

FROM THE CREATOR OF
JASON BOURNE



ROBERT LUDLUM'S™
THE
JANSON
OPTION

A NEW NOVEL BY **PAUL GARRISON**

**ROBERT
LUDLUM'S™**

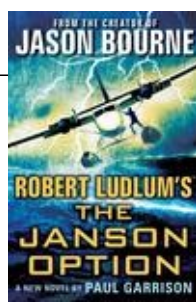
**THE
JANSON
OPTION**

PAUL GARRISON



**GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING**

NEW YORK BOSTON



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*For AMBER EDWARDS
and
LUCKY
Our “Present Friend”*

PROLOGUE

Exfiltration

Last Year

30°8' N, 9°30' E

Tunisian Border near Ghadamis

395 Miles South of Tripoli

Checkpoint,” said Janson.

Two Toyota pickups, angled nose to nose a mile ahead. The narrow oiled road, a service track for a string of high-tension power lines, was banked six or eight feet above the rolling desert. A tracked combat vehicle and a trained driver might get around it. A stolen taxi with an amateur at the wheel didn't have a hope.

“Government or rebel?” asked Kincaid. She sat in back with a dented Leica slung from her neck.

Janson, sitting in front to calm the driver, scoped the pickups with an eight-power monocular lens. Civilians caught between loyalists and rebels clogged the roads to the border, so he had directed the taxi farther south through hot, windblown land edged by rock ridges and speckled with the pyramid silhouettes of camels grazing on thin groundcover.

He steadied the instrument with two hands. “Black mercenaries...bullpup assault rifles...truck on the left is towing a Type 63 rocket launcher.”

Kincaid hid their rebel pass under the driver's seat and handed Janson government-issued business visas sponsored by a Tripoli importer of irrigation pumps for the Great Man-Made River Project Authority. Young and fit, she wore a scarf over her short brown hair, loose cargo pants, and a baggy, sweat-stained long-sleeved shirt. Her papers said she worked for the publicity department of the Infrastructure and Minerals unit of KBR. She sat still as ice.

Janson's visa named him a hydraulic engineering manager with the same unit. He was older than Kincaid, a nondescript man with iron-gray, close-cropped hair. Faint lines of scar tissue on his hands and face and a hint of bulk under his loose shirt suggested a career ladder that had started at the bottom as an oil-patch roughneck slogging through night school. He was as calm as the woman in the backseat, almost serene.

“We'll get through this fine,” he told the driver. “Just take it easy.”

It was clear to the driver that neither American understood the danger. African mercenaries were trigger-happy in the best of times. They'd be better off facing rebels who were anxious to look good on CNN. The government's foreign soldiers did not care what the world thought; their backs were to the wall, and for them it was win or die.

Worse, the officer commanding the checkpoint wore the insignia of the 32nd Brigade, the infamous

Deterrent Battalion. He was not about to “join the people’s struggle.” Not only did he enjoy elite status, he knew that rich rewards awaited the officer who captured the dictator’s turncoat son. If the traitor was lucky enough to be caught by the rebels instead of the loyalists, they might preserve him as a hostage. The loyalists would kill him, and whoever delivered the traitor’s head to his father would receive a medal and a villa in the best neighborhood.

The soldiers raised their rifles.

“Slow down,” said Janson. “Keep both hands on the wheel.” He laid his own hands in full view of the dashboard, papers under his left. Kincaid gripped the back of the driver’s seat with hers.

The driver, a bare-headed man in his thirties dressed in fake designer jeans and a shabby white shirt—the costume of North Africa’s disaffected hordes of overeducated underemployed—felt an overwhelming impulse to stomp on the accelerator and run down the soldiers. If he stopped, the best they could hope for was the mercenaries would rough them up and tear the car apart. God help the woman if the officer let them at her. Would it not be better to take a chance and put their fate in the hands of Allah?

“Slow down,” Janson repeated. “Do not provoke them.”

Everything he and Kincaid had encountered trying to cross the border—fear-crazed civilians, jumped mercenaries, roving rebel units—indicated that the revolution had tumbled into chaos. No surprise after forty years of rule by a psychotic. But the fact that the loyalists were utterly distracted by a manhunt to catch one foolish traitor took the cake.

The psychotic dictator, the self-named “Lion of the Desert,” had spawned eight sons. Four of them—the playboy, the Army commander, the family’s oil-company director, and the transport minister—were national figures seen regularly on state TV and feted abroad in Rome and Paris. Another, who had become an obscure imam in a remote province, had disappeared behind a priestly beard; and the gay one who had fled to Milan hadn’t been seen in years. The same was true of the youngest son, Yousef—“The Cub”—who had studied computer science in the United States.

The Cub’s face was not familiar, his photograph never published. The best intelligence confirmed that he had won trust from his father that his brothers never had because he had modernized internal security to control cell-phone communication and Internet access. Twitter and Facebook were indulged at the Lion’s pleasure. He could shut them down with a word.

Hope that Yousef would steer the old despot in enlightened directions had been shattered in the first bloody days of the revolt when the Lion vowed to fight to the death. The Army was fragmenting, his cabinet resigning, and murderous civil war was certain. The political standoff and the threat of NATO bombing had even some loyalists whispering for the old man’s ouster.

Yousef had panicked, fearing prosecution for war crimes. Then Italy offered an out. Trying to stop the slaughter, and positioning herself as a savior of the oil-state’s business elite, Italy promised asylum. Like everything else in the conflict, it had come too late. Before Yousef could surrender, the fighting turned chaotic. He was on the run, last seen in the oasis town of Ghadamis.

“*Slow down!*” Janson repeated, hard as a round racked into a chamber. The driver took his foot off the gas, convinced that if he tried to run the checkpoint, Janson would kill him before the soldiers could fire their rifles.

* * *

THE SOLDIERS GESTURED them out of the car. The Deterrent Battalion officer glanced at their papers. “Open the trunk.”

“No key,” said the driver.

“Shoot the lock.” The mercenaries aimed casually in the general direction of the lock, fired a dozen rounds, then aimed carefully as one stood to the side and tipped the lid up with the barrel of his rifle.

The trunk held a bullet-riddled spare tire and a bright green Libya national soccer bag. The officer opened it. His eyes widened. He plunged his hand inside and withdrew a banded stack of hundred-euro bills. “Is this yours?”

Janson said, “No. I had no idea it was in there. Perhaps you could take charge of it.”

The officer gestured, and a soldier sprayed the taxi’s hood with a crescent of green paint. “Go. If you run into any more checkpoints, that will get you through. Sorry for the inconvenience. Tell the world you were treated decently.”

The officer cuffed the driver on the back of his head and kicked his leg, herding him back to the car. The driver stiffened at the insult. Janson shoved him behind the wheel. Kincaid called to the officer. “May I take your photograph, please?”

An engaging smile warmed her face. The officer squared his shoulders for her camera, wondering how he had missed at first glance that she was an unusually attractive woman.

Janson walked unhurriedly around the front of the taxi, climbed in, and said, “Drive. Before they change their mind.”

The driver stomped the accelerator and the old taxi rolled away.

* * *

THE GREEN SPRAY-PAINT pass and a hundred-euro bribe got them across the border.

Tunisian authorities, overwhelmed with refugees desperate for food, water, and shelter, waved them on to the airport. A twin-engine Embraer Legacy 650 landed. The long-haul executive jet was owned by Catspaw Associates—Janson’s corporate-security consultant outfit of independent contractors, linked 24/7 by Internet and secure phone into an ethereal amalgam of freelance researchers, IT specialists, and field agents.

Janson and Kincaid helped their pilots unload tents, blankets, and bottled water. Fifteen minutes after the plane touched down, its big Rolls-Royce engines hurled it back into the sky carrying Paul Janson, Jessica Kincaid, and the dictator’s son Yousef dressed like an overeducated, underemployed North African taxi driver.

PART ONE

“Who Governs Here?”

ONE

Now, One Year Later

5° S, 52°50' E

Indian Ocean, 700 Miles off the East African Coast

En Route: Mahé, Seychelles Islands, to Mombasa, Kenya

The superyacht *Tarantula* was making eighteen knots between the Seychelles Islands and Mombasa. Built on a Kortenaer-class frigate's hull, she had a warship's profile—a high bow, a clean sweep to the low stern—and a strikingly graceful superstructure by Parisian designer Jacques Thomas, famous for resurrecting the fluid curves of the Art Nouveau in bent glass and carbon-fiber-reinforced epoxy. She was pointing west, burnished bright and shining by the sunset. Seen from a low-slung skiff racing full out on a course to intercept, *Tarantula* appeared to skim the surface of the Indian Ocean like a fierce dragonfly.

A crew of twenty men and women attended the fully automated ship, her middle-aged owner, Allegra Adler, and Adler's guests. She carried two helicopters—each painted gold with Adler's initials emblazoned red on its tail boom—a ten-place Sikorsky S-76D on a pad amidships and a light-turbine five-place Bell Ranger on the foredeck. Two twenty-passenger high-speed tenders were cradled at the stern in a well deck, which was a bay that could be flooded in order to launch the boats. Also sharing the well deck was a fifty-three-foot blue-water sloop, an ocean-passage Nautor Swan that would make a millionaire proud.

Night was falling quickly, as it did so near the equator. Five of Adler's guests—a former fashion model, a retired United Nations diplomat and his wife, and a New York real estate agent and his husband—gathered for cocktails to watch the sun set from a forward lounge under the steering bridge.

The sixth, Allegra Helms, a thirty-year-old Italian countess with pale blue eyes and long blond hair, joined their host on the bridge itself—a spacious, glass-enclosed aerie with views in four directions over the darkening sea. Adler was trying to impress her by driving the yacht. To demolish his expectation of a hookup, she had packed an outfit that her mother would have bought from Valentino's resort collection—monastically simple high-waisted white linen yachting slacks with a boat-neck blouse and an Hermès scarf, screen-printed with her family device in a pattern so minute that only a cousin or an ancient enemy would recognize it.

A round German stewardess in a short, tight skirt brought a tray of marinated shrimp and scallops. She returned with a Champagne bucket, opened a bottle of Cristal with quiet efficiency, and poured two glasses.

“That's all,” Adler said patting her behind. “Outta here. You too, Captain Billy,” he told the officer watching the instrument cluster that surrounded the auto-helm.

Allegra Helms was kicking herself for accepting a last-minute invitation from a man she had known only through a mutual acquaintance. Now she was trapped in the middle of the ocean on a boat full

boring strangers. She could dodge the other guests, but there was no escaping their host, who would not shut up about his money and his fucking yacht.

“Biggest in the world—460 feet, 3,550 tons—and I had her teched-up so I can drive her with a smart-phone app.” Adler swigged Champagne, indicating with a nod that Allegra should help herself and resumed his monologue with a joke she had heard twice at dinner the night they sailed. “I don’t know what I’m paying the captain for.”

An alarm sounded a staccato chirp. Allegra saw the captain’s eyes shoot to the radar monitor, and she noticed an orange dot flare briefly. Adler brushed past him and flipped a switch to mute the noise that was interrupting his delivery.

“I can run this baby from the middle of Kansas. Captain Billy, what am I paying you for?”

Allegra glanced at the captain, a sun-polished symphony of curly chestnut hair and Viking cheekbones—speaking of hookups, if she were considering one, which she was not. Not with her husband meeting her in Mombasa. And never, ever, when trapped on a boat.

“You *could* run her from the middle of Kansas,” Billy Titus answered with an affable smile as he fiddled the radar’s controls. “You pay me so you don’t have to.”

Allegra laughed.

Adler glared. “Fact is I pay him a bonus to save on fuel, and I fine him when he wastes it. Isn’t that right, Captain Billy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go grab a bite. The countess and I will run the ship.”

“Keep an eye on the radar.”

“Get out of here.”

“I mean it, sir. If you see pirates before they get too close, we can cut in the turbines and get the heck away.”

“I guarantee you that no pirates will bother me. Go get something to eat and leave us alone. I’ll call you back when I need you.”

“The hunting season just started, Mr. Adler. The monsoon’s over, and the water is calm enough for small boats.”

“Go, goddammit! *Now!*”

Captain Titus took his time checking the radar once again, before he turned on his heel and left the bridge.

Alone with Allegra, Adler said, “My captain is a regular comedian.”

“*Che buona figura.*”

“What does that mean?”

“It means...He has a great image—handsome—and you could also count on him to do the right thing.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It would be hard for you to understand. It means he’s a gentleman.”

Adler heard the challenge and threw it back at her. “You saw me grab that girl’s ass. You think there’s something wrong with that?”

She turned her back on him and studied the radar screen, which showed an empty sea in every direction. Adler was more alert than she had thought, and she wondered idly whether he used his crudeness to confuse business rivals into underestimating him.

Adler said, “She’d be disappointed if I didn’t grab her ass. She’d think I was mad at her.”

When Allegra still remained silent, Adler demanded, “What do you think?”

She was thinking about her husband, who was currently rooting around East Africa like a truffle pig on his incessant hunt for oil and gas concessions. It would be nice to have him around if Adler became any more of a pain.

“I think you remind me of my father.”

Adler’s face hardened. “I’m not old enough to be your father. I’m forty-eight.”

He was fifty-eight, she knew for a fact—though remarkably fit and still handsome, with looks that would age well. She said, “My father gropes the servants too.”

“Oh yeah? What does your mother think of that?”

“We’ve never discussed it.”

Adler blinked. Then he switched tactics, though not his manner. “How much money does your husband make running American Synergy?”

“He doesn’t run all of ASC. He’s president of the Petroleum Division.”

“The Petroleum Division is their number-one profit center. What do they pay him to run it?”

“I haven’t the vaguest idea.”

That stopped him again, though only a moment. “You don’t care?”

“I’d rather feel young than rich.”

Adler winced, as she hoped he would. But it didn’t shut him up. “How long do you think that will last?” he shot back.

“How can you guarantee that pirates won’t attack us?”

“I cut a deal with Bashir Mohamed. Bashir’s ‘king’ of Somalia’s pirates. He gave me a pass for protection. No one will attack my yacht.”

“How can he guarantee other pirates won’t attack?”

“They’re afraid of him. He’s organized them. Anyone gets independent, he turns them over to the UN’s African Union Army, or the Combined Maritime Force. They include the Chinese and Russians who play a lot rougher than the US and EU. Or he pays somebody to kill them. Piracy is the same as any business: you make money by controlling the market, and you control the market by clearing out independents.”

“What did you offer Bashir Mohamed in return?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

At last, she thought, Adler was becoming interesting. Allegra smiled a smile that warmed her pale eyes. She ran her fingers through her hair. “You must tell me,” she said. A beguiling hint of an Italian accent lent music to her fluent English. “You’ve made an interesting story.”

“Do you know anything about New York?”

“I was sent to school there, as a girl.”

“Where?”

“Nightingale-Bamford.”

“OK. That explains a few things.”

“Like what?”

“You act less like a countess than a New York rich kid.”

“So what did you offer Bashir Mohamed?”

“I sit on the boards of private schools like Nightingale. Not theirs, but others. In exchange for *Tarantula*’s safe passage, Bashir Mohamed’s firstborn son has a spot guaranteed in preschool. I swear that’s the truth. That’s all it took. He’s dreaming preschool to prep school to Harvard.”

Allegra Helms laughed. “Well done, Mr. Adler.”

“I keep telling you, call me Allen.”

“Whatever you say, Allen.”

“Now you tell me something. Why’d you accept my invite to come on this cruise?”

“As I told you. I just finished a job in the Seychelles. I was ready to leave.”

“Appraising antiques?”

Tiring of his attitude, Allegra Helms answered with a dismissive gesture that reduced his lavish yacht to a commodity. “Men who’ve made money recently need to be assured that a copy of a Holbein portrait was painted by the master’s protégé instead of a master forger.”

“Maybe I should hire you to vet my paintings.”

Allegra shrugged. In the tight-knit world of high art, it was known that Adler was advised by young women who spent baskets of his money on nothing particularly interesting. Surprise, surprise. “When you invited me, I thought my husband might join me in Mombasa for a little get-together. We’ve both been traveling, for a while.”

Adler laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“I have never seen a ‘trial separation’ that didn’t work.”

Stung, and annoyed with herself that she had revealed too much to Adler, Allegra Helms said, “It wasn’t exactly a separation—No, that’s not true. It *is* a trial separation, and it is working very well. I am very much looking forward to reuniting with my husband in Mombasa.” She could hardly believe her ears, but there, she had said it. Out loud and in front of a witness.

“You look surprised,” Adler said.

“I am,” she said with a smile and a shiver of happiness she had not felt in a long time. “But you shouldn’t be surprised, should I? He is still the man I wanted ten years ago. He is handsome. He is decisive. And I like that he is self-made. It gives him a sureness that is deep because he earned it.”

“A *macher*, like me,” Adler cracked. “I earned mine, too.”

It struck Allegra that in one way Adler *was* like Kingsman—a man convinced that he deserved whatever he wanted *because* he wanted it. That was a reminder not to go overboard hoping for more for their marriage than could happen on a short visit in Mombasa. But wasn’t it still worth a try? And still worth hoping?

Adler said, “Why don’t I pinch-hit for him till we get to Mombasa?”

“Why don’t you try Monique,” she replied, pulling away. The striking Monique—a favorite Galliano model before Galliano wrecked his career—was an anxious brunette in her forties, near hysterical on the subject of her age, and in the market for a wealthy boyfriend if not a husband. Allegra had learned in the briefest of conversations the first night.

“I prefer countesses to fashion models,” Adler said, moving closer. “I checked out your family, you’re the real deal.”

“Quite clearly,” said Allegra Helms, “you invited Monique along in case it didn’t work out with me. It didn’t and it never will. I am married. I’m going down below now. I’ll send Monique up here.”

“You are a piece of work.” Adler’s laughter was cut off by the astonishingly loud noise of a sustained burst of gunfire. The firing went on and on, the sound of the shots blurring like a jackhammer tearing up a street.

* * *

GREED MAKES MEN BRAVE, thought Maxammed, the pirates’ captain.

Triple pay for the first to board the yacht: an immediate three million Somali shillings—or one hundred American dollars—plus the promise of a Toyota 4Runner after the ransom was paid, sparking

a vicious struggle between two clan brothers vying to climb the ladder they had propped against the low stern of the moving ship.

“Keep going!” Maxammed shouted. He was a tall, wiry Somali of thirty-five, with a high and broad forehead, strong white teeth, and light brown skin, and he leaped with practiced grace on the foredeck of a fiberglass skiff that was bouncing violently in *Tarantula’s* wake. He wore a flak vest, the only pirate so protected, and a bandolier of machine-gun bullets. The bandolier was for the shock effect. His weapon was a magazine-fed SAR 80 assault rifle with the stock chopped so he could wave it in one hand like a pistol.

“Go! Go! Go!”

Inshallah, they wouldn’t shoot each other. He was undermanned already, with only twelve fighters and one of the first-time boys so seasick that he lay paralyzed in the bottom of the skiff, too exhausted to even retch the nonexistent contents of a stomach emptied days ago.

Maxammed saw a shotgun poke over the stern. “*Gun!*”

The pirate who had made it to the top of the ladder first froze. The sailor from the yacht who was pointing the shotgun, a Christian Filipino wearing a silver Jesus cross around his neck, froze also, too gentle to shoot his fellow man even when his life was in danger.

Maxammed triggered his SAR. The sailor tumbled off the boat. Maxammed led the rest of his crew up the ladder onto the yacht and sprinted forward to seize the steering bridge and disable satellite phones, radios, and emergency tracking beacons.

His heavy vest and bandolier slowed him down. It had been a year since he had actually boarded a ship. He had advanced from lowly “action man” to managing from the shore, where the real profits lay in collecting the ransom. But this yacht was a special case.

His men—boys half his age and fired up on dreams of riches they could barely comprehend—raced ahead of him, up a stairway to the bridge. One of them let loose with a deafening burst of his AK-47.

Maxammed tore after them before they accidentally killed valuable hostages, or damaged equipment vital to running the yacht. Taking her was only a start. His battle to keep her had just begun.

The shooting stopped.

He heard women scream.

Bounding up the stairs past a window, he saw one of his men covering rich Europeans in a fancy lounge. He continued up a final flight to the bridge, swaggered into the sharp cold of the air conditioning, and drank in the huge, glassed-in command center. He could see out over the ocean in every direction and forward and back the full length of the yacht. There was a helicopter in front, and a bigger one in the middle—a magnificent Sikorsky—and a swimming pool sparkling like a blue gem.

Farole, his cadaverous second in command, was pointing his weapon at a middle-aged man and a striking blond woman. Maxammed had been shown their photographs, and he recognized his two most valuable hostages: the American who owned the yacht, and the rich Italian countess. Somali women were famous for their extraordinary beauty. There were truly none in Africa—none in the world—more beautiful. But this countess woman would give them a run for their money, even wide-eyed, pale, and trembling.

Maxammed gestured for Farole to move the hostages out of his way and strode over to the ship’s instrument panels to shut down the GPS, radios, radar—any instrument that would send out signals that naval patrols could track. He knew what he was looking for, and it took only moments to unplug the ship from the world it came from. Then he put the engines on manual control and throttled them back so they could haul their skiff aboard.

The middle-aged American took Maxammed for the pirates' leader and turned on him, red-faced with anger. "Do you have any idea who you're fucking with?"

Having grown up in cities, Maxammed spoke several languages: Somali, Italian, and English; and originally from the coast, he could converse in Swahili when he had to deal with Arabs or East African mercenaries. English was his favorite, being riddled with puns and multiple meanings that were tailored made for Somali wordplay. But he had the least occasion to speak it, so it took a moment for the meaning of the angry American's "who you're fucking with" to sink in. When it did, Maxammed grinned with pleasure.

"I am *fucking* with you. You are *flirting*. With death."

"You're the one flirting with death!" the American shouted back. "I paid your pirate king for safe passage."

"Meet the new king," said Maxammed. "Bashir retired."

"I spoke to him yesterday."

"But not today."

"I'll get him on the phone right now." Adler pawed a satellite phone from its clip on his belt.

Maxammed leveled his SAR at the patch of skin between the American's eyebrows. "Not today."

"You going to shoot your richest hostage?" the American shouted.

"I do not need all of you," Maxammed replied. "If your insurance pays only ten percent of the price of your yacht, I will be the richest man in Somalia."

The American raised his hands.

Maxammed shouted orders.

Two of his men herded the rich people he had seen below up to the bridge.

Maxammed looked them over carefully. There were two couples and a single woman. She was tall and dark-haired with arms and legs as thin as sticks. She was the French model. One of the couples was very old, the man frail, the woman hard-faced and haughty. They were the United Nations employees who had retired long ago—not rich, but related by marriage to the rich owner. The other couple was younger, in their fifties, and clutching hands. The woman's arms clanked with bracelets. A band of white skin on the man's suntanned wrist showed where his watch had been; a bulge in his trouser pocket indicated, Maxammed guessed, a hastily hidden gold Rolex.

All of them looked fearful. None would resist.

The rest of his men brought the crew at gunpoint.

Maxammed counted six guests and nineteen crew: chief engineer, first mate, bosun, cook and helpers, deckhands, stewardesses, and helicopter pilot.

"Where is the captain?"

No one spoke.

Maxammed searched their faces and selected the youngest crew member, a yellow-haired girl wearing a white stewardess costume with a short skirt that exposed her thighs. He pressed his gun to her forehead.

"Where is the captain?"

The girl began to weep. Tears streaked her blue eye makeup.

A middle-aged Chinese in a stained cook's uniform spoke for her. "Captain locked in safe room."

"Where?"

"By engine room."

"Does he have a satellite phone?"

The cook hesitated.

Maxammed said, "You have one second to save this girl's life."

"Yes, he has a phone."

Maxammed ordered Farole and two men below. "Tell the captain that I will shoot the stewardess if he does not come out. Hurry!"

They waited in silence, the crew exchanging glances, the guests staring at the deck as if afraid to meet one another's eyes. The blond beauty, Maxammed noticed, had withdrawn into herself, either frozen with fear or simply resigned. His men returned with the yacht's vigorous-looking American captain and handed Maxammed the sat phone.

"Who did you call?"

"Who do you think?"

"Tell him, for chrissakes!" shouted the owner. "You'll get us all killed."

"I called the United States Navy."

"Did you give them our position?"

"What do you think?" the captain asked sullenly.

"I think you put a lot of innocent people's lives at risk," said Maxammed. He turned to Farole and ordered in Somali, "Load the captain and his crew into a tender. Take the boat's radios and wreck the outboard motor."

"You're letting them go?"

"We'll keep the rich people."

"But the rest of them?"

"Too many to guard and feed. Plus, we'll look good on CNN."

Farole grinned. "Humanitarians."

"Besides, who would pay big money for crew?" Maxammed grinned back. The practical reasons were true, but there was more that he did not confide to Farole. This rich prize of a ship and wealthy hostages would make him a potent warlord in his strife-torn nation, more than just a pirate. A pirate who freed innocent workers and held on to the rich was a cut above—a Robin Hood, a man whose actions had consequences.

"Give them plenty of food and water, but don't forget to wreck the motors. By the time they're picked up, we'll be safe in Eyl."

* * *

ALLEN ADLER WAITED to make his move until the pirates got distracted launching the tender. Putting the tender in the water involved slowing *Tarantula* to three knots, and opening the sea cocks to flood the well deck, then opening the stern port so the tender could drift out. It could all be done from the bridge, where the release controls were stationed by the big back window, if you knew what you were doing. To his surprise, they did. Sailors were sailors, he supposed, even stinking pirates. They turned on the work lamps, bathing the stern in light, and went at it as neatly as if Captain Billy were running the operation.

Adler edged toward the stairs.

What the pirates didn't know, what no one else on his ship knew, not even the captain, was that *Tarantula* had in the bottom of her hull a one-man escape raft that could be launched under the ship in total secrecy and inflated on the surface. The raft carried food and water for a week, as well as a radio, GPS, and a sat phone. The reason no one knew was that there was no point in having a secret escape hatch if it wasn't a secret; otherwise the crew would be fighting to get inside it. He had rehearsed the move numerous times, sometimes for real, sometimes in his head. It was vital not to panic and

remember to lock doors and hatches behind him as he ran.

All the pirates and all his guests were watching the release of the tender in the work lights. The stern port opened. The boat started sliding out the back and into the water behind the ship. Adler ran.

Maxammed and Farole saw him reflected in the glass, whirled as one, striking on instinct as he would claw at motion. Maxammed fired two shots before he realized the fool had nowhere to go. It was too late. Shatteringly loud in the confined space, they knocked Adler's legs out from under him. He skidded across the teak deck and crashed into the railing that surrounded the stairs.

"I hope you didn't kill him," Maxammed said to Farole.

"We both shot him."

"No, I pulled my gun up. Only you shot him."

Farole shook his head, knowing that was not true. He changed the argument, saying, "But you said you didn't need him."

"To frighten him, you idiot. He's the richest of all."

"We still have the ship."

"If the ship is worth half a billion dollars," Maxammed asked scornfully, "how much is its own worth? Pray you didn't kill him."

Adler clutched the back of his thigh in both hands and tried to sit up. His face was slack with shock. He looked around the bridge, cast a disbelieving look at the pirates and hostages grouped at the aft windows. Then he sank back on the deck, still holding his leg.

Maxammed watched the rich people gather around him, the women holding hands to their mouths, the men staring wide-eyed. "Oh my God," whispered one. "Look at the blood."

There was so much blood on the deck that Adler appeared to be floating on it. He looked, Allegra Helms thought, like a swimmer doing the backstroke in a red pool. The New York woman whispered, "We have to stop the bleeding. It severed an artery. See how it's pumping?"

It was spurting rhythmically, the pulsing against his trousers as if a mouse trapped in the linen were trying to batter its way out.

"Tourniquet," said the white-haired diplomat. "He needs a tourniquet."

Maxammed shouldered them aside and knelt in the blood. He unbuckled Adler's belt, yanked it out of the loops, dragged his trousers down to his knees, shoved one end of his belt under his leg, pulled it above the ragged wound the bullet had furrowed in his flesh, slipped the tongue through the buckle and pulled it tight.

The blood kept spurting. He couldn't hold the belt tightly enough.

"Use this," said Allegra, handing over her scarf. Maxammed tied it around Adler's thigh and through his SAR in the loop and turned it like a lever, drawing the cloth so tightly that it bit into the flesh. At last the blood stopped spurting.

"Hold this here," he told her.

She knelt beside him in the blood and held the gun in both hands. She fancied that she could feel Adler's heart beating through the steel. It felt very weak, and she was struck by her ignorance. She knew not even the most basic first aid, and she was helpless to save his life.

He opened his eyes and they locked on hers. She felt the beating slow. He tried to speak, and she leaned closer to hear. "Hey, Countess? Don't hate your father for groping the servants."

In a moment of insight as sharp as it was unexpected, Allegra Helms realized it was probably the gentlest thing the man had ever said, and she whispered as intimately as pillow talk, "I don't hate him. He's just not my favorite relation."

"Who's your favorite?"

“Cousin Adolfo. Since we were children.”

“Kissing cous—?” Adler’s body convulsed. Allegra lost her grip on the tourniquet. She tried desperately to tighten it again. Then she saw that it didn’t matter. Where his blood had spurted, it now just dripped.

“Oh my God,” said someone.

Allegra stood up and backed away. But she could not tear her eyes from Adler’s face. The slackness had vanished. Dead, he looked more like himself: aggressive, and confident that he was invulnerable. She was truly afraid for the first time since the attack began. With Adler dead and Captain Billy sent away in the boat, she could not imagine anyone else on the yacht who could protect them.

The ridiculously imperious wife of the retired UN diplomat began to cry. Her husband patted her awkwardly on her shoulder. Hank and Susan, the New York couple, who were constantly holding hands, were gripping so tightly their fingers turned white. Poor Monique was biting her lips and shaking her head.

The pirate spoke. “This is your lesson. Do what I tell you. No one makes trouble. No one else dies.”

Allegra Helms stiffened. She had been afraid. She had felt useless. But suddenly she was outraged. “You didn’t have to kill him.”

The pirate shouted back, “No more trouble, no more die.”

“Where could he run? You have his ship. He had no place to hide.”

“No more trouble, no more die,” Maxammed repeated. To Farole he said, “Punch in a course for Eyl.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not? You said you have run ships.”

“I have run ships. But the instruments are all dead.”

“What about the radar?”

“Burned up, it seems,” said Farole, who had studied electrical engineering. “I bet the captain fried it with some kind of electric surge.”

“No radar?” Maxammed echoed, his heart sinking. The radar was vital. They could steer by a compass, and even without a compass the fishermen among his crew could navigate home by the shape of the swells and the light in the sky. But they needed the radar to warn them of the Navy patrols.

“Where is that boat?” he asked angrily.

“Drifted away.”

“Find it.”

“Why?”

“Run it down! Drown that devil captain.”

Farole laid a hand on Maxammed’s arm. “My friend, we must get the ship to Eyl. We have no time for revenge.”

Maxammed’s face was tight with rage, eyes bulging, lips stretched across his teeth. Farole prayed to God that he would come to his senses before he exploded like a volcano.

“Humanitarians, my friend. Remember?”

TWO

48°9' N, 103°37' W
Bakken Oilfield
North Dakota, near Montana

Paul Janson steered a drunk out of the path of an ambulance racing from the Frack Up Bar & Grill parking lot. Then he shouldered through a crowd of derrick hands, pipe wranglers, and rig mechanics who were cheering two men fighting in a cage made of chain-link fence.

The night was cold and the air stank of diesel exhaust from the trucks men left running to warm up in between bouts. A hundred-foot pillar of fire burning waste gas off a flare stack behind the bar lit the cage bright as day.

The bigger fighter had blood dripping from his nose into his chest hair.

A bare-legged woman in a short down jacket circled the ring with a cardboard marking Round Two. Phones flashed as fans took her picture. When she stepped out and closed the gate, Janson asked, “Where’s the sign-up sheet?”

“Nowhere. Dudes on law enforcement radar won’t write their particulars. You want to fight, get in line.”

“Where’s the line?”

“The end of it’s that truck driver getting his head stomped by the dancing Chinaman. Cranked-up dude put three in the ambulance. Everyone else decided to call it a night.”

The “dancing Chinaman” was a rangy, six-foot-two Chinese-American bouncing in a frenzy on the balls of his feet. He had a head full of shaggy dreadlocks that he shook like a mop, and he was cranked up, indeed, his eyes yawning wide with crystal meth. But his body was rock hard, and he moved. Janson observed, with the lethal grace of a martial-arts sensei.

He was showboating, playing to the crowd. A blazing-fast backflip drew cheers when he bounced high off the canvas, turned over in the air, and landed on his feet in icy command. A second backflip landed him closer to the truck driver. The driver—*inches taller and sixty pounds heavier*—lunged, throwing skillful combinations.

The Chinese-American jabbed him twice in a heartbeat and bounced out of range, leaving a circle of cuts and bruised flesh around his eye. The truck driver lunged again, willing to take punishment to get close enough to bring his size and weight to bear. The Chinese-American swirled into another of his seemingly impossible backflips. This time he landed on one foot, off balance, it appeared, until his other foot rocketed up in a shoulder-high kick that dropped the trucker with a heel to his jaw.

The crowd whooped and whistled. Cell phones flashed. The bare-legged woman signaled her assistants to carry the loser out of the cage. The winner cursed the crowd, daring men to fight.

Paul Janson took off his windbreaker and stepped into the cage. The floor was slippery with blood.

The Chinese-American greeted him with a backflip and ran in circles, taunting Janson. “Gray dude

What you doing in here? Run away, old man.”

Janson spoke softly.

“*What?* Who are you? How the *fuck* you know my name?” The meth made Denny Chin too impatient to wait for an answer. He jumped, levitated into another backflip, and ran circles around Janson, herding him into the middle of the cage. He flipped again, landed on one foot, and launched a kick.

Janson stepped close and hit him hard.

The dreadlocked fighter landed on his back. He tried to sit up. Janson dropped onto him. The man's neck was strong but not thick. A broad hand spanned both carotid arteries. When Chin stopped struggling, Janson hoisted him over his shoulder and carried him out of the cage.

The woman yelled, “Where you taking him?”

“Home.”

* * *

“ASC DON'T FUCK AROUND” was an oil-patch homage to American Synergy Corporation's management standards. There was nothing likeable about the arrogant sons of bitches, but no one worked harder or smarter than ASC's 68,000 employees.

In the dead of the night in Houston, Texas—1,800 miles south of the Bakken fields—seven men and two women to whom those 68,000 answered “sir,” and “ma'am,” quick-marched into a secure conference room atop the Silo, their round thirty-story bronze-glass headquarters tower beside the Sam Houston Tollway.

Night meetings didn't waste valuable daytime. And while the Manual of Employee Conduct cited no dress code for post-midnight appearance, not one of the division presidents taking their seats at the rosewood table would have looked out of place at a Federal Reserve Board meeting or a funeral.

Kingsman Helms, the tall, handsome, thirty-eight-year-old president of the Petroleum Division, set the standard. His shirt was crisp, his gray windowpane suit pressed, his English bench-made cordovan wingtips polished to a “gentleman's buff.” A linen handkerchief raised three equal points from his breast pocket. A red necktie decorated with Petroleum Club of Houston sunbursts was knotted dead center at his throat. Helms's Petroleum Division led in revenue and earnings, which made him the second wealthiest at the table, but he was just as hungry as his rivals for the power that eluded them all.

The wealthiest, their reclusive chief executive officer and board chairman Bruce Danforth—known to the tiny inner circle allowed in his presence as the Buddha—was rich beyond counting and doling out power with maddening calculation. For forty years, Danforth had hammered a conglomerate of Texas oil drillers, producers, pipelines, and refineries into a free-booting global enterprise that wielded more power than all but a few independent nations. He was pushing ninety now, and looked every year of it, with sunken cheeks, wrinkled brow, and hooded eyes. But those eyes were clear-blazing like twin high beams between a thick crown of snow-white hair and a vandyke beard speckled with black. And his heart and his lungs seemed so strong that his division presidents feared he would never die.

The Buddha's hearing was acute, the sharpest in the room, and when his mind wandered, those listening frightened most knew they had made the mistake of boring him. His voice was reedy yet commanded total attention, even when he opened a meeting with the credo everyone had heard a thousand times before.

“If you think oil money is easy money, you aren't making enough of it.”

Each division had sixty seconds to report what it was doing to make more of it. Kingsman Helms was last, the place of honor, though he was acutely aware that Douglas Case, American Synergy president of Global Security—as rugged a man as Helms had ever seen in a wheelchair—was seated next to the Buddha. Supposedly, there was more room at the head of the table to park Case’s wheelchair. But the chair on the Buddha’s right had been Helms’s chair before the Isle de Foree debacle—a recent defeat still seared in the Buddha’s memory.

Hopes had run high when Helms’s Petroleum Division scientists discovered the mother of all petroleum reserves in the deep waters off Isle de Foree. ASC had almost won control of the West African island nation by staging a coup. If they hadn’t dropped the ball, the corporation would have had exclusive access to the “ground resources” of a Gulf of Guinea version of Saudi Arabia, minus the misery of Arab politics. There had been plenty of blame to go around both inside and outside the corporation. Kingsman Helms had dodged as much as he could, but the cold reality was staring across the table: before Isle de Foree, the Security Division hadn’t even been allowed in the room. After Doug Case—guardian against cyberattack, headstrong dictators, whistle-blowers, and rebel assaults on Nigerian offshore oilfields—sat beside the Buddha, with full division privileges.

The Buddha interrupted Helms halfway through his sixty seconds.

“Yes, yes, yes, but where have you been the last two weeks?”

“At undisclosed locations.” Helms smiled easily. Danforth knew full well he was working East Africa in general and Somalia in particular. But the old man loved his hocus-pocus spy talk, having staked a career in clandestine federal service, a normal man’s lifetime ago, before turning his ambition to oil.

The Buddha did not return Helms’s smile. “I mean closer to home, Kingsman. Where in hell—”

The phone in Helms’s breast pocket rang behind the folds of his handkerchief.

Anger blazed in the Buddha’s eyes. “The rule is no calls, but for life and death.”

Helms snatched up his phone. The assistant who was calling him, the matronly Kate Clark, whom he had poached from the top tier of Doug Case’s own Global Security Division, knew the rules, and he trusted her judgment.

“What?”

What she said was so unexpected, so absolutely out of left field, that he could not breathe more than a single whispered word. “Pirates?”

None of the division presidents, not even Case, heard him.

But the bat-eared Buddha had, and, as Helms walked out of the meeting, Danforth beckoned him close and muttered, “Deal with it. Quickly. Before the goddamned Chinese eat your lunch.”

Helms hurried out the door and heard the old man raise his voice. “Meeting’s over, everybody—Doug, you stay.”

Helms looked back. Doug Case was wheeling his chair closer to the old man, and Helms would have given a year of his life to hear what they were going to talk about.

* * *

DOUGLAS CASE WAITED until the last division president had closed the door behind her.

“May I ask what that was about?”

The Buddha ignored the question and stared at Case. Case dropped his gaze, tacitly admitting that he had crossed a forbidden line. He waited, staring at his lap. When at last the old man spoke, what

said came straight out of the blue.

“Earlier today, I had an interesting conversation with Yousef.”

Doug Case sat up straight, stunned with admiration. That the Buddha could continue bargaining with Yousef in Italy while he was consumed with ASC petroleum prospects in Somalia was a powerful reminder that no global oil corporation CEO in the world could work with more balls in the air. Of course, the Buddha and Yousef’s family went way, way back.

American Synergy Corporation had done business with the dictator since before the Cub was born. The Buddha had enriched Yousef’s father—and himself—underwriting infrastructure in good times and trading embargoed oil as the old man got crazier. When the so-called Arab Spring blew their cozy arrangement to hell, the Buddha had quietly, secretly, persuaded the Italian government to contract with Paul Janson’s Catspaw Associates to exfiltrate Yousef before they hanged him from an oil rig.

The Italians had hoped to get credit for offering asylum that would end the fight. The Buddha had taken the longer view, convinced that Yousef was the one member of the family with the brains and ambition to take power back when the revolution fell apart.

“I admire Yousef,” said Case. “He’s a patient planner, not a reactor. And he knows what he wants.”

The Buddha raised a cynical eyebrow. “Yousef wants what he thinks should be his inheritance—his own country afloat on oil. At the same time he feels the International Criminal Court breathing down his neck.”

“I heard he lit out from Sardinia. Is he back?”

Another question the old man would not answer. He stared Case down again.

“I promised Yousef that ASC will offer legitimacy, both in worldwide public relations and in lobbying Congress. Yousef promised to return the favor with access. And this time he will keep order—as he tried to for his psychotic fool of a father—with high-tech security and secret police to jail and assassinate the opposition.”

“You were right to rescue him.”

“Damn right. This time around Yousef will be in charge and no longer serving his idiot father. And I don’t mind telling you, Doug, you were right about Paul Janson.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Doug Case’s part in the rescue had been to convince the Buddha that no private operator was better qualified to snatch Yousef from chaos than Paul Janson. Janson’s research was the best, his analytical skills the sharpest. Janson had taken the rescue job, despite misgivings about Yousef, because it had offered “white-hat” good-guy results. A swift end to the bloody civil war would not only save countless lives but would also keep the dictator’s arsenal of shoulder-fired rockets and heavy machine guns out of the hands of the Sahara Desert jihadists who would turn them in a flash on Algeria and Mali.

“Janson will regret taking the job,” said the Buddha, in a voice suddenly harsh. “Can you still guarantee that he doesn’t know who got it for him?”

“Guaranteed. Even if the Italians talked too much, they knew only middlemen. Neither you, nor me, nor ASC left any prints. Janson has no idea we set it up.”

“I was surprised at the time that he took it.”

“Optimism is Janson’s Achilles’ heel,” said Case.

Paul Janson had to have known that Yousef was no fool, known too that Yousef was even less of a white hat. But hope for a good-guy outcome had caused him to underestimate Yousef’s ambition.

THREE

47°55' N, 96°26' W
US Highway 2, Eastbound
North Dakota

Denny Chin woke up with the sun in his eyes. He was belted into the passenger seat of a four-by-four F-150 XL SuperCrew pickup headed east at seventy miles an hour. Paul Janson switched hands on the steering wheel to pass him a water bottle.

“Crank makes you thirsty.”

“No kidding.” Chin pulled long and hard and tossed the empty over his shoulder onto the crew seat. “Who the fuck are you?”

“What you called me in the cage.”

“Old man?”

Chin looked closer. He noticed traces of scar tissue that he should have registered the night before if he hadn't been buzzing the moon. He also should have noticed how the eyes managed to be simultaneously detached and alert. He told himself that the neutral iron-gray color of the dude's close-cropped hair had thrown him off.

“You're not old.”

“No kidding.”

Denny Chin stared at Janson. “Wait a minute. *The Old Man*. You're the operator who runs the Phoenix rehab?”

“A whole bunch run Phoenix. I help pay for it.”

Janson passed him another bottle.

Denny Chin drank and placed the empty in his lap. “Guys in the program talk about you. Trying to figure you out.”

“They'll have the jump on me when they do.”

Janson covered the lie with a self-deprecating smile. The opposite was true. Paul Janson was a man who constantly reviewed his life in small ways. He had developed the regimen as a field officer tasked with “sanctioned” killings for the State Department's clandestine intelligence unit Consul Operations. The habit had earned him the title “The Machine,” and it had kept him alive and dead longer than most assassins—no fatal “mistakes” or “accidents” triggered by guilt or confusion.

But awareness cost. Janson had awakened one morning unable to deny that for all his passion to serve his country, for all his hard-honed skill—and the layers and layers of detachment crucial to doing the job—his sanctioned killings were serial killings. Determined to redeem himself, he had founded Phoenix to help rehabilitate and restore to some semblance of normal life other operators crippled by dehumanizing service.

“If half I heard is true,” said Chin, “I'm lucky you didn't kill me last night.”

Janson reached to shake hands. "I studied your operations, Denny. You don't kill easy."

Denny Chin stared at Paul Janson's hand but would not take it. "So what is this? You're trying to drag me back to rehab?"

"I can't force you. But I'll do my damndest to talk you into it."

"I can't go back."

"There is nothing harder on Earth than trying to restore heart and mind and soul, Denny. But you've got what it takes to do it."

"How?"

"You're special ops. You know the drill. Sometimes you have to be tougher than the situation."

"You know that knowing the fucking drill and executing it are two different things."

"Next time you decide to cut and run, dig down and find yourself so you can ask, 'Why am I making this decision now? Am I really thinking this through? Or am I just too tired or low or scared to think straight?'"

Denny Chin hung his head. "I do not know if I'm worth the trouble."

Chin had been a rising star before he was swallowed up in a DEA Foreign-deployed Advisor Support Team operation conceived by bosses two thousand miles from the action. Janson said, "Denny, you served your country with everything you had. You questioned lousy orders on stupid missions, which makes you doubly worth the trouble."

Chin's FAST Team had been snookered by local drug lords into accidentally slaughtering civilians. "The bosses put the screws to you. But field agents you served with swear you're worth the trouble. So does everyone at Phoenix."

"Are you still in the game, or are you a full-time shrink?"

"I leave shrinking to the professionals."

"Are you still in the game?"

"I do security consulting to fund Phoenix."

"That must be a big outfit."

"I don't do big. I don't trust more than two people in one swept room."

"Two?"

"Me and a sniper."

"Corporate security? How can two do the job?"

"We have specialists on call." With its operators linked by the Internet, encrypted websites, and secure phones, and contracted on a job-by-job basis, Janson explained, succinctly—without giving up secrets—Catspaw Associates was essentially a virtual organization with no expensive physical installations to be maintained and few vulnerable employees to be defended. "From a bad-guy point of view, we don't exist—and you just had your last question."

Chin said, "From what I've seen of Phoenix—docs, nurses, facilities—you must charge a ton to pay the bills."

"Our clients can afford it."

"So you're a mercenary?"

It was meant as an insult. Janson ignored it.

Chin took another shot. "So when you straighten out guys like me, we're supposed to re-up in your private army?"

Janson pinned him with the strangest gaze. Chin had always thought of cold eyes as empty, devoid of emotion. Janson's were not empty. They glistened with passion. The dude cared. But they were still the coldest eyes he had ever seen.

“If an operator returns to federal service, of course I’ll tap him for intelligence. How he responds up to him. Nobody owes Phoenix. Nobody owes me.”

“Bullshit. I would owe you the moon and the stars if you put my head straight.”

“Pay the next guy.”

“Yeah, but let’s say a guy *wanted* to join your private army.”

Janson’s glance nearly broke Chin’s heart. It told him that Phoenix would be there for him as long as he needed help, but it would be a long, hard slog to regain the edge—and trust—to be invited to repay the favor with fieldwork. Trying not to sound bitter, but knowing he did, Denny Chin said, “You mean guys break down, again, even doing ‘corporate security’?”

“None yet. We operate by rules we never need to lie about.”

“What rules?”

“No torture. No killing anyone who doesn’t try to kill us. No civilians in the cross fire.”

“Fann-tass-tic. What do you call them, Janson Rules?”

“It’s not a fantasy.”

“Not a fantasy? What the fuck is it? A dream?”

Janson surprised the shattered operator with a grin as optimistic as it was unexpected. “I have nothing against dreams.”

Denny Chin laughed and shook his dreadlocks. “Shit, man...How’d you get into the saving business?”

“Operator I served with dove off the roof of our Singapore embassy. Forgot he trained as a paratrooper. Landed about as good as you can.”

“How’d he make out?”

“These days he runs global security for a global corporation.”

“Lucky dude.”

“From a wheelchair.”

“I meant getting saved by you.”

“All I did was make a place to save himself. The rest was up to him. Like it’s up to you, Denny.”

Denny Chin closed his eyes.

Janson’s cell broke the silence with an old-phone ringtone.

The caller ID surprised him. Kingsman Helms. What did the president of the petroleum division of the biggest oil company in the country want from an enemy?

“Excuse me,” he told Denny, pulling off the road. “I have to take this.”

He stopped the engine, took the keys, stepped out, and walked along the shoulder.

Sensing opportunity, he set the phone to Record and waited until the tenth ring to answer. “Hello.”

“Is that Paul Janson?”

Janson asked, “Am I supposed to believe I’m out of the doghouse for making American Synergy play fair in the Gulf of Guinea?”

“My wife is on that yacht.”

“What yacht?”

“*Tarantula*, that the pirates hijacked.”

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