

CLIVE CUSSLER'S DESOLATION CODE

Prologue

The Island

A man dressed in tattered rags sprinted headlong through a tropical rainforest. Drenched in sweat, bare feet pounding the uneven ground, he pushed through the broad green leaves and charted a path higher. Upward, toward a peak he couldn't see, but believed he would reach.

Finding a more open trail, he paused near a tangled bush covered in colorful flowers. His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. He wiped the sweat from his brow and smacked the side of his neck as a biting insect landed. Pulling his hand away revealed a smear of his own blood, which only partially covered the tattoo on his neck, displaying

numbers and letters in an odd code-like arrangement. The last two digits were an offset one and zero. Because of this he was called Deci.

Wiping the blood off, Deci glanced back into the foliage, looking for the others, who were falling behind. “Come on,” he shouted. “Keep moving.”

A group of younger men appeared. They resembled him in skin tone and facial features, appearing so similar to one another it was hard to tell them apart. Their clothes were as ragged and dirty as his, and fear streaked their faces.

They pushed through, looking to him. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

In truth he wasn't, but he'd been told he would find a trail, and here it was. He pointed along the path. “To the top. Go quickly.”

“And then what?” one of the younger men asked.

“Escape,” he said. “Freedom.”

These words landed flat with the younger men. They almost seemed confused. But the sound of dogs barking shook them out of their stupor. The hunters were coming, they'd picked up the trail and there was no chance of them losing it now. Not with so many of them

pushing through the trees, sweating like beasts of burden.

“Go, go, go,” Deci shouted.

The young ones took off again, followed at the last by another man, who was as old as their leader. He stopped and crouched near the bush. At a distance the two men appeared almost identical, but Deci’s sunken eyes, gaunt cheeks, and scared face showed how their lives had diverged.

“Brother,” the second man said. “They have us. We should turn back before it’s too late.”

“It’s already too late,” Deci replied. “Our only hope lies ahead.”

“On the cliffs? What are we supposed to do? Jump?”

“A way will be revealed,” the leader insisted. “She promised us.”

A look of irritation crossed the second man’s face. “*She* has never been seen. She’s just a whisper in our minds.”

“She gave us this,” Deci insisted, grasping a necklace that lay heavy against his chest. It was bulky and heavy and made of electronic parts and batteries. He wore it as if it were a talisman of great power.

“The necklace cannot deflect bullets,” the second man said, “or stop a dog from biting. And blind faith is for fools.”

“Then turn back,” Deci said. “But I will not let them do to the younger ones what they’ve done to us.”

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. They’d had this argument before. The deadlock ended as a gunshot rang out from below. Both men flinched and ducked and then turned for the trail together, sprinting up the path in bare and bloody feet.

“You’d better be right,” the second man said. “Or this is the only freedom we’ll ever know.”

The two men scrambled up the trail, ignorant of the tracks they were making in the dirt and the bloody footprints left on the steep rock faces. When they pushed through the last wall of tangled brush and arrived out into the open, they found themselves atop a rocky bluff, high above the sea. By now the sun was low on the horizon, the ocean waves shimmered in bronze and gray. A cool breeze drew the sweat off their bodies, while the sound of crashing waves echoed up from below.

The young men were staring.

“I see forever,” one of them said.

“How do we go?” another asked.

The leader looked around. He saw no sign of rescue. No sign of

help. *Maybe they were supposed to jump.*

He stepped to the edge and looked down. Piles of rocks made up a jagged shoreline two hundred feet below. They stuck out too far from the base of the cliff to imagine one could reach the water. Even if they could jump far enough to make the water's edge, they would die broken and battered after plunging through the shallows and hitting the rocks below.

Stepping back from the edge, Deci shuddered. He'd led them to their doom. He suddenly wished he wasn't the leader. Wished even more intensely that he'd never received the message or been given the necklace. And then he saw something that gave him hope. A knotted line had been anchored to the side of the cliff. It dropped down thirty feet, where a weighted end hung loosely. It looked as though the rope hung in front of an opening in the side of the cliff. A way out. He had been promised a way out.

He had no experience in such things, but he quickly saw the drawback to using it: if he could see it, so could the hunters.

He removed the necklace and placed it over the head of his brother. "Climb down."

His brother looked down at the rope and the rocks far beneath it. He shook his head.

“Go,” Deci insisted. “Lead them.”

“No,” he said. “You take them. I have no faith.”

Deci grasped his brother by the arm and drug him to the edge of the cliff. Reaching over, he managed to grasp the rope. He pulled on it to test the security, then placed it in his brother’s hands. “She promised a way out. This is it. Now go!”

Pushing through the jungle, a half mile behind the group of escapees, a tall Caucasian man with a bald head and narrow, hawkish eyes found himself enjoying the hunt. Dressed in khakis and a safari vest, he carried two pistols on separate belts and walked with a shotgun in his hands.

On the island he was known as the Overseer, but at previous stops in his life he’d been a big-game hunter, a trail boss in some of the toughest parts of the world, and a mercenary for hire to anyone with the right denominations of currency.

Here on the island, he found himself grinning as the dogs locked in

on the scent and pulled hard against their leads. He laughed as the handlers struggled to keep up, holding the animals back and hacking their way through the brush with machetes.

“Run them down,” the Overseer growled with a demented sense of glee. “If even one man escapes, each of you will suffer the punishment meant for them.”

If his men needed any more motivation, this was enough. They pushed on, climbing higher and moving faster as the foliage thinned. Before long they were tracking bloody, scuffling footprints, left by raw, uncovered feet. It made the trail easy to follow, but left the Overseer wondering about the course they’d chosen.

Previous escapees had always run for the other side of the island, fleeing the civilized but prison-like compound in hopes of surviving in the rocky volcanic wasteland. These men were taking a different path. One that kept them away from the dividing wall and its razor wire and cameras.

It was curious, he thought, but it didn’t matter much. Soon they’d be trapped between the dogs and the cliffside.

The dogs began yelping more intensely. They smelled the quarry

up ahead.

“Let them go,” the Overseer shouted.

The handlers dropped their leashes and the dogs shot forward. They rushed upward and vanished from sight, a lethal pack only a fraction removed from the wolves they were descended from. The Overseer picked up his pace, eager to watch the animals do their job.

He arrived at a small clearing to find the animals running in circles, sniffing the ground and then raising their snouts to howl at the sky. The trail had come to an end, but there was no one to be found.

A branch creaked behind him, and the Overseer turned in time to see a figure leaping down toward him. The barefoot man hit him, knocking him to the ground and rolling free. Both men jumped up, and the dogs spun around as if to set upon the attacker.

“Stay!” the Overseer shouted at them in a deep commanding voice. The dogs heeled and stood stiffly.

The Overseer aimed the shotgun at the dirty, bleeding man. “Where are the others?” he demanded. “Tell me now and I’ll show you mercy.”

The escapee was thin. The shredded clothes hanging on him like

rags. Living in the bush for weeks would do that to a person. He stepped back nervously, looking from side to side. From the waistband of his threadbare pants he pulled a homemade knife. It was nothing more than a length of thick fabric wrapped around a sharpened flint.

“You’ve made yourself a weapon,” the Overseer noted. “How interesting. We didn’t teach you that. Maybe you vermin learn faster than we’ve been told to expect.”

The Overseer tossed the shotgun aside and took a machete from one of his men. “Let’s see how well you use it.”

He stepped forward, but Deci threw a handful of dirt in his face. The Overseer squinted against the attack, suffering the sting of the grit with eyes open as he slashed with the machete.

It grazed Deci’s chest deep enough to draw a line of blood, but the mark was no more than a flesh wound. He had suffered worse than that in *the rooms*.

Deci glanced at the blood on his chest and shrugged it off. He circled to the right, and then back, holding the knife toward the Overseer and then pointing it at the nearest of his men.

“Don’t worry about them, boy,” the Overseer said. “Bring that

sharpened little stick to me.”

As if responding to the command, Deci lunged forward, slashing for the Overseer’s neck. It was a daring attack, but the Overseer had a lifetime of fighting in his past. He stepped sideways, leaning back to avoid the knife, and countering with the machete.

The heavy blade dug into Deci’s arm. This time he howled in pain and stumbled back, staring at the gash in his flesh. Blood was running red, pouring from the exposed sinew and fat.

“That’s just a taste of what’s to come,” the Overseer warned. “Now throw down your weapon and I’ll tell them you have promise. That you belong with us.”

No statement he made could have enraged Deci more. With his face twisted into a mask of hate, he lunged again, raising his wounded arm as a shield and thrusting the primitive knife toward the Overseer’s stomach. He managed to rip into the safari vest and draw some blood, but the Overseer shoved him aside and brought the machete down hard.

Deci’s hand was taken off at the wrist, and he tumbled to his knees. He scuffled away, retreating like a beaten animal.

Tired of the game, the Overseer looked at the dogs. “*Mord!*” he

shouted, issuing the command to attack.

Two of the dogs shot forward, charging at Deci without hesitation. They hit him nearly simultaneously and he rolled with the impact. Another roll seemed deliberate, and then all three went over the edge.

They heard barking and howls as the animals fell. It was followed by sudden silence. An eerie quiet spread across the clearing. The men seemed unsure what to do.

The Overseer moved to the edge of the cliff and glanced downward. Deci and the two dogs lay battered and broken a few feet from each other, splatters of blood marking their impact points.

Looking down, it dawned on the Overseer that Deci had sacrificed himself. More than that, he'd come up with a complex plan, made a weapon, led a mini-rebellion, and chosen to die for a concept he couldn't possibly understand: freedom.

They were learning things they hadn't been taught. And doing so faster than anyone had a right to expect. This, he would have to report.

"Fan out," the Overseer snapped. "Find the others. Look in the trees and the bushes. Look under every rock. They have to be here somewhere."

With new urgency, the men, and the surviving dogs, rushed into the tropical brush, desperate to pick up a new trail.

The Overseer lingered at the cliffside, silently impressed with Deci's choice to go out fighting. He gazed at the ocean. The sunlight was streaming through a line of clouds on the horizon, its beams visible in the contrast between light and dark. There was nothing else to see. No ships, no land, nothing but the endless, golden sea.

It made him wonder where they thought they were escaping to. This island, *the rooms*, the Overseer and the Providers—this was all they knew. All they had ever seen.

He briefly wondered what their primitive brains would think if they did reach the web of complexity, chaos, and madness that men called *civilization*. Probably, he guessed, they would wish they never had.

Howls and barking from deep in the brush interrupted his reverie and the Overseer reverted to the task at hand. He turned away from the sea and went back down the path, pleased to know that the hunt was still on.

Chapter 1

Reunion Island, Southern Indian Ocean

The island of Reunion, or *La Réunion* as the locals called it, sat in the tropics five hundred miles east of Madagascar and nearly two thousand miles due south of Saudi Arabia. A domain of France, it was a natural paradise as dramatic and beautiful as the famed island of Tahiti. It boasted stunning volcanic peaks, rainforests of brilliant green, and smooth, black sand beaches made from eroded lava that had been ground to dust by the waves.

Despite the appearance of a deserted tropical isle, Reunion was home to nearly a million French-speaking citizens. It drew tens of thousands of tourists every month and, according to some, nearly as many sharks.

Because of its location, Reunion acted like a rest stop on an oceanic path linking the waters of Australia and those of South Africa.

Marine biologists called the route Shark Highway, as it was traveled heavily by great whites, bull sharks, makos, and hammerheads. As a result, the little French island in the Indian Ocean had become the shark attack capital of the world, dealing with dozens of attacks every year and scores of fatalities.

Unhappy with the nickname their island had earned, Reunion's government took action, stringing nets around certain beaches to cordon them off from the sea, while imposing strict no swimming/no surfing rules outside the protected zones. The program reduced the number of attacks dramatically, eventually culminating in a full year without any fatalities.

It was a stunning success, but no one really believed the ocean-dwelling predators were gone. No one, that is, except an American named Kurt Austin.

Kurt was a tall man of around forty, with broad shoulders and a lean build. He was the director of Special Projects for an American government agency known as NUMA, the National Underwater and Marine Agency, which operated around the world performing scientific research, locating sunken ships, and working with other nations on

issues involving the sea.

In a joint effort with the University of Reunion, Kurt and his colleague Joe Zavala had spent the last six weeks in, on, and under the waters around Reunion, running a study on the shark population. Strangely enough they'd had a hard time finding any, traveling farther and farther out to sea in search of significant examples to tag.

Bait hadn't drawn the sharks. Recorded sounds of struggling fish hadn't drawn them in. Even buckets of blood and a floating tuna carcass they'd come across hadn't brought anything larger than a few juveniles to the table. It was as if the rest stop had closed its doors and all the adult sharks in the community had moved on.

It was a puzzling discovery, one which Kurt wrestled with even as he stood in the main departure lounge in Roland Garros Airport, waiting for the arrival of the long-haul aircraft that would take him and Joe off the island and away from the mystery. Had there not been other obligations waiting for them back in Washington, he would have canceled the trip home and stuck around in search of answers.

A tap on the shoulder broke his reverie. Turning to look, he found no one behind him, only a small metal pointer with four rake-like

fingers protruding from it. The telescoping device led back to his closest friend, Joe Zavala, who sat at a high-top table with a hefty club sandwich and a stack of pommes frites in front of him.

Having drawn Kurt's attention, Joe retracted the lightweight aluminum back scratcher and tucked it in his pocket. Kurt recalled Joe buying the device for five dollars at a kiosk the day they arrived. "I can't believe you got through security with that thing."

"*This*," Joe insisted, "is a useful tool. It's made my life easier in every way. For example, I didn't even have to get off my seat to bother you."

"Not sure that's a good thing."

Joe had short dark hair, dark brown eyes, and a fit build. He seemed to be perpetually smiling, as if life, good or bad, was always grand. He motioned toward the plate in front of him. "You want a bite of this sandwich?" he asked. "Number one rule of travel: never skip a meal, you don't know when you'll get another chance to eat."

Kurt shook his head in mild amazement. Joe was ten years younger than Kurt and several inches shorter, but he still looked like the middleweight boxer he'd been during his time in the Navy. Somehow,

he seemed to eat all day long and never gain a pound.

“I’m sure they’ll feed us on the plane,” Kurt said. “Besides, not everyone has your enviable, overactive metabolism. You know, we’ve been here six weeks, and I can’t actually remember a time when you weren’t eating.”

“That’s the key,” Joe said. “A constant supply of food keeps the energy level high and burns more calories.”

Kurt wasn’t sure the science held up on that, but at the buzzing of his phone he let it go.

Pulling the device from his pocket he tapped in a password and looked at the screen. A text had appeared, but there was no name, email address, or phone number attached to it.

The cynic in him figured it for spam. And if the phone had been an off-the-shelf, commercially available unit, that would have made sense. His friends were always complaining about robocalls and phishing texts, and the endless numbers of attractive foreign women who apparently wanted to spend time with them. But Kurt’s phone was a NUMA-issued device, specially designed to avoid any such pitfalls. All communications to and from the phone went through NUMA’s

satellites and a highly secured computer system back in Washington, D.C., which should have made it impervious to such intrusions.

As Kurt studied the message he sensed something else odd about it. Not only was there no sign as to who the sender might be, but the message wasn't complete. As he watched, additional letters were appearing one at a time, as if being keyed in by the world's slowest typist. When the last letter appeared, the message read cryptically.

I've sent them to you . . . Find them . . . Their fate lies in your hands . . .

The idea that he was looking at spam fell away. There was no link to click, no invitation to write back, no offer of any kind. Just the odd phrases and a lengthy string of numbers and letters that looked like a password or the product code for a computer program.

Making the entire episode even stranger, the message vanished right before his eyes. He searched for it in various programs and applications, but found no record of it. It was just gone.

Joe looked over and noticed the irritation on Kurt's face. "What's the matter? Can't figure out today's Wordle?"

"No," Kurt said. "Phone seems to have a ghost inside. Have you

been getting any weird messages?”

Joe shook his head.

“I need to call our tech gurus,” Kurt said. “Something odd is going on here.”

Before he could place the call, a commotion at the security checkpoint caught his eye. Three policemen and two men in suits had come rushing into the building, cutting the lines and then badging their way past the screening crew. Now on the airside of the terminal, they pushed through the sparse crowd of passengers and came directly toward Kurt and Joe.

“Excuse me,” the policemen demanded. “Excuse me, please step aside.”

Kurt put the phone away as the men came closer. “I’m sure this is about that back scratcher.”

The trio of uniformed policemen arrived first, flanking Kurt and Joe, as if to keep them from running off. The men in suits arrived seconds later. The leader of the two was a man of perhaps sixty. He had curly gray hair and wore a white linen suit. He was perspiring and winded. He stopped to wipe his brow before addressing them.

“Are you Kurt Austin?”

Joe turned away and took a bite of his sandwich. “I wouldn’t answer that,” he said under his breath with a mouth full of food.

“I am,” Kurt said. “And this is Joe Zavala, my associate.”

“Really?” Joe said, turning around. “You couldn’t leave me out of this?”

Kurt grinned at Joe’s pretend frustration.

“You two men work for NUMA,” the man in the suit said. “The American marine biology agency?”

Close enough, Kurt thought. “That’s right,” he said. “What can we do for you?”

“My name is Marcel Lacourt,” the man said. “I am the prefect here on Reunion. What you Americans would call the island’s governor. I officially request your assistance.”

“To do what?” Kurt asked warily.

“There’s been a mass stranding of whales on the far side of the island,” Lacourt said. “I’m being told there are a large number of other sea creatures swimming in the bay and close by offshore. More whales. And schools of fish. The tide is high right now, but it will change soon.

The volunteers are afraid more animals will strand themselves during the night.”

It was late in the afternoon.

“How many whales?”

“One very large and the others smaller,” Lacourt said. “I must tell you, this doesn’t happen here. We have sharks. We have whale watching. But we’ve never had a mass beaching of these magnificent creatures. We’re not equipped to deal with such a thing or even certain how to handle it. We’re hoping you can help.”

Nothing more was needed. While Joe wolfed down the last part of the sandwich, Kurt grabbed his backpack off the seat and nodded toward the exit. The flight back would have to wait.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We’ll make plans along the way.”

Chapter 2

It took fifteen minutes with a police escort to get from the airport to the beach. Along the way, Kurt gave Lacourt instructions and detailed a list of equipment that would be helpful. “We’ll need excavators that can get down to the water. Fifty-five-gallon drums, Sheetrock or metal panels we can use to line a trench, and plastic highway barriers, empty and easy to move around. We passed a truckload on the way to the airport earlier.”

Lacourt looked surprised by the list of requirements, but he didn’t question it. “Anything else?”

“Fire trucks that can tap into the main water line.”

Lacourt listened closely and wrote everything down on a small pad, then pulled out his smartphone and began to send out texts to those who were waiting on instructions. By the time the police convoy weaved through the gathering crowd, help was on the way from multiple sources.

Kurt stepped out of the car as it pulled to a stop. One look told him they were going to need all the help they could get. Standing on the coastal road, thirty feet above the beach, he could see dozens of stranded whales, with one full-grown sperm whale right in the middle.

Out beyond the waves, the bay was teeming with sea life, the water churned white and foamy as the animals thrashed around in a panic, colliding with each other and darting off in different directions. Despite the wide opening to the bay, none of the animals seemed interested in swimming away.

Kurt had never seen anything like it.

Joe was just as baffled. “Are they trapped?” he asked Lacourt. “Is there a reef or a sandbar out there?”

“No,” the man in the white suit insisted. “No coral on this side, just a steady drop to deeper waters.”

“Maybe they’re trying to get to their leader,” Joe suggested. “Whale strandings often involve a pod

of whales traveling in a group. A large family. If the leader gets confused and becomes stranded, the others may try to rescue it, or follow to their doom. Pilot whales are notorious for it, unfortunately.”

Kurt had been thinking the same thing, but as he studied the animals on the beach he noticed they weren't the same species. The sperm whale was a solitary traveler. A pair of juvenile humpbacks farther down might have been traveling together, and there were several pilot whales and several porpoises, but even they were a mixed bag of different species, including a spectacled porpoise with its black and white color scheme that resembled a killer whale.

“They are not one family,” Kurt said.

Joe nodded. They weren't marine biologists, but they knew enough to understand this was not a normal beaching.

Normal or not, they still had to get the animals off the beach and find a way to keep those in the shallows from joining them.

Kurt started down toward the beach. The group followed. “Which animal came in first?”

“The big one in the middle,” one of the policemen replied. “He was spotted an hour ago in the shallows.”

The sperm whale was on its side, its mouth open at an odd angle, its great weight deforming its normally majestic shape. Volunteers were throwing buckets of water on it, but beyond that, the crowd could only stand and stare.

“We need to move that one first,” Kurt said.

“You sure you don't want to start with the smaller ones?” Lacourt asked.

Kurt was playing a hunch. “For reasons I can't fathom, the others may have followed the first one in. If we get it back into the open water, those in the bay might leave and we can work on saving the smaller ones.” He turned to Joe. “What's happening with the tide?”

Joe had been checking the tide and wave conditions on the way over. “High tide in forty minutes.”

“That's not a lot of time,” the policeman said.

“It's all we have,” Kurt replied. “Either that whale is off the beach in forty minutes or it's never

going back to sea.”

They arrived at the damp part of the beach a few yards from the whale’s nose. Kurt looked into the animal’s eye and sensed it wanted their help. It was probably his imagination, but it didn’t hurt to think that one mammal could sense the calming presence of another.

Stepping away from the whale, Kurt gathered a group of volunteers around him. They included a member of the fire brigade and a construction foreman, who’d arrived with one excavator and insisted another was on the way.

Once Lacourt had made the introductions, Kurt began to speak, dropping down on one knee and drawing a diagram in the wet sand.

“This is the waterline,” he said, drawing a horizontal line. “This is the whale,” he added, placing a stick of driftwood down to represent the stranded animal. “We need the excavators to dig a pair of channels.” Using his fingers, he gouged out a pair of diagonal lines, leading from the surf zone to a spot above the whale. “One here and one here.”

“You don’t want to dig under or behind the whale?” the man in the hard hat asked.

“Can’t really get under it,” Kurt said. “It’ll just sink in deeper. Like spinning your tires in mud. Dredging the sand behind it will be helpful, but save that for the last, because the sea will fill it in almost as fast as you dig it out.”

“Okay,” the man said. “I’ll get my guys on it.”

“We have barrels coming over on a flatbed,” Lacourt announced. “What do you want us to do with them?”

“How many do you have?”

“A couple dozen, they came from the highway project.”

Kurt took some pebbles and placed them around the front of the stick, which represented the whale’s head. “Put them here,” he began, and then turned to the battalion chief from the fire brigade. “Fill them to the top and round up some strong volunteers who can be ready to dump them over when we need it.”

“I think I see what you have in mind,” the fire chief said, standing up. “We’ll be ready.”

“One more thing,” Kurt said before the man left. “How much pressure is in the waterline?”

“Twenty PSI at the hydrant, but running it through the truck we can jack it up to one-fifty.”

That sounded helpful. “Are you comfortable burying that line under sand and getting the nozzle under the whale?”

The chief pushed his helmet back. “Comfortable isn’t the word I’d use, but if you think it will help, I’ll give it a try. What’s the idea?”

“I want to create a slurry under the whale at the right moment,” Kurt said. “The biggest problem in moving this creature is that the sand compresses underneath it, which creates a lot of friction, but water doesn’t compress. If we can supersaturate the sand, it’ll be easier to move the big fella. As different as sliding on foam instead of forty-grit sandpaper.”

The chief nodded. “I’ll get my bravest guys to start digging a trench. How close do you want us to get?”

“As close as possible and as deep into the sand as you can go,” Kurt said. “Get the nozzle under the animal if you can.”

“What about all those teeth?”

Curved seven-inch teeth were visible in the whale’s open jaw.

“As long as you don’t stick your arm in his mouth you should be fine,” Kurt said. “On the other hand, if any of your guys don’t like the smell of fish, I’d leave them back at the truck. Whales have horrible breath.”

“Good to know,” the commander said, chuckling.

He went back up the slope to where the fire engines had parked. When he was out of earshot, one of the volunteers spoke up, a young woman who was part of the university’s marine biology department. “I don’t mean to be the voice of doubt,” she said. “But as you pointed out, the sand is porous. All the water you pour onto the beach will just sink downward and spread horizontally.”

She had raven-black hair, dark eyes, and pale, almost alabaster skin. Her lips were full and a dark reddish color without a hint of lipstick or gloss on them. She stared at Kurt with arched eyebrows and

crossed her arms, waiting for an answer.

“You make a good point, Ms. . . .”

“Chantel Lacourt,” she said, eyebrows remaining on full alert.

A whimsical look hit Kurt’s face. “The governor’s daughter?” If only he were a pirate looking for amnesty.

“She’s my niece,” Lacourt said. “And I am the *prefect* here, not governor.”

Both Kurt and Chantel laughed at that one, but the prefect didn’t seem to get the joke. Kurt looked back to Chantel, who was still waiting for an answer. “The water won’t sink too far, because high tide has saturated the sand below the surface. As for spreading sideways, that’s where the sheet metal comes in.”

Searching for something to represent the sheet metal, Kurt pulled out his wallet and emptied it of credit cards. He stuck them in the sand at an angle, pushing them down and under the stick.

“We jam the panels into the sand, making sure every sheet overlaps the one next to it.” His driver’s license and a library card made up the last links in the wall. He slid a fistful of sand in behind them for support. “We use the bulldozers to pile up sand behind them, and that way—”

“We create a sluice to hold all the water,” she said, finishing his thought. The eyebrows came down and she nodded approvingly. “Will it be enough to float the whale back out to sea?”

“‘Float’ is a bit optimistic,” Kurt said. “But with some luck, and a solid pull from one of the boats, we should be able to drag this big boy out into the bay. And from there, we can tow him to deeper waters.”

“Her,” Chantel said.

“What?”

“The whale is a female,” Chantel informed him. “Which is good because if she was a male she’d weigh another ten tons at least.”

Kurt had to smile. “Do me a favor,” he said. “Take charge of the placement of those metal sheets. I don’t have enough credit cards to explain it again.”

“I’ll get it done for you,” she said. “I’m good at bossing people around. Runs in the family.”

She moved off, heading toward the pallet of sheet metal and drywall. Only Lacourt and Joe remained in the circle.

“She’s trouble, that one,” the prefect said. “Always another question, until she completely understands. Ever since she was a kid.”

“There are worse traits,” Kurt said, then changed the subject. “We’re going to need a couple of boats. Any thoughts?”

“There’s a marina not far from here, just a few miles up the road,” Lacourt said. “I’m sure we could find something for you.”

“Take Joe. He knows what we need.”