

# SHADOW OF THE GREAT OWL

BOOK 2 OF THE COMANCHERÍA SERIES

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This book is dedicated to my wife,  
Sharon—my best friend and  
the love of my life.



## **LATE SATURDAY MORNING, SALT FLATS, TEXAS, NORTH OF BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK**

Reid Matthews had asked a sensible question, so he stood stiff with disbelief when Deputy Barnes replied, “I’m not going to tell you a damned thing, pal.”

Reid glared with narrowed eyes across the room at the deputy, a young man with a face as broad and hard as the bottom of a cast-iron skillet. After a long moment, Reid replied, “I wasn’t asking for state secrets. I just want to know if there’s been any word on the search for Derrick Calendar.”

“What’s it to you?” the deputy asked with a frown.

“Derrick’s grandfather is a friend of mine. He said he was in here earlier and asked—”

“Yeah, and I ran his damned ass off, too.”

Reid forced a smile. He knew Bill Calendar possessed an overwhelming propensity for getting himself into pissing contests with just about anybody with little provocation. His wife, Willie, usually rushed in at the last minute and made things right, but in this case, she hadn’t been there to smooth things over for him.

“Bill’s worried about his grandson,” Reid said in a tone of reconciliation. “If he said something wrong, he didn’t mean it.”

And Bill probably had said something wrong, for he was not a man adept in the social graces. What he was known for were his honesty and integrity. He was a man of texture, a man of the land. Hired

by Reid's father, Bill had managed Reid's Texas Hill Country ranch, the Comanchería, for more than thirty-five years; now in his early seventies, Bill was still as solid as a thick cypress beam despite his years.

Reid pushed his Stetson hat back from his forehead and leaned forward, putting his weathered hands on top of the slatted, waist-high partition separating him from the large, open office space beyond. To his right, a robust woman sat looking up at him from behind a desk in the corner of the room. Two unsmiling computer nerds stared into their computer monitors, occasionally and expertly drumming their fingers on their keyboards. Reid didn't think they looked much like law enforcement guys, or as if they belonged in a small town in Texas like Salt Flats.

Reid said, "Listen, Bill Calendar's sorry if he said anything wrong."

"Pal, you look like a damned Indian, just like your friend," the deputy said, "and I'm not telling any fucking Indian a fucking thing." He turned and walked away.

Reid stood there watching while the deputy strutted into the back corner of the room. "Comanche," Reid said loudly. "And damned proud of it, asshole."

The deputy swung back around angrily. "What did you say to me?"

Reid grinned. "I said Comanche and proud of it, as a whole. I'm also German and proud of that, too, as a whole."

The deputy returned to the back of the room and disappeared through an unmarked door.

Reid disliked the way the deputy walked: like a damned spider, edgy and quick to jump on something. The deputy didn't like Native Americans for some reason, and Reid knew quite well he resembled one, despite the blue eyes and sandy-colored hair he got from his

German ancestry—which also provided his height, all six feet four inches of it.

The woman in the corner pushed herself away from her computer monitor, caught Reid's eye, and made a jabbing motion at him with a fat forefinger, clearly indicating he was dismissed and should get his butt back outside. She didn't look like someone who would entertain any objections. She wore her hair closely cropped and brushed back, and her tight pants did nothing to hide muscular thighs of which even a man might be jealous. Her face possessed the same hard eyes as the deputy's.

Reid tipped his hat to her. "Y'all are promotin' tourism this week, I see."

He stepped outside and drew a sharp breath. He'd never been treated so rudely in a sheriff's office before. And he'd never been in one where radios weren't crackling, phones weren't ringing, and bulletin boards weren't cluttered with pictures of criminals and missing children. Why were all those things missing here? And what was the deal with all those computers? They looked brand-spanking-new, and expensive, to boot. Yet Salt Flats was too small to even have a chief of police (despite being the county seat). The county sheriff handled law enforcement for both the town and the surrounding county. Saying that something seemed wrong here was an understatement. No wonder Bill was so anxious to find his grandson before the sheriff caught up with him. A few of the local ranchers had told Bill that the sheriff had it in for Derrick. No one knew why—or if they did, they weren't talking.

Reid stood outside the sheriff's office under the shade of an awning and peered down Main Street. Salt Flats looked like the kind of town in which a long parade of brightly decorated tractors rolled through every year on the Fourth of July. Reid smiled. To his right stood several clothing and shoe stores, a barbershop, and a saddlery. To his left were

a drugstore and a café. And at the end of the street were a feed and hardware store. The sidewalks and storefronts buzzed with people doing their Saturday shopping. The town had the feel of well-worn jeans or broken-in leather gloves. Reid knew the kind of people who lived in this town: they were ranchers and farmers, like his father and mother had been, and like Bill and Willie Calendar were today. He had been an oil field hand himself, but oil field hands weren't all that different from ranchers and farmers: honest, straight-talking, hard-working men and women with important jobs. Ranchers and farmers provide food to the nation, while oil field hands supply the energy that makes tractors run and keeps homes livable in the summer and winter.

Reid put on his sunglasses, lowered the brim of his hat, and stepped forward. The late August sun at midmorning stood high and unyielding. His watch told him he had fifteen minutes remaining before he was to meet Bill at the feed store. Bill was gathering supplies for their trip on horseback into Big Bend National Park and the Chihuahuan Desert, where they'd look for Derrick Calendar and his employers' granddaughter, Brenda Brodine. Derrick was the ranch manager for Brenda's grandfather and grandmother, Farley and Thelma Brodine.

It was a strange story, and Reid felt sure there was much more to it. He knew that when Bill and Willie Calendar had arrived at the Brodine ranch at sunrise this morning for a visit they'd planned for months, they'd found their friends Farley and Thelma Brodine unconscious at the kitchen table. The Calendars had called 9-1-1. The Brodines were rushed immediately to McKittrick's Clinic here in Salt Flats. The doctor said the Brodines had consumed an overdose of what was probably the date-rape drug Rohypnol, but not enough to be fatal. They were still unconscious, but wouldn't be much longer. The doctor was positive there would be no lasting damage to either of them.

Reid waited for several passersby to move on before he crossed

the street to the drugstore. He wanted to pick up a few things he'd need in case of injuries on their trip. As he walked, he continued mulling over what seemed to be going on here. Why had the sheriff told everyone that the Brodines were murdered before checking it out? He'd never actually saw the Brodines himself. He couldn't have. They had already been carried away in an ambulance by the time he arrived at their ranch. Who had told him that the Brodines were dead? Not the two ambulance attendants. They knew the Brodines were alive and thought the couple had been hit with food poisoning. And the doctor at the clinic? He said he never talked to anybody, especially not to the sheriff, whom he didn't like very much, anyway. Reid frowned. This whole business was just one big, confusing mess. It gave him a headache just thinking about it.

Reid stepped over the curb and opened the door to the drugstore. He heard a bell ring in the back. Reid preferred this kind of store, with its herbal and medicinal smell—the result of storing hundreds of different kinds of ointments, herbs, and medicines for a hundred years—to modern-day stores. No gray metal shelves or plastic countertops had conquered this place. Here, just about everything was made of wood, much of it hand carved. The flooring was pecan heartwood, which Reid recognized immediately due to its distinctive reddish-brown color and dark brown stripes.

A little old lady with white hair ambled over from the back and asked if she could help him. Reid said he'd like to speak to the pharmacist. She gave him a funny look and muttered something.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Reid said, cocking an ear her way.

"Everyone wants to speak to a pharmacist these days," she replied. "Especially all those young men in town from Baltimore."

"Baltimore?" Reid asked, hoping to encourage her to say more.

"Oh, yes, they've been here for two months."

"Two months?"

“Maybe longer. The bank hired them as security guards because it’s been repossessing a lot of ranches in the county, and there’ve been death threats, they say. Those young men have filled up Cooper’s Inn.” She moved closer to Reid after looking around to see if she might be overheard. “I wouldn’t stay at Cooper’s nowadays on a bet. After Betsy Cooper died, Buzz lost interest, the poor dear. Now the place is nothing more than a buffet for cockroaches and other crawly things.”

“How many security guards did the bank hire, for goodness’ sake?”

“I don’t know.” The little lady tugged at her chin. “Well, I say I don’t know, but there’s the five at Cooper’s Inn and the two or three who stay with Mayor Rosoos in his home.”

“The mayor?”

“George Rosoos. Besides being the mayor, he’s also the president of the bank. And he’s also the sheriff’s father. You might say that his family pretty much has this town sewed up. The town hasn’t been the same since George brought those security men in here from Baltimore. They’re rude, and they talk dirty. Why, just this morning at Betty Faye’s Café, I heard one of them cussing because his coffee wasn’t hot enough to suit him. Can you imagine?”

Reid shook his head no. He had heard all he had time for at the moment. “Ma’am, I reckon I’d better go ahead and talk to the pharmacist. I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

The little lady ignored what Reid had said and continued talking. “Eleven years I’ve worked for Wayne and Imogene Roberts. They’re the owners and the pharmacists here, you know. But ever since those boys from Baltimore showed up, they’ve been acting very strange.”

Once he was finally able to speak to her, it took longer than Reid had expected to convince Imogene Roberts to give him the medical supplies he wanted. She relented in the end, but only after talking to Mr. Roberts for a long time. Something was wrong in the pharmacy,

all right. Wayne and Imogene both looked tired, as if they hadn't been getting enough sleep. Reid was well acquainted with that kind of harried look, having seen it on his own face often enough. Working offshore on oil rigs hadn't been an easy life. It had made him rich, but he'd paid a price. And he might've continued paying that price if it hadn't been for the woman he had married only two months ago, Kelly O'Connor.

Reid paid for the medical supplies and quick-stepped it over to the feed and hardware store, a wood-framed building that needed a slap or two of new paint. By contrast, the diner next door was painted neatly in light blue, trimmed in white. Red lettering above the door said Betty Faye's Café.

Reid entered the feed store and saw a balding man standing behind a counter to one side of an ancient cash register. The uncompromising frown on the old man's face struck Reid as odd. Of course, maybe the poor bastard had just recently dealt with Bill Calendar.

Reid heard Bill say to somebody, "Dad-gum-it, you're blockin' the aisle."

Reid turned toward Bill's voice. Bill stood surrounded by two men, both in their mid-twenties, both trim and athletic with broad shoulders and ponytails.

Bill said loudly, "Get outta the danged way."

"Fuck you," one of the young men said. "We don't want you in here or in this town."

"I don't give a rat's ass what you want," Bill said, pushing the man aside.

The other young man grabbed Bill from behind in a headlock.

The man Bill had pushed aside pulled back his right arm to deliver a wicked punch to Bill's rib cage.

Reid caught the man's arm in his huge left hand and kicked the man's legs out from under him. As the man fell, Reid slammed a fist

into his nose, the impact splattering blood on the tools hanging neatly on a nearby pegboard.

Bill managed to grab a long-handled brush from the blood-splattered pegboard and, using it as a bat, brought it up forcibly between his attacker's legs. The man grunted. His eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped to the floor with a thud. Bill then whacked the man over the head, breaking the wooden brush handle and knocking his attacker unconscious.

"What did you do to these boys?" Reid asked Bill. "Pee on 'em or something?"

"Beats the hell out of me." Bill glared over his shoulder at the man behind the counter. "Thanks for the help," he said sarcastically.

"Couldn't do anything," the man said. "Bad legs and ticker. Sorry." He caught Reid's eye. "Name's Mick Barnes." Reid walked over and put out his hand. "Related to Deputy Barnes?"

"My brother's son," Mick replied, shaking Reid's hand.

Reid kept his mouth shut about his earlier encounter with the deputy.

Mick pointed at the two men lying on the floor. "Those boys work for Jays Kerrville. He runs the security company the bank hired some months ago."

"The one George Rosoos hired?" Reid asked.

"You know about that?"

"A little. Heard the bank has been repossessing a lot of farms and ranches in the county lately. And threats have been made."

"I'd reckon there'd be," Bill said as he walked over and put the broken brush handle on top of the counter. "Guess I'd better pay you for this."

Mick waved a hand dismissively.

Reid noticed that Kerrville's two men were starting to rouse. "Perhaps we'd better call your brother's son and have him come over and arrest these boys."

"I'll take care of it," Mick said. "He might come over here and arrest you instead. Not that he's all that fond of Kerrville and his men, mind you. But the sheriff, Sonny Rosoos, and Kerrville are as tight as fleas on a cur dog. Right now they're both out tracking down the Calendar boy they say killed the Brodines."

Bill grimaced. "Derrick Calendar's my grandson. And the Brodines ain't dead."

"Thank God," replied Mick. "But why did the sheriff tell everyone they were?"

"Good question," Reid replied. He clapped a comforting hand on Bill's shoulder while gazing intently at Mick. "Do you know why the sheriff has it in for Derrick?"

Mick shrugged. "Not sure. I like Derrick a lot. My guess, it probably has something to do with old man Brodine's granddaughter, Brenda. I hear Sonny Rosoos is sweet on her and thought Derrick was competition. I don't know why he'd ever think that, though, because the last time Derrick and Brenda came in here together they got into a big row over horse feed. Derrick told her in no uncertain terms that he was the one her grandfather had hired to run the ranch, and he'd pick out whatever feed he darned well pleased."

Reid listened to Mick while keeping an eye on the two men on the floor. When they began to get to their feet, he turned and walked over to them. "Stay put. I want to see if you're all right." The man Reid had hit said raucously, "Fuck you!" Reid held him down. The young man pushed up hard, but relented when he realized he couldn't overcome the enormous power in Reid Matthew's big arm.

Reid crouched down and put his face close to the young man's. "Don't you ever raise your voice or use profanity in my presence again, son, or it'll be more than your nose that'll be bleeding." He took a large handkerchief from his back pocket, a red-and blue-pat-

terned Hav-A-Hank, and handed it to the young man. “Put that to your nose and hold it in place with some light pressure. Your nose may be broken. And your friend over there won’t be high-stepping it for a while, or peeing in a straight line for that matter.” Reid couldn’t help but smile a little at the thought of what else the young man wouldn’t be doing.

Reid and Bill dropped in at McKittrick’s Clinic ten minutes later to visit with their wives before departing into Big Bend. The doctor taking care of the Brodines was good enough to provide Reid with additional medical supplies that he hadn’t been able to get at the drugstore, one of them being an antidote for poisonous snake and spider bites. The land they were about to ride into—where Derrick and Brenda had disappeared—was extremely hostile and fraught with danger: dehydration and heatstroke; poisonous snakes, plants, and insects; and any number of places to accidentally slip and fall on jagged rocks. Not to mention a lot of angry, bad men with guns.