

Black Gold, Red Death

Chapter 1

Buck Shimer flipped on the lights as he reversed the rusty trawler out of its slip. When he felt the solid bump against the stern he swore, cut the engine, and reached for the stout wooden pole that lay against his foot. With the pole he probed the murky water and shoved aside the corroding oil drum that had drifted across the mouth of the slip. As it bobbed into the light thrown from a freighter off-loading a hundred yards away, he saw the word "Pemex" stenciled on the end of the barrel.

Coatzacoalcos was a filthy damn port and getting worse every day. Its harbor stank more than any other on the Gulf, and Shimer had long since lost his ability to smell anything but diesel smoke, sour gas, and sulfur. Unconsciously he worked the muscles of his unshaven jaw as he turned the Lucille away from the brightly lit docks where giant cranes and power machinery strained in a deafening roar to unload three grimy freighters. Out in the bay to his left, he saw the winking beacons of four more ships waiting their turn to disgorge an endless stream of cargo destined for the Reforma oil fields scattered around the Bay of Campeche.

As he eased the trawler away from heart of the warehouse district, the harbor brilliance gave way to the muted, low-voltage blues and reds of the *Zona Rosa* which was strung along the waterfront from the wharves to the edge of the city. The bars were the last things he could see before he turned his boat toward the deeper water of the bay and headed for Sanchez Magallanes, a rotting fishing village twenty-five miles farther down the coast. There was nothing there, but that was where his charters wanted to go. He had had stranger requests. Hell, it was nothing to him. They had

paid him enough to go all the way to Campeche. This was one night's sleep he wouldn't mind missing.

The cabin door to his left opened, and one of the passengers emerged from below and joined him on deck. He was a young Mexican, early twenties, Shimer guessed, as the youth lighted a cigarette illuminating his face in the glow of his cupped hands.

They were an odd bunch. Four of them, two dead-assed drunk and holding each other up as they came on board. The boy had done the talking. He had paid for the trip himself from a roll of American cash he drew from his khaki pants. But the wad of bills wasn't all that unusual in this part of Mexico, anymore. You saw a lot of unusual things, but you never let on what you thought. A poker face and deaf ears were invaluable in Coatzacoalcos.

They picked up speed, and the Gulf breeze whipped the back of Shimer's denim shirt, drying the sweat that had drenched it while they had sat in the foul stillness of the harbor. He kept the trawler close to the shore for the first five miles, avoiding the network of buoys farther out that marked the freighter lanes to the busy port. In keeping this close to the mainland, the crusty old boat moved in the powerful glow of an infamous scene well known to those who plied these coastal waters at night.

Across fifteen miles of dark vaporous marshland dotted with flickering fire pits for burning off chemical waste rose the monstrous spectacle of the refinery of Minatitlán, a glittering castle in the mouth of hell. Surrounded by giant flares burning excess raw gas, it belched clouds of leaden smoke which hung in the night sky like brooding volcanic smog reflecting the lurid oranges and reds which themselves were mirrored on the glassy surfaces of the stagnant lagoons. It was an awesome sight, a billion-dollar conflagration in the poverty-stricken marshes of southern Mexico.

Swinging the trawler farther out into the bay to avoid the long tongue of a sandbar at the mouth of the Pedregal River, Shimer switched his attention from the landward side to the bay, where the sparkling towers of the offshore drilling rigs were scattered across the water toward Campeche. A cabin launch that had been gaining on them for the past five minutes veered off to their left toward the nearest rig, its wake leaving a

widening V behind it. These launches maintained a constant ferrying service from Coatzacoalcos, carrying shift crews and supplies to the isolated rigs.

The cabin door swung open again and an older man came out onto the deck. In the brief splash of light that fell across the man's face, Shimer noticed his strained features were glistening with sweat. Though it was no doubt stuffy inside and the rolling trawler couldn't be comfortable on a belly gorged with *cerveza*, there seemed to be more than the discomfort of a drunkard's nausea portrayed in the man's expression. The older Mexican glanced at Shimer and then turned his back on him as he took a cigarette from the young man, whom he engaged in an earnest conversation inaudible to Shimer above the trawler's rumbling diesel.

It was none of his business, Shimer reminded himself as he caught a whiff of the resinous-sweet fragrance of marijuana, none of his damn business that these bobos wanted to go to that reeking coastal village. He tried to think of the money and how soon he would be back to Coatzacoalcos. He thought of the engine overhaul the Lucille had to have and how her hull needed scraping. There was no problem about getting those things done now, and all he had to do was lose one night's sleep. A goddam bargain.

But it wasn't a bargain, and Buck Shimer knew it. He sensed it, despite his forced optimism. He could feel the little bundle of folded money in his pocket, and for some reason he couldn't believe they would let him get home with it. He glanced around at the two men talking behind him. The kid was as nervous as a cat, and Shimer got the impression he was in something way over his head. The older man was right up in his face giving him a tongue-lashing he wouldn't soon forget, and the kid was looking him straight in the eye as if he was afraid to look anywhere else.

When the man had vented his spleen to his satisfaction, he turned to Shimer, wiping his face on the shoulder of his shirt with a shrug.

"How much longer is it?" he asked in Spanish.

Shimer looked toward land, catching familiar lights, simple landmarks. He used to use the rigs in the bay for markers but he soon learned they couldn't be trusted. They moved around, shifted positions if the locations weren't suitable to the geologists and drillers.

"I guess we're 'bout halfway," he said, nodding toward the shore. "There's the microwave tower at Politos."

"Time. How much time is it?" The Mexican didn't try to hide the impatience in his voice.

Shimer looked at him. "I'd say fifteen minutes. Not long."

The man ran his fingers through the rancid curls of his oily hair.

"Pound on the cabin just before you head into shore," he commanded. He was careful not to open the door too wide as he stepped back inside.

"Damn!" Shimer said to the young man without looking around. "Drinkin' sure sets 'im on his ear, don't it?" He knew the man wasn't drunk.

The youth didn't respond but sat despondently on the gunwale.

"Hey," Shimer said, turning to him. "You sick? They're not throwing up all over my cabin, are they?"

The boy jerked his head up angrily. "Shut up!" he yelled. "You shut up or—"

Suddenly a strident scream burst from the cabin, a scream of unmistakable agony. Shimer whirled around to face the youth, who was already on his feet, both arms extended straight out in front of him, his hands gripping a revolver pointed at Shimer's stomach. As they stared at each other, a second scream jolted them both, a sustained high pitch abruptly cut off by a blow Shimer could hear clearly from where he stood.

Ducking and spinning around, Shimer whipped the trawler's steering wheel, causing the craft to dip sharply as it sheered, flipping the boy backward over the gunwale. As he fell over the side he flung out his left hand and grabbed for the railing; the reflex action of his right hand jerked the trigger, firing a shot into the air.

Shimer righted the trawler, shoved the throttle on full speed, and headed for the nearest drilling rig platform. He recognized the older Mexican's voice calling "Marcos! Marcos!" as he grabbed the wooden pole and stepped to the blind side of the cabin door to wait for what he knew would come next. When the door burst open, Shimer slammed down the pole with all his strength across the Mexican's neck.

Jerking the door back, he stepped over the body into the doorway. In

an instant his stomach went hollow. Spread-eagled on the cabin floor with his wrists and ankles tied to pieces of furniture with nylon fishing cord that was cutting into his flesh with each convulsive jerk lay a middle-aged American dressed in business clothes. His shirt was pulled up under his arms, exposing a soft white stomach. His trousers and underwear were pulled down around his knees. Between his legs a briefcase lay open, revealing a dry-cell battery with wires running from it to the man's testicles.

Crouching over the man's stomach with an ice pick and a bottle of dye, a third man gaped up at Shimer, interrupted from his task of scratching a crude tattoo in the American's soft flesh. The American's eyes were open but glazed over. Shimer knew he had gone beyond what he could endure and still be expected to live. Blood from his nostrils had caked around his mouth and run into his shirt collar.

In a single swift movement, the third man came to his feet flipping the ice pick end over end at Shimer, who saw it coming and fell back over the body of the Mexican on the stairs. The ice pick whistled over his head into the water. As the Mexican lunged at him, Shimer kicked out with his right foot and caught the man in the throat, a lucky blow that sent him sprawling over the American on the floor. Shimer scrambled up the stairs and slammed shut the cabin door and barred it with the wooden pole. As he raised himself to the steering wheel a gunshot splintered the top of the door. It had come from behind!

He whirled around to the stem of the trawler and froze at the unbelievable sight of the young Mexican clinging to the gunwale railing with one arm and aiming the pistol at him with the other. He saw two flashes, then a third. He didn't feel the slug smash into the corner of his eye, and he didn't feel the back of his head blow out. He didn't feel anything at all.

San Antonio, Texas

Martin Gallagher was awakened by the sun streaming through the tall casement windows of his bedroom. He knew he was late. When he pulled Saturday shifts it put him in a bad mood even before he got out of

bed. He threw back the cover and swung his legs onto the floor. It was already hot outside, and he could hear the cicadas droning in the Spanish oaks along the street. For a moment he sat half asleep on the edge of the bed fighting the impulse to fall back into the cool sheets. Instead, he turned his head to the windows again and opened his eyes. The burst of direct sunlight blinded him for a moment, making his eyes water. He stood up.

He pressed his feet against the cool hardwood floor as he selected his clothes from the wardrobe, then plodded into the bathroom for a cold shower. He hadn't slept well, and he knew why. On his desk at the office were half a dozen slips of yellow notepaper reminding him his sister had called repeatedly the previous day. He hadn't returned her calls.

The two of them had never understood each other. They were as different as two people could be, and, in many ways, he believed their long-standing alienation had been inevitable from the very beginning. And yet he couldn't help feeling that somehow they had let each other down. But if Stella felt anything similar she hadn't expressed it, and it was highly unlikely that she did. Wavering indecision wasn't a part of her makeup.

Though their personalities differed dramatically, that in itself hadn't been the cause of their alienation. Stella's impetuosity and hot temper were attributes Martin had always taken in his stride, even when they were children. He had accepted them early on and had even found them admirable when they took the form of righteous indignation. She was seldom wrong when it got to that point.

The serious differences had come much later when they were in college together at the University of Texas. It was during the rampaging sixties, and Stella had become embroiled in the radical politics of *La Causa*, a league of human rights activists who fought the long fight against police repression in the Mexican countryside. In those years there was a large contingent of students from Mexico at the university, and Stella had readily embraced their fiery causes.

But Martin steadfastly refused to become involved and accept what she insisted were his moral responsibilities. She badgered him unmercifully throughout graduate school trying to draw him into various

political movements. Like so many of the radicals during that hectic decade, she couldn't tolerate benign silence.

The ultimate split came shortly after they both had completed their graduate degrees. Martin was already a rookie reporter working for his father at the San Antonio Times, and Stella was teaching at St. Mary's University while devoting what money and time she could to Mexican revolutionary causes. They were home for Easter Sunday, and Stella, having arrived in a foul mood, began haranguing the family and goading Martin during the course of the dinner. She accused him of having no affection for his own blood. She called him a drone, an albatross around the neck of human decency, because he didn't care for his own people who suffered injustice in their homeland while he took for granted the easy ride fate had given him.

It was the kind of rhetoric he detested, and finally he retaliated. By now he had forgotten his own words, but he remembered they had raved at one another, flinging curses and indictments across the table until his father had stopped them. But he was too late; they had said too much. In their anger they had gone too far, spoken words that would always hurt, that never could be canceled out with apologies or tears. They could never see each other with the same eyes again, and never did.

Then, later that same year, his parents were killed in a car wreck on a crooked caliche road north of San Luis Potosi during their annual trip into Mexico to visit his mother's family. He and Stella went down together to bring back the bodies. They drove from San Antonio to Laredo and then took the train to San Luis Potosi. They rode south in silence.

Coming back on the night train with the bodies of his parents in the baggage car behind them, they talked. He and Stella had been badly shaken by his parents' deaths, knowing how grieved they had been over their recent split. It was clear to him Stella was feeling guilty, though she would never be able to find the words to express it. They sat together in the empty coach drinking her Passport scotch from an aluminum thermos and watching the desert float by in the moonlight. Stella drank heavily, even then, and instead of becoming reticent as she usually did when she drank, she grew loquacious.

She admitted, as Martin had always suspected, that she resented

being a stepchild to his parents. It didn't matter, she said, that they had been reared exactly the same. It really never could have been the same and never was.

"It's ironic," she said, holding her cup of scotch close to her mouth with both hands but not drinking, "I'm Mexican—Anna's cousin; we've the same blood, she reared me from infancy as her own child, and she loved me as much as any mother could. But temperamentally, spiritually, I'm Brian's daughter, and I haven't a drop of Irish blood in me."

Martin didn't reply. She had been talking endlessly, cathartically.

"You're like Anna," she continued. "Thoroughly Mexican, dissimulating, reticent, moody. But I'm like Brian: impulsive, fervent, explosive. I think he recognized that and it amused him. There's always been an abyss between you and me. You know that."

"Yes," he had said, staring out the window, "I know that."

"I loved her, dearly, but he captured my imagination. Those books he read to us when we were kids! He could have been an actor. Hell, he was an actor! He played the lead in *Life*, right up to the end." She smiled, then let it fade and sipped the Passport. "It's hard to think of them mute, back there in those boxes."

"Don't think about it," he said.

"Don't think of an elephant!" she snapped, then caught herself. "Shit. Anyway, I'm glad he saw us both through graduate school. That meant a lot to him. He was strictly bourgeois in that respect. Thought education would save the world. Well, he made us literate, by God, and he taught us to think. Poor Anna, she didn't look good, did she? I can't stop thinking of her slamming into the dash and what must have happened after that. She was the handsomest woman I've ever seen. Everyone said that, didn't they? Damn, they were wonderful."

Martin listened to her talk. He would rather have been alone, but Stella was taking them on a tour of the past. She remembered what his parents had been like when he and Stella were small children; she remembered the annual summer trips the four of them took to San Luis Potosi to visit his mother's family and Stella's aunts and uncles. She remembered high school when she decided to assert her independence and began calling them Brian and Anna, and how his mother had been hurt by

what she believed was an act of rejection and how Brian had laughed at her spunk. She remembered the fat years when Brian had won national notoriety for his coverage of organized crime in San Antonio, and how the New York Times had tried to hire him and he had refused. She talked about the college days, not so far in the past. It had been a night train through Stella's memory, and Martin had felt sorry for her that it had been no less dark than the Mexican desert outside their window.

That had been ten years ago. He saw her seldom in the intervening decade, dinner together once in a while, birthdays, Christmas, and the anniversary of their parents' deaths. But they had never again talked of her work with *La Causa*. She had gone underground. She was even more serious now, the stakes were higher, and she had seen the wisdom in discretion.

Then, lately, she had been calling him under the pretense of "needing someone to talk to." They had had dinner together a few times, and she had alluded occasionally to her work with a group in the city who supported "certain political movements" in Mexico. She was subtle, subdued, less inclined to rhetoric, and he found her obvious desire to talk dispassionately with him about her great passion a touching show of deference uncharacteristic of the Stella he had always known.

For whatever reason, she was trying to lay to rest the past ten years of their strained truce. Their awkward dinners together two or three times a year had not been pleasant for either of them, and he had often wondered why they kept it up. Now she was wanting to close the gap that had grown between them, and he found himself holding back. He was suspicious, and angry at himself for his cynicism.

After shaving, he quickly dressed, locked the front door, and began jogging the three blocks to the bus stop. He had been late to the office three days (including today) out of the past two weeks, and he remembered with relief that his car would be ready at Sammy's garage at noon. He got to the corner just in time to put his foot on the bench and tie his shoe before the bus heaved to a roaring stop beneath the palm trees.

Martin stepped in the door, and the driver pulled away from the curb as he dropped his coins in the change box. Grabbing the upright chrome posts, Martin hesitated in front of three dumpy Mexican women

clustered at the front of the bus. They stopped talking, a concerted reflex action, and waited for him to choose his seat. He swayed past them down the aisle and sat near the back door.

The only person on the bus besides the women was a middle-aged man sitting two seats up from him across the aisle. He was small, pear-shaped, and wore light gray serge pants and a suit coat with a yellowed white shirt open at the neck. His hair was oiled, dyed black, and parted high near the center of his head. Puffy bags hung under his eyes and a simpering upper lip sported a black pencil-thin mustache. Cradled in his arms, an aging Chihuahua with its nails painted red salivated profusely, smearing and streaking his coat. The man let the dog rest its chin on its paws in the crook of his arm as he stroked it gently, kissed its knobby head, and toyed with his little finger inside the dog's ear. With a ringed middle finger he daintily wiped a string of dribble from the thin canine lips.

The bus followed the boulevard to Market Street, where the three Mexican women got off with their webbed shopping bags. A discount record store blared bouncy *musica nortea* from a storefront speaker where young Chicanos lounged in the shady doorway staring passively out to some distant, more romantic way of life.

New passengers got on: a platinum blonde in a waitress uniform with a ruffled pink plastic apron, two cocky Mexican teenagers who leered at the waitress from behind designer sunglasses and nudged each other in a worldly manner. A solemn-faced streetwalker found an isolated seat, leaned her head against the window, and closed her eyes.

The stops came more frequently as the streets grew busier and the selling, buying, and arguing of the downtown day dictated the pace of the traffic.

The bus stopped on the southeast corner of St. Mary's Park at Trinity. At the other end of the block the tall wooden doors of the cathedral were thrown open, and a frail, wizened black man sat on the steps of the church tossing stale popcorn to the pigeons which came sailing in from the park across the street.

The pear-shaped man with the Chihuahua slid out of his seat and stepped into the aisle. He looked the other way as he brushed past Martin

on his way to the back door. The dog yapped once as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. Martin turned to look and saw the man put down the dog. With his hands on his hips, he strolled out onto the gravel pathway which led into the park, where the morning sun was streaming through the trees.

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