

**STEPHEN
COONTS'**

**DEEP
BLACK:**

Sea of Terror

Written by Stephen Coonts
and William H. Keith



St. Martin's Paperbacks

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STEPHEN COONTS’ DEEP BLACK: SEA OF TERROR

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PROLOGUE

Pacific Sandpiper
Harbor Channel
Barrow, England
Thursday, 0745 hours GMT

SHE WAS A BLUE AND WHITE monster slipping slowly down the deep-water channel on a gray and rainy early-fall morning. To port were the sprawling facilities of the Roosecote Power Station and the neighboring Centrica Gas Terminal at Rampside. To starboard, toward the southwest, was the clawlike hook of Walney Island, the South End. North, blocked at the moment by the towering mountain of the *Pacific Sandpiper's* superstructure, the port of Barrow-in-Furness slowly receded into the morning haze.

Through his binoculars, Jack Rawlston looked straight across the low-lying strand of Walney Island and could just make out the slender white towers of the BOW on the southwestern horizon, seven kilometers offshore. British Offshore Wind was a joint project of Centrica and a Danish energy group, a wind farm consisting of thirty windmill turbines harvesting ninety megawatts from the winds blowing across the Irish Sea.

Energy. It was *all* about energy these days.

Rawlston stood at his assigned post on the ship's bow,

his assault rifle slung over his shoulder as he watched the Walney shoreline creep past. Seabirds wheeled and screeched against the overcast. A foghorn lowed its mournful, deep-throated tone.

And he could just make out another noise behind the normal sounds of the sea. A mile and a half ahead, hoots and honks and bellowing horns sounded in a slowly gathering maritime cacophony that made Rawlston's skin crawl.

Idiots, he thought. *As if their pathetic little demonstration could stop us.*

He turned to give the blockading line a disdainful look, and added to himself, *The bastards wouldn't dare.*

A ponderous 104 meters long, with a beam of sixteen meters and a full-load displacement of 7,725 tonnes, the *Pacific Sandpiper* was one of just three purpose-built oceangoing transports currently owned and operated by Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited, a British firm headquartered in Barrow, in the northwest of England. Her cargo, bolted to the decks in five large and independent storage holds below her long main deck, consisted this September morning of fourteen TN 28 VT transport flasks, each 6.6 meters long and 2.8 meters wide, weighing ninety-eight tonnes and each holding, stored carefully in separate containers, between 80 and 200 kilograms of mixed plutonium oxides, more colloquially known as MOX.

The fact that plutonium is, weight for weight, the single most poisonous substance known to man, and that there was enough on board the *Sandpiper* to construct perhaps sixty fair-sized nuclear weapons, did not bother Rawlston in the least. He'd served as security for other PNTL shipments and knew exactly how stringent the safeguards and precautions were. *He* was one of those safeguards, in fact.

But the demonstration now picking up at the mouth of

the channel had him uneasy. What did the fools think they were playing at, anyway?

Less than three kilometers ahead lay the exit of the Barrow Channel into the Irish Sea. From north to south, a half mile of open water separated Roa Island and the southern tip of Rampside from Piel Island in the middle of the channel, and another half mile from the southern tip of Piel to the north-curved tip of Walney. The deep-water channel ran to the right of Piel Island, an utterly flat and grassy bit of land capped by the ruins of Fouldry Castle.

That channel was narrow, only about two hundred yards wide. Spread now along that gap were dozens of small craft, pleasure boats, fishing boats, even a few yachts. They'd been gathering all morning, lining up across the channel entrance. Closer at hand, Zodiac rafts hopped and bumped ahead of churning white wakes as they moved to intercept the slow-moving mountain of the transport.

"Jesus Fucking H. Christ," Jack Rawlston said.

Folding his arms, he leaned against the portside railing forward, watching the show.

Timmy Smithers slung his "long," SAS slang for his SA80 rifle, over his shoulder and joined him from farther aft along the forecastle railing. "Quite a party, huh?"

Rawlston spat over the railing and into the sea. "Fuck-ing idiots," he said.

"Shit, mate," Smithers replied with a grin. He was former Australian SAS, and his words oozed outback affability. "Things just wouldn't be the same if we didn't have our little embarkation party, right? Lets us know they *care*."

Straightening, Rawlston raised his binoculars to his eyes, massive Zeiss 15×45s that snapped even the most distant of the boats into crisp, close-up detail. He'd purchased them on eBay rather than relying on his

service-issue set. Several of the larger small craft out there sported banners draped festively from their sides. "STOP NUKE SHIPMENTS," a particularly garish red and green sign read above a crude drawing of a human skull. "NO MOX," read another.

"Pretty wild, ain't it, mate?" Smithers said. "Playing up to CN-bloody-N, I suppose."

"Just so they move the hell out of our way," Rawlston replied after a moment. He focused on a pair of Zodiacs that appeared to be closing with the *Sandpiper* off her bow. Each carried two men wearing wet suits, bent low to keep their craft stable as they skipped off the waves.

"Looks like they're siccing the dogs on 'em as we speak," Smithers said, pointing. To starboard, the *Sandpiper's* escort was leaping ahead, lean and white, a shark to the *Piper's* lumbering whale. She was the *Ishikari* of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, the numerals 226 prominent on her knife-edged prow.

"Some of them're already inside the exclusion zone," Rawlston said. "Serves 'em bloody right if the *Ishi* runs 'em down!"

"Yeah, but then if she does, you have all of those lawsuits and demonstrations and newspaper editorials," Smithers replied. "So tiresome."

Rawlston lowered the binoculars and looked at the other man. Like Rawlston, Smithers wore civilian clothing, though the tactical vest, boots, and floppy-brimmed hat were all military issue. As with Rawlston, a small radiation meter hung from his tactical vest. In fact, both men *were* civilians, but until four years ago Rawlston had been in the British SAS. Now he was a contract employee for Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited, more usually called simply PNTL. He and the twenty-nine other security personnel on board the *Sandpiper* had been referred to more than once and disparagingly as "rent-a-cops." That, he thought, might be true . . . but they were very

dangerous rent-a-cops, the very, very best that money could buy. PNTL had a great deal riding on these radioactive cargoes, and could not afford to hire anyone who was less than the absolute best.

“There they go!” Smithers shouted, and he gave a whoop. “Run, you green little bastards!” The *Ishikari* was swinging to port, now, putting herself between the demonstrators and the slow-moving *Sandpiper*, using her sheer tonnage to clear a path through the line of demonstrators, scattering them. Overhead, a Royal Navy helicopter, a Sea King off the RNS *Campbeltown*, roared south with a clattering thunder of rotor noise. Under threat from sea and air, the demonstrators appeared to be losing their nerve.

“You’d think,” Rawlston said with just a shadow of a smile, “that they’d be happy to see our backs! We’re hauling the radioactive crap out of their backyards, after all!”

“Aw, the coppers’re more worried about saving the bloody whales, ain’t that right? Don’t matter if a city or two gets fried . . . but we can’t hurt the *whales!*”

One of the approaching Zodiacs, Rawlston saw with approval, had been capsized by the *Ishikari*’s surging wake. Raising his binoculars again, he studied the scene with a grin as two wet-suited swimmers floundered in the chop. The occupants of the other Zodiac had been attempting to deploy a large banner reading: “GREEN-PEACE,” no doubt for the benefit of news cameras ashore, but the sudden dunking of their comrades had interrupted the operation.

This sort of thing, Rawlston knew, happened around the world in dozens of other ports. Greenpeace and similar anti-nuke organizations liked to create demonstrations and photo ops any time a military nuclear vessel put to sea or, as in this case, when radioactive material was being shipped from port to port. These shipments of processed radioactive material had been carried on between Britain and France on one side and Japan on the other since 1995.

PNTL had completed almost two hundred shipments during those fourteen years, with not a single accident, not a single release of radioactivity, not a single hijacking or act of piracy, not a single problem of any type.

But Greenpeace and the others still had to put their tuppence in.

Ishikari was through the channel entrance now, and the *Pacific Sandpiper*, slowly gathering speed, followed in her wake. Rawlston watched the lines of civilian craft milling about to either side, continuing the honking and tooting of horns, the wail of sirens, the clang of bells. He could hear voices now, chanting, though the distance was too great for him to make out the words.

But the way was open as *Pacific Sandpiper* nosed through the channel entrance and into the chop of the Irish Sea. The wind was brisker here, kicking up whitecaps beneath the gray scud of the sky.

“At least,” he told Smithers, “that’s the *worst* part of the voyage behind us!”



Some eighty yards aft of Rawlings and Smithers, the main deckhouse superstructure of the *Pacific Sandpiper* bulked huge and white above the main deck. On an open wing of the superstructure, high above the main deck, two other men leaned against the railing and watched the demonstrators falling astern.

“Jikan desu yo,” one said.

“Hai!”

Both men were Japanese and, so far as anyone else on board the ship was concerned, were representatives of the Japanese utilities company that owned 25 percent of PNTL. They certainly had the requisite papers and ID, though the *real* Ichiro Wanibuchi and Kiyoshi Kitagawa were now dead, their bodies hidden in two separate Dump-

sters on the outskirts of Sellafield, twenty-five miles north of Barrow.

The second man pulled an encrypted satellite phone from his windbreaker, punched a code into its keyboard, and began speaking rapidly into the mouthpiece.

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1

Royal Sky Line Security Office
Southampton, England
Thursday, 1127 hours GMT

“MY GOD, MITCHELL!” CHARLIE Dean said, shaking his head. “You have *got* to be freaking kidding!”

“You know better than that, Mr. Dean,” Thomas Mitchell said. “MI5 *never* kids.”

Dean was sitting with the three security people at a console at the center of a large room, hanging one floor above the security checkpoint leading from the Royal Sky cruise ship terminal out to the dock. In front of them was a giant flat-screen TV monitor, on which the black-and-white image of a naked man could be seen walking through a broad, white tunnel. To one side, a much smaller security monitor showed the same man, this time from a high angle near the ceiling and in color, wearing dark trousers, a yellow shirt, and a white nylon jacket.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed cautiously. “When it comes to a sense of humor, you’re worse than the FBI and CIA put together. But since when did you guys turn into pornographic voyeurs?”

“Believe me, Mr. Dean,” the woman sitting next to him at the console said. Her name badge bore the name “Lockwood,” and she was, Dean knew, a technical specialist

with X-Star Security, the company that manufactured the equipment. "There is *nothing* whatsoever pornographic about this!" She sounded prim and somewhat affronted.

"That's right," David Llewellyn added, grinning. "After the first couple of hundred naked bodies, you don't even notice!"

Thomas Mitchell was an operative with MI5, Great Britain's government bureau handling counterintelligence, counterterrorism, and internal security in general, while David Llewellyn was the head of the Security Department on board the cruise ship *Atlantis Queen*. Dean had met Mitchell in Washington a week earlier, and knew him to be a dour and somewhat unimaginative British civil servant; he'd met Llewellyn and Lockwood only that morning, when Mitchell had escorted him into the Royal Sky Line's Southampton security section.

"That hardly matters, does it?" Dean said. "It's *their* privacy at stake, not how many naked people you've seen in your career."

Interesting, Mitchell thought. Llewellyn was seeing bodies. Dean was seeing *people*.

"I needn't remind you, Mr. Dean," Mitchell said, "that conventional metal detectors simply cannot pick up plastic bottles containing explosives or petrol, hard-nylon knives, or anything else made of plastic. Richard Reid walked through metal detectors several times before he boarded Flight Sixty-three."

Richard Reid had been the infamous "shoe bomber" who'd been subdued by passengers on board an American Airlines Boeing 767 in December of 2001. He'd been trying to light a fuse in one of his shoes, which had been packed with PETN plastic explosives and a triacetone triperoxide detonator. Ever since, airline passengers in the United States had been required to remove their shoes at airport terminal security checkpoints.

Charlie Dean had considerable experience with anti-terrorist security technologies of all types. A senior field

officer of the U.S. National Security Agency's top-secret Desk Three, he'd circumvented quite a few of them while on covert missions overseas, and he'd gone through more than his fair share at secure installations back home. In fact, he'd read about *this* technology some years ago, though he'd never seen it in operation. It was called backscatter X-ray scanning, and it was the latest twist in high-tech security screening . . . as well as the most controversial.

"I seem to remember seeing this sort of thing in a movie, once," Dean said. "Slapstick stuff."

"*Airport*," Lockwood said, rolling her eyes. "Yes, we've been told. Numerous times."

The man on the screen was somewhat pixelated by the digital imaging process, but every detail stood out with startling clarity, from the frames of his glasses to the zipper of his open jacket—every detail except his clothing, which had been rendered invisible. His face seemed a little blank; Dean could see his eyeballs and eyelids easily enough, but the iris and pupil were almost impossible to distinguish.

But the rest! The guy was heavy, his belly bulging strangely over an invisible belt. His belt buckle appeared to ride tucked in beneath the bulge just below his navel, and he was wearing a small, bright crucifix on a chain around his neck. His pubic hair, the trail of hair up his belly to his navel, and the thicket on his chest and back all had a crisp, wiry, almost metallic look to it. Dean could just make out the zipper in the trousers at the man's crotch, and it was clear, as an older generation of men's tailors would have put it, that he "dressed to the left."

"I thought," Dean said, "that there was supposed to be a software algorithm that blurred faces and . . . other body parts."

"Oh, sure, some places still do that," Llewellyn replied. "But that rather defeats the purpose, doesn't it? People have tried smuggling guns or drugs hidden at their crotch

or between their butt cheeks, where they think a pat-down wouldn't find them." He made a face. "You Americans are *so* squeamish about this sort of thing."

Lockwood typed a command into the keyboard in front of her, and on the big screen the man's computer-processed image seemed to freeze, then revolved in space for a moment, showing his body from all possible angles. At the right of the screen, a column of data appeared as it was forwarded off a security card the man was carrying—his name, passport number, cell and home phone numbers, Social Security number.

"Show us level two," Mitchell told her.

Lockwood typed in another command, triggering a small flood of data. James Gullabry, it seemed, was American, was visiting England on business, and was a sales rep for Del Rey Computers. He lived in Westchester, just outside of Boston; he had a wife, Anne, and two children . . . and was on medication for depression and for type 2 diabetes. Apparently, he was taking the long way home, by way of a Mediterranean cruise. *That*, Dean thought, was unusual.

"What . . . you don't have his credit history?"

"We can call that up for you, if you want," Mitchell said.

And Dean knew the man wasn't joking.

It's not that Americans are squeamish about nudity, Dean thought, watching the image on the screen, though that *was* of course a factor. The whole privacy issue had become a hot button on both sides of the Atlantic in the paranoid years since 9/11. MI5 itself had been called on the carpet back in 2006, he recalled, when a member of Parliament had disclosed that the security agency maintained extremely detailed and highly secret files on 272,000 British subjects—the equivalent of 1 in every 160 adults.

How far did you go to stop the threat of terrorism, and to protect your citizens?

Where did you draw the line between protecting your citizens . . . and spying on them?

The man on the screen walked off to the left. A moment later, he was replaced by an attractive young woman. She was wearing a bracelet, a watch, two rings, a single-strand necklace, and small, bright bits of jewelry in her navel and through both nipples. Quite obviously she was not carrying a gun . . . or anything else for that matter, not even a book of matches. Hurriedly Dean looked away, focusing instead on the security cam image that showed a pleasant-looking woman in her twenties, wearing a skirt and a bright green blouse and with an exuberant cascade of long blond hair hanging down past her waist.

Damn it, he *was* embarrassed.

And yet Mitchell had a point. Dean remembered a humorous but half-serious comment that had floated about in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror hijackings . . . something to the effect that the only way to ensure passenger safety on an airline flight would be to strip every passenger stark naked and handcuff them to their seats.

Technology had all but delivered the first of those two requirements.

Lockwood used her keyboard to call up the woman's information.

"O-*kay*, then, Miss Johnson," Llewellyn said, reading her name off the screen. "Here, Mr. Dean. Watch this."

He turned a dial on his console, and on the big screen the young woman's hair faded to a pale transparency, then vanished completely. A plastic hair clip continued to hang unsupported behind her now completely bald head, and Dean noticed that her tuft of pubic hair had vanished as well. Somehow, if possible, the complete lack of hair made her appear even more shockingly naked.

"We can adjust the strength of the X-ray beams," Mitchell explained. "We've had people try to hide stuff in long hair, men and women both." He glanced at Dean,

and seemed to read his expression. "Look, I *know* it's intrusive . . . but most people would rather have *this* than have security guards frisk them . . . or put them through a strip search!"

"Both of which slow down the queue," Lockwood added, "and make for unfortunate delays at the security checkpoints."

"Do they have a choice?" Dean asked.

"Oh, yes," Llewellyn told him. "They can walk through the machine, or they can submit to a hand search. Of *course* they have a choice!"

Dean wondered if most people knew they even had that option. That had been a problem with trials in the United States, he remembered . . . that, and the fact that most people simply didn't know how graphically revealing this sort of device actually could be. They heard "X-ray" and immediately thought of *medical* X-rays, black-and-white transparencies showing decidedly non-erotic shadows of bone and translucent tissue.

"So how much radiation are those people getting, anyway?" Dean asked. He knew the answer but wondered what the security people would say.

"About as much radiation as you would pick up walking outdoors in full sunshine," Lockwood replied. "Not an issue."

Dean looked back at the main screen as the computer froze the shockingly bald woman's image momentarily, then rotated it in three dimensions before going back to a real-time image. Her hair, clearly not hiding anything dangerous, faded back into view, and she stepped off-screen.

"I see you leave no fig leaf unturned," Dean said. "You could make a fortune putting these up on the Internet, you know."

"The data are *immediately* discarded, Mr. Dean," Mitchell told him.

This backscatter unit, Dean noted, was an upgraded

model, much improved over the first such devices of a few years ago. The first one had gone into service back in 2007, at the Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, Arizona. With that unit, airline passengers had stepped onto the painted outlines of footprints in front of a cabinet the size and shape of a refrigerator and stood there for ten seconds. Fast-improving technology had soon made this new model possible, with a computer imaging the body in real time, manipulating viewing angles, and even adjusting its sensitivity to peer down through successive layers of leather, cotton, nylon, and silk. Privacy concerns had delayed the widespread adoption of the technology; there'd been talk about having the computer blur sensitive parts of the body, or even redraw it as a kind of cartoon image that wasn't so completely graphic.

As Mitchell had pointed out, though, there were problems with that approach. New types of high-velocity explosives in a plastic container the size of a pack of cigarettes were powerful enough to kill several people, or depressurize an airliner's passenger cabin. That had been Reid's intent, obviously, with his PETN-laden shoe.

And if you *could* look at each and every passenger boarding an aircraft or, in this case, a cruise ship and be able to see with absolute clarity and perfect certainty whether or not just one person out of some hundreds or thousands was smuggling a bomb or other weapon . . . didn't simple common sense demand that security forces make use of that technology?

It is, Dean thought, an increasingly strange and difficult world.

"Uh-oh," Mitchell said, sitting up straighter in his swivel chair. "We've got a live one."

"Ah!" Llewellyn said. "I see it. Okay, Mr. Dean! *There* is why we don't have the machine put a blur over 'body parts,' as you put it!"

Another man had just walked into the tunnel. He was skinny, his ribs showing clearly. He was bearded and,

though his facial features were somewhat vague and blank-eyed on the X-ray image, his movements appeared jerky and seemed nervous or uncertain. Hanging above his genitals were what appeared to be three semitransparent bags, each the size of a man's fist. His hips were oddly pinched by an invisible cloth belt cinched tightly against his skin. As the image rotated, two more bags came into view, one flattened over each buttock. On the security camera, the man was wearing loose-fitting trousers and a shirt with the long tail hanging down outside the pants halfway to his knees. To an unaided eye, there was no way to see the bags secreted underneath.

“‘Nayim Erbakan,’” Mitchell said, reading the data on the right as Lockwood called it up. “Turkish national, German visa.”

Llewellyn reached up and touched his communicator headset. “Fred? David. Hold this one! Looks like a mule.”

On-screen, the man looked up, stopped, then took a backward step, raising his hands as if to push someone away. Two security guards entered the screen, one from the left and one from the right. Closing on Erbakan, they took him by either arm—with holstered semiautomatic pistols at their hips, with extra ammo clips, plastic belt pouches, badges, ID cards, wallets, radios, handcuffs, flashlights, nightsticks, zippers, buttons, the bills and internal structure of their caps, and other paraphernalia all dangling unsupported from their otherwise nude bodies.

Dean stood and walked across to the slanted windows looking down onto the terminal concourse and security area. The two guards, fully dressed in blue and white uniforms, were escorting the man away from the white tunnel toward a door marked “Private” and “No Admittance.”

The security process had been efficiently streamlined, Dean saw. A line of civilians, most of them in appropriately garish vacation clothing, stood in line waiting to go through the backscatter scanner. Each person in turn would stop beside a conveyor belt and deposit wallets,

handbags, cameras, cell phones, and other devices and carry-on items into baskets for conventional X-ray scans, then walk first through an old-fashioned metal detector and then through the smoothly sculpted white tunnel of the backscatter X-ray machine. Security guards stood at strategic points to control the traffic or to administer, as with Erbakan, more detailed and personal attention. Under the guards' watchful eyes, they retrieved their personal items at the end of the conveyor, on the far side of the backscatter device. Once they were cleared through the checkpoint, they filed through glass doors leading to the dock outside and the immense white cliff of the newest addition to the Royal Sky Line's fleet of luxury cruise ships, the *Atlantis Queen*.

Another young woman, looking harried and a bit impatient, stepped out of the tunnel below Dean's window, holding an infant on one arm. She turned, and held out her free hand, fingers impatiently wagging. A moment later a dark-haired girl walked out and took her hand. The girl couldn't have been more than ten.

Disgusted, Dean turned away and watched Lockwood, Llewellyn, and Mitchell at the console but did not walk back to where he could see the screen.

"Just how long have you been using this device?" he asked. He was trying not to think about the ten-year-old . . . or about a world gone so sick and paranoid that this kind of thing was thought necessary.

"Do you mean here in England?" Mitchell asked. "Or Royal Sky Line? We've had them operating at Heathrow International for a couple of years now."

"That's where I got my training," Llewellyn told him. "We started using this unit here just yesterday. The upgrades are amazing."

"We've already screened over a thousand of the *Queen's* passengers," Lockwood added.

"Really? How many opted for a hand frisk?"

As he spoke, his right hand peeled a three-inch strip of

black, sticky plastic from the back of his tie, the movement blocked from the others by the screen itself.

“A couple of hundred,” Lockwood told him. She shrugged. “Like Tom said, most people prefer this. It’s less obtrusive. Less . . . *personal*.”

“So what is the CIA’s interest in our little peep show?” Llewellyn wanted to know.

Dean had introduced himself that morning as a security analyst with the CIA, though he’d used his real name. The National Security Agency remained not only the largest and best-funded intelligence agency in the United States but also the most secretive. Its operatives rarely admitted who they really worked for. NSA employees jokingly referred to the acronym as “No Such Agency” or “Never Say Anything,” and, even yet, few people in the general public had ever heard of the organization, or knew anything about it.

But *everyone* had heard of the CIA.

“We’re interested,” Dean said carefully, reciting from a memorized script, “in how new transportation security technologies might be interfaced with various international databases, passport records, and police files, so that we can track known criminals and terrorists before they can even enter the United States or Great Britain.”

Unobtrusively he pressed the tape, sticky side down, against the back of the freestanding console. The tape had a meaningless ten-digit number printed on it in white letters; if a security sweep found it later, it would look like just another serial number.

“Royal Sky Line,” Dean added as he finished, “is introducing some . . . novel concepts along those lines.”

“Ah. You mean the passenger tracking chips,” Llewellyn said, nodding.

“Among other things.”

“Makes sense, actually. As you saw, Ship’s Security personnel can pull everything necessary in a person’s

jacket into a database when they check in, or even when they first buy their ticket. When they check on board, they receive a key card with a magnetized strip and an embedded microchip. It serves as the key to their stateroom, but it also holds all pertinent data about that person, *and* lets them be tracked wherever they go on board the ship. At any given moment, Ship's Security can determine the exact location of everyone aboard. If someone goes ashore at a port of call but doesn't come back aboard for some reason, Security knows about it."

"Scanners in the passageways and public areas ping the cards' strips every few seconds," Lockwood added. "A computer in Security tallies up where every card is at any given moment, and which cards are missing. Or it can isolate, identify, and pinpoint the location of any one particular card, anywhere on board."

"Very convenient," Dean said. "What if someone forgets and leaves his card in his stateroom?"

"Then a steward very politely informs him of the fact," Llewellyn replied, "as soon as he tries to go ashore or to enter a monitored public area. If he loses his card, he is escorted down to Security, where his identity can be verified, and he is issued another card."

"And how do you safeguard the data?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Dean gestured at the back of the big screen. "You've got a lot of sensitive, personal information there. I'm not saying you, necessarily . . . but what's to stop one of your security people from misusing it?"

"I'm *sure* I don't know what you mean," Llewellyn said.

"You liked the looks of that one woman who just went through . . . what was her name? Miss Johnson? And here, right at your fingertips, you have her age, her marital status, her address, her phone number, her Social Security number, what she does for a living, where she works, health conditions. For all I know, it tells you whether she

prefers Harvey Wallbangers to scotch on the rocks! Are you telling me you don't see how that much personal information could be misused?"

"All data here are destroyed, Mr. Dean," Mitchell insisted.

"No, they're not! Those X-ray images are erased—or so you tell me—but the personal data are still there. And why should the public accept your word that even the naked pictures get shit-canned?"

"Mr. Dean," Lockwood said. "There are professional and legal standards here. We are professionals, no less than doctors or therapists! And our clients, the companies using X-Star's equipment, I assure you are self-policing. A scandal—"

"In other words, Mr. Dean, we're *not* going to do anything that would generate lawsuits or right-to-privacy injunctions," Llewellyn said, interrupting.

"Maybe not," Dean said, shrugging. "But what about outside access? Hackers?"

Lockwood patted the keyboard in front of her. "This network is completely isolated from the Internet. Hackers can't get in."

"Oh? What kind of protection software do you use?"

Lockwood hesitated, and Mitchell answered, "They're not supposed to tell you, but you've been cleared. It's a software package called Netguardz."

"Ah, right. I've heard of it."

"Since when is the American CIA so interested in protecting the privacy of individual citizens?" Mitchell asked.

"There's a difference between what I do for a living," Dean replied slowly, "and what I feel and believe on a personal level."

"Really?" Lockwood said. "Maybe you're in the wrong line of work."

"I've often thought so."

The door to the security room opened and a young man in the blue uniform of the Royal Sky Line walked in.

He was young, in his mid-twenties, perhaps. "Hey there," he said. "Shift change!"

"About time," Llewellyn said, standing. He turned to Lockwood. "Can I get you anything, Ellen? Tea? Coffee?"

"I'm fine, thanks," the woman said. "I'll be breaking for lunch in a little bit."

"Suit yourself. How about you gents?"

"Thanks, no."

Mitchell stood up as well. "Well . . . you wanted to see the operation here, Mr. Dean," he said. "Are we done? You got all you wanted?"

"I think so," Dean said. He nodded at Llewellyn and Lockwood. "It was nice meeting you both. Thank you for your help."

He turned for one last look down through the windows onto the concourse again. There was someone he'd been watching for. . . .

Yes! There she was. He resisted the urge to wave.

"See anyone you know?" Mitchell asked.

"Yes, actually. A . . . friend."

"More CIA?" Mitchell frowned. "Just how many of you are there here today?"

Dean grinned. "Just me. She's not Company." Which was true enough. "She's just a friend, and I happen to know she's taking your cruise to the Med and was going to check in through your queue today."

"Really?" Mitchell said, joining him at the window and looking down at the line of tourists. "Who is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you that!" Dean said. "You're about to strip her naked and peer up every orifice in living black and white! She can just remain anonymous, thank you very much!"

Lockwood snorted. "If his friend was CIA, you don't think he'd *tell* us so, do you?"

The young man sat down at the console in the seat Llewellyn had vacated. "What's all this? CIA? Cloak-and-dagger stuff?" The others ignored him.

Dean turned away from the window. “What’s next on the tour?”

“Lunch, actually,” Mitchell said, standing by the door. “After you?”

As Dean walked out, he heard the young man’s voice behind him. “Coo! Now *there’s* a sweet bird!”

“Jesus!” Lockwood said. “*Grow up!*”

**Royal Sky Line security queue
Atlantis Queen passenger terminal
 Southampton, England
 Thursday, 1202 hours GMT**

Carolyn Howorth couldn’t resist. She stepped into the yawning mouth of the white tunnel and struck a sexy pose, hips cocked sharply to one side, left hand on her hip, right arm straight overhead. “See anything you like, boys?” she asked.

Dropping her arm, she swished out of the tunnel, smiling sweetly at the cruise line security guard waiting outside.

He looked puzzled. “Did you say something, ma’am?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said. “Just checking to see if these things are equipped for sound.”

“No, ma’am. It just takes your picture.”

“Oh, I see. Is that all?”

She glanced up over her left shoulder. She could see the line of windows up near the ceiling of the cavernous room, the office where Charlie Dean was making nice with the Royal Sky Line security people, and wondered if he’d just gotten an eyeful. She didn’t see him, however, and so she walked on down the line to the end of the conveyor, claiming her handbag, her camera, and her laptop computer. She asked the guard for a hand check on her camera. He had her remove her camera from its case and

looked down into the lens, but Carolyn noticed that his eyes were watching hers, checking for nervousness or other telltale clues.

“Open the computer, please, miss,” the guard told her, setting the camera aside. “Thank you. Now turn it on for me.”

She pressed the power switch and they waited for the machine to boot up. “Damned Vista,” she told him. “It tries to boot everything at once and takes forever.”

Finally, though, the screen came up. Satisfied, the guard motioned to her to close it up and put it away. “Thank you,” he said, apparently satisfied. “Have a nice cruise!”

“Thank you,” she told him. She was wondering if he had any idea what was possible in computer technology these days. It wouldn’t be hard at all to have a working laptop exactly like this one, which booted to a full screen and yet had free space enough inside for a disassembled gun or high explosives or almost anything else she cared to smuggle onto the ship.

Presumably, they’d checked for that sort of thing when her laptop had gone through the carry-on scanner . . . but still.

In fact, her machine wasn’t at all what it appeared to be, or not entirely, at least. The computer part *did* work.

Technically, Carolyn did not work for the NSA as Charlie Dean did. She was GCHQ, one of the Menwith Girls, as they were known, an employee stationed at Menwith Hill, in Yorkshire, of the highly secret British eavesdropping agency that was closely partnered with America’s NSA. Carolyn had worked with Dean before, in an op targeting the Russian mafia.

Through the double glass doors and onto the dock. A gangway festooned with bunting extended up to the entry port on the *Atlantis Queen*’s port side, where a ship’s officer waited for her.

He checked the electronic pad he was holding. “Good

afternoon, Ms. Carroll," he said with a pleasant smile. "May I see your ticket and your passkey, please?"

"Certainly." She fished into her handbag and produced both. For this operation, Carolyn was traveling as Judith Carroll and all of the electronic information about her in the system, save for her nationality and her gender, was completely false.

The officer swiped her card through a reader and handed it back to her. "Here you are, Ms. Carroll. We'll keep your ticket for you in the bursar's office. Your passkey serves as your ticket and your ID during your cruise. You have your ID bracelet?"

"Oh, yes. Somewhere here." Again she fumbled through her bag, producing a slender strip of white plastic with a small metal clasp.

"I don't need it, miss," he told her. "All of your information is in the ship's computer. I was just going to tell you that you should keep your passkey with you at all times during the cruise . . . but that if you want to go to the pool, the spa, the sauna, or any of the other shipboard facilities where you might not want to have to carry the key along, you can wear that bracelet instead."

"But what's it all *for*?" she asked him, giving him her best wide-eyed innocent's look.

"Security, miss. It's for your safety." He pressed several keys on his electronic pad. "Right, then! You're all checked in. Stateroom Six-oh-nine-one. That's straight ahead to the elevator, then up to Deck Six and follow the signs. Have a nice voyage!"

"Thank you . . ." She glanced at his name badge. "Mr. Norton, is it?"

"Lieutenant Norton, miss."

"Maybe I'll see you around the boat?"

He grinned at her. "Could be. But it's a *ship*, not a boat."

She started to reply, but he was already turning to greet the next person coming up the gangway.

Not a problem. Norton wasn't part of the security staff in any case. She needed to see if she could run into Foster, Ghailiani, or Llewellyn sometime during the course of the voyage.

In the meantime, she was going to enjoy this assignment. A four-week cruise to the eastern Mediterranean? With stops in Madeira, Greece, Turkey, and Israel? And all at the Company's expense! Now *that* was luxury!

She was looking forward to checking out her accommodations for the next glorious month.

Yeah, this was going to be *fun*!

**Lower Mortimer Road
Woolston, England
Thursday, 1215 hours GMT**

Mohamed Ghailiani trudged up the steps leading to his flat, one flight up from the street just across the Itchen Toll Bridge from the center of Southampton. He was tired and he was worried. He'd tried phoning home earlier that morning, but Zahra hadn't answered. With all of the craziness going on at work lately . . .

He turned his key in the lock and stepped through the front door. "Zahra?" he called.

There was no answer. Odd.

Pocketing his keys, he walked through to the living room. "Zahra? I'm home!"

Mohamed Ghailiani was Moroccan, but his family had moved to England in 1973, when he'd been five. He was a Crown subject and thought of himself as British. He was not particularly religious, though he did go to mosque most Fridays. It was a formality, something that gave him a social connection with other members of Britain's Moroccan community.

He'd worked for Royal Star Line for six years, now.

Before that, he'd worked for a computer company in London, and before that he'd been an electronics technician in the British Army. He was *good* with computers.

He supposed that that was why Khalid had approached him two days ago.

Finding no one in the living room, he continued through to the kitchen. The men were waiting for him there.

"*What are you—*," he began, but stopped when the two men pointed handguns squarely at his face.

"Shut up, you," one of the gunmen said in heavily accented English. He pointed at one of the white-painted kitchen chairs beside the table. "Sit down. Someone wants to talk to you."

Trembling, Ghailiani did as he was told.