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PROLOGUE

The Rescue

Three Years Ago
41°13′N, 111°57′W
Ogden, Utah

Ogden's a great town if you like hiking and mountain biking and skiing." Doug Case gripped the broken armrests of his secondhand wheelchair and pretended they were ski poles. "That's what I'm doing here, since you ask. How'd you happen to track me down? I wiped my names from the VA computers."

Paul Janson said, "When it all goes to hell, people go home."

"The place where they have to take you in? Not me. I'm not asking any favors."

"I don't see you getting any, either."

Case's home was the mouth of an abandoned railroad tunnel with a view of a garbage-littered empty lot, a burned-out Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the snowy Wasatch Mountains. He hunched

in his chair with a frayed backpack on his lap, stringy hair down to his shoulders, and a week of beard on his face. His dull gaze flickered occasionally toward four muscular teenage gangbangers who were eyeing them from a Honda parked beside the KFC.

Paul Janson sat on an upended grocery cart. He wore lightweight assault boots and wool trousers, a sweater, and a loose black ski shell.

"Kill me and get it over with," Case told him. "I don't feel like playing games."

"I'm not here to kill you."

"Just do it! Don't worry; I won't defend myself." He shifted the pack on his lap.

Janson said, "You are assuming that I still work for Consular Operations."

"Nobody quits Cons Ops."

"We have an arrangement. I went private. Corporate security consulting. Cons Ops calls me now and then. Now and then I call back."

"You never were one to burn bridges," Case conceded. "You work alone?"

"I have someone to bring along if I need a sniper."

"Good?"

"As good as I've ever seen."

"Where from?" Case asked, wondering who of that caliber Janson had recruited.

"Top of the talent pool," was all Janson would reveal.

"Why'd you quit Cons Ops?"

"I woke up one morning remembering all the people I killed for the wrong reasons."

Case laughed. "For Christ's sake, Paul! The State Department can't have covert operators *deciding* who to kill. When you have to

kill somebody to do the job you kill him. That's why they're called sanctioned in-field killings."

"Sanctioned *serial* killings was more like the truth. I lay in bed counting them up. Those I should have. Those I shouldn't have."

"How many in total? Shoulds and shouldn'ts."

"Forty-six."

"I'll be damned. I edged you out."

"Forty-six *confirmed*," Janson shot back.

Case smiled. "I see your testosterone hasn't passed its sell-by date." He looked Janson up and down. The son of a bitch hadn't aged. Paul Janson still looked thirtysomething, fortysomething, fifty. Who knew with his close-cropped hair a neutral iron-gray color? And he still looked like somebody you wouldn't look at twice. Unless you were another professional, and then, if you were really, really good, you'd look twice and see the shoulders under the jacket and the watchful eyes and by then it might be too late.

Janson said, "We have company."

The gangbangers were strutting toward them.

"I've got 'em," said Case. "You got lunch." The empty Sonic burger bags were neatly folded under one of his wheels. Doug Case let them get within ten meters before he said, "Gentlemen, I'm offering one free lesson in survival. A survivor never gets in the wrong fight. Turn around and go away."

Three of them puffed up. But their leader, the smallest, shot an appraising glance at Case and another at Janson and said, "We're outta here."

"The guy's in a fuckin' wheelchair."

The leader punched the dissenter hard in the ear and herded them away. "Hey, kid!" Case shouted after him. "You got what it takes. Join the Army. They'll teach you what to do with it." He grinned at Janson. "Don't you love raw talent?"

"I do," said Janson, and called in a voice accustomed to obedience, "Come here!" The kid came, light on his feet, wary as a stray. Janson gave him a business card. "Join the Army. Call me when you make buck sergeant."

"What's that?"

"A rung up the ladder that says you're going places."

Janson waited until the Honda squealed away on smoking tires. "I remembered something else. I remembered every idea I used to believe that I turned my back on."

"You could use a dose of amnesia."

"There's none available."

Case laughed, again. "Remember when that happened to an operator? Forgot everything. Woke up beating the crap out of people. Couldn't remember how he learned close combat. What the hell was his name? . . . I can't remember. Neither could he. Unlike you; you remember everything. Okay, Paul, if you're not here to kill me, what are you doing in fucking Ogden?"

"Telling the truth about what I did is pointless if I don't atone."

"Atone? What? Like an AA drunk apologizing to people he was mean to?"

"I can't change what I did, but I can pay back the next guy."

"Why not just buy a pardon from the pope?"

The sarcasm button didn't work. Janson was deaf to it. He said, "You take the skills of observation we learned and turn them into yourself, it's not a pretty sight."

"Saul on the road to Damascus discovers his moral compass and changes his name to Paul? But you already are Paul. What are you going to change? The world?"

"I am going to do my best to save every covert government operator whose life was wrecked by his covert service. Guys like you and me."

"Leave me out of this."

"Can't."

"What do you mean?"

"You're my first project."

"A million people hold top-secret clearances. If one in a hundred work undercover that's ten thousand covert agents you could save. Why me?"

"Some people say you were the worst."

Case returned a bitter smile. "Some said I was the *best*."

"Fact is, *we* were the worst."

"I don't need saving."

"You're living outdoors. Winter is coming. You're hooked on Percocet and the docs have cut you off. When this month's prescription runs out you'll be scrambling to find it on the street."

"Paul Janson's famously accurate research?"

"You'll be dead by Valentine's Day."

"Janson's renowned discerning analytic tradecraft?"

"You need saving."

"I don't want saving. Get out of here. Leave me alone."

"I've got a van with a ramp."

Doug Case's pale, grizzled cheeks flamed angry red. "You got a van with a ramp? *You got a van with a ramp?* You got shooters in the van gonna help you wrestle me up your fucking ramp?"

An awkward smile tightened Janson's face. For the first time since appearing at the mouth of Doug Case's railroad tunnel, he looked unsure. The man they called The Machine was suddenly vulnerable, and Doug Case pressed his attack.

"You're falling down on the planning end, fella. No assaulters in the van. No rehearsal. No quick-reaction force backup. No contingency. You're kind of, sort of, fumbling on impulse. Should have gone about this the way you'd plan a Cons Ops job. Tortured soul

muddles toward atonement? And you're going to get *me* straightened out?"

"More than straightened out. We're going to put you back together with a life."

"With a *life*? So first you'll get me off the Perc? Then you'll have shrinks fix my head? And when the docs get through you'll find me a career that will employ my considerable talents? Go to hell."

"You will be made whole."

"Maybe even find me a girl?"

"If you want one, you'll be whole enough to find one on your own."

"Jesus, Paul, you're as wired and freaked out as I am. Who in your mental wilderness do you imagine would pay for this fantasy?"

Janson said, "On my last job someone deposited a ton of money in my overseas accounts to make it seem I turned traitor. That someone no longer exists. Money will not be an issue."

"If you ever do rope some poor fool into your pipe dream, you'll need more than money. You'll need help. Lots of it. You'll need a staff. Hell, you'll need an entire company."

Again Janson looked unsure. "I don't know about that. I've had it with companies. I've had it with institutions. I've stopped trusting any more than two people in one room."

"Poor, tormented Paul. Trying to make everything right by saving the worst guy you know, single-handed? What are you going to call this outfit? The Paul Janson Institute for Raising Fucked-up Former Field Agents Out of Deep Shit? No, keep it simple: the Phoenix Foundation."

Janson stood up. "Let's go, my friend."

"This guy ain't going anywhere. And I'm not your friend."

"Maybe not," Janson agreed. "But we've worked together and I could be sitting where you are, so we are brothers."

"Brothers? Is your halo pinching?" Doug Case shook his head, scratched an armpit, and covered his face with his dirty hands. After a while, he lowered his left hand and spoke through the fingers of his right. "They called you 'The Machine.' Remember? Some operators they call an animal. Some a machine. A machine usually beats an animal. But not always."

In a blur of coordinated movement drilled ten thousand times, Case's left hand flashed from his knapsack, pinching the barrel of a Glock 34 9mm automatic between thumb and forefinger. His right hand closed around the butt, forefinger curling into the trigger guard, and his left pulled back the slide, loading a round into the chamber and cocking the pistol with the speed of liquid flame.

Janson kicked it from his hand.

"Fuck!"

Doug Case rubbed his wrist where Janson's boot had connected. Should have remembered that Cons Ops combat instructors, the best in the world, had a saying: Lightning fast, nano fast, Janson fast.

Janson scooped up the gun. He was suddenly grinning ear to ear, optimistic, full of hope, and absolutely convinced he could fix what was broken. "I see you're not completely screwed up."

"What gives you that idea?"

Janson tapped the Glock. "You replaced the crappy factory sights with ghost rings."

He removed the magazine and pocketed it, removed the round from the chamber, snapped the knapsack off Case's lap, removed two spare magazines from a side pocket, pulled a third from the waistband of his sweatpants, and handed the empty gun back to Doug Case.

"When do I get the rest of it?"

"Graduation Day."

PART ONE

The Mother of All Reserves

Now

1°19′N, 7°43′E

Gulf of Guinea, 260 miles south of Nigeria, 180 miles west of Gabon

ONE

Vegas Rules," said Janet Hatfield, captain of the *Amber Dawn*. Her three-thousand-ton offshore service vessel was running up the Gulf of Guinea on a black night, pitching and rolling in following seas. Her voice rang with quiet authority in the near silence of the darkened pilothouse. "What you saw on *Amber Dawn* stays on *Amber Dawn*."

"You already swore me to Vegas Rules when we sailed from Nigeria."

"I'm not kidding, Terry. If the company finds out I snuck you aboard, they'll fire my ass."

"And a lovely ass it is," said Terrence Flannigan, MD, nomadic corporate physician, globetrotting womanizer, world-class snake. He raised his right hand and gave Janet Hatfield a sleepy-eyed grin. "Okay. I swear, again, to keep my mouth shut about *Amber Dawn*, about oil in general and deepwater petroleum exploration in particular, cross my heart and hope to die."

The captain, a solidly built blonde of thirty-five, turned her back on the snake and ran an uneasy eye over her radar. For the past several minutes the screen had been throwing out a ghost target. The mystery pinprick of light fading and reappearing was too dull to be another ship yet bright enough to make her wonder what the heck was out there. The radar was a reliable unit, a late-model Furuno. But she had the lives of twelve people in her care: five Filipino crew, six American petroleum scientists, and one stowaway. Thirteen, if she counted herself, which she tended not to.

Was the hot spot only sea clutter? Or an empty oil drum bobbing in the heavy seas, topping crests, hiding in troughs? Or was it something bigger, like an unreported, half-sunken hulk that she did not want to run into at fifteen knots?

It glowed again, closer, as if it was not merely drifting but moving toward her. She fiddled the radar, playing with range and resolution. Otherwise, the sea looked empty, except for some large oil tankers a safe twenty miles to the west. A single land target at the top of the screen marked the summit of Pico Clarence, the six-thousand-foot volcanic mountain at the center of Isle de Foree, tonight's destination. " 'Foree' rhymes with 'moray,' " she told visiting company brass new to the Gulf of Guinea oil patch. "Like the eel with the teeth."

She glanced at her other instruments. Compass, autopilot, and a wide panel of gauges monitoring the diesel generators that powered the twin three-thousand-horsepower electric Z-drive thrusters all gave her normal readings. She stared intently at the night-blackened bridge windows. She grabbed her night-vision monocular, shouldered open a heavy, watertight door, and stepped out onto the stubby bridge wing into equatorial heat, humidity she could slice with a knife, and the brain-numbing roar of the generators.

The southwest monsoon was blowing from behind, swirling

diesel smoke around the house. The following seas had gathered ponderous momentum rolling three thousand miles up the African coast from Cape Town. They lifted the ship's stern and plunged her bow nearly to the foredeck. The heat and humidity had the captain sweating in seconds.

Her night-vision device was an eighteen-hundred-dollar birthday splurge to herself to help spot navigation buoys and small craft. It did not magnify, but it pierced the dark dramatically. She glassed the sea ahead. The 2-gen image intensifier displayed everything green. Nothing but whitecaps swirling like lime chiffon. Probably just a barrel. She retreated back into the cool quiet of the air-conditioning. The red glow of the instruments reflected in Flannigan's come-here smile.

"Don't even think about it," she warned him.

"I am merely offering to express my gratitude."

"In four hours you can express your gratitude to the ladies of Porto Clarence's massage parlors."

Low-rent Eastern European and Chinese cruise ships had discovered the capital city. A mix of poverty, an embattled dictator desperate for cash, and the legendary beauty of Isle de Foreens' West African and Portuguese bloodlines had sex tourism booming in the old colonial deepwater port.

Terry paced the pilothouse. "I've been company physician on enough oil jobs to know to keep my trap shut. But this voyage is the most secret I've ever seen."

"Stop saying that."

"You spent the week towing hydrophone streamers and air guns. When was the last time your OSV was Rube Goldberged into a seismic vessel?"

"Last month." Janet Hatfield kicked herself the instant she admitted it.

Terry laughed. "The 'captain's curse.' You love your boat too much to keep a secret. This isn't the first time? Are you kidding? She's an offshore service vessel, not an oil hunter. What is going on?"

"Forget I said that. I shouldn't have—so it's weird. So what? When the company makes me vice president of marine services, I'll ask why. Till then, I'll drive the boat. Now shut up about it. Jeezus, I should have left you in Nigeria."

"I'd be dead."

"Roger that," Janet Hatfield agreed. It was easier than ever to die in the oil-soaked Niger Delta. Militants kidnapped petroleum workers right off their rigs, drunken soldiers strafed their own checkpoints, and fanatics rampaged in the name of Jesus and Mohammed. But catnip-to-women Dr. Terry had come close to getting killed the old-fashioned way: a jealous husband with a machete, a rich chief, no less, with the political connections to get away with hacking up the wife poacher.

"Janet, where did we go wrong?" Terry asked with another soulful smile.

"Our relationship collapsed under its own lack of weight."

He made a better friend than lover. As a boyfriend he was treacherous, head over heels in love with himself. But as a friend Terry Flannigan had something steady deep inside that said he would take a bullet for you. Which was why Janet Hatfield had not hesitated to bundle him aboard before the angry husband killed him. For ten days she had hidden him from the crew in her cabin, "airing" him when it was her watch.

The bridge and her attached cabin stood in splendid isolation atop a four-story deckhouse near the front of the ship. Under it were crew cabins, mess and galley, and the lounge that the petrologists had taken over as their computer and radio room. The

scientists had declared it off-limits to the crew. They even told her that the captain had to ask permission to enter. Janet Hatfield had informed them that she had no plan to enter unless it caught fire, in which case she would not knock first.

"You know what the petrologists are doing now?"

Terry was staring out the back windows, which looked down on the hundred-foot-long, low and flat cargo deck, empty tonight but for the OSV's towing windlass, deck crane, and capstans.

"Get away from the window before they see you."

"They're throwing stuff overboard."

"What they're doing is their business."

"One of them is crawling around with a flashlight— Oh, he dropped something."

"What are they throwing?" she asked in spite of herself.

"Computers."

* * *

Belowdecks, jubilant petrologists peeled off their sweat-soaked shirts and did a victory dance in the now-empty computer room. They had worked 24-7 for ten days, trapped on a boat where possession of booze or drugs or even a bottle of beer would get you banned from the oil business for life. Now they were headed for a well-earned party in the brothels of Porto Clarence, having successfully uploaded multiple terabytes of the hottest 3-D seismic data on the planet.

The data acquisition was done, the client's seismic model refined, the success of what oilmen called an elephant hunt confirmed beyond any doubt. The client had acknowledged receipt of the densely encrypted satellite transmissions and ordered them to throw the computers into the sea. Every laptop, desktop, even the

fifty-thousand-dollar subsurface-modeling workstation that took two men to lift over the side of the ship. The monitors went, too, so no one would see them and ask what they were for, as did the hydrophones and air guns and their mil-spec satellite transmitter.

In a few more hours the petrologists would celebrate the discovery of the "mother of all reserves"—billions and billions of barrels of oil and trillions upon trillions of cubic feet of natural gas that would transform Isle de Foree from a remote plantation island trickling oil through a neglected infrastructure into a West African Saudi Arabia.

* * *

"Hey, Janet. How many dinosaurs died to make the oil patch?"

"Algae. Not dinosaurs."

Terry Flannigan stared at the dark ahead of the boat. The big secret could only be about oil. The water was miles deep here, but if you took the long view in eons, eras, and epochs, the seabed was actually an extension of the shallow African coast. For more years than there were stars in the sky, the Niger River had been dumping sediment into the Atlantic Ocean. This slurry of mud, sand, and dead plants and animals had filled the troughs, rifts, and clefts of the Atlantic and had kept spilling across the continental slope into the deep and continued seaward, drifting, filling. A lady petrologist once told him that the compacted fill was eight miles deep.

"What did dinosaurs make? Coal?"

"Trees made coal," Janet Hatfield answered distractedly, her eyes locking on the radar. She switched on the powerful docking lamps. They lit a brilliant hundred-yard circle around the OSV. "Oh, shit!"

"What?"

An eighteen-foot rigid inflatable boat driven by enormous Mercury outboards swooped out of the dark bristling with assault rifles and rocket launchers. Janet Hatfield reacted quickly, grabbing the helm to override the autopilot. The RIB was struggling in the heavy seas. Maybe she could outrun them. She turned *Amber Dawn*'s heels to it, locked the new course, rammed her throttles full ahead, and yanked her radio microphone down from the ceiling.

"Mayday, Mayday. Mayday. This is *Amber Dawn, Amber Dawn, Amber Dawn*. One-degree, nineteen minutes north. Seven-degrees, forty-three minutes east.

"One-degree, nineteen minutes north. Seven, forty-three east. One-degree, nineteen minutes north," she repeated her position. "Seven-degrees, forty-three minutes east." They couldn't help if they couldn't find her.

"Pirates boarding *Amber Dawn*. Pirates boarding *Amber Dawn*. One-degree, nineteen minutes north. Seven-degrees, forty-three minutes east."

There was never a guarantee that anyone was listening. But the 406 MHz satellite EPIRB, which was out on the bridge wing in its float-free bracket, would broadcast her position continuously in case of sinking. She pushed through the door again to switch it on manually.

The inflatable was so close she could see eight soldiers dressed in camouflage. *Jungle camouflage on a boat?*

They had to be from Isle de Foree, she thought, the only land within the inflatable's range. But they couldn't be government troops in that little commando boat. Free Foree Movement rebels? Pirates or rebels, what did they want? The only thing valuable on an offshore service vessel was the crew. To hold hostage or for ransom. So they wouldn't kill her people. At least, not yet.

Muzzle flashes lit the inflatable like a Christmas tree and all the

windows in *Amber Dawn*'s bridge shattered at once. Janet Hatfield felt something tug hard in her belly. Her legs skidded out from under her. She pitched backward into Terry's arms and she almost laughed, "You never stop trying, do you?" except she couldn't speak and was suddenly afraid.

* * *

A CARGO NET edged with grappling hooks cleared the low side of *Amber Dawn*'s main deck, clanged onto steel fittings, and held fast. Seven FFM insurgents scrambled aboard with their assault rifles, leaving their rocket launchers with one man in their boat. They were lean, fit, hard-faced fighters with the distinctive café-au-lait coloring of Isle de Foreens. But they took their orders from a broad-shouldered South African mercenary named Hadrian Van Pelt.

Van Pelt carried a copy of *Amber Dawn*'s crew list.

He sent two men to the engine room. Bursts of automatic fire echoed up from below and the generators fell silent, but for one powering the lights. The men stayed below opening sea cocks. Seawater poured in.

Two others kicked open the door to the improvised computer room. Van Pelt followed with the crew list. "Over there! Against the wall."

The petrologists, shirtless and terrified, backed against the wall, exchanging looks of disbelief.

Van Pelt counted heads. "Five!" he shouted. "Who's missing?"

Eyes flickered toward a closet. Van Pelt nodded at one of his men, who triggered a short burst, shredding the door. The ship rolled and the body of the scientist hiding there tumbled out. Van Pelt nodded again and his men executed the rest.

A burst of gunfire from the quarters on the levels above spoke

the end of *Amber Dawn*'s Filipino crew. Eleven down. Only the captain to go. Van Pelt drew his pistol and climbed the stairs to the bridge. The door was locked and made of steel. He signaled a soldier, who duct-taped a chunk of C-4 onto it. They sheltered halfway down the steps and covered their ears. The plastic explosive blew the door open with a loud bang and Van Pelt vaulted through it.

To the mercenary's surprise, the captain was not alone. She was sprawled on the deck, a pretty blonde in blood-soaked slacks and blouse. A man was kneeling over her, working with the sure-handed economy of a battlefield medic.

Van Pelt raised his pistol. "Are you a doctor?"

Terry Flannigan was holding death in his hands, and when he looked up from Janet's riddled chest to the gunman standing in the door he was staring death in the face.

"What kind of doctor?" the gunman demanded.

"Trauma surgeon, you asshole. What does it look like?"

"Come with me."

"I can't leave her. She's dying."

Van Pelt stepped closer and shot Janet Hatfield in the head. "Not anymore. Get in the boat."