

Testimony

CHAPTER 1

Jack Kelly stroked the edge of his clipped moustache with the tip of his forefinger, realizing there would be trouble that night if Carl did not keep his hands off Selene. As he sat in an overstuffed leather chair, Jack looked around the room. The party had swelled to a peak; tobacco smoke rose and wafted past the mounted longhorns on the wall to the heavy beams of a vaulted ceiling that gave the room an almost sanctuary-like feel. Tables, once heavy with food, appeared decimated, as if packs of hungry dogs had been at them. The banner above that read “Happy 35th Anniversary Rocky & Mimi” sagged like the breasts of his first Sunday school teacher. Ancient black cowboys rubbed shoulders with young men in thousand dollar boots that never touched anything but concrete. Mexicans in carefully pressed and colorful garb stood next to poor whites whose button snap shirttails hung out over beer guts. Women in dresses from Neiman-Marcus talked animatedly with those in polyester pantsuits and jeans.

Not seeing Don, Jack turned his gaze back to Selene, Don’s wife. Slender, dark, and sensuously striking, she inclined her head to Carl. Dressed in slacks and looking almost too urban for the crowd in the room, Carl, taking a quick glance around them, put his hand down to Selene’s derriere for a swift feel. She laughed and moved back, but only slightly.

As he listened with half an ear to a rumble of conversations, Jack saw Toni approaching. A three-year-old with long blonde hair and large blue eyes, she held a stuffed sock monkey in her tiny hands. Already dressed for bed, she had on a homemade pink nightgown trimmed in little white ruffles. With solemn eyes, she leaned on his legs and put the monkey on his knee.

“Hello, Toni,” Jack said, giving her a smile and placing the beer bottle he had been drinking from on the other side of his chair.

Toni smiled back, its innocent charm adding to the unusual loveliness of her face. She raised her arms, and Jack picked her up, putting her in his lap.

“Can you say your name?” he said. “Can you say ‘Toni’?”

She smiled and nodded. “Toni.”

“And what’s your monkey’s name?” Jack asked, touching the stuffed animal. “Can you say ‘Binky’?”

“Binky,” she repeated.

His wife, Louise, crossed the room and joined them with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She sat on the arm of his chair. Jack glanced at her, a too-thin woman who wore a look of perpetual unhappiness; she was one of the women in designer clothes that set Jack back an amount he did not care to think about.

With a frown, Louise looked down at the beer bottle on the floor. “Lone Star Light?” she said. “I’m surprised it’s not Jim Beam and Coke. You have such plebian tastes, Jack.”

They had been through that argument many times. Initially attracted to him because of his money, Louise now found fault in his conservative ways and that he was a West Texas country boy at heart. Even his dark eyes and swarthy skin, inherited from a Montenegrin grandmother, irritated her. His job required absolute physical fitness, but in twenty years when he retired and developed a paunch, that would annoy her too.

“It appears Carl is up to his old tricks again,” Louise said, looking across the room. “You’d think winning a seat in the Senate would slow him down. Where’s Don?” she asked, looking around. “Has he seen how his wife is acting? I know he doesn’t give a damn about her, but to behave this way at his parents’ anniversary party is rather tacky.”

“Louise,” Jack said, pointing his head at Toni.

Louise looked at the child with disinterest. “Oh, she can’t understand what we’re talking about. She doesn’t know what a whore her mother is, at least not yet.”