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CHINA STAR

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CHINA STAR

A Novel

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CHINA STAR

A Novel

by

MAURICE MEDLAND

Chapter One

“Suits on the quarterdeck, Skipper.”
Matt Connor cursed under his breath. Through the dark glass of the welder's mask, he focused on the bead forming up around the patch. There was no need to look. Suits could only mean Kaohsiung port officials, American IRS agents, or Gray Wolf's enforcers. Whichever they were, they were trouble, the kind that could shut him down. *Lousy timing*. In a few hours he'd have been under way.

“Not now, Sam. Get rid of them.”

“One of 'em's wearing a skirt.”

“I don't care what they're wearing, get rid of them. If they're from Gray Wolf, tell them the check's in the mail.”

Sam laughed and said in his rich baritone, “I think he's heard that one before.” He squinted into the late afternoon sun glimmering across Kaohsiung Harbor. “Anyway, they don't look much like Gray Wolf's boys.”

Matt blew out a long breath. That left Kaohsiung port officials and American IRS agents. They could cause him a lot of trouble, but at least they couldn't kill him.

He dialed the feed down, and the acetylene torch flickered out with a pop. He tilted the mask up, leaned back against a capstan, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He wasn't worried about being seen. Dressed in his grubbies, there was nothing that would distinguish him from a dozen other crewmen swarming over the ship, making preparations to get under way. He shielded his eyes and focused on the pair.

The man was black, early forties, close-cropped hair graying at the temples, dark suit. The woman was white, late twenties or early thirties, short brown hair, cream-colored business suit with a short skirt. Damn. He'd thrown enough IRS agents off his ship to know them when he saw them. They looked as if they'd been plucked out of their offices in Washington, D.C., and set down in the Taiwan seaport without a hair out of place.

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The IRS sent out a new team of agents to harass him every few months, and they had a talent for showing up at the worst possible time. The pair stood awkwardly on the quarterdeck, clutching briefcases, flinching at the chaos around them.

Matt couldn't blame them. *CoMar Explorer* appeared to be in a state of total confusion. Cranes swung pallets of supplies aboard as crewmen scrambled to secure topside equipment and make last-minute repairs. On the dock below, a chain of longshoremen shouted commands in Mandarin, passing crates of provisions into the ship's hold, while engineers in blue jumpsuits pumped acrid-smelling diesel fuel into her tanks. He smiled at the anxious look on the agents' faces. Bureaucrats out in the real world.

The bastards never gave up. If you want to be Public Enemy Number One in America, just start your own business. Every federal, state, and local agency in existence will come swooping down on you, trying to bleed you dry with one hand and close you down with the other. After a year of trying to comply with countless idiotic government regulations, he'd moved his ocean-salvage business out of the U.S. to the Republic of China—more commonly known as Taiwan—and established new headquarters in Kaohsiung, a bustling seaport on the South China Sea.

He'd thought that would solve the problem, but he couldn't bring himself to give up his U.S. citizenship—which convinced the Internal Revenue Service that part of the money he made was theirs, no matter where in the world he made it. Neither Matt nor his lawyer saw it that way, but the IRS had more lawyers than he did and slapped a \$2,800,000 lien on his ship. He didn't have the time or money to fight them, but it didn't matter; as long as he stayed out of the U.S., they couldn't touch *CoMar Explorer*.

His first instinct was to throw the agents off his ship, but something about the woman—a kind of aura around her—made him hesitate. At first he thought it was the sun behind her that gave her that radiant quality, but her companion had the same sun behind him and he didn't glow. He stared at her. A gentle breeze lifted her hair, pressed her skirt against her thighs. He told himself there'd be no harm in

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seeing them; they were on his turf now and couldn't do anything to hurt him. The truth was that he hadn't talked to a woman—especially an American woman—in a very long time.

“Take them to the crew's lounge,” he said. “Have Francisco get them some coffee. I need to change my shirt.”

“Aye aye, Skipper.”

He ducked down through the after hatch and paused on the ladder with his head above deck. “Make sure the fuel tanks are topped off, Sam. We've got a long way to go.”

“Go where, Skipper?”

Matt suppressed a laugh. He hadn't told anyone where they were headed, not even his first mate. No one was going to scoop him on this job. It was too big and too important to the survival of Connor Marine. He flashed an exaggerated grin.

“You'll find out along with everyone else once we're at sea.”

He slid down the ladder to the second deck and wound his way forward to his sea cabin, checking along the way to see that everything belowdecks was secured, dodging questions from crew members. They'd be under way by midnight, and he'd announce their destination and answer all their questions once they were far at sea. He was sure they'd like what they heard. Unlike the crews of most ocean-salvage companies, Matt's shared in the profits, like pirates of old, and this job promised to be the biggest in the company's history.

“Hey, Traveller.” Matt tousled the fur of the scrawny yellow dog sprawled across the deck in his sea cabin. “You're about to live up to your name, old buddy. We're fixing to make tracks.” The dog put its head down and went back to sleep, paws crossed, while Matt rummaged in his locker for a shirt. He found a blue one, faded but clean, and pulled it on while he glanced around the room. He liked this small cabin, used it exclusively for his quarters whether in port or at sea. Unlike the captain's stateroom, which was luxurious and isolated, the sea cabin was spartan, just a bunk, a desk, and a locker. But it was located near the bridge, where he could see what was going on.

Fumbling with the buttons on his shirt, he looked out the porthole at the black nuclear sub moored across the way. The USS *Salt Lake*

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City, a Los Angeles-class attack boat, had come in early that morning. In all the time he'd spent in Kaohsiung, he'd never seen a U.S. attack boat in the harbor before, and the damned thing had parked right across from him. He probably knew some of the senior officers aboard. He had no doubt that they knew of him.

Like the IRS agents, the sub had shown up at the worst possible time. Seeing it brought back memories he'd been struggling with for years, and right now he needed to stay focused. As he watched, a young officer in khakis came aboard, saluted the colors, and dropped down the after hatch. The thought of a hatch screwing down over his head made him suck air into his lungs. He wiped sweat from his forehead and saw his hand tremble. *Christ*. Nothing had changed. He closed the porthole and turned away.

That part of his life was over, but just seeing the sub reminded him how much he missed the Navy. He could never go down in one of those steel coffins again, yet in his most private fantasies he saw himself having his commission restored. There wasn't much chance of that. No chance, in fact, now that he was persona non grata in the U.S.

Matt let out a sigh and sat down at his desk, grateful for what he did have. Starting with one beat-up tugboat in San Diego, he'd built Connor Marine & Salvage into a small but respected company. It was a boom or bust business that demanded eighteen-hour days and seven-day weeks, but he couldn't stay away from the sea. He'd managed to keep afloat during the busts by borrowing on his ocean-going tug to keep his crew intact. It had been a gamble, but his crew had never missed a paycheck, even in the leanest of times, and the gamble had paid off. He now had a bulldog-loyal crew of the best divers and salvors in the industry.

But even the best crew would take you only so far without the right equipment. After years of scrimping, a couple of lucrative jobs, and a four-million-dollar loan from Gray Wolf, he'd finally been able to buy a decommissioned salvage ship from a broker in Amsterdam. She was a 1930s vintage ship the Dutch Navy had declared surplus, and he felt a certain kinship with the cast-off vessel. She'd been through several owners and was a sad spectacle by the time he brought her

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limping into Kaohsiung Harbor.

He'd put his heart into her restoration, feeling somehow that in proving the old ship was worth another lease on life, he was proving the same thing about himself. After months of hard work she still looked rough on the outside, but her main systems were functional and Matt was convinced that he was now in a position to compete for the major salvage contracts. Mortgaged to the hilt, he'd re-christened her with the lofty name *CoMar Explorer*, in honor of a ship he'd always admired, and waited for the phone to ring. It was another huge gamble, but all he needed was one big job to stay alive, and it looked like he had it.

He unlocked the center drawer of his desk and retrieved the fax from his agent. A U.S. flag freighter with a load of manganese had run aground on an island off Macau. A job like this could be worth 25 percent of the value of the ship and cargo—maybe five or six million dollars—depending on the weather conditions and the difficulty of the job.

He glanced at his watch. June 10. Big jobs didn't come along often, and with a payment on *CoMar Explorer* in arrears, this one had come along just in time. Gray Wolf wasn't known for his patience.

The phone on his desk buzzed. He swiveled around and hit the speakerphone button.

“Captain.”

“Hey, Boss-man. When you come?”

Matt sighed. “‘Captain,’ Francisco, not ‘Boss-man.’ You're a sailor now.”

“Francisco chef, no sailor.”

“Everyone on my ship is a sailor.”

“Not me, Boss-man.”

“What do you want, Francisco?”

“Man in suit 'bout to bust. He say why you not come?”

Matt felt a knot form in his stomach. He looked at his watch, sorry now that he'd agreed to see the two IRS agents.

“I'm on my way.”

He switched off the speakerphone, locked the dispatch away in

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his desk drawer, retrieved his tax attorney's card from his card file, and walked aft to the crew's lounge with Traveller close at his heels. He paused at the door. The woman sat on a leather couch drumming her fingers on her briefcase, while the man stood behind her, pacing.

“Welcome to Kaohsiung,” Matt said, stepping over the coaming. “I hope you've had a pleasant trip, but I think you've wasted your time. We've been all through this before.”

“All through what?” the black man said.

“Two-point-eight million in back taxes and penalties. You say I owe it. I say I don't.” He took the dog-eared business card from his shirt pocket. “Here's my tax attorney in San Diego. Talk to him.”

The man walked around from behind the couch. Smiled. Full of himself. “We're not from the IRS.” He extended his hand. “Cliff Howard, U.S. State Department.” He nodded to the woman on the couch. “This is Susan Elliott, Central Intelligence Agency.”

Matt blinked. What the hell could the State Department and the CIA want with him? He made an attempt at a smile.

“Sorry. You government types all look alike.”

The woman's eyes made the trip up and down his too-lean frame, his faded blue shirt, grease-stained khakis, and scuffed boots.

“You're Matthew Connor?”

Matt felt his ears tingle. He'd had about four hours sleep and knew he looked like hell, but it galled him to have some manicured bureaucrat—even one with an aura—look at him as though he'd crawled out of a cardboard box.

“Some of us have to work for a living.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean—”

“Forget it.”

Matt glanced at their ID's and took a seat on the couch opposite her. There wasn't that much difference in their ages, maybe ten years, but she made him feel old. Traveller sat beside him, sphinx-like, staring up at the pair. A low growl emitted from his throat.

“Nice doggy,” Susan Elliott said.

“Don't patronize him,” Matt said. “He's had a hard life.”

“Why's he growling?”

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“You survive on the docks by knowing trouble when you see it.” Matt reached down and stroked the dog's ragged ears. “Cool it, Trav.”

“Don't tell me, let me guess. I bet his name is Travis, like Travis McGee, because you live on a boat.”

“I live on a ship and his name is Traveller.”

“After an insurance company?”

“Two L's. A horse.”

Susan Elliott's eyes widened. “Oh, I get it. Robert E. Lee's famous horse. Are you a southerner?”

Matt gave her a dip of the head. So she was well-read. “Just a student of military history.”

Cliff Howard twisted in his seat. “Can we get down to business here?”

“Sure,” Matt said. He glanced over their perfect hair, across Kaohsiung Harbor at the container ships moored at Chichin Island. He'd always prided himself on being able to size people up in about three seconds, and these two were no challenge. Howard was square-jawed and aristocratic-looking, older than he'd first thought, a bureaucrat used to waving his government credentials around. Susan Elliott was maybe in her late twenties, not yet experienced enough to know how to throw hers around. Or maybe she had a different weapon, an athletic body poured into a short-skirted business suit that exposed an unbusinesslike amount of thigh when she crossed her legs. Now that he'd met her, he was sorry he'd let his libido talk him into this. She was pretty, no doubt about that, but she seemed to have all the maturity of a teenager. He glanced at his watch, eager to be rid of them and under way. “What can I do for you?”

“We're looking for someone for a special assignment,” Cliff Howard said. “When we asked around, your name came up. When we found out you were Admiral Jacobs's brother-in-law—”

“Ex brother-in-law.”

“He said you'd be quick to point that out,” Susan Elliott said, tugging at her skirt.

Cliff Howard glanced at her. “When we found out you were related, we went to see him.”

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“How is he?” Matt said.

“Fine,” Susan Elliott said. “He was just appointed CNO.”

“*Jake?*” Chief of Naval Operations. He'd had no idea. But he shouldn't have been surprised to learn that his old mentor had the number one job in the Navy. Jake had a gift for politics, knew how to use people to get what he wanted. Not bad. Four stars on his collar, a corner office on the E-ring, and a four-striper for a secretary. His ex brother-in-law had gone as far up as Matt had gone down, and at about the same speed. He managed a smile. “Good for him.”

“He had good things to say about you,” Susan Elliott said.

“I'll bet.”

“No, really. He said you'd someday have been sitting in his chair as CNO if you hadn't been so hardheaded.”

“Let's cut the crap,” Matt said. “I'm sure you know I left the Navy under a very big cloud.”

“We've gone over your record,” Cliff Howard said. “What we were hearing from everyone didn't jibe with what we were seeing in your file. That's why we went to see Admiral Jacobs.”

“Great guy,” Susan Elliott said. “Old Navy family. He said you'd have gone all the way if you hadn't resigned over some fire aboard a nuclear submarine. He said his sister, Barbara, wanted to be married to an admiral. She walked out when you resigned your commission. You pretty much lost everything overnight. Is that about right?”

Matt glared at her. Jake must have left out the part about his father disowning him. “You tell me. You've got all the answers.”

“Not all. Why did you resign?”

“That's none of your business.”

“He said you'd say that, but he did his own private investigation of the fire. He told us you were executive officer of the USS *Phoenix*, a nuclear-powered attack submarine. At thirty-two, the youngest in the Navy. Fire broke out under way, running deep off the Marianas. A man died before you brought it under control. You and the skipper were automatically relieved.

“The skipper's career was finished, but the Navy's a little more forgiving for an exec, especially a rising star. Admiral Jacobs tried to

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convince you to stay and rebuild your career, but you refused. He said you'd have had to expose someone else—a chief named Flemons—for the delay in reporting the fire, and you wouldn't do it. He couldn't figure out why you covered for him, but when he went poking around he found out the chief had a kid who was autistic, needed care for life, and you wouldn't do anything that would cost him his pension.”

Matt folded his arms across his chest. So that's what his old mentor had come up with. Let Jake believe what he wanted. He'd die before he'd tell him—or anyone else—what really happened down there.

“He doesn't know what he's talking about.”

“He said you wouldn't defend yourself during the Court of Inquiry. The chief could have helped, but he didn't say a word. You accepted full responsibility and resigned. The chief got to finish up his career. He's kicking back in Florida now while you're running a tramp ocean-salvage ship out of Taiwan.”

“What do you mean, tramp ship?”

“Isn't that what you call a ship that can't return to the U.S. without being seized for nonpayment of taxes?” she said.

Matt stared at the pair of bureaucrats.

“If there's a point to this, I'd like to know what the hell it is.”

“Sorry if this seems intrusive,” Cliff Howard said. “The record doesn't always reveal the true story. We just had to find out what happened.”

“Why? What do you want from me?”

Cliff Howard nodded to the CIA agent. She opened her briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers. On top was an eight-by-ten color photo she slid across the table.

Without picking it up, Matt cocked his head and looked at the picture. Headshot of a young woman. Black dress, short string of pearls, short brown hair, exotic eyes, not much makeup.

“What's this?”

“Her name is Elizabeth Grayson,” Susan Elliott said. “She's the only daughter—only child, in fact—of Senator John Grayson.”

Matt glanced at the picture again. “She looks Asian.”

“Eurasian, actually, her mother is Chinese. One of the famous Tang sisters.”

Matt shrugged.

“Prominent Han Chinese family known for, shall we say, marrying well. The eldest sister married the top general in Beijing, the second married a billionaire real estate developer in Hong Kong. The youngest, Elizabeth's mother, emigrated to the U.S. and married a wealthy politician.”

Something about the young woman's countenance pulled Matt into the photo. He picked it up. A senator's daughter. It figured. The look on Elizabeth Grayson's face reminded him of his ex-wife. Haughty, disdainful of anyone less intelligent, determined to get what she wanted. Like Barb, she was beautiful, but the look in her eyes said it all. Trouble. *Someone I wouldn't want to know*. He tossed the picture back on the table.

“So?”

“She's a scientist,” Howard said, “an expert in microlaser technology. That picture was taken while she was a grad student at MIT. After a teaching stint at UC Berkeley, her cousin, who heads up the largest tech company in China, invited her to do medical research at a lab in Canton—or Guangzhou, as it's now called.”

Matt's head came up. Guangzhou was near Macau. He studied the two for a moment, then told himself to stop being paranoid. No one knew he was on his way to Macau, not even Sam.

Howard said, “He convinced her they were on the verge of a breakthrough and that she could help—something to do with killing cancer cells with laser beams.”

Matt glanced at his watch.

“According to her parents, she's a pacifist who feels caught between two saber-rattling countries,” Elliott said. “She jumped at the chance to do something that might improve relations between the U.S. and China.”

“Look,” Matt said, “this is all very interesting, but I'm in kind of a hurry.”

“Bear with us, Mr. Connor,” Howard said. “A cleaning woman

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found some secret documents from the lab hidden in her apartment and turned her in. The PLA arrested her and put her on trial for spying. She was convicted and sentenced to ten years in a *laogai*, a forced labor camp.”

Laogai. Matt had heard the word whispered by refugees from the mainland. There were thousands of *laogai* throughout China. The literal translation was “reform prison,” but everyone knew the sentences meant nothing. Most people who entered the camps never came out. And those few who did were never quite the same. He shuddered at the thought of an American woman caught up in that system, then shook the feeling off. It wasn't his problem.

“Tough break,” Matt said, “but it seems to me if you go to another country and steal their secrets, they've got every right to throw your ass in prison.”

“The documents were planted,” Howard said. “That's not why she's in prison.”

“Whyever she's there,” Matt said, “I can't see what any of this has to do with me.” He started to come to his feet.

“We want you to help get her out,” Susan Elliott said.

Matt froze. He stared at her for a minute and eased himself back down on the couch. His eyes went back and forth from Howard to Elliott.

“Are you nuts?”

“Now, hold on,” Howard said. “Admiral Jacobs said you'd give us a fair hearing. That's all we ask.”

“Hell, you're the State Department. She's the daughter of a senator. Surely you can negotiate her release.”

Cliff Howard said, “We've tried—repeatedly—but the Chinese are intransigent on the subject.”

Matt looked at Susan Elliott. “Well, here's an idea. You're the CIA. You get her out.”

“We're an intelligence-gathering organization, Mr. Connor.”

“Bullshit. I know what the CIA does.”

“Whatever your perceptions of the CIA, there can't be any U.S. government involvement in any of this.”

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“Okay. What about all those high-powered relatives she's got in China? Her cousin? An uncle who's a top general? Another uncle who's a billionaire? They must have some influence. You just—”

“They say their hands are tied.”

“Well, then, there you are.” Matt stood up. “She stays where she is.” He looked at his watch. “Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a job to get to.”

“We know,” Howard said.

“What do you mean you know?” Matt said. “You know what?”

Elliott gave him a small, crooked smile. “You said you knew what the CIA does, Mr. Connor.”

Matt stared at her.

“We set it up as a cover,” she said. “The prison where she's being held is on a small island off the coast of Macau. Escape-proof, like Alcatraz, or so they say. The only way we could get anywhere near it is to stage a shipwreck of a U.S. flag vessel on a neighboring island. That's where you come in.”

Matt sank into the soft leather of the couch. He rubbed his face in his hands, feeling more tired than he'd ever felt in his life.

“Are you telling me you ran a damned freighter aground as a cover for this insane venture without even asking me if I'd do it?”

Elliott nodded. “We contacted your salvage agent with instructions to transmit the information only to you. We withheld it from all your competitors.”

Matt stared at her, clenching his hands into fists. He could see everything he'd worked for slipping away.

“Why me?” he said finally.

“We started asking around, your name came up,” Susan Elliott said. “Repeatedly.”

“I can't imagine why. This doesn't make—”

“You're the perfect candidate,” Howard said. “You've got the expertise. You've got a way in, and a way out. And there's nothing to link you to the U.S. government. You don't even live in the U.S.”

“What do you mean, I've got the expertise?”

“We've gone over your record,” the CIA agent said. “All of it. As

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executive officer of a nuclear sub, you've had experience with covert operations involving SEAL teams.”

“That's the expertise you're talking about? All I ever did was haul those guys around on the boat. I'm not a SEAL. I've never gone on a mission like that in my life.”

“But you understand the process,” Elliott said. “You've managed some operations so sensitive they've been stricken from your record.” She moved to the edge of the couch. “The bottom line is, you can do it.”

“At my age? Get real.”

“You're thirty-eight,” she said. “That's the same age Neil Armstrong was when he landed on the moon. Look, we're not suggesting some commando-type raid where you charge in like Rambo, guns blazing. It's an inside job. We've got people under contract who'll deliver her to you. All you have to do is pick her up and sail away, get her out of there. We want this as low-key as possible. We—”

“You people are something else. You believe everything you hear, you scrounge around in records you don't understand, you take a piece from here and a piece from there and add them all up and come up with me. Damn you both—I was counting on that job.”

“Look, this *is* a job,” Howard said. From his briefcase he retrieved a letter on heavy stationery and slid it across the table. “Senator Grayson is offering five million dollars for the safe return of his daughter.”

Five million dollars. With that kind of money, he could get Gray Wolf off his back for good. He picked the letter up.

“Is this for real?”

“Five million,” Howard said. “Deposited into any bank account you specify on the day you deliver the girl.”

Matt thought hard for a moment, then pushed the letter back across the table.

“This is crazy. Even if I could get her aboard, how far do you think we'd get, once they know she's gone?”

“All you need to do is get out beyond the two-hundred-mile limit. They can't touch you out there.”

“The hell they can't. The PLA Navy thinks it owns the South China Sea.” Matt shook his head slowly, as if steeling himself against his own impulses. “No. Forget it. I could lose my ship, my crew, my freedom, maybe my head, with a stunt like this.”

Susan Elliott leaned forward and looked him directly in the eyes. “We've worked it out very carefully, Mr. Connor. There's not as much risk as you think.”

“Like hell. You'd have to send a brigade of marines to break someone out of a Chinese prison.”

“It's a forced labor camp, not a full-blown prison,” Howard said. He nodded to Susan Elliott, who pulled a satellite photo out of her stack.

“It's an island. Right here.” She pointed a red fingernail at the largest speck in a chain of specks.

Matt knew exactly where it was. A dozen tiny islands clustered together fifty miles east of Macau. He'd been plotting his course there behind closed doors since he'd received the fax.

“The locals call it Turtle Island,” she said. “Not because it has any, but because it's sort of shaped like one.”

“I've seen it from a distance. Fiji has nothing to worry about.”

“All it's good for is growing peppers,” she said. “The prisoners are usually out working in the fields all day. The Chinese think the prison is escape-proof because it's on an island. Security's tight. We've beached the freighter on the island furthest from it so as not to arouse suspicion. We'll have a contact on the island, someone to get her out of her cell and deliver her to the north shore at midnight. All you've got to do is pick her up with a Zodiac, get her aboard your ship, and get out of there.”

“You think the Chinese won't be watching us? I've done salvage work in Chinese waters before. They watched us like a hawk, every move.”

“They'll watch you, but from a distance. The freighter's an American flag vessel. There's a trade meeting scheduled for next month between the Chinese prime minister and the president. The Chinese don't want anything that looks like an incident right now.”

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“The more I think about this, the less sense it makes,” Matt said. “Even a senator can't dispatch someone from the State Department and the CIA to initiate something like this on his own authority. There's more to this than the senator, and his daughter, and his money.” He looked at the pair, eyes narrowed. “Why would the U.S. go to so much trouble to get one person out of a Chinese prison?”

“The senator wants his daughter back and he's willing to pay five million dollars to make it happen,” Howard said. “That's all you need to know.”

“I don't buy it,” Matt said. “Something like this would have to come from a much higher authority.”

Susan Elliott smiled, almost imperceptibly, but said nothing. Howard shot her a sharp look.

“How high?” Matt said. “The secretary of defense?”

Elliott grinned and lifted her eyebrows, playing with him now.

“The president?”

Howard glared at Elliott and said, “Unacknowledged and undocumented, of course. The president asked the secretary to work with CIA to find a way to get her out of there. Without any official U.S. involvement.”

“Why? I understand Senator Grayson's concern. What I don't understand is why the president of the United States would get involved.”

Elliott said, “Senator Grayson is threatening to withhold crucial support from a tax bill the president wants passed unless he sees some movement in getting his daughter out of China.”

“Politics? You're asking me to risk my neck so the president can get some bill passed? Come on. I may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night.”

Elliott sighed. “That's the story we were supposed to give you if you balked. I didn't think you'd buy it.”

Matt felt a touch of relief at her candor. His eyes went back and forth between the two.

“You might as well level with me. I'm not going anywhere unless I know the full story.”

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Susan Elliott took a deep breath, then said, "I can't be more specific, but we have reason to believe Elizabeth Grayson accidentally learned something during her tenure at the lab in Guangzhou that the Chinese don't want us to know. We have indications that they're up to something. We need to know what it is, and we believe she can tell us."

"If that's true," Matt said, "if she knows something so sensitive, why risk keeping her alive at all? Why don't they just kill her and be done with it?"

"The Chinese can't afford to kill the daughter of a U.S. senator, but they can't let her go, either. Her father has four years to serve before his retirement. Sending her to a forced labor camp is a way to keep her quiet in the short term and kill her in the long term. She'll die quietly in prison, after her father is no longer in office."

"Who else knows about this?"

"A handful at NSA and NGA. Two or three at State. About that many in Langley. Not even the senator's wife knows about it."

Matt had never even heard of the NGA. He looked her straight in the eyes.

"If this thing goes south, you won't even know my name, will you?"

"Afraid not. That's why we've tried to structure it so the reward outweighs the risk."

Matt fell back against the couch and rubbed his eyes. Like it or not he had to make a decision, and the choices were lousy. If he accepted, he could lose everything. If he turned their offer down, there was no telling when the next big job would come along, and he knew he couldn't hold Gray Wolf off for long. As it was, with one payment in arrears, his unsavory Chinese friend could show up at any time and seize his ship.

"I need time to think—"

"Five million," Cliff Howard said. "In cash. We're also authorized to tell you the IRS lien on your ship will be torn up and you won't be hassled any more. You'll be free to go home again."

Home. After almost five years of being out of the country, he missed the U.S. A lot. The deal was sounding sweeter, but. . .

CHINA STAR

“I'd have to talk to my crew. I can't take them into a situation like this without their okay.”

“Not until you're at sea,” Elliott said. “There can't be any chance of a leak.”

“You won't have a problem with your crew,” Howard said. “We've checked them out. They're out for the big score and they'll follow you anywhere.”

Howard was right—they'd follow him anywhere, especially if the price was right, especially if the job was challenging and dangerous. Matt knew he was cut from the same cloth, but this time there was something bigger pulling at him.

He looked across the way at the black nuclear sub and suddenly knew why it was there. Jake had sent it, a subtle reminder of the man who'd died on his watch six years ago. His old mentor was offering him a chance to redeem himself.

Some chance. It was all or nothing, a chance to wipe the slate clean or lose everything in one roll of the dice, and he had no choice but to take it. He exhaled a long, weary breath.

“All right,” he said. “Let's do it.”

Cliff Howard came to his feet and Susan Elliott began stuffing papers into her briefcase. The telephone on the forward bulkhead rang. Matt picked it up.

“Captain.”

“Hey, Skipper.”

Matt could tell by his first mate's measured tone that there was a problem. Add it to the list. Problems were normal when you were getting a ship as old as *CoMar Explorer* ready to go to sea.

“What's up, Sam?”

“More suits on the quarterdeck,” Sam said. “Only this time it *is* Gray Wolf's boys. Six of 'em. Bulges under their coats.”

Steady. It was Gray Wolf's usual show of force when Matt was behind on a payment. The old man was probably sitting in the back seat of his gray Mercedes limo on the dock, enjoying the show. All Matt had to do was sit down with him over dominoes and a cup of Oolong tea. He'd always been able to talk his way into an extension. He

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glanced at the pair of government agents getting ready to leave. As long a shot as it was, this job was his only hope now, and if Gray Wolf seized his ship, even that was gone. He turned away from them and spoke quietly into the phone.

“Don't worry about it. I'll talk to Gray Wolf.”

“He ain't here,” Sam said. “Not that I can see.”

Matt winced. That was a bad sign.

“Who's in charge?”

“That loud-mouth muscle of his, the one with the messed-up face.”

Matt felt his stomach slide. Popeye Zhang. The left side of his face had been blown off in an assassination attempt, leaving one eye bulging out. Matt didn't know if it was true or not, but the story was that he'd hunted down everyone responsible and killed their entire families.

“What does he want?”

“I don't speak the lingo,” Sam said, “but it looks like he's here to take the ship.”

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