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SHADOW TYRANTS

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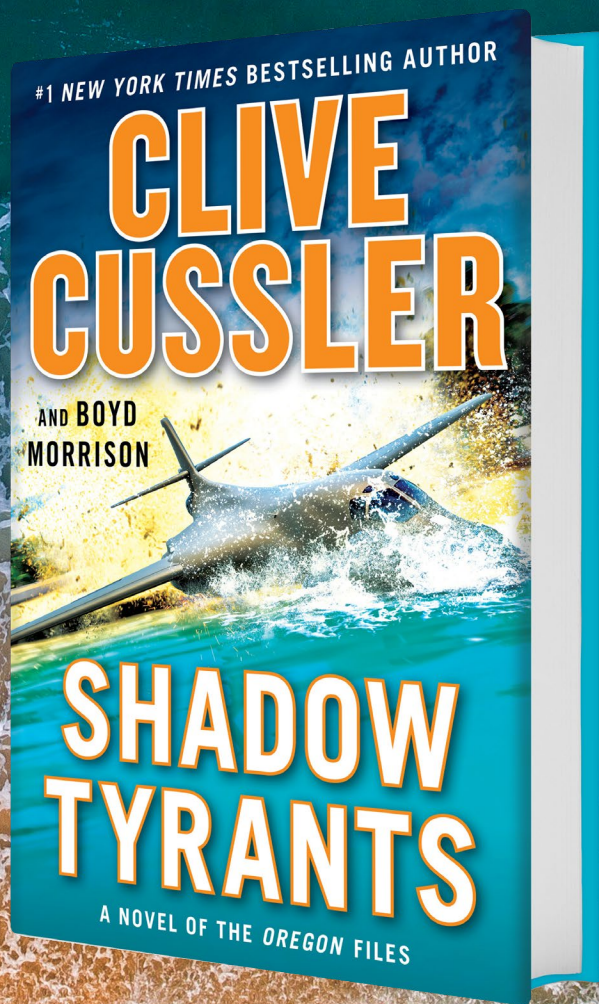
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SHADOW TYRANTS

CLIVE CUSSLER
and Boyd Morrison

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Cast of Characters

The Kalinga War

Ashoka the Terrible Mauryan Emperor.

Kathar Mauryan general.

Vit Ashoka's younger brother.

The Corporation

Juan Cabrillo Chairman of the Corporation and captain of the *Oregon*.

Max Hanley President of the Corporation, Juan's second-in-command, and chief engineer of the *Oregon*.

Linda Ross Vice president of operations for the Corporation and U.S. Navy veteran.

Eddie Seng Director of shore operations for the Corporation and former CIA agent.

Eric Stone Chief helmsman on the *Oregon* and U.S. Navy veteran.

Mark "Murph" Murphy Chief weapons officer on the *Oregon* and former U.S. military weapons designer.

Franklin "Linc" Lincoln Corporation operative and former U.S. Navy SEAL.

Marion MacDougal "MacD" Lawless Corporation operative and former U.S. Army Ranger.

Raven Malloy Corporation operative and former U.S. Army Military Police investigator.

George "Gomez" Adams Helicopter pilot and drone operator on the *Oregon*.

Hali Kasim Chief communications officer on the *Oregon*.

Dr. Julia Huxley Chief medical officer on the *Oregon*.

Kevin Nixon Chief of the *Oregon*'s Magic Shop.

Maurice Chief steward on the *Oregon*.

Chuck "Tiny" Gunderson Chief fixed-wing pilot for the Corporation.

The Nine Unknown and Associates

Romir Mallik CEO of Orbital Ocean and descendent gifted with the cosmogony scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Xavier Carlton CEO of Unlimited News International and descendent gifted with the propaganda scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Jason Wakefield CEO of Vedor Telecom and descendent gifted with the communication scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Lionel Gupta CEO of OreDyne Systems and descendent gifted with the alchemy scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Melissa Valentine Internet search firm founder and descendent gifted with the scroll about the mysteries of light from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Daniel Saidon CEO of Saidon Heavy Industries and descendent gifted with the gravity scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Pedro Neves Biotech executive and descendent gifted with the scroll on diseases from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Boris Volanski Head of military contracting firm and descendent gifted with the physiology scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Hans Schultz Swiss banker and descendent gifted with the sociology scroll from the Scrolls of Knowledge.

Asad Torkan Brother-in-law of Romir Mallik.

Rasul Torkan Asad Torkan's twin.

Natalie Taylor Assistant to Xavier Carlton.

Missing plane victims

Lyla Dhawan Chief technology officer of Singular Solutions.

Adam Carlton Son of Xavier Carlton.

Central Intelligence Agency

Langston Overholt IV The Corporation's CIA liaison.

Diego Garcia incident

Keith Tao Leader of *Triton Star* hijackers.

Major Jay Petkunas B-1B bomber pilot.

Captain Hank Larsson B-1B bomber copilot.

Lieutenant Colonel Barbara Goodman Air Force Global Positioning System commander.

Sergeant Joseph Brandt Camp Thunder Cove communications operator.

Jhootha Island

Fyodor Yudin Warden.

Colossus

Chen Min Chief scientist.

India

General Arnav Ghosh Head of the Indian military's weapons procurement.

Kiara Jain Bollywood actress.

Gautam Puri Kiara's boyfriend.

Prisha Naidu Bollywood actress and friend of Kiara's.

Samar Naidu Prisha's husband.

SHADOW TYRANTS

PROLOGUE

THE KINGDOM OF KALINGA THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

261 B.C.

The air reeked of smoke and burnt flesh. The army's main encampment was on the other side of the destroyed city. The only sound was the restless shuffling of hooves from the Imperial Guard's horses and the snapping of the Royal Lion banner in the breeze.

"How many dead?" Mauryan emperor Ashoka the Terrible asked his top general, Kathar, who sat astride an ebony stallion that contrasted with Ashoka's brilliant white steed.

"It is a glorious victory, Excellency," Kathar said. "We have lost only ten thousand men during the entire campaign."

For a week Ashoka rode through the nation he had conquered and saw nothing but death and destruction. Now as they crested the heavily forested hill overlooking the remains of Tosali, Kalinga's capital, he finally saw the true extent of his war to crush the last kingdom on the subcontinent that refused to bow to his rule. The entire city had been incinerated, and the fields were littered with corpses as far as the eye could see.

His army's ten thousand casualties meant that one out of every seven soldiers had been killed or wounded in battle. Despite the staggering numbers, it was still the mightiest force south of the Himalayas, possibly in the whole world. No army known could stand against him. But that was not his concern right now.

Ashoka turned from the vast scene of carnage and stared at his general. "I mean, how many have *we* slain?"

Kathar smiled, cruel and unremorseful about the savage annihilation he had caused of a proud people. "My officers tell me that we have wiped out one hundred thousand Kalingan soldiers. None were spared. An equal number of civilians were either killed or deported in the plunder after the battles. We have taught the world a lesson. No one will dare defy us again."

Ashoka did not return the smile. Instead of pride over his great triumph, he felt a deep shame that had been festering for days. Unwilling to become his subjects, the citizens of Kalinga had fought to the last man, woman, and child. He'd heard tales of entire villages committing suicide rather than suffer brutalization by his rampaging army.

His empire now stretched from Persia to the Ganges Delta. This ride was supposed to have been a survey of his monumental achievement. Instead, it had become a trail of infamy, a testament to his viciousness, and it was changing his view of the world in profound ways. Ashoka knew he couldn't let this be his lasting legacy.

He deserved his title Ashoka the Terrible. He had done hideous things to secure his reign as emperor. He'd killed ninety-nine of his one hundred half brothers to prevent them from overthrowing him, sparing only his younger brother Vit, his most trusted adviser. He'd created a prison known as Ashoka's Hell, where his enemies endured every kind of torture imaginable. No inmate had ever come out alive.

But all of that paled in comparison to the suffering he'd seen over the past week's ride. These were not betrayers and criminals. The dead and exiled of Kalinga were noble soldiers fighting for their homeland and its innocent civilians who only wanted to live their lives in peace.

Vit and his forces were scheduled to meet Ashoka today at Kalinga's capital to bring news from the rest of the country. But what he'd seen already was enough to convince him to turn away from further conquest and focus on improving the lives of his subjects.

The rustle of leaves in the forest caused his guards to draw their swords. Ashoka turned to see a filthy young woman in ragged clothing emerge from the tree line. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she took in the holocaust her people had endured. Then she turned and caught sight of the Emperor and his men. She limped toward them.

"Kill this vermin," Kathar casually said to one of the guards.

The guard raised his sword and readied to charge at her.

"Sheathe your weapons!" Ashoka ordered. "All of you!"

The guards instantly obeyed his command and put away their swords.

Kathar narrowed his eyes at the Emperor. "Excellency?"

"No one will harm this woman."

She staggered to a stop in front of him without a hint of fear. Ashoka could see only sadness and defiance on her face. She glanced at the Royal Lion on his banner and then stared at him.

"Are you the Emperor Ashoka the Terrible? Are you the butcher who has done this to my people?" She gestured with a weak and trembling arm at the devastation below them.

"How dare you speak to His Excellency with such disrespect!" Kathar yelled. "You will—"

Ashoka put up his hand and looked at the general. "Quiet. I want to hear what she has to say." He turned back to the woman. "I am Ashoka. Are you from this city?"

She nodded. "Tasoli *was* my home."

"Are you alone?"

“You should know. Your armies murdered my father, my husband, and my three brothers in battle.”

Kathar shouted at her, “They were not murdered! They died because they refused our gracious offer to surrender and become subjects of the Mauryan Empire! They were nothing more than pathetic vermin to be wiped off the face of the—”

“Enough!” Ashoka dismounted to the surprise of his guards, who immediately surrounded him and the woman as he approached her.

Ashoka took her hand. “Do you not have any family left?”

She shook her head. “My only son died of disease, and my sisters and two daughters were violated before they were sent away to become slaves. I escaped into the woods hoping to find more of my people, but there are none. I am all that is left.” The woman dropped to her knees and clutched STET at the Emperor’s hand. “Please kill me.”

“Why should I do that? You are no threat to me or my men.”

“You have taken everything from me. I have nothing left to live for. If I don’t starve first, I will suffer the fate of the other women.”

“I give you my word as supreme ruler of the Mauryan Empire that no further harm will come to—”

Before Ashoka could finish, Kathar drew his sword, STET causing the Emperor to jump back when he saw the flash of steel out of the corner of his eye, and slashed the woman’s neck. She gurgled blood and fell over, a look of calm and relief on her face as she died.

Ashoka felt a warm trickle of liquid on his throat. He touched the spot and felt a gash in his skin. When he pulled his hand away, he saw that his fingers were covered in crimson. The wound wasn’t deep, but the fact that it was there at all shocked him. If he hadn’t moved so quickly, he would have been killed by the same blow that struck down the woman.

The general's sword was now pointed at Ashoka's chest. The Emperor's guards had already drawn their swords and were ready to defend him, but they could see that the slightest movement would doom their beloved leader.

"Kathar! You almost beheaded me!"

Kathar smiled and shrugged. "I underestimated your reflexes, Excellency."

"Are you saying you were trying to kill both of us?"

"She wasn't bad to look at, but there are many more where she came from. You, on the other hand . . ." Kathar shook his head. "I can see how this war has changed you. You no longer strive for the greatness of the empire. You have become weak."

One of the guards inched closer, but Kathar pressed the tip of his sword against Ashoka's chest to stop him.

"If any of you come nearer, I will run him through."

"If you do that," Ashoka said, "you will be dead before I hit the ground."

"Possibly. But then I would be a hero of the empire."

Ashoka could hear the sound of hooves approaching from the forest. It had to be his brother Vit coming with his archers. If Ashoka could delay Kathar just a little longer, Vit's men could slay him before his sword moved.

"Don't you see that conquest is a fool's errand?" Ashoka asked. "What does it matter if we gain more land unless we improve the lives of our subjects?"

"Because conquest is what will guarantee that our names will be remembered throughout the ages," Kathar said, his eyes wild with the power he now held in his hands. "Alexander the Great assembled the finest army in history, was never defeated in battle, and ruled over the largest empire the world has ever known. People will be speaking his name until there are no people left."

Ashoka nodded solemnly. "And then he died at thirty-three

and his empire was torn apart in a series of civil wars. Don't you see that there's another way?"

"This Buddhism you've been speaking about?" Kathar spat. "A waste of time. With our armies, you could have been remembered for even greater conquests. You could have ruled the known world. I won't let you throw this opportunity away. Maurya will know greatness under my rule. I will be called Kathar the Magnificent. History will remember my name, worshipping it even more than Alexander's."

Ashoka looked around at his loyal guards. They would not let Kathar get away with killing him.

"What makes you think you'll live through the next few moments?" Ashoka asked calmly.

Kathar answered only with a grin. Horses emerged from the forest, but they did not belong to Ashoka's brother Vit. They were Kathar's most loyal soldiers, double the number of his guards. They flanked Ashoka's men, who were now hopelessly outmatched.

"I did not do this on a whim," Kathar said. "I have been planning this for weeks, scouting out just the spot to ambush you and your men. When I return with your body, I will tell your subjects about how rebellious Kalingan traitors had cut you down. Who else will they turn to but your most trusted general, who has delivered this great but tragic victory for the empire?"

"My brother will avenge me."

"He will try. But he's just as weak as you are. If I can defeat you, he will prove no trouble at all."

Kathar turned to one of his soldiers, who Ashoka recognized as a top cavalry officer.

"You found them?" Kathar asked.

The officer nodded and took a satchel from his shoulder. He removed a scroll and held it over his head for all to see.

"All nine," the officer said.

Ashoka felt a chill at seeing one of the nine sacred Scrolls of Knowledge, representing the collected intelligence of the best minds in his kingdom. The fact that the scrolls were here had to mean the Librarian was dead, and now Kathar had everything he needed to rule with absolute power.

Kathar turned back to Ashoka and smiled. “Maybe you now realize that I missed you on purpose before, to give time for my men to arrive. I was keeping you alive until I made sure the scrolls were in my hands. Since they are, you are no longer necessary. Your dynasty ends here. Now.”

Kathar raised his sword for the killing blow as his soldiers charged toward the Imperial Guard.

Ashoka wasn’t going to make it easy for him. He crouched down and twisted to his side as the sword came down, striking his shoulder. The leather armor absorbed part of the blow, but the blade cut deeply into his muscle.

Ignoring the pain, he stood to run, but Kathar had the advantage of height and speed astride his horse. The general drew his sword back for another swing, a maniacal look of bloodlust in his eyes.

Among the din of clashing swords, snorting horses, and screams of dying men, Ashoka heard the distinctive sound of an arrow whizzing by. It struck Kathar’s hand, and he cried out as he dropped the sword.

With a look of fury, Kathar wrenched the arrow from his palm and looked in the direction it had come from. Ashoka followed his gaze and saw Vit and his archers stampeding toward them, arrows flying from their bows. A quarter of Kathar’s men went down in the first volley.

Seeing that his defeat was imminent, Kathar wheeled his horse around and charged the cavalry officer holding the satchel. He snatched it away and yelled, “Make sure no one follows me.” Then he whipped his horse and galloped into the forest.

Ashoka wasn't going to let him get away so easily, not with the Scrolls of Knowledge. As long as Kathar had those, he would be a dire threat to Ashoka's plans for his country's new era.

Ashoka leaped onto his horse and drew his sword with his uninjured arm. Despite his brother's calls to get to safety, he followed his betrayer.

Kathar was the better fighter, but Ashoka was a superior horseman. Instead of taking the clear path through forest where he could have used his horse's speed to escape, Kathar was weaving through the thick stand of trees in an effort to lose any pursuers.

But Ashoka wasn't fooled. He could spot Kathar's trail of broken branches and trampled underbrush as he rode, taking whatever shortcuts he could to close the distance.

Finally, he spotted the bright silver buckles on Kathar's armor flickering in and out of view. Ashoka raced to the side and paralleled his course, drawing nearer with every moment.

Kathar realized he was being followed and drew his dagger. In desperation, he threw it at Ashoka, but it sank into a tree that came between them.

Seeing his chance, Ashoka cut his horse through a narrow alley between the trees and drew alongside Kathar. He raised his sword and swung with all his might.

The sword met nothing but air.

Kathar had leaped from his horse to avoid the blow and careened into a tree. He bounced off it and came to rest on the ground. The scrolls tumbled from the satchel and scattered across the forest floor.

Ashoka turned around and dismounted, his sword held in front of him as he approached the kneeling general, who was shuddering with pain.

Ashoka knew it was a trick. He circled around until he was

directly behind Kathar and put the tip of his sword to the base of the general's neck.

"Drop the knife."

Kathar stopped trembling and chuckled. The knife he'd been holding in his good hand dropped to the ground.

"Now stand."

Kathar got to his feet and turned around.

"You won't kill me," he said with a wicked grin.

"Why not?"

"Because of this Buddhist faith you've been talking about converting our entire country to. It doesn't allow killing. I know. I've been hearing about it for weeks now. From you."

"You're right," Ashoka said. "I have been thinking about ordering all my subjects to follow the ways of the Buddha. And your betrayal only confirms that it is the right thing to do. Killing only begets more killing. If you'd had your way, your rule would have been built on terror and death."

"You know that's the only way to build a dynasty."

Ashoka shook his head. "There's another way. As long as I'm alive, we will take a different path."

Gallop ing hooves approached, and Ashoka could see that Vit, a fine tracker, had followed their trail. He pulled his horse to a stop beside them.

"Are you all right, brother?" Vit asked.

Ashoka nodded. "But I wouldn't have been if you hadn't come along at the right time. Gather up the scrolls."

Vit got off his horse and began collecting the parchments to put them back in the satchel.

"This piece of garbage must have killed the Librarian to get these," Vit said. "Who will be the new one? Tell me and I'll take them to him." He walked over with all of the scrolls secure in the pouch.

"I am not naming a new librarian," Ashoka said. "Kathar has proven that it is too dangerous to keep them all together. Vit, I want you to find nine unknown men, common men who have shown themselves to be good and loyal. Each of them will be tasked with safeguarding one of the Scrolls of Knowledge to keep any single man from using them to conquer the world."

"It will be done," Vit replied. Then he looked at Kathar with contempt. "And what about him?"

Ashoka took a step closer to Kathar and laid the sword along his neck. "My first order of the new age will be to strike this traitor's name from all scrolls and etchings. If anyone speaks his name aloud, they will be banished from the country." He looked at Kathar with pity. "By the end of this growing season, no one will remember your name. You will be lost to history forever. It will be as if you never existed."

For the first time, Kathar's smug expression faltered before he made another halfhearted attempt at bravado. "But I am still here. My followers are numerous and my soldiers loyal. They will rise against you and rescue me from your prison."

"No, they won't." Ashoka raised his sword.

Kathar gaped at him. It was the only time the general had ever shown fear. "But the ways of the Buddha! They don't allow killing!"

"You're right," Ashoka said. "From this point on, I will decree no living thing, human or animal, shall be killed for punishment or sacrifice. From this point on. It is my duty and responsibility to make sure that you, who are without a name, are the last."

Ashoka brought down the sword.

ONE

OVER THE ARABIAN SEA

Present day, eighteen months ago

“Don’t tell anyone,” Adam Carlton whispered as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening. “I’m not supposed to take you down there.”

Lyla Dhawan knew his dramatic gesture was all for show. They were alone in the airplane’s palatial rear lounge, with its mahogany tables and Gucci-embossed sofas. Although the double-decker Airbus A380 was gigantic and could carry more than eight hundred passengers when fitted out as an airliner, this plane currently held fewer than one hundred people. Most of them were in the luxurious forward bars, enjoying the free-flowing champagne and snacking on expensive caviar.

Lyla still didn’t know why she’d been one of the lucky few invited onto Xavier Carlton’s private jet, but she jumped at a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Fending off advances from one of the billionaire’s sons almost made her wish she’d reconsidered. However, his offer was intriguing.

“You mean, we can go down and see the cargo hold?” she asked.

Carlton nodded, downed the rest of his hundred-year-old scotch, and leaned in closer, practically purring, in his British accent, “Have you ever seen a Bugatti Chiron?”

The reek of alcohol on his breath almost made Lyla gag. She shook her head.

“Fastest car in the world,” Carlton said. “Worth three million dollars even before I added the solid gold trim. I brought it from London to see what it can do on the desert roads. Obviously, I can’t take you for a drive, but you can sit in it. The leather is the softest you’ll ever feel.”

She managed not to roll her eyes. Lyla couldn’t care less about cars, and his constant bragging was getting on her nerves. But she didn’t know when she would get another opportunity to tour the cargo area of an A380. She was a pilot herself, logging more than six hundred hours in twin-engine prop planes back in San Jose, California, so going down to see the hold was like getting a backstage pass to Disneyland. Her only hesitation was the thought of being alone with this jerk.

“That’s quite a tempting offer,” Lyla said. “Maybe some of the other guests would like to see it, too.”

Not that she couldn’t fend him off if he got handsy. He was short and decidedly out of shape, while she was taller than he was and could deadlift two hundred pounds thanks to regular Cross-Fit classes. The bigger concern was that she would offend him and torpedo any future contracts with his father’s company.

Like all of the other passengers on board for this extravagant meet and greet, Lyla was a computer company executive visiting Dubai for the TechNext trade show. As the chief technology officer of Singular Solutions, she was attending the convention to help pitch her firm’s groundbreaking pattern recognition software to customers around the world. So far they’d signed contracts for fifty million dollars, but Carlton’s massive media corporation, Unlimited News International, could double that figure with the stroke of a pen.

When Lyla suggested they bring others with them, Carlton scowled and sat back.

“If you don’t want to see my car, just say so,” he huffed.

“No, I really do,” Lyla said with a smile. She stood up, smoothing the skirt of her black cocktail dress. “Quick! Before anyone knows I’m getting a private tour.”

Carlton grinned and nearly leaped to his feet. “I promise you won’t regret it. The Chiron is almost as beautiful as you are.”

“Lead the way.”

He took her to a tiny elevator, and they both squeezed in, Carlton smiling up at her as they descended.

“Are you from America originally?” he asked.

“California, born and raised. My parents are from New Delhi.”

“I’ve been to India many times. My father has a villa outside of Mumbai.”

“I never got to thank him for the invitation to this event.”

“Unfortunately, he couldn’t be here. He had an urgent matter to attend to in Dubai.”

The elevator opened, and Carlton escorted her out into a small storage area before showing her through the door into the main hold. He froze at the sight that met them.

The vast cargo area was completely empty.

Carlton wheezed a couple of times, then yelled, “Where is my car! I saw it loaded onto the plane last night before we took off from England! When I find out who—”

Without warning, the airplane suddenly plunged into a dive, sending both of them soaring toward the ceiling. Floating ten feet above the floor, they flailed for a few moments. Then the jet rapidly reversed course, slamming them down.

Lyla landed on flat metal, but Carlton wasn’t so lucky. His head smashed into a bare stanchion that should have been holding down his car.

She got to her feet and rushed over to him. Blood pooled around his head. He was unconscious but breathing.

With a frantic search of the storage area, she found some cloth

towels and took them back to the cargo hold. She propped up Carlton's head with two towels before pressing the third against the wound.

Yelling for help was useless. The hold was too isolated for anyone to hear her. She would have to leave him alone so she could get him medical attention.

She ran back to the elevator and had to wait for what seemed like forever for its return. The glacial ascent was agonizing.

When she reached the main deck, she sprinted forward through the rear lounge, past the conference room and into the piano bar, which was eerily silent. She gasped when she saw why.

All of the passengers were seated with emergency oxygen masks over their faces. Each of them was slumped over, their eyes closed.

Lyla approached the nearest woman with dread. She put a finger to the woman's throat and sighed with relief when she felt a pulse. She tried two more passengers. Though comatose, they were all alive.

She nearly panicked, then it occurred to her the situation might have been caused by an explosive decompression, which would explain the plane's sudden dive.

But she quickly dismissed the idea. Not only would she have felt the frigid air from outside even if the tear in the fuselage had occurred on the upper level, but she would have also fallen unconscious herself seconds after reaching the main deck.

She checked two more rooms and found the same chilling sight: all of the passengers and crew with masks on and out cold.

Lyla wasn't an expert on large airliners. Flying was just a hobby—her only one—a chance to get away from the stress of her job for a few hours a week where work emails couldn't reach her. Even better, her mother couldn't call to berate her for not having a husband at the advanced age of thirty-one.

She knew everything that could go wrong with a Cessna

twin-prop Corsair, but the Airbus was far more complicated. Something might have malfunctioned in the emergency oxygen system, but she had no idea what that could be. A better question was why they were wearing the masks in the first place if the air in the plane was breathable.

Lyla looked out a window and saw nothing but the sun shining through scattered clouds on the calm water below, but they should have stayed over the Saudi Arabian Desert for the duration of the flight. They were out of range for an ordinary mobile phone, and the odds of finding a satellite phone on board were minuscule. She had to get into the cockpit. If the pilots were on the same oxygen system, they might be unconscious as well, but she could radio a Mayday and get help from someone on the ground. She couldn't land this plane, but the controls were so highly automated these days that someone at air traffic control in Dubai should be able to talk her through getting them back to the airport safely.

When she got to the cockpit door, it closed and locked. No one answered her pounding fist. She desperately tried to wrench it open, but it was a secure door. Since 9/11, all aircraft had been built with stronger cockpit doors and locking mechanisms controlled by the pilots to prevent terrorists from gaining access. It also meant that if the pilots were incapacitated, no one could get inside.

Lyla examined the door. She noticed a keypad with a red light beside it and realized there might be a way inside. She remembered reading that there was a code the flight attendants could use to access the cockpit in a medical emergency as long as the pilots hadn't disabled it from inside, as they would during a terrorist event.

They had to keep a code like that nearby so all the flight attendants could find it quickly. She rooted through the food lockers in the front galley and found what she was looking for: a piece of

paper taped to the inside of the cabinet door with a six-digit number written on it. The Arabic text above the number was unreadable, but it had to be it.

Lyla punched the number into the keypad, and the light turned green with a beep. She was overjoyed as she flung the door open.

Her happiness vanished when she saw the pilot slumped back in his chair, a small bullet hole in his right temple.

The copilot, however, was very much alive. She flinched and instinctively put up her hands when he turned around and pointed a small pistol at her.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"No . . . no one," she stammered. "Just a passenger. Lyla Dhawan."

"Where did you come from?"

"I was in the hold with Adam Carlton when we hit the turbulence."

"Where is he?"

"He hit his head. He's badly injured."

"How did you get in here?"

"The access code. It was on a piece of paper."

He got up from his seat. "Show me."

He kept the gun on her the whole time as she showed him where it was in the galley. He yanked the paper off the door, crumpled it up, and shoved it into his pocket.

He motioned with his pistol for her to return the cockpit. After shutting the door behind him, he got back into his chair and told her to sit in the jump seat.

"Belt yourself in," he said while glancing at his watch.

Lyla let out a sob of relief. He wasn't going to kill her. She snapped the seat belt together.

"Now put on the mask." He pointed to the one hanging next to her.

The thought of all the unconscious passengers flashed in her mind. “Why?”

He held up the pistol and pointed it at her head.

“Do it.”

She had no choice. The dead pilot was evidence that he wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger.

She fit the mask over her face but tried to keep it as loose as possible.

The copilot looked at his watch again and then at her. “No. Tighter.”

Reluctantly, she pulled the straps taut. Within seconds, she started to feel herself get light-headed. There had to be some kind of knockout gas in the emergency oxygen system.

“Why are you doing this?” she shouted through the mask, but the copilot ignored her.

He looked to his right, then shielded his eyes with one hand. A moment later, a blinding flash lit up the cockpit.

Immediately after that, the copilot pushed his control joystick forward. The huge airplane nosed into a steep dive.

Lyla tried to unbuckle herself so she could stop the maniac from killing them all, but her muscles were like jelly. She couldn’t feel her fingers, and her mind was a muddled haze. She had the sudden hope that this was all just a nightmare, that none of it was truly happening.

Then she looked through the front windows as they emerged from a cloud bank. No sky was visible. Only ocean.

They were going down, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. Then, mercifully, she tumbled into darkness.

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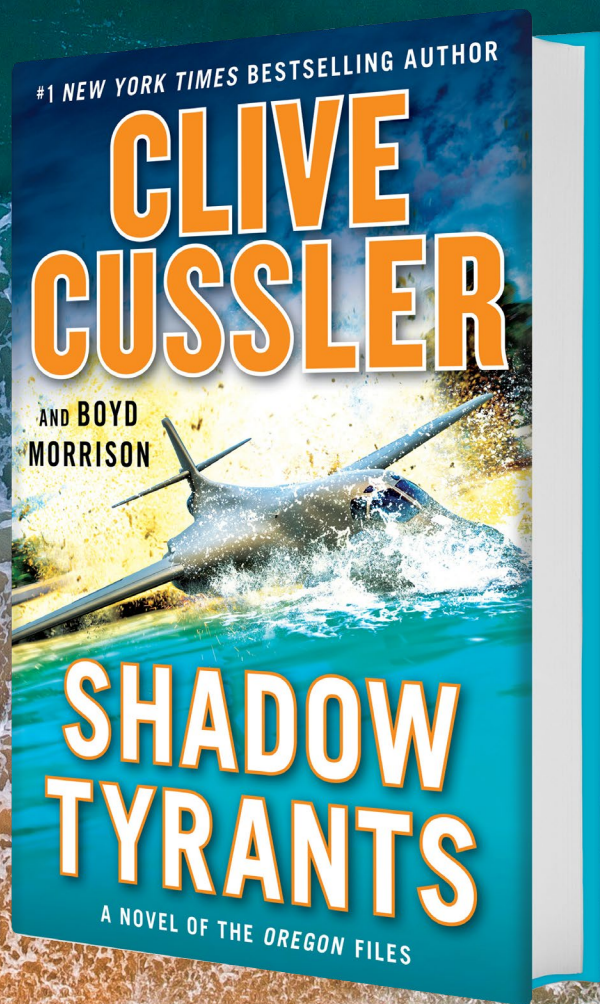
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