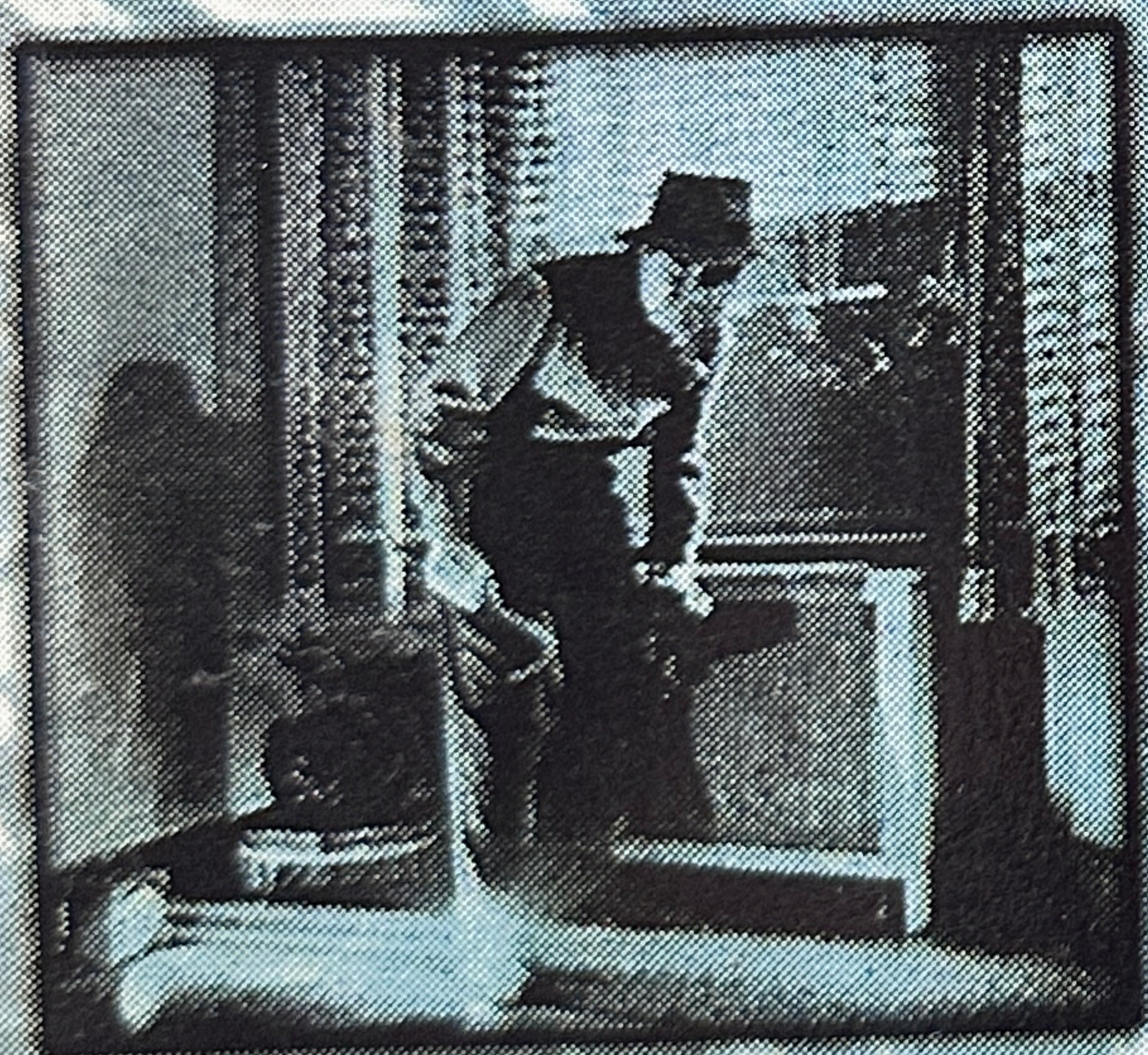
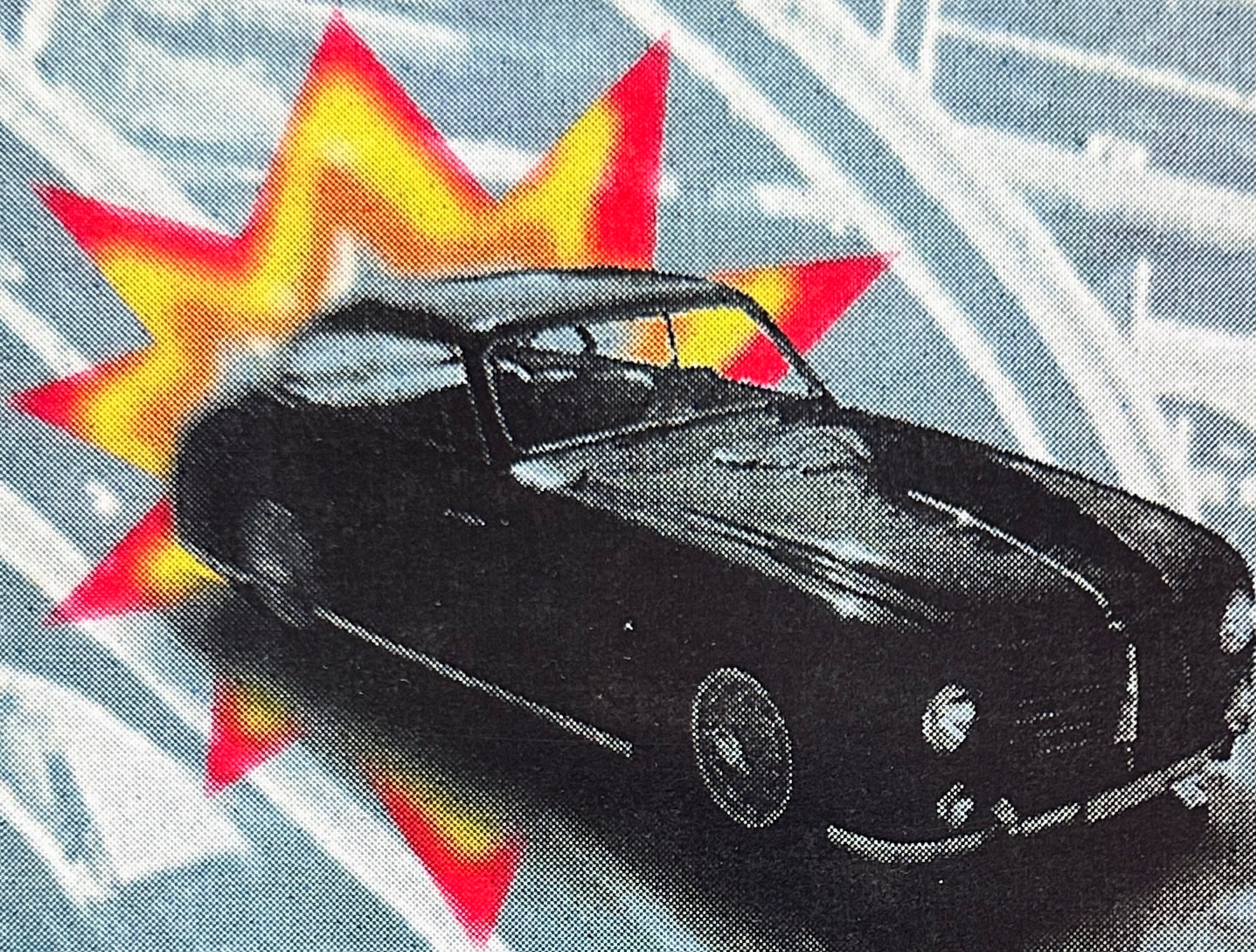
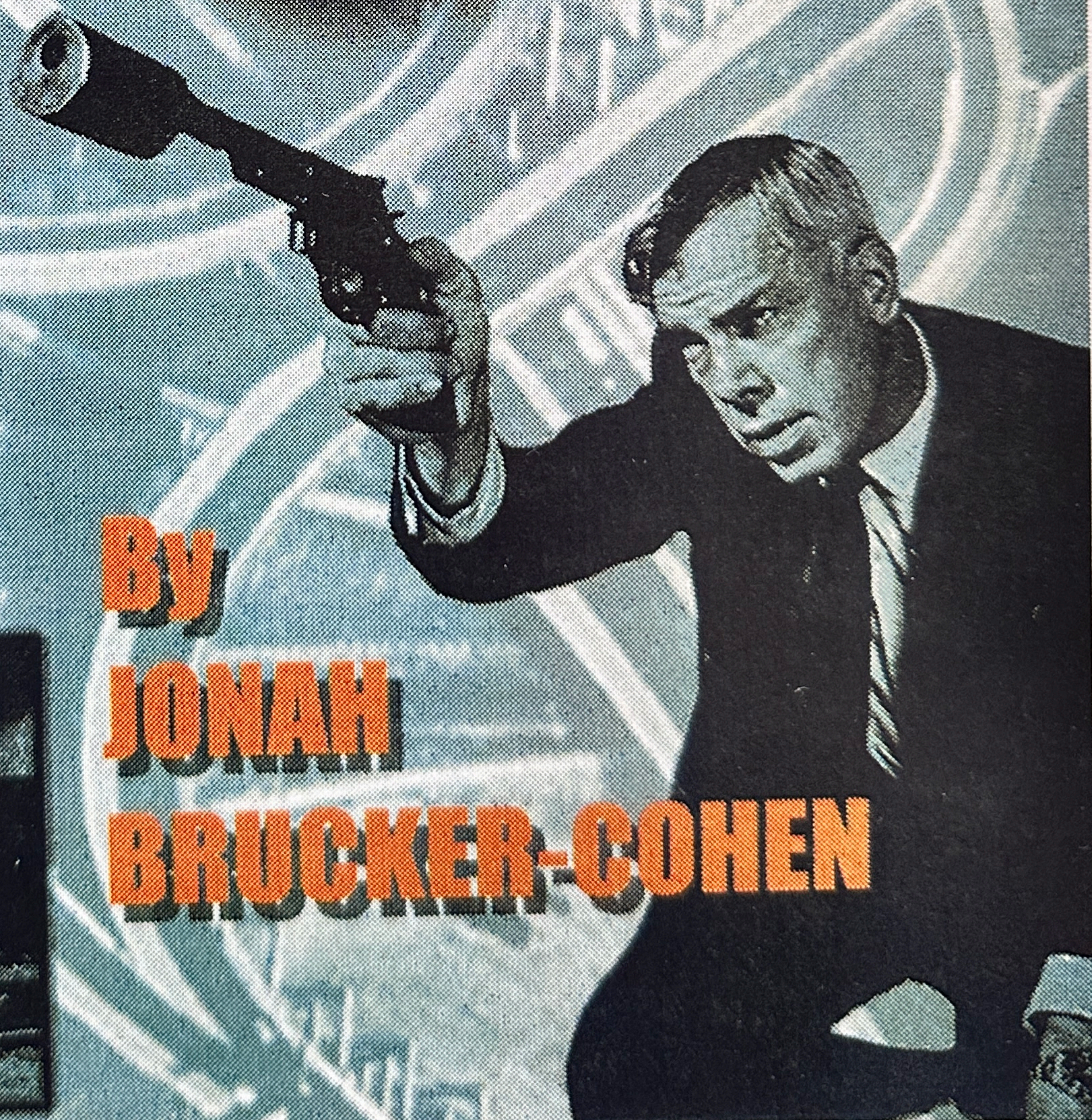


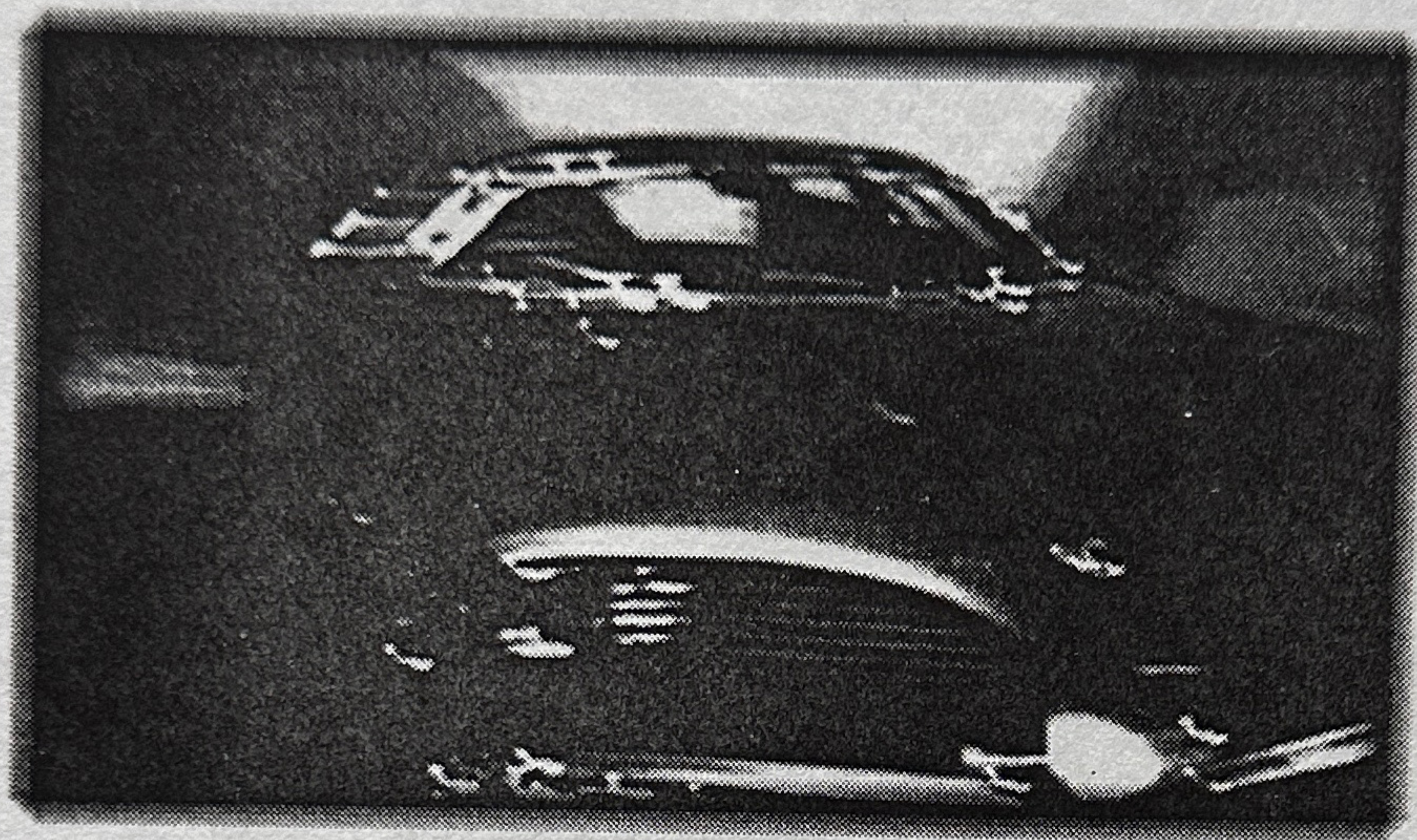
# NO SALE COPPER!



BY  
**JONAH  
BRUCKER-COHEN**







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BY JONAH BRUCKER-COHEN

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**CHAPTER ONE**

# **CROSSTOWN JUNCTION**



Renshaw had me taped to my seat. Slick Banister was out the door with a dame in the front seat and 40 Cs at coat check. Up at Aunt Arlene's a couple of hard nosed no lifers pinned my shooting hand to the table with crobars. I couldn't reach the Luger, and some lefty with a crosseyed anvil for a fist, left a dent in my skull three stiffs deep. When I came to, there was nothing but my bruised self in the lynch of some blue cheese stinker of a factory on the waterfront. I took out my Lucky Ace ballpoint and stretched the sticky saran wrap harder than a plastic rubber band in a case. After two taps I was free, and old Lefty Renshaw was about to go down. I got up, shook off the ropes, stretched myself out, and walked down the spiral case. My car was where I left it; no gaskets missing. I had a run on Slick's position, but the bank he heisted tracked down a stolen Fifty at Crosstown Junction, two hops from Lester Knowles' Place. I knew I'd be paying Lester a visit soon, after he managed to racketeer seven of the highest selling Pablo Vega albums on the charts. In my caddie I was as good as gone, so I shoved out six shiners to my ex-police buddy Tommy Gunn, and he gave me the blue Rosalinda. Nothing like a Floater for the barbeque. I filled it up, medium petrol, went home, took a shower, and packed up for the long haul. I knew Slick's luck would turn sooner or later . . .



I was seven blocks down on the 220 when six machetes filled my rear view and Ted Viper, the no-hat hairless wedding ring, pushed down on the accelerator. He was gaining on full throttle, so I skipped two blinkers and edged over to 1st and Downy, through Letterman's alley. My hair was dripping with sweat as I watched the sun go down like an orange into a juicer. Nothing but pulp. Before I knew it I was on the 220 again. Viper was gone and Slick's madhouse was coming around the corner. That shyster was about as crooked as the next, but he was about to be straightened by a Mauser .25 and the weight of a ball peen on his face.

The Highway was like a road to my funeral. Twisting asphalt and tall grey buildings with decaying sign posts and tattered walls. There was a church on the way, and its steeple was black and smoldering from a recent fire. What a grease pit. Ol' Slick needed a two by four headache and I was his pint of aspirin. The Rosalinda shined harder than a batting cap on first base, ready to steal one from Dwight Gooden's locker. I knew this dolly would crash open into a swimming pool of bad memories. It was the carbon soot that made me happy. I pulled up to the joint about twenty-two past the hour and turned off my headlights, so as not to alarm the cretins inside. I was doused up for a rough beating. A .22 Cliff and Smythe in my left pocket, brass knuckles with razor tips in my right, and a bottle of Brill cream for my



do. There wasn't anybody or anything that was going to make me late for my date tonight, or muss up my outfit. There were six stark weather grey caddies seven inches to the curb and three feet apart on the bumper. The parched one was Slick's, its tailpipe emitted his poison even when the engine was shut off. I made my approach to the house on foot, leaving the Rosalinda behind the Colgate billboard off the 220. Ted Viper's car was sitting in the driveway. What a plague.

When I got to the front door, I peered to the right and saw it. A six foot deep well with a staircase in the middle. The well was about four feet in diameter, about the size these rats fit into on a good day. Instead of breaking down the door with my fist, I thought I'd scoop in the back way and throw these losers for a loop. They were like a bunch of tired old horses, if ya didn't kick em' from behind, they'd try and stomp your guts out with everything they got. I knew my ammo wouldn't hold so I grabbed a pack of 20 fringeheads from Lucky Lucy's Gun Shoppe before I hit the road. If these lickens couldn't do the job, I'd have ol' Slick's necktie for a noose. But I knew I was ahead of that bug-eyed Flounder.

Two minutes later and a nickel for the waiter, I flooded the well and plunged down three flights of stairs into Slick's dungeon. There were seven



of em' upstairs. I could hear their feet and Viper's shoes sounded like an ambulance with a wooden leg. What a no brainer. I didn't hear the shot until the water cooler looked like a pot of Alka-Seltzer in a thunderstorm. It was one of Slick's guys, Bonnie "Hot Man". He was coming at me faster than a monkey licking up his own spit. That barrel was about as holy as Prince Charles giving the Pope a wedgie. Slipping on the floor, I made it behind the wine rack with a chip on my shoulder and two fries in the oven. "Hot Man" was tailing me by sneaking behind the rear duct, but I could see his eyes through the bottles. He was deader than the callous on my right foot, and only I knew it. I reached up, threw a bottle on the floor, and waited for him to pounce. He came quickly, and all seventeen hundred vintage 1900 Chardoneys came crashing down on his no-name skull. What a rush. He was a goner, and I knew the rest would hear the racket, so I made it back through the well and outside faster than a camel in a tidal wave. Now I had them puckered.

I knew if I got to Slick first, Renshaw would bow down. Slick was like a son to him and no one takes me down without a fight. Inside there were bodies all in front of the basement door. One was a straggler, looking like he'd take the money and split, so I went around back to catch him. There were six Mona Lisas near the pool; statues with no arms or legs. It



reminded me of my uncle Charlie's wedding. The bad rat was Curly Bernardo. He knew Slick wouldn't pay off his dog racing racket and a punch in the face came off my fist in no time. I threw him in the pool, lifted him up, searched him (no dice), and stuck him unconscious in some shrubs next to Modigliani's faceless sculpture. What a pair! Now it was five against one. I opened the side window and peered inside. Someone forgot to flush the toilet so I did them a favor; next I'd do it to their head in a pile of boiling linguini. But all this talking just makes me hungry.

The bathroom was about as big as my pad. There was enough room in the tub to fit my 400 lb landlady and her exercise group. The door unlatched without a sound, and I made it to the parlor in no time. No cookies for grandpa. Five guys were huddled on arm chairs and sofas in the living room. They were talking so loud, I thought the TV was on so I eased past the bar and tiptoed into the kitchen. All of a sudden, they got frantic. Slick Banister was there with his two body guards, Baster and The Fridge. On Slick's left was Terry Tugboat, the no-good life cruster who caused a ruckus in Rio when he torched the Grand Hyatt and seven hundred of its visitors, all because he lost a game of craps. That guy thought he was Hot Pants Lester. To his left was Sir George "the stapler" Molls. This man was pushed back five years in the joint for putting 30 staples into each of the



warden's eyes and then pulling em' out with a remover. This guy had more cheez on him than a pint of broccoli in the Valveeta commercial. He would go down as well.

There was nothing I could do but wait. If I jumped them now, Baster and the Fridge would be on me faster than a pint of fudge at Dairy Queen. These no good finaglers needed a bust in the chops and I was their Arm and Hammer. Slick got up from his seat and walked over to the fireplace. Ol' Baster was on his heels and spinning before Slick even touched the mantle. I eased over to the Lazy-Boy in the den, armed with my pistol and a bowl of hard-packed liverwurst; oven fresh and hotter than a boiled pack of spinach. Sir George tried to leap at me but Baster's feet tripped him straight into Fridge's jaw bone. I eased around the marble pillar and smacked Terry Tugboat with a hi-hat pounce of liverwurst; enough to put him out with a fracture. His body swerved off kilter until his feet cracked the sliding doors and his face thudded hard on the railing. Now it was just Slick and me.

Unfortunately, while I was wacking these bozos, Slick had sped out the back like a wild goose without a head. Damn weasel monkey! I had four bodies down, my Luger primed, and a stiff full of waxed Chardoneys in the cellar, all in a house I should have scrambled from weeks ago. It would be no time

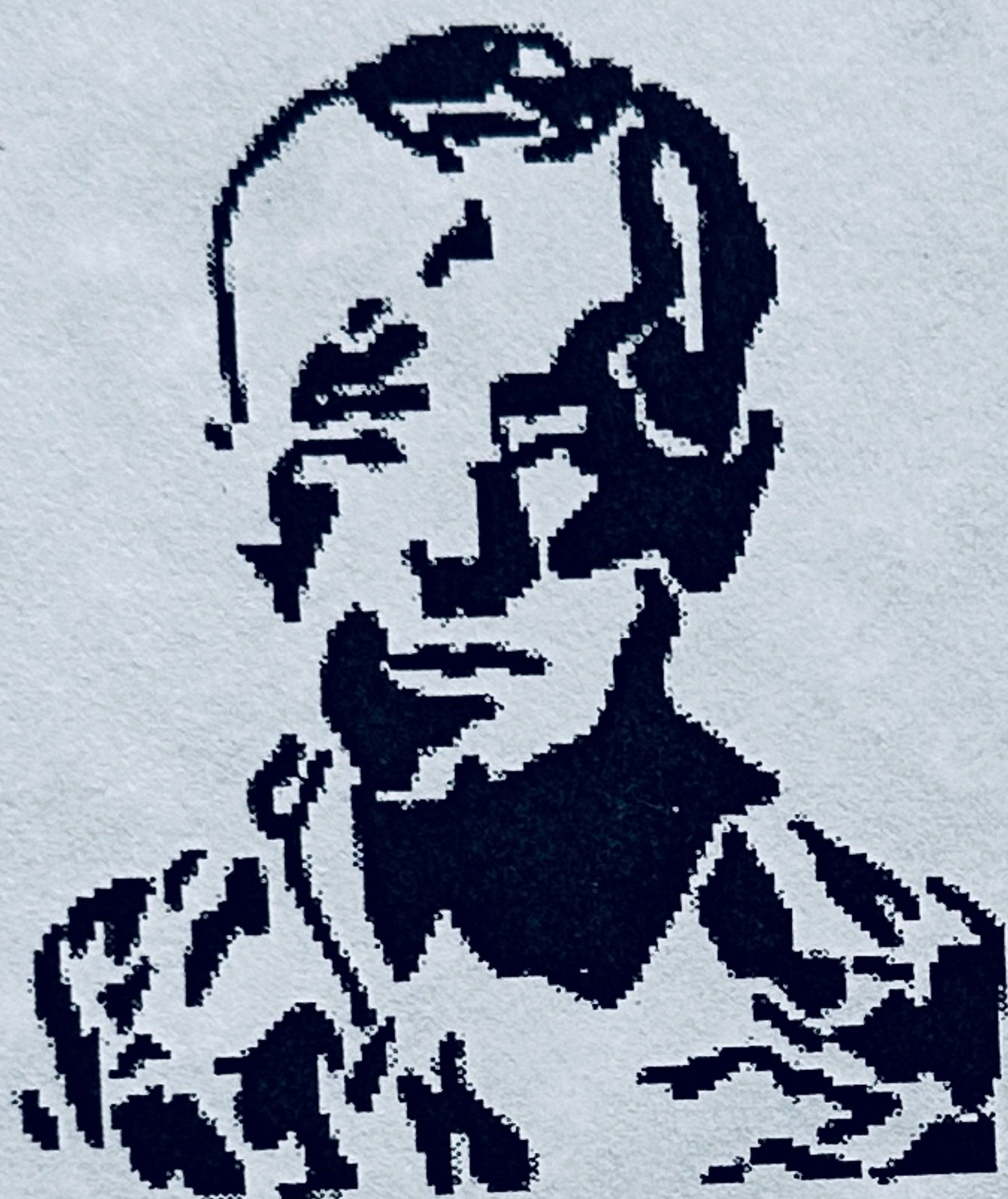


until the Feds arrived, so I tied up the grease monkeys to the pillar, and shoved ol' "Hot Man" into a wine vat in the basement. This way the bodies would stay put for the heat, and I could just plead my case as routine business. But I decided to leave. This place was no good for a private eye and my quarrel was strictly with Slick. I had a bone to pick with him and Renshaw. Nobody tapes me down without a fight. When I opened the door a machete cut through my overcoat, enough that the lining spun out like tired old car upholstery. It was Viper. I knew there was something I had forgotten. Slowly, I turned around and came face to face with his bulging nostrils, not to mention the no-good Elvis sideburns. He closed the door behind me, and forced me into the easy chair that had been occupied by Terry Tugboat. Where's Slick, I asked the loser in front of me. Say one more word and this blade' ll bust your skull into a deviled egg. He meant it, but his crass tone reminded me of a kindergarten bully. He took the Cliff and Smythe, but forgot I was carrying my Lucky Luger in my sock pocket; just in case I ran into any freaks like him on my way out of this joint. When he turned to look at his buddies all tied up like a sack of onions, I planted six barrels of good lead in his weak little back. It was a no dirt game, and we both knew it. If he had had the guts to threaten me, or if I wanted the dough on Slick, someone was going down. But I probably should have found out where Slick was first. Oh well.



There's this guy in the derby races who used to do favors for Slick's posse before he started heisting banks. I pulled the Rosalinda up to Clanton Bridge Raceway just in time to snag a parking spot from a no-good cabby with a banana for a tailpipe. It was noon. I had patched up my jacket from Viper's talons and freshened up from the bloodstains on my suit. I knew the cops would be all over the joint this morning, cleaning up residue from the floor and checking the house for prints. But I had outsmarted them. By wearing gloves, replacing the Luger I carry with an unregistered, out of state one, and etching the bullets with S.B., they would just think things got rowdy and Slick busted his old gang. I'd be left in peace, just like Slick would rest soon. I walked up to the gate and entered the empty coliseum.





**CHAPTER TWO**

**ARC**



I'm smart, but I'm tougher than I am smart. You see, all that talk about scamming the cops with my gloves and out of state pistols was just talk. If the cops knew it was me who planted the lead sacks in Viper's back, they'd hi-tail it after my butt until they pinned my wrists to the boiler and watched my veins run for cover. That's just what I wanted them to do. That way they'd be after me, and I could bust up Slick before they found out. I had to make him pay first, then Renshaw. I'd fight every last copper in the junction until I killed the corporal, just so that I'd be able to make my date. Crosstown Junction was a cemetery now, and the rugs had enough red liquid on them to paint all the stop signs in Pasedena. I knew I'd find out what I wanted from Clanton Montgomery, the derbies were his playground, and I was about to throw him out of the sandbox.

I walked onto the dust ridden track around 12:07 pm and looked around. Just beside the jockey dugouts stood the stables. Made up of a shanty roof full of small bullet sized holes, and a latch and key door, this place was about as run down as my old artillery bunker from the war. What a garbage heap! I passed six mares, the kind you'd let loose on your in-laws, and caught a glimpse of ol' Clanton shoveling some goop in the right corner. This guy had more ghosts breathin' down his neck than a president during his acceptance speech, but I was about to fix that.



He saw me before I took another step and emptied the shovel. I moved closer and he lifted the doppelganger over his head. This clown was so steamed, the clams must jump back into the ocean when he sits down for dinner. What do you want? Get away from me, he shrieked like a tired old lady in curlers. Where's Slick? I said as I pulled out my Mauser. He tried to advance but I shot that steel framed toilet plunger right out of his puny little grasp. The horses jumped behind me, kicking the walls of their pens harder than Babe Ruth on a slider. Give me the guts on Slick, I said, plunging the gun into his navel, and taking out my Luger. It was right where I always kept it, next to my Lucky Ace ballpoint, but I didn't need that now, not yet. This place was deserted enough so that no one would have heard the shot, but I had to hurry. I pushed the gun harder. Its. . . he spoke like a wrinkled old house cat. He's. . . I cocked the gun. Arc . . . I must have pressed in a little too far because poor ol' Clanton bit the dust. Must have been the shock, or the stink of this cesspool he was running, but I didn't care either way. He gave me what I wanted, and I had to get out fast. These horses sure could smell up the place. . .

There were three places in this sorry excuse for a city with "Arc" in their title. Slick's posse didn't run any of them, but Renshaw sold stolen apoxy from one in the West Kingsley Area. If Slick wanted to be coy he would go



right up to Renshaw, and chat up the protection of big brother. That would be too easy for me, but Slick probably guessed that. He'd probably set a trap for me there and then coop out at one of the other two joints on his list. So I decided to go north, to site number one: Arching Towers. It was the second largest condominium/shopping arcade this side of the Mississippi. It'd be tough searchin' this lot, but I had to trash Slick's plans somehow. There would be cops everywhere, so I took the precautions of entering around back to avoid suspicion. This was the best game yet. . .

I spent all day roaming that mall. I checked for clues in the back rooms of every shop on the main strip, and then headed upstairs towards the apartments. This place was a suburban death trap. This was where the tired, the fat, the old, and the ugly would end up, after chasin' themselves around the block with a fistful of greasy fries. I searched upstairs, breaking and entering with ease, but found no residue of Slick's trail of filth. He had six aliases, but none of them checked out at the front desk. I stopped in the men's room to wash my face, check my do, and spit shine my shoes. When I got him I wanted to look good doin' it.

I left Arching Towers, crossed it off my list, and fired up the Rosalinda until it squealed like helium from a hot iron balloon. The cops had staked out



most of the city, but I managed to squeeze by unnoticed. They were looking for me and Slick, but they were missing the one element that made it all worthwhile: Revenge.

The turnpike was like gliding on the back of a boa constrictor about to strangle the tiny necks of every driver. There was dense fog and everyone's lights were on. The harbor was flat with six schooners sitting on the north pier and no one in sight for miles. It was still, and the hum of the motors around me didn't help to rustle things up. Next stop for me was Archie's Lakeside Fish Market. From six inch thick swordfish to blue crabs the size of a stop sign, Archie's was the heavyweight champion among seafood dealers. Not to mention the stench. I knew if Slick was here he'd try to either blend in or get lost in the hull of some stolen life preserver excuse for a boat. This guy was the catch of the day, and I had twelve bullets that couldn't wait to play the hook. It was ten past five when I got there, just in time for the pre-rush hour dinner crowd. Full of grey haired business men, this place looked more like a strip bar, than a food market. I parked the Rosalinda in the back, and entered the mob from the eastern entrance.

My mom used to make salmon dinners for the family, and that stuff was like putting a tractor in your mouth, gargling it, and then waiting for it to have



enough momentum to speed down your throat without trying to swallow. I made it through the steel gates of Archie's and headed towards the fish counter just to get a look at the morning's haul. If Slick was here, he'd have contacts working the premises, and they'd spot me in no time. I moved towards the vacant lot beside the Crab House, and edged over to the trailer behind it. This place looked like an over-baked loaf of Wonder Bread with a sardine can for a roof, and enough rust to give tetanus to all of China. The loud crowd was brimming at the seams of Archie's, so my movements went unnoticed. Now was the time to get Slick. He had come this far, and even I couldn't believe his luck. It was about to run out.

When I got to the door of the trailer, I was spotted. I watched as a small body sped behind the garbage heap to the left of the Crab House service entrance. If I followed him, there'd be so many of Slick's bruisers waiting for me I'd have to run through a three alarm fire just to get 'em off my back. So I laid low for awhile beside the door and listened for any movement inside. That's when I saw her. Five foot ten, one hundred ten pounds, with heaven for a face, and all of the flowers in the British Botanical Gardens for a body, this dame made my heart do cartwheels and my mind turn to Jello. Forget my other date, and thank God for my do. I watched as she walked towards the beat up trailer, looked behind her, and



entered. Now I knew I had found the right place. I moved through the thick shrubs lining the river, and edged over to a window. I wanted to see what I was getting into early so I could smack Slick's posse before they knew what hit them. Two steps and six breaths later, I felt a hard jab in my back and the barrel of a sawed off jimmy poking my vertebrae. Don't move copper! the voice said.

Of all the people that made this city the scum infested slime hole it is, I should have known it'd be him. Clyde Patton was the dirtiest, racketeering fraud infested worm this end of the prohibition decades. If there was something going down in the alleys behind his back, he'd stop at nothing until everyone of his competitors were dead, and until he took over whatever the swindle turned out to be. This guy's brains left him for a bank machine. If the greenbacks could talk, they'd curse ol' Clyde to hell in a handbasket. . . I put up my hands slowly as he frisked me. I only had my Luger on me, the other two pistols were in the Rosalinda; one in the glove compartment, the other taped under the front bumper. You're just in time, he snarled like a weasel with a head cold. He ordered me forward towards the trailer door. I could hear voices inside, and the shadows of about four figures standing against the far wall. With the jimmy at my back, I eased up the stairs and entered the rust-ridden crap heap. This place was filled with



more insects than a Marvel comic book, and the dust looked like a furry animal. But nothing else here was a surprise.

When I got inside, she was there. On her left was Ali Gator, the owner of every five and dime store in the whole damn city. He was such a shyster, but no one could pin a fraud on him for even the slightest disturbance. I knew he was no good when I first laid eyes on him kissing his mother at the public opening of his super mall in the Causeway district. This guy had bigger fish lips than a Barracuda on the 4th of July. Sitting down on the left were two lugs I had never seen before. One was small, with squinty eyes and slick backed hair; enough shine to give the Pope an ice-cream headache. The other looked like a brute who beat up school kids for their lunch money and used it to bribe their mothers for car keys. He wore a black Stetson with a needle nose suit from Winky's Suit Emporium down on 76th. I used to use those garbs for firewood. Ah, Mr. Kelley, thank you for joining us. Ali Gator was no stranger to greetings. No Problem, I belted, showing confidence with a jimmy in my back.

Slick's been pretty upset lately about what you did to his boys. . . especially Viper. They sat me down to the right of the dame who kept her trap shut like a Zip-Loc in a flood. Viper was no good, I answered slowly, motioning

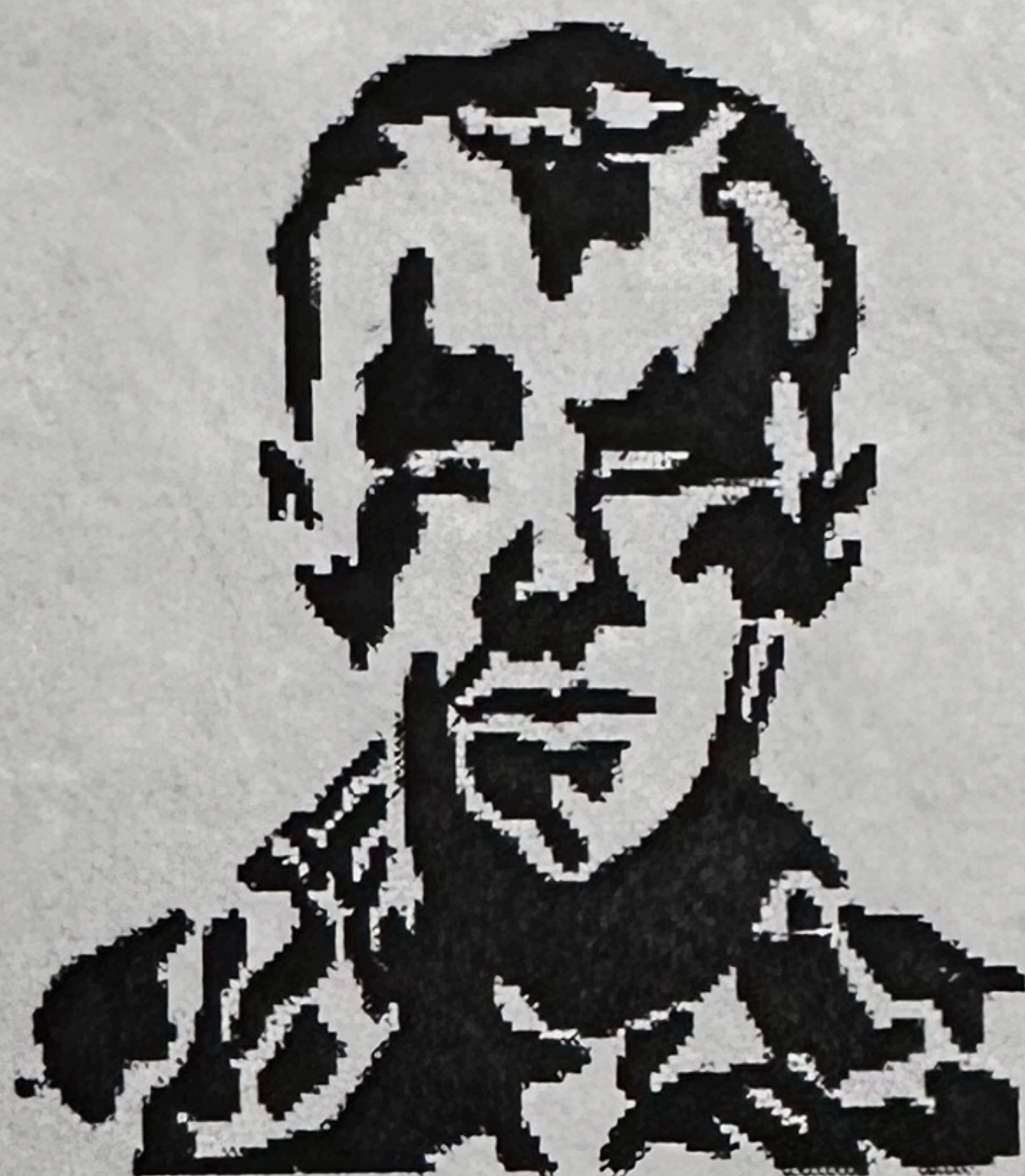


for my cigarette case. He obliged and I pulled out a thin nicotine roll to soothe my accumulating hunger. Here, the first lug said to me, offering his lighter. I lit the cig, took a puff, and leaned back in my chair. I knew I had to find out where Slick was, but if I was gonna pull it off, I had to be patient. Viper was Slick's tailgate in the Great War, Ali said like it would make me keel over in sympathy. Viper kept Slick clean, watched over him. . . he was his goddamn guardian angel. I took another puff. I have direct orders from Slick to waste anyone who messes with Viper. . . There was silence except for the steady hum of customers in front of the Crab House. . . I waited. . . Where's Slick? I said. I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Ali motioned to the squinty eyed thug beside the girl and stood up. The girl acted coy like she was auditioning for a movie and sulked back in her chair. Since when are you working for Slick? I asked Ali. Slime was oozing out of his face like a train wreck playing solitaire. Nothing but clubs. He looked at me while I took a deep drag. I waited until my cheeks were full, and exhaled a steady stream of smog. Since we started doing business. . . He lays a job on me, and I finish it up without a scratch, double or nothing. Since you got into the picture its been nothing. . . Squinty grabbed my arm out of the chair and ol' needle nose got up and snagged my collar. I looked up and saw his pointy nostrils; about as wide as a chimney with an ulcer. The last thing I heard was Ali's order, and a smack on the lip put me in cold



turkey for a good while. I wasn't completely out, and that dame's perfume was about as sour as three week old cottage cheese in a blender. I was dragged past the Salmon Hut (that stench laid a biggee) and in four seconds flat, I was out cold.





## CHAPTER THREE

# HIT MAN



When I came to, I almost collapsed from the stench. It was dark and the only speckles of light I could see were diffused along a wall of solid oak. The stables. I should have guessed. With Clanton dead, and a fist full of rotten fish at Archie's, Ali Gator knew he could lock me up at the race track. Closed for months, on the verge of bankruptcy, this place was like a stale piece of bread, too old for even one-hundred ravenous squirrels. It was the perfect cell, and no one, not even ol' Clanton was around to argue. Even if I screamed for hours, all I would do was scare the horses. Ali was up to something, and if I didn't get to Slick first, this thing would blow. I looked around my pen. I was tied to the rafters on the left wall with heavy rope. To the right I saw the edges of a pitchfork underneath a pile of hay. That needle nose must have been in a hurry. What a no brainer. I reached the hay with my foot and tossed it aside to see the handle. The rope on my arms was tied by some nut who flunked cub scouts. Even my grandma on a pint of valium could have escaped. When you're in the business as long as I've been, untying rope is as easy as flicking tape. Too bad my Lucky Ace ballpoint wasn't a razor. Those knots were off like a suntan in January, and the pitchfork wasn't far behind. I was as free as a Dairy Queen ripple sundae with an ouzi in the throat and I pounced on the pitchfork, shoving it into the stable door. This place was about as complicated as a mouse trap to a nuclear technician.



That jimmy was off in four seconds flat and ol' Ali never even kept watch. Even the crime world, with its posh good looks, high priced meals, and expensive cars, lacked the most important aspect to all high roller types: brains. These guys go around impersonatin' Einstein when it's true that their skulls never even finished eight grade. Slick and Ali were no exceptions, but Renshaw was in a different league. He was a goody goody. This guy came from the richest family in West Courtland, about an hour north of the city, where all the chief CEOs of all the big businesses downtown lived. With a prep school beginning, six years at Knoxland Academy, finishing a PhD in economics, Renshaw grew out of the most respected family structure this town knew. And even with everything he had, he still got greedy. A pinch there, a heist here, there was nothing to his name he couldn't weasel, with no one on his back and twenty bribes in tow. If he was gonna play tough, I'd match him. This guy was about to get an F at quick draw. . . Today was like a bad pot of coffee with no caffeine, and a headache to boot. I left Clanton Bridge Raceway with a sore right wrist and the ache of two days with no sleep. These shysters were like peas in a pod - all stuck together, but deep in a rut. I had to find my car or else Tommy Gunn wouldn't owe me, but I needed a break first. I snagged a cab to my apartment, showered to erase the stench, changed, ate the remains of my chinese take-out, and hit the sack. I was out cold in forty-five seconds flat. . .



When the sun hit my face, burning my skin until the red swelled deep into the the blackness of my closed eyes, I bolted up. If I was gonna find Slick, I had to do it today. This place was going up in smoke, and the police would bust it down quicker than a tax audit on Wall street. I packed a case, highball tux of course, and scrambled out of there like hot pants Lester. The cops weren't gonna ruin me before I got to Slick; His number was up...

There was a grey caddie parked half a block west on Astor street, with a jake in the driver's seat. As I walked towards the byway, the car inched forward, stopping slowly and then speeding up again. This guy must have grown up in a flea circus, he was too stupid for the real thing. I edged over to the alleyway before Stark street and sped down the corridor towards the dumpster. If he followed me, I'd have his brains for a cushion, and his car on a cutting board. I heard the engine purring like some sick dog, and that shiny hood glided into view with seconds to spare. With my case on the window, and his face on the wheel, there was no chance I was losin'. This guy had Renshaw written all over him, and I was gonna trace him right back to Slick. Where's Slick? I pushed, blending his head in nicely with the apolstery. His withered cheeks reminded me of my aunt Arlene's meatloaf. He smiled at me. No dice Kelley. I punched his face hard and pulled out my Mauser. He's lucky it wasn't the Luger. I repeated myself.



No dice, he answered. Usually when you hear sirens in this business you boot, because having a police tailpipe in your rearview means no fun at the candy store. But this time I had no choice but to wait. This guy was about to get a barrel of lead in his jaw and no copper was going to stop me. As soon as the smokey past me, I took hold of the wheel, put my Mauser on the bad rat, and left that stink hole. It was early morning in the Lafayette projects. The roads reeked of scum left behind by the city's streetsweepers and waste removal units. It was like a toilet bowl in the arctic, even the crap wouldn't flush because the pipes were frozen solid shut, and the thaw never came. As I drove, the car jerked back and forth like a bumper car in a pint of Cool Whip. What a slugger. I knew those smokers would be on my tail soon, so I high-tailed over to Rusty Walter's joint to fix up this tanker, spill the geezer next to me, and bust out of the hole I was digging. If Slick was gonna turn up, it was going to be today. . .

Rusty had been on my side a long while, but he never was pegged as an accomplice. Ever since the Marvin heist on the six most low-life gamblers this side of the standard line, I knew I could count on Rusty to shake me loose. I was five down at coat check, a barrel by my head, and lousy ol' Buford on my neck, but I managed to clean up the place in no time thanks to Rusty. When you needed a hit man, no chat, just licks, he was your man.



I pulled into his place at 9:30 a.m., jacked the buckeye sittin' next to me with my Lucky Luger, and led him into the house slowly. I knew Rusty would be up, he never could keep his eyes closed. Kelley, he said with a grin, and looked at the cut-throat on my gun. Who's the punching bag? It took two hours and a load of booze to tell him my story, but that was just long enough for the pigs to run free, and my trail to disappear like pedestrians in a hurricane. Not to mention a gangster on the run from Chrome Kelley, P.I.

So you got the hit on Slick. Rusty was familiar with the turf. He smiled and slugged down a shot of bourbon. Rusty was a drifter; the kind that showed up just when the bullets flew, escaped without a scratch, and never left without a bag full of dough. He knew more than the best snitch, and he'd even help you get your man. I need a position on em', I replied. Slick sped away from Archie's so fast that Ali Gator probably had him on board a Mach-270, heading south to St. Thomas. But I knew Rusty would crack this load of bricks wide open.

I took a swig of bourbon and that stuff sure hit the smacker. Rusty took two more hits, looked me square in the mug, and said three words: Lester Knowles' place. Two thumps and he was out like a wet newspaper in a



thunderstorm. I laughed my guts out. What a capper! I left Rusty's in a hurry, took out the geezer in my jalopy and locked him solid in Rusty's basement. That place was such a stink hole, he'd be gaspin' for oxygen in about ten seconds. Instead of driving the trashcan I stole, I boosted Rusty's jet black Marauder from the garage and fired it up. That thing had more purr than a siamese doing sixty. This day was turning out just fine.





CHAPTER FOUR

THE GOOD FIGHT



At high noon, in the blinding sunlight, with a glare thick enough to toast a slab of brown bread, I was back on the 220's slippery asphalt. This keg had enough powder to split open a wall of goons from Oakland to Jersey, and I was about to get out the lighter. I knew Rusty was right about this one. Slick, Ali, and Renshaw all wanted in on Lester's racket. If he gave them a taste, they'd stop at nothing until his face looked like an empty six-shooter. As I drove, the Marauder spit up dirt, chewed it out, and left a wake big enough to cause a thirty car pile-up. This car had class. I headed towards Lester's joint, but to avoid suspicion, I took the long way around. With all three of those no-good crooners cooped up in one hole, there were bound to be 100 Viper look-a-likes snuck behind every corner; not to mention the cops. Those guys were breathin' down my neck so hard, the heat felt like a gun rack during hunting season. I was ready to shoot Slick point range, but those damn sirens kept gettin' in the way. No one tapes me down with no pay dirt. I passed Mugsy's Botchco Diner, a couple of bootleggers, and the Trolly State Hotel, and then I found it. Lester Knowles was a hot shot alright, but he forgot about his enemies. To him everyone wanted a piece of the action, but he had no idea what they'd do to get it. . .



I got up to Lester's faster than the lightening on Shazamm. The Marauder shot through the air and fire bombed the sidewalk. This place was no hide out. With a ten foot high wall, lined with thick steel bars, and a wrought iron gate, Lester Knowles' place was a second class White House; with the stink of a trash heap. Two guards held the front gate with three more inside- all armed. If I was gonna get in I'd have to pull off all the stops. What a cinch! I shut off the motor, parked on the opposite curb, and just walked up to the front gate. I knew they'd be expecting me. Those losers knew I'd be on em' faster than the Pope in a mini-mall, especially since my break from the chains of Clanton Bridge Raceway. As soon as I was in, I'd do my bidding, trash some of those low life thugs, and get out before the cops arrived. Those sirens were getting closer every minute; they must have tracked down Rusty by now. I took my Lucky Ace ballpoint with me, and taped my revolver, Lucky Luger, and Cliff and Smythe under the front bumper of Rusty's quick-draw speedster. If I had to make a fast exit, I wanted those guns ready and willing. When I got to the gate, the two buggeyed meanies waved me in. One of them followed me from behind, while the other stayed at his post. This was gonna be fun. I edged up to the door slowly and turned around facing the gate. What a pad! There was one main gate, two service exits on the right and left, and one chained door to the left of the main.



When I got inside I was frisked. The thug that followed me took me to the right door of the joint. It was so gaudy, full of gold plush and crystal chandeliers, all the stuff that made you sick just lookin' at it. The marble floor under my shoes was polished so hard I could see the Vance Packard .28 hidden underneath this no-lifer's vest. He was in for a long night.

When I got into the main ballroom, everyone was there. He's clean, my escort announced and slowly left. They were all there, all four of those clowns, plus a bunch of brown nosers. Renshaw, Ali, Lester, and Slick, all in a row next to a blue Barcalounger. Slick looked like a bent up old wet newspaper, with a smirk on his face big enough to send the World Series into extra innings. As soon as I got there, I knew I was set for a little time. To these guys I was just a bad rat, crawling up from the sewer to snatch their chance at the big cheese. And even if I was gonna get trashed, they'd hafta fight me first; and I love a good fight.

We meet again. It was like they all said it in unison, and it stuck in my head like a spiked fruit cocktail on Christmas eve. I walked up to the easy chair and sat down. Two of the brown nosers got up and stood next to me. What a bunch of high strutting honchos. In no time, Renshaw gave me a stare, and pointed his sawed off tommy at my head. He laughed hard. Kelley, I bet you can't wait to get off this dead end case.



He's not worth our time! Slick shot off his mouth like a loose spring on a blender. His lines were so recycled he looked like a wrinkled old man. I reached for my Lucky Ace, and those two guerrillas beside me pounced. I want to make a deal, I said. I was looking at the raw end of a 32 caliber high propulsion air rifle with multiple firing capacity and 25 millimeter radius shells. This was crunch time. . . . Renshaw looked surprised. You iced five of my boys over at Crosstown Junction, not to mention tightening the noose around Clanton Montgomery, and now you want to make a deal? Ali snickered behind him, Slick yawned, and Lester appeared so perplexed, his face looked like it had been shot out of a cannon. Thats right, I replied.

In ten seconds flat, right after those words came out of my lungs, there was a crash louder than the back of my tailpipe after a full tank of diesel petrol. It was like I was speeding down the 220, with nothing on my mind, and a couple of martinis in the hole, when my tires hit a grease spot, the gas pedal stuck to the floor, and the steering wheel locked. I lost control at that moment, but that wasn't the worst of it. The blast behind me came from something I had feared and expected the whole time: the cops. When I saw Renshaw pull out his tommy, I dove to the floor. I kept my eyes on Slick the whole time. The brown nosers that had held me down were scared so bad they looked like they had just jumped a pier in the clench of 310 lb



cement shoes. The main copper in charge was Lieutenant Conté. I worked with that trainwreck back when the law meant something. Now the police station was a just a breeding ground full of wanna-be mobsters. At this point, the guns kept going off. They must have brought the damn cavalcade. Ali and Lester were gone already, and Renshaw was huddled beside the Barcalounger with his tommy primed. Slick gunned down a few of those smokers and fled out the back. I was right on em'. It wasn't just the four mugs the cops were after. If I didn't scram when I did, my butt would have been hanging higher than a disco ball at the Ice Capades. I followed Slick out the back with Conté right on my tail, and Renshaw blasting his tommy. Lester's back yard was as big as Shey Stadium, and looked like a goddamn Botanical garden, with lots of dead shrubs and pruned, flowering trees. Slick sped off towards the north end, firing two rounds at my feet with every other stride. This place looked like a crooked labyrinth with lots of foliage and no head room. Conté was on my back with about six of his boys on the move from the eastern gate. I followed Slick closely until he got to the greenhouses beside the north wall. Sirens, shots, lights, and megaphones blasted the air in front of the pad, like fireworks in the Lincoln tunnel. I knew by now that Renshaw was toast. Conté's sergeant probably got a bolt of lead in the jaw, but Renshaw didn't have a chance. Lester and Ali had sneaked out some secret passageway and



were probably halfway to Rio by now. Those suckers. All that was left was Slick, and I knew I wouldn't let him escape. With Conté and my revenge creeping up on him from the right, and a straight path into the screaming sirens on the left, Slick was trapped. That loser could only pray for a way out of this one. I know the guy's stupid, but this was ridiculous. As if some sick, twisted wind came and pushed him along, Slick sped off towards the police stakeout like he had it all planned. That was fine with me, especially since my Luger was over there. And if I didn't move soon, Conté would have my face for a socket and Slick's for a hole in one.

Believe me, when you're in the lynch of thirty six, fully armed, ready to shoot coppers, and you have the sillies about gettin' out of there alive, at that point, the frying pan sure beats the fire. Slick knew it, I knew it, and ol' Conté was probably licking his chops. But that greaser named Slick, kept on runnin'. When he got to the front gate of Lester's, he froze solid like a cube of ice fresh from the freezer - right before the first crystal thawed. I kept runnin' towards Rusty's Marauder, brushing off a few bullets close to my head. Conté stopped on the perimeter and began to order the cadets into firing position. As soon as I made it to ol' blackie, I hit the deck. This was gonna be a fine shootout, and I held center court. Crawling towards the front bumper, I grabbed my Luger, revolver, and Cliff and



Smythe from the tape, cocked the cartridges, and flexed my index harder than an uppercut in the ribcage. This party was about to crash wide open. In six seconds flat, I was up in the air, with a gun in each hand, both aimed at Slick. When I was visible, I heard the sound of hard steel pistols, and Conté's voice like the dying horn of a Beretta, about to hit the scrap heap. Slick saw me and laughed. Give it up Kelley! Conté's words jolted through me faster than an ice-pick at the opera. I kept my guns on Slick. You're through! I spat.

Drop it Kelley! The words split open the smog around us, and I could feel the talons tightening around my skull. My fingers kept a tight hold on the Luger and revolver. Dirt mixed with salty sweat splattered into my eyes and stung harder than a wasp with a whip. My grip tightened as my eyes were fixed on Slick. The sirens had stopped, and every cop in the area had their guns on me. They knew that even if I gave up, Slick wouldn't dare try a fast one. This is my final warning, Kelley! He belted with a thick wind twisting his words like some sick snake. NO SALE COPPER! He's Mine. . . I threw out those words as my fingers squeezed five rounds of nine millimeter steel casing into Slick's sorry chest. And just as I snapped, there was an echo from the no good leftys around me, and a vicious weight hit my body as my knees buckled. But all that didn't matter; I still had won. To be a private



eye was a dime a dozen racket. I was the last in the bushel and now I had washed up my trail with one final reward. Slick was as gone as I would be soon, but I still had the upper hand. With a city full of high nosed junkies, killing for their riches, and stepping on the nice guys to get there, I knew that this had to pay off somehow. I dropped the pistols, plunged down on Lester Knowles' dirty asphalt driveway, and felt the strangle-hold smother my body. I never would have gone down without a good fight, and this beat them all. One problem though, I'd have to miss my date. . .

-THE END -