

Dark as Night

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“For I have sworn thee fair
and thought thee bright
who art as black as hell,
as dark as night.”
--Shakespeare, Sonnet 147

Chapter One

Billy Hope Jr. was looking for the duct tape.

It was Wednesday, April 5th, and the rain hitting the roof sounded like bacon frying. Billy grabbed the bottle of Jim Beam, upended it, letting some run down his chin, onto his shirt. He checked the hall closet, dug through the boxes, all the coat pockets, ran his hand along the overhead shelf—no duct tape. Shit. Slammed the closet door, hard, breaking the latch.

Billy could feel the left side of his face doing gymnastics—the tic worse than ever. He took another pull on the Jim Beam, rubbing his big belly, then belched loudly.

Billy’s father, William Hope Sr., prominent Philadelphia surgeon, at sixty-two the top cutter at Jefferson, apparently had enough and walked into the O.R. one afternoon eight months ago, grabbed a scalpel and sliced his wrists and throat—dead before he hit the floor. Billy’s mother, Catherine June Hope, always a little nutty, went off the deep end, had to be institutionalized. Billy’s younger sister, Anita, *of course*, took over the estate, and now controlled the money. They weren’t about to leave the house, the bank accounts or the stocks in the hands of a forty year old drunken gambler, a career criminal like Billy, especially since everyone thought he took after his mother and was a little cracked in the head. Ordered held for observation twice now, once when he found himself wandering down Broad Street naked, though that was just an alcohol blackout from mixing tequila and bourbon—but try telling that to

a shrink on the city payroll; the other time when he exposed himself to the female Assistant D.A. And that was bullshit—did it on purpose, hoping to beat a B&E charge on a psycho. Didn't work, he still took the fall, though the judge reduced it to time served and probation. Thank God for prison overcrowding.

Now he was wandering around his parents' huge house in the Mount Airy section of the city, looking for the goddamned duct tape. Had to break in—Anita changed the locks and wouldn't give him a key, but what she didn't know was that he had the security codes to the alarm. She'd have them changed after today, but of course what the hell did he care what she did after today?

Billy walked over to the roll top desk, the Jim Beam hanging at arm's length, bumping up against his leg, started searching the desk. Nothing there but papers—mom's correspondence, sympathy cards for the old man's funeral. No duct tape, not even Scotch tape or masking tape, nothing. Shit.

It all started when he got the call earlier this afternoon. Sonny Jackson was the only person who knew where he was holed up, back of the Greek's TV repair shop, living on canned ravioli and sodas out of the machine, the Greek away for a month visiting the homeland. Billy was afraid to stay at his apartment, because he knew what was coming, he just didn't know when.

Sonny was a tall, skinny black dude, with a huge 70's 'fro. Pretty decent car thief. He wasn't any good with alarms, but without them Sonny could crack and hotwire most American made cars in under ninety seconds. He was partial to Caddy's and Lincolns, as Billy figured most sensible people were. Billy acted as a spotter a few times for Sonny. The order would come

down from the Eye-ty's, somebody wanted a Town Car or an Eldorado, late model of course. Billy'd find it, Sonny'd boost it. Three large, split anyway they wanted.

So when the phone rang Billy knew who it was.

“Yo, man, Vince is gettin' out.”

“When.”

“Today, man, he's fuckin' out now!”

“No shit?”

“Straight dope.”

Billy dropped the phone, felt his face go into spastic convulsions, and went instinctively for the bourbon. He knew they'd be coming for him. They always said they would, once Vince got out. It would either be them or Vince himself. Well, fuck 'em, he wasn't going to give them the pleasure. Got into a cab, went straight to Mount Airy, his parents' home. Something just felt right about doing it here.

Billy thought of the utility drawer by the sink, stumbled through the dining room, knocking over a planter, went into the kitchen. Pulled open the drawer. Corkscrew, twist ties, cheese grater, menus from Chinese restaurants. No duct tape.

Billy and Vince must have pulled, what, a dozen jobs together? Liquor stores, check cashing agencies, one gas station. Maybe a baker's dozen. Of Course! That was it, the last one, the one that went bad was number thirteen.

Shit!

Billy stopped in his tracks, standing in the middle of his parents' living room, thinking about it. He ran his hand over his bald head. He had a bad feeling about the whole thing when Johnny Stacks set it up. Didn't sound right, or, really, it sounded too right, too easy. Some old

Jew's got a hundred grand worth of diamonds insured for a cool quarter million and *wants* them stolen. He's into Johnny for something like seventy-five grand, betting the ponies, and this is the only way he can pay him back. Whatever the diamonds sell for, Vince and Billy take half, Johnny Stacks gets the other half. Too easy, and he should have known better. You never pull thirteen jobs with the same guy—it's bad luck. You just don't do it. End it at twelve and move on.

Billy upended the Jim Beam again, but found it empty. He let the bottle drop to the floor and stumbled into the den, opened up his father's liquor cabinet. No bourbon, no Jack. Lots of fancy single malt Scotch and a bottle of Cutty. He took the Cutty.

Well, it was a good ride. Made a lot of money from those jobs, even though he lost even more betting on football. Him and Vince and Sonny, they had a good time. Sonny was never actually in on the robberies, but he'd boost a car for them to use. Afterwards, they'd get together, the three of them, blow some of that dough on booze and broads, have a few laughs.

Until the jewelry store. Number thirteen. Goddamn, how could he have been so stupid?

Billy opened the Cutty, let the cap fall to the floor, took a long pull on the bottle, started gagging on it, nearly puked. He felt like spitting it out, but got it down, coughing, tears coming to his eyes. Goddamn his old man for not having any decent booze in the house.

Then it hit him: the garage. The goddamn duct tape's in the garage.

He went through the kitchen, into the laundry room, to the door leading to the garage, opened it. His old man's maroon Jag was still sitting there—Billy already had the keys to it in his pocket. He stumbled over to the workbench. There was a box sitting there—laying on top of a pile of nails inside the box was the duct tape. He grabbed the tape, walked around the Jag to where the garden supplies were kept. Took a long drink of Cutty, still wincing at the taste, set the

bottle on top of the car. He reached down and grabbed the garden hose. Stretched it out, took an end, walked around to the back of the car. Started to bend down, but wobbled, grabbed the bumper and fell on his ass and grunted. Sitting there, he fitted the end of the hose into the exhaust pipe, and sealed it up with the duct tape.

Billy stood back up slowly, using the car as support. He grabbed the Cutty, walked around to the driver's side, pulling the hose along with him, opened the door and cracked the window. He fitted the other end of the hose through the open space at the top of the window, then sealed it up with the duct tape.

Got in the car and closed the door, then dug into his pocket for the keys. Took a long drink of Scotch, cursing his old man again, then thought it would be nice to have a tape to listen to, the Doors or the Stones, but he didn't bring one, and his parents sure as shit wouldn't have anything like that laying around.

Started up the car, took another long drink from the bottle and belched. Turned on the radio—it was set to the classical station, so he turned the knob until something else came on. It was a news conference. The mayor was saying there wasn't any money for city pay raises this year, the union leaders could bitch all they wanted to, there just wasn't any more money. Everybody was going to have to bite the bullet.

The exhaust fumes started coming into the car—Billy could smell them now. He took another long drink of Cutty. The bottle was half empty, and he was starting to get used to the taste, thinking it wasn't so bad after all. Probably if you cut it with a little water, it ain't so bad.

Tears started coming to his eyes, and he wiped them away, noticing his facial spasms had stopped. He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes.

Never, ever pull thirteen jobs with the same guy.

Never.

Forty-five minutes earlier Lenny Zielinski was walking across the parking lot of Cat's Cradle, a strip club on Delaware Ave., thinking about how his life turned completely around two days ago.

On Monday: Lenny got a call on his cell. He was told to come to the restaurant right away. As soon as he walked in the front door, Erasmo grabbed him by the arm, dragged him inside, saying, "C'mon we got a job to do."

Lenny pulled his arm away, smoothing out the sleeve of his black jacket. He didn't care too goddamned much for being handled that way. "Jesus good God, Mo, fucking take it easy."

Mo said: "Johnny give us a job," his broken English dripping Italian.

Lenny couldn't tell if he was serious, could never read Mo, his dark face always a blank, and his eyes always sleepy, half closed. "What kinda job?"

"Johnny's niece—"

"Carmen?"

"No, the other one."

"The little one? Anne-Marie?"

"Yeah, her. Coupla niggers grabbed her after school, tore her dress, tried to rape her."

"No shit?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Johnny?"

"His sister's, takin' care of the girl."

"What's he want us to do?"

“We got a kid, involved, or knows who done it, don’ wanna say. Johnny says find out for sure.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s the kid?”

“The basement.”

“The basement *here?*” They were in Dominic’s, Johnny Stacks’ restaurant and bar, a typical South Philadelphia dago place. Wood paneling covering the walls, the lights dim, pictures of famous guineas on the wall, Sinatra on the jukebox. Four thirty in the afternoon, the place was closed. Lenny wondered why driving up. Now he knew.

“Yeah. Here in the basement.”

Mo grabbed Lenny by the arm, started dragging him down the stairs. Lenny was wondering why Johnny wanted him in on the job. This was the kind of thing Mo usually took care of by himself, the rough stuff. They hadn’t ever used him on a job like this before.

The basement was dark and cool, the place lit by a single uncovered bulb hanging from the ceiling. There were boxes of booze stacked against the walls, and mouse turds all over the place. Then Lenny saw the kid. He was tied to a chair, hands behind his back. Seventeen, eighteen years old, he was wearing big, oversized jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers. Looked like Mo had already started on the poor fucker. His lip was busted, there was blood on his shirt and his eye was almost swollen shut. He’d been wearing a blind fold, but it had slipped down around his neck.

Mo stepped up to the kid, leaned over slightly, and in his deadpan voice: “Hey, Sambo, playtime’s over. Lenny’s here now. He gonna ask you some questions. You better answer good,

or else,” and he backhanded the kid, blood splattering against the wall. The kid didn’t make a sound, just kept staring straight ahead.

Mo wiped his hand on the kid’s shirt, then stepped away from the chair and looked over at Lenny with his sleepy eyes. Then Lenny knew what was going on: Mo was busting his balls. That’s what this was about. Johnny never said Lenny should handle this job. This was Mo’s way of proving what he’d been saying all along: Lenny was pussy, couldn’t handle the business, Johnny shouldn’t have ever taken him on in the first place. Fucking Mo resented him ‘cause his last name’s Zielinski. The hell of it was, Mo wasn’t even all Italian, his grandfather on his mother’s side was from South America, Brazil or some fucking place. That made him one quarter Brazilian, so he’d never be a made guy. The New York families would never have him. You’d think he’d be more sympathetic, cut Lenny some slack, but not this fucking wop. He busted Lenny’s balls every chance he got.

Lenny thought, Fuck him, and he stepped up to the chair, took a deep breath. “Well, how ‘bout it, Sambo?” and he smacked the kid hard, feeling his ring catch skin, blood splattered the wall again. The kid still didn’t say anything.

Lenny looked down at his hand, there was blood on it, he felt a little queasy. He was hoping he wasn’t going to get blood all over himself—he’d just bought the shirt he was wearing. He took another breath and said, “You know why you’re here, don’t you, Sambo? You’re gonna tell us who fucked with the little girl, Anne-Marie Decongelio. ‘Cause that wasn’t just any little girl. That was Johnny Staccardo’s niece,” and he hit him again, open-handed, harder, the sound echoing in the little room.

Lenny braced himself and made his voice sound as hard as he could: “So who done it, home-boy? I heard *all* you niggers like white pussy. Maybe it was you. You don’t give us a

name, we're gonna tell Johnny it was you. You fuckers all look alike to me anyway. But lemme tell you somethin', you sure as shit wouldn't like what he'd do to you if he thought you raped his niece," and he slapped him again, feeling the blood spray over his shirt and pants. The kid still didn't say anything, but now his nose was bleeding fast, and he was sniffing back the blood.

Mo said, "This ain't going nowhere," and he turned to the workbench beside him and grabbed something. "Here, use this," and he handed Lenny a drill. A fucking Black and Decker drill with a big wood bit on it.

Lenny looked at the drill in his hand, knowing it was a test, a goddamned test. Mo didn't think he'd hit the kid, and he hit him, so now he's taking the next step, see if he'd use the drill on the stupid kid, see if he'd back down. Lenny knew what'd happen if he backed down: Fucking Mo'd tell everybody about it, especially Johnny. Lenny'd never hear the end of it. Mo'd ride him from now on, telling him he ought to find new work, if he ain't got the stomach for this kinda shit, tell him he wasn't cut out for the big time, he oughtta go back to pool hustling and shaking down junkies.

Lenny knew: there wasn't any backing down. He grabbed the drill.

Mo reached over and plugged it in. Lenny pulled the trigger switch, the thing whirred, then died. He pulled it again, once, twice, the thing whirred and died, whirred and died.

He looked at the kid. "So how 'bout it, boy?" his voice cracked a little—he hoped Mo didn't notice. The nigger still sat there quiet, but Lenny thought he saw him shaking. He glanced over at Mo. The fat fucker still just stood there, emotionless, looked like he was half asleep, like nothing ever fucking bothered him. Lenny pulled the trigger, the drill whirred, and he lowered it. The kid flinched in his seat. He put the bit against his thigh, the thing started digging in, blood splattering, tearing the flesh, the kid was still silent, his face clenched, gritting his teeth. Lenny

pushed, feeling sweat pouring down his face, the thing hit bone, finally the kid screamed, Lenny lifted the drill.

“Alright!” the kid yelled out, balling, crying. “Alright, I’ll tell who done it! I’ll tell!” rocking back and forth in the chair, moaning.

Still holding the drill, blood and flesh hanging off the bit, Lenny looked over at Mo and smiled. Mo didn’t say a word, just turned around and walked back up the stairs.

Now, walking up to Cat’s Cradle, Lenny was thinking about nicknames. Since Monday, he was thinking about calling himself “Lenny the Drill.” That sounded cool, but he didn’t really like using the drill and didn’t know if he ever would again. Too goddamned messy. Ruined a new shirt and a good pair of pants. He was also thinking about “Lenny Chompers,” on account of his dental work—Lenny had a mouth full of silver teeth. That wasn’t quite right, though. He was trying to come up with something about his black clothes—he always wore black, head to toe.

He’d waited until the rain let up and was heading into Cat’s Cradle to find Sammy Foster, who was late on his payments. Sammy dropped four grand during March Madness. The stupid shit always bet the home teams, even *against* Duke and North Carolina. Now he was a week and a half late and Johnny said to lean on him. This was the first serious muscle job Johnny’d given him. Johnny heard all about how Lenny made the nigger spill, of course—Lenny made sure he heard—and he was impressed. He told Lenny he’d give him muscle work from now on. He wouldn’t have to answer no more goddamned phones, or do the fucking paper work.

Lenny slipped a C note to Frankie Lee, half Italian, half chink bartender at the Cradle, to keep an eye out for bad luck Sammy, known to make the rounds of the strip clubs up and down Delaware Ave. Frankie called his cell this afternoon and tipped him that Sammy was there.

Lenny stepped into a puddle and cursed, pulling up his pant leg to get a look at his shoe, see if the shine was ruined. He squinted hard at his sock and swore again. They were navy blue. They weren't black. Goddamn it! He told the old bitch specifically, emphatically: always black; *only* black. And what did she do? Went and bought him navy blue socks. It seriously ruined his look, no doubt about it. Well, he'd just have to go home and change, soon as he could, before anybody noticed. He wasn't going to have people laughing at him because of a pair of goddamned socks.

Still pissed, Lenny looked up to see Sammy Foster walking out the door of the Cradle. He called out: "Hey, Sammy!"

Sammy took one look at him and started running like a rabbit with the dogs hot on his heels. Lenny chased him between cars. Sammy tripped and fell face first into the bumper of an old Benz. Lenny caught up with him, turned him over, and grabbed him by the lapels. Sammy's lip was cut and his nose was bleeding. "Jesus good God, Sammy, look what you did to yourself. I'm supposed to be spillin' the blood around here. Now, let's have it."

Sammy was sniffing blood. "I swear, Lenny, I swear to God I ain't got it... You think I'd try to stiff Little Johnny?"

"You asking me? Yeah, I think you're just stupid enough to try it."

"I swear to God."

"Then why you been hidin'?"

"I been trying to get the money together. I swear, Lenny. Johnny knows I wouldn't stiff him. Sometimes I'm late, sure, but I always pay! Johnny knows that."

"Yeah," said Lenny, "that's why Johnny sent me to lean on you, 'cause he trusts you so completely."

“I swear,” Sammy blubbered, “I’ll have the money next week, the whole thing!”

Just then a horn started honking. Lenny looked up. His girlfriend Gina stuck her head out of his copper colored Deville. “Goddamn it, Lenny,” she shouted “I’m gonna be late!”

Lenny sighed and looked back at Sammy. “Next week then. And don’t disappear again, or Johnny’s gonna get suspicious. *Capisce?*”

“Yeah, sure, Lenny, sure! Whatever you say.”

Lenny let go of him, letting him fall back onto the wet pavement, and walked over to his car, straightening his clothes. He was still pissed about those navy blue socks. Couldn’t believe his mother couldn’t tell the goddamned difference between black and navy blue. Have to get her eyes checked or something.

Lenny got in the Cadillac, looked over at Gina, sitting there completely pissed, of course. “Now I’m gonna be late for my class,” she said, snapping her gum loudly.

Gina Romelo attended Gordon Philips Beauty School. Lenny encouraged her to go, thinking it might class her up a little. She dressed okay, but she was twenty-six now, four years younger than Lenny, and no hot young piece of ass anymore. More than anything, Lenny hoped she’d put on some weight—she was too damned skinny—and get surgery to fix her crooked nose. Whenever he brought it up, though, she told him to go screw himself. Her friends told her she looked like a model, even with the crook in her nose. Look at Lauren Hutton, she’d say, and that big gap between her teeth—it was kind of a trademark, and it was sexy. Lenny always let it drop there. He didn’t know who Lauren Hutton was, but he thought any broad he’d ever seen with a gap in her teeth was butt-ugly.

“You ain’t gonna be late.”

“The fuck I ain’t,” she said, lighting a cigarette.

“Hey,” Lenny gave her a serious look, “what did I tell you about using profanity?”

She frowned at him. “You curse all the time.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t nice for a *lady* to use them words.”

“Ha!” she snorted. “Then I guess I ain’t no lady.”

“Well, try to be one, for God’s sake.”

She took a long drag on the cigarette and blew smoke at him. “Why?”

“So you’re presentable, so we can go places and I ain’t ashamed to be seen with you.”

“Go fuck yourself, Lenny.”

“Just listen to the way you talk, goddamn it.”

“Can we just go?”

Lenny shook his head, started up the car and pulled out of the lot. “We’re gonna talk more about this later,” he said. “And for Christ’s sake use the ash tray!” Lenny’s Cadillac was ten years old, but mint condition. The paint job was perfect—he waxed and polished it every week, and the interior was spotless.

Along Delaware they were quiet for a few minutes. Then Lenny spoke up. “You ain’t gonna believe this.”

Gina was looking out the window at the overcast skies. “Yeah, what?” She snapped her gum again.

“Ma bought me navy blue socks.”

“So what?”

“So what?” he said, looking over at her, not believing he had to explain it. “I only wear black, that’s so what! That’s my look—all black.”

Gina laughed and sneered at him. “You’re so stupid, Lenny. You think wearing black makes you look really cool and tough. I got news for you. You’re not even a real gangster.” Lenny’s face went red and he clinched his teeth, staring out at the road. “Johnny Staccardo’s a two-bit hood. *He’s* not even real mob, and you’re just his errand boy.”

“Oh, *Dios mio*,” Lenny said quietly.

“See!” she screamed, laughing. “That ain’t even Italian! That’s *Spanish*, you stupid shit!”

“I swear to God, Gina.”

“You ain’t Italian. Your last name’s Zielinski!”

“I *know* what my name is,” he growled.

“You’re probably thinking about changing it to sound Italian, ain’t you?” She kept laughing, and Lenny’s face went deeper red. Actually, he had been thinking about shortening it to ‘Zielini.’ He sure as hell wasn’t going to tell her that.

“I swear to God, Gina, you keep it up, one of these days you’re gonna get it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed.

Emphatically: “Jesus Christ, I’ll fucking kill you if I have to!”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she repeated. “My cousin’s good friends with Joey Spinoza—Joey even came to his wedding, and if you ever lay a hand on me, Joey’s crew’ll chop you up and dump you in the Delaware. He’s a *real* goddamned gangster—and a real *man*.” She put out her cigarette in the ash tray.

That last shot stung, and Lenny was fuming. Silently, he turned off Delaware onto Washington Ave. He’d remember this conversation. Lenny didn’t forget shit like this.

Gina lit another cigarette, took a drag, blew out the smoke, then picked gum off the filter. Tight-lipped, through his teeth, Lenny said: “So, d’you think about it?”

“Think about what?” Her voice still had an edge to it. Her voice *always* had that edge, far as he could tell.

“What we talked about?”

“Jesus, Lenny, you’re gonna have to be just a little more specific!”

Lenny cracked the window to let a little air in. He was feeling warm. “You know...about Christina.”

“What about her?” Christina was Gina’s best friend. They went to beauty school together.

“You know, about the three way?”

“Three way? What are you talking about?”

“We talked about us having a three way with Christina—you were gonna ask her about it.”

“What the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

“We talked about it the other day.”

“You wanna do my best friend?”

“No, I don’t wanna *do* your best friend. I want we should have a three way with her.

What are we talkin’ about here?”

“Are you outta your mind, Lenny? I’m not gonna sit there and watch you fuck my best friend.” She drew hard on the cigarette, shaking her head, blew out the smoke.

“You wouldn’t be sitting there. You’d be, you know, *participating*.”

“Jesus, Lenny,” she said, disgusted, “you’re lucky you’re getting any at all. I don’t know where you come up with these crazy fucking ideas.”

Just then a guy in a beat up Escort cut in front of Lenny, flipping him off. Lenny had to swerve to avoid hitting the guy. Gina screamed.

That was it. That was fucking it. Lenny hit the accelerator, lead-footing it down Washington, Gina grabbing the dash, yelling at Lenny, asking him what the fuck he was doing. Lenny crossed the yellow, into the other lane, got ahead of the guy, pulled in front of him, slammed on the brakes. The guy went into a skid on the wet road, tires squealing, stopped just short of the Caddy.

Lenny jumped out of the car, pulled out his Smith and Wesson automatic, marched back to the guy, his eyes like saucers, staring at the gun, desperate to get his car started again. A jig driving an Escort. A Ford fucking Escort, and he cut Lenny off. Lenny couldn't believe it, the guy dissing him like that.

Lenny stepped up to the car, grabbed the handle. It was locked. Gina was screaming out the window, people looking on from other cars. Lenny tapped the glass with the gun, telling the guy to open the goddamned door, or he was going to shoot him through the glass, right then and there. The guy pissing in his pants, couldn't get the car started. Lenny yelled at him again: "Open the goddamned door, or I'll shoot you right now, you cocksucker!" then he cocked the pistol, pointed it right at his face.

The guy with his hands up, terrified, unlocked the door. Lenny opened the door, grabbed the stupid nigger, dragged him out of the car, laying him down on the pavement. Kneeling over him, Lenny put the gun barrel up against his cheek. "Look at me!" he screamed. "Goddamn you, look at me!" Terrified, the guy opened his eyes. "You see me, motherfucker?! You see me?!" The guy nodded quickly, his hands still in the air. "My name's Lenny. You show me a little bit of fucking respect! You hear me?" he shouted at him. "I said, do you hear me, motherfucker?!" The guy whimpered, nodding his head fast. "You pull that shit on me again, I'll kill you deader

than...than fucking dead!” The guy kept nodding and whimpering. Lenny dropped him right there in the street.

He walked back to the Caddy, putting away the pistol, thinking how much better that woulda sounded with a nickname: “You see me? My name’s Lenny *Chompers*. You show me some respect!” Or: “My name’s Lenny *the drill*. You show me some fucking respect!” Got to come up with a nickname.

He got back into the car, put it into gear, squealed the tires getting out of there. Gina sat there all quiet, *seriously* pissed off. She took a hard drag on her cigarette, and out of the corner of his eye Lenny could see her hand shaking. He smiled, turning his head away so she wouldn’t see.

She said: “I hope you don’t think that kind of shit impresses—“

He cut her off: “Don’t even...Just be quiet, don’t even fucking talk to me right now, Gina.”

Lenny’s cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, pushed the button. “Yo.”

The voice on the other end of the line said: “It’s Mo. Johnny says to pick him up.”

Lenny said: “Pick who up?”

The voice said: “Who the fuck you think? Who were we talking about this morning?”

Lenny said: “Oh...Now?”

There was a sigh on the other end of the line, then: “Yeah, *right* now. At his parents’ house.” Then he hung up.

Lenny pushed the button and put the phone back in his pocket. He pulled the Caddy over to the curb, 11th and Washington Ave., reached into his pocket, pulled out his roll and peeled off a ten dollar bill. “I got business,” he said to Gina, handing her the ten, “take a cab.”

She took the money, looking at him like she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

“You're joking?”

“It's *business*,” he said.

“I'm already late!” she screamed at him, “and it's fucking raining out, in case you haven't noticed!”

Lenny reached across her and opened the door, then pushed her out of the car. She slowly got out, swearing the whole time. She slammed the car door, and Lenny pulled away, grinning to himself.

He made it to Mount Airy in seventeen minutes, drove down Sedgwick, just off Clearview, found the house, pulled into the drive. He got out of the car, walked up to the front porch, peeked in through a window. The place looked empty. He rang the bell two, three times, stood there, nothing.

He could break in through the back, but he thought he'd check the garage first. Walking up to the garage door he could hear a car running inside. He pulled on the door and it came open. There was a Jaguar XJ-S sitting there, and what the hell? There was a garden hose taped to the exhaust pipe.

He walked around to the driver side door, following the garden hose. It ran into the car, taped in place, and there was someone in the driver's seat. Lenny opened the door and choked on a wave of exhaust fumes. Billy Hope Jr. was sitting there, unconscious. Lenny grabbed him, pulled him out of the car, then dragged him out of the garage, out onto the driveway. Billy started coughing. Lenny slapped him across the face a few times. Finally, Billy opened his eyes, saw Lenny standing over him, and the left side of his face went into spasms.

Lenny grinned. “This must be your lucky day, Billy. Johnny Stacks wants to see you.”

