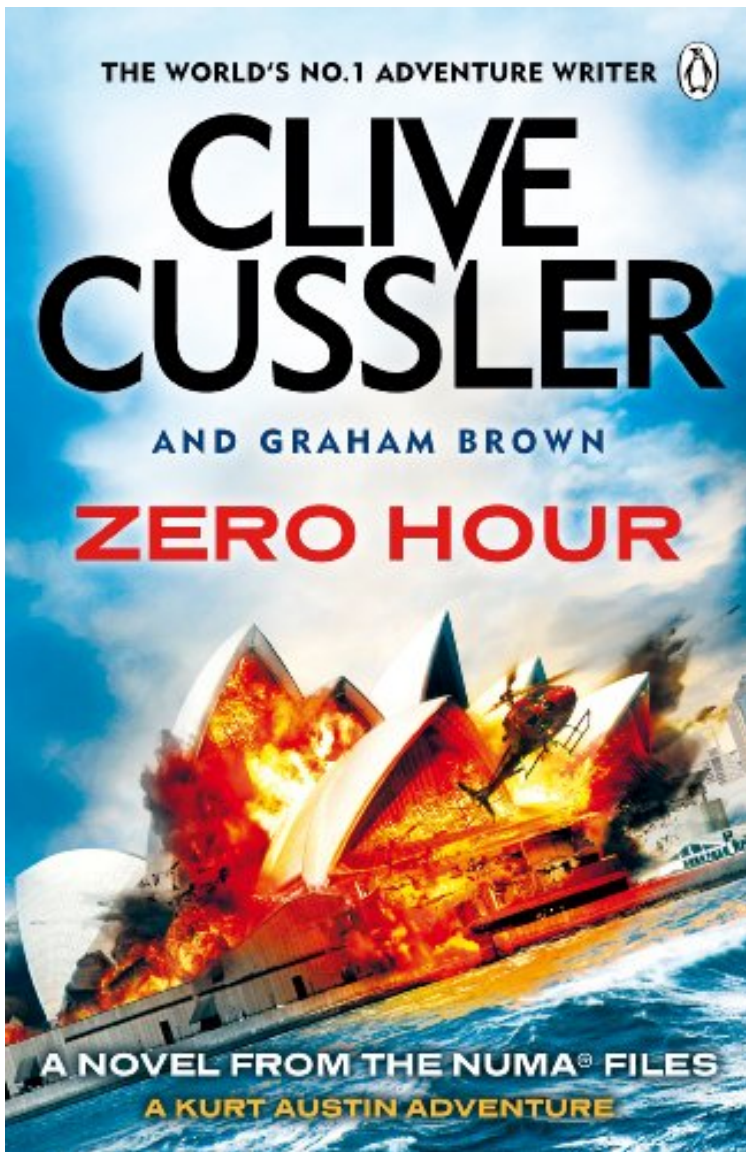


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## Zero Hour: NUMA Files #11



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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurZero Hour is the dazzling new novel in the #1 New York Times-bestselling series from the grand master of adventure, Clive Cussler.A new energy source holds the promise to change the world. If it doesn't kill it first. It's called zero point energy, and it really exists - a state of energy contained in all matter everywhere, and all but unlimited. Nobody has ever found a way to tap into it, however. Until one scientist discovers a way.Or at least he thinks he has. The problem is, his machines also cause great earthquakes, even fissures in tectonic plates. One machine is buried deep underground; the other submerged in a vast ocean trench. If Kurt Austin, Joe Zavala and the rest of the NUMA team aren't able to find and destroy them - and soon - the world will be on the threshold of a new era of catastrophe and unchecked

volcanism. Clive Cussler, author of recent New York Times bestsellers *The Tombs*, *Poseidon's Arrow*, and *The Striker* brings us the adrenalin-soaked doomsday masterpiece, *Zero Hour*. Praise for Clive Cussler:

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE  
April 18, 1906  
Sonoma County, Northern

California  
Thunder shook the unlit cavern as an immense, blue-white spark jumped between a pair of towering, metal columns. Instead of fading, the shimmering charge split in two and the twin streams of plasma began to circle their respective pillars. They moved like flames chasing the wind, racing around the columns and snaking their way upward toward the underside of a curved, metallic dome. There, they swirled together like the arms of a spiral galaxy, joining each other once again before vanishing in a final, eye-searing flash. Darkness followed. Ozone lingered in the air. On the floor of the cavern, a group of men and women stood motionless, night-blind from the display. The flash had been impressive, but they'd all seen electricity before. Every one of them expected something more. Is that it? a gruff voice asked. The words came from Brigadier General Hal Cortland, a burly, squat figure of a man. They were directed at thirty-eight-year-old Daniel Watterson, a slight, blond-haired man wearing spectacles who stood by the controls of the great machine from which the artificial lightning had come. Watterson studied a bank of dimly lit gauges. Im not actually sure, he whispered to himself. No one had ever gotten this far, not even Michael Faraday or the great Nikola Tesla. But if Watterson was right if his calculations and his theory and years of serving as Teslas apprentice had led him to understand what was about to occur then the display of light they'd just witnessed should be only the beginning. He switched off the main power, stepped away from the controls, and pulled the wire-rimmed glasses from his face. Despite the darkness, he could make out a soft blue glow coming from the columns. He raised his eyes to the dome above. An effervescent hue could be seen coursing around its inner surface. Well? Cortland demanded. Back at the console, one of the needles ticked up. Watterson saw it from the corner of his eye. No, General, he said quietly, I dont think its quite finished. As Watterson spoke, a low rumble made its way through the cave. It sounded like heavy stones tumbling in some distant quarry, muffled and distorted, as if the vibration had to traverse miles of solid rock just to reach them. It rose for several seconds, then faded and ceased. The general began to snicker. He switched on a flashlight. Uncle Sam aint paying for a show with wet fireworks, son. Watterson didnt reply. He was listening, feeling for something, for anything, at this point. The general seemed to give up. Come on, people, he said, the party's over. Lets get out of this mole hole. The group began to move. Their shuffling and mumbling made it impossible to hear. Watterson raised a hand. Please! he called out loudly. Everyone, stay where you are! The observers stopped in their tracks, and Watterson edged over to where the steel columns penetrated the rock floor. From there, they descended another five hundred feet to get a firm grip on the Earth, as Tesla once put it. Laying a hand on one of the columns, Watterson felt a cold vibration. It surged through his body as if he'd become a part of the circuit. It wasnt painful like electricity and didnt make his muscles spasm, nor did it find its way to the ground and electrocute him. It was almost soothing, leaving him slightly dizzy, even a bit euphoric. Its coming, he whispered. Whats coming? the general asked. Watterson looked back. The return. Cortland waited a few seconds before scowling. You scientists are like barkers at a carnival: you think if you say something loud enough, and often enough, the rest of us will begin to believe it. But I dont hear any. The general swallowed his words as the deep rumble made a second appearance. It surged through the cavern more emphatically this time, and the blue glow around the towers intensified, pulsing and matching the sound waves identically. This time, when the waves faded, everyone held still. They were waiting for

more. Forty seconds later they were rewarded. A third wave came through like a freight train passing by. It shook the cave underfoot and brought the swirl of lightning back to the polished surface of the dome above.

The visible spiral of energy began descending the pillars, making it halfway down to the ground before vanishing. Watterson pulled back, stepping away from the danger zone. Moments later, a fourth reverberation surged into the cavern. The columns flared as it hit. Flashes of light jumped back and forth between them.

The cavern began shaking. Dust and tiny bits of stone rained down from above, sending the witnesses scurrying for cover. Watterson caught sight of General Cortland bathed in the light and grinning manically. Their roles had reversed. Now it was Cortland looking satisfied as Watterson began to worry. The scientist stepped toward the panel, slid his glasses back on, and studied the display. He couldn't account for the vibration. Before he could determine anything, a fifth wave hit. The vibration and the artificial lightning grew so intense, even the general seemed to realize something was wrong. What's happening? Watterson could barely hear him, but he was wondering the same thing. The power gauges all but dead moments before were heading toward their redlines. A brief respite gave way to a sixth harmonic return, and the needles went off the scales. The shuddering was unbearable. Rocks were falling from above. A huge crack began to zigzag its way across the reinforced wall of the cave where the army had poured concrete to shore it up. Watterson had to grip the panel to stop from falling down. What's happening? the general repeated. Watterson wasn't sure, but it couldn't be good. Get everybody out of here, he yelled. Get them out now! The general pointed toward the cage-like elevator that would take them four hundred feet to the surface. The group ran for it like a stampeding herd. But the tremors intensified and the far wall gave way before they could climb inside. A thousand tons of rock and concrete plunged down on them. Those too close were crushed instantly. Others scrambled away just in time as the scaffolding-like frame of the elevator was bent and shoved aside. Watterson began to panic. His hands flew back and forth across the controls, flicking switches and tapping gauges. The vibration was constant. The sound deafening. Cortland grabbed him by the shoulder. Turn it off! Watterson ignored him. He was trying to understand. Did you hear me?! the general shouted. Turn the damned thing off! It is off! Watterson shouted, pulling free of the general's grasp. What? It's been off since after the first spark, Watterson explained. The latest wave faded, but on the panel he could see the next wave building. The needles went off the scale and Watterson's face went white. Each wave had been bigger than the last. He feared to imagine what kind of power was on its way. Then where's the energy coming from? Cortland demanded. From everywhere, Watterson said. From all around us. That's what the experiment was supposed to prove. The cavern began to shake once again. This time the lightning was not contained on the columns, it jumped around the room, flying into the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. Shards of stone and clouds of dust blasted out into the open space. Amid the screams and panic, Watterson stood helpless, his moment of victory fading to utter catastrophe. From above him came the ominous sound of cracking. With the cave shaking so badly they could barely stand, both Watterson and the general looked up. A dark fissure snaked across the ceiling. It went from wall to wall and then spidered in different directions. The ceiling collapsed all at once and a million tons of rock dropped toward them. Death came instantly, and neither Watterson nor General Cortland would ever know the fury they'd unleashed or the utter devastation that the ensuing earthquake caused in the city of San Francisco. December 2009 In the midst of a growing tempest, Patrick Devlin stood on the aft deck of the Java Dawn, an oceangoing tug linked by a single massive cable to the rusting hulk of a cruise ship known as the Pacific Voyager. Huge swells came at the tug sideways, slamming against the hull with the sound of a shotgun blast. The rain fell in diagonal sheets, though it was hard to distinguish from the wind-whipped spray. Surrounded by towing and loading equipment, including a fifty-foot crane and a powerful winch array, Devlin looked positively small. In truth, he stood nearly six feet tall, with broad shoulders that were hunched against the cold. With gray stubble on his cheeks and folds of burnished flesh hooding his eyes, Devlin appeared every bit the wizened old sailor he was. Taking stock of the deteriorating weather, the increasing strain on the cable, and the condition of the sea, he came to a grave conclusion: they'd made a ruinous choice to leave port, one they'd be lucky to survive. As Devlin grabbed the ship's phone, another swell rolled the tug severely. The captain picked up on the other end. What's our heading? Devlin yelled into the receiver. Due south, the captain said. It's no good, Devlin replied. We'll never survive this side-on beating. We have to turn into the swells. We can't, Padi, the captain insisted. That'll take us into the teeth of the storm. Gripping the bulkhead to keep from falling, Devlin watched a wave crash over the deck. This is madness, he said. We should've never left Tarakan. Tarakan was the primitive, almost backwater port where they'd picked up the Voyager. The old liner had berthed there for repairs some years ago after an accident. She'd ended up marooned when her shipping line went bankrupt several days later. At

some point, the ship was sold to a mystery buyer, but, for reasons unknown, the Voyager sat and rusted at Tarakan for three more years. Issues with the bankruptcy and squabbles about who would pay for the repairs, Devlin guessed. Whatever it was, the ship looked like a derelict when they found her; covered in corrosion from stem to stern, barely seaworthy. The hastily repaired damage from where the freighter had holed her looked like a jagged H near the bow. Now, caught up in a storm that was rapidly getting worse, she was certain to go down. How's the line? the captain asked. Devlin glanced at the thick cable that stretched from the gigantic winch across the aft end of the tug and out toward the Voyager. The cable tensed and strained with the load before going slack again. The cables taut, Devlin said. That rust bucket is starting to pitch with these waves. She's definitely riding lower as well. We need to get the inspection crew back. Against Devlin's wishes, the captain had allowed three men to stay aboard the cruise ship to watch for leaks. It was dangerous in these conditions and a waste of time as well. If she was taking on water, there was nothing they could do to stop it. And if she started to go down like Devlin thought she would, they would need to cut the cable and let her go before she dragged the Java Dawn into the depths alongside her. But with three men on the ship, cutting that cable would be the closest thing to murder Devlin had ever done. The big tug nosed over and dropped into the largest trough yet. As it did, the cable stretched so tight that it actually began to sing. The tension pulled the aft end of the tug backward, the water churning around the hull as the propellers fought against the strain. By the time the tug rose up on the next swell, the Voyager must have been dipping into a trough of her own because the tow cable pulled downward, bending over the reinforced-steel plating at the tugs transom and forcing the aft end of the deck into the water. Devlin raised binoculars to his eyes. The action of the waves had a way of obscuring the truth, but only to a point. The Voyager was definitely riding lower. She's down at the bow, Captain. Listing slightly to port. The captain hesitated. Devlin knew why: this tow was worth a small fortune, but not if the ship didn't make it. Call them back! Devlin shouted. For God sakes, Captain, at least call the men back. Finally, the captain spoke. We've been calling them, Padi. They're not answering. Something must have gone wrong. The words chilled Devlin's core. We have to send a boat out. In this? It's too dangerous. As if to emphasize the point, another wave hit them broadside and a thousand gallons of water crashed over the rail, flooding the aft deck. The sturdy tug quickly shed the water, but moments later another wave swamped it more drastically than the first. As the Java Dawn recovered, Devlin looked toward the Voyager. She was definitely going down. Either a couple of hatches had blown or the shoddy repair job had caved in. The captain must have seen it too. We have to let her go, he said. No, Captain! We have to, Padi. Release the cable. The men have a boat of their own. And we can't help them if we go down. Another wave crashed over the deck. For God sakes, Captain, have pity. Cut the cable, Padi! That's an order! Devlin knew the captain was right. He let go of the phone and took a step toward the emergency release lever. The deck pitched hard as another swell overran the stern and sloshed toward him. It hit like a wave at the beach, knocking him off his feet and dragging him. As he got up, Devlin saw that the cable was now disappearing into the water. Through the rain and spray, he could see that half the cruise ship was submerged. She was going down fast, plunging to the abyss and about to drag the tug down with her. The back quarter of the tugs rear deck was already awash. Padi! The shout came over the dangling phone, but Devlin needed no more urging. He pulled himself up, grabbed the emergency release handle, and wrenched it down with all his might. A loud crack rang out. The giant cable snapped loose and flung itself across the deck like a speeding python. The tug lurched forward and upward, and Devlin was thrown into the bulkhead, splitting his lip and bruising his eye. Stunned for a moment, he gathered his wits and turned. The old liner was sliding beneath the waves at a gentle, almost peaceful angle. Seconds later, it was gone. The men they left behind were almost certainly dead. But the Java Dawn was free. Devlin grabbed the phone. Take us back around, he demanded. The men may have gone overboard. The deck shifted as the rudder and the directional propellers kicked in. The tug began a sharp, dangerous turn. By the time she'd made it around, Devlin was at the bow. It was almost dark. The sky held a silver hue above the black sea. The whole scene so devoid of color, it was like living in a black-and-white movie. Devlin gazed into it. He saw nothing. As darkness enveloped them, the tugs spotlights swept the area. No doubt every available eye was straining to find the men just as Devlin was. It was all to no avail. The Java Dawn would spend the next eighteen hours searching in vain for her lost crewmen. They would never be found at sea. Present day Sebastian Panos made his way through the narrow corridor like an alley cat on a dark street behind restaurant row. The passage was dank and wet, more like a sewer tunnel than a gangway. Condensation dripped so persistently that he often wondered if the poisonous waters from outside the submerged station were leaching through the walls and slowly killing them all. Still, it wasn't as bad as the island where the main work was done, with the notorious

quarry at its heart. Compared to that place, this station was a pleasure. And yet, Panos had become obsessed with thoughts of escape. A Cypriot engineer of mixed Greek and Turkish background, Panos had been lured to this underwater nightmare by the promise of a big contract and enough money to set his family up for a generation. All it required was three years of his life and utter secrecy. Six months in, he had begun to feel uneasy. Before the year rolled over, he knew he had made a terrible mistake. Requests to leave were denied. All communications were monitored and often interrupted. The slightest hint of protest resulted in veiled threats. Something might happen to his family if he didn't stay and complete the work. As the project neared fruition, Panos and the other engineers were played off against one another. It was impossible to know who to trust and who to fear, so they feared one another, did as they were told, and one year stretched into two. All that time Panos lived like a sailor press-ganged onto a ship. He had no choice but to do the masters bidding or forfeit his life, though he felt certain that his end would come that way eventually. The project was so secret and dark that his logical mind told him there would be no witnesses left when it was done. No one gets out alive, a fellow worker had joked. One day later, the man disappeared, so perhaps it was true. Panos remembered an offer to bring his family along. He wasn't a religious man, but he thanked whatever god or fate or random instinct had caused him to decline. Others had brought their families in. He had seen them on the island, wretched and miserable, prisoners to an even greater degree than he. He knew not to trust them. They were the easiest to control, they had more to lose than their own lives. Some had even borne children in the depths of that putrid, sulfur-tinged world. They lived like indentured servants, like slaves building a modern-day pyramid. Panos was at least free to think about escape, though he had never had any real expectation of pulling it off. At least, not until the note appeared in his locker. It was the first in a set of mysterious contacts from an unseen angel of mercy. Initially, he assumed it was a trap, a little test to see if he would lunge at the bait. But he had reached a point where it no longer mattered. Freedom beckoned. Whether it came through escape or the cold sting of death, he welcomed it either way. He tested the offer and received more notes. They arrived at odd times. Help to escape would be made available, the notes promised, but it would come with strings attached. He was to bring the plans of this terrible weapon to those who might stop the madman constructing it. A drop had been arranged. All Panos had to do was make it to the location alive. With that goal in mind, he continued down the wet gangway and into the dive room. It was late, well past the hour for anyone to be there. Using a key left in his locker by his unknown contact, Panos opened the door and slipped inside. He shut the door and switched on a desk lamp. The dive room was a twenty-by-forty rectangle with a sealed airlock protruding at its center. Visible through the airlocks thick observation glass was a circular pool of dark water. Panos switched on the pool lights. The water lit up perfectly clear, for the poisons filling it made it absolutely sterile. But instead of blue or turquoise or green, the water shimmered in a reddish tint, a color like translucent blood. He took a deep breath. He would be all right. The dry suit would keep the toxins out. At least he hoped it would. He glanced over at a whiteboard. Three numbers had been scrawled on it: 3, 10, and 075. His unseen helper had been there before him, just as he had promised. Panos memorized the figures and then quickly erased them. He went to the third locker and opened it. A dry suit and an oxygen tank had been prepared for him. A dive watch, hanging with the suit, had its bezel twisted to the ten-minute mark. This was the time it would take him to ascend, moving at thirty feet per minute, a pace calculated to help him avoid the bends. A handheld compass had also been left for him. When he surfaced, he would look to a heading: 075 degrees. In that direction, he would find help. A dive knife would be his only weapon, if he needed it. He strapped the watch around his wrist and carried the tanks to the airlock. He slipped the compass into his pocket and then double-checked that the cargo he had promised to carry—the schematics of the station and a portable hard drive filled with data—were secured in a watertight container. He shoved them back inside his shirt and grabbed the bulky suit, sitting down to pull it on. Before he could get a leg in, a clicking noise sounded from across the room. A key in the lock. The handle turned and the door swung open. Two figures stepped in, chatting between themselves. For a second, they didn't notice Panos. When they did, they looked more confused and surprised than angry. But Panos knew the suit and tanks would give him away. He charged the men before they could react, swinging the knife downward at the closest figure, stabbing the man in the shoulder. The man fell back, grabbing at Panos and dragging him to the desk. The second man jumped on him, putting an arm around his neck. Panos reared up and forced himself backward until the two of them collided with the desk, fell to the ground, and separated. Spurred on by adrenaline, Panos was up first. He knelt the man in the face, then grabbed the desk lamp and slammed it into the man's forehead. The man hit the ground and didn't move again, but the one who had been stabbed was running out the door. No! Panos exclaimed. With no way to barricade the door and precious little time before

an alarm sounded, he made a fateful decision. He left the dry suit on the floor and stepped into the airlock. Pressing a switch, he closed the inner door and began to pull on the harness and an oxygen tank. Panos felt his ears popping as a hissing noise told him the airlock was sealed and being pressurized. Even though the station's pressure was twice the normal atmosphere, it wasn't enough to keep the water from flooding in through the open pool. Thus, the airlock was needed. He pulled on the dive helmet. The seal wasn't too bad.

He made sure the air was flowing, pulled his fins on, and dropped into the glowing red water. Stillness surrounded him. He swam downward, away from the light, and out into the dark. When he'd passed the edge of the submerged structure, he began to kick his way upward. Or what he thought was up. Three hundred feet down, there was no light. He quickly became disoriented. Vertigo set in, and it seemed like his body was doing summersaults even though he was completely still. Flicking on a light did little good. The red water gave nothing away. He began to panic, knowing men from the station would be following him soon. What had he done? He exhaled a cloud of bubbles. Quite by accident, he noticed the direction they raced off in. It seemed to Panos that the bubbles were traveling sideways, but his rational mind knew this was not the case. The bubbles could only be moving upward. The laws of nature could not be altered or tricked like his sense of balance. Forcing his mind to override what his inner ear was telling him, he began to follow the bubbles. It felt like he was swimming into the pit, to the bottom of this great red pool of death, instead of upward. He kept going until his mind began to accept it. His equilibrium began returning to normal. He exhaled more bubbles and kicked harder, swimming for the surface as fast as he could. In his haste, Panos forgot about the ten-minute warning. By the time he neared the surface, he was in the grips of pain. His knees, elbows, and back all felt as if they were cramping up. Despite the pain, Panos broke the surface and stared at the evening sky for the first time in months. It was periwinkle blue. He guessed it was almost dusk. He looked around.

High sandy walls rose up on every side. He'd never seen them before. He didn't even know where he was. Arrivals and departures always took place under sedation. They would fall asleep here and wake up on the island, or vice versa. Despite the pain in his joints, Panos managed to pull the compass from his pocket. He began to swim, heading 075 degrees. The wretched throbbing in his joints got worse and was soon accompanied by blinding flashes of light that seemed to shoot through his brain. Still, he fought on, eventually crawling out of the water and onto the sandy beach. He made it several yards before coming to a terraced wall of rock. It rose no more than ten feet, but it might as well have been a mountain. How could he scale it? He couldn't. Not in this condition. He tried to stand and then collapsed in agony. The sound of feet rushing toward him signaled his end. But when a pair of hands lifted him up, they did so caringly. He saw a face hidden by a bandanna. You surfaced too quickly, the man behind the bandanna said. I... had to... Panos managed. They... found me. Found you?! In the airlock... Panos said. That means they'll be coming. The unknown helper grabbed Panos and dragged him over the ridge with no concessions to the pain. He carried him to a waiting SUV, tossed him in the back and slammed the tailgate down. Panos curled up in the fetal position as his savior climbed into the front and turned the key. The engine roared, and they were soon bouncing over the rough terrain, each jolt spurring new waves of pain. To Panos, it felt as if his body were being crushed and exploding from within all at the same time. Im dying, he cried out. No, the driver insisted.

But its going to get worse before it gets better. Use your regulator. It will help. Panos managed to get the regulator back in his mouth. He bit down on it and breathed as deeply as he could. Even with that, a new series of spasms gripped him as the SUV careened across uneven ground. Panos bent his head closer to his chest. It seemed to ease the agony a bit. He noticed his fingers and arms curling inward. Do you have the papers? the driver asked. And the computer? Panos nodded. Yes... Can you tell me where were going? The driver hesitated, perhaps afraid to say too much in case they were captured. Finally, he spoke. To someone who can help, he said. To someone who can put a stop to this madness once and for all. Sydney, Australia, 1900 hours. Kurt Austin sat in a comfortable seat eight rows from the main stage in the Opera Theatre, the smaller of the two sail-and-seashell-inspired buildings of the famous Sydney Opera House. The larger Concert Hall lay next door, vacant at the moment. For years, Kurt had planned to visit Sydney and attend a performance there. Beethoven or Wagner would have been nice, and he'd almost made the trip when U2 played the venue, but the timing hadn't worked out. Unfortunately, now that he'd finally made it, the only sound coming from the stage was a dry, academic speech that was quickly putting him to sleep. He was there for the Muldoon Conference on Underwater Mining, put on by Archibald and Liselette Muldoon, a wealthy Australian couple who'd made their fortune together through four decades of risky mining ventures. Kurt had been officially invited because of his expertise in underwater salvage and his position as Director of Special Projects for the National Underwater and Marine Agency. But it seemed the Muldoons also wanted him

there because of the modicum of fame he'd earned within the salvage industry if there even was such a thing. Over the past decade, he'd been involved in a series of high-profile events. Some of those exploits were classified, with nothing more than rumors to suggest anything had ever occurred. Other events were public and well known, including a recent battle to clear a swarm of self-replicating micromachines from the Indian Ocean before they changed the weather patterns over India and Asia, potentially starving billions. In addition to whatever notoriety he'd earned, Kurt was easily recognizable. He had a rugged look about him, tan-faced, with prematurely silver-gray hair and sharp eyes that were an intense shade of blue. All of which meant his absence from any particular event was easily noticed, something the constant attention of one or both

Muldoons had so far prevented. They'd certainly been gracious, but after three days of seminars and presentations, Kurt was plotting his escape. As the lights dimmed and the speaker began a photo presentation, Kurt sensed the chance he'd been waiting for. He pulled out his phone and thumbed the switch that made it buzz audibly as if it were ringing. A few glances came his way. He shrugged a sheepish apology and put the phone to his ear. This is Austin, he whispered to no one. Right, he added in his most serious tone. Right. Okay. That does sound bad. Of course. I'll look into it right away. He pretended to hang up and slipped the phone back into his pocket. Is something wrong? Mrs. Muldoon asked from one seat over. Call from the head office, he said. Have to check something out. You have to go now? Kurt nodded. A situation that's been building for several days has reached the breaking point. If I don't go now, it could be disastrous. She reached out and grabbed his hand. She looked crestfallen. But you're missing the best part of the presentation. Kurt made a grim face. It's the price I have to pay. Bidding the Muldoons good-bye, Kurt stood and strolled down the aisle to the waiting doors. He pushed through them and jogged up the steps into the foyer. Fearing he might get trapped in a conversation if he ran into other attendees, he took a left, sneaking down a curving hallway toward an unmarked side door. He pushed it open and stepped out into the humid air of the Australian evening. To his surprise, he wasn't alone. A young woman sat on the step in front of him, fiddling with the heel of a strappy shoe. She wore a white cocktail dress with a matching white flower in her strawberry blond hair. Kurt thought it might be an orchid. She looked up, startled by his sudden appearance. Didn't mean to scare you, he said. For a second, she looked apoplectic, like he'd caught her stealing the Crown Jewels or something. Then she glanced around and went back to work on her shoe, wiggling the offending heel back and forth until the delicate little spike snapped off in her hand. That's probably not going to help, Kurt guessed. My favorite shoes, she said in a melodic Australian accent. Always seem to be the ones you break. Dejected but exhibiting admirable common sense, she slipped off the other shoe and broke off its heel, then compared the two. At least they match, he said, offering a hand. Kurt Austin. Hayley Anderson, she replied. Proud owner of the most expensive flats in all of Oz. Kurt had to laugh. I suppose you're escaping the keynote, she said. Guilty as charged, he admitted. Can you really blame me? Not in the least, she replied. If I didn't need to be here, I'd be off to the beach myself. She stood up and stepped toward the door from which Kurt had emerged. It seemed a shame to have the encounter end so soon. Flat shoes work well on the sand, Kurt offered. Almost as well as bare feet. Sorry, she said, can't miss this or someone will have my guts for garters. You could come back in with me, I promise to keep you entertained. Tempting, Kurt said. But my hard-won freedom is worth too much at this point. If you get bored in there, you'll find me on Bondi Beach. I'll be the one who's slightly overdressed. She laughed lightly and grabbed quickly for the door. She seemed to be rushing. She pulled the door open and then stopped. Her gaze drifted past Kurt. She was looking across Sydney Harbour. Kurt turned. In the fading light, he spotted the curving wake of a powerboat. It cut across the harbor, coming dangerously close to the front of a ferry. A scolding blast from the ship's horn followed, but the boat never slowed. An instant later, Kurt saw why. A dark-colored helicopter raced over the top of the ferry, flashing across the crowded vessel in the blink of an eye and dropping back toward the water in hot pursuit. The speeding boat turned left and then right, carving an S in the water and intentionally skirting the edges of a slow-moving sailboat. It was a madman's path across the harbor. He must be insane, Hayley said, gawking at the boat. Kurt took a good look at the helicopter, a dark blue Eurocopter EC145. A stubby, bulbous cabin that jutted forward gave its nose an odd compact look, something like the snout of a great white shark. A four-bladed rotor whirled overhead, leaving a white blur, while its short, boomlike tail ended in three small vertical stabilizers something like a trident. Kurt saw no markings or navigation lights, but he noticed flashes coming from the open cargo door: muzzle flashes. He grabbed his phone and dialed 911. Nothing happened. Hayley took a step forward. They're shooting. They're trying to kill those people. What's the emergency number here? Zero zero zero, she said. Kurt typed it in and hit CALL. By the time he was connected, the speedboat had turned head-on toward the Opera

House. It raced at them at full throttle, aiming for the rounded promenade that stuck out into Sydney Harbour like a great pier. Most of the promenade was a wall of solid concrete, but a single flight of stairs on the left-hand side led down to the water. The speeding boat was drawing a line right to them. The helicopter was following, trying to set up a kill shot for the sniper. More flashes lit out from the door. The boat jerked to the left as the popping sound of gunfire reached the shore. It swerved a bit, then came back on course and hit the stairwell at high speed. It flew up into the air at an angle like a stunt car launching off a jump ramp in catty-corner fashion. It traveled fifty feet and rolled halfway over before it slammed down on its side. From there, the boat skidded across the concrete deck, hit a lightpost, and came apart. Shattered fiberglass fluttered in all directions as the post bent over and its bulbs exploded with a flash. Emergency Service, a voice said over the phone. Kurt was too mesmerized by the accident to respond. Hello? This is Emergency Service. As the shattered boat settled, the Eurocopter thundered overhead, barely missing the pointed top of the Opera House. Kurt handed the phone to Hayley. Get help, he shouted, taking off down the stairs. Police, ambulance, national guard. Anything they've got. Kurt had no idea what was going on, but even from up on the platform he could see two people trapped in the boat's wreckage and smell leaking fuel. He reached the bottom of the stairs, ran a short distance, and hopped over a wall onto the promenade. As he raced up to the mangled craft, the still-spinning prop touched the concrete walkway. A shower of sparks lit out from it. They flew into the gasoline vapors, and a flashover roared outward. In the wake of this small explosion, a sea of flames rose from where the ruptured fuel had spilled. Despite the conflagration, Kurt rushed forward. FOUR HUNDRED FEET ABOVE and a mile away, the Eurocopter made a steep turn above the outskirts of Sydney. Even though he was strapped in, the sniper put a hand out and held on. Take it easy, he shouted. He was already wrestling with the long-barreled Heckler Koch sniper rifle, trying to attach a high-capacity fifty-round drum. The last thing he needed was to be dumped out the side. We have to make another pass, the pilot called back. We have to make sure they're dead. The sniper doubted anyone could have survived the crash, but it wasn't his call. As the helicopter leveled out, he gave up trying to attach the drum and jammed a standard ten-round magazine in the weapon. Keep it steady this time, he demanded. I need a stable platform to shoot from. Will do, the pilot replied. The sniper eased toward the open door, folding one leg underneath him and stretching the other leg down to brace himself on the step that was just above the copter's skid. They'd come around now and were approaching the sails of the Opera House more slowly. He racked the slide and readied himself to fire. BY THE TIME Kurt reached the shattered boat, fire had engulfed its stern. A hunched-over figure in the passenger seat was trying to get free. Kurt pulled him loose and dragged him over the side, ignoring the cries of pain. Fifty feet from the boat, Kurt laid the injured man down, noticing the strange way his hands and fingers curled up. It was an odd enough sight to stick in Kurt's mind even as he raced back to help the driver. Fighting through the acrid smoke, Kurt clambered onto the boat. By now, flames were licking at the driver's back. Kurt tried to pull the man upward, but he was held in place by the crushed-in section of the control panel. Leave me, the man shouted. Help Panos. If that's your passenger, he's already safe, Kurt shouted. Now, help me get you free. The man pushed and Kurt pulled, but the crushed panel held him tight. Kurt knew they needed leverage. He grabbed a harpoonlike boat hook that lay in what remained of the bow and wedged it in between the trapped driver and the mangled wreckage. Leaning on it with all his weight, Kurt forced some space between the driver and the panel. Now! he shouted. The man shook his head. I can't, he said. I can't feel my In a sudden recoil, the driver's head snapped back, and blood spattered across the dashboard. The smoke swirled with new abandon and the rising flames danced in odd directions as gusting wind from the helicopter's downwash swept over them. Realizing the driver was dead and that he was probably next, Kurt dove over the side of the boat and tumbled out. Shells hit left and right as he scrambled for cover. Hidden in the smoke, Kurt looked up. The Eurocopter hovered sixty feet above. He could see the sniper searching for a target, moving the long barrel of his rifle back and forth. Then the helicopter drifted to the left and turned away. The sniper must have seen the injured passenger limping down the promenade. He opened fire with abandon. Ricochets hit all around the man until a shell found its mark and dropped the poor soul to his knees. Before the shooter could finish him off, another bystander rushed in. It was Hayley. She dragged the limp figure behind a large concrete planter and ducked down. The sniper opened fire once again, the shells digging chips out of the concrete and throwing up chunks of dirt. But the planter might as well have been a giant sandbag. It was too thick for the bullets to penetrate. The helicopter began to drift sideways. Kurt had only seconds before the sniper found a clear line of fire. He grabbed the wooden boat hook once again, the business end of which was now in flames. He gripped it near the center, ran forward, and hurled it like a javelin. The helicopter was broadside to him now, and the fiery lance tracked toward the

open cargo door like a heat-seeking missile. It hit the target dead center, missing the sniper by inches but lodging in the cabin and spreading a wave of fire in the process. In a moment, smoke was pouring from the helicopters side door. Kurt saw the snipers body erupt in flames, and he could only guess that hed hit a fuel or oxygen line. The orange firelight surged through the helicopter as it began to turn. For a second, it looked as if the pilot would regain control and speed off across the harbor, but the angle of his turn tightened, and the helicopter began to corkscrew back toward the Concert Hall. By now, the interior of the cabin was an inferno, smoke billowing from it in all directions. Burning and falling and accelerating at the same time, the Eurocopter flew right into the famous glass wall of the Concert Hall, shattering the fifty-foot panes of clear glass. Shards from the impact burst inward, while other sections dropped in huge sheets and exploded into thousands of fragments when they hit the ground. The helicopter dropped straight down along with them, its rotors gone and its hub turning like a weedwacker that had run out of string. It landed with a great crunch. In moments, it was a barely recognizable hulk at the center of a small inferno. By now, emergency units were arriving. A squad of patrolmen raced up on foot. Fire trucks were pulling in. Workers from the Opera House came running out with extinguishers. Another group opened a fire hose from a stanchion in a wall. Kurt was pretty sure it wouldnt help the occupants of the helicopter, neither of whom had managed to get free of the blaze. He made his way over to Hayley and the lone survivor from the boat. The man was lying in Hayleys arms. His blood had soaked her white dress. She was trying desperately to keep him from bleeding out where two bullets had hit him. It was a losing battle. The shells had gone right through him, entering his back and coming out through his chest. Kurt crouched down and helped her keep pressure on the wounds. Are you Panos? he asked. The mans eyes drifted for a moment. Are you Panos?! He nodded weakly. Who were those people shooting at you? No answer this time. Nothing but a blank look. Kurt lifted his head. We need help over here! he shouted, looking for a paramedic. A pair of men were running toward them, but they werent first responders. They reminded Kurt of plainclothes policemen. They stopped in their tracks as he looked their way. I brought... what was promised, the injured man said in an accent Kurt thought might be Greek. What are you talking about? Kurt asked. The man grunted something and then extended a shaking hand in which he clutched several bloodstained sheets of paper. Tartarus, the man said, his voice weak and wavering. The heart... of Tartarus. Kurt took the papers. They were covered with odd symbols, swirling lines, and what appeared to be calculations. What is this? Kurt said. The man opened his mouth to explain but no sound came out. Stay with us, Hayley shouted. He didnt respond, and she began to perform CPR. We cant let him die. Kurt felt for a pulse. He didnt feel one. Its too late. No, it cant be, she said, compressing the mans chest rapidly and trying to force life back into him. Kurt stopped her. Its no use, hes lost too much blood. She looked up at him, her face smeared with soot and tears, her white dress stained red. Im sorry, he said. You tried. She sat back and turned away, looking exhausted. Her hair fell around her face as she looked to the ground. Her body shook as she sobbed. Kurt put a hand on her shoulder and gazed at the damage surrounding them. The wreck of the boat still burned on the promenade, while the blazing hulk of the Eurocopter lay where the shattered faade of the Concert Hall should have been. Volunteers were hosing it down, desperately trying to keep it from setting fire to the building, while onlookers poured from the keynote address on underwater mining, half of them gawking as the rest moved quickly in the other direction. It all happened so fast. Chaos sprung on them from nowhere. And the only man who might have known why lay dead at their feet. What did he say? Hayley asked, wiping the tears from her face. What did he say to you? Tartarus, Kurt replied. She stared. What does that mean? Kurt wasnt convinced that hed heard the man correctly. Even if he had, it made little sense. Its a word from Greek mythology, he said. The deepest prison of the underworld. According to the Iliad, as far below Hades as Heaven is above the Earth. What do you think he was trying to tell us? No idea, Kurt said, shrugging and handing her the papers. Maybe thats where he thinks hes going. Or, he added, considering the grime, dust, and stench that covered the poor man, maybe thats where hes been. Red and blue lights flashed across the famous sails of the Opera House in series of intersecting patterns, while blinding white spotlights illuminated the wreckage of the powerboat and the charred shell of the dark blue helicopter. They remained where theyd crashed, smoking and smoldering, as fire trucks poured waves of foam onto both vehicles to prevent any chance of reignition. The spectacle drew a crowd from both the land and the water. Police tape and barricades kept the shore-based onlookers at bay, but the number of small boats crowding the harbor had grown to more than a hundred. Cameras and flashes snapped in the dark like fireflies. From the shadows of a doorway, Cecil Bradshaw of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation studied the man responsible for all the damage. An aide handed him a dossier. This is awful thick, Bradshaw said. I need only the highlights, not every bloody clipping on the man. Bradshaw was a

stocky man in his mid-fifties. He had pile-driver arms, a thick neck, and a short buzz cut. In a way, he resembled a giant human bulldog. He liked to think of himself in similar terms. Get on my side or get out of my way, he often said. The aide didn't stammer in his response. Those are the highlights, sir. If you'd like, I have another fifty pages I could print out for you. Bradshaw offered a grunt in response and opened the file. He leafed through the pages quickly, studying what the ASIO knew about Mr. Kurt Austin of the American organization NUMA. His activities read like a series of high-stakes adventure novels. Before that, he'd apparently had a successful career in the CIA. Bradshaw couldn't imagine what strange permutations of fate had brought Austin to this very spot at this precise moment, but it just might have been a break the ASIO desperately needed. Austin might do, Bradshaw thought to himself. He might do very nicely. Keep an eye on him, he ordered. If he's as smart as the file shows, he'll be trying to get information out of Ms. Anderson in no time. He does that, you bring them both to me. Why would we want to do that? Bradshaw glared. Did you get a promotion I'm not aware of? Um... No, sir. And you're never going to if you keep asking stupid questions. With that, Bradshaw slapped the file back into the agent's hands and moved off down the hall.

ACROSS THE PLAZA, Kurt sat beside Hayley as a paramedic treated her for a number of scrapes and abrasions and then checked them both for shock. In the midst of this treatment, a ranking detective from the Sydney Police Department grilled them about the event. What did they see? What did they hear? Why on earth did they do what they did? Look at the damage, the captain said, pointing to the ruined facade of the Concert Hall. You're lucky the building was empty. Indeed, Kurt felt very lucky on that score. But he also felt he had little choice but to act. Would you rather I'd just let them keep shooting? I would rather... the detective began, ... that both of you had stayed inside until proper tactical units arrived. Kurt understood that. Police were no different than any other group of trained individuals. Leave it to the professionals. Something Kurt would have been glad to do except there hadn't really been any time. Besides, he was getting the feeling there had been other professionals on-site anyway. Next time, he said, I promise. Next time? the detective muttered. He shook his head, closed his book, and moved off to check with another witness. Left alone for a moment, Kurt studied Hayley. You're a brave woman. She shook her head softly. Not really. I just... Never mind. You ran right through a hail of bullets to rescue a guy you've never seen before, Kurt said. That's pretty much the definition of brave. So did you, she pointed out. True, Kurt said. But I thought the helicopter was out of the picture. You dragged that guy behind that planter while they were actually firing at him. She looked away. She'd been able to clean her face with a water-soaked cloth, but her dress remained tattered and covered in blood. The victim's blood. A lot of good it did, she said. There was definite sadness there. More regret than one usually felt for an unknown man. How long were you waiting for him? Kurt asked. What are you talking about? she replied. You were sitting out here all by yourself, he reminded her. As soon as I showed up, you tried to get me back inside. I'm guessing you didn't want me in the way because you were waiting to make contact with our friends in the boat. More than likely, they chose a public place where they figured they'd be safe. You chose a white dress so you'd be easy to spot when everyone else was wearing black or gray for the gala ball tonight. You sat out here on the wall so you could watch anyone approach. She tried to smile, but it looked forced. Either you hit your head very hard or you have an active imagination, she said. I'm here for the conference. The Muldoons are old family friends. I chose white because I like to stand out, and because it's summer here, and because someone recently told me white is the new black. He shrugged and turned away. Maybe you're right, he said. Maybe it is just an overactive imagination. Tell me, though, whatever happened to the papers? What papers? Revue de presse. Just about the best storyteller in the business. New York Post. Nobody does it better. Nobody! Stephen Coonts. CLIVE CUSSLER has no equal. Publishers Weekly

ZERO HOUR is A nonstop action thriller. The Associated Press