1

By the side of a horse trail in the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas a slumped-over black man, his hands tied around a tree, was regaining consciousness. It was still dark, the morning light an hour away. The first thing he felt was the burning pain on his back. The whiplashes had come down feeling like liquid fire. They had been so sudden that they had left him stunned, separating him momentarily from the pain, leaving him an instant to think that it was better to have pain on the back than around the neck. This consolation did little to salve the pain when it came full force or to prepare him for when lash after lash came down and cut through him like a scythe. His only respite had come from passing out, but that had not been altogether at first. It had not put his mind at rest. For the longest time his thoughts had swum from place to place and image to image. And then finally he had felt his mind begin to lose all activity. This he had thought was death coming. Instead of lynching him they were whipping him to death for being a runaway. But he had not died, he knew, because he was awakening from the pain in his back.

Because his hands were still tied around the tree, there was little he could do but bear the pain. After a while he willed a separation once again of the pain from his body and put it in a box. For a time he observed the pain. It was not his pain, he told himself, but a pain. He analyzed

the pain. It pulsated, it burned, it jumped from part to part of the back. Then he tried another separation. The pain was in one box, his body in another. With pain and body so distanced, he tried to see if he could make his mind operate independently and he thought back when he had first stepped foot in Texas.

He had actually set foot *on* Texas the year before in 1828 from the sea—or rather the Gulf of Mexico. He was not sure whether there was a difference between a sea and a gulf. He had been sitting in a skiff headed for shore. High above the crashing surf a gull had been circling looking for prey, alternately sailing with the wind and then flapping its wings madly to regain momentum. Her screeches had broken through the lingering morning mist onto him and three others on board—his owner, Samuel Bingham, the wife of his owner, Sarah Bingham, and a sailor who was pulling hard at the oars.

With a bump the boat hit sand. The sailor jumped out into the surf, grabbed the bow, and began to pull. James—that was his name—also jumped out to push from the stern. When the boat scrapped up onto the sand he cupped his hand over his eyes to shade them from the now brightening morning sun and surveyed what lay before him. To his left, down the beach, water rushed out through the mouth of a river and into the Gulf, creating a swirl of foamy turbulence at the point of meeting. Beyond, low-lying grasslands stretched, interrupted at distinct points by piney woods.

"That's the Colorado River over there, sir, where that building is," the sailor said to Bingham. "They're building the port of Matagorda there."

"I know," Bingham replied, taking a coin out of his pocket. "This is for you."

"Thank you and best of luck to you, sir."

James watched the sailor push the skiff back into the surf to begin his trip back to the schooner that lay anchored a hundred yards out. He stood watching until the skiff was in deep enough water that the sailor had begun rowing against the incoming waves. Then he heard his owner say, "Come along now, James. They're supposed to meet us at the river."

He turned and picked up the luggage so that there were two valises under both of his arms and two larger suitcases hanging from both of his

hands. His own possessions were in a bag slung over his shoulder. He fell in behind the Binghams as they began walking down the beach.

They had walked about halfway to the mouth of the river when he looked up and saw two men on horseback approaching from the other direction. It was probably the people who were to meet his owners, he thought. But maybe not. Bingham looked nervous. He saw him reach under the tails of his coat to the pistol that rested against his waist.

The riders stopped and Bingham looked straight up at them. "Good morning, gentlemen."

The two riders heard but did not understand the salutation and said something in Spanish to each other. Then they nodded at Bingham as men sometimes do when they can only acknowledge each other's presence in an encounter.

Bingham took his hand off the pistol as the riders rode off and said, "Mexicans. Can't understand English."

But James had recognized the words of the Mexicans. They were words he had learned from his mother. He'd grown up on the Bingham plantation in Tennessee. His mother, though, had grown up on a plantation in Cuba and then, somehow, been transported to New Orleans and from there up the Mississippi River to Tennessee and the Bingham plantation.

They resumed their walk. As they drew closer to the river and a couple of half-constructed buildings, he began to make out the figure of a black man who was leaning against the side of a wagon.

"You Master Bingham?" the black man said with a big smile when they arrived.

"Yes, I am," Bingham responded. "And who might you be?"

"Ezekiel, sir. Master Holmes send me for you. I'm to take you back to his house."

"Well now Ezekiel, that was mighty kind of your master to send you to fetch us." Bingham looked over at James and motioned for him to put the luggage in the wagon.

After depositing the bags James put his hands squarely on the backboard and sprang aboard making a half twist in the air so that he came down squarely seated with his feet dangling off the rear. He liked sitting on the back of the wagon so he didn't have to look at the Binghams. He could concentrate on this new scenery even if he was moving through it

backward. He thought to himself that he could easily turn to look at what lay ahead without his master seeing him, but through habit of custom he had become comfortable with facing backward.

"Okay, let's go," Bingham said, passing him and going to the front of the wagon.

They were now rolling down the road, first through grassland and then through cottonwood and oak trees. Ezekiel did his best to steer the wagon around the most offending holes, bumps, and ruts from other wagons. James kept his eyes looking out to the rear. He gazed out to the right and left of the road, trying to get a sense of what this country was like. Part of the land, he thought, looked like it did back in Tennessee because they were going through freshly plowed land. But the rest of it, beyond the furrowed rows, looked wild and desolate.

He was normally a field slave but for the purposes of this trip he was a manservant. He was in his early twenties, had a thin build, and a look of seriousness to him. He rarely smiled. It was not the look of sullenness that many slaves projected and the whites hated. It was rather a look that puzzled and sometimes worried them. They feared what might be behind it. A Negro who thought too much was a Negro not to be trusted, although there was though also a grudging respect for the seriousness since they took it as a sign of intelligence.

James understood these mixed perceptions of him and he tried to use them to his advantage. If for nothing else, they kept people guessing because he fit neither of the polar personality types that whites were used to among their slaves. He was neither like Ezekiel—the smiling, seemingly eager-to-please Negro that whites felt comfortable around—nor the sullen-looking Negro who put them in a bad humor. Nor did he seem to be somewhere in between these personality types. He had once overheard Bingham's father refer to him as an oddity.

2

A couple of hours later the wagon cleared a small hill and then passed by two small log cabins. A black woman stood in the door of one nursing a baby. Ezekiel nodded at her. He continued driving the wagon beyond the cabins and through a small grove of trees until coming to a much larger log-built house with a roof that sloped down over a front porch. He drove the wagon around to the front of the porch and pulled the horse to a stop.

The house fit in with its rustic surroundings. The logs that made up the outside walls matched the grove of trees that the house was set in, as if its builder had been attempting to make the transition from outside to inside as seamless as possible. A person would go from being among trees to being within an arranged clump of cut trees. The only initial hint that the builders had done anything more than arrange what they found already existing in the forest to make their dwelling lay in the unpainted but planed boards which stuck out from this front-facing wall of horizontal logs.

It was on these boards that a man and a woman stood waiting to welcome their guests. The fine cuts of their respective clothing contrasted sharply with the rustic surroundings.

James and Ezekiel waited until the whites were in the house before unloading the luggage onto the porch.

“You come with me,” Ezekiel said once the wagon was emptied.

James climbed back onto the wagon, this time into the seat his owner had occupied minutes earlier. For the first time on the trip he felt relaxed, even if the seat under him was hard and wooden.

“What they call you?” Ezekiel said after he had driven the wagon out of the clearing.

"James. I'm from Tennessee."

"Tennessee?"

"Up river from New Orleans."

"Right, I know that. Why you coming here?"

"Because he came."

Ezekiel let out a long slow laugh. "Ain't no other reason why a nigger would want to come here. But now it ain't a question of wanting, now is it? Your master going do what mine did and build himself a nice new plantation here which means you going to build it for him."

"You been here long?"

"Six years since we come from Louisiana."

"How is it?"

"Ain't much to like. There ain't nothing here so you have to break your back to clear the land, move all them rocks and trees and bushes out of the way before you can plant. The master, he real enthusiastic because he think he building something new. But the nigger just have to work so much harder to make his master's dream." Ezekiel paused and took a deep breath as if to emphasize that he had just said a mouthful. Then he remembered something else. "Another difference between working here and working there is that we are isolated here. Not many black folks here."

Ezekiel stopped the wagon when they reached the first of the two shacks they had passed on the way in. "You stay with us till you leave. Over there." He pointed to the second of the shacks. "There ain't nothing in it now but some sacks of seed. But first you going to come in and meet my wife and baby."

The two unhitched the horse and tied it to a tree and then Ezekiel pushed open the rough-hewn split log door to his cabin. Across the dirt floor in a corner a woman sat sewing. In the other corner a baby lay sleeping in a wooden box.

"Rachel, this is Mr. James. He come all the way from Tennessee. Look like he come here to stay."

The woman looked up from her sewing at James and then motioned for him to sit down on the floor. "We have to be quiet," she said. "The baby, he take a long time to sleep. Don't you dare wake him up."

She took an iron pot from the fireplace. With a heavy wooden spoon she first stirred the broth and then dipped enough out to fill two bowls that she brought over to the men. "Take this Mr. James. You must be hungry."

"James, I'm just James," he said to her.

"You look pretty scrawny," Ezekiel said. "Don't they feed niggers enough in Tennessee?"

"Don't pay him no mind," Rachel said. She was taking down a large loaf of cornbread covered by muslin cloth from a shelf by the fire. She broke off two pieces and handed them to the men.

James ate slowly and deliberately, dipping each piece of bread into the broth and placing it in his mouth. It was a little too salty for his taste but there was enough of a turnip taste to make it feel good in his stomach. He had not eaten since the night before on board the ship and what he had eaten then with the pitching back and forth in the rough waters had made him want to throw up. So he was breaking fast and he wanted to chew slowly anyway. But beyond that reason he had somewhere learned to eat slowly and chew thoroughly.

Ezekiel devoured his food and then leaned back against the wall and watched with a certain fascination as James worked little by little at finishing his. Finally, he could not stand the silence any longer. "This man look like he afraid he never get another bite to eat."

"No, I'm just slow. Food tastes better if you chew it a lot."

"I just thought of something you might like to know. There's one advantage to being here if you got a mind to escape. It's much easier here than back there."

"I'm not looking to escape," James said.

"I tell you why anyway. There are very few of them out here. It ain't like back there where they got sheriffs and all that to go after you."

"Why are you here then, if it's so easy to run away?" James said.

"Because he all talk," Rachel said from the corner where she had returned to her sewing.

"No, that ain't it. I figure it ain't no better down there. Besides, they don't speak like we do."

"You just lazy," Rachel said.

"We saw Mexicans on the beach—"

"They're around. But they keep to themselves. Don't have much to do with us. Besides, can't speak the language."

"Ever seen them owning one of us?"

"How could they if they can't speak the language?"

"That don't make no sense Ezekiel," Rachel said, looking up once again. "Master and slave don't have to speak the same language. Slave here to work, not to have no parlor conversation with the whites. But no, in answer to your question James, we ain't never seen the Mexicans with slaves."

"That's not the way they do things," Ezekiel said.

"Well," Rachel said, standing up, "the way they do things here is that I got to go up to the master's house now and help the lady fix dinner for that master of yours."

"One more thing," Ezekiel said. "Watch out for Indians around here. It's not like back there. You got to be more careful. Most of them okay, but they some real bad ones too."

It was mid afternoon with the sun still shining brightly when James stepped out of the small cabin. Across the yard a chicken pecked about searching for something to eat. He smiled at Rachel as she left the cabin with her baby wrapped in cloth. The truth was that he had always had a fantasy about escaping. But he wasn't ready yet, maybe for lack of nerve. He wasn't going to tell them that, at least not yet. You never knew who you could trust, even among Negroes.

3

At twenty-four years of age Samuel Bingham was striking out to start a farming operation in a foreign country still unsettled and unstable from a revolution. It was risky what he was doing, leaving an established family

plantation in Tennessee to work up entirely new land in Mexico. He could have stayed in Tennessee and inherited part of his father's plantation and lived well. That was the safe course. Even with three brothers, all with families, there would be enough to go around, though of course none would have as much as the father. That was what his wife and parents had wanted him to do. But to do that he would be living on the basis of what his father had built, not his own labor. He would not even be able to increase the size of the family plantation. Others had already claimed all the nearby land.

As he thought about the verdant land empty of people that he had passed through that afternoon, he felt reassured that he had made the right decision. There was a lot of land and very few people—the opposite of where he came from. The Mexicans and their ways would be a problem but not an insurmountable one. With enough talk and bribery, he had been told, they would not get in the way. All that was needed was a lot of work and it would look like Tennessee. New Tennessee, he thought.

The last thing his father had said to him after expressing his disappointment that he was leaving was that at least he wasn't going up north. Southerners actually had more in common with Mexicans than they did with Yankees. The Mexicans knew what it meant to appreciate life and live well. They weren't always thinking about business and how to make money like Northern businessmen. The North was one big, cold business operation. That was why abolitionism that wanted to turn slaves into paid labor came from there. They didn't understand that the slave received as much out of the Southern system as did his master. If the slave worked very hard—and not all of them did—that was because he was doing his part. The master did his part too, insuring that the slave had a place to live and food to eat even in the worst of times. It had taken generations to develop this civilization that was now entering an age of refinement. Leave it to the Yankees to want to come and tear it all down just so that they could pay the Negroes a miserly wage. The black man would not be any better off under that. He would be worse off because the Yankee would not hesitate to fire him without any means of support if he did not work well or his business was in hard times. That didn't happen on the plantation. The black man always had his place no matter what the market for cash crops. No one ever fired a slave. The

Mexicans were like that too. True, most of them did not have slaves. But they did have peasants who were almost like slaves. The peasants—Indians and mixed bloods—were a laboring race like the Negroes. And like the Negroes, they appreciated having white men see after them. These señores made sure that the peasants had a place to live and food to eat. They appreciated too that life was about living well, not how much money you made. It was much better to exchange a service with your servant than to pay him cold cash.

He had said nothing after his father's long discourse because he did not fully agree. He was going to Mexico to build a modern plantation that would take advantage of new conditions in the world market, not preserve a style of life.

Bingham had a ready smile for his hosts, Jonathan and Lily Holmes, a smile that showed his boyish good looks and friendliness. He always treated encounters with strangers the same: outwardly treat the other with friendliness; inwardly be prepared for the worst. He had smiled at the Mexicans on the beach while keeping his hand under his coat firmly on the handle of his pistol. Here with Holmes there was no need to be so prepared for any possible physical threat, but there was always need to be prepared for the kind of person his host might be.

Holmes seemed knowledgeable and that was what was important. He looked to be in his late thirties, forty at the most, older than him, younger than his parents—old enough to have the advantage of experience but not so old as to be able to dismiss him as a kid.

Jonathan Holmes stood up in the now darkening room and lit a candle. Then he turned. "Another whisky, Samuel?" "Yes, please. You were starting to say something about what grows well here in Mexico."

"Texas," Holmes corrected.

"But is not Texas a part of Mexico?"

Holmes handed Bingham his drink. "Well I suppose that technically it is. Mexico likes to think that this is the state of Coahuila and Texas. But your original question, Samuel, was about the business of planting. Here you have two major crops and some minor ones."

"Cotton and corn." Bingham leaned forward in his seat.

"Yes, cotton and corn. You grow the cotton to sell and the corn is for you and your animals to eat. It's really very simple that way. The soil

couldn't be a better for growing and, as far as the cotton goes, the market couldn't be any better. The English can't buy enough of it and I can't clear enough land to keep up with the demand. The only thing holding me back is labor."

"How many niggers do you have?"

"Just the one you saw plus his woman." Holmes motioned toward the kitchen. "She helps Lily with the house. But that's permanent ones. When I need more I can always lease some. There are several large planters like Jared Groce who have more than they can use all the time. They're not too close by, but then again they're not so far away that I can't get some of their men when I need them. The cost is higher than it is back there in Louisiana or Tennessee. But it stands to reason that it would be. Back there you have lots of slaves. When a man needs one for harvesting or whatever he can talk to lots of different planters. If the price that one planter demands for leasing seems too high, he can simply say, 'Thank you so much, I'll think about it' and then go to another planter till he gets the right price. But it's different here—"

"You don't have that many planters to go to," Bingham interjected.

"That's right, so the price is going to be higher. But it's still within reason."

Bingham had not been so naïve as to think that he could get along with only James as labor. He had assumed that from time to time, especially during harvests, he would need to lease more slaves. He had come with enough spare capital to cover those costs. He had not counted on the leasing cost being higher than it was in Tennessee, though, and he did not want to be at the mercy of what another man might charge for the use of his labor.

"This is only a temporary solution," Bingham said. "Eventually you will have to buy more slaves if you are to stabilize your labor supply and your farm is to grow."

"I'd buy more now," Holmes said, "but nobody wants to sell here and if they did, the price would be too high. Have to go to Louisiana to get a good price."

"The Mexicans don't object?"

"Don't object to what?"

"Buying slaves if you can find 'em to buy," Bingham answered.

Holmes frowned. “Even if they did, it wouldn’t count for much. This may be politically Mexico but economically it’s still the South, and economics in the end counts more than politics. There’s some talk in Mexico like in the United States about abolishing slavery. It won’t happen though. There’s too much at stake economically.”

4

Pedro Gomez Quintero found overly religious names to be a curiosity and a curse. He was crossing the Rio de los Brazos de Dios on horseback. What possibly could los brazos de Dios—the arms of God—mean and why would anyone want to name a river after them? It must have been a friar from one of the missions who had come across the river decades ago in the midst of his own agonizing personal meditations. What had possibly gone through his mind? Did he think up that imposing name on the spot or did he spend days pounding his head to come up with it? Was the idea the answer to a prayer for inspiration? The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous it seemed. The Anglo Americans were right to just call it the Rio Brazos. All that religious superstition and fanaticism, Gomez now thought, was weighing the country down and holding it back. Progress would come only from a scientific approach. God gave minds to men so that they could perfect their world, the French said, and perfection of the world did not mean intensifying devotion to superstitious ideas in religious clothing.

He was now firmly back in Texas and he wondered whether he had made the wrong decision in returning.

Four years earlier he had left Texas to go forward, to become educated and to become a priest. Now he was coming back without having become a priest. That he would never become a priest, that he had not made that elevated position in life, did not bother him now. It was of no importance

because now he believed other things. When he had set off from Texas he was much younger, maybe not in years, but in how he thought. He was no longer interested in the elementary soul of man and the afterlife. He was interested in what would become of man in this life.

He had thought that he perhaps made the wrong decision because he would be isolated here. There would be no one he could really talk to about much beyond the occurrences and struggles of everyday ordinary life except for the priests, and they could talk only of religious meaning. What he needed would be people or at least someone to replace those he knew in Mexico City who passionately thought and argued about the future of Mexico itself now that it was free from Spain.

He would miss Mexico City if not the life of a seminary student—the streets that he could wander down at will, the faces of people going in all directions, the snow-capped volcanoes on the eastern landscape, the thin mountain air, the moderate temperature year round. All of that was so different from where he was returning now, where in the eyes of his family and the people they knew he would be ignominiously returning after dropping out of the seminary.

In Mexico City after leaving the seminary he had met a general, Manuel de Mier y Terán, at the house of a friend. Terán, as everyone called him, took a special interest in him when he learned that he was from Texas because he would soon be going there to investigate conditions in the area bordering the United States. According to Terán, the border had been demarcated in the 1819 Treaty between Spain and the United States. It followed the course of the Sabine River from the Gulf of Mexico to the Thirty-second Latitude and from there ran due north until it struck the Red River. But now that Mexico was independent, a new treaty needed to be signed to guarantee these limits and the government needed to place physical markers on the line. The government was especially anxious, Terán told him, to establish its authority over its side of the border now that large numbers of Anglo-Americans, with and without permission, were beginning to stream across it.

It had taken him some time to agree to the general's request to accompany him to Texas as an aide and guide, but in the end he assented. It would be good to see his family again, of course. And Terán had told him that he would be serving his country by acting as his aide and guide

all the way to Nacogdoches in the northeast corner of Texas, just short of the border with the United States. Further, once they parted company in Nacogdoches—he to return home on the other side of the Colorado River and Terán to remain investigating conditions—Terán would count on him to be a source of information about conditions in his part of the department, especially those regarding the Anglo-American colonists. He would form part of a network of loyal contacts that Terán was eager to build.

Sprinkled among the two hundred or so Anglo Americans living in haphazardly placed wooden structures along this unfortunately-named river were ten Mexicans and a couple of Europeans. Two stores served this town. One, for indulgences, sold whiskey, rum, sugar, and coffee; the other, for basics, had rice, lard, flour, and cloth. Outside of the town many more colonists lived—some two thousand in all—on small farms scattered about the low rolling hills, woods, and fields.

Word of the general's official visit had been sent ahead, and the town authorities had set aside a house for him to use. There he would stay for at least ten days, and while necessary repairs were being made to the wagons, he would catch up on correspondence and journal entries and cast about for information on all matters from climatic, to soil, to economic, social, and political conditions. Terán, who Pedro observed seemed to be in worsening health, also needed this time to gather strength for the trip that lay ahead through the wilderness on to Nacogdoches.

This was the general's first contact with an actual Anglo-American settlement of significant size and he was anxious to observe all that he could of their way of life. That it was Stephen Austin's original colony gave it more importance since it was the center of gravity of the Anglo-American enterprise in Coahuila y Tejas—and Mexico as a whole, for that matter.

The name of the town, San Felipe de Austin, like that of its river, sent Pedro Gomez's mind racing with its ironies. Some friar, maybe the same one who named the river, had named the place for a saint—San Felipe. Then an Anglo American had come along with the arrogance to claim the place as his personal property along with immortalizing his name by adding de Austin—signifying property of Austin. But could a mortal, even an Anglo-American one, own a saint?

On the third day in the town, while Pedro was talking with the general, there was a loud, persistent knock at the door and the mortal who presumed to own the saint presented himself. Stephen Austin extended his hand, introduced himself with enthusiasm, and excused himself for having been away when the general and his party had arrived.

So this was the famous Austin, the most important Anglo American in Texas. Terán returned the greeting correctly and allowed Austin to guide the two of them over to his house. Austin spoke Spanish very well for an Anglo American and he had a certain grace to his actions that inspired confidence, Pedro thought. No wonder he had been able to get so much out of the authorities.

Austin's house consisted of just two simple rooms. If all his efforts to build up Anglo-American colonization were going to make him rich, it had not come yet. Terán took the rum offered by his host and listened to what he had to say.

"Right now," Austin said, "we're just scratching the surface of what Texas could be."

"Coahuila y Tejas," the general corrected.

"Of course, Coahuila y Tejas," Austin acknowledged as if it were indisputable. Then he quickly moved on. "We're at a very primitive stage, barely beyond the Indians. We plant mostly for subsistence and a little for export. The future that I see is one in which all of Coahuila and Texas are producing agricultural surpluses that can be sold throughout the country and abroad."

"And just what crops do you have in mind?" Terán asked.

"For Coahuila, wheat, tobacco, olives, wine; for Texas, corn, tobacco also, possibly sugar, some vegetables. Now, I'm saving the best for last."

"Cotton."

"Yes, cotton," Austin said. "This is the situation as I see it. The English want all the cotton they can get. They buy it from the United States, but they don't like the United States much because of the 1812 War. They also don't like the fact that the United States has high tariffs that are prejudicial to their own exports. The way the English see it, they buy all the U.S. exports of cotton with no prejudicial tariffs, and then the U.S. slaps tariffs on the goods that England wants to sell there. This is where Mexico, our country"—Austin said with emphasis—"comes in. We make a reciprocal

trading relationship with England where the English buy our cotton and we let them sell their goods here duty-free."

"To the advantage of both."

"Yes, definitely. Once this is clear, the English will shift their buying of cotton to Mexico and that will greatly stimulate our whole economic development. Texas, that is, this part of Coahuila and Texas, would be the lead in all of this because we have the best climatic and soil conditions for cotton. We also have men who know cotton and a lot more who would be willing to come here."

"I note the conditional way in which you are speaking," Terán said. "There are men who would be willing to come here, except for—"

"The uncertainty of the labor situation."

"Slavery, you mean."

"Yes, slavery," Austin acknowledged. "No one knows whether it is exactly legal or, even if it is, whether that will last."

"And just why is that so important?"

"Because it will take black labor to clear all these forests if we want to truly get a cotton economy up and running. Also, if we want to attract planters with experience in cotton from the United States, we must make it clear to them that they can operate here as they are accustomed to with slave labor. It is as plainly simple as that, General."

"Our country is opposed to slavery," Terán responded. "The ambiguity regarding it here is a thorn in the side of the national body politic."

"Look," Austin said, "I am personally opposed to it too."

"I note that you own slaves." This he and Pedro had learned inadvertently from a comment by Samuel Williams, another colonist.

If Terán's bringing up of the contradiction bothered him, Austin did not show it. He continued on without breaking stride. "I am opposed to it in theory, in the long run. But I am not a utopian. The conditions that we live in now demand slavery. At some point in the future it will no longer be necessary. But that is not now. If we wish to develop Texas to its potential, it is absolutely necessary that black labor be employed to the task."

"That is a point, Señor Austin, on which we must agree to disagree. Slavery cannot last much longer in any part of the republic."

Austin leaned back. "Let me put it another way. We're at a very early state in the development of our economy, generations behind what exists

in the rest of the country or in the country to the northeast. To catch up will take more than having more farmers come here just trying to make a subsistence living. They come and plant and are happy if it yields enough to feed their families. That's all fine and good for them. It's better than what they had. But if we really want this area to be prosperous, we will have to have products to trade on the international market so that they yield profits that come back here and are turned into capital—"

"And that's where cotton comes in."

"Yes, precisely," Austin said. "The future of Coahuila and Texas rests with cotton because it will bring back new capital. And once it is here, everyone benefits. The rub is that to export cotton right away to take advantage of favorable conditions on the world market, land has to be cleared in a much larger scale than most farmers who are only interested in feeding their families want to do. Hence, the necessity of black labor."

Austin ended his second attempt to convince with the look of someone who was pleased with himself for having at last found the right words to articulate the truth that he knew. Then there was a long silence, as if the words were sinking in on their intended target.

Finally Terán responded, but slowly. "Your economic logic is impeccable, Señor Austin—"

"I knew you would understand, General," Austin said, eagerly. "You are a man of much experience and learning."

"But, Señor Austin, I have not finished. Your economic argument is indeed impeccable but it is also politically fallible. As I told you, we cannot, indeed we will not allow slavery to expand in the republic."

5

Samuel Bingham's eyes squinted under the two o'clock sun. He was growing sleepy to the sound of the horse's clip clops on the beaten road,

and there was still a good two hours to go before reaching Brazoria where he needed to sign papers to legalize his ownership of the land he was now occupying. Jonathan Holmes was riding beside him. From time to time he saw lakes of water in the road ahead only to have them dissolve into the mirages that they were. He felt himself fall into a languid stupor as he was studying one of them, waiting for it to dissolve.

Suddenly long-haired riders galloped out of the mirage.

"Oh my god, Indians," Holmes said.

Bingham shook his head and the lake disappeared but not the riders. "What'll we do?" he said, now fully awake.

Holmes was looking wildly in all directions for an escape route. But they were coming up too fast and there were too many of them. "Nothing we can do," he said, settling back in his saddle and pulling up the reins, "except hope for the best."

An Indian, his face covered with ochre streaks, motioned with his rifle for them to dismount.

"Do what he says," Holmes said quietly. "Whatever you do, don't provoke them."

As they stood on the side of the road, two Indians searched through the saddlebags but didn't find anything of interest.

"Americanos?" one of the Indians asked.

"Yes," Holmes said.

The Indian's expression did not change. Then he made a motion with his hand, "Vayan."

Bingham was puzzled.

"It means to go," Holmes said.

They rode forward, each one dealing with the fright alone. After fifteen minutes Holmes pulled up his reins and dismounted. Bingham could see him trembling. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"Horse thieves," Holmes answered. "Comanches. They're the worst of the lot here. They rob horses from the Mexicans and then trade them for guns across the border in Louisiana. They didn't take ours because they don't want to lose the market there."

"How many of them are there?" Bingham had gotten off his horse too.

"They say that altogether there are some fifteen hundred families. Supposedly the Mexicans have a peace agreement with them. The problem

is that not all of them abide by it. That's why it's never safe to farm out west near Bexar, no matter what general agreement the Mexicans have."

"And what is the solution to this?"

Holmes shrugged. "They'll have to be physically eliminated as soon as there are enough troops to do the job. But it won't be easy. They're fierce fighters. Well enough of that," Holmes started to remount his horse. "We need to keep moving if we want to get to town in time to get things done."

At times Bingham thought he heard horses on the road and feared the worst. They always turned out to be nothing and he was careful not to share the false alarms with Holmes. It was best that he not show the other man the depths to which the fright had affected him.

"It's not much of a town yet," Holmes said as they reached the edge of a group of log cabins in late afternoon, "but in time you'll see Brazoria rise to rival the best of where we come from."

Bingham, who was still looking over his shoulder for Indians, was glad to see the town, any town. He counted twenty-seven cabins stretched in an irregular pattern back from an embarcadero on the Brazos River. There were also three brick houses, indicating a step up in town possibilities. All of the houses had wooden shutters rather than glass windows.

"First things first, Samuel, we'll make a little courtesy call on the authorities. This is where the land commissioner works." Holmes pointed to a cabin by the embarcadero.

The land commissioner was seated at his desk when the two entered. "What can I do for you gentlemen?" he asked in English.

"George Baker," Holmes said by way of an introduction, "this is Mr. Samuel Bingham from Tennessee. He is coming to register himself as a member of our colony. He has a letter from Stephen Austin granting him permission to move onto the land just east of my holding."

Baker stood up and leaned over the desk to shake hands. Then he sat back down and opened a side drawer to his desk and took out a sheaf of papers. "Stephen was in here last month and said to expect you. I took the liberty to draw up the papers."

"I thought you would be Mexican," Bingham said.

"I am Mexican."

"But your English is a good as that of any American I have met."

"That's because I used to be an American. Came down to Mexico fifteen years ago from Ohio."

"George hasn't yet become thoroughly Mexicanized," Holmes said, smiling.

Baker ignored the comment and turned toward Bingham. "Now, Mr. Bingham, do you understand Spanish?"

"No," Bingham answered. Then he looked toward Holmes. "Is that a requirement?"

"I certainly don't think so, is it George?" Holmes said. "I can't speak it yet either, though I wish I could."

Baker shook his head. "It's not a requirement, but it will be to your advantage to learn it as soon as you can since all legal business is conducted in Spanish and what you're about to sign is, too."

"What do those papers say?" Bingham said, realizing the quandary that he was in.

"What these papers say," Baker said, "is that you will be allotted one square league of land for grazing and farming."

"That's over 4,000 acres," Holmes said. "Should be enough Samuel, no?"

"In return you agree," George said, "to become a Mexican citizen and Roman Catholic. After six years of continuous residence on and working of the land, you will get the title. Your first payment for it will be due in the fourth year."

Bingham listened to Baker's summary translation of the terms and heard what he had been led to expect, first by a cousin of his in Tennessee who had first sold him on the idea of setting out for Texas, and then by Holmes the night before. He didn't like the idea much of becoming a Mexican citizen and even less the idea of becoming a Catholic. But he had known ahead of time that those were the conditions and he was prepared to accept them. Besides, Holmes the night before had told him not to take them very seriously. No priest, way out where they were, would be calling on him any time soon.