

## PROLOGUE

One-third of the way between Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Alabama's Mobile Bay, perched high above the sandy underwater flats of the Mexican continental shelf, is an abandoned oil-drilling platform. On this day, another in a weeklong series of clear days and gentle seas, a group of men and one woman were onboard from an American commercial diving company, Gulf Divers.

The unfiltered tropical sun made all exposed metal hot to the touch, but fortunately the heat was accompanied by the calm weather conditions that the company had patiently waited for. The three divers and their small support crew were to perform a cutting operation on the bottom at 600 feet, near the edge of the continental shelf just south of where the sea floor plummeted to the abyssal plain 4500 feet below.

The six workers were the only living things on the platform, except for a family of black-winged cormorants that seemingly took pride in fouling every square inch of the rusting steel platform with their pungent white feces.

The cormorants would return from feeding and dry their feathers by extending their wings straight outward. To the Cajun Jimmy Breaux, the most pious and literate of the three divers, the look of the three adult male cormorants simultaneously drying their wings on the highest reaches of the platform reminded him of Rembrandt's *The Three Crosses*, the crucifixion scene on the hill of Golgotha. For Jimmy, it was an omen — a bad omen.

His observation, voiced during their first day on the decaying platform, had so far set the tone for this diving salvage job. Of course, the unavoidable ammonia stench of a decade's accumulation of avian excrement made it difficult for the crew's mood to be anything other than morose.

Outside one of the rusting buildings sitting atop the oil platform was a rack of beige, eight-foot-long gas storage bottles with paint flaking under the assault of tropical ultraviolet radiation. A gas compressor was noisily chugging in an effort to keep the gas bottles fully charged in the face of the gas flows tumultuously exhausting 600 feet below. That gas, roiling the surface of the water about 20 feet away from one of the platform legs, was comforting to the topside crew, because it meant the men working far below had something to breathe.

Inside the building the diving supervisory team was sitting at a console controlling the pressure in the long umbilical hose dropping over the side of the platform into the clear Gulf Waters below. The three-man topside team was watching a television image coming from a helmet-mounted camera perched atop a bright yellow commercial diving helmet belonging to the diver on the seabed below. Jimmy, the bellman, was in the diving bell about 25 feet from where the outside diver was working. He was not on camera, but he was talking both to the diver in the water and to topside personnel.

The air supply umbilical was mated with other umbilicals carrying audio and video signals, and with steel strength members making a combined umbilical the size of a man's fist. In Navy and commercial salvage and underwater repair jobs, that helmet and the long umbilical to which it was attached constituted the diver's lifeline. Like a baby in his mother's womb, the diver was dependent upon the oxygen being delivered through that umbilical and that usually very reliable supply of fresh gas it provides.

But commercial diving is a dangerous business. By watching pressure gauges and adjusting the pressure driving the gas through the umbilical to the diver in the water, the bellman must

not only make sure that the working diver is getting enough gas but also act as a rescue diver if the diver runs into trouble.

The umbilical bundle originating at the diving shack, the portable shipping container from which diving operations were conducted, rose up to a crane before dropping straight down to the water's surface and, below there, to a diving bell suspended just off the sea floor. Marcus Jaffee, a country boy from near Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Jimmy had been carried to the work site while remaining inside the diving bell. While Jimmy stayed behind, Jaffee had exited through a bottom hatch once he was near the bottom. His helmet was connected to the bell by another umbilical.

He was using a cutting torch to make cuts in a large rusted steel structure. Since it was almost completely dark at 600 feet due to the absorption of daylight by the deep water, the sun-bright flame cast surreal shadows away from the metal structure. This was a type of cutting job that he had done many times before, and so he was relaxed, even though he was working hard.

He and Jimmy were good friends. They'd been diving as a team for almost three years, a long time in the commercial diving business. On land you could see that Jaffee was a handsome man with light blue eyes peering from under dark, disheveled hair. In his helmet, however, the oral nasal mask surrounded his nose and mouth, leaving only his eyes and a few stray strands of hair showing through his faceplate. While cutting underwater, he placed a dark lens over his faceplate to protect his eyes from the bright light of the cutting torch. When the protective lens was in place, no one could see into the helmet and, except for the progress of his cutting, he could see very little outside.

Sometimes when a diver is working in the almost total darkness, with an entire ocean behind him, he gets an uncomfortable feeling of being watched. Jaffee was getting that feeling now. Strongly.

Some primal sense deep in his vulnerable body was sending alarm signals to his subconscious mind, signals causing his heart and breathing rate to increase and the skin on his back to crawl, but the only thing he consciously felt was confusion and a sense of dread. Something was not right.

He secured the oxygen flow to his torch and raised his dark filter. The topside crew saw him stop cutting, a cessation not all that unusual, but they wondered why his helmet camera was now pointing away from his work, pointing out into the darkness to his right.

Topside called over the helmet communication line, "What's up, Marc? Taking a breather?" Jimmy, alerted by the topside call, scanned the gauges for abnormal indications. He leaned closer to the gas panel for a better view; the gauge needles were exactly where they should be.

For an instant the camera on Jaffee's helmet recorded what he saw in the feeble light 600 feet down: It looked like a shimmering bubble reflecting the last vestiges of surface light. Neither Jaffee's eyes nor the camera's iris had time to react to the darkness before disaster struck. A pressure pulse instantly squeezed Jaffee's chest just as he was about to speak.

At the same moment, Jimmy was thrown violently against the diving bell's gas panel and knocked unconscious. A deep gash on his forehead quickly coated his face with blood. The diving bell lights that had been illuminating Jaffee's worksite went dark a second after Jimmy's head smacked into the gas panel.

Stunned into near unconsciousness by the pressure wave, Jaffee couldn't comprehend why his next breath was one of water. His helmet, forcibly ripped off his head, had disappeared, and he had nothing to breathe. The fear of drowning blocked every other thought entering his brain.

For a few moments of desperation he tried to head to the surface, but he had pushed off only a few feet when the umbilical, clipped into his harness and attached to the diving bell, held him down. In a flash of lucidity he realized he had to get back to his diving bell, where there was breathable gas. But as he swiveled his head, he saw only blackness — no bell and no rescue diver — and then he panicked. Every human survival strategy that nature had ever created was working at once, automatically, in dire emergency mode, but the result was chaos.

Shocked initially into paralysis, the topside tenders felt the old platform, groaning noisily, shudder beneath them, and they saw on the video monitor that the helmet camera was drifting lazily against the metal structure. There were no breathing sounds — only a strange gurgling followed by noise, like static.

At about this time acoustical signals began arriving at four military acoustic listening stations in the Gulf: one at High Island 389, a commercial gas production offshore platform in 250 feet of water at the Texas Flower Gardens deep water reef; another in Tampa; and a third in shallow water west of Key West. Those three stations were tied through encrypted burst transmissions to the National Security Agency (NSA) in Fort Meade, Maryland. A fourth station had sensors at the base of Stage One, a submerged research platform sitting in 100 feet of water just south of Panama City Beach, Florida. Its signals were relayed to a small concrete building surrounded by barbed wire, a building unobtrusively sitting just west of the entrance to the popular Saint Andrew's State Park.

Within a few seconds the topside crew snapped out of their paralysis, and the dive supervisor, futilely screaming into the intercom, was trying to raise both the bellman and the diver. Realizing that the shudder they had felt may have been associated with their loss of communications to Jaffee and Breaux, the entire topside crew was now in a panic. If Jaffee had made it back to the bell, he would have come up on the bell intercom. But it, like the helmet intercom, was silent.

The dive supervisor switched to the emergency sound-powered phone and buzzed the phone in the distant chamber.

“In the bell, if you can hear me, recover the diver, close the hatch, and prepare for bell recovery to the surface.”

Cassie, the pretty 30-year-old blonde handling the communications, began sobbing as the horror of the situation became apparent. She, and the rest of the topside crew, hoped that perhaps the bell communications were merely damaged by whatever had caused the shudder. Maybe Jaffee had made it to the bell and climbed in, and then he and Jimmy would have closed the bottom hatch. Maybe they were just waiting for the bell to be winched to the surface. Once on the surface, they would be transferred under pressure into the recompression chamber to start their three-day saturation decompression — a start earlier than they had anticipated, but at least they would be safe. That was the unspoken hope of the crew.

The dive supervisor knew that if Jaffee had made it to the chamber to get air, and if he and Jimmy didn't have the strength to completely seal the bell, then fulminant decompression sickness caused by raising the bell to the surface would kill them both. Their blood would fill with bubbles from the change in pressure, just like a can of soda does when it has been opened after being shaken. Their hearts and the large vessels in their brains would fill with helium, quickly causing loss of consciousness and death.

Since no one has ever survived that manner of dying, no one knows whether that type of death is uncomfortable or not, but both divers would certainly have known that they were

doomed as soon as the bell left the bottom for the surface. On the way up, they would have maybe ten minutes to contemplate their fate before their bubbling blood would have rendered them unconscious.

A third diver, a safety diver on the platform, had quickly donned his helmet as soon as the trouble started. No one had noticed until he came up on the communication channel.

“I’m ready to go boss. Launch me.”

“No, stop.” The supervisor’s voice was clear and strong, well-practiced for emergencies.

“Stand down. You only have 300 feet of umbilical. You won’t even be able to see them.”

“Maybe I can’t,” the diver shouted over his microphone, “but I won’t let them drown!”

And with that, he stepped off into air, falling vertically to the water surface. His momentum carried him about 20 feet under, and there he stopped with the slack gone from the umbilical.

The crewman in charge of supplying the diver with umbilical looked to the supervisor for direction. The supervisor shook his head, indicating that no more umbilical would be given.

“I’m not risking another diver.”

The umbilical tender, risking insubordination, yelled back, “But he’s the safety diver!”

“I’m the boss for a reason, dammit. He’s no good to anybody at 600 feet, even if we had another 300-foot umbilical.”

On hearing that conversation, Cassie felt the blood drain from her head, and a wave of nausea swept over her. Jaffee was being left to die.

The topside supervisor had no alternative. After enough time had passed for the diver to be recovered and the bell hatch secured, he ordered the winch operator to start bringing up the bell. All the topside personnel knew the seriousness of this action, and they silently prayed that the hatch on the bell was sealed.

The old winch was struggling to bring the bell up at one foot per second, 60 feet per minute — a rate at which the entire ascent would take about ten minutes. Topside also knew that even if Jaffe had made it back to the relative safety of the bell and had inhaled water when the helmet came off, he would probably be dead before the ten minutes was up — unless Jimmy had somehow been able to do CPR all the way up.

Two minutes into the ascent Jimmy Breaux regained enough consciousness to realize that he was watching bizarre, bright orange geometric figures floating against a black background. The contrast between the intense orange and black was remarkable, and somehow the shapes seemed to hold some cosmic significance, but he had no idea what it was. Then the shapes spoke with strange, almost computer-generated voices.

“*I am so sorry,*” they said, seemingly in chorus. “*This was not supposed to happen.*”

Not supposed to happen, Jimmy thought, puzzled. What the hell does that mean? What’s not supposed to happen?

Then the shapes began making bubbling noises that seemed to get louder with each passing second. As his transition back to full consciousness was almost complete, he began to sense a diffuse light coming from above. And then he opened his eyes.

He was surprised to find himself lying flat on the cramped floor space looking up at a battery-powered emergency light that softly lit the inside of the bell. The bubbling sound continued, and as he turned his aching head to the side he could see his helium-oxygen atmosphere bubbling down and out the open hatch of the diving bell.

That’s odd, he thought. Topside must be ventilating the bell. But he didn’t hear the noise of gas flowing.

Feeling a gentle sway, he saw that the umbilical passing through the hatch was jerking and running as if a large fish were caught on the end of it.

He didn't realize that the combination of ocean currents and the flow of water past the rising bell was turbulently passing Jaffe's body, pushing it randomly to and fro.

The reality of what was happening did not register on Jimmy's groggy brain until he pulled himself to his feet and wiped the blood from his eyes, blood turned black from the red emergency lighting. With some effort he got the bell's depth gauge into focus. It read 400 feet. Hadn't they been at 600 feet? Had he lost track of the depth where they had been working?

Then, with horror, he realized the truth: They were on their way up. The bubbling was caused by the gas in the bell expanding and bubbling out the bell's open door. Their bodies had been saturated on a helium-oxygen atmosphere at 600 feet, and they were being brought to the surface. He shouted into the chamber, "Stop! You're killing us!"

Remembering that he had to use the communication panel, he grabbed the switch on the communications box, "Topside, stop the ascent! Stop — you're killing us!" But no one heard his cry as it reverberated inside the ball-shaped diving bell.

This is what those voices meant. This is what was *not* supposed to happen, he realized, clear-headed at last. Then in a mix of terror and anger he shouted again,

"Who the fuck's here? Who spoke to me?"

As he felt the right side of his body becoming numb, an image of the three cormorants perched on the peak of the oil platform flashed into his mind. A gas bubble, resulting from the rapid decompression, was forming in his cerebral arteries. The bubble lodged in the left half of Jimmy's brain, quickly causing the numbness to progress, within seconds, to paralysis. His heart pounding in terror, Jimmy Breaux collapsed on the floor as he realized that his life was ending — and he was powerless to prevent it.

Ten minutes after the ascent had begun, the bell became visible about 20 feet below the surface, and the standby diver swam over to render assistance. As it reached the surface, the hoist operator stopped the winch and waited for the safety diver to report.

When the safety diver surfaced, he was holding Jaffe's limp body in his arms. As they had all feared, Jaffe was bareheaded.

Cassie began sobbing uncontrollably.

The diving supervisor asked the safety diver, "What about Jimmy?" When the diver didn't answer, the supervisor dived in with his clothes on.

Disturbed by the commotion below, the three black cormorants flew off their perch to find food. The shadow of one passed over the diving bell containing the grotesquely swollen body of Jimmy Breaux.