

## PROLOGUE

### DHAHRAN, SAUDI ARABIA FEBRUARY 25, 1991

With air-raid sirens wailing all over Dhahran, Captain Jane Akers gunned her Humvee toward the harbor district, gripping the wheel tightly enough to turn her knuckles white. The real threat of the nightly Scud attacks, she decided, was not the missiles themselves. They either broke up in-flight or were knocked down by Patriot antimissiles. Far more dangerous was the ground war being fought by Saudi motorists. In their flowing robes and gas masks, they looked like giant hooded insects—and drove like madmen, totally ignoring oncoming vehicles as they scanned the skies for ballistic fireworks. Of course, if one of the vehicles she was battling for the road decided to hit her head-on, her own helmet might prove useful. Her gas mask, on the other hand, would probably be imbedded in her face. A death mask.

*No.* If she was going to die in the service of her country, it wouldn't be three hundred miles from the real action. Besides, if her life was to be aborted by a berserk motorist—Jane swerved out of the path of a careening truck—it ought to happen in Paris or Rome, where she would at least have eaten a decent last meal.

The truth was, on this Day Three of the ground offensive against Saddam Hussein's forces, Dhahranian drivers were not the only reason she wanted to be closer to Kuwait or southern Iraq. There she might be of some use.

"Don't get left in the dust," General Schwarzkopf had instructed his logistics chief, Lieutenant General William G. "Gus" Pagonis, in the early days of Desert Shield. And ever since Jane's arrival in Saudi Arabia six months ago, she and her colleagues in Pagonis's 22nd Support Command had worked eighteen-hour days to ensure that their supply lines could keep pace with any assault. In some cases, they were actually able to *outpace* an assault by setting up huge supply depots near the Iraqi border *before* the ground war was launched.

Right now, in her mind's eye, she could see armadas of Chinook transport helicopters crossing hundreds of miles of battlefront, to provide fuel, water, food and ammunition for the fighting advance. Backing up the Chinooks would be truck convoys crisscrossing the rocky desert with ammunition crates, boxed rations, tankloads of water, medical supplies, pallets of Pepsi, portable showers, latrines—even Abrams battle tanks.

In recent weeks Jane's "log team" had spent time working on the logistical problems posed by POWs. Now that Saddam's soldiers were surrendering by the battalion, hundreds of emptied trucks and buses would be filled for their return from the front with live cargo—captured Iraqis. Each of them would have to be cleaned and clothed, housed and fed, and given urgent medical attention.

Urgent—the word that accurately described all her assignments up to now. Every single day she'd felt useful in a way life had denied her previously. No doubt what she was in Dhahran to accomplish would also prove useful, but the assignment to mesh timetables with the logistics officer of the 14th Quartermaster Detachment, whose job would be to enter Kuwait as soon as the fighting stopped and set up large water purification units... well, it felt bland compared to what she'd been doing.

But this was the Army, and you did what they gave you to do.

*Right, Captain.* Jane saluted herself mentally and refocused. Her meeting, just up ahead in a converted-warehouse barracks in Khobar City, might not seem urgent right now, but Jane knew that if any segment of the war's logistics was out of sync with another, it would eventually create a problem.

Right now, just getting to her meeting, not three miles from the military air base, was becoming a problem, Jane saw, as she was yanked back to the street scene by several cars lane-jumping to get to the side of the road. She slowed the Hummer to watch as their drivers got out, all eyes raised toward an incoming Scud. The air-raid sirens kept up their frenzied whoop, as though there were actual danger. The next sounds would be the mighty kettledrum roar of a Patriot antimissile battery, then the sonic boom, followed by the midair interception of the Scud.

No roar. No boom. What in hell—

It wasn't possible! Jane peered up through the windshield, blinked at a fire streak racing across the desert night. Damn! The Scud was coming right toward her!

Behind the Hummer, tires screeched, metal crumpled. Jane veered sharply and pulled off the road. There was a lot of shouting in Arabic by robed figures running into the night. With an unfamiliar sense of helplessness, Jane followed the flaming trajectory as it slammed to earth beyond the other side of the road in a blinding orange flash. Her wide-wheelbased vehicle rocked in the blast wave, so it was impossible to tell if her body was shaking of its own accord. Then came a roar and a rain of sparks and shrapnel across the Humvee's roof and hood. She opened her eyes to see fiery debris falling onto a panel truck, which skidded across the road, then slammed into a parked taxi.

*You can't just sit here, soldier!* Jane wrenched open the door, scrambled out. People were scattering in all directions. A young man dodged across six lanes of highway to a chain-link fence already fringed with spectators. Beyond were red-and-yellow flames—in precisely the area of Khobar City where Jane was supposed to report. Darting through gaps in the chaotic traffic, she, too, raced across the road and joined the crowd at the fence. Where the Al Khobar warehouse-barracks had stood, she beheld an inferno.

At this hour a hundred people could easily have been inside. Suddenly she was in the belly of the war, and it was terrifying. Jane backed away from the fence, her body moving of its own accord, her mind having shut down rather than take in the incredible tragedy.

*Think!* Her assignment voided, plainly what she had to do was get back in the Hummer and get the hell out of there. Make room for others—*qualified* others—who would be converging on the disaster scene. They'd be arriving soon—emergency crews, MPs and Saudi police, firefighters, medics. People trained for nightmare duty. She wasn't! She'd only be in the way.

She was starting back toward the Hummer when shouting off to her right commanded her attention. Several men were crowding through a gap in the chain-link fence, forcing it wider, beckoning others to follow them.

They didn't mean her; they weren't even looking her way. She turned and kept walking. Stopped. *You're going through that hole and do what you can to help, soldier.* Her face clenched, Jane hurried to join the group squeezing through the opening in the fence. Her gas mask hood caught and tore, rendering it useless. She yanked it off and was assaulted by a sulfurous stench. Conventional explosive. Hope to God the warhead was, too. Without the mask goggles, she could see better. She wasn't at all sure that qualified as a blessing.

She made her way through the dark field to a narrow road—and stopped. Beyond the road, the blaze held dominion. Through coiling flames and showering sparks was visible a twisted skeleton of steel girders. The warehouse roof and walls were gone, evaporated in the explosion.

In a moment her fear likewise evaporated, and Jane advanced into the searing heat, through a maze of parked trucks and paralyzed onlookers. A muscular black man, wearing only his dog tags and underwear, stumbled against her, swiping at blood on his chest. Jane shouted at him, asking how she could help. The man pointed to his ear, shook his head, lurched on. Two more men sprinted past her, one naked, both wounded and screaming. Other dazed survivors, men and women, sagged against rescuers now streaming out of the barracks beside the leveled warehouse.

A gas-masked soldier dashed toward the blaze, stopped short, backpedaled—yelling “Gunfire!” Jane heard it, too, over the crackle—a sound like M16 rifle bursts. But more likely stored ammunition, she told herself, exploding in the flames. Which didn’t make it any less deadly.

She looked in vain for ambulances, helicopters, paramedics. It didn’t make sense just to be part of a swarming crowd. But what could she do? The answer came hopping toward her through swirling smoke—a fire-grimed GI, propelled on one bare foot; nothing showing below the bloodied cuff fringe of his other pants leg. He fell just out of Jane’s reach. Instinctively she stepped forward and levered him up onto his good leg, bracing him with her shoulder and arm, then screamed for help.

A tall, long-jawed man in T-shirt and blue jeans came out of nowhere. “You hang on,” he told the GI. “We’re gonna get you help. I can carry him, Captain. You just tell me where.”

But Jane had no idea where. And there was no time to plan this one out. The badly wounded youth, now cradled in the big stranger’s arms, could bleed to death in minutes. She scanned the rubble-strewn, vehicle-clogged street. Beyond an overturned pickup was a school bus, dented by shrapnel, its yellow sides charred, the windows blown out—but at least it was resting on its wheels. If they could just get it going, she thought, it could bulldoze all the other wreckage out of its way.

“The bus!” she yelled. “The nearest hospital is just north of the airport—five minutes from here!”

The bus’s rear exit door was off its hinges. Jane jumped in and swept shattered glass from the nearest bench seat, not even feeling the sliver that ended up in the side of her hand. Her helper eased the young man down, then charged forward.

“No keys, Captain!” he called back. “But I think I can hot-wire it.”

“Do it!” Jane yelled. “But first give me your T-shirt so I can bandage this boy’s foot.” She had no time to entertain her panic as she wrapped a pressure bandage around the young soldier’s ankle stump.

He’d be okay for a little while. She glanced outside at the teeming street. A young woman in a bloody bathrobe, arm pressed against her chest, was staring blankly straight ahead of her. “Be right back!” Jane shouted.

She scrambled off the bus. “You hit?”

“Flying glass,” the woman said, eyes returning to that awful place. “Couldn’t pull it out to stop the bleeding.”

“Come on—inside—we’ll get you to the hospital.”

Settling her beside the one-legged soldier, Jane said, “Keep his leg elevated and keep talking to him. We’ll get you both to the hospital as fast as we can.”

She rushed forward. Her helper was on his back, wedged under the steering wheel, probing with a flashlight and swearing nonstop.

Never waste transportation space. Logistics 101. “How much time till you get this going?” she shouted. “There’s lots of people out there who could use a ride to the hospital.”

“It’ll take a few more minutes to get the son of a bitch rolling,” he growled back. “You round up some of those folks.”

Instituting a one-quick-glance triage system, Jane moved quickly and, with more strength than she had ever been called on to test, herded sixteen more injured people on board. Those who seemed less injured she enlisted to help her get others aboard. Several were in worse shape than the young man who’d lost his foot, but all looked as if getting to a hospital soon might save them.

There were still no emergency crews. Across the street others were hoisting survivors onto a flatbed truck.

The tall, shirtless man was in the driver’s seat now, bent forward, peering beneath the dash.

Jane glanced around. One soldier was weeping from his excruciating pain; a luckier one had passed out. “We gotta go now,” she yelled in the ersatz mechanic’s ear. “Or move everyone to that flatbed.”

The reply was a sizzling spark and a long spasm of grinding while he tromped on the gas pedal. Then the engine rumbled to life, shuddering the entire bus frame as they pulled into traffic. “Better tell me where we’re going, Captain.”

“Get us through that.” She pointed at the abandoned vehicles jamming the street ahead.

“Right. Tell everybody to hang on.”

A few minutes later, as they careened back onto Ahd Dhahran Street, nearing the hospital, Jane heard the distant thrash of choppers. Finally.

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It was over weak coffee in the canteen, only after they’d turned over their busload of patients to the hospital staff, that Jane found out the name of her volunteer bus thief—Cheval Johnson: “Chevy since the day I found out that cheval is horse in French and decided I’d rather be a car.”

“And what did you decide to be after that?”

Chevy laughed. “A pilot. Getting around, one way or the other, that’s my motto.”

He filled in a few details. A commercial pilot and major in the Air Force Reserve, he was currently flying C-141s for the Military Airlift Command and had been billeted next door to the destroyed barracks.

“Nice job of hot-wiring,” she said, sipping from the steaming cup of coffee.

“My misspent youth finally paid off.”

“Sorry about commandeering your T-shirt,” she said, laughing as she pointed at the hospital gown he had put on in its place. Despite his skewed, youthful smile, Jane guessed that Chevy Johnson had ten or twelve years on her twenty-five. But this was no day to bank on a guess. Hadn’t her own face, caught in a hospital restroom mirror, shocked her? What she’d just witnessed seemed scrawled all over it.

Bodies were still arriving at the hospital, more going to the morgue now than Emergency. All those she and Chevy had helped evacuate were still alive on arrival, although one young man was burned so badly, the doctor upstairs told them his chances of pulling through were not good.

“What are you gonna do when all this is over?” Chevy asked. “Make a career of it?”

“The Army? Don’t think so. Of logistics—what I’m doing here—definitely. That’s my thing, like getting around is yours.” She smiled. “Working here has been an extraordinary experience, but I don’t want to spend the next ten years waiting for another that comes close. So I’ll probably be looking for a job with a private company.”

“Like?”

“It almost doesn’t matter, at least not right away. Every business has logistical parts to their operation—and plenty of them are fouled up.” She grinned. “I like finding out how things work, then figuring out ways to make them work better. Later on, if I can prove my stuff in a company, or a big consulting firm, I may want to go out on my own. How about you, flyboy?”

“I’ll go back to flying commercial. I like the life. And, heck, I’ve invested a lot of time perfecting my drawl.”

“Well, if I ever hear you over the intercom at thirty-seven-thousand feet, I’ll knock on your flight deck door.”

“You do that, Captain Akers.”

That sounded like goodbye to her. She stood. “I’m going to check on some of our passengers.”

“I’ll come with you,” he said. “You always have so many thoughtful ideas in one day?”

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The badly burned young soldier was dead. “Damn,” Jane said. “Damn damn *damn*.”

He held her until she got her tears in check.

“Sorry,” she said, moving away. She glanced at her watch. Chevy had said he was hitching a ride with a reporter back to the air base. “Your ride must be waiting.”

“He’s probably still trying to get through to his editor.”

Jane definitely wasn’t in any hurry. She was waiting to be picked up by an NCO in her group and find out whether the logistics officer of the 14th had made it. Someone else would retrieve her Humvee. Even if she could get back to the vehicle, she felt way too shaky to drive.

They walked together toward the nearest bank of elevators. Halfway there, Chevy stopped her and kissed her on the cheek.

“What’s that for?”

“For you,” he said. “You’re quite a soldier, Jane. Just wanted to say that.”

“Back at you,” she said.

“And quite a lady,” he said, a slight hoarseness in his voice.

She had to tilt her face up to look him in the eye. The corridor was dimly lighted, but that wasn’t why their eyes fastened hard. Jane waited, surprised but not shocked by the shudder of desire that ran through her or by her sudden certitude that they would spend what was left of this night together. Somewhere. If there was a better way to obliterate a little of what they’d seen and heard, she didn’t know it.

She reached up to touch his rough-stubbed jaw. Her hand was captured by his in mid-air, her knuckles kissed. Their eyes remained locked.

“Oh, boy,” Jane breathed huskily, dropping her head onto his shoulder.

“I’ll get you back to base tomorrow.”

“Now who’s full of good—” Her eyes registered a wedding band on Chevy’s left hand, just inches from her face. She stiffened slightly.

Tracking her glance, Chevy grimaced. “Shoulda taken that off. No dice, right?”

She shook her head. “I just can’t, Chevy. I’m not making any judgments, it’s just that—”

“Hey, no explanations called for.”

And hers would certainly not have erased the awkwardness as they said their good-byes. At the last moment, he kissed her. On the forehead. Not quite what her body had had in mind. In her last glimpse of him, Chevy still wore a rueful smile.

A quarter of an hour later, she was being driven away by the wrong man, angry for the thousandth time at her father. If he hadn’t...

It was all such a long time ago, but she could still remember how stupidly the sun was shining as he drove off to work after the horrendous fight with her mother over *that woman*. Jane was not—*ever*—going to be the “other woman” and risk tearing some other family apart.

She felt a sting and mindlessly rubbed the place on her palm. *Ouch*. She looked, found a sliver of glass. She had no idea where she’d acquired it. But it felt right. A *little* pain never hurt anyone.