

Shutterbug

PART I

Chapter 1

Friday, September 5, 2009

Dallas, Texas

I was alone in my studio, absorbed in my latest project. I scrolled down the webpage, scrutinizing my latest shoot of a young magician sitting in a booth with a cocky grin and cards flying through the air all around him. I'm thinking a front pager for the book. Muscle car layouts, high-society charity balls, models, the annual shoot of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader calendar. I was staying busy, but not inspired.

Recently I'd been commissioned by an influential group of political types from Austin, whom I suspect are avid supporters of the governor, to put together a book of photographs highlighting the finer attributes of the people and beauty of the great state of Texas. They wanted eye-popping images and scenes of the distinct geographical regions, north, south, east, and west with special emphasis on the unique personalities of native Texans in their natural habitat. The proposal sounded more like a wildlife shoot in Africa the way they described it to me, but a fat, five-figure fee plus expenses convinced me to take the job.

Five years ago, if someone had predicted that I'd be running around the state taking pictures of cowboys roping cattle at the 6666's Ranch and roughnecks scraping out a living on a drilling rig, I'd have laughed in their faces and questioned their sanity. But here I am.

The Dallas/North Texas shoot had been easy. Everyone likes to rub elbows with former criminals that are likeable and dashing, and that beat the system and made fools of those mean old prosecutors that don't understand free spirits. My past notoriety opened doors and helped with getting sports figures, local and national politicians, gang-bangers, homeless, and everyday Joes to jump at the chance to be in my book, *Faces of Texas*. In the past six months, besides the North Texas area, I'd already photographed the people from the canyons and ranches of the Panhandle, the Great Plains farmlands, and the oil fields of West Texas. Now it was time to direct my efforts to East Texas.

Before I could click to the second page, my cell buzzed, and I snatched it off the desk, checking for the name of the caller, but it was blocked. I hoped that it wasn't one of my former netherworld associates looking for a handout or attempting to solicit me from retirement. "Brian Braun," I answered, continuing to scroll, still mentally eliminating shots.

"Brian? Senator Jimmy Fagan, here. Calling from Rusk. How're you doing this fine morning, Son?"

I perked up. It was Mr. East Texas himself. A book about Texas without Senator Jimmy Fagan's face and endorsement would have no credibility in the eyes of fellow Texans. And no sales. The old codger was the longest serving senator from the state and had more swing in politics than the President. He probably had more constituents buried throughout the state than Lyndon Johnson ever dreamed about. He'd also been dodging my calls for the past month, in spite of calls of encouragement from the supporters that commissioned me for the book. I had to convince him to sit for a photo shoot. "Well, I'm good, Senator ... a little surprised, but I---"

He cut me off in mid-sentence. “I know you’ve been tryin’ to get through to me while we’ve been on our little summer recess, but you’ve got to understand, I needed some down time before going back to face those devils in D. C. know what I mean? That Austin group has been hounding me to jump onboard with this Texas book thing, but ... anyway, had other things to get worked out before I could make any committments. Know what I mean, Brian?”

“Sure, of course, Senator,” I answered. “What can I do for you? You ready to set a date? I can show you what I’ve got so far and ---”

“Well, Brian, I’ve been thinking about that photo shoot and that book thing you’ve been doggin’ me to do.”

“Well, that’s great, Senator,” I said, “I’m glad you’ve had a change of heart. Can’t have a book about Texas without her favorite son at the forefront. You know what I mean, Senator?” I kept scrolling down the screen while I stroked the old fart’s ego. “So when would you like to--” He cut me off again, as though I hadn’t said anything at all.

“As you can understand,” he went on, “I had you checked out before deciding to do this thing. Hope you don’t mind. There were a few bumps in the road from your past, but we can’t let a little obsession to steal other people’s belongings and some bad PR keep a man from bettering himself...now can we?”

Shit. “Uh, no, of course not, however, I---”

“Your work is good, Son ... uh, the *photography* work, that is,” he chuckled.

I wondered if being an asshole was a requirement for being a United States Senator. Probably.

“That’s what’s important to me, Brian. Quality work, that is. Checked out your website. Impressive. Also dug up that stuff about you and those Highland Park capers. You took those losers to cleaners, I tell you what! That right? About sayin’ you took in over a million in stolen jewels and shit?”

“Uh, well ... you should know as well as anyone how inaccurate newspapers can be. I wouldn’t believe everything you read about all that, Senator.”

“Hell boy, I don’t give a shit about any of that. I kinda like it if you know what I mean. And just between you and me, I can’t think of a finer bunch of hyenas that deserved to be fleeced than those uppity, high society assholes.” The senator chuckled again. “Now listen to me, Brian ... talkin’ that way about my constituents. Those are the same hyenas that vote for me every six years, can you believe that? Guess I should hold my tongue, don’t you think?”

“It’s nice that you’re the forgiving kind, Senator. Us little people always appreciate a second chance.” *Maybe it was time to start thinking about moving to Canada.*

Senator Fagan continued, “Anyway, I think your project is very worthy. It’ll be good for Texas and all, but I’ve got an alternate little *thing* that’s a little more pressing and immediate, you might say. One hand washes the other, right? You help me and I help you? *Quid quo pro?* Got me?”

Washes his hand mostly. “Not exactly, Senator. Why don’t you explain it to me,” I said.

“So there’s something I’d like to propose to you. Something that’ll possibly put your name on the map quicker than that book you’re tryin’ to put together now.”

“I’ve already been on the map, Senator. I prefer *low-key*, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course I do, Brian, but just hear me out, and I think you’ll find me hard to resist.”

I gave him a chuckle this time. “That’s part of your reputation, isn’t it, Senator? A man who’s hard to say *no* to?”

“Listen, if you do *ex-actly* what I tell you to do and everything goes according to plan, you’ll end up shelving that silly book. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, Brian. You can trust me on that one.”

I wouldn’t trust this son-of-a-bitch to sell Girl Scout cookies. “That’d be your alternate *thing* you’re talking about. Right, Senator? Alternate to my *silly* book?”

“Right, and remember, Brian. Trust me. And yeah, a Plan B, if you like. One thing I will tell you though ... there might be ... or could be a *lit-tle* risk involved on your part, but that shouldn’t bother a man like you. A man of your *resources*. A man with a sense of adventure. Right? Anyway, you game?”

Why did I have the feeling I needed to bend over and grab my ankles? “Uh, not until I know what you’re talking about, Senator ... but you’ve peaked my interest, at the least. I’ll listen to what you’ve got to say.” I didn’t want to play games with this guy because he always won.

“Are you sitting down for this?” He asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, standing up.

“Son,” Senator Fagan said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, “I’m going to be ... well ... *assassinated* tomorrow.” There was silence on the line, for effect

I'm assuming. Then the Senator finished his sentence. "And I'd like for you to catch it on film for me." Senator Fagan paused again. "*Now* ... do I have your attention, Brian?"

Well, I wasn't expecting that and I'll have to admit he had my attention. The whole hesitation for effect was a good move. "Sure, Senator ... kinda like home movies? What time would you like me to be there?" I asked, sitting down.