

# **CLIVE CUSSLER COLD FIRE**

Graham Brown

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## [Putnam logo]

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## Prologue – The Burning Ship

The thudding sound of the Chinese helicopter's rotor shook the cabin from nose to tail. Flying the overloaded craft low and slow on a hot and humid afternoon put a tremendous strain on the engine. The temperature gauges were creeping up. The pilot didn't like that. Under different circumstances he would suggest they dump some fuel or perhaps a little cargo, but they were a long way out to sea, and the cargo...

He glanced back into the main cabin. Fifteen heavily armed commandos from the People's Liberation Army. Some of them wearing scuba gear. Others strapped up in so much body armor he wondered how they could move. All of them looked ready to assault some well-defended objective.

"We should climb and add some speed," the pilot advised. "Engine heat is rising. We need cooler air and more of it. Otherwise, we risk a system failure."

He was addressing the combat team's leader, a hard-faced lieutenant from a special unit of the Chinese army. The lieutenant ignored him, his eyes locked onto a growing cloud of dark, oily smoke that was drifting across from the shimmering sea. The smoke concealed a burning freighter known to be hauling stolen weapons and barrels of radioactive waste. Somewhere on that freighter a ruthless cabal of smugglers awaited their arrival, no doubt ready to use the stolen weapons against them. He expected the flare of a missile to burst forth at any moment. Climbing would only make them an easier target.

"Keep us on the deck," the lieutenant ordered bluntly. "Circle the freighter. We need to assess our options."

The pilot did as ordered, manipulating the controls with the smooth precision of a veteran. His flying skills were the main reason he'd been chosen for this mission. He was known for his pinpoint control. But he couldn't do the impossible. The freighter was engulfed in smoke, it was listing and sinking, its masts and cranes had broken loose and could be seen swinging unpredictably through the fumes with every wallowing movement of the ship.

Metal cables dangling from the cranes had been strung up across the ship like anti-bird wires near an outside dining area. Landing, or even getting close enough to deploy the commandos, would be almost impossible.

They rounded the stern to find smoke billowing from every gap. Flames could be seen through open hatches. The engine room had to be ablaze at this point, diesel slurry burning and pumping out black clouds. Other parts of the ship burning with secondary fires suggested a deliberate act.

"They're trying to scuttle the ship," the pilot guessed.

"Any sign of the Americans?" the lieutenant asked.

The pilot shook his head. He saw no flares or flashing lights. He saw no one standing on the deck waving for help. "They can't possibly be on the ship. Not in that condition."

The lieutenant knew better. He'd studied the files of the men they were speaking about. He knew they would not abandon the mission until the ship went down and perhaps not even then.

He reached for the radio controls, checked that he was on the right frequency and spoke in well-studied English. "NUMA this is Dragon Lima," he announced. "Landing impossible. Freighter is burning from the stern to the number two mast. Aft of the main hold is an inferno.

We recommend you abandon the assault. Escape may be possible from the bow. We will pick you up. Do you copy?"

As he waited for an answer the lieutenant played with the volume, listening to static and silence. He was angry. For the first time in years a joint operation between an American agency and a Chinese one had proven fruitful. A ring of smugglers who had been dumping toxic waste into the seas between China and Japan had been tracked and cornered. Now it was all falling apart.

Political meddling had delayed their departure from Shanghai. A mechanical problem had forced a second helicopter to turn back, and the lieutenant's squad had pressed on alone.

With help coming late, the Americans had gone for the ship alone. They were now trapped in a hellish firestorm if they even remained alive. Not the result anyone wanted out of this rare moment of cooperation.

"NUMA, do you read?" the lieutenant called out again. "Freighter is ablaze and sinking. If you can get into the water, we will pick you up."

This time a voice cut through the static. It asked only a single question. "Any word from Gushan?"

Gushan was the Chinese team's point man. He'd boarded the freighter covertly to confirm the presence of the stolen weapons and waste.

"Negative," the lieutenant said. "The major has not reported in since confirming the presence of the radioactive samples."

"We'll find him," the American insisted. "Just watch for anyone attempting to escape. They wouldn't be scuttling the ship if they didn't have a plan to get away."

The lieutenant acknowledged the request, glanced at the pilot, and made a whirling motion with his hand. They would circle the freighter until they were needed one way or another, though the lieutenant feared it would only be to recover bodies. Between the burning ship, the brutal reputation of the smugglers and the unexpected radio silence from the major, he assumed Gushan was already dead. And if the Americans kept looking for him, they would only end up joining him in the world beyond.

Kurt Austin had no doubt he would end up in Valhalla or somewhere similar one day, but he had no intention of having today be that day. He moved along the deck on the upwind side of the ship, carrying a short-barreled assault rifle designed for combat in close quarters. He moved in the quick spurts of a soldier transiting hostile territory: darting from cover to cover, clearing the rigging above as he went, swinging the barrel of the rifle quickly as he passed blind spots and stacks of equipment on the deck. So far, he'd encountered no sign of the smugglers. In fact, they hadn't found a living soul.

He paused in a sheltered nook beside a bulkhead wall and covered the approach of his partner, Joe Zavala. Though they weren't soldiers, marines, or military operatives of any kind, the two men had been through plenty of scrapes and firefights together. They formed a tight unit. Each man knowing what the other was thinking.

The thickening smoke wafted past them, the fumes burning their lungs, throats, and eyes. They'd stuck to the outer edge of the ship on the windward side, but it was not enough to keep them in the clear. Touching the bulkhead behind him, Kurt could feel the heat. Looking up at the sun, he found only a fading disc drifting in clouds of thickening brown smoke. It had been robbed of its brilliance and glare. It seemed almost ready to go out.

Considering their next move, he put a hand through the tangled locks of his unruly and prematurely silver hair, brushing it back and off his forehead. He was a taller man of almost forty. He stood six foot two, with broad shoulders but an otherwise lanky frame. His silver-grey hair often gave him away, but his most striking feature was a pair of intense blue eyes, which were now bathed in a sea of red as the fumes irritated their corneas.

As Zavala ducked into the protected nook, he turned sideways to Kurt, covering the area behind them. Joe was shorter than Kurt, he had dark eyes and dark hair, which was buzzed down to a layer of stubble at the moment. He had the compact muscular body of a boxer and moved with the quick grace of someone who'd spent his youth training to throw and avoid punches.

As Joe settled in, he noticed a dead crewman on the deck ahead of them. "That makes five," he said to Kurt.

Kurt had seen the man. It did indeed make five. All shot in the back. "Ahab and the other smugglers are trying to cover their tracks. Eliminating anyone who can identify them."

"He's nothing if not ruthless," Joe said.

They'd been looking for the man who called himself Ahab for months, since information revealed that Ahab was taking toxic waste off the hands of unprincipled companies and dumping it in the sea for a hefty price, but one that was much lower than the true cost of dealing with such materials. The Chinese government had become involved when they learned he was smuggling weapons and siphoning radioactive material out of the waste he trafficked in for use in a "dirty bomb." A bomb he would almost certainly sell to the highest bidder.

It had been a good collaboration but each time they got close, Ahab slipped away. Informants turned up dead. An Interpol agent had gone missing, and several members of the Chinese federal police had been blown up by a rocket propelled grenade when they stopped a

truck believed to be carrying one of Ahab's shipments. If the man left this ship in anything but chains or a coffin, plenty of other deaths would certainly follow.

"They have to be up near the bow," Kurt said. "They started these fires in the stern for a reason."

"Why set them at all?" Joe asked.

"To slow us and the Chinese down," Kurt said. "To cover their tracks. They might even think the fires and smoke will help them escape."

"They may have abandoned ship already," Joe suggested as a counterpoint. "I would have."

Kurt probably would have left by now as well, but he wasn't a smuggler trying to salvage a large payday. "The Chinese would have seen them if they'd taken a boat out," he said. "Ahab's waiting for something. Help, maybe. Or just hoping to hold out until the Chinese helicopter has to go back to the coast. It can't loiter for too long."

Joe was a pilot. He knew the numbers better than Kurt. "Twenty minutes tops. Less if they had to fight a headwind coming out."

"That's when Ahab will go," Kurt said. "We need to find him and stop him before the timer runs out."

"What about Major Gushan?"

"He's either being held hostage or he's dead. If he's alive, he'll be with Ahab."

Joe looked around at the smoke. "If the safe place is ahead of us—and they still want to bring some of their cache with them—then there's only one spot left to hide. The forward cargo hold."

Kurt agreed. The forward hold was smaller and could be sealed off from the rest of the ship. That kept the smoke and fire at bay while the smugglers waited for their chance to escape. It also had side hatches down close to the water line for taking on provisions in port. They would make it easy for Ahab and his men to get off ship and onto a boat.

“That means we have to go inside,” Kurt said.

Joe nodded. From their packs they pulled small hoods that went over the head and shoulders. The hoods had acrylic lenses and filters that would remove the smoke and particulates allowing them to breathe. The hoods wouldn't protect them from an inferno, but they'd make it possible to run through a corridor or two. That was all they needed.

In the forward hold, nine men waited nervously, while one man bravely faced his death. The ship was burning. The smoke had begun drifting through the ventilation system. The bulkheads themselves were growing warm to the touch. The sound of a helicopter thundering past every minute or so added to the tension.

They had a boat prepared. Stacks of weapons and metal drums carrying the radioactive materials lay strapped into place. The boat itself sat on a conveyer belt designed to move cargo in and out of the hold. The belt ended beside a roller-equipped ramp that would be deployed and extended to the water once the side door was opened. This was their path to freedom. But with the helicopter outside they couldn't risk a move.

“You can't get away now,” a battered and beaten Chinese man said. “You're trapped.”

Gushan was down on his knees, his hands tied behind his back. His face was bruised from kicks and punches. A gash just beneath his right eye streamed red blood like warpaint.

“They will run out of fuel and crash before I have to make any move at all,” an entirely average looking man said. About the only thing that stood out on Ahab was a jutting jaw, hidden now by a grimy beard.

“They won’t come alone,” Gushan said. He wore a crewman’s overalls, having infiltrated the ship to search for the radioactive materials that Ahab intended to use in a dirty bomb.

“Alone is exactly what they are,” Ahab insisted. “The other helicopter never left Shanghai. My associates saw to that. There won’t be any rescue. They cannot possibly land on the burning deck. And by the time your ships get here I will be long gone, this freighter will be on the bottom, and your body will be food for the crabs and fish of the South China Sea. But before that happens you will tell me how you learned that I was aboard this ship.”

Major Gushan stared up at the man who’d been beating him. “The high command has a source in your organization,” he said.

“Who?” Ahab demanded.

Gushan shrugged. “They don’t share the name of a source with someone like me.”

Ahab grew irritated. He knew it was a lie. Just a way to put doubt into his mind. But he was tired and angry. His face was itchy from the salt and the heat. His eyes had begun to sting from the traces of smoke.

The helicopter rumbled by again. Another pass or two and it would have to leave. Ahab was certain of this. He would wring the information out of the Major or end his life before then.

He picked up a length of metal from the deck, examining its jagged end. “I’ll ask you one more time,” he said. “But first—”

He lunged forward with the staff, thrusting it downward and through the major’s gut. It stuck out through his back, the jagged tip grinding into the metal deck behind.

Gushan howled in pain and writhed around the stave, like a fish impaled with a spear. Ahab used the leverage it gave him to make Gushan bow down before him. "Assuming you can speak, I will take that answer now."

Gushan coughed and choked and drooled a string of blood. Then bravely shook his head.

Enraged, Ahab grabbed the metal shaft with both hands intending to rip the major apart. But a rifle crack sounded, his leg exploded in spray of blood and bone, and it was Ahab who went to the ground.

His men raced for cover. Some of them diving to the deck, others hiding behind the stacks of machinery and equipment in the hold. A firefight erupted as shots rang out from all sides. Ahab watched several of his men go down.

"Throw your weapons away," a voice shouted from the rafters.

Crawling desperately for cover, Ahab was stunned by the timber of the voice, it was loud and deep, and it cut through the clamor circulating in the hold.

"The Chinese navy is surrounding the ship," the voice replied. "It's over."

Almost poetically the helicopter raced by once again. But Ahab heard the pitch of the rotors change. It was headed out, going back to the mainland at last. They still had a chance.

Removing his belt, he cinched it around his leg, pulling it tight and stemming some of the blood loss. With his leg stable and numbness already setting in, Ahab drew a long-barreled pistol from his chest pack. The weapon was oddly shaped, fitted with attachments. It almost looked like a homemade weapon but was actually a modified competition pistol.

Ahab was so accurate with the weapon, he'd once shot a man dead by firing a bullet down a sixty-foot length of pipe no wider than a tennis ball. The shell had flown dead center

down the pipe, striking its target on the far end without ever grazing the sides. If he could spot the intruder, even just part of him, he would not miss.

“Open the hatch,” he shouted.

One of his men had been standing near the controls. The man threw the switch, and the huge cargo door cracked open and slid backward. Orange light poured into the vast compartment, sunlight filtering through the smoke.

“Anyone who makes a move for that door is a dead man,” the voice shouted in warning.

Ahab had heard only one voice. Even in the brief gunfight the attackers had fired only a few shots. Through the intense pain he calculated the reality. A large group would have opened fire en-masse, taking out most of the smugglers in a single volley. There could be only one or two men stalking them now.

“They’re up in the rigging above the cranes,” he shouted to his men. “Pin them down.”

His men took potshots at the catwalks and ladders that ran across the top of the hold. Ricochets rebounded, but neither Ahab nor his men faced any return fire.

Ahab crawled to a new position, spotting a man crawling along the yellow steel I-beam rail that supported one of the mobile cranes. He raised his weapon and fired.

The first shot plunked the beam dead center. He cursed himself for missing but he was unsteady and losing blood.

He aimed again, exhaled and squeezed the trigger. This shot missed the steel rail and grazed the man’s arm. Not a fatal wound but one that drew a reaction. The target rolled off the I-beam and dropped onto a catwalk.

Ahab fired again but the man leapt down onto a cargo container and out of sight.

“Get the boat ready!” Ahab shouted.

One of his men activated the conveyer belt. The ribbed inflatable boat began to move.

While another one of his men engaged the second attacker, Ahab saw his chance. "Help me," he shouted. "Get me up!"

The man who'd started the conveyer rushed to Ahab's side, lifting him up and assisting him across the deck. They reached the boat and tumbled inside.

As the boat neared the open hatch, gunfire burst forth from beside the cargo container. Bullets ripped into the inflated sections of the boat. They plugged the control column and the engine but hit neither Ahab nor the other smuggler.

Ahab fired back, forcing the attacker to take cover once more. The ribbed boat neared the top of the ramp. Two more of his men ran forward, jumping into the boat. They fired their weapons in all directions trying to keep the attackers pinned down.

The front end of the boat tipped over onto the slope. Just then the American who'd hidden behind the cargo container appeared again. The outside light lit upon him as he stepped forward.

Ahab saw him fully now. Tall and lanky. Silver-grey hair. Weathered face streaked with sweat and grime but marked by intense blue eyes.

Ahab raised his pistol intending to put those eyes out, but the rifle in the man's hands chattered first.

Another spread of shells hit the boat but this time they ripped into the metal cases. Gobs of contaminated radioactive liquid erupted outward. The fluid doused Ahab and his men. It burned with a cold fire as if some internal curse was being conjured upon them.

One of the men screamed. Another dove off the boat, hitting the ramp and tumbling into the water below. Ahab focused only on his enemy, pulling the trigger one last time, firing his final bullet as the boat went over the ramp and raced down into the sea.

He never saw the outcome of that shot. The boat had sped downward too quickly. It hit the ocean nearly throwing him out. Its momentum carried it away from the freighter.

It drifted aft, moving into the thick smoke and deflating slowly. It vanished in the clouds of burning diesel near the stern.

It would be found a mile from the freighter, adrift, swamped, and floating on its side; buoyancy provided by two compartments that still contained air. It would be found empty, the smugglers, the weapons, and the radioactive materials it had once held, long since spilled into the sea.

Inside the cargo hold, Kurt and Joe took three men prisoner, covered the others with tarps, and gave aid to the grievously wounded major. They didn't dare remove the metallic spear that had punctured his gut, but they cut the ends off and did their best to staunch the bleeding.

The major grunted as they laid him on a makeshift stretcher. "Thank you," he said. "I would like to see the sun again before I die."

They carried him toward the open cargo door and placed him on the deck where he could see the sun through the smoke. Kurt looked him over as they placed him down. "Don't worry. You're not going to die from a flesh wound like this."

The major offered a half smile, then he looked up at the sun and closed his eyes.



## Chapter 1

Fifty thousand feet above the Arctic circle the air temperature was a frigid one-hundred and nineteen degrees below zero. A heavily modified C-17 transport cut through this bitterly cold air followed by two F-35 fighters that trailed a mile behind. At this temperature, the atmosphere held nothing in the way of moisture and offered crystal clear views of the stars above and the moon, which oddly appeared below the aircraft as it had just emerged on the far horizon.

Inside the aircraft, in a comfortably heated compartment just aft of the cockpit, a group of engineers and technicians sat at various computer consoles watching different systems and analyzing incoming data.

“Target spotted,” a voice announced across the compartment.

Senior Test Engineer Dan Caldwell looked up from his screen. There wasn't supposed to be a target for them to shoot at yet. He glanced around to see who'd spoken. He was not surprised to see Ridley Wiles, one of the systems analysts, standing at the window. Ridley was twenty-three, a civilian contractor and not all that big on discipline. But he understood the laser system they were using like no one else.

“What target are you talking about?” Caldwell asked sharply. “Nothing on my scope.”

“It’s big and round... and allegedly made of cream cheese,” Ridley replied. “We can hit it from here. Then it’s bagels for everyone.”

Groans and mild laughter wafted through the cabin as Ridley stepped back from the window and pointed at the moon.

Caldwell was not amused. “Get in your seat Ridley. The punishment for failed attempts at humor is washing the plane by hand once we get back to Greenland. No gloves allowed.”

Ridley took his seat and strapped himself in like he was supposed to. Caldwell let it go at that. He didn’t mind the break in tension that a few well-placed groaners could bring on, but it was time to get serious.

The aircraft and laser system they were about to test was known as the EAGL, Enhanced Aerial Gunnery Laser. Caldwell had always wondered why someone hadn’t added another word to the acronym so they could call it the EAGLE proper, but that was above his pay grade.

The laser in question was the most powerful laser in the world by a wide margin. It was far too heavy to be mounted in a fighter or attack craft. But placed aboard the modified C-17 and lifted to a high altitude, it could do things that would alter the rules of war. Assuming, of course, that it worked as planned.

*Time to find out,* Caldwell thought to himself.

He pressed the intercom switch and spoke to the captain. “All systems go,” he reported. “Cryogenics functioning at optimal levels. Laser wave guides are tuned. Change course to two, four, zero. We’re entering the firing window now. Test protocol commencing.”

The pilot replied affirmatively, and the big aircraft banked into a turn. For the next few minutes, they would watch their screens and wait, while an extremely powerful radar system mounted below the craft scanned the ocean’s surface out to the edge of the curvature of the earth.

Several hundred miles away, an American submarine was about to launch an unarmed ballistic missile. It would burst from the surface in a spray of mist and foam, linger for an instant and then rocket skyward on a pillar of flame.

As it climbed above the horizon, the radar system mounted on the underside of the C-17 would find it, lock on, and track it. Seconds ticked by. Then several tense minutes. They knew roughly when and where the missile would be launched, but to make the test realistic they hadn't been given the exact data.

Finally, something appeared on the scope. "Target acquired," a radar technician said. "Altitude three thousand feet and climbing. Range, speed, and acceleration computing now."

"Bring the laser to ready," Caldwell ordered.

Ridley moved a trio of switches from standby to active. The system which had been tested before at lower settings would be operating at the maximum power level for this final test. The high-pitched whine of rapidly spinning generators could be heard emanating from the aft section of the aircraft.

"Energy storage at full," another of the techs announced. "All systems green."

"Targeting solution confirmed," Ridley reported. "We're locked on."

"Activate laser," Caldwell said calmly.

Ridley reached forward, flipped open a protective plastic cover, and pressed a square, red button. A soft click was heard but nothing else. There was no pulse, no recoil, no crash of thunder. There was no bright beam of a death ray to be seen, as the laser operated in the X-ray part of the spectrum.

Four hundred miles away, the submarine-launched ballistic missile was at ten thousand feet and streaking skyward at five thousand miles an hour; three times the speed of a rifle bullet. To the laser, which traveled at the speed of light, it might as well have been standing still.

The laser hit the target squarely, melting through the exterior in a hundredth of a second and detonating the rocket propellant. The explosion in the night sky over the Atlantic was visible for a hundred miles. Confirmation came to the C-17 via radar.

“Target separating,” the radar tech announced as the green dot on the scope spread out and faded. In seconds, the rapidly expanding ball of fire and fragments had diffused past the point of radar detection. The blip vanished from the screen. “Target eliminated.”

A small round of applause and congratulatory shouts erupted. Caldwell cut them short. “We still have work to do, gentlemen.”

He heard the grumbling behind his back but didn’t turn around lest the team see the broad smile on his face.

As he ran through a system check, a loud pop sounded behind him. Now he was angry. He spun in his chair, shouting as he turned, “That better not be champagne, Ridley!”

As he spoke the last word, Caldwell’s mouth hung open in shock. Ridley held a gun and was firing it into the backs of the other technicians. Blood was splattering across the computer screens and consoles. They slumped forward or recoiled backward as the bullets hit. One of them managed to undo his seatbelt and get up, only to get hit at point blank range in the chest.

Caldwell freed himself from his harness and launched himself toward Ridley, tackling him before he could swing the pistol around. The two men slammed to the floor of the aircraft, with Caldwell trying to drive his shoulder downward into the traitor’s neck.

The gun discharged beneath him. It felt like a small explosion. A burning fire flared in Caldwell's gut.

Caldwell knew he'd been hit but sensed it wasn't a mortal wound. He kept his weight on Ridley, rising up and slugging him in the jaw with a right hook. Ridley's head snapped to the side and blood splattered from his lips. It was a solid blow but not a knockout punch. And it left Caldwell off balance. His core muscles, torn by the first shot, were too weak to keep him upright as Ridley bucked him off.

He fell side, put his hands on the deck, and spun back toward his opponent.

Ridley fired a second shot. This time the gun was pointed upward not sideways. Caldwell felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest. He reeled from the impact, rocking backward and then toppling over to the side as his vision blurred. He slumped to the deck gasping for air.

Ridley got to one knee, leaning over him trying to determine if he needed another bullet.

"Why?" Caldwell asked, his voice a raspy whisper.

"Why not," Ridley replied nastily, as if that explained everything.

Caldwell barely heard the words; he'd lost too much blood. He laid his head on the deck and closed his eyes.

Ridley looked around the compartment. The first part of the job was done. The test crew were dead. The compartment secure. Now for the more difficult disappearing act.

He stood up, put a hand to his bruised mouth, and wiggled a tooth free. He looked at it for a second and then tossed it aside. He'd get implants, and anything else he wanted once he had money to burn.

Ahead of him the cockpit door opened. Ridley raised the gun as the co-pilot came out. Instead of firing he lowered the pistol.

The co-pilot held a bloody knife which had been used to good effect on the aircraft's captain. "I assume we're flying on auto pilot," Ridley said.

"For the moment," the co-pilot said. "I came back to see if you needed any help."

"Good work," Ridley said. "Time for the second act. Turn toward Murmansk and shut down all the data relays. It's time for this plane to disappear."

"What about the F-35s?"

Ridley tried to smile, but his bruised face wouldn't allow it. "I'll take care of them."

Eight hundred miles away in a high-tech conference room a group of senior military officers watched the successful test and cheered. They pumped their fists and slapped each other on the back. They spoke enthusiastically about controlling the 21<sup>st</sup> century battlefield with fleets of EAGL aircraft circling high above.

"The EAGL can shoot down a hundred ballistic missiles before they leave enemy territory," an Air Force general named Offerman boasted. "It can stand two hundred miles from a battlefield and take out a thousand drones in an hour's work."

"We could park one over every major city," the assistant secretary of defense added, "And office workers can take their lunch at sidewalk cafes in the middle of a war."

A representative from the company that had built the laser, a corporation known as Scion, grinned and shrugged as if that was a little far-fetched in his mind. But his smile suggested it wasn't too far off. The main idea behind the EAGL was not to shoot down drones but to make ballistic missiles obsolete. The plan was to build a fleet of the aircraft and have them patrol the arctic, where all the ballistic missiles from Russia or China would have to travel to reach the United States. It was conservatively estimated that nine such aircraft could eradicate the entire

Russian ballistic missile force even if it were launched simultaneously. Half the missiles would be destroyed before they reached the upper atmosphere. The other half would be wiped out as they raced directly overhead through the dark limits of space.

The Israelis had built an Iron Dome to protect their country. The United States would have one made of X-rays and invisible light.

Amid the celebration, one of the technicians noticed a problem. After confirming it wasn't a problem on the receiving end, he alerted Offerman. "General we're losing telemetry on the EAGL."

The celebration hit a wall. The laughter died. Everyone turned back to the screens they'd been watching earlier. Video from the chase planes showed the aircraft flying straight and level. It appeared fine.

"What data blocks are dropping out?" Offerman asked.

"We've lost navigation," the technician said. "Speed, altitude, heading, temperature."

On another screen, which showed a virtual mockup of the cockpit, the indicators went from accurate numbers to a series of question marks. Seconds later they became dashed lines. Engine readouts failed next.

"Were losing laser telemetry now," a technician from Scion reported.

Offerman wavered as he felt a sudden numbness in his knees. If not for the view from the chase plane they would have no way of knowing if the plane was still flying or had exploded midair.

"Contact the pilot," Offerman said calmly.

The air force communication specialist put in several calls but to no avail. "No response."

"Aircraft is turning and descending," someone called out.

“Contact the chase planes,” Offerman ordered. “Find out what the hell is going on.”

The communications specialist made the calls. “Blue Shadow Leader this is Bullfrog. We’ve lost communications and telemetry with the EAGL. Track shows it changing course and descending. Can you confirm?”

The fighter pilot’s steely voice came back an instant later. “Confirmed. EAGL is departing approved course. Aircraft is not responding to radio calls.”

“Look at this,” the Scion representative said. He’d pulled up a low-resolution feed from the cameras inside the aircraft. The video wasn’t watched live because it was really only useful to review the crew performance after the fact. It showed the laser technicians slumped in their chairs. Caldwell’s body could be seen on the floor, a swath of dark liquid seeping out from underneath him.

“Damn,” someone blurted out. “It’s a hijacking.”

Offerman wasted no more time. “Send the self-destruct signal. Take it down.”

Keys were turned. A switch guarded by plastic glass was revealed. The keys were turned again arming the system. The air force staff sergeant in charge of the self-destruct system looked up for confirmation.

“Do it,” Offerman snapped.

The switch was pressed and held. The signal went out via satellite. A sickening delay followed during which Offerman wondered what his next career would be after blowing up a billion-dollar aircraft. *At least he’d go out with a bang.*

Every eye focused on the view from the chase plane, awaiting a series of explosions that would start in the center of the fuselage, rupture the fuel lines, and quickly produce a massive fireball.

But nothing happened.

The sergeant reset the system and sent the signal again. “No response,” he announced.

Grunts and curses filled the room. The assembled officers couldn’t believe what they were seeing and hearing.

Offerman grabbed the microphone and spoke to the F-35 pilots. “Chase team this is Bullfrog actual. The EAGL has been hijacked. I repeat the EAGL has been hijacked. I’m giving you a direct order: Shoot down that plane.”

The lead pilot responded in a business-like tone, asking for a code word only they and Offerman knew.

“Confirmation code Red Whistle Falcon.” Offerman said.

“Red Whistle confirmed,” the fighter pilot grunted. “Stand by.”

General Offerman turned to the screen in time to see a missile launched from one of the F35s. It raced forward in a trail of smoke, exploding long before it reached the EAGL. A second missile met the same fate.

“They’re using the laser,” someone shouted.

The screen flared once more as the first F-35 exploded in a ball of flame. Offerman pressed the talk switch communicating with the second chase plane. “Shadow Two, switch to guns,” he snapped. “Fire immediately! Fire imm—”

It was too late. This time there was no explosion, only a flare on the lens followed by static. A moment later, the screen went dark, and the words *signal loss* appeared at the top.

Offerman froze, stunned into silence while staring at the dark screen. Somewhere over the arctic, the second fireball in the sky was dimming. It marked the end of Falcon Two and the beginning of a new danger, the true depths of which Offerman struggled to fathom. They’d built

a machine that could rule the sky, proven its worth in a difficult test, and now lost it to parties unknown.

Reality began to sink in. Offerman felt his hands trembling. He tucked them in his pockets and tried to slow his breathing. “Give me the EAGL’s last known position and heading.”

The technician gave a position report and then announced a heading. “One-five-five degrees.”

The men in this room didn’t need a map to tell them where that heading would take the plane. They’d spent their lives preparing for combat with the Russian bear. A heading of one-five-five would take the EAGL to Russia, directly to the sprawling military complex in the port city of Murmansk.

“Get me the Pentagon,” Offerman said grimly. “We need to deliver the bad news.”