

BLIND SIDETRACK

Chapter One

During the boom, we didn't know how young we were, or how naïve. We drove company Oldsmobiles, got raises every three months, and we were sure the price of oil would go up indefinitely. During the boom, our wives were pregnant, and we took out variable-rate mortgages on two-story houses, so confident were we in our futures. We had golf memberships, whopping expense accounts and we traveled on business to Europe, Asia and the Middle East. And if Dave King okayed it, we could use the company jet to fly to Lafayette or Casper, Bakersfield or Anchorage, Denver or Mexico City. Life was great during the boom, with opportunities everywhere, and I couldn't get enough of it. That's a feeling I'll probably never have again.

I'll probably never fly in a Lear jet again, either. About the last time I used the plane was when I flew up from Houston to Enid, Oklahoma, to pick up Bobby Stanton, the relief well drilling expert. As public relations manager and special assistant to Dave King, I had the assignment of convincing Bobby to come back to work for our company, American Sidetrack, the largest directional drilling firm in the oilfield. Bobby had become somewhat of an industry celebrity a month earlier when he killed a blowout in Saudi Arabia by drilling a slant well into the pressurized formation and pumping it full of cement. By accomplishing the kill in just two weeks, Bobby had saved ARAMCO at least a \$50 million. Dave King, our president, figured American Sidetrack could get a lot of business by hiring Bobby, especially after my efforts to publicize his talents and his connection to our company. In recruiting Bobby, Dave counted on my irresistible charm and the fact that Bob was married to my wife's sister.

I don't consider myself a materialist, but I couldn't help being seduced by Dave King's airplane. Who can blame me? A Lear jet is a wonderful, beautiful thing. Ostentatious, sure, but a true marvel of 20th century America, a sleek combination of time machine and corporate space ship. The jet's private hangar was at a small airport not far from the Goodyear blimp base in the pine forest north of Houston. The flight crew (Captain Jones, a white-haired former B-52 pilot, and his co-pilot, Lt. Corcoran, a younger man who had flown F-4 Phantoms over Vietnam) were at the air strip every day before dawn, to check out the airplane and log the flight plan. They also made coffee, brought fresh donuts for the day's passengers, and stocked the plane's bar with

beer, wine, liquor and Dave King's favorite canned lemonade. (Also on Dave's orders, they loaded a fresh canister of caramel-covered popcorn every morning.)

The Lear jet itself was amazingly small, built low to the ground and capable of carrying just six passengers and a crew of two. It had a long, narrow fuselage, stubby wings and two powerful engines, each small enough for me to cradle it in my arms. Inside the cabin, the ceiling was too low for me to stand straight up, but the seats were wide and covered with black leather. The plane's circular portholes seemed to give a more immediate view of the clouds than any oval, commercial window possibly could.

I was fifteen minutes late, but because I was their only passenger, Captain Jones and Lieutenant Corcoran waited until I arrived. Then, with smiles and nods, they escorted me across the tarmac, and we climbed aboard the jet, whose tail bore the red, white and blue checkerboard logo of American Sidetrack Incorporated.

I have always been intrigued by power, and let me tell you the power of a Lear jet, as it catapults down the runway and into the sky, is better than Disneyland. Shuttle astronauts must feel similar pleasure as their craft bursts from the launch pad and vaults into orbit. So too, Dave King's Lear jet surged into the air, so swiftly and with such marvelous power, that as a thirty year-old PR man, I could not suppress a thrilled giggle. Within a minute, we were in the deep blue, thousands of feet above the clouds.

I had rushed out of the house without breakfast and had raced through traffic to meet the plane. Now after the thrill of the Lear jet's takeoff, I felt extremely hungry. So I poured myself a cup of coffee from the artillery-shell sized thermos, opened the pastry box, and nearly inhaled an éclair and two jelly donuts. Satisfied for now, I licked my lips and leaned forward to look through the cockpit, over the multi-dialed control panel and out the narrow strip of windscreen. We were moving fast: the gauge showed an air speed of 550 knots. Up so high, moving so fast, nothing was visible through the windshield but blue sky ahead and brilliant sun blazing to our right. Resting back into my seat, I looked out the round window. Far below, I watched a twin-engine Cessna disappear into one side of a cloud then re-emerge from the other. Lower still, I could see the green carpet of the East Texas woods, a straight highway extending to each horizon, and the flash of sun off the curving ribbon of the Trinity River.

I opened my new leather briefcase and pulled out the file containing the handwritten instructions Dave

King had given me for my interview with Bobby Stanton. Dave wrote most of his memos by hand on NCR forms, lined and in triplicate, that enabled him to send a memo and keep a copy without his secretary seeing it. Today's note was written on one of those forms, in Dave's almost illegibly-small handwriting.

To: John Biondi

From: Dave King

Subject: Recruitment of Robert Stanton

Date: March 6, 1982

We've talked about the importance of getting Bob Stanton back on the payroll at American Sidetrack. The stunt he pulled in Saudi, without any technical backup whatsoever, has caused quite a stir. I've received calls from at least three customers asking why we need all our computers and bullshit when this kid from A&M can drill a relief well in just two weeks and without costing ten million dollars like our Libyan project last year. All I could say was that we trained B. Stanton and that he wants to come back to work for us...And it's your job to get him to do just that. I hate to take the disloyal little bastard back, but I know at least three contracts we could get with him on retainer. With any luck, our R&D programs will make hot-shots like B. Stanton superfluous, but for the time being I guess we can't do without them. So do your best. Here are your guidelines:

- 1) Don't talk money with him. Let me do that. You just tell him I promised to make it worthwhile for him. Tell him you're sure he'll be happy with the salary range. He'll have a generous expense account, as usual, much as I hate to piss away money like that. Giving a driller an expense account is like giving an alcoholic the key to your liquor cabinet. You'll live to regret it!
- 2) Be vague about his exact responsibilities. He's going to be a special projects troubleshooter or something, but let me work on the details. Just tell him he'll have worldwide responsibility for all of ASI's relief well and critical drilling activities or something like that.
- 3) Don't commit to staff, don't commit to budget. Remember, I, Dave King, control the money. Just tell him

he'll have the fire power of a large company behind him. Compare that to his hand-to-mouth existence as an independent consultant.

- 4) Tell him he'll be reporting directly to me, the President. He'll like that.
- 5) Stroke his technical ability. Tell him I read a report on the Saudi fire and was real impressed. Tell him that he'll have lots of influence over ASI's technical policy and research efforts. Aggies fall for that every time.
- 6) Pump him for information during your flight so you can tell me his "hot buttons" before I see him.
- 7) Good luck. You're on your own.

Dave, of course, never wanted anyone to operate on his own; if he could be in 1500 places at once, he would gladly do every job in the company. One morning when I came into my office, Dave was sitting in my chair, slouched over my desk, writing one of those memos. He looked up at me through his glasses with deadly serious, magnified eyes. His Adam's apple fluttered as if he had swallowed a small bird. "We've gotta do something about the way we answer our phones," he said. "I was working late last night and the phone kept ringing and ringing. No one answered it! Can you believe I had to answer the phone?"

"What time was that?" I'd asked. The answering service was supposed to provide 24-hour coverage.

"Three or three-thirty," he blurted out. "Do something about it today!" he commanded, stood up next to me and leaned his nose into my eye. "This morning!"

"You got it, Dave," I said. Three o'clock in the morning! I imagined him sitting there at his black lacquered desk, searching for inconsistencies in the financial statements as he drank canned lemonade and ate fistfuls of caramel-covered popcorn all night long. No wonder I'd spot him in the executive men's room (where I wasn't supposed to be) shaving or brushing his teeth at 7:30 in the morning.

The Lear jet descended toward the flat Oklahoma landscape (Where were Arlo Guthrie's hills? Tulsa, maybe?) and I looked out at the tawny pastures and muddy fields, neatly divided by perpendicular highways. As we came lower, I could spot the drilling rigs, unmistakable, beautiful towers jutting up with white or yellow or pale blue derricks 100 or 150 feet above the earth. I counted 15 rigs on the approach to Enid. More than 3500 drilling rigs were working in the United States at the time, down from 4500 three months earlier. The market had begun to slide in the Rockies, in West Texas and in Louisiana, but the oilfield was still incredibly busy in

Oklahoma. Dave's memo hadn't mentioned relocating Bobby to Houston, where people were beginning to get nervous. Why should Bobby move? For one thing, Enid was a boring place for an ambitious young engineer who considered himself a man of the world. But his wife Melanie had grown up in Enid and she was deeply attached to the vast sky and the treeless, windblown landscape beneath it. Melanie once told me she didn't want to live any place where she couldn't see a tornado coming from five miles away. "And after the storm," she said, "I want to see both ends of the rainbow."

But Bobby was restless and took every out-of-town assignment he could get. Even waiting for us he couldn't sit still. While Captain Jones talked to the tower, I spotted Bobby, pacing behind his red pick-up truck, kicking up a cloud of dust that marked his location like a smoke flare.

The landing was fast and rough and the pilots reversed the engines hard to stop the jet before it skidded off the runway. This roaring stop was thrilling in itself. Immortal, I was really experiencing life. I laughed along with the pilots as we turned just in time. Then we circled back to the hangar where two men in yellow ear muffs and orange coveralls directed the plane with dayglow batons, then tied the wings and nose down to rings in the pavement even before the crew turned off the engines.

"I hate Oklahoma," Corcoran, the F-4 pilot moaned. As he opened the door beside me, a blast of dust squirted in around the seal. "Frigging wind blowing all the time! How many airplanes get torn up in Oklahoma just from the wind?"

"A bunch," B-52 said and coughed as F-4 extracted the ladder and snapped it down onto the tarmac. "How long do we wait here, John?" Jones asked me.

"Ten-fifteen minutes is all," I said. "Mr. King wants us back in Houston for lunch."

"And back here this afternoon?"

"You got it."

"Okay, we'll get her fueled up as fast as we can."

I climbed out into the wind and my hair was blasted into chaos as I walked toward Bobby and his pick-up. He wore jeans, a black cowboy hat, yellow boots, and a cracked leather jacket. Either he didn't know the Lear jet was our plane, or he was ignoring us. He stood in front of his truck, kicking pebbles as he smoked a long

white pipe and squinted across the runway at a pump jack, which nodded up and down, pulling oil from the ground into a big, rusty tank. He was only 34, but his narrow black mustache made him seem older. In fact, he was the same age my brother Frank would have been. Bobby looked like Frank, too, and he had my brother's cleft chin and sly smile. Handsome, athletic and good story-tellers, both of them attracted people and held their attention. They would have liked each other, but Frank was killed in the spring of 1970, when his platoon crossed the border into Cambodia. Sometimes looking at Bobby gave me the eerie feeling that Frank had come back to see me. And the fact that we had married sisters heightened this strangeness. We seemed to be two brothers who had married sisters. For a moment, I sensed that it might not be good for us to work for the same company, too, but the feeling passed quickly. It would be nice for all of us if Bob and his family lived close by.

We shook hands and I nodded to the long, white clay pipe that he held between his teeth. "What are you smoking?"

"I got a bunch of these in Amsterdam on the way back from Saudi," he said. "Maybe five or six Dutch guys used to sit around in the pubs smoking the same pipe. Each time they'd pass the pipe, the next guy would break off a piece so his lips wouldn't touch where the last guy was smoking. Maybe the smoke'd kill them, but they sure as hell weren't gonna get any germs. Like a hit?"

"No thanks," I shrugged. With the small bowl, eighteen inches from Bobby's face, the thing could have been an elongated hash pipe. Looking over his shoulder, I noticed that his truck was spotted with smooth white smudges of sanded Bondo. Brown primer covered the lower chassis, like leather on the belly of a snake. "Been working on your truck?"

"Yeah, I gotta sell the sonofabitch. Melanie won't let me keep it. Says we can't afford insurance on three cars."

"I thought you made a pile of money by killing that well in Saudi."

"Shit. That just brought me even. I was in debt up to my eyeballs, John. Don't ask me how it happened. Every time Mel and Gennie get together I get a big damn Visa bill."

Gennie was Genevieve, Melanie's sister and my wife. Whenever Melanie came to Houston, she and Gennie went shopping. Lucky for me, Gennie mostly looked, but Bobby complained that Melanie bought

everything she touched, smelled or looked at. Living in Enid starved her for real shopping, she'd say, since Walmart was the best store in town. It would take a lot of spending to get that craving for real shopping out of her system. Sometimes a weekend visit consisted of 24 hours at the Galleria, eight hours of sleep, and 16 hours of travel time.

"Let's take off," I said and grinned toward the jet. "Dave wants us back in Houston before lunch. He really wants to hire you back, Bobby."

"That so?" Bobby grunted. "He wouldn't approve a raise for me before I quit last time."

"Things are different now," I shrugged. "You're marketable."

"I got lucky," Bobby said and tapped out his pipe on his heel. The boot was covered with pimples, where the feathers had been plucked from the ostrich. "And besides, Dave King is still an asshole."

"Maybe," I said. "But he's got a great airplane."

We walked together through the gate in the cyclone fence then into the waiting room beside the hangar. Seeing us, Captain Jones flicked his cigarette into a sand-filled ashtray and put on his sunglasses. Then he whistled to Corcoran, who was talking on a pay phone next to a bulletin board tacked over with cards advertising airplanes for sale.

Then I led Bobby across the windy taxi way to Dave King's Lear jet. We mounted the stairs, crouched through the hatch, and sat in seats facing each other. As we strapped ourselves in, Bobby smiled, squeezed the upholstery and nodded with approval. Even for Bobby, flying by Lear jet was traveling in style.

The takeoff from Enid was just as much fun as the boost from the runway in Houston. Bobby leaned back in his chair and laughed as the surge of power carried us into the air, and my seat belt was all that kept me from jolting back on top of him. As the plane ascended, Bobby looked out the window, ran his thumb over a thin scar through his eyebrow and studied the little town below. Enid was laid out in a nearly perfect grid, bisected by the railroad. The buildings were low, mostly white, with yards whose few trees looked like large shrubs. The most prominent landmarks were church steeples and the tall signs of fast food restaurants and car dealerships. All around Enid this time of year, the land was dull and colorless as it lay waiting for spring.

"Enid," Bobby moaned. "What a nothing-burger place. Never thought I'd be living in Oklahoma."

"Talk to Dave," I said, half joking. "He'll move you to Houston."

"It ain't your Paris, France," he grunted, "but Houston's more fun than Enid."

"Want some coffee?" I asked and lifted the big stainless thermos from its cradle on the wall next to my seat.

"Coffee?" he sneered in mock disgust. "I thought you said this plane had a bar."

"It's not even ten o'clock, Bob," I said. "The bar's locked."

"Bullshit," Bobby grunted and dug into his jacket, coming up with an inch-thick Swiss Army knife. "I need a Bloody Mary with a whole lot of Tabasco sauce. Is that cabinet there the bar?"

"Yes, but Captain Jones keeps it locked until three o'clock."

"Come on, John. If you'd spent as much time offshore as I have, you wouldn't let a pissant little lock like that stand between you and a Bloody Mary." Bobby unlatched his seat belt and moved across the narrow cabin to get a close look at the lock on the liquor cabinet. Then he opened the knife, selecting a blade that had been machined into a key.

"My locker skeleton key," he sighed and got the cabinet open on the first try. "Care to join me?" he asked as he pulled out a fifth of vodka, a plastic drinking glass and a small can of Snap-E-Tom tomato juice.

"I'll stick with coffee."

"I bet you will -- until the flight back. Then you'll get higher than a kite. Loose as a goose, you bet."

"Depends on whether you take the job with American Sidetrack. If you don't, I might have to drive you back to Enid."

"Come on, John, I never figured you'd be so scared of a weasel like Dave King," Bobby reflected as he tossed ice cubes into the plastic cup and rattled them like dice.

"I'm not scared of him," I laughed, but of course I was scared of Dave King, probably more than you should naturally fear your boss. Dave's whole reason for living, it seemed to me, was keeping American Sidetrack number one and making himself rich along the way. Besides money, only power mattered to him, and people were the tools he used to make a profit. Inasmuch as I was his special assistant, I saw this every day and knew I could get it in the neck any time Dave felt like firing me. But I believed then that companies needed people like

Dave King to survive. A hard-driving shark for a president was just one ingredient in the formula for success, like steady customers, positive cash flow, and a sound balance sheet. In short, Dave King was a necessary evil, who just happened to be my boss. If I played the game right, and made myself useful, I could expect to keep my job, while enjoying the boom at the same time. And as long as I stood up for what I believed in, I could sleep nights and look Gennie in the eye at breakfast. "I'm not scared of Dave," I repeated. "I know how to be careful around him, that's all."

Wanting to change the subject, I brought up the one thing besides work that weighed heaviest on our minds: both of our wives were expecting babies in the next few months. Gennie's first baby was due within a month and Melanie's third child would arrive in June. "How's Melanie?" I asked. "This pregnancy going okay?"

"Oh, she moans and complains every five minutes about how uncomfortable she is, how her back is killing her, and how she hates to put on weight. Christ, I was glad to get out of the house this morning."

"How are Mike and Karen?"

"Kids!" Bobby coughed. "Don't get me wrong, I love 'em. But they changed my life totally. Shit, John, you don't know what you're in for."

"I don't?" I moaned. His tone of lament made me expect the worst.

"When you have kids, your wife doesn't get up to make your breakfast like she used to. And you don't get any more back rubs or day-time sex, either, not even on weekends. It's a pain to get a baby-sitter, especially in godforsaken Enid, so you never get out of the house. You work like a mule all day and when you get home, dinner's not ready because your wife says she was tired, and she's too tired for sex, too, and *you* can't even sleep, because the baby's crying all night long, and she can't get him to shut up. I tell ya, John, the *idea* of having a family is a lot more appealing than actually having one. If you look at it selfishly, anyway."

"I hope you're kidding," I said and twisted open the thermos to pour myself another cup of coffee. I'll never admit it publicly, but I tend to look at things selfishly, too. Not that I minded Genevieve being tired and out of it during her pregnancy, but I had been hoping that things would get back to normal once the baby was born. If Bob was right, however, that had been a naïve illusion. Things would never get back to "normal." Quite literally, the honeymoon had been over for months, and I hadn't even realized it.

"You'll get over it, John," Bob said to me. "Maybe in a few months, you'll want to go offshore with me..."

"I've already got a good job," I said. I'd visited a few rigs to study the technology or to take photographs for brochures and the company newspaper. But I was always glad to come home after a day or two. Life in the field or on a cramped offshore platform seemed like too much work (and tedious work at that) for me. Besides that, people got hurt while working on oil rigs or traveling to them on choppers or work boats. Some people even got killed. I had no intention of unnecessarily making myself a target for a falling drill collar, a loose spinning chain, or a burning oil well.

Bobby took a sip of his freshened Bloody Mary then winked at me. "So what are you supposed to be telling me now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't bullshit me, John. You're the PR guy. He must have given you instructions about what to say to me...Why else would he send you with the plane? I'm not somebody's grandmother who needs an escort."

"He wants me to tell you what a great guy you are. An industry expert."

"Say it with dollars, John! How much will he offer me?" Bobby asked and jutted his chin toward me.

"I don't know. He'll make it worth your while, I can tell you that..."

"And what kind of job does he have in mind for me, John? Am I gonna be a glorified field hand, or will I have a staff and a budget so I can really accomplish something?"

"You'll have to talk to Dave about that. You'll be reporting directly to Dave."

"So what? You're reporting directly to Dave. I don't see you driving a BMW. I don't see you living in River Oaks."

"Is that what you want? A house in River Oaks?" This was, and still is, Houston's most expensive neighborhood. "Even Dave doesn't live in River Oaks."

"I don't give a shit about River Oaks, you know that," Bobby shrugged, squinted at me and nodded slowly. It was exactly the look my brother Frank would give me when he wanted my help on one of his schemes. I always agreed to help Frank, no matter how crazy the idea, because I wanted my brother to accept me. "Come

on," he continued, "level with me, John. I thought we were friends. And now you're acting like Dave King Junior. Where do I stand here, John?"

"Okay, okay," I said, snapped open my briefcase and pulled out the hand-written memo from Dave. "Here. My secret instructions. Don't tell him I let you read them."

Bobby grinned just the way he did whenever he won a pot playing poker (which was often). Then he leaned back in his seat and read through the memo while he stroked his scarred eyebrow, sipped his drink, and licked drops of tomato juice from his mustache with the tip of his tongue.

American Sidetrack's new two-story concrete and glass building stood a block east of the Astrodome on a soggy field that had once been dotted with oil wells. Now the prairie was developed with cheap apartments, filling stations, strip shopping centers, and the boxy warehouses of oilfield service companies. An eight-lane freeway separated ASI's parking lot from a poor black neighborhood which spread all the way to the University of Houston and beyond it to the Ship Channel. Because the company was so close to the ghetto, Dave King had the property surrounded with a 12-foot chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. Entrance to even the visitor's parking lot required an electronic card-key or the determined buzz on the security lock from George "Spareribs" Potts, the black watchman who also cooked at the company picnic every year. (After a rash of break-ins at the ASI plant, Dave King threatened to replace the toothless Mr. Potts with a Doberman trained to attack at the scent of barbecue. I advised Dave that firing a 30-year employee would not be a good PR gesture. In a few days Dave's rage subsided, and he had the fence electrified. This stopped the burglaries, but the lawn around the fence became littered with the carcasses of birds who made the mistake of roosting on ASI's perimeter.)

Instead of looking out on the manicured front lawn (with its transplanted live oak trees and beds of begonias and asters that spelled ASI in red, white and blue), Dave King's second floor office was in the rear of the building, overlooking the employee entrance and parking lot. With this view, he could watch his staff come and go, and could keep a mental record of their work schedules. He even had a convex truck mirror installed near his desk so he could keep tabs on the parking lot without turning his head.

Dave's secretary Rosemary carefully controlled admission to his office. Today, she sat with her head

bowed and her chair pushed back from her desk. She showed off her voluminous strawberry permanent as she looked down at her lap. I cleared my throat and Rosemary jolted upright, then dropped her Bible into a drawer.

"Oh, John," she said and pretended to check the open page on Dave's appointment book. "This must be Mr. Stanton. Mr. King is expecting you."

As Bobby and I came into his office, Dave King stepped out from behind the big black desk to shake Bobby's hand. Dave stood about six-foot four, weighed maybe 150 pounds dripping wet, and had so much nervous energy that he could hardly stand still. His big wire-rimmed glasses doubled the size of his eyes, and as usual, he seemed about a month overdue for a haircut. His wide paisley tie, several years out of style, flapped in front of him as he bobbed toward us. "Why hello, Bobby," he said and grinned crookedly, then sneaked a peak at his Rolex watch. "I'm happy you came down to see me. Did you enjoy your flight?"

"Just fine," Bobby nodded. "Especially after I got the liquor cabinet open and had a Bloody Mary."

"In the morning?" Dave frowned and spun toward me with a startled look. "John, I thought we kept the liquor cabinet locked until three o'clock."

"I guess Captain Jones forgot to lock it this morning..." I stuttered, embarrassed to be caught breaking the rules. "I couldn't exactly say no after he'd--"

"Right, right--"

--you asked me to treat him like a customer--"

"That's what I said!"

"And Bobby's here, ready to talk business--"

"Next time remind Mr. B-52 to keep the bar locked up. Okay, John?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come over to the couch and talk to me," he said to Bobby. "Want some *coffee* or something?"

"No thanks," Bobby said, as he took off his jacket, revealing his bright red golf shirt, which was a size or so too small, so it called attention to his muscular chest and large biceps. "I feel just fine."

"Are you sure? The damn secretary can at least bring you coffee."

"No thanks, I'm fine," Bobby grinned as he sat on Dave's leather couch, which forced most visitors to

recline backwards to an almost ridiculously relaxed position, while Dave's armchair kept him upright, alert. In spite of the bean-bag chair effect of the sofa, Bobby managed to sit straight, like a fisherman in a boat, relaxed, but ready for anything.

"I've been meaning to talk to you ever since I had a look at an internal report from ARAMCO on that blowout project you just finished."

"That was quite a challenge," Bobby grinned and nodded with eagerness. "That was a big job."

"A big job?" Dave laughed. "How can you call that a big job? It took you all of two weeks...Goddammit, it took us a team of twenty people and ten months to kill that Al Khafir well in Libya last year. Now *that* was a big job. That was a ten million dollar revenue producer for us."

"That was a deep well and you had to drill through hard rock. Crossed a couple of faults, too, if I remember right. The Ibrahim Number One was different. It was shallow, it was offshore, and the zone was bigger than the state of Rhode Island."

"There was sour gas, though, wasn't there?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, it wasn't easy. We had to plan fast and get after it. The well blew out in the Gulf when I just happened to be down in the Neutral Zone doing a blind sidetrack."

Drillers sidetrack a well when there's a problem with the original hole. For example, the drill pipe might twist off leaving a hundred feet or so of pipe in the hole (called a fish). Then the drillers pump cement into the lowest portion of the hole (set a plug) and start drilling again, but using special tools this time to deflect the wellbore from its original course and "sidetrack" the problem hole. A blind sidetrack is performed without any well surveys so the hole is drilled ahead "blind", in the hope that it will reach the payzone anyway. In the Neutral Zone between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the reservoirs are so big that a blind sidetrack can easily turn a lost fish into a good well. But an experienced directional driller like Bobby still had to supervise the operation to avoid mechanical problems like the ones that made the sidetrack necessary in the first place.

"The ARAMCO company man on the Ibrahim platform, Dwayne Fuller, is a good friend of mine," Bobby continued. "We spent nearly a year together offshore in High Island when he was with Pennzoil. I drilled fifteen wells for him there. One night around midnight on the Ibrahim, they took a gas kick and lost control of

the well. It came back real quick on them, even before the toolpusher could wake Dwayne up. A couple of the hands were killed by the hydrogen sulfide fumes and the Arab crew just panicked. Dwayne ran to the doghouse to see if he could close the blowout preventers, but it was too late. The fire had already burned out the controls. Then he went out on deck and started throwing people into the evacuation pods. When all 20 people were accounted for, he jumped in himself, in his gas mask, his pajamas and boots, carrying the drilling log and one can of snuff. He knew I love relief wells and I'd even drilled one in South Louisiana in 1979 and one in Texas in 1980, when I was with ASI. And Dwight knew I was in the Neutral Zone 'cause we ran into each other at the Hilton in Dubai and had dinner and a poker game the night before I went on location. Four days later, I'm in the Neutral Zone time drilling off the cement plug, building angle around the fish, when Dwight calls me on the radiophone. He said he was sending a chopper for me. He wanted me to drill a relief well from the Ibrahim Two platform, a half mile away from the fire. I wanted to work fast on this one, Dave. I didn't want Red Adair to get there ahead of me and steal all the glory. I thought we could spud the well and be lined up to target before Red could get to the Houston airport with his asbestos suit. Well, Dave, we were lucky and everything fell into place. Dwayne and I stayed up for two weeks straight, chug-a-lugging Dr. Pepper and eating No-Doz like candy. At night, the wind would kick up and the fire would go out, but the gas, oil and brine would still be erupting like a volcano. Then we'd have to send one of the Palestinian roughnecks out in a rubber raft to go shoot a flare into the eruption to burn off the H₂S so it wouldn't float over and kill us. We drilled into the target in just eight days, and we lost returns in the blowing formation-- With binoculars we could see drilling mud blowing up through the fire. So we pumped seawater into her for three days until the cement barge got there, and three days after that we killed her for keeps."

"How did you plan the well without computers?" Dave asked skeptically. "What did you do for engineering?"

"I'm an engineer, Dave, you remember. I got my professional engineer's license the year I left ASI. The year you canned my raise--"

"I never canned your raise!"

"Then Harvey Broussard lied to me."

"Don't change the subject," Dave insisted. "How did you do all those calculations so quickly without a computer? We charge \$5000 a day for a rig-site computer and you did this complicated job without one?"

"I would have used a computer if I had one, Dave, believe me. As it was, I was running two HP 41C calculators non-stop. One calculating the trajectory of the hole we'd drilled, and the other projecting where the hole would be in the next few minutes. I put the relief well within a foot of the blowout's casing shoe. Which is pretty good for a solitary Aggie. Some people think it takes three of us to screw in a light bulb, but we're good at drilling wells."

"That *is* good," Dave nodded and grinned, and I guessed he was ready to go in for the kill himself.

"Before I forget, Dave," Bobby said as he reached over to his coat and pulled something out of its pocket, a narrow, shiny object. "I know how you like mementos, so I brought you this knife." It was about four inches long, scimitar shaped and in an ivory sheath which was covered in geometric carvings. Bobby pulled the knife out of its scabbard to show off its sharp blade inlaid with gold and its elaborate handle. "The green stones are jade, and the blue panels are lapis lazuli."

"Thanks," Dave smiled. "Where did you get it?"

"After I killed the fire I wanted to go to bed, but the ARAMCO superintendent called on the rig phone and told me to wait up, Prince Omar is coming. Turns out this Prince Omar cat was the Deputy Minister of Petroleum. He buzzed out to the rig in his private Jet Ranger helicopter with his three British commando type bodyguards. Prince Omar wanted to congratulate the crew. When he heard I had planned everything, he presented me with that little knife as a token of his appreciation."

"It's beautiful," Dave said as he ran his thumb across its blade. "Valuable, too, I imagine."

"Imagine so," Bobby nodded. "I didn't have time to get it appraised, but it must be worth a couple hundred bucks, don't you think?"

Dave grinned at me and winked with delight. He obviously believed the knife was worth more than two hundred dollars.

"On the flight down here," Bobby continued, "John got me all psyched up about the opportunity to work directly for you, Dave."

"Did he?" Dave nodded. "I'm glad he caught your attention."

"I'd like to have the chance to be the critical drilling manager for American Sidetrack, Dave. Especially, if I have some input into the company's R&D programs."

"Well, that's just the spot we'll make for you, Bob," Dave King beamed.

"That's why I came to Houston today, Dave...If you can make it attractive enough financially..."

"Financially," Dave laughed. "With an exciting opportunity like this, you're worried about money?"

"I can't help it, Dave," Bobby laughed, too. "My wife spends it faster than I can make it."

"I know what that's like!" Dave nodded rapidly. "All three of my wives did the same thing. How much do you want, Bob?"

"I was making about eighty thousand as a directional driller, and I made a hundred thousand as a private consultant last year."

"A hundred thousand!" Dave coughed. "But you didn't have any benefits, did you?"

"No, that's a good point."

"And you had to pay your own expenses--"

"That's right. But they *were* tax-deductible, though, Dave."

"Well, holy crapes, if I paid you a hundred thousand, I'd have a mutiny on my hands. I've got a couple of vice presidents who don't make that much."

"I know you have to consider that," Bobby said and grinned. "But you don't want me to take a step backwards, do you? That won't exactly inspire loyalty..."

"Loyalty," Dave echoed. "Now that's important! I wouldn't even consider hiring you back if you had gone to work for a competitor. That would have shown that loyalty meant less to you than a few hundred dollars a month. No, you left ASI to be your own boss, to follow that entrepreneurial urge. That shows you've got a backbone, you've got the killer instinct. I like that...But face it, Bob. Life as an independent consultant has its drawbacks, too."

"You're on target there, Dave," Bobby nodded vigorously. "The first thing I missed when I left was the resources of a first-class organization like American Sidetrack. I've been the Lone Ranger, without even Tonto to

load my gun. If I had an assistant-- To help me out and give you some depth, too, Dave-- I'd consider taking a pay cut."

"Well, that wouldn't hurt my feelings. I'll give you 75 thousand and an expense account, and a car, and of course we'll move your family down to Houston."

"If they'll come with me," Bob laughed. "Okay, that's great, Dave. I think that'll work out fine."

They shook hands then -- the nervous puppet-like president and the muscular young driller in the tight red golf shirt.

"I'd buy you lunch, Bobby," Dave said, "but I've got a date with the president of Exxon today. Welcome back home, buddy. You won't regret it."

"Thanks, Dave."

"Bob, could you excuse us a second? I have one or two items to discuss with John."

After Bobby stepped into the hallway, Dave grabbed my shoulders and shook me happily.

"Way to go, John. Nice Job! This means a million bucks a year for us! With that kid on the payroll, I've got the Standard Gas and Primero Oil accounts in my pocket. Woo-eee! And you helped me cut down that hundred grand by 25 percent. Nice work. Feed him lunch and fly him home, and, kid, I'll put you in for a raise."

"Yes, sir."

"And get started tomorrow on a real dog and pony show for the trade journals, the newspapers, the Offshore Technology Conference, and the stock analysts. Promote the hell out of it while we can. And that Prince Omar zooming down in his helicopter, now that's great shit! We can use that in an ad, can't we?"

"We can try, I guess..."

"Well, use it, use a picture of this little dagger in our ad campaign. Now get out of here, I'm s'posed to meet this Exxon VP at Ruth Chris' Steak House in ten damn minutes."

In my car on the way to the local Mexican buffet, I told Bob about Dave's idea to use Prince Omar's knife in an advertisement.

"Give me a break, John," he laughed. "There *is* no Prince Omar. I made up that cock and bull story to impress Dave."

"Then where'd you get that neat little knife?"

"I won it from Dwayne in that poker game at the Dubai Hilton. He owed me five hundred bucks! But since he was a customer I took that knife instead...And by the way, I only made forty-seven thousand dollars last year. Twenty thousand of 'em on Ibrahim Number 2."

I had suspected that my life would get more complicated if Bobby moved to Houston and came back to work for American Sidetrack. Driving up Kirby, I sensed trouble. Next to power, I used to think trouble was the most interesting thing in the world.

When the plane made it back to Houston, it was raining a steady torrent, marked by gusts of wind and bursts of lightning. As far as I could tell, we were flying in total darkness. But the blue runway lights suddenly appeared in front of us as we came through the last bank of rough, inky clouds. Captain Jones put the plane down gently, then taxied it right into the metal hangar out of the rain.

Driving home through the thunderstorm -- avoiding high water and skidding cars -- I couldn't wait to tell Gennie that Bob had accepted the job. Having Melanie in Houston might relieve some of the loneliness Gennie had felt since she quit her job at the bank to prepare for the baby.

Water ran in a stream down the curb in front of our house. My car splashed through it, and I pulled up as far as I could, then jumped out under the eaves of the house. Opening the front door, I heard the television in the den and was glad that Gennie was awake to hear the good news.

"I made it," I called from the hall, but got no answer. Coming into the den, I saw that Genevieve was asleep on the couch beneath the high cathedral ceiling. The ceiling fan whirred overhead and the television emitted a commercial selling pickup trucks.

Gennie slept peacefully on her side, with her hand pressed against her cheek. Sleeping beneath her pastel afghan, with her soft face and flowing blonde hair, she looked like a woman in a Renoir painting. I leaned over to kiss her soft mouth. She smiled faintly, then sat up as she came awake, pulling on the back of the sofa and tossing back the afghan to reveal the pink velour robe, swelled round by her pregnant belly.

"Are you drunk?" she asked abruptly.

"No, of course not."

"I smelled liquor on your breath."

"I had a drink on the plane. Two hours ago."

"All right. I'm sorry," she yawned, then quickly lifted her head as if she heard the phone ringing. "Oh, feel the baby kick, John! He's really kicking up a storm tonight."

I spread my hand over her taut, drum-like belly. Even through her robe, the little impacts were startling. A large fish swimming inside her, slapping its tail against her uterus.

"Wow," I said, "does that hurt?"

"My ribs are sore from it. But it's not so bad when I'm lying on my side."

"Well, you just relax there. I'll get you a glass of milk--"

"Spare me."

I went to the kitchen and poured her a glass of milk, put a handful of chocolate chip cookies on a plate, then brought them back to the den and sat on the end of the couch and let Gennie prop her feet in my lap.

"So did Bobby take the job?" she asked as she squeezed the remote control to shut off the TV. Then she reached for a cookie.

"Yes, he took it," I smiled, hoping the news would improve her mood. "He and Melanie are moving down to Houston."

"That's great," she said flatly and she wasn't just tired, either. No, something was bothering her, and I could see I'd have to work hard to find out what it was.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Won't it be good to see your sister more often?"

"O yeah, I'll enjoy that," she said, even more remote.

"You haven't been fighting with Melanie again, have you?"

"Over the telephone? Are you crazy?" she snapped with aggravation. Did she want me to feel guilty for having a glass of bourbon on the airplane while she sat home drinking milk?

"I thought you'd be happy that Bob and Mel were coming to Houston," I said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm glad Melanie and the kids will be here but--"

"But not Bobby? Why not?"

"Because of what he does to you, John. When you and Bob Stanton get together you turn into overgrown teenagers. That guy gets you to do things you would never do on your own, and I don't like it."

"What does he get me to do?" I asked, grinning uncomfortably.

"You drink too much. You play pool. You go to too many ball games, and for all I know, you hang out in those topless bars he's always joking about."

"Not me!" I said. I only went to those places very occasionally, with business associates.

"You've been fishing with him three times," she continued. "You don't even like to fish."

"You're right, I don't" I shrugged. "But I like Bobby. And I thought it would help the family. He is your brother-in-law..."

"That's not the point. I just want you to use your better judgment, but with Bob around, that seems almost impossible for you. You're 30 years old, for gosh sakes. You're a daddy."

"Not yet, I'm not."

"Oh yes, you are!"

As she pointed to her belly, I remembered our trip to the ultrasound room at the hospital, where we saw the gray outline of our son and the rapid contractions of his beating heart. Yes, I *was* a Daddy. I'd better get used to it. Then I took her hand and squeezed it. Maybe Bob was wrong about having children. Maybe the honeymoon wasn't over after all. When it was time for bed, I decided to find out.

To save time, I brushed my teeth with the hot water. It started out cold and warmed up as I brushed, ridding my mouth of bourbon residue. Then I lathered my face and shaved quickly as I pictured Gennie undressing in the next room. Her breasts, fuller than ever, would bounce marvelously when she loosed them from her bra. And her face, my favorite anywhere, would be a little flushed, expecting my return. I nicked myself painfully above my lip, on my cheekbone, and on my neck just under my jaw. Bright red streams trickled from each wound, and glowed under the bright fluorescent light. I hoped a quick, hot shower would stop the bleeding. I soaped my skin twice and held my face under the shower to stanch the blood and to spray water between my teeth as extra insurance against alcohol breath.

Dried off, I brushed my hair (saw that the blood had stopped) slipped into my boxer shorts, then went into the bedroom.

Genevieve was sitting on top of the bedspread in an ice blue gown, cut low to reveal her breasts, with see-through lace sleeves, and a flowing skirt down to her ankles. She wore short tennis socks and flexed her toes as she read a copy of Redbook magazine.

"How do you stay in such good shape," she asked me. "You never exercise, but you never gain weight, either."

"Golf is exercise," I said, pleased that she noticed, "and I work very hard, too."

"Well, come over here and give me a back rub," she said and switched off the bedside lamp. "I've been waiting all day for one of your back rubs, John."

With this encouragement, I joined her on the bed. We lay together as close as spoons and soon confirmed that the honeymoon was still in progress.

A light brought me out of a sweet sleep, and I looked up to see Gennie sitting on the side of the bed. She seemed to cringe uncomfortably, and she bit her lower lip, as she squinted at the floor, looking for her slippers. Fighting to wake up, I remembered that Gennie was at least eight months pregnant. This could be the moment. That wonderful, terrifying moment of birth.

"What is it, Gen?" I asked.

She groaned quietly, gripped the bedpost until her knuckles turned white, then shot me a searing look. "You started this," she whispered.

"What?" I asked, feeling guilty on reflex, accused by my pregnant wife.

"I'm in labor, that's what!" she cried, and tears of pain formed in her eyes.

"Oh God." I realized that I had to drive her to the hospital. I felt panic. Which exit should I take off the freeway? Beechnut or Bissonnet? I couldn't even remember her doctor's name. "What time is it?"

"I don't care," she moaned. "I'm in labor. Where are my slippers?"

Climbing over the bed, I spotted her Dearfoams and retrieved them from in front of the closet, then

placed them at her feet. "Where's your bag?" I asked her.

"See what a pain love turns out to be," Gennie moaned. "I'm swearing off sex forever."

Pushed by guilt, I hurried to the bathroom to get her some Kleenex. It was just as Bobby predicted, I thought, but brought myself back to reality. The woman's in labor, I told myself, in extreme pain that you can't even imagine. The excruciating pain has made her temporarily imbalanced.

As she blew her nose and wiped her eyes, I put on my jeans and running shoes, found my keys, then went to Gennie's closet to look for her bag. It was packed and ready on the shelf.

"Shouldn't you be getting dressed?" I asked her.

"I don't need to be dressed to have a baby," she insisted. "I didn't have to be dressed to get pregnant."

"But for the trip to the hospital," I suggested. "You might like--"

"Eek! Another one! John, are you timing them?"

"Timing what?"

"My contractions! They're really close together."

"I haven't been keeping track--"

"You weren't paying attention in Lamaze class, either."

"Yes, I was."

"They told us to time the contractions."

"Right. Where's my watch?"

"Do I have to keep track of everything?"

"A rhetorical question," I said as I found my Seiko on the bedside table. "It's two-fourteen. Ugh. Two-fourteen?...About how long ago was your last contraction?"

"*That* won't be accurate. You'll have to wait for the next one."

"The next one. Right. Two-fourteen, then the next one."

"John, why don't you call the doctor?"

"We can call him from the hospital," I said. By that time, I might be able to remember his name. "At this hour we'll only get the answering service, anyway."

"It will take a few hours for the baby to come," she reminded me. "Dr. Hallet gets calls in the middle of the night all the time."

Dr. Hallet! Of course, the guy who still wore a Beatle haircut and who smiled constantly. "Please, get dressed. You need to get to the hospital as soon as possible."

"Okay, fine," she said, as she stood at last and moved toward the bathroom.

"Should I bring the tennis balls?" I asked.

"What for?"

"Weren't you paying attention in Lamaze class, either?"

Just as we were about to leave, we heard thunder and the great washing sound of heavy rain. The wind picked up, too, splashing water onto the porch, soaking the welcome mat.

"It looks pretty bad out there, John. Let's wait a few minutes," Gennie suggested.

"Wait? Are you kidding? You're in labor. What if the baby decides to come now? Who's going to deliver him?"

"You will."

"No, I won't. Let's go." I popped open the umbrella to block the glancing rain and clutched Gennie to my side. Then we rushed under the eaves down the sidewalk to my car.

Out on the freeway, the storm bombarded the Oldsmobile with crashing waves of rain. At times the windshield wipers seemed useless. My heart raced with anxiety and Gennie embedded her fingernails in the door and the front seat. Luckily, traffic was light, so I did not collide with anyone, despite my tendency to over-steer. A contraction came at two-twenty-five, and another at two thirty-seven, just as we pulled into the emergency entrance at the hospital. As we came inside, I called to the nurse on duty that Gennie was in labor. She put Gennie in a wheelchair and told me to move my car. "I'm taking her to the fourth floor," she told me, then pushed the wheelchair onto the waiting elevator. As the door closed, I felt severe separation anxiety. I worried that something would happen to Gennie now that she was out of my sight.

It took me ten minutes to park the car in the appropriate lot and hurry through the rain and the freezing

lobby to the elevator. As I got off at the fourth floor, the nurse was sitting next to Gennie on a couch in the waiting area. The nurse had short, white hair in bangs, and she grinned at me as she peered over her reading glasses. Did I look like an idiot, with dripping hair, soggy shoes and wet jeans? Or was I missing something?

Ignoring the nurse, I asked Gennie, "Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

"Mr. Biondi," the nurse corrected me. "Your wife isn't actually in labor at this time." She explained that Gennie had not dilated a centimeter. Instead of real labor, the pains she felt were Braxton Hicks contractions, something they'd discussed while I was daydreaming during the Lamaze class. "Next time," she advised us, "please call Doctor Hallet before you race over here." On the way home, the rain stopped and Houston was enveloped in a damp calm. We were both too tired to say much, but Gennie reached over to pat my shoulder. "Good practice, anyway, sweetheart," she said. "Maybe next time it won't be raining."