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LONGNECKS & TWISTED HEARTS

A Bill Travis Mystery

by

George Wier

PROLOGUE

The French ship ran toward the lowering sun. Behind her, southeastward, perhaps forty nautical miles distant, the wall of slate gray pursued: Hurricane.

The marauder's master emerged from his cabin, tromped up the companionway steps to the pilot deck and raised his glass.

They had been running before the storm for a week; as if it were a bloody hunt and themselves the prey.

"Capitaine," his commander called to him. "There is land."

The Captain turned, raised his glass and peered through it. There was land: it was the familiar long and narrow strip of sand bar that an earlier Spanish explorer had named Corpus Christi, which meant "Body of Christ", perhaps for the fact of his deliverance from just such a storm as followed. Spaniards were superstitious. Louis considered that it was almost a form of blasphemy itself to go around naming things after Deity. Still. . . He turned back toward the distant wall of gray. If there was, truly, a personage--Diety himself--then he might be angry at Louis and his ship for the theft, if not the murders.

For the last six days the storm had tracked the ship and men across the Gulf of Mexico, as if consciously following every turn of the pilot. It was enough to make a man superstitious.

The day before the storm appeared, Louis du Orly and his crew had sacked a galleon on the Spanish Main, just off the coast of the island named for the order of friars that now inhabited it: Dominica. They had taken five huge crates from the hold of the Spanish ship, each crate containing a treasure trove of gold and gems, then they had burned the ship to the waterline. Now, belowdecks, Louis had a dozen papists--the survivors of his conquest--in chains. He would return them to France for use in an exchange of prisoners. Perhaps his old Captain himself could be returned to him.

But the storm--some of his men thought it was the Wrath of God himself--pursued. And France was so far away.

"Bear north," he called. "Head for Matagorda. We will take shelter on the Brazos de Dios." In the Latin tongue it meant "The Arms of God", but in truth it was little more than a wide, muddy river that emptied into the Gulf of Mexico, named such by that idiot LaSalle. The story was that LaSalle, pursued by Indians, had stumbled upon the river, at first believing he had found the Mississippi. He swam it, and upon the other side he sank to his knees and offered a prayer to Divinity for delivering him, thus consecrating the river in God's name. The Indians, more worldly-wise, had not attempted the crossing. Perhaps they

were not mere savages. Perhaps they were wise. The Brazos was treacherous. If stories were true, half as many as had attempted the crossing had not made it. There were tales of great eddys in the current that would swallow any craft less than a large sailing ship. Also, there were great beasts; reptiles up to thirty feet in length that could eat a man whole. A year before Louis had taken Le Royale up river perhaps ten miles and there had observed a great geyser of water and sand. As he brought his ship nearer, he observed a thing that was part fish and part reptile slink into the water and disappear. Through the course of his life Louis had found that legends, by and large, were not true. However, such stories were usually based upon some fact; some thing, however idiotic, usually mis-observed. He would not himself have believed the animal existed if he had not seen it. Yes, the Brazos was treacherous. But there was greater danger from sandbars, from the Indians, from disease and ignorance than there was from legendary dragons.

The Brazos was the only navigable river within range. It was his only option.

The storm followed them, as if driven by diabolical intelligence. An intelligence with a taste for revenge.

Perhaps Satan, then. Louis could never bring himself to put his faith in a benevolent Deity. A malevolent one, though, was more realistic given the nature of life. Regardless, he would have to drive Le Royale far up river to escape, and all the while

the storm would be bearing down hard upon them. Sailing upriver through the meandering channel would take time, and time was a luxury he could ill afford.

It was the year of the Christian Savior 1643. The whole world was being swallowed up by Christianity, or so it seemed. Louis had narrowly escaped heresy charges himself by going to sea at the age of fifteen. His parents had been Huguenots, both slaughtered during the Purge when he was just a lad of eight. He had grown up under the uncertain guidance of his mother's brother.

Louis had been outspoken and willful. He did not believe in the Christian God, and had forever refused to take part in worship. He was one of a select few who had no God except his own ability to make his way in the world and do more than survive; Louis du Orly would commit the greatest blasphemy of all: he would flourish and prosper or die in the attempt. Thus far in his life he had found no middle ground between these two extremes.

From the seaport at Brest he entered the merchant employ of a garrulous shop-keeper, Simone Le Blanc, who while engendering Louis' loyalty would later sell his contract to a trading company that was set to sail for the New World.

And here he was, a hold laden with the ripest fruit of the New World--gold--and he was running like the coward he was certain his men now thought him to be.

"Monsieur Le Fitte," he called to his mate.

"Capitaine?"

"I am about to do something. Something untried. If any ill befalls me, you are to take command."

"Oui," the young man replied, fear etched into his features. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to make a pact with the Devil," Louis said. He turned from the quizzical gaze of his officer and looked toward the sandbar.

They were short of the bay by perhaps a hundred miles.

His eyes tracked back to the storm.

It would be close. Far too close.

He was twenty-five years old now, and had spent the last seven years of his life terrorizing the Spanish on the high seas. His Lettres du Marque gave him license in the name of the King to burn, pillage, and sack the Spaniards. Just now the Dutch and the English, aside from his own shipmates, were his only friends.

He sighed. It had been a good life.

Somehow he felt fated. The blood coursing through his veins would soon be stilled. He knew there would be no grave for his body, nor did he foresee burial at sea. But he was not afraid of death.

Louis smiled and turned his eyes from the coming hurricane toward the steps down into his ship.

He would die, this he knew. But he would make certain that

the treasure would survive. Enough to purchase a hundred such ships as his.

He shut the gentle salt breeze outside behind him and plunged into the darkness belowdecks.

There, on his desk was the chest, its gold framework limned with a shimmer of dying sunlight from the port window.

It had taken him days to work out the intricate lock. The pick tools, most of them garnered from among the crew, lay scattered across the desk. From memory he made quick work of the lock, and at the small 'snik' sound, lifted the lid.

It lay inside upon a tiny mattress of fleece.

He reached in and withdrew the cold object and turned it about in his hand, his eyes roving over it, looking for any seam, any mark that might betray its maker or its manner of manufacture. There were none.

The object was in the shape of a wish-bone, no more than twenty inches high, and heavier than any normal metal besides gold itself. He had discovered its purpose by accident on their third day of flight from the storm. It had been beneath his coat, its bluish, smooth metal against his shirt, when he went down into the hold to inspect the treasure.

Before he could remove his key from his breeches, he felt the tugging.

This object of the Aztecs was pulling toward the door, as if it hungered. It came free of his shirt and pressed hard against

the inner lining of his coat, tugging, shifting.

Louis had backed away from the hold door carefully, and as he did the tugging diminished, slowly.

"Gold," he thought. "It hungers for gold."

Later, sitting at his desk, he watched the closed chest that contained the object. He waited and he thought while he waited.

If word of the thing were to spread among the Spaniards, they would come for him. They would track him to the ends of the Earth and seize it.

It whispered to him that same terrible night.

I hunger, Louis.

He awoke from the fevered dream and stood for an hour regarding the chest, waiting for it to speak again. He could not sleep again that night.

Now, the thing in hand, he reversed along the passageway and emerged again upon the deck.

He strode to the foredeck of the ship. The men had stopped their work to watch him.

Louis du Orly lifted the object to the sky.

Overhead the slate gray clouds were banked, heaving forward with the weight of the storm behind it.

"Hear me!" he cried. "It hungers, as I hunger. Free us!"

The lightning bolt flicked to him faster than the eye could travel. It danced and wove through the object, his arms, his brain, and then exited his left boot.

He fell, and knew no more.

#

He awoke with a metallic taste in his mouth and a powerful thirst.

He sat bolt upright from his bed. Outside the wind howled and the rain peppered the port window.

Le Fitte was by his side.

"Where are we?" Louis asked.

"On the Brazos de Dios."

"Safe?"

"The hurricane is here. We have lost two men."

"How long? How long was I asleep?"

"Three days."

"Three?"

"Oui. I feared for your life."

The ship swayed and rocked, driven hard by the wind and rain. Louis tried to sit, by his lieutenant push him gently back down.

"Rest, monsieur. Please. We will need you, if we are to survive this."

Louis nodded and laid his throbbing head back onto his feather pillow.

"How far? How far upriver?" he asked.

"A hundred miles. Possibly more."

"Impossible," Louis exclaimed.

"We have not once had to tack against the wind. The river is wide and deep and the way has been clear. It is a miracle sent from. . . It is a miracle."

"Where? Where is the blue bone?" Louis asked.

"In the chest."

Louis' eyes turned toward the table, and as he did, he a lance of pain went through his skull. The chest was there.

"Locked?" he asked.

"Even so."

Louis felt unaccountably tired. His strength ebbed away quickly. He gripped his lieutenant's hand, fought to gather his thoughts to say something, something important, he felt, but as he grasped for it, it fled. And darkness descended upon him again.

"Rest my captain," Le Fitte said.

CHAPTER ONE

It seems there is never a good time for anything to happen in life, good or bad.

For instance, I was in a courtroom about to hear the closing arguments in a lawsuit involving a friend and the guy that had rooked him out of a neat hundred-thousand samolians when I got the word that my best friend from childhood had been killed.

Bradley Fisher and I had known each other from second grade straight on through. I never had a brother, but if I had, I don't know that he could have been any closer to me than Brad had been at one time.

I'd had a feeling of intense wrongness from the moment my head had hit the pillow the night before. That feeling had intensified in my dreams and I had awakened covered in a cold sweat around three-fifteen in the morning, that time when the night seems to be its darkest and the hope of any light is a world removed. I'd read once that three-fifteen was the witching hour. I never knew any witches to confirm it, but still, it's an hour that's best slept through. Somehow I had gotten back to

sleep, nuzzling into the warm, slumbering cocoon that is my wife.

Trial had resumed at nine as if the night had never occurred. But my usual slim breakfast had turned into a ball of nervous lead around nine-thirty and despite the fact that I had my head in the very serious game that was unfolding before me, the sense that something, somewhere, had gone south stayed with me.

My pager vibrated.

I don't normally carry a cell phone or a pager, but Julie was scheduled to deliver at any time and if all went well I'd be a father.

Somehow I knew that the oppressive and disquieting feeling of wrongness had nothing to do with Julie or the baby.

I jumped in my seat. The vibration in my pants pocket felt like an electric shock--as if I'd touched a live wire that hadn't been completely shut off from the power.

I fumbled in my pants pocket, attempting to look nonchalant.

A row ahead of me, just past the inlaid wood barrier between the public and the court, my friend looked over at me with a puzzled expression on his face.

I used my face to try to convey a shrug. It worked. Mendoza, my buddy, nodded once, giving me an "Okay."

The '979' prefix on my pager told me at once that the number was from back home; Bryan, Texas, my hometown, or at least within the same area code.

My throat went dry.

It was Brad's home phone number.

The judge looked at me. He had a practiced, concerned look on his face.

I shook my head: Nothing.

"I gotta go," I whispered to Mendoza.

He shrugged.

#

"Hello?" It was Mary Jo, Brad's wife, who answered the phone.

"Mary Jo. It's Bill."

"Oh God. Bill. Brad's dead."

I felt the blood drain out of my head. Suddenly I was leaning against the smooth travertine blocks that made up one of the walls outside the court room. I tried to say something, but I had no breath.

"Bill. . . I'm. . . so. . . sorry. . ." Mary Jo choked down into heavy sobs.

Somehow I managed to breathe.

"What happened?"

"I knew they were going to kill him. I tried to tell him. But Brad doesn't. . . didn't. . . listen to me."

"Mary Jo. It's not your fault. Brad never listened to anybody."

It was true.

I recalled an instance where Brad hadn't listened. Back around early 1990 Brad had called me up in a frenzy to get me in on the ground floor with him in what would later be called the Junk Bond market. He invested eighty thousand dollars, the bulk of his inheritance from his father, and sat back and waited for it to turn into a cool million. I did my best to warn him off of it without making him wrong or thoroughly raining out his parade. I'd wanted him to hold back. To try ten thousand first, or maybe five. He wasn't having any of it. I'm not even sure he heard me. There are no dreams quite like golden dreams--money falling from the sky like pennies from heaven. And there was no way that Brad was going to let the dream walk on by.

When the bottom fell out of the junk bond market, I called him up, hoping that I wasn't too late. I had the disturbing image in my mind of my best friend holding a gun to his head and pulling the trigger. But he was alright. It was okay for me to breathe easy. You live and you learn. "Don't ever worry about me, Bill," he had said. "I'll always be here."

Except he wasn't. Not anymore.

"Bill?" Mary Jo said. I could hear the concern in her voice. She'd just lost her husband and here she was worried about me.

"Don't worry about me, Mary Jo," I told her.

"That's what Brad always told me. Don't repeat him, Bill."

"Okay," I said. "I'll try not to. But it's hard."

"Bill, I know who did this. I know who killed him."

"Okay, Mary Jo. I'm coming. Right now."

#

I hoped that Phil Mendoza would understand.

Outside the Travis County Courthouse I walked the block over to the old Stewart Title Building where I parked my Mercedes during the trial. Along the way I called Julie.

"How you feeling, darlin'?" I asked her.

"I'm fine. Why aren't you in the trial?"

"Baby, I just got some bad news. My old running buddy, Bradley Fisher. . . his wife paged me while I was in Court. Brad's dead."

"She called me and I gave her your pager number," she said.

"She didn't sound so good but she wouldn't tell me anything."

"I was wondering how she got my number."

"She just said it was an emergency. I'm sorry baby," she said. "Are you going to be okay?"

I thought about it. I suppose I had to be.

"I'll be alright. It's a bit of a shock is all. Brad and I have been drifting apart over the years. . ."

"And now he's gone," she said.

"Yeah."

"You need to take off, don't you?" I could hear it in her voice--that certainty that only someone who knows you like no other can have. And I suppose she does know me, all too well.

I thought about it. The baby was due any time. I couldn't not be there by her side when the time came, whenever that was.

"Bill?"

"I'm here," I said.

"I'll be fine," she said, reading my mind like always. "Go, okay? Just go."

"I've got to be here when you deliver," I said, my throat feeling dry.

"You will be. Just no more hanging from blimps, no more shootouts. You got that?"

"Baby. We don't even own a gun."

"I know. But somehow guns seem to find you."

"Yeah," I said. She was right. "I know."

I crossed Ninth and San Antonio Street, taking the intersection on a diagonal. The parking garage was just down the hill.

"Baby, I'm about to go inside the parking garage."

"Okay," she said. "How did he die?"

"Mary Jo told me that somebody killed him and that she knows who did it."

There was a long silence while the news settled in.

"I love you," she said.

"Me too."

CHAPTER TWO

You can never go home again. That's the old saying, and I've found that it's all too true.

There's another old saying: "You can't put your foot into the same river twice." Time is like that. You turn around and look where you were looking just a few seconds before, and something will have changed, just in that short interval.

With my home town the change was bone deep.

I'd passed through it a few times in my comings and goings across Texas in the years since I left high school. During those previous infrequent trips I had noted that other than the new civic buildings, the new strip malls and retail outlets, and the obvious expansion outward into areas of the county that I had once considered the untracked wilderness, the changes had been superficial. It was the same town. There was still a Perry's Department Store on Bryan Street, the Dairy Queen still doled out the ice cream and "hunger-buster" hamburgers, the Baptists still had the market cornered on the local soul harvest. All was right

with the world because home was still home.

When I got into town that evening, though, I was in another world. And I didn't like it.

The buildings were the same, the traffic was only mildly heavier, the street names were the same, but what happened when I turned right onto Texas Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare, removed any hope that I was anywhere near home.

Red and blue flashed in my rearview mirror.

I was being pulled over.

Fine, I thought. Welcome back.

#

"License and registration, please," the policeman said. He had a stone face. I was willing to bet he'd spent hours at a time practicing it in a mirror until he had it perfect. You could have used a chisel on his face and broke the thing.

"Sure," I said. I fished out my license and the registration and handed them over to him with a calculated nonchalance.

He took them, glanced at the registration and stood, unmoving, looking at my driver's license.

"I'm from Austin," I said. "My best friend died and I'm in town to pay my respects."

"My condolences," the policeman said. If he meant it then I had complete lack of judgment of human character.

"Say," I said. "Why'd you stop me? Did I do anything

wrong?"

"Ran a red light," he said, trying to drill little holes into me with his eyes.

"I turned right on red. I came to a complete stop. Looked, then turned. Not trying to argue or anything, but you know that's what happened."

"You don't know anything that I know," he said.

He looked back down at my license.

"Is this your correct address?" the policeman asked, his eyes moving back and forth from me to my driver's license.

"Yes," I said. I normally reserve "sir" for people I have actually found respectable, or for dignitaries like the Governor. Thus far I'd found nothing about the guy to respect.

"Travis, William. Wait here, William."

"It's Bill," I said. I looked at his name tag. It read "H. Leonard."

"Bill, hunh? Are there any other assumed names you answer to?"

"No, Officer Leonard," I said. "It's not an assumed name, it's my name. Bill--William, William--Bill. Like Hank for Henry." I yawned. Yawning usually works best with his kind.

"I know what a nickname is. Any other assumed names, Bill?"

"No," I said. I was long past tired of the guy.

"Wait here."

I waited.

He was in his cruiser behind me for all of ten minutes. I glanced in my rearview mirror from time to time. What the hell was he doing?

Officer Leonard returned.

"Mr. Travis," he said, handing me my license and registration. I took them. "I'm going to do you a favor."

I didn't even have to think about it. "That's not necessary," I said.

"Still, you're going to accept this favor."

"Okay, what is it?"

"You're going to start up your car. You will turn right at the next intersection. You will turn right again at the very next stop sign. When you come to the next stop sign you will turn left. You will proceed back in the direction from whence you came, not deviating. I will follow you until you have crossed the Brazos River bridge from Brazos County over into Burleson County. Go back to Austin, Mr. Travis."

"You're running me out of town, hunh? Why?"

He leaned toward me.

"Mr. Travis. I firmly believe that you would be better off not exploring the alternative."

"Fine," I said, not missing a beat.

#

It's an eighteen-mile drive through relatively flat river-bottom countryside west from Bryan to the wide and muddy waters

of the Brazos River.

In the last two miles I had to restrain myself from speeding. My toes itched.

Also, I was hopping mad.

I thought about Brad and about Mary Jo; Brad as I had remembered him with a toothy grin on his craggy face, and Mary Jo as I would probably find her, trying to smile and be her warm and courteous self even as the tears rolled down her face.

As I approached the bridge I glanced up in my rearview. Officer H. Leonard slowed down and moved off the road. Probably he'd sit there for a good half hour or more and wait to see if I turned back around and crossed again.

Fine, I thought.

Two miles down the road I took the turn-off south onto Highway 50, which followed the course of the river fifteen miles to a four-way stop. A left there and College Station, Bryan's twin city, was directly ahead.

There was more than one way to come home.

CHAPTER THREE

We Texans are known for our single-minded and independent nature. Anyone that's been on the wrong side of that equation in dealing with one of us would tend to call it stubbornness. And I guess that pretty well defines me.

I rolled down Highway 50 doing about eighty-five.

At the four-way stop just a few miles east of Snook, Texas, I turned left and crossed the Brazos River bridge on Highway 60, which became University Drive inside the city limits of College Station within ten miles of the river.

I was back home.

I made a quick cell phone call and got Julie. She was fine. She didn't want me to worry about her. Do what I had to do, stay for the funeral if I needed to and for as many days as I needed after that, then get back to Austin. I told her I'd try to commute back and forth as needed. She loved me. I loved her. The baby was taking her time. I could understand it. If that was me in there, I wouldn't want to leave either.

I passed the veterinary college. There were some new additions to it that hadn't been there before. It had been awhile since I'd been down that road. Texas A&M University itself had spread out into the old cow pastures west of the main campus, and the college appeared to have grown out of its breeches and was busting at the seams.

Over the years I had become more of a University of Texas fan myself. The two rivals schools each had a place in my heart, but sometimes you dance with the one that brought you. While I never attended either of two schools, most of my colleagues were University of Texas Longhorns to the core, and I had become one by way of osmosis.

A campus policeman passed by me. I looked down at my speedometer. I was just under the limit. We ignored each other, and that was a good thing.

I turned and skirted the campus on Wellborn Road, heading south and paralleling the railroad tracks. The main campus loomed on my left. College kids crossed the road on foot and bicycle, not even looking up at the traffic. This was their world. A motorist wouldn't dare overstep his bounds and strike them.

I was looking at all the changes in the city of my rearing, but I was also attempting to avoid certain painful thoughts.

There is nothing like losing someone close to you to remind you of your own mortality. I'm not usually a morose fellow. I'm

generally too busy to take notice that the days, months and years are flitting past me. That's how I've always lived: stay busy, keep moving, and stick to the program.

Lately, for me, the program had been not engaging every little invitation to disaster that came rampaging my way. Me, I'm a mild-mannered financial consultant and accountant. It was the world of trouble outside that insular little world that tried to bust my door down, far too often. The previous Fall I'd had a run in with a latent insurgent Republic of Texas revolutionary group that had come very close to assassinating the Governor of Texas. Somehow I'd gotten out alive. I don't know how I did. About all I can say is that I was still breathing afterwards.

The last few miles to Brad and Mary Jo's house I spent introspectively, thinking about the ghosts of good times past, and not a few not-so-good times.

I thought about Brad. I'd known him since the two of us were kids. There was one occasion that usually sprang up when I thought very long on the subject of Brad. When we were both just kids we used to pick up extra spending money by shoveling horse manure at a quarter-horse stable near my family home. We mucked out stables and kept the horses watered and put them on the walker--all sorts of things. The time I was thinking about, Brad wanted to ride an old brood mare named Daisy--a horse that us kids had not-so-affectionately renamed "Hell Bitch". That day Hell Bitch was fine during the curry-combing and hoof-cleaning,

didn't nip at us with her humongous teeth as we put a blanket on her and cinched a saddle into place. But the instant that Brad sit his butt into the saddle she took off.

He tried to rein her in, but she was too much horse for him. He ended up getting pitched off at a full gallop right onto a barbed-wire fence.

It wasn't pretty. I had thought at the time that he was a goner. Before his ride I had entertained the notion that I might ride Hell Bitch. After that, we mutually agreed to give her a wide birth. Daisy didn't get much grooming after Brad's run-in with the fence. All told it took twenty-six stitches to put him back together interspersed between his left clavicle, his right arm, and a spot just below his belt but thankfully above his groin. As I saw it he wasn't just lucky to have kept his baby-making packaging--he was fortunate to still be able to breathe, much less walk.

As many rough scrapes and tight places as I had been in, Brad had me beat by about a factor of ten.

And there I was all of a sudden--pulling into his driveway. Bradley wasn't home. He never would be again.

CHAPTER FOUR

All of Mary Jo's tears had dried, and seeing me at her front door did not at once set her off again. She hugged me, squeezing me tightly.

"Bill, you're the first one here," she said.

"Who else is coming?"

"Brad's brother, Freddie. That's about it for now, as Brad's parents are dead and it was just the boys."

"Sure. I remember him. We never got along, though."

"I know," she said. "Also I'm expecting a Detective Emerson."

I following Mary Jo into the house. The place had not changed much since they were married. It was her house. Mary Jo had a little money of her own. She was frugal with every dime that came her way; a complete opposite from Brad in that respect, but in all others they matched up fine.

She took me into the kitchen, chattering all the way, avoiding the main topic.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Lots."

"Good." The coffee was already made. Probably she'd done it out of habit. Brad usually had a cup when he came home from work. She poured two cups and set them down by me at her kitchen table. I watched the steam boil off of it.

She sat down at my right elbow, crossed her arms on the table and looked at me. She had such beautiful eyes, and right then they were full of inexpressible sadness and grief. I didn't know whether to grab her and hold her or start crying myself. She was such a fine woman. I hoped that Brad knew what he was leaving behind.

"Mary Jo, who killed Brad?" I asked after a few unbearable minutes.

She almost lost it for a moment. She bit her bottom lip and held her head erect. I could tell she was fighting to keep it together, and doing a damn fine job of it.

"Officially, it was an accident," she said, her voice clipping off the words.

"Tell me what happened."

"Bradley told me a week ago that if anything happened to him that he wanted me to pack my bags, put up a For Sale sign on the house and run off to Florida, or Maine, or anyplace but here. He knew, Bill."

I waited.

"He knew. I didn't want to believe him at first, but I saw that he had changed. He never smiled anymore. He never laughed. . ."

"Mary Jo," I said. "If someone hurt Brad, I need to know who and how."

"I wanted to call you. I told him I was going to. He got mad. It was the first time he ever raised his voice to me. He told me 'No!' emphatically. I was not to call you no matter what."

And then she did it. She broke down, burying her head in her enfolded arms on the kitchen table. I wanted to reach out to her, to touch her and reassure her. But there was no reassurance I could give. I made out the words "should have" and "why didn't I" amidst her sobs.

"Mary Jo," I said, pressing gently.

"It's my fault," she sobbed the words out.

"No," I told her. "You could never have hurt Brad. It's not in your nature."

I let her go on, wishing all the while that I could be a thousand miles away. I don't like to see a woman cry. Through hard experience, however, I have discovered that it's always best to let a person feel what they're feeling. It's when you resist it that real problems develop.

She wiped her eyes on her sweater.

"He was running a work crew," she began. "Not the crew he

had trained, but a different crew. He hated his job, and I hated that he kept working at a job that he hated, but I could never tell him anything, you know? Yeah. You do know." She picked up her coffee cup and sipped at it. I followed her example. It was good coffee.

"From what Mike Fields tells me--he was the only guy at CTL&P that Brad trusted--Brad got hit with about ten thousand volts when he went into a satellite station that had detected a power drain. Other than that, I don't know. They won't let me see his body, Bill."

I got an unpleasant image in my head. A picture of Brad's body convulsing as his clothes and skin and hair caught on fire. I shook my head, trying to wipe the image out of existence.

"Mary Jo, there might not be much of his body left."

She looked up at me, her eyes wide open now and aware.

"I know," she said. "But until I see something, none of this will be real."

"Yeah. I know," I told her. "Who wanted to kill Brad?"

"Why, the company, of course."

#

Brad had gone to work for Central Texas Light and Power some fifteen years before. He had worked his way up to foreman after two years, then to supervisor. I was never sure how the chain of command worked in such outfits, but I knew that Brad's only having a High School diploma had kept him from rising to the very

top. I knew--and certainly Mary Jo and Bradley himself knew-- that he knew more about engineering than the professors in college who taught the courses. But also I knew that in this country it's the sheepskin that counts. It's paper that, in the final analysis, is more important than people. You can't even die properly unless your paperwork is done.

It took a little longer to drag the rest of the story out of Mary Jo.

From what I gathered, Brad had never given her a "why". What she was able to tell me was a "who". A name. The College Station city councilman that ran the show over at CTL&P.

When she first told me the name it stirred some of the cobwebbed furniture around in the back of my mind; that place reserved for almost useless yet unpleasant memories.

Terry Throckmorton, she had told me.

The name was familiar to me, but at the moment I couldn't place it. Couldn't get a face to go with it, nor connect it up directly with any single event from my former life in that town. But it was significant, and I felt an old, familiar chill coming home to roost in my stomach.

I asked her if she felt like she was in danger, if she hadn't better take some measures--lock up the house and get out of Dodge for awhile as Brad had suggested.

The answer was "No." There would still be a memorial service, even if the locals wouldn't give up Brad's body in time

for a proper funeral. There was Brad's family to think about, and his friends, like me. Come hell or high water she would give him a proper send off.

I found myself admiring her. Her fortitude and pluck.

"Do you have any protection here?" I asked her.

"I've got Brad's shotgun behind the front door and a pistol in my top dresser drawer. Both are loaded." She looked at me. "I know how to shoot, Bill."

"Oh. Alright. But shooting and killing are two different things."

"My father took me hunting with him when I was a kid. I think he wanted a boy, but what he got was me. If I can kill an innocent deer, I can kill a man trying to kill me."

"Good," I said. "I hate the idea of you being alone just now."

She just looked at me.

"I've got to go," I told her. The coffee, which she had drunk half of, was probably stone cold. I didn't need any anyway. I was all keyed up.

"Where are you going?" she asked me.

"I need to talk to Mike Fields."

"Oh," she said. "I forgot to tell you. I told Mike that Brad's best friend was coming from Austin."

"Why did you tell him, Mary Jo, if you think he's involved in Brad's. . . uh, case?"

"I had to tell him who was coming, Bill. I wanted to scare him."

"Why should he be afraid of me?" I asked.

"You'll see," she said.

I held her screen door open, one foot on the front porch and one inside the front door.

"How well do you know Mike?" I asked her.

"He's been over for barbecues more than a few times. And just about every time that Brad got distracted for more than a minute, Mike would hit on me."

She easily read the expression on my face.

"No, Bill. I'd never do that. And I didn't. I wasn't attracted to him anyway. I'd never hurt Brad. He and Brad would usually get into a contest to see who can kill the most longnecks in an evening. Brad usually won."

"Does Mike know anyone at the police department over in Bryan?"

"Well. . . Yes. I think so. I think his father is the Chief of Police."

CHAPTER FIVE

I like things nice and neat. For some reason I never seem to get them that way.

First, somebody didn't want me in town, and given the information I'd just gotten from Mary Jo, that person was either Mike Fields or his father, the Chief of Police. Second was the fact that neither Mary Jo nor myself had seen Brad's body. I put that about number two on the agenda.

So first was to drop in on Mike Fields, Brad's longneck buddy.

#

Mike Fields and I had a bit of a history. In Junior High and High School he'd been a bully, the kind who kicks kids chairs out from under them in the cafeteria or who goes out of their way to find the geekiest kid around and cajole them into taking a swing at him and then punching their lights out. When I was in my mid and late teens, I had an average build and quick wit. Also, I'd taken kick-boxing lessons for a full summer

between eighth and ninth grade just for the hell of it, so I had enough confidence to stand my ground when guys like Mike came around. One evening I found myself waiting for my father to pick me up after school. There was no one else around until I turned to see Mike leaning against a low concrete wall not thirty feet away.

"What're you looking at?" he asked me.

"I just wanted to see what a class clown looks like outside of class," I replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, shifting forward into a fast walk in my direction.

"Just a little IQ test," I said. "I wanted to see if you knew when you were being insulted. Looks like you passed."

His walk turned into a run. I stood there. At the last moment I stepped to the side, stuck my leg out, caught his back with a hard shove and watched him plow up ten inches of grass and sod with his face.

About that moment my father pulled into the parking lot.

I walked over and climbed inside the family car.

"What's his problem?" my dad asked me, gesturing towards Mike Fields, who was trying to gain his feet.

"Some people like to eat grass, I guess," I said.

"Oh," my dad replied.

#

I stopped at a local Quicky-Mart, gassed up my Mercedes, and

borrowed the store's phone book. Mike Fields had a listing. I jotted down the address, and even as I did, that action seemed familiar to me; as if I had written down the address before. A long time ago, maybe.

Back in the car, wending my way through familiar streets and main thoroughfares, I pegged the sensation that was gnawing at me. It was that Fields lived on the upper middle-class side of Bryan on the exact street where a girl I used to worship back in my High School days used to live. Back then, about the time I left Bryan for my first semester at Sam Houston State in Huntsville, I had persuaded myself that I'd never again find myself on Morning Glory Lane.

So much for that wish.

#

The sun was climbing down the back side of the sky and undulating shafts of fading sunlight played through willow and pin-oak trees and danced upon well-manicured lawns. I had arrived in the land of the status-conscious. There was a fine cool breeze blowing and I had the windows down on my old Mercedes.

I slowed and looked at a couple of mailboxes and front curbs with painted house numbers until I had a bearing on which side of the street the house was on and how far away it was.

I sailed down another two blocks.

Sure enough, it was the same house as my old High School

flame. What's the old rhetorical question? "What are the odds?"

There was an uneasy feeling in my gut.

I realized I was sweating. But it was a cold sweat, and I felt unfathomably thirsty.

#

"Bill? Bill Travis?"

"Hello, Heidi."

"My God, I haven't seen you in. . . forever."

She looked good. There were tiny crows feet at the corners of her eyes, and she looked slightly more hollow than she had decades past, if that was possible. Back in High School she had been on the wispy side--just a thin slip of a girl and not "pretty" in the conventional sense. To a byronic high school kid, namely yours truly, she had instead borne a sad beauty. The woman before me was older and a tad more hollow than I remembered her. The sadness, though; it was still there. It was still there even as she smiled at me.

"Come in, Bill" she said.

"Are you Mrs. Fields now?" I asked her as she led me into the heart of her home.

When I was younger I had fantasized about being inside the place, had dreamed up furnishings and wall hangings and placed them just so. Heidi's home on the inside was nothing like I had imagined.

"Yes. Do you know Mike? He never mentioned that he knew

you," she said. "I would have remembered."

The Field's tastes ran to nineteenth century antique. A large foxhunt mural hung in the living room area, a room that looked un-lived in--a place to sit guests down and chat; nothing more. The furniture was imitation Queen Anne, enough to appear pretentious, if not uncomfortable. It was all crushed velvet and old leather and had an unused feel about it.

"Mike and I know each other." I said. "Heidi, do you remember Bradley Fisher?"

"God yes. Mike told me about that. He and Brad were pretty close."

"How close?"

The question had the affect of a small slap. I had woken her up.

"They were weekend drinking buddies. That's the only thing I never liked about their friendship. I'm not sure who was worse. I mean. . . who was the bad influence on whom, if you know what I mean. How's Mary Jo taking it?"

I took a seat on a tawny-colored leather sofa, and she sat across from me in a wing-backed chair. She crossed her legs. Heidi looked nice in form-fitting blue jeans and white sweater.

"About as well as can be expected," I told her. "Her husband is dead, and she thinks somebody killed him."

I waited. Let the news sink in.

Truth to tell, at one time I had been deeply in love with

the woman in front of me. When a young man reaches the chasm that lies between adolescence and manhood he finds the gulf to be far wider and the depths to be far deeper and darker than he ever could have imagined. And smack dab in the middle of that narrow bridge is usually the ghostly figure of a young woman on her way to adulthood. But Heidi's bridge and my bridge never truly intersected. She had passed me by. Close, but nonetheless gone. Instead of befriending her I'd asked her out one fine day before lunch right near the end of our junior year of high school. She demurred. I was crushed. I spent the next several months acting like a wounded hound dog, too pathetic to shoot and little good to anybody. Then, one day during the summer I woke up.

I had spent that summer between junior and senior year mowing lawns, edging around tombstones in outlying cemeteries with an old weed-eater, and hauling hay--anything to make an extra buck. By the time school rolled around again I had bought a car with my own money, had muscled up to fighting physique and bore a bronze tan from head to toe. I suppose when I returned to school that final year that I was something to behold. Also I had money in the bank.

When Heidi approached me that first day of school, obviously interested and wanting to talk, I ignored her and turned and walked away.

We spent that entire year ignoring each other's existence. We must have passed each other a thousand times in the hall with

never a flicker of the eye in the other's general direction.

"About High School," I began, before she could respond further, "you do know how I felt about you, right? Before that last year."

Her head did the slightest little bobble, as if unconsciously. It was her eyes, though, that held my attention. The same sad blue eyes of the young and shy girl that I had enshrined as a sacred image for the better part of a lifetime, suspended as if frozen in liquid glass in my memory. There is no love quite like a first love.

"I knew, Bill. The whole world knew. You wore your heart on your sleeve."

Yeah. I supposed that she was right.

"We're both married now," I said.

"Yes, we are."

Was it me, or was the room getting warm?

I got a picture in my head. A picture of Julie, her face close to mine, looking into my eyes. When was that? Some hotel room a long time ago. Maybe it was right after we first met.

"You don't, anymore," Heidi said.

"What?"

"Wear your heart on your sleeve."

"Nope," I said. "Somebody else has the keeping of it."

And as the last syllable hung in the air between us, the front door opened.

Mr. Fields was home.

CHAPTER SIX

"Oh. Hello. And who might you be?" Mike Fields asked, and then a tenth of a second later recognized me.

"Mike, you remember Bill Travis? He's Brad's friend. He's here about Brad."

I stood, turned towards him, just as I had that day so long ago.

I found that after all the years intervening between our last meeting that I still didn't like Mike Fields, and the feeling was mutual.

His expression changed from surprise and puzzlement to shock and something else. His face began turning beet red. I was reminded of a bear who had been woken up too early before Spring.

Mike Fields was a large, tall man. He had a good six inches on me and at least seventy pounds, and despite the fact that his gut stuck out a few inches over the top of his belt, I was sure he wasn't all fat. I got the image of an unstoppable mass if he was in a hurry, and the speed, force, and pulsing red anger of a

charging bull when he was furious. I was in his living room and there were breakable things about. Hopefully, with his wife there, I was safe.

Mike struck me as the kind of guy who didn't look forward to visitors, even despite the furnishings, and especially to visitors who'd once made him eat a patch of school lawn. I understood the sentiment. There is often a fine line between being a visitor and being a trespasser. As we stared at each other, I knew which category I have been relegated to.

Something Brad had told me once came back to me while I found myself returning the steady gaze of a man whose wife--once the object of my full, unrequited attentions--stood two feet to my left. Brad had said: "Mike's the kind of guy that could go hunting with just his fists. That's why I made friends with the guy."

"Mike," Heidi said. "Say something. Make it something nice."

Mike began breathing again. He deflated, slowly.

"How's Mary Jo doing?" he asked me.

It was my turn to be nice.

"She's gonna be okay. I've just got to see her through the funeral. After that, life begins anew for her."

"Yeah," he said.

"When is the funeral?" Heidi asked. Mike dropped a well-worn dinner jacket over the back of the sofa and came on into the

living room. He didn't bother to offer to shake hands. That was fine by me.

"Well," I began. "There won't be a proper funeral until Mary Jo gets the body."

"Oh," Mike said. "That."

"Yeah. That."

His eyes flicked toward me, then away.

"Is there some kind of a hold up?" Heidi asked.

"That's why I'm here," I said. "I was hoping to find out what I could from your husband before I go blundering into trouble."

"Babe," he said to Heidi. "Why don't you rustle up some food." Then to me: "Hot dogs and beer okay?"

"Perfect," I said.

"We'll be out back," he told his wife.

She'd been given her marching orders and didn't appear too put off by them. I followed Mike Fields out the sliding-glass patio door off their dining room and into a Japanese Tea Garden, the creation and maintenance of which must have set the Fields back a pretty penny.

"You know, Travis. . ." he began, but then trailed off.

"I know. You could break me in half. Let's call it quits on those days. We were both hot heads. Call me Bill."

"Bill," he said, testing the word and testing the waters at the same time. "Okay. We'll try first name basis, Bill."

"Fine, Mike," I said.

We sat down at a picnic table on the patio across from each other.

"Bill," he said. "I'm sure Mary Jo told you that she thought Brad had been murdered. Also, you've no doubt learned that my father is the Chief of Police here, and you've probably put that together with being chased out of town."

"That was your doing," I said, knowing I was right.

"Damn right it was."

"Good," I said.

"What?"

"I can't stand a mystery."

"Oh. Well, now you know."

"Mike, I know diddly-squat. Which is why I'm here. Tell me a couple of things, will you."

"Like what?" he asked.

"About Brad. And trouble."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"You don't know what trouble is," he told me.

Each of us had a Shiner Bock longneck in our right hand, having been placed there by Heidi, whose timing was impeccable. When she disappeared back inside, the bull session had resumed.

"Oh? I don't know about that," I said. "I think trouble is what we make it. I used to make a lot of it. You think I'm making it now?"

He thought about it for moment.

"No," he said. "But Bradley Fisher sure did. I tried to keep him from screwing up. He wasn't having any of it. Some people you can't help, you know? Now you, on the other hand. You're a smart fellow. Accountant, right?"

"Something like that. Right."

"Okay then. You know that there are some lines you don't cross. Some people you don't piss off."

I sat there, expressionless.

"Brad never met a line he couldn't or wouldn't cross."

"Who killed him?" I asked.

"See? There you go. I was hoping you were smarter than that."

"Mike. I need to know why my best friend's wife is a grieving widow. And if there are some powers that be that are responsible, you better tell me that too. And who they are. And why."

"I don't better tell you a goddamned thing if I don't want to." He took a long draw on his bottle. I decided to use mine to keep my hand numb, at least for awhile. My hand wanted to make a fist.

"You're out of your depth," he continued after he set the bottle back down, two-thirds empty.

"How so?"

"You ought to feel privileged. You know, I come home and find you sitting talking with my wife. That was either real dumb or real smart. I can't pulverize you into dog meat while you're here because of her."

"Old Indian trick," I said.

"What?"

"Back in Old West days a white settler could walk into an Indian camp and expect food and drink and safety, even among his most bitter enemies."

"You're like Brad," he said. "Out of his depth. Never met a problem he didn't like."

"He was your friend?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said.

"Mine too," I said. "There's no reason you and I can't be friends, then. That is, unless you had something to do with his early death."

"You two go back a ways, hunh?" he asked.

I thought about it. I'd had maybe three or four real friends during my forty or so years on planet Earth. The oldest, longest, was Brad Fisher.

"He was my oldest friend," I told him. "What about you?"

He looked down at the table. The big man had small, twinkling eyes.

"Bill," he said. "My crying days are dead and done."

I waited.

"But, when Terry Throckmorton gave me the word that Brad was dead--"

His face was reddening, right before me eyes. Probably he had a bullfrog-sized lump in his throat. Moisture was there at the inner corners of his eyes.

I waited longer.

"Then, when I had to tell Mary Jo. . . And later when she called me back. . . Told me that you were coming to town. . . I figured there had been enough death for awhile."

"You were protecting me, then? By having me run out of town."

We both turned as the sliding glass door to the dining room moved back smoothly on its track. Heidi emerged again, this time with three longnecks. I could smell hotdogs cooking.

She sat one in front of us both and put the third one down to the left of her husband and took a seat beside him.

"I'm joining you two," she said. She looked at her husband as he turned to look at her. "Whether you like it or not," she said.

#

"You two better start talking soon," she said after her first long draught from her bottle.

Mike and I had been sitting there staring at each other.

"Honey," Mike began.

"Don't honey me," she said. "Remember that I spent ten years teaching deaf kids. I can read lips when I have to."

Mikes eyes rolled.

Heidi had just the hint of a smirk at the corners of her mouth.

"That's the same as eavesdropping," Mike said. "But we'll talk about that later."

"It is the same and we won't be talking about it later. Bill, he married me because I was the first person he ever met that didn't take his blustery exterior. He's really just an overgrown kitten."

Somehow, I doubted that. But I wasn't going to say it.

"You used your father to run Bill out of town and you won't tell him what really happened with Bradley Fisher and you two are sitting here like a couple of game cocks about to spur it out. That's bullshit! Mike, Bill is good people. You tell him what you know."

"And if I don't."

She turned toward him. Her eyes flashed. My God but I had never seen this side of her. I'd had this big illusion in my head about her ever since I was a kid. That illusion was gone now, shattered. Thank God.

"I think you don't want to test me on it," she said.

He sighed, big.

"No, I reckon I don't," he said. "Bill. I take it from your ring that you're married as well. Does your wife ever talk to you like that?"

"I never give her a reason to. But I'm sure she could if she felt she had to."

"Yeah," he said. He turned away from her. "Okay. I'll tell you what you want to know. Who knows. Maybe when I'm done you'll get in your car and head back to Austin anyway. I know I would if I were you."

He tossed down the last dregs of his bottle and wrapped his big, meaty right hand around the next bottle in line.

And Heidi and I listened to his story.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"You have to know how a company is put together, from the bottom all the way to the top, and you have to know a little bit about how people are put together as well, because that's what makes up a company, large or small.

"Now at the bottom and all the way in between you've got the little guy, slogging it out day in and day out, trying to do his job and survive in a world that would just as soon be rid of him as see him survive. In the scheme of things, little fish are supposed to remain little fish.

"But then there's the big fish. This guy swims in his own domain, and the little fish either get out of his way or get eaten up.

"That's where Terry Throckmorton comes in. You've got a guy there that's played the game ever since he was in college.

"When his frat senior said 'Jump', Terry didn't ask 'How high?', he just jumped as high as he could. And in his senior year he didn't bother to tell his juniors to jump, he was asking

the Dean if he wanted somebody to jump for him. And so on after graduation and into the corporate world.

"In other words, we're talking about a guy that paid his dues, and never stopped paying them just so long as the gravy train continued to stop and unload, stop and unload.

"The thing about that gravy train is, it just keeps on unloading. All you have to do is let it know where to dump it's load.

"And that's Terry Throckmorton, in a nutshell.

"Then you've got a guy like Bradley Fisher.

"Brad was small fish who always looked upon himself as a big fish that never quite made it into the big pond.

"Brad had ideas. Guys like Brad always have ideas. He had ideas about how to increase production, about how to make service easier and simpler. About how to cut back on the amount of labor and at the same time get things done. In other words, his ideas didn't take into account the basic universal laws that exist in the big pond. They were good ideas; don't get me wrong on that count: I've looked them over and I can tell you that not one of them was anything less than genius. But he was always bumping his head against management. Against the Big Pond. The place where he would never in a million years be allowed to swim.

"I tried to talk to him. I told him what I thought about his ideas. We knocked back many a Shiner Bock on that account. Him showing me a little drawing--done spur of the moment and

showing me how the thing would be done in the real world--and me there just nodding and struck by the sheer brilliance and magnitude of it. But Brad was no Westinghouse. He didn't have the magnetic personality nor the credentials. I've read how George Westinghouse fronted a good deal of dough to a genius named Tesla over a few lines of telegraph type. You know, every one of those ideas is there for the world to read. They're all there in the U.S. Patent Office, just waiting for some future generation to look and see what could be done, if a fellow was smart enough to get what he was talking about. I swear to God, Tesla was a man hundreds of years before his time. Got some good books on him, you know.

"But Brad. Brad was maybe ten or twenty years before his time. Also, he didn't have the degree.

"Also, he wasn't a bona fide member of the Big Fish Club.

"And so he swam in small waters and raised hell.

"One day he raised too much.

"And now he's dead.

"All you have to do is talk to any one of his crew to verify what I'm telling you."

#

"Who was his crew?" I asked.

"Five guys. Only one of 'em that I know of is bucking for sergeant. His name is Terrell. There's Jones, Lacey, Perry, Rogers and Terrell. All of them have been with CTP&L--that's

Central Texas Power and Light, in case you didn't know--they've all been with CTP&L for over five years. Jones is the newest of the lot. He's the token--uh, black guy. Also, he's the only one of them I'd care to work with. He lives first house just past the power plant. First one there in the morning and the last one to leave each evening. The rest of them I personally passed over at one time or another. Slackers all. Jones, though. He's not the kind of fellow you could get a peep out of. He's a parolee. Got a wife and four kids at home and works hard and never complains and keeps his family up. The others I wouldn't trade for day old biscuits."

"Okay," I said. "Why would CTP&L and Terry Throckmorton want to get rid of Brad Fisher?" And as I asked it, Throckmorton's name rang and reverberated in my head. It was familiar, alright. I just couldn't place him.

Mike Fields looked down at the empty bottle of Shiner Bock in his hands. I could tell that he wanted more. I could also tell that he would rather not say what he was about to. But he said it, anyway. I found myself re-assessing the guy. Maybe Heidi knew him better. Maybe he was an overgrown kitten after all. And just maybe it took two Shiner Bocks tossed down quick and his wife riding herd on him to get him to admit anything.

"Because," he said, "Brad must have known about the hole."

CHAPTER NINE

Mike Fields said: "Brad must have known about the hole," and then my cell phone rang.

It was Julie.

"Yeah, Babe?"

"Bill. I think. . ."

"What? What do you think? Is it--"

"Time? Yeah. Think so. Uh. . . contractions."

"I'm coming," I told her. "Call Penny and get her to take you to the hospital." Penny was my secretary. She had become, over the last few years, about as close as anyone could get without being family.

"I can drive, silly. I'm pregnant, not disabled. Besides," she said. "Penny is on a date."

"Yeah, but you're about to be not-pregnant," I said. "And Penny can cancel her date."

"I'll drive," she told me, and the way she said it didn't allow room for argument.

"Okay. I'll be there inside two hours."

"Don't rush. I'll be fine."

We traded "I love you's" and hung up.

I told Mike and Heidi that my wife was about to have a baby. I tried to beat a hasty retreat.

Before heading out the door I turned to back to the two of them, who were close on my heels.

"Mike, I'm going to be lead-footing it back to Austin. Can you at least make sure I won't get stopped on the way out of town?"

"I can do better than that," he said. "Hold on a minute."

Within five minutes it was all set. Not only was I not going to get stopped on the way out of town, but a state trooper was en-route to Mike's house to escort me all the way back to Austin.

The last thing Mike said to me--his cordless phone pressed hard into his ear as I started up my Mercedes--was: "Why didn't you tell me that your wife's uncle was the Lieutenant Governor?"

"Oh. You mean Nat Bierstone? He's just my partner. Besides, that's got nothing to do with anything."

"Bill. You don't need my help at all," Mike said.

"Au contraire. I need every bit of help I can get," I said, and I was off.

#

The drive took an hour and ten minutes, but that was because

we did ninety most of the way.

#

"False alarm? What do you mean false alarm?"

The state trooper was chuckling. Shortly, I expected he'd be guffawing.

The nurse I was talking to kept a deadpan expression on her face. She reminded me more than a little of Nurse Ratchet.

"She's having contractions," I said. "How can it be a false alarm?"

"Mr. Travis. Voice down, please. Like I said, not false alarm. False labor."

"Same thing," I said.

"Okay. Still, we want to keep her here overnight for observation."

"Observation, hunh?" I was beginning to settle down a little. I'd been hopped up pretty much into overdrive ever since our brief phone conversation back in the Fields' Tea Garden.

"Yes. Observation. She rests. We monitor. That's about it."

"Is she in any danger? Will you have to, uh. . ."

"Induce labor? I don't think that's needed just yet. The doctor won't do that for at least another week."

I felt a gentle squeeze on my right elbow.

I looked. It was Julie's Uncle Nat.

"William. Julie will be fine. Let's go in and visit her."

"I'd like that," I said.

When I turned to look back, the state trooper was waving goodbye, headed back toward the elevator.

Nat and I turned the corner, and before my hand even touched the door to Julie's room, there was explosive laughter from down the hall.

The things some people think are funny. I tell you.

CHAPTER TEN

It was dark-thirty by the time I left St. David's Hospital. I'd spent an hour at Julie's side in her private room until I was thoroughly certain that she was getting sick of me being there and wanted me to leave. I told her I'd see her tomorrow, kissed her, and left.

Before I was out to my car I was on my cell phone. I called Mary Jo. I told her about Julie's false alarm. She informed me that she had company. Brad's little brother, Fred, had arrived and was fit to be tied. He was raising hell and had already called and threatened the sheriff's office, the county coroner, and anybody else who would listen to him for more than a minute. He wanted his older brother's body and he wanted it right then.

All that was okay by me. Maybe it'd be him getting arrested instead of me. When Brad and I were kids we both thought that Freddie was a little demon, about like the kid on The Omen. Freddie could have been the Antichrist if he'd been a little more quiet and had a good dozen more points on his I.Q. score. I'd

saved Brad's life once from the little brat. Freddie, who was all of about eight at the time, had picked up a pitchfork and was running full tilt at Brad's back with it, the needle-pointed silvery tines glinting in the sun. I took two steps, reached out and grasped the pitchfork. I wrenched it from Freddie's hands hard enough to give him splinters.

No. I didn't mind if Freddie raised hell.

As I was listening to Mary Jo and getting into my car in the Hospital's parking garage, I remembered something that Mike Fields had said.

Something about Brad explaining his drawings to Mike over a few beers. I'd have to see those drawings. Also I wanted to talk to--what was his name? Jones? Yeah. Jones. Token black guy, as Mike had put it. Wife and three kids at home.

I told Mary Jo I was on my way back to town but that I'd get a hotel room. She tried to get me to commit to staying at her home, but there was no way that was going to happen. I wouldn't be sleeping under the same roof with Freddie during this lifetime, and knowing Freddie, he'd be sleeping on the living room couch, the only place to sleep in the whole house other than Mary Jo's bedroom.

By the time I was in my car and pulling back onto I-35, headed back to Bryan and College Station, I was beginning to get a glimmer of just who the hell Terry Throckmorton was as the advancing little world encompassed by my headlights moved across

the Texas miles.

#

What in hell was "The Hole?" It was the big and dark question that filled my thoughts as I returned to the outskirts of Bryan, Texas. The question had been gnawing away at the far back corners of my mind during the entire return trip.

I'd have to find out, and pretty quick.

I checked in at the Rodeway Inn on Texas Avenue, an older hotel built during the 60s, and built to last. I was never a Marriott or a Hilton type of guy. And while the twin cities had both hotels, I was looking for something a little more homey and familiar. So I got an interior room up on the second floor with my window overlooking what used to be the Kettle Restaurant but that was now some Taqueria joint.

Before getting to sleep I called Julie. Yeah, I'd woken her up. She was fine. No. No contractions. No more false labor, she corrected me, as opposed to false alarms. Maybe she'd been coached by Nurse Ratchet.

We exchanged I love yous. Said goodnight.

It took until nearly 1:00 for me to get to sleep. And, of course, I had a nightmare. But then, don't I always?

The coming darkness took me down, down into an abyss the like of which I had never encountered before. The abyss where I would talk with Brad, and finally get some answers.

I was surprised to find it was no more than a hole. A very

deep hole.

"I don't know, Bill," Brad said. "You're going off half-cocked again."

Brad had a shovel in his hand, and he was shoveling something black and raw and awfully smelly into a furnace.

"Why?" I asked. "All I want to know is what happened? And who?"

"Yeah. That's just like you, Bill. You never could leave well enough alone."

"It's smelly down here," I said.

"It's all this dragon poop," he said. "Makes good fuel, though."

"I'm sure. We used to shovel stuff just like this."

"That's right. I remember now."

He stopped shoveling and stood with his arms across the handle for support.

"Bill," he said. "I'm dead."

"I know, Brad. I'm sorry. You should have talked to me."

"It wouldn't have helped. Somebody had to fall."

"Why?"

"Why? Why. Always why. Some things just are," he said.

"Leave me alone for awhile, will you? I'm dead. We're not supposed to be talking. Company policy."

"Sorry," I said. "Goodbye, Brad."

But Brad never said another word.

#

I awoke at ten 'til six with a slightly stuffy head, red eyes, and the hunger of a she-wolf with a litter of pups.

By ten twenty I found a good diner that served up a decent breakfast.

At a little after eleven, I was back at Mary Jo's.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mike and I were under the live oak tree a dozen yards from Mary Jo's kitchen door. Each of us had a beer in our hand. Mary Jo was in the kitchen cutting up chicken. I figured we'd be smelling it frying soon.

There with us was Freddie Fisher. The beer was strictly off-limits for him. Mary Jo had alluded to his heart condition. There I was, about to turn forty-one, and here was this kid with something wrong with his heart. Go figure. Then again, I've seen my share of the habitually angry, and if chronic anger wasn't a risk factor for heart disease, then there wasn't such a thing.

Mike continued his story from the previous evening, and the two of us listened, me sipping a beer, and Freddie drinking tepid water. Life was sometimes kind.

In 1990 my friend Bradley took a summer temporary job at the Navasota Lignite Plant #2 seventeen miles east of College Station, Texas, just across the Navasota River in Grimes County. His chief duty was to do what he was told, and during that

hottest of summers he kept his hands wrapped around a long-nosed shovel and spent his days covering a fuel pipe that was being laid from the plant to the lignite strip-mine coal fields.

After the pipe was laid the crew was paid off and dismissed, all but Brad, who complained little and was ever eager to get his hands dirty.

Mike didn't believe that Brad learned about The Hole until some time the next Spring, and by that time he was full-time and busy completing endless rounds of safety-inspection crew orders. When anything got red-tagged--and there were a lot of red-tags flying around in those days before government de-regulation--Brad's job was to fix it. By that time he was certified as an electrician by the State, having spent his off hours during the week nights in class over at the Texas A&M Riverside Campus.

"When he found The Hole," Mike said, "he did what every new boot did. He asked questions. I wasn't his supervisor then, so I don't know for sure what he was told, and we only ever had the one conversation about it."

"When?" I asked.

"Two weeks ago."

"Tell me about the hole, Mike."

"There's no telling how many of them there are spread around the continental United States, in forests, deserts, near small communities. One of these days, say ten thousand years from now, whatever passes for human will stumble across the one we have at

CTP&L. And bad things will start happening. That's if the technology of the time is sufficiently low. If it's high, no doubt the people of that later time will clean it all up. Maybe they'll disintegrate everything, you know, like Star Wars or something. Or they'll fire it all off into the sun. But until that day, The Hole and its contents will be there. You couldn't get me near the damn thing.

"Forget seeing it yourself. Last thing I heard it was sealed off. And good riddance.

"Okay. Think of all the limestone caves there are underneath Texas. That's where our groundwater comes from. The rain comes down, permeates through the soil, gets filtered through a mile or more of limestone formation, and runs off into underground rivers, what we call aquifers. The cleanest water on earth. But water does strange things. I'm no geologist, but from what little I've read about it, the water carves out weak places in the limestone, cuts channels through the chalk, and what's left are endless miles of caverns down there in the dark. Some are solitary, cut off from others. Some run in chains, with narrow, snaking passages between them. A good spelunker could go down there and spend a lifetime looking, and never explore a thousandth of the entire labyrinth. Some are fairly close to the surface, and every once in a while somebody breaks through and discovers one. You've got the Natural Bridge Caverns over in New Braunfels, and the Wonder Cave in San Marcos. Out west there's

the Caverns of Sonora. Just north of Austin, near Georgetown, highway workers discovered the Inner Space Caves while taking core samples during the construction of Interstate 35. So, it was only natural that a strip mining company would discover what we call The Hole during the early 1990s.

"After a few employee deaths during early exploration, it became sort of Company Policy to keep it under our hats.

"But then along came Terry Throckmorton, at that time a junior member of the Board of Directors. Instead of a hole in the earth that swallowed people, he saw dollar signs.

"And that's when the core rods started coming in.

#

When Mike said the name "Terry Throckmorton", I got one of those long chills that physically shook me. I don't think he noticed, as it was his fourth or fifth beer. Who was counting? I wasn't. I was sipping my third. I think.

We went back in when the smell of frying chicken compelled us. I was hungry. Also, I wanted Mary Jo's company, her smile, her gentle nature, since Julie was back in Austin.

We all sat down at the kitchen table and ate. About halfway through dinner, when there was only the sound of forks on plates and men gobbling good home-cooked food, Mary Jo broke down into a fit of crying. Freddie tried his hand at consoling her--which was one of the oddest quirks of human nature I believe I've ever witnessed--but she wasn't having any of it. She got up and

headed for her bedroom and shut the door. I heard the latch click into place.

Mike Fields just kept looking down at his plate. From that I gathered that he was the kind of guy that didn't know how to handle emotional outbursts or awkward social situations. I'd begun to feel a grudging respect for the man, and I felt a little embarrassed for him.

When were done I got up and washed my dish and my glass and put them in the dish drain. I trotted back to Mary Jo's door.

"Mary Jo," I said quietly, and tapped on her door with a knuckle.

"Bill?"

"Yeah. We gotta go, hon," I told her.

"Where?"

"To see Brad," I told her. "Bring your jacket."

CHAPTER TWELVE

While there may be a governmental entity locally referred to as "The Coroner's Office", in practice it was little more than a sterile, cold, and badly lit room in the bowels of St. Joseph's Hospital in Bryan.

It was just the two of us. I understood Mike Fields' demurrer to come with, but still, I would have felt a little better about going in with the big man at my back.

"You're sure you want to do this?" I asked Mary Jo. I knew I didn't. The picture I had conjured in my head was bad enough, thanks to enough movies by George Romero and Steven Spielberg.

"I'll be fine, Bill," she said. A good liar, that Mary Jo.

A young fellow, no more than about twenty-eight and wearing garish green and orange scrubs, got up from a desk across the cold room and walked towards us.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"This is Mary Jo Fisher. Her husband is Brad Fisher. Was, that is. She's here to see the body."

"Sure," he said. "Kommen zie, bitte."

Great, I thought. He wore a relaxed attitude and a jovial smirk like he wore his scrubs--too much and out-of-place.

"Thank you," Mary Jo said.

We followed him to a bank of drawers and without checking to make sure it was the right one, pulled on a handle low to the floor.

#

Brad's body bore not so much as a mark. He could have been merely asleep, had it not been for the bluish and steely-gray pallor.

Beside me I heard Mary Jo's sharp intake of breath.

"Mary Jo," I said.

"Why is he dead, Bill? He looks fine."

"Mary Jo," I said. "Mary Jo. This is just the husk. Brad's gone. I don't know why."

It happened then. The floodgates opened. The dam burst. She was on her knees, her body thrown across his.

I could make out only a few words of what she said between the wracking sobs: "Cold. So cold... my Brad."

I looked at the intern, doctor, whatever the hell he was.

He rolled his eyes at the ceiling, then met my gaze.

I frowned at him. It was so much more nice than putting his lights out, at least for him.

"You got a report?" I asked him. "Any kind of report?"

"Yeah. There was no autopsy. Just the coroner's report."

"Fine," I said. "Let's have a copy."

"Sure. Can you make her stop that?"

I looked at him for longer than usual, and he got the communication. He held up his hands: fine, sorry.

I knelt beside Mary Jo.

"Honey," I whispered. "Time to go." But my eyes were on Brad's face.

Old friend, I thought, why didn't you call me? Why didn't you let her call me?

Brad said not a word, and I suppose that was fitting. He rarely had in life.

"Mary Jo?" I pressed, gently.

"Okay, Bill. I'll be alright," she said, quietly.

"I know."

I helped her to her feet. She opened her small purse and removed a small flower and placed it on his bare chest. A purplish passion flower. I wondered what the next person along to open Brad's drawer would think. To hell with it.

I reached down and pushed gently on the drawer, and Brad rolled slowly back into the darkness.

"Goodbye," I whispered to him.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, Bill," Mary Jo whispered to me.

#

We left the hospital, two page report in hand, and wandered

out into the parking lot. Overhead thick clouds were rolling in, piling up on top of each other. I could smell the rain before the first drop fell.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Core rods, Mike had said.

The words moved around inside my head like a steel ball in a pinball machine.

"Where are we going, Bill? This isn't the way home."

"To see somebody," I said.

The traffic was nervous with the anticipation of the impending downpour. A couple of thick drops thocked against the my windshield.

"Who?"

"One of the guys Brad worked with. The token black guy."

"That would be Jones," she said. "You know where he lives?"

"Sort of. You got a first name?"

"Irvin, I think. Something like that. Although I think he goes by some nickname." Mary Jo took a look around her at where we were going. "We going to the plant?"

"I hope not, but maybe. Today's a Wednesday. He's probably at work anyway."

"Yeah. Do you believe in ghosts, Bill?" she asked as I

pulled in behind a large concrete truck at the next red light. We'd be turning due east for awhile, then south.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because. . ."

"Spit it out, Mary Jo," I said.

"Because every since Brad died, I've been feeling like I'm being watched. Just. . . every moment. That's all."

There was silence in the car for a moment. I was expecting her to ask me if I had a sense that Brad was hanging out close by, checking things out. Instead Mary Jo lapsed into silence.

"Okay," I said.

#

The rain came down in sheets.

Along the highway a mile past the power plant entrance, there was a row of dingy houses. These were working people, I could tell right off. Through the rain I could make out old pickup trucks that had seen better days, rusted A-frames for hoisting engine blocks, blue tarpaulins covering God knows what-all, and everywhere cast off toys.

I pulled into the first driveway.

"Wait here, Mary Jo. Stay dry."

I reached under my seat for my umbrella, and not finding it realized that I had left it at my office. Great.

"You're gonna get soaked, Bill," she said when I came away with nothing.

"Yeah. Be right back."

I was on the front porch within six seconds, but in that brief space I managed to get completely drenched. Water squished in my shoes.

The door bell hung from the wall on twisted wire. It looked dead.

I knocked.

The front door opened and I heard the babble of children's voices in the background and a loud television--cartoons. I could smell boiling cabbage.

"Yes?" the woman asked.

She was very pretty but her face was implacably bored--a mid-thirty-ish looker with a light movie-star complexion, she was the mother of all those voices inside.

"I'm looking for the Jones family. Do they live close by?"

"Who wants to know?"

I didn't have to think about it. People are usually able to spot a lie from a mile away, and truth is usually best, if uncomfortable.

"Ma'am, my name is Bill Travis. I'm looking for the Mr. Jones that works at the power plant. His foreman, Brad Fisher, was killed, and I was Brad's best friend."

I waited.

She looked past me, out into the rain, then fixed her eyes on me, appraising.

"Come in. I'm Dorothy Jones. My husband is home sick today." She pushed on the screen door.

I turned toward the car and tried to give Mary Jo the thumbs up, but I doubted she could see me through the pouring rain.

The house was clean but for the toys scattered everywhere. On the couch there was a bored teenaged boy of about fourteen, and on the floor three kids dismissed me with a glance and returned to watching some strange Japanese anime cartoon I'd never seen before.

"Come on back to the kitchen, Mr. Travis," Dorothy Jones said. "You can't hear yourself think in here."

"Sandy!" Dorothy called out from the hallway to the kitchen, toward the rear of the house.

"What?"

"You got company."

"I'm sick, Dotty."

"You're not too sick to sit and talk," she replied.

The kitchen was clean. On the stove there was a pot of black-eyed peas just starting to boil over and the cabbage pot with its lid starting to do a little dance.

"Damn," Dotty said. "Have a seat, Mr. Travis. Sandy's gotta get his shirt on. You can't leave food cooking for two minutes."

"Fine," I said.

"Iced tea?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am."

Dotty Jones turned the fire down low on the peas, shifted the lid on the cabbage to let the steam blow off, and turned to the refrigerator and opened it.

"You're soaked, Bill Travis," she said.

"Yes ma'am."

"I'll get you a towel."

She poured a glass of tea and set it before me and walked out of the kitchen to return with a clean towel.

"You coming, Sandy?" she called out loudly.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," the voice was tired, hoarse, and resigned, all at once.

She draped the towel over my shoulder and I used it to wipe my face.

"Thanks," I said.

"Fiddlesticks," she said.

Sandy Jones emerged into the kitchen, buttoning the last two buttons as he came. He was a tall man with a bit of graying grizzle in his side burns.

I started to stand, but he held up a long-fingered hand.

"Keep your seat, stranger. We don't stand on ceremony around here. You selling life insurance?"

I laughed.

"It would be easier if I was," I said.

"What are you selling, then?"

"He ain't selling nothing. This is Bill Travis, Brad Fisher's best friend."

I watched his face as she said it, and it sagged all of an inch.

"What you want?" he asked me.

"Sit down, Sandy," Dotty said. "Be kind. His best friend just died."

Sandy Jones sat across from me.

"You're wet," he said.

"Yeah." I did the best I could with the towel and launched into the questions before Sandy Jones had a chance to think of what he was going to say.

"Can you tell me about core rods and the hole and how Brad Fisher died? And why?"

"Shit," he said. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," I said.

"Look Mister. . ."

"Bill," I said, maintaining a thin smile.

"Bill. Fine. Look. . . I've got a family to look after. I have to report to a parole officer once a week that don't give a shit about me or my family. I can't get caught up in anything."

"Sure," I said. "If you are able, I'd like to know those three things, and then I'll disappear back into the rain."

"Tell him, Sandy," his wife said, hot pot of boiling cabbage

in hand. "You can't even sleep right. You've got to tell somebody. This fellow is your chance."

"He ain't my chance if I lose my job."

"If you lose that damned job I'll dance with bells on my toes. You're a hard worker. There's always a job for you, and maybe a job where somebody will appreciate you."

Sandy Jones signed, loudly.

And then he told me.

#

"Them things are scattered all over the place, and they'll kill you if you get too close or stay too long. I was there when the first ones came through and I've seen the trucks come and go. I even know the name of the driver.

"They're in the hole, deep down there. They have them placed in bundles of no more than five at a time. I think one of them is enough to kill a man. One is dangerous. Five? Don't get me started.

"I've done some thinking on it. What can they do with those old rods that come from the nuke plants up north. Texas don't have nuke plants. Too much protesting.

"It's about money, that's all. So that's it for the core rods.

"The hole is just a little cave that leads down to a big cavern. There's a whole series of those caverns. I spent a whole weekend down there one time, and found some stuff that

shouldn't have been there."

"What kind of stuff, Sandy?" I asked.

"A lot of Indian pottery, arrowheads and stuff. Skeletons too. Then there's the chests and the diary."

"What diary?"

"It's in French. I don't know French."

"You got it here?"

"Yeah. I'll show it to you. Mr. Travis, you believe in ghosts?"

I shivered, and not from my dampened condition. It was the second time that day I'd heard that question.

"Why?" I asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me, Sandy."

"`Cause one of those chests is haunted."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I'll make a copy of this journal and return the original to you," I told Sandy Jones on his front porch.

The rain had slackened to a drizzle once again.

"Mr. Travis, I think you should see that hole."

"Call me Bill," I said. "I do want to see that hole. But I've got a woman in that car that I've got to get home. I'm not sure of her safety at this point."

"Safest place for her would be here with my wife," he said, and I met his searching gaze.

It felt right. There were things going on that I had no idea about. And I still hadn't seen that investigator that Mary Jo had told me about. Mike Fields was probably on the job just now at the power plant up the road. I was unsure how safe Mary Jo would be at home without me around. Not until a few things were settled.

"Sandy," I said. "How safe is that hole? What I mean is, I've got a wife of my own at home with a baby coming, and she'll be mad as hell if I come home in a pine box."

"I know where all the booby traps are, Bill," he said.

I looked toward the car. Mary Jo yawned, caught sight of me, then gave a little bored wave.

"When do you want to do this?" I asked him.

"It's right now or not at all," he said.

"Why 'not at all'?"

"Because, I'm supposed to be home sick. I've got to work tomorrow. After that, the only chance is the weekend, and that place is closed off tighter than a four by four shoved up a cow's ass."

"That's pretty tight, Sandy," I said.

#

Mary Jo was delighted at the prospect of staying with Dotty Jones and her kids while Sandy was to "show me a few things."

"You two be careful," Dotty Jones called out through the screen door as we stepped into the drizzle.

I turned back to her. "Mrs. Jones. I'm never careful. What I am, though, is thorough."

"Good enough," she said.

I stopped by my car, placed the journal, all wrapped up as it was with cellophane, under the driver's seat and out of sight. I locked the car all the way around and then followed Sandy to his battered Ford pickup and climbed inside.

"That woman," he said, depositing a pretty beat-up five gallon brown paper sack filled with flashlights and other odds

and ends on the floorboard at my feet. The old truck smelled like spent cigarette butts and old sweat.

"Who?" I asked.

"My wife. She's good," he said, "don't get me wrong, but she thinks too much."

"I don't know," I replied. "I like a woman who thinks for herself."

"Got one of those, do you?"

"Damn right," I said.

"She trouble?"

"Plenty."

"Good," he said, and turned the ignition key. "I hate bein' wrong. She pretty?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Even better."

#

Instead of going to the power plant main gate, Sandy turned off to the left several hundred yards to the south of it, got out and fished out a key for the large pad lock on the single bar steel gate, pulled through, then went back and locked it up again.

"The lock was on," he said, once back inside the truck, "which usually means that no one is around. But just in case, if anybody sees us, you're an inspector from the state office."

"You mean lie about it. I don't have any kind of a badge to

convince anybody."

"So. Just act like a jerk and stare them down. That usually works, and these people can't think for themselves. They've got to have somebody higher up do their thinking for them."

"Okay," I said.

We bounced along a muddied, caleche-gravel path through stands of trees and across an open field. Cows stopped chewing on wet grass and stared at us.

"All of this was strip-mined a few years back," Sandy moved his hand to take in the whole field. "Lignite field, you know. Had to put it all back the way they found it, or mostly, and it's starting to grow back a little now."

I nodded.

We went over a hill and down a winding course that threaded close to the trees again.

"It was found during the lignite years, early on."

"Who found it?" I asked.

"Me," Sandy said.

"Oh."

"I thought about not reporting it, but then somebody else would have fallen in and gotten themselves killed, and I didn't want anything like that bothering me, you know?"

"Yeah."

After ten minutes of driving through the rough countryside,

Sandy pulled off the narrow gravel path and behind a stand of yaupon scrub and stopped.

"We walk from here," he said. "I don't want my truck tracks anywhere near it."

"Fine," I said.

We got out. The clouds overhead were dispersing and to the west the sun was trying to poke through.

"Good timing," Sandy said. "I didn't want to get too wet."

We walked, cutting through the scrub brush along what could be described as no more than a cow path. My shoes picked up a good deal of mud, but I scraped it off whenever I could; here on a matt of thick weeds, there on a fallen tree branch.

After ten minutes we came around yet another stand of brush behind a high board fence that looked as out of place in a cow pasture as my Dr. Martin shoes.

Behind the fence I could make out a tin roof.

"It's supposed to look like a barn, but it doesn't have much floor on the inside of it, if you know what I mean."

Sandy rounded the fence and I followed. We came to yet another padlock that resembled the first and Sandy used a key from his large key ring, and the lock opened and we slipped through.

The wooden building was nestled inside the fence with no more than a few feet between them. The door in front of us had a simple board with a single nail through it into the front wall

which Sandy turned easily. The door opened.

Sandy reached in the bag, clicked on his flashlight and inspected the interior.

"Anybody home?" he called out. I heard a dim echo. Sandy laughed.

"Nope," he said. "Just us chickens."

He reached up and tugged on a string and an electric light came on.

#

The hole was twelve feet wide by about ten long, and encompassed half the interior floor space.

The smell was musty and strong.

"Smells like mold and chlorine," I said, then I pegged it. "Bats, I'll bet."

"Hell yes," Sandy said. "Used to be millions of 'em, but we killed most of 'em."

"Another environmental catastrophe," I said.

"That's what I thought, too. Ever time I have to slap a mosquito, I think about all those dead bats."

From the electric bulb overhead and Sandy's wandering flashlight I could make out the rough, dry walls of the hole. Ten feet down the topsoil gave out and what appeared to be shale and rock took its place.

"Over here," Sandy said.

I looked where his light flicked and there was a steel boom

against a side wall with a basket configuration and a motor and winch.

"That doesn't look promising," I said.

"Oh, it's safe. If it can hold Mike Fields, it can hold you and me."

"That's what I was afraid of," I said.

Sandy laughed again, and I couldn't help smiling.

#

"Stupid question," I said, fifty feet below the surface. Above the dwindling light looked a world away, and below, only blackness. Sandy had one hand around the steel cable and the other around the flashlight.

"What?" he asked, and shined his light on the walls.

"How do we get back up?"

"Damn, forgot about that!" he said.

"What?"

"Just kidding. Look, all we have to do is give the line a jerk to make sure its tight, then hit a switch down there that reverses the winch."

"Oh."

Down, down into the darkness. The air grew cooler and more dank.

The floor came up to meet us, or at least it felt that way, and I removed the safety rope and clip from the cable.

"How far down are we?" I asked, and my voice traveled long

and far and came back to me in a faint echo.

"Couple of hundred feet."

"Just asking," I said.

Sandy handed me a flashlight

I clicked my light on, panned it about. The hole above us had tapered until it was a very narrow entrance to the small cavern where we stood. To my left was another narrow entryway to a larger, darker space beyond.

"Not that way," Sandy said.

"Core rods?" I asked.

"You betcha. Come on," he said.

#

Sandy led me through an even narrower passage that opened out after a dozen yards into a large cavern that swallowed our light.

I felt a drop of water on the top of my head.

"It's raining," I said.

"You're no spelunker, Bill Travis."

"I know."

"Stalactites dripping is what that is. Always dripping, especially after a hard rain."

I followed Sandy along a limestone trail. The place was awash with little sparkles of light reflecting back from our flashlight beams. Great stalagmites grew from the cavern floor like the boles of bald cypress. Pools of translucent and milky

water were everywhere.

"Watch your step, Bill," Sandy said.

"Sure thing."

"It's the next cavern over."

"The chests?"

"Yeah."

I followed him along the undulating path, the rough, hard floor of the cavern dipping down toward little pools of water, then up abruptly up again over small ridges. I would have to do some studying up on caves and cave systems.

We went through another narrow crevice and we had to turn sideways, duck down and slink our way through.

The cavern we emerged into was decidedly different from the first. Here the stalagmites were larger, some meeting their mates a third of the way up to form great columns. How long would that take? I did know that they formed slowly, over hundreds and even thousands of years drip by infinitesimal drip. How much building matter could be contained in one drop of water? A few thousand molecules? Who knew. All I did know was that the cavern was old. Older than man? Perhaps. Was it here when dinosaurs roamed the Earth? Probably not.

"Look, Bill," Sandy said.

I turned my light to follow his, and there, high up on the cavern wall was a treasure beyond price.

We were looking at a pictograph mural of vast extent, etched

into the wall. It began six feet up and went as high as thirty feet. I began to imagine the amount of labor the endeavor had required, and all of it high work. Where were the pole marks against the walls? An image leapt into my head of a tower of natives standing on the shoulders of the one below him until there was a neat ladder of six or seven of them. God! Who knew how it was done?

"Indians," I said. "But which tribe?"

"I don't know anything about it," Sandy said. "Maybe many different tribes over lots of years. It just. . . it feels old."

"Yeah."

We went along the wall slowly, moving our lights between it and the floor so as to assure our footing.

There were symbols there that I had seen in textbooks, and many others I'd never seen, perhaps no one in modern times had seen. The sun and moon were prominent, not in size, but in recognizability and repetition. Warriors with spears and bows, tepees, pregnant maidens, bison herds, strange floating icons which were likely weather phenomena or shooting stars. A woolly mammoth being brought down with shillalaghs! I picked out a comet. And then came the oddest and creepiest of all: a sailing ship, complete with square-rigged sails and ropes and a bow effigy of a woman with large breasts.

"Damn," I said.

"Yeah. Bill, we can't stay here long. There's a stack of core rods over there. We have to keep moving."

I swung my flashlight in the direction he indicated, and thirty feet away on the floor of the cavern was a dingy metal rack with five steel tubes.

"Jesus," I said.

"Come on. We're almost there."

#

"It's gone," Sandy said. He stood on a hump of limestone and shined his light into a large alcove.

"Thieves," I said. "Desecrators."

"Desecrators," Sandy repeated. "That's a big word. Sounds pretty bad."

"It is. It's anybody that robs a tomb or destroys something of benefit to mankind. How many chests were there?"

"Five big ones and one small one."

"The small one. . ." I began.

"Yeah. The one that was haunted," he said.

Sandy shined his light along the floor close by.

"Check this out," he said. I saw what he meant. There were grooves in the cavern floor, going back the way we'd come.

"Tell me what you think," I said.

"I didn't think anybody knew about the crates except me."

"Did you ever open them?"

He hesitated.

"You'd better spill it," I said.

"Okay," he signed. "I did open one."

"The haunted one?"

"No. I wouldn't have touched that one for anything. No. One of the others."

"And you took something," I said, matter-of-factly.

"Yeah."

"What'd you find, and what'd you take?"

"A croaker sack full of gold, rubies, and big green gems."

"What about the skeletons?" I asked. "You said something before about skeletons."

"Oh. Oh shit. You're right."

"What?"

"They're gone."