

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICK CUTTER

“UTTERLY TERRIFYING.” —CLIVE BARKER

THE
DEEP

A NOVEL

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**THE
DEEP**

NICK CUTTER



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PART 1

THE 'GETS

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1.

THE OLD MAN'S HEAD was covered in mantises.

At first Luke thought it was a wig or some weird toupee—but he was at the southern tip of Guam, a few miles from the Pacific, and the man was wearing tattered clothes and what looked like strips of old radial tires lashed to his feet. Why bother with a toupee?

The driver saw the old man, too. He hissed between his teeth—an uneasy *tssshk!* He said something under his breath: a curse, maybe a prayer? Luke didn't speak the local dialect.

"I'll do it," Luke told the driver. "You wait here."

He elbowed the Jeep's door open. Sweet Jesus, the heat. It'd hit him like a fist when he stepped onto the runway at the Agana airport. It hit him again now—the tropical air, laden with the nectar of heliotropes, caused beads of sweat to pop along his brow.

The old man stood facing the wall of a one-story workshop. The ground was strewn with hubcaps and crankcases snarled in rusted wiring. Wrist-thick vines snaked out of the greenery to twine around the industrial junk; with nobody around to hack it back, the jungle would reclaim this spot in a matter of months.

The old man was walking into the wall—his sandals made a gentle *whush-whush* as they brushed the yellowing adobe. The spotting was pronounced on his bare arms and his throat. The scabs were dime-sized, bigger than what Luke was used to seeing. Some of them had cracked open and were leaking grayish pus.

Luke had no clue what had drawn the mantises. Maybe they'd dropped from the creeping ivy snarled across the shop's roof. Or maybe something on the man's scalp, or leaching out of it, had attracted them.

They were the largest insects Luke had ever seen. Each mantis was the length of his thumb, and muscular-looking. They had swollen, cantilevered

abdomens that curved above their sharp, considering faces. A baker's dozen or so carpeted the man's skull.

Luke got the sense of them turning to stare at him, all at once.

Luke retreated to the ditch. His feet sank into the muck. He didn't like the way it sucked at his boots—greedy, a lipless brown mouth.

He found a stick and went back. The insects squirmed quarrelsomely on the man's head, which was covered with wispy white hairs as downy as those on a baby's skull. Their exoskeletons made a brittle chitter. What the hell were they doing?

Luke watched their choreographed manner. The stink of burned diesel mixed with the heliotropes to create a sticky vapor that coated his throat. Distantly, he heard the driver repeat what he'd said before—that breathless curse or prayer—and Luke was worried he'd set the Jeep in gear and take off, leaving him with the old man and the mantises, the heat and the crawling jungle.

What in God's name were those bugs *doing*?

One mantis pinned another in a violent vise grip, then widened its jaws and bit down, cleaving the other's head in half. Their abdomens were wed. What was clearly the female continued to eat the male's head while his antenna whipped about frantically.

Using the stick, Luke brushed the mantises off the man's skull. A decapitated male skittered wildly across Luke's fingers; he shook it into the mud with the rest of them. The urge arose to step on them. Squash them all to paste.

Instead, Luke set his hands on the old man's shoulders to turn him around. His expression was familiar: *The Big Blank*. His eyes gone milky, the edges of his eyelids pebbled with nodules of acne that gave his skin the look of an orange rind. His mouth wide open, his tongue coated in white film. He may not have drunk water in days. He'd forgotten to, probably.

That's how it went with the 'Gets: you forgot the little things first, then the not-so-little things, then the big ones. Next, the critical ones. In time, your heart forgot how to beat, your lungs how to breathe. You die knowing nothing at all.

As soon as Luke pointed him in a new direction, the old man started to walk. He'd go on until he fell down or stepped off a cliff or stumbled into a