

FADDEN

The background of the cover is a photograph of a dense, dark jungle. In the center-right, there is a dark, rectangular opening that appears to be the entrance to a cave or a small building. Two figures are silhouetted against the bright light coming from the opening. The figure on the left is taller and stands with arms slightly away from the body. The figure on the right is shorter, possibly a child, and is holding a long, thin object like a cane or a staff. The surrounding environment is filled with thick foliage, including large ferns and moss-covered tree trunks and roots.

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CHAPTER I

Faden sat crouched in the corner of the dark closet trying hard to fight the icy fingers of fear that clutched so unmercifully at his heart. He found it extremely difficult to do even that most basic of all things in life ... to breathe! Tears of shame coursed through the dust on his cheeks, pooling on the front of his shirt, as the stain spread from the crotch of his pants onto the linoleum between his legs. He had tried valiantly to hold, and then stem the flow of hot urine, but it was just not to be. The furry thing that had scampered across his foot, taking the time to nibble at the nail of his little toe had caused him to void his bladder.

There was an audible clicking noise and the odor of burnt ozone coming from the circuit breaker box located on the wall behind his left shoulder. The clicking would occur whenever one of the major appliances of the household was turned on. Although Faden was mature for a boy of ten years of age, he was also cursed with an overactive imagination, and therefore a scenario began to take shape in his mind.

If he were to plunge his fingers into the electrical box while sitting in a pool of piss, would it not electrocute him? And wouldn't this release him from abusive bonds of his evil stepfather forever. Wouldn't his mother grieve for him, and in her grief not come to realize how vile and cruel this man was that she had married?

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Perhaps it would be all for naught and he would have died in vain. His mother had always been so wise in the past, so why couldn't she realize the mistake she was making now?

These were just a few of the thoughts that ran through his mind as he sat there. Faden wasn't worried so much about his own welfare, but fretted endlessly over his mother. She had had to endure the loss of his father to a freak drowning accident, which was rather suspicious in nature. Rumor had it that the very man, to whom she was now married, had been instrumental in the death. Supposedly, it had been because of a "Dare" on his part, which led to his father attempting to run the trotline stretched across the flood-ravaged water of the Red River.

True, as many had witnessed, he had made a futile attempt to rescue the man after he had become ensnared on one of the several fishhooks. Many were to wonder later why he hadn't simply cut loose one end of the line, thereby allowing the current of the river to swing hook, line, and man to the safety of the shore, but then hindsight is 20-20. Faden didn't accept the excuse of ignorance on Ben's part, but felt then as he did now, that there had been a deeper motive behind the doomed rescue.

His mother had then lost her father in an automobile accident six months later, and she and Faden had made do on their own. It had saddened Faden to no end to watch his mother's suffering. He had done all he could do to ease his sole surviving parent's pain, but there is a limit to what an eight-year-old boy can accomplish. Finally, friends, family, and well-wishers had convinced her to marry Ben, after a

respectable amount of time had elapsed. After all, didn't Faden need a role model, and was *he* not the Minister of the Church of Higher Power?

The first few months of the marriage had been somewhat bearable for Faden, but then the abuse had begun. The actual physical mistreatment had come to a halt when Faden's mother had threatened a scandal if the abuse didn't stop. What would his parishioners think if they knew their Minister didn't practice what he preached? Ben had promised to stop hitting the boy, and had been true to his word. The mental abuse that ensued was far worse as Faden was to learn. Faden just couldn't do anything to suit him. For such an intelligent boy his ego was at an all time low and therefore his school grades began to suffer. It was after his mother started back to work that all hell broke loose in their tentative household. Ben had discovered Faden's one major weakness...

CLAUSTROPHOBIA...

For a man who dealt in fear this was simply too good to be left unexploited. Faden's closet episodes had taken form, and had surpassed all Ben's expectations. He would lock Faden up for some trumped-up imaginary wrongdoing, and keep him there until shortly before his mothers return from work.

"Trick or treat,
Smell my feet,
Little kids are good to eat!"

Faden endured these atrocities because he believed that the real reason his mother had returned to work was to earn

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enough money so that they may be allowed to leave this monster.

There was very little light filtering in through the one-inch crack at the bottom of the closet door, but it was enough for Faden to catch and reflect propagating waves of illumination onto the walls of his imposed prison. The pocket watch that his grandfather bequeathed him, which he was never without, was his salvation during these trying times. The shiny brass back of the watch was the source of his light refraction, and he cherished it above all his worldly possessions. He kept it on a chain around his neck, and it was the one thing that absolutely no one was ever going to take away from him. He would valiantly fight to the death before surrendering this object of his youthful obsession.

He didn't know how long he had been in the closet on this particular occasion. Time had a way of dragging its feet during these ordeals, but then it really didn't matter anyway. He would be in here until shortly before his mother got off work. Ben always made sure Faden was bathed and involved with his homework when she walked through the door.

It wasn't only the darkness that bothered him so much, but the moving walls were something else entirely. He knew that walls secured to the floor with #16 penny nails weren't suppose to move, but his imagination told him different. He could sense the walls closing in on him, putting additional pressure on his shoulders and back. The walls had to be shifting inwardly because he sure-as-heck wasn't growing any larger sitting there pissing and crying all over the place. One day, he didn't know exactly when, but one day, never-the-

less, they were going to find him crushed as flat as one of those cartoon characters that run into the rock bluffs on the television set. Whose ass was going to be the blackest then?

Faden was jarred from his musings by the sound of his mother's angry voice. By the tone he knew she was really giving Ben what-for. This was one time that *he* wasn't going to be able to lie his way out. Faden hadn't told his mother about these latest treks into Hell because he didn't want to cause her additional grief. She didn't need that sort of thing heaped on her shoulders right now. He planned to tell her eventually, once they were free of Ben, but from all the signs the cat was out of the bag. Yes siree, Bob, he was damned glad that the jig was up. Now he and his mother could make a new life for themselves somewhere far away from this monster. Things were certainly looking up! No siree, nothing could rain on his parade now. Nothing could goooooooo...

WRONG!!!!!!!

Faden heard the all too familiar meaty thuds of a fist striking flesh. An involuntary shudder ran up and down his spine. The physical abuse had ended for him, but not for his mother. In this day and time, in Small-Town, Oklahoma, a woman being "reprimanded" by her husband (while not well thought of) was still socially accepted and considered a problem for the family to solve. As long as it didn't go to extremes, outsiders would generally look the other way and mind their own business.

Faden heard his mother scream, and felt the floor tremble, as what he imagined was her body, fell. There was a crashing

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sound as some sort of furniture, or perhaps an appliance toppled, then the shattering of glass.

Faden's hands encountered a sticky substance flowing in through the crack at the bottom of the door. He absent-mindedly squished it around between his thumb and forefinger. He brought his fingers tentatively to his mouth, and with a flick of his tongue his sense of taste registered saltiness and something else that eluded him. He somehow intuitively knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was sampling the blood of the woman who had given him life.

It was the year of our Lord, 1964. The Ford Mustang was on the assembly line, and the Beatles had yet to make their British Invasion of the United States. President Kennedy had been assassinated the year before and the world was still reeling in shock. But in Beaver Point, the county seat of Jefferson County, Oklahoma ... the most scandalous trial in the history of this small peaceful town was about to begin.

* * * *

The defense attorney asked, "You didn't actually see the defendant strike the deceased with the lamp, did you?"

"No."

"As a matter of fact, by your own admission, you didn't see anything that transpired, did you?"

"No, but..."

"Just answer the question, yes, or, no!"

Faden squirmed in the witness stand. The district attorney had forewarned him that this very thing was likely to happen. Faden had pleaded to be heard at the trial. The Judge had

finally relented, and had overruled the objections of the attorney for the defense. He had allowed the testimony of the boy.

On re-cross by the D.A., Faden was given the opportunity to relate what he knew to be factual and true. He was asked to describe the events leading up to that fateful day. He told what it was like to live in the same household with the cruel monster. In his own words, and without interruption, he stated, "At first, it wasn't all that bad. True, you had to forget everything you had ever been taught in life and accept his teachings as the ONE TRUE WAY! If you failed to do this, then there would be hell to pay. Severe punishment is his cup of tea. I believe *he* enjoys watching other's suffering. No pain, no gain is his motto; he lives to cause a lot of it. Every breath taken and everything you do has to be for the good of the church, which is the same thing as being for him. All the money earned by my mother, or me had to be immediately turned over to this devil known as Ben. I failed to do so once and he held the tip of my finger to the stone of an electric grinder." Faden then held up his hand, displaying for the Jury, his amputated fingertip. The jury gasped, the defense objected, but the judge instructed Faden to continue.

"I never told anyone until just now what had really happened to my finger. He said he would do my mom bodily harm if I so much as hinted to the truth of the matter, so I told everyone that it had been an accident. I guess my mother must have had her suspicions because that was when they had their first really big fight. I don't know exactly what she said to the monstrous bastard, nor he to her, but I do

know that he never touched me again. That ungodly snake beat my mother ... though ... she would claim to have fallen, or some such excuse, but anyone who knows my mom knows that she issssss..." Tears welled and flowed shamelessly from his eyes, "was ... very graceful, and didn't have a clumsy bone in her body. I am the clumsy one of the family.

"Neither my mother nor I were ever allowed to have any friends over, nor could I ever go anywhere except on church business. I was often sent to bed without supper so that my soul might be cleansed of its vileness and filth. Ben then became aware of my fear of closed-in places, and therefore he started locking me in the closet where I was found on the day of my mother's death.

I heard him and my mother arguing, and then I believe I heard hit her. He then struck her with the glass lamp. I do not honestly know whether he actually meant to kill her, or not, but I do know that he did! It was when I saw the closet doorknob turning that I began to scream. I believed at the time that it was just plain good luck that brought Sheriff McClure to our door at that precise moment. He heard my screams of terror and it was he who saved my life, for I know in my heart that, the demented son of a bitch, was a-fixin' to kill me, also. I am saddened that no one in this town stopped him before it was too late, but I don't blame anyone because he also fooled the one person I respected and admired above all others ... my mother!"

The defense won out over Faden's testimony and it was stricken from the record (they claimed he had been coached by the DA), but the damage was already done. The jury took

less than an hour to return with a verdict of guilty on the charge of first-degree manslaughter.

The judge declared, "Mr. Roachman, it saddens me to no end that I can only sentence you to five years in the penitentiary, when what I really would like to see is you a-swingin' from the end of a frayed rope. I would also like to say that I, like many other of the local Red River fishermen, believe you to be responsible for the death of Ted Casteel. In my opinion, you're lower than a diamondbacks belly, and a conniving sum-bitch.

And as for any of you bleeding-heart liberals out there in those seats, I'd like to announce that this is the last case I will ever officiate over, as I am retiring. I won't be able to sleep so good at night knowing that a scum bucket like Roachman will soon be walking the streets with decent people. He has killed, and he has duped so many of you out of your meager savings. He has shaken to the very core, my belief in men of the cloth. Bailiff, get that low-life turd out of my sight afore I shoot him with my .44!"

The judge made a movement to reach inside his robe to where the bailiff knew him to keep a .44 caliber pistol, and he hastened Ben Roachman out of the courtroom. Ben allowed himself to be led out, all the while proclaiming his innocence in one breath and threatening vengeance against Faden in the next.

Faden was turned over to the McClure family, and for all intents and purposes was raised as their very own. He and their natural born son, Dewayne, were like brothers. Faden became somewhat of a loner, despite all their efforts. They

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could only figure it came from having to deal with so much tragedy at such an early age. He never gave them any trouble, and would later comment on how well they treated him. It was against their wishes when he enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of seventeen, but due to his urgings they signed for him anyway.

The date of his mother's death would haunt him for the rest of his life. June sixteenth, 1964, would always be a black day, but for some reason or the other, he couldn't help but feel that some good had happened somewhere.

Upon returning home, via Vietnam, Faden did indeed become a loner. With what money he had saved in the army, and a trust fund that had been set up by his mother's insurance company he was able to purchase one hundred and forty acres of not so good land on the Red River plain. His property was surrounded on three sides by a loop of the river. It fronted on some land that was owned by a holding company based in Dallas. It was at the furthestmost West end of his land that he chose to erect his cabin. This had him situated in the least accessible spot of his one hundred forty acres. Folks would wonder about him as folks are wont to do, but the few who did approach him, knew his history and understood his desire to be left alone. He was never outwardly rude, and was deemed unsociable, but harmless.

There were three striking peculiarities about Faden that anyone who paid him any mind noticed right off the bat—his fondness for the pocket watch given to him by his grandfather; his penchant for sitting on the front porch, hours

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on end, staring to the southeast as if watching for a sign; and his obsession with the entertainment sensation of 1975.

She was an eleven-year-old Rock and Roll singer from Oscar, Oklahoma—a small community some thirty-five miles to the Southeast of his place. He would buy every single article about her the minute it came out. He would as soon gnaw off his own arm as not to be at Zimmerman's Drugstore the very moment one of her new albums came in.

Sheriff Dewayne McClure was once heard making the remark that he wouldn't be spending any more time with Faden, as he was sick to death of hearing that girl's records over and over. It was all that Faden ever listened to.

So Faden very rarely came to town, needing only the bare essentials. He had an excellent garden behind his cabin, and raised his own poultry, beef and pork. Deer, turkey, squirrel, quail, dove, rabbit and wild boars ran wild on his place. There were also fish of many species his for the taking out of the river. All in all, for Faden at least, life was good.

CHAPTER II

Ben Roachman was born on the fourth day of June, 1935, in Fort Worth, Texas. He was the son of a stump-jumping backwoods evangelist. Religious fanaticism ran rampant throughout the Roachman clan, reaching back to their roots in Tennessee. Sins against God (and even more importantly, against Old Man Roachman) were punishable by various parts of the anatomy being subjected to the moral healing powers of scalding hot water. By the time little Ben was six years old, his feet were roughly the color and texture of a boiled lobster.

This malady was always being administered to young Ben due to the fact that a meaner, nastier, more belligerent child had never been born of mortal parents. A lot of bleeding hearts believe, and rightly so, that a child's behavior and development is dependent on said child's environment and conditioning.

Not so in Ben's case!

He was rotten to the core. A bad seed by birth, the boy was pure evil incarnate, plain and simple. He stood absolutely no chance of recovering from this affliction, nor did he desire to. Not to be confused with a mere problem child, Ben was sadistic! From the time he was old enough to get his hands, with their chubby little fingers, around the throats of frogs, snakes and small birds, he became an incurable strangler. When he grew older and his hands became larger he graduated to cats and dogs. Anytime the traveling Roachman Revival came to town, you could bet your bottom dollar there

would be local children, minus household pets, crying their eyes out when they left.

Ben was fourteen years old when he was sent to the reformatory for his cruelty to animals in hopes that it would straighten him out. Fat chance! The place proved to be a smorgasbord for someone of his talents. The jump from animals to humans was an easy one for him. He became adept at making others suffer. Young boys could endure an enormous amount of pain for a sadistic son-of-a-bitch like him. A little threatening was all it took to keep their mouths closed. The punishment for squealers was reputed to be death by their upper classmen. This latter being boys of Ben's age group.

Broken fingers, razor fragments beneath the fingernails, and testicles squeezed to the point that the injured boy either passed out or screamed into his pillow, were just a few of the many perversions that Ben dealt out. His guile was outstanding, he could be plucking the eyeball from a boys socket, and yet convince someone that what he was doing was absolutely vital to prolonging the victim's life. One shudders to think how far he would have gone, or how many would have paid the price of a fate worse than death, had it not been for Joey.

Joey was a boy who didn't have any business being at a place like the reformatory. It was simply that the State had nowhere else to put him for the time being. He was past the age preferable for adoption, all the foster homes were temporarily filled, and it was a real shame too because Joey was such a good boy. He was asked to help the younger boys,

to guide them in a limited way. Needless to say, he and Ben clashed shortly after his arrival.

Ben convinced some of his cronies to help him give Joey a blanket party one night while he lay sleeping. He was beaten with broomsticks; mop handles, and bars of soap wrapped inside socks. An excessive blow to the head with a splintered broomstick, wielded by none other than Ben himself, killed the boy when one of the sharp fragments of wood penetrated his brain. Joey's only crime had been the unfortunate loss of both parents, and relatives too impoverished to take him in.

This last bit of madness on Ben's part convinced the younger boys to break the cardinal rule, and all of them en-masse, told the stories of Ben's atrocities. He would spend the next four years of his life in the Fort Supply Mental Hospital for the criminally insane.

Ben could masquerade as a sweet, normal young man, charisma oozing from every pore, and all the while be inflicting a tremendous amount of pain on another. Pain was the only thing that got him off. Sexual stimulation of the normal type did absolutely nothing for him. Masturbation was useless unless someone else was hurting. Just let him be torturing another, and he was off like a rocket.

The psychiatrist who treated Ben wasn't a bad man. His major shortcoming was his vanity. He knew he was out of his league when it came to Ben's unique case, but his professional pride wouldn't let him admit it to himself, or others. He was aware that Ben was psychotic, but the depth of the psychosis eluded him. Ben was already a master of deception and manipulation. If the psychiatrist would have

sought help, he probably could have saved the world a lot of grief, but due to an erroneous diagnosis Ben was set free to roam the streets of an unsuspecting society on his eighteenth birthday.

He didn't waste any time trying to locate his family, choosing instead to strike out on his own. According to him, he found the Lord and received his calling shortly before his nineteenth year. His knowledge of the Bible, along with his mature visage and demeanor, coupled with his captivating authoritative voice lent credence to his claim of being an ordained minister. If not for the lack of credentials, he most likely would have become one of the wealthiest and most famous in the religious sector. As it turned out his notoriety made the good people of Beaver Point more than happy to erect him a church building. Why he, a man of his caliber in his chosen vocation, would choose to settle in a community where his talents were to be so limited, was beyond anyone's comprehension, but they were not foolish enough to look a gift horse in the mouth

The reason Ben chose to stay in Beaver Point was one of the oldest known to man, and certainly not a mystery to him. As a matter of fact it was one of the most common causes of man's irrational behavior ... he had met the woman of his dreams. The fact that she was married to, and loved another, was of little consequence to him. Just one more obstacle, a mere hurdle to be cleared, as had all the others before.

He met her at a revival he was conducting in Byers, Texas. For him, it was as close as it was going to get to love at first sight. She wasn't a beautiful woman, but was easy on the

eyes. As a matter of fact, many of his Groupies would have put her to shame, but what drew him to her like a moth to a flame was her ability to endure pain. After the revival was over, a very few of the most zealous were invited into his expansive special built motor home, for the laying of hands on the serpents. She unknowingly opted for the only one of the snakes that hadn't been defanged (the defanging was done to prevent lawsuits in case one of the handlers wasn't a true believer) of the bunch. It was a five-foot Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, native to the region. It had been given to Ben that very day, having only been captured hours before by a snake hunting fan of his.

The reptile had immediately bitten her on the arm. She had remained calm and composed when most people would have been hysterical. In only a matter of a few minutes the venom performed its dirty work, and the infected area swelled to twice its normal size. When asked, she had remarked that it felt like someone was trying to extinguish a cigar on her flesh. Ben convinced her to put her life into his and the Lord's hands. She had quelled to the idea at first, but with the urgent prompting of her husband and the True Believers of the Rolling Church of Higher Power, she consented.

She suffered through the next seventy-two hours without so much as a wet cloth on her burning forehead. When the pain would become so unbearable that she was on the verge of crying out, he would kneel beside her and pray. She somehow endured the delirium and bouts of unconsciousness with a stolid countenance. She was quite literally on the threshold of death on more than one occasion during the

ordeal. She would have greeted the Grim Reaper with open arms (although she was ashamed to admit it, even to herself) if it would stem the endless flow of pain wracking her body to its very core.

He was so captivated with this wondrous creature that he made up his mind to possess her regardless of the cost. When he found out she was from Beaver Point, a small town some twelve miles to the East of Byers, he contacted the city council there and formulated plans for a church to be built in the rural area outside of town.

He would talk daily with the woman's husband, but refused to let him in to visit claiming it would upset her too much. He learned from the man that her name was Chelsea Casteel and they lived on a farm on the outskirts of town. Ted and Chelsea worked the farm together and had been blissfully married for two years. It was they whom would ultimately donate the three acres on the Southeast corner of their property for the Church of Higher Power to be built. Ted believed it was the least he could do for the man who had healed his wife using faith in God as the only medicine.

He would never learn how much or to what extent she had suffered at Ben's hands, for the memory of pain is soon forgotten. She had also been delirious most of the time. It took her two weeks to heal to Ben's satisfaction. She returned to the farm with her husband, but remained under the ever-watchful eye of Ben Roachman.

Ben nurtured the friendship of Ted through no genuine fondness for the man, but only as a means to be near Chelsea. It took six grueling backbreaking months of hard

work to finish the church building, and another two months to complete the rectory. Ben and Ted were always the first to arrive and the last of the volunteers to leave in the evenings. They pushed themselves and the others to the limit of human endurance. During this building period Ben lived on the good will of the Casteel's who could scarcely afford it. His extravagant motor home was parked next to their modest wood frame house and powered by their electricity, all of which Ted refused reimbursement for. It never seemed to occur to him that had it not been for Ben, Chelsea would never have been in danger in the first place. Ted was oblivious to this fact as he had been raised to believe in the self-healing of the body through divine intervention. It was also lost on him that his favorite uncle had died because he had refused a blood transfusion and had instead sought the services of a noted faith healer. This belief was the foundation, which caused Ted to think that there wasn't anything he could do to repay Ben for saving his wife.

The next two years saw the church grow in prominence as well as in size. On Sunday mornings a film crew from KWFT, a television station out of Wichita Falls, would arrive to telecast the services on Channel 4.

Approximately nine months after she was bitten, give or take a few weeks; Chelsea gave birth to a baby boy. Ben had once again worked his evil magic on the unsuspecting Casteel's, and had convinced them to have a natural childbirth (against the better wishes of her obstetrician who believed she might have to have a caesarian section). Ted couldn't stand to see his beloved wife in such pain, so he

begged the good Reverend to take his place by her side during the delivery.

And so it had been Ben who held her hand in the makeshift delivery room of their bedroom. None other than he, knew of the ecstasy he garnered from her obvious pain. Watching her caused him to blissfully ejaculate into his boxer shorts. Seeing her lying there with lips swollen and bleeding from constantly biting them, along with her body writhing through contortions of agony from giving birth for the first time was almost more than he could endure. While the midwife's attention was diverted to another part of Chelsea's anatomy, Ben wiped the sweat from her brow with the palm of his hand. His fingers lingered lovingly at the base of her throat. He (caressed) massaged her neck, aching to throttle her to within an inch of her life. Longing to make her dance the thin line between life and death, stopping himself almost too late as he heard her gasping for air.

After hours of punishing, brutal labor, Chelsea gave birth to a seven pound, three ounce, Faden Casteel. The date was June fourth, 1954, and it had been a day of pure rapture for one, Ben Roachman. The midwife placed the newborn infant into his arms, and it was an erotic thrill with which he held the baby, all the while wanting nothing more than to swing the boy by his heels and bash his head against the unyielding concrete of the floor.

Ben was livid with rage. There wasn't any doubt as to the baby's father; he was the spitting image of Ted. Ben's calculations had convinced him that she had conceived the one time that he had taken her during the delirium of the

snakebite, but obviously it had been either shortly before or after her recovery. He had hoped to drive a wedge between the married couple with the baby having been confirmation of her infidelity, but it was not to be. He was further mortified by their audacity to miss his next Sunday sermon following the birth. Much to his horror the baby seemed to have drawn them even closer together.

Ben bided his time for the next seven years, diligently and without fail, working on a plan to strengthen the bond between Ted and himself. At every opportunity that presented itself he would try to drive them apart. Praising Ted's anger at any sleight, imagined or factual, on Chelsea's part, while belittling any indiscretion on Ted's part in the everyday dealings of life.

Ben's church continued to flourish, but he knew that as his popularity grew, so did the chances of someone from his sordid past recognizing him. He did not fear the threat of blackmail (there was only one way to deal with blackmailers and he would do so without a qualm) it was the thought of someone throwing a monkey wrench into the gears of his plans concerning Chelsea that drove him crazy. He canceled the contract with KWFT, and began to scale down his operation, citing fatigue as the cause for such actions.

It was the weekend of Faden's seventh birthday when Ben suggested they camp out at the Highway 70 Bridge, which spanned the Red River. They parked on the Texas side, Ben's self-propelled motor home dwarfing all the other recreational vehicles. (The motor home was Ben's idea of roughing-it,

having had to sleep as a child, whenever and wherever the Roving Roachman Revival happened to be at a given time.)

Due to the fact that heavy rains had been reported to the north they decided to set the west pole of the trotline three feet up on the shore. Usually both poles were anchored out in the river with only the very tops sticking above the waterline. Normally the three feet of shore would have the lines in too shallow water, but this would allow them to run the lines after the anticipated rise of the water throughout the night. The east pole was set one hundred or so feet in the stream, which made it about the middle of the north to south running river. They had moderate success on the midnight running of the lines, taking a twelve-pound flathead, nine-pound channel cat, and a twenty-pound humpback blue catfish. They awoke the next morning eagerly anticipating the first catch of the day. They were as dismayed as the other trotliners when they discovered the river hadn't merely rose the expected three feet, but instead had risen better than five feet. All the trotliners agreed that none but the foolhardy would attempt to wade such water. No fish was worth the risk of drowning. Knowing the Red River the way the fishermen did, the only thing left to do was to break camp and return home, which Ted began to do.

Tears of sadness sprang unbidden from Faden's eyes as he realized that there would be no more fish taken on his birthday. Ben saw the boy, and immediately seized the opportunity that was presented. Without any real intent on his part, he said, "I think I might just be able to pull it off, with the Lord's guidance that is."

Ceasing what he was doing at the time, Ted turned toward Ben and inquired, "Pull off what?"

"Why, the running of the line, of course!" he responded while in the process of removing his (PAYING TOLLS IS LIKE THROWING MONEY OUT THE WINDOW) T-shirt. "If I only take the net and make no attempt to re-bait, I believe I might be able to bring in what fish we have hooked."

"Are you cra.... zy?" asked Ted, forgetting for the moment to whom he was speaking, so familiar had he become to being in the company of this local celebrity.

"Crazy?" inquired Ben, cocking a disapproving eyebrow in Ted's direction, not wanting to believe that he could possibly doubt the sincerity of a Man of the Cloth. "Crazy, perhaps, but I would prefer to think that my belief in God the Almighty will protect me.

Have you forgotten, my good friend, when your precious Chelsea had her momentary lapse in faith, which allowed the serpent to inject its venom into her veins? It was God's will which delivered her from the jaws of death that held her captive during those two weeks of recovery, and continues unwaveringly to watch over her."

"I'mmmmmmm, sorry!" stammered Ted. He was ashamed and mortified to discover that he was even capable of insulting this prestigious person before him. The thought crossed his mind that he would rather have his testicles severed from his scrotum and have them placed inside of his own mouth to carry around for all eternity, than to cause even one iota of embarrassment to befall this pious man of such Greatness. This man who had chosen to call someone as

undeserving as himself, a friend. "What I meant to say was that it would be better for me to go. I am more experienced, and know the ways of the river better than you." He hastened to add, "As well as anyone can, that is."

The way that these people referred to the river never ceased to amaze Ben. The unholy reverence which inflected their voice when they spoke of it (almost as if it were a living, breathing thing, which could rise up and smite down the unbelieving at any time of its choosing) had become a bone-of-contention in many of his sermons. Ben believed it to be a bunch of hogwash.

"I've been in it once before when it was this wild, but of course I had Johnny with me that time." Ted immediately bit his tongue after saying this last. Johnny had been his best friend for as long as he could remember, but there hadn't been any love lost between him and Ben. They had detested each other from the get-go. Johnny claimed that Ben was a fake and extremely dangerous to-boot. He warned Ted to watch out for the man, that a person in Ben's position wielded too much power over their parishioners. There had always been a difference of opinion as to the subject of religion between Ted and Johnny, but never before had it played a role in their friendship.

Johnny wasn't only Ted's best friend; he was also Chelsea's brother. The rift in their relationship had come about when Ted had refused to take Chelsea to the hospital after the rattlesnake had bitten her. Johnny was an old hand at catching the snakes for the annual Beaver Point Rattlesnake Round-up, and believed that the best place for

his sister was the Jefferson County Hospital where the antitoxin serum was available and could be administered. It soon became apparent that Johnny wouldn't relent on the subject of one, Benjamin Roachman. He was rankled by the blind, ignorant, bliss with which the ardent fanatics followed the self-proclaimed preacher. (Going so far in fact as to slap the piss out of the man on the courthouse steps in plain sight of a crowd of over one hundred.)

The slap, while not that painful, was hard for Ben to take, to instead, turn the other cheek had been somewhat of a clever move on his part. It hadn't been from any thought of doing the right thing that had staid his hand. It had been fear and common sense. The reckless abandon and devil-may-care attitude with which Johnny had struck, convinced him that should he retaliate at that particular time, he would be setting himself up for the all time ass-kicking of his miserable life. Prudence, therefore, won out over valor for maybe the first time that he could remember.

Chelsea, after seeing what the controversy was doing to Ted, asked Johnny to stay away for a while. He had complied with her wishes, and all communications with him ceased until the birth of Faden. Once a month, until he was old enough to read them for himself, Chelsea would read the letters that her brother sent to his nephew. Every birthday and Christmas, without fail, Faden would receive a gift that he might or might not need, but one which he wanted very much. The presents would be of an extravagant nature, which the Casteel's couldn't possibly afford to buy the boy. He unerringly always purchased just what Faden wished for. She

suspected that Ted and Johnny were somehow secretly corresponding behind her back, or the uncle and his nephew were linked telepathically. Johnny therefore lived for him vicariously through his gifts and written word. The letters had stopped about a year previous, and no one knew of Johnny's present whereabouts.

"You wouldn't dare!" remarked Ben, choosing to ignore the reference to Johnny. "You've a wife and child to think of."

Without another word, Ted eased his way into the water of the raging river trying with all his might to keep his footing as the current pulled at him. It was all he could do just to hang onto the trotline, and not be swept away. Fear of being snagged on one of the hooks, or having a submerged log ram him in the back caused him to have severe abdominal cramps. He took several deep breaths to dispel them, and then waited a moment for them to subside.

He could feel the jerking of a fish of considerable size about fifteen hooks down the line from where he stood. He was beginning to have serious doubts about making it that far, the water was up to his chest already, but he wanted the fish for Faden. He continued to feed the line through his hands, inching his way along. He heard Faden calling out for him to come back, but was at this time only some five feet from the fish. The shifting sand washed out from beneath his feet, and the current jerked the line out of his hands. The one thing that all Red River trotliners feared the most then happened to him. He was caught below the third rib on his left side by one of his own hooks. The velocity of the water, coupled with the tension of the line, made his chances of

surviving, minimal. His head went under, as his body was held horizontal to the riverbed. He drowned while trying unsuccessfully to get his knife out of the pocket of his shorts.

Ben made what appeared to be a Herculean effort to rescue the man. He strode into the river then went under the water as if his feet had been washed out from under him, although he knew exactly where he was in relation to the spacing of the fish hooks on the line. He broke the surface of the water some twenty feet down stream of where the line was located. All he could do then was to strike diagonally for the shore. There wasn't a mortal man who could swim against the current when the river was in this stage.

One of the experienced fishermen dove into the water well upstream of the line. He angled for the east pole, which was in the middle of the river. He rested briefly, steadying himself upon reaching the pole. Taking a deep breath, he pulled himself down the pole until he could brace his feet against the sandy bottom of the river. He heaved up on the pole pulling it free of the sucking sand. He then held onto the pole with the trotline still attached, and much like a water skier, let the river current swing him in an arc to the safety of the shore. He was assisted out of the water by some of his friends as others cut the lifeless body of Ted Casteel free of the line.

Everyone from the town agreed that it was indeed a black day for the community when one of their native sons died in such a manner. They could not for the life of them figure out why Ted had gone into the river, knowing the futility of the situation. All of the Beaver Point merchants closed up shop the day of the funeral. There wasn't a single soul to be seen

on the streets during the memorial services, so well loved had Ted been.

The honorable Ben Roachman was not in attendance. He had been so traumatized by the events that he had to be sedated and hospitalized for several days following the unfortunate death of his dearest friend. He sent along his most sincere heartfelt apologies to the widow and her son for not being able to deliver the eulogy for Ted.

The truth of the matter was Ben was so deliriously happy that he was afraid his good humor would be recognized for what it was. The boy had a glimpse of his joy when Ted had gone under. Ben's laughter of triumph after emerging from the river had been mistaken for the onset of nervous anxiety, and for the sake of discretion, he played along with this presumption.

He allowed a suitable amount of time to elapse, then began to pursue Chelsea in earnest. He desired her more than he had ever desired anyone or anything in his life.

It was her love for her departed husband, which made her all but shun Ben's advances. She turned to her aging father for comfort and guidance, never realizing she was signing his death warrant with her actions. He had moved from the nursing home where he was residing to the farm so he could be closer to her. He had been residing in the home since the death of his wife, more from being lonely, than any sense of helplessness.

Her finances were in better shape than ever. Ted had gotten a life insurance policy worth a small fortune, and insurance at the bank, which paid off the farm loan upon his

death. She now, for the first time, owned the farm lock, stock and barrel, free and clear of debt. With things looking up the way they were, it was just one more sign of her misfortune that the brakes went out on the pick-up truck as her father was backing down to the ravine to dump the household trash. The truck rolled over seven times on its way to the bottom, breaking the old man's neck and killing him instantly.

Sheriff McClure allowed it was a damned shame, but just an unfortunate accident all the same. From all the signs he presumed it must have been a sawed off mesquite stump, or perhaps one of the many outcroppings of rock that had broken the right front brake line, allowing the fluid to escape.

Ben was eight miles to the southwest at the time the truck rolled into the ravine. Deer hunters had spotted him standing on the Highway 70 Bridge. They watched, as he appeared to throw some objects into the roiling waters below. The significance of his actions never occurred to them until much later.

Ben watched as the oily spot surfaced on the water, then dissipated as the current carried it downriver. He knew that the chisel and ball-peen hammer would never be found.

It took Ben another six months of soulful ass-kissing with Faden to achieve his goal and have his innermost desire fulfilled. He finally got what he wanted and a lot more than he bargained for in the process. Chelsea had seemed to be somewhat subdued while married to Ted, but she was altogether different with him. He had originally been attracted to her because of her endurance to pain, but had not realized it came from an inner strength that would give him more

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trouble than it was worth. He had planned to brush Faden aside as if he were a fly, and have with his way with Chelsea.

She had other ideas on the matter. Ben could rattle her teeth and she would usually just take it in stride. The trouble began between them when he attempted to discipline Faden in the manner he himself was familiar with. She became a lioness, fangs bared, protecting her cub by using mental and physical abilities he hadn't been aware she possessed. She would come up fighting if he so much as laid one finger on the boy. She had dealt Ben a mortal blow by threatening to expose his abusive side to his parishioners. This was something he simply could not allow to happen.

Ben had made several bad business ventures, blowing not only what cash he and Chelsea possessed, but also most of the church money as well. The farm had been sold shortly after their marriage to pay his personal debts. Chelsea had then hired on at the local feed store to do bookkeeping. Ben became suspicious when he learned that she was actually earning four dollars per hour instead of the two-fifty she had told him. She was apparently rat-holing money, which to his way of thinking could only mean one thing ... she was saving money with which to leave him. He had to teach her a valuable lesson, soon.

Ben and Faden were in the small workshop at the back of the rectory. Faden was near tears and sobbing uncontrollably. Ben had discovered six dollars in the pocket of Faden's jeans that was unaccounted for. "Where did you get the money?" screamed an overtly irate Ben.

"I earned it picking up trash around the Dairy Queen parking lot." quavered a very frightened Faden.

"What have you been told, time and again, to do with your earnings?" inquired Ben, as he flipped the switch of the electric bench grinder to the ON position.

Faden watched with morbid fascination as the grinding stone picked up speed, becoming an indistinct grayish blur. "I was going to turn it over to the church when I had accumulated ten dollars." He wasn't about to tell Ben that his mother had told him not to say anything about the money. It had been his own foolishness for leaving the money in his pocket that had him in this predicament. He subconsciously backed away from the grinder.

"I don't believe you had any such intentions. I think the best thing for you to do now would be to give me that silly, worthless pocket watch your grandfather left you. It is small atonement for you, but just maybe the Lord will accept it as a token of your faith. He might even consider it restitution for your sins against HIM."

Faden lied, and said, "I don't have it with me!"

Ben grabbed him by the arm, and slowly, inch by inch, forced him to move nearer the whirling rock of the grinder. He folded the rest of Faden's fingers into a fist, leaving the index finger poking straight out. With agonizing determination he began to push the fingertip against the porous surface of the stone. Pieces of fingernail, flesh, and bone flew in a spray of bloody gore throughout the shop, much of it landing on Ben who seemed not to pay it any heed, so intense was he in his evil creativity. Carnage hung from the bare bulb of ceiling

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light, stringing down to form a puddle on the earthen floor. Ben's face was unrecognizable as anything remotely human due to the red mask he now wore. Faden was relatively protected from the bloody mess by the shield of Ben's body.

Faden began to scream when the finger was down to the first knuckle. If asked, he would have replied that it felt like a bad scrape. Shock was rapidly setting in so the pain as of yet, was bearable. It was the blood, flesh, and bone fragments that caused him to kick up such a ruckus.

Ben slapped him hard across the face, and then instructed him to hold his injured hand above his heart. "You see what you made me do?" he shouted at the terrified boy, as if it had been all his fault. He then drove Faden to the hospital, taking his merry time about doing so. He told everyone it had been a childish accident ... that Faden had been messing with something he had no business playing with.

Faden didn't contradict the story as Ben had forewarned him that his mother would suffer a fate which would make what he had just experienced seem like a walk in the park. Faden had not a doubt to Ben's sincerity.

The episode with the grinder only served to whet Ben's appetite for sadism. He learned of Faden's claustrophobia quite by accident. He had once told the boy to sleep in the upper berth of the motor home when they were camping. After being awakened in the middle of the night by Faden's weeping, he had made him spend the rest of the night outside by himself. The fear of the dark and things that go bump in the night didn't have the effect on Faden that Ben had hoped

for. It was only close, confined places that struck fear into his heart.

The last time he put Faden into the closet had been his undoing. Chelsea had come home early from work and demanded to know where Faden was. She had made an anonymous phone call to the police department before leaving work, explaining that she suspected foul play afoot at the Church of Higher Power. She had told of seeing what appeared to be young vandals casing the building. She would have been hard pressed to have to tell what had made her make the call and leave her job early. Perhaps it had simply been a mother's intuition that led her home on what would become ... THAT FATEFUL DAY!

Ben met her at the door, but was unable to block her entrance into the house. She brushed by him as if he weren't there. She shouted for Faden, then guided by some unknown force, headed purposely for the bedroom. Ben caught up with her and swung her around by the arm. He then struck her on the face with his closed fist. She hit the floor as expected, but bounced back up with agility usually associated with much younger people. She slapped him hard across the face sending his bifocals flying to the far side of the room.

Instinctively he struck her again, this time adding a hard shove to the breast area for good measure. His surprise turned to amazement when she tried to rise to her feet again. He had hit men twice her size, half as hard and achieved more favorable results. He grabbed the glass lamp (which had been a gift to her from Ted), and brought it down upon the back of her defenseless head. The blow itself may not have

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been fatal, but the shard of glass, which entered the soft tissue of her temple, certainly did.

He remained calm as the blood spread across the floor of the bedroom, but then the little heathen in the closet began to scream bloody murder. He knew he had to stop that God-awful yammering so he made his way to the closet door, paying little attention when he stepped in the blood as he twisted the knob. It would take quite a bit of imagination to falsify the evidence, but he believed he could make it look like she had killed her son, and then committed suicide. It was in the middle of this thought that he heard the rapping on the front door.

Sheriff McClure, fearing the vandals had broken in, surprising the occupants, strode through the house with his pistol drawn. Taking the scene unfolding, in at a glance, he leveled his gun at Ben as he saw him pulling the struggling boy from the closet by the hair of his head.

Ben was arrested and held in the county jail. His court appointed attorney got the charges reduced from murder to manslaughter. He was found guilty by a jury of his peers, and sentenced. He was led from the courtroom, proclaiming his innocence with one breath, while swearing his vengeance against Faden with the next.

CHAPTER III

Sinda Rilla Davenport was born on the sixteenth of June, 1964. She was to have been the icing on the cake in the Cinderella love story of Skate Davenport and Ruby Oscar. Ruby's family founded the town of Oscar, Oklahoma, and she lived her entire life there.

Skate was a roving roughneck who followed the oil field to wherever it might happen to be at any given time. He hired on to the Oscar's rig, never intending on staying after the drilling was finished. But that was before he met the breath taking Ruby. The beauty of the seventeen-year-old girl was already legendary in the oil patch of Southern Oklahoma.

Oil had been struck on her father's land in 1916. He had become a wealthy man from the sale of the oil, but detested the process of recovering it. He cared little for what it did to his grazing pastures and would have much preferred to simply tend his cattle. He amassed thousands of acres by paying his hands to settle on the land. Once the property had been proved on, and filed, then he would purchase it from them for one dollar, plus six months wages. The hands had no use for the land, as the cowhand of the time was notorious for his inability to put down permanent roots anywhere.

Ruby was an only child as had her mother and her mother's mother, been. Something in the make-up, or something lacking rather, in the Ranson women made pregnancy and birth a treacherous event, not to be undertaken without considerable thought.

Ruby had flaming locks of the reddest hair imaginable. The tresses fell to below her waist. She had the complexion of a China doll, and a build that guaranteed no man of mortal blood would be taking only one look. Her eyes were cobalt blue, and her personality went far beyond sweet. She was a rich girl in more ways than simple monetary gains.

She was never rude to any of the hired hands, be they ranch workers, or oil field. There wasn't a man in a fifty-mile radius that didn't worship the ground she walked on. Not a single hand would stand for any talk against her. In a land of rock, sand, mesquite and rattlesnakes, she was a natural born goddess, and no one more deserving.

She could have had her pick of the elite, from Oklahoma City to Dallas, or for that matter, any man of her choosing. This was the reason everyone was so shocked to learn of the love she had for Shake. Her picking one of THEM, endeared her even more, and made her a champion of the working class. No one really knew of the events, which led to the union of the two, nor could they have told you themselves.

Shake stood six feet two inches tall in his bare feet, and was as skinny as a rail. He was by no stretch of the imagination, handsome, but was constantly jovial and a lot of fun to be around. He was known for his practical jokes and was considered the most footloose of the bunch. He had earned his nickname, Shake, by virtue of having survived an earthquake while working in the derrick. There was one in every crowd, and it was always turning out to be him.

His chance encounter with the lovely Ruby had come about one day while they were moving the rig to another location.

He had spied a horse tied to the bumper of the Tool Pusher's pick-up truck. The jokester side of him couldn't resist the temptation that the opportunity presented. He chose the oldest trick in the book as far as saddled horses were concerned. He placed a cocklebur between the saddle blanket and the horses hide. He then hid behind a tool shed to watch the festivities.

He would have gladly died, and was struck momentarily speechless for the first time in his life when he saw the gorgeous creature place a small boot into the stirrup. He would have given anything to have the burr back, even if it meant having it shoved up his ass. He tried to stop her, and then had to stand in horror as the horse threw her the moment she sat in the saddle. She landed in an unmoving crumpled heap on the hard-packed earth. He raced to her side to assist her in rising, and was immediately set-upon by the other hands. It would be hard to surmise how far they would have gone in their thrashing, had it not been for Ruby.

She saw what was happening to Shake, and pleaded with the men to stop. Shake was as stunned as the others to find her laughing. He didn't know whether it was from him getting a beating, or if she had shaken something loose when she landed. She explained that the irony of the situation was that she had pulled the same stunt on her best friend just that very morning. In fact, she had been out to the rig to hide from her father and her friend whom were hunting for her at this very moment.

She knelt in the dust beside the prone body of Shake, and placed his battered head in her lap. Through swelling eyes he

gazed upon the face of an angel. He could have stayed in that position, with her ample breast softly touching his forehead, for all eternity. For this kind of treatment he would happily take a beating an hour. He would still be lying there to his dying day had it not been for her father driving up.

Ruby's father thought it was only right that the trick had been played on her. He sincerely believed that what went around came around. He was an ordinary man, despite his wealth, and his handling of the situation earned him even more of the trust and respect of the men. Not a single word was ever mentioned in anger, or otherwise, about what had happened to Ruby, or Shake. Her father drove Ruby and Shake to the house so that he could be cleaned up and bandaged, while Ruby's friend rode the horse home.

It was love at first sight for the two. There are those that insist opposites attract, but for Ruby and Shake nothing could have been farther from the truth. It was their similarities and ability to not take anything too seriously that brought, and then kept them together. They were all but impossible for anyone to be around. They would keep everyone on pins and needles with their combined antics and practical jokes. They would even resort to playing tricks on each other, should no other victim be available.

Ruby's father took to Shake like white to rice. He gave the two his heartfelt blessings and made Shake a full partner in everything he owned. The only condition being that Ruby have an operation insuring she would never become pregnant. Shake had heartily agreed upon learning the history of the Ranson women.

A surgeon in Dallas that was a pioneer in the field, for the time period, was contacted and arrangements made. He would perform the hysterectomy a month before the planned wedding date.

Ruby had her own agenda and insisted on driving herself to the hospital in Dallas when the time came, stating that she wanted to be alone. She had no intention of having the operation as she was already carrying Shake's baby. She, and she solely, knew this bit of news. She returned to the ranch two weeks later somewhat subdued, although she was her usual cheerful self by the day of the wedding.

And what a wedding it was! Folks from miles around came for the weeklong celebration. Beds were prepared in the brick mansion for the women, while the men slept wherever they fell. Cases of whiskey and watering troughs full of bottled beer made the men not mind where they bedded down.

Ruby was radiant in the white chiffon gown that had been her mother's wedding dress. It was the only time she had seen her father cry. He claimed that she looked just like her mother in the gown. He was reduced to a whimpering mess, tears streaming down his face. It was an extremely emotional event for the man, bringing back memories of a time long passed. (But of course, the raw onion she had rubbed into his shirt collar the night before hadn't helped him to hold his composure.)

Ruby and Shake were united in marriage on the fifteenth day of November 1963. Unbeknownst to Ruby, her father had been fighting cancer for some lengthy time. Just before he passed on he told Ruby that he could join her mother, with a

clear conscience, now that he knew Shake would be there to protect and love her. She had never fully realized to what extent her father had missed his departed wife. Thinking back, she recalled that he had never even looked at another woman in all these years, so deep was his love.

She lost her father on the seventh day of December, 1963, and passed away herself giving birth to Sinda Rilla on the sixteenth of June, 1964. Shake had so loved Ruby that at first it was hard for him to accept the baby, but before she died, Ruby had exacted a promise from him to care for and love the baby with everything she knew was inside of him. With each passing day Sinda began to resemble and take on the characteristics of her mother, more and more. He hired a black woman in her mid-thirties that had recently lost her own newborn, to nurse and be a nanny to little Sinda.

The woman's name was Kimberly, and the affection she lavished on Sinda was genuine. It was at times almost enough to make up for the lack of fatherly love. Kim began to work with the young girl's love for music at the tender age of six. Sinda already had a voice years ahead of most girls her age. Kim nurtured and coaxed this unusual trait, and Sinda exceeded all her expectations. The old mansion would resound with the sound of Kim's piano playing, and Sinda's divine singing. Kim wished for Sinda to sing gospel songs as she had in her own youth, but Sinda had other notions. She could, and would, up to a point sing the songs Kim wanted, but her love for Rock and Roll would always somehow manifest itself. She was liable to jump from a haunting

rendition of the "Old Rugged Cross", to Three Dog Night's, "Joy to the World", without so much as missing a beat.

The band, Bread, was her favorite group, and at any given time you were likely to hear her bust out with, "I Wanna Make It With You." Sinda, Kim, and Shake lived in the gigantic house alone, until she turned eleven.

All the hands tried to idolize Sinda as they had Ruby. She had inherited all her mother's natural talent and beauty. She resembled Ruby so much at the same age that she could have passed for her twin, but that was where the similitude ended. Where her mother had been friendly, caring, and loving ... treating everyone as equals, Sinda was conceited and selfish. She looked down on anyone whom she considered below her station in life. Kimberly was the only non-wealthy person she would associate with. The hands gave up on Sinda after being scorned by her so many times. She was more or less left to make-do on her own, alone.

A record producer from Dallas that was also a cattle buyer had heard tales of the young phenomenon. While at the ranch conducting cattle business, he inadvertently heard the girl singing. He was so infatuated with Sinda that he signed her to a contract on the spot. Sinda and Kim hit the music road.

Sinda missed her father, but firmly believed it would be easier on him without her always being around to remind him of Ruby. He had never been able to show any true feelings for her, merely tolerance because of a promise he had made to a dying woman. He would buy her anything she desired, regardless of cost, to appease his conscience. Deep down

inside where no one could see, he still subconsciously blamed Sinda for the death of his beloved wife.

Shake committed suicide on the day that would have been his and Ruby's thirteenth anniversary. He left everything to Sinda, appointing Kimberly legal guardian and executor until such time that Sinda reached the age of twenty-one.

Sinda had little use for the inheritance as she had one hit song after another. She and Kim would stay on the road until either one of them was exhausted, and then seek the seclusion of the ranch. Kim discovered, much to her amazement, that she had a natural talent for writing the kind of songs young people wanted to listen to. By combining parts from traditional Blues tunes she had grown up with, and giving them an upbeat tempo, she did quite well for Sinda and herself. Her songs were tailor made for Sinda to sing, and sing them she did. They were to find that anything with Sinda Rilla's name on it was to be a sure-fire hit.

Sinda grew to be not only extremely talented, but also even more beautiful each passing day. She had all her mother's good looks, plus the rare ability to tan, as her mother had not. Very few red-haired women attain the golden bronze that she possessed. Many of her male fans became obsessed with her. The husky, sexy voice, coupled with the body to die for, drove men crazy with lust. Against Kim's better wishes Sinda began to build on this lust, showing off more and more of her bodily features, as she grew older. A yellow halter-top along with a pair of the skimpiest possible white shorts, which stood out in sharp contrast against the tan of her skin, became her trademark. A brief glimpse of a

nipple when she would bend over, or a chance glance at a few strands of red pubic hair below the frayed crotch of her shorts as she suggestively writhed about on the floor while performing her monster hit, "Come and Get It", was all it took to whip any crowd into a frenzy.

Her breast got larger, her waist thinner, and her legs longer and shapelier as time went by. If anything, she became more desirable with each seceding year. At the ripe old age of sixteen she measured, 36-24-35. She was five-feet-four inches tall and weighed a whopping one hundred eighteen pounds. Her flaming locks touched the back of her knees, and her concerts were Standing-Room-Only, months before she was scheduled to perform.

She had everything money could buy, and anything she wanted, besides the one thing she desired most of all ... the love of a mother and father. She turned twenty-one in 1985, and was the most sought after entertainer in the world. Everyone loved her, but Sinda loved only three things ... Kimberly, Rock and Roll, and COCAINE.

CHAPTER IV

Faden watched Sinda Rilla's meteoric rise to stardom with a jaundiced eye. Her fame and fortune alarmed him. He had liked it much better when she had only been a local celebrity. She was now larger than life. He watched from the sidelines as fame took this obscure wildflower of Southern Oklahoma, and made her a prisoner of the adulation of the public. He watched as the monkey climbed on her back with the addiction to cocaine, as it had so many of his buddies in Vietnam.

He...

S creamed in horror as the once clear eyes of cobalt blue, took on the murkiness of a roiled stream.

I nwardly cringed as the bags formed beneath the eyes, giving her an ancient appearance far beyond her years.

N eeded to warn her, to help her.

D esired her as no other possibly could.

A nd cried as the drugs did their dirty work.

R eally wanted to hold her and tell her everything was going to be all right.

I nstead, had to watch from afar as her health went.

L oved her with all his heart and soul.

L ikened her unto an angel.

A nd vowed to help make her life drug free, whether she welcomed his aid, or not!

He was becoming totally *FUBAR*. His entire sense of well-being was falling apart. He had chosen this life of solitude,

but now it would never do. He had to possess her, to have her love him in return. He had once accepted the fact that she would never be his; she was unattainable by a writ of God. She was destined to one day become an angel, had to. Regardless how much he desired her, he must never touch her, he was unworthy. She had for a time belonged to two others, but they had been fools and allowed her to escape. He worshipped the *water* she walked on and knew in his heart that should he ever reach for her he would drown in that holy water.

He was aware that he should be content to adore her from afar, fantasy being his only release. To gaze on such beauty from up close would surely cause blindness to the beholder. To actually hold her in one's arms ... would bring upon instant death, of this he was certain.

What he was going to do came to him before the night of her twenty-first birthday. Sinda was giving a concert on National television in honor of the event. It was to be a celebration like no other before.

Faden had always believed she had been born on the day of his mother's death for a reason. Perhaps God was making amends for allowing the tragedy to happen. The next day he started a special addition to his cabin. When he was finished he had a padded cell with roughly twenty by twenty feet of living space. The bars between the cell and the rest of the cabin were made out of one inch round stock. The three remaining walls were constructed of concrete blocks. The room was virtually escape proof for a novice to prison life. He stocked the bathroom with all the womanly stuff he could

imagine, an electric razor among other items. The rest of the boudoir contained a bed, television set, stereo, recliner, and a vanity table. He used polished stainless steel above the sink in the bathroom, and the vanity table. As far as he could discern, the room was also suicide proof

He took a shovel from the utility shed, and walked about three miles down river from where he lived. He began to dig in the center of a copse of cottonwood trees. He dug a pit in the sand some ten by twenty feet, by eight feet deep. He returned the next day with some lumber that he rafted down the river. He boxed in the excavation, and built a wooden top, which he camouflaged with sand. The door leading down into the cellar was masked with a mortar made of sand and leaves. The location of the hidey-hole would be all but impossible to find unless someone knew exactly where to look. Each day he would return to the cellar with more supplies. He soon had it stocked with enough food and medicine to sustain a small army if he so desired. Drinking water, 12-gauge shotgun shells in a variety of shot sizes, case after case of .22 caliber ammunition, a 12-gauge pump shotgun, and a Winchester .22 caliber lever-action rifle were some of the last items to be brought in. He then undertook his most difficult task to date ... mastering his claustrophobia. Thoughts of Sinda Rilla, and how he was going to help her, aided him in this most trying of ordeals.

He cached bank hooks all up and down the river for catching fish. He purchased a sterno oven of the type that was supposed to be virtually smoke free. It was while he was making his purchases in town that he let on that he would

soon be leaving for an extended hunting trip in Colorado. He pulled the ruse so that no one would come out to the cabin to visit. It was after he was satisfied everything was in order that he initiated the task of stalking Sinda Rilla.

It took a hefty chunk out of his savings to accomplish all of this, but he didn't care. His life was now for a single purpose, and that was to save Sinda from herself. By pretending to be someone he wasn't, he gained vital information about her from her second ex-husband (who just happened to be the executive producer of her recording studio and her own SIN record label) who also detested her, and was more than happy to divulge secrets about her nasty drug habit.

She procured her drugs from a character known as the Candyman. He supplied drugs to many of the entertainment people, but Sinda was by far his best customer. So good in fact that while she was on the road touring, he or one of his lackeys was always hanging around.

It was the last night of her 1985 tour, and the concert was billed as her "Homecoming". She was playing to a sold out audience at the Oklahoma City fairgrounds. A blow with a baseball bat to the forehead of the Candyman took him out of the action. Faden assumed the ridiculous costume of the street dealer, stole the Candyman's car, and set out for the hotel Sinda would be spending the night in before heading to the ranch the following morning.

She was a bit leery when she discovered Faden in the car instead of the Candyman, but her addiction to the drugs outweighed her caution. She drew lines on the mirror from the glove box, never doubting for a moment the contents of

the packet he had given her. Instead of cocaine, she snorted a mild dose of horse tranquilizer. The results were better than Faden could have hoped for. She was in such a state of exhaustion from the concert that she fell asleep immediately.

He drove the Candyman's car to where he had left his '63 Chevy pick-up. He very carefully carried her to the vehicle, laying her head gently on the pillow against the locked door on the passenger side. Due to her weight, and having precisely measured the dosage, he figured her to be out for somewhere in the neighborhood of three hours. Barring any unforeseen incident it would be more than enough time to reach his destination.

He drove safely and arrived at his cabin, without mishap, two and one-half hours later. He carried her limp body into the cell he had built especially for her, and laid her on the bed.

Sinda slept peacefully through the remainder of the night. Faden even managed to catch a few winks himself, only to be awakened early the next morning by the awfulest caterwauling he had ever heard in his entire life. Sinda missed her morning snootful of cocaine, and the whole world was damn well going to know about it. She called him every name in the book when she realized she was being held captive. She couldn't recall any of the events that transpired following the concert, nor did she care to. She exhausted her extensive vocabulary of expletives, and ran for the bathroom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the stainless steel serving as a mirror above the sink, and believed she had never

looked worse. The uncontrollable nosebleed certainly wasn't in her favor.

Faden thought otherwise. He believed her to be gorgeous. She could root with the hogs and roll her hair in cow dung, and she would still be beautiful to him. He was saddened by her anger, but understood the emotion. He hoped and prayed that she would someday find it in her heart to forgive him.

He asked her if she would like something to eat when she returned to the living portion of her room, but after thirty minutes of shouting obscenities at him she had lain down on the bed, sobbing pathetically. He strolled outside because it tore the heart out of him to see her like this. An hour or so later he returned to find her sleeping once again. It wasn't the peaceful drug induced slumber of before, but was instead a tossing, turning affair. Sweat drenched her body, even though the room was relatively cool, and her hair was a tangled matted mess. She looked so pitiful that he had to leave the cabin again. It was six o'clock in the evening when he returned for the second time. She was in the bathroom throwing up. He felt so sorry for her, but knew there wasn't anything he could do. She had to do it cold turkey, or he feared it would all be for naught.

She refused to speak to him until 11:00 P.M., when she asked, "How much do you want?"

"This isn't about money," he responded.

"Then, why am I being held against my will?" she inquired.

"You will just have to believe me when I tell you it is for your own good. Would you like something to eat now?" he asked, as he stood and stretched.

"For my own good, huh? I bet you're some kind of pervert that gets his kicks by being in control. Isn't that right, aren't you a control freak? If that's what it's all about, then why don't you come on over here and fuck me? Come on, let's get it done and over with so I can get out of this dump." She remarked, as she began to remove the nightgown he had purchased for her.

Hurt and confused, he said, "You think every man in the world is after your body, don't you?"

With the gown halfway off and covering her head, she remarked, "All the men that I have had the dubious pleasure of meeting are after one of two things, or both ... my body or my money. You have already established the fact that you aren't after my money, so what does that leave, Einstein?"

Changing the subject as he noticed the sores between her toes and on the inside flesh of her elbows, along with the all-over filth of her body in general, he asked, "Why didn't you shower before you put the clean gown on?"

She threw the gown onto the floor and stomped on it in a fit of rage, then remarked, "What's the fucking matter with you, jack-off? Can't you get it up, cowboy?"

Disgust registering on his face, he responded, "Frankly, my dear, I am repulsed by the sight of you. You're twenty-one, but look all of fifty. I have seen Mexican peons without any means whatsoever stay cleaner."

Tears of shame sprang to her eyes as a memory of her father telling a hand the same thing came unbidden to her. She was momentarily stunned to think that someone would have the audacity to say something so shameful to her, yet

found the fortitude to respond, "I'd die before I would let you touch me! You're a sick son-of-a-bitch and I will laugh like hell when they finally catch you. And catch you they will, you can bet on that. Don't you realize who I am? I AM A GODDAMED BONA FIDE SUPERSTAR!!!!!! There will be a million people searching for me. You have no idea who you are fucking with!" She then jumped on the bed where she demonstrated real class when she squatted and pissed.

Faden smiled and said, "You're the one who has to sleep in it."

Sinda refused all food, and slept in the recliner. Faden placed a fresh coverlet through the bars before sealing the cell with the dummy wall. He was surprised to find the next morning that she had rinsed out the soiled sheets in the shower sometime during the night, and had them hanging from the bars drying. The mattress was leaning against the south wall with a fan blowing on the wet spot. He was pleased to find that she had bathed herself, although she hadn't been able to do anything with her matted hair. He could tell by the way that the coverlet was hanging half on, half off her body that she had had a night of it.

He felt shame at the stirrings inside of him when he found himself staring at her left breast, which played peek-a-boo with him as she breathed. In sleep, while her body relaxed, she was almost as beautiful as he had imagined her. The only blemish he could find on her were the creases on her face, and the main one down the center, which gave her the pithy look. The circles beneath her eyes appeared to be darker. He didn't know exactly how long the withdrawals would last,

never having experimented with anything stronger than marijuana himself (and that had been when he was in the army) so he could only guess. He prayed that she would be able to take nourishment before her body deteriorated beyond recovery. He had a limited supply of medicine, and a restricted knowledge as to what dosage and how often to administer it. It was in Gods hands now.

In the midst of his musings he heard her gasping for air. She seemed to be swallowing her tongue. He opened the cell door, without thought of ruse, and rushed into the room. He dashed into the bathroom and grabbed a glass of water when he saw her gesture for something to drink. She drank slowly, and after a short while she was able to whisper to him that her mouth and throat had been dry enough to spit cotton. Then ... she sprinted for the open door. He caught her easily, and propelled her back into the cell, locking the door after he had exited.

"You bastard! I hate you! Let me out of here, you sadistic motherfucker!"

"Ugly language for such a pretty girl," he remarked, as he once again sealed the room.

The next few days were hell on him, as well as her. Her mood swings were unpredictable and challenging. He finally got her to eat some soup on the third day, but she was unable to keep it down. She seemed to experience less anxiety when she could see him, so he took to reading while sitting in an easy chair within plain sight of her. On the fifth day she was able to keep some food down. Her system was in such turmoil that one moment she was fine, the next she was

shaking like a dog shitting peach seeds, and screaming her lungs out in some unknown tongue.

"Would you please cut my hair for me?" she asked, one day, startling the hell out of him.

"What did you say? I'm sorry, but my mind was elsewhere and I'm not sure I heard you right."

"I asked if you would cut my hair for me. It is so tangled that I absolutely can't do anything with it." She replied so demurely that he was afraid he was hallucinating.

"I'll make a deal with you. If I can shampoo it and get all the tangles out, then you leave it long. Okay?"

"You are more than welcome to try, but Kim is the only person who has ever been able to get all the knots out of it." She replied most civilly.

Faden entered the cell and saw the hurt look in her eyes when he locked the door behind himself. He wasn't sure he could trust her yet even though she seemed resigned to this fate. He was utterly amazed at the transformation in her, both physically and mentally. It had only been five days, but her body had recovered remarkably well.

Her skin had a healthy, satiny texture, and by lying beneath the skylight he had constructed she was well on the way to regaining the golden hue that she had lacked for the past two years.

There wasn't any way she was going to let on to him, but she felt better than she had in years. There was something strange about this man, her captor (or perhaps savior), and she didn't know whether it was all bad, or all good, only that it eluded her. He appeared to genuinely care about her

without expecting anything in return, and she secretly knew she could trust him.

Once, on either the fourth or fifth day of her captivity she had felt him crawl into bed with her. She had been alarmed at first, and then she accepted the fact that he was there merely to give her comfort in her direst time of need. To tell the truth, his body warmth had helped ease the cramping of her weary muscles and had chased away the trembling that threatened to shake her apart.

Faden washed her hair with the gentlest of care and loving caresses. He spent four of the happiest hours of his life brushing her shiny, luxurious, flaming tresses. He answered all her questions, but with the utmost caution. He explained to her that they were on an island of sorts, surrounded on three sides by a bend of the Red River, and a large pond on the remaining side. He told her there wasn't any way to exit the property unless you knew the location of the low-water crossing. He lied about there not being a telephone, when in fact, he had simply unplugged it.

She knew of the stories surrounding her vanishing from watching television and listening to the radio. As of yet there were no clues to her whereabouts. Only one time had anyone knocked on the front door, and Faden had gotten rid of them post-haste. She was aware that once the dummy wall was in place her prison became sound proof, thereby rendering all shouts for help useless.

When he was finished with her hair it shone with the brilliance of the sun. She was so beautiful it took his breath

away to gaze at her. He was so overwhelmed with her that he could only look at her in short term glimpses.

She was nothing short of amazed at the metamorphosis that had taken place in such a brief time span. The lovely young woman that stared back at her from the mirror was a far cry from the troubled girl who had ended up in this mysterious place. She turned in the chair and took him by the wrist.

"Why?" she asked.

He simply replied, "You needed help."

"But why would you put yourself in such a precarious situation for someone you didn't even know? Are you my guardian angel, or something? Am I dead?"

"No! I'm just a fan that didn't want to sit by and watch you kill yourself. You have too much to live for, so much to give the world. There are a lot of kids messed up because of your DRUGS, SEX and ROCK AND ROLL idealism."

She looked away guiltily, but then it crossed her mind that it was only *her* songs that he played on his stereo. It was *her* posters stapled to the walls of his quarters. She began to fear for her life when she realized she was the sole object of his obsession. She screamed at the top of her lungs, "I'm never going to leave this place alive, am I?" then jerked her hand off of his wrist.

Faden saw she was about to go through one of her mood swings, which preceded the raging fits, so he bolted for the door, mere steps ahead of her. It was a week later before she spoke to him again. She had eaten during this period even though she refused to engage in conversation with him.

She finally came around, and asked him one day, "Are you going to kill me? If you are, then just do it and get it over with. If not, why put yourself and me through all of this? Why won't you just let me go?"

The caught-in-the-headlights look that she directed at him almost scared him speechless. He realized then that she was genuinely afraid that he was either going to kill her or keep her held prisoner for life. He explained, "I'm only going to hold you until you're able to help yourself. I promise to set you free once I believe you have truly kicked your addiction to drugs."

"But can't you see? I have overcome my addiction," she cried.

"No, you haven't! You are currently in denial. You have pretty well mastered the physical craving, but that may be because of the controlled environment. I believe that if I were to let you go now, you would be right back where you were in no time at all."

"Bullshit! She vehemently spat back at him. "You will never set me free. Aren't you aware of what the authorities will do to you when they catch you? The best you could possibly hope for would be an insanity plea, and even then you would have to spend the rest of your natural life in a mental institution for the criminally insane."

"I had, and do hope that by the time you have recovered you will see things my way, and forgive me for what I have had to put you through. Believe me when I say, it is necessary. If I am wrong, and you don't find it in your heart

to spare me, then steps have been taken for that eventuality."

They continued to chat and soon things became as normal as could be expected, given the odd set of circumstances. Faden held the "Bull" sessions in much the same manner as AA meetings. He was a recovering alcoholic himself, therefore he knew quite a bit about such treatments. He had learned to imbibe far more than called for while in the service of his country.

She was somewhat hesitant at first, but then started to really open up. He would let her spend time outside (always chaperoned by him of course) during the dark hours of the evening. She loved to sit on the front porch swing and gaze into the heavens above. The twinkling stars seemed to amaze her. He could not chance having her seen by a fisherman or some other passerby in the daylight, so her visits with Mr. Sun were made in her room beneath the clear skylight.

The one thing that Faden just hadn't planned for happened one day. He became very ill. He gave Sinda enough nonperishable items to keep her nourished for several days. He then went to bed secure in the knowledge that whatever bug he had contracted would soon pass out of his system.

He made a drastic decision when he woke up the next morning sicker than ever, and sincerely believing that he may just up and die at any moment. He unlocked Sinda's door and told her she was free to go. He then collapsed at her feet, his head taking a nasty rap on the concrete floor.

Sinda half-carried, half-dragged him onto her bed. She fed him like a baby when he was semi-conscious, and cradled his

head to her breast when he shook uncontrollably in the throes of delirium. She sponge bathed him when he burned with fever, and slipped beneath the covers, her nubile body naked against his when he trembled with ague. He was a week recovering from the illness, and in all that time she left his side only once.

She had placed a call to her dear Kim upon discovering the telephone. She had instructed Kim to call her back from a payphone so the call couldn't be traced. She didn't inform Kim of her whereabouts, but assured her that she was safe and free of harm.

There was something in her tone which convinced Kim that she was speaking the truth of her own free will, and not being forced to read from a prepared script. It had been a long time since she had heard the happy lilt in Sinda's voice. She didn't know what had brought about the change, nor did she care. Sinda's speech was clear and sober, so unlike the slurred, incoherent way that she normally spoke while in the grip of drugs. Her health and happiness were all that mattered to Kim. She suspected that a man was involved, and prayed that he would continue to treat her well. Sinda deserved some joy to repay her for all the cheer she had brought to the masses with her music. Kim promised that all the Kings men and all the Kings horses couldn't drag any information from her about Sinda, or her having phoned.

Sinda told her that she would get in touch with her when she decided the time was right to brace the public again. After both parties spoke tearful good-byes, Sinda hung up the

phone, unplugging it from the wall jack just as she had found it.

The virus left Faden weakened, but his constitution was strong and he made a full recovery, only to discover that he was now the prisoner. She had wanted him to see how it felt to be held against one's will, but he appeared to be totally content and happy to have her as a jailer. Taking him completely and utterly by surprise, Sinda made him promise to love and hold her forever. She even went so far as to make him marry her in a mock wedding ceremony with both of them vowing to forsake all others, before she would release him.

They made tender love on her bed, in the shower, across the chair, and on the floor. He feared she might kill him in his weakened condition, but then ... what a way to go! Their appetite for each other was insatiable. Her lovely body in all its' splendid glory was all the aphrodisiac that he needed.

His hand innocently resting on her thigh was all it took from him to send her soaring. They discovered they were perfect soul mates, and inseparable. He was thirty-one, and she was ten years his junior, but in the lovemaking department they were equals.

A glance in his direction from her sexy, smoldering, bedroom eyes would set him on fire, a fire that only she had the power to extinguish. Her breast had regained the buoyancy, her legs the shape and firmness befitting a woman of her age. The belly, which led to the red treasure nestled in the V at the top of her long legs, was taut and flat enough to land an airplane on.

Anytime he was near, her nipples would become turgid, straining the silver dollar sized aureole to hold them, her crotch would become soaked with the vaginal secretions which prepared her opening for his love.

The simple thought of her voluptuous figure, and the cleverness of her mind was all it took to make him hard for her. It was a God-given miracle that either of them survived the first month of their togetherness. One morning during the fifth month of their affair he had noticed that her belly was becoming rounded and slightly swollen. He had meant to tease her about it, but then decided not to say anything. In truth, he thought it added to her appeal. He chalked it up to a nutritious diet and a healthy appetite.

After five full months of bliss it came to an end, as all good things must. He would have to share her with the rest of the world. Sinda had placed a call to the Oscar ranch house to verify a bit of news she had overheard on the television. A live-in maid assured her that Kim was indeed in an Intensive Care Unit in a Dallas hospital. She had suffered a massive heart attack. The maid put the blame on Sinda (after learning that she had been safe all along) claiming that Kim would be okay if only she would have phoned to let her know how she was doing. According to the maid, stress and worry brought on the attack. How could Sinda have been so callous as to let the woman, who had raised her as one of her own, suffer?

Sinda let the maid run on. There was something rotten in Denmark all right, and Oklahoma, too. Kim had always taken such good care of herself. She was a health food nut, and had been monitoring her cholesterol level long before it was

fashionable to do so. She was only forty-one years old, and had been in excellent health the last time that Sinda had seen her some seven months past. Sinda supposed that the "not knowing" had taken its toll, although Kim had sounded fine when they had spoken on the phone. The maid wasn't aware of the fact that Kim had known Sinda was safe for five of the past seven months.

Sinda phoned her personal secretary (and had to go through the entire thing again), and had her make all the arrangements to get her to the hospital in Dallas. Faden spoke to the woman, giving her directions to the cabin. Sinda was shocked (to put it mildly) to discover that she had been held all this time only thirty some odd miles from where she had been born and raised. She told the secretary to set up a press conference for the following day, and then hung up the phone.

She turned to Faden, and asked, "Did you know my father?"

"Yes ... I used to hunt rattlesnakes on your ranch. I believe the first time was in 1971, and then from '75 until this past year. I can even remember seeing you for the first time. I was in my senior year of high school, and you were just a mere slip of a girl, red headed and freckled faced. I can recall thinking at the time that you were very beautiful, even though you couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old. One day in '71, you and your dad drove up on us while we were checking the den in the Creek Pasture. I tousled your hair and told you; she's got freckles on her but ... she's pretty."

And she did remember him too. She had thought at the time that he was the greatest thing on earth, and had even taken umbrage when her father had stated that all the snake hunters were crazy ... although he did appreciate the service they were providing. He had explained to her that they sold the snakes, captured live, to the volunteer fire fighters for use in the annual Beaver Point Rattlesnake Round Up.

Choking back a sob, she said, "I remember you, too! I had such a school-girl crush on you." His words had jarred a memory she had believed to be forgotten. One of the few happy memories she had from her childhood. The dam broke and she raced from the room. He tried to call her back, but she had locked herself in the bathroom.

Sinda was going to come out of hiding after visiting Kim. She would suffer the consequences of her actions when Kim was out of danger. Faden wasn't up to sharing her with anyone, so he had begged off accompanying her on the trip. He felt like he was throwing her to the wolves, but he just wasn't any good with crowds. He knew he would only make things worse by going with her. He told her to call him if she got into more trouble than she could handle, and he would be her Knight in shining armor and come to her rescue. He wasn't any good at tearful good-byes, either, and so he had given her the watch his grandfather had bequeathed him. He exacted a promise from her to return to him one day soon, and then walked into the copse behind the cabin. He sat down on a stump with his head cradled on the palms of his hands. She had been sitting in the rocking chair, weeping copiously, with the watch pressed to her lips when he last saw her.

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

The symbolism of his giving her the watch wasn't lost on her. She knew how much it meant to him and for him to give it to her said more than any words could possibly express. She would definitely return, of this he could be certain. She loved Faden more than life itself. She loved him with all her heart and believed with all that was holy in her that God would lift the curse of the Ranson women, for this match that seemed to be made in Heaven.

Oh, yes ... she would return to him all right, because she sure as hell wasn't going to raise the baby growing inside her without its father.

CHAPTER V

Ben became infamous as the "Roachman" while in prison. Thoughts of revenge against Faden kept his hatred, and therefore his life going, while spending time. He learned behind the gray walls that he could be paid for doing what he enjoyed so much ... bringing pain and suffering to others. What a concept, much like a professional athlete, to be given money for having fun.

Ben had a tattoo put on the back of his hand between the thumb and forefinger. A cockroach was standing erect on its hind legs performing the Mexican Hat Dance around a sombrero. The legend "EL CUCARACHA" was emblazoned on the brim of the hat. Ben became a member of the Bear Clan.

Bear was a giant of a man, standing six-feet eleven inches in his bare feet, and weighing an impressive three hundred pounds with less than seven percent overall body fat. His skin was as black as the ace of spades, and his beard extremely bushy, hence the nickname. He had once upon a time been a professional wrestler, but had broken the necks of his wife and her lover in a fit of rage. He had started the Clan so that they may watch each other's backs. The only requirement for admittance to the Clan was murder. You had to have killed someone on the outside, and would be called upon from time to time to do the same thing on the inside. Ben easily met the entire criteria.

Frankie Martinelli didn't amount to much by anyone's standards, but he was the son of one of the most powerful

Families on the East Coast. He had raped an Oklahoma City girl when she had spurned his advances. He had been in Oklahoma attempting to settle a dispute among one of the trucking companies that the Family owned. He had believed that any poor, ignorant, "OKIE" female should swoon at the feet of a wealthy, sophisticated businessman like himself. He had been wrong in his assumption, and was serving a three-year sentence for his erroneous belief. "Big Mac" is the state penitentiary of Oklahoma, and the place he would temporarily call home. He had been a royal pain in the ass while a civilian, and a thorn in the side of the Bear behind the gray walls. The Bear was paid to keep the boy safe. He had, with some difficulty, managed to do this, that is, until Frankie got crossways of the Queen.

The Queen was a man who looked anything but the stereotype of a homosexual. He had an extremely muscular build, and a face chiseled out of granite. He was doing time for molestation, and it hadn't stopped when he entered the system. He still enjoyed his sex with young, pretty boys. One day during lunch, the Queen had made a pass at Frankie. The kid, thinking to make an impression, had slapped the Queen, hard, across the face. The sound was like a shotgun blast inside of the silenced chow hall. The Queen smiled, and then walked away. Everyone was stunned; the Queen had never stood for this kind of insolent behavior before. All the old cons suspected it to be a put-up show, financed by the kid's folks. A contrived act of bravery to convince the others that he was some kind of tough-guy.

No such luck for the boy in a man's body! It had simply been another testament to the kid's egotistical stupidity. The Queen and his lackeys took care of the boy a week following the incident in the chow hall. The multiple sodomy, while extremely painful, hadn't killed the kid, but the sharp pointed stick that the Queen shoved up his ass, did.

The Bear had to bring the Queen down, or lose face. He had been paid good money to protect the kid, but due to Frankie's idiocy, he had failed. He had to wreak vengeance; the Family would accept no less. The main problem was that the guards were aware of this also, and many of them were on the Queen's payroll. The Bear was immediately put into solitary confinement before he could speak to anyone about any planned retribution.

The Queen had the run of the entire prison with the Bear secluded, and he made the fatal mistake of relaxing his vigilance. The Roachman seized the opportunity that presented itself. He traded cigarettes for a gallon of flammable cleaning fluid and some stout cord. He talked a trustee (who had a damn good reason for hating the Queen and his cronies) into assigning him clean-up duty on the fourth floor. This was the Queen's bailiwick. It was three o'clock in the morning, and the Queen was sound asleep in his private cell. Ben had hidden the fluid in the mop bucket. By reaching through the bars as far as he could, and with the aid of a filed teaspoon handle, he was able to poke a hole through the two edges of the wool blanket that hung down both sides of the bunk. He pushed the cord through the hole on the right side, then through the side next to the wall. He

pulled the ends of the cord as tight as possible beneath the bunk, taking great pains not to waken the snoring Queen. He tied a hard knot in the cord, thereby trapping the Queen in his bed. Given enough time, a man would be able to wriggle out from between the blanket and bed, but the Queen didn't have that kind of time. Ben struck a match, and then hurled the entire contents of the pail into the unsuspecting face of the Queen. The match made an eerie glow as it arced through the air on the way to its target. Ben exclaimed, while sneering, "Hot Springs, tonight!"

The prison doctor, who also doubled as coroner, probably wasn't as thorough with his examination of the deceased as he should have been, but then it was his golf day. He advised the warden that the departed might have drowned from the volume of fluid that entered his nose, mouth and lungs, been asphyxiated by the fumes, and, or explosion that ensued, or may even have lived long enough to feel himself burn to death.

The warden had a tryst, which he was late for, with the bleached blond from the diner down the road, so he allowed that it was a damn shame, but shit happens.

Ben was routinely questioned, then released for lack of evidence and interest. There wasn't a prisoner in the entire place that was going to rat on the man who had done what he had to the Queen, not even the Queen's own men. The Roachman returned to his cell to find the Bear reclining on his bunk with his hands clasped behind his head. The Bear smiled, and said, "The Queen is dead ... long live the Roachman!"

Bear explained to Ben, in no uncertain terms, his appreciation for a job well done. The Family was also very pleased. Upon his release the Roachman would receive twenty thousand dollars for the actual killing, plus a bonus for the suffering he had inflicted. There was also to be instructions included with the money. Instructions that would tell him how to get in contact with the Family for possible future jobs on the outside. There was always work for a man with Ben's unique talents in the Family business.

Ben finished his sentence without further incident, other than a murder, or two. He was released on the third of June, 1967. He found a new '67 Ford Galaxy 500 in the parking lot outside the gate. His name was scrawled on the driver's side window in white shoe polish. There was a new briefcase lying on the passenger side of the front seat. He turned the ignition on and drove out of the prison parking lot without peering into the case. Gazing into the rearview mirror he saw the long black limousine pulling out of the rear exit of the lot.

He didn't stop for lunch until he arrived at a small roadside diner near Lake Murray, just outside of Ardmore, Oklahoma. He opened the briefcase and found one thousand, twenty-dollar bills, along with a note that read;

"I sincerely hope that you enjoy your bonus. A Ford Galaxy is supposed to be a good car, or so I am told. Take some time off and relax for a while, then come to the designated place in Albany, New York. Drive safely. Thanks for a job well done. I know that my boy's soul has found peace since you did the nice work."

D.M., SR.

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

Ben destroyed the note and instructions, as he knew he was expected to. His plans for vengeance against Faden would have to be put on hold for the time being. He had all the time in the world to make the little punk pay for his insolence. For now, he would take care of the business at hand. He believed he could really go places in this line of work he had chosen.

And go places he did! He was an apt pupil of the perversities of human nature. His skills at causing pain and suffering, which eventually led to death, were so great that by 1969 he was one of the most sought after and highest paid hit men on the continent.

CHAPTER VI

"What if she was dead?" inquired the man in the three-piece suit.

"We both know that she isn't dead!"

"But what if she were?" asked the other of the two men that occupied the room. The date was the twenty-first of December, 1985, and the place was an office in the thirty-story building, which sported the SIN record label logo. The two characters were Jim Simmons (Sinda's former second husband), and Vic Rogers, Vice President of SIN productions.

"Her record sales are down. Kids these days are the money people, and you have to keep making hits and having concerts to keep them interested. Sinda's drug habit has cost us more money than I care to mention. She was a no-show for three of her '85 concerts. She hasn't had a number one song in over two years, and after she made such a fool of herself at the Grammys she won't be invited to any more award shows, not even as a presenter. I don't have to remind you of how her tit fell out of the halter-top last year, do I? Everyone was so shocked when Mick ran up on the stage to put it back in for her. My God, man! That was on live national television. She was so whacked out of her gourd she thought he was merely getting fresh with her and in return grabbed him by the crotch. Instead of looking like a superstar, she came across as a trailer-trash tramp!" exclaimed Jim.

Vic had to suppress a grin as he recalled the incident. Sinda had grabbed Mick by the crotch all right, but not hard.

She and Mick had spent the next two weeks in the Bahamas. In defense of her actions, he said, "She will get back into the swing of things."

"Bullshit!!! She's finished in the recording business, and you know it as well as I do. Once word leaks out that she has simply been hiding out from the public, we're all through." Jim had become suspicious when Kimberly had stopped calling to see if he had any information of Sinda's whereabouts. Record sales had been up immediately following the sensation of her disappearance, so he hadn't given any more thought to his suspicions. When the public had tired of the vanished singer, and moved on to something new, record sales had plummeted. This was when he had contacted the man, known to inner circles, as the Roachman.

Ben had gone to work on Kimberly, giving her sodium pentathol, (truth serum), and her system's low tolerance for any drug had caused her to sing like a canary. He had then given her a drug, which gave a person all the symptoms commonly associated with heart failure. He then checked her into the emergency room of the Dallas Memorial Hospital, claiming to have found her wondering aimlessly along side of the freeway.

At this time only six people knew for sure that Sinda was alive (excluding Faden and Sinda) Jim, Vic, the ranch house maid, and Sinda's personal assistant, all of whom were in on the deal since its inception. Kimberly, who wouldn't be saying anything to anyone for some time to come, if ever, and the Roachman.

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

The plan was to bump Sinda off, then capitalize on her tragic death. Elvis and Hank Williams had sold a shit-pile of albums after their deaths, and were still immensely popular. Jim detested Sinda, and hated the way she had thrown him the bone, which happened to be a one hundred thousand-dollar a year job, knowing full well that his gambling debts would keep insuring his continued employment. If only he hadn't signed that damned pre-nuptial agreement, but he had been so "in lust" with her. Thoughts of the three times he had slept with her could still stir him to an unwanted erection. Maybe the black eye and broken jaw he had given her were more than had been called for, but dammit, he deserved at least half of everything she owned for having kept up the appearance of a happy marriage for those seven months.

Ben was staying in a swanky motel room outside of Fort Worth, Texas, when word came down for him to "take-out" Sinda. The price was one million dollars, but he would have done it for free. This was an opportunity of a lifetime, two birds with one stone. He would be rewarded with the million for wiping out Sinda, and wreak vengeance on the punk, Faden, by framing him for the murder.

Life was good!

CHAPTER VII

Sinda was sitting on a rocking chair in the living room of the cabin when Roachman drove up in the long black limousine with the SIN logo on its side. He got out of the car wearing the costume of a chauffeur. He knocked on the door, and was told to enter by the sobbing woman. She held the back of a pocket watch on a gold chain to her lips.

He had seen the watch many times twenty-one years before, and the significance of her now possessing it was not lost on him. Faden must have really fallen for her in order to give her the watch. Ben thought, so much the better.

He had seen the Star on television, most notably the last time he had watched the Grammys, but she was barely recognizable as the same person. The girl on the awards show had been an emaciated, disheveled version of the wholesome woman that now sat before him. He asked for something to drink, before starting on the way to Dallas, and was told to help himself.

When he was behind Sinda, presumably on his way to the kitchen, he took a bottle of chloroform out of one pocket of his jacket, and a handkerchief out of another. He doused the kerchief with the colorless liquid, and held it over her nose and mouth. She put up a small struggle, and then succumbed to the drug. He locked the door so no one could enter unbidden. He tied her ankles to the legs of the chair, and her wrist to the arms, after having stripped her of all her clothes.

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

She soon awoke naked to the world with a splitting headache. She tried to move her arms and legs but found she couldn't because they were bound to the chair. She cried out for Faden, but he didn't answer, of course, because the big mean looking man standing before her wasn't him. She watched at first through a kind of dream like haze, then with morbid fascination, as he punctured the flesh immediately above her vagina with the tip of Faden's hunting knife. The effects of the drug wore off, and she was engulfed with pain as the man with the weird tattoo on his hand brought the knife up deeply through her belly, and into her chest cavity. Her right hand jerked in a spasm, which broke the watch chain that had gotten looped around the arm of the chair. The watch then slipped from her fingers and shattered the face when it hit the floor, freezing the hands at 2:15 for all eternity. Mercifully, her eyes had glazed over by the time that Roachman severed the tiny body from her womb.

Ben drove to Ryan, Oklahoma, before stopping to place the anonymous phone call to the Jefferson County Sheriffs Department, reporting a disturbance out at the Casteel place.

CHAPTER VIII

Faden waited until darkness had claimed the land before heading back to the cabin. He had wanted to be sure she was gone so that he wouldn't break down and beg her not to go at all. He topped a small rise of land and saw the flashing lights of several State Trooper vehicles. There were people crawling all over his front yard and in his cabin.

He surmised that they were looking for evidence. She had pulled the wool over his eyes and betrayed him ... but how could she have done it so well? How could it be wrong, if it felt so right? She was the one, after all, who had initiated their lovemaking. His heart had told him that the love he felt for her was reciprocated. Why had she turned him in, after going through all the trouble of telling him how much she appreciated what he had done for her?

He ran for the river as fast as his legs would carry him. He grabbed the tarp covered truck inner tube that he had stashed on the bank at an earlier date. He floated downstream until he came to the tree near the cellar. He stood in the fork of the tree, which he had climbed by grabbing one of the branches overhanging the water, and pulled the string that opened the cellar door. A coat hanger and a piece of twine, which were also stashed in the tree, were used to fish the fully loaded Winchester .22 caliber rifle from the cellar. He then closed the door and dropped onto the inner tube. It had rained since he last visited the cellar so he was able to accomplish all of this without leaving one trace for

the trackers, or scent for the bloodhounds that would soon be on his trail. All evidence of his continued existence would end at the river edge where he had entered the water. He knew they would think he had taken a boat, and would be searching all up and down the river for him.

It took him a week to reach his destination. He had traveled only by night, on the river where he could, and away from it when he couldn't. He ate rabbits that he snared, cooking them over the near smokeless fires he had learned to build in Vietnam, and as far as he could get away from the river without losing too much time.

His choice for a hideout was the bluffs south of Oscar. The almost sheer rock walls on the north bank of the Red River were riddled with caves and holes large enough for a grown man to stand erect in. He had stocked one of these caves with supplies, months before, in anticipation of just such an eventuality. He raked the leaves off of the rope that was buried in the sand. The other end of the rope was secured to a spike driven into the rock floor of the cave. He released the inner tube allowing it to drift with the current. He slung the rifle across his back and pulled himself a short distance up the rope, bracing one foot against the rock wall. He used his other foot to splash water onto the sand to wipe out his scent, and then scaled the remaining distance to the cave. He pulled the rope in after himself, changed into dry clothing, ate a bite of non-perishables, then sat back on his haunches with the rifle across his knees, and began the wait.

CHAPTER IX

"For God's sake man, he nailed the fetus to the mailbox post. He kidnapped her, held her against her will, and then he more-than-likely raped her. There were traces of semen found inside her, you know. As if that wasn't bad enough, he tied her to a chair and carved her up with his hunting knife, which I might add, he left sticking in her right breast. But what really uncorks me, really throws my ass out of joint, is the fact that he nailed that poor unborn baby to a post. The blood test done on the fetus matches the blood type we dug out of his old army chart, which means that it might even have been his own baby. I tell you the son-of-a-bitch is as crazy as that mother-fucking stepfather of his, was. Hell, all the evidence you could ever want, or ask for, is right there in front of you for everyone to see. If he hadn't been raised in your house you'd be able to see the light, and quit this denial phase you are going through. The light is bright enough for a blind man to see."

The pompous agent from the O.S.B.I., was starting to rankle Sheriff McClure's hide. If the man had known Dewayne better he would have recognized the signs that said he was about to be thrown out on his ass.

"You, and everyone else I've questioned around here contend that Faden would rather be caught dead than go anywhere without his pocket watch. I'm telling you that she jerked it off during the struggle for her life, and he was so keyed-up he didn't notice." Shouted the agent.

"And I've been trying to tell you ... you red necked peckerwood ... that Faden is much too smart to have left all that evidence lying around if he had committed the crime of which he is accused. Remember, he was also raised as the son of a police officer." Replied Sheriff Dewayne McClure, as coolly as he could.

"Even with an eyewitness, you still believe him to be innocent?" inquired the agent, incredulously."

"Your so called eyewitness just happens to be a convicted drug trafficker, currently residing in prison. He never said he saw Faden murder anyone. He claims someone fitting Faden's description conked him on the head with a baseball bat, and then stole his car. All of which I will buy, but not rape and murder."

The agent stared at the sheriff, cynical wonder stamped on his face. "You mean to tell me that you are going to stick to that idiotic theory of yours presuming that the noble Faden was holding her against her will to fully dry her out?"

"As a matter of fact, I am! There isn't a person in the United States over the age of four that doesn't know she had a drug addiction. Shit, man, she used to brag about the amount it took to get her off."

"And this proves exactly what?" sneered the agent.

"The test performed on her blood during the autopsy showed her to be clean. Detox centers have failed, right and left, to accomplish this goal. They were unsuccessful, so how do you explain the fact that she was drug free at the time of her death, and had been so, for a lengthy period of time?" rallied Dewayne.

"You're either just plain crazy or stupid...!" was all the agent got out of his mouth before Dewayne threw him bodily out into the street.

"I'll have you arrested!"

Some people never learned.

Dewayne delivered a swift kick to the seat of the man's pants, and boldly shouted, "I am still Sheriff of Jefferson County, and I will conduct this investigation my way. You and yours can conduct your investigation in any manner you choose. Keep one thing in mind, though, as long as I am sheriff, there will be no bounty phrased *Dead or Alive* placed on the head of any man. I don't give a good goddamned if he is at large for another six months, he will be apprehended using the same methods as any other fugitive who hasn't yet been convicted of a crime. Do I make myself perfectly understood, or do you need more clarification?" asked the sheriff, as he brandished a fist in the air.

As things turned out Dewayne wasn't able to stop the reward from being placed on Faden's head. Sinda's SIN production company put up \$500,000. It was cleverly worded to give the impression that it was merely for the apprehension and conviction of her killer, but word on the street was that it would be paid to the person that brought Faden down. The wanted posters went up and every bounty hunter and his brother showed up in the Beaver Point area to collect on it. Faden had been on the run for six months when the flyers came out.

Dewayne doubled the efforts of the department he headed. He arrested and held every bounty hunter he could, charging

them with obstruction of justice if he found them within five miles of the crime scene. He hoped and prayed that he would be the one that brought Faden in, so that he may receive a fair trial.

Dewayne knew that Faden had kidnapped the girl, and quite possibly held her against her will. In a warped sense, which defied all logic, Faden probably believed, maybe even rightly so, that what he was doing was for her own good. It would never enter his mind that it was all illegal.

Faden had eluded the efforts to arrest him by his knowledge of criminology, and his uncanny ability to live in harmony with the river and land. He had garnered his keenness of police procedure from Dewayne's father, and had been born with the understanding of nature. His grandmother on his mother's side of the family had been half Cherokee, while his paternal grandmother had been Choctaw. His veins flowed with blood that had, who knew how many years of experience, in living off of the land. He had wisdom of these ways, which no pure Caucasian could ever hope to emulate. If he didn't want to be found, then it was doubtful that he would be. Unless someone got lucky (or as Dewayne figured it, unfortunate enough to stumble into Faden), or Faden uncharacteristically got careless, he was apt to be roaming free for some time to come.

They had played at being trackers from the "Old West" days when they were children, and Dewayne, or whomever, had always lost to Faden. He was a natural born woodsman, and an adept river man. He seemed to enjoy his own company, and being alone didn't bother him one whit.

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

Dewayne had found through experience that loneliness, the constant yearning for companionship, was what brought most fugitives out of hiding, and eventually led to their capture. This wouldn't be happening in Faden's case.

CHAPTER X

For a period of fifty-two days the bluffs south of Oscar were the place Faden called home. Once, around two o'clock in the morning he heard the voices of two men. They were directly above where he was hiding. Luckily for them they continued past without detecting him. Several times he watched different men pass by in a boat, sometimes near enough to almost reach out and touch. He never once ventured out of the cave during the entire fifty-two day and night sojourn. He relieved himself in a five-gallon bucket, and then would sling the contents into the swiftly flowing river. He was extremely blessed in the fact that it had rained almost every day during that late December, January, and early February. The constant rain and consequent flooding made tracking him with any accuracy all but impossible.

It was still showering, on and off, when he began the arduous trek for home on the sixth of February. He was chilled to the bone, and sincerely believed he had never in his life been colder, when he arrived at the cellar on the still rainy, twelfth. He crawled in and slept around the clock. He awoke to a bright sunny day. It was unseasonably warm, and he fairly ached to be outside. Slinging the rifle over his shoulder, he wondered down to the creek. A pen and pad were in his pocket for writing down the routes he took so that he wouldn't use the same path two days in a row, or for too many times. This would make it far more difficult for any pursuers to track him down.

He came to the log crossing, and if not for the creek itself separating them, would have run face to face with Dewayne. He had been perilously preoccupied, and so had the Sheriff. Faden immediately dropped to his knees behind the cover of some briar and brush, and in one smooth continuous motion had the rifle unslung, with the crosshairs of the scope above the glistening barrel, aligned on the silver badge pinned over Dewayne's right breast pocket. He was applying pressure to the trigger when he realized what he was doing.

What had he been about to do? What had he become? He had just come within a heartbeat of killing his only friend in the world. The friend that had always treated him like a brother, and had never done anything to harm him in any way fashion or form. The friend who had always stuck up for him when they had been boys in school. Shaking out of control, Faden cautiously backed out of the brush, and then scampered off, being as quiet as possible to avoid a confrontation, which could only end in heartache.

A mile or so upstream he found Dewayne's patrol car. It was where he expected it to be. He wrote the following note and placed it beneath the driver's side windshield wiper;

Dewayne,

Just a few minutes ago, down by the old log crossing, I had your badge in the crosshairs of my scope. I wouldn't have missed, even if I wanted to. Please, for old time's sake, don't make me kill you! I know you are only doing your job, but please let someone else do it, and warn them that from now on I shoot to kill. I didn't do anything to cause her harm,

regardless what she told you. I only meant to help her, and believe it or not, I did for a while.

Faden

He then made his way back to the cellar. It would have to be sardines and tuna if he wanted fish tonight. That night the cellar was a dark and lonely place for the first time since he had been staying there. Memories of the good times he had with Sinda Rilla kept him awake to the wee hours of the morning. Sometime during the night she came to him in his dreams and told him that everything was going to be all right, that soon he would be joining her in a far better place.

He awoke the next morning in a cold sweat. He knew that to keep his sanity he had to get out for a while. He set out to run his lines, but was once again halted in his endeavor. He watched them getting prepared for the hunt from behind the cover of a huge oak tree. Jim Clayton was at the bottom of the rise, back of the cabin. He held the leashes of his two straining bloodhounds. With him, and obviously paying him for his dogs services, were two mercenary types. Faden suspected that there had been a reward put on his capture, and he could be expecting much more of this sort of thing.

He decided to discourage these parasites on the ass of humanity, as fast as he could. Maybe it would deter any other bounty hunters that might want to try their luck. He took aim and fired, shattering the snout of the lead dog. He heard Jim scream in anger and alarm at the two men in his company.

"I tried to tell you two dumb sons-a-bitches that you'll never bring him in. He's too smart for city folk like you. He's gonna kill them dogs, then us. I'm a-fixin' to get me and my

hounds outta here. If you half a brain 'tween the two of you, you'll foller me out."

All of this was said from behind the shelter of a boulder. He then yelled, loud enough for Faden to clearly hear, "FADEN, I KNOW YOU ARE PISSED, AND I CAN'T SAY I BLAME YOU. I KNOW YOU ARE NOT GOING TO ANSWER AND GIVE YOUR POSITION AWAY, BUT IF YOU WILL ALLOW ME TO, I'LL TAKE MY DOGS AND THE THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS THESE JASPERS GAVE ME AND CLEAR OUT. I DIDN'T REALLY FANCY GOIN' UP AGIN' YOU NO WAY, BUT SHIT ... FADEN, TIMES IS HARD."

The little man in question, made up in courage, what he lacked in stature. He stood shakily to his feet and stepped boldly out into the open. Gaining nerve with each passing second he harnessed his dogs, taking special care of the wounded animal. One of the strangers grabbed Jim by the front of his shirt.

Faden couldn't hear what was being quietly said because of the distance between the three men and him, but the gist of the conversation wasn't lost on him. The stranger's wanted their money refunded. Faden took careful aim on the man that was shaking Jim like he was a rag doll. He squeezed the trigger (being surprised when the gun went off, as he had been trained to do), and had the dubious pleasure of seeing the kneecap shatter. The man tumbled to the ground like a failed tree, clutching the wounded knee to his chest and moaning fit to be tied.

"Get down you old fool", shouted the uninjured of the mercenaries. "He's going to shoot you next."

"Nope, he ain't!" replied Jim, puffing his chest out like a bantam rooster as he strutted around the man on the ground. "He hit just what he was aimin' at. He's one of us, irregardless of what he's accused of doing, and it wasn't me he was a-shootin' at. Let it be a lesson to you. I'd suggest you get what's left of your friend and beat feet out of here. He might just not be so neighborly with where he puts his next bullet." He then delivered a boot to the seat of the wounded man on the ground, and exclaimed, "Learn you to fuck with me, you Yankee sums-a-bitch!"

Faden watched and smiled as Jim entered the brush out of sight of the other two. He took a large packet of beef jerky from one pocket and the makin's for cigarettes out of another. He withdrew an unopened pint of whisky from the back pocket of the khaki pants he wore. He laid all the wares on the ground as a peace offering, and said in a voice loud enough for him to hear, "Faden, me and mine won't be back, you can count on it. Good luck!"

Jim turned and walked away with the hounds trailing after him. He loaded the dogs into the back of his old pick-up truck, and climbed into the cab. He mopped the perspiration from his brow, then threw a hand into the air in the general direction of where he believed Faden to be hiding, and drove off. The two mercenary types were left with a long and painful walk back to town.

Faden tried hard to suppress a smile as the one man aided the injured one to the side of the highway. As luck would have it, a Highway Patrolman happened by and gave them a lift to town. Faden knew the patrolman would be back as soon

as the wounded man was safely in the hospital. He would also be bringing a lot of reinforcement.

Faden waded the water at the edge of the river until he came to his tree. Grabbing a branch, he hoisted himself up, and entered the cellar by dropping into it. He was aware that there would be three or four days of confinement before he would be able to venture outside again.

Police officers had a job to do, and this he could understand and respect, but the bounty hunters weren't interested in justice being served. They were in it strictly for the money. They didn't care if he was taken dead, or alive, and would shoot on sight. He would do likewise. He was shocked to discover that he had enjoyed shooting the big bully when he had been manhandling Jim. In all the time that he was in Vietnam he had never fired a shot at the enemy, so this was a novelty for him.

If only he could get the thoughts of Sinda out of his head. He knew in his mind that she was lost to him forever, but his heart tried to tell him otherwise. He had been alone for a long time, by choice. He preferred solitude, or so he had believed until he had spent time with Sinda. His nights were tortured with dreams of her. She continued to speak to him in his subconscious, telling him that he would soon be with her in paradise. He couldn't imagine, for the life of him, how this occurrence could ever come about unless she was either in jail, or about to die. These seemed to be the only two options left open to him. It was all the ravings of a delusional madman. This was the only logical conclusion he could draw.

CHAPTER XI

Faden remained below the ground for several days while the police searched the area. They finally lost interest in him once again when the three-day storm came through. He stepped out of the cellar to the brightest sun shiny day that he could ever recall. Everything smelled so fresh after being cooped up for so long. The lime that he poured on top of his excrement in the five-gallon bucket worked to a degree, but there wasn't anything that matched the scent of freshness after a rain shower washed the land. He had never before paid that much attention to such details.

In the midst of his pondering over the many wonders of nature, he heard men shouting to each other, and they sounded near, but then noise really carried along the river. He didn't hear any yelping hounds so it might just be some fishermen ... no such luck, he discovered as he scaled a tree about a quarter of a mile from the cellar. There were five of the bounty hunters in a ragged line. The largest of the five kept bullying his way to the front. The other four finally let him have his way and he led by some twenty feet when they came within rifle range.

Faden had had his fill of this shit! It was time to shoot them all, and let God sort them out. He took aim on the big man's right knee, and slowly squeezed the trigger. Working the lever action as fast as he could (which was pretty damn quick) he also shot the falling man in the left knee. The rest of the gang scattered taking cover where they may. Faden

needed to draw them out into the open before they discovered where he was concealed. They were armed with heavy caliber hunting rifles, while his was merely a .22.

He took a bead on the injured man's right hand and fired. He was rewarded for his effort by the sight of the man jerking the hand to his chest. His left hand was busy stanching the flow of blood coming from the left kneecap.

The man screamed, and the bravest (or most foolhardy, depending on how you looked at it) of the remaining four broke cover and rushed to the man on the ground. He was intent on dragging the man to safety. Faden shot this man square in the forehead, and he dropped like a poled ox.

Faden had the growing certainty that he had to bring this to an end as quickly as possible. The police had grown somewhat lethargic of late in their efforts to search for him. As one of them had put it, they were tired of looking for a puff of smoke. He was aware that this recent exchange of gunfire would make the public outcry demand they renew their efforts. He would have to make his way to the bluffs of Oscar when this episode was over, and wait for things to cool down before he returned.

He knew of Dewayne's attempts to put a stop to these bounty hunters, and others like them. He had witnessed from concealment, the arrest of several of them. Faden's "Will" dictated that upon the eventuality of his death, or incapacity to make reasonable judgments, all of his belongings (other than the pocket watch, which would be buried with him) were bequeathed to Dewayne. So therefore Dewayne was within his rights to *post* the land as he had done. Legally, these

outsiders were trespassing on private property, and Faden was the self-appointed enforcer of this law.

The man was by this time screaming for, and demanding help. Faden moved to the relative sanctuary of a large boulder atop the highest point of his property. This afforded him a vaster scope of the suffering man, and would give the other three absolutely no chance for a clear shot at him whatsoever. Faden peered through the scope, and shot the man in the left elbow, which doubled his shrieks of pain.

One of the two still standing made a mad dash for the injured friend, taking cover behind the prone body of the man shot in the forehead. One of the other two headed back down the trail in the direction they had originally came from. The last one began a maneuvering tactic intending to come up on Faden from behind.

Faden smiled as all of this was taking place. The five were obviously rank amateur's intent on easily earning a large sum of money. The man putting the sneak on Faden didn't know it, but he would have to scale a sandy bluff some three hundred feet in elevation, with not a single trace of cover to speak of. He would have to start this climb by treading and swimming in a hole thirty feet deep with the river current tugging at him all the while. He had to do all of this without catching a bullet from the barrel of Faden's rifle, which wasn't very damn likely. They should have had the good sense to question someone familiar with the terrain before coming after him. Faden shot the man he supposed was going for help in the back of the head. He placed just enough shots in the lifeless body below to keep the man taking refuge there

down. He then turned his full attention to the man intent on taking him from behind.

He waited until he saw a hand on the boulder, which was half in, half out of the water. The poor, misguided fool did exactly what Faden had figured he would; he lost his footing in the shifting sand of the river. He threw the rifle away from his body and began to swim in the swiftly flowing river current. Faden shot him in the ass, barely grazing the skin. The man would now have stories to tell his grandchildren about his bounty hunting days. Faden knew he wouldn't be back as he yelped in pain and dove below the surface.

This left one man for his undivided attention. He made his way slowly down hill, stopping ever now and then to pump some shots into various body joints of the injured man. He felt he had to keep the guy moaning so that the healthy one wouldn't think that he had forgotten about him in all the excitement.

Faden halted twenty feet from the carnage, which littered the open glade, and instructed the unharmed man to throw all the weapons into the brush. After Faden was sure the man had complied, he warily walked up to him. Deliberately and mercifully, he shot the barely living man on the ground, through the heart. It was very doubtful that the man would have survived with even the most thorough medical care, having lost so much blood. Several of his major arteries had been severed with the multiple wounds. The man had the appearance of being an active outdoorsman who probably only enjoyed strenuous sports. He would have been a cripple, confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. If given a

choice, he more-than-likely would have preferred to die, then to have to face all the people he had bullied around while healthy.

The one remaining hunter, shocked by the brutality of what he had just witnessed, began, "You sadistic, heinous son-of-a-bit—"

"What were you all planning on doing to me? I'm relatively certain you weren't going to take me on a picnic." Faden halted further comment by hitting him a good one on the point of the jaw with the butt of his rifle. The man fell over backwards without a sound. Faden carved his initials onto the chest of the unconscious man. He then did likewise to the other two, and wiped the blood from the razor sharp tip of his hunting knife on the forehead of the survivor.

He remarked to no one in particular, "Teach you to trespass on my land." He then walked to the man who had thought to seek help. This man, with the back of his head blown away, he hung in a tree with a note pinned to the flesh of his bare chest warning future bounty hunters of their fate.

Faden started the trek for the Oscar bluffs with a state of mind that would brook no interference. He was liken to a wounded animal, extremely dangerous to himself, and anyone who had the misfortune to get in his way.

He only wished to be left alone. The girl wasn't hurt physically, after all. He hadn't intentionally hurt anyone that hadn't meant to harm him. He had sincerely believed he was doing right by Sinda Rilla. That she had taken such umbrage at the treatment he gave her, after professing eternal love for him, caused him the greatest of torment. He screamed like a

panther into the night as he continued to walk. He made up his mind that this would be the last time he would run. He didn't give a damn if they sent the National Guard after him the next time, he was going to stay and fight to the very end. The only reason he was leaving this time was because of some primeval instinct which dictated he procure peace with his Maker. To accomplish this feat he would fast for three days and allow a vision to instruct him what to do next. In his present state of mind he didn't care how many he took with him when the time came for him to depart for the unknown.

He arrived at the cave in a weakened condition, and half out of his mind from starvation. He still lacked four hours of the self imposed seventy-two of fast he had set for himself. He smoked a pipe filled with peyote, which had cost him dearly before this ordeal had begun.

For hours he was swept with a phantasmagoria that scared the Be-Jesus out of him. His malnourished body trembled with jolts of adrenaline as he fled from the fiery monsters, which pursued him so unmercifully. Then, he saw a familiar face, and the man behind the face was weeping. It was a face that probably had never seen a tear of sadness in its lifetime, yet here the tears fell shamelessly as if the owner didn't care who knew he was saddened. It turned out to be Dewayne, and he kept telling Faden that he was so sorry for what he had done. He apologized over and over again.

Faden reached out to him, to assure him that whatever he had done was okay. Everything was all right ... but when he touched the man his index finger spouted a stream of blood, and he jerked his hand back as if he had been burned. It

dawned on his subconscious that this wasn't Dewayne before him; it was the vile evil Ben Roachman.

Ben held an unborn fetus by the heels, and as Faden watched in horror, the man took a voracious bite from the baby's buttocks. Blood and gore squirted from his mouth as he attempted to speak around the grossly filled cavern in his face. He offered the, not more than half formed, infant to Faden.

Faden screamed in silent terror as the fetus, which oddly had his own facial features, spat out a pocket watch. For some weird reason or the other, Faden was on the ground and was scampering back on his haunches as the watch became a six-foot diamondback rattlesnake, coiled and poised to strike. There was a wall at his back. He realized he was in the closet of the rectory once again, and he sensed that this was going to be the end of him. Terror clutched at his mind; his belly cramped so terribly that he feared he was going to puke although there wasn't anything in him to vomit up. He then heard the voice of an angel; an angel named Sinda, calmly singing to him to hold on. She told him the snake was his friend, if only he would believe. The snake was his soul's double from the Happy Hunting Ground, and was there to assist him.

Quick as lightning, the snake turned and struck Ben, time after time, but he must have been immune to the snake's venom because he just sat there laughing hysterically. Faden had had all he could stand. He was sick and tired of being scared. He screamed, "Nooooooooo!" at the top of his lungs, and rose, intent on charging the leering devil. But he couldn't

because he was once again a frightened ten-year-old boy, and the object of his intense hatred was his smiling, opened-armed, Mother.

She patted him gently on the head as she had done when he, as a child, did something that pleased her. He watched in horror as the snake, which now sported Ben's head, struck Chelsea. She began to disappear within a wisp of smoke, but as she was dissipating, she called out to him to beware of Ben because his evil wasn't finished yet. He was a shell of a man with the soul of Satan. Although she winnowed through his fingers, Faden tried again and again to clutch at her, all the while promising he would be careful, and never take candy from, or ride with strangers.

Faden came back to consciousness, mortified beyond belief, and puzzled by the last thing the apparition resembling his mother had said to him. "Faden, I approve of Sinda, and *she* sends you her love."

Perspiration drenched his body and he was trembling out of control. He took deep breaths and held them for as long as he could, hoping to abate his terror and stave off the panic that threatened to overcome him. It was hard to distinguish fact from fiction, born of hallucination, so real to life had the vision been.

He didn't really know just what to make of his vision, and may never know without a shaman to interpret them. He supposed he would just have to listen to what his White man's blood told him. If the trek and vision hadn't accomplished anything else, it had at least bought him some precious time. He may not have achieved the peace with his

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Maker that he had sought, but from here on out it was going to be, "Shame on the ass of anyone who got in his way!"

Faden walked home, taking little care for hiding. He walked with a lightness of spirit that he hadn't felt in a long time. Whether he was at peace with his Maker, or not, he was tranquil within himself. Nothing was out of sync except for the memories of Sinda.

He longed to hear her voice, was desperate to talk to her, and yearned to touch her, because he loved her so much. But he knew he was destined to never see her again. He wanted to hate her for the betrayal, but couldn't, so he lied and told himself it didn't matter. What he had done was wrong, he realized that now, and she had been well within her rights to turn him in, even if it meant deceiving him in the process. She probably believed that it was the only way she was going to be free of him.

Once again, his daydreaming had almost gotten him killed. There were four men in this bunch, and Faden muttered in a tone that only he could hear, "Let the games begin!" He should have been weak from the fasting, but the squirrel he had for breakfast had infused him with an uncanny amount of endurance. He felt invincible. He waved the rifle in the air above his head, and screaming like a banshee, he charged the four men. The tactic had the desired effect and the men scattered from the clearing, diving headfirst for the cover of underbrush that surrounded their makeshift camp.

The suicidal charge itself had been unnerving enough, but his off-key singing of...

"I run through the bushes,

And I run through the bramble;
I run though the briars,
Where a rabbit wouldn't go;
I run so fast that the hounds can't catch me,
Down the Beaver Creek;
To the Red River, Oh!"

caused the would-be glory hunters to lose their enthusiasm for the sport of man hunting.

One of them remarked to the other's, "It's bad enough that he would charge into an enemies camp like he did, but what really bothers me so much is the way the son-of-a-bitch seemed to enjoy doing it. I've heard tales of this guy, but didn't believe them. Now I see they hardly lent credence to his true bravery. I've got a wife and kid back in Texas, and I'm going to them while I still can."

The others followed suit, and Faden would have to find other participants to carry on his vendetta against. He no longer wanted to be left alone. He desired and needed to shed the blood of others. He harbored a death wish for himself and anyone else who hoped to bring him down. Something had gone terribly haywire inside of him. He wanted to kill, not the innocent, of course, but those who would desire to take him out for the reward. Those who didn't give a damn whether or not he was guilty, but only cared about the amount of money placed on his head. These vultures that lived off of the suffering of others were scum to his way of thinking, and deserved whatever fate destiny threw at them. He had always subscribed to the axiom "live and let live," but these buzzards were trying to do the job

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meant for trained professionals, above and beyond their meager capabilities. Did they think that killing a man would be no different than slaying a defenseless deer? He had no feeling of remorse for anything that happened to them.

The four men came back into the camp to gather their possessions when they figured he was long gone. Just for meanness, he put a bullet into the middle of their campfire, scattering sparks and the men in every direction. "Come and get me!" he shouted to the heavens for the entire world to hear, but for today there wasn't going to be any takers. He ate a delicious leisurely meal from the staples he had taken from the four men.

CHAPTER XII

SAND...

The sand was everywhere, in his eyes, mouth, and nose. It was in his stores and his drinking water. His fingernails were filled with the grit, and would only become packed with the stuff again just moments after he cleaned them. His body was chafed all over by the sand trapped in his clothes. The winds had blown for twenty-six hours straight with a velocity of thirty miles an hour, and gusts of fifty or better. Sand had pelted Faden and the men that had been searching for him. The only positive thing to come from this was the wiping away of all traces of him.

Faden's jaw was swelled to almost twice its normal size. A grain of sand had found its way into a cavity he hadn't even known he had. The pain was becoming unbearable, and he knew he had to do something fast before the infection became so intense that he couldn't. He had managed to keep the ache under control for a while with doses of the whisky Jim had left for him, and by taking all but two of the Tylenol he had packed in his wares. It was around one o'clock in the morning the best he could figure it. He would have to wade the river, but this would be the most direct route for him to get to Byers, Texas, some five miles to the west of his present location. Five miles as the crow flies, that is. He calculated that it would probably take him a couple of hours to reach the small town, putting him there around three A.M., if he started right now. The Fish House was nearer, but

although they had aspirin, he knew he needed an antibiotic, as well as a painkiller. The drugstore in Byers would be the closest place to acquire these items. Barring trouble, he should be back home about five A.M., while the land was still cloaked in darkness.

He took the last two Tylenol and made the trip to Byers without incident. It was 3:15 A.M. when he twisted the padlock on the back door in two. Luckily, there wasn't a soul stirring in the small town. Security measures were lax in the area where everybody knew everyone. Faden scooped a handful of antibiotics he recognized from having to take them before, and about fifty Tylenol No. 3 pills. He placed the contents of medicine into his pocket in a waterproof bottle. He deposited more than enough money to pay for what he took on the cash register, then stepped out into the alley, and ran face to face with the town's young paperboy.

The kid was visibly shaken, but had the presence of mind to point an accusing finger at Faden, and say, "You're Faden Casteel!"

Faden smiled, and quipped, "I know that." as he put the damaged lock back on the hasp and staple.

"My dad says you didn't do all the things they blame you for." Remarked the boy, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Is that right? Who is your daddy?" asked Faden, as he edged his way to a darker portion of the alley.

"Sonny Coffee. He says y'all used to hunt Devil's Hollow together. He claims you are the best snake hunter ever."

Faden chuckled at the memory of hunting with Sonny until the sore tooth reminded him that nothing was that funny

anymore. "Your dad is a pretty fair hand at it too. I haven't seen him in a long time, though." Then, changing the subject, he said, "We've kind of got a situation here. As you are well aware, I have to be getting on down the road, and I can't have you sounding the alarm before I am able to get away. You understand my dilemma, don't you?"

"Not a problem, sir. If my dad says you're innocent, then I guess you're innocent." Replied the boy, with maturity far beyond his years. "Dad says you are a good man, and as far as you breaking into the drugstore, I didn't see a thing. The old fart that owns it won't even let me have credit to buy the catcher's mitt I need for summer league. I always pay my bills, ask anyone in town. Dad whipped him one time when they was a-drinkin' and he decided to take it out on the rest of the family. I hate the mean sum-bitch!"

Faden enjoyed the conversation more than he could have imagined; the exchange of words and sound of another human voice was something that he missed dearly. "A mean old fart, is he? I tell you what; I've got a lot of cash on me that I'm not going to needing where I'm headed. I'll give you enough for the mitt, plus some for gas. You tell your daddy that I said for him to drive you over to Wichita Falls, and buy you a glove there."

The boy reluctantly took the money, and asked, "But what can I do for you? I can't accept charity."

"You just be the best damn catcher you can be, and maybe think of me every once in a while when you throw out a runner on second base. That will be pay enough. I don't care if you tell your dad about this conversation, but I'd just as

soon you didn't mention it to anyone else, at least for the time being, anyway. Is it a deal?" he asked, reaching out to shake the boy's hand.

"Sir, I appreciate the loan, and I promise to pay it back someday when your trouble is all cleared up. You don't have to worry about me telling anyone besides dad. Everyone in this fleabag treats us like poor White Trash because dad drinks too much, and can't manage to keep a job since mom died. I try to tell them that he's just having a hard time getting over her death. He'll snap out of it one of these days, you just wait and see if he don't."

It was hard to tell if the kid was trying to convince Faden, or himself, as the tears streamed down his face unchecked.

Faden could easily relate to the boy's plight, he had also lost his mother at a young age. He gave the boy another five hundred dollars, which was all the money he had on him, and told the boy to buy some groceries and anything else they might need. He felt bad that he didn't have more to give. He also told the boy to tell his father that he better straighten up and take care of his responsibilities, or he, Faden, was going to come back to town and kick the shit out of him.

The boy replied that he would do exactly as instructed, then very adult like, wished Faden good luck. He handed Faden a *Wichita Falls Times* newspaper, and watched until Faden was out of sight. He then continued with his paper route, busting a gut to get home and tell his daddy about his early morning adventure.

More than a hundred men, at one time or other had been pursuing this legendary ghost. Most, not even getting a

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glimpse of him, and yet, he, Tommy Coffee, had spoken at length with him as if they were old friends.

CHAPTER XIII

Faden made it back to the cellar right at the crack of dawn. He had swallowed one of the antibiotics and a Tylenol on the way home. He could feel relief already. He changed into dry clothing and laid down after tossing the unread newspaper into a corner. He needed sleep in the worse way. Figuring he had nothing to lose, and being aware that the wind blown sand had erased his scent, he took another Tylenol and went into a deep sleep.

He awoke to the beautiful sound of many birds singing in perfect harmony. His left arm was asleep, and the pins and needles sensation was driving him crazy. He attempted to raise his arm so that he might get some feeling restored to it, but found that he couldn't because something was lying on it. He glanced over, and from what little sunlight that filtered in through the makeshift skylight of the cell he saw a familiar red haired head cradled on his forearm.

It had all been nothing but a bad dream!!!

Sinda hadn't betrayed him after all. She did indeed *love* him. It had been the worse and most true to life nightmare he had ever experienced. But now it was over, and life would be so good. If his dreams of the future were going to be anything like the one he had just had, then he wasn't ever going to sleep again. His heart still pounded in his chest so loudly that he felt sure it would soon awaken Sinda.

The law wasn't pursuing him, and he didn't have a toothache. He had never fired a shot at another, and had

never been fired upon himself. The dream had been so lifelike and vivid that he was still trembling. He would get up and fix their breakfast just as he had yesterday morning, and many of the previous mornings before that. After breakfast he was going to suggest they spend the day in bed holding on to one another for all they were worth.

Just wait until he told Sinda about his dream, she would certainly get a hoot out of this one. She was going to want to know which one of the two of them was going through drug withdrawals. He decided right then that he would never again eat anything too spicy before going to bed.

He lovingly stroked the luxurious locks of hair on the back of her head, and softly called out her name. She murmured a sleep ridden response, and curled tighter into a ball, which made her delectable bare derriere press more firmly against his left leg. Her flesh was so cold, almost shockingly so.

"Sinda," he called, while gently shaking her shoulder.

She whispered something unintelligible and turned her head toward him. Faden involuntarily jerked his arm free, and jumped out of bed. Flesh eating worms crawled through her empty eye sockets, and maggots spewed out of her mouth when she tried to speak. The maggots had eaten through all of the flesh, which held her bottom lip in place, except for a small spot in the very corner of her mouth. The lip was now on her chin, hanging straight down from that corner.

She lunged across the bed, wrapping her arms around his legs. Terror all but paralyzed him, as he shouted, "Noooooooo!" and pushed her away from him. Her body went limp and slithered to the floor. When next she raised her

head, it wasn't her own. It was the leering face of Ben Roachman that sat upon her shoulders.

"No!" cried Faden, as he willed himself to awaken, so that he might leave this nightmarish HELL behind. But no matter what he tried, it wouldn't happen. He must have undoubtedly died, and had indeed been sent straight to hell. Roachman was the devil, and would you just look at him.

He sat on the edge of the bed winking obscenely at Faden. It was Ben's ugly head that was situated above the lovely twin breast and torso of Sinda Rilla. It was so grotesque that Faden began to vomit.

And the retching woke him up. He was in danger of strangling on the bile. When he had finally hacked up enough of the vile stuff to breathe normally again, he made a mental note to himself to never take two of the Tylenol so close together. At least, not if he was going to sleep.

He toiled with the door for a long period of time before he managed to get it open. Another windstorm on the evening of his return from Byers had piled a considerable amount of sand on top of the door. He had been able to move it an inch or two at a time by getting on all fours and putting his back against it. This allowed some of the sand to sift inside, while the rest of it fell in a pile at the back of the door.

He took an antibiotic and a Tylenol, and went outside. He was determined to catch some fresh catfish today come Hell or high water, and may the devil take care of anyone who got in his way. He got the lines baited, without incident, and was on his way back to the cellar when the police helicopter topped the high rise of earth that bordered the river on the

east bank. He made a headlong dive for the cover of a shallow ravine. The chopper flew past, and then made a wide turn to circle back. Dirt and small rocks geysered in miniature burst all around where he was laying as the man in the passenger seat of the copter fired at him with an automatic weapon. The crafts momentum carried it out over the water of the river. Faden didn't want to kill any policemen, but in the same token, he didn't wish to be killed by them either. He chose this time to put three rapid burst of fire into the hydraulic system of the helicopter.

Black smoke poured from the now twirling copter. The pilot wisely crash-landed in the water using every bit of the failing steerage as the rotor stopped turning. Both of the men emerged safely from the river. One of them wrung the water out of the cap he had managed to hold onto while swimming for the shore. He placed it on his head, but then had the displeasure of seeing it land back in the water, just a moment before he heard the crack of the rifle shot and the whine of the slug as it passed an inch above his head, taking the cap with it.

"All right, Faden! We are going. It's a job, you know. We're just doing our job." The speaker stood at the edge of the river with his hands held high in the air.

The other man took a step forward, but stopped short when Faden put three rapid shots into the sand immediately in front of his left foot. He backed into the water, and then shrugged his shoulders as if to ask if this was what Faden wanted.

Faden fired two shots into the river. The two men saw the eruptions on the surface of the water, and shouted in unison, "You want us to swim the river out of here?"

Faden shot once more into the river. The two men sat down at the edge of the river and removed their socks and shoes. They then waded out into the current and drifted downstream. Faden watched until they went around a bend and out of sight. He lost interest, knowing they wouldn't be back today, if ever. He caught two, four-pound channel cats, and dined on fresh fish that night.

It was three days before the swelling in his jaw went down, taking the pain with it. He only had two or three minor scrapes with John Law and the bounty hunters over the next four days. Someone or something else must have happened to divert their attention away from him. The best he could determine, he had been on the lam for more than a year and seven months. He wondered why the National Guard and various Law Enforcement Agencies hadn't been back to look for him in a concentrated effort. He was aware that they had combed the area thoroughly while he was staying in the bluffs of Oscar, and figured that he had Dewayne to thank for the heat not being hotter than it was. That there were still a lot of people searching for him every day, was a certainty, but most were amateurs and of little consequence. He prayed that Sinda or whomever, had taken the reward off of him, but felt there was hardly a chance of this eventuality. He would most likely be a fugitive until his capture (which wasn't an option), or death took place.

The rain fell softly on the earth. It had been the wettest two years running that he could recall. This, more than anything else was what led to his continued freedom. He sincerely hoped the weather held out. The dreary cloudy days and nights had a way of taking the enthusiasm out of even the most die-hard of the searchers. There was something about standing or sitting around in wet clothing that really put a damper on being outside in the elements.

Faden had watched massive trees that had been uprooted somewhere upstream go by on the bank-to-bank Red River. Foam was a constant sight along the edge, and he knew from secretly watching that record-breaking fish were being taken from the water that he had such an affinity for. He longed to join the fishermen in their quest. They obviously knew he was in the general area (but were also aware that if they left him alone, he would return the favor), and yet paid him no mind despite the warnings from the police. These were men who not so long ago had been his friends, and many of them still considered him a pal that was incapable of doing the atrocities of which he was blamed.

His lungs were bursting and he had a stitch in his side that threatened to tear him apart. He had joyfully been partaking of his newest hobby of watching people fish for the sand bass that had started their run, and had all but been run over, himself, by three of the latest would-be fortune hunters. This particular batch was a cut above the rest, and had managed to get off a few shots in his direction. As his seemingly endless charmed luck would have it, they all missed, but the chase was on.

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He jumped into the water of a swift running creek, and returned their fire. They were unscathed by his hastily fired bullets, but he accomplished what he had set out to do ... he made them scatter for cover. As they pumped shot after shot into the place he had been, he floated with the stream that ultimately emptied into the river. He exited the water via his tree, and entered the cellar by the usual means. He would stay put, secure in the knowledge that the oncoming storm would soon wipe away all trace of him.

CHAPTER XIV

Faden dreamed constantly of Sinda Rilla, and it was always the same ending. She would dump him for some reason or the other, and he would never hold another, and not see her face. She had gotten into his blood and under his skin, and there absolutely wasn't any way possible that he was ever going to get her out. He would be standing at the edge of the river watching the ripples dance in the wind on top of the water, when the bullet with his name on it would take him. He would always awaken from these nightmares shivering in a cold sweat.

He had been on self-imposed confinement for two whole days when he remembered the newspaper that Tommy had given him. He decided it was past time to get caught up on what was happening around Wichita Falls and the surrounding area. The news would be somewhat dated, but old news was better than no news. There might just be something about him in it.

He unfolded the paper, and there it was right in the front-page headline;

LOCAL MAN STILL BEING SOUGHT IN SUPERSTAR'S MURDER

It has been eighteen months since Sinda Rilla was slain. As of this writing, nothing further has been discovered as to the whereabouts of the suspected culprit. Although he has been sighted numerous times, he continues to elude all efforts of

capture. The five hundred thousand-dollar reward for the arrest of the suspect is still in effect.

On another note, there is growing public outrage at the handling of the situation by local law enforcement agencies, and the numerous bounty hunters that have flocked to the area causing considerable damage to surrounding properties, and a general unrest among local citizenry. No one feels safe to be anywhere near the river, or out in the countryside for that matter. Ironically, the upshot of it is the fact that the suspect has harmed not a single innocent person. While three men have been killed by the suspect, most believe suspect acted in self-defense. All persons harmed were bounty hunters. There is growing concern over the accidental shooting of two innocent fishermen that were mistaken for the fugitive by said bounty hunters. The suspect himself is rapidly becoming somewhat of a folk-hero, and has unintentionally amassed quite a following.

* * * *

There was more, but Faden couldn't see through the tears of mixed emotions, which clouded his eyes and senses. On the one hand he was greatly saddened by Sinda's senseless murder, while on the other, he couldn't help the relief he felt knowing she hadn't betrayed him. She had been *killed* while still in his cabin. The implications of this fact were astounding and far-reaching.

She didn't betray him; and he wasn't wanted for only kidnapping her. They actually believed he had murdered the woman whom he idolized and placed above all others. This

was the most preposterous thing he had ever heard. How could so many people be afflicted with such stupidity at the same time? Didn't they know that he couldn't possibly harm a hair on her beautiful head? And that he never did.

It was too late now, though. He had taken life while on the run, and there was no denying the fact. Unbelievably, there was lightness around his heart that he hadn't felt in some time. He could live, or die, with equal emotion now that he knew she hadn't deserted him. She was with him now, in spirit, he had felt her presence for quite a while, and hadn't recognized it for what it really was. She had been in his vision, and was constantly present in all of his dreams. He had even imagined that at times she talked to him. He now believed that the reason she always left him in his dreams was because she was dead, not because she desired to. She wouldn't come back to him because she couldn't.

He shook his head at the tragedy of it all. He had finally found someone to love, and to be loved by, only to have her taken from him by some psychopathic killer. There was apparently no justice in the world except for what was meted out by folks like him. They were spending valuable time and resources trying to catch him while the real culprit roamed free to do it again somewhere else. He now knew from reading the newspaper that he was the one and only suspect, so whoever had set him up was evidently a professional. If he had known that he was wanted for murder from the start, then he might have been able to do something about it, depending on how well the frame had been set. But it was all

water under the bridge now. He would just have to face the consequences of his actions.

Life became monotonous now that he knew the truth about Sinda and the hopelessness where she was concerned. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had always believed she would someday come back to him. His intuition hadn't been that far off. She would most certainly have returned to his open arms if she had been able.

He went through the motions of surviving. He ate even though he was seldom hungry. He slept when the tedium became too much and exhaustion claimed his body. He was above and beyond all else, thunderstruck with heartsickness. He wanted to join Sinda, now knew she wanted him to, and yet, suicide wasn't an option to be considered. Sinda had gone to Heaven, of this he was certain. Suicide would buy him a fast ticket straight to hell, and this he couldn't have.

He more or less left himself uncovered for most of the time he was outside. He would see a helicopter or a group of men making their obligatory routine search for him, and would make only a desultory attempt at concealment. He was aware that the public expected this of the police. It had been such a long time since the murder, and the world hadn't stopped very long for the bereavement of Sinda Rilla. She was yesterday's news. Life went on, and the law enforcement officers were often needed elsewhere. The police believed that one day Faden would tire of his solitary life, and would foul-up and make a mistake that would lead to his subsequent arrest.

The bounty hunters as a whole had tired of braving the elements more than anything else. A few still continued with the search, but any real hope of capturing, or killing him had vanished a long time ago. Some, from far away, believed him to be a figment of local law enforcement's imagination. Of course, these were the one's that had never actually come across him. Those who did, and lived, knew he was for real, and carried the emotional and physical scars to prove it.

The same local folks that had at first aided these parasites in their pursuit of Faden now shunned them. It was an everyday occurrence to have to mend fences, and clean up after the bounty hunters. They had become an embarrassment and a nuisance for the good people of Beaver Point, and were no longer welcome. Faden's property, while still open to the investigation of the police, was *posted* to all civilian traffic. The signs read, *ALL SURVIVORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW.*

Trespassing arrest had become big business for the local courts, but most of the man-hunters had simply given up from lack of interest. It was hard to adhere to something that you never actually came in contact with. It was like chasing the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Financial resources were rapidly depleted during the search and most of them had much easier cases which to apply their trade.

This abandonment was what led to most of Faden's boredom. There were very few giving chase anymore. Things began to look up one day when Faden accidentally slipped up on a two-man camp. He listened as they conversed in subdued tones, of a man (who as they claimed was larger

than life) that was coming to seek out Faden. They had two days left to spot Faden's whereabouts before the man arrived. The man apparently worked alone, and everyone else in the area had to vamoose, or be squashed like a bug by him.

Faden had heard enough to assess the upcoming situation. It was now time to have some fun with these guys. With an authoritative tone of voice, he shouted, "Throw down your weapons and let me see those hands reaching for the sky. This is Sheriff Dewayne McClure and you're under arrest for trespassing on private property."

The two frightened men readily complied with his bogus demands, and then were shocked when he stepped into the small clearing. It had been a long time since he had given any thought to his physical appearance. He was formidable looking in a scary sort of way. His hair and beard were all scraggly and long, matted and sticking to his face. There was a fiendish aura about him that would cause alarm in anyone who saw him. He grinned, showing his pearly whites through the darkness of his unshaven face, and good-naturedly exclaimed, "Got you!"

"Hey, man, you ain't the police!" shouted one of the two, in disbelief, as if by saying this aloud, all would be right in the world again.

"No shit! Nothing gets past you, does it?" he questioned scornfully, the inquiry dripped with sarcasm. "I'll tell you what I want you to do, and you can either comply, which I might add will cause me a might of displeasure, or you can tell me to go to hell, which will tickle the shit out of me ... and I'll kill you!" Although there was already a live round chambered, he

worked the lever action of the rifle for emphasis allowing the men no doubt whatsoever as to his preference.

The two men had no inkling as to what the other choice was going to be, but it sure as hell had to be better than certain death, so one of them asked, "What do we have to do?"

"Strip down to what you were born in," he answered with a smile plastered on his face.

"You've got to be as crazy as a loon! I'm not about to take off my clothes for you or..."

The bullet that took off the lobe of his left ear made him see the light and he peeled out of his attire so fast that a body would have thought Raquel Welch was in bed nude, just waiting for him to join her. The quieter of the two quickly, and without any fuss, followed suit, so to speak.

Faden allowed them to keep their boots on, sans socks, as he marched them to the pilings of the old river railroad crossing. The three concrete columns, which stood like sentinels watching over the Red River, were all that remained of the defunct bridge. It was the only column of the three, which wasn't currently standing in water that he bound the men to. He had them take their boots off before tying them hand to hand encircling the piling. Their naked butts would be visible from the Highway 70 Bridge come first light, regardless of how they moved in a circle around the column. He had tied them tight enough, stomachs against the cool concrete, to make any movement extremely difficult. He had to sit and allow his laughter at the sight of the two of them to subside before he was able to continue.

He said, "I'd suppose it's going to be a might embarrassing come morning. That is, if the river doesn't rise during what's left of the night, and drown you first," then liked to have busted a gut in a fit of laughter. It was the first time he had laughed out loud since talking with young Tommy in Byers that night, which seemed like it had been eons ago. He stood and turned to leave, preparing to rush headlong into the night.

One of the men remarked, around a face full of concrete, "You can't leave us here like this. It's inhuman. You'll get *yours* when *he* gets here!"

"Inhuman? Did I hear you say, inhuman? I suppose in your mind it's okay for you all to track me as if I were some sort of rabid animal, intending to shoot me on sight in cold blood, but when I attempt to defend myself, I'm inhuman. I've just got one more thing to say to you. I can, and will, leave you here all night. If only you would have taken it like your partner and kept your mouth shut, then you would have at least been able to stand there with some measure of dignity, and not had that splitting headache to contend with."

"But I don't have a headache, my ear hurts like hell..." was all he got out before Faden slammed the butt of the rifle against the back of the man's head, causing a nasty scrape on the front of his face from the sudden contact with the rough texture of the concrete column, along with the swelling bump on the back of his noggin.

Faden looked from the unconscious man, to the other one who was smiling, and inquired, "You got any pearls of wisdom that you believe I absolutely need to know?"

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"No, Sir!" he hastily quipped. "I'll be just fine now that you've shut that big mouth of his. He's an agreeable enough fellow, but he hasn't shut that trap of his since we embarked on this crazy journey. I should never have let him talk me into coming along with him. He made it sound so easy, and made you out to be some kind of monster. I suppose I deserve what ever happens to me for being so stupid. I'm much obliged to you for shutting him up. I consider it a personal favor, and if I ever get out of here you don't have to worry about ever seeing my ugly mug again."

Faden figured this was the longest stretch of words that the man had ever spoken in his lifetime. While leaving him bound, Faden assisted him in putting his pants back on. As Faden was leaving he glanced toward the quiet man, and said, "Under different circumstances..." then left the rest unspoken as the disillusioned, but likeable fellow, nodded his head in mutual assent.

CHAPTER XV

Faden sat on his haunches behind the screen of mesquite brush. It was somewhere in the neighborhood of six o'clock in the evening, and the stranger was preparing his supper over a well-built campfire. The man was no tinhorn when it came to adapting in the great outdoors. He was sort of familiar, but then he wasn't. Faden couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt that he knew the man from somewhere, maybe from a long time ago. This had to be the professional tracker and man-killer he had overheard the last two talking about. They had spoken with awe in their voices, as if this one might hear them and seek retribution against them. As Faden understood it, this man demanded that everyone else clear out of the area whenever he took an assignment. He always worked alone, and would brook no interference from anyone. If anyone should dare to cross him in this endeavor, then the hunter was likely to become the hunted, or so the legend went.

The man's identity came to him at about the same time as the stranger calmly said, "Come have something to eat, Faden. I've known for some time that you were watching me. You're good, I'll have to give you that, but I saw the sun glint off of that well oiled rifle barrel of yours'."

It took Faden all of thirty seconds to piece it all together. The man was none other than his old nemesis, Ben Roachman, and he would bet his bottom dollar that Ben was the one who had killed Sinda, and then set him up to take the

fall. "I've got my rifle trained on your black heart, you son-of-a-bitch! You killed her! Didn't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose I did! Where do we go from here? You aren't going to shoot me in cold blood, I know you too well for that." Ben continued to calmly stir his soup as if he didn't have a care in the world, much less a gun aimed at him. The man was an ice cube.

Faden snapped a shot into the center of the campfire, and saw the sparks and embers fly onto the face and arms of Ben. The man merely watched as his own flesh and blood extinguished the coals. He never so much as flinched or lifted a finger to brush them off.

"Nice shot. Pain is a wonderful thing, Faden. I hear you have been responsible for quite a lot of it lately. Are you beginning to enjoy watching other's suffering? Have you crossed over the line yet?"

Faden walked into the camp, rifle at the ready. He stopped when he was directly across the fire from his enemy of old. This foe that he had despised for almost all of his life. Placing the business end of the rifle against Ben's forehead, he asked, "Why?"

"Why did I kill her? It was strictly business. Why did I frame you for it? Pure and simple, vengeance! Oh, you should have seen her, she never once begged for her life, or anything. She reminded me a lot of your mother. She could take an enormous amount of pain. Was that your bastard she was carrying?"

He saw the look of confused surprise stamped on Faden's face, and knew he had hit a nerve. He decided to twist the

knife a little. "But of course it was! What was I thinking? She loved you, you know? Oh yes, she loved you with all of her heart, even told me so. As a matter of fact, it was the last words out of her mouth. To think that a woman like her could possibly ever love a weakling like you ... go figure!"

He gathered the scattered coals, never paying Faden, or the threat he posed any mind. He nonchalantly got the fire going again, then said, "Shoot if you've a mind to, or put the gun down. As you can well see, I am unarmed at the moment. What is it going to be? Rifles at thirty paces? Knives, hand to hand combat, or are we going to draw like the Earp's at the OK Corral?"

Faden was fairly seething on the inside, but remained serene on the surface. It would never do to let Ben know just how much his needling was getting to him. He laid the rifle in the fork of a mesquite tree, and said, "I'm going to kill you with my bare hands, you low-life dog!" But just as he was turning back around to face his adversary, Ben shot him high in the left shoulder with the .44 caliber derringer he had been concealing in his boot. The shock and impetus of the heavy slug drove Faden onto his back on the ground. He made a grab for his rifle, but Ben, surprisingly agile and quick for a man his age, kicked it out of his reach. He booted Faden in the wound, and then returned to the other side of the fire.

"Stupid, Faden, very stupid. When did you ever start thinking you could trust someone like me? Honor among thieves, and all that rot, huh? Some people never learn!" he exclaimed, keeping the remaining loaded barrel of the derringer trained on Faden's prone form.

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by Johnny Stewart

The force of the kick and ensuing bolt of pain had turned Faden on his side. He could sure enough use about twenty of the Tylenol No. 3s now. By being very careful not to show any undue movement, he began to work the hunting knife out of the waistband of his pants. It was then that he saw the rattlesnake. It was identical to the one he had seen in his vision. It lay, apparently sleeping and unconcerned, with all that was taking place in the vicinity. Faden left off with his retrieval of the knife, which would probably have only gotten him killed, anyway.

"I don't know whether to toy with you, or just kill you right out. What do you think I should do? Do you suppose you could take anywhere near as much pain as your mother and girlfriend did, or will you pass out and start screaming for mercy which won't be forthcoming?" Ben threw back his head in laughter.

Faden, without any regard to his own safety, very quickly threw the snake at Ben. Luck was still with him, and the snake hadn't struck him when he grabbed it, but it did bite Ben on the neck on its way by. Ben screamed, and reflexively fired the gun he held. The slug tore through the meaty portion of Faden's thigh, tearing out a great chunk of flesh, and rendering him momentarily all but helpless.

But God must have been watching over him because Ben, in his terror, had backed into a log and fell, striking the back of his head on a semi buried rock. He was for the time being stunned into unconsciousness.

Faden half crawled, half stumbled over to the fallen body. He watched the rattlesnake slither into the brush, then picked

up a stone of some fifty pounds or so in weight, and while lifting it as high as possible above his head, his arms stretched to the limit, he let loose a blood curdling yell of triumph.

"Put the rock down, Faden. He's not worth it!" Dewayne was speaking and he had his .357 Magnum aimed at Faden's heart. "Please don't make me shoot you!"

Faden barely heard the sheriff. The pain radiating from his shoulder and leg distorted his hearing. Not that it would have made any difference if he had heard him clearly. It was taking all the strength that he currently possessed just to stand and hold the stone. His vision was becoming blurred from the loss of blood, and he didn't know how long he was going to be able to relish this exquisite moment. He wished with all of his might that Ben would wake up so he could see what was about to happen to him, but Faden was tiring out fast.

"DROP IT, FADEN! DROP IT NOW!" screamed Dewayne, panic creeping into his voice. He was trying to penetrate the fog that surrounded Faden's brain. "Drop it, please?"

And so Faden did ... bringing the stone crashing down on the forehead of Ben with all of his pent-up frustration and might. Ben's skull fractured with an ominous splat. Red and gray matter gushed from his ears. Tears of blood flowing from the corners of his eyes coursed down both sides of his face. He made a last desperate gasp for air, which turned into a death rattle.

Faden raised his arms high above his head, once again, in a placating plea to God. He yelled, "It is a good day to die!" and was shot through the heart by a purely reflexive action

Faden
by Johnny Stewart

on the part of a high-strung, nerve wrought, Dewayne. Faden was dead, his eyes already glassing over, before his body hit the ground.

EPILOGUE

No matter how much Dewayne dug, he could never gather enough evidence to get a judge to vindicate Faden of the crime. He wished to clear Faden's name, but then it really didn't make much difference anyway. Everyone who had known Faden before all of this started knew that he hadn't committed the crime of which he was accused. Dewayne had, with the help of Kimberly, deduced the truth.

Kimberly Johnson inherited all of Sinda Rilla's money and possessions, making her the wealthiest Black woman in the history of the state of Oklahoma. She had miraculously survived the ordeal caused by Ben Roachman, and was currently in the best of health. She became Dewayne's closest personal friend and confidant.

Jim Simmons died a violent death at the hands of a professional gambler to whom he had owed a substantial amount of money, which he had intended to welsh on.

The ranch house maid, and Sinda's personal business secretary were both killed in a freak automobile accident at the intersection of Highways 70 and 81 near Beaver Point. The maid had been driving and had apparently fallen asleep at the wheel, striking the center median curb and entering the path of an oncoming semi tractor trailer rig. The truck had to have been traveling at a very high rate of speed to cause so much damage. The car had flipped and rolled numerous times. The two were reportedly on their way to Oklahoma City to catch a flight for Los Angeles, California. Sheriff Dewayne

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McClure believed it an ominous omen that the radio was still in operating condition when he arrived at the scene. The speakers were blaring at full volume, playing Sinda Rilla's song, "I'm Going To Get You!" which was one of her hits that was being played in a twenty-four hour tribute in memory of the late singer. They had to unhook one of the battery cables to shut the stereo off.

Dewayne had resigned shortly after investigating the accident. With the \$500,000 that he had collected through anonymous channels for bringing Faden down, and with the help and major contributions from Kimberly, he built a combination lodge and vocational training school on the one hundred and forty acres he inherited from Faden. It was a place for children from abusive homes to live. The kids were taught how to live off of the land, and learned skills that would help them when they grew old enough to be out on their own. The main theme of the park-like place was to have fun and enjoy life. Dewayne received training on how to best manage such a place, and did so, happily. No child would ever be mistreated while at the Faden Sin River Ranch for as long as he and Kimberly lived.

Once a year, without fail, a boy would ride a bicycle, then as he grew older, a motorcycle, to the Beaver Point Cemetery. He would mow, trim, clean up, and always leave flowers and a poster of Sinda Rilla on Faden's grave. In time, he became an all-star catcher for a national baseball team. He was once seen leaving an old worn-out catcher's mitt leaning against Faden's tombstone. Inside the portion of the glove made for the index finger, there was a rolled-up signed

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check for the amount of six hundred dollars, made payable to one, Faden Casteel.

~—~

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