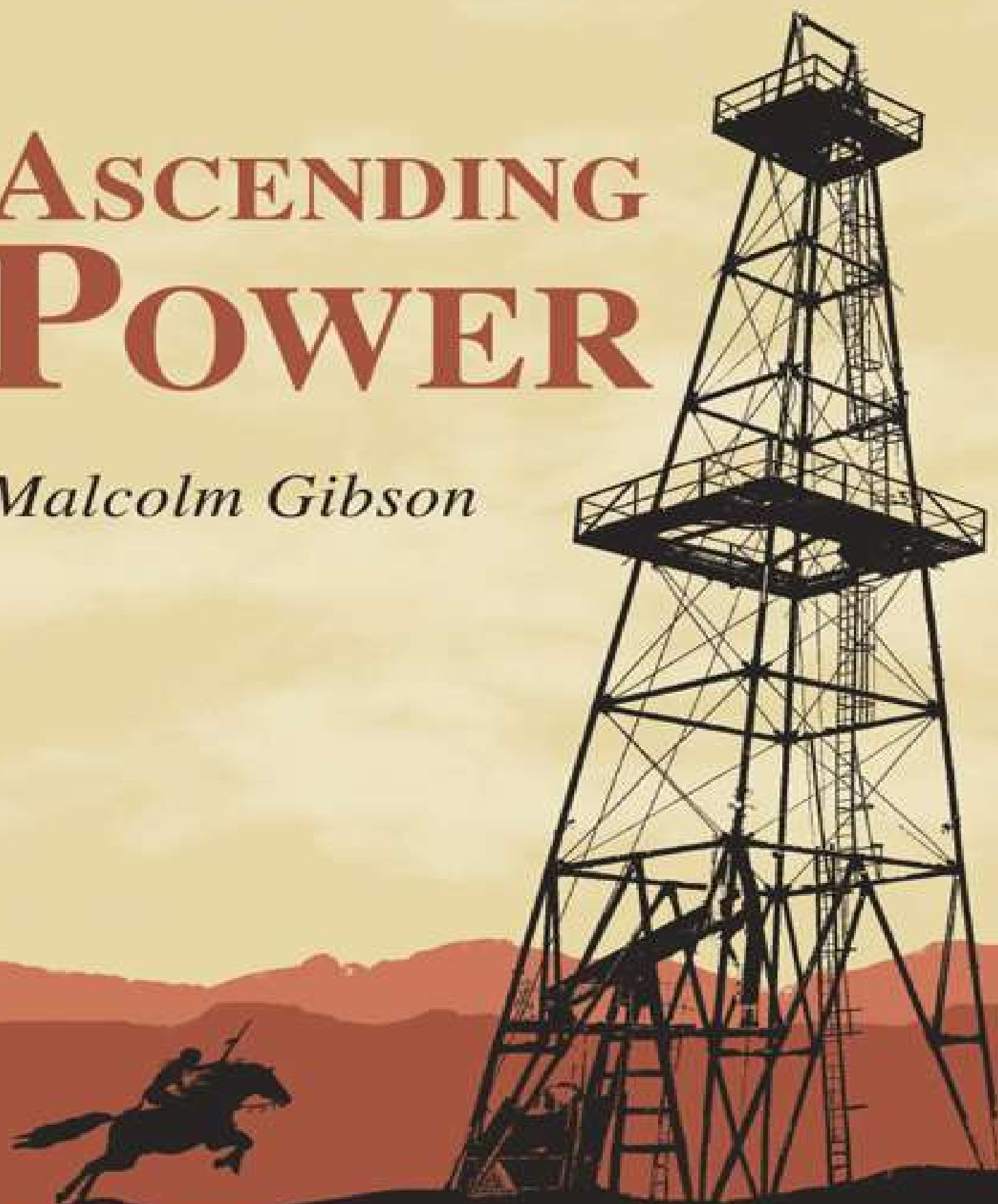


# ASCENDING POWER

*Malcolm Gibson*



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**STOREHOUSE**  
MEDIA GROUP

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Jack and Barbara Gibson.*

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# I

**BILLY STRIKELEATHER STARED OUT THE PASSENGER WINDOW** of the ancient pickup as it lurched down the highway. In this part of Texas, there was nothing but a few cacti, and fewer people. A hot desert wind sent auburn dust billowing. In the distance, the Chisos Mountains, framed by a summer sunrise, stood guard over the emptiness.

His uncle, Sam Longbird, drove them through the Lost Pines Reservation, home of the Chinati Indians. Three hundred square miles of hardscrabble so desolate the government had been glad to unload it on them a century before.

Sam was old school. His white ponytail was thick and his jaw set. It took a tough Indian to survive in the West Texas desert. Sam had done it for eighty years.

Billy's jet-black hair, high cheek bones, and copper complexion affirmed his mother's tribal background, but his softer eyes, her Caucasian lover—the one she'd never seen again. His six-foot-three, two-hundred-pound frame gave Billy the look of a hero. The sadness in his eyes, less so.

Billy took a deep breath and looked at the skyline ahead. He was raised on these plains. Just another Chinati half-breed, but he could throw a football farther than any schoolboy in the state. There'd been little else to do. He was good enough to earn an athletic scholarship at the University of Texas and, having grown up exploring the caves and cliffs of the Big Bend country, bright enough to leave with a geology degree.

After five years with the New Orleans Saints, one with the Houston Texans, a torn ACL, and a half dozen DWIs, he was now 'pursuing other opportunities.'

"So, you want to tell me why you called?" he asked Sam.

"I'll explain when we get there."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

Sam had picked up Billy at the airport in Alpine, the county seat forty miles north. Billy refueled his old Piper airplane there after making deliveries of equipment from Houston to West Texas oil rigs. The plane, once a classic,

was now a relic and all that was left of his high-flying days in the NFL.

In thirty minutes, they reached Chinati Flats, the only village on the reservation. Rows of terracotta shanties just shy of squalor dotted the road.

Billy scanned the mesquite fences blanketed by drifts of red sand the texture of talc, and a junked school bus knee-high in tumbleweeds. Little had changed since he'd been away.

The shotgun house where he was born crept by.

Ahead was a dirt playing field flanked by listing goal posts and low stands. Billy took in the scene where he had debuted as a football phenom. He swiveled his shoulders as they passed, until his right knee flashed a painful reminder of the night that dream had died with the hit of an NFL linebacker.

When the truck rolled through town without stopping, Billy frowned at Sam with head cocked. On the outskirts, swirls of dust shrouded the road. From the haze, a crumbling limestone sign emerged reading *Chinati Flats. Birthplace of Billy Strikeleather*. He remembered the dedication ceremony a decade ago.

The truck drifted across the center line. Billy glanced at Sam, who was fumbling under the seat, then reached over and straightened the steering wheel.

Glaring at Billy, Sam sputtered, "I've got it."

"Sorry," Billy said. "You got started early this morning. Want me to drive?"

His eyes back on the road, Sam replied, "I'll let you know if I need your help."

"You already did, remember?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Sam lifted a thermos from the floorboard and pushed it across the seat. "You handle the coffee."

Billy found two Styrofoam cups in the glovebox, poured, then closed the jug. He handed one cup to Sam.

Billy sat back to take a sip and thought about the day Sam had called. At first, Billy had turned him down. Chinati Flats was the last place he wanted to visit. He'd been a hero there. To come crawling back, even as a favor, after being drummed out of the NFL would have been another blow to his ego.

But oil prices had dipped due to an oversupply from fracking. Drilling equipment, and Billy's plane, sat idle. He realized he had nowhere else to go.

They rode in silence until there were no more road signs.

Billy reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette. A book of matches fell to the seat—*Joe Bob's Ice House. Wives and Dogs Welcome*. He winced. It was an embarrassing reminder of the depths to which he'd sunk in Houston society. He hid it from Sam behind cupped hands as he sparked a flame.

"You know, those things will kill you," said Sam from the side of his mouth.

"That problem's not too high on my list."

"A man who doesn't care whether he lives is either a hero or a fool," Sam said. "I can't decide which you are."

"That's a tough one," Billy replied with a tinge of sarcasm. "I'm worth more dead than alive."

The truck labored up and down two low water spillways, both dry as Billy's throat. Sam glanced at his nephew, then touched him on his knee.

"So, is it the loss of all that football money that's got your dauber down? Did you think it would solve your problems?"

Billy resented his tone. "Well, you can't exactly live off the land in Houston."

"Money is never the answer," Sam said, shaking his head.

"Is that so? I suppose next you'll tell me our people are better off without it," Billy said.

"Oh. So, it's *our* people now."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't," Sam snapped, throwing back his ponytail. "Suppose you explain it to me. Explain how all that white man cash worked out for you. If you are still one of *us*, explain to me why that kind of easy money would be better for our tribe than being self-sufficient."

Billy scratched his head and gave Sam a puzzled look. *This isn't about my troubles anymore*, he thought. *It's about the tribe. Something's got Sam worried.*

Billy took a drag from his cigarette and blew smoke through ballooned cheeks. "Okay, you've got a point, Sam. But just because I didn't handle my money well doesn't mean every Chinati would be better off without it. From what I've seen this morning, the tribe damn well needs something or it'll dry up and blow away. Money, leadership, something. You've been out here what, eighty years? Maybe it's time you took a little ownership in the situation. You've got to admit, a few more bucks in circulation would help."

Sam stared straight ahead. His knuckles turned white on the wheel. “At what price? There are always trade-offs.”

A moment passed—Billy stole another look at his uncle. *What the hell is up?* he thought.

Throwing his cigarette out, Billy changed the subject. “How’s your family, Sam?”

“Getting by. How’s your wife handling all this rough water?”

Billy flinched. With a sigh he said, “No damn good, Sam. Leslie Jean had to trade her tennis league for a job with a big investment outfit. We’re too broke to be clients.”

Sam nodded. “You came out of the chute pretty fast, son. Now that things have changed, it could take her a while to settle in.”

“If ever.”

The hum of the engine dwindled to a growl. They were climbing. Billy remembered his college training. Sheep Mountain, and others in this range, were born of lava explosions and uplifts. Magma had surged upward through volcanic rock leaving pyroclastic chokers, greenish in the morning sun. He’d studied the ash deposits and layers of gravel and clay from erosion between eruptions.

Sam wheeled left onto a dirt road leading to a small arroyo. A grove of mesquite trees signaled water and a wooden sign read *Hot Springs Parking Only*. There’d never been a violator.

“Anyone come here anymore?” Billy asked.

“A few tourists hoping for a miracle cure. Haven’t seen anyone since last fall.”

Gravel popped under the floorboard as Sam pulled to a stop. The shocks groaned as they stepped out. Sam motioned Billy to follow.

A stone path led down to the spring, a natural pool the size of a basketball court carved into the bank of a ravine. From boulders around the perimeter, you could wade into warm mineral water bubbling up from the bedrock. The overflow snaked through pampas grass to the Rio Grande below.

When they reached the bottom step, Sam nodded toward the water, wiping his brow with his sleeve. “So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“God, man, have you gone loco in Houston? Look at the plants. This water’s had minerals, but never enough to kill grass and trees. Something ain’t right.”



Squinting into the sun, Billy studied the ravine bed. The trunk of each mesquite was a deep gray, the branches withered. A dark powder etched the shoreline. He squatted and put a pinch of the powder on his tongue, then grimaced and spit hard. "It's brine, but stronger than any I've tasted. Has there been any oil drilling around here lately?"

"Only shallow stuff. Trans-National sent their fracking crews not long ago. Their drill site is about a half-mile west of here, across the creek bed. Just off the reservation."

"Where'd you hear about fracking, old man?"

"Well, when your windows start rattling from underground explosives, you learn fast."

Billy let the brackish water sluice through his fingers, then reached into his back pocket for a silver flask. He took a swig of vodka and emptied the remainder onto the ground. He filled it with spring water and put it away. Over his shoulder he asked, "Does anyone else know about this?"

"Well, since I noticed it two weeks ago, the only one I told was—"

A shot rang out. Billy turned just in time to see the old Indian fall backward head first onto the rocks, a bullet hole under his chin. A second shot ricocheted off the heel of Billy's boot, spinning him into the shallows.

He crawled behind a stump, scouring the horizon for the shooter. Sam lay motionless, his body spread-eagled across a field of stones along the shoreline. An apple-sized abrasion distorted the side of his head from the fall onto a jagged rock. Blood oozed from his ear. The bullet had shredded the collar of his shirt, leaving a wound that bled through like a gruesome bib. Billy crawled toward him, his eyes still darting around the perimeter of the springs. He grabbed Sam's pant leg and dragged him behind a boulder. The old man's pulse was faint but steady.

"Hang on, hang on," Billy whispered into his ear.

## 2

**SAM WAS BLEEDING BADLY.** Billy shrugged off his shirt and wrapped it around the wound. After scanning the rocks above, he hoisted Sam over his shoulder and started up the path. He half expected to be cut down, but the silence held.

With Sam in tow, opening the passenger door was a struggle. Finally inside, Billy laid his uncle across the seat, then stumbled to the driver's side on his damaged boot. Swinging in behind the wheel, he reached for the ignition. It was empty. "Shit," he muttered, going through the old man's pockets till he found the keys. The truck roared to life. He cradled Sam's head in his lap and dropped the gearshift into drive. Sam moaned and flicked open his eyes.

"You're okay, you're okay," Billy said. After struggling to navigate the rutted dirt road onto the highway, he floored the gas pedal.

When they careened into the village, necks craned. "That's not like Sam," a woman with a baby remarked to the grocer.

Holding Sam's head with one hand and the steering wheel in the other, Billy pulled into the caliche parking lot of the Chinati Flats Medical Center, a converted strip mall with a flat roof and cracked stucco walls. He lay Sam's cheek gently on the seat and grasped his hand.

"Sam," Billy said into his uncle's ear. "Can you hear me?"

He felt Sam squeeze his hand then watched his eyes open, blue as the summer sky that loosed the bullets.

"Someone shot at us," Billy said. "Hit you pretty bad. We're at the clinic in town. I'm going for help."

The old Indian nodded, but held fast to his nephew. A crowd formed at the open truck door. Loosening his grip, Sam used his pointer finger to trace the letter "R" on Billy's palm. He looked into his nephew's eyes, then his weathered hand went limp.

Billy bolted from the truck, through the onlookers, and inside the building. He returned with two young orderlies who lifted Sam onto a gurney. They pushed him up a low ramp, pausing for a nurse to open the

doors. Billy followed with his hand on Sam's foot.

"Stay here. We'll call you," one of the men barked over his shoulder. They rushed their patient down a hall toward a door with a hand-stenciled sign: *Emergency*.

Exhausted, Billy retreated to a tiny waiting area with peeling wallpaper. An assortment of worn furniture was stacked with last year's magazines. A ceiling fan turned too slowly to matter.

"Excuse me," he said to the young Indian girl at the desk. She was reading *Seventeen Magazine* and drumming her fingers to the song on her earbuds.

"Excuse me!" he repeated, lowering his face to her level. "Do you have a shirt I can borrow?"

"Can I help you?" she said, pulling out the ear pieces. She smiled and gazed appreciatively at his bare chest.

"Please. That was my uncle they just rolled in."

"When?" she said, throwing back her hair.

"Forget it. Where's the nurses' station?"

She motioned behind her to a yellow swinging door with a round window. "But you're not allowed in. Too bad for them."

Billy said with a weak grin, "Could you please just ask them for a shirt of some kind?"

"I'll try." The tall teenager slipped out from behind the desk, swinging her hips as she disappeared into the bowels of the clinic.

Billy collapsed into a red plastic chair and closed his eyes.

When she returned, her hair was pulled back and her lipstick fresh. "This is all we could find, Mr. Strikeleather," she said, handing him some pink scrubs.

"Thanks," he said, arching into the top.

She sauntered back to the desk with a smile.

Outside, a constable's car, siren blasting, skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust. Through the front window Billy saw a weasel of a man with a big Stetson exit the cruiser. His high school classmate, Deputy Martin Metcalf, clad in a brown uniform with a badge the size of a saucer, hitched his pants and strode toward the clinic. Belying a wispy physique, his waist was huge with a .38 in a black holster, a fat barreled mace gun, a notepad, and a yellow Taser circa Buck Rogers.

When he entered, Billy grimaced. *For barking dogs and fender benders,*

he thought, *Marty Metcalf would be fine. Not for attempted murder.*

The officer strutted through the sliding doors, into the hall, and up to the front desk, hardware jangling. The receptionist's eyes were fixed on Billy.

"Ma'am . . . Ma'am!" he blurted.

She glanced up.

"One of your nurses called. Said there'd been a shooting."

Her gaze traveled to Billy then back again. *Hard to believe they're the same species*, she thought. "It was Billy Strikeleather's uncle, Sam Longbird," she said. Her hand waved regally as if making a presentation. "Mr. Strikeleather's over there."

She watched the little deputy glance across the room then step back and pluck a cell phone from his breast pocket.

After dialing, he said in a clipped tone, "Sheriff. Metcalf here. It was Sam Longbird." He listened. "Yes, sir. I will."

The girl peered over the top of her magazine and smirked as he snorted and cinched up his weapon belt. Striding past her toward the red chair, he gave her a wink. She cringed.

Billy's eyes were shut and remained so even when he heard Deputy Metcalf approach.

"So, Mr. Strikeleather . . ." Marty began.

"For Chrissake, Marty, cut it out," Billy sighed, running his hands through his hair.

"Okay, okay. So, Billy, who shot Sam?"

Billy's fingers traveled up the sides of his face, stopping at his temples to trace tiny circles. "Marty," he answered, blinking his eyes open, "if I knew, don't you think I'd have mentioned it by now?"

"Just procedure, Billy." The deputy took a seat and pulled out a pad and pencil. "Now tell me about it."

"We were standing by the Rio Hot Springs when shots came from behind us, up on the road I'd say. One hit Sam in the neck, the other hit my boot heel," he said, pointing to his foot.

Marty's eyes narrowed in contemplation. "There're a lot of hunters out there this time of year. Maybe a stray shot."

"Really, Marty? Two shots hit within three feet of us."

"Did Sam say anything to you?"

Billy drew the fingers of his right hand across his mouth and paused them over his lips. When he turned to answer, the deputy was staring at his

compass-sized tactical field ops police watch. Billy was about to tell him of Sam's cryptic hand message when Metcalf blurted, "Gettin' late." He stood and pivoted toward the door.

"Let me know if you think of anything," the policeman tossed off. "Sheriff wants me to drive out to Paint Creek. A fence is down, cattle on the road." Putting his pad away, he tipped his hat and left.

As he watched the patrol car pull away, Billy squinted and shook his head. *Of the hundreds of NFL interviews I've given, he reflected, none has been so useless.* He dropped his head back into the chair and stared at the ceiling. His lips pursed together in a thin line as he replayed the conversation in his mind. *He's either incompetent or complicit.*

In the waiting room, time slowed to a crawl. Billy drifted in and out of a half-sleep. For an instant, he was back at the Rio Hot Springs. *Get down, Sam!* He tried to reach him, but the old man's legs buckled. He watched him go down. Suddenly the scene changed to a football field. The crowd was deafening. A lineman bore down on him. *Slide!* It was too late. He could only wait for the hit. It bent his knee in half, sideways. They were the kind of dreams you have when you long to regain control of your life, but feel powerless to do so.

He awoke in a panic, his eyes darting about the room. The receptionist looked up and cocked her head, as if to ask what demons could frighten a superstar. Billy shook his head and dragged himself up to the front desk. "Can you please find out how he's doing?"

The girl studied Billy's face. "Are you okay?"

*Good question,* he thought. "Sure."

"I'll ask." She slithered around the desk and disappeared through the ER doors. When she returned, she said, "They'll be out to talk to you."

The doors swung open, presenting a bespectacled woman in blue scrubs with black hair pinned back and a stethoscope dangling. "Mr. Strikeleather?"

"Here."

She took an adjoining seat. A plastic name tag identified her as Ms. Stone, Physician Assistant.

"Is he going to make it?" asked Billy.

"He's stable now, but it's been touch and go. Most men his age wouldn't have survived."

Billy's shoulders slumped as he gave out a sigh of relief.

"Can I see him?"

“Mr. Strikeleather,” she said gently, “your uncle is in a coma.” She waited for her words to register. “It’s not the bullet wound. We stopped the bleeding in time. It was the fall.”

Billy sat back, his hands grasping either side of the seat.

The PA put her hand on his arm. “We don’t know how serious it is. He suffered a concussion for sure. I spoke to a neurologist in Midland. She also suspects a brain bleed and prescribed sedatives to put him into a coma. At his age, anything can happen.”

They both sat in silence.

The moment was eclipsed by the clatter of the front door. Into the waiting room burst a slender Indian man in his early twenties, wearing a white shirt with sleeves rolled, designer jeans, and a black felt western hat.

Taking in the room, he locked eyes with Billy and hurried over. “I came as fast as I could,” he panted.

“Oliver,” said Billy. He turned to Ms. Stone. “This is Oliver Greentree, Sam’s grandson.”

“Of course,” she said looking up at the young man. He had a narrow jaw thrust out Mussolini style, with deep set eyes, and a shock of thick black hair protruding from under his hat.

“How is he?”

“He’s got a chance,” Billy said. “But there are problems.”

“What kind?” The grandson frowned, looking closely at the PA.

She explained Sam’s condition.

“Can we see him?” Oliver asked.

“For just a minute, no more,” she said, rising. They followed her.

Inside the ER was the gurney surrounded by trees of mobile IVs sprouting tubes and wires, all tethered to Sam. A woven blanket covered him chin to toe, a gauze bandage wrapped around his head. From an EKG machine, his heart pinged a faint beat. A young doctor tracked it on a blue monitor. As the visitors approached, he looked up. “He’s stable, starting to settle down a bit. We’re going to move him to ICU. The neurologist from Midland will be down tomorrow to have a look.”

“What are his odds?” Billy asked.

Oliver leaned in over his shoulder, interrupting, “Can he remember anything? Will he come out of it?”

With a steady gaze, the doctor turned to the young Indian. “He may not.”

Billy stroked his uncle’s cheek. With wrinkles smoothed by the swelling,

Sam's face brought to mind a photo, cherished by Billy's mother, of Sam and her in their early teens. They had roamed the reservation, living off the land—like their ancestors. It was a time, she would tell her son later, when the Chinati still had ancient warrior chiefs and the soul of a nation.

Billy's mother, Nightingale, or Gale as she was called, had told Billy about moving to San Antonio and about the white soldier she fell for there. Burt Cole was the son of a rancher from La Mesa. He was introduced to Gale by Jimmy Littlebow, a Chinati boy in Burt's Army unit, awaiting assignment to Vietnam. Burt and Jimmy shipped out a week before she learned of her pregnancy. In letters, his father had promised to come back for them after the war. When he returned, however, it was in a coffin.

For years, Billy recalled a one-hundred-dollar bill arriving each month with no return address or postmark. She wasn't sure how he'd managed it, but each delivery reminded Gale of how much Billy's father cared. Her son blamed the soldier only for stealing his mother's heart.

Growing up, his Uncle Sam had been the closest thing to a father Billy had. He taught him to throw—not a football, but an *atlatl* that consisted of a shaft with a grip on one end and a cup on the other used to fling projectiles, *jai alai* style. By age twelve, Billy could sling a rock the size of a baseball through a barn door from forty yards. Transition to a football had been easy.

It was at that time Sam's daughter and her husband were killed in a car crash. Their infant, Oliver Greentree, survived. Sam was heartbroken, but assuaged the pain by taking in his grandson. Twelve years younger, he grew up in Billy's shadow. Awkward and an average athlete at best, Sam could only ascribe Oliver's caustic nature to his cousin's shadow. The perfect anti-Billy.

The sound of the doctor's voice brought Billy back. "He needs rest."

"I'd like to sit with him for a while," Oliver said.

"Fine," the doctor replied. "But please, no talking. His brain has taken a blow and needs time to heal."

Oliver nodded and followed the gurney as the orderlies rolled Sam out of the ER toward the semi-private rooms.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Oliver," Billy said, as the procession passed.

Oliver didn't reply.

**BILLY LEFT OLIVER WITH SAM** at the hospital and headed to a motel on the edge of town. The Petrified Forest was an old-fashioned motor lodge built from brown flagstone. A dirt parking lot fronted ten decrepit rooms with doors dappled by decades of blowing dust.

Sam's pickup wheezed to a stop at the office, under a sign flickering *Vacancy*. The *No* was rusted out. The only link to a forest was a front step of petrified wood.

Billy killed the engine and stepped out, stumbling on his damaged boot. He made his way to the entrance and turned the knob. A bell atop the door rang. The manager, a paunchy Chinati in his early thirties, glanced up from his newspaper. "Help you?"

"I need a room," Billy responded in a tired voice.

The clerk put down the paper. Screwing up his eyes behind thick glasses, he inspected his guest and said, "Billy Strikeleather, right?"

"Yeah, how you doin'?" the ex-star responded robotically, reaching for his wallet.

The manager took a key from the wall but paused to see if Billy would remember him. He didn't. The quiet was awkward—a wall clock ticked. Finally, he took mercy on Billy and handed it over to him. "Jimmy Quinta. Chinati Flats School, Class of '96."

Relieved, Billy nodded and shook his hand.

"Right. Good to see you, Johnny."

"Jimmy."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"Haven't seen you around here in years."

"Yeah, it's been a while."

"Used to watch you play on TV. Too bad about the knee."

"Bad luck. Part of the game," Billy murmured, scuffing his heel on the wood floor.

Jimmy looked out the front window at Sam's truck, then back at Billy's pink medical shirt. "Seen Sam?"



“Yeah. He had a little accident.”

The clerk’s eyes narrowed. “Need any help?”

“No thanks. He’ll be fine.”

Quinta nodded his head tentatively.

“Cash or credit, Billy?”

*I guess he thinks I don’t have a good card, Billy thought. News travels fast.*

He handed the clerk a fifty. “Will this cover it?”

“Sure,” Jimmy said, smiling slightly with his fat lips. He put the bill in the drawer and handed back two twenties. Billy felt his face redden. It was charity and he knew it.

Jimmy watched him hobble to the door. “Billy,” he called out. “You did good. You did good.”

“Thanks,” Billy replied softly.

The engine of the old truck coughed as Billy moved it ten yards down to Number Three. The room was sparse but clean, with a woven rug and Gideon Bible. He threw down his faded Nike grip, pulled off his boots, and fell onto the bed. With eyes closed, he tried to make sense of things.

Except for his DWIs, he’d never been around a police investigation. This one, however, seemed a quarter turn off. *Why didn’t Deputy Metcalf ask more questions . . . or even go to the scene of the shooting to investigate?*

Billy needed a drink. Out of habit, he rolled over and reached into his jeans for the flask. He unscrewed the cap and lifted it to his mouth. The briny fluid made him flinch and sputter. *That’s one way to kick the hooch.*

He sat up and shook two more drops onto his tongue. They were bitter and metallic, setting his teeth on edge. As he set the flask on the bed stand, something registered in his memory. *I know that taste. What the hell is it?*

A smile crossed his lips. *Of course. Clive Larsen. How could I forget?* His thoughts drifted back to an eccentric geology professor at the University of Texas who’d recruited Billy to help with a research project on some obscure mineral, a so-called “rare earth” mineral known as dysprosium. *It had a taste, he recalled, so unique you could never forget it. And it was easy to test for. One part citric acid (Coca Cola would do in a pinch), one part sodium hydrogen carbonate (baking soda), and one part dysprosium. The foulest tasting stuff in the world.*

He stood and walked into the bathroom to rinse his mouth. *Probably the less Leslie knows about this the better. That would only make her a target,*

*too. But then I'd have to lie to her. Through all our ups and downs, he thought, that's one thing I've never done.*

He reached for the phone and dialed home.



In a McMansion on the west side of Houston, Leslie Jean Strikeleather stepped from the marble shower into a white terrycloth robe. With her left hand, she wiped a swath of fog from the mirror. She brushed back her dark hair, then bent forward to touch a wrinkle on her neck.

The slender brunette picked up the bourbon and branch water from its usual spot on the sink and took a sip, then padded across the hardwood floor of her bedroom through the hall and into a paneled office. Sitting down at a rolltop desk, she clicked on the computer and began studying a double screen of financial projections. Tomorrow at nine she was meeting a fat-cat prospect. *It's showtime*, she told herself.

At LaCour Financial they called Leslie the Velvet Closer. She had the gift of gab and a cum laude intellect. When a client of either gender needed a push, they brought in Leslie. She always came through.

She printed the financials and tucked them into a leather briefcase. Returning to the bedroom, she tossed the case on the poster bed and glanced at the picture on the dresser. In it, the King's float of the Krewe of Bacchus parade bore a grinning Billy, wearing a bejeweled crown, white toga, and gold chains, through the streets of the French Quarter. Krewes were the New Orleans equivalent of high society, and Billy was that year's royalty. Following atop the rear of an exotic convertible, Leslie—in a white ruffled gown—waved to their subjects. That was the happiest day of her life. Now, ten years later, the party was over.

After a gulp of whisky, she sauntered to the bed and placed the glass down on the nightstand. Arching her back, the Velvet Closer slipped out of her robe and into the sheets. Sleeping au naturel was a luxury she allowed herself only when Billy was away. Leslie knew most of her girlfriends wouldn't turn down the chance to make love to her husband. She didn't blame them. They just didn't know the price.

She closed her eyes remembering the years when passion trumped reason in their marriage—how they'd followed their emotions, blind to each other's

faults. When it began to unravel, passion was the first to go. Even now, however, Leslie couldn't block out those halcyon days. She drained the bourbon and snapped off the lamp.

Laying back, the sheets felt cool against her breasts. She recalled her first thrill of Billy's body. It would teach her pleasures she'd never imagined, then catapult them to stardom with the New Orleans Saints.

For five years Billy and Leslie had owned the Big Easy. Their lives, she remembered, had been a whirlwind of penthouses and wild parties. As the bourbon hit, she drifted back to the delicious impieties of life in the French Quarter. Beneath the sheets her fingers traced a delicate path.

Leslie's breath grew ragged and her pulse quickened. For a moment Billy again held her captive in his arms, savage as the Chisos but gentle as a desert breeze. At her core she still longed to feel his power, if only for a final taste of the man—the life—she'd lost. Her lips parted in a circle of passion. Her hips twitched. Then, with a sob, she surrendered to the memory of Billy Strikeleather—the Billy she'd married. Afterward she wept.

When her body had calmed, she rolled onto her side and checked the time. It was 11 p.m. She lit a cigarette, exhaled, and reflected for the hundredth time on the demise of her marriage. It had begun the day Billy was injured. She pictured the vicious tackle at the goal line that tore his ACL, sidelining him for the season. For Billy, it began a precipitous fall.

As his rehab foundered, so did his confidence. She glanced at the empty glass and remembered how he'd turned to booze to bridge the gap. In three months, her prince had melted into a mean drunk. The nightmare continued even when Billy returned to the team. He was a step slower and a stride closer to unemployment. Riding the bench, his drinking spiraled. Finally, the Saints had enough and traded Billy to the Houston Texans for a fifteenth-round draft pick.

She crushed out her smoke and lay back on the bed, recalling the terrible quarrel the night she urged him to quit the game for broadcasting. He stormed out, got liquored up, and drove his SUV into Buffalo Bayou, destroying his chance at either career.

Rubbing her temples, she recalled how Billy's downfall began her own emancipation. She'd dusted off her finance degree and landed a job at LaCour, the biggest investment banking firm in town.

Leslie remembered how, like Newtonian opposites, she had prospered while Billy stumbled. Even in a wide-open oil town like Houston, his

continuing brushes with the law cancelled the value of Billy's celebrity. With each new DWI, the Strikeleather brand, and those who bore it, had suffered. She knew the Billy she married was no more, and began planning her escape.

The former NFL wife knew she needed to maintain her lifestyle, even enhance it, to succeed in the high dollar world of LaCour. Her ticket to the big paydays was dependent on an upscale image. She needed money. For the last two years Billy had provided none. Their savings were depleted.

Leslie scanned the bedroom with its lavish wall coverings and appointments. *This*, she said to herself, *is what I've earned. He may be foolish enough to throw it away, but not me.* While her body still craved him, with each passing month, her lust for the largess of LaCour waxed, while her tolerance for marriage waned. Billy was the only one who couldn't see it. Something had to give.

When the phone rang, Leslie checked the ID and picked up the receiver. "Hi, Billy. It's late."

"I know. Did I wake you?"

"No. Couldn't sleep. Anything wrong?"

She listened expressionless as Billy reported the trip to the Rio Hot Springs with Sam and the rifle shot that took Sam down. When he went on to tell of the second shot intended for him, her eyes widened. A sick feeling welled in her stomach, but not from horror.

"Are you still there?" Billy said.

"Yes, yes," she answered, struggling for the right tone. She drew the sheet up under her chin as if to hide from the source of her anxiety. *My God. I'm sorry he missed.*

As Billy continued his description of the attack, Leslie tried to deny her feelings, to write them off as the kind of dark fantasy where you push an annoying stranger in front of a train. But the more he described how close the bullet had come to him, the more she thought what a perfect solution it would have been. She shook her head and blinked. *This has gone too far. I've got to get out.*

As Leslie considered this new reality, Billy continued his story of the day's events. "The taste of the water was familiar, but I couldn't place it," he said. "It wasn't until I got to the motel and tried it again that I remembered. I did a few simple tests and they held up. High-grade dysprosium."

He recounted Clive Larsen's experiments with that and other rare earth minerals. "Since we've got no money to go any further with development,

I'm thinking I need to do two things, and fast. Find Larsen to get confirmation of the mineral, and line up someone to help us process it.

"If it checks out with Larsen," Billy said, "Luke Stasney might be interested. Stasney Energy is independent and has a history of taking risks. I'm afraid the big nationals will just steal it, or worse. So, what do you think?"

The wheels were turning in Leslie's head. Luke Stasney had been a fraternity brother of Billy's at UT. Luke and Leslie had dated for a year before she met Billy. Rich and handsome, Luke had all the credentials. She recalled the day she'd left him for Billy. It was ugly. First, he'd been angry, then sad, then pitiful—not a day a man likes to recall. Especially a man who'd always gotten what he wanted.

Leslie opened her briefcase, took out her iPhone, and entered the name Stasney Energy into her Dunn and Bradstreet account. "Well, I'm sure Luke would be happy to hear about the discovery," she said, buying time.

"You think he'd hold any grudges?"

Her pulse quickened as she read the company's report. "Annual Sales: \$50,000,000. CEO: Luke Stasney." No spouse's name. The thought of another chance at one of the most eligible men in Houston was a powerful drug. She responded casually, "I'd give him a call."

"I'll do that. Looks like I'll have to be out here for a few days. Will you be okay?"

*Now is the chance, she thought, to solve all my problems at once.* She closed her briefcase. "Sure, Billy. Be careful."

She turned out the light and slept better than she had in months.