

Sacred Stone: A Novel from the Oregon Files

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Clive Cussler debuted his new series, The Oregon Files, with the incredible adventure of Golden Buddha. Now he follows that triumph with Sacred Stone, a rollicking new tale featuring the enigmatic captain of The Oregon, Juan Cabrillo. In the remote wastelands of Greenland, an ancient artifact possessing catastrophic radioactive power is unearthed. But the astounding find puts the world at risk. Caught between two militant factions bent on wholesale slaughter, Juan Cabrillo and his network of spies known as The Corporation must fight to protect the stone - and prevent the outbreak of World War III... Clive Cussler is the author of numerous New York Times bestsellers. He splits his time between Telluride, Colorado and Paradise Valley, Arizona.

Craig Dirgo has been special projects director on many NUMA[®] expeditions since 1987 and now serves as a trustee. He also cowrote The Sea Hunters series. Chapter One

LIEUTENANT CHRIS HUNT rarely talked about his past, but the men he served with had gathered a few clues from his demeanor. The first was that Hunt had not grown up in some backwoods hillbilly haven and used the army to see the world. He was from Southern California. And, if pressed, Hunt would volunteer he was raised in the Los Angeles area, not wanting to disclose that he grew up in Beverly Hills. The second thing the men noticed was that Hunt was a natural leader—he was neither patronizing nor put on an air of superiority, but neither did he try to hide the fact that he was competent and smart.

The third thing the men found out today.

A chill wind was blowing down from the mountains into the Afghanistan valley where the platoon under Hunt's command was breaking camp. Hunt and three other soldiers were wrestling with a tent they were folding for storage. While the men were bringing the ends together longways, Sergeant Tom Agnes decided to ask about the rumor he had heard. Hunt handed him the side of the tent so Agnes could fold it into halves.

"Sir," Agnes said, "rumor has it you graduated from Yale University—that true?"

All the men were wearing tinted ski goggles but Agnes was close enough to see Hunt's eyes. A flicker of surprise, followed by resignation, flashed quickly. Then Hunt smiled.

"Ah," he said quietly, "you've found out my terrible secret."

Agnes nodded and folded the tent in half. "Not exactly a hotbed for military recruiting."

"George Bush went there," Hunt said. "He was a navy pilot."

"I thought he was in the National Guard," Specialist Jesus Herrera, who was taking the tent from Agnes, said.

"George Bush Senior," Hunt said. "Our president also graduated from Yale, and yes, he was a National Guard jet pilot."

"Yale," Agnes said. "If you don't mind me asking, how did you end up here?"

Hunt brushed some snow from his gloves. "I volunteered," he said, "just like you."

Agnes nodded.

"Now let's finish breaking down this camp," Hunt said, pointing to the mountain nearby, "and head up there and find that bastard who attacked the United States."

"Yes, sir," the men said in unison.

Ten minutes later, with fifty-pound packs on their backs, they started up the mountain. IN A TOWN where beautiful women abound, at age forty-nine Michelle Hunt still caused men to turn their heads. Tall, with hazel hair and bluegreen eyes, she was blessed with a figure that required neither constant dieting nor endless exercise to appear trim. Her lips were full and her teeth straight, but it was her doelike eyes and flawless skin that gave the strongest visual impression. And while she was a beautiful woman, that was as common in Southern California as sunshine and earthquakes.

What drew people closer to Michelle was something that cannot be created by a surgeon's knife, honed through dress or manicure, or developed through ambition or change. Michelle had that thing that made both men and women like her and want to be around her—she was happy, content and positive. Michelle Hunt was herself. And people flocked to her like bees to a flower in bloom.

"Sam," she said to the painter who had just finished the walls in her art gallery, "you do such nice work."

Sam was thirty-eight years old and he blushed.

"Only my best for you, Ms. Hunt," he said.

Sam had painted her gallery when it had opened five years before, her Beverly Hills house, her condo in Lake Tahoe and now this remodel. And every time she made him feel appreciated and talented.

"You want a bottle of water or a Coke or something?" she asked.

"I'm okay, thanks."

Just then an assistant called from the front of the gallery that she had a telephone call, and she smiled, waved and began to walk away.

"That's a lady," Sam said under his breath, "a lady."

Walking to the front of the gallery, where her desk faced out onto Rodeo Drive, Michelle

noticed that one of the artists she represented was coming through the front door. Here her amiability had also paid off in spades-artists are a fickle and temperamental lot, but Michelle's artists adored her and rarely changed galleries. That and the fact that she had started her business fully funded had contributed greatly to her years of success.

"I knew today was going to be good," she said to the bearded man. "I just didn't know it would be because my favorite artist would be paying me a visit."

The man smiled.

"Just let me take this telephone call," she said, "and we'll talk."

Her aide corralled the artist toward an area with couches and a wet bar off to one side. As Michelle slid into her desk chair and reached for the telephone, the aide took the artist's drink order and a few seconds later began packing ground espresso into the machine to draw him a cappuccino.

"Michelle Hunt."

"It's me," a gravelly voice said.

The voice was one that needed no introduction. He had swept her off her feet when she was a young woman of twenty-one, freshly arrived from Minnesota, seeking a new life of fun and sun in 1980s Southern California. After an on-again, off-again relationship, necessitated both by his inability to be bound to a relationship, as well as his frequent absences for business, she had borne his son at age twenty-four. And though his name never appeared on the birth certificate-nor had Michelle and he actually lived together before or since-the pair had remained close. At least as close as the man allowed anyone ever to come.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I've been okay."

"Where are you?"

It was the standard question she asked him to break the ice. Over the years the answers had ranged from Osaka to Peru to Paris to Tahiti.

"Hang on," the man said easily. He stared at a moving map on a forward wall near the cockpit of his jet. "Six hundred and eighty-seven miles from Honolulu on the way to Vancouver, British Columbia."

"Going skiing?" she asked. The sport was something they had enjoyed together.

"Building a skyscraper," he answered.

"You're always up to something."

"True," he noted. "Michelle, I called because I heard our boy has been sent to Afghanistan," he said quietly.

Michelle had been unaware—the deployment was still secret and Chris had not been able to disclose his destination when he'd been dispatched.

"Oh my," she blurted, "that's not good."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"How'd you find out?" Michelle asked. "I'm always amazed by your ability to ferret out information."

"It's not magic," the man said. "I have so many senators and other politicians in my pocket I've had to buy larger pants."

"Any word on how it's going?"

"I guess the mission is proving harder than the president envisioned," he said. "Chris is apparently leading a hunter-killer squad to locate the bad guys. Limited contact so far—but my sources claim it is cold and dirty work. If he doesn't contact you for a while, don't be surprised."

"I'm afraid for him," Michelle said slowly.

"Do you want me to put in a fix?" the man asked. "Have him pulled out and sent stateside?"

"I thought he made you agree never to do that."

"He did," the man admitted.

"Then don't."

"I'll call you when I know more."

"Are you going to be down this way soon?" Michelle asked.

"I'll call you if I am," the man said. "Now I'd better go—I'm starting to get static on the satellite line. Must be sunspots."

"Pray our boy is safe," she said.

"I might do more than that," the man said as the call ended.

Michelle replaced the receiver in its cradle and sat back. Her ex-beau was not one to show worry or fear. Still, his concern for his son had been palpable and personal. She could only hope his worry was misplaced, and that Chris would come home soon.

Rising from the desk, she walked toward the artist. "Tell me you have something good," she said easily.

"Outside in the van," the artist said, "and I think you'll like it."

FOUR HOURS AFTER sunrise, one thousand feet higher up the ridge from the camp where they had spent the night, Hunt's platoon met a determined enemy. The fire came from a series of caves just above and to the east. And it came all at once. Rifle fire, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, handgun fire rained down. The enemy dynamited the mountain to create rock slides, pelting the ground below, and they had mined the ground where Hunt's troops sought refuge.

The enemy's goal was to wipe out Hunt's team all at once-and they would come close.

Hunt had taken refuge behind a series of boulders. Bullets were ricocheting off the rocks to all sides, sending chips flying through the air and striking his men. There was nowhere to hide, no way to advance, and their retreat had been cut off by a rock slide.

"Radio," Hunt shouted.

Half his team was twenty yards ahead, another quarter ahead and to the left. Luckily, his radio operator had stayed close to the lieutenant. The man edged toward Hunt on his back to protect the radio. For his effort he received a wound to his kneecap when a bullet grazed his raised knee as the man pushed himself closer. Hunt dragged him the rest of the way.

"Antencio," Hunt shouted to a man a few feet away, "take care of Lassiter's wound."

Antencio scurried over and began cutting away the radio operator's pants. He found the opening was not deep and began to wrap a bandage around the knee as Hunt flicked on the radio and adjusted the dial.

"You're going to be okay, Lassiter," he said to the radio operator. "I'm going to get us some help in here posthaste. Then we'll have you medevaced."

The fear in the soldiers' faces was obvious. For most of them, as for Hunt, this was their first time in battle. As their leader, he needed to take control and form a plan.

"Control, Control, Advance Three," Hunt yelled into the microphone, "need positive support, grid three zero one eight. Taking heavy fire."

"Advance Three," a voice said immediately, "report situation."

"We're pinned down," Hunt said, "and they have the high ground. Situation critical."

Hunt glanced up as he was talking. A dozen bearded men in flowing robes were starting down the hill. "Get some fire up there, men," he screamed to the forward half of his team. A second later a volley of shots rang out.

"Advance Three, we have a Spectre two minutes out and inbound. Four whirlies-two carriers and two gunships-will be off the ground in three. It'll take them another ten minutes to reach your site."

Hunt could hear the whine of the massive propeller-driven gunship racing up the canyon miles below them. He peeked over the rock to see eight of the enemy still advancing down the hill. Raising himself, he shot off a rocket-propelled grenade. A whoosh then a thump as the charge flew through the air and ignited. He followed up with a volley of automatic weapon fire.

"Advance Three, acknowledge."

"Advance Three, affirmative," Hunt yelled into the microphone.

Where there had been eight there were now just four. They were only twenty yards from his forward team. Hunt swiveled his bayonet and locked it in place. The forward team seemed paralyzed. They were young, unseasoned and about to be overrun. A mortar landed close to the boulders and exploded. The area was showered with powdered rock and dust. From higher up the mountain another group of the enemy started down the hill. Hunt stood up and started firing. He sprinted the twenty yards ahead to his men and met the advancing enemy head-on.

Three's a charm, and that's how many Hunt shot dead in the gut. The last one he bayoneted, as his clip was empty. Tasking his sidearm from his holster, he finished the man off, then slid to the ground, replaced his clip and rose and started firing again.

"Back it up, men," he shouted, "behind the boulders."

Two by two his men retreated to the relative safety of the boulders to the rear, while the men remaining kept fire on an advancing enemy. The enemy was high on distilled poppy, misplaced religious zeal and the narcotic khat leaves they were chewing. The slope was red with the blood of their fallen comrades but still they advanced.

"Advance Three," the radio squawked.

Antencio reached for the radio. "This is Advance Three," he said. "Our C.O. is away from the radio, this is Specialist 367."

"We've located a B-52 at another target," the voice said. "We've diverted her to assist."

"Affirm-I'll tell the lieutenant."

But Antencio would never have a chance to relay the message.

Only Hunt and a grizzled old sergeant were left at the forward site when the AC-130 arrived on station. A second later a wall of lead began pouring from the 25-, 40- and 105-millimeter guns that poked from her sides.

The sergeant had seen a Spectre live-fire before and he wasted no time. "Let's back it up, sir," he shouted to Hunt. "we have a few seconds of cover."

"Go, go, go," Hunt said, yanking the sergeant upright and pushing him toward safety. "I'm right behind you."

The Spectre crabbed sideways from the recoil of her firing guns. A few seconds later the pilot pulled her up and out to turn and make another pass through the narrow canyon. As the gunship ended her turn and lined up for her second run, seven of the enemy still advanced. Hunt covered his sergeant's retreat.

He killed five of the enemy with a combination of a rocket-propelled grenade and a concentrated field of fire. But two made it close to Hunt's position. One shot him in the shoulder as he turned to retreat.

The second one slit his throat with a wicked-looking curved knife.

Starting down in the dive for the fire run, the pilot of the AC-130 saw Hunt being killed and radioed it to the other aircraft. Hunt's troops saw it as well-and the sight removed their fear and replaced it with rage. As the AC-130 lined up for the pass, the troops rose and charged another wave that had just left the cave and was advancing downhill. Pushing forward as a team, they reached their fallen leader and erected a protective circle around his body. They waited for the enemy to advance, but as if by magic, or sensing the fury of the American troops, the enemy began to turn and retreat.

TWENTY THOUSAND FEET above them and less than ten minutes from the target, the pilot of the B-52 flicked off the microphone and replaced it in its cradle.

"Did you all hear that?" he said quietly on the intercom to his crew.

The plane was silent save for the drone from the eight engines. The pilot didn't need an answer-he knew they'd all heard what he had heard.

"We're going to turn this mountain into dust," he said. "When the enemy comes for the bodies, I want them to need to collect them with a sponge."

* * *

FOUR MINUTES LATER the helicopters came for Advance Three.

Other Books

Poseidon's Arrow, Poseidon's Arrow by bestselling Clive Cussler is the twenty-second thrilling Dirk Pitt adventure. In 1943 a submarine returning from a secret mission is attacked, its vital cargo believed lost . . . Three quarters of a century later, NUMA director Dirk Pitt is asked to help locate a missing person: the scientist responsible for the design of the revolutionary Poseidon's Arrow submarine. This craft is so advanced and dangerous that any government would kill to possess it - and not only has its designer disappeared, but so too have the plans. But this is no simple search. It leads Pitt from Washington to the Panama jungle, draws in the full resources of NUMA, and slowly unravels a deadly conspiracy that seeks to bring the world to its knees- and only Pitt can prevent it.

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