



ANOTHER **BUSBY BERKELEY NUMBER**

or
SLIM KID CHEMISE
and the
WHISKEY BOYS

A Robert McNeal Book
Illustrations by Carol Kewley

This is a dangerous book. Deceptive by nature. In its claim to tell the American story through the moral and ethical outrage of the hero, it is in fact no more than a tale of rugged individualism run amok. The frontier spirit and Manifest Destiny are indeed for the hero. The right hero. For such a hero, for where such a hero treads, remember, we have your shoe.

Scythe

Another Busby Berkeley Number

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*For Jocelyn Talita Towers,
who came along
at the right time*

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BEGINNING CREDITS

Set decorations Shanti
Wardrobe direction Enie
Film score Juan
Choreography Madeleine
Sub-routine choreography John (nukemshoes) Davies
Continuity Emma Burrows
Production stills Peter Leiss

Key grip Gregory Thomas
Catering Christian Rantzau
Editing Andrew McCrae at Magic Typewriter
Produced by Art Bébé Studios
Executive-in-charge-of-production Tim Burnett
Directed by Frank Weissenborn





Prologue

But for a red '67 Mustang convertible along the night highway, nothing moves. The convertible glides almost silently, the low drone of its engine and the break of air past its long lines and chrome trim barely audible. Two persons are within. She, in a black slip dress, smokes the last of a cigarette. He, in black suit trousers and an open-necked white shirt, drives with one hand on the wheel, the other arm resting along the chrome of the window edge. He toys momentarily with a gray Fedora on the dash to the right of the wheel, and then looks to her.

'No.' She stubs the cigarette into the ashtray, her voice thick and lazy. 'The drive's fine. I like the silence.' She leans against the door edge, studying the blow of her brunette China doll bangs in the side mirror.

He faces forward again.

In the darkness, the desert glows a faint red; the sagebrush and cacti a violet luminescence. The hyper static of a radiation counter is heard from the back seat, and as it counts, a bead of sweat swells and falls to a pinched cheek. He takes the wheel with his left hand, flicks away the bead with the tips of his right hand, which, bears a gold signet ring initialed NVB. He accelerates, and with the speedometer reading 80 mph, shifts the stick on the steering column to cruising speed.

The car's lights illuminate clumps of vegetation on each side of the road in terminating flashes of violet light. A sound intrudes. The rasping of a metal lid screwed from a half-empty bottle of Johnnie Walker. She snatches up the bottle clasped between her thighs, pours into a glass

tumbler, takes a sip, and in the play of warm wind around the quarter window, leans her head against the seat back. Nipples erect against the black satin of her dress, eyes closed, she slips the glass beneath the fabric, circles slowly round the areole of a naked breast and moans; bedded by the warmth of the night and the warmth of the drink.

He looks to the rear vision mirror. A point of light suddenly comes to focus within. Clenching his hand, he thumps the steering wheel. 'There's a car coming.'

Eyes wide, she sits up.

'I think it's Pearlstein,' he adds.

'It can't be.' She is now fully upright in her seat, attempting to turn around.

'Who else?'

'But we shot him back at the studio, in Movietown, he's dead.' She wedges the bottle between her seat and the gearshift housing and climbs to her knees to face around.

He answers, 'We shot the idea of him. The reality's quite different.'

She shrugs, looking over the seat. 'So the studio brought him back. Who cares?'

'We do.' He makes an adjustment to the mirror, centering the trailing car's lights.

She looks between the seats, failing to find the bottle, which, now rolls around in the foot well. She climbs down from the seat to retrieve it, knocks back another swig, and then offers it to him. He shakes his head, saying simply, 'When it's over.'

'More for me then, huh.' She smiles, finishing her glass, and then opens the glove compartment. Within lies a Colt M1911 semi- auto, a

Glock M27, and a black leather handbag with a gold clasp. She removes the Glock M27, placing the bottle and whiskey tumbler in its place. 'Just let him get closer.' She checks the gun's slide. 'He's got guts, but it's not going to help him dead.'

'I think he's playing with us.' He again has his eyes to the mirror. 'Hanging back.'

She is back on her knees, facing over the seat. She raises the Glock into the air. Waving it, she yells, 'You're a ham, Pearlstein. You've no backbone.'

He feels out the accelerator. This releases the cruise lock.

He then takes his foot away, slowing the Mustang.

'That's it.' She looks towards him from over her shoulder. 'Let him catch up. See if he can take the heat.' She bounces on the seat, then reaches into the back to lift the radiation counter, exclaiming, 'It's reading one hundred per minute.'

'A beau-ti-ful stream.' He smacks his lips, smiles, and drums his hands upon the wheel. 'That Johnny, he's a-good-boy.'

'Hey!' she shouts. 'Cut the phony accent. It's not you.' 'Sorry.' He returns his attention to the road.

Something flies out of the night. It splats on the windshield, leaving a smudge that spreads half across the driver's side. He switches on the wipers, saying, 'That's the second one tonight. What's with the flies around here?'

She shrugs, keeping her concentration on the lights behind. 'We're doing fifty.' He downshifts. 'That should be slow enough?'

'Don't make it too obvious. Let him make the next move.'

Her elbows propped on the seat back, she stares down the gun barrel.

‘We’ll fix him for good this time. I think he’s yellow.’ A smile brightens her face. ‘I need another drink.’

‘What?’ He faces toward her.

‘I can’t see straight.’

He laughs, slapping her buttocks, and shouts, ‘He’s closed up!’

‘Damn. Let me get a shot.’

Matching their speed, Pearlstein’s car is now visible as a white, ’64 Mustang sedan. She cocks the gun’s firing hammer, then falls sideways against the door.

‘You idiot,’ he yells. ‘He snatches the gun from her and wedges it beneath his thigh. ‘What the hell?’

Pearlstein’s headlights suddenly blaze in the mirror as he accelerates towards them, swerves and speeds past.

‘Help me up.’ She struggles with a hand, unable to get a grip on the seat.

‘You’d better sober up.’ He grips her by the elbow and pulls her back into the seat.

The night is now visibly darker, and the wind cooler. In the distance, lightning strikes from black clouds. He keeps his attention on Pearlstein. Planting the accelerator, the big-block 320-horsepower convertible thunders down the road. Handing over her gun, he says, ‘We’re catching up. Get ready.’

Ahead, in the growing dark, Pearlstein’s tail lights are now visible. She lays the gun on the dash, and then works at smoothing her dress and straightening her stockings and suspenders. Finally, she takes her puff and scarlet lipstick from her handbag, touches up her lips and face, circling her tongue around her lips till they glisten. Returning the hand-

bag to the glove compartment, she looks to the sky. There is a flash of lightning. She shivers, says, 'It's going to storm.'

'Do you still want to take him out?'

She winks, snatching up the readied Glock from the dash. 'Then let's do it.' He grips the wheel, gritting his teeth.

She rests back against the seat, legs stretched, the barrel of the Glock poised against her cheek.

'Pass me the counter.' 'What?'

'The counter!' he insists. 'What for?'

'I want to hear it chatter.'

'Oh.' She snatches the counter from the back seat and studies the gauge. 'Nearly two hundred. We're practically being bathed.'

'Just a pleasant shower baby.' He nods. 'We'll be clean in no time.'

'I want more.' She sets the instrument in the seat divide and playfully stamps her feet up and down. 'I love the feel of a good bath on my skin.'

From out of the darkness, Pearlstein's car begins to take shape.

'Is he worried?' she asks.

'Can't say.' He jams the accelerator to the floor, quickly closes the gap to Pearlstein's car, and rams it.

Pearlstein, however, suddenly brakes. The cars lock, their crash bars entwined.

'Let off the accelerator,' she yells.

He complies. This dips the Mustang's hood, Pearlstein's car is released, swings around, careers off the road and sits still. Now ahead of Pearlstein's Mustang, he stomps on the brake, then turns their convertible back round. They come to a halt on the opposite road verge, Pearlstein's car about 100 yards further up the road. He shouts, 'Get my gun!'

She removes the Colt M1911 semi-auto from the glove compartment.
'And now the bottle.'

She feigns surprise. 'I thought you said when it was over?' 'It soon will be.'

She lifts out the bottle of Johnnie Walker and hands it over. He takes a long draught and, screwing the lid tight, lays the bottle at his feet. He then lifts the gray Fedora from the dash, dons it, and checks the angle of the brim in the rear mirror. They exit the car simultaneously, guns in hand, both coming to stand in the Mustang's open doors, the rain just beginning.

The clouds are now massed, illuminated intermittently by lightning flares. Against the clap of thunder, both walk slowly forward, guns held in ready position; angled down. Each take in the rain; she with her slip dress pressing between her thighs and molding to firm décolletage, and he with his white shirt clinging to firm pectorals. Pearlstein's white sedan rests with its hood steaming in the rain. At fifty yards, there is still no movement outside Pearlstein's car. He says, 'If he leaves the car, shoot to kill.'

She nods.

The white sedan's driver door kicks open with a booted thud.

The sound of scurrying is heard, and then silence.

He signals her to circle to the left.

The rain is now torrential, the flashing of the clouds such that they seem to be within an amphitheater of dark and light. He shouts, 'Fire into the gas tank.'

She raises the Glock. Fires three rounds into the gas tank.

The sedan explodes.

Pearlstein runs from behind the car. He wears a white Stetson, blue denim jeans and a white shirt. The back of the shirt is ablaze with fire. He attempts to bring a white-enameled bullhorn to his lips, but collapses to his knees with a strangled cry.

She shouts over the rain, 'At the count of three, fire.' She counts down, 'One, two, three, fire.'

Both fire. The rounds ricochet and spark off the bullhorn's white enamel. Pearlstein jerks about as the bullets hammer the horn.

He winks at her. 'Seems we both missed.'

'Too bad.' She shrugs, firing a single shot directly into Pearlstein's chest.

Pearlstein is now completely aflame. His arms are stretched out to the sides imploringly, one hand still gripping the bullhorn. Finally, he tips forward to lie on the road, the flames little extinguished by the rain.

Half a dozen strides take them to where Pearlstein lies dead. They stand looking down, awash with the torrential rain, guns by their side. She brushes hair from the side of her face; he tips back his hat and says, 'Now to the house.'







ACT ONE

The time approaches midnight, the roller blind is drawn over the room's single window, and Edward G. Moore, dressed in gray suit trousers and white shirt, paces the floorboards, thrusting his hands into and out of trouser pockets, and tugging at his shirt front. His Remington holds a fresh sheet of paper. He stops to collect his thoughts, paces to the desk, looks at the blank page, and resumes pacing. Sweat soaks his armpits, his shoulder holster feels too tight, the Model 20 Magnum revolver much too heavy. Halting by the bookshelf at the far end of the room, he studies the wall clock above the door, curses the time, then turns back to his desk.

A chromium-tubing coaster chair is pushed into the footwell, and upon the green leather inlay of the mahogany desk sit his copy holder, a desk lamp, a stack of fresh paper to the left of the Remington, and a stack of typed sheets to the right. Moore takes a deep breath, searches through the handful of mocha coffee beans in his trouser pocket, tosses two into his mouth, sits in the chair, and begins to type.

Soon after, advancing only a paragraph, he reads through, curses loudly, then rips the page from the machine. Scrunching it, he tosses it into the overflowing beige-colored waste basket to the right of the desk. He then braves himself to search the typed sheets. The pile is inches high, and about a quarter of the way from the top, he finds it.

The old draft of his synopsis.

He had it right. The revisions were all wrong. And none of it his fault. He clips the old synopsis to his copy holder, and now, determined

to push on, he is quickly at his bookcase. It stands against the wall by the door and holds about 100 titles. Beside it, sits the room's only other chair. It is straight-backed, and made of brown-lacquered wood. He stands on the chair and selects three books from the top shelf of the bookcase. He slams these down beside the Remington, then resumes his pacing.

There are the key themes to consider, their relationship to the plot, and most importantly, the denouement.

As he paces, he tosses two more mocha beans into his mouth and cracks his neck. Doing this, his shirtsleeve catches the butt of the Magnum in the chest holster. This reminds him of last night.

He'd stood the cardboard effigy of J.W. Pearlstein against the studio lot back fence and emptied the Magnum at its chest. The effigy is fixed to a cast iron base with a swinging hinge. It appears as a grimacing cowboy in black Stetson and blue Nudie suit holding a revolver in shootout stance. The effigy is now returned to its position by the wall before his portrait of Busby. Further down the portrait wall, and beside his desk, is the small fridge and surgical cabinet.

Moore thinks to reload the gun. He steps back to the desk, removes the box of ammo he keeps in the top desk draw and fills the empty chambers. Keeping hold of the gun, he resumes his pacing. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches view of the effigy on each pass. This quickens his pacing.

The man had it coming. A hack.

On his umpteenth pass, Moore spins round on the balls of his feet, aiming the Magnum. He fires three shots at Pearlstein's chest, then watches as the effigy takes on a rhythmic swing. Satisfied, he returns to

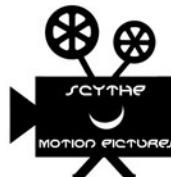
his desk chair, winds a fresh sheet into the Remington, and begins the redraft of his treatment from the top.

Two pages on, feeling the lateness of the hour, passing the still rhythmically swinging Pearlstein, he steps to the fridge.

The fridge contains a number of caffeine citrate drip bags. He un-hooks one of them, carries it to the intravenous drip stand beside the surgical cabinet, attaches the bag to the stand, and then rolls the stand towards his desk.

Back at the surgical cabinet, he opens its glass door to remove a small bottle of antiseptic ethanol and a cotton swab. He then sits in his desk chair, rolls up his right shirtsleeve, dabs with the ethanol at the top of his forearm, unwinds the feed line from the drip stand, and inserts the cannula and into his arm. He is then back on the type keys.

Like staccato fireworks, images fire to retinae and the keys of the Remington dance.





ACT TWO

Where the narrowing perspective of the highway meets under the crackling sky, there is a sudden flash. A mushroom flare domes a brighter flame, initiating a thermal wind at peak overpressure. Slowing the Mustang onto the shoulder of the road, Ned parks and leaves the engine to idle.

‘Is this what you had in mind?’ ‘Something like that.’ Chemise smiles.

Ned steps from the car and moves around the hood. Standing by the crumbling edge of the macadam, he brings a Chesterfield to his lips and lights it with a gold Zippo, its front face etched with a portrait of Frank Sinatra. The Mustang’s lights remain on, giving his silver-gray suit a phantasm shade. Chemise steps up with the Geiger counter.

‘How long till the wind hits?’ ‘Six seconds. We’ve spent ten.’

A cloud billows towards them, a rolling colossus like a great unfurling blanket beneath the black of night.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ She places the Geiger counter on the Mustang’s passenger side fender and links onto his arm.

‘It’s pure.’ Ned throws the spent Chesterfield to the road, crushing it beneath the polished toe of his Valentino. ‘Nothing can touch it. We’re going to be born again, sweetheart.’

Together they face the Mustang. She hooks up her dress, and sliding her backside up the hood, lies back, cradling her head upon the windshield. He lies between the V of her raised thighs.

The broiling heat and the keening and spiraling of wind-blown sagebrush and sand overtakes them. They lock eyes and make love to

the blurred stream of the radiation counter.

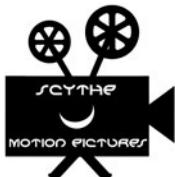
‘Thank you, darling.’

He rolls over, zips up, coming to sit with his shoes resting on the chrome bumper. Peeling herself from the hood, she steps slowly along the road. Upon the horizon the remnants of an orange- red nuclear cloud dissipates outward.

‘It’s like the sun,’ she whispers. ‘The sun on a new day.’ He moves up beside her, takes her hand and squeezes it tight.







ACT THREE

Eward G. Moore sits in his shirtsleeves typing on his Remington. An intravenous drip line feeds his forearm. As he types, the elongated form of a shadow suddenly falls across his back. It's the J.W. Pearlstein effigy, keeping up the rhythmic swing induced by the last three rounds that Moore fired into its chest. As the shadow retreats, a rapping sound is heard upon the door. Moore stops typing, listens, but otherwise does not respond. The rapping sounds louder. Moore stiffens. 'Who is it?'

'Who is it?'

'It's me, Eddy. I heard you were working.' 'That's right, I'm working.'

'Can I come in?'

The effigy's shadow descends once again over Moore's back. He stutters, 'Yes ... yes ... of course, come in.'

The click of the door latch is heard as the door opens. The man who steps through looks identical to Moore, right down to his gray suit trousers and white shirt. He closes the door behind him. Moore faces around to look at him, sweat spotting his brow, his eyes searching from side to side. 'Ah, pull ... pull up a chair.'

The man lifts the simple, straight-backed chair by the bookcase and carries it to the corner edge of Moore's desk. In this way, he sits facing Moore and the door.

'The talk is you're onto something hot. Something that will revolutionize the motion picture industry.'

'Yes, it could do.' 'Sounds interesting.' 'What?'

'The idea.'

The sweat increases on Moore's forehead. 'But I haven't told anyone?' The man shrugs. 'Yet the talk's all over the lot.'

Moore abruptly jumps from the chair. The intravenous drip stand is knocked over in the process, the coaster chair rolling against it, but the feed line holds in Moore's arm. The arm begins to twitch.

'The lot?'

'That's right. The motion picture lot.'

Moore stares down at his cannulated arm. He rips the cannula out, draws the Magnum from his shoulder holster, and begins to pace. His brow is now in a profuse sweat. There is another knock on the door. He quickly stops. Listens.

The knock is repeated.

Moore's doppelganger asks, 'Aren't you going to answer it?' Moore digs the thumbnail of his free hand between his teeth,

and then, facing the door, mutters, 'Yes – yes, of course,' and shouts, 'Who is it?'

'It's Busby. Busby Berkeley.' The answer is heard muffled through the door. 'Can I come in?'

More looks at the gun in his hand and hurriedly holsters it.

The door opens slowly and Busby steps in. He looks to be in his mid-30s, holds a cane, wears a Panama hat, and cream-colored suit with rounded collar and narrow lapels. Removing his hat, he bows cordially.

'Evening.'

Moore's mouth hangs open in disbelief. 'Busby ... yes ... I mean, Mr Berkeley ... won't ... won't you have a seat?'

Busby remains standing. 'I'm sorry, Eddy. I'm intruding. I heard voices from outside the door. You're with someone?'

Moore wipes at his face. 'Voices ... oh, yes ... Dialogue ... I ... I was rehearsing dialogue.' He looks to the chair by his work desk, which, is now empty. 'Please sit.' He nods in the chair's direction.

Busby steps up to the desk, peers momentarily down at the page on the Remington's platen, then takes up the chair so that he faces Moore. 'Rehearsing dialogue, yes, I understand now. And I have disturbed you! It's just that there's been talk ... you know ... that you're onto something hot. I had to find out for myself.'

From where he stands a few feet behind Busby, Moore stares down at him, his disbelief continuing. Busby remains calm, resting the cane between his legs, and crossing his hands over the handle.

Moore draws in his breath before he speaks. 'You heard talk?'

'Yes ... On the lot.' 'The lot?'

'Yes ... You're going to revolutionize the motion picture industry. Everybody's talking.'

'Everybody!' Moore's mouth develops a spasmodic twitch as fresh sweat breaks over his face. He coughs into his hand to help clear his throat, but finds himself unable to speak.

Busby plays with his cane, giving it a complete turn, and saying, 'Well ... we'll leave that matter for now. There's something else I need to talk to you about. I hope you won't mind. I'd like to suggest some additional choreography for the shootout.'

Moore stumbles back a step, his face whitening. He abruptly finds his voice and shouts, 'But the scene's been in rehearsal for weeks. Every step is down to the last detail.'

Busby looks up from his cane, his eyes calm, yet firm. 'We have to razzle and dazzle them.'

Moore's mouth resumes its spasmodic twitch as he repeats, 'Razzle and dazzle them?'

'Yes. Some glitz. I've thought of a chorus line of cocktail waitresses wearing fishnets and sequined minis. They're to hold giant bananas.'

Moore returns to his pacing. At the end of the room, he faces around and shouts, 'Bananas? What do you mean, bananas?'

Busby maintains his calm composure. 'Just like I said. Four- foot bananas. Like with Carmen Miranda. Something big and fruity.'

Moore hurries forward a couple of steps, now drawing the Magnum. 'But I'll need to rewrite the whole scene. Take it back to the beginning.'

'Yes.' Busby nods. 'I expected that. And we'll shoot from above. Everybody will be moving in synchronized patterns, like within a kaleidoscope.'

'But that's crazy. Moore lifts the Magnum and uses it to point and wave at Busby. This is a shootout.'

Busby finally seems taken aback. He sits straight in the chair, stammering, 'I'm sorry ... I thought ... I mean ... You know ... I thought you were working on something hot. Something that would revolutionize the motion picture industry. I only wanted to help.'

Back to pacing, Moore gesticulates wildly with the gun. 'Yes. Different. Something new. Something unique.' He taps at his head with the barrel of the Magnum, illustrating. 'From in here.'

'Well ... ah, um ... as you know, I'm the choreographer. I've got the right to have some input.'

Moore stops mid-stride. 'It's Pearlstein, isn't it,' he yells. 'This is his idea!'

Busby moves both his hands up and down the cane's stem. 'Well ...

the studio ... it um ... took things into review. Lehrmayer ... well, um, ah ... he hasn't got the sway he used to. He ... um, ah ... oh hell ... The suits held a conference with Pearlstein.'

Moore hoicks up his shirtsleeves. 'Pearlstein! They got him into a conference?'

'Yes, that's right ... Scythe wanted to talk to Pearlstein alone.'

'Alone!' Moore mutters under his breath as he passes the rhythmically swinging Pearlstein effigy.

'Yes, that's right. Scythe said, writers, what do they know? So they wanted to talk to Pearlstein alone. He suggested saloon girls ... because the picture's a Western. And then the suits said what about cocktail waitresses? So, Pearlstein said yes to that.'

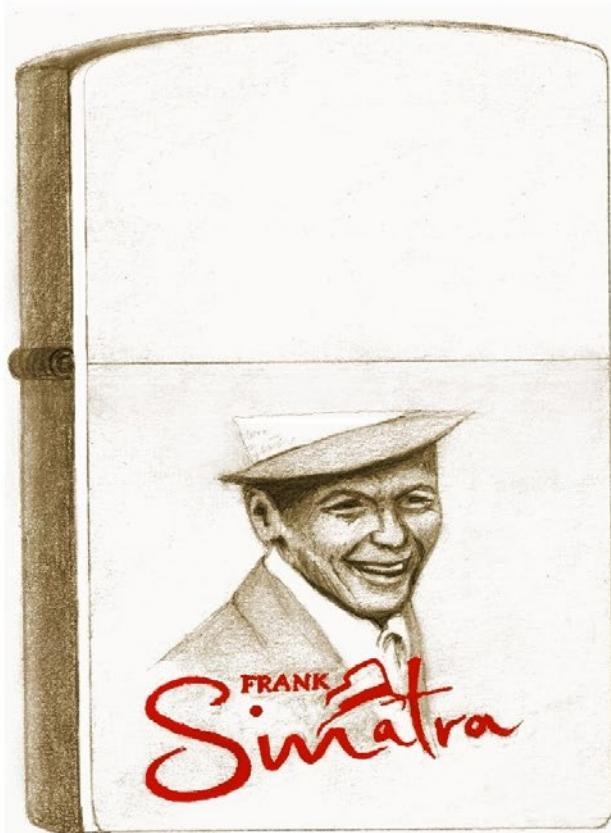
Moore slaps the Magnum from one hand to the other as he continues to pace. Busby continues with his explanation, saying, 'And that's when Scythe called me suggesting a routine with lots of leg and sequined costumes. Plenty of sparkle.'

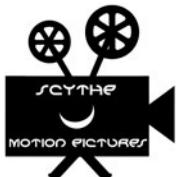
'Plenty of sparkle.' Moore repeats as his pacing quickens.

'But - ' Busby is suddenly out of the chair, almost knocking his hat from his head in the process. 'I thought of the bananas.'



Another Busby Berkeley Number





ACT FOUR

Warm early morning, desert stone patio, white plastic outdoor setting, and the tinkle of ice in a glass. Wearing gray suit trousers and an open-necked white shirt, Ned leans over the table and grinds a Chesterfield stub into the chrome ashtray. Sitting opposite, Chemise holds a tumbler of Johnnie Walker, saying, 'I had a dream last night ... After we made love.'

Ned pushes the ashtray aside. 'Sure, kid. I'd like to hear.' 'We made love beneath the bomb.' Chemise's emerald green eyes begin to glisten as she places the glass down. 'On the bonnet of the Mustang. I can still fell the tingle. The radiation washing over us.' She gazes over the grounds, rubbing a hand over her naked upper arm.

It is quiet but for a wind that blows from the corner of the glassed-in living room to the left. The wind continues to the right, dipping into the empty oval swimming pool, back out and over the pebble-mix edging, then the baked clay of the cyclone wire mesh fenced tennis court, then the pebble-and-boulder strewn grounds, to sway the faintly luminous citrus trees and cacti against the burnished amber of the encroaching dawn.

Ned chuckles. 'Some dream. Let's try it for real.'

She looks directly at him. He laughs harder, and it is not long before she joins him. When Ned recovers, he pours himself a fresh Jack Daniel's. 'Ok, let's get back to Ben. He loused up the party for everyone. We have to get even.'

Chemise picks up her drink and sips from it. 'Your plan's just a little

over the top, Ned, don't you think? It'll never work.'

'No.' Ned shakes his head. 'I just need you to convince Ben that you're leaving me for him. He'll go for it. He's a total rube that way.'

Chemise directs him her best reassuring smile. 'And I guess the others won't have any problems just shooting me dead?'

'Why not?' Ned studies the splintering ice cubes in his glass. 'That's what makes it such a gag. Ben's a part of the gang. He'll have to shoot you along with the others. He'll crack for sure.'

Chemise finishes her drink and refills the tumbler. 'So all I have to do is convince Ben to call in drunk on the night of the shootout.' She sips from the tumbler. 'That cancels the fight. Only it's ok, because we plan for a second fight, this time on the street. And that's when you want me to get Ben to mickey with Terry's chemistry set and Eddy's caffeine drip, getting each of them so wired that neither could hit the broad side of a barn. How much did you drink before you dreamed this up, Ned?'

Ned smiles. 'But we both know that the second time around Ben will get drunk for real. He won't be able to handle the pressure. So the shootout goes ahead, even though the boys are all loaded. As for me? I don't shoot. I know that in a fair draw you'll be quicker. So the shootout's loused up for the second time. That gets you away with Johnnie, and you come out here to the house. As for the boys, I arrange for Eddy, Terry, Benny and Long Black to scout ahead looking for you, while I trail with Ben. That'll give me a chance to work on him. He'll be drinking his own sweat.'

Chemise takes a moment to tuck a stray curl of raven hair behind her ear, then asks again, 'You don't think the plan could be made simpler?' She stands suddenly and clacks across the stone on her stilettos. She

stops a short distance away, her slim frame casting a delicate silhouette in the morning light. Ned says. ‘Sure it’s convoluted. That’s the point. I’ll keep Ben guessing.’

‘And all over a Polaroid? That’s cruel.’ ‘He sold us out didn’t he?’

‘Maybe.’ She faces back around towards Ned. ‘But he showed that Polaroid to Johnnie when he was drunk. He didn’t know what he was doing. He’s forgotten about it.’

‘He remembers, alright.’ Ned shakes his head. ‘It’s written all over his face. Fear and guilt, every time you mention Scythe.’

Chemise returns to the table. The sun has now fully risen and brings a glow to her face. ‘Pour me another drink, Ned. I need that liquid languor.’

Ned looks at her glass on the table. ‘But you just poured one. Your glass is full.’

‘Oh. I’m ahead of myself. Funny how you loose track.’ She sits, picking up her glass. ‘I kind of feel sorry for him. For Ben, I mean. He’s weak.’

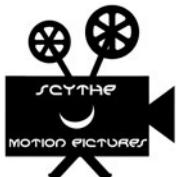
‘He’s a Charlie. There’s too many of them around. We nix him, and everybody will be better off.’

Chemise crosses her legs. This draws up the hemline of her shift dress, showing the lace of stocking and a Barretta 9 mm in a garter holster. ‘Ok, we nix him. Then what?’

Ned doesn’t answer. Instead, he sips from his own glass, rests the glass on the table, then stands to stare up at the Canyon wall. He feels the warm wind through his open shirt, and says, ‘I wish we could stay, but we have to get back. How about you drive. At least as far as the Otis, anyway.’







ACT FIVE

The street is a dusty red earth, appearing at each end to run straight into the night. The buildings are that of a small, Midwest town, one or two storey frame affairs, their clapboards either white-washed, or a varying shade of cream. Footways are boarded and roofed, and lit by lamp standards. The street is Main Street, Movietown, somewhere west of the Santa Ana mountains. Upon the west side of the street, the roof signage reads CAFFEINE EDDY'S 24 HR ESPRESSO & COKE. A figure is leaning against the wall in the café's recessed doorway.

Light from the open door behind casts across a gray snap-brim Fedora, the corrugated folds of a camel-brown, leather overcoat, the bottoms of silver-gray suit trousers, and the tips of jet polished, cap-toed Valentinos.

Said to have been born directly into Valentino diapers, and to have made of his cot something of the Piazza San Marco, Ned Valentino Beatty can shoot six rounds from a 44 Magnum directly through the buttonhole of a suit lapel without burning the stitch. He reaches with long, slim fingers and well-manicured nails into the inner pocket of his suit, removes a cigarette from his packet of Chesterfields and lights with his Sinatra Zippo. Holding the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, inhaling, he directs his gaze across the street.

Parked before the long plate glass of the City Lights Restaurant & Cocktail Lounge, is a red '67 Mustang convertible, its roof raised. The cocktail lounge is empty except for Charlie and Chemise, and quiet

enough for the clinking of coins to be heard through the slot of a Wurlitzer juke box, the slotting of a record to the spindle, and the slow step of black, three-inch stilettos to a bar stool as the sound of tenor sax begins. Upon the stool, long legs are crossed, revealing suspenders and black lace stockings beneath a black shift dress. A whiskey tumbler holding two fingers of Johnnie Walker is lifted, the drink is drained, and when the tumbler is slammed back onto the counter, a refill is ordered, the voice, thick and lazy.

Back across the street, coiling like the smoke from his cigarette, Ned hears the long, plaintive sighs of the tenor sax. The first splats of a heavy rain have begun, and he watches as it smacks into the dust of the street, sending up tiny puffs. He drops the stub of the Chesterfield on the boarded footway, grinds it with the toe of his right Valentino, and then steps to the footway edge. Eddy moves up behind him.

Eddy is a *Coffea robusta* bean, wet processed, measuring a thin and bony five-six, always on the ball of one foot or another, twitching with one arm and shoulder, and running fingers through permanently steamed oily black hair. Consequently, everything about him has been tugged loose. His pants hang, his shirt is out, his white apron sits half-way down his hips, and when he speaks, it is with a continuous sideways jerk of his head, each sentence jolted from his mouth.

‘She went inside an hour ago, Ned ... Saw her while I was cleaning up front ... She didn’t look too steady on her feet either.’

Ned doesn’t look around, but keeps his eyes on the Mustang. ‘How many drinks was she under, Eddy?’

‘Getting on sloppy, Ned.’ ‘And the veil?’

‘She had on that fancy one ... The one with the roses ... Like she was heading for a funeral.’

Ned nods and draws back his pale blue shirt cuff to expose the face of a gold Rolex to the light of the street lamp. He says, 'It's 11.30. You know the routine. Get yourself ready, then make that call to Ben. Tell him to take his position at the bar the way we worked it out. And make sure to add that he's to take it easy on the drink. Now get me my bottle.'

Eddy pulls wet lips over brown-stained teeth and is quickly off, careering with a series of jerks and twitches past tables. He soon returns with a bottle of Jack Daniel's. Ned unscrews the top, takes a swig, reseals the bottle, and then slips it into the outer pocket of his overcoat. Finally, he steps to the street in the direction of the Mustang.

Muddy puddles have formed in the increasing rain. Ned steps carefully, avoiding the largest of the puddles. Reaching the Mustang, he finds the driver's window wound down and the passenger seat and floor littered with pulp Westerns. One of the Westerns rests cover down upon the dash. He lifts it, reading, 'Tall Cowboys, Big Guns'. Scowling, he throws it to the driver foot well, then proceeds around the back of the car, coming to stand beneath the blue canopy that extends towards the frosted twin doors of the restaurant. He notices that his shoes are muddy, and stamps them clean on the red carpet. When satisfied, he steps through the doors.

There is a semi-circular flight of lacquered hardwood stairs leading onto a black and white tiled foyer. At the far end of the foyer, across from a passage, is the restaurant, its white linen-clad tables spaciously arranged. To the foyer's right is the gentlemen's cloakroom, and to the left, the ladies'. He proceeds across the foyer into the gents'. Its ante-room floor is a black terrazzo, the wall tiles a soft green, and within the cloakroom proper, the basins are ivory, the faucets gold, and these are set against black tile and a wall-length mirror.

By the far corner basin, Ned removes both shoes and rests one to the left, and one to the right tap, respectively. Standing in his gray woollen socks, he tears off a paper towel from the dispenser, and folding the rough paper into a neat square, wets it from the cold water tap, and then proceeds to meticulously clean both shoes. He returns the shoes to his feet, and then washes and dries his hands with the same thoroughness. Finally, he removes his overcoat and hat, hangs both on the wall hook, and stands before the wall mirror.

He wears a double-breasted, peak-lapelled, silver-gray wool suit matched to a sky blue shirt and gray tie. His black hair is luxuriantly layered back, but stuck with sweat around the hat line. He combs the hair, following each pull with the flat of his hand, and then slips free of his jacket, hangs it with the overcoat and returns to the mirror.

There is a Colt M1911 semi-auto in a shoulder rig.



Another Busby Berkeley Number





ACT SIX

The room has only two walls. One wall has a curtained window facing the street, the other, holds a six-foot by four-foot blackboard, above which hangs a wall clock, reading 11.15.

Beams comprise the ceiling, and suspended from these at the open end of the room, are two large 220-volt DC arc lamps that can be manipulated by a series of ropes and pulleys. A plain, walnut-colored wooden table and chair stand centered upon the room's floorboards. Upon the table, beside a dial telephone, sits a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam, and in a neat row beside it, three semi-automatics of different action and caliber. Holding a glass poured from the bottle, Ben (One-on-One Action) Edwards steps from the table to the blackboard

Studio-hewn from Mount Rushmore, and fitted without deviated line or form into a vested brown wool suit, a white cotton shirt, a red and gold patterned silk tie and brown leather Oxfords, all from Leading Man men's apparel in Movietown, Ben stretches to a height of six-two, has hair more golden than a Kansas wheat-field, blue eyes, a face tanned the color of light chocolate, and thick pink lips over polished ivory teeth set in a lantern jaw modeled to US Marine specification. He takes a sip from the glass, rubs at his jaw, and reads the bold, chalked typeface heading the blackboard, ANOTHER BUSBY BERKELEY NUMBER, and then studies the detailed schematic of the City Lights cocktail lounge beneath.

The arrangement of tables is shown as large circles, the bar counter as a long thin rectangle running the length of one long wall, the barstools

as smaller circles, crescent couches as Cs, within which sit the circles of tables, then upon one short wall, a quarter arc representing the gents', and upon the opposite short wall, another quarter arc representing the ladies, and the Wurlitzer as a closed half circle against the wall opposite to the bar. Amidst all this, Busby's carefully choreographed routine is marked in vigorous swirls of chalk and crosses, this a routine that had taken a month to get down with the precision that Bushy wanted. Now, each step, turn and draw of the gun was down to the last detail, and to add to the challenge, it was all to be shot in one take, with no reruns.

Ben takes a further sip from the glass, then facing away from the board, returns to the table. There he feels out some dents and scratches at the table edge as he studies the guns.

They comprise of a Heckler & Koch, a Smith & Wesson, and a Colt M1911. Ben picks up the Colt after putting down his glass and rests the Colt in his open palm. It is identical to the one Ned is packing, the most famous single-action self-loader of them all. He closes his palm on the stock and brings the gun up to stare down its sight. The low-level light in Charlie's had made it necessary to trick out the Colt with Tritium sights, one at the barrel end, two near the hammer. Keeping his eyes focused along the barrel's length, he steps back to the blackboard to once more stare fixedly at the carefully choreographed dance sequence. Specifically detailed along the bar counter, the third stool from the right is initialled SKC, and its partner stool NVB. He had to admit, it was a well thought out routine.

At the approach of midnight, following an argument that had Ned and Chemise leave their stools and drift out across the floor, Ned was to harass Chemise into a draw from which she couldn't back out. From

there, it would be on, guns blazing. He, Eddy, and Terry were to wait in the corridor leading to the bar, pressed against the wall, readying themselves only if they were needed. When the real fun of the pas-de-deux began, Ned would spring, Colt blazing, from behind an upended table, leap over Chemise's tenth round, clap calves together, land, take three running steps into the second elevation, a *jeté*, and then perform two turns in arabesque, followed by a leap and knee slide along the bar counter. That would finish it. Chemise would be shot dead.

But that slide? It had taken two weeks to get it right. Eject one magazine, clip in another, line up the Tritium sights, and fire, taking Chemise out with a clean shot to the chest. Simple enough, but the polish on the bar counter kept catching and bunching Ned's trousers. First, they tried kneepads beneath Ned's trousers. But Ned complained they ruined the leg line. Then Charlie set to work on the counter polish till his elbows wore out and he couldn't even carry a drinks tray. The last resort had been a specialist in floor glazing. Three coats of resin and a buff each time the counter got the slightest stain or mark. That did it. Ned took to working on the slide like a winged Nureyev, bringing it to a halt within an eighth of an inch of Busby's marked X each time.

Ben hangs his head.

It all started a year ago. He'd been drinking alone in Charlie's Saloon. It had been no surprise to find Ned and Chemise there. Charlie's was their frequent haunt. They headed a gang of bit actors calling themselves the Whiskey Boys. He had to laugh. That had to be no more than a front to do a lot of drinking, but they also claimed to have an ethos. They claimed to be fighting the system. And top of hit list was Scythe Motion Pictures.

Then, as luck would have it, at around midnight, a Scythe executive had come in. The executive had sat next to him. At first he'd thought he'd been recognized for the star he once was. But the executive was just looking for someone to get stinkers with. He recognized a drinking partner.

The night wore on, and Charlie's emptied of everyone except Ned, Chemise, the executive and himself. And all that time the executive had been laying it on thick about how good it was to be employed by Scythe Motion Pictures, and how right now he was just passing through Movietown, en route from the wasteland to the Scythe studios in LA.

And in that lay the rub. The executive didn't realize that thirteen years ago Ben had been employed by Scythe Motion Pictures when it was only a sports shoe company called Scythe Shoes.

Scythe had been at the height of the testing in the valley, when they were still perfecting the Scythe 'Sweep', the graphic logo that marked all their sports shoes. Scythe was looking for an indestructible icon. To be as famous as Coca-Cola. But they were having trouble with the angle on the Sweep. It didn't look quite right.

Then they got it. They dropped the Big One, and the Sweep had stayed on the billboard without so much as a burn mark.

Ben had been working as a male model and Scythe believed he had the perfect look to front their latest range featuring the Sweep logo.

And so there were images of him streaking along athletic tracks. Ben Edwards, naked but for stretch-tight blue elastic shorts and red, white and blue sneakers featuring the Scythe 'Sweep,' his bronzed, rock-hard pectorals gleaming with sweat, his muscular thighs pumping. And better, his blue eyes, Kansas wheat- field hair, and ivory teeth were dis-

played on billboards across the country, making him the role model for every wannabe-all- American who would get the girl.

And then Scythe broke into the motion picture industry. Ben became its lead action hero. He got the nickname, One-on-One Action, and stayed a box office star for five years, earning thirty million a picture at his peak. But then it had all fallen apart.

He'd made a flop picture. It wasn't his fault of course. It was the writers. He'd been given too many lines. The public turned against him. And from there, it only got worse. Five years ago, Scythe let him go. No-one else gave him any work, so he spent his time drinking and waiting, living off the money he'd earned as a star. And then, one year ago, he woke up after a two-week bender and found himself on the floor of Charlie's Saloon in Movietown.

He couldn't remember how he got there, and he didn't exactly care, at least not as long as there was a bar in sight. So he'd stayed, drinking out his days in this one-horse town, waiting till he got himself back on top again, which could happen any day now. Someone just had to recognize his talent.

So that night, after listening to the executive talk, he socked him one. Maybe it was only because he'd gotten himself more loaded than was good for him and wasn't thinking straight. But all the while, he'd been boiling up inside. Scythe owed him. He was the greatest star they ever had. They had no right letting him go. So he laid the executive out cold on the barroom floor with a firm sock to the jaw. And naturally that had got Ned and Chemise's attention. They came over and asked if he'd like to join their gang.

He thought it over then and there. He wasn't so sure he wanted to

be in an outlaw gang. Secretly, he still believed in the system. Sooner or later, Scythe would realize that they'd made a mistake letting him go. They'd want him back and he would be a star all over again. And then it came to him. He could work as an insider. Betray the gang to Scythe. He took up their offer.

Only things became more complicated then he could ever have imagined. He'd gotten involved with Chemise. She'd come to realize his star quality. That he had more to offer than any two-bit outlaw, which, was how she had come to see Ned. But sometimes he wasn't so sure of her. Maybe she and Ned were up to something?

Ben suddenly shivers and looks back up.

Outside, rain has begun to fall, and a wind blows in from the room's exposed sides. For the moment, the heat of the arc lights on the back of his neck is a blessing, but, nevertheless, he wishes that Pearlstein would be more sympathetic about how cold it can get on night shoots. Back by the table, the corner of the microphone boom catches his eye and he moves to where a bottle of Jim Beam and a shot glass stand beside a dial phone. A husky voice sounds behind him.

'Nice collection of guns, Ben.'

The Colt still in his hand, Ben faces around.

Wearing a full-length black mink over her black slip dress, and with her rose motif black veil folded back from her face, Chemise holds a Capri Super Slim to her red-glossed lips. With the smoke wafting before her face, Ben's eyes suddenly take on a glow.

'Cut.'

J.W. Pearlstein jumps from the director's stool, relaxing the white-enameled bullhorn from his lips. He stands 6-feet 3-inches, wears

Western boots, blue denim jeans, a khaki shirt, a black ribbon neck tie, and a white Stetson. Hurrying across a planked walk-way with a long rolling gait that breaks the knee inwards at every step, he springs onto the sound stage and comes to stand in his customary Donatello contrapposto pose, his right leg forward, the right arm relaxed by its side, and his left arm hooked to his hips. He speaks with a drawl, 'All-right Chemise, take-ten. Ben, yah come-with-me.'

Looking on, Chemise casts Ben an icy stare. She grinds the Capri into the ashtray on the table and storms off the sound stage. Pearlstein steps up. 'I'm sor-ry-Ben. We had ta-cut.'

Ben doesn't speak, finding that he can only looks to the floorboards. Pearlstein lets out an exasperated breath.

'Look-here-Ben, I've-been mean-in-ta-talk with yah for some- time now. Yah know how tha cam-era r-eads thoughts. And you've been telegraphing them. It's Chem-ise, I-know. You're all doe-eyed over her, not to mention pul-lin' up yah pony every-time she but looks yah-way.'

'Five minutes, Mr Pearlstein.'

'Al-right Jerry.' Pearlstein faces towards the camera man. 'Now remember tah keep that there Arri-flex smooth over them bo- ards. Da-flate them tires some like I told yah, and no-shakin'. I want one long take as she-comes-in and make sure yah crab round keepin' tha angle just-to-ha side.'

He faces back to Ben. 'We're gonna shoot-again-Ben. Now for Pete's sake, when she comes-in, don't make it look like you're gon-na make out over a-soda and a-coke.'

Ben smiles wanly.

Off stage, Jerry is bent over the wheels of the crab dolly, checking its

movement, while the clapperboard operator stands ready. Chemise has had her hair retouched and her fox fur blotted of drizzle. As she steps upon the soundstage, Pearlstein puts his bullhorn to his lips. 'All-right pil-grims, clear-tha-set.'

The clapperboards snap. 'And action.'

'Nice collection of guns, Ben.'

Colt in hand, Ben faces about, avoiding her gaze. 'You're late.'

'Is that a complaint?'

'It could be seen that way.' 'My, my.'

Ben shifts his gaze to the table, running his hand along its edge to feel out the dents and scratches in the damaged walnut. 'Any problems your end?'

'None. Ned never saw me. I made it look like I had a few too many while drinking at Charlie's and told him I better leave, then slipped out the back. The Mustang's still on the street, parked right out front. Ned's got no idea I'm no longer in the bar.'

'And Charlie doesn't suspect anything?' 'How could he?'

Ben holds silent, turning the Colt over and over in his hand. 'How can I be sure that this isn't one of your tricks, that you didn't mean for Ned to see you?'

Chemise stubs out her Capri in the ashtray. 'I took up your offer to work for Scythe, didn't I. That should tell you what you want to know. Ned and I are finished.'

Ben looks to the Jim Beam and glass on the table. Sweat breaks on his forehead and he looks away and down. The lighting gaffer allows Ben's face to shadow by moving one of the arc lights. Simultaneously, Jerry proceeds to reach along the length of the Arriflex, raising its aperture by one stop.

Ben continues to hold quiet.

Chemise stamps a foot against the floorboards. 'It's over between Ned and I.'

Ben makes no move. 'Ben!'

The dial phone on the table rings. Ben darts a glance at the wall clock above the blackboard. It reads 11.40. He hears Chemise.

'Are you going to get that?' Ben looks to the phone.

'That'll be Eddy, Ben. Answer it.'

Ben takes a step closer to the phone but still does not pick up.

'Get a grip, Ben. Do you want in or do you want out?' Abruptly, Ben snatches up the phone handle, shouts into it, 'I'm too drunk,' and slams the handle back upon the cradle. 'An-d cu-t.'

Slapping a hand to his thigh and jumping from the stool, Pearlstein hurries along the planked walkway, waving his free arm and the bull-horn. 'Good-wo-rk, Ben. Th-at'll-be-a-wrap.'

Chemise gives Ben a cold glance, then shifts her focus towards Pearlstein. She folds back her black mink, lifts her Glock 9 mm from her garter holster and shoots. Pearlstein falls back, shot directly through the forehead, and lands with a loud thump upon the floorboards.





ACT SEVEN

As a formulation consisting of a non-substituted phenyl ring, an alpha-methyl group attached to an alpha carbon, a two-carbon side chain between phenyl and amino radicals, and a primary amino group, his eyes permanently fused open, and the pupils hard-wired to their retinae, Machinegun Amphetamine Terry is all flipper action and chromium pinball bouncing. He currently wears a clerical suit and black, broad-brimmed Quaker hat, sits on an Arabica bean sack in Caffeine Eddy's back storeroom, and then not sitting on the bean sack, but over by the boxes of biscotti, he watches as Eddy enters. To him, Eddy appears to move as if being drawn back. Careful to modulate and slow his voice, Terry asks, 'Did thou'st tell Ned?'

Eddy comes to sudden halt in the middle of the room. 'Couldn't Terry. Just couldn't.' He shrugs up his shoulder.

Terry hears the words like slowly forming speech balloons. He is now by the door and fingers the rim of his broad-brimmed hat. 'So the good brother doesn't know? And Ben?' He shoots from the door to the bench at the left of the room, continues, 'Sayeth he is too drunk?'

Eddy finds himself unable to speak.

Terry thinks the situation over, his eyes to the floor. 'I believeth that brother Ben seeks to deceive.'

Terry looks up, though the movement is as if never initiated. His visage is one of cavernous cheeks sunk into terminal wells. A Heckler & Koch machine pistol rests at the bench edge. He snatches it up and glares at Eddy.

Eddy's eyes grow as wide as dinner plates. He is then so fast out of the room that he doesn't bother to use the door, _ he runs straight through the plasterboard wall.

They are mahogany swing doors with frosted glass inserts. The doors split open, revealing Charlie. He proceeds through, and comes to a halt as the doors close behind him. He wears a bowler hat, a tailcoat, over-sized pin-striped trousers and over-sized shoes, and keeps his cane hooked by the elbow joint of his right arm. Tucked beneath his left arm-pit are a series of placards.

Ned approaches along the red-carpeted hallway. He comes to a halt a short distance before Charlie, and as he does, Charlie lifts the first of the placards and holds it before him. Thick black marker reads:

TERRY CALLED

Charlie replaces this with:

BEN'S TOO DRUNK

Follows this with:

CHEMISE HAS LEFT

And finally:

SO MUCH FOR BUSBY

Ned tips his hat, gives a curt nod, and then faces about.

Hands within the pockets of a camel-colored overcoat, and eyes doleful beneath a fawn Fedora, Ben (One-on-One Action) Edwards watches from beneath a roofed section of the sidewalk. Across the street, Pearlstein's stretcher is being moved into the paramedic van. The director's white '64 Mustang sedan rests a short distance behind the van, and standing dissolutely around this scene, the cameraman, Jerry, and others of the film crew appear to be in some indecision about what to do with the Mustang.

‘You did well, Ben.’ Chemise steps up, standing herself beside him. She nods in the direction of the paramedic van. ‘That should keep Pearlstein out of the way for a while. I understand you’re still worried about Ned.’ She lights a Capri Super Slim. ‘Don’t be such a fool, Ben.’

The stretcher attendants slam the ambulance doors closed, climb into the front, and the van drives off, the siren wailing and the wheels churning in the muddy street.

Chemise grabs Ben’s arm. ‘You’ve got no backbone, Ben. You’re yellow. Tell me why I’m wasting my time.’

‘Fuck you,’ Ben says, whirling about to face her, and breaking her hold on his arm as he does. ‘I counted for something once. You seem to forget that.’

‘And who’s to blame?’ Chemise takes a step back, going on, ‘Wise up Ben. You could still turn things around.’

Ben is momentarily silent. ‘Maybe.’ He looks down at his feet, then back up again. ‘All I know is I’ve had enough. And I want to get good and drunk. Join me?’

‘Sure.’ Chemise drops the remains of her Capri to the sidewalk and grinds it out with the toe of her black stiletto shoe. ‘Let’s get good and rotten, Ben. Tomorrow’s a big day. We want to set ourselves up for it good and proper.’

Ben glares at her, but Chemise has already faced about, and is making her way along the sidewalk.

There is a spectral quality to the night street. The rain has stopped, a fog drifted in, and where the lamp standards light the sidewalk, doorways and alleyways fall into shadow. Chemise halts outside Caffeine Eddy’s, stares across at Charlies across the road, at the red Mustang

convertible parked out front. The night is quiet, as if all sound has left with the departing paramedic. The fog appears as a concealing and parting veil. Ben catches up. Chemise says, 'Life imitates art, Ben. It's funny how you can't draw the distinction.'

Ben snorts. He then takes to staring at the row of planks that have been laid across the street. He tries the first, stabbing at it with the toe of his brown Oxford, then returns his foot to the sidewalk proper, saying, 'These planks better be sound!'

Ben steps upon the planks without waiting for a reply.

They are too pliable for their purpose. Mud oozes over them. Warily, Ben makes his way along, reaches Charlie's canopied entrance, where he stamps his muddied Oxfords on the red carpet, scowls, and says, 'They're really doing this one on the cheap. They can't even afford decent planking.'

'You have to learn to tread lightly.' Chemise steps up behind him, her stilettos clean.'

Ben directs her a sharp look. 'Good for you. All I want is a drink.'

Chemise takes a step closer. 'That's the spirit, Ben. The town drunk. Central casting got that right.' She pushes her way past. 'And I'll hold you hand while you sob into your drink.'

They enter. It is quiet. Ben overtakes Chemise as she walks, is quickly at the swing doors to Charlie's cocktail lounge and, pushing through, finds the lounge deserted, the lights dimmed, and the chairs up-ended on the tables. Immediately at the bar, he leans over its highly polished lacquer and searches left to right. When no one shows, he slams the flat of his hand on the counter and shouts, 'Charlie. Get out here. I'm dry,' then faces around towards Chemise, a few steps behind, and just off to his right.

‘Where is that two-bit mute? Sun’s not up yet.’

Chemise stands silently, working on a fresh Capri Super Slim.

A door bangs open from behind the bar. A long way down to the left, Charlie emerges.

He wears his standard wardrobe of bowler hat, tailcoat, over-sized pin-striped trousers and over-sized shoes. He keeps his cane hooked by the elbow joint of his right arm, walks up to Ben with his duck-like gait, twirls the cane, and then tipping his hat, returns the cane back to his arm.

Ben faces from Chemise towards Charlie. ‘About time. Where’s your respect? You know I used to earn thirty million a picture. And I’ve got a thirst.’

‘That’s right Charlie, thirty million.’ Chemise steps up, pulling on the Capri and exhaling. ‘All sunk into a bottle. That’s a thirst all right.’

Ben’s back stiffens, but he says nothing.

‘We’ll grab a table if you don’t mind, Charlie,’ Chemise continues speaking. ‘Make mine the usual. As for Ben, roll in a barrel of Black Jack so he can soak in it.’

Ben’s back stiffens. Chemise smiles around the smoke of her cigarette, then turns on her heels and strides to the nearest of the crescent-couched tables. Ben joins her, seats himself to her right, removes his hat and spins it down on the table’s black Formica.

‘You don’t have to rub it in like that. Sure, I like a drink.

Who doesn’t? And I got a reason to.’

Chemise sits smoking, exhales a final time, then stubs the Capri out in the chrome ashtray. ‘But how are you going to feel tomorrow?’

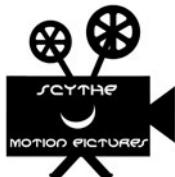
‘You’re forgetting the hair of the dog.’

Charlie has arrived with the drinks tray, a bottle of Black Jack and tumbler for Ben, and a two fingers of Johnnie Walker red in a tumbler for Chemise. He sets the bottle and glasses down on the black Formica, tips with his hat, twirls his cane, and waddles off. Ben pours from the bottle and raises his glass to Chemise. ‘Aren’t I supposed to be loaded anyway?’

Chemise runs her palm against the small patch of couch space that separates her from Ben, feeling its fine purple felt, and then her hand suddenly jumps to his thigh, where his overcoat flap has fallen open, her hand gripping through the trouser leg.

‘Sure. But it’s really going to be those banana peels that will have you off your feet.’





ACT EIGHT

Making their way along the sidewalk, Machine Gun Amphetamine Terry and Eddy continually check behind them. Terry is carrying a machine pistol and wearing his black, wide-brimmed hat and clerical collar. Eddy is in a black suit and holds a semi-automatic Glock pistol down by his side.

‘Jesus ... Fuck me Jesus ... Can’t see a thing.’

A thick fog has drifted in, following the rain. Terry tracks Eddy’s gaze, looking to the far side of Main Street, at the opening of an alley, but all that is visible despite the glowing lamp standard is a shadowy black form. Terry answers, but his reply sounds like the squeal of fast-forwarded audio. Eddy continues searching across the street, his pupils as large as black pool balls.

‘There’s someone there ... Someone in the alley.’

Terry now crouches in ready position, his machine pistol thrust forward. Simultaneously, Eddy jumps all over the sidewalk, the semiautomatic pointed from one side of the alley to the other. The shadowy black form is now beginning to look like a figure.

Terry fires.

The fog swirls, a cry is heard, and then the thump of something falling heavily to muddied earth.

There is a blur as Terry flashes across the street. Eddy follows at a lesser pace. Terry crouches before a prostrate denim-clad figure and lifts the white bullhorn from where it lies fallen from an outstretched hand. A drop of blood drips from the outer slope of the horn. Eddy,

silhouetted beneath the glowing lamp standard, stands
stock still, gun held down by his side.

‘Fuck me Jesus ... Fuck me Jesus ... We’ve shot
Pearlstein.’





ACT NINE

Yellow sand and sagebrush blows in a gale-force wind.

To one side of the street, handkerchiefs held to their mouths, a crew unloads from a white painted truck bearing the Scythe motion picture logo. Clear plastic sheeting covers the equipment, and Matt, the foreman, wearing a plain red, peaked cap, blue denims and a green and white checked flannel shirt, shouts from the sidewalk, making sure that everything is being handled safely.

On the opposite walkway, just out from the doorway of Caffeine Eddy's, stands production producer, Samuel Karl Lehrmayer.

He wears brown britches, black polished long boots, holds one hand to a feathered, green Fedora, and indicates up and down the street with a silver-tipped walking stick, saying, 'Zis zet I build wiz my own hanzs. Is best, I know vot I vont. Today ... no one understands old vay. Movies ... pfff.' He pinches at his monocle. 'I vont expressionist movie. Like Fritzie used to make.'

Caffeine Eddy steps up beside Lehrmayer and nods to satisfy the producer. He is wearing his Coffea robusta tin helmet, but is having trouble with the viewing slit. The helmet is too large for his head, and so the slit continually shifts about, obscuring his vision. Nevertheless, he makes a show of looking up and down the street to satisfy the director.

Lehrmayer continues, 'Is only vay of making good movie. You know of Fritzie? He make famous movie M.'

Chemise interrupts. 'So let's get on with it then. I've been rehearsing

all day for the right mood.' She stands beside Ben, in black shift dress and black, rose-motif veil. She continues, 'And Sammy dear, you'll make sure that Jerry shoots those close-ups. I've had my make-up specially done.'

Lehrmayer has moved to stand himself in the doorway proper, wanting to be out of the wind. 'Don't worry ...' He busies himself with the manipulation of a Camel cigarette into a long-stemmed ebony holder. As he works at this, Chemise steps closer, while Eddy waits at the sidewalk edge, still struggling with his helmet. Chemise says, 'You were saying?'

Lehrmayer lights and puffs out smoke. 'I verk many movies wiz Jerry. He shoot my best movie ... za vone about za boy. You remember zis?'

Chemise nods. 'Yes, Sammy. Now where's Ben? If he's been drinking again, I'll brain him.'

'Is alvays za zame.' Lehrmayer pulls on the Camel and works at correcting his monocle. 'Zhey must drink. Ve shoot anyvay. Fritzie would zay zis.'

'We're ready, Mr Lehrmayer.' Matt abruptly bounds onto the sidewalk. He wears a hands-free headset over his red, peaked cap. He briefly speaks into the microphone, then returns his attention to the producer. 'Sorry Mr Lehrmayer. I've just had confirmation that Pearlstein hasn't shown yet.'

'He vont show. I know zis.' Lehrmayer steps out from the doorway and exhales a long column of smoke, all of it quickly taken by the wind. 'He is no good director anyvay. In old country ve would shoot zis man. I vill direct.'

Matt breaks into an instant smile, bunching the lines on his rugged, deeply tanned face. He quickly relays this news to through the headset microphone, and soon after, bounds back onto the street.

‘Matt is best production foreman at studio.’ Lehrmayer pats Chemise’s arm. ‘Verstehen Sie mein liebes Kindchen, Sie haben ...’ He stops himself abruptly, smiles, and pats her arm again. ‘Sorry

... sometimes I vorget zis is not old country.’ He takes a step back and taps at his head through the green felt fedora with his middle finger, ‘I vill show you vot I have up here. Vot I know. Zis storm is best zing for movie. Ve vill not need Pearlstein.’ Lehrmayer thumps the tip of walking stick upon the boards of the walkway, turns abruptly toward the street and, clapping his hands loudly three times in quick succession, shouts, ‘I vont locations please ... Alle ... machen Sie schnell.’

Heads turn towards him up and down the street. There is a flurry of activity. Lehrmeyer, doing his best to see into the blowing sagebrush and sand, takes in the readying set, biting down hard on the cigarette holder.

The Scythe truck now stands parked across the width of the street to the right, forming a partial windbreak. Two 1000-watt fresnal-lensed spotlights have been set up at its front and back, their light focused ahead 50 yards, to where Chemise is to come into frame. Catching the wind-blown sand, the light creates the effect of a blanketing haze. Shifting his attention to the far side of the street, Lehrmayer watches the tracking crane overhead. From around its wheels to the left, ducking past the gaffer and clapper-loader, Jerry makes his way towards him, clutching a light meter and shielding his eyes with his hand. He shouts, ‘I still need to plan some camera angles, Mr Lehrmayer.’

‘Is ok.’ Lehrmayer lights a fresh Camel. ‘Set ze krane so zat it can shoot extreme close on Chemise and Ned. Also, Terry must have close-up. I have only plans for a few scenes at any time and vill know better as ve go through ze takes. You understand, yes?’

Jerry nods and rushes back beneath the crane.

Along the full length of the street, the set is nearly complete.

Dressed in green and yellow sequined tailcoats and fishnets, the chorus line of 12 girls hold four-foot bananas, six per wing, forming a V. Chemise stands in the spot light at the tip. Ben, escorted from make-up by an assistant, stands upon the sidewalk, his head lolling. Pacing behind him is Caffeine Eddy, his helmet still with a mind of its own. He pushes an IV drip stand with his left hand, and holds a semiautomatic Glock pistol in his right, with which he gesticulates wildly through the air. Ned stands in the mouth of the V, his overcoat whipping about him, and his Fedora lifting and flapping, but saved from taking to the air by double-sided adhesive tape on the inside of its brim. Looking upwards, Lehrmayer checks on the tracking crane.

It is performing a practice run, the camera angled from a height just above the roof tops. When it comes to a stop above Chemise at the tip of the V, and is just about to make its return run, Lehrmayer feels his right arm suddenly bumped. Wheeling round, he is just quick enough to catch the sight of a blurred motion beyond the focusing point of the fresnals.

It is Terry.

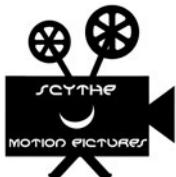
Lehrmayer adjust his monocle, trying to make him out afresh, only to have Matt run up, breathless.

‘It’s Pearlstein, Mr Lehrmayer ... He’s been shot ... A machine pistol ... I found him dead outside his car in the lane opposite Eddy’s.’

Lehrmayer snatches the cigarette holder from his teeth, takes in a deep breath, and exclaims, ‘Good, is best zing for movie. Now ve prepare for action.’







ACT TEN

Over the newly formed Coachella Canyon, the sky is an amber whiskey, and the clouds black and bristling with electric charges.

The canyon extends in a ragged semicircular line to the foothills of the East San Bernardino Mountains, and of the desert towns Palm Springs, Cathedral City, Thousand Palms, Rancho Mirage, Indio and Cabazon, nothing remains but red sand, sagebrush and cacti. A highway follows the canyon north, and at the end of a macadam turnoff 400 yards into the desert, within its fenced garden of cacti and citrus trees, stands Sinatra House. In the gathering evening, the horses Bender and Maggio stand watching from the canyon edge. Bender wears a pork-pie hat and black, horn- rimmed spectacles, and puffs on his pipe. Maggio wears a sombrero.

‘The Promised Land, um … ah, Bender.’ ‘Eden across the wide Missouri, Maggio.’ ‘Um … ah, onward and outward.’ ‘Manifest destiny.’ Bender snorts.

Scythe had bought out the entire Coachella Valley, and relocated its population so that it could build a nuclear drop site called Nukemtown north of Palm Springs.

Thereupon, a 12-foot by 6-foot billboard featuring a prototype Scythe logo was placed within a demarcated circle on an acre of macadam, and a one-megaton bomb was exploded at an altitude of two-miles. Sadly, nothing remained of the billboard, but thus began Scythe’s testing program. The goal? The design of the Scythe logo as an indestructible icon.

Six years of unsuccessful testing followed before the crucial break-

through. Having tightened the curve of the Scythe Sweep by 0.01 degrees, a 20-megaton bomb was dropped, and the logo on the billboard was left with no more than powder burn. However, the explosion proved calamitous for the Coachella Valley. In the most remarkable of geological catastrophes, the land sank half a mile into the earth, leaving nothing of the towns and cities in the valley with one remarkable exception. Sinatra House.

Thereafter, though much vexed by the survival of the house, Scythe claimed dominion over the new canyon, and commanded, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over men.’ It was made so, and seen to be good, and in the seventh year, abandoning the canyon, Scythe rested.

‘And the effigy, it lives on?’ Bender directs a bookish gaze downwards through his spectacles, and puffs on his pipe as he contemplates the question.

‘Um … ah, legend records that, Scythe, while flying over the canyon one last time, the Sinatra effigy was seen to step from the house, give, um … ah a bow, raise a tumbler of Jack Daniel’s in salute, then, um … ah, step back into the house.

Bender snorts and shakes his head, nearly relieving himself of his pork-pie hat. ‘And the rumors? They say you can hear singing across the wasteland. Tunes lonely and haunting, warning of revenge?’

‘Um … ah, yes. During the wee small hours.’

‘And things are alive in the canyon, abominations from the testing program?’

‘Um … ah, yes. Props and effigies.’

Both stand reverent for a minute. Following this, Bender is the first

to move, his hooves clop along the ridge to where a jagged spear of rock juts over the canyon. ‘We’re going to need the binoculars. Ned can’t expect us to see anything without them.’

‘They’re, um … ah, with Black Jack.’

Maggio draws up along side him, the rim of his sombrero flapping in a fresh wind. He follows Bender’s downward gaze, tightening the draw string on his sombrero by gripping with his teeth and pulling.

The desert’s nightly glow has now set in. The grounds of Sinatra House are awash with light, the sagebrush and cacti emanating a violet, halo-like aura.

Bender whispers, ‘Ned’s at his wardrobe.’

Maggio swallows and blinks. ‘We better, um … ah, wait here then.’

Bender nods.

Ned ‘Valentino’ Beattie, not wanting to be seen in anything less than his full Valentino ensemble, comprising of black oilskin, shirt, vest, denims, Stetson, neckerchief, and snakeskin boots, the clothes smoothed and steam pressed to within designer specification, and the boots polished as mirrors, has brought his wardrobe and laundry train with him. The train stands as a series of four-wheeled, open-sided platforms, unhitched from Maggio, and now drawn in a line extending back from the canyon, the three platforms loaded respectively with a wardrobe, a washing machine, and the last, a dryer and a steam press.

The wardrobe’s twin doors are mirrored, and ringed with 60-watt, battery-powered globes. Ned stands between the doors, keyed in the mirror light, his hands on his hips and his oilskin swept behind him, as he inspects the strapped angle of his two hip holsters. The right holster packs a Colt revolver, and the left, an aerosol of Black Flag, reformulated

for extra strength. Both weapons are slung insouciantly low. He faces about, and strides towards the ridge where Bender and Maggio stand.

‘Any sign of them?’

‘We need the binoculars.’ Bender answers. ‘Then get them.’

Bender is quickly on his way.

‘And what about you?’ Ned directs his attention towards Maggio. ‘It’s almost night and I’m getting nothing but talk.’

‘Um … ah, I see them now, approaching the turn-off.’ Maggio snorts.

‘Good. And the Geiger counter?’

Maggio stretches his neck as far out over the canyon as he dares. ‘Um … ah, yes, it’s with Black Jack.’

Now seen approaching the house in single file along the macadam road, are two horses and their riders. The second of the horses, Long Black, tows a giant, pneumatic-tired Geiger counter.

Ned pushes up beside Maggio. ‘We’ll follow tomorrow, taking the Otis. Now where are those binoculars?’

‘The Otis!’ Maggio mutters and swallows, hanging his head. ‘I’ve got the binoculars.’ Bender has returned in the

meantime, standing himself directly behind Ned, and to the side of Maggio. The binoculars are looped around his neck. Ned wastes no time removing them, almost knocking Bender’s pork-pie hat from his head as he does, lifts the binoculars to his eyes, and studies the house.

‘Ben isn’t looking too good.’ Bender has recovered, but saying this, steps back.

Ned wheels round. ‘What?’

‘He had a bottle on the ride up.’ Bender takes a further step back.

‘Damn him!’ Ned quickly reaches Bender, returning the binoculars

around his neck, and strides on towards the steam press. He finds Ben sitting slumped on the edge of the platform, his head in his hands.

Ben (One-on-One Action) Edwards has completely unravelled, his Heston-Lancaster suit now a sad mix-and-match bowery ensemble of sweat-soaked, green and white checked flannel shirt, frayed blue denims, elastic-sided boots and battered, white, sweat- stained Stetson. 'She went thataway, Ned.' He lifts his face from his hands and points towards the canyon. His face is heavily made up with white powder, cheek rouge and lip gloss.

Ned ignores this and continues on towards Black Jack, their whiskey and pack mule, ten yards distant.

Black Jack is smoking a cigarillo. He wears a black, flat- crowned, wide-brimmed boater hat, and a gray and white patterned poncho, is loaded with three crates of Jack Daniel's on one side, and three crates of Jim Beam Black on the other, and also packs a tent, a yellow table umbrella, a pair of bar stools, various tools and assorted equipment, and has in tow a Mustang-wheeled drinks cart. As Ned comes to stand before him, he spits out the cigarillo and stamps a hoof.

'I'm tellin' yah again, Ned. If it ain't enouff dat I'm loaded down wid dese crates, haulin' dis drink cart, and packin' da kitchen sink an' all, I ain't black enouff to go down dat canyon.'

Ned takes a step closer. 'Would you like to say that again?' 'I said I ain't black enouff.'

Ned draws back a fist and socks him square in the eye, sending him crashing to his knees. 'Ben got hold of a bottle. How?'

'Got no idea.' Black Jack shakes his head, remaining on his knees. He manages to get to his feet, his boater hanging around his neck by its

cord. 'He's a souse ain't he? Probably kept one hid. Go ask him yah self'

Ned readies his fist a second time.

'Ok, ok. He sniveled it orff me. Dat's what I'm ere for ain't it? Tendin' whiskey.'

'Only on my say so.' Ned relaxes his arm and fist. 'Next time you'll know better.'

Ned moves on to the drinks cart hitched to Black Jack and squats down to open a door within its body. On a shelf, is the portable Geiger counter from the Mustang. He lifts the counter out, and then proceeds back to Black Jack and unlocks one of the Daniel's crates with a key from his jeans pocket, and removes a bottle. As he does so, Black Jack cranes his neck around to face him. 'If yah wanna warder down da drink den I say leave me oud 'ere. Don't yah know dere's a storm comin'.'

Ned's hat is suddenly blown to the sand. He picks it up, dusts it off, and then looks to the sky to see that the clouds over the canyon have drifted closer.

'See, I told yah so. Storm's comin'. Now I wanna ice pack. My eye's real sore.'

Ned rests the Daniel's bottle to the ground. 'You don't learn do you?' He socks Black Jack in the eye for the second time, and with such force that Black Jack is laid flat on his side. He then retrieves the Daniel's and continues back towards the slumped figure of Ben, the Geiger counter switched on. He unclips the wand from the top and circles it before Ben.

'Toxicology's reading high, Ben.'

The counter is chattering at its limit and Ned watches as the gauge needle arcs and snaps into two pieces against the stop. He throws the machine to the sand.

‘Now look want you gone and done, Ben. You broke the Geiger counter.’

‘Genuine Jim Beam, Ned. Aged eight years.’ Ben lifts his head, a crooked smile suddenly to his face. ‘Set meself up for a real bender.’

‘I guess you did, Ben. Only, I thought we agreed. You were only to get it when I doled it out.’

‘Kept a bottle hid, Ned.’

‘I guess you fooled me then?’

‘Guess I did, Ned. Fooled you good. Drunk it all down.’ ‘All?’

‘Went down smooth, Ned.’

‘I don’t believe you. You got a fresh bottle stashed don’t you?’

It is almost completely dark, the sun having fully set in the west behind them, and the clouds moving in from the canyon now a rolling and billowing mass. Maggio and Bender stand stoically by the canyon edge, silhouetted by the flash of lightning. Ned unscrews the Daniel’s bottle he has taken from Black Jack and drinks, then nods his head in the direction of the canyon.

‘It’s a half-mile drop, Ben. You’d want to be careful, you know, especially seeing that you haven’t been too steady on your feet of late.’ Ned allows the bottle to hang by his side. ‘You’re no good when you’re sober, Ben, let alone whiskiated. It’ll be a long way down the canyon if you slip. Now where’s that bottle?’

Ben remains quiet.

Above them, the clouds have massed in a billowing front.

Thunder suddenly booms and lightning cracks.

‘Da barddle’s in da wardrobe. Look inside yah udda sedda boots.’ Black Jack steps forward, standing in front of Ned, a freshly lit cigarillo glowing like a firebrand between his teeth.

There is the sound of booted feet thudding across the sand. 'Damn.' One-on-One Action Edwards has made a remarkable recovery. He is soon lost in the dark, but it is not hard to guess his destination, he is after the hair of the dog, in fact, several dogs.

'Wad about da umbrella? I wanna be dry.'

Ned hurriedly retrieves the Geiger counter from the sand. He tosses this at Black Jack's head, hitting him square in the snout, and then follows this by socking him in the eye for the third time, leaving Black Jack reeling, but not falling. In the increasing wind, Ned is again upon the rock spear. At its tip, Maggio and Bender stand shoulder to shoulder, Bender tenaciously peering through the binoculars. Ned yells, 'Both of you get back. I'll take over.' Bender and Maggio graciously retreat, while Ned, having snatched back the binoculars, trains them upon the house.

The cacti now glow an intense violet, illuminating the house, and Ned tracks along a path lying between the flora. He holds momentarily on the shadowed outline of a wall, then searches back and forth till he finds the lit window. Satisfied, he lowers the binoculars, then drinks from the Daniel's, only to have the first splat of heavy rain strike the bottle's end. This is followed by a shout behind him.

'Got the booze, Ned. Gonna set meself up for a real bender.'

Ben stands with his hat blown from his head, and his rouged lips pulled in a frenzied grimace, the Jim Beam bottle raised in the air before him. Against the boom of thunder and crack of lightning, Ned draws his gun, hurries from the rock spear, and as he runs, shoots the bottle directly through the red-ribboned B of the label. Whiskey and glass explode to the ground, leaving Ben holding the bottle's broken neck, his mouth agape.

Ned reaches Ben and points at the spilled mess with the barrel of the Colt. 'Lick it up, Ben.'

Ben does not move, his mouth remaining agape.

'I said lick it up.' Ned moves closer, pressing the tip of the Colt's barrel to Ben's forehead. At that moment, there is a sudden and tumultuous burst of rain. As if borne down by the rain, Ben drops to the sand on his knees. He cuts a knee on a shard of glass as he does so, and then lowers his head, stretching out his tongue. Ned lifts the gun away and returns it to its holster.

'Good work, Ben, but I guess there's nothing left to lick up but rain.'

The rain is now a torrid stream, the lightning flaring in a continuing arcing lattice from the jet black cloud. Standing well back from the precipice, Maggio and Bender watch the water cascading over the edge, their heads hung, respective pork-pie and sombrero hats battered flat.

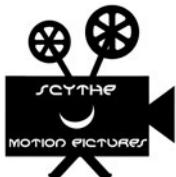
'Now we'd best pitch the tent.' Ned calmly remarks, looking for Black Jack.

"Bout time." Black Jack approaches from Ned's right, his lip curled in a sneer. 'Dis ain't exactly a summa shower,' he goes on to quip.

Ned socks Black Jack in the eye a fourth time. This time he crashes down, falling on his off side, and passing out. In sequence, Ben, rain plastering his skull and running in greasy streaks down his white cheeks, falls to lie beside him.







ACT ELEVEN

The horses Benny Dexedrine and Long Black, each wearing Ray-Ban shades and gray Fedoras, and sat respectively by Caffeine Eddy and Machinegun Amphetamine Terry,

are pulled to a halt at the end of the road. Sinatra House stands as they expected.

Protected by a two-meter, cyclone wire mesh security fence and gate, the house is true desert cool: flat-roofed, made of stone, smoked glass, and sand-colored clapboard, and nestled in a pebbled garden of mutated cacti and citrus trees. And there is every possible mutation of octillo, saguaro, cholla and prickly pear, all tangling and spearing each other like clashing armies of multi-armed lancers. But most foreboding are the Joshua trees that line the desert path winding its way to the house entrance, each tree with branches grown like head and arms, and the arms clasping long spikes like halberdiers at the ready. The surroundings left no doubt about the character of the Sinatra effigy within. He was the coolest, swingingest gunslinger of them all. With a Chesterfield and Jack Daniel's on ice in one hand, and coat slung over his shoulder in the other, he could still outdraw the best of Scythe's corporate guns.

Caffeine Eddy is quick out of the saddle. Under the fierce atomic sky, he passed second pop, reaching French roast, and is now carbonized instead of caramelized, his skin black, matching his black stovepipe jeans, boots, leather vest, shirt, Stetson and six-shooter. He moves on a few steps to where the gate's brass padlock and bullet-snapped chain lie in the sand at the foot of the gate, and there, finding himself standing in

front his idol's Palm Springs compound, is able to do nothing but stare silently while tugging at his Stetson, which is continually working aloft, borne by permanently percolating and steaming oily hair.

'Dost thou feel reverent, Brother Eddy? Thou shalt soon stand within.' Terry leans upon Benny's saddle horn with crossed arms.

Like Eddy, Terry has undergone a remarkable transformation. After Ben reformulated his chemistry set, sympathomimetic amines have rebuilt, carbon side chains have stabilized, and phenyl and amino radicals have formed new bonds, suspending him in a kind of anchored potency. His Heckler & Koch machine pistol is slung on a shoulder strap, and he wears a gray gabardine overcoat and black pin-striped, Prohibition-era Chicago gangland suit. His question unanswered, he turns to Long Black beside him.

'Dost thou believe the temptress still to be within?' Terry indicates the brass padlock and bullet-snapped chain by the gate with a nod of his head.

'She's long gone,' Benny interrupts, spitting a murky, salivated glob of chewing tobacco onto the road. 'There's no point wasting time here. We should get to the Scythe gas station.'

'Not so soon.' Long Jack has his chance to answer. 'We should check the house first, then do a read on the grounds.' He looks back at the pneumatic-tired, oversized Geiger counter to which he is hitched. 'They should read off the scale.'

With the setting sun, within the perimeter fence, like a bejeweled desert garden, the cacti and citrus trees have begun their nightly glow. Terry sits up in the saddle, and extends his arms to encompass the grounds. 'Wise be thou, Long Black, but dost thou not feel the holy emanations?'

Benny stamps a foreleg. 'It's nearly 110 degrees out here.

'That's the emanations!'

'And thou ever be the cynic, my hoofed friend.'

'I know what I'm feeling. You feel out this.' Benny breaks into a vicious buck, throwing Terry high out of the saddle. Terry lashes right and left at Benny's flanks with his cane, and regains his seat, leaving Benny to paw at the sand, and snort.

'This be holy ground, Brother Dexedrine.' Terry glares out from sunken eyes while adjusting the thong of the cane upon his wrist. 'Thou shalt show no wrath here. I warn thee no more.'

'Well, there'll be no need to remind Eddy,' Long Black quips in an attempt to lighten the mood. 'Look at him.'

Eddy has opened the gate and stepped onto the path leading to the house. In response, on either side of the path, the first pair of Joshua trees have thrust forward with their halberds. 'Thou be well advised to hold quiet, Brother Eddy.' Terry looks to Eddy, answering Long Black, and dismounts. 'We must be as scholarly pilgrims. Observe.' He lifts his hat and holds it to his chest in reverence as he stands beside Benny.

'Pilgrims?' Benny spits more tobacco. 'Like hell. Show me your Quaker hats and I may just begin to believe you.'

This is finally too much for Terry. He spins on his heels and thumps Benny directly in the throat with his right fist, and then kicks Benny's forelegs out from under him, sending Benny crashing to his knees. 'I have warned thee, Brother Benny. Thou will learn to kneel before the holy.'

'Three rounds,' mutters Long Black, ignoring them. He has moved up to the broken gate chain and nudges at it with his muzzle. 'That

would be my guess.' He nudges further at the chain. 'Going by the rust spots on the cut edges, I'd say that we've missed Chemise by a day at the most. She won't be far ahead.'

'Then we must hasten within to learn what beguiled her here.' Terry comes forward. 'But leave before dawn we shall not.' His gaze is to the sky. 'I believe a tempest approaches.'

Dark clouds are quickly massing overhead, blown by an increasing wind.

'Water's going to pour over the canyon like Niagara.' Long Black says, looking towards the canyon wall. 'Ned will have to pitch his tent well back from the edge.'

'Aye, 'tis so, Brother Long Black.' Terry nods his head in agreement. 'And so we must be vigilant here.'

'Yes, so let's hurry and get inside.' Looking away from the canyon wall and back up the path, Long Black, however, pauses before following Eddy. The other pairs of Joshua trees, imitating the example of the first pair, have also thrust forward with their halberds. To this, Eddy's hat has begun to resemble a clapping lid, sending up puffs of steam from his ever-faster percolating hair. Long Black responds as loudly as he dares, saying, 'Eddy, raise your hands and step back carefully. No sudden moves.'

Eddy begins a slow retreat. Once outside the gate, the leading pair of halberdiers snap back to attention, followed by the others, giving rise to a shuddering of branches down the line like rising dominoes. Eddy's hat returns to rest, releasing a small puff of steam, a coda to his relief.

'We're wasting time.' Benny has recovered from his beating and steps up. 'We going in or what?'

Long Black faces him. ‘Didn’t you see what happened?’

‘I saw a bunch of trees rustling their leaves. What of it?’ ‘Tis written in the Scriptures that the Shepherds of the Lord shall guard the house with barbed lances, all who enter, be aware.’ Terry adds.

‘That’s all myth. I been saying it all along. How did Chemise get in?’

‘Resourceful are the ways of the temptress, Brother Benny,’ Terry continues. ‘But mind thy tongue, I have warned thee.’ He brings up the muzzle of his Heckler & Koch, thrusting it towards Benny.

‘That’ll do.’ Long Black stamps a hoof. ‘Chemise shot the lock and got away with it somehow. If we want to know more, we just have to go inside.’

‘You want us to carry the books, that’s it isn’t it? We got to look stupid.’ Benny cranes his neck around, looking to the saddlebags which he carries.

‘Yes, Benny,’ Long Black answers. ‘We are acolytes paying homage to the legend. We must humble ourselves and set forth calmly, books clasped, and heads bowed. That’s what we agreed before we started out.’

‘And what about Eddy? He’s already overcooking.’ Benny shifts his gaze from the saddle bag to Eddy, whose hat has again begun to lift high.

Long Black thinks for a moment. ‘We’ll have to chance it. No choice.’

‘If thou say, so shall it be.’ Terry returns his machine pistol to rest at his side, adding, ‘Let me help you, brother. A book each, and to be held with reverence.’

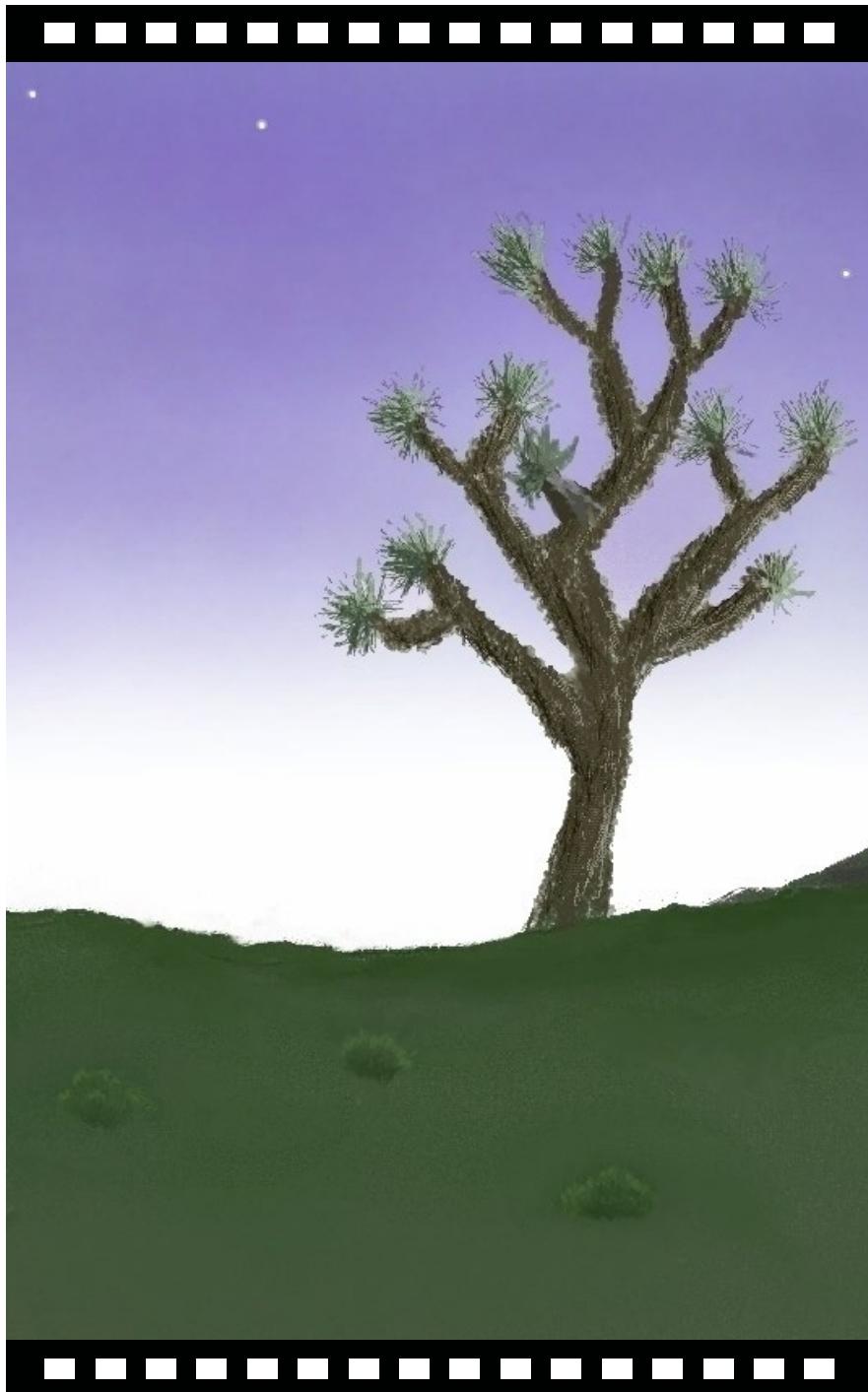
The books are scriptures and historical texts detailing the Sinatra legend. Terry removes them from the saddle bag and hands them around.

The halberdiers now gleam welcomingly. Terry takes the lead, his step solemn, the book clasped to his chest, and head bowed. Long Black

is next, towing the radiation counter, and the book held by a special thong looped around his neck, and then Benny, barely concealing a sneer, also with a book looped around his neck, and finally Eddy, jerking and twitching, his hat rising and falling, occasionally buffeted by the wind. At the entrance porch, they are confronted with flanked halberdier Joshua trees with lances at attention, while the open hallway beckons, radiant with light.



Another Busby Berkeley Number





ACT TWELVE

A few storm clouds prevail to ignite blue upon amber, and the temperature is already 98 degrees, though it's only an hour since sunrise. A barfly the size of a shot glass, with 10- inch diaphanous wings, and fuelled on a belly full of 100-proof desert cacti, circles the tented camp.

The laundry and wardrobe train is drawn in a semi-circle to form a barricade extending around from the canyon edge. Ned has lassoed and pegged his wardrobe as insurance against another storm. At the moment, he is by the dryer, unloading his denims. He is naked but for neckerchief, snakeskin boots, white undershorts, newly shaped and brushed Stetson, and his gun and aerosol hip holster.

Maggio and Bender stand vigilant by the canyon edge, gazing at the house. The barfly moves towards Ben, careful to keep the accelerated droning of its wings quiet.

Ben had fooled Ned again. Having tucked the secreted bottle of Jim Beam down his shirt front at the onset of the previous night's storm, he had then connived with Black Jack to gain a second bottle, and had raised this bottle as a decoy when confronting Ned. However, during the tail end of the storm, the secreted bottle drunk dry, he'd passed out while exiting the tent, to lie face down in the sand through the open zip, still clutching the empty bottle. This is how Ben remains as the barfly zooms in, naked but for midnight-blue, Scythe patterned, Calvin Klein boxer shorts, pulled loose, and exposing the cleft of his buttocks. Additionally, in consideration of his cut knee, Ned has wound Ben's leg in

designer cloth bandage by Vestimenta from ankle to mid-thigh. Smiling at Ben's hapless form, and exposing two pointed incisors, the barfly flies quietly on to sight Ned upon the steam press platform, pressing his denims. Steam erupts from the press in a thick cloud, and partially enveloped, the barfly moves on towards Black Jack, who stands a few yards away, tethered beneath the yellow table umbrella. Black Jack has a cold compress bandaged to his blackened left eye, and remains loaded down with the whiskey crates and equipment. Hearing the barfly, he pricks up his ears and sneers, 'Fock orff.'

It is at this point that Ned becomes aware. Enveloped in further steam from the press, he pinches a newly lit Chesterfield from his lips, throws the butt to the ground, draws his gun and the Black Flag aerosol, spins both weapons in his hands, jumps from the dryer platform, and sprints across the sand. Panicked, the barfly zooms beneath the umbrella, attempting to hide.

Ben is immediately wakened by the noise. Shaking his head, he struggles up on one hand, raises the empty bottle of Jim Beam before, and shouts, 'Got the booze, Ned.'

Ned hears him and is quick to aim and shoot. The round strikes beneath Ben's crotch, kicks up sand, upon which, Ben drops the bottle and flops back down.

This action panics the barfly further. Its bulbous eyes swell and prick red, and finding itself caught beneath the spokes of the umbrella, half-blinded, its wings beating with the unmistakable buzz of a 100-proof, it sights the umbrella lip, zooms beneath, and is soon lost in the distance to the east.

'Nice work, Ben. That was a liquor scout.' Ned strides over to Ben

and stands over him, scowling. 'It won't be long before it's back with the parent swarm. We're going to get siphoned dry.' Ned kicks, catching Ben hard in the chest. Ben curls into himself, gripping the sand and groaning. He tries to stand, but can only stare dumbfounded at his bound leg.

Ned explains, 'Don't you remember, Ben? That broken bottle last night. Cutting your knee. I got to worrying and thought you might bleed to death. Did some doctoring. Now—' Ned takes a moment to check the skyline. 'We better make preparations and bury the whiskey.'

Ben is quickly to his feet and shouts, 'I'll dig a hole deep enough to include the angel's share, Ned. You wait and see, Ned. I'll bury the whiskey good.' He struggles a bit to keep standing, his bandaged leg extended out behind him.

'I expect so.' Ned shoots at the empty bottle of Jim Beam before Ben, scattering glass across the sand. 'Otherwise we'll be emptied out like that bottle.'

Ben hurries off, dragging his bandaged leg, but halts halfway to the canyon edge, unsure where to start digging.

'Where dare's smoke, dare's fire.'

Black Jack is staring at the steam press, seeing the rising of smoke. Ned has forgotten about his denims. He sprints over and leaps upon the platform. The lid of the steam press lifted, he rescues the denims.

'Good pair of cut orffs dose.' Black Jack has walked closer, his snout curled in a sneer.

Ned immediately throws the smoking, ruined denims at Black Jack's head, then jumps from the platform and smacks Black Jack in the bandaged eye, knocking him off his feet. Black Jack falls directly on his side, causing one of the crates of Jack Daniel's to break, and the bottles spilled

across the sand, Ned snatches up a bottle, then loosens the tie on the shovel, and storms off towards Ben, who is on his knees, digging with both hands.

‘Whiskey’ll be safe Ned. Gonna bury it deep just like you said.’

‘This might help.’ Watching Ben’s fat, wobbling buttocks, dressed in their midnight-blue, Scythe patterned Calvin Klein’s as he digs, Ned swings back the flat of the shovel and smacks him clean across the butt cheeks, knocking him half into the hole, then tosses the shovel down beside him. ‘Now I’m going to get the whiskey crates, Ben.’ Ned faces about towards Black Jack, adding over his shoulder, ‘I expect you’ll have the hole done soon.’

Black Jack stands recovered from the punch only a short distance away. He puffs on a fresh cigarillo, and blows out a thick cloud of smoke. ‘Dat’s it. Bury da whiskey. It’s a bout time I got a load orff.’

Ned is quickly over. He shoves the cigarillo back through Black Jack’s mouth, flips up the end of his poncho, wraps it around his head, secures it with the reins, so that now Black Jack is now effectively muffled, and rebuts, ‘You want to be buried with the crates, just say one more word.’

A spray of sand erupts from the hole. Standing within to the depth of his shoulder, Ben is digging with ever-increasing fury. Ned carries over the first crate, and stands looking down, hearing Ben.

‘Whiskey’ll be safe, Ned. Diggin’ it deep. Ain’t no barfly gonna get near it.

‘Except you.’ Ned sets down the first crate. When he returns with the second, he finds that Maggio and Bender have left their position at the canyon rim and now stand staring down at Ben’s hole. Bender quips, ‘Is that China down there?’ ‘Um-ah, the Ming Dynasty,’ Maggio says.

Ned fixes them with a stare, before asking, 'Did you see anything?'
'They're heading for the caboose. We thought you'd like to know.'
'And Chemise?' 'No sign.'

Ned sets down the second crate and nods. 'Then you'd both better go back and check.'

Maggio and Bender plod back to the canyon rim.

Ned judges the hole deep enough. He reaches down, grabs Ben by one arm, drags him up the long slope of the hole, and throws him beside the edge, saying, 'You're to help now with the crates, Ben. We have to hurry.'

Ben, sweating heavily, and covered with sand, glares at the stacked crates by Ned's feet. This seeming to inspire something within him, he gets quickly to his feet and hobbles off towards Black Jack on his one good leg, yelling, 'Gonna give yah a hand, Ned. Be done in no time, you'll see.'

The remaining crates are quickly stacked in two neat columns within the pit, and the loose bottles from the broken crate scattered at random at the bottom, when Ned, standing at the hole rim with Ben, draws his gun on him, saying, 'Now get in the hole, Ben, so I that can bury you with the whiskey.'

Ben's jaw drops. 'Did just like you said, Ned. Buried the whiskey right proper.'

'Good for you.' Ned cocks back the firing hammer. 'So you won't mind guarding it. Considering all that effort you put in.'

Ben looks at the hole, incredulous.

'Six crates of gold, Ben,' Ned goes on to explain. 'I can't imagine any complaints.'

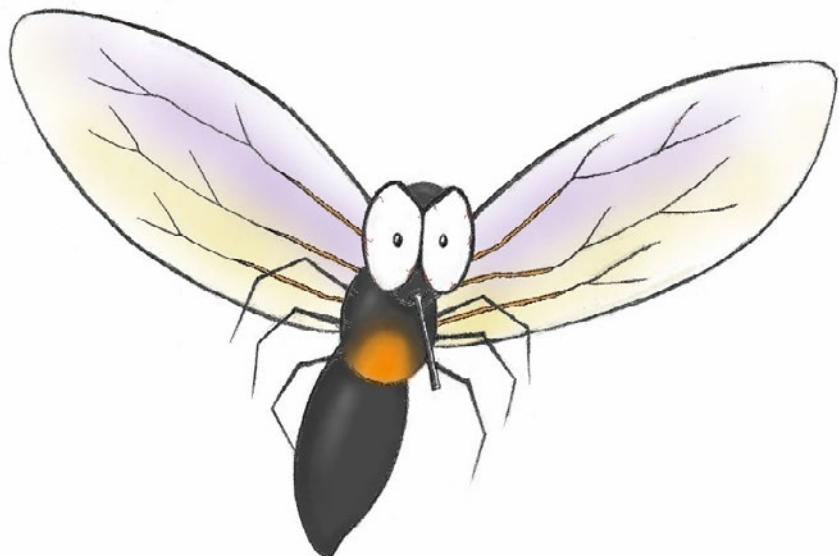
Ben's eyes suddenly light up. 'Barflies ain't gonna get no whiskey, Ned. Gonna see to that.' He jumps in, but having forgotten about his strapped leg, trips and tumbles head over heels.

Ned follows him down, long legs striding down the sandy, hole slope. He straightens Ben out, correcting his feet so that he stands on the lowest of the crates, and rests his arms straight by his side. He then climbs back out of the hole, hearing Ben behind him, 'Gonna stand guard over the whiskey, Ned. See no barfly gets it.'

The shovel stands spiked in the sand a few yards away. Ned retrieves it, and begins to fill in the hole, being sure to direct most of the sand over Ben's face. During all this, Ben keeps up his manic grin, his pale-lipped, blistered mouth spitting out globs of sand. Finally, he is buried up to his neck, and Ned retrieves Ben's battered, sweat-stained Stetson from where it has fallen just outside of the tent, and slams it down on Ben's head, pulling the flaps down tight over his ears. And then with hardware supplied by Black Jack, and the pine slats from the broken crate, he nails up a sign, and paints on it red paint. He erects the sign behind Ben's head, and then takes up a canvas folding chair, and sits ready with Colt, Black Flag aerosol, and the one unburied bottle of Jack Daniel's, staring out over the desert to the east. The sign reads:

**FOR ONE-ON-ONE ACTION,
LOOK TO THIS BUM.**







ACT THIRTEEN

Their entry into the house had not been without incident.

Stepping into the hallway, they immediately heard song, haunting and lonely, and turning into the living room, they had encountered the famous Sinatra effigy. It stood behind a lacquered pine wood bar counter, offering a Jack Daniel's on ice, wore a six-shooter slung to the hips, an orange shirt, and a black vest embroidered with 'I Did it My Way' on the back. Eddy's hat had immediately spiralled to the carpet, borne aloft on a column of blue steam. Already roasted to 20 per cent carbon, he had arrived at a roast well beyond any known type. Terry had sat him down at the bar in the living room, propping his feet on the footrest of a chrome legged, white swivel stool.

The bar itself is a wonder. Along its top runs a miniature, circular railway, its home stop a replica of the Hoboken train station. From the bar counter, the track continues along a wall, then on towards a mirrored shelf stocked with bottles of Jack Daniel's, the last of which is fitted with cantilever arms and a measuring dispenser. The Hoboken Express has engines at the front and rear, and now stands parked by the station, pulling five flat carriages carrying traditional rocks glasses.

Eddy is seated in a transfixed state, not having moved since Terry placed him down. Benny and Long Black face Terry from adjacent corners of the glass wall. Long Black shakes his head.

'I heard it too. All or nothing at all.' Long Black works a Marlboro around the side of his mouth. 'Poor Eddy. Who'd have believed he could boil over like that?'

‘The music must have been timed to play with the opening of the door.’ Benny answers, chewing a fresh wad of tobacco. ‘The whole house is a fake.’

‘You can believe what you want, Benny, but I know what I heard. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. We have to decide what to do about Eddy.’

‘Let him figure it out.’ Benny indicates with his head towards Terry. ‘Or maybe he’d like to send out a prayer … Preacher that he is.’

Terry sits an ivory-colored armchair, his legs stretched over the baroque-gold carpet, and his Heckler & Koch machine pistol slung over the chair back. He reads from a from a gold-clasped book on his lap. Looking up, he slaps the book closed. ‘And thou be a trial which I shall soon end, Benny.’ He reaches to the chair back behind him for the machine pistol.

‘All right,’ Long Black says. ‘The Sinatra effigy? We’ll have to take it with us. It’ll be the only sure way of getting Eddy out of the house. He’ll follow it anywhere.’

There is an immediate silence across the room as everyone thinks this over. Benny is the first to speak. ‘Ok, but for the record, I still hold that the legend is a fake. You’ll probably find a wind-up dial at the back of the thing. Has anyone seen it move?’

‘Blasphemers. Each of ye.’ Terry springs from his seat, snatches the Heckler & Koch from the chair back and trains it around the room. ‘Thou’st cannot violate this house. The effigy must remain.’

‘You’re obsessed, Terry.’ Benny glares at him, chewing on his tobacco. ‘Look at the facts. It’s all smoke and mirrors. As fake as Scythe Pictures.’

‘And thou forgets thy place, as always, Benny.’ Terry relaxes the pistol’s aim.

‘And what’s my place Terry?’ ‘Thou’st be a disciple.’

Benny takes a further step forward. ‘You actually believe this house is holy, Terry? A house belonging to a lounge act?’

‘Aye. And his spirit be manifested within.’ ‘It’s a piece of cardboard, Terry, that’s all.’ ‘It be resting.’

Finally exasperated by this argument, Long Black moves over to the smoked glass coffee table. He drops his Marlboro into the chrome ashtray and explains to Terry. ‘It was a horse trough you found yourself in after that crank cocktail, Terry. Ned threw you in. Not the hand of God that reached down to save you. I’m sorry. We’re taking the effigy with us. And you can put that machine pistol down. You’re not going to shoot in here and you know it. It’d be like shooting in a church.’

Terry turns about and steps slowly towards the courtyard window to view out. The citrus and cacti whip back and forth, lashed by a pounding rain and wind. Some of the trees glow violet. ‘The Lord’s wrath is ever vengeful,’ he goes on to say. ‘I sayest again … thou cannot violate this house.’

‘We have no choice, Terry.’

‘Then thou must see to it alone. I shall play no hand.’

‘Ok then. You’ve made your choice. We’ll tie the effigy to the radiation counter. But I still want to know why Chemise would come here?’

‘Sentimentality,’ Benny snorts. ‘This is where Ned and her spent most of their time.’

‘No, it’s more specific,’ Long Black asserts. ‘Ned would know.’

‘Then why not tell us?’ Both consider.

‘Tis that the good Brother has been much distracted by Brother Edwards.’ Terry turns away from viewing the courtyard. ‘Tis not on his mind to say much.

‘No, it’s more complicated,’ Benny says. ‘Ned’s playing with us.’ A three-way exchange of glances follows, and abruptly, Terry once more raises the muzzle of his machine pistol. ‘What sayest thou, Brother Benny?’

‘She came here for the Mustang. And Ned knows it. I bet he’s on that canyon ridge right now, cracking a smile over what chumps we turned out to be.’

‘Could be true,’ Long Black says. ‘Ned and Chemise might have put together a scheme. A phony play. That would be just like them. And if she came here for the Mustang, she would have ridden Johnnie.’

“Tis devilry at work. It be Nukemtown. The temptress rides there.” Terry runs a hand along the barrel of the Heckler & Koch.

‘Yes, so we can expect that Chemise has left Johnnie somewhere on the grounds.’ Long Black explains further. ‘We should find and question him.’

Lighting flashes and thunder booms. As if on cue, the Hoboken Express whistles and begins to chug along the bar counter. It comes to a stop before the cantilevered bottle of Daniel’s, decants a single measure of drink into the last carriage’s tumblers, and with the opposing engine now leading, the train returns to Eddy. His hat steams upwards, before falling back to the carpet.

The storm has abated with sunrise. Terry, Benny and Long Black, having left Eddy in the house, stand amidst the ruin of cacti leaves, citrus branches and thrown pebbles in the courtyard. They have argued through the night and agree on only one point: that they should search the grounds for Chemise’s horse Johnnie.

‘We better hurry.’ Benny is the first to speak. A slag tobacco to dribbles from his mouth as he adds, ‘If Johnnie is on the grounds, he would

have talked himself hoarse by now.'

'Thou'st will find the foreign-tongued beast in the garage.' Terry suggests.

'Or the caboose,' Long Black directs his gaze across the courtyard.

The caboose stands to the side of the tennis court. It has been renovated with prefabricated sheeting to resemble a log cabin. The inside is fitted with a sauna, a barber's chair, a massage table, exercise bench and Toledo scale. Long Black's intuition proves correct. They find Johnnie within. He stands on his two hind legs beside the barber's chair, wearing a silk top hat, red tailcoat, black long boots, and has his right fore hoof resting on a knobbed black onyx cane. As the group enter, he acknowledges them with a wave of the cane, and squeezes down on his monocle, which is held by a gold chain to the lapel pocket of his tailcoat.

'Aye! 'Bout time ye lads shoed up. A've beena stuiden here so loong I coulda been measuring ma whiskers with Robert tha Bruce. Onwyay, A'm richt gled ye cud luek in but ye're too late. Tha lassie's taken tha Mustang to Nukemtoon and had tha cheek ta look me in the caboose. I cannae say A'm happy. Then tha storm. She's a mighty wund that rumm'led in the glens and shouers that I not seen alike since I were a wee laddie in tha highlands o Sco'land. The roof was liftin. Tha whole caboose was liftin. And I was watchin tha Tooledo scale weigh air. Then I sees tha lights on in tha house an' I thanks tha blessed — '

Terry levels the Heckler & Koch and fires.





ACT FOURTEEN

Viewing east, barricaded behind the circular arc of the laundry and wardrobe train, smoking a Chesterfield, an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's resting in a lank hand against his thigh, Ned sits the folding chair beneath the noonday sun, Ben's head visible at his outstretched feet. Behind Ned, with shotguns at the ready, are Maggio and Bender, while Black Jack sits on a bar stool to his right, his muzzle dipped deep into a bucket of popcorn. Black Jack abruptly lifts his head, knocking some of the popcorn out of the bucket, and cocks an ear, while continuing to chew.

A sound like the muted droning of a squadron of propeller planes breaks the noon stillness, the barfly swarm becoming visible on the amber horizon as a broad smudge of brown. Black Jack swallows the last of his mouthful of corn, quipping, 'Dis is gonna be good.'

'Dem injuns comin' for fire water, Ned.' Ben also has an ear cocked. 'Buried it good, though ... Just like you said.'

'That's right.' Ned throws the empty bottle of Daniel's into the sand. It rolls to rest beside Ben's head as Ned turns to spit into a spittoon to the right of his chair, before facing back to Ben and adding, 'And you're standing on it. Only let's get back to talking about that last shootout, Ben. The one against Chemise. You know ... your big day with the gun.'

Ben blinks sweat from his eyelids, but otherwise holds silent, edging the tip of a swollen tongue over cracked lips.

Ned takes a final draw on the Chesterfield, then flicks the butt at the sign behind Ben's head.

‘Now listen up, Ben. Busby had the routine well worked for Charlie’s. You remember. That night you said you were too drunk. Well—’ Ned pauses for effect. ‘I don’t believe you. Any comment?’

‘Injuns are getting closer, Ned. Best get those wagons in a circle.’

‘Got them circled already, Ben.’ Ned checks the sky. The barfly swarm is now visible as a shimmering blue cloud. Ned smiles, and presses his face close to Ben, elbow points rested upon his knees. ‘You disappoint me Ben. I thought you could take your liquor.’

‘Injuns ain’t gonna get no booze, Ned. Gonna head ’em off at the pass with aerosol and six-shooter.’

Black Jack chews down the last of the bucket’s popcorn and then faces his one good eye towards Maggio and Bender. ‘Dis is nuts. I’m going fa more popcorn. You guys wun-any?’

Maggio and Bender shake their heads in unison, more shocked at reprisals from Ned than anything else. Maggio stutters, ‘We bet-ter, um-ah, keep at the-ready.’

Black Jack heaves himself from the stool with the popcorn bucket clenched between his teeth and plods towards the popcorn maker on the drinks cart. As he nears, a huge shadow passes over him, and he hears an ear-splitting noise like thousands of buzz saws on the go. The popcorn bucket is blown from this mouth, he remains still, and forgets about replenishing the popcorn.

‘Dem’s injuns on a warpath, Ned, comin’ for fire water,’ Ben yells.

‘Interview’s over then, Ben.’ Ned stands and lifts the spittoon by his chair, slams it over Ben’s head, and gives it a firm kick.

The sky is seething. It is the parent swarm. As a mass, it is equipped with ropes, grappling hooks, pulleys, winches, giant barrels, siphoning

hoses and funnels. Above this mass, a banner strung between two poles reads **DISTILLERS OF QUALITY PROOF SINCE '44.**

Ned retreats to stand beside Maggio and Bender, his neckerchief knotted over his nose, and his Colt and aerosol drawn. Of a sudden, however, the swarm quietens, having settled its flight 50-yatds above Ben and the buried whiskey.

‘Ned?’ Ben yells from beneath the spittoon.

Above Ben, the swarm forms into a corkscrew, and begins a slow descent.

‘Ned?’ Ben yells all the louder.

Ned takes aim with the Colt and fires into the swarm. A single fly, shot directly between the eyes, buzzes free, spins erratically in a circle, and then explodes, releasing a spray of 100-proof. Maggio and Bender, encouraged by Ned’s marksmanship, both open fire, but both miss, their shots striking up sand a dozen feet off target.

‘Buried it just like you said, Ned … Whiskey’ll be safe.’ The spittoon, Ben’s head remaining trapped inside, begins to bob up and down with increasing agitation.

Ned fires into the barfly corkscrew a second time. This time flies explode at random, showering down 100-proof. Maggio and Bender also continue shooting, but remain ineffective.

‘Ned!’ Ben’s spittoon threatens to leave him with its bobbing. ‘I’ve got the booze hid … Best get those wagons in a circle.’

Black Jack takes that moment to fetch an old-fashioned horn speaker gramophone. He tows it via a rope gripped between his teeth, places it between the open doors of Ned’s clothes closet, winds the handle, but holds off with the playing needle.

‘Buried the booze like gold, Ned. Injuns won’t find it.’

The corkscrew of barflies now hits the sand and digs with blasting force. Ned fires, hitting dozens of flies, while continuing to reload the Colt. Maggio and Bender, however, decide to gallop for it, throwing their shotguns to the ground. Seeing them flee, a group of barflies detach from the corkscrew, form an arrowhead, and give chase.

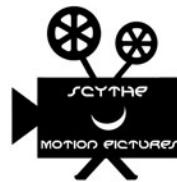
A pit now dug, the barflies secure Ben beneath his arms with grappling hooks and drag him from the hole, complete with spittoon. Black Jack, recognizing his cue, puts needle to old- fashioned shellac, and conducts with his cigarillo, as Ben is borne aloft to the sound of six shimmering harps, four-fold woodwind and eight horns to the rhythm of DADA DE DADA, DADA DE DADA, DADA DE DA. It is the Ride of the Valkyries, and Ben is a flying spittoon, his arms outstretched, his leg bandage unfurling behind him like the scarf of a WWI flying ace, and his voice only just heard above the music. ‘The whiskey’ll-be-safe- Ned. Buried it—deeeeep.’

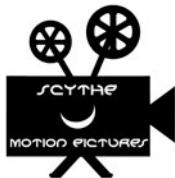
More grappling hooks grasp the crates. Ned aims for a single crate, shoots, and breaking the rope, the crate plummets to the sand. A group of barflies gives chase, but Ned is ready with the Black Flag. He sprays, releasing aerosol balls the size of marbles that explode the barflies, leaving nothing of them but wings which flutter and twirl. The remaining whiskey is, however, lost. And with this, the Ride of the Valkyries winds to a close. Black Jack takes the shellac between his teeth, spins it away beneath a clearing sky, and says, ‘Now dat’s wad I call music.’ Ned hears, holsters the Black Flag, twirls the Colt and fires. The shellac shatters, and the pieces rain down. As for Maggio and Bender, they have broken all land speed records for the 400-yard dash, out distancing the arrow-

head of barflies. Pulling up, Bender quips, breathlessly, 'Did you get a look at the war paint on that lead arrow? ... It had to be the chief.'

'Um-ah, missed him,' Maggio, says. 'Too, um-ah ... many-of- them.'

Back by the empty whiskey hole, Black Jack lies with his legs sprawled on his poncho. Ned has punched him out after his smartass antics with the vintage gramophone. Ned, himself, has come to stand beside Ben. The barflies have dropped him by the canyon edge, his toxicology reading too high, even for them. The spittoon fallen from his head, Ben stares into it, his leg bandage trailing behind him, and his body covered head to toe in red, pimple-like bites.





ACT FIFTEEN

‘The clack, clack, clack of typewriter keys can be heard. Edward G. Moore stops typing, and keeps his hands rested lightly on the keys. He appears to be listening.

‘Is that you, Eddy? Moore keeps silent.
‘It’s Busby, Eddy. I’ve got bad news. I’m sorry.
There’s been talk amongst the suits.’
‘The suits?’ Moore’s back stiffens beneath his sweat-soaked white shirt.

‘Yes, at Scythe Motion Pictures.’
Moore pauses, and then asks, ‘What are they saying?’ ‘They want more action.’
‘More action!’
‘That’s right. And less verbal ping pong.’ Sweat drips heavily from Moore’s brow.

‘The suits say there is too much talk, Eddy. They want the dialogue halved.

Moore remains silent. The rate of his sweating increases.
‘I have a suggestion, Eddy. Do you want to hear it?’ Moore holds his silence.
‘Why not keep the conversations one way? Have no exchange. That would cut the verbal ping pong.’
‘No exchange.’ Moore’s teeth clench, the muscles of this throat tightening.
‘That’s right. That’s what the suits at Scythe are saying.’

‘And what is Lehrmayer saying?’

‘Um ... ah ... um ... I’m sorry Eddy, he’s no longer directing.
He’s been taken off the picture.

Moore’s Magnum lies beside the Remington typewriter.

He looks at it.

‘So who’s directing?’

‘Pearlstein. I’m sorry, Eddy. The suits demanded it.’

Moore jumps from the coaster chair, sending it
crashing against the opposite wall. The Magnum is in
his hand.

‘He’s going to be shot!’





ACT SIXTEEN

It is night, and two shadows are thrown on the tent wall. One is of Ben lying with his head pillowled on a rubber air mattress. The other is of Ned with his back to the tent pole, and a fresh bottle of Jack Daniel's, rescued from the broken whiskey crate, rested on a raised knee.

Ben is a mummified figure.

Since his winged abduction by the barfly swarm, and being extensively bitten, Ned has swathed him head to toe in Vestimenta bandages. All that is visible of him are his puffy, red eyes, and swollen lips and tongue.

Ned lights up a Chesterfield.

'Think about the bar counter at Charlie's, Ben. Busby and I had the number worked out. Three running steps into a *jeté*, two turns in arabesque, and then a leap onto sliding knees. It was my solo.'

Ben tips his head to face Ned and tries to speak, but he can't part his lips.

'And that's what's disappointing, Ben,' Ned drinks from the bottle. 'That after all the preparation and choreographed rehearsals we're on the street in a conventional shootout. Only, nothing's right here either!'

'Terry and Eddy are so nervous that they take to Eddy's back room and the chemistry set. They spend a whole night and a day in the room and then on the eve of the shootout, Eddy comes out in a robusta tin can suit. He's got one can over his head with a viewing slit for his eyes, and another can around his torso with holes for his arms and, he's wheeling

a drip stand which says **CAFFEINE CITRATE SPECIAL BLEND.**'

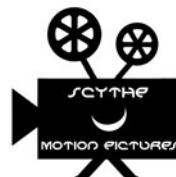
Ben clutches at his stomach, suddenly gripped with a spasm. Ned continues.

'And Terry? He's different too. He's dressed like a prohibition-era Chicago gangland boss. He wears spats, a double-breasted pin-stripe suit, a wool overcoat, and he's packing a Tommy gun. And then the door to Caffeine Eddy's opens, only no-one comes out. It's you, Ben. You're so dully tailored you can't be seen. So this shootout is a complete washout, Ben, just like the first.'

Ned momentarily examines the Chesterfield and, seeing it smoked out, grinds the stub on Ben's naked chest where a strip of bandage has pulled free. 'You got an explanation, Ben?'

Ben's eyes immediately begin to water. Ned lights a fresh Chesterfield, holds the Zippo to Ben's air mattress, burns a hole, and deflates it. 'Kind of gives you a sinking feeling doesn't it, Ben? Being let down.'

Ben lies flat on the mattress. His Mount Rushmore façade has now completely cracked, coming to lie crumpled at the base, having sheered clear off the mountain.





ACT SEVENTEEN

It is 10.00 am, and already 110 degrees. Sitting on bar stools beneath the yellow table umbrella, Ned wears his full Valentino ensemble, and Ben his Vestimenta bandages plus a red and blue Tommy Hilfiger peaked cap matched with Hilfiger chromed aviator shades, the label still attached and dangling down the length of his cheek. Black Jack serves as bartender, and slides two fingers of Jack Daniel's on ice over the drinks cart counter towards Ned. He wears an apron on which is printed DA DRINK'S DA TING, has an ice pack strapped to his bruised eye, which is further bruised from when Ned socked him during the barfly air raid. In line with Ben, he is also outfitted in Vestimenta bandage, his muzzle and lower lip wound tight. Ned is speaking.

'The shootout, Ben. You exit Caffeine Eddy's, dull tailoring and all. Terry is next. But he's three days ahead of himself. Got crank bugs, is seeing things no one has ever seen before, and fingers so itchy that they remove themselves. And following is Eddy. Almost as fast, only slowed by the drip stand, its wheels digging in the sand. And what about that wind, Ben?

'Let me tell you it's not exactly a breeze. It's a regular hurricane, the sand coming in buckets and the tumbleweed bouncing off every roof. I'm blinded, and have to keep my hat down; then suddenly Terry's to my left and Eddy to my right. And sure, that's in keeping with the choreography Busby planned, but what I'm waiting on is you. You're still not visible.'

Ned pauses to light a Chesterfield and sip from his drink. Ben coughs, trying to speak, but the swelling of his mouth hasn't improved. Ned continues.

'Now, Chemise, she's on cue, Ben. A true professional. She steps from the tumbleweed with Glock in hand. She's wearing a black shift dress, stockings, pumps and a veil. Naturally, Terry's the first to shoot. The only thing is, he's stuck on repeat. He keeps shooting in a circle and hits nothing but air.'

Ned takes a further puff on the Chesterfield. He waits a moment, and then, as if coming to some sort of decision, finishes the Daniel's and pushes the empty glass towards Black Jack for a refresher. Seeing the refilled glass, Ben's peaked cap turns about, coming to face back to front.

'So you see Ben, its mayhem out there.' Ned lifts the glass. 'Only Chemise remains calm. Terry is missing with every shot, and Eddy can't see to shoot straight, the robusta tin can turning every which way on his head. He's like an over-animated tin man, jerking and firing all over the place. And me?' Ned takes a moment to sip on his drink and pull on the Chesterfield. 'I finally start with the choreography Busby worked out, moving to my left. But nothing's right. All I can see is weed. It's coming from all directions. Then I get a ball right in the head. Thawck! Just like that.'

Ben's cap faces forward again. Ned drinks and smiles.

'So there we have it, Ben. Terry's given up shooting air, finger locked on the Tommy gun, he's firing at the ground so hard that he's jack-hammering himself into it. Soon he's deep underground so that all I can see is spit from the Tommy gun coming up from the hole. And the girls with the bananas? They're looking uncertain. The wind's too strong and

they're struggling to hold them. What's more, the bananas are beginning to peel. I can't do much. I'm still shaking the weed from my ear, a small part of me still hoping that you'll make yourself visible and flank to my left.'

Ben suddenly falls from the stool. Smiling down at him, Ned adds, 'Remind you of something, Ben? You see, when you did manage to show, you got yourself mixed up with the bananas. I guess that says something. You were slipping and falling on the peeled skins. That's no way to fire a gun. And Chemise, Ben? She's thrown down her gun. She never fired a shot. So the fight's over. She walks.'

Ben makes it back to the stool and works at correcting the angle of his Hilfiger shades. But abruptly, he cocks his head, listening. Flicking ash from the Chesterfield, Ned checks the sky, aware of a blurred motion to his right. He pulls on the cigarette.

'That's the summation, Ben. But I'm concerned about Terry. There's smoke coming up from the hole. Then I see flames. Terry's reached flash-out. It had to be flicker from the Tommy gun that set him off. I pull him up, throwing him in a horse trough. As for Eddy? He's mainlining. Nothing but a spinning can.'

Suddenly, a loud buzzing is heard from above. It is a rogue barfly. Swooping down towards the bar, Ned is ready, jumping from the stool with the Colt in hand. He twirls the gun and shoots, exploding the barfly just above the rim of his Daniel's glass. But Ben is running, already two hundred yards distant.

Forming a train along the canyon edge, Ned rides a labouring Maggio, who is hauling the wardrobe and laundry platforms. Ben follows on Bender, and Black Jack trails stoically towing the drinks cart. Towards sundown, Ned catches a glimpse of reflected light in the distance. On a

hunch, he turns about in the saddle to check on Ben.

Ben remains in his Vestimenta bandages, sitting slouched with legs forward in the stirrup irons, his chromed, Hilfiger aviator shades barely on his nose, and his Hilfiger peaked cap twisted to the side. Suddenly he lifts his head. There follows the thud of booted feet to the sand as he jumps from the saddle, and immediately he is on the run.

It is Ben's second feat of athleticism in as many days. The first, the previous morning, was his 21.5-second, 200-yard sprint from the drinks cart to flee the rogue barfly's attack. And now, a

9.87 second 100-meter dash to the glinting object that Ned had first sighted.

The glinting object is a Jim Bean vending machine. It is, however, severely iced over, the heat of the sun having induced it into working overtime. Ben is already on his sixth circuit of inspection as Ned arrives and dismounts. He leaves Ben to his ardent examination of the machine, more interested in something embedded in the rock a short distance away.

It is a pair of black Western boots, sunk to their ankles, the boots stitched and tooled in swirls and curlews which take great fancy, and never more so than on their side uppers where embedded pearl and blue rhinestones read **BOOTS OF DESTINY**. Ned whistles. 'Fossilized by the watering hole, Ben. Must have been some bender to leave only the boots.'

Ben does not hear. He is in front of the coin slot.

'The boots look to be newly minted, Ben.' Ned squats down, his hands feeling out the boot uppers. 'How about the luster on these rhinestones.'

But Ben isn't listening, instead, pulling at a piece of ice over the coin

slot. As he tugs, the machine begins to rumble and shake.

‘Let’s get the boots out, Ben,’ Ned yells as he stands and makes his way over to Black Jack.

Black Jack has stepped up to level with Maggio and Bender. As Ned approaches, he explains, ‘I been tellin’ dese guys dat dem boots oughtta be tellin’ yoze boyz sumtin’. It’s dat vendin’ machine. I ain’t going near dere.’

Ned appears not hear and calmly removes his oilskin, folds it neatly over Maggio’s withers, and then unstraps the sledgehammer from behind the saddle. He swings it high in the air, commenting, ‘Got a good feel. Balance is about right.’

Black Jack immediately ducks, his legs splaying wide. Ned, smiling back at him as he steps off, makes his way back towards the boots. As Ned leaves, Black Jack curses sotto voce, ‘Give me one minid wid him gone and I’m gonna throw dis last crate of whiskey off da cliff.’

Maggio and Bender, hearing, blink sympathetically, but say nothing.

Ned, back beside the boots, positioning his feet astride them, raises the sledgehammer. ‘Let’s continue with our chat, Ben. We still haven’t finished discussing the shootout.’ Ned slams the hammer into the rock, cracking it. ‘You see, when everything went wrong the way it did, I smelled a rat. Now,’ Ned bends to rest on his haunches. He lifts a fragment of rock, examines it for a moment, and then throws it over his shoulder. ‘Could you be that rat, Ben?’

Ben seems not to hear. He has freed the coin slot of ice. The machine shudders and rumbles. Ben runs his hands up and down his *Vestimenta* bandages frantically in search of coin. As he does so, the machine lurches violently to the side. When it comes back to rest, a large piece of ice sloughs off from the machine’s center, revealing the red-ribboned B

of the Jim Beam label. Ben stumbles back.

‘None genuine without the James Beam signature, Ben,’ Ned yells. He is back beside Black Jack, where he has taken up his oilskin, and from his wallet kept in the inner pocket, removes some coin. He tosses these in the sand beside Ben’s feet.

Ben’s peaked cap does a complete backward turn. ‘It’s going to jump, Ben.’

Ben scrambles for the coins, but is too late. The machine has moved toward the canyon edge, and begins to pogo up and down. This inspires Ben’s third feat of athleticism in two days. He is beside Black Jack in a flash, grabs the lasso from beside the hitched umbrella, whirls the lasso in the air and has the machine roped before Ned has time to once more lift the sledgehammer and slam into the rock. Caught, the machine begins to pogo all the harder, its entire carapace of ice finally crashing to the ground. Ben strains on the rope, his bandaged heels dug in the ground, but he soon slips on some ice. The machine gives a sharp jerk, tearing the rope from his hands.

‘You’re losing it, Ben.’ Ned has freed the boots and lifts them clear of the broken rock.

There is now a sudden explosion of compressed air from the vending machine and it jets off, propelling itself over the sand in a series of rocketing bursts. Ned ducks. Maggio ducks. Bender and Black Jack duck. But Ben isn’t so lucky. Back on feet after slipping on the ice, he is hit under the chin by the rocketing machine and knocked flat.

‘You’re not too steady on your feet, like I keep saying, Ben.’ Ned walks up beside him, throwing down the BOOTS OF DESTINY. ‘Lucky I found some new boots that might help you out.’





ACT EIGHTEEN

The elevator cage swings beneath a stilted, tin-roofed, clapboard operations hut, buttressed out over the canyon from the Scythe Tester Compound. As with the Jim Beam vending machine, the Otis has found itself sorely tested by the inclement weather, its mechanics rusted, and its circuits corroded. Ned, however, has made some repairs, rewiring the electrics, and managing to ease the rusted mechanics with lubricant from twelve aerosol cans he found in a mouldy cardboard carton in the hut.

It is now mid-afternoon, and sheltered within the hut, fully outfitted in his Valentino ensemble, Ned relaxes on a simple wooden chair beside the cable division in the hut's floorboards, a bottle of Jack Daniel's in one hand, and his view to the hut's open door. He ponders. The elevator hoist cables, where they directly attach to the Otis elevator cage, remain of some concern. All six cables are badly rusted, and have begun to fray.

'Hoist cables are a bit rusted, Ben.' Ned voices his thoughts and focuses his eyes directly upon the open door. To the door's right, Ben lies stretched across the floorboards. He is bound hand and foot, gagged with one of Ned's red neckerchiefs, his swollen tongue healed, and wears his Vestimenta bandages, complete with red and blue Hilfiger cap, matching chromed aviator shades, and BOOTS OF DESTINY, now accessorized by Ned with rowelled, Texan spurs. What do you, say?' Ned sips from the Daniel's and raises the bottle to Ben in a toast.

Ned turns his attention from Ben, back to the hoist cables. They drop from the roller held between spring-loaded cantilever arms that

run parallel to where Ben lies, the arms extending back to the cable drum and selector. He finds no further damage to the cables, and heaves erect from the chair, pulling at his sweat- soaked shirt. 'As for the motor, Ben,' Ned drinks from the Daniel's and continues. 'I've thought about taking a closer look, only I don't see the point in tooling around if it runs smoothly enough. It's an Otis, remember. The elevator that built Manhattan. But how about the gas?'

Ned steps around behind the cable divide, and to his left, deeper into the hut. He comes to the motor, squats down, and unscrews the motor's gasoline cap. He sniffs to check the level, and satisfied, checks the controller and relay panel above it, before saying, 'And concerning the wiring, Ben, I did my best. I'm no electrician. We'll have to see how it holds out. You understand don't you?'

Ben shakes his head and thrashes about on the floor. After a moment, he manages to stand by bracing his legs against the boards, and by sliding his back up the wall.

Appearing not to care, Ned proceeds around to the viewing window overlooking the canyon, picking up his supervisory chair along the way. The chair's matching wooden table stands beneath the window. He places the chair beside it, sweeps aside the emptied stack of lubricant cans that have been stored on the table top, clattering them to the floor, and then thumps down the Daniel's bottle in their place, and sits. 'I've got a simple plan, Ben. Maggio and Bender will lower the train platforms one at a time, remaining below with the last of them. We'll follow with the drinks cart and Black Jack. How does this sound?'

The hut shakes as a sudden wind blasts through the open door. Ned snatches up the Daniel's bottle protectively, just in time before the hut

creaks and tilts, and once out of the chair, makes his way up the sloping floor towards the door. Ben remains on his feet, bracing himself hard against an edge of the door frame. Ned continues to ignore him as he proceeds directly onto the walkway outside.

Black clouds have begun to bristle like overcharged gyros against the amber sky to the east. Thunder booms. He faces back around to Ben, and yells against the wind. 'A storm's brewing, Ben. Shouldn't matter though. Reckon we'll be down before the worst of it.'

Ben faces him imploringly, his chromed aviator shades catching flashes of storm light. He attempts to speak through his gagged mouth, but emits only muffled sounds. Without further comment, Ned swings back around and takes the ladder down. He jumps the last step, landing firmly on the tester compound macadam.

There are four test bunkers standing about fifty yards distant. Each is flat-roofed, and painted a striped yellow and black, with centrally placed, lead-shielded doors between double- glazed windows. A 12-foot, cyclone wire mesh fence makes up the perimeter, the entry road in from the desert secured with a boom gate and hut. The wardrobe and laundry train platforms stand side by side before the test bunkers, each readied with a tow rope.

Ned drinks from the Daniel's bottle, draining it dry, then throws it down, causing it to shatter loudly upon the macadam. He hears Black Jack.

'As if dat vendern machine weren't enurff. You guys are askin' for it. I'd rader jump down da cliff dan go down on dat Otis.'

Black Jack is just visible as he steps out of the dark. His muzzle bandage has half unwound and the ice pack on his blackened eye has melted flat.

Ned remains calm, answering, 'We'll load the platforms first, and then follow with the drinks cart. You got a problem with that?'

'I got a problem wid everyting. You especially. I wanna vacation to da Bahamas widda a straw hat and one of dose drinks widda bent straw. And I'm not comin' back. Not as a whiskey mule for youse boyz anyway.'

Ned snatches the Colt from his holster and levels it between Black Jack's eyes. 'You'll be taking the elevator down with the drinks cart. Everything secured. Nothing broken. Now I need some things.' Lowering the gun, Ned moves to the saddle bags and takes up a fresh bottle of Daniel's and a flashlight. When he faces around, he sees Maggio and Bender approaching.

'Three frayed cables.' Bender puffs on his pipe and throws up his head. 'We should look for another elevator.'

'Um-ah, yes, we're not engineers, but um-ah, the tension over time, and five trips.' Maggio nods in agreement. 'The cables are going to break. The others were lucky.'

'But not both of you.' Ned shoots. One round blows Maggio's sombrero from his head, leaving it to hang by its drawstring. A second round strikes and shatters the bowl of Maggio's pipe, leaving only the stem between his teeth.

'Now you and Bender load the platforms, starting with the wardrobe. From there, the order doesn't matter. I'll be with Ben.'

Ned holsters the gun and waits for Maggio, Bender and Black Jack to trot off. He then moves back to the elevator hut, shining the flashlight beneath. The hut's buttresses have buckled, collapsing it on its forward stilts. The elevator, however, is not affected, running off an independent

frame and rails. He returns up the ladder and back inside the hut proper to find Ben collapsed on the floor near the door. He says calmly, 'We're preparing to load, Ben. I guess it's time to check on the motor.' As Ben squirms and kicks on the floor, there is the sudden flash of lightning through the open door.

Ned moves off to the motor and yanks at the start cord. No sound follows. He pulls several more times until the motor coughs and spits the spark plug at his feet. 'Well how about that, Ben?' Ned lifts the plug, examining it. 'The plug's electrode has melted. No problem though, I'll just fit a new one.' Ned moves on to the nearby tool chest, removes a fresh plug, drives this into the plug hole with a hammer, and tries the start cord once more. Immediately the motor is off and rumbling. The hut shakes, and the window rattles. Ned thinks to check on the elevator through the floor cable division. Maggio and Bender have loaded the wardrobe within and are standing either side. Satisfied, he retrieves his supervisory seat from the table by the window, and returns it back beside the cabled divide, then sits.

'The wardrobe's loaded, Ben, we're making progress.' Ned drinks from the fresh bottle of Daniel's, and salutes Ben by raising it towards him.

Ben is once more on his feet. His Vestimenta bandages are unwinding, oscillating with the vibrations of the hut induced by the motor. Ned smiles. 'Now's not the time to unravel, though, Ben. I'd like to continue with our interview.'

Ned further salutes with the bottle, watching as Ben's red and blue Hilfiger cap faces right, then left, before returning to center, and then checks back on the elevator through the floor gap. Maggio presses the

decent button with his snout, and then both horses splay their legs, their heads staring down at the storm-darkened canyon depths as the elevator drops. ‘Ok, Ben,’ Ned faces back to Ben. ‘Now that things are underway, I’d like to ask a question. What makes a pally?’ Ned watches Ben’s Hilfiger cap once more do its double take, before answering for him. ‘I have a short list in mind, Ben. Let me count off.’ Ned raises a hand, starting the count with his little finger. ‘One, I’d say, trusting each other. Two, sticking together. And three, how about mutual respect. What do you think, Ben? All this telling you something?’

A snap and twang is heard and the hut jolts. Ned is knocked about in the chair, and nearly slips from it, the hut taking on a profound slope. His right boot heel braced on the edge of the floor gap, he trains the flash light over the hoist cables and sees that one has broken. There is another jolt, sharper this time, as the elevator arrives below. From where he stands, Ben is thrown forward, falling to lie like a swathed doll over the cantilever arms. Ned winks in Ben’s direction. ‘Good to see you helping with the load-bearing weight on those arms, Ben. The only thing is ... we’ve lost a hoist cable.’

The clopping of hooves sounds above the wind outside. Leaving the chair, Ned makes his way carefully over the sloped floor to the door, and out onto the walkway.

The sky is covered in dense black cloud. But there is an exception. A single shaft of sunlight strikes down, spotlighting Black Jack where he sits on the barstool beside the drinks cart. It was his clopping footsteps that was heard. He has lit himself a fresh cigarillo, keeps this clenched in a corner of his mouth, and brings up a white enamelled megaphone. ‘It’s carnival time at da tester compound folks,’ he bellows through the

megaphone. ‘Step rite dis way to da midway. We got sometin’ for da whole family. Not just da grown-ups, but da kidz as well.’ He puffs on the cigarillo, and lowers the megaphone.

Ned takes up the Colt and fires three rounds, each ringing across the compound. The first round pings directly off the inner curve of the megaphone, sending it clattering away over the macadam, and the second and third round kick the megaphone along the macadam, finally having it disappear into the dark, and leaving Black Jack open-mouthed with the cigarillo dangling from his lips. Ned smiles and returns back inside the hut.

He is just in time. He hears the sound of breaking glass and the screeching of nails. The rumbling of the motor has shattered the viewing window and begun to tear the hut’s clapboards loose. Ben is not helping. Having remained hanging over the cantilever arms, perhaps nostalgic for his earlier flying adventure during the barfly air raid as a WW1 flying ace, he is attempting to fly by flapping his arms, his chromium aviator shades pushed flat to his face in the effort, and a swath of bandage fluttering free about his neck like the end of a scarf. Ned settles back in the chair and drinks from the Daniel’s.

‘So, Ben, why don’t you tell me where you fit in? I mean ... with being a pally?’

A screech and clanging is heard from below. Ned checks the cable divide, not hearing from Ben. Maggio and Bender have returned from below, parking the elevator. They exit, soon to disappear from view. Still not having heard from Ben, Ned checks him over. He dangles quietly over the cantilever arms, his arms and legs still. Ned guesses him too exhausted from his flapping to comment.

A ripping and screeching of tin against nails is heard. Ned shines the torch beam upward to find that a roof sheet has torn away. 'Hut's coming apart, Ben,' he shouts. 'Only you just keep helping out with the loading bearing weight on those arms, and I'm guessing we'll be all right.'

This time Ben acknowledges. His cap does a complete spin around his head and he flaps a couple of times with his arms.

A powerful flash of light lights through the roof gap. A rumble of thunder immediately follows, shaking the hut, and then there is an explosion of rain. In little time, Ben's *Vestimenta* bandages are soaked through, yet they continue to oscillate with the vibrations of the hut. Soon begin to slip with the weight of the water, until they have gathered around his *BOOTS OF DESTINY*, exposing the cleft of his fat buttocks within their *Calvin Klein's*. Ned drinks to this. 'Good to see you showing your true form, Ben.' He then checks back through the floor gap on the loading process.

Maggio and Bender have returned from the compound with the washing machine platform in tow. Loaded, the elevator descending, the compounded strain on the hoist cables, breaks two more. The rattling motor works all the harder, and further boards spring loose across the hut. A thump is felt.

'That would be the washing machine safely down, Ben,' Ned informs. 'Next to go are the dryer and steam press platform, then us with Black Jack and the drinks cart. Now I know you'll going to enjoy the ride, especially with all that booze on board.'

Ben flaps about on the cantilever arms.

The elevator returns only to have another of the motor's mounting

bolts spit from its cushioned flange. Ned kicks at it, sending it clattering against the elevator roof below. About to take a fresh swig of the Daniels, he hears, 'Dat's right folks, da show's not over. Step right to da front ta catch da action. It's carnival time at da testa compound.'

Ned returns to the walkway. Black Jack has retrieved the megaphone and sits back on the bar stool.

Ned checks the Colt. He replaces the three spent rounds, and then promptly empties the barrel at Black Jack. The first round jars the megaphone from Black Jack's hooves, the second and third bounce it over the canyon edge, the fourth shoots Black Jack's hat from his head, and the fifth and sixth snap a leg from the bar stool, leaving Black Jack spread-eagled on the macadam. Ned returns to the chair. Seated, he finds that Maggio and Bender have loaded the clothes dryer and steam press.

The two horses appear to have suffered severely from their travails. Maggio has lost his sombrero, the cord snapping in the wind, and Bender's horn-rimmed spectacles hang off an ear beneath his pork-pie hat, one lens cracked. Maggio nevertheless manages to work the decent button with his snout, and the elevator gets underway.

There is now a repeated thudding and Ned checks over his shoulder.

A second mounting bolt has spat free from motor. It claps up and down, working itself loose from the floorboards beneath. Seeing this, Ben's Hilfiger cap completes another full circle. Ned drinks from the Daniel's, saying, 'Now, Ben, I'm guessing it's time to get off those arms. We're next.' Ned reloads the barrel of the Colt, and takes aim. He shoots, hitting one of Ben's rowelled Texan spurs, leaving it to freewheel.

This is too much for Ben's aviator shades. Panicked, they take flight directly through the cable divide, the label fluttering like a maddened

propeller. Ben thrashes and kicks with his legs, falls from the cantilever arms, and lands on the floorboards with a heavy thud. Ned raises the bottle in salute. ‘That-a-boy, Ben. Thanks for getting down. I see you’re really keen to get underway.’

The elevator cage returns empty. Ned celebrates with a long drink, but notes that two further hoist cables have broken. He then hears from the hut’s groaning clapboards. The clapping motor has finally eroded the integrity of the entire hut. Groaning board after groaning board springs free. Ned ducks under the firing of loosened nails, but as with the Jim Beam vending machine, Ben again finds himself not so lucky. He is tacked flat to the floorboards. When it is all over, Ned peels him away, and oilskin whipping about him in the naked wind and rain, drags him out onto the walkway.

This gives Ben his third opportunity for a feat of athleticism. He sees the ladder, and rushes to descend. But he forgets about his Vestimenta hobbled ankles and trips. Going into a dive, he first performs a faultless pike, follows this through with two somersaults, his knees expertly tucked, and finishes by hitting the macadam headfirst, his legs perfectly straight. Staring after him, Ned cocks a quizzical eyebrow, while the recovered Black Jack stands erect beside the drinks cart holding high a scorecard reading 10. Simultaneously, behind Ned, the relay panel, wet with rain, and in apparent celebration, discharges a cornucopia of fireworks.

Kneeling forward on its stilts, and peering down the canyon face, the Otis operations hut sheds its last floorboard. The board spins down the canyon face, rain-lashed, wind-whipped, and intermittently lit by the flaring of the sky, till finally it is engulfed in dark. Soon after, the motor

spits out its newly hammered plug, and together with the table, chairs, tool chest, gasoline can, and emptied lubrication carton and aerosol cans, it follows the floorboard into the abyss. Heaving erect, and giving a final shudder, the Otis hut then walks from the tester compound upon its stilts.

As for Ned, Ben and Black Jack, the elevator cage had begun its final descent suspended from its one remaining hoist cable. During this, Ben and Black Jack had lain unconscious in separate corners, Ben not yet recovered from his Olympian dive, and Black Jack, knocked senseless by the scorecard, Ned having holed it over his head, and leaving it to hang. Ned, himself, had sat on a bar stool by the drinks cart, waiting the ride out, smoking and drinking from a fresh bottle of Daniel's.

With the break of the last hoist cable, emitting a whip-like crack, the Otis brake had justified its reputation of 150 years of engineering excellence, and brought the elevator to rest a yard from the ground. The drinks cart safe, Ned had casually jumped out, Daniel's in hand, to greet Maggio and Bender, waiting beside the assembled platforms.

And something was unknown to all. Within a large hangar amidst the abandoned buildings and Chevrolet trucks in the tester base compound, sheltering from the storm, was a group of Scythe billboards muttering to themselves, each resplendent in Scythe runners of neoprene and polyurethane, and colored white, day-glow tomato red, and with a blue Scythe Sweep.





THE SCYTHE



YOUR SHOE





ACT NINETEEN

A morning panorama narrow and stretched
And a posse of Scythe billboards animated
and muttering stand before Pearlstein's parked
Mustang.

'We'll head 'em off at the pass, boys,' Pearlstein hollers, whooping his hat into the air, and 24 pairs of neoprene and polyurethane runners stampede the canyon ground.

And now a post-midnight view of distant storm clouds over the San Bernardino mountains, on a phantasmagoria of blue-white sagebrush and cacti, on red sand patterned by gusts of wind into howling phantoms, on a highway running north by north-east, and en route, the Whiskey Boys.

The storm had petered out in the late afternoon of the following day, and in the tester base storage compound, under the renewed sun, Ned had made preparations, centered on Ben. He had remained oblivious to all, in a perpetual daze from his 10-point Olympic dive from the Otis hut, and Ned, in wont of having the cuts induced by the clapboard nails nursed, had wound him afresh with *Vestimenta* bandages from head to foot. And then, the Hilfiger cap and matching aviator frames retrieved from their hiding place in one of the compound's storage huts, had further accessorized with a pair of batwing leg chaps, stored with Black Jack, the chaps likewise stitched and tooled and embedded with pearl and Montana blue rhinestones as Ben's *BOOTS OF DESTINY*. And then, inspired by the chaps, had lined Ben's arms and the outer flaps of the chaps with the 60-watt globes that had edged the door mirrors of his

wardrobe, making Ben the electric cowboy. Lastly, Ben was to be fitted into Bender's saddle, achieved by a frame tacked up from the remaining whiskey crate slats, and to power Ben's electric cowboy ensemble, a battery mounted behind the saddle rig. And so Ned had signalled the column onto the highway; Ben to lead, as befitting the star, Black Jack next, left with the holed score card as necklace, and towing the drinks cart, and Ned taking up the rear, upon Maggio, towing the wardrobe and laundry platforms, the intention to ride through the night.

And so it had come to pass, the column plodding stoically along the highway in the growing cold. And the flat of the canyon ever more fantastic, a fog steadily rolling in down from the mountains, drifting to shroud the glowing sagebrush, cacti, and Joshua trees, all to appear as a tableau of the wandering lost, and so Ben, leaning to Bender's off side, despite the rigged frame, earthbound.

In time, they approach their first '57 Chevrolet. It sits upon naked wheel rims in the runoff of the road, a rusted and gutted shell. Ned slows, tugging lightly upon Maggio's reins.

During the years of testing, the Chevrolets had been parked at ground zero immediately before the Scythe billboards, and seated with Scythe executive effigies, there to gaze as rapt cinema goers upon the drop, but also, as a nostalgic want on the part of the testers of evoking the early years of atomic testing in the desert. But now abandoned, the '57 Chevrolets and executive effigies are rumored to be moving about.

Ned hears a hiss of steam, and believing he has seen movement from the parked Chevrolet, tugs Maggio to halt. He then whistles ahead to draw up Black Jack and Bender, watches as they comply, and then down from the saddle, at his saddle bag, he lifts out his flashlight.

He detects no movement from the Chevrolet on first approach, then directs the flashlight through the glassless windshield. Behind the wheel is a Scythe executive effigy, startled by the light, shielding its eyes with a hand, and dressed in a gray, narrow-lapelled suit, gray fedora, and tortoise-shelled, round- rimmed eyeglasses. The engine then suddenly breaks into life with a roar and rumble, the hood claps up and down, and the tireless rear wheels spin in the runoff dirt. The effigy is attempting to escape with its foot on the accelerator. But Ned, quickly by the window, gripping the effigy by the neck, hauls it out, leaving the Chevrolet to idle driverless, and maintaining his grip on its neck, drags the effigy along the highway towards Black Jack.

‘I ain’t takin’ it. Let it walk. And I got a sore head. How ‘bout an aspirin?’

Ned throws the effigy over Black Jack’s back with rest of the packaged luggage. ‘You’re taking it or I’ll black over that other eye. Anything else to say?’

‘Only dat I’m gonna be talkin’ to da union. Dis isn’t wot I signed on for. Extra haulage an’ all. And dat Otis? Who said any ding ‘bout stunt work?’

‘I did, like now for instance.’ Ned draws back his fist, leaving Black Jack with a second blacked over eye, and reeling on his feet.

Returned to Maggio’s saddle, ready to continue the journey, Ned, however, notes movement within a fog shrouded grove of sagebrush and Joshua Trees about 50 yards into the desert to his right. He concentrates. The sound appears to be muffled speech, followed by the quiet stamping of many feet. Ned smiles, takes the time to reach to his canteen of Daniel’s, slung from the saddle horn, drinks a healthy swing, and then salutes with the canteen in the direction of the grove. This action seems

to bring about some panic amidst the sagebrush.

It is onward again and deeper into the canyon. Ever more cold. Ever more mist. And the column, the clomping of the hooves, the creaking wheels of the platform train and drinks cart, all as solemn as a procession along the Via Dolorosa. And soon the Joshua trees. They have come to encroach upon the edges of the highway like mysterious wayfarers, shrouded in fog, arms stretched wide to the sides, or out over the road, either offering solace or warning of portent. There is one tree, however, that appears to have taken independent initiative. It stands like a hitchhiker, one arm directly over the highway, with raised thumb. Ned acknowledges with a swig of Daniel's. The Joshua trees bows, drawing back its arm. Ned thinks to check the riding column ahead.

Ben's battery is shortening in the increasing damp. His electric cowboy ensemble flickers, and in this fashion, he has taken on the appearance of a yellow, road hazard light. He is not helped by Bender beneath him. Bender's vision impaired by his cracked spectacles, he weaves and meanders. Sitting up on Black Jack, is the Scythe executive effigy. It has taken to smoking one of Black Jack's cigarillos, and works at blowing smoke rings, sending these out into the night. One settles above a Joshua tree, others float and break above the crown of Black Jack's boater hat. In response, Black Jack swishes up with his tail, as if to swat, and intermittently kicks with his hind legs and bucks. Ned takes a further swig of Daniel's, then tugs his hands further into his riding gloves, knots his red neckerchief over his nose, and shrugs deeper into his oilskin.

Dawn begins with the diffuse glow of amber over the mountains and, with the gradual thinning of the fog, the outline of a figure emerging by the roadside to the right.

First to be seen is a giant white Stetson, and then slowly revealed, is a 30-foot effigy in shootout stance. It is Pearlstein, clad in blue denim jeans, white shirt, red neckerchief, and twin colts blazing the length of the highway, and behind him, the Scythe gas station, flat-roofed, of desert stone and smoked glass, and painted red, white and blue.

The column passes the effigy, Ben first, with his head hung, Black Jack next, perfecting the curling of his snout into a sneer, and Ned, inching his hand toward his Colt.





ACT TWENTY

‘Again thou try my patience, Benny Dexadrine.’

‘Nukemtown’s still a day’s ride up the highway. Why wait here?’ Benny answers Terry.

‘We must question the good Brother, Ned.’ ‘Why? He’s been lying.’

‘Aye! And thou be honest above all men.’

‘Terry’s right.’ Long Black breaks in, eyeing Benny. ‘Ned deserves to be given a chance.’

‘So we can hear more lies?’ Benny spits a slag of chewing tobacco onto the white linoleum floor, leaving a reddish-brown smear. ‘If we beat him to Nukemtown, we can ask Chemise ourselves. What have we got to lose?’

They had arrived the previous day. They are now grouped within the station’s glass-fronted shop, waiting for Ned’s arrival, and impatient to press onto Nukemtown. The shop is fitted with three rows of white metal shelving, each stacked with Scythe Runners. Between these, hanging from the ceiling, are white plastic placards bearing the slogan **WE GOT YOUR NUKEM RUNNERS.**

Terry, Long Black and Benny are at the checkout counter, and Eddy, his blackened face painted with a beatific grin, stands in the center aisle with the Sinatra effigy. Long Black takes in his breath.

‘That sounds fair. But there’s someone else we should think to question.’ He pauses for effect, then swings his head toward the glass wall facing the desert. ‘Johnnie.’

Terry and Benny look over.

Top hat cocked raffishly, and cane hooked in the crook of a foreleg, Johnnie stands by the automated entry door, reading from a Coachella Canyon tourist brochure removed from the display rack. Terry marches over with the Heckler & Koch thrust forward. Johnnie catches his hostile glare, and hurriedly returns the brochure.

‘Aye! Whit ye be wantin’ then?’

Terry raises the machine pistol muzzle up towards Johnnie’s throat.
‘First thou shalt learn English.’

Johnnie glares down through his monocle.

‘Aye, talk fa yrself laddie. Whit kintra dae ye think ye come frae?’
And it’ll do ye noo gued threatenin’ me with that wee poopgun. Aye
canna shoot straight anyway. Ye missed the last time an’ oniewey I haurd
ye not as fast as ye used to be.’

Red-faced and grabbing Johnnie’s lapel, Terry yanks him forward,
thrusting the machine pistol deeper into his gullet. Long Black steps up.
‘If you want him to talk, Terry, take that gun away. You’re only bruising
his throat.’

Terry complies, though is slow to lower the machine pistol. ‘I be
thankin’ ye, laddie.’ Johnnie rubs at his throat and

coughs. ‘But youse boys must be slow to learnin’ so I guess I’ll have
to say again, even though I be fearin’ that ma words are fallin’ on deaf
ears. Ye see, I may be the wee lassie’s horse, but I knoo no more than I’ve
told youse. At the keek o nuin the wee bonnie lassie takes me into the
caboose an’ tells me she’s goin’ to Nukemtoon in the Mustang. Now I
don’t knoo whit fu’ but I suspects it’s more than her jost feelin’ like she
wants tae go motorin’. I’ve had plenty o’ time to think so lat me tell ye
me thochts. This whole thing’s ‘bout Ben. Ae time faur-back I kent him.

He's no tae lippen til. One nicht he was richt fou an' just gabbert awen on, shows me a photo frae his pocket. Now a dinna care aboot nane o't but atweel, I was dumfoondert. If Ned were tae find out—‘

‘We're wasting time.’ Benny walks up, stifling a yawn. ‘He's a walking Scrabble box. We should leave. The sun's coming up.’

Long Black and Terry exchange glances. ‘Ay!’ Terry for once agrees with Benny. ‘And I grow tired of these riddles.’

‘Everybody easy!’ The automated entry door slides abruptly open, and Ned rushes inside with Colt drawn in one hand, and rope gripped in another. He throws the rope at Terry's feet. ‘I got an executive outside and I want him well tied. We'll talk in the morning.’

Lifting his cane and flourishing it in a circle, Johnnie says, ‘Aye ... And I be thankin' ye. The lads 'ave been givan ma nothing but trouble.’





ACT TWENTY-ONE

Red sun upon late amber morning and the posse of Scythe runner-shod billboards are gathered across the road from the station. Ned, the Scythe executive effigy, and Ben take in the sun out in the unroofed car park. The executive and Ben lie stretched on paired, canvas sun lounges, Ben in his battery-powered electric cowboy ensemble, and the executive bound ankles and wrists. Ned sits in a director's chair beside Ben, his black Valentino oilskin, shirt, vest, denims, Stetson, and neckerchief, freshly laundered, and black snakeskin boots, reflecting amber. A gas hose, especially extended out from the roofed pumps, snakes along the macadam. Ned drinks from his canteen, re-filled by the gas pump.

‘Now, Ben ... remember how we were talking about being pallies? Well ...’ Ned lights a Chesterfield, nudging the chair closer to Ben. ‘You know, Ben, Frankie understood about knowing yourself. About following through on your beliefs, and especially, he believed in fighting the Charleys of the world, the phoneys who have no beliefs, who say one thing and do another.’ Ned tips his hat to Scythe executive effigy in the sun lounge beside Ben, and then drinks afresh from his canteen as Ben’s globes wink on and off. ‘But most of all Ben,’ Ned continues, ‘Frankie believed that pals mattered, pals who saw things the way he did and who stuck by him; something you haven’t learned yet, Ben, because let’s face it, right from the start, you’ve been a phoney.’

Ben’s globes momentary take on a bright glow.

Ned places his canteen down beside his chair, and then flicks the

spent Chesterfield out over the macadam. He then bends forward, and from beneath Ben's sunlounge, draws forth a shoebox. 'You see, Ben, this is the tune you've been walking to all these years.' Ned straightens back up, lifting the lid on the box. Inside is a pair of red, white and blue Scythe runners from the station shop. Ned lifts them out, throwing the box down, and rising from the chair, moves over to Ben's feet, unzips Ben's BOOTS OF DESTINY, fitting the Scythes.

Ben's Hilfiger cap does a double take, spinning left, and then right.

Back in the chair, Ned drinks the last drops from the canteen and refills from the gas hose.

'So there you have it, Ben. That's something Frankie would never do, walk to someone else's tune. He did things his way, without compromise, because compromise means betraying the dignity you are born with, betraying the fact that you're an individual and unique. You don't kow-tow and follow the line. You don't let yourself be taken over, and you certainly don't betray your integrity. Look at yourself, Ben. Ask yourself how someone with no backbone, no moral fiber and no sense of real self can come to represent what matters in the world because —' Ned pauses a moment for effect. 'Let's face it, you're Dudsville, Ben.'

Ben's globes begin to short, sending up yellow sparks.

Ned takes a long drink from the canteen, and rests it back on the macadam. He then directs a weak nod at Ben, before reaching into the inside pocket of his oilskin. 'Let me show you something, Ben.' He lifts out the Polaroid, holding it in front of Ben, the top edge pinched between thumb and forefinger. 'That's you Ben, you with your finger on the button that sank the whole valley. You dropped the bomb on Frankie, Ben. What were you thinking? Good publicity?'

Ben's globes flicker and spark frantically.

Ned stands, throws the Polaroid down on Ben's chest, and draws the Colt. 'You see ... you've always been on the losing side, Ben.' Ned shoots. The round passes directly through the Polaroid, continuing on through Ben's chest. His globes spark once more, he slumps, and his arms flop either side of the sunlounge.

Pandemonium follows.

In a chorus line centered on the station macadam, Maggio, Bender, Johnnie, Black Jack, and the Otis hut, simultaneously bow, and then cross kick left and right, breaking into the number 'You Don't Know What You Did, But You Did It Anyway.'

A series of shots ring out as the Pearlstein effigy fires both pistols at the glassless '57 Chevrolet as it speeds down the highway. The rounds strike directly through the open windshield, and the Chevrolet spins out of control and crashes into one of the gas pumps.

Against the amber sky, six squadrons of barflies spiral into a flower formation, centered by the Jim Beam vending machine.

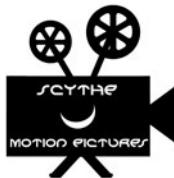
Terry, Benny, Long Black and Eddy walk from the station shop, and together with Ned and the Sinatra effigy, join the chorus line for the finale 'Don't Blame It On Me, Eddy Wrote It.'

And as this sings out, a resounding noise bursts forth from across the road as the Scythe-shod Barcodes stomp their feet, only soon to scatter, as from their midst, a red mustang drives out. It brakes a short distance before them, sending up clouds of dust, and from the dust, emerges Chemise, Glock pistol in hand. She aims the pistol at the Pearlstein effigy by the gas station and fires three rounds direct to the chest. The effigy wavers in the air, and then falls to lie spreadeagled, facedown, across the

road. Chemise fires four further shots, one knocking the hat from the head, and then three to kick it down the dusty road. She then twirls the Glock around her finger before holstering it in her garter, and standing spread-legged with a broad smile.







EPILOGUE

A sh a pellicle curtain, dissolved by touch, but leaving a powder that billows. Everywhere twisted steel and ripped concrete shells of buildings and on the flat roof of the tallest building, a Scythe billboard, bearing the Sweep as red quarter moon.

Two walk the ash, he in black suit trousers, a gray Fedora, open-necked white shirt, and Colt M1911 in shoulder holster, and she in black shift dress, a rose motif veil, black satin elbow-length gloves, stilettos, and Glock in garter holster. A concrete plaza approaches to their left.

‘We’ve had a swell time, Ned.’ ‘Sure, baby. A ring-a-ding-ding.’

As they round the corner, windows stare dark as the eyes of skulls from gutted high rises on each side of the concrete plaza. In the center is a raised granite tomb. Ned halts to light a Chesterfield.

‘I guess it took some doing.’

He crosses the plaza, wafting clouds of ash knee-high, leaving her for the moment. The gold inscription upon the tomb reads:

**BEN (ONE-ON-ONE ACTION) EDWARDS
HOLLYWOOD LEGEND
DEAD**

Chemise steps level. ‘No regrets?’

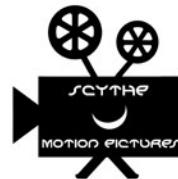
‘None. He was no good to anyone. Not much point to his life really.’

Chemise removes her right glove and runs her index finger along the tomb’s bevelled granite, leaving a gray smudge. ‘I guess you’re right. And us?’ She suddenly sheds a tear, which swells from dark mascara, and runs in a delicate tract to meet quivering red lips.

‘We’re forever, kid.’ He cups her milk-white chin, lifting her face to his. ‘That’s all that’s ever mattered. Without you … Endsville.’

From her, a waxing of lips and green eyes smiling; and she shrugs, wafting her veil, ash falling from rose motifs like the spent leaves of fall. There is a wooden bench on the far side of the square. They walk over, seating themselves. He leans back with legs stretched and ankles crossed, she sits with crossed knees and hands resting upon them.

The wind is heavier now, and a plume of ash, caught in a whirligig, spirals over the tomb and seems to take shape. It is the Sinatra effigy. The effigy settles itself before the tomb, raises a tumbler of Jack Daniel’s in a toast and bows, extending its arms to the side.





CODA

Edward G. Moore sits in his shirtsleeves typing on his Remington. An intravenous drip line feeds his forearm, and he wears his shoulder holster, packing the Magnum revolver.

A knock is heard three time through the door behind him. He ignores this and continues typing. The knocking sounds again, which, once more he ignores, completing a sentence. He then begins a fresh paragraph at the very moment the J.W. Pearlstein effigy falls across his back, engaged in its rhythmic swing. The knocking sounds a third time as Moore initiates six further strikes on the keys, then relaxes his shoulders. The door knob is now heard as it is turned, followed by the whoosh of the door as it opens. Busby Berkeley enters from the door, and walks quietly up behind Moore, peers over the writer's shoulder, and reads on the type sheet:

THE END

‘Um ... ah ... Mr Moore, it’s Busby, Busby Berkeley.’

Edward G. Moore pivots around in the coaster chair, a huge, satisfied smile across his face.

Busby takes several steps back, his mouth suddenly open and nervous.

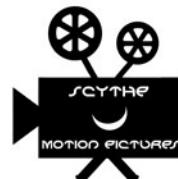
‘Um ... ah ... Mr Moore. I’m sorry to say, the suits ... they’ve been reviewing the drafts. Too cerebral.’

Moore stands calmly from the chair. His face keeps up his broad smile as he slowly clenches his right fist, advances on Busby, and then swings with the fist, punching Bushy square in the nose, and knocking

him flat to the floorboards. The intravenous line remains attached to Moore's arm, which he rips out, leaving the line to dangle from the stand as he snatches up the Pearlstein effigy. The effigy tucked under his arm, he marches through the open door, slamming it shut behind him. On the door's oak wood panelling, a brass plaque reads:

**ROOM 40 PRINCIPAL WRITER'S ROOM
(EDWARD G. MOORE)**

Moore marches on a few more steps, then spinning on his heels, draws the Magnum revolver and fires six clean shots, blasting the sign from the door.





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OR, SLIMKID CHEMISE AND THE WHISKEY BOYS

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