

## FIRST

Joe locks up for the day. Walks across the street into the town square. Sits down on a wooden bench beneath an olive tree. Looks up through the tree's branches at the night's first stars.

People come and go. Murmurs, conversations, a car horn, some muted music from the bar down the street. Mexican music. Joe closes his eyes, leans his head back, tries to let the night wash over him. Still so hot.

And she is there, then, standing right in front of him. Pamela.

He sits up, glancing furtively over his shoulder in the direction of the bell tower.

—He has gone home, says Pamela. —He had a long day.

Joe looks at her. Can't stop staring.

—He asked me again. Kids at school are on him.

Joe shakes his head. —What do we do?

She stands before him, hands on her magnificent hips. —Absolutely nothing. Understand?

—Yeah.

—I just thought you should know.

—But what are you going to tell him?

—Same thing I've always told him. That his father was killed.

—Pamela.

—It's the only way it can be. The only way.

She looks hard at him. Joe looks away; then looks back. Nods.

Pamela disappears into the night.

## SECOND

—Weather not fit for man nor beast, says RC to himself. —Weather not fit for man nor beast, he keeps repeating.

The heat rises off the cracked clay road in waves. The road is empty; RC walks down the middle of it in the uncanny hot of the middle of the day. He stops. Bends down to pick up a four-inch flake of clay. Frisbees it up into the air.

RC's twelve. Just a kid. He hears a voice, coming from the open door of Pascal's place, the diner. Turns toward the voice, the heat slapping him in the face.

—What, asks RC. Stops and walks slowly toward the diner's open door. —What did you say?

—Fuckin mongrel, I said. From out of the cool shadows of the diner steps a bad bad man called Clyde.

Clyde's about seventeen, goes six-two one-fifty with a bad complexion and mean eyes. —You heard me. Fuckin mongrel. You even know what that means?

RC stops in front of him, squinting up at the mean-eyed man. —No. What's it mean?

—Reckon it means you got no daddy. Clyde giggles. —And your ma's a whore. Reckon that's *about* what it means.

RC scuffs up some clay dust with his sneaker. —Everybody knows I got no daddy.

—And now everybody gonna know your ma's a fuckin skank.

RC's eyes are a little wet. —I wish you wouldn't talk like that about my mama.

—Yeah. You wish. What you gonna do about it? Huh? Clyde flicks a cigarette butt into the clay at RC's feet.

—I want you to stop that. Don't talk about my mama like that.

Some of Clyde's friends have come out of the diner and are watching and laughing. Some kids RC's age have come out of the store next door and are watching too. They whisper to each other.

—How bout you go fuck yourself little man. How bout that, says Clyde, advancing on RC.

—Stop it, Clyde. Pascal comes out of the diner, wiping her hands on her apron. She looks at RC. —You go on, hon. Back at Clyde. —Ignorant sonuvabitch. Leave that kid alone, you hear.

Clyde and his friends crack up and amble off to their cars in the gravel parking lot. RC stares at his shoes. The kids his age snicker and go back into the store.

Pascal looks at RC. Shakes her head. —You tell your mama I said hey. OK, RC?

RC nods. He doesn't look up. His cheeks are wet. He watches the butt of Clyde's cigarette burn up in the heat. He heads off down the middle of the deserted road, toward the town square and the bell tower.

### THIRD

Seven hours later. It's night. The air is still; refuses to move around much. And the heat still envelops, though its grip has loosened.

Pascal's diner and the store the kids were in are closed. Sounds of a strummed guitar drift out from the saloon, over the cracked clay of the street. The door to Joe's studio is still open; there's a light on inside.

Still walking down the middle of the road, twelve-year-old RC spots Clyde's F-150 in the gravel parking lot that the saloon shares with Pascal's diner.

He reaches into his pocket, fingers the cool steel of the gun there, and heads for the saloon.