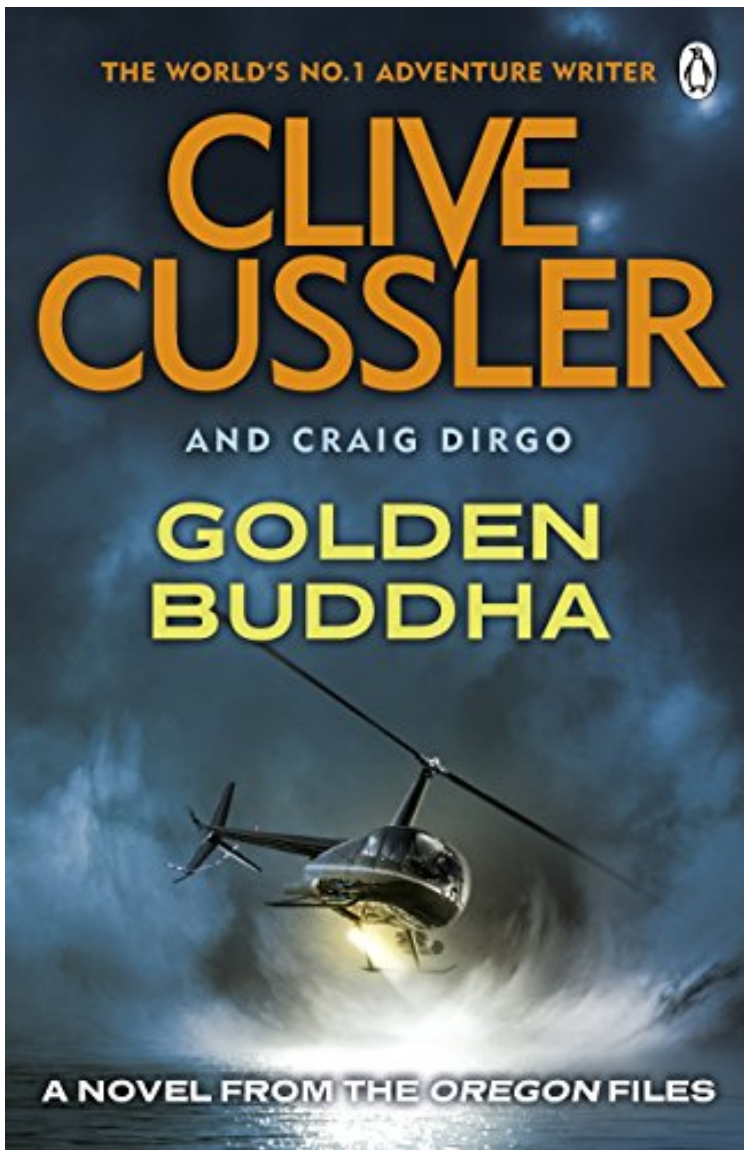


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Golden Buddha: Oregon Files #1



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Description : Description du produitClive Cussler, creator of the bestselling NUMA and Dirk Pitt series, presents his latest and most intriguing high seas action hero: the enigmatic captain of the Oregon, Juan Cabrillo. In his first feature-length adventure, it's up to Cabrillo and his crew of expert intelligence and Naval men to put Tibet back in the hands of the Dalai Lama by striking a deal with the Russians and the Chinese. His gambling chip is a golden Buddha containing records of vast oil reserves in the disputed land. But first, he'll have to locate--and steal--the all-important artifact. And there are certain people who would do anything in their power to see him fail...

Prsentation de l'diteurIn Golden Buddha Clive Cussler introduces a new hero: Juan Cabrillo. Clive Cussler is back with a new action hero for the high seas: Juan Cabrillo, captain of the Oregon, a state-of-the-art vessel

disguised as a rusting heap of junk...When Cabrillo and his ship are hired by the US government to find an ancient statue known as the Golden Buddha, stolen from the Dalai Lama in 1959, the stakes couldn't be higher. Success or failure will determine the future of Tibet. Playing the Russians off against the Chinese while battling against mysterious forces who will do anything to stop them, the crew of the Oregon face a formidable foe. But like his extraordinary ship, the enigmatic Juan Cabrillo has more than a few aces up his sleeve...Packed with blazing action and daring exploits, Golden Buddha is a nerve-shredding thriller from the best in the business. The number-one bestseller Clive Cussler, author of the thrilling Dirk Pitt novels Crescent Dawn and Atlantis Found, and co-author Craig Dirigo tell the tale of a new hero - Juan Cabrillo - caught up in a plot of treasure hunting and international relations in, the first novel of the adventure series The Oregon Files, Golden Buddha. Praise for Clive Cussler: 'Cussler is hard to beat' Daily Mail 'The guy I read' Tom Clancy Extrait

THE PRESENT DAY EIGHT IN THE evening. From out of the south, like a dark insect crawling over a wrinkled blue tablecloth, a tired old cargo ship pushed her way through the Caribbean swells toward the entrance of Santiago Harbor on the isle of Cuba. The exhaust from her single funnel drifted in a blue haze under an easterly breeze as the sun settled below the western horizon and became a ponderous orange ball magnified by the earth's atmosphere. She was one of the last tramp steamers, a cargo ship that traveled the sea anonymously to the exotic and far-flung ports of the world. There were few left in operation. They did not follow a regular shipping route. Their schedules depended on the demands of their cargo and its owners, so their destinations changed from port to port. They coasted in, unloaded their freight and sailed away like wraiths in the night. Two miles from shore, a small boat slapped over the rolling sea, approached the ship and swung around on a parallel course. The pilot closed on the rust-streaked hull as a boarding ladder was thrown down from an open hatch. The pilot, a man in his fifties with brown skin and thick gray hair, stared up at the ancient ship. Her black paint was faded and badly needed to be chipped away and repainted. Streams of rust flowed from every opening in the hull. The huge anchor, pulled tightly in its hawsehole, was completely covered by corrosion. The pilot read the letters, barely discernible on the upper bow. The weary old freighter was named Oregon. Jesus Morales shook his head in amazement. It was a miracle the ship hadn't been scrapped twenty years ago, he mused. She looked more like a derelict than a cargo carrier still in service. He wondered if the party bureaucrats in the Ministry of Transportation had any idea of the condition of the ship they had contracted to bring in a cargo of chemical fertilizer for the sugar and tobacco fields. He could not believe the ship had passed maritime insurance inspection. As the ship slowed almost to a dead stop, Morales stood at the railing and the pilot boat's bumpers squeezed against the freighter's hull. Timing the crest of a wave as it lifted the boat, Morales leaped agilely from the wet deck onto the boarding ladder and climbed to the hatch. It was a function he performed as often as ten times a day. A pair of crewmen were waiting beside the hatch and helped him up on the deck. The two were both burly-looking individuals, and they did not bother to smile in greeting. One simply pointed toward the ladder leading to the bridge. Then they turned and left Morales standing alone on the deck. Watching them walk away, Morales hoped that he'd never have to meet them in a dark alley. He paused before climbing the ladder and took a few moments to study the upper works of the ship. From his long experience and knowledge of ships, he judged her length at 560 feet, with a 75-foot beam. Probably a gross tonnage around 11,000. Five derricks, two behind the funnel and superstructure and three on the forward deck, stood waiting to unload her cargo. He counted six holds with twelve hatches. In her prime, she would have been classed as an express cargo liner. He guessed that she had been built and launched in the early 1960s. The flag on her stern was Iranian. Not a registry Morales had seen very often. If the Oregon looked shabby from the waterline, she looked downright squalid from her main deck. Rust covered every piece of deck machinery from winches to chains, but the hardware at least appeared to be in usable condition. By comparison, the derricks looked as if they hadn't been operated in years. To add further insult, battered drums, tools and what could only be described as junked equipment were scattered around the decks. In all his years as a harbor pilot, Morales had never seen a ship in such filthy condition. He climbed the ladder steps leading to the bridge, past bulkheads with flaking paint and portholes whose lenses were cracked and yellowed. Then he paused before finally swinging the door open. The interior of the vessel was as bad, if not worse. The wheelhouse was dirty, with the scars of cigarette burns on the counters and on what had once been a polished teak deck. Dead flies littered the windowsills, the smell assaulted his nose. And then there was the captain. Morales was greeted by a great slob of a man with an immense stomach that sagged over his belt line. The face was scarred, and the nose so badly broken it slanted toward the left cheek. The thick black hair was plastered back with some kind of greasy cream and his beard was scruffy and stringy. The captain was a cacophony of

colors. His eyes were red and his teeth yellow-brown, while his arms were covered with blue tattoos. A grimy yachtsman's cap sat perched on the back of his head and he wore dingy coveralls. The tropical heat and the humidity on the non-air-conditioned bridge made it obvious to Morales that the man had not bathed for at least a month. Any dog worth his salt would have tried to bury the man. He extended a sweaty hand to Morales and spoke in English. Glad to see you. I'm Captain Jed Smith. Jesus Morales. Pilot for the Harbor Office of Santiago. Morales felt uncomfortable. Smith spoke English with an American accent--not what he'd expected on a ship of Iranian registry. Smith handed him a packet of papers. Here's our registration and cargo manifest. Morales merely cast a brief glance at the documents. Officials on the docks would study them more closely. His only concern was that the ship had permission to enter the port. He handed back the packet and said, Shall we proceed? Smith waved a hand toward a wooden helm that somehow seemed terribly old-fashioned for a ship built in the sixties. She's all yours, Senor Morales. What dock do you want us to moor at? There are no docks available until Thursday. You will have to anchor in the middle of the harbor until then. That's four days from now. We have a schedule to meet. We can't sit around for four days waiting to unload our cargo. Morales shrugged. I have no control over the harbormaster. Besides, the docks are full with ships unloading new farm machinery and automobiles, now that the embargo has been lifted. These have priority over your cargo. Smith threw up his hands. All right. I guess it's not the first time we had to twiddle our thumbs waiting to unload. He gave a broad, rotten-toothed grin. I guess me and my crew will just have to come ashore and make friends with your Cuban women. The thought made Morales's skin crawl. Without further conversation, he stepped over to the helm as Smith called the engine room and ordered half speed. The pilot felt the engine's vibrations through the deck as the tired old ship began to make way again, and he aimed her bow toward the narrow entrance of Santiago Harbor, which was bordered by high bluffs that rose from the sea. From offshore, the channel that led inside to the bellows-shaped harbor was invisible until a ship was nearly on top of it. Rising two hundred feet atop the cliffs on the right stood the old colonial fortress known as Morro Castle. Morales noticed that Smith and the members of his mangy crew standing on the bridge seemed interested in the defenses that had been dug into the hillside when Fidel Castro had thought the United States was going to attack Cuba. They studied the gun and missile emplacements through expensive binoculars. Morales smiled to himself. Let them look all they wanted most of the defenses were deserted. Only two small fortresses maintained a small company of soldiers to man the missile emplacements in the unlikely event an unwelcome vessel tried to enter the harbor. Morales threaded his way through the buoys and steered the Oregon deftly around the twists and turns of the channel, which soon opened into the broad, ball-shaped harbor surrounded by the city of Santiago. The wheel felt strange to him, though. The odd feeling was barely perceptible, but there nonetheless. Whenever he turned the wheel, there seemed to be a short lag before the rudder responded. He made a quick but very slight turn to starboard before bringing the wheel back to port. It was definitely there, almost like an echo, a two-second delay. He did not sense sluggishness from the steering machinery, but rather a pause. It had to come from another origin. Yet when the response came, it was quick and firm. But why the hesitation? Your helm has an off feel to it. Yeah, Smith grunted. It's been that way for a few days. Next port we enter with a shipyard, I'll have the spindles on the rudder looked at. It still made no sense to Morales, but the ship was entering the open part of the bay off the city now, and he pushed the mystery from his mind. He called the harbor officials over the ship's radio and kept them informed of his progress, and was given orders for the anchorage. Morales pointed out the buoys to Smith that marked the mooring area and ordered the ship brought to slow speed. He then swung the stern around until the bow was facing the incoming tide before ordering all stop. The Oregon slowed to a halt in an open area between a Canadian container ship and a Libyan oil tanker. You may drop your anchor, he said to Smith, who acknowledged with a nod as he held a loudspeaker in front of his face. Let go anchor! he shouted at his crew. The command was answered a few seconds later by the rattling clatter of the chain links against the hawsehole, followed by a great splash as the anchor plunged into the water. The bow of the ship became hazy from the cloud of dust and rust that burst from the chain locker. Morales released his grip on the worn spokes of the wheel and turned to Smith. You will, of course, pay the pilot's fee when you turn over your documents to the harbor officials. Why wait? snorted Smith. He reached into a pocket of his coveralls and produced a wad of crinkled American hundred-dollar bills. He counted out fifteen bills, then hesitated, looked into Morales's shocked expression, and said, Oh, what the heck, suppose we make it an even two thousand dollars. Without the least indecision, Morales took the bills and slipped them into his wallet. You are most generous, Captain Smith. I will notify the officials that the pilot's fee was paid in full. Smith signed the required affidavits and logged the mooring. He put a massive

arm around the Cuban's shoulder. Now about them girls. Where's a good place in Santiago to meet them? The cabarets on the waterfront are where you'll find both cheap entertainment and drinks. I'll tell my crew. Good-bye, Captain. Morales did not extend his hand. He already felt unclean just by being on board the ship; he could not bring himself to grip the greasy hand of the obnoxious captain. Morales's easygoing Cuban warmth had been cooled by the surroundings and he didn't want to waste another second on board the Oregon. Leaving the wheelhouse, he dropped down the ladder to the deck and descended to the waiting pilot boat, still stunned at experiencing the filthiest ship he had ever piloted into the harbor. Which is just what the owners of the Oregon wanted him to think. If Morales had examined the ship more closely, he might have realized it was all a facade. The Oregon rode low in the water because of specially fitted ballast tanks, which when filled with water lowered the hull to make it look as though it were loaded with cargo. Even the engine tremors were mechanically staged. The ship's engines were whisper-silent and vibrationless. And the coating of rust throughout the ship? It was artistically applied paint. SATISFIED THAT THE pilot and his boat had pulled away from the Oregon, Captain Smith stepped over to a handrail mounted on the deck that did not seem to serve any particular purpose. He gripped it and pressed a button on the underside. The square section of the deck on which Smith was standing suddenly began descending until it stopped in a vast, brightly lit room filled with computers, automated controls and several large consoles containing communications and weapons-firing systems. The deck in the command center was richly carpeted, the walls were paneled in exotic woods and the furniture looked as if it had come straight from a designer's showroom. This room was the real heart of the Oregon. The six people—four men and two women—neatly dressed in shorts, flowered shirts and white blouses were busy manning the various systems. One woman was scanning an array of TV monitors that covered every section of Santiago Bay, while a man zoomed a camera on the pilot boat as it turned and headed into the main channel. No one bothered to give the fat captain half a glance. Only a man dressed in khaki shorts and a green golf shirt approached him. All go well with the pilot? asked Max Hanley, the ship's corporate president, who directed all operational systems, including the ship's engines. The pilot noticed the delay in the helm. Hanley grinned. If only he'd known he was steering a dead wheel. We'll have to make some adjustments, though. You speak to him in Spanish? Smith smiled. My best Yankee English. Why let him know I speak his language? That way, I could tell if he played any tricks over the radio with the harbor officials as we anchored. Smith pulled back a sleeve of his grimy coveralls and checked a Timex watch with a badly scratched lens. Thirty minutes until dark. The equipment in the moon pool is all ready. And the landing crew? Standing by. I just have time to get rid of these smelly clothes and get decent, said Cabrillo, heading toward his cabin down a hallway hung with paintings by modern artists. The crew cabins were concealed inside two of the cargo holds and were as plush as rooms in a five-star hotel. There was no separation between officers and crew on the Oregon. All were educated people, highly trained in their respective fields—elite men and women who had served in the armed forces. The ship was owned by its staff, who were stockholders. There were no ranks. Cabrillo was chairman; Hanley, president; the others held various other titles. They were all mercenaries, here to make a profit—though that did not necessarily rule out good works at the same time—hired by countries or large companies to perform clandestine services around the world, very often at great risk. THE MAN WHO left the cabin twenty minutes later did not look like the man who'd entered. The greasy hairpiece, scruffy beard and grimy coveralls were gone, as was the foul smell. So was the Timex, now replaced with a stainless-steel Concord chronograph. In addition, the man had dropped at least a hundred pounds. Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo had transformed himself from the grimy sea dog Smith to his true self again. A tall man in his forties, ruggedly handsome, he stared through pixie-blue eyes. His blond hair was trimmed in a crew cut and a western cowboy-style mustache sprouted from his upper lip. He hurried down the corridor to a far door and entered a control room perched high inside a vast cavern in the hull amidships. The three-deck-high moon pool, as it was called, was where all the Oregon's underwater equipment was stored—diving gear; submersibles, manned and unmanned; and an array of underwater electronic sensors. A pair of state-of-the-art contemporary underwater craft by U.S. Submarines—a sixty-five-foot Nomad 1000 and a thirty-two-foot Discovery 1000—hung in cradles. The doors on the bottom of the hull slid open and water flooded in until it was level with the outer waterline. The remarkable ship was not what she appeared from her exterior. The outer decks and hull were disguised to make her look like a rust bucket. The wheelhouse and the unused officers' and crew's quarters below were also kept in a slovenly condition to avoid suspicion from visiting port officials or harbor pilots. Cabrillo entered the underwater operations room and stood before a large table showing three-dimensional holographic images of every street in the city of Santiago. Linda Ross, the

Oregons security and surveillance analyst, was standing at the table lecturing a group of people dressed in Cuban military fatigue uniforms. Linda had been a lieutenant commander in the navy when Cabrillo had sweet-talked her into resigning and joining the Oregon. In the navy she had been an intelligence officer on board an Aegis guided-missile cruiser before spending four years in Washington in the navy's intelligence department. Linda glanced sideways at Cabrillo as he stood quietly without interrupting. She was an attractive woman, not a head turner, but most men still considered her pretty. She kept her five-foot-eight-inch, 130-pound body in firm shape with exercise, but rarely spent extra time on makeup or hairstyle. She was one smart lady, soft-spoken and greatly admired by the entire Oregon crew. The five men and one woman standing around the detailed 3-D image of the city listened intently as Linda ran through the last-minute instructions, using a small metal rod with a light on the end to point out their objective. The fortress of Santa Ursula. It was built during the Spanish-American War, and after the turn of the twentieth century it was used as a warehouse until Castro and his revolutionaries took over the country. Then it was turned into a prison. What is the exact distance from our landing to the prison? asked Eddie Seng, the Oregons master of subterfuge and director of shore operations. Two hundred yards less than a mile, answered Linda. Seng folded his arms and looked thoughtful. We'll be able to fool the locals with our uniforms going in, but if we have to fight our way back a mile to the docks while herding eighteen prisoners, I can't guarantee we'll make it. Certainly not in the condition those poor people are going to be in, said Julia Huxley, the Oregons medical officer. She was going along on the raid to care for the prisoners. A short woman, large bosomed with a body suited for wrestling, Julia was the congeniality lady of the ship. She'd served as a chief medical officer for four years at the San Diego Naval Base and was well respected by them all. Our agents in the city have arranged for a truck to be stolen twenty minutes before you leave the prison. It's used for hauling food supplies to the hotels. The truck and a driver will be parked one block from the workers' maintenance shack situated on the wharf above your landing dock. He'll drive you to the prison, wait, and return you to the dock. From there he'll ditch the truck and ride home on his bicycle. Does he have a name? Is there a password? Linda smiled slightly. The password is dos. Seng looked skeptical. Two? That's it? Yes, he'll reply with uno, one. It's that simple. Well, at least it's concise. Linda paused to flick a series of switches on a small remote control. The images of the city dissolved into a 3-D interior diorama of Santa Ursula Prison without its roof, revealing the inner rooms and cells and their connecting passageways. Our sources tell us there are only ten guards in the whole prison. Six on the day shift, two in the evening and two from midnight until six in the morning. You should have no problem overpowering the two on the station. They'll think you're a military unit come to transport the prisoners to another secure facility. You're scheduled to gain entry at ten o'clock. Subdue the two on-duty guards and release the prisoners, then return to the submarine and make the ship by eleven o'clock. Any later and you jeopardize our escape out of the harbor. How so? asked one of Seng's team members. We're told the harbor defense systems are run through an operational test every night at twelve. We've got to be well on our way to sea before then. Why not wait and go in after midnight, when most of the town is asleep? asked a member of the landing force. At ten o'clock, the local citizens will still be stirring around. You'll cause less suspicion if you don't sneak around the streets before dawn, she replied. Also, the other eight guards are usually out on the town in the local bars until early morning. You're sure about that? asked Seng. Linda nodded. Their movements have been watched and clocked for two weeks by our agents in the city. Unless Murphy's Law rears its ugly head, said Cabrillo, the release of the prisoners and the escape should go smoothly. The tough part comes when you're all on board and we have to sail out of the harbor. The minute Castro's harbor security forces see us pull up the anchor and turn down the channel for the open sea, they'll know something is wrong and all hell will break loose. Linda looked at Cabrillo. We have the weaponry to knock them out. True, Cabrillo acknowledged. But we cannot fire the first shot. If they strike the Oregon first, however, we'll have no choice but to protect ourselves. None of us has been told, said Seng, who exactly are we breaking out of jail. They must be important or we wouldn't have contracted for the job. Cabrillo looked at him. We wanted to keep it under wraps until we got here. They're Cuban doctors, journalists and businessmen who opposed Castro's government, all highly respected men and women. Castro knows they are dangerous if they are free. If they reach the Cuban community in Miami, they can use it as a base to instigate a revolutionary movement. Is it a good contract? Ten million dollars if we deliver them to U.S. soil. Seng and the others around the holographic display smiled. That should add a tidy little amount to everyone's nest egg, he said. Doing good for profit, Cabrillo said with a wide grin. That's our motto. AT PRECISELY 8:30, Seng and his small force boarded the Nomad 1000 along with the two crewmen who would pilot the sub and guard it during the operation. The sub looked more like a luxury surface yacht than a

submersible. Capable of running at high speeds on the surface with its diesel engines, it was battery powered beneath the waves. With a speed of twelve knots underwater, the Nomad could dive to a thousand feet. The interior was designed to hold twelve people comfortably, but Cabrillo had had her configured to carry three times that number tightly packed together, for missions such as this one. The entry door was closed and sealed, and the craft, secured by a large sling, was lifted by a crane into the center of the moon pool. The operator looked into the control room and was given the descent signal by Cabrillo. Then, slowly, the large craft was lowered into the black water. As soon as she settled, divers removed the sling and were carried upward to the surrounding balcony by the crane. Radio check, said Seng. Do you read me? Like you're in the same room, Linda Ross assured him. Are we clear? No ship movement and only three fishing boats are heading out to sea. At thirty feet, you should stay well below their keels and props. Keep the coffee on, said Seng. Bon voyage, quipped Cabrillo. That's easy for you to say, Seng came back. A few moments later, the lights inside the Nomad blinked out and it vanished into the dark water of the harbor. THE PILOTS OF the sub relied on their Global Positioning System to set them on an exact course for the section of the city docks that was their destination. Detecting the pilings by their laser monitoring system, they were able to slip between the stern and bow of two container ships unloading cargo and maneuvered their way amid the giant pilings. Once under the wharves and out of sight from anyone above, they surfaced and closed the remaining gap using a laser night-penetrating camera that magnified the city lights filtering beneath the pilings. Floating maintenance dock dead ahead, announced the chief pilot. There was no hard check of weapons or survival gear. Though they all carried concealed handguns, they wanted to look like a small security unit moving through town without any menacing designs on the citizens. Their only inspection was to make sure their uniforms looked neat and presentable. The combat members of the team had all been members of the Special Forces. They were under strict orders not to commit mayhem unless it was absolutely necessary in order to save lives. Seng himself had served on a marine recon team and had never lost a man. No sooner had the Nomad gently bumped against the floating dock than Seng, followed closely by his team, exited the sub and headed up the stairs to a little house that sheltered the dock and maintenance workers' tools and small equipment. The door was easily unlocked from the inside, and Seng, with only a brief look to see if anyone was standing nearby, silently motioned everyone to follow him. The lights of the cranes and the ships they were unloading lit up the dock like daylight, but luckily the exit door was opposite and the team formed in the shadows. Then, in a column of twos and marching in cadence, Seng led them to the end of the dock and around the warehouse. His watch said 9:36. Exactly twenty-four minutes to arrive at the front gate of the prison. They found the truck nine minutes later, parked under a dim dock light beside the warehouse. Seng recognized it as a 1951 Ford delivery van that looked like it had passed the two-million-mile mark years ago. In the gloom he could make out lettering in a fancy red script on the side of the fourteen-foot cargo body. It read GONZALES FOOD PURVEYORS in Spanish. The driver was visible only by the glow of his cigarette. Seng walked up to the open window, hand on his Ruger P97 .45 caliber automatic with suppressor, and said quietly. Dos. The driver of the truck exhaled a cloud of nonfiltered cigarette smoke into the cab and replied, Uno. Pile in the back, Seng ordered his team. I'll ride in front. He opened the passenger door and slid onto the seat. There was no conversation as the driver crunched the worn-out transmission into gear and drove off the dock into the city streets. Every other light on the boulevard running along the bay was dark, either because the bulbs had burned out and had never been replaced or to conserve energy. After a few blocks the driver turned onto a main street and headed up a slight grade toward San Juan Hill. Cuba's second largest city, Santiago was in Oriente Province and had been the island's capital in the seventeenth century. Surrounded by hills with coffee and sugar-cane plantations, the city was a maze of narrow streets, with small plazas and buildings of Spanish colonial architecture bearing hanging balconies. Seng remained silent, concentrating on scanning the side streets and studying the numbers on his portable GPS to make certain the driver was heading in the right direction. The streets were mostly empty of traffic, except for fifty-year-old cars parked along the curbs, and the sidewalks were filled with people simply out for an after-dinner stroll or sitting in bars that reverberated with loud strains of the Cuban beat. Many of the stores and apartments above had paint that was faded and chipped, while others were coated in vivid pastel colors. The gutters and sidewalks were clean, but the windows looked like they had rarely seen a cleaner and a squeegee. For the most part, the people looked happy. There was much laughter and occasional singing. No one gave the truck a second look as it passed slowly through the main downtown section of the city. Seng spotted a few men in uniform, but they seemed more interested in talking with women than watching for a foreign intrusion. The driver lit up another foul-smelling cigarette. Seng had never smoked, and he leaned further against his door

and turned his face through the open window, lifting his nose in disgust. Ten minutes later the truck reached the front gate of the fortress prison. The driver pulled past and stopped fifty yards down the road. I will wait here, he said, in almost perfect English. They were the first words he had spoken since the dock. Seng read him like a book. Educator or doctor? I teach history at the university. Thank you. Don't be long. The truck will look suspicious if it sits here past midnight. We should be out before then, Seng assured him. Seng climbed out of the truck cab and peered up and down the street cautiously. It was empty. He rapped softly on the cargo doors. They opened and his team dropped out and joined him on the brick-surfaced street. Together they marched as a unit up to the front gate and pulled the bell cord. A ringing could be heard in the guard's office behind the gate. In a few minutes, a guard came wandering out, rubbing his eyes and temples. He had obviously been asleep on duty. He was about to tell the intruders to go away when he recognized Seng's uniform and insignia as a colonel's and he feverishly opened the gate, stood back and saluted. Sir, what brings you to the fortress this time of night? Colonel Antonio Yarayo. I was sent by the Ministry of State Security with this team to interrogate one of the prisoners. A new investigation has turned up a suspected United States spy operation. We believe they have information which could prove useful. Pardon me, sir, but I must ask you for the proper papers. As a good soldier, Sergeant, said Seng officiously, well you should. He handed the guard an envelope. Why aren't there more guards on duty? There is one other who watches the prisoners' cells. Hmm. Well, I see no reason to stand out here all night. Take me to your office quarters. The guard immediately ushered them into a barren office that contained only a desk and two chairs. A photo of Castro, taken when he was a young man, hung alone on one wall. Who is the officer in command here? asked Seng. Captain Juan Lopez. Where is he? He has a girlfriend with a house in the city. He will be back at nine o'clock tomorrow. How very convenient, Seng said as if bored. What is your name? Lieutenant Gabriel Sanchez, sir. And the name of the other guard on duty in the cells? Sergeant Iñez Macco. Please check the documents so we can get on with it. The guard sat down at the desk and pulled some paper out of the envelope. Seng moved behind and removed a small gun from his pocket as Sanchez stared blankly at a pair of comic books. He looked up. Colonel, I don't understand that was as far as he got before Seng shot a tiny dart filled with a tranquilizer into the nape of his neck. Sanchez looked at Seng oddly before slumping unconscious over the table. Seng threw a roll of duct tape to one of his team. Every move was so well rehearsed that he did not have to give orders. Two men took the tape, bound the unconscious guard, searched his pockets finding an unusual round key and then stuffed him in a closet. Another man went to work carefully rendering the security alarms and communications equipment inoperable. As they rushed through the passageways and tunnels and down stone steps to the cells below, Seng knew where he was within a foot, thanks to the holographic image of the fortress that he had committed to memory. There was no desperate hurry, but they could not afford to throw away time. He could see now why only a few men guarded the entire facility. The walls were massively thick, and there was only one entrance in and out of the dungeon cells far below street level. The only way a prisoner could escape was the way the team from the Oregon had come from the outside. A string of lightbulbs lit the passageway. The ceiling was very high, but the space between the walls was very narrow. The steps finally ended at an enormous steel door with the thickness of a bank vault. A TV camera stared ominously at Seng and his men. This was the tricky part, he thought, as he inserted the odd-looking key into the steel lock. Seng prayed that the key would do the job without a code being demanded. His fear was confirmed when he turned the key and a buzzer could be heard from the other side of the door. A minute later a voice called through a nearby loudspeaker, Who goes there? Colonel Antonio Yarayo, State Security, with an interrogation team to question the traitors. There was a pause. Seng didn't wait for a reply. Open up. I have the authority and necessary documents. Lieutenant Sanchez would have accompanied us, but he said he was not allowed to leave the front gate unguarded. Sergeant Iñez Macco, is it? Seng held up the envelope. If you have any questions, I have your service record in my hands. But sir, the voice of Macco pleaded, if the door is opened before eight o'clock in the morning, alarms will go off in the state security office at Fort Canovar. I ordered Lieutenant Sanchez to turn off the dungeon alarm, Seng bluffed. But sir, he cannot do that. The door is on a separate system that is wired to the security commandant's office in the city. It cannot be opened until eight o'clock in the morning. It was one more obstacle to overcome, but not totally unexpected. Seng was betting that the security officers would think the alarms were malfunctioning and call the fort to check it out before sending a squad of security police. Macco fell for it. A few seconds later, the big steel lock clacked and the bolts that extended from the door into the framework could be heard withdrawing from their slots. Then the massive door swung open silently and smoothly. Sergeant Macco stood at attention and snapped a salute. Seng wasted no more time on

niceties. He aimed the tranquilizer gun at Macco's throat and squeezed the tiny trigger. The guard's eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped to the stone floor like a sack of sand. The dungeon was not a state-of-the-art prison. The rusting iron cell doors had been hung in the late nineteenth century and still required the large antique key chained to Macco's belt. Seng ripped the key and its ring from the guard's belt and began opening the first doors. As soon as the door was swung ajar, Julia Huxley rushed into the cell to check the condition of its inhabitant. Seng's team helped by assisting the shocked prisoners, who feared the worst, into the dungeon's passageway. Five are in no condition to walk up the stairs and onto the street, said Julia. They'll have to be carried out on stretchers. Then we'll haul them on our backs, replied Seng. We don't have enough bodies to carry five stretchers. These poor devils think we're going to execute them, said a tall, ruggedly built team member with red hair in a buzz cut. We haven't got time to explain! snapped Seng. He knew that the security officials downtown were wondering why the dungeon alarm in Santa Ursula had been triggered at this time of night. They were certain to call and find the phones down. How soon they would send a squad of men to check was anybody's guess. Julia, you round up those who can move on their own two feet. The rest of you men carry the ones too weak to walk. They moved off, almost having to drag the poor, suffering Cubans out of the dungeon and up the stairs, every team member with a Cuban over one shoulder, their free arms braced around other prisoners who could barely manage the steps. Julia brought up the rear, supporting two women and whispering encouraging words whose meanings could only come through in her soothing tones she knew only enough Spanish to order a margarita. Climbing the winding stone steps was a torturous exertion for the weakened prisoners, but there could be no turning back. Any capture now meant certain execution. They struggled up the steps, chests rising and falling, lungs gasping for air, hearts pounding. Men and women who had long ago given up hope now saw an opportunity to live normal lives again, thanks to these crazy people who were risking death to rescue them. Seng could not afford the time to sympathize with their plight, or look into their gaunt faces. Any thoughts of compassion were fleeting. Sympathy could come once they reached the safety of the Oregon. He concentrated on pushing them all toward the main gate, keeping his mind cold and logical. At last the front of the column reached the guard's office at the gate. Seng stepped cautiously out onto the brick street. There was no whisper of sound or any sign of vehicles or people. The truck was right where they'd left it. The team carrying those too weak to walk were huffing and puffing now and soaked in sweat from the tropical humidity. Warily, Seng studied the darkened street and buildings through his laser night binoculars. The area was clear. Satisfied, he hustled everyone through the gate and shoved them roughly in the direction of the truck. He rushed back into the office and checked the guard. He was still unconscious. He also spotted a red light on a console beside the desk. The alarm had indeed been activated when they'd opened the dungeon door. The phone began to ring, and he picked it up and snapped in Spanish, Uno momento! Then he set the receiver down and dashed out the door. The rescue team and the freed prisoners were crammed into the cargo bed of the truck like Japanese workers during rush hour. The driver shifted the weary old transmission into gear with a brief metallic grind, and the truck leaped forward. The streets were as before, the auto traffic thin, while Cubans were enjoying a balmy evening outside on their balconies, sitting at chairs and tables on the sidewalks or drinking in the cantinas, dancing and singing. Seng cocked his ear out the window and listened for any sound of alarms or sirens. There came only the strains of music in the night air. The harshest sound came from the truck's muffler, which seemed to be coming loose from the engine header pipe. The rattle of the exhaust soon drowned out the city noise. He saw Cubans glance at the truck and then turn away. Loose exhaust pipes and rusted-out mufflers were common on the old cars that traveled the streets of Santiago. The city's inhabitants had more entertaining thoughts on their minds. The truck driver drove maddeningly slow, but Seng knew better than to push him. A truck casually taking its time through town would arouse no suspicion. After what seemed an hour, but was only fifteen minutes, the driver pulled up alongside a warehouse dock and stopped. A quick look up and down the deserted dock and Seng began goading everyone toward the maintenance shed. The five-minute journey to the shed was uneventful. Their luck still held. The only activity was centered on the two cargo ships unloading their big containers. Though still apprehensive, Seng finally began to relax. He motioned them through the door of the maintenance shed and down the wooden stairs. In the darkness he saw the vague shape of the Nomad sub's pilot, standing on the floating dock and helping the Cubans on board. The other pilot was down below, packing them tightly inside the narrow confines of the Nomad's main cabin. When Seng and Julia Huxley, the last to board, climbed onto the sub's upper deck, the pilot quickly cast off the mooring lines, looked up briefly and said, You made good time. Get to the ship as fast as this craft can take us, Seng replied. We couldn't help setting off an alarm. I'm surprised Cuban

security forces aren't already breathing down our neck. If they haven't tracked you here, said the pilot confidently as he closed and sealed the hatch, they'll never guess where you came from. At least not until the Oregon's found missing from her assigned anchorage. In seconds the sub was dropping beneath the surface of the dark water. Fifteen minutes later it surfaced inside the moon pool of the Oregon. Divers attached the hook and cable of the big overhead crane, and the Nomad was lifted delicately until it was even with the second deck and moored to the balcony. Huxley's medical team was waiting along with several members of the ship's crew to help the Cubans to the Oregon's well-equipped hospital. The time was three minutes past eleven. A thin man, his hair white before his time, recognized Cabrillo as an officer and walked unsteadily up to him. Sir, my name is Juan Tural. Can you tell me who you people are and why you rescued my friends and me from Santa Ursula? We are a corporation, and we were contracted to do this job. Who hired you? Friends of yours in the United States, answered Cabrillo. That's all that I can say. Then you had no idealistic purpose, no political cause? Cabrillo smiled slightly. We always have a purpose. Tural sighed. I had hoped that salvation, when it came, would come from another quarter. Your people did not have the means to do it. It's that simple. That is why they came to us. It's a great pity your only motivation was money. It wasn't. Money is simply the vehicle, said Cabrillo. It allows our corporation to pick its fights and to fund our charity projects. It's a liberty none of us had when we were employed by our respective governments. He glanced at his chronograph. Now if you'll excuse me, we're not out of the woods just yet. Then he turned and left Tural staring after him as he walked away. ELEVEN SEVENTEEN. IF they were going to make a run for it, now was the time, thought Cabrillo. The alarm had long been answered at the prison, and by now patrols were certainly roaming the city and the countryside in search of the escaped prisoners and their rescuers. Their only link was the truck driver, but he could not provide any information to the Cuban security forces, even if he was captured and tortured. His original contact had made no mention of the Oregon. As far as the driver knew, the rescue team had come from a landing party on another part of the island. Cabrillo lifted a phone and called down to the Corporation's president in the engine room. Max? Hanley answered almost immediately. Juan. Have the ballast tanks been pumped dry? Tanks are dry and the hull is raised for speed. The tide is about to turn and will swing us around. We'd better leave while our bow is still aimed toward the main channel. As soon as the anchor comes free, I'll set the engines very slow. No sense in alerting any observers on the shore to a sudden departure. At the first alarm or when we reach the main channel, whichever comes first, I'll enter the program for full speed. We'll need every ounce of power your engines can give. You think you can get us through a narrow channel in the dead of night at full speed without a pilot? The ship's computer system read every inch of the channel and the buoy markers on the way in. Our escape course is plotted and programmed into the automatic pilot. We'll leave it to Otis to take us out. Otis was the crew's name for the ship's automated control systems. It could steer the Oregon within inches of the intended route. Computerized automated controls or not, it won't be an easy matter to race through a tight channel at sixty knots. We can do it. Cabrillo punched off and hit another code. Mark, give me a status on our defense systems. Mark Murphy, the Oregon's weapons specialist, replied in his west Texas drawl, If any of them Cuban missile launchers so much as hiccups, we'll take them out. You can expect aircraft once we're in the open sea. Nuthin' we cain't handle. He turned to Linda Ross. Linda? All systems are online, she replied calmly. Cabrillo set the phone in its cradle and relaxed, lighting up a thin Cuban cigar. He looked around at the ship's crew, standing in the control center. They were all staring at him, waiting expectantly. Well, he said slowly, before taking a deep breath, I guess we might as well go. He gave a voice command to the computer, the winch was set in motion, and the anchor slowly, quietly through Teflon sleeves the team had inserted inside the hawsehole, which deadened the clank of the chain rose from the bottom of the harbor. Another command and the Oregon began to inch slowly ahead. Down in the engine room, Max Hanley studied the gauges and instruments on the huge console. His four big magnetohydrodynamics engines were a revolutionary design for maritime transport. They intensified and compounded the electricity found in saline seawater before running it through a magnetic core tube kept at absolute zero by liquid helium. The electrical current that was produced created an extremely high energy force that pumped the water through thrusters in the stern for propulsion. Not only were the Oregon's engines capable of pushing the big cargo ship at incredible speeds, but it required no fuel except the seawater that passed through its magnetic core. The source of the propulsion was inexhaustible. Another advantage was that the ship did not require huge fuel tanks, which enabled the space to be utilized for other purposes. There were only four other ships in the world with magnetohydrodynamics engines--three cruise ships and one oil tanker. Those who had installed the engines in the Oregon had been sworn to secrecy. Hanley took

proprietary care of the high-tech engines. They were reliable and rarely caused problems. He labored over them as if they were an extension of his own soul. He kept them finely tuned and in a constant state of readiness for extreme and extended operation. He watched now as they automatically engaged and began pushing the ship into the channel that led to the sea. Above in the command center, armored panels slid noiselessly apart, revealing a large window on the forward bulkhead. The murmur among the men and women gazing intently at the lights of the city was quiet, as though the men manning the Cuban defense systems could hear their words. Cabrillo spotted another ship leaving the harbor ahead of them. What ship is that? he asked. One of the team pulled up the list of ship arrivals and departures on his computer monitor. She's a Chinese-registered cargo vessel carrying sugar to Hangzhou, he reported. She's leaving port nearly an hour ahead of her scheduled departure time. Name? asked Cabrillo. In English, the Red Dawn. The shipping line is owned by the Chinese army. Turn out all the outer lights, and increase speed until we are close astern of the vessel ahead, he commanded the computer. We'll use her as a decoy to lead us out. The outer deck and navigation lights blinked out, leaving the ship in darkness as she narrowed the gap between the two vessels. The lights inside the command center dimmed to a blue-green glow. By the time the Red Dawn entered the ship's channel and passed the first of the string of marker buoys, the darkened Oregon was trailing only fifty yards off her stern. Cabrillo kept his ship just far enough back so that the Chinese vessel's deck lights would not cast their beams on his bow. It was a long shot, but he was betting the silhouette of his ship would be mistaken for the shadow of the Red Dawn. Cabrillo glanced at a large twenty-four-hour clock on the wall above the window just as the long minute hand clicked onto 11:39. Only twenty-one minutes to go before the Cubans' defense systems test. Following the Red Dawn is slowing us down, said Linda. We're losing precious time. Cabrillo nodded. You're right, we can't wait any longer. She's served her purpose. He leaned over and spoke into the computer's voice receiver. Go to full speed and pass the ship ahead! Like a small powerboat with big engines and a heavy hand on the throttles, the Oregon dug her stern into the forbidding water and lifted her bows clear of the waves as her thrusters erupted in a cloud of froth, creating a vast crater in her wake. She leaped down the channel and swept past the Chinese cargo ship less than twenty feet away, as if she were stopped dead in the water. The Chinese sailors could be seen staring in stunned disbelief. Faster and faster with each passing second she raced through the night. Speed was the Oregon's crowning achievement, the thoroughbred heart of the vessel. Forty knots, then fifty. By the time she passed Morro Castle at the entrance to Santiago, she was making nearly sixty-two knots. No ship in the world that size could match her speed. The beacon lights mounted high on the bluffs were soon little more than blinking specks on a black horizon. THE ALARM SPREAD quickly onshore that a ship was making an unauthorized departure but the radar and fire control operators did not unleash their shore-to-surface missiles. Their officers could not believe that such a large ship was moving at such an incredible rate of speed. They assumed their radar systems were malfunctioning, and they were reluctant to unleash missiles that they did not think could lock on to such an inconceivable target. Not until the Oregon was twenty miles out to sea did a general in Cuban security put two and two together and deduce that the sudden departure of the ship and the escape of the Santa Ursula prisoners were somehow tied together. He ordered missiles fired at the fleeing ship, but by the time the word filtered down through the sluggish command, the Oregon was out of acceptable range. He then ordered jets from the Cuban air force to intercept and sink the mystery ship before it reached the protection of a United States Coast Guard cutter. It could not possibly escape, he thought, as he sat back, lit a cigar and contentedly puffed a cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling. Seventy miles away, two geriatric MiGs were sent aloft and set a course toward the Oregon as directed by Cuban radar. CABRILLO DIDN'T NEED to study a chart to see that sailing around the tip of Cuba from Santiago through the Windward Passage and then northwest to Miami was little more than a suicide run. For nearly six hundred miles, the Oregon would be less than fifty miles from the Cuban coast, a voyage in a shooting gallery. His safest option was to set a course southwest around the southern tip of Haiti and then almost due west to Puerto Rico, which was a territory under the U.S. flag. There he could unload his passengers, where they would be safe and cared for at proper medical facilities before being flown to Florida. Two unidentified aircraft closing, announced Linda. I have them, Murphy announced, hunched over a console with enhanced radar screens and an array of knobs and switches. Can you identify? asked Linda. Computer reads them as a pair of MiG-27s. How far out? Cabrillo probed. Sixty miles and closing, Murphy answered. Poor beggars don't know what they're in for. Cabrillo turned to his communications expert, Hali Kasim. Try and raise them in Spanish. Warn them we have surface-to-air missiles on board and will knock them out of the sky if they show any sign of hostility. Kasim didn't have to speak Spanish to deliver the warning. He merely ordered the

computer to translate his message over his radio, which was tuned to twenty different frequencies. After a couple of minutes he shook his head. They are receiving, but not responding. They think we're bluffing, said Linda. Keep trying. Then to Murphy: What's the range of their missiles? According to specs, they're carrying short-range rockets with a range of ten miles. Cabrillo looked solemn. If they don't break off within thirty miles, take them out. Better yet, launch one of ours. Then manually guide it for a close flyby. Murphy made the necessary calculations and pressed a red button. Missile on its way. An audible swoosh swept the command center as a rocket lifted from an opening in the foredeck and swept into the sky. They all watched on the monitors as it raced to the northwest and soon disappeared. Four minutes to flyby, said Murphy. Every eye turned to the big clock above the window. No one spoke, all waiting in anticipation. Time dragged as the second hand on the clock seemed to take forever to make a sweep. Finally, Murphy spoke mechanically. Missile passed two hundred yards over and between the hostiles. Did they get the message? asked Cabrillo, a slight tone of apprehension in his voice. There was a long pause, and then, They're turning for home, Murphy reported happily. Two Cubans who are very lucky men indeed. Also smart enough to recognize a no-win situation. Indeed, Linda said with a broad smile. No blood on our hands this day, Cabrillo said with an obvious sigh of relief. He leaned over in his chair and spoke to the computer. Slow to cruise speed. The clandestine operation was almost complete, the contract fulfilled. The Oregon and her crew of executives did not consider themselves lucky. Their achievement had come from a combination of special skills, expertise, intelligence and precise planning. Now, except for a technician to watch over the command center and the navigation systems, everyone could relax; some headed for their staterooms for well-deserved sleep, while others congregated in the ship's dining room to snack and wind down. Cabrillo retired to his teak-paneled cabin and removed a packet from a safe under the carpet mounted in the deck. It was their next contract. He pulled out the contents, studied them for nearly an hour, and then began planning the initial levels of tactics and strategy. Two and a half days later, the Oregon sailed into the port of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and discharged the Cuban exiles. Before the sun set, the remarkable ship and its strange crew of corporate officials were once again at sea on a course toward their next assignment. Before it was through, they would steal a priceless artifact, return a divine leader to power and free a nation. But when the Oregon left port, Cabrillo was not on board. He was winging his way east against a rising sun. From Publishers Weekly Cussler and Dirgo, coauthors of two nonfiction books (*The Sea Hunters*; *The Sea Hunters II*) team up this time to debut a new action-filled series, dubbed the Oregon Files, equal to any in the Cussler franchise. An organization of intelligent and superbly proficient mercenaries, known as the Corporation, is headquartered on the ship Oregon, a seagoing marvel of science and technology disguised as an ancient, rust-bucket cargo vessel. The leader of the Corporation-cool, brainy Chairman Juan Cabrillo-explains the mission of his organization: "We were formed to make a profit, that's for sure, but as much as we like the money, we are also cognizant of the chances that arise for us to somehow right the wrongs of others." They've been secretly hired by the U.S. government to find and acquire an ancient statue known as the Golden Buddha, stolen from the Dalai Lama upon his ouster from Tibet by the Chinese in 1959. An intricate plan is then set in motion culminating in the defeat of the Chinese in Tibet and the ascension of the Dalai Lama to his rightful place as the leader of the country. The list of characters, both good and evil, is long and sometimes confusing, but a useful directory is supplied. Cabrillo and crew are adept at high finance and diplomacy, playing the Russians off against the Chinese and winning over the United Nations. But it's the technology, real and imagined, that steals the show with awe-inspiring secret weapons and spy gear that the Defense Department would kill for. Readers will burn up the pages following the blazing action and daring exploits of these men and women and their amazing machines. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.