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Bad Signs

Written by R. J. Ellory

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BAD SIGNS

R.J. ELLORY



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CHAPTER ONE

By the time she reached her mid-twenties Carole Kempner had seen enough of men to be nothing other than disappointed. She bore two sons from two forlorn and wretched fathers, and it seemed that in all quarters and aspects those fathers were found sorely wanting. One was dumb and thoughtless, the other just downright crazy.

Elliott, the older of her two children, was born on January 2, 1946. Elliott's father, Kyle Danziger, was a transient oilfield worker, and he swept through Carole's life like a bad squall. Kyle was gone before Carole made her first trimester, perhaps because he could not envision himself burdened beneath the responsibility of fatherhood, perhaps for other reasons. Carole, believing that such a gesture might precipitate Kyle's eventual return, gave her son his father's name. And so he was Elliott Danziger, though from the first moments of speech he referred to himself as "Digger."

How Clarence, the second and younger of her sons, came to be was a thing all its own. His conception—merely eight months after Carole's delivery of Elliott—occurred in a moment of drunken awkwardness that was regretted immediately. That was indeed a low point, but things didn't improve much from then on. Suffice to say that the boys' childhood was grounded hard in violence and madness.

Just to begin with, Clarence's father—Jimmy Luckman—killed Carole stone-dead on a cool winter's morning while both Clarence and Elliott looked on.

Clarence was five by this time, Elliott a year and five months older. Jimmy was busy getting drunk. Carole, however, had set her mind to leaving once and for all. Perhaps she was simply exhausted with the disappointment. Or maybe she believed such

an action would serve the boys well in the longer run of things. Either which way, Jimmy Luckman didn't seem to agree with her plan.

So Jimmy—enraged at Carole's calumny and deceit, the way she seemed to have thought this thing through with no regard for *his* needs and wants—took a baseball bat and broke some crockery. He broke a window. He spiderwebbed the TV screen. Then he broke Carole's darn fool neck.

She went down like a stone. She was expressionless in the moment of impact, expressionless after the event. She could have been staring at a discount sign in a convenience store.

Jimmy Luckman appeared uncertain for some time. Later Clarence figured him to be calculating the odds. If Jimmy buried Carole, or perhaps chopped her up and drove out to Searchlight or Cottonwood Cove to hurl her piece by piece into a bottomless ravine, perhaps if he sent her headfirst down a dry well, or took her out northwest a hundred miles and left her in the desert for the coyotes . . . If he did this and told the world she'd finally left him for her mother's place in Anaheim and was likely never to return, then what were the odds? Would anyone ever discover the truth?

Eventually Jimmy Luckman told Clarence to sit quiet. *Wait here until she wakes up*, he said. *I'll be back soon, kiddo.*

Jimmy did not speak to Elliott. Elliott was neither his son nor his responsibility, and Elliott—slightly slower than Clarence, heavier, almost denser in some way—had always seemed to Jimmy as a distraction and a deadweight.

Jimmy—despite what he told Clarence—didn't come back soon.

He didn't come back at all.

Carole didn't wake up neither.

Three and a half hours later Jimmy Luckman, never a man to take after his name, was shot in the throat by an off-duty cop in a liquor store in North Las Vegas. He was trying to escape with nineteen dollars and sixty-two cents. Even today, allowing for inflation, it wasn't a great deal worth dying for.

Clarence waited patiently for the father that would never return. Elliott waited with him. They waited in the bedroom—one of four rooms in their first-floor apartment. The front door

opened into the kitchen, the kitchen gave onto the sitting room, the bedroom with a narrow en-suite came last.

Frightened to leave their mother in case she woke, Clarence and Elliott took turns to venture only so far as the bathroom for water. They ate nothing however.

Their view to the street from the bedroom window was obscured by the walkway and heavy railings that circumvented the internal square of the apartment block. Above the railing and beneath the walkway above they could see a strip of sky. As it grew dark the stars appeared. Little Clarence talked to them. He asked them to relay a message to God. *Make her wake up*, he said.

Elliott merely watched his younger brother.

How Carole slept with her eyes wide-open Clarence did not understand. Whatever the reason, it did not matter. He just wanted her to wake up.

It was the most part of two days before anyone visited.

So it was that on the 5th of November Evelyn Westerbrook came by. She had always been Carole Kempner's closest friend. She came to tell Jimmy and Carole that Eisenhower had won the election and they should celebrate. She carried with her a copy of a newspaper, the headline of which read, "Ike to The White House!" Jimmy had left the front door unlocked. Evelyn let herself in. She called out after them. "Carole? Carole?" And then—"Jimmy? Jimmy . . . are you guys in?"

She came on through to the bedroom. She found both Elliott and Clarence asleep, Clarence's head against his mother's shoulder, Elliott resting against her tummy, his hand holding hers.

Evelyn woke the boys up. She called the police. What happened after that Clarence didn't really remember, except that he never saw his mother again.

It was a long time before he understood that she never did wake up.

Evelyn Westerbrook gave the police Jimmy Luckman's name. It wasn't long before they figured out who he was and where he'd died. Despite the fact that Carole had married neither Kyle Danziger nor Jimmy Luckman, the authorities afforded each boy their respective father's names. Elliott would forever be Digger Danziger, and Clarence would be a Luckman. Maybe that was the

start of his trouble, for Clarence Luckman was born under a bad star—that was the small and unavoidable truth—and people born under a bad star carry a bad sign their whole lives. Apparently this is so. And as far as people in general are concerned, there's bad ones and real bad ones. The second lot are pretty much broke beyond mending. Might as well shoot them where they stand. And shoot them the first time you see them. Anything else is just going to be a heavy sack of heartache for all concerned. Clarence was possibly in the first category, Elliott too, but those who would later most influence their lives were definitely in the second.

Clarence and Elliott, looking from the start like the longer they lived the worse it was going to get, were both shipped off to a boys' school outside of Barstow, California. It was a vast complex of buildings surrounded by a wall high enough to leave much of the day in shadow. The rooms smelled of dirty clothes and death, like a hospice for the destitute. In such a place life could be nothing but lonely and awkward. The kids ranged from seven to nineteen. The moment they hit their nineteenth they were released or moved on up to the big house. These were kids who had come up hard and bitter. Spent their childhood eating from hot dog stands and sleeping in bus depot restrooms if they were lucky. The attitude engendered by such experience was one of tight-wound nervousness. There was no way else to survive. Everything you didn't grab was grabbed by someone else. Sometimes people would kick and grab even when you'd got there first. Start out like that and it wasn't long before you figured all of life was colored that way. It was here that Elliott shined his light. The denseness, the slowness, became a methodical and pragmatic ability to deal with things that perhaps might have overshadowed Clarence. Elliott was the older boy, the big brother, and he wore his hat with pride and diligence. He was not afraid of people it seemed, neither kids nor grown-ups, and he was always there behind Clarence, always ready to step in and defend his younger brother if springs got wound too tight and fists were set to fly. He seemed to know when he was wanted, and when he was not. He had a temper for sure, much like his father, the transient oil worker, yet other times Clarence would watch Digger as Digger seemed to drift off in his mind to someplace where there was no one else but himself. He wondered if he was looking for long-lost

Kyle, just as Clarence often thought of his own father, the ironically named Jimmy Luckman, who—it seemed—had neither been really lucky, nor really a man.

“Digger?” Clarence would say. “Digger?” And it would require three or four urgent repetitions before Digger snapped out of it, smiled, and said, “What’s up, little man?”

At Barstow they taught Elliott Danziger and Clarence Luckman to read and write. Clarence took to it quickly, Elliott a little more slowly. They were different boys in so many ways, though often mistaken one for the other. It was their eyes. They both had their mother’s eyes. As they grew older they became less physically similar, but their eyes stayed the same. See Clarence, see Elliott, you saw Carole. How that physical attribute would contribute to an endless chain of troubles was both unknown and unpredictable. Safe it was to say that had they taken after their respective fathers—at least in looks—then life would have been a great deal simpler.

Life progressed in some vague fashion until Clarence was thirteen, and then he kicked one of the kitchen staff real hard in the pants. The man that Clarence kicked had been trying stuff that was about as wholesome as a roadkill sandwich. Elliott was there too, and he got down and gave that guy a wallop or two before the guards came to break it up. They took off, the pair of them, but the police caught up with Elliott and Clarence no more than three miles away. They beat them some, and then sent them to the juvenile hall in Hesperia. Here a different man tried the same sort of thing on Clarence, but had sense enough to tie the boy to a bed before he started. By the time Clarence got to tell Elliott what had happened, well, it was too late for Elliott to do anything about it.

And so it went on, Elliott Danziger and Clarence Luckman weathering their lot like stoics, and all the while they had in their minds the thought that there had to be something better than this someways up the road. Where that road started, and where it ended up, they didn’t know. Such things were just details, and details came long after the main body of a plan. That’s what Clarence set his mind to working on—a plan—and whether he was sluicing out piss buckets or peeling potatoes or

spit-shining shoes that wouldn't stay clean for an hour, his mind was always working. Got close enough and you could hear the wheels turning, some kind of intricacy in there like a Frenchman's clock. The cogs turned, the ideas evolved, and maybe everything would have come right had he kept his ideas to himself.

But he didn't.

He shared them with Elliott. Older brother. Rock of ages. Elliott didn't have the vision or foresight of his younger brother. The boys were similar perhaps, but only in the thin thread that connected them through their mother. The rest was wildly different, and that difference would only become more evident as time moved on.

Elliott, now known as Digger to all and sundry, was a magnet for small and unnecessary troubles. Hesperia had served the local community with a juvenile facility for as many years as anyone could remember. Back before secession it had been a prison, before that something else. They had rooms that could sleep eight or ten, and Clarence and Digger were berthed side by side.

Within their first days at Hesperia Clarence noticed a shift in Digger. Slight, perhaps unnoticeable to anyone but Clarence, but there was a shift. He seemed bigger, a mite taller and wider, and he seemed to hold himself with a good deal more presence. This was more like a grown-up facility, and Clarence believed that Digger knew it would take more work to care for his younger brother.

"Your name is Clay," he told Clarence on the third or fourth morning after their arrival. "That's what you should call yourself. Clarence is all fucked up. Sounds like a homo name. Clay is much better."

Clarence was puzzled, but he nevertheless agreed. From that day forward he was Clay Luckman.

Digger was merely a year and five months older than Clay, but he started to look like a man when he hit twelve. He was willing to fight anyone, and did when it suited him. He lost more often than not, staggered away with his nose bloodied and his pride battered. But he never lost that pride, and he never lost his confidence and willingness to give it his best shot. His fists were all bone and no meat. His temper flared fast like a cheap firework, but he had the carry-through and balls to back it up. Nine times

out of ten he went into battle for Clay, and Clay loved him for that. There was a loyalty there, a fraternity that meant the world to them both but for different reasons. Digger had charged himself with the responsibility for Clay's physical welfare, and Clay, well, he believed that at some point in the future Digger would be receptive to education, enlightenment, a wider mental and emotional perception of life. Digger was the fighter, Clay the negotiator. Digger was the pugilist, Clay the philosopher. Had both parts been worked into one boy, then that would have been some boy. But they were not. There were two of them, linked by blood, but separated by personality.

One time Clay asked Digger what he wanted.

"More to eat most of the time," Digger had replied.

"You know what I mean, Digger," Clay said. "From life. From the future."

That question had given Digger pause for thought. He did his little disappearing act, and he was gone someplace else for a good three or four minutes. "S'pose when it comes down to it," he eventually said, "I want the same things as everyone else. Enough smarts to keep out of trouble, enough money to get what I want, enough time to enjoy it."

Perhaps that was the deepest Digger would ever go. He had a view of life, a longer-term view, but present environment seemed so *present* that he rarely saw beyond the next meal.

Digger carried on fighting. He carried on losing. Clay wondered how much pride he did in fact possess, and how long it could be battered before it was entirely broken.

So as far as those that were charged with his welfare were concerned, Digger became both a trial and a tribulation. Rumor had it that Digger was going to be there through his eighteenth year, and then he'd be graduated to the big house. Rumor had it that had he not been a juvenile he'd have been there already. Rumor had a lot of things to say for itself, all except some way to determine the truth.

Digger seemed to find the notoriety and negative reputation somewhat of a charm and an allure.

"I'm a hot potato," Digger told Clay. "Far as the law is concerned, that's what I am."

Clay shook his head. He didn't understand.

“They got me for a salt and buttery,” Digger explained, and then he bust a gut laughing.

Digger got like that. He blew hot and cold. A funny guy, very funny, and then all of a sudden serious. Clay sometimes wondered if he hadn't been hit in the head just a few too many times. It didn't make sense, but it seemed to Clay that everyone who'd given Digger a kicking had left a little of themselves imprinted on his personality. Or maybe it was that Digger, seeing someone stronger or faster or smarter, had snatched a little of their attitude away while they were pounding on him. Snatched that thing away and kept it for himself in the belief that it would make him stronger. All those bits of people were now there inside of him, packed up tight in his skin, and Clay didn't know from one mealtime to the next which one he was going to get next.

Clay loved Digger. He respected him. He cared for his well-being. He also stayed close because no one bothered him if Digger was around. Whenever he got mad with Digger, he had only to cast his mind back to the day of their mother's death, the way Digger carried water in his cupped hands all the way from the bathroom to where Clay was sitting. He did it many times. He'd figured that Clay was crying so much he'd just dry up and blow away if he didn't drink plenty of water. In Clay's mind there was nothing that he would not forgive Digger. He found himself rationalizing Digger's viewpoints, appreciating his left-of-center sensibilities, listening to his little dreams and aspirations. As time went on they just became closer. See one and you'd see the other. Some other kid said they were probably homos together, but Digger broke the kid's nose and he never said it again.

And the more they talked, the more it seemed that Digger's perspective and viewpoint widened. He listened to his younger brother. He started asking questions. He wanted to know *Why this . . .* and *Why that . . .* and Clay told him what he knew, or what he thought, or what he imagined was the truth. Digger taught Clay how to hit someone so they wouldn't get up so fast. He called it “lumberjack fighting,” and Clay paid attention and toughened up somewhat. They were good for each other, and they started to connect not only as half brothers, but as real honest-to-God friends.

Perhaps Clay figured that was the point at which his fortunes

altered. That now he'd outlived the irony of his name and gotten something good. Digger had a dark shadow, but he had a sense of humor and his mind was surprisingly fast. Clay knew he could always count on him in an awkward place. How awkward that place would be, and how it would happen, well, neither of them had the slightest idea.

"Nothin's really trouble till you're caught," was always a favorite line of Digger's.

One time—spring of 1961, Clay all of thirteen, Digger a couple of months more than fifteen—they were out on a field gang, all of them tied together with a length of chain, working like dogs, digging up rocks and stones out of sun-baked fields and loading them in the back of a pickup by the bucketload. The sun was high and brave. The wind out there didn't blow, it sucked. Sucked every ounce of moisture right out of you and replaced it with dead flies and dust. A hellacious thirst came upon Clay. Would've drunk a pint of warm piss had it been offered.

Duty guard was called Farragut. Sat on a horse and rode back and forth up the line making sure the boys worked hard and fast. Wore an expression like he'd had toothache his whole life. He was a compact knotted little man. If you hit him you would hurt for days. He would never go down without a bullet or two. Farragut was known as Shoeshine. Kicked boys in the ass of their pants all day and all night until his toecaps glossed up like river pebbles. He had true meanness deep inside of him, as tight and twisted as a box of snakes. He said little, but when he did the words sounded practiced.

"Toe the line and I'm behind you, boy. Cross it and I'll be the first agin you," he'd say, and "I told you with words to quieten down, boy. Next time I'm telling you with fists." Such tough poetry as this.

First time Clay met Shoeshine was his second day at Hesperia. "Seems to me you got only two expressions, boy," was his greeting. "Causing trouble an' asking for forgiveness. Well, you listen here now. I won't have the first and I won't give the second. That keeps it simple enough for both of us to understand."

Shoeshine had a cool box in the foot well of the service truck. Inside of the cool box were a half dozen or so chilled bottles of

root beer. That day, April something-or-other of 1961, Digger took a liking to the idea of a root beer, a chilled root beer in a glass bottle with a crimped metal cap. Being Digger, he was suited to doing the job with his fists, not with his smarts, but this day was different; this day Digger had a mind to working some kind of angle on Clay.

"No way, Digger," Clay told him. "You get busted for some foolish stunt like that they're gonna beat you and throw you in the tool shed for the rest of the day."

"You think I can't take it?" Digger asked.

"Hell, Digger, sure you can take it. The point is not whether you can take it, it's whether it's worth it for some foolish dumbass bottle of root beer."

"But it sure would taste so good, right? You like root beer, right? Hell, everyone likes root beer. And it'd be so cold, and it'd taste so good, and it would be worth it, I reckon."

"Digger, you are sometimes so fuckin' stupid."

"Thirsty," Digger said. "Not stupid, just real thirsty."

It was a bad game from the start. Digger didn't say anything directly. Perhaps it was Clay's own fault by mentioning the fact that another transgression would see Digger into the tool shed with a few more bruises. Digger just kept on talking about the damned root beer. How cold, how tasty, how refreshing, how special on such a hot, hot day. Perhaps it had been his plan all along, but it seemed that Digger was trying to persuade and cajole Clay with his mind. Like he was set to hypnotize his younger brother. Later, after many other troubles, Clay Luckman would wonder if Digger had such a power, or if it was just his own mental process that was weak. Digger turned Clay's thoughts in such a way as to make him believe that stealing a bottle of root beer from Shoeshine was the only thing that could be done. Maybe it was Digger who did that, or maybe it was simply the memory of Digger walking back from that bathroom with his hands full of water.

"I know you don't agree," Digger said, "but maybe it's right to feel sore about people who have a lot of things. Like the more they have, the less there is for everyone else." He carried his broomstave across his shoulders like a yoke, his hands up and over left and right. He and Clay were walking to the edge of the

road to get water. An old truck had been abandoned amidst the foot-flattened ridges of a fallow—four, five bullet holes in the radiator grille like the thing had quit one time too many. *To hell with you*, someone had thought, and took a rifle from the rear rack and shot the thing dead where it stood. *You don't work for me . . . hell, you don't work for no one*. Federal yellow flowers had grown up around the spare on the tailboard and made a crude wreath. Given enough time the seasons would take it all down to rust and dust. The other kids were coming down behind them. A five-minute break for hydrating, and then back to work. They gathered along a high dirt bank punctuated with rough handfuls of hardy sedge, dun and dry and dusty. This land hadn't seen rain for weeks, and the air itself made you cough. Fifty yards away was a deserted homestead; stone ruins like broken teeth, as if this were all that remained of some giant's fractured jawbone. Perhaps this was such a place where folks weren't s'posed to settle.

"Take this situation, for example," Digger said. "I'm one to latch on to an idea and let it take hold." He smiled. "Like this here root beer proposition. Seems to me that if you decide you want something, and then give up on the idea because it's too much trouble . . . well, you say this yourself. You gotta decide on a plan and then carry it through despite whatever obstacles come in the way, right?"

"Sure," Clay replied, the sense of resignation already evident in his voice. He knew where this was going, and he didn't like it. "I'm talking about what you want, Digger . . . what you want when we get out of here. I'm not talking about a bottle of root beer."

Clay looked sideways at Digger. He was waiting for a response, but Digger didn't say a word. He shielded his eyes against the sun. He looked out to where Shoeshine was watering his horse, and then back to the truck. The door was closed but unlocked.

Clay looked at Digger again and shook his head. Digger just returned an expression like he'd lost a piece of his mind and never cared to look for it.

"Some folks don't deserve to be wished well, wouldn't you say?" Digger asked.

"I think there's some good to be found in everyone."

“Sure, that’s as may be, but with some folks you gotta dig real deep to find it.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Shoeshine for example—”

“It ain’t gonna work, Digger. I ain’t doin’ this thing.”

“Well, I see things different from you, Clay,” Digger said. “I see a guy like Shoeshine, and he’s got what he’s got, and we ain’t got nothin’, but he’s the bad guy here, he’s the one who likes to kick kids and hurt them and whatever . . .”

“You are crazy,” Clay said. “Always have been, always will be. Sometimes I don’t know whether you’re being serious or just winding me like a cheap watch.”

“Whichever way you wanna take it,” Digger said, and then he looked at Clay for a while longer, and then out to the truck, and then he smiled and said something about water being for horses and dogs and gardens.

Clay drank the water. Water was good enough for him. He didn’t need a root beer, and he sure as hell didn’t need the kind of trouble that would come from stealing one from off of Shoeshine.

“Seems to me that good things don’t come find you. They stay where they are and you have to go looking. And hell, if they don’t hide in the damnedest of places.” Digger shook his head and looked out toward the horizon. “Bad things, however . . . well, let’s just say that bad things is something else altogether. Bad things can find you anyplace, and sometimes it means a great deal to have someone there who can help you take care of them . . .”

“I don’t want to go,” Clay said. When he first thought of the words they sounded strong and definite. When they left his lips they didn’t.

The tension between them was so solid you could have pushed it over.

Clay wanted to say *Fuck you, Digger*, but he stayed silent.

Looking at Digger then, he realized another facet of their difference. Digger was not stupid, never had been, but there was a shadow there, something that perhaps had come from his own father. Digger always appeared to be looking for the slant and pitch of the situation, how angles could be influenced to some

small advantage. Digger was certainly no stranger to threat or violence, neither of them were, but maybe Digger was the sort of person to bring his own if none were present. It gave him the upper hand. Perhaps he believed he would make his mark more firmly on the world if he made others around him unsettled.

They went back to work for another two hours, scratching stones and rocks out of the dirt with their hands, an exercise that seemed to serve no purpose but to keep them occupied.

The feeling came upon Clay slowly. It was the kind of feeling that got right down into the basement of his gut and stayed there, slow-cooking like a pit barbecue. He believed that if he didn't do what Digger had asked of him then there would be discord between them. That was more trouble than he could weather. Clay knew that Digger would never threaten him, never hurt him. Nothing like that. It was not a concern for what Digger would do to him, but what could be taken away. Without Digger he would be adrift in this world. He would manage, of course, but the tension and agitation that would become part of his life without Digger there to defend and protect him would be a strain he could do without. He thought of the times Digger had patted some kid who was grieving him. Without Digger as a shield perhaps that kid would come back for revenge. He had never really had to do such things alone. Yes, he began to think, perhaps all of the past avoidances would come back at him. Right when he least expected it. Saying nothing about the violence itself, the surprise would be enough to kill him.

Clay said nothing, but he watched the pattern that Shoeshine followed. The service truck sat at the side of the road, no more than twenty feet from the wheels to the edge of the hot top. The line of boys—more than eighty of them—stretched a good two hundred yards. Shoeshine paced his horse from one end of the chain to the other. He looked ahead of him, never back—not unless someone called for permission to take a piss. If that happened he would watch the boy until his business was done, and then he would resume the walk. Clay counted the time it took from one end of the line to the other. From the moment he turned he reckoned three minutes until Shoeshine was coming back the other way.

Next break time Digger said something to Clay. Said it low like

a whisper, nothing direct. "Sometimes I feel like there's two sides to me. Sometimes I think the only reason I have a left hand is to stop my right hand from doing stuff it wants to." Digger tried to hide his smile, but it was there in his eyes. He was winding, winding, winding.

"You are so full of shit," Clay said. "You think you can make me do this—"

Digger laughed. "Hey, man, cool it. I'm just baiting you."

Clay opened his mouth, and then he hesitated. There was a change in his expression, a different light in his eyes. There was some shadow of grim determination that seemed to have taken hold. He looked across at Shoeshine, at the truck, back to Digger, and then he said, "I'll do it. Don't say any more. I'll get you your root beer."

Digger didn't say a thing. He didn't even smile. Expression on his face was suddenly serious and implacable, like he'd spent a lifetime walking against the wind.

Clay wondered then if Digger would try and stop him. Wondered if the whole thing had been nothing but a test. Now it was there, now Clay had agreed to do it, well, he had demonstrated courage sufficient for Digger to ease up. Digger would say the whole thing had been a prank, a stunt, and he had no more yen for a root beer than he did a snake sandwich.

But no, he didn't say a word.

There was a fraternal angle, a challenge, a thrown-gauntlet of sorts, and it had progressed too far to be reversed.

Clay made a small prayer. He thought of where his mother was, whether she could see him, and what she would say. He wondered if there was a heaven and a hell, and he wondered if the folks in heaven could see the folks in hell, and if he wound up down there with his father would he ever be able to speak to her again.

And then he realized how stupid he was being. It was a root beer. He was going to get his brother a root beer. Damn, the number of times Digger had bailed him out crap, this was the least he could do.

He waited until Shoeshine turned at the end of the row, and then he dropped his shovel and took a step.

The next boy in line stopped working.

Digger glared at him. The boy started up again. Seemed like the

whole world went quiet. Seemed like the breeze stopped, the dust settled, the birds stayed right where they were in the branches of trees.

Clay's heart was in the middle of his chest, in his throat, in his mouth, and he could see everything twice. There were beads of sweat along his hairline. Seemed never to have bothered him before but they rolled down his brow and met his eyes and blurred his vision.

Three times he asked himself what the damn hell he was doing before he'd even made it two yards.

Shoeshine was still going the other way, his back to the line, his rifle across his knees, his attention all the way forward and nowhere behind.

Clay glanced back at Digger. Digger was leaning forward, his shovel in the ground, but he was not moving. His expression was unreadable. Clay wondered what would happen if he turned back. Would Digger forgive him? Would he just brush it off as a great joke that might have played out? Or would he make it a big deal? Would this put some irreconcilable rift between them that would never be healed?

Dead if he did, dead if he didn't.

Clay loved his brother, but hated himself. He feared Shoeshine, but more than that he feared the loneliness that he would have to endure without Digger by his side.

He looked back at the line of boys. He looked at the tool shed. He crouched lower to the ground and took another three steps. The truck was another fifteen yards. He wondered if he should just make a dash for it. There were boys farther down the line who would stop working as soon as they saw Clay run across the field. Shoeshine would hear him. He would stir the horse and chase him down within a heartbeat. He would knock him over with the butt of the rifle. Maybe the horse would trample him.

Clay swallowed. He gritted his teeth. He was going to do it. He *had* to do it. There was no other choice.

He pictured himself back in the ditch with Digger. He could feel the cool weight of the bottle in his hand. He could see the smile, the pride, the sheer unalloyed pride in his brother's eyes, and he knew that this was the way to make his mark with everyone else in the line. After this they would see him not as Digger's sidekick,

the weaker brother, the one who was always being defended and protected, but they would see him as an individual in his own right.

This was his test, and destiny had brought him here.

He edged forward—another step, another two—his heart racing ahead of him, his pulse quickening in his neck, his temples, feeling the blood in every part of his body, his mouth dry, every hair on his head rigid with fear, but he took another step and he could see the truck getting closer.

Shoeshine was halfway down the line. He needed to gather pace if he was going to make it there and back. He took three more steps, three more again.

There seemed to be a united gasp all the way along the line. Eighty boys held their breath. Clay knew he was imagining it, but it was as real as anything he had ever experienced before.

Now was the moment. Now was his chance to make a dash across the last twenty-five feet and get that bottle out of the foot well.

Clay Luckman, believing he had broken the spell of bad fortune, held on to his belt and made that run for all he was worth.

Three yards, no more, no less, and his foot landed awkwardly on a protruding stone. Fist-sized, round every which you looked at it, the sole of his boot skidded off the surface and sent him sprawling.

Some kid laughed. Others laughed too. It was not so much the sense of ridicule that they found humorous, but the relief, that terrible instinctive reaction when you see some calamity befall another. A relief that it was not you.

Clay lay there for a second, dust in his eyes, despair in his heart, and then he tried to scoot around and head back for the ditch.

Shoeshine saw Clay Luckman before he'd made it five feet. He stirred that horse and chased him down just as Clay had envisioned. He did not use the butt of the rifle to knock him down, but rather booted the boy fair and square in the back of the head. Clay went down like gravity. His lights were out before he tasted dirt.

Shoeshine figured the boy had planned to take off in the truck. That's how he wrote it up. Clay didn't argue. Would have served

no purpose. Shoeshine and Hesperia were going to believe what they wanted to believe regardless of what anyone said. Clay was up on an attempted escape charge. He went to the solitary block for a month. He stitched pants and shirts with rough thread, he washed piss buckets and shined boots and dug trenches and held his tongue. He didn't say a damned thing about Digger goading him up for the enterprise with the root beer, and he knew Digger would appreciate that.

When Clay came out it was May of 1961 and white folks were terrorizing colored folk for taking bus rides in Alabama.

Digger, having earned himself a reputation for trouble, seemed to now have passed a little of that reputation to his brother. They became even more inseparable, not because of any wish on Clay Luckman's part to be troublesome, but because they each possessed a need for reliance on the other. Possibly Clay might have survived far better without Digger. He would have taken the beatings that would have come without Digger to protect him, but he would have made it through. He might have figured out a way to exorcise Digger's influence and attention. As with all things there was a way to do it. As with most things he didn't know what it was.

Late at night, the sweltering darkness, the sound of dogs punctuating the throaty pitch of cicadas, Digger would whisper things.

"I seen enough bad in men to know that they could never really have been created in His image," he said. "Couldn't have been. And most folks think one way, say another, and then act in a fashion that contradicts both. Don't make sense to me."

Another time, saying, "There's a little bit more to being smart than just knowing how to get out of trouble. Real smarts is never getting into trouble in the first place. And unhappiness? Unhappiness is like a sediment. You don't know it's there until you empty everything else out. And when something good looks like it's gonna happen, well, you take it slow. Don't rush it. Don't drink that thing too quick or you'll get a mouthful of inevitable bitterness at the bottom."

And then he would reach over and prod Clay in the shoulder. "You listenin' to me? You listenin' to me there?"

Clay tried to hold on to his optimism, his wishes for the future, but too much of what Digger said made too much sense. He had seen his share of bad things. He had experienced his share of rough fortune and disappointment. If the first decade of his life had been a portent for the rest, well, there was a great deal more heartache and hopelessness on the way.

Clay didn't try to dissuade Digger from his monologues. He just lay there listening awhile, and then he slept the best he could.

Hesperia was a shadow of some other distant and better place. Children came and went. Sometimes faces would appear for weeks, days even, and then they'd be shipped off to some other facility on the West Coast. Seemed to Clay Luckman that he and Digger were part of the great unwashed and unwanted, a tribe of misfits. No one ever said the thing directly, but it was evident that such people as they were consigned to short lives filled with jail, with violence, with hardship and awkward death. Perhaps, early on, he decided it would be somehow different for them. They were not criminals like the other kids. They were boys with no parents that no one had wished to adopt and no one knew what else to do with. Clay, it seemed, was unaware of the bad star, thus ignorant of the bad sign that followed him, and though ignorance was never a worthy defense, it at least gave some small respite for the time it remained.

Digger had his darker moods, and during those times he would talk his bitter talk. He had a chip on his shoulder sufficient to break it, but most times it didn't show. Only thing that Digger ever said that Clay really took to heart was about being stupid. *Worst kind of stupid is the failure to learn from experience.* That was something Clay could understand. That was something that felt like a truth.

The quiet passage of weeks and months became the relentless passage of years. Both Clay Luckman and Digger Danziger became hardened in their own ways. Clay resolved in himself the desire to be free of Hesperia once he had gained nineteen years in June of 1966. Digger was still uncertain of his fate, whether he too would be released, or if they would send him up to the big house as they had threatened so often. Digger told Clay that he intended to

escape before this happened. Escape or die trying. He was going out to Eldorado, Texas.

“You what?”

“Eldorado, Texas,” Digger said.

“What the hell do you know about Texas . . . or anyplace, for that matter?”

Digger crouched to the ground and ferreted his hand beneath his mattress. He withdrew a folded piece of something-or-other, and when he spread it out on the bed Clay saw that it was some kind of magazine advertisement. “The Sierra Valley Estate,” it shouted in big sunshine-yellow letters. Every house was picture-perfect, the adults were smiling, the kids were laughing, there were shiny silver barbecue sets on emerald-green lawns and sapphire-blue pools in every back yard. In that picture Digger saw everything he’d never had. Clay saw it too. It was enchanting beyond words. They saw what they wanted to believe, and each of them—in their own very different way—imagined this place, this “City of Gold,” to be representative of everything they had been denied.

“Where d’you get that?” Clay asked.

“There was a magazine in the infirmary. I tore it out.”

Clay reached out and touched the page. He could feel the warmth of the sun through the tips of his fingers.

Eldorado. Where kids have moms and dads. Where the grass is green and the sky is blue and you are never hungry and you can smile without someone wanting to wipe that smile right off of your face.

Eldorado, Texas.

Yes.

“We gotta got there,” Digger said.

Clay looked at him. He couldn’t have agreed more.

“That’s what we gotta do, Clay . . . We gotta find someplace like Eldorado and make our fortunes and find some good things after all this crap we’ve been through.”

“Eldorado,” Clay whispered, and it sounded like just the sort of place where you had to leave all the bad stuff behind just to get there.

It was everything that they’d been denied, and how their intentions to remedy that denial became inextricably linked,

and the consequences for both brothers could not have been foreseen. It was all related to a man that neither of them knew, nor had ever met. A man who came to Hesperia in a thunderstorm in the late fall of 1964.