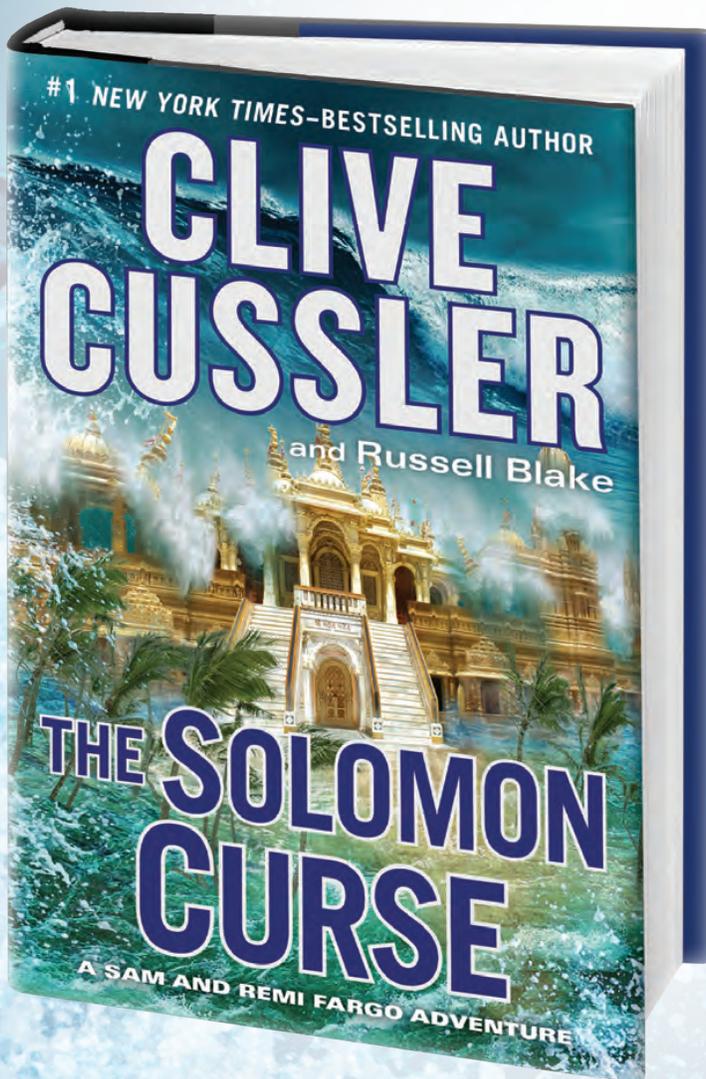


# CLIVE CUSSLER

## THE SOLOMON CURSE



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# PROLOGUE

*Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, one week ago*

Aldo pounded through the brush, crashing through the jungle, as he ran for his life. His breathing rasped as he pushed vines from his path, sweat coursing down his face, eyes searching for a hint of a trail. Branches scratched him, drawing blood. Ignoring the pain, he drove himself harder, listening for sounds of pursuit.

He stopped at the edge of a winding stream, a tangerine moonglow on its rippling surface, and debated crossing it to continue deeper into the rain forest or following it to the sea.

Then he heard them.

Dogs.

They weren't far behind.

He needed to keep moving. If his pursuers caught him, he was worse than dead.

Aldo's bare feet splashed in the stream as he chose to follow the water. A jagged stone tore his foot open. Ignoring the spike of pain, he

continued along the far bank, veering in and out of the water to throw off the dogs.

His moves were driven purely by instinct. Aldo was just seventeen, but tonight he'd die like a man if he was caught.

The thought fueled him: lose them or die. There was no third option.

He picked up his pace when he heard the snap of twigs behind him. Only a heartbeat away. Urging himself forward, caution abandoned, he fought to put enough distance between himself and his trackers to buy a slim chance at survival.

A native of Guadalcanal, Aldo never came to this part of the island—nobody did—so he had no special knowledge of the area, no sly tricks that would gain him an advantage. All he had was panic-fueled energy and the desperation of a cornered rat.

He heard them closing in on him.

How had he gotten sucked into this nightmare? It seemed impossible, yet he was racing for his life in the dark of night. A thicket of bamboo rose out of the darkness on his right and for a moment he considered trying to hide, his exhaustion arguing for it with every ragged gasp.

Aldo's side hurt, a sharp lance of pain below his rib cage, but he didn't allow himself to think about it. He had to keep going.

But where? Assuming he evaded his pursuers, where could he go that he would be safe? It was a small island. He could just return home, hoping that it was all a bad dream. But they would come for him before he could tell anyone and he'd just disappear.

Like the others.

Thunder roared overhead. The heavens let loose a deluge of warm rain, and Aldo smiled even as his gaze roved over the brush. The rain might throw the dogs off his trail.

A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and for a second his surroundings lit up in the bright flash. He spotted a faint game track in the

heavy foliage to his left and made a snap decision. The ground was spongy and slick from the cloudburst as he climbed the bank and followed the route parallel to the waterline. Now Aldo could clearly hear the dogs on his trail, all pretense of stealth discarded as they sensed his proximity.

Any hope he'd lost them evaporated as claws scabbled on the ground behind him, followed by clomping boots. Aldo willed himself to move even faster, now running blind, the skin of his feet shredded and bleeding.

And then he tumbled and slipped onto his back and down a slope on a blanket of wet leaves, gravity pulling him inexorably to the bottom of the gulch the trail skirted. He thudded to a stop, stunned, his momentum halted by a tree trunk. When he reached up and felt his skull, his fingers came away slick with blood. Gulping for air like a drowning man, he tried to orient himself as he fought the dizziness.

Aldo forced himself up. His ribs and left arm radiated pain and immediately he knew he'd broken bones. Thankfully, not the ones he needed to run, but the agony was enough to hobble him in the harsh environment. He looked around in the near-total darkness, his vision blurry from the fall, and spotted a promising opening between the vines. He moved into the gap and found himself on another track.

His pulse thudded in his ears as he drove himself to the limits of his endurance. His cracked ribs sent searing spasms through his chest with each breath. The sound of his trackers faded as he pushed himself to the brink, and for the first time since he'd bolted for freedom he dared hope he might make it.

Aldo's foot snagged under a vine and he went down. He uttered an involuntary cry as he hit the ground and his ankle gave way with a sickening snap. Tears of rage welled in his eyes, and then the world faded as he passed out.

When he regained consciousness a few minutes later, Aldo found

himself staring into a snarling canine's muzzle. His heart sank even before the hated voice of his pursuer drifted to him through a fog—the last words he'd ever hear, he was sure.

“Don't you know you can never escape on an island?”

A boot slammed into his temple before he could get his mouth to cooperate with his brain, to protest or plead or curse or beg for mercy. A starburst exploded in his head; the agony was excruciating. He tried to muster a defense, but his arms and legs were leaden.

Aldo's last thought was that this was some kind of mistake, a misunderstanding, and then the boot landed again, harder. His neck snapped with a crack, and Aldo's final living sensation was the tingle of the warm rain splattering on his face, and then he silently slipped into another world.

# CHAPTER 1

*Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 1170 A.D.*

Dawn's glow shimmered off the flat ocean as a column of islanders marched along a jungle trail, their voices hushed as they neared the coast and their destination, the new city said to have been built on the very surface of the sea.

At the head of the group was the chief holy man, decked out in a colorful robe in defiance of the ever-present heat. His skin was the color of jerky, and a sheen of sweat coated his face. One of the few to have already made the pilgrimage to the just completed palace near the western tip of Guadalcanal, he was now leading his flock to the site. He gazed back at the procession with satisfaction—he'd collected the most important men in the kingdom for the journey, many of whom were newly arrived from the surrounding islands, for the ceremony and festivities that were to last the remainder of the week.

Slivers of light filtered through the overhead canopy of tropical trees as the group moved along the faint game trail, surrounded on all sides

by dense jungle. The islands were untamed, and the majority of the Guadalcanal tribes lived within a hundred yards of the shore, avoiding the inland areas that abounded with predators both real and imagined. Legends of giants, ferocious creatures more than twice the size of a man that traversed the island through a series of underground caves and satisfied their thirst for human blood by attacking the unwary or the careless. Besides, there was no reason to brave the unknown in the interior of the island when a generous bounty from the sea could be had for the asking.

The shaman halted at the top of a rise. The miracle beyond now jutted from the bay—buildings rising from the waves where before had only been water. He pointed at the impossible spectacle with his staff, ornately carved with reliefs of deities, and murmured the king's name in a tone reserved for prayer to the gods. Indeed, the king seemed like he'd descended from heaven, so unlike ordinary men that he had become a legend in his own lifetime.

This—King Loc's greatest achievement—made all his others pale in comparison. Loc's vision of a series of man-made islets had been realized using local rock in the relatively shallow half-moon-shaped harbor. After the celebration, the buildings would be used as the royal residence.

The island's holy men considered the compound sacred, evidence of Loc's divine superiority. His builders had spent a decade creating it, with thousands of men quarrying and transporting the rock to the shore. Nothing like it had ever been seen, and the king had assured his counselors that its completion signaled the beginning of a new era.

Nobody doubted his word—Loc was a ruler who had transformed his island from a humble trading collective to a wealthy kingdom, an empire with untold riches legendary among his people. By organizing a primitive mining effort focused on locating gemstones and gold, he'd made the island's fortunes. What had been just another stop on a lack-

luster trade route had become a hub of wealth whispered about on distant shores.

Over the years, the islanders had grown to appreciate the value of their legacy. Traders from other islands and as far away as Japan came to exchange goods for the treasures the natives amassed. Gold was especially prized, and now there were whole tribes devoted to mining the precious metal in the mountains. Their existence had evolved into one of relative prosperity, all under the encouragement and watchful eye of their benevolent ruler.

The shaman and his followers shuffled forward and filled the clearing at the top of the hill, surrounding the holy man with murmurs of awe and disbelief. A stocky chieftain from the large island to the south moved to the shaman's side and pointed at a platform on the nearest islet, where a group of figures emerged slowly from an ornately crafted stone temple.

"Is that Loc?" he asked, squinting at the tallest of the men, whose tunic's gemstones and gold adornments glinted in the sunlight.

The holy man answered, "Yes. It is he."

"The temple is magnificent," the chieftain said. "It symbolizes the beginning of our thousand-year ascension as foretold in the prophecy."

It was widely held that Loc's reign symbolized the start of a golden era for the islands, a time when the kingdom would become the region's power center, revered by all, and prophesied to last twenty lifetimes. The oral traditions spoke of a powerful magic that would accompany the appearance of the "chosen one," the earthly embodiment of celestial power. It was believed that Loc was that being. The massive treasure he had accumulated only solidified his position, as if the earth were validating his dominance by offering its riches to its new master.

The chieftain nodded. Who could doubt that this was no ordinary man, given the strides he had made since taking the throne? Any skepticism the chieftain might have harbored vanished at the spectacle

before him. When he returned to his island, he would bring with him miraculous news.

A flock of birds flapped noisily into the sky, sharp cries piercing the morning stillness and reverberating through the rain forest. The shaman looked around at the assembly, a puzzled expression on his face, and then the ground began to tremble. The shaking was accompanied by a dull roar. His breath caught in his throat as the vibrations intensified, and then the earth began pitching like the deck of a ship in a storm as he groped for a nearby vine to steady himself.

A man screamed as the ground split beneath him and he disappeared into a steaming fissure. His companions scattered as more rents in the earth's crust tore open. The world tilted, and the shaman dropped to his knees, a prayer frozen on his lips, as he gazed out at where the new city had stood.

The temple and islet where Loc had been moments before were gone. The water had pulled back from the shore as though sucking out to sea any trace of the impudent king's puny attempts to conquer nature. What had taken ten years to build was erased in a moment as the earthquake intensified, and the entire coastline dropped into nothingness as the bottom of the bay collapsed.

The holy man's eyes widened in terror as the ocean rushed to fill the chasm that had been the shallow bay, and then as suddenly as the nightmare had started, it was over. The island lay still. The hiss of vapor from the new cracks in the earth's crust was the only sound besides the moans of injured and terrified tribesmen. The survivors were on their knees, looking to the holy man for guidance. His panicked gaze roamed over the sea, and then he forced himself to his feet.

"Run. Get to higher ground. Now," he cried, clambering up the trail as fast as his shaky legs would carry him. He had heard stories of moving walls of water from the elders of the dim past, when the gods of earth and sea had fought for dominance, and some primitive part of his

brain understood that when the ocean returned, sucked into the new trench that was even now filling, it would do so with a vengeance.

The men ran in confused flight to a safe elevation, but only a few made it. When the tsunami attacked the island, the wave was a hundred feet high. The surge as it crashed against the unyielding rock carried half a mile inland, wiping the ground clean like the swipe of the sea god's hand.

That night, the shaman and a handful of the survivors huddled around a campfire, well away from the shore, the ocean no longer their benevolent provider.

"It is the end of days," the holy man said with the conviction of the true believer. "Our ruler has angered the giant gods. There is no other explanation for what we endured. We have been cursed for our arrogance and all we can do is pray for forgiveness and return to lives of humility."

The men nodded. Their king had put himself on the same level as the giant gods and had been punished for his insufferable sin of pride. His temples and palace were gone, and he with them, erased as though he'd never existed.

In the following days, the survivors gathered and spoke in hushed tones of the day the gods' harsh justice had been meted out. The holy men gathered for a summit, and after three nights emerged from their sacred grove to counsel the islanders. The king's name must never be spoken again, and any reference to his kingdom, his temples to his own glory, would be erased from their collective memory. The only hope was that by banishing his existence from the island's lore, the giants would be appeased and forgive the islanders for his actions.

The stretch of coast where the city had once stood was considered cursed by those who lived through the disaster. Over time, the precise reason was forgotten, as were the events of the dark times that ended the island's prosperity. Eventually, the cove that looked out over the

placid bay became an encampment of the diseased and the dying, a place of suffering colored by a reputation for misfortune that grew hazier over the years.

Occasionally the king's name could be heard as a muttered curse, but, beyond that, his thousand-year legacy faded into obscurity, and within a few lifetimes Loc was only remembered in forbidden stories told in whispers by the rebellious. The legend of his divine palace and its riches diminished with each successive generation until finally it was considered to be folklore, ignored by the young, who had no time for the fearful stories of the past.

## CHAPTER 2

*Solomon Sea, February 8, 1943*

Gale-force winds churned the heavy seas into white foam as the Japanese destroyer *Konami* plowed southeast of Bougainville Island. The ship was running without lights in the predawn gloom as it bucked through the massive waves. Engines strained as forty- and fifty-foot breaking cliffs of black water slammed into the bow.

Conditions aboard were miserable. The vessel rolled ominously as it pursued a course well away from the calm straights to the west, where the naval force evacuating the last of the soldiers stationed on Guadalcanal was steaming through flat ocean.

The Yūgumo-class destroyer, with a long waterline and sleek engineering, was capable of over thirty-five knots wide open. But tonight it was crawling along at less than a third of that speed, and the power plants throbbed steadily belowdecks as the weather slowed its progress to a crawl.

The sudden squall had hit unexpectedly, and the exhausted and

emaciated soldiers being transported home were hard-pressed to keep their rations of rice down. Even the seasoned faces of the sailors were strained at the pounding they were receiving. One of the seamen moved along the cots, dispensing water to the soldiers, offering what limited comfort he could. Their uniforms were little more than rags now, their bodies in the final throes of starvation.

On the bridge, Captain Hashimoto watched as the helmsman tried to meet the chaotic swells to soften the worst of them. There seemed to be no rhythm or direction to the confused seas, and the ship was battling to stay on course. He'd briefly considered deviating to flatter water but had chosen to keep forging north toward Japan. His schedule allowed no time for detours whatever the reason.

The destroyer had been conscripted on a top secret mission under cover of darkness, capitalizing on the confusion caused by the Japanese's final evacuation of the island. The officer they had taken aboard had been deemed too important to the war effort to be risked in the main evacuation, so he and his elite staff had been spirited away aboard the *Konami*, which had veered east while the rest of the force proceeded on a more westerly tack, running the customary gauntlet from Guadalcanal to Bougainville Island.

Hashimoto didn't know what was so special about the army officer who required the dispatch of a destroyer for his transport. He didn't care. He was accustomed to following orders, often seemingly in conflict with common sense. His role as a Japanese destroyer commander wasn't to second-guess the high command—if the powers in Tokyo wanted him to take his crew to hell and back, his only question would be how soon they wanted him to leave.

A monster of a wave appeared from out of nowhere on the port side and slammed into the ship with such force that the entire vessel shuddered, jarring Hashimoto from his position. He grabbed the console for support, and the helmsman glanced at him with a worried look. Hashimoto's scowl matched the storm's ferocity as he debated giving

the order he hated. He sighed and grunted as another mammoth roller approached.

“Back off to ten knots,” he grumbled, the lines in his face deepening with the words.

“Aye, aye, sir,” the helmsman acknowledged.

Both men watched as the next cliff of water rose out of the night and blasted over the bow, for a moment submerging it before passing over the ship’s length. The vessel keeled dangerously to starboard but then righted itself as it continued its assault on the angry seas.

Captain Hashimoto was no stranger to rough weather, having guided his vessel through some of the worst the oceans could throw at the ship since her christening a year earlier. He’d been through two typhoons, survived every type of adversity, and come out alive. But tonight’s freak storm was pushing the limits of the ship’s handling and he knew it.

When morning came, he’d be faced with an even greater danger—the possibility of being hit by a carrier-launched Allied plane equipped with a torpedo. Night was his cloak, and usually his friend—with light came vulnerability and the ever-present threat of breaking the streak of good fortune that had marked his short wartime career.

Hashimoto understood that at some point his number would be up, but not tonight—and not from a little wind and a few waves. Could it be that the war was lost now that their occupation of Guadalcanal was over? If so, he would do his duty to the end and die a courageous death that would do justice to his rank and family name—that was a given—and he would follow the course of so many of his fellow combatants in the best samurai tradition.

The army officer they’d rescued from the island entered the bridge from below. His face was sallow and drawn but his bearing ramrod stiff. He nodded to Hashimoto with a curt economy of motion and eyed the frothing sea through the windshield.

“We’ve slowed?” he asked, his sandpaper voice hushed.

“Yes. Better to proceed with caution in this weather than race to the bottom.”

The man grunted as though disagreeing and studied the glowing instruments. “Anything on radar?”

Hashimoto shook his head and then braced himself for another jolt as a big wave reared out of the darkness and broke against the bow with startling ferocity. He stole a glance at the army officer’s face and saw nothing but determination and fatigue—and something else, in the depth of his eyes. Something dark that caused Hashimoto a flutter of anxiety, an unfamiliar sensation for the battle-hardened veteran. The man’s eyes looked like one of the classical illustrations of an *oni*, a demon, from his childhood. The thought sprang o mind unbidden and he shrugged it off. He was no longer seven years old and had seen real-world devils since the war had started; he had no need for belief in the mythical past.

He was turning to ask the officer what he could do for him when the ship shuddered like it had run aground, and then everyone on the bridge was yelling as alarms sounded.

“What’s going on?” the officer demanded.

“I don’t know.” The captain didn’t want to speak his darkest fear out loud.

“Did we hit something?”

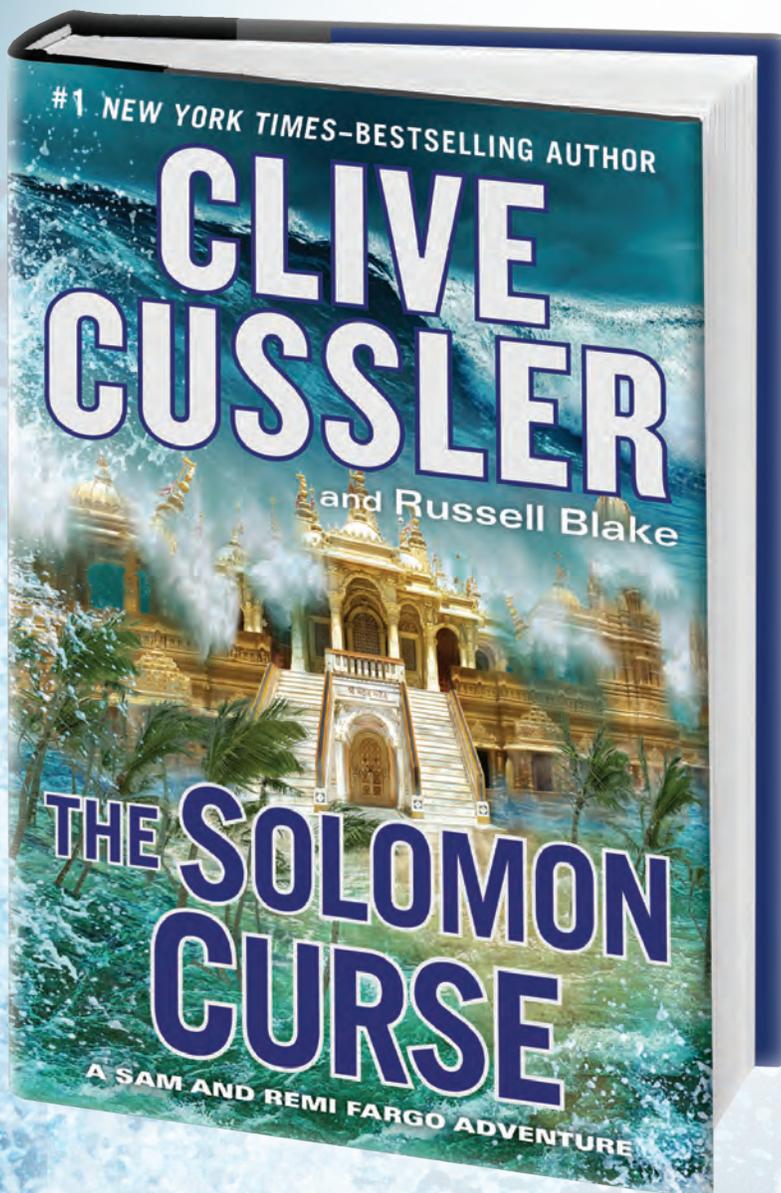
Hashimoto hesitated. “There’s nothing to hit. We’re in nine thousand feet of water.” He paused as a junior officer approached with a pallid face and gave a grim report. Hashimoto nodded and issued a terse instruction, then turned back to the army man. “I’m afraid we must prepare for an unpleasant possibility. I need to ask you to go below and follow the emergency instructions that are issued.”

“What?”

Hashimoto sighed. “It appears that a repaired area of the hull has split open. We’re going to do everything we can, but it’s uncertain whether the pumps can keep up. If not, we may have to abandon ship.”

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