FIRE

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ICE

A NOVEL FROM THE NUMA® FILES

CLIVE CUSSLER

with PAUL KEMPRECOS

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PROLOGUE

Odessa, Russia, 1918

THE DENSE FOG rolled into the harbor late in the afternoon, nudged by a sudden change in wind direction. The damp gray billows washed over the stone quays, swirled up the Odessa Steps and brought an early nightfall to the busy Black Sea port. Passenger ferries and freighters canceled their runs, idling dozens of sailors. As Captain Anatoly Tovrov groped his way through the bone-chilling mists that enveloped the waterfront, he could hear bursts of drunken laughter from the crowded dives and brothels. He walked past the main concentration of bars, turned down an alley and opened an unmarked door. Warm air, heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke and vodka, invaded his nostrils. A portly man sitting at a corner table beckoned the captain over.

Alexei Federoff was in charge of Odessa Customs. When the captain was in port, he and Federoff made it a habit to meet at the secluded watering hole, frequented mostly by retired mariners, where the vodka was cheap and not usually lethal. The bureaucrat satisfied the captain's need for human companionship without friendship. Tovrov had steered a lonely course since his wife and young daughter had been killed years before in one of Russia's senseless outbursts of violence.

Federoff seemed strangely subdued. Normally a boisterous man who could be counted on to accuse the waiter jokingly of overcharging, he ordered a round by silently raising two fingers. Even more surprising, the frugal customs man paid for the drinks. He kept his voice low, nervously tugging at his pointed little black beard, and glanced nervously at other tables where weather-beaten seamen hunched over their glasses. Satisfied that their conversation was private, Federoff raised his drink and they clinked glasses.

"My dear Captain," Federoff said. "I regret that I have little time and must get directly to the point. I would like you to take a group of passengers and a small amount of cargo to Constantinople, no questions asked."

"I knew something was odd when you paid for my drink," the captain said, with his usual bluntness.

Federoff chuckled. He had always been intrigued by the captain's honesty, even if he couldn't comprehend it. "Well, Captain, we poor government servants must exist on the pittance they pay us."

The captain's lips tightened in a thin smile as he eyed the corpulent belly that strained the buttons of Federoff's expensive French-made waistcoat. The customs man often complained about his job. Tovrov would listen politely. He knew the official had powerful connections in Saint Petersburg and that he spent his days soliciting bribes from shipowners to "smooth the seas" of bureaucracy, as he put it.

"You know my ship," Tovrov said, with a shrug. "It is not what you would call a luxury liner."

"No matter. It will suit our purposes admirably."

The captain paused in thought, wondering why anyone would want to sail on an old coal carrier when more appealing alternatives were available. Federoff mistook the captain's hesitation for the opening round of a bargaining session. Reaching into his breast pocket, he withdrew a thick envelope and placed it on the table. He opened

the envelope slightly so the captain could see that it held thousands of rubles.

"You would be well compensated."

Tovrov swallowed hard. With shaking fingers, he dug a cigarette from its pack and lit up. "I don't understand," he said.

Federoff noted the captain's bewilderment. "What do you know about the political state of our country?"

The captain relied on scuttlebutt and out-of-date papers for his news. "I am a simple sailor," he replied. "I rarely set foot on Russian soil."

"Even so, you are a man of vast practical experience. Please be frank, my friend. I have always valued your opinion."

Tovrov pondered what he knew about Russia's tribulations and put it in a nautical context. "If a ship were in the same condition as our country, I would wonder why it is not at the bottom of the sea."

"I have always admired your candor," Federoff replied, with a hearty laugh. "It seems you have a gift for metaphor as well." He grew serious again. "Your reply is entirely to the point. Russia is indeed in a *perilous* state. Our young men are dying in the Great War, the tsar has abdicated, the Bolsheviks are ruthlessly assuming power, the Germans occupy our southern flank and we have called upon other nations to snatch our chestnuts from the fire."

"I had no idea things were that bad."

"They are getting worse, if you can believe it. Which brings me back to you and your ship." Federoff locked his eyes on the captain's. "We loyal patriots here in Odessa have our backs to the sea. The White Army holds territory, but the Reds are pressing from the north and will soon overwhelm them. The German army's ten-mile military zone will dissolve like sugar in water. By taking on these passengers, you would be doing a great service for Russia."

The captain considered himself a citizen of the world, but deep down he was no different from the rest of his countrymen, with their

deep attachment to the motherland. He knew that the Bolsheviks were arresting and executing the old guard and that many refugees had escaped to the south. He had talked with other captains who whispered tales of taking on important passengers in the dead of night.

Passenger space was no problem. The ship was practically empty. The *Odessa Star* was the last choice of sailors looking for a berth. She smelled of leaky fuel, rusting metal and low-end cargo. Sailors called it the stench of death and avoided the ship as if it carried the plague. The crew was mostly wharf rats no other ship would hire. Tovrov could move the first mate into his quarters, freeing up the officers' cabins for passengers. He glanced at the thick envelope. The money would make the difference between dying in an old sailors' home or retiring to a comfortable cottage by the sea.

"We sail in three days with the evening tide," the captain said.

"You are a true patriot," Federoff said, his eyes glistening with tears. He thrust the envelope across the table. "This is half. I will pay you the balance when the passengers arrive."

The captain slid the money into his coat, where it seemed to throw off heat. "How many passengers will there be?"

Federoff glanced at two sailors who entered the café and sat at a table. Lowering his voice, he said, "About a dozen. There is extra money in the envelope to buy food. Purchase the supplies at different markets to avoid suspicion. I must go now." He rose from his seat, and, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, said sternly, "Well, my good Captain, I hope you have a better understanding of our customs rules and regulations! Good day."

On the afternoon of departure, Federoff came to the ship to tell the captain the plans were unchanged. The passengers would arrive late in the evening. Only the captain was to be on deck. Shortly before midnight, as Tovrov paced the fog-shrouded deck alone, a vehicle squealed to a halt at the bottom of the gangplank. From the

guttural sound of the motor, he guessed it was a truck. The headlights and engine were turned off. Doors opened and closed, and there was the murmur of voices and the scuffle of boots on wet cobblestones.

A tall figure wearing a hooded cloak climbed the gangway, stepped onto the deck and came over to the captain. Tovrov felt unseen eyes boring into his. Then a deep male voice spoke from the dark hole under the cowling.

"Where are the passengers' quarters?"

"I'll show you," Tovrov said.

"No, *tell* me."

"Very well. The cabins are on the bridge one deck up. The ladder is over there."

"Where are your crew?"

"They are all in their bunks."

"See that they *stay* there. Wait here."

The man silently made his way to the ladder and climbed to the officers' cabins on the deck below the wheelhouse. Minutes later, he returned from his inspection. "Better than a stable, but not much," he said. "We're coming aboard. Stay out of the way. Over there." He pointed toward the bow, then descended to the quay.

Tovrov was ruffled at being ordered about on his own ship, but the thought of the money locked in his cabin safe smoothed his feathers. He was also wise enough not to argue with a man who towered above him. He took up a post on the bow as instructed.

The group huddled on the quay filed onto the ship. Tovrov heard the sleepy voice of a young girl or boy being shushed by an adult as the passengers made their way to their quarters. Others followed, lugging boxes or steamer trunks. From the grunts and curses, he guessed that the baggage was heavy. The last person onto the ship was Federoff, who huffed with unaccustomed exertion from the short climb.

"Well, my good fellow," he said cheerily, clapping his gloves together for warmth. "That's the last of it. Is everything ready?"

"We sail when you give the order."

"Consider it given. Here is the rest of your money." He handed Tovrov an envelope that crackled with new bills. Then, unexpectedly, he embraced the captain in a bear hug and kissed him on both cheeks. "Mother Russia can never pay you enough," he whispered. "Tonight you make history." He released the astounded captain and descended the gangway. After a moment, the truck drove off and disappeared into the gloom.

The captain brought the envelope to his nose, inhaling the smell of rubles as if they were roses, then he tucked the money in a coat pocket and climbed to the wheelhouse. He went into the chart room behind the wheelhouse, then through a door into his cabin to roust Sergei, his first mate. The captain told the young Georgian to wake the crew and cast off. Muttering incomprehensibly to himself, the mate went below to follow orders.

A handful of human flotsam staggered out onto the deck in various states of sobriety. Tovrov watched from the wheelhouse as the mooring lines were cast off and the gangway pulled up. There were a dozen crewmen in all, including two men hired at the last minute as stokers down in the "junkyard," as the engine room was called. The chief engineer was a competent seaman who had stayed with the captain out of loyalty. He wielded his oilcan like a magic wand and breathed life into the piles of scrap metal that powered the *Star.* The boilers had been warming up and were building up steam as well as could be expected.

Tovrov took the helm, the telegraph jangled and the ship moved away from the dock. As the *Odessa Star* inched her way out of the fog-bound harbor, those who saw her crossed themselves and invoked ancient prayers to ward off demons. She seemed to float above the water like a phantom ship doomed to wander the world in search of

drowned sailors for her crew. Her running lights were veiled in a gauzy glow, as if Saint Elmo's fire danced in the rigging.

The captain steered the ship through the winding channel and around fog-shrouded boats as easily as a porpoise using its natural radar. Years of steaming between Odessa and Constantinople had engraved the route in his brain, and he knew without resorting to charts or channel markers how many turns of the wheel to make.

The *Star*'s French owners had purposely neglected her maintenance for years, hoping one good storm would send the ship to the bottom and pay out its insurance. Rust dripped from the scuppers like bleeding sores and streaked the blistered hull. The masts and cranes were splotched by corrosion. The ship listed drunkenly to port, where water from a leaky bilge had settled. The *Star*'s engines, worn and long in need of an overhaul, wheezed as if they suffered from emphysema. The choking black cloud that poured from its single smokestack stank as if it were sulfur emanating from Hades. Like a terminal patient who somehow existed in a wasted body, the *Star* continued to plow through the seas long after she should have been declared clinically dead.

Tovrov knew that the *Star* was the last ship he would ever command. Yet he strove to maintain a spit-and-polish look. He buffed his thin-soled black shoes every morning. His white shirt was yellowed but clean, and he attempted to keep a crease in his threadbare black trousers. Only the cosmetic skills of an embalmer would have improved the captain's physical appearance. Late hours, poor diet and lack of sleep had taken their toll. His sunken cheeks gave even greater prominence to the long, red-veined nose and his skin was as gray as parchment.

The first mate went back to sleep, and the crew settled in their bunks while the first shift of stokers fed the coal into the boilers. The captain lit up a potent Turkish cigarette that triggered a coughing fit that doubled him over. As he got his fit under control, he be-

came aware that cold sea air was coming in an open door. He looked up and saw he was no longer alone. A huge man stood in the doorway, dramatically framed by wisps of fog. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

"Lights," he said in a baritone voice that identified him as the figure who had been the first to come aboard.

Tovrov pulled the cord for the bare bulb that hung from the overhead. The man had thrown back his hood. He was tall and lean and wore a white fur hat known as a *papakha* at a rakish angle. A pale dueling scar slashed his right cheek above the beard line, his skin was red and blistered with snowburn and sparkling drops of moisture matted his black hair and beard. His left iris was clouded from an injury or disease, and his staring good eye made him look like a lopsided Cyclops.

The fur-lined cloak had fallen open to reveal a pistol holster at his belt and in his hand he carried a rifle. A cartridge bandoleer crossed his chest and a saber hung from his belt. He was dressed in a muddy gray tunic and his feet were shod with high, black-leather boots. The uniform and his air of barely repressed violence identified him as a Cossack, one of the fierce warrior caste who inhabited the rim of the Black Sea. Tovrov stifled his revulsion. Cossacks had been involved in the death of his family, and he always tried to avoid the belligerent horsemen who seemed happiest when instilling fear.

The man glanced around the deserted wheelhouse. "Alone?"

"The first mate is sleeping back there," Tovrov said, with a jerk of his head. "He is drunk and doesn't hear anything." He fumbled with a cigarette and offered the man one.

"My name is Major Peter Yakelev," the man said, waving the cigarette away. "You will do as you are told, Captain Tovrov."

"You may trust me to be at your service, Major."

"I trust *no* one." He stepped closer and spat out the words. "Not the White Russians or the Reds. Not the Germans or the British.

They are *all* against us. Even Cossacks have gone over to the Bolsheviks." He glared at the captain, searching for a nuance of defiance. Seeing no threat in the captain's bland expression, he reached out with thick fingers.

"Cigarette," he growled.

Tovrov gave him the whole pack. The major lit one up and drank in the smoke as if it were an elixir. Tovrov was intrigued by the major's accent. The captain's father had worked as a coachman for a wealthy landowner, and Tovrov was familiar with the cultured speech of the Russian elite. This man looked as if he had sprung from the steppes, but he spoke with an educated inflection. Tovrov knew that upper-class officers trained at the military academy were often picked to lead Cossack troops.

Tovrov noticed the weariness in the Cossack's ruined face and the slight sag to the powerful shoulders.

"A long trip?" he said.

The major grinned without humor. "Yes, a long, hard trip." He blew twin plumes of smoke out of his nostrils and produced a flask of vodka from his coat. He took a pull and looked around. "This ship stinks," he declared.

"The *Star* is an old, old lady with a great heart."

"Your old lady still stinks," the Cossack said.

"When you're my age, you learn to hold your nose and take what you can get."

The major roared with laughter and slapped Tovrov on the back so hard that sharp daggers of pain stabbed his ravaged lungs and set him coughing. The Cossack offered Tovrov his flask. The captain managed a swallow. It was high-quality vodka, not the rotgut he was used to. The fiery liquid dampened the cough, and he handed the flask back and took the helm.

Yakelev tucked the flask away. "What did Federoff tell you?" he said.

"Only that we're carrying cargo and passengers of great importance to Russia."

"You're not curious?"

Tovrov shrugged. "I have heard what is going on in the west. I assume these are bureaucrats running away from the Bolsheviks with their families and what few belongings they can bring."

Yakelev smiled. "Yes, that is a good story."

Emboldened, Tovrov said, "If I may ask, why did you choose the *Odessa Star*? Surely there were newer ships fitted out for passenger service."

"Use your brain, Captain," Yakelev said with contempt. "Nobody would expect this old scow to carry passengers of importance." He glanced out the window into the night. "How long to Constantinople?"

"Two days and two nights, if all goes well."

"Make sure it *does* go well."

"I'll do my best. Anything else?"

"Yes. Tell your crew to stay away from the passengers. A cook will come into the kitchen and prepare meals. No one will talk to her. There are six guards, including myself, and we will be on duty at all times. Anyone who comes to the cabins without permission will be shot." He put his hand on the butt of his pistol in emphasis.

"I will make sure the crew is informed," the captain said. "The only ones normally on the bridge are the first mate and myself. His name is Sergei."

"The *drunk*?"

Tovrov nodded. The Cossack shook his head in disbelief, his good eye sweeping the wheelhouse, then he left as suddenly as he had appeared.

Tovrov stared at the open door and scratched his chin. Passengers who bring their armed guards are not petty bureaucrats, he thought.

He must be carrying someone high up in the hierarchy, maybe even members of the court. But it was none of his business, he decided, and went back to his duties. He checked the compass heading, set the helm, then stepped out onto the port wing to clear his head.

The damp air carried a perfume laden with scents from the ancient lands that surrounded the sea. He cocked his ear, straining to hear over the erratic *thrum-thrum* of the *Star*'s engines. Decades at sea had honed his senses to a sharp edge. Another boat was moving through the fog. Who else would be so foolish as to sail on such a terrible night? Maybe it was the vodka at work.

A new sound drowned out the boat noise. Music was coming from the passengers' quarters. Someone was playing a concertina and male voices sang in chorus. It was the Russian national anthem, *"Baje Tsaria Krani."* "God Save the Tsar." The melancholy voices made him sad, and he went back into the wheelhouse and closed the door so he could no longer hear the haunting strains.

The fog vanished with the dawn, and the bleary-eyed mate stumbled in to relieve the captain. Tovrov gave him the course orders, then stepped outside and yawned in the early-morning sunlight. He swept his eyes over the blue satin sea and saw that his instincts had been right. A fishing boat was running parallel to the *Star*'s long wake. He watched the boat for a few minutes, then shrugged and made the rounds, warning every crewman that the officers' quarters were off-limits.

Satisfied that all was well, the captain crawled into his bunk and slept in his clothes. His first mate was under strict orders to awaken him at the first sign of anything unusual. Nevertheless, Tovrov, who had mastered the art of the catnap, rose several times and returned to a deep slumber in between. Around midday, he awoke and went into the mess, where he ate bread and cheese, plus sausage purchased with his newfound wealth. A stout woman was there, bending over the stove, and standing by was a tough-looking Cossack who helped

her carry the steaming pots back to the passenger section. After his meal, Tovrov relieved the mate for a lunch break. As the day wore on, the fishing boat fell back until it could have been any one of the dots visible on the horizon.

The *Star* seemed to shed years as she glided over the mirrored surface of the sunlit sea. Eager to reach Constantinople, Tovrov ordered the ship kept at nearly top speed, but finally, the ship paid for its coltish behavior. Around dinnertime, an engine broke down, and though the first mate and the engineer tinkered with the engine for hours, their only accomplishment was to coat themselves with grease. The captain saw that further effort was futile and ordered them to push forward on one engine.

The major was waiting in the wheelhouse and roared like a wounded bull when the captain laid out the problem. Tovrov said they would get to Constantinople, only not as soon. An extra day, perhaps.

Yakelev raised his fists in the air and affixed the captain with his baleful eye. Tovrov expected to be smashed to goulash, but the major suddenly whirled and swept from the cabin. The captain exhaled the breath he had been holding and returned to his charts. The ship was moving at half speed, but at least it was moving. The captain prayed to the icon of Saint Basil on the wall that the good engine would hold out.

Yakelev was calmer when he returned. The captain asked how the passengers were doing. They were fine, the major said, but they would do better if the stinking rust bucket they were on got to where it was going. Fog moved in later, and Tovrov had to reduce speed by a couple of knots. He hoped Yakelev was asleep and wouldn't notice.

Tovrov had the nervous mental tic that comes to men who have spent their lives on the water, his eyes constantly darting here and there, checking the compass and barometer dozens of times in an