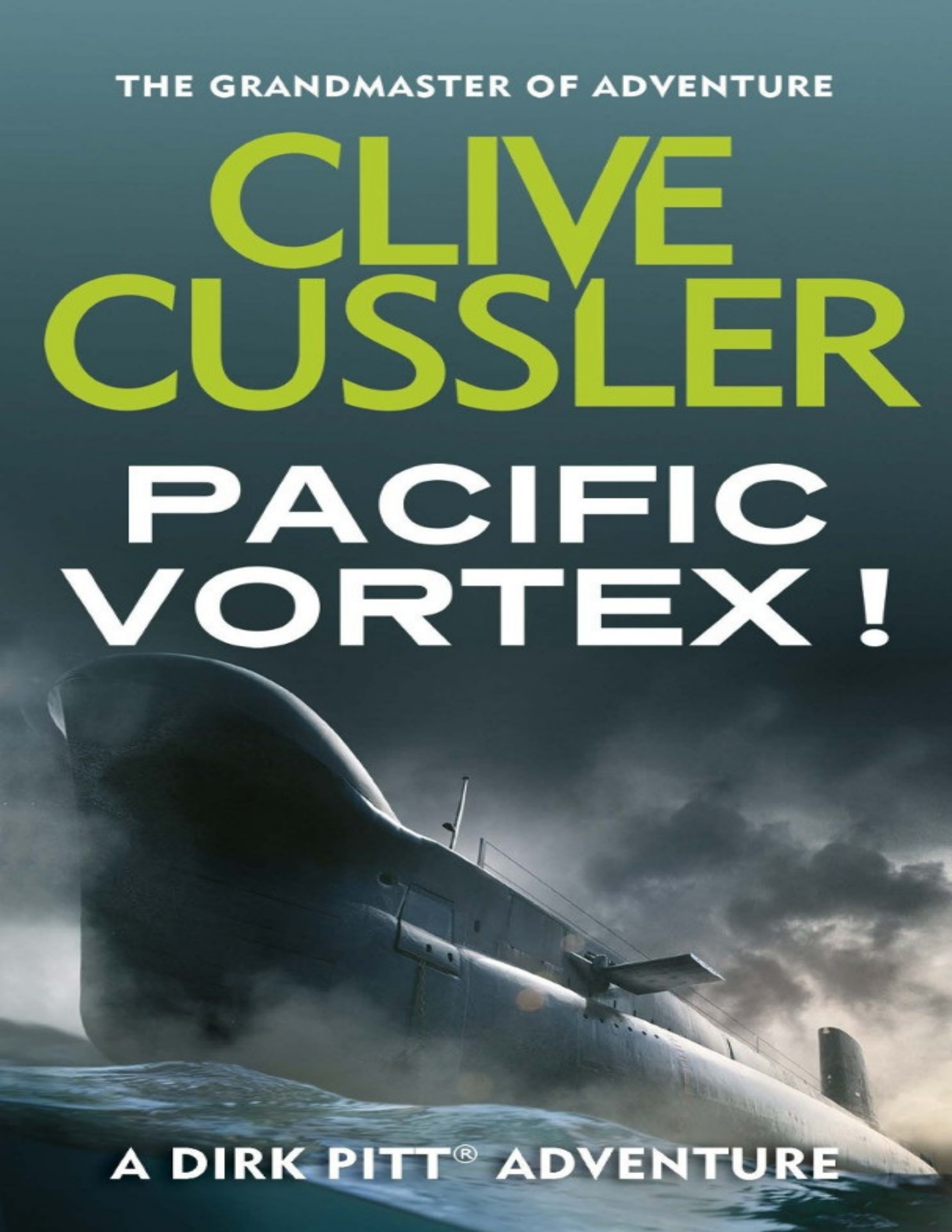


THE GRANDMASTER OF ADVENTURE

# CLIVE CUSSLER

# PACIFIC VORTEX!

A DIRK PITT® ADVENTURE

A dramatic scene featuring a submarine on the surface of the ocean. The submarine is dark and sleek, with a conning tower visible. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, suggesting a storm or a tense atmosphere. The water is dark blue with white foam from the waves. The overall mood is one of mystery and adventure.

# **PACIFIC VORTEX!**

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## FOREWORD

NOT THAT IT really matters, but this is the first Dirk Pitt story.

When I mustered up the discipline to write a suspense/adventure series, I cast around for a hero who cut a different mold. One who wasn't a secret agent, police detective, or a private investigator. Someone with rough edges, yet a degree of style, who felt equally at ease entertaining a gorgeous woman in a gourmet restaurant or downing a beer with the boys at the local saloon. A congenial kind of guy with a tinge of mystery about him.

Instead of a gambling casino or the streets of New York, his territory became the sea, his challenge, the unknown.

Out of the fantasy, Dirk Pitt materialized.

Because this was his first adventure, and because it does not weave the intricate plots of his later exploits, I was reluctant to submit it for publishing. But at the urging of my friends and family, fans and readers, Pitt's introduction is now in your hands.

May it be looked upon as a few hours of entertainment and, perhaps, even a historic artifact of sorts.

Clive Cussler

## Prologue

EVERY OCEAN TAKES its toll of men and ships, yet none devours them with the voracious appetite of the Pacific. The mutiny on the *Bounty* took place in the Pacific, the mutineers burning the ship at Pitcairn Island. The *Essex*, the only known ship to be sunk by a whale (the basis of Melville's *Moby Dick*), lies under the Pacific's waves. So does the *Hai Maru*, blown to bits when an underwater volcano erupted beneath her hull.

Despite all this, the world's largest ocean tends to be a tranquil place; even its name means peaceful and mild of temper.

Perhaps that is why the grim thought of disaster couldn't have been further from Commander Felix Dupree's mind as he climbed onto the bridge of the nuclear submarine *Starbuck*, just before nightfall. He nodded to the officer on watch and leaned over the rail to gaze at the effortless ease in which the bow of his ship pushed aside the marching swells.

Men usually respect the sea: they are even awed by its serenity. But Dupree was not like most men; he was never overcome by the spell. Twenty years at sea, fourteen of them spent in submarines, he was hungry—hungry for recognition. Dupree was captain of the world's newest and most revolutionary submarine, but it wasn't enough. He yearned for more.

The *Starbuck* was built in San Francisco from the keel up, as no other sub had been built before; every component, every system in her pressure hull, was computer designed. The first of a new generation of underwater ships—the beginning of a submerged city capable of cruising at one hundred twenty-five knots through the timeless depths two thousand feet beneath the sunlit surface. The *Starbuck* was like a thoroughbred jumper at her first horse show, chafing at the bit, ready to show her stuff.

But there was to be no audience. The Department of Underwater Warfare ordered the trials to be conducted in the strictest secrecy, in a remote area of the Pacific, and then without an escort vessel. Dupree was chosen to command the *Starbuck* on her maiden trial because of his outstanding reputation.

The Data Bank, his classmates at Annapolis had called him: program him with facts, and then watch his mouth spit out the logical answers. Dupree's skills and talent were well-known among submariners, but personality, influence, and a flair for public relations were the necessary ingredients for advancement in the Navy. Since Dupree possessed none of these traits, he had recently been passed over for promotion.

A buzzer sounded; the officer on watch, a tall raven-haired lieutenant, picked up the bridge phone.

Unseen by the voice on the other end, he nodded twice and hung up.

"Control room," he said briefly. "Echo sounder reports the seafloor has risen fifteen hundred feet in the last five miles."

Dupree turned slowly, thoughtfully.

"Probably a small range of submarine mountains. We still have a mile of water beneath our keel." He grinned and added, "No worry about running aground."

The lieutenant grinned back. "Nothing like a few feet for insurance."

The lines around Dupree's eyes wrinkled with a smile as he slowly turned back to the sea. He lifted a pair of binoculars which hung loosely around his neck and peered intently at the horizon. It was a gesture born from many thousands of lonely hours spent searching the oceans of the world for other ships. It was also a useless gesture; the sophisticated radar systems on board the *Starbuck* could detect an object long before the naked eye could. Dupree knew that, but there was something about studying the sea that cleansed a man's soul.

Finally he sighed and lowered the binoculars. "I'm going below for supper. Secure the bridge for diving at 2100."

Dupree lowered himself through the three levels of the conning tower—or sail, as the modern Navy called it—and dropped into the control room. The Executive Officer and another man, the navigator, were bent over the plotting table, studying a line of depth markings. The Executive Officer looked up at Dupree.

"Sir, we seem to have some strange readings here."

“Nothing like a mystery to end the day,” Dupree replied good-naturedly.

He moved between the two men and stared down at a sheet of finely printed chart paper illuminated by a soft light from the frosted glass tabletop. A series of short dark lines crisscrossed the chart, edged with carelessly written notations and mathematical formulas.

“What have you got?” Dupree asked.

The navigator began slowly. “The bottom is raising at an astonishing rate. If it doesn’t peak out in the next twenty-five miles, we’re going to find ourselves rubbing noses with an island, or islands, that aren’t supposed to exist.”

“What’s our position?”

“We’re here, sir,” the navigator answered, tapping his pencil at a point on the chart. “Six hundred seventy miles north of Kahuku Point, Oahu, bearing zero-zero-seven degrees.”

Dupree swung to a control panel and switched on a microphone. “Radar, this is the captain. Do you have anything?”

“No, sir,” a voice replied mechanically through the speaker. “The scope is clear... wait... correction, Captain. I have a vague reading on the horizon at twenty-three miles, dead ahead.”

“An object?”

“No, sir. More like a low cloud. Or maybe a trail of smoke; I can’t quite make it out.”

“Okay, report when you confirm its identity.” Dupree hung up the microphone and faced the men at the plot table. “Well, gentlemen, how do you read it?”

The Executive Officer shook his head. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. And where there’s fire, something’s got to be burning. An oil slick, possibly?”

“An oil slick from what?” Dupree asked impatiently. “We’re nowhere near the northern shipping lanes. The San Francisco to Honolulu to Orient traffic is four hundred miles south. This is one of the deadest spots in die ocean; that’s why the Navy picked it for the *Starbuck’s* initial tests. No

prying eyes.” He shook his head. “A burning oil slick doesn’t fit. A new volcano rising from the Pacific floor would be a closer guess. And that’s all it would be—a guess.”

The navigator pinpointed the radar’s fix and drew a circle on the chart. “A low cloud on or near the surface,” he thought out loud. “Highly unlikely. Atmospheric conditions are all wrong for such an occurrence.”

The speaker clicked on. “Captain, this is radar.”

“This is the captain,” Dupree answered.

“I’ve identified it, sir.” The voice seemed to hesitate before it went on. “The contact reads as a heavy bank of fog, approximately three miles in diameter.”

“Are you positive? ”

“Stake my rating on it.”

Dupree touched a switch on the microphone and rang the bridge. “Lieutenant, we have a radar sighting ahead. Let me know the minute you see anything.” He rang off and turned to the Executive Officer.

“What’s the depth now?”

“Still coming up fast. Twenty-eight hundred feet and climbing.”

The navigator pulled a cotton handkerchief from his hip pocket and dabbed it to his neck. “Beats the hell out of me. The only rise I’ve heard of that comes close to this one is the Peru-Chili Trench. Beginning at twenty-five thousand feet beneath the surface of the sea, it climbs at a rate of one vertical mile for every one horizontal mile. Until now, it was considered the world’s most spectacular underwater slope.”

“Yeah,” the Executive Officer grunted. “Won’t marine geologists have a ball with this little discovery?”

“Eighteen-hundred fifty feet,” the voice from the echo sounder droned unemotionally.

“My God!” the navigator gasped. “Up a thousand feet in less than half a mile. It just isn’t possible.”

Dupree moved over to the port side of the control room and placed his

nose within a few inches of the glass encasing the echo sounder. According to the digital display, the sea bottom was depicted as a long zigzagged black line climbing steeply toward the red danger mark at the top of the scale. Dupree placed a hand on the shoulder of the sonar operator.

“Any possibility of a foul-up in calibration?”

The sonar operator flipped a switch and stared at an adjoining window. “No, sir. I get the same set of readings from the independent backup system.”

Dupree watched this upward trail for a few moments. Then he stepped back to the plot table and looked at the pencil marks showing his ship’s position in relation to the rising seafloor.

“Bridge speaking,” a robotlike voice came through. “We’ve got it.” There was some hesitation. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say our contact was a scaled-down version of a good old New England fog bank.”

Dupree clicked the microphone. “Understood.” He continued gazing at the chart, his face unreadable, his eyes thoughtful.

“Shall we send a signal to Pearl Harbor, sir?” the navigator asked. “They could send a recon plane to investigate.”

Dupree didn’t answer immediately. One hand idly drummed the edge of the table, the other hung loosely at his side. Dupree rarely, if ever, made snap decisions. His every move went by the book.

Many of the *Starbuck*’s crew had served under Dupree on prior assignments, and although they didn’t exactly offer him their blind devotion, they did respect and admire his ability and judgment. They trusted him to a man, confident that he would never make a critical mistake that would endanger their lives. Any other time they might have been right. But this time they were all terribly wrong.

“Lefs check it out,” Dupree said quietly.

The Executive Officer and the navigator exchanged speculative glances. Orders were to test the *Starbuck* —not chase after ghostly fog banks on the horizon.

No one ever knew why Commander Dupree suddenly stepped out of

character and deviated from orders. Perhaps the lure of the unknown was too strong. Perhaps he saw a fleeting vision of himself as a discoverer, sailing toward the glory that had always been denied him. Whatever the reason, it was lost as the *Starbuck*, like an unleashed bloodhound with a hot scent flowing through her nostrils, swung on her new course and surged through the swells.

The *Starbuck* was expected to dock in Pearl Harbor on the following Monday. When she failed to show, and an exhaustive air and sea search failed to find a single trace of oil or wreckage, the Navy had no choice but to admit the loss of its newest submarine and one hundred sixty men. It was officially announced to a stunned nation that the *Starbuck* was lost somewhere in the vast emptiness of the North Pacific. Shrouded in a silent mystery she vanished with all hands. Time, place, and cause unknown.

## Chapter 1

AMONG THE CROWDED beaches in the state of Hawaii, it is still possible to discover a stretch of sand that offers a degree of solitude. Kaena Point, jutting out into the Kauai Channel like a boxer's left jab, is one of the few unadvertised spots where one can relax and enjoy an empty shore. It is a beautiful beach, but it is also deceptive. Too often its shores are whipped by rip currents extremely dangerous to all but the most wary swimmers. Each year, as if predestined by a morbid schedule, an unidentified bather, intrigued by the lonely sandy strand and the gentle surf, enters the water and within minutes is swept out to sea.

On this beach a six-foot-three-inch deeply suntanned man, clad in brief white bathing trunks, lay stretched on a bamboo beach mat. The hairy, barrel chest that rose slightly with each intake of air, bore specks of sweat that rolled downward in snaillike trails and mingled with the sand. The arm that passed over the eyes shielding them from the strong rays of the tropical sun, was muscular but without the exaggerated bulges generally associated with iron pumpers. The hair was black and thick and shaggy, and it fell halfway down a forehead that merged into a hard-featured but friendly face.

Dirk Pitt stirred from a semisleep and, raising himself up on his elbows, stared from deep green glistening eyes at the sea. Pitt was not a casual sun worshipper; to him, the beach was a living, moving thing, changing shape and personality under the constant onslaught of the wind and waves. He studied the swells as they rolled in from their storm-rocked birthplace thousands of miles at sea, rising and increasing their velocity when their troughs felt the shallow bottom. Changing from swell to breaker, they rose higher and higher—eight feet, Pitt judged—from trough to crest before they toppled and broke, pounding themselves into a thundering mass of foam and spray. Then they died in small, swirling eddies at the tideline.

Suddenly Pitt's eyes were attracted by a flash of color beyond the breakers, about three hundred feet from the shoreline. It was gone in an instant, lost behind a wave crest. Pitt kept gazing with intent curiosity at the spot where the color was last visible. After the next wave rose and crested,