

Return to Atlantis: A Novel (Nina Wilde & Eddie Chase series Book 8)

By Andy McDermott

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American archaeologist Nina Wilde and her husband, ex-SAS bodyguard Eddie Chase, are back for another heart-stopping, globe-spanning adventure in the latest *New York Times* bestselling series that "raises the bar to please adventure junkies who prefer to mainline their action" (*Publishers Weekly*, starred review).

A MISSING SCRAP OF ANCIENT PARCHMENT.
THREE POLISHED PURPLE STONES.
AND FROM THE SUNKEN WORLD OF ATLANTIS:
THE GREATEST POWER ON EARTH.

Nina Wilde and Eddie Chase have stunned the world with their discoveries, from the legendary sword Excalibur to the golden city of El Dorado. Now, by bringing together three ancient statues from three different continents, Nina is about to tap into a colossal energy source—one not felt since the days of Atlantis.

But when the statues are stolen and Eddie is falsely accused of murder, forcing him to go on the run to hunt the man responsible, a violent struggle erupts among a secret, vastly powerful group that wants to control Nina and the earth energy. From a glittering, high-tech skyscraper in Japan to a harrowing chase beneath the Vatican and an underground military vault in Nevada, she and Eddie must piece together an astounding puzzle. For Nina Wilde is the key to a plot that will change the world forever. And Eddie is the key to keeping her alive.

BONUS: This edition includes an excerpt from Andy McDermott's *The Valhalla Prophecy*.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the novels of Andy McDermott

“No fan of Indiana Jones, Matthew Reilly or action in general will be able to put it down.”—*Northern Territory News*, on *The Pyramid of Doom*

“Raises the bar to please adventure junkies who prefer to mainline their action.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review), on *The Hunt for Atlantis*

“Adventure stories don’t get much more epic than this.”—*Daily Mirror* (U.K.)

About the Author
Andy McDermott is a former journalist and movie critic who now writes novels full-time following the international success of his debut thriller, *The Hunt for Atlantis,*which has been sold around the world in more than twenty languages. He is also the author of *The Tomb of Hercules, The Secret of Excalibur, The Covenant of Genesis, The Pyramid of Doom, The Sacred Vault, Empire of Gold, Return to Atlantis, The Valhalla Prophecy,* and *The Shadow Protocol*. He lives in Bournemouth, England.

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ONE

Zimbabwe

Four Billion Years Later

The heat and stench were as inescapable as the cell itself. The thick stone and clay walls of the former pioneer fort trapped warmth like a kiln, and the small, stoutly barred window providing the only ventilation opened out almost directly onto the row of latrines at one side of the prison’s central courtyard.

Fort Helena. Hell on earth for those unfortunates imprisoned within by the country’s despotic regime.

A bearded man sat statue-like in one dirty corner of the gloomy cell; his stillness partly because of the cloying heat, and partly because each movement brought pain. He had been delivered to the prison a day earlier, and as a welcoming gift given a beating by a group of guards before being taken to a dark room where a grinning man had provided him with a hands-on demonstration of some of the numerous instruments of torture at his disposal. Just a sample, he had been promised. A full show would soon follow.

Someone else was in the torture chamber now, screams echoing through the passages. The guards had made a point of dragging the victim past the bearded man’s cell so that he would hear the desperate pleas for mercy. Another sample, a demonstration. You’re next.

A new sound, this from outside. A rising mechanical thrum—an approaching helicopter.

The man stirred, painfully levering himself upright and going to the little window. He ignored the foul smell

from the latrines, narrowing his eyes against the harsh daylight as he watched uniformed men hurry into the courtyard to form an honor guard. Behind them came the prison's governor, a squat, toad-faced man in small gold-rimmed glasses. From his look of apprehension, it was clear that the new arrival was important.

The prisoner tensed. He knew who was aboard the helicopter.

Someone with very good reasons to hate him.

Dust and grit swirled as the helicopter descended. It was an elderly aircraft, a French-built Alouette III light utility chopper converted to what was known as "G-Car" specification by the addition of a pair of machine guns. A veteran of the civil war that led to Rhodesia's becoming Zimbabwe in 1980 . . . now being used as VIP transport for a man who fought in that war as a youth, gaining a nickname that he retained with pride to this day.

Gamba Boodu. "The Butcher."

A guard opened the cabin door and Boodu stepped out, head high as if daring the still-whirling rotor blades above him to strike. Despite the baking temperatures, he wore a long black greatcoat over an immaculately fitted suit, the coat's hem flapping in the downdraft as he strode across the courtyard to the governor. Sunlight glinted off gold: a large ring on the middle finger of his right hand, inset with a sparkling emerald. That same hand held an object that he swung like a walking stick, its end stabbing into the ground with each step.

A machete, its handle decorated with lines of gold.

The bearded man remembered the weapon well. Some years earlier, he had wrested it from the militia leader and used it against him. The result was a deep, V-shaped line of pink against the Zimbabwean's dark skin, the scar the aftermath of a blow that had hacked clean through flesh to leave a bloody hole in his cheek like a second mouth.

He smiled, very faintly. The injury was only a fraction of what a murderer and sadist like Boodu deserved, but among his many unpleasant characteristics was vanity: Every look in the mirror would provide some punishment.

The smile disappeared as, formalities quickly over, Boodu and the governor marched into the prison buildings. They would soon come to the cell. The man returned to his filthy corner.

Footsteps over the screams. The wooden cover of the peephole slid back; then came the clatter and rasp of a key in the lock. The heavy door swung open. A guard entered first, pistol aimed at the still figure, who responded with nothing more than a fractional raising of his eyes. Next came the governor, broad mouth curled into a smirk, and finally Boodu himself. The machete's tip clinked down on the stone floor.

"What a pleasant surprise," said Boodu, his deep voice filled with gloating satisfaction. "Eddie Chase."

The balding Englishman lifted his head. "Ay up," he said in a broad Yorkshire accent. "How's the face?"

The line of the scar shifted as Boodu's expression tightened. "It has healed."

"So who'd you use as your plastic surgeon? Dr. Frankenstein?"

The governor angrily clicked his fingers, and the guard booted Eddie hard in the side. He was about to deliver another blow when Boodu stopped him. “Leave him for me,” the Zimbabwean rumbled. He ground the machete’s point over the floor, the sound as unpleasant as nails on a blackboard. “I’m going to have some fun with him.”

Eddie clutched his aching ribs. “You’re throwing us a big party with cakes and jelly?”

“The only thing that will be thrown is your corpse, into a pit,” said Boodu. He rasped the blade over the flagstones again. “You caused me a lot of pain, Chase—professional and personal. Getting those criminals across the border made me look very bad in front of the president. It took me a long time to get back into his favor.”

“Leaving the country ’cause you don’t want to have your family raped and murdered doesn’t make you a criminal.”

Boodu snorted sarcastically. “If you oppose the president, you are a criminal. And my country has far too many of these criminals—this prison is full of them. They must be dealt with. Firmly.” He paused to listen to a shriek from the torture chamber. “Like your friend Strutter. A dog of war, spreading sedition, arranging for mercenaries to work for criminals. Mercenaries like you, Chase.”

“Not anymore, mate. I had a career change.”

“Yes, I heard. We do still get the international news here in Zimbabwe, even if it is filled with lies about our country. You married an American, no? I’m very sorry.” He laughed. “But I also heard that you got into some trouble, hey? You are wanted for murdering an Interpol officer! I was almost tempted to turn you over to them. But then”—he turned his face to display his mangled cheek to the prisoner—“I remembered that you gave me this.”

“My pleasure,” Eddie said with a sardonic grin.

“It will soon be my pleasure.” Boodu advanced, tapping the machete on the floor. He nodded to the guard. “Hold him.”

Eddie was kicked again, harder than before. While the Yorkshireman gasped for breath, the guard hauled him up and shoved him against the wall.

“Here,” said Boodu, mouth somewhere between a smile and a snarl. He brought up the blade and sliced through one of Eddie’s dirty, ragged sleeves—and the skin beneath. Dark blood blossomed on the fabric.

Eddie choked back a growl of pain. “You fucking cockwipe!”

“When I was told you had been arrested, I had it sharpened. Just for you.”

“Hope you had it sterilized too,” said Eddie as the guard released him. “Wouldn’t want to catch anything.” He examined the cut. Boodu had been right about the machete’s sharpness; the African’s sweep had only been light, but still enough to open up a stinging gash in his arm.

Boodu laughed again. “I’m disappointed in you, Chase. You knew you were a dead man if you ever came back to Zimbabwe—so I congratulate you on your bravery, at least—but you were a fool to be so open about

it. We were watching all of Strutter's contacts. Did you really think we had forgotten you?" He gestured at Eddie's face. "A beard! That was your disguise? Very stupid. You must have spent too long in America, with all the comforts of marriage—you forgot how the world really works."

"I didn't forget," said Eddie. Boodu was about to say something else when a prison official appeared at the door and indicated that he wished to speak to the governor. The two men exchanged muttered words, eyeing Eddie suspiciously, before the militia leader went over to join in the sotto voce discussion.

Before long, Boodu let out a sharp "Ha!" and, swinging the machete almost nonchalantly, turned back to Eddie. "Where is it, Chase?"

"Where's what?" Eddie replied, face a portrait of innocence.

"You have a radio transmitter. My pilot picked it up and then used the prison's own receiver to triangulate its position. This cell."

The governor was already defensive. "We searched him when he was brought here."

"Not well enough," said Boodu, his look suggesting there would be repercussions for the oversight. "So that's why you were so open about coming here to rescue Strutter. You thought a homing beacon would help your friends rescue you if you got into trouble." He shook his head. "Not from here, Chase. Not from Fort Helena. Now, where is it? Or will I have to cut you apart to find it?" He raised the machete again.

With a defeated look, Eddie unfastened his trousers. "Don't get all excited, lads," he said as he reached into the back of his underwear and, straining in discomfort, extracted a small tubular object from where the sun didn't shine. "Ow! Christ, you've no idea how uncomfy that was. Made my eyes water."

Boodu was about to take it from Eddie when he noticed the unsavory coating on its metal surface and instructed the guard to hold it instead. With an expression of great distaste, the man held it up for his superiors to examine. It was around three inches long and a little over an inch in diameter, one end rounded off. A red LED blinked at the other, flat end, a tiny switch beside it. "Does the switch turn it off?" Boodu asked Eddie. The Englishman nodded.

Boodu gestured to the guard, who clicked the switch with a thumbnail. The LED went dark. Chuckling, he regarded Eddie again. "You shouldn't have set it to transmit on a military frequency, Chase. A stupid mistake."

"Oh, I dunno," said Eddie. A sudden confidence in his voice was accompanied by distant sounds from outside, a series of flat thuds. Boodu stiffened, realizing that the situation had somehow changed. "It wasn't to tell my mates I was here." A broad smile exposed the gap between his front teeth. "It was to tell 'em you were here."

He dropped and shielded his head—

A rising high-pitched whine told Boodu what was happening—but too late to do anything about it as mortar shells struck the prison.

A hole exploded in the corridor's ceiling, shrapnel ripping into the head and back of the prison official. The governor was also hit, the blast flinging him into the cell. Both Boodu and the guard were thrown off their

feet as more detonations tore through the building.

Eddie lifted his head as the first round of shelling ceased. As planned, the bombs had been fired to impact in a pattern around his cell as soon as the beacon was switched off. Risky, but he'd had confidence in his collaborators' aim. The mortars were just over the top of a small ridge almost a mile from the fort, set up and sighted on his position by surreptitious use of a laser rangefinder during the early hours of the morning. So far, they were on target. The door hung off its hinges, the wall beside it smashed. A shaft of sunlight cut through the swirling dust from a hole in the roof.

He jumped up. The guard was closest to him, breaking out of his daze as he saw the prisoner move and standing clumsily, raising his gun—

Eddie grabbed his arm and wrenched it up behind his back as he fired. The bullet smacked against the door.

The sound shocked the governor back to life. He fumbled for his own holstered weapon, broad face contorted in panic and fury.

Eddie twisted the guard's arm even harder, jamming the gun's muzzle into his lower back—and his own index finger on top of his captive's. Four shots burst gorily through the guard's abdomen. Even mangled and smashed by their passage, the rounds still had enough force to tear into the governor's flesh. He screamed, gun forgotten as he writhed in agony from the mortal wounds.

Pulling the gun from the dead guard's hand, Eddie dropped the corpse and whirled to face Boodu. The Zimbabwean was on his hands and knees. As he squinted in pain and disorientation, his gaze fell upon his machete, the ornate handle just inches away. He grabbed it—

Eddie's foot stamped down on the blade.

Boodu looked up to find the smoking, blood-dripping gun pointed right at him. "All right, face-ache," Eddie growled. "Let go." Boodu withdrew his hand and backed away. The Englishman bent to retrieve the machete. Outside, an alarm bell started ringing—just as another round of far-off thumps reached the prison. "Oh, and if I were you, I'd duck."

Boodu shielded his head as another round of mortar shells struck their targets. These explosions were farther away, but still shook dust from the ceiling as guard towers were blasted into fragments and the prefabricated administration block blew apart, the remains collapsing on top of the prison staff inside.

Eddie jabbed Boodu with the machete. Another noise rose: the helicopter, its pilot desperately trying to take off. "Okay, get up. Get up!" He gestured with the gun toward the broken door. "Move."

Boodu had no choice but to obey, though his voice seethed with defiance. "Where are you taking me?"

"Long term? Botswana. Short term," Eddie went on as the other man responded with confusion, "we're going to do what I came here for—get Strutter. Lead the way."

"You can't get out of here," Boodu spat as they exited the cell. Through the hole in the ceiling, they heard the Alouette's roar as it left the ground. "The main gate is shut, and mortars won't break it—I know, I attacked this place during the war. You need a tank. And you don't have one."

“Let me worry about that,” said Eddie. He prodded him again, far from gently, with the machete’s point. “Come on, shift your arse.”

Making an angry sound, Boodu stepped over the rubble littering the floor and moved down the passage, Eddie a few paces behind. Another explosion outside: a secondary detonation, one of the vehicles inside the compound. There would be a last round of shelling, then after that everything depended on getting the main gate open . . .

Frantic yelling and thumping came from a cell as they passed it, a man inside begging in the Shona language. Eddie checked the door, but it needed a key. Shit! He should have taken the set from the dead guard—

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