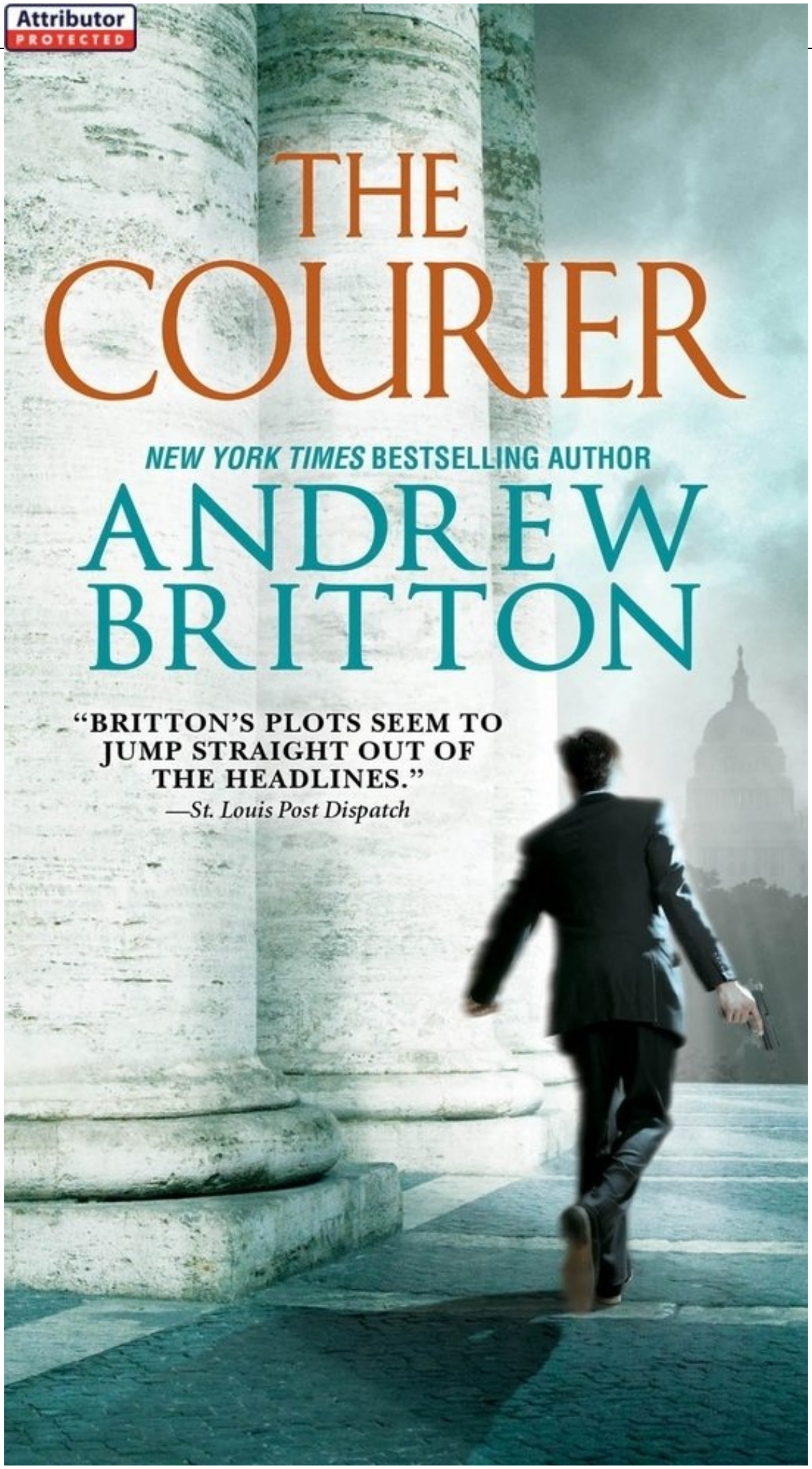

Also by Andrew Britton

The Operative

The Exile

The Invisible

The Assassin

The American

THE COURIER

ANDREW BRITTON

PINNACLE BOOKS
Kensington Publishing Corp.
www.kensingtonbooks.com

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE

ALTONA, GERMANY, 1915

When he was growing up in Altona, Germany, Karl Rasp owned a wooden boat he used to sail on th Elbe. It was a hand-carved replica of a steamer, and it had been given to him on his eighth birthday b his grandmother. He named it *Adelheid*, in her honor, his father having told him that ships wer always named for women. Each Sunday, if it wasn't raining, Karl and his father would go to churc have lunch at a busy café, and walk to the riverbank. There, after attaching the hook-eye at the front the vessel to a sturdy rope, the boy would watch it surge forward on the current, then twitch from sid to side when it could go no farther. While he watched the boat struggle, Karl would listen to his fath talk, between thoughtful puffs on his pipe, about dispatches he received at the telegraph office whe he worked. This was the part of the ritual Karl loved best. The messages had come from places arou the world, many with exotic names like Calcutta and Veracruz, some of which, the elder Rasp assure him, were filled with very dangerous people—just like the evil knights and deceitful lovers in th books they read and the operas his mother played on the piano while singing "arias." The stori sometimes frightened Karl, but his mother's voice made him feel safer, as did the confined, coz embrace of the tiny salon in their small flat right on the border of Hamburg.

After each excursion, Karl would take the boat home and repaint the hull—bright blue with a gree stripe along the top—to repair the ravages of the current. Without the paint, the hollow balsa woo would take on water and the vessel would sink. Karl also went to his father's old atlas and looked u some of those places, determining which of them were connected to the Elbe. From the stories an operas, he learned to be afraid of the Russians and the Britons—and marked carefully on his ov hand-drawn maps how they might reach Altona via the river, from the ocean.

Shortly before his tenth birthday, Karl decided it was time to let the *Adelheid* go. He had watched struggle for nearly two years and it was listing now, ailing. Besides, he wanted a larger boat, one th would sit lower in the water, command the current a little more. He wasn't sure what kind, but h would find one—perhaps a fireboat with working hoses—and put it on his birthday list. Witho telling his father, the short, gangly boy picked at the strands of the cord with a piece of broken bott he found in the empty lot beside the school he attended. He frayed it in the center so his father wou not be tempted to lunge after a strand trailing along the shore. Into the smokestack on top, Karl stuck rolled, handwritten note that read: *Russians and English: do not come to Germany. I, Karl Rasp, wi stop you*.

It was a chilly October morning when the ship set out on its final voyage. With his heart thumpin hard in his little chest, Karl watched as the tiny fibers strained and unraveled, like the fair little hai on his arm in the cold. Then, in a particularly strong current that tugged the boat left, then right, th rope snapped.

"Oh!" he cried, not in loss but in a sudden rush of excitement.

To Karl's surprise, his father did not run after it. Standing behind the boy in his old wool sweate his slender shoulders hunched forward against the wind blowing from behind them, he put a firm restraining hand on his son's shoulder, expecting that it was Karl who would give chase.

"Father—"

"She craves her freedom," his father said softly.

"But she is trapped—"

“The river craves her as well, and the river is mightier,” his father said. “Do not grieve. We had good run with her.”

Karl did not mourn the loss but his own thwarted plans. Now, who would warn the invaders to sta away from their shores? He watched the boat rise and fall and occasionally twist like a weather van on the rapid waters. The young boy watched until he could see her no longer, and then with a mist rain rising against their necks, they went home.

The next day, on his way to the schoolhouse seven blocks away, Karl walked along the river a always. Only this time his eyes were not on the other children or the automobiles or the horse car that moved through the cobbled streets. It was on the murky olive-colored waters. Nearly at th school, he saw something that caused him to stop short. His little boat was lying on its side in th shallows, on the rock, more under the water than above it; he had seen the blue and green colo glinting dully in the sun. The rope he’d sawed in two was tangled on a metal projection from a barg parked along the shore: it had snagged the toy boat and dragged the *Adelheid* backward. There was tiny rent in its hull and water burbled in and out. It reminded him of the ocean liner his parents ha been talking about two or three years earlier, the British ship that had collided with an iceberg an went down.

Karl was sad, but only for a moment. His ship was dead, but there was something peaceful, natura even beautiful about it. The *Adelheid* had ceased to be something belonging to people and was no more of a fish. He mentioned at supper that night what he had seen; his father smiled.

“So! It is still just resting.”

“Yes . . . we need to find a way to free her. Perhaps we can throw stones, sticks.”

“You do not understand,” his father said with a wink at Karl’s mother. “It has changed int something wonderful, like a caterpillar into a butterfly.”

“Father?” Karl asked, confused by that and by his mother’s smile.

“It has become an *Unterseeboot*—a U-boat.”

“A U-boat,” he repeated. The word, the mysterious way his father said it, sounded fascinating an strange; for a moment the boy forgot his loss. “What is a U-boat?”

“It is a ship that sails beneath the water,” the man replied.

“*Beneath*?” the boy said reverently.

His mind immediately conjured a version of the *Adelheid* with a tail and a fin made of metal like smokestack, with mermaids in the bridge and on deck. But after dinner his father took him to the des where he wrote his correspondence and, dipping a pen in ink, drew out a cigar-shaped object wi stick-figure men inside and an air tube running to the surface of a roughly sketched sea. He added pump inside, in the back, and explained that from what he had read the boats draw in air, the withdraw the tube and submerge. He sketched a propeller in the back and explained that, like a automobile, it used fuel to drive the U-boat forward.

Karl never thought of the *Adelheid* again.

In all their talks, in all their reading, in all his own studies, in all the classes he had sat throug Karl had never heard of anything like that. Immediately after eating, the young boy went across th hall to Herr Lang, a retired schoolteacher who sometimes helped Karl with mathematics and wh owned more than an atlas and a dictionary: he possessed an encyclopedia, an incredible *library* knowledge. Together, Karl and the old bachelor looked up “U-boats.” There was a little about how th French author Jules Verne inspired engineers with his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Se* in 1869, how the first working designs were tested later in the 19th century, and how the U-boats wer being deployed to protect Germany from the aggression of the English and the French in the Gre War.

Even though Karl had seen troops in the cities and batteries of guns beyond it, the idea of war w

foreign and terrifying. But underwater was a world Karl could imagine, *had* imagined, many times. H
had been to the two artificial lakes in Hamburg—the *Binnenalster*, the Inner Alster, and th
Außenalster, the Outer Alster. He had gone many times to the beaches at the North Sea. He ha
pictured the fish, the whales, the old sunken vessels and skeletal sailors he had read about. The wor
below excited him, and now he was transfixed by the idea that men could travel under that water. H
had seen an airplane once, and the idea of flying had never appealed to him. Humans could not fly, b
they could swim. In the air, your machine could malfunction. You could fall. Or someone could shoo
you down for sport or out of fear. Only angels flew, not men. But a man could not harpoon a met
whale or snare it with a hook. And if something did happen, you could come to the surface and flo
on life preservers or you could swim. Undersea, you could go farther than by air. You could travel t
those places with strange names, spy on them, even stop those who would seek to hurt you. That wou
make his father proud and his mother safe!

"But you know," said Lang, "the sea is a place of mystery. Unlike the empty sky and the void o
night with its stars, which we can study with telescopes and record with cameras, we cannot see ver
far in the water. We do not know what creatures inhabit the depths, what wrecks, what dangers."

Karl already knew those things, and that made it even more exciting. He knew, at that moment,
that young age, the moment his eyes had settled on the drawing in Herr Lang's volume, just what kin
of larger boat he wanted.

BREST, FRANCE, 1944

Captain Largo Kealey did not want to be here. At the same time, there was nowhere else he wante to be other than running Operation Blackbird, named for the color and insignia of the target.

He had already done the groundwork at Anklam, followed the trail here. Done some interrogating the perimeter of the facility—rough, ugly, but necessary. It had been an exhausting haul, and th Florida native needed a long rest.

Not long as in permanent, *Lord*, he thought, in case God was listening. *Just a couple of months, sir*

It was nearly dusk as Kealey, having picked his way through high grasses, his radio on his bac crouched behind a concrete bunker. Inside the aboveground structure was a pair of Germans doi exactly what he was doing: looking out to the sea through two narrow, pane-less slits in the concret The Germans were watching to see if the RAF appeared from across the Channel just as the stubbl jawed Marine watched for the *Luftwaffe*. By six p.m., if there was no air support making a test-run fl over, he would send the simple code "Doughboy" to his liaison in the town proper and then leave. If h saw enemy fighters coming after the vessel, he would send the code "Broadsword" and then leave. the first case, the mission would proceed in roughly thirty-six hours in a surgical formatio increasing the chance of hitting the target. If the latter, fighters would have to be dedicated to batt the German planes, leaving fewer to strike at the objective.

Two of those planes had been earmarked as "Stopgap 1" and "Stopgap 2." It meant that if th bombing run looked like it was going to fail, they were to kamikaze the target like Japanese flyboys. was *that* important. Compared to them, Captain Kealey's escape plans were like a day at the beac His survival, his wife's status as "married" instead of "widowed," depended on the two young men the bunker—one an *Unteroffizier*, a corporal, the other a *Mannschaft*, a junior enlisted man—doi their primary job so well that they were unaware of him, which meant reporting on the incomi planes; it also depended on the German soldiers of the 266th Infantry opting to safeguard the harbor the harbor, as they usually did, and not take up positions on this overlook, as they occasionally did. they came up the road behind him, saw him with the radio, that was where he would die.

The sun was just vanishing into the blackness to his right. He got as comfortable as he dared her He had chosen the spot so the glow from the radio would not be seen below, by spotters in the harbo He had memorized the route back since he would have to negotiate it in the dark. Escape should h easier than his belly-crawling approach. If this place was to be where he made his final stand, th mission his last, at least it was a responsibility that validated him and the life he had chosen.

A life? Largo Kealey was just twenty-two and it had only been three years since war broke out Europe and he joined the French Foreign Legion. He returned after Pearl Harbor and enlisted in th Marine Corps. Because of his reconnaissance work behind the lines in Poland and Austria, he was se to the Recruit Depot on Parris Island, South Carolina, for two months as an assistant training office After that he was shipped to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to join the Twenty-third Marines, whe he attended parachute school. That had always been his ambition since watching the gulls swoop a glide off Key Largo: to fly, not in a cigar tube but on wings.

Because his mother's side was Cajun, Kealey spoke French. That, his experience in Europe, and h flawless jump record brought him to the attention of the nascent Office of Strategic Services. The OS had been formed to coordinate Allied activity behind enemy lines—and France, now, was a ma target of their activities. Colonel Kent Gailey of the Division of Plans and Policies at OSS contacte Kealey's superior, seconding him to the Army through COMINCH, the chief of naval operation

commander in chief, U.S. Fleet. In that same communication, Colonel Gailey recommended
promotion to first lieutenant. Kealey got that, and then a bump to captain after a successful stint
Tangier, Morocco, where he worked recruiting informants while serving as assistant naval attaché.

Then came France. He parachuted into the Haute-Savoie region, which was home to more tha
3,000 French Resistance fighters who would form the backbone of any diversionary action to distra
the Germans whenever D-Day finally arrived. The collaborative effort with American, French, ar
British spies was code-named UNION and, against all odds, German troops and supply lines we
hounded right up until the landings. In mid-June of 1944, Kealey was called to England to prepare f
his current mission. That included a crash course in German so he could eavesdrop on the enemy
Anklam—which was actually safer than being in France because he spent the entire time in th
German town hiding by the Peene River. Now, he lived with a French baker and made daily deliveri
to the occupied port. Hiding in plain sight was the more difficult task by far.

No mission on the planet, perhaps no task in all the war, was more important than this one. The or
that rested almost entirely on his shoulders.

And now the day he had been preparing for was here. He refocused his binoculars from the air to th
sea. It wasn't just aircraft he was watching for. It was the vessel that was due to leave the submarin
pen that morning. He had been tracking the movements of the presumptive captain since his arrival.
had made sense that the Germans would give their most important assignment to their most decorate
U-boat commander.

It was a showdown Kealey had been both looking forward to and dreading. Kealey hoped that th
German high command hadn't done to him what the Allies had done to them: placed one of their to
commanders, General George S. Patton, in charge of a fake army to draw attention from the real arm
being readied for D-Day.

No, Kealey told himself as the last of the sun glittered red across the water. *It is too late in the w
for tricks*.

This was a project the Germans needed to succeed.

Karl Rasp was the man for the job.

As the Allied armies pushed south and west through France, the men who lived and worked at th
U-boat bunker in Brest were working around the clock to evacuate essential materiel, persons, ar
most important, the boats themselves from the sprawling facility. The Flotilla Secrets Act of 1941 ha
largely been lifted here after the D-Day landings, allowing crews and engineers from the ten differe
bays to exchange information, personnel, and equipment as needed to expedite the evacuation of th
facility.

However, that did not apply to the personnel working in Pen 10, where the U-246 was berthe
Korvettenkapitän Karl Rasp was about to embark on a mission of Blank 69 importance: nothing abo
its cargo, schedule, and destination was written. Everything was communicated verbally from th
Abwehr, German Military Intelligence in Berlin, directly to Korvkpt. Rasp. He told no one but h
second-in-command, Oberleutnantzur See Fritz Kuehle; if anything happened to Rasp once they we
underway, the new commander would tell his own second, Leutnantzur See Curt Vater. Tha
information was never to go further than the next officer or petty officer in succession. With the cre
of forty-five traveled the sole hope for Germany to win the war, but secrecy was the key to th
mission. If the men themselves knew what was onboard, some of them might become distracted-
even afraid—and there were few things that could frighten men who had seen so much since the vess
was commissioned in October, 1941.

It was shortly after dusk when Rasp took his place on the conning tower, just after Helm, the ant

aircraft gunner, took his position aft of the tower. If the ship were to be attacked, its captain wa protected.

His crusher-style cap was pulled low and tight against the damp wind that swept from the sea, i brim tugged low to shield his eyes from the glare of the lights. The brutes were affixed to th underside of the ceiling, which was concrete 6.2 meters thick. The lights shone directly down on th U-boat, stern to stern, with virtually no bleed into the water. The illumination was efficient and it wa safe: to strike the target, an aircraft would have to fly directly into the boat's guns for half a kilomete No Allied plane could survive that assault, especially if the other U-boats joined in the defense.

Rasp was dressed in a leather jacket for warmth, zippered over his two-piece navy blue uniform. H was squinting through the glare, watching for the arrival of the convoy from Haigerloch. They ha taken a route that carried them in a long, looping journey to the south; Berlin did not want the running into advance units from the US VIII and XV Corps, among the few that were pushing sou instead of east to Paris. High Command had run the risk of fielding the three trucks without air cove presumably, Allied spotters and even the occasional aircraft were scouting for trouble spots, and squadron of Messerschmitts would have attracted their attention.

Rasp hooked back the jacket sleeve and glanced at the illuminated face of his watch. The truck were due in less than two minutes. The last radio check, from Lorient, had it precisely on time.

That validated the U-boat philosophy, Rasp reflected. *Travel under the surface and they will lear of you when it is too late.*

His gloved hands gripped the iron rail that had been freshly scraped of rust and repainted. H sucked down the clean air, if breaths tinged with sea salt mingled with the heavy odor of diesel fu could be called fresh. For someone who lived on recycled air, it was close enough. He stood there an thought about the cargo they were to carry. It scared him, too. He and his crew understood ordnanc They knew how to stalk and sink ships. They were experts at transporting fifth columnists and puttin them ashore. They were masters at decoy, using themselves as bait to draw destroyers or aircraft in position for counterattack.

But this—

The officer didn't see the headlights of the lead truck because they were swallowed in the glare the overheard arcs. But he heard the rumble of the diesel engines. They stood out among the squeakin of gears and pulleys, the hum of transformers, the whine of drills, the sputtering of screws under th surface, the slap of the water on the hull, noises to which he'd grown accustomed during the three day they had been here. In a U-boat, one's survival often depended on noticing sounds that were out of th ordinary, from the hiss of a leaking pipe to the hum of an approaching vessel. Though it was the lac of sound that was most unforgettable: the awful silence of every hand, of the shutdown of ever unnecessary system, that anticipated the explosion of a depth charge.

The vehicles were all three-ton Opel "Blitz" trucks, painted in camouflage green with matchin canvas backs. These were the later versions with tires, not the original, treaded Maultiers meant f rapid movement through field and wood. On this mission, speed was essential, and aerial scouts ha determined that the road conditions were satisfactory.

Rasp swung over the ladder and climbed to the deck. He jumped from there to the concrete pier. the cargo worried him, the importance of the mission was an effective counterbalance. Succeed an the Reich could be saved. Fail—

No. The reaction was instant, emphatic. But Rasp had never failed. Not in his resolve to join th German navy, not in his determination to be assigned to a U-boat crew, not in his rapid rise from *Maschinist*, a motorman responsible for maintaining the engines, to an *Electro Obermaschinist*, chief petty officer who looked after the electric motors and batteries, and then through the offic ranks, nor in sinking more enemy vessels than any other U-boat commander. It had been a rewardin

seventeen years. Rasp had his differences with the Reich, though he never articulated them. Hitler ha raised Germany from the ruins of the First World War, a war that had cost him his father. Though h was in his thirties, telegraph operators were needed at the front and they had sent that loving man France shortly after his son's tenth birthday. He was killed when an artillery shell made a direct hit o his trench. His mother went to work as a typist for the local newspaper, then as a secretary for one the first offices of the German Workers Party in 1919—the group that evolved into the Nation Socialist movement. She encouraged her son's military career, not that he needed the push. Sh wanted him to avenge his father's death, to punish the oppressors, to destroy those who sought to twi the German character into something weak and decadent.

The Russians and the British, whom he already disliked. Now the Americans. No, a push had n been required.

The convoy stopped at the inner mouth of Pen 10, just twenty meters from the gently rocking pro of the U-boat. A complement of eight armed guards surrounded the vehicles. Rasp went directly to th second truck. His contact was a civilian, Professor Paul Dammann, who would identify himself with single word. That word had been radioed to Rasp on the submarine just an hour before fro *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the Armed Forces High Command in Berlin. It had been given Professor Dammann when he left. The OKW had also given Rasp one additional instruction.

A slender young man in a white overcoat and black fedora stepped from the back of the truck. H was followed by two brawny soldiers. They lowered a wooden crate from under the canvas and carri it between them. It was about the size of a steamer trunk and was supported by two strong leath handles.

Rasp was the only one standing on the pier, and Dammann went up to him. He examined th chevron of rank on the officer's cap. Then his pale blue eyes drifted to the brown eyes of th commander.

"Captain Rasp?"

Rasp nodded.

"I have been instructed to say nothing," Dammann said.

"Nothing" was correct. Now it was Rasp's turn.

"Professor Dammann, I have been instructed to ask for the item Obergruppenführer Holtz gave yo when you left his office," Rasp said.

The scientist seemed puzzled, but only for an instant. He smiled and reached into the pocket of h overcoat. He handed Rasp a silver *Reichsmark*.

"It was for good luck on my journey," Dammann said. "I agree, though, it is fitting you should hav it."

It wasn't for that, though Rasp didn't bother telling him so. It was for identification. Had Damman been captured and replaced en route, the package stolen, the impersonator would not have known wh to give Rasp.

The soldiers brought the heavy crate to the deck, where two of Rasp's crew took charge of it. With bit of effort and more hands—two men on top, two on the bottom—the object was lifted to the top the tower. It had to be turned on its side in order to lower it through the hatch, though Damman assured the captain that was all right.

"The item is secure," he said.

Physically, Rasp thought. On his last leave, right before the Allied Invasion, when he first hear whisperings of this project—without knowing that he would ever be involved in its potential salvatio —he read from a book in the library he had purchased from Herr Lang. The object itself was n fragile. The risk, the danger, was what could not be seen.

Once the crate was inside and safely stowed in the captain's small aft cabin, Dammann nodded, lit

cigarette, uttered a small but heartfelt *"Heil Hitler"*—which Rasp returned—then offered the capta
his hand.

"I will await you on the other side," Dammann said.

Rasp gave him a little smile, then motioned to the Head of Security that it was all right for th
convoy to leave. The trucks would head for the airfield at Lannion, a hundred kilometers to th
northeast. From there, the scientist would fly to their destination at Bornholm, Denmark. If somethin
happened to the U-boat, the OKW did not want to lose their *wunderkind* physicist along with h
creation. If Dammann were lost, there were others in Denmark who could continue his work. Tho
concerns were the reason the OKW staged the mission outside Germany. The logical port from whic
to disembark was Kiel, just a short run across the Kiel Bay to Denmark. But military intelligen
believed the base had been infiltrated; a similar operation, with an empty chest, was being conducte
with the U-70 in case the Allies were watching.

The guards withdrew from the trucks, the men boarded them, and Rasp returned to the conni
tower. When the hands ashore had released the two cables on each side that held the U-boat secure
in the pen, Rasp picked up the radio handset and gave the order to leave port. Steuermann von Harbo
on the helm, knew the order was twofold: he was to back the U-boat from its berth and immediate
submerge, since they would no longer be protected by the concrete roof. By the time they cleared th
pen, they would be underwater.

Rasp had entered the hatch immediately after the order was acknowledged. Hooking one arm on th
inside ladder, he pulled the iron cover down and secured it with clockwise turns of the wheel. Th
officer hurried down the seven metal rungs, the thump of his hard-rubber-soled shoes lost in th
surrounding rush as the sea closed in around them. He remembered how it had hurt the first time h
had heard that sound from in here, the combination of the noise and the immediate change in pressur
That was before he had learned to swallow, hard, right before submerging.

The sounds of both men and machine were heightened underwater. Rasp had expected that when h
was assigned to his first U-boat, the Type IIB U-120, with just twenty-five officers and seame
aboard. Using an electric hearing aid that was inserted directly in the ear, he was trained to be awar
of the many background sounds he would hear but to ignore the details. Otherwise, the mind wou
become overstimulated and tire quickly. Wearing padded leather earmuffs, Rasp was also taught t
listen very carefully to what was being said by those sharing his station. During periods of "silen
running," when surface vessels or other underwater boats might be listening, orders would be given
a whisper. During training sessions on a mock-up in Kiel, Germany, when pumps and ventilator fan
had been shut down, when all movement ceased, the whispers actually seemed louder than norm
speech.

What did surprise Rasp on his first run in 1936—a weeklong patrol in the Baltic Sea—was hov
once undersea, the crew and the boat became a single organism. He was part of the fish he had so lon
ago imagined. And the fish was part of a school of brothers, the school part of a larger system. It wa
there, packed inside forty meters of metal and equipment, that he understood what his mother ha
meant: Man was made great by a unity of purpose.

Rasp stood by the communications console on the port side of the vessel, Oberleutnant Kuehle
his left. Except for their stature, a broad-shouldered 5'8", the men were opposites in almost eve
way. The two even stood differently, the commander standing at ease with his arms at his side, h
second poised more rigidly, clasping his hands behind his back. Kuehle was a fun-loving womanize
raised in Berlin, a competitive boxer and weightlifter. He was blond, square-jawed, clean-shave
Rasp's hair was black, and on the days when he shaved he had a stubble by noon. He preferred to rea
—science and history, mostly—and when he had leave he went to see his mother. He did not drink an
found no comfort in 48-hour liaisons. When Rasp was younger, there was a career to prepare for. No

that he was older, there was a war to salvage. Those thoughts had never been far from his mind.

However, the two shared a passionate love of country. If Kuehle shared Rasp's concerns about th dangerous cargo they carried, it was not evident in his manner. Neither man had admitted anythin other than the fiercest desire to see this mission to a successful conclusion. At present, life held n other purpose.

Rasp did not go to the periscope. The Brest harbor was closely protected by around-the-clock s and air patrols. There was no chance they would be approached by sea until they were at least te kilometers out. With luck, with the Allies focused on Paris and beginning to shift other assets to th assault on Germany, this journey would go unnoticed.

The voyage to bring the core of an experimental thermonuclear device, an "atom bomb," to an ar where it could be completed, mounted on a V-2 rocket, and used to utterly destroy London today, the Moscow, and then Washington, D.C.

Captain Kealey had watched as the truck approached the submarine pens, then watched as it ha departed. No fanfare, no excessive guard, as befitted a valuable cargo. He watched as the U-bo disembarked. He saw it go under at once, signaling the importance of its mission: it would strain i resources rather than risk being seen with its tower above water. They would surface only when the were certain Brest itself had not been targeted for a twilight raid.

That was the most important of the circumstantial evidence.

Kealey waited a few minutes more, then cranked his radio, and sent the one-word messag "Doughboy."

There would be no audio response because he didn't carry earphones. He had to wait for the re light on top to pulse twice.

He dropped low behind the bunker to make sure he had not been heard. From inside his blac leather jacket he wore his single-shot .45. The so-called "Lighter" was a palm-sized handgun, millio of which were made by a small U.S. weapons firm from sheet metal stampings. Extra shells we stored in the grip. They were dropped by air for use by the Resistance, whose members wou approach a soldier and produce papers or ask for directions or a light for a cigarette—hence, th nickname—and fire. If the Germans happened to find the weapons after airdropping, they were little practical use

Kealey heard distant sounds from the harbor, barely audible over the thump of his heart. The wir picked up a little and he bowed his head to keep it from rushing into his ears. He couldn't turn awa entirely because he had to keep one ear trained on the dirt road to his left. He wished he could he *something* from inside the bunker, anything. But the walls were too damn thick.

He thought of his wife, May. He gave her soft cheek a mental kiss. He smelled her in his min thought about their brief leave-time honeymoon in New Orleans a year before, on Columbus Day—

A year? He'd forgotten his anniversary. Not that he could have sent her a letter or a cable. He wa not permitted contact with the world beyond Brest, except by radio to London—and those we typically one-word messages. May was living with his parents in Key Largo. He hoped they wou have remembered and made a fuss. His mother would have. She wrote everything on that little des calendar of hers. As a boy, that was how Kealey knew when she and his father were going to visit h teacher at the one-room schoolhouse he attended. Young Largo knew to be away from the house o those days.

He thought one last time of his smiling bride. *I'll make it up to you*, he promised. *If I survive th next ten minutes*.

The light on top of the radio winked twice. The message had been received—blink one—an

understood—blink two.

Kealey felt his chest deflate as he hurriedly closed the flap over the radio, slipped his arms throug the straps and heaved it onto his shoulders, and squatted low to make sure his retreat was clear. H made sure he had his balance, that his breathing was steady so that he wouldn't feel dizzy when l rose, then got up slowly—

The bunker door opened. Kealey heard the hinges squeak faintly and he crouched back down. H hunkered as low to the ground as he could go and still remain on the balls of his feet. The "Lighte grew hot and damp in his sweaty palm. He flexed his fingers to redouble his grip and held tight keep it from slipping. A moment later he heard the gentle crumbling of boots on dirt, heard pap crinkle, saw the glow from a flaring match. Then he heard a long inhale. Kealey guessed that this w the corporal allowing himself a short break after what had been a tense departure. The nonco wouldn't have known what was onboard the U-boat, only that its timely departure was imperativ That had been accomplished; protocol now allowed him to open the door and stand down from *Höc stealarmstufe*—high alert.

Kealey was no longer thinking of home. He had been in this kind of situation before, living mome to moment. Each instant was extended, each sense heightened, each stimulus magnified. Every mov of the man's boot was like a beacon: was it an idle motion, a step away, or a step toward him?

The dirt crunched. It was nearer than the last step. A second step, the glow of the lighted cigaret was nearer, the smoke wafted around the wall—and then the man stopped. Another pair of steps ar he would be at the edge of the wall. He would see Kealey.

The American agent breathed slowly through his nose, his breath softer than the wind. It would n be heard. He didn't swallow, however, and saliva pooled in his throat. He considered his options if th gun misfired, which was a possibility.

The footsteps moved—toward Kealey.

Suddenly, a voice came from inside. "*Unteroffizier Lang, hast du eine Zigarette für mich*?"

"*Ja,*" the corporal replied.

"*Ich habe keine.*"

"*Warten sie eine Minute.*"

"*Wurden sie mögen Kaffee*?"

"*Ja, ja,*" the corporal said.

The kid was out of smokes, Kealey thought, *but he didn't need to tell his superior that. He w probably green. Really green. That was why he asked about the coffee, too. He just needed to talk.*

Kealey knew that if he took one he'd have to take them both, but that wasn't what concerned hi When the team didn't check in—probably on the quarter-hour, which they must have just done, hen the break—the infantry would descend on the spot like sharks on an injured porpoise. They wou know the U-boat's departure had been observed. They would radio the sub to wait or divert. Th course that the British Admiralty had carefully left them—through battleships and openly mine waters—might not be used.

If he stayed there, the noncom might see him. If he moved, the man might hear him. If he we found with the radio, Kealey would *have* to shoot—which would bring reinforcements.

Don't take another step, Kealey thought—

Unteroffizier Lang came around the edge of the building. The glow of the cigarette was like th headlight of a jeep. Kealey acted instantly—but not with the gun. He dropped it, at the same tim grabbing the man's left arm with his right hand. He pulled him around to the back of the bunker an pushed his left forearm against the man's throat, hard. He could literally feel the contours of th man's windpipe against his own bone. The cigarette clung absurdly to the German's lower lip as h mouth went wide and his hands became claws that tore at Kealey's sleeve. The loudest sound the ma

made was a croaking one that sounded like a cough. Kealey dug his feet into the ground and put h
body into the choke and felt the man's body go from tense to floppy to inert. The American didn
release his victim until his tongue rolled forward and knocked the smoke to the ground.

Kealey crushed it, then lowered the man to the base of the structure.

He had about ten minutes before the next check-in. He had to kill the enlisted man but he couldn
do it with the gun or dagger the corporal was carrying. There must be no wounds when the body w
found.

Kealey took off the radio, laid it on the ground, then removed his own leather belt. He took the pac
of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and went around to the front of the reinforced structure. He ducke
under the open slit of window, then peeked inside through the "letter slot" in the door—the opening b
which visitors were identified before being admitted. The enlisted man was sitting at the radio se
There was a small hot plate to his right, as Kealey had surmised. Coffee was percolating in a pot o
top.

Kealey took a practice fling, then let the half-empty pack of cigarettes fly through the door onto th
far side of the desk.

"*Ah, danke*—" the young man said, looking away from the door.

Kealey moved in. He looped the belt around the man's throat from behind and pulled the two end
across one another tightly. The blond, pale-faced boy turned red under the glow of the single lightbu
as every inch of him kicked, wormed, struggled, then died. Kealey left the limp body in the chair. H
hurried back to the rear of the bunker, carried the dead corporal inside, then went back and smoothe
out the man's footprints. He also picked up the cigarette and moved it to the side of the bunker.

Back inside, Kealey closed the door, then examined the bolt on the inside. It could work. He put th
buckle of his belt on the back of the bolt, then placed the other end on the letter slot opening. Then h
laid the sleeve of the enlisted man's jacket on the hot plate. It was literally red-hot: there was no he
up here and chances were good they left the plate on round-the-clock to provide at least a little radia
warmth. The fabric began to smoke at once and Kealey hurried to the door. He closed it from th
outside and used the end of his belt to maneuver the buckle to the right.

It took a little jiggling, but the bolt slid in enough to lock the door. When help arrived, it woul
appear to all that the men had been asphyxiated and then burned.

An accident.

Gathering up his belt and the radio, Kealey hurried down the hill just as the first wisps of smok
were borne toward him by the wind. As he retreated he saw the faint glow of orange light on the di
road ahead. He moved quickly, since it was essential that he reach the fork that took him along th
coast before the fire brigade came the other way from Brest.

Captain Kealey gave no further thought to the men that he had killed, only to the prospect that, wi
this behind him, he was one step closer to going home.

It started as a low buzz that built to a sound like a bass cello.

The U-boat had been at sea for thirty-six hours of their two-day journey. They had achieved th
most difficult part of the journey, maneuvering northeast through the English Channel, and had ju
submerged to a depth of forty meters, moving at six knots, after entering an area where Allied aircra
had been conducting reconnaissance and escort duty for ongoing landings in Dunkirk.

Rasp was with Obersteuermann Dietze, reviewing the course—there was a strong current behin
them, putting them nearly an hour ahead of schedule—when he heard it. So did the men around him,
moment later. No one moved. The captain looked at his watch. The skies had been overcast earlier, bu
there was still an hour of daylight.

“Dive, one hundred meters,” he ordered.

The captain was concerned about not only the aircraft spotting them but also the possibility th they were accompanying a convoy. The boats would be equipped with sonar.

“One hundred meters,” Steuermann von Harbou said, the young man’s voice steady and unafraid.

“Ahead thirteen knots, on course,” Rasp ordered. That was the top speed the 402-horsepow electric motors could provide.

The helmsman acknowledged the order just as the world turned red. It wasn’t blood or fire the cre saw, but sound: the explosion of depth charges all around them, bursting in their ears, inside the heads, punching against their eyes. None of the hits had been direct, and there was no seriou structural damage. But they had occurred in concert so that not a man remained upright, the blas rocking the ship and spilling them forward in their seats or down to the floor; the concurrent vibratio caused each man to tremble as though he were electrified.

Rasp tried to rise from the rubberized floor, reaching for the back of the swivel chair in front him. As he did, the U-boat dropped toward the stern, sending him back several meters, where he struc Oberleutnant Kuehle. He tried to shout an order to cut the engines, since the new angle combined wi their speed would send them to the surface. But his voice was lost in a second set of explosions, whic dropped the nose of the vessel below level and sent the U-boat down. The lights went out, the re emergency lamps came on, and Rasp was dimly aware of screams, including his own. The collision men with men and men with hardware created pain and chaos. A cry was the only thing a man coul recognize—was the only source of relief.

Another explosion and the red lights died. Rasp couldn’t hear anything but the humming in h head, but he was still alert enough to feel the floor for water. There was none. The dampness he felt o his clothes was just his own sweat. If the diesel engines were still functioning, there was still a chan of getting out of harm’s way—

A final set of explosions ended any thought of recovering control of the boat. The blasts punche the vessel in successive directions, after which it went spiraling—down, it seemed, though Rasp cou not be certain because he wasn’t sure where exactly he was. He had lost all sense of place, only awa that he was piled atop writhing, pushing men and that others were skidding onto him. He tried to sho a command to the men tumbling onto him, but the depth charges had deafened him. He could not he his own voice and doubted anyone else could. In moments he could no longer speak, or breathe, as h was buried beneath a pile of deadweight crewmen.

Too weak to struggle, Rasp drew a piece of paper from his inside vest pocket, then lay limp whe he was. As he fought to stay conscious, to seize any opportunity that might present itself, he felt a h tingling, as though the air itself was electrified. Then a glow punched through the darkness, somethin white and hot.

Rasp looked at the paper and smiled. In the dark he could barely see what he knew so well by hear the crude drawing his father had made of a U-boat.

It was the last thing Rasp saw before his world went black.

CHAPTER 1

DAHLGREN, VIRGINIA, 2013

The Naval Space Command in Dahlgren, Virginia, was established on October 1, 1983. A division o USSPACECOM at Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, Colorado, its primary function is t intercept and decode telemetry sent by space-based craft and satellites and see which of it may b relevant to the security of the nation.

One of the smaller groups at the NSC is the Earth Monitoring Systems and Analysis Division, subsection of Defense Satellite Communications Systems Management. The EMSAD monitors network of twenty-three different satellites that, in addition to intercepting data streams from foreig space assets, monitor radioactive spikes on earth. All EMSAD does is watch for up-glow; if there is nuclear test, a leak at a nuclear power plant, or a deposit of uranium newly exposed by tectonics mining, Web-23 will spot it.

At 5:19 in the afternoon, Lt. Jr. Grade Mark Mason was seated at his console, the last in a row seven consoles that filled a small narrow room in Sub-basement 814. His round face had a bluish ti from the Barents Sea, the area he was studying. Just moments before, a Code Nine "ping" had alerte the 28-year-old data-processing technician that a small heat bloom had been detected at latitude 57 degrees N, longitude 36.2 degrees W. The number designation put it high on the one-to-ten list o being a non-natural occurrence.

As it was programmed to do, the satellite that had picked up the anomaly, the Redbi Geostationary Operational Platform, automatically turned its array of sensors to the spot. The da streamed into a chart that appeared in the lower left quadrant of the screen. As the numbers appeare —going from blue to red, indicating a dangerous hot spot—Mason's neutral expression darkened. H sent an instant message to Station 2, which managed the Greendog GOP, and asked for confirmatio of the Redbird readings.

Forty-seven seconds later—all communications were time-stamped and stored off-site in a bunk two hundred feet under the Pentagon—Lt. JG Heyder Namjoo IM'ed back: "One hundred perce match."

Mason picked up a red phone to his right and punched in the number of Lt. Cmdr. Alan Bobbit head of EMSAD. While he did so, he IM'ed to ask Station 3 for a geological survey from Bluetiger.

"Go," said the deep voice on the other end. There were no salutations. Not when someone called o the red phone.

"Sir, we have a North Polar reading from Redbird that triggered a Code Nine," Mason sai "Greendog confirms: 175.8 MeV, Alpha decay. Source core 1.3 meters in diameter. The readings ar one hundred percent consistent with Plutonium 239."

There was a moment of silence as Lt. Cmdr. Bobbitt digested the information. Both men knew the was no way a natural deposit would occupy a spot that small. It was what the NSC described as "toothache" reading: very intense at one location with virtually no bleed to surrounding spots.

An IM popped on from Lt. JG Kamala Ivy at Station 3, and Mason read it to Bobbitt: "A temperature thirty-four degrees Fahrenheit, edge of Salmassinia Glacier. Ice loss thirteen percent ov the last seven months."

"What's the image database got?" the EMSAD chief asked.

Mason was already accessing the weekly satellite image of polar regression. He got hits on the fir four.

"Eight days ago, that ice was forty-three meters deep," the officer said. "The edge of the ridge h lost seventeen percent of its mass since then, retreating ten meters back and twenty-three mete down."

"That's not just global warming," Bobbitt said.

"It would appear not, sir."

"Lock Redbird on the site and give me continuous full-spectrum readings," Bobbitt told him. want to know if it's heating. I'll get visuals from the NRO."

"Yes, sir."

Bobbitt hung up and Mason programmed Redbird to override its ongoing sweep to remain focus on the anomaly. Some satellites used plutonium as a power source, but there hadn't been a report one falling in that region. Besides, the radioactive material was still inside the ice. When that glaci froze, chances were good no one on the planet was using plutonium to power anything.

The mystery was acute, but it wasn't the only concern. If the NSC had picked up the heat bloom chances were good that other nations had or were about to see it. Though plutonium may not have ha many uses in previous years, it had many applications now.

The kind USSPACECOM was singularly devoted to preventing.

As Mark Mason anchored the coordinated investigation, something occurred that was as unexpecte as the precipitating event itself: four minutes and three seconds after it appeared, the heat signatu vanished.

THE NORWEGIAN SEA

Nakhoda Yekom Ebrahim Elham stood on the roof forward the funnel on the guided-missile friga *Jamaran* . The captain was dressed warmly in the big, navy blue greatcoat he wore over his uniform the collar upturned and his white cap pulled low against the sharp winds. After a trip along th American coast, and then a pass along the British shores, the vessel headed north. This was the crew first voyage into cold-weather environs. It would also be the first dry run of the Iranian-built weapon systems in below-freezing conditions; though no weapons would actually be discharged, the data c crew reactions and lubricant gelidity would be crucial in designing future armaments and Arctic wea

The *Jamaran* was a *Mowj*-class vessel, one of two that the Islamic Republic of Iran had launche from the port facilities of the Bandar Abbas Air Base since 2010. The other vessel, the *Velayat*, w newly commissioned and sailing the southern Atlantic. The purpose of the "Wave"-class ship wa expressed in a directive from Daryaban Ali Hammad Sayvari. The rear admiral wrote that the ship would sail "internationally but with particular strategic attention to the maritime borders of the Unite States." A cooperative arrangement with Venezuela allowed Iranian vessels to refuel in Sout America, giving them access to virtually all the open waterways on the planet.

Nakhoda Yekom Elham was equally proud of and humbled by the vessel he captained. For ove thirty years, since the dawn of the Islamic republic, the seaman had watched, with frustration, as h nation was forced to purchase outdated vessels from Russia—such as the clumsy *Kilo*-cla submarines that had, until recently, comprised the entirety of their underwater fleet. Now, the Irania Navy had their own *Ghadir*-class midget submarines patrolling against imperialism and Zionism the Persian Gulf... *their* gulf. Soon, the larger *Qaaem* class would make its way through the se beyond. Standing on the bridge, Elham let his eyes run slowly over the gleaming white surface-to-a missiles set in their box launchers on the main deck. Beside them was the helipad, which was outfitte

with a rapid-deployment Toufan helicopter. The name, which meant “storm,” was a streamline version of the AB 212 anti-submarine-warfare helicopter. It was a tidy little craft that could mov against any air-or-sea-borne target with state-of-the-art weapons including rocket-launchers and tw 20mm cannons.

The *Jamaran* was armed with other weapons as well. There was a Nour surface-to-surface missil which, with recent upgrades, had a range of three hundred kilometers. Below, the ship was equippe with a pair of triple torpedo launchers on either side of the stern. They were armed with 324mm lig torpedoes. Like the Toufan, the vessel was equipped with two 20mm manned cannons as well as 40mm automatic cannon that offered both assault capabilities and point-defense against incoming fir Yet it was the main gun that was a prize, a 76mm Fajr-27 set on the forecastle. The gun had a range o over seventeen kilometers and could fire eighty-five rounds every minute.

Below deck was some of the finest technology afloat, designed by Chinese and German scientis and built in Iran. The sensor array included a low-frequency variable-depth sonar and radar, a long range air/surface search and tracking radar, and a navigation radar with a backup system. Senso attached to the main mast could detect bacteriological, chemical, and radiological attacks within two- to ten-kilometer radius, depending on the concentration and potency of the materials. Tw powerful 10,000hp diesel engines and four auxiliary diesel generators allowed for a brisk maximu speed of 30 knots.

And then there was the crew, 127 of the finest young men in any military service anywhere. Elha was a man of peace, but as a lifelong sailor there were times, like now, when he ached to test his shi his crew, himself, in the kind of confrontation for which they had been trained.

Drill first, he reminded himself. There was no dishonor in learning. But rushing—

A dull, bass cello sound rang across the deck. Then another. Then again. Elham was already movin toward the bridge before the first alarm had faded.

A *navidovom,* a petty officer third class, was already running toward the captain. The swarthy youn man saluted as he reported. He was trembling. Elham did not think it was merely from the cold.

“Sir, we have encountered a radioactive source that registers 4,000 millisieverts,” he reported, h teeth chattering audibly. “It is coming from Ice Floe 48589.”

The captain stopped just short of the bridge. The glacier and iceberg designations were from th European Space Agency’s environmental satellite ENVISAT ASAR, data that was publicly availabl to all shipping. Even if they departed at once, by the time the ship reversed course and sailed out range, that level of radiation would kill half the crew within a month. And they would have learne nothing for the price. That was unacceptable.

Elham punched the stopwatch function on his wristwatch and hurried onto the bridge. The five-ma command saluted and he motioned them back to their positions.

“Approach the radiation source at full speed,” the captain ordered.

The helmsman acknowledged the order. Standing behind him, the captain looked out at the drea sea. He could just about make out a large shape in the haze. Icy sea mist had gathered on the back his neck. It melted now and ran down his nape under his collar. He unbuttoned his coat as he went the radio. He snapped his cap crisply under his arm—he would never have tossed it casually onto h seat—and took the headset from the operator and pressed a green button on the console.

“Engineering, this is the captain.”

“Sir!”

“Prepare welding equipment. We will be sealing radioactive materials.”

“Yes, sir.”

Elham pressed a red button. “Sonar, what do you have?”

“Captain, we aren’t sure,” the operator admitted. “At first we thought it was a plutonium-powere

satellite from America or Russia, but the configuration is—strange. So was the radiation burst."

"Strange how?"

"It wasn't there and then it was," the operator said. "It was as if someone had twisted a fruit open reveal its pit. Then squeezed the fruit into something unrecognizable."

He killed the open line. "Helm, distance?"

"Two kilometers and we are mutually closing," replied the young man who sat directly in front the captain. Perspiration was running from under his cap. His hands shook. Elham laid a hand on h shoulder. The man steadied.

A short, lean figure had stepped to the captain's right elbow. He was Nakhoda Sevom Azizi, secon in-command.

Without turning from the looming shape in the mist, the captain said, "Lieutenant Commander– want a shore crew in the water in five. If there is a way to seal the object, do so and bring it bac Please command the detachment personally."

"Yes, sir."

The man saluted sharply and left the bridge. If he knew that proximity to the source of the radiati was certainly a death sentence, the forty-year-old Azizi did not show it. Elham had given him th mission not just because he was a supremely competent commander but because he had two brothe and sisters and was unmarried. If the rest of the crew had any chance at all, Azizi's parents woul suffer less than some others.

In just over four minutes, Azizi and six other men were paddling north in a black inflatable dingh The men wore black wetsuits and appeared as a dark smear in the mist. The boat was kicked around the rough waters, but the men were well trained and held both their bearing and speed.

"Sir, this is Paria," a voice came over the headset. It was the sonar chief.

"Go ahead," Elham replied.

"The computer has assembled the pieces in the ice. It's an old submarine. It appears it was seale inside and literally pulled open when the floe separated. The satellite images put the breaku concurrent with the radiation spike."

"Is it an early American nuclear submarine?" Elham asked. The propaganda value of finding a lo U.S. naval treasure, especially a failed one, would be high.

"We aren't certain, Captain," he said. "The pieces have been too badly compacted by the ice."

"Thank you."

Elham did not bother relaying the information to Azizi. They would find out soon enough. Now th it was too late, he second-guessed himself: if he had known it was something old, not something ne would he have committed the crew to the mission?

Yes, he decided. Even in the earliest days of his career, in the eight-year war against Iraq, he alway put the security of assets—such as oil platforms—and the capture of any enemy craft over the securi of himself and his fellow soldiers. Protecting service personnel was God's job. Serving the Ayatolla was his. The honor of having this responsibility thrust upon him overwhelmed all oth considerations.

The captain wished he had a visual on the team. That was one of the areas Iranian technolog lagged. It was important to field home-made assets, but many of them were little different from th old models on which they were based. Modern technology was not easy to come by, especially in th era of heavy sanctions against trade. Sadly, due to international hatred of his people, even scienc students were not coming back from Russia and China with the levels of education they received America and Europe during the days of the Shah.

Every moment brought the *Jamaran* nearer to the ice. He could see, now, the jagged edge where smaller piece had fallen away. The raft was tied to an icy outcropping and the men were standing on

flat shelf; he could see their black shapes moving.

There were white sparks, just a few, but so brilliant they seemed like fireworks in the dull gra afternoon.

"Captain, the Geiger counter found the object," Azizi radioed. "We are resealing the container."

"Do you know what it is?" Elham asked.

There was a brief hesitation. "It appears to be the inner workings of a crude nuclear device."

"A bomb?"

"It would appear to be, but not like anything we've seen in briefings. There's a perfect sphere in large metal container—I believe the box is lead. The radiation levels are dropping fast."

The sparks flashed a moment more, then died. After a moment the blue afterimages faded from th captain's eyes, leaving the outside world once more pale and hazy.

"We're coming in now," Azizi reported. "Two of the men feel sick."

"Understood." Elham glanced at his watch. "Full stop," he ordered the helm, then turned Navsarvan Farshid, who had taken Azizi's place on the bridge. "Lieutenant, have a recovery team o deck. All medics on hand."

The officer saluted and left. The *navbanyekom* who manned the External Sensor Array in the son room reported that radiation levels had returned nearly to normal. The voice of the lieutenant juni grade did not sound relieved. Nor should it. The nearly eight-minute exposure they had taken was n reason to rejoice. He thought back to other personnel who had made this same critical, fatal decisio In 1961, the crew of the Russian K-19 submarine had spent ten minutes repairing the nuclear reactor cooling pipes to prevent a thermonuclear explosion and twenty-eight of them perished. Fifty worke accepted "suicide missions" to tend to the crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant exactly fifty yea later. There were probably others, many others, though that kind of information did not receive wi dissemination.

And now God has handpicked another crew to join their heroic ranks, the captain thought.

Although the captain wished he could meet the crew himself, he did not want to leave the bridg Whatever the object was, it would have to be taken to Bandar Abbas as swiftly as possible—thoug that might not be possible if enough of the crew were stricken. He turned thoughtfully and went to th nautical chart on the wall behind him. It was an old-style paper chart; an electrical failure during trial run had convinced him it was unsafe to rely on digital maps.

There is another consideration, he told himself. An object that hot would have been picked up b the intelligence agencies of at least a dozen nations. Even now, military vessels would be convergin here to investigate. Spotting the *Jamaran* from the air or sea, enemies of the Islamic state would h waiting to intercept her along the way. At best, they would be shadowed; at worst, they would b quarantined or sunk in the open seas. The Russians would not hesitate to sink them for transportin nuclear materials in opposition to maritime law.

Contacting their home base would be risky, but it had to be done. The cargo had to be offloaded.

The chart was broken into three dozen sectors, pinned with friendly ports of call and marked wi the courses of North Korean, Syrian, and Yemeni vessels. Elham decided there was one place wher safe harbor for their cargo might be found.

Elham wore a key around his neck. He removed it, turned, and inserted it in the console. As th communications officer watched, the captain twisted the key and input a series of numbers into th keypad beside it. This brought up an encryption program through which all typed messages would h run until it was disengaged.

The captain stood beside the radio operator and dictated a message. It was what the Vezarat-e Ettela'at Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran—the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security of Iran- called a "double bind": even if Washington or Tel Aviv or Moscow managed to break the code, the

would not know what was meant by the terse message:

ROGUE STARFISH TO AREA THIRTEEN N

CHAPTER 2

WASHINGTON, D.C.

"It's too early to be thinking."

Ryan Kealey was staring at the ceiling when Allison Dearborn touched his forehead. Her fingertip were light and had the desired effect of relaxing his brow.

Kealey turned and regarded her. He pushed the lump of pillow down so it wasn't covering h mouth. He didn't ask how she knew what he was doing. She'd known him too long—and too well.

"Is that my—what's the acronym? BBF?"

"BFF," she said. "Best Friends Forever."

"Right. Is that my BFF or my shrink talking?"

The woman appeared wounded, though it was tough to make out details with the hotel drapes drav and the only light coming from the red-glowing digital clock behind Kealey. He could just make o the slight dip in her eyebrows, felt the disapproving tap of her index finger, which was still on h forehead.

"It's the whole me, the amalgamated self."

"Oh, 'amalgamated,' is it? It'd say it's too early for twenty-dollar words."

"Don't try to turn this on me, Ryan."

"What do you mean?"

"*I'm* right here, in bed with you. You're the one who's off somewhere. I'm just trying to reel you i It's okay to take some down time. You've earned it. You deserve it."

Her tone wasn't accusing or critical. Allison wasn't like that. He surrendered to her concern b smiling.

"Since you know what I'm doing, you know I can't help myself."

"I know you don't want to help yourself," she said. "But I've had my say." She peered over hir "It's not even six a.m. I'm going back to sleep."

Her companion took her finger from his forehead, kissed the tip, then lay back and continued look at the ceiling . . . and to think. It wasn't about work, as Allison seemed to think. It was about her

Kealey was accustomed to waking in unfamiliar beds—though more often than not they weren actually mattresses but cots, sleeping bags, or even piles of scrub tucked against a big rock. They we located in places like South Africa, India, and Iran. The longest he had ever been anywhere w Maine, when he resigned from the CIA. He got a teaching gig, bought a three-story house in Ca Elizabeth, and spent his spare time fixing it up with Katie Donovan. Kealey suspected that when was lying on his final bed, if he still had all his marbles, he would look back on that period with Kat as his happiest. At least, if he could slide from this world with that thought in his head, he would b content.

But being an itinerant was a lonely business.

A couple months earlier, Kealey had reluctantly gone back to work for his former bosses, CI Director Robert Andrews and Deputy Director Jon Harper. It was a onetime assignment, preventin the destruction of Manhattan, but it had cost him both physically and psychologically. Apart from th pressure of rooting out the imminent plot, Kealey had been partnered with a man in turmoil: an age who had just lost his daughter in a bombing. Harper's wife had been badly injured in the same blas