



Deep Storm

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3

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438 pages

Extrait

1

It looked, Peter Crane thought, like a stork: a huge white stork, rising out of the water on ridiculously delicate legs. But as the helicopter drew closer and the distant outline sharpened against the sea horizon, the resemblance gradually fell away. The legs grew sturdier, became tubular pylons of steel and pre-stressed concrete. The central body became a multi-level superstructure, studded with flare stacks and turbines, festooned with spars and girders. And the thin, neck-like object above resolved into a complex crane-and-derrick assembly, rising several hundred feet above the superstructure.

The pilot pointed at the approaching platform, held up two fingers. Crane nodded his understanding.

It was a brilliant, cloudless day, and Crane squinted against the bright ocean stretching away on all sides. He felt tired and disoriented by travel: commercial flight from Miami to New York, private Gulfstream G150 charter to Reykjavik, and now helicopter. But the weariness hadn't blunted his deep—and growing—curiosity.

It wasn't so much that Amalgamated Shale was interested in his particular expertise: that he thought he could understand. It was the hurry with which they'd wanted him to drop everything and rush out to the Storm King platform that surprised him. Then there was the fact that AmShale's forward headquarters in Iceland had, rather oddly, been bustling with technicians and engineers rather than the usual drillers and roughnecks.

And then there was the other thing. The helicopter pilot wasn't an AmShale employee. He wore a Navy uniform—and a sidearm.

As the chopper banked sharply around the side of the platform, heading for the landing zone, Crane realized for the first time just how large the oil rig was. The jacket structure alone had to be eight stories high. Its upper deck was covered with a bewildering maze of modular structures. Here and there, men in yellow safety uniforms checked couplings and worked pump equipment, dwarfed by the machinery that surrounded them. Far, far below, the ocean frothed and worried around the pillars of the substructure, where it vanished beneath the surface to run the thousands of feet to the sea floor itself.

The chopper slowed, turned, and settled down onto the green hexagon of the landing zone. As Crane reached back for his bags, he noticed that someone was standing at the edge of the LZ, waiting: a tall, thin woman in an oilskin jacket. He thanked the pilot, opened the passenger door, and stepped out into frigid air, ducking instinctively under the whirring blades.

The woman held out her hand at his approach. "Dr. Crane?"

Crane shook the hand. "Yes."

"This way, please." The woman turned and led the way off the landing platform, down a short set of stairs, and along a metal catwalk to a closed, submarine-style hatch. She did not give her name.

A uniformed seaman stood guard outside the hatch, rifle at his side. He nodded as they approached, opened

the hatch, then closed and secured it behind them.

Beyond lay a spacious, brightly-lit corridor, studded along both sides with open doors. There was no frantic hum of turbines, no deep throbbing of derrick equipment. The smell of oil, though detectable, was faint, almost as if efforts had been made to remove it.

Crane followed the woman, bags slung over his shoulder, glancing curiously into the rooms as he passed. Once again, curiosity pricked at him: there were laboratories full of whiteboards and workstations; computer centers; communications suites. Topside had been quiet, but there was plenty of activity here.

Crane decided he'd venture a question. "Are the divers in a hyperbaric chamber?" he asked. "Can I see them now?"

"This way, please," the woman repeated.

They turned a corner, descended a staircase, and entered another hallway, even wider and longer than the first. The rooms they passed were larger here: machine shops, storage bays for high-tech equipment Crane didn't recognize. Crane frowned. Although Storm King resembled an oil rig in all outward appearances, it was clearly no longer in the business of pumping crude.

What the hell is going on here?

"Have any vascular specialists or pulmonologists been flown in from Iceland?" he asked.

The woman didn't answer, and Crane shrugged. He'd come this far—he could stand to wait another couple of minutes.

Up ahead, the woman had stopped before a closed door of gray metal. "Mr. Lassiter is waiting for you," she said.

Lassiter? Crane wondered. That wasn't a name he recognized. The person who'd spoken to him over the phone, briefed him about the problem at the rig, had been named Simon. He glanced at the door. There was the nameplate, white letters on black plastic, spelling out *E. Lassiter, External Liaison*.

Crane turned back to the woman in the oilskin jacket, but she was already moving down the corridor. He shifted his bags, knocked on the door.

"Enter," came the crisp voice from within.

E. Lassiter was a tall, thin man with closely-cropped blond hair. He stood up as Crane entered, came around his desk, shook hands. He wasn't wearing a military uniform, but with his haircut and his brisk, economical movements he might as well have been. The office was small and just as efficient-looking as its tenant. The desk was almost studiously bare: there was a single manila envelope on it, carefully sealed, and a digital recorder.

"You can stow your gear there," Lassiter said, indicating a far corner. "Please sit down."

"Thanks." Crane took the proffered seat. "I'm eager to learn just what the emergency is. My escort here didn't have much to say on the subject."

“Actually, neither will I.” Lassiter gave a brief smile, which disappeared as quickly as it came. “That will come. My job is to ask you a few questions.”

Crane digested this. “Go ahead,” he said after a moment.

Lassiter pressed a button on the recorder. “This recording is taking place on June 2. Present are myself—Edward Lassiter—and Dr. Peter Crane. Location is the E. R. F. Support and Supply Station.” Lassiter glanced over the desk at Crane. “Dr. Crane, you are aware that your tour of service here cannot be fixed to a specific length?”

“Yes.”

“And you understand that you must never divulge anything you witness here, or recount your actions while at the Facility?”

“Yes.”

“And are you willing to sign an affidavit to that effect?”

“Yes.”

“Dr. Crane, have you ever been arrested?”

“No.”

“Were you born a citizen of the United States, or are you naturalized?”

“I was born in New York City.”

“Are you taking medication for any ongoing physical condition?”

“No.”

“Do you abuse alcohol or drugs with any regularity?”

Crane had fielded the questions with growing surprise. “Unless you call the occasional weekend six-pack ‘abuse’, then no.”

Lassiter didn’t smile. “Are you claustrophobic, Dr. Crane?”

“No.”

Lassiter put the recorder on pause. Then he picked up the manila envelope, slit it open with a finger, pulled out half a dozen sheets of paper, and passed them across the table. “If you could please read and sign each of these,” he said, plucking a pen from a pocket and placing it beside the sheets.

Crane picked them up and began to read. As he did so, his surprise turned to something close to disbelief. There were three separate non-disclosure agreements, an Official Secrets Act affidavit, and something called a Binding Cooperation Initiative. All were branded documents of the U.S. Government; all required

signature; and all threatened dire consequences if any of their articles were breached.

Crane put the documents down. He was uncomfortably aware of Lassiter's gaze upon him. This was too much. Maybe he should thank Lassiter politely, then excuse himself and head back to Florida.

But how, exactly, was he going to do that? AmShale had already paid a great deal of money to get him here. The helicopter had already left. He was—to put it euphemistically—between research projects at the moment. And besides, he had never been one to turn down a challenge: especially one as mysterious as this.

He picked up the pen and, without giving himself time to reconsider, signed all six documents.

“Thank you,” Lassiter said. He started the recorder again. “Let the transcript show that Dr. Crane has signed the requisite forms.” Then, snapping off the recorder, he stood. “If you'll follow me, Doctor, I think you'll get your answers.”

He led the way out of the office and down the corridor, through a labyrinthine administrative area, up an elevator, and into a well-furnished library, stocked with books, magazines, and computer workstations. Lassiter gestured toward a table on the far side of the room, which held only a computer monitor. “I'll come back for you,” he said, then turned on his heel and left the room.

Crane sat where directed, watching the door close behind Lassiter. There was nobody else in the library, and he was beginning to wonder what would happen next, when the computer screen winked on in front of him. It showed the face of a grey-haired, deeply tanned man in his late sixties. *Some kind of introductory video*, Crane thought. But when the face smiled directly at him, he realized he wasn't looking at a computer monitor, but a closed-circuit television screen, with a tiny camera embedded in its upper frame.

“Hello, Dr. Crane,” the man said. He smiled, his kindly face breaking into a host of creases. “My name is Howard Asher.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Crane told the screen.

“I'm the chief scientist of the National Ocean Service. Have you heard of it?”

“Isn't that the ocean-management arm of NOAA?”

“That's correct.”

“I'm a little confused, Dr. Asher—it's Doctor, right?”

“Right. But call me Howard.”

“Howard. What does the National Ocean Service have to do with an oil rig? And where's Mr. Simon, the person who I spoke with on the phone? The one who arranged all this? He said he'd be here to meet me.”

“Actually, Dr. Crane, there is no Mr. Simon. But I'm here, and I'll be happy to explain what I can.”

Crane frowned. “I was told there were medical issues with the divers maintaining the rig's underwater equipment. Was that a deception, too?”

“Only in part. There *has* been a lot of deception, and for that I’m sorry. But it was necessary. We had to be sure. You see, secrecy is absolutely critical to this project. Because what we have here, Peter—may I call you Peter?—is the scientific and historical discovery of the century.”

“The century?” Crane repeated, not fully able to keep the disbelief from his voice.

“You’re right to be doubtful. But this is no deception, Peter. It’s the last thing from it. Still, ‘discovery of the century’ may not be quite accurate.”

“I didn’t think so,” Crane replied.

“I should have called it the greatest discovery *of all time*.”

2

Crane stared at the image on the viewscreen. Dr. Asher was smiling back at him in a friendly, almost paternal way. But there was nothing in the smile that suggested a joke.

“I couldn’t tell you the truth, Peter, until you were physically here, at the Facility. And until you’d been fully vetted. We used your travel time to complete that process. Fact is, there’s still much I can’t tell you, even now.”

Crane looked over his shoulder. The library was empty. “Why? Isn’t this line secure?”

“Oh, it’s secure. But we need to know you’re fully committed to the project first.”

Crane waited, saying nothing.

“What little I can tell you now is nevertheless highly secret. Even if you decline our offer, you will still be bound by all the confidentiality agreements.”

“I understand,” Crane said.

“Very well.” Asher hesitated. “Peter, the platform you’re on right now is suspended over something more than an oil field. Something much more.”

“What’s that?” Crane asked automatically.

Asher smiled mysteriously. “Suffice to say the well drillers on the platform discovered something nearly two years ago. Something so fantastic that, overnight, the platform stopped pumping oil and took on a new and highly secret role.”

“Let me guess. You can’t tell me what it is.”

Asher laughed. “No, not yet. But it’s such an important discovery the government is, quite literally, sparing no expense to reclaim it.”

“Reclaim?”

“It’s buried in the sea bed directly below this platform. Remember I called this the discovery of all time? What’s going on here is, in essence, a dig: an archaeological dig like none other. And we are, quite literally, making history.”

“But why all the secrecy?”

“Because if people caught wind of what we’ve found, it would instantly become front–page news on every paper in the world. In hours, the place would be a disaster area. Half a dozen governments, all claiming sovereignty; journalists; rubbernecker. The discovery is simply too critical to be jeopardized that way.”

Crane leaned back in his chair, considering. The entire trip was becoming almost surreal. The rushed flight plans, the oil platform that wasn’t a platform, the veil of secrecy...and now this face in a box, speaking of an unimaginably important discovery.

“Call me old fashioned,” he said, “but I’d feel a lot better about it if you’d take the time to see me in person, talk face to face.”

“Unfortunately, Peter, it’s not that easy. Commit to the project, though, and you’ll see me soon enough.”

“I don’t understand. Why, exactly, is it so difficult?”

Asher chuckled again. “Because at the moment, I’m several thousand feet beneath you.”

Crane stared at the screen. “You mean—”

“Precisely. The Storm King oil platform is just the support structure, the resupply station. The real action is far below. That’s why I’m speaking to you over this videofeed.”

Crane digested this a moment. “What’s down there?” he asked quietly.

“Imagine a huge research station, ten levels high, full of equipment and technology beyond the cutting edge, all sunk into the ocean floor. That’s the ERF—the heart and soul of the most extraordinary archaeological effort of all time.”

“The ERF?”

“Exploratory and Recovery Facility. But we refer to it simply as the Facility. The military—you know how fond they are of buzzwords—have labeled it Deep Storm.”

“I noticed the military presence. Why are the soldiers necessary?”

“I could tell you it’s because the Facility is government property, because the NOS is a branch of the government. And that’s true. But the real reason is because a lot of the technology we’re using in the recovery project is classified.”

“What about those men I saw topside, working on the rig?”

“Window dressing, for the most part. We do have to look like a functioning oil platform, after all.”

“And AmShale?”

“They’ve been paid exceptionally well to lease us the rig, act as front office, and ask no questions.”

Crane shifted in his chair. “This Facility you mention. That’s where I’d be quartered?”

“Yes. It’s where all the marine scientists, historians, and engineers live and work. I know how much time you’ve spent in submerged environments, Peter, and I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. Actually, ‘amazed’ is more like it. You’ve got to see the place to believe it—the Facility is a miracle of undersea technology.”

From the Hardcover edition. Revue de presse
Early Raves for *Deep Storm*

“Lincoln Child’s novels are both thrilling and tantalizing, always managing to stay one step ahead of readers’ expectations. *DEEP STORM* hatches a fascinating riddle that refuses to unravel until the final exhilarating page.”

—**VINCE FLYNN, *NEW YORK TIMES* bestselling author of *ACT OF TREASON***

“The suspense is harrowing and brilliantly conceived. Child tells a story with style and fascination. *DEEP STORM* is undersea adventure told like never before, with a terrific ending.”

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“A slick, savvy, intelligent thriller with a scary, sticks-in-your-brain climax.”

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“Few writers do it better than Child.”

—Booklist Présentation de l’éditeur

Construit dans les abîmes glacés de l’Atlantique, *Deep Storm* est le centre technologique le plus perfectionné au monde, mais aucun chercheur n’en mentionnera jamais le nom, ni même l’existence. Le docteur Peter Crane est envoyé en mission dans cette base sous-marine secrète où scientifiques et militaires forent le plancher océanique. Alors que le personnel présente de mystérieux symptômes, Crane réalise qu’ils sont sur le point de faire la plus terrifiante des découvertes...

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