

A Kill Line

BOOK 1 OF THE COMANCHERÍA SERIES

B RAY MIZE

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In memory of Carl Sutton
Assistant Professor of English
University of North Texas

MONDAY NIGHT, GULF OF MEXICO, 200 MILES SOUTH OF NEW ORLEANS

Reid Matthews climbed 150 feet of the derrick before stopping to catch his breath. April air softly nuzzled all it touched, cooling and refreshing. He looked up and found the stars above as thick as sequins on a black evening dress. Navigational lights on the crown at the top of the derrick, only forty-five feet up, looked a mile away.

He looked down, vaguely aware that his weathered hands grasped the cold rung of the steel ladder even harder. The rig floor of the Sea Breeze was as well lit as any nighttime football game, and everyone below was busy. Those working the tongs used to uncouple drill pipe and those mopping slippery fluids from the drill floor existed as part of a small army of workers engaged in the hundreds of important jobs required to drill a hole 200 miles from the closest land, and in water depth of more than 3,000 feet.

At one time or another, Reid had done nearly all the jobs the men and women below were doing. He wished he was back on the rig floor, and that he hadn't volunteered to look at the crown block at the top of the derrick. But the young toolpusher had couched his request as a challenge. He was calling out Reid, who owned most of the company.

Reid could have resisted the challenge easily, but was bored and wanted the exercise. Besides, at the top of the derrick, he would be closer to God. And he had a question, a personal one, the answer to which he figured he already knew. He just needed to go ahead and do something about it.

He started to climb again, then stopped when he noticed the crane operator on the new Liebherr crane drop a hook over the side of the rig to retrieve something from the ocean. The man quickly hoisted it onto the deck of a supply boat and into a large wire basket used by the rig to dump scrap metal and equipment. The boat would later transport the junk basket to a shore-based facility for disposition and handling.

Reid nodded approval. The crane operator had seen something that had fallen overboard. Reid would look into it later.

Reid saw an object on the ocean he couldn't quite make out: he was too high to see it clearly, and moonlight caused the water below to glitter. He squinted. The object seemed to be self-propelled, moving at a constant rate of speed. It looked like the conning tower of a submarine. When he looked again, it had disappeared.

Reid shook his head, telling himself it was nothing. He started to climb again and, within a few feet of the crown of the derrick, felt the rig shudder violently. His right foot slipped from the ladder and he bashed his shin on a rung. He recoiled. His forehead smacked steel. Dizziness as thick as a heavy sheet of visqueen blanketed him.

He thrashed wildly with one hand and held on furiously to the ladder with the other. As he regained his footing, he glimpsed a blinking light above.

Reid fought to stay conscious by focusing on the blinking, rotating light. It made an awful squawking sound.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Reid said loudly. "The well's kicked."

If the crew couldn't control the kick quickly enough, it would become a blowout. Then, a small electrical spark created by mere friction would be all it'd take to ignite the natural gas blown from the formation, and everyone aboard would be turned to ash. The rig itself would melt in a fireball more than a square mile in diameter.

Reid blinked to clear his vision. On the rig floor, everyone scrambled to emergency stations. They were scared. Him, too. He could tell

because his stomach had lodged itself in his throat.

He scrambled down the derrick as quickly as he could. It seemed to him that the air had gelled as thick as sixty-weight crude oil, and he forced his way through it inch by inch. Twenty feet above the monkey board, he took time to look down again.

The derrickman, still on the monkey board, racked the last stand of pipe so he could get down to the rig floor, a decidedly safer place. Vernon Haydell was a twenty-year company man, an experienced hand, but he was about to get himself trapped between two stands of pipe.

Reid yelled, but too late.

Vernon, left arm and leg crushed, stood stuck fast. Although injured and in great pain, he tried to push the pipe aside with his right arm. The weight of the pipe was just too heavy.

Reid jumped from the last rungs of the ladder and dashed over to Vernon. He placed his arm around him for support and pushed at the stand of pipe. It moved, but not enough.

Reid drew a deep breath and tensed his 6'4" frame. This time his huge arm moved as inexorably as a bar of hot-rolled steel fresh from the mill's oven. The stand of pipe moved, clearing Vernon's arm and leg.

Reid carefully lowered Vernon to the floor of the monkey board. "A second and I'll get us down from here."

"Leave me," Vernon said. "We're all going to die, anyway."

"Maybe," Reid said, putting on a pair of leather work gloves he had snatched from the back pocket of his khaki overalls, "but you and I are leaving here together."

Reid knew this man and his family. One of his sons worked on another of the company's rigs.

Vernon moaned. "Can't stand up."

"You won't have to," Reid said. He bent at the knees and scooped Vernon up from the floor. He stood up, then tucked Vernon safely

in his left arm and, with the other, disengaged the Geronimo line, a steel cable running a length of fifty feet from the monkey board to the drill floor.

Vernon said, "This ain't gonna work."

Reid paid no heed to what Vernon said and slid down the Geronimo line with Vernon cradled in his arm.

When they landed on the drill floor, a small group of men gathered to help, along with two safety men with a canvas stretcher. As Reid lowered Vernon onto the stretcher, he overheard Mike McCoy, a helicopter pilot from Petroleum Helicopters and a thirty-year veteran of the oil field, telling the younger men that Reid Matthews was half Comanche Indian and had been called Two Feathers when he'd served in the military.

Reid wished everybody would stop talking about it. That was all a long time ago, in another lifetime, in another dimension—a dimension of nightmares and demons. And the demons would have won except for his grandfather, who knew of such things and how to exorcize them with old Comanche chants and magic.

Reid raced for the driller's console, where he found the toolpusher and the driller huddled, consulting and examining the gauges on the driller's console. A company man from Pelican Oil stood behind them, watching over their shoulders.

Reid had met the young man from Pelican only recently: Chad Wentworth, a new grad from LSU and a bit of a pain in the ass. Young grads these days always seemed to think they knew more than they really did—or maybe it had always been that way.

The first words Reid heard came from the driller. "Nothing wrong here," Charlie said, turning to face Reid. "The well didn't kick is what I'm trying to tell these two towheads."

Alden, the toolpusher, with a grim face and jaw muscles bunched, said, "Something sure as hell happened."

“Drilling status?” Reid asked.

Charlie said, “Tripping out to—”

Wentworth interrupted. “Charlie left the drill pipe screen in the drill pipe.”

“Hey, asshole,” Charlie said. “I’m the one who realized I’d made a mistake. Faced up to it and said I was sorry.” He gazed at Wentworth with angry eyes. “You need to get over it. The problem here is you had me pulling up pipe too fast.”

“Both of you stop it,” Reid said, turning to face the toolpusher. “What’s going on here, Alden?”

“We tripped out to retrieve the screen. Charlie pulled the first three stands of pipe when Wentworth ordered him to speed it up.”

“Going to be all year pulling pipe,” Wentworth said.

Reid put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Son, be quiet for a moment, please.”

Alden went on. “Pulled another six stands of pipe when the rig rocked like crazy. Don’t think we’ve been pulled off location, but the well’s flowing some.”

“Shut her in,” Reid said.

“What? Don’t do that,” Wentworth barked to Charlie.

“Consider it done,” Charlie said to Reid.

“You can’t do this,” Wentworth said angrily. “I’m in charge here. My company owns this well, and it’s the one paying the bills.”

“Hush, son,” Reid said. “I’m hoping you haven’t already caused the well to be swabbed in.”

“There are no data indicating a downhole condition that’s conducive to swabbing,” Wentworth said, rolling his eyes upward. “You people need to go back to school.”

“Maybe,” Reid said. Charlie and Alden looked at Reid intently. “But speeding up tripping the pipe may well have allowed gas to be swabbed into the well. My guess is that the reason the well is flowing

is because of a reduction in well bore hydrostatic due to the swab gas." Reid pointed a finger at Alden. "Get the mud man on the radio and find out why that alarm on the crown went off."

A moment later, Alden said, "Mud man says everything's OK now. The alarm went off when the rig tilted. The PVT thought we took on a big increase in mud volume and reacted accordingly."

"Keep the well shut in until we find out what's going on here," Reid said. "I'm going to the ballast room to see if anybody there knows what happened."

Reid departed the drill floor and was standing at the foot of the walkway leading to both the upper and lower decks of the rig when the rig's electrical superintendent, Leroy, waved him over. Reid was in a hurry, but there was something desperate in the way Leroy was behaving.

"A minute," Leroy said.

"Got only that," Reid replied.

"Thought you might want to know the same thing that happened here tonight happened a month ago on the Ocean Javelin. The very same thing. The Jav suddenly rocked and rolled, then went quiet. No problem. No kick. Nothing."

Reid frowned. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"Don't know. Guess no one thought it was a big deal."

"It is a big deal," Reid said. "A good man got hurt tonight, and all of us got the peewaddie scared out of us." A flicker in Leroy's eyes told Reid there existed more. "What else?"

"A rumor—just a rumor, mind you—that a submarine dragged one of the anchor chains just far enough to cause the rig to list fifteen degrees for a few seconds."

"Submarine?"

"The derrickman said he saw one, or thought he did, just minutes before the rig rocked. Roger Leeman ain't no greenhorn, so if he said he saw one, I guess he saw one alright."

Reid put his hand on Leroy's shoulder. "Thanks for the info."

"Think it could have been a submarine?" Leroy asked.

Reid shrugged. "I'll send some divers to check things out."

Reid turned and dashed up the walkway, taking three steps at a time. There was a crane operator he wanted to talk to, and now. Maybe he had seen something.

Reid was sitting at his desk in his office, the Dog House, when the crane operator, a gangling man everyone called Pepper, came in. Pepper's eyes were dazed and had crow's-feet at the corners, despite his being only thirty years of age or so. Reid thought Pepper had the look of someone who had run the gauntlet once too often. "Take a seat," Reid said. "I saw you pick up something from the ocean earlier. What was that about?"

Pepper's eyes suddenly became clear. His right forefinger started tapping the arm of his chair.

Reid hadn't expected this sort of nervous reaction. He asked the question only as a warm-up to asking him about seeing a submarine. Pepper hadn't done anything wrong. He had done something right, and Reid intended to tell him so. The company had strict rules about throwing junk overboard; when such things were found, they were retrieved and disposed of properly.

Reid stared into Pepper's eyes and waited for an answer.

A long moment later, Pepper said, "A bag of rags or something. I'm not sure."

The company bought huge quantities of rags, using them for all sorts of purposes. The rags came wrapped in bundles about the size of a square bale of hay.

Reid suspected Pepper was lying to him for some reason. "Why put it in the junk basket?"

Another long moment went by before Pepper answered. "Wet with seawater and all. I guessed it'd be useless after that."

Sensible answer.

"Name of the boat you put it on?" Reid asked. "Don't think I've seen her before."

"The *Cassandra*. A boat that picks up junk baskets for us, or at least the one that does it for as long as I've been working for Tidal Wave Drilling."

"How long has that been?"

"Two months."

Reid figured it might be time to move on to his real question. "When you picked up the bundle of rags, did you happen to notice anything off to the south about 500 yards?"

Beads of sweat popped up on Pepper's forehead. His forefinger tapped even faster on the arm of the chair. "No," he said.

Reid was now certain that the man was lying. But why?

Reid decided to avoid a confrontation. Short of torturing the man, he didn't think he'd get anywhere asking more questions. But Reid knew someone who could get the truth out of him: Roland Guidry, the Cajun from Chackbay, Louisiana, and the company's head of security. Roland could wrench the truth from the most hardened politician, even during an election year.

Pepper had opened the door to leave when something occurred to Reid. "You said you've been working for us for two months. What other rigs have you been on?"

"The Ocean Javelin. A month ago."

As soon as Pepper walked out of earshot, Reid put in a call to the rig's radio room. "Rick, get Roland Guidry on the line for me, please. And yes, I know it's 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday." Reid pulled a notepad closer to him and picked up a pen to make a note. "By the way, who owns the boat called the *Cassandra*?"

When Reid heard Clubman Enterprises, he dropped the pen, clenched his fists, and used a profane word he'd promised not to use

too often. Now he feared other promises he'd made to himself would collapse under the weight of having to deal with Saul Clubman and his professional thugs.

EARLY TUESDAY MORNING, NEW ORLEANS

Saul Clubman, with a phone to his ear, waved Bruce Chimes into his office. As Bruce took a seat, Saul leaned back in his chair and puffed on a handmade Cuban cigar. Outside his floor-to-ceiling picture window, a foreign-flagged ship moved up the Mississippi River. It would eventually pass New Orleans as it made its way to one of the plants upriver.

Saul shouted into the phone, "You tell that goddamn captain he's getting the sub too close to the rigs! And if he tweaks another anchor chain, he'll find his lead ass being used for an anchor out where the water's a mile deep!" Saul slammed down the phone.

He expected to hear from Bruce about the two companies Bruce seemed keen on acquiring: one, a scrap dealer in Morgan City, Louisiana; the other, an equipment rental company in Houston, Texas.

These companies would help in laundering all of the new money coming in due to the success of the submarine Saul had acquired from his connection in China. It seemed to Saul that the more money he made, the more companies Bruce had to acquire.

It took only a few minutes for Saul to discover Bruce wasn't in his office to talk about acquiring companies. Bruce seemed to be cowering before him for some reason. He sat on the office couch with his chin slumped to his chest and his eyes fixed on a spot on the floor a few inches in front of his feet.

Saul was used to seeing men cower before him. Even in his youth, he had intimidated the other kids in the neighborhood. But

Bruce was his cousin. They had grown up together.

As soon as Bruce started talking about stepping down from the company because he was in love with Kelly O'Connor, Saul stood up from his chair and sat down next to him on the couch. Bruce had hired Kelly, a big-time financial analyst, several months ago from a bank in Savannah. Saul now wished he had made Bruce hire an ugly gal instead of some black-eyed beauty.

"You can't do this to me, pal," Saul said, poking a forefinger into Bruce's shoulder. Bruce winced. "I need you. Too many things going down now." Saul lowered his voice to take on the reasoned tone of a personal confidant. "I see the problem here. You've got satin bed-sheets on the brain."

Bruce raised his eyes to protest, but before he could speak, Saul held up his hand as a sign he didn't want to be interrupted. Saul's eyes, lime-green, held behind them a cage containing a wild animal barely held in check.

Saul went on. "You have enough money to have any gal you want. You can have two of them at the same time. Hell, I'll fix it up for you."

"No," Bruce said, straining to sound defiant. "I just can't take it anymore. Can't sleep at night." His chin began to quiver. He put his elbows on his knees, rested his forehead in the palms of his hands, and sobbed.

Saul stared at Bruce and absently began cracking the knuckles of his right hand. He had known for a few months now that Bruce wasn't his usual tower of strength, but he'd never suspected him of becoming some kind of pantywaist. Bruce had been useful, but his present condition made him not only worthless but a substantial risk, and one that might well have to be eliminated.

Saul looked up and scowled at the ceiling for a moment, then reached over and grabbed Bruce's shoulder, shaking him violently. "Stop sniveling."

When Bruce didn't stop, Saul slapped him hard on the side of the head, the impact nearly knocking him from the couch. Saul was about to slap him again when Bruce collapsed facedown on the floor.

Saul stood up and used the toe of his Italian loafer to roll Bruce over. He felt like kicking him in the side of the head as hard as he could. He walked over to the bar and filled himself a tumbler full of scotch, draining most of it in two swift gulps. He smoothed back his long, sandy-colored hair, stopping for a moment to massage his neck and admire himself in the mirror behind the bar. He moved his head a little to the left to examine his profile. He put his hand under his chin: skin tight, neck muscular. He held up an arm: biceps bulging, shoulders thick.

He looked over at Bruce and shook his head in disgust. Bruce knew too much, and he had probably told that bitch Kelly more than he should have. He never should've let him hire her, an outsider. He decided the way to gain some time was to lie, to go along with Bruce, letting him believe it would be OK for him to leave.

After crushing out his cigar and finishing what scotch remained in his tumbler, Saul walked into his office bathroom, where he soaked a wash towel in cold water. He walked back to the bar and poured two fingers of whiskey.

Bruce responded to the wet towel, rose, and shook his head, his breath coming in short, heavy bursts. "What happened?" he said, his speech slurred. "Feel like my head is going to explode. My ears are ringing."

Saul put on a face he believed to be both fatherly and concerned and said, "Ol' buddy, you conked out on me. We were talking when all of a sudden your eyes rolled back into their sockets, and you leaned forward and fell to the floor." Saul put a tumbler of whiskey into Bruce's hand. "Here, take a snort of that. Put you right."

Bruce drank.

Saul continued, "Sorry about what I said earlier. See now that you've been working too hard. Sorry. I wasn't paying enough attention to my best buddy."

Bruce's eyes now made contact with Saul's, and he nodded to Saul's words.

Saul went on. "This Kelly gal seems real nice. Going to need a few weeks to get a replacement for you, ol' buddy. So we can keep things moving smoothly. Two weeks. OK?"

"OK," Bruce said eagerly. "I know this is a big shock. You've been a good friend. Thanks."

Saul listened with revulsion. He couldn't imagine what he'd ever seen in Bruce to have made him his trusted partner. He saw clearly now all of Bruce's faults: too handsome, like one of those prissy men on television soap operas; physically weak; and drank too much.

"No problem, sport," Saul said, winking at Bruce. "Going to quit this bullshit business myself one of these days. Come live with you and Kelly." Saul laughed.

"Any time. Always welcome. Name our first child after you." Bruce stood up, still a little wobbly on his feet, and walked to the door. "Guess I'd better get out of here and start things rolling. Have a lot of work to do in a short time, huh?"

"You sure do," Saul said, following Bruce to the door and playfully slapping him on the back.

After Bruce left, Saul walked to the bar. He grabbed a bottle of scotch and quickly filled his tumbler. He lifted the tumbler to his nose before taking an enormous gulp. Afterward, he walked over to the phone on his desk and punched in a number. The phone on the other end rang twice before the recorder kicked in.

Saul said gruffly, "Call me. I have a serious warranty problem here."