

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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*Christopher Howley*

The Last Outlaw is a contemporary western in three parts that begins and ends in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Book One of the novel represents the bulk of this creative thesis. Also included is a short story, "Last of the Blood," which grew spontaneously from Book One's characters and situations. Book One represents approximately one-quarter of the projected length (120,000 words) of the completed novel. In structure, The Last Outlaw relies on the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell in Hero With a Thousand Faces, and upon the traditional Robin Hood legend; it also borrows heavily from outlaw lore of the American west.

**THE LAST OUTLAW:  
A CONTEMPORARY WESTERN**

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A Thesis

Presented to  
the Division of English  
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by

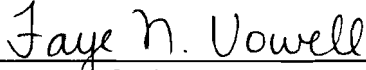
Max McCoy

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Officer Bill Tolliver of the Council Grove Police Department deserves special note for his help in gathering background material, as does John Hale White, president of Farmers & Drovers Bank.

Finally, I would like to thank--and dedicate this work to--three friends who have remained steadfast in their support: Dan Spees, James Keim, and Susan Pinkerton.

## PREFACE

The Last Outlaw is a contemporary western in three parts that begins and ends in the Flint Hills of Kansas. The bulk of this creative thesis is represented by Book One of the novel. Also included is the short story, "Last of the Blood," which grew out of Book One's characters and situations.

Research for this work began in the spring of 1993, although the idea which drives it is much older. It occurred to me several years ago, while driving the interstate late at night across the Flint Hills of Kansas. It was raining, and the drone of the windshield wipers and sound of the tires on the pavement induced a profound melancholy; I had the unshakeable feeling of being hunted, of running from some unknown dread that lurked behind me. This, coupled with reading accounts of the seemingly endless journeys of the long riders of western folklore, produced the idea for a contemporary western.

In structure, The Last Outlaw relies on the hero's journey as described in Joseph Campbell's Hero With a Thousand Faces, and upon the traditional Robin Hood

legend; it also borrows heavily from outlaw lore of the American west.

Stylistic influences include the work of Thomas Berger (Little Big Man), Charles Portis (True Grit), and Edward Abbey (The Monkey Wrench Gang). Although I would like to attribute the sometimes spare narrative style to the influence of Ernest Hemingway, my favorite twentieth century author, it is probably more the result of ten years as a working journalist. And, since Hemingway said that all American literature comes from one book called Huckleberry Finn, I have good authority to cite Mark Twain, whom I loved as a boy and continue to regard as my favorite storyteller.

The protagonist of The Last Outlaw is Jack Younger, a teen-aged descendant of the famed outlaw clan who is about to graduate from Council Grove High School. Jack is (to paraphrase Maurice Keen in The Outlaws of Medieval Legend) courteous, brave, and bears himself with a certain working man dignity. He is strong and resourceful, skilled in the ways of the outdoors and in the use of weapons; he is loyal to his country and he is conventionally pious." Principal features of the Robin Hood legend that echo Jack's experience are: a young man deprived of his land by evil men; rescue of the captured

outlaw from the sheriff; and the ultimate betrayal of the outlaw by a kinswoman. It differs significantly, however, in the ending: our outlaw survives the betrayal to make a clean getaway to Australia.

Book One, which represents only one-quarter of the projected length (120,000 words) of the completed novel, sets up most of the action that follows. Jack Younger is a state track star and he's in love with Susan, the daughter of the county sheriff. He also loves his grandfather and is devastated when the old man commits suicide after losing the family ranch to the Farmers & Drivers Bank. He is equally dismayed by the impending auction of the grandfather's Y-Bar Ranch, which is one of the largest unspoiled plots of tallgrass prairie in Kansas, and the disposal of the ranch's horses, which are sold for meat to a Japanese food companies. Also, early in the story, Jack attends the funeral of his older cousin, who has been killed in an automobile accident. At the funeral, Susan pulls Jack's longish hair behind his head and comments that Jack is a ringer for the dead boy.

In the climax of Book One, Jack walks into the Farmers & Drivers Bank with the (unloaded) Northfield Gun. The gun is a 130-year-old percussion revolver that

was carried by the outlaw Cole Younger on the Northfield, Minn., raid, and it was left to him by his grandfather. Jack wants to trade the gun, which is worth several thousand dollars, for the run-down family farmhouse. But before Jack can clearly state his intention, the manager sees the gun and trips the burglar alarm.

Book Two, as planned, is an extended chase scene, loosely following the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico, with the FBI always close behind. Along the way he picks up Susan, and Jack's best friend, Billy Worth--a member of the Indian tribe that inhabited the area around Council Grove and gave its name to Kansas--also becomes involved. There is at least a possibility that Jack may turn himself in and straighten out the mess, at least until the FBI pushes him to the breaking point; after Susan is nearly killed in an FBI ambush, he sends her home, then robs a bank in earnest for money to continue his war against the FBI. After a series of adventures which give a twist on many of the cliches of the mythic West--the modern cowboy culture, for example, is the endless series of eighteen-wheelers and truck stops that dot the vast landscape--Jack seeks refuge at the home of Billy's uncle, Carlos, a full-blood Kaw who lives near



Bitter Creek, New Mexico. Here Jack has a spiritual conversion (definitely not of the 12-step variety) which helps him understand his place in the universe. Emerging finally as a man in a difficult world, he agrees to a meeting with the FBI to discuss terms of surrender.

Book Three will be the shortest of the three parts and begins with the meeting with the FBI, on the bridge across the Kaw River. Of course, the special agent in charge of the case has no intention of letting Jack surrender. He knows there is undeniable proof that the original bank robbery in Council Grove was a misunderstanding; also, the Council Grove police chief, an old man named Tyman, has pointed out that the FBI shouldn't have even gotten involved, since no robbery took place and the Northfield Gun is a cap-and-ball revolver and isn't even classified as a firearm under federal law. In the middle of the bridge, with Susan and his mother looking on (but unable to hear Jack's conversation with the special agent), Jack is shot in the chest. He falls from the bridge and is washed away by the Kaw. Despite a bad wound and a massive search Jack manages to elude the feds, and make it to the home of his aunt. His aunt nurses him back to a semblance of health, cuts his hair, gives him the passport for his

dead cousin, and puts him on the plane to Australia-- while Chief Tyman, who of all the lawmen is the only one who knows what has happened, watches from the gate.

The Last Outlaw represents a radically different approach from my previous novels. The Sixth Rider, published by Doubleday in 1991, and Sons of Fire, 1993, are not strictly category westerns, but they take a rather conventional approach in point-of-view and narration.

The Last Outlaw is an experiment in both.

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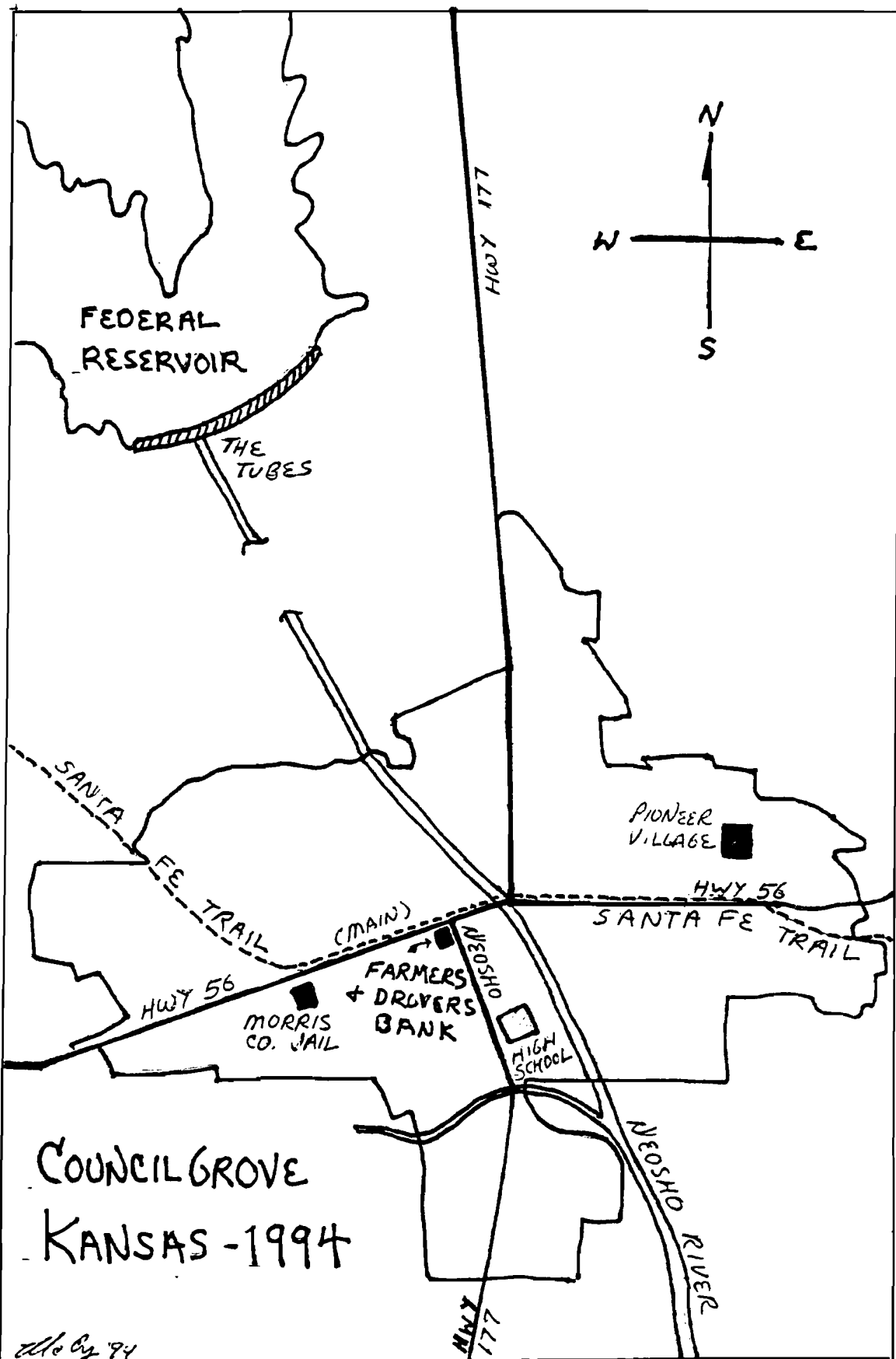
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### Last of the Blood

Billy Worth was the Radio Shack Indian. At least that was how he thought of himself during the far-off contacts he made on shortwave. He had built the radio himself, from a kit advertised in the back of an electronics magazine, with money he had made by mowing lawns. He would sit for hours hunched over the archaic-looking telegraph key, periodically tapping out CQ CQ CQ DE NORSE NORSE NORSE K in Morse, patiently waiting for a reply across the oceans of static. Depending on the ionospheric conditions, the time of day, and the amount of sunspot activity, he could expect his signal to bounce half a world away. Dawn and dusk were the best times, when propagation was particularly good for other countries aligned along the grayline, the moving band that separated day from night. The thinly paneled walls

of his cramped bedroom in his mother's mobile home in the Pioneer Village Trailer Court were covered with QST cards sent from shortwave stations around the world. But this evening, the beginning of the long night of the winter solstice, the 40-meter band was silent.

CQ, he repeated. Calling any listening station. DE NORSE K. This is November Zulu Romeo Sierra India. Listening.

NORSE, came a faint reply. NORSE DE KB6HT AR. Over.

Damn, Billy thought. A domestic--a California call sign. He was tempted at first to ignore it, because there was now a perfect grayline alignment between the Midwest and Southeast Asia. He was hoping for a contact with Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam. Oh well, he thought, he should have listened for a station he wanted instead of calling CQ, but etiquette demanded an answer. At least it was a contact--somewhere, there was another human being (even if it was a Californian) waiting for his reply. KB6HT DE NORSE ROGER, he tapped out in code. THANKS FOR THE CALL. RST 337. MY LOCATION COUNCIL GROVE, KANSAS. NAME BILLY. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT. HOW ABOUT YOU? OVER.

The band went dead thirty minutes later, and Billy

hung up his headphones. He finished recording the single contact in his log book, carefully straightened his radio area, and turned off the high intensity lamp.

He was painfully empty.

Billy didn't talk much about his interest in amateur radio to the few friends he had at Council Grove High School. It would have marked him as a hopeless technofile and unfit for most forms of intercourse--not that Billy was popular, but he was aware of those things that amounted to social suicide. Besides, he really didn't understand his fascination with talking in code over long distances, so how could he explain it to anyone else? And finally, there was the feeling that, despite what the number of cards on the walls of his bedroom might suggest, amateur radio was the communicative equivalent of masturbation. Besides exchanging names and call signs and sharing the barest information about school or jobs, Billy never really had anything to say during the contacts. You couldn't conduct business on the bands--that was prohibited by law--and you could never count on finding a long-range contact again, so all conversations were necessarily brief and ephemeral.

But what bothered Billy most was that it seemed

inconsistent with his Indian heritage. He was the Radio Shack Indian, kind of a technological update of the old cigar store Indian, but instead of a fistful of smokes, Billy had transistors.

He sat on his bed, debating his options for the night.

He could see, from the narrow aluminum-framed window of his bedroom, that it was already dark out. From the draft coming in around the window, he knew it was cold. He did not feel athletic enough to venture out to find his best friend, Jack Younger, and he couldn't call him, because the trailer had no phone. He could join his mother and the uncle in the shoebox of a living room and watch television, but he decided against that, too--he had been avoiding the uncle as much as possible, because the old man smelled bad. He had been ill, had nearly died, may yet die, in fact, and the stench of the sickness clung to him.

The uncle, the old man--Carlos--made Billy uncomfortable in other ways, as well. He was a full-blooded Kaw, and Billy counted his own Indian blood in eighths. His mother called him "uncle" out of respect, although they were not related; Carlos lived in New Mexico and had been a close friend of Billy's father,



and his mother had invited the old man to recuperate at the trailer because of the memory of that relationship. Christmas was looking slim enough without the addition of another person to the household, even temporarily.

His mother knocked on the door of the bedroom.

"Billy, you okay?" she asked. "Are you through playing with your radio? Why don't you come out now and watch some TV with us?"

"I'll be out in a minute," Billy called.

He was still feeling empty.

Billy reached beneath the bed and brought out a cassette player and a box of tapes. Some of the original tapes were nearly twenty years old, and Billy had carefully dubbed them off onto new cassettes so that he could listen to them without fear of damaging the recordings. His mother said that even though cassette players were a fortune back then--more than seventy dollars--but they had bought a pair of them so they could exchange tapes. Besides, his father was never much at writing letters.

Billy dug through the box until he found the cassette he wanted. He slapped it in the player, plugged his headphones in the jack, and lay back on the bed.

The audio quality was poor, and Billy listened

carefully for the words, even though he knew them by heart. He wondered if there wasn't some way to clean it up, to make it sound more lifelike.

Sandra? This is William. The man cleared his throat. He was anxious, but he was attempting to sound cheerful. That noise you hear behind me are the generators here at sunny Firebase Mace. Sorry, but this is the only place I can be alone to make this for you. I got the picture of the baby. I'm looking at it right now. He is so incredibly beautiful...

The meal was macaroni and cheese. After putting the dishes in the sink, his mother left for her job on 3rd Shift at Modine, the radiator manufacturing plant in Emporia. Billy and the old man were left uncomfortably alone at the kitchen table.

Billy was about to excuse himself when Carlos lifted his bald, buzzard-like head and cleared his throat.

"I'm really not that old," he said.

"I know," Billy said.

"No, you don't know," Carlos said irritably. "You've been treating me like the plague ever since I came last week. I know I look old, but it's the cancer. I'm only sixty-nine."

"I know," Billy said again.

But he thought sixty-nine sounded old.

"I'm going to beat it," Carlos said. "One way or another. And you don't have to avoid me. It's not contagious. I'd like to spend some time with you, get to know you. I thank you for allowing me in your home. Your father and I were very close, you know."

"Mom told me you were friends."

"That's an imprecise word," Carlos said. "We were... well, I was sort of his mentor. He came to the desert and I introduced him into the ways of the tribe. I was an important man in the Kaw Nation back then. William was a very good man, and I am sorry that you never knew him. I promised him that, when the time came, I would teach you as I taught him. How old are you now?"

"Sixteen," Billy said.

"Time has snuck up on me," Carlos said, and laughed. The laugh turned into a hacking cough. When he had recovered himself, he asked: "What do you know of our people?"

"That Kaw, or Kansa, means 'People of the South Wind.'" Billy said. "But look, I don't feel especially Indian. I think you may be wasting your time with me. I just don't seem to fit the mold--I mean, I like science

better than track."

"Do you think people are born with culture?" Carlos asked. "Of course not. It is something that is learned. It takes time, but it is not too late. And don't give me those bullshit stereotypes about Native American track stars, okay?"

Billy shrugged.

"Here's your first bit of cultural information: You and your mother are important. Know why? Because you are the first Kaw family to return to Council Grove since our removal from Kansas to Indian Territory in 1873. There were six hundred of us then. They tried to turn us into white people with their mission, but it did not work.

"Now there are seventeen hundred members of the Kaw Nation--you and your mother included--but there are only five full-blooded Kaw left. Three women and two men, one of which is me. The others live in Oklahoma near the old reserve."

"So the tribe is dying?"

"Our race is dying," Carlos said. "It is a tragedy, but there is no way around it. We five are the last of the blood, and all of us are too old for children. But the nation, our tribe, is strong, and the culture will

survive. That is why it is important that you learn the culture, so that you can pass it on."

"I think I'm a lousy candidate for that."

Billy brushed his long black hair from his face and smiled.

"What's so funny?" Carlos asked.

"I was thinking about the kind of girls I go for," Billy said. "You know who turns me on? Susan Masterson. I sit behind her in English class. She is very blonde and very blue-eyed--a real wasichu."

"So was Quannah Parker's mother," Carlos said. "But all that is beside the point. What counts is what is in your heart, and your heart is Kaw."

"In New Mexico," Billy asked, "what did my father do?"

"He was fifteen--younger than you. He sought a vision question in the desert."

"Did he have a vision?"

"Yes--but he kept it to himself."

"Is that necessary?"

"No. Your father thought it best. It was a prophecy about his death in combat. But you may share your vision."

"So you think I should go to the desert and starve

myself until I see things?"

Carlos shook his head.

"You must go out there," he said, and pointed beyond the trailer park to the country outside of town. "The Flint Hills. That is where you will have your vision."

"And how do you know this?" Billy asked.

"Because I'm too damn old and sick to take you to New Mexico," Carlos said. "You work with what you have. And you don't have to starve yourself. It can be any kind of privation. Thirst. Heat. Cold."

"Cold?"

"Yes," Carlos said. "Tonight, for example, would be a good night. It is the longest night of the year. It would be appropriate to sit unclothed upon a hillside and pray for a vision."

Billy shivered.

"I'd catch pneumonia."

"You won't."

"It might be warmer next year," he said.

"Your father didn't wait a year," Carlos said.

Billy went back to his bedroom and shut the door. The conversation with Carlos had left him unsettled. He turned out the light and lay on the bed, listening to

nothing but the sound of his own heart beating.

Then he listened to the tapes from Vietnam again. All of them.

When his friend Jack Younger came to the trailer at nine forty-five, Carlos was already asleep on the couch. It somehow made it easier for Billy to ask to be taken out to the hills.

"What?" Jack asked, tipping back his feedstore cap.

"Yeah," Billy said. "There's something I need to do out there. It's... an Indian thing. And I need you to come back to get me at dawn. With a thermos of coffee."

In Jack's aging and battered Chevrolet pickup--which Billy had once named Bringer-of-Victory in a moment of humor inspired by a broken drive shaft--they left the trailer court.

They turned west on Main Street, which was the once the Santa Fe Trail. They passed beneath rows of Christmas lights strung through the business district, then took a left and followed Highway 177 south. They passed Council Grove High School--"Home of the Braves!" A few blocks further was the macabre shrine which enclosed the dead stump of the Custer Elm, where legend said George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry had once camped while patrolling the Santa Fe Trail.

Soon they were out of town. They drove for miles along 177 until Jack finally turned off on a country road into a series of low, grass-covered hills.

"Where are we?" Billy asked.

"This is part of the Y-Bar, my grandfather's ranch," Jack said. "It's one of the largest pieces of unplowed tallgrass prairie in the country. If you're on a vision quest, this is the place to do it. I also reckon it would be best to do this on somebody's land you know, so they won't prosecute when the county sheriff hauls you in for indecent exposure."

Jack pulled the pickup to stop at the tallest hill in sight.

"You're really going through with this, aren't you?"

Billy nodded. He had his jacket off and was working on the buttons of his shirt. He kicked off his sneakers and his socks, then swung open the door of the truck and stepped barefoot onto the dirt road. There he peeled off his jeans and underwear, wadded them into a ball, and threw them onto the seat of the truck with the rest of his clothes.

"How cold do you reckon it is?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," Billy said. "Low thirties, I guess." He was trying not to shiver.



"I hope nobody sees us out here," Jack said. "It's going to be damn hard to explain what I was doing out in the middle of the night with a naked Indian."

"You still got that tarp behind the seat?" he asked. "I want something to sit on."

"You're not quite shucked yet," Jack said. "Give me your wristwatch."

Billy hesitated, then unstrapped the Wal-Mart digital watch and handed it over. He took the canvas tarp from behind the seat and put it under his arm.

"Come back at dawn," Billy said.

"Well, I'll just wait here a while," Jack said, "in case you change your mind."

"Suit yourself," Billy said.

Billy climbed gingerly over the wire fence. The ground was cold, and hard, and the small stones and dead grass hurt the soles of his feet. He walked to the top of the hill, then spread the tarp and sat facing east. Already his teeth were chattering and his sides quivered.

"Well," he told himself, "that's the idea, isn't it?"

The night was clear and the moon, waxing toward full, was low in the west and bathed the landscape in a surreal monochrome. Above, the stars were hard, bright

points of light. Somewhere, a coyote howled. In ten minutes he was colder than he ever thought possible, and he hugged his knees to his chest. In thirty minutes he was shaking so hard he thought he was going to dislocate something and die. An hour later he heard Jack start the truck and pull out, but he was too stiff to turn around and watch him go. He lay down on his side, with his eyes closed, and pulled the tarp around him.

Billy began to lose his sense of time.

He couldn't tell whether he had been on the hilltop for two hours or two days, and he didn't know enough about the sky to tell time by the stars. He slept, and dreamed, and woke, and slept some more. His father was in his dreams, but he couldn't understand what he was trying to tell him. Billy cherished the belief that his father remained alive, still being moved from prison camp to prison camp, and that one day he would make contact with him. He woke, and at first thought his father had been his vision, but decided it was just another dream.

He wrapped himself in the tarp and pulled handfuls of dead grass and stuffed them inside, against his skin. He wished he had a lighter to start a fire. He cursed himself for letting Carlos talk him into this. He would

have walked out, except he was so cold and stiff that he knew he wouldn't get far. He tried to masturbate, kneeling at the edge of his tarp, thinking of the girl in English class, but his body insisted that it could not spare the blood. Defeated, he lay on his back, looking up at the stars, his chest heaving.

The fat scimitar moon was disappearing below the horizon, plunging the landscape into darkness, leaving the sky to the hard bright stars. Billy had the peculiar sensation of falling into the sky and floating among the stars, of becoming one of the constellations that were familiar to his eye, but which he could not name. The stars wheeled in the sky and Billy wheeled in smaller circles among them. The Milky Way loomed like a filmy phosphorescent highway, beckoning toward eternity. Billy awoke on the ground, shivering. He crawled into the tarp, crossed his arms and legs, and tried to stop the chattering of his teeth but couldn't. His mind was sluggish, and although he had some dim idea that he should walk for help, he was too disoriented to act upon it.

He just wanted to go back to sleep.

But suddenly he sat up.

Something was moving in the grass along the perimeter

of his vision, ghost-like. Fear gripped his heart like a vise, pumped adrenalin into his bloodstream, and coiled his muscles like springs. The threat of freezing to death couldn't make him move, but he had no control over the fight-or-flight response triggered by the ancient fear of being small and naked and attacked by something from the darkness. His consciousness narrowed to sight and sound. He sat motionless for several minutes.

Then it moved again. It was an animal, perhaps a dog, carefully approaching, a blur moving in the darkness. It would stop every few yards and, satisfied at Billy's lack of movement, would come closer. Billy had heard that wild animals that approach humans aren't to be trusted, that it is not a normal behavior, that it could be a sign of sickness--of rabies. Despite his urge to run, Billy thought that any sign of fear might provoke the animal into an attack. So he remained still, waiting for it to move again. It did, and finally he could see that the animal was not a rabid dog.

It was a coyote.

The coyote's ears were thrust forward in curiosity. Its coat was thick and its tail swung after it like a bristle. Its eyes were wide and strangely luminous in the darkness. The coyote seemed to be asking Billy what

in hell he was doing sitting naked on the top of a hill at night in the dead of winter.

"Cold, ain't it?" Billy asked.

As if on springs, the coyote jumped backward at the sound of Billy's voice. Its ears laid flat and there was a flash of teeth. It kept its eyes on Billy, although its feet seemed to move by a will of their own. It minced sideways a few steps, stopped, then went down on its front paws. Then curiosity got the better of it and its ears went up again as it stood and waited to see what Billy would do next.

Billy didn't do anything.

The animal took a few steps forward, and then a few more steps. It was now within yards of where Billy sat. He could hear its breathing and see its tongue lolling from the side of its mouth. It was, he thought, an exquisite beast--what power there was in the teeth and claws.

Billy had never been this close to a wild animal before. He was afraid, but the fear was mingled with a wonderful wild exhilaration. His heart felt as if it would beat its way through the walls of his chest.

He had a wild desire to touch the animal.

Billy extended his right hand, very slowly, and

offered his open palm to the animal. The coyote regarded Billy warily, its ears twitching, and inched forward, attracted perhaps by the salt on Billy's skin.

For an instant Billy felt the coyote's cold, dog-like nose against his palm. The animal looked up, and in its grinning canine face Billy saw amusement at some secret cosmic joke. Then the animal turned and walked leisurely away, disappearing back into the night.

Billy thoughtfully rubbed the spot on his palm. He had become so absorbed in the coyote's visit that he had forgotten about the cold. He sat cross-legged on the tarp, resting his right hand on his thigh. He was looking down, into his open palm, and he suddenly realized that he could see the muscles and blood vessels and bones inside his hand.

His gaze drifted to his solar plexus. His consciousness suddenly plunged into his torso, then was swept up in the flow of arterial blood. Then he dropped further, to inside his cells, to the chromosomes, and dropped again, to the molecular level. Along the twisted rope of the DNA molecule was a code, a code composed of only four letters: CTACTGAGTTTCTGTTATAGT-  
tcatttaagcatttgagggaa-AGACTTCAAAACAGACACTT-  
atggcatgtagtgaggaca-GCAACAGTTTATGCTAAAGC-

gcctatgcagttcaaata...

Billy understood. Four was the sacred number. Combinations of four could make all things.

...CCTGAGAATTGAGGGGGAGGTGGC-  
gtagactcaaagaagtactgtact-CTCCATGATTTCGTCCCT...

At 7:51 a.m. dawn broke. Half an hour later Jack arrived, with Billy's clothes and the promised coffee. On the way back into town he asked Billy if he had received a vision.

Billy smiled, but said nothing.

"You're one crazy Indian," Jack said.

"Yes," Billy said. "I am."

Back at the trailer, Billy spent twenty minutes under a warm shower. When Billy came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, Carlos was at the kitchen table.

"Did you have a good night?" Carlos asked.

"Uncle," Billy said. "There is a way."

Billy explained his plan to collect blood samples from each of the five full-bloods, beginning with Carlos, because within the blood was the genetic code for making a complete human being. You didn't necessarily need blood--any tissue would do--but blood was probably the easiest to obtain and preserve over

long periods. And it was important to collect the genetic material now, while the full-bloods were still living. Science could not yet clone a human being from the DNA code--hadn't, in fact, succeeded in breaking the entire code--but it would probably happen within Billy's lifetime. Even if it didn't, the important thing was the preservation of the genetic information. It could form the basis for the regeneration of the Kaw race.

"Yes," Carlos said. "And these clones--they would be whole human beings? Without disease?"

"Without disease," Billy said.

Billy did not explain, however, the rest of what had been revealed to him: That once the genetic information had been decoded, it was free of its organic prison, and could be transmitted in a variety of ways--including radio. That the genetic code for the Kaw could be broadcast into deep space, bundled together with the tribe's history and culture. The message would spread through the stars at the speed of light and, in the eventuality born of eternity, the Kaw would live again.



## Chapter One: The Bank

First, the bank.

On the southwest corner of Main and Neosho streets in Council Grove, beneath a curious Byzantine dome, is the Farmers & Drovers Bank. This particular corner is like a principal chamber in the veritable heart of this, our town, population 2,305. Since 1893, a good portion of the fiscal blood of Council Grove has pumped--or, as in the Great Depression, seeped--through this bank's imposing arched doorways.

Beneath the curious dome the building spreads in red brick and limestone, stained glass and romanesque arches, minarets and marble columns. Its amalgam of styles is unnecessarily described in the four-color brochures at the Chamber of Commerce as "eclectic." The bank was designed in the days when buildings meant

something, when architecture was a testament to belief, and the particular fevered vision of architect C.W. Squires seems to have included the notion that all of history had swept down the Santa Fe Trail to lap at the bank's limestone steps. But however it may appear, the Farmers & Drovers Bank, like the cathedrals of old, holds a secret that only the initiated--and possibly the long-dead--may know.

The Santa Fe trail, now buried beneath the pavement of Main Street but eulogized by the brown route markers tacked up for the convenience of the meager tourist trade, still runs in some Golden West just a few feet from the bank's front door. The trail precedes the bank by more than half a century (the first pack train kicked and bawled its way down it in 1821), but commerce was the father to both; when Capt. William Becknell arrived in Santa Fe, he sold his supply of cotton goods at a handsome \$3 per yard. The trail was just a memory when the cornerstone for the bank was laid, but had there been no trail there would be no bank.

And distance--if not time--remains constant.

Stand on the curb in front of the bank and look to your right: Kansas City (it would have been called Westport back when) is 102 miles to the east. Now look

to your left. Beyond the signs and storefronts and automobiles and power lines and street lights, past the rolling Flint Hills with the wagon ruts still cut deep into their grassy shoulders, some 631 miles in the direction of the setting sun--an episodic six weeks by wagon, a nonstop thirteen hours and thirty-nine minutes by automobile--lies Santa Fe, New Mexico. The adventurous of old sometimes reduced the distance by taking the Cimarron cutoff, but that shortcut included 50 miles of desert where travelers were sometimes forced to drink the blood of their animals to survive. The modern paved route to Santa Fe still follows the Cimarron cutoff, but a taste for oil and antifreeze is not required.

Here, within cussing distance of where the bank now stands, is where the great caravans bound for Santa Fe were organized. It was the last spot where hardwood could be had for repairing the wagons--Goddamns! in teamster lingo, as in the wonderfully economical "another goddamn stuck in the mud"--and making the extra tongues and axles to replace those that were all but certain to break on the hard trail ahead.

The bank was organized by William H. White and six other Masons during a chilly January 1882 meeting in the

local Masonic Hall and it opened for business on the following March 22 (the now celebrated building was built ten years later, when business started to boom). The bank's first statement of condition listed its total resources at twenty-one thousand, four hundred and two dollars and twelve cents. The bank's current statement of condition, issued one hundred and eleven years later, lists the bank's total resources at forty-nine million, two hundred and seventy-five thousand, eight hundred and sixty-nine dollars.

The odd cents, if recorded, are not listed.

What is listed against these current unimaginable millions, as the better portion of a \$983,348 allowance for bad loans, is the delinquent mortgage on a 12,000 acre ranch outside of town that encloses one of the largest tracts of privately-owned tallgrass prairie in several states. The Y-Bar Ranch. That brings us to the Youngers.

The Youngers. Direct descendants of the famed outlaw clan of Cole and his brothers, alumni of Quantrill's Raiders, saddle partners to the Jameses, and the boogeymen (at least until Northfield) of every bank and lawman west of the Mississippi. Or so the story goes.

You'll meet them, shortly. Our Youngers, anyway.

There has been only one robbery in the history of the Farmers & Drovers Bank, and that occurred in the spring of 1926, and the Youngers were not involved. The Fleagle Gang, which nobody remembers now, locked bank president William H. White (our mason, remember?) and ten others in the vault and escaped with \$5,000. Son Clarence H. White beat a path to the hardware store across the street, to join some other vigilantes who had armed themselves with rifles. Son Clarence selected a shotgun. A shoot-out and chase ensued. The bandits escaped, although the windshield of a taxi parked near the bank was demolished. Clarence, who was disappointed that his barrage drew not a drop of blood from the desperadoes, discovered he had loaded his weapon with birdshot instead of buckshot. The gang was eventually run to earth and shot down out west.

John H. White, the current president of the Farmers & Drovers Bank and great-grandson of William H., is a congenial fellow who reports no experiences with bandits, at least not of the armed variety. And if he is aware of the secret hidden in the architecture of the Farmers & Drovers Bank Building, he's not talking.

So there you have it--the stage is set. All the background you need before our story begins. No more

boring but significant exposition. Except, perhaps, one last detail...

There is no brown sign to say so, but the bank occupies the spot where the original station for the Santa Fe stage once stood--an auspicious location for commerce since the beginning of recorded fiscal time, it would seem. And a place where journeys of bravery, hardship, and heartache, could still begin.

The Golden West is like that.

## Chapter Two: The Ranch

Caught by the last rays of the sun, the red-tailed hawk rode the south wind high over the prairie. The bird wheeled and dipped in the mild spring air and turned into the breeze to hang motionless against the gunmetal sky. Below, the wind coaxed the grass into gilded waves that gently swelled and troughed and seemed to roll forever without breaking. Carried on the wind was the poignant, slightly sweet aroma of burning grass. But the hawk appeared indifferent to the smell and to the rising columns of smoke that smudged the horizon, the signal that the spring burn had begun; or, perhaps, the bird had learned to ride the thermals the fire created and hunt the small frightened animals that scurry before the flames.

Jack Younger watched the hawk from the top of the

corral fence, his boot heels locked beneath the bottom rail. Jack wondered what it would be like to be free of the earth, to soar in the blue dome of the sky, to look down upon the homes and ranches and see them as specks on the prairie and to watch the brilliant orange fires snake over the hills at night.

Jack wore scuffed boots, a pair of faded jeans, and a relatively new blue-and-white letter jacket with a caricature of an Indian on it. In his gloved hands he held a firestick, an eight-foot-long section of metal pipe filled with gasoline and with a dribble hole in one end. Like most Flint Hills stockmen, Jack's grandfather had made the device--which looked like nothing so much as a bomb--to drag behind the four-wheeler during the annual pasture burning.

The kitchen screen slammed and Jack turned to watch his grandfather as he strode from the house. The old man was carrying a bundle under his right arm.

"Aren't we going to burn, Grandad?"

"Not today. Maybe not ever."

Old Dan Younger's weathered face appeared expressionless, but there was a tightness about the eyes and mouth that Jack did not like. The old man thumbed back his sweat-stained gray Stetson from his forehead



and looked out beyond the corral as he spoke.

"The bank has been granted foreclosure," the old man said. "It's all their property now. There will be an auction, two weeks from tomorrow. Everything is gone-- the land, the horses, the stock."

Jack had known for months the ranch was in trouble, but he had not realized just how desperate the situation was. He felt sick, as if he had eaten something rotten. He dropped the firestick on the ground and pulled off his gloves.

"Granddad, I'm sor--"

"Ain't no use being sorry, son. We have to face facts. The Y-Bar belongs to somebody else now. The Youngers have lost it. There's going to be a man from the auction company come out tomorrow to take inventory of everything, inside and out. But there is one thing I'm not going to let them have."

The old man unwrapped the bundle of oil rags. Inside was a gun that Jack had seen only a few times before, and always after his grandfather had been drinking and talking about the old days.

It was the Northfield gun.

Jack picked it up.

The gun was a revolver--a cap-and-ball Navy Colt, with

an octagonal barrel and a badly tarnished brass frame that was covered in a scaly green patina. The grips were black with age and sweat, but the cylinder turned freely and locked into place with a smart click when the hammer was cocked. The gun was 130 years old and had been carried by the outlaw Cole Younger. It had been taken from him following the reckless Northfield, Minnesota, raid of 1879. The revolver had been sold at auction to a family friend and unreconstructed Missourian by the name of W.C. Bronaugh. While Cole was still rotting in Stillwater Penitentiary, Bronaugh had returned the gun to the family.

Jack cocked the gun and extended it toward the horizon. The gun held steady in his outstretched hand as he sighted on a dove perched on a telephone wire along the county road. The gun wasn't much different than the modern guns he had shot--except this one used loose powder, ball, and a percussion cap to fire--but there was something about this gun that was different. There was a tightness in his chest and his arm seemed to tingle as he pointed it.

"Don't snap it," the old man said.

"I won't," Jack said disgustedly. "Don't you think I know better than that?"

Jack eased the hammer down with his thumb pressing the trigger. The tightness in his chest went away. He tried to hand the gun back to his grandfather.

"No, it's yours," he said. "It's the only thing left around here that is worth a damn, and I want you to have it. Jack, this gun is part of our family history."

"I don't want it," Jack said quickly. There was something wrong about this, something in his grandfather's manner that made him uneasy. The old man should keep the gun. There would be plenty of time later for passing it down.

"You don't understand," the grandfather said. "I can't keep it. They'll sell it along with all the other stuff if I do."

"Then give it to Mom or Aunt Karen to hold for you," Jack said, suddenly angry. He jumped down from the fence. "I don't want it. You can't make me take it."

Jack thrust the gun into his grandfather's hands. Then he scooped up the firestick from the ground and tossed it overhanded toward his thirty-year-old Chevy pickup. It landed in the bed of the truck with a bang.

Jack walked over to the truck and leaned against a rusted fender. His grandfather followed. The old man had given him the truck the year before, when he got his

license. Old Dan Younger opened the passenger door and sat with his legs outside the truck, waiting for Jack's anger to pass.

"I'm going to miss the Y-Bar," Jack said.

What he wanted to say, but couldn't was that he was going to miss spending time with the old man, that he felt suffocated when he was in town, and that the ranch had been the only real home he had known.

"It's a tough thing to swallow," his grandfather said. "You know, I always thought this would be your father's someday. When he died, I just took it for granted that it would go to you when I died."

"Have you told Mom yet?"

"Yes," he said. "I talked to Kate just a little while ago on the telephone. I think that was the toughest thing of all. She took it pretty hard."

Jack considered asking if she were sober, but thought better of it. The old man was still plenty strong enough to backhand him.

Jack got behind the wheel of the pickup.

"It'll take some getting used to," the old man said. "But give some thought to taking that gun. It's the only thing I can give you. Sleep on it. You might feel differently in the morning."

Jack nodded. He hit the starter and the six-cylinder engine sputtered to life. The older man got out of the pickup and shut the door.

"Take care of yourself, Jack," he said through the open window, loud enough to be heard above the noise of the engine. "Remember--" the old man said, but he could not finish the sentence. Finally he simply waved goodbye.

Jack let out the clutch and the pickup jumped forward.

### Chapter Three: The Pioneers

Jack Younger was seventeen years old and he lived with his mother at the Pioneer Village Trailer Court on Eighth Street in Council Grove, Kansas. Their trailer was No. 784, a thirty-year-old, blue-over-white Skyline with one bath two bedrooms and imitation wood paneling throughout. In a week they would be a full month late on the \$230 rent.

It was dark enough for headlights when Jack pulled his truck into the driveway behind his mother's aging Buick. He lit a Marlboro before he went inside. He really didn't smoke but he had bought the cigarettes after noting that James Dean was often photographed with one hanging from his lip.

"Those things will kill you," his mother told him.

"I won't live long enough for that," he said,

squinting against the smoke as he peered into the refrigerator. Along came a Spyder and took him down the road to eternity. He withdrew a bottle of orange juice, slammed the refrigerator door shut with his hip, and brought down a glass from the cupboard.

The juice cooled his irritated throat.

"Why didn't you tell me Grandad was losing the Y-Bar?"

Kathryn Younger sat with her chin in her hands at the kitchen table. Before her was an ashtray full of cigarette butts, the current edition of the Council Grove Republican (eight pages, including want ads) and two empty Coors cans. She was 37 years old and although she had once attended junior college the best work she could find was waitressing for the Trailside Diner on Main Street. She had started there when Jack was a sophomore in high school, and she swore at the time that it would only be temporary. Every week she religiously poured over the help wanted sections of area newspapers, checked the bulletin boards at the laundromat and the Wal-Mart at Emporia (thirty miles to the southeast), but her enthusiasm had waned as Jack drew closer to graduation. The only thing she had to show for nearly three years of poring over the newspapers was an

astonishingly complete book of clippings about Jack's career as a track star.

"I thought you should hear it from Dad," Kathryn said. Old John Younger was her father-in-law, not her father, but she had grown so close to the old man since marrying Young John in 1975 that she never thought of him as anything else.

"I never thought he'd lose the Y-Bar. It was destined to be yours, you know."

Jack grunted and drank the last of his juice.

"He tried to give me the Northfield gun."

"Did you take it?"

"I didn't want it."

"Why not? That gun's worth a lot of money, you know-- Dad's been offered thousands for it."

"It didn't feel right," Jack said. "I always figured I'd get the gun when Grandad died, not before. I didn't want it."

"You should have taken it."

Jack grunted again.

"Did he say what he was going to do with it? I'll bet that damned Karen Proctor winds up with it. Christ. Did he say?"

"No, he didn't say."



"What about the other guns? Did he say what he was going to do with the Bianci shotgun?"

"No."

"Billy called," Kathryn said absently.

Jack carefully rinsed his glass in the sink and left.

He put two dollars worth of gas in the truck at the C-Mart on Main Street and drove out to the tubes, northwest of town. Teen-age jargon aside, there was in actuality only one tube, the massive concrete overflow in the shadow of the dam containing the federal reservoir. What was left of the Neosho River after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was done with it sometimes trickled, sometimes gushed, and sometimes rocketed down the concrete trough toward Council Grove, where it would bisect the town on a skewed axis, from northwest to southeast. The river would continue toward the southeast, skirt Emporia, and be damned again by the Engineers at John Redmond near Burlington. Jack parked the truck in the lot above the tubes and walked past a sign that screamed WARNING BEWARE OF TURBULENCE AND RAPID CHANGES IN WATER LEVEL HORN OR SIREN WILL SOUND WHEN GATE CHANGES ARE MADE. Jack climbed up the concrete steps and sat down on the rim of the overflow, letting

his legs dangle below the guard rail.

The Neosho was a mere trickle.

Jack shook another Marlboro from the pack, lit it, and took a long drag. The smoke bit into his lungs and he coughed convulsively. After making sure he was indeed alone, he threw the butt into the water. It was full dark now and the cigarette traced a 35-foot arc into the water below.

In two weeks, Jack would graduate from high school.

He had always counted on working at the ranch when he was finished with school. He liked horses and he liked working stock, even though it could seem backbreaking at times. He liked ranch work the way he liked running--it seemed natural, like walking or breathing. He had never dreamed that the ranch could be lost. Lost--as if they had just misplaced it, as if Youngers hadn't owned it and worked it for the last ninety-five years, as if they weren't part of the land like the rocks and the grass and the scrub that sprouted along the cuts. The largest unplowed tract of tallgrass prairie in Morris County. Virgin prairie. The way the Indians found it, for God's sake. God-damned Farmers & Drovers Bank. Grandad should have sold the Y-Bar to that government land agency when it was interested. How badly could the government have

managed it? Maybe then the family could have still worked it. Christ, what could Grandad have done to drive it into bankruptcy? Now, what were they going to do? Jack didn't have the money or inclination for college and he couldn't expect his mother to support him any longer. But other than a paper route when he was 12, he had no job experience of any kind.

He looked up.

It was a clear night. Stars were out. In the past he had considered them beautiful. Now they were also cold and very distant.

#### Chapter Four: Wild Horses

On the way back into town Jack passed Billy Worth walking along the side of the road. Billy's long black hair swayed in rhythm to his steps. He was wearing ragged blue jeans and a plaid shirt that had once had sleeves. Jack pulled the truck onto the shoulder while Billy ran to catch up.

Billy opened the passenger's door.

"Thanks, man, it was getting cold." He noticed a bundle wedged between the side of the bench seat and the floor. "Hey, what's this?"

Still standing outside the truck, Billy unwrapped the bundle and held up the cap-and-ball revolver.

"Cool," he said, and jerked his head to get the hair out of his eyes. "Does it shoot?"

"Shit," Jack said.

"What's wrong?"

"My grandfather," he said. "He tried giving me that gun earlier today and I told him I didn't want it. So he threw it in the truck."

Billy cocked the gun and drew a bead on Rigel.

"Don't snap it," Jack shouted.

"Okay, man," Billy said, carefully lowering the hammer. He wrapped the gun back in the cloth, climbed into the truck, and put the gun on the seat between them. "Why don't you want it?" he asked again.

"I just don't," Jack said.

"Okay, I'll drop it," Billy said and rolled his eyes.

"I called you this afternoon."

"Yeah, my Mom told me."

"Why didn't you call me back?"

"I had some thinking to do," Jack said. "Look, I'm sorry. Things are kind of bad right now. It's got nothing to do with you. Sorry."

Billy nodded.

"What do you want to do?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," Billy said. "Nothing. Hang out at the C-Mart, I guess. Look at babes."

Jack drove through town to the C-Mart convenience store opposite the Madonna of the Trail monument, then

pulled off and parked in the asphalt lot facing Main Street. Jack knew, but never thought much about, Main being the route of the old Sante Fe Trail through Council Grove.

The truck was the only vehicle in the lot. They watched through the windshield for cars they knew. Billy took a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses from his pocket and slipped them on. What we have here is a failure to communicate. What movie did Guns and Roses get that from?

"Got a cigarette?" he asked.

Jack shook a Marlboro out of the pack.

Billy lit the cigarette with his Zippo and took pleasure in flipping the lid shut with a flick of his wrist, snuffing out the flame.

"Here," Jack said, giving him the pack of Marlboros.

"You can have them."

"Thanks, man," Billy said, pulling down the sunglasses to count how many cigarettes were left in the pack. "They're my brand, too."

"You know the guy that did all those Marlboro ads died of lung cancer, don't you?"

"What's your point?" Billy asked.

Jack smiled and shook his head.

"What did you want?" he asked. "When you called earlier, I mean."

"To tell you that my Uncle Carlos is in town," Billy said, blowing twin gushers of smoke from his nose. "I wanted you to meet him. I'm only one-quarter Kaw, but my uncle is one of the fullbloods. Did you know that out of seventeen hundred members of the Kaw tribe, there are only five fullbloods?"

"Yeah, you told me," Jack said. "About a million times."

"Well, Carlos is up from New Mexico. He lives in the desert someplace. He's only going to be here a week, and I wanted you to meet him because he is seriously cool."

"Does he wear buckskins and warpaint and live in a tipi?"

"You're an ignorant fuck, Jack."

"Yeah, but I'm the only friend you've got."

A black Mustang GT slowed and pulled into the parking lot without signaling, the lights from Main Street rippling over its waxed fenders. The car had a nose bra and blacked-out hood and a pair of quartz halogen fog lights on either side of a personalized license plate-- "101"--in the middle of the low front spoiler. An array of radio aerials quivered from their mounts on the rear

hatch, and the low-frequency rumble that came from the exhaust pipes rattled the windows of the convenience store.

"Shit," Jack said.

"You're talking about the woman I love," Billy said.

"That car is obscene," Jack said. "It cost more than my Mom makes in a whole year?"

"So I have expensive tastes," Billy said.

"In cars or women?"

"Both," Billy said as the Mustang pulled to a stop next to his side of the truck. "I can't believe I lust after a blonde-haired, blue-eyed waisachu woman, but it must be written in the stars."

"Her eyes are hazel," Jack said.

"You noticed?"

"I'm not blind."

"I cannot tell you how I have sat in English class and--"

"Spare me," Jack said. "I'm going."

Jack turned the key and hit the starter. The starter growled but failed to turn the engine over, then died with a buzzing sound.

"You're embarrassing me, Jack," Billy said.

Jack leaned his forehead against the wheel.



"You can walk next time," he said.

"Looks like I'll have to walk this time."

The power window on the driver's side of the Mustang came down. The music inside the car was loud. She is Tiffany twisted / She's got the Mercedes bends (uh!).

"Need a jump?" Susan Masterson asked, turning the music down. The Eagles faded into the background. "My Daddy put a set of jumper cables in the back, along with all the other road hazard stuff."

"Yeah," Billy said. "Thanks."

Jack got out of the truck, shook his head, and lifted the beaten and rust-stained hood. Susan opened the immaculate back of the Mustang and retrieved the pair of jumper cables. Billy stepped forward to take them and bumped his head against a corner of the open hatch, knocking the glasses from his face and rattling his teeth.

"Are you okay?" Susan asked. "Why are you wearing sunglasses?"

Billy pressed a palm to his head and grinned.

"I thought it looked cool," he said.

"Yeah, and that lump on your forehead will look really bitchin'," Susan said and laughed. Billy took the cables to Jack while Susan reached through the window to

pulled the hood release of her car.

"Nice move," Jack said.

Jack grounded the negative jaws on the truck's frame.

"Why'd you do that?" Susan asked.

"It's safer," Jack said. Then he put the positive cable on the truck's positive terminal, and matched the ends of the cables to their respective terminals on the Mustang's battery.

"Jesus," Jack said. "That's some engine."

"Three-fifty-one police package," Susan said. "You can't just walk into a Ford dealership and buy this. It's special, for law enforcement only. Daddy ordered it along with the rest of the cars for the department--but of course we paid for it. Fuel injected, with the competition chip in the computer, three-quarter race cam, and headers. Five-speed transmission. Competition suspension. The tires are Z-rated."

"What's that mean?" Billy asked.

"Good for speeds in excess of 140 miles per hour," Jack answered. "They're soft--you don't get a lot of mileage out of them--but they handle like nothing else. You have one bad car, Susan."

"Thanks," she said. "It's really my father's, but he lets me drive it. That's why it has all those police

radios in it."

"Okay, you can start it up."

Susan started the Mustang. The motor in the truck started easily when Jack tried it. "It's got a terrific alternator, too," Jack said.

"Don't know anything about that stuff," Billy said. "You can see what happens when I get around cars... Don't look know, but here comes the man."

Jack watched in the rear-view mirror as a dark blue Taurus with a red-and-blue light bar and Council Grove Police Department shields on its front doors pulled in behind them. Jack's breath stopped for a moment when he saw the car, his chest tightened with anxiety, then he told himself he'd done nothing wrong and to relax. A car door slammed as Bill Tyman, the chief of police, got out of the Taurus.

Tyman walked up between the Mustang and the truck.

"Suzy," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

"Chalk's been trying to get ahold of you for the last half hour. Have you got those radios turned off again?"

"I was giving these guys a jump," she said. "And my name is Susan. I haven't been called Suzy since I was in junior high school."

"Sorry, honey," Tyman said, pushing his cowboy hat

back on his head. Susan grimaced. "Junior high school wasn't that long ago, at least not for me. I just naturally think of you as Suzy. Why don't you give Chalk a holler and let him know you're all right. He was a little worried about you and that car--you know what I mean."

"I'm fine, Chief Tyman," Susan said. "And I haven't been racing it again, if that's what you mean."

"Well, he thought you might've had the music too loud to hear him," he said. Tyman began helping Jack unhook the jumper cables. When the cables had been stowed again in the back, and the hatch put down, Tyman said: "Just give your Daddy a call, okay?"

"Okay," Susan said.

"You boys all right now?"

"Yes, sir," Jack said. "Thanks."

"Don't I know you, son?" Tyman asked. "Weren't you in my hunter safety class a couple of years ago?"

"Yes, sir. John Younger, Jr."

"Nice to see you again, Jack. You are one helluva shot, as I recall. You better get that truck home before she dies again--or before I have to pull a safety inspection on it."

Tyman got in his car and left.

Keeping his foot on the accelerator so the truck wouldn't die, Jack leaned across Billy and shouted Susan's name through the open window. She had to turn the music down again to hear him.

"The next time you race, you might want to yank the element out of the air cleaner," Jack said. "It's an easy way to pick up thirty or forty horsepower."

"Yeah?" Susan smiled. "Thanks."

The Mustang was already moving, gravel skittering from the rear tires as it pulled onto Main.

## Chapter Five: DOA

The headlights of the truck were anemic orange pools by the time Jack Younger reached home. He let the truck idle for a moment, and craned his neck out the window to make sure his mother had enough room to back out. Then he killed the engine, which died with a sigh of finality.

Jack struck the metal dash with his fist.

He didn't know where he would get the money for a new battery. Even a cheap battery would cost at least thirty or thirty-five dollars. And that, Jack reminded himself, was assuming that it was the battery. It could be the regulator, or the generator, which would cost even more. He knew it wasn't the posts or the cables, because he kept those clean. Maybe his grandfather had some parts out at the ranch he could scrounge.

He picked up the sack containing the cap-and-ball revolver and made his way to the trailer.

"Where have you been?" his mother asked as Jack opened the door. Her arms were crossed over a faded terrycloth bathrobe, and in one hand a cigarette smoldered. Jack had to look to make sure her foot wasn't tapping.

"Around," he said.

"Well, I've been trying to find you," she said. "I tried calling over at your friend Billy's, but their phone was disconnected."

"That's a fact," Jack said, dodging her to get to the kitchen. He put the sack in the middle of the kitchen table and peered inside the refrigerator door.

"Your cousin Jory is dead," she said.

Jack stopped with his arm half inside the box.

"When?" he asked. He shut the refrigerator door.

"This evening, about two hours ago," she said. "He was on his way back from Lawrence and some drunk hit him broadside at the corner of U.S. 59 and Liberty in Ottawa. Pronounced dead at the scene."

"Jesus Christ," Jack said.

"Watch your language. Your Aunt Karen called and told me. She was nearly out of her mind with grief. Imagine

losing your only child that way. It's terrible. She's having the funeral Friday afternoon. I'm wondering if they will be able to have an open casket."

Jack imagined his cousin sprawled dead in a pool of blood while cops swarmed over the accident scene, calculating skid marks and taking measurements. He had always considered Jory to be a jerk of the first class, one of those A students who always has a mechanical pencil in his shirt pocket and gives a damn about when the Battle of Hastings was fought. It was hard for Jack to imagine him dead, not because he cared for Jory, but because death didn't signify much to Jack. It was abstract, like algebra.

"Did they catch him?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The drunk."

"Who knows."

"You didn't ask?"

"Honestly, it didn't occur to me," she said. "I was stunned by the news. The drunk was the last thing on my mind."

Jack grunted.

"Well," he said.

"What?"



"Aren't you going to get cleaned up and go be with her? I mean, isn't that what families do for each other?"

"I don't see any reason to," she said, glancing away and taking a drag from her cigarette. "I mean, the Rev. McNally is there. You know how I hate him. I think he's, well, you know--a queer. He gives me the creeps. Besides, Karen and I we were never really close, even when we were kids. I would just be in the way."

"Suit yourself."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Jack said tiredly. "Do what you want. You always have."

He walked passed her.

"What's in the sack?" she asked.

Jack stopped.

"The Northfield Gun," he said.

He walked back into the kitchen, picked up the sack, and again made for his bedroom at the far end of the trailer.

"Your attitude had better improve, mister, or you'll find yourself staying home this weekend," she said, but even she knew the threat lacked substance.

Jack carefully closed the door to his room.

## Chapter Six: The Gun

Jack's boots crunched in the gravel and dust puffed at his heels as he walked across the high school parking lot toward the school lunchroom. He wore an ill-fitting brown jacket that rode too high in the shoulders and a dark knit tie that dangled from his neck like some kind of unwanted leash. Slung from a strap looped over his right shoulder was his well-worn leather backpack, and the pack swung as if it carried something heavy.

Jack stepped into the lunchroom and paused for a moment, letting his eyes adjust. Billy Worth waved, from a table where he sat alone, and Jack nodded. After taking an apple from the serving line, Jack joined him.

"Got a date?" Billy asked.

"No," Jack said. "I'm going to a funeral."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I forgot."

"It's all right."

Jack polished the apple on the fabric of his shirt, then turned it over in his hands, searching the yellow skin for imperfections.

"That all you're going to eat?" Billy asked.

"Not hungry," Jack said.

"What're you looking for, worms?"

"Yeah," Jack said.

He put the apple down.

"Find some?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," Jack said.

Susan Masterson walked by with a tray of food. Jack lifted a finger in greeting and she stopped, looked back over her shoulder.

"I didn't recognize you," she said.

"I'm in disguise," Jack said. Then, "I'm going to my cousin's funeral this afternoon. Borrowed the jacket from my mother's boyfriend."

"Oh," Susan said. She looked over at the group of girls at the far table where she had intended to sit, then back at Jack. "Do you mind?" she asked, indicating the seat next to his.

"Sit down," Billy said pleasantly.

"Yeah," Jack said, glaring at Billy. "Have a seat."

"Thanks," Susan said, and placed her tray on the table. She smoothed her skirt and sat down, knees together and pointed at Jack.

"I'm awfully sorry about your cousin," she said. "I read about it in the paper. It sounded like a horrible accident."

"Well, I hardly knew the guy," Jack said. "Our family ain't what you'd call close."

"The obituary made it sound like Jory had an awfully bright future--graduating from KU with a degree in chemical engineering."

"Yeah," Jack said. "I guess he was really smart. He had this job already lined up in Australia. Then, bang. Killed by a drunk."

"Life sucks, doesn't it?" Billy asked.

"Worth, please shut up," Jack said.

Billy rolled his eyes.

"What time's the funeral?" Susan asked.

"Two o'clock, but I'm leaving school now."

"Why?" Susan asked.

"I'm walking. Still haven't got a battery for the truck. Besides, I thought I'd stop by the bank on my way. There's a guy there I need to talk to."

"Going to ask for an auto loan?"

"No," Jack said.

"Susan," Billy said suddenly. "That's really a terrific dress. Blue is definitely your color."

"Well, thanks--"

"You look great," Billy added.

"I must," Susan said, "judging from the way you were staring at me in English class. What is it you told Jack the other day in the hall? That I have a 'nice rack?' Was that the term?"

"Oh, shit." Billy let his head fall forward onto the table. His cheeks burned brightly.

"Look, it's okay," Susan said. "Just don't stare at me so much. When you lust after women, use some discretion. We know you're looking. But glance, don't stare."

"Right," Billy said.

"Billy, don't you have some ancient Indian ritual that you have to perform right away?" Jack asked. "You know, the one to make sure your soul goes to the happy hunting grounds when you're killed by your only friend?"

"Thanks for reminding me," Billy said. But he didn't move.

"Billy," Susan said. "I'm really very flattered. It's okay--we can still be friends."

"Friends," Billy said as he rose up. "The deadliest word in the English language. I'll be leaving now." He walked away without looking back.

"He's really strange, isn't he?" Susan asked.

"Billy? He's okay," Jack said.

"Does he always say the wrong thing?"

"Yeah, unless he's talking about electronics," Jack said. "Radios and stuff. He's really good at that. With girls, he's not so hot... But he's got good taste."

"You think?" Susan asked.

Jack nodded.

Susan looked away. "Look, do you want a ride to the funeral home? I hate for you to walk. I've got my car here, and I'm between classes, so it would be no trouble."

"I hate to be a bother."

"No bother," Susan said. "We could stop at the bank and you could take care of your business. I'd even let you drive."

Jack looked out the window.

"What about your boyfriend?"

"Who, Mark?" Susan laughed. "We're not going steady. Besides, this isn't a date. I'm just giving you a lift to a funeral, for God's sake..."

"Say, are you going to eat that apple?"

Charley Hart was the loan officer at Farmers & Drovers Bank, and like many of the more disturbing and romantic figures in Kansas history--William Clarke Quantrill comes first to mind--he was a gift from Ohio.

After waiting for twenty minutes while Hart concluded a telephone call to his sister in Dayton, Jack Younger and Susan Masterson were called into Hart's office.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Hart said without a trace of regret in his voice. "What can I do you for today?"

"I'm Jack Younger, sir."

"I'm just the chauffeur," Susan said. Hart had a bowl of polished buckeyes on his desk and she scooped up several and began rolling them in her palm.

Jack rested the pack on the carpet between his boots.

"I'm here about my grandfather's farm," Jack said. "The Y-Bar. I know that you have foreclosed on it, but I was wondering if we couldn't make some sort of deal about the house."

Hart sucked in his breath.

"I see," he said. "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do to stop the foreclosure at this point, unless you

have a couple of hundred thousand dollars in your pockets." He shuffled through the files on the desk, found the one he was looking for, and flipped it open. "Two hundred and forty-six thousand, three hundred and twelve dollars, and six cents. You don't make that kind of money working at the local Dairy Queen, do you?"

"Jesus," Susan said. "I've got the six cents."

When Hart didn't smile, she put the buckeyes back in their bowl and sat with her hands folded across her lap.

"No sir, I don't have that kind of money," Jack said evenly. "But I was thinking that maybe we could make some kind of deal, at least for the farmhouse. It couldn't be worth a whole lot, considering the shape it's in. Or maybe the bunkhouse. Anything would do."

"What kind of deal?" Hart asked.

"I have this gun," Jack said. He reached down and grasped the top of the backpack, then hesitated. "It was the gun that Cole Younger used to rob the bank in Northfield, Minnesota. I know it's worth a lot of money, a few thousand dollars at least."

Jack pulled the pack onto his lap.

"I might be interested," Hart said. "The market is good now for western memorabilia, especially among the Japanese collectors. They are especially crazy over



anything with a history."

Jack smiled and grasped the top zipper of the pack.

"Do you have any documentation?" Hart asked.

Jack stopped.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know much about guns, but I do know about collectibles. You can't just say something is historically significant; you have to prove it. Do you have an affidavit or some other kind of evidence that attests to its authenticity?"

"Well, no."

"An expert, perhaps, who is willing to attest to the authenticity of the gun?"

"No," Jack said. "You just can't take my family's word for it?"

"It seems we've taken your family's word on things quite as far as it will go," Hart said. "Look, I'm sorry. Without some kind of proof, it's just another piece of junk."

"You don't have to insult him," Susan said.

Hart shrugged.

Jack sighed and shouldered the pack.

"There isn't anything I can do?" Jack asked. "I'd be willing to sign a note and work for the rest of my life

to pay it off just so my grandfather could have a place to live."

"You're throwing the old man off the farm?" Susan asked.

"Look, miss, the auction is going to be held in less than two weeks. The bank bent over backwards to help him keep the farm, but it was just impossible. He's too old to be ranching."

"You could let him stay," Susan said. "Jack could help him."

"No, I can't. This is business. I'm just doing my job."

"If I had your job," Susan said, "I'd cut my throat."

"Come on," Jack said, shouldering the backpack and touching Susan on the arm. "Thanks for seeing us, Mr. Hart. I'm sorry we bothered you."

"I can't believe that guy," Susan said as she pulled away from the Farmers & Drovers. "And I can't believe how you let him talk to you. If I were a man, I would have punched him right in the mouth. I wonder if old man White knows what this Hart fellow is up to. I'll bet he'd put a stop to it."

"Of course White knows," Jack said resignedly. "It's

like he said, it's just business. Nobody forced my grandfather to take out those loans. He gambled, and he lost."

"Yes, but--" Susan said. "The Y-Bar has been in your family for years. And who are they going to sell it to? Somebody who will plow all that tallgrass under? This is insane."

"Yeah," Jack said. "It feels pretty crazy."

"They should at least let him keep the house," she went on. The Mustang was like a guided missile, accelerating around slower cars with a vengeance, following as if by wire the path to the funeral home. When she passed Chief Tyman, who was going in the opposite direction, he briefly touched his siren and shook his finger at her.

"Fuck," she said, looking in her rear view mirror as she slowed the Mustang to nearly within the speed limit. Then, realizing what she'd said, she put a hand bit her lip.

"I don't talk that way all the time," she said.

"Just when you're driving," Jack observed.

The Mustang rolled to a stop in front of the funeral home.

"Thanks for the ride," Jack said. "Sorry you had to

sit through that waste of time at the bank."

"It wasn't a waste of time," Susan said. "I've been thinking. If we could somehow prove that the gun was at the Northfield Robbery, then maybe Hart would make you a deal. Or we could sell it ourselves and buy the farmhouse at the auction."

"Yeah, but how could we prove it?" Jack asked.

"If I knew that, we wouldn't have left the bank empty-handed," Susan said. "Look, my Dad says that everything leaves a paper trail, and that the mark of a good detective is being able to follow that trail. This is like a research paper, but in real live. And I'm good at research."

"I know. You get straight A's."

"Would you let me have a crack at it? I'll need the gun, because we might have to compare it to a photograph or something."

"Sure," Jack said. He thought about asking her why she was offering to help him, considering they hardly knew each other, but he thought better of it. Such a question might be rude.

He opened the pack and handed her the revolver, which was still wrapped in the grain sack. Susan took it by the barrel and hid it beneath a stack of magazines on

the back seat.

"See you later," Jack said, opening the door.

"Can I come with you?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, sure. But why? What about your classes?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just know I want to. And to hell with classes. We're seniors, aren't we?"

## Chapter Seven: The Ringer

Jack felt somehow taller as he walked into the Kendall Funeral Chapel with Susan Masterson hanging lightly onto his arm. Something was also stirring beneath his solar plexus, as if he had eaten something that had been left on the kitchen counter too long, but he didn't exactly feel sick, either.

They signed the register together. He avoided his mother and introduced Susan to his grandfather. "Masterson?" the old man barked. "You Sheriff Chalk Masterson's girl?" Susan made a joke about somebody having to keep an eye on the Youngers, and the grandfather laughed. The funeral home people pinned a flower to Jack's lapel, to identify him as a pallbearer, and when the service was about to begin he gave Susan a wave and went to sit with the other young men who would

carry Jory to his final reward--which, Jack thought while suppressing a grin, was down under but unfortunately wasn't Australia.

Jack's mother sat in the first pew with his aunt Karen, who had lapsed into a kind of stupor. Her eyes were so swollen from crying and her mascara had run so badly it looked as if somebody had beaten her. She stared at a spot on the floor in front of the casket and seemed not to acknowledge the presence of anything else around her. From time to time a sob overtook her and her shoulders shook with grief and rage.

Jack was relieved when the preacher finally began.

A third of the way into the service, after delivering the obligatory praise for the deceased's character and conveying a carefully cultivated sense of contemplative confusion over the family's loss, the preacher's tone changed.

"Isn't it comforting," he asked in a voice that was suddenly brimming with confidence, "for Jory Younger's family to know that he was saved? What a wonderful thing that Jory had found Our-Lord-Jesus-Christ. Hallelujah. There was a design in this young man's death, one which we cannot know, but which we may rest assured that the Lord knows."

Karen Younger began to rock slowly and mutter beneath her breath. Jack's mother put a protective arm around her sister and, at the same time, tried to dissuade the preacher from the present tack by holding a finger to her lips and gently shaking her head.

"What a joyous knowledge," the preacher continued, "that death is not eternal, that darkness does not have to win. Our-Lord-Jesus-Christ made certain of that. He died for us on that lonely cross at Calvary. And brothers and sisters, if you haven't found Jesus, you are facing eternal night. It's like that sign says outside of town on the highway. It says, 'You Must Be Born Again.' But how many of--"

A howl escaped from Karen Younger's throat, a kind of animal sound that began deep in her throat and rose in pitch and volume until it finally drug the sermon to a full stop. The preacher blinked, regained his composure, and looked with kindness at the bereaved woman. He extended a hand toward her and gently said: "Karen, we share your pain."

"Who the hell do you think you are," Karen Younger growled, "You share nothing with me! How dare you use the death of my only son as an opportunity for a sales pitch for your goddamn fairy tales!"



Jack's mother tried to shush her, but Karen Younger stood and pulled away from her. Several others stood and attempted to force her to sit down, but she turned and backed away from them.

"There was no design in this," she screamed. Then she lowered her voice. "Why would God punish me in this way? And that fucking sign outside of town could mean anything. Why does it have to mean what you say it means? Haven't any of you fundamentalist morons ever heard of reincarnation?"

"This woman needs some medical attention," the preacher said. "Is there a doctor present?" he asked and looked hopefully into the audience. But nobody stood up.

"I'll tell you one thing," Karen, jerking her arm away from the grasp of the funeral director. "If there is a God, then I'm really pissed, because it means he let my son die when he could have taken somebody else--" here Karen Younger looked straight at Jack "--somebody not as good."

She sucked in her breath, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and aimed a shaking finger at the figure of Christ on the wall behind her. "I'd rather roast in hell," she said, "than ever bow my head to that sonuvabitch again. It's all lies."

A phalanx of grim-looking men finally managed to maneuver Karen Younger into a corner, where she gave a last piercing shriek and then collapsed moaning upon the floor.

"Somebody call an ambulance," the preacher said.

"Don't you dare," Jack's grandfather said, pushing his way through the knot of men. "I'll knock the snot out of any man that tries. Don't insult her by hauling her away in a straitjacket. She said what she said, and I reckon she thought it was important, and I may not agree with her, but I stand with her."

Dan Younger hitched up his pants legs, knelt down beside his eldest daughter and rocked her in his arms. "Come on, honey," he said softly. When he led her back to her seat she had stopped moaning.

"Let's finish up," he told the preacher.

Jack Younger, sitting stiffly with the other pallbearers, was shaking. When the service ended his grandfather quickly took his aunt outside, and Jack stood in the hallway waiting while the mourners paid their last respects at the casket. He noticed Susan in line, and her amazed expression when she looked down upon the corpse of Jory Younger.

Jack was still so shaken by his aunt's accusing glare

that he was afraid to look Susan in the face when she came into the hall. As she approached he turned toward a mirror in a golden frame and pretended to straighten his tie.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," she said, looking over his shoulder at the reflection of his face. "I think you're good." Then, impulsively, she reached up with her right hand, gathered the hair from his collar, and kissed his neck.

"You know," she whispered, studying his reflection as she held his hair back, "with a haircut, you're a dead ringer for your cousin."

## Chapter Eight: The Sheriff

Jack Younger lifted the new battery from the ground and placed it in the empty tray beneath the open hood of the pickup. Then he used his pocket knife to carefully pare away the inside of the corroded ground terminal, revealing a shiny band of unspoiled lead. After he had bolted that terminal into place on the battery, he picked up the positive cable and began to repeat the process.

A blue, late-model Crown Victoria with a long radio antenna quivering behind it pulled into the driveway behind the pickup. Behind the glare of the afternoon sun on the windshield Jack could see the short barrel of a pump-action riot gun peaking from its mount, and a red Kojak light on the dash. The driver's door opened and Jack could hear the background chatter of police radio

traffic as Chalk Masterson stepped out.

"Oh, shit," Jack muttered as he peered around the hood of the truck.

Masterson was tall, blond, and tan. At 43, he still had the taut, well-muscled look of an athlete. He didn't smoke or drink, and his only vice was black coffee. He placed his gray cowboy hat on his head--there wasn't room to wear it in the car--and adjusted his amber sunglasses. Then he leaned against the open door while he keyed his microphone, which was attached by a coil of black cord to the radio beneath the dash.

"Morris County, this is 101. I'll be 10-7 for a short at Pioneer Village, Number 784," Masterson said. Then he hooked the microphone on the dash, left the engine idling, and walked slowly up to the front of the pickup. The palm of his left hand rested on the butt of his holstered pistol.

Jack concentrated on the battery terminal.

"New battery," Masterson said.

"Yeah," Jack said.

"Not the regulator?"

"No. My friend Billy checked it."

"You're smart to clean that terminal real good," the sheriff said. "You might as well not replace the battery

if you don't."

Jack nodded.

"You don't seem to be very talkative," Masterson said.

Jack pushed the terminal over the positive post on the battery, then began to tighten it down with a quarter-inch wrench. When he had finished he stood up and looked at Masterson.

"Sheriff, what would you like to talk about?" he asked.

"Son," Masterson said, "I just wanted to get to know you, that's all. I understand that Susan has dropped her regular boyfriend and has been seeing you for the last couple of weeks. Since you hadn't been out to the house to visit, I thought I'd come find you."

Jack nodded.

"You're graduating in a few days."

When Jack didn't respond, Masterson asked: "You are graduating, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. What kind of plans do you have?"

Jack wiped the wrench on a rag he took from his pocket.

"I've got an application in at Iowa Beef in Emporia,"

Jack said. "If I don't get on there, I thought I'd try the radiator plant or at Custom Manufacturing here."

"I see," Masterson said. He took off his sunglasses.

"I always reckoned I'd work with my grandfather at the ranch," Jack said apologetically. "I didn't count on us losing it."

"I'm sorry about that," Masterson said. "Im sure it must be tough."

"Auction's Saturday," Jack said.

"Look here son," Masterson said, "Have you ever considered college? Maybe even a junior college or a technical school?"

"I haven't liked high school all that much," Jack said. "Can't imagine I'd like college any better. Besides, my grades were never that great."

"Christ," Masterson said.

"Is there a problem?" Jack asked.

"Well, I'm concerned--let's put it that way. All of a sudden Susan has started spending all of her time with you, and now she's talking about laying out a year or two before she goes on to school at Lawrence. It makes sense to me now."

Masterson wiped a sleeve across his forehead.

"Jack," he said, "I know how it is to be young. Hell,

I was young myself."

"I know," Jack said. "You were a basketball star. You nearly single-handedly defeated Duke. Susan's told me all about it. It sounds like you were one heckuva player."

"That was a long time ago," Masterson said.

"It got you elected sheriff, didn't it?" Jack asked and smiled.

"It may have got me there, but this--" Masterson tapped his forehead"--has kept me there. Look, what I'm trying to say is this: you know Susan's valedictorian of your class. You know how bright she is. She's got a scholarship she's considering throwing away to be with you. You don't want to screw up her life, do you?"

"No," Jack said.

"Then back off a little," Masterson said. "Give her some room to think things over before she fucks up. If you kids get serious, and she ends up staying with you instead of going to college, there will come a day when she'll hate your guts for what she gave up."

"Think so?" Jack asked.

"Son, I know so."

"I'll try not to let that happen."

Masterson bit his lip.

"We're not communicating," the sheriff said. "You'll



cool it for awhile, if you know what's best for both of you. Susan is my only child and I'm not about to let anybody ruin her future. Sabe?"

Jack returned his stare.

Masterson put on his sunglasses. He started toward his patrol car. Then he stopped, peered at the back of the truck over the tops of his glasses, and turned to Jack.

"You've got a busted tail light," he said. "Get it fixed."

As the patrol car pulled away with a snarl from its dual exhausts, the door of the trailer opened. Jack's mother, cigarette in hand, was still in her robe.

"What have you done?" she asked.

"Nothing," Jack said, slamming the hood down.

"Then what did the sheriff want?" she asked.

"He told me to stop seeing Susan," he said.

His mother took a drag from the cigarette. With her other hand she clutched the collar of the pink terry robe tight against her breasts.

"I knew that girl was trouble," she said.

Jack Younger sat in a booth at the Trailside Diner on Main Street, drinking a cup of coffee, thumbing through

the want ads in a three-day-old edition of The Kansas City Star he had found on the seat. He discovered there wasn't even a heading for cowboys or ranching.

"Truck running okay?" Susan asked as she slid into the booth beside him. She placed a manilla envelope on the table.

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks for the battery. I'll pay you back."

"No problem," she grinned. "I charged it."

Susan ordered a caffeine-free diet soda with a twist of lemon. The waitress asked her if she wanted a little paper umbrella, too.

"What a bitch," Susan said as the waitress walked away. Then she turned to the envelope. "Look what came today. "It's stuff from Minnesota. I called the museum at Northfield and talked to this little old man who agreed to send me these photocopies from the time of the raid. He said some of the reports contain a description of the guns that were taken from the outlaws when they were captured."

"Good," Jack said.

"If only we can find something that lists the serial number," Susan said as she looked at the first of the sheaf of pages. "Man, these are hard to read. They

really wrote funny back then, didn't they?"

"Your father came to see me."

"Oh? What did Daddy have to say?"

"He told me to stop seeing you."

"I knew that was coming," Susan said, shuffling through the pages. "He thinks he owns me. Says I'm going through a phase or something."

"Is that why you never invite me over?"

"Maybe," Susan said. "Does that bother you?"

"Some," Jack said. "You aren't just going through a phase or something, are you? Our families are really pretty different. Maybe you'll get tired of this."

"You mean am I slumming?" she asked. "Forget it. I don't care what my father thinks. To hell with that. He can't tell me what to do."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," she said and laid the photocopies aside. "You know, I've been thinking. It would be nice if we could have dinner at the Hays House tonight. Sort of a graduation celebration."

"I can't afford it," Jack said.

"Would you stop worrying about money?" she asked.

"I'm treating you. You're not a male chauvanist, are you? You'll let a girl buy you dinner, right?"

"As long as it's you."

She kissed him on the lips, and her tongue darted briefly into his mouth.

"Right answer, cowboy."

Police Chief Bill Tyman, who had watched the pair from a booth in the rear of the Trailside Diner, paid for his coffee and stuck a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. He walked outside and stood on the sidewalk, regarding what could be seen of the sunset behind the buildings and power lines. Tyman tried to recall the last time he had kissed a girl in public, and it seemed that it had been when he got back from Korea, and although he knew well the girl's name he could not now conjure her face.

Tyman smiled.

"What fools these mortals be," he said softly to himself, and walked down the sidewalk to the corner, where his patrol car waited in front of the Farmers & Drovers. He opened the door and looked up at the bank building for a moment before ducking into the car. He studied the curves and lines beneath the curious dome and wondered, for surely the thousandth time, about the secrets that life tucked securely away in plain sight.

Dan Younger leaned against the corral fence. The horses were fed, the tank was full of fresh water, and the yard was picked up. He had cleaned out the house and thrown most of the clothes and junk away; what little there was to keep--some old photographs, a few rodeo trophies, the family Bible--was packed away in a cardboard box in the middle of the living room floor, sealed with strapping tape. The papers for the horses were left in a neat pile on the kitchen table.

Dan Younger was tired but, as he looked over the ranch, the effort was worth it. Things were in order, or as near to it as he could make them without some paint and lumber and a lot of help. Old Possum, the big blue stud that had been Dan's favorite for more than twenty years, came over and nuzzled his graying head against arm. Dan absent-mindedly took an apple from a pocket in his jacket and fed it to the horse from the palm of his hand.

The sun was an orange ball sinking into the western prairie. Dan grunted in appreciation, scratched Possum behind the ears, turned away and walked toward the barn.

## Chapter Nine: Busted

The Hays House is probably the oldest restaurant west of the Mississippi (at least the oldest continuously operating restaurant, as the brochure points out) and its long list of patrons includes such notable blood-letters of the Golden West as George A. Custer and Jesse James. It's not known whether Council Grove's most infamous resident, Bloody Bill Anderson--a guerrilla leader who took scalps, lined Yankees up in a row to see how many a single rifle ball would kill, and rode into battle crying and quoting Bible verses--ever took a meal here, but the odds are for it. So, the presence of Jack Younger didn't even create a ripple in the pool of collective conscience, but he and Susan signed the guest register anyway.

They ate next to the fireplace in the main dining

room. Jack had the brisket and Susan, breaking her health regime with zeal, ordered the prime rib bloody with a baked potato and extra butter on the side. They topped it off with fresh peach pie drowning in real cream. When the meal was over Susan paid with a credit card, gave Jack a squeeze on the leg, and laid a motel key on his empty dessert plate.

Jack picked up the key. The plastic tag said it belonged to Room 227.

"The Sunrise Motel," Susan said. "I figured we'd better get out of town, what with Daddy lurking about. It's on east 50 in Emporia. Know it?"

Jack nodded.

"I've got some things to do," she said, putting the credit card back in her purse. "I'll meet you there about ten. That is, if you want."

"I want," Jack said.

He wiped a smear of peach pie from the key and slipped it into his right jeans pocket.

"What do you have to do?" he asked.

"Pack," she said. "I'm not going back home."

Jack nodded.

"Jack," she said. "I've got something else for you." She took an envelope from her purse and pushed it across

the table. Jack opened it and unfolded the piece of paper it contained.

"What's this?"

"I found it in those papers the museum sent," Susan said. "Look at the list of guns. The serial number on the Navy Colt taken from Cole Younger--this one, right here--matches the Northfield Gun. It's authentic. The auction's tomorrow afternoon, but the bank's open in the morning. Maybe you should pay Mr. Hart a visit."

Jack Younger left Room 227 of the Sunrise Motel a little after six o'clock the next morning. He climbed into his pickup truck and started to pull out, then braked when Susan ran out of the motel room in her nightgown. She gave him a kiss for luck through the open window, then ran back inside.

The sun had only been up an hour, but Jack wanted to see Hart as soon as he could get into the bank, and he planned to sit on the steps outside until that happened. Then, when he was finished at the bank, he would go to the trailer and gather up his clothes. Susan had said she'd wait at the motel until he got back.

North of Emporia, near the tiny community of Allen and the intersection with Highway 56, he passed



classmate Tom Miller walking along the edge of the deserted two-lane road. When Miller looked behind him and saw Jack's pickup approaching, he stuck his thumb out and began to wave wildly. Jack hesitated, then braked and let Miller run up to the passenger's door of the pickup.

"Thanks, man," Miller said as he scooted into the seat and wiped his stringy hair from his face. "I thought I was going to be walking forever. I went to this graduation party out in the country last night, passed out, and when I woke up everybody was gone."

"You're wasted," Jack said.

"No shit, man," Miller said. "I don't think I could have walked another step. Can you let me off at my brother's house when we get into town? It's just a couple of blocks off Main. Say, what's up with you and the Masterson chick?"

Eight miles outside of Council Grove they passed a sheriff's cruiser going in the opposite direction. It was a white maroon Taurus with a red and blue light bar, and Jack watched in the rear view mirror as it receded behind them.

"Sonuvabitch," Jack hissed when he saw the flash of brake lights as the Taurus slowed and cut a wide circle

in the road. The Ford began to accelerate to close the distance to the pickup truck.

"What's happening?" Miller asked.

"Nothing, I hope," Jack said. "Just stay calm."

"Calm?" Miller asked. "Sure. No problem." But he began to shift uncomfortably on the seat.

When the Taurus had drawn up to within three car lengths of the pickup's tailgate the lightbar began to swirl and the headlights began winking. In the rearview, Jack could see the deputy reading off the truck's tag number to the dispatcher.

Jack slowed and drove for a few hundred yards or so. The highway was narrow and there were few places to turn off. Finally he came to a cut where a road led into a field, and he guided the pickup off the pavement and onto the grass. The cruiser pulled in slantways behind the pickup, effectively blocking the truck in.

"Shit," Miller said. "Fuckin' pigs."

"Listen to me," Jack said, his hands gripping the top of the wheel and his eyes on the mirror. "You keep your mouth shut. Don't piss this guy off, you got it?"

"No problem," Miller said.

While Jack was watching the mirror, Miller slipped a plastic bag out of the pocket of his ragged surplus army

jacket and wedged it between the seat halves.

The deputy--another six footer, but younger than Masterson by twenty years--walked up and stood behind the cab for a moment, watching through the cracked rear window. Then, standing behind and to the left so Jack had to turn to see him, he asked Jack's license and registration.

"Yes, sir." Jack methodically pulled his wallet from his jeans pocket, opened it, and handed the deputy his license. Then he reached across to the glove compartment and retrieved the registration, which he handed through the window.

"Thank you," the deputy said. The nametag clipped above his badge said his name was J. Colby. "The reason I stopped you, Mr. Younger, is that you have a broken taillight."

"You could spot that going sixty miles an hour in the opposite direction?" Jack asked. "My lights weren't even on. Sir."

"I could sure tell it when you braked for a stop here," Colby said. He looked at Miller, who was biting his lip and staring out the window. "What's wrong with your passenger?"

"Nothing," Miller and smiled.

"His name's Miller," Jack said. "I picked him up a few miles back. He was hitching."

"You two friends?" the deputy asked.

"He's in my class," Jack said.

"Uh-huh. He looks a little nervous to me. Is there a reason for you to be nervous, Mr. Miller?"

"Nope."

"I see. Would you have some kind of identification, Mr. Miller? Please move slowly and keep your hands where I can see them."

Miller carefully handed him his license.

"Fine," the deputy said. "Would you gentlemen mind staying in vehicle a moment?"

"No," Jack said. "We'll wait."

"Good," the deputy said pleasantly. "I'll be back shortly. Don't leave the truck, please."

The deputy strode back to the patrol car and got back on the radio, but he didn't take his eyes off the truck.

"Okay," Jack said. "What is it?"

"How the hell should I know, man? You know how the fuckin' pigs are." Sweat dripped from the end of Miller's nose.

"Miller," Jack said, "you're lying."

Five minutes later a second sheriff's car pulled in

behind the first. This one was a maroon Crown Victoria and it had a solid red light bar. The undersheriff, a tall man with red hair, and another deputy, stepped out.

The first deputy came up on Jack's side of the truck while the undersheriff and the other man approached on Miller's side. Their guns were drawn, but pointed in the air.

"Fuck," Miller said.

"Please exit the vehicle slowly," the undersheriff commanded. "Keep your hands up."

Jack took a breath and opened the door. He lifted his hands and slid down from behind the wheel. The deputy grasped him by the shoulder and guided him to the front fender of the pickup.

"Carefully put your head down on the fender," the deputy said.

"You're kidding."

"I'm afraid not."

Jack placed his palms on the fender and lowered his head. The metal was cold and rough against his brow.

"Now place your hands behind your back. Good. Spread your legs. I'm going to pat you down."

"Are we under arrest?" Jack asked.

"We're just being careful," the deputy said.

"All you guys on the sheriff's department are really big," Jack said and smiled. "I'll bet you have enough for your own basketball team."

"We play the city police on occassion," Deputy Colby said. He ran a hand over Jack's body, between his legs, and down his jeans to his socks.

"I'll bet they lose," Jack said.

"Okay," the deputy said. "Relax for a minute."

On the other side of the pickup, Miller was arguing with O'Banyon, the undersheriff.

"You're under arrest," O'Banyon said. "Put your head down."

Miller glared at him.

O'Banyon grasped the back of Miller's head and forced it down on the hood, hard enough that it left a dimple in the sheetmetal.

"That hurt," Miller said.

"Then don't resist," O'Banyon said. "Put your hands behind your back." Miller did, and the deputy next to the undersheriff snapped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists.

"Mr. Miller," O'Banyon said as he lead him toward the maroon patrol car, "you're under arrest on an outstanding felony warrant for failure to appear in

district court on a charge of possession of marijuana with intent to sell."

"Okay," Colby told Jack. "You can stand now."

Jack stood up and stretched his neck.

"Can I go?"

"No, sir," Colby said. "May we search your vehicle?"

"Why?"

"Based on a visual inspection, and because of Mr. Miller's presence in the vehicle, I have a reasonable suspicion that it may contain a controlled substance."

"Don't you need a warrant for that?"

"Not any more," Colby said. "The Reagan Supreme Court changed all that."

"Well, I don't mind," Jack said. "Search it. I don't have anything to hide. I was just giving Miller a lift."

"He should be more careful of his court dates," Colby said.

The deputy began searching the pickup--the dash, the glovebox, the floorboards. He had already seen a corner of the plastic bag peaking from the seat, but he didn't want to miss anything. Finally he folded down the seat, where he could easily see the bag.

"Is that yours?" Colby asked.

"That sonuvatch," Jack said. "No, sir, I've never

seen it before. Honest."

"We'll have to take it in," Colby said, and asked the other deputy for an evidence kit. "I'm also afraid that we're going to have to place you under arrest."

"But I didn't do anything."

"We're going to have to take you in until we can sort this thing out."

"How long will that take?"

"It could be some time. I'm going to have to handcuff you now. Sorry, but it's procedure."

"But I didn't do anything. Can't I post a bond or something?"

"You can't do that until your first appearance," Colby said, "and this is Saturday. Court won't open until Monday morning."

"Please, not now."

"Take it easy," Colby said as he snapped the handcuffs in place over Jack's wrists. "It's not that bad."

"You don't understand," Jack said. "My grandfather's farm is going to be auctioned this afternoon, and I have to see a man at the bank this morning. It can't wait."

"Sorry," Colby said.

"Can I make a phone call?"



"After we process you," Colby said. "And, Mr. Younger, there's one other thing: under the drug forfeiture law, we're going to impound your vehicle."

"Will I get it back?"

"That'll be up to the court. But you seem like a nice guy. Can I give you a word of advice? Next time, be more careful about who you let into your vehicle."

"That won't be a problem," Jack said, "since it looks like I just lost my goddamn truck. I get it back, right, if I'm found not guilty?"

"No," Colby said. "The way it works is that the truck itself is charged with a crime, for carrying a controlled substance. Whether you are found guilty or not, the truck will go through its own court process."

"Have you all gone nuts?" Jack asked. "How the hell can a truck commit a crime? It's a piece of shit pickup, for God's sake. Why would you want to take it away from me? My grandfather gave it to me."

"It's just the way it is," Colby said. He began reading Jack some of the rights they had studied the spring before in civics class.

Within the white concrete block walls of the Morris County Sheriff's Office in Council Grove they

fingerprinted Jack four times (the copies would go to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Crime Information Computer); stripped, showered, and searched him again; dressed him in an orange prison coverall; filed a report on his clothes and personal property; made him fill out a health questionnaire; gave him a copy of the inmate rules; and led him through a series of bars to a gray cell with two bunks, a lightbulb in a wire cage, and a combination steel gray toilet and sink.

"Where's Miller?" Jack asked.

"We can't keep him here," Colby said. "He's a juvenile. But you turned eighteen a couple of months ago."

"Terrific. When do I get to make those two phones calls?"

Colby unlocked the cell door allowed Jack into the recreation area. There was a phone on the wall just outside the pen, close enough so that the receiver could be handed through the bars.

"This works just like a collect call," Colby said. "Anybody you call has to agree to accept the charges. Who do you want me to dial?"

There was a clock on the wall beyond the bars. It was

2:30 in the afternoon.

"I... I don't know," Jack said. "You think a motel would receive a long-distance collect call? Neither do I. Billy doesn't have a phone. I guess I call have to call my mother."

Jack gave Colby the number. Nobody was home.

"Christ," Jack said.

"Do you have a lawyer?"

"I've never needed one before. Besides, I thought you said one would be appointed."

"Monday," Colby said.

"Am I allowed any visitors?"

"Sunday," Colby said. "Between 2 and 4."

"Fuck," Jack said. "You guys are really pissing me off."

"Watch your language," Colby said and hung up the phone. "I'll be back later and you can try your Mom again."

"Will you deliver a message for me?"

"Can't do that. If you behave yourself, I'll leave you here in the rec area. Previous guests have left a little library here. Why don't you read?"

"You can't leave me here," Jack said, pleading through the bars. "Look, the auction's already started."

You can't leave me in here--goddamit, you have no right to do this to me. Where're you going?"

The door shut behind Colby.

Jack sat down at the gray metal table in the center of the room. He struck the table hard, with his fist, but it didn't even make a satisfying bang. And he hurt his knuckles.

He sighed and looked around him. The area was bare except for a line of well-thumbed paperback books stuck between the bars along one side. They were all westerns: Louis L'Amour, Will Henry, Don Coldsmith.

A little after six o'clock the dispatcher brought in the evening meal. Meatleaf and bread pudding on a styrofoam plate, coffee in a styrofoam cup, milk in a carton, and a plastic fork and spoon.

The meal had turned cold by the time Colby and Police Chief Bill Tyman came in.

"Let me talk to him," Tyman said.

"Can I make a phone call?" Jack asked.

"Sure," Tyman said. "In just a little bit. I need to talk with you first, son."

Colby unlocked the door of the rec area and Tyman stepped inside. When Colby made no move to leave, Tyman

asked the deputy for a little privacy.

"I think I should stay here," Colby said. "He may get, well--"

"Christ," Tyman said. "Leave us. This boy ain't going to give me any trouble."

Colby nodded, then backed away.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked as Tyman sat down.

"I know this has been a terrible day for you," Tyman said, "and I'm about to make it worse. You got ahold of yourself? There's no way to make this easy. Your granddad killed himself. They found the body at the auction this afternoon. He apparently went into a corner of the barn last night and shot himself in the head with a double-barrel shotgun. Me and Dan Younger were friends once upon a time, so I wanted to tell you."

Jack tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"Don't talk," Tyman said. "Don't fight it. There's nothing anybody can do about it. Are you okay?"

Jack nodded.

"You just hang on until we can get you before a judge. I read the report and I don't think these assholes have a damn thing to hold you on. I can't believe they brought you in. You know what it's about, don't you?"

Jack nodded.

"As soon as Susan comes home Chalk will cool down. I'm going to try to contact the judge and explain things to him, about your grandad and all, and maybe we can get you out of here a little sooner than Monday morning. Will you be okay?"

"Sure," Jack said.

"No, really," Tyman said. "You're not going to twist a bedsheet around your neck?"

Jack looked at him.

"No, I reckon you wouldn't," Tyman said. He stood to leave.

"Chief," Jack asked. "Did they go ahead and have the auction? Did they sell the ranch?"

"Most of the odds and ends," Tyman said. "The horses, the equipment, the linoleum off the kitchen floor. But the bank didn't get a minimum bid on the land so they declard a no-sale."

"The horses," Jack said. "Who bought the horses?"

Tyman hesitated.

"Some Japanese company," he said.

"What for?"

"Son," Tyman said, "they're going to turn them into meat. Your avererage quarter horse is worth more these

days as food than as something to ride."

Jack Younger squinted against the sunlight as the dull gray door of the Morris County Sheriff's Office closed behind him. Under his arm was a yellow envelope which contained the change and everything else that was in his pockets when he was booked.

Susan was leaning against the fender of her car, which was parked at the curb along Main Street.

"I sort of expected you to come during visiting hours yesterday," Jack told her.

"I couldn't," Susan said.

"Well, I knew something was wrong when you didn't show. It was just one of those weekends, you know? But then, I had my mother to comfort me."

"Jack, I'm sorry, but I had to promise my father that I wouldn't see you again. He said that if I didn't, he wouldn't drop the charges and you'd spend the next five years in the state penitentiary at Lansing. The amount of marijuana was over an ounce. It was a felony, Jack."

"You should have let him try," Jack said. "I don't think he would have won."

"I couldn't take that chance," she said.

"So it's over, just like that?" Jack asked. "I

thought you said the sheriff didn't run your life. I guess you were wrong, huh?"

"I guess I was," she said.

Susan began to cry.

Jack began walking down the street.

"Wait," Susan said. She reached inside the black Mustang's open window and pulled the leather pack from the rear seat. "You left this at the motel."

Jack slung it over his shoulder.

"I'm glad," Jack said. "Or they would have taken it, too. They got everything else. So long."



## Chapter Ten: The Outlaw

At the southwest corner of Main and Neosho in Council Grove, Kansas, beneath a curious Byzantine dome, Jack stopped walking. He stood on the curb and looked to the east, toward Kansas City; he turned and looked west, toward Santa Fe; then he looked up at the Farmers & Drovers Bank Building. There an eagle, attached to the bank's time and temperature sign, soared over over a digital readout.

It was 9:15 a.m.

It was 78 degrees.

Jack walked up the limestone steps. He trudged across the bank lobby to the corner office where Charley Hart sat behind the big wooden desk with the bowl of polished buckeyes. Jack rapped lightly on the doorframe. Hart, who was on the phone, held up one finger and motioned

for Jack to have a seat outside.

Jack waited. It seemed awfully hot in the bank, and he tugged open a couple of buttons at the collar of his shirt so he could breathe.

Seven minutes later Hart put down the phone and called for Jack to come in. Hart regreted it when he finally recognized Jack's face.

"You're the Younger boy, aren't you?" Hart asked. "I'm sorry, but we have nothing to discuss."

Jack cleared his throat. He was having trouble speaking. A headache was building behind his eyes and the colors in the room seemed too bright, like they were in a painting or on television. When he moved his head they left streaks.

"I thought I would ask," he began. "I'd still like to... I mean, I have this."

Jack pulled the revolver out of the pack by the gun's walnut grips.

"I see you do," Hart said. His hands rested on the desk and his knuckles turned white.

"I have a paper," Jack said, and from his jeans pocket he took the folded photocopy that the museum had sent. He held it out toward Hart.

"Yes," Hart said. "A note. Splendid."

Hart's left hand slid below the desktop and searched for the button hidden on the rough underside. Jack placed the paper on the desk. Hart's fingers found the button and pressed it.

"Read it," Jack said.

"Sure," Hart said.

He picked up the note and slowly unfolded it. "Would you like big bills?" Hart asked with a nervous laugh.

"Or would you prefer tens and twenties?"

"It's that easy?" Jack asked. "You haven't even told me how much it's worth yet." Jack rubbed the back of his neck with his left hand. He was having trouble thinking.

"Is it hot in here?"

"Rather," Hart said.

He glanced down at the photocopy in his hand.

"What is this?" he asked. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked. "It's--"

A glint of sunlight from outside, coming in from the lobby, hurt Jack's eyes.

"--your authentication."

Jack noticed that Hart's eyes never left the barrel of the gun. Jack was idly in front of him, pointed at nothing but the wall, but if the barrel wavered a few

inches to the right, Hart's eyes followed it. The sunlight stabbed at Jack's eyes again. He realized it was the front door, opening and closing.

"Where are all your people going?" Jack asked.

"Why don't you give me your bag," Hart suggested, "and I'll go fill it up for you."

"Sonuvabitch," Jack said, shooting out of the chair. "You pressed the silent alarm, didn't you?"

"No," Hart said. "I'll get you some money. There's no problem. Just don't shoot me, for God's sake."

"I'm not going to shoot you," Jack said. "Jesus, you don't understand. I'm not trying to rob you."

"Of course not," Hart said. "You just want what's yours."

"You dumb bastard," Jack shouted. Hart cringed. "Call the police and tell them this is not a holdup." Jack got a better grip on the gun. When Hart made no move toward the phone, he cocked the hammer. "Do it. Call them and tell them that there has been a big mistake."

Hart gingerly picked up the telephone receiver.

"I don't know the number."

"It's 767-5200," Jack said. "I know. I was just there."

Hart dialed.

"Hello, this is Charley Hart at the bank," he said.

"Yes, that's right. I did. Well, I'm here with Mr. Younger and he wants me to tell you that it was a mistake. That's right, Jack Younger."

The dispatcher at the other end of the line pulled down a black ring binder from above the communications console and frantically flipped through it.

"Mr. Hart," she said. "Could you give me the code word?"

"Of course. It's Washungah."

Hart hung up.

The dispatcher finally found the entry for silent alarm 308, Farmers & Drovers. It was Santa Fe. She summoned Chalk Masterson on tactical radio channel two and told him that the alarm was a verified 10-93.

Masterson eased his Crown Victoria into the middle of the intersection of Neosho and Main. Two other sheriff's cars nosed in on either side, blocking the intersection. Masterson put on his gray hat and grabbed the riot gun from the dash.

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