

**CLIVE CUSSLER**  
**CONDOR'S FURY**

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**CLIVE CUSSLER**  
**CONDOR'S FURY**

A Novel from the NUMA Files®

**GRAHAM BROWN**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

**PUTNAM**  
— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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## *National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA)*

**KURT AUSTIN**—Director of Special Projects, salvage expert, and boating enthusiast

**JOE ZAVALA**—Kurt’s assistant and best friend, helicopter pilot, and mechanical genius

**RUDI GUNN**—Assistant Director of NUMA, graduate of the Naval Academy, runs most of the day-to-day operations at NUMA

**HIRAM YAEGER**—NUMA’s Director of Information Technology, expert in the design and function of the most advanced computers

**PAUL TROUT**—NUMA’s chief geologist, graduate of Scripps Institute, married to Gamay

**GAMAY TROUT**—NUMA’s leading marine biologist, also graduated from Scripps, married to Paul

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### *Naval Intelligence*

**REAR ADMIRAL MARCUS WAGNER**—Head of Naval Intelligence, old friend of Rudi Gunn's

**COMMANDER JODI WELLS**—Ranking operative at Naval Intelligence, leader of the Arcos mission

**LIEUTENANT MASON WEIR**—Leader of fire team alpha, Arcos mission

**PETTY OFFICER BOSWORTH CONNERS**—Member of fire team alpha, Arcos mission

**PETTY OFFICER DIEGO MARQUEZ**—Member of fire team alpha, Arcos mission

### *Ostrom Airship Corporation*

**STEFANO SOLARI**—Brazilian aviation visionary, after a successful career as an aeronautical engineer, he launched Ostrom, creating the first international airship line since the days of the zeppelin

**LUIS TORRES**—Cuban engineer working for Ostrom, loyal to Martin Colon

**CAPTAIN MIGUEL BASCOMBE**—Senior captain at Ostrom, in charge of test flights, friend of Stefano Solari

### *Picadors—Cuban Intelligence*

**MARTIN COLON**—Former colonel in Cuban Intelligence, leader of the Picadors, an elite unit tasked with weakening the United States, now a VP at Ostrom Airship Corporation

**ROJO LOBO [THE RED WOLF]**—An assassin during his time in Cuban Intelligence, Lobo is now a smuggler of pirated goods

**ANTON PEREZ**—Former colonel in Cuban Intelligence, now chairman of the Ministry of Production, which oversees the production and distribution of Cuban raw materials



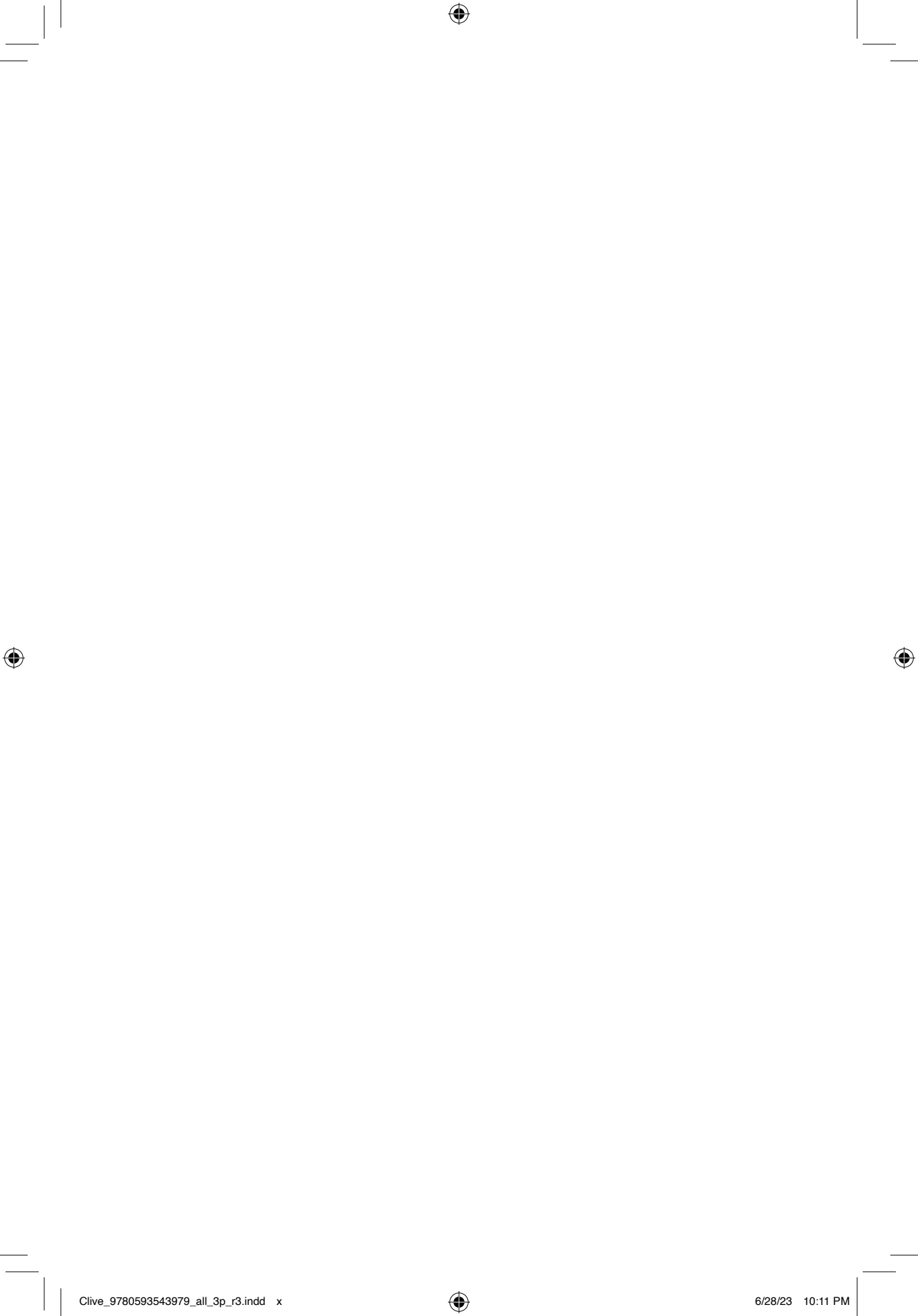
## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**VICTOR RUIZ**—Former sub commander in Cuban Intelligence, now a member of the Cuban National Assembly and an up-and-coming politician

**LORCA**—Former commander in the Picadors, now a high-ranking member of the Cuban Port Authority in Havana

**YAGO ORTIZ**—Cuban neuroscientist involved in the Havana Syndrome experiments, later recruited by Colon to the Arcos project

**ERNESTO MOLINA**—Important member of the Central Committee, heads the Counter-Espionage Commission, a sometime ally of Martin Colon



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## PROLOGUE

# CUBA

### ARCOS, CUBA

**A**n old Russian-made SUV sped through the tiny Cuban village of Arcos on a humid afternoon. Dilapidated buildings lined the streets. Telephone poles leaned over at odd angles as if they were about to fall. With the sun dropping low, the SUV raced around a curve near the outskirts of town, narrowly missing a wild dog that had strayed too far from the gutter.

Martin Colon glanced in the rearview mirror. The stray dog had spun around and darted away just in time. It was now cowering in the weeds beside an old building beneath faded images of the Cuban and Soviet flags.

“How far to the lab?” a voice said beside him.

Colon looked over at the man in the passenger seat. Ernesto Molina was a politician and a member of the Central Committee in Havana. He was something of a roughneck, willing to throw his weight around and bluster. He was also an influential force, heading up the Counter-Espionage Commission, a group charged with finding traitors and spies. Colon had gone to great lengths to keep him as an ally, but the relationship was fraying.

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“Three miles from here,” Colon said.

Molina tugged at the collar of his wrinkled, olive-drab field jacket. Like many in the Cuban government, Molina chose to wear a military uniform, hoping to be seen as a leader of the revolution. Colon was the opposite. He wore only civilian clothes, despite being a full colonel in the Cuban Intelligence Directorate and a former pilot in the air force.

“And you’re sure the Americans are coming?” Molina asked.

Colon was certain. “My sources tell me a raid will happen any day now.”

Molina didn’t like this. The specter of American soldiers on Cuban soil was both terrifying and infuriating. He blamed Colon for the danger. “I warned you about this project. The committee has always been wary of it, but I backed you. In return you’ve taken things too far. Kidnapping an American scientist. Running experiments on human subjects. What madness is this?”

“The American came willingly,” Colon explained, offering a half-truth. “The test subjects were political prisoners. Traitors. Your committee would have ordered at least half of them to face a firing squad if I hadn’t taken them off your hands.”

“You’ve been reckless,” Molina snapped. “And now you have to face the consequences.”

Colon remained calm and in control. He was far less worried than his political passenger. And he’d been anything but reckless. “And just what consequences are you talking about?”

“You’ve run out of rope,” Molina said. “We’re shutting you down. The materials and research will be moved to a military base where they’ll be properly guarded, if not destroyed.”

“Destroyed?”

“Yes,” Molina replied. “Some members of the committee consider your work an abomination. Others consider it a threat. And now they alone will decide what to do with it.”

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Colon's jaw tightened, but it was all for show. His informants had told him of the growing unease in the committee long ago. He was prepared for the news. He was prepared for everything.

He glanced to the west. The sun was about to dip behind the mountains. If he was right a squad of commandos from the U.S. Navy would arrive sometime after dark.

"It's a good thing the Americans are coming," he said.

Molina looked at him as if he'd misheard. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I need the world to blame them for what I'm about to do."

With a jerk of the steering wheel, Colon whipped the vehicle to the left. Molina, who wasn't wearing a seat belt, was thrown against a door that hadn't closed securely for years. The door flew open with the impact. Molina went sailing through it and out onto the dirt road. He tumbled more than slid, arms and legs windmilling until he came to rest in a thicket of weeds that had grown up around a wooden fence.

Colon slammed on the brakes and brought the Lada to a stop. Grabbing a pistol, he got out of the car and walked back to Molina. He found him bent and broken, but not yet dead.

"Why?" Molina wheezed, looking up at him. "Why?"

"Because you and the rest of the old men in Havana would waste what we've done on silly mind games or even turn it against our own people. I won't allow that to happen."

"But . . . the Americans?" Molina managed.

"Don't worry," Colon said. "They won't get it either."

As Colon spoke, he could see Molina sliding a bloodied hand with broken fingers toward a holster on his belt. He didn't wait for Molina to reach it. He straightened his wrist and fired one shot into Molina's chest and then a second into his skull. The echoes of the gunfire rang out across an unnaturally quiet landscape. Colon doubted anyone would hear them or come to investigate if they did. This was the *zona*

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*de muerte*, a field surrounding the testing facility populated by dead animals left to rot in the sun. It formed a very effective shield. No one came here if they didn't have to.

Holstering the weapon and climbing back in the SUV, Colon reached over to close the passenger door and then put the car back in gear. As he sped off, he glanced into the distance. He could just see the outline of a radio tower silhouetted against the gathering dusk. It wouldn't be long now.

---

Lieutenant Mason Weir crawled through an overgrown field thick with tall grass as pinpoints of starlight appeared in a darkening sky above him. A special operative in Naval Intelligence, Weir was leading a three-man team toward a small building in the distance. Moving slowly and sticking to the thickest parts of the tall grass, Weir was halfway across the field when he came across a dead horse with no eyes lying in the dirt. He stopped beside the animal, waiting for the two enlisted members of his team to catch up.

The first to arrive was a petty officer named Bosworth Conners. Everyone called him Bosco. "Damn shame to treat an animal like this," he said, studying the eyeless horse.

Weir had seen another dead horse over by the tree line, along with a couple of dead goats and at least one bull. He knew from satellite images that the fields surrounding the small building were littered with carcasses. This one looked the freshest. "Brass wants to know what killed it," he said to Bosco. "Take some blood."

As Bosco got out his medical kit, the third member of the team moved up beside them. "I'll tell you what killed it," Diego Marquez promised. "Radio death ray."

He pointed ahead to a tower rising up behind the flat-roofed building. It was a classic transmission tower made up of intersecting metal rods. Halfway up, a trio of crescent-shaped dishes pointed in different



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directions, while a red beacon blinked on and off at the top. "Havana Syndrome," he added. "The latest way to melt your brain."

Havana Syndrome was the name given to a raft of neurological symptoms occurring among U.S. embassy staff in Cuba. Each case was different, but most involved a sudden ringing in the ears, pain in various joints, and a feeling of intense heat that seemed to be coming from the inside. More severe problems such as vertigo, confusion, and seizures sometimes followed. Several people had been hospitalized, one with trauma that resembled radiation burns.

The CIA thought the whole thing was nonsense. NSA was undecided and waiting for more data. Only Naval Intelligence considered the issue to be a legitimate threat. And only because they'd linked it to a rogue American scientist named Wyatt Campbell, who had experience with directed energy weapons.

They'd tracked him to Havana. And then to Arcos. And when satellite images revealed a pasture littered with dead animals and a small building giving off excessive amounts of heat, they'd decided to act. Sending Weir and his team to investigate.

Depending on how it ultimately turned out, they were either there to rescue Campbell or to capture him and drag him back to the States in chains.

While Bosco drew the horse's blood, Marquez used a high-tech machine to sample the air. He reported all clear.

Weir nodded and got on the radio. "Mongoose, this is Strike Team," he said. "We're about to enter the snake pit. Building is quiet but not dark. Four vehicles parked outside. No sign of activity. Air samples clear of chemicals and biologics. Confirm we're still a go?"

A female voice came over the speaker in his ear. It belonged to the mission leader, call sign Mongoose.

"You're cleared to enter the pit," she replied. "No sign of military units in the area. We're ready to cut the power and start jamming. We'll stand by to provide backup once you've breached the door."

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Weir acknowledged that and turned back to his men. “Bosco, you done yet?”

Bosco had just pulled the needle out. He packed the sample away. “Stored and saved.”

“All right, let’s go.”

Weir led them to the edge of the brush. The building was only sixty feet away. A scan of the structure showed no heat signatures on the outside, which told them there were no guards on patrol or snipers on the roof. It also detected minimal heat coming from within, the opposite of what the satellites had picked up. Aside from a strange hum coming from the radio tower, the area was deathly quiet.

They crossed to the wall, crouching around a door. They still hadn’t seen any activity or faced any form of resistance.

“You sure we’re in the right place?” Marquez asked.

Weir was sure. He sent a signal to Mongoose and the lights around the building went dark. The interior glow coming from the high mounted windows dimmed as well, but never went totally black. The hum from the radio tower continued.

Looking up, Weir saw the red light still glowing.

“The tower must have its own generator,” Marquez said. “Want me to go find it and shut it down? I wouldn’t want to get fried when we egress back across that field.”

Weir nodded. “Knock it out,” he said before turning to Conners. “Bosco, you’re with me.”

As Marquez looped around the building toward the radio tower, Weir and Bosco pushed through the door with their MP5 submachine guns at the ready.

The hall was empty, but its appearance surprised them. What looked like an old storage facility from afar was decidedly modern on the inside. The floor was polished concrete, the walls made of sterile, high-gloss plastic. Glancing down the hall Weir spied security doors

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with coded locks. All of it partially illuminated by a set of emergency lights at the far end.

"Definitely the right place," Weir said, studying the laboratory-like setup.

They moved down the hall, coming to the first room and pushing the door open. Despite the heavy bolt and the numerical keypad connected to it, the door swung open with ease.

"Top-notch security," Bosco said.

Weir glanced around. The room was vacant. Not a scrap of furniture or a stray box. It struck him as odd. Before he could say anything the sound of gunfire rang out. Three quick bursts followed by silence and then two more.

Weir hit the deck with Bosco scrambling to the door.

"See anything?" Weir asked.

"Clear," Bosco replied.

With nothing around them suggesting they were being shot at, Weir pressed the talk switch on his radio. "Quez, you taking fire?"

The reply came instantly. "Not me, boss. All quiet out here."

Another round of shooting erupted. This time accompanied by an anguished scream and then a final, silencing shot.

"It's coming from down the hall," Bosco said.

Weir didn't like any of this. It wasn't far-fetched to think the Cubans might execute Campbell or even silence their own people if a raid occurred, but at this point for all they knew it was just a power failure. A common occurrence in Cuba, especially in the heat of summer.

Weir moved to the door and then ducked across the hall into the next room. They found overturned file cabinets and trash cans filled with paper that had been set on fire. The smoke was billowing, and the flames grew hotter as the open door let new oxygen in. All they could do was close the door and move on.

Across the hall they discovered a bank of computers smashed to

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bits. Lying on the ground nearby were two men in lab coats, each of them bloodstained from multiple gunshot wounds.

“Hamza and Min Cho,” Weir said, comparing their faces to images he’d seen in the briefing before the mission. “The Iranian and North Korean scientists who the brass thought might be in on this. At least they were right about something.”

Bosco grimaced at the bad news. “Someone’s cleaning this place out. If these guys are dead, Campbell won’t be around for long.”

Weir agreed. “Get what you can from the computers and check these guys for pocket litter. I’m going to find Campbell.”

Weir was breaking protocol by spreading his men out like this, but he needed to move fast. Otherwise, the whole mission would be for nothing. Leaving Bosco, he continued down the hall. Smoke was now clinging to the ceiling and dampening the glow of the emergency lights. A spate of chatter from the backup team told him they were on their way, but he was too focused on the hunt for the scientist to join in.

He searched the next room and found nothing. A few steps away he reached a large door. Like all the others it was unlocked. Kicking the door wide, he cleared the room with the MP5 at his shoulder. He saw no sign of danger and stepped inside.

This must have been the main laboratory, he decided. It had shelves filled with equipment and supplies, and worktables loaded down with microscopes, centrifuges, and other high-tech machines. He moved deeper into the room, checking the shadows and the space behind each workbench. Near the back end of the room, he found another body lying face down. He rolled the man over, noticed the scruffy beard and the long nose. “Campbell,” he said to himself. “Damn.”

Before he could do anything else, the radio squawked in his ear.

“Chief, this is Quez. Something odd out here. This tower isn’t hooked up to the main grid at all. Nothing here but broken and frayed cables left over from the sixties.”

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"You find a generator?" Weir asked.

"Yeah, but it's the size of a dollhouse. Might be putting out three hundred watts. Just enough to light up that red beacon on top."

As Weir struggled to put some meaning to that discovery, Bosco chimed in on the radio call.

"Hate to say it but there's nothing worthwhile in the lab. I forced my way back into the room with the burning trash cans and pulled out some of the papers. It's just empty notebooks and blank sheets."

Weir knew there could only be one reason for this. "This whole thing is a setup," he said. "Get out. Get out now."

A loud squeal hit his ears, telling him his transmission had been stepped on. A second try resulted in the same thing. It meant someone was jamming them.

Weir turned for the door, only to see it slamming shut. He lunged for the handle, but grabbed a second too late. He heard the bolt slide home and saw the coded lock engage. Two hard pulls were enough to tell him it wasn't budging.

As he looked for another way out, the ventilation system kicked on. Streamers attached to the grates in the ceiling fluttered like ribbons as the air began to flow. A nasty scent like an electrical fire quickly filled the room, as if the air conditioner were melting down.

Weir didn't know what the hell was going on, but he knew he needed to get out of there. He swung his MP5 around and blasted away at the glass window in the center of the door. A tight pattern of impact strikes clustered in a circle, but they left only mushroom-shaped dents in what was obviously a bulletproof panel.

*"Don't waste your ammunition,"* a voice said from behind him.

Weir spun and saw only the glowing screen of a laptop propped up on one of the desks. The image of a face appeared on the screen.

"Who the hell are you?" Weir said. "What is all this fun house nonsense?"

Weir was surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth. It

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was not his style to engage a target in conversation. He felt as if the peculiar situation had thrown him off.

*"It's anything but nonsense," the image told him. "In fact, I'm about to reveal a truth you'll find hard to believe."*

Weir edged around the first worktable, wary of being attacked while he focused on the computer. He felt a tone in his ears, followed by an odd ringing. "And what truth is that?"

*"You've been set up to fail. Your government sent you here. Your Bravo team stayed close enough to observe, but too far away to render any real assistance. Your fire-team members split off one by one, allowing you to come here . . . to this room . . . alone."*

Weir found himself getting angry. The smell in the air was bothering his eyes and burning his nostrils. It was worse than the smoke in the hall. He felt like smashing the computer screen but instead found himself answering once again. "Why would they do that?"

*"Because you're the final test subject. The last experiment. The human guinea pig. They've known what we were doing here all along. But rather than blow this place off the map they sent you here to be infected. To bring the dust home. Even if you get out alive, they'll prod you and poke you and eventually dissect your brain in a petri dish in hopes of figuring out how we've accomplished the impossible."*

Weir tried to reason through the noise in his head. He thought back to the demand for samples. Air, soil, water. Blood from the dead horse. He didn't want to believe it, but there was something familiar in what the voice was telling him. As if he'd already been thinking it himself.

*"Someone had to be sacrificed to find out the truth," the voice continued. "They . . . chose . . . you."*

With each new word, Weir's struggle to process them became more serious. He found himself thinking about Havana Syndrome and then realizing this was something more. But what?

The harder he tried to think, the louder the noise in his head became. He found it difficult to hold a thought. Even more difficult to

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refute what the voice was suggesting. The noise became pain, and the pain a blinding wall of resistance, impenetrable to any notion other than those coming from the speaker.

Weir fell to his knees. He no longer sensed the metallic smell in the air, nor felt the weapon in his hand or the ground beneath him. His vision began failing. His world shrank, until all that existed was the wave of pain and the voice that cut through it.

*"You have only one choice,"* the voice said. *"Kill them. Kill them all."*

As Weir considered this thought, the wall of pain vanished, falling away like a plate-glass window shattered into a thousand pieces. The truth was suddenly clear. All he had to do was act.

His senses returned in a rush. Feeling flooded back into his hands and feet. Sight to his eyes. He saw the computer screen go dark. Heard the air handler kick off. Watched the fluttering streamers fall slack.

With his strength returning, Weir stood, watching as the bullet-scarred door opened. He heard footsteps in the hall and saw Bosco appear through the smoke.

Bosco cocked his head, looking at him strangely. "You all right, Chief?"

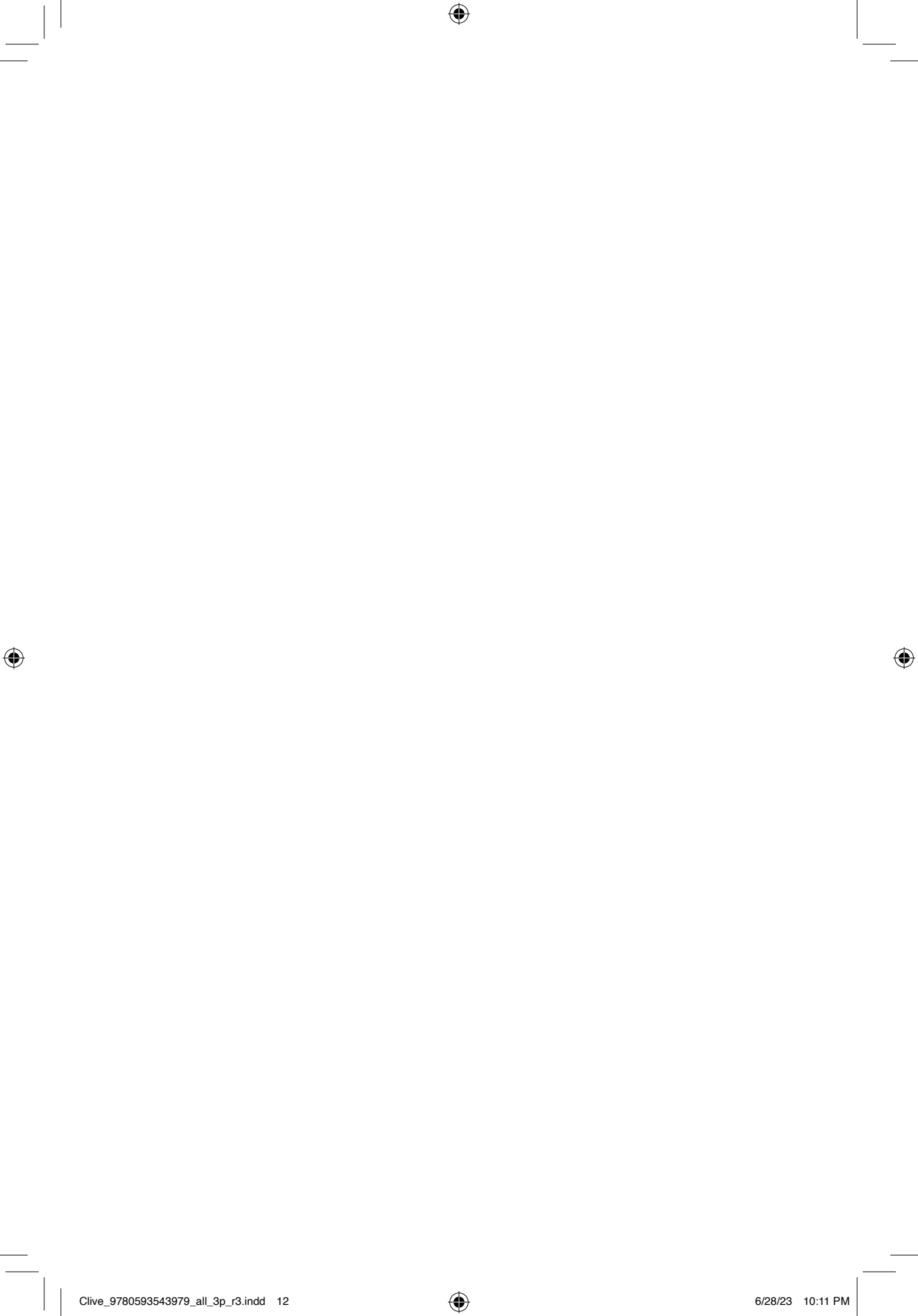
Weir didn't smile or speak. He just swung his weapon into place and opened fire. Bosco fell in a hail of bullets with rounds through both legs and one arm. He remained alive only because the body armor he wore had protected his chest.

Bosco cursed in agony and brought his own weapon around.

Weir fired again. This time holding the trigger down until the magazine was empty and the walls were covered in blood.

With the shooting finished, Weir entered the corridor. He stepped over the body of his dead friend and turned down the hall, pulling and discarding the empty magazine and jamming a full one in its place. He moved slowly and methodically, a single thought playing on an endless loop in his mind.

*Kill them. Kill them all.*





## A HUNDRED MILES NORTHEAST OF NASSAU PRESENT DAY

Captain E. F. Handley stood on the bridge wing of the MV *Heron*, squinting into the distance behind the ship. His dark eyes focused on the line running from the *Heron*'s stern to the dilapidated fishing trawler she was towing.

He grunted a note of displeasure. "We've got a situation brewing."

Handley was a lifelong sailor in his early sixties and the captain of the mid-sized freighter that made runs between the Bahamas and various American ports. His face was a weathered mix of sun-damaged skin and a bristly beard. It was deeply tanned with a hint of carmine red in the palette. His hair was wild and unruly, a nest of coarse grays that stuck out from beneath an old ball cap, which he repeatedly removed and repositioned in hopes of corralling the bushy mess.

"What kind of situation?" a taller, more kempt individual asked.

Handley looked over at the man in khaki pants and a blue windbreaker. Gerald Walker was not a member of the crew but had chartered the voyage and come along to supervise, taking them to a random spot in the eastern Atlantic, where they'd found the damaged trawler and taken it under tow.

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Walker claimed he wanted to take it back to Nassau, but he would allow no radio calls or other forms of transmission, and Handley expected he had another destination in mind.

As a pretense, Walker pretended to work for a big insurance company, but Handley knew an American Navy man when he met one. Walker was too squared away to be a civilian. Too tight-lipped to be telling the whole story. Besides, the trawler was of negligible financial value, cheaper to sink than to save. And then, of course, there were the bodies . . .

“See our towline?” Handley said. “It should be dipping into the water halfway between us and the trawler, but it’s pulling up. The sag has gone out of it. The strain on the line is growing.”

“Current or wind?” Walker asked, showing he knew a thing or two about towing a derelict.

“Neither,” Handley said. “She’s taking on water. She’s sinking. We’re gonna have to go back on board, set up pumps, and see if we can find the leak.”

“I can’t allow that,” Walker said with a firm but polite tone.

The captain propped the ball cap higher on his head. “Something you don’t want us to see on that ship, Mr. Walker? Something other than a bunch of dead Chinamen?”

“Dead Chinese,” Walker corrected. “And I don’t know what you’re referring to. That ship was abandoned when we found it.”

Handley laughed. “You play all the games you want, Mr. Walker. Meanwhile, that ship is getting heavier and lower in the water. She’s dragging us like an anchor, which means we have to slow down or the line will snap. Reducing speed means Nassau is another half a day’s sailing. The slower we go, the longer it takes. The longer it takes, the more water that trawler takes on. Forcing us to slow down even more. See where I’m going with this?”

Walker understood the predicament. “You’re saying the trawler will be on the bottom before we reach the Bahamas.”

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“She’ll be un-towable long before that.”

As Walker pondered the options, Handley took another look behind them. Out beyond the trawler, something new caught his eye. An odd arc of light had appeared in the sky. It looked like the sunrise, but it was nearly dusk, and the sun was going down in the other direction.

At first, he thought it must be a reflection or a mirage. But the shimmering arc of light was moving closer. “What the devil is that?”

The apparition seemed to be approaching in silence—or perhaps just so quietly that any sound was drowned out by the wind and the waves—but as it crossed above the trawler, a humming sound became audible.

An instant later, the arc of light split into four separate orbs. Two of them branched off to the port side, while the others went to starboard. Before long they were circling the *Heron* like a pack of wolves.

“Captain?” one of the crewmen said nervously.

“What is this?” Handley snapped, looking at Walker. “A message from your dead Chinese friends?”

Walker was turning from point to point, trying to keep his eyes on the slowly circling balls of light. They were growing brighter with each pass, leaving streaks on his retina as they flared into spheres of gold and orange.

Walker used his hand as a shield against the light, trying desperately to block the glare. Try as he might, he saw nothing that suggested machinery or equipment behind the light. No wings, nor propellers or rotors, just glowing balls of light slowly circling the ship.

Watching them turn, his heart began to race. He knew things. Things that Captain Handley and his crew didn’t. This knowledge chilled him to the bone.

The humming noise grew louder and deeper, becoming a haunting tone, like some aboriginal instrument echoing through the canyons. Walker found his skin itching and throat going dry. He stepped back

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against the bulkhead, his face now shaded, but lit in oscillating waves from the artificial suns dancing around them.

He scratched at his arm, casually at first and then uncontrollably, soon he was digging his nails into the skin, raking them until he drew blood. His eyes darted around, following the globes. Across and back, across and back. It was dizzying and mesmerizing all at once.

A pair of rough hands slammed him into the bulkhead, snapping him out of the trance.

“What the hell are these things?” Handley demanded.

Walker tried to answer but a shield had gone up in his mind. He tried to force the words through, but the harder he pushed, the tighter his throat cinched.

Realizing Walker had become useless, Handley shoved him aside. He ducked through the hatch onto the bridge, noticing that the lights overhead were throbbing in concert with each passing disk.

A migraine erupted in his head. A tight feeling spread across his chest. “Get off a distress call,” he ordered. “Tell them we’re under attack.”

One of the crewmen was already fiddling with the radio, switching frequencies and trying to get a message out. He was getting feedback and interference on every channel. The noise got worse until a high-pitched squeal and burst of static blew out the speaker and the unit went dark.

The radioman stared at the ruined unit, which was mounted overhead. The microphone slipped out of his hand and dropped, swinging wildly on the looped cord that connected it to the transmitter.

Several lights blew out in sharp pops, like the flashbulbs of older days. The helmsman went still, his face catatonic, his eyes staring into the distance.

Handley pushed past his immobilized crewmen and pulled open a locker. As the door swung wide, his chest tightened again—much like it had during a heart attack he’d suffered three years earlier.

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*A damned bad time to be having a second one*, he thought.

He pushed his thumb into his sternum to fight the pain while reaching into the locker. The first thing he grabbed was an emergency VHF radio. After lifting a plastic shield from its face, he pressed and held the distress button.

A tone confirmed he was transmitting. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," he said loudly. "This is the MV *Heron* out of Nassau. We're under attack and request immediate assistance."

He let go of the transmit button and heard only a loud electronic squeal.

He turned the squelch down and tried again. "I repeat, this is MV *Heron*, we're under attack. Our location is—"

A wave of feedback erupted from the speaker as the unit flared hot in his hand. The little LEDs that told him it was generating power. It blazed for an instant and then went dark.

"Damned useless thing."

Handley tossed the radio aside and reached deeper into the locker, grasping for a different piece of emergency equipment. He pulled out a Browning ten-gauge shotgun and ripped off the plastic trigger guard.

Flicking off the safety, Handley moved out onto the bridge wing. The balls of light continued to circle, buzzing past the ship no more than fifty feet away.

Tracking them left Handley feeling dizzy, so he braced himself and waited for another one to come around. As the next sphere appeared from behind the funnel, he raised the shotgun and pulled the trigger.

The first shot either missed or had no effect, so Handley pumped the forestock, reloaded, and fired again as the next orb appeared. A third orb followed the second, and Handley emptied the weapon in its direction. *Bang . . . bang . . . bang*. The spent shells kicked out from beneath the shotgun, the steel pellets blasting their way across the sky.

With the shotgun empty, Handley dropped to one knee. As far as he could tell, he'd accomplished nothing. Worse yet, the pain in his

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chest had become unbearable. He grabbed at his sternum as the shotgun fell from his hand. As the next orb raced by, he slumped to the deck and lay there.

Standing in the shadows, Gerald Walker had watched the scene play out. The swirling lights continued to orbit the ship, moving so fast they appeared like streaks in the darkening sky.

The oscillating hum continued to haunt him, while slowly resolving into a sound like whispered speech. Confusing at first, like an announcement echoing through a large stadium, the words eventually became clear.

*Cut . . . cut . . . cut . . . Loose . . . loose . . . loose . . .*

With every sound and syllable the pressure in his head grew worse. His eyes began to sting. Sweat dripped down his forehead. He continued to dig at the skin on his arm.

*Cut . . . cut . . . cut . . . Loose . . . loose . . . loose . . .*

Stepping back onto the bridge, he found the helmsman unconscious and the radioman digging at his ear, blood running through his fingers. Without warning, the radioman shouted something, ran out onto the bridge, and vaulted over the rail. No life jacket, no hesitation, just a desperate leap into the unknown.

Walker considered following him. The veins on his forehead bulged. Tunnel vision set in. His mind spinning with the circling demons.

*Cut . . . cut . . . cut . . . Loose . . . loose . . . loose . . .*

It made no sense to him. None at all. And then he thought about the trawler they were dragging to Nassau. He turned to the stern and focused on the Chinese ship. Without a conscious thought, he began walking toward it.