

Summary: Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy that forever changed the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.

PROLOGUE

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers was the kids' most sought-after trophy.

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock and the big buckskin tossed her head, halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual.

Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against the wind. He walked through the mud and mist hopscotching puddles.

Stepping into the trailer shed—a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light—Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-stepped, tow-headed children scurrying around loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent gifts of

matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" as the saying went, with baby Amber a bit past five feet and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's sleek honey ponytail; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray like his father with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones; Coral soft and tulip-like, reaching upward; Amber round like the moon with secret unexplored depths.

Leaning across the Jeep, Gray slipped his .30-06 into the scabbard on the passenger side near the gearshift while Coral took her little sister's shotgun and tucked it with her own on a piece of old rug between the front seats. The girls climbed through the open sides and into the back avoiding the roll bar, a curved pipe just behind the front seats that Hank had welded to his Army surplus Willys Jeep, his tinkering-toy. The spare tire centered above the rear bumper arced like a blackened moonrise.

Thunderstorms had passed but clouds hovered; sunrise, still more than an hour away, played an unknown hand. Hank buttoned his jacket against the lingering gusts from last night's blue norther that raced across his River Road Ranch dropping the temperature to the mid forties.

"Well, happy 'last day of deer season,' kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

"Daddy didn't miss him," Coral said in defense, "his rifle locked up."

"Locked up from buck fever!" Gray punched his father's arm, grinning. "The old man ain't got it no more."

"Anymore! Anymore!" Amber chanted.

"Amber! Pipe down!" Hank shook his head. Amber showing off. Always got to be center of attention. Little Miss Narciss he and her mother, in private, sometimes called her.

[section cut]

Stepping back, Hank motioned toward the lane and the southern half of the family's almost-thirteen hundred acres on the north bank of the Nueces River some sixty miles from the border with Mexico. "Y'all go have fun. I'll get the pit ready to barbecue those jackalopes when you get back. Now be sure to get a turkey for your mother."

"Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blond curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a complaining cackle as Ophelia ran to the shed, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

Ophelia gave good-bye kisses all around, and with one last reminder to the kids to close the pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't roam, Hank stepped back. Arms interlinked, the parents called in unison, "Good luck!" and "Be careful!" Gray turned on the headlights and backed out of the shed.

[section cut]

Following the two-track lane—hacked through thick mesquite and cactus—that paralleled the river, Gray cut the engine downwind from the Jackalope Ambush Stands, the kids' name for their deer and hog hunting spot. About a quarter mile south in the pecan bottom, wild turkeys roosted on the bank of the river. The girls, as instructed, would wait until Gray shot, then sneak through the brush to the river and take their shots.

"Now wait five minutes after I fire," Gray whispered as he cut the engine. "I'll probably take him down with my first shot, but you girls wait. Count to sixty five times before you start out. And be quiet."

Coral nodded and mouthed, "We will."

"I'll use my watch," Amber whispered back. "That's why I'm wearing it, stupid."

"Whatever," Gray mumbled.

"You be careful, Gray," Coral said softly. "And here, wear my cap. Your cowboy hat is too dull for walking through the woods."

"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her enlightened wisdom.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

A dark still mist swaddled the Jeep. No birds called, no game or varmints ventured through the underbrush. Twilight lightened the cloud cover; sunrise would come at 7:30, if at all. The kids had a while to sit and wait, girls in the Jeep and Gray in his deer stand.

Amber wriggled around and found a kneeling position on the back seat. Coral removed her gloves and pulled the matching Remington twelve-gauge double barrel shotguns from

between the seats. She handed one to her sister. Breaking the barrel, Amber inserted a brass-and-green No. 5 lead-shot shell into each chamber and lifted her gun back up.

Gray, reaching to pull his rifle from the scabbard, scooted toward the passenger side and leaned across the gearshift mound. As usual, the scope hung. He stretched and raised up to loosen the gun without messing up his scope and precise sighting, issuing a few whispered curse words as he worked the shoulder stock back and forth with care.

Standing behind the driver's seat, Coral broke the shotgun across her left arm, letting the barrel fall toward the outside of the Jeep. She pulled a pair of shells from the half dozen stashed in her jacket pocket and let them slip into the chambers. Snapping the barrel to the locked position, she shifted the gun to her right forearm and reaching up, Coral pushed back Gray's cowboy hat that had inched down on her forehead.

From next to her Amber whispered, "I'm ready."

Coral felt her shotgun slip. Her feet rose from the floorboard as the world exploded.

Her shotgun hit the roll bar. The world exploded again. Brush vibrated with beating bird wings and panicked wildlife, the blasts replaced by screeching warnings. Frantic shrieks and screams reverberated through the mist.

A jackalope paused, Coral saw, in a clump of prickly pear beside the Jeep.

Gray lay across the front seats. His head—blond hair, brains, bits of bone—covered the dashboard with red and yellow. The folded windshield, tray-like, held an array of color and mass that disappeared onto the hood and into the dark. An odor of gunpowder and a life stench/death stench filled Coral's nose, permeating her entire body.

Coral's legs locked as she stared down at her brother's form draped across the seats. His hands clasped the gun's stock, now loosened from the scabbard but hanging part way. His boots

freed of the clutch pedal caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat. And there he stopped. He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

Where's my cap? Coral thought.

Amber huddled in the far corner of the back seat clutching her shotgun, cringing, trembling. Her knees were pulled to her chest; her blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness made darker by the spare tire's dawn-shadow. She stared at the back of the passenger seat. She seemed to grow in size as she raised her shoulders; her head rotated, her vision moved across the dripping dashboard then down the outside line of the seat to the sideways streams of blood on the running board. She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice frigid and lethal, Amber said, "You shot Gray."

[Prologue continues]