

CLIVE CUSSLER  
THE  
CORNICAN  
SHADOW

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BY DIRK CUSSLER

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*New York*

**PUTNAM**  
— EST. 1838 —

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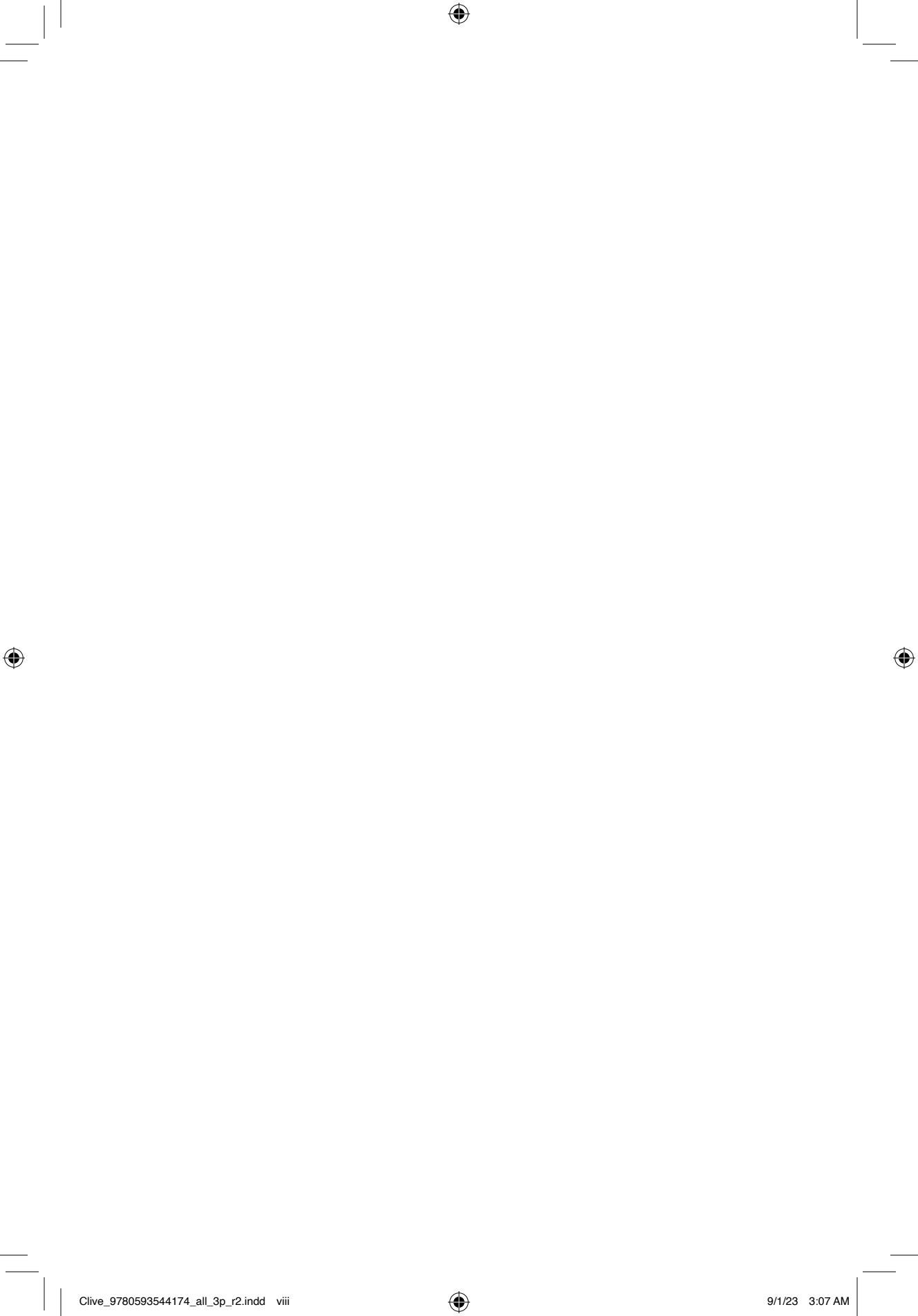
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For Lauren and Bryce  
*Mes belles princesses de joie*





# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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## 1940

*Marcel Demille* Chief Curator of the Musée de l'Armée in Paris

*André Carron* Assistant to Demille at the Musée de l'Armée in Paris

*Eduard Martin* Vice President of the Antwerp Diamond Bank

*Georges Lamotte* Banker with the Antwerp Diamond Bank

*François Mailleux* President of the Antwerp Diamond Bank

*Paul Rapine* Undersecretary in the French consulate to Bermuda

## NATIONAL UNDERWATER AND MARINE AGENCY (NUMA) TEAM

*Dirk Pitt* Director of NUMA

*Al Giordino* NUMA Director of Underwater Technology

*Rudi Gunn* NUMA Deputy Director

*Summer Pitt* NUMA Special Projects Director and daughter of Dirk Pitt

*Dirk Pitt, Jr.* NUMA Special Projects Director and son of Dirk Pitt

*Hiram Yaeger* NUMA Director of Information Technology

*Harvey Boswick* Captain of the NUMA research ship *Pelican*

*Ben Houston* Captain of the NUMA research ship *Nordic Star*

*Keith Lowden* Captain of the NUMA research ship *Havana*

*Meisa Noriku* Marine Archaeologist on the NUMA research ship *Havana*

**LAVERA EXPLORATION COMPANY**

*Yves Villard* CEO and owner of Lavera Exploration

*Henri Nassar* Ex-commando and head of security

*Hosni Samad* Ex-commando and Nassar's second in command

*Tomas* Helmsman aboard the cruise ship *Hydros*

**FRANCE**

*Brigitte Favreau* Oceanographic researcher at the Le Havre Marine Institute

*Raoul Vogel* Le Havre journalist and informant

*Pierre Roy* Seine River vendor aboard his boat *La Rose*

*Charles Lufbery* Captain in the French National Police

*Jules LeBoeuf* French underboss in the Corsican mafia

*Maurice Hauser* Jeweler in Le Havre

*Allain Broussard* Brewer of calvados and nephew of Eduard Martin

*Jacques Lurel* Harbormaster of Le Havre

*Monsieur Dumont* Director of Les Invalides complex in Paris

**UNITED STATES**

*Claude Bouchet* Contract industrial spy

*St. Julien Perlmutter* Nautical historian and longtime friend of Pitt

*Eric Watson* Security technician for New York–New Jersey Port Authority

*Dario Cruz* U.S. Army captain at West Point

*Steven Schauer* Civil engineer for the Rondout Bypass

*Murphy* West Point cadet

*Blake* West Point cadet

**OTHERS**

*Ahmad Hamid* Egyptian wheat farmer in the Sinai

*Dan Durkot* Section chief for U.S. consulate in Bermuda

*Waynne James* Commander of the Coast Guard cutter *Venturous*

*Doris* Director of the Caribbean Children's Rescue in Martinique

**VESSELS**

*Avignon* Ferry sunk in the English Channel in 1940

*Jupiter* Aged cargo ship attacked at Le Havre in 1940

*Pelican* NUMA survey vessel operating near Le Havre

*Cornwall* Sunken Channel ferry containing diamond cases

*La Rose* Seine riverboat owned by Pierre Roy

*Nordic Star* NUMA research vessel operating in the Irish Sea

*Mary Spring* Cabin cruiser sunk in the Irish Sea

*Chamonix* Black cable-laying ship owned by Lavera Exploration

*Cardiff* Merchant ship sunk by collision in the Irish Sea

*LÉ Samuel Beckett* Irish Naval Service patrol ship

*Mont Blanc* Oil tanker owned by Lavera Exploration

*Shearwater* High-speed Channel ferry at Isle of Wight

*Hydros* Former Greek islands cruise ship

*Venturous* U.S. Coast Guard cutter

*Moselle* Survey vessel owned by Lavera Exploration

*Surcouf* French submarine launched in 1929

*Naugatuck* Towboat in Long Island Sound

*Thompson Lykes* American freighter that may have collided with  
the *Surcouf*

*Havana* NUMA research ship in the Caribbean Sea

*Sokan* French Martinique customs patrol boat



# PROLOGUE



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NORMANDY, FRANCE

*May 12, 1940*

**M**arcel Demille rubbed his tired eyes for the hundredth time. Fatigue draped over him like a heavy cloak as his hands resumed their grip on the thick steering wheel. The moonless black night didn't help his weariness, leading his eyes to transfix on the weak yellow beam of the truck's headlights. He felt like he was driving through an endless amber tunnel.

Since early afternoon, Demille had driven the Renault cargo truck toward the port city of Le Havre. He had expected to reach the city hours ago, not anticipating the human tide of refugees in his path. They had clogged the road for most of the journey, men, women, and children. All poor, tired souls, many from Holland and Belgium, fleeing the German blitzkrieg. Well after midnight, the road had finally cleared, as the newly homeless took to the adjacent farm fields for a few hours of sleep. At last, Demille found some speed and the miles soon began to pass.

He downshifted as the truck lugged while cresting a small hill, the physical movement of changing gears helping him stay awake. Demille turned to the passenger beside him . . . and from the corner of the windshield, a blur of color caught his eye.

It was a baby carriage rolling across the roadway, its green, ruffled top caught in the truck's headlights.

Reaction overtook thought as Demille stomped on the heavy truck's brakes, rising off the seat to force his full weight onto the pedal. The younger man half dozing beside him, a cap low over his eyes, flew forward against the dashboard. He jerked awake, suppressing the impact with an outstretched arm as an over-and-under shotgun slipped from his knees onto the floorboard.

The Renault ACG truck shuddered across the damp asphalt as its wheels locked. Demille had a sudden fear their crated cargo in back might smash through the cabin and crush them. But the truck had not been traveling fast enough to shift the load, and the big vehicle skidded to a stop intact. Just a few centimeters from the front bumper, the baby carriage rolled to its own lazy halt.

A wide-eyed young mother in a dust-covered dress ran up and grasped its handle, staring up at the headlights. Demille slumped against the steering wheel, waiting for the pounding in his chest to subside. The woman merely checked the baby in the carriage, then proceeded to the side of the road as if nothing had happened. She pushed the stroller down the hill as two small boys trailed behind her, dragging heavy suitcases through the dirt.

"My God," André Carron said from the passenger seat. "They could have all been killed." He regained his seat and placed the shotgun back on his lap.

Demille wiped his palms across his pant legs and put the truck back into gear. "It is not their fault," he said, easing onto the accelerator. "Everyone's world has been turned upside down these past few days. No one is thinking straight."

The rapid success of the German offensive had caught everyone off guard. Although France had declared war on Germany months ago, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, there had been few actual skirmishes between the two countries.



Confidence had been high that France was safe behind the Army's Maginot Line and its fortifications that stretched across the border with Germany. The large French Army had quickly been mobilized and positioned along the border, ready to repulse any German advance. As months had slipped by, people began calling the apparent stalemate the Phony War and a wary sense of normalcy returned to everyday life.

In Paris, Demille had resumed his daily duties at the Musée de l'Armée, where he worked as the chief curator. The museum's most valuable artifacts had already been crated and shipped to the South of France for safekeeping, much as the Louvre had done. Too old for the Army, Demille remained in Paris and kept the museum running, aided by André Carron.

Like most Parisians, Demille thought the Allies would repel any German offensive. The government, the newspapers, and the man on the cobblestone street were all certain. Time was on the side of France.

All that changed on May 9, when the Germans burst across the borders of Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The French Army marched into Belgium to blunt the assault, leaving the rugged Ardennes Forest on their right flank sparsely defended. Days later, a surprise assault through the forest by three Panzer tank corps struck like a knife to the heart. Within two weeks, the French and Allied forces found themselves bottled up in Belgium, thoroughly routed. The road to Paris was left entirely undefended.

As the City of Light approached its darkest hour, its citizens fled. A mass of humanity sought safety in the South of France. With the train system overwhelmed, evacuees clogged the roads from the city, the wealthy in their motorcars, the less affluent in horse-drawn carts. Those less fortunate dragged their belongings behind them. The Parisians joined throngs of Dutch and Belgian civilians who'd already spent days on the road, fleeing the invasion. It was called *L'exode*, and would include more than six million French civilians.

Demille had considered boarding up the museum and joining the exodus. Then a letter had arrived, hand-delivered by a young Army officer in a crisp blue tunic. Demille had to read the short missive twice, rubbing his finger over the signature of General Maxime Weygand, France's military commander in chief.

The task seemed impossible, yet here he was just hours later, driving the back roads of Normandy in the middle of the night, feeling as if he carried on his shoulders the weight of the country.

With the approach of dawn, Demille quickened his pace, pushing the truck at top speed through the sleepy farmlands. Soon afterward, he reached the village of Quillebeuf-sur-Seine, where he woke the local ferry pilot, asleep in the cabin of his vessel, and paid for transit across the placid river.

The port city of Le Havre appeared in the distance a short time later, a plume of dark smoke rising from its center. Demille drove nearly to the city center before turning toward the harbor. The normally bustling commercial center looked like a ghost town. Demille guided the truck west, making his way to the waterfront.

Le Havre's port facilities sprawled over several man-made basins, and Demille had to stop for directions to locate the one in the center of the complex, named Vauban.

Carron looked over the expansive facilities as they drew near and shook his head. "Where are the ships?"

"All of the people we saw on the road from Paris," Demille said. "They have already evacuated. The ships, too."

Carron sat upright in his seat, at full attention for the first time since they had left the French capital. "What are we looking for?"

"A Channel ferry called the *Avignon*."

Sirens sounded nearby, and the black smoke they'd seen earlier now drifted over them from the shifting winds. The day before, German bombers had struck several oil storage tanks north of the port, and they continued to burn.

Demille found the quay alongside Vauban Basin and pulled to a stop between two empty berths. The dock was strewn with a jumble of pallets, crates, and travel trunks. Farther down the quay, a handful of small fishing boats were tied to the dock, near bundles of nets and stacks of lobster traps. A stale amalgam of salt water, diesel fuel, and rotting fish filled the air. Absent, however, were any large ships.

But that hadn't deterred the mass of waiting refugees. Families, businessmen, and displaced foreigners alike were camped on the wharf, many still asleep under blanket tents, while others brewed coffee on small fires. Some young boys with dirty, sullen faces stared at Demille with idle curiosity.

An uneasy feeling of defeat struck the museum curator as he stopped the truck and climbed out.

"Stay and watch the truck," he called out to Carron, who had also exited the vehicle and was striding about, stretching his legs.

Demille stepped to the edge of the quay, which was restricted by a tall wire fence. He followed the fence to a ramp that passed a small wooden structure. A large red sign on the roof proclaimed *Capitaine*. Demille knocked on the door and stepped inside.

An overweight man in a dirty striped shirt and suspenders was just entering the office from a rear kitchenette, a demitasse of coffee wedged in his thick fingers.

"Good day," Demille said. "I am looking for the steamship *Avignon*. I was told it would be departing this dock later today."

The port master parked his large frame behind a messy desk, then took a sip of his coffee. "You and a hundred other people," he said, waving a hand toward the quay. He then looked Demille up and down, his lips drooping into a frown. Dressed in freshly polished shoes, a tailored suit, white shirt, and polka-dot necktie, the visitor was clearly a Parisian. The harbormaster gave Demille a smirk. "The *Avignon* will not be departing Le Havre today, or any other day."

"What are you saying?"

“She was sunk in the Channel following an attack by German aircraft yesterday afternoon.”

Demille felt his legs wobble, and he collapsed into a worn chair opposite the man. “I . . . I have an important cargo that was to be shipped to Britain on the *Avignon*.” He felt in his breast pocket for the letter from General Weygand, but declined to share it.

The harbormaster gave him a look of indifference. “Every ship-owner with an ounce of brain matter evacuated in the last few days. Even the Navy ships have left. The *Avignon* had a good ferry business going, being pretty much the last regular vessel in play.” He took another sip of his coffee. “They charged triple the normal fares to England and got it. But I guess they paid the price.”

“There are no other options?”

The fat man picked up a clipboard and held it close to his face. “There is a tramp steamer due in this morning with a load of Brazilian rubber. The *Jupiter*. She’ll be your best chance . . . If she shows up. Berth two.” He pointed out the front window.

Demille nodded and rose to his feet. “I will wait. Thank you.”

At the truck, Carron sat on the running board, smoking a cigarette. “Find our ship?”

Demille shook his head. “It was sunk yesterday.”

“We can keep driving. Cherbourg . . . Or maybe Brest?”

“There’s another ship due in today, the *Jupiter*. We’ll wait for her.”

Less than an hour later, a large cargo ship crept into the basin and tied up at berth two. Built in 1926, the *Jupiter*’s best years were long behind her. Her black hull was streaked with rust and her dirty white topsides cried for a coat of fresh paint. Heavy black smoke curled from an upright funnel banded in red and gold, wafting over the dock. A tough-looking crew of Portuguese merchantmen took to the assorted derricks that sprouted from her deck and began off-loading a cargo of Amazon rubber.

The quay came alive with the people camped near the ship. They

rushed toward the gangway with their belongings in hope of gaining outbound passage. A burly stevedore blocked their path until the ship's executive officer arrived and attempted to impose order.

He was a young bearded man with heavy gray eyes. He shouted at the refugees in broken French.

"Back, I say. Everyone back on the dock. We are not a passenger ship, and our outbound cargo will put us full up." He raised his arms in a stopping motion. "We'll only have room for a limited number of passengers."

Cries and murmurs sprang from the crowd, but they obeyed the officer and formed an orderly line. The XO disappeared into the harbor-master's office for a few minutes, then returned with a foldout desk he set up by the gangway. One by one, he listened to the refugees' tales. Most were turned away, but a few lucky souls were allowed to board.

Demille waited patiently near the back of the line, but grew distressed when the line began dispersing. Everyone was being turned away.

"We are full and can take no more," Demille heard the officer say to a large Dutch family. He repeated the words when Demille reached his place at the front of the line.

"I have an urgent cargo from Paris," Demille said.

The officer looked the curator up and down, but shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Demille reached into his pocket for a note that was attached to the letter. "I have a travel authorization from General Weygand." He looked the man in the eye. "My cargo was to have sailed on the *Avignon* to England, but she was sunk yesterday."

"The Channel is a dangerous place now." The man took the note and studied the document. The *Jupiter* was a commercial ship, so a government travel authorization meant little. But the French government would guarantee payment. Accepting an important cargo at the

last second, in wartime conditions, would justify a hefty premium in transit fees.

“You are Marcel Demille?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“And how large is your cargo?”

Demille pointed to the Renault. “It nearly fills the back of that truck.”

“Very well. Our holds are accounted for, but we can lash it to the deck. I’m afraid your accommodations will have to be with the ship’s crew.” He turned to a burly crewman near the ship’s rail. “See to it that this man’s cargo is taken aboard once the holds are secured.”

The officer turned back to Demille. “One more thing. The *Jupiter* is not sailing to England. Our next port of call is Bermuda.”

Demille looked down and nodded, then turned away. Bermuda? Was he making a mistake?

He shuffled back to the truck and waited as the *Jupiter* completed loading its holds. When the hatches were sealed, Demille was waved over and he backed the Renault to the paved edge of the dock. A derrick was swung toward the truck and a line lowered. A pair of crewmen climbed into the back of the truck and secured a rope sling around the crate.

Demille paced the concrete dock, watching as the sling was attached to a hooked cable. The derrick operator applied tension to the cable and drew the crate out of the truck. But he underestimated the weight, pulling it out too quickly. The crate’s leading end tipped down and hit the concrete quay.

Demille stared in horror as the end section of the crate splintered and swung forward like a hinged gate. He yelled and waved his arms at the derrick operator, who calmly lowered the crate to the ground.

“Heavier than it looks,” said one of the crewmen, who tried to peer inside. “What do you have in there? A cannon?”

Demille turned to Carron, then back at the man, staring. "The crate must be repaired at once."

The *Jupiter's* executive officer, back aboard the ship and hearing the commotion, stepped to the bow. "Get that crate aboard," he shouted. "We must get underway."

"Your men have damaged it," Demille yelled. "It must be repaired before it is moved again."

The officer squinted at the crate, then barked at the two crewmen ashore. "You men take care of that. Quickly."

As the crewmen hustled to grab some tools, Demille snuck a peek inside. The contents were wrapped in heavy tarps, concealing any possible damage, but everything appeared intact.

Demille pushed the splintered wood against the opening as a rakish blue car sped onto the wharf and stopped beside the truck. The front license plate had red numbers on a white field, the standard in Belgium. A slight, well-dressed man climbed out of the coupe and gazed at the *Jupiter* and the surrounding waterfront.

"Is that the *Avignon*?" He stepped closer as he pointed at the tramp steamer.

"No, it is a vessel called *Jupiter*. The *Avignon* was sunk by the Germans yesterday."

The two crewmen reappeared with some short planks and a toolbox and set about hammering up the crate.

"Do you know its destination?" the man asked Demille.

"Bermuda. But I don't believe they are accepting any more passengers."

The man glanced at the ship. "Bermuda will do." He faced Demille and Carron. "Are you both boarding the ship?"

"I am," Demille said, "but André here is not."

The Belgian approached the younger man. "I have a nephew near Rouen. Could you arrange to have my car transported to him?" He pulled out a business card and a Belgian thousand-franc note.

“Yes, of course.” Carron eyed the banknote. “I can drive it there myself.”

The man wrote a name and address on the back of the card and passed it with the money to Carron. The young Parisian eyed both sides of the card as he pocketed the money.

“Yes, Monsieur . . . Martin,” Carron said, reading the name printed on the front.

Martin handed him the keys to the car. “Please show the vehicle due care. I had it custom ordered.”

Martin stepped to the car and retrieved two hard-sided cases from the backseat, along with a small overnight bag. As he closed the door, a siren sounded, followed a few seconds later by the thump of a distant explosion. All eyes turned to where a plume of black smoke arose from a far section of the port.

Demille spotted two dark objects in the sky, growing larger. Seconds later, they materialized into a pair of bent-wing Junkers Ju 87s, which roared overhead. Demille nervously eyed the black-and-white crosses on their wings. One of the planes still carried a bomb on its undercarriage.

The German dive-bombers, known as *Sturzkampfflugzeuge*, or Stukas, flew to the end of the commercial dock, then separated. The one carrying the bomb turned in a graceful arc, seeking higher altitude. The second plane made a more abrupt turn, maintaining its low altitude as it banked over the harbor, then aligned perfectly with the *Jupiter*.

“Cast off!” the ship’s exec yelled. “All crew aboard. Prepare to get underway.” As he rushed for the bridge, he paused by the derrick operator. “Get that crate aboard now and secure the crane.”

As the derrick operator began taking up the line’s slack, the two crewmen dropped their tools and sprinted toward the gangway. They didn’t run far before diving behind some rusty bollards. Machine-gun fire rattled from overhead as the Stuka approached. The dock,



the deck of the ship, and then the wharf exploded with shrapnel as the twin 7.92-millimeter MG17 guns opened fire. The bullets walked a seam of destruction across the wharf before the plane pulled up and continued toward the city skyline.

As the plane roared by, Carron and Demille dropped to the ground and rolled under the back of their truck. Screams erupted from the refugees fleeing the attack or caught in the melee. The Stuka vanished over the hill, and for a moment there was peace. Then chaos erupted.

Shouts rang across the *Jupiter's* deck as crewmen tried to release the mooring lines. In front of the two men, the crate slid across the tarmac as the derrick operator took up the lift cable again. Demille jumped up to close the gap . . . but hesitated when he heard a moan to his side.

The man named Martin lay on the ground near his car, breathing heavily. Demille rushed over to offer aid, but there was no hope. Martin's white shirt was stained red, his suit coat peppered with holes. Demille slipped an elbow under the man's neck and raised his head.

Martin's eyes were glassy, but they focused on Demille with a momentary fierceness. "My bags . . . They must leave the country." He turned and coughed away a spittle of blood. "Take them with you. Please. My bank will come for them later."

Demille gazed at the stricken man, his own heart pounding. "Yes," he said.

Martin gave a faint smile, then the life ebbed from his body.

"Marcel!" Carron shouted. "You must get aboard the ship."

Demille gently lowered Martin's head to the ground, then picked up the two heavy cases. He turned to see his crate dragging across the dock before being lifted into the air. The two crewmen assigned to help were already back on the ship and pulling in its gangway.

"Grab that hammer," he shouted to Carron, motioning toward the tools on the dock. Demille rushed to the moving crate and forced Martin's two cases inside.

Carron joined him with the hammer and a handful of nails. "I will secure it. You get aboard."

Demille patted his assistant on the shoulder. "Be well, my friend."

The *Jupiter* was beginning to pull away by the time Demille sprinted onto the berthing dock. He glanced to his left as the big crate rose off the quay and dangled in the air, swinging wildly. The damaged end appeared mended, Carron having pounded in several nails on the fly.

Demille sprinted to the edge of the dock and leaped across several feet of open water. He fell hard against the side rail, knocking the wind from his lungs. He nearly slid off and into the harbor, but a crewman grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him onto the deck.

"Cutting it close, mate," the seaman said.

Demille pulled himself to his feet and nodded thanks. His eyes were already on the suspended crate. Its gyrations slowed enough for the derrick operator to drop it onto the bow deck, just ahead of the forward hold. He held his breath, but the crate held with no further damage as the line above it fell slack. On the dock, Carron waved farewell, and the curator returned the gesture.

But his sense of relief ended when a mechanical wailing sounded from high above. The second Stuka had circled overhead, climbing in altitude to fifteen thousand feet. Its pilot then rolled the plane into a vertical dive, its nose aimed at the *Jupiter*. As the dive-bomber accelerated, a pair of small sirens on the undercarriage, called Jericho trumpets, released a shrieking wail that rose in volume and pitch as the aircraft plummeted.

Black smoke belched from the *Jupiter's* funnel as the captain desperately backed the ship from the dock. Through the smoke wafting overhead, Demille watched as the warplane descended toward them. When a bomb sprang free from the Stuka's undercarriage and the plane began to pull up, Demille dropped to the deck and rolled against the crate.

The bomb seemed to hang in the air as the *Jupiter's* propeller dug fiercely into the harbor's water under full throttle, gradually tugging the old ship away. By the barest of margins, it escaped a direct hit.

The bomb struck the water just a dozen feet from the *Jupiter's* vertical bow and detonated with a thunderous roar. The ship shuddered as a fountain of water sprayed Demille and his crate, but the *Jupiter* remained intact. The old steamer turned and reversed engines, making its way across the basin and toward open sea. The *Stuka*, absent more bombs and low on fuel, gave up the attack and flew east toward a captured airfield in Flanders.

The *Jupiter's* executive officer appeared on deck and rushed to help Demille to his feet.

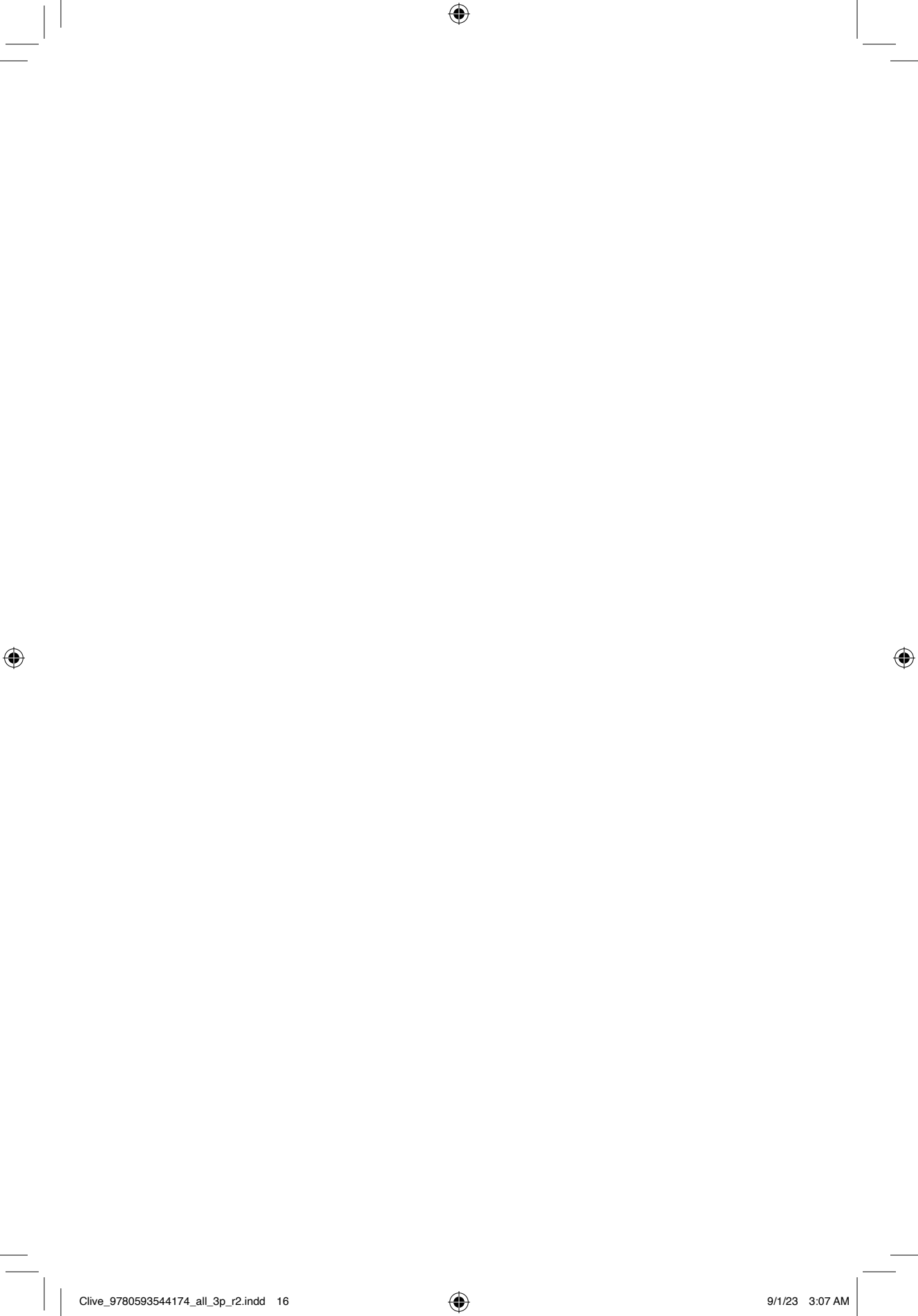
"Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes," Demille replied, patting down his clothes. "I wasn't expecting the war to come to us this morning."

"It has arrived for all of us, I'm afraid." The officer pointed at the large water-soaked crate. "A close call for your shipment. May I ask what you have in there that is so critical to take from France?"

Demille took a second to glance at the coastline of his beloved country receding behind them. He then turned to the officer with a forlorn gaze.

"This," he said, rubbing the side of the crate with reverence, "is nothing less than the soul of France."



# PART I

**Drive into the Seine**



# 1

PALMACHIM, ISRAEL

*February 15, 2025*

A bright half-moon cast silver rivulets across the Mediterranean Sea, illuminating two dark objects gliding to shore. Black inflatable boats, each holding six commandos, motored through the light surf under near-silent electric power. As the fiberglass hulls scraped the sandy bottom, the men leaped out and dragged the boats ashore, concealing them in a tide-cut gully.

Each man peeled off a loose black jumpsuit, revealing a uniform of desert camo beneath. They pulled on sand-colored balaclavas, over which they tied green headbands marked with Arabic script and the logo of an armed man holding a flag and the Qur'an. It was the emblem of the militant wing of the Palestinian Hamas organization known as the al-Qassam Brigade.

The two teams assembled before their leader, a thick, commanding man with dark brooding eyes. Henri Nassar raised a hand as he faced the men.

"We will meet back here in ninety minutes," he said in a low voice, "and not a second longer. You know what to do. Move out." Lebanese by birth, Nassar had been raised on the brutish streets of Marseille. His youth was filled with a litany of assaults and petty crimes

until he was fingered in a local gang killing. The charges were dropped when he agreed to join the French Army. It gave him a sense of discipline that complemented his tough street smarts. He soon found himself an airborne soldier in the Foreign Legion and discovered he had a natural talent as a warrior.

Assignments in Afghanistan, Chad, and Mali molded his skills and made him an attractive candidate as a private mercenary. After several years in Africa fighting on both sides of the law, he found an even more lucrative position in corporate security. He occasionally rued the job's boredom, but his employer operated on the dark side, allowing him back in the field, where his heart beat fastest.

As the first commando team moved out to the south, Nassar led the second team inland, following a narrow drainage basin ankle-deep with water. They followed the cut for half a mile, then climbed its low bank and emerged on a rolling terrain of scrub brush and dust. A paved road crossed their path, angling north to an immense industrial compound illuminated by rows of lights on tall poles. The Sorek Desalination Plant was one of the largest reverse-osmosis facilities in the world. Drawing in seawater from the Mediterranean, the plant produced 165 million gallons of fresh water a day, more than twenty percent of Israel's municipal drinking water. The fenced and guarded compound stretched for one-third of a mile, containing dozens of open treatment basins and several huge buildings housing thousands of semipermeable membrane units that filtered the seawater under high pressure.

Nassar led the team along the side of the road, moving well past the main entrance, then crossed the asphalt and circled around the back side of the complex. The commandos moved quickly down the length of a high chain-link fence until Nassar stopped opposite a large metal building. At his signal, two men ignited heavy smoke canisters and tossed them over the fence. As a thick white cloud filled



the air, a third man attacked the fence with wire cutters, carving a large hole.

The commandos scurried into the complex, sprinting through the smoke to the edge of the building. Motion detectors on the fence failed to detect them through the smoke, so their presence would be discovered only by chance monitoring of surrounding video feeds by the guards at the front entrance.

The team moved to the end of the building, then separated into two groups. Three men moved south, toward a natural gas-fired power plant that provided electricity to the facility. Nassar and two others followed close behind, then peeled off to a metal-sided building with several large white pipes protruding from one side.

It was the main pumping station, the heart of the whole operation. Inside, thirteen massive pump units sucked in water from the sea and directed it under high pressure through various filtration stages and the reverse-osmosis system.

Nassar entered through a side door, hesitating at the scene within. The high-ceiling area contained a maze of pipes running in all directions, interconnected to a row of large pumps on the main floor. It was hot and noisy, as the electric pumps were in full operation.

Nassar scanned the three-story interior. Two men in yellow hard hats stood nearby, monitoring a control panel. A third man, high overhead on a catwalk, walked slowly while consulting a clipboard. Nassar raised his rifle at the man overhead, while his fellow commandos approached the control panel. Gunfire erupted as each let loose with their AK-47s, cutting down the three technicians. As their gunfire ceased, the clipboard fell from above and clanked onto the floor beside Nassar, followed by steady droplets of blood. He sidestepped the splatter and approached the console, confirming all pumps were running, while his two comrades went to work. They jumped into the recessed bed that held the red pumps, opened their

backpacks, and retrieved small bundles of Formex P1 plastic explosive, one for each pump.

The charges were affixed with a small timer and detonator that required only a simple activation. The two moved from pump to pump, slapping the sticky charges to the base of each machine and activating their timers. They had crossed half the bay, when a distant alarm sounded.

Nassar moved to the door and waited, his gun ready, while the last charges were placed. When the other two men joined him, he burst out the door onto the tarmac. A small security truck with a flashing orange light on the roof was just skirting the building. The driver hit the brakes at the sight of Nassar. The truck's passenger jumped out, brandishing an Uzi, followed a few seconds later by the driver. The first man stepped away from the truck, yelling at Nassar in Hebrew.

Nassar responded with twin salvos, cutting down both men with deadly accuracy. He stepped close to the fallen security men as the two other commandos rushed to his side. The passenger lay dead near the truck's grille, but the driver still lived. Slumped against the front fender, he held his stomach with a bloodstained hand. One of the commandos raised his gun to finish the job, but Nassar waved him off. He wanted the security man to remain alive as a witness.

Nassar stepped to the front of the truck and raised his weapon toward the sky.

"*Allahu Akbar*," he shouted, then nodded at his comrades, who repeated the cry. Nassar squeezed a burst of fire from his gun for effect. Then the three men turned and took off at a run toward the back fence.

Sirens were now sounding all over the facility and multiple security vehicles could be seen prowling the far end of the compound. Gunshots rang out as they reached the hole in the fence and crawled through. The three men took a defensive position and waited.

Within minutes, they heard the footfalls of the other three com-

mandos. A security truck rounded the building to their right, catching the fleeing commandos in its headlights.

Nassar and his men opened fire, spraying the truck's cab. The windshield cracked with a half dozen spiderwebs, and the driver slumped forward. The truck veered and smashed into the building without slowing. The second commando team reached the fence opening and dashed through. Nassar led the combined teams in a measured run along the plant's perimeter, crossing the road and returning to the drainage ditch. Nassar had prepared the team with strenuous training runs, so each man held his own and the group moved as a single dark shadow.

At the beach, they rendezvoused with the second six-man team, which had arrived minutes earlier. Both teams slipped back into their black jumpsuits to resume their escape.

"Report," Nassar inquired of the other team's leader, a tall wiry-haired man named Hosni Samad.

"No resistance encountered until we were on our way out. All our charges were planted and activated."

Sirens sounded along the coastline as security forces and emergency responders converged on the desalination plant. Nassar led the commandos in hauling their rubber boats into the surf, and the stealth killers departed the Israeli shoreline as quietly as they had arrived.

A coastal oil tanker, its lights blacked out, waited for them five miles offshore. Once the commandos were aboard, the two inflatables were sunk, along with their Russian-made weapons and desert combat fatigues. If the ship were boarded and inspected, Nassar made sure there was no evidence linking them to the attack.

The commando leader made his way to the high stern bridge, where a leather-faced man at the ship's wheel turned to him. "The boss is waiting to hear," he said in a guttural voice. "Were you successful?"

Nassar eyed a wall-mounted chronograph, then picked up a pair

of binoculars. He casually stepped to the bridge wing and surveyed the largely dark coast. Soon a symphony of explosions erupted in the distance. While the fireballs appeared small on the horizon, a thundering echo still played out to their position at sea.

Nassar savored the sight for a moment, then put down the binoculars and turned with a smug grin to the ship's captain. "I think you have your answer."