

All Saints by Karen Palmer

Chapter One

Harlan Desonnier sat on his bunk in the white prisoners' dormitory of Angola's Camp E, dangling his cold hands between his knees. The rest of the camp had left for the cane fields in the dark, after a 3 a.m. count and a meager breakfast of Louisiana blackstrap and grits. Rap-up had come two hours early, the result of an unexpected freeze around midnight; all inmates were needed to harvest the cane, and quickly, before it started to rot. From the yard, Harlan had watched them run out to the fields under a slivered new moon, the line a long shadow undulating behind the guards' horses. When the last convict disappeared, Harlan was escorted back to the dormitory to pack up his things.

Now the guard in the doorway said, "Hurry it up."

Harlan lifted an open sack onto the corn-shuck mattress. He slowly stuffed his few belongings inside: seven single-page letters from his brother, Russell, one each year since 1946; a blurry dog-eared photograph of his daughter in her First Communion dress; and a new pair of brown socks, price tag attached. He cupped a small wooden carving of a woman's head and torso. She had empty eyes, a slender neck. Long hair coiled like snakes over her breasts. Last summer he'd whittled her from a branch of the live oak that grew behind the sugar mill, using a rusty cane knife hidden under the stairs.

The guard said, "Who's that sposed to be?"

"I don't know. My wife, probably."

Harlan ran his thumb over the statue, stroking the smooth bridge of her nose, the curving lips; even with the bad knife he'd done a good job.

"A memorial. You're a sentimental shit, Desonnier."

Harlan shut his left eye. With the right one he could just make out a soft yellow cloud, the guard's lantern, seen like candlelight through a thin muslin veil. The eye had been damaged a long time ago, when he was a boy.

The guard shifted impatiently. "You don't move some, Desonnier, I might get the idea you'd rather stick around."

Harlan gripped the edge of the bunk and squeezed.

"Maybe you don't want to go home."

Home, Harlan thought. Ricefields and chinaberries, cape jasmine, bois puant. Carpetgrass for the cattle; shallow platins for crawfish and ducks. Home, the front porch was ringed with hedges of Cherokee rose. A current raced down Harlan's arms. His fingertips stung. Over at the administration building he was due to pick up a clean white shirt and black pants, a lecture, a handshake, \$46.23. His brother Russell would bring him his shoes. On the other side of the gate he could toss the stiff leather brogans put together by inmates with nails. Harlan saw himself peeling the sticker off his new socks, slipping the thin nylon over his bony feet. Russell would expect him to be able to step into his old self along with the shoes—go on home. The only problem being that there was no old self, and therefore no home, at least none that Harlan dared return to. Eight years ago he'd been a husband, a daddy, a brother, a son. He'd been greener than grass, and quick blooded, with a righteous heart. He'd been desperately, sweetly, in love. That man was done.

Harlan opened his good eye. He tied the top of his sack with a short length of twine. "I want to see Guzman first."

The guard grinned. "Didn't you all say your farewells last night?"

"You'll take me now," Harlan said.

"I'll be damned." The guard raised his lantern and leaned forward and shone the yellow glow into Harlan's upturned face. Harlan kept his expression blank. He sat very still. The striped mattress ticking scratched under his wrists. Harlan was small, with soft skin and delicate bones, and for eight long years he'd steered clear of demands.

The guard studied Harlan, and nodded once.

Dazzling white frost dusted acres of cane. Not yet dawn, and the convicts had already cleared a quarter-mile swath. From a high point in the road, Harlan watched two dozen fires burn, set to clear the underbrush and dead lower stalks.

Yellow tongues licked at the ground; clouds of silver smoke carried the acrid scent of burnt leaves. A line of Negro inmates wielded wet greentops, beating the flames to keep them under control. As the fires cooled, the white prisoners moved in with long knives. They seized the cane near the roots, slashing low. Fifteen foot stalks tumbled in waves. A mule-driven wagon rattled past, and the guard said, "Just think, Desonnier. You're leaving all this behind."

Harlan followed him down into the field. They headed toward the edge nearest the river, where the Camp E prisoners worked. Eddies of cold opaque air spiraled above them. A sheath of thin ice cracked underfoot and Harlan's boot soles skidded in slime. Along the distant top of the levee, a mounted captain danced his horse to one side, raising a gloved hand at Harlan's guard.

And suddenly there was Guzman bent deep into the wall of cane, and Harlan stopped.

Guzman's wet jumper pulled against the muscles in his shoulders and back. Long hair curled on his neck, soaked with sweat. The black strands threaded with gray glittered in the firelight, as if like the fields he were sheeted with frost. His bare feet were slick with mud, the ankles jutting white, like buried bones. Guzman couldn't stand to wear shoes. In '51 he'd been one of those that severed their heelstrings, to cripple themselves and get out from under the guards. Harlan had seen the right tendon let loose and fly up Guzman's leg, under the skin. Guzman had held the bloody razor out in the air, an offering, wanting Harlan to cut his own heelstring next. But Harlan refused. He was already half blind; damned if he'd be lame as well. Others were willing enough. Afterwards the nurse at the infirmary sewed the convicts back up and inside a week they returned, limping, to the fields.

Without lifting his head Guzman said, "I thought I seen the last of you, boy."

His arm swung and the wide blade gleamed. He held the severed stalk of cane in one hand and stripped the leaves, using the hook at the back of the knife. Then he sliced the top at the last matured joint. He tossed the denuded cane into a heap at his side.

Harlan stuck his hands behind his back.

"Fool," Guzman said.

Now he was here, Harlan found he had nothing to say. The hangnail moon floated in a ribbon of pale light where the sky met the field. Behind him the guard asked, "That it, Desonnier?"

Guzman turned. He set his hands on his hips and scowled.

"So tell me now, boy," he said. "What you gon' do first?"

The familiar words rang in Harlan's ears like a prayer. He laughed gratefully and said, "Eat."

"That sound about right," Guzman said.

"Crawfish étouffée," Harlan said.

"Big old steak."

"Onions and garlic. Tomatoes."

"Lime pie."

"Cold bottle of Jax."

"That's right. Get drunk." Guzman licked his lips. "Then what? What you gon' do then?"

"Get myself laid," Harlan said.

Guzman nodded approval. "Don't forget. Get you a Catholic girl with a strong sense of sin. They the best. Cajun girl. Get one from home." Guzman had been born in New Orleans and didn't even speak French, but his people came from Bayou Chien and he had literally hundreds of cousins there still.

Harlan said, "Well, I ain't goin' home."

Guzman looked surprised. "Since when?"

"Since a while."

"Well, why ain't you? What else you got to do?"

"Nothin'," Harlan admitted. "But I thought I'd get Russell to take me down to New Orleans, drop me off there. I'll figure somethin' out."

Guzman snorted. "Like what."

Harlan stuck out his chin.

"Fool," Guzman said, his eyes narrowing. "And what about that fool priest?"

"What about him?"

"He's there, ain't he? In New Orleans. You plan on lookin' him up?"

"I might," Harlan said. "Or I might not."

"Uh-huh. Show me your hand."

Harlan shrugged.

"C'mon, boy. Let me see."

Reluctantly Harlan brought his arm forward. He turned up his palm.

Guzman pointed at an address inked in blue on the fat pad below the thumb.

"Uh-huh, still there," he said. "Two days and you ain't washed it off. What you want to mess with that fool priest for anyway?"

Harlan shrugged again.

But he remembered sitting in the prison visiting room, staring across the table into questioning eyes. Calmly the priest had folded his white hands on the tabletop. He'd talked about some book he'd just read, and made a predictive comment about rain. Then he'd offered to hear Harlan's confession. Which Harlan refused. But something in the man gave Harlan a feeling, an embarrassed longing that was hard to describe, and he'd listened intently in spite of himself, trying to read between the priest's words. Even then, three months shy of parole, Harlan had been looking for a way to dream the rest of his life; he'd known even then he could never go home.

The guard asked wearily, "That it, Desonnier?"

"I guess so," Harlan said.

Guzman said, "Well, you be good now."

"I'll try."

"Slip it in once for me while you at it."

"I will."

"But take it easy, boy. You gon' have them all breathing down your zipper now. Too good-lookin' by far. You already know that."

Harlan pulled at his jaw. *Good-looking*. Well, it hadn't served him that well. His wife used to say his hair slipped through her fingers like folds of black silk. She'd trace the single dark eyebrow that arced across his forehead like the open wings of a bird, sniff the pulse at his temple, run the flat of her tongue up his neck. She claimed his skin tasted like cake. But so what. It hadn't stopped her

from running around with Louis Chopin, his oldest friend. And see where that led. Harlan had let loose a hammer at Janine's crystal lamp, while behind them in her crib the baby girl had laughed, clapped her hands. Just before it hit, Janine had darted inexplicably into the light and the flying hammer had smashed the side of her skull. Harlan saw it still each night in his dreams; each morning he awoke with sorrow like blood in his mouth.

At Angola, his so-called looks had got him turned out on day one. Trapped like a mouse in a corner of the yard, he'd become Guzman's gal-boy. The alternative being he'd belong to them all.

The sun broke over the horizon, washing Guzman's face in weak light. His cheeks were furrowed, black soot from the fires worked into the lines. His eyelids drooped languidly. Harlan felt an old anger stir in his bones, along with something very close to regret. All told, he'd spent more years with Guzman than he had with Janine.

"I won't forget you," he said.

Guzman shook his head. "I'll forget you right away."

"I can't never go home," Harlan said angrily.

"You're wrong about that."

"It was an accident," Harlan said then, meaning Janine. He nearly choked; he'd never said it before. Not to his family, nor Janine's, and not to the judge. Because for just that one second, by God, he'd wanted her dead.

Guzman said, "This whole world's nothing but."

The guard rolled his eyes. "You ready, Desonnier?"

Guzman said, "You know, Harlan, my Uncle Hot Eye used to make his wife stand all the time in the door to the house while he was plowing his fields. Wanted to keep her in sight, make sure she couldn't do him no dirt." He paused. "One day he rode his tractor into a tree, killed hisself. Snapped his neck. Was kind of a freak thing, but you know, he wasn't looking ahead like he should've been."

Harlan watched the mounted captain again step his horse sideways along the levee. The animal pranced, lifted its neck and showed huge yellow teeth. Up ahead the Negroes were setting new fires. They shouted, their voices passing in

relays over the field. The cane looked very green under its dusting of frost.

“An accident,” Harlan said.

Guzman looked at Harlan. He laid the long blade of his knife in his palm. He drew it across, raising a thin line of red, then reached out and caressed Harlan’s face. He brought the cut to his mouth, and sucked.

He said sadly, “Well, I figured as much.”

On the freedom side of Angola’s front gate, Harlan drank in every sharp gold blade of grass, every lanky brown weed, every coarse grain of earth, every stone and rut in the road that spooled south from under his feet toward Russell’s waiting red truck. The thin white clouds floating directly over his head also drifted above the canefields, he knew, but they seemed so much closer here. Harlan felt he could rise up and capture them in his hands, pull them to his lips, breathe in, swallow them whole.

Next to Russell’s old pickup, an alligator sunned itself on a rock. The gator’s ridged back blended into the stone, dull gray, dark olive. Its broad snout was turned to one side, displaying powerful jaws that met in a smile. Through the dirty rear window, Harlan saw Russell twist around in his seat. His brother honked twice, and the horn sent the gator lumbering into the weeds. Russell leaned across the seat and threw open the passenger door.

Harlan ran, kicking mud onto the bottom of his stiff new pants. He slammed into the back of the truck and hand-over-hand pulled his way to the door. He threw his bag on the seat, ducked his head and climbed inside. Then he stared speechless at the empty road, wheezing, unable to take in enough air. The idling truck vibrated gently under his thighs.

Russell turned and threw his arms around Harlan and brought him close. He kissed Harlan full on the lips.

Harlan tried to ignore the clotted mass in his throat.

Russell released him. “Let me look at you!” he cried. He clapped at Harlan’s chest. “Why, you son of a bitch, you ain’t changed! All this time and you look just the same.”

Harlan didn’t know what to say to that lie. It must have showed, for

Russell laughed. “You son of a bitch,” he said, “too bad for you.” Russell rubbed his hands together happily and placed them high on the wheel, and Harlan saw that his brother’s right forefinger was singed, a livid red twist like the stripe on a barber pole.

Russell slid his eyes sideways. “Me and Augustin Graugnard branded two days,” he explained. “You know how it is, cher. No sleep at all.”

“What about Pa-Paw? Didn’t he help?”

A shadow crossed Russell’s face.

“Well, Harlan, Pa-Paw—Pa-Paw, he’s gettin old. I tell you, brother, I was that glad for Augustin. I was tired, me. And glad to see the animals go.”

Harlan nodded. Late fall, when the fields darkened with cane stubble and withered rice and the cold winds swept down from the north, the Desonnier cattle went into the marsh. There the herd grazed on the chênieres, oak ridges thick with winter brush. Some Cajun families left with the change, disappearing themselves deep into the bayou. Harlan’s friend Louis did that; trapped nutria, muskrat, mink if he could find it; fished some, lived in a camp. Others hired out to the oil. Roustabouts. Good money, that. But not for the Desonniers. Harlan’s Pa-Paw owned a town store, and every year come winter he’d fire the clerks and for three months Harlan and Russell would stand at the counters pulling dry goods from the shelves and making change, until finally, in February, they were released to the fields. And wasn’t it heaven to plow through rich mud! The first of March saw every arable square foot well turned, made ready once again for the rice. The cows came home to an explosion of green. In July ripe figs filled the garden, watermelons and green corn. Then came summer lay-by, a time to fix fences, chop wood. Hot rain left the air so thick that to breathe was like drinking steam. In September they harvested rice. The cotton began to whiten and sugarcane reached for the sky. Catalpa yellowed at first frost. The departing cows trod through littered gold.

And eight years running, Harlan had missed it all.

Russell gunned the engine a bit. “Ready now, cher? Let’s go. Everyone is waiting home.”

Harlan ducked his head. “Everyone” no longer meant Mama, dead of a

fever his third year away. No, “everyone” now meant Pa-Paw, Earlvane, Rachel and Claire. The husbands and little ones. Harlan sighed. His three older sisters had wed while still in their teens, producing nieces and nephews nearly every year since. He’d lost track long ago. Then, the June after he got sent up, Russell had married Janine’s sister, Anne, and they had four kids. Harlan wondered sometimes why of all the girls in the world his brother couldn’t have found someone else, but he was hardly in a position to complain.

It occurred to him that “everyone” might also mean Anne’s people, the Landrieus. The thought of Père Landrieu waiting on the front porch for his daughter’s killer to come home made Harlan go dangerously light in the head.

Russell said, “If I drive fast, we can be in Abbeville before noon. You can see your girl before noon.”

His girl.

He hadn’t forgotten. That laughing, clapping baby was now a child. But she was Louis’s blood, by God, and not his.

Russell said, “What a sweetheart she is, Harlan. Me and Anne love her like crazy. The babies, they scream to sit on her lap—well, everyone loves Maggie. These days, Harlan, she looks just like you. You wait and see, you. Poor thing.”

“Poor thing,” Harlan croaked. “Poor thing, you bet.”

He thought of the photograph in his bag: the girl in her white dress, hands clasped under her chin, a white Communion veil crowning her head. The print was hopelessly blurred, as if at the last instant she’d danced to one side.

Russell threw him a look. “Don’t you worry now. It’ll be fine. It’s been a long while. But you’re her daddy, and that’s enough for everyone.”

In spite of the cold, Harlan started to sweat.

“You seen that gator, Russell?” he asked. “Big one. Big teeth.”

“No. When?”

“Before. When you honked.”

“Mais, non. Where’d you see it?”

“Right here. By the side of the road.”

Russell craned forward, gazing intently at the sea of brown grass. Then he

laughed. He stomped on the clutch and threw the truck into gear.

“Wrong time of year, Harlan. And too far from the river. Let’s go.”

“I seen it,” Harlan insisted.

“Brother, your trouble is you always seeing things they ain’t there.”

The truck lurched forward, straddling the center line. After a few hundred yards, they climbed a rise that led into a long hairpin turn. At the last second Harlan couldn’t resist looking back. To the left of the guard tower, the words State Penitentiary arched over the front gate like a rainbow, the letters forged in black steel. Harlan watched the administration building grow gradually small. Though he couldn’t be sure, he thought he saw the tower guard wave.

He said to Russell, “You bring my shoes like I asked?”

Russell parked the truck at the end of the lot, behind an iron hitching post at which Harlan felt certain no horse had ever been tied. He studied the one-story dance hall through the dusty windshield; shaped like a barn, it was built of wide, unpainted pine boards. A row of shuttered windows faced onto the street. Children chased the length of the porch, climbing the double rail and dropping down to the lot to run shrieking among pickups and jalopies that were pocked with brown rust. Harlan watched couples two-step briskly through the yellow light that shone from the door. The women wore colorful full skirts, the men, print shirts and string ties and cowboy hats. Harlan sucked on his teeth. The midday sun glowed overhead, a cold white disk pulsing under blankets of clouds. Beyond the roof of the hall, the concrete towers of New Orleans’ business district angled heavenward, shrouded in mist. Were it not for these, Fais Dodo Marie could have been lifted entire from any small country town.

He cranked his window down. The Cajun band played loud enough to hear inside the cab: accordion, fiddle, triangle, steel guitar. Trap drums set a beat. Harlan cocked his head. He recognized “La Valse du Vacher,” a lament about the lonely life of the cowboy. A high-pitched voice sang:

Malheureuse, j’attrape mon cable et mes éperons

Pour moi aller voir à mes bêtes.

Miserable woman, I'm taking my rope and my spurs
To go and see about my cattle.

Harlan turned to Russell. "I ain't in the mood," he said grimly. "Let's go someplace else."

"You crazy, cher." Russell slapped his thigh. "Bad enough I let you talk me into coming all this way. New Orleans! We should be home, and that's the truth. Anne's gon' be madder'n hell as it is."

"You know what I think about that."

"I ain't gon' just drop you on the street, cher."

"By comin here," Harlan said, "we might as well be at home."

"Brother, that's the idea, yes."

Russell's grin lifted his ears. He flung his door open and jumped out and came around the front of the truck to lean against Harlan's side. He lowered his head to the window. "Breathe," he commanded. "You said you was hungry, cher. Smell that!" Then he opened the door so quickly Harlan nearly fell out. "Let's go, brother," Russell said, "time to eat. Trust me, Fais Dodo Marie's the place for you, cher."

Inside, a shaft of sunlight streamed in through the open front door, highlighting a lazy swirl of dust motes and smoke. The air was palpable, dense with the heat of bodies packed close. Two dozen tables were set against the back wall; most were occupied. Shouting cooks manned an open kitchen. Flames shot into the air as they lifted smoking black pots, dishing up portions of spiced seafood and chicken, beans, dirty rice. Harlan's mouth filled so full of spit he felt like a dog.

A woman in a red dress twirled past, so close his heart squeezed. By God, there were a lot of females here. Grandmamas with buns fixed at their napes. Young women with clear, untroubled eyes. Girl-children with skinny legs and black patent-leather shoes. And young or old, pretty or not, it didn't matter one bit, because they all smelled so maddeningly of the sweet female damp that Harlan found himself staggering as if he'd been punched. He didn't know where he could safely set his eyes. There was a hand-lettered sign over a doorway and

he read its instruction: *Fais Dodo: go to sleep*. Harlan knew the room beyond would be filled with mattresses, a place where *maman* could put the little ones down. As a boy he'd slept many a time in such a room; many a time he'd settled his own infant in nests of warm quilts. The band started in with, "*Ma bébé chère créole*," and the scuffed pine floor shook under the stamping of boots. He shouted into Russell's ear, "Don't anyone work in this town?" and his brother said, "*Mais, non. It's Friday now.*"

Russell moved Harlan across the room. He shoved him at an empty table and pushed him into a chair. Then Russell called to a passing waitress. She spun on her heel, her skirts flying, and Harlan caught a slice of white thigh above her stocking. A bolt shot through him and he sat thoroughly upright, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. The waitress teased, "Cat got your tongue?" Russell laughed delightedly and the waitress instructed Harlan, "Just say what you want, sugar. I'm listening." But his voice was nowhere to be found. So Russell ordered for them both: boiled crawfish, *filé gumbo*, corn on the cob, bottles of ice cold Jax. When the gumbo arrived, Harlan held the bowl up under his chin, burying his nose in *sassafras* steam. He spooned the thick soup into his mouth with a locomotive greed. The waitress came by again, dumping crawfish from a tin bucket onto the tablecloth, and these Harlan ate with his hands, sucking the creatures one by one through his lips. He bit down, releasing the sweet, chewed slowly, swallowed. Between bites he washed his mouth with the beer. He kept his eyes shut and tried not to weep. Finished, he signaled for the waitress to bring another bucket, and then another, and then another still. His hunger was depthless, seemingly impossible to satisfy. Russell groaned finally, "I had enough, *cher*. You win."

He stretched, and stood to dance. Picking a plump grandmama from a table nearby, Russell led the woman over the floor in a dizzy two-step. His cheeks blazed and sweat dripped from his brow, and for the first time Harlan noticed the thinning strands at his brother's crown, the flesh pouched at his belt. Then a little yellow-haired girl darted past. Harlan watched her run through the crowd to the bandstand. She clambered up the boards, stamping her feet to "*Jolie Blonde*." The fiddler bent from the knees, and the child planted a kiss on his chin

and pulled a spoon from his shirt pocket. A washboard materialized from somewhere behind the drums. As the crowd shouted and clapped, the little girl scrubbed the corrugated metal with her spoon. Harlan shook his head, remembering. At Angola you could always count on a harmonica, some old broken guitar. Late at night the colored dormitory fair throbbed with the blues. Well, they had some good musicians back at Camp E.

The song ended and Russell brought his partner to the table; she in turn had a pretty teenager in tow. The women plunked themselves either side of Harlan in a tumble of crossed legs and crackling skirts, and he felt his groin string up tight with fear.

Russell leaned forward and said to the older woman, "This here's my baby brother that I was telling you about. Harlan, meet Loretta. And her granddaughter—" He turned to the girl. "What'd you say was your name, chère?"

"Denny." The girl fanned herself, squinting at the remains of the meal, corncobs and beer bottles and broken shells. "Y'all have got a good appetite, I'll say that." She looked Harlan up and down and pronounced, "He's damn cute."

"Don't say damn," Loretta said.

"Cute!" Russell said. "He's uglier'n sin."

"He ain't ugly at all," Denny said. Her lips curled at the corners. Her white forehead shone.

"Don't he talk?" Loretta asked.

Harlan felt his tongue like a rodent: furry, and thick.

The band began, "Madame Etienne" and Russell said to him, "That's a good song, cher. Go on now, dance with the girl."

Harlan wanted to sit on his hands.

"I don't dance," he said.

"That's too bad," Denny sighed.

Loretta said, "What kinda Cajun don't dance?"

Russell leaned on his elbows. He said to the women, "Well, my brother's real shy. He's been away, him."

Denny asked brightly, "Where you been?"

It struck Harlan then that she reminded him more than a bit of Janine. Same curling lips, same earnest brow. He glanced at Russell to see if he'd caught it too, but his brother's expression was flat and happy, open as an empty field.

"Angola," he said. "I been up at Angola a while."

"Harlan!" Russell said.

"Never heard of it," said Denny.

But Loretta said, "Is that a fact?" She passed a hand over her mouth, and pushed the chair back, and rose. She tugged at Denny's arm. "We got to get goin' now, chère."

The girl looked up at her, surprised. "No, we don't."

Loretta yanked on the girl's hair. She tapped her foot impatiently. She glared at Russell and said, "Oh, we do. We most certainly do."

Harlan leaned against the front of the truck. He looked at the sky. The sun balanced low, still haloed in mist, and a cold breeze tickled the tips of his ears. Thick ground fog was rolling in from the lake; it wound about his ankles and knees. Someone at the mouth of the lot leaned on a horn, and he turned to see a Rambler jumping the curb. There were so many cars now that some had been parked willy-nilly over the sidewalk, spilling into the street. Harlan folded his arms. He felt chilled to the core. The beer he'd drunk had already worn off.

"Wouldn't've killed you to dance," Russell said. He hoisted up to sit on the hood and knocked a knee playfully against Harlan's waist.

"I don't know," Harlan said. "Just might have."

"That was a nice girl in there."

"Pretty girl, yes."

"Angola. Shit. What'd you go and say that for?"

"You brought it up, Russell. Tellin' her I been gone. Anyway, it's the truth."

"Brother, that ain't the point."

"You got a cigarette, you?"

"You don't smoke."

"Yes, I do."

“Since when’d you become so all-fired stuck on the truth?”

Harlan inched away from his brother’s leg. A slow boil had starting to churn in his gut. He wanted a cigarette to help him calm down. That girl Denny had put him dangerously in mind of Janine, which meant Louis was poking around in there too. *Truth*. Well, it was funny how eight years could change so many sides to a man, yet leave the facts exactly as they ever were; exactly as they ever would be. Harlan could feel his next words as they formed in his mouth, the individual sounds of the individual letters pulled from his darkest convictions, like a magnet held over splinters of steel.

“So tell me about my old friend, Louis Chopin,” he said. The name hissed like slow poison released from a well. “What’s Louis doin’ these days? How’s Louis been? Tell me now, Russell, how’s his life go?”

He heard exasperation in Russell’s answering sigh. “I knew this was coming,” Russell said. “All that time in the truck you kept still? All that time eating, lookin’ like you was satisfied just to be free? Made me glad, Harlan. I figured you might’ve finally got you some self-control.”

“Yeah,” Harlan said. “Angola’s the place.”

“I figured you might’ve let that shit go.”

“Guess you figured wrong.”

“Well, forget it, cher. I ain’t gon’ play with you now.”

“Come on, Russell,” Harlan said. “Tell me ‘bout my friend. You owe me some, you.”

“Like hell!” Russell said. “Seems more like you the one that owes me. I been raising your child. You forget that?”

“I ain’t forgot.” Harlan shook his numbed wrists. The dance hall swam in a curtain of fog. “I ain’t forgot the fact she ain’t mine.”

“Aw, she is, Harlan. She is! She looks just like you.”

“No, Janine got her off Louis. You know that. Everybody does.”

Russell jumped off the hood. He slid around in front of Harlan and grabbed hold of his arms. “And after all the trouble you brung!”

Harlan shoved at Russell’s hands; he couldn’t stand Russell’s touch. And the tears he saw flooding his brother’s eyes fed a fury he had no desire to

contain.

"All women are like that," Harlan said carefully. "The pretty ones, especially."

"Like what?" Russell said.

"Faithless."

"Where'd you get that idea, cher?"

"And all those Landrieu girls are pretty. Ain't they, Russell? Ain't they, now?"

"Leave Anne out of it!" Russell cried. "Mule! When you gon' learn. Janine never did nothing to you. And Louis never did nothing."

"I should've killed Louis, too," Harlan said. "I might do it yet."

As if from the other end of the earth, he watched Russell draw back his arm. Russell's fist shot forward, landing solidly at the edge of his lip. Harlan staggered from the blow. He felt the soft tissue of his mouth swell. He smelled blood, tasted salt.

"Good," he said, his mouth full.

Then his feet moved; he started to walk. He stumbled, weaving quickly among the parked cars until he was out in the street. There he raised his chin and flung out his chest, and ran. He headed into the rolling fog from the lake, flying past storefronts, the windows a blur. His arms pumped and his feet slapped hard against the pavement. By God, how long since he'd last gone full-out? The old shoes Russell had brought him from home pinched his toes. They were too small; his feet must have spread. It didn't matter. Harlan felt he could run forever and never get tired, and he gave to escape his entire self, his flailing limbs and whirling mind and pounding heart. He sailed along effortlessly. Behind him, through the noise of traffic, he recognized the Ford's plaintive horn. He thought he heard Russell shout. But the words were lost in the throb of blood in his ears.

Harlan turned onto a residential street, a row of tiny ornate dwellings fronted by drying grass. He hurled down an empty sidewalk, vaulted a gate and disappeared along the side of a house. Through an open window came the sound of rushing water, a child's voice raised in complaint.

He pulled up short in the backyard. A huge black hound slept on weeds,

tethered to the trunk of an old banana plant. A chain link fence barred passage to the alleyway. Harlan held out a hand and the dog lifted its glossy head from its paws. It growled low in the throat. Its lean flanks quivered. Harlan considered running back to the street, and he would have, but for Russell. Instead, he sprinted to the end of the fence. There he hesitated again; at Camp E, a hand on a fence got you the shooting end of a rifle jammed up against your spine. He stuck his toes into the wires and climbed. The fence bowed and clanged and the dog leapt snarling to its feet, and pounced. The leash snapped taut. Harlan panicked, remembering Angola's hounds. He hung himself desperately over the top of the fence, while the dog hooked its claws on the chain link and howled. Harlan swung his head and tried to fix his good eye on the beast.

Then he saw the little boy naked and dripping under the banana tree. "He's a good dog," the boy said, and Harlan slipped. Before he could stop himself he'd slid partway down the fence. A sharp end of loose wire scraped the underside of his neck. It pierced his swollen lip easily. Harlan's vision went black for a second. He grunted and jerked his head. He felt his lip tear. Blood dripped to the ground. Harlan straightened his arms and hauled himself up and pushed over the fence, tumbling headfirst into the alley.

He landed directly in front of Russell's old truck.

At Charity Hospital, the emergency ward smelled of vomit and pine, with the injured gathered in the waiting room on worn green vinyl chairs. Russell and Harlan stood at the admissions desk. Russell answered questions and filled out forms as Harlan contemplated the Sister's headdress, prow shaped above her red face. He held a sticky hand to his mouth. The front of his white shirt was soaked. An orderly shouted, "We got eight on the way, a head-on uptown," and several staff members took off in a run.

The Sister said, "Come with me." Harlan followed her rustling white robes. She led him through swinging doors, down a tiled hall to a room filled with machinery and metal sinks. Along one side curtains were pulled to form examining rooms. Harlan heard agonized moaning, an instructive drone. The Sister said, "In here," indicating an empty space. Harlan climbed up onto the

table. The Sister closed the drape around him and left. After a while a doctor came by. He glanced at Harlan briefly, and then he left, too. Somewhere, somebody wept.

Russell stuck his head through the drape. At his back a female voice inquired, "In or out?" and Russell said, "In."

"Well then, get in." A lay nurse pushed past, steering a metal cart. Harlan stared. The nurse towered over Russell, slim as a flower stem, her arms curved gracefully. Pale hair hung over her forehead in transparent wisps. The pink tips of her ears poked through the lank strands that escaped from under her cap. The nurse's skin was smooth and unblemished as a child's, but with bones like steel scaffolding beneath the silk. She wheeled closer, and Harlan saw that a red splash stained her left breast. He read the metal tag: Glory Wiltz. He looked into her eyes. They were the color of eggplant overlaid with sunbursts of brown. Swallowing, he said her name: "Glory." The nurse met his gaze. "As in 'Glory be,'" she said. "My parents' idea of a joke." She put a finger under his chin and lifted his face to the light. "Ah," she said, and her warm breath smelled of a spice he couldn't name. "You sliced it right through. What was it?"

"Chain link fence," Russell said.

"You're going to have quite a scar."

"Improve his face some."

"You're too young," Harlan said. His mouth hurt so vilely he thought he might faint.

"Obviously," she said, "I'm not."

"How bad is that cut?" Russell asked.

"Bad enough. But it'll be all right." She asked Harlan, "When's the last time you had a tetanus shot?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I've got to give you one now. Then I'll stitch that lip."

"The doc can't do it?" Russell asked.

"Sorry. Full house."

She picked a syringe from the rolling cart, opened a drawer and filled the tube from a vial. She told Harlan, "Loosen your pants." He hesitated,

embarrassed, and she said simply, "Works best in the rear." So he undid the buttons and rolled onto his hip. The needle jabbed. When he sat back up, Glory Wiltz cupped his cheek, and the touch of her cool palm eased his pain. Cautiously, she swabbed the wound. She took a long needle from the tray and aimed a length of thread at its eye. She rolled a knot between her forefinger and thumb. Then she set a hand on his shoulder and said, "This'll sting." She took a careful stitch. Harlan willed himself not to flinch. She took another, and he counted the pale freckles scattered like gold dust over the bridge of her nose. He exhaled and a lock of hair floated against her neck. A blue vein fluttered at her temple. Her breasts lifted gently with each breath. The nurse stitched delicately, with fingers nimble and sure, and it occurred to Harlan that this woman might be more at home in herself than anyone he'd ever met. She murmured, "I'll bet you don't see much with that eye," and snipped the end of the thread. "That's it. You're done." She removed a silver tube from the drawer. "Here's some ointment. It's an antibiotic. Use it three times a day. You can come back in a week or so to get the stitches out, but otherwise, you should be fine. Come in sooner if the wound gets purple, or swells up any worse than it is."

Russell clapped his hands. "All right, cher," he said. "You heard the lady. That's it. Might as well tell you, I phoned Anne from outside. She's hopping mad, but if we get goin' now, we can still sleep home tonight. Brother, let's go."

"No," Harlan said.

Russell said, "I'm takin' you home." He turned to Glory. "Any old doc can get those stitches out. Ain't that so?"

"I. Ain't. Goin'. Home."

Harlan bit the words off painfully. How many times had he said it today? He locked eyes with Russell and this time he sent the message so cruel and complete that Russell, poor Russell, at last understood.

"How I'm gon' explain why I ain't got you, cher?" Russell's face crumpled. "How I'm gon' explain why I let you go?"

"You'll think of somethin'," Harlan said.

"And what about Maggie? She's countin' on seeing you. What I'm gon' tell Maggie tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Shit," Russell said. He yanked the curtain back. The folds flew into his face and he swatted them with his palms. "You goddamn fool. You don't know who all this hurts."

Through the opening Harlan saw an orderly wheeling a gurney down the hall.

"You got any money, you?" Russell asked heatedly.

Harlan nodded, but Russell dug into his pants anyway. He pulled out a handful of crumpled bills and tried to give them to Harlan. But Harlan shook his head and left his hands in his lap. "Mule," Russell said. He threw the money at the nurse's cart and some of the bills fell to the floor. "Shit," he said. "Shit." He turned his pockets inside out and coins dropped over the tile, ringing like bells.

The gurney stopped. The orderly set the brake and said to Glory, "This one's critical." He slapped a hand under the rail. "Oops," he said. "I forgot the chart. Keep an eye on him a minute, will you, dear?" He took off down the hall.

The patient's head stuck out from under a blanket pulled to the neck: matted hair, a slack mouth. The pores of the skin were large, a pale moonscape riddled with veins.

As they watched a light went out in the eyes.

"Aw, no," Russell said. "No."

Harlan looked away. At the end Janine's eyes had gone out just like that, the turn of a page.

Beside him, Glory sighed. She wrapped her arms around her waist. The nurse seemed helpless to Harlan then, and fragile, so lost that he longed to set his hands over hers, to pull her to him and hold her against his heart. But then she lifted her chin and stepped briskly past and her resolute strength of purpose filled him with doubt. He was frightened at what he'd nearly done, ashamed, and relieved, too, glad he'd kept desires to himself.

Glory leaned over the gurney. Her hair swung against her cheek. She laid her fingertips against the dead man's scrawny neck and smoothed the knotted brow.

"Harlan, oh!" Russell moaned. "Come home with me, cher."

"I can't," Harlan said.

"You mean you won't."

"That's right, by God."

Louis! Harlan's rage came rushing to the surface again. His mouth flooded with bile. It was Louis's fault! Harlan had thrown that hammer in a blind certainty of deceit, and whatever Russell might say, nothing since had changed his mind. Nothing ever would. He could *never* go home. Because Louis was there; and worse, Maggie was there. With the blood of the traitor running fast in her veins.

He couldn't bear it.

And Guzman? By God, there was another reason not to return. Even to himself, Harlan hardly dared say the name. He felt Guzman in the room, a dark weight.

Glory said quietly, "Well, the poor man is dead."

"I won't go home," Harlan said.

Russell hung his head. "Brother, that's a bony shoulder to give to them that loves you so deep."