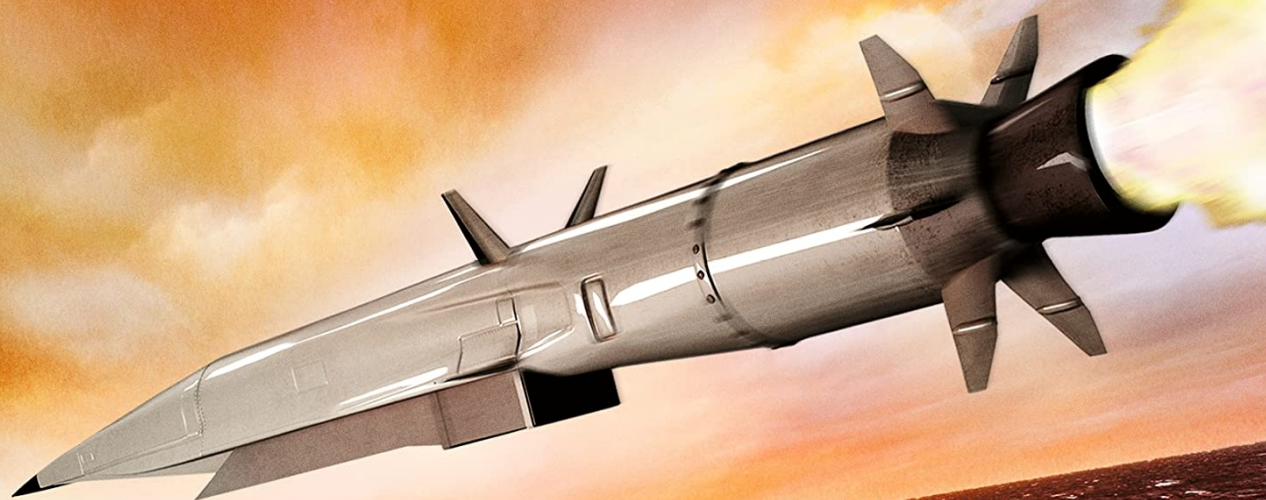


THE WORLD'S NO.1 ADVENTURE WRITER

# CLIVE CUSSLER'S FIRE STRIKE

A NOVEL FROM THE OREGON FILES



WRITTEN BY MIKE MADEN



**CLIVE CUSSLER**  
**FIRE STRIKE**

A NOVEL OF THE OREGON FILES®

**MIKE MADEN**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

**PUTNAM**

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*Publishers Since 1838*

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)



Copyright © 2023 by Sandecker RLLLP

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Maden, Mike, author.

Title: Clive Cussler fire strike / Mike Maden.

Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [2023] | Series: A Novel of The Oregon Files; [17]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023012546 (print) | LCCN 2023012547 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593543931

(hardcover) | ISBN 9780593543948 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.A284327 C56 2023 (print) | LCC PS3613.A284327 (ebook) | DDC

813/.6—dc23/eng/20230316

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012546>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012547>

Cover design: Eric Fuentesilla

Cover images: (missile render) Eric Fuentesilla; (aircraft carrier) SugaBom86 / Shutterstock; (sky)

Aastels / Shutterstock

BOOK DESIGN BY KATY RIEGEL, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK BY MAGGIE HUNT

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

pid\_prh\_6.0\_143786116\_c0\_r0



# CONTENTS

*Cover*

*Cast of Characters*

*Epigraph*

*Prologue*

Chapter 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |  
19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 35  
| 36 | 37 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 51 |  
52 | 53 | 54 | 55 | 56 | 57 | 58 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 62 | 63 | 64 | 65 | 66 | 67 | 68  
| 69 | 70 | 71 | 72 | 73 | 74 | 75 | 76 | 77

*About the Authors*

*Titles by Clive Cussler*

\_143786116\_

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## **THE CORPORATION**

*Juan Cabrillo*—Chairman of the Corporation and captain of the *Oregon*.  
*Max Hanley*—President of the Corporation, Juan’s second-in-command, and the *Oregon*’s chief engineer. U.S. Navy and Vietnam swift boat veteran.

*Linda Ross*—Vice President, Operations. Retired U.S. Navy intelligence officer.

*Eddie Seng*—Director, Shore Operations. Former CIA agent.

*Franklin “Linc” Lincoln*—Operations. Former U.S. Navy SEAL sniper.

*Marion MacDougal “MacD” Lawless*—Operations. Former U.S. Army Ranger.

*Raven Malloy*—Operations. Former U.S. Army Military Police investigator.

*Eric Stone*—Chief helmsman on the *Oregon*. Former U.S. Navy officer, weapons research and development.

*Dr. Mark “Murph” Murphy*—Chief weapons officer on the *Oregon*. Former civilian weapons designer.

*Russ Kefauver*—Intelligence analyst. Former CIA forensic accountant.

*Dr. Eric Littleton*—Director of the *Oregon*’s biophysical laboratory.

*Mike Lavin*—Chief armorer on the *Oregon*. Retired U.S. Army armament/fire control maintenance supervisor.

*Bill McDonald*—Senior armorer on the *Oregon*. Former CIA paramilitary operator.

*George “Gomez” Adams*—Helicopter pilot and chief aerial drone operator on the *Oregon*. U.S. Army veteran.

*Hali Kasim*—Chief communications officer on the *Oregon*.

*Dr. Julia Huxley*—Chief medical officer on the *Oregon*. U.S. Navy veteran.

*Amy Forrester*—Physician's assistant on the *Oregon*. Former Navy combat medic.

*Kevin Nixon*—Chief of the *Oregon*'s Magic Shop.

*Maurice*—Chief steward on the *Oregon*. British Royal Navy veteran.

## **UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT**

*Langston Overholt IV*—The Corporation's CIA liaison.

*Captain Kim Dudash*—Commanding officer, USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78).

*Robin Stansberry*—U.S. senator.

## **SAUDI ARABIA**

*Abdullah bin Abdulaziz*—Crown Prince.

*Muqrin bin Khalid*—Deputy crown prince and Royal Saudi Air Force colonel.

*Khalid bin Salman*—Former deputy crown prince and former head of the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP).

## **ISRAEL**

*Sarai Massala*—Former Mossad agent.

*Asher Massala/Duke Matasi*—Sarai Massala's brother.

*Shlomo Gottlieb*—Shin Bet senior executive.

## **SURCHEV (Private Military Company)**

*Jean-Paul Salan*—President of SurChev and former French 1st Marine Infantry Parachute Regiment captain.

*Moulin*—Salan's number two and old comrade from the French Marine paratroopers.

*Sergeant Angus Fellowes*—Salan’s training supervisor and former British Special Air Service sergeant.

*Risto*—Macedonian SurChev operative deployed to Dr. Hightower.

*Mat*—Malaysian SurChev operative deployed to Dr. Hightower.

*Samson*—Nigerian SurChev operative deployed to Dr. Hightower.

## **THE HIGHTOWER ORGANIZATION (HH+)**

*Dr. Heather Hightower*—CEO and founder of HH+.

*Dr. Jing Yanwen*—Amazon collection team member.

*Dr. Brigit Schweers*—Amazon collection team member.

*Karl Krasner*—Hightower’s security chief, former Stasi officer.



“History began when humans invented gods, and will end  
when humans become gods.”

—YUVAL NOAH HARARI

# PROLOGUE

## **BORNEO, 1963**

**A** drenching rain in the moonless night was perfect cover for the three Special Boat Section operatives.

The “wet cousins” of the better-known Special Air Service, the SBS was a commando unit of the Royal Marines specializing in coastal insertions—hence the mission tonight running a Zodiac deep upriver.

A stubborn British national named Rawlinson desperately needed an emergency exfil from his family’s rubber plantation. The communist Indonesian insurgents raiding across the region were hell-bent on killing all foreigners and seizing their properties. A Dutch family just eight kilometers away had been decimated by the bandy-legged Marxists the night before and Rawlinson and his wife suddenly realized they were next on their list.

Private Desmond “Wraith” Vickers killed the Zodiac’s big outboard Evinrude and the three men paddled the last five hundred meters in practiced synchronicity. They were grateful for the splattering downpour that soaked their kits but silenced their efforts. All three men scanned the dim shoreline for any sign of movement—of rebels, certainly, but also for Bornean crocodiles, thick as flies in this part of the country. So far, lady luck had paddled along with them.

The lieutenant gestured with his free hand and the men angled the rubber-hulled boat toward the shore. They slipped noiselessly out of the Zodiac and dragged it into the cover of thick brush. Each man unslung their “Silent Sten” submachine guns and checked their mags by feel. Vickers slipped his hand to his hip and patted the holster of his .38 Webley revolver, then he snaked his fingers down his thigh to the hilt of his razor-sharp Fairbairn-Sykes dagger in its well-oiled leather scabbard.

Good to go.

The lieutenant nodded in the direction of the plantation. Vickers, just eighteen years old and the youngest operator in the entire squadron, took the point, threading his way through the leaves and brush beneath the orderly rows of rubber trees. On base he carried himself with the self-possessed dignity of a landed earl, but in the field he moved with the preternatural grace and cunning of a jungle cat. His inaudible movements and sudden appearances had earned him the moniker “Wraith.”

Vickers halted at the edge of the clearing that led to the darkened plantation house looming in the distance and scanned the perimeter yet again. The lights were off as per the lieutenant’s instructions. So far, so good.

Confident that the way was clear, Vickers dashed for the house in a crouching run, his Sten up and his finger on the trigger guard. He silently prayed that Rawlinson remembered the lieutenant’s order not to fire on them as they approached the house. A nervous British civilian armed with a loaded Lee-Enfield No. 1 could prove as lethal as any Indonesian killer.

Vickers leaped onto the porch with quiet ease and gazed into the front window. The rain hammered the sheet metal roofing like a mad drummer. He saw no signs of movement inside as the lieutenant and Corporal Sterling, a hulking Scotsman, thundered up next to him.

Vickers shook his head.

The lieutenant’s eyes swept the shadowy perimeter once again before he crossed over to the front door and kicked it open with his muddy boot.

Vickers charged in first, gun up, with Sterling—his closest friend—hard on his heels, and the lieutenant right behind them.

“Rawlinson!” the lieutenant called out. “It’s the Queen’s own come to get you out of here!”

Nothing.

“Sterling, head upstairs. Wraith, check the back.”

The two men sped away as the lieutenant pushed open the basement door. He pulled the light chain and called out again. “Rawlinson! Don’t shoot. We’re here to get you out. Are you there?” He jogged down the wooden staircase and scanned the dank room. All he found were undisturbed storage shelves laden with canned goods and household sundries.

The lieutenant climbed back upstairs into the kitchen. Vickers and Sterling shook their heads.

Nothing.

“Rawlinson may have already bugged out without telling us,” the lieutenant said. “But we can’t take any chances he’s still on the property. Sterling, check the storage shed out back. Wraith, head over to the machine shop. I’ll sweep the perimeter. We’ll meet back at the drop-off point in fifteen minutes, no exceptions. And give it some rice. Understood?”

Heads nodded. Sterling added, “Sure, boss.”

---

The suffocating heat came on as suddenly as the pounding rain had stopped and raised a shroud of fog from the waterlogged ground.

The lieutenant’s eyes strained in the dark as he crouched at the drop-off point near the boat. No sign of his two men. He checked his watch. Where were they?

“Boss.”

The lieutenant flinched, startled by Vickers’s sudden appearance behind him, seemingly out of nowhere. The boy really was a ghost.

“Any sign of the Rawlinsons?” the lieutenant asked, his whisper masked by the din of chirring insects and croaking frogs.

“Behind the machine shop. Throats slashed ear to ear.”

“Dear God. And Sterling?”

Both men heard the crash of leaves ahead of them, but didn’t see the—  
*Thump!*

A Chinese-made “potato masher” hand grenade splattered in the mud at their feet.

Wraith shoved the lieutenant aside and threw himself on the explosive.

“Vickers!” The lieutenant reached down to grab him, but a bullet plowed through his skull.

His corpse thudded into the mud next to Vickers.

“Boss!”

Vickers crawled to his knees and scrambled over to the lieutenant’s corpse. The Chinese grenade was a dud, but the bullets zipping overhead

were very much alive and threatened to cut him down, too. No matter.

Vickers slipped away as the Indonesians advanced through the rows of rubber trees. The air echoed with the ripsaw staccato of their automatic-rifle fire as rounds splintered the bark and branches.

Vickers raced perpendicular to their advance, silent as a shadow, then turned north.

Emboldened by the lack of British resistance, the Indonesians shouted and laughed as they emptied their magazines into the bush where the lieutenant had fallen. Moments later, they stood over the commando's shattered corpse.

They had no idea that Wraith had completely flanked them from behind.

Vickers fired his silenced machine gun at the shadowy figures. His bullets found their marks as he emptied the thirty-round mag, stitching across the backs of the Indonesians from left to right, felling them like bowling pins into the mud. Two were left.

Vickers reloaded and angled his gun at the last two rebels ducking behind a tree—one a head taller than the other—and suddenly froze.

*Sterling!*

Vickers could now see the tall Scotsman was gagged and his arms bound behind his back, pushed along by the shorter communist, who held a pistol to the base of Sterling's spine. The smaller Indonesian hid behind the big Scot, using him as a human shield as he maneuvered between the trees.

*Bastard.*

Vickers circled through the trees, using the trunks for cover as he closed the distance between them, trying to flank him yet again.

Panicked, the Indonesian spun in circles, keeping Sterling close in front of him, one hand around the Scotsman's neck, uncertain where the next gunshot would come from.

Vickers rested the barrel of his Sten on the side of a tree for stability and sighted his weapon at the spinning figures, waiting for the chance—

*Pop!*

A single 9mm bullet tore into the Indonesian's chest and dropped him to the ground.

Vickers raced out from behind the tree and straight for Sterling.

His mouth still gagged and his hands still bound, Sterling saw Vickers emerge from the trees and shouted a muffled scream.

And then he turned, and ran.

“Sterling! It’s me!”

The Scotsman took three long strides before the British L2 grenade—tied around the back of his neck—exploded.

The Indonesian had booby-trapped him. By looping his finger through the grenade pin, the Indonesian’s corpse pulled it when he fell away, just as he had planned.

Vickers stopped dead in his tracks, the air ringing with the rising cacophony of insects and the distant, angry shouts of more rebels in the forest beyond.

What had he done?



With the bodies of Sterling and the lieutenant safely secured in the Zodiac, Vickers gunned the throttle, not caring about the roar of the big Evinrude motor nor the splash of bullets geysering the water around him. The boat rose high out of the water as it rocketed away, his tear-streaked face cooled by the warm air beating against it.

## **HER MAJESTY’S NAVAL BASE, SINGAPORE**

**Two weeks later**

Admiral Bromley glanced up from the file folder on his burnished teakwood desk and crushed out his cigarette in a silver art nouveau ashtray.

Vickers sat upright in his crisply ironed Royal Marine uniform, its creases sharp enough to shave with. His shoes were polished to a gleaming mirrored gloss in stark contrast to the blank expression on his handsome face.

“I refuse to sign this,” Bromley said, stabbing a letter in the file. “You’re one of our finest soldiers and a tremendous asset in Her Majesty’s service. We can’t afford to lose you.”

“I believe I’ve made my reasons clear, sir.”

“Nonsense. The board of inquiry found you completely innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever. No one holds you accountable in the least—except yourself.”

“My best friend is dead because of my actions.”

“Your best friend is dead because a fiendish communist cutthroat killed him. I urge you to see things as they truly are.”

“I’ve tried, sir.”

“Tell me, Vickers. Do you like military service?”

“All I ever wanted to do since I was a young schoolboy was to serve my country. The day I earned the Bootneck green beret was the greatest day of my life.”

“Your uncle, Sir Edmund Vickers-Hart, was the finest officer I ever had the privilege to serve with. Judging by your exemplary service record, it’s clear you and he were cut from the same jib.”

“I take that as the highest compliment, sir, though I doubt I deserve it.”

“Would you consider a transfer away from your beloved Bootnecks and into the Royal Navy?”

Vickers frowned. “I could never allow myself to be put in a position where I might risk the lives of my comrades ever again.”

“I quite understand.” The admiral held up his pack of cigarettes. “Care for one?”

“No, thank you, sir.”

“Good for you. Filthy habit.”

The admiral lifted a silver Dunhill lighter and lit another cigarette. He blew a cloud of blue smoke as he studied Vickers’s file again.

“I noticed here a number of letters of support from your commanding officers and enlisted comrades.” He held one up for closer inspection. “This one says you are ‘well liked, and highly commended for his manners, deportment, and diction.’ ”

“A reflection of my Eton education, I’m afraid.”

“It also seems as if you have quite a flair for the finer things in life.” Bromley held up another letter. “‘Something of an amateur sommelier,’ this officer states.”

“One of the many privileges of my upbringing as the son of a landed viscount.”

“Frankly, I could use someone like you on my personal staff.”

The admiral came out from behind his desk.

“Sir?”

“It’s a position as far away from close-quarters combat as I can imagine. But it is honorable service in Her Majesty’s Navy. It’s a position that requires discretion, tact, and taste. I think you’d be perfect for it. Shall I tell you about it?”

“Please do.”

Vickers’s eyes narrowed as he listened to the job description. It only took him a moment to decide.

“Honorable service, indeed, sir. I had never considered it before.”

“I only foresee one difficulty.”

“Sir?”

“You served with one of the finest commando units in the service, and participated in several top secret missions. Missions that were, shall we say, off the books?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, when you transfer to another branch, so will your records, and we can’t have unauthorized eyes raking over them. To avoid that, we’ll have to seal your records permanently so that no one may know of your service with the SBS. In fact, we’ll have to terminate the service of Private Desmond Vickers. He’ll disappear to ‘parts unknown,’ so long as you’re in uniform. After you retire, you may resurrect him if you wish.”

“I understand.”

“That means, of course, we’ll have to create a entirely new service record for you. A new name, background, everything. How do you feel about all of that?”

“If it gives me the freedom to serve Queen and country, I’m all for it.”

“Excellent. I’ll have my adjutant make the necessary arrangements. In the meantime, take a few days off and enjoy Singapore. It’s a truly marvelous city.”

Vickers stood, a smile creasing his face for the first time in weeks.

“Thank you, sir.”



The admiral extended his hand. Vickers shook it.

“I look forward to our relationship, Vickers— Oh, say. While you’re gallivanting about for the next few days, you will need to conjure up a new name for yourself. A nom de plume, as it were. Something quite the opposite of your given name.”

Vickers frowned, his mind racing for an answer.

“I believe I have it.”

The admiral beamed. “Excellent. Tell me, then, with whom shall I be working?”

“Last name ‘Chavasse,’ after an uncle on my mother’s side. Killed at El Alamein.”

“My condolences. Excellent choice.”

“For a middle name I’ll go with ‘Morley’ for a cousin I lost in Korea.”

“We lost too many good men in those godforsaken hills. And the first?”

Vickers smiled. “My father’s manservant was buried in our family plot last year. I admired him greatly. Terribly wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He was awarded a Croix de Guerre with an *étoile d’argent* for valorous service.”

“A hero by any measure. His name?”

“Maurice.”

# 1



## PRESENT DAY

### **GORNO-BADAKHSHAN AUTONOMOUS REGION, TAJIKISTAN**

**T**he vintage Soviet-era snowcat crested the final rise on the steep climb. Its big diesel engine belched a plume of oily smoke as it roared with the effort. It had taken three hours clanking through a narrow pass high in the towering Pamir Mountains through the swirling snow to reach the ancient Tibetan fortress. It loomed above the forested valley floor, perched on the edge of an insurmountable cliff. Its sturdy walls could resist the siege weapons of its day, but the fort's remoteness and sheer inaccessibility had always been its primary defense. All but the most determined visitors were deterred from even venturing here. How the mighty stone edifice had ever been built by ancient hands in this location several hundred years ago remained a mystery.

The snowcat finally ground to a halt just opposite the short drawbridge crossing the abyssal chasm. The cab door opened and a sturdy Chechen in a sheepskin coat and boots leaped out, then opened the rear doors for the seven esteemed guests.

The passengers—six men and one woman—stretched out knotted muscles and aching backs from the long, monotonous ride. They had sat in silence for the entire trip, sizing each other up with sidelong glances in the snowcat's spacious but utilitarian cabin. Outside in the frigid air, their breaths jetted out of their mouths, but the vapors were quickly swept away by the biting wind.

The morbidly obese Venezuelan, Yeferson Osorio, was the head of security for South America's largest drug cartel. His red-rimmed nostrils

and eyes suggested he was addicted to his own product. Despite the temperature, he didn't button up his gaudy, full-length ermine coat and his shoulder-length hair danced in the snowy breeze.

Osorio was familiar with the elegant Russian, Yakov Mityaev, and the bespectacled Chinese woman, Wu Shanshan, from the reports he'd read. Like him, they were the functional equivalents of security chiefs for their respective criminal enterprises, heading up organizations with intelligence-gathering assets that equaled or exceeded the capabilities of most nations. Had Osorio known these two world-class dirtbags were attending today's gathering he would have made other arrangements entirely.

The Venezuelan couldn't identify the others, but he assumed they were high-ranking members of their respective security departments as well. The tattoos peeking beyond the collar and sleeves of the Japanese man identified him as a yakuza even without the missing finger. A portly, clean-shaven Indian; a silver-toed, cowboy-booted Mexican; and a Thai highlander wearing a bright yellow ski parka that reached to his knees rounded out the rest of the passengers.

Osorio wondered if there had ever been a gathering of this level of criminal technical talent before. Police organizations around the world would salivate at the opportunity to gather them all up in one fell swoop.

The Chechen called into his walkie-talkie and a moment later the fort's portcullis rose on its chains. He pointed the seven visitors toward the cavernous entrance, where a tall soldier in a civilian snowsuit waited for them, a rifle slung over one shoulder. A third, shorter man stood by his side with a wand to check for weapons and other contraband items.

The seven invited shuffled toward the gate, their apprehension rising with each step. What lay beyond could change their lives forever.

Or end them.



Osorio silently fumed at the importunity of yet another weapons check as he stood inside the airport-styled millimeter wave scanner. He raised his arms above his massive head for the third time that day. These people were taking their security precautions seriously. He'd counted at least fifty

armed guards as he made his way through the ancient castle. It would have been impossible to assault the fortress with any hope of success.

The former Cuban intelligence officer monitoring the wave scanner fought back a smile as he examined the digital readout of the rotund gangster. Osorio's thick beard couldn't fully hide the double chin waddling beneath his jawline. At just over six feet tall with a size sixty-four waist, the Venezuelan crime boss was built like an enormous avocado. His designer-label green velvet tracksuit, though quite expensive, only added to the comic effect.

Despite his poor physique and even poorer health, the crime boss came fully vetted and possessed more than sufficient funds to qualify for today's auction. The unfortunate man had to climb five flights of stairs because the ancient fortress had no elevator. Sweat beaded his forehead. The Cuban was surprised the Venezuelan hadn't dropped dead of a heart attack with the exertion. How they would have ever managed to move his four-hundred-pound carcass from the narrow stairwell without a forklift would have been anyone's guess.

The Cuban signaled for Osorio to quit the booth as he whispered in his comms, "All clear." He nodded at the smaller bins on the table. "Your jewelry and watch will be returned to you after you finish your business with Mr. Martin," he said in Spanish.

Osorio answered him in the same language. "Make sure they are, *pendejo*."

The insult wiped the solicitous smile off the Cuban's face. His eyes narrowed as a voice command reverberated in his earpiece. He turned toward the guests.

"*Señora y señores*, we have one last stop. Please follow me."

Osorio snatched up his ermine coat from the bin on the nearby table and followed the Russian and the Chinese into another room, where a portable retinal scanning station had been installed. The ex-intelligence officer pointed at the seat just vacated by the Indian.

"Ms. Wu"—not her real name, of course—"if you please."

Wu nodded and took the seat, and the technician gave her instructions. She leaned forward and placed her chin on the machine's chin rest. Moments later, the retina of Wu's right eye had been scanned and her