

HALF EMPTY

(AUGUST 12, 1941)

The urgent thing was to settle the track dust from his mind. So Castle Frazer set his beer on the bar, hiked his pants, breathed in the day he'd had at Churchill—and breathed it out. Nothing for the record books; still, he'd read the track, the weather, the jockeys. He'd found the news: Who was held back, let out. To the tune of ... but money wasn't the issue. Not entirely. Being in tune was. Being right. The point was, horses were magic. Horses were religious and beautiful—if you understood, if you had conversations with the right trainers, jockeys. And tonight! All the right seats were reserved for the poker game. Castle felt like he owned the world. Well, close. Even if, unmarried and without heirs, he owned it by himself.

Castle gulped his beer, looking around the dark insides of Frog's Pool Palace & Emporium. Then the boy appeared and Castle heard, "Hi, Mister Frazer."

He looked down, recognized the kid from Cropper. Somebody's son. One of the Pollards'. Ah yes, Jack Pollard. Cruel and stupid Jack Pollard. "Day off from the farm?" Castle said. He smiled down.

"You remember me?" the boy asked. "Shaking my hand?"

"I do," Castle said.

"Remember telling me you like the way my eyes fit in my head?"

"I remember."

"When?"

Oh, so now the kid was testing Castle. Brighter than his father, obviously. "Well, dates are a bit like water for me. They evaporate so quickly. But a horse-bettor always remembers the name. Because you need the right name at the window. You're Earl."

The kid smiled like he'd drawn to an inside straight. "Rich, sir," he said.

"No, I don't think so." Castle winked. "I always remember the name. I think it's Earl."

"Rich," the boy said.

"You're not Jack Pollard's son? You're not Earl?"

"Am—except I think of myself, most times, as Rich."

"Oh! Right. Got you."

"My folks calls me LeEarl."

"Making you French, I guess." Castle grinned.

"But I decided to call myself Rich. I liked the name. Rich Stillman."

"Because you're planning to grow up and be—"

"Rich," finished the boy.

"And a Stillman as well, I guess. Whatever a Stillman is."

"Right."

Castle smiled. Here was a boy better than the poor harsh people who had reared him.

Rich smiled. Nodded.

And there they were. The man and the boy. Two

people who, if the background hadn't been a bar full of gamblers, could have been teacher and student, father and son.

Castle had a knack for friends, recognizing red-headed Pete from Indiana when he ran into him again at an Ohio track. Kids, though ... Still, he remembered this boy; something about him had stuck, for some reason. Wouldn't have minded a boy like Rich for his own. He liked ambition. Determination. Dreams. Dreams were things you could always work on. Turn out.

"Nice tie, Mr. Frazer," Rich said.

"Won it in a bet."

"Nice suit."

"One hundred percent wool. You want it? Think it will fit?"

"You dresses nice, Mr. Frazer."

"Thank you."

Castle stretched, filling his custom suit. "So, day off from the farm?" he asked again. "What're you doing in a pool hall?"

"Sweeping," Rich said.

"I see. If I were an observant man, I would have known that. Sweeping."

"I sweeps, sir."

"Sweep," Castle prompted.

"Afternoons. For Mister Frog."

"Enterprising," Castle said. "I like that."

Rich's eyes stopped, such that you could almost hear his brain behind them. "Enter—?"

"Enterprising. Means you want something, you go after it," Castle said.

"Oh," Rich said. "True."

"So, what're your goals, young man, besides rich?"

“Well—”

“Saving up for something? A bike? A fishing rod? Frog paying you enough money?”

“Mr. Frazer, sir, I don’t get paid.”

“Sounds like Frog.”

“That’s not why I work here. Mr. Frog and I have an arrangement.”

“I’m sure it’s Frog’s arrangement. You sweep this swamp up for Frog—for free. You sweep; he? ...”

“Mr. Frog lets me sweep.”

“Oh! I see. And in return, you let him—what? Watch you?”

“I gotta go, Mr. Frazer. Do my work. Mr. Frog says to keep busy. Good seein’ you, sir.”

Castle watched Rich walk away, shoulders free-swinging and without wasted motion. Like a racehorse in the winner’s circle. Castle blinked, brushed his hair back with his fingers, held it, then turned to another regular railbird. “Kid there tells me he’s sweeping for Frog, but not getting paid. What do you think?”

“Frog lets him practice,” said the railbird.

Castle tugged his hair again, squinting. Something in the picture was missing.

“Pool,” the railbird explained. “Frog lets the kid practice pool. Whenever it’s slow. Kid’s damned good.”

Castle nodded.

“Fact, he’s natural. I think someone’s been working with him. Turned him out,” the railbird said.

“How old do you think the kid is?” Castle asked.

“I overheard him say his mom’s not sure, but she thought he was eleven.”

“Looks right.”

“Eleven ... twelve.”

“Could be thirteen and look young.”

“Could be ten and look old.”

“Deal working? Frog’s? I mean, for the kid? He play a lot? You say he’s a natural. How good?”

The railbird smiled. “Hang around,” he said. “You’ll see.”

Castle had no appointments until poker. He paid for another Millers and moved to an observer chair, thinking he’d begin settling the day’s dust. He reached to pull up the chair, stopped, stood, watched the boy. Just a small ratty broom, but Castle was impressed with the care the boy took—each stroke, his tidiness, his precision, how his sandy hair was neatly trimmed and his jeans and T-shirt were as clean as they were, though a little frayed. Interesting, given the kid’s home. Given the kid’s family.

Castle watched; Rich swept. Something about the boy’s eyes, Castle thought. Serious. Like ice. Or fire. Or both. Something special. No wasted motion. Castle thought again. Hands as well. The broom—under the observer chairs lining the walls around the twelve pool tables. There seemed destiny in it—crazy word, certainly, for a barsweep. It wasn’t the job, really, nor young Rich’s sweeping. It was more ... style. The boy’s sense of himself, of what had knocked him down in his life, and knocked him down again. And of what was possible. He was the kind of young man Castle might teach, might take under his wing, turn out, then ... Hell, he’d known the kid for only ten minutes. What was he thinking?

Castle watched Rich move each chair to dust and sweep under. Meticulous—another word. Then Rich started brushing the tables. He paid extra attention to the hidden pocket corners and playing surface. He also leaned his head down to look at the smooth surface from

eye level and ran his hand over the whole tabletop. Castle understood why Frog had made this deal. After the boy finished his chores, he wiped his tools, then disappeared into the storage closet to put them away. What now? Castle was curious. What was the kid doing in the closet? Castle waited.

A minute seemed like ten or more. Finally Rich reappeared—like an assistant in a magic show—out of the storage closet, carrying a pool stick and a footstool. He crossed to an empty back table, stood beside it, teased the felt lightly with his fingertips, chalked his cue.

Castle was no pool player, but he'd driven the gambling circuit and seen the world's best players—all from inside the hooded light. So he watched as the eleven-year-old extended his left index finger, planted his palm and three free fingers in a bridge, checked his grasp on the shaft, then slowly stroked through straight and true. The discipline in the boy—again, meticulousness—drew Castle close. Effortlessness. Oil lubricating oil. It buzzed Castle, excited him. This was the kind of kid who if Castle had had a son ... No. Would you want a son to? ... Possibly.

Rich positioned the footstool, placed the cue ball, stroked it into the racked balls. Crack! The balls scattered. Castle craned his neck. Not a lot of options on the break. The kid hadn't given himself much. Nothing certain or sure. Castle eased quietly into his chair. It seemed, almost, that the kid had given himself the worst possible setup. As a test. A trial. To practice.

And Castle Frazer's hunch proved right. Every shot was a problem. Textbook. The kid was his own teacher, his own student. He studied, gauged, prepared. Shot. Amazing! Shot again. This was no bright ambitious kid from the farm. This was, if Castle was right, the opportunity that his

twenty-seven years had been preparing him for.

Castle's breathing caught, jumped with each click of the cue. The way the object balls followed Rich's strikes was almost military. Draw. Strike. Contact. Fall. Hardly a fault or failure. Castle shook his head, pulled free, approached. Rich seemed alone on the planet—eyes totally locked on the table, the balls. Then, for no reason Castle Frazer could discern, the kid looked over.

"Hello again."

Rich blinked, measured; he lifted an elbow, rolled a shoulder slightly.

"Rich," Castle brushed back his sand-colored hair and tried again.

Rich drew his cue back.

Castle waited. And saw Rich almost catch something in the air, recalculate, shift, readjust, change the angle of his body, shoot. "Can we talk briefly?" Castle inserted. "Just a ..."

But Rich had no space for voices—outside of his own. It was all balls, angles, green felt in his head. One of his eyes seemed cueball; the other, object ball. And he was lining them up.

"You're ..." Castle knew better, but he couldn't stop. Something about the kid—he chased him. "You have talent."

Nothing. No recognition. No word.

"And, you know, talent's ..."

Rich shot. Made the eleven.

"Talent's not a thing easily ..."

Rich edged Castle aside on his way, circling the table, to his next shot. "Scuse me, Mr. Frazer," he said.

"Right. Absolutely. Excuse me," Castle said. "No problem. Excused."

The boy's words had fallen dull and automatic. Rich paused, shot, banked, sank another.

"You're ... what? Ten? Eleven?" Castle tried.

"Eleven. And you're twenty-seven—right?" Rich said.

"Eight," Castle said.

"I think seven," Rich said.

The boy was right. Castle lied to himself about his age.

"Rich, do you ever? ..."

"Mr. Frazer! Just one more shot. Thank you." Rich measured, took it, made it, turned. "Sorry."

"Why'd you bank that shot?"

"See if I could."

"Fair enough."

"Man I met told me: Easy way's sometimes the hard way; hard way's sometimes easy."

"Smart."

"Very. But you were asking: Did I? Ever? ..."

"You ever consider playing for money?"

Rich seemed, almost, to evaporate—into his own body. So Castle tried again. "You're good. You're natural. An old professional like myself would inquire ... I mean, I have certain skills, certain talent, certain knowledge. And it occurs to me ..."

The boy's lips came together. He looked straight at Castle, as if he weren't entirely real. Rich had the eyes of a sleepwalker. "I'm sorry," he said. "You said something, but I was thinking. I was thinking about that last shot. I didn't hear you or see you. That happens. You were saying?"

"You ever play for money?"

"It depends."

"On?"

"On how much."

"Oh."

"How much do you want to play for, Mister Frazer?"

"Did I say me? I ... I don't think I said I was looking to—"

"How much?"

"Rich—listen, I believe in manners as much as the next person, but call me Castle. I appreciate that you're being polite. Polite's good. But Castle is as easy as Mr. Frazer. Can you imagine naming your boy Castle Frazer? Castle? Except I've grown, in my own way, to like it. Makes me sort of a chess piece. You see, I know people. ... Certain kinds I don't gamble. I'm in the gambling business, but I don't put money in jeopardy unless there's good odds. And when I watch you play ..."

Rich squinted—measuring, calculating. "What's jepurty?" he asked.

"Well, jeopardy ..." Castle began. "If I put money in action without the right advantage, that money might get confused, forget its rightful home. Jeopardy is confused money."

Rich nodded. "I understand."

"I avoid confused money," Castle said as he walked around Rich in a slow but sure stride. "Basic principle. And watching you, I had the thought that ..." Castle stretched his neck, cleared his throat slightly. "I thought since we're both from Cropper, we might, together, pursue some money, team up. Possibly." Castle saw Rich smile. "You interested?"

Castle watched Rich rotate the cue under his fingers. A constant roll, a constant turning. Had he made the eleven-year-old nervous?

"Rich, did you hear—"

"Mr. Frazer, you say something I like, I'll hear," Rich said.

"Fine. Good. Well, I need to know, then, if the answer is yes," Castle said. Then he asked, "Do you know the question?"

"The question is if playing for money is a thing I'll do."

"Right," Castle said, slowly. He felt a chill.

"I can play for money," Rich said.

"Good." Castle led the boy to a corner, sat with him under the moosehead with the sleepy look. "You beat any of the good players that come in here?"

Rich twisted his lips, looked at Castle's hand still on him. Castle removed it. Rich blew air through his nose. "All of 'em," he said. He stood.

"Well," Castle said. He was impressed. "Fact?"

"I don't lie, Mr. Frazer," Rich said.

"Here's what I'd propose. I bankroll. I put up some money—I'm not talking a fortune. I find customers. We go halves. Try that for a while, then—"

"Thanks, Mr. Frazer," Rich said. "But I've got bankroll and there ain't going to be no halvesies."

"You've got—"

"Sir, I know you. People talk. You're a steering man. You point; you find. Everyone knows that, and I like it. It's good. Find me a pigeon, and I'll play. And I'll pay a quarter of my action."

The two stared. Some inkling, some untaken chance, some sense of a life left alone, something Castle hadn't done began to unwind inside him.

"I don't need bankroll," Rich said. He dipped into his pocket, produced a packet of bills, peeled off a dozen twenties, threw them down. "Find somebody wants to play for that," he said. "I'm not exposing my 'A' game for no candy-store money."

Castle assessed the wad. He looked at Rich. He re-

membered himself at age eleven. And it was a mirror, in part, but wasn't. "I thought Frog didn't—"

"He doesn't."

"That's a lot of money," Castle said.

"There's more," the eleven-year-old said.

Castle calculated, registered. "Why play then?"

"To beat 'em. Why else?"

Castle patted the boy—once, twice—on his J.C. Penney shirt, turned, and without a word slipped out the side door.

He puzzled over the situation. Kid had money. Wanted to play for perfection.

Castle was without clear direction, purpose. He remembered how he'd turned north onto Shelbyville's Main Street, five miles short of his regular turnoff. Amazing, he thought, an eleven-year-old kid with a pocketful of bills. And the kid was cagey, shrewd. Castle shrugged. Where was he headed? What was it, exactly? The answer sprang into the moment. Two dreams were whisking each other. The boy had talent and desires to go where he'd never been; the man had been training all of his life to lead that parade without knowing it. Now the puzzle: How was Castle going to put these pieces together right? They had to be right.

Screw it, he thought, and headed for his car. A drive around the town would let him shine his day-old '41 Buick down on the pedestrian locals. He'd hook up with the kid later. Discuss. Negotiate. It was an innocent game—or a game of innocents. Castle would surprise them all.

The new car was where he'd left it. He got in and started the engine. Imagine: An eleven-year-old wiping his shoes on all the wood parquet and imported Oriental carpet that Castle traveled. He could relive his own rise

through the kid's rise. He'd watch the kid, and it would be like watching twenty-year-old films of himself.

Except, of course, for Lee Ann.

Main Street. He crossed Sixth, crossed Seventh, felt the power of all ninety horses in the car's engine guiding him. Toward. Toward something. Willing it. What exactly, it was hard to say; still, the feeling was there. And it was good. Turn! Right! Right now ... left. Casual walkers swung their heads as if to the music of his passing, leaned, stretched to see more of the sparkle of Castle's new car.

He brushed his hand over the green seat fabric. The smell of the Buick's newness lifted the hair on his arms. Lord—this was pure! This was the feeling he loved. If he could feel this way every day, then paying for the Buick would seem as easy as making conversation in the line to the winner's window at Churchill.

There was a space in front of Frog's, so he pulled in. Castle hadn't mastered the Buick's hydraulics or steering column shift, so he bumped a front tire into the railroad tie guarding the walk. Maybe he should wait. Why come back this soon? What was he hoping? Jesus! And a child shall lead them. Castle remembered that from somewhere, church probably, when he used to go.

Outside, he patted the fender over the offended tire. "Sorry pal," he said. "I'll treat you better. Better and better. I promise." And then Castle saw Frog, inside, face pressed against his own window. Good! New car, pressed suit: He had the locals guessing today. Castle smiled, then laughed. Frog's eyes said: Okay—what're you planning, Front Man? What're you doin' with my kid?

Inside, Frog's jowls fluttered with belly-laugh air, and the laugh almost bounced him off his bay-window perch.

He greeted his friend: "Looks like that car's too much for a young man to handle, Cass."

"Careful, old man," Castle said. "You fall—no tellin' if there're enough sober men here to pick you up."

"So, what're you up to, Cass?" Frog inquired. "I got my eyes on you. You're up to something."

"Oh—"

"I can smell it."

"Frog Man, don't pamper me. Or I won't donate my usual dollar to your money board."

"Sorry, too late," Frog said. "Minute I saw that new Buick, I saw the dollar signs. Castle's rich, I said. And I rang you up. Two bucks."

The two grinned. Castle pulled some bills out, fanned them, drew two. "Any winners left?" he asked. "Any of those crooked wires got winners? I know I'm asking the impossible." His gaze scanned the room. Where was the kid? Where was Rich?

"Any winning numbers I reserve for regulars," Frog said. "You uptown folks get what you get. Sorry." He smiled and reached for Castle's money.

But Castle pulled it back. "Condition," he said. "I get that new wire-board. Over there. Go for a half-honest shot." And now he checked the mirror over Frog's head for a glimpse of the kid—maybe lining up shots. He felt a rising thirst. "Oh, and a bottle of your best see-through beer," he said. "Before it stinks up your floor. Smells like you dumped a keg." One final time he checked for Rich. Gone. Home maybe. Back to Cropper. And his family's meanness. But he'd be back.

Frog presented the board. "Voilà!" he said in his deepest gravel voice.

"Now everyone here knows why we call you Frog,"

Castle said. He closed an eye, pulled the number stickers apart, lined them up, and made a ticket fence around his two dollars.

After Castle set the last ticket in place, he scooped them up with the money and tossed them into an open cigar box on the back bar. "Same-old, same-old," he said, dropping his nickel onto the bar for Frog's beer, not feeling same-old at all, feeling new-blood more to the point. He checked the pool fraternity one last time for the eleven-year-old. "Frog," he said, "someday ... someday I'll discover where you get these winnerless boards—make myself a fortune." And he left.

Frazer needed to walk. Think. Thumb through the pictures his mind had taken of the boy. Not go any place in particular. "Direction's not always necessary," he had told someone once. He didn't notice his gleaming new Buick, even passing close enough to smell its new tires, catch his reflection in the paint.

He crossed into Shelbyville's city park. Water, grass, trees—something led him there. The arriving evening. It was warm; cardinals sang. The park smelled fresh and sweet. Castle didn't stay on the paths. He never followed a traditional route. And when he ducked his head to slip through some vines, his right ear brushed against soft sweet honeysuckle.

The park people weren't around, so he found a bench and sat. The bench seemed too hard, the slats too wide. Castle couldn't get comfortable, so he got up, roamed, this time circling the outer path. He checked his watch. Amazing! No more than an hour and a half since the track, and his whole life, his total direction and sense of future, had begun shifting, shining in a new way. Filled with new possibilities.

Except, with an eleven-year-old, how? Castle scratched his head with one hand, pinched an earlobe with the other, then switched hands. Okay, if I were eleven, he thought, which I once was, and somebody who hung out at the track made me this proposition, what would I do? The kid was smart—a codger and a baby all at once. Kid needed a father, a friend, a manager, someone who could take his natural talents and turn him out. And what Castle needed was ... well, maybe needed was too strong a word. But he needed to move and to walk some more until a plan became clear to him.

Castle's larger path traced an inner circle—Shelbyville's downtown—and each time he swung the path near Frog's, he had the impulse to cross the street and enter. Still, he resisted. Patience, Castle Frazer, patience! Give up some gold dust for the lode. So he circled. And circled. Then, finally, nerves looser, more settled, he crossed the street and sauntered into Frog's front door. His plan was to mill by the polished cherrywood bar, visit with the beer-bellied politicians. Wait. At some point, the boy ...

Frog was sopping a spilled Pabst. When he saw Castle, his tongue rolled his White Owl to the side. "Back to try my board again?" he asked.

"No deal, Roundman."

"You never know."

"Your place—I always know. And I've made today's donation." He scanned Frog's for the kid.

"Make another." Frog grinned. "Contribute to the poor. The looks of your new wheels, you've tunneled into the Fort. And are making withdrawals. Am I close?"

"Knox is safe," Castle said. "Don't jump to conclusions. I just found a dealer in Frankfort with more cars than he could park on his lot—that's all."

“What’d you give?”

Castle eyed the pool players, measured, rated them.

“What’d you give?” Frog repeated.

“I can’t think real good now,” Castle said. “My mind’s stuck on something.” He smiled, half-embarrassed, at Frog. What had Frog asked? Oh, yeah. The Buick. “Dealer sold it on contract,” Castle said. “Made me pay eleven hundred seventy-five, plus two percent a year time charges. Not bad—but I could’ve done better with cash.”

Frog nodded. It was a rare show of approval, but he liked cars, appreciated them. He owned three. Rarely drove, just parked them out front. So he couldn’t help himself, his curiosity. He waddled his three-hundred-plus-pound, five-five frame back to the front window, looked out over the window’s painted lower section, and said, “Nice color. Unusual color. Only a man with too much cash in his pocket would be able to—”

“Okay! Okay! Give it a rest, Frog.”

“I still want to know what you’re up to with my helper,” Frog growled.

HALF FULL

(AUGUST 12, 1941)

Frog's was its own kind of place. Like some tiny interior country, Frog's had its own population and politics. One of Frog's main-team politicians, Lance Jesson, occupied the bar stool he'd held since Frog's opening. On the backrest, Pidg Meyers, everybody's drinking friend, had painted: "Lance Jesson—Paid in Full." So now it was Lance who leaned toward Castle, tilted his head, and out of the corner of his mouth said, "Son, that's a lot of dough for a car."

"Lance, my friend," Castle said. "Spend like a rich man—become a rich man. That's my philosophy."

"I think Castle has to be in pain," Frog said. "I mean, if money is blood—he has to have lost a lot."

Everyone laughed.

"Yeah, but I got a transfusion," Castle said. "I went to the blood bank, and now I'm fine." And with that, Castle, smiling, rose and moved off without so much as a nice-talking-with-you, past the busy-lipped pack of professors at the end of the bar, until he found a place in one of the observer chairs, where he sat and gave himself a manicure with his Reed pocket knife.

He guessed the kid had gone home. Boy his age probably had chores or homework—hell, he was only eleven. He imagined Jack Pollard saying, “Get your ass home an’ do your work!”

The balls clicked; the balls clacked. Too much time passed. Too much beer. Castle began to fidget in his chair. He started to get up, then he heard Rich’s voice.

“Mister Frazer?”

“Well-well-well,” Castle said and felt glad.

“I say something to make you mad?” Rich asked.

Castle sat back. “Mad?” he asked.

“You left. You seemed angry.”

Castle stood, smiled, put a hand on Rich’s shoulder, spoke in a low voice. “No, Rich, I’m not angry.” Anxiety seized him. “Excuse me a minute. I’ve just got to do some emptying—take a hold of myself, literally!”

Castle smiled and walked casually toward the restroom, stopped to watch a stranger play a meaningless pool shot, then slowly continued. After using the restroom, he slow-washed his hands. He liked care, cleanliness; they made sense. Care and cleanliness together made a person calm, he thought, helped the quiet. In the mirror, he was sure he looked younger. It was in his mouth mostly. Eyes too. He parted his hair with the tips of his fingers. Finally, when he knew he’d stalled long enough, he left and returned to the kid.

“I just assumed from our talk that you had all the action you needed. I thought you didn’t need me.”

“Mister Frazer, I’ve beat all the drop-ins here. An’ Mister Stillman, he taught me to never pick on regulars. He said if I ever needed help, I should find you. He said everybody likes Castle Frazer.”

Castle felt a brainbuzz at the sides of his eyes. He felt

it move to the middle of his forehead. Something was happening. Stillman! A fly in his brain had been set loose by the name. Some connection. Something involving pool, involving the parade of years that lay ahead, involving some kind of a bargain.

Castle pulled the boy aside. "Rich, let's slip over to the Hub for a soda," he said. "Better place to talk."

"Yes sir, Mister Frazer," Rich said, smiling; he was a polite kid. "Just let me put my stool and stick away."

"That your cue stick, Rich?" Castle asked.

"Is. Mr. Stillman made it for me. Before he died," Rich said.

Castle pondered. He rubbed the name again, Stillman. Rich completed his task. They began walking. And Castle asked: "Was that the same Stillman who wrote for the *Bluegrass News*?"

"Were!" Rich smiled.

"Wasn't he? ..."

"He was my teacher."

"Well, you've had a fine teacher," Castle said. And he began to wonder how the link had been forged.

"Stick Stillman," said Rich.

"Yes. Exactly."

"That's what they call him before he quit."

"Stick Stillman. Yes. I remember." So Stick Stillman, before he'd gone to pasture, had found a protégé.

They walked the two blocks to the Hub, talking. "He was a little man," Castle said. "I mean, I never heard anything about Stick Stillman's playing big-time pool."

"Don't advertise yourself," Rich said.

"Scuse me, son?"

"That's what he said. That was my number-seven lesson from him. Never advertise what you're going to

do—or what you’ve done. Just finish the job an’ go home.”

“What about the other six lessons?” Castle asked.

“Oh, there’s more than six,” Rich said. “He told me ever’thing!”

“That’s a lot.”

“How to hold the stick. Stragedy. Stroking the ball. Lineup. Plain shots, combinations, rails, and spins.” Rich stopped, gazed up at the sky.

Castle watched the boy.

“He taught me who to play, how to bet, how to practice, how to concentrate, when to quit, an’ to always call your mark ‘Sir’ or ‘Mister.’”

Castle smiled. So Stillman had taken a kid who might have been a scientist and turned him into a pool player. “That why you always call me ‘Mister’? Am I one of your targets? That the plan?” Castle asked.

“Nah. You’re a pro steerin’ man. That’s what I know Mr. Stillman would have said. He talked about you. He said he knew secrets about you you didn’t even know about yourself. And he tole me some others. Rules, too. Tricks. Secrets. Some, he say, never tell anybody.” Rich shrugged, then said, “Mr. Stillman said the number-one rule to remember was more than I could understand then, but to keep thinkin’ about it. He said number one was—”

“Listen, son, should you? ...” Castle wanted the words, wanted Stick Stillman’s mystery. But he wanted the eleven-year-old’s trust more.

The boy stopped beside him. “Should I? ...” he asked.

“Well, Stick Stillman tells you all kinds of tricks. Rules. Secrets. I don’t know if you should just pass them on. I believe in trust. You know? Trust’s important. You and I work together, you have to believe I’m not going to ... betray you.”

“Not going to what?”

When they started walking again, they were quiet for a while—Castle wondering whether Stillman was really dead. Men like Stillman had a way of vanishing, then reappearing. And even if Stillman was dead, would he ever die for Rich? And what, in Stick Stillman’s mind, were Castle Frazer’s secrets that even he had no idea about? Had someone told Stillman that Castle had lost his one love? Lost Lee Ann? And that he would never, ever, again attempt to? ... Again the word destiny bumped in Castle’s mind. Hello Destiny, Castle found himself thinking—not even sure, precisely, what it meant. Hello Destiny. Imagine running into you. In Frog’s Emporium of all places. And Castle smiled.

Rich slowed his walk, wrinkled his brow, set his jaw.

“Mr. Stillman say, ‘If you can’t play from the middle of your feet, don’t play nothing.’” And in Rich’s young voice, now, was an older voice; Castle could hear it. And though Castle didn’t say anything right away, he turned toward Rich and smiled. “Listen,” he finally said, “if Stillman taught you so much, why are you cracking open to me now?”

“I been watching you. An’—together with what Mr. Stillman tole me—I thinks I knows you. An’ I needs somebody like you who knows money players. Who can bring ’em to Mr. Frog’s. ’Cause I ain’t ready for no big-time player yet on his turf. But I knows Mr. Frog’s tables better than the skin on my pud.”

Amazing! The boy was eleven, and he was sixty at the same time. It made Castle nervous. Yet excited. “Well, you certainly have done your homework,” Castle said.

“Mr. Stillman said I was his best student.”

“That’s for sure. Head of the class.”

"Scuse me?"

"Nothing. Just ... you're right. Or Stillman. I am the best steer-man. Probably anywhere. In or out of the Big House. And I enjoy it—it's my life. So, there are some facts you need to know up front."

"Yes sir."

Again, the simple "yes sir" made the boy sound old and young.

"Okay. You said no, you wouldn't go halvsies. No halvsies."

"Right."

"Well, here's a Castle Frazer rule. If there's no possum, there's no stew." Castle smiled.

"Right! Mr. Stillman said that," Rich said.

"Mr. Stillman said if there's no possum, there's no stew?"

"Yeah."

Castle paused, mused. "Good," he said finally. "Then here's some other rules. First, we go down the middle on the wins, losses, and the bankroll."

"But Mr. Stillman said—"

"Rich, at this particular minute, I don't care what Mr. Stillman said. Now, if anybody's disgruntled—unhappy—the time to resolve or dissolve is after a play, not in the middle."

They could hear their footsteps on the sidewalk. Rich looked angry. Or perhaps he was only measuring, thinking. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I mean, if you get mad, hold it until the play's over—so we can either work it out or chew our matchsticks with somebody else."

"Okay. I can handle that," Rich said. "I know when to talk—and when to play pool." He nodded and smiled.

Their talk seemed to fuel him, give him energy. “An’ that reminds me. Don’t talk when I’m playing, because I can’t hear or see nothin’ past the rails of the table.”

“Fair enough.”

Castle liked this kid. He was confident. “Hey!” Castle pointed. “Look what we did! We walked past the Hub.” Both laughed. “I didn’t need a drink,” Castle said. “I drink too much. You hungry, Rich?”

“Tell you what, Mr. Frazer. You give me the money—I’ll buy myself a hamburger some time.”

“And right now?”

“An’ right now—I’ll show you some of my other shots.”

They turned around and started back toward Frog’s. The evening breeze rattled a gum wrapper and a few dry leaves along the boards that divided the street from the concrete walk.

“I like what I see,” Castle said. “Not so much, though, what I hear. If Stillman was a ... What is it they get called? Man of words? Then why didn’t he teach you to talk better?”

“Well, he kept sayin’ he would—but we was busy. I guess he didn’t get around to it before his heart attack,” Rich said.

“So what about school? Your teachers?”

“Don’t go to school. Anyway, I don’t pay attention to words. I like numbers. Teacher yelled at me one time, in front of everyone, ’cause he said all I do is show off with numbers.”

“A teacher accused you of showing off with numbers?” Castle asked.

“Got some paper and a pencil?”

Castle found his pencil. And notepad.

“Write down some numbers,” Rich said.

Rich was squeezing his left hand with his right. Castle placed the pad against a thigh and wrote the column—47, 39, 64, 98, 57—then handed the pad to Rich.

Rich squinted. “I mean numbers,” he said. “That’s just three hundred and five added together. Write some real numbers.”

Castle retook the pad. He felt strange, off-balance in the moment. He walked to the front of the Shelbyville Commercial & Savings Bank, used the door glass for backing, and wrote: 2386, 9237, 6174, 7563, 89484. He leaned against the granite entryway and gave the pad back to Rich.

Quicker than snow falls, Rich scanned from top to bottom, handed the pad back, and said, “Hundred fourteen thousand, eight hundred and forty-four.”

“Again?”

Rich repeated his number.

Castle cocked his foot against the gray rock and wrote Rich’s total down, using his knee for backing. Mechanically, he added the columns, then added them again. “You’re right,” he said. “One hundred fourteen thousand, eight hundred and forty-four. Do you ever make mistakes?”

“Once, a long time ago. I just knows numbers.”

“Well-well-well,” Castle said.

“Well-well-well,” the eleven-year-old mimicked. “Well-well-well. What’s that mean?”

“It means I’m impressed. It means you’re precocious. It means—”

“Precocious?”

“Old for your age. Given your talent, it seems to me you’re wasting your time playing pool. You could do other things. Important—”

“But Mister Stillman—”

"I know. He turned you out. He taught you pool."

"Mr. Stillman was my father." Rich seemed irritated.

"Suppose. He turned you out. How long did he work with you?"

"Two years."

"Good start."

Rich grabbed Castle's pencil and shoved it into his sandy hair. "He said we were going on the road when I got older."

"And your real dad?"

"What're you asking?"

"What'd he say?"

"'Move your ass!' The usual. He doesn't care."

Castle calculated the difference in age between himself and Rich. Nearly twenty years. "So what if I talked to your dad?" he asked. "Told him I thought you're a bright boy with—"

"Wouldn't matter," Rich said. "He wouldn't care. Alls he cares about's his homemade snuff, some o' Flint's shine, an' Ma's poony."

Castle cleared his throat. He blushed. He reached and pulled his pencil out of Rich's hair. Castle was not a prude, certainly. He'd fallen in love, once, and lost. Still, he wasn't a womanizer. Did the boy have any sense of what he was saying?

"Mr. Stillman said I could be rude," Rich said.

"Yes," Castle said. "You can."

"True's still true, though," Rich said.

"Most days, I suppose."

"An' bein' not rude doesn't make it not true."

"Still, I'd like to talk to your dad," Castle said. "In the event you and I strike a way of working."

"Suit yourself," Rich said.

"I could come over about eight in the morning. Tomorrow."

Rich's gaze turned icy. "Sure. Come on over. But if my pa says okay, I'm out. Understan'? He says no, I'm in. Whatever he says, I'm the opposite. That's us."

Castle's shoulders shrank. The kid was churned up, fired with his own notions, his own sense of himself. He might break their deal just to prove how much he didn't care for his dad. "How about," Castle began, "instead of talking to your dad, I pick you up at nine, take you over to Mortensen's Clothing?" Castle imagined them, someday, getting ready to take off a thousand-dollar score and the mark being put off by Rich's roughness. "We need to get you into some proper clothes," Castle said. "A little style."

Rich smiled. "Good," he said. "Mr. Stillman tol' me, clothes make the man—after money."

"Oh, and another thing, Rich."

"Yaa?"

"I want to start working on your language."

"Okay."

"Stick your tongue out."

Rich did.

"Wiggle it to the left."

Rich's eyes narrowed. Still, he did as he was told.

"Now right. Now, open your mouth as wide as you possibly can. And say 'ahhh.'"

"Ahhh."

"Say 'ohhh.'"

"Ohhh."

"How do your jaw muscles and cheek muscles feel?"

"Okay."

"You'll be fine."

"So. What were you doing?"

“Seeing if you were ready to get halfway toward doing what you do with numbers, with language.”

“Like? ...”

“Let’s start with a single word.”

“Okay.”

“You learn one good word, you’ll be off and running; you’ll be begging for more.”

“I never beg.”

“Well, hungry for, then. You learn one good word, you’ll be hungry for new ones. I mean, look what you’ve done with Stick’s help on ‘sir’ and ‘mister.’ Deal?”

“Yaa, why not?”

They stood facing each other, looking at each other, and Castle thought how they resembled each other in every way—hair, stature, hands, and skin—except for Rich’s piercing blue eyes and his own dark brown eyes.

“Good. First word, then: ‘yes.’ Forget ‘yaa,’ ‘yep,’ ‘uhhuh.’ Try ‘yes,’” Castle said.

“‘Yes!’ Good enough?”

“It’s a seed.”

BEAT UP THE COPS

(FEBRUARY 7, 1943)

The seed grew.

Frazer backed, as agreed, and for the next two years Rich played—a gifted kid who got better as he got older.

“Want some fun?” Frazer might say to a track friend, someone from poker, another one cultivated in a pool hall. “There’s this kid. I have to tell you, he’s good, but ...”

So, at first it was disbelief and pride that brought in the trade, made the games. Age and arrogance. Seasoned players went blind. They wouldn’t allow themselves to think that a thirteen-year-old kid could beat them. But, of course, the kid did. The seasoned player saw only a cocky kid, but what the kid measured in his sights were carelessness and error and victims.

Soon, though, what brought players to Frog’s was rumor. Someone would hear, there’s a kid down in Kentucky whippin’ everyone’s ass. So players from Indiana, Ohio, or Tennessee would drive to Shelbyville, pull up in front of Frog’s. And they’d walk in thinking, joking: Teach a country kid a lesson. But the lesson was given by the country kid. “He’s got a sextant and camera in his head,”

someone said. "He's wired up. Measures, photographs, all the angles."

And though the local constabulary knew, the cops were amused. It made them laugh. They'd go into Frog's, break up their day, watch the youngster making fools out of hotshots from out of state. And the police suspected that Castle was fronting young Rich, but it just didn't matter. It was too good as entertainment. Besides, the cops had another take on it. "We'll get that money one of these days," City Chief Ab Hopkins said, grinning out over his stout six-foot frame and under his white ranger-style hat. "Little Rich is just holdin' it while it earns interest."

Hopkins was a regular player in his own game, a poker night with Shelbyville's Sheriff Clarence and his two deputies. It was a dealer's-choice game—stud or draw with no wild cards, no joker. The lawmen thought they were smart, seasoned, sharp. Sheriff Clarence, though not as awesome in size as Ab, thought of himself as the Elliot Ness of Western Kentucky. He also had a yen for sports. He'd pull Benny Mack, even at thirteen the basketball talk of Shelbyville, aside and talk to him about his game, what he ought to think about, how to get Wildcat coach Adolph Rupp's attention. And in Clarence's talk, he would work his way around, always, to Benny's friend, Rich. Who taught him? Was he as good as he looked? What were his plans? What was a kid his age doing with all that money?

"He's just havin' fun," Benny insisted.

"I don't know. Seems more than that," said Sheriff Clarence. "Who's he in with?"

"Oh, he's just in with himself."

And so their back-and-forth talk would go.

Then, one night, Clarence feeling good—real good—after a few of Frog's beers, told Benny, "If your friend

thinks he's so hot, tell him to drop by and join the card game Wednesday nights in the back of the courthouse."

Benny reported the invitation to Rich, when Rich and Max and Willie and he were sitting around in Frog's shed one evening playing their own poker. It wasn't just a simple scouting report, though. It churned out of Benny Mack's resentment and impatience with Rich. Benny, Willie, and Max hustled five dollars here, ten dollars there, nothing like Rich's pool take. This one was different, Benny thought. After all, he was bigger than any of the others and just as smart, except maybe for Rich and his math. When they'd started off—just boys having their own fun playing desperado—each one had had his chance to hustle; each one had had his time of winning a couple bucks. Now, it seemed, all the talk centered on Rich. Rich this, Rich that. Rich needed; Rich wanted. Rich got all the talk. All the money. It wasn't four friends having fun anymore. It was something else.

"I'm tired of hustling my ass for a few bucks to bring over to Frog's shed and give to Rich," Benny announced. "Rich, you treat us like we're your friends, then you grab the hustling bread out of our teeth. Now that I think of it, you've always been like that. When we were five years old, you won all my marbles. You've always played for keeps. And you always will."

Rich sat back and looked from one to the other of his friends. He didn't say anything. Benny went on: "I mean—look, it isn't that I don't want to be your friend. We all want to be your friend. We can see you're amazing. But, since you and Frazer started in, you've got more money than anyone else in town and you're still after me, after us, for our little bit. Now it's just bullshit! It's not fun anymore. We need fun again—all of us. Or hell, we'll all

go off and pick up our own buddy pool games and make our own money.”

Rich looked at his three friends. He nodded. “Well,” he began.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Benny Mack said.

“What’m I going to say?” Rich asked.

“Without you, we wouldn’t . . . Never mind. Forget it.”

“Without me, you wouldn’t what?” Rich was smiling.

“The point is,” Benny went on, “you know something we don’t. And, knowing whatever you know, you’re making us, me, feel that.”

“Why do you feel that?” Rich asked.

“Because all the poker players I’ve watched and played against—when the cards are turned—show something. On their faces. Surprise. Disgust. You just laugh—win or not.”

“Benny, I’m playing for fun,” Rich said. “Just fun. I learn things; I see things; I try things out. It’s fun. So if you don’t want me to play, I’ll find another poker game.”

“Talking about fun, Rich,” Benny said. And the whole large-limbed and lanky length of him was jumping. “Talk about fun—you, me, Willie, Max—I know the four of us can beat a game for something.” And that’s when Benny Mack laid out what he’d been thinking, spilled what the sheriff had teased him toward.

Max and Willie both grinned. They leaned in. Rich leaned back. “What’s your plan?” Rich asked.

“I don’t know. We all play pretty good, but you’re different.”

“And?”

“I think the game with the sheriff could be a special bit of fun.”

Benny saw that Rich was thinking. Rich touched the deck of cards in front of him, lifted one card, moved it in

his fingers, set it down, picked up and moved another. He slipped the second card under the first, the first under the second. Benny, Max, and Willie waited.

“Benny, I’m not doing anything to you—you and Max and Willie. Except maybe ...”

“What?” Max asked.

“Except maybe teaching you something—while I’m teaching myself. Everything you do’s a chance; everything you do’s a lesson.”

“What’s that mean?” Willie asked.

“See? I knew it!” Benny Mack said, and he slapped the table.

“Where’s the game?” Rich asked.

“About a block from here,” Benny said.

Willie stood up, his eyes scanning beyond the walls of their shed like radar.

“Watch out! Willie-the-professor’s figuring something,” Max kidded.

“Willie-the-lawyer! Willie-the-judge!” Benny joined Max in the taunt.

“Willie’s all right; Willie’s just fine,” Rich defended.

Willie Blant circled the table. The three watched his eyes. Willie’s eyes were on them, but somewhere else too, somewhere else always—a whole geography. Finally, he stopped. And smiled. “No,” he said. “It’s bull. Hog wallow. There ain’t no poker game within a block of here.”

“Max?” Rich asked. Max was the roamer, the rover. He’d come to town on the back of a truck, jumped off. It was in his meandering that he’d met Rich and Benny, the two standing outside of Frog’s. Every once in a while, Max would disappear for a couple of days, and when he’d come back, he’d say, “I had to move. I just had to go somewhere, check things out.” And that was what he did best: check

things out. He checked things out for Rich, Benny, Willie, and for himself. He knew the back alleys, the rooftops, the basements of Shelbyville. He knew all of the towns within a thirty-mile radius of Shelbyville.

"Max?" Rich asked again, sensing that Max had an intuition, if not an idea. "So where's Benny's famous game?" Rich asked him.

Max nodded. "Has to be the courthouse," he said, "'cause that's the only building I never go in."

Benny Mack grinned.

"Max nail it?" Rich asked.

"Yeah, he nailed it," Benny said.

Willie laughed. "Who plays? Old Judge Beale, Mayor Shelby Junior, and the county lawyers?"

"No." Benny told them that it was the sheriff, his two deputies, and the city chief. The room turned frosty quiet. The Law. It was the Law playing—the Law with a vengeance.

Rich started lifting and moving cards around again. He'd lay the deck on its face, pass his hand so that the backs of the cards made a fan. Then he'd set a finger under one end of the fan and lift, rolling it perfectly, so that the backs of the cards, in a single move, became their faces. And so it went: a wave—lifting, cresting, breaking—and then another. Backs. Faces. And outside the tick and glide of the cards, there was only waiting, only silence.

"So?" Benny finally asked Rich. "What do you think? How about it?"

Rich Stillman turned over four cards that he'd slipped from the gathered deck. The ace of diamonds turned over first. Then the ace of spades. Then the ace of clubs. Then the ace of hearts.

"Holy shit!" Max said.

“He’ll say yes,” Willie said. “He’ll say we should do it.”

“Willie-the-lawyer,” Benny Mack said. Then to Rich, he said, “You want to do it? Is what you got good enough to swim in that pond?”

Rich grinned. “Willie says I’ll say yes,” he said and raised his eyebrows. “Willie knows things; Willie knows poetry.”

“A jug of wine! A loaf of bread!” Max mocked.

Rich threaded his fingers, stretched his head back. “Unique!” he said.

“Where’d you learn that word?” Willie asked him.

“Hey, I’m learning a lot of words,” Rich said. “Unique, unique, unique—I want it!”

“All right!” Benny Mack said.

Frazer had introduced Rich to an old-time friend and prime card mechanic. Of course, right off, Rich had become a student, put in his time, practiced and practiced. And now he wanted to test his skills. What better place than with his pals? He didn’t want his pals’ money, but they were streetwise and sharp, so if he could get past them, he felt he might be ready for the deeper offshore waters. “I want to swim in that pond—the big pond!” Rich said.

“All right; yes!” Benny Mack said, and he slapped his hands together.

“Even if I drown, I want it!” Rich said.

“I knew you’d want it,” Benny said.

“But do you think we can win?” Max asked.

“We can win,” Rich said.

“We can win,” Benny echoed.

“We can win,” Rich said again. “How’re we going to get in the game?”

“Handled!” Benny said. And then he explained that

the reason he'd been late for their own game was that Deputy Cal Higgs, who'd become his friend, had let him drop in and watch the back courthouse game. "I went over with my brother while he took his driver's test. Higgs let me in to watch." Benny told his pals about how he'd kidded the sheriff. "I said, 'We play for more money than you do.' And so he laughed and said if we thought we were tough enough for his game, come over tomorrow about two. He said to bring Rich."

"So you think he was serious?" Willie asked.

"Why wouldn't he be serious?" Benny Mack said.

"Willie's asking a good question," Rich said. "We're kids; they're cops. Word got out, they could ..."

"Sheriff told me, 'We're always open to political contributions. Just bring enough money,'" Benny said. "He was serious. He's seen the money you make at Frog's. He wants some."

"Okay," Willie said.

"Makes sense," Rich said.

"I said I'd be there for their next game and bring my friends," Benny Mack said.

Rich had been working with Castle for about two years. Before that, Stillman had been his mentor. And both of these men had made it clear: Know the project. Know everything you can about the project beforehand. Castle had once pointed out to Rich what he called "on-the-job learners." "You don't want to be one of them," he'd said. "On-the-job learners never quite know where they are. They're unsteady. They're off-balance."

"So, Benny, what games do they play?" Rich asked.

"Dealer's choice," Benny reported. "Stud or draw poker with nothing wild."

"Rules?"

“Near as I could tell, same as we play. Except no joker.”

Rich nodded. He pinched his lip. “Okay,” he said, “it’ll take the four of us to work the game.”

Willie and Max were standing; they sat down.

Rich had known for a while that pool wasn’t the way to make the big money. And almost every time he beat someone for the big bet or the last of his bankroll, the player wanted to fight. But Rich had never seen anyone fight over a loss at poker. “Here’s the plan,” he began.

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” Willie said. “Don’t we all get to help make it? This plan?”

Rich turned to Benny Mack. “You think I know something the rest of you don’t know?” he asked.

“I do,” Benny confessed.

Rich looked at the others. “Then I make the plan. I tell you what you need to do.”

“I don’t like the way you take over,” Willie said.

“That’s the way it is.”

Willie wanted in, so he backed off. “What do you want us to do?”

Rich slid his hands together, rubbed them. “I furnish the bankroll.” He looked at Benny. “Benny earns ten percent off the top for giving us the target. The three of you, after that, split forty percent for your work.”

Willie was on his feet, nearly splitting his pants in the process. “You get half? And the three of us split half?”

Rich turned to Benny, Willie, and Max, met each one’s gaze. “I told you, that’s the way it is,” he said. “You do business with me, I call the shots. That doesn’t work for any of you, do it yourself your own way.”

“Hey, I’m in,” Benny said.

“I’m in,” Max said.

Rich looked at Willie. Willie was staring into the corner of the room. He was thinking; he was computing. He muttered to himself, words that all the others knew came from Omar Khayyám. He made a compact and wiry, tough-looking bundle—standing muttering to himself in the corner.

Willie wasn't as tall as Benny or Rich, but they all knew he'd never learned the meaning of retreat.

"Say you're in," Benny coaxed Willie. "Say you're in. I've known Rich for a long time. Rich knows cards. Rich knows games. Let him call the shots; say you're in."

Willie turned. He smiled. "I'm in," he said.

The others cheered.

"How're we gonna do this?" Willie asked. "We're thirteen; Max is only eleven; they won't let him play."

Rich covered his eyes with his open fingers, looked through. He was a man behind a secret. He lowered his hands and said, "Max doesn't play. He has another job, which, when the time comes, I'll let him know."

Rich leaned forward. "Listen to me," he said. "This will be the only time I say this: Don't ask what we're going to do. I'll say—when the time's right. I'll tell you what to do. Trust me, this is the way I learned things; this is the way I've seen and know. I've been taught by some good people. If this isn't good enough for you, quit now."

"I've got some money I'd like back," Willie said. "Count me in."

"You say an' I do, Rich," Max said.

"Watch," Rich said. They were all seated. All six eyes were on him, Willie's especially. Rich held his hands up for the three to pay attention. He checked their faces, then began. "If my right hand is in front of my chips," he instructed, "I'll be telling you something." Then he changed

the configuration of his hands. "If my fingers are spread apart like this"—he held out his hand on the table to demonstrate—"that means, pass out of the hand." Again he reconfigured his hand, fingers. "If my fingers are together like this, call the bet. If my fingers are together and move in any direction more than once, raise the bet. If I don't have anything to tell you, my hand will be somewhere else. In that case, play your best. You can both play the games. Anything else—we can talk aboveboard. Questions?"

"Doesn't seem like much," Benny said. "Doesn't seem like I expected you might say. Like a big plan. Like a big strategy."

"Well, it's my money and it's enough," Rich said. "Tomorrow will be a test. We'll go. We'll play. We'll find out how far we can drive our pickup truck onto their farm." Rich set his hands in front of him. He spread the fingers. He drew his fingers together and moved them right, moved them right again. "Were you watching?" he asked. "Did you see?"

The first game took place the next afternoon. When Benny Mack asked Rich what to wear, Rich said, "They think they're making some easy money from kids. Dress like kids." And so they did—street clothes, school clothes, nothing special.

"Well-well-well! The pool hustler and his friends!" Sheriff Clarence announced when the four arrived. "You hotshots ready to be taught a lesson?"

"Afternoon ... afternoon ... afternoon, Chief," everyone greeted each other before they sat down.

Sheriff Clarence reviewed the rules. Rich and Benny and Willie nodded. Max stood aside. "He's still learnin'," Rich announced. Benny had reported the limits as being higher than they were. Rich wasn't happy with all

the dimes and quarters. But he pressed his back into the straight Naugahyde of his chair, squared his shoulders, and settled in.

During the first half-hour, the sheriff, the city chief, and one of the two deputies, a man named Caleb, made jokes each time one of the boys played a hand.

“Sure you want to do that?”

“All that money scare you?”

“Never know, the next card might be an ace!”

The men would elbow each other, snort, smirk. But when the pots began falling the kids’ way, they stopped. Forty-five minutes into the game, City Chief Ab Hopkins demanded of Max, “I want you sitting down over there behind young Stillman.”

And Max complied. But the direction of the game didn’t take any turns, and by the end of three hours, Rich and his team had close to seventy-five dollars of the local constabulary’s money sitting in front of them. “Looks like the Little League got lucky,” the deputy named Caleb said.

“Beginner’s luck!” Sheriff Clarence said.

“Right,” Rich said. “I know you guys. You’ll get it back.”

“Count on it,” Ab Hopkins said.

“Jeez, almost past our bedtime and definitely past Max’s,” Willie said.

“Next week? Same time?” Sheriff Clarence said.

“Fine with me,” Rich said. “Benny?”

“Fine with me,” Benny said. “Willie?”

“Sure. Why not?” Willie said. “Max?”

“I’ll have to check with my parents,” Max said.

“Parents? Who you tryin’ to shit, kid? Far as I know, you ain’t got parents,” the sheriff said.

And the game broke up.

Later at Frog's shed, Benny, Max, and Willie watched Rich cutting the room in half with his pacing, cutting the room in half again. He'd walk from the south wall to the west wall, west wall to the north wall, north to east. When something bothered Rich, he would either stand absolutely still or pace diagonals. So the three waited. They'd learned that. They'd learned, ultimately, that Rich would always tell them what was on his mind.

Finally, he stopped. He picked some cards up, fanned them, closed the fan, fanned them again. From the fan, he pulled an ace of diamonds, set it down. Then a two of diamonds, set it on the ace. Then a three of diamonds. Rich's three cronies watched in amazement. When he got to the nine of diamonds, he stopped. "That was bullshit," he said. "Bush league."

"What're you talkin' 'bout, Rich?" Benny asked.

"It was stupid. Useless. What I'm doing's not good enough."

"Jeez, I thought it was great," Max said.

"Well, it wasn't," Rich said.

"Why didn't you like it?" Willie asked.

"A hundred reasons," Rich said.

"Shit. We got their money, didn't we?" Benny said.

"It wasn't smooth," Rich said. "Stillman, Castle—both—they say, 'You want the waters smooth.' Yeah, sure, the stupid cops didn't see; they didn't know. But it was ..."

"What?"

"Choppy. Too much. Half a dozen times. It wasn't right."

Willie thought he might humor Rich. "Hey, we broke them! We got every bit of their money."

"If I want to rob, I'll buy a gun."

"Rich is too much," Willie said to Benny. "We just

did something none of us will ever forget ... and all he says is how bad it was." Willie and Benny laughed.

Max scowled at Benny, scowled at Willie. "Hey," he said, "if Rich says it isn't good enough, it isn't good enough."

Rich reached into his pocket, pulled the poker money out. He held it at arm's length, dropped it on the table. "Split it three ways," he said. "Counting the sixty bucks bankroll, that should get your poker-school money back."

The three friends looked at him. He had one fist in his mouth. His eyes were misted and looked far away. There was a sense of loss about him. The loss of a friend, a dream. He had the look of a person who'd betrayed himself. He drew in a large breath and, with it, moved away to the shed's door. When he reached it and had opened it, he turned and said, "I don't know what I'm looking for. In these games. In a game like that. It isn't money. So, if you don't see me for a while, don't worry. I'll be okay. I'll be back." Looking skyward through the plywood ceiling, he added, "Mr. Stillman warned me there'd be times like this."

MONEY DON'T FLOW DOWNHILL

(MAY 23, 1944)

Rich's first disappearance like this lasted six months, to the day. He went away and, yes, the "away" had miles to it; on any map of the United States, Rich went from point A to point D. But more than that, the away had to do with Rich's map, some map of himself, of his future, inside his heart, inside his brain. Something happened to Rich the night he and his friends beat up the cops. If you drew it on a piece of paper, you would have to draw a picture of Rich with question marks filling him up. And so he had to go away to deal with those question marks. He had to travel and the trip took him months.

During this time, Rich took the question marks, one by one, between his fingers like playing cards. Fingered them. Got the feel. Dealt them. Picked them up. Sometimes he held and fanned and cut and lifted the whole deck of question marks. He'd wake up doing that. Go to bed. He'd dream the deck, the cards, feel the weight of each question mark in his brain, visualize the heart, the club, the spade, the diamond. And then, however he did it, the time was past. Whatever had urged him away was over.

He felt clear about where the next moment was, “x” on the map. So he returned home.

Rich found Frazer. He was eating pork chops and eggs at the Riverbend Cafe. “We need to talk,” Rich said.

“Well, look who’s here.”

“I’ve been away.”

“It’s not a secret,” Frazer said.

“I’m back now.”

“It would appear,” Frazer said. “So, where’ve you been?”

“What’re you asking?” Rich said.

“I don’t know. Was that confusing?” Frazer asked.

“Not to me—but maybe to you.”

“Got to work on that language, Rich. Polish it up. No one’s seen you.”

“That’s right; it would’ve been hard,” Rich admitted.

“You’re okay, then?”

“I’m back,” Rich said. “You tell me, Language Man, when I say I’m back, what’s that mean?”

“It means you’re back.”

“That’s the way I’d see it too,” Rich said. “So, good, we’re together.”

“You know, about the time you left, I heard a rumor.”

“It wasn’t a rumor,” Rich said. “It was true. We beat up the cops.”

“It went around town.”

“Well, things travel.”

“Rich, you need to take your life one game at a time.”

“I need to not keep doing something just because I’m good,” Rich said. “I need to get better. At whatever. And then when I’m better, I need to get better again. That’s the point. If you can’t get better, and then better, then stop.”

“You love the challenge, don’t you?”

“The what?”

Castle wrote the word “challenge” on a napkin with his pen and handed the napkin to Rich.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s the word ‘challenge.’ Look it up. Look up the word ‘challenge’ in the word ‘dictionary.’ See what you find.”

“Hey, I know what a dictionary is.”

“Have one at home?”

“No. I have one here.” And Rich produced a tiny dictionary from his pocket. “You keep throwing out words. An’ it’s a challenge—what they are. So I got this.”

“Very good,” Castle said. He smiled.

Rich smiled too.

“You want something to eat?” Frazer asked.

“No, thanks. When you’re finished, we’ll walk. I have a plan.”

When Frazer finished his breakfast, the two walked by the river. The morning threatened to spit rain. Rich said he’d finish the games Frazer had in mind for him. But he’d decided he was through with pool; he wanted to concentrate on poker. “Pool’s been good,” Rich confessed. “Pool’s been profitable, but almost every score has been a hot score.”

“But?”

“But I’m fourteen.”

“Ripe old age.” Frazer smiled.

“I need to start thinking about the future. Which there’s a lot of for me.” Rich stopped. He squatted, picked up a deadwood stick, and tossed it into the current. Then watched it drift. “Things move. Things don’t stay the same.”

“That’s true,” Frazer said.

"Pool's a stick in the river that doesn't float."

"Ripe old age," Frazer repeated, if only to himself.

"It's time for me to go on to the next thing."

"Poker?"

"Poker—yes," Rich said.

"Okay. Okay," Castle said, and he motioned to Rich for them to cross the bridge. When they were halfway, Castle paused, faced out over the rail, and looked at the bluegrass meadow. "You know you're magic at pool," he said.

"I can be magic at cards, too," Rich said.

A boy and a girl in a canoe paddled under the bridge. They waved up. Castle and Rich waved back.

"Question is," Castle said, "can you be magic enough? Can you be as magic?"

Rich started walking again. Castle matched his pace. "I don't want to seem big-headed. But if I decide I'll be magic, I'll be magic. Because it's numbers; everything's numbers, and I know numbers."

"You do know numbers," Castle said.

"I do and I've been getting the feel. I can find cards; I can move them. And Benny and Willie and Max and me, we've gotten good. And when we beat up the cops—well, it wasn't our best game. Certain ways, I was disappointed. But it was a damned good game. And we took all their money."

"Let's head back," Castle said. He'd stopped, turned. He nodded in the direction of Frog's.

"Are you saying no?" Rich asked.

"I'm saying, let's head back." And they started walking again. "First," Castle said, "you're a student. You learn fast. So, what I'll do is, I'll set up access to the best card mechanic I know."

"No," Rich said.

"Excuse me?"

"No," he repeated.

"Rich, if you're going to play poker—"

"If I'm going to play poker, I'll do it using the numbers, using my head. Mr. Stillman said—"

"Look, Mr. Stillman was shrewd. But 'shrewd' doesn't mean that whatever he said is absolute."

"He said, 'If you can't play from the center of your feet, don't play.'"

They were walking the riverbank again, moving in on the cafe. "Good advice," Frazer said. "Still—"

"You think about it. I'll think about it. Then we'll meet for breakfast again at the Riverbend tomorrow. You can buy me ham and a short stack."

"It's a deal," Castle said. And, as had become their way, they shook hands.

At eight-thirty the next morning, Rich was drowning his short stack with syrup and Castle was warning him about eating too much sugar. "I'd say that was a man's breakfast," Castle kidded.

"I'm on my own now," Rich said. "Could you pass the butter?" Castle slid over the butter. "Independent," Rich said. "How's that for a word? You like that word? I've gone 'independent.'"

"Good word; questionable idea," Castle said.

"What I'm saying is: I'll do my own figuring. I'm not going to talk about what I discover or don't discover. Which doesn't mean I don't want to learn anything or think I don't have anything to learn. If I have a question, I'll ask it. I'm just not going to discuss things."

"And this is leading where?" Castle asked.

"I don't want to be a mechanic. What I do want is

to learn how a mechanic works, so I can protect myself.” Rich cut the bone out of his ham steak. “But for me, if I’m going to be the best, it’s all got to be the numbers: patterns, numbers, how that all comes in, how I see all that in my head. I’ve got a start now.”

“Rich”—Castle poured more coffee for them both—“you can be a genius—”

“Mr. Frazer, I am a genius. You said so.”

“You are a genius; I stand corrected. The point is, genius doesn’t mean jack-shit with some of those operators out there.”

“Buy me another short stack?” Rich asked.

Castle signaled the waitress, told her Rich wanted more hotcakes.

“Rich, I don’t want to be accused of yelling ‘whoa’ at your horse race. But—”

“Mr. Frazer, if I can’t win with what’s in my head, I’ll quit. Look, I want to meet your mechanic. I want to learn what he has to teach. But I won’t ever use it. Ever!” And with the word “use,” Rich wriggled his fingers, made them dance in the air. He picked up his paper napkin, tore it in half, balled the two halves into his fist, opened his fist, let the paper breathe, opened it. The napkin was whole again. Frazer’s eyes went wide.

“Skill!” Rich announced. And then, pleased with himself, exclaimed, “Dexterity!”

“How’d you do that?”

“I’m a student of the world,” Rich said. He pulled out his little dictionary and waved it under Castle’s nose.

“Rich, sometimes you’re fourteen; sometimes you’re forty,” Castle said. “You amaze me.” Then Castle told Rich about what he felt to be a good trial, a proper target. Since Rich was feeling the need to shift his focus from

pool to poker and all, Castle suggested a test of whether Rich was on to something, whether he was ready or not.

The target was a man named Gus. Gus was a big-volume moonshiner who never left the shadows of his mountain stills. Beyond his considerable moonshining, Castle told Rich, Gus' passions were money and poker. Castle himself had made three trips to Gus' cabin, working on the man to try to get him into town and into one of the set-up poker games. Each trip, Castle had tried to lubricate his invitation by buying some shine. But to no avail. Old Gus wouldn't step away from the rough rusticana of his operation.

"There's a rumor." Castle leaned in to Rich and made his voice more hidden than Rich had ever heard Castle do. "Rumor is that—all over his property up there—he's got money buried in coffee tins. Can't even remember where and how many."

"Well, I'll play him," Rich said. "But I don't work with a shovel."

Castle laughed. "Rich, here's another word for you," he said. "The word is 'legend.' You know the word 'legend'?"

"I think so."

"Well, mark my words," Castle said. "Rich Stillman's going to be a legend."

"Maybe," Rich said.

"Count on it."

"Until he gets tired of being a legend, when there's no challenge in it."

Castle set up the poker game a few afternoons later. He drove his three-year-old Buick into the hills southeast of Lawrenceburg, above the Kentucky River. He bought some shine, talked to Gus, and told him about some kids

who thought they were hot stuff, and whom Gus could probably take for four or five grand they'd won playing pool. Would Gus be interested in coming down and over to Louisville for a game? Castle could arrange it. Castle saw fires light in Gus' eyes. Gus' mouth got wet; his lips fattened.

"Up for it?" Castle asked Gus.

"Stay here," Gus said. He left the larger room of the shack and disappeared into another. Three minutes later, he was back with a bundle of bills wrapped in old string. Castle swallowed his amazement. The first two bills on the stack were hundreds. Gus set the wrapped stack in the center of his table.

"That mean you'll come to Louisville?"

"I don't leave," Gus said. "Bring them boys here. We'll play."

"They don't drive," Castle said.

"Drive 'em."

"I could do that."

"Then do it. Tomorrow," the old shiner said.

"I bring three pigeons here for you. What do I get?" Castle asked.

"Load of shine," Gus said.

"Sounds good to me."

The next day, Castle piled Rich, Benny, Willie, and Max into his Buick and drove into the hills. Rich had already met with his friends and reviewed their rules, their signals. They'd sat and practiced. "Okay, again," Rich kept saying to them.

"Rich, we know this. Why do we need to keep doing it?" Max had asked.

"We need to keep doing it, because we need to keep doing it," Rich had said. "Subtlety. Perfection."

So now Castle tried to tell Rich and his friends everything he could about the moonshiner Gus. What he looked like. Smelled like. How he got words confused and mixed up. "Sometimes he says 'goodbye' when what he means is 'hello'—that kind of thing," Castle said. "He'll get confused—up for down, inside and outside. But he knows money. He loves money. And he's got a pile of it."

When the five arrived, Gus was alone. At the same time, Rich whispered to Benny that he sensed other people. "Somewhere in the shadows. Behind trees," Rich confided.

"I don't think so," Benny said.

"Well, the number that comes into my head," Rich whispered back, "is three. Somewhere, from the shadows—an' maybe it's just the shadows of my brain—I get the number three."

"Nice to have you girls here," Gus said, as he cleared the table. "Frazer here tells me that I'd better be careful. He says you're giants dressed up like kids."

Max looked at Rich; Rich looked at Willie; Willie looked at Benny. They all tried, unsuccessfully, not to smile. Then Gus threw his bundle of bills down onto the table, and the smiling stopped.

In the first hour, Gus won maybe a hundred and fifty from the boys. The more he won, the more his mouth opened and the more his breath stank. Tobacco saliva slid down from his lips. "Well, you girls are good, but I'm better!" Gus said.

"Jeez, I guess so," Rich said.

"I guess so," Benny and Willie echoed. The boys had rehearsed. They knew their cues.

Then the flow of the game shifted. Rich opened his fingers, closed his fingers, set them down, and his two playing friends performed according to the script. Gus

lost two big hands, then won a small one. He won another small hand, then lost big. "It's not that I'm not winning," he announced.

"Absolutely!" Rich said. "You're good. You're winning. We just got lucky on a couple of hands."

And so it went. The turn; the shift. Nothing perceptible, but three hours later, the boys had more than eight hundred dollars of the moonshiner's bundle, and then, an hour after that, nearly seventeen hundred. The clock was moving in on midnight.

"You know, these boys have a curfew," Castle announced.

"Not today they don't," Gus disagreed.

"Sorry, but if I get stopped—four underage boys in my car—all of us are in trouble," Castle said. "State cop says, 'Where you been?' I fumble around; cop sees the road I'm coming from. I don't know, Gus—you want to risk it?"

Gus was chewing his wrist as if it were a ham bone. Chewing his wrist, chewing his wrist. "Well, you're either wrong or right," he said, and he got up, began wrapping string around his bills that were left.

"They'll be back; I'll bring them back," Castle said.

"He'll bring us back," Willie said.

"Well, you either will or won't," Gus said.

* * *

As Castle's Buick pulled out of the dirt clearing beside the moonshiner's shack, the five inside covered their mouths to keep quiet. Frazer wanted to laugh. Benny and Willie wanted to shout and cheer. Rich wanted to review every hand he'd played—note the inspired ones, find any errors. But they all kept their voices contained. "I still have

the number three moving around in my brain,” Rich said.

But when they’d gotten maybe a half-mile away, Max and Willie and Benny began to chant: “Whipped his ass! Whipped his ass! Whipped his ass!”

“Modesty, boys,” Castle advised, grinning. So Castle was advising modesty; the boys were chanting, “Whipped his ass”; Rich was replaying all the hands aloud. But as the Buick rounded an S-curve on the mountain road, Castle cursed and slammed on the brakes. Three enormous boulders blocked the way.

“Holy shit!” Benny said.

“Easy, boys,” Castle said.

“I remember this from a dream,” Willie said.

“The number three,” Rich said. “Something about a word I learned—the word ‘logic’—I keep figuring it.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Castle said. “We’re going to have to put our shoulders to these.” They all opened their doors, piled out, and moved to where the three boulders were on the roadway.

“Grab the sky!” a voice came out of the dark.

The four boys and the man looked around and at each other.

“Man said, grab the sky!” another voice from the dark bellowed. “Grab the sky—if you don’t want an ass full o’ buckshot!”

The five reached up.

First one, then a second, then a third hillbilly appeared out of the dark. They all looked as if wild crows had eaten at their faces. Two carried shotguns. The third carried a coil of rope.

Two minutes later, all the money that the boys had won, and all the money they’d brought, was gone, and the three figures had disappeared into the dark.

“Three,” Rich said, lowering his hands, looking out into the night. “Three. I knew it.”

SLEEPOUT LOUIE

(AUGUST 14, 1947)

For the next three years, challenge was the game (sometimes it was called knowledge), and the game was constant. Challenge—more than Stick Stillman, more than Castle Frazer—was the power that turned young Rich out. Frazer's years at Churchill had made him known to legions of action players, and Frazer drew on his admiring gifts. He'd arrange the accident of running into this player or that. Where've you been? How's it going? Heard about these crazy damned kids—think they're unbeatable over in Shelbyville? Lucky as hell, but they've got a streak going that someday a real player's gonna end. A player like you could show them what the game's really about. And the action player would bite and join the other victims.

Between games Rich was becoming harder to find. So one day, Castle asked Rich for a good way to contact him if something important came up. "So Mr. Frazer, tell me." Rich showed his right palm to Castle.

"I suspect you're making a point," Castle said.

Rich smiled, fisted his hand. "If you want me when

I'm away, park your Buick in front of Redfield's Hardware. I'll hear about it."

"Why Redfield's Hardware?"

"Why not?"

So that was the signal. And though such times made Castle nervous, Rich never missed his cue. Come 4 p.m., any afternoon of the signal, Rich would be found—back resting against the front grill of the Buick—ready to play. And that's the way it was just before Sleepout Louie.

"Tonight?" Rich asked when Castle showed up.

"This is a big one," Castle said. "Big shot with a loose cannon. I needed to be sure you'd be here in plenty of time. We'll start with breakfast tomorrow."

As had become their ritual, Castle met Rich the next day for a Riverbend breakfast. Castle, though, seemed grim—without the usual smile, the upchirp in his voice. All he ordered was toast. Dry. Rich sat with a waffle and pork chops. "For a scrawny kid, you sure eat a lot," Castle said.

"For an almost fat man, you don't eat much at all." Rich grinned. "This mark you've found scare you? This mark make you nervous?"

"Let me put it this way. I wouldn't choose Sleepout Louie Levinson as a friend. He appears, though, to have chosen me. And since—some would argue—you can't have too many friends, I haven't run and hid."

"You'd make friends with a cannibal."

"Thank you, Rich."

"You made friends with my father, which is the same thing."

"I encourage your sense of humor—new as it is."

"I work on everything. Try to improve everything about myself."

"Sounds like going to church."

"My own church," Rich said.

"Okay." Castle looked at Rich. "One of my friendly bird dogs told me about dealing with Louie. I guess I'm hoping you'll like it the way I do."

Rich lifted one of his pork chop bones, gnawed on it. "So?"

"I've slipped in and out of Newport and Covington a couple hundred times, seems, over the years, looking for big-money gamblers."

"And?"

"And my bird dog tells me, 'Sleepout Louie Levinson, who runs the Flamingo Club in Newport for the Jewish Mob, has his poker game wired.'"

"How?"

"He has the cards painted—big as the tote board at the Downs—with the number and suit of every card."

"I still don't see—"

"Watch!" Castle pulled what looked like a new deck from his jacket and handed it to Rich. "Open it."

Rich held the boxed deck, first in his left hand, then in his right. He set it back in his left hand again and finished his waffle.

"What're you thinking about?" Castle asked.

"Maple syrup," Rich said. "I'm thinking about imitation maple syrup, and it makes me unhappy." He set the cards down, licked the tips of his fingers, wiped his fingertips on his gabardines, and lifted the box. Then he slid the fresh cards out, examining them briefly.

"Shuffle. Cut them. Then shuffle again," Frazer instructed.

Rich shuffled, cut, shuffled, then asked, "Now what?"

"Deal one face down," Castle said.

Rich did.

“Good. Ten of hearts, and the card on the top of the deck is the three of clubs.”

Rich turned the top card. Castle was right. “What’s the gaff?” Rich asked. He rotated the card, checking it. “I don’t see markings, ’specially big as a tote board.”

Castle smiled. He had Rich, he knew; he had his curiosity.

He picked up the top card, turned it over, showed Rich the three of clubs. “I painted these,” he said. He was proud. “With an infrared liquor. Invisible to the naked eye, but plainly visible with the red contact lenses I have in right now.”

Rich looked appreciative. He nodded, studying Castle’s eyes. “Your eyes look a little darker than I know they are.”

“Right.”

Rich examined the cards, turned them over—one then another. He calibrated the thickness of the cards with his finger, ran the back of his hand over the surface. He was imagining. Calculating.

Castle watched. He understood Rich to be a person not to rush or be rushed. When the time seemed right, Castle started in. “Good job—don’t you think?”

“Not bad.”

“Like you, Sleepout’s got blue eyes.”

“So?”

“Neither of you can wear these.” Castle touched his lid lightly with his fingers. “These infrareds. Blue eyes would show red. So Sleepout has a helper, brown-eyed, who wears the lenses and signals him all the downcards.”

Rich nodded.

“Back play,” Castle announced.

“Back play.”

"Back play is the play. I could go in—my own pair of infrareds—play his own stuff back at him. Fire with fire."

"You're right." Rich smiled. "Back play would be stronger than my Aunt Molly's breath. You'd tear Sleepout Louie a new butt hole."

"Except my reputation isn't for jumping into someone else's trap," Castle said. "People watch me. I move with certain expectations. I knock over Sleepout like that—especially a greedy nervous person like Louie—he'd smell a skunk. And Louie's got his Indians."

"His Indians?"

"A whole tribe, right? A whole mob of Indians."

"And when that mob smells skunk ..."

"You got it," Castle said. "Skunks they treat with hot lead and cold dirt. So I'm obviously not the player—if we're gonna burn them. You can see what I'm getting at."

Rich sighed. But it was like the whoosh of brushes in a machine. The push of oiled pistons. He was thinking.

"Obviously I don't want to send you to the land of the great spirits, but I really think you could pull this off."

Rich began turning more cards—over, back. He picked up the deck with one hand. Cut it, and cut it again.

"I mean, your reputation," Castle announced.

"What about it?" Rich was still cutting and recutting.

"People in Little Mexico over in Newport talk about you. Haven't seen you—but have heard. You're that good."

"And?"

"I think you could scratch Sleepout pretty deep."

"Possibly."

"Remember what Stick told you? Old Stillman—about two wrongs?"

"I remember well."

“Well, this deal here with Sleepout may be the exception,” Castle said.

Rich started setting cards up into a house—card supporting card—the whole thing swaying just a bit, the whole thing fragile. “Mr. Frazer, be careful. Be careful of exceptions. Still ...” Rich nodded, and Castle knew he was in. “Just you, me, and Max.”

“Why Max?”

“Because Max is my reliable,” Rich said. “Max does what I say, when I say, and without questions. Max is fifteen and looks twelve. I have this image of him on the road home from Gus’.”

* * *

Castle turned north off of Newport’s York Street—Rich and Max barely shadows with him—in his new Cadillac. He found a space at the end of the block and parked, facing the open corner of Monmouth Street. “Stay here,” he said to Rich and Max. He left and walked the block and a half to the York Street door of Sleepout Louie’s Flamingo Club.

Castle made his usual round of pit bosses, box and stick men, twenty-one dealers, and bartenders. When he felt the calm of a lazy Wednesday settle in, he proceeded to the cardroom and struck up a conversation with Jimmy Blue Eyes, an old acquaintance now railbirding Sleepout’s poker game.

“I hear Sleepout likes taking naps in his poker games,” Castle said.

“Oh—”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Not really. Not in these games,” Jimmy Blue Eyes

said. "Naps he reserves for marathon games. High stakes. We got some Chicago cronies come down here—walk on the edge. Those games got nap times. Those games don't wear watches. Those people don't live nine to five. Somebody gets stuck, there's no quitting till tapioca time. So Sleepout takes his Z's at the table—couple o' hands here, couple o' hands there—every now and again."

"Sleepout," Castle said.

"Right. Let's him get stronger down the stretch."

Castle patted Jimmy between his narrow shoulders, then strolled to the bar, found himself a *Racing Form* for the next day and a *Cincinnati Enquirer*. He positioned himself where he was certain Sleepout Louie would see him and sat down at an empty poker table to read. A few minutes later, Sleepout appeared—ready for the day, ready for action—looking as mean as the snake he had probably descended from.

Castle had told Rich to take a half-hour. Enter big. And, after the half-hour, Rich entered, made his approach, splashed a fistful of hundreds onto the felt, and announced, "I hear a man can find a high-stakes stud game in here!"

Heads turned. Louie looked at the youth, blinked, and said, "A man—sure. But we don't take advantage of kids."

"Looks are deceiving," Rich said.

Behind his *Racing Form*, Castle smiled.

"So, how old are you?" Sleepout asked Rich.

"Somewhere between fifteen and a hundred," Rich said.

"Comedian," Sleepout said.

"Not really," Rich said. "Just smart. Smarter than the management."

"I know who you are," Sleepout said. "You're rich little Rich, the pool player, right? I've seen you. My scouts

have seen you. Sit down. We're more than happy to take your money."

"I just like to play," Rich said. "I like the game."

Louie shut his eyes. He opened them. "Don't go away," he said. "I'm gonna get myself some ammo. I'll be right back."

Castle raised an eyebrow. He watched as Louie pulled the arm of one of his runners and whispered something. Castle read the move. He'd expected it, so he exited through the side door and walked up the alley to the Glenn Hotel. In his room, he could install his infrareds without being discovered.

Castle washed and dried his face. He framed himself in the mirror. Still not a bad-looking guy, he thought. Maybe he'd meet another woman—one like Lee Ann. He had the face of an actor—someone who'd once been a leading man, but who now played the understanding father. Castle opened the contact case, removed the infrareds, and put them in. He checked himself in the mirror. Same guy; same face; nothing different. He left the room and walked back to the Flamingo.

Castle had worn the lenses before, but moving with them was another matter. His sense of distance and depth changed. He would come too close to some obstacle; others he'd reach and they'd not be there. The infrareds altered his balance, and Castle Frazer found himself wondering if what he'd planned would work. When he reentered the Flamingo, he bumped head-on into Sammy Gameboy Miller, a tout Castle had known from his days in the dust at Churchill.

"Hold still, Castle," Sam said. "You okay?"

"Sorry, Gameboy," Frazer said. "I just got a glare from the sun. Made me dizzy."

“Here to play?”

“Too rich for my blood. Just taking a break. Hanging out.”

“Something’s too rich for your blood?” Gameboy joked.

“You never know,” Castle said, and he moved on his way.

Again, he sat where he could watch the action and chuckled as he saw the floorman bring in a fresh setup of cards, then hand it to the dealer. Would he be able to see? Would he be able to read?

Then—bingo! Yes. There it was, plain as the nail on his thumb—numbers with stamped shapes of clubs, hearts, diamonds, spades. Amazing! Just amazing. Clear, all of it, as a mountain lake in early spring.

Castle watched Louie’s stool pigeon position himself behind and to the right of Rich for a perfect vantage. The card readouts were so clear, so easy, that Castle chose the most unlikely spot to pick off Sleepout’s hole cards.

He found that space between the dealer’s ear and right shoulder made a neat little window framing any hole card on its way to Louie’s hands. The only time he had to look in Louie’s direction was if he missed the card as it flashed by. Perfect position. Invisible almost. Castle had been gallery at so many poker games that no one even took note.

Rich, in his place, was taking stock, measuring. He knew he had to play with every sense open. Otherwise he’d be waking up the wrong people. But playing at the edge of his senses was exciting; it was why he played. His strategy was to pay off the small pots with losing hands, duck the larger ones, and wait for the inevitable big bluff.

And so the game went. The hours passed. The first time Rich won a bluff, Sleepout ground his teeth. He

looked over at his runners, each look a question: How? And Sleepout's runners looked back. Shrugged. They were frustrated too; they didn't know.

Rich was doing his own grinding—hundred-dollar bills stacking, hour after hour. But for Rich, it wasn't the amount of the money. It was how he moved ahead. It was the play, the executing. It was designing an idea about how Sleepout Louie Levinson could be beat, then seeing that idea work in action. Rich's pleasure in the game doubled, tripled, and had he not bitten his lip so hard that he nearly drew blood, would have percolated into laughter.

"You're a friggin' little poker demon," Sleepout said to him at one point.

"I like the word demon," Rich said. "Good word."

During the first three hours of the game, Sleepout called in more bills. Stacks of them. He didn't want to be left short when the right hand showed. "Rich Rich," he sneered. "Hand's gonna come along any minute now—be careful!—an' I'm gonna bust you, bust your ass! With one pop!"

"Big hands happen," Rich said. "I know."

"Pop!" Louie Levinson threatened.

"Pop," Rich echoed back.

"And you will know," Louie said. "When it happens. You will."

But Sleepout's bully tactics were no match for the engine of Rich's memory for numbers. The cat was much wiser than the dog. Meanwhile, Castle watched. Waited. Read the cards. Sent his code. Watched and waited. Signaled.

On one of Sleepout's new-money runs, the cage manager told him he was wanted on the phone.

"Too busy," Louie barked.

"It's Trigger Mike Coppola," he was told. Trigger Mike and Sleepout did occasional messy business. So Louie took the call.

Gambling news spreads quickly. It's called the gamblers' hotline. Louie Levinson mentions a game he's in "with the Little Louisville Slugger" to Trigger Mike Coppola, and within an hour Jimmy Brink and Screw Andrews, two of Sleepout's closest compadres in Little Mexico, will hear about Louie's troubles and drop by to needle the fat man. Of course, Jimmy and Screw both knew Sleepout's scam would get him the money if the game lasted. Still, they couldn't resist the chance, hearing he was behind, to abuse a friend.

"Friends," Louie said, seeing them, sensing they'd arrived for blood. "Friends—who needs 'em."

Rich, on the other hand, took a ride like he'd only dreamed. Traveling ... moving ... some place. To some lost continent. He was at the edge. He was on the crest. Rich felt himself being the play, the play being him; the two, inseparable. He forgot blueprints; he forgot Castle in the wings with his infrareds, ready for the kill. All Rich's ratios, his mathematics and attention, sped and channeled instead into the moment, the game. And the more situations he played, the more his percentages seemed to favor his stack. So the stacks—Louie's, Rich's—shifted, some for the drama of it, some for effect. But the steady shift—like the inescapable erosion caused by dripping water—wore down Sleepout, powered Rich.

If Louie bet too much with the best hand, Rich let him win. If he soft-played—and the live cards in the deck were favorable, the pot high enough—Rich called.

Rich avoided calling Louie's more modest bluffs. Let the fat man live with the illusion that his, finally, was the

advantage. Let him think he could call in a win any time it mattered.

“You thought you had that one, didn’t you?” Levinson would crow.

“Sure as hell misread you,” Rich might say.

Baited by Rich, Louie became more and more brazen—stepping out with bigger and bigger bluffs whenever Rich held a weak hand.

The Big Game had started sometime after four in the afternoon. The other players had dropped out and run for cover. The game became two-handed as it moved into and through the evening, which was exactly what Rich and Castle wanted.

At first, they’d played seven-card stud. Louie’s seven-card luck hadn’t been holding, so he canceled the seven-card part, and they played five-card. As the game heated up, he’d started sweating, scratching himself under his shirt.

At nine-thirty, Rich was dealt the king of hearts for a hole card with the queen of spades face up, while Louie was dealt the ace of diamonds in the hole with the jack of clubs up.

Rich opened with the standard five dollars. Sleepout raised fifty. Rich—even though he read the percentage—wanted to reach out for the right spot.

Rich got dealt an eight; Louie, a ten.

Rich was still high on the board and checked. Louie, loving Rich’s check, felt he had the hand locked and bet three hundred. Inside, the glee bubbled again for Rich. It was textbook! Rich had been chasing this situation all night. Other hands had teased. They’d hinted. But none had moved the right way.

Something lit in his mind. Numbers fell so that he

saw them, almost, in a pattern. It was the hand—and he couldn't exactly say why—he'd been waiting for. The ideal hand. The hand of Fate. Except—with a perfect moment like this, a perfect hand—young as he was, would Rich use up Play's challenge? But that was silly. What was the word he'd looked up just the other day? Arrogant.

So Rich moved his three hundred into the pot. The dealer gave Rich an ace and Louie a queen.

Rich knew, counting the two thousand in dealer rake-off over the five hours the game had been running, he had forty-two thousand, eight hundred fifty-six when he started the hand, and three hundred fifty-five of that was now in the pot. He knew Louie had more than enough to cover.

So what was the play? What bet would make the pot absolute and pure nectar? Play had taught Rich that Louie couldn't resist a draw at a straight, and he'd already represented a pair of jacks with his early raise. Okay, so given those two propositions ... Rich's math machine spun. And spun. And—yes, of course—this was where Castle, lying in wait, could help. But that would—what was the word?—contaminate what was pure in the play. Take perfection away. No!

Rich's math machine slowed. Landed on the number twenty-two hundred. And even though Rich knew it was an out-of-line bet, he still wanted enough money in the pot to muster Louie's larceny. If the cards would only fall right! And Rich felt—no, not felt; he knew they would.

So he counted and spread the twenty-two hundred across the table like a Japanese fan. "You watching?" he asked Sleepout.

"I'm watching."

"You counting?"

"Twenty-two hundred."

“You’re quick, old man,” Rich teased him.

Louie hesitated long enough to recheck with his stoolie about Rich’s hole card. When he got his cue—that Rich held an off king—he called the bet.

And so it was infrareds against infrareds. “You’re not trying to sell me a bucket of dead worms, are you, kid?” Sleepout sneered.

“Still calling me kid?”

“It’s your eyes,” Sleepout said. “And mouth. And the fact—I’d guess—you probably have trouble getting a hard-on.”

“What’s a hard-on?” Rich said.

“I think—at this point—some people say grow up,” Sleepout said.

“Actually, some people say touché,” Rich returned.

The dealer dealt Rich a four and Louie a nine. So Louie held a possible straight. Rich was still high with the ace on board, but he needed a right calculation. He had a result in mind, the one he wanted. There wasn’t enough money in the pot for Louie to bring the load, so Rich said, “There’s fifty-one hundred ten dollars in there, and that’s my bet.”

Louie lifted his gaze, shifted it, skipped a beat, and Rich knew. Sleepout Louie Levinson was there! Sleepout Louie Levinson belonged to him now! With ten thousand in the pot, most of which had come from Rich, Louie’s moment dressed itself for the Big Bluff. Louie knew the small margin of the hands, his possible visible straight. And there’d been his early showing of power with his raise. Still, Louie stalled again to verify Rich’s king in the hole.

Rich stayed away from excitement. Nevertheless, something like an electrical surge snaked suddenly through him. The moment had size. The moment had opportunity

larger than he'd known, and he'd waited a long time for it. He slid his hole card out from under his upcards to recheck its value, pausing just long enough to be sure Sleepout's stoolie got an extra good look at its backside.

There was a moment of silent communication before Sleepout—now satisfied there wasn't a mix-up—pushed all his chip stacks and cash into the pot.

"Sizable bet," Rich said.

"For you, maybe." Sleepout grinned.

Rich didn't have to recheck Castle's signal. They were from the same school of intuitives and professionals; they played in the same arena, same league. So Rich pushed his own stacks closer to the pot and said, "Mr. Dealer, I'm not calling that bluff. Yet. But since I don't have as much as the old man, count both stacks and give him back his change. I'm in this pot seven thousand, six hundred and sixty-five dollars—which means I should have ... thirty-five thousand, one hundred ninety-one dollars left to call."

The dealer began counting stacks, checking numbers. Rich didn't care; it let him study Louie under pressure. When the dealer finished, he said: "You were off, Kid—not as good as you think you are. There's only thirty-five thousand, one hundred seventy-eight dollars here."

"No," Rich said.

"I'm sorry—"

"No. I didn't miss my count. I just didn't fully credit you." Rich didn't care whether the dealer tracked what he was talking about or not. "And Mr. Levinson," Rich went on, "while we're taking count—when you bluff, the vessel above the third joint on your right index finger does a kind of Indian dance. Maybe Zulu. Right now, your heart's pumping ninety-three times a minute. That's too fast. So I don't have any choice but to call your bluff."

Rich smiled. He pushed his stack into the pot and turned over his king in the hole for the winning hand.

Louie didn't bother with his hole card. He left it covered and pitched it, with a flick of the wrist, toward the dealer. "How the fuck could you—!" He stopped. Breathed in, hung his head, stared hard and fast at the floor, as though the green in the carpet would offer religion, peace of mind, serenity.

Louie sought quiet, Rich accommodated, and the dealer said nothing. Finally Rich spoke. "Looks like the game's over, Mr. Sleepout."

Sleepout Louie looked up, looked over.

"Appears like we're done," Rich said.

"What're you saying?" Louie said.

Rich made an arc with his index finger and traced the shape and depth of Louie's final stack of chips. "No more ammunition," he said.

Louie almost flew from the table and called the security guard. "Frank! Get over here! Watch this kid and don't let him leave the table!"

Rich didn't even have to turn his head to see Louie bolt from his chair, charge through the cage door, and disappear into the vault. Less than a minute later, he was back with two large bales of hundreds. Rich knew money; he could gauge bales. These two were million-dollar bales.

Sleepout hadn't set the money on the table before Castle was on his way to the restroom. Castle knew who the bales belonged to, and it wasn't Louie. Suddenly the game had become dangerous. Castle felt adrenaline pumping—making him want to move. He told himself to be calm. He moved as though going nowhere in particular. He found a private place, popped the infrareds from his

eyes, and dropped them into his pocket. He signaled Rich, then moved out a side door.

Once he had cleared the light of the club, his feet responded to the adrenaline and he dashed for the car to cue Max. Everyone had a role. And right now, Max had to be Academy Award material. The clock, Castle knew, was ticking.

Inside, the dealer had dealt one hand, two hands, three without any two-way action, when a series of vocal detonations began in the crap pit. Rich did a quick calculation: the distance from the car, inside, to the crap table. It was the plan; he knew what was happening.

But Louie and the security guard stepped quickly over to the pit to see what vein had popped this time with Haverson, the floorman. "Get out of here!" Haverson was yelling at someone. "Out! The hell out! Kids can't shoot craps at the Flamingo Club!"

Commotion churning, Rich slid his bills into a pillowcase he'd carried under his shirt and slipped out the side door. While the dealer was standing on his tiptoes to see what was happening up front, Rich heard Max screaming, "Put me down! I want to play craps!"

"Grow up! Then come back!" was the last Rich heard as he broke into a victorious trot for the car.

And Castle—his friend, his front man, his advisor—was there. Standing beside the open trunk. Rich literally jumped, leaving the pavement. He was like a basketball heading for a hoop. Into the air ... through the air ... swish. Castle shut the lid. Rich landed on the padding they'd set and curled there with the pillowcase full of money. Next came Max—half being chased away, half escaping with a grin. He cleared the club's light and was just a shadow. A

kid's shadow. Max jumped onto the back-seat floorboard and covered himself with a blanket.

It was all timing, Castle knew. Timing was the key. If they could avoid Sleepout long enough for his temperature to settle, they'd be fine. Louie couldn't afford for his brothers, Ed and Mike, to find out about the lost money. Hell, none of the boys from New York could be standing downwind of the information. Any kind of rumble might reach the wrong quarters. So buying a little time was all that was needed. Timing. Castle was a good manager.

Castle drove north on Monmouth Street and crossed the bridge over the Ohio River to Cincinnati. When the river was behind him, he turned west onto County Road 22, past Death Valley. He picked up Indiana 65 south toward Louisville. It wasn't the short way. But Gus had seen to it that departures would no longer be simple.

In the dark enclosure and comfort of the trunk, Rich stretched out. He felt warm. He felt bathed in something, something slick as blood. Everything was right, it seemed. Everything was as it should be. Beautiful. Could he have known more perfectly the experience of a grown man squirming, all the while knowing entirely what that man was thinking? It was sweet. It was powerful.

But then Rich felt a lingering chill. A cloud over the sun. Was this perfect, really? Was this the best? Was this a preview of his future? No! No! he thought and almost screamed. There has to be a better way!