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AND ROY JOHANSEN

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An Unexpected Song

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On the Run

Countdown

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Deadly Visions

Beyond Belief

The Answer Man

SHADOW ZONE

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AND

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America.
For information, address St. Martin's Press,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

ISBN 978-0-312-61160-6

First Edition: July 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Jerry

A faithful friend
who brought much love and laughter into the world

**S H A D O W
Z O N E**

PROLOGUE

Venice, Italy

10:35 P.M.

MARINTH.

Samuel Debney piloted his motorboat up Venice's Grand Canal, wishing he had never heard that word.

Marinth.

He had been only vaguely aware of it before, but in the past two weeks the name had come to mean many things to him. Awe. Wonder. Wealth. Fear. Ugliness. Death.

Marinth.

Had it only been two weeks since it had totally consumed him, wrenching him from his old life? It had been a good life, a comfortable life, but one that was now lost to him forever.

He shook his head. Can't look back. He would soon have plenty of time to wrestle with his regrets.

He hoped.

The lights of Sestiere di Castello shimmered on the water as he eased off the throttle and turned down Fondamenta San Lorenzo. Three turns later, he was facing the white-plaster back side of an art

gallery. He heard music in the distance, but other than that there was only the sound of water lapping against the building foundation. It was deserted and only partially visible from the adjacent waterway.

He cut the engine. Why in the hell had he agreed to this?

He knew why. Because he was tired. Because he wanted it to be over. Because he just wanted—

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Debney.”

He turned. Two men appeared from around the corner of the building. Debney tensed. He recognized them both. Gadaire’s men, whom he’d seen when he’d made the attempt to contact Gadaire. The red-haired man with the narrow face who had spoken was Tad Bekins. The smaller man with gray hair and muscles like a weight lifter was Ralph Johnson. Nasty bastards like all of Gadaire’s goons. This was not good.

Debney tried to smile, and only then did he realize that his lower lip was trembling. “Hello, Bekins, I didn’t expect you.”

“Why not?” Bekins and Johnson jumped off the concrete walkway and landed on his boat. Bekins stepped closer to him. “Mr. Gadaire was intrigued by the information you claim to have.”

“I do have it.” His lips tightened. “And if he was so intrigued, why didn’t he come himself?”

“Mr. Gadaire is a very busy man.”

“So am I. I don’t have time to waste with—”

Johnson slipped around and grabbed him from behind. As Debney struggled to break free, Bekins grabbed his arm and sliced his left wrist. Blood spurted onto the boat deck.

Debney reached for the revolver tucked into his waistband, but Johnson got there first. The man hefted it and struck him on the back of the head. In the next instant, he felt an icy cold shiver of pain on his right wrist. He looked down and saw that Bekins had cut him there, too, and his blood was now pooling at his feet.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Debney screamed.

Johnson pushed him down onto the weather-beaten seat. “You’re losing blood fast. You’ll be unconscious in seven minutes, and dead in twelve. *Unless* you tell us exactly what we need to know.”

“You’re out of your minds! I had a deal with Gadaire!”

“Deal canceled. This is the new deal,” Bekins said. “Talk. Tell us where we can find the sample.”

He was going to die. Debney rocked back and forth. “Mother of God . . .”

“The sample,” Bekins repeated. “Tell us where—” Bekins suddenly arched, his face drooping. He stumbled backwards toward the side of boat.

Debney stared in bewilderment as Bekins tried to speak. Blood. Blood pouring from his chest. Another step back, and Bekins tumbled into the canal.

“What the—” Johnson spun around to face the walkway.

A man was standing there, a tall, powerful shadow in the dimness. He took aim with the automatic handgun and fired two muffled shots. Johnson collapsed onto the cushion next to Debney, almost as if dropping down to rest.

The man with the gun stepped down onto the boat.

Debney looked up. A fog was creeping up from the back of his head. Must fight it. Must stay awake. Fall unconscious, and he was a dead man. “You . . . killed them . . .”

“Yes. I’m sure neither of us is going to miss them.” The man was powerfully built, a gleam of silver burnished the hair of his temples, and he spoke with a slight accent. Russian? “I’ll offer you the same deal those gentlemen did. Tell me what I need to know, and I’ll save your life. The difference is, I will keep my word, which those two had no intention of doing.”

“Who . . . are you?”

“Kirov.” He checked his watch. “Your time’s running out. I suggest you begin talking now. If you talk fast enough, I’ll have time to stop that blood before those wounds kill you. But I won’t start until I have what I want.” He added with lethal softness, “Believe me. I don’t bluff, Debney. Marinth. Let’s start there, shall we? Before this is over, I’m going to know everything that you know about Marinth.”

CHAPTER

1

Marinith Underwater
Archaeological Site
Atlantic Ocean
Copernicus Research Vessel
7:10 A.M.

“HEY, I DIDN’T SEE YOU IN the galley for breakfast, Hannah,” Josh Carnaby said as he strolled down the deck toward her. “You okay?”

“Fine.” Hannah Bryson made a face as she gestured to the satellite phone in her hand. “I’m just trying to get through to my sister-in-law before we go down in the minisub. I want to talk to my nephew, and the time difference between here and Boston usually screws everything up.” Her lips tightened determinedly. “But I will get through, dammit.”

“An emergency?”

She shook her head. “It’s my nephew Ronnie’s twelfth birthday.” Her expression became shadowed. “It’s the first one since my brother’s death. I want to touch base with him. It’s going to be tough on Ronnie. It’s going to be tough on all of them.”

Josh nodded soberly. “It’s only been a couple months since

Conner died. The wound has to be still raw.” He was silent a moment. “Damn, I miss him. The entire crew misses him. Every time I see you, I expect Conner to be right beside you.”

As he’d been beside her all through the years, she thought. They’d not only been brother and sister, they’d worked together on hundreds of undersea projects, traveled the world together, and been best friends. She missed his sweetness, his humor, his gentle way of opening her eyes to the good things around her when all she could see was darkness. Dear God, how she missed him. “Yeah, I know.” She swallowed hard and quickly gazed out at the sun-dappled sea. Get control. She mustn’t be all teary when she talked to Ronnie. “Conner would have loved this job. He was always telling me that I spent too much time involved with machines and not enough enjoying the wonders the machines could uncover.” She smiled with an effort. “Here I don’t have a choice. The wonders are all around me whenever I go down to that lost city that all the historians are trying to link with Atlantis.”

“That city would be damn hard to uncover if you hadn’t been so brilliant and designed those minisubs.” He was silent a moment. “I just want you to know that I appreciate you letting me go down with you and having a part in this show. It’s the chance of a lifetime, and you’ve always been the best boss a guy could have. I’ll never be as good as Conner, and I know it probably hurts you to work with anyone else. But it’s been an experience I’ll never forget.”

“Bullshit,” she said unevenly. “If you weren’t terrific at your job, I wouldn’t have chosen you. We make a good team.” She drew a deep breath. “Now get out of here and let me make my telephone call. We’re supposed to dive in thirty minutes, and I won’t go down until I’ve talked to Ronnie.”

He grinned. “I’m on my way.” He moved down the deck. “I’ll

even keep Ebersole away from you. He was asking for you at breakfast.”

Hannah groaned. “Then I’m glad I skipped it. For the last three days, he’s been cornering me and squeezing every bit of progress information out of me.”

“Imagine that. But since he’s chief operating officer of AquaCorp, and AquaCorp is funding our little expedition, you can understand how he’d have a *slight* interest in the operation.”

“Money men,” Hannah said. “The bane of my life.” She made a shooping motion. “Go. Keep him off my back until I finish my call, and I’ll be eternally grateful.”

“Consider it done.”

She smiled as she watched him stroll away from her. Yes, Josh would find a way to give her these few moments’ respite. He’d been a member of her team for years, but she’d learned new respect and affection for him since she’d lost Conner.

She dialed Cathy’s number again. It rang six times, but Cathy finally picked up.

“Hi, I’ve been trying to get through to you. Everything okay?”

“Sure, we’re about to cut the cake. Ronnie’s been on the phone with my mom.” Cathy chuckled. “And Donna had to have her turn. She doesn’t totally understand the concept of special treatment on birthdays.”

“She’s only five.”

“And Ronnie doesn’t mind. He’s a very protective big brother with her.” She was silent a moment. “Particularly since Conner died. He thinks I need help with her.”

“He’s a great kid.”

“You bet he is. The best.”

“How are you doing, Cathy?”

"I'm surviving. Some days are better than others. This one is not so great." She changed the subject. "We saw you on the Discovery Channel this week. Donna was very excited."

"And Ronnie?"

"Thoughtful. I was worried that he might be thinking about Conner. I tried to talk to him, but he closed me out," she said. "We're okay, Hannah. Stop worrying about us."

"You're my family. It goes with the territory."

"We worry about you too. We're not the one who's careening around in the depths of the ocean in that weird contraption." She paused. "You named that exploration minisub you use after Conner. It came as a shock when that announcer started talking about *Conner One*."

"Conner would have liked this sub. I can hear him laughing because it's so crazy-looking."

"Yeah, he always teased you about your mechanical 'creatures,'" she said. "It's kind of . . . comforting to have his name on one. Thank you for doing it, Hannah."

"I'm selfish. I did it for me."

"You did it for us, too. Now I'll let you talk to the birthday boy. He's right at my elbow."

Ronnie came on the phone. "Hi, Aunt Hannah."

"Happy twelfth birthday. I wish I was there."

"Me, too. Thanks for all the new soccer equipment. It's cool."

"No, *you're* cool. I'm expecting stellar things from you next season."

"I'll try." He was silent a moment. "I was thinking about skipping soccer next year. Mom may need me."

"She needs you to be a normal kid." But he wasn't a kid any longer, she thought sadly. He'd always reminded her of Conner, and since her brother's death, she could see all Conner's caring and seri-

ous responsibility mirrored in the boy. “She’s trying to hold everything together. Don’t make her feel like a failure.”

“Mom’s great.” He was silent a moment. “I saw the TV show about you and Marinth. It looked . . . cool.”

“It is.”

“They said there are hundreds of dolphins who live down there.”

“Yes, the people of ancient Marinth had a special relationship with dolphins. That’s why my friend Melis Nemid became involved in searching for the lost city. She’s a marine biologist, and she loves dolphins. She has two, Pete and Susie, who are her special friends. They’re absolutely amazing.”

“I’d like to see them,” he said haltingly. “I think I should come there, Aunt Hannah.”

She had been afraid this was coming. “To see the dolphins?”

“No, to take care of you. My dad told me that you were alone, and we had to take care of you. Now that he’s gone, it’s my job.”

So solemn, so endearing. It was breaking her heart.

She would *not* tell him that she didn’t need him. “We all have to take care of each other. But right now you need to take care of Donna and your mom.” She paused. “Maybe I could arrange for you to have a working holiday with me next summer. Sort of an apprenticeship.”

“Working together?” His voice was eager. “Doing stuff like Dad did for you?”

“Exactly. I’ll look forward to it, Ronnie.”

“So will I.” He paused. “But that’s months away. Is that okay? I don’t want you to be lonely, Aunt Hannah.”

“It’s okay. I’ll keep busy, and you’ll be here before I know it. Now go back and have your cake. I love you, Ronnie.”

“I love you too. I’ll study all the books in Dad’s library that have to do with mapping and scientific—”

“You do that. I’m sure it will help. Enjoy your birthday. Good-bye, love.” She hung up.

What had she gotten herself into?

Dealing with a twelve-year-old. Responsibility. Duty.

Love.

As long as there was love, she could handle the rest. In fact, she was beginning to feel excited about the prospect of having Ronnie with her on the job.

She gazed out at the sea. She hoped that Ronnie would be able to come here and see the wonders she’d viewed in the last weeks. If AquaCorp had its way, her team would be sent on their way long before next summer.

I don’t want you to be lonely.

She didn’t want to be lonely either, but she’d made her choice. She’d tried marriage, and it hadn’t worked out. She was too driven and obsessed by her work to be able to make that kind of commitment. It would have to be an extraordinary relationship to ever tempt her to try again.

Kirov.

She veered away from the name that had suddenly slid into her mind like a seductive whisper. That was a promise that had never come into being. Just as well. Kirov might be extraordinary, but he was also deadly. She was better off alone than walking that path.

Stop moping, she thought impatiently. She worked with great people, and she had Cathy and the kids to love and nurture. That was a hell of a lot more than most women had going for them.

She turned and headed for the minisub at the docking station on the vessel.

And she had work that was headily exciting and filled her life. When she was in that minisub exploring those wonders she had

wanted to show Ronnie, there were exhilaration and curiosity and endless possibilities.

And there was no loneliness.

DAMMIT, HE'D MISSED HER again, Ebersole thought with annoyance as he watched Hannah climb into the minibus. He had an impulse to go down, pull her out of that sub, and throttle her. He knew she'd probably been avoiding him again, and Josh Carnaby had been a party to it.

Yeah, sure. If he laid a hand on her, she'd very likely deck him. There was nothing fragile about Hannah Bryson. She was tall and slim but with shapely broad shoulders and beautiful long legs. Her wild curly dark hair reached her shoulders and framed a face whose deep-set brown eyes, high cheekbones, and wide lips made you want to keep on looking. The cameras loved her, and that face had been a bonus to the corporation when the Discovery Channel had been doing the interviews. Science was great, but charisma made it go down a hell of a lot smoother.

But now she was proving to be a complete pain in the ass. She didn't understand the common dollar-and-cents rules that governed expeditions like this. She wanted things her way and fought any limits they tried to put on her. She was stubborn and hardheaded and thought that the ships she built were almost human.

And some of them seemed to come very close, he had to admit. She had been a valuable asset. Past tense. He was feeling regret as well as irritation, he realized.

Because in these months aboard the research vessel, he had become caught up in the camaraderie and excitement that Hannah and her team had felt exploring the underwater city. At times he

had actually thought of himself as one of them. It had been . . . different.

Hannah turned, smiled, and waved at him.

Be professional. Smother the annoyance. He lifted his hand and waved.

Enjoy the trip.

I'll be waiting.

HANNAH GLANCED AWAY FROM staring out into the murky water at the minibus's forward port. "Once more around the spire, Josh."

Josh smiled as he pulled back on the control stick. "We've already photographed it from every conceivable angle."

"I don't care. Let's get it again."

"Aye, aye. And for the record, I don't blame you, Hannah. I'm going to miss this place."

Hannah took in the magnificent vista before her. Even after all these weeks, the sight still took her breath away.

Marinth.

In the decade since its discovery, the fabled four-thousand-year-old city had sparked a cottage industry of books, television shows, a hit IMAX documentary, and even a new-age religious movement. It could be even older than scholars estimated because mention of Marinth was made on the wall of Hepsut's tomb in Egypt. No matter how ancient the city, the glory was in the architecture and sweeping symmetry, streets laid out in perfect order. Huge white columns built to last forever, a people so advanced that universities were vying for every word of their lives and studies. There was even speculation that it might be the Lost Atlantis.

But none of the media frenzy could match seeing it with her own

eyes, Hannah thought. She had designed *Conner One* and its almost-identical twin, *Conner Two*, as state-of-the-art undersea-research vessels, and she couldn't think of a better way to break them in. She had browbeaten the sub's manufacturer, AquaCorp, into financing this trip not only to evaluate their new minisubs' effectiveness, but also to demonstrate their abilities to potential customers.

Hannah aimed the digital cameras at one of the tall golden spires as they moved around it. "The lighting is better today. This looks fantastic."

"Amazing what a couple million watts of candlepower can do, isn't it?"

Hannah nodded. Dozens of movable billboard-size light towers had enabled them to map and photograph every square foot of the site with incredible clarity and detail. Finally, the world would see Marinth for the magnificent city that it was, with long boulevards, breathtaking statues, and grand buildings that were as beautiful as they were functional. Tall golden spires marked north, south, east, and west on what was once a four-hundred-square-mile island, and miraculously, three of the four spires still stood, almost a quarter mile beneath the ocean.

They circled downward around the South Spire until they found themselves cruising over what was once one of Marinth's main thoroughfares.

Josh smiled. "Get Matthew on the horn. Tell him to bring *Conner Two* down for a drag race."

"Not in my subs."

"Funny how AquaCorp thinks the subs belong to them."

"Not bloody likely." Like all her other creations, the subs would always be hers, no matter what company or branch of the military financed their construction. A nautical magazine had recently run a series of articles on "Hannah's Fleet," which, to her surprise, now

numbered over two hundred vessels—thirty-six individual designs—not including her early sketches dating back to a drawing on the place mat at her senior prom. She stood on the deck of her first launched sub on her twenty-fourth birthday, and in the thirteen years since, she prided herself on her versatility, from large nuclear attack subs to tiny one-man exploratory vessels.

To the general public, however, she was best known as the woman who mapped and photographed the *Titanic* wreck like no one before, enabling armchair explorers to explore large sections of the doomed luxury liner through an interactive Web site and a 3-D software program. Although others played key roles in the expeditions, it was Hannah and her revolutionary subs that captured the lion's share of attention from the world's media outlets.

Those subs were positively conventional compared to this new design, Hannah thought. It was a round pod with winglike structures on each side. Each wing featured a retractable mechanical arm and hand that had become a trademark of her research-sub designs, manipulated by a pair of controller gloves in the pod.

She was still amazed that she had ever been able to get such a ridiculous-looking little sub built. Its wings, exotic curves, and retro lighting panels looked more like something out of Jules Verne than a product from one of the world's largest defense contractors. The design was adventurous even by her usual standards, and it had been the source of much controversy ever since she had submitted her preliminary sketches over three years before. Many within the Aqua-Corp company had ridiculed her concepts as impractical, but the craft's speed and maneuverability had silenced most of the critics in the past few weeks.

Josh stared in awe at a statue garden even though he had seen it a dozen times before. "This was all under a hundred feet of silt?"

"Most of it. And it would still be there if—"

“Shit!” Josh pulled back the stick, and the minisub veered hard to the right.

Hannah’s gaze flew up to see that the dark superstructure of an inactive light tower, fallen on its side, now filled the entire front window. “Pull up,” she yelled. “Pull up!”

“I’m trying!”

Before she could brace herself, *Conner One* spun to the right, struck the remnants of a building, and brought down a pile of debris. A dull roar sounded in her ears, and the hull of the submersible shook as it was carried along by the debris.

Piercing alarms sounded, and Hannah heard her own voice—a temporary audio track—repeating “Collision imminent!” over and over again.

“Any thrust?” Hannah called over the rumbling and alarms.

Josh struggled with the control stick. “I got nothing!”

She felt as if her teeth were vibrating out of her mouth. After over a minute of the sliding, rumbling, and the sounds of groaning, twisting metal, they finally slowed to a stop.

She looked out the window ports. Total darkness. They had been carried away from the light towers, and the silt further cloaked them.

She turned toward Josh, whose face was covered by a glaze of perspiration, despite the fact that the minisub’s interior was now quite cold. Condensation from his rapid breathing frosted on the instrument panels in front of him. “What’s the power situation?” she asked.

He pulled back on the stick, and *Conner One*’s thrusters whined weakly. “I guess that’s your answer.” He tapped the button on his headset. “I’ll call for help.”

“Save your breath.” She was staring at her diagnostic screen. “The antenna system is damaged. No A/V communication, no GPS beacon, no lifeline to the surface.”

Josh shook his head. “This keeps getting better.”

“You don’t know the half of it. The aft oxygen tank has also ruptured. We have maybe forty minutes left.”

“Tell me you’re making some kind of sick joke.”

“No joke.”

“Dammit, we shouldn’t even be here. This expedition should have been finished a week ago.”

“You volunteered to stay on. You believed in what we were doing here. We all believed.”

He managed a rueful smile. “Sorry, Hannah. I guess I’m believing a whole lot less right now.”

She glanced around the small compartment, which was illuminated only by the glow of the panels in front of them. Beyond the instrument panels were two forward-facing window ports.

And beyond that, Marinth.

Josh shook his head. “This is my fault. I hit that wall like a bulldozer. I tried to spin away before it came down on us, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

“It wasn’t your fault. There isn’t a soul on earth who’s better at piloting this thing than you are.”

“Except you.”

“I designed it, but that doesn’t mean my reflexes are better than yours.” Hannah flipped a switch that toggled between the minisub’s observation cameras. Three of the six cameras were operational, offering murky views of the right, front, and rear of the sub.

Josh squinted at the carved features that surrounded them. “How far away did the collision carry us?”

“Half a mile, maybe more.”

“The rescue team may have a tough time finding us. If our GPS pulse cut out when the wall first came down . . .”

“I know, Josh. I guess we need to stay positive.” It was all very well to say that, she thought ruefully.

She studied the monitors. The rockslide had kicked up so much silt that visibility was still at only a few yards. She didn't want to say the words, but she knew that their oxygen would run out long before full visibility was restored.

She had to think of something. Fast.

The diagnostic screen blinked red wherever there was damage on the sub. It scared her to see that warning lights were flashing all over the vessel's superstructure. Damn.

She pointed to the power indicator. "We're losing juice."

"Great. Fuel-cell rupture?"

She nodded and bit her lip. "Those cells are made up of a liquid hydrogen-carbon compound . . . Heavier than water."

"Yeah? So?"

She leaned forward and pulled a lever that would activate the left retractable arm. The servo motors whined, and the arm lurched from its place beneath the wing.

She slipped her left hand into the controller glove and flexed her fingers. Outside, the mechanical hand vaguely mimicked her motions, as if crippled by arthritis.

"You're not going to do much with *that*," Josh said.

"It's okay. This isn't exactly a delicate operation."

"What kind of operation is it?"

Hannah drew back her arm. "I'm sure they sent *Conner Two* down here as soon as they lost touch with us. It can't be that far away."

He shook his head. "It could still be a mile. And in this muck, it might as well be a hundred."

"We need to send up a flare."

"How are we going to do that?"

Hannah raised her arm, and the mechanical appendage outside struck a stone wall. She made a clawlike motion and dragged the

mechanical hand back toward the rear of the pod, where the ruptured fuel cells rested.

“See any sparks?” Hannah said.

“Sparks? Down here? Why would there be—?”

He was interrupted by the blinding, white-hot flash of light, accompanied by a low rumble.

Josh threw himself back in his seat. “Holy shit! What did you do?”

“I ignited the fuel-cell compound.”

“Are you trying to blow us up?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

Sparks flew from the mechanical arm, and yet another flash lit up the ocean floor.

Josh was almost hyperventilating.

Hannah scraped the mechanical hand against the rock wall a few more times. Although sparks flew, there were no more ignitions. “I guess that’s it.” She pulled her hand from the controller glove.

“Dammit, you could have killed us!” Josh said.

“It was a distinct possibility.”

“Then why the hell did you do it?”

“I had a pretty good idea that the compound was diluted enough not to blow apart the entire sub.” She looked out the forward port. “We don’t have time to wait and hope they stumble upon us.”

“Even so, it would be a miracle if they—” He stopped. “Sorry. I know it’s no good being negative. Is there anything else we can do?”

Hannah shook her head. “We wait. We conserve air, we keep movements to a minimum.” She added quietly, “And we try not to stare too hard at the oxygen gauge.”

“IT’S BEEN A LONG TIME,” Josh said. “They should have been here by now, shouldn’t they?”

“It’s only been fifteen minutes.” It had seemed longer to Hannah too. She had hoped that the rescue ship would have come long before this. “I think we’re both a little on edge. They may be having trouble finding us in all this silt and—”

“Look!”

Another shaft of light shined through the port windows, but this was no explosion.

Hannah leaned forward. “It’s *Conner Two*!”

The minisub descended from above and came to rest less than ten feet in front of them. Matthew Jefferson’s dark, chiseled face appeared in the craft’s forward-right port. He smiled when he saw Hannah. He looked down for a moment, then raised a small whiteboard on which he had scribbled “R U OK?”

Hannah grabbed the whiteboard from underneath the console in front of her. She wrote her response and showed it to him: “BOTH FINE. O2 < 20 MINS!”

Matthew nodded and backed away from the viewing port. After a few moments, *Conner Two*’s two mechanical arms extended before it. The hands gripped the wall pinning them, then slowly raised it and pushed it away. The mechanical hands, with a dexterity that could only be Matthew’s work, then attached a steel tether cable to *Conner One*. *Conner Two* slowly rose, once again kicking up the silt and totally obliterating Hannah and Josh’s view. Their craft lurched, and they felt themselves being pulled from the ocean floor.

“Thank God,” Josh said fervently.

After a few minutes, they completely cleared the silt and could once again see the intense blue and green lights that accented the underside of *Conner Two*’s pod and wings.

“How’s the oxygen?” Hannah asked.

“Good. Still over ten minutes left.” Josh shook his head. “I still don’t know how in the hell they found us. Even if they were right

on top of us when you triggered those fuel-cell blasts, it must have taken them a while to get here. Do you know how lucky we are?"

"I know, Josh. I know."

After a few minutes, Hannah peered through her port. "You know, I don't think it was just luck that they knew where to find us."

Josh smiled. "Are we talking about destiny, Hannah? That's not at all like you."

"That's not what I mean." Hannah pointed outside. "Look."

Josh leaned forward to look out his port. "What are—"

Then he saw them. Two sleek dolphins circled the two minisubs, playfully tapping the windows with their snouts.

Hannah smiled and tapped the window with her fingers. "Hello, Pete," she whispered. "Hello, Susie. Nice to see you . . ."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, HANNAH and Josh stood with several members of her team on the top deck of the research vessel *Copernicus*, gazing at a twin-masted schooner floating fifty yards away. "When did *Fair Winds* get here?" Hannah asked.

Captain Danbury, a red-haired bear of a man, shrugged. "A couple of hours ago, right after you went down. Melis radioed and said she'd join us for dinner."

Hannah nodded. "Good thing she brought Pete and Susie with her. I have a feeling we'd still be down there if she hadn't."

"You got that right," Matthew said in his thick Australian accent. "But give credit where it's due. I was the one who zoomed to save you from the murky deep. Not a bad bit of rescuing, eh, doll?"

She smiled. Matthew was a tall, good-looking black man whose easy charm made many forget that he was one of the best minisub

pilots in the business. "I'll let you get away with calling me 'doll' only because you just saved my neck."

"I know how to pick my moments." He smiled at the dolphins chirping and turning back flips in the waves between the two boats. "As soon as we hit the water, Pete and Susie bullied and cajoled us until we headed in the direction they wanted us to go. I thought they were way off base, but they wouldn't take no for an answer."

Kyle Daley, her hydraulics specialist, pulled off his SEE ROCK CITY baseball cap and scratched his curly brown hair. "Okay, am I the only one here who doesn't believe that dolphins are the sea world's Einsteins? They're *fish*, people."

"Mammals," she corrected.

"Whatever." He made a face. "I'm happy you're okay, Hannah, but it's just as likely that they were leading Matthew to a school of yummy salmon they had their eyes on."

Hannah shook her head. "You can be a skeptic about a lot of things, but not about Pete and Susie. Not after the things we've seen them do in the past few weeks."

"Right. And next you'll have them doing your taxes." Kyle motioned toward the banged-up hull of *Conner One*. "It's amazing you guys were able to walk away from that thing. Looks like a scene from one of those old driver's-education films. You know, the ones where you see a mangled car all covered with the blood of a couple of careless teenagers?"

Hannah crouched beneath the left wing. "Thanks for the mental image, Kyle. But I see what you mean. It doesn't look like something a person could survive."

Hannah tuned out Kyle as he prattled on in the clichéd deep baritone of a driver's-ed instructional-film narrator. She usually welcomed the tension-breaking humor he brought to their long weeks at

sea. Now, however, she couldn't focus on anything but the wounded *Conner One*. Josh knelt beside her, examining the twisted plates on the wing's underside. "Nothing a month back in the machine shop can't fix."

"Six weeks. Everything was going so well, too."

"It's still going well. If we had been in any other minibus ever built, we'd be dead now. This only proves what an incredible design you've given them."

"I have a feeling Ebersole isn't going to look at it that way."

"You're damn right I'm not," Sean Ebersole's raspy voice said from behind them. He gave Kyle a cold glance that stopped his narrative in the middle of the sentence. "You think this is a joke?"

Hannah and Josh stood and turned to face Ebersole, the chief operating officer of AquaCorp. His short, stocky frame was practically bristling. Even in the open air he smelled vaguely of McClelland Dark Star pipe tobacco. He always carried the scent with him even though she almost never saw him puffing on his pipe.

Hannah patted the minibus's damaged plates. "Yeah, it's a howler of a joke, Ebersole. You should have seen us laughing down there on the ocean floor. We're both fine, by the way."

Ebersole nodded toward *Conner One*. "More than I can say for your vessel."

Josh stepped forward. "It was my fault. I thought I'd left enough clearance, but I misjudged the distance. I still think this is the best craft I've ever piloted."

"Do you? Hannah, let's talk inside."

"Now? I need to run diagnostics and—"

"Your people can take care of it. Let's go."

Josh and Matthew moved to follow him, but Ebersole turned and raised his hand. "Just Hannah."

She turned toward them. "It's okay, guys. Finish up here." She

followed Ebersole, who was already halfway across the deck. The crew was looking at her as if she had been sent to the principal's office, and she knew it was taking every ounce of Kyle's self-control to hold back a taunting "Uh-oh . . ."

They walked downstairs and made their way through the long, narrow corridor to the conference room, which was papered over with schematics for the submersibles. *Conner One* and *Conner Two* were virtually identical, but Hannah had designed subtle variations so as to evaluate the best total design for the final product. Three-foot models of the two vessels were suspended over the long table by almost-invisible strands of wire.

Ebersole closed the door behind him. "I'm shutting the mission down, Hannah."

She tensed. "Don't do this."

"I'm the only reason you're still here. Corporate wanted it over weeks ago."

"I know that. But you need to buy us some more time."

"Every day we're out here is costing the company a fortune. The rental of this boat, payroll for the crew . . ."

"AquaCorp is all over the Discovery Channel TV special, not to mention a logo placement in every newspaper ad and bus-stop poster. Plus the *National Geographic* spread. The exposure will be huge."

"It will be. But the Discovery Channel television people are gone, and the National Geographic team has finished. And you've completed your trials on the XP38 vessels."

"*Conner One* and *Conner Two*," she corrected.

"If you prefer. The point is, AquaCorp has gotten everything out of this mission that it's going to get. Your creations have performed magnificently, and everyone in the industry knows it. Even more people will know it when the magazine pieces and television profiles hit. We already have a three-year wait list on orders."

“So doesn’t that entitle me to two more weeks?”

“The company has nothing to gain by keeping us out here and everything to lose. Everyone will know that one of the best underwater pilots in the business cracked up in your sub. That won’t give our potential customers a comforting feeling.”

“It’s still a story without an ending.”

“You mean Marinth.”

“Yes.” Hannah crossed to the far wall, where dozens of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch color printouts had been pieced together to give a complete mosaic of what remained of the ancient city. “We’ve learned so much about the people who lived here. How they ate, worshipped, married, raised their children, governed themselves . . .”

“Your minisubs made that knowledge possible.”

Hannah turned away from the mosaic. “But we didn’t solve the biggest mystery of all . . . We don’t know how they died. It was a brilliant, beautiful civilization that just seemed to . . . vanish. Almost no trace of their language or customs has ever existed anywhere else. What happened to them?”

“That’s a question for another expedition, Hannah.”

“But with just a few more dives, we might be able to answer it with *this* expedition.”

“I’ll give you one more day. Tomorrow. Then we’re heading home.”

“When all the TV specials and companion books come out, I’ll promote the hell out of them. I’ll give AquaCorp all kinds of credit.”

“You’ve already promised to do that. That’s why we’re out here.” Ebersole shook his head. “When I report your accident, it will be out of my hands anyway. We’re done here, Hannah.”

He strode out of the conference room.

Dammit. She had been half expecting it after the crack-up, but

she had hoped that she could persuade Ebersole to stall for more time with the corporation.

Okay, he had pulled the plug. That didn't mean she had to give up without a fight. She just had to think of some way to make that fight as effective as possible.