

IN THE 1980S WEST-TEXAS OIL PATCH, WHEN THE POLICE REFUSE TO GET INVOLVED, A LOW-LEVEL CRIMINAL WITH FAMILY PROBLEMS, COLTON PARKER, AND FELLOW LOW-LIFERS ARE HIRED TO FIND TWO MURDERERS.

Gamblers, cons, and whores inhabit the night-time bar world of the early 1980s Odessa, Texas oil boom. Colton Parker—with a wife, two young boys, and a father-in-law—is a bouncer for a gambler and loan shark in this dark hidden world. Danny Fowler cruises this world looking for gay lovers. When he finds two mean ones, he ends up beaten to death and dumped on the road to an oil rig. Danny's rich mother, Mina, doesn't want Danny's night-time life exposed, so she persuades the police not to investigate. But she hires a reluctant Colton Parker to track down Danny Fowler's killers. Colton teams with Bullet Price, a retired whore, climbing up the bar-world social ladder. With help from a young whore and a gay tool pusher, Colton tracks down the two oil-field welders who killed Danny.

Praise for Danny Fowler's Killing

"A brilliant, intense carefully crafted narrative with no feeling of strain or effort. This is masterwork. The language and vision match, so the world opens for us as readers without any waver of authenticity. We are in it and trust what we are learning. There is always more to understand than we can, at the moment.—*Mary Hood, author of How Far She Went and Familiar Heat*

"Jim brings a literary and poetic sensibility to his compelling, utterly original crime novel, full of edgy, unique characters, sharp dialogue, and powerful storytelling. Colton Parker, Bullet Price and #Way Low will haunt you long after you've turned the final page."—*Lee Goldberg, #1 New York Times bestselling author of Lost Hills, Bone Canyon, True Fiction, and others.*

"Noir-writer Jim Sanderson's tough new novel gives us a two-generation search for belonging and soul set in the boom-bust oil town of Odessa, Texas. Sanderson's tortured characters are unexpectedly loyal, and they carry the weight of their own longings. They're also capable of almost any meanness—knifing, beating, murder—on their way to finding a place for themselves. Like their creator, they know one thing for sure: *Everybody's guilty.*"—*Lisa Sandlin author of Shamus Award winning novels, The Do-Right and The Bird Boys*

Excerpt

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"I ain't heard. And why should I care?" Colton said.

"You know Danny Fowler?"

"Can't say as I do."

"You've seen him. He comes in the bars starting around ten. He dresses like some college boy, but he's way older. What he's doing is looking for boys."

Colton pulled his squinted eyes from the line of the horizon and shifted them toward Bullet. "He's queer?"

"He had more problems than that."

"Maybe he deserved it. Maybe he scared some poor country boy, and that boy didn't want Danny Fowler groping around in his underpants, so he took to whaling him and, country boys being country boys, didn't know when to stop."

"Could be. But I figure some smarter boys noticed the cash he carried and robbed him. And then things got out of hand."

"What do you care? Let the police find out."

"The police can't know where he was killed."

Colton turned his bulldog face to her. "I'm guessing he was killed at your whore house motel."

“Like I said, the police can’t know that, not yet. But I aim to find those who killed him. But I’m just a woman in a man’s town, and I need some muscle, somebody to cover my back. I can pay good. You interested?”

Danny Fowler’s Killing

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For Liz

About the Author

Jim Sanderson has published seven novels and republished #three and an e-book collection of those three novels, and he has published three short story collections, one essay collection, two textbooks,



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"Dee Price's Story," *The Book of Villains*. Ed. Josh Wood. Main Street Rag (Charlotte, NC), 2011.

"Playing Scared." *Mystery in the Wind*. Second Wind Publishing, 2010.

Chapter 1

On a Sunday before the sun was up, late in October, after the 1981 Odessa, Texas Oil Show had closed, after all the drinking, whoring, and gambling had ended, Colton Parker stepped out the backdoor of the Cactus Lounge and into an early morning breeze. The sun was just coming up, and it lit a pumpjack. To somebody not from West Texas, a pumpjack would look something like a giant mosquito sucking up blood from the very heart of the earth. The line of orange the rising sun made and the glitter from the new pumpjack almost made the morning pretty, but the cool, kind fall breeze, not a rough West Texas spring wind nor a fall norther, blew tumbleweeds and trash against the pumpjack and a barbed wire fence farther away in the half-light.

Colton Parker squatted on the steps, the way an old farmer would, looked down, and saw crumpled laundry at the bottom of the steps. Raising himself, Colton toed the laundry and heard a grumble and noticed the laundry shifting. One of the drunk gamblers at Snake Popp's game must have come outside to piss in the dark, but he fell and passed out. Best to let him lie, Colton thought, and squatted back down on the step. His head hurt. His eyes still watered from all the smoke inside the Cactus Lounge. He coughed up some goo from his burning throat and lungs. His clothes smelled from the smoke. He had just closed another one of Snake's invitation-only gambling nights. Amarillo Slim himself had once spent the night in the Cactus Lounge, losing big and leaving well before sunrise. Snake had several tables set up and different games went on at each.

Colton was Snake Popp's "assistant." Colton was not tall, but he was a good two hundred and twenty pounds. His was squat like a pulling guard or a #bulldog. He was the type of guy that a troublemaker or

badass could look at and think he could whip—but wouldn't want to try. Snake hired Colton to keep peace.

All night, with Lionel Dexter, his partner, Colton had watched over the card players. The pros stayed sober and concentrated on the cards. Amateurs faked laughing at their losings or went outside and cried about them. The lump of laundry at Colton's feet was probably a crier. Somebody could have just lost control of his nerves. Somebody could have gotten pissed. So, Colton and Lionel were there, watching and ready. At the end of the night, the way Snake Popp pushed his shoulders back, Colton knew Snake Popp had won big.

Snake Popp was mostly a legitimate businessman. He was not nicknamed Snake because he was as mean as a snake but because, when he was just a kid, he got bitten by a rattler and lost a chunk of skin off his ankle. Snake grew up liking to show that scar to people. He became "Snake," and then he became rich through questionable means, through cashing in on what the good Baptists and Church-of-Christers would call sin.

The backdoor hit Colton in the back. He looked up and saw Bullet Price in the doorframe. Bullet owned the building and the rights to the vending machines. Betty Howard's husband had owned the business, but he died. To support herself, Betty ran the bar. Bullet, being a friend of Snake's and Betty's, arranged for the game after midnight closing. "Almost pretty, isn't it?" Bullet said and sat beside Colton.

Her body was taut. She had lost a breast to cancer and liked to tell people about the operation. She even liked to show them her scar. Her hair was swept back from her face in wings. She was attractive. But a forked scar running down her forehead to her left cheek ruined her face. As with her mastectomy, she liked to tell people about that scar. A broken whiskey bottle gave it to her. Colton looked at the bobbing pumpjack to avoid Bullet because she wanted him to work for her. "Long night," she said.

"It's what Snake pays me for."

"There's better money and shorter hours," Bullet said. "If you want them."

Colton looked at the trash lined up on the fences and watched a tumbleweed catch on the pumpjack and then roll away. Far off in a small pasture, a frisky young horse trotted the length of the fence and then back again, just burning up his pent-up energy. "You're right. It is almost pretty."

The few clouds in the sky had pink undersides. A rooster crowed. The smell of rain was in the wind, though West Texans knew that it would not rain, hardly ever did. And it was as cool as it would be all day. He watched because this truly was as beautiful as it could get in West Odessa, the unincorporated, ill-planned community of trailers, cinderblock buildings, and small bars with tin roofs and gravel parking lots. And in just a split second, as it happened in West Texas, the sun pulled itself above the flat horizon and suddenly the morning was bright yellow light and hot.

The 1981 Oil Show had closed the night before. After the oil show, some of the high-rollers from out of town who wanted to dip their beaks just a little bit longer into the spirit of the show had stayed another night and drifted into the Cactus Lounge for Snake's game. Even some of the locals came, to gape and lose. During the oil show, for those who preferred whoring away from the trailers at Ector County fairgrounds or who couldn't afford the high-priced hotels, Bullet furnished the whores and the locale, the First Quality Motel, out on Second Street. Running whores during the oil shows that ran every other year could make nearly a year's living for Bullet. Running whores was how Bullet got the money to buy the Cactus Lounge from Betty Howard in the first place.

"I suppose you heard Danny Fowler got killed last night," Bullet said. "He was beat to death."

"I ain't heard. And why should I care?" Colton said.

"You know Danny Fowler?"

Colton stared off at the distance. Snake had warned him to stay away from offers from Bullet. "No good can come of working for her," Snake had said. But Colton thought maybe that was just because Snake

wanted to keep Colton working for him at what he pays him. "Can't say as I do."

"You've seen him. He comes in the bars starting around nine or ten. He dresses like some college boy, but he's way older. What he's doing is looking for boys. Figures all those loose wild boys come to the oil field to get rich and busting their asses working as worms out on the rigs might be susceptible to his charms. The later it gets, the trashier the bars he goes to."

Colton pulled his squinted eyes from the line of the horizon and shifted them toward Bullet. "He's queer?"

"He had more problems than that."

"Maybe he deserved it. Maybe he scared some poor country boy, and that boy didn't want Danny Fowler groping around in his underpants, so he took to whaling him and, country boys being country boys, didn't know when to stop."

"That could be. But I figure some smarter boys noticed him and the cash he carried and deliberately robbed him. And then things got out of hand."

"What do you care? Let the police find out."

"The police can't know where he was killed. At least not yet."

Colton turned his bulldog face to her. "I'm guessing he was killed at your whore house motel."

"Like I said, the police can't know that, not yet. But I aim to find those who killed him. But I'm just a woman in a man's town, and I need some muscle, somebody to cover my back. I can pay good. You interested?"

Colton pulled his eyes away from Bullet and looked at that frisky pony running for joy within the confines of his corral. Colton thought that, if he looked at Bullet, she would seduce him in a way that didn't have nothing to do with sex but would have him out beating the shit out of people just because of her suspicions. "So why do you care? What's this queer to you?"

"Look at me," Bullet said. Colton obeyed. She balanced her cigarette on her bottom lip and held it in place with her top lip. She

slowly slid her denim jacket off one shoulder, then she unbuttoned her blouse, tugged at it to reveal a shoulder. She tugged some more and showed an ugly, twisty pink scar across half her chest. Around her neck was a chain, and dangling from that chain, next to the pink scar, was a casing for a .45 bullet.

Colton had to look, and he wanted to touch the scar and the bullet, but to save himself from Bullet, he said, “Good God, Bullet. Cover that up.”

“Danny Fowler bought me that. Saved my life.”

“The scar or the casing?”

“The scar, Colton, the goddamn scar. He paid for my surgery. So, you see I owe him big time, and I hurt like hell that I couldn’t save his. I’m doing the next best thing and finding who killed him.”

“I ain’t seen nothing on the news, ain’t read nothing. How come you know so much?”

“Like I said, I know where he was killed. And I got something of a witness.”

“Shit, Bullet. Well just shit.”

The backdoor to the cactus lounge hit Colton in the back again. He looked up. Betty Howard said, “If you can tear yourself away from the view, Colton, Snake wants to see you.”

As Colton pushed himself up, Bullet said, “You know with just a little more nerve, you could be making more money than what Snake pays you.”

“I ain’t gone to jail for what Snake has me do.”

“Not yet,” Bullet said. “But don’t forget about Gervin. And you got to ask yourself, are you making what you should for what you are risking?”

“I’m making due.”

“You making what you’re worth?”

“I figure I am.”

“Then hell, you making what you want?”

Colton didn’t answer her but walked through the door into the haze of cigarette and cigar smoke in the Cactus Lounge. Betty Howard went

behind the bar and started stocking beers in the cooler for the next night. On the other side of the bar, sitting on a barstool, with his head on his folded arms and his snoring rattling the rickety bar and a glass, was Lionel Dexter. Colton walked up to the barstool and lightly kicked it. Lionel didn't budge. Colton kicked it again. Lionel pulled his head up and shook it. "Don't let Snake see you sleeping this soon after working," Colton said. Lionel was much younger than Colton. He was bigger but not as scary. He had a gentle look in his hangdog face and eyes. People might not think he would do what he threatened to do to them. They knew Colton would. But Lionel was quick; he tried hard; and he listened to Colton. He played football for a while, like Colton, a machine with a football some people called him, but as with Colton, a busted knee ruined his football playing. And as some of the old time Odessans used to say, "Without a football under his arm, Lionel was just another nigger," and Lionel knew the score out in West Texas in 1981.

The Cactus Lounge had an office, and Colton entered it without knocking. He sat across from the card table that served as a desk. Snake came out of another door that connected to a small, private restroom. He slapped cologne on his face, trying to wake up. His large silver, gold, and turquoise rings glinted in the early morning light. Snake's silver hair was combed straight back, making him look like that ol' country singer Porter Wagoner. His just-barely-thicker than a pencil-thin white moustache lifted as he smiled. Snake made it a habit, even in hot summer months, to never look hot. He made his living with his big, fancy bar, his bootlegging in dry counties, and his stripper bar. But his passion was gambling. All required that you bluff, but Snake wanted no one to know when he was bluffing, including Colton.

"Job well done," he said to Colton. "Went real smooth tonight. Course there was some weeping and gnashing of teeth, but nobody just lost their shit."

"Bullet's offered me another job again," Colton said.

"Now, Colton," Snake said. "I'm being as fair to you as I can. I ain't got the profits I used to."

“I got a family,” Colton said.

“That Mexican family you married into still eating up your money?”

“I got expenses.”

“And just what you think you’re going to do with your talents other than to work for me? You think that family of yours is going help you climb up the social register? You think you going to join First Baptist and go to church?”

Snake, in his polo shirt with the little alligator where the pocket should be, combed his hair back up over his head, shook his comb, and put it back into his starched cotton slacks’ back pocket. “Bullet’s talking shit. What can she offer you? Picking up and servicing vending machines? Throwing out drunks?” Snake slid his arms into his new leather jacket.

“This is different. She wants me to help her find out who killed a friend of hers.”

Snake stopped pampering himself. “Danny Fowler?”

“How the hell do you know?”

“I hear things.”

“How come I don’t?”

“Cause you ain’t me.”

“How about I help her?”

“Goddamn it, Colton. I thought you had better sense. There’s police involved. What if the police connect Danny to her, to me, to this place, or to you?”

“So how they gonna do that?”

“You keep out of it.”

“She makes it sound like I could help. Sometimes, I feel like I want to know more, be in charge. You know, be more than just help, but help somebody.”

Snake pointed. “I know Mina Fowler. Let me call her. But unless and until you get any word from me, you stay out of this.” Snake rubbed his hair along the sides of his head. “Aging pretty boy Danny Fowler got killed by butt-fucking queers, and you want to get involved.”

“I’m fixing to go home. Like you, I been up all night.”

“Bullet and me go back.” Snake smiled and flipped up the collar of his leather jacket. He had worked on his suntan by sitting out at his pool two hours a day, even when the weather was cold. He was lean from swimming in that heated pool. His slacks were black with sharp creases. His polo shirt was purple, and he looked as fresh as if he had just gotten up, showered, shaved, and dressed. “I’m just trying to say you got to watch her. She likes you, you got no better friend. But Bullet don’t have the same kind of moral bearing as most people.”

“But she’ll tell you she’s still got her soul.”

“Listen, let’s not get bitchy here. Why don’t you come and let me buy you breakfast?” Snake turned around like he was looking for another mirror.

“I got to get home.”

“Got or want to get home?”

“My family’s going to be in church, and I’m supposed to watch my two boys.”

“We can still get breakfast.”

“Maybe Lionel’ll go.”

“This family business is twisting your stomach and your brain in knots. Relax a little.” Snake patted Colton’s shoulder as he walked out the office door. A year before, Colton and Lionel had driven to El Paso and checked into a Holiday Inn. Then they went to a liquor store just outside of town and started carrying cases out of the store and into their car. It was payment for Snake. A month before, a runty-looking guy said nasty things to one of the strippers at the Stampede. Then he followed her home. That stripper didn’t speak English, but the next day she made Snake and Colton understand. So Colton and Lionel waited for the runt out in the parking lot. When that lonely man told Colton and Lionel to fuck off, Colton plowed straight into him, pinning him against the wall, and kneed him in the crotch. While Lionel pounded him, Colton took off the man’s thick belt and wrapped it over his knuckles, so his knuckles wouldn’t get so battered. After pounding him with that belt, Colton looked at his battered knuckles. The zipper on the inside of that money belt had torn up his knuckles. Colton kept the

money folded up inside that belt and gave the belt to Snake. What was that lonely runt to do, press charges and have the police know he was stalking strippers?

Colton stepped back into the Cactus Lounge and the slanting sunbeams filled with the dust falling down from the ceiling and the smoke wafting about. Snake came out behind him and yelled to Lionel, “Hey, Lionel, your partner don’t want none, but you interested in breakfast?”

Lionel lit up and looked at Colton, “Boss is buying breakfast and you refuse?” he said to Colton.

“Go on ahead. I got family to tend to.” Lionel jumped off his barstool. Smiling, the new morning sun gleaming off his silver hair, Snake steered himself out the Cactus Lounge, and Lionel Dexter, with one last look over his shoulder at Colton, followed Snake into the sunshine.

Colton stepped through several sunbeams when Bullet came in from the backdoor. “That fella got sober enough to stagger down the road. He can’t remember where he left his car.”

Colton planted his elbows on the bar and worried. Bullet said, “Maybe if you’d studied harder in high school and gone to college, you’d be doing the books for Snake instead of busting heads.”

“I was never good with numbers.”

“So, you don’t know what adds up to what,” Bullet said, and Colton smiled. “You want a drink? I’m buying,” Bullet said.

“I got to go home,” Colton said.

“You know, I got a friend. Ol’ Bill Sears. He sells old, beat up cars to illegal Mexicans. He knows they’re poor, knows they can’t make the payments, but he sells them, collects what he can for several months, takes a loss several months, then repos them. Then Bill sells that car again, and again, and again. Bill is making good money. And now listen to this. When he has a night off and needs cash, your partner, Lionel, rides shotgun for Bill’s repo guys. And here’s the point. I’m thinking of going into business with Bill Sears. Why not you?”

“Why you so interested in me?”

Bullet poured herself a shot and sipped it. “I don’t like to see people sell themselves short. And I could help you. And I plan on lasting longer than Snake Popp. But first you got to help me find out who killed Danny Fowler.”

“Why the hell you want me? What I got you need?”

“Reliable people who can provide the type of help you do are hard to come by.”

So, Colton went to breakfast with her instead of Snake and Lionel and listened to her schemes and scams. And watched as she fought back tears to tell him all about Danny Fowler.

Chapter 2

Colton lived with his wife and his two sons, Arnie and Mando, in a small house on Adams Street. But to help watch the boys, Elena brought her father into the house, and he stayed. So, Colton lived with Way Low too. The house was old and crumbling, but it was cheap. Colton knew that he should want a family. He knew that a family in place in a house was a part of what he should have and want. A family in your house is social and economic advancement. But he wasn't prepared for a family, a house, or advancement.

On this October Sunday now twenty-nine hours after Danny Fowler was killed, he came home to a nearly empty house. In the kitchen, Way Low sat and listened to a throbbing Norteño song on his transistor radio. It was about bleeding and broken hearts and the women who caused that bleeding and breaking; it was that kind of sentimental crap that sounded better in Spanish. "We have TV," Colton said.

"I like the radio better," Way Low said.

"So, they've already gone to church?" Colton asked.

"Early mass."

"And you?"

"I done fine my whole life without the church. It's for women anyway. Besides, I got a job usually lasts past church."

"Any of that oilfield equipment move?"

Way Low chuckled, "It don't seem to notice me, and I'm getting where I don't notice it. We compromised."

"How's the boys,"

"Look for yourself. They fought over the pan dulce, stuffed themselves. So now, instead of going to church and getting religious, they're sleeping."

Way Low's real name was Raul. He was Colton's father-in-law. Colton's youngest son, Mando, like Colton, had trouble making his

mouth say Spanish words. Colton couldn't say and Mando couldn't hear *Amando*, so *Amando* became *Mando*. Mando couldn't hear or say *abuelo*, so Mando and Arnie's grandfather become *Way Low*.

Arnie was eight and stayed to himself, finding things to amuse him instead of finding people. Mando was just six years old, waiting to start school. He did not know words. So Mando was jealous of his older brother. Sometimes at night, instead of going to sleep, Mando would get a flash light under his covers and stare at his picture books and try to say the words that were under the pictures and pretend that he could read. Way Low and his mother and sometimes Colton would read those words to him.

Colton left Way Low to his coffee and music and walked down the hall to the last bedroom. He hesitated at the door, not sure if he should or wanted to look in on his sons or not, not sure if they were asleep or awake, not sure if he should wake them. He forced himself to smile, opened the door, and stepped in.

Mando was smearing deep blue across his coarse coloring book paper with his crayon. Arnie was watching some show about animals on the small TV. They had used sleepiness as a con to get out of going to church. But they were still in their pajamas and fighting sleep.

Arnie looked up at Colton and smiled but turned back to his TV. Mando did not look up from his coloring book, but he stopped coloring, stared at the words under the pictures, and from memory of his mother reading the words to him, tried to recite the word. Colton was interrupting his boy's intensity. He thought to take Way Low's advice—bring home the money—thought he should just leave them to it, but he had sons. "You boys, not going to say 'hello' to your Daddy," Colton said and held his arms open, his smile stuck.

And in unison, his boys said, "Hi, Daddy."

At first Colton did not know what to do, but he remembered and scooped Mando up, got him horizontal between his two hands, and pressed his boy like a dumbbell up in the air until he almost touched the ceiling with him. Then he started to spin, and Mando made his little-boy giggle. Colton felt like he was standing still and the room was

spinning around him and his boy. But he kept on twirling, then blew air between his lips to make a humming sound. And Mando made the sound and spread out his arms like he was flying. They called this game “airplane.” They wouldn’t have too many more years to play it because Mando was growing. Arnie had started school and reading and was almost too big for airplane rides. Besides, he liked watching his TV better than reading, school, or airplane rides. Dizzy, breathing heavy, Colton stopped, curled Mando in his arms, then set him down. He put his hands on his knees to look at the boy eye to eye and wondered what the word *father* meant to Mando, the boy pretending he could read.

* * *

Colton left his sons to their TV, their coloring books, and their words and went into his kitchen. He had already had a breakfast and coffee with Bullet, and though he was tired, he knew that he could not go to sleep. He listened to Way Low’s sad songs that he could not understand and stared into his cup.

“Way Low, did Elena say anything when she left for mass?”

“Say about what?”

“About me.”

“She says you should go to mass.”

“I don’t know shit about mass.”

“A man’s job,” Way Low said and waited to point at Colton, “is his job. That is what he should do. So you don’t got to worry when you come home.”

“I’ve been offered some extra,” Colton said. Way Low twisted in his seat and reached up to turn down the volume of his radio. “There’s some things about it that are, are, are not quite right.”

“You mean ‘legal,’” Way Low said. “I’m a Mexican. I know about these things. You got to figure out the risks. You got to figure what you got to lose.”

“You tell me. What I got to lose?”

Way Low reached and turned the radio down lower. “What you mean?”

“I don’t know nothing about this.”

“What’s this?”

“This family thing. All that goes on here.”

“What’s to know? Same as church. The women go. They take care of family. Your job is your job.”

“But I don’t know what goes on here.”

“So don’t.”

“I got to live here.”

“So live here, but don’t think so much.”

“What if I was to go to jail, or get shot, or something?”

“My father swims a river and pulls me and a raft with our clothes in it after him. Never bitched. You takes your chances when you do what you got to.”

Colton stared into his coffee. His nerves danced and tingled. But he knew the coffee and his thinking would keep his brain sizzling. He walked through his house and looked at the crucifixes and paintings of the Virgin Mary, the brightly colored walls that Way Low painted, the bare carpet. He opened the door and smiled again at his boys. They colored and watched, but Mando finally smiled back. He went to his living room, turned on the TV, watched *Meet the Press* until the boring politicians and the political analysts cooled his brain, and he went to sleep.

His own snoring and the hum of many voices speaking Spanish woke him. He rose and went into the kitchen to see children and in-laws coming into his house. The women busied themselves in his kitchen. His sons came running out, still in their pajamas, to play with their cousins. He had no idea of how many people filled his house. He had no idea if he even knew them all. Soon, grease was popping; the smell of garlic filled the air, and the kitchen warmed from heating the dishes that his in-laws had brought over.

Colton drifted and dodged into the backyard, and the in-laws and friends were there too. In one corner, by herself, covered in a blanket, was Colton’s mother smoking her Marlboro. It was as though the Mexican people made an empty half circle around this white lady. Colton walked across the half-circle to his mother and sat on the

stickers and weeds to be face to face with her. "Thank you for inviting me," Helen Parker said. Even after another husband or two, she never let go of the name that Colton's father gave her. "I don't get the heebies like I used to coming over here. I don't understand most of what they're saying, but anymore I like listening." Helen sucked in on her cigarette, turned her head from Colton, and exhaled the smoke.

"How are you doing, Momma?" Colton asked even though he knew how she was doing.

"I manage," she said.

"What about that nice gentleman you been running with? How is he?"

"Sam? You mean, Sam?"

"Yes, that's it. He seems like a decent sort of fellow."

"He's gone."

His mother retired from her secretarial job too soon. She had nothing to do but hang out in the bars during the day. She met fellow retirees. And Sam was the latest. Colton had hoped that Sam might contribute some of the money that he couldn't. "What happened? You're kind of short on story."

"What's to say. We're two different people." Colton let his mother's statement sit in his mind awhile. His mother exhaled and turned to him. "Colton, I'm not one to say. Lord, I was never one to say. What do I know about successful marriages? But do you fit into all of this?"

"Way Low says my job is to give them the money to have these parties. Somebody must appreciate it."

"You done well for yourself, then."

"You said 'hi' to your grandkids, my boys. That would help."

Helen Parker shrugged. "I was gone most their lives. Now I'm back. They don't really know me or want to. But this is fun." She took a strong pull on her cigarette, then her beer.

"You heard from my Daddy?"

"When your Daddy left, he genuinely left. I have no idea where he is. Last I heard, maybe Arizona."

Colton patted his mother's shoulder. "You want me to go get you a plate? Elena's Mexican food is the real deal."

"No," Helen shook her head. "I grabbed a plate on my way here. I don't want to spoil myself for the cheap Mexican food I get in my neighborhood." Helen looked up at the sky, and Colton followed her gaze. "No clouds, nice day. You got to learn to appreciate things." Colton dropped his head and tried to appreciate things. "You go back in. Mingle with your guests. I'll show myself out directly."

"Come in with me."

Helen hung her empty hand from her wrist and back-waved Colton toward the house. "Scooch on now. Leave me to the coolness and peace in the air."

Colton patted his mother's shoulder once more, then left her to herself. He had dim memories of his father. He had better memories of men coming and going, not that his mother was a whore, just that she had been young and attractive in a town with booms. As Odessans themselves said, "Ain't really nothing to do in Odessa but drinking, fighting, and fucking." He turned to look back at Helen. She seemed to have no regrets, no grudges. She smiled and dropped her hand from wrist to swoosh him back across his backyard to his house.

He finally recognized his wife on the tiny back porch. Elena was small and petite—just over five feet. She could disappear into a crowd, yet when you picked her out in a crowd, you saw her distinct, and your eyes stuck on her. Likewise, her eyes could hold you in place. Colton smiled, and she gave the smile back to him. But behind her smile was a look that said she was happy with her family but disappointed with Colton. He walked to her and kissed her forehead.

"I love you and the boys," Colton said. She flashed that smile that hid something and reached to pat the soft spot on the front of his shoulders.

"Everybody loves you too." She gestured toward the guests. "Everybody here. Who couldn't love my papi?" But activity and all the buzz in the house caught Elena's eye, and she moved away from Colton because she was the host and this was her house.

Colton was by himself in a crowd. He tried to take his mother's advice and appreciate things. But he hazily wished for more and better and waited. What he got was a phone call from Snake Popp. He heard the phone, pushed quickly through the people,[#] and answered it. Snake Popp said, "About that Danny Fowler killing."

"Yeah?" Colton asked.

"I volunteered your services."

"What changed?"

"His momma, Mina Fowler, called me. She's an old friend and too rich to ever die. *She* wants to know who did it, but she doesn't want anybody else to know. Especially the police."

Colton just breathed into the phone. "Colton," Snake said. "You got it in you?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Go see Bullet."

Chapter 3

The late Friday night or early Saturday morning that Danny Fowler got killed was the final night of the 1981 Oil Show. The high-rollers from the oil patches across the country came to the International Oil Show in Odessa, Texas every two years. That meant lots of gambling, drinking, and whoring for everybody. During that two week-long show, Odessans said there were more whores in Odessa per capita than any place in the world. The high-rollers running the oil show over at the fairgrounds had their tents, trailers, and hotels rooms. Their parties and their whores were invitation only.

But if you weren't such a high roller, you had Second Street. You pulled off Second Street, and the whores would run out in front of your car, press their cleavage against your windshield, and lick at your side mirror with long, tip-curved tongues. Flashing a badge would keep them off your car. Only telling them you had no money would get them to turn their mini-skirted, oversized asses to you and saunter off to another car. That's how it operated. You drove up and did your whore shopping, and she took you into one of the cheap motels. The Odessa Police and the Ector County Sheriff's Department were not about to stop the party despite what the Baptists and Church of Christ's said.

And this was the boomtime. People had come from all over the country to work the oilfields. They'd pushed right out of the city limits into West Odessa, which was just barely-paved streets, gravel parking lots, cinder block or trailer homes (sometimes tents or RVs), and mean bars. At nights, # wound up, energized roughnecks with money in their pockets would drive around looking for whores, trouble, or just something to do. Sometimes out of boredom or frustration, they would pull their guns out of their pickups and start shooting up in the air. Besides whores, Odessa had more murders per capita than anyplace else in the country. It even topped drug smuggling Miami. During the

boom, during that two-week-long drunken orgy, and during that last closing night, Danny Fowler was out trying to get the kind of love he wanted or needed.

Early in the morning after Danny Fowler was killed, Bullet Price got a phone call from one of her whores. Renee St. Cloud was crying, and she said that she thought that something awful happened in room three of the First Quality Motel. Bullet told Renee to stay where she was but to give her a number. Bullet slung a denim jacket over her shoulders and stepped out of her duplex and into the season's first cold norther. The wind lifted her jacket off her shoulders. Her short hair danced in it. She shivered. The gas stations' hinged signs creaked as the wind lifted them to a nearly steady and level ninety degrees from the ground. But she made it across the parking lot of the First Quality Motel, and she fumbled with the key to open the door to room three. As she flipped on the light, she saw splatters of blood on the sofa, bedspread, carpet, and wall. Bullet went back to her duplex, which is two combined units of the First Quality Motel, called Renee, and told her to get back immediately.

When Renee St. Cloud got to room three and peered in, she pulled her head out of the room, shivered so hard her teeth shook, and looked at Bullet. "You got to believe it wasn't like that when I left." Then she turned her head to puke. "Good God, more to clean up," Bullet said.

"I'm just remembering," Renee said after her last heave.

"Remember later," Bullet said and poked a mop and a roofing crowbar at Renee, "Here."

Renee took the mop but stared at the roofer's crowbar, "What's this?"

"It's what we're going to use to pry up the carpet," Bullet says.

"You gonna ruin that carpet?"

"Don't you think it's ruined as is?"

As best she could, with what little help she could get from Renee, Bullet tore at the carpet, sliced at it with a razor blade carton opener, and rolled it into cylinders. "Hope those ain't your good clothes,"

Bullet said. And as Renee stared down at her jeans, Bullet splashed bleach on one wall. They rubbed at the spotted blood and bled the color out of their clothes. Then, they pulled the bedspread and the sheets off the bed and wrapped them in a bundle. Bullet told Renee to take the sheets to the dumpster outside behind the complex and throw them in. While Renee was gone, Bullet worked the sofa to the door. And when Renee got back, the two of them got the sofa outside, doused it with bleach, and then dragged it out in the wind and behind the complex of rooms. Bullet sprayed the dumpster with lighter fluid, then lit it to burn the sheets. The flames shot up and twisted and snapped in the wind so that Bullet had to lower the dumpster's lid to keep the wind from carrying a fire to her motel.

In her office, protected from the cold and the wind, Bullet sat behind her desk and sucked in for breath while Renee sat in front of the desk and shivered and whimpered like one of those little lap dogs. "Wow," Renee finally said as she looked around.

Bullet's desk was right in front of the door in the living room. On either side of the desk were golden lamps shaped like naked ladies holding up the shades. The carpet was thick red and black shag. Behind her desk was a rock wall. Next to the rock wall were two golden arches stretching over the entrance to the dining room, which had a chandelier stretching over a chrome and glass table and two long mirrors on the empty walls. Behind the wall next to the dining room was her kitchen.

From behind her desk, which immediately gave Bullet some power over whoever walked in, Bullet looked at Renee St. Cloud, sitting where a customer should be, to see how she was packaging what she was selling. Renee had on a mini-skirt that barely covered her butt. But then it is hardly a butt at all. Same with her chest. Just two mosquito bites, as they said. She had slipped on those wool dancing leggings that some West Texas girls wore even over boots. She had on a loose-knit sweater with the loose knits letting in the cold wind. She had dirty blonde hair hanging in a couple of strings over her face. And she had pulled those skinny legs up to her chest and hugged them, and those skinny legs

shook all of her. She was mostly a little girl trying real hard to play older and sexier. Bullet said, "You're not in trouble, yet."

Renee's teeth chattered as she nodded. Renee St. Cloud's real name was Jennifer Peveto. She was a plain little girl with no particular savvy or looks or money from Seminole, Texas. She wandered to Odessa to see what she could find. She wanted fast and easy money. She found fast and easy but not much money. All she had going for her was Bullet's management.

"I'm scared."

"Of course, you're scared. But you got to calm down and think." Renee shook her head and searched for some answers or comfort from Bullet, who had become as close to a mother as Renee now had. "Now you're going to tell me what happened, and then, we're going to rehearse what you're going to say to any cop."

Renee nodded, sucked in for breath. "You drink?" Renee nodded. Bullet got up and came back with two scotches on ice.

"So now you tell me what happened," Bullet said. Renee squeezed her knees to expose her panties and her ass. She could say nothing. "Go on, now," Bullet said.

"What can I say. I'm doing my job. I'm walking down Second Street with the rest of the girls. Getting what I can. And everybody is gone, and I'm thinking to myself I should just go home, ain't no one else coming by because it's cold, and this bright red car comes by . . ."

Bullet froze. "What kind of bright red car?"

"A red one."

Bullet tried to control her voice. "What kind of red one? What make? A model?"

"A fancy one."

"A Mustang?"

"Maybe." A slow shiver worked through Bullet, but Bullet stopped. But then it started shaking her again.

"Who is in it?"

"This fella driving is dressed nice, like with the preppy kind of clothes. He has those kind of shoes they used to put pennies in."

“Is he wearing a tie? A coat?”

“He has this tan sport coat.” Spreading her knees and twisting her glass in between them, Renee raised her glass to her nose, sniffed it, tasted it, then coughed.

“A camelhair coat? Is that what it is?”

“What’s camelhair?”

“Tan and fuzzy and soft.”

“Maybe,” Renee said and tried another sip. Renee shivered.

But the shiver inside of Bullet was not because she was cold. It started because she was thinking of Danny Fowler. “And now you tell me some more. You ain’t through yet with just shoes and coat.”

Renee made a child’s face, that grimace, like when she tasted Bullet’s scotch for the first time. “This is nasty. You have something to put in it?”

“Your story?”

“And there’s a guy in the passenger’s side, and he has on a white Western shirt, the kind with the snaps, and a cowboy hat. And in the back is another guy, leaning up from the back of the red car, between them, and yelling at me.”

“And the guy with the camelhair coat is driving?”

“Yeah, right. And this sharp-dressed fella, he pays me. And sos I take them to number three.”

Because she hesitated, Bullet said, “What happened inside.”

“It was kind of weird. They was in a partying mood. They all drank. Then, we got to doing it. First the guy in the backseat, then the guy with the cowboy hat.”

Bullet felt the shiver become a bile-like surge and worked its way up her throat. But she swallowed it. “What about the sharp dresser?”

“He was having none of me.” Renee sniffed at the scotch and then smiled at Bullet. “And like you said, no freebies. They both paid. Or rather, the sharp-dressed fella, he paid.”

“Did they act like they knew each other?”

“The two boys, the young ones. Did I mention that they was younger than the fancy dresser? They knew each other. They talked about going

to The Tank and eating steaks and drinking good liquor. Seems like they must've met the dresser there."

Bullet closed her eyes and asked with them closed. "Anything else they talk about?"

"Work."

"Where was work?"

"They said something about a rig out toward Andrews. Something, somebody's crew?"

Bullet pulled her eyes open. "Who is somebody?"

"I don't remember?"

"Remember, goddamn it."

Renee choked on some of the liquor and lifted her eyes to look at Bullet with soft puppy eyes. "Rafe, Ralph, Raven, Rafters." She sucked in for some air, "I can't remember."

"How did they act around that fancy dresser?"

"Friendly like. And he was real friendly to them."

"How's that?"

"He'd whisper stuff to them. He'd pat their backs."

"Did they do anything to him?"

"After a couple of hours I left. It was cold, and the wind was blowing trash and tumbleweeds down the street, but I figure there's always more money to be made, like you told me. . . . Am I in trouble?"

"I don't know. You think that you can lie to the police?"

"I guess I could." Renee smiled. "Yeah, I can."

"No, you listen to what I mean. I mean can you lie to them and not show what you are saying to be a lie."

She sipped, managed not to shake, looked like she would cry. "I never tried. I never been in a thing like this."

"Well then don't lie. If the police come, you tell them what you told me."

"Thanks, Miss Bullet." Bullet squeezed her whole body in a tight knot of worry, but it wasn't until that afternoon that she knew that the blood was Danny Fowler's.

* * *