Long Before the Stars Were Torn Down

J.A. Wainwright

for Michael, Eric, and Chris
who rode with me

There was a movie I seen one time, I think I sat through it twice/ I don't remember who I was or where I was bound

--Bob Dylan

Tell them what you saw here.

--Tom Horn

Author's Note

In no small part, this novel is concerned with the construction of personal identities in individual histories and popular culture. Its origins lie in my own attraction to the screen personae of the actor Steve McQueen, which remain simultaneously convincing and unstable, like the cool, macho image of the real-life McQueen. Accordingly, certain aspects of the gunfighter's, gambler's, and actor's stories in the novel are based on John Sturges' 1960 film *The Magnificent Seven* (itself a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*); Norman Jewison's film *The Cincinnati Kid* made in 1965, based on Richard Jessup's novel of the same name; and McQueen's outsider status in Hollywood despite his international stardom.

The book's title is taken from Bob Dylan's and Sam Shepard's song *Brownsville Girl*, which is largely about the quicksand territory between fact and fiction, particularly in western films as purveyors of the American experience.

The song lyrics on p. 206 are from Robert Hunter`s *Dupree`s Diamond Blues* (Ice Nine Publishing, 1969).

I. Boon

Reese was a mean son-of-a-bitch. Mean like a snake when it's stepped on. But just like a snake won't usually strike unless you threaten it, he kept that meanness to himself until someone startled him. If you moved carefully and kept your distance, you were alright.

The boy once asked me if other people see us the way we see ourselves. He was only eight at the time so he kind of surprised me. But I was his grandfather, and since his father wasn't around to answer him, I had to reply.

"Somewhere in between, Max. That's where the truth lies."

He looked at me with those clear blue eyes, with what the Mexicans call *mirada fuerte*. "One day I'm going there," he said.

We rode south on the old outlaw trail that led up into the Sierra Madres. North of Monterrey, we headed into the mountains. Before the real climb began we turned off into an arid valley, dry except for a trickle at the bottom of a stream bed that made a sound like a man makes when he's taken a slug to the throat. There were seven of us, including Reese and me, hired guns for a pittance and a shaky tale of untold wealth on our way to protect a village from some raiders. Each of us had his reasons for taking the job, but in the end it came down to the fact that we were all violent men, and there wasn't much room left for us in the southwest in 1890. Mexico was still pretty much lawless despite the *federales* troops, so our hair-trigger thoughts and feelings that usually blew out the barrel of a .45 wouldn't attract too much attention. *Bandidos* were a dime a dozen down there.

Max came to live with me after his mother died. Clay had probably called her a stacked deck as he walked out her door five years before with his leather grip that would have held no more than a toothbrush, his hand-written odds-book, and some cards. He'd been called 'Kid' ever since he'd begun to play poker seriously. He was damn good at it,

but I guess he'd never grown up when it came to women and family. This was my fault partly since I taught him to play, usually after we'd mucked out the stables or mended fences on the Montana ranch where I was a hand. And I'm not one to talk about women.

Clay's mother was a Scandinavian whore I spent a couple of weeks with in Abilene. I found out about him when I passed through a few years later. He was sitting on the boardwalk outside the saloon as I went in, but his fair hair and blue eyes caught my attention for a moment. When I nodded at him, he ignored me and stared off at the Chisholm Trail beyond the end of the street. There was something cold and edgy about him at the same time, and I was glad he wasn't old enough to carry a gun. The whore had died from blood poisoning and the other women took turns looking after Clay, meaning between customers. They'd figured I'd return one day, and when they told me I was his father I couldn't deny the resemblance. He found out who I was and stopped me in the street to ask if I was going to take him away. It hadn't occurred to me to do anything like that. I'd led a shiftless life, and still did, moving through north Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, fighting in range wars and, when they were over, bounty-hunting and generally watching my back for someone younger and faster. At first I thought he was concerned I'd make him leave, but then I realized he wanted to go, and if I was his father that meant a free ride out. I don't really know why I decided to take him along. Maybe I sensed he was my ticket to a place I'd never find without him. Later on, when he'd learned to play poker, he told me he'd kept an ace in the hole for a long time in Abilene, waiting for a King suited. It would be years before he was dealt Max, but he folded his hand with me long before that.

I'd been passing time in a little border town, starving for some action, when I met Reese. Some locals were objecting to the burial of an Indian bar-fly in their Boot Hill, and the gravedigger couldn't find anyone to drive his buckboard with the Indian under a blanket in the back. That was strange in itself. Most Indians got carried off by their own kind for a ceremony out in the desert, but this old warrior had been so long lost to his tribe that no one, red or white, seemed to give a damn, and even if they had there was no gumption to take the wagon up the hill. That's when he stepped forward. I liked his black outfit and the way he moved, uncoiling himself from a hitching post like that snake I

mentioned and telling the gathering crowd that since he had nothing better to do, he'd take the reins. Well, I had nothing better to do either, so I borrowed a scatter-gun and some shells from a stage-coach guard and got up on the seat beside him.

"Where you from?" he asked. He had a stare that looked right through you.

"Santa Fe. You?"

"Wichita."

We both knew we were talking about where we had last been. He lit up a thin cigar and looked around.

"Much happening there?"

"No. Wichita?

"Quieter than a whore's cunt on Sunday morning," he replied, and blew some smoke toward the hill. "Maybe we'll make some noise up top." He took a silver pocket watch from his vest and checked the time, though I couldn't see how that mattered.

"Maybe," I said, and snapped two shells into the chambers of the scatter-gun.

The main street of the town rose gradually then steeply to the cemetery so we could only see the top of the ornate gate as we moved along. The crowd was behind us keeping to the shelter of the buildings on either side, all except for some young *mestizo* with a low-slung .45 who waved off my concern when I turned in his direction. Everything was quiet beside and ahead of us, then I saw a white curtain move behind a store door and the tip of a rifle barrel sticking out.

I twisted in the seat for a better shot but everything happened fast as it usually does. There was an explosive crack from the doorway as I pulled both triggers and blew out the window glass. The curtain turned red as the shooter's head flopped against it, and I thought I heard a whistle from someone in the crowd behind. When I looked at my partner he was still puffing on his cigar. "Not quiet anymore," he said.

I reloaded and we kept going. As we came up the crest of the hill we saw the four of them in front of the gate. He pulled up the horses about ten feet from their boot-tips.

"Well," he said, "are you the gravediggers?"

The biggest one spat in the dust. "No fuckin' Indian is comin' in here."

He put the reins down slowly. "Even considering who *is* in there?"

"You ever hear of Big John Lobo?"

"If you mean John Wolfe, sure. Fast right hand."

"Yeah, well he was a friend of mine until a fuckin' redskin shot him in the back. I put him in the ground behind me there." He gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "Then I dragged the Indian out for the coyotes and buzzards. Same kind of peckin' order right now."

He took another thin cigar out of his shirt pocket and lit it up. "That where you want to be when this is all over? Out with the coyotes and buzzards?"

I was watching the other three, figuring he would deal with the talker. John Wolfe might have been fast, but my man drew down on Lobo's pal before his barrel cleared his holster. I saw him fall out of the corner of my eye as I gut-shot the second one to go for his gun. The other two froze then raised their hands. He calmly shot both of them in the knee. I could see the blood bloom like a rose through their pants. We left them screaming in the dirt as we drove through the gate.

The gravedigger took over, and I guess the old warrior got his burial. We drove the rig back down the hill at a clip and shared some whiskey when someone offered us a bottle.

"What do you go by?" I asked.

"Reese." He looked at me and waited.

"Call me Boon," I said.

When Clay and I left Abilene I had no idea where we were going or what I was going to do with him. I was forty-one years old and the new century was well under way. The west was drying up for people like me, the ones who'd lived by their nerves and never looked back at the blood they left behind. As for the future, it was always right around the next bend in the trail, behind a boulder or up a box canyon, maybe across a faro table in a crowded saloon. The only way to survive was to stay a moving target. Now I had a six-year-old kid with me, which would only slow me down and signal I'd gone soft. Maybe I had, but something told me he wasn't just a burden, and that I had more to lose if I didn't give the father-son thing a chance. God knows, I was tired of the role I'd been playing.

I was too well-known in the southwest so I decided to ride north and look for ranch work. It took us three months of short-term jobs and sleeping on rocky ground before we

reached Montana and the Bitterroot Valley. I hired on as a stock-man and general odd-body on a place run by an old woman named Ma Barnard. Her husband had died beneath a stallion's hooves twenty years before, but she'd taken over without a blink and had twenty hands looking after her cattle and horses and keeping her fences in place. No one asked any questions of Clay and me. We just fit in and didn't offer up too much about ourselves. After awhile it was as if we'd been there all our lives.

There weren't any other kids in the bunkhouse, but Ma had some nephews and nieces nearby so Clay wasn't entirely dependent on me for company. He was mostly a loner who studied other folks like they could reveal something to him they didn't know about themselves. This didn't unsettle the other hands too much until they played cards with him. That wasn't for a few years, of course. He went to the one-room schoolhouse in town and learned to read and write what I had trouble deciphering or putting down on paper. After school and on Saturdays he'd ride with me to cut steers from the herd or rope stallions for breaking. He'd put on thick gloves too large for his hands that protected him from barbed-wire cuts and help me dig post holes or clear brush from the upper pasture.

He never said very much, and I knew he was restless in this settled life with me, but he didn't complain about his chores or about Montana. The wide blue skies in summer and winter made the range seem even bigger than it was. That space was what held me there. You could see a rider coming from miles away, and usually he wasn't wearing a gun. Everyone had a Winchester in his saddle-scabbard, but that was to scare off wolves or shoot the occasional bear. There were still Friday-night bar-room brawls in the local saloon, but the territory was mostly civilized and the law came down hard on anyone who didn't accept that. As the years passed, though, I began to notice that Clay liked winter best and those afternoons and nights when we'd hunker down with the rest of the boys by the woodstove and gamble away some of our weekly wages as they sipped whiskey and told the usual stories about women. I joined in the laughter, but didn't give too much away about my past.

"Why don't you talk about who you are?" he asked me one sleety afternoon on the range when we were huddled by a small fire with our coffee and hardtack.

"That's an interesting question," I said, wondering how I was going to deal with it.

"You're a good listener. I know that because you keep track of things the boys tell you about themselves. They like that, but they don't notice there's not much you give them to remember."

What he was telling me was that he was a good listener too. But he also wanted to know more about himself, and that meant finding out some things about his father.

I held the mug below my nose and inhaled the odor of burnt grounds. He watched me and waited patiently while I made up my mind. I don't know why I decided that my time in Mexico might be a branch in the stream he could cling to, but I gave him the Boot Hill story that day and said I'd keep going with the rest of the tale when it suited me.

The three villagers found Reese the same night. They'd followed us up the hill with the crowd and seen what we did. Reese had a room above the saloon, and they came up the back stairs because they knew someone in the drinking crowd of cowboys and gamblers below would be bound to challenge Mexican farmers. Reese was dozing on the bed but jumped up when he heard their rope-soled sandals coming down the hall. He turned down the oil lamp, drew his .45 from the holster, clicked back the hammer, and held the barrel by his pant-leg, pointing it at the floor.

They knocked softly as a sign of respect, and entered slowly when he said "It's open," shuffling their feet on the old carpet, and holding their hats in their hands.

"What do you want?"

"*Por favor, senor*. We have come to ask for your service," one said. He was older than the others, maybe sixty.

Reese had no idea what they could possibly ask of him. Clearly they were poor, and he wondered how they'd managed to find their way across the border.

"What kind of service?"

"We need your gun, *senor*."

"My gun? What for?"

"There is this *bandido* Fuentes. Every year he comes to our village, the village of Santa Eulalia, and steals our harvest. In the spring he takes our chickens and animals. We have barely enough for our children after that. He also steals any money we have saved for the church. It has been going on for a long time. We must stop him."

"He doesn't come alone, does he?"

"Oh no, *senor.* He has many men with him. They ride their horses over everything. Last year they shot two young men who were in their way."

"How many?"

"Perhaps thirty, maybe more."

"Why don't you get the law?"

"We have done this. But the *federales* cannot stay in our village all the time. Fuentes knows when to take advantage."

Reese told me later that it was this "take advantage" that stopped him from throwing them out of the room. His services had been bought many times by more powerful and educated people who only complained about getting fucked by those they wanted to get rid of. But these three farmers had a dignity of expression they kept to even when speaking about those who treated them violently. The snake in Reese must have recognized it as a territory they'd defend when they were trodden on. But there was something less venomous in him that might have welcomed such company.

"Thirty men is a lot," he said. "I'd need to get help. How much money do you have?"

"Please, *senor*, we have this." The old man took a folded cloth from his white tunic and spread it open the table beside him. Reese looked down and saw a pile of *pesatas* and an old gold watch.

"That's it?"

"Please, *senor*. It is over a hundred of your dollars. We sold everything of value in the village to bring you this."

Reese said he'd need five or six men, at least. That meant only fifteen or twenty dollars for each of them on a job that would take weeks as they waited and prepared for Fuentes' return. It was crazy, but he thought of the shattered cigar that he'd held between his lips after the shot from above. Was it any crazier than that?

"There is something else, *senor.*

"What?"

"Fuentes has a cave in the mountains where he keeps his treasure."

"Treasure?"

"Oh yes. He has boasted of it. All the gold candlesticks he has looted from the churches in many towns along with the silver and jewelry stolen from the bishops' carriages as they traveled in the countryside." The old man said it fast, as if the wealth could quickly disappear.

Reese didn't know whether to believe this. But if it was true there could be a lot of money on the table. What the hell, he thought, it was action, and you couldn't expect to meet a Boot Hill crowd every day.

"We'd need food and a place to stay."

"Of course, *senor*. Fuentes has not yet taken this year's harvest."

"Tell me where your village is. Then go home. If I'm coming with some men, look for me in a couple of weeks." He released the hammer he'd been holding back all this time and put the gun on the table beside the coins and watch. The blue-black of the .45 seemed dull in comparison.

I taught Clay a lot of different games, but it was five-card Stud that grabbed him. We'd play in a corner of the bunkhouse for an hour or so every night, then I'd go and join the boys at the table where we'd use matchsticks as chips, each one worth a penny. Sometimes, if the booze was flowing, five cents was the rule. It was then that tempers flared over foolish bets and lost hands. He watched all of this quietly, but I saw him mark things down in a little notebook from time to time. When I asked him about it, he shrugged and said it didn't mean much, he was just keeping track of the cards. But I snuck a look after he was asleep one night and found drawings of the boys' faces together with brief notes about their habits at the table. "Bill rubs his finger across his lower lip when he's bluffing…Ernie looks away when he's holding a pair after the first draw." He even had me pegged: "Pop taps table with right thumb if he's sure." I knew then that when I eventually let him in the game he might fleece us, but I'd just have to be careful and let the boys fare as they might. After all, he still had to play what he was dealt like everyone else.

The first time he sat in he was eleven. I asked the boys if they'd mind if he played a few hands, and they didn't object. "But when your pennies are gone, no cryin,'" Bill said, to much laughter.

"How much you got?" Ernie asked as Clay sat down beside me.

"Twenty cents."

"Well, kid, losin' is part of life. Better you learn it now than when you got more than twenty cents on the line."

Ernie was just calling Clay a youngster, but 'Kid' stuck through all the card games that winter, and it was Ernie and the others who did the learning.

He seemed able to memorize what had already been dealt when others had folded their hands and he was left staring down one or two survivors. Most times when they called he had them beat with a high pair or even three of a kind, and more than not when they had a straight he'd have a flush. Sometimes he'd be bluffing, of course, but usually with a card high enough to take the pot as often as anyone else. That first night he won forty cents, and Ernie grudgingly slapped him on the back as we left the table. "The cards like you, kid. Anybody can see that."

As time went on, I saw he wasn't only good with cards but smart with people. He knew when to lay down so as not to push the boys into too many corners. They had a hard time losing consistently to a youngster, so Clay let them win enough pots to keep them even-keeled and eager to play. That first night I watched him fold to Ernie's two pair when he had two aces showing and I was certain he had the third buried. I even saw him give up a straight when Bill was bluffing on a flush. Hell, I knew Bill was bluffing, so Clay sure did. When he turned over his hole card to show the doomed straight, he smiled happily at me as Bill whooped in scorn.

Reese found me in the saloon and told the Mexicans' story.

"Twenty dollars wouldn't even pay for my bullets if those thirty men are true."

"Yeah, I know. But there's that cave in the mountains. We could go to the village, wait for Fuentes to ride through, and follow him home. When he left again there'd only be a few guards left behind. It could set us up for a long time."

"What about the farmers?"

That's when he told me about their way of speaking and how there was something about them he was finding hard to shake off. "Maybe it was the watch," he said. "They

must have hidden it from Fuentes, like he didn't deserve it. It's worth more to them than all the bishops' jewels."

I was thinking of those jewels, and how, if we got our hands on them, the split might mean I could buy a piece of land somewhere and stop looking over my shoulder for the next fast gun. "I'll try not to waste my ammunition," I said.

"Well, two of us can't handle thirty. I'll put the word out, and we'll see who shows up."

The first one to knock on our door was the young *mestizo* with the low-slung .45 who'd followed us up the hill. He was a thin and good-looking, maybe nineteen or twenty, but he was dressed a little too fancy for my taste. With his black leather vest and spangled hat band, he looked like he was playing a part in one of those wild-west shows I saw years later.

"I hear you're looking for men."

"Yeah, men who are good with a gun."

"I'm good."

Reese stepped up to him in the close air of the room and clapped his hands. The fancy boy flinched and asked what was going on.

"You draw before my hands come together," Reese said, and clapped again.

He set himself and went for his gun as Reese's hands moved and closed before the barrel cleared the holster. They did it again with the same result.

"You clap, said Reese, and when the kid did his hands bounced off Reese's .45 that came through the air like the blur of a bird flying by your window.

"Come back when you're ready." Reese turned his back and winked at me.

The spangles glittered as the kid spun on his heel and slammed the door.

"Little hard on him, weren't you?" I said.

"Fuck that. If he keeps trying so hard, he'd be dead the first day."

The night Clay killed a man I was back in the bunkhouse mending harness. He was sixteen, and I couldn't look after him every minute. Besides, he made it plain he didn't want me to, taking off to town without telling me, where he'd sit down at the saloon table and play for serious money. It was dangerous for a kid to be doing this. Cowboys would

bring their month's wages to a game, not to mention their reputations, and they didn't like to lose. The ones who knew how good Clay was played very carefully, so it was the newcomers or passers-through who took him on. Like he did with Bill and Ernie, he'd play easy for awhile, sit back, and watch how his opponents fared. Oh, he'd win a pot or two in the first hour just to whet their appetites for competition, but mostly he'd break even, and let one or two others grab big piles of coins and bills.

This particular night there was an easterner at the table, a real cardsharp, Clay said, with a lightning fast shuffle and deal. He was a talker too. Liked to remark on every draw and dig it in when he won, which was more often than everyone else. Clay kept within striking distance, and it was clear the contest was coming to a showdown between the two of them. Three other players stayed in, including the local judge, who owned a ranch twice as big as Ma Barnard's. A crowd had gathered, and the saloon air was hot and heavy with smoke and rowdy conversation.

There must have been a hundred dollars in the pot already when the easterner, with four spades showing, raised fifty bucks. Two cowboys dropped away from the flush, as did the judge even though he had two Kings turned up, and left Clay with only a 2-6-8-9 unsuited in front of him. He told me later he knew his man was bluffing, but he wanted to milk the moment. So he sat there for at least two or three minutes, as the crowd hushed and you could hear stomachs growling and the clink of beer glasses on the barman's tray.

"Well, boy, you going to worry about it all night or take your medicine?" the easterner taunted.

Clay smiled and tossed $50 on the pile. "Call."

"What do you mean, 'call'"?

"I think you're trying to buy it." He turned over his hole card to reveal a deuce of spades.

"Shit," said the easterner, and turned over a five of hearts. There was no other five on the table.

The crowd cheered the local hero, and the judge leaned over to pat Clay on the back. Then the easterner said quietly, "You called a possible flush on a lousy pair of deuces? Nobody takes that kind of chance."

"You did," Clay replied evenly.

"Well, it's easy to see what's been going on." His voice had a hard edge to it now.

"I don't get you friend," said the judge.

"You think your boy here is pretty good, don't you? Well I'm saying he's good enough to mark the cards."

The judge looked astonished, and there was a dark murmur in the crowd. Clay stood and picked up his winnings. "I don't need any help to beat someone like you."

The easterner was around the table in a flash, the knife blade coming straight at Clay's chest. Maybe he was bluffing, but Clay didn't wait to find out. He twisted away and grabbed the man's wrist, and they fell to the floor, rolling tightly together as the crowd backed away to give them room. This sort of thing had happened hundreds of time in the saloon and had always ended with minor cuts and bruises and both characters arrested for drunk and disorderly. But this time was different. The judge was yelling for them to stop while the crowd was urging them on when Clay suddenly stood up and left his opponent lying still. Blood pooled on the easterner's shirtfront around the knife that was buried in his chest.

The sheriff showed up and brought out his handcuffs, but the judge had seen it all. "Undoubted self-defence in my court," he announced. Someone handed Clay a shot glass of whiskey and he swallowed it in one gulp, breaking his rule of sobriety at the poker table. As he left the saloon, a cowboy called out, "You showed him, Kid."

He tried to be quiet when he came in, but we woke up anyway, and he told us the story matter-of-factly. Ernie looked troubled, but Bill laughed and made a reference to "fuckin' easterners" that had the other boys nodding their heads in agreement. "Jesus, Kid," one of them said, "you just won three months wages!"

He didn't say anything, and had a puzzled look on his face as if he couldn't absorb what had happened and that his life wouldn't be the same after this. Then he said so softly that I don't think anyone heard but me, "It wasn't about the money."

Later, when the buzz had died down and the boys had gone back to their bunks, I asked him how he was feeling. He hesitated, and I thought he was trying to figure out his emotions. Maybe he was, but he kept his poker face.

"He was an easy read."

I remembered an impassive Mexican face from a long time ago, looking down at me from horseback as I waited to defend myself. I took a deep breath to clear my thoughts. “That’s not what I meant, Clay.”

“I know,” he said. “What I meant was I could see him coming. I’m sorry he’s dead, I guess, but I’m glad I’m not.”

He wasn’t going to give me any more so I went with what I’d been given. Sometimes that’s all a father can do. That’s what I thought then, anyway. “How did you know he was bluffing?”

“All the spades were out but three, and I had one of them in the hole. He wasn’t the kind to pay attention to the odds.”

The help we picked up over the next week was pretty ragged. Virgil, from Kansas, carried a Bowie knife like a second gun and needed to lie low for awhile, having killed a stockman who’d foolishly challenged his reputation. Tom was a heavy-set Irishman we found chopping wood for his dinner; he’d backed the losing side in some range wars and was keeping his head down. There was something wrong with Martin, who wore a Buntline special that couldn’t stop him from having bad dreams in the daylight. Then there was Henry, an old acquaintance of Reese, who had a million questions about the treasure. They all showed up at our door looking to get away from Texas. Twenty dollars and room and board in another country would keep vigilantes, angry ranchers, or even ghosts at a distance. Besides, there was that cave full of jewels. They were a dark and dirty crew.

“Sure,” I said to Reese, “they can take care of themselves, but will they cover your back or mine when Fuentes shows up?”

“Thirty guns have a way of creating loyalty, fast.”

“Maybe, you’re right, but supposing we win and find that cave. Then what?”

“Then I guess it will be every man for himself. But there’ll be two of us against four of them, won’t there? If we all survive.”

The first day out we noticed a single rider behind us, but didn’t think much of it since there were many border crossings for many different reasons. The next morning, though, after we’d forded the Rio Grande, he was still there, almost close enough to eat our dust.

"Want me to go back and warn him off, Reese" Virgil asked.

"No, he's nothing to worry about for now."

When I raised an eyebrow, he said, "It's that kid with the fancy vest and hat. Seems I wasn't hard enough on him." Wrapping his reins around a wrist, he clapped his hands together. "What do you think, Boon?"

"He never left me with the impression he couldn't shoot straight."

"We could use one more, that's for sure," Virgil declared.

"Let's see how he handles it." Reese shifted in his saddle and peered back through the bright light." "He'll come by when it's dark," he said.

We were sitting around the fire after a dinner of eggs and beans. The blaze lit up the bottom half of the men's faces in the circle, the usual tight line of their mouths softened somewhat by the glow, their eyes in the shadow of their hat brims, their hands never far from their weapons. The rasp of knife blade against stone singled out Virgil to my left. Tom, Martin, and Henry were opposite leaning back against their saddles. Reese sat beside me staring out at the scrubland beyond the flames, waiting.

"What makes you so sure?" I asked him.

"It's what I would do if I'd been laid open like that. My self-respect would say, "Don't lie down. Do something about it."

"He's part Mexican, Maybe he'll do it differently from what you expect."

"No, this is a better set-up for him than I'd provide alone. He wants to play the game again, only with some witnesses when he wins."

"Will he win?"

"One way or another. Pride will help him find a way."

Reese was an interesting man. The other day he'd predicted the kid's death. Now he was suggesting there could be more to his story than that. I wondered how his own pride figured in the matter.

We had all turned in, our feet to the fire. I knew the high desert temperatures rose and fell with the sun, and as I shivered beneath my thin blanket I swore that on the next trip I'd pack more protection against the cold. I'd made this oath many times before, but food and a whiskey bottle always won out over extra clothing and covers. I was drifting in and out of sleep, dreaming fitfully of Fuentes riding down on the village, when I heard the

soft click of a .45 hammer. All around the fire I heard the same sound repeated, muffled by the bedding

Reese said, “What kept you?”

Over the edge of my blanket I saw the hat spangles reflecting the fire’s low flame. The kid’s pistol barrel was pressed hard against Reese’s temple. I could see the slight indentation of the flesh.

“This doesn’t concern any of you,” he announced loudly but with a voice so steady I knew he wasn’t about to be shamed again.

“Get up,” he told Reese, “and do it slow.”

When they were facing one another, the kid put his .45 back in his holster and said, “My name is Federico Juarez. *Senor* Reese and I have something to settle.”

“Are you sure about this?” Reese asked. His clothes were rumpled and his hat a little askew on his head, and for a moment I saw him as a defenseless old man who didn’t stand a chance against the speed of youth.

When the kid holstered his gun, the others eased off on their hammers and propped themselves in various positions to watch what was coming. Reese was their leader, sure, but if this contest brought his death that would simply mean more wealth for each of them. This was a single gun, not thirty, so loyalty wasn’t yet on the table. I wasn’t like them, I told myself. Somehow, because I’d seen Reese humble him, I was involved more than I wanted to be. If he killed Reese, I couldn’t just walk away.

“I’m going to clap my hands,” Federico said. “If your gun stops the sound, you can pull the trigger. If not, it’ll be my turn.”

Reese didn’t reply, but straightened up as the kid held his hands apart just above waist level. I watched them for the slightest sign. Reese, I think, was watching his eyes. They stood facing one another for several long moments, then Federico moved and Reese’s .45 ruffled the air like the thrum of a partridge wing as it leaves the thicket. It was so fast Reese couldn’t have been holding back, but the top of his barrel slammed against the bottom of the closed palms.

“You lose. Now you clap.”

Reese slipped his gun back in the leather and put his hands up as Federico had moments before. My thumb still pressed against my hammer, and I eased my .45 out of

my holster. I didn't like to shoot the kid in cold blood, and I didn't believe he could outdraw Reese's hands, but if he didn't he'd still have the drop on us all, and Reese might be a dead man. I had to let it play out because that was obviously what Reese wanted, but if the kid hesitated even slightly when the contest was over, I'd hit him before he could react to his second failure.

They stood there face to face, Reese's hands hovering in the air, the men's breathing and the slight shifting of the coals the only sounds in the quiet air. I had no doubt the echo of the kid's or my shot would carry all the way to the border line.

I saw Reese began his clap but I didn't see the gun until it rested between his palms. Not a partridge, I thought, but a hawk.

Reese didn't see surprised but stood still like a field-mouse will beneath a bird of prey. For some reason I gave Federico every chance to shoot, as if his winning fair and square gave him the right. But I was shocked when he pulled the trigger.

Reese jumped back as if shot, but there'd been no noise except the click of the hammer against the empty chamber. Everybody was on their feet, guns out.

"What the fuck?" Virgil exclaimed.

Then Reese laughed long and hard. "You really got me, didn't you? Better than killing me because then I wouldn't have known!"

Federico spun his .45 chamber. "It's empty," he said.

"You sure took a chance," I said. How did you know one of us wouldn't kill you?"

"I didn't. But it was worth the gamble. He'll never forget it." He looked at Reese and smiled, then over at me.

"Why did you win this time?" I said.

"This time it wasn't a game. I've always been fast under real pressure."

Reese put out his hand. "That makes seven of us, kid."

Clay left a few months later. He didn't mind the increased respect from those in his inner circle of card players because it was something they didn't try to put into words. They just gave him a little more space than they had before and worked on improving their own games to show him that while he might have killed a man who'd been bluffing, he still had to be on his toes with them. They wouldn't have to come at him with a knife

because they'd have quality cards in the hole. Clay won most of the pots, but he had to work harder, so his own game improved as well.

But outside that circle he'd gained a reputation he didn't want or like. Respectable citizens gave him a wide berth in the street. Storekeepers thought he was bad for business, so he couldn't pick up Ma Barnard's supplies the way he used to. And he attracted the wrong kind of people to town. Card-sharks from all over the state came to the saloon for a game, and they brought women and other hangers-on with them. Clay began to make some real money, at least by ranch standards, but he had to be in town almost every night to satisfy those who wanted to bring him down or just to say they'd sat in with the killer. He was tired during the day, and his ranch work suffered. Ma Barnard told him he'd have to shape up or else choose between his two professions. There never was any choice really, and I knew it was just a matter of time before he left. What I didn't know was that it was about me too.

"I want to be the best, Pop, and not because I can take down some fools who think I'm somebody I'm not. I'm going because I killed that man, but I'd be going anyway. You know that. You never stopped moving, at least not until you found me. And I was just an excuse in the end."

"An excuse?"

"Yeah. If you'd been any younger when you came back through Abilene, I'd still be sitting outside that whorehouse. But you were getting old and tired, and I gave you a way out."

"That's the way you see it?" He was right in his way, but I thought the life we'd made deserved better. "Maybe it was a way on," I said.

"But it was your way." We were by the corral fence, and I could see the weathered cracks in the wood. Inside one of them was the dried husk of a berry blown there by the wind. He looked around. "It still is." His eyes came back to mine. "There's another thing," he said.

"What's that?"

"You were a gunfighter. In ways you still are. You gave me your nerve. I'm not afraid of anyone or anything at the table. But you gave me something else as well."

I waited.

"I killed him because of you."

"Bullshit, Clay. You had to do it."

"No, I didn't. I got the knife from him, and I could have tried to back off. He wasn't making it easy, but I could have tried."

"He wouldn't have given you a chance."

"That's right, but it wasn't enough to make me kill him. I was wide open. He was probably going to get the knife back."

"So what happened?"

"It was only a moment, but I suddenly knew what you'd do. That's when I put it in his chest."

"So I'm giving you a way out."

"I'm not blaming you. We're too much alike, that's all. I want to get to the top, not end up in jail or at the end of a rope because you reach over my shoulder and make me play a dead man's hand."

I was angry, and my right hand crept down to where my .45 used to hang. Then I must have realized what was happening and clenched my fist in protest. Was he right or could I now put my hand *on* his shoulder? If the gun had been there I might have known. But even if it wasn't, I couldn't uncurl my fingers. "Where will you go?" I said.

"Billings first. But I have to get out of Montana. What I need is a big city like St. Louis or Chicago. Tables where no one knows me and I don't know anyone, especially how they play Stud. I'm not a gunfighter, so I've got to find players who are better than me. I've got to lose in order to win."

The night before he left the boys threw him a party in the bunkhouse. There was lots of booze to go with the special steaks they cooked up, and Ma sent down a cake decorated with the Ace of Spades on top.

"You oughta take that with you and keep it up your sleeve," Bill said to much laughter.

They all envied him his freedom and because he had a talent that could make him a good living anywhere he went. But because he'd learned to play at their table and each of them had taken a pot from him at one time or another, they felt a part of his coming adventure. Clay was never much with words, but this was his home and the boys were

like uncles and older brothers to him, so when he thanked them he made mention of how he always knew they'd been there for him and he wouldn't forget their company.

"Shucks, Clay, we won't forget you either," Ernie declared, "but we'd remember you even more if you gave us a few tips with the cards."

'You already know how to play the game," Clay replied. "Any cowboy can figure out what to do when he's got nothing and the other man has aces showing. So I'm going to give you something to unsettle that other man." He then proceeded to tell each of them how their eyes and hands revealed more often than not what they were holding.

"A poker face is a mask you have to put on at the beginning of the game. Nobody can see your real face then and what you're thinking or feeling. Ernie, look your man in the eyes all the time. Or else never look at him. Bill, do something else besides rub your lip with your finger when you think you've got a winning hand. Get inside your opponent's head so he's never sure where you're coming from. And *watch* him. Because even the very best players do things that give them away."

"What about you, Kid?" Ernie asked. "How come people can't seem to figure you out at the table?"

Clay smiled. "My mask is a mask," he said.

In the morning it was cold, and the steam rose from the horses' flanks when we led them from the stable. I rode with him through the valley as the sun came up and the trail led us through thick groves of pines and over shallow river beds. Montana was beautiful country, and he was leaving it behind for towns so large they'd swallow Ma's thousand-acre spread for breakfast. I may not have been tapping my thumb on the table, but Clay could read me just the same.

"I'll miss rides like this," he said. But I couldn't tell if he meant with me or in general. Either way he was concerned with where he was going and the possibilities there, not with the binding features of his past. I was a harness he had to shake off, and that's why I probably wouldn't see him again. I was right unless you count Max.

"So long, Pop. I'll let you know how it goes." We shook hands, and I realized I had no words of wisdom for him, nothing he could take to remember me by. But he had something for me.

"What was it the old Mexican told you and Reese? You reminded him of the quick, strong leopards who weren't around anymore. Well, I'm still young and fast and there are things I want to do before I disappear."

I knew where I'd arrived and where he wanted to be were very different places. I reached over and touched his shoulder. "*Vaya con Dios*," I said, and turned my horse back to the west.

We rode into the village at noon on the sixth day. There wasn't much to see, just a line of white-washed adobe houses stretched out over maybe a couple of hundred yards and one hitching rail outside a small *cantina*.

"Hell, the whole village ain't worth twenty dollars," Henry said, and spit a wad of tobacco juice into the dust.

"That means the women won't cost too much," Virgil told him. "And don't forget we have a place to stay."

"Yeah, there's no charge for the fleas," Tom added.

"Let's find our three friends," Reese said, dismounting and wrapping his reins around the rail. He was all business, and I was glad of that. The others would ride off in different directions without him. Maybe I'd do the same. The hard life I saw around me might not be worth dying for.

The *cantina* was empty. Martin walked over to the one-plank bar and poured himself a glass of what looked like tequila. He took it down in one swallow and clenched his teeth together in satisfaction. "Nice welcome," he said.

Reese went back out on the stoop and looked around. "Too early for siesta, which means they're hiding from us. We're just another version of Fuentes' men."

"I ain't no fuckin' Mexican," Henry declared.

Tom said, "Easy friend," and Henry glared at him. Federico stepped between them and pushed Henry back slightly so he could get to the door. "*Con permiso*," he said. "That means 'Excuse me' in Mexican." Henry glared at him. I could see that seven might be an unlucky number.

I went outside and asked Reese what he thought we should do. He didn't answer but walked over to a large bell that was hanging from an angled post at the end of the stoop.

"Let's see who'll come to dinner," he said and used his .45 to bang the clapper against the iron. The noise was deafening, but it had the effect Reese wanted. People began to emerge from the houses, a few old men and women followed by mothers and children who moved slowly down the street toward us. Then maybe fifteen or twenty middle-aged and younger men came around the corner of the *cantina*, shovels and adzes held like weapons in their hands. Reese recognized the old man he'd met back in Texas.

"*Buenas dias*, *amigo*." He put his gun back in his holster.

The men lowered their tools, and the elder came forward. "*Buenas*, *senor*. You have brought six men, like you said. God willing, it is enough."

"I don't know about God, but seven good men should make it hard for Fuentes."

The old man chuckled and translated Reese's words for the others. Only one of them smiled. The rest stood silently and watched us without a flicker of movement in their brown eyes. There was a troubling depth there, and, as with Federico, I couldn't take them for granted anymore.

"Do you think they're all happy with the arrangement?" I asked Reese.

"They better be happy," Henry said. "I want a piece of that cave."

"Ask them if they know why we're here."

"But of course, *senor*," the elder replied. He turned to the group and said something harshly to them. Two of the men answered him angrily, and the rest of the group seemed to murmur in agreement.

"Federico, what are they saying?"

"There's a problem for some with our being here. Those two—he pointed at the angry speakers—said we aren't wanted now. Seems there's been a change of heart. They want their money back. They're more scared of Fuentes than they are of us."

The crowd of women and children had gathered in a semi-circle in front of the *cantina*. Reese looked at them and back at the elder. "Do they get a vote?" he asked.

The old man blinked. "No, *senor*. They would not understand."

"I think you underestimate them, *amigo*. And I know you underestimate us. We didn't come here to work for two or three men. We were hired by a village, and that includes everyone here. We'll handle Fuentes for you, but we won't do it without your help. Federico, tell them that."

After Federico had spoken you could have cut the silence with Virgil's knife. Then several women began to cry out and I could feel their emotion before Federico put it in English. "They say Fuentes has raped girls in other villages and he will do it here. They want us *gringos* to kill him and his men."

The men in the group hung their heads and would not look at us. "I don't doubt it's true" Reese said. "Well," he asked the elder, "what'll it be? Your money or your daughters?"

The old man spoke softly to the other men. After a few moments they raised their heads and nodded. He turned and faced Reese. "God's will be done, *senor*. They will help you." The desert wind blew through the folds of his *serapé*.

"God won't have nothin' to do with it," Henry said.

I heard from Clay twice in the year after he left. The letter came from Omaha, which he described as a hick town despite its size. He had day work in the stockyards, but at night he played cards. A good streak of luck and some easy marks had given him a stake he'd use to get further east, probably to Chicago. He had a lot to learn, he said, but so far he'd encountered only one person at the tables who could match him hand for hand. It was interesting to sit down with this man, called Robinson, who he described as grizzled and blind in one eye. It seems he was pretty much unreadable. All his habits at the table were consistent whether he was bluffing or holding something of real value. When his good eye stared at his opponents, though, it made most of them fidget and speak foolishly aloud like they couldn't control their tongues. Clay said he learned not to meet the gaze, staring past it to the left or right, but he'd seen others melt as if hatless under a prairie sun at noon. They'd raise when they clearly didn't want to or fold a high pair, and curse themselves when Robinson won with nothing at all.

One night after several hours of play, Clay and Robinson were the only ones left in the game. Clay had two tens and a King showing and a ten in the hole. The one eye looked down at his own two sixes and an Ace, fixed on Clay, then bet fifty dollars. Clay studied the space behind Robinson's left ear. The best he could have was three sixes or two pair, so he was betting against Clay's third ten or second King in the hole. Clay called, and the final card was dealt to each of them, an inconsequential deuce to Clay but a disturbing

Ace to Robinson. This time Clay looked right at the old man. The one eye stared back unflinchingly, and for the first time since he'd begun to play poker seriously Clay felt entirely alone. He'd have to make his bet on what he held without any idea of what was on the other side of the table. He had three tens, King high. Robinson had two pair, but the third six or Ace lying face down would give him a full house. Then the old man surprised him by checking his hand. You just didn't do that in such circumstances. The smart move would be to bet big and make your opponent sweat over what you were holding. Was it worth a hundred bucks to find out? Now it was up to Clay. He could check, but he didn't like the fact that Robinson knew he wouldn't do that. It would be like jumping off a bronco ride when you'd gotten on the damn horse to break him, to show him who was boss. The hundred bucks he could wager would break Robinson if he was bluffing, but hobble Clay's winnings if he wasn't. Then something strange happened.

As he'd never done with anyone before, because he'd never had to, Clay tried putting himself in Robinson's position, tried looking through that one eye. And what he saw at first through a hazy film of time and experience and then as clear as Montana light in the morning was himself holding three tens. Gradually he came back behind his own eyes, certain Robinson had checked because he had no doubt what Clay held and he couldn't match it. Despite that unreadable face, he had given himself away with the check and was attempting to take the pot with the least damage possible to himself rather than trying to lure Clay into betting. Clay knew if he stayed on the bronco and bet Robinson would fold. But, with the bills in his hand, Clay did what most poker players never learn to do. He questioned his certainty. Hadn't he told Ernie his own mask was a mask? So what had Robinson done to bring him to the assurance of betting? He was still more sure than not that the old man didn't have an Ace or six face down, but he sensed that Robinson had already won more than the pot by making him waver this way. If he bet now and won or lost it wouldn't be the same as if he had acted with conviction a few moments before. And if he checked the bronco would win no matter what the cards said. For the first time he realized that leaving something more on the table than the winning or losing hand could affect the next time he played. He put the bills down.

"I fold," he said quietly.

The one eye blinked. “Three tens is a lot to give up, kid. Don’t you want to see what I have?” Robinson started to turn over his hole card, then hesitated.

The rider smiled. “It doesn’t matter.” The horse looked bewildered as he walked away.

We figured we had three or four weeks before Fuentes made his fall raid, coming in from the north. The farmers were busy in the fields bringing in the maize, the women and children helping. But when we told them what we planned to do, they went out in shifts so there were always half a dozen of them to help us carry out our plans. We’d talked it over and had decided to try and trap Fuentes in the village. There were only two ways in and out—north and south along the dirt track. The spaces between the adobe houses were too narrow to allow more than one horse and rider through at a time, and slowly at that. Anyone trying to escape that way would have to contend with wire-fenced gardens and a maze of wooden sheds. In one of these sheds at the north end we stored a thick net of rope and vines that we could rig horse-high across the track in just a few minutes. The idea was to keep Fuentes’ attention focused on the seven of us in the centre of the village while the farmers dealt with the net. At the south end we worked on digging a wide ditch about three feet deep that would be covered with thin boards and dirt. Horses and men would die there, I was sure.

There were three old single-shot rifles in the village, used for hunting and to kill the occasional boar or wolf that was looking for food. It turned out that most of the farmers were good shots, but we knew that killing men required a different kind of ability. Reese had his way of getting their attention about this. He took a group of them with Federico and me outside of town with one of our Winchesters.

“Who’s the best shot here?”

Federico translated. Nobody said anything, just stood in a line and looked at him.

“Okay, I’ll assume you’re all equal.” He picked one man, pulled him forward, and snapping the lever-action back and forth gave him the rifle. Then he walked about thirty feet away. He pointed at the man with the gun and said, “I want you to shoot me.”

“*Quiero que me disparan*,” Federico said. The man’s mouth opened slowly and I could almost see his heart pounding through his chest.

"Shoot me, or I'm going to shoot you," Reese told him and drew his .45 from the holster. When the farmer didn't move, Reese put a bullet by his ear. The report was loud and the line of men jumped as if hit. The farmer slowly raised the Winchester to his shoulder and aimed it at Reese.

"Do it now," Reese yelled, raising his pistol as if to shoot again.

I knew the man was scared, but clearly it was Reese's intention that he pull the trigger. I didn't know how he could miss him and what Reese was going to do about it.

For a long few seconds we stood there, and then I saw the farmer's finger move and heard the hammer of the Winchester click. I waited for the gun-blast, but all I heard was the sound of cicadas then Reese's voice saying, "Good. You had the guts to do it." He walked over to the man and took the rifle from him. "But don't hesitate the next time or you'll be dead." When Federico had translated, Reese turned to him and said, "I learned that trick from you."

He told them they'd have to kill Fuentes' men not just wait for the *gringos* to do it. So they'd better pick two more besides this fellow here who were capable. The rest should plan to use adzes and shovels for the job. If they were going to get rid of Fuentes there'd have to be blood spilled, and some of it was bound to be their own.

That night the old man came to us where we sat outside the *cantina*. "*Senor*," he said sadly, "that was a harsh thing you did today."

Reese looked at him. I knew he had a soft spot for the old man, but I also knew that people were going to die in this village, likely some of us included, and that, when it came down to action, Reese wasn't going to let Fuentes or the villagers "take advantage" of him.

"Maybe. But it was necessary."

"The men are troubled by what happened, and for Pepé who held the rifle."

"They need to be troubled. It isn't easy to kill a man. They know that in ways they didn't before. Tell Pepé I admire his courage. The others should too."

"I will tell him, *senor*." The old man started to turn away, then looked back at Reese. "Does it always take death to get rid of death?" he asked.

"I don't think there's any other way," Reese answered. He looked around at the rest of us in the shadow of the *cantina*. "None of us do."

As the days passed and the defences were near finished, things slowed down in the village and the real waiting began. It was a time when your nerves got edgy and to keep your mind off them you thought about other things. I watched Virgil, Martin, Tom, and Henry, and I could see them, or maybe feel them, turning over parts of themselves they hadn't considered in years. It was what you did when you were prepared but the fight was still some way off. You asked yourself how you'd ended up here when 'here' was a place you'd been many times before. Reese was the same even though he was the leader, and I often saw him pull that silver timepiece out of his vest and rub the shiny case between his thumb and fingers. When I asked him about it, he said it belonged to someone he'd once known. I figured he meant a relative, like his father or uncle, but it was a curious way of referring to family if that was so. Then he added quietly, "I had to kill him," and I hoped I was wrong.

As for Federico, he seemed the only one of us that was content. He walked through the village, talking to the women and children, and at night he'd play cards with some of the farmers, a strange game I couldn't follow. I saw him getting close to a *senorita* who wasn't more than fifteen or sixteen. Her parents, if they knew, couldn't have been happy about that. Their money was supposed to save their daughters. But I didn't think Federico would push things too far. He was too young to be like the rest of us yet. Besides, he was a *mestizo* trying to get away from what the village offered.

Reese and Federico didn't sit in much, but I played quite a bit of poker with the rest of the boys. They knew what they were doing, but any real card-shark would have eaten them alive. As it was, I had to take it easy on them or they would have shut me out of the games. If they gave themselves away when they were bluffing or holding a good hand, they didn't reveal much in conversation. Henry was the most talkative and, in ways, the most likeable. Unlike the others, me included, he'd been all over the country, not just the southwest. That was because he'd signed on to cattle drives heading the beef north to the railhead at Kansas City. None of us had seen a city that big, and the way Henry described it we were leery of ever making the visit. Oh, the brothels sounded good, there were so many of them, as did the saloons with their fancy outlays of carved wood and chandeliers. But the crowds on the streets all day and most of the night pressed in on us in that little *cantina* as he told his stories.

"Course you need money, lots of it, to stay for any length of time. That's why I'm doing this Mexican trip. As soon as we find that cave of Fuentes, I'm taking my share and heading north. Gonna get to one of those high-class whorehouses I couldn't afford before and have me a time. Maybe I'll never come back to Texas."

Tom and Martin didn't say anything, but Virgil peered at his hole card and asked, "How much for a night in one of those places?"

"Fifty dollars, at least. We're talking prime filly here."

"It all ends up in the same place, Henry, and in the dark you can't tell the difference between high and low."

"I'll be sure to let you know, Virgil. I think the perfumy smell alone will be worth the money."

To me Virgil always moved like a big cat. You couldn't hear him coming, he trod so softly, and all his actions were smooth and limber. He was a loner and rarely worked with other men like he was doing now. Bounty-hunting was his main occupation, the one-on-one contest of the cat and mouse. That made him a sort of lawman, you could say, and different from the rest of us. But none of us robbed banks or trains or killed innocent people in the process. We were legitimate guns for hire and any men we were up against were in the same game. The law wasn't after us, just like it wasn't after Virgil for killing that stockman. Cowboys had testified that the dead man had been going to draw on Virgil and he'd only defended himself. He was lying low because the stockman's friends had organized a vigilante posse when the sheriff refused to arrest him. All I knew was that in a fight, if I wanted Reese beside me, I wanted Virgil at my back.

Tom had the red hair of an Irishman, but his voice was pure Texan. He was very strong, and I saw him lift stones out of the ground when we were digging that ditch that two of us together could only push aside. He didn't say much about where he'd come from or been, but I got the idea the Irish might have been mixed with something else, maybe Indian. For one thing, his dark eyes didn't match his hair and pale skin, and for another he was mighty sensitive when Henry made some cracks about Comanches and how it was a "goddamn good thing they was mostly on reservations."

"Maybe you should be on a reservation, Henry," he said with just enough edge in his voice for the rest of us to notice and Henry to ignore.

"Now why's that, Tom? I'm a good American citizen, just like you. Hell, I voted for Governor Ross last year."

"Yeah, I bet you did, But I know some Comanches who can hold their liquor better than you."

That was a strong insult to any white man, let alone a gunfighter with a hair-trigger temper. Henry stood up with his hand on his pistol and yelled, "You take that back, you son-of-a-bitch!"

If Martin hadn't fallen over backward as he tried to get out of the way and toppled arse-over-kettle into the one-plank bar, we might have been down to six men. But Virgil and I burst out laughing and Henry was distracted by Martin's loud "Fuck off!" as he banged his head on the bottom of the thick board. It was only then I noticed Tom's .45 out and cocked by the side of his chair.

"Sit down, Henry," I told him. "Martin's done himself an injury, and we can't afford to lose both of you."

Tom, realizing he had the upper hand said, "I could be wrong, Henry." That was all he was going to give him, and Henry, to his credit, chose to take it as an apology.

I know I made Martin seem clumsy, but he was nervy, that's all. He'd start at the slightest noise during the day and peer into shadows as if dark threats were always lurking there. At night we could hear him talking in his sleep and turning restlessly.

I asked Reese about this, worried how Martin would hold up in a fight.

"He'll make Fuentes uneasy when he sees him. That Buntline and those darting eyes tend to bother people who are expecting trouble anyway."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't really know. He's a good gun and hasn't ever backed down that I've heard of. But he's killed more than most of us, which means he has more enemies. Maybe that's on his mind."

Reese made sense, but, given the way Martin summoned up danger out of thin air, I thought he was haunted not so much by real foes as by phantoms. I hoped in the coming tussle with Fuentes he'd shoot straight at solid flesh.

Clay didn't write any more letters. But I did get a card from St. Louis about six months later. There were several tall buildings on the front. The message on the back said, "Big city and lots of people. Lots of rich players too. Don't need a day job anymore. Probably stay awhile, then maybe head south to New Orleans." After that I heard nothing for thirteen years.

While we waited we talked over how we'd handle things when Fuentes turned up.

"Talking's not going to do much good," Reese said.

"Not much need for conversation when you've got thirty guns against seven," Tom agreed.

"I say we just blast them as they ride into town." Henry had worked his tobacco wad into a huge bulge in his cheek, and I watched it move up and down as he spoke. "We'll get more than a few that way."

"We would," Reese replied, "but some surprise will get us more."

"What have you got in mind?" I asked him.

"Well, once they're all in the main street, there's nowhere for them to go except ahead or where they came from. Most of them won't try to turn around, so they'll ride on through and find the ditch. I say one of us meets them in the middle of the street and grabs their attention with a few words. Once they've all bunched together, four of you—two on either side—pick off as many as you can. When the rest run towards the ditch, the last two and the three Mexicans with rifles hit them there. We should be able to get a dozen or so, which will cut down the odds the next time."

"Why let the one man be exposed like that?" Virgil said. "Why not let them ride in as usual? The old man says Fuentes always heads for the *cantina*. We can start firing then."

Reese nodded. "It's a good idea, but they'll notice something's wrong if the villagers aren't out in the streets, and they might pull up short. But if I'm one *gringo* out there alone, they might just assume I'm the only problem to deal with."

Virgil smiled. "I figured it would be you because you weren't going to get too many volunteers drawing for the short straw. What'll you say to them?"

"Yeah," said Federico. "And how good is your Spanish? We don't know how much Fuentes speaks *yanqui*."

Reese looked at him steadily. “You’re right. Maybe you should be there with me.”

“No, I think they’ll be less threatened by me alone.”

I knew what he meant, and so did Reese. Federico was telling us that a *mestizo* with a gun wouldn’t seem as dangerous as a pure *gringo*.

“He’s probably right,” I said, “his being a kid and all.”

Everyone laughed, including Federico. I knew he’d prefer this kind of joke to one about his mother or father.

Reese thought it over. “Okay,” he said. “But the question’s still there. What will you say?”

“I’ll tell him I’m lost. No, even better, I’ll tell him I’ve heard about him and butter him up. Say I want to join him.”

“That’s good,” said Tom. “Keep talking so we can make sure as many of them as possible get in our sights.”

“You’ll need to draw it out,” Reese emphasized. “The Mexicans stationed in the last house will need time to string the net. That’ll take a couple of minutes, at least.”

“It is good except for one thing,” I said.

“What’s that?” Reese and Federico spoke together.

“I don’t mind killing a man, but I’ve never shot anyone down in cold blood.” I heard Martin stir behind me.

“I don’t do that either,” he murmured. “Not anymore.”

“Hell,” Henry exclaimed, “they’re *bandidos.* They’ve raped women and gunned down men in this village.”

“Even so,” I said.

“So you want them to shoot me first?” Federico asked angrily.

“No, I want them to *try* to shoot you first. And it will be Fuentes or one of his men close to him. Nobody back in the pack would do anything without orders. As soon as one of them makes a move, I’ll kill him.”

“What if I make the first move?”

“That’s up to you. I don’t care why Fuentes goes for his gun.”

“I’ll make it easy for you,” said Reese. “Virgil, Tom, Henry, and I will be in the alleys on either side of Federico. Boon, you and Martin will be down by the ditch with the

Mexicans. It would be good to take down Fuentes, but don't waste your ammo trying to get him. Just bring down as many as you can. Federico, you move off to one side or the other once the shooting starts."

"I'll kill Fuentes first."

"What about those who do turn around to the north?" Tom said to Reese.

"Good point." Reese thought it over. "When they hit the net they'll have nowhere to go except back through the town. We'll make sure of that by having one of us on each side closer to the north end to stop them from trying to get out through the alleys."

I felt better now the plans were set, and that no one had gone on about my concerns. I'd probably killed nine or ten men in my life, but each one of them had tried to kill me first. Sure, I'd provoked more than one of them, so the line I was drawing between cold and hot blood was pretty thin, but I knew if I crossed that line I'd be no better than Fuentes. Maybe I wasn't anyway, but it helped to think so.

Reese and I told the old man what we'd decided. "What about the adzes and shovels?" he said. "All of us should help."

"There might not be a need for them," Reese replied. "Fuentes might decide he's lost enough, if he gets out of the village alive."

Reese knew there'd be a second set-to unless Fuentes was killed in the first volleys or at the ditch. Only then might his leaderless men decide to move on. Otherwise, he'd be back for revenge. And if he tried to take the houses one by one, which would be the smart thing to do, plenty of adzes and shovels would be needed then.

The old man knew the truth too, but he came at it from a different direction. "If we fail, *senor*, Fuentes will destroy the village. He will kill all the men, old women, and children, and take the young women with him."

"That's so," said Reese. But you've known that all along."

"Yes, *senor*. But this village lives every day in hope. Hope that the rains will come and the crops will not fail, hope that our children will not be born crooked and our mothers will survive the birth, hope that the fever will leave us alone this year. Sometimes these hopes are realized, but when they are not we keep going on. Our faith helps us do so. But our dream that Fuentes will not bother us again, if it is broken we will be no more. I am not saying we should surrender. But you can see it is hard, *senor*.

"Even if I don't have your faith," I told him, "prayers can't do any harm."

He lifted his arms, palms open, as if to include the whole village. "They are all around you, *senor*."

I lay on my corn-husk pallet in the night, listening to the snores and sleep-words of the other men around me, wondering how I had ended up here, asking myself if it mattered whether I died in this village or somewhere else. I was twenty-six years old, born in the middle of the Civil War. After he came home in his rebel gray, my father ran a hardware store in Hollis, Oklahoma right on the Texas border. We lived above the store, and my mother helped out when my three sisters and I were in school. It was an ordinary, happy life until they died with my two younger sisters in a fire that leveled the store building when I was twelve years old. My mother's family in Tulsa took my older sister, and I was sent over the state border to Wichita Falls to live with my father's brother, Uncle Will, on his ranch. He was a hard man who'd never really gotten on with my father, and he expected me to work. I quit going to school and within a year I'd learned to ride and shoot a rifle pretty well.

A few months later I stopped living in the house with Will, his wife, and my cousin Amy. She was a year older than me, and at first we spent a lot of time together after she got home from school and I had finished my chores. We'd ride out beyond the corrals and watch the clouds scud across the huge Texas skies, or sit on the porch while the rain pounded the red earth into muddy puddles that dried as soon as the sun came out. Some nights the moon was so big and bright you could spot prairie dogs a hundred yards away. We didn't kiss or even hold hands, but there was a physical current between us. I liked to be pulled along by it, but sometimes I felt I could slip beneath the surface and not come up again. Besides, Amy's mother, Clara, wanted her daughter to sit in a soft-padded parlor chair rather than a saddle. She also wanted her to get to know boys whose fathers owned ranches, not adopted nephews who weren't going to inherit anything at all.

In the second year Will arranged for me to move to the bunkhouse and not have much time on my hands to share with Amy. We tried sneaking off together after supper, but once that was discovered, I was told straight out by Clara to "leave my daughter alone." Will warned me that he'd boot me off the ranch if I didn't accept my station. Amy

disappeared into the folds of her mother's fancy dresses and plans. I'd see her ride by in a buggy on her way to picnics and dances to which I had no ticket. I watched until I was sixteen, and then I rode out the gate one day with a blanket, some hardtack, and my Winchester, and never looked back. Will had given me the horse and I'd bought the rifle out of my wages, so I couldn't be accused of stealing anything. I rode south toward Abilene and started my wandering life.

I took work on small ranches but didn't stick it out in any one place for long. I guess the loss of my family in Hollis and the rejection by another one in Wichita Falls made me leery of any permanence. I settled for awhile on one spread north of Abilene where I learned to handle a .45 when a kid not much older than me let me use his to shoot at tin cans on a fence rail. Every man wore a gun, and since I wanted to grow up fast, I soon wore one too. For some reason, my right hand was quick, and I could draw and hit my tin targets faster than most men seemed able to think about it. I practiced a lot by that fence. Then one day in town the target changed.

I was lifting and throwing sacks of feed into one of the ranch wagons when I turned and accidentally bumped into a passing cowboy. I saw his shiny boots before I took in the rest of him. His pants and shirt, unlike mine, were clean, and his black leather vest and black Stetson looked like he'd just bought them off the shelf.

He pushed me up against the store wall and said, "Watch it, boy."

I'd put my arms up to balance myself, and when I dropped them he must have thought I was going for my gun because he went for his. Without thinking I drew before he'd cleared his holster. He stepped back and whistled, letting his pistol slide back into place.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Seventeen."

"Where'd you learn to be so fast?"

When I didn't respond, he said, "Do you know how to use that?"

I knew what he meant. "Good enough," I answered. It had been the first time I'd ever drawn on another man, but I wasn't going to let him know that.

"Come around back and show me."

I don't know why I went with him. The wagon was waiting to be loaded, and I had other things to do at the ranch, but he'd stirred something in me, some need to break the

usual pace of my life and cross a few lines. I followed him down the alley and out to the edge of the prairie behind the store.

"See that over there," he said, pointing to an empty bottle of whiskey lying in the dirt about fifty feet away. "Think you can hit it?"

I took out my .45, cocked it, and aimed at the company name etched in the glass.

"No, not like that. Like this." He drew his own weapon and fired all in one motion. The thin neck of the bottle shattered. "It must have moved," he said, laughing.

I stood there and saw the air wavering above the earth. Out on the prairie a rider was approaching the town under the cloudy autumn sky. I put my gun back in its holster, waited a moment or two, then drew and fired as he'd done. My memory of it is that my hand moved of its own will and became one with the pistol. There seemed to be no space between my first movement and the roar of the gunshot. The bottle exploded then everything was silent. I could hear the hoof-beats in the distance.

"Not bad. But now hit him," he said.

The rider wasn't too far off by now, and I knew it was an easy shot. But why wasn't I more disturbed than I was by his demand? Instead of telling him he was crazy, I told him I'd no reason to do that.

"What if I gave you a reason?" He pulled a twenty dollar bill out of his vest pocket. "Here's one."

"Fuck you," I said, and turned back toward the town.

He laughed again. "Don't sweat it, kid. We all get to name our price."

I thought he was talking about my gun, not me. "I still have to pull the trigger," I said.

His name was Hallam, and he worked for a big cattle rancher forty miles southwest of Buffalo Gap. As far as I could tell he was the head of a bunch of hired guns who patrolled the spread looking for rustlers, Comanches, and anybody else that didn't understand what private property meant. Private property of a particular kind, that is. The ranch owner also didn't like small homesteaders who interfered with the herd's grazing and waterholes. I didn't learn about that until later. What Hallam did was offer me thirty dollars a month and a horse if I needed one to join him and his gang as a ranch-guard.

"There's a bunkhouse that goes with it, but we spend most of our time in the saddle. There's five thousand head of cattle spread out over two thousand square miles of prairie."

"Gang" turned out to be the right word for the men who rode with Hallam. They lived on the edge of the law when they went after those they saw as intruders, but that first day all I knew was I wanted to move on from my regular dog's body work and try something new. I was wary of Hallam, especially his casual attitude towards human targets, but I'd seen respect in his eyes when I handled my .45 the way I did, and I liked that. He was rough and ready, but he'd backed off when I drew on him and not just because he wanted to use me. I was young and foolish and thought I could use my gun how I wanted to even if others were paying for it.

"How many do I ride with?" I asked him.

"That depends. New ones come along like you. Others leave. Sometimes when they don't want to."

He'd sensed my restlessness and had taken it for granted I'd come with him. But he was also warning me that he'd decide whether I measured up.

"Don't you have to check with your boss about me?"

"I'm enough boss for you, kid," he said. Then, as if he thought he might have pushed me too far, he added, "Don't worry about it" and slapped me on the shoulder.

I gave my notice and left with him two days later. We rode south following the Elm Creek riverbed to Buffalo Gap. It was smaller than Abilene but was the county seat, and I could see some well-dressed types along the boardwalks. When I mentioned this to Hallam, he scoffed.

"Lawyers and would-be politicians. The lot of them ain't worth the sweat under my saddle. The real business of this state is done down where we're going."

The high plains don't have much growth, just prickly pear and short scrub grass. There's not much rain either, which is why big cattle ranchers damned up rivers for reservoirs and got into wars with homesteaders who needed water for their crops. It was cold out there with winter coming on and the wind always blowing hard from the west, but Hallam knew where to find shelter. We ate mostly beef jerky and hardtack by the fire and drank bitter coffee to wash it down. Hallam didn't talk much, and I felt no need to

spill my history to him. He was a man who did what was necessary to move through the world, protecting himself not just physically but in his mind too. He used words to keep fences up between him and others, though he'd stand at a gate now and then to remind you he was in charge. On the second night out as we were laying in our bedrolls staring up at the stars, I asked him where he was from, thinking to learn a little, not about him so much as about the places I'd never been. When he didn't answer, I looked over at him through the firelight and saw his thumb pointing back behind his right ear. From everywhere and nowhere, he was telling me, and I knew not to ask again.

Around noon, three days south of Buffalo Gap he pulled up his horse and said, "You're on ranch land now."

I gazed around. There was no sign, no fence, nothing to warn a stranger or welcome a wanted guest.

"You'll get used to it. See that line of big prickly pear going down into the arroyo? He pointed off to the west. "That's just inside the ranch boundary. When you've been here long enough you'll have your own markers."

I didn't know how long "long enough" would be. As it was, I rode with Hallam for almost a year.

One evening Federico came to talk about the girl. I don't know why he chose me. Maybe because I hadn't ever mentioned the time Reese had humbled him, even though I'd been there. Maybe because, as the others had, I'd seen him with her but hadn't made jokes about the brooms of Mexican mothers sweeping him all the way to Texas, like Virgil and Tom did, or muttered nastily about "his own kind," like Henry. There wasn't much point in talking personal to Martin, so that left me.

"I know she's young," he said.

"So are you."

He left that alone. "Don't worry, I wouldn't try anything with her."

"Why not?" He was a decent kid, but he must have gotten around in the Texas border towns, and the company there wouldn't have taught him any manners about bedding a woman, young or not.

"Why, because she's…"

"Innocent?" I said.

"*Si*, *es claro*. But she also has a family who would disown her if she behaved badly. Girls here must be courted and have the permission of their father and mother to walk with a young man. I'm getting away with something because of the situation. But I can't push it too far."

I wanted to tell him it was also because he was part-Mexican, that one of us wouldn't have got near her, situation or not, but it was up to him to mention his upbringing. I wasn't Henry.

"I don't want to settle down," he said. He was quiet for awhile, and then he came to it. "I left a village like this one because I felt trapped. You know what I mean?"

I told him I guessed I did, but didn't say that I'd been forced to leave mine, and that Uncle Will hadn't given me much choice after that.

"There was nothing there for me but a farmer's life scratching at the dirt. Same thing here. It's just that…"

"Just that the dirt doesn't seem so bad when you're around her?" I was maybe five or six years older than him but feeling like I was his father. I'd never had any conversations with my own father or Uncle Will like this, so it was a bit like fording a river in spring. I had to stay in the saddle and watch out for logs churning in the current. The first one jumped up at me right away.

"You ever had a girl like her, Boon? I mean one with a family and fences around her that you wanted and didn't want at the same time?"

I looked up and down the street. It was getting dark, and I could see the faint light from oil-lamps and candles in the houses. A crescent moon was rising behind the hill north of the village, a thin reminder of the full one I'd watched with Amy years ago. She'd be long married by now with a houseful of kids. I'd followed a different trail on which whores and dance-hall women lay scattered like dollar bills. Federico might have been fast with his gun, but despite his brave talk I didn't think he'd shoot Fuentes down in cold blood. He'd do what I'd do, get under his skin and get him to go for his weapon, firing his own before Fuentes could clap his hands on his .45. I liked him for that, and hoped he'd stay alive for the girl, but it didn't mean I'd answer his question.

Just then, Reese showed up, almost like he'd been there all along, and said we should probably post a lookout on the hill in the next day or two. Federico smiled sadly at me. "Some choice, Boon," he said, and walked off into the night.

"What was that about?" Reese asked me.

"He's worried about getting fenced in."

"Hell, we've all been there in one way or another."

"Yeah, but he's worried he might like it."

He peered down the street where Federico had vanished. "As long as he does his job first."

Two hours later Hallam and I crossed a dirt track that ran off to the north and rode through a gate with a painted sign that read BT, the letters close together like a cattle brand.

"BRAZOS TYLER," Hallam said. "The ranch backs on the Brazos River and the owner's name is Bob Tyler. Mr. Tyler to you."

It took us another hour's ride before we saw the outbuildings and corrals. Hallam pointed out the bunkhouse. "There's forty men work this ranch, not counting my gang. The smell in there in the winter can be mighty strong."

Beyond the stables was a two-story timbered house that would have towered over my Uncle Will's home. His was painted white and had flower beds in front of the porch, while this one was rough-hewn and dirty-looking in comparison, but it looked big and strong enough to take a tornado's punch. I knew the man who built it was the real boss Hallam hadn't wanted to mention.

"We'll get cleaned up, then I'll introduce you."

By 'cleaned up' he meant watering the horses and dunking our heads in the trough. We went into the bunkhouse where there was some coffee simmering on an old pot-bellied stove. Hallam poured himself a cup and didn't offer me any. I was tired and thirsty but let on I didn't care. He saw through that. "Find yourself a cup," he said. "You'll learn to get what you need on this ranch as long as you don't step on anyone's toes."

A couple of cowboys came in, but Hallam ignored them. Then two more arrived and came over to us. They looked me up and down, and the larger one said, “Who’s the greenhorn?”

“This is Boon,” Hallam told him. “He may be young, but he can pull his .45 faster than you can drop your pants in a whorehouse.”

The man laughed loudly. “Well, kid, Hallam is full of shit about a lot of things but I’ll always take his word on how a man can handle his gun.” He put out his hand. “Jim Allen, and this,” he pointed at the other cowboy, “is Waco.”

I shook Jim’s hand, but Waco paid no attention to me. He was thin and shifty-looking and his black hat lay between his shoulder blades, held there by a braided cord around his neck. “We’ll need another hand in our section,” he said to Hallam. “Paulie broke his leg yesterday.”

Hallam spat some coffee grounds on the floor. “How the hell did he do that?”

“Ah, we was chasin’ a couple of Comanches and his horse hit a gopher hole. Down they both went in a pile. He chuckled. “Least we didn’t have to shoot Paulie. But he’ll be on the mend for quite a while.”

“Fuck him,” Hallam exclaimed. “Bob’ll have his wages unless he can hobble around and do something useful. Let’s go, Boon. There’s one more reason to hire you now.”

We walked across the yard and up to the porch of the house. “Wait here,” Hallam said, and went up the steps. Before he could knock on the door it opened, and a large man with a red face and crown of white hair came out. He glanced at Hallam and stared down at me.

“What have we got here?”

Hallam said, “Mr Tyler…” but a meaty hand waved him off. “Let the boy tell me himself.”

I was thinking that it was clearly “Mr. Tyler” to all of us, and didn’t answer right away.

“Well?” It was a strong voice but not an unkindly one, I thought. Like Hallam had said, I’d learn.

“My name’s Boon. Hallam told me there’d be work in his gang.”

“I know you can ride, son, but can you shoot? More important, can you shoot men?”

I remembered the rider outside of Abilene Hallam had told me to hit. “I’ve never had to,” I said. “but I won’t let anyone shoot me.”

“He’s fast, Mr. Tyler, faster than anyone I’ve seen for a long time.”

“Fast is one thing, Hallam. What you do once the gun’s in your hand is another. You know that.”

“Paulie Evans broke his leg yesterday,” Hallam told him. “We need a replacement.”

Tyler clicked his tongue. “Cut his wages in half. Tell him he’s got two weeks to get back in the saddle or he’s gone. Even if he makes it, he won’t be much use at a gallop for a month after that.” He pointed a finger at me. “We’ll try you out, son. Thirty dollars a month, plus your food. Don’t fuck up.”

We decided to put a Mexican boy up on the hill, one who could put his thumb and finger in his mouth and whistle loud enough to wake up the whole village. Fuentes always came fairly late in the day, the old man said. He’d ride without hurry from another village about twenty miles away where he’d spent the night after taking what he needed there. It was the first time I considered the circuit he rode and that there were other places just like this one that he’d trample down.

We were all getting restless with the wait. You could only check your .45 chamber so often before you were confident the six slugs hadn’t gone anywhere. Virgil’s Bowie knife was honed so fine he could have shaved a baby’s face, and the spangles in Federico’s hat-band shone like real polished silver. We’d be alright once the shooting started, but until then were like mustangs penned up in a small corral.

It was about three o’clock on a mid-week afternoon. I was sitting outside the *cantina* dozing in the sun. The kid’s sharp whistle almost raised the hat from my head. Reese, Tom, and Virgil came out of the house where we stayed. They’d obviously been taking a *siesta* since they were all buckling on their gunbelts. Federico stepped out from an alleyway across the street, and Martin seemed to appear from nowhere. I thought about Fuentes’ thirty guns and saw what a small band we were. The three Mexicans with the rifles came running out of their homes, their sandals flapping against their heels. The kid charged down the hill, lost his balance, and fell in a heap at our feet. When Federico asked him how long, he held up ten fingers so there was no need to translate. Then he

said something else and Federico turned to the rest of us and said, “It’s a big dust cloud, they’re making.” Once the kid disappeared only men with guns were left on the street. I watched Reese and Virgil and Henry and Tom pair off and head for their alleyways, then headed down to the ditch with Martin and the three Mexicans. We set up between houses on either side. When I looked out at the ditch I couldn’t see any signs that set it off from the rest of the street. We were in the shade, but there were still some flies buzzing around. There’d be more later, I thought. It was very quiet and even the cicadas seemed to be taking a break. The Mexican next to me was breathing heavily. I looked across at the others and realized we could die together without knowing one another’s names.

“*Qué es su llama*?”

“*Miguel, senor*.”

"*Buena suerte*. *Me llamo es…*”

“*Boon*,” he said. “You are Boon.”

I peeked out and saw Federico standing in the middle of the street. He had his hands on his hips as if he was impatient. I saw the dust cloud then heard the horses.

They were three abreast as they rode in. Fuentes was in front with his big moustache and high saddle pommel. At first he was looking from side to side, then he saw Federico. He checked his horse immediately and raised his hand. The group stopped behind him. He watched Federico for a moment, looked around again, and gave a flick with his stirrups, coming forward very slowly, his men following close behind. Good, I thought, they’re bunched up.

Fuentes rode up until the horses muzzle was about three feet from Federico’s nose, and spoke rapidly to him in Spanish. Federico told us later what they’d said to one another.

“Who the hell are you?”

“*Mon genéral*, I have come home to my village and heard the most wonderful stories about you.”

“You’re from here?”

“Yes, *mon genéral*. But not since I was a boy and sat on my mother’s knee have I heard such tales of bravery and generosity.”

"You're a crazy dog." He turned to his lieutenant. "Angel, should I kill this crazy dog?"

Federico said he was making it up as he went along, but he knew now that what he said next would have to anger Fuentes enough to make him go for his gun. "I mean you are so brave and generous to murder these helpless villagers." He smiled broadly so it might take a moment for his words to sink in, but he watched the man's eyes.

"*Cabron*!" Fuentes shouted and moved his right hand.

Federico had him beat easily, but what he hadn't figured on was the lieutenant moving first. He saw the man out of the corner of his eye and hit him in a flash, then spun sideways towards the *cantina,* firing more shots. That was when Reese and the others opened up. I saw two riders fall and another clutch his side before Fuentes set off at a gallop towards us with his men spread out raggedly behind him. The gunsmoke from the alleys was gathering in two clouds that hung like targets in the air. The riders at the end of the line fired blindly to either side, and I saw another one go down. Fuentes hit the ditch but the boards didn't give way under his stallion's hoofs. Years later I saw a picture of a race horse with all four feet off the ground at once, so that's what must have happened. But the horse beside him broke through the wood, and two riders immediately behind smashed into its withers. Martin and I and the Mexicans blasted them from both sides, but those at the back could see what was happening and except for three or four managed to jump the ditch and keep going. Reese said afterwards that he and the others had stepped out into the street and were firing into their backs. The air was hot and heavy with smoke and the screams of horses and men. It was like some huge battle in the war that my father had told me about. We stopped firing and looked through the smoke to see Reese, Virgil, Tom, and Henry walking coolly down the middle of the street. I couldn't see Federico at first, then I did see him beyond the bodies in front of the *cantina*. He was near the net pointing his .45 at a prisoner.

Reese came up to me. "There's five up there. How many here?"

I looked around. "Six."

He glanced back at Federico. "With that one it makes a dozen. Not bad work. There's one problem, though."

"Well?"

"There were at least forty of them."

Martin walked over to a wounded *bandido* lying on his back. "He's near done."

Reese nodded. "Federico's got a live one."

Martin shot the wounded man between the eyes.

There were six of us in Hallam's gang, including him. We patrolled the western border of the ranch with two days off a month, riding through mesquite, along riverbeds that held only a trickle of water, and over grassland that hid antelope and coveys of quail. The skies were clear and bright most of the time, but the temperature dipped at night and our feet were hard-pressed to the fire. I slept in an old sheepskin jacket Hallam found for me, wrapped in two wool blankets, but I was still cold. Occasionally we'd meet sections of the herd and share a coffee and smoke with the cowhands. They were friendly enough but older than most of us and part of a more regular life. They had a chuckwagon and hot meals served up to them, as well as canvas they could shelter under during a rain. Our presence reminded them they were up against more than restless cattle and storms out here, and I knew they weren't displeased when we rode on.

Jim Allen was the most talkative one. He always had some story at hand, usually about his exploits with women or in saloon brawls. According to him he bedded every female who suited his taste, not just whores but a few fine town girls as well.

"Too bad there ain't any clap that can shut down your tongue," Waco said one afternoon when we'd all heard just about enough.

"Now my tongue," said Jim, "it's been places you can't even imagine, Waco."

I don't think Waco liked women much, or anyone else for that matter. "I ain't interested in cow's arseholes," he said, and we all laughed loudly.

Jim didn't get testy about this because he was sure he was a ladies' man that the rest of the boys couldn't compete with, but I saw him look at Waco out of the corner of his eye and consider a reckoning.

It was a hard life because of all the riding, but also because nothing much happened. I asked Hallam about this, saying that the ranch seemed over-protected what with twenty men on four sides endlessly patrolling to scare off the occasional Comanche.

"Boon," he said. "You've got a lot to learn. Why do you think there's only the occasional Comanche?"

"Fair enough. But what about the rustlers? Any serious set-to's with them?"

"A few months ago we killed three of them in a shoot-out. They were smart and waited until we'd moved on after visiting some of the boys. Rode right in and shot down our foreman then made off with a hundred head. A cowhand caught up with us two days later and told us what happened. By the time we got some reinforcements, it took us a week to catch up. They didn't run like most do, so it was a nasty fight. We hung the rest of them."

I didn't mind the prospect of a gunfight, but I didn't like the thought of being told to string somebody up even if he was a rustler who knew that was the price to be paid. There was a cold-bloodedness involved that didn't sit well with me, and I guess that objection's what had kept me on the legal side of the line so far. On the other hand, I didn't like the idea of anything being stolen from me, so I had some respect for what Mr. Tyler owned. I tried to think of what belonged to me that I'd kill a man for if he took it. I'd just get it back, that's all, and if I had to defend myself doing so, so be it. But I wouldn't shoot or hang a man first and then pick up my property. I said most of this to Hallam.

"Ain't no difference if you stand there and watch or tie the knot," he said. You signed up. kid. You can ride off now and no one of us will care. But don't try to ride when we've got a rustler in the saddle and the rope around his neck. If you do, I'll shoot you myself."

Up until then I only knew I was faster than Hallam. That quickness would be all I had if he drew down on me. Now I wasn't sure it would be enough.

Through Federico Reese asked the surviving *bandido* if Fuentes had come to the village with all his men. The man was sullen and close-lipped at first, then Reese told Martin to shoot him. Before Federico could translate Martin had his .45 out and the man saw him coming. "*Espere un momento*," he said. Then he told us there were five more left behind at their camp.

"Why?" Reese asked him.

"To guard things."

"What things?"

"Horses, money."

"Why don't you carry the money with you?"

"We always go back there after raiding villages. We have chests of pesos and…"

"And what?"

"Jewels. We have many jewels."

"I knew it!" Henry exclaimed. The others were interested too, including me. Virgil said, "How much for all of us?"

When Reese asked him about the amount, the man spoke for some time. "He doesn't know exactly," Federico told us. "Fuentes and a few others, the ones he leaves behind, keep the jewels for themselves. This one," he gestured at the man, "sees the rubies and emeralds only when they are torn from the bishops' necks and hands. He also gets to carry them out of the churches and then they're stored away in the cave."

"So the stories are true," Henry said.

"Seems so. Ask him how far it is," Reese told Federico.

The man said two days' ride from the village. He grinned through brown and broken teeth. "*Usted morirá*."

"He says we will die."

"Tell him if that's so he'll die with us," Reese said.

Later that night we talked things over. "First of all," Reese reminded us, "Fuentes will be back. He'll lick his wounds, but he'll figure out, despite his losses, that there are only a few of us, and he won't come in the same way."

"What do you think he'll try?" Tom asked.

"If I was him, I'd surround the village and wait us out. Sure, we've got food, but the village well is at the north end of town and right in the sights of anyone he wants to post out there. We'd run out of water. But…"

"But what?" said Henry.

"But I'm not him, and I'll bet he's more impatient than me. For one thing, he's got more than thirty men to feed and he depends on his circuit of village raids to keep up his

supplies. He can't afford to leave us here because we could spread the word to other villages that we've beaten him. He can't afford to wait too long either."

"So what does that mean?" I asked.

"He'll surround us alright, but then he'll come in from the sides. We can't defend all the alleys or houses. He'll take them over one by one, and we'll lose. If he was down to twenty men we might have a chance, but he's not."

"So how do we win?"

Reese wasn't the only one doing the thinking. "We go to him," said Virgil."

The Mexicans weren't happy when we told them. "The *bandido* is right, *senors*," the old man told us. "You will die up there, and then Fuentes will come back to the village and kill us all."

"He's going to do that anyway if we wait for him," Reese said. "He won't be expecting us to pay a visit. The surprise will cost him many of his men."

"Even so, *senor*, there will be enough left to kill you."

"What would you have us do, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps we were wrong to believe a few *gringos* could kill Fuentes and all his men. Now, whatever you do we will pay the price for our belief."

"Hell, old man," Henry declared loudly, "we could just ride off and save our own skins. But we're not doing that, are we."

"No, *senor*. But it is not because of us. It is because of the riches."

I knew he was right, and so did Henry and the rest of us. We wouldn't have come here for twenty dollars apiece, no matter what we were told about Fuentes' murderous ways. It was the promise of wealth that had drawn us to the village and that kept us here still, except for Federico. He was trying to prove something to himself, and he hadn't figured out exactly what that was. The village and especially the girl complicated things for him, and I wondered what he was thinking now.

After the old man left us, Henry spoke up. "I say it's easy. We wait until Fuentes leaves to hit the village again. Then we kill the guards and take the jewels and money."

"You mean leave the villagers to Fuentes?" Reese asked him.

"Look, Reese, if there was a chance of winning, okay, but we'll just get ourselves killed if we try to outfight Fuentes. The villagers always knew we might not get the job done."

Reese looked around at the others. Like me, I knew they weren't happy with the situation. Thirty guns was way more than they figured would be left after the first shoot-out. And, like me, they wanted the riches so they wouldn't have to do this kind of job again. But I also wanted to be certain I'd live long enough to enjoy the wealth.

"Boon?"

"I'll listen to what you've got in mind, Reese," I said.

Reese looked at Virgil, Tom, and Martin. The first two didn't give anything away, but I could see Martin didn't want any more ghosts following him.

"Federico?"

"I wouldn't let you do it, Henry," Federico said. Those three villagers who stood in the alleys with us could have run, and they wouldn't have got paid for doing that. But they stayed there because they're trying to protect something that can't be bought."

"That's a fine speech, kid. I'm just not sure I want to die defending it."

I was more on Henry's side than not. Federico was from here in ways that we weren't. It was alright for him to sound like he was protecting the Mexican version of the Alamo, but despite all the fine speeches made back in 1836 the outnumbered men there never had a chance. Sure, they stayed to fight Santa Anna when they could have walked away. But I couldn't see the freedom of this village matching Texan independence. Like Tom and Virgil, I waited to see what Reese had up his sleeve.

"First of all," he said, "they'll have a man on the trail watching to see what we do. If we ride straight north Fuentes will know pretty quickly that we're coming. I think we need to hit him one more time to cut down the odds before we go after the pesos and anything else that's there."

"You're asking an awful lot," Henry declared. "We're lucky none of us was killed this morning. I'm not too fond of laying my skin on the line again."

"Hear me out, Henry. Fuentes doesn't know exactly how many we are. The three Mexicans in the alleys helped with that. We have to show them something or they'll ride on the village soon. What I say is five of you take two of the Mexicans with their rifles,

as well as the prisoner, and ride north toward the cave early tomorrow. Federico, that includes you so you can make sure the *vaquero* keeps talking straight. Boon and I and the third Mexican gun will go west tonight with muffled hooves then ride hard and circle behind the cave. The *bandido* will give us directions. Fuentes will come after you but I don't think he'll use everybody. Take a stand where you meet him. You won't have to deal with him long."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because I brought a little insurance." He walked over to his horse and opened a worn saddle-bag. When he turned I saw the dynamite sticks in his hand. "We couldn't use these in the village, but up at the cave, that's different. When they hear the explosions Fuentes men will head for home. A lot of their *compadres* will be dead by the time they get there. You come up behind, and we'll finish off as many as we can."

"How many's that?" It was Henry again.

"At least half of them with the dynamite and our guns."

"Then what?"

"It's a good question," Virgil said.

"Yeah, it is," Reese replied. "And I don't have an answer. We'll have to see if the rest have the stomach for fighting. If not, we get the cave."

"And if they like their pesos and jewels too much?"

"Then we'll have a decision. They won't be interested in hitting the village again, especially if we manage to kill Fuentes, so we'll have accomplished something. We'll just have to make up our minds then how much we want to get rich."

Nobody said anything at first, not even Henry. We knew we couldn't beat Fuentes in a head-on shoot-out, and we knew if all of us rode up the north trail we'd never get near the cave. But Virgil had one more question.

"What if we all rode west and circled the cave? More firepower from behind with the dynamite and seven guns."

"It's a good plan," Reese answered, "but it means two days before we hit them. I think they'll move on the village before that unless we threaten them first. That man up on the trail needs to get back to Fuentes quick. He'll fast gallop all the way." He paused and put

the dynamite back in his leather bag. “I know we’ll have to be lucky, but I think it’s the only way.” He looked at me. “What Mexican do you want with us?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Miguel,” I said. “He knows who we are.”

That first winter we had no trouble on our border of the ranch. The rustlers were over on the east side, but the boys there couldn’t catch them. A few head went missing, but Hallam wasn’t too concerned.

“Bob says it gets them over-confident. Sooner or later they fuck up and we have our say.”

In the spring things got underway for the big drive north to the railhead. Hallam told me he’d be going with most of the gang and I’d stay behind with a handful of others to protect the new-born calves and stock Mr. Tyler kept at home, including his prize bulls. I wasn’t unhappy about it. I didn’t want to go back up north, and was looking forward to more time with a roof over my head as the sparser herd grazed in pastures just a couple of hours from the bunkhouse. The morning he left, Hallam told me, “Look out for yourself, Boon. There’s a few out there think the ranch is open season when the drive takes so many men away. Comanches mostly. You’ll see some young bucks you haven’t seen before. They usually take one or two cows at a time. But that still means a rope around their necks.”

Nothing much happened for a couple of weeks. I’d spend four or five days and nights out on the range with several of the boys, helping with the roping and branding and keeping an eye out for Indians and other strangers. The two or three days a week I was around the bunkhouse I did chores like any of the cowhands, mending corral fences and saddle harness, and, like them, I enjoyed coffee from a pot that was always hot. Mr. Tyler wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty. He’d mosey down and muck out stables with us, and share a story or two of his early times building up the ranch. He’d come out from Missouri back before the war. His wife died young and they’d had no children, so he couldn’t afford to be stand-offish with his men. Otherwise he’d have nobody to talk to. I liked him because he was a wealthy man who didn’t wear his money like a gun, ready to pull out and flash like he had something to prove. But one day he asked me if I’d had to

use my .45 when riding with Hallam. I think he knew the answer to that. If there'd been any trouble Hallam would have reported it. But I went along with him just the same.

"No sir. There's been no need."

"Nobody pushed you?"

I thought he was talking about rustlers. "They haven't got close enough."

"What about Hallam?"

"What?" I said.

"He doesn't like competition, Boon."

I remembered what Hallam had told me about being a party to any hanging, or else, and wondered if it had been passed on to the boss. "That's nothing to do with me, Mr. Tyler."

"You work for me, Boon, not for Hallam. If he ever puts you in a corner, ask yourself what I'd have to say about the situation."

I wondered why this had come up, why he was warning and advising me at the same time. "I will," I said, but I knew it was likely that with Hallam there wouldn't be time to think much over.

One afternoon when I was out with the herd, I set off after a brindled calf that had disappeared down an arroyo. There wasn't much room at the bottom with the cottonwood thickets searching for moisture along the streambed, and I had to steer my horse carefully among the twisted trunks and branches while keeping an eye out for a flicker of tawny hide. It was very quiet except for the soft sound of the hooves on the sandy ground and the occasional twitter of a bird. Then it was even quieter as the birdsong stopped altogether. I pulled up my horse and listened. The slightest breeze brushed against my face, and I took off my hat and wiped the sweat from its leather band with the end of my bandana. It was then I saw the calf lying on its side maybe ten yards off. It wasn't moving, and I couldn't figure out why not since it wouldn't have fallen anywhere here and broken its neck. I got down off the horse, walked toward it, and saw the arrow in its neck. It had gone in deep and cut the artery. The blood was seeping into the sand. My gun had just cleared its holster when something crashed into me and I felt a searing pain in my side. I fell down and rolled sideways, holding on to my .45, while the thing rolled with me. I lashed out with the gun butt, heard a grunt, and swung my arm again. A weight

fell away from me, but the pain in my side was strong enough to bring me near fainting. I gritted my teeth and staggered to my feet. An Indian boy, no more than thirteen or fourteen, was lying at my feet, fresh blood matted in his hair where my butt had come down. He might have been hurt, but there was nothing wounded about his eyes. They burned through me with what the Mexicans call a *mirada fuerte*, a killing stare.

"Get up," I yelled, pointing my gun at his head. My other hand reached down and bumped against the knife that was sticking out from my side. "Goddamn it," I yelled even louder. It hurt like hell, but if I pulled it out I'd bleed to death.

He got to his feet and stood there with those eyes. He was wearing only buckskin pants and a bead necklace around his neck, and I could see how skinny he was. I glanced over at the calf. It was clearly meant to be a meal, and I wondered for the first time whether there were any of his family or friends around that I needed to be concerned about. As if he was reading my face, he said something in Comanche, rubbed his stomach, and pointed off down the arroyo. I understood what he meant. "You're still a rustler," I said.

As soon as I spoke I knew what would happen. Not only had he killed a calf but he'd attacked me. Waco was back with the herd. He'd string the boy up in a minute. I could have shot him and taken the body back. That would have saved him the rope and satisfied Waco. Maybe I wasn't thinking clearly because of the pain, but deep down it was because Hallam wasn't there and I knew I could handle Waco that I did what I did. Sure I was pissed that I had his knife sticking in my side, but he'd known he was dead meat if he didn't silence me. One calf didn't seem a fair exchange for his life, and my side would heal. "Get going," I told him and waved my gun in the direction he'd pointed. For a moment he stood there, then he jumped backwards turned and ran. I watched the cottonwoods swallow him like he'd never existed.

When I rode into camp half an hour later, I was pretty weak from the blood loss. The boys wanted to ride off and get the boy, but I said he was long gone and, besides, it was a good spot for an ambush down there. When Waco came in I told him about the arrow in the dead calf, the knife hitting me before I could draw my gun, and the Comanche boy running off down the arroyo. Waco grunted and didn't say anything, but I knew it was a story that would reach Hallam's ears.

Just after midnight, Reese, Miguel, and I walked our horses with pieces of canvas tied around their hooves for a mile or more west of the village. Then we shucked the canvas and rode northwest for another ten miles before turning back towards the mountains. The prisoner had said to look for twin peaks east of the rising trail into the Sierra Madres. The cave would be in the saddle between them. But the terrain was rougher than we'd expected, and although we saw the summits on the second day, it was too late to get to them before dark. So it was early on the third morning that we hid ourselves on the steep slopes of the southernmost peak, a couple of hundred feet above Fuentes' camp. We were tired and hungry since we hadn't dared light a fire along the way. My belly ached for some fresh baked bread and coffee.

Despite what the *bandido* had said, when we looked down over the lip of the ridge above the camp we thought we'd see maybe a dozen men left behind to guard what the villagers had called the "treasure." Instead, there were only five he'd predicted sitting around a fire below us.

I watched them eating tortilla bread and sipping from their steaming cups. "Maybe the others are inside."

"Maybe," Reese said. "We'll wait for awhile."

After an hour when there were no signs of life from the cave, Reese said, "I'm going to have a closer look." He went forward and down behind the cover of some boulders, moving carefully over the loose stones beneath his feet. I soon lost sight of him and saw him next in the trees about thirty yards from the fire and in a straight line from the cave mouth. He wasn't going to get any closer than that. One of the men got up and walked back into the darkness. He came out a few moments later, cupping his crotch as he sat down. The others laughed loudly. I looked over to where Reese was hiding and saw nothing at all. Then I caught a glimpse of him again climbing up through the rocks. Fifteen minutes later he was back beside us, breathing heavily and wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"I don't think there's anyone in there. For one thing, there's only five horses back in the trees."

"That means twenty-five or thirty have gone after Virgil and the rest." I looked over at Miguel.

"*Que Dios les ayude*," he said softly. I caught something about God. It wasn't hard to figure out the rest.

We had to try to get them back here, and the sooner the better. Reese gave me some directions about the dynamite. We'd throw two sticks, one from each side of the fire. Miguel would come halfway down the slope with us and position himself with his rifle to pick off anyone who survived the explosion. We could only hope Virgil and the boys had held off the bandits and would follow them back to the camp where our combined guns and the rest of the dynamite would finish things off. We were about to start down when we heard the horses coming.

I counted off the men as they rode without hurry into the clearing. Twenty-seven with Fuentes still at their head. Miguel grabbed my arm and pointed to the back of the column. Federico was there, hatless, his hands tied to the pommel of a stallion, and behind him were four young village women. I thought Federico's girl was one of them. I knew the worst had happened.

"They're all dead," I said to Reese.

"Yeah. He must have set off before we did and waited for them on the trail. Then he hit the village." His fingers were clenched tightly around the dynamite stick as if he could squeeze some life-blood out of it.

We would have abandoned our original plan but for Federico and the women. "We have to try to get them out," I said.

"We must, *senor* Boon." Miguel looked down the mountain and over the flatter land to the south. Like me, he must have been wondering if anything was left in the village.

They'd strung Federico to a tree, and were herding the women into the cave amidst much shouting and laughter. Miguel started to stand up, but Reese grabbed his arm and pulled him down. "Not now," he told him. "We have to wait for dark."

"Too late, *senor*. You know what they will do to the women."

"Listen, Miguel," I said. "We can't get to them or Federico in daylight. They'll spot us for sure." We might have a chance at Federico, but I didn't know how we could save the women, even in the dark. I knew they'd be raped before then, but it was likely they'd still

be alive. All the men would want their share. Miguel knew it too. He slumped back against a rock and wept into the sleeve across his face.

"Well?" I said.

"We free Federico and give him a gun. Then we have to get Fuentes and trade him for the women. It's the only way."

It was a long shot and we both knew it. But the only other choice was to ride on, and Virgil, Tom, Henry, and Martin were in our way, not to mention Federico down below. As for the women, it was worth a try.

We sat there for ten more hours until the sun went down and the stars began to appear. There'd soon be just enough light from them to guide us down the slope. We'd run out of hardtack and I was afraid my stomach would growl so loudly by the camp that it would give us away. In the blaze of firelight we could now see six men and beyond them Federico roped against the tree. He hadn't had any water since they brought him into camp. There was only silence from the cave, but its mouth was lit up by another fire burning deeper inside where Fuentes was.

We crept downward and left Miguel directly above the cave entrance. "Listen," Reese whispered. "If they see Boon cutting down Federico start shooting. Otherwise, wait. I don't want them to know you're up here if we can help it. If I get to Fuentes they won't try anything when I have a gun to his head, but the trade won't happen in a hurry. If we get the women, you come down. We'll have to take some of their horses and scatter the rest."

There were a lot of 'ifs.' I patted Miguel's arm but couldn't think of anything to say. We didn't have much of a chance. Reese and I made it to the bottom of the slope ten minutes later and split up in the woods behind Federico. The tree he was tied to was big enough to provide some protection, and I crawled up behind it with my knife out and an extra pistol and a dynamite stick stuffed in my belt. My eyes were fixed on the half a dozen men by the fire about ten yards away.

"Federico, it's Boon" I whispered, and his head turned slowly against the bark. "I'm going to cut you free, but don't move. I'll put a .45 in your holster." I stood up behind the tree and inches from his ear told him that Reese was going to get close to the cave mouth and toss his dynamite by the entrance. He and I would take out the men by the fire, and

Reese would grab Fuentes when he came out in the smoke and confusion. “We’ll trade him for the women,” I whispered. He nodded his head and I cut the rope. His body was turned slightly from the fire so when I slipped the .45 into the holster the *bandidos* couldn’t see it. We waited for Reese.

The men at the fire were playing cards, and I focused on their every move. We had to kill them all and then get the drop on those running out of the cave. One of them looked across at Federico. The tree was in shadow and I hoped I was invisible as I peeked out above his shoulder. He said something to the man beside him and they both stood up. I saw Federico’s hand drop down towards his gun, then the cave entrance exploded.

I stepped out from behind the tree and we fired together. Five of the men went down but the sixth ran for the cave. Federico shot him before he reached the entrance. I could see a bunch of figures in the smoke, and there was a lot of shouting. Then things cleared away, and I saw Reese with his arm around Fuentes’ neck and his .45 cocked against his temple. The others saw him too and their guns were all on Reese. He yelled, “Tell them Federico.”

Both of us stepped forward into the firelight, and Federico shouted, “*No se muevas, o que es un hombre muerto!”*

“You will die like your friends,” Fuentes said angrily.

Reese pushed the gun harder against his head. “You’ll go with us, fucker.”

“What do you want, *cabron*?”

“The women. Bring them out.”

Fuentes smiled. “They are sleeping my friend. For some reason they are very tired.”

I hoped Miguel would stay calm up above, but I knew there wasn’t much time before one of the band got restless. It was hard to watch them all at once. Reese had backed up against the rocks by the cave mouth so he wasn’t an easy target behind Fuentes, but one of them might want to take a chance.

“Let’s you and I go in and take a look,” Reese said.

Fuentes didn’t like that idea and put up his hands. “Alright,” he said. Then he motioned to a man nearby. “*Ir y llegar las putas!!*” Be still, Miguel, be still, I prayed.

The man disappeared for a few moments and then came out with the four women behind him. They looked dazed but there was a darkness on their faces that told the

whole story. Federico called them over to his side. His girl was one of them, but she didn't look at him.

"Tell your men to drop their guns and get inside the cave," Reese said.

Fuentes hesitated, and Reese jammed the .45 tighter again. "Do it now."

He gave the order and the others slowly obeyed. When a few of them hesitated, I heard the click of Miguel's Winchester lever. They heard it too.

It was the first time Fuentes showed some real concern. "You have more up there? How many? "

The men took a little time shuffling into the cave, and I watched as closely as I could to make sure all the pistols were on the ground. "Now you," Reese said.

Fuentes looked hard at him. "Listen, *amigo*. There's a lot of gold and pesos in there. You can have it all." His voice was wheedling, as he tried to coax Reese into dropping his guard.

"I know what's in there, but I don't care anymore." Reese must have been sure about Federico because he glanced across at me, as if I was the only one left to make up his mind.

I knew there was too much death we'd find back on the trail and in the village. It was blood money. "Let it go," I said.

"You heard him." Reese pushed Fuentes towards the entrance and watched him stagger inside. Then he holstered his pistol, took the dynamite stick from his belt and lit the fuse.

With Hallam back from the drive things went on as usual. We kept patrolling the perimeter and going after the odd stray that had wandered beyond the cowhands' long-range vision. Those boys could see a mule deer two hundred yards away, and that was a whole lot smaller than a steer or spring-born calf in mid-summer, so we didn't have much work to do in that line. The rustlers and Indians seemed to keep to themselves, and by late summer we'd settled into a comfortable routine that didn't have us rushing to break camp at dawn. Hallam didn't countenance afternoon siestas or we might have tried them, but our times by the evening fires were longer now the sun's curve was lower in the sky.

I enjoyed the different smells in the prairie air as I mounted up in the mornings, and for the first time I began to notice the little things around me I'd taken for granted. The burs on the buffalo grass with its foot-long leaves, how bluegrass grew in the driest regions because of its long roots, how the lark sparrows would come down in the hundreds to feast on grasshoppers, and how a five-foot long racer snake would squeeze a fieldmouse until its eyes popped out. Under the stars before I drifted off I'd remember my kid sisters playing on the wooden walkway in front of the hardware store, though I couldn't see their faces clearly. I could recall Amy like she was framed in a picture, but there was no sense dwelling on my loss of family or a rich girl who'd likely forgotten me. I did ask myself if I was getting soft when I leaned down from the saddle to pick a wildflower from time to time. It didn't go in my hat so the others could hoot at me. I just sniffed it and tossed it back to the ground.

Hallam and Waco mostly rode together in front. They didn't talk much, but Hallam had heard about the Comanche boy. The only time he mentioned it was when he asked how my knife wound had healed. Fine, I said, and we left it at that. I was foolish to believe I could break his law and get away with it.

There was no way to keep track of a few head of missing cattle. Larger gangs of rustlers would usually try to steal fifty or sixty head at a time, and that would be noticed. But smaller gangs or Comanches would settle on three or four, and we'd have to rely on tell-tale signs, like mixed-up animal tracks miles from the main herd. One day in mid-September we found such a trail of unshod pony and cattle hoofprints moving west.

"Three bucks," Waco announced after studying the ground. "Three steers as well."

"Let's go," Hallam said.

The trail took us well beyond the western border of the ranch. We'd been out there before to warn off some homesteaders, but only about ten miles or so. This time the Comanche had a good start on us and we'd gone twenty miles before we spotted their dust cloud. As we closed in, Hallam sent Jim and me circling out ahead of them while he, Waco, and two others went straight in for the kill. It was rough country, and when I looked back to see where best to cut the Indians off, the dust cloud had gone and it was as if they'd disappeared into the ground. Jim and I pulled up. About a mile away to the north we could see Hallam and his men reined in. Then they vanished as well. When we tried

to ride directly over to where we'd seen them last, we ran into a dry stream-bed with high loose-dirt banks that the horses couldn't manage. As we followed this to the east trying to find a way around, we thought we heard muffled shots but couldn't be sure.

"They probably got 'em," Jim said. "Damn I wish we was there!"

Finally the banks petered out and we raced north. The narrow arroyo entrance was visible between two boulders perched like giant gateposts pitted by the rain and wind. We didn't hear anything at all as we went down and the gully opened out onto the sand floor and usual snarl of cottonwoods. After picking our way along for a hundred yards or so we heard voices.

It had happened in a small clearing. The Comanches had waited until Hallam and Waco came into the open and blasted them from the other side. The other two men held back, then made their way sideways in the shelter of the trees where they shot like blazes at the end of the clearing. Waco wasn't moving, but Hallam had pulled his horse down and fired his rifle from behind it. The three Winchesters had their effect, most of all because it turned out the bucks owned only one repeater between them. In a few minutes it was over. Two bucks were dead and they roped the third down. As Jim and I rode in, Hallam was standing over Waco, banging his fist hard against his leg.

"Never gave him a chance," he said to none of us in particular. Then he turned and said harshly, "Let's finish the business." He went over to the roped buck lying face to the ground, hauled him to his feet, and slung him up on Waco's saddle. It was the boy I'd let go a few months before.

I sat there frozen while Hallam took one end of Waco's rope, noosed it, and slung the other end over a thick cottonwood branch about eight feet off the ground. He pulled the boy's head down by the hair and put the noose around his neck. Then he looked over at me for the first time. "Come here, Boon," he said evenly. "I've tied the knot, now you can hold the rope."

The Comanche boy stared at me, and through the fear in his eyes I saw his recognition. It didn't matter about the cattle. Waco was dead, and any arguments I made about self-defence weren't going to stop the revenge. I hadn't much liked Waco, but no one deserved to die this way in a Texas hole-in-the-ground without his gun in his hand. It was hard to say he hadn't been murdered, even if this boy most likely hadn't pulled the

trigger. I looked over at the body of one of the bucks. There was the repeater beside him as proof. I dismounted and walked toward Hallam who was holding out the rope end. The boy said something to me as I passed and rubbed his stomach. Puzzled, I stopped and looked at him. Why would he tell me he was hungry again? Then Jim snorted and said, "He wants you to know his name is 'He-who-has-the-prairie-inside-him.' Another man laughed and said, "Well, he's going to have the prairie on top him soon enough."

I stood still and remembered that day in the spring when I'd had my gun on the boy and his knife in my side. About to die he hadn't been making an excuse for killing the calf, trying to make me feel sorry for his hunger. He'd been telling me who he was, and when I thought he'd pointed down the arroyo, he was really pointing up to the prairie above as if I could understand it was part of him. Now he was telling me his name again before his second death. Hallam's command broke the spell. "Get it over with, Boon!"

"I can't do it, Hallam. *We* can't do it."

He dropped the rope end and stepped away from the horse. I heard the click of a hammer behind me. "Put it away, Jim," Hallam said. "You others too." He walked about ten feet off, turned, and pointed his finger at me. "I told you what it would come down to, Boon. Now I'm giving you the chance Waco didn't get." When I didn't reply, he said, "Remember that day in Abilene when you outdrew me? I wouldn't have shot you down in the street, just cracked my barrel across your face. So there wasn't much at stake then."

"I didn't know that," I said, trying to warn him.

Just then the Comanche boy kicked the horse with his heels and it took off across the clearing. Before any of us could react a head-high cottonwood branch whipped him from the saddle. Jim ran over and bent down over his quiet body. Then he stood up. "Neck's broke. Good as a hanging."

It was only later I'd feel sick to my stomach. Right then I was cold and distant from what had just happened as if the boy had never told me his name. I turned back to Hallam. "It's over," I said. "You got what you wanted."

"No, you'll do this every time." We faced one another for maybe five or six seconds then he went for his gun. My slug hit him in the throat, and he made a gurgling sound as he clutched it with both hands and toppled to the ground. I spun around with my .45

ready. Jim opened his mouth to say something then put his hands in the air. The other two dropped their Winchesters.

I pointed at Hallam and the blood oozing from his throat into the sand. “Take him and Waco back to the ranch,” I said. “Tell Mr. Tyler what happened. Make sure you tell him Hallam drew first.” There was no law against not holding a hanging rope, just ranch rules that had been broken. I figured what they’d see as my weakness wasn’t cause for a man-hunt. As for Hallam, Mr. Tyler wouldn’t like his loss, but maybe not enough to come after me. Jim didn’t argue, and the others helped him tie the bodies carefully over their saddles. Then they rode off without a word, driving the three steers before them.

I couldn’t do anything about the other two bucks, and after a time I picked up the boy and slung him in front of my saddlehorn. The Comanches might have been waiting at the other end of the arroyo so I headed out the way we’d come in. It was slow going through the cottonwoods, but I soon hit the rising ground and came out beneath the cloudless sky. I rode a little way, not really thinking about what I wanted to do, until I came across a large flat-topped boulder in the middle of the emptiness. I stared at it for awhile, then roped the boy’s heels, climbed to the top of the rock, and hauled him up. My idea was that most critters wouldn’t get to him except buzzards, but at least they wouldn’t carry off main parts of him in different directions. It was crazy because the buzzards would do this in their own way, even if more slowly. For some reason, though, I wanted him to last awhile.

I sat there beside him, noticing the beadwork on his necklace and the smoothness of his brown skin. He had a beautiful name, and leaving him high up, looking out over what he was part of, seemed the right thing to do. I undid the knot of the necklace and took a red bead from the rawhide loop. Then I carefully re-tied the knot. Finally I stood up. His dark eyes were seeing through me. “I’m…” I started to say in reply, but the wind lifted the sound of my name into the sky.

The cave entrance was so covered with rubble that it looked like a landslide had come down the mountainside. No one would ever suspect there was anything of value beneath the stones. I hiked up with Miguel and brought our horses down. He didn’t say anything, and I knew how hard it must have been to hold his peace when Fuentes mocked the

women and then when they came out of the cave so damaged. I could see the pain in his eyes, and left him alone with his thoughts. It wasn't easy for Federico either. The girl clung to another woman, and nothing he said to try to comfort her made any difference. He told us the story of the ambush before we headed back the next morning.

Fuentes had hit them when they were only half a day out of the village, so they weren't expecting him. He must have made his plans and left the cave long before they set off. They were riding more or less single file along the narrow trail. Virgil was in the lead and got tossed out of his saddle like a doll by the rifle blasts that also hit Tom. Martin managed to pull Tom behind some low rocks, where Henry had dragged the *vaquero* and had taken cover with the two villagers. Somehow Federico ended up on the other side of the trail, away from the main line of fire but protected only by some small cactus and thin sagebrush. The fight didn't last long. After a short exchange of fire, Fuentes and his men mounted up and just rode over the rocks. Federico could see Martin and Henry stand and take down several *bandidos* with well-placed shots, but then those who had got by them wheeled around and shot them in the back. After that, there were a few more shots, all from Fuentes' men, which meant the villagers were dead too. Federico pressed himself down into the dirt and waited.

"*Mestizo!*" Fuentes called to him, "I know you are out there. I saw you on the trail. If you wish to die like a dog, so be it. But if you give yourself up, I will spare the village."

He was lying, but the tiny thought there was something he could do if he stayed alive made Federico stand with his hands raised high.

"Ah, there you are," said Fuentes. "*Venir aquí, ahora!*"

When he got over by the rocks he saw Tom and the two villagers with half their heads blown away. Henry and Martin were lying face-down, their shirt-backs ripped by bullet holes and soaked with blood. The man we'd captured was dead too, either shot in the cross-fire or killed by Martin or Henry so he wouldn't talk.

"Too bad," said Fuentes. "They should have worked for me."

Federico thought fast. Fuentes was going to ask him about the rest of his friends, and since anything he said would be a lie, he decided to go for a big one. "That's what we wanted to do."

"What?"

"Yeah, we knew we couldn't hold the village if you came at us from the sides. So we talked it over. Argued really. In the end five of us decided we'd make a lot more than twenty dollars each working for you."

"Twenty dollars? That's what they paid you?"

"That's right."

"So the other two ran away?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. They just decided Texas was a better prospect."

"Why didn't you surrender just now?"

"You hardly gave us a chance."

Fuentes laughed. "It seems your two deserters were right about Texas. What about these villagers?" He pointed to the dead Mexicans.

"They were tired as well of too much work with no reward. They could shoot, so they decided to try their chances with you."

"If I believed you completely, I'd offer you a job myself. You have *cajones, mestizo*. But if Carlos told you where I was he could have told you other things as well. I'll have to get that out of you. Right now we have some business. "*Vamanos*" he called to his men, and they saddled up, Federico tied to his own horse, his Winchester taken from its scabbard.

They rode into the village and called for the old man. "You have lived a long time," Fuentes told him, "but now I will show you something you have never seen."

He ordered the villagers into a circle in the middle of the street. "I will favour you," he said, "and take only your most beautiful virgins." Then he rode among the people and tapped four young women on the head with his quirt." Mothers screamed when the bandits came into the crowd and took the girls. Fathers stood with their heads down. Only the old man looked Fuentes in the eye.

"Well, what have you got to say?"

"*Que Dios te perdone*."

"*Yo so Dios aqui, viejo*."

He gave a signal and his men went inside the houses where they poured oil from the lamps over the sticks of furniture and the rugs and blankets. Then they threw their glowing cigar ends or matches on the piles. Now the women wailed and waved their arms

in the air. The men raised their eyes to look at their homes, and Federico could feel their helplessness behind their stony masks.

"You see this man here, this *mestizo*," Fuentes said to them. "He is the only one left of your *yanqui pistolas*. I have killed them all, and two more ran away before that. Your men who deserted you died with them."

Federico looked at the old man, but he didn't seem to be listening. The villagers who did hear him would think only that all salvation was gone. Fuentes' men got back on their horses. They watched the houses burn for a few minutes, the smoke rising thickly above the scorched adobe and flaming rafters, then started back for the cave. The first night out Fuentes tried to get Federico to talk. They put his head in a water bucket and held it there until he thought he would drown, but when they yanked him out by the hair, he just kept saying the same thing over and over. Yes, the villagers had talked about a cave of treasure, but Carlos had denied this, saying only there was a camp he would lead them to. They knew from the stories of village raids that Fuentes could pay them more than twenty dollars.

"Besides," he told Fuentes, "there would be action with you. Texas has too many lawmen. It's hard to make an honest living."

"You mean with banks and stagecoaches, eh?"

"Yes, and even if you want to hire your gun to a rancher. Nearly all the Indians are gone, and there's only a few rustlers left."

Fuentes stroked his whiskers. "I will keep you tied for now. Later we will see."

They rode back past the ambush site where a few of the victors took leather boots and gunbelts before they headed for the cave. One of them put on Tom's hat.

When Federico had finished his story we set off for the village, but didn't make much time and made an early camp for the night. None of us could sleep so we rode on through the darkness and came to where they lay in the early morning light. The ragged hole in the heel of Henry's sock bothered me as much as the bloody rips in his shirt. Miguel went over to his two *compadres* and made a sign of the cross. We tied the villagers on the extra horses, but decided to bury Virgil, Martin, Tom, and Henry where they lay.

"I will bring a cross for each of them, *senor*," Miguel said.

Reese was grim-faced, but thanked him just the same.

We could see the smoke from the village long before we got there. The wind carried the smell toward us, and the four young women, who had suffered in silence until then began to weep and cry out. When we rode down the street, men, women, and children ran up to Miguel's horse. They didn't say anything, but when he dismounted they touched him gently and crossed themselves over and over.

Reese rode up to the old man near the *cantina* and dismounted. "*Por favor*," he said, walking by him. "Some of us need a drink." He went inside and brought a bottle of liquor and glasses out to Federico and me. He poured us each a shot then swigged some from the bottle. "I'm sorry, old man," he said.

"*Creo que usted, senor*. But it was not your fault."

"We buried the jewels with Fuentes."

"Good. He cannot wear them in his grave."

Reese shook his head. "That's not what I wanted to say." He took another swallow from the bottle. If I hadn't known him, I would have said he was looking for some courage. "We shouldn't have left you alone."

The old man gave a little grimace, as if he was trying to smile but could not do so through the pain.

"Then you would have died here, *senor*, and Fuentes would still be alive. This way the village has suffered, but it will suffer no more."

We stood there together, watching the smoke drift in the wind, listening to the sad sounds from the women and children.

"I'd like to stay here for awhile," Federico said to the old man.

"*Que sería bienvenida, mi hijo*." And you as well," he said to Reese and me.

We looked at one another and then away. "Thanks," I said. "But we're not the kind to settle, not yet at least." I wondered, as he did, if the jewels might have let us start over. But it was a fact that forty dollars and a whole lot of blood already stood between us and who we had been. Too little to buy back too much.

Federico shook our hands and walked down the street to where the girl stood with her family. I heard him say, "*Que no haca ninguna diferencia para mí*."

The old man did smile then. "*Alabado sea*. Perhaps someone has won," he said, "even though the price was so high."

Reese and I mounted up. "Miguel said he'd put a cross on the graves up there," I told him, pointing to the north trail.

He nodded. "When I was young the leopards would come down from the mountains to hunt. They were very quick and very strong, but they were always alone. Then one day they disappeared." He smiled at Reese then turned to me. "We will not see you again," he said.

I told Clay the story of Fuentes and the village over a few months that winter. It took some time because he'd interrupt me and ask for more details about a man's face or the way he moved both when he was relaxed and when he felt some pressure on him. He was especially interested in Fuentes and how his words matched the look in his eyes when he felt he was in control of a situation. As for Reese, he said, "He'd be a hard one to read. I think everything meant the same thing to him. Nothing given away."

"Maybe you're right," I said, as I recalled Reese with his .45 against Fuentes' temple. I still don't know how he got to him through that smoke. It must have been as Clay said. What he had to accomplish there was not any different than finding a man in clear daylight. It was just a matter of doing what you had to do with no thought of failure.

"What happened to him and Federico?"

"Far as I know Federico's still down there. Maybe a grandfather by now. Reese and I rode over the border together. Then he headed north and I went west to New Mexico. That's the last I ever saw of him."

"Why didn't you stay partners?"

"We weren't ever partners, Clay. It was like poker. Every man for himself, even if you played along with the man next to you to get rid of someone else. Reese and I both wanted to hold the winning hand in the end, so there wasn't room enough for the two of us in the same game. Not in the long run anyway. I respected him as much as any man I've met, but I never knew him well enough to call him a friend."

Clay nodded. 'I can understand that, Pop."

I never told him about Hallam and the Comanche boy. That was a private story I didn't want anyone else to make their own until I surprised myself one day by giving it to Max. A few years after Clay left I was in the state capital and saw a two-reel western starring William S. Hart. It was called *The Toll Gate* and was about an outlaw named Black Deering who decided to do one last job before he gave up the bad life. I knew Deering wasn't real, but his story seemed real enough, despite how clean everybody looked on the screen. As I watched I wondered how much Hart had changed the actual gunfighter Deering was bound to have been. I couldn't figure out the answer, but I knew what I was seeing was like the surface of the water dazzling your eyes when you were fording a river. You felt your horse feeling its way, and that was as close as you got to what was beneath. When I killed Hallam and left that boy on the rock I was underwater the whole time.

It was 1917 when I had that last card from St. Louis. The country was going to war with the Germans, but we didn't pay much attention along the Bitteroot. I wasn't worried about Clay signing up, just like I wouldn't have done it. The story Federico told Fuentes about me not wanting to join his gang was true enough. Too many orders and decisions made for you. When I took on the village job with the other boys I wasn't in anybody's army but my own. Like me, Clay was his own man. He'd defend himself like he did with that easterner, but if he was going to defend others he'd do it freely. I did expect to hear from him when he got settled in New Orleans, though, and never thought, like Reese, he'd disappear from my life entirely.

In 1930 I was still on the ranch, but semi-retired from the hard chores. Ma Barnard was in her eighties and left the daily running of things to a nephew who'd come in few years back. Of course business was different by then. The herd was smaller, the rail-head was close by, and fewer hands were needed on the range. We took the hay to the cattle in the backs of trucks as long as the weather was good. I hated their noise and how they rattled your bones worse than any bronco ride. But I learned how to fix engine troubles and set up part of a stable where I kept some chains and tools and spent most days there getting my hands dirty.

The envelope had the return address of a New Orleans lawyer. I put it down unopened on a pile of screwdrivers and finished cleaning a carburetor. He'd be thirty now and almost half his life had gone by without my knowing anything about it. That was his choice. I hadn't had one when my parents died in the fire, and I probably learned how to handle a gun to protect myself from such chance. If my father had been around I was sure things would have turned out different. Probably the same thing with my mother. But I hadn't given Clay any choice about his mother, and even though I'd been around he'd killed a man at seventeen and gone off to find his own way. With the cards I'd given him a tool to survive out there. I'd made sure it wasn't a gun, but how he'd handled that knife coming at him was in his blood. After letting these thoughts bother me for awhile, I washed my hands and opened the envelope. The letter was about Max.

II. Clay

He first saw the Missouri when his father took him on a hunting and fishing trip in the Beaverhead Mountains. They camped on Trail Creek on the Continental Divide and he watched the waters run east, tumbling and turning into the Jefferson River a few miles downstream. His father told him these waters were the beginning of the Missouri and would eventually empty into the Mississippi and flow on down to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico.

"That's a long way," Clay said.

"Yeah, it is. Even farther than Abilene. I've seen the Rio Grande but not the Mississippi."

He asked his father how the Missouri got to the bigger river and learned that it passed through North and South Dakota into Nebraska and then Missouri itself. Not far north of St. Louis it poured into the bigger stream.

"That's what the Ojibway call it. *Misi ziibi*, the great river. But I guess a lot of tribes have their own names for it."

Clay put his arm up to the elbow in the cold water and picked up a smooth white pebble, wanting a piece of the beginning.

When he left Montana he more or less followed the Missouri's course, moving east each day until he ended up in Omaha where he found work and card games, including some real contests with an old, one-eyed man who taught him a great deal. He sold his horse and saddle without much thought when he quit the town and hitched a ride with a farmer in his brand-new Ford truck. He'd learned to drive Ma Barnard's truck that, like this one, bounced along the dirt roads at about the same speed as his stallion and not nearly as comfortably. But now he was headed for the bright lights and needed to shuck his cowboy ways. After that the river took him through Kansas City and across Missouri to St. Louis. He stood on a low bluff above the confluence with the Mississippi and saw the strings of barges lined up like north-to-south trains filled with their cargoes of coal and iron. As many as there were, they caused barely a ripple on the blue-brown surface gliding powerfully beneath them, carrying debris that might have swirled around his legs

when he fished Trail Creek. He hadn't known until then that he'd always been heading for the estuary and the legendary city there. All he had to do now was follow the straight line to the Gulf.

He sent a card to his father that suggested he was making a lot of money at the tables, but the truth was he was stuck in penny-ante games in the dockland district, and after awhile he couldn't get much action there because of his skills. He had to take barge work to keep a room and feed himself more than pretzels and beer. The days were long and hard as he loaded and unloaded steel rails, bags of sulfur, and sacks of grain from dawn until 6.00 p.m. with a half hour for lunch on the levee. At midday he'd sit between the groups of blacks and whites who slaved together when it came to lifting, piling, and dripping sweat, but who couldn't or wouldn't share a meal or conversation when the work stopped. The blacks eyed him warily, and the whites, sensing he'd have no trouble taking care of himself, left him alone. He didn't play cards with any of them, but they'd heard of his reputation, and that added to the allowance for his stand-offish ways. One day an old black man paused as he passed with his lunch-box and asked if Clay had a cigarette. He gave him one, and the old man asked him what he was doing wasting his time on the levee.

"I don't have much choice, pal."

"That's not what I've heard. No sir."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you got a way with the cards that should take you outa here." The old man waved his hand to include all the visible river shore. Clay could see the sweat running down through the gully seams in his cheeks, dripping off like amber beads to the dirt below.

"How do you figure that? No offence, but it's hard to make any money from you or anyone else I've met so far."

"Take a look out there, son." He pointed to the middle of the river. "What do you see?"

"Barges and more barges."

"After them, moving like they owned the water."

Clay looked beyond the flat vessels and their towboats and saw two sternwheelers glittering in the sunlight. They were like white buffaloes, squat and powerful as they churned downstream, the black smoke from their horn-like funnels twisting into the sky. “Yeah, I see them.”

“Well, that’s your ticket to better places I’ll never see again.”

“How so?”

“All you got to do is dress neat, get yourself on board, and join a card game. There’s money on them boats, son. I know. I shoveled more coal than you can count into their bellies ‘til I got sick of being below decks. After that I came up in the world and tipped my hat to the finery comin’ on board every day. Cairo, Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge. All the way down to the Big Easy. That’s where a stud poker player like you should go, and I’m tellin’ you how to get there.”

“That where you’re from?”

The old man looked at him with sadness in his eyes. “East of there,” he said. “Long time ago.” He walked off to join his friends who were staring stolidly at the water, though Clay knew they’d been picking up on every word.

On the weekend, he put on some laundered clothes, packed his bag, and went down to the steamboat offices where he bought a ticket to the next port downriver. The fare took up all but ten dollars he’d have for food and a table stake. He shared a tiny cabin with a man and his young son who walked the deck during the day and went to bed early. After a supper of some bread, cheese, and coffee from the canteen, he went into the saloon and bought himself a beer. There were several tables with four or five players each, and he asked if he could sit in at the one nearest the windows. The men looked him over. His unpressed trousers and leather jacket weren’t the right uniform, and he thought for a moment that the old black had made a fool of him and he’d end up on the levee in New Orleans, working for wages and living in a two-bit room. Then a pale man in a striped shirt with black stone cuff links said, “Why not?” He looked around the table and added, as if speaking for all of them, “You aren’t going to skin us, are you son?” The three others in the group laughed loudly, and Clay knew he’d have to play carefully, taking money from them equally and in small amounts while losing to each man as well. The first night was a break even affair so he’d have a future with them or their replacements.

The ante was a dollar a hand, but even so he played very conservatively, folding the occasional high pair that included his hole card, and taking a pot only when his winning hand was obvious. After a couple of hours he was up ten dollars, while two men were ahead more than fifteen. He cashed in his chips, saying, “That’ll keep me for a day or two.”

“Come back tomorrow night,” the cuff-link man said. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

Clay was tempted by the invitation, but he disembarked and waited for the next boat. It was wise to stay a stranger if he intended to make money all the way to New Orleans. This time he paid for a ticket that would take him to Natchez. He felt more relaxed as he surveyed the saloon. After watching the tables carefully he headed for one with seven players and a two-dollar ante. He still meant to pick and choose to whom he’d lose but make sure he came out with much more than a ten-dollar gain. The men at this table knew what they were doing, which made his strategy difficult, so he went after the bigger pots, usually winning one of three and folding on the others before he got too deeply involved. The conversation was about women and horses. The whorehouses and race track in Natchez weren’t far apart. He was lucky, as he had to be, drawing the odd second pair and even a straight or two on his final card, and by the end of the night he was up over a hundred dollars. Three other men weren’t far behind, so he didn’t stand out too much. Word was going to get around on the boats pretty quickly about the new kid from St. Louis. At Natchez in the morning he decided to go for broke, and bought his final, one-night ticket to New Orleans.

In late afternoon he boarded the steamboat and lay down for a short nap before dinner. The boat would stay moored until seven o’clock, and as he fell asleep he could hear the other passengers making their way down the hallway and the more distant sound of activity on the wharf. A band of sunlight cut through a gap in his curtains, and as his eyes slowly blinked before closing he followed the light across the floor and up the opposite wall. The dream he had was vivid and disturbing, and when he woke he was shaking with cold from the dried sweat across his body. The room in which he had been playing stud had no doors or windows. Two other figures at the table were dead, propped up by broom handles under their armpits. There were pennies over their eyelids, and their hole cards had been turned over before the rest of the deal. One of them was his father as a young

gunfighter. The other was a woman he knew instinctively was his mother, though she wore her painted face like a mask. He sat opposite a mirror, watching himself move and listening to his mirror voice repeat “Check” as he and his image were dealt the same second card. He knew without looking that his hole card was the King of Spades. His third and fourth cards were matched in the mirror, and the voice there said “raise” and “call.” There were no pairs in the hand. But when he revealed his King his mirror self smiled sadly and turned over an Ace. A voice inside his head said derisively, “I don’t need any help to beat someone like you.” He leaned across the table and pushed a knife through the mirror into his own heart. As he came out of the dream he thought he was wearing the face of the man he had killed in Montana.

It was dark in the cabin when he opened his eyes. Snapping on the light he checked his watch. Nine o’clock. How long did dreams last? He put his hand to his chest and felt the thumping organ inside. Then he stood and stepped across to the sink with a shaving glass above. In this mirror he saw his frightened eyes and tears come to them. Why was he crying? The easterner meant nothing to him, especially since he’d died over his stupid frustration at not winning a bluff. Besides, the man had come at him with a knife, and he’d just defended himself, that’s all. The tears ran down his cheeks, and he still didn’t understand why. Suddenly he thought of how he’d responded to his father’s probing him about the killing. “He was an easy read,” he’d replied, and glimpsed a sadness in his father’s face like that in the black man’s features when Clay asked him where he was from. A sadness that lingered in his father’s voice as he said, “That’s not what I meant.”

Clay had always known his father had killed men. He’d shot down plenty in Mexico and certainly before and after that. But Boon had never expressed any particular regrets about what he’d done, never suggested to his son that his violent heritage was a matter of concern. Clay had never seen him cry, and the closest he’d come to sorrow was when he’d spoken about the hole in the sock of his dead friend Henry. Now Clay wondered how much his father was troubled by the deaths he’d so matter-of-factly described in his story of the Mexican village and by feelings he’d never shared. He’d missed his chance to ask about those feelings, and it wouldn’t be easy to do so if they ever saw each other again. That wasn’t likely. His father would never leave the west, and Clay intended never

to go back. But if part of Boon could be invisible in his past as a gunman, why couldn't he be the same way in his future as a poker player?

He rinsed his face with cold water. What would his name be? 'Kid' was what others had called him when he took their money even if "it wasn't about the money," as he'd told them. That's why he was still alive and not the easterner. It's why his father was still around in his fifties, whatever price he'd paid for survival. As for his mother, whom he could hardly recall, he had no stories of her. He knew only she'd sold herself for money but hadn't sold him. The other whores had looked after him because she'd cared enough to make them care, not because they'd been paid. Had he been crying for her too? He shook his head. He couldn't dwell on these mirror images, or they'd become signs, tells in the one game he was otherwise confident he could always win. Taking a deck of cards from his bag he shuffled them effortlessly. The sound soothed him. If he let Boon and his mother go, maybe he wouldn't have the same dream again. He left them in the glass, and made his way to the saloon.

Through that night and the next he won four hundred dollars. When a man at the table asked him about his hometown, he didn't hesitate. "St. Louis," he said. "I was born on the levee."

He lived in a small apartment above the corner of Iberville and Bourbon in the Quarter. Every morning he'd walk down to Jackson Square for some coffee and beignets, usually at the Café du Monde where he'd read the newspaper and watch the old men playing chess. They knew him by name and reputation. "Hey, Kid," they'd call, "when you gonna learn a real game!" He'd laugh and shrug his shoulders and ask them why they didn't play a game that earned them an honest living. The pigeons would flutter around the cathedral, and the smell of the river would flow over the levee, mixing with the perfume from the jacaranda trees and potted plants beneath the café windows. He liked the mornings because the city was always strolling into a new day of promise, forgetful of lost sunsets and bad memories drowned in Jax and rum. For him after sunset was mostly when he went to work. While others drank and slapped their cards down like clenched fists, he sipped mineral water and watched them pound themselves into submission as the hours passed. Those with better manners and in more control of their

emotions drank as well, but without hurry or compulsion so it always took longer for his lethal game disguised with a light touch to ruffle their languid feathers.

He played all over town. The backroom at Lafitte's was a favourite spot because of the easy money. The trade could be rough there, but the bouncers took care of business when tempers got too hot. The Napoleon House was quieter and catered to a smoother crowd with more to spend. The classical records always on the turntable went along with the style of game. No voices were raised or anger expressed in any direct ways, but the adjustment of shirt cuffs or the straightening of a tie were as much giveaways of hands as the involuntary blinking of eyes or aggressive cracking of knuckles. Sometimes he'd find action in the jazz clubs out on Lake Pontchartrain, but only those near the old Spanish fort that catered to the college crowd and salesmen on the Gulf run. The very wealthy places like the New Orleans Country Club and the Milneburg Resort held private games and tournaments by invitation only. Occasionally members would come down to the Quarter, some after a visit to the Storyville cribs, but they didn't sit in at Napoleon's, just watched from a distance, their eyes coolly on him as if taking a measure they might one day have to remember. When he saw them watching, he played well enough to win consistently more than he lost, leaving the impression that luck as much as skill was on his side. He hadn't yet been able to crack through the high society barrier that kept him from challenging the big-shot players he'd heard of, the ones with state-wide, even national reputations. Men like Baudry Cain. To get that high, he'd need a backer, someone who'd stake him to the hundred-dollar ante, no-limit betting contests where money was a paper trail to the top of the poker world. He needed to find that backer to be the best there was. Already a long way from his Bucktown days, he wanted to be even farther.

The steamboat had let him off near the New Basin Canal where the small-craft traffic ran into Lake Pontchartrain. Maybe fifty boats he later learned were shrimpers lined up by the canal entrance, and there were more of these out on the lake. He could see the railroad terminus by the edge of the wharves and the bustle of figures there loading up the trains. Along the shore were rows of wooden shacks on stilts, their wide galleries covered by tin roofs. The shack floors were only a few feet above the water, and he wondered

what happened during storms, let alone the hurricanes he'd heard about blowing in from the Gulf. A steward on the steamboat had told him Bucktown by the lake was the place for women, liquor, and cards, in that order, and as he looked around he could see signs on a lot of buildings announcing their wares. The biggest one saying "BonTon Club" had a colour painting of a nude straddling a bottle so you couldn't see her privates but knew what the bottle stood for. He paid twenty cents for a po'-boy sandwich and a dime for a watery beer and sat on a bench that faced the water. Whiffs of salt had been in the air south of Natchez, but now the tang was strong in his nostrils as the wind blew unfiltered from the sea, and he realized how far he'd come in his long journey along the Missouri and down the Mississippi to this end of the line. Out there was the Gulf he'd imagined and to the west the city he'd come to explore. He'd been born in North Texas and born again on the St. Louis levee with some Montana time in between, but uptown from here, he felt sure, was going to be his permanent home.

He walked into the first building he saw with a "Rooms" sign. It was a two-story affair set back from the shore and resting on solid ground, or at least on the packed-down generations of silt the big river had left behind. After he'd given the owner his name and a week's rent in advance, he asked where the best poker games were held.

"How good are you?" the man said. He was small and wiry with a big moustache that held more hair than the top of his head.

"I can handle myself where some can't."

"Then you want Maylie's place a few blocks in and to your right. Watch out for the Cajun."

His room was clean enough, and he had a view of the water beyond the back edge of the place next door. He slept for a couple of hours on an old mattress that didn't offer much support, and then took a shower in a rusty stall down the hall. In the evening he walked out into the town following the man's directions until he saw Maylie's. It was a low building with long windows whose heavy shutters were propped open with wooden poles. The front doors were tied back, and a group of drinkers looked him over as he passed inside. They were talking quickly in high voices, and their combination of English and what he assumed was French wasn't easy to understand. There was one large room with a bar running the length of a side wall. A few patrons leaned against it, but the

majority was seated at tables that took up most of the floor space, though he could see a small bandstand at the far end with room for dancing in front. Several black men were arranging themselves there, instruments dangling from neck cords and shining in the hard light. He walked toward the musicians, took a chair at an empty table near them, and looked back at the other customers. Most had cards in their hands, the white-aproned waiters slipping easily among their tables to keep them well-supplied with beer and shrimp. He ordered a Jax for himself and after awhile carried it over to a large group of players to the left of the bandstand.

"Room for one more?" he asked.

"Stud's the game, son," said a short, fat man who had just folded his hand. "You're welcome, like anyone else."

He nodded his appreciation and sat down next to the fat man. "We don't ask where folks are from, just as long as they can ante up," he said, tossing a quarter out in front of him. Clay did the same, and watched the dealer pitch the shuffled cards face down to each of them before rewarding himself. An hour passed. The largest pot had been twelve dollars, taken by a grey-haired, sharp dresser with two pair over the fat man's Jacks. But they were all skilled players who didn't waste anyone's time or their own money with foolish bets that had bluff written all over them. He found, despite the fact he'd made only enough to pay for a round of beer, that he was enjoying the game. It was nice to relax a little and not worry about tactics at the table. The band was blowing some good jazz tunes, and a few couples were up and dancing, the hair of the women whipping wildly as they spun around. Then after a break, as he and the fat man stood at the bar together, Clay was surprised by the question.

"Why are you holding back, son?

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"Sure you are. Oh, don't get me wrong. A man's business at the table is all his own. I'm just curious, that's all. I can see you watching our every move with those machine-gunner's eyes, like we're targets you know you can hit if you want to. Only right now you don't want to."

"I'm that obvious, am I?"

"No, I didn't say that. Those others are good card players, but they're so busy looking for the tell, they can't see when there isn't one." The fat man looked him in the eye. "I've never seen better self-control, son. Not at this level at least. You might have what it takes."

"Thanks. But I'd like to play in some real games where everyone knows they're a target but can't necessarily do anything about it."

"Who-ee," the fat man said. "You sure are direct, aren't you?" He looked around the room, then leaned closer to say in a soft voice. "You want to come back after hours. Those real games you mentioned don't get going until two a.m."

"Will you be there?"

"Some nights I sit in for the hell of it. We're talking cut-throat poker, son. You'll get a hundred-dollar pot now and then, but there's a lot of bodies left along the way. Go around to the side door just before two. They'll let you in, no questions asked."

He cashed in and thanked the other players for their hospitality. Since he'd been no threat, the table was all smiles. The fat man winked at him as he left.

One Saturday night he walked along Bourbon Street to Pat O'Brien's at the corner of Royal and St. Peter. The speakeasy had a secret password, *Storm's Brewin,'* designed to keep out riff-raff, but of course the accepted clientele had let the cat out of the bag and all sorts got in. Fortunately the space was small and the bouncer large, so any trouble was dealt with quickly. He went there to relax before finding the night's big game, one usually set up in advance by Pat or another bar or restaurant owner who liked the money that gamblers left on the table. There was a baby grand in the corner and a pianist offering soft jazz as background to the quiet conversation or for those who just wanted to sit alone and stare at their glasses. This time in the mirror he noticed the singer on the stool beside the piano, a girl with strong cheekbones and raven hair. She wore a simple white dress and had a black boa trailing across her shoulders. She was certainly good enough to look at, but when she started to sing Clay turned away from the bar to listen. It was a song called "Who's Sorry Now," and she sang it without effort, her voice gently rising on "Who's sad and blue/who's cryin' too" and falling hauntingly into the refrain about regret for the one who's had his way.

"What's her name," he asked Pat.

"Margot Anderson, but I'd be careful with this one." Pat poured a drink for another customer, then answered the unasked question.

"Because she's a friend of the Carollas."

"How good a friend?" Everyone knew about the Carolla family that controlled the city's bootlegging, as well as big-time gambling and narcotics operations. It was more than rumored that boss Sam Carolla had been the trigger man when a police chief had been gunned down thirty years before. The family moved without challenge in the New Orleans underworld, though Sam and his cronies were members of the best Pontchartrain and city clubs, and hobnobbed openly with state politicians clearly on the take.

"Let's just say she's been seen in their company."

"Maybe I'll ask her if she's allowed out at night."

"Suit yourself, Kid, but don't say you weren't warned."

When she took a break he waited for her to come to the bar. But the piano player came over and said to Pat, "Margot would like a gin and tonic, light on the gin."

"I've got it," Clay told him, when Pat finished mixing. The piano player raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Then he sat down on a stool and asked Pat for a beer.

Clay walked over to her and held out the drink. "Your man got held up."

"Seems so," she answered, looking at the bar. She took the glass from his hand. "Thanks."

"I like your voice," he said.

"It's done me no harm." She smiled at him and said, "You're the poker player, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right. How did you know?"

"Things get around."

"I'll try to remember that when I'm holding a flush."

"Hmm. But you're not holding anything right now."

He liked the patter, but he wanted more than that. Her eyes were dark, and because she was a woman and not a card player he had some trouble reading them at first. "Are you free?" he said.

"Who's asking?"

"Most call me "Kid," he said. "But you can call me Clay."

When she'd finished for the night they went to an oyster bar on Bourbon Street and, knees touching, sat in a booth by the window that was the size of Pat O'Brien's baby grand. She told him she was from Cincinnati and had started singing there when she'd finished high school.

"I was in the school glee club, but I'd never sung alone before I auditioned for my first job. I'd always liked jazz and blues, though. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sippie Wallace, especially when Sidney Bechet played with her. I had their records, but my father built a radio receiver and we listened to KDKA from Pittsburgh. What about you?"

He shook his head. Music was something he heard when he emerged from the different rhythms of a card game. He had vague memories of a piano in Abilene, but he'd been raised in a bunkhouse where the occasional cowboy would pick up a guitar and warble a saloon tune through a haze of liquor and smoke. Such performances hurt his ears, and it wasn't until he'd come to New Orleans that he'd opened up to Rabbit Brown's band down at Mama Lou's on the lake and songs like "Bucktown Bounce" by Johnny Wiggs. But he'd already told her he was from Missouri, so he tried to bluff.

"'I hate to see that evening sun go down/'Cause my baby done left this town,'" he half-sang.

"'St. Louis Blues'!"

"Yeah, we didn't have a receiver, but a friend of mine had a few songs on Edison cylinders. I didn't hear much more than them, though."

"Well, you live in a great music town now. It's all around you all the time."

"When did you come to New Orleans?"

"A couple of years ago. It took a while to break in here. I waitressed in the Quarter. Still do if I can't make ends meet."

"You're good. Better than most I've heard." He meant white women, but didn't say. "Why can't you make a living at it?"

As if she'd read his thoughts, she said, "It's tough being white and trying to sing the blues or jazz. Pat O'Brien's holds maybe thirty people. Down on the lake they like the black girls with their bands. Up in the Blue Room at the Roosevelt where blacks aren't allowed, I'd need a ticket to get in. And even if I had one, this dress wouldn't do."

She smiled at him, and he felt something click with her. They were from the same side of the tracks, even if she hadn't started out on a cattle ranch or in Bucktown. "I'd like to see you again," he said. "Maybe have dinner."

"Maybe?"

He laughed. "Okay. "Let's have dinner. Say tomorrow."

"What about your card games?"

"They don't start until later. Sometimes they go on past dawn. Tonight's an exception."

"I'm busy tomorrow night. But call me before you go to bed the next morning. I'd like to see you in the daylight."

In the cab, after he'd dropped her off at her apartment on Ursulines, he realized he hadn't asked her about the Carollas.

He knocked on the side door of Maylie's at ten to two. A large man with red hair opened it and stared at him coldly.

"I'm a friend of the fat man's," he said.

When he went in he saw three or four men at the bar and another half dozen at a table in the middle of the room. The fat man called him over. "Hey, Kid," he said. "Welcome to the big time." He could feel all the eyes coming at him in pairs and he met them without blinking, standing by the fat man's chair, the breeze from the fan overhead ruffling his hair. The men at the bar came over and sat down along with the large doorkeeper. Clay made twelve.

By 6.00 a.m. he was alone with three others. The fat man had dropped out early, but was watching from the bar. The doorkeeper was still in the game as were a sharply-dressed Italian without a name and a Cajun they called Snap Beans. The doorkeeper was low man and the Italian had the most money in front of him, maybe four hundred dollars. Clay and the Cajun had roughly two hundred each. The night's play had shown him he'd be there with the Italian at the end. First to go, unsurprisingly, was the doorkeeper, his face as red as his hair when he lost to Snap Bean's higher pair, betting everything on two tens. His colour spoke for him because he said nothing as he stood up and walked away from the table, but Clay could see the neck vein pulsing violently above his collar.

Snap Beans was more relaxed. He'd bet with a casual ease that made him difficult to read, and he smiled the same smile whether he won or lost. When the Italian folded Clay decided he'd have to push him soon. He had an eight of hearts down and was dealt another heart by the Cajun, the four. Snap Beans had an ace of clubs showing. Clay bet ten dollars against the Ace. He was immediately raised another ten. Two aces? Maybe. But at this stage of the game with more on the line, another high card was more likely. Clay called and a second heart came up, this time the two. Snap Beans got a five of spades and bet twenty to bolster his claim of the two aces. He knew Clay at the most had a low pair. The flush wasn't even on the table at this point. Clay made the call. When the three of hearts appeared for him he looked at it as if it were just another card, his thumbs and fingertips barely resting on the table. The Cajun's fourth card was the nine of diamonds. After a minute or so Clay checked.

Snap Beans smiled. "You askin' for too much, Kid. Too much. It time to take you down."

There had never been any limit on the bets, but the highest so far had been the eighty dollars that the fat man had matched and then lost. Now Snap Beans said, "you stayed with wit' me this far. Let's see what you made of." He counted off the bills in front of him. Clay was expecting him to put everything in the pot. That's what you did at this stage of the game with a certain high pair against a possible flush draw. But the Cajun put down three fifties. It meant he didn't have the ace in the hole.

Clay looked across at him for a long time, long enough for Snap Beans to say impatiently, "C'mon Kid. You ain't afraid to go for that flush, are you."

"How much you got left?'

Snap Beans blinked and checked his cash. "One hundr'd and twenty-five."

"Let's make it all of that." He heard the fat man let out a whistle.

The Cajun pursed his lips, went to reach for his bottle of Jax, then withdrew his fingers quickly. But he knew he'd given himself away. "Okay," he said. "Maybe I don't got that ace, but I think you got nothin' but the flush to hope for. And that's a long enough shot for me."

Clay smiled. Normally he wouldn't reply, but a few well-chosen words would bring the Cajun home. "A pair of deuces beats what you're showing now," he said.

"*Merde a votre mère*," Snap Beans cried and threw his bills down on the table. "Call!"

He'd learned never to expect anything at all. He knew he could play with these men, and they knew it too. One hand wouldn't make any difference. Unless he won, of course. Then it would make all the difference in this small world. When the fifth heart didn't show he let out a barely perceptible sigh because it wasn't the flush, and that's what he was supposed to do. But he was staring at the eight of spades. Snap Beans let out a whoop of delight as another five came up for him.

"I gonna break you now, boy." He turned to the Italian. "Lend me five hundred, man. I give you that and half the pot."

The man had kept a blank look on his face through this whole exchange, but Clay knew he'd been watching carefully. "Tell you what," he said to the two of them. "It's late. Let's do something I learned on the levee upriver." He pointed at the Italian. "He gets dealt five new cards, and decides once he's seen them if he bets his pot against me too. That's both your hands against mine." In fact, he'd seen a bunkhouse cowboy try this back on the ranch and lose his shirt. He'd called it "Twenty Fingers" and that's what Clay called it now, smiling at the Italian as if he were giving away a bargain.

The man's blank expression didn't change, but Clay saw something in his eyes behind the self-control, an unquestioned conviction he wasn't meant to lose a one-on-one confrontation with any man. Clay was his opponent now. Snap Beans didn't matter at all. "Deal," he told the Cajun.

Clay watched a King-Jack-seven-seven turn up. The Italian counted his money and said matter-of-factly, "Four hundred and eighty dollars." He took a billfold from his pocket and placed another twenty on the table. "Make it an even five hundred."

It was that assurance that convinced Clay he had the man beat. What the Italian had done was to create a situation he couldn't back away from, wouldn't have done so even if he hadn't a pair of sevens showing. He was too used to winning, and not because he was a good poker player. He was that, but the money didn't matter to him. What did matter wasn't visible and had a darkness all its own. For some reason it made Clay think of the Mexican bandit leader in his father's story.

"Call," he said quietly, and turned over his eight.

Snap Beans looked expectedly at his partner. “I just got the fives. Tell me you got more than those sevens, man.” The Italian didn’t reply. There was no sweat on the forehead, no vein in the neck. He just turned over a Queen and gave Clay a glance that was already full of memory. Then he said evenly, “I knew a man once whose last breath was a sigh.”

The fat man called out, “The beer’s on me, Kid.”

They saw one another a couple of times a week. After their first breakfast in Jackson Square they made a habit of Sunday morning coffee at a small café below the Pontalba apartments, “the oldest rented apartments in the U.S.A.” she told him.” In mid-week he’d go down to Pat O’Brien’s and listen to her sing. She didn’t know how long Pat would keep her on, but he’d promised to find her work in another club if she ever wanted to move. They didn’t sleep together right away. Clay didn’t ask her how she felt, but he liked having a relationship with a woman where sex wasn’t the primary bond and conversation came easily about most things. When they did make love for the first time, it happened unexpectedly. She’d taken him up to City Park on a Sunday afternoon where they’d wandered under the rows of oaks along the bayou.

“There was an old plantation here,” she said, “where they fought duels until they were banned. The legend is there’s more than one body in the bayou.”

“Now why would that be? People who fought duels were all concerned with honor and most of them were probably pretty high class. They’d be buried in some fancy tomb with lots of family flowers around.”

“Oh Clay, that’s not very romantic. Don’t you think some of those men were gamblers like you who got in a quarrel over cards or something?”

“Fights like that are settled at the table,” he said.

She took his hands and swung him around under the tree branches until they fell and rolled together on the bayou bank, sheltered by the oak trunks and high grasses. He kissed her as he had before but felt her open to him under the slivers of bright sky that reminded him of Montana. The smell of trumpet creepers and passion vines was different, though, from that of the purple-pink bitteroot and Indian Paint Brush in the mountain meadows. In Bucktown he’d mounted women like mares in heat and ridden

them until they cried out words and sounds they weren't paid to utter. There were some he'd liked better than others, but their fucking had always seemed like a struggle for survival. Belle had been different, of course, but even she hadn't given him the sense of peace he had in this moment as he moved inside Margot.

"I think I love you, Kid," she said softly.

"That's good." He didn't say he liked the fact she wasn't altogether sure, but he knew he needed to add something. "I love being here with you too." He kissed her forehead and stared out over the blades of carpetgrass, what he'd heard Creoles call *petit gazon*.

If she was disappointed she didn't show it, and he was relieved when she smacked his cheek lightly and said, "Why sir, I do believe you've taken advantage of me."

"Yeah, and I'd like to do it again." As he ran his fingers across her breasts her scent was tinged with bitterroot.

After that day she assumed they were a couple. Pat O'Brien did too. "Better get the Carolla thing straightened out, Kid."

He'd forgotten all about the initial warning, and this second one bothered him more than a little because it was like he needed permission to take something he already had, something he could see, despite his wish to emphasize his own role, had been given to him willingly.

That same night when she'd finished her set at the club, they went for a drink on Royal Street. She'd coiled her hair into a chignon and some dark strands were hanging down the nape of her neck like beauty lines that could never be held in check. He decided the best thing would be to ask her directly.

"Margot, Pat tells me I should be concerned about the Carolla family. Why's that?"

She stiffened, looked down at the table, back up at him, then took a swallow of gin and tonic. Just like a tell, he thought. Here comes the bluff.

"Pat's an old busybody," she said. One of Carolla's sons tried to pick me up last year. I told him I wasn't interested and he left me alone."

"Why weren't you interested?"

"Oh because he expected me to surrender to his charms." She paused. "And his money."

"He came on too strong?"

"Not so anyone else would notice. He just leaned in close and let me know he thought I was for sale."

"And that was that?"

"Yes, of course. You know I may be for rent to a selected few, but not for sale." She laughed and stirred her drink with the twizzle stick. The bubbles rose and burst on the surface.

He didn't believe her, but it was what she wanted to give him, and for now he wouldn't get any further. He'd look around on his own because he didn't want a Carolla heavy turning up at his door one day, and he especially didn't want any interference with his game. The Carollas ruled the slots and the race tracks, and had a firm grip on the poker rooms at the Pontchartrain resorts, but he'd seen no evidence of their interest in backroom tables where maybe a thousand dollars changed hands in a night, and he wanted to keep it that way.

"Okay," he said. "I didn't think you were a gangster's moll."

She gave him a big smile and twisted the loose strands of hair until her finger whitened.

When he told Pat about their conversation, the bar-owner replied, "Let's just say the Carolla boys don't stop until they get what they want."

"Fuck that," he said.

"You're too right. The old man, Sam, brought up his sons on booze and broads, plus a .38 in his back pocket. Both of them were hitting on Margot."

"What did she do about it?"

"Here? She told them to get lost. But I heard she was with Carlo, the oldest, down at Milneburg's more than a few times. Like I said, you want to be careful. She's a nice girl, but in over her head with the dagos."

Margot was with him now. He didn't want to live with her, but he didn't want her going out with anyone else either. When he told her a few days later that he wasn't ready to settle down, but there were no other women, she laughed and said, "I guess that's almost a proposal coming from you." Then she kissed him and sang, "'I been lookin' for a man I can call my own.' Ma Rainey says it better than me."

The fat man brought him into a few other games before he became known enough to branch out on his own. He got a larger room in a sturdy stilt-house right on the water, and every morning he looked out at the sun rising over the lake and the flocks of geese, ducks, and herons gathered there. He'd seen thousands of vireos fly over the ranch heading for Canada, but he wasn't prepared for the millions of purple martins that descended on the lake in the fall on their way south. They blanketed the water then wheeled upward and dove down like the World War fighter aces he'd seen in movie houses, their throaty cries drowning out the jetty sounds beneath his window. He wondered how they could bunch up like they did and never collide. There were many boats out there besides the shrimpers and steamers. Deep-sea fishers with small crews were constantly heading out to the Gulf at dawn and returning at dusk. Sportsmen in flat-bottomed skiffs went after speckled trout that lay on the bottom off the far shore. Never mind the birds crashing, he'd heard of an accident at the beginning of the century when the captain of a tug had collapsed at the wheel and his boat had pulled several barges in such a tight circle that they capsized in front of an inbound frigate. Thirty men had died and the tug captain had served some time for manslaughter.

He went up to the city a few times and wandered through the French Quarter. It seemed too exotic and too civilized for him yet, though he liked the sense of confidence it gave him. If Bucktown smelled of the swamps and sweat, the odor here was sweeter and spoke of a more relaxed way of dealing with the world. In Bucktown men and women grabbed one another and held on as if there were no tomorrow. Yesterday was long gone and the present as precarious as the poorer stilt-houses in a storm. The Quarter people, on the other hand, he imagined embracing with an equal trust in the two-hundred-year weight of the cathedral and the temptations of Bourbon Street. He didn't believe in the church, and temptation was something he could handle. But he liked the promise of tomorrow here, and would move in when he was ready.

Meanwhile he was still a Bucktown lodger, and held on to what was available. Belle LaCour ran one of the better brothels in the district. Its reputation was based on the choiceness of the girls and Belle's no-nonsense approach to her business. She didn't tolerate drunkenness or loutish behaviour, and, without sentiment, she changed over the

girls periodically, the ones let go usually ending up in other local houses. Favourites would be kept on longer, but even they would leave in the end. The most Belle would do was recommend them to places in the Quarter. The first time Clay went to *La Rivière Perdu* he slept with a slender blonde who was very efficient in her movements and asked him no questions, not where he was from or what he did for a living. He liked that, and returned to her more than once, though she told him the Madam preferred it better if clients didn't become attached.

Belle greeted everyone at the door, looking newcomers up and down like children who would be allowed into her playground only if they behaved themselves.

"You're the card player," she said to Clay, the third time he turned up.

She was a tall, full-bodied mulatto with jet-black tresses and eyes that spoke of times and places off the usual map of experience. Probably in her mid-thirties, he thought, but someone who wore her physical age lightly despite the spidery lines near the outside corner of each eye. When she smiled at him, it was a warning as well as a welcome. 'Don't ever take me for granted,' the smile said, and he knew she was the kind of player who'd wait patiently for the slightest mistake then strike without mercy. You'd have to have a lot of cash and nerve to stay with Belle. But he was attracted to her from the beginning, and wondered how much she'd cost, if indeed she slept with her customers. Even if that price could be negotiated, there'd be the matter of keeping steady from first deal to last call, and a sense that the game wouldn't be over even if he won. But if nerve was what was required he wouldn't come up short. So when she spoke to him about finding another girl after his third visit to the blonde, he said, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You got something on your mind, Kid, I can listen without a pick-me-up." The ruby on her right ring finger smoldered in the lamplight. Her eyes wouldn't release him into any comfortable territory of table talk or his usual sense of the odds. But at this point he'd only lose if he backed off.

"Do you ever go upstairs?" he asked.

Her stillness gave nothing away because it was like a quiet pool of water that might be rippled by a passing wind but never stirred to its depths except on its own terms. She studied him for a few moments as if she might see who he really was rather than a young man not that long out of his teens who was over-reaching himself purely for reasons of

sexual greed. “My mask is a mask,” he’d once said in the bunkhouse, and he wasn’t sure what she could see as he looked back at her, not knowing how to let go a little of his steely self-control when meeting the gaze of a true opponent. He wanted her to trust him, at least for the time being, but he knew she didn’t stay on top of her game that way. Just when he was sure she was about to dismiss him with a cutting remark, she said, “That depends.”

“On what, Belle?” He spoke her name without thinking, but felt it had been drawn from him like desire and that he had to trust her to say it. He had nothing else in his hand.

Then an almost imperceptible flicker of response passed over her face that he would never have glimpsed if he weren’t open to the slightest shift in currents when the second card had been dealt. But unlike the usually predictable gamblers, she gave him no further access to what lay beneath the surface ripple, so he waited without knowing at all what her next move would be.

When it came he was completely unprepared. “On how much you can give me,” she said. He knew all the cash in the world wouldn’t buy what she meant.

One afternoon he sat in the Jackson Square sun reading the sports pages in the *Times Picayune*. A major league ballplayer had been killed the day before when he’d been hit in the head by a pitch. The report said the ball had been smeared with tobacco juice and dirt, making it hard to see in the twilight towards the end of the game. The batter hadn’t moved and when the ball struck him the sound was so loud the pitcher thought it had hit the end of the bat. He’d run in, picked up the ball, and thrown it to first base.

“Shit,” Clay thought, “what a way to go.” A shadow fell across the page, and he looked up and saw the fat man.

“How goes it, Kid?”

Clay hadn’t seen him since Bucktown five years ago, but he hadn’t put on any weight, just carried his poundage as he had back then in a loose-fitting suit that was now crisply pressed and accompanied by a patterned tie and silver clasp.

Clay was genuinely glad to see him. The fat man had started him off in Bucktown, and hadn’t tried to hang on to his company when he’d begun to make it on his own. After a few months, they’d lost touch, and although Clay had seen him around, they hadn’t

done more than nod in a friendly way in sawdust-floor bars or shrimp and crawfish joints. They talked a bit about the ballplayer and the about life in the Quarter. The fat man lived over on Barracks Street, but he spent a lot of his time in the Garden District and uptown.

"That's where the action is, Kid. Lot of money changes hands. Usually in private clubs or homes. Gentlemen's games, you know."

"They let you play?" He laughed. The answer to his question was in the fat man's snappy outfit.

"Now and again. But I'm more of an arranger of games. I bring people together and watch them go after one another."

"For a price, of course."

"Of course, Kid. A piece of that action goes a long way. I usually get ten per cent of the winnings. On a good night they're playing for five grand or more."

Clay knew then this meeting was no accident. His own reputation was high enough in the Quarter that he could be easily found. "How long have you been on Barracks Street?" he asked.

"About a year. Before that I was around the corner on Esplanade."

"Funny we've never run into one another."

The fat man sat silently for a few moments. Then he said, "To be honest, Kid, I've been waiting."

"For what?"

"For the right time. And how to fit you into it."

"I'm listening."

"I've been keeping tabs on you since Bucktown. You were as good as anyone I'd ever seen back then, and I know from reports around here that you're the best stud player in the Quarter and probably the whole city. And that's saying a lot." He asked a passing waiter for a coffee and beignet. "But for reasons beyond your control, you're stuck at a certain level. Of opponents, I mean. You're making a comfortable living, but you can do better, much better."

"And you can help me?"

"Yes, I can. I've got contacts with some rich men who like to play poker for big stakes. You can beat them, though one or two have real talent. If you do that for awhile,

you can hit the really big time where you play the best not only in Lousiana but in the country. Men like Baudry Cain."

Clay had been very aware of Cain since he'd left Bucktown. He was from Savannah, but played all over the South and only at reserved tables in swanky hotels and clubs. The story was he'd never lost a big game in the last fifteen years. He'd gutted every challenger who'd come his way, and they were never the same players afterwards.

"I know what you're thinking, Kid. He's getting old. Must be sixty now, if a day. But you've got to be invited to play with him, and you can only get that invitation by going about things in the right way. I can be the guide along that way if you want." The coffee and beignet came and Clay thought things over as the fat man sipped and chewed without hurry. This was the backer he'd been waiting for. He wanted Cain alright, but he wanted to arrive at his table with a reputation that would give the old man pause. That meant winning elsewhere in the city and in circles Cain would respect. If the fat man could show him the trail up, he'd be foolish not to go with him. "Okay," he said. "But at the first game I'm a guest. The pot's all mine. After that we'll discuss percentages."

"That's fine with me, Kid. I don't carry contracts in my pocket. We'll just do it like we did in Bucktown. I'll let you know when I've arranged something. He took three fifties from his wallet. "No offense, but put this toward some shirts and pants, and a replacement for that leather jacket. Nothing too fancy, just so they know you've got some weight."

As the fat man stood up to leave, Clay said, "I never did get your name."

"Felix. Felix Corby."

They shook hands. "Uptown, how do you want them to call you?"

Clay thought about where he'd come from. Texas, Montana, then a riverbank outside St. Louis where the old black man had given his start. That's where he'd told a steamboat stranger he'd been born. "Tell them I'm Clay Boon," he said. Then he chuckled. "The Levee Kid. That'll unsettle them, despite the new clothes."

Belle didn't replace the blonde or other girls. Maybe once a week she'd take him upstairs to her private boudoir on the top floor. They'd hold gently then fiercely to one another in a bed with a wrought-iron headboard and a feather mattress that seemed like

one long pillow compared to the more basic affairs in the rooms below. Her body was long too, and she used it to keep him at a distance even as she pleasured him and seemed pleased by his attentions. He couldn't tell how much she was truly aroused and how much of her response was habit, even though she would accept no money from him and told him he was a good lover. He could get only as close as she would allow, and her breasts and the space between her legs were diversions from the rest of her whose past remained in shadow and whose present was not given to him alone. At first he thought she simply wasn't going to trust a white man with more than her body. Then he realized how complex such trust would be because her light-brown colour likely meant there'd been a forced sexual union somewhere in her background. He knew she had other men and that he, while probably the youngest, was no more or less special to her. But he had no idea whether these others talked about themselves as he found himself doing in her bed. She said little as he gave her unembellished descriptions of the Abilene whorehouse, the death of his mother, and the arrival of his father. When he provided more detail in the story of the seven gunfighters and the Mexican village, she pronounced them "strong men, and lonely ones." He didn't find it hard to go into the past with her, and doing so eased the dark image in the steamboat mirror that still disturbed him from time to time when he closed his eyes.

"Let's go to my room once in awhile," he said one night as they lay quietly after the sex or love-making, whatever the mixture of flesh and managing of emotions added up to.

"No, Clay," she replied. "You don't need me there."

She said this matter-of-factly without emphasis on any word, so he wasn't sure if she was referring to his desire or her particular presence. Either way it was a refusal, and as she didn't elaborate he was left to puzzle it out.

His card-playing interested her, and she did probe him about poker and those who sat down at the tables. "What is it you want from them?" she asked.

He laughed. "Everything they've got."

"That's not the same as everything you don't have. You know that, don't you?"

It had never been put to him that way before. He wanted to be the best poker player there was because it seemed the only thing he could do that set him apart from other men.

His father had been very fast with his .45, though he hadn't had to play clap-your-hands with Reese. Boon had looked his enemies in the eye and, using the one weapon he had, he'd beaten them. That's all he was trying to do now, sit with the hammer pulled back on a high card or pair waiting for his opponents to move. But Belle's question bothered him because he knew the world had stayed young while his father aged. He was now an old man on a Montana ranch whose pistol was in the bottom of a trunk somewhere. Would that happen with the cards as well? Would he be too slow one day to swiftly calculate the odds or remember what was already out in different hands around a table? What wouldn't he *have* then? He shook his head to clear away the threat, but she took it as an answer.

"I think you do know," she said. "You just have to discover what you're missing so far."

He leaned over and placed his hand on her warm belly. Her eyes were closed. "Belle," he said, "I promise if I find out I'll let you know."

Later, in the darkness, he told her about killing the easterner.

"How did you feel?" she asked.

It was hard to say what he hadn't told his father at the time. "Like the cards didn't matter."

"So you made them matter," she said. "You…" but his mouth was already on hers.

Felix was true to his word. A week after their meeting he contacted Clay to let him know about a game over on First Street in the Garden District.

"This is a big step up," he told Margot. "But I've got to play it slow and friendly. I don't want to piss these guys off. If it works out I could be on my way."

"That's good, Kid. But how much can you lose?"

"The buy-in's a thousand bucks, but Felix is covering it. Anything I win on the first night is all mine. After that he gets a ten per cent cut. And baby, I'm not going to lose."

"I'll be at the club that night. If you cash in early we can celebrate."

"It doesn't get started until ten. You'll have to take a cab home."

She didn't have anything else to say, and in the few days leading up to the game she was more quiet than usual." What's wrong?" he finally asked her.

"Do you ever think about going home, to St. Louis, I mean? I had a dream about Cincinnati last night. My life there seems so far away."

He stayed away from her question. "Maybe you should go for a visit sometime."

"There's no one back there I keep in touch with except a friend from school. What about you? You never talk about your relatives back home."

He wondered if the old black man was still walking the levee.

The homes in the Garden District were huge, built, he'd heard, from money out of the slave trade, cotton, and banking. There were big columns on the porches of most of them that you could see if you peered through the cast-iron fences with their cornstalk patterns. Felix had told him the game was in a Shotgun-style mansion, so named because the rooms ran in a straight line. You could stand at one end of the house and fire a gun at the other end without hitting anything. Not just a rifle or pistol but a scattergun, which emphasized that the houses weren't just long but wide too.

When he knocked the door was opened by a negro in a white suit, who smiled and said "This way, sir." Clay followed him through a high-ceilinged hallway where a chandelier the size of a boulder hung from a gold chain and paintings of bayous and brightly-coloured birds covered the walls. A grey-haired white woman with a lined face nodded at him as she passed.

"That be the Missus," the negro whispered. "If she know who you are, she stop and say 'good evening.' If you strange, she keep going just like that."

They entered a large room where a group of men stood around a large polished table. They all had drinks in their hands, including Felix whose black suit had thin grey stripes that made Clay think of a convict's garb.

"What'll you have, sir?" The negro gestured to the bar along the side wall.

"Mineral water with a little ice and lemon." He walked up to Felix who put a hand on his shoulder and introduced him to the others.

"Gentlemen, this is Clay Boon, the Levee Kid."

Felix looked good enough, but the six men he faced wore suits that fit them like fine leather gloves. Their ox-blood loafers or low-cut black boots, he knew, had been polished to their dazzling shine by servants like the one who was now handing him his drink.

Their faces were reddened by sun and liquor, and their soft bellies pushed over their belt-lines like the udders of milk-cows on the Montana ranch. But their eyes were hard in a way that reminded him of where their money came from. “Thanks,” he said to the negro who didn’t look at him as he took the glass.

One of them stepped forward, an elderly man with dyed hair, and offered his hand. “I’m Douglas Chalmers,” he announced, as if speaking to a crowd. “Felix tells me you’re quite the poker player.”

Clay smiled. “He tells me you host quite a game, Mr. Chalmers.”

“Oh, Douglas, please. You’re among friends.” He turned to the others. “At least for now.” They all laughed heartily and came forward to shake his hand. One of them called him “Mr. Levee,” and Clay couldn’t tell if he was joking.

“Shall we?” Chalmers said, and they sat around the table, Clay next to his host. Felix took a stool at the bar. “You keep an eye on that liquor, Felix, we’ll look after your boy here.” Chalmers pulled a wad of bills from his jacket pocket. “The game is stud poker, gentlemen. The buy-in is one thousand dollars.”

His new pants, shirt, jacket, and shoes had cost two hundred, but even if they’d been more he would have remained casually dressed in this crowd as he wasn’t wearing a tie and his cuff-links were made of brass. He put his money down and waited for the first deal.

Over the next four or five hours he played as he always did when he wanted at least a second invitation to a table. He won more than he lost but not enough to discourage betting against him, and occasionally he’d fold when he knew the pot was his just to encourage a flagging adversary. They all drank heavily though it was clear they could hold their liquor, and except for one man the booze didn’t seem to affect their judgment. He stuck to mineral water and took some ribbing for it, but for the most part the table talk was about Louisiana politics.

“I hear that Long boy from up Winnfield way is considering running for governor,” said one man who had oil connections.

“I understand your concern, James. He’s been after your company like a pit bull on a bone. Unfair business practices, isn’t it?” Chalmers lit a cigar and tossed the match over his shoulder. Clay watched the negro pick it up.

"Not only that. He turned the Railroad Commission against us and now he's chairman of the Public Service Commission. God knows what he's got up his sleeve. Governor! By God, he'd destroy this state!"

"But don't you admire that white linen suit of his, James. Very distinguished."

"Damn him and damn his suit," another man said. "He don't support the Klan."

"What about you, Kid," Chalmers asked. "Are you a friend of Mr. Long?"

"I'll play with most men," Clay replied, and bet fifty dollars on a pair of tens showing.

Chalmers looked down at his cards and folded his hand. "Yes, I should think you would," he said archly.

In the end it wasn't a matter of cleaning them all out, even if he'd wanted to. He was up a few thousand, but they had more than that left in their billfolds and losing to him wasn't something they added up in bankbook numbers. He realized there had been more at stake back in the bunkhouse in Montana. Ernie and Bill had brought everything they had to the table, except for a little tobacco and whiskey money to get them through the month. When they won a hand they were genuinely happy and it was hard not to be happy for them. Here it was all about the bragging rights of the moment, who'd bluffed whom, or who'd drawn a lucky pair on the final card. They loved turning over their hole card to reveal their bluffs. Most of them were decent players but they lost their edge by making it personal.

At four a.m. as the others stood up and stretched, talking of one for the road, and gathering up their cash, Chalmers said, "What do you say, Kid. I'll cut you for what's left in front of both of us. High card takes all."

Chalmers had maybe three thousand in neat piles. Felix said, "Now, Douglas." The others stopped their clean-up and looked at Clay.

"I've got nearly twice what you have. Let's make it even."

Chalmers misunderstood him. He counted his money carefully. "Thirty one hundred and twenty dollars," he said. "Match that."

"I know what I have. Fifty-eight hundred. You match it and we'll cut."

Chalmers flushed angrily. "You want me to throw in another twenty-seven hundred that wasn't even on the table?"

"Mr Chalmers, you're asking me to play a game we haven't been playing all night. It's not what I usually do, so it'll have to be worth my while." In the silence he could hear Felix breathing heavily. He knew the money wasn't important to Chalmers, but saving face was. He'd pushed the man far enough and didn't want to lose the opportunity of playing again. "Tell you what," he said. Since we can't agree, why don't we play one stud hand, my stash against yours. But we have side bets on each card, and there's no limit."

"Now that's a generous offer, Douglas," said the oil man. "I'd take him up on it."

Chalmers sat back and smiled. "You do have a way of turning things to my advantage, Kid. But I think you're better than Lady Luck with five cards. I'll keep my money and thank you for the lesson."

Later in the cab Felix said, "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"Here," he said, counting off some bills. "You earned your percentage early."

"You pushed him too far, Kid. These are proud men who don't like to be shown up."

"He didn't really want to cut with me, but he couldn't help himself. I gave him a choice. That's all he wanted, a little freedom. Just like Huey Long's working man."

One night Belle said, "Come for an early breakfast tomorrow. I'll take you for a drive after that."

"I didn't know you had a car."

"When I need one I do. Bring an overnight bag. It's quite a ways."

It was a blue Premier with a soft-top roof. "Whose is it?" he asked.

It belongs to a man who owes me some favours." When he smiled, she said, "Not those kinds of favours, honey. But the important question is can you drive?"

"Why don't you get us out of town," he said.

She took the wheel, and they followed the Mississippi up past Baton Rouge, turning west near Simmesport where the Red River joined the larger stream. He hadn't asked where they were headed, but when they stopped for lunch around noon, he said, "How much longer?"

"Another hour or two, Kid. You've been very patient. Why don't you drive now? I'll tell you when to slow down."

They came into Natchitoches from the east around three in the afternoon. The main street buildings shimmered in the heat, and the leaves on the oak trees barely moved in the warm breeze that came through the uplifted windscreen. "Here we are," she said. "The oldest settlement in Louisiana. Named after an Indian tribe in 1714."

"Is it home?" he asked.

"Yes, I was born here. Not in town but over there on the Cane River. She pointed to the south. In a way it was the first home for all of us."

"Who do you mean?"

" Us Creoles. It was a colony founded by CoinCoin. That's what we always called her. Her full name was Maria Thereze Coin Coin. She'd been a slave but married a Frenchman. They owned a plantation. There were lots of plantations here. We were the equals of the white planters. *Les gens de couleur libre*, the free people of colour. I'm sorry some of us kept slaves to prove it."

They drove south to where the pavement ended and followed the dirt road for several miles until it passed between two stone pillars and gave way to a smaller track that was relatively smooth and still wide enough for the car. As they passed a dilapidated wooden structure set back in the trees she said, "That's the Old House. It was the first building on the plantation. They cleared the land, built roads and fences, and grew cotton, tobacco, and indigo. The original walls were made of mud."

It reminded him of smaller ranch-houses in Montana, and he was surprised to learn that black settlers here weren't much different from white ones in the west. They'd started from scratch, counted on hard-won crops for survival, and probably fought off Indians every bit as tough as the Sioux and Blackfoot. As if reading his thoughts she said, "We were friends with the local tribes. There are Creoles today all over Louisiana descended from marriages between blacks, whites, and Indians."

They came through an alley of oaks and he saw a large two-story house, the lower level built of white brick and the upper one of wood. A balcony ran the length of the building and at the left side was a six-sided tower. "This one came later," Belle told him. "It's been owned by whites for a long time."

As they got out of the car the front door opened and an old, well-dressed woman came out, her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. “Hello, Miss Annie,” Belle said.

“Why Belle LaCour. How wonderful to see you.”

This is Clay, Miss Annie. I wanted him to see where I came from.”

He was deep in her world, and deeper into the past than he’d ever been before. She hadn’t prepared him for any of it, and he was wary of what he’d find. “C’mon, honey,” she said. “Miss Annie will take care of us.”

It rained heavily in the night, and he woke several times to hear the rain beating against the windows. In the morning, though, the sky was clear, and the fresh air held scents of what Belle told him were swamp rose and wild iris growing in Miss Annie’s garden. On the way to breakfast they passed through a room lined with books, and when he whistled at the sight, Belle said, “Years ago Miss Annie decided to save as much as she could of Cane River’s history. All these are about Creoles in Lousiana and quite a few about Natchitoches and this plantation. She went over to a shelf and picked out a large leather-covered book. Placing it on a wooden table, she began to turn some pages. “Look at this, Clay.”

He saw colour drawings of birds that were so life-like he felt he could reach out and stroke their feathers. He was struck by the exact expressions of the smaller ones and the way the larger ones, like the Turkey Buzzard and Golden Eagle, filled the white space. The artist must have studied them for years to know them so well.

“This is John James Audubon’s *Birds of America*,” she said. “You’ve heard of him, haven’t you? He was born in Haiti. His father was a French privateer and his mother a Spanish Creole. He traveled all over the country to make these beautiful pictures.”

He hadn’t heard of the artist, but he could see the drawings captured the birds in ways that photographs did not. For a moment he was jealous of the man’s ability, and he tried to laugh it off by saying, “How much did the birds pay him?” When she looked at him in disappointment, he felt foolish. Audubon was clearly one of the best at what he did, maybe *the* best. Belle was proud he was a Creole. That’s what mattered.

“Did he get a lot of attention?”

“Oh yes. He was very famous. His portrait hangs in the White House.”

She showed him the Brown Pelican. “That’s the state bird of Louisiana. “Let’s look up Missouri for you.” She took down another, smaller book and they found the artist’s detailed description of the bluebird’s range and habits. He wondered what Montana’s bird was, but Belle had closed the book.

Miss Annie plied Belle with questions while they ate grits and slices of fresh-baked bread and drank strong black coffee she told them came from Brazil. When Belle said she was in business in New Orleans, the old woman wanted to know all about it. Here we go, he thought, the end of the happy return to childhood. But Belle had obviously prepared a story ahead of time, and she told it now with great excitement. She had a gift shop, she said, in the Quarter, where she sold mementoes of New Orleans, everything from tablecloths to fancy painted oil lamps, greeting cards to pictures of Jackson Square and the cathedral. “In fact, I have something for you,” she said, and excused herself to go to her room and fetch it.

When she’d gone, Miss Annie asked him what he did for a living. Since he had no story at hand, he told her he played cards.

“Whist?” she said. “How can you make money doing that?”

“No, m’am. Poker.”

“You mean you gamble? Isn’t that illegal?”

“Not in private homes and clubs.” He got ready for the lecture.

“I knew a gambler once. He worked on the riverboats, probably doing what you do. He was a handsome man, and a good one, despite his calling. We were sweet on one another for awhile, but my father disapproved, so he drifted off on me.” She gave him a sly smile. “But I won’t disapprove of you, since Belle clearly doesn’t.” She poured him some more coffee. “Where did you meet her by the way?”

He couldn’t say the gift shop. What would he have been doing there? So he told her he’d seen Belle walking one morning in Jackson Square. The wind blew her hat off and he retrieved it for her. She was very attractive, and since there was no ring on her finger he invited her to lunch.

“A bit forward of you, wasn’t it?” There was no reproach in her tone, just curiosity. He thought about how they’d really met and his question about ‘upstairs.’

“Sometimes you have to take a chance.”

"You gamble," she said.

"Yes, you gamble."

Belle came back and unfolded a blue tablecloth filled with woven birds in flight or sitting on the branches of bushes and trees. "It's as close to Mr. Audubon as I could get," she said.

Miss Annie clapped her hands. "Thank you, dear. Is it from your shop?"

He could see Belle was happy to tell the truth. "No, Miss Annie, I bought it somewhere else in the Quarter."

After breakfast they went for a walk, and she steered him toward the river.

"A gift shop?" he said. "I guess it's an accurate description if you think about it."

She laughed lightly. "I thought you'd appreciate it. Besides it's better than poker. I'm sure she asked you about that."

He told her about the riverboat gambler.

"Why Miss Annie," she cried. "I do declare."

They strolled for half a mile or so above the sloping bank, and then she pointed to the ruins of a cottage on the edge of the water. "That's me," she said. "That's where I was a girl." It could have been sadness in her voice that he caught, but maybe she was just tired from the walk. They made their way down to the river.

The roof had collapsed and the window glass that remained in the frames was jagged and dirty, but he could see it had been a solid enough structure in its day. The walls were hewn timbers that had bleached with age, and there were knot-holes scattered along their lengths. A jet-black fox squirrel chattered at them from an overhanging oak. The opposite bank was covered in thick foliage, and the blue-gray water flowed swiftly under it.

"We'd swim out there for hours," she said. "Or it seemed like it. We actually had a lot of work to do in our garden and up in the fields behind the Big House. We had to hoe them and put in the indigo seed, then keep the weeds away. At harvest time we'd cut the indigo stalks and bundle them together. My mama and the other women would put them to soak in tubs of water so the colour would come out. It was a yellow-green like amber at first. We'd stir and stir it until it got blue and the indigo turned into mud at the bottom of the tubs. Then we'd take it out and dry it in tiny squares that we cut. You'll never guess how we got the dye from those squares."

"How?"

"We'd all pee in another big tub then throw the squares in along with some wood-ash. Then we poured in some water. When you put in the cloth it turned amber and stayed that way until it dried. Then it magically turned blue." She drew in a breath and let it out slowly. "I'll never forget the first time I saw that happen. It was like God had touched the cloth. My mama's hands stayed that colour too. When my sisters and I were older and she'd smack us for being bad, we joked about the blue hand of the Lord."

He couldn't help asking. "Didn't it smell?"

"Lots of ways to get rid of that. Miss Annie's tablecloth was in the car with us all the way from New Orleans. I didn't notice you complaining."

"Did she own the Big House?"

"Her family did, ever since the Civil War. But they always treated us kind. She was like an aunt to us when we were kids, and the door to that house was always open. Elsewhere wasn't necessarily like that."

She took him uphill behind the cabin to some weathered gravestones in a grove of oaks. Kneeling down she cleared away the mucky weeds in front of them, and he could see the carved inscription. *Antoine LaCour 1860-1900, Suzanne LaCour 1862-1900*.

"They died year I was born," he said.

"It was typhoid fever that took them just two months apart. My oldest sister raised the rest of us, and Miss Annie helped."

"When did you leave here, Belle?"

"When I was sixteen." She wiped the dirt from her fingers. "I've only been home once since then."

On the way back to the city she fell asleep. He drove steadily through a light rain, thinking about what he'd seen and heard. The past could hold you to it until you couldn't breathe, he thought. But he knew Belle's heart would always beat with the rhythm of what she could never leave behind.

He used some of his winnings to buy Margot a special gift, an amber necklace he'd seen in a jewelry store window in the Garden District. She opened the box between sets at Pat O'Brien's, and he thought she was going to cry as they stood by the bar and he put

it around her neck. But she held back the tears, kissed him, and said, “Thanks, Clay. It’s lovely.” Then he watched it shine in the soft stage light as she sang a Sippie Wallace tune, “You Never Can Tell,” all about love’s possibilities.

When she was finished for the night and they were walking back to her apartment, she fingered the necklace and said, “You should get yourself a special gift too. Not anything ordinary and useful, but something unusual.”

“I might do that.”

He knew of a place that sold old prints and second-hand books and went looking for photographs from the city’s past to frame and hang on his wall. There was a large collection and he chose half a dozen prints, including one of the Bucktown wharfs and another of jazz players on Bourbon Street at the turn of the century. While the clerk was wrapping them, his eyes roved over a line of books behind the service counter. The thick leatherbound volume jumped out at him. “How much for that one?” he asked, pointing.

“Oh, that’s very special, sir.” The clerk pulled it down. “Audubon was a great artist, and these are hand-tinted engravings of his work.”

“I’ve seen it before. How much?”

“I couldn’t let it go for less than three hundred dollars, sir.”

If the clerk was expecting him to blanch or make some excuse, he was disappointed. Clay handed him three bills plus a fifty for the prints. “Do you know what the state bird of Louisiana is?” he asked, but left before the surprised man could attempt an answer.

Margot was delighted with the prints, telling him they spruced his place up. But she was genuinely bewildered by the book. “Who’d have thought you’d be interested in the birds of America,” she said. “Or birds in general. What made you buy it?”

“I don’t know,” he lied. “Maybe it’s all those decks of cards with birds on the back.”

“You’ve got a deck with cars on the back, but you didn’t buy one.” She turned some pages. “Look at that golden eagle!”

He stayed with her that night and lay thinking as she slept about the Cane River Plantation. Five years ago, he’d learned Miss Annie had died and left Belle the Big House. “I’m giving up the brothel and going back there, Clay,” she told him. There was never any suggestion he go with her. She didn’t ask, and he would have said ‘No” if she had. Although she said she’d write when she’d settled, she never did, and soon after he’d

made his own plans to leave Bucktown. Now, gazing out the window into the darkness above Ursulines Street, he wondered how Belle had managed so far from the action she'd seemed hungry for at the time.

Felix arranged more games, some in the Garden District and some in the old Lafayette ward just to the north. The hotels there attracted out-of-towners, and that was how his reputation began to spread to other states. The visitors would tell friends who were coming to town about him and they'd ask for a game. Felix's percentage went up to fifteen, but Clay didn't mind. The games weren't all as rich as the first one with Chalmers, but he was bringing in a couple of thousand a month and sometimes more. He could have had a better apartment but liked his Iberville location. When he asked Margot if she wanted some help finding a new place she told him yes, but only when he decided to share the space with her. "No pressure," she said. "Just a reminder of what I'd prefer." So he put the cash in a bank vault on St. Charles, holding enough spending money in his pockets to keep him in good clothes and day-to-day needs. She let him buy her suppers out and take her to other jazz and blues clubs, but that was all. Once, after they'd made love, and talked for awhile about some songs she wanted to bring into her sets, she said it was about time Pat gave her a raise.

"I can help you out, baby."

She shook her head. "You mean like paying my rent?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I told you, Clay, I'm not for sale."

For almost a year he stayed on top of his game. No one in the city could touch him, which didn't mean they wouldn't sit down with him. If you could beat 'the Kid' you'd move into the big-money bracket, and everyone who played stud wanted to be there. But they were cautious with their betting, and wouldn't make any kind of move unless they were very sure. It wasn't real poker where taking chances was what made or broke you, sometimes at the wrong as well as the right time. He grew tired of the wealthy lawyers and bankers in the Garden District who'd begun to treat him as if he was an expensive bit of entertainment they'd hired for the night. Since they didn't want to lose money to an employee they put a pot limit on their games, and spent more time discussing business than in paying attention to the cards. Their cohorts at the Milneburg Resort down on the

lake weren't much better, except they drank more and became louder as the night went on. He didn't like to burn the old crowd he'd still meet at Lafitte's or the Napoleon House, so he didn't mind the limit there. The atmosphere was relaxed and the conversation easy, but they all wanted to know when he was going to play Baudry Cain.

"I hear he's avoiding New Orleans," said one. "Doesn't want to run into you, Kid."

"Yeah, he's an old man now. Can't go the distance," said another. "Just like sex, eh Kid. He may be a legend, but you got all those years on him."

Despite the praise, they were looking for some hint that the great game would happen before Cain really did get too old to tell a straight from a flush. Felix told them you couldn't go after Cain. He had to decide you were a threat to him before he'd play you, and that depended on a lot of things. Like whether the moneyed men you were beating wanted to see you taken down enough.

"What about Cain? Don't they want to see him gutted?" Clay asked.

"He's been around longer than they have. Besides, he comes from the true Old South. His father was a Georgia judge who had a huge tobacco plantation. Ran it like a courtroom, I hear tell. You got out of line, black or white, you got hard time. When the old man died suddenly, Baudry sold out to a tobacco company, but for a piece of the action. That's what he always has in the bank. He's never needed to play poker. It's not about the money."

"I guess that's fine if you can afford it."

"It's about the money not mattering even if you can't afford it. Ain't that right, Kid?" Felix talked too much, Clay thought. Like those players who couldn't keep their mouths shut at the table and tried to buy a hand with their patter. He didn't really need him anymore, except for the Cain arrangements.

"Whatever you say, Felix. Just as long as you can afford me." The fat man didn't reply when the others laughed. If the Kid beat Cain there'd be no need for percentages.

Margot knew what he was waiting for even though he never mentioned it himself. The word was out around the Quarter that Baudry Cain couldn't afford to keep ducking the Kid and that it would be the biggest game in town since Corbett had stopped O'Sullivan back in 1892. They wouldn't sell tickets. You couldn't even buy your way to the table. It would be invitation only, and far more exclusive than the Garden District and New

Orleans Country Club. But whenever it happened every gambler in the South would sit up and pay attention.

"If you win, what then?" she asked.

"Then I'm the best."

"Won't you be the target of every hotshot, the ones who'll be hungry like you are now?"

He wanted her to understand. "Listen Margot, I'm not just a hotshot. You know what it's like when you're in a song and you reach for that impossible note for the first time and you get it. And after that you know what's always there for you. Not just that note but every one that's ever been sung because you know if you have to you can reach all of them too. Well, I hit that note a long time ago. If Baudry Cain beats me he's a music man from another world."

"That's beautiful, Clay."

He'd surprised himself, not about the feeling but that he'd managed to say it. But if it was her singing that had given him the images, he'd been talking about himself, and he had no words now to lift her from the stage glow and include her in a different kind of light. When they made love after that, his hands were clumsy and his tongue on her body spoke only in the old way. He sensed she was holding back too, but not because she didn't have any words.

Felix found him at the Lafitte one night and beckoned to him in the middle of a hand. He wasn't holding anything worthwhile, so he folded and walked over to the bar. "Not that I was going to play it out," he said.

"Forget it, Kid. I just found out Baudry Cain's coming to town next month. He hasn't been here for almost five years, not since you took over, which means just one thing. He's interested in a game."

He signaled the barman who brought over a glass of mineral water with lemon and ice. "Well, if you're not going to celebrate, I am," Felix declared. "Two fingers, Charlie," he said, and waited patiently until the whiskey was set down in front of him. "Listen, Kid, he'll come to us. Not Cain himself, but we'll get word, don't you worry."

"I'm not worried, Felix."

"And I don't want you to be. You just think about the cards. I'll take care of everything before that."

"Who else will be there?"

"I don't know right now. It'll be a small table, maybe five guys including you. Cain will want a little side action to size you up, but not something that goes on too long."

"Do we get any say?"

"Tradition has it the challenger can invite one player. Got someone in mind?"

At first he couldn't think of anyone. He'd been alone at the tables for a long time. Every man in games that mattered had been an opponent, not a friend. Except for that old man on the St. Louis levee whose colour meant he could never be the best, but who hadn't let it stand in the way of his free advice. Well, if he couldn't go back that far with an invitation, he could still bring a ringer to what he knew would be an all-white dance. "What about Snap Beans?" he said. "That tricky Cajun's probably still around."

Felix gave him a puzzled look, but nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"Has it been set up yet?" Pat was wiping glasses behind the bar. Clay could see his bald patch in the mirror, and instinctively ran his hand over his own thick crop checking for any changes. He watched himself in the mirror and smiled tightly. He had all those years on Cain, but would they make a difference in the long run?

"Felix says we wait, but I think he's doing things behind the scenes."

"I hear the big money's gathering."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning a whole lot will be bet on you and Cain. The Carollas will handle most of it."

"That's got nothing to do with me."

"Don't be stupid, Kid. If those people want to have an influence, they will."

"Fix the game, in other words."

"If it's necessary. They're not going to put the same amount of cash on both of you. So they'll have to choose. If it can all happen naturally, fine. But once the big bets are made, if everything isn't going to plan…well, that's how it works."

"Not with me."

He was anxious to get it settled and found himself staying away from familiar tables because the buzz was all about him and Cain. Margot took his mind off things, but not enough. Besides, she seemed preoccupied with her own life away from him, and spent more time than usual down at the club rehearsing songs and breaking in a new piano player. He kept himself sharp by playing one-on-one against four other hands of Felix who could bet on all of them in the end. It gave Felix a tremendous advantage since he knew what each hole card was and could figure the odds of what Clay had down. The fat man didn't say much, just hummed to himself when he was thinking things over and grunted when Clay took a pot of matchsticks. "You're always out of tune when you're bluffing," Clay said.

"Only if you know the song, Kid."

One afternoon Felix phoned him and said, "It's on. I'll be right over," and hung up before Clay could ask for any details.

"The old Grand Hotel," he said when he arrived. "Two weeks from today. There's a second-floor suite reserved."

"It's definite? You heard from Cain himself?"

"You never hear from Cain himself, Kid. He has a Savannah lawyer make his calls. It's almost a legal agreement, for Christ's sake. You get to bring one player, like I said. He decides on two or three others out of a whole pile who just want to sit down with him. And you, of course. The buy-in's five thousand dollars."

"Did you find Snap-Beans yet?"

"Yeah, he's still in Bucktown. I've been waiting for things to be finalized."

"He'll be in the same places. I'll go down there myself."

"Do you want me to set up any games between now and then? Get the feel of the table again?" Felix was walking up and down the length of the room clapping his palms together. "This is it, Kid! The brass ring!"

"I'll play in Bucktown. Not too many will ask me about Cain down there."

Two days later he found Snap-Beans at Maylie's sipping on a Jax and taking money from a couple of tough boys in dirty undershirts. "Hey, Kid, you the one been asking around 'bout me?"

"Well, I did ask a friend to see if you were still playing in big games like this one."

One of the boys said with a surprisingly soft Irish lift, “Is there a problem friend?” Trouble was behind the accent.

Snap-beans laughed. “Relax, Tommy. The man you’re talkin’ to is just the best damn poker player in Nawlins. He got a right to crap on our game. Sit down, Kid.”

After he’d orderd a Jax and all three clicked bottles with him, Tommy said, “Let’s play a hand, ‘best damn poker player.’”

“Thanks. Maybe later. Right now I have to talk with a Cajun.”

“You boys give us some space, Tommy. We’ll catch up with you in a while.”

After they’d shuffled off, Snap-Beans turned to him and said. “It makes me nervous, Kid, questions being asked.” He laughed. “I owe the gov’ment too much money!”

“You know who Baudry Cain is, don’t you Snap?”

“Ev’ryone knows Cain. You got the Big Easy, Kid, and maybe even Looziana, but most would say Cain’s got the rest of the country.”

“He wants to play me.”

“He’s coming to town?”

“Yeah, in two weeks. The game’s at the old Grand. I get to invite a friend. A friend who can handle himself at the table.”

The Cajun cut the deck in front of him and turned over a Queen of Spades. “Too rich for this man’s blood, Kid.”

Clay took out his wallet. “This is your buy-in, Snap.” He placed five one-thousand dollar bills on the table. “For old times,” he said.

Snap-Beans stared at the money for a long time before he spoke. “Hell, Kid, I heard tell you was makin’ your way in the city, but I never guessed how well.”

“How much can you bring?”

“Maybe fifteen hundred.”

“I’ll have another two for you. Anything you win is yours.”

“You gonna let me take a hand from Baudry Cain?”

“I think you can do it on your own, Snap.”

“You want to play with those two now?” He nodded at the Irishmen at the bar.

“In an hour or two. I’m going for a walk.”

As he reached the door, he heard Snap call to him. “Hey, Kid, ‘*Laissez le bon temps rouler!’*

The Bucktown streets hadn’t changed. Pools of stagnant water held remnants of the last rain and the alleys between the board houses were filled with bits of old furniture and other scraps of daily lives. Along the levee the shrimp boats huddled against the slap of tide, and out on the lake the traffic rode with the prevailing current or plied against it, depending on where the goods were bound. He walked back from the main jetty and down the street toward the brothel. The sign was a bit grayer but the foot-high letters still made reference to Belle’s past. He remembered her leaning against a porch rail, her face turned to the morning sun that shone down with equal favour on Madams from Natchitoches and card players from Montana. Her scent came into his nostrils and her taste to his tongue, but stronger than these was the sight of her kneeling by a gravestone on the Cane River. He went inside where a tall black woman said, Welcome to *La Rivière Perdu*.”

He gave her fifty dollars. “I want you to paint your sign blue.”

It was as if he’d made a particular sexual request and she simply wanted to get the details right. “Light or dark blue?”

“Indigo,” he said. “Get someone to piss in the paint.”

She didn’t blink. “I know that colour, sir.”

He told Margot he needed to get out of town for a couple of days. “It’s the waiting,” he said. “I’m ready now.”

“Where will you go?”

“I think I’ll just get on a steamboat and head upriver. It’ll do me good to play with some strangers.”

He hadn’t meant anything by it, but her face fell, and he knew she was feeling rejected at the very time he should have needed her support. He held her and said when he got back they’d go back up to City Park and make love by the bayou again. She smiled and told him they’d bring a blanket this time and maybe a picnic lunch. “Okay,” he said, relieved she’d come around. When he left the next morning he headed for the bus station. He might have borrowed a car, but that would have required further explanations. The

trip to Natchitoches took six hours with the bus stopping to pick up and let off passengers, usually at gas stations or in front of general stores. When he got to the town he had a coffee and sandwich in a small café and asked the owner about transport to Cane River.

"Not much goes out there these days," she said."'Cept Augustine and his truck. He was in here a short while ago. I do believe he's over at the store for supplies."

In front of the hardware store was a dilapidated flatbed Ford with tires almost as shiny as bowling balls. A light-skinned black man came out the door carrying an axe handle and an open cardboard box filled with nails.

"Are you Augustine?" he asked.

"I am. Who might you be?"

"My name's Clay Boon. I'm a friend of Belle's."

He was grateful the man didn't ask him too much beyond where he'd come from that day. Clearly he worked for Belle, and it wouldn't do to reveal anything about her Bucktown past. They rode along in silence most of the way, the river water glinting through the trees, and the ruts of the road, deeper than before, forcing him to put his arm out the window and hug the door while his driver gripped the wheel tightly.

"It's the truck in the springtime mud that's done this," he heard the man say. "The carriages went over this in the old days and didn't leave much of a mark."

"You been here long?"

"I was born on the plantation."

They drove through the gates and past the Old House to the larger dwelling. As Clay stepped down from the truck she came out on the porch.

"Hello, Kid," she said, smiling broadly. "I thought you might come back one day."

"I met Augustine in town." He kicked one of the bald tires. "He's a good driver."

She smiled broadly. "He's good at a lot of things, my husband." Augustine chuckled and moved off toward the barn.

She'd known him when they were children. Both of their families lived by the riverbank. Not long after she went to New Orleans at sixteen he moved to Thibodaux, the county seat, where he went to college. After drifting around the state and several years on a shrimp boat in the Gulf, he eventually came back to Natchitoches and took a job in the

town library. When Belle returned home she went to the library to look up some Creole records. Antoine courted her for awhile, then asked her to marry. “It seemed the natural thing to do,” she said.

“Did you tell him about Bucktown?”

“It was the first thing I let him know. I might have fooled Miss Annie, but with him there was no use in pretending I was something I wasn’t.”

“I’m glad it worked out for you, Belle.” She was five years older but still a beautiful woman, her skin tight across her cheekbones, her hair with no streak of grey, and her eyes reflecting the happiness she’d obviously found. They sat in the main book-lined room with the late afternoon sun streaking the faded spines.

“What about you, Kid? How has New Orleans treated you?”

He told her about his life in the Quarter and pursuit of Baudry Cain. When he mentioned Snap Beans she clapped her hands together and laughed. “That sly Cajun,” she said. “He’s a good-time man, though. I’m glad you’re still loyal to Bucktown. But haven’t you found anyone to settle down with? No lucky girl to keep you off the streets?”

After he’d described Margot, emphasizing her talents at Pat O’Brien’s place, Belle said, “Sounds like she could be the one, Kid. Not only lovely to look at, but able to put bread on the table too. You want to have someone who can take care of herself, don’t you, not just sit around waiting for you to come home at all hours of the morning? Why don’t you live with her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe after I beat Cain.”

“And if you don’t? No, don’t answer that,” she added quickly. “I know you can’t afford to think about anything but winning.” She smoothed her skirts and asked him if he’d like some coffee. When he said yes, she went into the kitchen where he could hear the sounds of preparation and soon smelled the ground beans as the water bubbled in the percolator. She brought back two poured cups and some sweet-cakes. “Remember when you told me that after you’d killed that man in Montana the cards didn’t matter.”

“I remember.” The saloon and the sweaty smell of male aggression came back to him, not the perfume and shared secrets of her boudoir.

“Maybe love’s the only thing we can put up against death, Kid. I do know it’s not sex or money. You’ll have to find a woman who can convince you of that. Oh, not to the

point where you don't want to play, but enough so you can put things in a clear light. This girl might do it for you if you give her the chance."

There was no use trying to talk this through with her. He pointed to a bookshelf. "I found another copy of that, you know. The Audubon, I mean."

She was delighted, and after he'd said a little about the store where he'd bought it, he continued to keep the conversation away from the cards and Margot.

"Tell me what you do here, Belle. How do you make a living?"

"Augustine still works in the library, and I teach some children in the neighbourhood, not just their ABCs but things about who they are and where they come from. We'd make ends meet most of the time, but…"

"But what?"

"Well, Miss Annie left me the house, but she also left me some debts to go along with it. I took ownership only because I convinced the lawyers that I'd find ways to pay off what she owed."

"Didn't you have money from the sale of the brothel?"

She looked at him with amusement. "Oh Kid, I never owned that place. I just ran it. When I left I got to take my silk sheets and a few pieces from my wardrobe. I'd saved a few hundred dollars besides, and that's what got me started here. I don't know what I would have done if Antoine hadn't been waiting. When we get the debt paid off, there's things we want to do here."

He pointed to the shelves. "These books are worth a lot." When she shook her head, he said, "I don't mean sell them all, of course."

"You should know I couldn't do that, Kid. Besides, that's what I'm talking about."

"What do you mean?"

"Antoine and I want to make this a place where Creoles can come from all over and learn about their past. Turn it into a library that all kinds of students can use, and maybe even rebuild one of the cabins down by the river so youngsters can know what the old Cane River was like." She walked over to the windows and gazed out steadily for a minute or two like she could see something there he couldn't quite grasp.

"How much do you still owe?"

"Five thousand dollars. We've paid off a thousand since we got married four years back." She sighed, but then her face lit up like a sky of summer lightning. "Only twenty years to go! I'll never be a grandmother, but maybe I can be a Miss Annie to some children, and leave this place to them."

That evening she served the best the best jambalaya he'd ever tasted. "Must be the browned butter," he said.

"We call it *roux*. I learned to use it from the Cajuns, but my mama taught me just the right amount of cayenne and garlic."

Accepting another helping, he turned to Antoine. "You know if you could convince her to turn this place into a restaurant, you'd get more than students here."

"Yes, but we'd need half the county to drop by regularly just to break even. And most of them live to far away for that." Antoine smiled. "Belle's Place. It has a nice ring." Clay couldn't tell if he was making a joke about the brothel, then Antoine said, "That's what *La Rivière Perdu* should have been called. The Carollas didn't care for the name, but Belle insisted. "

"The Carollas owned the place?"

"Every pillow and mattress," she replied. "They came around sometimes to collect from the girls. And from me."

"They're a rough crew," he said, thinking about Margot.

"Yes, they are, Kid. You ever run into any of them at the tables?"

"No, I don't go to the places they control."

"Not any more," she said. "In Bucktown you just didn't know it."

When Antoine went out to close up the hen-house, Clay asked her directly. "Does he know about us, Belle?"

"If he didn't he's smart enough to figure out you're not here just because you admired me from afar. But, yes, I told him about you. I told him about everything that mattered to me. You're part of the better side of my life, Kid. Antoine knows that. He wouldn't be so accepting of the Carollas though." She bit her lower lip. "I had to be available for them, you know."

"You mean sleep with them?"

"I mean fuck them, or be fucked by them was more like it. Rough wasn't the word for it."

"Were they around when I was with you?"

"All the time, Kid. But they were night owls too, so you'd be at the tables when they dropped by."

"I'm sorry, Belle."

"What for? You couldn't have done anything. Besides, I told you, you mattered to me. They didn't. The difference meant a lot to me. Still does."

In the night he lay awake thinking about the place of the Carollas in his life. The two women he cared about most had been involved with them, and not prettily. If he hadn't figured out what Margot meant to him yet, he had no doubts about Belle.

He kissed her on both cheeks as he left the next morning, and she held him close while Antoine turned the flatbed around. "You come back when they're calling me Miss Belle," she said. "Don't keep yourself at a distance. And, Kid, give that girl a chance, whether you beat Baudry Cain or not."

In town, he shook Antoine's hand and wished him luck, staring after the truck when its dust had long settled on the road home. He crossed the main street and went into the bank. "You know Belle LaCour," he asked the manager.

"We're glad she and Antoine are here," the man said. "Natchitoches is a better place for it."

"When I get back to New Orleans I'm going to wire you some money for her account."

"Yes, sir. How much?"

"Five thousand dollars." The manager didn't visibly react to the sum. Maybe there was more business here than met the eye, Clay thought.

"Who shall I say it's from, sir?"

"My name's…" He saw her standing by the window, her past the clear road to her future. His own path was more uncertain and he was hurrying down it now, but he was grateful to have been with her along the way. "No, just tell her a distant admirer."

*

"Have a good time, Kid?" Felix was happy to see him. "There's a small party at the Grand later this week, just for the players and some others like me. It'll give you a chance to size up Cain."

"Good idea." Cain was more than a simple opponent, and anything he could read over a drink and casual conversation would be a help. He knew it would be the same for Cain.

"We'll get the ground rules straight. Who likes to sit where, what kind of breaks you can take, the usual."

"I'll tell Snap Beans."

"Better tell Margot this won't be the regular all-night session. It'll go on for a few days.

"All the way to the end."

"You can take him, Kid. I know you can."

He'd heard the words many times before, only now they had an urgency to them, if not a desperation, and he realized the fat man had a lot riding on the game too. "Like Snap says, Felix, 'Let's go pass a good time.'"

"See you Thursday. Incidentally, everyone calls him Mr. Cain until he gets to know them."

When he told Margot about the party, she said, "Boys only, I guess." They were in her apartment, and she had a record on, *Bedroom Blues*.

"That's the way it is, baby. You'd be bored by all the roosters strutting around and not crowing about their hens. Too much on their minds."

She punched him playfully. "I don't know," she said. "The barnyard's a big place." Then suddenly she was more serious. "What'll we do, Kid? If you win? I mean, do you just want to play stud poker for the rest of your life when there's nobody to go after?"

"Plenty of guys will be coming after me. I'll keep busy.

"I don't think it'll be the same. You'll need something else."

"Like?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like some different interests. 'I thinks about my man, all night long,'" she sang in time with Sippie.

He pulled her to him and kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose and her mouth. "What else do I need, baby, when I've got the cards and you."

She leaned back slightly and looked down where their bodies still touched. “But you don’t have me,” she whispered. “Not like you could.”

He had to deal with this quickly before it went any further. He couldn’t focus on her and the cards at the same time. “Listen, Margot, we’ll talk about things when it’s over. I promise. Maybe we’ll just get on a boat and head south to the islands for awhile. I’d like to see Cuba.” He kissed her forehead again and stared at the kitchen wall behind her.

“Okay, Kid. I’ll wait for that.” But he sensed she was telling him there was a limit to this game.

The Grand on St. Charles was only a few blocks from his apartment and just past the market he and Margot would go to on Saturday mornings. The hotel had opened about ten years before and catered to well-heeled visitors who would walk over to Broussard’s in the Quarter for supper or take a cab to Casamento’s on Magazine. He’d had a drink or two in the hotel bar but never played there, and as he climbed the wide staircase to the second floor he pondered Baudry Cain’s legendary taste for this kind of luxury. It would have been interesting to have played the old man in Maylie’s, but that was never going to happen, and he felt a pang of loss for Bucktown where he’d never get to play again once he’d beaten Cain. But Snap was going to be here. He ran his hand along the smooth mahogany railing. You could always bring Bucktown to the table one way or another.

The heavy red curtains were drawn in the suite even though it was still light outside. The men were gathered at the bar with its ornate mirror above the bottles. He could see himself growing larger as he approached. Felix stepped forward and led him into the crowd. Snap gave him a large smile, and one or two others nodded in a friendly way. A stocky man with swept-back gray hair gazed at him in the mirror then turned and extended his hand.

“I’m Baudry Cain.

“This is Clay Boon, Mr. Cain. The Levee Kid.”

“I hear you play a good stud game, Kid.”

“And I hear the same about you, Baudry.” Cain was unflappable he’d heard over and over again, so he didn’t expect any immediate reward for this familiarity. Nonetheless, he knew it hadn’t gone unnoticed by the rest of the men and would become part of the atmosphere that Cain couldn’t control.

"How's Bucktown these days? I notice, like me, you've brought a friend along."

So he'd done his homework. What else did he know? "There was a black man in St. Louis, Baudry, who knew all about the cards. I would have brought him, but you know how touchy the Grand can be."

"Why if Snap Beans can get in, I'm sure anyone can," Cain replied, though in a way that seemed to include the Cajun rather than turn him away. Snap kept the smile on his face and said, "Damn right, for sure."

Felix tried to lighten things up. "Who else'll be sitting down with you, Mr. Cain?"

"Why, these two gentlemen here. He introduced a Savannah banker and Mobile lawyer who were dressed like him and whose long cigars had a sweet aroma that went with the dark rum in the glasses they set down to shake Clay's hand. "Then there's Carlo. Where's he got to?" Just then the bathroom door opened and the Italian from Maylie's stepped out. "Kid, this is Carlo Carolla."

It was his turn to appear calm and not give anything away. There was a lot on the table. The man had threatened him all those years ago, and he'd been rough on Margot. That was enough to keep his attention. But the immediate question was, what was he doing here?

"I remember you, Kid," Carlo said in a gravelly voice. "Some game called Twenty Fingers, ain't that right, Snap?"

Clay shook the Italian's hand, his mind now racing. Whose side was Snap on? What did a crime family have to do personally with Baudry Cain? He kept his gaze level and his words steady. "Yeah, that was a good night for me."

"I'm glad you two know one another already," Cain said. "Carlo's a tough player, Kid. I'm impressed you took him down."

"It won't happen again." Carlo took a silver cigarette case from his pocket. "I'm sure of that." He opened the case and offered one to Clay.

"No thanks." He could see the Italian's yellowed finger tips. He hadn't been a chain smoker back then.

"I notice you haven't ordered a drink either, Kid. How about women? You can't be immune to them as well?"

"Give me a Jax," he said to the barman. He glanced at Felix who was looking down at his feet and over at Snap Beans who was still smiling but a little less easily now. The way it was working Carlo should step in with a remark that would bring Margot into it. But the Italian was just watching him with cold eyes, the cigarette tip glowing brighter as he inhaled. "No, I'm not immune, Baudry. But they don't distract me either."

"That's good to know, Kid. There shouldn't be any distractions at the table." He turned to Felix. "Why don't we say eight o'clock Saturday night. I trust you've got sleeping rooms booked in the hotel. And can we agree that breaks every five or six hours are allowed. I need my beauty rest, after all."

The banker and lawyer laughed dutifully and asked Cain if he thought the game would go on that long.

"Oh I think the Kid and I might be in it for some time. As for the rest of you, I'm sure you'll have time to decide about your commitments. Meanwhile, let's enjoy ourselves, boys. The night is young."

He had no desire to stay. The arrangements had been made, and he wanted no more small talk. The next time he met Cain there'd be only the cards between them. Besides, there were some serious questions he had for Felix and Snap. Within half an hour he signaled to the two of them and made his excuses.

"Only that one Jax and then some mineral water," Cain said. "I clearly can't count on alcohol wearing you down. I just hope what you meant what you said about women."

"See you on Saturday, Baudry." He nodded to the others. "Gentlemen." Carlo had his back to him, but their eyes met in the mirror, and the Italian raised his chin slightly.

Outside, as they walked along St. Charles, he pressed them hard.

"Have you been playing regularly with Carolla, Snap? And what about Cain? He seemed pretty familiar with you."

"Naw, Kid. I seen the dago around Bucktown after that night at Maylie's but we never sat down again. I was just as surprised as you. And Cain, it be the first time I see him in my life. He just foolin'' wit' us, that's all."

"What's Carolla doing there, Felix? And don't tell me you're surprised too."

"But I am, Kid. Baudry Cain's an aristocrat. You saw those two guys with him. High society. I don't get the connection unless…"

"Unless there's a lot of money on Cain, and he's there protecting the Carolla interest."

"Well, just helping Baudry out a little, I suppose. Taking some of the pressure off him from time to time, the way Snap will do for you."

"I want to get rid of him early. You got me, Snap? And Felix, find out about the betting line."

"What about the two others?"

"They're a side show. They won't last long. It'll be Cain and me, and when that happens it'll take some time. He'll use every trick in the book. He already tried a few with me tonight. He knew Carolla and I had played before. And that means he knows you were there, Snap. So your game is out in the open."

"What about yours, Kid?" the Cajun said.

"You haven't seen my game yet, Snap. Just like Cain."

He and Margot ate supper at the Napoleon House on Friday night, crawfish gumbo with fresh cornbread for him and *tasso* jambalaya for her. "This is so good," she said. "You should try some, Kid. I don't think you've had better."

"No, I'll pass. Gumbo's fine for me." That morning he'd gone down to his bank and wired the money for Belle. It wasn't like Natchitoches. The clerk had called over the manager because the amount was so large, but the man knew Clay had much more than that and was a valued customer. "We'll take care of it right away, sir." Clay thought of how the small river cabin would look when reconstructed. You can't bring back the past, he told himself as he left the bank, but you can put your hands on it in ways that matter. He knew he probably wouldn't see Belle again, but he'd always have the Audubon book whose leather cover was the colour of browned butter. That past of hers got mixed in others' lives like the ingredients of her jambalaya.

"I'm going to be gone for a few days, Margot. This game might go on until Tuesday or Wednesday."

"That long?"

"The old man won't fall easily. The first night we'll just feel one another out. It'll take Sunday and maybe part of Monday to finish the others off. Then Cain and I will get into the slugfest."

"Like Corbett and O'Sullivan."

"Yeah, and that lasted twenty-one rounds."

"You look happy, Kid."

"I guess I am. I've been waiting a long time for this. And," he added for his own benefit as much as for hers, "I don't have any doubts." He wasn't going to mention Carolla.

"I'm happy too. I want to tell you something, but I don't know if it should wait until after the game."

"Why wait? Especially if you're feeling good about it."

"Okay, then." She gave a deep sigh. "I'm pregnant." She was staring down at her plate when she said it, but then she raised her eyes to meet his, her face glowing, and a big smile, the biggest he'd ever seen, hitting him like a left hook from nowhere.

Involuntarily he raised his hand across his own mouth, then pinched his lips by bringing thumb and forefinger down sharply across each cheek. He stared at her, not knowing what to say.

Her smile faded as they sat there in silence. Finally he said, "How long have you known?"

"'That's wonderful news, Margot. You mean I'm going to be a poppa, Margot? Have you thought of any names, Margot?' Jesus!" she exclaimed, "I knew for certain the week you found out you were going to play Cain. But it was like you were the one who was pregnant. I've been waiting ever since for the right time. First you went away without telling me where, and since you got back you've been somewhat preoccupied to say the least."

"Margot, listen, it's just that…"

"Just that no time's the right time with you. You don't want anything to interfere with Baudry Cain, and when that's over you'll be the king of the hill with all that responsibility to other card players." Her voice shook with scorn and anger, but he knew the tears wouldn't be far behind.

"I don't want to fight about this, Margot. Can't we wait until next week. I promised you we'd head for Cuba. We can talk it over then."

"Don't you see?" She was sniffing now and wiping her nose. "There's nothing to talk over. If you want this baby you don't throw words around, you just hold on to me, goddamn it!" Her voice was very loud now and other customers were gawping.

He paid for the dinner and got her outside, but she wouldn't let him touch her. "It's too late for that, Kid. You know," she laughed at him mockingly, "you showed me your hand for the first time. I hope you don't do that with Cain!"

"Margot," he pleaded, worried about her but also about himself with just twenty-four hours to go. When he held out his hand he saw his fingers were trembling. They walked across Canal Street where she hailed a cab. "I don't want you to come with me," she said. "But that's really what you're telling *me*, isn't it?" When she was in the back seat, she rolled down the window. "Good luck, Kid. I hope you do beat Cain, for your sake. But don't expect me and our child to cheer from a distance when you do." He watched the red tail lights weave their way through the traffic until they disappeared.

He lay awake in the night listening to the sounds from Bourbon Street and watching his curtains blow in the hot breeze. Now, of all times, he had to deal with this. Why hadn't she saved the news for a few more days? What difference would it have made to her? She wasn't more than a month or two along. They would have had plenty of time to talk it out. Didn't she know he'd never push her to get rid of it? His own mother could have done that so easily, but she'd chosen to try and raise him. He'd encourage Margot to do the same thing. She wouldn't want for money. But how could he live his kind of life with a kid underfoot? His own father wouldn't have stuck around had he known, but just as he thought this he saw Margot having to walk away from her singing career. The image jolted him. Maybe she'd want to get rid of it. And didn't he have to give his father credit for what he did later on when he came back to Abilene? Sure, but this wasn't later on, was it? He cursed aloud. Too many questions. He had Baudry Cain in front of him. Was he supposed to fold for a child that wasn't yet born? He knew Margot wanted some commitment, but what that really meant was she wanted him to love her. Maybe he did, but not in ways that made him want to get married. Not yet. Probably not ever, he had to admit. He heard her singing a line from a blues tune, "Baby, I can't use you no more." She'd told him that through the cab window a few hours ago. The idea that she'd already made up her mind calmed him somewhat, and finally he slept.

"He won't come at you fast," Felix said. "Not at first. He'll play some loose hands just to see what you do. And he'll get out early sometimes so he can watch you against his friends. Don't get distracted by his small talk. He never stops paying attention."

"Most of what you're saying is common sense, but you've seen him close-up before, haven't you?" They were sitting in Lafitte's late Saturday morning. He had a po'boy sandwich in front of him and Felix had a plate of crawfish, but coffee was the only thing they reached for as they talked.

"Back before the war, Cain came to town and played a game at Milneburg's. He was big then but so were a few others. They opened it to the public so the place was packed. A crazy crowd running up bar-tabs and tipping the waiters. The local talent was a guy called Ringa, older than you, but not much. Very good player. He was a punk, though, too cocky and sure of himself. I think Cain could have taken him out in the first few hours, but instead he toyed with him, sucking in all his strengths and using them against him. He destroyed him by inches, Kid. It wasn't pretty."

"You think I'm too sure of myself?"

"Yes, I do, but you've got way more ability than Ringa. He didn't watch Cain the way you will. The cards like you, Kid. That's a big plus. I'm just saying don't take anything for granted with Cain, not even when you think you've got him. He'll hit you like a swamp moccasin falling from a tree."

"What'd you find out about Carlo?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Let's have it, Felix."

"You had it pegged. The Carolla's have a lot of money riding on Cain. They won't be happy if he loses. Carlo's there to make sure he doesn't."

"He can't get in the way for too long. If Cain doesn't get rid of him, I will."

"Maybe at the table, Kid, but that's not my worry."

"You mean he's there to remind me."

"Yeah, and there'll be some boys downstairs to back him up."

"Fuck it, Felix, I haven't waited this long to take a dive."

"All I'm saying is it's not just Cain you're up against."

"Okay, listen. You go to Carlo and tell him his family should keep backing Cain but put more money on me. Tell them I'll cover the difference."

"Jesus, Kid, that could be a lot of money. More than you've got. They'll take it out of you in other ways."

"But I'm going to win, Felix. It's Cain who should be worried."

"What about Margot?"

He blinked. All that had been left back in his apartment. His home for the next few days was the Grand. "What about her?"

"Carlo knew her, Kid. He knows you're with her now. She could be a lever, and levers get bent."

"I'll deal with it. No, you deal with it. We had an argument last night, a big one about tying the knot. It wouldn't do me any good to see her now. Here's a couple of hundred. Give it to her and tell her to get out of town until this blows over." He thought about Natchitoches. Too bad he couldn't send her to Belle. But she wouldn't go there. "Galveston, maybe. That's far enough away."

"Okay, but what if she won't leave?"

"Ask her if she wants Carlo on her doorstep again."

Felix stood up. "I better get going," he said. "I've got a busy afternoon. See you at the hotel."

He went for a long walk along the river, sure it would all come together. If the Carollas were smart they'd take his offer. And they were smart when it came to money. For a moment he wondered how much they'd put down on Cain and how much cash they'd want him to cough up if he refused to dive. Hell, the buy-in for the game was five grand each, so there was already thirty thousand on the table before they got started. He'd taken everything out of the bank except for a thousand rainy day bills. But it wasn't going to rain. As for Margot, all she had to do was stay out of the way until it was over. Then he'd work it out with her about the kid. He held his hands out in front of him. His father's hands, he thought. No tremor before the showdown.

When he went back to his apartment a couple of hours later they were waiting for him, Carlo and two others. "Let's take a ride," Carlo said.

"Felix already talk to you?" Carlo didn't reply, just gestured to the door.

It wasn't far to the Warehouse District. The car stopped in front of a four-story building on Annunciation Street. He could smell the coffee stored inside before Carlo opened the door. Behind a table and chairs at the far end of the ground floor sat an elderly man dressed in a brown suit with wide lapels. His grey hair was slicked-back, and his lined face gave nothing away. He motioned Clay to sit down

"I won't waste words with you. I'm Sam Carolla. My son tells me you're trying to work a deal." It was a smooth voice with husky overtones, one that convinced politicians and gamblers alike.

Being allowed to play like he could depended on this exchange. Maybe being able to play at all. "With respect, you're the ones who're trying to make something work. I'm only saying I can make it work better."

"You that good? Better than Baudry Cain?"

"Yes, I am."

"You got a big reputation. Maybe because this is your town, the odds are even money. I've never seen that before with Cain, but my quarter million says you won't beat him. That's another quarter million for me when he wins. Why should I be interested in what you think works better?"

"Put a quarter million on me as well, then a hundred grand on top of that. I'll cover it."

"You got that kind of dough?"

"I can get it."

"You need to be sure."

"I'm sure."

Carolla stared at him for a full minute. "You got balls, but you're asking me to lay out half a million to get a hundred grand back. I'll stick with Cain. He should gut you, but if you gotta make a choice on the final hand, don't make the wrong one."

"I can beat him."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, it's the truth." The old man dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

When Carlo dropped him off in the Quarter, he said, "You got no place to hide, Kid. Neither does she."

Felix was talking to the concierge when he walked into the Grand, his hair damp from a thick river mist. He caught the fat man's eye and leaned his head toward the bar.

"How much do you think will be on the table in the end?"

"Maybe a hundred thousand."

"Get to Chalmers," he said. "We need a quarter of a million for three or four days. Tell him there's ten per cent interest in it."

"Jesus Christ, Kid!

"Chalmers can afford it."

"I know that, but what do I tell him?"

"Tell him I need it to bet on myself." He told Felix about the meeting with Carolla.

"Goddamn it, Kid, you've got to go down. They'll kill you."

"Did you find Margot?"

"She wasn't home. I left a message for her at Pat's."

"You find Chalmers, then her. Nothing's going to happen for awhile."

He climbed the ornate staircase to the second floor. The curtains were still drawn in the suite and would stay that way until it was over. A circular oak table, maybe five feet across had been set up under the swag lamp in the middle of the room. Cain introduced him to Quick Eddie, a dealer he knew from the Quarter.

"Good to see you, Kid," Eddie said. "I'll try not to dazzle you."

"Just as long as we get the same number of cards, Eddie, I don't care how fast they come."

"Well, Kid, if I was the Babe I'd say 'time to play ball.' Cain was dressed in slacks and jacket with a white silk cravat neatly circling his throat

"You won't be throwing us any curves, will you Mr. Cain?" Snap said.

"You can hit a curve ball, can't you Mr. Boudeaux?" Everyone laughed, even Carlo, his black hair shining with pomade that smelled like women's perfume.

More homework, Clay thought. He'd never known Snap's real name.

They sat down, the lawyer and banker on either side of Cain, Snap and Carlo on their right and left. He took his chair opposite the old man, the dealer beside him. Cain struck a match and looked around the table. "Good luck to us all, gentlemen," he said and lit his cigar.

"This is five-card stud poker," Quick Eddie said. The opening ante it's been agreed is fifty dollars. There's no limit to the bets. House rules say you can walk any time, but if you're up half your winnings go into the pot. Markers are acceptable." He threw out the circle of cards like the blur of a sawmill blade.

The betting was modest for awhile. Snap took a couple of small hands with high pair, and Carlo won two hundred with high card ace against the banker's king. Cain seemed barely interested at first, but Clay could see his eyes flicking between the players, more a sleepy milk-snake than a moccasin, capable of shedding one skin for another when the time was right. About an hour in, the old man suddenly raised on a king-ten showing, when Snap had two sixes and the lawyer ace-deuce. They were the only ones to stay with him. The next card for Cain was a jack. Snap pulled a seven and the lawyer a second deuce. Cain took a sip of rum, rubbed his chin, thought for awhile, and checked. Snap looked at his hole card. "Hundred dollars," he said. The lawyer folded.

"I think you might have that third six, Mr. Boudeaux."

Snap grinned. "Gonna cost you to find out. Cain slowly counted off some bills. "Call," he said matter-of-factly.

Clay looked at Snap and saw he had the six face down. He could tell because the Cajun had put on a mask of indifference that all but hid the glimmer of light in his eyes. If he'd never played with him before, he wouldn't have been able to tell. Cain had a high pair, kings or jacks, but he'd misread Snap so far. The last card was a four of hearts for Snap. Cain pulled a three of clubs. Snap's mask didn't slip, but Clay knew what he was thinking. If I put some money out there, Cain may or may not read it as a bluff. But if I check, Cain will make a bet and I'll raise him. Then the old man will have to fold. There was a lot more certain money in the check, and that's what Snap did. Clay was startled when Cain immediately folded and said, "Too strong for me." But right away he understood the old man had seen the flicker in Snap's eyes when he had. He'd picked that up even though he hadn't sat down with the Cajun before, then he'd stayed in to learn more.

He sat out a hand and went to the bar for a mineral water. The fat man raised an eyebrow at him as if expecting some inside information.

"He's good, Felix," he said quietly." Better than good. He saw Snap coming before I did."

"Don't kid yourself. You weren't in the hand so you got busy watching Cain. When you've got the cards you read the table like nobody else."

"Maybe, but I'm glad he just beat me like he did." He looked in the mirror and saw Cain look at him and smile.

Things went faster than he'd expected. By three in the morning, the Mobile lawyer was out, gutted by Carlo's flush that took down his straight. An hour later the banker followed, through attrition rather than one or two spectacular losses. Snap was up about five thousand, Carlo ten. The rest was split between him and Cain, about thirty thousand apiece. With the thirty thousand buy-in stack there was just over a hundred thousand up for grabs. Of course anyone could play a marker if he went in the red. "That leaves four of us, gentlemen," Cain said. "Why not a rest break now? We can reconvene at, say ten a.m."

"Everything according to plan," Felix announced once they were back in his room.

"Did you find Chalmers?"

"We've got the cash and there's no interest charge. Seems he's got a lot of faith in you. There's an extra hundred grand of his that says you gut Cain."

"Okay, give it to Pat right away. It's still even money, right?" Felix nodded. "Tell him to bet it all on me. That way I've got Carolla and Chalmers covered."

"Carolla's expecting to win a quarter million, not just get his money back."

"Yeah, well we'll deal with that when the time comes."

"It's that *we* I'm worried about."

He was already thinking about the game. "Carlo will take some getting rid of. He knows what he's doing, and Cain wants to keep him around as long as possible. Carlo's not supposed to take him down, but if he can gut me his old man wins his bet.

"You think Cain knows about that?"

"How do you think Carlo got invited to the dance? I don't think Cain has anything to worry about except his reputation if he loses to me. It's my neck out there not his. But if he wins you can bet he'll see part of that quarter million."

"Meanwhile you should try and get some rest. Oh, yeah, this came for you." He took an envelope from his jacket pocket.

When Felix had gone he poured himself a Jax and unfolded her letter. She told him that by the time he read it she'd be on a bus back to Cincinnati where she'd live with her school friend until she had the baby. Then she'd look for some club work to support herself. "The baby means a lot more to me than to you. Even if I stayed and had it in New Orleans, you wouldn't be the kind of father it deserves. The only difference with Cincinnati is I won't keep hoping you'll change. I love you, and sometimes I think you love me, but never enough to make me your queen of hearts. That's corny, I know, but I sing all those songs about how a woman has to suffer for her man, and aren't they just as sappy in the end? *Queen of Hearts Blues*. It could be a Sippie Wallace number. I hope you find what you're looking for, Kid. I'm sorry I wasn't it. I don't want our child to know he wasn't either. I guess I think it will be a boy." She signed it simply 'Margot.'

He tossed it down on the bed. Why now, Margot? Why not let me get the brass ring after all these years and then give me the choice? He thought of her staring out the bus window as she moved north following the river, entering a life without him and without the city she knew so well. He felt an ache for her loss then realized he was alone now too. Even though he hadn't been able to live with her, he'd counted on her presence; the grittiness with which she sang the blues; her delight in the freshness of the fruits and vegetables at the market; the warmth of her body in the bed they shared most nights even if his clothes and the Audubon book were back at his place; above all, the conversations with her that were about anything but the cards. There was something about Jackson Square in the morning, the coffees and beignets, and the light-hearted words that wove their way like pigeons through the sunlight, settling here and there without obvious intention or result. But what would they do with a child, a boy with a poker player for a father and a blues singer for a mother, each of them night owls when they should be watching over him, each of them hunting for something when it should be right in the nest in front of them? Then it hit him like a knife blade. He was doing exactly what his own father had done. Riding on. His own son would be raised without knowing who he was. The difference was his father hadn't known the whore was pregnant. The difference was Margot wasn't a whore. And still he was riding on. He lay on the bed for a long time.

She'd be in Mississippi by now. There were footsteps in the hallway. He fell asleep to the sound of horses' hooves.

Someone had pulled the curtains back and opened the window. The ashtrays had been emptied as well, so only the faint smell of cigars and cigarettes lingered. But there was still an air of spent energy in the room as if any transfusion from the outside couldn't affect the condition of the players. They'd lose more and more of that energy as the hours passed. The trick, he knew, was to slow yourself down until the cards were barely breathing beneath your hands. That would store up your reserves for the final crucial exchanges when, without showing it, you'd inhale great lungfuls of experience and concentration to carry you through.

"You don't look like you got much sleep, Kid. I hope everything's alright."

"Everything's fine, Baudry. Let's play poker." Snap had on a clean red shirt, Carlo's suit had been pressed, and Cain's cravat was still in place. He'd gotten up from his own bed, splashed some water on his face, and walked down to the suite in the same set of clothes he'd been wearing hours before. Could be a tell, he thought. A big one. Maybe he'd let it go that way for awhile.

He played almost ragged for a few hours, mostly to the benefit of Carlo who picked up a couple of thousand from him. Cain took a little from Snap who was playing close to his chest. It wasn't often he had this much in front of him, and he didn't want to lose it now.

As a food break approached, he decided it was time to put Snap's best interests on the line and get rid of Carlo. He spoke to Snap as they sat in some fancy period chairs by the window, the crumbs from their ham and cheese sandwiches falling on the red brocade.

"How much you got, Snap?"

"Fifty-eight hundred, give or take."

"I want you to take Carlo out. You don't need to rush it. Use a marker if you have to, but get all his cash on the table." The Cajun stared at his boot tips and didn't reply.

"Listen to me. If you win, you'll walk with at least six thousand, even after you give up half your winnings. I'll cover that half. If you lose, I'll still cover any gap you have." He could see Snap wasn't happy. "There's two things here, Snap. I'm skating a thin line

with the Carollas. It's better I don't push Carlo. The other is if you want to stay, that's fine, but I'll gut you."

Snap raised his head. "You sure got a sweet way of putting things, Kid."

"I'm sorry, Snap, but that's the way it's got to be. You knew all along this would come down to Cain and me."

"Yeah, I did. I've just been enjoyin' myself is all."

Carlo's confidence was high and his betting was aggressive. Clay stayed out of his way and watched Snap work. He knew Cain was watching too. Over the next hour Snap harried the Italian, folding before he could lose much or winning little bits of cash again and again.

"You ever gonna take any real chances, Cajun?" Carlo had a smirk on his face that barely hid his frustration.

"Ain't no rules say I gotta play it your way."

Snap folded his next hand after pushing Carlo to the final card, and Clay knew his move was coming soon. Two hands later Cain got out of the way first. Snap had an ace-five up and Carlo had two kings. Clay folded his small pair. Carlo bet two thousand and Snap, after pondering things for awhile, called him. A nine came to Snap and a jack to Carlo who decided to make sure and checked. Snap made a small bet, five hundred, and Carlo called. The Cajun's last card was a king and the Italian drew a five. Snap thought things over while Carlo waited impatiently. Finally he leaned forward and said tauntingly, "You ain't got the balls."

Snap puffed up his cheeks and let his breath out slowly. He counted off all his bills. "Seven thousand, four hundred."

Carlo laughed. "I don't have to count mine. I got ninety-three hundred. Any Bucktown boys around who'll give you a marker?"

"I've never been to Bucktown, but I admire Mr. Boudeaux's game, and I'd like to see what he's got." Cain took a big puff on his cigar, "I'll supply his nineteen hundred."

Carlo's cheek twitched. Cain's self-confidence was evident. He could afford to rile the son just as long as the father got his payoff.

Snap nodded at Cain, then played it for all it was worth. He pursed his lips and tapped his fingers on the edge of the table waiting for the final remark from Carlo. It wasn't long in coming. "C'mon coon-ass, I haven't got all day."

"Call," Snap said, ignoring the insult, though 'greaseball' must have been on the tip of his tongue as he slowly turned over his second ace.

"Fuck!" Carlo yelled, jarring the table as he pushed back his chair and stood up. His hands were shaking, and Clay could see the pistol bulging under his left shoulder. "You fuck."

No one said anything as Snap picked up his money. He tapped it into a neat pile, then raised it to his nose and inhaled. "Nothin' finer," he declared, "'cept maybe a Bucktown whore in heat." He slid some bills across the table. "Let's make it an even two thousand, Mr. Cain. I appreciate your…ah, interest. And now, gentlemen, I think this old coon-ass has had enough. If I stay you two will take everything I got. I figure half of almost seventeen thousand is better than nothing at all."

Cain didn't appear surprised. He smiled at Clay. "I guess it's a new game, Kid. Mind if we take a break?"

Back in his room, Felix paced up and down, a Jax in one hand and a po'boy in the other. "With the buy-in's and Snap's contribution I make it ninety-eight thousand."

"You're missing the point."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you and Baudry Cain. You been waiting so long for this maybe you forgot about the Carollas. I'm just trying to figure how you can get more money from the old man to cover your ass."

"I'll worry about that later, Felix. Right now I just want to bring him down. Besides, he did us a favour by pushing Carlo into the corner. Old Sam might like to see Cain slip a notch or two as well."

"Not to the point of a quarter million."

The door suddenly opened and Carlo walked in with two backup men. "Hey, Carlo…" Felix stuttered.

"Shut up, fat man. Sit down with the expert and listen."

Clay knew what was coming. Sam Carolla was protecting his money, and his son was the delivery boy. He sat very still and waited for the warning. "That Cajun fuck was

lucky, but I know you ain't lucky, Kid. You just might be able to take Cain. The problem for you is my old man doesn't think you can. More to the point, he doesn't think you should. But you've known that all along. I'm just here to put paid to any temptations you might have. And in case you ain't worried for yourself, there's always the blues girl, isn't there. You don't want to lose an easy lay like that, do you?"

He saw the doubt in Carlo's eyes as he mocked Margot, unsure if his sexual slur had worked the way he wanted it to. Why didn't he just say that he'd fucked her? And even if he hadn't why didn't he say so anyway? Maybe being under his old man's thumb for so long had messed with his confidence. Maybe Margot's own strength had something to do with it. "'I'm not for sale,'" she'd told him. He wanted to believe it, but that was for later. What mattered more for now was that she was gone, and the Italians would have no idea why or where.

"I hear you, Carlo." Then he said, not like a wise-guy but as if he was asking a favour, "You don't mind if I mess with him a little, do you?"

"You want to look good for awhile, Kid, that's fine. Just lay down in the end."

When they'd gone, Felix asked him, "What you gonna do, Kid?"

"Make Sam Carolla some money."

Felix had a good idea what he meant. "Even if he takes it, you won't play in this town again."

"There are other places. I'll work it out."

Felix put the empty bottle down on a table. "If he lets you."

Back and forth they went like crabs scuttling across an estuary, or like boxers, he thought, trying to cut off the ring, each of them wary of his skilled opponent for whom betting and folding were as much feints as attempted knockout blows. They traded pots evenly, one of them pulling ahead by a few thousand, then the other. He saw Cain playing differently now, still focused on each card but probing for some hidden depth beneath the obvious surface of his game. His face and hands were under a magnifying glass intended to show his tendencies or preferences. Clay knew that forty years or more of playing high-stakes poker had given Baudry Cain a confidence not so much in his own superiority as in the other man's flaws and his ability to expose them. He would pursue

his prey relentlessly until exhaustion set in, the vulnerabilities were apparent, and the kill was inevitable. But they could play for two days and still be within striking distance of one another, so, respectful of Clay's game, he'd set himself up for the long haul certain that things would go his way in the end.

Aware that exhaustion was an eventual factor no matter your age, Clay also knew he was younger and stronger in the short term, and that if Cain's chase tactics were speeded up he could turn the extended cat-and-mouse hunt around. For two hours after they'd started their one-on-one showdown nothing much happened, then with a jack in the hole he caught another. Cain already had a jack showing, so Clay checked as if they were even. Cain took his time then bet two thousand. Four cards out and three jacks, but Cain saw only two showing. He didn't know he was trying to represent the fourth when the odds against it with four cards dealt were staggering. The odds against three on the table were high enough. Of course, his bet signaled he more than likely had an ace or king down and was sure Clay's jack was beaten. Clay called, as he did again after he drew a six to Cain's nine. Since he'd come this far, Cain had to think Clay was holding high as well. The next cards told the tale. Clay found a deuce while Cain's second nine turned up.

Cain sipped his rum and water. "How's that mineral water, Kid? You need a little ice to cool it down?"

"No, I'm fine, Baudry."

"Good, good. How does three thousand suit you then?" Cain lay the bills down very precisely.

"I'm trying to persuade myself you don't have that third nine, Baudry."

"Or the paired jack. It's not too much to find out, is it Kid?" Cain was certain he'd fold, and Clay was certain he was bluffing.

"Call."

Cain's eyes narrowed slightly, then he smiled. "That's a good bet. But you know as well as I do the odds are against you."

He didn't reply, just hoped they'd both get neutral fifth cards. When they did, there was an almost imperceptible relaxing of Cain's shoulders. He laced his fingers in front of him on the table and leaned forward. "I think we're starting to get down to things, Kid. Let's see, there's ten thousand in the pot. Why don't we make it an even fifteen?"

That was half his cash. He could raise, but something told him it might not be time, that, if he was bluffing, Cain was too smart to trail him into a thicket he himself had constructed. He was about to call and was even thinking of a comment cutting enough to add insult to injury when he realized what he could do. He might shake Cain's self-assurance a little by winning this pot, but the old man had certainly lost many individual hands to Lady Luck. Clay's second jack wouldn't represent any great skill on his part, just a winning card that had been there all along against huge odds. What if, instead, he visibly questioned his own confidence in the face of a possible three of a kind or two pair?

"That's too much for me, Baudry."

"Too bad, Kid," Cain said as he gathered up the bills. "I was a little concerned about your hole card," he said a little too earnestly for it to be true.

"You know what the odds were against you having that fourth jack?" He turned over his hole card and heard Felix grunt behind him. "What about that third nine?"

Cain shook his head and chuckled. "You didn't pay enough to find out."

He looked hard at Clay who sensed his uneasiness. No one in a cutthroat game would throw away two jacks like that. Clay should have raised the first two thousand bet and taken over the hand from there. The third nine or even a second small pair would have been a long shot. The question was did Cain think he'd folded from obvious weakness or some strange kind of strength? He didn't think he'd have to wait too long to find out.

He played the next five or six hands as if he was off-balance. He didn't want to arouse any suspicions by making stupid moves, so he was grateful he didn't have to work very hard to take two small pots on high cards and give up several barely higher ones when it was clear he had nothing. Cain was all business now. He had at least fifty thousand while Clay had twenty and change. "Bring me an orange juice," Cain called to the barman. "I need to keep my mind clear in case the kid mounts a charge. You are going to try that, aren't you, Kid? Like General Custer, I mean."

The Little Bighorn flowed into its larger namesake, then merged with the Yellowstone, and found eventually the Missouri up near Hardin. He and his father had visited the battle site when he was fourteen or fifteen. They'd taken the train to Billings, hired some horses and ridden down to Crow Agency where they spent the night. In the

morning they saw the cemetery where the 7th cavalry troopers were buried and the marble monument with all the names. Every boy in Montana knew about brave Custer and fierce Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, but his father told him the general had been too cocky, taking just under three hundred soldiers, civilians, and scouts into a village of over a thousand warriors. He showed him Reno's Hill and the coulee where Custer was trapped and died. "What killed him was his pride, Clay. No one talks about that. He's a hero to most people. But he overplayed his hand." He believed his father because he knew he was a good judge of men, especially in dangerous situations. Fuentes must have been like Custer, though he'd probably never heard of Son of the Morning Star, which was what the Sioux called the general. Clay had found a brass button and then an arrowhead near the graveyard, but when they rode away he dropped the button in the dirt and didn't look back.

He drew the king of spades down and then the ten of clubs. Cain got the eight of hearts and bet a thousand dollars and Clay called. A ten of diamonds turned up for him while Cain's card was a second heart, the jack. He bet a thousand on his pair and Cain raised him the same amount, representing another jack down and interest in the flush. When he found the king of diamonds and Cain the ten of hearts it was time to make his move. Right now all Cain had was two possible jacks against his two pair. The flush draw was sitting there, of course, and even a straight flush, but the odds weren't with that. A mere pair of tens against those possible jacks or that flush draw, however, ought to have made him hesitate, so he did, taking a sip of mineral water as if he was buying time. If he was bluffing, he'd be greedy but not too much until the last cards were dealt. "Two thousand," he finally said.

He kept his eyes on his hand but could feel Cain studying him. "You wouldn't fold a second king, Kid. Not after what happened with that jack a while ago. Of course, you'd want me to believe that now, wouldn't you? Well, I have to find out just what your state of mind is. "Call."

He got his third king and the full house, but Cain drew a nine of hearts. He had to bet against the possible flush. If he checked, Cain would know what he had. If he put too much down there could be the same result. He hadn't bet big in this game without being able to back it up. But if he showed he wasn't certain of his two pair showing, the old

man might bite. “Three thousand,” he declared, raising his eyes deliberately but looking past Cain’s shoulder.

“You know, Kid, that’s a good-looking two pair, but I still don’t think you’ve forgotten that jack.” He was keeping the mistake on the table. “Let’s see if I’m right. I call your three thousand and…”

If Cain had either the queen or the seven of hearts he would have the supreme champion’s hand. He wouldn’t have to do anything more than take the cash Clay had left and rub salt in his wound by patting him supportively on the shoulder. But if he decided to do more than simply gut Clay, it would mean his common flush wasn’t going to provide enough satisfaction by itself. That’s what he’d signal with an aggressive move.

“How much do you have left?”

Clay counted his money. “Twelve thousand and fifty.”

Cain picked up a pile of bills in front of him and peeled off half of it. “Alright, I’ll raise you ten more than that. Twenty-two thousand. You keep the fifty.” He put the money in the center of the table and his palms down on the oak.

This is what it always came down to, Clay thought. The other guy making the wrong move at the right time. He sat there as if paralyzed by the moccasin’s venom.

“There’s always a marker, Kid,” Cain said.

Carlo whispered almost too softly to hear, “And we know where she is.”

He looked Carlo in the eye for a split second, then swung his gaze back to meet Cain’s. They didn’t know about Margot. They were bluffing with a quarter million on the line. “I appreciate that, Baudry. How much do *you* have left now?” he asked.

Cain lightly gripped the edge of the table. Then he reached for his remaining cash and added it up. “Twenty thousand, four hundred.”

“I’ll cover it all,” he said.

“Bugler, sound the charge,” Cain replied. “I’ll see you, Kid, and I see you.” He raised his glass in a mock salute, sipped some rum, and without taking his eyes from Clay’s reached with his free hand to turn over his hole card. What he found with his groping fingers was the eight of hearts beside it. He flipped it face down.

Someone gasped and said, “Shit.”

“That’s a dead man’s hand, Mr. Cain,” Eddie said. “The Kid wins the pot.”

The glass slipped from Cain's grasp, and he cursed as the rum ran over the edge of the table into his lap. Pushing back from the table he adjusted his cravat. "Not much of a victory, Kid," he said shakily. "We know who won." He turned over the deuce of hearts to show the flush.

"You're right, Baudry." Clay turned to Eddie. "Forget the dead hand. Let's finish it with what he's got." He showed his third king.

"Somebody bring me a towel." Cain looked vacantly around the room. "I'm through here."

Snap was pounding him on the back, shouting "You did it, Kid! You did it!" The banker shook his hand and the lawyer gave him his card. Felix smiled sadly and said, "I hope it was worth it, Kid." Then Carlo had him by the arm and was steering him toward the door.

"At least let me have a shower."

"How you smell ain't gonna make a difference."

They drove to the same building on Annunciation Street. Carlo told him to wait by the car.

"You couldn't run far enough," he said as he went inside. A few minutes later he came back and called to Clay.

Sam Carolla was in the same suit behind the table on the ground floor as if he hadn't moved since the first visit. This time there was no invitation to sit. He stood there wondering how much the money mattered to them. He was betting it did.

"So you're the best now, Kid."

"I guess so."

"Naw, naw, no guessing about it. You took down Baudry Cain. The King is dead…" His words trailed off and Clay knew what the incompletion meant. "The trouble is, for you to do what you did it cost me a quarter of a million bucks."

"No it didn't."

"I'm sure you got a good reason for saying that."

"Yes, I do, Mr. Carolla. I bet the same amount on myself to win. So you get your money back, and…." This was where it would work or not.

"And?"

"And there's the hundred thousand I won. You get it all."

Carolla stared at him for awhile. "Let me get this straight. I put down a sure bet, a *very* sure bet because you know about it. I stand to make a quarter million on top of my bet, and now you're offering me a hundred grand. Seems there's something missing here. Like maybe a hundred fifty thousand."

It was the money not the betrayal. "Mr. Carolla, I can make you twice that in the next six months. You know everyone will be coming to me now. The buy-ins, the stakes are all mine to call."

"You think you can cut a deal?"

"With respect, Mr. Carolla, there was a time when you took down the best, even though you knew what it might cost."

"You talkin' about the Matrangas?

"Yeah, I am. They were good at what they did, but they were old school. You were younger and faster, and you didn't fold when it got tough."

Carolla smiled. "Like I said before, Kid, you got balls. But with the Matrangas what you saw was what you got. With cards you know it ain't like that. What would you have done if he'd had the queen?"

"It wasn't likely."

"But was possible?"

"Yeah, it was possible. But you would have won and been happy. I'd be out a lot of dough and playing in penny ante games the rest of my life."

"Instead you owe me a hundred and fifty grand."

"The way I see it that's a good deal."

"If I take it, Kid, if I take it."

"Pop," Carlo said.

"You lost twice to him Carlo. You can always try again."

Carlo took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What about Cincinnati?"

Clay kept his face immobile but his heart was smacking his chest like the card-slap in a fast shuffle.

"What you think, Kid. We need to bother the blues lady?"

"No," he replied, trying to find some spit to swallow. "She's out of it."

"Okay, Kid, you got the six months, but don't give me anything else to worry about."

He walked down to the river. The Mississippi poured its life-blood toward the delta and the Gulf beyond. Like the waters from its source up on the Continental Divide he'd flowed one inevitable way in the end. His father couldn't stop him. Nor Margot and the child. Not even Belle could get in the way. He'd lost all four of them, let them go in the current of his need. He was Clay Boon, the Levee Kid. There was no one better at the game.

III. Max

He remembered a little of the train ride west with Alice. When his mother was sick she told him he was going to live with his father in New Orleans. She'd written to Clay and was sure he'd look after his son. But his father's letter arrived after she'd died. Alice opened it and read it would be better if Max went to stay with his grandfather on a ranch in Montana. His father would pay for the trip and for someone to accompany the boy to Missoula. He'd also send some money to the ranch every month. Alice took him, of course. She'd been looking after him much of the time because Margot worked nights and slept half the day. She couldn't sing anymore because of her throat, but a club owner had made her assistant manager, and her hours were about the same as they'd been before she became ill. As she got worse, she couldn't even make Max his lunch and supper, so Alice came in from her apartment next door, and Margot lay on the couch and whispered to him while her friend prepared a meal for the three of them. His mother liked him to read to her, stories from his illustrated Bible about David and Goliath and Isaac bound to the altar. The truth was he'd memorized every word and knew exactly when to turn each page. The stories were inside his head, and he imagined himself as the boy whirling his sling against the giant or lying still as his father held the knife above him while the angel descended. Sometimes he made up words to hurl at Goliath or speak to the angel, words that would never be written down but sounded real to him all the same.

Margot talked to him about his father. He was a card player, the best there was, and Max looked a lot like him, she said. He lived in a part of New Orleans called the French Quarter. It was very exciting to live there below the level of the Mississippi River. You had to walk up to the top of the levee to see the boats, although sometimes the tops of their stacks were visible when you stood in the streets below. There was a market every Saturday morning with lots of delicious fruits and sweet-cakes. The buildings were very old and beautiful, and sometimes when the mist settled over a place called Jackson Square you thought you were in a fairy land. He didn't want to leave his mother, and wished they could both go to his father's city.

"No, Max," she said. "I can't go, but I'll be there with you."

He didn't understand how there could be two of her.

Then one day a taxi came and took her to the hospital where Alice said the doctors would try to help her. Their medicine wasn't strong enough, though, and she never came home. As he cried beside the casket and his mother's friends kissed him or patted him on the shoulder, he thought about the fairy land. It was a week after the funeral that his father's letter came and he learned about his grandfather.

"I guess your mother didn't know about him either," Alice told him.

"Why not?"

"Your father never mentioned him. The letter says he always intended to tell her where he was really from."

He didn't know what 'really from' meant.

The train trip to Montana took three days and nights. He sat by the window and watched the big river flow under the bridge.

"It goes all the way to New Orleans," Alice said, and he pictured his father standing on the levee in a few days as the same piece of water went by.

Then the prairie grasses blew in the wind for a whole day. He watched them bend and toss as his eyes closed in sleep and saw them again in the morning light. Flocks of birds rose and fell on the same wind, but he knew they must sleep at night like him. Much later his grandfather would tell him about birds who slept while they flew, their wings outspread to help them glide safely through snatches of time when they weren't conscious of who they were or where they were bound.

"Don't they get lost?"

"No, they have an instinct that takes care of them. Like your horse, Max. If you fell asleep in the saddle, he'd bring you home."

"But he wouldn't be asleep himself."

"He might as well be. He's not thinking about home, something inside him just pulls him along toward it."

Alice told him when they crossed state lines, so he knew they'd gone from Ohio to Indiana to Illinois and across the river to St. Louis, Missouri. Then they headed northwest through Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and into Montana. The land was mostly flat, and when the clouds banked in a storm, climbing in black and white thunderheads, they looked like the ash plumes from erupting volcanoes he'd seen in picture books or huge

Indian smoke signals that would have frightened Goliath. The first part of Montana was flat too, but he could sense the train working harder as they moved west towards a line of hills in the distance. Then the clouds parted and he saw the mountains stretching north and south in an unbroken chain of rock and snow.

"Those are the Rockies," Alice said. "They're longer than the Mississippi. All the way from Canada down through Mexico and into South America."

He wanted to climb them and stand on the highest peak so he could see where they began and ended and everyone else would be below him. Years after, when he played a gunfighter who rode up into the Grand Tetons in the final scene of the film, he knew exactly where he was going.

Back in Cincinnati he'd asked Alice what his grandfather was like, but she'd had no answer except to say she was sure he'd take good care of him. Now as they got closer to their destination he told himself to be brave like David or Isaac, that no matter how big his grandfather was or even if he had a gun instead of a knife—this was the wild west!—he wouldn't let his face show his feelings until he was ready.

There was a small crowd on the platform at Missoula, people waiting for arrivals and others for the train that would take them, according to Alice, across the northern tip of Idaho all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Most of the men were wearing cowboy hats and fur-collared jackets, and their pants were neatly pressed above their shiny leather boots. He peered up and down the platform after he jumped from the folding step. When he turned to see where Alice was, he saw a white-haired, brown-skinned man in an old coat and jeans reach for her bag as she stepped down.

"Mr. Boon?" she asked him.

"Yes, m'am." It was a strong voice, neither harsh nor gentle. The blue eyes above the deeply-lined cheeks were like the sky beyond the thunderheads.

"I'm Alice, Margot Anderson's friend. And this is Max."

He put his hand out as he'd been taught to do. It hung there alone in the air for a moment before it was suddenly wrapped in the old man's grip. He hadn't seen his grandfather's hand move and wondered how that was so.

"You look like him." There was a pause long enough to be filled by the train whistle blast and echoing silence afterwards. The big hand let go of his. "And a little like her." For a long time he thought it was his mother his grandfather had been speaking of.

They rode out of town in a battered truck, climbing along a dirt road bordered closely by a pine forest. After a few hours and when the sun was low they emerged from the trees and looked down on a wide valley where a river curved like a silver snake and thin columns of smoke rose from buildings on the far side.

"That's the ranch, Max," his grandfather said. "Where Clay—your dad—was raised."

He sat, legs crossed on the wood floor, looking out at the ocean. The windows of the house ran from floor to ceiling on the west side, and the view of the water was unimpeded. Although he was high above the shore, the entire Pacific seemed poised to pour over him. On the sand below he could see his orange kayak pulled up among the rocks. As long as the wind wasn't too strong he could paddle up and down the coast at will. This place had been good to him. Twenty-five years and counting. When he'd walked away from it all he just got in his favourite car, the black Jag, and drove north. He had thoughts about returning to Montana, but knew everything had changed there. Besides, living on the coast he'd grown used to the water, the ceaseless change of it, the relentless sweep of waves from the other side of the world, all the way from the Philippines where he'd been after the war. He stopped and stayed the night in a small town near the Oregon border. The next morning, walking the main street, he saw the photo in a real estate window. *Seaside. Private beach. Woodstove. 300 acres.* It wasn't a ranch in Montana or like the one he owned northeast of L.A., but he wasn't going to raise cattle or build an airstrip.

His exit had taken a little work. He'd settled with his former wife long ago. No kids to worry about. His studio contract days were long gone, he'd called his own production shots for years. But there was still all the money to deal with. Fortunately he had a good accountant who handled his investments and assured him everything would keep rolling along. His residuals from twenty films, several of them blockbusters, meant he'd never have to act or direct again.

The first thing he did, even before renovating the house, was install an electric alarm fence around the entire property. He monitored different sections of it from a control display in his den and, with the push of a button, could floodlight a hundred yards of wire. In case intruders were shock-proof or sightless a siren would tell them they'd been spotted. The deaf ones, he had to admit, might deserve entry, provided they were mutes as well. The space he'd created around himself was like that once provided by his grandfather's .45 or his father's impassive response to the cards while opponents revealed their fear of invasion with every twitch.

He hadn't been a total recluse. There were still one or two good friends from the early days who came up a couple of times a year, and he had occasional female companions who stayed awhile until he signaled the honeymoon was over even when he was having a good time. But his door remained shut to journalists and fans, many of whom had turned up at his gate through the years looking for answers. Why did Max Boon abandon one of the great careers in Hollywood and what was he like in old age? He didn't want to explain his self-imposed exile, but he had to admit he was pretty much like anyone else who couldn't move like they used to or always recall where they'd put their keys. Satisfied to live a day-to-day existence without makeup or looking over his own shoulder for the paparazzi, he'd let self-analysis sit outside his mind's fence for over two decades.

His male friends knew better than to bring up anything from the past except beer talk about hunting and fishing trips or fast cars. The women who lasted weren't interested in celebrity, only in creature comforts with him. He made sure, though, that he learned just as much about them as they assumed they knew of his life in seclusion. He told them matter-of-factly that anything he read in the papers about their time together would be followed by nation-wide tales of their indiscretions and even ones they hadn't committed. His lawyers, he emphasized, received retainers higher than any legal costs they might think they could afford. But he hadn't slept with anyone in almost five years, and it didn't look like sex was on any horizon he could recognize. As for love, that was something he'd given the complex figure of his grandfather and the faint memory of his mother, no one else. He still didn't know how he felt about his father.

Maybe it was death waiting around some nearby corner that was pushing him towards the past and what he'd left behind. He'd died more than once on-screen, but he was

always young when it happened, and caught in some crossfire that gave his character little time to think. He was always running or driving fast up there where courage and dominance of danger won out over self-reflection. The trouble was, you could come to believe in that kind of victory when you weren't acting and the dialogue wasn't scripted anymore. Then you had to find your own words to match the mask that stayed more and more in place, eventually molding itself to your face until there was little difference between the image and who you were off the set.

He'd had it all, if 'all' could be measured by fame and adulation. The heroes he'd portrayed struck a chord with a generation on the cusp of rebellion against rules and hypocrisy, despite the fact he hadn't worn his hair long and many of his characters had worked within the system, usually as cops or soldiers. Maybe it was because they were always loners, men who refused to be co-opted by sentiment or corrupted by group allegiances. Then there were the true outsiders, the rogue cowboys or gamblers of one kind or another who'd never joined up but went down fighting just the same. Of course there'd been plenty of Hollywood leading men who'd followed the same route, but not, the critics said, with such unbending intensity and utter immersion in their roles. Max Boon became synonymous with a passionate cool that spawned a herd of studio and street imitators and the almost fanatical allegiance of fans in North America, Europe, and even the Far East. He'd made the most his time at the top, but there'd been a growing gap between his late-thirties peak and the inevitable slide into age that make-up couldn't hide and parts that lacked the usual edge. He had the kind of face that weathered hard, especially since he spent so much of his free time outdoors to counter the artificial atmosphere of the set. But if he'd always taken his good looks for granted, he also knew that a man grew inescapably old like his grandfather had. Acting wasn't everything. Directing had been important to him for a long time. There'd been scripts he'd written and stories he'd told by looking through the lens. In the end it wasn't vanity that made him walk away. It was something deeper than that.

He uncrossed his legs and stood up. On a large rock offshore the seals had gathered for their daily dives, barking beneath the cries of the circling gulls above. Out on the deck the salt wind blew back his hair and filled his nostrils with its sharp tang. He leaned against the rail and thought for the first time in years about trying to make the film he'd

given up on long ago. The business wasn't the same anymore, but there were lots of kids with hardly any funds who were doing indie productions and showing them at festivals. He had more than enough money to stay away from the studios and hire whomever he wanted. But first, whatever his misgivings about what the camera could and couldn't do, he'd have to try and write a script, and that would take a lot of remembering.

His grandfather was in his mid-sixties, but hard and lean and able to walk Max into the ground if he had to. They'd go out on the grasslands beyond the fences where he skipped ahead looking for gophers or snakes he'd pick up by the tail once he'd learned the difference between a rattle and a harmless hiss. Boon would find his own pace and sometimes there'd be a quarter of a mile between them, but he always caught up to ask Max if he was getting tired and wanted to be carried home. Max would take offense and challenge him to a race to the stable.

"No thanks. But see that mountain over there." He pointed to a peak ten miles off. "Let's see who gets to it first."

Max laughed. "You always say that, grandpa. One day my legs will be as long as yours and then we'll see who wins."

Boon soon taught him about horses, and they rode to the mountain and beyond. Max liked being out there with the old man, although he was old only by the number attached to his years. Sometimes Max wished his grandfather could be closer to his age so he'd be like a brother, someone to play with and talk to about silly things that didn't matter. Boon was always serious. Even when he was joking about their races he rarely smiled. Gradually Max realized this wasn't because his grandfather didn't have a sense of humor; he clearly did, but he was always alert, always watching for something or someone who wasn't there. To be impulsive, to lose himself in laughter, would be to drop his guard. Once, by the river, Max heard the click of the Winchester lever before he heard the rattle. With the gun's roar the thick body of the snake jerked into the air three feet from his boot.

"That was close, grandpa."

Boon nodded. "It's okay to day-dream. But part of you needs to stay in the real world."

Max asked him about his father. “Did he like it here?”

“I guess so, but life was tougher back then on the ranch. He had to start working pretty hard when he wasn’t much older than you. He didn’t like school much, so he became a ranch hand like me.”

“That’s what I want to be.”

“No, Max. There’s no future here. When Ma Barnard dies, her family will sell the place off. People will buy up her land and build houses to live in while they have jobs in town.”

“What will we do, grandpa?”

“Well, you’ll keep going to school and get yourself a job one day. As for me, I’ll find a cabin somewhere and do a lot of fishing.”

“When will Ma Barnard die?”

Boon looked at him. That was a question he’d been asking himself for some time. The old woman was in her eighties now and was getting frail. She’d already told him that cabin on the river was his together with a few surrounding acres. “When it’s her time, Max. Not before.” He knew the boy wasn’t so worried about Ma as he was about him. Not like Clay who must have had faith in his father’s longevity or that he’d at least see Max safely out of his teens.

“Why did my dad leave?”

“He was restless and wanted to see the rest of the country. We came up from Texas when he was about your age and he stayed until he was seventeen.”

“If I go away, I’ll always write to you, grandpa.”

“I’m counting on it, son.”

Ma had let her herd go years before and kept a few horses. Then she’d sold a large section of the ranch to a neighbor and had been living off the proceeds ever since. There was enough to pay Boon and a couple of hands. Ernie had gone home to Billings not long after Bill was killed when the ranch truck was sideswiped by a carful of drunk kids. He didn’t know what he could have done for Max if Clay hadn’t had his lawyer send a hundred dollars every month. Now he had more than enough to care for the two of them and was able to put a little aside for Max’s future somewhere else.

Another day the questions came about Clay’s gambling.

"Did you teach him to play cards?"

"Yes, I did. But he learned faster than I could teach him. He beat everybody on the ranch and then went into town. There was some money there but not enough for someone as good as him."

"So he wanted to see the card games in the rest of the country."

The boy was sharp. His words came back at you like pistol shots if you weren't careful.

"That's how he ended up in New Orleans. There's a lot of big action down there, I've heard."

"Why didn't he want to see you again, grandpa? Why didn't he want to see me?"

"I don't know, Max. Your dad liked to do things his way. I guess his way became the only way after awhile. Maybe he learned that from me as well. But he did feel you and I could look after one another. I got a letter from his lawyer asking me about that when your mother died."

"Why did you say yes?"

Boon stared at the dead snake. "Sometimes you have to begin again," he said.

Max dug at the ground with a stick, thinking things over. Finally he looked up and smiled. "Will you teach me to play cards?"

"You know, I don't think I will." The boy's face fell. "But I will teach you to shoot one day soon." Max clapped his hands together. "Just my rifle, son. Just my rifle," Boon said, as if there were another gun somewhere.

But how do you deal with memory? How do you stop it from pouring over you like the ocean or, if it does, last long enough down there—back there—so certain faces and moments come into the clear? He needed a sea-anchor, something to hold him in place while he tried to go over what had happened to him and why. First of all, he wasn't writing a book, he was just thinking about making a film that would be two hours long at the most. He couldn't put everything in, and what he did select, while telling part of his own story, couldn't be so completely personal that viewers wouldn't be able to identify with it. He wanted it to interfere with the impossible audience expectations of a film star

and reveal his own participation in the creation of Max Boon. Once he'd become big enough to have a say, he'd always kept his dialogue minimal, always kept his distance inside his character. Now he'd have to find a way to close that distance and gain some trust. He'd never been concerned with this before. Like him, the men he'd portrayed didn't need company. Their surrounding walls of self-confidence said they could be approached only on their own terms, and even then there was a line in the sand. But it wasn't really self-confidence as much as an instinctive ability to read situations quickly and move through them with a kind of tough grace that left bodies and feelings in its wake. If his story was to be about his past, he couldn't turn his back on how his on-screen and off-screen selves had merged. He'd have to find a go-between, a method, maybe a character, to interpret and translate that merger whatever the risks. He knew what the critics would say. 'Boon reborn as *auteur*' or 'Monosyllabic Max speaks in sentences.' Well, there was nothing he could do about that. The time was long gone when he'd call one of them out in the press or even turn up at their door, fist cocked and ready. If he made this film it would be because he owed it to a few people who, whether they knew it or not, reminded him when he got to the top why it wasn't enough.

One rainy day when he was eleven years old he absently climbed the ladder into the bunkhouse loft looking for something to do. He'd been up there before to sort through gear left behind by long-dead cowboys, their scarred saddle-bags, scuffed boots, and even a few hats he tried on. Once he found an old photo of a ranch-hand staring down from horseback, a bit of corral fence and maybe part of a cow in the background. On the back someone had scrawled 'Bill 1915.' The man slouched in the saddle, a cigarette between the fingers of his hand that rested on the pommel. He was grinning like the picture-taker had just told him a joke. Max wondered if he'd seen the drunks' car coming and if he knew he was going to die. There was a wooden trunk beneath the tiny window filled with frayed shirts and pants neatly folded as if a little mending would make them ready to wear again. He thought the loft held no more secrets, but now he noticed the edge of a small crate hidden under the sloping rafters behind a pile of harness and rope. There was no lock on the hasp just a knotted piece of cord that he easily undid. Inside, wrapped in oiled cloth, he found a gun-belt looped around a holstered pistol. Carved into the holster

leather was a small ‘R’. His fingers traced the metal butt that shone dully in the window’s light. The leather had tightened with time, and when he tried to push a bullet out of its cartridge holder it wouldn’t shift. When he lifted belt and gun together he was surprised at their weight. The belt went around his waist almost twice and he couldn’t find a way to do it up, so he took the pistol from the holster and, pointing it at the far wall, tried to pull the trigger. It wouldn’t budge no matter how hard he squeezed. Then he heard his grandfather talking to another man outside and quickly replaced the gun, wrapping the belt around it as best he could. As he lowered it into the crate he saw a small leather pouch held closed by a drawstring. Stuffing it in his pocket, he tied the cord on the hasp and went down the ladder.

He couldn’t hear the voices anymore so he went over to his bed in the corner, loosened the drawstring, and turned the pouch upside down. Nothing fell out, but when he gave it a shake a small glass bead rolled onto his blanket. It was round and red and had a hole through it as if it had once hung on a necklace of some kind. Why was it so special to be kept in the pouch, and why were the pouch and gun together? For the first time he wondered if they belonged to his grandfather. He knew if he was going to ask, he’d have to put the pouch back first. He picked up the bead and cupped it in his palm. Then he heard his grandfather say, “I hope you left the gun alone.”

Boon took the pouch from him and told Max to bring the crate down from the loft. He must have noticed that the gun-belt had been disturbed, but he didn’t say anything. Instead he strapped it on, tied a leather thong from the bottom of the holster around his leg, and motioned Max to follow him outside.

“You have to cock it first,” he said, pulling back the hammer, then slowly releasing it. He spun the empty chamber, took six bullets from the belt, and loaded the gun. “Saddle up,” he said. They rode along the river for a few miles until they came to the waterfall. The funneled roar of the water through the rocks into the boiling pool below shut off the rest of the world. “No one wears handguns anymore, let alone shoots them. Best not to alarm anyone,” his grandfather told him. “Now you find me a couple of small rocks and put them up on that boulder there.”

Max did as he was told. The boulder was about fifty feet from where his grandfather was standing. Max came back beside him and said, “They’re pretty small grandpa.” He

hadn't seen the hand move at the railway station and he didn't see it now. All he heard was the explosion clapping against his ears, louder than the waterfall's thunder. Both rocks were gone, splintered into nothingness, and he realized there must have been two shots in a split second. His grandfather holstered the gun. "Slow," he said. "Very slow." Then he undid the belt and thong, coiled them carefully around the weapon and tossed metal and leather into the middle of the wild stream.

Max ran to the edge of the bank. "Why'd you do that? Why'd you do that?" he shouted.

They rode downstream and eventually turned into a grove of pines where they made a small fire. His grandfather pulled a coffee pot from his saddlebag with a bag of ground-up beans. As the water boiled and the smell mingled with that of the pine needles and some harebells nearby, Max listened to what he had to say.

"I said I'd teach you how to shoot a Winchester, and I guess it's time to start. You can bring down a few coyotes, and maybe bag us a deer in the fall. But .45's were made for killing people, Max. There's no need for them now."

"Did you kill people, grandpa?"

"Yes I did, son, but only when I had to. By that I mean when they came after me."

"Why'd they come after you?"

"Well, to be honest, I guess I put myself in their way much of the time. But that didn't mean they had no choice."

"Were you a gunfighter?"

"Some called me that. Called me a lot of other names too."

Max thought of the letter carved on the holster. He'd only ever known his grandfather as 'Boon.'

"What did the 'R' stand for grandpa? Was it for your first name?"

The old man looked at him for a few moments, though Max didn't think he really saw him. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Just like that gun. What matters more is this." He took the leather pouch from his vest pocket and dropped the bead into Max's hand. "There was a Comanche boy," he said, "Not much older than you."

Gradually he came to see how it might be done. Years before he'd seen a European film in which an old man took a holiday and dreamed or imagined scenes from earlier days. He wandered through them and spoke with figures he'd known and lost, including his younger self. It had seemed too arty, and he hadn't liked it much at the time. But now the exposed nature of the old man attracted him, and especially his struggle to understand how he'd arrived where he was. If he followed such a story-line it would mean he'd have to meet the young Max Boon and see what translation was possible. It would also mean revealing himself to scrutiny he'd avoided for so many years, walking on to the screen with his grey hair, time-ravaged face, and all. The camera wouldn't be kind, and he'd have to overcome that by emphasizing the vulnerability of *anyone* who goes back, as the European director had. How would he set it up? He didn't want to make an imitation, but it was clear there'd have to be some kind of on-going dialogue with the past. Some key exchanges based on his personal history would be part of that.

He climbed down to the beach. The sound of the breakers farther out was repetitive and soothing, and he walked through the shallows with nothing in his head but the wash of water and the occasional cry of a gull. His wife had loved the ocean. She would have swum out to those breakers despite the undertow. He remembered the trip he'd made with her to Hollywood when he'd been nominated for the Oscar he wouldn't receive. He'd wrapped up his next film in San Francisco, and they'd taken a day and night to drive down to L.A., happy and relaxed together and blind to the possibility of breakup that came less than a year later. She'd known him well, but only when he was young. After her came the others who were framed by the hard edges of his career. The tabloids had loved the surface glitter.

When his grandfather had finished the story Max felt like he was going to cry, and he bit his lip hard to punish his weakness. The tears came anyway, and he stared through them at the dying fire, the bead gripped tightly in his fist. Boon poured himself a cup of coffee and sipped it slowly. Max could hear the whisper of the hot liquid from metal to skin.

"Why did the boy have to die, grandpa?"

"He would have said it was his time, but Hallam hurried him along."

"Why?"

"Back in those days, Max, an Indian didn't live long in the presence of an angry white man."

"Why was Hallam angry?"

"I don't know. He just was."

"Why did he want to kill you?"

"To him I was weak and disobeyed his orders. He couldn't abide weakness in others, and he couldn't allow it in himself."

"I'm glad you killed him."

"That's not why I told you the story, Max."

"I know. I just am, that's all."

Boon threw the dregs from the pot on the fire. "I wish none of it had happened. It hurt me, and after that I was angry too."

"Are you still angry?"

"No, not anymore."

"What about this?" He unclenched his fist and the bead glowed like a tiny ember in the afternoon light.

"I took it from his necklace. At the time, I didn't know why. Now I guess it was so I wouldn't forget him."

Max stretched out his hand. "Here, grandpa."

Boon shook his head. "You keep it. I don't want you to forget either."

The car moves slowly along the coastal highway. Sometimes his wife is there beside him and sometimes he's alone. He isn't sure why he's going to Hollywood. To receive some kind of award. But for what? He hasn't made a movie since the late Sixties. Christ! The war was still on! He pushes his foot down on the gas, but it doesn't make any difference. The car holds its steady speed. At this rate he'll get to L.A. next week. The sea unfolds on his right and the hills rise abruptly on his left, but when he looks straight ahead he sees a different landscape. He is telling her that he's dreamt about the Philippines.

"You never talked about it much," she says. Her hair is short, the way he likes it. She wore it that way when they met at the Actors Studio in New York. The rumor was she'd dated Brando. That was one reason he went after her.

"You never asked."

"And if I had?"

He grunts. "You're probably right."

The ship's prow made a sweeping V in the calm water of the river. It was long and winding, with lush vegetation overhanging its banks. The gunboat was heading inland to pick up some Catholic missionaries threatened by the Huks. The war had ended the year before, but the guerillas who had fought so fiercely against the Japanese were now opposed to the U.S.-backed government of the Philippines. Some said they were communist, while others insisted they were just fighting for peasants' rights. Either way they were taking over central Luzon and pushing out anything American. That included Christianity, although the missionaries refused any political allegiance.

"You used to dream about it a lot. You'd wake up in a sweat pulling imaginary leeches off your legs and yelling at me to get them off your back."

"I remember."

"Why were you there in the first place?"

He doesn't reply but loses himself in the memory.

Max had been too young to enlist until the summer of 1945. He chose the navy because he'd never seen the ocean but could still remember the big river flowing beneath the bridge that he and Alice had crossed. "All the way to New Orleans," she'd told him. Maybe he'd dock there one day and look up his old man. But after basic training in San Diego he ended up in the South Pacific the week the A-bombs were dropped. There was some mopping up of Jap stragglers, but most of the time he just swabbed decks and scraped rust from bulkheads and railings. Then they were ordered up the Chico River to a place called Sadanga in the central mountains of Luzon. The Catholic mission had been

established back in the nineteenth century, and the priests since then considered it an independent state with no loyalty to armies of any kind.

He was ship's engineer and worked with a small group of Filipinos below decks. The gunboat was old and coal-fired, built back before the first war. Steam pipes were always leaking and the pressure valves weren't accurate. The captain called for full-speed ahead when they broke into clear water, but sandbars would demand sudden cutbacks, and Max warned him the engines wouldn't take it. The trip upriver was supposed to take three days, but they came under fire on the third day a few miles from the mission and had to anchor in mid-stream about a hundred yards from either shore and just before a narrows. As night came down, the captain called his officers and a few men together.

"We'll have to use the launch," he said. He told the senior lieutenant he'd be in charge of a crew of three. There was a priest and three nuns to pick up. "Anderson, you'll have to go," he told Max. "We can't have a breakdown up there." He made it sound as if he were going along.

The giant acacia trees loomed like dark sentinels over the water as they rowed with muffled oars. The engine was inboard, gasoline-powered, and they could scoot along if they had to. The captain had told them to use it on the return trip if necessary. Normally Max didn't like rowing, but he was glad to do it if they didn't draw fire. The lieutenant had a rough map of the town that showed the mission on the far side of a central square at the top of a hill. The streets went straight up from the river.

"Were you scared?" she asks. Somehow she has come with him into the past. He can't see her, just hear her voice.

He'd never been able to admit anything like that when they were together, despite the leech-filled nightmares. Now he says, "Yeah, I was, especially when we went through the narrows. Everyone else was too. But what could we do? We were under orders, so we had to try to get them out."

"Did anybody say anything?"

"You mean about being scared? No. The lieutenant whispered to us to stay steady with our strokes. It was hard work. We were sweating like..."

She smiles. "Like pigs?"

"No, like horses after you've run them too hard." For a moment he sees the ranch and hears whinnies from the stable.

They came to a crumbling wharf and tied the launch. The town was silent and covered in a gray mist. He was told to stay with the boat and if he heard any firing to take it out to mid-stream and wait. "If we're not back in two hours, return to the ship as best you can," the lieutenant said.

"You mean use the engine?"

"If you have to. The captain will decide whether to come after us or not. But listen, Anderson, I expect to be back here with the missionaries without any hitches." The other sailors didn't say anything, but he knew they envied his position.

"What did you think about while you were waiting?" she says.

"Not a lot. I was listening for any noises. Footsteps, voices. I didn't like the quiet, but I didn't want it broken either. After about an hour and a half I thought I heard one shot from the hill and then nothing."

The sound had been so sudden and disappeared so quickly he could have been mistaken. Two hours in and time to make a decision. What if they were on their way back?

"I waited a while longer and then decided to go and have a look. Don't ask me why. It just seemed better than leaving them there."

He crept through the streets with his M1 slung across his back. The houses were all mud-brick and the occasional light flickered from a small window. He hadn't had a good look at the map so all he could do was keep going uphill and hope he hit the square. After fifteen minutes he found it. The church was on the other side. He thought he could see a body on the steps. It took him another ten minutes to work his way around to the front corner of the church. From there he peeked out and saw the officer's uniform. The lieutenant looked dead, and if he was Max was in charge of the operation. He went back

along the side of the building looking for another entrance. There was a small door about halfway along and it opened when he tried the handle. He found himself behind a column next to rows of benches that covered the floor. Candles were lit up by the altar where the priest and three nuns were talking quietly among themselves. There was no sign of the other sailors.

"What then?" Now she becomes visible beside him. He looks closely at her for the first time. Her face is young and unlined. He puts his hand to his own cheek and feels the sagging flesh there. "It doesn't matter," she says. "You were beautiful, but there was more to you than that. You just didn't know what it was."

"The church was like a film set. Only I didn't have any script to follow. Finally I stepped out of the shadows. A nun said, 'There's another one.' I asked the priest what had happened."

"The Huks were here when your men arrived. They opened the door and shot your officer. Then they took the others away. None of them could speak English and they didn't trust our translation. From what we gathered there are people back at their camp who can get information from them."

He couldn't save the sailors by himself. That would be up to the captain. "I'm here to get you out," he said.

"We know that, but we have no intention of going."

"Listen, one man is already dead and they'll probably kill the others. They came here to save you. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"We will pray for them. But we did not ask them to come." The priest spoke in a clipped, almost mechanical way. Max wondered if that's how he talked to God. The nuns had said nothing at all. Maybe they'd taken a vow of silence

"Sisters," he said. "What about you?"

One of them, the youngest, spoke up. "We're thankful for your concern, but we're in no danger. The Huks are against you and your guns, not us. If you leave us in peace, we'll be fine."

"What about my men?"

She looked at the priest. “Perhaps we can help them, but not if you stay here.”

Max was at a loss. He couldn’t force them to go with him. He knew the launch would be discovered at first light, if not before. It was time for him to get back to the ship and let others make decisions.

The harsh voice came from the church entrance where the lieutenant’s body lay. Max ducked behind the altar. “What’s he saying?” he called to the priest.

“He says to throw down your weapon. You should do that. Then we can try to save you all.”

The car slows automatically for the sharp curve that appears through the windshield. “Why didn’t you do it?” she asks him. He realizes she knows what will happen.

“My grandfather…” he says.

“What about him?”

“He waited and the boy died.”

“You never told me about that,” she says. “I don’t know the story.”

The voice from the door said something else. “They will shoot us,” the priest told him, “if you don’t surrender.” A man holding a machine gun stepped into the church followed by three others with rifles.

“You’ll do this every time,” he hears Hallam say.

“Get down,” he yelled and shot the man in front. The others ran behind some benches and fired at the altar. The priest fell along with two nuns. The third woman managed to get back behind the stone with him.

“We have to get out,” he said. “Is there a back way?”

“I can’t leave them.” She wasn’t much older than him. Her accent was mid-west.

He gripped her wrist. ‘They’re dead, and we will be as well. We need to move.”

She pointed to the rear wall. “The sacristy door is back there. Then there’s another door to the street.”

His hands grip the wheel tightly.

"How far was it?" she says.

"Maybe thirty feet."

There was no protection between the altar and the wall. He thought they'd never make it. He was thinking about a try for the side door, when he heard the click of her rosary.

"Pray for me," she said, and stood up. He reached for her but she'd already stepped out from behind the stone. He heard her say "The Lord is with me," and then call out in their language as she walked toward them.

"It was a sacrifice." She reaches over and flicks the wiper switch as the rain begins to fall.

"Yes," he says. "She looked back at me. Then they shot her once, but she didn't fall. I turned and crawled to the sacristy entrance."

"It was her choice. You realize that."

He nods. He can't understand why the wipers aren't making a difference, then he realizes he's crying.

"It's alright, Max. You didn't know her."

"When she looked back I saw my mother's face. I didn't know her either."

He heard another shot as he got outside. They thought he'd run straight for the river, so he moved through some back streets and downstream. He could hear them shouting below him as they hurried to the wharf. Would they know how to start the launch? After he reached the northern edge of town, he climbed down through the forest to the water. There was enough current to help him as he swam for the ship. The leeches were all over him.

"We never did get those other sailors," he says. "The captain reported them as missing in action."

He drives on through the rain for awhile. "She was going home," he says, then corrects himself. "She was home. What the hell happened?" He turns to the woman beside him, but she too has vanished.

Later the sun is out as they drive past Big Sur. There are deep, heavily forested gullies leading down to the ocean. The car moves at the same slow speed.

"Do you remember the beach?" she asks.

The short black curls have been replaced by long blonde hair that tumbles over her shoulders. She is younger than his wife and a star in her own right. He met her on the set of their big hit about a bank robber who couldn't give up the game.

"Of course I remember." It was back in the days before the state park. The beaches were empty on weekdays, and they'd camped and made love in the dunes, swimming afterwards in water so cold it would take an hour in their sleeping bags to get warm.

"I loved you so much," she says. Her voice is neutral, but he blinks at the past tense.

"When did it change?"

"When you came back from New Orleans. You talked about the movie you'd made, but nothing else. I got the idea you'd lost and found something at the same time, and were trying to figure out what it was. But there was no reaching you."

It was a great role. He knew that as soon as he'd read a few pages of the script. He was a pool hustler down on his luck who found a manager with connections. They traveled from city to city along the Mississippi always heading for the delta. When they made it to New Orleans, a big game was arranged with Louisiana's best played by a screen legend from the thirties who really could shoot pool although he was approaching seventy. Everything went smoothly until the hustler got involved with a heart-of-gold girl. He betrayed her by sleeping with the over-sexed wife of a southern aristocrat who'd bet a lot of money against him. Besides the legendary actor, there was a strong cast. The good girl was a striking up-and-comer, and the unfaithful wife an established femme fatale with sultry looks. Max slept with both of them, so the sparks that flew in certain scenes had real heat. From the beginning everything clicked on set, but a reckoning with the city was inevitable.

When he mentions the affairs, she shrugs. "You always did that. It was a price any of us paid to be with you."

"I'm sorry," he says so genuinely that she is encouraged to take a chance.

"Can you tell me what happened down there?"

"I'll try."

"I thought you'd been there before. When you told me about your role, you said, "'I'm going back to New Orleans.'"

"Did I? Are you sure?"

"Yes, because I asked you when you'd visited, and you said when you were a kid. But when I tried to ask a few more questions, you shut me off. You never talked about your childhood, so you'd given something away you hadn't meant to."

Through the windshield he sees his mother lying in her bed. She is talking to him about a fairy land. Slowly, piece by piece, the buildings around Jackson Square come into focus followed by a pair of hands dealing cards onto the cobblestones.

He knew his father was dead. The year he was discharged from the service and living in San Diego a letter arrived that had been forwarded from Montana. It was from Clay's lawyer in New Orleans who wrote that he had passed away that spring and left Max $50,000 to be paid out in annual installments over ten years. Would he please update his address every year, provide banking information, and indicate when he wanted the first portion paid. The lawyer also said he'd been left a rather valuable book called *Birds of America* by John James Audubon. It would be sent when the address was confirmed.

This death didn't hit him as his grandfather's had. The old man had died while he was in the Philippines. As near as Max could figure he was eighty-one or eighty-two. It was almost a year before he got home on leave and went to the cabin gravesite by the rushing water. There was no headstone, just a small pile of rocks at the end of an earthen mound grown over by wild grass. He'd held his grief in check on the gunboat, but wept openly by the river where the .45 lay rusting in the current. There had never been any first name, and Max wondered again about the 'R' on the holster. Nothing in the spartan cabin

provided any clues, so he carved a simple inscription on a wooden marker that spoke to what he knew.

Boon

Grandfather of Max

d. 1946

"And you never tried to contact your father before he died?"

"He had his lawyer send hundred a month to Montana, but he couldn't be bothered to say anything to my grandfather or ask about me. It was like neither of us existed except to take his money. I just wanted to forget about him."

"But you did take the $50,000."

"He was dead. So I said 'fuck it,' I wasn't doing him any favours he'd hear about. I needed a stake. It took me to New York and paid for the Actors Studio."

"Did you go to his grave?"

A fog closes in around the car and the windshield becomes a roiling screen. On it he sees the road sign: ***Natchitoches***

The shoot took six weeks. He was on-set most of the time, but had a few hours off here and there when he wasn't sleeping or in bed with one of the actresses. One night he walked into a club on Chartres Street and asked the barman if he'd heard of Clay Boon, the poker player.

"Everybody knows the Kid, man. He was a legend in this town."

'The Kid'? Max thought of the aging actor who could still handle a pool cue. But he was going to lose to the hustler in the film. Had somebody younger and faster come after his father?

"I'd like to find out some things about him. Do you know anybody I can talk to?"

"Who's asking?"

He hadn't been recognized. Maybe because it was too dark in the bar. Maybe because the barkeep didn't go to movies. Either way he wasn't going to give his name.

"He was family."

The man looked closely at him. "Yeah," he said. "I can see it. You want to try Pat O'Brien's place over on Bourbon. Pat must be pushing eighty now but I've heard he still gets in there most nights."

The place wasn't large, but he didn't feel crowded with the thirty people or so who were talking softly or listening to the jazz singer on a tiny corner stage. He asked for Pat O'Brien and was pointed to a table. The short, white-haired man was neatly dressed in jacket and tie and had a bottle of mineral water with a glass in front of him.

"You're Max Boon," he said.

"Yeah, that's right."

They shook hands and O'Brien asked him what he was drinking. Max ordered a Jax.

"You look like your father. But I can see your mother too."

"You knew my mother?"

"They met in this club. Margot was singing right over there. No stage then. The Kid showed up and asked me who she was."

He wanted to ask what she was like. The Jax came, and he took a swallow. "Was she good?"

"Yes, she was very good. It was tough to break in those days. Still is, I guess. But she was on her way. She fell in love with him, though."

"What happened?"

"Well, he was a strong guy. Knew what he was after and how to get it. She wanted to move in with him, but he wouldn't let it happen. The cards came first."

"How long did it go on."

"Couple of years. Until he got into the big game with Baudry Cain."

"Good player?"

"The best there was for a lot of years. The Kid gutted him and became the champ. But your mother left before it was over. She told me you were on the way and he didn't love her enough to take care of the two of you. Oh, he would have given her money. That wasn't important to him."

Had his grandfather known any of this? How could he?

"Did he try to stop her?"

"She left a letter for him. I think it was a goodbye that left the door open. But he was too busy with Cain. After he won that game the world was his oyster. Pretty hard for him to give that up and go to Cincinnati. I'm not saying he shouldn't have. I'm just saying there wasn't much room in the Kid's way of life except for the Kid." The barman came over and O'Brien signed off a tab.

"He came in and told me when she died. Said the best place for you was Montana with your grandfather. That was the first time I heard where he was from or anything about his family."

"What was she like?"

"Margot? She was sweet. But sharp too. And a great set of pipes. She knew the blues like the back of her hand. Bessie, Big Mama, Sippie Wallace, all of them. Too bad she never cut a record. I think if she'd stayed she would have got a deal. Your asking the question means you're still not sure about things. Listen, Max, she cared more about you than about being second fiddle to a card-shark. She left because your father would have made it obvious to you that you didn't matter as much as the next game. It's not pretty, but that's how it was. Felix and Snap Beans are still around. Felix was his manager for awhile, and Snap played a lot of cards with him. They'll tell you." O'Brien finished his mineral water. "On the other hand…"

"On the other hand?"

"Well, some people saw a different side to him. Maybe the side Margot fell in love with. You could ask them."

"Who are these people?"

"The ones who buried him. Belle LaCour and her husband Augustine."

He met Felix at the *BonTon* Café off Canal Street a few days later. He'd just finished shooting the scene where he took down the old pool player and now the rich aristocrat was going to come after him. It bothered him that the seventy-year-old actor could make his own shots while he had to have a local expert stand in for him. All of it was make-believe, of course, but he was used to doing his own stunts, and that always made it seem real while it lasted. As he stepped back from the table and let the expert take over, the fakery seemed more obvious.

"I like that one about the G.I.s in Korea," Felix said. "You sure took out that Chink platoon."

"Thanks."

"Where'd you make that? It looked awful cold."

"Northern California mostly. You're right, it was cold."

"Well, Max Boon! It wasn't until I saw you on the screen that I put two and two together. The Kid never mentioned you, and of course it was too late to ask when you got a reputation. Who would have thought his boy would become a star? But, then, he was a star too."

Felix must have been in his mid-seventies. Already overweight, he ate several beignets covered with powdered sugar while they talked.

Max asked what he'd never asked O'Brien directly. "How good was he?"

"I never saw better, before or since. The cards liked him. He seemed to know where they were all the time. And there was nobody cooler at the table. He made even Baudry Cain hot under the collar." Felix gave a raspy laugh. "That old man never knew what hit him. 'Course the Kid was in trouble after that."

"Why?"

Felix told him about the Carollas. "But he paid Old Sam off just like he said he would. Took him a bit over six months. After that they didn't bother him. That's part of the reason your mother left, though."

"What you do mean?"

"Carlo, old Sam's son, was sweet on her. In fact, there were some who said she'd got rid of his kid. That was before she met your old man. But Carlo was at that table with Cain. He got burned like he ought to have known he would. I think if Margot had stayed he would have found a way to get some revenge. The Carollas were a nasty bunch."

"How did you feel learning that about your mother?"

"I wasn't angry at her but because it was too late to talk about it. I was sad for her, though. She had no one, except maybe Alice, she could talk to. And that made me angry at my father."

"Did you get anything else from Felix?"

"Just a blow-by-blow of the big game. It was obviously the highlight of his life, and it took him places when it was over. He never worked for my father again, but he was on retainer for quite a few wealthy card-lovers for a long time. Made a few minor careers, it seems, but nothing to equal the Levee Kid."

"That was your father's nickname?"

"Yeah. Felix told me he said he was from St. Louis and worked on the river there. Never mentioned Montana. Anyway, this Baudry Cain died not long after. Apparently he made some big mistake at the table before he lost to my father. Felix said that hurt him more than anything else. I wasn't interested in Cain so I asked him what my father was like away from the table. He said he never really knew. No one got close to him."

"How did your father die?"

"He was on an old plantation near a place called Natchitoches. The old Cajun called Snap Beans told me about it."

Snap Beans was as tight and wiry as Felix was loose and swollen. They sat in a club called Maylie's in Bucktown that was made up like a big ship's saloon with life preservers on the walls and fake portholes above the polished oak tables. Behind the long bar on the side wall was an ornate mirror with carved mermaids at either end. A band down front was playing some sort of country-rock tune.

"This was a much simpler place when the Kid and I played here," Snap said. "Not as clean, maybe, but more *bien rangé* if you know what I mean."

"Felix told me about Baudry Cain. I want to know what happened to the Kid after that."

"All the big games moved down to Pontchartrain from the city. The Country Club, Milneburg's, Tranchina's, they were the places to be. The Kid took them over. Everyone wanted to play him after he gutted Cain. He had twenty good years or more. Never lost when it mattered."

"You think he was happy?"

"Happy?" The Cajun held the word on his tongue as if trying to taste its meaning. "Made a lot of money, and had more than a few women, beautiful ones, black and white. But I couldn't tell about inside. He didn't say nothin' about himself. Didn't talk 'bout

you.” Snap took a sip of his bourbon and smacked his lips together. “And you, Max Boon? You happy?”

“How did he die? He could only have been around fifty.”

“Yeah, not so old. Never got to be like Baudry Cain and have the young rooster cut him down. He got sick. Some kind of cancer maybe. In his stomach. It came up fast and he was gone in just a few months. When it was nearly the end he got on a bus and went up to Belle. You have to ask her now. She still there last I heard.”

Scene: French Quarter bar, 192-

Early morning. A couple sits at a table, a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses between them. The card player is medium height and weight. His fingertips are on his lap pressed together to form a steeple on its side. The singer has short hair and high cheekbones. She looks out the high window and hums a blues tune, beating time with her hand on the table. He watches her without moving.

“That’s why I’m leaving.”

He doesn’t say anything, but never takes his eyes off her.

“Because you don’t want me or the baby.”

“I want you.”

“We’re not alone anymore.”

“We could be.”

“That’s what you don’t understand. I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want to be one of the women I sing about.”

“Listen. I’m just not ready yet.”

“You never will be. The cards are all that matters.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? When I told you, you looked at your watch. The big game was waiting.”

“What did you expect? I couldn’t walk away.”

“What if I was dying? Would you walk away then?”

“Don’t be stupid. Of course I would.”

"I'm dying now. You want me to kill the baby."

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"Okay, what are you saying?"

"Look, if you want to have it, go ahead. I'll give you whatever you need to raise it. I just won't settle down, that's all."

"You'll stake me, in other words."

"If you want to put it that way."

"I'm not a bet. Neither is he."

"He?"

"Let's imagine he's a boy." She smiles. "A Jack of Hearts."

"Now who's betting?"

"You're right. I won't call him 'Jack.'"

"So where will you go."

"I'll go home. Back to Ohio."

For the first time he looks away. He picks up his shot glass and tips back his head to drain it. "When?"

"A day or two. I've already given notice at the club. There's not much to pack up, is there?"

"I guess not."

"What will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"With your life. Oh, I know you'll find another girl. That's not what I'm talking about. I mean you can't play cards forever."

"Why not?"

"Where's home for you? You've never told me. But you'll have to go there one day."

He squints and looks past her shoulder as if there's something there he can't quite make out.

"Maybe you should tell me about your family."

"Why?"

"Don't you want your son, the one we're not calling 'Jack,' to know where he comes from? My parents are dead. Will he have any grandparents on your side?"

"There's my old man, if he's still alive."

"Where does he live?"

"I'll let you know."

Now it's her turn to drain her glass. "No you won't. Something made you leave him behind."

She holds up her hand, palm out. "Yes, I know. That's another story." She takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. "I'll fill in the gaps, I guess." She pours him another drink, then stands up and walks to the door. There she stops, but does not look back. "If it is a boy, what do want to call him?"

He looks at her for a long time, but doesn't reply.

"What about his grandfather's name?"

He smiles. "He had more than one."

The door closes behind her. He takes out a deck of cards and shuffles them over and over. Then he cuts the deck and turns over the Jack of Hearts. A blues tune is heard as the scene fades to black, a woman's voice singing.

"*When I was just a little young boy*
Papa said, 'son you'll never get far,
I'll tell you the reason if you want to know,
'Cause child of mine, there isn't really far to go."

When the shooting wrapped up Max hired a car. He couldn't find a sports model and had to settle for a sedan. It wouldn't do much above sixty, and there was quite a bit of traffic in the morning heading up to Baton Rouge, so by the time he turned west to Lafayette and eventually took 49 North it was past noon. He was still on the coastal plain and marveled at the lushness of the land. He could tell a spruce when he saw one, but there were flowering trees with multi-coloured petals that he couldn't name and different shades of grasses by the Red River. Along the banks he saw herons resting on one leg, and wondered how far they'd travel from the sea. He'd never cracked that bird book his father had left him but promised himself he'd find the answer to this question at least.

There were hawks and plenty of meadowlarks to remind him of Montana, though they were smaller here, and he didn't think they migrated all the way to the Bitterroot Valley.

The sign at the entrance to Natchitoches said 'Est. 1741' and some of the houses off the edge of the main street, with their gables and wrought-iron balconies, looked like museum pieces. He saw several antique stores and restaurants that advertised Creole cooking, but, despite his hunger, he stopped only at a gas station to ask directions to the old plantation Snap Beans had mentioned. He had to backtrack a few miles then turn off on a well-kept dirt road that wound beside a tributary of the Red. It eventually took him between two stone pillars and past a wooden building called 'Old House' according to the plaque. The grounds were well-kept, and he saw groups of people moving through the oak trees on the river side. The size of the house surprised him. There was a balcony running along its second floor and a hexagon tower on its west side that blocked some of the afternoon sun. There were several cars parked in the gravel drive. As he got out of the sedan, a tall, brown-skinned woman who looked in her late sixties came out on the porch.

"Are you Belle LaCour," he said.

"Yes, I am," she replied. "And you're Max Boon."

When he smiled at her recognition, she said, "No, I haven't seen any of your movies. Snap Beans let me know you'd be coming. But you could be your father standing there when he was young. Please come in."

They went along the entrance hall and turned into a book-lined room with French doors leading out to a garden and the river beyond. "I'll make some coffee if that suits you."

Snap Beans had told him a little about her. She'd been born on this plantation, ran a brothel in Bucktown for years, then went home and got married to a childhood sweetheart. She was left the property by a white woman, and turned it into a Creole Education Center. People came from all over to look at the books and rebuilt houses and soak up the atmosphere. "'Course they like to soak up Belle too. I ain't seen her in a long time, but I know she's still a beautiful woman. She and the Kid were an item for awhile." Snap sighed. "Then she went home and he went to the top."

The Cajun was right about her looks. Even years later, Max could see the attraction for his father. That didn't explain, though, his coming here to die. When she was in the

kitchen he walked over to the bookshelves and saw many titles about Louisiana and the Creoles. They were old and he didn't want to risk any damage, so he left them alone until he saw John James Audubon's *Birds of America* staring back at him. It was heavier than he remembered, but he could see it was the same volume exactly, though perhaps in better shape than the one his father had left him. Opening it he found a typed list of state birds. The Brown Pelican fittingly belonged to Louisiana, but strangely the Missouri Meadowlark stood for Montana.

"Did you know he was born in Haiti and raised for awhile in France?" She was carrying a tray with two steaming mugs and a bowl of sugar. "I'll get some milk if you need it."

"Audubon?"

"Yes. He was a Creole, you know. Son of a French sea captain, some say a privateer, and his Creole mistress. If he hadn't been sent to America when he was eighteen he would have been in Napoleon's army. What a loss that would have been."

"My father left me a copy of this book."

"Did he? I'm glad. Clay wasn't much of a reader. But near the end he would sit in a chair by those doors with the Audubon on his lap. He talked a little about you, Max, how you were with your grandfather and better off for it. In his way, I know he loved you."

"Not enough to keep me with him."

"No," she said, "not that much." She sipped her coffee and looked off toward the garden for a few moments. "He was a man alone but not lonely, your father. The same strength that made him who he was kept others at a distance."

"Like my mother."

"Yes, like your mother. But I don't think he ever made promises to her he didn't keep. She would have known from the beginning that he was driven to be the best poker player there ever was, and no one could get in the way of that." She smiled to herself. "I would have brought him here with me if that wasn't the case."

"What about your husband?" There hadn't been any signs of him, but Max assumed he must be working on the property somewhere.

"He's gone. Three years ago. But that's not what you meant, is it?" She explained their childhood relationship and how surprised she was to encounter Augustine in town

one day. “We hit it off pretty quickly. But, if I’d been with the Kid, there wouldn’t have been any sparks. I shouldn’t put it that way. If Clay had come here he would have left the Kid behind.”

“Is that what he finally did?”

“Yes, I think so, though he couldn’t do it entirely, of course. No man can let go of his past completely. It’s just that your father began to realize, even before he came here to die, that his past was larger than he’d ever wanted to admit.”

“How do you know?” That was why he’d come here himself, wasn’t it? To find something of that larger past beyond even what his grandfather had told him? At least he could depend on what Boon had given him. Max was the name his mother had wanted him to have, so when he changed his name from Anderson to Boon at the Actors’ Studio it wasn’t any refusal of her but an embrace of the old man’s integrity.

“I’ll tell you,” she replied. “But first let’s go for a walk by the river.”

She led him out the French doors and across the broad expanse of lawn. It would make a great film set, he thought, but whatever his father had found here was private, and Belle’s ancestors were part of a story that was larger than anything the big screen could provide. She was quiet as they came over the brow of the sloping bank and saw the cabin.

“Welcome to my true home,” she said as they approached it. “It’s where I was born and lived as a girl.”

Clearly it had been restored, but so naturally he could have been looking at her house as it was at the turn of the century. It was built of pine boards that had been left to weather. The roof was covered with wood shingles and one side was overgrown with moss. There was a small stoop outside the door and two steps leading to the ground.

“We used to jump down from the top,” she told him. My cousin liked to go off the side into a pile of mud until my mother told him he wasn’t allowed inside unless he cleaned himself up. He was killed in the first war. All that mud to die in.”

Inside was one room. There was a big bed with straw pallets nearby, a table with two chairs and a wooden bench alongside, and a counter with bowls and utensils. In one corner was a big woodstove with an oven.

"One like that kept us warm and cooked the best meals I've ever had, including in the Quarter." She sniffed. "I can still smell the fresh-baked bread and gumbo simmering in the big pot."

She took him over to a framed photo on the wall. "There's my family. I'm the little girl in pigtails." She laughed. "I hated having my hair braided. But I loved the ribbons. Those are my parents and grandparents, and there's that cousin I was telling you about. He's beside my older brother and sisters."

"Are they still alive?"

"No. They went north before I left for New Orleans, and I never saw them again. My grandparents died not long after that picture was taken. My mother and father from typhoid fever just two years later."

He looked at the proud faces and strong limbs. He had no such picture, not even of his grandfather. Alice had given him a small photo of his mother as she boarded the train east, but he'd lost it somewhere between Montana and the Philippines. "You're lucky," he said. "Lucky to know where you came from and to have it there always in front of you."

"Yes, I am" she said. "They were slaves, you know, my grandparents. They weren't badly treated because they were Creoles, but it was a mark on them all their lives." She reached out and touched the glass of the portrait. "I've always romanticized this place. Things worked out for me in ways they wouldn't have imagined."

There was another, smaller photo of a young white woman beside the family one.

"That's Miss Annie when she was young," she said, anticipating his question. She left me the plantation. But it was your father who paid off her debts and made the Centre possible."

She'd tell him the rest when she was ready, but he didn't feel hurried by this place. They walked out and around the cabin, and made their way uphill to a grove of oaks. There were tiny reddish flowers on the branches. "Did you know that on one side of the branch the flowers are female and the other side they're male? When I was a girl I used to wonder how they got together. They don't actually, at least not on the same tree. The male pollen fertilizes the female flowers on other oaks to make acorns. Not much different from us, I guess."

There was space between the trees as they circled through them, and he could see the grave-stones on the edge of the grove facing the river. The three side by side were those of her parents, Antoine and Suzanne LaCour, and her husband, Augustine. She pointed out Miss Annie's grave close by. He read the words on her stone below her dates: *Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow*."

"Is that from the Bible?"

"No, W.E.B. DuBois."

Max hadn't heard of him.

"He was of Creole descent and a great teacher. There's a book in the house by him called *The Negro*. It tells the story of the slave trade and African contributions to the world. Miss Annie knew it by heart. She was one of the few white people I've known without prejudice. None that I could see anyway. Those words on her stone are meant to say that she accepted in her day what most whites couldn't." She bent down and touched the stone. "What most still don't," she added.

Then she drew him by the arm to a stone that was off by itself beneath the low branch of an oak. "He didn't feel he belonged with the others," she said, "though I would have been happy to put him with them."

Clay Boon

The Levee Kid

1900—1950

She drew another picture from her jacket pocket. "I took this when he came up before the game with Baudry Cain."

Max stared at it and was floored by the resemblance. He could have been looking in a mirror. He'd wept for his grandfather, and now he cried for his father. Belle held him as he did.

"What did you find there, Max?"

The sun is out and the morning air blows through the car's open windows. They must have stopped for the night, but he has no idea where. His mood has lightened, as if he is finally approaching a destination, though he can see from the road signs that they are just south of San Simeon so L.A. is still several hours away.

"I thought I'd found my father. It was a peaceful place for him to be."

"But…"

"But I discovered he'd been searching too, and I still had a long way to go." In the bright light of the windshield he sees Belle in the room of books and hears her words.

"Your father told me a story."

The sun was going down, and they had walked back to the house through the scent of the oak flowers and the call of whippoorwills from the river. After supper they sat beneath the books again.

"I brought a divan in here when he was too weak to climb the stairs. He slept a lot and ate a little gumbo. I'd bake fresh baguettes and he'd make one last all day with a cup of coffee that I'd keep re-heating. Augustine would read the newspaper aloud, but Clay liked him to hold open the Audubon book so he could see the drawings of the birds. One evening he told us about your grandfather and a Mexican village. There were two parts to his tale. Perhaps you know the first part about the seven gunmen and the bandit leader called Fuentes?"

"No," Max said. "My grandfather was good with a gun, and he told me about a big ranch in Texas where he worked as a kind of private guard protecting the herd from rustlers. I know he killed a man there, and the circumstances bothered him a lot. I didn't get much else from him about his early life. By the time I was old enough to push him about it a bit, it was too late. He died the year after the war when I was still overseas."

She told him about Boon, another gunfighter named Reese, and five more hired guns back in 1890. Max wondered why his grandfather had kept the tale from him. The sides of right and wrong seemed much more clear-cut than in his story of Hallam and the Comanche boy. Fuentes was a killer who raped women and shot down any man who got in his way. Hallam, unrelenting and even murderous, was working on the side of law and order. What his grandfather did in Mexico made him a kind of hero as far as Max was

concerned, whereas his shooting of Hallam seemed personal in the end and was too late to save the Indian. It struck him that the story of the seven would make a great film, though there'd have to be a huge amount of editing and re-writing. He asked Belle to go over certain details again. How Virgil threw his knife, how Federico faced down Reese in the clapping game, how Reese lit the fuse of the dynamite at the cave, and, most of all, what his grandfather did and said.

"Twenty dollars each," he exclaimed when she'd finished. "My father won more than that in poker games before he left Montana."

"You know it wasn't the money. It was the chance to keep being what they'd always been, free of restrictions and able to defy the odds. Clay would have understood that. From the little I've heard about your movie roles, the men you play would understand too."

She was right. His film characters always sought to move freely despite violent efforts to restrain them. As for his father, he'd made the table space an open territory where the rules were like Boon's code with his .45—you didn't shoot first but you made sure your own shot was lethal—and chance was just another player to be challenged. What about himself, though? What had he really done except pretend to be fast with a gun or a champion at pool. His grandfather hadn't had anyone writing his lines for him when he said to Reese, "I've never shot anyone down in cold blood" and neither did the Comanche boy when he spoke his own name. The Kid's poker face wasn't something he put on for the camera but a self-command that told others who were trying to act out their hands it was a losing proposition. Why did he want to turn the Mexican story into a film? Why not put his grandfather's words about the village in their own pouch of the past like the bead he'd always carried with him?

"Is that what you did, then?" she asks.

"It's what I wanted to do, but Belle had more to tell me."

In 1946 Clay was in San Antonio for the first time, playing in the company of an oil magnate and his invited guests. He'd been to Dallas and Austin before but never this close to the border, which was only 150 miles away at Laredo. He hadn't thought about

Boon's Mexican story for a long time, then one of the guests spoke about his hunting experience in the Sierra Madres.

"We got lots of deer in those pine-oak forests. But we were after jaguar. Found their tracks, heard them at night, but never saw them. Once you get past Monterrey it's isolated as hell up there. You don't want to go too far off the track by yourself."

"What about the locals?" the oil-man asked. "Didn't they give you any help with the cats?"

"There aren't too many locals up in the mountains, except as miners. Lots of pesos underground so they didn't want any guide work. The valley villages haven't changed much since the Spanish invasion five hundred years ago. They don't like outsiders."

What was the name of that place where the seven went? Santa something. In the morning he asked his host if he had a road map of northern Mexico.

"Thinking of a little hunting yourself, Kid? I can lend you a good weapon."

"Thanks," he said. "More like an exploration. I've never been down there before."

"It's another world," the man told him. "Nothing you'll recognize."

He didn't know where they'd crossed the Rio Grande, and his father hadn't mentioned any larger places in Mexico except for Monterrey to give him some direction. But the mountains were clearly marked and the roads as well, running like spider lines through the green and brown topography. The ride from the border on horseback had taken almost six days. From the map's scale chart he figured it was just over a hundred miles from Laredo to Monterrey. Even if they hadn't gone that far south, they'd covered at least fifteen to twenty miles a day over very rough ground. He had no idea of the path the old outlaw trail followed, or how much of their time had been spent in mountainous terrain. He scoured the map. Santa Maria, Santa Anna, Santa Cristina. None of these matched his memory. Well, he'd take a train to Monterrey and see what he could find. A break from the usual would do him good.

It was an overnight trip, and as he lay in his bunk and listened to the snores and farts of other passengers he asked himself what he meant by 'exploration.' What was he looking for anyway? If he wanted to find his father, why didn't he go back to Montana. The old man was probably still alive, though he'd be around eighty now. And what about the boy he'd sent to his grandfather? Max would be twenty or twenty-one. Did they ever

think of him except when they got the money? Probably not. He didn't dwell on the past, so why should they? His father would have been interested in his success with cards, but he knew his reputation wouldn't have made its way across the high plains and into the Bitterroot Valley. Besides, he'd want to forget his son had killed a man, wouldn't he? Then he thought about Boon's own violence and wondered if that saloon death so long ago might be the only reason his father would keep him in mind. So what was this trip about? By morning he'd figured it had to do with the power of the story he'd been told as a boy. His old man had recalled things in such detail, and as he went over them in his mind he could see the village street again and hear the noise of the gunfire as Fuentes and his men tried to escape the trap. He could taste the dust raised by the horses as he rode with Boon and Reese to the cave where Fuentes died. He could imagine what it must have been like to take a stand against the odds and not give anything away. He knew about such stands, but he also knew his father would have beaten him in this particular struggle. He wanted to get closer to that fact, to understand, as he'd said to his father when he left the ranch, what would make him lose.

In Monterrey he bought a more detailed map that showed dozens of villages in the valleys of the Sierra Madre. Roads branched off the major highway that skirted the edge of the range, then tributaries to those wound their way through the coloured shadings until they stopped at a name or simply in empty space. He went over them carefully, starting with those within a fifty-mile radius of the city and moving outward. Maybe the village was too small. Maybe it had disappeared before the roads could reach it and bring it into the firm grasp of the twentieth century. Maybe his father had misremembered the name. No, that wasn't possible since he hadn't forgotten anything else. Then he found it about seventy-five miles northwest as the crow flies, a dot like any other, without distinction except for its place in memory that was larger than local history. Santa Eulalia.

With some difficulty he managed to rent a truck, a flat-bed normally used to haul vegetables from outlying farms, the man told him. He'd been given his name at the train station, and expected to find a garage or small business of some kind. Instead he ended up at a market stall negotiating the price in broken English with a chubby Mexican who said he had another trucks just like it and could spare this one for a few days. It would cost the

senor ten American dollars a day plus gas. No, he had never heard of Santa Eulalia, but the drive into the mountains would be beautiful in this season. "*Es muy grandé*," he said. "Lost is easy."

Clay followed the paved road northwest for two hours, then, finger on the map, chose a dirt road that seemed to lead most directly to the village. But he'd underestimated the roughness of the trail, and the worn tires didn't give much grip on the loose stones that scattered down steep hillsides whenever he touched the brakes. The market man had been right about the beauty. The sky hung like a deep blue curtain above a crowded landscape of whites, ochres, and greys that painted valleys, foothills, and mountain peaks. Although it was early summer he climbed into shadowed zones where he could see his breath in the clear air. Then he'd drop into gorges where a hot wind dried his mouth seconds after he'd sipped from his coffee thermos and made him long for the cold. Boon hadn't described much of the ride, and he wasn't even sure if this was close to the route they'd taken. Probably not, as the road twisted with the contours of the ridgelines that the horses would have crossed without much swerving. He passed through several villages that gave no clue as to their identity. Each time he would stop and ask someone, a farmer with his mule, a group of old men outside a bar, once even a shy *senorita* and her protective mother or aunt, "Santa Eulalia?" And each time they waved him forward with big arm motions as if he still had a long way to go. Finally, in late afternoon, with the sunlight splitting into fragments on the jagged edges of a western peak, a man pointed to the ground at his feet and said, "*Aquí es Santa Eulalia*."

"What were you thinking when you found out you were there?"

"That I'd come to an end, not a beginning."

"But you were wrong." It is not a question.

"Yes."

He looks over her shoulder and sees his own face, old and young; his father's in the picture Belle showed him; and his grandfather's after he had thrown his gun in the river. They are superimposed on one another. "It's a trick of the camera," he says.

"Tell me about the beginning, Max."

The oil man was right. It was another world. But he did recognize it because it wasn't so different from the Montana town he'd known as a boy or even from the dirt-street memories he had of Abilene. Except the main track wasn't torn up by horses into a muddy swamp, and there was no garbage or waste strewn around. He saw a woman with a short-handled corn broom sweeping the dust in front of her door and a young girl sprinkling water after her. Halfway along the street there was a one-storied building indistinguishable from the others but for the tables and chairs in front and a battered sign whose words he couldn't read. Across the road a small stone church sat like a sentry. It looked newer than the other buildings. There were no other vehicles. He parked in front of a broken hitching rail with an old bell above it.

Inside the *cantina* a group of men were playing some sort of domino game, clacking their pieces on the table as they waited to make a move. They nodded at him through their cigarette smoke, watching his progress to the bar without turning their heads. He hoped at least one of them spoke English. The barman grinned at him in a friendly way and said, "You're a long way from anywhere, *senor*."

When he told him that almost sixty years ago his father had been in the village, the man asked immediately, "He was one of the gunfighters?"

"Yes, he was."

"Él dice que su padre fue uno de los yanquis gunfighters!" he shouted to the others. They left their game and gathered round him, slapping him on the back, and saying, *"Bienvenido amigo"* over and over.

"I am too young to have been there," the barman said, as if his middle age wasn't obvious. "But it's a story we all know from our fathers and grandfathers." As you can see, not much happens in Santa Eulalia, so the killing of the bandit leader Fuentes by your father and his friends even so long ago is not forgotten."

"From what I understand, your grandfathers helped them."

"Yes, they did. And some died as well. Along with four of you. I mean, of your *paisanos*, your countrymen."

"I'd like to talk to someone who was there, who's old enough to remember."

"Of course, *senor*. I will take you myself to Federico."

"Federico! He's still here?"

"Yes, *senor*, only now he is an old man. Not so old maybe. I would not dwell on that with him."

They walked to a small hacienda about a mile outside the village. "He married a girl, Pilar," the barman said. "She was mistreated by the bandits, but that made no difference to Federico. She died very young, and he married another. They had children and grandchildren. Sadly he lost her two years ago. But he is a strong man, and part of him, I think, always knew how to live alone. *"Hola! Federico!"* he called as they passed under an adobe arch in front of the house. A slim man with light brown skin and black hair barely flecked with grey suddenly stood in the doorway.

"I'm Clay Boon," he said to the man, putting out his hand.

"Federico Juarez." His grip was easy, but his eyes studied Clay carefully.

"El hijo de un gunfighter,*"* the barman said to Federico. "He will show you the graves, I know. *Adios, senor*."

"Please come in, *senor* Boon."

"Call me Clay."

He accepted a glass of rum and looked around the main room. There were photographs of Federico with a smiling woman and many children, several of them taken at different times. In another picture Federico stood beside a young woman dressed in black. She was beautiful, but Clay read the reserve in her expression.

"Do you have children?" Federico asked.

"Yes, I have a son, but he always lived with his mother and grandfather. I haven't seen much of him." It didn't seem difficult to mention Max for some reason. Maybe because his grandfather had been in this village and fought with Federico against Fuentes.

"Tell me," Federico said," about your father. Manuel says he was a gunfighter." His slight emphasis on the barman's name suggested he was waiting to be convinced.

If the men at the bar had been spontaneous in their response to memory, this man faced the past's messenger patiently, measuring him warily and waiting for a false move. Close to the chest, Clay thought. Very close. He decided the only way forward was to tell him what he knew.

He described the ranch in Montana and how his father had told him the story of the village over a period of time, usually in the bunkhouse after his chores were done, but

sometimes when they took a coffee break out with the herd. Federico listened silently as he told of the ride up the border-town hill on the funeral rig, the arrival of the villagers, and the gathering of the five other men. He smiled when Clay mentioned the hand-clapping, but didn't say anything. With another rum in hand and the room lit softly by oil lamps Clay talked about the preparations made to trap Fuentes and his men and the subsequent fight on the main street. Federico had been part of this, but he didn't know what had gone on at the cave, not until he'd been brought there as a prisoner. Boon had cut him loose, and when the cave had been dynamited Boon, Reese, and Federico had ridden back to where the others had been ambushed. After that they returned to the village and learned of Fuentes' rampage. It was a summary of his father's drawn-out tale, but it still took him a couple of hours to go through, and in the end he apologized for getting anything wrong or eliminating matters of importance.

Federico waved a hand. "No, he seems to have told you everything that happened. I'm glad the story hasn't just stayed in this village. Your father, like all of us, kept his feelings to himself. Maybe his letting you know about his past was sharing what he could. When was the last time you saw him?"

Clay knew it would be difficult to explain this, but there was no way to avoid it. "1918. I'd killed a man over a card game a few months before. It was self-defense, but nothing seemed right about Montana after that." He told Federico about his mother in Abilene and how his father had found him by the whorehouse steps. "I was angry at both of them. Their way of life had brought me into the world, and I couldn't help but think the violence in my father had led me to try and take that man's knife away then use it against him. I was lucky there was a judge there as witness or I could have spent a lot of years in jail. I made a promise to myself I'd never lose control of a situation again." Federico refilled his glass and he swirled the dark black liquid in his glass before taking a sip. "That worked out at the tables, but not with the people I..."

"You loved?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah, I loved. I realized a long time after I'd left that the choices I'd made were all mine and that he'd tried to do his best for me. I guess I tried to show him that when Max's mother died. I put him on a train and sent him to Montana."

"So you kept your son from his father when you were cut off from your own."

It was a fact not an accusation, but there was a question it in he could try to answer.

"Let me tell you a bit of my own story." He spoke about his slow journey down the Mississippi and his time in Bucktown, mentioning Belle, but mainly focused on his life in the Quarter and the time leading up to Baudry Cain. "The cards were what I wanted then, and I wasn't interested in being tied down. There wasn't any room for Margot. And after Cain there was no room for Max."

"Is your father still alive?"

"Probably. He was sure tough enough to make it this long. I can give you his address if you want it."

"Yes, I would like that." He topped up their glasses. "What about your son?"

"I don't know where he is."

"But you could find out."

He was being pushed now, and didn't like it. "Yeah, I could find out."

Neither of them said anything for a few moments. He tried to deal with tumbling thoughts of what he'd just admitted.

"Why did you come here?"

Federico would be hell at the tables. He kept coming at you from different positions.

"I thought about that on the train to Monterrey. I once told my father I had to learn to lose in order to win. But I never learned to lose like I would have lost here or to deal with the cost of winning the way you and my father did. There's a kind of truth to it all that I've never found in the cards. I play a game for a living, and most of it isn't about the truth at all."

"There's more to it than that."

"How so?"

"There were six of us, not seven."

Clay shrugged uncomfortably. It was an important detail. Virgil, Martin, Henry, and Tom. Which one hadn't been here? And why would his father include him? Important but minor. Did it really make any final difference to the story? When he said that Federico shook his head.

"You don't understand"

"What don't I understand?"

"There was no Boon."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"There was no one called Boon with us. What did your father look like?"

When Clay told him Federico said, "It's Reese."

The rum glass slipped from his grasp like a useless card. He heard it shatter on the stone floor.

"Jesus Christ." Max exclaimed.

"Yes," said Belle. "It was still hard for your father to talk about it almost four years later."

"What did he do then, down in Santa Eulalia, I mean."

"What could he do? He asked Federico question after question, but the same answer kept coming back. What his father had told him was essentially true, though there were things Boon said in the story that hadn't come out of Reese's mouth. Your grandfather made them up. As for what Boon did, most of that belonged to Reese. The ride in the funeral rig, for instance. Reese did that alone. He was the one who cut Federico free. And he was the only one to ride away when it was all over."

"But Boon was different from Reese."

"Yes, he was. Federico told your father Reese was harder than any man he's ever known, and a man of very few words. But he also said every once in awhile when you'd catch him dreaming about something or looking off into the distance when everyone else was caught up in the moment. You had to look quickly to glimpse this through his toughness and authority. I think that's when Boon became visible."

"You mean he told the story the way he did to reveal Boon, the Boon in him I mean?"

"Yes, and it was your father who prompted him to do that. He wanted him to have a sense of who he really was. Not just a man who was fast with a gun, not just a killer. He was those things, and he wasn't going to deny them. But there was more to him than that. He saw the world in ways he couldn't or wouldn't share with other people, not until Clay came along."

"Why didn't he tell me the same story?"

"I don't know, Max. Maybe he thought he'd failed with your father, that there was more of Reese in him than Boon. After all, Clay killed a man, and then he left Montana and never saw your grandfather again."

"But my father finally went looking for Boon, didn't he? That's what Mexico was all about, wasn't it?"

"Like Federico said about Reese, the Kid was a man of few words. A month or so before he died, he told me he'd written a letter to your grandfather in Montana. But it was too late for both of them."

"Why did he wait so long to write?"

"I don't think what he learned in Mexico was some kind of magic cure for him. He was who he was to the end. So it took him a while to work out what his father had meant by the story and that Boon's son could write the letter that a son of Reese could not."

He wondered what the meeting between his father and grandfather would have been like and if it would have made any difference if he could have been there rather than in the Philippines. He'd changed his own name from Anderson to Boon, but there was Reese in him now as well. He saw his grandfather throw the gun-belt in the river, the pistol butt glinting in the sunlight before the splash, the small 'R' carved in holster leather.

"Clay said that Federico took him to the graves of the four men who died. The villagers still tended them as they did those of their own families. No stones, just wooden crosses that were replaced every few years. Their first names and the same death date, 1890, that's all. Apparently Federico walked around and touched all the crosses. Then he said, 'They stayed here, but I always wondered what happened to your father. I'm glad we both found out.'"

"There's something they didn't know," Max replied to Belle. He told her about the Comanche boy.

All this takes a long time to pass through his mind. It's dark now, and he's tired. She offers to drive, but he's afraid he'll sleep if she does and lose the waking dreams he wants to hold onto. Besides, she's fading and he knows another passenger will join him soon.

"Was that the last time you saw her?"

"Yes. I stayed in touch. She died ten years later. She left the property to a black university in New Orleans. Their Creole Studies program uses it as a summer campus. She left me this. My father gave it to her just before he died." He takes a smooth white pebble from his pocket and holds it up. "It's from Trail Creek," he says, "The beginning of the Mississippi."

In the end, the search took him almost a decade. He spent six or eight months a year making films on location in different parts of the country and occasionally in Europe. Some of the rest of the time he was promoting his roles, reading scripts, and trying to relax with his woman of the day or his few old Hollywood pals. The women weren't happy vacationing without him, and his lame explanation of wanting some time to himself didn't inspire either trust or contentment in their relationships. But he needed to know about the legitimacy of his grandfather's second story. Was Boon a younger version of Reese? What about Hallam? And where was the Comanche boy in all this, if there had been a Comanche boy? There was no place like Santa Eulalia to help guide him as it had his father, no Federico who'd been in the arroyo and could reveal the fact and fiction of that tale. The Brazos Tyler ranch, if it existed, had been over two thousand square miles in area. That made more than fifty miles of the property's western border that opened out into the vast territory of grassland, hills, and gullies of west Texas. His grandfather had said Hallam's gang had left the ranch far behind when they went after the stolen cattle. How far they had ridden and in exactly what direction he hadn't made clear.

One summer Max flew to Abilene, hired a truck, and drove south-west to Buffalo Gap. There he made some inquiries and found the ranch had indeed been real. It had been bought up back in the Twenties by a consortium of cattlemen who'd sold it about ten years later to the King family. There were no more small ranches in Texas, and this particular part of the King empire extended over fifty thousand square miles of the state. Oil, not cattle, was the money-maker now, but there were still vast tracts of grazing land open to the wind and sky.

The road to the old ranch site off the main highway south to San Angelo was a smooth, two-lane blacktop laid down in as straight a line as possible over the rough plain.

He drove it to its end at a chain-link gate where a security guard occupied a wooden booth attached to a shiny silver trailer. The head-high wire fence stretched away in the distance on either side.

"Do you have an appointment," the burly man asked. His voice wasn't unfriendly, just very confident.

"No, I'm looking for someone."

"Who might that be?"

"Mike Fitch." Max had been given the ranch manager's name in Buffalo Gap.

"Who wants to see him?"

He hadn't been recognized, which was fine, but he'd never intended to hide. The best story, he'd decided, would be to say he was scouting out a possible film location.

"Max Boon," he replied, and waited for the response.

But the guard just wrote the name down in a notebook, picked up a phone in his booth, and called the next sentry down the road. After a few moments he leaned out and said, "Are you an actor?"

"Yeah."

The guard spoke into the phone. He must have then pressed a button or flicked a switch because the gate slid slowly back, and Max was through. About ten minutes later he pulled up in front of a low concrete building surrounded by trailers that were replicas of the one at the gate. There was no sign of the two-storied timbered house strong enough to take a tornado that his grandfather had described. No bunkhouse and no corrals either. This wasn't the starting point he'd imagined.

The sign on the door, which he realized hadn't been on the gate, said North Texas Oil Inc. Inside a middle-aged woman behind her desk exclaimed, "You're Max Boon! I've seen all your movies!"

Max gave her the smile she expected, the one he offered to his screen conquests when he was about to move on. "Yes," he said, "but I'd appreciate it if you could keep my visit secret. I'm on a holiday, and I'd rather not have the press down here. You know what I mean, don't you?"

She regained her composure and assured him his identity was safe with her. Pointing to the office door behind her, she said, "Mr. Fitch doesn't go out to movies, so he

probably won't even know who you are. When I told him your name, he didn't even blink." She blushed. "Of course, I couldn't see him over the phone, but I could tell from the sound of his voice."

"That's fine. We'll just keep it between us then."

She nodded eagerly, then held out a pen. "Oh Mr. Boon," she said, "could you possibly give me your autograph."

Max winked. "You wouldn't want me to leave any evidence, would you?"

It turned out she was wrong. Mike Fitch did know who he was and accepted the film site explanation without question. "Lots of empty space out there with no oil rigs around," he said, after he'd shaken Max's hand and offered him a drink. It was just before noon, so the whiskey bottle the Texan slapped on his desk seemed a little premature. Max knew he had a reputation to live up to, though, and he wanted the man's cooperation. He sipped the scotch slowly and let Fitch convince himself of the worth of the Hollywood project.

"Obviously be a western," Fitch declared. "Still looks like the old west around here." He waved his arm to include all directions.

They talked about movie stunts over a second shot of whiskey, then Max said, "I'm not in any hurry. What I'm after might take some time to find and set up. I'd like to get a pass of some kind from you that would allow me to come and go over a couple of years."

"Just you?"

"Yeah, that's how I prefer to work if I'm going to direct. I have to see the real place before I can make the story real." He put down his shot glass. The liquor was starting to talk.

"Not a problem, Max. But you realize you might need a horse. Once you get off the tracks it's pretty rough country. Horse'll take you anywhere, though."

"I thought I'd get a trailer, drive as far as I can, then mount up."

"We've can give you one of those and the horse. You can get started today if you want."

Max thanked him. "And Mike," he added, "I'd appreciate if there was no publicity until I find what I want. If the film's done here, of course, the North Texas Oil Company will get screen credit."

"Don't you worry about that. I'll put the word out."

He spent the next few days driving along the western perimeter, trying to see if there was a jumping-off point, some kind of prairie sign that connected what his grandfather had told him to where he was now in time and space. It all depended on the truth of the story, a truth that apparently belonged to Reese. What continued to bother him was Boon's role. Did he exist anymore than he had in Mexico? But there was no sign, and he realized he'd have to search in a grid pattern, marking off slices of territory from his map as he went over them, looking for the boulders at the head of the arroyo and a flat-topped rock somewhere near the exit. It was going to take a long time, especially as he could only get down here once or twice a year and because the distance he chose to go west was completely arbitrary. He could miss the site by a few miles or even a few hundred yards. What he expected to find after seventy years or so wasn't at all clear to him. A rotting rope over a cottonwood limb? A bead necklace?

When he returned to the trailer enclave, he asked Fitch if there were any ranch hands still alive he might talk to about the old days.

"I'll look into it," Fitch told him. "But I wouldn't count on going back much more than fifty years. That wasn't exactly cowboy and Indian days. They were still driving cattle back then, of course. So I guess it depends on what kind of story you want to tell."

"Haven't made up my mind yet." He gave him his card. "That's where you can reach me anytime."

Scene: Abilene saloon 1900

There are tables and chairs, a stairway leasing to second floor, and a mirror above a bottle-lined shelf behind the bar. It is morning and the place is deserted except for a couple seated at a table. He is a gunman. Medium height and weight, wearing faded pants, a black shirt, and leather vest. About thirty-five years old. She is a saloon whore, late twenties, long brown hair, dressed plainly as she is not on the job. They sit opposite one another. There is a coffee pot with two chipped mugs on the table between them The camera sees them in the mirror from a distance but then moves in to eclipse the mirror frame. Their entire conversation is a reflection.

"When are you going?"

"I don't know. He pauses. *"Soon."*

"Do you know where?"

"West, maybe. New Mexico."

"You got a job there?"

"I hear there's some work."

She plays with her empty mug, then fills it from the pot and takes a sip. "Hell, that's hot." She laughs and blows across the surface of the liquid. "Did you ever think of a different kind of work?"

He smiles. "Did you?"

"That's not fair. What else can I do? You need a license to teach school." She laughs. Can you see me doing that?"

"You could work in a store."

"So could you."

"Yeah, you're right. I guess we're both stuck with who we are."

After a long silence. "That's the trouble, Boon. I don't know who you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've never told me anything about yourself. Where you're from. Your family. Things like that."

"Why's that important? I've never asked you those questions."

"You didn't have to. You know I'm from Brownsville. I've got a sister and a brother there. Leastways a sister. My brother's in Dallas now. Besides, that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I don't really know. Maybe it's that you never seem to be completely here. It's spooky. I'm lying in bed with a man who's off somewhere else. It's like there are two of you."

She laughs. "Maybe more than that."

He drinks his coffee. "This isn't getting us anywhere. We've had a good time, but we both knew that's all it was. The best way I can say it is that I have to move. Maybe someday there'll be something or someone to hold me in one place, but not yet."

She holds the steaming mug in both hands. Her head is down, then she raises it to look across at him. "What if…

"What?"

"I'm pregnant. And yes, it is yours."

He looks past her shoulder, avoiding her gaze. "How far along?"

"Three months."

He sighs. "Then there's still time."

"It's that simple for you?"

"It's not simple, no. But I'm not a father." He pauses. "Or a husband."

"So just get rid of it?"

"Yes."

"What about everything that can happen if I don't?"

"Like?"

"Say it's a boy. You teach him things. Different things than a gun. So do I. He loves us and we love him. He grows up and has a child. Then you're a grandfather. I'm a grandmother. That's how it goes."

"Somewhere else, maybe."

"I'm going to have the baby."

"I can't help you."

He gets up and stands with his palm on the butt of his .45. He is about to speak, then thinks better of it. The camera slowly draws back to expose him in the mirror frame as he turns and walks toward the door. She watches him for a moment then cries out loudly, "Listen!" He looks back as she picks up her mug and hurls it at the mirror. The glass cracks but does not shatter.

"Whatever your story is, we're part of it. I'll make sure he knows that even if you don't."

The following winter a letter from Fitch came to his office. "I would have called," the oil-man wrote, "but it didn't seem urgent. I found an old guy whose father apparently worked on the ranch when it belonged to Bob Tyler back in the 1880s. He might have

something useful to tell you. He's in an old folks' home down in San Angelo. His name's Jake Allen. Here's the address…"

Max was busy in the Caribbean with a film about an American mercenary in Haiti, and it was six months after he received the letter before he was able to make it back to Texas, almost a year and a half after his first visit. Once again he flew into Abilene and took the highway south, past Buffalo Gap and the turnoff to the oil company site, down through Bronte, and into San Angelo. There was an air force base on the outside of town and a sign that pointed west to the Fess Parker birthplace. He was the actor who'd played Davy Crockett on the big screen, a role Max had auditioned for in the early fifties and thank God hadn't won. Parker had been identified with Crockett since then, breaking free only to play Daniel Boone in a short-lived television series.

He found the home on a quiet back street that ran along a ridge with a view of the plains to the south. Inside was quiet and clean, but Max felt confined by the hobbling and murmuring in the foyer, and reminded himself he had the money to avoid this kind of ending. And when he couldn't walk or talk straight they could take him up into the San Bernadino mountains and leave him there, like he'd heard some Indians did with their elders. He asked for Jake Allen and was pointed toward a bent-over figure in a wheelchair by a window.

When Max introduced himself the old man sat up straight and asked him for a cigarette.

"No, sorry, one of the few vices I don't have."

"Used to roll my own. Won't allow it in here. Like being penned up in a corral."

"Did you work on a ranch, Mr. Allen?"

"Call me Jake. Everyone else did." Max caught the past tense. "Yeah, sure I was on a ranch. My old man too. Taught me how to ride and shoot. Not much use any more is it? What do you do anyway?"

"I'm in the movies. Some westerns."

The old man barked out a harsh laugh. "Westerns? You mean like Tom Mix and the rest of those guys with the fancy hats and pearl-handled Colts? Hell, the only one that looked real was William S. Hart. My old man would have recognized him. Hell, I recognized him. Got a cigarette?"

Max said no, then interrupted right after ‘roll my own’ to say, “It’s your father I wanted to ask you about.”

Jake Allen stroked his chin a few times and looked at Max quizzically. “Who’d you say you were?”

“Max Boon.” He’d better get to things quickly or Jake would puff the imaginary cigarette into exhaustion. “Did your father ever tell you stories about his time on the Brazos-Tyler ranch?”

“Stories? He had lots of them.”

“Did you ever hear of a man called Hallam? Or a younger man called Boon?”

“You ain’t a lawman, are you?”

“No.”

“My pa had no truck with lawmen.” He paused. “Neither did Hallam.”

Max leaned forward in excitement. “Tell me about him.”

Once he got into the story, the old man never let go of the thread. It was as if he needed a script to follow to stay in the saddle. Max had known quite a few actors like that.

Hallam led a gang of gunfighters that took care of rustlers. They patrolled the borders of the ranch and were judge, jury, and executioner rolled into one. While they hung a few whites, most of their trouble was with Comanches. “Them Indians could sneak in and get a steer to walk away on air.” They’d take only a few at a time to avoid noise and allow fast travel, using a trail of arroyos to hide, places where they could ambush Hallam and his men. “Nobody bucked Hallam. He was ornery and fast with a .45, faster than anyone ‘cept…” The old man took two fingers to his mouth and sucked in his breath. Max could almost see the ash ready to fall.

“Except?”

“Well, this kid came along one day…”

“Boon?”

“Don’t know his name. Don’t remember if my pa ever said he knew.”

“Okay, what about him.”

Jake Allen peered at something past Max’s right shoulder and a sparkle came into his eyes. He began to talk in the first-person as if he was his father riding with Hallam. Max

was astonished by the role-playing that hadn't required any rehearsal. The story had obviously stayed with the old man like his grandfather's had with him.

"He was plenty fast as well. We all wondered if he could take Hallam on a good day. I mighta bet on that. Anyway, he rode with us. Did his work. Didn't complain. We liked him, but you could see Hallam kept an eye on him. He was young and there was somethin', well, kinda sizeable about the way he looked at things"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know. Kinda generous. Hallam could show a bit of that too, but he was tightfisted most of the time. I think everythin' would have stayed fine until the kid moved on one day, but there was this Indian."

Here it comes, Max thought, his heart racing.

"The kid got stabbed by some Comanche boy down a gully. He'd been after a calf down there and forgot to keep a lookout, I guess. By the time he got back to camp he'd lost a lot of blood. Hallam wasn't there to hear the story of how the boy got away, but he wasn't happy when he heard about it later. Didn't say nothin,' but we knew he thought the kid shoulda come back with a scalp."

"Is that what you did to them?" In the movies it was always the other way around.

"Hell yes. That's how Mr. Tyler knew we was doin' our jobs. Besides, them Comanches wasn't any better." He coughed and brushed some imaginary smoke away from his face.. "I seen some things…"

"What happened with Hallam and the kid?"

"Later on we tracked some pony and steer tracks into rough arroyo country. A white man goes in too far, he's liable never to come out." He stroked his stubble and pursed his lips. "That's what happened. The six of us were ambushed down there. They killed Waco, a mean bugger but mighty reliable in a tussle, then we killed some of them and scattered the rest, all but the boy. Hallam liked Waco, but he woulda done it anyway. He tied the boy's hands, put him up in Waco's saddle, and threw a rope over a cottonwood limb just like we'd done often enough before. But the kid hadn't been with us then. It was pretty clear this was his first necktie party. The Comanche said somethin' to the kid, his name I think it was, but I can't recall. That was when the kid told Hallam there wasn't gonna be a hangin'. Just then the Indian kicked the horse and took off. Didn't get very

far. A cottonwood branch whipped him across the neck and broke it right there. Hallam told us to take Waco and get on back to the ranch. He and the kid had something to settle, he said, and we knew one of them wasn't comin' outa that gully. Turns out we didn't see either of them again. Say, could you get me a glass of water from the sink over there? I'm kinda dry."

Max filled a cracked coffee mug he found in a cupboard. Jake had more to tell him.

"Thanks." He took a large swallow, then another, and let out a loud "Ahhh." He peered over Max's shoulder again. "Awful hard to say what happened. But they didn't kill one another, that's for sure."

"How do you know?"

"Because I went back a couple of days later. Mr. Tyler told me to when Hallam didn't turn up. I didn't like going down in that arroyo by myself, but I figured the Comanches was long gone. In fact, they'd come back after the showdown because the bodies of them we killed and the boy's body was gone. The strange thing was there was no sign of either Hallam or the kid either. One of them shoulda been there for sure. I rode down the gully a distance but there was only a pile of pony tracks goin' that direction. As for the way I'd come in there was too many horseshoe marks. I ain't no Comanche so I couldn't track anything from outa that mess. Mr. Tyler wasn't happy when I got back and told him. He'd lost his best man and two other fast guns and got to bury just one of them."

Max was puzzled. His grandfather had told the same story as this old man, except for the ending. In his version, he'd outdrawn Hallam and killed him with a shot to the throat. Then he'd told the others to take the body back to the ranch and had ridden out of the arroyo with the dead Comanche boy. He touched the leather pouch in his pocket. That's what the glass bead was about, wasn't it, to make the story true? But if it wasn't completely true, what had happened to Hallam? Had his grandfather buried him in the arroyo or up above? But why would he have paid Hallam the same respect he offered the boy in the end? After all, he'd taken a stand to defend the boy against Hallam's lynching rule. The boy had died because Hallam was going to hang him, his neck broken by the branch as it would have been by the rope.

"The kid's name, you still can't remember it?"

"Naw," Jake Allen said. "People back then put on names to suit them. Gunmen most of all. Hallam wasn't no different."

"What?"

"That's what he called himself. But there was a small 'R' carved on his holster."

They are only a short distance from L.A. The traffic is all around them in the evening light. He wonders how it would have been to approach this place on horseback when it was an 18th century village. He knows Hollywood was just a collection of adobe huts until the 1850s.

A scene from the first studio film made there forms on the windshield. Two cowboys in a bar with a dead body between them.

"It was called The Squaw Man," he tells the blonde, "directed by DeMille. Why was the first film a western, and why are we still making them?"

"It's still a man's world," she says.

He sees a man called Reese light a dynamite fuse and toss it into a cave-mouth. He sees a man called Boon do the same thing. He sees a young version of his grandfather shoot a man called Hallam in a cottonwood grove at the bottom of a gully. He sees Hallam who looks like Reese gun down a faceless young man in the same gully and ride away. The camera pans across the gully and settles on the young man's body. Slowly his face comes into focus. It is Max made up as Boon.

'That's a good answer," he says. "But I don't think it's the only one."

As he drove north from San Angelo to catch his plane, Max went over the end of Jake Allen's story. It had to be the same holster that his grandfather had thrown in the river. So, was Hallam Reese? That would mean he'd survived the arroyo showdown and ridden into a Mexican village years later. After that he found Clay and eventually told him a story about Fuentes and the American gunmen, just like he'd tell Max a version of Hallam and the Comanche boy. But why did he invent Boon? Was that the name of the kid he'd shot down in the arroyo? Did he feel guilty about it? Is that where Boon came from? A simpler explanation would be that the kid—Boon—had won the gunfight. He'd shot Hallam in the throat, taken his gun-belt, and made up a name to fit the 'R', a

necessary disguise. He hadn't invented Boon at all. He'd created Reese. Max shook his head. It was all crazy. Somebody had walked out of that arroyo and into the role of his grandfather. He needed to find out who it was.

"Was he any help, "Fitch had asked when he stopped in on the way to Abilene.

"Yeah, I learned a lot about how the ranch was run and the rustling business."

"That what the film will be about?"

"Maybe. I need to get some more details straight about the country first. I'll be back in the spring for one more look.

In fact he came back twice and worked the grid pattern over a few hundred square miles. Although he found some likely arroyos, there were no rock formations close at hand. He knew eighty years or so of erosion wouldn't have dissolved the boulders. If Jake Allen's story handed down from his father was true, one of the gunfighters had to be buried somewhere between the arroyo and the flat-topped boulder. But he had even less chance of finding a gravesite than of discovering the place where the Comanche boy had lain beneath the sky. Even if he found one or the other, what would it tell him about his grandfather and the trio of figures in his makeup? Finally he gave up the speculations and made the film.

He didn't want any top-down interference so he formed his own production company, Bucktown Inc., which gave him complete control of financial and creative decisions. He just wanted to tell the story of the kid and Hallam without his own image getting in the way, so he stayed behind the camera and found two other actors to play the leads. His script focused on frontier justice and made a distinction between the rustlers who stole cattle for money and the Comanches who took them for food. He opposed the older ranch-guard leader, who was a hard ally of progress on the Texas plains, against the romantic figure of the younger newcomer to the gang who always put the individual ahead of the group. When it came to the showdown in the arroyo, though, he filmed two endings. In one the younger gunfighter died because history had dictated things that way. The cattlemen had won, the Comanche had been herded onto the Clear Fork reservation, and the solitary gunman had been eliminated. The final moments of the film showed the victor riding up onto the plains with the vanquished lying back in the gully beneath the

hanging body of the Indian boy. In a crane shot that showed a vast expanse of land, the leader was seen catching up to the other gang members as they headed back to the ranch and more defence of law and order. In the alternate scene, the confrontation was as his grandfather had described, and the young gunfighter rode out of the arroyo with the body of the Comanche slung over the neck of his horse. In the last shot of this version the camera circled immediately above the table rock then moved farther and farther away so the figures of the two young men, one dead and one alive, were spun smaller and smaller until they disappeared.

"I'm just making it up as I go along," he told the cast and crew. Like *Casablanca*." Everyone laughed, but they all knew he'd have to choose.

He disappointed Fitch by filming along the Pecos River close to the New Mexico border in West Texas. It was there he hired his Indian extras and a young, untried Comanche to play the boy. He also found a tribal advisor to make sure details of dress and behavior were accurate. It was this man who told him about Albert Looking Cloud when the shooting wrapped.

"He's getting close to a hundred. And it's not only me who learned about the old ways from him. He's a one-man Comanche history book."

"So he goes right back to the time we're trying to film."

"Yeah. After the Civil War most Comanches were forced onto the reservation in Oklahoma. After a few years of near-starvation there they learned that buffalo hunters were destroying the herds in Texas. A group of them left Oklahoma and returned to the Texas plains. By the end of the 1870s the buffalo were gone, and many families surrendered to the Clear Fork and the Brazos River authorities. Albert and some others stayed free for a few years living off stolen cattle and hunting small game. Most of them died out there, but Albert survived and finally made his way to a government home not far from where he was born near Buffalo Gap."

The old Comanche's face was surprisingly smooth and unlined, and his skin so clear it seemed as if you could reach through and touch the bones behind. He sat in a rocking chair covered by a striped blanket, nodding and clicking his tongue as Max was introduced. This was in the house of his granddaughter on the Colorado River west of

Sweetwater. The advisor accompanied Max and said that while the old man could understand English he'd speak only in Comanche. Translation, Max thought, was like a close-up shot that eliminated anything outside the tight frame.

Albert Looking Cloud spoke in a soft, slightly singsong voice. "I've told him you're a famous actor," the advisor said. "He wants to know why you act."

Max bought some time by sipping from the cup of strong tea he'd been served. It seemed as if everything was happening in slow motion. The old man didn't blink as he watched him bring the mug to his lips then lower it to sit on his knee. The long grey braids resting on the blanket hem rose and fell with each breath. This wasn't a tabloid interview that demanded a quick, easy response, but it might be a test he had to pass, a rite of passage that would gain him the wisdom of the elder. That's what happened in the movies, wasn't it?

The old man spoke again. "He says it's just a question that has many answers in the space of many moments. He wants you to choose a moment."

He thought of Boon or Hallam dying so the other could live. "I act so I can be in more than one moment at a time," he said.

"Like a shape-shifter," Albert said in English.

"Yes," Max replied. "Like my grandfather."

He asked if Albert remembered the Brazos-Tyler ranch, hoping he'd known the country around it well enough to offer some advice about the arroyos and rock formations or just about the practice of leaving a dead Comanche open to the sky.

"I remember stealing the cattle so we could eat. White men followed the cow tracks. They hung us if they caught us."

Max told him his grandfather's story of the arroyo. "I don't know if it happened this way," he said when he was finished. "Maybe if I can find the place."

"The moment that will not be more than one."

"Yes, that moment."

"I don't know if it exists," the old man said. "But I can tell you something about your grandfather's story."

Max listened to the singsong voice as it took him on, not back.

They had refused to return to the reservation, even though the buffalo were gone. It was not a way of life for a Comanche warrior. There you were forced to grow corn and beans and live in wooden cabins like whites. On the prairie they had a rifle and some cartridges for protection, but made bows and arrows for hunting. There were no women to make bannock, but they ate wild berries and boiled the roots of plants to keep them strong. The western herd of the ranch could spare a steer or two, so they took them in the night and went through the arroyos to lose the gunmen who pursued them like mad dogs. They never went to the herd alone, but one day He-who-has-the-prairie-inside-him took a calf that had wandered off. He was tracked into an arroyo by one white man, which was strange because they never rode alone either. This white was more unusual than that because when He-who-has-the-prairie-inside-him wounded him with a knife, he drew his gun but did not shoot. Instead he let his Comanche attacker go. The boy had tried to laugh at such cowardice, but Albert knew he was puzzled by the white man's generosity.

"Many days or weeks later we stole three steers and six whites came after us. We ambushed them in an arroyo and killed one. But they killed two of us and made a prisoner of He-who-has-the-prairie-inside-him. I ran away with two others. We heard shots but hid in a small cave near another arroyo. The next morning we returned and found our two dead and the body of one white man. There was a hanging rope over a cottonwood branch."

"Was it the same white man as before?"

"I cannot tell you that for it was the only time I saw him." Albert smiled. "Besides, all whites looked the same to us. I can tell you he had no gun-belt at his waist. We who wanted weapons were disappointed. We followed the horse tracks out of the arroyo. Four horses headed back towards the herd, but one did not. That horse carried a heavy load because the hoof-prints went deep into the soil. Several miles away to the west, the trail led us to a large boulder whose top looked cut off by a giant knife blade. We could see something had been dragged across the ground to the bottom of this rock. Then the horse tracks went away to the north much lighter than before. I climbed up the rock and found He-who-has-the-prairie-inside-him lying on the top. It was plain some care had been taken to make his body peaceful. He had not been shot, but his neck was broken. I remembered the hanging rope and wondered if he had been taken down after suffering

that death. I wondered why one white would bring him here and why another had been killed but not by us. This man you say was your grandfather had respect for us that most whites did not, even though he was wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I have seen your stories that show how Indians left their dead beneath the sky. But, like you, Comanches buried those they lost in the ground. We took him back to the arroyo and gathered the bodies of our other friends. I looked at the dead white man and, not knowing how or why he died, thought he did not deserved to be eaten by coyotes. We carried him with us back to our camp. He is not in the same place as our warriors, but he is part of the soil now as well. Since I have heard your story, maybe I wish we had left him for the animals and birds."

"Maybe?"

The old man smiled again. "While we are alive, there is always more than one moment," he said. "We are all shape-shifters, Max Boon."

Max followed Albert's directions. He didn't want to see Fitch again, but still had the pass that allowed him on ranch land. So, with the horse trailer behind his truck, he drove west along the northern perimeter and turned south where a stone pillar indicated the corner of the property. The ground was rougher than the patches he'd covered a few years before, so he soon mounted up. Far off to the east was a snow-covered peak in the Palo Pinto range. Albert had told him that when the peak was hidden by a large rock formation he should head directly west. He would eventually come to deep pockets of arroyos. The entrance of each opened up without warning, but one would have two giant boulders sitting like the gateposts his grandfather had described.

It was huge country, and when he came to the first group of gullies he could see how difficult things were going to be. Looking through his binoculars he saw that his angled vision of so many rocks meant he'd have to ride up to them head-on before he could tell if they were side by side and possibly the markers he was seeking. But Albert had given him another clue. "When you've gone so far," he said, "that the mountain behind you is whole again from top to bottom you will arrive."

He kept glancing back over his shoulder. The rock outcrop he'd left behind got smaller and smaller. First the peak of the mountain emerged out of the top, then the broad slopes, and finally the base. He slowly scanned the area around him. The first rock pair he rode to turned out to be at least fifty yards apart with nothing but hard ground between. The next pair were closer together but joined by a low ridge of shale on which thistle and bull nettle grew. Fifteen minutes later he almost missed the entrance. The reason was the boulders were no more than ten feet apart and seemed like one rock until he was almost on top of them. He rode down a narrow slope that opened out into a sandy bottom where the cottonwoods roots tapped an invisible stream beneath. A hundred yards in was a clearing where the gunfight must have occurred. Everywhere else was thick with trees except for the remnants of a trail that contained some trickles of water. Men had died here, Comanche and white, but there was nothing in the earth or air to reveal that past, just one long white limb ten feet above the ground that might have held the rope. His father had been to Santa Eulalia, but this place was part of the tale Max had been told, and part of his grandfather, whoever he'd been and had become. He sat quietly for a few minutes until a grunt from his horse broke the silence, then he retraced his steps to the upper world.

Albert had said the flat-topped rock was directly west of the arroyo entrance, perhaps half an hour's ride away. Max moved slowly through the scrub-grass and blooming cacti with their yellow and orange flowers. A mule deer skittered in front of him and he heard the bark of prairie dogs at the entrances of their tunnels. They are always what they are, he thought, while we make ourselves up as we go along. He'd filmed the two endings, but he still wasn't any closer to discovering which one held the truth. There was a Comanche boy and someone had laid him out on the rock as Albert described, but was it the younger man who became Reese? Or was it a man who shucked off his Hallam mask after the gunfight with the kid? There was no straight line between Texas, Mexico, and Montana, just a storied landscape whose curves and chasms had shaped Clay and Max Boon and had probably never stopped shaping his grandfather.

He pulled up the horse and rested his arms on the pommel. It didn't matter which ending he chose, not in terms of his father's or grandfather's lives. Nothing could change now for either of them. The multiple roles his grandfather had acted out weren't any

different from the single role his father had insisted on playing right to the end. Each of them had survived the best way he could, and each of them had paid a price for that survival. And where was he, Max, in all this? He'd put on masks all his adult life and the cost had been steep. Too many women gone, no kids, a screen image that locked him into preconceptions of how to act in real life as Boon and Clay had done. But surely what he was doing now wasn't following a scripted role? His grandfather had never directed Clay to go to Mexico and meet Federico. He never knew that Max would put that altered story together with what he'd said about Hallam. He couldn't have predicted his grandson's ride to the rock where he'd left the Comanche boy.

Max nudged the horse forward and asked himself how much the personal mattered, after all. Maybe he was free to consider what they never had, but didn't the interweaving of all the stories—those of Boon, Reese and Hallam, Clay, Margot, and Belle, Jake Allen and Albert Looking Glass, and his own film portrait of different sides of his grandfather—become something more than the mouthpiece of particular individuals? His mind reeled with the possibilities. After awhile the horse stopped and he looked up and saw the table rock in front of him.

It was higher than he'd imagined, and he realized the time and determination it would have taken to get a body to the top. He dismounted and picked his way across the pebbly ground to the base, watching for snakes and remembering Albert had told him as he was leaving that the shape-shifter often lived in the fangs and stings of poisonous creatures. He would have little defence against rattlers or scorpions as he climbed, but while it was true Reese and Hallam had been venomous men, Max realized the shifter who was his grandfather Boon had let his stories become an antidote. He found tiny ledges for his hands and feet and scaled the rock.

There was nothing but the view stretching away in all directions and a fine sand powder that created different patterns as the wind blew it across the surface of the stone. He would never be sure who had been the winner in the arroyo, but whoever it had been had been decent enough to bring the Comanche boy here. There was no ending to the stories he'd been told, and his film homage could have no one ending either. After a brief fade to black as Hallam and the kid drew their guns, each firing a shot, viewers would see Hallam emerging from the arroyo superimposed over the figure of the kid doing the

same. Each of them would have the Indian's body across his saddle. He'd use what was already in the can to combine the two figures. In the final frame the identity of whoever stood beside the body on top of the rock wouldn't be clear. He himself would stand-in for the nameless gunman who still had so far to go.

Max took the leather pouch from his pocket and spilled the bead onto his palm. He watched it roll across his lifeline. Then he bent and placed it in a shallow fissure in the rock. The wind was blowing hard now, and the bead moved back and forth. But he had an anchor to keep it where it belonged because Clay deserved to be here as well. He placed the white pebble over the bead as he would a feather.

"It was a resolution."

"Yes."

"But it wasn't enough, was it?"

It is dark again and they are nearing Los Angeles. He looks across at the young model who came late in his career and was never a part of his film world. She had her own life and, like him, her own way of doing things. She smiles confidently and he realizes she would have had his child.

"You're right," he says. "I'd only found part of it all."

They weren't called Boon and Reese in the new script, but the two gunfighters were distinct characters just as they had been in the original story of the Mexican village. Of course, that story was too long for a feature-length production. He had two hours or less not six or eight, and, whatever his box-office draw, there was an eventual limit to his funds. So he decided to cut out the cave sequence and have all the action take place in and around the village. Fuentes rode in with his men, was trapped, escaped, and returned to wreak his vengeance. He was played by a Spanish-American actor who had specialized in villainous roles for most of his career, but whose classical training elevated his performances beyond the merely vicious and predictable. Max gave the roles of Virgil, Tom, Henry, and Martin to actors he'd hung around with when he first arrived in Hollywood and who'd been mildly successful in westerns and mysteries on television and the big screen. Federico was played by a young Mexican actor who had some training in

L.A. but hadn't done a film in English before. Max knew he was taking a chance, but he liked the kid's edgy attitude and the way he moved.

He'd always thought he'd do Boon himself, but now struggled with the fact it was Reese he also wanted to inhabit. How could he leave the hidden side of his grandfather to someone else's interpretation. There had to be a tension between the two men that each would use to his advantage and for the benefit of their struggle against Fuentes. They'd respect one another's strengths but be wary of them at the same time. He wanted their dialogue to sound sometimes as if it was coming out of the same mouth. He had to have not only his acting equal but his image equal playing opposite him. There were several proven actors out there who could more than measure up, men who, like him, combined a definite masculine weight with a suggestion of vulnerability, a cool surface with more than a hint of fire underneath. The problem was the competition between the stars would distract the audience from the scripted characters. It would be different if there could be some humorous or ironic banter between them, but Max saw the mostly unleavened darkness at the heart of his grandfather's tale. The split between Boon and Reese had been a secret that had shaped his own life and his father's, and it was woven into the violent shadow cast by Fuentes. While their relationship within that shadow would be the focus of his film, his own coming to terms with the secret meant he must play both lead roles. Before they moved to location in New Mexico, he called the cast together to announce his decision about his dual parts.

"You mean they're twins?" the Fuentes actor asked in a puzzled voice.

"No, but they are like brothers in a lot of ways. The make-up will show they're not related physically."

"You're taking a big chance, Max, that's all I can say."

"Maybe, but there's no other way to do it." He looked around the room. They were all guaranteed their salaries, plus a small percentage of the gross. No one but him could lose his shirt, not to mention his reputation.

The final version of the script didn't come easily. He based most of their exchanges on what his grandfather had reported, but he needed to find some key ways to emphasize that Boon and Reese were different sides of the same coin. If Boon's code of behavior that held more than a trace of morality never broke away from Reese's eye-for-an-eye

values, the reverse would be true as well. So it was Boon who clapped hands with Federico's character Manolo and announced "He'd be dead on the first day," and it was Reese who had the conversation with Manolo about settling down with the village girl and understood that "the dirt doesn't seem so bad when you're around her." In the end, because his grandfather Boon had buried Reese inside him, Max had Reese shot by Fuentes outside the cave. It was Boon who then forced the bandit leader into the cavern and lit the dynamite fuse. As Reese lay dying he said to Boon, "Make the most of it." Boon simply nodded. Federico stayed in the village, and Boon rode on alone. *"Vaya con Dios,"* the old man told him.

The actual playing of the two roles required some subtle camera work. For one thing, Max wanted Boon and Reese together on the screen at the same time, even if the lens was focused on one face. That meant doubles being used who were seen from behind or from a distance, and it meant shooting the same scene twice when the two men were talking with one another. He kept their exchanges short and infrequent with intense action on either side to hinder any viewer recognition of trickery. For as long as possible he wanted the deception to be invisible. It would be Max Boon playing Reese, and his name would naturally be at the top of the credits, but he swore the cast and crew to secrecy and had the best make-up group he could find transform him utterly in his role as Boon. This meant skin-tight plastic over parts of his face to change its contours, the severe altering of his nose, and never being seen without his hat pulled low on his forehead. The first time he came on set as Boon, no one recognized him. To complete the artifice he had a fictitious name inserted below his in the credits, Clay Anderson. On opening night everyone was asking about this unknown actor who stood his ground with Max Boon.

Inevitably his double role was exposed and the critics were furious. Those who had given rave reviews, concerned with their own betrayal, turned on him and the film. Only one suggested that the merging of two screen personalities was deepened by the disturbance of assumptions about a star actor whose identity was taken for granted. What Max himself had been after, the critics never considered. But audiences loved what he'd done and the box-office gross was higher than that of any movie he'd starred in previously.

What he discovered surprised him. He'd thought that by playing Reese without disguise he'd get closer to the side of his grandfather that had been hidden from him. To some extent this was true. Despite the changes he made between the script and his grandfather's story, Reese was still the hard, unswerving leader of the hired guns. Boon followed him for the most part, questioning some of his ideas and actions while remaining a man who reacted rather than made things happen. He could feel a softness, though not a weakness, in Boon's character, and he didn't know how he could defeat Reese if they ever met in a showdown. Reese would shoot first while Boon waited for some—what?—*feeling* before drawing his gun. But his mask of Boon in character complicated his view of his Montana grandfather as a strong, kindly figure whose efforts led only to his grandson's well-being. By camouflaging Boon and himself simultaneously Max found himself asking if any kind of acting could be without consequence. Through the mask he found himself grappling with the cost of illusion.

He'd continued to star in films, but never directed again. What he really wanted to capture was his visit to Belle's plantation that included his father's trip to Mexico. But how could he set that up without portraying the composite face of his grandfather in Montana and the entire saga of Clay Boon? How could he leave out his own search for the arroyo and his final gesture on the flat-topped boulder? He made some false starts, slowly realizing he'd already said what he could with a camera. He also knew that crucial parts of the tale had been put into words by those who'd cared deeply about their listeners. He'd always thought such speaking was a gift like his grandfather's speed with a pistol or his father's way with the cards, but now he sensed the gift was more attuned to Belle's voicing of her past to him and his father, or to his mother's singing the blues while his father listened. The sound and sense of their words were shaped by their loving something or someone deeply and wanting to share what mattered. He'd loved his grandfather when he'd been a boy, but it had taken him a long time to admit that love couldn't be separated from the blending of Boon, Reese, and Hallam. In their presence and hers, he'd taken off his mask on Belle's plantation. His father had done the same. Even if Clay had never learned about Hallam and the Comanche boy, Max had brought them together on the table rock. He'd become a speaker too, but those he cared about

could no longer be acted or directed for an audience of strangers, they could only be embraced.

Scene: A ranch house kitchen outside L.A. 196-.

The famous actor sits at one end of a long oak table. He is about forty-five, a little past the height of his fame, but not much. Lines cross his forehead when he frowns and crease his cheeks when he smiles, but his expression is confident and controlled. She is much younger, late twenties, with a presence to match his own. She sits a couple of chairs way on the side of the table and at an angle from him. He has to turn his head to look her in the eye. Either that or shift his chair, which he doesn't do.

"Why should I believe it's mine?"

"I don't care if you believe me or not. I'm here to tell you that's all."

"Why? You know I won't marry you. I told you I wasn't interested in that more than a few times.

And we didn't shack up either." He pauses. *"How much do you want?"*

"I don't want your money. But I'm going to have the baby."

"Better not to. Don't you think?"

"Why?"

"It wouldn't help your career."

"It wouldn't help you either."

He notices the 'you' rather than 'your career,' and purses his lips. "You don't want money, but you'd let people know?"

"I might want the kid to know."

"Know I'm the father?"

"Yes."

"So he could hit me for money."

"You can't buy or sell a relationship."

"So I should expect a visit one day."

"That'll be up to her." She laughs. "It could be a long wait. You'd be an old man by then."

He loses a little of his composure but struggles to retain it. She isn't looking at him and doesn't notice. But when he speaks she hears the difference in his voice and turns back to him. "Long waits turn into never."

"Why do you say that?"

"Let's just say I've waited before."

She is shocked. "You mean you've had a kid already?"

He rubs his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "No, but I've had a father."

"He left you and didn't come back?"

"My mother left him and didn't go back."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"What happened to her?"

"She died young."

"Then what?"

"I was raised by my grandfather."

"And you never heard from your father again?"

"Not directly, no. He used to send money. When he died he left me enough to go to New York and pay for acting school."

"What did he do?"

"He played cards."

"Cards?"

"Yeah, like poker. Apparently he was the best there was."

"What about your grandfather?"

"He was a different story. An ex-gunfighter."

"How do get to be an 'ex' in that business?"

"You live or die."

"I'm leaving now."

"Will you write to me?"

"Don't hold your breath."

"Will you tell her what you told me?"

"One day, maybe."

Sitting on the deck above the Pacific, he looks out to the deep water and thinks about the two letters, one from Mexico and the other from Natchitoches, vanished like the .45 below the rapids. The first might not have been written, and it wasn't clear if the second had ever been sent. They weren't with his grandfather's belongings in the river cabin, but they are visible now in his mind's eye. He imagines Federico releasing Boon and perhaps deliverance for his father.

Santa Eulalia, 1946

Ola, amigo

It's been a long time, I know. Fifty-six years. I was nineteen then and you weren't that much older, though everyone called me 'the kid.' You'll wonder how I found you. Well, it was your son Clay who told me. He came to the village just over a month ago and gave me a lot to think about. I guess I gave him a few things to ponder as well. You told him our story when he was a boy, and he never forgot it. I know something of why he left you in Montana and never looked back, but it was clear you were very important to him. He called you 'Boon' and said you were one of the seven gunmen who helped the village. It wasn't too difficult to figure out you were playing two roles in your story, and I've been thinking about why for the past few weeks. With your permission, I have some thoughts to offer. But first I want to tell you about the village after you left.

When I decided to stay behind it was mainly because of Pilar. That was the name of the girl you and I spoke about that night outside the *taverna*. Despite my ability with a gun, I was a little afraid of you. You weren't predictable like the others. I don't mean I always knew what they were going to do or say, but most of them—it's a Mexican expression too—*que llevaban sus corazones en sus mangas*. Your heart stayed inside your shirt most of the time, but once in awhile it was visible. You remember what you told me? You said, "The dirt doesn't seem so bad when you're around her." It reminded me of who I was, not who I wanted to be with the gun. So I stayed because of that dirt and Pilar. But Fuentes himself had raped her in the cave, and she was forced to watch

while her friends were raped by the others. I thought I could hold her and help her after it was over, but I was wrong. She was never the same, and the marriage I wanted never made her happy.

I have asked myself through the years if our coming to the village was responsible for her sadness, and now I believe in some strong ways it was. Please do not misunderstand. It is almost certain Fuentes would have taken her one day even if we had not arrived. He never hesitated to take what he wanted. The younger girls had been spared so far, but the stories from other villages were whispered in every house. We weren't just guns for hire, though, we were saviours, and if the villagers knew some of them might die, they also felt Fuentes would not be allowed to claim their children in ways more terrible than death. We won the fight in the end, but we let them down. When we rode to the cave we left the village wide open. The people were terrified by the reality of his vengeance when before they had only dreamed of what his punishment might be. It was worse when he took their daughters because their mothers and fathers had allowed themselves to believe the *gringos* would never let it happen. So I stayed as well to make sure no new Fuentes would ride in again and to help them go on with their lives. For some I was an unwanted reminder. For others I was repenting, which, in a way, I was. And repentance was a comforting thing to be part of. For them it came from God. But Pilar was lost, maybe even to God. Eventually I realized I could not save her. Long after she died, I courted another girl and married her a year later. We had daughters and sons. They are all scattered now. Mexico City has swallowed them without much of a backward glance. I do not complain. That is the way of things. I think you understand this.

That heart of yours was shown in other ways. You remember the clapping game? The first time we played you were pitiless. That was good for me. I had to think about why I froze when nothing was at stake but my pride. You reminded me in a harsh way that proud feelings were not enough to cover a man in a dangerous situation. I had to forget those feelings and make the situation my own. So I surprised you and made you play the game on my terms. It was simple. I won, you and the others respected me, and I did not doubt myself again. But I have also thought about this over the years, and I now I am sure you let me win. I was fast enough to put my gun between your palms before they met. But I saw the way you drew your .45 on that boot-hill funeral wagon. My own clap could

not have beaten you. But just as you wanted to cut down my foolish pride, you also wanted to make sure my self-respect was complete. So you hesitated a split second and your gun barrel hit my fingers. After that you knew I would never let you down.

Your son was also very proud and wanted to control every situation. That worked for him at the card tables, just as it worked for us when we were using our guns. In ways, it seems to me, he bet his life just as we did. There was no constant danger, even though he mentioned some criminal threats behind his biggest game, but when he wasn't playing, or thinking about playing, he didn't have much ground to stand on. Not much dirt. So there wasn't any room for others. As for you, you took him away from his own mother, a woman you had abandoned. He was angry about that. You told him the story of the village, and no matter how you tried to play down who you really were, he tied his killing of his poker opponent to what you had done with your life. The cards were like a loaded gun in his hands—win or lose everything became the code he lived by. You hadn't lied to him with your story. You'd just expanded on the truth. But when he found out there was no Boon, it forced him to look at his own story in ways he had never done before. I confess now I told him the truth about his father for the same reason you first played the clapping game with me. I also confess I don't know if he has the strength to come back and find his self-respect by finding you and your grandson. But if he was not prepared to try with Boon, perhaps he will try with Reese. If I have been wrong in this, I am sorry. But you gave me what I would never have found on my own. It is the same with him.

You thought Boon was a better version of yourself, the one who talked with me about Pilar, the one who didn't like to shoot a man unless he drew his gun first. That part of you watched and listened to everything that went on while Reese was busy being the leader, the ruthless one. I don't think there was a split in you. I think both of you existed at the same time. If I could paint a picture your son and grandson would see the faces of Boon and Reese together, the blood of the gun and the blood of the heart. I wish I had told your son that.

Vaya con Dios

Federico

Natchitoches, 1950

I don't know what to call you. I don't know if I am writing to a ghost—because you are dead or because you are Reese. I'm dying here on an old plantation. There is a Creole woman taking care of me who I love as I should have loved Max's mother. She'll bury me here. It's where I finally want to be. I went to Mexico four years ago, to your village and met Federico. He told me there were six of you and that Boon didn't exist. For a long time I thought you'd betrayed me again. The first time was when you left me in Abilene, even though I know it's not reasonable to say that because you didn't know I was going to be born. But I felt it was true, and it was only an accident you found me after she died. Everything about Montana was an accident, even my killing of the easterner wasn't done on purpose, and I wanted to leave to make something intentional happen in my life. I can't make out why I was so good at cards only that I was given it, like your speed with a gun. But it made me more certain than I should have been. I told Federico your story was always there to remind me how people lost even though they won and what the price could be. That's why I went to Mexico, to meet what had always stayed in my mind, despite my endless need to win. I was angry when I learned about Boon, but I admit he was the reason the story stuck. He exists because you told him the way you did. Reese was coldhearted like me, but Boon was somewhere inside him. That's what you gave me in Montana. I see that now, and I wish it wasn't too late. As for Max, I'm sure he was raised by Boon too. Maybe you told him the same story, and maybe you had better luck with him. I have nothing to leave him but money, but I hope you'll tell him who I was. If not, I don't know who will.

Clay

He stands on stage in a huge auditorium in front of a giant screen. The house lights are down, and the empty rows of seats stretch away into the darkness. Then, one by one, the seats fill up, and he sees shadowy figures sitting and watching.

"What are you looking for?" he asks them.

"Max Boon!" they all cry at once.

The young Max turns and walks into the screen to deafening applause. The aging actor rides through silence into his slow sunset. In between a .45 hammer clicks again and again like a rattler's warning, a card is turned over with a sharp slap that stings the cheek, a Brown Pelican rises from the delta mud and turns into a beautiful woman, and a man without makeup speaks to him so he finally understands the words.

"Sometimes you have to begin again," he hears his grandfather say.

J.A. Wainwright was born in Toronto in 1946. He is the author of three novels, five books of poetry, and two biographies. His first novel, *A Deathful Ridge: a Novel of Everest,* was shortlisted for the Boardman-Tasker Prize in Mountain Literature in 1997, and his biography of the Canadian painter Robert Markle, *Blazing Figures,* was shortlisted for the Foreword Magazine Literary Prize in the U.S. in 2010. He is McCulloch Emeritus Professor in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.