



The Zephyr Alliance

Book three of the Nimbus series

By C. P. Spencer

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*To Tim, for his unending encouragement,
enthusiasm, and invaluable knowledge from his
military service.*

Prologue

SEPTEMBER 1972

“Sir, emergency propulsion is not responding; the battery must be damaged.” The submarine’s XO, Lieutenant Watson, was calm in his delivery of this information, but wet stains were spreading across the armpits of his shirt.

Commander Henderson took a slow sip of his coffee from a chipped and stained mug with the words “Because I Said So” boldly emblazoned across its middle. It had been a gift from his former CO when Henderson received his first boat, seventeen years before.

“Reactor still offline?” Henderson asked, mildly, as though he were inquiring about the weather.

Watson nodded. “Affirmative. T-plus eight minutes from the SCRAM that safely shut her down, and we’re still working on the restart. Engineering reports there’s water coming in aft from somewhere. The nitrogen levels are increasing, so it’s a significant amount. They’ll have the rate of intrusion soon.”

Henderson held his cup up to his lips but didn't drink. "If we flood, they won't have to worry about a restart. How'd we lose the primary loop steam so fast?"

"Chief's got no idea. No coolant leak indicated, and all systems should've been green."

"What about the emergency chicken switch?" Henderson asked.

"Chief says no measurable buoyancy," Watson reported. "It's failed."

Henderson sighed, marking his first outward sign of frustration. "Water level on the main ballast tank?"

Watson cleared his throat, which was becoming tighter. "High on the interlock."

Henderson slammed his mug down on the table, splashing coffee out of the top. "Christ. Did anyone check with con about the aft vent? It was stuck during trials."

Watson found himself mesmerized by the rivulet of coffee sliding down the outside of the skipper's mug. "Chief said it checked out, so there was nothing to report."

Henderson stretched his neck. "Forget an emergency blow as an option. At least we won't shoot up like a breaching whale, given that we're not supposed to be in this area anyway. Trim tanks pump still unresponsive?"

Watson was always amazed at how Henderson could remain so cool no matter what the circumstances were. Of course, it helped that he had always gotten out of any sticky situations before, and there were many of those over the last ten years they had served together.

Not this time. This time we're fucked.

Watson frowned. "The pump on the compensating tanks has gone unresponsive as well."

"What the hell *isn't* wrong with the boat?" Henderson asked.

The boat's Navigator, Sandy Nowak, choked out a short laugh. "We're not melted down."

"That would've been quicker and better for all involved," Henderson responded.

Watson paused and then asked the unutterable. "I know what the specs say, but how far down do you think we've got left to go?"

Henderson looked directly into his eyes, picked his coffee mug up without looking at it, and answered flatly, "all the way to the bottom."

"What about the *Irukandji*?" Watson whispered, looking down at the floor.

Henderson blinked his eyes hard, almost like he was coming out of a deep sleep. “Nowak, what’s our bottom situation right now?”

“We’re looking at eight hundred fifty meters, skipper,” Nowak responded.

“Can we get her deeper?” Henderson asked.

Watson snapped his eyes back to Henderson’s.

Nowak tightened his lips. “Not with propulsion down. We were on a forward glide toward deeper waters, but we’re sliding backwards now. We’re three hundred meters away from crush depth, rate of drop increasing.”

Henderson gave a nod. It was a short, sharp movement that spoke of resigned acceptance. “That’ll have to be deep enough. Jim, Mike, it’s been an honor serving with both of you. When we took this volunteer mission, we knew it could end badly.”

He laughed, the sound coming out like a sarcastic bark. “Not that I expected it to end quite this way. In fact,” he started, but the sound was cut off by nothingness.

—

Edward paused in the hallway, reaching up to remove his hat, then realized he wasn’t wearing one.

Old habits die hard. Nowadays he’d be more likely to be wearing a fishing cap than a uniform cap.

He shifted the briefcase he was holding to his left hand and rang the bell with his right.

The man who answered the door was tall and skinny, thinly mustached, and had slicked-back dark hair parted down the middle in a style reminiscent of that worn in the late nineteen forties. The man’s dark eyes bore intensely into his own, and Edward found himself surprised at the sharpness of the gaze—he’d expected something a little more broken down.

“Commander,” the dark-haired man said. His voice sounded rough like it hadn’t been used recently.

“Rear admiral, if you want to get specific, but I stepped out of that some time ago. Please call me Edward.”

The tall man stepped aside and swept his hand to indicate Edward should enter the suite.

“So much for your retirement,” the man said, closing the door to the suite. He walked to the dining table, sat down, and gestured for Edward to join him across the table. “I’m pleased to meet you in person, even if the circumstances are difficult.”

Edward glanced around. The room was disheveled. There were several jars of a mysterious liquid, which could have been urine or just as easily apple juice, lined up on a tray next to the couch. Discarded paper cups, utensils, plates, and napkins were strewn from one end of the room to the other. A decaying sort of smell was present that seemed to be wafting from behind a partially open door off to the left of the room.

Edward sat across the table from the man, placing the briefcase on the floor as he did so. He noted that he wasn't offered a beverage. "Thank you for meeting with me so quickly. I know this is challenging for you."

The man waved his hand in dismissal. "It's no secret that I'm not at my best."

The man's attention seemed to drift. Edward waited patiently for him to continue.

"But I'm very curious as to what you think I could do for you."

"I was told you've been briefed," Edward said.

The man nodded. A flap of slicked-down hair came down on his forehead, which he ruthlessly flipped back into place. His fingernails, Edward noted, were long and filthy. It looked like pieces of food and heaven knows what else had gotten embedded under the tips.

"Where'd she go down?" the man asked.

Edward leaned forward, reached into a pocket of the briefcase, and pulled out a map. He put it on the table and turned it around to face the man. "Her last ELF communication put her somewhere in this vicinity," he tapped his finger twice on a spot.

"That's Russian territory," the mustached man replied, his eyes snapping up to meet Edward's. "How'd your boat end up there? She launch from Yokosuka?"

"No, Guam."

The man's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That's a fair distance to sneak past the Russians."

"She's a sneaky boat," Edward answered. "Well, she was."

"Pity she didn't go down closer to Hokkaido. But then, you wouldn't be talking to me."

The man looked up at the ceiling, considering something. He snapped his attention back to Edward with an alarmingly piercing expression and asked, "Was she headed there by chance?"

"Yes."

The man nodded as though whatever idea he'd just had was confirmed. "The brief said your submarine was numbered SSNx 443, but it didn't list her name. What was it?"

"She was called *Crystal River*."

“Ah, named after Florida. I spent a lovely summer there once with a very beautiful blonde woman. She smelled like strawberries...” the man’s attention faded again.

Edward stared at him, trying to see the scar on his upper lip that was hidden by the mustache. He waited quite a while for the man to stop reminiscing about the encounter he’d had long in the past.

The man’s misty expression cleared suddenly. “The brief said she was carrying something very important, but it didn’t say what.”

Edward started to speak, but the man waved him off dismissively. “No need to explain what’s missing from the brief. I should tell you that I know what was on board, and I know why you want it back. Quite an impressive piece of engineering, by the way.”

“May I ask how you found out about the project, when everything was done under such secrecy? Even the president’s office wasn’t briefed,” Edward asked.

The man grinned, showing teeth that were stained and dull-looking.

“I know everything, and that’s the truth,” he stated without arrogance. “Let me put it to you this way. If you’re going to base a design on another design, be sure my company’s design isn’t the one you’re copying. Even if you have my permission to do it!”

Edward might have chuckled, but it didn’t seem appropriate. “Since you know what problems we’re facing, I’ve been dispatched to ask if your *Glomar Explorer* is up to the task?”

The man rocked his head from side to side. “With you on board her as a technical advisor?”

“Affirmative,” Edward responded.

“I’m not sure the CIA would let that happen. Russian waters—that’s sticky. Very sticky. Even stickier for me to explain why my brand-new boat needs to run an unscheduled sea trial in the Okhotsk Sea. What you’re asking won’t be anything like your recovery of the USS S-51 submarine, I’ll tell you. But I enjoy a challenge. I’ll see what I can do.” With that, the man stood up and, with swiftness, moved across to the entry door and yanked it open.

Edward rose from his seat, picked up his briefcase, and walked to the open door. The man stood there as though he wasn’t seeing Edward approach. They did not shake hands, nor did they say goodbye. The door simply closed behind Edward and he left as quietly as he had arrived.

PRESENT TIME

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate,” David Endicott uttered with a slight Southern drawl. He raised his hand and gestured toward the darkened window he was seated next to in the extended stretch limousine.

The other seven employees of his tech company, Nimbus Services, LLC, along with two non-employees, craned their heads around, curious as to what had caught David’s attention.

No one uttered a word about the spectacle making its way toward the vehicle. The only sound came from the hum of the front passenger window as it made its way to the fully open position.

“Charles, the outfit is not acceptable,” David, the organization’s leader and founder, firmly spoke out the open window to the ridiculous display that had arrived at the curb. He had dropped the false Southern drawl, his tone returning to his normal cultured Boston Brahmin accent. “Go back up to your rooms and change into a plain polo shirt and long pants, clean, and preferably dark in color.”

“Hey, you just arrest yourself right there, *Mr. Armani*,” Charles shot back as he stood outside of the vehicle. “You said casual and this is casual,” he added with a dramatic swoop of his hands down the front of his body.

Charles Zitmore, better known as “The Zit” to his colleagues, stood pouting next to the limousine. He was the resident computer genius of David’s cloud-based backup company. While operating legitimately as a business in that realm, more importantly, Nimbus existed as a cover to hide the secret operations of the elite black ops team under its clandestine employ.

At present, The Zit was clad in a pair of lime-green shorts, with its side seams splitting apart. The front pockets of the shorts were overflowing with a bulky assortment of papers and other sundry items.

He’d paired the shorts with an impossibly stiff Hawaiian shirt designed with oversized plumeria flowers in a rainbow of neon colors. Hanging from one pocket was The Zit’s cheap, plastic travel coffee mug, an item he claimed he could never be without. His colleagues would never have dreamed he meant to take it on

the flights that would be transporting them to a luxurious company vacation cruise starting in Tokyo, Japan.

The other pocket of the shirt boasted an open bag of Cheetos that was fastened on with a worn-out plastic chip clip. Running down the entire button placket of the shirt was a yellowish stain. It was possibly mustard, since it wasn't as orange in color as the usual Cheetos blots that were present on most of The Zit's clothing.

At least his long hair, often wild and unclean, was washed and brushed.

"What I told you was country club casual," David stated calmly. "You didn't ask for an explanation, so I assumed you knew what that terminology meant. No matter, you now have exactly twenty minutes to change, organize yourself, and get back here."

The Zit took a dramatic breath and was about to say something, but David cut him off before he could do so. "Leave behind all the paraphernalia that you have jammed in your pockets and have hanging from your clothing. Take only your passport, any paperwork needed for the cruise, and the company credit card."

Someone from the back of the vehicle said, "David sounds like Paulie in *The Godfather* when he told his henchman partner, 'Leave the gun, take the cannoli'."

"And furthermore," David continued, "from what I've observed here, I strongly suggest you completely unpack your suitcase and bring it to the vehicle totally empty. I don't trust that anything you have stashed in there will be tolerable. You will shop for a new wardrobe when we get to Tokyo."

"What the hell is with you, boss? I won't know how to shop in Japan," The Zit whined.

"Someone will accompany you. I'm starting the countdown, Charles. If you don't manage in the time I've given you, we will leave without you." With that said, the hum of David's window could be heard as it climbed upward to the closed position.

The inhabitants of the car watched as The Zit whirled around and stomped back toward the entry door of the building.

"I have no intention of sharing my theory on what that brown stain on the back of his shorts could be," Mark Trent, David's top undercover agent, offered.

There was a quiet snort of laughter from the driver along with snide snickers from the rest of the group.

"And where have I heard that saying David used on The Zit?" Mark questioned.

"It's a line very dramatically uttered by Strother Martin in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*," Callie Dawson answered. "I've watched it on TCM several times on my classic movie nights with Unkie D."

David let out a slight groan.

"I know, I know, you're not crazy about the movie. But since you like Paul Newman, I'm happy to say it gets a watch and I really like it," Callie said.

David turned to smile warmly at her. "Anything for you, my dear. You know I suffered through that double header of *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Last Voyage* the other night just for you."

"Ah Unkie D, if it weren't for me, you'd only watch the really good stuff and miss out on the cheese in a can," she laughed.

Callie was David's goddaughter and an experienced Secret Service agent on the close-quarter protection detail of the President of the United States. While not officially part of the Nimbus team, she had been included in the company vacation since she had become an important asset of the group during their last mission.

David secretly hoped that the vacation would also bring her into a deeper romantic relationship with Nick Sherpa, David's nephew, and another top operative in David's clandestine organization. Nick and Callie had known each other since childhood, but until recently, hadn't bothered to glance in one another's direction with any feelings other than friendship. All that changed after the last mission, and while Nick hadn't said how their handful of recent dates went, the way they were touching each other while sitting side by side in the limo gave David confident hope for his most desired outcome.

"Can't we just leave without him?" Nick asked, reaching over to caress Callie's hand.

Nick had experienced a few rough incidents on the last two missions the team had handled, and was really looking forward to this downtime. He had begged David not to include the geek at all, as it would be much more relaxing without his presence. But even though The Zit was everyone's worst social nightmare, and a special pain in the ass to Nick, David had declined the request.

"A company-wide vacation means all the employees," David had firmly stated.

"Be nice," Callie whispered. "He won't be anywhere near us. I promise."

She leaned in closer to Nick and said something meant for his ears only. If anyone had been observing, they would have seen Nick flush red.

The only Nimbus employee who was not present in the limo was their office manager, Thelma Morrison, who chose to drive herself to the airport so she could participate in the single vice she loved more than anything else in the world. That vice was smoking. The ninety-something-year-old woman lived under a perpetual cloud of smoke, the ever-present cigarette hanging out of her mouth no matter the task at hand, including eating and possibly sleeping. No one knew how she was going to survive through the international flights they had ahead of them.

David glanced at his watch and was about to give the go-ahead to the driver when The Zit blasted through the office building's door and charged toward the car. As he settled himself in his seat, the group listened to him mumbling about his friend having brought back the Hawaiian shirt from *Hilo Hattie's*, the ubiquitous tourist shop that for many years was found all over the Hawaiian Islands. He kept going but no one was actively listening to his rant about how meaningful it was for him to honor his friend by wearing it.

"So what am I supposed to buy in Tokyo?" he questioned no one in particular.

David sighed. "Do I have a volunteer who'd be willing to assist Charles in acquiring an appropriate wardrobe for this vacation?"

David made eye contact with each of the occupants of the vehicle, excluding the driver and The Zit.

"I'll take on the task," Andrew Trent offered, grinning a devilish smile and leaning over to plant a quick kiss on his surprised wife's cheek. Unlike his wife, Maddie, who held the position of in-house coordinator and researcher for Nimbus' undercover operations, Drew was a professor of Economics at a prominent university in Washington D.C. While he didn't work for Nimbus like his wife and brother, Mark, Drew had still been briefed about the activities the team participated in, which simply made life easier for the three of them. The expression on his face as he looked at The Zit made it clear he had also been briefed about Charles Zitmore.

Mark and Nathan Brookman, former Navy SEAL and another of the Nimbus operatives, exchanged a knowing glance. Both men, like Drew as well, but unlike The Zit, wore custom-made clothing of the finest quality. Nathan, because he was six feet eight inches tall and nothing but custom fit properly, and Mark and Drew simply because they liked it.

“Thank you, Drew,” David smiled. “All of us will be eternally grateful for your sacrifice.”

Claudine Moreau, known as Dina to her colleagues, was another main operative on the team. She and Maddie both made identical head shakes toward BJ Carter, who was seated across from them.

BJ, christened Beulah Jane upon her birth, was an ex-D.C. cop and the newest member of the group. She occupied a place alongside Carlos Santos, the other most recent operative to join David’s undercover business.

Carlos had lost his wife and two children in a mission the team had previously worked on in Mexico. Bereft, Carlos had relocated to D.C.. He had lived in D.C. years prior, serving as a detective with the D.C. force and had always loved his time spent in what he considered a very exciting city. Returning to D.C. to join up with Nimbus Services and reconnecting with BJ, a woman he had known in the years during which both of them worked on the force, had literally saved him from the deep depression and uncontrollable despair that had threatened to take him out.

As they made their way to the airport, David felt his excitement build. He desperately wanted his people to enjoy this well-earned and long-overdue break.

The last mission that David had assigned to his team was especially traumatic. It involved the difficult elimination of a deadly group of serial killers, one of whom had kidnapped and tried to murder Dina, and another of whom held a top position in the United States government.

David’s exceptional group of operatives had once again utilized their skills to rescue mankind from those men, as well as a myriad of other untold evils that were a constant threat to the unsuspecting and innocent peoples of the world. This vacation, he felt, was the very least he could do for his band of warriors.

2

The snap of cold air that hit Bruce Sanderson as he stepped through the watertight door and onto the deck slammed into him like a thousand freight trains at once.

"Ah shit," he mumbled as he quickly closed the zipper on his coat all the way up to his neck.

"Got cold last night," a voice called out from the flying bridge above.

"Hey Pip," Bruce replied looking up, "you're up early. We got a problem with the array?"

Randy Shelton, known as Pip to his shipmates, shook his head, brushing his medium-length brown hair off his forehead. "Nah, I'm just taking in the air before I go on shift. Stay there, I'll come down."

Bruce turned to the railing and looked out over the ocean where the sun was just beginning its ascent. The icy air was a reminder that September was pretty late in the short season to be on the sea in this area, but it was the only opening the Shirshov Institute of Oceanology had to take the team out to the Sea of Okhotsk.

His job of evaluating kelp fields and checking on the health of the fish population after poachers realized they could make money on the black market from selling Okhotsk-harvested fish roe on the cheap was a far cry from the exciting years he had spent as a Navy SEAL.

He laughed lightly thinking about it. When he left the SEALs three years ago, he had vowed to live a quiet, peaceful life that guaranteed no one would be trying to kill him anymore. Oceanographic research and bottom mapping seemed a safe bet. The most excitement he'd had in months was when an angry little octopus spread itself across the deep sea camera lens of the remote operating vehicle—its tiny beak doing its damndest to bite into the ROV.

He *almost* wished something dangerous would happen to break the monotony of the boredom he thought he craved.

No, that's not exactly right.

Thinking back on some of the missions that he'd been involved with, it was the skill and trust between his team members that he missed, not the rush.

When the SEAL team had first broken up, the team would get together regularly and shoot the shit. As they drifted apart to different areas of the world in their civilian lives, they at least kept

in regular touch on the phone. But that had eased off in the last two years as everyone immersed themselves in their jobs and families.

A burst of wind whipped past his face just as the sound of helicopter rotors buzzed dully in the distance. The combination of the sound and the feeling brought him back to a mission long past. He reminisced for a time and then felt the urge to call his friend, Nathan Brookman, and catch up.

“Here you go,” Pip said, handing Bruce a plastic insulated mug with an oversized handle that could accommodate use with gloves.

“Thanks,” Bruce took a sip as his attention snapped to the present, the alcoholic content prickling the inside of his nose. “Ah, it’s spiked. Gives new meaning to the term day drinking.”

“Well, it’s still a little dark out so it’s more like night drinking. And, after all, this is a Russian boat. Alcohol is like water to these guys.”

Pip and Bruce stood in silence as they watched the sun climb fully over the horizon. The warmth of the spiked drink spread through Bruce’s system and he found himself tugging the zipper of his coat down to his chest.

“Pretty soon this place will be all iced up. Good thing we’re out of here in a couple of days,” Pip remarked.

“Aren’t you running short on time to get your whatever it is tested out?” Bruce asked.

Pip grinned. “Nope. Today’s my baby’s big day.”

“You finally gonna tell me what that thing you brought on board is?”

Pip looked conflicted. He sighed as an expression of resignation crossed his face. “Yeah, why not? I got the patent-pending notice last night, so I think I can safely share the news now. You know how when we tow a side-scan SONAR, the umbilical cable gets tangled into all sorts of shit?”

“Umm hmm,” Bruce replied, taking another sip.

“I figured when I signed on to this expedition, mapping kelp was the perfect place to test Sylvie.”

Bruce waited for Pip to continue, an expectant look on his face.

“Think of Sylvie like a weed whacker and a fidget spinner mated and had a baby.”

Bruce grinned. “Okay.”

Pip took a deep breath and explained with excitement, “she’s basically a spinning ring with nylon spikes wrapped all around and a couple of small propellers inset into the inside of the ring. She attaches to any deep-sea equipment umbilical cable, which

could be tethered to a remote-operated vehicle, a side-scan SONAR—essentially anything with a power and data transfer cable system because she powers herself off the unit. I thought of adding her own power via battery packs but keeping her light so she doesn't affect the equipment with drag was paramount, especially when dealing with a small remote operated vehicle or SONAR unit. Her only job is to run about twenty feet of the length of the tow line, back and forth, back and forth, spinning away. When the ROV or SONAR fish's cable gets caught in soft debris, like kelp, Sylvie chops the impediment up so the unit can be freed. She's totally autonomous in operation and runs whether there's a problem or not."

"Hmm," Bruce replied, trying to picture what Sylvie looked like. All he could come up with was a small Christmas wreath ornament wrapped with green nylon weed whacker line instead of pine needles.

"Not bad," he said, thinking how something like that might work.

"I'm even working on a modification that would add a second ring with a prying claw option that would let the cable get out of hard materials, too. So, like if a tethered line gets caught in a fissure of a rock, or a lost fishing net, or even a crack in a sunken vessel, the prying claw would wedge into the same space and deploy itself open to make space for the cable to come out."

"You'd need to get a lot of torque for the cutting blades. How'd you solve the power pickup problem to get enough current to drive the cutter motor as well as the propellers?" Bruce asked.

"Well, that's the magic now, isn't it?" Pip replied grinning, but without elaboration.

Bruce didn't press. "If it works, it'll be pretty amazing."

"Yeah, I think so. My plan is to get a fish down there with Sylvie. I'll have the ROV film the results of her operation, and if I'm very lucky, I can get the captain to let me shoot the ship's multi-beam SONAR for recording any extra data I might glean from the process. It's why I'm up so early today. I've been given permission to work the systems on my own so no one can steal the idea, and god forbid, beat me to the market."

"You trust the crew not to sneak a peek at what you're doing?"

"I do because we have a Non Disclosure Agreement in place. And these guys are scientists so they respect keeping secrets anyway. Plus, as I said, I have the patent pending so soon enough it'll be public and unable to be stolen without financial penalties in place that would benefit me greatly. Anyway, I'm off

to set her up. I'd invite you to join in her debut, but the data must remain private for now."

"I hear you," Bruce responded. "Good luck."

"Thanks, I'm pretty sure I'll get the results I'm looking for. Later, man."

"Later." Bruce watched Pip open the semi-watertight door and disappear inside.

A weed whacker for tow lines. Who'da thunk it?"