



## CHAPTER ONE

Reid Matthews climbed a hundred and fifty feet of the derrick before stopping to catch his breath. The March air was especially refreshing in the Gulf of Mexico tonight. He looked up: The stars were as thick as sequins on a black evening dress. The navigational lights on the crown at the top of the derrick looked a mile away. He knew it was only forty-five feet.

He looked down, vaguely aware that his weathered hands grasped even harder the cold rung of the steel ladder. The rig floor of the *Sea Breeze* was as well lighted as any nighttime football game, and everyone was busy: Some were working the tongs used to uncouple drill pipe; others were mopping slippery fluids from the drill floor. That still left a small army of workers engaged in the hundreds of important jobs required to drill a hole two hundred miles from the closest land and in a water depth of more than three thousand feet.

At one time or another in his day, Reid had done nearly all of the jobs the men and women below were doing. At this moment he wished he was back on the rig floor and hadn't volunteered to take a look at the crown block. But the young toolpusher had couched his request as a challenge. He was calling out the senior vice president of the company.

Reid easily could have resisted the challenge but was bored and wanted the exercise. Besides, at the top of the derrick, he would be closer to God. And he had a question. It was a personal one, the answer to which he figured he already knew. He just needed to go ahead and do something about it.

He started to climb again, then stopped when he noticed the crane operator on the new Liebherr crane drop a hook over the side of the rig to retrieve something. Whatever it was, it was quickly hoisted from the ocean onto a supply boat and into a large wire basket used by the rig to dump scrap metal and equipment. Later, the junk basket would be transported to shore based facilities for disposition and handling.

Reid nodded approval. The crane operator had seen something that had fallen overboard. He'd see about it later.

He was still looking at the ocean when he saw an object he couldn't quite make out. He was up too high to see it clearly and the moonlight was causing the water below to glitter. He squinted. The object seemed to be self-propelled, moving at a constant rate of speed. Then it stopped. It looked like it could be the turret of a submarine. When he looked again, it was gone.

Reid shook his head, guessing he was just seeing things. He started to climb again and was within a few feet of the crown of the derrick when the rig shuddered violently, causing his right foot to slip from the ladder. He bashed a shin on a rung and when he recoiled, his forehead smacked steel. Dizziness as thick as a heavy sheet of visqueen blanketed him.

He thrashed wildly at the visqueen with one hand and held on furiously to the ladder with the other. As he was regaining his footing, he glimpsed a blinking light above.

Reid fought to stay conscious by focusing on the blinking, rotating light. There was something important about it. And it was making an awful, squawking sound.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Reid said loudly. "The well's kicked."

And if the kick wasn't controlled quickly enough it would become a blowout. Then, only a small electrical spark created from mere friction would be all it'd take to ignite the natural gas *blown* from the formation, and everyone aboard would be turned to ash. Later, the rig itself would melt in a fireball larger than a square mile in diameter.

Reid blinked to clear his vision. On the rig floor everyone was scrambling to get to their emergency stations. They'd be scared. And so was he, evidenced by the fact that his stomach had splashed its scorching contents on his throat.

He scrambled down the derrick, though it seemed to him the viscosity of the air had changed to that of sixty-weight crude oil and that he was having to force his way inch by inch. He was twenty feet above the monkey board before he took the time to look down again.

The derrickman was still on the monkey board racking the last stand of pipe so he could get down to the rig floor where it was decidedly safer. Vernon Haydell was a twenty-year company man, an experienced hand, but he was moving too quickly.

Reid saw that Vernon was about to get himself trapped between two stands of pipe. He yelled. It was too late.

Vernon's left arm and leg were crushed, and he was stuck fast. Although injured and in great pain, he was trying to push the pipe aside with his right arm. The weight of the pipe was just too much.

Reid jumped from the last rungs of the ladder and dashed for Vernon. He placed his arm around him, then pushed at the stand of pipe. It moved, but not enough.

Reid drew a deep breath. This time his huge arm moved as inexorably as a bar of hot-rolled steel fresh from the mill's oven. The stand of pipe moved, clearing Vernon's arm and leg.

Reid carefully lowered him to the floor of the monkey board. "A second and I'll get us down from here."

"Leave me," Vernon said. "We're all going to die anyway."

"Probably," Reid said, putting on a pair of leather work gloves he had snatched from the back pocket of his khaki overalls. "But we're leaving here together." Reid knew this man and his family. One of his sons worked on another of the company's rigs.

Vernon moaned. "I can't stand up."

"You won't have to," Reid said. He then bent at the knees and scooped Vernon from the floor. As soon as he stood up, he tucked Vernon safely in his left arm and with the other disengaged the Geronimo line, a steel cable running a length of fifty feet from the monkey board to the drill floor.

Vernon said, "This ain't gonna work."

Reid paid no heed to what he had been told and slid down the Geronimo line with Vernon cradled in his arm.

When they got to the drill floor, a small group of men had gathered to help, along with two safety men with a canvas stretcher. As Reid lowered Vernon into the stretcher, he overheard Mike McCoy, a helicopter pilot from Petroleum Helicopters and a thirty-year veteran of the oilfield, telling the younger men that Reid Matthews was part Comanche Indian and had been called Three Feathers during the Vietnam War.

Reid wished everybody would stop talking about it. It took place a long time ago, in another lifetime, in another dimension, a dimension years later of nightmares and demons. And the demons would have won except for his grandfather, who knew of such things and how to exorcize them with old Comanche chants and magic.

Reid raced for the driller's console where he found the toolpusher and the driller huddled, consulting and examining the gauges on the driller's console. A company man from Pelican Oil stood behind them watching over their shoulders.

Reid had met the young man from Pelican only recently. Chad Wentworth was a new grad from LSU and a bit of a pain-in-the-ass. Young grads these days always seemed to think they knew more than they really did. Or maybe it had always been that way.

The first words Reid heard were the driller's: "There's nothing wrong here," Charlie said, turning to face Reid. "The well didn't kick all that much is what I'm trying to tell these two hardheads."

The toolpusher's face was grim, the muscles of his jaw bunched. "Something sure the hell happened," Alden said.

"What's the drilling status?" Reid asked.

"We were tripping out to—" Charlie said.

Wentworth interrupted. "Charlie left the drill pipe screen in the drill pipe."

"Hey, asshole," Charlie said. "I'm the one who first realized I'd made the mistake. I faced up to it and said I was sorry." He gazed at Wentworth with angry eyes. "You need to get over it. The problem here is that you had me pulling pipe too fast."

"Both of you stop it," Reid said, turning to face the toolpusher. "What's going on here, Alden?"

“We were tripping out to retrieve the screen. Charlie had pulled the first three stands when Wentworth ordered him to speed it up.”

“We were going to be all year pulling pipe,” Wentworth said.

Reid put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Son, be quiet for a moment, please.”

Alden went on. “We had pulled six stands when the rig rocked like crazy. I don’t think we’ve been pulled off location, though. But the well is flowing some.”

“Shut her in,” Reid said.

“What? Don’t do that,” Wentworth barked to Charlie.

“Consider it done,” Charlie said to Reid.

“You can’t do this,” Wentworth said angrily. “I’m in charge here. My company owns this well and it’s the one paying the bills.”

“Hush, son,” Reid said. “I’m hoping you haven’t already caused the well to be swabbed in.”

“There’s no data indicating a downhole condition that’s conducive to swabbing,” Wentworth said, rolling his eyes upward. “You people need to go back to school.”

“You’re right on both counts, but...” Reid said. Charlie and Alden looked at Reid intently. “Speeding up the tripping of the pipe may well have allowed gas to be swabbed into the well. My guess is that the reason the well is flowing is because of a reduction in well bore hydrostatic due to the swab gas.

“Get the mud man on the radio,” Reid said to Alden, “and find out why that alarm went off.”

A moment later Alden said, “He says everything’s okay now. The alarm went off when the rig tilted. The PVT thought we took on a big increase in mud volume and reacted accordingly.”

“In any case, keep the well shut in till we find out what’s going on here,” Reid said. “I’m going to the ballast room to see if anybody there knows what happened.”

Reid left the drill floor and was at the foot of the walkway leading to both the upper and lower decks of the rig when the rig’s electrical superintendent waved him over. Reid was in a hurry, but there was something desperate in the way Leroy was behaving.

“Hold up a minute,” Leroy said.

“Got only a second,” Reid said.

“Thought you might want to know that the same thing that happened tonight happened a month ago on the *Ocean Javelin*. The very same thing. The *Jav* suddenly rocked and rolled, then was quiet. No problem. No kick. Nothing.”

Reid frowned. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“I don’t know. I guess no one thought it was a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Reid said. “A good man got hurt tonight. And all of us got the peewaddie scared out of us.” Pause. “What else?”

“Well, there was a rumor—just a rumor, mind you—that it was a submarine and it had dragged one of the anchor chains a few yards.”

“A submarine?”

“The derrickman said he saw one, or thought he did, just minutes before the rig rocked. Roger Leeman ain’t no greenhorn. So if he said he saw one, I guess he saw one all right.”

Reid put his hand on Leroy’s shoulder. “Thanks for the info.”

“Do you think it could have been a submarine?” Leroy said.

“I don’t know. I’ll send some divers to check things out.”

As soon as Leroy was out of sight, Reid dashed up the walkway, taking three steps at a time. He had a crane operator he wanted to talk to—and now. Maybe the crane operator had seen something.

Reid was at his desk in his office the rig crew called the Dog House when the crane operator came in. He was a gangling man everyone called Pepper. Pepper’s eyes were dazed and had crow’s-feet at the corners, despite his being only thirty or so.

Reid thought Pepper had the look of someone who had run the gauntlet once too often. “Take a seat,” Reid said. “An hour ago I saw you pick up something from the ocean floor. What was that about?”

Pepper’s eyes suddenly became clear. His right forefinger started tapping the arm of the chair.

Reid hadn’t expected this sort of nervous reaction. He had asked the question only as a warmup to asking the one about seeing a submarine. Pepper hadn’t done anything wrong: He had done something right, and Reid had intended to tell him so.

The company had strict rules about throwing junk overboard, and if found, it was to be retrieved and disposed of properly.

Reid stared into Pepper's eyes and waited for an answer.

A long moment later Pepper said, "A bag of rags or something. I'm not sure."

The company bought huge quantities of rags, using them for all sorts of things. The rags came wrapped in bundles about the size of a square bale of hay.

Reid suspected Pepper was lying to him for some reason. "Why put it in the junk basket?"

It was another long moment before Pepper answered. "It was wet with sea water and all. I guessed it'd be useless after that."

The answer was sensible.

"What was the name of the boat you put it on?" Reid asked. "I don't think I've seen it before."

"The *Cassandra*. It's the boat that picks up junk baskets for us—or at least the one that does it for as long as I've been working for Tidal Wave Drilling."

"How long has that been?"

"Two months."

Reid figured it was now time to move on to the real question he had. "While you were picking up the bundle of rags, did you happen to notice anything off to your right about five hundred yards from the rig?"

Beads of sweat popped up on Pepper's forehead. And his forefinger tapped even faster on the arm of the chair. "No," he said, this time too quickly.

Reid was certain now that the man was lying. But why?

Reid decided to avoid a confrontation. Short of torturing the man, he didn't think he'd get anywhere asking more questions. Reid knew someone, though, who could get the truth out of him. The Cajun from Chackbay, Roland Guidry, the company's head of security. Roland could get the truth out of the most hardened politician—even during an election year.

Pepper was opening the door to leave when something occurred to Reid. "You said you've been with us two months. What other rigs have you been on?"

"The *Ocean Javelin*. A month ago."

As soon as Pepper was out of earshot, Reid put in a call to the rig's radio room. "Rick, get Roland Guidry on the line for me, please. And, yes, I know what time it is." Pause. "By the way, who owns the boat called the *Cassandra*?"

When Reid heard that the boat was owned by Singleton Enterprises, he clenched his fists and used a word of profanity he'd promised himself once to never use again. Now he feared other promises he'd made to himself would collapse under the weight of having to deal with Lyle Singleton and his professional thugs.



## CHAPTER TWO

Lyle Singleton, with a phone to his ear, waved Bruce Chimes into his office at a few minutes before eight o'clock. As Bruce took a seat, Lyle leaned back in his chair and puffed on a handmade Cuban cigar. Outside of his floor-to-ceiling window a foreign flagged ship on the Mississippi River moved by on its way past New Orleans to one of the plants upriver.

"You tell that goddamn captain he's getting the sub too close to the rigs," Lyle said. "And if he tweaks another anchor chain, he'll find his lead ass being used for an anchor. Out where the water's a mile deep." Lyle slammed down the phone.

He was expecting to hear from Bruce the latest report on the two companies Bruce was keen on acquiring—one a scrap dealer in Morgan City, Louisiana, the other, an equipment rental company in Houston, Texas.

These companies would help in laundering all of the new money coming in after the success of the submarine he had gotten from his China connection. It seemed to Lyle that the more money he made, the more companies Bruce had to acquire.

It took only a few minutes for Lyle to discover Bruce was not in his office to talk about acquiring companies. Bruce seemed to be cowering before him for some reason: He sat on the office couch with his chin slumped to this chest and with his eyes fixed on a spot on the floor only a few inches in front of his feet.

Lyle often expected to see men cower before him. Even when he was young, the other kids in the neighborhood were intimidated by him and found it easier to give in than to stand up. But Bruce was his cousin. They had grown up together.

As soon as Bruce started talking about stepping down from the company and about his being in love with Kelly O'Connor, Lyle stood up from his chair and sat down next to him on the couch. Kelly was the big-time financial analyst that Bruce had hired several months ago from a bank in Savannah, and Lyle wished now that he had made him hire an ugly gal instead of some black-eyed beauty.

"You can't do this to me, pal," Lyle said, poking a forefinger into Bruce's shoulder. Bruce winced. "I need you. Too many things coming down. Anyway," Lyle lowered his voice to take on the reasoned tone of a personal confidant, "I see the problem here. You've got satin bedsheets on the brain."

Bruce raised his whipped-dog eyes to protest, but before he could speak, Lyle held up his hand as a sign he didn't want to be interrupted. Lyle's eyes were lime-green and behind those eyes was a starting gate containing a wild animal the gate was barely able to hold in check.

Lyle went on. "You have enough money to have any gal you want. You can have two of them. At the same time. Hell, I'll fix it up for you."

"No," Bruce said, straining to sound defiant. "I just can't take it any more. I can't sleep at night." His chin began to quiver. He put his elbows on his knees, resting his forehead in the palms of his hands, and sobbed.

Lyle stared at Bruce and absently started cracking the knuckles of his right hand. He had known for a few months that Bruce was sliding down backwards from a tower of strength, but he had never suspected him of becoming some kind of pantywaist. Bruce had been useful. But this made him not only worthless but a substantial risk. And one that may well have to be eliminated.

Lyle looked up and scowled at the ceiling for a moment, then reached over and grabbed Bruce's shoulder, shaking him violently. "Stop sniveling."

When Bruce didn't stop, Lyle slapped him hard on the side of the head, the impact nearly knocking him from the couch. Lyle was taking

his hand back to slap him again, when Bruce collapsed face down on the floor.

Lyle stood up and used the toe of his Italian-made loafer to roll Bruce over. He felt like kicking him in the side of the head as hard as he could. He went over to the bar and filled himself a tumbler full of Scotch whiskey, draining most of it with two swift gulps. He smoothed back his long sandy-colored hair, stopping for a moment to massage his neck and to admire himself in the bar mirror. He moved his head a little to the left in order to see his profile. He put his hand under his chin: The skin was tight, the neck muscular. He held up an arm: biceps bulged, shoulder was thick.

He looked over at Bruce and shook his head in disgust. Bruce knew too much. And he'd probably told that bitch, Kelly, more than he should have. "I never should've let him hire her."

He decided the way to gain some time was to lie, to go along with Bruce, letting him believe it was okay for him to leave. After crushing out his cigar and finishing what Scotch was left in his tumbler, Lyle walked into his office bathroom where he found a wash towel hanging on a towel rack and soaked it with cold water. He went back to the bar and poured two fingers of whiskey.

Bruce responded to the wet towel, rose, and shook his head. His breathing was in short, heavy bursts. "What happened?" he asked, his speech slurred. "I feel like my head is going to explode. My ears are ringing."

Lyle put on a face he believed was both fatherly and concerned, then said, "Ole buddy, you conked out on me. We were talking when all of a sudden your eyes rolled back into their sockets, then you leaned forward and fell to the floor." Lyle put a tumbler of whiskey into Bruce's hand. "Here, take a snort of that. It'll make you feel better."

Bruce drank.

Lyle said, "I'm real sorry about what I said earlier. I see now that you *have* been working too hard. I'm sorry. I wasn't paying enough attention to my best buddy."

Bruce's eyes were now making contact with Lyle's, and he was nodding to his words.

Lyle went on. “This Kelly gal seems real nice. I’m going to need a few weeks to get a replacement for you, ole buddy. So we can keep things moving smoothly. Two weeks. Okay?”

“Okay,” Bruce said eagerly. “I know this is a big shock. You have been a good friend. Thanks.”

Lyle listened with revulsion. He couldn’t imagine what he’d ever seen in Bruce to have made him his trusted partner. He now saw clearly all of Bruce’s faults: He was too handsome, like one of those prissy men on soap operas; and he was physically weak and drank too much.

“No problem, sport,” Lyle said, winking at Bruce. “I’m going to quit this bullshit business myself one of these days. I’ll come and live with you and Kelly.” Lyle laughed.

Bruce laughed. “Anytime. You’ll always be welcome. We’ll name our first child after you.” Bruce stood up, still a little wobbly on his feet, and walked to the door. “I guess I’d better get out of here and start things rolling. I have a lot of work to do in a short time, huh?”

“You sure do,” Lyle said, following Bruce to the door and playfully slapping him on the back.

After Bruce left, Lyle walked to the bar. He grabbed the bottle of Scotch and quickly filled his tumbler. He lifted the tumbler to his nose before taking an enormous gulp. Afterward, he walked over to the phone on his desk and punched in a number. The phone on the other end rang twice before the recorder kicked in.

Lyle said gruffly, “Call me. I have a serious warranty problem here.”

Reid was in the Dog House when Roland Guidry’s phone call was put through. Roland was not only the company’s chief-of-security, reporting to Reid, but also Reid’s best friend. They first met when they were both eighteen and competing in PRCA-sponsored rodeos. Roland was a bull rider from Chackbay, Louisiana; Reid a steer wrestler from Fredericksburg, Texas. Roland already had his card from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association; Reid never would, for he left the rodeo when he was nineteen and enlisted in the Army.

Roland told him that by the time he had gotten to the docks at Port Fouchon, the junk basket on the *MV Cassandra* had nothing unusual in it, other than a wet bundle of rags.

“Figures,” Reid said. “Have you found Pepper yet?”

“This morning. Face down in Bayou Segnette with a gunshot wound to the head. Gun clutched in his hand. They’re calling it a suicide.”

“I can’t get involved in this,” Reid said. “I’d like to kill Lyle Singleton.”

“Don’t,” Roland said ruefully. “I tried it years ago and spent the next two months in the hospital. Besides, we don’t have proof of any misconduct on his part. The only thing we have is his reputation. His reputation, however, won’t do anything for us at the courthouse. He owns too many judges there. I’ll sic the Coast Guard on this submarine business, but I don’t think much will come of it. What would help a lot is for you to talk to his cousin Bruce Chimes for me.”

Reid disliked Bruce: He was the younger brother of a friend who had helped Reid escape from a prison camp in Vietnam and who was killed only days later. Reid felt like he owed something to the family. So he had kept in touch with them over the years.

“Why would I want to talk to Bruce?” Reid said.

“He’s the one who signed the contract between Tidal Wave and Singleton Enterprises. Maybe he’ll agree to just tear up his copy.”

“I don’t care what he does. We’re not doing business with Singleton. Period.”

“Well, the legal department says there’s punitive damages if we unilaterally violate the contract.”

“Crap. I’m tired of the lawyers and accountants running the company. I’m going home and never leaving. I almost had a chance to talk to God about it, but instead He got in the first word by nearly pitching me off the derrick a few nights back.”

“When you’re leaving for home, why don’t you stop by on the way and have dinner with me and Adele? She’d love to see you.”

“That’s a roger on dinner.”

Reid leaned back in his chair. His eyes followed a column of sunlight streaming through a small round window to where it collided with a picture on the wall of his home in the Texas Hill Country, a place his great grandfather named The Comanchería.

Reid saw it as a sign of confirmation: Go home. Maybe there he could acquire a new life. The one he had now seemed empty. Lonely.

He suddenly stretched and yawned. Yes, he'd go home and hide out from the world. The world was going to hell in a handbasket anyway. No one took responsibility for anything anymore: Thugs and criminals blamed their misconduct on their mothers; mothers blamed Hollywood when their kids misbehaved; and Hollywood blamed its trash on the American people, using polls that said violence and sex were what everybody wanted to see for three hours every night.

Reid stood up. *I'm outta here!*



### CHAPTER THREE

Kelly O'Connor walked to the curb, looked right and left, then quickly crossed St. Charles Avenue in the central business district of New Orleans. She had been away from her desk for a little less than twenty minutes, the usual time it took her at the bank. As soon as she entered the front door to a small office suite, Cassandra LeBlanc, her office assistant and only friend in New Orleans, waved her over.

"The principal at St. Patrick's called," Cassandra said. "Said it was *imperative* he meet with you this afternoon at five o'clock. So I called the dance studio and told them we couldn't make it to our lesson."

"Thanks," Kelly said, handing a leather portfolio to Cassandra containing forty-five thousand dollars in cash.

She walked into her office and sat behind her desk. She had hoped moving away from Savannah, Georgia, and her ex would improve her son's attitude. Brandon had been an A student and had gotten along well with his classmates until his father showed up, having never seen his son before, but now wanting to keep him on weekends. She wished she hadn't allowed it, because her ex started coming over a lot, frequently unannounced and drunk. There had been words.

She picked up the phone and punched in the school's telephone number: Brandon had misbehaved again. Fortunately, the student was not injured too badly. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss ten-year-old Brandon's future at St. Patrick's.

Kelly grabbed a tissue from a box on her credenza and wiped her eyes, then stood up from her desk and walked to the couch in the left

corner of her office. It was the largest office she had ever had, and it was nicely furnished: an oak desk, with matching credenza and file cabinet, guest chairs, conference table, and the couch she was sitting on. She wasn't sure what all the furniture was for, since the only guests she ever had were Cassandra and her boss, Bruce Chimes, the chief financial officer of the company.

Cassandra came in with a serving tray of coffee and sat on the couch next to Kelly. They talked about men, and little boys, as they divided the money from the bank into three brown envelopes, each one containing fifteen thousand dollars in cash.

The remainder of the afternoon passed quickly. Kelly worked on financial research and continued to compile investment analyses on the six companies Bruce had asked her to study. Mr. Singleton might be interested in buying an equity interest in one or two of these companies. She also arranged with the bank to have thirty million dollars available in the company's operating account to transfer to China for the plant being built there to process scrap metal.

At three-forty Kelly took a phone call from Bruce. He asked her to come to his house for dinner Saturday night: Business, he said. Kelly found their frequent dinner meetings to be sometimes informative, sometimes bewildering. Bruce tried to answer her questions about Singleton Enterprises and its operations, but she often found him elusive, his explanations confusing.

At first she had asked Bruce lots of questions: Why did she have to convert so many checks to cash? Why could only Cassandra deliver the envelopes containing the cash to Singleton's suppliers and employees? Why did Singleton do so much business with China?

She finally stopped asking questions, because Bruce became so defensive—and she needed her job. She had not left her position as vice-president of consumer loans at the bank in Savannah on very good terms. When Kelly discovered her salary there was a good deal less than some of the male employees'—even those with less experience—she had lost her temper and said some things she probably shouldn't have.

At four-thirty Kelly cleaned off her desk, filled her briefcase with reports to read later, and told Cassandra she was leaving for her meeting at school and would be taking Brandon straight home. “You shouldn't

miss dance class on my account,” Kelly said. “Steve is supposed to be showing some great stuff in the waltz tonight.” It had been Kelly’s idea to start taking lessons and they had been doing so two nights a week for several months.

Cassandra said she didn’t want to go alone and wished Kelly luck at her meeting.

Kelly waved goodbye to her friend, the only friend she had ever had in her whole life for whom she felt sorry. Cassandra was Lyle Singleton’s mistress and she knew that he was abusing her, both mentally and physically. And she wished she could do something about it.

The campus of St. Patrick’s was located in the Garden District. The school’s buildings were built in 1875 and were constructed of a crimson-colored brick imported from Georgia. The main building of the school was originally a church for a convent of Irish nuns. Two surrounding buildings had been the nuns’ living quarters and were occupied by the nuns until 1930, when the boys’ school was established.

When Kelly arrived she was escorted immediately into Father Murphy’s office. The room was small and cluttered with files, books, and boxing trophies. He answered Kelly’s questions: Brandon had tripped Raymond in class, causing him to hit his chin on the corner of a desk. No, Raymond wouldn’t have a scar. Yes, Raymond’s parents were upset but were not unreasonable. No, he wasn’t going to expel Brandon this time. He had a plan and should have insisted on it immediately after the first incident six weeks ago.

Kelly wanted to hug him.

“Easter is a time for forgiveness and compassion,” Father Murphy said. “Next week is spring break. When Brandon returns he will have to enroll in an extracurricular athletic activity, such as boxing.”

Kelly was unenthusiastic about Brandon learning to box, because she deplored violence of any kind and thought boxing to be an unusually brutal and violent sport. Football, too. Track and swimming were okay.

Father Murphy discussed the pros and cons of all the various sporting activities offered at the school. Ultimately, they agreed to let Brandon decide which sport he would enroll in.

Brandon was brought in from Penance Hall, led by Father Mac. Penance Hall was a small, dimly lit room set aside for students to contemplate their misdeeds.

As soon as Kelly got Brandon home he went immediately to his room, slamming the door behind him. Kelly left him alone. Or at least she would for awhile. If he hadn't come out of his room in fifteen minutes or so, she'd go to him.

Her son was becoming like every man she had ever known when facing a problem: He clammed up, then went somewhere to be by himself. It was a pretty stupid thing for a man to do; but she had found it always better to let it pass; otherwise, one small problem expanded into lots of problems, with the usual result being some kind of a giant wreck instead of a small one. It was always a better choice to keep wrecks small if you could.

It was too late to fix supper, so Kelly ordered pizza. It was one of the few things Brandon would eat. She was becoming increasingly worried about his diet and that he didn't eat enough. And she thought maybe he was getting a little too skinny. He was a handsome boy, tall for his age, like she had been. He had his grandfather's, her father's, Irish-red hair and hazel eyes and crooked grin. The grin was especially crooked when he was being mischievous.

Not long after Kelly phoned in the pizza order, Brandon came out of his room and sat forlornly in the living room in front of the television. He had yet to say a word and she could tell he wasn't really paying attention to what was on television.

She walked over, sat on the floor, and snuggled up next to him. Brandon stretched out his legs and put his head in his mother's lap. She smoothed his hair with her hand.

"I'm sorry," Brandon said. "I didn't mean to be bad. I promise I won't do it again. I'll enroll in track, if you want me to. But you're not going to send me away somewhere, are you? To my father, or something?"

"Good Lord, no!" Kelly said. She paused. "Your father? Did he do something to you?"

"No-no."

She thought Brandon's response was too hesitant. "Did he say something to you about me?"

"No, Mom."

She decided to drop the subject for now. "I love you very much, Brandon. I'm only disappointed with your conduct. Because you know better and can do better. And you know how much I hate violence."

They spent an hour together eating in front of the television and watching a nature special.

Afterward, she sent Brandon to his room to study for his mid-term exams, while she looked over some of the paperwork she brought home in her briefcase. She was distracted by thoughts of her son, however, and paid little attention to what she was reading.

At nine-thirty Brandon interrupted her to say he was going to bed. She asked him questions about his upcoming exams: Were they going to be hard? How did he think he would do? Did he study enough?

Later that night in bed, Kelly couldn't sleep. Brandon had promised her time and time again he wouldn't be disruptive in school. And with each promise, he was more adamant he would be good. She felt sure the promise he'd made today would be as short-lived as all the others. She was losing her son somehow and didn't know why, or what to do about it.

At one point she cried aloud into her pillow, "Oh, Dad, I need you so much. What am I going to do?"

Abruptly, she saw her father as he was today afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. She missed most his smile and the way his eyes sparkled whenever he looked at her. She was, after all, Daddy's little girl. Now, all day long he'd sit quietly in his rocking chair and stare aimlessly out the front window of a cottage in Ireland. From the window he could see a woodland of sessile oak, silver birch, and wych elm filled with red-breasted chaffinch.

Kelly's parents didn't own the cottage they lived in, so she had been saving for years, not only to buy the cottage, but to return permanently to Ireland to help her mother. Her job at Singleton Enterprises paid her more money than she ever dreamed of making and would make both things possible in a few years.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Thirty minutes before Kelly was to leave her apartment for dinner with Bruce, her babysitter called and canceled. She phoned Bruce immediately to say she wouldn't be able to make it tonight.

"Bring Brandon along," Bruce said. "I should've thought of it to begin with. He can watch movies in the den."

Brandon was agreeable, preferring the idea of going with his mother to staying home with a babysitter.

Kelly arrived at Bruce's house at seven-twenty and parked her blue Toyota at the curb in front. A terra-cotta walkway guided her and Brandon through a manicured yard. The house was a two-story southern antebellum home, with columned portico and French windows.

Later inside, Kelly talked to Bruce as he prepared dinner. The smells of sauteed onions and bell peppers for the jambalaya lingered in the air.

"And my second choice of companies to acquire would be—" Kelly was saying. She quit talking because of the ugly frown that came to Bruce's face when the doorbell rang.

Bruce stopped cutting vegetables for the salad he was making and took off his apron. "I'll be right back," he said impatiently, glancing at his watch. "This'll take less than two minutes."

When Bruce left the kitchen, Kelly walked into the den to check on Brandon.

Her son was reclining in a thick-cushioned chair and channel surfing on the television. He was wearing baggy denim pants, an oversized T-shirt, and athletic shoes that looked more like combat boots. He looked

up at her when she came into the room. "This big TV is really cool. We need one of these."

Kelly smiled. "Sure, why not two?"

She heard Bruce open the front door, then overheard him start to say something. Another voice, deep and guttural, interrupted, "Inside, motherfuck!" The front door slammed shut. "Where's your bitch?"

Kelly was puzzled and frightened but reacted quickly. She grabbed Brandon and raced into the kitchen to escape through the back door. In her haste she stumbled on the leg of a chair, recovered after a moment, and opened the door.

"Stop right there," she heard behind her. "Or I'll shoot the boy."

Kelly stopped, turned, and pulled Brandon behind her, holding him there tightly. She stiffened at the sight of the giant man in front of her. Her eyes went first to the large gun he held, then to his eyes resembling two black holes.

She started to tremble but forced herself to focus on Brandon's safety.

Bruce was on his knees at the giant's side mumbling something. The giant had Bruce by the hair and had been dragging him through the house as effortlessly as a child drags a teddy bear.

"Let the woman and her son go," Bruce said, his words barely audible.

"Shut the fuck up," the giant said, violently shaking Bruce's head and kicking at him.

The giant wagged his gun at Brandon. "This little fuck's supposed to be with the babysitter."

Kelly wondered vaguely how he knew that. The giant must be a burglar. He wasn't here to kill anyone. Bruce had a fortune in art objects in his home. He had shown them to her, bragging about their value.

"My purse is in the other room," Kelly said, pointing. "Take it. Just leave us alone."

A wicked grin came to the giant's face, revealing several broken, jagged teeth. The sight unnerved Kelly and she shuttered.

"Where's the bedroom?" he said, yanking on Bruce's hair.

"Over there," Bruce answered meekly, pointing to a door down the hallway directly behind the giant.

The giant lifted Bruce completely off the floor and kicked him down the hallway, causing him to stumble and crash to the floor in front of the master bedroom. “Stay there, asshole!” The giant grabbed and jerked Brandon toward the bedroom.

Kelly saw Brandon’s face redden. She knew he was angry and hoped he wouldn’t do anything foolish. She could tell he was fighting to hold back tears. She herself was trying to smother the panic rising up within her.

Brandon kicked the giant on the shinbone as hard as he could.

“Ouch, you little fucker!” the giant yelled. He slapped Brandon on the side of the face with the palm of his hand, catching most of Brandon’s right ear. Brandon winced.

Kelly screamed. She punched the giant as hard as she could, but she was ineffective. He pushed her aside harshly, causing her to fall next to Bruce. He laughed as he shoved Brandon through the door of the bedroom. “Stay there.”

The giant pointed his gun at Bruce, who was still sitting on the hallway floor and was now shivering uncontrollably, and said, “No watching while I have some young ass.”

Kelly’s blood coursed through her veins like steam through a high-pressure hose. She could feel her heart pounding so forcibly she was certain it was going to rupture. The giant wasn’t interested in *her*. He wanted Brandon.

Tears stung her eyes. She yelled, “Take my purse, for God’s sake. Bruce, tell him he can have your paintings.”

Bruce slouched awkwardly, staring blankly ahead. He was a bizarre sight, and it did not raise any hopes within Kelly that he would be of any help. She had to do something herself. Maybe Brandon could get away, even if she couldn’t.

The giant raised his gun and pointed it at Bruce’s face. There was a slight *poof* and a hole appeared between Bruce’s eyes. His face fell between his knees.

Kelly jumped up and struck out at the giant. “Run, Brandon, run!”

The giant grabbed for Brandon at the door of the bedroom.

Kelly saw her son duck, pivot, and scramble down the hallway to the front of the house. She tried to hold the giant back.

He backhanded her, knocking her sprawling to the floor. She got up quickly to fight back.

She saw the gun but couldn't get out of its way. She saw her blood flow, then felt a weakening queasiness as she fell into the spiraling black holes of the giant's eyes and was overtaken by darkness.

Reid Matthews arrived on the outskirts of New Orleans just as the sun was setting. At the last minute he had reconsidered talking to Bruce Chimes, waiting until late in the afternoon to telephone him. That way he'd catch him off guard.

Despite saying, "Good to hear from you," Reid knew Bruce was not glad at all. Bruce pressed for details. Reid was vague, saying only that he needed to see him now. It'd take five minutes, maybe less.

Bruce finally relented.

Reid picked up his cell phone with the intention of calling Bruce to tell him he was running late. He thought better of it and instead phoned Roland and Adele Guidry. He was expected for dinner.

"I'll be a little late," he told Roland. "I've decided to see Chimes."

"Boss, I hadn't intended for you to do that without backup." Roland rarely called Reid boss. He did it only when he was upset with him.

Roland went on. "Watch yourself. If Bruce told Lyle Singleton you're stopping by—which is likely—who knows what Lyle might do. And don't be surprised if it's a cop that meets you at the front door. Singleton's got plenty of them on his payroll."

Reid knew if Roland said Singleton had cops on the payroll, it was true. Roland was an ex-Louisiana state trooper and former head of the state's Drug Enforcement Administration. "I'll be careful."

Reid was now at the apex of the Crescent City Connection, the bridge crossing the Mississippi River at an elevation of almost five hundred feet and stretching for more than two miles before delivering passengers into the heart of the city. Reid quickly noted the city skyline. But of more interest to him was the setting sun, which was painting the sky a reddish-orange. Reid admired the sun's handiwork and touched the brim of his Stetson hat in recognition of a job well done.

Reid was upon Bruce's house before he knew it. He had intended to park in the driveway, which he recalled being in back of the house,

facing a dead-end street running along one side. Quickly, he braked his truck and turned sharply onto the dead-end street. In front of him, parked at the curb, was a dark-colored van partially blocking the driveway. When his truck's headlights strafed the van, a large bird swooped in front of the van's windshield. Somebody moved inside the van. Reid put his truck in reverse and quickly backed up onto the main street.

He parked, then looked over his shoulder to make sure whoever was in the van could not see his truck. He took out a .45-caliber Army Colt and tucked it in the waistband of his jeans, then slipped out of the truck slowly, noting that no one seemed to be watching. He decided to check out the van before knocking on Bruce's front door.

He kept close to a high row of ligustrum bushes separating Bruce's house from the one next door, and within moments was behind a hedgerow of azaleas next to the van. He kneeled and listened. He heard nothing out of place. The fragrant smell of wisteria was carried on a gentle breeze that rustled the leaves in nearby live oak trees.

He saw a light flicker in the van, then the glow of a cigarette. Reid could tell it was a man in the van, youngish, maybe thirty.

Reid inched backward, stopping to flip a coin high into the air directly above the van. The coin hit the top of the van with a loud clack.

"What the hell?" the man in the van said. "Joseph? You asshole. Is that you?"

The man in the van reached up and flipped off the switch to the overhead light, then slowly opened the door, stepping out. In his right hand was an Uzi. Mounted on the end of it was a silencer.

The adrenaline hit Reid's veins like a pile driver's hammer hitting steel drive pipe. That was no damn party favor! He instantly lunged through the azalea bushes, bringing the barrel of his gun down hard behind the man's ear.

The young man collapsed half-in half-out of the van. Reid picked up the unconscious man's dangling legs and folded them inside, shutting the door behind him.

Moving cautiously to the back of Bruce's house, Reid searched for a window to look through. The curtains on all of the windows at the back were pulled. He walked to the front of the house, stepped onto the front porch, and tiptoed forward. A curtain at one of the French win-

dows was not closed tightly, leaving perhaps an inch of space. He stood to the side and peaked in: A giant, thug-of-a-man with a gun was struggling with a little boy. He appeared to be squeezing the boy's neck so hard the boy was doubled up in pain. No one else seemed to be around.

Reid darted from the window and pounded on the front door. The door shuddered. "Bruce, I know you're in there. I saw your shadow through the window."

The giant shouted through the closed door. "We don't want any. Go away."

Reid shouted back. "I'm here to meet with Bruce Chimes. He's expecting me."

"He left town."

"Well, at least take this package I was told to leave," Reid lied.

"Drop it near the door or leave it in the mailbox."

"Listen, asshole, there's twenty-five thousand dollars here. And I can't leave it outside somewhere. Open the goddamn door. You can give it to Bruce whenever he comes back."

The door opened. "All right! All right!"

Reid's fist found the side of the giant's face. The impact of the blow ruptured skin and crushed bones. Blood splattered the room, hitting furniture ten feet away. The giant collapsed into a heap and lay motionless.

Reid quickly walked up to the fallen man and rapped him over the head with his Colt. He picked up the gun the man had dropped on the floor and tucked it safely under his belt.

He went up to the boy, frozen in the middle of the living room. The boy's shirt and pants were spotted with blood. He dropped to one knee, took the boy in his left arm and hugged him, keeping his gun pointed toward the open hallway.

"You're gonna be okay now," Reid said. "But I need your help."

When the boy didn't respond, Reid hugged the boy again and patted him on the back. "Listen to me, son, I'm going to need your help for a minute. How many bad guys are there?"

"Just him," the boy said weakly and pointed. "He killed my mother. And he killed Mr. Bruce." The boy's chin started to quiver.

“Listen, big guy, stay here. I’m going to see about your mother and Bruce.” Reid stood up and mussed the boy’s hair. “My name is Reid. If he moves, yell for me. Can you do that?”

The boy wiped his eyes and nodded dumbly.

Reid walked to the dining room. At the end of the room was an antique oak buffet and to its left was a matching china cabinet containing a collection of expensive porcelain figurines. The table in the middle of the room was prepared for dinner with place settings for three.

He walked into a large kitchen. On the butcher’s table in the middle of the kitchen was a large salad bowl partially filled with pieces of cut vegetables. On the kitchen cabinet behind the butcher’s block was a brown accordion folder, and next to it a stack of papers spread out. They looked like reports of some kind.

He walked out of the kitchen and made a right turn down the hallway. The walls of the hallway were covered with original oil paintings, mostly scenes of the French Quarter. He saw a man at the end of the hallway in a sitting position, with his head slumped between his knees. When he got closer, he could tell it was Bruce.

Reid tiptoed forward to the opened door of a room to the left of Bruce’s body, the master bedroom. It was full of expensive-looking furniture. A woman was lying on the floor. Blood soaked the carpet.

Reid put his finger to the woman’s carotid artery, just below her left ear. Her pulse was strong. The only wound he saw was a blow to her head. Head wounds were prolific bleeders, as he knew from being whacked on the head a few times himself.

He drew a sharp breath and spoke aloud: “What the hell are you doing here with the likes of Bruce Chimes?” He knew the answer: Bruce was handsome and had lots of money.

He was glad the woman was alive, but he was also angry with her for getting herself—and her son—into this kind of scrape. “Jesus, lady,” he said, running his eyes over her. He thought she was the most attractive woman he had ever seen. He was particularly partial to tall, full-figured women like this one with dark complexions and long black hair. *Too bad she was a damn whore.*

For the first time in a long time, Reid was at a loss as to what to do. He thought of walking away from the whole thing. It’d be what the

woman deserved. But her son: What about him? He probably saw Bruce killed by the man in the living room. It'd all wind up bad for the boy in the end.

Reid considered killing the two hit men outright. They'd deserve it. And it'd sure deter them from any further acts of misconduct, especially against the boy and his mother. But he'd made a promise years ago and he'd keep it.

He knew he was pressed for time. He had to do something now, even if it was wrong: *Call an ambulance? The police? No, not the police.*

His senses told him to get the woman and her son out of harm's way before anything else happened. He could get the woman to an emergency room almost as fast as an ambulance could. Baptist Medical Center was only a few minutes away. Then, he'd quickly make a getaway, leaving them there to sort things out on their own.

He bent down and picked up the woman. As he walked into the living room, he said, "Hey, big guy, you're momma's still alive."

The boy rushed to him. "My mother's alive?" He wiped tears away with the back of his hands as he came closer to see.

"She's been whacked on the head pretty good, but I think she'll be okay. I'm going to put her on the couch here while I do a few things."

Reid carefully put the woman down, then put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Stay here with your momma. I've got to go outside for a minute."

At the van, Reid found the young thug still unconscious. He took out his pocketknife and cut the stems from two of the van's tires. While the air swished from the tires, he frisked the man and took his wallet. He picked up the man's gun with a handkerchief.

Reid repeated what he had done to the man outside to the giant inside. When he finished, he picked up the stack of guns and wallets he had collected and walked over to Bruce's body. He placed the guns and wallets behind Bruce, so they would not be detected easily by anyone until the coroner said the body could be moved.

Reid picked up a phone and dialed 911. In a muffled voice, he said, "There's been a murder at 401 Magnolia." He dropped the phone to the floor.

He lifted the woman from the couch and said to the boy, “Open the front door for me, would you, please? We’re getting out of here.” When he looked back over his shoulder at the boy, he saw the woman’s purse on a table near the door to the dining room. He grimaced at the thought of his overlooking it. “Son, grab your momma’s purse over there.”

Reid took long strides toward his truck. When he passed the cars parked at the curb, he asked Brandon which car belonged to his mother.

“The blue Toyota,” Brandon said.

Seconds later, Reid had placed Brandon’s mother in the backseat of his truck, with Brandon alongside her. Just as he was getting into the truck himself, he saw a man running up the street toward him with a raised gun in his hand.

Reid didn’t hear the sound of the gun’s discharges because of the silencer, but he heard the bullets slam into his truck as he sped away.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Reid turned his truck right onto oak-lined St. Charles Avenue, heading to the emergency room at Baptist. He had already committed himself to a left turn at Napoleon Street before noticing the traffic was at a complete stop in front of him. It was too late to back up, and he was still a long way from the next intersection. He cursed mildly to himself at his bad luck.

He realized suddenly he was sweating profusely. He lowered the car window, and for a moment felt the cool air work some relaxation into the tight muscles of his neck. He turned to look at Brandon, who was still holding a thick wad of gauze to his mother's wound. "How you doin' back there?"

"I think the bleeding's stopped. But I'm afraid there's blood all over your backseat."

"It's okay. It'll go along with all the coffee stains." He paused. "Brandon, do you have any relatives in town or who live nearby? Your father?"

"No. No one. My mother and father are divorced. My father lives in Savannah. But my mother has a friend, Cassandra, who lives here."

The traffic in front of Reid started to break up and move forward. He phoned Roland Guidry. "I've got a situation here."

As he told Roland what happened, he pulled his truck into the driveway of the Emergency Room at Baptist. Reid parked and told Roland where he was.

"Get out of there. Now!" Roland ordered.

Reid dropped the phone to his lap and threw the truck in reverse. But he was too late. An SUV had pulled up behind him, blocking his

retreat. And a man had appeared from nowhere at his side window pointing a gun.

Reid rolled down his window. “Sorry, sir. I didn’t see the no-parking sign.”

“Put the truck in park and scoot over,” the man said.

“But, sir—”

“Do it,” the man said, making a threatening gesture with his gun.

Reid complied.

The man slid into the driver’s seat of a truck used for hauling oilfield equipment. When he tried to engage the stick shift on the floor he found he couldn’t make it go anywhere, because he was unfamiliar with anything but an automatic transmission. “Goddamn this piece of shit,” he yelled as he fought the stick, succeeding finally in causing an awful grinding sound. Now distracted, he failed to keep an eye on Reid.

Reid slid his Colt from his waistband and shoved the barrel of the gun almost all the way though the man’s temple. He then pushed the man aside and operated the truck from the passenger’s side.

Reid shouted back over his shoulder to Brandon, “Hold on to your mother!”

Reid revved up the huge diesel engine. The impact of the truck’s reinforced steel chassis and guard bumper sent the SUV backward ten yards and crumpled its meager front end into the shape of an enormous accordion. The unconscious driver of the SUV was trapped.

Reid stopped his truck just long enough to push the man in the driver’s seat onto the curb. As he slid into the driver’s seat, he saw a man with a gun jumping from the shadows of a magnolia tree. Reid bounded into the street, tires squealing. For the second time that night he heard bullets hitting the truck as he sped away.

Reid turned left at the first opportunity, then switched off the headlights and pulled over. He saw a speeding van going up Napoleon toward Claiborne. He searched for and found the phone he had dropped. “Roland, hold on one second more.”

He got out of the truck to see about Brandon and his mother. The woman had been knocked to the floorboard after the impact with the SUV and her head wound had started bleeding again.

Reid returned her to the seat and made her as comfortable as possible. Brandon’s face was pale.

Reid forced a smile. “We’ll be out of this in a minute.”

He climbed back into the cab of the truck and picked up the phone. “That was close. If those jerks keep pumping holes into my truck, I’ll soon have a convertible I don’t want.”

“I’m sorry now I ever asked you to speak to Bruce,” Roland said.

“Forget it. Just get me out of this mess.”

“It gets worse. While you were wrecking cars and smashing heads, I told Adele what was goin’ on.”

Reid now heard Adele’s voice on the phone and it had a decidedly unpleasant tenor to it. “What the hell were you thinking?” she demanded. “Listen to me, you knucklehead, get that woman to a clinic—one out of town somewhere. Those guys will have every medical center in a fifty-mile radius covered. Take her to the clinic Tidal Wave uses in Lafayette and be quick about it. And get some ice on that wound.”

Adele was a nurse, or used to be. She was working at the clinic in Lafayette when she met Roland. He had been shot up in a gunfight.

Reid once more gave thought to abandoning the woman and her son, maybe taking them to her friend Cassandra. But decided he couldn’t do it, at least not yet.

Reid drove as Roland gave directions on what streets to use to avoid being found. They decided that before going to Reid’s jet, he’d get some ice and drop off the woman’s purse at a local bar called Tumbler’s. Roland would need the contents of the purse—driver’s license and credit cards—to find out who the woman was, as well as keys to move her vehicle from the front of Bruce’s house.

“If the doctor at the clinic says she’s okay and can make the trip,” Roland said, “I think you should take her and the boy to Texas with you. Get them out of harm’s way. We’ll figure out what to do with them tomorrow.”

Reid’s Citation III sliced neatly and precisely through the night sky over Texas. Reid stood in the cockpit behind the pilot.

The pilot talked over his shoulder. “I see Bill and Willie have turned on the runway lights. Don’t they know I can turn them on from here using the pilot controlled lighting?”

Reid grinned. The Calendars had lived on the Comanchería for thirty-five years. “They know, but they don’t care. Besides, they drive the runway and check for any debris.”

Reid went on. "Bill and Willie are both in their mid-seventies and they do as they dang well please." Reid had thought of the Calendars as his surrogate parents ever since his own had been killed.

The plane landed smoothly and taxied to the hangar.

Reid walked down the air stairs carrying Kelly, following Brandon. Kelly was now awake and had initially protested about being carried, saying she was too heavy.

Reid said, "I don't think so, ma'am." Then he picked her up as easily as if she were a small child. Kelly discontinued her protest.

With Kelly still in his arms, Reid walked up to Willie, leaned over, and kissed her on the forehead.

Kelly squirmed. "You can put me down now. I think I can walk." Reid put her down slowly, supporting her with his arm.

Willie put a blanket around Kelly. "We'd better get you out of this air. It gets a little chilly at night."

Willie slid in the backseat of the truck with Kelly and Brandon, Reid in the passenger seat in front, Bill in the driver's seat.

Reid inhaled deeply. He had not been home in three months. "You are a sight for sore eyes," he said, poking Bill on the shoulder just as the truck bounced from hitting a deep pothole. He turned to face Willie. "Did he manage to hit all the chuckholes on the way over?"

Willie moaned. "Does a one-legged duck swim in a circle?"

Reid laughed.

Willie said, "He hit every doggone one of 'em." Willie put her arms around Reid's neck and kissed him on the cheek. "We're glad to have you back on the Comanchería."

"Thanks," Reid said. "I think I'll be stayin' for a while. I reckon I'm gonna spend a lot of time tryin' to catch Big Moe."

Brandon leaned forward and supported his chin on top of the front seat between Reid and Bill. "What's a Big Moe?"

Willie put her arm around Brandon's neck. "Honey, they're talking about a stupid old fish."

"I've never been fishing," Brandon said, sitting back down.

"Why that'd be perfect," Reid said. "Big Moe just might want a round with a newcomer."

It took them only a few minutes to arrive at Reid's house. It was a large home, partly made of locally quarried limestone, but mainly wood-framed, white, with eight second-story dormer windows. The stone portion of the house was the original home of Reid's grandfather, Nokahwek Clancy Matthews, who was half Comanche. After his grandfather's death, it had been unoccupied for twenty-five years. As soon as Reid had enough money, he started building a new house around the old stone building, which became the den of the new house with a fireplace ten feet long and six feet high. The combination kitchen and dining room was the size of a small restaurant. There were four large bedrooms downstairs, each with its own complete bath, and upstairs there were six bedrooms and an office and communications center. A wraparound covered porch was at the front and sides of the house, and each bedroom on the ground floor had a door opening onto it.

Reid helped Kelly to one of the two corner bedrooms on the north end of the house. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked around. "This room is big," she said. Then she lay down, curled herself up into a fetal position, and went to sleep.

Willie, having seen Brandon to the bedroom to the left of his mother's, went into Kelly's room to help out. When she saw Kelly asleep on top of the bed, she said, "Poor child. What kind of person would try to harm such a nice girl?"

"She brought it on herself," Reid said. "But *why* is hard to figure."

Willie put her hand to Kelly's forehead. "I imagine it'll be as hard to figure as what part of snake is neck, and what part's tail." She shook her head. "My, my, my. Reid, would you pick her up so I can turn the bedding back? Then, I'll try to make her as comfortable as I can."

After doing as Willie asked, Reid left the room so Willie could undress her. As he walked by Brandon's bedroom, he decided to look in on the boy. He found Brandon curled up into a ball and fast asleep, his blanket half on the floor. Reid smiled and tiptoed over to the bed and replaced the blanket. He stood there awhile admiring how soundly the young boy slept and wondering if Brandon would be okay.

He hoped that the violence tonight would be all the violence the boy would ever have to endure. But he knew better.