

BLOOD SINS

A Novel by Philip Watson

Prologue

1981

North Central Mexico

Charles Marcus Harper saw the scorpion as soon as he opened his bloodshot eyes. The largest he'd laid eyes on, and he'd seen more than a few. It was the Bark variety which had the dark brown triangle, the scorpion with the strongest venom. The ugly thing crawled across the dusty floor toward the opening of his Tony Lama boot, still where he had kicked it off sometime after midnight.

Marcus raised himself on the metal bunk and sat on the edge, the cheap springs screaming into his skull like a sheared pipe on a drill rig. His eyes

ached from the morning sun angling in through the dusty panes. The scorpion froze, then turned and scurried across the plank floor and disappeared through a hole that seemed too small for the lobster-like pinchers and curved tail to crawl through.

“Anybody here steps on one of those with a bare foot ain’t gonna walk for a month,” he said aloud. None of the other five in the room answered. He paused and listened to the woman sleeping with Dan Folk, her breathing sounded ragged, sickly.

From the gritty floor he dragged over his boot and tossed it at the bunk five feet away where it bounced against a body curled tight in a soiled white sheet. The man disgorged a grunt which was taken over by smoker’s cough.

Marcus felt a soft pressure on his thigh and slid his gaze to the Mexican girl who rolled to her side. He pulled away the Indian pattern blanket, in slumber she bent and drew in her knees, gave a vulnerable moan. He stared, feeling like a piece of garbage for taking advantage of the girl’s lot in life. He guessed her to be eighteen, if that. Smooth skin made her look more child than woman, but any innocence left in her was evaporating like dew on a cactus bloom. He stood and spread the blanket over her, tucked it under the small, brown feet.

From his back pocket he slid a well-worn leather wallet, opened it, thumbed through the twenties, tens . . . counting. Six hundred and seventy two. He pulled out every bill and rolled them tight, then reached to the floor and lifted her frayed jean shorts and pushed the bills into a pocket. He got

dressed and headed for the door. On the way out he kicked the two metal bunks. “Wake up.” A woman mumbled a sleepy protest in Spanish.

Marcus stepped out on the loose planked porch. Fresh morning sun glinted off his Cessna 410, shiny white with blue trim, the modern machine posed a striking contrast to the scrub of Mexican landscape. Gazing around he grimaced at the rout of water-sucking mesquite, dwarf cactus, chaparral scattered like confetti and dry as pre-historic bones. Then the rancid smell of rotting meat flared his nostrils. He heard a chorus of croaking and turned to his right. On a knoll a group of vultures stalked and spread their charred-looking wings, some with entrails hanging from their beaks.

Lumbering across the weeded and dirt clumped yard, Marcus got to his plane parked a hundred feet at the side of the cabin. From the wing tank, he drained two ounces of fuel into a plastic cup, held it toward the sky, checked for moisture. Pacing around the beautiful aluminum bird, he patted it like a trophy thoroughbred, palmed and eyed the flap cables, swung the tail section, tilted down and up the aereons, finally running his hand along the edge of both propellers. In one he found a slight ding, took a file from the glove box, and smoothed out the leading edge. He kicked the tires.

Ready for one more flight.

Unlike so many of his screw-ups, this one he had thought through, the plusses and minuses summed a thousand times. Sometimes, hell, maybe most of the time, people have to make these kinds of decisions in a split second. Marcus had had the time to think long and hard about this one. For that he

was thankful.

He nudged a small rock with the sharp toe of his western boot. Right up to this point, every inch of the way, the choices were his. Each and every damn one. Same with those now in the cabin, three men with a trail of failed marriages, squandered fortunes, and wasted days. The only innocents at this hunting camp were the three teenage girls from Nuevo Laredo, bought yesterday like range-bred cattle and herded out here. He gave a soft smile, thinking of how the girl would feel when she found that roll of cash.

He reached under the pilot's seat and pulled out a Smith and Wesson, opened the chamber, noted the six brass caps stamped .357, then swung the gate closed. He cocked the hammer back, leaned into the cowling, rested his stiffened arm across the nose, drew a bead on a bottle of Jack Daniels on the barbeque grill. Glass and amber liquid exploded, the bullet ricocheting off the stove pipe, buzzing through the dry air like an E string on a tejano guitar.

"Goddamn." It was Bob Stringer inside the cabin.

"What the hell, Marcus. Shit." Dan Folk next, sounding angry.

He heard the Spanish, the women's energetic, high-pitch jabbering.

"Party's over." He thumbed out the smoking cartridge and replaced it with another hollow point. "Time to go."

Bob Stringer came out on the back porch, shirtless and barefooted, zipping his khaki pants. "Jesus Christ, Marcus. That bottle was half damn full."

"No liquor in private craft. FAA regulations."

“Hell we were drunk when you landed us here,” Stringer said, and returned a questioning look, like it was a joke. But Marcus Harper wasn’t smiling.

Dan Folk came out the opposite door, buck naked and fully erect. Seeing the tattoo on his upper arm, Marcus’s mind flitted back 15 years to that night in Bangkok when Dan had gotten the stupid thing.

“Just hang on, C. M.” Dan tilted his head to the cabin door. “I gotta have another round with Juanita.” His grizzled face had that fake look of despair, like he was forced to put on a suit and attend church. He stalked back inside. Marcus Harper felt the rage surge throughout his body. He tightened his grip on the handle, wanting to swing the heavy Smith and Wesson into Dan Folk’s crooked teeth.

Standing beside the plane, Marcus jerked a bandana from his hip pocket, wiped away the dust on the tinted side window that threw back his reflection like a black mirror. A pair of chiseled creases angled away from his pronounced nose, some grey at the temples, bags beginning to puff below the eyes. Old enough to say he had had a life. A damned sorry one at that.

He slid a picture from his wallet. A school book photo of a somber-looking twelve year old. ‘Fall 1981’ was printed in the bottom border, taken eight months ago. He thumped the corner. ‘Course for a while no one could blame Marcus Harper for being a bit damn skeptical, but soon enough there was no doubt, Lane was his boy.

He reached inside the plane and wedged the photo into the control steer,

in view of the pilot. He blew out a resigned breath, nodded, reminding himself once again. It was best. Best for the most people, and best for the best people. And now, in an odd sort of way, he felt exhilarated, almost felt like rearing back and yelling out a laugh.

But he gazed around in silence. The morning chill was getting chased into the next day, in another hour the mercury would crawl into the nineties. He stared into the cloudless sky, breathed in and filled his lungs with the warm, dry air. Yep, it was looking like a good day. Which was fitting, seeing how this was going to be his last.

Chapter 1

Twenty-Five Years Later

Dallas, Texas

The punk gave that smirk again, the second time this hand. Smirk number one was right after the deal, when he peeled back and eyed his two hold cards. Smirk number two was just now, on the River in Texas Hold ‘Em, the turn of the fourth community card. His two-time smirk meant three of a kind. That kind of smirk was impossible to fake because it was unconscious, so subtle even he didn’t know it bounced off his face like a sonar ping. But sitting across the poker table, Lane Harper saw it.

The punk fiddled with his stack of chips, acting like he was weighing the heavy calculations, giving that fake thinking-man-frown. Lane saw the greed boiling out of his every pore, having nailed this phony twenty minutes into the game. That was three hours ago.

The punk thought he owned the pot, now at over twenty grand.

It was Stoner’s turn to bet. “Check,” he said, listless.

The next player drummed his fingers on the green felt. The other hand cradled his meaty head propped up by a forearm that kept his face from crashing onto his short stack of chips. “Check.” His voice barely audible, but his body language screamed defeat.

Now it was the punk’s turn. A thirty-something with a ball cap bill pulled down to his eyes. Wearing a black t-shirt, he had a pair of dice dyed

into his neck, his pale arms had a dozen tattoos. His mouth formed a natural scowl with lips as thin as if sliced into the clear plastic of cold, packaged meat. At first glance he seemed skinny, but Lane sized him as junkyard lean and just as mean, immunized at birth from affection or conscience. Earlier, in a straight hard voice, he'd said his name was Pile Driver, then served up a smart-ass grin to ensure the players knew it was a lie.

At the table with Lane and Driver were four others, three players plus the dealer. Lane knew the hand was about to drop to just him and Driver, it was as certain as water flows downhill. Pile Driver counted a stack of chips, then a second, and a third. He shoved all three to the middle where they hit the other neat stacks, knocking all of the chips into a jumbled pile. "Five." He gave a cocky sniff.

Just like water goes downhill, the other three tossed their cards atop the chip pile.

"Five k to you, Lane." James "Strum" Dunn reached into the pot and re-stacked the chips in neat order, then took the folded cards. Strum Dunn, sixty, with reading glasses hung around his neck by a red cord, owned the game. It was the back room of Ten Pin, a decades old bowling alley, pool hall and café where Strum Dunn was part owner. For twenty years he'd run a clean table, his players mostly an inner circle of thirty or forty guys, a few women, low key, friendly.

Until today. Now this new face with the dice cubes burned into his neck had been running his mouth since he won two decent pots in a row. But this

skillet was the biggest since the guy sat down. Lane noted Strum was getting nervous.

“I only made it five thou to keep you from folding, Harper. Trying to tweak that just-right amount.” Pile Driver put a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. “Enough to make you call, but not too much to make you crawl,” with his tongue he rolled the toothpick across his lower lip, “under the table.”

Lane had seen guys like him a thousand times. His look was a mix of arrogance and ignorance, confidence rippling through his body, thinking he had it all figured out. But he'd failed to grasp certain fundamentals of mathematical odds, and just as important, human behavior.

“How much is the pot?” Lane was calm as if asking how many quarters were needed for the soda machine.

A collective of soft whistles and low mumblings came from the dozen or so standing and watching.

Pile Driver cocked his head with a curious look as if he'd heard Lane ask what was his favorite movie. “What did you say?” Pile Driver frowned.

“The pot. That's my bet.” Lane evened out five stacks of blue chips.

The confidence in Pile Driver's face slid away like snow off the roof of a burning barn. He cut his eyes to Strum. “Something ain't right. Something stinks like shit.”

Strum ignored the accusation, the insult.

Pile Driver leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, his taut face resembling a snake about to strike. “I was told you run a straight game.”

Silence filled the room. Inferring that Strum was a cheat was like striking a match next to a dynamite fuse.

“You were told right,” Sturm said in a careful voice. He slid the glasses down on his nose, staring at Driver.

Lane cut in. “You got three queens.” His tone was as certain as if he’d informed Driver that his fly was open.

Pile Driver’s face was full of expression and Lane could read the indecision in his eyes. “If that’s a fact, then this game is a rat fuck.” He settled back and tilted up his chin.

“Hey.” Strum slapped his palm on the table. “Your trash talk is getting old as hell.”

Driver’s mouth tightened. “I ain’t gonna get cheated.”

“No you ain’t.” Strum gritted out the words, showing obvious regret that Driver was in the game.

“Reason I know,” Lane said, his tone matter of fact, like an expert instructor in a classroom. “Your expression. It tells. Twice. First when you eyed your hole cards and then again when the river floated that queen.” Lane waited several beats, staring into the man’s eyes. “You haven’t got four ladies, that’s a mathematical fact. Best you can have is a boat, queens over. But the odds of you having that are low and therefore warrant my sizable raise.”

The look on Pile Driver turned mean and unstable. Lane knew that all the players at the table, along with those watching, now felt Strum had made a mistake letting this stranger buy in. Several of the men shifted their eyes

toward the closed door with the EXIT sign.

Strum spoke. "Whoever told you this game is clean should have also told you it seats some of the best." Strum Dunn turned his head to Lane. "I admit Lane here is acting out of character. He's usually a friendly player."

Murmurs went around the room. Strum had passed some guilt to Lane, questioning why he had turned merciless on this new guy.

"What's the pot?" Lane repeated.

"Twenty-five," Strum Dunn answered, sighing with regret.

Again, the room went silent. Lane laid his palms flat on the table with thumbs touching, and slowly pushed in five tall stacks. "Raise twenty five."

Strum Dunn lifted out of the chair, leaned to the middle of the table, pushed the glasses high on his nose, counting. "Pot's right."

Pile Driver drew his thin lips back, baring his teeth. "I think you are some cheating motherfuckers." Pile Driver's voice was low, the tone threatening.

"You're an amateur," Lane came back.

"Knock it off. Both of you." Strum stabbed a thick finger onto the felt. "What in the hell is the matter with you, Lane?" Then Strum turned to Pile Driver. "You came here looking for action, now you got some. Call or fold."

Pile Driver didn't budge. The only sounds in the room were shuffling of feet and some one clearing his throat.

Lane stared hard across the table at the tattooed man in the black t-shirt. "Is Pile Driver your name because you pile Mexicans in a truck and drive

them up Interstate Thirty-Five then drop off the ones still alive at labor camps?” Pile Driver’s eyes squinted into slits, then he swallowed, a reaction grounded in fear, and not the kind of fear of losing a poker hand.

From the corner of his eyes, Lane saw Strum Dunn turn and scowl, but Lane kept his eyes fixed on the man across the table. Rage leaked into Driver’s expression.

“Lane, what the hell you talking about? I want both of you to focus on this poker game.” Strum Dunn turned to Pile Driver. “Twenty-five was the pot. We’re playing pot limit. Lane just bet twenty-five thousand. It’s fifty thousand to you.”

There was a long pause. Pile Driver’s finger twitched as he slowly dragged his hand toward the edge of the table. Strum lowered his voice in warning. “Hey bud, I got security here.”

Lane leaned back, at the edge of the table he turned his palms up. “Just so you been told.” His words were cordial. “I can beat your trip queens. Punk.”

Pile Driver thumbed up his cap bill, exposing an eyebrow bisected by an old scar. He gave another fake smile, obviously not wanting to acknowledge the cunning that had outdone him. After a full minute, he flipped his cards toward the dealer. “Cash me out.”

Strum reached behind him, got a paper plate, and sailed it across the table into Pile Driver’s chest. “The man through that door will take care of you.”

Pile Driver stood and kicked the chair backward, knocking it across the room, then he raked the chips into the plate. Stepping around the table he stopped, turned toward Lane.

“I guarantee you one goddamn thing you cheating bastard, you’ll see me again.”

“With you I didn’t need to cheat. I could have busted you out of the game over an hour ago. I folded hands that had you beat. But I wanted to keep you in the game.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Cheat you? I wanted to stall you. If I could’ve beat your three queens I wouldn’t have bluffed.” Lane flipped over his down cards. “I didn’t have a single pair. No chance for a flush or a straight. Was that cheating? Lying? Or was it poker? Or,” Lane tilted his head, and gave a questioning expression, “was it a process of moral ordering where men test their existence relative to other men?”

“Shut up, Lane,” Strum Dunn growled, his voice turning angry.

Lane ignored the order as Pile Driver set his feet apart like a prize fighter posing for a photo. “You and I squared off, heads up, mano y mano, punk.” Lane turned sideways in the chair, his eyes boring into Driver’s face. “What did you square with those Mexicans seeking some hope in their lives? When you took their savings and loaded them into the hull of an eighteen-wheel fuel tanker, pitch dark and a hundred thirty degrees?”

Pile Driver returned Lane’s glare, his thin lips drawn into a vicious snarl.

“You been stalled. Now you’re gonna be busted.”

Driver slung the plate aside. With the reflex of a reptile his pale tattooed arm moved to the back pocket then thrust forward with a loud click and the blur of a mirrored blade.

“Hey, you say? Mano y mano?” Driver’s face held the wicked grin of a sadist.

Lane grabbed the back of his chair and slung it against Driver’s knees, knocking him off balance. The knife attacker regained his footing, juked to his right then left, two head fakes before he lunged, driving the blade straight for the throat. Lane grabbed another chair and held the legs out like a trainer in a lion cage. With the blade held in front, Driver balanced on the balls of his feet, eyeing his next move. Then he cocked his arm back, taking the blade behind his head and flung. The knife flew, spinning through the air like a saw, brushing the hair at the side of Lane’s head before sticking in the wall.

Lane saw a brownish blur in a perfect half-circle as a pool stick cracked into the side of Driver’s head. He collapsed. On the floor he thrashed atop a confetti of red and white poker chips, trying to get up. Two uniformed cops rushed through the door, jerked his arms back and cuffed the sprawled man. Each cop grabbed an arm and lifted him to his feet.

Driver turned his head and spit into Lane’s face. “I promise I’ll get you, you motherfucker.”

The cops hurried the black t-shirt out the door. From outside a man stepped in. He was clean cut, wearing a navy blue blazer, white shirt, striped

tie. The room was silent. Lane's ears hummed from the adrenaline firing through his blood stream. The man drew his blazer aside showing a badge and pistol on his belt. "Good work, Harper." He spoke in a soft but serious voice. "Owe you a beer." He turned and left in the direction of the two uniforms.

Lane blew out a breath and felt his heart pound against his rib cage. He grabbed the back of a chair to steady his shaking knees. All around the room people who had instinctively dropped down were raising themselves off the floor, most heading for the exit, none bothering with the usual hand waves and so-longs.

"You're barred from this game, Lane." Strum Dunn produced a wad of cash, licked his fingertips, and started counting bills. "I've worked with you, let you play knowing it was a violation. If you come back," Strum jammed his thick thumb against his meaty chest, "I'll call your parole board myself." His bottom lip trembled.

"How about when I get off parole?" Lane held his arms out in a gesture of innocence.

Strum Dunn turned his eyes down, exaggerating the back and forth motion of his head, counting out cash with shaky hands, making even piles of twenties on the green felt.