

CLIVE CUSSLER

with Paul Kemprecos



A Novel from THE NUMA® FILES

LOST CITY

A Kurt Austin Adventure

LOST

A NOVEL FROM
THE NUMA[®] FILES

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS * NEW YORK

CITY

CLIVE
CUSSLER

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PROLOGUE

THE FRENCH ALPS, AUGUST 1914

HIGH ABOVE the soaring majesty of the snowcapped mountains, Jules Fauchard was fighting for his life. Minutes before, his plane had slammed into an invisible wall of air with a force that jarred his teeth. Now updrafts and downdrafts were tossing the light aircraft about like a kite on a string. Fauchard battled the gut-wrenching turbulence with the skill that had been drilled into him by his strict French flying instructors. Then he was through the rough patch, luxuriating in smooth air, unaware that it would nearly prove his undoing.

With his plane finally stable, Fauchard had given in to the most natural of human impulses. He closed his weary eyes. His eyelids fluttered and drooped, then slammed shut as if weighted down with lead. His mind drifted into a shadowy, uncaring realm. His chin slumped onto his chest. His limp fingers relaxed their grip on the control stick. The diminutive red plane wavered drunkenly in what the

French pilots called a *perte de vitesse*, or loss of way, as it slipped off on one wing in a prelude to a tailspin.

Fortunately, Fauchard's inner ear detected the change in equilibrium, and alarms went off in his slumbering brain. His head snapped up and he awakened in a daze, struggling to marshal his muddled thoughts. His nap had lasted only a few seconds, but in that time his plane had lost hundreds of feet of altitude and was about to go into a steep dive. Blood thundered in his head. His wildly beating heart felt as if it were about to explode from his chest.

The French flying schools taught student pilots to fly an airplane with the same light touch as a pianist's on the keys, and Fauchard's endless hours of drill proved their worth now. Using a feather touch on the controls, he made sure not to overcompensate and gently coaxed the plane back on an even keel. Satisfied that the plane was stabilized, he let out the breath he had been holding and gulped in air, the arctic cold striking his lungs like shards of glass.

The sharp pain jolted him from his lethargy. Fully awake again, Fauchard summoned up the mantra that had sustained his resolve throughout his desperate mission. His frozen lips refused to wrap themselves around the syllables, but the words screamed in his brain.

Fail, and millions die.

Fauchard clamped his jaws shut with renewed determination. He rubbed the frost from his goggles and peered over the cockpit cowl-ing. The alpine air was as clear as fine crystal, and even the most distant detail stood out in sharp relief. Ranks of saw-toothed mountains marched off to the horizon, and miniature villages clung to the sides of verdant alpine valleys. Fluffy white clouds were stacked up like piles of newly picked cotton. The sky was luminous in its blue intensity. The summer snow capping the jagged summits was bathed in a soft sky-blue pink from the lowering sun.

Fauchard filled his red-rimmed eyes with the magnificent beauty, as he cocked his ear and listened to the exhaust sound produced by

the eighty-horsepower, four-stroke Gnome rotary engine that powered the Morane-Saulnier N aircraft. All was well. The engine droned on as it had before his near-fatal nap. Fauchard was reassured, but his close call had shaken his self-confidence. He realized, to his astonishment, that he had experienced an unfamiliar emotion. *Fear*. Not of death, but of failure. Despite his iron resolve, his aching muscles further reminded him that he was a man of flesh and blood like any other.

The open cockpit allowed for little movement and his body was encased in a fur-lined leather coat over a thick Shetland wool sweater, turtleneck, and long underwear. A woolen scarf protected his neck. A leather helmet covered his head and ears, and his hands were enclosed in insulated leather gloves. Fur-lined mountain climber boots of the finest leather were on his feet. Although he was dressed for polar conditions, the icy cold had penetrated to his bones and dulled the edge of his alertness. This was a dangerous development. The Morane-Saulnier was tricky to fly and required undivided attention.

In the face of the gnawing fatigue, Fauchard clung to his sanity with the single-minded stubbornness that had made him into one of the richest industrialists in the world. Fierce determination still showed in his flinty gray eyes and the stubborn tilt of his craggy chin. With his long aquiline nose, Fauchard's profile resembled that of the eagles whose heads graced the family crest on the plane's tail.

He forced his numbed lips to move.

Fail, and millions die.

The stentorian voice that had struck fear in the European halls of power emerged from his throat as a croak, the pitiful sound drowned out by the engine's roar and the rush of air past the fuselage, but Fauchard decided a reward was in order. He reached into the top of his boot and extracted a slim silver flask. He unscrewed the top with difficulty because of the thick gloves, and took a pull from the flask. The high-octane schnapps was made from grapes

grown on his estate and was almost pure alcohol. Warmth flooded through his body.

Thus fortified, he rocked in his seat, wiggled his toes and fingers and hunched his shoulders. As the blood flowed back into his extremities, he thought of the hot Swiss chocolate and fresh-baked bread with melted cheese that awaited him on the other side of the mountains. The thick lips under the bushy handlebar mustache tightened in an ironic smile. He was one of the wealthiest men in the world, yet he was cheered by the prospect of a plowman's meal. So be it.

Fauchard allowed himself an instant of self-congratulation. He was a meticulous man and his escape plan had gone off like clockwork. The family had placed a watch on him after he had made his unwelcome views clear before the council. But while the council had pondered his fate, he'd evaded the watchers with a combination of diversion and luck.

He'd pretended to drink too much and told his butler, who was in the pay of his family, that he was going to bed. When all was quiet, he had quietly left his bedroom chamber, slipped out of the château and made his way to where a bicycle was hidden in the woods. Carrying his precious cargo in a backpack, he had ridden through the woods to the airfield. His plane was fueled and ready to go. He had taken off in the dawn's light, stopping twice at remote locations where his most loyal retainers had stockpiled fuel.

He drained the flask and glanced at the compass and clock. He was on course and only minutes behind schedule. The lower peaks ahead indicated that he was nearing the end of his long journey. Soon he would make the final approach to Zurich.

He was thinking about what he would say to the Pope's emissary when it seemed as if a flight of startled birds took off from the starboard wing. He glanced to the right and saw, to his dismay, that the birds were actually shreds of fabric that had peeled off the airfoil,

leaving a ragged hole several inches across. There could be only one explanation. The wing had been hit by gunfire, and the high-pitched roar of the engine had drowned out the noise.

Reacting instinctively, Fauchard banked the plane left, then right, twisting and turning like a swallow in flight. As his eyes scoured the skies, he glimpsed six biplanes flying in V formation below him. With uncanny calm, Fauchard switched off his engine as if he were preparing to volplane to the ground in an unpowered landing.

The Morane-Saulnier dropped like a stone.

Under ordinary circumstances, this would have been suicidal, placing him in his adversary's gunsights. But Fauchard had recognized the attacking planes as Aviatiks. The German-built plane of French design was powered by a Mercedes in-line engine and had originally been built for reconnaissance. More important, the machine gun mounted in front of the gunner could fire only upward.

After a fall of a few hundred feet, he gently adjusted the elevator and his plane came up behind the Aviatik formation.

He lined up his plane's nose on the closest Aviatik and squeezed the trigger. The Hotchkiss gun rattled and tracer bullets homed in on the target's tail. Smoke poured from the plane and then flames enveloped the fuselage.

The Aviatik began a long spiraling plunge to earth. A few well-placed volleys brought down another Aviatik as easily as a hunter bagging a tame pheasant.

Fauchard accomplished the kills so swiftly that the other pilots were unaware they were under attack until they saw the greasy black smoke trails from the plummeting planes. The precise formation began to come apart at the seams.

Fauchard broke off the attack. His targets were scattered and the element of surprise was no longer on his side. Instead, he put the Morane-Saulnier into a steep thousand-foot climb into the belly of a puffy cloud.

As the misty gray walls hid his plane from unfriendly eyes, Fauchard leveled off and performed a damage check. So much fabric had ripped off that the wooden ribs of the wing were exposed. Fauchard cursed under his breath. He had hoped to bolt from the cloud and outdistance the Aviatiks with his plane's superior speed, but the damaged wing was slowing him down.

Unable to run, he would have to stay and fight.

Fauchard was outgunned and outnumbered, but he was flying one of the most remarkable aircraft of its day. Developed from a racing plane, the Morane-Saulnier, though tricky to fly, was incredibly nimble and responsive to the lightest touch. In an era when most airplanes had at least two wings, the Morane-Saulnier was a midwinged monoplane. From the bullet-shaped propeller spinner to its triangular tail fin, the Morane-Saulnier was only twenty-two feet long, but it was a deadly gnat by any measure, thanks to a device that would revolutionize aerial warfare.

Saulnier had developed a synchronizing mechanism that allowed the machine gun to fire through the propeller. The system had outpaced the newfangled guns, though, which sometimes fired erratically, and since ammunition could hang fire, metal deflectors shielded the propeller blades from errant bullets.

Girding himself for battle, Fauchard reached under the seat and his fingers touched the cold metal of a strongbox. Next to the box was a purple velvet bag, which he pulled out and placed on his lap. Steering the plane with his knees, he extracted a steel helmet of ancient design from the bag and ran his fingers over the engraved surface. The metal was ice-cold to the touch, but heat seemed to radiate from it, surging through his whole body.

He placed the helmet on his head. It fit snugly over the leather covering, and was perfectly balanced. The helmet was unusual, in that its visor was made in the form of a human face whose mustache and

raptor's nose resembled Fauchard's. The visor limited his visibility and he pushed it up above his brow.

Shafts of sunlight were filtering into the cloud dungeon as his cover thinned. He flew through the smoky wisps that marked the edge of the cloud and broke into full daylight.

The Aviatiks were circling below like a school of hungry sharks around a sinking ship. They spotted the Morane and began to climb.

The lead Aviatik slipped below Fauchard's plane and moved into firing range. Fauchard gave a sharp tug on his seat belt to make sure it was tight, and then he pulled the nose of his plane upward, climbing in a great backward loop.

He hung upside down in the cockpit, giving thanks to the French instructor who had taught him the evasive maneuver. He completed the loop and leveled out, placing his plane behind the Aviatiks. He opened fire on the nearest plane, but it peeled off and dove at a steep angle.

Fauchard stayed on the plane's tail, enjoying the thrill of being the hunter rather than the prey. The Aviatik leveled out and made a tight turn, trying to get behind Fauchard. The smaller plane easily matched him.

The Aviatik's move had put it at the mouth of a wide valley. With Fauchard giving the plane little room to maneuver, it flew directly into the valley.

Hoarding his ammunition like a miser, Fauchard fired short bursts from the Hotchkiss. The Aviatik rolled left and right and the tracers went to either side of the plane. It flew lower, trying to stay below Fauchard and his deadly machine gun. Again, Fauchard tried to line up a shot. Again, the Aviatik went lower.

The planes skimmed over the fields at a hundred miles an hour, staying barely fifty feet above the ground. Herds of terrified cows scattered like windblown leaves. The twisting Aviatik managed to

stay out of Fauchard's sights. The rolling contours of the ground compounded the difficulty of a clear shot.

The landscape was a blur of rolling meadows and neat farmhouses. The farms were growing closer together. Fauchard could see the roofs of a town ahead where the valley narrowed to a point.

The Aviatik was following a meandering river that ran up the center of the valley directly toward the town. The pilot flew so low his wheels almost touched the water. Ahead, a quaint fieldstone bridge crossed the river as the waterway entered the town.

Fauchard's finger was tightening on the trigger, when an overhead shadow broke his concentration. He glanced upward and saw the wheels and fuselage of another Aviatik less than fifty feet above. It dropped lower, trying to force him down. He glanced at the lead Aviatik. It had started its climb to avoid hitting the bridge.

Pedestrians crossing the span had seen the trio of advancing planes and were running for their lives. The sleepy old plow horse pulling a wagon across the bridge reared up on its hind legs for the first time in years as the Aviatik skimmed a few yards over the driver's head.

The overhead plane dropped down to force Fauchard into the bridge, but at the last second he pulled back on his control stick and goosed the throttle. The Morane-Saulnier leaped upward and carried him between the bridge and the Aviatik. There was a huge explosion of hay as the plane's wheels clipped the wagon's load, but Fauchard kept his plane under control, guiding it up over the roofs of the town.

The plane on Fauchard's tail pulled up a second later.

Too late.

Less agile than the monoplane, the Aviatik smashed into the bridge and exploded in a ball of fire. Equally slow to climb, the lead Aviatik grazed a church steeple whose sharp spire gutted its belly. The plane came apart in the air and broke into a hundred pieces.

"Go with God!" Fauchard shouted hoarsely, as he wheeled his plane around and pointed it out of the valley.

Two specks appeared in the distance. Moving fast in his direction. They materialized into the last of the Aviatik squadron.

Fauchard aimed his plane directly between the approaching aircraft. His lips tightened in a grin. He wanted to make sure the family knew what he thought of their attempt to stop him.

He was close enough to see the observers in the front cockpits. The one on his left pointed what looked like a stick, and he saw a flash of light.

He heard a soft *tunk* and his rib cage felt as if a fiery poker had been thrust into it. With a chill, he realized that the observer in the Aviatik had resorted to simpler but more reliable technology—he had fired at Fauchard with a carbine.

He involuntarily jerked the control stick and his legs stiffened in a spasm. The planes flashed by on either side of him. His hand went limp on the control stick and the plane began to waver. Warm blood from his wound puddled in his seat. His mouth had a coppery taste and he was having trouble keeping things in focus.

He removed his gloves, unbuckled his seat belt and reached down under his seat. His weakening fingers grasped the handle of the metal strongbox. He placed it on his lap, took the V strap that ran through the handle and attached it to his wrist.

Summoning his last remaining reservoir of strength, he pushed himself erect and leaned out of the cockpit. He rolled over the coaming, his body hit the wing and bounced off.

His fingers automatically yanked the ripcord, the cushion he'd been sitting on burst open, and a silk parachute caught the air.

A curtain of blackness was falling over his eyes. He caught glimpses of a cold blue lake and a glacier.

I have failed.

He was more in shock than pain and felt only a profound and angry sadness.

Millions will die.

He coughed a mouthful of bloody froth and then he knew no more. He hung in his parachute harness, an easy target for one of the Aviatiks as it made another pass.

He never felt the bullet that crashed through his helmet and drilled into his skull.

With the sun glinting off his helmet, he floated lower until the mountains embraced him to their bosom.

1

THE SCOTTISH ORKNEYS, THE PRESENT

JODIE MICHAELSON was steaming with anger. Earlier in the evening, she and the three remaining contestants of the *Outcasts* TV show had had to walk in their heavy boots on a thick rope stretched out along a three-foot-high berm made of piled rocks. The stunt had been billed as the “Viking Trial by Fire.” Rows of torches blazed away on either side of the rope, adding drama and risk, although the line of fire was actually six feet away. The cameras shot from a low side angle, making the walk seem much more dangerous than it was.

What wasn’t phony was the way the producers had schemed to bring the contestants to near violence.

Outcasts was the latest offering in the “reality” shows that had popped up like mushrooms after the success of *Survivor* and *Fear Factor*. It was an accelerated combination of both formats, with the shouting matches of *Jerry Springer* thrown in.

The format was simple. Ten participants had to pass a gamut of

tests over the course of three weeks. Those who failed, or were voted off by the others, had to leave the island.

The winner would make a million dollars, with bonus points, which seemed to be based on how nasty the contestants could be to one another.

The show was considered even more cutthroat than its predecessors, and the producers played tricks to ratchet up the tension. Where other shows were highly competitive, *Outcasts* was openly combative.

The show's format had been based in part on the Outward Bound survival course, where a participant must live off the land. Unlike the other survival shows, which tended to be set on tropical isles with turquoise waters and swaying palm trees, *Outcasts* was filmed in the Scottish Orkneys. The contestants had landed in a tacky replica of a Viking ship, to an audience of seabirds.

The island was two miles long and a mile wide. It was mostly rock that had been tortured into knobs and fissures aeons ago by some cataclysm, with a few stands of scraggly trees here and there and a beach of coarse sand where most of the action was filmed. The weather was mild, except at night, and the skin-covered huts were tolerable.

The speck of rock was so insignificant that the locals referred to it as the "Wee Island." This had prompted a hilarious exchange between the producer, Sy Paris, and his assistant, Randy Andleman.

Paris was in one of his typical raves. "We can't film an adventure show on a place called 'Wee Island,' for godsakes. We've got to call it something else." His face lit up. "We'll call it 'Skull Island.' "

"It doesn't look like a skull," Andleman said. "It looks like an overdone fried egg."

"Close enough," Paris had said, before dashing off.

Jodie, who had witnessed the exchange, elicited a smile from An-