



PROLOGUE



PURSUED

FEBRUARY 15, 1898

Sweat flowed down the exhausted man's face, cascading in heavy drops off his unshaven cheeks. Pulling a pair of thick wooden oars toward his chest, he tilted his head and rubbed a soiled sleeve across his forehead. He ignored the pain in his limbs and resumed a slow but steady stroke.

The exertion alone didn't account for his perspiration, nor did the muggy tropical climate. The sun had barely cleared the horizon, and the still air hanging over Havana Harbor was cool and damp. It was the strain of pursuit that kept his pulse rapid. With vacant eyes, he stared across the water, gesturing with his head to the man behind him in the boat.

It had been nearly two weeks since the Spanish militia first tried to appropriate his discovery, forcing him to flee. Three of

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his comrades had already died defending the relic. The Spaniards had no qualms about killing and would gladly murder him to get what they wanted. He would have been killed already, except for a chance encounter with a ragtag band of armed Cuban rebels, who provided him safe passage to the outskirts of Havana.

He glanced over his shoulder at a pair of warships moored near the harbor's commercial anchorage.

"Al estribor," he rasped. "To the right."

"Sí," replied the squat Cuban seated behind, wielding his own set of oars. He was similarly attired in torn and soiled clothes, his face shaded by a weathered straw hat.

Together, they maneuvered the leaky longboat toward the modern steel warships. The old man scoured the harbor for threats, but he seemed to have finally eluded his pursuers. A safe haven was within his grasp.

They rowed slowly past the smaller warship, which carried a Spanish flag hung from its stern mast, and approached the second vessel. An armored cruiser, it featured twin gun turrets that protruded awkwardly over either side rail. The deck and topsides were painted a straw yellow, offset against a clean white hull. With lanterns still aglow in the dawn's light, the ship sparkled like an amber diamond.

Several sentries patrolled fore and aft, watching over the ship in a high state of readiness. An officer in a dark uniform appeared on a superstructure walkway and eyed the approaching longboat.

He raised a megaphone. "Halt and state your business."

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“I’m Dr. Ellsworth Boyd of Yale University,” the old man said in a shaky voice. “The American Consulate in Havana has arranged for my refuge aboard your vessel.”

“Stand by, please.”

The officer disappeared into the bridge. A few minutes later, he appeared on deck with several sailors. A rope ladder was lowered over the side and the longboat waved to approach. When the boat scraped against the warship’s hull, Boyd stood and threw a line to one of the sailors.

“I have a crate that must accompany me. It is very important.”

Boyd kicked away some palm fronds that concealed a thick wooden crate lodged between the benches. As the sailors lowered additional ropes, Boyd surveyed the surrounding waters. Satisfied as to their safety, Boyd and his assistant secured the ropes to the crate and watched as it was hoisted aboard.

“That will have to remain on deck,” the officer said as a pair of sailors muscled the heavy box to a ventilator and tied it down.

Boyd handed his rowing partner a gold coin, shook hands in farewell, then climbed up the rope ladder. Just north of fifty, Boyd was in strapping condition for his age and acclimated to the humidity of the tropics from working in the Caribbean each winter season. But he was no longer young, a fact he was loath to accept. He ignored the nagging pains in his joints and the constant fatigue he couldn’t seem to shake as he climbed onto the deck.

“I’m Lieutenant Holman,” the officer said. “We’ve been expecting you, Dr. Boyd. Let me show you to a guest cabin, where

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you can get cleaned up. Due to security concerns, I'll have to ask that you remain confined to your cabin. I'll be happy to arrange a tour of the ship later, if you like, and we'll see if we can get you on the captain's schedule today."

Boyd extended a hand. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm grateful for your hospitality."

Holman shook his hand with a firm grip. "On behalf of the captain and crew, I welcome you aboard the USS *Maine*."



A light evening trade wind nudged the *Maine* about her mooring until her blunt bow pointed toward the heart of Havana. The ship's sentries were thankful for the breeze, which alleviated the rank odor of the harbor's polluted waters.

The evening breeze also carried the nighttime melody of Havana's streets—the honky-tonk music from its harbor-front bars, the laughing voices of pedestrians on the nearby Malecón, and the clank of horse and wagons maneuvering through the narrow boulevards. The vibrant sounds were a painful reminder to the *Maine*'s enlisted sailors that they had been denied all shore leave in the three weeks since they had arrived. The ship had been dispatched to protect the American Consulate after a riot by Spanish loyalists, angry at the U.S. support of Cuban rebels battling the oppressive Spanish regime.

Boyd's cabin door shuddered under a loud knock and he opened it to find Lieutenant Holman, dressed in a razor-crisp blue uniform that seemed to defy the humidity.

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Holman gave a slight bow. “The captain welcomes your acceptance to dine with him this evening.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Please lead on.”

A warm bath and a long afternoon nap had rejuvenated Boyd. He walked with the confident gait of a man who had beaten the odds. He still wore his field clothes, now freshly laundered, to which he had added a dinner jacket borrowed from Holman. He tugged uncomfortably at the sleeves, several inches too short for his gangly arms.

They made their way to a small officers’ mess near the aft deck. In the center of the room, a linen-covered table gleaming with white china and silverware was occupied by the *Maine*’s captain.

Charles Sigsbee was a studious man with a reasoned mind, well respected in the Navy for his leadership qualities. Sporting round spectacles and a bushy mustache, he resembled a bank clerk more than a ship’s captain. He rose and greeted Boyd with an impatient gaze as Holman made the introductions.

The three men sat down at the table and a steward appeared, serving a consommé. Boyd ignored a small dog that clung to the captain’s side.

Sigsbee turned to Boyd. “I hope you find your accommodations aboard the *Maine* satisfactory.”

“More than adequate,” Boyd said. “I am thankful for your courtesy in allowing me aboard on short notice. I can’t tell you how beautiful the *Maine* looked when I first sighted her this morning.”

“I’m afraid we’re not configured for comfort or guests,”

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Sigsbee said. “While our presence in Havana is to affect the transport of Americans at risk, local events seemed to have calmed since our arrival. I must say, I was surprised at receiving a communiqué from the Havana Consul asking that you be welcomed aboard for transit back to the United States—with nary an explanation.”

Boyd sighed. “The local Consul is a family friend from Virginia who was kind enough to intervene. However, it is no exaggeration to say my life was in grave danger.”

“Lieutenant Holman tells me you are an anthropologist from Yale University.”

“Yes, I specialize in the native Caribbean cultures. I just completed a winter field school in Jamaica and made an unplanned detour to Cuba.”

The steward cleared away their empty soup bowls and returned with plates of broiled fish. “The crate that we brought aboard,” Holman said, “it was from your excavation?”

Boyd nodded.

“Perhaps,” Sigsbee said, “you’d care to show us this artifact after dinner and explain its significance.”

Boyd tensed. “I would rather wait until we get to sea,” he said in a low voice.

“How did you come to arrive in Havana?” Holman asked.

“I left Montego Bay on the steamer *Orion* a fortnight ago, bound for New York. But shortly after we departed, the vessel developed boiler problems. We were forced to limp into Cárdenas, where the passengers were offloaded. We were told we

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would be delayed at least three weeks while the ship was repaired. I decided to come overland to Havana in the hope of catching a packet boat to Key West. Then the trouble began.”

He took a sip of water, and Sigsbee and Holman waited for him to continue.

“It was the Spaniard, Rodriguez,” Boyd said, his eyes bulging in anger.

“Rodriguez?” Holman said.

“An archeologist from Madrid. He happened to be in Jamaica and visited our camp. Someone must have tipped him off to my discovery, as there he was, traveling aboard the *Orion*, watching my every move. It was no coincidence.” His voice quivered. “I have no proof, but somehow he must have disabled the vessel.”

The captain frowned. “So what happened when you landed in Cárdenas?”

“I was traveling with two students and my field assistant, Roy Burns. We purchased a mule and wagon in Cárdenas and loaded the crate and our belongings. We set off for Havana the next day, but while bivouacked that night we were attacked.”

His eyes glazed in a distant stare at the painful memories.

“A group of armed men on horseback assaulted us. They roughed up Burns and me pretty good and took the wagon. Then one of my students went after them with a knife. The fiends ran him through with a machete, then hacked up his classmate. They didn’t have a chance.”

“These were Spanish soldiers?” Sigsbee asked.

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Boyd shrugged. "They were armed and wore uniforms, but they seemed to be some sort of insurgent outfit. Their uniforms had no insignia."

"Probably Weylerites," Holman said. The extremist faction remained loyal to Spanish Governor General Valeriano Weyler, who had recently departed Cuba after a brutal reign subjugating Cuban rebels.

"Perhaps," Boyd said. "They were well equipped but appeared to be irregulars. We found they were camped in a village called Picadura. Burns and I were determined to recover the artifact and followed them to their camp. Burns started a fire to distract them, while I scattered their horses and retook the wagon. Burns caught a bullet in the chest. I had to leave him . . ." His voice trailed off in bitterness.

"I drove the wagon hard through the night, barely escaping their pursuit. At dawn, I hid the wagon in the jungle and foraged for food for me and the mule. I eluded their patrols for three days, traveling only at night on trails I hoped would lead to Havana."

"Remarkable that you avoided capture," Sigsbee said.

"Ultimately, I didn't." Boyd shook his head. "They found me on the fourth day. The mule gave me away with his braying. It was just a small patrol, four men. They pushed me up against the wagon and had their rifles raised when a volley sounded from the jungle. The Spaniards fell to the ground, cut down to a man. It was a band of Cuban rebels, who happened to be camped nearby and heard the ruckus."

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“They didn’t try to take the crate?” Holman asked.

“They were only interested in the dead Spaniards’ weapons. They treated me like a *compadre*, seeing, I suppose, that I was an adversary of the Spanish. They stuck with me until the edge of Havana.”

“I’m told the Cuban rebels, while untrained, are tough fighters,” Sigsbee said.

“I can attest to that,” Boyd said. “After their patrol was killed, the remaining Spanish contingent consolidated forces and came after us with a vengeance. The rebels constantly peppered and harassed them, slowing their advances. When we reached Havana’s outskirts, the Cubans dispersed, but one of them contacted the consulate on my behalf. Their best fighter guided me to the waterfront, acquired a longboat, and helped me reach the *Maine*.”

Sigsbee smiled. “Fortuitous assistance.”

“The Cuban rebels show great hatred to the Spaniards and appreciate the armed assistance our country is giving them. They pleaded for more weapons.”

“Duly noted.”

“Captain,” Boyd said, “how soon will you be departing Havana?”

“I can’t say, but we’ve been on station for three weeks, and the local unrest appears to have subsided. We have a commitment in New Orleans later this month, which I believe will still be honored. I anticipate orders directing our departure within the next few days.”

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Boyd nodded. "For our well-being, I hope it is soon."

Holman laughed. "Dr. Boyd, you needn't worry. There's not a safer place in Havana than on the *Maine*."

After dinner, Boyd smoked a cigar with the officers on the quarterdeck, then returned to his cabin. A nagging uneasiness gnawed at his thoughts. He wouldn't feel safe until the ship left the waters of Havana Harbor far off its stern. Somewhere in his mind, he heard the voices of Roy Burns and his dead students crying a warning from the heavens.

Unable to sleep, he climbed to the main deck, drawing in a deep breath of the damp night air. Somewhere near the bridge, he heard the chimes of a bell signaling the time at half past nine. Across the harbor, revelers were getting a jump on their Mardi Gras celebration. Boyd ignored the sounds and stared over the rail at the calm black waters below.

A small skiff approached the battleship, eliciting a sharp warning from the officer of the deck. The boat's lone occupant, a ragged fisherman, waved a half-empty bottle of rum at the officer and shouted a slurred response before turning the small boat away.

Boyd watched it angle around the *Maine*'s bow, then heard a metallic clink in the water. A small crate or raft was banging against the hull. The wooden object skittered along the ship as if self-propelled. Boyd looked at it, then realized it was being towed by the fishing skiff.

A knot tightened in his stomach. He looked up to the bridge and yelled at the officer on watch. "Officer of the deck! Officer of the deck!"

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A muffled bang seemed to originate beneath the ship, and a small geyser of water sprayed near the bow. Boyd felt two beats of his heart, then there was a titanic explosion.

The Yale professor was flung against a bulkhead as the front half of the ship erupted like an angry volcano. Steel, smoke, and flames shot high into the sky, carrying the mangled bodies of dozens of crewmen. Boyd shook off a pain in his shoulder as a rain of debris hammered the deck around him. The ship's forward crow's nest appeared from nowhere and collapsed in a heap alongside him.

Rising to his feet, Boyd instinctively staggered forward across the listing deck. His ears rang, drowning out the cries of sailors trapped belowdecks. All that mattered was the relic. Under the red glow of an inferno burning amidships, he staggered toward it. Somehow the crate had escaped damage and was lying secure near the remains of a crumpled ventilator.

A fast-approaching side-wheeler caught his eye. The steam-powered boat drew alongside the sinking battleship, turning briskly and slapping against its hull. Without making a sound, a trio of men in dark clothing leaped aboard.

Boyd thought they were part of a rescue party until one of the *Maine's* sailors, a machinist who had been standing watch, limped across their path, his singed uniform smoking. One of the boarders lunged at the sailor, driving a blunt knife into his side and tossing his crumpled body over the rail.

Boyd was too shocked to react. Then, his mind processed the meaning. The boarders weren't there to lend aid; they were Rodriguez's men. They had come for the artifact.

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The archeologist limped back to the crate and spun to face the attackers. A twisted shovel, flung up from one of the coal bunkers, teetered against a bulkhead. Boyd grabbed it.

The first attacker brandished a bloody knife that glistened under the light of the spreading flames.

Boyd swung the shovel.

The intruder tried to step back, but the water now swirling at his feet slowed his movement. Boyd tagged him across his cheekbone. The attacker grunted and fell to his knees, but his two companions behind didn't falter. They rushed Boyd before he could swing again, knocking the shovel aside. A heavy pistol appeared in the hands of one of the men and he fired point-blank at Boyd.

The bullet struck his left shoulder. The archeologist fell back, and the two men elbowed past him and loosened the ropes that secured the crate.

"No!" Boyd shouted as they began dragging the crate across the sinking deck.

He regained his feet and slogged after them on weakening legs. The boarders ignored him and hoisted the crate over the side and into the arms of several men in the lighter. One wore a low-brimmed hat to hide his face, but Boyd knew it was Rodriguez.

Woozy from loss of blood, Boyd sagged against the nearest man. The boarder, a short man with cold black eyes, grabbed Boyd's arm. But before he could shove Boyd aside, his face fell blank. A faint shadow crossed his face, and his gaze shot upward.

An instant later, the man disappeared under the towering

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mass of one of the *Maine*'s twin funnels, which had fractured at its base and collapsed like a hewn redwood. While the attacker was flattened, Boyd was only clipped by the funnel. But his leg got caught under the mass, pinning him to the now awash deck.

He struggled to break free, but the weight was too great. Held underwater, he fought for air, poking his head above the rising water and gasping great breaths as he pulled at his trapped leg.

Beneath him, he felt the ship lurch as the keel sought the harbor floor. As the forward fires licked at the ship's ammunition magazines, sporadic shots zinged around him. Then the bow began a slow descent to the bottom.

Feeling the vessel begin to plunge, Boyd strained for one last breath. His final vision was of the side-wheeler, the stolen crate wedged on its aft deck, steaming rapidly toward the harbor entrance.

Then the *Maine* dragged him down into the blackened depths.



PART I



MYSTIC
CURRENT

1

JUNE 2016

The squat wooden fishing boat had been painted a dandy combination of periwinkle and lemon. When the colors were fresh, they had lent the vessel an air of happy tranquility. But that was almost two decades ago. The weathering of sun and sea had beaten out all semblance of vibrancy, leaving the boat looking pale and anemic against the rolling sea.

The two Jamaican fishermen working the *Javina* gave little thought to her dilapidated exterior. Their only concern was whether the smoky engine would propel them back to their island home before the leaks in the hull overran the bilge pump.

“Quick with the bait while the tuna are still biting.” The elder man stood at the stern while manually deploying a long

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line over the side. Near his feet, a pair of large silver fish flopped angrily about the deck.

“Not you worry, Uncle Desmond.” The younger man picked up some small chunks of mackerel and slapped them onto a string of rusty hand-forged hooks. “The sun is low, so the fish still bite on the bank.”

“It ain’t the sun that’s waiting for the bait.” Desmond grabbed the remains of the baited line and dropped it over the side, tying off the end to a cleat on the gunwale. He stepped toward the wheelhouse to engage the throttle but stopped and cocked his ear. A deep rumble, like rolling thunder, sounded over the boat’s old diesel motor.

“What is it, Uncle?”

Desmond shook his head. He noticed a dark circle of water forming off the port beam.

The *Javina* creaked and groaned from the invisible hand of a submerged shock wave. A frothy ball of white water erupted a short distance away, spraying a dozen feet into the air. It was followed by a bubbling concentric wave that seemed to rise off the surface. The wave expanded, encompassing the fishing boat and lifting it into the sky. Desmond grabbed the wheel for balance.

His nephew staggered to his side, his eyes agape. “What is it?”

“Something underwater.” Desmond gripped the wheel with white knuckles as the boat heeled far to one side.

The vessel hung on the verge of flipping, then righted itself as the wave subsided. The *Javina* settled back to a calm surface as the wave dissipated in a circular path of boiling froth.

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“That was crazy,” his nephew said, scratching his head. “What’s happening way out here?” The small boat was more than twenty miles from Jamaica, the island’s coastline not quite visible on the horizon.

Desmond shrugged as he turned the boat away from the receding eruption’s epicenter. He motioned off the bow. “Those ships ahead. They must be searching for oil.”

A mile from the *Javina*, a large exploration ship tailed a high-riding ocean barge down current. A blue crew boat motored slightly ahead of the ship. All three were headed for the *Javina*—or, more precisely, the point of the underwater explosion.

“Uncle, who says they can come blasting through our waters?”

Desmond smiled. “They got a boat that big, they can go anywhere they want.”

As the small armada drew closer, the waters around the *Javina* became dotted with white bits of flotsam arising from the deep. They were bits of dead fish and sea creatures, mangled by the explosion.

“The tuna!” the nephew cried. “They kill our tuna.”

“We find more someplace else.” Desmond eyed the exploration ship bearing down on them. “I think it best we leave the bank now.”

“Not before I give them a piece of my mind.”

The nephew reached over and spun the wheel hard to port, driving the *Javina* toward the big ship. The blue crew boat noted the course change and sped over, pulling alongside a few minutes later. The two brown-skinned men in the crew boat

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didn't appear Jamaican, which was confirmed when they spoke in oddly accented English.

"You must leave this area now," the boat's pilot ordered.

"This is our fishing grounds," the nephew said. "Look around. You kill all our fish. You owe us for the fish we lose."

The crew boat pilot stared at the Jamaicans with no hint of sympathy. Pulling a transmitter to his lips, he placed a brief call to the ship. Without another word to the fishermen, he gunned the motor and drove the crew boat away.

The massive black hulk of the exploration ship arrived a short time later, towering over the *Javina*. Undaunted, the fishermen yelled their complaints to the crewmen scurrying about the ship's decks.

None paid any attention to the dilapidated boat bobbing beneath them until two men stepped to the rail. Dressed in light khaki fatigues, they studied the *Javina* momentarily, then raised compact assault rifles to their shoulders.

Desmond rammed the throttle ahead and spun the wheel hard over as he heard two quick thumps. His nephew stared frozen as a pair of 40mm grenades, fired from launchers affixed to the assault rifles, slammed onto the open deck and bounced about his feet.

The wheelhouse vaporized into a bright red fireball. Smoke and flames climbed into the warm Caribbean sky as the *Javina* wallowed on her broken keel. The pale-blue-and-yellow fishing boat was charred black as she settled quickly by the bow.

For a moment, she seemed to hesitate, and then the old vessel rolled in a faint farewell and disappeared under the waves.

2

JULY 2016

Mark Ramsey allowed himself a slight grin. He could hardly contain his sense of euphoria as he sped past the grandstand. The gritty smell of gasoline and burnt rubber tickled his nostrils, while the cheers of a trackside crowd were just audible over the roar of his motorcar. It wasn't just the sensation of racing on an open track that gave him joy. It was his leading position with two laps to go that thrilled the wealthy Canadian industrialist.

Driving a 1928 Bugatti Type 35 Grand Prix racer in a vintage-class oval race, he had been the odds-on favorite. The light and nimble French blue Bugatti, with its iconic horseshoe-shaped radiator, had been one of the most successful racing

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marques of its day. Ramsey's supercharged straight-eight engine gave him a healthy boost against the competition.

He had quickly separated himself from the field of assorted old cars, save for a dark green Bentley that tailed several lengths behind. The heavy British car, carrying an open four-seat Le Mans body, was no match for the Bugatti through the Old Dominion Speedway's banked turns.

Ramsey knew he was home free. Easing out of the second turn, he floored the accelerator, roaring down the main straight-away and lapping a Stutz Bearcat. A white flag caught his eye, waved by the starter atop a flag stand, signaling the final lap. Ramsey allowed himself a sideways glance at the crowd, not noticing that the pursuing Bentley had crept closer.

Braking and downshifting with the racer's heel-and-toe foot maneuver, he guided the Bugatti in a low arc through the next turn. The heftier Bentley was forced to follow higher, losing precious distance. But coming out of the turn, the Bentley cut a sharp line onto the backstretch and let out a bellow. Equipped with a Roots supercharger, which protruded from the front crankcase like a silver battering ram, the Bentley howled as its driver mashed the accelerator before upshifting.

Ramsey glanced at a dash-mounted mirror. The more powerful Bentley had closed within two lengths, its imposing blunt radiator filling the image. He held the accelerator down through the backstretch as long as he could, braking late and hard, before throwing the Bugatti into the final turn.

Behind him, the Bentley fell back as its driver braked earlier and entered the turn wide. Its tires squealed as they fought for

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grip while chasing the Bugatti through the turn. The Bentley's driver was no slouch. He was driving the big demon at its limit.

Ramsey tightened his grip on the wheel and muscled the Bugatti through the curve. His own late braking had sent him on an awkward line through the turn. Trailing his own brakes to hold his turn, he was angered to hear the wail of the "Blower" Bentley accelerating from behind him.

The Bentley was high on the track, but its driver had aligned its wheels to exit the corner. Ramsey dug hard through the turn, then was flat on the gas the instant he could unwind his steering wheel. The shrieking Bentley had almost closed the gap and was on his rear fender as they hit the homestretch.

It was a classic fight to the finish, pitting lightweight finesse against brute power. The Bugatti's 140-horsepower motor was a hundred fewer than the Bentley, but the British car tipped the scales at a ton heavier.

Both cars surged toward the 100-mile-per-hour mark as they stretched for the finish line. Ramsey saw the flagman wildly waving the checkered flag and he felt his heart pounding. The Bugatti still held the lead, but the Bentley was inching alongside. Racing fender to fender, the two ancient vehicles roared down the track, mechanical dinosaurs from a more elegant age.

The finish line approached and brute power held sway. The Bentley lunged ahead at the last instant, nipping the Bugatti by inches. As the larger car edged by, Ramsey glanced at the Bentley's cockpit. The driver appeared totally relaxed at the moment of victory, his elbow casually cast over the door sill. Breaking

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protocol, Ramsey charged ahead of the field as the entrants took a cooldown lap before heading to the pits.

Ramsey parked the Bugatti next to his customized luxury bus and oversaw his crew of mechanics as they checked the car and placed it in a covered trailer. He watched curiously as the Bentley pulled to a stop nearby.

There were no trailers or team of mechanics tending to the British car. Just an attractive woman with cinnamon hair waiting for the victor, sitting in a folding chair with a toolbox and a cooler at her feet.

A tall, lean man climbed out of the Bentley and collected a passionate hug from the woman. Pulling off his racing helmet, he ran his fingers through a thick mat of black hair that framed a tan and rugged face. He looked up as Ramsey approached and extended a hand.

“Congratulations on the win,” Ramsey said, muting his disappointment. “First time anybody’s taken me in the Bugatti.”

“This old warhorse found a burst of energy on the last lap.” The driver patted the Bentley’s fender. His sea-green eyes nearly matched the color of the car and burned with an intelligence Ramsey had rarely observed. The driver had the look of a man who lived and played hard.

Ramsey smiled, knowing full well it was the driver, not the car, that had beaten him.

“My name’s Mark Ramsey.”

“Dirk Pitt,” the driver said. “This is my wife, Loren.”

Ramsey shook hands with Loren, noting she was even more attractive up close.

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“I love your Bugatti,” she said. “Such a sleek car for its day.”

“Fun to drive, too,” he said. “That particular car won the Targa Florio in 1928.”

As he spoke, his team of mechanics pushed the French car into the back of a semitrailer truck. Loren recognized the logo, emblazoned on the side, of a red grizzly bear with a pickax in its teeth.

“Mark Ramsey . . . you’re the head of Bruin Mining and Exploration.”

Ramsey looked askance at Loren. “Not many people know me in the States.”

“I was on a recent delegation that toured your gold mine on the Thompson River in British Columbia. We were impressed by the environmental consciousness that surrounds the entire operation.”

“Mining has had a poor track record, but there’s no reason that can’t change. Are you a congresswoman?”

“I represent the Seventh District of Colorado.”

“Of course, Representative Loren Smith. I’m afraid I was out of town when the U.S. congressional delegation toured. My misfortune, I should say. What was your interest in the operation, if I may ask?”

“I serve on the House Subcommittee on the Environment, and we are examining new ways of managing our natural resources.”

“Please let me know if there is any way I can be of help. We’re always looking at safe ways to mine the earth.”

“That’s very good of you.”

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Pitt picked up Loren's folding chair and placed it in the rear of the Bentley. "Mr. Ramsey, would you care to join us for dinner?"

"I'm afraid I have to catch a plane to Miami to meet with some clients. Perhaps next time I'm in Washington." He eyed Pitt with a dare. "I'd like another go at you and your Bentley."

Pitt smiled. "Nobody has to ask me twice to get behind the wheel."

Pitt climbed in and restarted the Bentley. Loren joined him a moment later.

Ramsey shook his head. "You don't have a trailer?"

"The Bentley's as good on the street as it is on the track," Pitt grinned, gunning the car forward. Both occupants waved as Ramsey stared back.

Loren turned to Pitt and smiled. "I don't think Mr. Ramsey was too impressed with your maintenance crew."

Pitt reached over and squeezed his wife's knee. "What are you talking about? I've got the sexiest crew chief on the planet."

He collected his winner's trophy at the gate, then rumbled out of the Manassas, Virginia, track grounds. Passing the nearby Civil War battlefield site, he turned onto Interstate 66 and made a beeline toward Washington, D.C. The Sunday afternoon traffic was light, and Pitt was able to cruise at the speed limit.

"I forgot to tell you," Loren shouted over the roar of the open car, "I got a call from Rudi Gunn while you were on the track. He needs to talk to you about a situation he's monitoring in the Caribbean."

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

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“He called from the office, so I told him we’d stop by on the way home.” Loren smiled at her husband, knowing his disinterest was only a bluff.

“If you say so.”

Reaching the suburb of Rosslyn, Pitt turned onto the George Washington Parkway and followed it south along the Potomac. The white marble edifice of the Lincoln Memorial gleamed in the fading sunlight as he turned into the entrance of a towering green glass building. He drove the Bentley past a guard station and parked in an underground garage near a keyed elevator, which they rode to the tenth floor.

They had entered the headquarters of the National Underwater and Marine Agency, the federal department tasked with stewardship of the seas. As NUMA’s Director, Dirk Pitt oversaw a large staff of marine biologists, oceanographers, and geologists who monitored the oceans from a fleet of research ships across the globe. The agency also used ocean buoys, gliding submersibles, and even a small squadron of aircraft, all linked to a sophisticated satellite network, that allowed constant monitoring of weather, sea states, and even oil spills in nearly real-time fashion.

The elevator doors opened onto a high-tech bay that housed the agency’s powerful computer center. A quietly humming IBM Blue Gene supercomputer system was concealed behind a high curved wall that faced Loren and Pitt. Extending across the face of the wall was a massive video display, illuminating a dozen or more color graphics and images.

Two men were engaged at a central control table in front of

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the video wall. The smaller of the two, a wiry man with horn-rimmed glasses, noticed Loren and Pitt enter and bounded over to greet them.

“Glad you could stop by,” Rudi Gunn said with a smile. An ex-Navy commander who had graduated first in his class from the Naval Academy, he served as Pitt’s Deputy Director. “Any luck at the track?”

“I think I would have made the late W. O. Bentley proud today.” Pitt smiled. “What brings you boys into the office on a Sunday?”

“An environmental concern in the Caribbean. Hiram can tell you more, but there appears to be a pattern of unusual dead zones cropping up south of Cuba.”

The trio stepped over to the control table, where Hiram Yaeger, NUMA’s head of computer resources, sat pecking at a keyboard.

“Afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Pitt,” he said without looking up. “Please grab a seat.”

An ardent nonconformist, Yaeger wore his long hair wrapped in a ponytail and dressed like he had just staggered out of a biker bar. “Sorry to intrude on your weekend, but Rudi and I thought you might want to be aware of something we picked up on satellite imagery.”

He pointed to the top corner of the video wall where a large satellite image of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea dominated the screen. “That’s a standard photographic view. Now we’ll go to a digitally enhanced image.”

A second photo appeared, which overlapped the original

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with brilliant colors. A bright red band arced across the eastern Gulf Coast shoreline.

“What does the red enhancement indicate?” Loren asked.

“A dead zone, judging by its intensity, off the Mississippi River,” Pitt said.

“That’s right,” Gunn said. “Satellite imagery can detect changes in the light reflection off the ocean’s surface, which provides an indication of the water’s organic content. The seas off the Mississippi River Delta are a textbook dead zone. Rich nutrients in the river from fertilizers and other chemical runoffs create explosive growths of plankton—algae blooms. This in turn depletes the water’s oxygen content, leading to hypoxic conditions that kill all marine life. The area off the Mississippi Delta is a notorious dead zone that’s concerned scientists for many years.”

Loren noted the lingering bands of magenta that discolored the coastal waters from Texas to Alabama. “I had no idea it was so pervasive.”

“The intensity is fairly localized at the delta,” Gunn said, “but you can see the widespread effects.”

“That’s well and good,” Pitt said, “but we’ve known about the Mississippi dead zone for years.”

“Sorry, chief,” Yaeger said. “We’re actually focused a little farther south.”

He pointed to a trio of burgundy blotches that dotted the waters northwest of Jamaica. The patches were spread across an irregular line, extending past the Cayman Islands to near the western tip of Cuba.

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Yaeger tapped at his keyboard, zooming in on the area. “What we have is an odd series of dead zones that have cropped up rather suddenly.”

“What does the maroon color mean?” Loren asked. “And why do the spots get darker as they progress to the northwest?”

“It appears to be another burst of phytoplankton growth,” Gunn said, “but much higher in intensity than we saw in the Mississippi Delta. They were fast-forming but may be somewhat temporary in nature.” He nodded at Yaeger, who brought up a series of satellite images.

“This is something of a time-lapse view,” he said, “starting about three months ago.”

The initial photo showed no anomalies. A brightly hued spot appeared in the next image, then two more burgundy patches in the following photos. As each new dead zone appeared, the earlier spots faded slightly.

“There’s some sort of sharp impact that is gradually diluted but is soon followed by another outbreak at a different location. As you can see, there seems to be a pattern from southeast to northwest.”

Pitt eyed the multiple dead zones as they progressed. “What’s odd is that they are far from any landmass. They aren’t the result of pollution from river runoffs.”

“Precisely,” Gunn said. “It doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Could someone be dumping pollutants at sea?” Loren asked.

“It’s possible,” Gunn said, “but why would someone go to all these locations? A criminal polluter would likely just dump in one spot.”

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“What got our attention were the related fish kills and the apparent progression of the disturbances toward the Gulf of Mexico. We’ve found numerous media reports in Jamaica, the Caymans, and even Cuba, reporting large quantities of dead fish and marine mammals washing ashore miles away from the visible zones. We can’t say for sure there is a connection, but if so, the impact may be much more acute than appears on the images.”

Loren looked back at the view off Louisiana. “The Gulf Coast can hardly afford a new environmental catastrophe on the heels of the BP oil spill.”

“That’s precisely our concern,” Gunn said. “If these dead zones begin sprouting in the Gulf of Mexico at the intensity we’re witnessing here, the results could be devastating.”

Pitt nodded. “We need to find out what’s creating them. What do our hydrographic buoys have to say?”

Yaeger brought up a new screen, showing a global schematic. Hundreds of tiny flashing lights peppered the map, representing NUMA sea buoys deployed around the world. Linked to satellites, the buoys measured water temperature, salinity, and sea states, with the data constantly downloaded to Yaeger’s computer center. He zeroed in on the Caribbean, highlighting a few dozen buoys. None were located near the dead zones.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any markers in the wake of the dead zones,” Yaeger said. “I checked the status of those closest, but they didn’t reveal anything unusual.”

“We’ll need to get some resources on-site,” Pitt said. “How about our research vessels?”

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“The closest vessel of size would be the *Sargasso Sea*.” Yaeger converted the screen to show the fleet of NUMA-deployed research ships.

“She’s in Key West, supporting an Underwater Technology project that Al Giordino is leading,” Gunn said. “Do you want me to call him and reassign the ship to investigate?”

Yaeger rolled his eyes. “Al will love that.”

Pitt stared at the map. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

Loren saw the look in her husband’s eyes and knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Oh, no,” she grimaced, while shaking her head. “Not the lure of the deep again.”

Pitt could only gaze at his wife and smile.