It was dark and it was raining. Billy Joe Ford sat outside the saloon on the boardwalk and watched the rain turning the dirt road into mud. He thought about looking for shelter. There was a livery stable at the end of the street with big bales of hay piled up, which would make a warm bed for the night. But if he went there, then how would his pa find him when he came out of the saloon?

He got up and looked through the window. His pa, John Ford, was sitting at a table with four other men playing cards. Cowhands, by the look of them. Money was piled up on the table, but very little in front of his pa. John Ford usually lost at cards, or he cheated. When he lost he got drunk and beat Billy Joe. When he cheated and won, he still got drunk, but on those occasions he didn't beat him. Well, not straightaway. Usually he went off and found a woman, and she'd steal his money from him while he was out cold. John Ford would wake up and find out he'd been robbed, and then he'd beat Billy Joe. Or try to, but usually he was still so drunk he'd miss. It was a hard life, but it could be worse. A boy like Billy Joe could be working in a mine, or in the cotton fields. As it was, he and his pa moved from town to town – John Ford gambling, Billy Joe begging and stealing. It was a job. According to his pa it was the only kind of job Billy Joe would ever get in this land.

'It's cos of you being half-Injun half-Irish,' his pa had told him. 'Now if you'd took after me and looked Irish, you'd be fine. Your trouble is you take after your mother's people, the Comanche. You look too much like an Injun for white people to trust you, but at the same time you look too much like a white boy for the Injuns to trust you. Trust *me*, Billy Joe, being a half-an-half like you are, you ain't got nothing but trouble comin' to you in this life.'

And so far trouble was about all Billy Joe had seen in his eleven years. But most of it had been caused by his pa getting them into difficult situations. Gambling. Getting drunk and starting fights. Messing with other men's women. Cheating at cards.

As Billy Joe looked through the window into the saloon, he saw his pa throw a card down on the table and grin, then lean forward and put his hands on the pile of money in the centre of the table.

As he was pulling the money towards him, one of the other men suddenly reached out and grabbed John Ford's arm and twisted it so a playing card fell out of his sleeve onto the table.

Billy Joe's pa looked shocked, and then he went for his gun. He never made it. The man who'd grabbed his arm pulled out a pistol and shot John Ford twice in the chest. Billy Joe heard the shots through the thick walls of the saloon. He watched as his pa crashed back into his chair, then carried on falling backwards, blood spreading rapidly across his shirt, his arms flailing, his eyes wide in shock. He hit the floor and lay there, his eyes staring straight at Billy Joe.

Billy Joe stood, stuck to the spot, his mouth open in shock. It felt like his heart had stopped and he couldn't breathe. Pa was dead! Killed right in front of his eyes!

Suddenly Billy Joe realized that the cowhand was now aiming his gun straight at him!

He threw himself to one side just in time. There was the explosion of the gun and then the window shattered at the exact spot where his head had been.

There were shouts and screams from both inside and outside the saloon, but Billy Joe was already running as fast as he could, fear and panic driving him on. A gunshot sounded behind him and chips of wood flew up around his feet. He had to get off the boardwalk, but if he ran into the rain-lashed street he'd get stuck in the mud for sure and the gunman would just shoot him dead.

There was another gunshot, and Billy Joe felt this bullet tear at the sleeve of his jacket. The next one would blow him apart!

He reached the end of the boardwalk and threw himself off. He tried to move to the left, heading for the darkness of an alleyway, but mud clung to his boots, holding him. The next second he felt a blow in the back, and then he was face down on the ground.