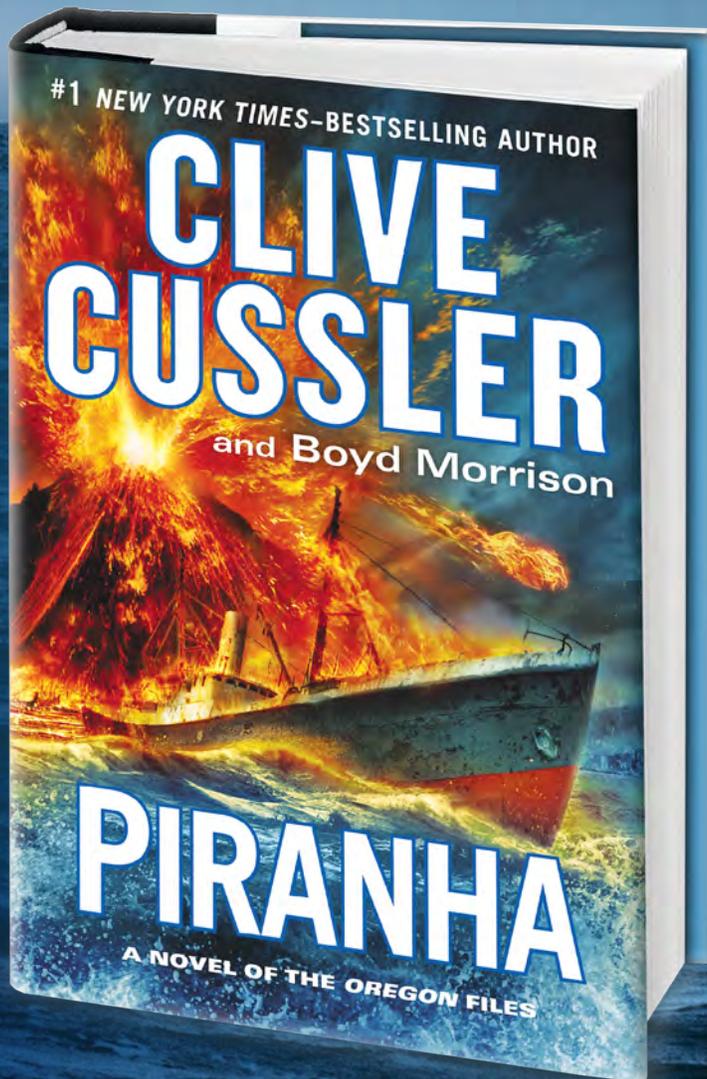


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# ***PROLOGUE***

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**Martinique**  
**May 8, 1902**

The steamer *SS Roraima* was sailing toward the Apocalypse.

From the bridge of the Canadian cargo and passenger ship, First Officer Ellery Scott peered through a gray snowfall dirtier than anything he'd seen during a sooty London winter. Although it was 6:30 in the morning, the light from the rising sun could do little to penetrate the ash drifting over Saint-Pierre's harbor. The outline of "The Little Paris of the West Indies," as Martinique's commercial center was known, resembled less a thriving city of thirty thousand and more a blurred Impressionist watercolor recently fashionable in the Caribbean town's namesake.

Scott absentmindedly stroked his silver whiskers as he turned toward Mont Pelée, the volcano looming above the harbor. Although he normally bore a jovial demeanor that made him well liked by officers, crew, and passengers alike, today he could manage nothing better than a wary frown. He'd been a sailor for

twenty years, aboard every kind of cargo vessel, at sea through murderous gales and towering rogue waves, but the stout old sea dog had never seen anything as ominous and foreboding as the mountain only three miles to the north.

Rolling thunder pealed from beneath its depths at regular intervals, as if a great roaring beast lay within. Darkness shrouded the peak, and a sulfurous odor permeated the air. Scott could imagine the Devil himself taking up residence in such a place.

“What do you think of this weather, sir?” Scott asked with a casualness he hoped did not betray his apprehension.

Captain George Muggah, his face etched with lines carved by years of salt and sun, and his upper lip hidden by a bushy mustache, glanced up from his log and squinted at the otherworldly tableau.

“Stay the course, Mr. Scott,” he said, his voice steadfast. “Unless I hear different from the harbormaster, we’re going to drop anchor.”

“This ash might foul our equipment. It could delay our sailing this evening.”

“Then I leave it to you to make sure the crew sweeps the decks and keeps our machinery clean. There are eighteen other ships at anchor. If it weren’t safe, they’d be long gone.”

The thick coat of ash floating on the water made it look as though the ships to either side were moored on dry land. At the risk of seeming impertinent, Scott persisted. “What of the explosion we heard two nights ago?”

They had been at anchor off Dominica fifty miles north when a blast at four in the morning rocked the ship so vigorously that cups and dishes crashed to the deck.

Captain Muggah went back to scribbling in the log. “I’m in-

clined to agree with the Portsmouth telegraph operator, that it relieved the pressure inside the volcano. It may continue to belch, but I'm sure nothing will come of it."

Scott wasn't as sure, but he kept his tongue still.

After they found their berth and dropped anchor, the harbor-master and doctor came aboard to check the ship and make sure the crew and passengers carried no contagious diseases that might infect the island. Both of them downplayed the continuing volcanic activity and bolstered Muggah's supposition that Pelée's growl wasn't dangerous. The current activity was nothing more than the mountain's last gasp.

Because it was Ascension Day, all the laborers would be at morning Mass, so Scott and Muggah headed down to the officers' mess for breakfast. They discussed the day's lading schedule—unloading lumber and potassium from New Brunswick, loading rum and sugar bound for Boston—but nary a syllable was spoken of the volcano, even though its rumblings continued to make it impossible to ignore.

After finishing breakfast, Scott went up on deck to receive the local agent who would be supervising the stevedores.

The 340-foot cargo vessel was a simple design, with holds fore and aft of the midship bridge topped with a single funnel. Masts equidistant toward each end were used for lifting heavy cargo. Every inch was dusted with Pelée's bountiful output. As Scott walked, his treads left prints on the deck.

Passengers crowded the railings for a view of Saint-Pierre's menacing backdrop. Some of them were sweeping ashes into envelopes and tobacco tins as souvenirs. Two women raised parasols to keep their dresses from being dirtied.

One man Scott recognized, a meek German named Gunther

Lutzen, was even setting up a tripod so that he could photograph the scene. He'd boarded two days before in Guadeloupe, and Scott had rarely seen the man without his camera.

"A fine day for pictures, Mr. Lutzen," Scott said.

"Yes, I am very interested," Lutzen replied in halting English.

"Is this for your scientific expedition?"

"No, that is complete. But I will be pleased to add this photo to my . . ." He paused and pulled a German–English dictionary from his pocket. "*Ach*, what is word for *Sammlung*?" He leafed through the pages.

"'Collection'?" Scott offered.

Lutzen smiled and nodded vigorously. "Yes, of course. 'Collection.' English is my new language. I learn still. My sister in New York gives me child's books to read."

Scott patted him on the shoulder. "You're doing well. It's better than my German."

Lutzen laughed and put away the dictionary so he could jot in his ever-present notebook. Scott went on, nodding greetings to other passengers as he passed.

When he reached the forecabin, he saw Monsieur Plessoneau, the local agent, coming up the gangway that had been lowered to his boat. Plessoneau, a gaunt man dressed in a white suit and straw hat, shook hands with Scott.

"Good to see you again, *monsieur*," Scott said. "I see that your angry mountain hasn't hurt business." He nodded to the other ships stretched out across the crescent-shaped harbor.

The Frenchman pursed his lips and blew through them. "*Oui*, but we are hoping the worst is over."

Scott frowned. "What's happened?"

The comment elicited a rueful chuckle from the agent. "We have been hearing from Pelée for over a month now. The ants and

centipedes at the sugar mill in Usine Guérin were the start of our troubles.”

“Ants and centipedes?”

Plessoneau made a face. “I will not miss them once I return to France. We call the ants *fourmis-fous*—crazy ants. They swarm over everything, biting in a frenzy. The centipedes are even worse. One foot long and black, a few bites will kill a man. It took every mill worker to save the horses. Then the snakes arrived.”

Scott’s eyes widened at the mention of snakes. Insects were one thing, but he could not bear the idea of facing a snake.

Plessoneau nodded in return. “Hundreds of *fer-de-lances*—pit vipers—suddenly appeared four days ago out of the forest in northern Saint-Pierre. Fifty people and hundreds of animals died. Then a day later a mud slide destroyed the mill. Fortunately, it happened at night, but we still lost many men.”

This was sounding more like the coming of the Apocalypse that Scott had imagined as they sailed into the harbor.

“Perhaps we should leave and stop here on our return trip instead,” he said.

Plessoneau shrugged. “I was going to suggest that since it is a holiday, many of our men won’t work, and you might continue on to Fort-de-France and come back tomorrow. You will need the harbormaster to give permission, though, and he may not let you.”

“Why not?”

“Because the governor has ordered troops to keep people from fleeing the city. There is an election in three days, and he is worried that it will not happen if everyone leaves. Some got out, but peasants are coming to Saint-Pierre from farms on the mountain slopes, so it’s as crowded as I’ve ever seen it.”

“Suppose we leave anyway?”

“Only one ship has so far, an Italian barque called *Orsolina*

that had loaded only half its sugar cargo yesterday. The harbor-master refused permission to depart until they'd finished loading, and he threatened the captain, Marino Leboffe, with arrest. Supposedly, Leboffe, who is from Naples, told the harbor-master, 'I know nothing about Mont Pelée, but if Vesuvius were acting the way your volcano is this morning, I'd get out of Naples.'

"He might be right."

"It is your captain's ship, but another leaving without permission may cause a panic with the others. A French cruiser just arrived in Fort-de-France, the *Suchet*. She might be called on to stop you."

"Let's see what Captain Muggah thinks," Scott said, and led Plessoneau to the bridge.

The captain listened to the agent's tales but was unmoved. He waved a copy of *Les Colonies*, the city's newspaper, which the doctor had left with him.

"The editorial in here says the mountain is safe. That's good enough for me. Now, prepare the ship for unloading."

There was no arguing with the captain. His decision was final. Scott gave him a curt, "Aye, Captain," and escorted Plessoneau back to his launch.

Scott bade him adieu and made his way back to the quarter-deck, where he found the third mate gazing at the city in rapt silence.

"Mr. Havers," Scott said, "what's caught your eye?"

"Well, it's a peaceful sight, isn't it, Mr. Scott? Gray, but bathed in a bright sunshine."

Scott grudgingly agreed that the sight was mesmerizing. But "peaceful" was not the word he would have chosen. To him it still seemed ominous. "We have work to do. The captain wants this deck to sparkle by the time we leave."

“Aye, sir. But do you mind if I take just one photo before we get started? My camera is on my bunk.”

Scott took out his pocket watch. 7:49. What with the dockhands at Mass, a few minutes wouldn't hurt.

He smiled and nodded. “But hop to it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Havers said with glee, and ran toward the crew's quarters.

Scott had moved only two steps toward the bridge when it seemed as if the sun had been extinguished. With dread, he looked toward Pelée. The sight that met his eyes caused him to be rooted in place as if his feet were trapped in cement.

A massive plume of black smoke and ash shot straight up into the sky like the expulsion from a battleship's cannon. The side of the mountain blew apart, and a second mass of ash churned down the slopes of Pelée in a glowing avalanche of superheated gas. The deadly flow was aimed directly at the city of Saint-Pierre. At the rate it was going, it would engulf the town in little more than a minute.

Still, Scott couldn't move. He was mesmerized by the appalling view, which was silent until the deafening shock wave arrived and blasted him backward. He would have remained pressed against the bulkhead until he was taken by the deadly cloud if not for that unholy sound. Thrown off his mark, Scott came to his senses. His first impulse was to get the ship to safety, so he sprinted toward the bow.

As Scott came amidships, he met Captain Muggah running in the other direction. The captain must have had the same idea as Scott.

“Heave up, Mr. Scott!” the captain yelled as he raced past toward the bridge.

“Weighing anchor, aye!” Scott yelled back. The third mate

who'd gone off to get his camera joined the captain on the bridge, ordering the boilers up to full steam.

Scott reached the anchor chain and engaged the steam-powered donkey engine to raise the anchor. Passengers around him screamed in terror and ran in every direction, unaware of how to protect themselves from the coming rain of fire. Most of the crew fared no better, and despite Scott's shouts for help, none came to his aid.

He counted fifteen fathoms of chain retrieved when the lethal cloud of ash rolled over the northern edge of Saint-Pierre, setting everything it touched aflame and blowing apart stone structures as if they were made of matchsticks.

The cloud continued to roll out over the harbor, where it met the cable-laying ship *Grappler*. She did not have time to catch fire before she was capsized by a wall of water. The tsunami swept toward them, smashing one ship after the other.

With fifteen fathoms of chain still to go, Scott knew getting the *Roraima* out of the harbor in time was hopeless. He scrambled to find shelter. With only seconds until the fire reached him, all he could do was snatch a large tarpaulin from one of the ventilator covers, flip it over to create multiple layers, and pull it over his head. He threw himself to the deck and huddled beneath the tarp, with only a tiny hole to see through. He could see Captain Muggah barking out orders on the bridge, defiantly trying to save his doomed ship.

Scott felt the heat before the blast wave. It rose to such a degree that he thought he would be cooler inside one of the ship's boilers. The layered tarp deflected the worst of the heat; without it, Scott was sure he would not survive. It was confirmed when he watched in horror as the captain's mustache, hair, and clothes were set on fire. The captain wailed in unbearable agony, and

Scott was spared from seeing more when Muggah dropped from view.

Hot stones and mud pelted the tarp, some of them smaller than buckshot, others as big as a pigeon's egg. None of them were traveling at a speed that would injure Scott, so he simply endured the hail of stones, listening to them hiss as they splashed into the water beside the ship.

A moment later, the blast wave reached the *Roraima*, causing the tarp to be nearly ripped from Scott's hands. Both masts were sheared off two feet above the deck as cleanly as if they'd been cut by a saw, and the smokestack snapped in half. The tidal wave struck the side of the ship, initially tilting her to port before jerking her so hard to starboard that the ship's ice rail dipped into the sea.

Fearing that he'd be pitched into the water, Scott cried out and scrambled to find a handhold. He slid down the ash-covered deck, still under the tarpaulin, until his feet slammed into a cargo latch. For a second he thought the ship would capsize like the *Grappler*, but the old girl held strong and bobbed back up, though she still carried a heavy list.

Scott opened his eyes, peeked through the tarp's hole to get his bearings, and saw that he was just opposite the forecastle. He was about to make a try for it when the door swung wide and two sailors, Taylor and Quashey, reached out and dragged him inside.

They closed the door and covered the portholes with mattresses, trunks, anything they could find. When the room was sealed, they huddled beneath the tarp and blankets, waiting for the end—either of the firestorm or their lives.

After what seemed like an hour but could have been no more than ten minutes, Scott felt the heat abate. Hoping the worst to be over, he stood and opened the door.

With one look, he realized that the worst was just beginning.

The deck was littered with charred corpses. Men, women, and children were burned horribly or coated with enough ash that they appeared to be frozen in concrete. He could not tell passenger from crew.

He stepped gingerly around them, searching for any signs of life, when he found someone facedown, the back of the clothing burned away. The poor wretch was moaning in pain. Scott gently turned the person over and reeled backward when he saw the awful visage.

The man's hair was gone completely, his skin blackened and his nose and ears misshapen and melted to his face. The only reason Scott knew it was a man and not a woman was because of the remnants of coat and tie that were still intact beneath his folded arms. His lower half was burned to a cinder. Scott figured the man must have been lying on his stomach when the fire scorched him.

"Help me, Mr. Scott," the man sputtered through cracked lips.

Scott looked at the man in confusion. "Do I know you, sir?"

"Don't you know *me*, Mr. Scott?" he croaked, every word an excruciating effort. "I am Lutzen."

Scott gaped at Gunther Lutzen. He would never have recognized the German.

Lutzen trembled as he raised his arms toward Scott, who thought the man was reaching out for aid. Instead, he lifted his precious notebook and held it toward Scott. Now he realized that Lutzen must have thrown himself on the notebook to protect it from the flames.

"I'm dying. Give this to my sister."

Scott did not want to see another man die, so he desperately searched for any signs of help coming to them. A cargo vessel he

recognized as the *Roddam* was turning to port to head out to open sea, and he could see that the entire stern was on fire.

“Please, Mr. Scott,” Lutzen said, drawing Scott’s gaze back to him. “Ingrid Lutzen, New York City.”

Seeing that there was nothing more to do for the man, Scott nodded and carefully took the notebook and tucked it into his waistband. “Of course, Mr. Lutzen. I’ll see to it.”

Lutzen couldn’t smile, but he nodded in understanding. “Tell her I was there,” he said with a pitiful wheeze. “I made the breakthrough. It will change everything. They shined like emeralds, as large as tree trunks.”

He coughed violently, his body shaking from the strain. Scott tried to stand to go find him water, but Lutzen grabbed his sleeve and pulled him close so that Scott’s ear hovered over his mouth. He whispered three words, then his hand fell away from Scott’s coat. Lutzen became mercifully still, finally free from his pain.

Scott remained kneeling for a moment, confused by what he’d heard. Then more groans caught his attention, and he was on his feet. With the captain dead or mortally wounded, he was now in charge.

Scott gathered as many survivors as he could find, a total of only thirty out of the sixty-eight on board, and half of those would likely not make it through the night. Scott and three other crew members were the only ones not badly injured. They set about constructing a raft out of the remains of a lifeboat, but their efforts were rendered moot when the French cruiser *Suchet* arrived in the afternoon and took them aboard, leaving the *Roraima* behind to sink. The officer who gave him coffee told him that they feared not a single soul in Saint-Pierre had lived through the holocaust.

With nothing more to do now that he and his few charges were

safe, Scott took Lutzen's journal from his waistband and flipped through it. As he'd suspected, he couldn't understand a word of it. Not only was every page written in German but the majority of the writing consisted of equations and scientific mumbo jumbo. Scott hoped Lutzen's sister would know what to make of it and vowed to keep his promise to return it to her.

Scott thought about what he'd tell her when he met her upon his arrival in New York, whether to save her from the horror of what her brother had suffered. He thought she deserved the whole truth, including Lutzen's last message to her.

He wanted to make sure he remembered it verbatim in the days it would take for the trip north, so he scrounged a pencil from one of the *Suchet's* sailors and leafed to the first blank page. Scott scribbled the cryptic phrases he'd heard, Lutzen's raw voice in his head.

*Tell her I was there. I made the breakthrough. It will change everything. They shined like emeralds, as large as tree trunks.*

Scott paused, still unsure whether he'd heard Lutzen's final three words correctly. He shrugged and reproduced Lutzen's strange message exactly.

*I found Oz.*



## **Chesapeake Bay Nine months ago**

The X-47B prototype attack drone made a sweeping turn, only minutes away from the target eighty miles northwest of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. Frederick Weddell adjusted the frequency-hopping algorithm of the jamming transmission. His mission was to block the control signal coming in from the drone's operator at Naval Base Ventura County in California and recode its onboard navigation system, causing the aircraft and its one thousand pounds of fuel to smash into a derelict barge.

Even without the two smart bombs it was capable of carrying, the drone could cause a deadly terrorist attack on the U.S.

Weddell relished the challenge. "We're gonna do it," he said to no one in particular, although there were two other men in the small room filled to the brim with electronic equipment and displays. The eighty-foot communications vessel anchored near the

mouth of the Potomac was otherwise unoccupied except for its captain, who was topside on the bridge. Weddell adjusted his wire-framed glasses and looked up at the largest monitor to check the view from a camera on the deck. The drone was in its first turn after takeoff, a white wedge against the orange glow of dusk behind it.

To accomplish their mission, jamming the control signal wasn't enough. If the drone's contact with its controller was lost, it would revert to autonomous mode and return to its base at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, the Maryland flight center that served as the test facility for most of the Navy's aerial weapons systems. The key was to establish a new control authorization so that the coordinates for an alternative target designation could be loaded. In this case, the unmanned aerial vehicle would be instructed to crash into the barge at five hundred miles per hour.

This attack was the worst-case scenario for the Pentagon. No one—not the drone designers nor the Joint Chiefs—thought that the onboard systems could be hacked. But ever since a top secret RQ-170 Sentinel reconnaissance drone crash-landed in Iran, top brass had demanded that the Air Force and Navy prove that their communications protocols were unbreakable. Apart from losing a drone that cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build, the crash had given Iran a free peek inside one of America's most advanced pieces of technology. If the Iranians could bring it down, they might be able to wrest a drone's control away from its operator. The military was pouring funds into a program to make sure that never happened.

That was the reason for this hijacking simulation.

The call had gone out for the best and brightest in the drone community to put together a team to serve as the enemy infiltra-

tion unit. An electrical engineer by education and now the Air Force's top communications specialist, Weddell had jumped at the chance. He was an expert in all manner of signal transmission, encryption, and disruption, so he was chosen to head up the signal intercept mission. His team consisted of two other top-notch scientists.

Lawrence Kensit, a mousy fellow with a stooped gait and an acne-scarred face, was a computer scientist and physicist who had gotten his Ph.D. from Caltech when he was twenty. Despite his penchant for calling anyone he felt didn't rise to his level of brilliance "irredeemably stupid"—including officers who depended on his work—he nevertheless became the military's most brilliant drone software developer. He sat to Weddell's right, tapping away on a keyboard set in front of three screens winking with data.

The second man was Douglas Pearson, a hardware designer responsible for the technology that went into the most advanced drones in the military's arsenal. He was a bear of a man whose bombastic voice and enormous gut suited someone who didn't say no too much and wasn't used to hearing the word, either. He ruled his fiefdom with an iron fist and would argue loudly with anyone who disagreed with his viewpoint. He sat to Weddell's left with his feet up on the counter, a tablet computer in one hand and a coffee mug in the other.

If the three of them couldn't crack the drone's command system, no one else in the world could. After confirming that the drone would in fact proceed on an intercept path toward the derelict barge, Weddell planned to veer it from its course and have it waggle its wings over Patuxent in a final flourish before returning it to Ventura control.

Pearson slurped his coffee loudly before setting it down and tapping his tablet against the counter. “What’s happening, Larry? I’ve got nothing on the linkup so far.”

“Dr. Weddell,” Kensit said without looking away from his screens, “please remind Dr. Pearson that I don’t respond to that nickname. I prefer ‘Dr. Kensit,’ but I will accept ‘Lawrence,’ even though that privilege is usually reserved for people who could be considered equals.” He paused before adding, “If it’s not clear, I don’t consider him an equal.”

“Equal in what way, *Dr. Kensit*?” Pearson said with a mocking laugh. “We sure aren’t equal in height.”

“Or weight.”

Pearson snorted. “Why don’t I just call you *shorty*? Or how about *pipsqueak*?”

“My height is lower relative to yours, but close to average,” Kensit replied without inflection. “Much like your IQ.”

“Enough,” Weddell said, fed up with their constant bickering. “We’re not going through this right now.” He had spent half of the last six months playing referee between them.

“We’re about to win this thing,” he continued, “so try to remain civil until we’re done. We’ll only have a direct line of sight for two more minutes. What’s your status, Lawrence?”

Kensit pressed a final key with a decisive snap. “If Dr. Pearson’s hardware calculations are correct, as soon as you are able to wrest the control signal away from Ventura, I will be able to reconfigure the onboard navigation protocols.”

Weddell nodded and put his plan for blocking the transmission into motion. Spoofing the GPS navigation wouldn’t work because all U.S. drones relied on inertial navigation to prevent just such a tactic. He had to be much more creative. Using an antenna

of his own design mounted on the deck of the boat, he blasted the receiver on the X-47B with an overload spike that would cause the onboard systems to momentarily freeze. The sensitive part of the operation was to do it just long enough so that its receiver would immediately go into search mode again, but not so long that it recognized someone was attempting to compromise its protocols and cause it to revert to autonomous operation.

“Get ready, Lawrence,” Weddell said. “Remember, you’ll have only twenty seconds to acquire the signal.”

“I know.”

*Of course he does.*

Weddell turned to Pearson. He was responsible for disabling the drone’s automated self-destruct, which would engage if the drone’s sensors detected an unauthorized signal controlling it. “Doug, are you ready to go?”

“Let’s do this,” Pearson said, rubbing his hands together.

“Okay. On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark.”

Weddell pressed the ENTER button, and the pulse bombarded the drone. His screen confirmed that he had a direct hit.

“Go, Lawrence!”

Kensit began typing furiously. The seconds ticked by. All Weddell could do from this point was watch. He kept his eyes on the monitor above him. The drone remained on its original heading.

“Status, Lawrence.” The countdown timer he’d programmed into his laptop gave them ten more seconds.

“I’m isolating the control subroutines,” Kensit said, which was as close as Weddell would get to an estimate from him.

More ticks. The wait was excruciating. For the first time in the entire process, Weddell was completely powerless.

“Five seconds, Lawrence!”

More typing.

“You can do it, Kensit,” Pearson said.

Kensit’s fingers flew across the keyboard, and then he pulled them away like a concert pianist finishing a minuet.

“I know,” he said. “We now have control.” He looked pointedly at Pearson. “Try not to make my brilliance a moot point.”

Although this drone wouldn’t actually explode if Pearson couldn’t disable the autodestruct, a switch inside the X-47B would trip in the event the autodestruct sequence wasn’t terminated. The inspectors checking the drone later would know that the hijacking mission had failed. There would be no partial credit.

Pearson used the tablet as deftly as Kensit had manipulated his keyboard. Weddell was focused on entering new targeting coordinates into the nav system. He finished just as Pearson called out in triumph, “Take that, Uncle Sam! We done got your drone!”

Weddell and Pearson clapped and slapped palms. All they could get from Kensit was a raised eyebrow and a shrug, as if he shouldn’t celebrate something that he fully expected to happen.

The festivities became short-lived when Weddell noticed the X-47B turning on the monitor. It should have been heading away from them on the course toward the barge. Instead, it was flying directly toward them.

And it was descending.

“What the hell is going on, Lawrence?”

Kensit shook his head in bewilderment. “This can’t be.”

Pearson took his feet down and stared at Kensit. “What did you do, Larry?”

“I didn’t do anything to cause this.”

“Cause what?” Weddell asked.

“The drone is locked onto the signal we’re broadcasting.”

“What?” Weddell tried to disengage the signal they were broadcasting, but the computer wouldn’t respond. “How is that possible?”

“I . . . I’m not sure.”

Weddell looked up at the monitor. The X-47B was growing larger on the screen every moment. They had less than a minute before the drone and its payload of fuel completed its kamikaze attack and blew the boat apart. “Can you reprogram it?”

Kensit just gaped at his screen, perplexed and mute.

Weddell rushed over and shook him by the shoulders. “I said can you reprogram it?”

For probably the first time in his life, Kensit uttered the words “I don’t know.”

“You’ve got to try or we’re all dead.” He wheeled around and pointed at Pearson. “See if you can engage that autodestruct.”

Pearson nodded furiously and hunched over his tablet. Weddell raced for the door at the front of the room.

“Where are you going?” Kensit asked.

“If you guys can’t reassert control, I can at least stop our antenna from broadcasting.”

He threw open the door and ran up to the bridge, where he found the captain staring at the drone diving toward them.

“Get us moving—now!” Weddell shouted.

The captain didn’t need to be told why and throttled up the engine.

Weddell climbed up onto the top deck above the bridge where the antenna was located. If he disconnected the power cable, the broadcast would cease. Even if the drone had locked onto their initial position, moving the ship would get them out of its path.

He reached the antenna and was about to reach for the cable

when the ship lurched forward. He was thrown back, tripped on a railing, and struck his head against the bulkhead.

He saw stars for a few seconds and shook his head to clear them before crawling toward the antenna. The black cable leading to the dish lay exposed on the white deck.

He glanced up and saw the slash of white wing plunging toward them, the drone's black air intake gaping like the maw of a manta ray. The banshee wail of the jet engine foretold a fiery end if he couldn't disable their broadcast. It looked like neither Kensit nor Pearson had been successful.

Weddell grasped the power cable with both hands and yanked it. The cable held firm. He braced his feet against the dish's rotating pedestal and put everything he had into it, his muscles straining in protest.

With a sudden pop, the cable flew backward in a shower of sparks, sending Weddell tumbling.

He picked himself up and saw the cable had completely disconnected from the antenna. There was no way it was still broadcasting.

The water splashed in whitecaps from the bow, indicating that they were now doing a good twenty knots. They'd have plenty of distance from the drone's impact.

Weddell turned his attention back to the drone so that he could tell the crash investigators exactly where it went down. But to his horror, the drone continued to make adjustments in its course.

It was still aimed straight at them, no more than five seconds away.

He scrambled to his feet in a mad dash to jump overboard, but he was far too late. Time seemed to compress as the drone plunged into the ship and exploded.

His last thought before the fireball consumed him wasn't of his wife or his mother or his German shepherd, Bandit. It was focused on the fact that this event was no accident. Frederick Weddell used his brain's final impulses to wonder who it was that killed him.



## **Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela**

### **Present day**

Harbormaster Manuel Lozada shook his head in disbelief as his boat approached the rusting hulk that he was about to inspect before it unloaded its cargo at the La Guanta docks. He shielded his eyes from the setting sun to give himself a better look. From a distance the pattern of mottled green paint on the hull seemed designed to camouflage the ship for a jungle cruise, but up close he could see that it was just a sloppy patch job, with various shades of puke green splashed on the sides to cover up bare spots, and even the newer paint was now flaking away.

As his boat passed by the stern, Lozada could make out the name *Dolos* on the champagne-glass fantail, the only mark of elegance on an otherwise profoundly ugly vessel. The flag flying from the jackstaff was of a Liberian registry, which matched the information he'd obtained independently.

The ship was large—560 feet long—but nothing compared to

the massive supertankers that berthed at the Pamatacual oil terminal only five miles away. The *Dolos* wasn't a containership, but rather an old tramp steamer that carried whatever needed to be transported between the less prominent ports of the world. This one in particular looked like it should have been sent to the scrapyard last century. If it ever got caught in even a minor gale, Lozada wouldn't be surprised if the old girl broke in half and sank.

Two of the five cranes on board were so corroded that they could not possibly be operational. Trash and broken machinery was scattered across the deck without a care. Twin funnels belched black smoke. The filthy white superstructure was situated between the six forward holds and two aft holds, and two bridge wings poked out from either side. The windows on the pilothouse were so dingy that Lozada could see the spot the pilot had wiped clear to see through during the five-mile trip into the harbor.

Lozada had served in the Venezuelan Navy for twenty years, and had remained a reservist since becoming harbormaster, and he would have been keelhaunched if he'd let a ship of his reach this state of disrepair. Only the cheapest or most desperate shippers would trust their cargo to a vessel like this.

He motioned for the boat's operator to pull alongside the shabby gangway lowered from the *Dolos* and turned to the man sitting behind him, a former Chinese Marine named Gao Wangshu. With a high-and-tight brush cut and a lean, sinewy frame, Gao could have still been in the military.

"Well?" Lozada said in English, the language common between them. The admiral had handpicked Lozada for this task and wanted a definitive answer.

"I do not know yet," Gao replied.

"I can't report back to the admiral until you are sure. Your payment depends on it."

“I cannot be confident of my conclusion until I get on board.”

“Either way, you’d better be right.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A warning. Admiral Ruiz does not like to be made a fool.”

Gao eyed Lozada’s sidearm and nodded slowly. “I will share with you any doubts I have about its identity.”

“See that you do. Remember that you are playing a trainee, which means you will be silent.”

“I understand.”

Once the boat was tied to the *Dolos*, the two of them climbed the gangway and were met at the top by a slovenly crewman sporting a battered cowboy hat. Tendrils of stringy brown hair jutted out at odd angles around the edges, and bits of food were caught in a handlebar mustache draped under his bulbous nose. The man’s khaki shirt was dotted with coffee and sweat stains and strained to cover a generous gut.

“¿Habla Español?” Lozada asked.

“Nope,” the man replied with a twang Lozada couldn’t identify. “I sure hope you speak English.”

“My name is Manuel Lozada. I am the harbormaster for La Guanta. Please take me to your captain.”

A smile revealed the man’s nicotine-soaked teeth. “You got him. Buck Holland’s the name. Welcome aboard *Dolos*.” He stuck out a hand and shook Lozada’s vigorously.

Lozada could barely contain his surprise that this slob was the vessel’s master, but he recovered quickly and introduced Gao as his apprentice, Fernando Wang. He didn’t expect Gao’s ethnicity to raise any red flags since Venezuela has a sizable Chinese immigrant population.

“I need to review your crew and cargo manifests, as well as your registration and shipping orders.”

“You got it,” Holland said. “They’re up in the bridge. Follow me. Watch your step. We’ve got a few deck plates to repair.”

Lozada almost laughed at the understatement. Rust was so prevalent on the warped steel plates that it was a wonder the ship held together, regardless of the weather. Chains stretched across breaks in the railings, and the superstructure was even more of a horror close up. Rotting plywood sheets were screwed over gaps in the bulkheads, and a third of the windows around the bridge were cracked.

Despite his research into the captain, he hadn’t expected this degree of neglect, not only to his vessel but to himself as well. Although Holland’s age was forty, drinking and sun damage had added fifteen years to his face. According to his file, the captain was a recovering alcoholic who had run a containership aground near Singapore. The only command he could get after that was this rickety tramp steamer, and by the looks of it Holland had completely ceased to care about his reputation.

They entered a narrow corridor, and Lozada was struck by the foul stench, a mixture of cigarette smoke, diesel fumes, and sewage. He practically gagged.

“Yeah,” Holland said. “Sorry about the smell. The head’s backing up again, so I hope you don’t have to use it. I’ve got my boys working on it. You know, two weeks ago in the middle of the Atlantic we had to resort to using buckets.” Instead of being embarrassed, he laughed at the memory.

Lozada suppressed the temptation to hold his nose and followed the captain inside. Gao kept pace beside him, taking in the awful state of the interior. Chipped linoleum squeaked under Lozada’s rubber soles, and he took care not to rub his clean uniform against the grimy bare-metal walls. The overhead fluorescent lights flickered enough to trigger epileptic seizures.

They arrived at the captain's office, where the pungent aroma was even stronger. The rectangular room had a single porthole caked with salt, and creepy sad clowns painted in neon shades stared down at them from black-velvet paintings on the wall.

The office featured two other doors, both open. The first was to a captain's cabin, furnished with little more than a dresser bolted to the wall, a mirror, crazed as if someone had put his fist in it, and an unmade metal bed topped with discolored sheets and a worn blanket.

The second door led to a cramped bathroom that looked as if it hadn't been cleaned since the ship had been built. The odor emanating from the toilet was overpowering.

Holland went behind his desk and plunked himself into a chair that squealed in protest. Lozada was amazed to see him plug bare wires from a desk lamp into the wall, snatching his hand back and cursing when the inevitable sparks shot from the outlet. The lamp winked on anyway.

"Take a load off," Holland said, and gestured to a couple of chairs on the other side. Lozada perched himself on the edge of the seat to avoid a glistening spot of some unknown substance. Gao mimicked his uncomfortable posture.

Before they could get started, a huge black man rushed into the room carrying an enormous dead rat by the tail, startling Lozada and Gao.

"I found it, Captain!" the man yelled in victory.

"The critter was what clogged us up?"

The crewman nodded. "The heads should be working now."

"Be sure to get more traps while we're here. We're going through them like crazy." While Holland was distracted by the rat, Lozada surreptitiously took his photo with his camera phone.

"Aye, sir." The crewman left just as quickly.

“At least something’s going right today,” Holland said as he rummaged through his desk. He produced two binders, one containing the cargo manifest and shipping orders, the other the registry and crew manifest.

Lozada flipped through the cargo information to start.

“This says that you’re carrying fertilizer,” he said.

Holland nodded and picked up a toothpick from his desk that he stuck in his mouth.

“That’s right. Five thousand tons from Houston. Only a thousand of it is for Venezuela. The rest is going to Colombia. We’re also taking on some lumber while we’re here.”

“You’re new to Puerto La Cruz. I haven’t seen you before.”

“I go where they pay me to go. Most of the time, it’s the northern Caribbean, but I’m happy to visit your fine country for a change.”

Satisfied that the cargo information was in order, Lozada next perused the crew manifest. Nothing stood out. It was just a mix of Filipino and Nigerian crewmen. The Liberian registry also checked out.

He passed the binders to Gao, who inspected them and then set them on the desk.

“How’s it looking?” Holland asked.

“I’m afraid our dockworkers are very busy tonight,” Lozada said. “I don’t know if they have time to help with your cargo until tomorrow.”

Holland grinned. “Maybe I can change that.” He opened a drawer, withdrew an envelope, and handed it to Lozada. “That should cover any overtime.”

Lozada riffled through the money inside and counted five hundred American dollars. Although he was here on a mission, there was no sense in letting this opportunity for a bribe go to waste.

“We all good?” Holland asked.

Lozada glanced at Gao. “Have you seen what you need to see?”

Gao gave a curt nod.

Lozada pocketed the envelope and stood. “Everything seems to be in order, Captain Holland. You may begin unloading immediately.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, Mr. Lozada. Let me walk you out.”

They made their way back to the gangway.

“Nice doing business with you,” Holland said with a tip of his hat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve been waiting to make use of the facilities for hours, if you know what I mean. *Adiós.*”

Lozada couldn’t wait to get away from this putrid mess. He smiled wanly and nodded good-bye. When they were safely back on his launch and he could breathe fresh air again, he shrugged at Gao as the operator motored away.

“At least we know now this isn’t the one,” he said.

“You are wrong,” Gao said. “This is the ship you’re looking for.”

Lozada looked at Gao in amazement and then up at the disgusting captain walking back toward his cabin. “You’re joking! That thing isn’t fit to be a garbage scow.”

“It’s all a clever disguise. I have been on that ship before.”

“Look, we’ve all heard the rumors. A normal-looking cargo ship bristling with weapons that is used to spy on countries around the world. Some say it’s British, some say American or Russian. No one knows its name. No one can agree on what it looks like. All we have are vague secondhand stories about the ship getting into sea battles with Chinese destroyers, Iranian submarines, and Burmese gunboats. Supposedly, it has missiles and torpedoes and lasers, armor three feet thick, and can withstand anything short

of a nuclear blast. Does that barely floating embarrassment look like a warship to you?”

Gao’s expression was deadly serious. “I didn’t see any torpedoes or lasers, but I was stationed aboard the destroyer *Chengdo*, and I was one of the Marines sent onto that ship to capture it. We were repelled by a well-trained force armed with the latest weaponry.”

Lozada laughed. “I could return with two men from the police force and seize that vessel without a problem.”

“I advise against that. Your admiral has information that you don’t. I suggest you call and report my conclusions.”

Lozada narrowed his eyes at Gao. “Give me one reason why I should believe you.”

“The ship’s name—*Dolos*. Do you know what it means?”

“Of course. A ‘dolos’ is a molded concrete block. We pile them up to form breakwaters.”

“There’s another meaning. I did a search on my phone on the way here. *Dolos* is the Greek god of deception. You are meant to think it’s harmless.”

Lozada checked his own smartphone and came up with the same result. He frowned. It was flimsy evidence, but he could be in serious trouble if he didn’t report back to Admiral Ruiz and then was proven to be wrong.

“All right,” he said, and dialed the number he’d been given. He asked for Admiral Ruiz and was connected immediately. A distinct hiss came over the line before he heard a click.

“This is Admiral Dayana Ruiz,” a female voice said in Spanish. “Who is this?”

“Admiral, this is Commander Manuel Lozada,” he said nervously. “Señor Gao is confirming that this is the spy vessel.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s nothing more than a cargo ship two voyages away from going under.”

“Did you take his photo as I ordered?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Send it to me now.”

Lozada messaged the picture to her.

After a slight pause, she said, “That’s him. Holland is the same man as the one in my photo. We have intelligence identifying him as the captain of the spy vessel.”

Lozada felt a rush of adrenaline. Admiral Ruiz was the most powerful woman in the Venezuelan Navy and next in line to be defense minister. He could write his ticket if he captured a foreign spy. “I’ll have them arrested at once.”

Her voice stabbed through the phone like an ice pick. “You will do nothing, Commander. I’m aboard the frigate *Mariscal Sucre*. We are currently three and a half hours from Puerto La Cruz. If the rumors are true, we will need all the firepower at my disposal. I plan to capture the vessel myself.”

Lozada swallowed hard at her bloodcurdling tone. “I must warn you, Admiral, the *Dolos* is carrying four thousand tons of fertilizer. Ammonium nitrate is volatile. If a fire is started by gunfire, it could blow up and destroy the entire harbor.”

“How long before she is scheduled to depart?”

“Four hours.”

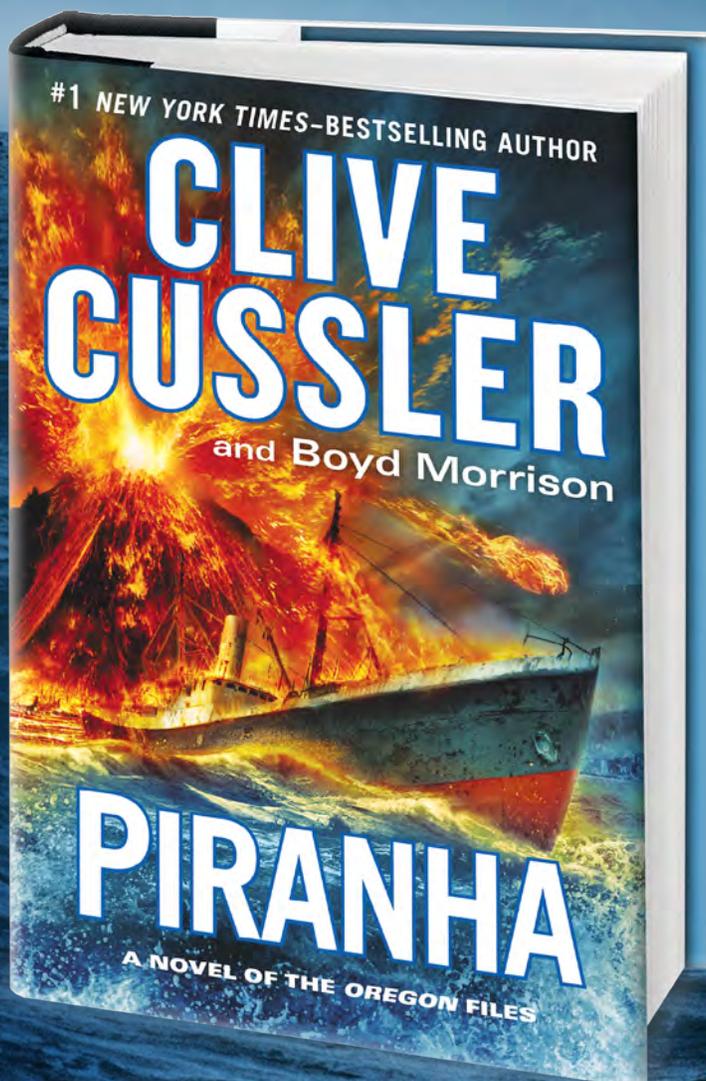
“Then we’ll lie in wait outside the harbor. Let her get her cargo on board and set sail. We’ll intercept her in open water.”

“And if they do have all those mythical weapons on board?”

“It doesn’t matter. *Mariscal Sucre* is more than capable of sinking her.”

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