

Spiral

## Prologue

Jerry Lowell personally didn't like the idea of dealing with Mexicans. You didn't grow up in Texas without learning a couple of things about Mexicans, and the things you learned didn't encourage you to want to do business with them. But this one had been checked out. The bankers had done their work and a \$500-a-day investigator had done his work. As far as they could tell, the Mexican was fresh meat.

The fact was, Jerry was always a little antsy when he came to Houston, though he swaggered his way through it. In this goddam business you never admitted anything except that you were on a rocket and if anybody wanted to make a goddam fortune they damn well better climb on with you. But for years Houston had had this reputation of being the world's fastest rocket and even though it was presently sputtering, nobody expected it to fizzle out completely and some people even claimed it was going to pick up and blast right out of the universe. It still represented some of the best razzle-dazzle in the money market and you could still be surprised. The only thing was, you just never knew if you were thinking fast enough in Houston. Especially if you were from out of town, like Jerry.

Lowell mentally checked himself as he tugged at his crotch and tried to settle his parts into the little biddy pocket of his red nylon jockey shorts. He had on his native Austinite young buck wheeler-dealer uniform: knobby ostrich-skin cowboy boots, super-starched Levi's, super-starched tailor-made sky-blue shirt, specially made heavy-linked gold chain lying in

the nest of his chest hair and peeking out of his open collar, a Bill Blass sport coat which was cut full and helped hide the fact that Jerry was getting a little thick through the middle. He shook his left wrist to make sure the Rolex Oyster Perpetual worn loose like a bracelet so it would show from under his shirt sleeve, was indeed showing. He looked at his University of Texas Business School class ring on his right hand, big as a horse apple but a hell of a lot harder, and the specially made gold-glob ring on his other hand. He thought about his red Porsche 928S as he rubbed his cleanly shaven jaw and caught the fragrance of his own cologne. Shit, that Polo. He loved it.

He was ready for the Mexican.

Thing was, even if you made millions in Austin, you go to Houston you feel like somebody's kid brother. The city was so . . . damn big. The damn place didn't have a skyline, it had three or four of them. He stood on the forty-fifth floor of a building in one of them now. Greenway Plaza was the third-largest of what urban planners were calling Houston's "high-density urban centers," what Jerry used to call "downtown." To his left, across a seemingly solid blanket of treetops, he could see the West Loop District around Post Oak, and to his right, across more treetops, he saw the largest, original downtown. The city leaders had annexed so much land that Houston now covered nearly six hundred square miles, as much as Dallas, Denver, Atlanta, and San Francisco put together. Goddam.

But for a while Houston had been stepping back from unbridled, aggressive land development. Dallas was easing back, too, and Austin, which for several years had been the hottest spot in the country for flipping real estate, was slowly rolling over, belly up. A few years back the big players in the country had converged on Austin like cockroaches on Karo and nobody slept in the state capital for nearly two years. Fortunes changed hands twice a day every day while good ol' boys and bankers and conglomerate reps talked deals till they were pumped up tight and red in the face, passing around parcels of land like they were coke queens at a stag party, everybody wanting to get his hands on a nice piece before she passed out. Buy in a panic sell at a profit. Don't slow down, it can't last forever.

And it didn't. Flipping land was now just a sweet memory, like the

\$36 barrel of oil. Bankers were wearing slightly constipated expressions, the "thirty-day free look" was an outdated and meaningless phrase, and the city council had sucked up on development restrictions and zone changes. Times had changed.

So the Mexican was something to consider. He was already into condos and hotels on South Padre Island; he had bought some downtown property in Houston he had hotels in New Orleans, office buildings in San Antonio, health clubs in Dallas, ski lodges in Vail a radio station in Atlanta. He owned two homes in Houston. He had Swiss and Panamanian bank accounts. Where did he get his money? Jerry's philosophy was who gives a shit? If it came from a clean account it was clean money as far as he was concerned. The law couldn't expect him to sniff out the origin of every dollar he turned. You couldn't put a moral meter on money.

Jerry Lowell was thinking all this over when the door behind him opened and George Crisman hurried into the conference room. Crisman was the agent. He liked to call himself a "facilitator." As a lawyer, he came business possibilities from time to time that he knew Jerry would be interested in. He never put up any money, but if the deals went through he handled the legal work, for which he was well paid, and collected a finder's fee. When word got around Houston that Benigo Gamboa Parra was looking toward Austin, Crisman got on the telephone to Lowell, who started running his traps. Within twenty-four hours he had located some prime hill-country acreage just outside of Austin and had strong enough verbal commitments from the principals to enable Crisman to set up the meeting. Crisman liked meetings.

"Okay, Jerry, Gamboa's on his way up. You ready?"

"Sure, sure." Lowell gestured behind him to four orange, pasteboard cylinders with metal caps. "I've got the maps, plats, aerial photographs, the works."

A woman dressed as if she had just stepped off the ramp of the new Valentino show in Paris strutted into the room followed by two men in white jackets, one carrying a silver service, the other a tray of China, silver cigarette boxes, and an arrangement of fresh flowers. It was too early in the day for liquor. The woman directed the stewards in setting the table and showed them where to put each of the four yellow legal pads, each

with its accompanying fourteen-karat gold Cross pencil laid perpendicular to it on the mahogany conference table. Crystal ashtrays by each pad, an LED calculator by each pencil. The woman left the room. Crisman checked the layout with a quick eye and followed her. Jerry glanced at the stewards, who were puttering with the details of their coffee responsibilities. Steam was beading up on the spout of the silver coffee pot when the door opened and Crisman entered again, followed by four men in suits.

"Mr. Gamboa" Crisman said, "this is Jerry Lowell."

Lowell came forward and shook hands with the first of the four men. Benigo Gamboa did not fit into Jerry Lowell's "typical Mexican" category. This guy was smooth city. Spanish, Lowell thought. No Indian blood here. Eight-hundred-dollar suits on these old boys. Jerry did not see a Rolex Oyster on Mr. Gamboa's wrist.

"It is my pleasure," Gamboa said, smiling.

He did not have a pencil-thin mustache

"This is my associate, Mr. Sosa," Gamboa said, stepping back and gesturing an opened hand to a smaller, hawk-nosed man in a gray suit.

Jerry shook hands again. He looked at the other men, who did not come forward, and no one made any move to introduce them.

"Well, let's sit down, gentlemen," Crisman said.

Gamboa and Sosa smiled hugely and moved toward the black leather chairs on the side of the table that allowed them to face the windows and the panoramic city skyline. As they were in the process of sitting down and making room for their briefcases, one of the men who had not been introduced casually walked across the room and nonchalantly opened the first of two other doors that opened out of the conference room and executive bath. He sauntered over to the second door, saw it was a coat closet, and strolled back to a position near the main door of the conference room. His partner was easing along the wall of windows, looking at the Summit Tower across the plaza, looking at the thin window ledge. He eventually settled near the stewards standing beside the coffee service. None of this had escaped the stewards' attention. They cut their eyes at each other and waited uneasily for instructions.

Jerry tried to ignore the background movement, walked around to the other side of the table, and sat down facing the two Mexicans.

"Everyone want coffee?" Crisman asked, sitting down.

"Yes, please," Gamboa said appreciatively.

There was small talk while they were being served, and when the stewards had done their jobs they backed away to their neutral corners and Crisman began restating the background for the meeting. As Crisman spoke, Jerry wore an earnest expression of interest in the business at hand but noticed that the two no-names had touched the stewards' elbows, silently inviting them to leave the room. By the time they were out, Crisman was ready to get down to specifics and Jerry was beginning to recall headlines about Mexican drug kingpins and bodies found in the trunks of abandoned cars. He looked at the two no-names again. Jesus. They looked like gorilla sidemen on *Miami Vice*. Then he told himself to get real. This was typical Mexican flash. He had come to cut a land deal, and he had better get his mind on it.

"Would you like Mr. Lowell to go over the maps of the land with you?" Crisman asked.

"I do not think that will be necessary," Gamboa said, smiling. "We have done some of our own research. I think we know the attributes of the land in Austin well enough."

Crisman nodded deferentially. "Good. Then is there any information you require before we proceed?"

"I think not," Gamboa said.

Crisman nodded again. "Then do you see an offer?"

"We would be happy to offer you fifteen thousand-dollars per acre," Gamboa said. "We are prepared to seal the negotiations now if you wish."

There was a pause in which Crisman played poker face neutral, and everyone looked at Lowell. Lowell's expression took on a little bit of a frown. Just twenty-four hours before he had put down \$100,000 for a free look at the 265 acres he was proposing to sell to Gamboa. He did not own the land. However, he had talked to the Owners, who themselves had bought the acreage only six weeks before and told them he was interested in working a deal with them. They told him that they were about to option the land out for \$10,000 an acre, but they hadn't signed any papers. It was prime real estate, in the hills, on Austin's west side, not far from the lakes and adjacent to land that was rumored to be in for heavy development by

Canadian investors. Jerry thought he could smell the last real flip in central Texas.

He told the owners of the property that he thought he could get them \$12,000 an acre for it if they would let him put down \$200,000 for thirty days' free look. A free look simply meant that they could hold his money while he scouted around for potential backers. If he decided to buy the land the option money would go against the purchase. If he didn't buy, he could have his money back. They said they already had the solid deal for \$10,000 an acre which was going to give them a \$795,000 profit on a two-month investment and they didn't want to scare it off. However, it would be a week before they signed on the other option and if Jerry would let them hold \$100,000 he could have a week. Lowell never looked back.

In his eagerness to get a shot at the land, Jerry had told the owners that he thought he could put together a deal that would net them a \$5,000 per acre profit. That meant that his own profit from anything he might put together would lie in whatever money he could get over \$12,000 per acre.

As the four men sat in silence, Jerry was doing his damndest to look contemplative. If he accepted Gamboa's offer he personally would clear \$795,000 only thirty-six hours after he had located the property. But he couldn't do it. Not the first damn offer, not with what he knew about the Mexican's deep pockets.

"Is that pretty much what you see as tops?" Jerry asked. He had decided to chew on the inside of his cheek and frown a little more.

"That is our offer," Gamboa said. His smile was gone, replaced by a look of sincere apology.

Jerry looked at Crisman "I'm afraid I'm going to have to make a telephone call," he said. "You have an office I can use?"

"Sure," Crisman said. He pressed a button on a small panel near the edge of the table.

"Will you give me five minutes, Mr. Gamboa?" Jerry asked. "I'm going to have to check this out with my people in Austin."

"Of course. I understand." Gamboa smiled.

The woman who had been in earlier came to the door and took Jerry to an office down the hall. After telling him he could dial direct, she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaving him alone. He

stood stock still for a second, a shit-eating grin slowly covering his face. Then he slapped his left hand over his crotch, squatted, squeezed tight, and made a hook 'em horns sign with his right hand raised high in the air. He started laughing, making private wheezing sounds, as he flopped over on the leather ottoman, still gripping his crotch, raised his knobby ostrich cowboy boots, and spurred the air as if he were riding a bare-backed bull in a rodeo which he had never, ever, even come close to doing in real life. When he had had enough of that, he got up again and tried to stop laughing. He went to a mirror and tried to compose his face, working at it, then made up his mind to go for it.

When he came back into the conference room, Gamboa and Sosa had their heads together and Crisman was just coming out of the executive bathroom. That was good. He had left them alone. Jerry went back around to his side of the desk. He wore a sober expression, as if he were going to have to deliver some bad news.

"I'm going to have to have your final offer, Mr. Gamboa," he said. "Some other players have gotten into this.

"Crisman picked up his Cross pencil and screwed the lead inside. Jerry thought maybe he was going to stab it into the side of Jerry's neck if Gamboa folded.

"What will you have to have for us to get the property?" Sosa asked. Gamboa had leaned back from the table.

"I'm afraid it'll have to be seventeen thousand, Mr. Sosa. I'm sorry."

"Agreed." Sosa spoke without tension, as if he had just bought a television set.

Jerry Lowell had just made \$1,325,000 in less than thirty-six hours from the sale of a piece of land that he didn't even own.

Mr. Benigo Gamboa Parra had made an even better bargain. The \$4,505,000 he was investing in 265 acres of prime Texas real estate was not, strictly speaking, his money.

## Chapter 1

Summer came early. By March, the mild coastal winter had disappeared and Spring was a disregarded season: a few pacific days in early May. In the closing days of the month temperatures had climbed to record highs and the usual spring rains, seemingly confused by the brevity of the season, were few and slight. The heavy gray pillows of Gulf clouds that could pile up unexpectedly and darken the day with torrents of warm rain never paused, but drifted quickly on the southerly breezes passing over the city in bright white spumes that gave way to clear skies by midmorning. June ushered in two straight weeks of thermometer readings over a hundred, and by July Houston was locked into one of the hottest and driest summers of the city's history. It was the time of the long days, and at night, of Sirius, the dog star.

The old Belgrano home was on the southeastern edge of the city. When the mansion had been built more than a hundred years before, it had been part of a large estate that lay deep in the isolated coastal lowlands, almost in the flood-plains of the bayous that wriggled their way toward the back bays of the Gulf twenty miles to the east. Built in the nineteenth-century southern tradition, it had been constructed of brick and limestone with wide wooden verandas on both floors that were meant to take advantage of the meager and torpid Gulf air that made its way across the surrounding miles of scrub brush flats and into the East Texas woods of cypress and loblolly pine. The house was situated in the center of a cypress grove encircled by a high wall, its pediment crowned with sharp wrought-iron fleurs-de-lis.

Now all that was left of the estate lay within those same dun colored, crumbling walls. The big cypresses and oaks remained, casting a perpetual twilight of shadow over grounds which had been unattended for so long no one remembered them otherwise. The old house itself was hidden, obscured by the wild undergrowth of dead weeds and grasses, lost



within the matted tangles of coral and butterfly vines. The once wooded countryside had been scored and cross-hatched by the shaggy streets of one of the city's Latin barrios that had crowded and bullied itself right up to the pitted estate walls. The Houston Ship Channel was less than a mile away, and in the near distance toward the bays the barrios died away where miles of oil refineries, stark and sprawling, attached themselves to the channel like noisome tumors.

The entrance to the Belgrano estate faced Chicon Street in the core of the barrio, its graffiti-smearred walls abutting the sidewalk, its badly rusted gates sagging over a strip of bald caliche that went from the Street to about three feet inside the gates, the span of an arm's reach through the wrought iron bars where the smooth paving stones had been plundered over the years. The body lay in this patch of chalky dust.

It was approaching nine-thirty in the morning and the dry heat had already stirred the insects in the parched undergrowth on the other side of the high wall. The edge of the dead man's right shoulder and the tip of his splayed out right shoe were just now being touched by the thin light of the morning sun; the rest of him was in the blue shade, suspended on the white bed of caliche dust in his own silence and in the rasping drone of the insects.

He lay on his back, his legs straight out and parallel to each other and to the gate, his left shoulder up under the bars themselves as if he had been trying to crawl under. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit with stripes of a lighter gray, the coat neatly closed with a single button above his waist. A soiled white shirt, open at the collar and without a tie, showed above the V of his coat lapels. His hands were placed properly inside the Coat pockets, the thumbs outside as if he were posing for a quaint old fashioned photograph. He wore a pair of scruffy black lace-up shoes, but the laces were missing, the empty eyelets giving the impression of dispossession. He appeared to be a Mexican in his early thirties, chunky, not tall.

In the very center of the man's lead-colored forehead, just above his eyebrows, a single carpenter's nail protruded from his skull. There was no mess; it was very neatly done. One end of a tiny black string was tied to the nail, and to the other end of the string was tied a large red ant. The ant was

trying to walk away from the string, and in doing so was clambering back and forth in a shallow arc across the dreaming gaze of the man's opened eyes.

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