



# BLUESTONE RONDO

a novel by

**Walker Smith**

*BLUESTONE RONDO*

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## Chapter 5

In the six days following his birthday Joe saw his brother twice. He had no idea where Calvin was spending his time and didn't care. When he got home from school that Thursday, he heard the radio warming up, but no one was around. "Mama?" he called. "Where are you?"

"Out back," she answered. "Bringin' in this laundry so I can start ironin' yo' shirt, baby."

Joe met her at the back door as she came in. "Now, how'd you know I needed that shirt?"

"It's yo' favorite, ain't it?" she said, spreading out the shirt on the ironing board. "I figured you'd be wantin' it for choir practice tonight. What time you leavin' out?"

"'Bout an hour. I'm going in to wash up now."

A few minutes later Joe came out of the bathroom, but stopped when he saw his mother. She was standing at the ironing board, just as he had left her, but there were dark clouds of steam rising from his badly scorched shirt, and his mother's shoulders were slumped and shaking. He ran over to retrieve the iron, and saw that she was sobbing. "Mama! What's wrong?"

Leah just shook her head and stared at the radio. The announcer was in the middle of a news bulletin, and his voice cracked with emotion: ... *I repeat, President Roosevelt is dead.*



It was dark when Joe heard the front door slam. He was sitting at the table eating soup and didn't look up. He recognized his brother's heavy steps.

"Where Mama at?" Calvin said in his usual belligerent tone.

"In her room," Joe said. "But don't go in there right now."

"Why not? I got sump'm to tell her and I wanna get the shit over with."

"Didn't you hear the news about the President dying today?"

Calvin looked at Joe with an expression of genuine shock. "Nah. Roosevelt's *dead*?"

"It's true, and Mama's been crying all day. So whatever you have to tell her can wait."

Calvin dropped into a chair and stared out the kitchen window. "Roosevelt was her hero."

"He sure was. I can't believe he's dead. He's the only President I can even remember."

"Well, what happened to him?" Calvin asked softly. "And why ain't the radio on?"

Joe shook his head. "I turned it off. It was breaking her heart."

Leah walked in just then, staring at Calvin with red eyes. "What'chu got to tell me, boy?"

Calvin squirmed in his chair. "Nothin', Mama. It can wait."

She sighed and leaned against the wall. "I'ma ask you again. What'chu got to tell me?"

He looked at the floor. “You ain’t gonna like it.”

“Boy! I ain’t got no patience now!”

“It’s just—I ain’t gon’ graduate, Mama. Joe is, but not me.” He saw her quick tears and groaned. “Aww, come on, Mama. I’ll graduate next year is all.”

“No, you won’t,” Joe muttered.

“Shut up,” Calvin hissed.

Leah started to say something, but then just shook her head and walked out without a word.



Joe’s graduation was bearing down on Calvin with an inescapable pressure. Letters from family members began to arrive, and Leah was planning a big meal. Each time the subject came up, Calvin fought her to a draw about not going, but her tears finally defeated him.

When the day came, Calvin reluctantly put on his best Sunday pants, shirt, and necktie. As he waited outside, all he could think about was *Angels With Dirty Faces* and Jimmy Cagney’s long walk down that dark hallway to the electric chair.

The graduation ceremony bored Calvin to sleep until he felt his mother’s elbow jabbing him awake. When it was over, visiting family members and Joe’s friends headed back to the Bailey house. Uncle Cyrus had traveled from Baton Rouge with his own stash of liquor, a phonograph, and a stack of records. Judging from the number of times he played it, “Minnie the Moocher” was his favorite. With Cab Calloway’s voice grating on everyone’s nerves, Joe basked in the praises of the uncles, who called him “graduation man” and patted him on the back. Calvin was left to the sympathy of the bosomy aunts, with their smothering hugs and comments about trying harder next year. He finally ducked into a corner and watched the minutes drag on the clock. At 10:05, Uncle Cyrus drowned out a chorus of groans with a drunken roar. “*Goddamn!* I done tol’ y’all I seent Cab Calloway at the Renaissance Ballroom back in ’33, ain’t I? Up in Harlem, beautiful Harlem! Thash my lady!... Hey, Leah! Come on an’ dance with ol’ Cyrus one time!”

“No! And sit down, ya drunk fool!”

“Come on now, Leah! Bus’ out another bottle and les’ all us’ chillun git *blind!*”

Calvin closed his eyes. *Time to go.*

The last thing he heard as he left was Uncle Cyrus’s off-key chorus of hi-de-hi-de-hos.

He headed toward Highway 61, feeling the need to run. Clawing at his necktie, he ripped off his shirt and bunched it up in his fist. *Faster.* A moment before, the night breeze had felt cool, but now he was burning up and running faster than he had ever run before. In his head he could

hear voices murmuring in a rapid, discordant cadence that grew to a steady roar. Then he saw a figure up ahead at the railroad crossing, and stopped so abruptly he nearly fell. As he regained his footing, he saw who it was.

Joe. Grinning, girlfriend-stealing Joe. Graduation man.

“Hey, Calvin. What are you doin’ out here?”

Calvin stared at his brother’s untroubled smile. He was surprised to see Joe strolling closer to him, like an unwitting bug into a spider’s web. The voice in Calvin’s head was laughing like a cold-blooded thrill killer: *Better back up, Joe.*

“I slipped out around nine,” Joe was saying. “Couldn’t take any more of Uncle Cyrus’s singing. I was gonna go see Michele, but she’s still not home from Cynthia’s party, and I didn’t feel like goin’ over there. So, uh, you never said what you’re doing out here.”

Calvin felt the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and continued to stare silently at his brother. Then he saw what he had been waiting for—that flicker of fear in his eyes.

Joe backed up a step and sighed heavily. “Aww, shit, Calvin... Come on, not tonight.”

*Should’a ran, Joe. Should’a ran for your life.*

Joe attempted to sidestep his brother. “Look, aren’t you over that girl *yet*? I mean—”

Calvin was on him before he could finish his sentence. Anger and adrenaline had swirled together, eclipsing every thought but one: *Nobody’s around this time.*

It took less than a minute for Joe to begin begging for his life. “Awww, God, pleeease—”

As Joe clawed at his forearms, Calvin could see the terror in his eyes. He swung harder, connected, and felt the skin on his knuckles split with the impact. When Joe fell, Calvin yanked him to his feet just for the pleasure of knocking him back down.

“Wait!” Joe screamed. “Calvin! You’re killin’ me! Stop—*please!*”

A solid right smacked a wheezing sound out of him, and Calvin became dizzy with an urge to finish him off. But suddenly, he was surrounded by a shock of bright headlights. Each blink of his eyes felt like thunder in his head as he peered over his shoulder at a dark-colored automobile prowling up behind him.

Joe let out a feeble sob and tried to get up. “Help me, pleazzsh! He’s—killin’ me!”

Calvin shoved him back down and strode over to the driver’s door. Staring out at him with a horrified expression was the face of Miss Anson, his history teacher from Douglass. One of the F’s responsible for his failure to graduate. Calvin leaned in menacingly and bared his teeth. “Get out’a here, bitch!” Then he lunged at her, thumping the car door with his knee.

Miss Anson gasped, jerked the car into reverse, and sped away with tires screeching.

“Wait!” Joe cried as he crawled toward the car. “Aww, God. Don’t leave me here!”

The interruption momentarily jolted Calvin out of his rage. He blinked uncertainly at Joe, who was still struggling to crawl away. Then something glittered in the moonlight—the stone from one of the cuff links. Calvin felt his lips stretch tightly over his teeth, and he jerked Joe up by the collar. “Look at me!” he yelled. “I said *look* at me! Who got the goddamn grin now, huh?... Hey! Wake up! This ain’tcho regular ass whuppin’, Sunshine! I ain’t done yet!” Snatching the cuff links from Joe’s sleeves, he shoved him back down and heard a dull clunk when his head hit the tracks.

“Come on!” Calvin screamed. “Call me Mud Boy now!” He kicked Joe’s leg, but there was no reaction. He stared at him for a long, still moment, and then kicked him again. Nothing. Calvin backed away slowly, and then began to run as fast as he could toward town.

By the time he got home, Calvin had lost all sense of time. The house was dark, so he crept in quietly, squinting at the clock by the moonlight from the window. But before his eyes could adjust, the kitchen light blazed on.

Leah stood there glaring at him until her gaze lowered to his bloodstained undershirt. “Oh my Gawd, Calvin!” she gasped. “You all bloodied up! What’chu gone and did now?”

“Nothin’,” he snapped. “Where eb’body go?”

“They gone. And where that blood come from? Lawd, please don’t let my Joe be hurt!”

Calvin felt his back teeth grinding together. “How you know this ain’t *my* blood, Mama?”

Leah narrowed her eyes and gathered the collar of her robe tightly around her neck. “It ain’t *never* yo’ blood, Calvin. Who you been beatin’ on this time? Next thing you be tellin’ me is that crazy story about yo’ *other* brother makin’ you beat on folks, huh?”

He smirked and reached for a hunk of bread. “Mama, you must’a dreamed that. What the hell I need with another damn brother? I wish I ain’t had the one I got!”

“Don’t you say things like that, Calvin! Now where my Joe at?”

Calvin stuffed the bread into his mouth. “Who? Oh, you mean Graduation Man? Shoot! Ain’t my job to be lookin’ out for him. He grown.”

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Calvin refused to worry about Joe until three days had passed. Waking earlier than usual, he glanced over at his brother’s bed, still made up, just as he had left it on graduation day. Gazing around the room, he tried to ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut. Above Joe’s bed were his

tacked-up Frank Sinatra photos and articles, and the popular swimsuit pin-up of Betty Grable smiling seductively over her shoulder.

Calvin scowled. “Joe sho’ do love hisself some damn white folks.”

Leaning his head back, he looked up at the photos of Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson that he had pinned on the wall over his own bed. He had considered hanging a pin-up of Lena Horne, but decided against it. Beauty queen or not, Lena Horne was a female, just like Michele Littlejohn, and not to be trusted. He cut his eyes at Betty Grable. “Shit. You ain’t so purty.”

His gaze drifted back to Joe’s empty bed, and there was that digging feeling in his belly again. “Damn!” he snapped, getting up suddenly to dress. “He prob’ly jus’ tryin’ to worry Mama so she’ll be fussin’ over him when he finally brings his sorry ass back home... Shit. I’ma catch hell when Mama sees what I done to Pansy Boy’s face.”

He stopped buttoning his shirt when he heard his mother crying in the other room. She was usually at work at this hour. A cold shudder went through Calvin and he closed his eyes, only to see an image of Joe lying face-down on the railroad tracks. Completely still. Unconscious.

*Naw. I ain’t beat him that bad—did I? But what if he—wandered off someplace and—*

A surge of panic propelled him out of his room. “Mama, how come you ain’t at work?”

Leah sat down slowly. “Miz Chapman gimme the day off. She let me use her phone last night to call the police, and they comin’ today. Sump’m terrible done happened to Joe.”

“No, Mama, look—I was jus’ leavin’ out to go find him. I think I know where he is.”

“You don’t know where he is,” she said, then gave him a cold stare. “Or maybe you do.”

There was a sound outside—the crunch of automobile tires in the rocky dirt. Calvin touched his mother’s hand. “Don’t go out there, Mama... Please.”

When she heard the knock, she didn’t move for a moment. But finally, she placed both hands on the table and pushed herself out of the chair. “You tell ’em what you know, boy.”

Calvin felt as if his feet were nailed to the floor as he watched her walk out. When she returned with two white men, he still hadn’t moved. The man in front was tall and slender with slicked-back reddish hair and hooded blue eyes, and behind him was a shorter, more muscular man, who looked younger than his partner, despite his balding head.

“Mornin’, Miz Bailey,” the taller man said with a thick Mississippi drawl. “I’m Detective Jansen and this here’s my partner Detective Masterson. This yer son?”

“Yessuh. This Calvin.”

Calvin could feel the detective's eyes giving him a calculating once-over. He gripped the back of a chair and tried to respond, but his mouth had dried out, so he just nodded.

Jansen tapped out a Camel and stuck it in his mouth. When he struck a match to light it, Calvin flinched, drawing all eyes to him. Jansen smiled artfully. "Why don't we all sit down?"

"I—got some coffee on the stove," Leah said nervously. "Can I git'cha a cup?"

Detective Masterson shook his head. "None for me, but—mind if I look around a little?"

"No suh. That be fine."

Calvin sat down, but kept his eyes Masterson as he disappeared into the back room.

Jansen took out a notepad. "I'll take some'a that coffee, Miz Bailey—no cream or sugar. Now, on the phone you said yer boy ain't been home since graduation. That right?"

"Yessuh." Leah poured the coffee into a cup and handed it to him.

"And that'd be what? 'Bout three days ago, right?"

"Y-yessuh. And my Joe ain't never stayed away that long. He a good boy."

"Mm-hmm. I'm shore he is, Miz Bailey." He leveled a pinpoint stare at Calvin as he sipped the coffee. "So, tell me, Calvin. When's the last time *you* saw yer brother?"

"Same as Mama. Graduation." He glanced quickly in the direction of his room, wondering what Masterson was doing back there.

Jansen scribbled on his pad, then dropped it carelessly on the table and looked away, giving Calvin a chance to sneak a look at what he had written:

*Son sweating on a cool morning. Scraped knuckles and arms.*

Calvin quickly hid his hands under the table, angry at his slip-up.

Jansen turned back to Leah. "Miz Bailey, did anything odd happen on graduation night?"

"Well, Calvin come in— He come in real late." She looked at the clock, then at Calvin.

*No, Mama, don't say it. Please.*

Jansen leaned forward. "Was that strange—him comin' home so late? Was he alone?"

"Yessuh. He was alone, but he was— His shirt was—"

Calvin shifted slightly in his chair.

Leah's voice was a whisper. "Lawd, I pray you ain't did nothin', son. Please, Lawd—"

Calvin was about to pitch his hastily prepared alibi when Detective Masterson walked back into the room carrying a pair of scuffed shoes and a cigar box with the top flipped open.

Placing the shoes on the table, Masterson pointed at a bundled handkerchief in the cigar box. "Found this under a bed in that back room with these shoes. These yer shoes, Calvin?"

Calvin hesitated a moment, then tried to sound casual. “Yessuh.”

“Where’d you get the scratches on your hands and arms, Calvin?” Jansen asked.

Calvin jerked up his chin defiantly. “Don’t remember.”

Jansen untied the handkerchief and a cuff link dropped out onto the table. “What’s this?”

The sound of Leah’s sharp gasp hit Calvin like a punch to the midsection. “That belongs to—to *Joe!*” she screamed. “Oh, Calvin, what’chu *do?* Oh, my Gawd!”

Jansen narrowed his eyes at Calvin and flashed a smug grin. “Well, well. Looks like you got sump’ m sticky on your brother’s cuff link, Calvin. Looks like blood to me.”

Calvin lowered his head and stared at the floor as his mother sobbed for Joe.

Detective Jansen stood up. “Looks like you’re comin’ with us, Calvin.”