

CHAPTER ONE

September-October

THE FEAR ENVELOPED HER, and yet, despite it, she found herself oddly detached, being from body, as she ran frantically from the stifling grip of the subway station out into the rainy, darkened street.

Her physiology now took full control, and her pupils dilated and gathered in the dim light to scan the streets, the storefronts, the randomly parked automobiles. Like a laser her vision locked on to him, indiscriminate in the distance. Her brain computed: one hundred yards away. Her legs received the computation and turned her body toward him, propelling her faster. How odd, she thought through the terror, as she watched herself from above. It was almost the flight of an inanimate object. So unlike that of a terrified young woman.

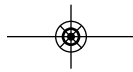
When her scream came at last, it struck her deeply and primordially, and she ran even faster with the sound of it. A microsecond later the scream reached his ears and she saw his head snap around toward her. The silver object at the crest of his hat glistened in the misty streetlight, and she felt her heart leap wildly in her chest.

Oh my God, she thought, a police officer, dear God, a police officer!

As he stepped from the curb and started toward her, she swooned and her being suddenly came slamming back into her body from above. Her knees weakened and she faltered, stumbled, and as consciousness left her she fell heavily down, sliding into the grit and slime of the wet, cracked asphalt.

* * *

I



Lou Manfredo

MIKE MCQUEEN sat behind the wheel of the dark gray Chevrolet Impala and listened to the hum of the idling motor. The intermittent slap-slap of the wipers and the soft sound of the rain falling on the sheet metal body were the only other sounds. The Motorola two-way on the seat beside him was silent. The smell of stale cigarettes permeated the car's interior. It was a slow September night, and he shivered against the dampness.

The green digital on the dash told him it was almost one a.m. He glanced across the seat and through the passenger window. He saw his partner, Joe Rizzo, pocketing his change and about to leave the all-night grocer. He held a brown bag in his left hand.

McQueen was a six-year veteran of the New York City Police Department, but on this night he felt like a first-day rookie. Six years as a uniformed officer first assigned to Manhattan's Greenwich Village, then, most recently, its Upper East Side. Sitting in the car, in the heart of the Italian-American ghetto that was Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood, he felt like an out-of-towner in a very alien environment.

He had been a detective, third grade, for all of three days, and this night was to be his first field exposure, a midnight-to-eight tour with a fourteen-year detective sergeant first grade, the coffee-buying Rizzo.

Six long years of a fine, solid career, active in felony arrests, not even one civilian complaint, medals, commendations, and a file full of glowing letters from grateful citizens, and all it had gotten him was a choice assignment to a desirable East Side precinct. Then one night he left his radio car to pee in an all-night diner, heard a commotion, looked down an alleyway, and just like that, third grade detective. The gold shield handed to him just three weeks later by the mayor himself.

If you've got to fall ass backwards into an arrest, fall into one where the lovely college roommate of the young daughter of the mayor of New York City is about to get raped by a nocturnal predator. Careerwise, it doesn't get any better than that.

McQueen was smiling at the memory when Rizzo dropped heavily into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

"Damn it," Rizzo said, shifting his large body in the seat. "Can they put some fuckin' springs in these seats already?"

He fished a container of coffee from the bag and passed it to

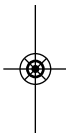


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McQueen. They sat in silence as the B train suddenly roared by on the elevated tracks above this length of Eighty-sixth Street. McQueen watched the sparks fly from the third rail contacts and then sparkle and twirl in the rainy night air before flickering and dying away. Through the parallel slots of the overhead tracks, he watched as the twin red taillights of the last car vanished into the distance. The noise of the steel-on-steel wheels and a thousand rattling steel parts and I-beams reverberated in the train's wake. It made the deserted, rain-washed streets seem even more dismal. McQueen suddenly found himself missing Manhattan.

The grocery had been the scene of a robbery the week before, and Rizzo needed to ask the night man a few questions. McQueen wasn't quite sure if it was the coffee or the questions which had come as an afterthought. Although he had known Rizzo only two days, he suspected the older man to be somewhat less than an enthusiastic investigator.

"Let's head on back to the house," Rizzo said, referring to the Sixty-second Precinct station house, as he sipped his coffee and fished in his outer coat pocket for his Chesterfields. "I'll write up this interview and show you where to file it."



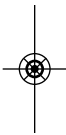
McQueen eased the car away from the curb. Rizzo insisted he drive, to get the lay of the neighborhood. McQueen felt disoriented and foolish: he wasn't even sure which way to the precinct.

Rizzo seemed to sense McQueen's discomfort. "Make a U-turn," he said, lighting the Chesterfield. "Head back up Eighty-sixth and make a left on Seventeenth Avenue." He drew on the cigarette and looked sideways at McQueen. He smiled before he spoke.

"What's the matter, kid? Missing the bright lights across the river already?"

McQueen shrugged. "I guess. I just need time, that's all."

He drove slowly through the light rain. Once off Eighty-sixth Street's commercial strip, they entered a residential area comprised of detached and semi-detached older, brick homes. Mostly two stories, the occasional three-story, some with small, neat gardens or lawns in front. Many had ornate, well-kept statues, some illuminated by flood lamps, of the Virgin Mary or Saint Anthony or Joseph. McQueen scanned the homes as he drove. The occasional window shone dimly with night-lights glowing



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from within. They appeared peaceful and warm, and he imagined the families inside, tucked into their beds, alarm clocks set and ready for the coming workday. Everyone safe, everything secure.

That's how it always seemed. But six years had taught him what was more likely going on in some of those houses. The drunken husbands coming home and beating their wives; the junkie sons and daughters; the sickly, lonely old; the forsaken parent found dead in an apartment after the stench of decomposition had reached a neighbor and someone had dialed 911.

The memories of an ex-patrol officer. As the radio crackled to life on the seat beside him, he listened with half an ear and wondered what his memories as an ex-detective would someday be.

"Six-Two unit one-seven, see the uniform C.I. Hospital ER. Assault victim, female. Copy, one-seven?"

Rizzo keyed the radio. "Copy, dispatch," he said.

"Alright, Mike. That call is ours. Straight up this way, turn left on Bay Eighth Street to the Belt Parkway. Go east a few exits and get off at Ocean Parkway. Coney Island Hospital is a block up from the Belt. Looks like it's gonna be a long night."

When they entered the hospital, it took some minutes to sort through the half dozen patrol officers milling around the emergency room. McQueen found the right cop, a tall, skinny kid of about twenty-three. He glanced down at the man's name tag.

"How you doing, Marino? I'm McQueen, Mike McQueen. Me and Rizzo are catching tonight. What'd ya got?"

The man pulled a thick leather note binder from his rear pocket. He flipped through and found his entry, turned it to face McQueen and held out a Bic pen.

"Can you scratch it for me, Detective? No sergeant here yet."

McQueen took the book and pen, and wrote the date, time, and CIHOSP ER across the bottom of the page, then scribbled his initials and shield number. He handed the book back to Marino.

"What'd ya got?" he asked again.

Marino cleared his throat. "I'm not the guy from the scene, that was Willis. He got off at midnight, so he turned it to us and went home. I just got some notes here. Female caucasian, Amy Taylor, twenty-six, single,

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lives at Eighteen-sixty Sixty-first Street. Coming off the subway at Sixty-second Street about eleven o'clock, twenty-three hundred, the station's got no clerk on duty after nine. She goes into one of them—what'd ya call it?—one-way turnstile things, the ones that'll only let you out, not in. Some guy jumps outta nowhere and grabs her."

At that point, Rizzo walked up. "Hey, Mike, are you okay with this for a while? My niece is a nurse here, I wanna go say hello, okay?"

Mike glanced at his partner. "Yeah, sure, okay, Joe, go ahead."

McQueen turned back to Marino. "Go on."

Marino dropped his eyes back to his notes.

"So this guy pins her in the revolving door and shoves a knife in her face. Tells her he's gonna cut her bad if she don't help him."

"Help him what?"

Marino shrugged. "Who the fuck knows? Guy's got the knife in one hand and his johnson in the other. He's trying to whack off on her. Never says another word to her, just presses the knife against her throat. Anyway, somehow he drops the weapon and she gets loose, starts to run away. The guy goes after her. She comes out of the station screaming. Willis is on a foot post doing a four-to-midnight, sees her running and screaming and goes over her way. She takes a fall, faints or something, bangs up her head and swells up her knee and breaks two fingers. They got her upstairs in a room, for observation on account of the head wound."

McQueen thought for a moment. "Did Willis see the guy?"

"No, never saw him."

"Any description from the girl?"

"I don't know, I never even seen her. When I got here she was already upstairs."

"Okay, stick around till your sergeant shows up and cuts you loose."

"Can't you, Detective?"

"Can't I what?"

"Cut me loose?"

McQueen frowned and pushed a hand through his hair. "I don't know. I think I can. Do me a favor, though, wait for the sarge, okay?"

Marino shook his head and turned his lips downward. "Yeah, sure, a favor. I'll go sniff some ether or something." He walked away, his head still shaking.

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McQueen looked around the brightly lit emergency room. He noticed Rizzo down the hall, leaning against a wall, talking to a bleached blond nurse who seemed to be about Rizzo's age: fifty. McQueen walked over.

"Hey, Joe, you going to introduce me to your niece?"

Joe turned and looked at McQueen with a puzzled look, then smiled.

"Oh, no, no, turns out she's not working tonight. I'm just making a new friend here, is all."

"Well, we need to go talk to the victim, this Amy Taylor."

Rizzo frowned. "Is she black?"

"No, cop told me Caucasian. Why? What's the difference?"

"Kid, I know you're new here to Bensonhurst, so I'm gonna be patient. Anybody in this neighborhood named Amy Taylor is either black or some yuppie pain-in-the-ass moved here from Boston to be an artist or a dancer or a Broadway star, and she can't afford to live in Park Slope or Brooklyn Heights or across the river. This here neighborhood is all Italian, kid, everybody—cops, crooks, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers. Except for you, of course. You're the exception. By the way, did I introduce you two? This is the morning shift head nurse, Rosalie Mazarino. Rosalie, say hello to my boy-wonder partner, Mike Mick-fuckin'-Queen."

The woman smiled and held out a hand. "Nice to meet you, Mike. Don't believe anything this guy tells you. Making new friends! I've known Joe since he was your age and chasing every nurse in the place." She squinted at McQueen, then slipped a pair of glasses out from her hair and over her eyes. "How old are you—twelve?"

Mike laughed. "I'm twenty-eight."

She twisted her mouth up and nodded her head in an approving manner. "And a third grade detective already? I'm impressed."

Rizzo laughed. "Yeah, so was the mayor. This boy's a genuine hero with the alma mater gals."

"Okay, Joe, very good. Now, can we go see the victim?"

"You know, kid, I got a problem with that. I can tell you her whole story from right here. She's from Boston, she wants to be a star, and as soon as you lock up the guy raped her, she's gonna bring a complaint against you 'cause you showed no respect for the poor shit, a victim of



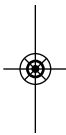
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society and all. Why don't *you* talk to her. I'll go see the doctor and get the rape kit and panties and we'll get out of here. The day tour can follow it up later this morning."

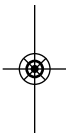
McQueen shook his head. "Wrong crime, partner. No rape, some kind of sexual assault or abuse or whatever."

"Go ahead, kid, talk to her. It'll be good experience for you. Me and Rosalie'll be in one of these linen closets when you get back. I did tell you she was the *head* nurse, right?"

McQueen walked away with her laughter in his ear. It was going to be a long night. Just as Joe had figured.



HE CHECKED the room number twice before entering. It was a small room with barely enough space for the two hospital beds it held. They were separated by a seriously despondent-looking curtain. The one nearest the door was empty, the mattress exposed. In the dim lighting, McQueen could see the foot of the second bed. The outline of someone's feet showed through the bedding. A faint and sterile yet vaguely unpleasant odor touched his nostrils. He waited a moment longer for his eyes to adjust to the low light, so soft after the harsh fluorescent glare of the hall. He glanced around for something to knock on to announce his presence. He settled on the foot board of the near bed and rapped gently on the cold metal.



"Hello?" he said softly. "Hello, Ms. Taylor?"

The covered feet stirred. He could hear the low rustle of linens. He raised his voice a bit when he spoke again.

"Ms. Taylor? I'm Detective McQueen, police. May I see you for a moment?"

A light, hidden by the curtain, switched on near the head of the bed. McQueen stood and waited.

"Ms. Taylor? Hello?"

The voice was sleepy, possibly sedated. It was a gentle and clear voice, yet it held a tension, an edginess. McQueen imagined that he had woken her and now the reality was hitting her. It had actually happened. No, it hadn't been a dream. He had seen it a thousand times: the burglarized, the beaten, the raped, robbed, shot, stabbed, pissed on. He had seen it.

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“Detective? Did you say ‘detective’? Hello? I can’t see you.”

He stepped farther into the room, slowly venturing passed the curtain. Slow and steady, don’t move fast and remember to speak softly. Get her to relax, don’t freak her out.

Her beauty struck him immediately. She sat, propped on two pillows, the sheet raised and folded over her breasts. Her arms lay beside her on the bed, palms down, straight out. She appeared to be clinging to the bed, steadying herself against some unseen, not possible force. Her skin was almost translucent, a soft glow emanating from it. Her wide-set eyes were liquid sapphire as they met and held his own. Her lips were full and round and sat perfectly under a narrow nose, her face framed with straight shoulder-length black hair. She wore no makeup, and an ugly purple-yellow bruise marked her left temple and part of her cheekbone. She was the most beautiful woman McQueen had ever seen.

After nearly three years of working the richest, most sophisticated square mile in the world, here, in this godforsaken corner of Brooklyn, he finds this woman. For a moment, he forgot why he had come.

“Yes? Can I help you?” she asked as he stood there.

He blinked himself back and cleared his throat. He glanced down to the blank page of his notepad, just to steal an instant more before having to speak.

“Yes, yes, Ms. Taylor. I’m Detective McQueen, Six-Two detective squad. I need a few minutes for some questions, if you don’t mind.”

She frowned, and he saw pain in her eyes. For an instant he thought his heart would break. He shook his head slightly. What the hell? What the hell was this?

“I’ve already spoken to two or three police officers. I’ve already told them what happened.” Her eyes closed. “I’m very tired. My head hurts.” As her eyes opened, they welled with tears. McQueen used all his willpower not to move to her, to cradle her head, to tell her it was okay, it was all over, he was there now.

“Yeah, yeah I know that,” he said instead. “But my partner and I caught the case. We’ll be handling it. I need a little more information. Just a few minutes. The sooner we get started, the better chance we have of catching this guy.”

She seemed to think it over as she held his gaze. When she tried to



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blink the tears away, they spilled down her cheeks. She made no effort to brush them away, but instead looked deeply into McQueen's eyes. Despite the steely toughness of their cold blue, she saw an empathy and warmth in his expression, and it brought her a reassuring comfort.

"Alright" was all she said.

McQueen felt his body relax, and he realized he had been holding himself so tightly that his back and shoulders ached. "May I sit down?" he asked softly.

"Yes, of course."

He slid the too-large-for-the-room chair to the far side of the bed and sat with his back to the windows. He heard rain rattling against the panes. The sound chilled him and made him shiver. He found himself hoping she hadn't noticed.

"I already know pretty much what happened. There's no need to go over it all, really. I just have a few questions, most of them formalities. Please don't read anything into it. I just need to know certain things. For the reports. And to help us find this guy. Okay?"

She squeezed her eyes closed again and more tears escaped. She nodded yes and reopened her eyes. He couldn't look away from them.

"This happened about eleven, eleven ten?"

"Yes, about."

"You had gotten off the train at the Sixty-second Street subway station?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What train is that?"

"The N."

"Where were you going?"

"Home."

"Where were you coming from?"

"My art class in Manhattan."

McQueen looked up from his notes. Art class? Rizzo's inane preamble resounded in his mind. He squinted at her and said, "You're not originally from Boston, are you?"

For the first time she smiled slightly and McQueen found it

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disproportionately endearing. “No, Connecticut. Do you think I sound like a Bostonian?”

He laughed. “No, no, not at all. Just something somebody said to me. Long story, pay no attention.”

She smiled again, and he could see that the facial movement had caused her some pain. “A lot of you Brooklynites think anyone from out of town sounds like they come from Boston.”

McQueen sat back in his chair and raised his eyebrows in mock indignation. “‘Brooklynite?’ You think I sound like a Brooklynite?”

“Sure do.”

“Well, Ms. Taylor, just so you know, I live in the city. Not Brooklyn.”

He kept his voice light, singsong.

“Isn’t Brooklyn in the city?”

“Well, yeah, geographically. But the city is Manhattan. I was born on Long Island, but I’ve lived in the city for fifteen years.”

“Alright then,” she said, with a pitched nod of her head.

McQueen tapped his pen on his notepad and looked at the ugly bruise on her temple. He dropped his gaze to the splinted, bandaged broken fingers of her right hand.

“How are you doing? I know you took a bad fall and had a real bad scare. But how are you doing?”

She seemed to tremble briefly, and he regretted having asked. But she met his gaze with her answer.

“I’ll be fine. Everything is superficial, except for the fingers, and they’ll heal. I’ll be fine.”

He nodded to show he believed her and that, yes, of course, she was right, she would be fine. He wondered, though, if she really would be.

“Can you describe the assailant?”

“It happened very fast. I mean, it seemed to last for hours, but . . . but . . .”

McQueen leaned forward and spoke more softly so she would have to focus on the sound of his voice in order to hear, focus on hearing the words and not on the memory at hand.

“What was his race?”

“He was white.”



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"Was he taller than you?"

"Yes."

"How tall are you?"

"Five-eight."

"And him?"

She thought for a moment. "Five-nine or ten."

"His hair?"

"Black. Long. Very dirty." She looked down at the sheet and nervously picked at a loose thread. "It . . . it . . ."

McQueen leaned in closer, his knees against the side of the bed. He imagined what it would be like to touch her. "It what?" he asked gently.

She looked up sharply with the near panic of a frightened deer in her eyes. "It smelled," she whispered. "His hair was so dirty, I could smell it."

She began to sob. McQueen sat back in his chair and held his questioning for a moment. She needed time to compose herself.

And he needed to find this man. Badly.



"I WANT to keep this one."

McQueen started the engine and glanced down at his wristwatch as he spoke to Rizzo. It was three in the morning, and his eyes stung with the grit of someone who had been too long awake.

Rizzo shifted in the seat and adjusted his jacket. He settled in and turned to the younger detective.

"You what?" he asked absently.

"I want this one. I want to keep it. We can handle this case, Joe, and I want it."

Rizzo shook his head and frowned. "Doesn't work that way, kid. The morning shift catches and pokes around a little, does a rah-rah for the victim, and then turns the case to the day tour. You know that, that's the way it is. Let's get us back to the house, write up the reports, and grab a few zees. We'll pick up enough of our own work next day tour we pull. We don't need to grab something that isn't our problem. Okay?"

McQueen stared out the window into the falling rain on the darkened street. He didn't turn his head as he spoke.

"Joe, I'm telling you, I want this case. If you're in, fine. If not, I go to

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the squad boss tomorrow and ask for the case and a partner to go with it.” Now he turned to face the older man and met his eyes. “Up to you, Joe. You tell me.”

Rizzo turned away and spoke into the windshield before him. He let his eyes watch McQueen’s watery reflection. “Pretty rough for a fuckin’ guy with three days under his belt.” He sighed and turned slowly before he spoke again.

“One of the cops in the ER told me this broad was a looker. So now I volunteer for extra work ’cause you got your head turned?”

McQueen shook his head. “Joe, it’s not like that.”

Rizzo smiled. “Mike, you’re how old? Twenty-seven, twenty-eight? It’s like that, alright, it’s always like that.”

“Not this time. And not me. It’s wrong for you to say that, Joe.”

At that, Rizzo laughed aloud. “Mike,” he said through a lingering chuckle, “there ain’t no wrong. And there ain’t no right. There just *is*, that’s all.”

Now it was McQueen who laughed. “Who told you that, a guru?”

Rizzo fumbled through his jacket pockets and produced a battered and bent Chesterfield. “Sort of,” he said as he lit it. “My grandfather told me that. You know where I was born?”

McQueen, puzzled by the question, shook his head. “How would I know? Brooklyn?”

“Omaha-fuckin’-Nebraska, that’s where. My old man was a lifer in the Air Force stationed out there. When I was nine he died, so me and my mother and big sister came back to Brooklyn to live with my grandparents. My grandfather was a first grade detective working Chinatown back then. The first night we got there, I broke down, crying to him about how wrong it was, my old man dying and all, how it wasn’t right and all like that. He got down on his knees and leaned right into my face. I still remember the smell of beer and garlic sauce on his breath. He leaned right in and said, ‘Kid, nothing is wrong. And nothing is right. It just *is*.’ I never forgot that. He was dead-on correct about that, I’ll tell you.”

McQueen drummed his fingers lightly on the wheel and scanned the mirrors. The street was empty. He pulled the Impala away from the curb and drove back toward the Belt Parkway. After they had entered the westbound lanes, Rizzo spoke again.

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"Besides, Mike, this case won't even stay with the squad. Rapes go to sex crimes and get handled by the broads and the guys with master's degrees in fundamental and advanced bullshit. Can you imagine the bitch that Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug would pitch if they knew an insensitive prick like me was handling a rape?"

"Joe, both of those women are dead."

Rizzo nodded. "Whatever. You get my point."

"And I told you already, this isn't a rape. The guy grabbed her, threatened her with a blade, and was yanking on his own chain while he held her there. No rape. Abuse and assault, tops."

For the first time since they had worked together, McQueen thought he heard a shadow of interest in Rizzo's voice when the older man next spoke.

"Blade? Whackin' off? Did the guy come?"

McQueen glanced over at his partner. "What?" he asked.

"Did the guy bust a nut, or not?"

McQueen squinted through the windshield. Had he thought to ask her that? No. No, he hadn't. It simply hadn't occurred to him.

"Is that real important to this, Joe, or are you just making a case for your insensitive prick status?"

Rizzo laughed out loud, expelling a gray cloud of cigarette smoke in the process. McQueen reached for the power button and cracked his window.

"No, no, kid, really, official request. Did this asshole come?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask her. Why?"

Rizzo laughed again. "Didn't want to embarrass her on the first date, eh, Mike? Understandable, but totally unacceptable detective work."

"Is this going somewhere, Joe?"

Rizzo nodded and smiled. "Yeah, it's going toward granting your rude request that we keep this one. If I catch a case I can clear up quick I always keep it. See, about four, five years ago we had some schmuck running around the precinct grabbing girls and forcing them into doorways and alleyways. Used a knife. He'd hold them there and beat off till the thing started to look like a stick of chop meat. One victim said she stared at a bank clock across the street the whole time to sort of distract herself from the intimacy of the situation, and she said the

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guy was hammering himself for twenty-five minutes. But he could never get the job done. Psychological, probably. Kind of a major failure at his crime of choice. Never hurt no one, physically, but one of his victims was only thirteen. She must be popping Prozac by the handful now. We caught the guy. Not me, but some guys from the squad. Turned out to be a strung-out junkie shit bag we all knew. Thing is, junkies don't usually cross over into the sex stuff. No cash or H in it. This could be the same guy. He'd be long out by now. And except for the subway, it's his footprint. We can clear this one, Mike. You and me. I'm gonna make you look like a star, first case. The mayor will be so proud of himself for grabbing that gold shield for you, he'll probably make you the fuckin' commissioner!"

TWO DAYS later McQueen sat at his desk in the cramped detective squad room, gazing once again into the eyes of Amy Taylor. He cleared his voice before he spoke and noticed the bruise on her temple had subsided a bit and no attempt had been made to cover it with makeup.

"What I'd like to do is show you some photographs. I'd like you to take a look at some suspects and tell me if one of them is the perpetrator."

Her eyes smiled at him as she spoke. "I've talked to about five police officers in the last few days, and you're the first one to say 'perpetrator.'"

He felt himself flush a little. "Well," he said with a forced laugh, "it's a fairly appropriate word for what we're doing here."

"Yes, it is. It's just unsettling to actually hear it spoken. Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "I think I know what you mean."

"Good," she said with the pitched nod of her head that Mike suddenly realized he had been looking forward to seeing again. "I didn't mean it as an insult or anything. Do I look at the mug books now?"

This time McQueen's laugh was genuine. "No, those are your words now. We call it a photo array. I'll show you eight photos of men roughly matching the description you gave. You tell me if one of them is the right one."

"Alright then." She straightened herself in the chair and folded her



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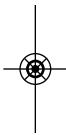
hands in her lap. She cradled the broken right fingers in the long slender ones of her left hand. The gentleness made McQueen's head swim with, what? Grief? . . . pity? He didn't know.

When he came around to her side of the desk and spread the color photos before her, he knew immediately. She looked up at him, and the sapphires swam in tears yet again. She turned back to the photos and lightly touched one.

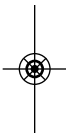
"Him" was all she said.

"YOU KNOW," Rizzo said, chewing on a hamburger as he spoke, "you can never overestimate the stupidity of these assholes."

It was just after nine on a Thursday night, and the two detectives sat in the Chevrolet eating their meals. The car stood backed into a slot at the rear of the Burger King's parking lot, nestled in the darkness between circles of glare from two lampposts. Three weeks had passed since the assault on Amy Taylor.



McQueen turned to his partner. "Which assholes we talking about here, Joe?" he asked. In the short time he had been working with Rizzo, McQueen had developed a grudging respect for the older man. What Rizzo appeared to lack in enthusiasm, he more than made up for in experience and an ironic, grizzled sort of street smarts. McQueen had already learned much from him, and knew he was about to learn more.



"Criminals," Rizzo continued. "Skells in general. This burglary call we just took reminded me of something. Old case I handled seven, eight years ago. Jewelry store got robbed, over on Thirteenth Avenue. Me and my partner, guy named Giacalone, go over there and see the victim. Old Sicilian lived in the neighborhood forever, salt of the earth type. So me and Giacalone, we go all out for this guy. We even called for the fingerprint team, we were right on it. So we look around, talk to the guy, get the description of the perp and the gun used. We tell the old guy to sit tight and wait for the fingerprint team to show up and we'll be in touch in a couple of days. Well, the old man is so grateful, he walks us out to the car. Just as we're about to pull away, the guy says, 'You know,' he says. 'You know the guy that robbed me cased the joint first.' Imagine that? 'Cased the joint.'—Musta watched a lot of TV, this old guy. So I say to him, 'What'd ya mean, cased the joint?' And he says, 'Yeah, two

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days ago the same guy came in to get his watch fixed. Left it with me and everything. Even filled out a receipt card with his name and address and phone number. Must have been just casing the place. Well, he sure fooled me.’”

Rizzo chuckled and bit into his burger. “So,” he said through a full mouth, “old Giacalone puts the car back into park and he leans across me and says, ‘You still got that receipt slip?’ The old guy goes, ‘Yeah, but it must be all phony. He was just trying to get a look around.’ Well, me and Giacalone go back in and we get the slip. We cancel the print guys and drive out to Canarsie. And guess what? The asshole is home. We grab him and go get a warrant for the apartment. Gun, jewelry, and cash—bing-bang-boom. The guy cops to rob-three and does four to seven.”

Rizzo smiled broadly at McQueen. “His girlfriend lived in the precinct and while he was visiting her, he figured he’d get his watch fixed. Then, when he sees what a mark the old guy is, he has an inspiration! See? Never overlook the obvious. Assholes.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a good thing,” McQueen said. “I haven’t run across too many geniuses working this job.”

Rizzo laughed and crumpled the wrappings spread across his lap. “Amen,” he said.

They sat in silence, Rizzo smoking, McQueen watching the people and cars moving around the parking lot.

“Hey, Joe,” he said after a while. “Your theory about this neighborhood is a little bit off base. For a place supposed to be all Italian, I notice a lot of Asians around. Not to mention the Russians.”

Rizzo waved a hand through his cigarette smoke. “Yeah, well, somebody’s gotta wait the tables in the Chinese restaurants and drive car service. You still can’t throw a rock without hitting a fuckin’ guinea.”

The Motorola crackled to life at McQueen’s side. It was dispatch directing them to call the precinct. McQueen pulled the cell phone from his jacket pocket as Rizzo keyed the radio and gave a curt “ten-four.”

McQueen called and the desk put him through to the squad. A detective named Borrelli came on the line. McQueen’s eyes narrowed and, taking a pen from his shirt, he scribbled on the back of a newspaper. He closed the phone and turned to Rizzo.



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"We've got him," he said softly.

Rizzo belched loudly. "Got who?"

McQueen leaned forward and started the engine. He switched on the headlights and pulled away. After three weeks in Bensonhurst, he no longer needed directions. He knew where he was going.

"Flain," he said. "Peter Flain."

Rizzo reached back, pulled on his shoulder belt and buckled up.

"Imagine that," he said with a faint grin. "And here we were, just a minute ago, talking about assholes. Imagine that."

MCQUEEN DROVE hard and quickly toward Eighteenth Avenue. Traffic was light, and he carefully jumped a red signal at Bay Parkway and turned left onto Seventy-fifth Street. He accelerated to Eighteenth Avenue and turned right.

As he drove, he reflected on the investigation that was now about to unfold.

It was Rizzo who had gotten it started when he recalled the prior crimes with the same pattern. He had asked around the precinct and someone remembered the name of the perp. Flain. Peter Flain.

The precinct computer had spit out his last-known address in the Bronx and the name of the parole officer assigned to the junkie ex-con. A call to the officer told them that Flain had been living in the Bronx for some years, serving out his parole without incident. He had been placed in a methadone program and was clean. Then, about three months ago, he disappeared. His parole officer checked around in the Bronx but Flain had simply vanished. The officer put a violation on Flain's parole and notified the state police, the New York Supreme Court, and NYPD headquarters. That's where it had ended as far as he was concerned.

McQueen had printed a color photo from the computer and assembled the photo array from which Amy had identified Flain. Flain had returned to the Sixty-second precinct.

Then Rizzo had really gone to work. He spent the better part of a four-to-midnight hitting every known junkie haunt in and around the precinct. He made it known he wanted Flain. He made it known he would not be happy with any bar, poolroom, candy store, or after-hours

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joint that would harbor Flain and fail to give him up with a phone call to the squad.

And tonight, that call had been made.

McQueen swung the Chevy into the curb, killing the lights as the car rolled to a slow stop. Three storefronts down, just off the corner of Sixty-ninth Street, the faded fluorescent of the Keyboard Bar shone in the night. He twisted the key to shut off the engine. As he reached for the door handle and was about to pull it open, he felt the firm, tight grasp of Rizzo's large hand on his right shoulder. He turned to face him.

Rizzo's face held no sign of emotion. When he spoke, it was in a low, conversational tone. McQueen had never heard the older man enunciate more clearly.

"Kid," Rizzo began, "I know you like this girl. And I know you took her out to dinner last week. Now, we both know you shouldn't even be working this collar since you saw the victim socially. I've been working with you for four weeks now, and you're a good cop. But this here is the first bit of real shit we have to do. So let me handle it. Don't be stupid. We pinch him, read him his rights, and off he goes." Rizzo paused, his dark brown eyes in McQueen's face.

"Right?" Rizzo asked.

McQueen nodded. "Just one thing, Joe."

Rizzo let his hand slide gently off McQueen's shoulder.

"What?" he asked.

"I'll process it. I'll walk him through central booking. I'll do the paperwork. Just do me one favor."

"What?" Rizzo repeated.

"I don't know any Brooklyn A.D.A.s. I need you to talk to the A.D.A. writing tonight. I want this to go hard. Two top counts, 'D' felonies. Assault two and sexual abuse one. I don't want this prick copping to an 'A' misdemeanor assault or some bullshit 'E' felony. Okay?"

Rizzo smiled, and McQueen became aware of the tension that had been hidden in the older man's face only as he saw it melt away. "Sure, kid," he nodded. "I'll go down there myself and cash in a favor. No problem." He pushed his face in the direction of the bar and said, "Now let's go get him."



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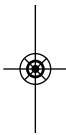
Rizzo entered first and walked directly to the bar. McQueen hung near the door, his back angled to the bare barroom wall. His eyes adjusted to the dimness of the large room as he scanned the half dozen drinkers scattered along its length. He noticed two empty barstools with drinks and money and cigarettes before them on the worn Formica surface. At least two people somewhere, but not visible. He glanced over at Joe Rizzo.

Rizzo stood silently, his forearms resting on the bar. The bartender, a man of about sixty, slowly walked toward him.

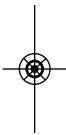
"Hello, Andrew," McQueen heard Rizzo say. "How the hell you been?"

McQueen watched as the two men, out of earshot of the others, whispered briefly to one another. He noticed the start of nervous stirrings as the drinkers came to realize that something was suddenly different here. He saw a small envelope drop to the floor at the feet of one man.

Rizzo stepped away from the bar and went back to McQueen.



He smiled. "This joint is so crooked, old Andrew over there would give up Jesus Christ Himself to keep me away from here." With a flick of his index finger, Rizzo indicated the men's room at the very rear in the left corner.



"Our boy's in there. Ain't feeling too chipper this evening, according to Andrew. Flain's back on the junk, hard. He's been sucking down Cokes all night. Andrew says he's been in there for twenty minutes."

McQueen looked at the distant door. "Must have nodded off."

Rizzo twisted his lips. "Or he read Andrew like a book and climbed out the fuckin' window. Let's go see."

Rizzo started toward the men's room, unbuttoning his coat with his left hand as he walked. McQueen suddenly became aware of the weight of the nine-millimeter Glock automatic belted to his own right hip. His groin broke into a sudden sweat as he realized he couldn't remember if he had chambered a round before leaving his apartment for work. He unbuttoned his coat and followed his partner.

The men's room was small. A urinal hung on the wall to their left, brimming with dark urine and blackened cigarette butts. A cracked mirror hung above a blue-green stained sink. The metallic rattle of a worn,

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useless ventilation fan clamored. The stench of disinfectant surrendered to vomit.

A single stall stood against the wall before them. The door was closed. Feet showed from beneath it.

McQueen reached for his Glock and watched as Rizzo slipped an ancient-looking Colt revolver from under his coat.

Rizzo leaned his weight back, a shoulder brushing against McQueen's chest, and heaved a heavy foot at the stress point of the stall door. He threw his weight behind it, and as the door flew inward, he stepped deftly aside, at the same time gently shoving McQueen the other way. The door crashed against the stall occupant and Rizzo rushed forward, holding the bouncing door back with one hand, pointing the Colt with the other.

Peter Flain sat motionless on the toilet. His pants and underwear lay crumpled around his ankles. His legs were spread wide, pale and varicose, and capped by bony knees. His head hung forward on his chest. He hadn't moved. McQueen noticed his greasy, black hair. Flain's dirty gray shirt was covered with brown, foamy, blood-streaked vomit. More blood, dark and thick, ran from his nostrils and pooled in the crook of his chin. His fists were clenched.

Rizzo leaned forward and, carefully avoiding the fluids, lay two fingers across the jugular.

He stood erect and holstered his gun. He turned to McQueen.

"*Morte*," he said. "The prick died on us!"

McQueen looked away from Rizzo and back to Flain. He tried to fathom what he felt, but couldn't.

"Well," he said, just to hear his own voice.

Rizzo let the door swing closed on the sight of Flain. He turned to McQueen with sudden anger on his face. "You know what this means?" he said.

McQueen watched as the door swung slowly back open. He looked at Flain, but spoke to Rizzo.

"It means he's dead. It's over."

Rizzo shook his head angrily. "No, no that's not what it fuckin' means. It means no conviction. No guilty plea. It means 'Investigation abated by death.' That's what it means."



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McQueen shook his head. "So?" he asked. "So what?"

Rizzo frowned and leaned back against the tiled wall. Some of the anger left him. "So what?" he said, now more sad than angry. "I'll tell you 'so what.' Without a conviction or a plea, we don't clear this case. We don't clear this case, we don't get credit for it. We don't clear this case, we did all this work for nothing. Fucker would have died tonight anyway, with or without us bustin' our asses to find him."

They stood in silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, Rizzo brightened. He turned to McQueen with a sly grin and spoke in a softer tone.

"Unless," he said, "unless we start to get smart."

In six years on the job, McQueen had been present in other places, at other times, with other cops, when one of them had said 'Unless . . .' with just such a grin. He felt his facial muscles begin to tighten.

"What, Joe? Unless what?"

"Unless when we got here, came in the john, this guy was still alive. In acute respiratory distress. Pukin' on himself. Scared, real scared, 'cause he knew this was the final overdose. And we, well, we tried to help, but we ain't doctors, right? So he knows he's gonna die and he says to us, 'I'm sorry.' And we say, 'What, Pete, sorry about what?' And he says, 'I'm sorry about that girl, that last pretty girl, in the subway. I shouldn'ta done that.' And I say to him, 'Done what, Pete, what'd you do?' And he says, 'I did like I did before, with the others, with the knife.' And then, just like that, he drops dead!"

McQueen wrinkled his forehead. "I'm not following this, Joe. How does that change anything?"

Rizzo leaned closer to McQueen. "It changes everything," he whispered, holding his thumb to his fingers and shaking his hand, palm up, at McQueen's face. "Don't you get it? It's a deathbed confession, rock-solid evidence, even admissible in court. Bang—case closed! And we're the ones who closed it. Don't you see? It's fuckin' beautiful."

McQueen looked back at the grotesque body of the dead junkie. He felt bile rising in his throat, and he swallowed it down.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes still on the corpse.

"Jesus, Joe," he said, the bile searing at his throat. "Jesus Christ, Joe, that's not right. We can't do that. That's just fucking wrong!"

Rizzo reddened, the anger suddenly coming back to him.

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“Kid,” he said, “don’t make me say you owe me. Don’t make me say it. I took this case on for you, remember?”

But it was not the way McQueen remembered it. He looked into the older man’s eyes.

“Jesus, Joe,” he said.

Rizzo shook his head. “Jesus got nothin’ to do with it.”

“It’s wrong, Joe,” McQueen said, even as his ears flushed red with the realization of what they were about to do. “It’s just wrong.”

Rizzo leaned in close, speaking more softly, directly into McQueen’s ear, the sound of people approaching the men’s room forcing an urgency into his voice. McQueen felt the warmth of Rizzo’s breath touch him.

“I tole you this, kid. I already tole you this. There is no right. There is no wrong.”

He turned and looked down at the hideous corpse.

“There just *is*.”