THUNDERBOLT

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The Jack Courtney Adventures

Cloudburst
Thunderbolt

Look out for the next Jack Courtney Adventure,
Shockwave, coming in 2022

WILBUR SMITH

WITH CHRIS WAKLING

THUNDERBOLT



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PRESS

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For all our young readers and their families
Wilbur Smith & Chris Wakling



1.

I was concentrating so hard on the *beep-beep-beep* of the metal detector probing the ocean bed beneath me that I didn't notice the shark. The little green light in the middle of the detector's circular head winked in time with the beeping which, underwater, sounded more like *blip-blip-blip*. I floated above it, breathing slowly. The mouthpiece tasted rubbery. Silver bubbles swam lazily above me in gentle bursts. If the detector sniffed out metal – a bottle top, the tag of a broken zip, or an old coin, say – the blips would come closer together and the winking would go mental. Though I'd only turned up rubbish all morning, the idea that Amelia or Xander – both of whom were in the water somewhere nearby, conducting their own searches – or I might actually find what we were looking for was compelling.

Blip-blip-blip.

Sand puffed up around the roving detector's head as I swung it gently from side to side.

Blip-blip-blip-blip-blip.

I'd finned my way to the edge of a patch of sea grass and bobbed there for a moment, watching the green tips of the grass swaying in the current. A few metres beyond this underwater lawn the detector had picked up a metallic scent of some sort. I rooted about in a circle, sending up another billowing cloud of sand.

This machine was set to search a diameter of about fifty centimetres. When the *blip-blipping* became a constant whine, I switched to the smaller wand dangling from a lanyard clipped to my Buoyancy Control Device. It searched with a more focused eye. As it homed in, the clicking sped up. Rather than beeping, this one clicked. It sounded a bit like an insistent dolphin.

My fingers, magnified by the glass of my mask, sifted the sand carefully. Before I even saw it, they had closed around something small with a hole in its middle. I realised that – breaking the first rule of scuba diving – I was holding my breath. Lifting the item to inspect it, I heard the rush of bubbles as I let the breath go: not a wedding ring, as I'd hoped it might be, but the ring-pull off a drinks can.

Rather than chuck litter back into the Indian Ocean, I slid it into my mesh bag and looked up to see where Amelia had got to. And that's when I saw the shark, not thirty metres away, the colour and length of a torpedo, gliding towards me.

The in and out of my breathing was suddenly very loud indeed, the column of bubbles above me thickening to a constant mass. The shark, drifting my way, looked utterly at ease, comically chilled in fact.

Though I'd been diving a lot over the last few days, enough

to get very comfortable underwater again, I suddenly felt as out of place as a football boot in a fridge. The shark slipped closer. With an almost imperceptible flick of its tail it veered to my left. But it didn't get any further away. It was circling me. The unblinking dot of its nearside eye took me in. 'What on earth are you doing down here?' it seemed to say.

Fair question.

What was I doing there? There being ten metres underwater, weighed down with metal-detecting kit, just off the coast of Zanzibar.

Searching for treasure, obviously.

It was all Xander's fault. When he heard Mum was planning a trip to Zanzibar, to help put what happened in the Congo behind us – as if anything ever could – he sent me a link to a company selling underwater metal detectors, telling me I should buy one.

I sent him one word back: 'Why?'

In response he sent me another link, to – of all things – a wedding planner's website. It was full of pictures of beaming brides dressed up like meringues cutting pointlessly elaborate cakes, while men wearing cheesy grins and shiny suits tried to look useful by leaning on the same knife.

None the wiser, I re-sent Xander the same one-word question.

Eventually he picked up the phone to explain. Zanzibar, with its white beaches, turquoise sea, cloudless skies and jaunty palm trees, is one of the most popular high-end honeymoon spots on Earth. Newlyweds pitch up there week in, week out, to celebrate getting hitched. Most of

them jump in the sea at some point, wearing nothing but their swimming costumes, sun lotion, and their brand-new wedding rings.

Though the sea there is relatively warm, it's still sea, meaning the water is cold enough to cool you down. Cool anything and it will shrink a bit. A newlywed's finger is no exception. If you've not worn a ring before, and many people – particularly men – haven't before they get married, you're likely to think one that fits correctly is too tight, so you buy one that's a bit loose.

Flap about in the cool sea and your brand-new, highly valuable wedding ring is liable to slip off and sink into the sand, lost forever. Unless you look for it with the right kit. Xander had heard of an American guy who found a bunch of wedding rings just off Waikiki beach in Hawaii. That's also a popular honeymoon spot.

The prospect of spending a fortnight lying by the pool, trying not to think about what Dad had done to Mum and me in the DRC, wasn't that tempting. I'd have gone diving anyway to escape my thoughts. Why not give Xander's hare-brained suggestion a shot while I was at it?

If it worked and I turned up something valuable, I could give the proceeds to Mum. Post-Dad, I knew she needed money more than she was letting on. Conservation is expensive work. Perhaps I could actually help out?

Amelia had jumped at the idea. Knowing how much she likes swimming, and guilty at having dragged her through the Congo disaster, Mum invited her on this trip too.

I was fine with that. She's my oldest friend: we've known

each other since our mothers gave birth to us, fourteen years ago now, in the same maternity ward. The bond between us had grown stronger since our time in the Congo, when Dad turned out to be a fraudulent crook and took off. She's never had a relationship with her own father, and I could feel her sympathy for my loss. I was also fine with my newer friend Xander inviting himself along. Some people you just click with instantly, and he and I had seen eye to eye since the day we met at boarding school a year or so ago. He'd bought his own ticket, plus some ultra-high-end detecting kit. So far the only treasure we'd found – the ring-pull, the zipper, the green coin and something that looked like a bit of boat – was worthless – but, pre-shark, I was still feeling hopeful.

Now, with the shark circling me, I'd settle for getting out of the sea alive.