

THE RELUCTANT COWBOY

A Musical For Stage and Screen



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The screenplay version of this story was written
between 2010 and 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

Pokey Cribbage, a Chihuahua-terrier mix, lies on the 1950s motif davenport fast asleep. The football game on the TV roars scratchily. Outside, a siren wails, and flashes of red and blue cut through the window to dance across the walls. They keep dancing.

Pokey awakens. He makes a low-pitched, quiet howl. He gets up, his hair raised a bit in simple irritation, and walks to his drinking pan in the kitchen.

He stands over the pan a moment and laps unenthusiastically once, twice—missing the water entirely the second time.

He howls again, and there is a trace of a growl in the sound.

The sirens die away in time, and Pokey returns to the davenport and is soon fast asleep again. The TV blares on. The lights on the wall flash brighter. They dance on the wall and on the sleeping dog.

The TV screen is now nearly all green with the expanse of Astroturf. Football players run across the field. From the TV comes the voice of Horace Golding.

There are some things more important than a football game. News from New York City. James McKay composer and former leader of

the Storm Kings shot in the back and dead on arrival at...

The sound of muttering from the TV is heard, and then there is a pause of several seconds.

What?What the...

The voice pauses again and then comes back.

I stand corrected. McKay's condition is not known...and I am told now that he has been critically... but I will say nothing more.

There is still another pause.

Idiots. Goddamn it! Get me the facts first—the facts. Fools.

CHAPTER TWO

A young man stands on the sidewalk in front of the Shawnee, an imposing, multi-story apartment building. He thumbs through a book, holding it up to the light of a streetlamp.

A car approaches and the figure of James McKay emerges and starts toward the apartment building. The young man raises a .38. Three shots are heard and a fourth when the shooter has put the muzzle of the .38 in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The book flies into the air and lands on the sidewalk in the light of the streetlamp. The book is open. Its title page is visible, and it reads, "In Our Time."

A breeze stirs and blows the title page to one side, and then for a while an invisible hand leafs through the book lying on the sidewalk.

Sylvester T. Cribbage, New York Native, actor and musician, is seated in the aisle seat of the Boeing 727. It is quiet inside with only a slight sound of the whistling jet engines. Next to him, at the window, sits another man, Edward Wentworth. The seat between them is empty.

Wentworth is obviously Cribbage's senior. His hair is mostly gray and he is dressed conservatively. Cribbage is youthful but mid-fortyish. His face seems big and blatantly expressive, good humored, and plastered on it is not a perpetual smile but what might be called a perpetual laugh. Cribbage wears a suit with a vest and has on a bolo tie with a long-horned steer as the slide. The bolo tips are silver bullets.

A female flight attendant stands in the aisle with the beverage cart.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Sir. You first,” Cribbage says to Wentworth. He has a Brooklyn accent.

“Thank you. I'll have a bourbon on the rocks, please—a double.”

Wentworth leans over to speak to Cribbage. “Always get a double. You won't have to wait for your next drink, and the attendant won't be bothered twice.”

“Great idea!” He looks at the flight attendant. “A bloody Mary. Make it a double!”

Cribbage winks at Wentworth.

The flight attendant serves the older man a plastic glass with ice and two one-ounce bottles of bourbon. She pours the bloody Mary mix from a 12-ounce can over the ice in another cup for Cribbage and puts it on his tray along with two bottles of vodka.

The older man begins to fix his drink. He takes the cap off of one of the bourbons.

Cribbage sticks out his hand. "Sylvester T. Cribbage!"

Wentworth shakes Cribbage's hand. "Edward Wentworth. I'm a Catholic priest."

Cribbage blanches. "Well, I'm Catholic myself." He pulls a tiny chain from under his shirt revealing the St. Christopher medallion. "My traveling companion, Sir. But you don't have to warn me you're a priest, Father. I wouldn't have embarrassed you. I talk to everyone the same: man, woman, grocery store clerk, cop on the beat, Indian chief, even priest. Tell the truth, Father. Were you really afraid I was going to say something just *awful*?" He digs the man playfully in the ribs with his elbow. "You know. Heh, heh—just guy to guy?"

"Well, I..."

"You'll never see the best in people if you expect the worst, Father. Seek and ye shall find and all that."

"Well, of course I always..."

"If you're uncomfortable going plain clothes, wear the collar, Father, though I take a dim view of any priest who would wear it just to put us all on notice." Cribbage pauses a moment and then there is sly look on his still big, laughing face. "Don't you think it's time

you started believing in the basic goodness of people?"

Cribbage leans over putting that big ebullient face so close to Wentworth's that the priest leans back a little to get away. "What *you* need, Father, is a little *faith!*"

Cribbage cheerfully uncaps both vodkas, pours them into his cup, and tosses it all down. The flight attendant turns from the seats opposite where she has just served another passenger. Cribbage gently grasps her sleeve and playfully tugs. "Father Wentworth has advised that I order a double bloody Mary."

"I just served you a double bloody Mary not one minute ago."

"And it was a very good one too," Cribbage smiles sweetly, but there is no reaction from the flight attendant. "Er, he *asked* me to. He says it saves *time*."

"I think not, sir."

"It's all right. He points to the priest's remaining unopened bottle. "We have an extra anyway."

The flight attendant turns away. and Cribbage leans toward Wentworth. "So much for *your* advice."

CHAPTER THREE

Cribbage walks up the steps to his apartment as the cab he has arrived in disappears down the street. There are an unusually large number of people on the street. He sees flashing red and blue lights and hears some singing down the street.

Cribbage takes his apartment key from his pocket. The key is attached to a long, rather heavy chain. He turns the key in the lock and goes in.

There is something about a shooting on TV, but Cribbage switches it off. Pokey runs in circles in excitement. Cribbage picks him up and the two hug and kiss until Pokey has calmed down.

He puts the dog on the couch and picks up the note from dog sitter on the coffee table. He reads her note.

Pokey was very happy today. Lots of tummy rubs! And a good walk. Gave him his meds and we played "Snappy Dog" in the living room. Your TV was on when I came in. I didn't know if you wanted it on or off, so I left it that way. Looking forward to seeing Pokey again soon. He's a sweetheart!

Cribbage looks at the note and rolls his eyes. He takes the dog leash from the coffee table. Pokey barks and runs in circles.

“A quick pee, Pokey. Then we're hitting the sack.”

Cribbage steps out of his doorway with Pokey. He locks the door behind him with the key on its long, dangling chain and goes down the steps.

Cribbage walks Pokey down the street in the opposite direction of the lights and singing.

Cribbage reads the newspaper article about the shooting at his kitchen breakfast table. *They said that one more shot anywhere and it would have spelled curtains for McKay*, he thinks. *The world was almost one Storm King down. And the best composer in the band at that.*

Cribbage knows there are a lot of big, famous names around and most of them had good sized egos. But they'd secretly trade all the talent they have to be able to knock off hits like James McKay. Or like he used to—with or without his equally famous collaborator. *I wonder what he'd say if I asked him to help me out*, Cribbage thinks. He knew McKay would be in the Diamond Point Studios sooner or later.

McKay is in the hospital bed, his arm in a cast. McKay is fortyish. The TV is on in the background. A remote control has its cable going through the rail on the side of the bed. Horace Golding stands at McKay's bedside. Golding is a tall man better than 20 years older than McKay.

"Forget about it, Horace. Exaggerated reports of my death and all. It's really kind of funny."

"I won't stay any longer, James. I'm glad you're doing better. Take care."

"You too, Horace."

Golding leaves and McKay turns the TV up. Now it blares with an announcer's voice. There are shots of the flashing neon sign outside a Broadway theater with the word *LAREDO!*

Brooklyn's own Sylvester T. Cribbage is breaking some box office records with his quirky western stage production, Laredo! Cribbage stars in his own brainchild as Pokey Laredo, a goofy but tuneful buckaroo with a song in his heart and a laugh up his sleeve.

The TV scene shifts to the stage where Cribbage is seen in a Hollywood western cowboy outfit plucking a string bass. He sings his song "The Flip Side of Love."

There are two sides to love, it's true. Side A is sweet; Side B is blue...

KNYC reporter Katherine Standage caught up with Cribbage back stage yesterday.

Cribbage appears on the screen standing next to Standage. He is still in wardrobe with his neck kerchief neatly knotted and his hat in hand. The music continues in the background.

"Well, Pokey, you've been driving cattle up West 42nd Street three nights a week for more than a year now."

"I have," Cribbage says, in his usual Brooklyn accent. "Stopping only to graze at the Carnegie Deli."

"Tell me about the show."

"Well, what we don't have in storyline we make up for in toe-tapping tunes and one-liners. And we have a cast that would make Rodgers and Hammerstein jealous."

"Now, you're the one who writes all the tunes."

"Right. No covers. If you want to hear "Cool Water" for the millionth time, Laredo! will disappoint you."

"What will we hear?"

"You'll hear new material every three or four shows. I said we didn't have much in the way of a storyline. But because of that, we can swap songs and skits in and out so the show stays fresh."

“The show changes that often?”

“Morphs. It *morphs*! A month from now you can come back and see it again.”

“That's good for repeat business, but doesn't it make a lot of work for you?”

“Yes, but it's my show,” Cribbage answers still in a Brooklyn accent. “And...” He gives her a sideward stare with one eye closed. “...ma'am, I aim to run herd on it. Hey! Want to see me lose 30 IQ points in three seconds?”

“Sure.”

“One, Two, Three!”

On three, he sets the cowboy hat on his head.

“You strike me as a somewhat reluctant cowboy, Sylvester.”

“Well, I'm from Brooklyn, for cryin' out loud.”

The last line of the music plays.

Don't make me sing that lonesome song on the flip side of love!

“Best of luck on Laredo, Sylvester.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“This is Katherine Standage KNYC News with Sylvester Cribbage.”

Cribbage shouts, “Sylvester TEE Cribbage!”

“Sylvester TEE Cribbage runnin' herd...”

“Runnin' *hoyd*!”

“...Sylvester TEE Cribbage running *hoyd* at the Bluebird Theater.”

McKay switches off the TV.
“Bloody hell!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Cribbage sits in a chair in front of George Heinemann, who is at his desk.

"Sylvester, I'm hearing everywhere that you plan to change the theme of Laredo, though with that title I don't know how you intend to do it."

"The show has always morphed."

"It hasn't suddenly changed into a cockroach."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"It's bad business."

"Bad business."

"Of course. When Middle aged Mom and Pop Midwest travel to Manhattan, they never miss your show. They buy tickets because of the cowboy theme. They listen to country music at home."

"If they'll listen to country, they'll listen to anything."

"You mean they'll listen to anything country."

"No, I mean they'll listen to anything. And the music isn't country anyway; it's western."

"That fact is lost on your audience. They fancy themselves trail drivers, Sylvester. They come to see the hats. I don't mind if you very gradually move away from the theme, but a sudden change will kill us at the box office."

"I've got a New York following too, you know."

"Well, local fan clubs don't pay the bills. And I'm not sure you'll like it when your fans turn the production into a western version of Rocky Horror Picture Show."

"I'll die of *ennui*."

"See you later, Buckaroo."

Cribbage shuts the door behind him. He has a sour but determined look on his face.

Sylvester T. Cribbage walks toward the audience picking a guitar and singing. He in reality is walking in place as the props on either side of him, intensely two-dimensional cut-outs of cacti, boulders, brush, and the occasional longhorn cow, move past him on oval carousels.

On either side of the stage are plywood cliffs painted red and burnt sienna like alternating layers of vertical sandstone and sloping shale.

All of the scenery is far from realistic, but that is part of the show's look as a hokey frolic, and the moving props give the impression that he is walking down a canyon.

Dreams and reality seem an awful lot alike to me. And dreams are the only thing that keep me going. Just dreams and the sound of my guitar!

All of the tunes are his. The show closed with "Good-bye Trail Mates," not his best work, but it doesn't have to be. Cribbage has never even tried to outdo Dale Evans in a fare-thee-well, and this is the only one of his own that he has, and since he doesn't do any covers, that's that. The same song closed the first record album, which is making him a very modest income.

Cribbage sings the last line:

Just dreams and the sound of my guitar!

The song ends with a six-note Eadd9 chord, the first, second, and sixth strings open.

When the cast takes stage for the finale, a prosaic horse—two people in a suit—curtsies along with the actors, and then turns backwards and bows with its proverbial south end facing the audience. Cribbage always booted the horse's behind and the horse turned around all apologies curtsying frantically in apology. As corny as it comes, but the crowd ate it up. One night is to be different, though.

Michael Rosenburg runs up to Cribbage in a panic.

"Mr. Cribbage! Mr. Cribbage!"

"What?"

"Amanda can't go on."

"What do you mean she can't go on?"

"She's hurling, Mr. Cribbage."

"Well put someone else in the horse suit.
What am I, your personal valet? Christ."

"Who?"

"You do it."

"I'm claustrophobic, Mr. Cribbage."

"Amanda has the back of the horse. You
were born for the role."

"I'll suffocate in there. Really, Mr.
Cribbage."

"No, you won't. Go!"

Cribbage and the cast sing "Good-bye Trail
Mates." Michael and another actor are in the
horse suit They dance slowly about as the song
ends.

*Now time is nigh to say good-bye to you my
friends...*

The song ends, but by that time, Michael is
in a claustrophobic panic. He falls to the stage
floor. The front of the horse attempts to curtsy,
but the bulging back end of the horse suit
containing Michael pulls the front of the horse
backward.

"Get up!" says the front of the horse loud
enough for the audience to hear. It sounds like a
stage whisper.

There is a gasp and a tearing sound as the back of the horse is ripped open, and Michael exits running.

"Aaaaaaagh! I'm dying in there!"

Cribbage stands center stage, an uncomfortable smile frozen on his face, but there is an explosive laugh from the audience, and Cribbage's eyes widen. He smiles to the audience as though it had all been part of the act.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cribbage sits backstage in a chair writing on a clipboard. Amanda Smith walks up to Cribbage. She's a pretty brunette but she looks disheveled and sick.

"I'm really sorry Mr. Cribbage. I got so sick!"

"Don't worry, sweetie. It's all for the best. Believe me. Go home and get better, Sugar Pop."

Amanda leaves. Stage hands strike the set and others just walk around.

Serendipity. Cribbage is in love with it whenever it crossed his path. The crowd liked Michael's little disaster so much that he made it a regular part of the show. He has Velcro sewed into the back of the horse suit. Every night, Michael would tear himself out of the horse, and when he does, the audience always cracked up. *Who can figure?* Cribbage thinks. *Sadism?*

Each night Michael runs from the torn-open suit screaming stage right. The audience laughs. His face is wide-eyed and he is sweaty and out of breath. He hears the crowd's laughter and turns to look back on stage as if staring into a nightmare. Every night it's the same. He sits in a folding metal chair, picks up a towel and wipes the sweat off his face. His hands shake.

Cribbage knows that changing the scene is good for Amanda. She is too pretty and too good a singer to hide in the suit anyway, so he gets her a little background singing part with the other girls and everyone's happy. Well, Michael isn't. Cribbage gets someone else to take Michael's place in the horse.

CHAPTER SIX

A cowboy stands next to a fence and performs the spoken part of a song with a swing guitar accompaniment from the orchestra pit. He has a lariat and motions with it as he speaks. On the fence three cowgirls are seated. Two are blond and the other is Amanda.

The cowboy talks, "A cowpoke town folk 'round here know can rope and brand but does it slow. He rides in the saddle rocking to and fro and he's everybody's favorite cowboy!"

Amanda and the two others sing the chorus:

Pokey, Pokey Laredo!

At drawing fast he just ain't worth a dime

Pokey, Pokey Laredo!

They call him Pokey 'cause he likes to take his time.

The cowboy talks again, "There was a gunfight once and Pokey won 'cause it took him so long to draw his gun the other fella died from standing in the sun. He's everybody's favorite cowboy!"

Amanda and the others sing the chorus again,

...Pokey, Pokey Laredo!

The girls all love him 'cause he likes to take his time.

The show is a songwriter's dream—and nightmare—both because of all the tunes Cribbage has to come up with. But it is fun to write perky ones like "Pokey Laredo" and even ones that are slightly over gush. Cribbage always has a couple of those; there is a perennial percentage of the audience who required their ration of schmaltz.

The Buckin' Bronx jam in a back-stage room at the Bluebird. The band members are dressed in ordinary street clothes. The band consists of two guitarists, a bass, a keyboard player and a drummer. The words "BUCKIN' BRONX" are stenciled on the bass drum. Above the words is the brand name of the drums, "LUDWIG."

Cribbage is with the group and sings. He plays one of the guitars. The song is "Tell Someone Your Dreams." There is a TV in the room and it is on.

Three nights a week Cribbage has the Buckin' Bronx in the orchestra pit playing. And he jams with them once or twice a week too. The practice sessions are a testing ground for new material. They play all kinds of stuff. And Cribbage occasionally goes over to one of the

band's regular gigs on 47th Street and sit in for a few tunes.

Cribbage sings.

Dreams are the only thing 'kept me going so far. Just dreams and the sound of my guitar. Tell someone your dreams and they'll know who you are. Just from your dreams and the sound of your guitar.

There's a tag and the song ends with a screaming 6 add 9 chord.

The drummer shouts, "Woo! Old Storm Kings ending!"

The TV can be heard now. And cribbage looks at the screen, "Speaking of which, he says.

He unplugs his guitar and walks to the TV and turns up the sound.

After a long stay in Manhattan's Westside Hospital, James McKay is traveling home to the Shawnee, where a deranged fan shot the former Storm Kings leader and self-proclaimed peacenik after an evening recording session. McKay's arm is still in a cast having been broken by the barrage of bullets that nearly killed him, but the cast will be off soon, and he will regain full use of the arm, doctors say. No word on his plans.

Cribbage stares at the screen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

James McKay sits at a table with a microphone in front of him. His left arm is in a cast. Next to him is Kelly Shawnsen, a TV announcer. He also has a microphone.

"What have you been up to since that night? I mean aside from hospitals and recuperation?"

"Well so far, not much else. Trying to get myself right-side-up again."

"Well then, once you have, what are your plans?"

"I've got a second shot at life, so I feel I should make something like a new year's resolution—in fact a whole string of them. I haven't come up with anything specific yet, but I will"

"Some activism?"

"I'm sure."

"How about composing?"

"Well, I'll always do that."

"Together with anyone from the Storm Kings?"

"Now you've done it."

"You knew I had to ask."

"Well, you never know, sir. You never know."

Cribbage walks Pokey on a leash on the way to the Diamond Point Studios. He's dressed sharply in slacks and has a bolo tie with an agate slide. People on the street give him a few sideward glances, most probably because of the black cowboy hat he is wearing. When they arrive at the door, Cribbage picks Pokey up, gathers the leash, and pushes open the door.

A receptionist is at her desk inside.

"Good morning, Mr. Cribbage," she says.
"How are you today?"

"Great!"

"And how are you, Pokey?"

Cribbage grasps Pokey's jaw and moves the dog's muzzle, pretending that the dog can talk. "I'm great too!" Cribbage says trying but failing to keep his lips from moving. He giggles and walks with Pokey through another door and into the hallway beyond.

Cribbage walks through the hallways and offices carrying Pokey. He sees James McKay talking with two other men. One is the studio director. McKay's right arm is in a sling and cast.

"Just so long as we have that studio for the whole two weeks," says McKay to the director.

"Yes, it's already scheduled. No problem. We're both gonna be there the whole time anyway in case you need something. And to get you a safe ride home."

"Sounds great. See you then."

The two men leave and Cribbage walks up to McKay

"James McKay! Sylvester T. Cribbage!" He sticks out his hand and McKay shakes it.

"What's the big, gold-embroidered T stand for, Mr. Cribbage?"

"Terrific! What else?" He looks down at Pokey and says, "Oh, sorry; *Terrier*. That's right!" Cribbage laughs at his own bad joke unapologetically and then looks back to McKay. "You know, James. I have that big show Laredo in town. I assume you've at least heard of it."

McKay just looks at him. He glances at the cowboy hat and makes the tiniest snort of laughter.

"Well, it provides a musical opportunity of sorts. You see, my worst nightmare is to wake up singing my very own "Good-bye Trail Mates" for the ten thousandth time when I could occasionally be doing some really fresh material."

"So?"

"So I've got plenty to work with, but I lack a collaborator."

"Now you're describing *my* worst nightmare. Take it up with my booking agent. The same goes for your little dog, too."

McKay walks off as if Cribbage ceased to exist.

Cribbage picks up Pokey and says, "Pay no attention to him. I'll bet his booking agent is going to be wanting a raise before long."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cribbage types on a manual typewriter at his desk at home. He is wearing wire-framed reading glasses. He is an expert typist. He types the words "THE RELUCTANT COWBOY, A MEMOIR" at the top of the page. He continues typing fast.

People have always said I had a lot of audacity. And asking James McKay to be my collaborator the first time we ever met was pretty bold even for me. Just the same, one listen to his last record convinced me that he might need me more than I needed him. Convincing him is the only problem.

It's late and McKay is in the studio, his left arm still in the cast. He stands in front of an organ. There are earphones on the top of the organ. A console is nearby. Musicians leave the room. Two men remain with McKay. One is the studio director.

McKay says, "I'm going to listen to what we've done so far so I'll be ready for tomorrow."

"Okay. I think we're going down to the office for a while," the director says. "Take your

time and come on down when you're through. Then we'll get you home."

McKay is alone. He puts on the earphones and takes a step toward the console. He laughs and sees his reflection laughing in the glass between himself and the control room. But when he stops, it is as though the reflection does not. It keeps on laughing. It isn't something he is really seeing. It is something he is suddenly feeling yet a vision to him just the same. His face in the glass seems to change as the reflection brays in bravado revealing itself as brainless, selfish, contemptible.

McKay looks horrified by what he sees. He closes his eyes. He steps back to the organ. His right hand touches the keyboard and falls into a three-note F chord and he sings. His voice is scratchy and chokey.

*Just today at work something set me to
thinking. And I wanted to go home
And maybe fix myself a drink...*

A song always cries for a bridge, a chorus, a middle eight. And this time the bridge comes to him with no effort. Then, like the bridge, the entire song reveals itself.—every bit of it—with no effort on his part. Songs have come to him that way before.

*Hide it away, we just hide it away. Cold is
this heart of mine.*

Cribbage lets the song write itself. Should someone interrupt, it will be gone in an instant. But no one does, and he sings the final verse.

You can run from the truth and be running from a lie. But you can't run from yourself no matter how you try. Just today at work something set me to thinking. And I wanted to go home and cry.

CHAPTER NINE

It is two o'clock in the morning in Manchester, United Kingdom and the phone is ringing. Valerie McKay hears it as a part of a dream until she at last awakes and answers.

"Hello?"

"Val."

Valerie snaps on the lamp on the headboard of her bed where she has just awoken. Her eyes are almost closed. Her recognition is immediate. "James."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Do you know what time it is here?"

"No. I assume some ungodly hour. Sorry; thoughtless. It's just like me, which is actually what I'm calling about."

"What do you mean?"

"Squaring accounts."

"It's too late for that."

"Is it?"

"Of course, it is."

"I was hoping you were an idealist of sorts. One who says it's never too late. I've been an idealist in words only, I think."

"It's never too late to make an overture, I suppose."

"I'm making one. It's all I can do."

"It's nice of you. But it doesn't change anything. If you want me to say all that happened never mattered..."

"It's not that. I want to make amends."

"Well, that's what's too late, isn't it?"

"I know. So, since I can't change the past, I want to say I'm sorry. I've become introspective. Suddenly. Belatedly."

"Introspection is a great gift."

"And the lack of it a great failing."

"Yes."

"Thanks for not hanging up on me."

"I wouldn't do that, James."

"I guess you could say I hung up on you and Danny a long time ago."

"You could. And I forgave you a long time ago. No guilt, James."

"How is Danny doing?"

"He's doing fine. There have been rough times, but there is some forgiveness there too."

"Thanks, Val."

"I have to say that when I heard I wanted to call you. Thought I was through with it. Talking I mean."

"Maybe we can talk sometime again."

"That would be nice, James. Good-bye."

Valerie hangs up the phone.

Cribbage is in bed asleep. Strains of "The Flip Side of Love" are singing in his head.

The doorbell rings. It rings again. Cribbage stirs, rolls over. The sound of the song decreases in volume. He sits up, and shakes his head as the music fades, comes back a little louder, and then disappears altogether.

Pokey is lying next to him and wakes up. The dog barks, jumps off of the bed, and runs for the door.

Cribbage gets up out of bed and starts for the door wearing pajamas decorated with lariats, and horses, and saddles. He grabs a robe from a closet and puts it on.

"Let's see who the hell it could be, Pokey."

Cribbage opens the door.

James McKay is standing at the top of the cement stairs leading up from the street. He has a friendly smile on his face.

Cribbage leans back as if reading a book without his glasses.

"I was wondering when you wanted to get together," McKay says.

Cribbage delays but an instant and answers, "How about now?"

"Now's good for me."

"Come in." Cribbage waves McKay inside. "Let me get dressed. Have you eaten? Quiet, Pokey!"

McKay and Cribbage are on the sidewalk in front of a downtown eatery. The sign on the place says, "COMPASS ROSE DINER, NORTH, SOUTH, EAST, WEST." There is a large compass rose on the wall with a rose motif. They go inside and walk to an empty table. It is fairly busy with customers who seem especially busy to pretend that they don't notice who has come in.

The two men sit. A bus boy comes by and gives them each a menu.

"I'm not sure I've heard tell of you going anywhere without your cowboy hat, but I see that sometimes you do."

"You look at those country guys—you know, the hat bands. They actually believe in the hats as dumb as that may sound. And they've just got to wear 'em, even when they're not working."

"You don't wear yours at home?"

"I'm from Brooklyn for Christ's sake."

"You wore one in the studio."

"Well of course, for laughs. The show is for laughs. The cowboys are make believe. And the costume goes with the music. Like gladiator costumes go with heavy metal."

"You know, they're not real gladiators."

"I knew that."

"What makes a Brooklyn lad take up country/western?"

"Country/western. Never the twain shall meet. The themes differ totally, of course, but more importantly, western players play swing half of the time and the country boys as a rule don't."

"I know the western tradition. Thirties and forties swing, chunk! chunk! guitar players like Freddy Green. Cindy Walker tunes. Bob Wills. I like it, but I can't say I've played it."

"You're ripe for it. You can morph along with the show. But I need some help on the current stuff first—at least long enough to fill out the next record album."

"Getting some resistance to change, are you? Producers leaning hard on you? Or do they know your plans?"

Cribbage is quietly taken aback. He wonders how in the world McKay knows what's going on. He must be just guessing. *One astute son-of-gun*, thinks Cribbage, but he doesn't answer McKay's question. "You haven't seen the show."

"No."

"Well, tickets are hard to get, but I think I can find you one."

The waitress, Lorelei Engel, comes to the table. She is blond and a striking beauty.

"I'm Lorelei, and I won't pretend I don't know who you are, James."

McKay looks at Cribbage, "It's okay. It's worse when they pretend not to know."

"How's your arm?" says the waitress.

"The cast comes off tomorrow, thank you."

McKay sticks out his good hand and Lorelei shakes it. McKay knows that fans like to say they shook hands with him.

"Are you pretending you don't know who I am?" Cribbage asks her.

"No, I'm not."

McKay smiles and says teasingly. "She isn't even going to ask."

Cribbage points to the menu. "I'll have the *Western* if that's any clue."

"Will you have hash browns..."

Another waitress shouts out to Lorelei, "He always has it the same way, Lorelei. Just write "Cribbage" on the ticket. The cooks all know."

Lorelei looks in the direction of the waitress's voice and then looks at McKay. "How about you, James?"

"The same."

Lorelei leaves to put in the order.

Cribbage looks in the direction Lorelei has gone. "She's new here."

"She shouldn't be here at all. She should be in a red dress sitting on a grand piano somewhere singing "Miss Otis Regrets."

"Lorelei, you know, was a German siren."

"Then she can sing. Hey, *there's* something you could do. Hire her and change the name of the play from Laredo to *Lorelei!*"

Cribbage considers it a moment and then says, "You know, that isn't as bad an idea as it sounds."

CHAPTER TEN

Cribbage and McKay are in Cribbage's apartment. Cribbage is sitting on the piano seat, his back to the piano. He holds an archtop guitar. McKay lounges relaxed and stretched out next to him in a chair.

"Recycling is the name of the game in a stage musical," Cribbage says. "Your audience has time to remember only a few melodies and themes, so whenever you can, you give them the familiar."

"I think you need to tell me now why that isn't a bore," says McKay.

"Was it a bore for you to create a great chorus and repeat it two or even three times in a song? That's a mini musical."

"I'll play along. A song's a mini musical. A musical's a long song."

"About right. It's been a challenge for me, writing the songs I mean. But you're often as happy with your remakes as your originals. How hard can you bend that song before it's no longer familiar? Huh? Is it even a remake if you take the talking guitar bit from one song and sing it as the melody in another with different words? And it's like anything else. You get what you put into it."

"Fair enough."

Cribbage strums a D chord on the guitar. "Listen to that. Why does every hack guitar player from Maine to Albuquerque play in D?"

"Playing variations around that little D shape has been the basis for about ten thousand great songs."

"I'm hep. But is also the trademark of the 60-year-old country singer who has that hokey Nashville accent and that big, pre-emphysemic cigarette voice."

"How does the cosmos self destruct when someone plays in D?"

"It's the voicing that does that, James." He plays another D on the guitar. "I can hear the lame sound of a vanilla D a block away."

"And it isn't pleasing to your ear. 'Hokey' is it? Like the nasty old Nashville accent? The way you talk sounds funny to me too. Beware of elitism, Sir Cribbage."

"I don't think enough of myself to be accused of that. But I do think it's hokey to have a required accent. It gets stale and hackneyed. Fast."

"So there's no acting in Laredo? Everyone plays himself?"

"Well, Pokey Laredo—that's me—sounds more like Bugs Bunny than James Arness."

"Well, he's a New York rabbit."

"The other actors and singers tend to do the accent. Sadly, the audience expects it. But it's

not Nashville; It's generic, backwoods bumpkin talk. About as authentically western as Appalachia."

"All the same to me—just like what key you play in."

"Well, let's stay out of D at least."

"How about drop D?"

Cribbage turns the tuning peg on the sixth string and lowers it from E to D. Then he strums the D chord again.

"Listen to that drone. Great for writing a tune for bag pipes."

"You're irreverent."

"You can hear that tuning *three* blocks away."

"I've written in drop D."

"You have. I think once. Your instincts are good. Write another that way and it will sound just the same. There's a reason the guitar is tuned the way it is. I like to play *real* guitar."

"Real guitar? You're so full of shit!"

"No, no! It's like the arrangement of the keys on a typewriter. There are ways to design the keys to make typing as easy as playing hack guitar tuned to open G. Only the same arms with the same frequently used letters would get stuck together all the time." Cribbage puts his two index fingers out and crosses them. "It's the exact same thing."

"You've got the whole fucking world figured out, haven't you?"

"Not all of it. Not yet. I have to admit that lately things are beginning to make fairly good sense to me."

"Are you sure you aren't just crazy?"

"Not enough to be noticed."

"I'm leaning toward disagreement. You don't even think it's crazy to ask me to sit right down and write you a little western tune."

"It isn't unless you can't. By the way, B flat would be a *very* nice key to try it in."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

McKay sits at the window in the Shawnee composing with an Ovation acoustic guitar. There's a thundershower outside, and the window is streaked with rain.

He strums a "vanilla D" and sings a short western song, "When the Rain Falls in the Valley."

*When I see the rain fall in the valley.
Do you see it too?
When the rain falls in the valley
Can't help but think of you...*

Cribbage is typing at his desk.

Well, of course, he went right ahead and wrote it in dumbbell D. But I had to admit that I liked it. Short, sweet, tearful. And the title alone put it into the western genre. He knew that instinctively I guess. All he had to do was put the word "valley" in the song and people would think "Red River Valley, the West, cowboys, and saying adieu to your sweet little filly.

A couple of days later he uses McKay's song for inspiration. He steals the title to use as the

first line and writes his own bitter, melancholy western love song. He even writes it in D. It's the same as always for him. Forever composing. He never feels he has enough songs.

Cribbage sits on a chair. There are papers around him on the couch and piano. He reads off of one sheet of paper on the arm of the couch as he plays and sings.

When the rain falls in the valley, there's nothing but rain to see, and when you went away to Lowly Canyon, you went without a word to me...

Cribbage directs stage hands to arrange giant plywood gravestones with epitaphs. McKay is there but doesn't help with any of the work.

One epitaph reads, "He called Bill Smith a Liar," another "Here Lies Lester Moore, four slugs from a forty-four, no Les, No More."

Cribbage becomes impatient and starts moving some of them into position himself. He grabs one that says, "Ann Parker, Aged 111, the Good Die Young." A worker behind him has one that reads, "Jake Jenkins, Never More to Be"

Cribbage wants something to sing that will give the people time to read the funny epitaphs. He takes time to put down the work and look at McKay.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"Nice. I'm going to look around. I'll find you when I'm done."

"Good enough."

McKay leaves and Cribbage continues giving directions to the stage hands.

Cribbage and McKay come in the door of the apartment. Cribbage cheerfully sings and dances.

And when the working day is done, I ain't gonna hang around here! I wanna go home and blow the foam off a great big, frosty mug of beer!

Cribbage opens the refrigerator and takes out a bottle of beer. It's an off brand whose label reads "COTTONWOOD BREWERY PALE ALE.

Cribbage sings some more as he takes the magnet bottle opener off of the door of the refrigerator. He pops off the cap with the opener, throws the bottle cap in the trash bag

under the sink, and takes a swig. Then he starts singing again.

When I've got troubles, you'll always hear me say, "Help's just a beer away!"

Cribbage lifts the beer bottle up to McKay.
"Want one?"

"No way. I can't drink."

"Can't."

"You've read the stories. A mean Mr. Hyde, I can be. Can't remember the night before, so I wake up horrified at what I'm going to be told I've done."

"Don't mind if I have one, do you, Mean Mr. Peace Love Brother?"

"Not at all."

Cribbage takes a swig of the beer and starts singing and dancing again. McKay is not amused, but lets Cribbage finish.

Early in the mornin' when you've had lots of sleep, that's when the coffee's sweet! And when you've been working and you have yourself a brew. That's when your dreams come true!

"Do you fucking wake up singing?"

"I wake up hearing music."

"Your clock radio."

"No. Music that isn't there."

"You mean in your head."

"No, it's outside my head. "

"It's outside?"

"Yes, definitely outside."

"If it's outside and it isn't there, doesn't it mean you're crazy?"

"I'd hate to think so. You see, as a boy I used to listen to the air—this was before the Storm Kings and transistor radios and I didn't like Elvis, so there wasn't much for me to listen to that I did like. Ah, except Satchmo. I'd listen to the air and hear "Loveless Love" or "Beale Street Blues" or "Hello Dolly." I could make the background noise in a room sound like anything."

"When the TV went off the air, did you hear voices in the white noise?"

"Actually I didn't. And I can't even hear the music now. Well, I can, but it isn't voluntary."

"You hear the singers?"

"Of course I do."

"The hearing of voices is an indication of serious mental illness."

"Well, I often wake up to it, especially if I've had too many of these hoppy beers."

"Hops are hallucinogenic?"

"They are to me."

"You're a queer buggerer. And bloody full of yourself."

"I'm not bragging that I can create anything from what I hear, James. It's all stuff I've

already listened to a hundred times. In fact it's just annoying now. Like having a song stuck in your head when you're trying to sleep."

Cribbage starts to sing again, loudly, eyes wide with feigned misery.

Silence is golden, golden!

"Oh, thanks."

"Now you can stay up late and create!"

"Create what?"

"Well, I'll tell you." Cribbage guzzles the beer, opens the refrigerator, and grabs another. He pops off the top with the opener, throws the bottle cap and the empty in the trash bag under the sink. He takes a long draught. "You saw the new set."

"A bunch of funny epitaphs."

Cribbage

"Yeah, the jokes stolen lock stock and barrel from Boot Hill. Real belly busters too."

"You want a song to go with a bunch of fucking gravestones?"

"Exactly. It will give the people something to listen to while they think about the jokes."

"I need something to think about while I listen to you talk."

"Are you game or not?"

"I'll have a go at it. But here's an observation: the show would be a lot better without your ridiculous plywood marble orchard."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cribbage and the stage hands are taking down the plywood gravestones and putting up a movie screen.

When Cribbage hears the song, he knows he has to set aside the gravestones and silly epitaphs for later. The song doesn't fit the set. McKay has written him another vanilla D tune, but it is a fairly serious song.

During rehearsal, Cribbage sits on a stool singing. He plays McKay's "Nevermore to Be" on a J-200 Gibson jumbo guitar out of a D shape with the capo on the second fret. Behind him are screens with a slide show of late 1800s photographs of people young and old and scenes of the prairie frontier.

*When the leaves turn gray in September and
the winter is riding on the breeze, I think of
days gone by and I remember all the people
lost and gone from me.*

Cribbage walks Pokey on his leash. Pokey's back arches and Cribbage grimaces slightly. He reaches into his pants pocket and extracts a plastic bag. Then he walks, twirling the bag, which is partly full. He goes to a trash can and drops the bag into it.

McKay takes his advice about recycling existing material. He steals Cribbage's own talking guitar riff off of "Down the Canyon" nearly note for note and laid it over the song so Cribbage doesn't even have to learn a new part. But he decided to have one of the Buckin' Bronx pick it out on his telecaster in the orchestra pit while he just strummed away. And now, walking Pokey, he can hear the music in his head.

They say the western sky goes on forever, but there's no sky wider than a person's eyes.

The music continues in the background. A plump, middle-aged woman walks her poodle and passes Cribbage and Pokey. Cribbage smiles sweetly, "Hello, Mrs. McGreggor."

"Good afternoon, Sylvester."

After she passes, Cribbage rolls his eyes and sticks out his tongue. He continues walking Pokey on the leash. And he continues thinking about the song.

It strikes him as a real western. No swing in it, but they will get to that later. He thinks about how McKay has taken his guitar riff and shown him what it is really meant to do. The first song has been tearful, but this one is sad.

Think of all the people nevermore to be!
Goes the refrain. And it makes Cribbage think of all the people "lost and gone" from him.

Cribbage knows that when word gets around that McKay is composing tunes for him, people won't understand it. But Cribbage feels he knows exactly why McKay has thrown in with him. You can't create without any context, and McKay doesn't have any. Cribbage has a living, breathing show. Who cares if there are cowboys in it? McKay realizes he's been going nowhere—grinding out crap only to get shot for his trouble.

The music continues in Cribbage's head as he walks Pokey on his leash.

He has never offered to pay McKay for doing this piecework. It would never cross his mind to figure out what the hourly wage of a guy like that would be. They have never talked about money. Of course, Cribbage knows that McKay can pick up royalties from any records they make and get some chicken feed from sheet music. But he is already worth a quarter of a billion dollars, so Cribbage doesn't feel guilty. McKay is where he needs to be, he reasons—and he believes McKay knows it.

"Think of all the people nevermore to be"—*indeed.*" Cribbage thinks to himself. "You can't get any more cathartic than that. McKay is dealing with the horror of very nearly being one of those people himself." A thought makes Cribbage snicker a bit: "I'm really doing the guy a favor by not charging *him!*"

Pokey's back arches and Cribbage grimaces slightly. He reaches into his pants pocket but is out of plastic bags. He slaps his hip pockets and shirt pockets somewhat frantically. Then, furtively, he looks left and right and then behind himself. He gives a quick tug to Pokey's leash. "Let's cheese it, buddy."

Cribbage and Pokey hurry away from the scene of the crime.

Cribbage sits on the receiving room cot. The doctor stands in front of him.

"I just don't want anything that will interfere with my monomania. It's what makes me tick."

"Oh, there are some drugs that will do just that," says the doctor. "But I usually refer a patient to a specialist before I prescribe any of those."

"Do you think I need a specialist?"

"I'm not sure, frankly. I think we should start by figuring out where we are. Your symptoms on the face of them are quite serious, but if you were as troubled as your symptoms suggest, you'd be under expert care already. There's no way you'd be as successful and productive as you are if there were anything seriously wrong with you. When was this last ... vision of yours?"

"A month ago. Two years since the one before that."

"And it's when you wake up—right?—when you see someone there?"

"Yes."

"Hear them too?"

"Yup."

"Well, auditory hallucination is easy for the mind to do. For it to conjure up a talking apparition is another thing. But I'm guessing it's something not so serious. Lots of people just wake up still dreaming. I'm betting it's nothing more than that. Let's try a medication that's good at getting rid of what you call a feeling of . . ."

"Unreality. It's probably also one of the side effects of what you're going to prescribe."

"Oh, it is. That's called paradoxical effect when the drug gives you more of the problem you've got. But don't worry; that's unlikely. Let's make an easy positive move and treat the unreality issue first. It could make all the difference."

"Let's hope so."

The doctor is writing on a prescription pad. "The correct dose will be printed out for you. You can take one more pill if you have a problem but never more than one more than what's prescribed daily. Okay?"

"Okay."

Cribbage leaves the office convinced that the doctor has absolutely no idea of what he is doing.

At home, Cribbage sits on the piano bench, his back to the keyboard and plays an archtop guitar. McKay sits next to him in a chair. He also has a guitar, an Ovation acoustic, but he doesn't play it. Cribbage strums the archtop in the fast, sure strokes of swing style. The song is Gershwin's "I've got Rhythm." The song has him play a chord every beat with the rhythm chop on the second and fourth beats. Cribbage whistles the melody as he plays.

He finishes the song.

"Looks like fun."

"I've got a poppy little number worked out. It seems as though it should lead to another song, but what that could be I don't know. "

He plays the guitar and sings. It's the last line that needs to be going somewhere.

Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!

"It's poppy all right. And, frankly doesn't provide much inspiration."

"Inspiration comes from within."

"Don't get preachy."

"I'm just telling you like it is. Some British kid in India teaches you basic folk picking and you found inspiration enough to give him a lesson in what could be done with it."

"What song?"

"The one about your mom."

"You've been reading all the popular fiction about me."

"Who hasn't? Great stories. Did you really get the hook for "Tonight Only" off of a theater ticket?"

"Yeah, but I think I work differently now."

"Well, I *know* you do. Your problem is you shouldn't."

Cribbage swings his legs around the bench to face the piano.

"You didn't need Desmond Clarke to come up with a better bridge on that last so-called hit of yours. Pokey could have done it.

Pokey looks up eagerly from his place on the carpet.

Cribbage balances the guitar in his lap plays a major 7th with both hands on the piano and sings mockingly with saccharin sweetness.

Pokey lies back down somewhat dejectedly.

You're beautiful! Cribbage sings mockingly. He turns back to look at McKay. "You get stuck for inspiration and resort to a big sugar-frosted major seventh. Your fans will develop pop pellagra feasting on a diet of corn like that."

"You say I'm slipping."

"No, James. You're resting on your lapels."

Cribbage looks at his watch and gets up. "Show time. Hey, could you do me a favor and feed Pokey? And...if you could get a chance to

walk him. He'll pee on the carpet eventually if you don't. The leash is on the piano. Here's the key to the apartment."

"Okay," McKay says smiling but not too pleased.

Cribbage hands McKay the key with the long chain.

"Go ahead and keep this one. I've got a spare."

"Is it okay to leave my guitar here?" McKay says. "I don't want to be lugging it back and forth."

"Sure. Don't forget to lock up. Thanks. Bye."

Cribbage leaves.

McKay talks to the dog. "Well, I've hit rock bottom. A gopher for some loopy gaucho from Brooklyn. C'mon, Pokey!"

McKay gets up and walks to the kitchen. Pokey follows eagerly. McKay opens the refrigerator. There is a can of dog food whose label reads, "HAPPY TAILS DOG FOOD." Next to it is a bottle of beer.

McKay picks the bottle up. The label on the bottle reads, "COTTONWOOD BREWERY PALE ALE, RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cribbage types at his desk wearing his reading glasses.

Well, wasn't that something else? I ask him to write a little tune to follow "Oh, Yeah!" And my song turns into a 10-second intro for his smash folk hit "Down by the Riverside."

That evening Cribbage is center stage on a stool. He plays a guitar and sings. The spotlight is on him.

Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!

Cribbage switches from strumming and begins standard folk picking of the guitar which leads to the McKay composition. He is an expert at picking the guitar.

*There's a place down by the riverside
Where the snowy white down from the
cottonwood trees
Is floatin' all around in the summer breeze
You can see it up high in the air
How I wish that I were there!*

Stage lights shine on Amanda and another female singer. They are seated near Cribbage and sing "oo" in harmony to back him up.

Cribbage is typing. The heading on the page reads: "THE RELUCTANT COWBOY, A MEMOIR—CONT."

What did a guy from Manchester know about cottonwood trees anyway—or a guy from Brooklyn for that matter? He got it off the beer bottle. Brewed in Riverside, CA no less. I was getting a lot more than I bargained for here, but I couldn't gripe about that. Well, I was tempted to when one of my songs wound up on the B side of the single.

Cribbage stops typing and picks up a 45 single labeled "Down by the Riverside James McKay." He flips it over to reveal the title of the flip side. "The Flip Side of Love Sylvester T. Cribbage."

McKay and Cribbage are in Cribbage's apartment again.

"You're taking my advice?" says McKay. "You're changing Laredo to Lorelei? After that diner doll?"

"Why not? We get a blondie in a red dress who can really sing, deck the cast out in

tuxedos, and we're off and running. I've got a million ideas. It's how I created Laredo."

"You'll need a song."

"Oh, I'm on it, my friend. I might need some help with the bridge though."

"What's the name of the song?"

"Lorelei! What else?"

"Lorelei. Just don't get any ideas about my girl, Cribbage."

"Well, you randy bastard. Never crossed my mind."

"You've never even been married?"

"Nope."

"How come?"

"Well, I'm an only child and used to be alone. And I've had some bad luck that really seems like good luck now. At the moment I don't need the distraction."

"I'll bet that Amanda distracts you."

"Oh, it's not that I'm without libido, James. It's just that it's not worth it. To be blunt..." He puts a cupped hand by the side of his mouth and whispers, "Every time I get what I want, I want 'em to get!"

"Well, I've met some fools in my time, but you're fucking daft. A goddamned fool. When was the last time you had to ask a woman to get? Love is what it's about. Love."

"Oh, yeah? Love? When was the last time you saw your son?"

McKay looks at him. He's completely unaccustomed to such a broadside salvo. And he is known to settle such insult with a punch to somebody's nose. But he knows he's the one who started it.

"*Touché*. Well, I did call you a fool to your face."

"Yes, a goddamned one." But Cribbage is already smiling. McKay smiles too.

"Sorry. Er, why don't you show me what you've got of that song?"

"I need another day or two for that. But look at *this*."

He hands McKay a sheet of paper on which are the two names LAREDO! and LORELEI!, the former just above the latter.

"It's for the neon sign on the Bluebird Theater. See how both names match up and share letters? Only a few characters are different. We'll have those change blinking on and off Laredo! to Lorelei! A simple effect."

"You know what you could do with the 'i' in Lorelei..." McKay says.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The neon billing sign shows the letters flashing back and forth from LAREDO! to LORELEI! The "i" in Lorelei begins to spin. A duplicate "i" is left on the sign, and then the spinning "i" becomes the exclamation point in "Lorelei!"

McKay and Cribbage sit in chairs facing each other and practice guitar.

"My tricks are really kid's stuff. Basic substitutions. That kind of thing. When a tonic as a seventh takes me to the subdominant, I like to play a ninth one half step above and slide it down to get a kind of steel guitar feel."

Cribbage plays a basic E chord on his guitar and then slides up to put his middle finger on the fifth string, eighth fret, where he plays an F ninth. He slides that chord down one fret to E ninth. The E ninth leads to an A major, which he strums once.

"Play a flat five"

"Where?"

"Way up the neck. Start with an A minor seventh flat five and slide it down the same way to A flat. The A flat minor seventh flat five will function as your E ninth. It'll sound even more like a steel."

"Twelfth fret."

Cribbage plays the A minor seventh flat five chord at the twelfth fret. Cribbage slides the chord down one fret as he strums.

"Oh, nice. Steely. I should be doing that all over the place."

"Show me your swing progression."

"You know all the shapes. Just put your rhythm chop on two and four."

Cribbage strums a four-note G sixth on the third fret and follows it with a rhythm chop dampening the strings. He plays the chord and rhythm chop a few times more.

"Yeah, that's swing. It's the exact opposite of rock rhythm-wise."

"Or folk or country. Don't even mention Latin. But the cowboy songs tend to swing if you let them. They don't have to be dirges."

"Give me your generic swing progression."

"Well, it's nothing you don't know. Just what you don't often do." Cribbage names the chords and he plays them. "G major sixth, A flat diminished, A minor seventh, and D seventh. Try to use three strings only. And mute the fifth string most always. You don't need it half the time."

Cribbage and McKay play the pattern a few more times. McKay's guitar work is effortless and he is immediately almost as adept as Cribbage with the style.

Cribbage strums a chord. "This is my so-called D seventh, but there's no D in it at all. It would be an A diminished in another song, but here it subs as a D. Sometimes the first thing to go in a jazz chord is the root itself."

"That gives it an unusual voice. Cool chords. Only three notes. Less is more. That was Freddie Green's secret."

"Here, try extending that progression like this."

Cribbage plays two beats per chord in a jazz progression that walks up and back down. The chords each have three notes. They are G major sixth, A flat diminished, A minor seventh, B flat diminished, G major with the third in the base and then the same chords in reverse going back down in tone to the G major sixth. Cribbage chunks the chords hard and then stops.

"Chunk! Chunk! Cool, huh?"

"Very. Let's play some more."

The two men "chunk" the hours away playing half of the American songbook.

Cribbage stirs in his bed. He awakes suddenly. "What? Who's there?"

"Nobody but us famous rock stars."

Cribbage turns on the light on his night stand. McKay is sitting in the bedroom chair dressed entirely in white."

"I shouldn't have given you the key. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I didn't need the key, Sylvester."

"Well, I sure as hell didn't leave the door unlocked."

"You have no idea what it's like to be murdered."

"But you weren't."

"Actually, I was."

McKay disappears.

"Shit!" yells Cribbage.

Pokey lifts his head from the foot of the bed. Cribbage sits up in bed, pulls open the nightstand drawer, and removes a pill bottle. He opens it and takes one of the pills out. He puts it in his mouth and swallows it. He chases it with a gulp from a half-full bottle of beer taken from the stand. He then guzzles the rest of the bottle.

He stops a moment appearing to consider something. Then he gets up and goes down the hallway, snapping on the light to the living room.

McKay's Ovation guitar is there. Cribbage picks it up, holds it a moment, and puts it on the couch. The strings brushing against the couch fabric make a quiet ringing sound. Cribbage walks back to the hall and snaps off the living

room light. He turns the corner into his bedroom.

For a moment the hallway is dimly lighted from the glow of the light from Cribbage's bedroom. Then the light goes out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lorelei Engel is walking down the street, and James McKay catches up with her. When he does, they stop to talk.

"I was wondering if you could sing."

"What?"

"I was wondering if you could sing."

"Why?"

"Well, if you can, there's a part I think you could audition for."

"Why would you think of me especially?"

"Because I believe in serendipity. You see, the character who sings is named Lorelei."

"And how did that come to be? "

"Easy. Sylvester and I named her after you."

"How is that serendipitous?"

"What?"

"And why in the world would you do that? "

"I was smitten."

"Ah, I see. And now you're making a pass."

"No, no!"

"I make a policy of never mixing with the rich and famous, James."

"Why not?"

"I'm not that kind of girl."

"I didn't think you were."

"You hoped I was."

"You think I'm that kind of guy."

"You all are."

"I detect some bitterness there. You've got an ex, haven't you?"

"Yeah, and I've got two kids too that I have to share with the bastard."

"Oh, bad scene. So?"

"So—what?"

"Can you sing?"

"Not a note. Look. Maybe I'll see you at the diner. I won't be serving you though. I'm climbing the corporate ladder. Assistant manager. Starting tomorrow."

"Congratulations. Then I'll see you later. I was just hoping you were waiting tables to keep yourself afloat while you looked for singing gigs."

"I'm sorry you're disappointed. "

"I am actually a little, but I'm glad we got to talk."

"Well, bye."

Lorelei walks off. McKay watches smiling for a while and then sighs, turns, and goes on his way.

Pokey has his head in the cabinet below the kitchen sink and is pulling trash from the bag inside.

"Oh, you naughty dog!" Cribbage says.

Pokey, caught red-handed, slinks from the cabinet and cowers.

"Oh, No, no! Good dog. Good dog! I'm sorry! Did you think I liked the trash more than you?"

He picks up a now happy Pokey and kisses him. He puts Pokey back on the kitchen floor.

"Why would I be mad at you? What is that stuff there? Something I was saving? Was it my *special* trash? Listen, I'm putting you in charge of the refuse department. From now on, that trash is yours. Go get it!"

Pokey looks up, uncertain.

"Go and get it!"

Pokey grabs the trash bag and shakes his head. Trash goes flying. Cribbage smiles.

There is a knock on the door. Cribbage walks to the living room.

McKay has let himself in. The TV is on and McKay is distracted by it.

On the TV is a group of rodeo cowboys, hats in hand, heads bowed in prayer, some of them even kneeling in the rodeo arena. American flags are seen.

"I didn't know cowboys were such little altar boys."

"They're not really calling on the Almighty. They're just testing the waters."

"What do you mean?"

"To see if there are any objectors. There's a difference between piety and sanctimony."

"You judge them rather harshly."

One of the kneeling cowboys on the screen with eyes lowered in prayer looks up furtively at the crowd. His eyes shift once from right to left.

"Well, they can fool themselves but not me. Just my personal opinion."

"Which are you—pious or sanctimonious?"

"Let's nope not sanctimonious at least. I'm afraid to say what I think I am. Just because you say you're something doesn't mean you are."

"Shit. You're talking about *me*."

"You're not as thick as you look. But you're okay. At least you get it, so I have faith in you."

"If you want to worship me, you'll have to take a number."

Cribbage turns off the TV and picks up his guitar. He puts the strap around his shoulder so he can play standing.

Well, here's what I've got. An intro and the A part. But the song is crying out for the perfect bridge, which is your department, Mr. McKay. Listen.

*I'm giving up these lonely days forever
Though people say I'm gonna wind up blue
Though we've spent some time together,*

*I still sigh over that girl I want to love me
Her name is Lorelei!*

Cribbage plays a swing walk-up and then a walk-down, a chord for each beat, to get to the main part of the song.

*Lorelei, people always warn me not to try
They say you'll never be true
Everybody tells me that I'm just another guy
And I will never make you love me
It's just my turn to cry!*

Cribbage stops playing. "See what I mean?"
"I think I know where you can go with that."
Cribbage wrinkles his forehead and sings softly as he plays.

*Everybody tells me that I'm just another guy
and I will never make you love me
It's just my turn to cry...*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The following evening the full orchestral version of McKay's bridge plays. Cribbage is in the center of the stage dressed in a tuxedo. He's playing a string bass and singing. The music is loud, upbeat, and rollicking.

But there's a part of this town I know you've never seen.

And there's a part of your heart you don't even know is there!

Let me show you where!

McKay's bridge music repeats

You know it always amazes me how you can get up and sing with the band.

How you can still look just like an angel— with a drink in your hand!

Actors in tuxedos appear with a blond beauty in a red dress on a piano. They push the piano on its coasters towards Cribbage.

McKay's bridge music repeats

People say, "Look out, boy. She'll make a doormat outta you!"

She could serve me my heart on a platter; I wouldn't care!

The final chords to the song are played on a guitar from the orchestra pit. They are a walk-up that ends with an Ab6th.

Cribbage sings the last line and turns from his bass. The piano is now within easy reach. He puts his hand out and plays three beats containing two notes, one unchanging, the other ascending to form the classic two-note Count Base jazz ending.

He reaches to the left on the piano and plays a single low Ab to end the song.

He smiles at the girl on the piano.

Cribbage sits at his desk. He has written out the melody of "Lorelei!" on a sheet of musical staff paper and writes the chords above the staff to match the lyrics written below it. Pokey is curled up on the easy chair next to him.

He's stuck for a bridge and all McKay does is throw everything into the key of E by hitting an unexpected F sharp eleventh.

Cribbage sings the lyrics as he scribbles F#11th over the first word of the bridge, "There's," "B7th" over the word "town," "E" over the word "never" and "C#min" over the word "seen." At the end of the line, he writes "F#min" and "B9th"

He sings as he reads what he has written.

There's a part of this town I know you've never seen.

Cribbage sings the lyrics as he scribbles F#11th over the word "part." and B7 over the word "heart."

And there's a part of your heart. You don't even know..

He just strums another eleventh, a B flat, to take him back to A flat.

Cribbage sings the song and writes "Bb11th" over the word "there," holding the note as he sings long enough to finish writing the chord name. He continues singing and writes Eb9 over the words "Let me" and Ab6 over the word "where."

...is there! Let me show you where!

He holds up the sheet and looks at it.

Well, he has asked for a bridge and now he's got one. Only it runs away with the whole song. Cribbage takes to calling it the Siamese fighting fish bridge because it is pretty and can swim in circles forever. He doesn't even need to go back to the Part A he has written. Humbling but exactly what he has asked for.

Across town George Heinemann sits on the couch watching TV. Katherine Standage does a story on Cribbage.

Sagebrush city slicker Sylvester T. Cribbage, who has brought his version of Dodge City to Broadway, has some plans to transform his hit musical into something more East Coast—and you won't believe who he's teaming up with...

There's a clip from the show with the song "Lorelei!" and he TV shifts to a picture of McKay and Cribbage goofing off together.

Fairly reliable rumor has it that McKay himself will help in the musical transformation.

The TV shifts to a scene depicting Cribbage in a Tuxedo singing on stage with a blonde in a red dress.

We see the neon sign changing from Laredo! to Lorelei!

Heinemann picks up the phone and dials a number.

"Oh, Sylvester. I have a bone to pick with you."

Two nights later a blonde in a red dress stands center stage and sings "The Flip Side of Love".

*Before I met you I had someone
It wasn't very long before it all was done
He made me sing that lonesome song
On the flip side of love!*

It's the Barry Mullen show and Barry Mullen stands center stage.

"...so get ready to welcome my guests animal trainer Orsen Hughes, the beautiful Janet Clayton, and the ever irreverent Sylvester T. Cribbage!"

Cribbage waits for George Heinemann in a sedan parked outside Heineman's apartment. Heinemann comes out of his building and opens the car door. Cribbage has an envelope in the gaudily embroidered pocket of his cowboy shirt. It reads, "AVIS RENT A CAR."

Heinemann picks the cowboy hat off of the passenger seat and hands it to Cribbage, who puts it on the dash.

Cribbage starts driving and the hat slides off into Heinemann's lap. Heinemann hands the hat back to Cribbage, who puts it on his head.

Cribbage's car comes out of the Holland Tunnel into New Jersey.

"I hate these little public appearances. They take up so much time."

"Just try your best to be polite this time. And try not to say anything too wacky."

Cribbage looks in his rear view mirror. He sees police cars and flashing red and blue lights. "What the hell is this all about?"

Heinemann turns and looks through the rear window.

In just seconds Cribbage's and Heinemann's wind is knocked out them as they are thrown to the ground by police. Cribbage looks up and is struck in the face by a policeman.

"Stay down, you son of a bitch!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cribbage is center stage with the cowboy outfit on. He's doing a stand-up act and has a black eye.

"...I *hate* that!"

There's a drum roll. The audience laughs.

"You know what else I hate? Getting beat up by the Jersey City cops. The other day, I was driving down the road dressed as I am today. Minding my own business. I come out of the Holland Tunnel and see about ten black and whites screaming behind me. Little did I know some clown from Wyoming wearing a Stetson had just held up the First Federal. Next thing I know, I'm pulled out of my car and two cops are taking turns trying to strangle me while the rest are beating me over the head with whatever they got handy. Flashlights. Nightsticks. Chunks of cement they find along the road. It was awful. I have to admit they did apologize. They said, "We're very sorry, Mr. Cribbage, but we don't get many cowpokes driving out of the Tunnel. I said, "Word gets out how you treat them, and you're not likely to get many more!"

We hear a drum roll. We hear laughter from the audience along with some good-natured groans and a couple of playful boos at the overdone joke.

"But most of all, I hate going to the dentist. The other day I was at the dentist's and he started drilling into my mouth. I said, "What are you drilling for—oil? He said, "No, your wallet!"

There's another drum roll. The audience laughs.

"Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen!"

The stage in the Bluebird Theater is dark except for where Cribbage stands in the spotlight wearing a tuxedo.

"An angel of angels. Svelte, mysterious, a temptress—but no tramp! Lorelei, a German siren."

There's a loud German siren, and Cribbage waves it to silence with mock furor and impatience.

"Not *that* kind of siren!"

A few moments later Cribbage is backstage.

He has come from the stage in his tuxedo and walks quickly and then stops.

McKay walks up.

"This is harder than I thought," Cribbage tells him. "I can't change in time to get back."

McKay smiles gleefully. "Oh, nice, *nice* planning! You've got to go out and play cowpoke in a tux? This is great!"

Cribbage shouts, "A hat someone!"

A stage hand runs up with a black cowboy hat and Cribbage puts it on.

"Well, that'll have to do."

A musician walks up. He is a rather disheveled, hippy type.

"Here's the sheet music with my corrections for you to proof, Mr. Cribbage," he says.

"No time, buddy."

"I'll take it," McKay says.

The musician hands the sheets to McKay.

Cribbage gives a mock expression of determination and pulls the hat down sideways over one eye. He feigns licking his thumb and then makes a slow swipe with it across the front brim. Then he heads for the stage.

McKay looks at the sheet music. The musician reads aloud over his shoulder.

"Lorelei! Words and Music by Sylvester T. Cribbage and James McKay.

You got second billing."

"Well, I'm growing."

"You're growing?"

"I'm *morphing*!"

A Memorial Day parade bangs through the streets. There are marching bands and floats, some with military themes. The sign on one float reads, "DAY OF REMEMBRANCE."

Cribbage stands on the sidewalk among the noise and bustle as the loud parade passes.

When McKay composes, people listen. Cribbage knows that so it isn't a surprise when a song from Laredo has caught the public fancy. Cribbage finds out something about himself: despite the many faults he will admit to as well as those he won't—he is not the envious type. He's happy for the guy.

An American flag adorned float passes with the words "THINK OF ALL THE PEOPLE." A noisy, six-piece brass band sits atop the float in front of the sign playing at the decibel level of a major train wreck. The song is "Never More to Be."

Cribbage is seated next to the talk show host, Barry Mullen.

"That mugging by the cops really happened?"

"True story! True story!"

"That's a nice shiner. Any plans to take some legal action?"

"Are you kidding? What for? The bread? I'm making a *fortune* on my western record album."

He looks at the audience and rolls his eyes.

"Besides, the cops did me a favor. You see, my producer, Georgie Heinemann was in the car and they worked him over pretty good too. They had us face down hogtied on the ground and our mouths propped open with a couple of sticks. Georgie spits out his stick and says, "Sylvester, I'm gonna take this as a sign. You've got my permission to get rid of that ridiculous hat."

The audience laughs.

"You've still got it on.

"Yeah, but understand that it's a slow process. I think you have to get weaned off of these things."

Cribbage turns to the audience, keeping his Brooklyn accent and perhaps laying it on especially thick: "Those stalwart pioneers headed west across them plains. Each one of dem newborn babes was weaned on a buffalo chip."

The audience laughs.

"It took courage in them days, but they pressed on—westward across them plains. Using buffalo chips for their cookin'... "

Cribbage looks sideways at the audience.

"Using buffalo chips for their *eatin'!*"

The audience laughs and also boos.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

McKay sits in Cribbage's apartment composing with a Gibson round shouldered dreadnaught guitar. He strums a slow tempo—a CMaj6 on the eighth fret and slides to the fifth fret for an A minor. He continues with Fmaj, Bb9 played right at the nut and back to a four-note CMaj6, keeping the same tempo for the other chords.

On the last line, he begins playing a swing guitar style with the rhythm chop on the second and fourth beats.

Hey, Lorelei! How time just seems to pass us by...

Cribbage is on stage a few nights later seated with a guitar. He sings McKay's "Hey! Lorelei!" in a faster tempo with a sound system and backing bass and drums.

*You've got to seize the moment
Before you're old and gray.
If it's time to start living,
Maybe it's time you gave your heart away.*

Cribbage goes to the bridge, which is a key change to G major.

I see your eyes and I see envious skies...

The G chord becomes a seventh and functions as the dominant leading back to the key of C and the A part of the song which ends with:

Maybe it's time you gave your heart away.

The word "away" in the tagged line at the end of the song is held for as close to two measures as Cribbage can manage and the sixth has been left out so the guitar chord is a simple, clear C major.

The curtain closes to applause.

Cribbage saw his chance to save poor Michael at last from life imprisonment in the horse suit. He'd been a trooper. Cribbage wrote a new line at the end of the song so the show could close with it instead of "Good-bye Trail Mates." And good riddance to bad rubbish! He thinks.

The idea for the last line Cribbage has stolen from Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady."

Hey, Lorelei! If you don't give your heart away, one day you'll look back and cry.

The music fades away with a C6add9 chord. It's the end of the show, and the curtain closes to applause.

The horns start loudly playing McKay's bridge music for the song "Lorelei!" and the curtain opens again. The performers take their bows.

The Buckin' Bronx are practicing with Cribbage again. Cribbage sings "You Can't Fool Me" as he picks a guitar in a Merle Travis style. The other guitarists back him up.

*Your non-stop naggin' and third degree
Are part of a plan to murder me
Well, I may look dumb
But I know what you're thinkin'*

The Buckin' Bronx shout out the refrain:

*You can't fool me. You're just trying to start
me drinkin'!
You met me down in Laramie
You threw a bottle of beer at me
Well, I may look dumb
But I know what you're thinkin'*

The Buckin' Bronx shout out the refrain:

*You can't fool me. You're just trying to start
me drinkin'!*

The song ends in a tag.

When the room quiets, Cribbage says, "Well, that's a fun one. A little too countrified for Laredo though, and for Lorelei for sure."

"I like it," says the drummer.

"Well, you can *have* it. Try it out at the Ten Gallon Manhattan. It's a good sing-along for those gin fizzes. That's it boys. Tomorrow's practice is cancelled. Heinemann has me out of town for three days. Promo stuff. Hate it! See you Friday for the show."

The band members start breaking down their equipment.

"Had fun. Thanks, Sylvester. See you Friday," they all say.

Cribbage gets on the phone in the theater

"Hi, James. Say, I've got to go out of town and I suddenly got a swingin' idea. "

"What could that be?"

"Well, I was thinking that if you might be popping into my apartment to compose anyway, you could do me a favor."

"You want me to take care of Pokey. Yeah, okay. He and I are pals."

"Oh, thanks. That saves me dealing with the dog sitter again. I love her dearly, but she's bats. Just make yourself at home there as usual. I'll be back Thursday night. Thanks zillions, Buddy."

"Don't mention it. Enjoy your trip."

Cribbage hangs up the phone.

McKay sits at the table writing, and Pokey has his paws on his leg. Pokey jumps down and looks up. McKay finishes writing and looks at Pokey.

"This is for the revised edition of my book. You were my inspiration, Pokey."

He lifts the sheet of paper to read in way-over-the-top Scouse.

There's a certain kind of green fly
You know the ones I mean
The ones when doggie defecates
Come flyin' on the scene
They appear as if by magic
They appear as in a dream
With their emerald opalescence
And their iridescent sheen
When doggie doesn't defecate
These flies are never seen
So where do green flies come from?
From some green fly machine?
From the carcass of a rotting steer
In some dried up ravine?
Where do green flies come from?
Do they hatch from a green fly bean?
Or when doggie poops does someone
somewhere
Open up a screen?
And let the green flies fly about
To on his stool convene?

I'll never know the answer
But I judge from their cuisine
That the place the green flies call their home
Is a place that's none too clean!

He puts the paper down. "What do you think? Suppose it could go in Laredo? I guess not."

Pokey looks up quizzically.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

McKay sits down at a table in the Compass Rose Diner. He is next to a window through which rain he sees the rain falling on the street. The diner is not very busy.

A waitress comes and gives him a menu.

"Would you like me to bring you something to drink, sir, while you decide on your order?"

"Just coffee and, no, I already know what I want—the Western."

She takes out her pad. "Hash browns or fries?"

"Hash browns."

The waitress writes on her pad.

"You know, I'm curious. I wasn't asked for my choices last time."

"That's because Sylvester Cribbage always has his Western the same way."

"Sylvester TEE Cribbage. I remember now. Pretend I'm him."

"Right. I'll get your coffee."

McKay thinks, "Sheesh! She wasn't even here and she remembers. Our little breakfast must have been all the buzz around the steam cabinet."

"You know, I've only seen you here once."

McKay looks up and sees Lorelei standing there.

"Oh, hi."

"Mind if I sit for a minute?"

"Please."

Lorelei takes a seat across from McKay.

"I'm beginning to wish I could sing."

"New job's rough, is it?"

"I shouldn't complain. It's what I want. You might be surprised to know that. There's a lot to learn. I mean a lot. So that's what I want to do."

"Good for you. I'm not surprised. Singing's for losers anyway."

"I don't think you're known as a loser."

The waitress comes with the coffee. McKay puts in cream and sugar.

"So I take it, it's the ex-hubby."

"I guess it shows."

"It must; I can be pretty thick."

"Things would be so good if he weren't making trouble."

"I'm sorry. But just ignore that jerk. Enjoy your new job and your kids."

"James, he's not a good person. How could I have been so dumb?"

"It's always a crap shoot. You never know a person until time passes. I'm especially qualified to say that; look how long it took my wife to find out about *me*. I didn't make trouble. I just ran. I guess you could say that's even worse."

"At least you can admit it."

"Just don't let it give you the blues."

"There's a lot of that going around."

Lorelei looks through the window at the rain.

"Even the sky's got the blues."

She gets up.

"Well, I've got to go boss some folks around."

"That's the spirit."

"You're not as bad a guy as your ex-wife might believe."

"Thanks. I think. If you need to talk some more..."

"I really meant what I said before about my not mixing that way."

"Well, I really meant just to talk some more...."

Lorelei looks at him quite sternly. She doesn't buy it.

"I didn't mean to press."

Her expression softens and she relents.

"Thanks for being so nice."

"It's my pleasure, dear."

Lorelei leaves. The waitress comes with McKay's Western.

Blues singer Gregory Coleman is on stage. He sings the song "Even the Sky's Got the Blues."

*I'm the kind of guy who would never even
sigh but now I find myself staring out the
window. And way up high seems even the
sky's got the blues!*

CHAPTER TWENTY

McKay stands on the sidewalk looking at the lighted sign that reads "THE TEN-GALLON MANHATTAN—LIBATIONS, VICTUALS, AND WESTERN MUSIC"

McKay enters. The band members recognize him at once and nod at him smiling.

One member quickly waves a barmaid over and whispers to her. Then the band starts "You Can't Fool Me."

*I used to talk about my catch
Now, all I've got is a shouting match
Well, I may look dumb
But I know what you're thinkin'*

The audience, most of whom are drunk, respond with enthusiasm. They've apparently heard the song played earlier and are right on time when they sing the refrain:

*You can't fool me! You're just trying to start
me drinkin'!*

The guitarist is at it with his Travis style thumb picking and slips into a Travis Version of "I'll See You in My Dreams" to fill out the song.

The barmaid comes to McKay's table with a drink.

"It's from the band."

McKay

"I..."

Band members see from the stage that the drink has been served and smile and nod at him as they play.

McKay smiles and raises the glass. He doesn't drink but puts the glass back on the table.

The guitarist finishes his instrumental and picks and sings the last verse of the drinking song.

*I used to talk about my catch
Now, all I've got is a shouting match
Well, I may look dumb
But I know what you're thinkin'*

The Buckin' Bronx and the crowd shout out the ending.

*You can't fool me! You're just trying to start
me drinkin'!*

McKay stands unsteadily in front of Cribbage's refrigerator with the door open. He grabs the sole bottle of Cottonwood Brewery Pale Ale inside and slams the door shut. He tries to snatch the magnetic bottle opener from the door but drops it.

As he leans down to get it, he is faced with a quizzical Pokey.

"What do you want, you ingrate?" he says menacingly. "Take you for your walkies and the

only time you deign to as much as say hello is when I've got the bloody refrigerator door open. Hungry, are you? You miserable cur!"

Pokey, frightened at the tone, turns and runs to the bed in the room across the hall from the kitchen. He sits up and looks nervously at McKay, who has turned his attention to the bottle and opener.

McKay uncaps the beer and chugs the contents. He tosses the empty bottle on the countertop and slaps the opener back on the refrigerator door.

"Ought to be something more down the street."

When McKay speaks, Pokey leaves the bed and runs around a corner out of sight.

McKay pulls the apartment keys from his pocket and heads out of the kitchen to the living room. He stands on the top of the cement stairs and fumbles with the key. It is attached to its length of sturdy, rough chain. McKay holds the door open while he inserts the key in the door lock. Drunkenly, he slams the door shut.

The swinging keychain is caught tight, slammed in the door, but McKay reaches over and turns the key to lock the apartment. The chain loops over the key, holding it fast. McKay tries to remove the key, but the chain is jammed in the door, and the key will not budge.

"Bloody hell!"

He yanks at the chain and lets out a cry of pain. His fingers are cut and bleeding.

McKay turns from the door, staring at his bloody hand. He takes a step forward and falls down the stairs, barking his knuckles on the rough cement sidewalk at the bottom. He stares at his smashed knuckles.

He gets up and staggers down the street. He walks into the darkness of the city streets.

McKay crosses a street to where he sees a storefront lighted. He stubs his toe on the curb when he reaches the other side and falls face first on the sidewalk.

He looks up to see Lorelei standing above him. She helps him to his feet.

"I'm locked out of the apartment."

"Whew!" she says inhaling through her nose and grimacing. You're more than just that.

"Yeah, I'm sick."

"You'd get run over just hailing a cab home in your condition. I'm just down the street. I'll put you up, but only if you behave yourself."

"Okay."

They begin walking. Lorelei steadies McKay, and he drunkenly embraces her as they walk. She pushes him away. McKay smiles with the smile of a lovable drunk. The mean drunk has gone out of him in the presence of Lorelei.

They reach her apartment and Lorelei unlocks the door.

"Kids with a baby sitter?"

"Yeah, their grandmother in Connecticut. Nice break for me, and my mom can't get enough of them."

They go inside the apartment. McKay turns pale. He covers his mouth.

"Oh, God, where is it?"

Lorelei points to the bathroom.

McKay falls to his knees in front of the toilet and vomits in the bowl. Lorelei rolls her eyes in disgust. McKay flushes the toilet and then stands and drinks from the sink faucet. He splashes water on his face.

"This way," Lorelei says.

She leads McKay to the children's bedroom and McKay falls onto one of the beds and rolls onto his back.

Lorelei, not very lovingly, tosses a blanket over him. McKay lies on the bed looking up with a contented, drunken grin on his face.

"I've got to be at the restaurant early, so you can have breakfast there. That's if you're through throwing up by then."

McKay doesn't answer. He snores with the vestiges of the drunken grin still on his face. We hear the door close.

Daylight streams through a window. McKay lies asleep on the bed. He's on his back. There is the sound of voices and of police radios. McKay awakes, confusion on his face. The door to the bedroom bangs open and police begin pulling McKay from the bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Cribbage sits on one of the large double beds in the fairly plush hotel room. A football game is on TV and it is interrupted suddenly by a news announcer.

A shocker from New York City. James McKay, former Storm Kings leader and victim of violence has himself been arrested in the brutal beating of Lorelei Engel. Engel is rumored to have been the inspiration for the Broadway stage production Lorelei! Details are sketchy now, but police investigator William Marshall says there is evidence that McKay is the perpetrator and will be charged with the crime. Engel is in a coma and unable to provide any information. Her condition is listed as guarded. We will be back with more news on this breaking story as soon as it is available.

Cribbage puts his face in his hands. Then he stands and goes to the other bed where he has left his suitcase. He opens the suitcase and takes something from it. He walks to the desk by the window and sets a small candle there and lights it with a match. He puts his hand over his mouth and looks out the window.

Cribbage's reverie stops suddenly as a thought comes to his mind. He goes to the phone and quickly calls the dog sitter.

"Hello, Maggie's Mutt Service. How can I help you?"

"Maggie, you angel from heaven. Thank God you're home."

"Sylvester, darling. You sound upset."

"I am and I need you to grab my apartment key now and go check on Pokey. It's an emergency. Can you do it?"

"Anything for you, Sylvester."

"Wonderful. Call me on my apartment phone the minute you get there. I'm at the Sheridan in Philadelphia. The number's..."

"Philadelphia? Who's taking care of little Pokey?"

"Just get there and call me, dearest. I'll explain later. Here's the number..."

Cribbage rolls his eyes.

McKay sits on a folding metal chair with his arms on the table in front of it. He is unshaven, hung over, distraught. He puts his head on the table but lifts it when the door opens.

The police interrogator enters. He is overweight and is dressed in slacks and a wrinkled white shirt that isn't completely tucked in. He sits in the chair next to McKay.

"How did you injure your hands, Mr. McKay?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, let's talk a little about it and see if we can."

McKay

"I want a lawyer."

The policeman pauses for a second. "Okay. Sit tight and I'll be back in a minute."

Through a two-way mirror, McKay can be seen exhausted with his head back on the table. The police interrogator and a female detective look at him.

"Well, he ain't dumb," the man says. "He's a son of a bitch, but he ain't dumb."

The detective says, "Don't worry; he's good for this and we'll get him for it."

Cribbage is alone on stage, seated. He plays a guitar in the spotlight and sings.

*Hey, Mr. Heartache, don't knock on my door.
You've been around here before.
Don't need you to bring me a reason to
sigh...*

McKay is curled in a ball at the end of a bench in a cell. A jail officer opens the door to the cell. He says gruffly, "You're in the clear. She woke up and pinned it on the ex."

"Is she all right?"

"You're free to go."

"Is she all right?"

"I've told you all I know."

McKay stands on the sidewalk confused. He looks up to the sky and takes a deep breath.

McKay sits on the sofa. Cribbage sits on the piano bench facing him.

"Have you ever done really wrong?"

"Oh, more than once I'm afraid. Not so bad."

"And how did you face yourself?"

I said to myself, "The name's Cribbage—not Christ."

"Kind of a cop-out."

"It would be exactly that if I hadn't tried and failed despite myself. Like you."

"Christ himself wouldn't forgive me."

"Er...James, you didn't do it—remember?"

"Don't you understand? I didn't *know* I didn't do it."

"So? Your name's James, not Jesus."

"It's not just this. It's my whole fucking life. I wish I believed in redemption."

"Well, I do. But don't look to me for it."

"I'm sure as hell not going to your god for it!"

"That's not what I meant. I don't want you to. I don't want anyone to. I only want people to believe in their own gospel, whatever it is."

"I can't make amends."

"See what I mean?"

"What?"

"You can make Peace, James. Peace. C'mon. It looks as though you been given yet another second chance, so just thank your lucky stars and be happy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gregg Coleman is in a tuxedo center stage. He sings an operatic version of "Never More to Be" the lyrics to which Cribbage has written.

*Folks I know are contemplatin'
'Bout a westward land that's out there
waitin'
Where the boughs hang heavy beneath a
perfect sky...*

It has been hard for Cribbage to get the western feel out of the song, but the blues singer's style and the new words seemed to work. "Never More to Be" has always been a serious song, but Cribbage's new take on it is another intentional move away from the hokey frolicking of Laredo. He has hoped for the feel of "Old Man River" and Coleman has given him just that.

*When I awoke my heart was achin'
For a paradise is godforsaken
If the people there are never more to be...*

There is a pause with the music fading, and suddenly the singer almost shouts the last words.

Think of all the people never more to be!

Cribbage is looking toward the stage from a vantage point behind the curtain. Oh, that's so much more on the mark than Laredo!

He looks at the people around him. They are actors and singers and they smile along with him. McKay walks up.

Cribbage says, "Well, not *everything's* great. They've talked me into putting on the cowboy duds again and browsing around some to-do with the bosses. It's tonight, so I've got to get moving. Not thrilled, but I've gotta do it."

Coleman arrives from the stage and greets people. McKay offers his hand and the singer shakes it.

"Really nice work."

"Well, I thank you, sir," Coleman says. He leaves to greet others who are coming up to him.

"You know, I've possibly forty years left to get whatever it is I've got left to do finished. I'm thinking of making a list," McKay says.

"I think it would be a good idea."

"You know, I'm glad I fell in with you, Sylvester."

"Well, I thought it was a good idea all along. Oh! Before I forget. I had breakfast at the Compass Rose Diner."

"I haven't gone back there."

"Maybe you should. They told me Lorelei will be back at work tomorrow. Be kind of nice to welcome her."

"Would you come with me?"

"Of course I would. Let's do it! Seven tomorrow. Sharp."

"I'll be over early."

McKay is at a white grand piano. He is dressed in white. He sings "You Can't Dream the Past Away."

Time flies fast, so live for today and dream of tomorrow cause you can't dream the past away.

The song ends with a simple major chord that fades away.

Cribbage awakes lying on the bed with his cowboy outfit still on. Pokey is asleep at the foot of the bed. Cribbage hears an old song of his "Sad Times Are Coming" playing in his head. He recorded it years ago and the mix is amateurish, the tempo slow and uneven. The organ is scratchy and Cribbage's voice is out of tune, broken, and raw. Cribbage's face seems pained by the sound of it.

*I take what I see as my reality
Just to wake up to a sad old song
With the same old name and the same
old pain
Just yesterday I picked up my guitar
But I couldn't sing a word
Of my own refrain
And the only thing I heard
Was someone calling out my name
Don't you see sad times are coming?*

Cribbage shakes his head, gets up leaving Pokey asleep on the bed, and walks groggily to the kitchen.

He gets a can of coffee from the shelf and opens the top. He looks up when he hears the voice of Horace Golding on the TV in the living room. He puts down the coffee and listens.

There are some things more important than a football game. News from New York City. James McKay shot in the back and dead on arrival at...

Cribbage's face looks bewildered and then panicked. He rushes to the living room.

The screen is nearly all green with the expanse of Astroturf. Football players rush across the field. Cribbage stares. Several

seconds pass by. Then the words "TV'S WORST BLUNDERS" appear on the screen.

There is a knock at the door. Pokey barks once. Rain pours outside and Cribbage can see through the blurry, rain-streaked window a hooded figure at the door. The figure puts a key in the door, opens it, and sticks his head in. It is McKay.

"It's me. Are you ready?" he says.

By the Same Author

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