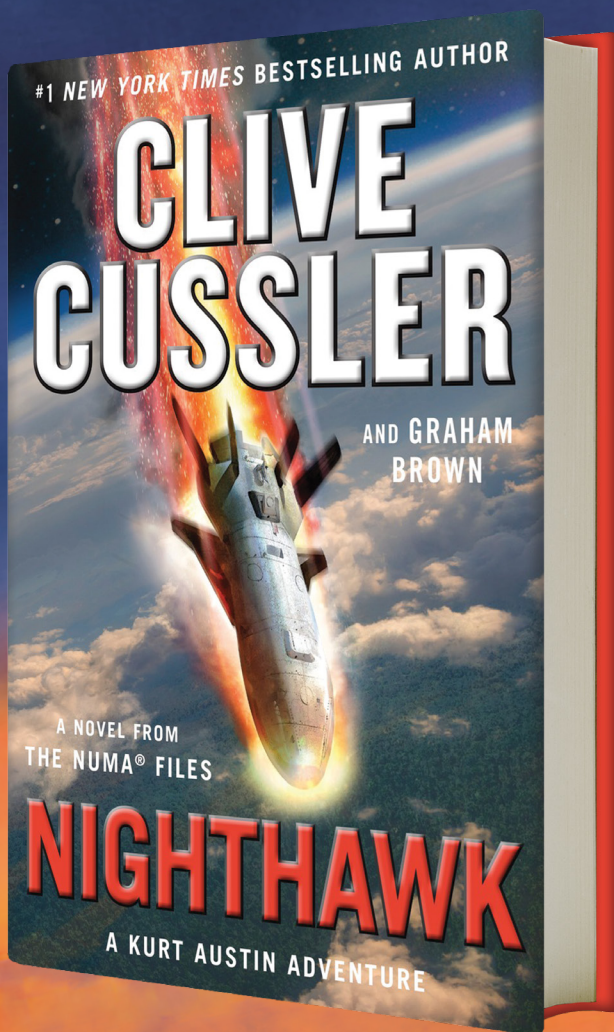

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NIGHTHAWK

[A NOVEL FROM THE NUMA[®] FILES]



CLIVE CUSSLER
AND GRAHAM BROWN

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SPANISH EXPEDITION OF 1525

Diego Alvarado Spanish soldier and leader of an expedition into South America circa 1525, contemporary and competitor of Francisco Pizarro.

Costa Spanish nobleman and financier, bankrolled Alvarado's expedition.

NATIONAL UNDERWATER AND MARINE AGENCY

Rudi Gunn Assistant Director of NUMA.

Kurt Austin Head of NUMA's Special Projects division, world-class diver and salvage expert, once worked for the CIA.

Joe Zavala Kurt's right-hand man, mechanical expert, also an accomplished helicopter pilot and amateur boxer.

Hiram Yaeger NUMA's resident computer genius, owner of many patents relating to computer design.

Priya Kashmir Hiram Yaeger's assistant, was supposed to join a NUMA field team, before a car accident left her unable to walk, instead joined the computer technologies department.

Paul Trout Tallest member of the Special Projects division, at six foot eight, married to Gamay. Has a Ph.D. in Ocean Sciences. Quiet and steady.

Gamay Trout Marine biologist, married to Paul, Gamay is a fitness aficionado, an accomplished diver and an excellent marksman.

Ed Callahan Captain of the NUMA vessel *Catalina*.

NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

Steve Gowdy Head of Ex-Atmospheric projects at the NSA, director of the *Nighthawk* program.

Emma Townsend Former NASA scientist, astrophysics expert, integral part of the *Nighthawk* program. Coworkers refer to her as *Hurricane Emma*.

Agent Hurns NSA field agent.

Agent Rodriguez NSA field agent.

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Colonel Frank Hansen Commander of the 9th Space Operations Squadron, based at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Constantin Davidov Special executive at the FSB, successor to the KGB, in charge of *technology retrieval* for the Kremlin.

Rear Admiral Sergei Borozdin Old friend of Davidov's, commander of the Russian 1st Salvage Fleet (Pacific).

Victor Tovarich Captain of the TK-17 Typhoon-class submarine.

Major Yuri Timonovski Commander and pilot of *Blackjack 2*.

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

General Zhang Highest-ranking officer at the Chinese Ministry of State Security.

Daiyu (Black Jade) Special operative for the Ministry, one of the “children that were never born.”

Jian Daiyu's partner, also one of the “children that were never born.”

Li Ying Liaison officer, Beijing.

Lieutenant Wu Field officer for the Ministry of State Security.

Falconer Code name of an anonymous asset connected with the NSA's *Nighthawk* program.

MS REUNION

Buck Kamphausen Captain of the *MS Reunion*.

PERU

Urco Archaeologist studying the origins and disappearance of the Chachapoya people.

Vargas One of Urco's volunteers.

Reyes Another of the volunteers.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Collin Kane Bomb disposal expert.

PROLOGUE:

THE BURNING POINT



South America
January 1525

The spear hit Diego Alvarado in the chest. A jarring blow that knocked him to the ground but failed to puncture the strong Castilian armor he'd carried all the way from Spain.

He rolled, took a position on one knee and leveled his cross-bow. Spotting movement in the trees, he let the bolt fly. It sliced into the foliage, drawing an anguished scream.

"In the trees to the right!" he yelled to his men.

A cloud of blue smoke exploded over the narrow trail as several large-bored muskets, known asarquebuses, fired simultaneously. The shots tore into the forest, severing small tree limbs and ripping through the lush green leaves.

A wave of arrows flew back at them in response. Two of Alvarado's men went down and he felt a spike of pain in his calf as an obsidian-tipped dart punctured it.

“They have us surrounded,” one of the men shouted.

“Hold your line,” Alvarado ordered. He limped forward instead of back, ignoring the pain and reloading his weapon.

After a long hike into the foothills, they’d been ambushed, lured down a path and attacked from both sides. Another group of men might have broken ranks under the assault, but Alvarado’s men had once been soldiers. They stood like a wall and didn’t waste their precious ammunition. Several drew their swords while the others steadied their heavy firearms.

The natives were drawing themselves together to attack once again. With a shrill cry, they charged from the trees. They broke into the clearing only to be struck down by Spanish thunder as a second wave of black powder explosions shook the air.

Half their number fell, others turned and ran, only two continued the attack. They rushed toward Alvarado, charging through the smoke, their dark, reddish faces and blazing white eyes highlighted by streaks of war paint.

Alvarado took the first one with the crossbow, dropping the man in his tracks, but the second lunged with a spear. The tip of the crude weapon deflected off the angled chest plate of Alvarado’s silver armor. Impervious to such crude blades, Alvarado reached toward his assailant without fear. He grabbed the man, shifted his weight and flung him to the ground.

Falling on him, Alvarado finished the native with a dagger.

By the time he looked up, the rest of them had fled.

“Reload,” he shouted to the men. “They’ll be back soon.”

As the men began the laborious process of packing powder charges in their weapons, Alvarado tried to remove the native’s arrow from his calf. He dug at his own flesh with the tip of his

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dagger and then eased the arrow out. He looked at it and then tossed it aside. It was nothing new. He'd been told these "people of the clouds" were different than the Inca and the other tribes of the area. That they were brave in combat, there was no doubt, but they had no greater weapons than any of the other natives. They had nothing to their advantage but raw numbers.

Alvarado poured some wine from a small flask on the wound. It stung, but helped numb the pain—and, he hoped, clean out any poison. He then wrapped his calf in a cloth and watched as the blood soaked it, spreading from a central spot, until the entire cloth was stained crimson.

"We have to fall back," he said, struggling to get up on his feet.

"How far?" one of his men shouted.

"All the way," Alvarado said. "Back to the village."

None of them argued. In fact, they looked relieved to hear the order.

They formed up and began to move. Alvarado managed to walk for the first mile, but the heavy armor and the pain in his leg soon became too much. One of his men came to help, supporting him and leading him to the sturdy packhorse they'd used to carry in supplies. The strap was loosened and the goods dumped on the ground. With a boost, Alvarado was lifted up onto the horse. He held on tightly, and the entire party continued quickly, heading downhill, back toward their camp.

After several hours Alvarado and his men reached the village they'd left early that morning. Night had fallen, but warm fires stoked by the soldiers he'd left behind welcomed them.

A nobleman named Costa helped Alvarado down from the horse. "What happened?" he asked, blanching at the wound.

Costa was an aristocrat of the middle tier. He'd agreed to fund the expedition in return for a third of all treasure recovered. Why he'd come along personally was anyone's guess, perhaps for the adventure, or more likely to ensure he wasn't cheated out of his profits. So far, he'd done little but complain.

"We've been tricked," Alvarado said. "These people of the cloud are not amenable to our presence. They would rather kill us than join us even if it means they remain enslaved to other masters."

"But what about Pizarro?" Costa asked. "These are his marks. He came this way. He said we would find allies."

Alvarado knew all about Pizarro's marks. The would-be conquistador had carved inscriptions into some of the trees alongside the trail so that Alvarado and his reinforcements could catch up with Pizarro and his advanced guard.

He knew about Pizarro's plans as well, to turn other natives against the ruling group. It had worked in other places, but not here.

"Something must have happened to him," Alvarado said. "Either Francisco has been killed or . . ."

He didn't have to finish. None of them really trusted Pizarro. He kept talking of gold, which no one had yet seen, kept promising wealth, which had yet to appear. He was a little man with big dreams. He'd been turned down by the Governor twice when requesting funds to assist his expeditions and in desperation had finally turned to Costa, and to his rival: Alvarado.

While Alvarado didn't like or trust Pizarro, he did understand the man. Both of them were cut from the same cloth. They were

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men of inauspicious birth, both had come from Spain to make a name for themselves. But they'd been enemies only months before, and it was entirely possible that Pizarro had agreed to partner with them only to lead them to their doom.

"We must leave for the coast immediately," Alvarado said.

Costa looked sick, at the thought.

"Something wrong with that order, my friend?"

"No," Costa said. "It's just that . . ."

"Spit it out."

Costa hesitated. "Some of the men have fallen ill. Fever. It may be the pox."

Alvarado could not imagine worse news. "Show me."

Costa led him to the largest of the native huts, made of mud and grass, that might have been a communal gathering place. A fire in the center burned brightly, venting smoke through a hole in the roof. A group of Alvarado's soldiers lay on the dirt floor around it, each of them in various states of distress.

"When did this begin?"

"Shortly after you left to find Pizarro."

In the flickering light, Alvarado kneeled beside one of the men. The soldier was little more than a boy; he lay on his back with his eyes closed and his face toward the thatched ceiling above. His shirt was soaked with perspiration and small red sores had begun to appear on his neck, face and chest. His temperature was so high that kneeling over him felt like standing too close to an open flame.

"Smallpox," Alvarado said, confirming the diagnosis. "How many are like this?"

“Eight are in the grips of it. Three others are less ill, but they can barely stand. They certainly can’t walk ten miles to the coast.”

With eleven of his men sick, several wounded and two dead, Alvarado had only twenty left who could fight. “We’ll have to leave them.”

“But Diego . . .”

“They’re too sick to walk and too heavy to carry,” Alvarado insisted. “And we’re greatly outnumbered. I count thirty huts around us. Each big enough for a large family. There must have been more than two hundred people living here before Pizarro came through. Even if half are women and children, we’ll never hold out. And who’s to say other villages are not allied with this one.”

Costa took the estimate grimly. “Perhaps Francisco will turn back and bring help.”

“It’s too late to pin our hopes on rescue,” Alvarado said. “You and the others must go while there’s still time.”

“*Me and the others*,” Costa repeated, suspiciously. “Surely you don’t intend to stay?”

Alvarado put a hand to his forehead and wiped a sheen of sweat from it. It might have been the heat or the wound in his leg, but he suspected it was the beginnings of the disease that was ravaging his men. “I would only hold you back. Now, round up the men and head for the ship. Sail with the current until you’re clear of the coast, then turn north and head back to Panama.”

Costa stared for a short moment, then abruptly turned to leave.

Alvarado grabbed him by the wrist, gripping it with such

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strength that Costa thought his bones might break. "Pay my family what you owe me or I will haunt you till the end of your days."

Costa nodded. It might have been the only promise he'd ever made that he was honestly afraid to break.

As the men departed, Alvarado grew feverish. He'd armed himself with two preloaded muskets and his crossbow. The other men who could hold weapons were each given a loaded pistol and several helpings of rum.

With the fires still burning in the night and the smoke drifting thick and low, they waited and watched. It seemed forever, but eventually the natives appeared.

Through a gap in the thatched wall, Alvarado saw them approach. When they were close enough, he fired into the nearest group.

The blast scattered them, but others came from different directions. They burst into the huts from all sides.

The pistols fired and several natives went down, but the horde raced across the bodies of their dead brethren, while others crashed through the flimsy walls to join the attack.

Alvarado fired the second *harquebus*, killing two more natives. He clubbed a third attacker with the smoking barrel, but was knocked to the ground an instant later.

Resorting to his crossbow, he fired the bolt into the melee. He was reaching for his dagger when a stone axe came down upon his wrist and hacked off his hand.

He shouted in agony and gripped instinctively at the bleeding stump. But a spear through his back paralyzed him, ending his cry and leaving him on the ground unable to move or to even call out to his men.

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Lying there, Alvarado watched as the natives massacred his sick and dying men; hacking at them and stabbing them repeatedly. The frenzy lasted for several minutes, with blood, sweat and saliva flying in all directions.

In the aftermath, Alvarado was left for dead. As the light faded from his eyes, he watched the natives dragging a few surviving men into the forest. He would never know what became of them.

Invisible and unseen in the mayhem, the tiny pathogens that carried smallpox and measles had been spread with every breath and every splattering of blood and saliva. The natives of this New World had never been exposed to them before. They had no resistance to the invisible enemy.

In a week, most of the warriors involved in the attack would be sick and dying. In a month, their entire village would be stricken. By the year's end, scores of other settlements would be suffering as well, and, in a decade, the entire region would be wilting under the strains of the epidemic.

Unchecked, smallpox would ravage the Incan empire, pave the way for the Spanish conquest and ultimately kill over ninety percent of the native population of South America. An entire continent laid to waste by a weapon no one could see.

1



Vandenberg Air Force Base, California *Present day*

Steve Gowdy sat in a comfortable chair on the top level of a darkened control room in the heart of Vandenberg Air Force Base. The setting resembled the NASA command centers in Houston and at Cape Canaveral, but was smaller and stocked with military personnel instead of civilians.

Gowdy was in his late forties. He wore a gray polo shirt and black slacks, his thin covering of sandy brown hair perfectly coiffed but too thin to conceal his scalp beneath. He looked like a golfer ready to play eighteen holes at the local country club, a visitor on a day tour or a bored middle manager stuck in another endless meeting. Only the tightly bunched wrinkles around his eyes and the unconscious drumming of his finger on the arm of the chair suggested he was paying close attention.

Gowdy hadn't come to Vandenberg for a tour of the place, or to marvel at the technology, but to oversee the final stage of

a mission so secret only forty people in the entire world knew of its existence.

The project was called *Ruby Snow*, which meant nothing, of course, but had a poetic ring to it that Gowdy appreciated. It involved an aircraft funded by the National Security Agency and operated by the Air Force and other members of the Defense Department.

Aircraft was the wrong word, he reminded himself. The *Nighthawk* was a hybrid vehicle, part aircraft, part spacecraft. The latest in a long line of platforms descended from the space shuttle. It was the most advanced machine ever flown and was finally returning to Earth after three long years in orbit.

A large storm brewing over the Pacific had caused the NSA to move the reentry up by a full week, but, other than that, everything had gone according to plan.

Watching the reentry live, Gowdy stared at the huge, high-definition screens that made up the front wall of the room. One showed a column of numbers and symbols that honestly meant nothing to him, except that all of them remained green.

A second display showed a chart with a line that dove sharply from the upper-left-hand corner before leveling out across the middle and then beginning to drop again on the right side. Labeled *Nighthawk Descent Profile*, the chart had something to do with the altitude, speed and distance of the aircraft. But he kept his attention glued to the central display, where a global satellite map showed the Pacific Ocean and the west coasts of North, South and Central America.

Icons representing the *Nighthawk* and lines tracing its path

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were drawn in bright colors. Because the *Nighthawk* flew in an unusual polar orbit, the reentry path originated over Antarctica, cutting across the globe at a diagonal angle. It had flown past New Zealand, passing to the east by less than a hundred miles, and from there it drew a line directly over the top of the Cook Islands and Tahiti. It passed south of Hawaii, and its projection continued toward Vandenberg and the high deserts of California. It still had several thousand miles to go, but traveling at over five thousand miles per hour meant less than forty minutes before touchdown.

An echoing call rang out over the loudspeaker system, known as the loop. “Vehicle has cleared Max Q,” an anonymous voice said. “Heat shield secure. Temperatures dropping.”

Max Q. That was a term Gowdy knew. *A danger point—the point of maximum aerodynamic stress on the craft. A point where any weakness or damage would likely result in structural failure and loss of the craft.*

Hearing that the *Nighthawk* had passed Max Q reduced Gowdy’s anxiety a bit. Many things could still go wrong, catastrophically wrong, but the largest hurdle had been cleared.

He glanced down to the middle tier of the amphitheater-style room. That level was the domain of the flight director. In this case, an Air Force Colonel named Frank Hansen. Hansen was a steely-eyed veteran of thirty years, a former fighter jock and test pilot who’d survived two ejections and a crash in his time and was now head of the 9th Space Operations Squadron.

Hansen turned, made eye contact and offered a nod. So far, so good.

Among all the controllers and system specialists and experts, Hansen was the only man in the room—aside from Gowdy himself—who understood just what a monumental risk they were taking. And if Gowdy measured him right, Hansen was just as nervous.

Hansen pressed his intercom switch. “Give me a status update,” his calm voice called out.

Down on the lowest level of the room, the individual systems controllers went into action. Each of them had one thing to worry about; guidance, telemetry, propulsion, etc. . . . Like the front row in a movie theater, their positions made watching the main screen a neck-craning exercise, but since every bit of information they needed was displayed on smaller monitors directly in front of them, they rarely looked up until their tasks were done.

Gowdy sat back and listened as the stream of replies poured in over the loop, his finger continuing to drum.

“Telemetry: Go.”

“Electrical: Go.”

“Flight controls: Go.”

On it went, each man or woman reporting, confirming good news, until all the controllers had reported in but one.

An awkward pause ensued. Down below, Hansen waited and then pressed the button on his transmitter. “Guidance, what’s your status?”

There was no response.

“Guidance?”

The room went deathly quiet. Gowdy’s finger stopped its tapping. In all the simulations, he’d never heard a delay, not even a

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few seconds. He stood up, gazing down over the rail toward the bottom row, where the guidance controller sat.

A young airman with a crew cut was working furiously, typing and tapping things on his keyboard, switching screens.

“Guidance?” Hansen called out. “I need a response.”

“Guidance is go,” the airman finally replied, “but we’re seeing a delay in the repeat.”

Because the *Nighthawk* was a pilotless craft and controlled remotely from Vandenberg, the system had been designed to repeat every instruction back to control center before executing a maneuver, much in the way a pilot repeated the instructions to air traffic control to make sure everyone was on the same page.

Gowdy tapped his own intercom button, which went directly, and privately, to Hansen. “What’s happening? What does it mean?”

“A delay in the repeat could be anything,” Hansen replied. He spoke with a practiced indifference. “It could mean a problem processing the command, an error on our end, or even—”

Before anything else could be said, the Telemetry controller spoke up. “Telemetry is yellow. Signal intermittent.”

On the big screen with the numbers, two boxes had begun flashing yellow alarms; a third began to flash red.

“Course deviation detected,” the tracking controller said. “Two degrees south and turning . . . Five degrees and turning . . .”

Gowdy felt his throat clench up. He buzzed Hansen again. “What’s happening?”

Hansen was too busy to reply and Gowdy turned his gaze

back to the screen. The *Nighthawk*'s projected line had begun to curve, angling to the right, away from California and toward Central America.

"Eleven degrees south and still turning," the guidance controller said. "Speed dropping, descent arrested. Altitude maintaining nine-one thousand."

Gowdy could hardly believe his eyes. Instead of descending as planned, the *Nighthawk* was leveling off at ninety-one thousand feet and losing speed because of it. Since the craft was a glider at this point, it was imperative that it maintain the proper descent profile; otherwise, it would bleed off so much speed that it would no longer be able to reach California.

Gowdy felt his legs shaking. He gripped the rail in front of him with one hand while the other went into his pocket, fumbling for a key.

"Reissue directional commands," Hansen called out tersely.

"No effect," the controller said.

"Reboot command program."

"Reboot initiated . . . Stand by."

Gowdy descended the stairs to Hansen's level and held his position. He was sweating now, his hands trembling, his fingers on the key he hoped never to use.

How could it all be going wrong now? A decade of research and three years in space. How could the effort possibly be failing here at the end?

"Twenty-one degrees south," the guidance controller said. "Altitude still nine-one thousand, speed dropping to four thousand."

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“What’s happening?” Gowdy shouted to Hansen, no longer bothering with the intercom or the pretense of calm.

“We’ve lost control.”

“I can see that,” Gowdy replied. “Why?”

“Impossible to tell,” Hansen said. “It seems to be a constant right turn. There may be damage to the wing or vertical stabilizer. But that wouldn’t explain the telemetry problems or the delay on the command repeat.”

Gowdy fumbled with the key in his pocket, turning it over and over in his hand. It was his responsibility to terminate the mission if it became too dangerous; his call. To act early before all hope was gone would be a mistake, but to act too late . . . could be disastrous.

He stepped forward, barging into Hansen’s personal space. “Get this damned thing back on track.”

Hansen pushed past him, all but shoving Gowdy into a seat. The two men had never liked each other. Hansen felt Gowdy didn’t know enough about physics and astronautics to be attached to the program, and Gowdy considered the Air Force Colonel to be arrogant and condescending to his authority. The higher-ups had ordered them to get along; it had worked for a while, but not now.

“Transponder data intermittent,” the telemetry controller said. “We’re losing the signal.”

“Reboot the transponder,” Hansen called out. “If the transponder goes out, we’ll lose track of the vehicle. It’s not in primary radar coverage.”

Gowdy sat, immobile. His body went numb and he listened

to the desperate exchange as if in a trance. It wouldn't matter if they were in radar coverage, the *Nighthawk* was designed with a complete stealth covering. Unlike other spacecraft, it was black in color, invisible to telescopes. It was covered with the most advanced radar-absorbent material ever developed.

He looked up. The vehicle was now streaking toward the coast of South America at thirty-five hundred miles per hour. Its turn was moderating, its speed continuing to drop. Its maximum glide path, marked by a shaded orange circle on the map, was shrinking with each second and moving south. It no longer reached the United States.

Gowdy knew what he had to do. There was no more reason to wait.

He pulled the red key out of his pocket and inserted it into a slot on the panel in front of him. A turn of the key opened a compartment just above it and a small pedestal rose up and locked in place. The pedestal was marked with yellow and black chevrons. In the center loomed a red button protected by raised metal bars that prevented it from being pressed by accident.

Gowdy looked up at the screen. They were now getting erroneous position data indicating the *Nighthawk* was in several different places at the same time. Returns blinked on and off, but the main line continued to head south, heading straight for the Galápagos Islands and the coast of Ecuador beyond.

"Guidance reboot completed," the controller said.

"And?!" Hansen asked.

"No response."

"That's it," Gowdy whispered. He turned the key to the right and the red button lit up.

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"*Self-destruct, armed,*" a computer voice called out.

Letting go of the key, Gowdy reached for the button.

A firm hand intercepted him, grabbing his wrist and yanking it away.

Hansen had appeared at his side. "Are you insane?" the Air Force Colonel growled.

"It's gone off course," Gowdy said. "We can't have it coming down in a populated area, the risk is too great that the worst will happen."

Hansen continued to hold Gowdy's arm back. "*The worst* has already happened. It happened the moment we brought the *Nighthawk* and its cargo back into the atmosphere. Destroying it now will only trigger the catastrophe."

Gowdy blinked, confused. He felt a sense of vertigo. He truly didn't understand. But then, this was what Hansen had complained about all along. The science was beyond him.

The *Nighthawk* suddenly vanished from the screen. The graph showing its descent profile went blank and all the numbers in the far screen froze and began to blink red.

"Telemetry is down," another controller reported with little emotion. "*Nighthawk* contact lost."

A murmur swept through the room. It sounded like fear. Gowdy stared at the screen, waiting and hoping the course line would reappear. He sat in silence as repeated attempts to reestablish the link between Vandenberg and the aircraft failed.

Eventually, a new number appeared on the screen and began rapidly counting toward zero.

"What's that?" Gowdy asked.

"Surface interface time," Hansen said with grim honesty.

“The longest possible time the *Nighthawk* can remain aloft before reaching zero altitude.”

The number ticked down without mercy, going from minutes to seconds and then stopping implacably at 0:00:00.

“Now what?” Gowdy asked.

“Give me live satellite coverage,” Hansen ordered. “Wide-angle. South Pacific and western South America.”

The controllers did as ordered. No one asked why.

One by one, the satellite views came up. Gowdy stared at the peaceful scene. Clouds drifted over the Pacific. The west coast of South America ran hard against the blue waters of the ocean. The tropical disturbance in the Pacific swirled like a peaceful merry-go-round.

Everything appeared calm.

“What are you looking for?” Gowdy asked.

The stern Air Force Colonel turned to the NSA bureaucrat he’d put up with for so long and exhaled. It was more relief than frustration.

“Absent a command from the ground, the *Nighthawk* will enter an autonomous mode, thinking for itself. When it determines its own position and computes that it can’t reach Vandenberg, the craft will execute emergency descent procedures, slow to an appropriate speed and then land safely . . . by parachute.”

“How do you know it hasn’t broken up already?” Gowdy replied, trying to reassert his aura of authority. “How do you know the autoland system hasn’t failed like everything else?”

“Because,” Hansen said, “we’re still here.”

It took a moment, but Gowdy began to understand. He looked

NIGHTHAWK

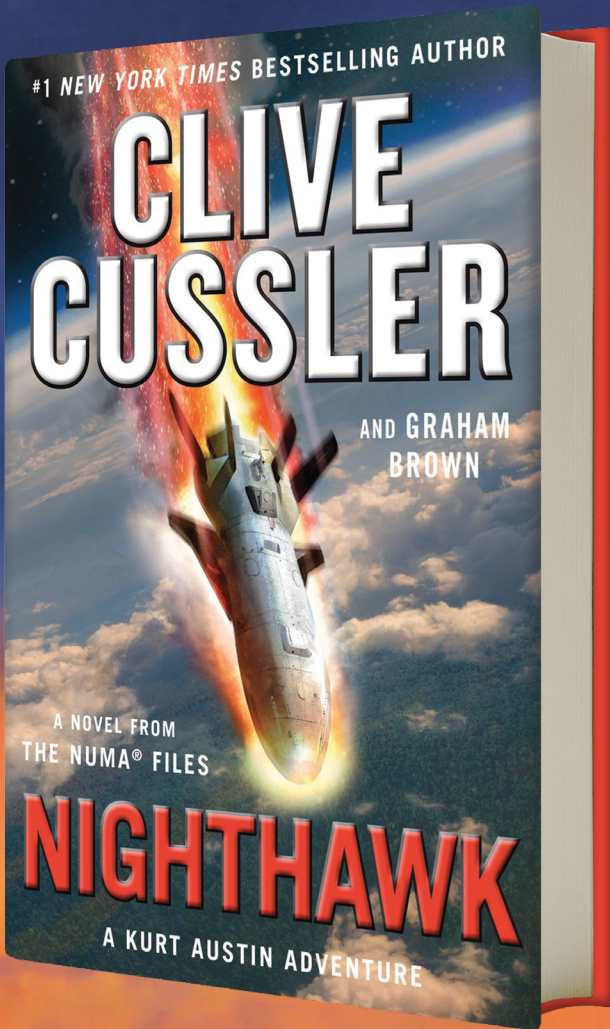
up at the live satellite view and all the normal things it displayed. “How long do we have?”

Hansen performed a quick mental calculation. “Seven days,” he said. “Less, if the fuel cells, solar panels or the battery packs were damaged.”

Gowdy turned back to the screen and the massive expanse of the South Pacific on display. Seven days to search all that ocean and find a needle in its watery haystack. Seven days to find and shut off a ticking bomb that could shake the very foundations of the Earth.

CLIVE CUSSLER

NIGHTHAWK



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