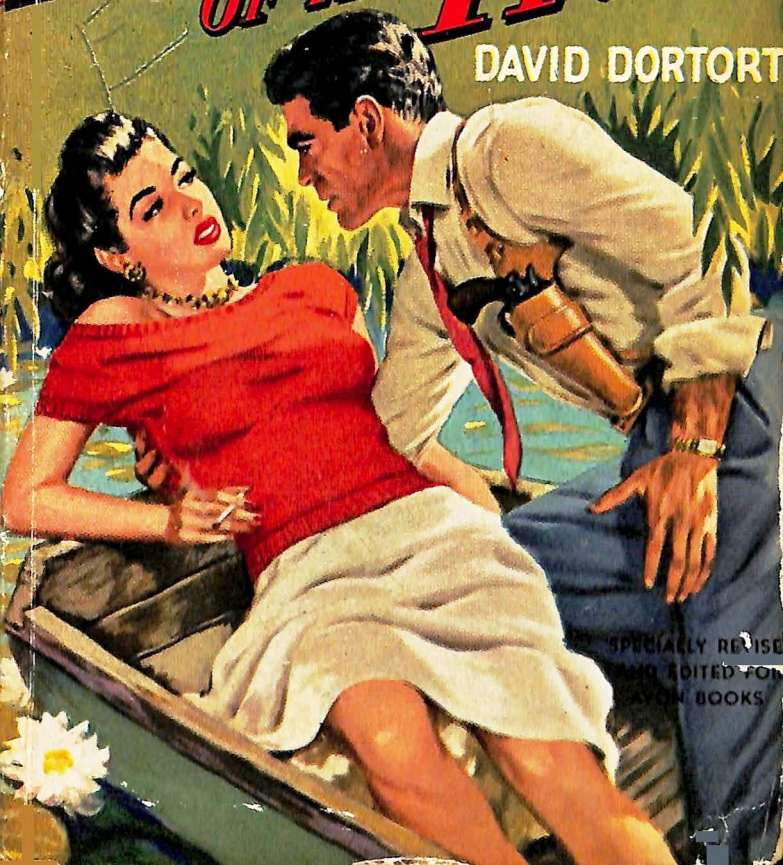


A GRIPPING NOVEL OF YOUTH IN THE SLUMS

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# Burial Fruit OF THE

DAVID DORTORT



SPECIALLY REVISED  
AND EDITED FOR  
AVON BOOKS

## *Conflict, Romance and Tragedy in the Slums of Brooklyn*

What makes a boy or girl go bad? Why do some of the boys and girls of our city slums succumb so quickly to moral decay? In this tensely realistic novel of slums and gangs, of love and violent death, much of the bitter truth is unashamedly revealed.

In these pages we live and die with young "Honey" Halpern through his hot-blooded, tragic career. From his neglected boyhood in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, he rose to be trigger-man for Lupo's mob of thugs and poolroom racketeers. When his best friend was killed, Honey lived only for revenge—until a new passion entered his life. Beautiful Renee was, like himself, a slum product, a devil-may-care girl pushed around by life. It may be that he shouldn't have loved her, body and soul, the way he did. But like all men, Honey had a good side too, and this new love proved it even to himself.

In this arresting novel David Dortort has given us a searing picture of the conflict of love and evil—of passion and criminal violence—in the mind and heart of one young man. When you have read *BURIAL OF THE FRUIT*, you will probably say, as the noted journalist Gerald W. Johnson said, that it is truly "A powerful and beautiful piece of work."



*Burial*  
OF THE  
*Fruit*

by

DAVID DORTORT



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To ROSE

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PART ONE

THE SEEDS TURN BLACK

Chapter One

IT WAS always there, the rotten sour smell of the old house, the dingy rooms, the dirty, dark courts, the cooking, the garbage, the toilets. Tonight, he couldn't get out fast enough. He pulled his jacket out of the closet, patting the oversized inner pocket. It was there. He was set.

He reached for his hat and coat and darted through the rooms, his small lithe figure springy and sure in its movements. His mother cried something out as he ran through the kitchen. Christ, he mustn't listen to her, he mustn't hear it. In a frenzy, he tore open the door and leaped down the two flights of dark stairs to the street.

Then it hit him. He couldn't believe it. The sweet spring air rolled out and caught him clean in the face. He had no defense for it. He didn't want any. He let the beautiful spring night pour over him, open, his hands tied, like a young scared kid, like the first time the cops had caught him and he had blubbered and whimpered and the young, sallow-faced cop had slapped him hard across the face.

He stopped in front of Al Lajoie's\* poolroom, in the dark shadow of the steel girders that carried the New York subway out over Brownsville to the muddy streets of New Lots. He took another breath of the soft night air, feeling as he expanded his chest the hard solidness of the gun in his inner pocket. He tightened and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

It was a new hat, soft, a light brown felt. It looked good on him. Lupo had taken him into Terry's on Stockton Avenue,

\* In Brooklyn, it is pronounced La Joey.



the best hatter in Brownsville. Terry had tripped over himself when he had seen the big dark man.

"What's new, Lupo? What can I do for you?"

Lupo had looked at Terry, his large, black eyes boring out from under thick, bushy eyebrows. Then he had smiled a cautious, unfriendly smile.

"This is Honey Halpern," he said. "Give him a hat."

Honey's mind was full of such things tonight, burning up from somewhere, running over him like marsh fire. He turned away from the poolroom window and looked down the dark street. He went through it again, the time he had come sneaking into the poolroom to get the baseball returns that came over the ticker. That had been way back, and the older guys had joked about the little runt hanging around, and Lajoie had discovered that he didn't have any money, not even for a bottle of soda.

Lajoie had told him to beat it the hell out. He hadn't budged, only looked with pleading eyes at the short, fat man, overaware of the laughing older fellows. The fat man, as usual, had lost his temper, instantly. His white face had flared to a brick red, and he had charged at Honey, grabbed his arm, and kicked him out, screaming abuse after him.

Honey had come back much later, after hours of miserable wandering through the streets of Brownsville. Crossing a tangled, junk-strewn lot, he had found a small, thick length of iron pipe. He had picked it up, had examined it with his thin hands, and had carried it back with him. He had waited for Lajoie to come out, doggedly standing a few doors from the poolroom, waiting for hours, hardly moving out of his tracks.

When Lajoie had stepped out, Honey had thrown the pipe, not to hit him, but to slam down along the sidewalk where Lajoie was walking. The fat man had whirled around in trembling terror. Honey had cursed out at him, all the rage and filth he could think of. Then he had run off, with a swooping sense of elation.

It was working off from somewhere inside, these events of a past he hated, that he had nailed shut behind him. That was

all under his legs. He had stamped on it in rage, in terrible anger. It was gone.

Here was his life beginning. Now. Now he commanded respect. Now he had money, power, authority. No more a sharp-faced, gray-eyed kid with thin cheeks, hungry, slapping the pavements searching for work. No more lip; he didn't have to take any of it, from anyone. A boss, a man physically stronger, a cop—the hell with them all; he could put all of them away in neat packages with colored ribbons. His hands thrashed up under his coat and he gripped it through the cloth, clenched it furiously with his fingers. It was there, the thing that made him, that was half of his life—his gun.

Slowly, his hands relaxed and he dropped his arms. He hiked up his coat again, a beautiful, long, tight-fitting, dark blue coat that made him appear taller, straighter. With both hands he creased the brim of his hat. He was panting lightly, and the air was sweet and warm again after the long cold winter, and suddenly he knew that this would be an important night for him; that he would completely and for all time conclude the first phase of his life; that he would use his gun on this lovely night of early spring in a way he had never thought of, that would forever change the pattern of his life.

Lajoie's poolroom was a stop on the circuit. The big boys traveled, making the rounds, showing their faces, collecting, settling minor disputes, keeping things right, and boasting. Max Minkoff, called "Kid Spades"; Black Poppy One-Arm, his bodyguard, decisive on the trigger; Lupo. How the Spades loved to boast, stringing it out through all the haunts where the listening men gathered, his burly, heavy figure strutting, his black, kinky hair standing stiff and ragged, a short, squat powerful thug—well-connected—a killer with a long, bloody record, dozens of arrests, one or two laughable convictions. Black Poppy One-Arm, dogging the Spades, his small, deep-set eyes more than half-shut, always alert, always vicious; a natty, fastidious dresser, his one arm resting easily in a specially enlarged pocket, shooting through the pocket when he had to, moaning



over the small holes bored by the bullets, tight-lipped, bitter and merciless, tall, thin, with high, pinched shoulders, his right arm hacked off at the elbow in a laundry mangle at the age of fifteen; Black Poppy One-Arm guarding the Spades with all of his powers of concentration, love and hate. Lou Predo, "Lupo," black-browed, square-jawed roughhouse man and general manager, tough and efficient, taking care of the loose ends, the stray threads, supervising collections and killings, sullen, taciturn, in the business for all he could get, mechanical, ruthless, building things up for himself, his family, his future.

Honey Halpern, sharp-eyed, thin-cheeked, dressed in expensive clothes, a hunger in his heart for all the world's treasures, a young Brownsville punk turned killer, unafraid of the gun, adept at handling it, the mob's new executioner.

Under the battery of lights at the rear of the store, out of reach of the fight broadcast just coming in over the radio, three men were playing blackjack around a small, black-enameled table. A few others were seated on the long bench along the wall, watching the players, smoking cigarettes, silently following the game.

Honey Halpern walked over slowly, the cigarette drooping from his lips. He couldn't get into the fight broadcast yet. He was too impatient inside, bristling with an inner nervousness that he had to keep out of his face and his movements. He had to work overtime to hold it under. The players greeted him loudly.

"Wanna get in?" Meyer the barber waved his heavy hand. The other players waited. Honey shook his head, as if they weren't there, as if he had never seen them.

His hat low over his eyes, Honey Halpern watched and sensed everything that went on in the room. He was aware instantly of any change of feeling among the onlookers, any sudden rise of emotion among the men grouped about the pool tables, or down front listening to the radio. His mind was only half on the card game. He could see clear across the smoky poolroom to the front door. Every few seconds he snapped his



head up, his eyes shooting toward the door. Someone might be coming through that door tonight. Someone with something for him.

The players were lost in the game. Roy Jackson the bookie, Mock the pimp, and Meyer, who had put the lock on his barber shop next door after ten hours on his feet. They were happy that Honey had refused a hand. They knew that Honey's pocket had a low ceiling, that he had only glimpsed the big money, and that he played high and recklessly and wild beyond reason. They understood how Lupo worked a new kid, very carefully, priming him slowly, curbing his head and his appetite until he thought the new kid was dependable and would stick, in the way he was supposed to stick. But Lupo wasn't always around, and if Halpern had wanted it that way, they would have played with him, because there was no way out—you couldn't point-blank say no to him.

The men called for their cards, slowly, calculating each draw, and Honey Halpern felt it come back again, sliding a film across his eyes, stabbing pin pricks out of the forgotten years. Meyer the barber, who was old enough to be his father. These men remembered him as a kid, remembered him and Nino hanging around, on the corner, in the poolroom, around Mollie's candy store when the girls from the flats upstairs didn't know they were alive. Standing beneath the battery of harsh, green-shaded lights, thirsty for the pull of the night air outside, memory brought it back again. He had once asked Jackson, in those days of the past, to place a quarter bet for him. Jackson had answered, looking away, a tall, lean man, gray-haired even then.

"Go home with the quarter, kid, and buy your mother a coupla bananas."

He could jump through his skull just thinking about it, even now! The thin, bony-nosed bastard! For years those words had been a pile of coal blazing in his head. He looked down at Mock the pimp, and sudden black dizziness swirled through his eyes.

Quickly, Honey stared across the room, past the men listen-

ing to the broadcast, fighting it down. He detested the soft, round man, his flabby, fleshy face, his swollen lips. To him, all of Mock's smoothness and elegance were oppressive, unclean, revolting. Now Mock pandered for the girls in the luxuriously remodeled flats over Mollie's corner candy store. Mock was widely known in the neighborhood, an easy spender who treated the boys right, who could be touched for a few bucks, almost with regularity.

Suddenly, Honey Halpern twisted around, shaking himself, whipping his body, brushing past Mock, savagely rubbing his coat arm against the pimp's neck. Mock pulled his head away, quickly, like a rabbit, his fat, full-colored cheeks quivering.

"See you later," Honey said, his voice smooth. He walked across the room, past the almost deserted pool tables, slowly, his hands jammed into his coat pockets. He held his head high, his thin body erect. He moved gracefully, easily, dead sure of himself, stopping quietly at the edge of the crowd that was bunched around the radio.

The fight was in its fifth round, and the men were beginning to wonder about it. Garcia was doing fine. Against Louis. Five rounds had gone in, and Garcia was still a fighter. By this time he should have been a punched-cold body. The men hadn't counted on anything else.

Garcia was proving himself, though, and right there in the ring. He was proving himself against Joe Louis, the boy they knew down to the last detail. Interest in the fight flared. There might be a surprise. The lights might suddenly flicker out and new beams come in flashing. It had happened before. It could happen now and catch them on the wrong end of the long prices.

Al Lajoie sat close to the radio, chewing his cigar. He was a faraway lost and gone fight fan, and he had money on Louis, by a knockout, naturally. He was deep in the broadcast. He knew that Whitey Ward could take care of the tables. If it came to that, he knew that Whitey could take care of the whole damn poolroom. He could go down to Lakewood for a week, and Whitey would keep it all going with oiled, smooth-clicking precision.



The bell rang out for the sixth round. The boys had drawn up a dollar pool on the knockout round. A tall, thin, stoop-shouldered boy piped out in a singing voice:

"This is the round, fellers."

He waved a slip of paper with the number 6 on it. The men barked at him, cursing, friendly, keyed up to the high pulse of the slugging, the hurried blow-by-blow description. The announcer raced along, trying to stay on the heel of the punches. The fighters were in there, trading. Some of the men broke away in their excitement, straggling over to the tables, nervously spinning the loose balls with their fingers. Honey Halpern watched them closely, seeing the same unrest in them that had been cutting its way through him, the same aimless urge to be a million miles out in the night somewhere. To get out of Brownsville. To smell the grass.

The radio rose to a sudden frenzied crescendo. A hubbub of excited noises rose with it, the recognition of the end coming, the roar of the blood, of the kill, grinding all witnesses, spectators and listeners alike, into a vast, single mirror that reflected the face of death. Honey Halpern caught that much of it. Raising his hands, he pulled down the brim of his hat, carefully smoothing out the rough places. Before his hands came down again, he knew what he was going to do, what he had to do. There weren't any choices for him, not tonight, not after the way the spring air had twisted and jangled all the strung-out lines of memory.

Quickly, shoving his way through the tight-packed knot of men, using his shoulder like a scythe, Honey Halpern reached out and switched off the radio. Right in front of their faces, their far-gazing eyes. The sudden silence, after all the hubbub and clamor, was unbelievable, fantastic. The men couldn't react to it, not for seconds, not for long, interminable, sound-echoing seconds. Honey Halpern wheeled around, his back to the glass case, setting himself, gaining position. He was ready for them, ready and waiting, long before they knew what had hit them.

Lajoie first, screaming with rage, the cigar big and choking in his mouth. "What the hell's the idea?" Screeching, scream-



ing, the blood roaring into his face. "What the hell's the idea? What kind of a lousy trick do you call that?"

Honey Halpern looked at him, stiffening, his back against the case, roping off the radio. There hadn't been any choice for him. Ten, twelve years, what did it matter? He was slapping back at Lajoie now, at all of them, but not with a four-inch strip of lead pipe. He was using a mile of it, a long solid ton, swinging it like a toy, with two fingers, twirling the whole of it around like a toy.

Then Steepy, the tall, stoop-shouldered kid with the high voice, breaking in piteously: "Honey, that was the round!" Wildly waving his slip of paper, the number 6 on it. "The round, Honey, that was the round!"

The rest of them, the glaze gone now, anger in the eyes, the open wish to leap out and strike, to brush this thing aside, out of their paths. Twenty, perhaps thirty men, all ages, all sizes, all of them filling up with anger now, the bitterness coursing through them like a tide, a great sweeping tempestuous tide.

He would teach them the meaning of respect. Twenty of them, thirty of them, all frantic with the desire to learn the outcome of the fight. Right in their faces, between their eyes. The conditions were perfect, the arena was set, all the way down the line. He would imprint upon them what was meant by respect, the full, certain meaning of it. Tonight, now, here.

He gazed back at them, all of them. He said it slowly. "The fight's over now. Why don't you guys take a walk? Around the block or something?"

They stared at him, soaking up the words. None of them answered him, none of them capable of a clear, distinct answer. Instead, a rumble stirred among them, a hot, buzzing rumble that had anger in it, a lot of motionless, stonestill anger. The rumble rose, spinning, and then Al Lajoie, the fat man, the man with a framework of authority to preserve, struck out into the open.

"Whitey!" he screamed, not moving, hugging the far end of the case with his body and his arms, his fists nervously rapping the glass. "Whitey, throw this sonofabitchin' hophead out of

here!" Lajoie couldn't stop screaming. "Whitey! Throw the bastard out! Who in hell's he think runs this place!" Then, high and piercing, like a siren, a steam whistle, in the low-ceilinged room: "Whitey, throw the bastard out!"

Whitey slowly detached himself from the circle of faces and walked up to Honey Halpern. He was slightly taller, but he was far more powerfully built. He wore an open-necked polo shirt, and you could see and think about the bulging muscles of his arms and shoulders.

"Get the hell out, Honey," he said, quietly, in an unexcited, definite way.

Honey Halpern looked at him briefly, then beyond him, into space. He didn't say anything. He didn't move an inch. Lajoie couldn't hold it in.

"What are you waiting for, Whitey? Throw him out!" A small, choked-up laugh sprang from the men knotted around, and then it was gone.

"Get out of here, Honey," Whitey said, in his steady voice. "Please get out of here."

Honey stared at him from under his low-brimmed hat. He liked Whitey. Whitey was in every way a good guy. The only thing wrong with him was that he worked for a jerk like Lajoie.

"Don't talk to me that way, Whitey," he said, softly, almost whispering. "I don't like it."

Lajoie broke in again, his eyes wild and uncontrolled. "I told you to throw that hophead out of here, Whitey," he shouted. "Now go on, throw him out!" The voice was high, virulent, the fat hands feverishly gripping the edge of the case.

The men watched with silent, intense interest. Honey Halpern stood in the center of the small cleared space, thin, short, his back braced, his feet squared, his hands in his pockets. Lajoie was fuming, his eyes popping with it. Whitey stood silent also, looking a little sick. He shut his eyes and silently rocked back and forth on his heels.

Slowly, another man detached himself from the crowd. He was a comparative newcomer to Lajoie's, a stranger, a man who had drifted into the neighborhood from one of the far-flung



fringes of Brooklyn, from Red Hook, from the Erie Basin. They didn't know much about him at Lajoie's, except that his name was Zober, and that he was extremely powerful of build, on a par with Whitey Ward, and that he was a heavy, thoughtless drinker. A mean man, drunk mean, very conscious of his great strength, but not one of them. A stranger, unable to recognize the signs, to interpret the plain-drawn signals.

Zober pushed up close to Honey Halpern, towering high above the kid, almost enveloping him with sheer, massive bulk. Honey Halpern looked at him, not raising the level of his eyes, staring into Zober's mouth, ready, his back braced.

"Why don't you do like you're told, squirt," Zober said, slowly, a drunk half-grin on his face. "Why don't you go out like a good boy, before you get hurt?"

Never raising the level of his eyes, never showing by the smallest sign that he knew that the big man was alive—in the same room with him, living or dead. Quietly, Honey Halpern stood his ground, ready, waiting.

Zober suddenly began to laugh, a wide bleary grin on his face. He half-bowed to the silent, watching crowd, drawing it out, building it up. He was pretty sure of the answers. He was twice as big as the kid in the tight-fitting coat. He could rip him apart with his bare hands, without even straining.

"This here kid is dumb," Zober said to the crowd. "He don't know what plays here. He don't understand what I'm talking about," Zober told them all in his loud, nasty, drunk voice. "Maybe he needs a little help. Maybe all he needs is a little help," Zober said raising his arm high and bringing the palm of his hand down on Honey Halpern's back, not too heavily, but with weight behind it.

Honey jumped with the blow, quivering. Curiously, he hadn't expected a blow, not even this kind of blow that had nothing of real force in it. It could only have come from a stranger, a guy who couldn't read signs, any of them. His earlier thought, to spread the meaning of respect, was for higher levels only. He had meant to build, not begin. He was a long way removed from beginnings now. He hadn't been prepared for a stranger.



A stranger could bring him back quickly, coalescing time, distance. Even more than the others, a stranger could hurl him back in the face of time, through all the blind and stunted years of growth.

He was shaking now, the trembling driving through him like fire in dry summer grass. His hand flashed out of his pocket and he slapped Zober hard across the face. "You goddam bastard!" he yelled. He lashed out with his foot, kicking into Zober's crotch. The big man reeled, and doubling his fists, his eyes blazing, came after him. Honey's right hand whipped inside his coat and came out with the gun. Zober stopped, blanching. He hesitated, his mouth open, and then slowly, cumulatively, in the next several seconds, everything in him had crumbled.

"Don't shoot, mister," he begged, his large, heavy head wagging from side to side. "Don't shoot! Please! Don't shoot!"

Honey's narrow face was icy white. He was on the edge of falling into a deep pit of helpless trembling. "C'mere!" he screamed, pointing to the floor near him. The big man's eyes were rolling now. "Don't shoot," he moaned. "Please, mister, don't shoot!" His large head wagged, loosely, disjointedly. Honey Halpern bit on his lips.

"C'mere!" He was screaming, and he couldn't help it. It had all run out on him. Zober came a step closer. Honey's free hand lashed out at the big man's face, slapping him once, twice, three times, hard. The livid red finger marks burned into the skin. Zober shook the blows off, moaning, slow tears dribbling out of his eyes. Honey slapped him again, grunting with it, wild and lost, again, again.

A man came in through the door, a tall, heavyset man, wearing a new black felt hat. He was followed by a smaller man, rough-looking, husky. The tall, dark man paused for a moment, lining the whole thing up. Then he walked over, very quickly, pushing his way to where Honey Halpern was standing.

"Put it away," he said. Honey looked down at the gun, shook himself, then shoved the gun back into his pocket. The man in the black hat looked at him quietly for a few seconds; then,

whirling, he snapped out at Lajoie:

"Hey, you! Sticking your neck out for trouble? I want this boy handled carefully. Remember that!"

Lajoie nodded blankly, his eyes fixed on the dark man. The dark man glanced over the crowd, then motioned to Whitey.

"Get rid of this guy in a hurry," he said, pointing to Zober. Whitey stepped out and calmly hustled Zober through the door. The large man was like a sack of flour, offering no resistance, his body slack and formless. The dark man watched him being thrown out, the lines along his jaw strained tight, standing quietly, close to Honey Halpern. The one who had come in with him stood behind him, back to back. He looked very hard and rigid, very tough. Whitey came back, placid, unexcited. The dark man waited for him.

"I like the way you handled that," he said, his voice strong and even. "You know me, I'm Lou Predo. Watch out for this boy." He pointed to Honey. Then, talking to the crowd, his eyes suddenly fierce, blazing:

"Anyone does anything or says anything that hurts this boy, remember, I burn the tongue out of his mouth." Then turning back: "Lajoie!"

Al Lajoie nodded, the color draining out of his face, his eyes fixed and unmoving "Yes, Lupo," he mumbled. "Yes, Lupo."

The dark man spoke slowly, drawing the words out.

"I heard that you were a good guy, Lajoie. That's the way I want you to be. Always."

Honey Halpern was standing with drooping shoulders, staring down at the floor. Lupo looked at him carefully, studying him, then ran his hand up the boy's arm. Honey held his eyes pinned to the worn wooden floor. For a few seconds Lupo kept it up, running his strong fingers along the boy's arm.

"O.K., Frankie," he said to the man behind him. "They've got good boys here. It's been a nice party. Now we go."

He hooked his arm through Honey's, and started to walk out of the poolroom. Honey braced his shoulders and walked out with his head high. The squat, husky Frankie followed them, taking choppy, mincing steps.



## Chapter Two



RANKIE DROVE the car, a new, low-slung model, slowly, taking the corners carefully. Lupo did not like to ride fast. You had to understand that about Lupo. You had to really understand that and remember it. Frankie understood it.

Honey Halpern pulled on a cigarette, his gaze outside the car, somewhere out in the night.

"I don't ever want you to show the gun like that," Lupo said. His face was very dark under the low black brim of the hat. He leaned well back into the seat, seeking its softness, watching the boy. "I want you to hide that gun like a bad sore on your body. Keep it covered, out of sight."

Honey Halpern stiffened with the words. Lupo saw it happening, quickly. "Relax, kid, you're too tight." Quickly, smoothly, Lupo reached out and pushed the flat of his palm against Honey's sharp chin.

"Look. Forget it," Lupo said. "I'm not bawling you out. What the hell for? You're not gonna snap. Sometimes a guy snaps and then I have to put him together again. If I can do it, all right, but both ways he won't be much good afterwards. That won't happen with you, kid. I'm not losing any sleep over you." Lupo was laughing, his head resting way back on the sleek cushion, his black eyes shut.

"Hey, Lupo," Honey said, working hard to keep his voice calm. "I feel like driving the car. Frankie can take it easy. I'm gonna drive."

Lupo didn't move. The hat had moved down over his eyes, half-covering his face. His lips opened and closed with his slow breathing. Honey couldn't hold it in. "Hey, Lupo! For Christakes, wake up! I'm gonna drive a while."

Lupo straightened out slowly, pushing the hat back on his head. He had stopped smiling. "I heard you," he said.

Honey looked directly at him, his eyes clear and bright. "It's gonna be a goddamned fast ride, Lupo."

The dark man leaned forward. His face had never changed. "Stop the car, Frankie," he ordered, his voice even. The car slowed down, gradually, smoothly. It was black on both sides of them. They were well out, near the Nassau line. A string of red lights shone a long way down the road. He wasn't going to enjoy this. He knew what was eating the kid. He didn't like it, but he knew what it was. He knew it could be pretty strong.

"Honey is gonna drive," he said to Frankie, still leaning forward, still hating the idea. Frankie twisted his head around, his rough face puzzled.

"Want me to come in the back?"

"No," Lupo said.

Honey opened the door and stepped out on the highway. It was cooler here than in Brownsville, but it felt good. All around him was the smell of green things growing. He slid into the front seat, throwing the gears quickly. The car jumped forward, then settled. He let it pick up speed and threw the gears again. He gave it a long play in second, the motor whining. Then he threw her into an easy, powerful high. The car flashed down the dark road, Honey holding her fast and hard. He was caught in the grip of his excitement. He felt keenly alive, aglow, his back arching up and out with the direction of the movement. The speed was lifting him slightly off the seat.

"Take it easy, kid." Lupo's voice came over, steady.

"Hey, boss," Frankie began, half-turning around.

"Shut your face!" Lupo barked. Frankie shoved back into his seat, hugging the corner, studying the road.

They had traveled a great distance into the spring night, over narrowing, lost and unknown roads, before, slowly, the speed of the car began to slacken.

Suddenly, Honey Halpern slammed down on the brakes and the car ground to a stop. On both sides of the road spread wide open fields, flooded in white moonlight. They had been riding



through a black, crushing tunnel, and they had come out to greet the full moon, cheering it as it slipped out from behind the dense curtain of a winter's clouds. Soaring up at the end of one of the fields was a tall dark grove of trees. Honey opened the door and stepped out on the road. For a moment he hesitated, then he walked out into the field toward the trees. The ground was rough underneath. He stopped, breathing in the sweet cool air. Then, carefully, he slid to the rough, knobby earth and smelled its fragrance. He breathed deeply of the earth, and there was the heady smell of wine in it, and the strong smell of death.

Honey Halpern raised himself from the rough earth, brushed his coat, and slowly walked back to the car. He opened the rear door and sat down next to Lupo. He felt good, relaxed, tired but unwearied.

"Had all you want, kid?" Lupo's voice was muffled, half-drowned in his throat.

"Yeah," Honey said. "All I wanted and more."

"Now we go home?"

"Now we go home."

Lupo leaned forward, his voice booming out. "Frankie, you sonofabitch, start driving, and if you go fast I slice your ears off." Frankie turned the car on the narrow road, expertly, and they headed for home.

On the way back, Lupo broke the news. They sat back in the big car, the one man talking, the other listening and smoking. Occasionally the lights of another car picked them out from the rear and then flashed past them. Frankie was giving them a long slow ride. There was plenty of time.

"We go back to Parkman Street, and you grab a few hours' sleep," Lupo said. "I want you fresh. Benny will take care of you. Then we go to a place where you get to work. It's a pretty nice job, around four thousand dollars, and what makes it taste like sugar, the money is waiting to be taken. All you do is take it. There won't be any trouble."

Honey half-listened, his mind soothed and eased by the night air. He wasn't worried about the job. He could handle it. Lupo

knew he could handle it. He relaxed into the seat, dragging on his cigarette.

"Just in case anything goes wrong," Lupo's voice droned on, "you got a gun. I want you to get plenty used to a gun. This guy is a fireman. He may try to run. You don't let him get away. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Any questions?"

"Wish he were a cop." Honey Halpern laughed, his eyes shut, head back.

"He's not a cop," Lupo said, his voice sober, even.

They turned down Parkman Street, rode past a livery stable and two squat, bleak factory buildings, and stopped before a frame house. The house seemed to lean over an empty lot where some old lumber was piled.

The three men walked up the few steps into the frame house. A little man wearing white ducks and a short, black half-jacket let them in.

"Hello, Benny," Lupo greeted him. The little man nodded, his small puckered face alert and bright. He was a mute who could go for days without sleep. There lay his usefulness. He could keep the long vigil on demand. A bullet had done that for him. It had gone clean through the back of his head, very close to the top of the skull. It had tried to kill him, and it almost had, but finally it had settled for two great things. It had made Benny a mute, and it had given him the ability to keep going with very little sleep.

The men walked into the large living-room and sat down. Benny stood at the door, holding his hands, his small dark eyes restless and probing, his whole body eager, crouched for action. Lupo looked up at him.

"I want this boy to have a few hours' sleep. Wake him up at seven and give him a feed. We'll be back at eight." Benny nodded rapidly, his small mouth open, showing his even white teeth. Honey lit a cigarette and yawned. He lifted his hat off his head and twirled it across the room. The hat landed on an open bridge table.



"What'll I do if I get lonesome and wanna talk to somebody?" Honey asked, laughing.

Lupo looked at him, his soft black hat low over his eyes. "I want you to be in good condition," Lupo said. "I don't want any mistakes."

Honey laughed out loud. "You and my grandmother," he said.

Lupo stared at him, then slowly drew himself up from the chair and walked out of the room. Frankie followed close after him.

Honey Halpern stretched lazily and stood up. He took off his coat and draped it carefully over the chair. Then he unbuttoned his jacket and vest. His fingers slipped around the hardness of the gun. He gripped down on it. It was a good feeling.

Half the room was dark, the other half gray-luminous with moonlight. He was a long distance from sleep.

After a while he turned on his side again, and looked out into the night. A light burned in one of the back windows on Jennefer Street, and it drew his eyes, like a beacon. He watched it steadily for a long time and then dozed off.

A half-hour later he was up, thrashing in the bed, shrieking, half-crying. He pulled himself awake just as Benny came running in. He was ready for Benny by a split second.

"Beat it out of here, you bastard! You didn't hear anything. Nothing happened. Beat it!"

Benny whipped around and disappeared. Honey Halpern sat up and reached for his shirt. Then he drew on his pants, slowly. He pulled the chair close to the window and sat down, lighting a cigarette. He had seen it happen all over again. The cop had swung the belt hard across Nino's mouth, and the blood had gushed out, terribly. Nino's eyes had blazed up at the cops, and he had spat his blood on the stone floor, and then he had said it softly, so very softly. "I did it myself. I did it all by myself, all by myself."

The picture of it had come to him in his sleep, again,

tearing the heart out of his body. If only it were going to be a cop later on. He wouldn't waste any time. He'd shoot like it were crawling lice and be happy about it. He'd walk right up to a cop and slam a bullet into his guts and laugh doing it.

It was all over now. He could never sleep in this night. Lupo had better come quick. He was on edge, small nettles of restlessness surging through him, probing for soft spots. He jumped up from the chair and ran into the other room. He took the gun out of his coat pocket. He held it stiffly, his muscles taut, almost shooting. He had to bite deep into his lips to keep from shooting. Then he got over it. He went back to the bedroom, swinging his arm, relaxing it. He sat down again, near the window. He put the gun on the window sill, full in the harsh moonlight, and he stared at it with fixed, blind eyes.



## Chapter Three



RANKIE OPENED the door for them as they came out of the house, and they climbed into the back of the car. Then Frankie hopped around to the driver's seat. The car began to move, quietly, smoothly.

Lupo was quiet, his chin and cheeks covered with a black, heavy stubble. He looked set and calm. Honey lit a cigarette. He was on edge. He knew it and he had to keep it from Lupo.

It was a little after nine o'clock. The streets were almost empty. The morning work and school crowds had already left the streets and it was still too early for the housewives to be out.

Frankie swung into Drake Avenue and headed east over the stone bridge that spanned the railroad cut. They had crossed into the twin of Brownsville—East New York. The car rolled a few blocks and stopped, close to the curb, about fifty feet from the corner of Winfield Street. The stores were just opening. There were a few people in the streets. The early morning sunlight still had something of gray steel in it. Lupo let it come out, slowly.

"This is where we'll wait. He'll walk up Winfield Street on his way back to the firehouse. He can't go any other way. The bank is one block down, the firehouse two blocks up, on the same street. He knows the guys are waiting for their dough, so he won't look for any longer way to get back."

Honey threw his cigarette away. He had heard this before. It was beginning to bother him. Lupo went at it again.

"You get him close to the corner. Show your gun and scare the guts out of him. After he hands you the box with the dough, you keep him turned the other way. Then beat

it around the corner. The door of the car will be open. Frankie won't waste any time. So there's nothing to worry about. He hasn't got a gun." Lupo paused a moment. "Get it?"

"Yeah," Honey said, quickly. "When's he due?" He wanted to get out of the car. He wanted to get away from Lupo's cold black eyes, from the dark face under the black hat.

"You can start now," Lupo said, quietly, his face showing nothing. "You'll spot him by the uniform."

Honey slipped out of the car. He turned the corner and there down the long street, coming toward him, he saw the fireman. Honey went cold quickly, at the suddenness, at the hair-split timing. Fiercely, he shook it off. The fireman was way up the block, walking easily. Honey leaned against the low iron gate that ran in front of the row of old houses. His right hand went high up into his coat. Then he tried to ease up. The street was deserted.

The fireman was coming closer. Honey could distinguish the uniform, trim, neat-looking. He saw that the fireman was dark, rather heavy in build, with a fine, springy motion. He had a clean, dark face, and he was smiling to himself as he walked, his arm wrapped around a small, black tin box, and suddenly it hit Honey Halpern like a hammering sledge that the fireman was an Italian and that he looked like Nino Dilonge. The loose, springy walk, the hidden smile, the way the head rose off the shoulders. A hot steaming mist blurred up in Honey Halpern's eyes, and he staggered into the fireman's way, croaking out the words.

"Hey, you! Wait a minute!"

The fireman stopped, hugging the small tin box. "Take it easy, pal," the fireman said, smiling, pulling away. Honey's eyes were clouded, blurred.

"Hand over the box," he said, his voice clattering in his throat. The smile dropped away from the fireman's face. Clean, like Nino's, the cheekbones high and olive-dark. The fireman shoved his free arm out, pushing Honey away. Honey almost fell, his legs in a tangle, not responding the way they should. He had one more try.



"Give me the box. Quick!"

It almost sounded funny, but the joke concerned half a month's pay for forty men. The anger flared up in the fireman's face, smooth, obstinate, Nino Dilonge's great look.

"It ain't my dough," the fireman said. "It belongs to all the fellers. It ain't only mine!" His fist came up swinging, but it didn't have to land. Honey Halpern's hands were drooping at his sides. He was staring at the fireman with strange, insane eyes, and the fireman wrenched himself away and sprinted across Drake Avenue and down the long block to Beaumont.

Honey Halpern ran around the corner to the car, like a mechanical toy, his head bobbing. He saw Frankie's tough, smiling, contemptuous face. Frankie knew. Then Lupo had dragged him into the car and they were racing down Drake, around into Granger, and down, headlong, toward Beaumont.

"Get out and shoot, you yellow bastard! Get out and shoot!" Lupo yelled it into his face, again and again. They wheeled into Beaumont and Lupo hurled him out of the car. Honey stumbled to his feet and steadied himself, bracing his shattered muscles. Then he ran to the corner of Winfield, his gun in his hand.

The fireman was still running, loping along easily, smiling at the joke of four thousand dollars. He saw Honey and tried to stop, but his legs kept moving. Honey Halpern pumped two bullets into him, very fast. The fireman crumpled, the box clattering on the sidewalk. Honey swooped down on it and ran back to the car. Frankie had the motor racing and they started in high. They sped across the railroad cut and backtracked through Brownsville.

Honey Halpern sat with his eyes shut and his mouth open, moaning, fighting, fighting to keep it off for a few minutes longer, to keep it from sweeping him under. His head rolled erratically on limp shoulders, listening to the thunder. He saw it coming, a black raging cloud, and he screamed, shrinking away from it. Then his chest caved in, and he went to pieces, completely. Frankie slowed down. Furiously, Lupo turned and laced out.

"Snap out of it, you dumb punk! This ain't the first time you used your gun!"

Honey Halpern moaned, high, thin, weak. His head went down, almost touching his thighs. He hid his face in his hands. Lupo reached out and slapped the hat off Honey's head.

"I'm not gonna tell you again," he said. He was shouting. "Cut it out, you yellow bastard!"

Honey Halpern stopped moaning. Lupo leaned back, quieting down. Honey Halpern lifted his head. His face wore his sorrow. He looked out the window of the slow-moving car, steadying himself. The sun was stronger now, and the old houses looked exposed and ashamed. The streets were still rather empty.

"He looked like a guy I once knew," Honey Halpern said, holding his voice even and dry. "A guy that was killed by the cops." Lupo remained quiet, the black hat shadowing his face. Honey punched his fist into his palm.

"It hit me fast, before I could stop it. I must've been nuts."

"Yeah," Lupo said. "How are you now?"

"I'm over it."

"We'll see," Lupo said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Home."

Lupo leaned forward and barked at Frankie. "Take this mutt home."

Frankie half-turned, twisting his mouth. "Where the hell does he live?"

"Catkin near Laverne," Honey Halpern said, his tongue thick and sticky in his mouth. They were almost there. It was less than a mile from the spot where he had killed a man to the house where he lived.

The car turned left on Catkin Street and rolled down the two long blocks to Laverne. Low strings of tenements lined the street. A large coal and ice yard in the middle of the block roughly shouldered the worn houses that adjoined it.

"Third from the corner," Honey Halpern said. Frankie pulled up to the curb and Honey stepped out of the car.



"See you at Ishie's," Honey said. Lupo looked out at him. The car slowly moved away.

Honey walked up the two flights of stairs. The halls were heavy with breakfast smell.

## THE GROWING YEARS

## Chapter One

THE WIND came tearing down the slum streets in the late afternoon, resounding through the neighborhood with its exultant turmoil. The wind swept and coiled around the milk-loading station, swirling the granulated manure, peppering stoops and cellar openings with a fine coat of dust. It was a wind and a day of violence. The streets were littered with the accumulated dust of a winter's perfunctory sweeping, and the warm, violent wind rode into them, whistling, scattering the dust wildly over windowsills and rooftops.

Little Honey Halpern, his cheeks thin and pale, his eyes a hard gray and already sharp, walked the tightrope of the curb. He walked jauntily, on the hem of the wind, arms outstretched for balance. If the caverns of darkness were suddenly to open under his feet, he would jump, zooming, an airplane writing letters in the sky. With nimble hands, like lightning, he would wrest the knife away, the terrible, long, cutting knife, the bloody knife of Jack the Ripper.

Sitting right there at the corner, mounted on his own private grandstand, he didn't see it happen. *Jack the Ripper is a lie.* He didn't see it happen, but he was off the box as soon as he heard the little girl's scream, his heart outwhistling the wind.

She had been hit by a car, hit hard. She was lying in the gutter, her legs bleeding, thin legs in a short little dress. The driver was looking down at her, his face bewildered, taut. Again the crowd came surging, encircling the car and the girl and the small gray man. Honey was a young leaf trembling as the crowd broke into men and mothers, the mothers pressing up close, forgetting the wind. Polish mothers, Jewish mothers, excited Italian mothers, tired, moaning Negro mothers. They picked the girl up in cradle-arms, tenderly



cherishing the dripping legs. With bleeding hearts, they carried her to the drugstore across the street.

Honey shut his eyes against the running blood. Think of the drums, of ringing bells, of hoofbeats. Then he was peering into the dark drugstore, his nose rubbing the window, his wide-open lips leaving a wet outline. He stood a long, tragic time, until the ambulance came and the cop poked him with his stick. Then he ran.

Little boys are safe from Jack the Ripper, but run anyway. Learn to run swiftly, pump those small, thin legs. Danger seeps out of the ground, grinning, or swoops down from the sky. Run until the lungs strain and clamor. Then grit your eyes and keep on running. Take a leaping broad jump and land thirty feet away!

The afternoon was gone and the wind with it. At night it was warmer, a slight mist sinking into the streets between the tenements.

"I'm going down, Ma," Honey said, with bread in his mouth.

"It's late, Honey. Time to go to sleep."

His mother was a tall, thin, quick-moving woman. She walked to the sweatshop every morning, to sew and to carry home work for the night, and for this she put lipstick on every day, one of the few married women in the old slum house who used it. Her son loved her red mouth.

"I'll be up in a minute, Ma."

Tearing through the streets like a white-hot cannonball, searing the darkness, cascading over the high roofs of the houses, the siren rose steadily to a shriek. Driving over him, mauling and ripping its way through him, it came out of the warm darkness, a long, high, wailing blast that meant danger, danger, all signals down. He was off, running, racing with all his heart. The scream of the siren rose louder and higher, blacking out the mist, the night, the further darkness. If he had wings he would flap his way up, soaring, into the sky. In a thunder of giant wheels over pavement, the fire engine

tore past the corner, the siren streaking after it like a long, white comet.

He stopped running. He could never catch it. He sat down on the stone stoop of a tenement, his breath coming hard. The siren was a lost wail in the distance. He felt the warm breeze on his cheeks, and he blew up his mouth, puffing out the tiredness.

A girl came out of the house, pushing an empty baby carriage. She bumped the carriage down the short stoop where Honey was sitting and walked to the side of the house where there were more steps leading down to the cellar. She was a tall girl, about thirteen or fourteen, and she wore a light thin dress. Honey slid over to allow her to pass, deciding how many American Associations he would trade for one National Leaguer. How many Walter Johnsons for—

Long, sharp screams came from the cellar. Terror-stricken, agonizing screams that tore into the heart of the night. Honey was on his feet, suffocating with fear, with trembling. He ran to the side of the house, and on his knees, he stared down the dark passageway at the bottom of the steps. There, in the dim light, the girl was frenziedly struggling with a man. Already, the man had ripped her dress all the way down one side, and she was fighting him, screaming, fighting like the wind. Then the knife flashed out, the long, sharp knife of steel, slashing, ripping into the soft flesh. Honey broke and ran.

His heart breaking and bursting within him, his back to the night and the dark wind of spring, he was shivering in his mother's arms. Very slowly, almost dryly, a few tears rolled from his eyes. He brushed them away roughly, with the back of his hand. He looked up at his mother's face and saw the red, painted mouth, the lightly rouged cheeks.

"It's nothing, Ma. I only fell," he cried, but not like a baby. His babyhood was behind him now. He held on to her dress, shielding her.

"It's nothing, Ma."

The damp breeze from the bay blew through the windows, ruffling the curtains.



## Chapter Two

THE SUN was fresh and cool on their backs, sweeping around them to bathe the concrete playing-field brightly, and finally coming up short against the high brick wall of the school's auditorium. They were playing a split-class game of indoor baseball, deep in the corner of the long, angular yard that stretched the length of the school. Outside the tall, linked wire of the fence, the side-street traffic ran past a row of heavy, tight-packed tenements. At the far end of the concrete yard, out toward Atkinson Avenue, a hill, with trees on it, reared up suddenly and majestically, shading the red brick buildings of the County Home for Wayward Girls. To this hill, deep in the tangle of scrub and bush, and at night, the older boys of the neighborhood gangs would bring, sometimes forcibly, the wild girls of the surrounding streets. Infrequently, when the police came, after a girl had died, perhaps, the gangs would swoop down to meet them, and the ensuing all-night battles would be bitter and bloody and merciless. All would be quiet on the hill then, for about a month. . . .

No one knew who had spotted them first, but now Flat-Rate Cresci was standing at the edge of the tangle, excitedly announcing it.

"The Atlanta Street gang is over at the wall!"

"They've got two girls with them!" Philly Steiner picked it up, loudly.

"Yare!"

The two teams pulled apart and watched the five older boys of the Atlanta Street gang back the two girls up against the crumbly white wall that ran below the hill, separating it from the schoolyard. They knew that the game had escaped now, over the high wire fence, and Desorcey stood there, watch-

ing, the tears looming in his blue eyes, not really seeing what the Atlanta Street boys were doing to the girls, reacting only to the certainty that the heart of the game had flown.

None of the boys really saw what was happening over at the wall. They could tell that the Atlanta Street boys were hemming the girls in closely, but the distance hid all the details. They hung about loosely, mumbling, filling in the details. They were quickly forgetting the presence of the young teacher.

"One of those guys is fooling around her."

"You're nuts!"

"Sure he is. You can tell by the way—"

Slowly, with a definite mass movement, the boys began to edge down toward the wall. The young teacher saw it beginning and knew that it had to be halted. He had to do something, and he sensed quickly that there wasn't much you could do when you were afraid to order. Or almost afraid to order.

"All right, fellows, the game period is over. You can go home now."

A few of the boys looked up at him.

"I want you all to use the Deacon Street exit," the young teacher went on, briskly.

He should have said gate. It was time he understood how important single words were. The Deacon Street gate was farthest from the white, crumbly wall. He started to cross the narrow width of the playground toward the gate. The boys were still mumbling, even those who had looked up at him.

"Come on, fellows, we'll all use the Deacon Street gate."

There was a sudden loud snicker, and only a few of the boys trailed after him. It wasn't merely his choice of words. It was his tone also. It was sixty different things, but over and over again it was fear and courage and things like that. He was afraid of these kids, of all these kids together. Certainly, they were slum kids, and underprivileged, and everything that went with that, and were the reasons why they had to be tough and hard and brutal.

Brutal! That was funny. That was only fear and courage, or lack of it, all over again. He had been assigned to after-school



game period. All the male teachers took their turn at it. Some of them complained, most kept quiet about it. If he didn't complain or squawk openly, and in public, it was of no account. He squawked too much to himself, and that was the same thing.

"Come on with me if you know what's good for you!" he yelled. He didn't actually realize that he had yelled that way until he heard it with his own ears, but it brought results. Nearly all of the boys jumped into a ragged straggly line. Rapidly, the young teacher led them across the field. Four boys remained at the wire fence, their faces flushed.

"The hell with him! He can't do nothin' to us!" Pee Nots' large black eyes bristled. Everything seemed to bristle about this young son of Kristofos, the peanut vendor. It was really only his tough, spiky hair, and though Pee Nots tried to pretend it was more than that, it didn't always go.

"What are yuh yappin' so big about?" It didn't go with Honey Halpern at all.

"Who's yappin'?"

Honey looked at him, staring the Greek boy down. "In your face," Honey Halpern said.

They walked, shuffling, down the long playground toward the white wall. Flat-Rate Cresci, a tiny, sleepy-looking Italian boy, with long, silky eyelashes that forever lulled his small, smoky eyes, brought up the rear. No one had ever stopped to figure Flat-Rate out. Flat-Rate just tagged along like a motherless kitten, and you took it all for granted.

They were much closer to the wall now, and they tied up their imaginations for future reference. One of the girls was a very slender mulatto girl, with a faint, pale-brown coloring. Her thin arms were wrapped tightly around the shoulders of one of the Atlanta Street boys. The Atlanta Street boy was pressing her up against the wall, and the others were laughing at the two of them. They couldn't help laughing—the others—and they couldn't keep quiet about it.

"Hey, Dominic! You wanna go through?"

"Don't bust the wall. Hey, Dominic! Look out! You gonna bust down the wall!"

"You're doing fine, Dominic." The other girl shook the words out of her laughter. A second Atlanta Street boy, crouching deep down on his haunches, steadied her carefully with his hand. She was a well-built girl, with large breasts openly outlined beneath her light summer dress.

The younger boys knew them both. The laughing girl was Lorraine Haggin, daughter of Timmy Haggin, the neighborhood drunk. One of the neighborhood drunks, as was Missus May Haggin, his wife. Lorraine was about eighteen, one of the oldest pupils in the school, and for the younger students, already something of a legendary figure. At the close of the school day, before walking home, Lorraine Haggin would loll for an hour or two close against the wall with several members of the Atlanta Street gang. The gang, or part of it, would wait for her, regularly. Usually, she would be the only girl. Last year she had been accompanied by a younger girl, and several months later, the girl had swallowed a phial of iodine in one of the classrooms. A policeman had been stationed in the yard after that, to aid Mr. Brocken, the assistant principal and school disciplinarian. The policeman had appeared for two weeks, then had left the job for Brocken to handle alone. Today, Lorraine had brought this young mulatto girl, Pearl Anvers, a rather good student, with her, and it had turned out to be very funny.

"Hey! Cut it out," Lorraine said, laughing, smacking the top of the crouching boy's head. The boy fell over backwards, using both hands to break his fall. He was about eighteen or twenty, tough, hard, his face flaring with sudden anger. The other boys laughed, Lorraine hitched down her dress, and Dominic never stopped hugging the mulatto girl.

"Don't get rough," Lorraine said. One of the laughing boys came up and put his arm around her, and Lorraine kissed him.

The kids watched with glittering fascination. They hung together closely on the sun-bathed cement, all of them beginning to feel slightly sick and sleepy, as if they weren't sure of anything, as if the ground had started to rock and roll, and they had nothing they could hold onto for support. Lorraine wound her bare arms around the boy, and the laughter died away.



"Let's get the hell out of here," Nino said, suddenly walking away. The boys turned and followed him quietly. They had to move and keep moving. They must perform some action now, because they had been caught up and were no longer spectators. Either that, or melt away.

Later, on the ragged slope of the little hill, they sat looking across at the high, fortress-like building that was the County Home for Wayward Girls. The Home was ringed by a high, red-brick wall, the top of which was encrusted with a thick mesh of broken glass set in cement.

"Remember what that guy Dominic was doing?" Nino cried out, his voice happy and warm. "That's my meat, Honey. I'd like to be doing some of that myself."

Honey's eyes were wet and sparkling, the pupils larger and relaxed looking.

"You and me both. With Lorraine Haggin," Honey Halpern said, the words drained of all tension.

"Lorraine Haggin!" Nino roared out the name. "Lorraine Haggin!" Nino Dilonge whooped. "That's my meat!" They were both prancing now, bursting with the idea of the girl and themselves, and girls, and life, and adventure, and their friendship and themselves. The dusty twilight of late spring in the city, in the districts of slum and warren, of factory adjoining home, of home adjoining stable, was heavy and vibrant about them. The dark shadow of the tall school, the darkening pool of the long playground, the gray, lonely shapes of the old, battered houses, stood out now, with more life and substance than they had possessed under the warm eager sun. The boys raced up the hill, shouting and whooping, over the crest into full view of the County Home for Wayward Girls. Panting, they gazed down at the long thickness of wall, at the thick, ugly, embedded glass that kept the Home a world apart. Hurriedly, they made their plans. That night they would scale the wall. They would explore the dim, secretive world hiding behind the broken glass. They would be the first to do this. In the world of their lives, it had never been done before. They were heady

and aglow with the thought and excitement of it, and they wheeled around on Pee Nots and Flat-Rate.

"You two jerks got the guts to do this with us?"

"Sure! Sure!" In a full-throated, bristly bellow.

A slow, sleepy smile, followed by an almost imperceptible nod.

The four of them charged down the hill, screaming like long-starved panthers, running with the speed, the power, the ferociousness of long-starved panthers.

"Remember!" Nino called warningly. "Every guy comes with a good, strong box."

Flat-Rate danced up and down, unable to talk, unable to say it. They waited impatiently, and at last he got it out.

"I'm gonna ask Pincus, the fruit-man, for my box," he said, with the joy of it. "My ole man on'y owes him seven dollars and ninety cents."

They gathered again, swiftly, each from his own street of slum, converging upon this spot in the shadow of the wall that hid the mysteries. Pee Nots and Flat-Rate from the east, where the races tangled and were not clearly defined, where the English of the sons was a second or third language for the fathers. Nino and Honey coming from the more crowded, teeming area to the south, where the high, heavy tenements stretched in noisy, narrow rows.

They put their boxes down on the thin, dusty grass. Nino gauged the height of the wall, then stacked up two of the wooden boxes. That left four feet of clear wall above them.

"We'll have to stick two on the other side," Nino said. They all looked at him, thinking the same thing. Just one of those boxes on end would be shaky enough to stand on. Two of them, one perched on the other, would be an uncertain thing to climb, either to get up over the wall, or on the way down. Thinking about it, they stopped dead at the thought of hurry. If there were going to be a need for hurry, they didn't want to think about it now. In a way it would make things simple. They wouldn't waste time with the boxes coming down.

"I'll see what it's like," Nino said. They were huddled in the shadow of the wall, away from the light of the late spring moon.



Even the street was dark, with one dim lamp-pole set at each end, and, strangely, the long center section completely without lights. The small scattered frame houses across the street were all below the grade of the sidewalk, and seemed far away and fuzzy, like soft mounds on the black carpet of the night.

The boys steadied the boxes and Nino carefully clambered up. With extreme caution, he hugged the wall with his fingertips, just getting the length of the nails over the near edge. Slowly, he came out of his crouch and stood erect. His head and shoulders were higher than the wall.

"Friggo," he whispered down at them. "Whatta load of glass!" He extended his hand and Honey tossed up an old red brick. Nino caught it, the boxes trembling.

"Friggo, here goes," Nino said, his voice low and animated. The boys below stood close together, watching and listening intently, as he began to chip at the protruding glass. From far off, the stir of life in the tenements reached them as a noisy breeze, but in the shadow of the wall, with the moon beginning to ride across the night, it was hushed and silent. In this deep and heady silence, the chipping of the glass sounded as a roar. Nino halted and looked down at them.

"This lousy stuff is hard as rock," he said, waiting.

Then, using the brick as a roller, he ground it over the surface of the wall, bashing down the specks and slivers that remained upright, brushing them off on either side. The top of the wall was clear of glass, except for minute particles, for a space of about two feet.

Honey was first over, jumping from the wall almost straight down to drop short of the trees, landing light and alert, like a hunting cat. Nino was astride the wall, reaching for the boxes Pee Nots and Flat-Rate were handing up to him. Carefully, Nino pulled the boxes up, twisted, and lowered them to Honey's outstretched fingers. Two boxes, one mounted on the other, and they were all set. Pee Nots scrambled up, Nino's fingers hooking under his armpits to aid him.

"Watch the glass, yuh bonehead," Nino hissed, holding him. Pee Nots wobbled on his legs, shying away from the

fields of glass, Nino's fingers digging into his arms through the shirt.

"You better jump," Nino told him. "We better save the boxes for coming back. I ain't taking any chances of you bustin' 'em on the way down."

"Hey, Pee Nots!" Honey called in a low, sharp voice. "Jump!" The voice was flooded with excitement and impatience. "Jump, yuh dumb schmohawk! Jump!"

Pee Nots stared into the shadows, trying to see beyond the thick web of trees. Nino shoved him gently, and Pee Nots frantically held back.

"Go on, Pee Nots," Nino kidded, laughing. "Try to land on your head. That's one place it won't hurt."

"Jump!" The anger creeping in beneath the impatience.

Pee Nots teetered at the edge, bending all the way over and forward. He leaped, landing heavily.

"Help!" He had yelled it going down, the excitement outstripping the fear. Nino cursed, then there was the quick smack of a fist landing on soft flesh. Pee Nots yelped like a kicked dog, and Nino, up on the parapet, laughed softly. That was Honey, his friend Honey, on the job. He turned back to the street side, stepping gingerly.

"Hey, Flat-Rate," he said, hesitating. Flat-Rate's small, sleepy face was turned up to him, the tongue excitedly flicking the sides of the wide mouth.

"You stay there, Flat-Rate. Keep an eye on everything."

Flat-Rate gazed up at him, his disappointment quickly pouring in, deepening.

"Can't I go with you, Nino? Can't I go with you guys?"

He had talked it over earlier with Honey, and they had decided. Flat-Rate was slow, he could trail along, but if they had to make a break for it, if anything went wrong and they had to spread and separate, Flat-Rate would be lost. He'd be a wooden Indian, and he'd end up by somehow getting hurt. They didn't want to see Flat-Rate Cresci get hurt.

"You stay here and give us the high sign. Suppose a cop comes?" He couldn't turn away from the kid's face. "Suppose



a cop comes and sees what we've done to the glass? How we goin' to know when the coast is clear?"

Beyond the line of trees, they stepped out into a park and gardens. The moon crossed over, meeting them, etching out of darkness an oval frame of lawn and flowerbeds. A winding, gravelly lane, writhing in the moonlight, led across the hushed gardens toward the towering hulk of the Home. They gazed up at the black walls and indeterminate shapes of corners and windows, all pitch and shadow, overwhelming the few specks of light at the very base of the building. The glass-sticky wall was lost behind the line of trees.

"Which way d'we go?" Pee Nots' eyes were bright and dancing.

"We try the other end first," Nino said, jutting his chin toward the far end of the park. They followed after him, gradually easing their tightness, even beginning to swagger, to walk with assurance. They edged out over the path, around the dark clumps of shrub and hedge, out into the midst of the clear moonlight. Their shirts flapped and rolled in the night breeze, broadening them, making them appear wider and larger. They stopped and looked at each other, smiling, then suddenly laughing, softly, their throats full. They stood there with their hands powerful at their sides, looking it all down; and silently, almost, on the slow, soft rise of the wind, they heard the crying, the sobbing from the shadows. They solidified, tightening all over again, crouching into strained wires receptive to sound. On the gentle rise of the late spring wind, out of nowhere, out of shadows, came the sound of a girl's tears, of a young girl sobbing.

"Honey," Nino called, very low. "Hear that?"

The slim, small boy nodded rapidly. "Over towards the Patrick Street wall," he said. The thin wind languished and died, their billowing shirts hung limp, and the sobbing was of another and long-forgotten time.

"Whattaya say?" Nino asked, not looking at them, listening. Again the slim boy nodded, the narrow head bobbing

firmly, without hesitation. Then the crying returned, muffled, yet loose and liquid, as after many hours, as after days, all strain gone, a helpless flowing.

"It must be one of the girls," Honey Halpern said, whispering. "One of the girls they're trying to reform."

"What's she crying for?" Pee Nots couldn't get his voice all the way down. Nino stabbed at him, but Pee Nots ducked and came up crowing, rather quietly for him.

"I bet they go around naked," he crowed, his voice slowly rising. "My Uncle Pete says these dames are too hot to wear clothes!" They both swiped at him, the blows landing, but they were all thinking it now. They shut out the echo of the tears, laughing, and Nino said it, with relish, with a vast, young yearning.

"My brother Angelo says he'd like to get lost with a bunch of those dames."

Honey laughed heartily, the thin, starved cheeks bulging.

"They can show Lorraine Haggin plenty," he said, breaking out of his whisper. "I bet they can show that Lorraine Haggin dame plenty."

"Maybe there's a guy there now," Pee Nots said, hectic with it. "Maybe that's why she's cryin'."

"Come on, fellers." He was edging away from them, over toward the line of trees.

"Take it easy," Nino said.

"Yare!" Honey Halpern said it. It was a matter of control. They had the control. They weighed it now, tossing it about silently between them, and then suddenly it had lost its importance, and they were following Pee Nots.

It was darker as they approached the trees, and they walked carefully, the crying very distant now, and a solid part of the night. The dark path twisted sharply, turning toward the huge blackened building, and they had trampled a bed of low flowers before they knew they had wandered off. They all laughed, simultaneously. With difficulty, they fought to swallow it, Nino worst of all. The crying had ceased completely, in a flick of time. Warily, the excitement boiling within them,



they circled back to the path, groping with their eyes, and Nino had already passed the bench, hidden in a curl of hedge, before the young matron cried out. The boys gathered themselves, ready for flight, their bodies quivering, as the small, round-faced matron came toward them.

"Do not run," the woman said. Her voice was very high and weak. There was nothing to fear, no reason for running. "Do not be afraid," the matron said in her weak voice.

Slowly the boys eased out, spreading themselves, and the matron halted and backed to the stone bench. The girl had stopped crying and was watching them, her hair disordered and wild, partially covering her face. She wore a gray institution dress, utterly without lines, and short, so that her knees were uncovered. The matron placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. The girl's legs shook gently, trembling, an echo of tears.

"You must go back," the matron told them. She was a very young woman. "Quickly, and as quietly as you can."

They could see better now. Their eyes were able to capture the pale light of the moon and flash it into the shadow of the high, curved hedge. There was nothing to fear, and they stood there boldly, staring with a strange longing at the girl. She wore long black stockings, over the knee, and in the gray-silver light, the trembling, black-clothed legs, flowing and disappearing into the depth of the skirt, were like hidden, underground rivers, holding the eye, gliding, gliding.

"You boys must leave the way you came," said the matron, in her young weak voice. She held the girl's shoulder, and the girl clung to her, her face touching the matron's small fingers, the wild, loose hair tangling against the dark cloth of the matron's cape.

"Leave, and do not disturb anything. You will not be punished." The matron's high voice was a drone from far off. It carried no threat, no implication of menace. There were other things in this night for them. Pee Nots walked close to the bench, bull-like, his chin jutting.

"What's she cryin' for?" The matron drew back, fear set-

ting over her like lace. They all sensed it, heavily, all about them, rising from the grass-covered earth, from the unseen walls crested with glass—the winds of June fanning their faces with it. Pee Nots clung tenaciously to his advantage, the other boys acquiescing, silent and eager.

“Why were yuh cryin’?” Directly. To the girl. In her teeth. Without any beginning, with merely a shrug of the night, the tears were flowing again. The girl moaned behind her tears and now the terror-stricken matron and the weeping girl clung to each other. High overhead the moon rode defiantly, smaller, very bright, a ball of white flame in the vibrant night. The scent of flowers and hedge, of the new grass lush underfoot, of the trees looming around them; more strongly, and closer, the lingering scent of sprinkled water over the lawn and the stone walk, rose and confused them, a screw turning, smothering.

“Hey! Yuh lonesome?” Honey burst out with it, relentlessly driving. “Are yuh cryin’ ’cause yer lonesome?” The tears spurted, and the matron covered her face with her tiny hands.

“Yaah!” Pee Nots shouted it, prancing. “I bet she wants to take off her clothes and dance naked. I bet! I BET!”

These were the things in their night. They hopped on their toes, shouting, disdaining caution. There was nothing to fear.

“My brother Angelo,” Nino crowed, his dark face glowing. “You know what? He wants to get lost with a girl like you.”

“Yaah! Yaaaah!” Pee Nots bellowing, and Honey cutting at him with his fists, deliberately missing, shadow-boxing, strutting, keeping Pee Nots on the run.

“Yaah! Make believe I’m Angelo,” Pee Nots shouted, running up close to the bench, his stomach grotesquely extended, his cheeks puffing. The girl wailed, and suddenly, ripping the night, the matron was screaming, tearing the vibrant fabric of the night with her young, strong, life-destroying screams.

There was nothing to fear, no reason for flight. The matron



was on her feet, swaying, her screams fading, her tiny hands boring into her eyes, shutting everything out. The boys listened to her, soberly, not fearing anything, waiting, and then the substance of the screams had vanished like thin smoke in the night, and they were being bathed and washed by the gentle, fuzzy wind. They waited, and the woman took away her hands, and there was no more crying. Very slowly, the matron stepped back, her long cloak hiding her feet, swishing along the grass. She was watching them, calmly now, stroking the wild hair on the girl's bent head, and suddenly, blasting out of the darkness, they saw terror leap across her face. Almost freezing with it, they dug their nails into their palms, and wheeling, wrenching their legs out of the grooves of the safe ground, they saw Flat-Rate running, against the night, against the blackness, away from the tall man pursuing him. The tall man waved the stock of a whip, and Flat-Rate was running for life across the moon-specked grass.

They shouted to him, poised for flight, unable to leave him alone with the whip. And then after the whip . . . But Flat-Rate heard them, and opening his eyes, he ran toward them, his shirt flapping, his knickers down and hugging his ankles.

"Ni-no! Niiii-no!"

They had recognized the tall man. They knew him from the Atkinson Avenue hill. He was the watchman that the Home hired to patrol the hill. They had run from him many times. They danced, now, torn with the impulse to flee, to escape. But there was Flat-Rate, and his small, sleepy eyes brimming with happiness and terror. Nino leaped out, meeting him, and Flat-Rate ran with his last breath, stumbling, and Nino caught him and thrust himself in front of him as the watchman charged down on them. The whipstock crashed down on Nino's head, and the boy shivered, trembling, his arms stretched behind him, guarding Flat-Rate. With the speed and savageness of a stalking cat, Honey Halpern leaped at the watchman, hurtling his thin body through space, staggering the man, then punching, punching, punching, both

fists slashing away. The watchman fell back, and then the arm came up, the black whip uncoiled, writhing in the bright moonlight, the arm raised and drawing back, then slash across Honey's chest, crackling in the night!

Honey screeched out the agony, and then the matron was running, both arms imploring, uplifted.

"No! No, Mathias! They are children. Have pity! Please have pity, Mathias!"

The matron clung to the watchman's arm, her fingers desperately reaching for the raised whipstock.

"They will leave peacefully, Mathias, as they came. You must not beat them."

The girl ran over, her hair streaming. "They're only kids. Let them go. They can't hurt anybody. They're *kids*!"

Together, the girl and the young matron pleading, and slowly the long arm came down and the watchman furled the whip. He turned to the boys and gestured with the whip.

"You kids beat it out of here. I'll leave you alone." He paused, and his teeth showed in the moonlight. He was a dark-featured man, with a short black mustache, black grit along his cheeks, hard as scabble over his chin. "I'll go vit you to make sure you get out."

"Do not beat them, Mathias."

"You don't have to vorry," the watchman said.

They walked in loose file, taking it easy, toward the place where they had leveled the glass on the wall. The watchman, Mathias, followed behind them, not hurrying them, playing with his whip, but not menacing them. They were near the line of trees, the gardens behind, the south wind from the bay burrowing past the trees to fool with them, like fur around their necks. Nearer the trees, they heard soft, padding sounds, indistinct and irregular, almost the sound of footsteps. Pee Nots was in the lead, closest to the trees, and he looked back quickly, his large head nervously shaking, calling their attention to the sounds. They listened for them, concentrating, walking slowly, and they weren't sure. It might be the fall of



the wind, or the flicking of leaves on a branch. Flat-Rate followed after Pee Nots, tiny and frail in the night, timid, hardly awake, as if by turning, the fine brush of sleep would come and scatter everything that had gone before.

Then they all heard the padded noises from behind the trees, muted footsteps with the moon at their backs, hidden in the blackness that ran like a moat to the wall. Honey and Nino, walking together, their heads high and cocky, taking their time, looked at each other and tightened. Nino edged away, imperceptibly, getting his head around slowly, working to spot Mathias without the watchman's knowing it. They couldn't show that they were scared. They couldn't show it—they weren't sure yet.

Nino worked it patiently, twisting and swinging on inches, and then he had the watchman in the corner of his eye. The watchman was grinning, and Nino swung all the way around.

"Hold it, Honey." Then raising his voice: "Watch out, fellers!"

The tall watchman, strong, hard, armed, unfurled the whip. Watching them, he brought the whip over his head and snapped it with a quick, furious motion. The whip-song crackled and blistered across the night. The boys backed toward the trees, away from the whip, cringing, then pulling up short at the now loud sounds of something pushing its way through the trees.

The watchman cracked the whip hard, his teeth clenching in his dark face, the black mustache curtaining his mouth. "Stand still!"

The boys watched him carefully. It was the whip they had to be afraid of, not the man. The whip and the sounds from the thicket of trees.

"Do not move," the watchman was shouting, his voice bloated with his power. "De first vun who moves gets de vip!" The watchman began to circle them, edging closer to their center, placing them all in range.

Then, like bullets, they were all at him, Honey, Pee Nots and Flat-Rate. Honey went in slashing, his fists cutting like

sabers, trying to match the bursting of his heart. Pee Nots tore at the watchman's clothes, punching and ripping. Honey slashed at the face, into the stomach, down hard into the groin. The watchman screamed, and Flat-Rate pounded at his back, kicking, punching.

"Now, Gerhard! Now! Now!" Mathias yelled into the trees, his voice lifting into a scream as Honey drove deep into his groin, shattering his whole body.

"I've got it! Honey, I got the whip!" Nino waved the whip as Mathias went down, the black face contorted with pain, the hands clutching at the groin.

"Hey! Watch it!" Pee Nots yelled, starting to run. They heard a crashing through the trees and now another man was charging at them. They screamed, seeing him, the loose, disjointed head shaking violently, the open mouth, the insane look in the eyes, the long bamboo rake held high in the air, ready to strike. They broke as the rake came down, scattering with its impact. The bamboo prongs were light, they couldn't damage. Still they had to get away from the man before he could recover, before Mathias could direct him again. They stared at him with shuddering bodies. The man was a mass of loose, slithering flesh, all the joints helpless and gesticulating, wildly tossing the jelly of arms, elbows, shoulders, neck and head. They stared at the head, with horror, trying to shut their eyes against the gyrating, puking, broken blob of death-white bone and skin. They looked into the long-dead, red-bursting eyes. They listened to the high, mouthless guttural that swarmed from the twisted throat, and then Mathias had pointed to them from the grass, croaking out strange words, and Gerhard had cried out like a stricken animal, and again the rake was high and towering over them. They fled as the rake came down, the red eyes rolling, but the long bamboo fingers reached them and scraped their bodies. They cried out against it, spitting it off their tongues, cleansing themselves of it. The feel of it was like slime against their bare skins, like the thick, black oozing slime that seeped out of holes in the bottom of the bay, that was host for maggots



and crawling things. Like the stomach-retching stench from the open sewers that emptied into Jamaica Bay!

They stumbled, running, their throats choked and clamoring for release. Outspread, tossed by their waves of panic, they raced and separated. Honey ran with open mouth, his lungs triphammering his chest, the skin taut over the pounding heart. He must get away from this headless, living death.

"That wasn't a head!" Sprinting away into the darkness of the moonlit gardens, his stomach foaming up into his throat, he kept repeating it, adding to his terror.

"No head! No head! No head!"

Running, he tore into a hedge, the shoots reaching into his face like eager fingers. He backed away in fright, and the cool touch of the tiny leaves brushed his skin, wet-feeling, and he almost screamed. Instead, his eyes opened and he was ashamed, tightening all over, getting it down. He looked behind him and he was alone, panting. With a quick motion, he flopped down on the grass to regain his breath, waiting. He heard something behind the hedge, creeping, coming his way, and his heart flamed, suffocating his mind. An arm reached out and pinned his leg, then low laughter. It was Nino.

"Yuh bastard," Honey whispered, tense, unrelaxing.

Nino drew alongside, his dark, smooth face grinning, holding the whip close to his body. "Take it easy," he said. The moon was high and white now, crystal-clear, and Honey turned his face down toward the grass. They could hear the wind rustling the leaves of the trees.

They had their wind now, and it was time to go, but the grass, creamy as fur, held them. If there were no danger, they could linger for hours that way, stomachs close to the soft grass, the night wind washing them. Then they heard crying, the high terrified whimpering of an animal in flight, the cries stifled by the great need of the body for speed. They got to their knees quickly, into the runner's crouch, and when they were ready and tensed for it, Flat-Rate Cresci came dashing into their sight, running across the great watery lawn, with the headless face of death, Gerhard, close behind him. Again

and again Gerhard brought the flails of the bamboo rake down on Flat-Rate's head, his own head pitching and tossing, his jangled gutturals mixing with the boy's whimper, drowning it. Flat-Rate saw them and screamed.

They were on their feet, pumping across the grass, their strategy worked out in the instant of preparation. Honey leaped for the rake on its way up again, on the run, tearing it out of Gerhard's hands. He kept on running, trailing the rake, yelling for Flat-Rate to follow him. Nino had the whip in position, and as Gerhard swung around to face him, he snapped it, shuddering, and the waxed rope smashed against Gerhard's chest. Gerhard screamed insanely, his arms flailing the air, his body collapsing into a hulk of boneless jelly. Again Nino cracked the whip, singing, into the twisted, contorted shapelessness. Then he was racing as the tortured roar rose up again, toward Deacon Street, after Honey and Flat-Rate.

He caught up with them near the line of trees. A great number of lights had come up in the long, dark mass of the Home, and they would be cut off if they didn't get over quickly.

"Pee Nots!" They yelled, their one last shot.

"Hey! Fellers!" Surprisingly close, almost on top of them. They stumbled through the trees into the trench of darkness that ran along the wall. "Hey, Nino! Honey! Ni-i-i-no!"

He was on top of the wall, bellowing like mad, his hair bristling in the moonlight. All around him the glint of the broken glass at his feet. They ran over to the boxes, shoving Flat-Rate ahead of them. The smaller boy was unable to climb. They pushed him, egging him on, Pee Nots yelling down from the wall, cursing wildly. Flat-Rate couldn't make it. His arms were limp. He couldn't lift his legs. He turned around to them, his face wet, the sleepy eyes helpless.

"Don't leave me, Nino." He was whispering, sucking in the tears. They heard voices coming toward them.

"Get up there!" Nino jabbed at Honey, pointing to the boxes.

"What for?"

Nino started to say it, but the downpour of curses from



the wall swept over his words. Honey climbed up, quickly, leaping. His fingers hooked over the edge of the wall, and he chinned himself up. All in less than seconds. Nino wrapped his arms around Flat-Rate, like a sack of sand, and lifted him onto the boxes.

"Please, Flat-Rate. On your feet!" The voices were coming nearer, buzzing, angry women's voices. "Get on your feet, yuh little bastard!" Flat-Rate smiled, the grin cleaving half his face, pulling to his feet while Nino propped the boxes. Then Nino was standing on the boxes next to him, lifting him to outstretched fingers that pulled him to the top of the wall, and instantly the terror had returned, shooting, and Flat-Rate had fallen heavily on the broken, wedged-in bottles, the glass deep-cutting, and he was out completely, lost in unconsciousness.

Honey lifted him off the glass as the matrons came through the trees. The kid felt limp and light, the bones almost uncovered. Honey handled him carefully. He had to be careful, or they'd both land on their domes ten feet below.

"Get down, Pee Nots," he ordered, not even looking at him. Nino would have to work it out for himself. He had this jerky kid on his hands.

Pee Nots went down into a crouch, deep-bending his knees, shortening distance, barking something out and jumping. He landed heavily and stretched out, his fingers digging. Then he was up, his oval face sparkling. He was over the wall.

The matrons stopped, led by one in a heavy, brown cape, her arms spread. There were four or five others behind the gate of her arms. Nino listened for more of them, for other things, but there was nothing beyond but the wind prowling. It was all right, then.

Jubilant, he swung around, and clambered up on the boxes. Then he dropped the whip into the grass, and said to them at the edge of the trees:

"Wait until my brother Angelo hears about this!"

They didn't know what he meant. He laughed, his chest feeling crowded, proud of his strength. With ease, he hooked his fingers over the edge and pulled himself to the top of the

wall. He looked down the long, dark street, his throat surging with hidden sound. He wanted to crow out into the night.

Honey was talking to him, rapidly, the tempo of orders. "The jerk fell into the glass. He must be cut plenty. I think I feel blood with my fingers. Hop down, Nino, and grab him with Pee Nots when I let go."

To crow like a rooster, because he felt so damn good! He jumped easily, almost leaping. The shock was greater than he'd expected and he half went down, but recovered. He looked at Pee Nots and it was unmistakable. He could tell just by looking at him. Pee Nots felt good too. What a night!

Flat-Rate was like a bundle of straw, light and loose, and they brought him down legs first, Honey directing from the top of the wall. They spread the kid on his back on the dusty grass, looking at his face bleeding, the hands and arms wet, and then Honey jumped lightly, gracefully, his body a bending bow, landing on his feet, on the toes and on the balls of his feet. Nino pulled out a handkerchief and mopped up the blood on Flat-Rate's face.

"We better take him to Wolff's drugstore," Nino said, staring at his wet handkerchief. His chest wasn't so crowded now. He didn't have any trouble breathing, now.

"We'll carry him," Honey said, his thin face bent toward the grass. "Pee Nots! You clear the way. Walk in front and kick the crap out of anyone who tries to stop us!"

Pee Nots stumped ahead like a general of cavalry, and they carried Flat-Rate down the long street, Nino's fingers hooked under the shoulders, Honey between the legs, not allowing the body to drag. Down the deserted street, in the shadow of the glass-tufted wall, past the small frame shacks that were cotton fuzz on the loom of night, they walked slowly, not talking, except for Pee Nots growling and clearing the way.

At the corner, they felt a long, reluctant quiver shaking through Flat-Rate, and the kid opened his eyes, slowly, sleepily. They put him down on the cement sidewalk, waiting, not looking at the fresh blood, hoping he wouldn't cry.

"Whatsa matter, Flat-Rate," Nino asked, touching him gently.



"Are yuh scared?" They tried to look into the kid's small, smoky eyes. "Can we help ya?"

"Nino!" He had almost shrieked it, but that was because his tongue was so thick with blood. They watched him, rigid, breathless.

"Nino." Lower this time, calmer, the head shaking slightly, the wide lips forming a slow grin. "Nino, before we go into Wolff's drugstore—" Flat-Rate hesitated, swallowing thickly.

"Yare, Flat-Rate," they shouted, bursting with it.

"Hey, Nino." Flat-Rate was grinning. "Treat me to a five-cent pineapple soda, will yuh, Nino?"

## Chapter Three

THEY ARE in a car, tearing down dark, empty roads, in the wild, city-savage month of October. The blood flows warm and swift in their strong bodies, and they howl into the night, exultantly, crowing, spreading their ears with it, like the flapping of wings. They race across the eastern rim of Brooklyn, city of millions, cutting knifelike on paved roads through the fog-misty, low-lying, forgotten sections that were once alive and throbbing, in the time before subways, in the unsanctified days before the blessing of open-draining sewers ten feet deep.

"Shut the windows!" the Sponge cries out as the first whiff hits his lacerated nostrils. The Sponge and Vinny de Angelis furiously pump the small handles inside the car.

"Come on, Nino! Quit crawling!" Vinny yells anxiously, his fingers protecting his nose, pinching it hard that no breath may enter. Nino smiles, and with one hand on the wheel, he quickly shuts his window. His shoe bears down firmly on the gas pedal, and he turns his head slightly and looks at the boy sitting next to him.

"How about it, Honey?" Nino asks, quietly, nothing in his voice.

Honey Halpern sits back, relaxed, one arm out of the open window, the fingers reaching to the roof of the car. This to heighten the illusion of speed, the cool air rushing past the extended fingers.

"It ain't gonna last forever," Honey says, laying it down.

"Murder! Murder!" The Sponge groans in agony, and Nino laughs and turns to Honey Halpern sitting next to him, and in the darkness of the car Nino glimpses the smile on the thin, narrow face. The fog swirls like a shower of feathers and the red fires go out, and Nino sees the milky,



smoking lights in front of him, and again, with all his will fighting against it, his eyes half close and there is no road. His head goes down, and the lights, suddenly, are blazing projectiles of destruction, and with a screaming, screeching impact, they hit!

One, two, three, four, five hundredth-seconds of time, and the roaring subsides. Nino holds the wheel lightly, steadying it, as they are hurled off the road. The cars have scraped fenders in passing, and they have been thrown to each side of the shrouded road, and one inch is the distance from Paerdegat to the innermost fastness of the sun. They rock down the shallow slope, their wheels holding the ground, and then they stop. Ahead of them, the red flames tear up through a gap in the fog.

"Let's go out and kill the bastard." Honey says it softly, uncertain of his voice. Nino still holds the wheel, a fragment of the smile remaining on his lips. There hasn't been time to drop all of it.

"Anybody hurt?"

There are angry replies, and they pour out of the car. The ground is soft, almost soggy underfoot, and they climb up through the fog to the road. They wait until they are bunched together, the wind damper than they had expected, and the Sponge leading, they cross to the other side of the road. The red haze of the dump fires spreads a crescent through the fog. Their nostrils are blasted by the heavy, fetid, vegetable-rot stench that the bay-wind pushes at them. The red flame flares, and picks the second car out in the mist, a short distance off the road. It is a new, expensive car, and it is resting with one wheel bent and kneeling on the ground. It has been hurt.

The driver is waiting for them beside his car. Through the haze they can see that he is a large man. He is leaning against a fender and he has been watching them grope toward him. They don't even stop to figure that. They are beyond overconfidence.

The Sponge wades in, his fists cocked, and the large man smashes down at him with a wrench. The wrench cracks

past the guarding arms and raps the skull. The Sponge staggers, but it's the beginning of the end for the large man.

Vinny de Angelis grabs for the wrench arm, and as the large man turns to him, Nino crashes his fist flush against the driver's ear. Honey lifts his knee and digs it into the small of the man's back, at the base of the spine. His right arm wraps around the man's throat, and he bends him back into the knee. The man is mugged now, and the boys can button their collars. Vinny pulls the wrench away easily. He gives it to the Sponge, and the Sponge splits the large man's face open with it.

The large man has stopped his shouting now. His mouth is full of blood, and he must hold it back. His ears and eyes are bursting with the stranglehold around his throat. The knee in his back is crushing the air out of his lungs.

Vinny de Angelis goes through his pockets. Nino steps away, holding on to the Sponge, and watches, a world apart, as Vinny takes the bills out of the wallet. Vinny tosses the wallet to the ground and Honey lets go. The large man lurches, and Nino steps up quickly, and with precision and certainty taps the man's temple with his hard fist, an inch over and behind the eye. The large man crumples and drops to the ground.

The fog spirals up from the lake of the sewer-fed waters, and they leap down the incline from the road, and Nino starts the car, and they jump on as the car plows the ground and noses up to the road again. They point south and Nino Dilonge presses down on the gas feed, and the car groans as it picks up acceleration.



## Chapter Four

**I**N THE deep heart of Brownsville, where the subway leaps out of the ground and cuts a gash of blight and permanent shadow even through the district of tenements, the small, neighborhood gangs gather at night, spinning in from the dark streets to the illuminated corners and the lights of the "hangout." Along some streets the "hangout" is a candy-store, the lights all out in front over the newsstand and the open-window counter. In other places it is a poolroom, or a cafeteria, or a drugstore where the young kids wait to run on telephone calls. The members of the "hangout" may straggle down from just around the block, or they can come from long distances, using the subway and the bus-line, or rocking in on one of the several trolleys that shake through the narrow streets of East Brooklyn. The pull of the "hangout" is strong, and where there is loneliness and chilling discontent and deep isolation in the new homes, or in the factories, or slapping them down one after the other along the pavements, there is warmth and excitement and the life-blood of companionship down at the old corners, in the aura of the hard lights and the familiar faces.

None of the gang had seen the three burly men walk up with Vinny de Angelis. All at once, the men were there.

The three men were dicks, detectives. The fellows knew that without having it explained to them. It was plastered all over the strange men's faces, especially on the faces of two of them. The third one they recognized. He was Sam Charney, a detective with a pretty good name in Brownsville. Sam knew most of them, by sight. He could pick out their faces, place their corners. That was usually enough. Sam was a pretty nice guy. Sometimes he wouldn't be able to place

a face. That happened when things were right and Sam could help it. The fellows knew that. When Sam couldn't help it, he'd look uncomfortable and find the guy. Right now, Sam looked very uncomfortable, almost as bad as Vinny de Angelis.

Vinny was dragging his face between his feet. He kept his eyes on the sidewalk, away from everything, acting blind. He looked shaken, mussed-up, his clothes rumpled, his hat way back on his head. He was being held at the arm by a middle-aged, bulky, hatchet-faced dick who seemed on the point of jumping out of his shoes. The hatchet-faced cop didn't waste any time.

"Which ones were wit' yuh?" He hurled it at Vinny, but his bitter, chiseled-out face was turned to them. Honey looked at Nino quickly. Nino's hand went up and scratched the hair that ran down the back of his neck. It was enough. Honey knew that Nino was on. So was he. They watched Vinny de Angelis working it out with the cops.

"Come on, yuh bastard! Point 'em out!"

They watched the hatchet face tighten his grip on Vinny's arm. Vinny thrashed around, trying to pull out, and the cop slapped him in the mouth. The third cop, the one who had poked Cocky, moved around and grabbed Vinny's other arm. He was a young, fat-faced cop, with a set, stubborn look and enormous hands. Vinny calmed down. Sam Charney stepped a few feet away, drawing a silent line between himself and the other cops. The boys saw him gaze up over their heads, toward the dark girder-work of the elevated line.

"Point 'em out!"

"Hey, fellers! Jump 'em! Go on, jump 'em!" Vinny strained away, frantically tugging, his eyes working feverishly. The fat-faced cop hauled off with his loose fist and slammed him above the eyes. Then he and the hatchet face held on as Vinny's knees buckled.

It had been a mistake. It had been more than stupid. It all looked as if it had been calculated, to put him in the clear. The boys didn't think twice about the punch after that. If they had been able to jump the cops, they would have done



it without it being shouted at them. But there was never a chance, not out in the open like that, right on the corner, not in all that light. Now Sam Charney was in on it also; he had to be after that, after Vinny de Angelis had given it away like a fool, or like something else.

The hatchet face shook Vinny up. He looked as if he wanted to swing a roundhouse club at the group of them. "Come on!" he yelled, taking them all in. "Which ones were wit' yuh?"

"None of these guys," Vinny said, talking into the ground. The boys held on that, waiting.

"Charney!" the hatchet face shouted, turning to Sam. "Is this the bum's hangout?" A train rumbled on the steel rails overhead. The ironwork rattled and Sam let it cut in. He was taking his time.

"Charney!" The hatchet face was falling all over himself, shouting wildly. Some people came down the long staircase.

"Yeah," Sam said. "This is his hangout." He waved the people away. The manner in which he did it took care of any and all questions. Some of them straggled, but they kept moving.

"Point 'em out or yuh get it again!" the hatchet face yelled. He started to swing his fist. Vinny suddenly stuck out his hand, the fingers pointing. The boys fell back, away from the shock of the stiff fingers.

"Which one?" The hatchet face moved closer to the boys, backing them up against the candystore window. Vinny didn't answer, his fingers still pointing. They were coming closer, the hatchet face dragging Vinny and the young cop. The young, fat-faced cop was a slow mover. Honey edged over to Nino. There was a chance now to break. There was only Charney, and they could risk it with Charney.

"Which one, yuh bastard?" The hatchet face turned savagely, his fists waving. Vinny continued to point into the tight knot of boys. "That one," Vinny said. It had narrowed down to about three of them. Honey tugged at Nino's arm. They were out of it! Vinny was passing it off on someone

else. The hell with it as long as they were out of it! He tugged again, harder, and saw Nino shake his head. Honey wrenched at Nino's arm. If they were going to break, they had to get started.

Nino pulled his arm away, violently, in a way that Sam Charney couldn't miss. Sam turned slowly away, edging his back to them.

"This one?" The hatchet face had pinned one of the boys. Vinny de Angelis nodded, dropping his fingers, his face stiff. He had shoved it on Spinner Olins, a quiet kid who only hung around, who kept his mouth shut and laughed at the things the guys said, a little dumb, but a swell ball player, loose and rangy, a boy they all liked. The hatchet face hooked his hands on the Spinner's shoulders.

"Hold him!" He swung his cleft chin in an arc from the fat-faced cop to Vinny. The fat face clamped down. Nino began to push up closer. Honey held on to him, his fingers digging into Nino's coat. They struggled with each other, quietly, trying to confine it to themselves. They didn't have to break now. They could just stand around until the cops would leave with Spinner. It was working out fine, Honey thought. Quick thanks to de Angelis thinking on his feet. It had looked very bad a little while back, but they could forget that now. If only he could hold Nino? What the hell was wrong with Nino? Honey hung on desperately as Nino slowly ground ahead, pulling the two of them closer to the hatchet face.

The heavy, tall, burly, full-grown, hatchet-faced cop raised his meat cleaver hands from the Spinner's shoulders, and with bitterness, with personal hate and fury, he slapped the young, growing-kid's face from both sides. Spinner reared back, tears spurting into his eyes. The boys around them yelled in protest. They knew Spinner, and they knew without anyone explaining it to them that Vinny had unloaded on him. Nino and Honey Halpern in front, they surged up, keeping their fists low, out of the picture, just getting their bodies in close, shouting, protesting.



"Take it easy, boys. Don't start anything." The words came from behind them, spoken calmly. Charney was only half-looking at them, saying it from a distance, not hammering it across, not threatening. The boys stopped and the hatchet face swung Spinner around, getting Spinner between himself and the boys, bear-hugging the tall kid's arms.

"Break it up!" The fat face held Vinny with one arm and waved the other. "Break it up or yuh get pulled in!" Vinny was very quiet now. The fat face had a loose grip on him. Vinny didn't move.

The hatchet face smiled at them, the whole face tight and set, only the twin points of hate smiling out of the eyes. Spinner was struggling, trying to break out of the bear grip, straining desperately to free his arms. The hatchet face held him like a child's toy. The boys stood staring at the Spinner's tugging shoulders, and the hatchet face smiled back at them with his hate-filled eyes.

Nino Dilonge stepped out, his fists knotted, his body erect and straight.

"Yuh got the wrong guy, mister," Nino said. He tried to hold his voice even, calm, but the words came trembling. "He was nowhere near it, I know!"

The fat-faced cop lifted his arm to swing at him. Nino brought his fists up belt-high, in defense.

"Gresch! Let him say it!" Sam Charney moved in quickly, his eyes on Nino. He liked the way this kid looked. This kid didn't make him feel that he was forever hitting old women, or hounding babies.

"I know," Nino went on, looking down at all of them. He relaxed all over, visibly. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat and spread himself, for all of them.

"I beat that guy up! All by myself!" He began to smile. Laughing, he said it. "He pulled a wrench on me. He smashed into my car, and I smashed into him. That's all. All by myself!"

The smile flickered out of the hatchet face's eyes, the

coldness remaining, growing. He stared at the young kid laughing and then he yelled:

"Grab him, Charney!"

The police officer Charney hooked Nino's arm. A sick, miserable stirring ripped through the close-watching band of boys. They could let it work out this way, watching like a stack of corpses, or they could go down fighting. It was too late for anything else.

Nino Dilonge never stopped smiling, the thin edge of his even teeth showing very white against the olive-dark skin.

"What are you looking for, kid? Glory?" Sam Charney asked, loudly, for all of them to hear. "Who says we have to believe you?"

Nino laughed at that. He kept his eyes on the hatchet face. He was all right as long as he didn't see Honey Halpern, as long as he didn't have to answer Honey Halpern's questions.

"I'm tellin' yuh," he said, laughing at it. "Yuh want me to sign it, I'll sign it."

Sam Charney brought it out slowly, not putting any pressure on the kid's arm. "We know de Angelis was there. We found his hat. Maybe he did it. Just him and this other kid." He pointed to Spinner. "Maybe you weren't even around?" He let go of Nino's arm. He knew the kid would like that.

"Vinny!" Nino called sharply. "Was I there?"

Vinny de Angelis stared down into the ground. His mouth was slightly open, his thin shoulders stooped. The fat-faced cop looked muddled. He was far out of it. He glanced at Charney, for advice, for an order, for an okay to do nothing. Charney didn't even look at him.

"No," Vinny said, suddenly looking up, his eyes popping and wild. "Yuh weren't there. Yuh weren't near the place. It was me, Spinner and another guy."

Charney cut in quickly. "What other guy?"

"Another guy," Vinny said, slowing down. "He ain't here. I don't even know him." His eyes straggled, wandering, picking out Honey Halpern. Vinny tried to hold on, but Honey didn't



even know he was alive. His entire mind was centered on Nino and slowly it was beginning to get across to him.

Nino stepped up to Vinny de Angelis. Sam Charney walked with him, not holding him. Slowly, drawing it out, Nino Dilonge raised his right fist, pulling it back for power, sighting down the short, straight line.

"Was I there?" The smile was gone. Anger tore through.

"They found the hat," Vinny said, quivering.

"Was I there, yuh bastard!" The anger rising, foaming. The fat face looked dazed. He shifted from leg to leg, like a guy waiting to get into a toilet. He licked his thick lips and gazed cow-eyed as Nino Dilonge drew back in a sudden rush, his fist flashing.

"Yare!" Vinny shouted, breaking away from the hurtling fist. Nino tried to pull back and the punch landed light. Sam Charney leaped in to separate them.

"Yare!" Vinny yelled. "Yuh were there!" The hat he was wearing fell off, and as he stooped for it, one of the boys stuck his leg out to kick him, or for it to look that way.

"Lay offa that," Sam Charney said, loudly. "Come on, O'Connor. We got the one you want."

"Yeah," the hatchet face said, speaking from behind the Spinner. He had been watching Charney work it out. It had been done so beautifully and so quickly, he felt lulled, as if by sleep. He came out of the coma all at once, his fury blazing back. "We got them now!"

"Let the kid go," Sam Charney said, pointing to the Spinner. Nino stared at the Spinner's long, rangy back. There wasn't any more he could do for the tall kid now. He saw that much plainly. The only thing he could do now was to hold on tight and watch it all, watch every bit of it. He had started it, and somehow it was going to end, but he didn't know how it was going to end. He caught O'Connor's bitter, burning eyes, and he knew that somewhere along the line he and the hatchet face would tangle. His head started to get thick at that, and he had to fight it down.

"We take him also," O'Connor said, coming out from be-

hind the Spinner, but holding him firmly. "He was named."

"That was a lousy lie," Nino shot in. It was definitely the final, last thing.

"You," Charney said, to Vinny de Angelis. "Was he there?" The Spinner looked sick. He wanted to fight, to use his hands to get back at them, to pound out with his fists how crazy they were. Vinny's eyes swung around loosely. There was one way out for him. One bright way in the night!

"Sure he was!" All the way! Don't stop for signals! "They both beat the guy up. I tried to stop them and they took a sock at me. That's how I lost the hat!"

The boys sucked in on that. They turned to Sam Charney. The fat face and O'Connor had taken it in. At least it had pierced through to their minds and they were working on it. Their faces showed that much. Sam Charney was a cop also but he wasn't the kind of cop the other two were.

"Nuts," Nino Dilonge said, not to Vinny de Angelis, but to all of them. "The Spinner wasn't there."

The words woke the Spinner up. Suddenly he started to pull out after Vinny. The hatchet face jerked him back, fiercely.

"We take him too!" the hatchet face shouted, ending it.

"Okay," Police Officer Charney said, turning away, taking his time. Then he looked at Vinny de Angelis.

"When he called you a lousy liar, he called it right!"

Sam Charney had spoken it loudly, for all of them to hear, and then the cops had walked the three boys away. That was what Sam Charney had given them, and the untouched boys hung onto it as the cops turned out of sight down Manitoba Avenue. They hadn't done anything about it and now there was nothing for them to do. Painfully, the boys unhung their frozen eyes, shut their open mouths.

Honey Halpern listened to the cursing, the violent, filthy, ineffectual cursing that the boys embraced with their whole hearts. Silently, he cursed with them, steadily, sensing the relief that it gave, and then he stopped. He didn't want any relief. That was the difference between him and the others.



Where did he come off seeking relief? He had to get in the clear. He had to work this thing out, and he had to be alone for that.

Savagely, Honey Halpern tore past them, breaking away from the corner. He crossed Manitoba Avenue and continued down Laverne, in the shadow of the long platform of the elevated station. A train came rolling in over the girders, the steel wheels screeching as the air brakes were applied. The sharp, grinding noise tore through his skull and, quickly, he dashed up a side street.

He had run north two blocks, his legs racing over the pavements, before he came to a sudden stop on the corner of Drake. His heart pumping, he put his hand out and clung to the iron light pole on the corner. He knew what he had to do. He looked along Drake Avenue and spotted a tiny candy store. He ran to the store, knowing that he must have been in a state of death not to have thought of it sooner.

The shriveled old man behind the counter looked at him sadly as he tore through the small store. A telephone booth was cramped into the space along the rear wall and Honey Halpern slammed the door shut behind him. Then he dialed the one telephone number he knew.

He had expected to get someone else, but he got Lou Predo. He didn't know what to do with Lou Predo on the wire. He stammered out: "This is Honey Halpern, Lupo."

"Yeah. Whattaya want?" Lupo's voice over the phone was ocean deep, very steady. Honey hung on to it. He couldn't go off now. If he went off—

"Yuh know who I am?" It was bad, but it was a beginning. He had to come around.

"Whattaya want, kid?" Very patient and calm, and with a spin of time Honey Halpern went all the way around. It spilled out like water over the sides of a tub. He told Lupo the whole story and he got better as he went along. Lupo let him talk. When it came to Nino, Honey made it simple. He was a few sentences ahead of himself by that time, and he was able to say it very easily.

"Then this little bastard de Angelis puts it on Nino Dilonge and another boy and the cops take the three of them away." He had it fine now.

"All right, kid," Lupo said. "I'll send Fleckner around. He'll get the three of them out."

"Wait a minute, Lupo," Honey Halpern said. It was beginning to creep into his throat.

"Yeah?"

"The hell with Vinny de Angelis."

"O.K., kid. The hell with him."

It had come out of his throat now. It was all over his face, all over his voice. "See you in church, Lupo."

"Take it easy, kid."

The sense of elation, the clamor in his throat, vanished the split second he hit the outside air. It all ran out into the ground, draining the life out of his legs with stunning force. He could hardly walk. He forced himself to move, and all he could do was stagger a few steps.

Honey Halpern looked down at his legs with a horror he had never known. Very cautiously, with infinite effort, he moved one leg several inches ahead. Then, heavily, fearfully, the other leg.

*What had he done?*

Think of it! Think of it! Force yourself to say it! Spit it off your tongue. Spit the blood from the bursting lungs also, but say it. Say that without lifting a finger, without wasting a breath, you let Nino Dilonge take the rap—for you.

The old sergeant at the desk was showing he had plenty of time. His eyes traveled unhurriedly about the large empty room.

"Dilonge, Olins, de Angelis and you. That makes four." The sergeant read the names off the blotter, carefully. A small green-shaded lamp arched over the left side of the massive desk. "All accounted for, as charged."

"Yare," Honey Halpern said, quickly. The old man was acting like a judge, like an overstuffed, wooden-Indian judge.



He'd ask a question and then sit back and chew on the answer for an hour. "That's catchin' on fast. One, two, three, four."

"Jahnckel!" The old sergeant screamed the name, the red blood sweeping into his face. "This is another one of the little bastards that mugged O'Connor's brother. Take him downstairs. O'Connor'll be tickled pink to see him."

The time had come now and Honey Halpern walked with Jahncke, the pot-bellied cop, through the bare corridors of the precinct house and down a narrow flight of stairs. The basement resembled a cold storage plant, the walls slapped over with a white limewash that had worn thin, revealing the red lines of the brick underneath. Several unshaded glass bulbs dangled at intervals, lighting the cellar brilliantly. In spite of all the intense light, however, all the whiteness, Honey Halpern strongly and overwhelmingly sensed the presence of rats in the cellar, of rats scurrying and defecating, of rats lost and trapped.

The black-shirted cop, Jahncke, stopped midway down the hall in front of an ordinary-looking door. Honey Halpern could hear the sound of voices through the door, indistinguishable, buzzing voices that he couldn't place. He waited for Jahncke to open the door.

"You're damn anxious," the cop said. "What's your hurry?"

Jahncke was smiling again, a weak, cold smile that barely parted his thin lips. Honey could tell by looking at him that the cop wanted to stall, wanted to talk it up, to drag it out. The cop didn't want him to walk through the door with his spirit high. That would make the cop a sort of female lap dog, an old lady's companion. The cop had to break down his impatience and replace it with anxiety, and with fear.

Honey Halpern stuck his hand out to open the door, extending it slowly, deliberately, giving the cop all the time he needed to pull his arms from the perch of his great belly. The blow was hard and swift, sharply catching the wrist, swifter than Honey Halpern had thought the fat cop could move. He rung that up for memory also.

"Don't touch that door!" He had caught Jahncke flat, driving the thin smile away, but it wouldn't happen again. Jahncke placed himself in front of the door, the smile edging back, reaching up to the tiny, fat-surrounded eyes.

"I'll do the opening," Jahncke said. "Keep your lousy hands down."

"O.K.," Honey Halpern answered. The blow on his wrist had hurt, but there were other things to think about. The old sergeant had said something about O'Connor's brother. O'Connor sounded like a cop, like the dick Sam Charney had brought around, and if they had knocked the crap out of a dick's brother they couldn't have done anything worse. The least the cops would settle for would be to get the beating back, in kind. That made it an entirely different thing, and all of it bad. He and Nino and Spinner could start worrying now. And if Lou Predo didn't send Fleckner quickly, worrying wouldn't matter one way or another. Which didn't mean, though, that he had to come around the way this smiling, pot-bellied cop wanted him to.

"You're acting damn proud," the fat cop said, his heavy arms folded. "Like you're expecting a medal."

"No," Honey Halpern answered.

"Whattaya mean no?" The thin cruel smile was firm, set. "Pulling a smart stunt like that? Sending a guy to a hospital? Say, you got plenty coming to you, haven't you, kid?"

"No," Honey Halpern said. That was the police way of doing it.

"Yes," the cop said, slowly, drawing out the words, slowly, throwing it all in, giving up. "You got plenty coming to you. Right past this door it's waiting for you, and you're gonna act a damn sight different after you get it!"

"O.K.," Honey Halpern said. He recognized all the signs of defeat. You could go a long way if your nerve was firm. A long way, even in darkness. "How about the door?"

Jahncke opened the door quickly, turning on his heels. Nino, Spinner Olins and Vinny de Angelis were sitting on stools in the center of the large room. The hatchet-faced cop sat behind a



small table that stood a few feet away from the brick cellar wall of the room. There was a fourth low stool in the center, and two heavy wooden chairs behind the frail-looking table. There was nothing else in the room except three short lengths of rubber hose on the small table.

"Detective O'Connor," the pot-bellied cop announced, rather formally, as if it were an occasion, "here's the fourth member of the gang that robbed and assaulted your brother. He's kind of proud of it. Thinks it was a smart stunt."

The hatchet face turned his burning, feverish eyes on Honey Halpern. "Sit down there," he ordered, pointing to the empty stool. His voice had quivered slightly as he said it. Then Jahncke left, closing the door firmly.

Honey Halpern walked across to the stool, grinning at his great friend, Nino. It was good to see the warm look of amazement on Nino's face. It was good even though they both would have been better off if Nino had kept his mouth shut, if Nino had let the Spinner take it alone. It would have been better all around and no worse for the Spinner, but it hadn't happened that way and now Nino was here and this was his place also. Honey slowly lowered himself down to the stool.

"Wipe that grin off your face!" This time O'Connor's voice was stronger; there was no quiver. Honey Halpern looked at him and sucked in his breath. The cop's eyes seemed ready to burst, to explode with the violence of the anger that was pressing down on them. The sharp, clipped features, more hatchet-like for being pulled in taut at the corners of the mouth, resembled a cutting tool. He was all hopped up, Honey Halpern thought, multiplying the force of his hatred, stewing in it, getting ready to bite, to hack.

"What's your name?" O'Connor snapped the question, running the words together like a whipstroke.

"Halpern."

"Halpern what?"

"Honey Halpern."

The cop's clenched fist smashed at the table, shaking the

lengths of rubber hose, shoving the whole table a foot across the concrete floor.

"Whattaya telling me?"

"That's my name," Honey Halpern said. He turned to look at Nino sitting next to him. Nino was staring down at the smooth stone floor.

"Don't turn your head!" The cop screamed it, lifting out of his chair. Honey Halpern looked at him, almost laughing. Then he stopped laughing. If that hophead caught on that he was being laughed at it wouldn't go well at all. It would go very bad.

"You don't move," O'Connor barked out. "You don't move your hands or your ears or your eyes. You look only straight in front of you and you keep your trap shut!" O'Connor fell back into his chair, without relaxing, without turning out any of the blaze in his eyes.

There was nothing to do but sit on the low stool, your back slouching, your hands on your knees. There were two half-windows in the side wall running down from the ceiling. They marked the limit of vision, but only the limit, and Honey Halpern's eyes clung to them. The windows were high and out of reach and beyond them it was black, very black. They were openings for air, not light, stuck at the bottom of a grated well. The grating led out to a dark spot, probably an alley. That accounted for the blackness. Still, the windows were something to look at because the eye could twist and strain for them, satisfying the need for movement though the body remained quiet. Honey Halpern sat on the backless stool, his eyes playing the involved, serious game, defying the power of imprisonment, and then suddenly it was only a game and the defiance small and hollow and he was gazing intently at the hopped-up dick, O'Connor.

It was a long time, with the dead silence, before he spotted Nino's fingers talking to him. Honey froze instantly, cursing himself, straining his eyes to the side and following with a bitter, raging concentration, the slow language of Nino's moving fingers. Limply, outwardly denying the possibility of motion,



Nino Dilonge was dragging his loose fist along the top of his thigh, only the index finger extended, communicating. Very slowly the finger crept down the dark cloth, three inches in a straight line, then on a right angle two inches. Back along the same path after a longer pause, then down three and across two. The figure L, again, the beginning of love, again, the letter for Lupo.

Honey Halpern looked up quickly, only his eyes moving. He watched the cop, O'Connor, and he saw that O'Connor was staring full at them and also past and beyond them. There was something else in O'Connor's mind, and at the realization Honey Halpern filled, glowing, with the one thought—communication without discovery! That way they could laugh at the cops, deep down inside where it was like a ball of fur, soft and warming!

Almost too quickly, just catching it in time, he tapped with his middle finger near the knee, twice in succession. Nino's finger stopped, tightening. Then, slowly, Honey Halpern drew it down his leg, three inches in a straight line, and across at a right angle, two inches more. Nino tapped twice, quickly, and it was over. They had hammered out a grammar and they had spoken. Now they could lean back and laugh.

The door opened and Jahncke came in with a tall, heavy-set man dressed in neat business-civilian clothes. O'Connor rose as the newcomer walked past the boys to the small table.

"Hello, Maurice," O'Connor said, his words sharp and cold. "I'm glad you made it. I've been waiting."

"I wouldn't want to miss this," Maurice said. The two men shook hands. They were brothers. The boys could see that by looking at them. Maurice seemed younger, burlier, but rather less well-preserved. He moved with a good show of nervous haste, but he had to force it. He didn't have the natural snap and the crackle of his older brother. The pot-bellied, black-shirted Jahncke had remained just inside the door.

"Here they are," O'Connor said. "All four of them."

Maurice looked them over. He had the same kind of face as

his brother, but the jaws were fuller, more fleshy. The nose was a steel spike driven between cold, bitter eyes.

"Lousy slum trash," Maurice said, coloring his words heavily with loathing. The boys sat quietly and took it. "You'll have to disinfect the place, James." The boys heard Jahncke's loud, short laugh behind them.

"Let's get started," O'Connor said. He picked up one of the lengths of hose. So did Maurice, quickly.

"We'll take the big one first," O'Connor said, pointing his hose at Spinner. "You! Stand up!"

The Spinner looked up at the cop from his stool. His large, warm eyes were full of doubt and confusion. He had always been a trifle slow figuring things out, but all this had him floored. He didn't even know how to start working at it. When would it begin to make sense? The boys watched now and they could see the thick uncertainty on Spinner's face. Then Maurice had charged over and had swung at the Spinner with the rubber hose.

"Get up when you're told!"

The blow landed on the Spinner's arm, near the loose, rangy shoulder. The boy stood up, quickly. It was hard to look at his face.

"What did I do?" the Spinner said, pleading. "I don't know what it's all about. Please, what did I do?"

Maurice swung at him, down across the arms, hard against the chest, slashing at the shoulders. The Spinner backed slowly, not lifting his arms, his young open face crisscrossed with perplexity and with pain.

"What did I do," he kept moaning, and the boys knew that he was crying. They could hear it in his voice. All at once Maurice stopped. He was panting loudly, his full solid cheeks bulging with lack of breath.

"Please, what did I do," the Spinner begged. He was slow, the tall, rangy ball player, slow and dumb and strong and he didn't know that he had been hit, and the way he kept begging meant only one thing—that he had shrugged off all the blows and that the rubber hose hadn't really hurt. It was as clear as all



that to O'Connor, clearer, and shoving his puffing, younger brother furiously aside, he raised his massive arm and crashed the hose viciously into the Spinner's face. The Spinner stumbled and this time the boys *saw* the tears. The hard rubber had struck across the eyes and the nose, and the red blood spurted from the nose, over the face, and down over the tall boy's clothes. The Spinner pulled out a handkerchief and dropped to the concrete floor, his head back, trying to stem the run of his blood.

"Now, you!" O'Connor whirled and shouted. He would handle it from now on, without puffing. Nino stood up slowly, his fingers hooking into his belt. Honey started to stand also, but Jahncke reached out from immediately behind him and yanked him back to the stool. No one had been near him and then a black-shirted arm was tight around his neck under the chin. It had been done very quickly and quietly. Honey sat still, thinking about it and watching Nino.

The cop, O'Connor, ran up to Nino Dilonge. With his free hand he lashed at the boy's face, viciously. Nino reeled back over the floor, almost tripping on his heels. "You're the one says you did it all by yourself?" the cop shouted.

Nino came back slowly, his fingers still hooked into his belt. His head was high, his dark proud face was the face of friendship, nothing of hate in it, nothing of bitterness. Honey Halpern writhed on his stool and the cop, Jahncke, twisted his arm simultaneously at the elbow and at the shoulder blade, so that the pain shot through like hot, pouring lead. It was a cop's trick.

"All by myself," Nino Dilonge said, standing in front of O'Connor. "I didn't want to hurt him. Only beat him up a little. He pulled a wrench, but I didn't want to hurt him. I'm sorry."

"He's still in the hospital, you little bastard!" Maurice shouted. It sounded like he wanted to say more, but the cop, O'Connor, cut him off with a wild, furious cut of the hand.

"I'm sorry," Nino said. He wasn't begging for himself. The look on his face showed that. He was begging for the others, for them, for the Spinner and for Vinny de Angelis and for the Sponge who wasn't there and, Christ God, for Honey Halpern also. Honey bit savagely into his lips, straining to get free, fight-

ing the horrible pain that Jahncke steadily inflicted on his arm. "Anyway I did it all by myself," Nino said.

It was all wrong. Don't beg for us! The cop, O'Connor, snarled like a hideous animal and leaped at the boy. "I'll kill you," he screamed. The hose crashed down into the face, all the cop's strength behind it. The boy shook it off, dazedly, and stood his ground, his fingers in his belt. Again the powerful cop arm went back and again the rubber hose crashed into the face. Still the boy held on, doggedly, his mouth a welter of blood. Honey Halpern fought desperately against the great strength of Jahncke, and steadily the heart-bursting pain mounted from his twisted shoulder. Again the cop arm went all the way back and again smashing into the torn and bleeding face.

"All by myself," Nino said softly, ever so softly, spitting his blood on the stone floor. "I did it all by myself."

A wild cry of torture from the innermost soul of the cop, O'Connor, and again, with insane, demoniacal power, the arm smashed the rubber hose into Nino's face. The boy's legs flew out and he fell over backwards. His head hit the stone floor with a thunder-silencing crash. Honey Halpern lunged to his feet and the pain came, blinding, excruciating, shooting through his skull, and he was out.

He was out less than a minute and then he came back again, still on his feet, his arm screaming with pain. He had to come back for Nino. The boy was flat on the stone floor, his legs, twisted and broken-looking, the blood oozing from all parts of his face. The mouth was a black gash of blood and loose segments of flesh. The eyes were shut and lost in blood. The horror of death rose up from the stone floor.

Maurice screamed first, but then Vinny de Angelis hiding behind his hands and the Spinner creeping away over the stone floor were screaming with him, and Honey Halpern's lungs were bursting and he was drowning with pain but he didn't go out and he didn't scream. He stared at the puffing cop, O'Connor, and he allowed hate to grow inside of him. He welcomed it as sustenance. He expanded his chest to offer it more room and he listened to the screaming and then the screaming stopped. Like



a long, rangy dog, the Spinner crying into the stone floor. Vinny de Angelis whimpering behind the screen of his hands.

Honey Halpern walked up to the cop, O'Connor. His arm was dead and it hung that way and O'Connor knew it and Jahncke knew it. O'Connor waited for him, puffing.

"Get a doctor," Honey said. "Don't waste any time, just get a doctor."

"Yes!" Maurice burst in. "He looks bad, James. Call a doctor right away."

O'Connor looked at his brother steadily, puffing. "Take it easy," he said. "He'll live." They heard Jahncke's short, nasty laugh, but Maurice was beyond all that now.

"I don't care what you think!" he shouted. "That boy may be dead!"

"He isn't dead," O'Connor said. "Shut up."

"How do I know?" Maurice shouted. The color had long since drained from his face. He looked awful. "I'm a respectable business man. I don't want to get mixed up in anything like this. I can't *afford* to get mixed up in anything like this."

"Shut up!" O'Connor roared. He hurled the rubber hose across the room. "Shut your goddam mouth!"

"Get a doctor," Honey Halpern said, quietly. His arm was starting to throb and to grow large as a mountain. His arm and his head, and he had to go on welcoming hate, and he had to work for Nino.

"You sit down," O'Connor said, raising his fist, then dropping it and pointing to the stool. "Stay out of trouble."

"Get a doctor," Honey Halpern said, without moving. His head was so large and light he had to close his eyes to say it. "You bastard. Get a doctor."

"Yes, James!" Maurice shouted. "He's right. Who knows what'll happen this way? That kid looks dead now!"

"He ain't dead," O'Connor yelled. Honey Halpern opened his eyes and looked at Nino. *I'll hold on, Nino. Go away, death. I'll hold on.*

"Please get a doctor."

Jahncke stepped carefully over the stools, his black-shirted arms folded snugly on the great bulge of his belly.

"I've got a way, Jim," he said. O'Connor looked at him sharply and Jahncke continued, calmly, slowly. "The kid does look bad, very bad. It's a pity he hurt himself that much but it was nobody's fault but his own. He thought he could squeeze out through those little windows up there. You see, there ain't no bars, and he figured all he had to do was reach it, pull himself up, and beat it the hell out." Jahncke paused, allowing that much of it to sink in. Then he walked up behind the stool on which Vinny de Angelis was sitting. Vinny tried to shrink away from the cop, but Jahncke was holding him at the back of the neck and Vinny could only sit quietly, his thin shoulders hunched with his terror.

Honey Halpern swayed on his legs and fought it down. Don't listen to the words, Nino. He's only joking, trying to be funny. Just a poor fool trying to make us laugh.

"Please get a doctor!"

From his new position, behind Vinny de Angelis, the cop, Jahncke, took it up again. "So he put a stool up on the table and moved the table over to the wall and started to hoist himself up. The window was a little higher than he figured, so he jumped from the top of the stool and he almost made it but then the table went over and he fell and smacked his head on the floor and injured himself." Jahncke paused, the grin spreading on his thin lips. "Ain't it a shame?"

"Who'll believe that?" Maurice whispered, his voice hoarse with hope.

"Why, Jim," Jahncke said, gazing across the room. "Ain't it the truth?" The hatchet-faced cop watched him steadily. "We even got a witness."

"Who?" Maurice whispered.

"You know who, Jim," Jahncke said, running his free hand through Vinny de Angelis' hair. "This kid here. He saw the whole thing happen, right from the beginning. Didn't you, kid?"

Vinny glanced up quickly, his eyes hunted and lost. "Didn't



you, kid?" The fingers running through his hair, tightening at the roots. The hand around his neck.

"Yare," Vinny de Angelis said. "Sure."

Honey Halpern walked to a stool and sat down. His whole world was bound and circumscribed by pain, but he wasn't giving up. He was only resting.

"You'll remember what you saw, won't you kid?" Jahncke said. Then he released his grip, both hands. Vinny de Angelis quivered and dropped to his knees. Then he crawled on his knees across the stone floor toward the hatchet-faced cop, O'Connor.

"Go on," Jahncke encouraged, his arms back on his pot-belly. "Tell it to him, kid."

"Don't hit me," Vinny de Angelis begged, on his knees on the stone floor. "I saw it happen. The whole thing. I swear I saw it happen just the way he said it."

O'Connor stared down at him, his lips drawn tightly together. "Get up," he said.

"Don't hit me," Vinny pleaded. "I swear I saw it."

O'Connor turned and walked quickly to the door. Maurice helped Vinny de Angelis to his feet and then the two of them started for the door. The cop, Jahncke, trailed them slowly, walking backwards, surveying the whole room, the spreading smile huge on his lips.

In the middle of the night, Fleckner came. A thin, stoop-shouldered cop let him in and together they looked things over, quickly. Fleckner was a small, compact man with a carefully trimmed mustache. He was dressed in very expensive clothes. After about a minute he beckoned angrily to the stoop-shouldered cop.

"Call an ambulance," he said. The cop nodded and left the room.

Honey Halpern watched Fleckner come over. He was sitting on the stone floor, holding the bloody head of Nino Dilonge on his thighs, doggedly fighting the desire for unconsciousness that had risen higher than his throat and was lapping at his

mouth. He was combating it from all sides. He was half-dead with thirst, and unconsciousness would be the coolest water ever drawn. The pain in his arm had brought him within an inch of delirium, and unconsciousness would soothe and salve that pain. He was almost out of his mind with the plain fact of Nino dead across his legs, and if he would go out he would at least have that much peace from the horror of knowing it.

But there was one thing left in his life that he had to hold on to. He would get that now, out of Fleckner's mouth. If he dropped away into unconsciousness he might be robbed of it forever. He couldn't think beyond that.

"What happened, kiddo?" Fleckner asked, standing over him in his impeccable clothes.

"What?" Honey Halpern said. He wasn't sure of it. Was that the sound of speech? He had to take himself away from the closeness of death. After all these hours he wasn't sure that life was still ahead to be lived. After all these hours of dying with Nino, suffering through all of Nino's last great pain, watching the sudden perspiration bubble up through the matting of blood on Nino's forehead, listening in anguish to Nino Dilonge moaning on the vast approaches to death, then watching the perspiration cool and vanish and the moaning stop.

"What happened, kiddo?" Fleckner repeated. He looked at the long, loose body of Spinner Olins stretched along the floor a few feet away, face down. Then he looked down at Nino again.

"The cops killed him," Honey Halpern said. Slowly, he was leaving death behind.

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Fleckner bent over Nino quickly and briefly. "He looks pretty bad," he said.

"He's dead," Honey Halpern told him.

"The ambulance ought to be here soon. There isn't much traffic at this hour of the night. They'll take care of him, fix him up." Fleckner spoke quickly, convincingly. He had it all



arranged. He would get them out of the precinct house, all of them. He knew what to do. He was a great arranger.

"They can take their time," Honey Halpern said. He was in sight of home now. "They can take plenty of time because it's too damn late." Almost like water on his parched lips.

"What about him?" Fleckner asked, pointing to the Spinner. "Is he dead also?"

"He's sleeping it off," Honey Halpern said. "He took a beating." Like water, because Fleckner couldn't shake out of it. "Listen to me, you bastard. When did Lupo tell you about us?"

"Who?" Fleckner looked at him coldly, the small trimmed mustache withdrawing into the lip.

"Lupo. Lou Predo."

"Predo called me about an hour ago. Watch what you're saying!"

"You're a sonofabitch liar," Honey Halpern said. He looked down at Nino's face and his eyes darkened. His head spun violently and he bit deep into his lips to keep it off. He couldn't raise his head, but he didn't go out. The pain in his arm now kept him awake. In a way, it was something to be thankful for.

But if Fleckner wasn't a liar and had stated the truth then there wasn't anything in life either. He might as well die with Nino Dilonge. He would want to die then. But Fleckner had to be a liar. Everything about him pointed to that, his assured voice, his nervousness, the fulsome dapperness that stuck out a mile in front of him. But far above all that, because there had to be something in life. In an ocean of deceit and cruelty and selfishness and indifference there had to be one speck of dry ground. One spot that you could hook your fingers into and keep afloat on. He raised his throbbing head.

"You're a lousy, sonofabitch liar."

Fleckner paced up and back across the large room, systematically working out patterns of squares and end-on triangles on the stone floor. Honey Halpern watched him steadily, waiting for it to end. He wouldn't go off now. He might die, but he wouldn't go off. Then Fleckner came back quickly. Now, in

this rat hole where death lurked, life was going to try to vindicate itself, now.

"Look, kiddo," Fleckner started. Then he stopped and started again, more slowly, his eyes turned away from the two young boys. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I didn't know how it was going to turn out. Lupo did get after me a couple of hours ago, but I was in a card game. I didn't see any reason to rush over. How did I know the cops would pull anything like this? I figured they'd keep you in here a couple of hours, no harm done, and then I'd come over and get you all out. So I hung around for a few more hands, and before I knew it, it was this late. If I had known—"

"O.K.," Honey Halpern interrupted him. It was a strange time for victory, holding the friend of your greatest years dead on your legs. A strange place also.

"I'm sorry, kiddo."

"Yare."

"Honest I am."

"When did Lupo tell you to come for us?"

"About five hours ago."

Yes, the notes of victory were sweet and crystal clear. Like water. Honey Halpern was laughing along his bruised lips. Like cool sweet water.

"Say, kiddo," Fleckner said, quickly estimating, watching the kid's laughter. "If Lupo asks you, tell him I came long ago, right after the damage. Just in case he asks you. You'll do that much for me, won't you kiddo?"

Honey Halpern laughed lightly. He didn't have the strength to make it louder, but it was enough to show how he felt. "Sure," he said.

The ambulance came and the interne and the driver carried Nino Dilonge out on a clean white stretcher. Then they roused the Spinner and carefully walked him into the drawn-up ambulance in front of the precinct house. The interne motioned to Honey Halpern to get in also, but the thin-faced boy cursed him and walked away. The interne shrugged his neat white shoulders and the ambulance silently drove off.



Honey Halpern walked down Lindley Avenue in the dead Brooklyn night. Fleckner was taking care of something in the precinct house. A new shift had come in and Fleckner was talking it over with a young, efficient-looking cop behind the heavy desk. The hell with him, let him talk. He turned down Stratford Street. It was a stiff walk to his home and he had to go easy with his strength. A cold southeast wind blew up from the bay. He bent into the wind, carefully, his mind as clear as a wide span of sky. There was nothing along the length of the street except a few parked cars. He could say it now without confusion, without interference. Even the racking pain in his arm helped to make it dry and crisp.

It had to do with his arm, yes, and with hate and with hope. If his arm would ever cure there was hope. If he could mold his growing hate into an instrument of power, a weapon, there was hope. His arm *would* cure. It might take six months. It might take a year, or two years. He was young and strong and his arm would cure. In time, in the good ripeness of time, his arm would be right and he would be ready for his instrument—his gun. He would take up his gun. He would avenge himself, and Nino Dilonge, and all the horrible wreckage of young life that he had witnessed in his years of growth. This he would do with his gun.

PART THREE

HARVEST

*Chapter One*

V

ARONA spun the low, twelve-cylinder car into the gravel road, cutting sharply without losing any speed. The heavy wheels dug into the loose gravel and the car took the short hill smoothly. A hundred feet up, the road ended in a patch of short-cropped grass where a number of other cars had been parked. Varona swung into the patch and shut off the ignition.

"Exactly 112 miles from Brownsville to the Shelton Lake Hotel," he announced, grinning at them. Whitey Ward grunted and opened the rear door. He stepped out of the car ponderously, stretching the stiffness in his muscles and joints. Behind him, Honey Halpern dropped down on the grass, light as a cat, lithe as a panther. He was as fresh now as when he had entered the car three hours ago. He had never felt better in his life.

He looked up toward the large, rambling hotel that spread out across a small tableland that overhung one end of the little lake. The building was a sprawling frame hulk, the white paint set off by dozens of small, blue-trimmed windows. A wide lofty porch ran the full length of the front of the hotel, facing the lake.

Again Honey Halpern felt the hard, brittle tightness around his eyes. He was having trouble adjusting his vision, his sense of perspective and balance. A range of the Catskill hills reared up quickly beyond the small, blue-green lake. The sweep of these wooded hills climbing up out of the flat earth affected him strongly. It had been that way all morning, riding up from the lowlands of Jersey and then hitting up through the first green-rolling hills. The trip had been a lark for Whitey and Mickey Varona. Varona had made the trip innumerable times. He was a



contact man for the Brownsville boys. The summer season in the Catskill Mountains was something the Brownsville boys were very much interested in. Traveling dice games, free-spending numbers and bookmaking takes, all-night stud, slot machines, pinballs, girls, and floating loan-shark trade . . . all these added up. The Brownsville boys, when summer came around, thought of the Catskill Mountains as they thought of home.

Honey Halpern slowly swept his eyes across the wide scope of lake, hill and forest. It was a new experience, this first trip to the mountains, and he was as excited as a kid finding a five-dollar bill on the street. His eyes sailed out to a field of light yellowy green draping the shoulder of one of the hills beyond the lake.

He grinned and rocked slightly on his toes. He looked down at the trodden grass that rolled right up to the base of the hotel. How could he lose it? They had come up to the mountain country to kill a guy called Posnack. He hardly knew the reason for it, but it was his, Honey Halpern's job, for two-fifty, to rid the earth forever of this guy Posnack. They had come up to the mountains, and for Whitey and Mickey Varona it was a lark. For two-fifty it was going to be a lark for him also.

He saw her standing alone on the porch, slim and erect, wearing a cherry-red sweater and a full navy skirt. As he came up over the easy slope of the lawn the girl sat down in a wicker chair and swinging around she saw him. At once they were keenly aware of each other.

He dropped into the wicker chair next to the girl lightly, easily. He studied the girl's lines, the soft rich swell her breasts made in the red sweater, the white line of her neck rising to the black-lush net of her hair. Suddenly, he was rushing all over himself, inside, because of this girl.

"You up here on a vacation?" Some of his eagerness spilled over into his voice, splashing and swimming in it. The girl didn't answer. There was a faint droop in the lines of her small red mouth, a curl downward that could come with extreme weariness. Honey Halpern searched the side of her face closely.

She was a young girl, no more than twenty, with a fine dark face, high wide cheekbones that were close to the skin, a rather strong nose. Her eyes were too deep in her head but they were large and clear and the hair came down over the forehead in soft loose waves and that made the eyes all right also. She wasn't more than twenty, with her wet lips drooping, and she had a face and lines that he was warm and wild and shouting about.

"Are you up here on a vacation?" She didn't answer. It took several seconds for him to awake and realize that he had spoken to her twice without answer. Somehow that mattered, even with this girl. Angrily, he leaned back in the chair. There had been something else also—the unruliness. He had to master that damned, coloring unruliness.

"I asked you something, girlie. I asked you twice." Better this time. This in the level hard monotone that was part of his offensive and defensive armor, used as a weapon, used as a guard.

The girl turned her head, half-facing him. "Yare," she said. "I'm up here on a ten-year vacation. I'm the Duchess of Windsor's sister." Her eyes were held away from him. The droop in her lips was less now. He could see how she was drawing herself together, against him.

"I could stand up and slap the teeth out of your mouth!" He had to stop that. He couldn't let her draw away completely. Even as he had let the menace creep out for her to hear and recognize, he had been unable to handle it right, to hold it sucked dry of all emotion, free of inner turbulence.

"There's a lake, brother. Go jump in it," the girl said. Honey Halpern rose out of his seat, ready to leap, to strike. Then slowly, he fell back.

He wasn't sure of himself. It was a hard thing to face and he hated to admit it, but it was there. He didn't know what to do. Of course, he could hurt her.

In how many different ways could he hurt this girl? He could hammer her with his fist, he could grip the back of her white neck from where he sat, yank her up out of her chair, throw



her around hard until her bones cracked. He could do all that without straining.

He looked up and saw Mickey Varona come rolling down the long porch, Whitey Ward lolling behind, taking it easy. Quickly, he clamped down on his rage, setting his jaws against it. He mustn't reveal it to these men who knew him. Right now, that was the only thing that mattered. Varona came up close, his dark, battered face set in its usual wide grin, the eyes ogling and strained. He made a loud clucking sound with his teeth.

"Leave the guy alone a minute and already he's out making hay."

The dining room was a long, narrow box, jammed tightly with large, circular tables, all of them crowded. Varona had arranged for a corner table near the space set aside for the orchestra. The orchestra, following the pattern of most Catskill Mountain houses, consisted of an upright piano, a set of drums, several music stands, and a number of players' chairs, now unoccupied. This was Saturday lunch and the players were eating. Sunday was the only time music came with lunch.

Their waiter was a short, shrunken, narrow-browed man named Leo. Leo set up their places, not too carefully, not particularly hurrying himself. The meal was in full swing, some four hundred men and women (no children in the main dining room) getting it down, the waiters and busboys hustling and sweating all over the place. A steady beat of sound filled the room, a mixture of voices and the sounds of eating and of cutlery rattling against a multitude of dishes. It was all confusion and noise and hurrying.

Honey Halpern sat facing the door, his back to the room, hearing Varona but not listening to him. Staring, without believing it, he saw the cherry-red sweater frame the open doorway, and then slowly, hesitantly, the girl came into the dining room. She looked out across the jumble of tables, briefly, then wandered over to the piano in the corner. Lightly, quietly, she began to pick at the keys.

She hadn't seen him. Honey was sure of that. She had glanced

out over the room, tentatively, then had dropped it and had turned to the piano. She hadn't looked his way. She had come quickly, but what was she looking for, or was she looking for anything?

Honey Halpern picked up his spoon and began eating. A fat boy appeared with a pitcher of water and poured their glasses full. Honey swung around in his seat before the kid could break away.

"Wait a minute, kid. I want to ask you something."

"What?" The fat boy began to pull away.

"Stand still when I'm talking to you."

"I'm standing still."

Honey Halpern knew he had to keep it out of his voice. He couldn't let the kid hear it in his voice. He hesitated, holding the kid with his eyes.

"Why isn't she eating?" He nodded toward the girl at the piano. The fat boy turned, following through, and a quick smile swam across his wet face.

"She ain't a guest," the fat boy said, grinning. There was enough in the grin to make Honey Halpern want to smack it off the face.

"What is she?"

"I don't know—exactly." The fat boy was enjoying it, speaking very slowly.

"When does she eat?"

The fat boy turned to look at the girl again. Honey could just hear her picking out the notes. There wasn't any tune. Just some notes, played at random, quietly.

"She manages all right," the fat boy said. "Don takes care of her pretty good even though Zucker doesn't like it."

"Who's Zucker?"

"The boss."

"Who's Don?"

The fat boy looked across the room toward the tables along the porch wall and pointed. "There he is, the tall guy with the blond hair."

"The waiter?"



"He's the head waiter. We call him Captain Kummer. He's a nice guy, but you've got to call him Captain, not Don."

"If I were nosy I would ask what's bothering you, Honey?" Whitey had finished his grapefruit. To kill time, he was tearing a piece of bread with his thick powerful fingers, methodically putting the strips into his mouth.

"I can guess," Varona said, his mouth spread, grinning.

"When I ask you, you'll tell me," Honey Halpern said.

Varona was a much larger man, heavier, with massive shoulders. He was accustomed to being treated with a certain amount of deference, but there wasn't anything he could do with a crazy hophead like this Halpern.

Varona sipped the clear cold water in his glass. His heavy face looked drawn and ashy beneath the dark surface skin. "Where's that dumb bastard waiter?"

"Yeh," Whitey said. "He'd better bring a lot more bread." Quietly, keeping his eyes on Honey Halpern. Honey felt it and lifted his head and met Whitey's large, washed-blue eyes. He half grinned at Whitey, nervously, shutting it off from everyone else in the room. Then he rose to his feet and walked to the piano. The girl looked up at him and Honey Halpern stared into her eyes. The girl held for a time, then she looked down at the worn, yellowed keys.

"We're three at our table," Honey Halpern said. Her eyes had been deep and black.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"The table can take four. We only have three." Not beautiful like Mock's girls were, all carefully selected, the best line in Brownsville. This girl, Renee, couldn't match Mock's girls, yet she was a thousand miles ahead of them—for him. She held her head poised, anticipating action. She was a battler, this girl, and the way her small mouth drooped and the black eyes receded deep behind the bulwark of the high strong cheekbones, she had been beaten, many times, but all that didn't mean anything. That was like salt in the ocean.

"I said I was glad to hear it."

"Don't talk to me like that," he said, and his voice was full

of it, full of the weakness and the softness. "I'm asking you to sit down at our table and eat with us." He stood over her, sick and unbelieving, his chin digging into his chest, his world running out. The girl trailed her long fingers over the keys, jumbling the notes, as though she didn't know he was there. Then she looked up at him and a small wild smile was laughing along her mouth and the deep eyes were thrust forward so that he could see both the excitement and the foreboding bubbling up in them.

"O.K., brother," she said and she was really laughing. "You asked for it!" She stood up and ran her hand through her thick, loose-combed hair, arching her back so that the shoulders tugged at the red sweater, the rise of her breasts blossoming as with sunlight. She placed her hand on his arm, the long fingers digging into the thin cloth of his coat. Her fingers were long but they weren't scrawny. They were strong fingers and that was of importance in itself.

"My name is Renee," the girl said. "If I sit down at the table, things are going to happen. Does that suit you?"

"That suits me." He almost had his voice the way he wanted it now. He didn't know how long he could hold it. He wasn't going to talk too much.

"When you were looking up my dress," she said, the wildness flowing in her eyes, "did you see very much?"

He had to hold it out. "Plenty," he said, hoarsely, his head swimming.

"What can you offer me?" The girl was only slightly shorter than he, and about as broad. She was looking far and deep into his eyes, and his head was up now, erect, held high. She was going to be his. His girl. Suddenly she let go of his arm and brought her hand up in a fist, short jabbing it through the air in front of her.

"I shouldn't talk that way," she said. Her hand dropped in a quick, tired thrust, all her lines dipping with it.

"Plenty," he said, his throat warm and rasping.

She looked up at him, quickly, only her eyes smiling. "You sound like you're in the plenty business."



"Plenty," he said, but he wasn't smiling yet, not even in his eyes. "I've got plenty for a girl like you."

She looked deep into him with her wild-smiling eyes, and then not only his eyes, but all his face—his lips, his cheeks and the taut skin over his temples—was smiling. He put out his hand to touch her, but she laughed teasingly, the deep smiling eyes black and beautiful over the high cheekbones.

"You can wait, can't you?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Not plenty?"

"No. Not plenty."

Her hand was on his arm and she ran it along the muscle, firmly, with her strong fingers. She did this with ease, in an offhand way that could mean nothing, and yet he knew that with the girl and with himself it drove clear to the very core of meaning. He flexed his arm, tightening the muscle, and she was looking into his eyes almost from his level and again, with new force, he knew that this girl would be his.

"What's your name?" she asked, taking her hand away.

"You won't laugh?" He looked out across the crowded room, over the great feeding throng engulfed in its self-made jungle of noise. Then he turned to the girl and she looked serious, waiting for him, and that was funny.

"No. I won't laugh." She saw how he was smiling and the serious look remained, but weaker. "Maybe," she said.

"Honey," he said. She looked at him strangely, the tanned cheekbones standing out, sharpening her face.

"That's my name. Honey." He was really smiling.

"Was it always that?" You didn't begin by believing.

"It could have been something else. But now it's Honey."

"When did now begin?"

He laughed and this time he had his fingers on her shoulder, pressing into the sweater lightly, and the shoulder was firm and sleek under his fingers. Then he let go.

"I'm not kidding you," he said and he had forgotten about his voice, which was now friendly and rose in friendly sounds,

and fell also, rounding out the friendliness. "It's really my name. Honey."

"Honey?" She was still not ready to believe it.

"Yes," he said. He glanced at Whitey and Varona at the table. Whitey had his back turned, but Varona was watching them.

"Let's sit down and eat," Honey Halpern said.

"All right, Mr. Plenty. Mr. Plenty Honey." She had that serious look again, the lips of her mouth pulled in and drawn. Honey watched it come back, suddenly, sharply.

"What are you afraid of?" He said it the way he had to, hard and flat. She felt the sting of it.

"Who's afraid?"

"When I'm around nothing can happen for you to worry about. Remember that!"

"O.K., Mr. Honey Plenty." She looked tired, her face peaked and sharp. He didn't like it that way. They walked over to the table, Varona looking quickly across the room as they approached. Leo burst through the swinging doors, carrying a tray shoulder high.

"I met an old friend of mine." Honey Halpern spoke down at them, his voice steady and certain. "I haven't seen her in years. Her name is Renee. She's eating with us."

"Suits me," Whitey said, nothing in his broad, pasty face, the broken nose ugly, but not sneering.

"This little guy is Whitey Ward," Honey Halpern said.

"A friend of Honey's is a friend of mine," Varona piped up. Honey didn't look at him.

"That's Mickey Varona," he said, watching the girl. Renee was smiling at the two men, her shoulders high and straight, and Honey Halpern didn't want to look at Varona because he didn't want to see Varona staring through the girl's sweater.

"You sit here," he said. The girl slid onto the chair, with grace, and he sat down next to her. Their chairs were pretty close together. It was a small table.

Leo was standing over them, his right arm bent under the tray. He stood that way for some time without moving. He was



staring down at the girl. His small, snouted face was wrinkled and frozen in the manner of his stare, which was that of seeing something for the first time, and that thing a clod of dirt. A strange and perhaps exotic clod of dirt, but a clod of dirt. Honey Halpern saw it and he went slack all over, but he held it that way, waiting.

"Set up a place for this lady and get going," Honey Halpern said, controlling himself.

Whitey looked at the boy, saw the wild rage on his face, the sharp awful look in the gray eyes. He sat down again, very slowly, very ponderous and strong.

"Move your carcass, Punchy," Varona chimed in, glaring at the little man. The little man drew himself up, standing stiffly, summoning together all of his snouty dignity and stubbornness.

"I'm handling this, Varona," Honey Halpern said, not turning his head. He was speaking to the waiter. "Start all over again, with the grapefruit." The fat busboy had come up close and was listening to him with a wet smile on his face. "Bring out all the things she'll need, knife, fork and spoons." He still had the control, but it was very close to the surface. Only Whitey knew just how close.

"I don't wait on her," Leo said. He didn't recognize them. He was too dumb to recognize their type, too dumb to realize that they had to be treated with respect, that you didn't argue with them unless you had something to back your argument. "Even if Zucker would allow it, I don't wait on her," he said, in his ignorance, his blind, dignified, stubborn ignorance.

"Listen, waiter," Honey Halpern began, and Whitey saw it gushing up through the boy's control. "I'm going to rap the teeth out of your mouth. I'm going to rap all the teeth out of your mouth if you stand there like that another minute!"

Leo looked down at him quickly. This was a little different. He could understand this. He was beginning to see past his dignified fog. The fat boy slipped away through the web of close-packed tables. Renee gazed into space, a thin, glittery smile on her tanned face.

"He's right, Mister Honey Plenty," she said. "Zucker wouldn't allow it. Zucker'll get sore."

An instant of quiet, then Mickey Varona laughed, a loud, explosive guffaw of a laugh, before he was able to prevent it. Then he was on his feet in a sudden flurry of motion. "I've got to get a drink," Varona said. "I've got to find me a drink." He went out the door to the porch.

"Even if Zucker says it's all right, I don't wait on her," Leo said. How could he serve her? That Zucker should have that on him the rest of the season, that he served her right there in the main dining room, a full course meal, bringing her knives and spoons and napkins?

Honey Halpern stared at him with wild, insane eyes. He would have to do it, right here in front of all these people. His hand was trembling, like a struck wire, but when he would bring the gun out, then his hand would be steady as a ton of lead. He knew that and he knew that in a moment the trembling would leave him.

Whitey began speaking to the waiter, very earnestly. "Beat it, buddy. Beat it out of here. Don't wait on us. We'll get along. Beat it out of here while you're still able to walk. I mean it." Then he was on his feet, between Honey and the waiter, facing Honey Halpern. Small, round beads of perspiration spread along his forehead, rimming the thin brown hair. His face was very white.

"Listen to what I'm telling you," he said. "Beat it out of here!"

The busboy was back now, with a tall, blond man in a waiter's jacket, the one he had called Captain Kummer. Whitey motioned to Kummer, the little beads of perspiration swelling on his forehead.

"We're not getting any service," he said. "What the hell's wrong here we can't get a little service?"

Kummer looked at Leo. He was a tall, handsome, college-boy type, older than he looked. "You're handling this table?"

"I don't wait on her. Suppose Zucker should know?"

"Don't worry about Zucker," Kummer said. That had done



something to him also. It was as clear as a crack of bright lightning that the mention of Zucker had done something to Captain Kummer also. Whitey saw that. He hoped that the kid would see it.

"What kind of a lousy, stinking, dirty, crap-hole dump is this?" Honey Halpern had exploded, and Whitey knew that the kid had seen it also. He felt better now. He could relax. "I'm paying for everything we get here, every lousy, goddam thing," Honey raved on, and Whitey listened to him, smiling inside, and the large beads of perspiration rolled down the sides of his doughy face. "Get that bastard out of here before I split his skull!" Kummer must have known that it was all over also. He listened to Honey Halpern politely, the eyebrows on his college-man's face slightly raised, listening. When Honey was through, Kummer turned to Leo, very evenly.

"I'll service this table myself. Pay attention to your other tables. You must be far behind by now."

Leo held his ground, staring at them all with narrow-browed dignified vindication. Then he started to move away.

## Chapter Two

H

HE HAD his arm around her, just below the shoulders, and she was leaning into him as they walked down the long, grassy slope of the hill to the lake.

The girl turned slightly to the left, following the path, and there, centered unexpectedly in a tiny cove, they came across the boat landing, a short, snub dock strung out over a half-dozen old, water-soaked piles. The backwash on both sides was stagnant and choked with the fat pads of water lilies, the sun turning it into a thick, greenish, splotchy-white scum at the edge of the blue water. The boats were tied up at the long end of the dock in clear water, and they picked a dry, round-bottomed one with high-off-the-water sides, and Honey Halpern unfastened the old rope and pushed the boat off, leaping after it lightly and surely and with joy in his heart.

The boat rocked as he teetered it from side to side, flat-footing to the center seat, the gunwales almost lapping water. The girl looked down into the blue-green water and laughed.

"Watch out or we fall into the soup."

She was facing him, laughing, and he stood there carelessly, rocking the boat, letting it run out with the momentum of his leap. Then he sat down and lithe as a reed he squared his legs against the sides and dipped the oars into the water. He hadn't said anything yet.

"Butter," he said, his voice almost laughing, looking at her tanned legs. She wore anklets that just reached above the gumshoes, and the hair on her legs was thin and black, fine in the sunlight.

He pulled the oars in deliberately, his gray eyes searching her face, then he leaned forward, stretching an arm, and with



his quick fingers he cupped her breast, burrowing into the sweater, feeling the great softness underneath. She shut her eyes, her head drooping, and he tightened his fingers.

"Let go," she said, her voice low, vague.

Suddenly he was on his knees in front of her, creeping along the curved slats of the boat. He raised himself quickly and kissed her, catching a tiny piece of her nose before he found her lips.

"You can't do that to me," she said. She was laughing a little, tossing her long hair back over her head. Black fur in the sunlight.

"Who says I can't?" He dug his shoes into the sides of the boat and dipped the oars again.

"You're anxious," she said. He was rowing more effectively now, quietly. It was a good feeling. He could pick this up quickly, just by concentrating on it and figuring it out. It felt good seeing the boat glide over the blue-green water. With this girl in the boat, watching him, it felt good. He didn't care to do much talking.

"Sure," he said, bringing the oars up neatly. They were moving now.

"You're plenty anxious, Mister Plenty." He watched her wriggle around on the seat, curling up with her arms clasped about her knees so that all of her could fit on the board. The skirt dropped away and most of the white thigh showed. He didn't say anything.

"Suppose I say no. What will you do, shoot me?"

He had watched her say it and there hadn't been anything there. No ripple across the throat, no tightening of the skin around the eyes, nothing.

"You won't say no." He answered it that way. He didn't want to say any more. They were well out now, in a perfect field of sun-flecked water. He leaned back, his arms propped against the seat, gazing out toward the hills that ran away gently.

"Want to know what I'm doing up here?" She paused and turned around toward him. He looked at the too deep eyes,

the thick black ridges of eyebrows. It was a good thing they were in a boat in the middle of a lake. He wouldn't have looked at her twice the way she was now.

"I came up here with another girl," Renee said, staring across the bright lake. "We got tired of hanging around the candy store on the corner. All you do is hang around and everybody is trying for stuff and then maybe somebody with an extra dime comes along and buys you a soda."

They were approaching the headland that jutted out, tongue-fashion, narrowing the upper end of the lake. A broad canopy of trees led down almost to the water's edge.

"Some girls would stay in their houses, doing their school work. We would strut past the corners, shaking our fannies. That was age fourteen."

They were in close now and he pulled heavily with his right oar, swinging into a small muddy bank that opened among the reeds. The boat reared as it hit, then stuck, and Honey Halpern sprang from a crouch, hurdling the patch of mud. He felt the jolt of the gun over his heart, the light holster hugging the skin.

Renee sat stiffly, her head high, almost posing. She knew he had eyes. "There's a sign there," she said, pointing to a board that was nailed to a post that leaned out from the shoreline. "It says private property, keep off." She looked up at him. "That means you," she said.

"So what?"

"So how the hell do I get out of this damned submarine?"

Honey Halpern laughed. Right back, and with an overhand cross, or better. "Take it easy," he said. He stepped down gingerly, cakewalking the mud. There was a length of anchor rope tied to the prow and he wrapped it around his palm and tugged back. His shoes sank inches into the brown mud, but the boat rode up the bank, easily.

"O.K.," he said. "Now jump!" She jumped, landing lightly on the solid ground.

"How's that?"

"Pretty good," he said. "You're pretty good all around."



She had her hands on her hips, standing slightly higher than he.

"You find out quick," she said.

She was his girl now, but he had to have her right. He worked up the bank carefully until he was at her level. She was a little too tall, her heavy black hair seeming to top him.

"Yeah," he said. "I find out plenty."

She looked at him and then she was laughing explosively and he had his arms around her, tightening. "Cut it out!" He snapped the words fiercely, increasing the pressure of his arms. She quieted down and he kissed her. She held on for a long time.

He was wild about her now. His hands leaped out, mussing the softness of her hair, then twisting and turning into the depths of the red sweater. She wrenched herself away, crying out the pain.

"Let go, you sonofabitch!"

He stood beside her, his hands hanging limply, grotesquely. He felt unsteady, shaky on his feet, and he shut his eyes against the dizziness that swept through him. Renee was holding her hands to her breasts, gently cupping them in the cherry-red sweater, crying with the pain. He opened his eyes when the dizziness was past, in seconds, and watched her softening the hurt. In a whisper he said it, his throat parched.

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Drop dead!" In the middle of the crying, the anger tearing through. "Drop dead, you bastard!"

It was all over now. Like a clean wind rushing through him he knew that it was over, that it would never happen again. This was his girl and never again would he hurt her. With that one act of torture he had pushed everything down. Everything that had come before was buried now by the quickness and sharpness of pain, all the men that had touched her, all the efforts to hungrily caress her body, all the times she had been with those who could help her, who could offer her something more than hours of standing on

the sour, dismal street corners of Brooklyn. Together, in their summer, they would bloom anew, surer.

He turned quickly and walked inland, circling the trees, trampling the reeds and the small chop grass. He didn't wait for the girl, his glad heart tilting to him that she would follow, that this was the beginning. The thin, low branches of the young trees struck him as he walked, his life singing, and he heard the girl Renee behind him, her straight legs swishing the scrub grass, her shoulders, her arms, her body from the top of her head down reopening the path he had made. They went that way more than a hundred feet, the growth thinning, until Honey broke precipitously into a small clearing ankle deep in rich summer grass.

He stood stone quiet, the fire roaring through him, waiting for the girl. She came stumbling through the brush, without pause, her head bent, and he caught her face and lifting her chin he kissed her lightly. Her lips were warm.

Renee walked away from him, straggling aimlessly over the plot of thick grass. He followed her, the fire leaping quickly. He held her tightly, without kissing, letting it cut through him like wild steam. All at once she went limp, her head hanging. He let go.

"What, Renee?" He was burning, but he didn't want it to go wrong. "What?"

She looked up, her eyes heavy and inert in their deep sockets. A half smile flickered across her lips and died. He saw the lines of strain under her jaw and it was beginning to come clear.

"I don't know what it is," Renee said, her voice soaked with apology. "Let's lie down."

They stretched out on the luxurious, fragrant grass, in the clean pure circle of the trees, on their backs, close to each other. He felt it from the earth now, clearly, and he would help her. But he wouldn't say anything. It was up to her to find her way of telling him. He raised up on his elbows and looked down at her. Her eyes were shut and she breathed slowly. He watched her breasts ride with the movement of



air for the lungs beneath. She would tell him. In her time, with his help, she would say it.

He sat up, shifting his position so that he more nearly faced her. Yes, he would help her. Carefully, he reached both hands under and gently arched her back. The girl opened her eyes and watched him.

"Honey?"

"Yes?"

She sat up quickly, her face close to his. Without effort, he could reach out and kiss her. He felt as light as a house made of straw wisps. He leaned back, his fingers sinking into the grass.

"Please," she said. "Not like this, Honey. Not with you, not just like this."

He looked deep into her black eyes. In his heart he was singing. He was beginning to choke with his happiness.

"You're not angry, Honey. I can tell you're not angry." He looked down at her and saw that beneath her sweater her body was full and alive and vibrant.

"Fix your sweater," he said.

She did, quickly, and now that it had begun it was all going to come out. "With another guy maybe. I'm no kid. I've been around. Maybe even now, if it were Don Kummer, or another waiter, or the bellhop, or even Zucker, or with Don Kummer, yes, if you had never come. I'm telling you this and you ought to kill me, but you won't. You're not even angry. I know it."

"Shut up," he said.

He was now ready, his life at its full flowering. In one breath he swallowed all the pain, all the sorrow of his years of deprivation. He clasped the girl tightly in his arms.

It took a long time going back over the lake. Honey Halpern rowed easily, studying it, working the boat into the strong currents, enjoying the feel of the boat knifing through the water. They were out in the wide part, their prow pointed at the hotel. A light breeze curled along with them, cooling

their skins. They sank back into the relaxing push of the breeze, watching the wide, cool sun edging the hills.

Whitey Ward watched them come in, his hands in the pockets of his expensive lightweight trousers, standing solidly in his white sport shoes on the weather-beaten planks of the old dock. Honey Halpern rowed in closely, wedging into a space between the idle, tied-up boats that lined the dock. He tossed the rope to Whitey, without warning, and Whitey grabbed for it, jerking his hands out of his pockets, but the rope hit him and bounced off.

"What the hell's the matter," Honey Halpern said, standing in the boat. Whitey looked down at him, broad-shouldered, silent, his enormous right hand held out in a fist. Honey tossed the rope again and Whitey caught it this time, deftly, and tied it to the stringpiece. While he did this, with his slow, sure fingers, Honey Halpern gripped the edge of the side timber and with a quick, springing leap reached the dock, on his feet.

"We been waiting for you," Whitey said, his broad, pasty face placid, unmoving. Honey Halpern turned his back on him, adjusting the shoulder holster through his shirt. He leaned down to help the girl.

"Hey, Whitey," he said, his voice strident and harsh, masking the softness, "I want you to know a girl named Renee. You're a pretty good guy, Whitey, when you're not drunk, and I want you to know a swell girl."

Whitey leaned against the rear fender, heavy, strong, calm. It didn't fit in, but the kid could have it. As long as it didn't interfere, if by some miracle it didn't interfere, the kid could have it. He pursed his lips, the heavy jaws standing out strongly, watching Honey Halpern swagger in his fancy coat.

"You're going to see a lot more of her, Whitey," Honey Halpern said, stepping close to the girl. "You and me both."

He turned to the girl, erect, clean-moving. "He's a great guy," he said loudly, his back to Whitey. "You can't beat him when he ain't drunk." He stuck his hand into his pants' pocket, pulling out folded bills.



"Here's ten, twenty," he said, handing the bills to Renee. The girl took them, a weak smile on her lips. It was almost night now. Honey's gray eyes looked black, softer than in daylight. He took her arm and slowly they walked away.

"I'll go that way," she said, pointing to the path that cut up the embankment. "It's a lot shorter and no guests around."

He watched her walk through the dark, up the narrow, lifting path, taking the slope easily, her body bent forward and slowly losing shape with distance. He reached into his coat pocket and took out cigarettes and matches. Then, carefully circling the parked automobiles, he walked back to where he knew Whitey was waiting.

## Chapter Three

V

VARONA WAS already there, talking to Whitey Ward, a cigar in the corner of his loose mouth. He seemed excessively high and jovial, as if he were trying to hide something from himself, something that showed on him like a runaway rash.

"It's no good in the bushes, Honey," Varona said. "Take it from a guy what knows." Jovial, sucking the corners, keeping it friendly, friendly.

"Shut up, you bastard!"

"What'sa matter, Honey?" Varona's surprise was large-mouthed, overheavy.

Whitey jerked his hands violently, the meaning carrying over. The worst thing to have with you on anything like this was a drunk. Particularly with someone like Honey Halpern around, with the kid's awful, wire-snapping tension adding to it.

"Hey, Whitey? What the hell's the matter?" Varona pushed his face close to Whitey, the cigar held loosely, almost falling. He tried to peer into Whitey's face, but it was dark, and Whitey turned away.

"Nothing, Mickey," he said, keeping it all out of his voice. They needed Varona. Without Varona it would be a hundred times more difficult. If Varona went wrong it would be messy from then on. "We all set?"

"Sure, Whitey. That's what I been wanting to tell you. That's what I been wanting to tell you, Honey."

"Don't tell me nothing, you yellow bastard." Quickly, turning to Whitey. "Let's get started."

Varona rolled up close, the cigar dangling, the large head craned forward. "Don't call me that," Varona said, the cigar



muffling most of it. He pointed with his finger, but not threateningly, not even bluffing a threat. Savagely, using his hand as a whip, Honey Halpern slapped the finger down. Varona brought it up again, slowly, the whole hand quivering.

"Cut it out, Varona!" Whitey suddenly yelled. It was falling apart right in front of him. "*For Chrissake, don't argue with him!*"

Varona held his finger out, shakily, his heavy head rolling from side to side, swallowing it, choking with the cigar in his mouth.

"Any week now," Honey Halpern said, tightly, rigidly, staring past the cars into the darkness.

"We'll start now," Whitey said. "Let's get the damn thing over. I'll drive." Honey looked at him quickly. He almost smiled. Good old Whitey. Then he opened the rear door of the car and climbed in.

"You ride in front with me," Whitey said to Varona.

They drove across country that way, Varona up front with Whitey, directing him, calling the turns in a loud dull voice. Whitey drove the big car mechanically, hard, fast, but always with perfect control. They climbed a good bit and then for a long time the narrow road dropped down again and then their headlights picked out the unbroken blackness of water at night.

"We're near the lake," Varona said. "Slow down and watch for a set of lights to the left of the road."

Whitey saw the lights first, ahead, through the low trees that lined the road. He put the brakes on the huge car slowly.

"That's Purcell," Varona said. He forgot everything that had happened before. There was true warmth in his voice now. He was drunk, but not badly, and he knew that everything that was behind him stood erased and that he was coming into a time when only the present mattered. Only the act of the present. Acutely he was aware of that and he couldn't shut it out of his voice. "He's in a boat, like if he was fishing. I seen him do it before."

Whitey switched off the ignition and for a brief, pulsating

moment it was absolutely silent in and around the darkened car.

"Only he never catches any fish," Varona went on.

"Let's go," Whitey said, cutting into it. He opened the door and stepped out on the road.

"You coming, Honey?" Varona asked, peering into the back of the car.

"Go drown yourself, lug."

"He ain't coming, Varona," Whitey said. It would be a good thing, he thought. It would be a damn good thing if the lousy fathead did drown himself. Asking questions, forgetting that they had it all worked out.

There was no one in the boat. The lantern stood on the wooden seat at the stern and they could make out a large quantity of evenly-folded burlap sacking at the bottom. Beyond the small cleared ring of earth the lake spread out undefined and pitch, a cup of blacker night than anything around it.

"Purcell," Varona called, his voice small, but carrying.

There was the noise of the water, like a cat padding, and the small circle of light thrown by the lamp. The water lapping at the sides of the boat looked oily, like thick liquid grease, but it was nearly all shadow there. The burlap sacking covered the entire bottom of the small boat and in the hard light the paint on the wood had no color, only darker than the burlap.

"Call him again," Whitey said. It was all the same to him, once he got used to the dark. The big thing was not getting rid of Posnack's body. The big thing was to do to Posnack that which . . . but the thought trailed off as Varona called again, at the last bellowing it out across the unseen water.

"Cut it out," Whitey said, sharply. He stared along the shore of the lake, as much of it as he could follow, and by forcing his eyes he was finally able to make out and define the shapes of trees. There was nothing between him and the trees. "He ain't here. Let's beat it back."

"He has to be here!" This was Varona's responsibility, his part of it. Drunk or not, he was aware of that much. He didn't want to face Lupo with his mouth open and no words coming. Or Honey Halpern waiting up there in the dark. No, he didn't



want to face Honey Halpern with it. "Purcell! Purcell!" he screamed, the quick panic in his voice arching across the black lake, the unknown distances magnifying the real terror that now tore through him. "Purcell!"

"Keep your shirt on, Mickey." The words almost hissing into their ears. The man had crept to within touching distance of them. In one hand he carried a long fishing rod.

Varona had been on the verge of running, and Whitey had sensed it and had put out his strong arms to hold him, and then had come the quick recognition. "What the hell kind of dumb trick do you call that?" With Purcell, now, Varona could lord and bluster. Purcell was there and that ended the need for questioning, and as for Purcell himself, that was where Varona counted. It was Varona who paid off and for Purcell that was where the meaning lay. It was the money, as much money as he could make in a month's work, and Varona paid out.

Purcell stood there quietly. "Who's the man?"

"A pal of mine. His name is Whitey Ward," Varona said. "Don't fall off your feet."

"Don't worry about me, brother," Whitey said.

"He's an old friend of mine," Varona said, expanding, making it sound like he wanted the three of them to sit down and drink on it.

"Yare," Whitey said. "Only we ain't got all night."

"It's all right, mister." Purcell spoke directly to him, calmly, but not overlooking Varona either. "Everything's ready. Flick your lights when you come back."

"O.K., brother. That's fine. That's all we want to know. Come on, Mickey."

"Wait a minute," Varona said. "We ought to check the bur-lap."

"It's all there, Mickey," the old man said. He raised the rod and walked into the sphere of hard light. There was no wind off the lake and the flame was steady. Purcell walked with short steps, unevenly, his legs in new denims.

"We'll look it over," Whitey said, walking down to the boat.

The ground was softer here, with the grass gone. "Only we can't waste time."

"Yeh, we want to be sure," Varona said, blustering it, his loose mouth tightly drawn now, baring his teeth.

"Shut up, Varona!" Whitey yelled, his huge fists forming and lifting. They held that way, the three of them, and then silently Purcell raised the burlap.

"It's real thick," he said. "Eight feet long. Two rolls of it." He raised the second roll, and they could see a row of short, dull metal bars beneath.

"Care to look at them?" Purcell asked, his thin mouth pulled to the side, his upper lip shortened. He was grinning.

Whitey stooped and picked up one of the bars. It was surprisingly heavy, the metal cold and rough to the touch. "Lead?" He was very close to Purcell and he looked quickly into the old man's small, up-staring eyes. Then he straightened suddenly, seeking the relief of the night's darkness. Deep in Purcell's eyes he had seen the grinning, an insane glittering laughter that transformed and gave new hues to the night.

"I cast them myself. It's cheaper that way and I know what goes into them." The words drifting up, tinged with the glitter, but controlled, normal sounding.

"Sounds good," Whitey said.

"Want to see the rope, too," Purcell said, still on his knees, his head twisted in the light, the banter edging up through his voice and just shading the compliance.

"That's all right, Purcell." Varona was settling things. He was waving his hands. "We ain't got time."

"Come on, Varona."

"O.K., Whitey. Let's go." Waving his big hands. "See you later, Purcell."

"Come on, Varona!"

"Sure, Whitey, sure. Don't catch too many fish, Purcell."

"Not more than I have to."

"Listen, you goddam . . ." Whitey stopped, pushing it down. He was boiling, but he had to hold it down.

"All right, let's go." Laughing, taking his first steps, laughing



it off. Whitey pushed ahead of him quickly, trampling the high grass. It was more difficult going away from the light. They were climbing up over a blank wall of darkness, slipping on stones they couldn't see. They looked back and Purcell's light went out.

In the fierce dark that followed, it took them a long time, slipping and clambering repeatedly, to reach the trees beside the road. They had stuck together, almost touching, the whole way, and they jolted heavily now, stumbling into a section of rainwater ditch. Frantically, their fingers digging at the hard ground, they quickly crawled out, and then the solid road under their shoes felt as good as the gift of life itself. The car wasn't there.

Whitey cursed steadily. To think that they would have to make it again, and with a load. There wasn't any other way and there was no getting out of it. They would do it again, with the load. Varona was cursing also, with relish.

They walked back slowly, guided by the sudden softness at the edges of the road. They ducked under a web of branches swishing past their faces. They would have heard the car starting up if it had been moved. If there had been any reason to move it. There was no reason.

They walked on and then they saw the car deeper black and squat, and peering at it through the pitch it couldn't be the car, but it was. Honey Halpern was sitting on the running-board, smoking. Whitey hung back. It was beginning to mess up. The kid must be half-strangled with waiting and tension. It would be hot from now on, hot and messy, everything falling apart. He took out his cigarettes and lit up. It had never occurred to him before, on the road, to use his matches to see with. The thought didn't rest lightly.

"We nearly got lost," he said. "It's so goddam dark." Varona was lighting a cigarette also.

"Whitey," Honey Halpern said, very low, softly.

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking about the girl. I didn't even know you were gone."

Whitey pulled in deeply, almost swallowing the cigarette. He wanted to feel the smoke in his toes. "I'm glad to hear it," he said. "I'm very glad to hear it." He paused a moment, the car racing across the night. "Only now start thinking about something else."

Whitey threw her into neutral as they picked out the lights of the new, brick hotel. They rolled with decreasing speed until he stopped her at the first entrance to the hard-packed, semi-circular, gravel driveway. Then Whitey started the car again and drove her to the other entrance, one hundred feet away. He let her nose in and then backed out, turning her around. They rolled a dozen feet and stopped along a row of high dark hedges. They were well-hidden and pointed in the right direction. It was perfect.

The three men walked up the circular driveway, Varona slightly in advance. It was Varona's game at this point. They walked slowly, gazing up at the brightly lighted porch, at the spaced dim lights of the three floors of rooms. They were coming into the outer blaze of the lights and Honey Halpern and Whitey Ward hung back. It was going to be all Varona for a while. It had been very carefully prepared that way.

Varona walked ahead confidently, with assurance, until he reached a group of small boys standing around the wide steps that led up to the porch and across to the screen doors of the front lobby. The boys were sprawling over the steps, seven- to nine-year-old kids on a country vacation, their stomachs heavy with food. One of them, a kid with a small round face, the lips full and pink, wore a heavy, oversized black and red helmet that had the words "Fire Chief" streaked across it. The kids stood up as Varona approached, alert, curious, slightly hostile.

Varona came up close, his face breaking into the wide, infectious grin. The kids stared at him, waiting.

"Hi'ya, Buddy."

The kid in the helmet stared back quietly, his pink lips parting. Another kid edged over from the side, lean, wiry, his face dark and aggressive, his narrow shoulders sauntering.



"Whattaya want?" The dark kid spoke it out, properly.

"Hi'ya pal," Varona said, even, unruffled. He included them all in his friendly words, in the warmth and happiness of his grin. "I'm looking for a man named Mr. Posnack. Any of you fellows know where I can find him?" He took a quarter out of his pocket and began to flip it easily, catching it and flipping it again easily.

The kid in the helmet opened his round mouth and started to say something, but the other kids were all shouting and the words were indistinct.

"Do you all know him?" They were with him now, their eyes trailing the flipping coin. Varona could feel it. He grinned down at them steadily.

"That's his father," the dark kid shot out, pointing to the kid in the helmet. "Whattaya want him for?"

Varona knew how with most men and with kids he was especially good. It was his chief asset, the point that made him most valuable as a contact man, his knowing how. Not with all men, of course. Never with anyone like Honey Halpern, but the dark kid was only that, a kid and no more.

"Well, you see, pal—" Varona came in closer, lifting a leg to the first step. Up on the porch, under the lights, groups of people were sitting around in large comfortable wicker chairs, people who could see him but not hear him. The kids were a break. It was always easier to work with kids—"It's like this. A friend of Mr. Posnack sent me up to see him on some important business."

The dark kid thought it over, looking hard into Varona's face, not even seeing the grin. "Who sent you?"

It was a mistake. The other kids were giving it up, their mouths forming words. "I'm telling you, pal," Varona said, never changing it, his tone friendly, amiable. "A certain friend of his."

"He's my father!" The kid with the full, pink lips finally got it out. "Want me to get him?"

"Sure, Fire Chief. You catch on."

The dark kid gave it up also. "O.K., Ralphie. Get your

father." The kid in the helmet ran up the steps, cutting through the crowded lobby. Varona watched him, smiling, then looked down at the other boys around him. The dark kid let go with his last shot.

"Who are those guys out there on the driveway?"

"What guys?" Varona asked, looking away from the kids, looking up toward the brightly lighted porch, wondering if any of the people sitting in the deep comfortable chairs were studying his face, memorizing it.

The dark kid jerked up his small, close-set ears. His right arm whipped out, the fingers pointing. "Those guys out there on the driveway. Those guys that came here with you in that big car."

Varona looked down at the kid quickly. "Take it easy, kid."

"Those guys right out there."

Whitey, following it closely, saw that they were all looking at them now, Varona and all the boys. There was a good deal of noise and chatter on the porch, and there was a chance, a strong possibility, that people up there were listening also, were beginning to ask themselves the kid's questions. He rocked solidly on his toes, watching it all, wondering whether the dumb wop would mess it up all over again. Then he glanced at Honey Halpern and instantly he forgot all about Varona.

"What's eating you?"

Honey Halpern's face was agonizingly drawn, the mouth tight and narrowed, the jaw tense, the small eyes fixed and staring. "That kid," Honey Halpern said, the words tortured and vague and coming from an immense, muffled distance. "That kid in the fireman's hat. I'll be doing it again tonight."

"Doing what?" Whitey asked, whispering, trying to bite into it, his whisper hoarse and fierce. He saw it all coming.

"I'll be doing it again tonight."

The goddam hophead. The crazy no-good mess of a sonof-a-bitch hophead. "Shut up," Whitey whispered, his voice hot with it. "Don't talk! Don't even hear it! You're only talking yourself into something. You're making it up."

"Yare," Honey Halpern said, his eyes staring. "Maybe."



"Forget it!"

Honey Halpern looked up at the bright, intense globes of light set into the ivory painted ceiling of the porch. Dozens of small moths and night insects circled the hot-white globes, flying erratically, winging in from the fringes of the outer darkness, madly, unable to shut their eyes against the bright, beckoning arcs of controlled flame. He saw a man coming out of the lobby, crossing the porch, and he knew it was Posnack, the last line in a contract that had already been sealed and signed. Had already been delivered, because there was no way out of it. He, Honey Halpern, was the designated instrument to carry out that contract and if he failed it would matter as much as the ink drying on a pen. There were others. There were always a few others. It only required a certain amount of skill to use a gun. Plus a little something that didn't come in containers.

Whitey motioned to him and they started to move across the cropped lawn. Honey Halpern, staring wide-eyed, saw that the kid in the fireman's helmet held on tightly to Posnack's hand. He reached up and felt the firmness of the gun under his armpit. He was trembling, his body a heap of dry dust that the first wind would scatter. Chokingly, his head throbbing with it, he fought it down and wrenched himself clear.

"Hi'ya, Solliel"

It was Varona, playing it right, sure, calm, confident. Posnack came down the steps slowly. He was a short, chubby man with a broad, heavy forehead, the hair above thin and reddish, slicked down, the eyes below small and animated. The mouth was large in the milk white face, the lips full and almost pink. In the bright light there were no eyebrows.

"Hello, Mickey," Posnack called, surprised, pleasant. "Whatchu doing up here?" The kid in the helmet let go as Posnack came down the steps. Varona stood waiting, his large hand outstretched, the huge jackal grin crowning his face.

"Your wife sent me up here, Sollie, to say hello."

"What wife?" The kids were clustered around the small man. In height he was closer to them than to Varona, almost a dwarf. He shook hands quickly. "Whatchu talking about?"

"Your wife, Sollie. The guy you're married to." Varona towered above the fat little man, grinning straight down at him. Honey Halpern and Whitey Ward shuffled up closer. "Your partner."

"Oh, my partner? Why dinchu say that, Mickey?" Posnack tried to back away but the kids around him cut his freedom of movement. He didn't want to step up backwards. With his stub legs he'd have to turn all the way around before he could manage it properly. "Come in, Mickey, you'll have a drink," he said, wriggling along the step, his throat craned upward.

"I'm working for your partner now, Sollie," Varona said, moving with the little man, hemming him in with his great bulk.

"There are two other guys with him, Mr. Posnack!" The dark kid shot it out, breaking away from the rest of the boys.

"Who?" The smile dropped from the round white face, the wisps of eyelashes dancing.

"Whatsa matter, Sollie," Varona said. Whitey was close now, clumsily shambling onto the first step, fumblingly, almost staggering, but getting close behind the little man. Honey Halpern stood apart, but in close also, his head bent, blowing up his cheeks and popping his eyes so that he resembled a simpering, harmless idiot. Whitey shuffled in closer, his flat face dragging, devoid of expression.

"Hey, what's going on?" Posnack's voice rose. He couldn't move without pushing one of the big men away.

"Take it easy, Sollie."

"All right, I'm taking it easy. Whatchu want, Mickey?"

"I told you. I'm working for your partner."

"For Bender?" Posnack suddenly dropped his head. He talked into Varona's chest.

"For your partner, Sollie. Your new partner. Kid Spades."

Posnack was silent, hemmed in by the two tall men. Then he repeated the name very softly to himself, just loud enough for the two men to hear it.

"That's right, Sollie. You learn fast," Varona said.



"So what, Mickey? So what do you want?" Mumbling it into Varona's fine gabardine clothes.

"He wants to see you," Mickey Varona said. "He wants to talk it over with you."

"He can't come up to the hotel?" Lifting the large head quickly, wide-eyed, the jaws working.

"No, Sollie. You know he can't do that."

"Where then?"

"He's right out on the road." Varona jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "In a car."

Posnack looked up quickly, rising on his toes. The small eyes were swimming in the large white roundness of the face. Little, sharp pinpoints of terror specked the dancing, swimming eyes.

"You gonna kill me?"

Varona laughed at it, softly, not the way he could laugh when he wanted to, but really laughing anyway. He dropped his heavy hand on the small man's shoulder and held it there, laughing. "What are you doing to me, Sollie? What are you, a comedian?"

The kids hemming them in were laughing also, listening keenly, packed against the steps and laughing. "You want to rupture me, Sollie?" Letting it flow easily, good-humoredly, not too wildly, not harsh and strident enough to cause interest up on the porch. "Hey, Whitey. What do you think? He wants to rupture me from laughing. This comedian."

Whitey grinned, looking past Varona, looking far out into the blackness that ran away from the lights. Then he disengaged his eyes and giggled, high up in his throat like a girl, like a young, simple lunatic girl. Posnack twisted around and stared up at him.

"See, Sollie. You got him laughing too," Varona said.

"Who is he?" Posnack looked relieved. His eyes were brisk again, the straining gone. He poked his head out, past the kid in the fireman's helmet, and glanced sharply at Honey Halpern. Honey's thin cheeks were full of air, rounding out the

hungry face. His lips protruded in an idiotic pout. "Who are these gentlemen?"

Varona's explosive guffaw came out perfectly, pulling the little man's eyes away, fastening them on himself. "Gentlemen?" Varona turned himself around, including the kids in it. "They're some gentlemen. They're Mrs. Kid Spades' brothers. Together their brains add up to a peanut. Take a look at them, Sollie. They'd miss a meal for an automobile ride, and that's all they know is how to eat. We ride them around all the time like monkeys."

"You mean?" Posnack paused, smiling. His lively eyes spoke to Varona, the meaning obvious.

"A couple of whacks, Sollie. God forbid you should have such a wife with such brothers."

They were all laughing now, the kid in the fireman's helmet, the other kids, Posnack, Varona, all of them listening to Whitey's high, girlish giggling. Whitey's eyes rolled with it, wildly, insanely.

"See, you got him started," Varona said, grinning his friendly, infectious grin. The kids howled. The one in the helmet smiled with wonder, his round pink mouth gaping.

"What do you mean my new partner, Mickey?" The smile dropped away from Posnack's saucer-round face, the lines of strain reappearing about the eyes. Like a gust of wind dispersing stale odors, the giggling ceased. Honey Halpern shambled up closer, letting the air drip slowly from his cheeks. The kids yelled, but Varona held Posnack, keeping it smooth, not losing it now in the stretch.

"Listen, Sollie. I don't know it all. He's out there waiting to talk it over with you. Maybe he's worked something out with Marty Bender. How should I know?"

Posnack could move around more easily now. The hilarity had burst the kids out of their tight-packed knot, spreading them out over the steps and into the driveway. The fat little man paced along the bottom step, his hands flipping briskly behind his back. He looked up to the porch. More and more people were coming out of the lobby, forming together in



groups, talking. Soon, the far into the night poker games, the spice of country weekends, would be beginning. The women and the kids would flock to the social casino and the master of ceremonies would repeat his long-winded, filthy stories and then the waiters and busboys would dance with the unattached girls, with time out for a piano or saxophone specialty.

"What's Marty Bender got to do with it," Posnack said briskly, thinking it over. He didn't care two cents' worth for Marty Bender. He, Sol Posnack, was an honest business man and Marty Bender was a gangster. He, Posnack, was a trucking contractor in the ladies' garment industry and this gangster, Marty Bender, charged him ten dollars for each truckload of piece goods delivered. Otherwise he couldn't get a truck safely through the streets of mid-Manhattan. He, Sol Posnack, an honest business man, had paid ten dollars a truck for over two years and then one day, his head spinning, he had told it all to an assistant district attorney and the assistant district attorney had listened very quietly, after calling in a stenographer, and then had told him to stop handing out ten-dollar bills. Several months had passed with no payments made.

What was Kid Spades interested in? Kid Spades belonged in Brooklyn, in Brownsville; in Brownsville he was important but not in the garment center. In the garment center he was only a small potato. If he, Posnack, could show Marty Bender, who was like a king, how could Kid Spades bother him?

"Don't worry about Marty Bender," Varona said.

"Come on," Sol Posnack said, stepping down to the driveway. He strode ahead of them, taking small choppy dwarf steps, his round heavy head held high on the short neck. "I got a poker game waiting for me. We'll see what's gonna be with my new partner."

They followed him, Honey Halpern, Varona, Whitey and the kids. The driveway circled out into the darkness and the kids ran off across the lawn, darting among the ornamental shrubs and reappearing suddenly. They were shouting for repeat performances by Whitey and Honey Halpern. The men

followed Posnack closely, Whitey almost on his heels, towering above the small man. They were almost beyond the ring of light when Varona wheeled sharply. He had played his point well, but it had to stop now. He couldn't hold it indefinitely.

"Hey, fellers!" He waved his long arms, calling the hooting kids together. "Give us a break, fellers. We got business to talk over." Slowly dropping out of it. The men hadn't stopped. Soon, they would be approaching the road.

"We wanna see the whacks again!" One of the kids yelled it, and then they were all yelling it together.

"Come on, fellers, beat it!" The pleading running out quickly. They would be on the road now. Honey would want to get going. "Beat it before I bust your heads off!"

The kids howled and danced and Varona charged them. They broke quickly, shouting, darting out from under the heavy, whirling fists. They regathered close to the house, well within the circle of light. Varona trotted rapidly toward the road. Just enough light carried to silhouette the men at the end of the driveway. They were waiting for him.

"Had to get rid of those kids," Varona said, puffing, not saying it to Posnack. They started to walk to the car, and then they heard the cry, sharply and distinctly.

"Pa-paal!"

They halted at once, as if struck by it in the darkness. "That's my kid," Posnack said, boasting it, passing out bright red apples. The cry came again, more high-pitched, tremulous, ending in a scream that touched the sharp edge of hysteria. It set them all off like catching tinder. "I just bought him a fireman's hat. He almost went crazy when he got it, he liked it so much."

"Let's get going," Whitey said. He had to dump the mask after that. It was almost time for it anyway. He couldn't see into Honey Halpern's face, but he knew what was happening. The cry came again, high, like a baby being whipped. Whitey hooked his fingers around Honey Halpern's upper arm and clamped down on the trembling.

"Forget it, Honey. Forget it."



Honey Halpern wrenched himself loose, his control shakily snapping back. "What are we waiting for?" Fiercely, spitting out the words. "Come on, let's get started!"

"What'sa matter," Posnack said, looking around in the dark. The masks were down.

"Nothing." Whitey grunted it out and they were walking again. They reached the black mass of the car and Posnack hopped up close, opened the rear door, stuck his large head in, and said, in an honest business man's voice: "Hello, Mr. Kid Spades."

Whitey, following it up, placed his huge hand squarely under the little man's rump and toppled him into the car. Honey Halpern and Varona hastily climbed into the back with Posnack and Whitey dashed around to the driver's seat. The doors slammed, the ignition was turned, the starter whirled, the gears were thrown in and they were rolling. All in seconds. The great points of light tore through the thick darkness, melting it beneath the thrashing wheels. Whitey stepped her up and the powerful motor responded smoothly, humming.

"Whatchu call this, Mickey?" It was Posnack's small surprised voice. There was a sound in his voice like smiling, like a ready-to-laugh-before-the-last-line-of-the-story smiling.

Varona didn't answer. Strangely, he was sweating. It was warm even in these hills, the night air torpid, crowded with moisture. The game was over for him. From this point on the play was entirely out of his hands, and it had been a long time since the last drink. He sat back limply, the heat collaring his head and his throat, his eyes fixed upon the white shafts of light racing down the black road.

"So it's a joke," Posnack said. "O.K., I bite."

"Shut up," Honey Halpern snapped, exploding it past his lips.

"Mickey? This is the whack?"

"Shut up, Sollie." Varona spoke with great fatigue. He could feel Posnack's small, soft body next to his on the seat.

The little man was sitting deep, at ease, waiting for the last line. "What's the use of talking?"

"Mickey? I don't get it?"

"You're gonna die, Sollie." Damn them, why didn't they take over?

"Mickey? You're nuts!" Sitting all the way back deep in the large seat, his short legs perfectly motionless. "I haven't time for this fooling around. What's the joke?"

"Shut up, Sollie!" He had shouted it, the words flooding the car. Whitey stepped it up faster, deathly silent, trying to race away from the looming mess. "This is your funeral!" Aiming the words directly at the little man, sharply and clearly. "This guy sitting next to you is a killer named Honey Halpern." He was sweating, the clothes feeling coarse and hot against his skin. The hell with them, the bastards, the lousy no-good, coked-up bastards.

"Mickey? What's going on? You sound like a nut-house." Varona felt the little man's hands groping for his leg, finding it, leaning into it confidentially. "Come on, Mickey. Turn the car around and let's go back. It was a good joke. If you could see me, honest I'm laughing. I'll buy you all a drink, you and these other two gentlemen." Turning his voice, toward Honey Halpern. "I'm sorry I called you a whack." There was silence except for the full-bodied hum of the racing car. "Honest!" Posnack said, his voice rising with it. "I don't know what's going on around here!"

Honey Halpern sat quietly, his eyes shut, closing his mind against it, but there wasn't anything he could do about the hearing. His hearing was an alert, independent force that reacted to every word.

"Honey!" It was Varona again, shouting. "For Chrissake, Honey, tell him! Tell him he's gonna die!"

Posnack laughed this time, loud, substantial laughter. "So what," he said, with his high womanish laughter. "You can't live forever. I know that. I wasn't born yesterday." There was the soft flat sound of his hand slapping down on Varona's thigh.



"Take your hand off, you bastard!" It was driving the coarse nap of the wool like nails deep into his hot skin.

"Whatsa matter, Mickey?"

Varona sweated the words through his teeth. "Don't kill him this way, Honey. Whitey! For Chrissake, Whitey, the guy thinks it's a joke. He won't believe it. He's laughing. You can't kill a guy when he's laughing!"

Silence, heavy, black silence, the car moaning with the strain of speed. "I'll get him ready!" Varona screamed, turning sharply in his seat, his voice choking. Viciously, his arms pumping like pistons, he slapped and rocked Posnack's face and head with his huge, open hands. The blows landed full, dry and crackling, like thunder over a tight valley. Again and again, reaching a frantic peak, and halting all at once.

There was a long, dead pause, then like low bells the wet sound of the small man's crying. They strove desperately to tighten themselves against it, to blockade it, and like thin smoke it seeped through their pores and hooked into their bones. They listened for minutes, the crying liquid and endless, until Honey Halpern, his head splitting with it, burst out in wild hysteria.

"I'm gonna burn your eyes out for that, Varona! I swear to God I'm gonna burn your rotten eyes out!"

The crying slackened. Whitey took a long curve recklessly, the heavy car lifting with the crazily spinning wheels. Far in the distance he saw a thin slash of light, from away off the road. That was Purcell. It had been a fast ride.

It was all silent now and he let the car have everything it could handle. They ate up the darkness, their blazing brights clearing the way, and suddenly they had reached Purcell's light. Whitey jammed the brakes, not all at once, but hard anyway, shaking them up. He switched off the ignition and flicked the lights. Then, remembering the climb from the lake, he left the lights on. Honey Halpern was already out of the car, waiting. The dark was thick with coming rain. The lights bore away down the road, but enough glow ran back for the men to make each other out.

"Take it easy, Honey. Relax. There's nothing to worry about."

Whitey stepped up to the open rear door, and peered in. He could just make them out, both sitting stone still. He had to say it. "Come on out, Posnack." His voice was right, firm. Miraculously it was calm and right. "It ain't gonna hurt."

There was no motion inside the car, no sound. Whitey reached in and found the little man's arm. With a sharp, quick snap he pulled him out, arm and head coming first, then the shoulders struggling past the door. Grunting, Whitey braced him erect, leaning over to prop his hands under Posnack's armpits. He let go to test the degree of limpness and the little, fat man slid away to the ground, like soft jelly. He stooped to prop him again, but Honey Halpern was on top of him.

"Leave him on the ground!"

Whitey straightened up. "How you . . ." He stopped. There was no way of saying it.

"Don't worry about it," Honey Halpern said, speaking away from him. Whitey saw the hand go up into the coat, then reappear, darker. Honey Halpern dropped to his knees and felt for Posnack's head with his other hand. He found it and placed the gun up close against the head. He held on, his breathing suddenly loud and gasping, then fired. The shot sounded muffled. The damp, heavy night air deadened it almost immediately.

Honey Halpern pulled himself erect and put the gun away. "Chalk another one up."

Whitey stooped, got his hands under Posnack and swung the fat little dead man onto his shoulder. "Hope one of us gets back," he said.

Honey Halpern laughed, a short, hysterical laugh. He didn't say anything. Whitey walked off the road toward the light beyond the trees, walking slowly, carefully. Honey Halpern watched him until he was blurred out and only the weak light showed. Then he put his hands in his pockets for cigarettes and matches. He walked up to the car and sat down



on the runningboard, lighting up. He inhaled quickly and deeply.

"I can kill you with one bullet, Varona."

There was no answer. Honey Halpern smoked quietly, staring at Purcell's distant light. He threw the cigarette away and at once lit another one. He smoked slowly, this time all the way down to his fingers. Then Purcell's light snuffed out.

Minutes later, Honey Halpern heard the noise of a man wading through brush. He waited, flicking his cigarette and Whitey came out, panting.

"I see you got back," Honey Halpern said.

"He's feeding the fish now," Whitey said slowly. They both laughed. They felt the first thin drops of rain. They hunched up against it and stepped into the front seat. Whitey drove her back slowly to the Shelton Lake Hotel through the thin rain.

## Chapter Four



FROM THE pounding train, the Lower Hudson spread wide as a bay in the early November morning. The trees that irregularly fenced the shore had already lost most of their red-gold and the river itself looked cold, gray and steely.

"We get into the station pretty soon," Whitey said, a troubled concern all over his square flat face. It had finally gone smoothly in Cleveland, in the clinch it had gone smooth as a clock, but everything else before and after that had been awful. All the way in from Cleveland now, Honey Halpern had been acting in a queer half-strangled sort of way. Lupo would have to be told about it. Whitey didn't want to tell Lupo, but it would be better all around for Lupo to know. He should have been told long ago. They were on their way back to Brooklyn now to collect. Five hundred for Honey Halpern, two hundred for himself. Then he would tell it to Lupo.

They were in a taxicab, threading through the traffic-heavy streets of downtown New York. The driver turned into Canal Street and battled his way to the East River bridge. It was slow going on the bridge, the rows of clattering trucks holding everything back. Traffic was somewhat lighter in Brooklyn. They put Flatbush Avenue behind them and the cabbie made time again. It was late morning, and as they turned into Eastern Parkway, with its side malls of thin young trees, a pale, yellow stream of sunlight broke through the gray sky. There were only a handful of leaves left on the young trees.

Honey Halpern sat bent and hunched, drawn into a corner.



He was deeply tired. They had left for Cleveland more than thirty hours earlier, and they had hardly paused between incoming and outgoing trains. It had been beautifully planned, but now he required rest and sleep. He had been unable to sleep in his clothes on the Pullman; the wheels pounding and slambanging over the rails hadn't given him a moment of quiet. Since he had pulled his gun on the fireman this distant and timeless spring, he had needed more and more rest. Nothing had helped. Even Renee. In these seven months his world had changed with Renee, he had his own place now, his own woman, Renee, sweet and soft as gold, with long black lustrous hair. Renee, waiting for him alone.

But something had gone out when the fireman, young Dominic Russo, had crumbled before him in that endless time of April. In the next seven months he had used his gun seven times and it had always turned out the same way. He was shooting Russo again, a young clean Italian kid who had gone down thinking about other guys.

He had begun to change. The gun was growing bigger, heavier. He couldn't swallow it. It wouldn't go down easy anymore. He had to yank open the jaws of his mouth, and with every inch of him bursting with the effort, he had to force it down in a grinding gulp. In Cleveland it had been hard as all hell to swallow the gun. The big guy had been sitting in the tiny sun porch of his run-down frame shack, reading. For Chrissakes, why couldn't they have got someone from Cleveland!

The cabbie turned around. "That's Utica Avenue, where the trolley is crossing."

"Tell him how to get to my place," Honey Halpern said, his voice very low. Whitey leaned forward.

"Keep on two blocks after Utica, then turn right. I'll tell you what to do as we go."

"Stop near the pump," Whitey called. The driver pulled over to the curb and Honey Halpern lifted out of the seat and opened the door.

Honey Halpern swung the door shut and the cab rolled off. He felt a little rocky and stretched up on his toes, steadying

himself. The blinds were drawn in all the windows. He walked to the house slowly, his heart suddenly leaping into his throat.

All alone she was waiting for him in this house. Always alone in the house and waiting for him. That was the big thing, that they could share a place that was cut off from the world, that became their world within a world. At the beginning Renee had wanted to have people over, at least some friends, girls whose names she remembered. He had explained to her patiently that they weren't ready for that yet. She had looked at him, wonder flecking her eyes. Why not ready? What did time have to do with it? Just an occasional friend, a familiar face when he was away, someone to laugh with, to show a dress, to compare a hat. To make the time between trips, between jobs, the time without him, less a time of loneliness.

No, he had said, ending it, ending everything but the wonder that hid and lurked in her eyes. He couldn't allow that. He was like a doomed and demented architect (time running out with April change) endlessly planning walls and barriers, shunting out all crevices, all openings for light, for sound, for air. "Why, Honey?" she had asked, and he had answered in irritation, "I want you for myself." His mind had blurred when he had said it, the way it had been blurring since April, and watching him, Renee had seen fear and the seeds of a strange terror burst into his eyes.

Why, she had wondered, why should he display anger and fear? What lurked behind his eyes? Had she been fooled? Had she been fooled into walking into a prison, willingly, on her own legs? Tremulously, she had gazed back into his eyes, smiling, hoping to arouse warmth in him with her smile. He had held himself stiff, tightening, tightening against everything, against her, against her smile. She had continued to smile, her lips parted, hoping and praying for warmth, for a relaxed note of companionship, for a shy answer. And all he had done was bite down on his lips, his eyes staring, the strangeness tightening and narrowing and shutting out the world.

Honey Halpern remembered, approaching the house, that Renee liked to sleep late. She probably was asleep still, in the



overlarge, ornate wooden bed that she had asked him to buy for her. She wouldn't even hear him come in. He walked faster. That was all right. He'd go upstairs quietly and wake her. She would look up at him and smile. He would make her stay in bed.

With trembling hands, almost choking, laughing deep inside where it felt warm and good, he opened the door with his key. The low musical chime sang once, twice. It would never wake her. She was a sound sleeper. He shut the door carefully, and then it came! In the instant of shutting the door! Renee's scream and the rush of a man pounding down the stairs. Honey Halpern braced himself, but he didn't have a chance. The man came leaping down the stairs, bawling at the top of his voice, dressed only in his underwear, barefoot. He threw himself into Honey Halpern with all of his weight, howling like a stricken animal, Honey going down with the impact. He was a fairly large man, taller and heavier, and strangely familiar. Honey Halpern began to pick himself up, a blinding fury driving him as the man tore frantically at the door. Then the howling man had opened the door and, his bare arms flailing the air, he leaped out into the street, running with huge, bounding hops, screaming his terror down the line of proper, snug little houses.

Honey Halpern watched him from the doorway. He recognized him now, the one from the mountains, the one they had called Captain Kummer. His hand went up to the gun, then fell back limp. Kummer disappeared around the corner and the street was quiet again. Honey Halpern closed the door and walked upstairs.

The bright, clean little rooms were empty. He tried the bathroom door and it was locked. She was hiding from him in the bathroom. He went into the bedroom. The bed was open and rumpled. Honey Halpern's head sank, his sharp chin digging into his chest, the fatigue penetrating unhampered through his body. Kummer's clothes were all over the place. Because he couldn't have them there to look at, Honey gathered up the clothes. He walked with them to the window, drawing the soft blue drapes that Renee liked so much. He opened the window and threw out Kummer's clothes, trousers, jacket, shirt, shoes.

They landed on the small cement walk at the edge of the yard. Then Honey shut the window and went back to the bathroom.

"Open the door, Renee," he said, in a low dead voice. Through the door he heard the sounds of flurried, helpless movement.

"Open the door, Renee," he said again. He felt like slumping to the floor. He was in terrible need of sleep.

"Don't hurt me, Honey." Her voice came through, muffled with tears, like a small, round puppy.

"I won't hurt you," he said.

"Promise you won't hurt me, Honey." Her voice changed to a loud wail. "I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything!"

"I won't hurt you," Honey Halpern said slowly. "Open the door."

"He only took his clothes off, Honey. He didn't do anything. I wouldn't let him do anything. Honest, Honey, I'd never let him."

There wasn't anything he could do but wait. All the fruit was tainted, all of it marked with spot. "Open the door, Renee," he said, his words barely audible. He looked at the door, his eyes dull and glazed. It didn't matter now. He was like a fighter who had been hit too often. It didn't matter any more. He turned away, but he couldn't walk. His legs were hammered and nailed. He couldn't move them.

He heard the snap turn and then hesitantly the door swung open. He turned quickly. She was dressed in a short, snug, green-red cotton dress. Her hair was down, long, black and beautiful on the white throat. Her face was wet-streaked with tears. He couldn't look at her face.

"What do you want of me, Honey," she whimpered, holding her arms together, rocking herself in her misery.

He looked down at her legs. The cotton dress was very short and skimpy in a way that he liked, showing off her firm straight legs. It showed her legs several inches above the knees. There were no stockings on her legs.

He shook himself, shivering violently, snapping the live blood back into his veins. His eyes fastened on her bare legs, over the



knees, then up the thighs, following the slim soft lines of the belly, the fullness of the breasts in the tight green and red dress. He leaped at her, his fingers clamping down on her arm high up near the shoulder. The girl screamed and he pressed down with his fingers, digging into the softness of the arm. Then his free hand whipped out and caught her face. He slapped hard, the force of it tingling his fingers. She started to slump and he jerked her up, his teeth cutting into his lips with the fierceness of it. Then he dragged her into the bedroom. He drew his strength together and threw her on the bed.

"What did you want of me," the girl cried. "Caged up in here like a rat, what did you want me to do?"

He watched her crying on the rumpled bed, breathing heavily. Slowly he unbuttoned his coat. He needed more space, more freedom to work. He walked up close to the bed and deliberately ground his fist into her face. She fought for breath, gasping. He let go and she screamed in complete terror. Doubling his fists, he drove down into her, hammering into the stomach, the chest, the throat. She choked in her screams, coughing, drowning with the agony. He drilled his fists into her face, tearing into the skin, with precision, with all the force he could handle. He kept it up until she went limp, all at once, her head rolling on the slack neck. Still he kept up the drilling, blind, his mouth parched and gritty. Then he stopped. She was very quiet, the head hanging, the legs twisted in the sheets. The cotton dress had been drawn up to the hips by the thrashing of her legs. She didn't have anything on under the dress.

He had kept his hat on all the time. Now he took it off and threw it across the room. After that, he could hardly move his arms. The fatigue sucked up through his insides, crawling through all his muscles. With great effort he slipped out of his jacket and vest, loosened his necktie and opened the collar. He sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his shoes. He bent slowly and all the weariness raced down to his head. He was panting heavily, without spirit, his chest aching. Suddenly he fell onto the bed, his head touching Renee's bare thigh. She was lying astride the bed, part of her twisted in the quilt and sheets, part

of her open and uncovered. Using all his last strength Honey Halpern lifted his legs and eased out over the bed. His shoes hit the wood base and his head bored gently into the softness of Renee's thigh. He was asleep.

Less than an hour later he blinked his eyes and turned over hungrily on his stomach. His fingers slid across the sheets and he was almost asleep again when it hit him like a whipcrack. He was alone in the bed.

He gasped and relaxed all the muscles and nerve-ends of his body, opening his mouth with the luxury of the sensation. His face was dry and cracking with sleep. Again it hit him, the whiplash of it cutting into his perception. He was alone in the bed.

He raised up on his elbows a few inches off the bed, the strength draining out of his arms in a rush. He was going to let go in a minute and sink down again. All he wanted was to sleep, to burrow into a warm dark mountain of sleep and pull it down over him.

He bit into his lips and in the next instant of wakefulness he jerked up out of the bed. The room rocked and jelled around him. He clenched his eyes shut and then snapped them violently open. He could beat it. If he had to he could always beat it.

He washed his face in the bathroom sink, swallowing the cold water hungrily. He began to dry himself with one of the thick orchid towels that Renee loved and suddenly he dropped the towel, his face still wet, and rushed in a panic down the steps, half-stumbling, and raced through the lower rooms. Everything was neat, quiet, and empty.

He walked up the stairs, his head hanging, and put on all his things again. He looked down at the bed and for a moment he wanted to cry out, to moan and whimper. He caught it and tightened up. He walked over to the window and brushed the blue drapes apart. There were Kummer's clothes where he had dropped them, littering the yard.

The anger flared through him in a sweeping, searing rush. He released the drapes and then he was beating his fists against his temples. Why had she done it? Why had she done it to him?



All that he had left now was his gun. He was a hopped-up, screwball killer, crazy with too much killing. His hand whipped up to his inside coat pocket and he felt the hardness of his gun. The rock of his pride and strength. All you had to do was point it at a guy, hold your arm steady, keep your nerve tight, pull the trigger and laugh and grunt and giggle and roar and scream and laugh and laugh and laugh, deep inside, at the mutt dying! Then after a while you didn't care. One guy or another. They all looked alike dead.

He was hopped-up, he was crazy. Jesus, Renee, he moaned, swaying on his feet, his eyes ground shut. Sure, she had found out, she had known he was crazy, but she didn't know how much. The bitch, she'd never believe it. As a joke, to prove to himself how little he cared about it, one way or the other, he had even killed a guy for Mikey the Peddler, at Mikey's price, ten lousy dollars.

He slapped himself hard across the forehead. Admit it, you no-good bastard! You killed him all over again, a clean kid named Dominic Russo, a kid who went down fighting for other guys. A kid one hundred per cent in every way exactly like Nino Dilonge.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, why hadn't he died with Nino? He should have jumped up with Nino, held on to his neck like a true brother. Together, carried through the streets to the cemetery, buried in the same grave!

He ran down the steps and out of the house into the street. He never wanted to see the house again. It was a house of death. He regretted that he was not leaving Renee dead in this dead house. He should have killed her. He should have slammed a bullet deep into the white flesh of her throat. He walked without seeing, his eyes blind and turned in upon themselves. He went down the quiet streets, past the groups of snug little houses with their grass plots and trimmed hedges. Without knowing it, he was cutting across to Brownsville. He was heading for home, for the heavy, sodden streets of home, where the paper and dirt scuffed over the sidewalks and changed color and added weight with the seasons.

## Chapter Five

**T**HE WIND blew up as Honey Halpern turned into Ashburn Street, the wind of November, blaring down from the north, smashing wildly through the narrow funnel of the street, hastening the withdrawal of day. The sky was low and colorless. Night would come all at once, sliding in easily.

The Club Ish Kabib did not give itself away. There were those who knew about it and for these no neon signs or bedecked doormen were necessary. The Club didn't advertise. Those who didn't know about it were, at the least, not welcome. Honey Halpern, almost dragging himself, feeling loose and open to the biting wind, climbed the worn stone steps that led into one of a long line of rotting tenements. All the narrow windows were shaded, and the tenement door Honey Halpern pushed open was old and heavy, the rain-beaten paint peeling, the wrought-iron trim thick with dust. There was another door beyond the short vestibule and Honey Halpern stood before its sturdy, varnished beams, quivering slightly with the sleepiness that was heavy upon him. He would have to face people. He had to be right. He raised his arm and pushed the button in the wall.

He waited until Feibush opened the door. He was ready for Feibush. "Hello, pal!"

Feibush pulled the door wide. "It's you?"

"Yeh." Honey Halpern pushed past him. Feibush was a tall man, built like a bear. He followed Honey Halpern down the hall.

"It's too early. No one's here yet."

"Who the hell cares."

The hall was dark and wide. Feibush pressed down on a switch set into the wall and the entire space lit up, resplendent.



They walked past black lacquer and chrome striped panels and pushed through a flower-patterned swinging door that opened into a narrow but rather long room.

"Don't put on any more lights," Honey Halpern said. The room was dimly lit by some small bracket lamps high up on the wall. Running down along both the long walls were two rows of small round tables. Toward the back of the room, the tables were larger and spread from wall to wall. Directly behind these large round tables, a small platformed stage had been built into the room. A very ornate, figured curtain hung across this stage.

"All right, no more lights," Feibush said, not questioning any more. "You want something to eat?" This was his role, feeder and server. He was famous for it.

Honey Halpern had his eyes shut. He wasn't hungry. He hadn't eaten since early morning on the train from Cleveland. There had been only one thought working in him, to get to Renee. That had been food. He was terribly tired now, enervated, but he still wasn't hungry.

"Yeh, get me a steak," he said, his eyes clenched. He felt the weight of the gun under his armpit, the straps dragging his shoulder. If only he could tear them off and fling the thing away!

Honey Halpern took off his long, tight coat and threw it across a chair. Without the coat, the gun bulged his jacket, but that was all right here, at the Ish Kabib. He sat down close to the wall, the swinging door in line with his eyes, his elbows propped on the table. He was too tired to fidget and he sat the way he had dropped, on the thin edge of collapse, aware only of the drawing fatigue in his legs. He shut his eyes against thought, blanked his mind against it, set up massive, unyielding walls to crush it out. He sat there in the near darkness, holding his face in his hands, breathing deeply through his mouth, his thin cheeks hollow and aching. He was swaying with half-sleep when Feibush came back with the steak.

"O.K., Honey. How's this?" Feibush had it all on a tray.

Honey Halpern dropped his hands and Feibush placed the food before him, a thick steak juicy with fried onions, mashed potatoes brown in gravy, a plate of sharp Greek salad, a small

bowl containing sour pickles and green tomatoes, and a platter of caraway-seeded soft rye bread.

"Looks good, hah?" Feibush was grinning, his mouth slightly open, his black mustache thinner. The crowd that came to the Club Ish Kabib did so for many reasons, but one reason was always Feibush. He was a born handler of food, a large-handed master of Russian cooking, a quick and eager server, a great dark giant of a man who treated the Club's patrons universally as starved children.

"Yare," Honey Halpern said, trying to come out of it. "It looks good."

"Want a little more light?"

"All right," Honey Halpern said, not thinking about it. He liked Feibush. He didn't want to argue with him. He didn't want to argue with anybody. Feibush switched on some lights and at once the figures on the wallpaper sprang to life. Repeatedly, at regular intervals, and in warm bright tones of yellow, orange and blue, the standing gondolier paddled the black-haired, faceless beauty down the glorious canals of Venice with bravado and with love.

Feibush was back with a glass pitcher. "Some seltzer, Honey?"

"O.K., Feibush. Thanks." Honey Halpern cut into the steak, the blood running with the knife. He ate slowly. It was more than delicious. He ate at a snail's pace and with no appetite.

Two young men pushed past the swinging door, Nate Herman and Jack "Pancho" Fuchs, drummer and clarinet artist respectively of the orchestra that played nightly at the Club. They stopped short, seeing Honey Halpern, surprised, overstepping one another. They had been talking loudly and they were quiet now, caught short.

"Hi'ya, Honey." They lifted their arms saying it, gesturing with their hands. "Pancho" was a crack dice man.

Honey Halpern nodded, hardly looking at them. They were good guys, both of them, Nate especially, a slim dark kid you liked having near you. Both of them Brownsville boys,



level-headed, self-reliant, clean. Right now he didn't know they were alive, either of them. He was all tied up in knots. The two boys made for the corner screen and out through the passage. Honey cut the soft rich meat into ribbons. He ate mechanically, fooling with the food in his mouth, swallowing with effort. He drank some of the fizzing seltzer water and he had had enough. He pushed the plates away and propped his cheeks in his hands, his elbows on the cleared space.

Feibush came out and looked at him. Honey Halpern felt it and gazed up at the big man. It didn't have to be that way. Feibush didn't have to take it like that. He liked Feibush. Sometimes he wished Feibush had been his father.

"Whatsa matter, Feibush?"

Feibush shrugged, not only with his shoulders, but with his mouth, his chin, his ears, his great bear chest. "You asking me, Honey?"

Honey Halpern laughed. It was funny. Not so much the way Feibush looked, the melancholy dragging along his strong jawbones, though that was funny also. It was the idea of Feibush looking out for him, worrying about his not eating, concerning himself with his welfare. It wasn't important, it was only a small matter, but it was something between them. It was really funny, the big jerk worrying about him. Honey Halpern stuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

"Here, Feibush," he said, extending it. "It was a swell meal. I enjoyed it. Only thing is I just ate before I came in. I must be in a daze, I forgot all about it."

Feibush stood still, towering above the table, shaking his bushy head.

"Come on, you jerk. Take it!" He didn't want to argue.

Feibush took the bill and cleared the dishes away.

"Now don't bother me any more!"

Feibush disappeared behind the screen.

Honey Halpern sat in the long shining room, alone, his sharp eyes shut. He wanted to sink deep into softness, to burrow his head into the small, soft pit of Renee's stomach, to

lie there in comfort, in happiness. He wanted to feel the coolness of Renee's strong slim fingers on his burning eyes. Renee, he said, mouthing the name, speaking it with his silent lips. He opened his eyes and there gliding down the canals of Venice the black-haired Renee was journeying the last trip to the sea. Wait for me. Wait for me. He would go with her, their boat sailing the smooth waters, winding down to the sea and death.

Ishie Kehanner burst in with a crowd of people. The place, at once, was in an uproar. That was the nature of Kehanner.

"We got money!" he cried, halting at the door, holding the others back. "Let Edison enjoy it!" Feibush was behind the screen, switching on lights. The room became brilliant, the waxed floor glistening, the mirrors on the wall shimmering with light.

"More, Feibush, more! Burn the joint down! For Edison!"

There was a great upswelling of laughter and the crowd surged around Kehanner, all of them talking, all of them just in from the street and flushed and aroused by the sharp wind of November. The several women wore fur jackets or scarfs. A young girl of about seventeen, with a bellhop's chin-strap hat on her rich red hair, dressed in a white-dotted bright green uniform that was almost a child's sun-suit, her legs long and shapely in their opera-length silk stockings, scooted through the passage and came running to take the furs and the men's coats and hats.

"Magda!" As always, Kehanner the traditional clown. "I love you, Magda! Come here, mine schmaltz!" The crowd laughed, watching Ishie embrace the girl, roaring as he patted her slim, neat fanny. The redhead gave him rein for a while, then pushed away. Kehanner had other things to do.

"All right, boys and girls. Find yourselves seats. From now on you are in the hands of that Russian madman, Feibush the Terrible. Order your favorite poison and he'll make you enjoy it." Ishie put on a face, his teeth bared, ugly, smiling. Feibush helped the crowd place itself around one of the large



tables and Ishie walked over to where Honey Halpern sat close to the wall.

"Hello, handsome. How'd you do?" Kehanner was a pale, medium-tall man who walked like a dancer, on his toes, his hips slightly swaying. His entire body was restless, the legs forever going into a stance, the shoulders never straight or in line. He had a thin nose, slightly upturned. His hair was slicked back tightly. He used face powder on his pale cheeks. With all that, he was tough, hard and smooth. He was even competent with a gun. Under his act, he was all right. Honey Halpern liked him. There was respect between them.

"How'd I do what?" Honey asked, climbing up to it. He had to master this fatigue. There was something about it that was deep and unknown to him before. He wasn't sure yet, but it was like quitting, like a kid throwing up.

"How'd you do? Hello, how are you? It's a joke." Kehanner had both shoulders going, though slightly. With gifted men like Honey Halpern, you couldn't get away only with acting.

"I'm not so sure," Honey Halpern said, his gray eyes steady, his voice right.

"I'm hearing things, or you don't sound interested." Kehanner was standing fairly still, across the table from Honey Halpern, meeting his eyes. Honey Halpern didn't answer, his body tight, aloofness slapped across his thin face. Kehanner laughed quietly, spreading his lips. They could figure each other. It was all right. Nothing was going to happen. "For some reason, my presence displeases you tonight, mine fine feathered friend."

"Yeah. You said it."

Kehanner grinned and walked away. The five-piece orchestra had swung into action alongside the stage. They started slowly, waiting for a few of the tables to fill up. The hat-check girl had set up close to the red-flowered swinging door. Her name was Florrie and she was friendly and attractive and young and her costume was very appealing in its bareness. Kehanner knew how to run a place.

Soon the Club was fairly full, by its own standards. Half

a hundred, a dozen or two more on big nights, was about the right number for maintaining a condition of comfort, intimacy and a certain exclusiveness. The Spades had to know everyone who came into the place. In fact, you had to have the approval of The Spades, in the same manner as holding a passport or traveling with diplomatic papers, before you could get into the Club Ish Kabib. It wasn't that The Spades was shy when it came to numbers. Hardly. It was more than that. It was the reason for the Club itself. In this elaborate hangout The Spades could rant and boast and crow at will, always in perfect ease, with never any fear of intrusion. This was something material, a creation of mirrors and chrome that was solid evidence of his standing, his position. Let Kehanner run it and keep the receipts. Money was a joke, when, only one item, there were two hundred stores in Brownsville that paid out twenty-five dollars a week. The Spades dictated the policies. The Spades reveled, a king among his collectors. Here he could shout, here he could thunder, here he could fall across a table with his belly full of drink. This was more than home.

Honey Halpern listened to the crafty music and watched the close dancing. He drummed his fingertips on the table and rowed the gondola out of the paper on the wall to a sea he had never glimpsed. The girl he had put in the slender boat, the girl with the long black hair, the high, heavy cheekbones, the deepset eyes, the melting mouth to his lips, was Renee the whore. They moved without effort, borne by currents, by eddies and whirlpools, by the interlocking of underwater hands. In fact he could throw away the long, curved paddles. He could move closer to Renee, within reach of her strong gentle hands, he could cradle his head, he could move his lips and smile at death. With his head touching her breasts, they would glide into the ocean-dark crevice. They would drop away through unfathomed blackness. The fatigue tore across his legs, stretching up to his shoulders. He stopped drumming and shut his eyes.

Whitey Ward and Lou Predo came in, quietly, pausing



for a moment inside the door, looking things over. Whitey looked clean, refreshed, strong and solid again after a few hours' sleep. They looked well together, both of them tall and broad, their clothes well-tailored, their different colorings setting each of them off nicely. Florrie took their coats, and Whitey patted her bare shoulder. He did it absentmindedly, like judging the quality of material in a suit. Florrie smiled at him, her small laughing eyes screwing up into buttonholes.

Lupo spotted Honey Halpern and he and Whitey slowly walked over to the side table. They stood over the boy for a while and then Honey Halpern opened his eyes. He stared up at them blankly. They were too broad, too self-contained, a vast gulf apart from the fields where death roamed.

"Why don't you get some sleep," Lupo said. The kid looked haggard, his narrow gray face pitted and drawn with fatigue. Lupo could tell just by looking at him that it had been messy in Cleveland. He had heard it all from Whitey, but one look would have told him.

"What for?" Honey Halpern stared without seeing them.

"What's the matter with you, kid? What's eating you?"

"I got dough coming to me," Honey Halpern said, still staring fixedly, but with a little of life edging into his voice.

"Yeah," Lupo said, quietly, working it out. "You got dough coming your way. What about it?"

"Whitey," Honey Halpern said, staring past them, his eyes centered on the wall.

"Yeah?" Whitey said it calmly, but shoving his hands into his pockets.

"You take the dough, Whitey. You're a good guy. Go out and buy me a boat, like *that*." With a quick, striking motion, his body held absolutely still, Honey Halpern whipped his arm straight out from the shoulder, the fingers pointing.

"Buy me that boat and keep the change, Whitey."

They listened to him quietly, hearing everything, the beat of the music, the sounds of people dancing, of people talking, of the scraping of chairs along the waxed floor. Ishie Kehanner had seen them and was coming over.

"You sound like you're nuts," Lupo said, angrily. "I don't know what's eating you." The lines of disappointment were rigid on his dark face, his strong chin jutting with it. Kehanner came up close, both hands extended, hooking them through Whitey's and Lupo's arms.

"Hi'ya, bantamweights!" He tried to rock them, to pull them closer together. The two men didn't even budge, their legs planted. They were preoccupied with Honey Halpern.

"The guy's a little on the off side tonight," Kehanner said, gesturing with his face. "What's going on?"

"He wants a boat," Whitey said, just repeating it, his voice flat. "Something he can drown himself with."

"It's a good idea," Honey Halpern said, quickly, looking at all of them.

Lupo's hand went up in a sudden fierce motion of disgust. It took months, even years, to develop a guy for gun work. Sometimes, as with Honey Halpern, the results were spectacular. That was what made this unexpected falling apart so much harder to understand. He couldn't begin to figure it. All he knew was it made him sick to his stomach.

"Listen!" His thick fingers chopped the air. "Cut out the crap. Go see a doctor, but don't unload on me. We'll be inside if you want the dough."

"O.K.," Honey Halpern said. They could tell they weren't near him.

"All he needs is a couple of drinks," Whitey said. "Leave him alone for a while."

"Mine friend, that looks like the ace," Kehanner said, popping his eyes in agreement. "Come. We'll get Feibush after him." He steered them toward the crowded tables near the stage. They collared Feibush, and then Lupo and Whitey ducked behind the screen. Almost at the same time, Frankie, Lupo's driver, came through the red-flowered swinging door, two young boys trailing him. They didn't stop to take off their coats, cutting straight across the room toward the screen. Little tough Frankie had his coat collar up around his ears,



his pock-marked face half-hidden, his black felt hat pulled down over his eyes.

The "Ditchdigger" they called him. He would never unbend, relax, ease off. Kehanner had given up long ago. The Ditchdigger could never accept the mirrors, the chrome stripes, the Venetian wallpaper, the waxed floor, the sounds of music. He was only happy working, sweating, bulldogging. The grimmer it was, the messier it became, the more it suited the Ditchdigger's style. He was perfect as Lupo's driver, slugger, handy man, moral support. He was as durable as oiled rope.

The two lads behind him were new. Honey Halpern watched them trail past the tables behind Frankie, walking stiffly, looking things over, not even thinking about stopping or sitting down. They were big kids with a swagger. They were young and strong and Lupo would study them and use them for a while, and then probably rap their heads together until their brains fell out. But for a period of time they would have a chance to work, and grab more than token money, and sweat it out, before, still ripening, still in possession of all gifts and sweetness, they would be dropped heavily to the hard ground and left to rot beneath the muck of dead leaves.

Honey Halpern could remember, sitting there, his fingers toying with the glass Feibush had brought him, when he had walked in new.

Honey Halpern finished the warm smoky straight Scotch that Feibush had brought him. He heard all the sounds of glasses and silverware, the loud noise of laughter, the weaving melody of the music makers, all merged, all fusing into a roar that was part of the lights and that tossed through the room as a glittering reflection of the many mirrors.

Feibush came over to Honey Halpern's table, his small black bow-tie bobbing on the huge swell of his white-shirted chest. He was flushed and smiling, his wild black hair thick and disheveled.

"You can go another one, Honey?"

"Sure, Feibush. Thanks."

"Why don't you join the crowd, Honey? Have a little fun."

"Hell with the crowd."

"I was only asking," Feibush said, walking away, shrugging his heavy shoulders.

Honey Halpern watched him duck behind the screen, without anger. He didn't have the strength for anger. He wondered whether he had the strength to unlace his shoes if he were to go to sleep. Where was there a place for him to sleep?

The first man he had killed had looked a little like Feibush. He had been a labor union official, a broad, bushy-haired man with a heavy face, a strong nose, wide shoulders and massive hands. Only he was an Italian, not a Sicilian, a broad, powerful Sicilian, not a Russian Jew, and he had crumpled like a bag of old laundry when the bullets had punched into him.

After that he didn't remember, except that there were three. Lupo had been astonishingly pleased. So had been The Spades, who was usually above that. Honey Halpern hadn't understood what all the fuss was about. All his life he had been preparing to kill. All the years in the tenements, all the nightmare years of living with a father tied to a wheel chair, helpless, praying daily for death. Then death came and his mother struggling to feed the two of them, the long years of starvation, of freezing, the never-change of seasons in the dark verminous flats. It was almost a natural reaction for him to kill, thanking an unknown God for the opportunity. He had become more proficient with each time, growing steadier, more confident, more accomplished. Then he had walked down a long, morning street and had shot a fireman.

The King of Brownsville, Kid the Spades himself, burst through the red-lacquered door, behind him his one-armed bodyguard, the Black Poppy, another man in a new, shining derby, and a tall, well-built blonde—Mr. Joe Harrison



and his second wife. Ishie Kehanner let out a whoop and came waltzing across the floor in the manner of a figure skater on ice. Florrie fluttered up close, a flower in a June sun, ready for plucking. Kehanner deposited their coats on her bare arms.

"Welcome public enemy number two and company!" Kehanner bellowed it across the room, crashing it from mirror to mirror. It was The Spades' proudest boast, pinned on him by a newspaper editorial and accepted in dead seriousness. It made him a man of national reputation.

Ishie guided them across the waxed floor, holding the tall blonde's arm, and placed them around the central table in front of the stage. There was a great clamor of greeting from the people at the other tables, even from the boys of the orchestra. The atmosphere was cordial, intimate, relaxed. They were all Brownsville products, native or adopted, and they got along well together. They could have more fun at the Ish Kabib than at any of the Broadway places. Collectors, numbers operators, gamblers, bookies, bail bondsmen, their close friends, their political connections, their women; a well-knit, compact group that worked and played together smoothly. There were grander places to spend their money, but the Ish Kabib was of Brownsville and so were they.

"Where's Lupo?" The Spades shouted. The whiskey glasses were full, ready. The Spades handed one to Joe Harrison, a small, pleasant man with red veins crisscrossing his face, his washed-out blue eyes alive and keen, the fringes of thin brown hair over his ears setting off his bald, knobby, district leader's dome. Without waiting for anything, Joe Harrison gulped the drink down. The Spades handed a glass to Mrs. Joe Harrison and turned back to Joe.

"Where'd that one go?"

Joe Harrison smiled a little, young boy's, pants down smile. His thin, whitish lips curled, and his tongue came out, licking them.

"Ain't had a drink since a week ago Sunday," he said.

The Spades' laughter roared out. He was a short, heavy

man, barrel-chested, with thick lips and scarred cheeks. One eye was twisted slightly out of shape. His nose looked cuffed, broad. He handed Joe another drink and they all put it down. The blonde swung her fat hand out, flashing jewelry, as she put hers away. The Black Poppy never drank. He sat there, immobile, his good hand in his jacket pocket, his quiet peaceful eyes almost asleep, a thin smile on his even, compressed brown lips. Kehanner stood alongside the blonde, talking to her, his eyes wide as a choir-boy's, pirouetting with his shoulders.

The Spades half turned in his seat, speaking the words out impersonally. "Somebody get me Lupo."

Kehanner lifted his eyebrows, his eyes blinking. "That boy Lupo? He's in the back room."

One of the men at the adjoining tables stood up quickly and ducked behind the screen. Joe Harrison poured himself a drink, putting it down neatly. His second wife saw him do it through the corner of her eye. She stopped listening to Ishie and turned around in her seat. Ishie stood there with his mouth open, one shoulder raised, while Joe Harrison quickly poured out a drink. The blonde took it like launching a battleship. She was a large woman, all over. She had a fresh red complexion that looked like boiled tomatoes. Her hair was bright, metallic blonde and from her ears there hung long, Oriental, gold and emerald rings.

The Spades and Kehanner looked at each other. "Start things going," The Spades said, grinning.

Kehanner twitched his expressive eyebrows, his eyes rolling, and looked down at Mr. and Mrs. Joe Harrison. Then he winked at the half-asleep Poppy, saw the thin smile creep over the lips, signaled with his hand toward the stage and Pancho took it out on a tenor clarinet.

Honey Halpern listened, sipping his drink. Several times now his head had started to spin, on the edge of vertigo, and he had been forced to clench his jaws and desperately fight out of it. He would never leave except on the boat. He would never again leave for home. With burnt-out eyes he gazed at



the frail-bottomed gondola and saw it plainly marked for death's door. Down the narrow canals to the open sea. He would wear rags, he would go bareheaded, his gun would be left behind, buried in the silt of a festering sewer. Light-handed, he would slip across the waters.

Pancho wound up, carrying it high. Nate Herman rolled the drums and the brocaded taffeta curtain swished apart and a dancer stood posed on the small stage. The crowd roared and the dancer came out of it, her arms whirling. She was wrapped in long, multicolored strips of silk. The band changed to fast time with a repeated, racing beat, and the dancer circled the stage, the silks flowing. She was a redhead, about thirty, the muscles in her legs tight as steel bands. Her trick was to whirl the silks until they stood out stiff. She had to keep spinning to stay exposed. It was a good trick, but all the drive had to come from the legs.

The people around the tables watched her closely. They knew that sooner or later she would strip, but this was interesting. This was showing her charms in small, sweet-tasting bits, and they went for it, howling. After a while she stopped, puffing badly, her eyes dragging with the weight of her mascara. The crowd sat back, expectant.

The redhead calmly tucked back the silks from her hips up. Her exposed bosom was very heavily grease-painted purple. Mr. and Mrs. Joe Harrison watched with all their powers of concentration. The Spades sat back easily, relaxing. The Poppy closed his sleepy eyes a trifle more, keeping away from it. Kehanner had pulled a chair up close to Joe Harrison. Slowly, Nate Herman let the drums drip out the beat. The fiddle took it up, exotic, singing, spicing the dominant drumbeat. Pancho tapped out on the clarinet, and slowly, with perfect rhythm, the redhead began to weave. She held her arms high behind her head, weaving and sighing with her swinging hips. Nate stepped it up and the redhead worked faster, her hips unslung, loose-jointed, burrowing in and the crowd warming. She began to walk, to strut, throwing out with the drumbeat, short, tight, choked-up steps, working it up, increasing her speed, driving

down, grinding, shouting with it, tossing her head, furiously shrieking, panting, gasping, until the crowd had caught it and was shouting, grinding, gasping with her. The redhead held it for a long time, the crowd wild, and then, with a crash, the music stopped.

Ishie Kehanner sprang to his feet, his eyes popping, not letting it sag. "Fifi! Fifi! That gave me an appetite!"

"A what?" Between puffs, she got it out.

"An appetite, Fifi! An appetite!" He sat down again, in a heap, his tongue out, his eyes ogling. The redhead came down off the stage. Everyone was waiting. The redhead came up close.

"Well, don't say I never gave you anything!" Kehanner leaped up again, full of life, holding his face out for the crowd to look at, the mouth and nose greasy with purple paint. He mimicked, aped, grimaced, drawing it out and the laughter crashed across the room. He tried to lick it off with his tongue and his tongue became sticky with it. They were all laughing, including the redhead. Joe Harrison instinctively reached for the bottle.

"Hey, Joe!" Kehanner shouted. He stopped and spat a glob of grease on the waxed floor. The crowd roared with it. "Hey, Joe? You got an appetite, Joe?"

A few of the women screamed. Joe Harrison smiled happily and his wife's fat hand crashed down on his shoulder. "You'd look like me blind aunt's wash," she squealed, her mouth disappearing into the bulging chin. The redhead ran up the steps to the stage and vanished behind the roll of the curtain. Reluctantly, the crowd leaned back, letting out its breath, laughing it off.

Lupo came through the passage with Whitey and The Spades waved them into chairs at his table. The band had it going again, smooth. Lupo whispered to The Spades and The Spades slowly turned in his chair and looked toward the back of the room. Then, shaking his head, he turned back and reached for the bottle.

"Here, have a drink. You're seeing things."



"Ask Whitey," Lupo said, looking at his square, manicured fingers. He drank the whiskey slowly. He wasn't much of a drinker. The Spades poured one for Whitey and Whitey gulped it calmly. Feibush had brought another bottle and Mr. and Mrs. Joe Harrison were going through it methodically. The Spades took two quick ones. Everyone was turning a little high. The talk was much shriller now, with flying darts of sudden loose laughter.

"I'll take care of him," The Spades said. He had spilled some of the whiskey and a brown stain grew along the white tablecloth. Some of it dripped over the edge onto Mrs. Harrison's ebony satin gown. She watched it without moving, then meditatively dipped her fingers into it and put them into her mouth. She saw Joe watching her with his watery blue eyes and she giggled loudly. She didn't move.

"He's a good kid, Honey Halpern is. Call him over." The Spades said it definitely, settling a point. Whitey stood up and walked to the back.

"He was a good kid," Lupo said, almost to himself. "Now he's nuts. He wants to die."

"Bull. That's a lotta bull." The Spades was flushed, but he sensed a lack of sufficient activity about him. He was a long way from being drunk and things had to happen until he got there. "Ishie!"

"Mine love?" Kehanner stood over one of the other tables, gabbing and wiping his face with a napkin.

"What else you got tonight?"

Kehanner placed two fingers into his mouth, spread his lips and whistled, short and piercing. The crowd laughed and a woman came out on the stage. She walked mincingly to the center of the platform and, shading her eyes with her hands, the hair thick and dark along her arms, she called in a high-pitched, carrying voice.

"Darling! Darling! Where are you?"

The crowd roar began all over again, as if nothing had gone before. Kehanner ran up on the stage.

"Here I am, Madame La Feely! I was waiting for you sucking on a lollypop!"

Honey Halpern listened to the laughter and the shouting. What did he really know about the open sea? He had been out in a rowboat on Jamaica Bay as a kid, with Pee Nots, and pulling back for shore the tides had worked against them and darkness had settled down over the wide desolate bay. After hours of frantic effort they had reached shore, almost three miles down from where they had set out, and the ground had been stickily swampy and pitted with unexpected holes in the darkness. All he could remember of it was terror. Perhaps he still had a lot to find out? Perhaps he wasn't ready? His thin narrow face broke with quiet laughter. That was silly. He would never be more ready than he was now.

"What's the joke?" Whitey said from across the small table.

"I was dreaming," Honey Halpern replied, looking up, explaining it to a child.

"You look it," Whitey said, rocking on his large, solid feet. "They want you up front." He waved his thumb toward the crowded tables. On the stage, the woman with the hairy arms was trying to embrace Kehanner and Kehanner was resisting. They kept a steady chatter going, it was all part of an act, and the effect on the crowd was uproarious.

Honey Halpern thought about the people up front. He could present them all with a parting gift. Perhaps he would toss all his money on the table, or scatter it across the waxed floor. He stood up quickly, calling on his reserve of strength. He saw his coat and hat draped over the chair behind him. He wasn't going to leave except on the boat. He wouldn't need his coat or his hat on the gliding boat.

The Spades gave him a great reception, standing up to meet him. Honey Halpern smiled, by forcing it. He looked like he had skipped a week's sleep. He shook The Spades' thick hand. His grip wasn't too good.

The Spades let go and reached for the bottle. He extended



the glass, keeping it jovial. The kid looked green. "Here, try some of this. Ten bucks a quart."

Honey Halpern ignored the drink, looking down at the brown stain on the tablecloth. "I've been drinking Scotch," he said, making it up.

The Spades looked at Lupo quickly, then gulped the drink. "O.K.," he said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. This was his party. He wanted it kept right. "Meet my friends. This is Joe Harrison and his wife. You know about Joe. He's a district leader and an old pal of mine. Meet Honey Halpern, a swell guy."

Joe Harrison popped up like an agitated rabbit. A mass of thin red lines crisscrossed the pink top of his bald head. His eyes were beginning to look as if they had been pressed deep into his skull. He put out his hand and Honey Halpern grasped it, making an effort.

"Let's watch the goddam show!" Mrs. Harrison said loudly, breaking it up. They all sat down and listened to Kehanner and the woman.

"You don't get the idea," Kehanner was saying. He had managed to powder his face again. He waved his hands and his shoulders. His eyes strained in their sockets. "I'm not interested. There's been a change."

"What could have happened, darling," Madame La Feely said, in anguish. She was very heavily made up, her cheeks brilliant, her lipstick exceptionally bright. Her dark hair glistened in an oily, mannish cut. She wore a tight green burlesque-house gown that covered her shoes. She had to do a lot of wriggling to keep her legs free. She kept going after Kehanner with her arms, wriggling all the time, and it was as funny as a pair of trained chimpanzees in a bicycle race.

"You wouldn't understand," Ishie repeated. "Not a nice refined young girl like you." The crowd roared. Ishie managed to squirm out of a realistic looking half-nelson.

"I'd do anything for a kiss," the Madame pleaded, slanting her eyes and grinning obscenely.

"If only I were able to help you out," Ishie sighed, with

heavy melancholy. The chase was on again, the laughter following them. The Spades turned around and saw Lupo, Whitey and Honey Halpern staring down at the floor. This was his party and he was having about as much to do with it as some shill in a flophouse.

"What the hell's eating you guys!"

Whitey and Lupo looked at Honey Halpern at the same time. The Spades was losing patience. He couldn't figure this. He jabbed his thumb into Lupo's arm. "Whatsa matter with him? Girl trouble?"

"How the hell should I know?" Lupo growled. He was sick of it. It didn't work out. He wanted to smack somebody down. "Ask him!"

"Hey, kiddo?" The Spades leaned over the table. He didn't want this around him. Not for anything. "You got girl trouble?"

Honey Halpern heard him like soft footsteps, like the turning of wheels in the distance. "Hey, Halpern! I'm talking to you. Want me to fix you up with Florrie? You know? Florrie. The kid who checks the hats."

"Lay off," Whitey said calmly, placidly, looking down at his large square hands. The Poppy moved closer, listening, his small, battered, brown ears lying flat along his skull. Lupo stood up quickly and vanished behind the screen.

The Spades turned completely around, ponderously. His small eyes, the twisted one and the normal one, were burning with the force of his rage. He raised his huge hammer fist and smashed it down on the table. The bottles and glasses clattered violently and more whiskey slopped over to widen the stain on the cloth.

"All I want is a man!" the woman shrilled. She had given up. She stood on the stage, panting, despondent.

"The same with me," Kehanner sang from the other end of the stage. He was swinging his hips, rolling his eyes, leering. "I want a man too! Yoy, yoy, there's been a change!"

Madame La Feely let out an earsplitting wail of sorrow, her hands digging into the folds of her long gown. It brought



down the house. The way she bellowed, her hands twisting and digging.

The Spades was up on his feet, waving his short powerful arms. The crowd watched him, laughing, but attentive. "I got a man for you!" The Spades yelled up at the stage. Kehanner and Madame La Feely snapped out of it. If this were a stunt they wanted to climb on fast. They hopped around, looking animated, waiting for it to break.

"You in the nightgown. C'mere!" The Spades shouted. Almost at once it was taken up all over the room. The Madame looked at Kehanner quickly. This was her first time at the Ish Kabib, but she knew all she had to know about The Spades. Kehanner nodded by flicking his eyes.

"I give in to Madame La Feely," he announced, smirking at the crowd. "She's an old practiced hand." He paused, his face freezing, then lowering the pitch of his voice as far as he could, he boomed out: "If yiz'll know what I mean?"

The Madame went out with the cue, mincing down the steps and swinging her arms.

"Over here, girly," The Spades said, pointing. Honey Halpern sat there motionless, his eyes fixed on the slowly widening stain crawling over the tablecloth.

"Lay off the guy," Whitey said. The words were drowned in the clamor that filled the room. The Spades hadn't even heard him. He had a grip on one of the Madame's arms. Mr. and Mrs. Joe Harrison sat with eyes wide and glazed, very drunk, waiting.

"Madame La Feely, meet Honey Halpern, a swell guy. All he needs is a woman to cheer him up." The groups started to gather from the surrounding tables, creating the circle that The Spades instinctively demanded.

"Honey!" the Madame squealed, as coy as a schoolgirl. She raised her arms and patted her painted face. "What a sweet, charming name for a man to have." The Spades howled with joy. He was in the center of the circle now. Suddenly, everything had worked out right. It was his party and he had

saved it from dying and it was going to be the way he wanted it to be from now on. He sat down again, heavily.

"He's a swell guy, Madame. Take my word for it."

Somebody pushed a chair close and the Madame sat down, gracefully, crossing her legs, toying with the folds of her dress. The Black Poppy watched her from across the table, his small eyes half shut, the thin skin around his mouth creased into a faint smile. He eased his chair away. He didn't like to have his arm crowded.

People started to shout encouragement. The Spades lit a thick cigar and waved it. Kehanner was talking to Feibush close to the screen, taking time out for a while. The Madame could handle it.

The Madame swung her obscene eyes at the crowd, then turned to Honey Halpern. "Honey, darling . . ." She broke off, tittering. In a different, full questioning voice, she asked the crowd at large: "Is that really his name?"

The crowd yelled it back, with enthusiasm. The Madame rubbed her hands together, warming up. "That's all I want to know." She put on her high, feminine voice again.

"All you need is a little loving and you'll be a real honey," she said. She moved closer and put out her hand. The crowd hung on it. Very gently, she began to stroke the upper part of Honey Halpern's arm.

Honey felt the weight of the fingers burning his skin, like acid. The upper layer of his skin had been sheared off and the hot burning acid thrown on the raw, exposed flesh. In spite of the growing torture, however, he could not move. He couldn't even think anymore. His eyes remained open, fixed, staring, but he was lost in tremendous, haze-swept mountains of sleep.

"I know how it is to have the blues," the Madame crooned. She said it strangely. Her eyes had suddenly become serious, brightened with a tormented fascination. "I get them myself. I know how it feels." Slowly it came out, and very gradually the crowd caught it, slowly quieting with it. The Madame placed her arm around Honey Halpern's shoulder. She had lost



the crowd. For her it had disappeared into murk, behind a smoke screen, forgotten, non-existent. She murmured to the young boy sitting disconsolate at her side. There were only the two of them in the long room. All else was thickness, a viscous fog, a substance that hurdled barriers and broke down the will. She tightened her grip about the boy's shoulders.

"Take it easy, Honey. Don't feel blue. Look at me, dearie. Please, dearie, look at me!" The voice sounded throaty and full, tremulous with eagerness and anxiety. The crowd heard, and in reply made low muffled response. The strength of the desire held them in check, but their amazement needed vent, and they gave it off quietly. The Poppy, The Spades, Whitey, the drunks, the boys up on the stage with their silent instruments; they were all quiet, bound and strapped, their wills drained, their group fascination holding them in chains.

Honey Halpern heard every word the Madame spoke. They came to him clearly, tearing through the stickiness that he could taste acrid upon his face, even winging across the vast distances that he had already traveled on his journey to the house of death. Like whipcracking he heard them, sharp, rhythmic, stinging to his bones. The Madame purred into his ear, brushing it, the Madame's mouth and face touching his and he was lost forever. He, Honey Halpern, was doomed, and knowing it, the thought crashing through his skull, reverberating through all the tiny cells of his body, he was still powerless to move. The Madame was rubbing her hand along his chest. The hand moved slowly, rhythmically, covering his skin with vermin, with maggots, insidious, sure of itself, reaching for more of his body, reaching, reaching—reaching all around him clear across to his left armpit—then halting. The hand probed, working it out, then grasped tightly.

"What is it, dearie? What is it that's so hard under your arm, that's pressing into your side?"

*The Gun!*

Like the thunder of bells ringing it pierced through to him, lancing the distance, the stickiness, the abysmal fatigue. The gun, the gun, the gun. He tore up from the chair, his heart

screaming. With frantic, yearning fingers he reached for and found his gun. His hands trembling, his eyes, tongue, throat, lungs, eardrums bursting and trembling, he pointed the gun, his gun, his beautiful immaculate instrument of release. His gun spoke. Once. Word of love. Twice.

They hadn't come out of it. He pushed through them quickly, not even seeing them, until he had found his coat and his hat. The gun was back in place, under his arm. He pushed past the red-lacquered door and down through the brilliant hall. He was out in the street again.

He walked with his head in the clouds through the dark wind-swept streets of home. He shouted out into the Brownsville night, wild lung-straining cries that were his message of hate and of triumph. The streets were almost empty, the garrulous summer-mourning people hugging the warmth of their cramped homes. Those that heard his cries, hurrying toward their familiar doors, hardly paused and scarcely wondered. They had seen and heard far stranger things in this East Brooklyn night that, inexplicably, was the night of home.

Down the streets he trudged, into the wind, seeing again and with sharper focus the constructed misery of creaking tenements, the rain and sleet battered frame shacks, the dark brooding ugliness of the deserted factories, the black silence of the coal and lumber yards, the frowsy stores, the empty, darkened store windows, the dust-blown stables, the moldering isolation of the junkyards, the barrenness of the garbage-strewn lots, the hatefulness of the streets of home.

Why cry out?

The wind tears through the open mouth, cloaking the tongue with dust, parching the overworked throat. These are the only streets you know. These, the treeless streets where the eye is able to take hold, where the unknown people that cross and jostle along your paths are familiar and part of one fabric. The small candy store on the corner, its dull lights peering near-sightedly out at the night, its dust-spattered newsstand a potential barricade. The old woman behind the cracked marble soda fountain, tending the customers in broken English. Far into



the night, waiting for the hangers-on to disperse, for the tough boys and non-heeding girls to break it up, to go home, to go away before the place gets a bad name.

Honey Halpern forced his aching eyes open and there, at the end of the long street, were the sharp clean lights of Stockton Avenue. His street. More than any other street in all the cities, towns, villages and hamlets of the world, this was his street. Stockton Avenue, with its lights, its noise, its brilliance, its rich humanity.

He stumbled onto the clean broad cut of Stockton Avenue, a gash of magnificence knifing through the sordid depth of Brownsville. The flow of automobiles and busses was as always, heavy and slow-moving, but he was totally unprepared for the emptiness of the sidewalks. He gazed down the long street, brilliant in the night, the towering neon signs tracing their red imagery like trumpets. The sidewalks were almost deserted. There was only one other man in close sight, and he watched this man hurrying away, shoulders hunched against the strong wind. Honey Halpern shook himself, trying to grasp understanding. He was alone on the block. He had used some of his last strength to reach the street, in anticipation of the crowds, of the glad sounds of voices, of the lift of long streams of people, all varieties and shapes of people, pouring down the length of the proud street.

He cried out, hoarsely. Yes. What was it? Was it the strength and bitterness of the pounding wind? Was that enough to shut the gregarious, life-loving people in their narrow homes? The people of Brownsville who rejoiced in jostling each other along this street, who poured out during the long warm months, late into the night, endlessly parading. Pushing their baby carriages, inspecting the displays behind the bright windows, munching on dried sunflower seeds, cracking the hard shells of Indian and pistachio nuts, swallowing with huge appetite the ice cream pops and flavored ices, the slices of pineapple, the thick juice-laden chunks of watermelon, the slivers of cocoanut, the paper bags full of candies, marmalade and sweet, chocolate-coated cherries. Now he was alone on Stockton Avenue. He shivered

with deep recognition of the keenness of the wind. He hunched up his shoulders, and with great effort, dragging his broken feet, he began to walk down the great street of his growing years. Behind him a long black car slowly and deliberately took the turn from the side street into Stockton Avenue.

Honey Halpern walked until he came to the new, impressive, streamlined mass of the bank building on Atkinson Avenue. Unbelievably, a man was mounted on a high, crotchety step-ladder, speaking into the wind. Clustered against the protecting marble wall of the bank, a small group of silent people listened to the speaker. An American flag, wind-tousled, hung draped about the legs of the ladder. The speaker talked slowly, drawing in breath against the wind, trying to make every word carry, fighting to prevent the crowd from straggling. Honey Halpern pushed into the crowd, rubbing shoulders in kinship, for they too were defying the bite of the wind. The black car parked at the corner.

Honey Halpern strained for the speaker's words, his eyes almost shut, drawing upon the closeness of the men and women in the crowd for warmth and strength. The words came down from their height slowly, simply, earnestly.

"We must go into every store on Stockton Avenue and ask them not to sell Japanese goods. That is our duty. That is our duty and our great service to humanity."

The crowd was silent, nestling closely together. The speaker's words hit the dark marble wall above them and bounced along the tops of their heads. They shifted their legs, uneasy, their eyes darting.

"Every purchase of Japanese goods is a bullet in the throat of a Chinese man, woman or child." Honey Halpern opened his eyes. The speaker's words came slowly, sparring with the wind, trying to hold the one group of people along the entire span of Stockton Avenue that had not scuttled for home. "Every man who buys a silk tie helps a murderer. Every woman who buys a Japanese dish is setting fire to a Chinese village.

"The fight against Fascism is a world fight. The struggle of the Chinese people against the Japanese enslavers and plun-



derers is our struggle, our fight. By their struggle against the victory of Fascism in Asia, they are preventing the triumph of Fascism in America as well. They are offering their homes, their lives, their blood, so that we in America can enjoy democracy, can live in peace. We cannot let them down! We must help them in every way we know how!"

The words stopped. The flag was pressed close against the legs of the high ladder by the wind, its loose ends flapping furiously. The speaker started to step down and a small murmur of sound rose up from the crowd. Nothing very definite. A rather feeble hum that quickly subsided and was lost in the wind. Several young girls circulated among the already disintegrating crowd, selling a magazine with a cover picture of a smiling Chinese baby.

Honey Halpern watched the crowd break up and melt away. There was no holding them. There were no more words. Instantly, panic stabbed through him, his mouth opening with it, the eyes straining. His head reeled and he stumbled in his tracks. Almost weeping, he fought until he had it again, the precious control under his belt. Two boys were disengaging the flag from the ladder. The speaker watched the girls count the number of remaining magazines. They were all that remained of the crowd.

Honey Halpern stood there silently, staring at the speaker and the young, bare-headed girls. The two boys were hurriedly closing the ladder. Honey Halpern stepped forward, moving woodenly, with stiff, rigid steps. They were watching him, one of the girls smiling. She was very young, about fifteen, with full round cheeks and a ready, generous smile.

"Go on talking," Honey Halpern said. His head felt blown, light, injected with pockets of air. "Why don't you go on talking?"

The chubby-cheeked girl never stopped smiling. The other girls were older, their faces flatter, less generous. One of them gasped sharply, sucking her breath in past thin, narrow lips. The speaker stepped up close to Honey Halpern. They all knew him. His picture had been in all the papers. Periodically,

he had been arrested, held for questioning, displayed to the reporters and newspaper photographers, and then as methodically released. It wasn't difficult to recognize this young killer for hire, to recognize the sleek expensive clothing, the long, dark, tight-fitting coat, the full-brimmed, fine felt hat that was turned low, almost hiding the eyes.

The speaker looked at him, thinking about it, about the pleading sound he had heard in Honey Halpern's words. Then suddenly brisk, aloof, almost sneering with it, the speaker gave his reply. "Who the hell asked you around?"

Honey Halpern stood and listened, the words hooking into his skin. "Why don't you beat it?" the speaker said, spitting it out. "Who asked for your opinion on anything?" The smiles quickly vanished from the girls' faces. They knew about Honey Halpern.

"Come on!" the speaker snapped, turning on them. "We've got to take the stuff back. Tonight!" He started to walk away and quickly they followed after him.

Honey Halpern watched them walk away down the long, deserted, windblown street. He was ready to drop to the sidewalk. He felt hollow inside, slashed into ribbons. He watched them and heard their sudden laughter ring out, the fat little girl turning her head quickly, for an instant, to look back. The young speaker was between them, between the laughing girls, the loyal boys. Honey Halpern watched until they were out of sight, lost in street darkness beyond the eye's range.

He started to walk after them, dragging his crying feet, his shoulders limp and caved, and the black car turned into Atkinson Avenue, moving very slowly, the driver holding it close to the curb. The wind hit down viciously from the north, the first freezing winter wind, tearing his hat away, slamrolling it across the gutter. Honey Halpern didn't even watch his hat run with the wind. He stumbled over the pavements, his mind a swirling, bursting blank. Grimly, he tried to hold onto the one thought that was left in his world. It came glancing into his consciousness, high-flying, the edges slippery, and he struggled with ragged, desperate tenacity to hold onto it, to get a solid



grip with his fingers around it. At the end of Brownsville, past the jutting land neck of Canarsie, there was deep water. Jamaica Bay, deep water, black and roomy, a vehicle for passage. He would stumble, he would lift himself up from the cold pavements, he would crawl on bleeding knees and he would reach the black water. He would walk into the deep black water.

The sudden drop of the curb into Carter Avenue jarred him roughly, the thought seeping away, eeling out of his clenched fingers. He tripped again over the opposite curb, somehow managing to stay erect. The traffic had all but vanished from these streets away from Stockton Avenue. All alone he began to walk down the next long block, past the bleak and scabby house-fronts, and a long, low-slung car followed him, pacing itself to his speed, moving with relentless ease.

The wind whipped through the canyon of the alleylike schoolyard as he approached Drake Avenue, spinning him around, into its teeth. He gasped with the force and drive of this wind of winter and stared with blind eyes full at the black car close behind him. The car stopped, precipitously.

What was the thought?

Despairingly, his breath coming in tearing gulps, he strove for the thought. It came in sideways, limpingly, and he had caught it again. The water, the black deep water of the bay, the water that would carry him along in its all-embracing tides out to the waiting ocean. He turned with the thought, his narrow, beaten face pointed southward, away from the wind. The black car glided after him.

On the other side of Drake Avenue, stretching across the block to Beaumont, and then heading off on an angle to Laverne, there stood, in all its barrenness, the one pitiful park of Brownsville. His hair down over his eyes, Honey Halpern heard and listened to the sound of voices coming from this park. There were warmth and color to the voices, rich, heartening warmth. Honey Halpern paused and waited, his sick heart throbbing.

A young girl, escorted by two boys, came high-stepping out of the park. She moved with grace, with freedom, supple and

trim about the hips, her shoulders high and springy. Her hair was long and wild in the wind. The two boys were trying to put their arms around her and she was battling them out of it, but it was with laughter and with shouting. Where was the wind? The boys wore sweaters, loose about the throat, and the girl was dressed in a short skirt and rough woolly jacket. They came out of the park prancing, the girl evading the eager arms, twisting and circling, and they crashed into Honey Halpern with all the vigor of their young bodies. Honey Halpern reeled and fell. Instantly, they had swooped down upon him and had lifted him to his feet again, laughing, talking to him between their laughter.

Honey Halpern stared at them with fixed, glassy eyes. They stood before him, allowing themselves to be looked over, willing to trade that for apology. They were all smiling. Honey Halpern's stare narrowed upon the girl. With her proud head high, she would be a fitting companion. More so than Renee, because Renee was older and at the end of her springtime. This girl was young, and in her first rich blooming. She was fruitful with sweetness, with the full coming of spring. She would sustain him on the voyage over chartless waters.

Slowly, Honey Halpern raised his right hand. Beneath the coat, under the left arm, hugging his side. The gun came out quickly, snub and dreadful in the night. The girl screamed and the boys backed away. Honey Halpern pointed the gun and, their bodies flashing, they were away running across the street and sprinting headlong over the pavements.

He hadn't fired. His arm was shaking helplessly. He couldn't prevent the gun from swinging. His gun. His voice. They were getting away from him, pounding noisily down the street. He tried to steady his arm by clasping the wrist with the fingers of his left hand. He called for all his remaining strength. The shaking ceased. Carefully, Honey Halpern aimed the gun and fired. The shot echoed past the sleeping tenements. He fired again.

They had escaped him, claiming the summer that was in store for them. With a wild cry of pain, Honey Halpern threw



the gun far into the park. He was lost now, utterly and insanely lost. His life had left him and he was nothing but a shell, a frame of deceit. Moaning, he dropped to the ground, his face touching the cold stone, his eyes shut.

The rear door of the black car was thrown open and two men leaped out. They rushed across the street and lifted Honey Halpern from the pavement and carried him back to the car. They were large men, heavily built, with strong, powerful arms. There was no resistance.

The car started to roll and Honey Halpern opened his eyes and looked into the smooth, frozen face of Black Poppy One-Arm, watching him from the front seat. Frankie the Ditch-digger was driving, over-reaching the wheel. Frankie was excited. They were moving straight down Atkinson, toward the Boulevard that skirted the railroad tracks which ran between Brownsville and Canarsie.

Honey Halpern brushed away from the two men who had carried him into the back seat. They were the new ones, the green, willing young boys that Frankie had marched in and out of the Club. They had been waiting outside the Club for Lupo, and by this time Lupo should have been sitting in the middle of the seat in Honey Halpern's place, going over something with these new boys, but that was never going to happen in this night. Honey Halpern smiled deep back in his eyes. He felt lightheaded, ready to float. Lupo was letting this one go by. Lupo was turning in his cards and walking out to the men's room. He was taking a long smoke for himself. Again Honey Halpern squirmed and pulled away from the new guys. One of them twisted and roughly shoved him back into the seat.

"Don't touch him that way," the Poppy said softly. His small flat nose was as frail as a child's in the light brown face. The tiny, half-closed eyes were a thin straight line.

"You did wrong, white boy, pulling that gun," the Black Poppy said, drawing the words out softly. Honey Halpern shut his eyes again and floated. His head was a large, hollow vessel. They crossed under the elevated at Laverne. The houses be-

came smaller, newer, set back from the sidewalks behind tiny gardens. There was very little traffic on the streets.

"You know the way it is with The Spades and me," Poppy One-Arm said, his voice low and diffident, working it out so that it would all come clear. "You made a bad one when you let go with that gun. You could have killed The Spades just as sure, white boy. You could have ripped those bullets into him and I wouldn't have been able to stop you at all. That can't never happen again." The Poppy opened his eyes a trifle.

"That's why you're gonna have to die, white boy."

The Poppy turned away and stared through the windshield. His hand wasn't in his coat pocket. His hand was resting on his lap, with a gun in it.

Honey Halpern looked at the small, sleek head, then out past it to the lights of the Boulevard. "You can't kill me," he said, a slow smile coming alive on his dry lips. "I got a date."

"Who with, white boy?"

"With a whore." The smile broke, warming him.

"I don't feel against you," the Poppy answered, his words coming back muffled over the smooth hum of the motor. "I hope you believe that, white boy. I ain't never felt against you. You the kind I like, Honey. You know that. You not ripe for dying. But you pulled that gun and there's nothing else can be done now."

"I'm ripe, Poppy," Honey Halpern said, the smile still warm on his lips. "I'm as ripe as I'll ever be."

Frankie the Ditchdigger turned the car savagely into the wide Boulevard. The place had been selected. Three blocks below, where the tracks were nearest the road. He stepped her up, the motor whining with it.

"I don't feel against you." The Poppy said it slowly.

Frankie yanked her to a stop, rasping the tires into the curb. He had to hold himself back, with all his control. He was at the hair point of explosion. He wasn't against Honey Halpern either, but he despised this talking. Do the job, your snout in the mud, but for Chrissakes, do the job!

"Let him out!" he shouted.



One of the new boys opened the door and jumped out quickly. "You too, Honey Halpern," Frankie said, some of the control firmly in hand now. Honey Halpern leaned forward, smiling. He found he could do it easily. He felt strength coursing through the muscles of his body again. He stepped out of the car, alert, his head light and airy, but clear. He flicked his hair back with both hands, flattening it down. He looked at the new boy with cool, caustic appraisal, the thin smile strident on his lips. The new boy hopped back into the car. The Poppy had opened the front door and had swung his legs out to the runningboard. He held the gun in Honey Halpern's direction.

Honey Halpern half-turned, still facing the Poppy, but his eyes free to study the layout where death was waiting. The cold wind from the north rushed across his face, his mouth. He was able to taste the anger in it. Slowly he inched away over the sidewalk, moving with sureness, with subtle grace and stealth.

There were these things now, between himself and the approach he would follow, the path he would take. Not so readily could he discard the embrace of the black waters. There were the long strings of the Boulevard lights, high arcs here, one hundred feet apart, cutting straight across the shadowy darkness. Miles of light that led to the hidden, nestling, Island towns. More immediate, closer to the core, were the two spheres of light radiating from the poles along each fifty feet of this never-traveled sidewalk. The Poppy wouldn't shoot if he were in the spotlight of either sphere. He wouldn't be much of a target, though, until he approached at least the edge of one of the spheres. The Poppy could let go right this minute and hit him in spite of the shadow. The uncertainty wasn't too great yet. But it would be the next minute. Honey Halpern weaved across the sidewalk, sliding his shoes over the loose sand that had drifted down from the railroad embankment. The Poppy was holding back.

There was also the traffic on the Boulevard. He cursed to himself for a short second, before cutting it off. He hadn't figured on the traffic. The cars came in groups, thin knots of them held and released by the change of green and red lights. The

groups of cars passed swiftly, leaving the Boulevard quiet and deserted, the black car all alone, for one or two long minutes. The Poppy wouldn't shoot while the other cars were rolling.

He had to believe in that. He didn't have too much to work with. He would have to reach the edge of the sphere of light at the split second the first cars came up on the green change.

Honey Halpern turned his back on the Poppy.

The sidewalk was out. They could catch him on the sidewalk with the car. He could never make it running across the Boulevard either, back into Brownsville. The Boulevard was almost two hundred feet wide at this point and there were long stretches of empty lots before the houses began again on the Brownsville side. Frankie had figured it quickly and well.

Anyway, he didn't know if he could run. He slid his shoes, carefully, turning, so that he faced the steep embankment that climbed to the tracks. There was a cluster of small, dim railroad lights on top of the embankment, the third point and apex of his shadow triangle of life. The embankment was littered with dried stalks of weeds, rusted oil and gasoline cans, broken glass, fragments of wood, brick and cardboard. With clear eyes, Honey Halpern traced the limits of the dark area that began at the edge of the two sidewalk spheres of light and ended below the field of the overhead lamps.

Suddenly, he raced up to the dark spot, the blood pounding in his throat. The Poppy was still holding back! Honey Halpern kicked against rocks and cans, smashing through dozens of crackling weed bodies. It would be more difficult shooting with the angle. His head was throbbing, wildly clamorous. If he could sprint up the rest of the embankment, swiftly, from out of the shadows, he might reach the top. Once over the tracks he was safe, he was beyond the range of bullets. There was all the dark sprawling space of Canarsie to lose himself in, the approach to the black waters.

Quietly, his breath coming faster, he prepared himself. He shut his eyes, breathing deeply, and called for all the force of his life. He tensed the muscles of his body, slowly, again and again, pouring in fresh new reservoirs of strength. He tightened



his slim, straight legs. He clenched his fists, and then he was way running, tearing up the slope, digging in with his toes, scrambling, slipping, pulling himself up through weeds, over loose dirt, stones and glass. He was in the circle of light and he heard thunder crashing over his head, bursting his ears, but no shots. He was across. He lay flat on the hard gravel of the roadbed, his head touching the end of a black tie. He was panting wildly, painfully, his head lifting with it. Then for the first time he heard the shouting, and the suddenly piercing cry of the Poppy:

"Don't nobody go after him!"

Honey Halpern stood up quickly, pushing up and away from the ground. He leaped across a double row of dull steel tracks. There was a cleared strip several feet wide in front of him and after that another double line of tracks. Beyond that, the embankment that led down to the night of Canarsie. Honey Halpern stepped across to the cleared strip and halted.

He laughed suddenly, deep and to himself. Beyond the quiet streets of Canarsie, beyond all the sleeping houses, there spread the silent waters of Jamaica Bay. Beyond the black bay, with the sweep of the tide, there lay in wait the brooding ocean. The ocean that accepted the bodies of men.

Where would he go? What could he find in all the dark slumbering streets? He would reach the water and walk out into it and disappear, and after the maggots and the oily bay slime had nurtured him, he would be cast up finally on some barren shore.

Could he reach the water? Did he have the strength to drag his body through all the long, quiet streets? He threw his arms out, not in despair, not in gloom, but in acceptance. He looked around him, the bite of the north wind sharp and quick on his thin cheeks. He could vaguely make out the straight lines of steel running away into the night. He kicked something, and without looking, he knew that it was a loose lump of coal. Because, with burning clarity now, he remembered.

In the dead heart of winter the coal freights came over these tracks, the open cars carrying hundreds and thousands of tons

of coal. There would be so many long trains of cars, and all of them so fabulously loaded with coal, that many of them would stand on the tracks for days, waiting until there was room at the unloading points. Night and day the cars were watched by railroad guards. The guards were armed with clubs and with guns.

In the dead heart of winter, he, Honey Halpern, along with other kids from the rotting, thin-walled, freezing tenements, would come to the embankment and hunt the lumps of coal that dropped from the overloaded cars. When these scrappings weren't enough to fill their baskets and pails, they would climb the freight cars and steal the black coal. They would fight the guards, they would be beaten and clubbed, and they would go home with coal.

That was the only thing he could remember of all the years of his life. Honey Halpern smiled, his head full with the impact of memory. He turned and walked back over the tracks to the edge of the embankment. Silhouetted, he looked out toward the lights of Brownsville.

The Poppy took careful aim.

THE END



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