



CLEA'S MOON

Edward Wright

Untreed Reads

Clea's Moon

By Edward Wright

Copyright 2010 by Edward Wright

Electronic Edition Copyright 2010 by Untreed Reads Publishing

Cover art copyright 2010 by Untreed Reads Publishing, created by Dara England

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold, reproduced or transmitted by any means in any form or given away to other people without specific permission from the author and/or publisher. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your ebook retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to the living or dead is entirely coincidental.

CLEA'S MOON

By Edward Wright

This book is for Cathy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to the Crime Writers' Association of Great Britain, including Russell James and Michael Jecks, and to my agent, Jane Conway-Gordon, all of whom made the first breakthrough possible; Jane Wood and Sophie Hutton-Squire for their professionalism and support; Todd Keithley, who offered expertise and encouragement early on; Mimi Cazort and Bob McLarty, the kind of kinfolk everyone should have; Marsha and Ted Baker, for their sharp eyes; the Los Angeles writers of The Group, for helping me get started; and my wife, Cathy, for everything.

I'm also grateful to those who, many years ago, created a Los Angeles on film so vivid that I would feel compelled to revisit it on the page. And I remember Al "Lash" La Rue, who gave a little boy his autograph back in a time when movie cowboys were the most memorable heroes of all.

* * *

HORN, JOHN RAY—B. 1909, Green Springs, Arkansas. Star of dozens of low-budget westerns for Medallion Pictures, 1937–1945. Described by one reviewer as “a cross between two silent-movie icons, William S. Hart and Harry Carey,” Horn was memorable for his laconic manner, penetrating gaze, and lanky frame. Most of his films featured him as Sierra Lane, an ex-cavalryman who seldom used a gun but who, when provoked, revealed a deadly side under his quiet demeanor. (In *No Man's Town*, he methodically tears up a bunkhouse to get at the three men who killed his friend the sheriff.) Many of his films co-starred American Indian actor Joseph Mad Crow.

Horn's career was interrupted by Army service in World War II. Discharged after being wounded, he resumed his place as one of Medallion's reliable money-makers. In 1945, he was imprisoned for two years following a controversial conviction for assault and battery, and his career in films was effectively ended. His current occupation and whereabouts are unknown.

Films: *Bloody Trail*, *Border Bad Men*, *Carbine Justice*, *Empty Holster*, *Hell's Rockpile*, *The Lost Mine*, *No Man's Town*, *Six Bullets*, *Smoke on the Mountain*, *Wyoming Thunder*, many others.

—From *White Hats: An Encyclopedia of Western Movie Heroes*, edited by Jeffers and Block, 1949.

CHAPTER ONE

The street smelled of dust and regret. *The loser's side of town*, Horn said to himself as he approached the rooming house, eyeing the front windows for any movement.

The neighborhood had the look of impermanence. The shingle-sided wood-frame houses had been thrown up more than twenty years ago as people migrated to Los Angeles looking for jobs. When the Depression hit, the houses sat vacant. Then the war came, and the houses filled up again. But now the war was over, the defense jobs gone, and all the little front yards on the street looked patchy and ill-tended. The people on this street weren't exactly poor, Horn thought, they were just passing through. They kept at least one of their bags packed, waiting for him to knock on the door. Or someone like him.

First he checked out the car. It was one of two in the cracked-concrete driveway, a Chevy sedan maybe ten years old, and the Kansas license number matched the one on the scrap of paper in his pocket. It was the collateral, all right. The windows were rolled down because of the heat, and he stood for a moment by the driver's window looking in, making sure of the ignition. He could manage it without a key if he had to.

Up the steps, the wood almost soft from the tread of countless feet, then through the unlocked screen door and down the hall—smelling of old food—a short distance to the first door on the right, the front room. As he rapped on the door with his left hand, his right curled around the roll of poker chips in the pocket of his cotton jacket. No harm in being prepared. *This one could be bad*, the Indian had told him with one of his hard-to-read grins. *Not like one of your pictures, where you wipe the floor with everybody 'cause that's the way it's supposed to turn out.*

Horn hoped it would be no worse than the two fishermen brothers down in San Pedro, the ones the Indian had been ready to write off if Horn couldn't collect. He had found them playing gin at a card table set up in their kitchen, a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter beside them. When he told them why he was there, one of the men went for Horn's eye with a knife. It was only a table knife, dull-edged and slicked with peanut butter, but it was his eye. The affair ended violently but reasonably well, and thereafter the Indian enjoyed referring to it as "the Showdown at Peanut Gulch."

He rapped on the door again. The woman who opened it could have been anywhere from thirty to forty. The lower half of her apron was darkened with the grime of all her hand-wipings. She looked resigned to whatever he had brought with him on this summer afternoon.

Horn hadn't expected a woman, and he felt some of the tension go out of his right hand. He tried to see past her into the room's interior, caught sight of what looked like a young boy sitting on a sofa in the gloom. "Afternoon, ma'am," he said. "I'd like to see Mr. Buddy Taro, if he's in."

"I'm Buddy." The man moved into Horn's line of sight. He was medium height and pudgy, wearing dress slacks with suspenders over an undershirt. His shoes were well-shined, and a single roll of flesh, smooth and pink, cradled his chin.

The man made a slight sideways shooing motion, and the woman moved back from

the doorway, hands tucked protectively in her apron. He stepped into the hall. "We can talk out here," he said easily. His face seemed open and friendly. *Buddy puts on a good front*, the Indian had said.

Horn gave the man one more good look up and down, then pulled his right hand out of his jacket. Maybe the Indian had been wrong. "I'm here for Joseph Mad Crow," Horn said quietly after waiting for the door to close. "You're into him for five twenty-five. He's extended you twice. Today's collection day."

"Sure," Buddy Taro said, nodding earnestly. "I knew it was today. Here's the thing." He touched Horn lightly on the elbow, a friendly touch. "I've got two hundred even. You can take it.

The rest I'll have real soon." His voice was smart and light and a little amused. A good gambler's voice, Horn thought, for telling stories to the boys around the table, between hands, without giving anything away.

Taro pulled a small roll of bills out of his pants pocket and handed it to Horn. "Here it is," he said. "Just tell him—"

Horn shoved the bills into the jacket pocket with the rolled-up chips. "I'll have to take the car," he said.

"What?"

"The Chevy. You put it up for collateral. Today's the day. I'll be taking it." He started for the front door.

"I can't let you do that," Taro said, the easy tone gone from his voice as he followed Horn heavily through the hall to the door. "I need that car. I need to get places." He sounded out of breath.

Horn pushed through the screen door, took the porch in two strides and the steps in two more, then waited by the car. *Get this over with*, he thought. "Can I have the keys?"

Taro stood a few feet away from him, talking through clenched teeth. "Look, I got a sick kid in there, and the woman doesn't do anything to bring in money. I got to get places. I got to find games."

"That's what got you into trouble," Horn said to him in a tone that was not unkind. "Get yourself a regular job."

"That's right, a regular job. Maybe I could get one like yours." Underneath the smart talk Horn could hear the desperation pushing to the surface. "I worked at Lockheed for a while, making airplanes, but there's no more of that. So I guess I should get a job like yours, taking people's grocery money."

"If that's what you like to do." Horn made a come-on motion. "Keys." Out of the corner of his eye he saw a slight movement. The curtain had parted at the front window to show the boy's thin, pale face, watching.

"Huh-uh." Buddy Taro was now the picture of comic defiance, arms crossed, face flushed, his middle straining at the undershirt over his trouser top.

“Never mind.” Horn reached inside the car window, pulled up on the door handle, and seated himself behind the wheel. From his left-hand jacket pocket he extracted a small screwdriver and a pocket knife. “I can manage.” He leaned sideways to study the ignition.

The other man was suddenly upon him, dragging at his left arm. Fearing a weapon, Horn came out quickly, the screwdriver held up protectively. But Buddy Taro simply stood there in front of him in an awkward crouch, eyes wide, as he doubled up a round fist and drew it back. Horn placed the flat of his hand on Taro’s face, fingers spread, and pushed quickly, hard. The man went over backward and sat down abruptly on the concrete pathway, his back against the lowest step. He stared straight ahead, looking dazed.

“Don’t do that again, all right?” Horn debated searching the man’s pockets for the car keys. But he caught another glimpse of the face at the window and decided to get back to work on the ignition. For a few minutes he could hear Taro’s labored breathing, then heard him heave himself to his feet, mount the steps, and go inside. Horn had the ignition pried out of its housing and was beginning to work on the insulation over the wires when he heard the screen door open.

“Here!” He looked up to see Taro fling a wad of bills into the front yard and driveway. They scattered over a wide area, like green leaves dropping off the trees too soon. “There’s the rest. Take it. You better count it.” He turned to the door. “Part of that’s milk money. I hope you get a big cut.”

It took Horn a long time to retrieve all the bills. He was counting them a second time on the hood of the car when he heard the voice. “Are you Sierra Lane?”

The boy was standing with one arm wrapped around the pillar by the front steps. He was maybe 13 or 14, extremely thin, barefoot and wearing corduroy pants and a multicolored T-shirt. Horn could see that one ankle, the one bearing no weight, was shrunken over the bone, like dried meat. Polio, Horn guessed, which meant that the whole leg probably looked that way.

“Who?”

“Sierra Lane. The cowboy.”

Horn shook his head.

The boy’s gaze never left Horn’s face. “Bet you are,” he said finally. “I seen enough of his movies. You’re dressed different, but. . . . What I mean is, I bet you’re the guy who plays him. Aren’t you?”

“No.”

“My favorite was *Border Bad Men*,” the boy said in almost a sing-song voice. “I seen it when I was little. You know, at the end, where Sierra talks the other guys into taking off their guns, then he fights all of ‘em. My friend Lee likes Sunset Carson, but I told him if we was in a tight spot, we’d want Sierra Lane on our side, ‘cause he could whup Sunset Carson any time.”

Horn shrugged as he rolled up the bills and put them in his pocket. “Maybe he could.”

“You sure you’re not him?”

“I’m sure.”

The front curtains rustled, and Horn saw the woman. “Come on in, honey,” she said.

The boy didn’t move. “Why’d you push my dad?”

Horn took a deep breath. “I didn’t want to,” he said finally. “You better get on inside.” Turning to the window, he said: “Ma’am, please tell Mr. Taro his account is square.”

Twenty minutes later, Horn slid into a seat aboard the trolley for the trip back. It was stifling in the car, and he shucked off his jacket and put his hat on his lap. His fingers were slick and stained, because some of the bills had landed in a puddle of engine oil in the driveway. He wiped his hands with his handkerchief, then leaned against the window and closed his eyes as the trolley bucked and rattled. The car was crowded and smelled of sweat. He heard the spark of the trolley against the overhead wire, and the air tasted as if he had a copper penny under his tongue. *This is where I ride off and everybody cheers*, he thought. *Nice job, cowboy. You come back and see us.*

* * *

“Here’s your money.” Horn tossed the roll of bills on the desk. The Indian, occupied as usual in financial matters, was toting up figures on his desktop adding machine, eyes scanning a ledger, the fingers of his left hand stabbing at the keys as his right worked the handle, ratcheting up the totals. He stopped, looked up.

“How’d it go?” he grunted.

“I bet you know how it went. Want to count it?”

Joseph Mad Crow was almost as tall as Horn but thicker in the chest and shoulders. He wore a white silk shirt with embroidery across the front. On his left wrist was an expensive Bulova, on his right a hammered silver bracelet with a turquoise the size of his thumb. He picked up the roll, stripped off the rubber band, and quickly flipped through the bills. Halfway through the wad, he stopped and looked up, his face gone sour. “They’re greasy.”

“It’s oil,” Horn said. “Some of them landed in the driveway when he threw them at me.”

“Threw ‘em at you.” Mad Crow suddenly broke into a grin. “That’s old Buddy.” In repose, his face was about as expressive as the face on the buffalo nickel. When animated, though, it was capable of a broad range, from a pixieish glee to the kind of clouded-over threat that would cause large men to duck their heads and quickly cross the street.

This time his expression suggested enjoyment of a secret joke. “I told you it could be bad.”

“I thought you meant different,” Horn said, taking the chair across the desk. To his left, most of the office wall was glass, allowing the Indian to look down on his domain, the Mad Crow Casino, biggest card parlor in this corner of Los Angeles County. Thirty tables and a bar crammed into a smoky, warehouse-like room. It was now late on a Saturday afternoon, and the place was beginning to fill up. Horn

recognized some of the regulars, and he spotted the photographer who, later in the evening, would make the rounds of the tables taking souvenir photos for the high rollers who wanted them.

“What happened?”

“Not much. Buddy got worked up and came at me when I went for his car—”

“So you didn’t drive there?”

“Figured I’d better not. I left the Ford here and rode the Red Car, just in case.” Horn pulled a pouch of Bull Durham and a packet of cigarette papers out of his shirt pocket.

“Come on,” Mad Crow said disgustedly when he saw the tobacco. “Worst habit you picked up in that place. Don’t know how you can smoke that stuff. Here,” he said, leaning toward Horn and shaking a Lucky out of an open pack. “Be civilized, okay?”

Horn smiled, having heard the gibe several times, and took one. “I don’t mind. Anyway, Buddy wasn’t hard to handle. Only there was a woman there, and a crippled kid. That’s the part I didn’t like.”

“I knew you wouldn’t,” Mad Crow said. “But who else was I going to send? Any of the other boys, it could’ve gotten messy. They might have come back with old Buddy’s scalp. You’re my diplomat.”

“Why didn’t you say that at the trial?” Horn asked, his attention on the cigarette as he lit up.

Mad Crow ran both hands over his hair, which was gathered in a short ponytail, and his face turned grim. “I did my best,” he said. “We all did. That son of a bitch had you in his sights, and that’s all it was. Clarence Darrow himself couldn’t have gotten you off that rap, my friend.”

The swivel chair creaked as he shifted his solid frame in it. “You hungry? I could send one of the girls out for a pastrami. What say?”

“I wouldn’t mind one of your beers.”

“Lula!” Mad Crow hollered through the closed door to his assistant in the outer office. “Couple of Blue Ribbons, if you please, honey.” He peeled several bills off the roll that Horn had brought in and laid them on the other side of the desk. “Your cut,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind some of the dirty ones. I threw in a little extra. Now you can get your phone turned back on.”

“It’s back on. I paid them the other day.” Noticing Mad Crow’s look, he went on: “I wasn’t broke or anything. I just let things slide, that’s all.”

“Good,” the Indian said patiently. “Well, now you can talk to people again, make contact with the world. I got awful tired of leaving messages for you at that rinky-dink garage. It’s like sending out smoke signals—you know, like in the cowboy movies.” He looked hard at Horn. “Something bothering you?”

Horn shrugged. “Just the kid,” he said finally. “He recognized me.”

“Ah.” Mad Crow leaned back in his chair. “I get it. One of your old posse. I don’t imagine you signed any autographs, did you? Sorry you didn’t run into him under

better circumstances.” His face brightened. “Lookie-here.” He pointed to the corner of the room over Horn’s right shoulder. On the wall was a large, framed movie poster, what theater owners called a one-sheet. The movie was Carbine Justice, and the artist’s illustration, done in broad strokes, showed the profiles of two men on horseback—Horn, in western garb, in the foreground, and Mad Crow wearing buckskins, with a feather in his hair.

“Ain’t it a beauty?” Mad Crow said. “I found it in the prop room over at the studio, and I got ‘em to give it to me. Of all the ones we did together, this is the only time they ran a decent picture of me.”

“It’s a good one,” Horn said. “You look very noble.”

“Noble red man, that’s me. White man speak truth.”

A young woman entered, wearing a gaudy satin shirt, boots and a fringed skirt, and placed two bottles of beer, still flecked with ice from the cooler, on the desk. “Thanks, sugar,” Mad Crow said as she left. He popped the two caps on the scarred edge of his desk, passed one to Horn, and raised his bottle. “Here’s to Sierra Lane, the gold-dangedest cowpoke who ever busted up a saloon.” He took a long pull on the bottle and belched noisily. “You got any of your old posters?”

“No,” Horn said. He was picking absent-mindedly at the label on the bottle with his thumbnail.

“The kid got to you, didn’t he?”

When Horn didn’t answer, Mad Crow went on: “Tell you what, I won’t give you anything to do with widows or orphans, okay? Just hard-core gamblers, tough guys, bad apples. Then you can keep your conscience clear.”

The Indian finished his beer and dropped the bottle into a wastebasket with a loud clatter. “Two guys who never finished high school,” he said, his voice softening a little. “We sure fooled ‘em, didn’t we? We had it pretty good for a while. Nobody ever seemed to notice neither one of us could act worth a hoot.” He shook his head, remembering, and laughed. “We just went around dispensing justice in the old west, by God. The cowboy and his faithful Indian—”

“It was all crap, and you know it.”

“Who says? Cecil B. De-fucking Mille? Okay, we turned out a lot of forgettable movies, for anybody who had a quarter in his pocket. But the kids liked us. And along the way, we had a few laughs, we made a few bucks.”

“Guess I should have saved some of them,” Horn said. “Wouldn’t be working for you, picking up greasy money off the pavement.”

“Please, a little less gratitude. You’re embarrassing me. I didn’t see anybody else standing in line to offer you a job. Not after Bernie Rome put out the word and you couldn’t get a job at any studio in town, even mucking out their stables. Look,” he went on when Horn didn’t respond. “Who cares? We’re saddle pals again, and I say to hell with all of ‘em.”

“Saddle pals. Right.” Horn got up. “I appreciate the work, Indian. I do. Every now and

then, I just get a little tired of it, you know?”

“Wait a minute.” Mad Crow reached in a drawer. “I almost forgot. You got a call today.” He handed him a slip of paper.

“Mutual 3224,” Horn read aloud. “Scotty?”

“Yep. I didn’t tell him I knew where you were, just said I’d pass it on if I ever ran into you.”

Horn crumpled up the paper and dropped it into the wastebasket alongside the empty bottle.

“Not going to call him?” When Horn didn’t answer, he said: “I thought you all were good friends. What ever happened to Horn and Bullard, the terrors of the Sunset Strip?”

“I don’t know,” Horn said, making sure he sounded as if he didn’t care. “I’ve lost touch with the guy.”

“He was at the trial, wasn’t he?”

“That’s right. Bought me a drink just before I went upstate, wrote me a couple of letters, and that was it. Last I heard from him was almost three years ago. I suppose when Iris dumped me, he had to pick sides, and he’d known her longer. Or maybe it was just that Scotty’s old man wouldn’t have approved of him hanging out with a jailbird. Bad for business. Bad for the family image.”

“Well, he doesn’t have to worry about Daddy’s opinion any more,” Mad Crow said with a snort. “You heard, right?”

“I saw it in the paper. Big funeral. They said it took an hour to clear all the cars out of Forest Lawn afterward.”

“So your old buddy’s a rich guy now.”

Horn shrugged. “Good for him.” He turned to leave.

“Why not give him a call? You can use every friend you’ve got.”

“Go to hell,” Horn said pleasantly as he closed the door behind him.

“Happy trails, amigo,” Mad Crow called loudly after him. “Keep in touch.”

CHAPTER TWO

Normally, Horn would have headed home to fix some dinner, but he was newly flush and felt like eating out. He drove downtown to Cole's Buffet, in the basement of the Pacific Electric Building on Sixth. Down the stairs off the sidewalk, the place was cool and dimly lit. The counterman made him a roast beef sandwich with a side of potato salad and drew him a draft beer. Horn settled into a table near the back.

Cole's was one of the places where he still felt at home. Those places seemed to be vanishing, the way things dissolve in one of those long, slow fadeouts on the screen and you know the movie is over. Horn had spent little time in the city during the past few years. First had been the war, and not long after that came prison. Now he was back, but from time to time he was troubled by small, unsettling surprises—the sight of a new building where there had been grass and trees, or a vacant lot where a hotel once had stood. Los Angeles, the city that had welcomed him in his youth with sunshine and promise, was beginning to present a different face to him, a little like an ex-girlfriend who had changed, who now preferred other men.

As he ate, he felt a mixture of shame and anger. Shame over the work he did, anger at everyone—Buddy Taro for being a fool, the boy for recognizing him. Anger even at the Indian, one of the few friends he had left, for putting him in the position of accepting charity, for handing him a job that made him feel low and mean. He went for another beer, to soften the edges of his anger. He had to be careful about the feeling. Sometimes, anger could fester and erupt in rage. It was rage that had put him in Cold Creek for two years.

The beer made him feel better, and he felt something soften in him. After a while he went over to the pay phone in the corner, paged through the phone book to find Scott Bullard's number at work, and dialed it.

"Scotty, it's John Ray."

"Hey, my friend. Thanks for calling me. Been a while, hasn't it?"

"I suppose it has. Sorry about your father."

"I appreciate that. At least it was quick—his heart. The old man wouldn't have wanted to stick around with some long illness. He told me that, back when we were still talking." Although Scotty spoke quickly, as always, with the words tumbling over one another, he sounded tired and distracted. "It's almost as if he picked the way he wanted to go. Just like he arranged everything else."

"I guess so," Horn said. "You needed something?"

"Look, I, uh. . . ." Scotty stopped, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. "Yeah, I need to talk to you. Where are you right now?"

"Cole's. On my second beer."

"Mind if I come by and try to catch up?"

* * *

Horn nursed the second draft while he waited. The place was getting busier as the

nearby office buildings emptied for the day, and he idly watched the counter men as they sliced rare roast beef off the bone, dipped the bread into the juice, and slid the sandwiches across to the customers. Nice to have a useful trade, he thought. Man comes in off the job hungry, his starched collar wilting in the heat, and this guy in a white apron hands him a juicy French dip with a glistening kosher dill on the side and a mug of cold beer to wash it all down. Now there's a service that's appreciated. Me? I take people's grocery money.

He thought about Scotty, trying to focus on the good times. Years earlier, the two had eased into a solid friendship. Each had something to offer the other. Horn had introduced his friend to the slower rhythms of a ranch and had invited him onto movie sets while some of his "oaters" were being shot. He showed him how to use a rifle and took him coyote hunting a few times up in the San Gabriels. For his part, Scotty, as the son of one of Los Angeles' biggest land developers, had showed Horn the joy of irresponsibility—and how intensely two young men could carouse when financed by Bullard Senior's money.

Even after Horn and Iris were married, she never seemed to mind when he and Scotty went off somewhere. She had worked for the Bullard company as a secretary and known the family—it was Scotty who had introduced her to Horn—and, like most people, seemed to genuinely enjoy Scotty's company. She and Horn would sometimes go on double dates with Scotty and his current girlfriend, who might be a file clerk with the family firm, a department store model, or a debutante from back East. Scotty was indiscriminating when it came to women. He liked them all, and they returned the affection.

When Horn began his two-year stretch upstate and Scotty let things lapse after a couple of letters, Horn reluctantly wrote the other man off as the kind of friend he didn't need. Then came the letter from Iris, giving him someone else to write off. . . .

The street door opened, and Scotty stepped inside with his usual quick, fluid movement. He waved to an acquaintance standing at the counter, patted another on the back, then looked around, spotted Horn, and came over.

"John Ray Horn," he said with mock seriousness, sticking out his hand as he sat down.

"Scott Bullard, Esquire," Horn replied, taking it.

Scotty looked much the same. Lithe build, sharp features, sandy hair with a pronounced widow's peak. The ever-present slight grin was in place, except now it looked strained. He was wearing a well-cut tropical-weight gray suit, apparently having come over directly from the family offices. The only difference Horn noticed was the circles under the other man's eyes. *Guess that's what losing a father does to some people*, Horn thought. *Wonder if it'll do that to me.*

"You doing all right?" Scotty asked, looking at Horn searchingly, taking in his clothes, the slightly tousled hair, the one-day stubble, the overall look of a man for whom good grooming had ceased to be a priority. "Someone told me you're working with Joseph now."

"For him," Horn grunted. "It's not much, but I didn't find many top-drawer jobs waiting for me when I got back. You want a beer?"

“Maybe later. What about the studio?”

Horn laughed. “What do you think?”

“What about another studio?”

Horn shifted impatiently in his chair. “I’ve got a felony on my record. I’m what they call blacklisted. Might as well be a goddamn Red or something.”

“I’m sorry,” Scotty said. “Look—”

“Hey, Bullard, if you’re about to offer me a job, save it. You’re a little late, anyway, know what I mean?”

The other man nodded, looking down at the table. Horn said, “So I guess you’re the big dog at Bullard Development now.”

Scotty shook his head. “The old man was too smart for that. He knew I wasn’t the one to carry the company banner. Just to make sure I didn’t tear down everything he worked to build—” His voice rose dramatically in mimicry of Arthur Bullard’s oratory. “Anyway, he set up a trust fund for me. My dear old mom and the board of directors are going to be running the company, which is fine with me.” He leaned back in his chair and unbuttoned his suit jacket. “I think I disappointed him from the day I first poked my head out into the world. Even though I wanted him to be proud of me, I never wanted to go into his business. He thinks all I ever wanted to do was spend his money.”

“Well,” Horn said, “you had a real talent in that department.”

“I did indeed,” Scotty chuckled. “I think he had this secret hope that I’d mature, buckle down at the office, get married, and sire a lot of Bullard grandchildren to carry on the line. But none of that ever happened. Then, when the war came and I wound up 4-F, I think that finished me for him. Not only was I a disappointment in every other department, now I wasn’t even good enough to die for my country.”

“Not your fault you were 4-F,” Horn said.

“You couldn’t tell him that,” Scotty replied, shaking his head. “I saw you and a bunch of others come back from the war, and I was jealous of you. When you wouldn’t even talk about what you’d done, that somehow made me feel even worse.”

Horn regarded him uneasily. Once Scotty had sat down, what energy he had left since his father’s funeral seemed to drain out of him, and his voice and gestures were growing slower. Scotty had always been able to throw himself into everything—a new car, a new girl, even a conversation. It was one of the things that made him likable. But his heart wasn’t in this conversation. He took long breaths, and his eyes flitted around the room, rarely meeting Horn’s.

“We didn’t have much to say to each other in the last few years,” Scotty went on. “Oh, I made a good show of it, so he could tell his friends at his club how he was grooming me to take over things some day. I’d show up for work, shuffle papers for a few hours, and go home without ever seeing him. . . .” Scotty stared at Horn for a few seconds.

“What the hell. Enough of this. Have you seen Iris?”

“No.”

“Or Clea?”

“Nope. Not since I went up.”

“That was almost three years ago.”

“I know it was three years ago,” Horn said, more loudly than he intended. “I went in married, came out divorced. Why do I need to see either one of them?”

“Well, I know Clea was special to you. . . .” Scotty trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

“Just let it go, all right?” Horn leaned forward impatiently. “Come on, Bullard. If you’re not going to get a beer, at least you can tell me what you wanted to see me about.”

Scotty nodded slowly, as if he’d been waiting for those words. “Can we get out of here? I want to show you something.”

* * *

Horn stood at the window looking down at the street twelve stories below. Beneath a cloudless, ink-dark sky, Spring Street danced with the lights of cars and the quick movements of the last workers exiting the office buildings on their way home. The heavy, wide-paned windows were thrown up, and the evening air was beginning to cool the room. He and Scotty were in Arthur Bullard’s office on the top floor of the Braly Building, where Bullard Development occupied the top two floors. Except for the occasional cleaning woman, most of the other offices were dark and unoccupied. The room where they stood was lit only by a study lamp atop the desk in one corner.

“Some view, huh?” he heard Scotty say behind him. “My office is on the other side, looking east out toward the rail yards.” Scotty nudged him and handed him a glass. Horn guessed it contained Bullard Senior’s favorite scotch, and a sniff confirmed it. He sipped appreciatively.

“But I like my view too,” Scotty went on. “Did you know this was the first skyscraper around here? It’s still pretty goddam impressive.”

Although Horn had visited Iris at work in the building a few times before they were married, he had never been in this office. The place was a statement of power, with richly paneled walls and plush leather furniture. He walked around the large oak desk to study a row of framed photos on the wall, squinting to make out the figures in the dim light. He saw Scotty’s father standing with the mayor, the archbishop, the governor, the occasional movie studio chief, and groups of friends on hunting and skiing trips. Although Horn had little interest in business or government, he nevertheless recognized some of the men known as the oligarchs of Los Angeles. They were the big businessmen who, earlier in the century, had sensed the city’s coming greatness and, by methods both legal and questionable, had accumulated enough of the vital pieces on the board—oil, rails, water, real estate—to ensure their fortunes. Arthur Bullard had been one of the last surviving oligarchs, and now he too was gone.

Scotty sat down in his father’s old chair and gestured for Horn to sit across from him.

“How’s the view from behind the big desk?” Horn asked.

“Pretty grand. But I don’t plan on getting used to it. Where are you living these days?”

Horn told him, explaining how to find his place, and wrote down the phone number on Arthur Bullard's monogrammed notepad.

"So. . . ." Scotty cleared his throat, looking vaguely ill at ease. "I guess I should have written you more. Maybe driven up there a few times."

"You probably had more important things."

"I don't know about that. Did you get along all right?"

"Sure. I made a few friends, tried not to make too many enemies—although that's not easy in a place like that. Kept my head down, my nose clean, you know. I even learned a little bit of a trade, tooling leather and working metal. I made this belt I'm wearing. Started on a saddle, but then my time ran out."

Scotty's mind appeared to be elsewhere. "Maybe this isn't much of a reason," he said. "But I heard people say you really tried to kill that guy."

"Maybe I did."

Scotty grinned ruefully. "And then I heard a few others say maybe he deserved it."

"Maybe he did."

"All right, here it is: My father had some things to say about you. You can imagine what they were. I tried to avoid being Daddy's good little boy most of the time, but this was one time I guess I listened to him. He said you had gone crazy and were dangerous. I admit, I was a little scared of you, scared of what my old friend had turned into. Make sense?"

"No."

"I know it doesn't, but that's the reason you didn't hear from me after that first couple of letters. I feel bad about it. If you've got any hard feelings, take a poke at me, and we'll call it even." He glanced down at Horn's oversized right hand cupped around his glass, the knuckles whitened with old callouses. "Maybe that's not a good idea. Why don't you just call me some names?"

Horn suppressed the desire to laugh. Although he wasn't rid of his resentment, it was hard to dislike Scotty for long. Still, there remained one thing, buried deep, that he needed to unearth. "For a while there, I was wondering," he said. "When I didn't hear from you, and then when Iris said she was divorcing me. . . ."

"You thought I was romancing your wife?" Scotty looked astonished.

Horn shrugged. "Sounded reasonable to me at the time."

"Well, it's crazy. She's a great gal, and I always liked her. But hell, John Ray, I fixed you up with her. She'd never get serious about me. I was only good for laughs. Besides, she's married again."

"You know anything about the guy?" Horn asked casually.

"A little. You know how I never turn down an invitation? Well, I just might have been at the party where they met each other. At least that's the way I recall it through the haze of alcohol. Also, I think they both showed up at the old man's funeral the other day, although there was such a crowd. . . . I haven't talked to her for a long time. He's

some kind of business type. A few months ago there was a picture of the two of them in the society page, some event. He's a decent-looking guy." He glanced quickly at Horn. "Apparently she's well fixed."

"Well, good for her," Horn said, trying to mean it. "Like they say, third time's the charm." The subject was making him uncomfortable, and he wondered what he was doing sitting in a dead man's office. "Is this what you wanted to show me?" he asked, gesturing around the room.

Something passed over Scotty's face. "No," he said. "There's more. When the old man died, my mother and I went through everything of his, all his papers. He was organized, like you'd expect. We opened his lock boxes, found a lot of things related to the business. Even a pile of her old letters to him, which made her happy that he'd bothered to keep them. Some people said he didn't have a conscience. When it came to business, he could be ruthless. But my mother said they just didn't know the real Arthur, the man who'd keep old letters from his wife."

Scotty paused, and Horn simply nodded, waiting. "We knew he'd written a will," Scotty went on, "but it didn't turn up in the lock boxes, so we came here to look in his desk. He kept the drawers locked, but we had all the keys from his key ring. Sure enough, we turned up the will down in the bottom drawer."

Scotty finished off his scotch in one gulp. "There was one other thing in the drawer—this," he said, reaching downward. He turned a key in a lock, opened the drawer, and extracted an ordinary manila envelope, which he laid on the desk. "I looked inside and told my mother it was just business details, not anything she needed to worry about." His eyes evading Horn's, he said quietly, "Now I want you to look at it."

The envelope was about 9 by 12, bearing the logotype of Bullard Development and no other markings. Horn picked it up, opened the clasp, and let the contents slide onto the desk. It was a packet of photos secured by a rubber band. He slid off the band and spread them around the desktop. Fifteen pictures, warped and dog-eared by Arthur Bullard's handling. Horn instantly knew the photos. Not because he had seen them before, but because he had seen many like them. The first had been at a county fair, when a cousin had taken him behind a stall and showed him a sepia-toned snapshot he had bought on the street in St. Louis, a picture of a woman lounging on a couch, naked, with her thighs apart.

Horn picked up his glass. "I've seen dirty pictures," he said. "A guy in my platoon over in Italy had a bunch of them. Said they were all of his girlfriend, and if he didn't make it back to New Jersey, he wanted us to bury 'em with him."

"I don't think they were like these," Scotty said.

"Hmm?" Horn looked over them again. The photos, like all those he'd seen, gave off a whiff of sinister energy: They were furtive, blatant, and forbidden all at once. Men and women, doing things few cameras ever recorded. The women were all naked, the men were covered in some way, wearing bulky robes, open in front. Their faces were hooded. His eyes swept over the inescapable details, the erect male organs, grasping hands, awkwardly sprawled legs, open mouths, joined bodies. Then he leaned forward, blinking. He'd had too much to drink, and something wasn't right. He fanned the

remaining photos out on the desk and stared.

There were no women in the pictures. Only girls. Children. The oldest, he guessed, were in their mid-teens. They appeared in the tableaux featuring men and sex. The youngest were usually posed alone, naked and in a semblance of seductiveness, their small fingers sometimes touching themselves in ways they couldn't yet understand. These girls were young, so young he didn't want to guess their ages.

Horn pushed his chair back and got up. "Don't know why you went to all this trouble just to show me your old man's photo album. You want my opinion, he had a sick hobby. Maybe he should have asked the family to bury these with him in Forest Lawn."

"Wait," Scotty said. "Give me another minute. Just keep looking."

Horn stared at him, sighed, then leaned over the desk, bracing himself with his hands. "I see a few guys who belong in jail, who don't want their faces to show," he said, sounding bored. "I see a bunch of little girls who are going to be messed up for a long. . . ."

He reached for one photo, held it up close to the desk light. Then he sat down slowly. A small girl, no more than four or five years old, stood in a doorway, smiling at the camera. Her weight was on one leg, her hip cocked and the other leg slightly bent. Her right hand cupped a nonexistent breast, her thumb toying with her tiny nipple. The girl's face was rouged and lipsticked, but underneath the grotesque mask, her smile was full and eager, as if she wanted to please whoever operated the camera.

It was the face that had stopped him. Even in this childish form, it bore features he recognized. He knew the full upper lip, the well-defined jaw, the pale, wide-set eyes. *I didn't know her then, he thought distractedly, I knew her later.*

He looked up to find Scotty staring at him. "I was right," Scotty said. "It's her, isn't it?"

Horn nodded slowly, not wanting to say the name. "It's Clea."

CHAPTER THREE

They sat there for a while, listening to the distant sounds of traffic. Horn's face was set into an expression that was hard and yet unfocused, as if he wanted to lash out at someone but couldn't yet make out his adversary.

A cleaning woman opened the door and started in, her water pail trailing behind her. She saw the two men and stopped. "This is Mr. Bullard's office," she said hesitantly in a thick accent.

"I'm the other Mr. Bullard, the junior one," Scotty said to her, not unkindly. "Come back later, would you?"

She closed the door behind her. "Fifteen years at this fucking company," Scotty said quietly, "and some of the help still don't know me. Guess that's what I get for only working half days, huh?"

Horn just stared at the photo of the little girl who had once been his stepdaughter. Finally he said, "You know where he got this stuff?"

Scotty shook his head. "There must be dozens of photographers in L.A., and it wouldn't surprise me if a lot of them sell this sort of thing. My father had a lot of money, and I'm sure he had people who could get this for him. This town's got something for everybody." He looked around, as if searching for something. "But I did find this." Reaching in the top center drawer of the desk, he brought out a small card and slid it across to Horn.

It was a business card. It read Geiger's Rare Books, with a phone number and an address in Hollywood.

"This place is one of several bookstores along that stretch of Hollywood Boulevard," Scotty said. "I've been in most of them. Geiger's is a little different. They sell first editions, but they've also got dirty books under the counter—expensive ones, leather bindings and all that—if you've got the money to spend and know what to ask for."

"You know about this sort of thing, do you?"

"I know about a lot of things, John Ray. Don't go getting holy on me. You asked me, and I told you what I know."

"All right," Horn said. "But your father probably had a lot of business cards."

"Hundreds of them," Scott said. "All arranged very neatly and alphabetically in that box." He pointed to a long and narrow teakwood box resting by Arthur Bullard's telephone.

"So why—"

"But this card wasn't in the box," Scotty interrupted. "It was underneath the desk blotter. The only thing I found there."

Horn thought about that for a moment, then put the card in his pocket.

"Here's a laugh," Scotty went on. "I've finally got the goods on the old man. But if he were sitting here right now, I wouldn't have the nerve to ask him what he was doing

with these pictures.”

“I know one thing,” Horn said, looking again at the photo of the little girl. “He held this one in his hands and looked at it. He was a sick son of a bitch.” He sat back, his face drawn, and rubbed his eyes. “How the hell could Clea—”

“Get her picture taken like this? That’s what’s been bothering me. Who took it? Where was she? Where was her mother when this happened? Tell me how old she looks here.”

“Maybe four or five. She was five when I married Iris, and she looks a little younger here. She—” He stopped for a second, swallowing hard. “She was growing real fast right about then. This was either while Iris was still married to Clea’s dad or after she divorced him.”

“Any chance Iris could have known about this?”

Horn had had the same thought, and his face twisted with something close to pain. “How am I supposed to answer that? Look, she’s not one of my favorite people right now, and I’m sure it’s mutual. But one thing I know—she loves this girl.”

Scotty nodded. “I would have said the same thing.”

Horn raised his gaze to him, and the look was not friendly. “Why did you show me all this?”

Scotty shoved his chair back until it rested against a bookshelf behind him. Horn had never seen him look so tired. “Maybe I want to get even with my old man,” he said, his words a little slurred. “For not letting a day go by without dropping a hint about what a disappointment I was to him. Maybe I just want somebody to know he wasn’t the high and mighty Arthur, the guy in those pictures up there on the wall. I don’t want his name in the papers or anything like that. My mother is pretty strong, but I’m not sure if she could handle this. I don’t want to tell the police. These pictures are old, and who are they going to arrest after all this time? I just want somebody to know, and I guess you’re the one I want to know.” He stopped, breathing deeply, and Horn heard the clatter of the cleaning woman’s mop against her pail far down the hall.

“All right, now I know,” Horn said. “But what do you want me to do?”

“Somebody needs to tell Iris about this.”

“You tell her.”

“Come on. I’m just a friend, and I haven’t talked to her in years. Clea was your daughter for a while.”

“Right. Stepdaughter, anyway. And Iris was my wife, until she resigned. I’m not exactly part of the family any more.” Horn was beginning to feel that Scotty was pushing him somewhere he didn’t want to be. “What good would it do to tell her, anyway? It would just make her sick. I’ll say what you just said: This picture’s more than ten years old. We don’t know where your old man got it, and we’ll probably never know. Clea’s a big girl by now. Let’s leave it alone.” Horn got up. “I’m tired.”

“What do you think I should do with these?” Scotty asked, sweeping his hand over the photos.

Horn glanced once again at the painted little face, younger than he had ever seen it, then tossed it back onto the pile. “Burn ‘em,” he said, turning to leave.

As he closed the door, he heard Scotty say quietly, “I hope she’s doing all right.”

* * *

An insistent knocking at the cabin’s front door awoke him when the morning light was still gray. He opened the door to find a little man with a thinning head of hair and an improbably bushy mustache. It was Harry Flye.

“I want to show the property this afternoon,” Flye said without preamble, the volume of his voice turned louder than necessary, as always. “I talked to you about the weeds. The place looks awful. You said you’d take care of it. Get up there today, all right? This morning.”

“All right,” Horn said.

“The place looks awful,” Flye said again, as if it had just occurred to him. “I can’t sell it the way it looks. You’re supposed to keep it up.”

“I will, Mr. Flye,” Horn said with what he hoped sounded like proper respect. *You used to be an actor*, he told himself. *So pretend he’s not a weasel, and act friendly.* “Today.”

“This morning,” the other man said as he stomped down the stairs to his car. “The swimming pool can wait a while, but the weeds can’t. You don’t take care of the place, lots of others be glad to get the job, I bet.”

“Nice to see you again,” Horn said as he closed the door.

After breakfast, he put on dungarees and an undershirt, fetched the long-handled scythe, and started up the path that led around his cabin and up the steep hillside through the trees.

The cabin sat on a densely wooded hillside near the head of Culebra Canyon, which wound like the snake after which it was named for a few miles until it dead-ended in the Santa Monica Mountains. The little building was made of rough, old-wood siding, but it had a solid foundation and a fireplace, both made of stone, and a brick chimney that leaned only a few degrees. Inside was one medium-size room with a couch where he slept. Behind a door was the bathroom, and behind a curtain was a tiny kitchen.

Harry Flye, the only other person who held a key to the gate, was his landlord. Flye had used the war to build an impressive little empire of new money—buying low and selling high, turning over property at precisely the right moment to make a buck, reading the market like a Gypsy fortuneteller reads a mark’s palm. At present, he was the owner of the old Ricardo Aguilar place here in Culebra Canyon, a relic of the silent-movie days when Hollywood royalty built estates to match their screen images. The property was mostly in ruins, but the caretaker’s cabin still stood, and Horn was allowed to live there rent-free in exchange for keeping up the grounds. Flye knew about his prison record and didn’t seem to care. What he cared about was cheap labor.

Within five minutes Horn stood on a large plateau, rimmed with eucalyptus trees, from where he could see the Pacific, far off to the southwest. Twenty-five years earlier, Aguilar had built his estate here, a Greek-revival palace where Valentino and