



IN THE  
**COMPANY OF STRANGERS**



P.D.  
LaFleur

## ONE

### **Near Bayou La Batre, Alabama**

THE ALUMINUM CREW boat bobbed like a cork in the Gulf, still dangerously close to the mammoth steel cargo ship to which it had been tied. Its cargo loaded, the crew of three was pleased to be on its way. The captain shoved off and set his course northwest. The twin engines growled and the bow raised its nose. Minutes later, they approached the cove and the captain aimed the bow towards the wooden dock. This was an unusually cool afternoon for a summer's day in Alabama, but dock's owner stood alone dressed in a tee shirt, shorts and sandals, and patiently waited for the crew boat to slow and tie up. Wordlessly, the crew unloaded the five crates and placed them on the bed of a pick-up truck. The captain approached the dock's owner and accepted an envelope that he knew held a wad of bills, a fine payday for light duty, and a full week's pay for each crewmember for just a few hours' work. They exchanged nods. No words were said.

The owner of the dock climbed into the cab of the pick-up and drove slowly, deliberately, to a large metal building that served as a garage and warehouse. When he had driven inside, he shut off the engines and slid the double doors closed. He scanned the five crates of cargo. They were only six feet long, two feet wide and three feet tall, but they possessed a power unknown less than a century ago. Spray-painted on the sides were a series of numbers and the forbidding symbol, three triangles in a circle warning of nuclear materials. Inside them, he was assured, were sufficient arms to eradicate a small city. Not that he'd ever use them. But one never knew

when they might be needed. And he wanted to be prepared. And to be on the winning side if and when that moment ever came.

### **The Mozambique Channel**

THE SEA BELOW was calm and visibility was crystal clear. Just ahead lay Madagascar. Clearing a ridge over rugged foothills near Morondava, the cargo plane circled twice before it began its final descent. The pilot lined the nose of the plane even with the single runway and almost skimmed the tops of the palms and mangroves as he trimmed the craft and reduced engine speed. The tires met the pavement and he gently brought the plane to a halt. In seconds, two large delivery vans, white and unmarked, appeared from the edge of the rainforest and pulled within feet of the cargo door. Sixteen minutes later, the cargo was offloaded and the captain pointed the nose into the wind to begin his takeoff; his task accomplished. The seven crates, each bearing the distinctive symbol of nuclear materials, were on their way to a destination unknown to him. He had no interest in knowing the specifics. He was just relieved to have the crates off his plane.

The pilot knew that a packet would be waiting for him in a locker at the Durban airport when he arrived, and that it would contain a thick stack of South African rands. The procedure was always the same. The new wealth he enjoyed from being chartered by the peculiar man whose name he never knew was welcomed. He had his own plans for his future, and they did not include ferrying horrific cargo over dangerous waters in an aged aircraft. For now, he was simply glad that the cargo was gone. He had no desire to be vaporized into the next world.

## **Off Stewart Island, New Zealand**

THE TRIP WAS made in the calmest of waters at mid-day. The craft, a forty-six foot Chris Craft trawler, was lumbering towards the small private harbor nestled along the southwestern tip of the island. The boat's owner, ruddy from the sun and wearing only swimming trunks and a canvas cap, smiled to himself as he slowed the engines and prepared to angle the cruiser towards the dock. He was alone on this trip. It was a relatively small shipment this time, certainly smaller than the last shipment he received. He'd have no trouble muscling the three cartons by himself. They weighed less than one hundred pounds each, and he was in excellent physical shape.

He shut the engines down and coasted gently to the dock. In two minutes, the ropes were secured to the cleats and he turned his attention to the three cartons. He hoisted them from the deck of the boat and placed them side-by-side on the surface of the dock. In a few minutes, he's place them in the rear of his aging Jeep, a relic from the American GI's in World War II, and drive them to his small warehouse. But for now, he'd remain on board his boat, enjoy a cigar, and consider his good fortune. The cargo had cost him less than three million American dollars. The money was nothing to him; he had hundreds of millions at his disposal. But in return, he was now the owner of six hand-held rocket launchers, each armed with a small nuclear warhead.

Whether or not he'd ever have to put them to their intended use, he could not predict. But as an observer of world affairs, he sensed growing unrest in all corners. An uprising in East Timor. A riot in Cincinnati. The Islamic Jihad spreading out from the mid-East. Al Quaida. Who knows what band of crazies would be the next big threat. Getting arms of superior quality and firepower was becoming easier than ever, and he envisioned frightful possibilities as they

increasingly fell into the wrong hands. He wanted arms in the right hands, especially nuclear arms. His arms. His hands.