



THE  
COMANCHERIA

Shadow of the Great Owl

**B RAY MIZE**

The Comanchería: Shadow of the Great Owl

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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Sharon,  
my best friend and the love of my life.*



## CHAPTER ONE

Reid Matthews asked a sensible question, so he stood stiff with disbelief when Deputy Barnes said, “Not going to tell you a damned thing, pal.”

Reid gazed across the room with narrowed eyes at the deputy—a young man with a face as broad and hardened as the bottom of a cast iron skillet. After a long moment, Reid replied, “I wasn’t asking for state secrets, just if there’s any word from the sheriff on the search in Big Bend for Derrick Calendar.”

“What’s it to you?” the deputy asked with down-turned lips.

“Derrick’s grandfather is a friend of mine. He said he was in here earlier and asked ...”

“Yeah, and I ran his damned ass out of here, too.”

Reid forced a smile. He knew Bill had an overwhelming propensity for getting himself into pissing contests with just about anybody and with little provocation. His wife, Willie, usually rushed in at the last minute and made things right, but in this case she wouldn’t have been with him.

“Bill’s worried about his grandson,” Reid said in a tone of reconciliation. “If he said something wrong, he didn’t mean it.”

And Bill probably had said something wrong, for he was not known as a man adept in social graces nor political correctness. What he was known for was being a man of honesty and integrity—a man of tex-

ture, a man of the land. Reid's ranch in the Texas hill country, Comanchería, had been managed by Bill for more than forty-five years. Reid's father hired Bill a few years after Reid was born. Bill was now in his seventies and, despite his years, solid as a thick cypress beam.

Reid pushed back his Stetson hat from his forehead and leaned forward, putting his weathered hands on the top of a slatted, waist-high partition separating him from a large, open office. A large woman sat behind a desk to his right, in the corner of the room, staring up at him. Two unsmiling, computer nerds stared into computer monitors, occasionally expertly drumming their fingers on keyboards. Reid didn't think they looked much like law enforcement guys nor like they belonged in a small town in Texas like Salt Flats.

Reid said, "Listen, Bill Calendar's sorry if he said anything wrong."

"Pal, you look like a damned Indian," the deputy said, "and I'm not telling any fucking Indian a fucking thing." He turned and walked away.

Reid stood there watching, while the deputy strutted into the back corner of the room. "Comanche," Reid said loudly. "And damned proud of it, asshole."

The deputy swung back around angrily. "What did you say to me?"

Reid grinned. "I said Comanche and proud of it ... as a whole. I'm also German and proud of that, too ... as a whole."

The deputy returned to the back of the room and disappeared through an unmarked door.

Reid disliked the way the deputy walked, like a damn spider—edgy and quick to jump on something. It was obvious the deputy didn't like Native Americans for some reason, and Reid knew quite well that he looked like one, despite the blue eyes and the sandy-colored hair he had gotten from his German ancestry, which also provided his height, six feet four inches.

The large woman in the corner of the room pushed herself away from a computer monitor, caught Reid's eye, and made a jabbing motion at him with a fat forefinger, clearly indicating he was dismissed, and he was to get his butt back outside. The woman didn't look like somebody who would entertain any objections. Her hair was closely cropped and brushed back. Her tight pants revealed muscular thighs any man would be envious of, and her face possessed the same, hard look as the deputy's.

Reid tipped his hat to her. "Y'all are promotin' tourism, I see."

When he stepped outside he drew a sharp breath. He had never been in a sheriff's office where he'd been treated so rudely. And he had never been in one where radios weren't crackling, phones weren't ringing off the hook, and bulletin boards weren't cluttered with pictures of criminals and missing children. Why were all those things missing here? And what was the deal with all those computers? They looked brand spanking new and expensive. The town of Salt Flats was small, although it was the county seat, even too small to have a chief-of-police. The county sheriff handled law enforcement for the town and for the county.

That something was wrong here was an understatement. No wonder Bill was so anxious about finding his grandson before the sheriff caught up with him. Also, Bill was told by a few of the local ranchers that the sheriff had it in for Derrick. No one knew why.

Reid stood under the shade of an awning outside the sheriff's office and looked down main street—first right, then left. Salt Flats was the kind of town where on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July every year there would be a long parade of brightly decorated tractors rolling through it. Reid smiled. To his right were several clothing and shoe stores, a barber shop, and a saddlery. To his left, a drug store, a café, and at the end of the street, a feed and hardware store. The sidewalks and storefronts were busy with people doing their Friday shopping. The town had the feel of well-worn jeans, well-used leather gloves. Reid knew this town's people: ranchers and farmers, like his father and mother were when they were alive; and like Bill and Willie Calendar were now. He had been an oil field hand, though. But oil field hands weren't all that much different from ranchers and farmers—honest, straight-talking, hard-working people with important jobs. Ranchers and farmers provided food to the nation. Oil field hands, energy for making tractors run and for making homes livable in the summer and winter.

Reid put on his sunglasses and lowered the brim of his hat before stepping from the shade of the awning outside the sheriff's office. The late August sun at mid-morning was high and unyielding. His watch told him he had fifteen minutes remaining before he was to meet Bill at the feed store. He was putting together supplies for their trip on horseback into Big Bend National Park and the Chihuahuan desert in an attempt to find Derrick Calendar and Brenda Brodine.

The whole story was a strange one, and Reid was sure he knew

only a small part of it. What he knew was that when Bill and Willie Calendar got to the Brodine ranch early in the morning today for a visit planned for months, they found their friends, Farley and Thelma Brodine, unconscious at the kitchen table. The Calendars called 911; whereupon, the Brodines were rushed immediately to McKittrick's clinic in Salt Flats. The doctor said the Brodines consumed an overdose of what was probably the date rape drug Rohypnol, but they had not consumed so much as to be fatal. They were still unconscious but not for long. The doctor was very positive there would be no lasting damage to either one of them.

Reid waited for several passersby to move on and crossed the street to the drug store. There, he'd pick up a few things he'd need in case of emergencies. As he walked, he continued thinking about what was going on here. Why did the sheriff shoot off his mouth to everybody that the Brodines were murdered before he checked it out first? He never actually saw the Brodines himself. He couldn't have. They had already been carried away in an ambulance by the time he got to their ranch. Who told him the Brodines were dead? It wasn't the two attendants in the ambulance. They knew the Brodines were alive and thought they were overcome by food poisoning. And the doctor at the clinic? He said he never talked to anybody, especially not to the sheriff, whom he didn't like very much anyway. Reid frowned. This whole business was just one big, confusing mess. And it was giving him a headache to even think about it.

Reid stepped over the curb and opened the door to the drugstore. He heard a bell ring in the back. The store was the kind of store Reid preferred. It had an herbal and medicinal smell, likely the result of handling hundreds of different kinds of ointments, herbs, and medicines for a hundred years. Carved wood was everywhere; no gray metal shelves or plastic counter tops had conquered this place. And the flooring was pecan heartwood. Reid recognized it immediately because of its reddish-brown color with dark brown stripes.

A little, old lady with white hair came from the back and asked if she could help him. Reid said he'd like to speak to the pharmacist. She gave him a funny look and muttered something.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Reid said, cocking an ear her way.

"Everyone wants to speak to a pharmacist these days," she replied. "Especially all those young men in town from Baltimore."

“Baltimore?” Reid said, hoping to encourage her to say more. He was curious.

“Oh yes, they’ve been here for six months.”

“Six months?”

“Maybe longer. The bank hired them as security guards because the bank has been repossessing a lot of ranches in the county, and there’s been death threats, they say. The young men from Baltimore filled up Cooper’s Inn.” She moved closer to Reid after looking around so as not to be overheard. “I wouldn’t stay at Cooper’s on a bet. After Betsy Cooper died, Buzz lost interest, the poor dear. The place now is nothing more than a buffet for cockroaches and other crawly things.”

“How many security guards did the bank hire for goodness sake?”

“I don’t know.” The little lady tugged at her chin. “Well, I say I don’t know, but there’s the five at Cooper’s Inn and the two or three who stay with Mayor Rosoos in his home.”

“The mayor?”

“George Rosoos. Besides being the mayor, he’s also the president of the bank. And he’s also the sheriff’s father. You might say the Rosoos’ pretty much have this town sewn up. The town hasn’t been the same since George brought those security men in here from Baltimore. They’re rude, and they talk dirty. Why just this morning at Betty Ruth’s Café I heard one of them cussing because his coffee wasn’t hot enough to suit him. Can you imagine?”

Reid shook his head no. He heard all he had time for. “Ma’am, I reckon I’d better go ahead and talk to the pharmacist. I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

The little lady ignored what Reid said. “Eleven years I’ve worked for Mr. and Mrs. Roberts. They’re the owners and the pharmacists here, you know. But for a long time, ever since those boys from Baltimore showed up, they’ve been acting very strange.”

It took Reid longer than he expected to convince Imogene Roberts to give him the medical supplies he wanted. In the end she relented, but only after talking to Mr. Roberts for a long time. *Something was wrong with them all right*, Reid thought. They both had tired faces, like they’d not been getting enough sleep. Reid was well acquainted with their kind of harried look because he had seen it on his own face often enough. Working offshore on oil rigs hadn’t been an easy life. It had

made him rich, but he'd paid a price. And he might've continued paying the price if it hadn't been for the woman he married only two months ago, Kelly O'Connor.

Reid paid for his medical supplies and quick-stepped it over to the feed and hardware store, a wood-framed building that could have stood a slap or two of new paint. By contrast, the diner next door was painted neatly in a light blue, trimmed in white. Red lettering above the door said Betty Faye's Café.

When Reid entered the feed store, he saw a balding man standing behind a counter to one side of an ancient cash register. An uncompromising frown on the old man's face struck Reid as odd. *Of course, maybe the poor bastard just had to deal with Bill Calendar.*

Reid heard Bill say to somebody, "Dad-gum-it, you're blockin' the aisle."

Reid turned toward Bill's voice. Bill was surrounded by two men, both in their mid-twenties, trim and athletic with broad shoulders and sporting ponytails.

Bill said loudly, "Get outta the danged way."

"Fuck you," one of the young men said. "We don't want you in here nor in this town."

"I don't give a rat's ass what you want," Bill said, pushing the man aside.

The other young man grabbed Bill from behind in a head lock. The man Bill had pushed aside pulled his right arm back for a wicked punch into Bill's ribs.

Reid caught the man's arm in his huge, left hand and kicked the man's legs from under him. As the man was falling, Reid slammed a right fist into the man's nose, the impact splattering blood on household brushes hanging neatly on a nearby peg board.

Bill managed to grab a long-handled brush from the blood-splattered pegboard and, using it as a bat, brought it up forcibly between his attacker's legs.

The man grunted. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he dropped to the floor with a thud.

Bill then whacked the man over the head, breaking the brush handle and knocking the man unconscious.

"What did you do to these boys?" Reid asked Bill. "Pee on them or something?"

“Beats the hell out of me.” Bill looked over his shoulder at the man behind the counter. “Thanks for the help,” he said sarcastically.

“Couldn’t do anything,” the man said. “Bad legs and ticker. Sorry.” He caught Reid’s eye. “Name’s Mick Barnes.”

Reid walked over and put out his hand. “Related to Deputy Barnes?”

“My son,” he said, shaking Reid’s hand.

Reid kept his mouth shut about his earlier encounter with the man’s son.

Mick Barnes pointed at the two men lying on the floor. “Those boys work for Jays Kerrville. He runs the security company the bank hired six months ago.”

“The one George Rosoos hired?” Reid asked.

“You know about that?”

“A little. I heard George has been repossessing a lot of farms and ranches in the county lately. And threats have been made.”

“I’d reckon there would be,” Bill said as he walked over and put the broken brush handle on top of the counter. “I guess I’d better pay you for this.”

Mick waved a hand dismissively.

Reid noticed that Kerrville’s two men were starting to rouse. “Perhaps we’d better call your son and have him come over and arrest these boys.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Mick said. “He might come over here and arrest you instead. Not that he’s all that fond of Kerrville and his men mind you. But the sheriff and Kerrville are as tight as fleas on a stray dog. Right now they’re both out tracking down the Calendar boy who they say killed the Brodines.”

Bill grimaced. “Derrick Calendar is my grandson. And the Brodines ain’t dead.”

Mick Barnes sighed with relief. “Thank God. But why did sheriff, Sonny Rosoos, tell everyone they were dead?”

“That’s a good question,” Reid agreed. “We don’t know the answer.” Reid laid a comforting hand on Bill’s shoulder while gazing intently at Mike Barnes. “Do you know why the sheriff has it in for Derrick?”

Mick shrugged. “I’m not sure. I liked Derrick a whole lot. My guess is that it probably had something to do with old man Brodine’s

granddaughter, Brenda. I hear Sonny Rosoos was sweet on her and thought Derrick was a threat. I don't know why he'd ever think that though because the last time Derrick and Brenda were in here together they got into a big row over horse feed. Derrick told her in no uncertain terms he was the one her grandfather hired to run the ranch, and he'd pick out whatever feed he damned well pleased."

Reid was listening to Mick but also keeping an eye on the two men on the floor. When they started getting to their feet, he turned and walked over to them. "Stay where you are. I want to see if you're all right."

The man Reid hit earlier said raucously, "Fuck you!"

Reid held the young man down. The young man pushed up hard but relented when he realized he couldn't overcome the enormous power in Reid Matthew's arm.

Reid crouched down and put his face close to the young man's. "Don't you ever raise your voice or use profanity in my presence again, son, or it'll be more than your nose that'll be bleeding." He took a large handkerchief from his back pocket—a red and blue patterned Hav-a-Hank—and handed it to the young man. "Put that to your nose and hold it in place with some light pressure. Your nose may be broken. And your friend over there won't be high-stepping it for awhile ... nor peeing in a straight line." Reid couldn't help but smile a little at the thought of what else the young man wouldn't be doing.

Ten minutes later, Reid and Bill dropped in at McKittrick's clinic to visit with their wives before he and Bill left for their trek into Big Bend. The doctor taking care of the Brodines was kind enough to provide Reid with additional medical supplies unavailable at the drug store, one of them an antidote for poisonous snake bites. Reid was quite certain these medical supplies would all be needed before it was over with. The land they were about to ride into, and that Derrick and Brenda had already entered, was extremely hostile and fraught with danger: dehydration and heat stroke; poisonous snakes, plants, and insects; and any number of places to accidentally slip and fall on jagged rocks ... not to mention a lot of angry men with guns.

## CHAPTER TWO

They called him Code Alpha. Alpha was an acronym for activism, love, peace, hope, and anti-globalization.

He stood at his office window at noon Friday and looked below into a small park squeezed between a book store and a restaurant in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C. A robin hopped around in the shade of a maple tree, pecked a few times between blades of grass, and hopped to another spot. It pecked again, this time bringing up a small worm clutched in its beak and flew off.

Code Alpha turned from the window and sat down behind a large, antique desk handcrafted by skilled tradesman of the nineteenth century. He picked up a phone. There were five phone calls he would have to make before he could leave the office for the day. He would use a disguised voice for most of them.

He used disguised voices often so that only his most trusted accomplices knew his true identity. The success of his business endeavors depended on this. The publicity would be ruinous. The disguised voice he would use for his first phone call was that of a middle-aged, southern woman. He had practiced for months until it was perfect.

His first call would be to Cleanora Lift in San Francisco, head of the League for a Global Council or LGC. Membership in the LGC had been dropping for several years, and she was desperate. Creditors were beginning to make waves at being paid so slowly, and the staff there hadn't been paid in months.

Code Alpha knew these things because he had planted someone on the inside of the LGC a year ago. And the LGC was not the only organization like it he had infiltrated and controlled: He controlled any number of large philanthropic and humanitarian institutions, foundations, and endowments as well as a plethora of Washington, D.C., based think tanks. He smiled as he placed immaculately polished, Italian-made loafers on the corner of his desk. The single, financial agenda of his clandestine network of organizations was to make money. He called it making money by creating *a divisive line*.

Doing this was basically simple. First, he would come up with a hot, emotional issue to exploit in order to cultivate the sky-is-falling-in and the I'm-a-victim crowds. Second, he would concoct an organization to collect all the contributions that would later flow in, last came promotion. The key to promotion was to get the right things displayed in the media in order to vilify his targets—multinational companies engaged in pharmaceuticals, tobacco, insurance, oil, defense, and, best of all, health and HMOs.

He bribed college professors to write spurious books and articles, politicians to leak bogus stories, popular actors and film makers to speak out, and newspaper editors to report on it all.

Today, he controlled three news anchors on national television; a dozen editors at large newspapers in major cities; eleven U.S. senators; and a throng of congressmen, judges, bankers, and government bureaucrats.

He told his closest companions, “It’s better than having to work for a living ... getting people to send you their money.”

What he wasn’t telling them was that he was close to running out of money. More money was going out than coming in. The payoffs and kickbacks were numerous and enormous.

His conversation with Cleanora Lift lasted forty minutes. In the end, though, she agreed to all his terms in order to receive an immediate advance of a quarter of a million dollars in cash. His terms weren’t complicated. She would remain head of the LGC, but someone else would be making all the important operating and financial decisions. He didn’t tell her the first operating decision made would be to convince a group of radicals he controlled into torching SUVs and the dealerships that sold them. Later, he would change the name of the LGC to the League for a Green Global Council or maybe A Green Tomorrow.

Moreover, if things worked out well, the quarter of a million dollars would come from a source in the Middle East who wanted to keep the environmentalists on the West Coast of the United States stirred up in order to block any oil drilling off the coast of California and Alaska.

Code Alpha had no sooner hung up with Cleanora when his secretary, a plump brunette in her early twenties named Starsparrow, placed a silver tray on his desk. On the silver tray was a canister of coffee and a blueberry muffin from a French coffee and pastry shop two blocks away called Le Jardin. Le Jardin was his favorite hangout, and he regularly showed up there for a double decaf latte and oodles of conversation with university intellectuals and highbrows.

He poured coffee into a cup, then got up and stood in front of his office window again, hoping the robin was back. He loved bird watching because he loved birds so much. He was fascinated with their beauty, their ability to fly, their songs. He could identify more than a hundred birds just by their song.

When he found the robin had not returned, he sat back down at his desk, checked his watch, and made another phone call. He had a few things to get straight with Thomas Manfred at the *New York Protruder*.

Code Alpha didn't waste any time getting down to business with Thomas. "Listen to me very carefully. Tomorrow morning on the *Nowadays Show*, I don't want any mealy mouth bullshit. You're choice of words to the media for the last month or so have been far too moderate. I want words that will incite, inflame. Do you understand me? I want that Combs guy so angry at you he'll throw a punch. In fact, if he doesn't throw a punch, you're fired. If he does, I'll give you a big, fat bonus." Code Alpha chuckled. "And I'll pay your medical bills, including plastic surgery if necessary."

Code Alpha knew there would indeed be plastic surgery if Combs hit Manfred. Manfred was a skinny runt with a big moustache. Combs, on the other hand, weighed nearly three hundred pounds. What Manfred didn't know was that Combs was also part of the network. If it all worked out as planned, the fight on the *Nowadays Show* would gain the sort of audience that regularly watched those afternoon shows where the guests popped each other over the head with folding chairs. Now those shows really knew how to create a *divisive line*.

He made two more phone calls. As soon as he hung up from the

last one, Starsparrow stuck her head through the door and asked if he wanted to see Daureen Mowder, who arrived early for her afternoon appointment. Code Alpha motioned with a raised hand to have Daureen sent in.

Daureen was a tall, thin woman in her early thirties. Because she spent a lot of time outdoors, her face was deeply tanned and dry looking; her skin pulled tightly over protruding cheek bones. But her most prominent feature, Code Alpha thought, was a nose so thin it created no space between her eyes. Her eyes were the most narrow set of eyes he had ever seen, and he wondered if she had any peripheral vision because of this. She must have some, though, because she spent a lot of time outdoors in the nation's forests tracking down rare and endangered species of plants and animals. And she was extremely good at doing so.

Daureen didn't sit down but stood behind a chair in front of Code Alpha's desk. "I can't do what you've asked me to do anymore. I'm sorry. I just can't."

Code Alpha put his elbows on his desk and massaged his temples with his fingertips for a long time before finally speaking. "I know how you feel. But we must make sacrifices, all kinds of sacrifices, for a greater good, for a greater order of things to come. When it comes to animal rights, or any other kind of rights, we must always appear to hold the original patent on goodness, intelligence, and compassion. I know you love animals as much as I do. And, like me, you want to expand the public lands by taking over the big ranches and farms."

Daureen interrupted, "You know damned well I do. But I just can't kill innocent animals."

"Look, we've tried it your way. We've plucked feathers and scraped off fur and spread them all around on scratching poles and the like. The park rangers found the evidence and made a case in order to keep ranchers, developers, and anyone else from using or exploiting the land." Code Alpha licked his lower lip. "But that's not good enough any longer. We need more draconian measures." Code Alpha looked up and gazed at Daureen. "Why don't we discuss this later? Dinner at my place?"

Daureen looked down at the floor and shook her head. "Dinner at your place?" She looked up. "I should have never slept with you the first time. You're never going to leave your wife, are you? Of course, you're not."

Code Alpha got up from his desk and stood in front of Daureen.

“You know I can’t do it now. And you know why. But one day ...”

“Oh, sure. One day ... just you and me, huh?”

“You know it. Now, how about dinner? My place at nine.” He took Daureen’s hand and kissed it. “Just you and me ... one day.”

“I’m a damned fool.” She turned and, as she left the room, flipped him a cool look over a shoulder.

Code Alpha had one more phone call to make, and he wasn’t looking forward to it. Things weren’t exactly going as planned in Texas, and he had talked to Jays Kerrville three times today already, the first time at 7 a.m.

Code Alpha listened while Kerrville talked, interrupting him only occasionally to make a comment or to ask a question. He had already learned during the first two phone calls that the Rohypnol in the orange juice had at first gone well. While the Brodines were under its influence, Kerrville’s technician was able to get a holographic will out of the old couple. Unfortunately, the dose of Rohypnol was excessive, and the Brodines had gone too heavily under its influence at the end. While Kerrville’s men were in the Brodines’ kitchen wondering what to do about it, they saw the Brodines’ granddaughter coming to the house unexpectedly. That gave them the idea of concocting a story that she and the Brodines’ young ranch manager had poisoned the Brodines to acquire their money. They chased after the granddaughter and the ranch manager but failed to capture them. And, before they could get back to make sure the Brodines didn’t survive the Rohypnol, a geriatric couple showed up and had the Brodines whisked away.

Kerrville said, “I’m becoming increasingly concerned we can’t pull this off.”

“Not to worry,” Code Alpha said confidently. “I’ve sent some men to Texas to help out.”

“Oh, God, you didn’t call in Wolf Howson?”

“I thought you and Wolf were an *item* at one time.”

“You know damned well we aren’t anymore. He is absolutely beastly.”

“He certainly is that. But it can’t be helped. He’s an avid outdoorsman and a splendid athlete. His gang of men are second to none. If anyone can find the Brodines’ granddaughter and the ranch manager, Wolf can.”

“You’re right, but he kills without finesse. And he’ll leave a long

string of mutilated, dead bodies behind.” Kerrville frowned. “When will Wolf and his men arrive?”

Code Alpha looked at his watch. “They should be there any minute. Have someone at the airport to pick them up. Also, I’ve sent a man with Wolf that goes by the name of Splinter. It’s a code name. I’m not even sure what his real name is. Splinter will take care of the Brodines at the clinic. He has some kind of poisonous gas called VX250 that can’t be detected. The doctors at the clinic will think the Brodines finally succumbed to the Rohypnol. You will need to keep everyone out of the Brodines’ hospital room. Splinter will tell you all about it. We can’t have anyone else die in the room with the Brodines. Otherwise ... well, you understand.”

“I understand.”

“Listen to me. We have to pull this off.”

“But I don’t understand why we want to. It’s all becoming too complicated. Maybe we can just back off for once. Regroup. The Brodine ranch can’t be that important to us.”

“You’re wrong.” Code Alpha took a sip of coffee. “The Brodine ranch is critical. I have investors, a lot of wealthy actors, like Beebe Sandstring and Michael Lesser. The total package is worth more than a hundred million.”

“That’s a lot of money. But maybe you can put everyone off for awhile.”

“I can’t. We’ve got to make things happen before the end of the month ... or the network is kaput.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“The network is in financial straights.” Code Alpha sighed. “I - I didn’t wanted to tell you unless I had to. I wouldn’t have to if the Brodine ranch fell to us like we planned.”

“How can we be going broke? What about all the money we’re sucking out of the bank in Salt Flats from the repossessed ranches and farms?”

“Not enough. I’m sorry. But if you can get the Brodine ranch ...”

“OK! OK! But why would the likes of Sandstring and Lesser put up any money, millions you say, for the Brodine ranch? I thought we were going to turn it over to the park service. Anyway, the damn ranch is hot and windy all the time.”

“For the wind, that’s why.”

“What?”

“It’s the wind that makes the ranch such an attractive investment.”

“That’s bullshit! I know you better than that. There’s more to the story. Isn’t there?”

“Yes, but ...”

“No *buts*, just level with me, and do it now, or I’m leaving Salt flats today.”

Code Alpha chuckled nervously. “It’s really about a company the network owns that makes wind turbines. Wind turbines for producing electricity.”

“I know that! What does it have to do with the Brodine ranch?”

“The Brodine ranch is located in a particularly isolated and windy place.”

“Hell, I just told you that myself!” Jays Kerrville shouted.

“Lower your voice, and let me tell you some things you don’t know.” He took another sip of coffee. “The topography at the Brodine ranch produces a constant wind tunnel. No one can explain exactly how or why. It just does. And just as important, the ranch is not along any migratory routes for birds. That means no birds will get caught up in the turbines’ blades. Plus, the ranch is so isolated no one will complain about any turbines being in their backyard. Although I myself believe they are remarkably beautiful pieces of equipment.” He paused to take a breath.

This gave Kerrville an opportunity to cut in. “You should have told me about our financial condition. And about the wind turbines. But you’re still bullshitting me. This is not about wind and some goddamn ranch in southwest Texas. This is about the turbines. I know you. You see turbines somewhere ... yes, in the south of France ... I remember you mentioning it now. It gives you an idea: Take as much money from the rich and famous as you can, using everyone’s concern about the environment. That way, you start hawking wind turbines to them. But, of course, you don’t have any turbines, so they have to put up the money to build them.” He paused. “How am I doing so far?”

“Go on,” Code Alpha said, chuckling a little less nervously this time.

“Of course, you have no intentions of building any turbines. You will just take the money and ...” Kerrville abruptly stopped himself. “No. Strike that. You indeed have built a few turbines and need some-

where to put them up. That's what the Brodine ranch does for you. It gives you a place to erect them. A showcase, so to speak, so you can hawk turbines, collect the money, and ..."

"OK. You have the general idea. But eventually all the turbines will be built and put into use. I am, after all, as concerned about global warming and alternative energy sources as anyone else. I think they call what I'm planning to do *floating* the money. When the network is back in the black, I'll then float the money from other projects to cover the money I took from the turbine project."

"Why can't you put up your turbine showcase on some other land other than the Brodine ranch? Wouldn't that be better?"

"I've already told you why. And, anyway, we don't have any other land right now."

"Hell we don't. How about the Ashby and Kallina farms in Arizona? The Lewis ranch in Colorado?"

"Gone. The two farms in Arizona were given to the Prescott National Forest, the Lewis ranch to the White River National Forest."

"No wonder we're in the red. We give too much away."

"Yes, we do, and all for a better order of things to come."

"Order of things? Well, make some order out of this: Tell your investors to wait for a month or two. We can have the bank in Salt flats repossess another ranch. Then, instead of selling it and paying me off, we'll take the land instead."

"There's no time for that. The deal has to be done this month. There are deadlines."

"What deadlines?"

"Everyone has a lawyer these days, even actors, especially the rich ones. Lawyers like deadline dates. I have to have three turbines up and working before the end of the month, or we don't get any money. This doesn't give us any time for fooling around. We have to get the Brodine ranch. Can you make it happen or not?"

"We'll make it happen."

"Good. I'm relying on you." Code Alpha switched the phone to another ear. He purposely changed the subject. "Are the mayor and sheriff behaving themselves?"

"They are doing what they are told. I don't give them any other choice. The sheriff is an idiot. His only usefulness, other than being a stooge, is his big helicopter."

“Right. But when this is over with, I think there may be some cleanup work to do. The sheriff and his father will have to become history. It’ll be the kind of work Wolf Howson and his men are good at.”

“Wolf has become a cold-blooded killer.”

Code Alpha knew exactly what Kerrville meant. Wolf and his gang were as hard as any men he had ever known. They were cruel, but they were effective. And they liked the outdoors. City jobs were not their forte. Wolf called in other men he knew for city work—men just as brutal and cruel as he was.

Kerrville added, “There are some people who came to Salt Flats today, friends of the Brodines. They flew into town in a private jet, an expensive one. I have a feeling they could make trouble. My computer geeks are checking them out now. I’ve sent Starsparrow what we have, so she can help find out about them from your end.”

“I’ll see she gets on it right away,” Code Alpha said. He didn’t need any more trouble than he already had. And if eliminating trouble meant there would be collateral damage, even a lot of it, then so be it. His network was close to ruin, and that meant his plans for an open society were close to ruin. He couldn’t let that happen ... at any cost.

## CHAPTER THREE

Kelly Matthews sat in the waiting room in McKittrick's clinic at 1 p.m. Friday. She flipped through a magazine she had taken from a huge stack of magazines on the coffee table in front of her. It had been two hours since Reid and Bill had left on their trip into Big Bend, and she had become restless—at first walking the corridors, then finally settling down on a couch in front of a picture window in the waiting room.

She had left Willie Calendar in the Brodines' room. There was only one decent chair in there, and she thought Willie should have it. Anyway, she was expecting someone to arrive soon. She kept looking impatiently outside the picture window that gave her a good view of the parking lot and front door to the clinic. She was expecting Adele and Roland Guidry. Roland, Reid's best friend, had worked for Reid as the company's chief-of-security before Reid's early retirement.

Kelly jumped up to examine her six-foot frame in a mirror hanging above a bureau along the north wall of the waiting room. She looked at herself straight on, then twisted her body to one side a little. She took pride in losing ten pounds since marrying Reid. The pounds just melted away trying to keep up with him. She turned back to face the mirror and leaned forward. She ran fingers through her jet black hair and noticed a few strands of grey. "Ah, crap," she said aloud, turning from the mirror with a sour look on her face.

After turning from the mirror, she saw that Adele and Roland had

just gotten out of an old, dilapidated pickup truck in the parking lot. The truck's front bumper was hanging precariously low to one side, the windshield was cracked, and piled up high in the bed of the truck were bales of hay. Reid rented the truck, the only one immediately available, for the Guidrys at an airfield outside Salt Flats where Reid parked his plane after he and Kelly had flown into town.

Kelly stepped up to the window and waved at Adele.

Adele waved back and pointed at the truck. Her lips formed the words, "What a piece of shit!"

Kelly laughed and instantly felt better. She left quickly to go get Willie.

A few minutes later in the waiting room, Kelly sat next to Roland and across the coffee table from Willie and Adele and wondered what she would ever do without these two women now that they were in her life. They were a godsend. In many ways these two women were much alike. In many other ways they were very different. They were certainly miles apart in their upbringing and physical features. Adele was blond, curvy, and short, maybe 5 feet. Willie was graying, wiry, and tall, probably five-nine or ten. Willie was in her seventies, Adele in her forties. Willie was country born and raised. Adele was a city girl from Chalmette, a suburb of New Orleans, and spoke the local dialect.

Kelly turned her eyes toward Roland, sitting on her right. Roland was one of the few men she knew who looked good in a beard and moustache. His mahogany-colored hair matched his mahogany eyes. Cajun eyes, Adele called them.

"Thanks for coming," Kelly said. "This business with the Brodines has gotten entirely out of hand."

Adele said, "We would have been here sooner, but when Roland saw the barber shop as we were driving through town, he decided to stop in and poke around a little. And since Melba June's Beauty Emporium was only three doors down, I thought I'd do some poking around myself."

Roland got up and stood by the window. "Here's what I was told." He looked over at Willie. "Please confirm. You and Bill arrived at the Brodine ranch around 6:30 a.m. and ..."

Willie interrupted, "How in the world did anybody know that?"

"The 911 operator, ambulance driver, and the clinic's staff," Roland said. "It's a small town."

Adele said, "Rose Ann Murphy, the head nurse here at the clinic, is the biggest blabbermouth around. And her cousin is Melba June at the Emporium. So you can just imagine what happened when Rose Ann talked to Melba June this morning."

Roland pulled at his closely-cropped beard. "Willie, 6:30 in the morning? You would've had to drive all night from the Comanchería."

Willie studied Roland for a long moment. "As I recall you were the only child in your family." Roland nodded. "Bill and I had seven. So when we traveled, which wasn't all that often mind you, we traveled at night, while the young 'uns were asleep. A good sight less trouble thataways. Bill got used to driving at night and won't change. He's like that as y'all know."

They knew.

Roland went on talking to Willie. "When you arrived, Thelma and Farley were unconscious at the kitchen table. You called 911, and the Brodines were brought here to the clinic. The doctor later said the Brodines had consumed Rohypnol in the orange juice they drank for breakfast."

"But, thank God, not enough to be fatal," Willie interjected.

"Or harmful," Adele said. "Rohypnol is very dangerous and can cause dementia. But in this case, the doctor is sure the Brodines will be just fine. They are just sleeping it off now. I phoned the doctor earlier and talked to him myself."

Adele was a registered nurse, retired. She had been working as a nurse in a clinic in Lafayette, Louisiana, when she met Roland, a state trooper. He had been in a gunfight and was wounded. They dated for three years before finally marrying. Roland later became the head of Louisiana's Drug Enforcement Administration, a position he held for two years. He then joined up with the offshore drilling company, Tidal Wave Drilling, as its chief of security, working for Reid Matthews.

"How did the date rape drug get into the Brodines' orange juice?" Kelly asked Roland.

"Don't know," Roland replied. "But it's causing a near panic in town. Any liquids in containers, like milk and orange juice, are no longer being consumed by anyone."

Adele frowned. "I'm afraid there are some of the women in Melba June's who are going along with the theory that Brenda Brodine decided to do in her grandparents to inherit the ranch, and that she ...

well, got Derrick to help out. And that's why they're on the run."

Willie shook her head.

Roland looked up at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. "Women! Sex, lies, and videos."

"I didn't say I believed it," Adele replied.

"Here's what the men are saying," Roland said. "They believe what happened has something to do with Mayor Rosoos and all the men he hired as security for the bank. The bank has been repossessing a lot of ranches and farms. The community is in an uproar about it, and there have been threats on the mayor's life, or so the mayor says. The men at the barber shop don't believe there have been any threats."

"Men!" Adele said. "You know damned well there have been threats."

Roland said, smiling, "I didn't say I didn't believe it."

Kelly asked Willie, "Do you think Farley was about to lose his ranch?"

"No, honey, he wasn't," Willie said. "Farley Brodine never borrowed a dime in his life. Didn't believe in borrowing. But he wasn't opposed to other folks doing it. In fact, he was one of the original founders of the bank the mayor now runs. He helped start the bank forty years ago to help out the smaller ranchers and farmers. And ... before you even ask ... I know for sure Farley didn't threaten the mayor's life." Willie forced a smile. "Farley would've just killed him outright. There'd been no talkin' about it." Willie sat up a little straighter. "Bill and Farley served together in the Korean War. That's how they know each other. Both are decorated war heroes. Farley was the best man at our wedding; Thelma was my maid of honor."

Everyone was silent for a while.

Kelly spoke up first, looking over at Roland. "If Brenda and Derrick didn't do it, who did?"

Roland shrugged his shoulders. "I'm going to drop by the sheriff's office and see what I can find out."

"Reid said he didn't get anything from them earlier," Kelly said. "And that they were most uncooperative."

"I'll give it a try anyway," Roland said. He gazed at Adele. "I have a job for you and Kelly. I want you two to take a drive to a motel just outside of town called Cooper's Inn. Some of the security guys the mayor hired are staying there. I want you to find out as much as you can: names, who they are, where they came from, who pays for their

rooms. Get credit card numbers. I already know these guys work for someone called Jays Kerrville. Find out what you can about him, too, if you can. He's not staying at Cooper's, though; he's staying at the mayor's house." Roland gazed at Adele intently for a second. "Do not cause any trouble. Hear me?"

Adele feigned surprise and shrugged. Her lips formed the words, "Who? Me?"

Kelly turned right onto the dirt road leading up to Cooper's Inn. Behind her a column of dust rose, spread out, and finally settled on the roadside grass, adding more to the thick accumulation of dust the blades of grass already had on them. She saw right away that Cooper's Inn was not a place where she'd care to spend the night. She looked over at Adele and laughed at her wide-eyed stare and opened mouth.

Each of Cooper's five units stood bare and alone among knee-high johnsongrass. All the units had peeling bright green paint and numerous missing shingles from the roofs. Two of the units were so rickety they looked like they were about to collapse.

"Where do think they got all that green paint from?" Kelly asked.

"From the John Deere dealership we just passed down the road," Adele answered. "But what I want to know is how in the world did the screens on all those windows over there get torn up like that?"

Kelly said, "I wish we hadn't told Roland we'd do this."

Buzz Cooper was a grizzly looking, old curmudgeon with three days of stubble on his face. He had lost his wife, Betsy, two years ago. Kelly immediately felt sorry for him.

Adele leaned over the desk Buzz was sitting behind and waved a bank check in front of his face.

Buzz's eyes followed the up and down movements of the check. "What's that?" he grunted irritably, flicking a fat finger.

"Melba June at the Emporium sent us over," Adele lied, "to see if you'd help her out. This is a bad check from one of the men staying here."

"Ain't got nutin' to do with me."

"Dawlin', of course, it *ain't got nutin'* to do with you." Adele locked her icy blue eyes on Buzz's face and left them there.

Kelly stood next to Adele and frowned down at Buzz. She tapped her foot on the floor for a moment and moved in closer. She couldn't take her eyes from Buzz because of his glasses; both arms were broken in half, and he had fixed them with several rubber bands tied together and wrapped entirely around the back of his head. She thought it was the saddest damn thing she had ever seen.

Buzz shifted his heavy body, and his chair creaked. "Now, who are you?"

"Melba June and I are cousins," Adele said impatiently.

"Why would one of the men staying here be going into the Beauty Emporium and buying anything from Melba June?" Buzz asked.

Adele put her lips up close to Buzz's ear. "He's a cross-dresser."

"What's that?" Buzz said.

"It means he likes to wear panties," Adele answered.

Kelly had to turn her face away.

Buzz made a guttural sound and picked up the phone and punched in numbers with a gnarled forefinger. "Melba June," he said into the mouth piece of the phone, "I got some short, blond lady over here that ... OK, your cousin." He was silent for a moment. "OK, OK, for God's sake. But they don't use credit cards. Jays Kerrville always pays for their rooms with cash."

Kelly was glad Adele had sorted out in advance with Melba June the cover story that would be used. But too bad Kerrville paid in cash. Roland was hoping credit cards were used because tracing the credit card numbers might help him find out who these men were.

Kelly saw Adele had softened her face and warmed her eyes, so she did likewise. Maybe these guys told Buzz something that could be important. She noticed Buzz had a soft drink on his desk. "You have any more Cokes back there? We'd sure like one."

Buzz grunted yes. And it was a decidedly friendlier grunt than the ones preceding it. He got up and brought back two Cokes and sank back down into his chair.

Adele pulled up a straight-back chair, scooting the legs on a hardwood floor that needed reworking and polishing. She sat down. "Some of the guys you got staying here are pretty rude, Melba June told me. Cursing and raising hell all over town. Usually over nothing." Adele took a swallow of her drink. "What's that all about, do you think?"

Buzz leaned forward in his chair. "They're a bunch of assholes. If I

didn't need their money so bad, I'd just leave town and leave 'em here on their own."

Kelly couldn't help but notice Buzz's eyes became even sadder after he mentioned money. "Who are these assholes?" she asked. "I know they're suppose to be security for the bank and all, but ..."

Buzz started fidgeting with a pen on his desk and began doodling.

Adele asked, "Any of them ever say anything? Like something they didn't want anyone to know about?"

Buzz shrugged. "Maybe." He took a drink from his cola. "They don't talk much, and I sure as hell don't talk to them." He drew some more doodles. "They're not right in their heads. I can tell you that much."

"What does that mean?" Adele inquired.

Buzz got up, walked to the window in front, and looked outside. "A few of them usually show up about this time." He returned to his desk and sat down. "They do drugs. Lots of drugs. I overheard two of them talking one afternoon about driving in to town to get narcotics at the drugstore. They talked about how they had threatened to kill the grandchildren of the pharmacists, the Roberts. The Roberts are fine people, and they have family all over town. When Kerrville's men got back from town they went crazy. They shot dead all the stray cats I used to feed out back. Five or six of 'em. Target practice, they said. But it was just plain meanness."

Adele's face got puffy red. Kelly knew she loved cats, all animals, really.

Kelly asked, "Did you tell the sheriff?"

Buzz coughed. "The sheriff's as useless as hen shit on a pump handle. He thinks he's in cahoots with Kerrville, but he ain't. And he'll find that out some day." Buzz brushed away a fly humming around his face. "You two ladies ought to get out of here. These men are dangerous. Their rooms are filled with guns and knives and what all. Some of the things they have I've never seen the likes of before."

Kelly swung around when she heard what she thought was the front door being ripped from its hinges. Her stomach clenched. A broad shouldered, young man with hard eyes and a Band-Aid on his nose came bursting in. He jabbed a threatening finger at her and Adele. "What do you two bitches want?" He walked forward a few steps.

Adele eased herself up from her chair. "Dawlin', that's not any of

your business.” She placed her purse on the desk in front of Buzz and took out a folded Buck knife.

Broad-shoulders stopped his advance and smiled thinly, his eyes scanning the room. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned to one side.

Adele unfolded the knife and tossed it handle first at his feet.

He laughed and smiled sardonically. “What’s that for?”

Adele removed from her purse her ivory-handled, .38-caliber Lady Smith. “That’s the knife you attacked me with.” Her eyes turned icy, and she inhaled sharply. She thumbed back the hammer of her revolver. The sound was unmistakable for what it was.

Kelly stepped away from Adele and removed her own gun from her purse.

Broad-shoulders’ face turned taut. Beads of sweat popped up on his forehead. One bead began trailing slowly down the side of his face. He uncrossed his arms from his chest.

Kelly caught Adele’s eye and motioned with her head toward Broad-shoulders. “It really is *kind of* his business.” Adele looked puzzled. Kelly went on. “You know, about what we’re doing here and all.”

Adele tilted her head to one side and looked at Kelly from the corner of an eye. “Well, yes, maybe you’re right,” she said, moving a little closer to Broad-shoulders. “We’re here to find out who you are.”

“Fuck off,” he said, putting a hand inside his jacket.

The discharge from Adele’s gun rattled the tacky pictures and deers’ antlers hanging on the walls. A bullet splintered the pine-board flooring precisely one-inch from Broad-shoulder’s right toe. His hand returned to his side.

A wisp of gun smoke peeled itself upward from the bore of Adele’s gun.

Buzz yelled an obscenity.

Adele yelled back at him over her shoulder, “Don’t get anal about your damn floor.”

Kelly walked over to Broad-shoulders with her gun pointed at him and carefully took away a gun he kept in a shoulder holster under his jacket, then removed his wallet. The wallet contained a thick stack of one-hundred dollar bills but no driver’s license, no credit cards, no ID. “Guys like you make me crazy,” Kelly said, stepping away. “But let’s start over with our relationship. How ‘bout that? We know you

work for Jays Kerrville. What's the name of his company? We might want to lodge a complaint."

Broad-shoulders' eyes narrowed, and a snarl formed on his lips.

Adele stared stonily at him. "Dawlin', we need to know your company's name, so we'll know where to ship your *remains*. 'Cause it sure looks like that's where we're headed here."

Kelly saw movement. A man was creeping up behind Buzz with a gun in his hand. She yelled and simultaneously pulled the trigger of her gun.

Her shot was high.

The man ducked, lost his balance, and tripped over the chair Adele dragged up earlier. He was quickly back on his feet.

Adele spun around and put a carefully placed shot into the man's right shoulder.

The man's gun clattered to the floor.

Broad-shoulders grabbed for Kelly, taking her gun and his own gun back, and forced her in front of him.

Kelly chopped him in the groin with the side of one hand.

The air swished from his lungs. He doubled over, dropping the guns.

Kelly quickly picked up the guns and the knife Adele threw down earlier and stepped to the side. But not quickly enough. Broad-shoulders grabbed for her again.

Adele put another bullet into the floor in front of him. "That'll be enough of that," she said harshly. "You are a very bad boy. Handsome as all get out but a bad boy nonetheless."

Kelly moved over and stood next to Adele.

The gunman who Adele shot in the shoulder was rolling on the floor and yelling.

"Hush, dawlin'," Adele said to him. "Don't be a baby."

Buzz, too, was yelling about how his place was being wrecked.

Adele walked over to Buzz's desk and picked up the telephone and dialed 911. She cupped a hand over the speaker. "Buzz, be quiet. Be still. Behave or I'm going to shoot you, too." Buzz instantly stopped his complaints.

Adele removed her hand from the phone's speaker and spoke into it. "There's been an attempted robbery at Cooper's Inn. One of the robbers has been shot but is not badly hurt." She raised her voice. "But

he's going to be dead in a second or two if he doesn't stop whining and behaving like a child." She dropped the phone on its receiver, then took Buzz by the elbow and led him away. She whispered, "Buzz, it might be a good idea for you to leave town for awhile."

"I gotta friend in Denver I ain't seen for five years," he whispered back.

"Sounds like it's time for a drop-by." Adele handed him the money Kelly took from Broad-shoulders. "Give us a sec, and we'll take up a bigger collection."

It took only a minute for Adele and Kelly to rummage through the pockets of the man who was shot—collecting gun, wallet, and money. Adele held all the money they collected out to Buzz, a little less than five thousand dollars.

When Buzz left the room to pack for his trip to Denver, Adele pulled up a chair for Broad-shoulders to sit in. She motioned with her gun for him to sit down and reminded him of all the appendages she had not shot off of him yet. "OK, let's start over," Adele said. "Let's skip over the easy stuff. You work for Jays Kerrville, so let's not go down that road again." She wiped the bore of her gun with a finger tip. "Who pulls Kerrville's strings? I need a name."

"I don't know," Broad-shoulders answered.

Adele motioned Kelly closer. "Did you hear this nincompoop?"

"I heard him all right," Kelly said. She saw that Broad-shoulders' face and eyes were hard, resolute.

Broad-shoulders said, "Lady, you're not going to do anything to me."

"I sure wish you hadn't said that," Kelly said. "You should take it back."

"Fuck you," he said.

Adele smiled broadly. "Kelly, break out that knife of mine once more and get out this nincompoop's gun. We're going to need the knife and his gun in a minute."

Broad-shoulders shifted in his chair. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"Blow your brains out," Adele said with cold eyes. "Afterward, I'll plant the knife in one of your hands and your gun in the other."

"Clear case of justifiable homicide," Kelly said.

"The sheriff will take care of you two," Broad-shoulders said.

“The sheriff’s not in town,” Kelly disagreed. “Besides, I’m the witness.”

“Oh, yeah, what about Charlie over there?” Broad-shoulders said arrogantly.

Adele replied matter-of-factly, “Oh, we’re going to blow his brains out, too. With your gun, of course. We’ll say you two got into an argument over who was going to rape us first.”

Charlie shouted out from across the room, “We don’t know who Kerrville works for. Really, lady!”

Kelly swung around. “How do you get paid?”

“In cash,” Charlie said. “Kerrville pays us.”

“How does Kerrville get paid?” Adele asked.

Broad-shoulders answered, “In cash like us ... from the bank here in town.”

Kelly frowned. “Adele, we’re putting the wrong questions to the wrong people. I have an idea. Let’s get out of here before anyone responds to your 911 call.”

Kelly pulled her truck into a vacant parking spot in front of the barber shop in Salt Flats. Two men were outside sitting on a bench. One of the men had the stub of a cigar stuck in his mouth. It looked like an oversized cork stuck in a bottle. It was just as well the poor man’s words were stopped up, for the other man seemed to be doing all the talking.

As soon as Kelly and Adele got out of the truck, both men jumped up and started furiously waving hello to them. Kelly returned the men’s smiles and waves, despite not knowing why they seemed so excited.

Kelly and Adele stood for a moment at the back of their truck to wait for a giant trashing machine to rumble by them before walking across the street to the bank.

The inside of the bank was modern and assertive. Kelly took an immediate dislike to it and wondered why anyone would be so stupid as to do such a thing in a bank for country people. *Too much glass and chrome do-dads with sharp angles.* And when the sun beamed through the front picture window—like it was doing now—it caused so much glare inside the bank that it blinded people, disorienting them. The

slightest mishap by an old person might wind up with his being impaled on some piece of crap passing itself off as art.

Kelly noticed a thin, scholarly looking, middle-aged man behind a glass desk staring at her. The man had one of those forlorn looks about him, the kind that causes one to ask, "Are you OK?" A brass name plate on his desk read Bob Roberts II.

Adele pulled at Kelly's elbow and said, "Are you sure this is such a good idea?"

"All Mayor Rosoos can do is to tell us it's not any of our business how Kerrville gets paid." Kelly smiled over at Mr. Roberts. "I have come up with a story, though, that might get him to tell us."

Kelly had, at one time, been the vice-president of a bank before coming to Texas and marrying Reid. Her story was a cock-and-bull one, and it would either work or it wouldn't. But in any case, it was worth a try.

Kelly walked over to Mr. Roberts. "I'd like to make a deposit. Can I speak to Mr. Rosoos?"

Mr. Roberts stood up and introduced himself as vice-president of the bank, saying he would be glad to take care of it himself.

"It's for a rather substantial sum," Kelly said, "and I have some questions I want to ask before I put any of my money in your bank. You understand, of course."

"Of course." Mr. Roberts straightened his bow tie. "If you don't mind me asking, what sum of money were you thinking about depositing?"

"Roughly five million," Kelly said without blinking an eye.

Adele looked at Mr. Roberts and raised an eyebrow.

Mr. Roberts cleared his throat. "I see. Well, yes, of course." He immediately picked up a phone.

Mr. Roberts escorted Kelly and Adele upstairs to the mezzanine offices. Mayor Rosoos's office was decorated with the same kinds of glass and chrome do-dads as in the bank's lobby. Kelly tried not to impale herself on anything.

Adele leaned over and whispered in Kelly's ear. "This place looks like it was done up by the ice fairy."

Mayor Rosoos was a meaty, heavy jowled man with graying hair. His eyes were clear and intelligent. Kelly knew immediately her story wasn't going to work with this man. But it was too late to turn back.

Mr. Roberts seated Kelly and Adele into overstuffed, leather chairs in front of Mayor Rosoos's gigantic desk and took a seat in one of the stiff, wooden chairs along a far wall.

The mayor gave him a hard look. "You can leave us now, Bob."

Mr. Roberts stood up awkwardly, embarrassed.

Kelly took an instant dislike to the mayor. "I'd like for Mr. Roberts to stay," Kelly said authoritatively.

The mayor motioned with a hand for Mr. Roberts to sit back down.

Kelly could see that the mayor's eyes and smile were no longer in sync; his hard eyes betrayed his warm smile. Kelly had seen this before when a man was stood up to and couldn't do anything about it.

The mayor opened a leather portfolio and removed a Mont Blanc pen from his front shirt pocket. "Mr. Roberts tells me that you are thinking about making *roughly* a five million dollar deposit into our bank."

Adele gazed intently at the mayor, pursed her lips, and raised her eyebrows.

Kelly had never seen anyone who could raise their eyebrows as high as Adele could raise hers. "Yes, my husband and I are thinking about buying one of the ranches around here." Kelly caught herself rocking one of her crossed legs and quit. "There seems to be quite a few of them up for sale." The mayor nodded his head. Kelly went on. "Since we might do this fairly quickly, we thought it would make the act of sale go easier if the money was already at hand. If you know what I mean? My husband and I are friends of the Brodines and are in town because of what happened to them," Kelly said. She was sure the mayor already knew this.

"The Brodines are close friends of mine as well," the mayor replied. "They still own a big block of stock in the bank." The mayor's eyes turned warm, his smile even warmer. "There is property next to theirs that may soon be available. Is your husband interested in raising cattle?"

"No, horses. Appaloosas." Kelly cleared her throat. "Before we put any money in your bank, of course, we would have to do due diligence, obtain current financial statements and the like. We would also be concerned about security issues. Not only computer security but the bank's physical security over its assets. You understand our concerns."

Kelly noticed Mr. Roberts had become exceedingly uncomfortable, and his face had reddened slightly. She wondered why. The mayor's face, on the other hand, was as blank as new sheet of paper. "Although

we've been in town for only for a few hours, we have already heard the bank is under special security ...”

“You don't have to be concerned about that,” the mayor said testily.

“Oh, but I am concerned. It's a matter of safeguarding my money. I'd like to know more about this Jays Kerrville. Who he is? His credentials? His track record for keeping bank assets safe? For that matter, for keeping key employees of the bank safe?”

“Mrs. Matthews, you are not a stockholder of this bank. You're not even a depositor. Jays Kerrville is none of your business.”

Kelly fixed her eyes on the mayor for a long time before picking up her purse and taking out a note pad and pen. She wrote something down on the pad. “Until I know about Kerrville, I won't *ever* be a depositor in this bank.” She tore a piece of paper from the pad and handed it to the mayor. “This is the name of my banker in Fredericksburg, Texas. Give him a call whenever you want.” Kelly fixed her eyes on the mayor's face again, holding them there. “Something's wrong here. And you're hiding it.”

The mayor exploded. “Lady, I don't give a shit how much goddamn money you have. What's going on here is bigger than you and a hundred like you. You're treading on dangerous ground, and you and your friends may all get swallowed up before it's over.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

**A**t a gallop, Derrick Calendar and Brenda Brodine rode a horse double-backed toward the reddish-brown mountains and a tree line of scrubby oaks and junipers at the foot of them. Derrick knew his horse was exhausted from carrying them, and a bloody trench along the animal's neck made from a bullet was beginning to bleed even worse.

Upon arriving at the tree line, Derrick stopped and gave an arm to Brenda to dismount. He was angry, pushing her off the horse more than assisting. "This running business is getting old fast," he said as his boots hit the ground.

"Well, then, you shouldn't have come along and gotten us shot at," Brenda replied.

Derrick grabbed ointment and a clean cloth from his saddlebags. "Seems like they were already shooting at you before I came along." He applied ointment to the horse's wound for all the good it would do. Then, removing the saddle, he threw it down hard at Brenda's feet. She jumped back.

"You jerk," she said gruffly. "And what are you doing? We'll need this horse."

Derrick gazed at her with darkened eyes. "He's injured. Anyway, he'll be too easy to spot." He turned and picked up his rolled duster and saddle bags, slinging one over each shoulder. "Maybe we just ought to give up," he said. "You could tell them you're sorry or something."

“Hush and listen,” Brenda said, turning an ear.

Derrick recognized the sound of the old Chevy truck. He drove it often enough. “Ah, damnit! Now they’re chasing after us in your grandfather’s old truck. We should get the hell out of here.”

He slipped farther into the trees, heading east, with Brenda following closely on his heels.

“You can move faster than this, I hope,” she said.

“I moved fast enough this morning to save your rear-end. If I hadn’t come along when I did, your goose would’ve been cooked by now.”

Brenda pinched Derrick on the butt. “Yeah, but you shouldn’t have let them shoot your rifle out of your hands.” She pinched again. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Yep. Over there. And quit pinching me!” He pointed to a thick tangle of thorny brush and stubby trees that looked peculiarly menacing. He had crawled into it several times before to go after stray cows and knew that once penetrated, it was a catacomb of trails made by all sorts of animals: javelina, deer, coyote. Once you got far enough inside, it was impossible for anyone to see inside.

Brenda balked. “You gotta be kiddin’. I’m not crawling around in there with the spiders and rattlesnakes. Are you crazy or what?”

“Stay out here then, and let Kerrville’s men get you.” Derrick stooped down on all fours and began to inch his way through the thorny brush. He managed to go 20 feet before looking back to check on Brenda.

Brenda’s shirt sleeve was hung-up on a thorn, and she was tugging away fiercely to get it free. Two of Kerrville’s men were approaching fast, and she was not far enough into the brush not to be seen by them.

Derrick scrambled back to help but was too late.

One of Kerrville’s men was already yelling at her to come out.

“Go screw yourself!” Brenda shouted back at him.

The bursts of shots from the Uzi kicked up dust at Brenda’s feet. The gun’s vexing sound caused birds everywhere to scamper from trees. Derrick flinched but kept scrambling back toward Brenda. On the way, he picked up a knotty stick.

Brenda and the gunman were struggling with one another. The gunman’s back was to Derrick when he came out of the bushes.

The impact of Derrick’s stick on the back of the gunman’s head brought the gunman to his knees.

Brenda kneed the gunman in the side of the head.

He collapsed and dropped his gun.

Derrick reached for the gun, but Brenda beat him to it.

She pointed the gun at a second gunman and pulled the trigger without a moment of hesitation. The man hopped around and disappeared behind some trees.

Derrick didn't know a single woman, or man for that matter, who would have reacted as quickly as Brenda had. "He was limping. I think you hit him." Derrick held out his hand for the gun. "How about letting me have a go at it."

"Just make sure you don't shoot yourself in the foot," Brenda said, handing the gun to Derrick.

Derrick slammed the side of the Uzi into the head of the dazed gunman, who was struggling to get to his feet. The gunman fell forward, skinning his nose on rough rocks.

"Nice gun," Derrick said, handing the gun back to Brenda. "Keep that guy held down in the woods. I'll go get the truck and come back for you."

"Stupid, what if they took the keys with them?"

"I won't need 'em. Cover me. I'm making a run for it."

Brenda looked uncertain but waved a hand for him to go. "I didn't know a cowboy like you *could* run. Now, shake ass."

Brenda was right. Derrick couldn't run, but he walked as fast as he could ... and it hurt. His knees had been busted up a year ago: The horse went crazy in the chute and, before it was over with, both of Derrick's knees were crushed, along with five broken ribs, an arm, and a collar bone. It ended his professional rodeo career.

Moments later, Derrick came driving up to retrieve Brenda. When he stopped, a thick cloud of diesel smoke enveloped her. She fired off another burst of shots at the gunman in the trees and jumped into the truck.

"Hit it," she yelled.

Derrick already had. Dust and gravel from the truck's spinning tires pelted the gunman on the ground, just as he was regaining consciousness and rising to his feet.

"How did you get this truck started without a key?" Brenda asked.

"Re-wired her a week ago. Your granddaddy was always losing the durned key, and I got tired of looking for it."

Brenda smiled. "Me, too."

Derrick liked Brenda's smile, but it usually didn't last very long, not for him anyway. She sure didn't mind smiling at the sheriff or Jays Kerrville,

though, until today. “Any more thoughts as to why we’re being chased?”

“No. I still can’t figure it out. All I know is I was walking up to the house when two of Kerrville’s men I had seen around town before came charging out of the backdoor yelling, ‘Get her.’ They weren’t smiling, and they had guns in their hands. For all I knew, they were going to rape me. So I turned and ran. I might have given up, but when you came along and they started shooting ... well, it was pretty clear they were up to no good.”

“They came out of the house?”

“Yeah, but you know my grandparents. They’d invite anyone in for coffee.” Brenda’s face hardened. “Do you think they hurt my grandparents?”

“Surely not.”

“Do you think we should go back?”

“Not while they’re shooting at us.”

“Where do you think we should go?”

“I’m hoping to get to the sheriff in the next county. But we have to make our way east through this bottom land first.”

The truck hit a hole, jolting both of them violently. Brenda hit her head on the roof.

“Ouch,” she said. “Didn’t you see that damned hole? It was huge.”

“No, I don’t see so well. But I can hear just fine, and I hear a helicopter.”

Brenda stuck her head out the truck’s window and looked behind her toward the west. “You’re right.”

“We’d better ditch the Chevy and get into those woods over there,” Derrick said. “We’re not too far from a place I know where we can hide out for awhile, if we can get there first without getting our asses shot off.”

When bullets started kicking up dust in front of the truck, Derrick took evasive actions, swerving left and right, and coming as close to the tree line as he could get. When bullets started hitting the truck despite his swerving like crazy, he told Brenda to get ready to jump.

He quickly pumped the accelerator to the floorboard three times, and braked hard. The truck backfired and sent up a massive cloud of black smoke.

“Jump!” he yelled.