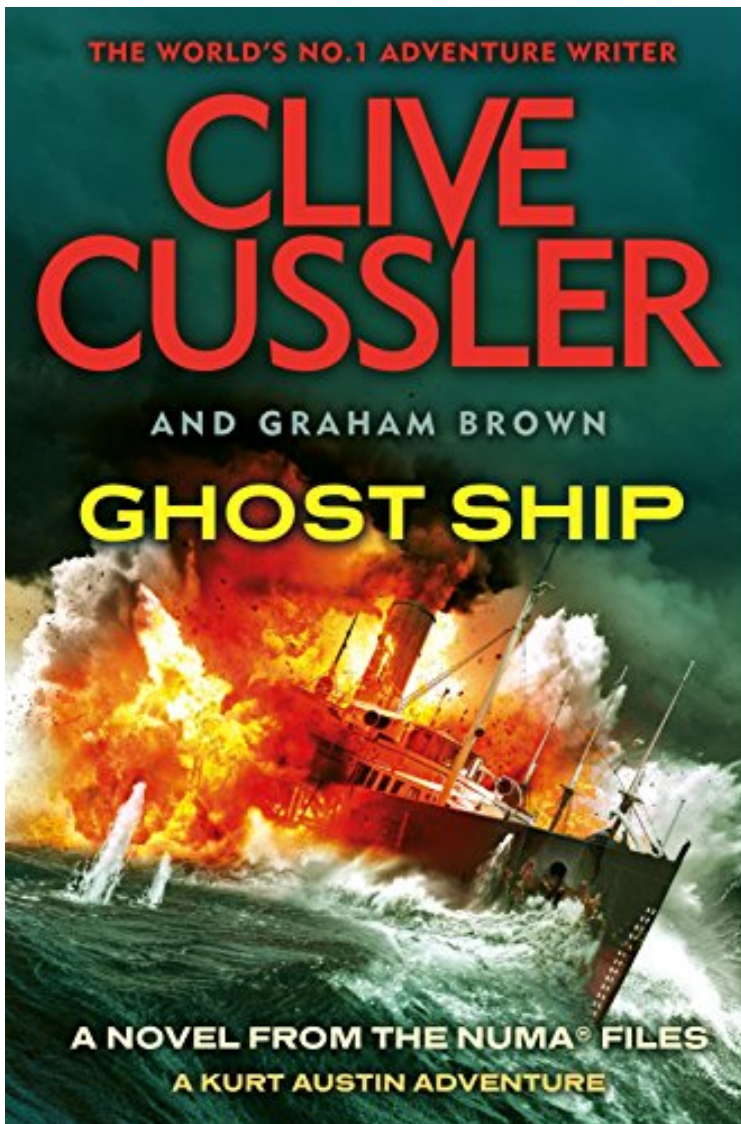


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## Ghost Ship: NUMA Files #12



*Par Clive Cussler, Graham Brown  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGhost Ship is the latest action-packed novel in the No 1 New York Times-bestselling NUMA Files series from the grand master of adventure, Clive Cussler.When Kurt Austin is injured while rescuing the passengers and crew of a sinking yacht, he wakes up with conflicting memories of what he saw. Did he witness an old friend and her children drown, or was the yacht abandoned when he came aboard?For reasons he cannot explain - yet - Kurt doesn't trust either version of his recollection. Determined to seek out the truth, in his hunt for answers, he soon descends into a shadowy world of state-sponsored cybercrime, where he uncovers a pattern of suspicious accidents, vanishing scientists and a web of human trafficking.Now, he must take on the sinister organization behind this conspiracy, facing off against them from Morocco to North Korea to the rugged coasts of Madagascar.But where this highly dangerous quest

will ultimately take him, even he could not begin to guess . . . Clive Cussler, author of recent New York Times bestsellers *The Tombs*, *Poseidon's Arrow*, and *The Striker* brings us the knuckle-whitening doomsday masterpiece, *Ghost Ship*. Praise for Clive Cussler: 'Clive Cussler is hard to beat' *Daily Mail* 'The guy I read' Tom Clancy 'The adventure king' *Daily Express* Extrait Durban, South Africa, July 25, 1909 They were driving into a void, or so it seemed to Chief Inspector Robert Swan of the Durban Police Department. On a moonless night, beneath a sky as dark as India ink, Swan rode shotgun in the cab of a motor truck as it rumbled down a dusty track in the countryside north of Durban. The headlights of the big Packard cast yellow beams of light that flickered and bounced and did little to brighten the path ahead. As he stared into the gloom, Swan could see no more than forty yards of the rutted path at any one time. How far to this farmhouse? he asked, turning toward a thin, wiry man named Morris, who was wedged in next to the driver. Morris checked his watch, leaned toward the driver, and checked the odometer of the truck. After some mental calculations, he glanced down at the map he held. We should be there soon, Inspector. No more than ten minutes to go, I'd say. The chief inspector nodded and grabbed the doorsill as the bumpy ride continued. The Packard was known as a Three Ton, the latest from America and one of the first motor vehicles to be owned by the Durban Police Department. It had come off the boat with the customized cab and windshield. Enterprising workmen from the newly formed motor pool had built a frame to cover the flat bed and stretched canvas over it, though no one had done anything to make it more comfortable. As the truck bounced and lurched over the rutted bumpy trail, Swan decided he would rather be on horseback. But what the big rig lost in comfort it made up for in hauling power. In addition to Swan, Morris, and the driver, eight constables rode in back. Swan leaned on the doorsill and turned to look behind him. Four sets of headlights followed. Three cars and another Packard. All told, Swan had nearly a quarter of the Durban police force riding with him. Are you sure we need all these men? Morris asked. Perhaps it was a bit much, Swan thought. Then again, the criminals they were after a group known in the papers as the Klaar River Gang had numbers of their own. Rumors put them between thirty and forty, depending on whom one believed. Though they'd begun as common highwaymen, robbing others and extorting those who tried to make an honest living doing business out in the Veld, they'd grown more cunning and violent in the last six months. Farmhouses of those who refused to pay protection money were being burned to the ground. Miners and travelers were disappearing without a trace. The truth came to light when several of the gang were captured trying to rob a bank. They were brought back to Durban for interrogation only to be rescued in a brazen attack that left three policemen dead and four others wounded. It was a line that Swan would not allow them to cross. I'm not interested in a fair fight, he explained. Need I remind you what happened two days ago? Morris shook his head, and Swan rapped his hand on the partition that separated the cab from the back of the truck. A panel slid open and the face of a burly man appeared, all but filling the window. Are the men ready? Swan asked. Were ready, Inspector. Good, Swan said. Remember, no prisoners tonight. The man nodded his understanding, but the words caused Morris to offer a sideways glance. You have a problem? Swan barked. No, sir, Morris said, looking back at his map. It's just that... were almost there. Just over this hill. Swan turned his attention forward once again and took a deep breath, readying himself. Almost immediately he caught the scent of smoke. It was distinct in flavor, like a bonfire. The Packard crested the hill moments later, and the coal-black night was cleaved in two by a frenzied orange blaze on the field down below them. The farmhouse was burning from one side to the other, whirls of fire curling around it and reaching toward the heavens. Bloody hell, Swan cursed. The vehicles raced down the hill and spread out. The men poured forth and took up positions surrounding the house. No one hit them. No one fired. Morris led a squad closer. They approached from upwind and darted into the last section of the barn that wasn't ablaze. Several horses were rescued, but the only gang members they found were already dead. Some of them half burned, others merely shot and left to die. There was no hope of fighting the fire. The ancient wood and the oil-based paint crackled and burned like petrol. It put out such heat that Swan's men were soon forced to back off or be broiled alive. What happened? Swan demanded of his lieutenant. Looks like they had it out among themselves, Morris said. Swan considered that. Before the arrests in Durban, rumors had been swirling that suggested the gang was fraying at the seams. How many dead? We've found five. Some of the boys think they saw two more inside, but they couldn't reach 'em. At that moment gunfire rang out. Swan and Morris dove behind the Packard for cover. From sheltered positions, some of the officers began to shoot back, losing stray rounds into the inferno. The shooting continued, oddly timed and staccato, though Swan saw no sign of bullets hitting nearby. Hold your fire! he shouted. But keep your heads down. But they're shooting at us, one of the men shouted. Swan shook his head even as the pop-pop of the gunfire continued. It's just ammunition going off in the blaze. The order was passed around,

shouted from one man to the next. Despite his own directive, Swan stood up, peering over the hood of the truck. By now the inferno had enveloped the entire farmhouse. The remaining beams looked like the bones of a giant resting on some Nordic funeral pyre. The flames curled around and through them, burning with a strange intensity, bright white and orange with occasional flashes of green and blue. It looked like hell itself had risen up and consumed the gang and their hideout from within. As Swan watched, a massive explosion went off deep inside the structure, blowing the place into a fiery scrap. Swan was thrown back by the force of the blast, landing hard on his back, as chunks of debris rattled against the sides of the Packard. Moments after the explosion, burning confetti began falling, as little scraps of paper fluttered down by the thousands, leaving trails of smoke and ash against the black sky. As the fragments kissed the ground, they began to set fires in the dry grass. Seeing this, Swan's men went into action without delay, tamping out the embers to prevent a brushfire from surrounding them. Swan noticed several fragments landing nearby. He rolled over and stretched for one of them, patting it out with his hand. To his surprise, he saw numbers, letters, and the stern face of King George staring back at him. Tanners, Morris said excitedly. Ten-pound notes. Thousands of them. As the realization spread through the men, they redoubled their efforts, running around and gathering up the charred scraps with a giddy enthusiasm they rarely showed for collecting evidence. Some of the notes were bundled and not too badly burned. Others were like leaves in the fireplace, curled and blackened beyond recognition. Gives a whole new meaning to the term blowing the loot, Morris said. Swan chuckled, but he wasn't really listening, his thoughts were elsewhere; studying the fire, counting the bodies, working the case as an inspector's mind should. Something was not right, not right at all. At first, he put it down to the anticlimactic nature of the evening. The gang he'd come to make war on had done the job for him. That he could buy. He'd seen it before. Criminals often fought over the spoils of their crimes, especially when they were loosely affiliated and all but leaderless, as this gang was rumored to be. No, Swan thought, this was suspicious on a deeper level. Morris seemed to notice. What's wrong? It makes no sense, Swan replied. What part of it? The whole thing, Swan said. The risky daylight bank job. The raid to get their men out. The gunfight in the street. Morris stared at him blankly. I don't follow you. Look around, Swan suggested. Judging by the storm of burnt cash raining down on us, these thugs were sitting on a small fortune. Yes, Morris agreed. So what? So why rob a heavily defended bank in broad daylight if you're already loaded to the gills with cash? Why risk shooting up Durban to get your mates out only to gun them down back here? Morris stared at Swan for a long moment before nodding his agreement. I have no idea, he said. But you're right. It makes no sense at all. The fire continued to burn well into the morning hours, only dying when the farmhouse was consumed. The operation ended without casualties among the police, and the Klaar River Gang was never heard from again. Most considered it a stroke of good fortune, but Swan was never convinced. He and Morris would discuss the events of that evening for years, well into their retirement.

Despite many theories and guesses as to what really went on, it was a question they would never be able to answer. 170 miles West-Southwest of Durban, July 27, 1909. The SS Waratah plowed through the waves on a voyage from Durban to Cape Town, rolling noticeably with the growing swells. Dark smoke from coal-fired boilers spilled from her single funnel and was driven in the opposite direction by a contrary wind. Sitting alone in the main lounge of the five-hundred-foot steamship, fifty-one-year-old Gavin Brvard felt the vessel roll ponderously to starboard. He watched the cup and saucer in front of him slide toward the edge of the table, slowly at first, and then picking up speed as the angle of the ship's roll increased. At the last second, he grabbed for the cup, preventing it from sliding off the edge and clattering to the floor. The Waratah remained at a sharp pitch, taking a full two minutes to right herself, and Brvard began to worry about the vessel he'd booked passage on. In a prior life, he'd spent ten years at sea aboard various steamers. On those ships the recoil was quicker, the keel more adept at righting itself. This ship felt top-heavy to him. It made him wonder if something was wrong. More tea, sir? Deep in thought, Brvard barely noticed the waiter in the uniform of the Blue Anchor Line. He held out the cup he'd saved from destruction. Merci. The waiter topped it off and moved on. As he left, a new figure came into the room, a broad-shouldered man of perhaps thirty, with reddish hair and a ruddy face. He made a direct line for Brvard, taking a seat in the chair opposite. Johannes, Brvard said in greeting. Glad to see you're not trapped in your cabin like the others. Johannes looked a little green, but he seemed to be holding up. Why have you called me here? Brvard took a sip of the tea. I've been thinking. And I've decided something important. And what might that be? Were far from safe. Johannes sighed and looked away. Brvard understood. Johannes thought him to be a worrier. A fear-laden man. But Brvard was just trying to be cautious. He'd spent years with people chasing him, years living under the threat of imprisonment or death. He had to think five steps ahead just to remain alive. It had

tuned his mind to a hyperattentive state. Of course we're safe, Johannes replied. We've assumed new identities. We left no trail. The others are all dead, and the barn has been burned to the ground. Only our family continues on. Brvard took another sip of tea. What if we've missed something? It doesn't matter, Johannes insisted. We're beyond the reach of the authorities here. This ship has no radio. We might as well be on an island somewhere. That was true. As long as the ship was at sea, they could rest and relax. But the journey would end soon enough. We're only safe until we dock in Cape Town, Brvard pointed out. If we haven't covered our trail as perfectly as we think, we may arrive to a greeting of angry policemen or His Majesty's troops. Johannes did not reply right away. He was thinking, soaking the information in. What do you suggest? he asked finally. We have to make this journey last forever. And how do we do that? Brvard was speaking metaphorically. He knew he had to be more concrete for Johannes. How many guns do we have? Four pistols and three rifles. What about the explosives? Two of the cases are still full, Johannes said with a scowl. Though I'm not sure it was wise to bring them aboard. They'll be fine, Brvard insisted. Wake the others, I have a plan. It's time we took destiny into our own hands. CAPTAIN JOSHUA ILBERY stood on the Waratahs bridge despite it being time for the third watch to take over. The weather concerned him. The wind was gusting to fifty knots, and it was blowing opposite to the tide and the current. This odd combination was building the waves into sharp pyramids, unusually high and steep, like piles of sand pushed together from both directions. Steady on, now, Ilbery said to the helmsman. Adjust as needed, we don't want to be broadsided. Aye, the helmsman said. Ilbery lifted the binoculars. The light was fading as evening came on, and he hoped the wind would subside in the night. Scanning the whitecaps ahead of him, Ilbery heard the bridge door open. To his surprise, a shot rang out. He dropped the binoculars and spun to see the helmsman slumping to the deck, clutching his stomach. Beyond him stood a group of passengers with weapons, one of whom walked over and took the helm. Before Ilbery could utter a word or grab for a weapon, a ruddy-faced passenger slammed the butt of an Enfield rifle into his gut. He doubled over and fell back, landing against the bulkhead. The man who'd attacked him aimed the barrel of the Enfield at his heart. Ilbery noticed it was held by rough hands, more fitting on a farmer or rancher than a first-class passenger. He looked into the man's eyes and saw no mercy. He couldn't be sure of course, but Ilbery had little doubt the man he was facing had shot and killed before. What is the meaning of this? Ilbery growled. One of the group stepped toward him. He was older than the others, with graying hair at the temples. He wore a finer suit and carried himself with the loose elegance of a leader. Ilbery recognized him as one of a group who'd come on board in Durban. Brvard, was the name. Gavin Brvard. I demand an explanation, Ilbery said. Brvard smirked at him. I should have thought it quite obvious. We're commandeering this ship. You're going to set a new course away from the coast and then back to the east. We're not going to Cape Town. You can't be serious, Ilbery said. We're in the middle of a bad stretch. The ship is barely responding as it is. To make a turn now would—Gavin aimed the pistol at a spot halfway between the captain's eyes. I've worked on steamers before, Captain. Enough to know that this ship is top-heavy and performing poorly. But she's not going to go over, so stop lying to me. This ship will surely go to the bottom, Ilbery said. Give the order, Brvard demanded, or I'll blow a hole in your skull and pilot this ship myself. Ilbery's eyes narrowed to slits. Perhaps you can navigate, but what about the rest of the duties? Do you and this lot intend to man the ship yourselves? Brvard smiled wryly. He'd known from the start that this was his weakness, the chink in his armor. He had eight others with him, three of them children. Even if they'd been adults, nine people couldn't even keep the fires stoked for long, let alone guard the passengers and crew, and pilot the ship at the same time. But Brvard was used to playing the angles. His whole life was a study in getting others to do as he wished, either against their wills or without them knowing they were doing his bidding. He'd known he needed leverage, and the explosives in the two cases enabled him to turn the odds in his favor. Bring in the prisoner, he said. Ilbery watched as the bridge door was opened and an unkempt teenager appeared. This one brought in a man covered in coal dust. Blood flowed from a broken nose and a gash across his forehead. Chief? I'm sorry, Cap'n, the chief said. They tricked us. They used children to distract us. And then they overpowered us. Three of the lads are shot. But it's so loud down there no one heard until it was too late. What have they done? the captain asked, his eyes growing wide. Dynamite, the chief said. A dozen sticks attached to boilers three and four. Ilbery turned to Brvard. Are you insane? You can't put explosives in an environment like that. The heat, the embers. One spark and—And we'll all be blown to kingdom come, Brvard said, finishing the thought for him. Yes, I'm well aware of the consequences. The thing is, a rope waits for me onshore, the kind that stretches one's neck. If I'm going to die, I'd rather it be quick and glorious than slow and painful. So don't test me. I have three of my people down there with rifles like these to make sure no one removes those explosives, at least not until I leave this ship at

a port of my choosing. Now, do as I say and turn this vessel away from the coast. And then what? Ilbery asked. When we've reached our destination, we'll take a few of your boats, a heap of supplies, and everyone's cash and jewelry, and we'll leave your ship and disappear. You and your crew will be free to sail back to Cape Town with a fantastic story to tell the world. Using the bulkhead behind him for support, Captain Ilbery forced himself up and stood. He stared at Brvard with contempt. The man had him and both knew it. Chief, he said without taking his eyes off the hijacker. Take the helm and turn us about. The chief staggered to the wheel and pushed the hijacker aside and did as ordered. The rudder answered the helm, and the SS Waratah began to turn. Good decision, Brvard said. Ilbery wondered about that, but knew he had no choice. For his part, Brvard was pleased. He sat down in a chair, laid the rifle across his lap, and studied the captain closely. Having spent his lifetime misleading others, from policemen to powder-wigged judges, Brvard had learned that some men were easier to read than others. The honest ones were more obvious than the rest. As Brvard stared at this captain, he pegged him as one of those. A man with pride and smarts and a great sense of duty for his passengers and crew. That sense of duty compelled him to comply with Brvard's demands in order to protect the lives of those on board. But it also made him dangerous. Even as he acquiesced, Ilbery stood tall and ramrod straight. Though he clutched his stomach from the blow he'd taken, he kept a fire burning in his eyes that beaten men didn't have. All of which suggested the captain was not ready to relinquish his ship just yet. A countermove would come, sooner rather than later. Brvard didn't blame the captain. Quite frankly, he respected him. All the same, he made a mental note to be ready. SS Harlow 10 miles ahead of the Waratah. Like the captain of the Waratah, the captain of the Harlow was on the bridge. Thirty-foot waves and fifty-knot winds required it. He and his crew were making constant corrections, working hard to keep the Harlow from going off course. They'd even pumped in some extra water as ballast to help reduce the roll. As the first officer reentered the bridge following an inspection run, the captain looked his way. How are we faring, number one? Shipshape from stem to stern, sir. Excellent, the captain said. He stepped to the bridge wing and glanced out behind them. The lights of another vessel could be seen on the horizon. She was several miles astern, and making a great deal of smoke. What do you make of her? the captain asked. She's changed course, out away from the coast. Could be a turn to get more clearance from the shoals, the first officer said. Or perhaps the wind and current are forcing her off. Any idea who it is? Not sure, the captain said. She might be the Waratah. Moments later, a pair of flashes only seconds apart lit out from the vessel's approximate position. They were bright white and then orange, but at this range there was no sound, like watching distant fireworks. When they faded, the horizon was dark. Both the captain and first officer blinked and stared into that darkness. What was that? the first officer asked. An explosion? The captain wasn't sure. He grabbed for the binoculars and took a moment to train them on the spot. There was no sign of fire, but a cold chill gripped his spine as he realized the lights of the mystery ship had vanished as well. Could have been flares from a brushfire on the shore behind them, the first officer suggested. Or heat lightning. The captain didn't respond and continued to stare through the binoculars, sweeping the field of view. He hoped the first officer was right, but if the flashes of light had come from the shore or the sky, then what had happened to the ship's lights visible only moments before? UPON DOCKING, both men would learn that the Waratah was overdue and missing. She'd never made port in Cape Town, nor had she returned to Durban or made landfall anywhere else. In quick succession both the Royal Navy and the Blue Anchor Line would dispatch ships in search of the Waratah, but they would return empty-handed. No lifeboats were found. No wreckage. No debris. No bodies floating in the water. Over the years, nautical groups, government organizations, and treasure seekers would search for the wreck of the missing ship. They would use sonar, magnetometers, and satellite imaging. They would dispatch divers and submarines and ROVs to scour various wrecks along the coast. But it was all in vain. More than a century after her disappearance, not a single trace of the Waratah had ever been found. Maputo Bay, Mozambique, September 1987. The sun was falling toward the horizon as an aging fifty-foot trawler sailed into the bay from the open waters of the Mozambique Channel. For Cuoto Zumbana, it had been a good day. The hold of his boat was filled with fresh fish, no nets had been torn or lost, and the old motor had survived yet another journey though it continued to belch gray smoke. Satisfied with life, Zumbana closed his eyes and turned toward the sun, letting it bathe the weathered folds of his face. There was little he enjoyed more than that glorious feeling. Such peace it brought him that the excited shouts of his crew did not break him from it at first. Mashua, one shouted. Zumbana opened his eyes, squinting in the glare as the sunlight blazed off the sea like liquid fire. Blocking the light with his hand, he saw what the men were pointing at, a small wooden dinghy bobbing in the chop of the late afternoon. It seemed to be adrift, and there didn't appear to be anyone on board. Take us

to it, he ordered. To find a small boat he could sell would only make the day better. He would even share some of the money with the crew. The trawler changed course, and the old engine chugged a little harder. Soon, they were closing the gap. Zumbana's face wrinkled. The small boat was badly weathered and looked hastily patched. Even from fifty feet away he could see that much of it was rotted. Someone must have dumped it just to be rid of it, one of his crewmen said. There might be something of value on board, Zumbana said. Take us alongside. The helmsman did as ordered, and the trawler eased to a stop beside the dilapidated craft. As they bumped it, another crewman hopped aboard. Zumbana threw him a rope, and the two boats were quickly tied off and drifting together. From his position, Zumbana saw empty cooking pots and piles of rags, certainly nothing of value, but as the crewman pulled a moth-eaten blanket aside all thoughts of money were chased from his mind. A young woman and two boys lay beneath the old blanket. They were clearly dead. Their faces were covered with sores from the sun and their bodies stiff. Their clothing was tattered, and a bloodstained rag was tied to the woman's shoulder. A closer look revealed scabbed wrists and ankles as if the three of them had once been held in cuffs and restraints. Zumbana crossed himself. We should leave it, one of the crewmen said. It's a bad omen, another added. No. We must respect the dead, Zumbana replied. Especially those who have been taken so young. The men looked at him suspiciously but did as they were ordered. With a rope secured for towing, they turned once again for shore with the old double-ended boat trailing out behind them. Zumbana moved to the stern, where he could keep an eye on the small craft. His gaze went from the boat to the horizon beyond. He wondered about the occupants of the small boat. Who were they? Where had they come from? What danger had they escaped only to die on the open sea? So young, he thought, considering the three bodies. So fragile. The boat itself was another mystery. The top plank in the boat's side seemed as if it might have once been painted with a name, but it was unreadable now. He worried if the boat would make it into port. Unlike its dead passengers, it seemed ancient. Certainly it was older than the three occupants. In fact, it looked to him like it might belong to another era all together.

Indian Ocean, March 2014

A flash of blue lightning forked across the horizon. For a second or two it lit up the gray darkness where sea and storm met. Kurt Austin stared into that darkness from the rear section of a Sikorsky Jayhawk as the big helicopter shouldered its way through bands of pouring rain. Turbulence shook the craft, and thirty-foot swells rolled beneath them, their tops blown off by the howling wind. As the lightning faded, Kurt saw his reflection on the glass. Roughly forty, with silver-gray hair, Kurt was handsome in the right kind of light. A strong jawline and piercing blue eyes saw to that. But like a truck that spent its days on the worksite instead of in the garage, his face carried the miles in plain view. The lines around his eyes were etched a little deeper than most. A collection of faded scars from fistfights, car crashes, and other incidents marked his brow and jaw. It was the face of a man who seemed ready for anything, determined and unyielding, even as the helicopter neared the limits of its range. He pressed the intercom switch and looked ahead to where his friend Joe Zavala sat in the copilot's seat. Anything? Nothing, Joe called back. Kurt and Joe worked for NUMA, the National Underwater Marine Agency, a branch of the American government dedicated to the study and preservation of the sea. But, at the moment, they were part of a makeshift rescue team called on to assist a group of floundering vessels that had been caught in a debilitating storm. As they flew on, the radio crackled with static and rapid-fire conversations between the South African Coast Guard and the small group of rescue craft. Sapphire Two, what's your position? Sapphire Two has contact with the Endless Road. She appears to be drifting but watertight. Four crew are visible. Maneuvering into position for basket rescue. Roger that, Sapphire Two. Sapphire Three, what's your status? Inbound with rescues. Two appear to have hypothermia, third is stable. The storm had come barreling in from the southeast, gaining intensity as it approached the Cape of Good Hope. It swept up several freighters, including a thousand-foot containership, and then swung north and set its sights on a group of yachts and other pleasure craft involved in a friendly race from Durban to Australia. The fury of the storm and its sudden arrival had taxed the South African Coast Guard to the limit. They'd called for any able assistance, enlisting the help of a Royal Navy frigate, two American supply ships, and the NUMA research vessel Condor. Seventy miles east of the Condor, Kurt, Joe, and the pilot of the Jayhawk were nearing the GPS coordinates they'd been given. But they'd yet to spot a thing. We should be almost on top of her, Kurt said. She might have gone down, the pilot replied. Kurt didn't want to consider that. By a strange twist of fate, he knew the family on the yacht they were attempting to assist. At least he knew one of them. How much fuel? Were we in ten minutes. At that point, they'd have only enough fuel to make it back to the Condor and would have to turn around or risk splashing down short of home and needing rescue themselves. Stretch it, Kurt said. The headwinds are killing us. There'll be tailwinds on the way home,

Kurt insisted. Keep going. The pilot clammed up, and Kurt turned his eyes back to the sea. I have something, Joe shouted, holding a hand to his headset. Its weak, but I think its their emergency beacon. Turn right to zero seven zero. The helicopter banked into the turn, and several minutes later Kurt spied the hull of a hundred-sixty-foot yacht listing to one side. She was still afloat but down at the bow, and all but awash in the waves. Take us in, Kurt ordered. He yanked open the cargo door, sliding it back and locking it in place. Wind and rain whipped into the cabin. A winch system and four hundred feet of cable would allow them to lift survivors on board, but they had no basket, so Kurt would have to go down and grab them himself. He clicked the cable to the harness he'd pulled on previously and slid himself to the edge, feet dangling over the side. I see no one, the pilot said. They could be clinging to the side, Kurt replied. Take us around. Kurt could feel adrenaline surging through his body, much as it had been since the details of the damaged craft came in from the South African Coast Guard station. Vessel Ethernet reports heavy flooding, the South African controller had informed them. NUMA Jayhawk, please assist. You are only rescue in range. Confirm vessel ID? Kurt had asked, hardly believing what he'd heard. Ethernet, the controller advised. Out of San Francisco. Seven persons known to be aboard. Including Brian Westgate, his wife, and two children. Brian Westgate was an Internet billionaire. His wife, Sienna, was an old friend of Kurt's. Years earlier, she'd been the love of his life. The message had stunned Kurt in a way few things ever did, but he was the type to recover quickly. He blocked out any thoughts of the past or fears of not reaching the yacht in time and focused on the task at hand. Get the spotlight on, Joe! As the helicopter circled the floundering vessel and dropped toward it, Kurt could see waves sweeping over the hull. The only saving grace was that the forward superstructure was being sheltered by the aft section of the ship. Joe turned on the spotlight, and the rain became a field of slashing lines. The effect was blinding for a moment, but once Joe got the angle right, Kurt could see the hull more clearly. He caught a glimpse of orange. There! Near the bridge. The pilot saw it too. He maneuvered the helicopter closer, as Joe unlatched himself and came back to operate the winch. This cable isn't designed to hoist people, he reminded Kurt. It tows a sonar array, Kurt said. The fish only weighs ninety pounds. It'll do the job, Kurt said. Now, release the tension. Joe hesitated, and once Kurt had looked down and gauged their position, he reached up and punched the tensioner himself. Before Joe could stop him, he'd dropped from the edge of the helicopter. Holding a mask to his face and pointing his feet straight down, Kurt hit the water at the top of a swell and plunged through it. For a long moment, he was bathed in the strange muted silence of the sea. It was calming and peaceful. And then he surfaced into the maelstrom. The swells were like rolling mountains, and droplets from the torrential downpour danced on the surface in every direction. Turning to the floundering yacht, Kurt began kicking hard toward it. Reaching the vessel amidships, he stretched for the rail. Before he could get a firm grip, a trough rolled by, and he dropped down along the side of the hull. He fought to stay in position, until the next swell arrived. It carried him upward until he was even with the deck. This time he quickly grabbed the rail and pulled himself aboard. He clambered across the deck, scarcely avoiding being washed overboard by another wave. He reached the bridge, where he found the windows smashed in. The orange flash he'd assumed to be a life vest was nowhere to be seen. Sienna! he shouted. It was useless against the wind. He peered inside. Several feet of water sloshed around. For a second he thought he saw a body, but the power was out, and in the darkness it could have been anything. He grabbed the hatchway door and yanked it open, forcing his way in. The vessel groaned ominously as it wallowed in the storm. Everything around Kurt seemed to be moving. He raised his arm and switched on a waterproof flashlight that was strapped to it. The beam played on the water and flared as it reflected off a wall of glass behind the bridge. In some corner of his mind, Kurt remembered reading about the yacht's design. Every wall in the upper deck was acrylic. It was supposed to make the inside of the vessel seem more spacious. If privacy was needed, they could be darkened with the flick of a switch. Another wave hit the ship and she rolled a little farther. Kurt found himself sliding toward that glass wall as green seawater began pouring in through the open hatch. Furniture, charts, life vests, and other kinds of detritus sloshed around him. Kurt stood and steadied himself. His arm came out of the water, and the light played off the glass once again. For a moment, it flared, blinding him, but as he adjusted his aim he saw a face on the other side. A woman's face framed in wet blond hair. A child floated beside her, a towheaded blond girl, no more than six or perhaps seven. Her eyes were open but unresponsive. Kurt lunged toward them only to crash into a glass partition. Sienna! he shouted. There was no response. The water was rising more rapidly now. It swirled up around Kurt's chest as he slammed his fist against the glass and then tried to smash it with a chair he found floating beside him. The partition held against two solid blows. And as Kurt reared back for a third swing, the ship rolled farther and the water reached his neck. The yacht was going over. He could feel

it. Without warning, the harness snapped tight around him, and Kurt felt himself being dragged backward. No! he shouted, only to swallow a mouthful of water. He was being pulled backward against a great current flooding into the bridge. It was like being dragged upward through a waterfall. For a brief instant, he saw the faces again, and then his mask was ripped off and the world went blurry and green. The cable jerked once more, pulling him hard and slamming his head against the doorframe in the process. Dazed and barely conscious, Kurt sensed he had been pulled free. But his progress was slowing. Some part of him knew the reason: Joe and the pilot must have maneuvered the helicopter to drag him out of the sinking vessel. They had managed to yank him clear, but the cable must have snapped, perhaps when he hit the bulkhead. He tried to swim, kicking feebly, but his mind was cloudy and his muscles were mostly unresponsive. Instead of rising, he was being pulled deeper, drawn down by the suction of the sinking yacht. He saw it beneath him, a gray blur retreating from the beam of his light. Thinking only of survival, he turned his gaze upward. Above him, Kurt saw a ring of silvery light. And then, feeling only simple fascination, he watched it close like the pupil of a vast discerning eye. With a jolt, Kurt bolted upright in his bed. He was drenched in sweat and gasping for air, and his heart pounded as if he had just run up a mountain. For a moment, he held still and stared into the darkness, trying to free himself from the grasp of the nightmare and the powerful emotions that lingered in the afterlife of a dream. The process was always the same, a quick realization of where he was and then a brief moment of uncertainty as if the mind was torn deciding which world was reality and which was illusion. Thunder rumbled outside, accompanied by a dim flash of lightning and the sound of the rain pelting his deck. He was at home, in his own bedroom, in the boathouse he owned on the banks of the Potomac River. Not drowning in the failed rescue attempt that had taken place months earlier and half a world away. Are you all right? a soothing female voice asked. Kurt recognized the voice. Anna Ericsson, as kind as she was pretty. A natural blonde with striking green eyes, the fairest of eyebrows, and a perfect little nose that turned up at the end. For some reason, he wished she was somewhere else at this moment. No, Kurt said, throwing the covers back. I'm far from all right. He climbed out of bed and went to the window. It's just a nightmare, she said. Repressed memories working their way out. Kurt could feel his head pounding, not just with a headache but at the back of his skull, where he had sustained a hairline fracture as Joe had pulled him free of the sinking yacht. They're not repressed, he said. To be honest with you, I wish they were. She was calm. Not one to respond to his agitation. Did you see them? she asked. Thunder crashed outside, and the rain rattled against the Arcadia door with renewed vigor. Kurt wondered if the rain had triggered the nightmare. Then again, he didn't need anything to trigger them. They seemed to come almost nightly. Did you see them this time? she asked again. Kurt exhaled in frustration, waved her off, and made his way to the wet bar in the living room. Anna followed seconds later, wearing yoga pants and one of his T-shirts. He couldn't help but admire how pretty she was. Even in the middle of the night. Even without a bit of makeup. He switched on a light. It pained his eyes for a moment but allowed him to pluck a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels off the tray. He noticed that his hand was shaking. He poured himself a double. You know it means something, she prodded. He gulped some of the whiskey. Can we please keep the psychoanalyzing to office hours? She was supposed to be his therapist. In the aftermath of the concussion, he had begun to have tremors and other issues. The nightmares came first, then memory problems and barely suppressed feelings of rage that those who knew him were right to consider out of character. In response, NUMA had assigned Ms. Ericsson to act as his therapist and counselor. In a fit of spite against those who were trying to help him, Kurt had spent weeks playing the role of a curmudgeon. It hadn't been enough to ward her off, and the two had ended up seeing each other on a more-than-professional basis. Kurt swigged some more whiskey and winced at the pain. He noticed a container of aspirin beside the liquor bottles and reached for it. How many nights this week had he repeated this same routine? Four? Five? He tried to add them up but couldn't honestly recall. It had become far too common. Have you been to work lately? she said, plopping down on the edge of his couch. Kurt shook his head. I can't go to work until you fix me, remember? You're not broken, Kurt. But you are in pain. No matter how much you want to pretend. You suffered a severe concussion, a fractured skull, and an emotional trauma all at the same time. For months, you displayed every symptom of a traumatic brain injury. And you're continuing to have some of them. Beyond that, you're a textbook case of survivor's guilt. I have nothing to feel guilty about, he insisted. I did the best I could. I know that, she said. Everyone involved knows that. But you don't believe it. He didn't know what to believe. Literally. Even Brian Westgate knows what you tried to do was heroic. Brian Westgate, Kurt muttered with disdain. She picked up on the tone in his voice, the one that signaled an uptick in his level of agitation, but she pushed anyway. He still wants to meet with you, you know. Shake your hand. Tell you thanks. She paused. Have you even

returned his calls? Of course he hadn't. I've been a little busy. She was studying him, nodding slightly. That's it, isn't it? What's it? You were supposed to marry Sienna but you drove her away. If you hadn't done that, she wouldn't have met Westgate. No Westgate, no yacht. No yacht, no storm. No storm, no sinking. And no failed attempt to rescue her. That's what you're blaming yourself for. Survivors' guilt was complicated. Kurt knew this. He had friends who'd come back from Iraq and Afghanistan. They'd done heroic things, more heroic than anything he'd done, and yet they blamed themselves for much of what went wrong. He took a breath and looked away. There was too much truth in what she'd said for him to argue, but for reasons he wasn't willing to explain it didn't help him much. He turned his attention back to the aspirin, pried the top off the bottle and popped a few of the pills into his mouth. He chased them down with more whiskey. Feeling his headache was now being properly treated, he turned back to Anna and tried to be more civil. Why does it matter? he asked. Why does it matter so much to you? Because it's my job, she said. And because like an idiot I chose to care about you as more than a patient. No, he said, correcting her. Why does it matter whether I see them in the dream or not? You keep asking about that. Why does that matter to you? She paused and stared up at him. The look was a mix of kindness and frustration. It doesn't matter to me, she said. It matters to you. Kurt stared. Based on what you've told me, the dreams are all the same, she pointed out. Except in half of them, you see this blond Caucasian woman and one of her children, while in the rest you see nothing but debris and empty life jackets. You can't even be sure the woman is Sienna. But either way, real or imagined, you couldn't reach them, the ship went down, and, unfortunately, they're gone. End of story. She tilted her head a bit. A look of empathy settled on her face. To the rest of the world, it doesn't make a difference because the outcome is the same. But these alternate dreams—these alternate realities—they must matter to you or you wouldn't keep having them. The sooner you figure out why, the sooner you'll begin to feel better. He could only stare. She was closer to the truth than she knew. I see was all he could say. She sighed. I shouldn't have come over, she said, reaching for her sneakers and slipping them on. For that matter, I shouldn't have kissed you. But I'm glad I did. She stood up and grabbed her coat off a rack by the door. I'm going home, she said. Go back to work, Kurt. It might do you some good. In fact, go see Westgate. He's actually in Washington. He's making some big announcement tomorrow on the steps of the Smithsonian. He's probably not the bastard you think he is. And it might give you some closure. She pulled her coat on, opened the door to the sound of rain on the driveway, then stepped through and shut it behind her. Seconds later, the engine of her Ford Explorer rumbled to life, followed by the sound of her backing out and up the hill onto River Road. Kurt stared at the empty space for a minute. With a gulp, he finished the drink and wavered on whether to pour himself another. He put the tumbler down. It didn't help much anyway. Instead of another drink, he walked through the living room and slid open the Arcadia door that led out onto the deck. The rain was relentless, beading up on the freshly stained wood like quicksilver in a lab tray. The river was covered in dancing droplets just like the sea in his dream. Why did it matter? He walked to the railing. As the rain soaked him, it seemed to draw some of the agony out. Far to the left he saw the red taillights of Anna's Ford as she drove off. Why did he try harder and harder to see the truth each time the dream started? He knew the answer to this mystery, it had come to him weeks ago, but he kept it to himself. He couldn't tell anyone, certainly not his therapist. Soaking wet, he stepped back inside, grabbed a towel to dry his hands and face, and dropped into the chair at his desk. Tossing the towel aside, he flicked on the computer and waited as the screen lit up. After typing in his main password, he clicked an icon that required a second password. It brought up a series of encrypted e-mails. The latest had been sent by a former Mossad agent whom Kurt knew through a third party. Money had been wired and received, and the man agreed to investigate a rumor. The e-mail read rather matter-of-factly. Can neither confirm nor deny the presence of Sienna Westgate in Mashhad or surrounding area. Mashhad was a city in northern Iran, suspected of being the headquarters of a new technical group working for the Iranian military. No one was certain just what they were up to, but the Iranians were believed to be desperately upgrading their cybersecurity and attack force. Embittered that the U.S. had somehow gotten a virus known as Stuxnet into their nuclear-processing facilities and caused a thousand high-priced centrifuges to spin out of control until they exploded, the Iranians were not only looking to protect themselves, they were planning to hit back. Part of that effort seemed to involve foreigners who'd been spotted shuffling in and out of Mashhad, sometimes under guard. Kurt read the rest of the e-mail. On good authority, I've been informed that three Western persons, two male, one female, were in Mashhad for some time. They were present for at least nineteen and possibly as many as thirty days. It's unclear if these individuals were captives or paid experts. Description of the female matches Mrs. Westgate in size and approximate age but not hair color. No photographs are available. Subject did not appear to be injured or to

favor either hand in daily activities. She was seen arriving and leaving the suspected defense building in northern Mashhad under light security. No coercion was evident. No mistreatment detected. All three individuals were spotted departing via small aircraft twenty-one days ago. No information has been uncovered to accurately suggest the destination of that aircraft or the current whereabouts or welfare of the persons on board. Kurt closed the file. Why did it matter what he saw in the dreams? Because, despite all evidence to the contrary, he had become convinced that Sienna was alive. And if she was alive, he could think of only one reason she'd be doing work for the Iranians: her children, Tanner and Elise. Someone had to be holding them hostage and using them as leverage against her. He knew it was a stretch of logic, supposition piled upon supposition. Considering the facts, it was irrational and unreasonable, and yet he felt it with every fiber of his being. Only the dreams made him doubt. If the empty salon and the abandoned yacht were the true memories, then he had reason to believe, to hope, and to trust his instincts. But if he had witnessed Sienna and her daughter drown and was trying subconsciously to rewrite his memories and replace what he knew with what he wanted reality to be then he was balancing on the very edge of madness, one misstep from tumbling into the abyss.

Western Madagascar, June 2014

The woman on horseback moved slowly, materializing like an apparition through the shimmer of the midday heat. Young and fit, in her late twenties, she held the reins of a spotted Appaloosa with quiet confidence as it trotted slowly along the sand at the edge of a muddy river. She wore black from head to toe, stylish riding boots, and a caballeros wide-brimmed hat to keep her pale skin from the sun. She guided the horse effortlessly, passing through a narrow section, keeping her eyes on the water's edge in case any crocodiles were lurking. As the gorge widened out, she came upon a group of zebu Brahman cattle with sharp V-shaped horns and distinctively humped shoulders. The cattle were part of her family's abundant wealth, a symbol of both power and plenty, though little care was given to them these days. Mostly they wandered unchecked, grazing on the vegetation that had grown during Madagascar's wet season. She put the cattle behind her and rounded a bend in the river. It brought her to an area of natural carnage. Weeks of rain had brought on heavy flooding, the worst this part of the island had ever seen. As the streams funneled together, the rushing torrents had grown strong enough to scour out huge sections of the banks, undercutting the land and tearing it away in parking-lot-sized chunks. Fallen trees had been swept downriver like toothpicks; those that remained lay in a tangle, their roots upturned. Farther on, she came to a section of shoreline that had once been a peninsula sticking out into a large bend in the river. It was now an island, cut off from the land and surrounded on all sides by the arms of the rushing river. She checked the horse with a slight movement of the reins and paused. The Mozambique Channel spread out ahead of her, its shimmering waters stretching to the horizon. Three hundred miles beyond lay the eastern shore of Africa. She'd come to this spot often over the years. It was her favorite place on the island, though for reasons others would find odd. Alone in this desolate place, she felt something different: a certain kind of sadness that she hid from the world. It seemed to belong to her like nothing else she possessed. It was part of her, an emotion she didn't want to lose. Unfortunately, things were changing. Events were unfolding beyond her control, and that melancholy feeling was being torn away piece by piece, like the small island eroding in the center of the raging channel. As she watched, a section of red clay the size of a house sloughed into the water from the front of the island. It slid down at an angle, like an iceberg calving from a glacier, and began to dissolve as it contacted the churning river. In its place she noticed something odd. Not more clay but dark, blackened metal. Flat and smooth like a wall made of iron. The churning water rushed past, relentlessly scouring the mud from it and slowly revealing more and more. A seam appeared and then another. She saw that the wall was actually great plates of riveted steel. A chill settled on her spine, a sick feeling rising in her stomach. Fear and curiosity mixed in a cocktail of emotions. She felt drawn to what she saw and afraid of it at the same time. An urge to cross the river and investigate came over her as if something or someone was calling to her, as if she were being asked to come to the aid of ghosts trapped beyond that metal wall. She eased the horse to the river's edge but the animal bucked and resisted. The current was far too strong, the footing too treacherous. One step into it and she and the horse would be carried away as easily as the large trees. The horse raised its head and neighed. Somehow, the act brought the woman to her senses. She backed off and looked toward the small island once more. She didn't know what lay beneath the reddish soil. And suddenly she didn't want to know. She only wanted to leave, to get out of there, before the truth was revealed. She turned the horse sharply, pulling its head around, and kicking her heels into its sides. Come on, she said. Yeah! With a willing surge, the horse took off, galloping away, heading back inland, back to the plantation, the palatial mansion and the life she knew. More storm clouds were gathering above the hills in the distance. Another flood would be coming. She guessed

accurately that whatever lay buried under that island would be gone before morning. SEBASTIAN BRVARD waited in the main hall of his opulent plantation house. Six feet tall, trim and muscular at forty-two years of age, with smooth olive skin and dark hair that revealed his ancestral origins in the South of France, Brvard was a handsome man in the prime of his life. His hair was thick and dark as mahogany, his eyes were lightly colored, almost hazel, and he sported a thin beard that ran along his jawline, trimmed daily by a personal barber. He carried himself with an air of confidence some would say arrogance that came from a privileged upbringing as master of the house. And while he liked the finer things in life, he wore no jewelry, save for a single gold ring given to him by his father. The house around him was a minor palace, built in the baroque style of eighteenth-century France. The grounds, arranged in terraces on the slope of the great hill, contained stables, ornate gardens, fountains, even a hedge maze that took up several acres on the second terrace just below the main house. The house itself was filled with splendor. As he walked the hall, he trod softly on polished Italian marble. Doric columns of granite rose on either side of the space, while extraordinary works of art lined the walls between statues and intricate tapestries. Like his home, Sebastian was clad impeccably. He wore a three-button Savile Row suit that cost as much as a small Mercedes. His feet were covered in silk socks and two-thousand-dollar crocodile-skin shoes. Completing the ensemble was a five-hundred-dollar Eton dress shirt with French cuffs, clasped together by diamond-studded cuff links. It was true that he had an important meeting later that afternoon, but he considered it a privilege to dress like a king. It helped those who met him know their station in life; it reassured those who worked for him that his path was a path of success. Near the end of the hall, two men who resembled him in their features waited. They were his brothers, Egan and Laurent. They knew of the importance of today's meeting. Are you really going to entertain Acosta's messenger? Laurent asked. We should have killed him for betraying us. Laurent, several years younger than Sebastian, was always ready for a fight, as if he knew no other way to deal with confrontation. Despite Sebastian's efforts to teach him, Laurent had never grasped that manipulation was more profitable and usually more effective than confrontation. Let me worry about that, Sebastian said. You just make sure our defenses are prepared in case we have to fight. Laurent nodded and moved away. In days past, the two had clashed, but Laurent had given way to his older brother's leadership completely now. What about all the explosives in the armory? Egan asked. Some of the munitions that Acosta left here are unstable. I have uses for them, Sebastian explained. Of the three brothers, Egan was the youngest and most interested in pleasing others. Sebastian considered it a weakness, but, then, Egan had been only fourteen when their father passed. He had not learned firsthand how to be hard. I'll make sure to give you an inventory, Egan said, and left by the main hall. With the two of them gone, the sound of high-heeled boots clicking against the marble floor turned Sebastian around. Coming down the hall toward him was the lithe form of the youngest member of the family. Calista was fifteen years his junior and as different from the brothers as night and day. Unlike them, she dressed as a commoner. Though with only half as much style, he thought. Today she wore black from head to toe, including a cowboy hat, which she took off and placed on the head of a priceless statue. Her short hair was dyed the color of coal. Her nails were painted darkly, and she had done her eyes with enough mascara that she resembled a raccoon. Hello, Calista, he said. Where have you been? Out riding, she said. And dressed for a funeral, I see. She put an arm around him provocatively and reached up to set askew his perfectly centered tie. Is that what's on the agenda today? He glared at her until she stepped back. Restraightening his tie, he spoke bluntly. It will be if Acosta does not return what he's taken from us. She perked up at that. Is Rene coming here? Your personal interest in him bothers me, Sebastian scolded her. He's beneath you. Sometimes a cat plays with a mouse, she replied. Sometimes she kills it. What concern is that of yours? Calista was a lost child. She didn't bond well with people. Not that she avoided human relationships; on the contrary, she was always entering into or leaving one. But from their father on down, all her relationships were a mix of love and hate, anger constantly set off by a crushing devotion for all the things she could never have. And once she possessed them, it changed. Sudden and cruel indifference was the usual response, or even a desire to cause pain and torment to that which she now controlled. How perfect, he mused, to have a beautiful little sociopath for a sister. It made her useful. Rene's disobedience is my concern, he told her. He's betrayed us. She seemed ready to defend her ex-lover. He took the woman to Iran as you asked, she said. She's done what we needed her to do. The Trojan horse is in place. The trapdoor link is active. I've checked it myself. Brvard smiled. Calista had her charms, one of which was her ability with computers and systems. At least they had that in common, for Sebastian was an accomplished programmer in his own right. But she couldn't see the big picture like he did. The Iranians are just one part of the plan, he reminded her. Giving them access does us no good unless she is back here and in our possession at the

appropriate time. Unless the world fears what we can do, they will not react as we need them to. She stared at him and shrugged, hopping up on a five-hundred-year-old credenza and swinging her legs back and forth as if it were a sideboard from a secondhand store. That piece once graced Napoleons summer retreat, Sebastian chided her. She glanced at the antique wood with its perfectly curved lines and ornate finish. Im sure he doesnt need it anymore. Sebastian felt his anger building but held back. We shouldnt have given her to Rene, she added, suddenly becoming the cold, dark version of herself again. We should have made a deal with the Iranians ourselves. Brvard shook his head. Rene is the front. His presence insulates and protects us. We set him up in business for that very reason. We need to keep that in place. But he needs to be reined in. Then we have to find a way to motivate him, she added. I suggest violence. Plenty of it. Really? he said. Why am I not surprised? Its all he understands. We are not blunt instruments like Rene, he insisted. We must succeed with style and grace. More to the point, we are artists. When we take what were after I know, she said, cutting him off, no one must know it was us. No, he corrected. No one must know it was taken. This was a point he thought hed hammered home. She sighed, tired of his lectures. You will never get the woman back from Rene until hes afraid. He may be a brute, but I tell you he lives in great fear and thats why he lashes out. You want her back, you will have to tap into that fear. Sebastian was silent for a moment. You might be right, he said. Come to my office. Renes messenger should be arriving any minute now. Twenty minutes later, a servant opened the door to Sebastians office. A guest has arrived, Monsieur Brvard. He claims to speak for Mr. Acosta. Did he come alone? He came with three men. They are undoubtedly armed. Show the messenger in, Sebastian said. And the others, sir? Offer them a drink from our private stock. Very good, sir. The servant bowed slightly and backtracked through the double doors. Moments later, a stocky man in tan cargo pants and a loose-fitting polo shirt came in. My name is Kovack, the man said. He spoke English with an Eastern European accent. He made uneasy eye contact with Sebastian and glanced nervously behind him at Calista, who stood with her back pressed flat against the wall. She didnt acknowledge him or move or even blink. Sebastian grinned inwardly. His odd little sister had a way of unnerving even the most hardened of guests. Where is Rene? Hes here and there, Kovack said flippantly. A very busy man. And why has he broken our agreement? The American woman was supposed to be returned to us after the Iranian exercise was over. Kovack took a seat in one of the chairs fronting Sebastians ornate desk and began to explain. We have discovered other buyers for her services. Who? Sebastian asked. Im not at liberty to tell you. Sebastian guessed the Chinese were involved, and probably the Russians. Both were known to be interested in cyberwarfare and using computer hacking as a weapon. Perhaps there were others. Under different circumstances, he would have set up a bidding war and sold the woman and the others to the highest bidder just as Rene was attempting to do. But he needed her back. No one else would do. No doubt aware of this, Kovack shifted in his seat. His new posture oozed superiority and arrogance as if he were ready to dictate terms in Brvards own home. His eye seemed to catch the box of Cuban cigars on Sebastians desk. These are most delicious. You dont eat them, Sebastian pointedly explained. But if you mean they have a wonderful flavor, then, yes, youre correct. With great calmness Brvard picked up the box and offered it to his insolent guest. Why dont you try one? Kovack reached out and plucked one of the cigars from the box. In the next instant, Calista appeared in the chair beside him. She moved quickly and startled Kovack. She didnt sit as much as perch on the armrest with her feet on the cushion. She reached down, took the cigar cutter from Sebastians desk, and toyed with it. Allow me, she purred. In a swift move, she cut off the end of Kovacks cigar. Sebastian almost laughed. How she loved that little guillotine. Kovack seemed to enjoy the attention. He smiled and brought the cigar up to his nose, breathing in the aroma. Do you have a light? Sebastian reached for a wedge-shaped block made of iridescent glass. It had sharp edges and looked vaguely volcanic. It held a butane lighter, partially recessed in one surface. Obsidian, Sebastian said. From Mount Etna. In a moment the cigar was alight. The rich flavor of the Cuban tobacco was soon wafting through the room. Sebastian let his guest enjoy the smoke for a minute and then spoke once more. Back to business, he said. What exactly does Rene want from me? He wants you to bid. In real money. There was a sarcastic tone to the comment. Real money? Sebastian said, his eyebrows going up. Kovack nodded. Hes arranging a new auction. Some parties have already been rejected. Their bids are too low. If you want her delivered back here, you will have to outbid the others or Mr. Acosta will have no choice but to move the merchandise to the place where it brings the highest profit. Despite his ego and pride, Sebastian answered quickly. Done, he said. It was foolish to quibble when billions were at stake. I dont think you understand, Kovack said, puffing on the cigar. There are many bidders. I doubt you will be able to afford the going rate. With that, Kovack exhaled a large cloud of smoke. For a brief instant it made a ring. Sebastian found his ire growing. Mostly

because Kovack was right. There was no way he could outbid the Chinese or the Russians or the Koreans, who were also rumored to want the knowledge the woman possessed. Acosta knew this. He was flaunting it in their faces. It was obvious that Acosta had broken from them completely now. He didn't know Brvard's plan, couldn't possibly expose it or threaten to duplicate it. But through simple greed, and stupidity, he was endangering a scheme three years in the making. A masterpiece of a long con. The longest of Sebastian Brvard's life and by far the most profitable, if it worked. The time for negotiations had ended. Brvard would not be drawn in. His will would be imposed. He smiled like a wolf baring its teeth. You have learned much about capitalism from Rene, he said. I compliment you. The tension eased a bit. Kovack offered a slight nod of the head. Your cigar seems to have gone out, Sebastian added. Let me relight it for you. Kovack leaned forward and put a hand on the desk to balance himself as Sebastian picked up the obsidian lighter once again. Instead of relighting the cigar, Sebastian stretched out his free hand and clamped a viselike grip onto Kovack's wrist. He yanked the man forward as Calista leapt from her perch, landed behind Kovack, and shoved his chair forward. Kovack was slammed against the desk, one of his arms pinned below the desktop, the other stretched and pulled toward Sebastian to the point where it felt as if it would be ripped from its socket. The cigar was long gone, fallen from Kovack's mouth, but Sebastian's free hand still curled around the heavy lighter. Kovack shifted his weight, trying to get in a position to use his legs, but Calista brought a letter opener up against his throat, pricking the skin. *Revue de presse* The guy I read (Tom Clancy) Cussler is hard to beat (Daily Mail) Delivers what it promises (Financial Times) The Adventure King (Sunday Express)