

PROLOGUE

Part One: Prelude in the Gulf

September 1956

Bobby Orgeron was under attack. Rain pelted him. Waves bombarded him. With each big breaker, his small crew boat rose into the air, and then slammed into the Gulf of Mexico.

As the water slapped his face, he spit out the salty spray and wiped his burning eyes. His boat tumbled, and he struggled to keep his balance. Suppressing a shiver, Bobby reached for the radio.

His *Davey Lou No. 4* was anchored, but in this weather the anchor wouldn't hold much longer. He wondered what he was still doing out here on the water. The rig's boss, the toolpusher, didn't seem to care that a hurricane was coming. The rig was right there, only a few hundred yards away from Bobby, but he couldn't see it in the dark storm. He could make out whitecaps and not much else. Despite the conditions, the pusher had asked him to stand by.

But this was something Bobby could barely do. Like Bobby, surely the pusher smelled the ozone. Surely he could feel the cool wind and hear it howl. The pusher knew this black, angry storm already had a name, Flossie, and it was obvious that she was coming right for them. If the pusher had any compassion, he would have ordered Bobby to attempt to pick up the rig's crew and take them to shore. However, when Bobby had made this offer, the pusher's answer was no. Now, Bobby could only worry about his own life. If he evacuated now, he had a chance to survive. He was just off Wine Island Pass, not that far from the good, safe earth of Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana.

His chance for escape was now or never. He certainly didn't want to ride out Flossie alone in a 41-foot boat. While he was generally not afraid of high seas and believed his lean, 6-foot-3, twenty-four-year-old body could do anything, Flossie definitely had him thinking.

The last thing he wanted to do was push the pusher. You didn't do that in the oilfield. You catered to the drillers and the operators. You showed them you'd try anything. He radioed the rig and told the pusher, "Man, I'm standing by out here. It's getting rough. I just can't stay out here by myself in this boat. Can you let me go inside the pass?"

"No, you gotta stay with the rig," said the pusher.

This was ridiculous. It would be at least two days before they could even think about drilling again. Bobby told the pusher, "Y'all on that rig up there. Y'all not being shaken. I'm being shaken to hell out here."

"Look, if you leave the rig, you lose your job."

Bobby knew that this was coming, and because this was the oilfield, he figured it would come that bluntly. But there wasn't much he could tell the man. This *Davey Lou No. 4* was his first and only boat, and this was his first and maybe his only chance to make a name for himself in the boat business. He had notes to pay and a new wife to feed. He'd finally started to prove to his father, his father-in-law, and the rest of his doubters that he might become someone. Of course, he was a long way from proving it completely. But he was planning to be a millionaire by the time he was thirty-five, and he didn't want this pusher to stop him.

The *moodie* oilfield, he thought. Rush, rush. Run, run. Drill, drill. If you're not drilling, you're not making money. That was all that mattered. To hell with everything else—hurricanes, lives.

Maybe Bobby would go into protected waters and wait. Because of the poor visibility, the pusher might not even notice if Bobby slipped inside the shoreline. But Bobby couldn't do that without saying something first. He pressed the receiver button and spoke, "I'll go inside the pass, where it's not so rough, and I'll anchor there."

"No," said the pusher, "I need you to stay."

"I can't."

"Well, if you leave, you lose your job."

"Well, I'm sorry. I'm not gonna lose my life for a job."

That's it. *C'est tout. C'est finis*. He couldn't look back. He decided to pull up anchor. He started to climb from the deck onto the gunwale. He had to walk along the side to get to the anchor at the bow's tip.

As soon as he put his foot on the gunwale, a wave crashed against the boat and knocked him to the deck. He got up, steadied himself, and looked at the bow. While the distance to its tip was only a few feet, it seemed like miles. With the breakers pounding the boat, he didn't see how he could walk the length of the gunwale to the anchor, pull it up, and then make it back to the cabin.

How big were these waves anyway? Eight feet. Twelve feet. Fifteen? It was too dark to tell. But hurricanes could throw up thirty to sixty footers, and the way he was anchored, a much smaller wave could easily flip him.

And until now, he'd been doing so well. His one-boat company had a steady job with Standard Oil Company of Indiana ("Stanolind") making \$40 per day. During a typical hitch, he'd work for thirty days, and then pay someone to relieve him for three days.

For the most part, the work was manageable. On a normal day, he'd run the drilling crew to and from the rig to the Stanolind dock in Dulac, twenty-five miles inside the shoreline.

But the job's schedule could also be taxing. At times, the oil company would abruptly shift his crew changes from days to nights, throwing off his sleep patterns. And whatever his routine, he was on call around the clock. If the rig needed him to make a one-passenger run in the middle of the night, transport-

ing a mechanic or a special tool, Bobby had to wake up and leave as soon as his cargo arrived. He understood the crucial nature of these trips: without a necessary tool or specialist, the rig couldn't drill; the company couldn't make money; and, in a greater sense, the oilfield couldn't function.

This job with Stanolind was Bobby's first offshore work. His assigned rig, the *Mr. Charlie*, was the world's first transportable, submersible drilling barge. But the rig's landmark novelty didn't offer any thrill to Bobby; he was indifferent to the type of rig he serviced. He was only concerned with doing his work and whittling down his note.

Before today, Bobby hadn't seen anything unusual or particularly hazardous about working off the coast, especially just barely off Timbalier Island, only thirty miles southwest of his hometown, Golden Meadow. It was no different from running to the rigs on the inland bays.

But now, as Hurricane Flossie whirled toward south Louisiana, the danger of offshore work was engulfing him. He was only a couple of miles from safety, but he wasn't sure how to take the first step. In truth, he had no idea what to do. He'd pissed off the pusher. He'd lost his job. Maybe he'd ruined his reputation.

Whatever he'd done, he had to put it past him. Before that final, lethal breaker hit, he had to find a way to reach the anchor.

Part Two: Preface to a Decision

September 1956

What was happening to Bobby during Hurricane Flossie was no different from what Sidney Savoie was facing. At the time, Sidney, his two deckhands, and his fifty-five-foot tugboat were pushing two barges out on Timbalier Bay, a few miles west of Bayou Lafourche; and the storm's rain bands stood between them and home. While the tug was making her way up the little channel that ran through the bay, she seemed to be running only on fate. The waves were so high the bay might as well have been the deepwater Gulf. Sidney couldn't see anything but driving rain and whitecaps.

It was an odd feeling because, when behind the wheel, Sidney was used to really *seeing*. His eyes were large, more circular than oval, full of hazel light and always wide open. At 5-foot-6 with his hairline receding, the forty-four-year-old man had the appearance of a little wiseman.

But his sagacity, both in look and in reality, was not very useful now on the bay where, most of the time, he couldn't tell the rain from the waves. It was as if he was inside a washing machine, with the only thing visible being tumbling water.

His vessel's radar might have warned him of any structures and an occasional channel marker, but it couldn't come close to delineating the channel's true boundaries. Sidney could have been inches from running aground. He had no way of knowing. With Flossie's bands turning Timbalier into an overflowing cauldron, he didn't want to chance riding out the tempest in the mud. When the brunt of Flossie entered the bay, the storm surge might fill up his boat with wave-wash and rain. Or it might turn her over. He wasn't taking any chances.

So he forged onward, praying, guessing, and feeling. When he felt the slightest bottom resistance on his port or his starboard, he pulled the other way. He was barely moving; if he sailed any slower, he couldn't have controlled the barges on his bow.

When he made it from the bay to a canal to Bayou Lafourche, he sighed. Then finally, the village of Leeville appeared out of the tumult. Within minutes, he was tied up at the Gulf Oil dock.

Sidney stepped into the Gulf office wet and shivering. Waiting for him was a Gulf transportation superintendent, a man who was both Sidney's client and friend.

"Sid," the Gulf man said, "I need you to go back out."

Sidney didn't know how to react.

The Gulf man told him that valuable equipment might be destroyed. He wanted Sidney to retrieve it.

When Sidney asked if there were any people out there, the man said he didn't think so.

Sidney didn't understand. With the storm only growing more violent, this was a ludicrous request for anyone to make, much less his friend.

During Sidney's seven-year relationship with Gulf Oil, he had answered the company's call many times. In fact, he'd never, ever told them no. But did Gulf really expect Sidney to risk his deckhands' lives for some lifeless equipment? Why would one friend place another in peril for the futile pursuit of salvaging a bunch of metal?

It was the oilfield at its most insane, and it didn't matter whether Sidney heeded or refused the Gulf man's orders. Either way, he stood to lose.

Part Three: Precursor to Bankruptcy

1959

Losing was exactly what was happening to Nolty Theriot in the late 1950s. In his case, the loss was financial. Frankly, in the spring of 1959, Nolty's business was drowning. It wasn't only the banknotes, but the past due accounts with his suppliers, everyone from the insurance companies to the paint store to the

grocery. Some invoices were six months past due, and Nolty had to convince his vendors to give him more time.

The fact that the suppliers trusted him defied good business sense. Although the confident thirty-four-year-old had the ability to make people believe in him, that spring, his creditors' trust was beginning to fade.

One of Nolty's CPAs, Dan Carroll, was shocked at how Nolty could linger so long on credit. Carroll, who'd recently graduated from Louisiana State University and was helping his father with the annual audit at Nolty's Golden Meadow office, had never seen anything like it with the firm's other clients in Baton Rouge, which was 130 miles to the north. Carroll's other customers either paid their bills on time or went out of business.

But things were different on the bayou, where, as the oilfield dipped in the late 1950s, it sometimes took the boat companies a year to pay Carroll's firm for the previous year's audit. Carroll would soon learn that when it came to market swings, the bayou's boat companies were a breed apart. Between Theriot and some of his other boat clients, he'd sometimes watch a balance sheet jump from a negative \$200,000 to a \$500,000 profit in six months.

But at times, the companies went bankrupt, and this year, that was exactly where Nolty J. Theriot, Inc. was heading. On some accounts, Nolty was a *full year* past due. In all, the debt was nearly half a million dollars. If his creditors decided to force Nolty's hand, they could bankrupt him on the spot.

For Carroll, verifying all the debt was painful. He was just getting to know Nolty and thought highly of him. He winced when he thought about the man having to close his business.

Then, in the middle of the pile of pink paper and red inky mess, Carroll heard someone running up the steps. Nolty, with a huge grin on his face, bolted into the room. How could he be smiling?

Of course, Nolty constantly grinned. He always sported a handsome, healthy look, with his dark pirate skin, his happy eyes that squinted dramatically when he smiled and his barrel-chested, 5-foot-10-inch frame that was always edging forward, always ready to pounce on the next prospect.

An outright jubilant Nolty looked at Carroll's father and said, "Mr. Carroll, Mr. Carroll, come over here and let me show you something."

The Carrolls followed Nolty to the window and looked down on the narrow parking space between the office and the highway. A blazing new 1959 Cadillac filled their vision. Her trunk wings were flaring and her rocket booster taillights were shining. Nolty explained that he'd just driven her off the lot in New Orleans.

Carroll's father looked aghast. "Nolty," he said. "What in the world are you doing buying a new Cadillac? You owe everybody up and down the bayou. You can't afford to buy a toothbrush, and you buy a brand new car?"

"Mr. Carroll," said Nolty. "You know that, and I know that, but *they* don't know that."

“Huh?”

“They don’t know that I’m broke. If I drove an old rusty Chevrolet, they’d worry about their money. But with me driving this car, they’re not worried about their money.”

They, Nolty explained, were the transportation men at Brown & Root, a big oilfield construction contractor in Houston, where Nolty was headed with his Cadillac.

Dan Carroll listened to Nolty talk about his plan to woo more business. He couldn’t believe how self-assured the man was; it was as if he were Howard Hughes. Somehow with only negative money to his name, Nolty had convinced the car dealership to sell him that winged Cadillac. But Carroll wondered how Nolty would buy the gas to get to Houston and find the funds to take his clients out to eat.

He doubted Nolty could make it through the trip, much less save his company from insolvency. Nolty J. Theriot Inc. would be lucky to live through the summer.

Part Four: Preview to a Price

1952

The challenges facing boatmen like Nolty also affected their wives. In the early ’50s, Minor Cheramie’s wife Lou realized that she had to share her husband’s commitment to the business. Mostly she supported Minor’s efforts to sell his company and his personality because it was his charisma—not his vessels—that set him apart.

Often, the jockeying for business went on at night, and because the oilmen were at the Golden Meadow bars, Lou recognized that Minor had to be there, too. She understood his impact in a public place and knew firsthand that when Minor moved, people watched. Physically imposing and handsome, Minor was a tapered 6-foot-2 with a long, deep face and what she called a thin “Errol Flynn mustache.” He was a more muscular version of Flynn, a rough-cut, bronzed movie star. But it wasn’t just his blue eyes and deep raspy voice that attracted attention nor was it his thick black hair with the trademark curlicue at the peak. It was merely his presence.

Sometimes, Lou asked Minor if she could accompany him to the bars, but he usually said no. It wasn’t that she could go these days; she had an infant daughter to look after. But before Deanie was born, she had certainly been game. She’d still like to get out once in a while and have her mother watch Deanie. And why would he not want to take out his cute, petite, brown-eyed wife? But Minor didn’t want her in a barroom. He had too much business to do there.

Lou, however, sensed that her husband wasn't all business at the Glo Room and his other haunts. He'd been a lady's man when she'd met him, and he still was. The perfume on his clothes was too strong to think otherwise. The feminine scent overpowered even the rankness of male body odor, smoke, and Scotch whiskey. As for the drink, Minor had a problem with that, too. If he drank beer, he was a fairly happy drunk. But anything stronger and he could become out of control. He would sometimes come home sloppy, slurry, and sporting a black eye, then go back out the next night like nothing had happened.

But oh Lord, Lou thought, look at how sweet he is with Deanie. He loves his little peanut. He's so gentle and kind and careful with her. Maybe Deanie would change him. Maybe her presence would make him realize how much he had here at home and how little he had at the bars.

But as the months passed, Lou was not so sure. One particular night, she was sleeping peacefully. One moment, she was dreaming. The next, the dream was breaking. She didn't know what roused her first. Perhaps it was the jostling or his ear-opening voice, or maybe it was the mingling odors of cigarettes, whiskey, and other women. Whatever it was, her husband wanted her up to make breakfast.

He turned on the lamp, and the light stung her eyes. As her ears began to tune, she could hear voices in the living room. Minor had brought home friends again, or was it clients, or was there a difference?

She could hear Texiens jawing their twang in the den. She could only groan, knowing she'd have to get up before they ransacked the kitchen and woke up little Deanie.

"Come on, *allons*," Minor rasped.

"I'm coming. Don't you wake Deanie up."

She rolled out of bed and threw on her robe, splashed some water on her face and put her hand on her hair. It was of no use. She didn't have time to gussy up.

When she walked out into the hall, she heard all the predictable words from the smoky men as she made her way to the refrigerator. Sometimes, it seemed as if these oilmen were the only friends she could have. While Minor had the freedom to make friends with anyone and everyone, it was difficult for Lou to find time to maintain a friendship. Lou's old friends? Out of necessity, they'd grown apart. Lou's new friends? Minor would introduce her to the oilmen's wives. They'd have plenty to talk about.

The oilmen were spitting their drunken blather now. At least a plate of breakfast would quiet them. Of course, Minor could make eggs and bacon. He loved to cook, him. But in front of these men, he wanted a servant.

He took pride in full service and that didn't stop at the boat dock. It extended into his home and required his wife to be on call, too.

Lou felt like a robot whipping these eggs in the grease. She was so sleepy she could barely smell the bacon fat. She could only go through the motions and put the plates in front of the smiling heathens, who tore into the food.

Her attention then shifted to Minor. And after a few bites, she got a reaction. “Needs a little mustard, *bé*. Not enough of it in the batter.”

Not enough. Too much. Undercooked. Overcooked. He was going to say something. For now, she’d let it lie. With these dignitaries around, she didn’t want to say what she was thinking. Instead, she put a bottle of mustard in front of him.

As the men gulped, Lou watched her husband hold forth, telling a story that was actually funny, and she wondered where he was going with it. With all of it. They had some money now. They had boats. Minor was still looking for another angle, but when he found it, would that be enough? When he was bubbling over with boats, hopefully, he would then stop the drinking, carousing, and the early morning breakfast demands.

The potential was there. He was so tender with Deanie that you would never think he could be like he was now. But when Deanie wasn’t present, and he was drinking, it was as if he didn’t care. Of course, he didn’t have to take the evil potion. Perhaps real success, whatever that was, would make him stop.

Lou wanted to succeed, too. She was aware that she was a big part of Minor’s team. So she’d give the oilmen seconds, if that was what they wanted. She’d pour them more coffee, pick up their plates, and clean up their mess.

One day, they’d want Minor’s boats so badly she wouldn’t have to be jolted out of bed. But until then, she’d rise early and light the stove.