

CHAPTER ONE

*Austin, Texas
December 3, 1999 / Friday / 5:30 p.m.*

The limousine was about five miles outside the city of Austin when the phone in the leather console chimed quietly. Carter T. Mason, chief executive officer and chairman of the board of directors of Helius Energy, looked at the number on the small screen. It was Charlie Gatwick from NewMark Capital, the lead agent on the bond deal. Mason waited for the phone to ring again before he picked it up.

“Mason.”

“Hello, Carter, Charlie Gatwick.”

“Charlie, I hope you’re back in Oyster Bay enjoying the evening.”

“I wish. I’m still in Manhattan.”

Mason knew Gatwick was in Manhattan, and he also knew why he was calling, but he feigned ignorance.

“We had the final underwriting meeting tonight,” Gatwick said.

“Excellent. I hope all is well.”

“It is. The deal’s a go. Some of the banks wanted to do more diligence on the financials, but we convinced them it wasn’t necessary.”

“Exceptional. This deal is going to be good for both of us.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Carter, I’m sorry, I have to run or I’ll miss the next train.”

“Go, enjoy your weekend. You deserve it.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

A rare smile came to Mason’s face as he placed the phone back in the cradle. The leveraged buyout he’d put together five years ago was about to pay off. The proceeds from the bonds would enable Helius to cash out the expensive financing used to buy out the old stockholders. The lower interest rate on the new debt would dramatically improve Helius’s bottom line. After three solid quarters of earnings, Mason intended to take the company public again. *I should make seven hundred million after capital gains, and still retain voting control.*

Mason’s reverie was interrupted by another call. It was his wife, Michelle. Mason ignored it. He knew why Michelle was calling. She wanted to make sure he remembered the dinner party at their French provincial mansion on the outskirts of Austin. Mason typically refused to attend family gatherings except on holidays. After twenty-four years of marriage, Michelle was used to apologizing for his absence.

The guest of honor was Michelle’s father, William Carmody. The old man was dying of cancer, and Mason suspected he was making his final round of good-byes. When Carmody had called Michelle from Dallas last week, he’d asked to see the entire family on this visit. Mason found the demand surprising. Carmody hated him. It had taken the old boy about five years to figure out that Mason had only married his daughter to gain access to Carmody’s political connections, and secondarily, to bear the family heir.

Being a political power broker, Carmody might have been able to choke down Mason’s ruthless opportunism if he’d kept it to himself, but Mason had done no such thing. Once his son, James Mason, was born, Mason had disabused Michelle of her fairy-tale view of their marriage. Ten years of alcohol and drug addiction had followed. Although Michelle had eventually recovered, after years of expensive help, she was a shell of the vivacious young woman who’d left the Carmody home two decades earlier.

Mason had initially refused to attend the dinner, despite Michelle's tears, but he'd reconsidered. His paranoia about the bond deal had tipped the scales. Carmody couldn't stop the offering, but he might be able to persuade some of his cronies at the Department of Corporations to issue a temporary hold on sales in the state of Texas. The hold would only have a minor effect on the deal, but Mason wasn't willing to take any chances. If listening to the old fool for an hour would eliminate a possible threat to the bond deal, he'd do it.

When the phone on the console chimed a third time, Mason looked over in irritation, but he smiled when he recognized the number.

"Good timing, Mac. I'm about to put another ten million in your pocket. I know you don't—"

"Carter—"

"—need it, but then—"

"Carter, God damn it, listen to me. *We've got a problem.*"

No one spoke to Mason that way—no one except James McNamara. Mac had been the Mason family's lawyer for almost fifty years. He brought to the table an encyclopedic knowledge of corporate law and a level of ruthlessness that the Mason patriarchs, and in particular, Carter Mason, fully exploited.

"What's the problem?"

"Where are you?"

"In the car."

"Anyone with you?"

"No, not now."

"The problem . . . the problem is the deed."

For a moment, Mason was confused; then the dark history of the long-buried conveyance document came back to him—a history that could pull down both Helius and the Mason family if it became public.

Mason forced himself to wait for Mac to continue. He could hear the old man drawing on the worn pipe that rarely left his mouth and then slowly exhaling the smoke into the air. After a quiet cough, Mac continued.

"I just got a call from Jonas over at county records. It seems a certain Richard Steinman, a reporter from the *Statesman*, has been investigating Helius's land records."

Mason exploded. "What! For thirty years we've been paying that—"

Mac's gravelly voice cut off Mason's tirade. "It was a fluke, Carter. This Steinman showed up when Jonas was in the hospital for two days. Some kind of heart problem. A temporary clerk gave him access."

Mason mentally raced through the possibilities.

"Mac . . . the archives . . . they're huge, and we had the deed misfiled eighty years ago. Even if this Steinman knew what he was looking for, he couldn't have found it in two days. It would take weeks."

"No. The files were cleaned up last year. A special audit team went through the place from top to bottom as part of the imaging project. The log shows he pulled the chain of title on BlackJack, and if he went back far enough . . ."

Mason hunched forward in his seat, pressing the phone against his ear until it hurt.

"He wouldn't have gone back more than a century. No one does that today. Do we know—"

"No, we don't know, but we know he had access to the box where the deed's filed, and we . . . we *must* assume the worst," Mac said, his voice hardening into a command.

Mason closed his eyes, trying to shut out the nightmarish sequence that would be ignited if the deed was made public. *How can this be happening?* Then he remembered something his grandfather said when they'd talked about the deed over a decade ago. He didn't say it explicitly, but the message had been clear. *There's no one left to cause a problem. They're all dead.*

"Wait, we don't have a problem, Mac. This . . . it's not an issue anymore."

"I know what you're thinking, boy. And maybe you're right. Maybe there's no one left to make a claim. On the other hand, your great granddaddy just might have missed someone. Either way, it

doesn't matter. Not even those Wall Street folks are stupid enough to underwrite a two-billion-dollar bond deal when one of the company's most valuable assets could get yanked off the balance sheet by some Johnny-come-lately looking to collect his billion-dollar inheritance. And we can't tell them, 'Don't worry, folks, Granddad killed all potential takers a long time ago.'"

Mac was right. The numbers behind the bond offering were thin, and the BlackJack field—the field subject to the deed—was a key asset: a safe, domestic oil field with massive proven reserves that generated a huge stream of cash. If the syndicate underwriting the deal suspected the field had a material title problem, the offering would be frozen until the problem was fully investigated and insured. That couldn't happen.

"Mac, this doesn't make any sense. Why would a reporter look at title records going back to 1885?"

"Can't say for sure, but I can make a pretty good guess. Do you remember that sunset law we spent a whole lot of lobbying dollars getting passed about ten years ago?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, let me refresh your memory. Ten years ago, a land-use group that Helius controls persuaded the legislature to pass a law voiding any power of termination incorporated into a deed recorded more than a hundred years ago, if the power wasn't exercised by December 31, 1999. That's about four weeks from today. So the way I figure it, this smart-ass reporter decided to try to find one of these damn things for an article, and hell, why not start with the most valuable piece of dirt owned by the biggest dog in town?"

Mason shook his head. The threat had always seemed so distant, even unreal.

"This can't happen, Mac."

"You're damn right, boy. This is one of those times when you're going to have to go way off the reservation. You and your friend Mr. Paquin are gonna to have to do whatever it takes to bury this thing. Do you hear me, Carter? Whatever it takes."

"I got it."

Mason hung up and dialed Paquin's direct line. A female voice answered.

"Hello, sir, how may I help you?"

"I need Paquin. I need him now."

"Sir, Mr. Paquin is in Cameroon. He's not scheduled to call in for two hours, and we can't reach him by cell phone at his current location."

For a moment, rage seized Mason, and then he remembered the problem he'd sent Paquin to solve, or, more appropriately, eliminate. It was a hundred-million-dollar issue. Mason had never worked with Paquin's second-in-command before, but he couldn't wait for Paquin. Steinman had to be stopped tonight.

"I need to speak with Paquin's number two . . . Severino. Get him, now."

CHAPTER TWO

*Austin, Texas
December 3, 1999 / Friday / 7:30 p.m.*

Richard Steinman didn't notice when the bartender placed a fourth round of beer on the bar. He was staring at the mahogany surface in front of him, underscoring lines of imaginary text with his index finger. Richie had memorized every word, comma, and period. His finger slowed as it passed under the restrictive covenant, and he softly read the words aloud, nodded, and then erased the memory with a napkin.

Richie looked up for a moment and noticed the beer, but his eyes returned to the lacquered surface in front of him. His finger traced the branches of the genealogical tree, which had taken weeks of research to construct, recalling each name from memory. At the top of the tree was Thomas O'Neill, the original grantor in the century-old deed. A series of branches sprang from this source, but each withered away, leaving only one. This branch led to a man named John Caine, Thomas O'Neill's sole surviving descendant.

Mr. Caine was a lucky man. He was about to become one of the richest men in the world, and he was still alive. Every other member

of the O'Neill clan had died in a series of "accidents" between 1910 and 1918, with the exception of Caine's grandfather. Richie suspected the deaths weren't accidental. He also suspected that Caine's ancestor had only survived because his birth record didn't appear in the official county records. The genealogist had found the record in the archives of a small church in East Texas. The discovery had led Richie to John Caine, the last O'Neill heir.

Richie wiped the bar with the napkin again, tiring of what had become an obsessive ritual. He looked up and stared at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. A thirtyish-looking man, with thinning dark hair, an overly round face, and a modest nose looked back at him. The large-framed glasses he was wearing magnified the dark circles under his eyes, and the twenty pounds he'd added to his five-eight frame during the past two months made his gray suit look uncomfortable. Richie closed his eyes and tried to forget the story for a moment, but it was impossible. *I have to get this thing published on Monday.*

The story would draw a nationwide audience. Intrigue, mystery, and death were not an everyday affair at the top of the Fortune 500, and the old deed would give the story an exotic twist, drawing readers from across the spectrum. The story would also pull down Helius Energy and one of the most powerful families in Texas—the Masons. But only if the story was published, and that's where the game would get complicated.

Richie had only been with the *Statesman* for a year. His law degree had earned him a spot writing stories on legal matters, but they were limited to local interest stories. Anything of national significance was transferred to the paper's big-name investigative guns, Crowley or Williams. Richie knew the same thing would happen once the paper realized what Richie had discovered. If he was lucky, his name would be mentioned at the tail end of the first article. After that, he'd receive a small bonus and a ticket back to the trenches. Richie wasn't willing to let that happen.

Richie planned to give Marc Friedman, the assistant editor he reported to, just a taste of what he'd found. Once Friedman was hooked, he'd insist upon a meeting with the *Statesman's* entire editorial board.

Then it would be a game of chicken. Richie would give the board a choice: agree to publish the story under his name, or he'd e-mail the monster to the *Dallas Morning News*. It was a big play, but he had to take his shot. In the meantime, he'd kept the story to himself.

The steady vibration of the phone in his pocket interrupted Richie's thoughts after the third ring.

"Hello."

"Richie?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"Celine . . . from the County Recorder's Office."

It took Richie a moment to put a face to the name—Celine, the clerk in the Travis County Clerk's Office who'd let him look at the title documents a week ago.

"Oh, hi, Celine. What's up?"

"Mr. Jonas called me down to his office today."

Richie remembered Jonas—the clerk in charge of the archives. When Richie had asked for access to the original deeds, the old putz had shoved a bunch of forms at him, without even looking up from his computer. When Richie returned the next day with the completed documents, Celine was sitting at Jonas's desk. The gregarious twenty-something had been sent over from another department to fill in for Jonas for the day. Richie had taken full advantage of Celine's good nature and ignorance. The combination of his press card and a few white lies had been enough to get him access to the original files on the BlackJack field.

"Oh. So . . . how's my friend Jonas doing?"

"Not good. He had the access log from the day you came into the office. He wanted to know exactly what boxes you looked at and why."

"Uhh . . . okay, so what—"

"Richie, when I came back and gave him the list of boxes, he . . . well, I thought the old guy was havin' a heart attack. His face turned all white and his hands started shaking. When I asked him if he was okay, he tried to cover it up and then kind of pushed me out the door. Do you know what's going on? I thought you said this was routine stuff for the paper?"

"Yeah . . . that's right. Look, don't worry about it, Celine. I'm sure it's just a missing form. That guy's big on—"

"I sure hope so. I don't want to get in trouble over this."

"You won't. Did . . . did Jonas say anything else?"

"No . . . but I felt so bad I waited outside his office for a minute, hoping I could tell him that I was sorry for whatever was wrong. But I left when I heard him on the phone. Man, was he upset."

"Upset? Did you hear him say anything?"

"No, not really. Well, I remember one thing, because he said it twice, and he said it kinda loud."

"What's that?"

"He said, 'I know there's only four damn weeks left.'"

"He said that? Are you sure?"

"Real sure. He said it twice."

Richie's throat tightened, and he had to force out the words.

"Thanks . . . thanks, Celine."

Richie flipped the phone closed before Celine answered, shoved it back in his pocket, and reflexively pushed his heavy-rimmed glasses back to the bridge of his nose. When he put his hand back on the bar, it was trembling. *The right of termination expired at year end—in four weeks. Jonas must have known about the covenant. Whoever was on the phone . . . it . . . they had to be with Helius. They knew what he had.*

"Sir, would you like another beer?"

Richie looked over at the tall blond woman behind the bar, momentarily forgetting where he was.

"Beer?"

"Yes. That would be your fifth," the bartender answered, as she turned to another customer.

"No . . . no," Richie said, as he stood up from the barstool and pulled on his overcoat. He glanced up at the clock on the far wall as he crossed the room, slowed, and then reached for his phone. *I gotta get to Caine . . . he . . .* Richie took another step and then stopped again. *I need a backup on this . . . Andrea. Shit! I should have sent her that package yesterday.* The mariachi band in the restaurant part of the bar began to play as he dialed the first number.