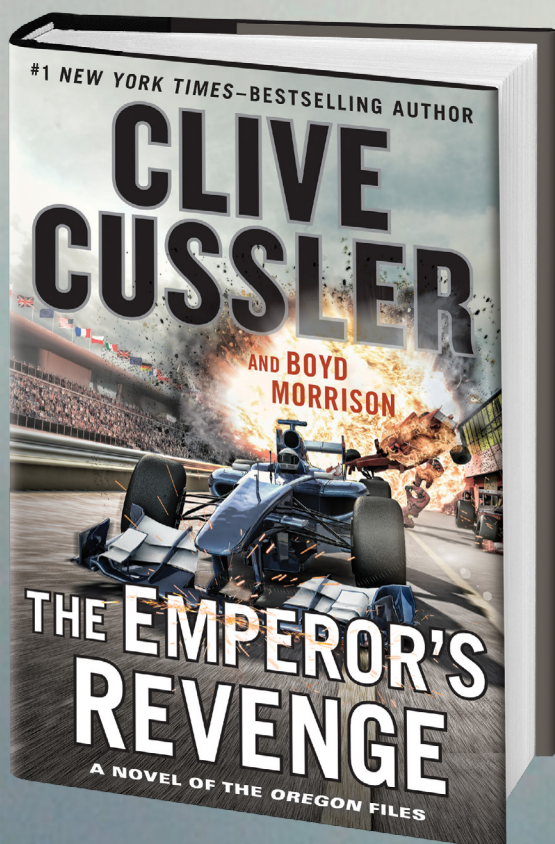
stuffed the tablet back into his bag. “They searched for it for weeks. Even called in the British Navy and French Foreign Legion to look for it.”

“What was it carrying?” Juan asked as he saw Nazari climb out of Scorpion 2, a malevolent smile breaking the Egyptian’s stoic demeanor for the first time. “Something portable, right?”

He turned to see Linc flip up his helmet’s visor and nod grimly. “The plane was transporting atomic bomb components to a base in Europe. Sitting about fifty feet away from us, somewhere under that sand, are two plutonium nuclear weapon cores.”

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