

CHAPTER 1

You gotta be nuts to stand on the roof in a thunderstorm. That's what Anita would say.

But Anita wasn't here.

Anyway, Rich Ford wasn't nuts; he was desperate.

Another shaft of lightning tore the night in two, illuminating the top of Glasco Oil's Gulf Coast Headquarters in stark relief. Purple afterglow lingered before his eyes like a specter. The storm was coming fast, its mountainous thunderheads rolling across the sky like crashing breakers, bearing down on Rich and his crew.

And the satellite array still wasn't working.

Under normal circumstances he would've called the whole thing off and waited for the storm to blow over. But these weren't ordinary circumstances. He had a survey team three hundred miles offshore gathering data on their next big strike: the Brazos Formation. Rich didn't think the ship would go down (or didn't want to), but storms were hard on equipment, especially computers. If anything happened to the survey data before they had a chance to upload, it would be game over—big time.

So here he was, with Vince Trevoy—the head maintenance foreman, and half the telecom department, crawling around the rooftop in the face of an oncoming thunderstorm, like a bunch of adrenaline junkies looking for a fix. They had to get the array up and rolling for a good data transfer and they had to do it now.

Another lightning bolt split the midnight air.

“Whooo-eee!” hollered Vince. “That was a close'un. Made my ass hairs stand up and shout!” He looked down at the trio of technicians huddled around the receiver dish. “You boys wanna finish up sometime tonight or y'all just wanna wait for twenty million volts of lighting to zap your nuts into charcoal?” Vince was tall and broad and the ghostly storm-light made him look crazier than usual. The telecom nerds looked like they were about to crap their pants.

It worked, though, and five minutes later they found the problem: rats. The little bastards had chewed through the transmission cable. After a quick splice, Vince gave Rich the thumbs-up—just in time, too. The storm broke shortly thereafter, sending sheets of torrential rain hissing across the rooftop. The telecom guys scurried for the stairwell, sputtering like drowned rats. Rich and Vince walked. They reached the stairwell drenched but still in possession of their dignity.

Vince elbowed Rich on the way back to the telecom room. “Hey, that'd be a hell of a thing if the whole operation went tits-up over some rats with a plastic fetish, wouldn't it?” He grinned.

Sometimes Rich envied Vince. There could be a nuclear holocaust and Vince would raise his can of Bud and laugh while he toasted the end of the world.

Rich was wound too tight for that, though. He was a worst-case-scenario guy, always looking for the next problem. Tonight, unfortunately, he didn't have far to look. Lightning exploded outside and thunder shook the stairwell. If the splice didn't work or if the chewed cable wasn't the only problem, they'd have to wait hours before heading back to the roof, and by then it might be too late. "I just hope Hal and Buggy and the boys on *Southern Digger* are okay. That storm's looking bad."

Vince snorted. "He-ell, you're worried about this little rain shower? Pfft. Hal's gonna be fine. He could take *Southern Digger* to hell and back. This piss-ass storm ain't gonna touch him."

Lightning cracked, thunder boomed, and the stairs rattled again.

Rich hoped Vince was right. He probably was. *Southern Digger* was the newest survey ship in Glasco's (admittedly aging) fleet, and Hal was a hell of a captain. Rich would know, Hal had taught him everything he knew.

Back in the telecom room, Rich dialed *Southern Digger's* satellite phone.

Hal Richter picked up on the second ring. Static hissed in the receiver, but his voice came through. "Richter here."

"Hal, it's Rich. How are things out there?"

"Shitty. We're trying for one more core sample before this storm runs up our asses, but I don't know if it's gonna happen. The wind isn't too bad but the waves are bigger than Dolly Parton's titties." A burst of static, then, "How's the uplink coming?"

"We're ready to give her a try. Go ahead and send the data."

"Roger," said Hal, "Sending."

Rich waited.

Normally these roles would be reversed. Hal was installation manager for Glasco's Gulf Coast Branch. Rich was assistant manager. Offshore operations fell under his purview, but since the Brazos Formation was make-it-or-break-it for Glasco, the board of directors decided to send Hal instead. The CEO, Arthur Trimble, backed them up. So Hal went and Rich stayed.

It had been the right decision. Hal had twice Rich's experience and knew the gulf better than anyone. Hell, he'd practically written the book on deep-water oil prospecting.

That didn't make it any easier, though. Surveying the Brazos Formation was huge. It was going to save the company and would've made Rich's career. He might have been CEO one day. Now now, though. And if this data transfer went south, regional manager was out of the question; he'd be lucky to keep his current job. It all hung on this transmission.

Rich watched the LEDs flick from red to green: signal—good, initial data handshake—good, uplink—

Seconds hung in deliberation. Everyone in the room watched. Even Vince had shut his mouth.

It blinked from red to green—uplink initiated. Christmas in August.

Vince pumped his fist into the air “Hells yeah!” He slapped the nearest telecom geek on the back and nearly knocked him through the wall.

The other two techs applauded, keeping a watchful eye on Vince, and Rich let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

“Hal, it looks like we have—”

The world exploded. Blinding light blazed in the darkened windows and it sounded like the building had split in two. Lights dimmed, bulbs blew out, and computer screens blinked off.

The uplink LED went black and Rich's stomach turned to lead.

The satellite phone was wireless, so they could still hear Hal. Three hundred miles away and oblivious to the sudden disaster, his voice was calm and casual. “Rich, how are things over there? The link looked good for a second, then we lost it. I'm gonna have Buggy see if the waves knocked something loose.”

It took Rich a second to find his voice. When he did, it came out hoarse and unsteady. “Don't. I think we just had a lightning strike. I'm heading up to the roof to check things out. Stand by.” Rich gave the receiver to Vince. “Stay on the line. I'll be right back.”

“Hell no, I'm coming with you.”

Vince was the head of maintenance, and technically this was his job, but not tonight, not with lightning popping off all over the place and everything going to shit. If anyone was gonna get his ass fried, it was Rich.

He pegged Vince with his index finger. “You're staying here.”

Vince opened his mouth to argue, saw Rich's eyes, and gave it up.

Thirty steps and ninety seconds later, Rich burst onto the roof. Wind screamed and sheets of rain attacked him like a swarm of angry hornets. Clouds strafed the ground with searing chains of lightning, leaving thundering cannonades in their wake. The air tingled with latent energy that raised Rich's hackles like a scared cat.

He *was* scared, but it wasn't the storm. It was the satellite array, or rather, the steaming pile of slag that *used* to be the satellite array. They'd had a lightning strike, all right, and it was a bull's eye, center mass—a kill shot.

He stared. Twenty years with Glasco up in smoke. He'd worked oil rigs and drillships from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Circle, clawing his way up from a greenhorn stacking drill pipes to assistant

manager of Glasco's biggest branch, and it all came to this: finished by a lightning strike—one-in-a-million odds and it had to be now.

Fuck me.

A bolt of lightning split, forking across the sky like a devil's tongue. It lit up the rooftop and the helipad below. A company helicopter was tethered there, rotor vibrating in the wind like giant dragonfly wings.

For a brief, insane moment, Rich considered taking the chopper out to *Southern Digger* for a manual transfer. It was a testament to his desperation; the idea was crazy. He could imagine what Hal would say. At least they still had comms. If it wasn't for the satphone, Rich would really lose his mind.

Then it hit him. The idea came to Rich like sunlight breaking through a cloud bank. The satellite phone—it was so obvious.

Rich flew down the stairs and burst into the telecom room. "Lightning hit the array. It's fried."

The technicians looked horrified.

Vince swore. "We're screwed!"

"Maybe not." Rich turned to the head technician. "Sam. Can we route data through the satphone connection?"

Sam frowned and pooched out his lips. Take away the coke-bottle glasses, add a banana, and Sam would've looked like a chimp contemplating dinner. "You know, that might work. It would be slow, but I think it's doable." He looked at the other two techs and they nodded in agreement.

"How long 'til it's up and running?"

Sam ran a hand through thinning hair. "Geez, I don't know. Maybe... twenty minutes."

Better than nothing.

"Okay, great. Let me tell Hal, then you get started." Rich held his hand out for the receiver and Vince passed it over.

"Hal, you still there?"

"Roger."

"The lightning took out our uplink array, but I have an idea." He explained the plan.

"Hell of a good idea, Rich. Better use the backup, though. I wanna keep this phone clear for emergencies."

And that's why Hal was running the show—always thinking two steps ahead.

"Roger," said Rich. "We'll use the backup."

"Rich, I gotta go. The weather's looking bad. Call me when you're ready to transfer." Hal ended the call.

Rich gave Sam the go-ahead then slumped into his chair. He was worried about Hal. That was natural; twenty years ago, Hal had saved his life—literally and figuratively. A week before Rich's first offshore assignment, his father had a heart attack and died. Rich's coping strategy was Wild Turkey. He smuggled a stash onto the rig and got so shitfaced he went over the rail. Hal dove in and pulled him to safety. He also shook some sense into Rich and took over where the late Billy Ford had left off.

Needless to say, Hal meant a lot to Rich. He was basically family, and it wasn't the first time Rich had worried about him. This felt different, though, like a premonition or something.

But what was he supposed to do? Call Hal and tell him to head for port because his horoscope looked unfavorable? That was nuts. Hal would be fine. In another month the survey would be over and the two of them would laugh about this whole clusterfuck over a couple of beers.

But Rich was wrong. He never saw Hal again.

Hal knew Rich was worried, could hear it in his voice, but he attributed it to the storm and the satellite relay snafu. He had no inkling of the deeper concern Rich felt. Even if he did, he would've ignored it—Rich had been right about that. No way would Hal have called off the survey over a case of the heebie-jeebies.

Anyway, it was good that Rich was worried. He'd be more careful, and you could never, ever be too careful.

Hal put down the satphone. Truth be told, he was worried, too—not about the storm, or even the data, but about Rich. Corporate usually kept its nose out of branch-level operations. That was one thing he liked about Arthur Trimble—the guy had balls. He could sit on a problem and trust his people to handle it.

But the Brazos Formation wasn't your typical branch-level operation. With the whole company on the line (and Shanxiang Petroleum sniffing around for a takeover) the board of directors would be looking for a scapegoat. This time it was Rich—which was official, honest-to-God bullshit.

Rich was one of the best roughnecks Hal had ever met, himself included. It would be a shame to see him hamstrung over this. Rich was resourceful, though, and maybe the satphone idea would work. Then everything would blow over. Corporate just wanted the data transferred; they didn't care how it happened.

Either way, it was out of Hal's hands, and this test well wasn't gonna drill itself.

He turned his attention back to the heaving deck. The waves were big—as big as he'd seen in a long time. Mountains of water rode before the oncoming storm like heralds of dark tidings. A fifteen-foot roller committed suicide against *Southern Digger's* bow, exploding into a shower of spray and foam that

shrouded the foredeck in misty haze. The haze parted as a gust of wind whipped low and fast across the water.

“...And here comes the wind. Shit. We'll never finish the test well now.”

Waves plowed into the surging drillship, making its deck convulse until the crew staggered like frat boys at a kegger. They clung doggedly to the drill equipment, fighting to finish before the storm made it impossible.

But it looked impossible was already here.

A rogue wave swept over the ship, scattering the men and wrenching them to the end of their safety tethers.

Hal swore.

Buggy Croix burst through the door, admitting a gust of wind that whipped papers into whirling, white cyclones before flinging them into the air like confetti. He shouldered the door closed and fixed Hal with his bulging eyes. “How much longer you plannin' on keeping this up, boss? Them greenhorns can barely keep their feet and even the old timers are gettin' tossed on they asses. We gonna lose somebody in this if you don' quit. Might be we'll lose the whole ship.”

Hal braced himself as another wall of water sent shudders through the deck. Buggy was right. “Okay. If it doesn't let up in fifteen minutes, we'll shut the whole thing down.”

“A'ight then, fifteen minutes.” Buggy pulled his yellow slicker tight and pushed his way back into the tempest.

Ten minutes later, Hal's luck turned around. The squall line passed, clouds parted, and for a moment, moonlight turned the turbulent sea to silver. Towering breakers sank into rolling swells and the crew returned to their stations.

From where Hal stood, everything looked fine, but that's how problems get overlooked. It was time to have a look around deck. He spent the next twenty minutes inspecting the ship with Buggy at his side.

A tool chest had gone overboard and one of the orange lifeboats had slipped its lashing. There was no damage, though, and nobody had been hurt—that's what mattered. The stack of spare drill pipes was secured, safety equipment was available and ready, and the deck was clear of obstructions.

Satisfied, Hal moved on to the derrick for a look at the drill string.

The drill string was a marvel of engineering: eighteen hundred feet of interlocking pipes that connected drill bit to motor. You could drill as far down as you wanted—just add more pipes. The only limiting factor was the strength of the steel. You had to be careful. A broken drill string could send a hundred thousand dollars of pipe to the ocean floor in a matter of seconds. Fortunately, this wasn't a

problem with test wells. Even if a pipe broke, the rock strata would hold everything in place until another pipe could be fitted into the string.

Hal liked what he saw. RPMs were well within limits, torque was low, and the temperature was green. A broken drill string was the last thing on his mind—until the motor began to howl like a dying animal.

The engineer cranked dials and flipped switches, but the howl rose to a devilish scream until plumes of oily smoke curled skyward from the motor housing.

Hal didn't think, just reacted. He threw the befuddled engineer aside, tore open the breaker box, and opened all the circuits.

The scream died away, but not before a sharp crack shook the derrick. The uppermost drill pipe shattered like glass, pelting the deck with shards of hot metal.

In the silence that followed, Hal stared incredulously at the empty derrick.

The drill string was gone.

“The hell 'd it go?” asked Buggy.

Hal shrugged, still coming to terms with something that, until five seconds ago, he would have called impossible. “I guess straight down.”

Buggy frowned. “That don't make no sense. That rock we was drillin' shoulda' held the string right there. I ain't never heard of no drill pipe breaking and the whole thing just dropping outta sight. Not on no test well. Mebbe one of them big production wells, but...” He trailed off, bulbous eyes turning to the sea.

Hal saw it, too. The ocean had suddenly gone smooth and its surface was as dull as pewter.

After fifty years, Hal knew the sea—knew it the way a young man knows his lover's body. This was something he'd never seen, and on the ocean, that was never good.

“I'm going to get on the horn with Rich,” said Hal.

Buggy nodded absently as his eyes roved the too-calm water.

There was fear in those eyes.

Rich paced the floor: window to door, door to window, back and forth, north to south, each time picking up a little speed, like he was building up momentum to shoot right out the plate-glass window and into Port Lavaca Bay.

He was scared.

Worry had grown into full-fledged fear with blood-matted fur, needle claws, and glowing, red eyes that burned holes in the back of his neck. Every time he looked out over the bay and the gulf beyond, it plucked at his guts. Something was wrong. He didn't know what it was, couldn't prove it if he had to,

but that didn't change the graveyard certainty hanging around Rich's neck. Something was wrong and Hal was in the middle of it.

The satphone rang.

Rich lunged. "Ford here."

"Rich, it's Hal."

The sweetest words he could have heard. Rich slumped in relief.

Hal continued. "Damndest thing just happened. The drill motor spun up and popped the drill pipe, then the whole string dropped right outta sight. And that's not all. The waves stopped. I mean dead-ass calm. I'm looking at the ocean and it's as still as—"

Rich never found out just how still the ocean was. A colossal burst of static obliterated the rest of Hal's words.

"Sorry Hal. Bad connection, didn't catch that last part."

More static. No Hal.

"Storm's probably screwin' with the satellites," said Vince.

But Rich wasn't thinking about the storm—wasn't really thinking at all. His relief had dried up and two words flashed through his mind like a buzzing neon interstate sign. Something's wrong. Something's wrong. Flash, flash, flash. Something's wrong. He stared at the satphone, as if trapped in some terrible hypnosis.

Then voices drifted through the static. It may have been Hal, or maybe not, he couldn't tell. The terrified screams were warped and distorted by concussive explosions that turned them into tortured warbles.

Rich's blood turned to ice.

"Hal, Hal can you hear me?"

More static. Screaming. A roaring, sucking sound. Then Hal's voice came through, twisted and scared, like a phone call from hell. "...oing down. Repeat, we are going down." The roar intensified then Hal screamed, "Buggy, abandon ship!"

There was a final explosion of static then the phone fell silent.

"Hal. Hal! Haaal!"

Rich dialed again, and again, and again, but there was no answer.

The phone was dead, and Hal was gone.

Silence hung in the air: thick, impossible, and final. Part of Rich rejected it, rejected all of it. Hal couldn't be gone. He'd always been there, as much a fixture in Rich's life as Glasco or the ocean itself. Such things don't pass away.

But there was another part of Rich: cold and practical, a part that had watched half a dozen men die on oil rigs and drillships—crushed, dismembered, drowned. This part knew that, eventually, everything passed away.

And then there was fear, that slimy, black, sniveling voice that spoke of ruin, and hopelessness, and death.

His hopes and fears were irrelevant, though. At this point, everything had to go by the book: attempt to re-establish communication for fifteen minutes, failing that, contact the Coast Guard, then notify corporate headquarters in Houston.

It was the fastest and slowest fifteen minutes he could remember. One call every minute, if no reply, hang up and try again. With each subsequent call, that slick, nasty voice grew stronger, more certain.

Hal's gone, Rich. He's swimming with the fishies—shark bait, fish food, old gym socks in Davy Jones' locker, a walking, talking crab trap, except his days of walking and talking are done now, aren't they?

Rich stabbed the redial button harder each time until, after the fifteenth unanswered call, he slammed the phone down. His chest heaved like he'd just sprinted a mile uphill. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and thick.

“Vince, get *Southern Digger's* last-known coordinates and call the Coast Guard. Tell them she's missing at sea.”

“You want me to call Chuck and Bernie too?”

“Yeah. I'll be in my office. Come see me when they get here.”

Vince went to work and Rich took a moment to collect his thoughts.

Call corporate—easy enough. He'd done it a thousand times before, except he'd never called with news like this, news that the Brazos Expedition was missing at sea, that it might be gone.

And they never had a chance to transfer the survey data.

The hallway lay shrouded in gloom, illuminated by a few flickering lights that only served to intensify Rich's nightmare feeling. He picked through the darkness and mouthed a silent 'thank-you' to no one in particular when his office lights buzzed to life. His fingers shook as he dialed corporate's emergency management department.

The on-call officer picked up on the first ring: Harris or maybe Harrison, Rich could barely hear the name past his own thundering pulse.

“Listen, Harris, this is Richard Ford at the Gulf Coast Branch in Port Lavaca.” He took a breath. “We just lost contact with *Southern Digger*.” Saying it aloud was terrible, like summoning a kraken—as

if the vowels and consonants might drift out across the gulf, wrap themselves around Hal's legs and drag him down to the hungry depths.

Rich realized the line had gone silent.

"Harris, you there? Can you hear me?"

"Y-yes, sir. Did you say you lost contact?" The man sounded young and scared. Well, that was okay because Rich felt old and scared.

"That's right, at approximately eleven forty-five PM. You need to activate the emergency contact roster. Tell Trimble I'm standing by for his call. You got that?"

Harris or Harrison had it.

Rich hung up and sagged back in his chair.

The "what if" part of his brain came out of its hole and started rattling around inside his head. He imagined Hal, Buggy, and the rest of *Southern Digger's* crew treading water beneath that moonless, windswept sky. The thought made his stomach curl into a tight ball.

It was summer and the water was warm—probably mid-eighties—so at first it wouldn't be so bad. But it would get worse; Rich knew that from experience.

Fifteen years ago, they'd lost a greenhorn over the rail. The kid had been lucky; he'd clung to the support struts until they found him the next morning. It had been mid-August and the water was eighty-six degrees, but by the time they'd hauled him, pale and dripping, from the gulf, his core temperature was down to ninety-five and he'd stopped shivering: hypothermia.

So Rich imagined Hal and Buggy, Steve Wilkins, Ben Rogers, Eddie Haught, Lester Crane, Billy Duval, and all the others floating in that bathtub water as it slowly drained the life from their bodies. He imagined them sinking, one by one, as their muscles seized and consciousness drifted away. The gulf was deep; it could take days or even weeks for a body to reach the bottom. Of course, once it got there, it wouldn't be much of a body anymore. The fish and crabs and shrimp and worms would've turned it into a skeleton with little pennants of flesh flapping in the deep-sea currents. He pictured their empty eye sockets, and garish, lipless grins, saw them jerk and spin as eels flayed the remaining strings of gristle from their denuded bones.

The phone rang and Rich nearly jumped out of his chair.

"Ford here," said Rich.

It was Arthur Trimble, Glasco's CEO. "Richard! I'm driving to the airfield right now. I'll be there within the hour. This thing has to be handled right. When the shareholders find out we've lost *Southern Digger*, I want them to hear it from us, not some goddamned internet tabloid."

Rich tried to respond, but the words caught in his throat.

Trimble's voice softened uncharacteristically. "Listen, I know you and Hal were close. Hell, sometimes he talked like you were his own son. But you gotta put that aside right now. Follow procedure, do it right, and, God willing, we'll see Hal and his crew again real soon." There was a moment of silence then Trimble's gruffness returned. "I'll see you in an hour."

He hung up.

Gentleness from Trimble was unsettling, but his words made sense. Follow procedure—it's what Hal would've done, what he was probably doing right now. The man was by-the-book through and through. He always had twice the required safety gear and constantly drilled his crew on emergency procedures. If *Southern Digger* had gone down, Hal would know what to do and how to get it done.

A sharp knock pulled Rich from his thoughts.

Chuck Burgess, operations deputy, and Bernard Jackson, head of logistics, came in. Vince followed. Chuck, Bernie, and Vince were the top three ranking officers behind Rich and he was glad they were here.

"Everything alright Rich?" asked Chuck.

"No. Sit down." Rich motioned to the couch.

They sat.

Rich's eyes shifted from Chuck to Bernie and back. This wasn't going to be easy. He took a breath and continued. "It's the Brazos survey team. Thirty minutes ago we lost contact with Hal and haven't been able to raise him since. *Southern Digger* is now listed as missing."

Chuck's mouth fell open. "What happened?"

"I don't know," said Rich. "We were talking about the drill string then all hell broke loose. For a second it was all static and explosions. After that—nothing. Just... nothing."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Chuck. "You don't think she went down, do you?"

Rich debated with himself then decided to give it to them straight. "Hal was scared—screaming. I've never heard him sound like that. The last thing he said was 'abandon ship.' I think we need to prepare for the worst." He turned to Vince. "What did the Coast Guard say?"

"Nothin' good. Planes are grounded and they can't launch a cutter for forty-eight hours."

"Check back every fifteen minutes and tell me as soon as they can get a plane in the air. Trimble and some execs are on their way right now, so we have to come up with some answers in a hurry. Chuck, Bernie, I'm gonna need information on all available drillships and platforms within a thousand miles. They need to be able to take over where *Southern Digger* left off. Call the other branches, get people out of bed, I don't care what you have to do. Everything's riding on the Brazos Formation. We can't fail."

There was a moment of silence, then Bernie, Vince, and Chuck set about their respective tasks.

Rich went over personnel rosters and began assembling a replacement crew. Trimble would want to continue the survey as soon as possible. The idea was distasteful to Rich—like prospecting on his best friend's grave—but he knew that business was business. If you're not drilling, you're dying. It was the unofficial company motto and he knew it was true.

As he worked, time slipped through his shell-shocked mind like water through a sieve. One minute stretched to ten, then sixty. His phone buzzed.

It was Trimble. “Ford! You gonna keep us waiting down here all night? Open the damn door!”

Rich flew from his chair. He shouted over his shoulder on the way out. “Trimble's here. Head up to the conference room and be ready to brief.”

“But I'm wearin' boxers,” Vince shouted after him.

Vince never knew when to quit. Or shut up. Still, the edge of Rich's lip quirked into a half smile as he boarded the elevator. The smile was a thin, weak thing, though, and it was gone before he reached the first floor.

Rich jogged across the lobby to admit a motley executive team, clearly assembled at the last minute. Trimble must've come from an event because he was decked out in a full-on tux. Beside him, in a crumpled black business suit, was Henry Meecham: corporate cronie numero uno or, as Vince like to call him, The Brown-nose Bandit (or Cornhole Commando, if the notion took him). Henry was flanked by Barry Jenkins in blue jeans and a wrinkled sweatshirt. Barry was another corporate puke, but not quite as bad as Meecham. Jenkins and Meecham were no surprise. They'd spent the last two years angling for a regional manager slot. Now there was blood in the water and they were hoping for a feast.

But the woman behind Jenkins and Meecham *was* as surprise.

It was Anita. *His* Anita.

(Well... she used to be his.)

It was like looking back in time twenty years, at a face he never, in his wildest fantasies, thought he would see again. It raised a whirlwind of regret and desire that thundered through his mind and left him feeling lightheaded and strange.

But this was no time to fall apart over the past. Rich collected himself. He turned to Trimble and forced a smile. “Mr. Trimble, it's good to—”

“Cut the crap and lets get to work.” Trimble stomped to the elevator, followed by the others. Rich hung back, cutting sidelong glances at Anita. She'd recognized him, that much was in her eyes, but otherwise—nothing. She hadn't looked at him twice.

Rich didn't blame her.

Trimble burst into the conference room and jabbed a finger at the table. “Sit down. We got a lot to do.”

Meecham, Jenkins, and Anita sat on one side. Rich crossed to the other and sat with Vince, Bernie, and Chuck—a face-off. The air between them was taut.

Trimble took the head of the table. “We haven't heard from *Southern Digger* in over two hours and based on Hal's final communication, I'm assuming the worst: that she's gone down. I want a replacement team out there ASAP. We haven't had a big strike in years and we need the Brazos Formation to pay off. Before we start talking courses of action, though, there's one thing I need to know. Rich, what's the status of the survey data? I hope to God you got it uploaded before we lost contact.”

And there it was: quick and dirty, like a sucker punch to the gut. Rich could feel his career slipping away.

Across the table, Meecham and Jenkins eyed him hungrily, like sharks. They could feel it too.

Well, they might get his job, but they wouldn't get the pleasure of seeing him squirm. Rich straightened, set his face against Trimble the way he would against a winter gale, and answered the question.

“No. The storm damaged our equipment mid-transfer and the uplink failed. Unless we find *Southern Digger*, the data is gone.”

Meecham's eyes gleamed.

The silence was absolute.

Trimble kept one hell of a poker face—you had to at his level—but Rich saw through it. Surprisingly, what he saw wasn't anger. It was more like disappointment—almost a sour look, like Trimble had accidentally taken a slug of turned milk.

Rich had been in management long enough to know that look and realized what was happening: the board of directors was forcing Trimble's hand.

Trimble was about to do something he hated, but he didn't have a choice. Rumor had it that Trimble disliked Meecham and Jenkins as much as anyone. It made sense; Trimble was old-school. He'd come up through the ranks—started as a greenhorn working rigs in Alaska and made his way to the top. The guy was a rock, and he knew oil top to bottom, inside and out. He was also a dying breed. The new execs were all college boys with business degrees from places like Cornell, Brown, and Princeton. They didn't know an oil well from a Porta-John, but that didn't matter. They knew *business* and these days, shareholders put more stock in Powerpoint presentations and organization strategies than actual knowledge.

Meecham was popular with several members on the board. So was Jenkins.

It all snapped into focus for Rich. He could see it now: Trimble before the board, glowering, wishing he could shove a drill string up their pampered, flabby asses. He'd been given an ultimatum. If Ford gets the data, good. He stays. If not, give the job to Meecham, maybe Jenkins. Your choice.

But Rich hadn't gotten the data. He'd gotten screwed. Worse, so had Hal and the rest of *Southern Digger's* crew. Big time. Meecham or Jenkins would be in way over their head just learning the branch. They wouldn't have near enough time for the recovery. And it was going to take a lot of time. This wasn't just Rich's job on the line, it was the lives of Hal and every man on *Southern Digger*.

Trimble cleared his throat. "Rich, you put me in a hell of a spot. Hell of a spot. Hal thought the world of you, told me the Brazos mission was your baby as much as anyone, but this mess with the survey data, well, you really goosed the goat on this one. I'm afraid I don't have any choice but to take you off the project. I'm sorry Rich. I truly am, but my hands are tied." Trimble really did look sorry. He looked terrible—almost as bad as Rich felt.

Rich wasn't shocked; he'd seen this coming, but he was surprised at just how bad it hurt. Failure wasn't something he did. He'd worked his ass off to get where he was—had outworked and outperformed each and every man who'd ever challenged him. And now, to lose it all to these two smirking, pansy kiss-asses was a blow his pride couldn't bear. It might have, if Hal's life wasn't on the line, but that threw everything over the edge.

Rich lurched from his seat. He wasn't sure what he had in mind, but his fists were balled and Meecham's jaw was just within range.

Before he got halfway, though, Vince's heavy hand fell on his shoulder and sat him back down.

Trimble looked uncertain (a rarity). Jenkins looked downright scared (not so rare), and Meecham's face had turned white as milk.

Anita broke the silence. "Mr. Trimble, if I may?"

Trimble jumped a little, like he'd sat on a tack. "Yes, yes, of course." He turned back to Rich's side of the table. "Looks like I got ahead of introductions. This is Anita Morgan. She's our disaster management consultant from Hardle and Felders. Go ahead Ms. Morgan."

She was every bit as beautiful as Rich remembered: the dark eyes, full lips, and long, wavy hair. But there was something else, too. It was in the set of her jaw, the way her eyes cut across Trimble, Meecham, and Jenkins, commanding their attention. When those eyes cut his way, he looked down.

"Thank you Mr. Trimble. I've been doing this for over twenty years: forest fires, oil spills, industrial accidents, even a nuclear meltdown. The problems are different, the companies are different, but the strategy is the same: stability. Our data shows that leadership change following a disaster leads to, on average, an eight percent increase in mitigation costs and ten percent increase in time for return to normal production activities. There are always exceptions, and sometimes management *is* the problem,

but unless Mr. Ford has a history of unsatisfactory performance or safety violations, I would recommend against any changes at this time.”

It was all Rich could do to keep his jaw from hitting the table. With their history, he expected Anita to kick his ass, not save it.

Trimble's jaw worked like a cow chewing its cud. His mouth turned down in a thoughtful frown. He was thinking—*reconsidering*.

But Meecham wasn't going to let it go that easily. “Mr. Trimble—Arthur—”

Trimble reddened slightly at the familiarity, but Meecham prattled on, oblivious.

“The level of negligence Rich demonstrated by failing to upload the data in time is completely unacceptable.” He turned to Anita. “Ms. Morgan, I understand we need stability—it's a good idea—and I can provide that stability. I'm a familiar face and I've got good rapport with the people here.”

Vince snorted under his breath.

Meecham rambled on. “So I really think it would be best for the branch and the company if I took the reigns here.”

Trimble's eyes flicked to Rich, like a judge waiting for the defense's rebuttal.

This is what Rich had been hoping for. His plan was a long-shot, but it was the only shot he was going to get. He stood.

“Sir, I'm not gonna stand here and make excuses. This is my mission and whatever goes wrong is ultimately my responsibility. But fixing it is *also* my responsibility. If *Southern Digger* went down, and at this point that seems likely, then we have to get the data back.”

Meecham scoffed. “Are you kidding? If the ship went down, the computers are fried. You'll never get it back.”

Rich pointed at Meecham and looked Trimble in the eye. “*That* is exactly why you need to keep me on. What Henry doesn't know, and I'll bet Barry doesn't know it either, is that Hal and I put together a failsafe. Every bit of data is backed up on CD ROM—completely waterproof and unaffected by deep-sea water pressure. The information is there; we just have to get it back.”

Meecham looked like he'd just been kicked in the nuts. It was beautiful.

Rich pressed his advantage. “We've got the drilling platform *Sonny Boy* and the drill ship *Lucky Strike* right here in the shipyards. Right now they're being outfitted for initial production but with a little extra money and manpower we can retrofit *Sonny Boy* to recover the survey data. Once we have it, *Lucky Strike* can continue the survey and *Sonny Boy* will be in position to start production once the permits go through.”

Trimble leaned in. “How much time do you need?”

“Four weeks.”

Trimble slapped the table. “Hot damn, Rich. That's some good thinkin'. I'm sold. You can stay, but listen.” He leaned forward again and his eyes grew deadly serious—bulldog eyes. “This is for all the chips. If you drop this thing down the shitter, it's your ass. It's my ass. It's all of our asses.”

Rich met Trimble's eyes. “You won't regret it.”

If Meecham looked like he'd been kicked in the nuts, Jenkins looked like his had been cut off. Vince, Bernie, and Chuck looked like the Cowboys had just won the Superbowl, and Anita was indifferent—all business.

Trimble moved on, following company procedure. He asked questions about the Coast Guard, manpower, materials, finance, and a half-dozen administrative details. Vince, Bernie, and Chuck were ready; they fired back answers like it was two in the afternoon instead of two in the morning.

Rich listened, but his eyes and mind kept drifting back to Anita. It had been twenty-five years since he'd left her—the single dumbest decision of his life. A colossal mistake. Of course, he hadn't known it at the time. He'd been twenty-one, infallible, invincible, and Glasco had just offered him a promotion to logistics foreman in the San Diego branch. That was great, except that he and Anita had just started living together in Tampa. So he'd made the tough decision and left her crying in his rear view mirror. It had taken him a few years to realize what he'd lost, but by then it was too late.

Rich had imagined seeing her again—a chance meeting in an airport or at the grocery store—and it was always good. Old wounds had healed. He apologized; she forgave.

But this wasn't like that at all. The old wounds may have healed, but looking at her was ripping them apart again. Thankfully, the meeting was almost over. She would leave with Trimble, and Rich could get back to putting this cluster-fuck in order.

Rich snapped back to the meeting when Trimble turned his way.

“Anything else for me, Rich?”

“No sir.”

“Good. Henry and Barry are coming back to Houston with me, but Anita's staying. I want her involved at every level. We haven't had anything like this happen since *Stinky Pete* went down off Anchorage thirty years ago, so most of us are doing this for the first time. We need her experience. I expect her to be involved in all decision making. Any questions?”

Rich shook his head, stunned into silence.

“Good. Now get out there and find Hal.” Trimble stood and turned to Meecham and Jenkins. “You boys ready to go home?”

They weren't, but they followed anyway, shuffling behind Trimble like beaten dogs as they skulked away.

The door slammed, leaving the conference room quiet and still. It was the kind of lull that followed summer thunderstorms, car accidents, or gunfire—like the air itself was recovering from the shock. Trimble had that effect. So did nearly losing your career.

Vince shattered the silence. “Whoo-ee! Son! Did you see the look on that brown-nosing sonnamabitch's face? Ha!” He slapped Rich on the back. “You sent 'em packin' with their tails between their legs. Damn! That's how it's done. So what's next?”

“Find *Southern Digger*,” said Rich. “That's top priority. Failing that, find the survivors.”

Anita cut in. “Have you contacted the Coast Guard base at Corpus Cristi?”

Vince answered. “Yeah, but they won't do shit 'til this storm passes.”

“Not even a cutter?”

“They won't have one ready for forty-eight hours,” said Rich.

Anita shook her head. “No, that's not right. They can do better.” She took out her phone and dialed. “Hello, this is Anita Morgan from Hardle and Felders. Can you connect me with Captain Gabriel White? Yes, I know he's busy. Just tell him whose calling and he'll make time. Anita Morgan. Thanks.”

She waited, but not long. Her eyes came alive and a smile filled her voice. “Gabriel, how are you?”

Rich stiffened. That was the voice she used to use with him.

Anita continued. “Look, I'm sorry for calling so late, but I'm here with Glasco Oil. They just lost contact with a ship and someone told them it would be forty-eight hours before they could get a cutter.” A brief pause. “I know. That's what I said. Okay, great. Be right over.”

She ended the call.

“They're going to launch a C-130 as soon as the weather clears. Also, Captain White is ordering a cutter to make ready immediately. How soon can we get there?”

“That's what, an hour and a half away?” asked Chuck.

“Faster if we take the chopper, as long as the weather holds.” said Bernie.

The weather held, and thirty minutes later the helicopter was spinning up for takeoff.

Rich left Vince and Chuck behind to start work on the rescue expedition while he, Bernie, and Anita headed for the helipad.

On the way out, Anita excused herself to put on casual clothes—it was going to be a long night.

Rich let Bernie go ahead. He wanted a private word with Anita and this looked like the only chance he'd get for awhile. If he waited too long, he might lose his nerve.

She came out of the bathroom wearing blue jeans and a polo. She'd put on a little weight over the last twenty years, but it looked good. Maybe a little too good; she caught him staring.

Her eyebrows arched. “Everything alright?”

Rich blushed. “I... just wanted to say thanks for saving my ass back there. Trimble was ready to give me the boot. You changed his mind.”

“Don't thank me. Thank the numbers—they're what saved you. I'm just doing my job.”

The indifference stung, but there was something artificial about it, something uncertain and thin, like scenery in a play. Anita was still mad at him—that was genuine enough—but the thinness made him wonder. How much had she been 'just doing her job,' and how much was something else? Who knew? Maybe the whole thing was just his imagination.

But he hoped it wasn't.

He followed Anita outside, keeping a studied silence.

Port Lavaca spread out below them as the helicopter rose and banked westward. Clouds loomed on the horizon but the sky overhead was clear. A full moon lit Port Lavaca Bay and the barrier islands beyond, but after that was darkness.

Rich stared at the gulf: a black void that drank the moonlight greedily, strangely menacing in its unquenchable thirst. His thoughts circled back to Hal and Buggy and the rest of *Southern Digger's* crew. It'd been three hours, and with no word, the ship was almost certainly gone. That left Hal and the others in the water. Rich hoped they could hang on a little longer, but at sea, nothing was certain.

The lines appeared so gradually, he didn't notice them at first. When he did, they'd grown to ranks of churning, silver cascades that stretched from horizon to horizon. It was like some enormous disembodied hand had raked its fingers across the gulf, gouging out huge, white furrows.

But they weren't furrows. They were foam crests crashing down enormous mountains of water.