

The Perk

Mark Gimenez

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Extract

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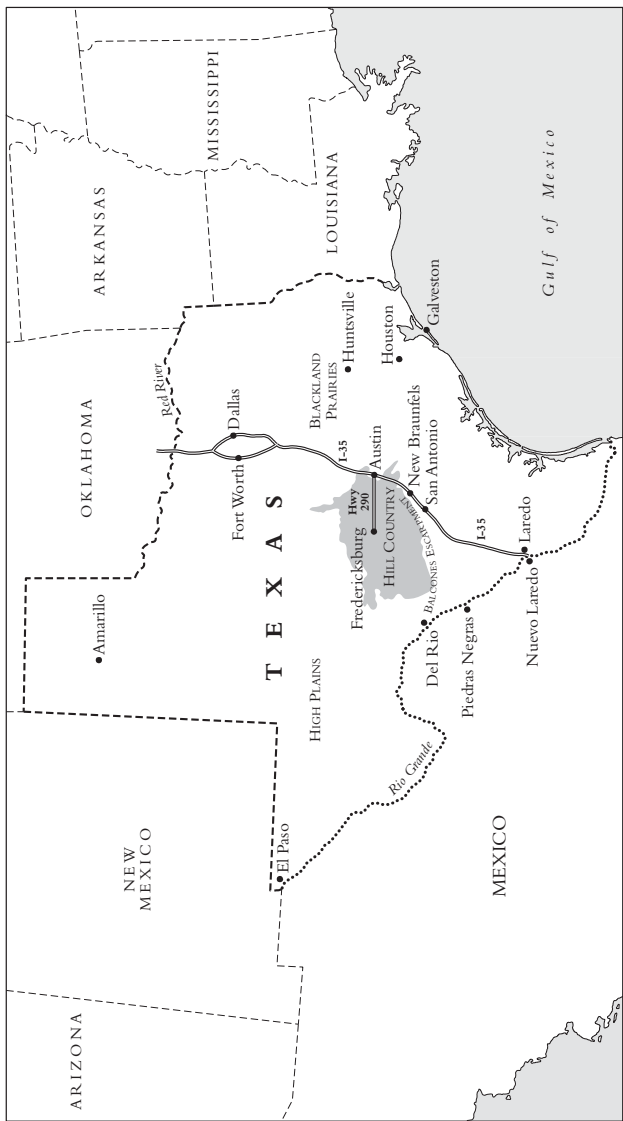
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Prologue

She was posing outside the limo with a dozen other girls, like illegal Mexicans waiting for work on L.A. street corners.

Sixth Street was packed with perks.

He had come back to Texas for the Austin Film Festival—okay, it's not exactly Cannes or even Sundance, but there were always plenty of gorgeous Texas girls willing to play groupie-for-a-day to a famous movie star. Jesus, they came out of the woodwork, especially in a college town like Austin, incredibly beautiful coeds thinking that if they laid a movie star they might become a star, too.

Of course, all they become is laid.

But he viewed groupies the same way he viewed private jets, personal trainers, Swedish masseuses, and chauffeured limousines like the one he was riding in tonight: perks of the trade. He was twenty-nine, he was remarkably handsome, and his last film had grossed \$250 million domestic. He got a lot of perks.

And he had just spotted his next one—blonde, beautiful, and built like a Playmate.

It was New Year's Eve and she was wearing a white blouse so sheer a blind man could see she wasn't wearing a bra, a butt-hugging black miniskirt, and black stiletto heels; she was swinging a little black purse like a hypnotist swinging a pocket watch in front of her subject—and he was mesmerized

by her. He lowered the blacked-out window and pointed at her like he was picking out a prime cut at the meat market. She damn near dove into the limo through the open window.

It was that easy.

He snorted another line of the white powder and chased it with a shot of whiskey while she settled back into the plush leather seat across from him and looked around the limo like a kid at Disneyland. You couldn't slap the smile off her face. She said, "I always wanted to ride in a limo."

"Honey, you're gonna get to do more than just ride."

She said, "I'm Heidi Fay," as if he would actually remember her name tomorrow. "I'm gonna be a big star one day."

"Sure you are, sweetie. You go to UT?"

"Uh, yeah."

He patted the seat next to him and she bounced over. He dove into her breasts and slid his hand up her smooth inner thigh until he touched a bit of heaven on earth. She scooted away from his hand and said, "Can I have something to drink?"

Playing hard to get, was she? Well, he had the cure for that. He removed his hand from under her skirt and raised up; she was holding out a cell phone.

"No one will believe this is happening to me."

The thought that she had just taken his photo never entered his intoxicated mind because his brain's diminished capacity could focus on only one thing now.

"Oh, it's about to happen to you, honey."

He turned to the bar and retrieved the whiskey bottle. He turned back and saw she was still fiddling with her cell phone.

"You don't want to call anyone."

He took the phone out of her hand and tossed it onto

the seat across from them. Then he filled the shot glass and held it out to her. She said, “I mean, like Coke.”

“Darlin’, you don’t drink my kind of coke. Bottoms up.”

She downed the whiskey and almost gagged. He refilled her glass, twice to make sure. Then he lined out some more cocaine on the little mirror and held the straw out to her.

“Oh, I don’t do drugs,” she said.

He thought, *Yeah, and you’re a virgin, too.* He said, “Then you don’t really want to be a star, do you?” He gestured outside with the straw. “Maybe I’ll make one of those girls a star.”

She stared out the window like a kid leaving home for the first time, then took a deep breath and the straw, bent over, and snorted the coke. She straightened up and sneezed. Twice. Hell, maybe she really was a first-timer. Maybe she was a virgin. That got him more excited, so he nudged her head down for two more long lines. When she came back up, her blue eyes were so dilated they looked black. He unbuttoned her blouse without objection—now that was more like it—and buried his face in her soft breasts. He leaned into her, and they fell back onto the seat. He reached up her skirt and pulled her thong down, then unzipped himself and pushed into her.

He lasted almost a full minute.

He pushed himself off her and drank whiskey from the bottle. She struggled up, fell onto the floorboard, then crawled onto the seat across from him. She worked herself into a sitting position.

She was a sight: her blouse hanging open and her bare breasts staring back at him like twin sisters, her skirt up around her waist like a tutu, and her black lace thong wrapped around her ankle. But she still smiled pretty-please and said in a slurred speech, “Can you get me an audition in Hollywood?”

They all asked the same question. But before he could give her his stock reply—“Honey, that *was* your audition”—her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell over like a stunt girl acting as if she’d been shot dead.

“Aw, shit.”

He looked at her lying there passed out and shook his head. *What the hell was he going to do with her now?* He couldn’t just open the door and roll her out onto the Sixth Street sidewalk crowded with agents, writers, managers, groupies, panhandlers, drunk college kids, and cops. And he couldn’t very well throw an unconscious coed over his shoulder and haul her right through the front door of the five-star Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin, waving at fans and walking through a gauntlet of paparazzi on the way up to the Cattle Baron’s Suite—that wouldn’t sit well with the studio brass, not to mention his pregnant wife. And he couldn’t just leave her to sleep it off; what if the cops found her in his limo? That would make *Entertainment Tonight* for sure. And besides, he needed the limo, much like a professional bass fisherman needed his lures: the night was young and the fish were biting.

He’d take her home. That’s what he’d do. He *could* haul her right into her apartment without fanfare or embarrassing photos. College coed, he figured she lived near the UT campus. So he grabbed her purse and searched inside for her student ID. He found it, stared at it, shook his head to clear his vision, and stared at it again. He felt as if some part of him had died.

Heidi wasn’t a college coed. Her student ID wasn’t from the University of Texas. She wasn’t twenty-one or twenty or even nineteen. Heidi Fay wasn’t her real name—it was Heidi Fay Geisel. *And Heidi Fay Geisel was a fucking sixteen-year-old high school junior!*

He then did what he always did in stressful personal situations: he freaked. So he snorted another line and downed another shot, which calmed him down and allowed his mind to work. Sort of. And he came up with a plan. The same plan.

They would take Heidi home.

But she didn't live in Austin. So he climbed over her and crawled up front and handed her ID to Rudy, who consulted the map in the limo's glove compartment and located her hometown—some burg seventy miles west of Austin. Thirty minutes later, they were carefully driving the speed limit down a dark highway so as not to get pulled over by some Barney Fife looking for his fifteen minutes of fame: **PODUNK COUNTY SHERIFF ARRESTS MOVIE STAR WITH UNDER-AGE GIRL IN LIMO.**

I don't think so.

He called up to Rudy for the fifth time: "We there yet? How much longer?" Rudy just shook his shaved head and shrugged his broad shoulders. Rudy Jaramillo had been his driver and bodyguard since *A Hard Night*, his first \$100-million-gross film. Driver/bodyguards were perks of the trade, too.

It was now past midnight, and it had started to rain. Flashes of distant lightning illuminated the night sky outside and the nearly naked Heidi inside. She had a great body . . . an unconscious great body . . . a sixteen-year-old body.

Shit.

He gazed out at the dark Texas landscape and sighed. The night was ruined and he was bored, a condition he could not tolerate for any extended period of time. So he pulled out his cell phone and was surprised to get a signal. He dialed his manager back in L.A.; it was two hours earlier

out west, not that he hadn't called Billy at three A.M. when the urge hit him. Billy answered on the third ring.

"How's Texas, my boy?"

Billy always called him "my boy," which sort of pissed him off. He said, "Playing cowboy for the local yokels."

"And you're so good at it."

"I'm an actor, Billy." He took a deep breath and then said, "What's the word?"

Billy sighed into the phone. "Clooney."

His blood pressure spiked. "*Clooney?* Are you shittin' me? He's what, forty-fucking-years old?"

"Actually, forty-two."

"*Forty-two?* That's way too old to be the sexiest man alive! I'm the sexiest man alive!"

"Yes, of course you are, my boy. You are indeed. Absolutely! It's just not fair. Not fair at all."

He immediately decided it was his manager's fault; Clooney had a better manager—that's why he had won! So when he returned to L.A. he would fire Billy and hire a better manager. Maybe Clooney's manager. At least a manager who didn't call him "my boy."

After his blood pressure had returned to normal, his attention returned to the phone at his ear; his soon-to-be-ex-manager had launched into a long discourse about the unfairness of it all, like the judging at the Olympic figure skating competition—the *figure skating competition?*—but he was already thinking of names of potential new managers.

When Billy finished, he disconnected then called his pregnant wife to find out how much of his money she had spent that day on baby stuff. She was due in one month. He could barely bring himself to look at her naked; she looked like a beached whale. Heidi did not.

Thank God for perks.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“We’re here.”

He struggled to open his eyes. “Where?”

Rudy said, “The girl’s home.”

He glanced at Heidi. She was still sleeping it off.

“What time is it?”

“Almost one.”

He had fallen asleep. He was still groggy. He put his face against the wet window as they slowed and entered a small rural town; they pulled up to a red light. The light changed and just as they eased through the intersection a flash of lightning off to his right lit up a huge ship looming large overhead like it was about to ram the frigging limo. He ducked back into the seat.

“*Shit!*”

But another lightning flash showed it was just a goddamn building with a second story shaped like the bow of a goddamn boat—*what’s that, some kind of fucking joke?*

The limo moved forward at a slow crawl; no doubt Rudy, with his record and an unconscious minor female in the back, was wary of local law enforcement. They drove down a deserted Main Street—the street sign read *Hauptstrasse*—and under a big banner that read WELCOME-WILLKOMMEN-BIENVENIDOS and a canopy of Christmas lights strung over the street. He stared out the window, expecting to see the typical small Texas town Main Street lined with convenience stores, fast-food joints, a liquor store, a VFW Hall, a used-car lot, and maybe a Piggly-Wiggly. But instead he saw a motel fashioned like a Bavarian chalet, a German brewery, and Old World-style buildings outlined in twinkling lights with second-story balconies and colorful awnings shading art galleries and quaint shops selling antiques and boutiques

selling fashionable clothes and stores selling handmade crafts, quilts, and jewelry, and . . . a *Hawaiian shirt shop*?

Buildings shaped like boats and cowboys wearing Hawaiian shirts—*where the hell am I?*

Even on a stormy night, it was like he was looking at a postcard and not from anyplace in the Texas he knew. Christ, he was glad his wife wasn't with him, and not just because of Heidi lying there; because this was exactly the colorful picture-perfect Christmas-card kind of small town that his wife would "ooh" and "aah" over as being so quaint and cute and cuddly that she'd want to buy the whole damn place—*with his money!*

Red, black, and yellow German flags flapped in the dark night, colorful umbrellas at outdoor restaurants sported names like *Spaten* and *Franziskaner* and *Weissbier*, and signs with *Ausländer Biergarten*, *Vereins Kirche*, *Alte Fritz*, *Der Lindenbaum*, *Der Küchen Laden*, *Der this*, and *Der that* hung on buildings up and down this Main Street.

Where the hell were they, back in Berlin for the European premiere of his last film?

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face and tried to shake his head clear of the whiskey and coke, and when he opened his eyes, he finally spotted a name he recognized, reassurance he was still in Texas: Dairy Queen. Man, he could use a DQ Dude and an Oreo Blizzard right about now, but it was closed. The entire town was closed, not a living soul in sight. This was one of those small Texas towns that rolled up the sidewalks at sunset, just like the one he had never grown up in.

Few people outside his parents knew it—and those who did had signed a confidentiality agreement—but his real name was Theodore Biederman, the only son of a vascular surgeon in Houston. He was a city boy; he had attended a private

prep school and then the University of Texas at Austin where he had parlayed his chiseled jaw line, curly blond hair, and deep blue eyes into a string of local television commercials, one of which had caught the attention of a Hollywood talent scout.

Austin, Texas, had been a hot spot for talent scouts ever since Matthew McConaughey and Renée Zellweger were discovered there. Hollywood came calling, and Theodore Biederman couldn't get the hell out of Texas fast enough. He wanted to be a star and Texas didn't have stars, except for football players, which he had never been. (He didn't like physical pain, notwithstanding his Hollywood image as an action-hero.) Of course, he always wore jeans and cowboy boots on TV, smoked big cigars, and played Texan on Leno and Letterman, a good ol' boy made good in Hollywood—"Aw, heck, Dave, I ain't nuthin' but a country boy like to swim nekkid in the creek down on the ranch"—even though he didn't own a ranch, didn't want to own a ranch, and had never even set foot on a fucking ranch.

But he always said "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am" in public and he tossed in a few Spanish words—"Muy bonita, señorita"—just to sound authentically Texan and even a "golly" every now and then to sound down-home, and damned if it didn't work. It was all about image, and he had image. Part of which required that he return to Austin every year for the fucking film festival to prove he was still a Texan at heart. Yeah, right. *Get me back to L.A.!*

He leaned forward now and gave Heidi a shake.

"Wake up, princess. You're home."

Nothing.

"Come on, wake up."

He pushed her hard, and she rolled off the seat and onto the floorboard. Cutting through the fog of whiskey and

cocaine in his mind was a sharp sense of fear. He slid down the seat to his knees and gently slapped her cheeks. She felt cold to the touch.

“Jesus!”

Rudy turned back. “What’s wrong?”

“Pull over!”

The limo slowed to a stop in front of a park where colorful Christmas decorations lit up the dark night. Rudy got out and came around back. He opened the door and leaned in. He wiped the rain from his face and looked at the girl; his eyes got wide.

“Shit!”

He jumped in and pushed on her chest and blew in her mouth and pushed on her chest again. After a few minutes, he was breathing hard. Heidi wasn’t breathing at all. Rudy sat back and stared at her then turned to him and said, “She’s dead, man.”

He slumped against the seat. “She said she was a college coed . . . she said she wanted to be a star . . . she said . . .”

Rudy said, “Boss, what she said ain’t gonna mean jack to the law. She’s a minor and she’s dead ’cause of your coke. That’s all that’s gonna matter to the cops.”

He had now broken out in a full-body sweat. His heart was beating against his chest wall so hard he was sure he was having a heart attack. He felt Rudy’s dark eyes boring into him.

“What do you wanna do, boss?”

At that moment, in a split-second, his mind played out alternate endings to this horror movie he was suddenly starring in, as real as if he were sitting in on a test screening. The first ending had his character taking Heidi to the nearest hospital and telling the doctors in the ER that she had drunk whiskey—*his whiskey!*—and she had snorted cocaine—*his*

cocaine!—and they had had sex—*was sixteen still jail bait in Texas?*—and then she had passed out. The doctors would try desperately to bring her back to life—they would inject her heart with epinephrine; they would perform CPR until their arms were numb; they would hit her with the defibrillator so many times he could smell her soft flesh burning—but there would be no medical miracles that night. They would finally look up from her lifeless body lying there on the gurney, slowly turn to the camera, and say to him, “She’s dead.”

He knew all this because he had played an action-hero ER doctor/CIA operative in *Doc Op* (\$175 million domestic gross). And he knew the next scene in this script: the local police would arrive at the hospital. And then the national media. And reporters and cameras and scandal: MOVIE STAR GIVES WHISKEY AND COCAINE TO 16-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL JUNIOR; GIRL ODs. And maybe worse: indictment . . . trial . . . conviction . . . prison. His rich celebrity life would be ruined. His career would be over. His fame and fortune would be gone. Along with the perks. When the credits to this ending began rolling across his mind’s eye—arresting officer, district attorney, judge, jury—he immediately chose the alternate ending to this movie.

“Let’s dump her and get the hell outta here!”

Rudy ran back up front, climbed into the driver’s seat, turned the wheel hard, and made a U-turn in the wide street. He glanced out the window just as a bolt of lightning lit up the dark sky and the building they were turning in front of—Gillespie County Courthouse—and he felt a sudden chill. Rudy accelerated out of town. When they reached a desolate stretch of road, Rudy pulled the limo over and came back again. Together, they buttoned Heidi’s blouse

and slid her thong back on. He put his arms under her to lift her out, but Rudy stopped short.

“Did you use a rubber?”

“What?”

“With her—did you wear a rubber?”

“No. You think she’s got AIDS?”

“No, man, she’s got your DNA . . . inside her. Like on those *CSI* shows.”

Panic gripped his cloudy mind. He glanced around and grabbed a bar towel. He stuck it inside her thong and wiped. Rudy was shaking his wet bald head.

“It don’t all come out.”

He sat back and tried to think clearly. After a moment, he looked up at Rudy and smiled. “They’ve got my DNA, but they don’t got me. No one saw us together . . . they’ll never tie me to her . . . they’ll never be able to match that DNA to me . . . and I’m sure as hell never coming back to this fucking place.”

Satisfied with that story resolution, he picked up Heidi’s black high heels and started to push the first one on her foot, but Rudy held his hand out.

“Give ’em to me . . . and that towel. I’ll toss them out on the way back to Austin, into that river we drove over.”

“Why?”

“’Cause they can get your fingerprints off that smooth leather and they might be able to trace fibers back to that towel and this limo.”

“Really?”

Rudy was again shaking his head. “Man, don’t you ever watch TV?”

Rudy stepped outside and checked the road for cars; then he leaned back in and grabbed Heidi’s legs, and together they lifted her out of the limo. The rain hit her face, and

her mascara started running down her cheeks like she was crying black tears. They bent down and gently placed her on the wet ground. They stood straight and stared at each other as if waiting for the other to say a prayer over her like they always do in those western movies; but neither said anything, so Rudy shrugged and gave Heidi a little nudge with his boot. She rolled down into a shallow ditch under a road sign that read: FREDERICKSBURG, TEXAS, POP. 8,911.

FOUR YEARS, SIX MONTHS,
AND FOUR DAYS LATER

Chapter 1

She died on her thirty-seventh birthday.

But not without a fight. Mastectomy. Chemotherapy. Radiation. More chemotherapy. But the cancer would not be denied. It took her breasts, her lymph nodes, her hair, and her life. An unrelenting, unthinking, uncaring, unfeeling disease—the doctors called it “invasive ductal carcinoma”—had killed his wife and their mother. Beck wiped his eyes.

“Daddy, you okay?”

He glanced back at Meggie in the rearview mirror. Only five, she knew her mother had gone to be with Jesus, but she thought it would be like a vacation, and when it was over her mother would come home. She didn’t know it would be forever.

“Yes, baby.”

“I gotta pee.”

“Bad?”

“Way.”

Beck steered the big SUV off the interstate at the next exit and pulled into a gas station. It wasn’t one of the modern ones at a brightly lit convenience store with pay-at-the-pumps outside and inside young employees in colorful striped shirts serving gourmet coffee with sparkling restrooms that smelled of pine-sol; it was an ancient stand-alone station with manual pumps and an old man with greasy hands

slouched behind a dirty desk and holding out a key chained to a hubcap that allowed access to a single restroom around the side of the concrete bunker-like structure, a restroom that likely hadn't been cleaned in years, if ever.

Welcome to Texas.

The hubcap banged against the steel door as Beck tried to insert the key into the rusty lock. He finally succeeded, worked the lock until it released, and gave the door a firm kick to pry it open. He felt around for a switch and turned on the light, one dim exposed bulb hanging from acoustical tiles long discolored from a leaky roof. Beck stepped inside and checked the dingy space for rats, roaches, spiders, scorpions, snakes, and other creatures of the dark; he found none, stepped out, and looked down at Meggie. Her knees were tight, her legs were bent, and she was bouncing slightly; a pained expression had captured her face.

"I gotta go."

"It's okay. Go ahead."

"*By myself?*"

"You need help?"

"*Duh.* Mommy showed me how to pee in a filthy restroom, but I can't do it by myself."

"Oh."

Beck followed her inside and shut the door, but not before checking on her ten-year-old brother locked in the black Navigator twenty feet away. Luke's ears were still covered with headphones and his eyes still glued to the Gameboy. Beck turned back to Meggie; she was pinching her nose.

"It stinks."

Stale urine, mold, and the July heat had combined to create an overwhelming odor; he pulled the door halfway open and let in fresh air and the sound of eighteen-wheelers

whining past on the interstate. Meggie held her arms out and said, "Help me up."

"Onto the seat?"

"Unh-huh."

"You don't sit?"

"No way. I squat. Mommy showed me."

Beck lifted her up so she could stand on the seat. She was heavier than she looked.

"Don't let go," she said.

Embarrassed, Beck averted his eyes as she pushed her shorts and underwear down to her ankles, then squatted, holding onto his arms for stability. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, as if she were doing a relaxation exercise.

She peed.

He gazed at her innocent face and saw Annie. It was an amazing thing, how a man and a woman could create two children, each a clone of one parent. Luke was Beck's clone, tall for his age and rangy, brown curly hair and dark penetrating eyes, athletic and intense; Meggie was Annie's, the same creamy complexion, the same black hair, the same blue eyes, an unusual combination that had always struck him. And she possessed the same gentle spirit.

"TP, please," she said.

Beck held her with his right hand and with his left hand he pulled a length of yellowed toilet paper from the roll in the holder attached to the wall. Meggie wadded it up and reached down. Then she pulled her underwear and shorts back up in one motion as she stood. She grinned as he lifted her down.

"That's how Mommy and I do it."

Meggie still spoke of her mother in the present tense, as if she were still alive.

“Does she . . . did she squat, too?”

“Unh-huh, but she doesn’t stand on the seat.”

Beck tried to picture his wife squatting over a public toilet, but that wasn’t the Annie he knew.

“She never told me.”

“It’s our secret,” Meggie said.

Beck pulled the door fully open and held it there for Meggie.

“Did you and Mom have other secrets?”

Meggie walked under his arm and out the door and said, “Lots.”

They had married twelve years before, when he was thirty and five years out of Notre Dame Law School, and Annie Parker was twenty-five and a new lawyer. They had met at a law school mixer after a football game. As a former Notre Dame quarterback and then a lawyer at a big Chicago firm that hired a dozen Notre Dame law grads each year, Beck Hardin had returned for every home game and received invitations to every law school function. He had walked into the crowded room and his eyes were instantly drawn to her across a hundred other human beings and lawyers.

He never looked at another woman.

Annie hired on with another Chicago firm, and they became a two-lawyer family. He tried cases; she wrote wills and trusts. Then Luke came along, and Annie opted out of the law for full-time motherhood. Her choice. Five years later, Meggie was born. They moved to a sprawling home with a big yard in a safe suburb with good schools. Beck took the train into the city each morning and back out each evening. He always worked late, and he often worked weekends. He billed three thousand hours a year, every year. He made partner, and he made great money.

Annie made their lives great. She was a soccer mom, a tee ball mom, and a room mom. She drove the kids to school, to baseball practice, and to piano lessons. She gave birthday parties, helped with homework, and went on class outings. She shopped, she cooked, and she ran the household. She was there when he left each morning and there when he returned each night. They had great kids, a great home, a great marriage, and a great life. The Hardins were the perfect family. Everyone said so.

A routine mammogram changed everything.

Now Annie was gone, born and buried in Chicago, and her family was moving to Texas. In the six months since Annie had died, Beck had tried to be a father, mother, and lawyer; he had failed at all three. He couldn't get the kids to school each morning and fed and to bed each night and still bill his three thousand hours. He had always prided himself on being in complete control of his world, but he had soon realized it was only an illusion enabled by Annie. Without her, he was lost and helpless.

The neighbors had tried to help; they brought dinner over several times a week, picked up the kids when he couldn't, and recommended a full-time nanny. But he didn't want his children raised by neighbors or nannies. He was determined to raise them himself because that's what Annie would have wanted. So he arrived late for morning conferences and court hearings, and he left afternoon conferences and hearings early. Over seventeen years of practicing law, Beck Hardin had accumulated a certain amount of goodwill among his partners and the judges, so they tried to be understanding. But there was a limit to understanding, and he was soon pushing the outer limits.

He found himself in a no-man's land: neither father nor lawyer.

Nor mother. Home life had gotten even worse. Meggie took to carrying a black-haired doll with her everywhere and conversing with it as if it were her mother; but at least she was happy in her denial. When she started wetting the bed, he took her to a therapist; when the therapist told him to take the doll away, he found another therapist.

But the therapists couldn't help Meggie, and they couldn't help Luke. He was neither happy nor in denial. He understood his mother was never coming back, and it made him sad and then it made him mad. And it changed him. The happy-go-lucky kid who loved school and sports was replaced by a stranger given to dark moods. His teacher said he'd just sit and stare and sometimes he would cry. And sometimes he would hit things and other kids. He got into fights, and his grades plummeted. He withdrew deeper and deeper into himself; he quit sports, refused to play with friends, and retreated to his room. Each night Beck would stand outside Luke's door and hear him crying. Beck saw his life replaying itself through Luke; he couldn't let that happen to his son. Beck knew he had to do something soon or he would lose his children, too. But what? He prayed for Annie to show him the way.

He woke one morning with the answer clear in his mind: Texas.

Beck Hardin would go home and take his children with him. As soon as school let out, he quit the firm, sold the house and his Lexus and most of their possessions, packed the Navigator, and headed south to a place he hadn't seen in twenty-four years. He had left at eighteen, a football scholarship in hand and a chip on his shoulder, vowing never to return to Texas, a vow he had faithfully kept. Until now.

To save his children, he would go home.

"Are we there yet?"

He glanced back at Meggie, propped up high in her booster seat like a queen on her throne.

“Soon, baby.”

She put the doll to her ear, nodded, and said, “Mommy says we’ve been in Texas a long time.”

“Tell her . . . It’s a big state, honey.”

They had crossed into Texas early that morning driving south on Interstate 35, which extends from the Red River to the Rio Grande. Twenty-four years before, Beck had been angry and wanted out of Texas; when he had crossed that state line heading in the opposite direction, he had felt like a lifer getting out of prison. Now, his life had brought him full circle.

Beck Hardin was back in Texas.

So he sped up. The posted speed limit in Texas was seventy, but Texans had always regarded the posted limit as the minimum speed. That hadn’t changed. They had just been passed by a young woman driving eighty miles an hour and steering with her knees while filing her nails and talking on a cell phone tucked under her ear. So he had had the cruise control set on seventy-five for five hours now—not counting two potty stops—and they had just entered the city limits of Austin, the state capital in the geographic center of Texas.

It’s a very big state.

“We’ve got just over an hour to go. You guys want to eat lunch here or wait until we get there?”

Meggie looked to Luke for a decision, as she often did, but Luke did not look up from the Gameboy. So Meggie whispered something to the doll, nodded, and said, “Mommy says wait.”

Beck stayed on the interstate that bisected Austin, barely

recognizable after twenty-four years, like a high school buddy who had packed on the weight: the sleepy college town had become a bloated city. When he had last driven through Austin, the pink granite dome of the capitol had loomed large over the skyline; now he only caught quick glimpses of it between towering skyscrapers. Back then, environmentalists had waged war with developers for the soul and skyline of Austin; now, seeing the granite-and-glass skyscrapers, it was obvious who had won.

But a few familiar landmarks had survived. The three-hundred-foot-tall white sandstone clock tower on the University of Texas campus still stood watch over the city; no doubt the tower lights still shone burnt orange on game nights when the Longhorns won. And no doubt the observation deck still remained closed, as it had since 1966 when an ex-Marine with a brain tumor and a marksman's skill stood up there with a high-powered rifle and killed sixteen people on the campus and streets below.

The UT football stadium still stood adjacent to the interstate but had been enlarged to accommodate corporate skyboxes; the stadium had been renamed after Darrell Royal, the legendary Longhorn coach, and the playing field after Joe Jamail, the billionaire plaintiffs' lawyer from Houston, surely the quid pro quo for a sizable donation to the football program.

Football had been Beck's ticket out of Texas, and he had punched it. But he couldn't drive past the UT stadium without a twinge of regret: he had been destined from birth to play in that stadium. His last visit to Austin had been a recruiting trip to UT as the top high school quarterback in the state, a country boy courted by rich and powerful businessmen and politicians who had come to him like the wise men to Baby Jesus; but Beck Hardin had held more

than the mere promise of eternal salvation. He held the promise of another national championship for their alma mater. But he had chosen Notre Dame instead, no lesser a betrayal than if Davy Crockett had fought for the Mexicans at the Alamo.

Beck Hardin had never figured on coming back to Texas.

He crossed over the Colorado River and exited the interstate at Highway 290 in south Austin and turned right. Home lay seventy miles due west, in the Texas Hill Country.