



RAPID READS



THE NEXT SURE THING

RICHARD WAGAMESE

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RAVEN BOOKS

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As always, for Debra

CHAPTER ONE

So I'm walking out of Shelly's Crab Shack around 2:00 AM with a handful of bills from my tip jar, and the moon is like a freaking eyeball staring right down at me. I'm tired. Sometimes these gigs are more of a hardship than a blessing. But there never was a bluesman worth his salt that didn't have to pay his dues. Me, I figure a few nights working shabby rooms like the lounge in Shelly's is gonna be worth it once I hit. I have to hit. There's no way I can't. I got me a handful of surefire riffs born from the blues I carry in my bones, man.

I was raised on a poor-as-hell Indian reservation smack-dab in the middle of nowhere, with twenty people sharing a three-bedroom house that had no glass on the windows and no electricity, and we had to haul the day's water from the lake in a five-gallon lard pail. So I know the territory of the blues. I been down so long it looks like up to me. That's how the old song goes, and I truly know how that feels. Trust me.

With a name like Cree Thunderboy, I'm a shoo-in. That's as honest a blues name as Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters or Sonny Boy Williamson. Getting folks to notice is the hard part. There's really no blues scene in this town. It's not really a working man's town. Ever since the high-tech boom, there's nothing but ISPs and systems-management joints or software-development places. And they mostly employ nerds and geeks who only listen to over-produced rock or pop or white-boy hip-hop.

I busked for over a year on the sidewalk for nickels and dimes before Shel Lashofsky stopped to check me out on his lunch hour one day. He looked at me like I mattered. Like he cared what I was playing. So I vibed him out with some slick harmonica and some down-home thumping on the bass strings of my ratty old Gibson, before peeling out a five-note run that would curdle cheese, man. That's how I got the gig at Shelly's, which is what Shel calls his place.

Trouble is, there's never anyone there. People come there to eat and head out to a shinier, more glamorous place. I wouldn't call Shel's a dump, but it's close. He serves up some good food, but he doesn't spend much on decor. Shel calls it realism. He says he's keeping it as close to Louisiana Cajun as he can even though, as far as I know, he's never been south of Ohio. So I plug in and play to six or seven people, maybe even a dozen on a good night.

But a gig is a gig, and I don't sweat the lack of big tips. In fact, I'll take this handful of bills to the track tomorrow and turn it into a whole lot more. Fast.

When I first came here, I worked as an exercise groom for one of the big horse trainers. I'd have to be up at like four o'clock to get to the track before the sun was up, but I never minded. It was like going to school. I got a diploma in picking winning horses because I'd listen to the jockeys and the trainers talk about each day's race card and whose horses were right and whose weren't. I learned how to tell when a horse is ready just by looking at it. But you can't bet when you work the back lot, so I quit after six months. After that I just bet.

The only trouble with that was that the track got successful. Pretty soon there were new and bigger trainers with whole stables of horses I didn't know. There were

a lot of new jockeys. So I was lost. I'd been winning for a while, but this new flood of activity left me high and dry. Even though I don't win a lot, I hit often enough to keep me going back.

My dad would say it's the lazy man's way. He was church-raised, a real Bible-thumper. And he didn't look kindly on either gambling or playing music. But the big bluesmen, the ones who left their mark, were all about playing the blues until the wee hours of the morning. When you do that like I do now, you get up late. It's hard to make an honest job when you don't get up until noon. Besides, to be a great blues player you have to be authentic, and this life I live gives me enough grit and hard times to make my music real.

Moms Mahood doesn't mind. Moms runs the rooming house where I live. It's not much. I got the only room with a small balcony overlooking the backyard, and I

sit out there and play on evenings I'm not booked. All Mom cares about is if I have the rent come the end of the week. I've been late a few times, but I'm always good for it.

I'm twenty-three years old. I don't have a girlfriend. I don't own a car. But I can play a guitar that'll shuck the husk right off a cob of corn from fifty feet away. I'm going to be a bluesman. They're gonna say my name right along with John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf and Stevie Ray Vaughan. That's my dream.

I'm going to win big money at the track too. That's my other dream. Because there's always a sure thing hiding in the numbers on the racing form. I don't know if that's true or not. I just choose to believe it.