BONE
IN THE
THROAT
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction
Gone Bamboo

Non-Fiction
Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly
BONE IN THE THROAT

Anthony Bourdain

BLOOMSBURY
To Nancy
. . . *Mise-en-place* is also a state of mind. Someone who has truly grasped the concept is able to keep many tasks in mind simultaneously, weighing and assigning each its proper value and priority. This assures that the chef has anticipated and prepared for every situation that could logically occur during a service period.

— *The New Professional Chef*  
by the Culinary Institute of America  
(Fifth Edition)
A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR
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That a dead body should be found washed up on the beach was not so unusual. Sandy Hook had had more than its share of floaters over the years. Hog-tied union officials in advanced stages of decomposition, crab-eaten torsos, discarded pets, missing children, drug dealers in oil drums; they came down with the current. Carried out of New York Harbor, down the Jersey coast, they filled with gas and popped to the surface before coming in with the tide.

Dr. Russel Breen, the Sandy Hook medical examiner, called away from his breakfast at the Tips for Tops Luncheonette, took one look at the latest, saw the duct tape around the wrists and ankles, the ligature marks under the chin, the welts indicating blunt force trauma, and the bullet holes in the back of the head, and declared him a city boy.

"No way he's local," he said. Another present from the Big Apple, he thought. He took X rays of the dead man's teeth (what was left of them) and some photographs (front and side view) and faxed them to the city.

He couldn't get any prints. The skin fell away from the fingers en masse. The hair was long gone, and the face, or what was left of it, was distorted beyond hope of recognition. The man's belly, swollen by the gas, had an umbilical hernia; the navel extruded like a turkey thermometer. When Dr. Breen turned his attention to the man's mouth, running a gloved finger around inside the cavity, he wondered at first if somebody had built a fire in there. The tongue was charred, and there were bits of red and brown paper embedded in the palate. Most of the teeth were gone, and the cheeks, blackened and torn, hung in spongy strips over the ears, as if somebody had tried to pull the man's face inside out and failed. Dr. Breen felt a hard object lodged in the throat and went after it with a hemostat.

"Son of a bitch," he said, holding it up to the light, "it's a cherry bomb. Guy got a mouthful a' damn cherry bombs."

Satisfied that the deceased had been shot, beaten, and garroted, and that an attempt had been made to blow up his head, Dr. Breen had loaded him onto a squeaking gurney and taken off to the cooler. Then he went back to Tips for Tops for the rest of his breakfast. He would wait for the inevitable delegation from New York before going any further. Maybe they could get some prints using chemical solvent to dry the fingertips. Maybe they could make an ID with the few remaining teeth. Someone would be down from New York, of that he was sure. In the meantime, he'd get some breakfast.

What was unusual was the size of the New York contingent that arrived a few hours later. Most times, a floater drew two, maybe three city detectives; once in a great while, there was even a forensics hotshot. This time was different. This was an invasion. They couldn't fit, all of them, in Dr. Breen's tiny office. There were guys in suits from the U.S. Attorney's office, FBI men in dark blue windbreakers, detectives in blue jeans and warm-up jackets, and others in slacks and polo shirts, as if they'd been pulled off the golf course. There was even a sallow-complexioned trio of pathologists, from Washington, no less, who arrived in a helicopter. It was all very strange.

Usually, the two or three detectives who came down to view the latest dead wise guy would swagger around the coroner's office cracking jokes, trying to shock the locals with their indifference. They'd snicker over the remains, eager to demonstrate how "this ain't nothin, we see this alla time." They'd refer to a floater as "Poppin Fresh" or, if the subject was dismembered, as "Kibbles 'n Bits," or, if found in a drum, "Lunch Meat."

Not this group. They were sullen and humorless; they seemed resentful about something. Instead of the usual good-natured banter, they bickered among themselves; unspoken recriminations seemed to hang in the air, occasionally flaring up into loud, shouted disagreements. Then there was a scuffle out in the hallway: A stocky FBI man took a poke at somebody from the U.S. Attorneys office; a couple of local uniforms had to separate them. An Assistant U.S. Attorney ended up needing stitches; the FBI man was hustled onto the helicopter and sent back to Washington.

After the scuffle, they all stood out in the hall, glaring at each other, the FBI men sneering at the detectives and making rude comments under their breath. A few feet away, the detectives scowled silently back at them. The AUSAs formed their own little group by the water fountain, FBI men and detectives taunting them from their separate corners.

A reporter from the local paper showed up, only to find herself confronted by the whole group, which was suddenly, if momentarily, united in their hostility. One menacing detective snarled something indescribably obscene in her ear, and she retreated in tears.

Once the reporter had gone, they continued with their dark, accusatory looks. They shook their heads. They smoked their cigarettes. They fretted over the perceived repercussions from this latest arrival on Sandy Hook's beach. Clearly, they knew who it was. And they weren't happy about it.

Dr. Breen thought they looked... well, guilty.
Salvatore Pitera, in a powder-blue jogging suit and tinted aviator glasses, stepped out of Franks Original Pizza onto Spring Street. He had a slice of pizza in one hand, too hot to eat, and he was blowing on it as he waddled through street traffic.

At the corner of Elizabeth Street, he passed the social club. A group of old men sat out front, in tattered easy chairs, drinking espresso.

"Hey, Wig! Sally Wig!" one of the men called out to him. The old men laughed. One man, the oldest, in a dark jacket and unbuttoned white dress shirt, put down his demitasse. "Hey, Sally, what you walking so funny for? You got the piles or something?"

"I don't want to get any fuckin' pizza on my shoes," Sally said.

"Hey, Wig," said another espresso drinker. "Looking good."

The old men laughed. Sally kept walking west, his face all red now, jaw clenched, both eyes on his new Bally running shoes. When he was out of sight of the old men, he reached up to feel if his hair was on right.

Three young men in spattered white chef's jackets and black-and-white-checked pants stood out front of the Dreadnaught Grill. The chef, the tallest one, was pale and thin, with long brown hair that curled out from under his chef's hat. He held a copy of Larousse Gastronomique and was turning the pages furiously. He wore the hat high on his forehead and pulled straight back like a skullcap. A cigarette dangled from his mouth.

"Beurre blanc, beurre blanc, beurre blanc," he was saying. Reading over his shoulder was Tommy. Darker, and not as tall as the chef, his hair stood up straight and spiky like a young Trotsky's. He had a faded blue bandanna draped over his shoulder. Two kitchen towels hung from his apron strings, one on each side, and he wore black, food-encrusted combat boots. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other impatiently while the chef turned the pages.

Ricky, younger than the other two, with thinning blond hair, stood at the chef's other shoulder, cleaning his fingernails with a paring knife. He gnawed on a plastic swizzle stick.

"I'm telling you right now," said the chef, "There is no, repeat, no cream in a real beurre blanc. Zero dairy . . . Got it? . . . Look—" He found the page in Larousse. "You see any mention of cream in there? No . . . You put cream in there, it ain't beurre blanc."

Tommy, his sous-chef, turned away from the book, saying, "Glad I didn't take the bet." He reached in his front chest pocket, fished out a Marlboro, and lit it. "So what the hell we been serving then?"

"I dunno what it is," said the chef. "It's cheating is what it is . . . And I'm telling you right now, both of you—I come in and find you or Ricky sneakin' cream in there again, you'll be peeling fuckin' shallots and bearding mussels for the next fuckin' month."

"That's how we made it at Giro's," said Ricky, lamely "Keeps it from breaking."

"I don't care how they do it at Giro's," said the chef. "Giro's is a fuckin' slop house. I want it done this way . . . Like it says in the book. The right way. And strain it. I'm not asking for you to run it through a goddamn cheesecloth, for Chrissakes . . . just pass it through a fine sieve. I don't want little bits a fucking shallot in there. Yesterday, I come in and Tommy here's got a beurre sitting out like . . . like fuckin' tartar sauce, it's got so many shallots in it. And cold . . . Shit was sitting up like a rock. You put that on a piece of fish, it's gonna slide right off on your lap like a scoop of ice cream."

"Alright," said Tommy. "I got it . . . No more dairy in the beurre. I guess this means I gotta stop puttin' corn starch in the demiglace?"

The chef turned and gave him a dirty look. "Go suck a turd, Tommy."

Ricky pushed some long blond hair out of his eyes and put the paring knife in his jacket pocket. He started to peel a gray, rust-colored Band-Aid off his left thumb. "Chef Uncovers Another Crime Against Food. Perpetrator Unmasked. Dining Public Grateful. Case Closed."

"That thumb doesn't look so good," said the chef.

"It's coming along," said Ricky, holding up a swollen, pink digit neatly bisected by a jagged wound. He rolled up the old Band-Aid into a little ball and flicked it into the street. He reached into his breast pocket for two new ones.

"These things are a fuckin' pain to unwrap," he said.

The chef helped him to rewrap the wound. "Just don't leave any Band-Aids in the food," he said. Then he turned and disappeared down the steps into the clatter and hiss of the basement kitchen.
"He's cranky today," said Tommy. "What's his problem?"
"What do you think?" said Ricky with a smirk.
"He's been riding my ass all day," said Tommy.
"We never shoulda got him that book."
"No shit."
"It wasn't me," said Ricky. "It wasn't me that told him."
"About the beurre?"
"It wasn't me that ratted you out."
"I know," said Tommy. "It's okay, man . . . It was probably somebody on the floor. He wouldn't a noticed himself.
Stephanie considers herself some kinda gourmet lately . . . She probably said something. Probably read something in the Wednesday food section, came in Thursday and tried to impress the chef with her vast knowledge . . ."
"She impresses me with her vast posterior."
Tommy shrugged, took a last pull on his cigarette, and flicked it into the street. "Let his sauce break on him halfway through dinner service a couple of times . . . He'll be right back at us to put a little cream in. He's just bustin' balls."
Ricky raised his chin slightly. "Look who's comin' down the street."
"Oh shit," said Tommy. He looked up to see Sally, halfway down the block, tossing a piece of uneaten pizza crust into a trash can. He grimaced, "It's fuckin' embarrassing, man. Just look at that fuckin' guy . . . He looks like a cross between Sonny Bono and Hermann Goring."
Ricky straightened up and moved away from Tommy.
"I think I'll leave you alone with your uncle, bro'," he said. "I've got something in the oven."
Sally approached Tommy with a broad grin stretched across his face from jowl to jowl. "Hey, chef," he said, "cookin' anything I like?"
"I'm not the chef," said Tommy. "I'm the sous-chef. I told you before."
Sally wrapped two beefy arms around Tommy and gave him a hug and a half-slap on the cheek. "Whassat mean? You make the soups or somethin'?"
"No, it means I'm the second chef—the under chef. Like the under boss. You know what that is, right, Sally?"
"You got a fresh fuckin' mouth," said Sally. "So what are you and your little friends cookin' down there today?"
"Absolutely nothing you like," said Tommy.
"No veal chop? No pasta? How about sausages? I thought this supposed to be some kinda fancy French restaurant. You don't got any fuckin' sausages?"
"This is a seafood place . . . Mediterranean seafood. French Mediterranean seafood. We do mostly fish," said Tommy.
"How about squid?" asked Sally. "That's seafood. You got any squid in there?"
"No squid," said Tommy.
"You should try some of that squid they got next door. You ever try the Count's squid? He serves some nice squid. That squid is beautiful," said Sally.
"Foreskins in afterbirth is what it is," said Tommy.
"It's good," insisted Sally.
"That shit is fuckin' vile," said Tommy. "I'm ashamed I ever ate there."
"It's good."
"It's not good. It's not even fresh! They buy it frozen," said Tommy.
"He told me it's fresh," said Sally.
"The fuck it is," said Tommy. "I'm tellin' you . . . they buy it frozen. I see the deliveries comin' in. They buy like six tons a that shit at a clip."
Sally held up his palm. "You just don't appreciate good Italian food. Anyways, we can agree to disagree. I don't want to get into it with you. You never knew how to fuckin' eat. I shouldn't be surprised."
"Whatever," said Tommy. He lit another cigarette. "What, you here to see Harvey?"
"Yeah, is he here?"
Tommy nodded. "He got in an hour ago. He's in the office, sweating the weather. He calls the weather service every ten minutes. Like they're gonna change the forecast, he calls back."
"Business not so good?" asked Sally.
Tommy shrugged. "Ask him yourself."
SALLY FOUND HARVEY looking out the window of his cluttered office. Harvey was a man of medium height with dark curly hair graying slightly around the sideburns and receding from a high forehead. He had bushy black eyebrows and horn-rimmed glasses. He was very tan. Harvey's desk was stacked with bills and invoices and bundles of dinner checks. On the wall, next to a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit calendar, two schedules, and a diploma stating that Harvey was certified to practice dentistry in the state of New York, hung a photograph of him in his white smock, smiling, with his arm around a plump, blond dental assistant.

"Hey, Harve," said Sally.

"Sally, what do you hear about the weather? Last time I heard they said it might be nice," said Harvey.

"I heard rain," said Sally. "They were playing the radio at Frank's."

"Why does it have to rain every weekend?" said Harvey. "Every fucking weekend now. I've never heard such shit."

"Yeah, well—"

Harvey turned and eased himself into an oversize swivel chair. He let out a long sigh. "Sally, I got nothing for you this week. I'm sorry. I'm dying here. It took everything just to make payroll this week. It's getting so the kids here run to the fuckin bank Thursday to cash their checks before they fuckin' bounce."

Sally moved closer to the desk and looked down at Harvey. "You know this makes three weeks. You're three weeks behind here. I mean, where are we going?"

"I don't know what to say. I don't know what to tell you. It's the fuckin' weather. I'm getting killed." Harvey leaned forward and flipped through a Page-a-Day calendar. "I just need a couple of good weekends—a couple of good Friday, Saturday nights, maybe a couple of brunches. I can get right with everybody no problem. I just don't have it right now."

"That's no good," said Sally. "That's no good at all. Some people are going to be real mad I come back there again with no money from you. It looks bad."

"I'm sorry. Really," said Harvey "Three times I come down here," said Sally.

"I know, I know," said Harvey, "I'm doing the best I can."

"I just can't have this," said Sally. "You got me?"

"I'm doing everything I can," said Harvey.

Sally shook his head. "I cant walk back there again and be coming up empty with you."

"I'm doing everything I can," insisted Harvey. "You understand that?" asked Sally.

"I understand," said Harvey.

"Okay, how are we gonna straighten out this problem here that we got?" asked Sally.

"I understand," said Harvey.

"Maybe if you can wait another week," said Harvey.

"Listen," said Sally, raising his voice, "you're not even making the fuckin' vig here and you're talking maybe? You're saying next week? This is not a next week' situation. I like you, Harvey, you're a nice guy. You did nice work that time on my niece's teeth and all. You gave my nephew Tommy a job. I appreciate it. But the way things are . . ."

"How about steaks?" Harvey said hopefully. "I got some beautiful shell steaks down there in the walk-in. I got lobster tails—"

"I don't want any fuckin' steaks," said Sally, his voice rising. "What the fuck am I gonna do with fuckin' steaks? I'm up to my ass in fuckin' steaks anytime I fuckin' want 'em! You've gotta do better than that. I'm not playin' with you here. This is serious. It's three fuckin' weeks. The man wants his money. He wants it regular. You understand where we are here?"

"I just don't know what I can do," said Harvey, looking defeated behind his desk. "I don't know what else I can do."
"I can tell you what we're gonna do," said Sally. "I—me personally—am going to cover you for this week. Out of my own pocket. This week only. This once. And next week . . ."

Sally reached across the desk and grabbed a handful of his cheek. Harvey noticed how the gold Piaget watch on Sally's wrist hung like a charm bracelet over his hand. Then Sally started to bounce his head off the desk, and he could hear his glasses breaking.

Harvey dabbed at his bloody nose with a crumpled tissue. Sally stood across the room examining Harvey's face with a clinical detachment.

"We're not playing around here anymore," he said. "I'm not gonna get jerked off again. No more next weeks' outta you, you lit tie prick. No more I'll do my bests'. Just get me my fucking money Get it on time. Borrow it. Steal from your partners. Go back to pulling fucking teeth if you got to. This is serious. You seen The Godfather, right?"

Harvey nodded.
Harvey stood, head tilted back, in front of the restaurant’s bathroom mirror, pressing a tissue to his nose. He was bleeding from both nostrils and was a little swollen over one eye. He rocked back and forth in front of the mirror saying, "Son of a bitch, son of a bitch." He noticed, from the corner of his eye, that the flowers in the vase by the sink were beginning to wilt. The lilies looked fine. Holding the tissue under his nose with one hand, he turned the vase around with the other so that the irises faced the rear. He took a long piss and saw that the porter had missed a spot in the urinal, and that the white hockey puck had melted down to the size of a Life Saver. He checked the inside of the toilet stall. There was no extra roll of paper.

Harvey left the bathroom, muttering under his breath. He walked across the empty dining room to the ice machine by the bar and filled a dinner napkin with some ice. He held it over his nose.

The interior of the Dreadnaught was fitted out like the lounge of an ocean liner. In fact, the fixtures, the zinc bar, the sconces, the curved banquetttes, even the china and the silver, were from an old cruise ship. Harvey had bought the whole lot at auction. There were seats for forty customers in the back dining room, another twenty in the front cocktail area by the picture window. Two enormous murals, painted in the Social Realist style, ran the length of the restaurant. They depicted brawny, square-jawed dockworkers working on the New York waterfront of the 1930s. The murals matched the restaurant's color scheme, shades of black, gray, and beige, with little highlights of pink, painted in later, to match the tablecloths.

A single skylight, streaked with dirt and lined with silver alarm-system tape, allowed a little sun into the dining room above a lonely potted palm. A thin fluorescent tube ran around the edges of the black ceiling, glowing pink on the banquetttes.

From his position at the bar, Harvey surveyed the room. Few things looked more tawdry than an empty restaurant during daylight hours. A bulb had gone out over the bar. There were scuff marks on the black baseboards, and he noticed that the bar stools needed reupholstering. Harvey tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that it would look better at night.

Back in his office, Harvey picked up the phone and called his old office number. Carol picked up.

"Dr. Rosenberg’s office. Hold one moment please."
Harvey listened to Billy Joel play through the receiver until Carol came back on the line.
"Thank you for holding. How can I help you?"
"Carol, it’s me," he said.
"Harvey, how are you?"
"What, has that jerk got you answering the phones now? Where’s the girl?"
"She’s out sick," said Carol. "I’m helping out."
"Carol, I got a little problem here. I wonder if you can do something for me," said Harvey.
"Yeah, sure. What’s up?"
"Can you stop by the apartment and pick me up my other pair of glasses and maybe a clean shirt and bring them down to the restaurant?"
"I can do that. After work, right?"
"Yeah," said Harvey. "Later. When you finish. I just can't get away till then. A light blue shirt. If there's no blue, a pink."
"What happened?" asked Carol.
"I was in—I had a little accident," said Harvey. "I hit my head."
"Oh, my poor baby," said Carol. "Is it serious? What happened?"
"It’s those low ceilings in the kitchen. They got all those pots and pans hanging off of there. I walked into a saucepot."
"Oh my god! Are you sure you're alright? Should you see somebody?"
"No, no, no. It's nothing."
"You should really talk to those boys down there in the kitchen. Somebody could be seriously hurt. You could get sued or something."
"It’s okay, really."
"Do you want me to come right down?"
"No. After work is fine. I just need the glasses and a shirt. I'll see you . . . what, around six or seven? We can have
a drink and maybe some dinner down here. I'll get them to make us up something nice.
"You got it, baby," said Carol.
"You have your key?"
"Of course, Doctor!" said Carol.

Harvey sat at his desk and looked up at the wall clock over the door. It was a quarter to four. He pressed the intercom button on the telephone, "Michael, pick up. Pick up, Michael."

The chef picked up. "Yeah?"
"Is the bartender in?" asked Harvey.
"He's changing," said the chef.
"What about Stephanie? She's early person tonight."
"She called before," said the chef, without inflection. "She said she's gonna be late."
"Thanks for letting me know. How late?"
"A few minutes," said the chef. "Head shots."
"Let me know when she comes in," said Harvey.
"Should I send her up?"
"No, just let me know. I want to know if I got somebody on the floor. Cheryl's due in at five forty-five. And the busboy. What's his name?"
"Hector?"
"That's it."
"Cheryl will be in early. It's chicken pot pie for the shaft meal. She loves chicken pot pie," said the chef.
"I have to go out for a little while in about an hour or so. Barry is off today, so watch the store for me, okay?"
"Okay," said the chef.

Harvey punched off the intercom and pressed down for an outside line. He dialed and heard two rings and a series of clicks on the other end. Finally, someone picked up.

A man's voice said, "Hello?"
"It's me," said Harvey. "This is Moses."
"Yes?" said the voice. "What is it you want?"
"I have to talk to my friend. As soon as possible," said Harvey.
"Is this an emergency?" asked the voice.
"Yes, it's a fuckin' emergency," said Harvey, losing his composure for a second. He paused and took a deep breath. "Alright, maybe not an emergency. But I've got to talk to the guy. Things are getting bad here. I got hurt today. Just now. I think he broke my fuckin' nose."
"Okay," said the voice. "Stay calm. You can meet him in... one hour. At the place. You know which place?"
"Yes, I know it," said Harvey.
"One hour then," said the voice.

Harvey hung up the phone and called his ex-wife.
Harvey stood out front of Village Cigars at the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue. The evening sky was filling with clouds. A line of Lotto players pushed past Harvey and into the store. Commuters scurried by, making for the subway entrances. Looking across the street at the Riviera Cafe, Harvey watched the busboys breaking down the cafe tables in anticipation of rain. A dirty, barefoot old man with sores on his face shook an empty cardboard coffee cup at Harvey and asked him for change. He shook his head and the man moved on to the Lotto players.

A cherry-red Alfa Romeo two-seater pulled up to the curb on Seventh Avenue. The driver rolled down the window on the passenger side and called out to Harvey, "Hop in, Doc!"

The driver was a heavyset man with dark hair, thinning on top, and a carefully groomed mustache. He wore a blue-and-red-striped polo shirt, open at the neck, and a tiny gold crucifix on a thin gold chain. He leaned across the passenger seat and opened the door.

"Come on! Get in!" he said.

Harvey slid into the black leather bucket seat just as it began to rain. "Jesus Christ," said Harvey. "Is this your car?"

"Nope," said the driver. "Perks, man, perks. They say we should blend. I'm blending."

"They let you people have cars like this? This is where my tax dollars are going?" said Harvey.

The driver laughed, "Since when have you been paying your taxes?"

Harvey sat silently for a moment as the Alfa turned right. Another turn on Hudson and they were headed uptown in the early rush hour traffic. "I could have been killed today. Right there in my fuckin' office, he smashes my face in. Look at me . . . He could have killed me. He broke my glasses."

"It doesn't look too bad," said the driver, sneaking a quick look as he steered the car between a bus and a delivery truck. "They said you got yourself a broken nose or something. It doesn't look broken to me."

"I think it might be broken," insisted Harvey.

The driver pointed at his own nose. "That's what a broken nose looks like. You put ice on it?"

Harvey nodded.

"It looks a little swolled-up maybe," said the driver. "But it doesn't look broken."

"It hurts," said Harvey.

It was pouring rain now. They pulled up at a stoplight, and the driver turned and looked at Harvey. "So what happened today?"

"He wanted money. It's Friday," said Harvey.

"So you gave him some?" asked the driver.

"I didn't have it to give," said Harvey. "I had to pay the liquor. You have to pay them or they put you on COD. You know what happens when they put you on COD? Once that happens, I may as well close the fucking doors."

"Harvey," said the driver, putting the Alfa into first gear as the light changed. "You are pissing me off. Our office disperses you certain funds. You, in turn, are to disperse those funds in the precise fucking manner we agreed. You are not supposed to pay your liquor bills with that money. You are not supposed to pay rent, or make payroll, or buy gifts for your bimbos. We've had this conversation before. You are supposed to give the nice Mr. Pitera his money when he asks for it." Seeing a long line of green lights in front of him, the driver quickly shifted gears and raced to make them.

"I'm sorry, Al," said Harvey. "I'm just trying to stay afloat till Labor Day. I'm jus' tryin' to pay my bills here. Tryin' to run a fuckin' business. Tryin' to make a fuckin' living. And it's getting damn near fuckin' impossible."

"That's just too bad, buddy," said Al, lighting a Marlboro 100 with the lighter from the dashboard. "But it sure beats spreading your cheeks up at Greenhaven, don't it?"

Al gave Harvey an affectionate pat on the left knee and then down shifted into second gear as he swung the Alfa east, heading toward the park.

"Now don't pout," he said. "We'll take a nice drive in the park. I got a stack of cassettes there, the previous owner was a Stones fan. Is that a break? We'll have a nice drive and you can tell me your troubles. We can go over a few things together, listen to a few tunes. You just relax and tell Uncle Al all about it."
"Whining," said Al. "As usual."

"What's his problem?" asked Sullivan, a fiftyish, athletic-looking man with a full head of snow white hair and a ruddy complexion.

"He got a boo-boo on his nose today. I had to kiss it and make it better. Sally Wig is unhappy with him."

"What's he unhappy about?"

"Harvey's behind with the money," sighed Al.

"Our money. What's he doing with it?"

"Fuck if I know. He says he's paying bills," said Al. "I think the guy's maybe taking things a little too seriously."

"Like what is he taking seriously?" asked Sullivan, annoyed.

"He's got delusions of grandeur. The guy thinks he's really going to make a go of the restaurant. You should hear him talk about it. He thinks he wants to be a success at it. I have to say, I was hesitant to disabuse him of the notion."

"And why is that?" said Sullivan, one bushy white eyebrow raised.

"Listen . . . We all know how Harvey got in the restaurant business. We put up his end, for Chrissakes. He knows that. We kept him out of the pen, made his problem go away and all. He's a snitch. He knows he's a snitch and he knows he's our snitch. It's just, I think he's beginning to think that if he makes some good cases for us he's gonna somehow get to keep the restaurant. I don't want to rub his nose in it."

Sullivan leaned over his government-issue desk and clasped his hands together. "I really don't see why we should give a shit one way or the other what he thinks. I mean, handling an informant is all about control. You know that. It seems to me, the way I read it, the tighter control we have, and the more he knows it, the better. We own him. He knows it . . . So what? He's hardly in a position to haggle."

Al settled back in his chair and smiled. "We want some indictments, right? We want a lot of indictments. More the merrier . . . This guy, given a little care and feeding, can give us some. But, I want everything to smell right. He's supposed to be a frightened, desperate little scumbag restaurateur, right? Well, that's exactly what he is right now. I want him to try and make a go of it. Can't blame the guy for trying. He's sure not gonna be practicing dentistry anymore—"

"I certainly hope not," interjected Sullivan.

"Sure, he's fucking us a little bit," continued Al. "He's fucking the wise guys. He's fucking his ex-wife and his girlfriend, and everybody else for all I know. Sounds like an amazingly lifelike re-creation of a frightened, desperate scumbag restaurateur to me. So the guy screws us for a little money. Good. He gets in a little deeper with the Wig. Maybe Sally gets mad and is kind enough to commit a few more felonies for us. Maybe on tape. I'm even wondering, maybe Harvey can get a knock-down loan from the Brooklyn people. They've been coming around, I understand. Acting real friendly, offering their services."

"They haul his garbage now, right?"

"Yeah. Maybe he borrows a little money from outside Sally's crew. That should send Sally right up the wall. I mean, they want to help, maybe we should let them help. You got anything against prosecuting people from Brooklyn?"

Sullivan smiled. "Okay, okay . . . We'll let this go one time with the money. But you're gonna have to get him on a tighter leash in the future. He can fuck everybody else for their money, but I don't want him playing around with ours. I've personnel and automobiles and technical assets diverted full-time on this. I've got two observation posts sucking up overtime and rent and resources, I've got the clock running on the Title Threes . . . Sooner or later, I'm gonna get a phone call asking me what the fuck I've got to show for it."

"Right this minute, we've got enough for bribery and extortion. We've got probable cause for some more Title Threes . . . We've got people on tape making usurious loans, arranging kickbacks. Things are progressing."

"I'm looking for more than that . . . Racketeering. That's what this office is interested in, goddammit. I want some of that good ol' 'continuing criminal enterprise' on tape. I want more than Sally Fucking Pitera . . . I want his whole crew. I want Charlie Wagons. I want Danny Testa and all their little helpers. The whole bunch. I don't want them for some diddly-shit loansharking. At the end of all this, I want to be able to seize assets and salt the ground so nothing grows there ever again."

"How about the Brooklyn thing?" asked Al. "They're offering."

money from them. A few thousand. He shouldn't go overboard. Let's see what happens."

"It'll make Sally angry," said Al. "And his people."

"Good, good," said Sullivan. "Tell him not to tell them right away. It'll give us something to tickle the wires with later. Maybe we'll get some interesting conversations for a change."

"We don't want to start a war," said Al.

"Who's talking about starting a war? Hopefully, by the time they find out, they'll be well on their way to a meeting with the grand jury."

"Harvey will have to testify," said Al.

"So, he testifies. We get him into the program and he can go off to East Buttfuck somewhere and write his memoirs."
Tommy sipped his coffee in the empty kitchen. The night porters, Big Mohammed and Little Mohammed, had finished their work; he could hear them arguing in Arabic in the changing room. Otherwise, the kitchen was quiet.

This was his favorite part of the day. The cutting boards were rubbed clean and white; the stainless steel work tables and reach-in refrigerators gleamed. There were no other cooks due in until two-thirty. A dishwasher would be in at noon to help him with the scut work and to catch up on the pots. Tommy would be undisturbed until then, free to cook at his own pace and in his own way. He went over the prep list taped to the reach-in door by the sauté station.

"TOMMY!" it said, in the chef's jagged, block lettering. (The chef loved exclamation points.)

Veal stock not reduced enuf... FIX! Also: Roast Chix...
25# culls coming... Cook and shuck for pasta Tonite.
Need Sauce for Sword... Any Ideas??
Also: Gaufrette Potatoes and Pommes Annas (sorry)

Tommy hated to make Pommes Annas.
There was more:

Fill bottles with red pepper vin. and Cilantro Sauce.
Cut Fish—One Sword Puppy (make sure it's a puppy!) and one
Salmon coming in. Sword cut 7 oz. Salmon usual.
SOUP!! 86 the old shit. Use squid from walk-in, any odds and ends in reach-ins. DO NOT USE SCALLOPS!
Mushie Sauce: Use portobellos, black trumpets, dried cepes. Step on it with regular mushies. Use demi after
reduced. AND PORT WINE!
Use any scraggly veg trimmings in veal stock . . .
Have DW pick over mussels when he comes in. Also shellfish.
One Pine Island Oyster and One Cherry coming in ... 
There's Veg cut already in walk-in ... DO NOT MAKE!
When Ricky and Mel come in, have them clean out boxes, throw out Mystery Items. I'll be in around 2:30.

Tommy looked at the last line. When the chef said he'd be in around two-thirty, he meant maybe three-thirty, or even four o'clock. "Mel" was the name given to any new, inexperienced cook. It was taken from the Italian term mal carne, meaning bad meat. The latest Mel was the new garde-manger, real name Ted, or something like that. Like all the other Mels, he was an extern from the Culinary Institute, spending a semester working in the real world for school credit. He was having what was sarcastically referred to as a Learning Experience, meaning he worked his ass off and the restaurant got some motivated labor dirt cheap. He'd shown up, like the others, freshly scrubbed, in his own new uniform, with the standard-issue black-vinyl knife roll-up under one arm and a copy of The Professional Chef under the other. But he worked like a Trojan, didn't bitch if somebody asked him to peel garlic or make hollandaise in bulk for brunch. Tommy considered asking Mel to shuck the lobsters but thought better of it.

The bell at the delivery entrance rang. Tommy walked down the narrow hallway and pushed open the heavy trap doors to the street. It was the fish delivery. A short, unshaven driver wearing a leather truss, work gloves, and rubber boots came in with a long cardboard box heaped with crushed ice. He dropped the box at Tommy's feet, a thin stream of water from the melting ice running out onto the floor. Tommy reached inside, first removing a wheel of swordfish, then an Atlantic salmon. He weighed both on the digital scale atop an ancient chest freezer, gave the salmon a perfunctory press with his fingers, checked the eyes and gills, and signed the invoice. He gave the driver the white copy and spiked the yellow on a nail on a stack of shellfish tags. Then he returned to the kitchen.

Tommy could hear Barry, the manager, in the upstairs waiter station steaming milk for cappuccino. He finished his coffee and shouted "SALAAM" to the two Mohammeds as they passed through the kitchen on their way out the door. He filled up the steam table with water and, his knees resting on the clean rubber floor mats behind the line, reached under and lit the burners. He switched on the range hoods and fired up the Frialator, the ovens, and one side of the grill. In a nonstick pan, he sautéed some chorizo and chopped scallions left over from the night before, then quickly beat in some eggs with a rubber spatula. He added a little fresh cracked pepper with a few turns of a steel
peppermill, slid the eggs onto a salad plate and, standing there at his workstation, ate quickly. When he was finished, he put the empty plate and the fork down on the prewash area of the dishwasher.

Moving on to his mise-en-place, he collected the pots he would need from the overhead racks and neatly arranged the house knives next to his cutting board. He filled a stainless steel crock with hot water and dropped a handful of male and female spoons, a pair of tongs, and a spatula in it. He got a stack of clean kitchen towels from the changing room and lay them down on a shelf over his workstation.

He went in the walk-in and hauled out a tall plastic bucket filled with veal stock, then poured the stock into a double-weight Crusader-Wear stockpot and started reducing it. He then went back to the walk-in and returned with a buspan of wriggling, one-clawed lobsters. He poured two quarts of white wine into a stockpot and added some bay leaves, some peppercorns, a bit of crushed red pepper, whole cloves, a sprig of raggedy fresh thyme. He found some vegetable trimmings in the sauté box, a drying half-onion, a few wrinkled carrots, some limp celery. He threw them in along with some leek tops and a head of garlic. He put a sheet pan over the pot and waited for the wine to cook down a bit and suck up the flavor from the spices and vegetables. He went back to the walk-in, wondering how much mileage he put in every day on his trips back and forth, then returned with a bucket of fish fumet and a bucket of peeled potatoes. The food-splattered radio cassette player was blaring an old Modern Lovers tune, "She Cracked," and Tommy bounced around in time to the music unembarrassed, as he was alone in the kitchen. "She cracked . . . I'm sad . . . But I won't. . ." he sang along. He rubbed a few red peppers with olive oil and put them on the grill for red pepper vinaigrette.

Tommy turned back to the frantic lobsters. He emptied them out of the buspan and into the boiling white wine. "Sorry guys," he said. "I'll all be over in a minute." He listened to them scraping their claws against the metal. After a few moments, the noise died down.

When the lobsters were cooked, he poured them into a colander in the pot sink and ran cold water over them.

He reduced some port wine for the mushroom sauce. Reaching into a cold bucket of shallots, he found there were dangerously few. His hand still wet, he started a night prep list on a piece of notepaper from the chef's clipboard, writing "Chop Shallots!!" He put some dried cepes in warm water to soak and, with a paring knife, trimmed away the gills and stems from a few handfuls of portobellos.

The old surf instrumental "Pipeline" by the Chantays came on the radio. Tommy smiled and decided it was an auspicious moment to begin the soup. He found his favorite pot in a corner under a work table where he had hidden it the day before and put it on the range. He poured some olive oil into the pot, minced some garlic and simmered it until transparent. He wanted to play air guitar along with the music, since no one was looking, but instead peeled the onions and chopped them into a fine dice. Remembering the red peppers on the grill, he spun around, grabbed them with the tongs, put them in a stainless steel bowl, and covered them with plastic wrap to free the skin. He tossed the diced onions into the soup pot with the garlic and sprinkled in some cumin in after. Soon the kitchen began to fill with the smell of garlic, onions, and cumin. He added the cut squid, chasing it around with a large steel paddle. He rooted around in the grillman's reach-in for a few minutes, coming up with some swordfish trimmings, a little lobster meat, and, wonder of wonders, a full crock of cherrystone clams, already shucked. He strained the clam juice in with the fish fumet that was already heating on a back burner and added the clams to the squid, along with the lobster and swordfish. When the fumet was hot, he poured it into the soup pot, added two cans of crushed tomato, a couple spoons of paste, and a gallon of red wine. He cut ten of the peeled potatoes into large dice and threw them in the pot, too. He finished the whole dark, wonderful mess with some crushed red pepper and a little tabasco sauce, and left the pot to simmer.

He lit a cigarette and felt around under the station for the chef's ashtray from the night before. He couldn't find it at first. He looked through the tiled speed rack, pushing aside the greasy bottles of Tabasco, olive oil, white wine, brandy, Worcestershire, rice wine vinegar, and lemon juice. He finally found the ashtray on an overhead shelf, tucked behind the chefs $450 custom-made Japanese knife in its rosewood scabbard. There was a small glassine envelope peeking out of the scabbard, and Tommy slipped it carefully out from next to the knife. The envelope had a colorful, rubber-stamped image of a toilet on it. He quickly rolled up a bill from his wallet, peeled back the tape on the envelope, and after a quick look in both directions, took a short, measured sniff of the bitter contents.

"Oooohhhhh, baby" he said out loud.

As always the chef showed up late: around three-thirty. He went straight for his knife, disappearing back into the changing room for a good five minutes before he reappeared in his whites, looking noticeably refreshed. Tommy didn't say anything. The chef tuned the radio to a classic-rock station, lit a cigarette, and drifted upstairs to the bar, returning a few moments later with a shaker glass of CocaCola and ice.

"What's the soup?" he asked Tommy.
"Check it out," said Tommy, proudly, "Portugee Seafood Chowder."
The chef lifted the lid off the still-simmering chowder. "That smells fuckin' great. If I think I can hold anything
down, I might have a bowl for breakfast. You get the lobster squared away?"
Tommy nodded. "Yeah. And I hated every minute of it. We should get the dishwasher to do that shit."
"The dishwasher'll throw half the fuckin' lobster meat in the trash. They don't get the knuckles. And he gets upset.
He's not too crazy about getting involved with shellfish. I think it's a religious thing."
"I got a fish sauce together," said Tommy. "Mustard tarragon vinaigrette with crispy leek garnish. That okay?"
"Yeah, that's fine," said the chef. "An oldie but goodie."
"I haven't cut the leeks yet," said Tommy. "I wondered if you'd let me use your knife. The house knives just mash
them to shit."
"Looks like you were at my knife already. Half the fuckin' bag is gone," said the chef.
"It was half empty when I found it. I just did a tiny poke," said Tommy.
"That was my wake-up, man," whispered the chef. "You don't need the shit. I need it."
"Now I gotta go east," said the chef, jerking his head to the east.
"They got nothing uptown, it's too hot in the forties. I was gonna go over later, but now I gotta go sooner. I don't
want to turn into a fuckin' pumpkin halfway through dinner."
"Really, I didn't do a lot," said Tommy.
"Now I gotta go over there," said the chef.
"Why don't you just send a busboy later. Hector's coming in in an hour," suggested Tommy.
"I thought about that," said the chef. "I don't like doing that anymore. It's not too cool. What if he gets popped?
They'll probably deport the guy. On top a that, you know Hector. I sent him over there a few times, now he thinks he
can shake me down for a steak dinner for his shaft meal. Can't you see Hector, the fuckin' busboy, sittin' up there,
munchin' on a twenty-ounce sirloin and all the waitrons and the manager are trying to choke down their shepherd's
pie? Doesn't look too good. On top of that, the son of a bitch eats his steak well done. I got principles."
"So you're going over now?" asked Tommy.
"Yeah, can you set up my station?"
"Yeah, sure." He hesitated. "Well, since you're going, can you pick me up a couple?"
"You have any money?" asked the chef.
"Enough for two bags."
"You got twenty extra till next week? I'm short."
"Alright," said Tommy, reaching for his wallet. "But I gotta have it back."
"No problem," said the chef. Though Tommy knew it would be a problem.
"So, you're gonna get four?" Tommy asked.
"Two for me, two for you," said the chef. He turned and headed for the door.
Two men sat in a graffiti-covered step van across the street from the Dreadnaught Grill. The dashboard was covered with empty coffee containers and candy wrappers. The men watched the white-clad figure emerge from the trap doors to the kitchen and head east on Spring Street.

"Who's that?" asked Detective Dudziak.
"That's Tommy Pagano," said Detective Rizzo, sitting behind the wheel.
"Yeah?"
"That don't look like the nephew to me," said Dudziak, fumbling for his scope in the glove compartment.
"That's him," said Rizzo. "That's the nephew."
"You got the pictures?"
"Left 'em onna breakfast table this morning. Kids were late for school.Forgot." Rizzo started the engine.
"What are you doin'?" asked Dudziak.
"I'm thinkin'," said Rizzo.
"You're sure that's him?"
"I'm tellin' you, that's him. That's Tommy. I remember the face."
Dudziak consulted a clipboard on his lap. "Where the fuck is he goin? Says here it's the middle of his shift, he's not due off till nine. What's he doin'?"
"I wanna follow him."
"Maybe he's runnin' an errand . . ."
"Maybe he is. Maybe he's runnin' an errand for Uncle Sally."
"Maybe he's runnin' out for a head of lettuce."
"It would be nice to find out."
"What?"
"C'mon," said Rizzo, "let's find out."
"Leave the post?"
"He who dares, wins."
"Oh, shit . . ."
"If he's not doin' nothin' we don't have to tell nobody. If he is, great. I'm tired a sittin' here just lookin' at a fuckin' restaurant. Maybe we got somethin' here."
"So we follow him?"
"We follow him. Maybe we get lucky."

The two detectives followed the chef in the van down Spring Street.

"Oh, man . . . It's nice to get a breeze in here," said Rizzo. At Bowery, the chef headed uptown. The van dropped back, waiting for him to gain some distance.
"Don't lose him," said Dudziak.
"I got him, I got him," said Rizzo.
At Houston Street, the chef turned right, heading east.
"Where the fuck is he goin?" asked Dudziak.
"I dunno, maybe he's got a girlfriend. Little love in the afternoon . . ."
The chef crossed onto the uptown side of Houston at Avenue A. Rizzo had to make a U-turn. The chef turned right at Fourth Street, once more heading east.
"That's Neverneverland in there," said Dudziak. "He's lookin' to cop."
"Look," said Rizzo. "He's slowin' down, he's lookin' . . ."
The chef crossed Avenue B, walking slowly through the suddenly crowded streets, headed for Avenue C. Detective Rizzo pulled the van over to the side of the street and took the scope from Dudziak. He peered through the lens. The chef was exchanging words with a thin, young male Hispanic wearing a baseball cap. The young man held a short length of plywood; he motioned the chef toward an abandoned tenement. The chef looked up and down Fourth Street a couple of times and then ducked quickly under a corrugated metal barrier that didn't quite block the entrance to the tenement.
"Bingo!" said Rizzo.
"What?" exclaimed Dudziak. "He score?"
"This is just too good to be true," said Rizzo. "They gonna love our asses for this. We're gonna catch him dirty..."
"I don't know about this..."
"They are gonna love our asses for this at Strike Force! We score... We score big time." He imitated a cheering crowd. "Yessss! Two days on the job and we score. Are we a pair a swingin' dicks or what?"
"What's he coppin'? Crack?"
"Better," said Rizzo. "Much better. Tommy's a fuckin' dope fiend! I love it!"
"We better call in," said Dudziak. "We better call in before we do anythin'. Are we gonna do anything?"
"I dunno, I dunno. I'll call in a minute. I just wanna savor the moment. I just wanna sit here and enjoy myself for a sec. Tommy's a dope fiend. It don't say nothin' about that inna file. This is a break. Tommy Pagano. Dope Fiend. I'm gettin' a fuckin' hard-on just thinkin' 'bout it."
"He could come outta there any fuckin' minute. You better call in."
"He ain't goin' nowhere," said Rizzo. "I know that spot. They sell the Check-Mate in there. That's one of the populuh spots down here, man. They usually got forty, fifty skells lined up in there. Tommy's gonna be busy in there for a while."
"So, what? You thinkin' a grabbin' him he comes out?"
"Damn right. You know he's gonna be dirty. Alright... I'll make the call."

Ten minutes later, Detective Rizzo returned from the pay phone.
"They said we can grab him," he said.
"Who'd you talk to?"
"Some AUSA, Lipman, I think his name is. He said we can grab him."
"What about Al? The Fibby... He's not there? You ask him? He's supposed to be the supervisor."
"They beeped him. Lipman said it's okay to go ahead. He said grab him when he comes out. We bring him down to the precinct and twist his nuts for him. The feds'll pile on later."
"He's gonna give up his uncle for a few dime bags? Is that the idea?"
"Who knows? Who knows? Greaseballs are funny about their people doin' smack. Tommy's gonna hafta think about that, sittin' there in the interrogation room. He's gonna hafta think about how his uncle's gonna feel about that, him doin' that babania. Tommy might worry a little bit about that. Maybe he can stand up for the bust. But Uncle Sally's not gonna be happy. That's the kinda motivation makes cases."
"So we grab him," said Detective Dudziak.
"Yes we do."

Out on Fourth Street the chef moved at a brisk pace back toward the restaurant. He heard footsteps behind him, closing fast. Thinking he was about to get mugged, he broke into a trot. He crossed the street, reaching into his pants pocket as he picked up speed. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a man running after him. He put the thin bundle of glassine bags in his mouth. The man looked like a cop, he realized; he was too heavy to be a mugger. Heart racing, the chef broke left for an abandoned lot connecting Third and Fourth streets. He saw another man coming straight at him. He considered swallowing the bags, but his mouth was too dry. He felt his knees weakening as he stumbled through the lot. Suddenly there was an arm around his neck. He felt himself thrown to the ground with somebody's weight on top of him. The arm tightened around his neck. A hand squeezed his cheeks. Yet another hand yanked his head back. Somebody was pinching his nose.
"Spit it out! Spit it out!" somebody was yelling.
The next thing he knew, he was being handcuffed.
THE LUMPY-LOOKING waitress with the nose ring (Tommy could never remember her name) picked up her appetizers and headed for the dining room. Tommy wiped the sweat out of his eyes and looked nervously at the clock.

"Party of twelve," said Cheryl, one of the prettiest waitresses. She was dark, with brown hair cut to the shoulders, large, almond-shaped eyes set wide apart, and an easy, sardonic smile. She straightened her bow tie and leaned her elbows onto the slide. "Walk-ins . . . what can I say?"

"Fuck!" said Tommy, bony . . .

Tommy started to say something else but Stephanie, another waitress, just as pretty as Cheryl but taller, crowded in next to her, a cigarette dangling from her lips.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Could you not smoke over the fucking food—please?" said Tommy, turning his back to the two girls and giving a pan full of shrimp a shake.

"What's his problem?" Tommy heard Stephanie say.

"Big table of walk-ins," said Cheryl. "Your station."

"Great. I need the money," said Stephanie, leaving her cigarette still burning on top of the stainless steel shelves, between stacks of plates. She ran up to the dining room, her Cuban heels clattering loudly on the wood steps.

"Where's your expeditor?" said Cheryl, lowering her voice.

"Chef's stepped out for a minute," said Tommy.

It was after six when the chef returned. Service had started an hour earlier, and the board was filled with dinner dupes.

"What happened to you?" said Tommy, irritably. "We're fuckin' swamped."

The chef looked haggard and dirty. "I got robbed," he said quietly, so Ricky couldn't hear him over the exhaust fan. "Three guys got me, comin' outta the place."

Tommy positioned a lobster claw in a big bowl of bouillabaise, then smeared rouille on two croutons and put them on opposite ends of the rim. "Cheryl! Pick up!" he yelled, putting the steaming bowl up on the shelf.

"What did they get?" he asked the chef.

"They got everything. They had a fuckin' box cutter at my neck. What was I gonna do?" said the chef, annoyed.

"Bummer," said Tommy, watching Cheryl take the bouillabaise and a bowl of steamed mussels off the shelf. He took down a dupe and spiked it.

"They got it all," said the chef, stepping behind the line. "I had it and they took it. Sorry."

"All of it," said the chef, stepping behind the line. "I had it and they took it. Sorry."

Tommy wiped the rim of a plate with a kitchen towel. "Are you gonna make it through the night?"

The chef shook his head. "No way. I'm sick already. I'll hit Harvey for an advance later and maybe hit Ninth Avenue or the Upper East after service. You wanna go again?"

"Fuck it. I'll get drunk instead. It's free."

"Sorry about the money," said the chef, looking pained.

The chef took his place at the sauté station. Tommy moved over to the grill and scrutinized a long row of fluttering tickets hanging from clothespins over the outgoing food orders.

"Pick up snapper!" yelled Tommy, leaning on the call buttons. Cheryl's chin and breasts appeared under the stacks of plates. She leaned into the narrow opening over the shelf.

"She doesn't want the head," she said. "She says she doesn't want it looking at her."

"Cheryl," said the chef. "I'm lookin' at the ticket right here and I don't see anything where it says 'head off.'"

Cheryl gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, I vegged out. I forgot. Can't you just whack the head off for me now? This woman is a bitch on wheels. She'll just send it back."

"Take the head off," said the chef, turning to Tommy. Tommy slid the cooked red snapper off the plate and onto the cutting board. He reached to his right and came over with a wide, carbon-steel blade, severing the head from the body in one motion.

"Not with my knife!" howled the chef too late. "Not with my fuckin' knife!"


The chef ignored the orders on the board and picked up his knife. He held it at eye level and examined the blade.
There was a tiny indentation in the soft metal at the heel. "Shit!" he exclaimed.

"Shit," said Tommy.

"My baby," said the chef. "You fuckin' mutilated my baby."

"Can't you work that out with a stone?" asked Tommy.

"Where's my snapper?" said Cheryl.

Tommy coated the bottom of a clean plate with beurre blanc and gently lowered the headless snapper on top. Using two plastic squeeze bottles, he drew quick abstract flowers on the plate around the fish, then pulled the tip of a paring knife through the design, making artful swirls through the beurre. He spooned a dot of red pepper relish onto the fish and put the plate up on the shelf for Cheryl.

"You can fix it, right?" he asked the chef, who was still brooding over his knife.

"Yeah, yeah, I can fix it," said the chef. "Please, please don't fuck with my knife unless I tell you, okay? Please?"

"Sorry," said Tommy.

"Where's Stephanie?" shouted the chef, to nobody in particular. "This food is getting cold! Pick it up! It's piling up back here!"

"She just took out a cold order," said Tommy.

"So send it with somebody else," said the chef. "The shits dyin'." He pounded on the call button. A new waitress with a nose ring arrived.

"What do you want?" she said.

"What I want," said the chef, "is for somebody to pick up this fuckin' food for me. This. Will you take this out to A-seven for me? If you would be so kind?" He mopped his brow. His nose was running.

"And can you bring me a Heineken when you come back?" asked Tommy.

"I'll get it for you," said Cheryl, back at the shelf. "Chef? You want something?"

"Gimme a Coke," said the chef.

"Ricky?" asked Cheryl.

Ricky put down a basket of gaufrette potatoes filled with pommes soufflées and pushed a few sweaty strands of blond hair off his face. "Rockin Roll," he said.

"One Heineken, one Coke, one Rolling Rock," said Cheryl. "How about the dishwashers?"

"Yeah," said the chef, "Bring 'em a couple a Cokes and a few packets of sugar. They like extra sugar in it."

"That's fuckin' disgusting," said Cheryl. She turned and headed out the kitchen doors.

"Man," said the chef, "I'd like to suck on her ass till her head caves in."

Tommy gave him a sour look and laid two pieces of center-cut swordfish on the grill, brushing them with garlic and pepper oil. A few minutes later, Cheryl returned with the drinks. She handed Tommy his Heineken first.

"There's a call for you on oh-two-two-seven," she said.

"Me?" asked Tommy.

"Yeah. Barry says it's for you," she said.

"I'll get it in the office," said Tommy. He stepped out from behind the line and jogged back to the chef's cramped office. He sat down on an upended milk crate, picked up the phone, and pressed the blinking button for 0227.

"Hello," he said.

"It's me," said Sally. "No names."

"What is it? I'm busy," sighed Tommy.

"I gotta see you. Tonight."

"Tonight? What for? What do you gotta see me about?"

"I'll tell you what I gotta see you about when I see you," said Sally.

"So, what—are you gonna swing by here later?"

"No," said Sally, "I'll meet you next door at the Count's."

Tommy groaned. "Don't do this to me. Does it hafta be there?"

"I'm fuckin' hungry. And I'm pressed for time here. I'm in a fuckin' hurry and I got somethin' else I gotta do over there. Kill two birds with one stone," said Sally.

"Don't make me go over there," said Tommy. "I'm gonna have to talk to Sonny I go over there."

"Listen," said Sally, curtly, "I've gotta meet a guy over there. Come by around ten, ten-thirty. You're outta there by then, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, soon's the rush is over. You sure it can't be here?"

"No," said Sally. "I'll see you later." He hung up.
THE COUNT'S VILLA NOVA RESTAURANT was everything Tommy hated in the world, all in one room. Bad food, bad music, and bad company. It was Embarrassment Central, made worse by the fact that he knew the Count, knew people that hung out there.

It was a big glass box with a bright green awning. The inside was all green carpeting and brass railings and mirrors. The restaurant was frequented by hordes of blue-haired tourists who chewed with their mouths open and left 10 percent tips, as well as a smattering of local wise guys from Sally's crew, enjoying the benefits of their investment. The place was always packed with groups of theater-goers who came over to Soho in their buses after some off-off-Broadway show; came over to see the Count, whom they remembered from that TV show, the comedy about the vampire who's really kind of a nice guy, looking after the cute kid, that little boy, what was his name?

The Count still got work. Whenever they shot a gangster movie of the week or a cop show in New York and they needed an authentic-looking Mediterranean-type wise guy, they'd call the Count. Any time you needed a somewhat lovable shylock, a huggable hit man to dress up a scene, somebody to say "dis and dat" and "youse guys" and "yeah, boss" like he meant it, the Count was your man.

God knows, thought Tommy, standing outside the front door, he certainly dresses the part. Twenty years playing exaggerated wise guys since his vampire show got canceled had spurred the Count to new heights of cartoonish wise-guy attire, a hideous overblown version of the people Tommy had been around, in one way or another, his whole life. Tonight, the Count wore a bright red sport coat, shirt open mid-chest, and gold chains. And of course, he had the watch, the pinky ring, the white patent leather shoes, the cheap, pleated slacks buckling under his gut.

Tommy looked up at the drawing on the awning of the Count's profile with his vampire cape drawn up around his ears. He sighed loudly and opened the front door. The Count, recognizing Tommy at once, came out from behind the cash register to greet him.

"Tommy, baby! How are ya? I ain't seen you in fuckin' ages," he said. "How's it hangin'?" He reached down to goose Tommy, but Tommy avoided the Count's wrinkled hand.

"How you doin', Sonny," said Tommy.

"Beautiful. I'm doin' beautiful . . . You see me on the tube last night? I was on that cop show, Perps, you see that?"

"No, I missed it. I was workin','" said Tommy.

"So, how's your mother," said the Count. "You son of a bitch, I never see you aroun' no more."

"She's good, she's good," said Tommy.

"Say I said hello for me, will ya? I been meaning to send her over somethin', some food or somethin'. Jesus, Tommy, it's been fuckin' years . . . What are you doin' over there? Sally said you the chef over there, is that right?"

"I'm the sous-chef," said Tommy, winking.

"Well," said the Count, "Not for long, right, Tommy? One a these days you make your move, you'll be the one runnin' things, right?" He clapped Tommy on the shoulder and winked at him.

"So," said Tommy, eager to change the subject, "How's things, how's business?"

"You know," said the Count, "Usual bullshit. Your uncle's here, right over there inna corner table, with Skinny."

Tommy gulped. He hadn't known about Skinny.

"You gonna eat somethin', Tommy?" asked the Count.

"I don't know, I ate at work."

"Oooh!" blurted the Count, disappointed. "You should come over for dinner. I ain't seen you over here since we opened. You were here for the opening, right? You was here with that lady a yours, what was her name? Helen?"

"Ellen," said Tommy.

"Right, Ellen. Ellen. Beautiful girl. Where you hidin' her?"

"She went out to L.A.," said Tommy.

"Actress, right?" said the Count, nodding wisely. "All these broads are actresses, now. Well, plenty more where that came from, right?" He winked again.

"Yeah, well . . ."


"Pretty busy," said Tommy "You know how it is. Summer."

"I know, I know. At least we get the tourists. People remember the show. You know . . ."

"They keep me pretty busy."
"Still, you gotta make time for your friends. I see Sally alla fuckin' time. Still bouncin' aroun' with the same guys. You, I never see. I seen you goin' in and out next door, that's it."

"Gotta keep an eye on the store," said Tommy.

"You should eat here," said the Count. "I oughta be insulted."

"I haven't seen you over at my place either, Sonny. So don't bust my balls too bad. I been busy, you know how it is," said Tommy.

The Count smiled. "I never get outta this fuckin' place. I turn aroun' for a second, they robbin' me blind. I gotta be here every fuckin' minute. I gotta watch these fuckin' guys like a hawk. These fuckin' busboys, the dishwashers . . . Forget about. They smokin' shit in my walk-in, stealin' food with both hands. I caught one a the cooks, this guy is callin' Puerto Rico onna phone yesterday, he musta been on there half an hour talkin' to the whole family."

"Wacky world of food service, right?"

"Yeah," said the Count, his mind elsewhere. He remembered where he was. "Well, I better let you go. I see your uncle over there, givin me the evil eye. You shouldn't keep him waitin."

"He's just wondering where his food is."

"Nah. He got his food already," said the Count. "It's been great talkin' to ya, Tommy. I'll see ya later. Lemme know—you decide you want somethin' to eat, I'll send over a waiter."

Tommy walked over to Sally's table and sat down across from him on a green leather banquette. A bored waiter, looking wilted and unwashed in his dirty white dress shirt and black clip-on bow tie, appeared at his elbow. Tommy waved him away.

"You're not gonna eat, kid? Well, fuck you," said Sally. He was wearing a burgundy jogging suit, his hair shining under the bright track lighting. He leaned protectively over a huge oval plate of gummy-looking deep-fried calamari drowning in a lake of red sauce.

Sitting further down the banquette, next to Tommy, was a tall, cadaverously thin man in his forties with bad teeth. He wore a jacket and tie, and he had sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes and a protruding brow and cheek bones that gave his head a skull-like aspect.

"You remember Skinny," said Sally.

"Hi, Skin," said Tommy.

The thin man nodded back at him and returned to his plate of scampi. There was a little pile of shrimp tails in the ashtray next to his plate.

"Listen, Tommy," said Sally, serious all of a sudden, "We need your help on somethin."

"Sally, really—" Tommy started to protest.

Sally raised his palm, "No. Tommy . . . Just listen to me here," he said. "It's gotta be you. It's no big deal. Just a little favor."

"Maaan . . . " said Tommy, shaking his head. He noticed Skinny looking at him intently, one eyebrow raised.

"Don't shake your head," said Sally "Don't shake your head. Look at me. Look at me. It's a little favor. A little one. You just gotta stay a little late at the restaurant tomorrow night."

"My restaurant?" asked Tommy.

"What restaurant you think I'm fuckin' talkin' about?" said Sally. "Yeah, your restaurant. The one I fuckin' got you the job at. Your place. You gotta let us in."

"Who's us?" asked Ibmmy, worried now.

"Just me and Skin and one other guy. We need a place to talk some business," said Sally.

"Why there? Why not over here? Someplace else?"

"We gotta talk about somethin' in private with a guy. Nothin' bad. Someplace everybody in the fuckin' world ain't gonna know my business. We'll be in, we'll be out. We just gotta talk to the guy a few minutes, show the guy a few things and then we leave. No muss, no fuss."

"This is bad, Sally."

"It's not bad. What's bad? What's fuckin' bad? We just need the place for a few minutes. You just gotta open the doors there."

"What about the porters? There's porters there all night," said Tommy.

"The porters are gonna be callin' in sick tomorrow," said Sally, matter-of-factly.

"Startled, Tommy thought for a moment. Skinny was still staring at him. "So Harvey knows about this? This is okay with Harvey?"

"Tommy, Tommy. You don't hafta worry about what Harvey knows and what he don't know. He knows you're with me. You're not gonna be gettin' in any trouble with that guy or anythin' like that. Just help us out here, this once, and after, you want, we can go back like it was before."

"I think this really sucks," said Tommy. "This really fuckin' sucks."
Sally shrugged. "You gotta do it. That's it."
"I don't gotta do anything," protested Tommy. "I'm not with you guys like that. I got somethin' goin' for me over there, I don't wannit to get all fucked up."
"Sometimes you gotta do somethin'," said Sally.
"You have to do things over there, that's okay. You can't work it out with Harvey? You got somethin' going over there, fine, that's your business. That's you. This is me. I work over there. It's my fuckin' job," said Tommy.
"Well, tomorrow, I'm your fuckin' job," said Sally.
"This sucks," said Tommy. He noticed Skinny exchange glances with Sally.
"You're not gonna get in any trouble. You don't hafta do nothin'.
You just wait aroun' till two-thirty and you let us in the trapdoor. Then you go upstairs, get yourself a cuppa coffee, whatever. That's all you gotta do. Is that so fuckin' much to ask of somebody? Somebody who's family?"
Sally shoved a hunk of bread into his calamari sauce and popped it in his mouth.
"It sucks."
"It's a favor," said Sally, still working his jaws on the bread.
"It's a big favor," said Tommy.
Skinny was shaking his head almost imperceptibly now.
"Tommy, what are you fuckin' bitchin' for?" said Sally. "You know you're gonna do it. You gonna have to do the right thing here, you know that, right? I reached out for you one time, Tommy. I got you that fuckin' job you got. You think that Jew dentist give you the job 'cause he likes you? You think he can't hire somebody outta the papers like that? Some French fag who wants the job? I didn't wanna bring it up, but there it is . . . You ain't gonna get in any trouble, that's what's eatin' you. I don't do this thing, it's me that gets in trouble. This is important. It's gotta be done tomorrow. I fuckin' helped you, helped your career, now you gotta help me out. Help out my career. This guy I gotta talk to is gonna be real helpful to my career, you unnerstan'? It's fuckin' that simple."
Skinny still looked skeptical.
Sally looked pleased with himself. "Good!" he said. "Now, hows-about somethin' to eat? I'll order you somethin'. You don't gotta pay for it."
"Fuck you, Sally."
Tommy walked home slowly, lost in thought. It's not like he hadn't done favors for Sally before, he mused. There'd been plenty of those, a few years back. He remembered Sally picking him up after school, driving out to a parking lot on the river. Sally had shown him a few cases of fireworks in the trunk of his car. It was the week before the Fourth of July, and all the kids in school were clammering for fireworks. Tommy had dealt them out of his locker, taking in over a hundred bucks his first day. After school, Tommy and his friends from the neighborhood sold them on the street, taking care of the carloads of kids from Jersey and Long Island who flocked in to Little Italy and Chinatown every year, looking forashcans, cherry bombs, firecrackers, and niggerchasers.

"You sell these," Sally had said. "You keep twenty-fi' cents onna dollar for 'em. You can make yourself a nice chunk a' change." Sally had mussed his hair, told him what he could do with his newfound riches. "Now you can take some girls out, treat 'em right for a fuckin' change, show 'em a good time. They like that." And it was nice having a pocket full of money.

There were other favors. He'd get a call from Sally after school; he'd meet him in another parking lot, a social club, a neighborhood bar. He'd be hiding out from some threat, real or imagined, and Tommy would have to sneak around. One time he had to take a gun to somebody, an older guy who ran a parking lot. He'd run around town for Sally, delivering messages, sometimes money. One time, Tommy had to bring a message to a lawyer; another time, a bail bondsman. Once he had to go all the way out to the airport, to a motor lodge near the terminal, to hand a folded piece of paper to a frightened little man in a dark motel room. The man had not been comforted by the message, Tommy remembered.

Then, of course, there was the time he'd been busted with a whole crate of firecrackers. Two hours in a holding cell, with the cops razzing him, trying to frighten him, until his mother came to get him. His mother had not been at all judgmental; afterward, she'd never mentioned it. But Tommy had felt ashamed.

He remembered his father, dead long before Tommy was in high school; remembered him coming back from a stretch in the Federal penitentiary, pale and thin; dutifully heading over to the Evergreen Sportsmen's Club on Spring Street whenever the phone rang. Though Tommy's father continued to make his daily appearances at the Evergreen and in the bars, the after-hours clubs and gambling spots where the day's business was decided and delegated, though he continued to come home with the boxes of swag, the tax-free cigarettes, the perks of his profession, Tommy believed that his heart wasn't in it. His father started to refer to the bosses as the Cigars and seemed to take little pleasure in their company. He did what he was told. Until the end, he was suitably uncooperative whenever the cops came around asking questions. He faded away when somebody, one of his associates, got arrested, often returning with a small gift for Tommy.

In the neighborhood, his father was a respected man. Tommy's school friends were deferential. Their own fathers spoke warmly, even enviously, of whatever position Tommy's father enjoyed in the criminal hierarchy; but Tommy had serious doubts. To him, his father was a tired old man, ruined by jail. He said as much.

On those rare occasions when his father took him out of the city, to Coney, to the Jersey shore, he smiled again. He'd carry Tommy on his shoulders and charge into the surf, saying, "Watch out! Here comes a big one," laughing when the waves knocked them off their feet.

How his mother felt about his father's business, Tommy had no idea. She enjoyed it when his friends came over because they loved to eat, and Tommy's mother liked anybody who liked her cooking.

When his father disappeared, Tommy's mother went on with her life, cooking for the procession of wise guys and half-wise guys who marched in and out of her kitchen. She sat back in her easy chair, stoically smoking her Parliaments and watching her soaps on the TV. She cooked lasagna and manicotti and osso bucco for her guests, seemingly oblivious to the increasingly frequent overtures his father's old friends made to Tommy to come into the business. Her brother, Sally, was the most persistent of all. His father had been missing not even a week and Sally had begun his long courtship of Tommy...
men, quieter ones, who always lurked within reach. Sally would beam with pride as they'd muss Tommy's hair, pinch his cheeks, slip twenty-dollar bills in his pockets.

He was not completely comfortable with all this. His neighborhood friends, were, of course, delighted to be running back and forth, picking up shirts from the dry cleaners for the local hoods. They'd wash their cars, court their daughters, go to their barbecues, and they'd brag about it later in the school yard. Tommy was not so pleased with himself. He wanted to see himself as a hero, and running around doing errands for Sally didn't seem like something any hero of his would ever do.

Then he met Diane. She lived in the Village, off Washington Square Park, in a high-rise building with a doorman. Her father was some kind of college professor at NYU, and her mother, a well-respected gynecologist. Diane arrived at school each morning in a beat-up Checker Marathon, jet black, her mother, an elegantly dressed woman in her forties, at the wheel.

Diane looked different. She listened to different music. She dressed like a boy, wore her hair straight and untamed, and favored ripped Levi's and black leather motorcycle jackets. When she made love, it was with a genuine enthusiasm that Tommy found starteling and delightful. In her room off Washington Square, lined with posters of the Clash, the Sex Pistols, and the Ramones, she'd take Tommy's prick in her mouth with a good-humored nonchalance that Tommy found intoxicating. Even the neighborhood bad girls, the ones his friends referred to as putannas, had sex with a mechanical precision, a solemnity, that Tommy found oppressive by comparison.

With her parents sitting right in the next room watching television, Diane and he would make love, rutting like a pair of musk oxen, right there on the bedroom floor. Sometimes he'd even spend the night; her parents didn't mind. Once, at the breakfast table, Diane's mother had sat down next to him, served him his coffee, Diane still in the shower. She'd said to Tommy, "Better she does it at home."

Diane smoked pot in the house, to Tommy's amazement. Her father would even join them for a hit, reminiscing about the sixties, how he'd tried to levitate the Pentagon with a few thousand other stoned Yippies.

Weekends, Tommy and Diane would sneak into nightclubs; she'd lend him books and insist that he read them . . . Tommy, too frightened of falling out of favor, read them carefully, afraid he might be quizzed. They'd go to the movies in small art houses, and over dinner with her parents, they'd talk about them.

She took Tommy to get his ear pierced at a jewelry store on Seventh Avenue that advertised piercing "With or Without Pain." She bought him an earring, a little sterling silver skull to match her own.

Diane was amused by Tommy's friends from the neighborhood; the young wannabe gangsters in his classes, his childhood pals. And of course, her disdain for their hair, their clothes, their narrow priorities, made Tommy feel even more uncomfortable. When Tommy's best friend, Richie Gianelli, showed up at school one day, newly enriched by his night's work as a lookout in a robbery, she snickered at the chunky digital watch, the brown, suit-cut leather jacket with the wide lapels, that so impressed Tommy's other friends.

Upon seeing Sally one day in the street, she had whispered a quote from a late-night TV commercial in Tommy's ear, "It looks like hair is actually growing out of the scalp," before breaking into peals of laughter. None of Tommys other friends ever laughed at Sally. "That's my uncle," Tommy had confessed, his ears burning.

When school let out for the holidays, Diane went away with her family, to places like Cape Cod, Aruba, Taos . . . She'd return with a suntan, a new favorite band to go see, stories to tell about people and places unlike any Tommy knew of.

By the time he graduated from high school and Diane had disappeared from his life forever, gone off to Boston and college, Tommy had, in his heart at least, turned away from Sally's world and the ambitions of his old friends. He'd cringe when Sally would raise his voice in a restaurant, bossing around his waiter. He began to hate the bluff,

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And when somebody Tommy knew would disappear—when, suddenly, somebody Tommy had seen around his whole life went missing only to reappear as a grainy newspaper photograph of a zippedpered body bag or a sprawled figure on the floor of a restaurant, shirt pulled up over a naked belly, spattered with blood and clam sauce—it didn't seem romantic at all. The life didn't even seem dangerous anymore. Dangerous, Tommy now believed, meant dangerous to the social order, not sitting there in Umberto's waiting for one of your friends to shoot you. The Sex Pistols were dangerous. Sally and his gangster friends were . . . well . . . kind of irrelevant.

**Tommy stopped** in the Lion's Head for a drink. He stared down at his vodka. He reminded himself that Sally had got him his first restaurant job out in Sheepshead Bay, and when that passed, another one at a large French place in midtown. Sally had an in there through the union. Tommy heard later that a Puerto Rican cook had been fired to make room for him. And finally, the Dreadnaught . . . His first sous-chef's job. A few well-timed words in Harvey's
ear, and Tommy was a sous-chef. Sally didn't think much of Tommy's new life in the restaurant business, but he had helped him out anyway. The least he could do was return the favor.

Tommy drained his drink and ordered another. Somebody put Lou Reed on the jukebox. The chef, Tommy knew, loved Lou Reed. Tommy liked the chef. He was impressed by him. Sure, he was a junkie. He fucked up. He forgot to order things. He showed up late or sometimes not at all. He leaned on Tommy to cover for him in a way no other chef had done. But Tommy enjoyed working with him. He was a very talented guy, and smart, and Tommy had learned a lot from him. He'd studied cooking in Paris. He'd worked in places Tommy had still only heard about. He was a good guy, a friend. Tommy wanted to stay with him. He wanted to stay at the Dreadnaught, make nice food, get famous maybe.

But this goddamn favor of Sally's. It threatened to pull him back to places he never wanted to return to. Threatened to contaminate him, remind him of all the things in his life he didn't want to look back at right now. But he owed. A lifetime as a beneficiary of Sally's rolling flea market, his precious job, his mother, his—he hated the word—his family. He'd just have to do what Sally wanted.
Tommy sat in the chef's office, waiting for Sally and the others to arrive. It had been busy that night, and Tommy was tired. He needed something to keep himself awake.

The chef's office was little more than a closet with a big steel desk and some shelves wedged into it. There was no door, only a few hinges where a door used to be. Tommy looked through the books on the shelves for something to read. There was the Larousse, of course; The Professional Chef; Le Repertoire de la Cuisine; cookbooks by Roger Verge, Paul Bocuse, Raymond Oliver; The Provincetown Seafood Cookbook. There were food-stained copies of Gourmet and Cuisine, Film Threat, Food and Wine, and a stack of Wednesday food sections from The New York Times. Tommy found a pile of paperbacks; in between Naked Lunch and a book by a man named Jack Black called You Can't Win, he found a scotch-taped copy of Down and Out in London and Paris. He read the blurb on the back, was interested, and tried to read a few pages. He was unable to concentrate; the words swam in front of his eyes, made him dizzy. He put the book in his back pocket to read later.

He went idly through the chef's desk. In the bottom drawer was a jumble of objects that told a story: rolling papers, a film canister containing a dried-up bud of sensimilla, a parisienne scoop, an accordion file filled with recipes, a pastry bag and assorted tips, some barquette molds, pastry cutters, the propane torch that the chef used on meringues . . . Rolling loosely around in the bottom of the drawer were a few cut-down plastic straws and some bic pens, the metal tips and ink cartridges removed. There was a new syringe, of course, still in its paper wrapping, some spare vegetable peelers, an electric shaver, and on top, a five-pronged ice shaver with a thick wooden handle, a nasty-looking object if he'd ever seen one.

In the top drawer, underneath a pile of new kitchen utensils, still in their clear plastic sleeves, Tommy found a framed black-and-white photograph of a young boy, unmistakably the chef, standing with what Tommy guessed was his mother in front of a two-story white stucco house with a tile roof and heavy wood shutters. The boy wore short shorts, a denim smock, and tattered espadrilles. The mother and the son had squinted into the lens, the sun bright in their faces. The mother was smiling proudly, the chef looked glum; unhappy, perhaps, about the shorts.

Tommy was staring at the picture, trying to imagine a boyhood in France, when the bell rang.

It was Skinny and he was alone.

Tommy led him into the kitchen. Skinny looked around, saw the sauce-splattered range top, the overflowing buspans, the sinks stacked with pots, and the food mashed down into the holes in the black rubber floor matting.

"Jesus, this place is a mess. Remind me not to eat here," he said.

"No porters," said Tommy, nervously.

Skinny walked the length of the kitchen. He looked inside the changing room, the dry-goods area, and the liquor cage. He went upstairs, Tommy following, and checked out both bathrooms, taking a peek inside the toilet cubicles. He looked behind the bar, inside the tiny cloakroom, pushing aside the forgotten umbrellas and raincoats before walking over to the window and peering through the shutters. Satisfied, he went back downstairs with Tommy, his rubber-soled shoes padding quietly. Tommy took him to the office and sat down behind the desk in the chef's ripped swivel chair. Skinny sat on a milk crate.

It was awkward. Skinny had the kind of face that made you think twice about small talk. Looking at him, Tommy had no idea what a person like Skinny's interests were. He didn't want to know, either. Tommy didn't know what to say, what to talk about, even what to do with his hands, with Skinny sitting there, unsmiling, in the cramped room. There was a nearly full bottle of Stoli on the desk, and Tommy offered some to Skinny. Skinny just frowned and shook his head. Tommy reached for the bottle himself and knocked over a stack of Restaurant Hospitality magazines; they slid onto the floor by Skinny's feet.

Skinny lit up a Pall Mall and pushed some papers around on the crowded desk looking for an ashtray.

"Use the floor," said Tommy, lighting his own cigarette.

Skinny looked disapprovingly at a rusted brioche mold filled with marijuana butts sitting on a stack of magazines in the corner. He emptied the roaches onto the floor and tapped an ash into it.

They sat in silence for a few more long minutes. At three o'clock, the exhaust fans in the kitchen clicked off, and there was only the sound of an occasional drip from the dishwasher and the whine of the compressors for the refrigeration units.

"Anybody else here?" Skinny asked.

"No," said Tommy. "Fan's on a timer. It shuts off at three."

After a few minutes more of silence, Tommy asked where Sally was.
"They’ll be here soon," said Skinny, looking straight at him.

Finally, the bell rang. Tommy jumped out of his chair and walked quickly to the stairs leading up to the street-level trapdoors. Skinny remained behind in the office, fiddling with his tie.

Bounding up the cement steps, Tommy threw the latch and pushed open the metal doors. He was almost relieved to see Sally standing there next to another man. They were laughing, Sally's arm around the other man's shoulder. They looked like they had been out on the town. Sally wore a jacket and tie instead of his usual jogging suit. The other man looked drunk, his shirt was hanging out of his pants. He was short, with gold-rimmed aviator glasses, gold pinky ring, and a puffy, chinless face lit up by alcohol.

"Tommy, you gonna invite us down, or what?" laughed Sally.

Tommy backed down the steps. Sally helped the other man down.

"You should get a fuckin' light down here," said Sally as the other man stumbled. Tommy squeezed past them in the dark hallway to close and lock the doors.

"So, how you doin'?" said Tommy feebly. The man with Sally smelled of peppermint breath mints and sweat. Sally introduced him.

"This is a good friend of mine, Freddy. I promised Freddy here some a that good French food you keep tellin' me about. You ready for Freddy?" asked Sally.

"Freddy's ready," said Freddy. He patted his stomach and grinned stupidly. "Bring it on, garçon!"

Tommy led them down the hall toward the kitchen. He saw that Freddy was unsteady on his feet, heard him get his foot caught up in the dirty aprons and kitchen towels on the floor, heard him bounce drunkenly against the shelving, breathing heavily. Sally was right behind him, guiding him.

"I'm ready for one serious fuckin' meal here, Tommy," said Freddy. "Your uncle talks about you a lot."

Sensing sudden movement, Tommy turned around, thinking Freddy had tripped. He moved to catch him. Instead, he saw Sally coming up with a .22-caliber Hi-Standard pistol. frozen, he watched as Sally put the gun behind Freddy's right ear and fired three quick rounds into his skull.

For what seemed like a very long time, Freddy stayed on his feet. His eyes jerked up into his head, a little saliva bubble forming in the corner of his mouth, his lips trembling as if he were trying to form words.

Then, suddenly, Skinny was there. He pushed roughly past Tommy, who saw that he was naked, wearing only bright blue rubber gloves and holding a kitchen apron in one hand and a boning knife in the other. He whipped the apron quickly around Freddy's leaking head and, at almost the same time, jammed the boning knife into Freddy's chest and twisted. There was a crunching sound. He withdrew the knife, and then, with Sally holding the bloody apron-wrapped head, let the body slowly down onto the floor.

"So that's that," said Sally.

"You should get him on some plastic bags," said Skinny.

"Oh, shit," said Tommy, paralyzed by what he had just seen. "Shit!" He thought for a second he was going to cry; instead, he just stood there, staring down at the dead man on the floor.

"Get some plastic bags," said Sally, pushing Tommy toward the kitchen with his palm.

Skinny poked at Freddy's buttock with his big toe.

"He's gone," he said.

"Oh, shit," said Tommy. He took a few dreamlike steps into the kitchen and returned with two large plastic trash bags. He felt like he was underwater, somehow going deaf. His vision began to get cloudy around the edges.

Sally put the bags down on the floor, and he and Skinny rolled Freddy onto them.

"Okay, Tommy," said Sally. "You can go in there or upstairs for a little while and get yourself a drink or something. We'll let you know when to come out. You got a mop around here?"

"In the garbage area, right back there," said Tommy, pointing a shaking finger toward the cleaning supplies. He walked stiffly back into the chef's office and collapsed into the swivel chair. His head hurt. There was a pounding behind his ears and in his temples. Sally and Skinny dragged Freddy past the office door into the kitchen. Tommy heard them, the sound of dead weight on crinkling plastic, pulled along the rough concrete. He watched Freddy's feet disappear from view, leaving a long trail of blood, like snail tracks. Skinny got the mop and the bucket and cleaned up. Tommy was reminded of the little man sweeping up after the elephants in the cartoon.

"MAKE SURE IT'S CLEAN," said Sally to Skinny. "I don't wanna leave nothin' like that around." He inspected the floor.

"We got time," said Skinny. "I like to let 'em sit for a while anyways. Blood gets lumpy. Makes it cleaner, easier later on."

"Alright," said Sally, "Let's get him up on there. That's good. This is good. There's a drain and everything. We can spray it down with that thing after."

The two men lifted Freddy up off the floor and heaved him onto the prewash area of the dishwasher. Freddy's face...
came to rest in a pile of dirty dinner plates and half-eaten food.

"Hey, Freddy got his dinner after all," said Sally.

"I just gotta open him up a bit," said Skinny, holding the boning knife. "So nothin' floats, they take him out on a barge. You don't know where it's gonna go. Just in case." He walked over to the sauté area and looked around under the cutting board for a minute. He came back with the chef's $450 custom-made Japanese knife. "I'm gonna need somethin' bigger like this for later. Help me get his clothes off."

**MUCH LATER,** Sally lit a True 100 cigarette. Skinny sucked on a Pall Mall.

"It's a fuckin' mess here. We gotta wash up these fuckin' dishes, spray down this shit," said Sally

"Let the kid do it," said Skinny. "He's just sittin' in there strokin' his fuckin' meat."

"I dunno how he's gonna like that," said Sally. "This is his first piece a' work and all."

"I'm not washin' any fuckin' dishes," said Skinny. "I did the mopping. I hadda chop the cocksucker up. Somebody else gonna do the dishes."

"Don't look at me," said Sally. "I don't even know how to turn onna fuckin' machine. And I ain't gonna fuck up this suit."

Skinny peeled off the bloody rubber gloves and threw them in the garbage can, along with the bloody trash bags, the bloody apron, Freddy's bloody clothes, and the gold-rimmed aviators. "Well, I ain't doin' it, so it's gotta be the kid." Skinny used the sprayer to rinse himself off. He soaped himself up to the elbows and then rinsed again. Sally washed his hands in the pot sink.

Freddy, neatly packaged into eight plastic bundles wrapped in butcher's twine, lay stacked against a reach-in.

"So we're gonna put him out with the garbage . . ." said Skinny, looking at the bundles. "Spread him aroun' between the cans. Mix him up so the bags ain't too heavy."

"We don't want anybody gettin' a fuckin' hernia takin' it out," said Sally.

They distributed Freddy evenly among the garbage cans in the kitchen, burying each bundle under the chicken bones, fish racks, oyster shells, and coffee grounds. They tied up the bags and dragged them back to the garbage area.

"Hey," said Sally, "I just thoughta somethin'. It'll be the Brooklyn guys taking him away."


"So long, dickhead," said Sally, waving to a garbage bag.

Back in the kitchen, Skinny wiped himself down from head to toe with some Handi Wipes from his jacket, while Sally helped himself to some cooking wine from the speed rack.

"I put the other one with the dishes," said Skinny. He held up the chef's expensive Japanese knife. "What do I do with this?"

"Minchia!" exclaimed Sally. "Skin, you really beat the shit outta that thing."

"It's a piece a shit," said Skinny.

"They should get that knife they got on TV. The ones they sell, whaddaya call 'em—the Ginsu. Shit saws through a fuckin' nail," said Sally.

"So whaddaya want me to do with this?" asked Skinny.

"I dunno," said Sally.

"Should I throw it out? I think I should throw it out," said Skinny.

"No," said Sally, "Somebody might go lookin' for it. Just wash it off and put it back where you found it. They'll blame it on some fuckin' dishwasher."

While Skinny dressed, Sally went into the office. "When's the garbage pickup tomorrow?" he asked Tommy.

"Ten A.M.," said Tommy. "But there's nobody to put it out on the street. The porters aren't here."

"Right, right," said Sally, furrowing his brow, "So, it waits till the next day. That happens sometime, right? That's nothin' new. You gotta do that onna weekends, right?"

Tommy nodded.

"This sucks, Sally," said Tommy, quietly, so Skinny couldn't hear him in the kitchen. "This sucks so fuckin' bad."

Sally reached over and rubbed the back of Tommy's neck. "C'mon, it's not so fuckin' bad."

"It's bad. It is bad, this is really, really bad," said Tommy. "I can't believe you did this to me."

"What can I tell you, it hadda be done," said Sally.

"You dropped me right in the shit. You didn't even ask, you didn't even tell me what you were gonna do . . . Why'd you fuckin' hafta do it here? Why me? Why'd you hafta do it here?"

Sally continued massaging Tommy's neck.

"It was a rush job, hadda be done in a hurry. Hadda be done tonight. It couldn't wait. There was no place else. I wanted to find another spot but it didn't work out. This guy, this guy was a rat bastard. He hadda disappear off the
face a the earth. He hadda go. And he hadda go tonight . . ."

Tommy blinked back tears. He flashed on a moment in his mother's kitchen, Sally standing there in the doorway, holding a new basketball for Tommy, some flowers for his mother, the same look on his face he had now.

"Don't be a crybaby," Sally was saying. "Don't be pissin' and moanin' about this. Especially in fronta Skin. You don't want him to see that. He'll start to be gettin' thoughts in his mind about you."

Tommy thought about Skinny thinking about him, and he shuddered. After a minute, he said, "You put him in the garbage?" He was trying to be tougher now, trying to get the image of Freddy's eyes, jerking up into his head, out of his mind.

"Yeah, he's all mixed up with the fish heads an' the eggshells."

"Where's Skinny?" said Tommy, hearing a reach-in door open.

"Maybe Skinny found where you keep the cheesecake."

"They count that shit," said Tommy, still trying to be hard, trying to be nonchalant.

"So, blame it onna fuckin' waiter, they always stealin' shit."

"I can't believe this is happening," said Tommy, his resolve wavering. "I can't believe you did this to me."

"I dunno what you cryin' about," said Sally. "If you wanted to, this could really help you. You come in with me, this could really help."

"What did he do?" asked Tommy, ignoring the suggestion, hoping it was something really, really awful this man Freddy did, something that would make him hate Freddy, make it easier to live with the knowledge he'd been shot and stabbed and then gutted like a big striped bass just a few feet away, broken down into pieces, portioned out.

"Who?" asked Sally. "The guy?"

"Yeah, what did he do?"

"He made some people mad," said Sally.

"You whacked a guy out right in front of me," said Tommy. "Right in my fuckin' restaurant. And now you want me to clean up after, right? I heard you in there. You want me to do the fuckin' dishes, clean up the fuckin' blood?"

"It don't look bad. I rinsed it off for ya," said Sally.

"Oh, great, fuckin' great, thanks," said Tommy, incredulous, feeling sick to his stomach, all the vodka he'd had rising in his throat. "How about tomorrow? I gotta work tomorrow. I'm gonna come in here and work, and know there's a fuckin' dead guy sittin' there inna garbage the whole fuckin' night I'm workin'? I'm supposed ta act like normal?"

"It's just one day that he's gotta be there," said Sally. "You'll feel better tomorrow. I seen your garbage. I seen your garbage and it smells a fuck of a lot worse than anythin' we put in there. Don't worry about that."

"What if somebody finds him there?" Tommy whispered, aware of Skinny moving around in the kitchen.

"Nobody's gonna find him there?" Tommy whispered, aware of Skinny moving around in the kitchen.

"You won't get any hysterical on me. I'm fuckin' countin' on you here."

"You want me to wash the dishes?" said Tommy, knowing he'd have to.

"Less you want me to ask Skinny to do 'em. I don't think you want me to do that," said Sally, ominously. "It's just a few things, and some pots that got a little dirty. Take you five minutes. Me and Skin, we'll have a drink upstairs while you finish up. Skinny and me, we got everything else. Tomorrow you call in sick. Awright? Now let's be a man."

Tommy finished the dirty dishes in the rack and sent them through the dishwasher. It took five loads to get them all. Then he took the sprayer and a rubber squeegee and cleaned the whole area, pushing pink water down the little drain.

He was taking off his apron when Sally and Skinny came down from the dining room.

"We all done here?" Sally asked.

Tommy nodded weakly.

"You should throw out that apron," said Skinny.

"You'll feel better tomorrow," said Sally.

"I guess so," said Tommy, for Skinny's benefit. He didn't like the way Skinny was looking at him.

They left the restaurant together. Tommy closed the metal trapdoors behind them and snapped on the Master lock. It was starting to get light on Spring Street. A bakery truck pulled up in front of the Count's, a man left brown paper bags of Italian bread in the doorway. Down West Broadway, a garbage truck hoisted a Dumpster, beeping as the driver put it in reverse.

They walked over to Varick Street and approached a dusty Buick. Somebody had written WASH ME on the rear window with their finger. Sally went around and unlocked the driver's side door, got in, and started the engine. He
leaned over and unlocked the passenger door for Skinny.
He called out of the car to Tommy. "We give you a lift?"
"No, thanks," said Tommy, "I wanna walk for a bit."
Tommy saw Skinny looking at him through the windshield, a smirking expression on his face. He waved to Tommy as the car pulled away.
Twelve

TOMMY WOKE UP at one-thirty in the afternoon, still in his clothes. He wasn't due in till four—they were serving brunch today. He lit a cigarette and tossed the spent match into a beer can on the night table. The television was on with the volume down low, and Tommy searched around in the sheets for a remote. Unable to find it, he pulled himself out of bed, walked over to the set, and turned it off.

He finished his cigarette, cleared away the empty beer cans, picked up the phone, and called the restaurant.

Harvey answered.

"Harvey, it's Tommy," Tommy said, his voice constricting, "I'm not coming in today. I'm sick."

"What have you got, the flu?" asked Harvey. "You don't sound too good."

"I don't know. I just feel real sick."

"You should drink some tea. With lemon," said Harvey. "You throwing up?"

"I've been either hugging the bowl or shitting like a mink all night long," said Tommy.

"Well," said Harvey, "get some rest. I'll get Ricky or somebody to cover. My fucking luck it'll be slow tonight anyway. You just feel better. When do you think you'll be back in? You gonna be able to work tomorrow?"

"Yeah," said Tommy, "I'm sure I'll make it tomorrow. If there's any problem, I'll call you back."

"Okay. Feel better. Should you see a doctor? I can get you an appointment if you need."

"No, thanks anyway. I think I just ate something bad maybe."

"Not here?"

"No, no. I had something to eat over the Count's the day before. Maybe I ate something bad."

"That explains it," said Harvey. "That fuck poisoned you. They should close that place down. It's not safe."

"I don't know for sure, maybe it's the flu."

"I think it was something you ate over there. What did you have?"

"Please, Harvey. I'm gonna puke just thinking about that place. I gotta go."

"Okay, Tommy. Get well soon. Take care of yourself."

Tommy lay back in bed. After a while he peeled off his clothes; then, he took the longest shower of his life. He decided to try to forget the whole thing.

"I AM HAVING the worst fucking day of my life," said Harvey. He sat behind his desk, the sun streaming through the dirty Venetian blinds. Across from him two men in dark Brioni suits sat quietly sipping coffee. Harvey wiped his glasses with the end of his tie.

"My sous-chef isn't coming in today. I've got no porters till later and the garbage is piled up to the fucking ceiling down there. My chef is threatening to sue me 'cause somebody wrecked his knife and on top of all that it looks like it's gonna be busy. Look outside. First nice weekend we've had in I don't know how long and of course we get it today."

"That's the restaurant business for you," said the short coffee drinker.

"It's unpredictable," said the other coffee drinker, a big man with no neck.

"I've been in the restaurant business," said the short coffee drinker.

"Just when you think you know what to expect when you come in the door—" Harvey began.

"Somebody give you a good kick in the crotch," the bigger man finished.

"Listen, Harvey," said the smaller man, cheerfully, "we think we can be helpful. About what we talked about on the phone."

"That's great," said Harvey. "That's really great."

"We've spoken to our principals," said the smaller man, "and we think we can do something here."

"Well, that's great," said Harvey.

"It's a lot of money," said the larger man.

"But we think we can do the whole amount for you," said the smaller one.

"Twenty thousand?" asked Harvey.

"We just need to iron out a few things, schedule of repayments and all. You need it for six months?" asked the smaller man.

"Six months," said Harvey.

"That's no problem there. We can do that. That'll be when you pay the principal," said the smaller man, putting his empty coffee cup on the desk. "You know how this works. It's five points per week."
"Five points!" shrieked Harvey. "Five points! That's completely unreasonable. Five fucking points? I can't pay that much. I won't pay that much! I don't pay the other guys that much, anywhere near that much! Two points. Two points I can do. I expected that. I can do two points. But five? Five points I may as well cut my own throat and fuckin' bleed to death right here. It's unreasonable."

"There's another thing," said the larger man.

"What other thing?" asked Harvey, patting down his hair on both sides and adjusting his tie. "What?"

"Your current lender," said the smaller one. "You're up to date with them?"

"Oh, yeah," said Harvey. "They fuckin' love me. They get theirs. Every week. If I'm short every once in a while, I have a bad week, it's no problem. They know I'll be there with the money. No problem. And two points."

"See, there's the political dimension," said the smaller man. "They lend you money, you have some understanding with them, it makes it uncomfortable if we come along and you know . . ."

"It's awkward," said the bigger man.

"So maybe, if we can work something out here, maybe it would be better if your current lender doesn't know what we do together," said the smaller one.

"We're not doing anything together at five fuckin' points, fellas," said Harvey.

"Harvey," said the smaller man, smiling again. "You're a first-time customer. And you're relatively new to the restaurant business. We understand that. We know how it is."

"So you know what it's like," said Harvey.

"It's hard. It's a hard business. We know that. So if we were to make it three points, we would expect you to make your interest payments on time. No knockdown. No excuses. You'll have to put our agreement first. What you do with the other guys we don't care so much, as long as it doesn't interfere with our business together."

"I can do three points. I can do that," said Harvey.

"When does Sally get his money?" asked the big man. "Tuesday?"

"Fridays," said Harvey.

"With us it'll be Tuesday, alright?" said the smaller man.

"No problem," said Harvey.

"Okay. We have a deal then," said the smaller man.

"Done," said Harvey. "How about a drink? I get you gentlemen a cognac? How about a nice cognac? I've got some Louis Treize'll knock your socks off. I'll buzz the girl, she'll bring it."

Harvey pressed the intercom button and shouted into the phone, "Barry, pick up! Pick up!"

Barry picked up the extension at the bar.

"Barry, send Cheryl in with three Louis Treizes. Use the big snifters. Is she here? She's here, isn't she? Tell her to hurry up, I wanna smell hair burn."

Harvey put the phone down and rubbed his hands together. Immediately there was a knock on the door.

"That was fast," said the big man.

The door opened quickly. It was the chef.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked.

"Michael, I'm busy with these people right now," said Harvey. "What is it?"

"It's about my knife," said the chef.

"Michael, I told you before about that. If you can't fix it I'll buy you another one."

"It's custom made," said the chef. "It takes weeks."

"We'll order you another knife. You can use the house knives until then, can't you?"

The chef rolled his eyes and looked pained.

"I'm sorry about the knife. I don't know what or who. But, I don't know what I can be expected to do about it right now. Especially now. I'm busy. We'll get you another, that's all I can do."

"Somebody deliberately fucked it up," said the chef. "Look at that," he said, holding up a piece of mangled steel.

"Somebody did that deliberately."

"Michael, you can see I'm busy here. We'll talk about it later," said Harvey.

The chef turned on his heels and stalked off to the kitchen. Harvey smiled at the two men. "He takes his job very seriously."

Cheryl came through the door holding a tray with three brandy snifters.

"You can put that right here on the desk," said Harvey. "Thanks, sweetheart."

Cheryl gave a fake curtsy and left the room. The three men raised their glasses.

"Cheers," said Harvey.

"Salud," said the smaller man.

"Here's looking up your assets," said the big man.
Sally pushed his way through the Bleecker Street foot traffic. It was hot and he was sweating under his wig. A chubby kid in a Megadeth T-shirt, wrangling over the price of a studded wristband with a Pakistani merchant in the middle of the sidewalk, blocked his way. Sally stomped on the kid's foot with his heel, and the kid moved off, yelping like an injured dog. He found Danny Testa sitting at a small cafe table at a souvlaki place near Thompson Street. Danny was reading the sports pages of the *Daily News* and sipping an iced cappuccino. Sally sat down across from him.

"Sally, how are you?" asked Danny, looking up from his paper.
"I'm good, Danny. How are you?"
"You know, same old same old," said Danny.
"Did you talk to him?"
"Yeah," said Danny. "I was just over there."
"So?" asked Sally, expectantly.

"He's grateful. He's happy." He pushed a folded copy of *New York* magazine across the table. There was an envelope tucked inside the pages. "There's somethin' for you in there. And somethin' extra for your nephew. I heard from Skin."

"For Tommy?" asked Sally, startled for a second. He picked up the magazine and put it inside his jacket.
"Yeah. He should get somethin', don't you think? Fair's fair, he likes the kid. He made a point to mention it," said Danny.

"So what did he say about me?" asked Sally. "Am I gonna get a button?"
"He say wait a little longer," said Danny. "It's not a good time right now. He says he opens the books right now and people are gonna be all over him. There's a whole fuckin' line of guys waitin'. Everybody and his fuckin' brother is bustin' balls. He says he straightens you out, he's gotta straighten out all these other guys. You should wait."

"I been waiting," said Sally. "I been waitin' a long fuckin' time here. This is the third time. This is the third time I done something for him. He calls me and has me come in and asks for somethin' to happen and it happens. And then what? Nothing. Time goes by, other guys go sailin' right past me. Why doesn't the guy like me? How come I'm always the guy left standin' out there with his cock in his hand?"
"You got him all wrong," said Danny. "He likes you. He talks about you all the fuckin' time. He likes you."
"Tommy, who's never done a fuckin' thing for him until now, he likes him," complained Sally.
"You have to be patient, Sal. Your time will come. He's very grateful. He won't forget."
"My time will come. My time will come. When? That's what I wanna know. When is my time gonna come?"
"Soon, soon," said Danny.

"The man doesn't like me. I know that," said Sally.
"That's not true. Maybe you come down to the place more often, say hello to everybody. You walk by the place the other day, you don't even stop in to pay your respects. He said he was hurt."

"I hate goin' down to that fuckin' place. Those old men down there always breakin' my balls, yellin' 'Wig' this and 'Wig' that."
"They're just havin' a little fun, Sally. You shouldn't take it personal like that."
"I do. I do take it personal. There's people over there, they owe me money. How do I collect, people see a buncha old men callin' me names in the street? It's embarrassing."
"They don't mean nothin'."
"They gotta call me that? My hair look funny to you?"
A chuckle escaped from Danny's lips. "No, no. It looks real good, Sally. Can you swim in it?"
"Yeah, I can fuckin' swim in it. Son of a bitch. This is not cheap. That's genuine human hair there," said Sally.
"Don't get mad. Don't get mad. Look, I'm your best friend over there. Believe me. I'll mention it to the man you're unhappy. Just hang in there. You did well for yourself on this. Be happy."
Charlie Wagens stood on Spring Street, smoking a cigar out front of the Evergreen Sportsmen’s Club. He wore a faded cotton bathrobe, worn at the elbows, a white T-shirt, and light blue boxer shorts. Bony, white, near-hairless legs stuck out from beneath the bathrobe, ending in brown stretch socks, held up by garters, and a battered pair of brown tasseled loafers. He peered through the smoke from his cigar at the figure of Danny Testa making his way toward the club.

The old men sitting on either side of the door smoked and drank coffee and sunned themselves in the remaining afternoon light. Danny nodded in greeting to them and then locked eyes with Charlie.

“Walk?” asked Danny.

Charlie stepped out onto the sidewalk, and the two men strolled side by side down Elizabeth Street. Danny held Charlie’s elbow gently with one hand.


“Everything’s good,” said Danny. “You talk to the lawyers?”

“Yes,” said Charlie. “There should be no problem now. They say it should be okay.”

“That’s good,” said Danny.

“And the Wig—what’s his state of mind?”

“You know. Same shit,” said Danny. “He feels neglected.”

“Yeah?”

“He says he thinks he should get straightened out for this last one.

“Never in a million fuckin’ years,” said Charlie. “Not in a trillion fuckin’ years would I make that fuckin’ jerk-off.”

“Don’t tell him that,” laughed Danny.

“What did you tell him when he asked you?”

“I told him to be patient,” said Danny.

“He’s gonna have to be real patient ‘cause I’d have to be dead inna fuckin’ ground before that hand job gets moved up. And if you move him up after I’m gone, I’d come back from the fuckin’ grave to haunt you.” Charlie spat forcefully on the sidewalk. “Makes me wanna clam just thinkin’.”

“You really have a hot nut for this guy,” said Danny.

“You ever see him eat?” said Charlie.

“Yeah,” said Danny with a smile. “I seen it.”

“He’s not our type of person. This is not our type of person. He’s not what we want. We use him. Okay. We always used people like that. But he’ll never be a friend of ours.”

“You know we was in Greenhaven together,” said Danny.

“I don’t care if you was on the fuckin’ moon with the guy. That fat son of a bitch. He’s a fuckin’ joke. A joke. He makes us all look bad. Last year at Jimmy Lang’s wedding? Remember? I’m sittin’ there next to Paul and Jerry Dap and them and I see him comin’ from across the room. I want to crawl under the fuckin’ table and hide. Paul and Jerry and them are sittin’ right there and their eyes are poppin’ out of their fuckin heads lookin’ at this guy. I gotta stand there in front of everybody and let this miserable piece of shit kiss me.”

“He’s a numb-nuts,” said Danny. “But he earns.”

“He earns ‘cause I let him earn. I gave that to him. Out of respect for his sister. Out of respect for the brother-in-law. Wasn’t for that, he’d be drivin’ the fellows around still, pickin’ up their fuckin’ shirts at the cleaners.”

“I gave him a little something extra for Tommy,” said Danny.

“Oh, really? Okay, that’s good. That’s good. That was a surprise. But that’s okay He’s a good kid, Tommy. Not a fuckin’ loudmouth like his uncle. You know the sister? An angel. You shoulda seen her. Hard to believe it’s the same blood.”

“So he should be patient,” said Danny.

“Real patient,” said Charlie. “Okay, he’s makin’ some money for us right now with the Count and with the other place, the other restaurant, a few other things. He’s got some money out onna street for us. That doesn’t mean I gotta love the guy.”

“So we don’t do nothin’ for him?” said Danny.

“Maybe get him a new car or somethin’, make him feel better. Talk to Benny D. Get him a fuckin’ car, token of our appreciation. Maybe he’ll drive it off a fuckin’ cliff.”
It was oppressively hot on the street, a hundred degrees and humid. Inside the basement kitchen, with the ovens on, the grill fired up, the broiler cranking away, and the steamtable and the dishwasher giving off clouds of moist, hot air, it was far worse.

Tommy's chef jacket was soaked through. It clung to his back and shoulders; chafed him under his collar. The bandanna he'd tied around his head didn't prevent the sweat from trickling into his eyes, clouding his vision. Leaning over the grill, he removed the last slices of fennel and eggplant and stepped over to the small hand sink in the corner. He took off his bandanna and the wet towel around his neck and ran them under cold water. He put them both in the small reach-in freezer. He slipped the charred, black skins off some red peppers, covered the peppers with olive oil while he waited. After a few minutes, he took the bandanna and the towel out of the freezer and put them back on.

The chef wasn't hot at all, though he was sweating. He was cold; his teeth were chattering. He stood directly in front of the broiler, arms crossed tightly across his chest, hugging his shoulders. He rocked back and forth on his feet, like a sailor in rough seas. It felt like the marrow in his legs was going to explode, like it was swelling up inside the bones. Any second, he thought, there would be a bang and a long hissing sound, the bones would crack, and it would all come rushing out. Maybe that would relieve the pressure. Anything would be better than this.

Tommy looked over at his suffering chef, huddled and trembling in front of the broiler. The chef's nose was running, of course; his eyes were tearing, and he had just come off a twenty-minute sneezing jag that had the whole damn floor staff asking if he had a cold. Watching the chef's discomfort, he thought about hell and wondered how much worse it could be.

The chef was around less and less these days. Tommy officially picked up an additional shift for which he was paid, and another shift and a half worth of extra work and overtime for which he was not. The chef was just not holding it together, and the only person left in the place who seemed not to know about his heroin addiction was Harvey. The chef was hitting Harvey for an advance every week, usually only a day or two after payday. And this, when he was taking home what, six, seven hundred dollars a week? Tommy had noticed that he'd begun to turn in dummied-up receipts at the bar for items never purchased. He'd even been adding on ghost shifts to the schedule.

"You're gonna be scheduled for an extra prep shift," the chef had told him, "only you're not gonna work it. We split the difference." Naturally, Tommy had gone along with it. He felt bad for the chef; he was dissolving into his constituent parts, for Chrissakes. People on the floor were talking about it, shaking their heads when the chef walked by, smiling knowingly when the chef was on the nod. Not too cool.

Why the chef was trying to do without today, Tommy didn't know. He did this every once in a while. He'd come in junk-sick, trying to make it through the shift, knocking back Sea Breezes and Daiquiris and beer after beer, unable to work. He could only wield a knife for a few minutes at a time. He'd wander around the restaurant, his clipboard under his arm, like the Flying Dutchman. He thought the clipboard made it look like he was doing something important, something supervisory, conceptualizing, he sometimes said. He couldn't really even do that. He could only drink and suffer.

Tommy saw the chef step back from the broiler. He turned and gave Tommy a familiar look. He'd had enough.
"Cover me, alright?" he said to Tommy. "I gotta get a few things at the store. Back in a few minutes."

The chef slipped quietly out of the kitchen. Tommy was relieved. At least, when he got back, he'd be able to do some work. It was a heavy prep day. Ricky had scorched a five-gallon batch of soupe de poisson. Tommy had to put a whole new batch on the fire. Ricky had just started piping seafood mousse into the vol-au-vents; he was no help. Mel was shaving a big block of semisweet chocolate in the walk-in; he'd be lucky if he got through the shift without cutting his own hand off. Little Mohammed was hip-deep in salad greens, singing quietly in Arabic.

"I hate these fucking potatoes," said Tommy, when the chef had returned.
"What's the matter with them?" asked the chef.
"They stick to the fucking pan!" said Tommy. He scraped some burnt slices of potato into the trash with a spatula from a black, pressed steel pan.
"They love them," said the chef. "And they love them at three-fifty a pop."
"They eat enough a the damn things," said Tommy. He laid some more slices in a clean, freshly buttered pan and arranged them carefully in overlapping concentric circles. He drizzled clarified butter over them and sprinkled them with kosher salt. He opened the oven door and had to reach around a foil-topped hotel pan of duck confit to pull out another two pans of potato, burning his wrist on the shelf in the process. He put two more pans of potato in the oven and kicked the door closed with his foot.
"You know how much a potato costs us?" said the chef, his wine reductions for the beurres giving off blue flame in front of him. "Like ten bucks a bushel. You do the math. It's a moneymaker."

The chef was feeling better. He put a cassette in the machine and hopped around his station to Stevie Ray Vaughan, cutting confetti vegetables in time to the music.

"How many orders of pommes you got?" he asked Tommy.

"Twenty-five," answered Tommy.

"What's veg?"

"Grilled asparagus."

"Cool. Where's the new Mel?"

"He's still in the walk-in. He's shaving the chocolate for the tone."

"Christ. . . You'd better send out a search party, see if he's still alive in there," said the chef. "Probably tripped over his dick and broke his fuckin neck."

"Leave him alone," suggested Tommy. "At least he's not in the way.

Tommy opened the oven again and removed the duck confit. He peeled off the foil and gently removed a duck leg from the rendered fat. The skin on the legs had just begun to break away from the knuckle.

"Perfect," said the chef, smiling, "Smells good, too. Gimme some a that. I think we better do a little quality control here. I think I can actually eat."

The chef picked a piece off the board and popped it in his mouth. "That's really good," he said. Tommy nibbled at the few shreds of meat left on the bone. Ricky, finished with the mousse, came over and grabbed a piece for himself.

"You save the extra skin for cracklins?" asked the chef.

Tommy pointed to a small metal crock. "All fried and ready to go," he said.

Service began. The waitrons set up their iced watercress, sprigs of fresh thyme and rosemary, butter curls, and chopped parsley. Mel returned from the walk-in, wearing a Band-Aid over one knuckle. But there were no orders right away. After a short while there was an order for two soups and a half order of pasta; then nothing.

After a few more minutes, the chef beckoned Tommy back to the office. "Let's go over the specials for tomorrow," he said, grinning.

Seated behind the desk, the chef put his grimy workboots up on a stack of magazines and took out his cigarette pack. He reached into the space between the cellophane and the pack and removed a glassine bag of dope. He got a cut-down piece of a plastic straw out of his desk, stuck it in the bag, and snorted most of the contents. He held out what was left to Tommy, the straw sticking out of the bag.

"You want a poke at this? You can kill it."

Tommy thought about it for a moment. "No, thanks," he said. "I'm trying to be good."

The chef replaced the bag in his cigarette pack, nodding his head in approval. He pursed his lips and said, "You know, I got myself on a waiting list for a methadone program."

Surprised, Tommy said, "Oh, yeah? That's great."

"I went in and signed up the other day. But I gotta wait till a spot opens. I don't know when that's gonna be."

"At least you're on the list, right?"

"Yeah . . ." sighed the chef. "That's something . . ." He rubbed his face with both hands. "I gotta get off this shit, that's for sure. It's taking away all my money, all my time. You know, I forgot to call in the fish order the other night? I had to run leftover stuff... I lucked out, we were dead or I never would of had enough. Can you see me eighty-sixing fish? The shit is fucking my whole life up."

"When do you think you're gonna start?" asked Tommy. "How long you have to wait?"

"I don't know, I don't know. They said they'll call me . . . when there's a space. They're gonna call me."

"You gonna make it? You can hang in till there's a space?"

The chef shrugged. "Don't have much choice . . ." He looked up at Tommy and lowered his voice. "You know, I can hardly even get a hard-on anymore?"

Shocked by this confession, Tommy didn't know what to say.

The chef continued, undaunted. "At first . . at first. . . it's good for sex . . but later . . . you know . . ." The chef shook his head, sadly. "You know, I was gonna ask Cheryl out the other night. . . Stupid, right? I got all dressed up in clean jeans, put on a clean shirt. Even managed to save a few bucks I didn't spend on dope. I come all the way over from my place at the end of her shift, I was gonna go in, she's getting off, ask her out to the Crow or someplace . . . You know what happened?"

Tommy looked at the chef intently.

"I stood there. I just stood there out front a the restaurant. Afraid to come in . . . I mean, what if something happened? I go home with her or something, get her in the sack, my prick's just hanging there like a fuckin noodle . . ."
"So, what happened?" asked Tommy, quickly.
"I went home. Never even came in," sighed the chef. "A glorious and triumphant end to a glorious fuckin' day. Went home and watched Dobie Gillis and shot up." He shook his head and crinkled up his eyes, disgusted with himself. "Can you believe that?"
The United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Raymond Sullivan, pushed his half-eaten plate of corned beef and cabbage away and wiped a thin mustache of beer foam off his upper lip with a napkin. Al, sitting opposite him in the darkened bar, stubbed out a Marlboro and looked around in vain for a waitress.

"You didn't eat," said Sullivan.

"I try not to eat anything comes out of a steamtable," said Al. "You know how long that shit sits there?"

"They put it up fresh every day he says," said Sullivan.

"Sits there under those light bulbs, people hockin' and sneezin on it. Shit grows under there. Like a petri dish."

"It's not that bad. You exaggerate."

"What I wanna know is—who do I have to fuck to get a beer around here?"

"Here she comes," said Sullivan, indicating a ruddy-faced blond woman with big hips headed their way.

"All done with that?" she asked Sullivan. "Can I get anything for anybody else? Some dessert? Coffee?"

"I'll have another Bass," said Al, curtly.

"Anything for you, sir?" she asked Sullivan.

"Same for me," he said.

After she had returned with their drinks, emptied the ashtray, and left with their empties, Sullivan leaned forward, elbows on the table, and inquired in a hushed voice, "So what's happened?"

"What happened," said Al, "is a couple of our local geniuses supposed to be watching the restaurant go chasing Tommy Pagano halfway across town to some shooting gallery on the Lower East Side. They leave their post, they follow him over there in the surveillance van and then they collar him when he comes out. Oh, they called in first, spoke to some pimply-assed AUSA and told him they got Tommy Pagano comin' outta there and he's gonna be dirty. Problem is—it ain't Tommy Pagano, it's somebody named Michael Ricard. He's the chef down there."

"They didn't get some ID?"

"By this time, they had such a collective hard-on they didn't bother to look."

"How did they—"

"Detective Rizzo says he left the photos home that day. He says he was sure it was Tommy, he just got mixed up."

"Son of a bitch," said Sullivan.

"They were pretty pissed off when they found out. They must have been 'cause they scared the shit out of him. By the time I got down there the guy was ready to deal his own mother."

"So he's agreed to work with us. Is that necessarily a bad thing?" asked Sullivan.

"It's a colossal fuck-up," said Al. "What's this guy gonna tell us we don't already know? What's he gonna tell us we're not hearing from the other guy? I got one fuckin' flake on the payroll already I gotta worry about. I need some junkie dirt-bag?"

"So why didn't we just throw him back?"

"We have to keep him. We couldn't have him running around talking about how two detectives just happened to see him coming out of the restaurant and decided to follow him across town. He's been around, this guy. He's not stupid."

("So why didn't they just say they saw him coming out of the building. They just happened to be there."

"That's what they said they said, the detectives. But who knows? They were starting in on the pitch right after they got him in the van. They called him Tommy for Christ's sake. There's no way they get the toothpaste back in the tube. We have to keep him now," said Al.

Sullivan winced. Al took a long drink of ale.

"Anyway, I talked to him. Why not? I can always use a new friend, right? Right away he wants to give us Harvey. Harvey cheats on his taxes, he says. Harvey's got something sinister going with Sally Wig. Harvey meets with strange men in suits. Yawn."

"So he didn't tell us anything useful?"

"Well, he says he's good friends with young Tommy. He says they're close. Says Tommy's a good kid, doesn't even like his uncle, says he's embarrassed by him."

"I don't blame him," said Sullivan. "Anything else?"

"One point of casual interest," said Al. "Seems they got two kinds of dinner checks at the Dreadnaught—You got your white ones and you got your off-white ones. End of the night, Harvey throws all the off-white ones in the garbage."
"So your dentist friend is skimming," said Sullivan.
Al shrugged. "Personally, I don't give a shit. He's a restaurateur, right? If he didn't steal it would look suspicious."
"So like it or not, since this chef fell in our lap, we have to keep him," said Sullivan.
"He's ours now. For better or worse," said Al.
"What a mess."
"I tried to make the best of a bad situation," said Al. "I told him, he's such good pals with Tommy he can get next to him for us. I reminded him of the thousand and one delights of a detox out at Riker's. We had a nice talk. I told him to go back there and concentrate on Tommy. I said I don't care if you have to suck his dick for him but get close to him."
"What does Tommy get us?"
"Maybe we can trade up," Al paused, leaned forward, and lowered his voice. "I had a very interesting talk about Tommy with Harvey. I looked at some pictures they got the other night. This is where we come to fuck-up number two. Last week, you remember, we got some pictures of Skinny di Milito dropping by the restaurant service entrance at two-thirty in the morning. Half an hour later, Sally comes by with a Mr. Freddy Manso. So, I ask Harvey about that and he tells me the night before, Sally calls him up and tells him he should give the porters the night off. He wants a little privacy, he says, to talk to somebody. So there's nobody else there but Sally and Skinny and Freddy. And who lets them in the door? Tommy."
"So where's the fuck-up?" asked Sullivan.
"Problem is they got pictures of everybody going in but they missed them coming out," said Al.
"This is a fuckin' nightmare. Son of a bitch. What are they, fucking sleeping out there?"
Al shrugged. "That's why I wanted Bureau guys watching the place. So we got Sally and Skinny and Freddy and Tommy getting together in the middle of the night, and they don't want anybody watching," said Al.
"I remember Skinny. We know him. A real piece of work," said Sullivan. "But what does it mean? So Sally has a party with his nephew and a couple of friends. Sally's Supper Club. Big deal."
"What makes it interesting is Freddy Manso. Freddy's not even in Sally's crew. What's Sally doing with Freddy? He's with Philly Black over the fish market. And from what I hear nobody's too fond of him over there. He's a gofer, a nobody, a wannabe. He's not a made guy. What makes the uninteresting Freddy Manso so interesting is that nobody seems to have seen him lately—and even more significant, nobody's looking."
"Ah," said Sullivan, settling into his chair. "So we think Freddy's gone. Never to return. Rest in pieces. Is that it?"
"That would be my guess," said Al. "Of course my guess would be a lot better, we had some pictures, see who came out of there."
"You know there's talk of a grand jury hearing testimony on control of the fish market," said Sullivan. "I'm not saying there is one. Just that there might be."
"Uh-huh," said Al skeptically. "So maybe somebody started to wonder about Freddy."
"Could be, could be," said Sullivan. "So now we have to play catch-up. Dig ourselves out of the shit. I'm gonna be hearing it from some people about Freddy, I can tell you that for sure. We don't know for sure anything about who, when, or how anybody left the restaurant. Is that right?"
"That's right," said Al.
"So Tommy has to be the one if we're talking about adding a homicide."
"I wouldn't want to count on it," said Al.
"But it's worth taking a run at him."
"The way things are, yeah, sure," said Al. "That's the prevailing wisdom anyway."
"Have you been listening to the tapes we're getting?" asked Sullivan.
"Yeah," said Al, glumly.
"We've got two extensions on the Title Threes for Sally's apartment already. I'm on my second on the pay phone outside the Evergreen and I don't think the judge is going to go for another," said Sullivan.
"The pay phone is giving us nothing," said Al. "A bunch of old men making bets. Bitching about their losses. We get a lot of 'Did you see the guy?' 'The guy down there?' 'No, the guy from the other place,' that sort of thing. They're careful."
"And Sally's place?"
"Sally doesn't own a telephone. That's a nonstarter over there. You read the transcripts from the room bug? You should for a laugh. Hour after hour of Sally watching cartoons. He likes The Jetsons you know. Sally watching Met games. Sally farting. He does a lot of that, especially when he's alone. Sally arguing with his bimbo, asking her if she thinks he looks fat. She says he looks 'husky.'"
"Maybe we should tickle the wire a little bit," suggested Sullivan.
"You can tickle the wire all you want. Sally doesn't entertain at his place. Just the odd bimbo now and again. He
has any of the fellas over, it's only for a minute, they don't talk much. You can listen all you want, all you're gonna
find out is Sally's got bad gas and a crush on Judy Jetson."
"So it's got to be Tommy," said Sullivan.
"I guess. A real criminal mastermind all of a sudden, our Tommy," said Al.
"Ask your CI what he thinks Tommy's doing. What's Tommy doing in a place with a bunch of known LCN
associates? Follow up on this. Tell the other one, the chef, to keep us apprised of young Mr. Pagano's activities. I
want to know what the fuck is going on before this whole thing falls apart."
"What about the Brooklyn end?" asked Al. "Harvey's into them for twenty long."
"I don't know what to do about that," said Sullivan. "I was thinking that's something we can tickle Sally with at
some point in the future. I don't know. If this murder thing pans out I may just give the Brooklyn DA a lay-up."
"You don't want to do anything there, right now?"
"I don't want to go down that road at this precise moment. Later. We might want to piss somebody off at some
point. The Brooklyn thing might do that."
"Okay," said Al.
"Let's see what happens with Tommy. Tommy interests me."
Harvey steered the black Toyota into the parking lot of the Skyline Motor Lodge and parked the car in the last space on the right. As he got out of the car, he looked over his shoulder at the traffic whizzing by on Route 46. It was early afternoon and very hot, and Harvey was perspiring. He reached in his pants pocket for his handkerchief and wiped his face.

The door to room twelve was unlocked, and Harvey let himself in. Al was sitting on the bed with his shirt off watching a Met game. An open bag of Cheez Doodles sat next to him on the bed. He was drinking a Diet Pepsi and trying with one finger to pick a piece of Cheez Doodle out of his navel.

"You're late," said Al.

"I'm sorry. Traffic on the bridge," said Harvey. "Help me get this fuckin' thing off. It itches like a motherfucker."

Al pushed his bulk off the bed and stood up. Harvey took off his shirt. There was a Nagra recorder adhesive-taped to the small of his back and a wire running down under his crotch and up his chest to a tiny microphone. Al turned him around and, in three quick motions, tore the whole apparatus unceremoniously from his skin.

"Jesus! That hurts!" said Harvey.

"Shave your back next time. It won't hurt so bad," said Al.

Harvey stood in front of a streaked mirror at an angle, examining the pink welts on his back. "I should put some cream on this," he said. Al went to the closet, found his jacket on a hanger, and tucked the little Nagra and the mike into the inside pocket.

"No air-conditioning," said Harvey. "You don't get any air-conditioning in here?"

"It's broken," said Al. "I'm hot too."

"You're hot," said Harvey. "I've been sweating my balls off, I can't even get a nice room to cool off in. It's like an oven in here." He wrinkled his nose. "And your feet smell."

"It's these sneakers," said Al. "I gotta get a new pair." He turned off the Met game. "You want a Diet Pepsi?"

Harvey waved his hand dismissively and sat down in a scratchy, floral-print chair that made his back itch.

"And Fort Lee," he asked. "I got to come all the way out to Fort fuckin' Lee? You know it's four fuckin' dollars get back in the city?"

"Just looking after your security there, Harvey," said Al. "So how'd it go?"

"I thought he was going to pat me down or something. I'm standing there with the guy and I'm thinking, These guys are huggin' each other all the time. What happens he gives me a hug and feels it there. I end up in the fuckin' trunk of a car. One pat on the back and that's it. You know he put his hand on my shoulder. I thought I was gonna let go in my pants."

"But it went alright?"

"I'm here aren't I?"

"So what happened?" asked Al.

"We went out for a walk-talk," said Harvey. "Down Spring, up West Broadway, over Prince, and back. He was nervous. Says people are watching him, he's got to be careful."

"Well, he's right about that," said Al.

"I gave him the money," said Harvey.

"All of it?" asked Al. "You didn't give him a story?"

"I gave him what I was supposed to. It's on tape."

"He say anything interesting?"

"It's all on the fuckin' tape," said Harvey. "Listen to it."


"He seemed nervous. And pissed off about something. Didn't talk much. Just 'Where's the money, make sure you have it together for next week.' He asked about the other people. The people from Brooklyn. Whether I'd seen any of them around."

"What did you say?"

"I said no. What do you think?"

"Did he believe you?"

"I don't know. Like I said, he seemed pissed about something."

Harvey got up from his chair and went to the bathroom. He took a few sheets of toilet paper and wiped under his
arms. He found a water glass wrapped in paper on the counter. He took one of the sodas off the night table, unwrapped the glass, and poured himself half a glass of Diet Pepsi.

"Shit is warm."
"Sorry, I've been here awhile. It was cold when I got it."
"They don't have ice here?"
"There's a machine by the office," said Al. "But I didn't want to leave the room."
"I didn't see your little red Alfa out there," said Harvey.
"No. I got something else today," said Al. "You see the black van on the other side of the lot? Got a sunroof and a mural on the side? That's me."

Harvey peered through the blinds. The van was parked all the way over. The mural on the side depicted a black man standing in front of some extraterrestrial landscape, surrounded by bejeweled naked women with melon-sized breasts, "Who's the schvoogie on the side?" Harvey inquired.

"Jimi Hendrix," said Al. "I think so anyway. It's a fuckin' seventies whorehouse on wheels, that thing. Carpet, beanbag chairs. Got it off DEA, they took it off some druggie—Florida, I think."

Harvey took a sip of his warm soda and sat back in the chair.
"I went out with the chef the other night," he said.
"That's Michael, the chef—isn't it?"
"Yeah," said Harvey. "He's French, you know. Or his family's French. I don't know,"
"So?"

"Well we go out for some drinks together. Talk about the menu, discuss a few things. Well, all night long he's bitchin' about his chef's knife. It's some expensive Jap knife he got custom made, costs about a million dollars, they got to measure your hand and everything to make it. Anyway, he's bitchin' about it getting all fucked up. He comes in the other day and it's all beaten to shit like somebody's been pounding on it with a hammer. There were chunks missing out of the thing, blade all bent up. Like somebody tried to cut through a chain-link fence with it. So after he comes into my office and a lot of pissing and moaning, I sent him out to get a new one. Cost me five hundred bucks. So we're sitting there at this bar and he's going on and on about his fuckin' knife and who could have done such a thing and I start thinking. I'm thinking about when the knife got so fucked up. See the chef keeps asking who could've done it and I realize who it was in the kitchen the night before. It was that night Sally was there."

"What did you tell him?" asked Al.
"Michael? I didn't tell him anything. I don't really know anything. I mean, I know who was down there, Sally and Tommy and all. But what am I going to say? I told him maybe the porters did it trying to scrape out a pot or something."
"That satisfy him?"
"I guess so."

"So what are you telling me, Harvey," said Al. "Sally is dropping by your kitchen in the middle of the night to play with knives? Is that what you're telling me, Harvey?"
"I don't know. I don't know who did it. I just know Sally and Tommy were there that night."
"Maybe it was somebody else," said Al.
"Everybody in the place knew about that fuckin' knife. Nobody was to touch it. Chef told everybody. Cooks, waiters, dishwashers, porters. He told them all a million times. Somebody put a little ding in it one time, he called a staff meeting to tell everybody not to touch his damn knife."
"And it wasn't the porters," said Al.
"The porters weren't there," said Harvey.
"Right, right," said Al.
"Anyway I thought about that today when I'm talking to Sally."
"Anything unusual about the place when you came in?"
"When?"
"The day after Sally used the place."
"Unusual. Like what?"
"Like how did the place look? Ashtrays full of mysterious cigar butts? Any booze missing? Sinatra tapes you didn't previously own left in the machine? Anybody cook anything? Maybe Sally just had a few friends over for a late supper. Fucked up the knife cutting lamb chops for some buddies. You see any dirty plates with some half-eaten lamb chops on them? Help me out here."
"No. I was the first one in. There was no plates. Somebody did them all."
Eighteen

The Chef stepped reluctantly into the shower. The bathroom was filled with steam. It was a hot day, but he broke into goose bumps. The drain wasn't working well, and soon empty bottles of shampoo and conditioner were bobbing around him in the ankle-deep water, souvenirs of a long-gone girlfriend.

Teeth chattering, the chef turned off the water and wrapped himself tightly in a dirty towel. He stood shivering in front of the mirror.

His face in the bathroom mirror was pale and bloodless. Tiny pupils floated around in watery, bloodshot eyes. His thick brown hair was too long, sticking up at odd angles, and his sideburns were uneven. The chef opened his mouth and grimaced at himself, examining his teeth. One tooth was missing on the right side, but you couldn't see it; there was one crumbling molar on the left, also invisible to the casual observer, and a chipped eyetooth.

The chef moved his eyes down over his naked, bony chest: protruding ribs, the stomach that was showing the beginnings of a paunch. He examined his arms. There were no tracks to speak of, only a small, yellowish bruise in the crook of his left arm. He walked into the living area of his narrow apartment and put a CD into a portable player. He looked around the room.

The chef was suddenly struck by how little remained in the way of possessions from his previous lives. There was a mattress on the floor, a twenty-one-inch TV set, the CD player, a few CDs, the tiny speakers. A few cables lay useless on a bare shelf, left behind when he sold the tuner, amplifier, cassette deck, turntable, and big speakers. The records were gone too—sold off with most of his books. He'd actually stood there in the street, selling his treasured collection of cookbooks, the classic LPs from the sixties and seventies, many of them irreplaceable. The first Stooges album . . . that Yardbirds record that was only on the shelf a week before they pulled it . . . the Dolls records . . . that Nazz album, the one with the red vinyl. . . All gone. Sold for as little as a dollar each.

The Velvet Underground played "Sweet Jane" in the background while he dressed. He selected a long-sleeve three-button T-shirt from his closet, first sniffing it to determine if it was clean enough. He put on a pair of tight black Levi's, ripped in the knee; tube socks; and a pair of black elkskin cowboy boots with damaged heels.

He rummaged around in the pile of unpaid bills and unopened mail on the top of his desk (not a desk really; just a sheet of plywood resting on cinder blocks and milk crates). Underneath a rent notice, he found the white pamphlet he was looking for. He folded it neatly and slipped it into his pants pocket. He took a last look at himself in the bathroom mirror, ran his hands through his hair, turned off the music, and let himself out the door.

He was sniffling and covered with a sickly sweat by the time he reached Cooper Square. He checked the address on the pamphlet and walked into an anonymous, municipal-type building through double glass doors. A security guard stopped him just inside the lobby.

"Who do you want to see?" demanded the guard.
"I'd like to see Mr. James, the director of Intake," said the chef.
"And your name is?"
"Ricard . . . Michael Ricard. I spoke to him on the phone."

The security guard stepped over to a small desk and turned down a clock radio playing soca music. He pressed the intercom button and paged Mr. James to come to the front desk. There was a short wait. The elevator doors opened, and a stout black man with a shaved head and military bearing emerged, looking distracted and in a hurry.

"Mr. Ricard," he said, shaking the chef's hand like he was taking his pulse. "If you'd come with me, please."

They took the elevator to the second floor and walked down a long hall that smelled of disinfectant. The walls were painted institutional green. The floor was gray linoleum, worn through in spots. The chef noticed posters scotch-taped to the walls, saying things like DO NOT LOITER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD and REMEMBER TO THOROUGHLY CLEAN AND STERILIZE YOUR WORKS.

They passed a long line of identical cubicles. The doors were open, and inside each one, the chef could see a bored counselor sitting at a desk, with maybe a potted plant and a file cabinet. In each room, an animated junkie sat in a chair on the other side of the desk, spinning a tale of woe. The chef heard one loud voice, protesting an injustice. "I was jus' standin there," said the voice. "I wasn't doin no drugs. I wasn't lookin for no drugs . . . They took my bottle off a me. Man said he was gonna put a cap in my ass! I said 'Whassup with that?' Now you tellin me I gotta go back to six-day? That's cold. Really cold . . ."

Mr. James led him down another hallway and into a large room, overlit with dirty fluorescent lights, where there were two badly formed lines of impatient and loudly complaining junkies waiting for the two bullnecked nurses at the counter to dispense methadone.
As each junkie reached the head of the line, the nurse put bright orange diskettes into a clear plastic cup, added hot water from a coffee urn, and handed it over. The person being medicated would add orange drink to the cup from the plastic pitchers on the counter and then stir the mixture with thin wooden stirrers. It was typically a swollen, puffy-fingered hand, covered with purple stripes and scar tissue, that would raise cup to mouth.

They drank greedily. Adding more orange drink to the cup, they would stir again, drink once more, the people on line behind them growing more impatient.

Mr. James led the chef back to a small office with a view of an air shaft. He motioned to a vinyl-backed chair, and the chef sat down. Mr. James took a clean file from his gray metal desk and sat down on the window sill. He started by asking the chef for his full name, current address, and age.

"Mr. Ricard, how long have you been using heroin?"

"A little over three years, regularly," answered the chef.

"By regularly, you mean every day?"

"Yes."

"And how much heroin do you use on a daily basis at present?"

"Don't know, it depends . . . Three, four, five, sometimes six dime bags. Depends we're talking downtown bags or midtown bags. Two or three midtown bags will get me through."

"You shoot it?"

"Only in the last like six months. I just started. That's why I'm in such a rush to get on the program. I think, I know I've crossed some sort of line. I used to snort it. I got my habit snorting."

"You share your works?"

"Never," said the chef proudly. "I buy a new set every time. I never share."

"You're addicted to heroin?"

"I'm addicted to heroin," said the chef.

"Because that's not a lot. That's not a lot of heroin. Have you considered seven-day detox?"

"I can't. I work. I still have a good job. I can't disappear for a week, a month. I got responsibilities. I've tried to kick on my own. It didn't work out."

"Three years is not a long time."

"Really?"

"Most of our patients have been using for much longer by the time they get here. Most of them ten years or more. Some have been using as long as thirty years."

The chef just nodded.

"Use heroin today?" asked Mr. James.

"Not yet," answered the chef. "But I'm sick now."

"Use any other drugs?"

"Today?

"In general."

"Well," said the chef, hesitating.

"Cocaine?"

"Occasionally."

"What's occasionally?"

"One or two times a month."

"Crack or powder?"

"Powder. I've done the other thing, but mostly just powder."

"Depressants or hypnotics?"

"Not really. I'll score some Valium on the street sometimes if I can't get to sleep and I can't get any dope."

"Amphetamines? Speed?"

"No. Never."

"Street methadone?"

"A couple of times I've bought it when I can't get heroin."

"How about alcohol?"

"I can't. I can't drink when I'm doing dope. It doesn't sit in my stomach right."

"What about when you don't have heroin?"

"Like a fish. To excess. Whatever it takes to knock myself out."

"Marijuana?"

"Yeah. Every day."

Mr. James wrote something in the file.
"Prescription drugs. Are you currently being treated by a doctor for any illness or condition with prescription drugs?"

"No."

"Okay," said Mr. James, slamming the file shut. "Mr. Ricard, as you know, as I explained on the phone, there's a waiting list to enter this program. There are a lot of people who'd like to get in, and most of them have drug problems far more serious than yours. Many of them have been on other programs. Have you been on any other program?"

"No," said the chef.

Mr. James opened the file and made a small notation before shutting it again. "As I said on the phone, there's a waiting list."

"I had hoped, I like to think that I would be a patient with a good chance of success," said the chef.

"You say you're serious about rehabilitating yourself—" continued Mr. James, oblivious to the pleading tone creeping into the chef's voice.

"Very serious," said the chef eagerly. "I have to get out of the life. As soon as I can."

Mr. James continued as if he hadn't heard him. "You know this program, this clinic in particular, has been recognized by the state as the best, most effective in the country" He pointed to a state-issued license and a certificate of commendation in a frame on the wall. "You were sensible to come here."

"I'd like to know if—"

Mr. James cut him off. "You know what methadone maintenance is? You know what that means?"

"It means I get on and stay on, for an extended period."

"Exactly. You're sure that's the right option for you? There's counseling and various detox programs."

"Mr. James, I'm a chef. I can't get away and go to Minneapolis. I can't do that."

"You say you're a chef?"

"Yes."

"My son's a chef," said Mr. James, warming to the subject. "He's a garde-manger at the Sheraton."

"Oh, really?"

"He went to school for it, too. He graduated from the New York School of Restaurant Arts."

"Yeah? I've seen their ads on TV. They're supposed to be good," lied the chef.

"Once you're in the program—assuming the doctor sees you, I okay you—it's usually a long-term commitment. We encourage patients to stay with it, sometimes for many years. We have found that the longer a person stays on the program, the less likely he or she will return to heroin."

"I've read the literature," said the chef.

"So you understand."

"I'm a desperate man, Mr. James," said the chef, half smiling, trying his best to be disarming. He looked for encouragement in Mr. James's eyes, saw only zeal, a faraway look, like that of a religious fanatic. "I want to get off dope. I don't want to find myself, in a few months or a year, slipping back into it. I want to be sure. I want out of the life. I don't want to have to score on the street anymore. I want to stop having to look for dope every day. If that means staying on the program for life, that's fine. I don't want any chance—any chance that I could fall back. I don't want to risk it. I don't want to have to think about it." The chef looked Mr. James in the face. "I don't want to have to trust myself."

"You understand, once you're admitted, you'll have to give a urine sample on a weekly basis. Or more frequently if requested by your counselor."

"That's fine."

"That means no other drugs. If your urine comes up positive for any other drugs, then you're going to have a big problem. If it comes up negative for methadone you'll have a problem. No messing around with your dose—you must take your medication every day. If we find, if the counselor assigned to you thinks you have misused your medication, you can be thrown out of the program. That means, not taking your methadone, selling your methadone, losing your take-home bottles, going on another program simultaneously. When you start here, you'll come in five days a week to be medicated. The sixth day you go to Saturday Clinic on 124th Street. They'll give you your Saturday dose and one take-home bottle. If your urines are clean, no other problems, your counselor can recommend a change in your schedule."

"What's the best schedule you can get?"

"One or two times a week, if it is felt that it's indicated, if it's approved by me. You screw around with your take-homes, we find out you're loitering in the neighborhood near the clinic, you have a dirty urine—you go right back to a six-day schedule, or worse."

"I understand," said the chef.
"Okay, Mr. Ricard," said Mr. James, consulting a calendar and a sheet of paper in the middle of a clipboard, "I can schedule you a doctor's appointment here in three weeks." He consulted a desk calendar. "That'll be the third, ten o'clock in the morning. You'll be examined by the doctor before you can be medicated. After the examination, you can get your methadone right away."

"Three weeks?"
"That's the best I can do," said Mr. James.
"But what do I do till then?"
"I can't tell you what to do or not to do."
"I have to keep scoring on the street till then? I have to keep doing dope?"
"I'm not saying that," said Mr. James.
"What should I do?"
"You should return here in three weeks. That's the soonest there's a place. You're still interested? You'll show up the third?"
"Yes," said the chef glumly. "I'll be here."
"Okay, then." Mr. James stood up and opened his office door. He let the chef out and closed and locked the door behind them. He walked the chef to the elevator and shook his hand.
"There's no way to get in sooner?" asked the chef.
"Sorry. See you the third."
The chef took the elevator down and walked out into the afternoon sun, soca music fading away behind him.

Across the street were a row of benches set alongside a small triangular park where office workers and students on lunch break sat munching Sabrett hot dogs or eating salads from plastic deli containers. Old men fed pigeons; a few of them, homeless, bare-chested, their shirts balled up as pillows, slept in the hot sun. The chef sat down, his legs tormenting him. He held his face in his hands and started to cry.

There was a voice behind him. "Hot sixty, hot sixty, got a hot sixty right here."

It was a skeletal black man with long, purple tracks on his neck. He had the pupilless cartoon bunny eyes and Popeye arms of a long-term junkie. He wore dirty gray sweatpants, loose at the hips, with his underpants pulled up near his navel. He didn't have a shirt. His filthy toes poked through holes in his high-top sneakers.

"What?" asked the chef.

"Hot sixty, B. Sixty milligrams, still warm," said the man. He held up a small screw-top bottle with orange liquid inside.

"How much?" asked the chef.
"Thirty dollar," said the man, putting the bottle back in a crumpled brown paper bag.
"I don't have it," said the chef dejectedly. "I just don't have it."

The man continued down the row of benches. "Hot sixty. Hot sixty."

The chef bent over and retrieved a twenty-dollar bill from inside his sock. He folded it up and held it tightly in his fist. His aching legs carried him east.

At Third Street, he crossed Avenue A, then B, then C. He heard the distant shout of "Open! Toilet's open!" A man holding a can waved at him and said "Green light. Got it good." He continued walking. A voice on a rooftop cried out, "Feo! Feo!" Someone asked him "Whassup, whassup?" "Yo, Flaco! Hey, Flaco!" He kept walking.

He passed a restless line of customers jostling each other outside a burned-out tenement. A heavily muscled Dominican holding a baseball bat was yelling, "Have your money out the long way. No singles. No talking on the line. Have your money ready."

Across the street, more junkies were lined up in an abandoned lot. Overhead, a rusting paint bucket on a string descended from a third-floor apartment. The bucket went down with the dope, was pulled back up again with the next customer's money. Each time the bucket descended, the customer at the head of the line would reach in, remove the dope, and then hurry away.

There was a cry of "Bajando!" from a rooftop. The bucket was pulled up and disappeared inside the apartment. The lines of junkies broke apart into ragged little groups making wide circles on the sidewalk, trying to look casual while they waited for the police to pass. The Dominican with the bat was saying, "Keep moving, keep moving," and waving people away from his stoop. A police cruiser turned the corner and rolled by, a sleepy blond policeman in the passenger seat looking over the chef without interest. When it turned the corner at the end of the block, the junkies instantly regrouped.

Just before Avenue D, an old man with a handful of stolen belts approached the chef and offered syringes. "Works, a dollar. Brand-new Blue-Tip works." From across the street, other voices: A woman called out from a doorway, someone cried, "Laredo's open," another voice offered "Try-It-Again," another, "Red Tape." The chef ignored them. Next to an abandoned public school, he approached the alcove of a five-story apartment building. A pudgy, Indian-looking woman with a black eye peered at him through the smudged glass of the dented front door. She opened the door a crack and said, "Show me some ID."

The chef rolled up his left sleeve and showed her the bruise on his left arm.
"Don't look like nothin'," she said.
"I been here a million times," whined the chef.
"Wait a minute," said the woman. "Marcial!" she cried.
A thick-chested man wearing a Toltec face mask stepped into the alcove and opened the outer door.
"You know this guy?" asked the woman.
"What do you want?" the man asked the chef.
"Manteca," said the chef. "I want some D."
"You know him?" the woman asked again.

The man looked the chef over carefully. "I seen him before." He let the chef inside the alcove and opened the inner door, using a key from a crowded key chain on his hip. He led the chef down a hallway and up two flights of
crumbling plasterboard. One raggedy-looking man with his arm in a cast crawled under a rusting box spring to hide.

On the second floor, they turned left. The man used another key on a steel-reinforced door with an enlarged peephole. Inside was an unfurnished apartment. They passed through a living area strewn with more crack bottles, bottle caps, candy wrappers, and condoms. There was a filthy kitchenette piled with food-encrusted dishes and empty take-out containers. A small religious icon stood on top of a nonworking refrigerator. At the rear of the kitchenette, a man-size hole had been bashed through the raw brick wall into the abandoned public school next door. The man took a flashlight out of the refrigerator and played the light around in the dark beyond the hole. "You know how to get up there?" he asked. The chef nodded and clambered quickly through the hole.

It was pitch black inside. It was cooler, and it smelled of piss and burning candles. It was damp, rain had come through the roof, and the chef had to step carefully in the dark, feeling with his toes for the lengths of plywood laid across the crossbeams in the ankle-deep black water, afraid the floor would give way and he'd fall through. A line of flickering votive candles placed every few yards lit the path. The chef picked his way through the dark, stepping on spongy bits of water-logged cardboard, the plywood pathway frequently sinking below the water. He turned a corner and heard people speaking Spanish. He had to climb through another hole, which was cut through sheetrock, and into another hall. A man loomed up in front of him, pushed a flashlight in his face. He held a Tec-9 pistol in the other hand and waved with it, directing the chef into a bombed-out classroom.

There was light in this room. It streamed through two shattered and paneless windows that looked down over an empty lot. The ceiling was water-damaged and sagged dangerously, wires hanging from the crumbling wet plaster above. More than thirty junkies stood restless and uncomfortable in small groups, waiting silently to be ushered elsewhere by the man with the pistol.

A short blond hooker with thinning hair wearing a tight bustier and tighter cut-offs stood in front of the chef. "Are they serving?" he whispered to her. She turned around and whispered, "Yeah, they just opened it up again," showing the chef a glimpse of rotted teeth.

"Shut up in there!" yelled the man with the pistol from the hall.

The chef could see the occasional figure moving past the doorway in the hall, heading back to the street. The man with the pistol stepped into the holding room and directed another small group into a hallway to the right. As the chef moved closer, he could make out another group of dark figures lined up in a stairwell. Every few seconds, another dark silhouette, moving quickly, would hurry down the stairs and past the doorway, transaction completed. He could hear them stumbling and sloshing through the water on their way back to the street.

Finally the chef's small group was called. The line closed up, more junkies wandering in to take their place. The chef's group walked up the steps single file. "Watch the third step," said the man with the pistol. He shined a light on the missing step; inside the hollow space was a piece of plywood booby-trapped with razor blades and nails. The line moved up the steps at short intervals. At the top, the chef could make out a jerry-built barrier, lit from behind by a single burning candle. The hooker in front of him approached the barrier. The chef saw it was covered by a blanket. She whispered, "Gimme a deck," in the dark. The blanket moved a bit.

Behind it, he could see a cage built of chicken wire, corrugated steel, roofing material, and pieces of wood planking. A hand extended out from behind the blanket and took the hooker's money and reemerged holding a bundle of glassine bags held together by a rubber band. She turned and stumbled back down the stairs on high heels.

"Cuánto?" He answered, "Dame dos grandes," and handed over his twenty-dollar bill. The hand reappeared holding two bags with EXECUTIVE stamped on them in smeared black ink. The man behind him on line growled, "Step off, chump," menacingly, and the chef had only a second to glimpse the two hunched, dark figures in the flickering candlelight behind the blanket before the blanket fell and he had to hurry down the steps.

He had just reached the last step, just outside the holding area, when he heard shouting below. From the roof came cries of "Bajando! Red light! Bajando!" There was the sound of the door to some secret escape hatch being opened as the two workers in the cage gathered up the drugs and the money; there was another sharper sound as the hatch shut behind them and they slipped into the dark bowels of the building. Suddenly panicked junkies were running in every direction. Frantic figures, looking for hiding places or a way to escape, pushed past him, banging into walls in the dark. He ran toward the only light, the holding room. People were clambering out the windows, jumping down a story into the trash-strewn lot. The chef saw blue uniforms down there standing over the prone figures of hapless junkies, putting on handcuffs, kicking legs apart.

The chef could hear them coming, the sound of their squawking radios getting louder and louder. Outside the holding room, he could see their flashlights moving toward him, reflecting off the water and through the holes in the crumbling plasterboard. One raggedy-looking man with his arm in a cast crawled under a rusting box spring to hide.
Another struggled desperately to pull up a rotting floorboard, then disappeared down into the hole. A small, emaciated-looking man with an Orioles cap pushed past the chef and slipped whimpering into the narrow space behind the plasterboard in the wall. Without thinking, the chef squeezed in after him. He caught a last glimpse of the man's eyes, frightened and rodentlike, before he was swallowed up by the dark. He edged after him, sideways, splinters penetrating his shirt and tearing at his hands. In seconds, the cops were in the room.

"Come outta there, dirt-bag!" he heard one yell. "Hands over your head! HANDS OVER YOUR HEAD MOTHERFUCKER I BLOW YOUR FUCKIN' HEAD OFF! GET DOWN ON THE FLOOR! GET DOWN ONNA FLOOR! ARMS AND LEGS SPREAD!!"

He heard them pull back the box spring and pull the man with the cast out from beneath it. He heard them call to the man in the floor, chuckling at first, then angry; shouts and threats as they had to go in after him. He could hear, "I'm stuck! I'm stuck inna pipes." There was a crash as the man was pulled free and dropped onto the floor. Then the clicking of handcuffs.

"Anybody else?" asked a policeman.
"I didn't see anybody," said another.
"Check back there," said another. "These guys are like fuckin' cock-a-roaches.'

Lights danced briefly through the tiny holes in the plaster in front of the chef. He shifted his weight slowly in the dark, trying not to breathe. The light moved away for a moment. The man with the Orioles cap twitched. The chef could feel the man's leg pressed up against him as the little man struggled silently to brace himself. The chef remained motionless. He felt something wet and warm on his leg and realized the little man had pissed in his pants.

"Anybody in there, come on out," said a policeman. An arm, reaching into the narrow entrance with a flashlight, scraped blindly around inside the wall for a few long seconds, knocking paint chips and plaster onto the floor, then moved away.

"Anybody in there?" asked a voice.
"Fuck if I know,' another voice responded. "I can't fuckin' fit in there. I can't get my head around."
"Fuck it," said the other "Let the rats have 'em, anybody in there. You wanna try it, hotshot?"
"I sure ain't squeezin in there," said another voice.
"Anybody else up here?" said a new, more authoritative voice.

Somebody banged a nightstick against the wall a few times. More plaster dust fell in the chef's hair. Another voice, coming from the opening to the wall, said, "I think there's somebody in there. I can see something."

The flashlight reappeared again, banging around at the end of an arm in the narrow entrance.

"What is it?" asked a voice.

The chef held his breath.
"I don't know, I think there's somebody in there. I can see clothes or something," said the nearest voice.
"Can you get to it?"
"No. Maybe run down to the car get a sledgehammer, we can find out for sure," said the cop.
"Fuck that, I'm not humpin' all the way down the car and back up again in this shit."
"Call on the radio," suggested another voice.
"Fuck it, we got enough. It's prolly just garbage. These animals put the garbage in the fuckin' walls."
"We got enough."
"Let's go then. We all done here?" asked the authoritative voice.
"We got these two," said another voice.

The radios began to squawk again. The chef could hear the junkies being bundled off by the cops. There were muttered curses as the cops stumbled and slogged off into the distance, their radios getting fainter and fainter.

After a few minutes, there was no more sound from the holding room on the other side of the wall. The chef felt the little man next to him squirming around, trying to push his way out.

"C'mon, man," said the little man. "I wanna get out. I pissed in my fuckin' pants."
"Sssshh," said the chef, still listening for police.
"They gone, B," said the little man.
"Hold on," said the chef, cautiously.
"They gone. Five-O be gone," said the little man.
"I'm not sure," said the chef.
"It's four o'clock, four-thirty," said the man. "Shift change for the mothafuckas. They goin' back to the precinct, write it up, get some overtime."

The chef slid carefully out of the wall. He stood there picking splinters out of his palms and his shirt. The little man emerged, blinking. He crept up to the window and peered over the sill. "They gone," said the little man. "They ain't comin' back today." He reached into his sock and took out a dime bag. He rooted around in his underwear for a
set of works, found them, and laid them out on the floor. He found a bottle cap on a mattress and picked up a cigarette butt and removed the cotton from the filter. "I gotta find some water," the little man said. He left the room for a minute, returning with a soda can. He emptied the bag of heroin into the bottle cap and began to prepare his shot.

The chef rolled up a crumpled single, and snorted one of his bags in one long draft.
"You shouldn't waste it like that, bro'," said the little man.

Upstairs, in the dark, the chef could hear the workers returning to their cage behind the barrier. From the roof came voices: "Open!" "Green light!" "Open!"
It was four o'clock in the morning, and it was raining outside Tommy's Morton Street apartment. Tommy stood, naked except for his bowling shirt, looking out at the empty street. He was thinking about the van.

On the bed, Cheryl was asleep. It was hot, in spite of the rain, and she was naked, sleeping on top of the sheets, head tucked under a crushed pillow, snoring gently. Tommy's cat slept also, curled up close to Cheryl's stomach.

Tommy was wide awake. It was that goddamn van. He was worried about that. He turned away from the window and looked at Cheryl on the bed. One delicate ankle extended over the side, toenails painted red, her ribs moving rhythmically in and out with her breathing.

He thought he was being followed. He was almost sure of it. When he left the Dreadnaught at the end of his shift, Tommy had seen a graffiti-covered delivery van pull out from a space directly across from the restaurant. A man, only a shape with eyes, really, had appeared to look right at him for a second. It had startled him.

He had put it out of his mind. But then there it was again when he turned up Sixth Avenue toward Morton Street; he had seen the van again, rolling slowly up Sixth, a block behind him. Even then, he had not been too concerned.

Shit like that happened all the time, he told himself. He saw the same trucks—the fish guy, the produce, the meat company, the dry-goods truck—he saw them all the time, all over town. He could recognize many of the drivers by now; he'd wave and they'd sometimes wave back.

But this van . . . this van was unfamiliar. Tommy had never noticed it before. The way it was covered with graffiti, unlike the others . . . And it didn't look like it was delivering anything, sitting outside the Dreadnaught at eleven at night. Tommy knew most of the trucks that delivered to the other restaurants on Spring Street. He knew who got their fish from Rozzo, their meat from New York Beef, West-Conn, their tortillas from La Barbone . . . It was the sort of thing you noticed after a while. You even talked about it, chuckling over the fact that the Villa Nova used a fish company you knew to have been indicted for substituting skate for scallops. Tommy had remarked on such things, sitting out front with the chef, watching the trucks pull up in front of other restaurants on the block.

You remembered what the trucks looked like, like you remembered the companies that short-weighted you, arrived late, didn't arrive at all. You took note if you saw your fish company making a delivery down the street when you hadn't got your order yet.

No, he didn't know this van . . . There was nothing written, no sign anyway, on the side. Only the graffiti, layer upon layer of it, spray-painted front, back, and sides as if the van had been parked in one place for a very long time, so the kids put their tags on it.

Even after he saw the van on Sixth, he had been all right. No reason to freak out, he thought. No big thing. Maybe it was some independent, a jobber . . . Some guy from Queens or one of the boroughs, owned a truck and ran around town, shopping for bargains for a small group of customers. There were a lot of guys like that in the produce market, working on almost no capital, trying to hustle up a living, working odd hours. No big thing. Coincidence.

Tommy had walked over to Chumley's for a few pints, ended up playing liars' poker with some cooks from Formerly Joe's. He had lost thirteen dollars and left the bar around one o'clock. He had gone out through the hidden entrance, through the courtyard, though a sign inside the door told you not to, and the van had been there again.

A half block down, toward the river, in a space in front of a hydrant. He saw two dark shapes, sitting immobile behind the dash.

Suddenly he had become stone cold sober. And scared. He had walked from Chumley's down to Seventh, faked a right, and then bolted left, jogging up Seventh Avenue, his heart pounding in his ears. Seventh Avenue ran downtown; there was no way, he reasoned, that they could follow him in the van. Maybe they were coming after him on foot though . . .

He had run uptown to Woody's, where Montana Eve used to be. He had worked briefly at Montana Eve. He knew there was an emergency exit in the back dining room that didn't sound an alarm if you went through it. You could walk in from Seventh, go straight back, through the bar, across the dining room, and exit onto Charles Street. Not many people knew about the door on Charles, it was tucked under some stairs and there was no sign, no outward indication it opened into the restaurant.

Tommy had gone straight through, pushed past some bar customers, crossed the dining room, and slipped out the door. On Charles Street he had removed his shirt, wrapped it around his head like an Arab headdress, and strolled casually toward Bleecker, looking, as this was the West Village, no more peculiar than anybody else on the street at that hour.

At Bleecker, he'd hailed a cab and had the driver drop him at the corner of Morton and Hudson, around the corner
from his apartment.

He had walked up the steps to his front door and was trying to get the key in the lock with shaking hands when he saw the van again. It was waiting for him, a few car-lengths down the street in a no parking zone. Frightened and confused, he had let himself in and then sat, crouched behind the front door in the alcove. Afraid to peek.

Now, much later, he looked out the open window of the apartment, searching the street for the van. It was gone. Tommy wondered if he could sleep. He didn't think so. Too much to think about. Was somebody really following him?

He lit a new cigarette from the end of the one he was smoking and ground the butt into an overflowing ashtray on the floor. His foot stubbed up against an empty beer bottle and sent it rolling under the bed. Cheryl stirred in her sleep. The cat woke, got up, changed position, and curled up again, her head on Cheryl's arm. Now that, thought Tommy, is peace of mind. Not a lot to worry about in the cat universe. Should I sleep or should I eat? That's all a cat had to worry about. Tommy couldn't do either of those things lately . . . Freddy's bleeding head, the apron as it soaked through with blood, Freddy's mouth opening and closing the way you see goldfish do . . . the images followed Tommy around. He was afraid to dream.

And now there was the van. It had been following him. They were waiting for him outside his apartment. Who could it be? It wouldn't be anybody from Sally's crew, Tommy told himself. Even Skinny—who obviously had doubts about sharing knowledge of a murder with Tommy—even Skinny wouldn't follow him around in a fucking van! If they were mad at Tommy, if they had a problem with him, worried about him keeping his mouth shut, they wouldn't shadow him in a van . . . They'd just call him up on the phone, tell him his mother was sick; invite him to a ball game; or have Harvey call him in to work in the early morning. On the way someone would step up to him and shoot him in the head.

No. It couldn't be Sally. Tommy tried to reassure himself. Sally was his uncle, for Chrissakes! Sally fancied himself his older brother, his surrogate father, regardless of how Tommy felt about it. He had no need to follow Tommy around in a van. He knew where Tommy lived. He knew where he worked. He could come over any time, or send somebody. He could call him on the phone, arrange to meet Tommy somehow, that would be all it took.

"Hey, Tommy!" somebody would call out to him in the street, "How ya doin'? Ain't seen, you in ages . . ." Maybe somebody Tommy knew as a kid, somebody he'd played dodgeball with in second grade, an old friend. He'd smile and Tommy would reach for the extended hand, the warm greeting, the hug, and ba-da-bing—ba-da-boom! No more Tommy.

So, if it wasn't Sally, or any of Sally's people . . . Who the fuck could it be? Why would the cops be watching him? Well . . . he knew why they might want to watch him . . . But how could they know about Freddy? There had been nothing in the papers . . . Nobody had come around the restaurant looking for Freddy. No cops asking questions, looking for evidence. Sally and Skinny sure weren't going to say anything . . . Why would the cops be watching him? Except for the other night, Tommy had stayed away from all that for years and years . . . If something was going on with the cops, Sally would have warned him, right? Wouldn't he? Tommy considered this for a moment. He decided that Sally would have told him if there was some kind of investigation, if only for his own protection. Sally and Skinny wouldn't want him going down to an interrogation unprepared. They'd be ready with the lawyers, their lawyers . . .

Tommy looked out the window again. Still no van. He sat down in front of the TV. The volume was down all the way. He tried to get interested in some footage of Stuka dive-bombers dropping high explosive on Warsaw. The Discovery Channel. Cheryl called it the War Channel. Panzer tanks rolled silently across the screen, scenes of bridges blowing, farmhouses burning, the Polish cavalry making a heroic, futile charge against the mechanized Nazi hordes . . .

He got up again and walked over to the window. He heard the distant warble of a car alarm from the direction of the river. There were no pedestrians, only a homeless guy, sorting through garbage bags across the street. In the spot where the van had been, Tommy noticed a Jeep Explorer, its windows tinted dark. Somebody could be in there, Tommy thought. Fie felt the hair on the back of his neck rising. Somebody could be in there, looking up at me right now, and I wouldn't know it. He stepped back from the window, moved forward again carefully. He tried to make out a shape or shapes behind the tinted glass, but he couldn't.

He considered going down to look, but that would be stupid. He didn't even know if he wanted to know for sure. Would that make it better? He didn't think so. It would only make it worse. If somebody really was following him . . . waiting for him at work, watching his apartment . . . If somebody was so interested in him they were following him around in a van, in a Jeep . . . Tommy didn't want to know. He wished he could forget about it. Put it out of his mind. He wanted to run away. He looked again at Cheryl on the bed, sleeping soundly with Tommy's cat. He wished he were someplace else with her. In the country maybe, a nice country inn. He'd cook, Cheryl would run the front desk. No Sally. No Skinny . . . no strange vans. Freddy's killing a distant, faraway memory, growing fainter and
fainter until he had no memory of it at all...

No reason for anybody to be worried about him keeping his mouth shut, he thought, thinking again of Sally and Skinny. They had to know he was a stand-up guy. Of course, his father had been a stand-up guy too. Look where it had gotten him. He still didn't know. They never found his father. Maybe if things had been different. If he'd met Diane sooner. Met Cheryl sooner . . . Maybe if Sally were dead and his father still alive . . . Maybe if his mother had been more like Diane's mother, not so willing to go along. If she hadn't let that endless procession of budding and veteran criminals trample through her kitchen and into Tommy's life. Tommy was ashamed of himself. Trying to blame his mother! Who was he kidding?

He sat down on the bed next to Cheryl, brushed the hair off her forehead. He ran a bent finger gently down her spine. He leaned over and ran his lips across her naked hip. Fear was making him horny. He ran a hand up over Cheryl's stomach, letting it stop, coming to rest just below her breasts. Cheryl came out of her slumber for a second. "Forget it," she said sleepily.

Tommy pulled back. Cheryl squirmed into the sheets for a few seconds and was soon fast asleep again.

Tommy picked up the chef's worn copy of *Down and Out in London and Paris* from the night table and read a few pages. He was too drunk to concentrate on the words. He wanted to lose himself in the underground passageways of the gargantuan Hotel X . . . haul ice through the cellars with Orwell, scrape fat, barehanded, off dinner plates with the *plongeurs* in the book . . .

He wanted to be in Paris, drunk in Paris. He wanted to be in Paris with Cheryl, rolling around in clean hotel sheets. He wanted to drown himself in Cheryl, live on room service, climb the Eiffel Tower . . . Do they let you go all the way to the top? He didn't know . . . He wanted to eat oysters in a little French cafe. He wanted to watch Cheryl eat a Belon oyster, watch her tip back her head and slurp one down, a real one, too, not one of those sorry-ass fakes they raise up in Maine. He wanted to drink absinthe, whatever that was, and smoke stinky French cigarettes . . .

He wanted the chef to be there, too . . . He could show them around. Maybe the chef could get work at some fancy bistro, open all hours. He and Cheryl could drop by to see him. The chef would feed them late supper, a platter of those little birds, the ones you ate with the bones still in them, and truffles as big as your fist . . .

Far, far away from Sally. Far away from trash bags full of dead men.

He wanted to stand in front of a house with wood shutters and a red-tiled roof, squinting into the sun, waiting for Cheryl to take the picture.
They sat at one of the better tables, near a gurgling fountain in the garden patio at the rear of the restaurant. Bright green ivy grew on the trellises behind them, and there were yellow tulips everywhere. Wealthy old ladies chatted in small groups at the other tables.

"You need money," his mother said; a statement, not a question. The chef nodded, trying to smile sheepishly.

"Remember how we used to make breakfast?" asked the chef's mother, changing the subject. "In France?"

"With the chocolate?" asked the chef, grateful his mother wasn't chiding him about the money.

"Yes," she said, "with the baguette, the Normandy butter and the big bowl of hot chocolate. We'd serve it in those big blue bowls."

"I loved that," said the chef. "I miss it. Can't do it here, it's not the same."

"It's the butter," said his mother.

She was tall and thin and elegant in a dark blue dress and a single strand of pearls. Her silver hair was put up in a tight bun, giving her countenance a severe aspect... Her face was pale and white, offset by the single slash of dark red lipstick. She sat ramrod straight in her chair and, with two long, manicured fingertips, removed a piece of tobacco from the tip of her tongue. Without turning her head, she sensed the waiter's approach, and she extinguished the unfiltered Gitane in a cut-glass ashtray.

The waiter placed an oversize china plate in front of her, saying, "Madame." She inspected the carre d'agneau without moving her head or changing her expression. Three tiny rib chops, impeccably trimmed, were crisscrossed on a stripe of sauce in the middle of the plate. An arrangement of baby vegetables, tied into little bundles with blanched bits of leek, surrounded the lamb. The waiter came around the table and put the chef's turbot down in front of him.

"Look how many truffles they put," said his mother in her slight French accent.

The chef smiled broadly. "Is that cooked to your liking, Maman?" he asked her.

"Parfait," she responded. She liked it when he called her Maman.

The waiter poured her a little more Côtes du Rhône, then lifted a bottle of Pouilly-Fuisse from a silver ice-bucket and refilled the chef's glass. He asked the chef's mother, in French, if there was anything else she would care for. She dismissed him, also in French.

The chef picked up a big piece of black truffle from the top of his turbot with his fingers and popped it in his mouth.

"Oh! Michel!" protested his mother, "not with the hands!"

The chef shook his head and picked up his fork and took a first bite of fish.

"Is it all right? It's moist in the center? It's not cooked too much?" asked his mother, peering across the table.

"It's fine," said the chef. He picked up the oversize white-wine glass and drank half its contents.

"You just got your fish and you've almost finished your wine," she said.

"I can always drink the rest of yours," he said. "You've hardly touched it."

"And stop squirming in your chair like that. Why can't you get comfortable? Something is always eating you," she said.

"Sorry," said the chef.

"And you drink too much," she added.

"I don't drink like this on a regular basis," said the chef. "It's just good wine. I don't drink a lot of wine this good. I'm trying to make the most of it."

She nodded and took a delicate bite from the center of her lamb chop. "I wish you had ordered some meat. You don't look well."

"Maybe it's my liver. Une crise de foie. I left the window open last night. The drafts, the night air..."

His mother frowned. "Don't make fun of me, Michel. It's not funny. You don't look well. I worry."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," scowled the chef. "I'm just working too damn hard. Not enough sleep."

"You don't even have health insurance. That terrible man you work for can't even give his people, his chef, health insurance. It's disgraceful."

"He can't afford it right now," said the chef. "I can't afford it."

His mother shook her head disapprovingly. "You could have worked here maybe. I could ask my friends. I'm sure he treats his people correctly here. You should let me ask."

"I couldn't be the chef here," said the chef. "I want to be in charge. I need the money, I can't afford to be just a
"All right," she said. "Not here then, somewhere else, where you could be the chef. Like this."

The chef shook his head slowly. "I couldn't work like this . . . I can't get up at four in the morning and go down Fulton Street and put my nose in a bunch of fish gills. I can't do fifteen, sixteen hours a day, six, seven days a week. And I'm just not that good to do this sort of food. Not as the chef anyway."

"That's a terrible defeatist attitude," said his mother. "You didn't always feel like this."

"Yeah, well, I'm getting older," said the chef.

"Exactly. Yes. You are getting older," said his mother. "And you still live like . . . like some sort of gypsy. Never enough money. Changing jobs, every two years another place, another apartment. No family, no insurance, you own nothing."

"I've always got you, right?" he said with a smile.

"Yes. For now. I won't always be here," she said. "I won't be here to help forever. Don't they pay you at your job?"

"They pay me," said the chef. "It's just everything is so expensive, you know. And I owe people money."

"You always owe people money. It's terrible to owe money. I don't owe anybody anything. I don't know how you live like that. And your friends, they look like a . . . like a motorcycle gang, not cuisiniers——"

The chef laughed and hurried to change the subject.

They ate quietly. His mother methodically stripped the last bits of fat from the lamb, leaving three thin white rib bones on an otherwise empty plate. The busboy appeared and removed the plates. The waiter pushed a cheese cart alongside the table. The chef's mother reached into her purse for her glasses and, perching them at the end of her nose, leaned over to inspect the cheese. After a moment's reflection she chose a runny-looking Pont l'Eveque. The chef, without looking, requested a wedge each of St. Andre and Camembert.

"I guess we like soft cheeses," said the chef.

"The cheese here is not the same. They ruin it for export," said his mother.

"They pasteurize it," said the chef.

"It's not the same," said his mother.

"Maybe you should live in France."

"Then how could I help you when you get in trouble. Who would give you money for your debts. Besides, I could not go back. It's a communist country now," she said.

"Socialist," corrected the chef.

"The same thing. De Gaulle should have put them all in prison. After the war."

The chef's mother took a last bite of cheese, dotted her mouth with the point of a napkin, and leaned forward. "Do you use a condom?" she asked.

Shocked, the chef tilted his head. "What?"

"When you, when you go out with your friends, maybe to meet a girl, some girl. Do you use a condom? I've been reading articles in the magazine."

"Yes, Maman," said the chef, embarrassed. He glanced at the surrounding tables to see if anyone else had heard. The old ladies at the next table were busy drinking martinis and commenting on the busboy's buttocks.

"Well, that is something. That's good. You should always use one," said his mother, satisfied.

"What have you been watching, Oprah or something?" asked the chef.

"What is Oprah?" inquired his mother.

"Forget it. Joke," said the chef.

"Qu'est ce que vous voulez comme dessert, madame?" inquired the waiter as the busboy whisked the cheese plates off the table. The chef's mother strained to see the dessert cart.

"Tell bucket-head to bring the cart closer," said the chef, slightly tipsy.

"SSSH! Ça suffit!"

The waiter had already moved over to the cart and was bringing it alongside the table. The chef's mother carefully scrutinized each item on the three-tiered pastry cart. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "Paris-Brest. Will you look, Michel, Paris-Brest. Remember?" She pointed a finger, and the waiter cut and served a portion. "Gimme one a those, too," said the chef to the waiter. When the waiter disappeared, his mother scolded him. "You shouldn't speak like that. I eat here every week."

"I'm sorry, Ma. Just enjoying myself. Loosen up. I'm having a good time, see?" said the chef.

"You like the dessert? You remember the last time we had it?" she asked.

"In Chagny? It was that place with all the dogs, right?"

"Yes. Chez Denis. Paris-Brest is absolutely my favorite. They made it so well. This is also excellent. Do you like it?"
"It's great," said the chef, shoveling an enormous mouthful into his face, creme Chantilly gathering at the corners of his mouth. "This was a great meal. Outstanding."

"And I suppose I'm paying for it," said his mother.

"Well," said the chef.

"And you said you need money," said his mother, reaching into her purse. She handed him a check for a thousand dollars, written in her spidery, old-lady scrawl. "I'm only giving you this if you promise to get a haircut. You look like a cannibal like that." She held onto one end of the check. "And make sure they trim your sideburns, I don't want people thinking you are, you are some sort of terrorist."

"Sure, Maman" said the chef. She released the check.

The chef put his soiled napkin over his empty dessert plate and sat back in his chair. Andre, the chef and owner of the restaurant, came over to the table to pay his respects. He wore a spotless white chef's coat with Chinese buttons and the French tricolor adorning the collar. His name was embroidered over the chest pocket in flawless blue script, his starched toque piled high up over his head. He spoke in French for a few moments with the chef's mother, inquiring about the meal and her health. They discussed mutual friends.

She turned to the chef and in English said, "Andre, allow me to present my son, Michel. He is a chef also." The chef sat up in his chair and extended his hand. He wanted to die.
Though the dining room was empty, the bar was still busy. A large group from Long Island was arguing loudly at the corner of the zinc bar. A drunk, one of the bar regulars, in a Yankee warm-up jacket slouched over his scotch, tearing little pieces off of the cocktail napkin under his drink. He rolled them into little balls and tossed them one after the other into the trash can under the register on the other side of the bar. Two lovers, both overweight and overdressed, groped each other at the other end. The woman had her tongue in the man's ear, and he was perspiring heavily and wriggling in his seat. Hector, the busboy, was on the pay phone, speaking to his family in Mexico on a stolen credit card number. He had been on over an hour, and Tommy watched him in the mirror from his place at the crowded bar. Tommy was drinking vodka, half sitting, half standing, one buttock perched on the tall bar stool. He felt something slide onto the other half of the bar stool and turned to face Stephanie. She had changed into her street clothes and taken her hair out of the clip, and she smelled of perfume. She leaned her long mane of wavy brown hair on his shoulder and sighed.

"Hey, Steph," said Tommy. "How'd you do tonight?"

"I would have done okay if it wasn't for those Canadians," she said.

"They stiff you?" Tommy asked.

"Just about," said Stephanie. "Five dollars on an eighty-dollar check."

"You still shoulda had a pretty good night."

Stephanie just shrugged innocently and called the bartender over for a drink. She ordered a Stoli Sea Breeze. When the drink arrived, she took a long sip, turned to Tommy, and giggled conspiratorially. "So, Tommy, I hear you're fucking Cheryl. Is that right?"

Tommy's ears turned red. "Who said that?"

"I heard from somebody," said Stephanie with a smile.

"A gentleman doesn't tell," said Tommy.

"So you are fucking her," said Stephanie, flashing an even bigger smile through abundant lips. She took another long hit on her drink. "So how long has this been going on, you dog?"

"I still want to know who's been talking to you," said Tommy. "You tell me and I'll tell you. Was it the chef?"

"Michael?" exclaimed Stephanie. "Michael knew—and didn't tell me? I'll kill him! I tell him everything that goes on on the floor . . . everything. And he's been holding out on me with something like this? Ooooh, I'm gonna kill him!" She finished her drink and ordered another. Tommy ordered another vodka for himself.

"No, it wasn't Michael," she said. "It was Harvey."

"Harvey?" said Tommy. "What the hell does he know?"

"He called me in the office yesterday and asked me if you and Cheryl were bing-bonging," said Stephanie. "He didn't tell me. He asked. But that got me thinking about things."

"That's how he said it? Bing-bonging? He said that?" asked Tommy.

"Nah," said Stephanie. "He asked if you were seeing each other. Harvey's got serious hots for Cheryl."

"You are fucking shitting me," said Tommy.

"Nope. He loves her. He wants to get in her pants so bad it's not even funny. He's always moaning over her. Why do you think she gets all the good shifts? He's totally in love with her. Gonzo. Why do you think he had them put the cappuccino machine so low on that shelf? So every time Cheryl's steaming milk, he can look at her ass."

"She does have a nice ass," said Tommy, lighting a cigarette. He was looking down Stephanie's leotard . . .

"Can I get one of those?" asked Stephanie. "The whole place was bumin' off me all night, I don't have any left."

"Sure," said Tommy. He gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. He leaned toward her and cupped his hand around the match. "Thanks," said Stephanie.

"So, you have to tell me now. I told you. How long have you been seeing Cheryl?" she asked.

"Why don't you ask her. I admit I've been seeing her, okay? Anything else you want to know, why don't you ask her," said Tommy.

"Oh, I can't do that," said Stephanie. "I ask her that, she'll think I want to fuck you."

"Stephanie," said Tommy, "you already did fuck me."

"Oh, that," said Stephanie. "A blow job in the bathroom isn't exactly a torrid weekend in the Poconos."

"Maybe not," said Tommy. He looked up at the bartender, who was hovering near them, and said, "Stop listening in on my fucking conversation, alright?"

The bartender smiled. "Sure, Tommy, sure. Sorry."
"He's the biggest gossip in the place. Like an old woman," said Stephanie. She leaned close to Tommy and whispered in his ear, "I hear he's hung like a hamster."

The bartender moved away, shaking his head. Tommy took a sip of his drink. "So Harvey's got hots for Cheryl," he said, beginning to feel the effects of the vodka.

"I told her to take advantage. She should get her teeth bonded. You know Rachel?"

"That's the short one with the nose ring?"

"Yeah. She had all her teeth capped and a couple a root canals and it cost her like fifty bucks," said Stephanie.

"But, he's not practicing anymore," said Tommy.

"He isn't. It's his partner who does it. Harvey can set it up. Rachel had a couple a drinks with him and bingo—movie star teeth."

"That's really fucking squalid, man," said Tommy.

"I wouldn't do it," said Stephanie. "Not for that."

"You'd just tell Cheryl to do it," said Tommy.

"I was kidding," she replied.

Tommy finished his drink and ordered another. Stephanie snuggled closer to him. "Soooo," she said. "How long have you been seeing her?"

"A couple months, alright. Happy now? I didn't want everybody in the place to know," said Tommy.

"I think that's so cute," said Stephanie. "Restaurant Romance. Secret Affair. And nobody knew."

"It's nobody's business," said Tommy.

Stephanie ran her finger around the top of her glass. "I hear Harvey's going to bring in some musicians for brunch," she said.

"I heard that too," said Tommy.

"What do you think?"

"I think I don't like it. Our paychecks are bouncing and he's hiring a bunch of musicians. I don't get it."

"You see the fish tank in the window? What do you think of that?"

"Oh, god," said Tommy. "That's a fucking abortion. I can't believe he spent money on that. That costs a lot of money. He's gotta pay somebody to come in and clean it, there's the chemicals, the pumps, the filters, the little bubblers. And it looks like shit."

"It's hard to keep tropicals," said Stephanie. "I had a fish once. The water's got to be just right, you gotta check the pH all the time. It's a lot of work."

"Business sucks, he's having a hard time making the nut, and he goes out and spends all this money on a bunch of fuckin' fish. Then he's gotta pay some fuckin mook to come in and clean it. I just don't see where we get any return on it."

"He says it'll bring people in," said Stephanie.

"That's what he says about every stupid idea he gets. 'I'll bring 'em in.' Buncha dead fish floating in a tank in the window, that'll really bring 'em in," said Tommy bitterly.

"I don't mind them. I think they're pretty," said Stephanie.

"The chef wants to poison them when nobody's looking," said Tommy. "He hates that tank worse than I do."

Stephanie looked concerned. "He wouldn't really do that, would he? It's not their fault. The fish didn't do anything."

"He says it reminds him of those seafood joints with the lobster tanks. You know, 'See 'Em Swim. Pick Your Lobster.' He hates it."

Stephanie shuddered. Tommy could feel it travel through his body. "But, he wouldn't hurt the fish?" she asked.

"No, he wouldn't do that," said Tommy.

"'Cause if he's gonna do that, let me know first. Maybe I can get Harvey to get rid of it. Maybe he'll let me have them. I'll take care of them," said Stephanie.

"Stephanie, you're such a softie. This is a side of you I've never seen," said Tommy.

"There's lots of sides of me you haven't seen yet," said Stephanie. "So, where's Cheryl? Waiting for you back at your place like the little woman?"

"Yeah, right. Can you see that?" said Tommy. "She's out visiting her folks in Rhode Island."

"Mmmm," said Stephanie thoughtfully. "How fortuitous." She slid her hand down Tommy's legs and squeezed his inner thigh.

"Cut it out," said Tommy, not too convincingly.

"You're blushing!" said a delighted Stephanie. She moved her hand up into his crotch and squeezed.

She led Tommy across the empty dining room and through the waiter station. They stumbled drunkenly down the stairs and through the swinging kitchen doors. The cooks were all gone. Big Mohammed was the only person in the
kitchen. He was mopping behind the line, listening to Egyptian pop songs on the cassette player.

"Will he keep his mouth shut?" she asked.

"Big Mo?" said Tommy. "I think so."

Tommy and Stephanie passed through the kitchen and down the hall to the dry goods area. Stephanie got up on tiptoe and unscrewed the lightbulb over the baking supplies. She grinned at Tommy and pulled a pair of sky blue panties with little pink stars down around her knees. She kissed Tommy briefly, just brushing her lips across his, then she turned her back to him, hiked up her skirt and bent over, resting her elbows on a pile of fifty-pound flour sacks. Tommy put his hand up between her legs and dropped his pants.
Harvey left the office muttering to himself about the ice machine. It was broken again, and the ice company had shown up late with the bags of ice, just a few minutes before the end of service. Carol was waiting for him at the bar, well into her second Glenlivet on the rocks, and Harvey sat down next to her with a groan and gave her a kiss on the cheek that rapidly evolved into a longer kiss on the neck. He looked over at the bartender and signaled for a cognac.

The group from Long Island at the corner of the bar had thinned out. Only four girls with big hair remained, talking to the bartender and giggling. The bartender interrupted his monologue and poured Harvey a double shot of Remy. He put the snifter in front of Harvey and returned to the girls. He leaned over the bar, one elbow resting on a pile of cocktail napkins, and continued flirting.

"Will you look at that," said Harvey. "Those girls gotta be sixteen. This fuckin' guy is gonna get me my license pulled with this shit."

"Why don't you say something?" asked Carol.

"Oh, I'm sure they all got ID says they're thirty-two," said Harvey. "Fuck it. It's not worth it. Right now I got other problems." He continued watching the bartender nervously.

"Bad day?" asked Carol.

"The worst," said Harvey.

"You look tired," said Carol, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I am tired," he said. "Janis called me today. On top of everything else, I gotta get a call from her."

"She wants money?"

"She always wants money," said Harvey. "This is different. This is something new. I mean it's still money. It's still gonna cost me. It always does."

"You just bought her a new pair of tits. What does she want now? Her ass lifted?"

"It's my daughter. She told my daughter she could take riding lessons. Riding lessons! I'm late with the alimony, the child support every fuckin' time. She knows I'm getting killed down here, that I'm not makin' any money. She knows that. But she wants me to fork over so Sarah can take riding lessons. Of course I said I couldn't afford it. 'But it'll break her heart,' she says. All her friends go,' she says. Of course, you know she already told her she could do it. So I say, okay, how much is it gonna cost me? She says fifty a week for the lessons. Alright—I don't like it, I don't like it, but I can live with that, I have to . . . Then she hits me with the rest. You gotta buy the clothes, she says. You gotta get the pants, the shirt, the jacket, the little helmet. And the boots! You gotta have them made special. It'll hurt her feet you don't have 'em made special. You have any idea what all that shit is gonna run? You just watch—next she's gonna tell the kid that Daddy's gonna buy her a fuckin' horse!"

"She's a beautiful little girl," said Carol. "If it makes Sarah happy, it can't be such a bad thing. The lessons I mean."

"Jews don't ride horses," said Harvey.

"When I was a little girl, I loved horses," said Carol. "I went riding sometimes. At camp."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Little girls love horses. I know that. I know that. But Janis is gonna pack her off to some Nazi country-club riding academy bullshit where they probably wouldn't even let me in the fuckin' door. They probably use the fuckin' horses to run me off the green, I try to play a little golf there."

"The place is restricted? You know that for sure?"

"No, I don't know. The point is, she's doing it on purpose. To get to me. She's trying to make my little girl into some kind of Protestant or something. And she wants me to pay for it."

"If it makes Sarah happy—"

"Let's talk about something else," said Harvey, a sour look on his face. He took a long belt of cognac, made a fist, and pressed it against his solar plexus. "How was it at work today?"

"The doctor screwed up," said Carol, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Oh," said Harvey, brightening. "I'm cheering up already. What did he do?"

"He did an extraction yesterday. Old lady with an impacted wisdom tooth. He should have put in stitches. I told him so in a nice way. Just a suggestion. He gave me such a dirty look. So he packs her with gauze and sends her out the door. This morning, she comes in with a hematoma like you wouldn't believe. Today he puts in the stitches." Carol made a face. "I would have loved to say 'I told you so."

Harvey groaned. "Lazy. The man is lazy. That never would have happened, I was there. I never would have let that happen . . . " He got up off his bar stool. "Let's go home. I feel like a sack of shit. I gotta get outta these clothes."
Office is right over the kitchen, right up the stairs. The cooking odor gets in everything. I smell like Charlie the Tuna in these clothes. I wanna change. First, I wanna shower, then, maybe take a Jacuzzi, maybe get a nice back rub, maybe?

"Do I get a back rub too?"

"Me first," said Harvey.

Tommy and Stephanie emerged from downstairs and stood by the service bar. Tommy had a funny expression on his face. Stephanie was reapplying her lipstick, looking at herself in the mirror behind the bar.

"I don't even want to think about what they been up to down there. This place is like Sodom and fuckin Gomorrah lately," said Harvey. He took a last worried look over at the bartender. He was still huddled with the big-haired girls, a portfolio spread out on the bar in front of them. The girls were oohing and ahhing and giggling, whispering comments to each other over the bartender's head shots.

"Christ," said Harvey. "I hate actors."
Twenty-Four

Harvey lay on his blanket in the late August sun. The Long Beach train had just disgorged another load of passengers, and Harvey could see them swarming down from the boardwalk, weighted down with their coolers and their folding beach chairs and their newspapers. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes, turned off his Walkman, removed the earphones, and rolled over onto his back. Soon he was asleep.

When he woke up it was two-thirty. He looked at his watch and sat upright. He had been asleep for over an hour and a half. People were beginning to leave the beach. He shooed a few seagulls away from his blanket and reached into his bag. He oiled his back with an expensive French sun-treatment and rolled over onto his stomach. There was a baggie filled with dried apricots and nuts on the corner of the blanket. Harvey reached for it, reconsidered, and rolled back onto his side. He patted his belly a few times, pinched the fat below his navel, and got to his feet. He gazed up at Seymour's Clam Bar on the boardwalk, patted his belly again, and headed for some fried clams.

He ate his clams with a tall draft beer on one of the benches at the end of the boardwalk. Tan, hard-bodied teenagers were playing volleyball on the beach. A large-breasted blonde with teased hair and a skull tattoo on her nearly naked butt stood talking and drinking out of a brown paper bag at the next bench. The three young men with her all wore the same thing: workboots, blue jeans, and no shirts. They were all heavily tattooed. Screaming eagles, coiled snakes, snarling panthers, skulls with top hats, and swastikas covered their chests and backs. An old man with an eye patch in a motorized wheelchair pulled up next to Harvey's bench and began throwing bread crumbs to the pigeons and seagulls. Soon there were birds everywhere. Disgusted, Harvey got up and walked back to his blanket.

He lay on his stomach for a while, but the shadows were getting longer; more people were gathering up their things and heading off to the train station. Harvey checked his watch. It was three-thirty. He applied après soleil to his face, chest, and arms and began to pack up. He put a pair of white linen shorts on over his bathing suit and a red polo shirt over his head.

He found his Toyota sitting alone in the center of the parking lot. It was stifling inside, and the vinyl seats burned his legs below the shorts. He rolled down all the windows and put a tape on. Marvin Gaye sang about radiation underground as Harvey peeled out of the parking lot. Thankful for the breeze, he sang along with the tape, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He drove past the train station and turned left over the short bridge to Island Park, then right onto a side street that ran parallel to the narrow channel between Long Beach and Island Park. There were a number of bars and restaurants alongside the waterway, their parking lots filled with shiny new muscle cars and rows of motorcycles. Harvey drove past a lobster wholesaler and turned into a small lot in front of a mission-style fake adobe structure. A cactus-shaped sign out front said THE MESA GRILL.

He walked around to the rear of the restaurant to a wooden deck. There was a small, circular bar covered with a gaily striped tent. A stairway led from the bar down to a dock crowded with speedboats. Sunburned speedboaters bounded up the steps and into the crowded bar, holding beer cans in little foam-rubber coolers. Three chubby white men played reggae music on a small stage. Harvey edged his way to the bar, the smell of Coppertone and mousse thick in the air, and ordered a Sauza margarita on the rocks from a busy bartender. When he got his drink, he looked around for an empty table. Finding one in a back corner next to a bus-stand, he collapsed, perspiring, into a chair. An overworked waitress with a red face asked him if he'd care to see a menu, and he shook his head. He pulled a dog-eared copy of Gourmet from his bag and leafed through it while he sipped his drink.

At four o'clock, a tall, thin man of about forty-five with a long, graying ponytail and a dark suntan emerged from the main bar area inside the restaurant. He was wearing a faded Hawaiian shirt, black Ray-Bans, jeans cuffed at his calves, and a pair of rope sandals. A thick, gold hoop earring gleamed in his tanned left ear. He came over to Harvey's table and sat down.

"Hey dude," he said, flashing a row of very white teeth. The skin around his eyes crinkled like old leather.

"Hi, Julius," said Harvey. "How you doin'?"

"Just got back from Belize," said the man.

"Nice?"

"Oh, it's great down there. Really outstanding diving. Nice reefs."

"Sounds nice," said Harvey.

"I'm buying a new boat next week," said the man. "A sailboat this time. Thinking about sailing it down to Antigua in the fall."

"Ahhh, Julius, what a life you lead," said Harvey. "That's what I should be doin'—sailin' around the Caribbean. That's what I should be doin'."
"You over at the beach today? Catch some rays?"
"Yeah," said Harvey. "Nice weather for a change. I get any color?"
"You got good color," said the man. "You use any sunscreen?"
"Yeah, I use a sunscreen," said Harvey.
"What do you use? What number?"
"I use a 12 on my face and a 7.5 on the rest. Estee Lauder. It's expensive."
"You should use a 15 on your face," said the man. "You want to end up lookin' like Willie Nelson? No way."
"You have that thing for me?" asked Harvey in a hushed voice.

The man reached into the chest pocket of his Hawaiian shirt and removed a crumpled tissue. He glanced over to the bar and then slipped the tissue across the table and anchored it under the ashtray. Harvey picked it up and slipped it into the pocket of his shorts.

"There's a half there. That's what you wanted, right?" said the man. Harvey nodded. "It's not racy like some of the shit that's around."

"Can I get you for this next time?" asked Harvey. "I didn't stop at the bank on the way to the beach. I didn't wanna miss prime ray time."

The man nodded. "Try to get me next time, though. We're getting up there. I'd like to carry you, but I gotta get some things for the speedboat."

"I can run to the cash machine," said Harvey. "I think there's one in town."

"Get me next time. That's cool," said the man. He glanced at a thick Rolex dive watch on his wrist. "I should be getting along. I got some people I gotta see over in Atlantic Beach. Try to get that bread for me next time." He got up and walked to the stairs leading down to the dock, and disappeared from Harvey's view for a couple of minutes.

Then there was a loud roar from below, and Harvey saw him, standing at the helm of his speedboat. He pulled out into the center of the waterway, opened the throttle, and sped away, leaving the other boats bouncing in his wake.

Harvey finished his drink and headed for the bathroom.
Al pulled the red Alfa over in front of the Evergreen Sportsmen's Club. The Rolling Stones' "Jigsaw Puzzle" was playing on the tape deck. Al rolled down the windows, turned up the volume, and got out of the car. The old men in front of the club grimaced at the blasting rock and roll and looked at Al with stricken expressions.

"Do I know you?" he asked.
"I don't know," said Al. "Do you know me?"
"You're a cop," said Charlie.
"You have to play that jungle music so loud out front of my place? I can't hear the fuckin' game in there," said Charlie, struggling to maintain his temper.
"Gee, I'm sorry, Charlie," said Al. "Damned disrespectful of me." He made no move to turn down the music.
"So, whaddaya want, Mr. FBI? You want somethin'? Talk to my lawyer. I'll give you his number."
"I'm sorry," said Al. "Is this a bad time for you? I didn't come over here to bother you. Not at all. I'm just lookin for some help on a thing I'm workin' on. Looking for some assistance in an investigation."

Charlie threw a half-smoked cigar in the street. He turned his head and looked suspiciously at Al. "What do you want?"

"I've got this case I'm working over in Brooklyn. Big RICO case. My boss has got me chasin' all over torn tryin' to put something together. The Calabrese crime family. You heard of them?"

Charlie said nothing. Al continued. "I just wondered if you, being a concerned citizen and a resident of this neighborhood and all . . . if you would care to help us out on this thing. Help keep your neighborhood free from the insidious infiltration of legitimate businesses by criminal elements from the other boroughs."

"My neighborhood—" Charlie started.
"I mean, you've lived here all your life. You're a respected man in the neighborhood. I understand people look up to you around here, they come to you with their problems. You've got family here. I figured you'd be outraged that these people from Brooklyn feel free to come down here and loan money at usurious rates to some of your local businesses. Extorting nice hard-working people like yourself. I would think you'd find that sort of thing disgraceful."

Al smiled.
"I'm not talking to you!" said Charlie, taking a step back.
"You mean you're not concerned?" said Al, with a look of feigned shock.
"Go away," said Charlie.
"I didn't mean to get you upset," said Al.
"I'm not upset," stammered Charlie. "I'm not anything! Talk to my fuckin' lawyer. I'm not talkin' to you. Not a fuckin' word.

Al held up his hands, palms up. "Hey, hey, Charlie, you don't have to get all defensive. Don't run away."

Charlie stood his ground. "I'm not running anywheres. This is my place here. If somebody's running away, it's you. You should get lost."

"Alright," said Al. "Alright. I can respect that. You don't want to get involved yourself. How about your friends and associates here."

Al motioned toward the old men sitting in the chairs outside the club. "You know, maybe they'd like to assist us. Out of concern for the area. They could start up like a neighborhood watch thing. You, they could sort of keep an eye out for us. Look out for some of these Brooklyn types who are coming around here lately and committing these illegal acts. You could set up patrols. Walkie-talkies, flashlights. No guns or anything like that, so it's safe. We'd be happy to help. Maybe we could get you guys uniforms. What's your jacket size, Charlie? What are you, a forty, forty-two? You'd be like the Guardian Angels. The eyes and ears of the neighborhood. What do you think? Interested?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" roared Charlie.

"Where's your friend Sally Wig?" asked Al. "I don't see him around. I thought you guys were tight. Everybody says he's like a son to you. I thought maybe he'd be here. You think he'd want to help?"

"Get the fuck outta here!" said Charlie, waving his arms. "Motherfucker! You fuckin hand job, get offa my stoop! Get the fuck out! Prick!"

Al looked ostentatiously at his watch. "I guess this is a bad time for you. How about we reschedule some other time. Tomorrow okay with you? We can have lunch, talk about this neighborhood watch thing. Go over the details. I
can get some sizes for your friends here, it'll go a lot faster getting the uniforms. How about I take you out for lunch? Or you want to eat here? I could bring lunch. What do you like? I could bring sandwiches. What do you like? Turkey club? Ham? Nice Reuben sandwich? Personally I'm a pastrami man. I know a place over there on Second that makes a great Reuben." Al paused for a moment and looked thoughtful. He patted Charlie on the stomach. "Or you want something light? Maybe a salad? All that starch you guys eat, it's bad for the heart."

Charlie, his face crimson, stalked into the club, muttering curses under his breath. A few seconds later, a big man in a V-neck sweater closed the door.

Al turned to the old men in the chairs. They sat there mute, star ing at him. "Jeez, what a grouch," he said. He got back in the red Alfa and pulled into traffic.

AL FOUND DANNY TESTA sitting on a crate of oranges on the loading dock of Testa Produce in Hunt's Point in the Bronx. Men pushed hand trucks laden with produce onto waiting trucks. They wore leather trusses around their waists and T-shirts with the Testa logo printed on the back. Danny sat smoking a cigar, going over a clipboard full of orders and invoices.

"Hi, Danny," said Al.

Danny looked up from his clipboard and said nothing.

"My name is Al. I'm a special agent assigned to the Organized Crime Strike Force, Southern District of New York. Maybe you read about us in the Post?"

"So what?" said Danny.

"I'm sorry to bother you at work," said Al. "Really. I know you're a busy man. But something's come up at the office and I could really use some help."

Danny smiled sardonically. "Oh, yeah?"

"It's a missing persons case, really," said Al.

"I didn't know you guys did missing persons," said Danny.

Al continued as if he hadn't heard. "We're seeking to ascertain the whereabouts of a certain Freddy Manso. He's been missing a long time. People are worried. His family must be worried sick. It's been so long nobody's heard from him and frankly"—Al lowered his voice—"people are beginning to, you know, fear the worst."

"I don't know the guy," said Danny, a smile still frozen on his face.

"Freddy Manso? You don't know the guy?" exclaimed Al. "Damn! I feel like a fuckin' jerk. I come all the way out here, use up a quarter tank of gas. You don't even know the guy. This is really embarrassing. I told my boss, I said, I'll go out there, Hunt's Point, see Danny Testa. He knows Freddy. I'll bet he's worried too. I'll talk to him. Maybe he knows where we can find him. Maybe he can help."

"I guess you made the trip for nothing," said Danny.

"Yeah," said Al. "Looks like it. I guess I got mixed up. It's those damn photos they give you down at the office. The long lenses. You don't get the whole picture. So much grain in the picture, the light is bad sometimes. I look at a picture, I see two guys standing next to each other, smiling and clappin' each other on the back. I think—hey, these guys are friends. They know each other. They know each other well. Just look at them there goosin each other like a couple of fags. They must go way back. Then I take another look at the same fuckin picture and I'm not so sure. Maybe the picture's a little fuzzy. Maybe I got it all wrong. Maybe that's not Danny Testa there smilin and laughin' and horsin around with old Freddy M. Maybe that's not even Freddy, these pictures are so bad. Who can fuckin' tell for sure? Could be fuckin Winston Churchill standin' there out fronta the Evergreen. What do I know?"

Danny shrugged, his smile starting to disappear slowly from his face.

"I mean, I know it's not Winston Churchill. I'm sure of that 'cause he's dead, isn't he?" said Al.

"Who's dead?" asked Danny.

"Churchill. You know, 'We will fight them on the beaches' and all that. The English guy."

"I don't know any English guy," said Danny, confused.

Al feigned a look of shock. "You think he's dead? Freddy, I mean?"

"I have no way of knowing something like that," said Danny. "I don't recall ever meeting—whassis name? Freddy something?"

"Freddy Manso," said Al.

"Manso, Manso . . . No. It don't ring a bell. He in the produce business?"

"No," said Al. "I believe Freddy was in what you'd call the entertainment and financial services industry."

"I wouldn't know the guy then," said Danny.

"That's too bad."

"If he was in the produce business, he buys produce, he sells produce, maybe I woulda seen him around. But, no . . ."
Al rubbed his chin. "Oh well. I guess I got it wrong then. I was sure you knew the guy." He extended a hand. Danny declined to take it. Al turned to go back to his car. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I'll be seeing you around."

"Yeah, sure," said Danny.

Danny Testa stood next to Charlie Wagons in the late afternoon sun.

"Somebody from the FBI been to see you?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah," said Danny. "You too?"

"Yeah. Somethin' he said. Somethin' he said about Calabrese people—"Charlie began.

"Maybe we should take a walk," said Danny. "They got microphones. They been takin' pictures."

Charlie motioned to a tan Chevy four-door a hundred yards down the street. "That's them there. I had Mickey bring 'em coffee the other day."

"We should walk anyway. Maybe they can hear," said Danny, eying the surveillance car.

"Make you feel better," said Charlie. They walked down to the corner of Spring and turned downtown. "This fed, he said something about the Brooklyn people shylockin' down here."

"Oh, yeah? Maybe he's just pullin' your chain," said Danny hopefully.

"Course he's pullin' my chain. He's rubbin' my nose in something that I don't know what it is," said Charlie.

"That's the thing. I don't know what it is. What is it I'm supposed to know that I don't know?"

"I don't know," said Danny.

"You hear anything?" asked Charlie.

"No, nothin'."

"What did he say to you, this guy? What did he want?" asked Charlie.

"He wanted to know about that guy. You know, that guy from over there. The one we had the problem with."

"What did you say?" asked Charlie.

"I said I didn't know the guy," said Danny. "What am I supposed to say. He said they had pictures."

"Of you and him?"

"That's what he said," said Danny. "By the club, they got pictures."

"That's not news. They got a lotta pictures. Don't mean nothin'," said Charlie dismissively.

"I don't like it," said Danny. "He wanted me to know, right? There's gotta be a reason he wants us to know something."

"Same shit. He's tellin me somethin talkin about Brooklyn," said Charlie.

"So what's goin on?" asked Danny, frustrated.

"They don't have shit. That's what's happening here. They don't have shit so they try to make you nuts. Try to make you do somethin', say somethin' stupid. You say anything?"

"He didn't get word fuckin' one outta me," said Danny.

"They're playin fuckin' games. They love that. They send you cards? They send me cards. Christmas, my birthday. 'Happy Birthday from the FBI.' I was home with a bug last year, they sent me a 'Get Well Soon card. Can you believe that shit?' Charlie shook his head in wonderment.

"They sent me a card one time," said Danny. "When I got straightened out. 'Congratulations on Your Promotion.'"

"That's your tax money at work. These guys got nothin better to do, they sit around jerkin off sending guys cards," Charlie complained.

"So it's nothin," said Danny.

"I still want to know," said Charlie. "I wanna know if somebody from over there's puttin' money on the street over here."

"So who do you think it is?" asked Danny.

"He mentioned Sally Wig," said Charlie. "He mentioned him, so I gotta figure maybe it's one of his places."

"So which one you think it is?"

"I'm thinking maybe that new one. The Jew dentist he's got. The place next to the Count's. Wouldn't be the Count, we know him."

"So what should I do?"

"Well, you gotta talk to Sally. That you gotta do first. After that I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I can't decide who I wanna whack out first—the guys from over there, I don't know if I want to get into a big thing with Brooklyn right now, or Sally for fuckin' up. Not minding the store. There's things I'm not sure of. When I'm sure, I'll know what to do," said Charlie.

"Sally's got shit for brains he let this thing get past him," said Danny.

"Makes sense, the guy's been paying regular last few weeks. Before that every week was a fuckin' problem."
"You're talkin' about the dentist?"
"Yeah. It's the sort of thing I'm not surprised. Sally fuckin' up—that I can see. I can see that happening. And Calabrese, he don't like me anyways. I can see him tryin' to get his foot in the door over here."
"You wanna put paper out on somebody from Brooklyn, friend of ours, you gotta get permission, right? You gotta go the Commission," said Danny.
"Fuck them. Buncha old men. They'll say no. Then it'll be me gets whacked. No. I don't wanna hit any bosses. Just the people that come over. We give the paper to Sally. Let him handle it. We tell him we got permission, if it's his mess, then he can clean it up."
"So what happens later?" asked Danny.
"He done it on his own. I'm sick a his shit anyways," said Charlie. "He's a bone in my fuckin' throat since forever."
"So I should talk to some people. Find out a few things," said Danny.
"That's right. That's what you should do," said Charlie.
"And if what's happened is what we think happened—"
"Then tell Sally to fix it. He can use Skinny."
"We're not gonna have any problem with Calabrese later?"
"That faggot? I served time with him in Lewisberg. He takes it in the ass. He had some nigger car thief there suck his dick for him, some punk. Guy wears a dress around nobody's looking," said Charlie bitterly.
"You're kidding, right? The fuckin' guy's huge. He's built like a brick shithouse. I seen him—"
"I'm tellin' you he's a faggot. Everybody knows, all the bosses. They don't do nothin' 'cause he earns."
"I can't believe it," said Danny.
"Believe it," said Charlie. "He owns all those fag places on the West Side. Maybe he saw something he liked. That's how he got in Manhattan in the first place. Now he maybe wants to make a move east. Fuck him. I'll put a fuckin' rocket in his pocket," said Charlie.
"The guys that collect," said Danny. "Right?"
"Yeah, find out who that is. Then check with me before we send anybody over."
"Okay. What about the other problem?" asked Danny.
"Oh, the other thing? The guy? The guy who isn't around? Don't worry about it. They're just blowin' smoke up your ass."
"I hope this isn't gonna be a problem," said Danny nervously.
"If it's a problem, it's gonna be Sally's problem," said Charlie.
Sally sat behind the wheel of his new Buick. It wasn't really new, though the odometer registered only 150 miles. Sally had picked it up two hours earlier at a chop shop in Queens. There was something wrong with the power steering, it made a terrible noise when he turned too far to the left or right. The rubber insulation around the driver's window was coming off, and the car smelled bad, like somebody had kept a wet dog in it. Sally pulled the car up to a stoplight and fiddled with the dial on the radio, trying to find an easy-listening station.

A red Alfa Romeo pulled up alongside of him, and Sally looked over at it enviously. Why couldn't he have a car like that? The driver of the Alfa leaned over and rolled down the window on the passenger side. "Hey! Sally Wig!" said Al.

Sally rolled down his own window, which sucked some of the rubber stripping down into the door with it. He looked into the Alfa, trying to figure out who it was that drove such a nice car, dared call him that name to his face.

"Hey, Sally Wig," said Al. "New car, Sally?"

Sally stared at the man. He looked like a cop. What was a cop doing in a nice car like that? Probably on the take. Sally mentally reviewed all the friendly policemen he was aware of, trying to place the face.

"Hey candy-ass," the man was saying, "they make you drive that piece a shit? What? You don't rate a Caddy? Not even a Lincoln? What the hell's wrong? I thought you were comin' up in the world . . . Drivin' around in a car like that . . ."

Infuriated, Sally struggled with the door handle, anxious to get out of the Buick, to reach over into the Alfa and strangle this son of a bitch, talking to him like that. . . He wanted to cave the guy's head in, tear his goddamn teeth out of his head, leave him slumped over the wheel in that fancy car of his. He pawed angrily at the handle. It came off in his hand. The red Alfa pulled away from the crosswalk, leaving Sally at the light, cursing at the top of his lungs and pounding his fist against the dashboard.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Tommy lingered over his pecan pancakes, reading the food section of The New York Times. The Pink Teacup was almost empty, the only other customers an elderly gay couple, sitting at the other end of the dining room next to the door. Tommy had his newspaper spread out across two tables. He had precut his pancakes into bite-size pieces, so he had his left hand free for the paper while his right hand traveled freely between his plate and his mouth. The Teacup's cook was putting on the collards for dinner sendee, and the lone waitress sat behind the register on a stool, reading People magazine aloud to the cook in a thick Southern accent.

The front door opened and Al entered the restaurant. "Man, I'm hungry," he announced. He turned to the waitress, "You still serving?" The waitress nodded and went back to reading her magazine.

Al sauntered over to Tommy's table. "Tommy Pagano, right?"

Tommy looked up at him, surprised.

Without hesitating, Al pulled out a chair and sat down across from him. He put his elbow on Tommy's paper.

"Mind if I join you, Tommy?" he asked.

Tommy's lips moved but nothing came out. Eventually, he man aged to stammer, "I'm sorry . . . I forget . . . Do I know you? Do I know you from somewhere?"

Al leaned closer. "FBI. Tommy. My name is Al. I'm a special agent attached to the U.S. Attorney's office here in Manhattan. Boy, is this a coincidence or what?"

"W-what do you mean?" asked Tommy, putting down his fork.

"Finding you here. I love this place. You know I been coming here for years. Back in the seventies I used to eat here all the time. What are you eating there, the pecan pancakes? I love those." He turned and called over to the waitress, "Lemme have some of what he's having, dear. And some black coffee." The waitress got up off her stool, wrote out a check, and handed it to the cook.

Al turned his attention back to Tommy. "I can't get over it. There I am, just a couple of hours ago, sitting in my office looking over your file and I go out to get myself some of those good pecan pancakes they got over here and there you are. Small world."

"File?" echoed Tommy.

"Oh, yeah," said Al. "You got a file. I was just reading up on you before I came over."

"Why, what do I have a file for?" asked Tommy.

"You got a file. Your uncle, he's got a file. Your uncle's file is this thick, weighs a ton." Al held up one hand with
the fingers wide apart from the thumb. "Your file's pretty skinny, you want to know the truth. All bones, no meat."

"Why do I have a file?" asked Tommy. "What did I do? I didn't do anything."

Al grinned. "Tommy, you don't have to do anything to get yourself a file. They love filling up files where I work. Like a big vacuum cleaner down there suckin' up all kinds a shit."

"But—" Tommy protested.

"I know, I know," said Al sympathetically. "You feel kinda violated. I can understand that. Lotta people feel that way. It's kinda an invasion of your privacy, buncha suits sitting in an office somewhere reading up on you, talkin' about when you had your braces off, if you jerk off with your right hand or your left. I can see as how you'd be a little upset."

Al lowered his voice as if to take Tommy into his confidence. "It's just... This is the thing. It's just some of the guys I work with... some of these guys at my office... they seem to think you're some kinda master criminal."

"Me?" yelped Tommy. "What for? I got grabbed once, when I was a kid, for selling firecrackers. One time my whole life I did a wrong thing. I musta been fourteen years old!"

"Actually, I think it was fifteen," said Al, helpfully.

"I never did anything after that. I never had any trouble since then," said Tommy.

"I know, I know that. That's what I told them at the office. I said, Tommy's a good kid. He's a cook, he's practically a chef down there where he works. He's a sous-chef, am I right? That means you do all the work, right Tommy? I told them. I said, Tommy's working hard at a career. He's not out there hijackin' loads out there in Jersey. He's not whackin' guys inna head. He's not getting any juice off the street."

"So what's the problem?" asked Tommy, trying to maintain his composure.

"The problem is this. This is what the problem is. Some of the guys down at the office, well they just don't believe it, you see. They say to me, they say Al, look at all these known organized crime associates this Tommy knows. Look who this Tommy gets seen with. That's what they say. 'Look who his uncle is,' they say. 'This is not a nice man, this Sally Wig fellow. We know him, we're lookin' at his file, and Al, this uncle this kid has is no good.'"

"That ain't me," said Tommy. "That's my uncle. I can't do anything about that."

"They understand that," said Al. "I said to them, you can't blame the kid for that. Who his uncle is. Hell, if I could pick who my relatives were my family would look a lot different than it does. But then they say, 'But, Al, look at some of these pictures, listen to what people are tellin' us. If this kid Tommy is such a nice, clean, hard working young man, what's he doing hanging around with dirtbags like Skinny Di Milito? How come,' they want to know, 'How come when Tommy works late at the restaurant he has late supper with this Skinny character, who is also well known to us? How come when people visit Tommy on this one particular occasion it's like the Roach Motel over there—the guests check in but they don't check out? Why is that? That's what they ask me." Al paused for a few long seconds. "Where's Freddy Manso, Tommy? Do you know where Freddy is?"

Tommy went ashen. His hands fumbled shakily for a cigarette. He thought better of it and gave up trying. He reconsidered again and managed to pull a bent Marlboro from his pants pocket.

"I... I... don't know," he stuttered.

"That's what I thought you'd say," said Al. "I said Tommy wouldn't do anything bad to ol' Freddy. Tommy wouldn't get himself involved in a murder. He doesn't know about that sort of thing. He wouldn't hurt anybody. Problem is, they just don't believe that."

Tommy weaved, pale and shaken over his uneaten food.

"You don't look too good," said Al. "Maybe I shouldn't have those pancakes after all." Al got up and walked over to the waitress, still sitting behind the register reading her magazine. She looked up at him. He handed her a ten-dollar bill.

"Cancel that order for me, will ya, sweetheart? I can't stay. I forgot an appointment." He returned to Tommy's table and looked down at Tommy.

"I didn't mean to put you off your food," he said. Then he turned and walked out the door.
The chef took his specimen to the urine desk. A lethargic Hispanic woman interrupted her conversation with a man in a wheelchair to hand the chef a preprinted label with his name, patient identification number, and the date on it. The chef wrapped the label around his sample bottle, put the bottle in a plastic Ziploc bag from the desk and placed it in a box with a hundred or so other samples. The box was decorated with a cheerful floral-print contact paper that curled at the edges.

There were two long lines for medication. The chef took his place at the rear of the first line, behind a hulking Irishman with a red, wrinkled face and tattoos on his fingers. He had another tattoo on his forearm. It said BORN DEAD. The people on the line swayed back and forth on worn sneakers like elephants at the zoo. They muttered complaints to each other. "Let's go, let's go . . ." said one man. The Irishman said, "Let's move this line," to nobody in particular. The woman in the next line, across from the chef, held a baby in one arm. There was a hospital bracelet on her wrist. Her black skin was chalky white at the ankles, and there were open sores. She held a thick metal cane with a rubber guard on the end in her other arm.

When the chef reached the head of the line and stepped up to the window, a red-haired nurse handed him his dose. He signed his name on her clipboard after checking the dose and poured orange drink from a pitcher in the window into the clear plastic cup with the methadone. He stirred it, raised the cup to his mouth, and drank it down. Then he added a bit more juice to the empty cup and drank that, too. Then he walked out the door to Cooper Square.

Al was sitting on a bench across the street from the clinic when he came out.

"Yo! Chef!" he called out.

The chef turned, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a half-smile. "Big Al. Saving Cooper Square for democracy?"


"The lady who took my urine sample today looked very suspicious. She had a funny accent and she didn't know who Mookie Wilson was. Maybe you should look into it, check her out," said the chef.

Al chuckled and put his arm around the chef's shoulders. "So you finally got in the program. I'm really happy for you, Michael. Off the streets and all. That's great. That's really positive."

"You sound like my counselor," said the chef.

"Sorry, didn't mean to do that. But I am happy for you. How is it? How's it goin' so far? The meth holding you?"

"It's fine. Fine," said the chef. "It's better, anyway. A lot better. Not having to score all the time, risking my ass over there every day, waiting to get pinched or for somebody to cut my throat. Yeah, I feel better."

"How's it feel? Do you get high?"

"From the methadone?"

"Yeah."

"No, no. I'm on a low dosage and anyway it's not supposed to do that. Feels just right. Just enough so I don't get sick. The first few days, though, they put you on a high dosage. They want your body to get used to, to make the change from the dope. Basically they're hooking you on the methadone. I was so fucked up the first weekend on the program, I mean drooling, nodding, scratching . . . that's how fucked up. I tell you, I was higher than I ever got on the other thing."

"But now it's okay?" asked Al.

"Oh, yeah," said the chef. "They bring you down to a lower dosage after a few days. A blocking dose. Now, now I forget I've even done any, not high at all. It's just like something I have to do every morning before I go to work."

"So that's good," said Al.

"Beats copping every day," said the chef.

"How's your counselor?" asked Al.

"He's a nice old guy. Black dude, retired. His kids are all gone and he needs something to do. He's a nice man, but it's like talking to somebody from Mars. Better him than some of the others. He was never a junkie at least. The ex-junkies who counsel are all like Muslim fundamentalists or something. Hard-asses. They know all junkies lie. And they're right. But these guys won't believe you you tell them the time of day. They'll look at you like you're trying to scam them. No . . . I like the guy I have. He's nice, and I think he's happy he's got me. He doesn't have too many people who can construct a sentence for him or who actually work for a living. I guess he gets a lot of disappointments doing what he does."

"So how long you gonna be on the program?" asked Al.
"I don't know. The people here, the counselors, the director, they pretty much want you to stay on for life. You talk about detoxing from the methadone someday, they smile at you like 'Yeah, right. We'll be seeing you again, asshole.' People who leave the program tend to go back to the other thing."

"You think you're gonna do that?" asked Al.

"Go back someday? Not if there's any other alternative. No, no way. But I'm not gonna kid myself. I didn't have that dose tomorrow, I'd be right back at it. On the other hand, I don't want to be down here sucking down jungle juice with a bunch of other scumbags every morning for the rest of my life. It's not enough to not be a junkie someday. I don't even want to see any junkies."

"So someday you'll get off?"

"Yeah. When the time is right. When I think I can handle it for sure. You can go on a slow reduction. It's too early though. I'll know when I'm ready."

"You gotta get well, get your shit together first," said Al.

"Yeah. I'll know when I can hack it," said the chef.

"Good. That's really good."

"So. What do you want?" asked the chef.

"I figured I'd take you out to lunch," said Al. "You like raw fish? I thought we'd have us some sushi a place I know and shoot the shit. You eat yet?"

"No. But I'm not dressed," said the chef.

"Forget about. I'm not either," said Al. "You don't have to dress for this place. Guys who run the joint are running around in their fuckin' bathrobes there. C'mon, let me take you out to lunch. My treat."

"I don't know," said the chef.

"C'mon. I won't bite you. Not much anyway."

"There were a few things I was gonna do," said the chef.

"It'll be fun," insisted Al. "I'm fuckin' hungry here, alright? I gotta talk to you about a few things comin' up. You think I'm hangin' around out fronta a methadone clinic gettin a fuckin suntan? I came down here to see you. We gotta talk. You want to talk over a nice plate of sushi or you wanna come down to the office and maybe get a Snickers bar and a cup a coffee outta a machine? Your choice."

"I guess I'll go with the sushi," said the chef.

"Alright, then," said Al. "Now we're talkin'."

Al waited until after lunch, when they were just finishing the green tea ice cream, to come to the point. "Sorry to bring up business after such a nice meal, but you know . . ."

The chef slouched down in his chair a few inches.

"It's getting near showtime," said Al.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"What it means is you have to do something for us," said Al.

"Oh, yeah? Like what?" asked the chef.

"Like talkin' to your good friend Tommy," said Al.

"About what? We been through this. What can I do? He doesn't talk about anything like you want to know. I don't think he knows anything. Why don't you just leave him alone. And me too," protested the chef.

"We have to know some things that Tommy knows. He's gotta talk to us. You've got to get him to come in."

"Oh, maaan," groaned the chef. "I don't . . . I can't. . ."

"Listen. Just shut up and listen to me for a second. Your friend Tommy is gonna be having some big, big problems in the very near future. He got himself implicated in some serious crimes, some pretty heavy shit. We got him placed at the scene of a homicide. That makes him, at best, a material witness. And every day that goes by that he doesn't talk to us, he looks better and better for accessory or obstruction. Some of the people I work with, they like the guy for murder. Okay? So you understand what I'm saying here? This kid is headed down the tubes. Sooner or later, he's gonna be taking the free bus ride out to Rikers, and then maybe upstate. That's if he's fuckin lucky. Maybe, after he gets called before the grand jury, a couple a Uncle Sally's goombahs are gonna shoot him in the head."

"I don't get it," said the chef. "What did he do?"

"He did something," said Al. "We don't think he did something. We know he did something. Alright?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You're his friend. You're his good buddy and confidant. You're always saying that. Are you his friend?"

"Yes," said the chef, sadly. "He's my friend."

"Well your friend is in the toilet. You didn't put him there. He did it all by himself. He put himself in. That's the
sad fact. But you—you're the one holding the chain right now. You don't get him to come in, you're as good as
flushing him down the tubes yourself. 'Cause you know, you know what's going to happen to him if he doesn't come
in."

"Why put it all on me?"

"Because you're the only chance he's got. You think anybody else is gonna talk reason to the guy? I don't. You
think any of his old pals, his uncle, you think they're gonna give two shits if he goes away for a nice ten-year jolt? I
don't think so. Hell, that's college to them. They'll give him a nice going-away party, and if he gets too unhappy in
the joint, maybe they get some citizen up there to stick a shank in him so he doesn't get too unhappy."

"Why does it have to be me?"

"Why you? Why you? Because it's your sorry junkie ass we own and not somebody else's. That's why," said Al."

"Nice fucking lunch," said the chef, unhappily.

"Hey, I'm sorry," said Al. "But that's where it is."

"What am I supposed to say to him. He's never talked about any of this. It's not like he confides in me. What am I
supposed to say?"

"Listen. You go to Tommy. You take him out for a walk, you go somewhere private. You have a quiet talk with
him. Just tell him how it is. Tell him how the big, bad FBI man is squeezing your nuts. Tell him how the Strike
Force on Organized Crime is looking very seriously at him for accessory to murder. Ask him what kinds of
problems he thinks he's gonna have when somebody shows up on a slow Saturday night at the restaurant and hands
him a subpoena to go up and see the grand jury. Tell him if he doesn't get his ass down to the Federal building and
start talking to us real damn soon, that it's gonna be you who goes directly to jail."

"You're kidding, right?" asked the chef.

"No. I'm not fucking kidding you. It's you that goes straight to the fuckin' can. You," said Al.

"But why?" protested the chef. "You said . . . they said if I helped, if I helped—I did help."

"You get to detox off the methadone in a holding cell. Who knows what happens to Tommy. I imagine you'll be
able to read about it in the day room."

"They'll medicate me out there," said the chef. "My counselor said they can do that."

"There's a happy thought. I guess you have no problem then," said Al, smirking.

"They will. Half the people on my program are in and out of there all the time. They can get you medicated right
there," the chef insisted.

"You'll lose your job," said Al.

"Restaurant's fuckin' terminal anyway. It's probably only got a few months to live."

"And there's your reputation to consider. Amongst your culinary brethren. It's a fairly small community—
restaurants, chefs, owners. That's what I hear anyway. Always bumping into the same people. I'll bet people get
squeamish about hiring ex-cons. I'll bet they get even more squeamish about hiring junkies to handle their food for
them. People don't like to think about things like that, they sit down to order a nice dinner. Am I right? They think
they might catch something . . ."

"We made a deal," said the chef, his upper lip sticking to his teeth.

"Let me explain something to you, Michael. You were a NYPD collar, in case you didn't know. Now, I was able
to exert some influence, I was able to keep you out of the shit because of, and I quote, your ongoing assistance of a
confidential nature in an investigation of the highest sensitivity.' The key word here is 'ongoing.' That means when
the information is not 'on,' then you're the one who's gonna be going.' I've kept you out of it for months, out of a
dead-bang drug case the DA would be happy to prosecute, and you've been feeding me shit. You try to serve up your
boss, fine. Only we're not interested in your boss. I told you then what I was interested in. You haven't delivered.
You haven't told me anything I don't know already. All you got to trade is your influence on Tommy. I can't hold the
dam forever. Some of these local boys would be happy to get their collar back. They don't like it when I take a nice,
easy possession case away from them. I'd like to keep you out of it. I really would. But you've gotta give me a
reason. People are asking me all the time, 'What has he done for us? What has he done for us lately?' What am I
gonna tell them?"

The chef sat there, shaking his head and blinking.

"Get him to talk to me," Al continued. "He's your good buddy. Spell it out for him. Tell him it's either that or he
gets a subpoena. Tell him if he lies to the grand jury he's gonna go away for sure. He doesn't talk to us and I don't
even want to think about all the problems the two of you are gonna have. It's just too depressing to contemplate.""

"What if I talk to him and he still doesn't want to talk to you?" asked the chef.

"Then I guess you're fucked, for one. NYPD gets their case back. You get to eat American Regional out there at
Rikers. Tommy gets to grab his ankles upstate. That's if his uncle and his pals don't turn him into fertilizer first."

"So, I have to get Tommy to come in and rat on his uncle," said the chef. "Nothing less . . ."
"That, my friend, is exactly what you gotta do."
Twenty-Eight

When the alarm went off, Tommy sat up blinking in bed. He looked over at the empty space next to him, remembered that Cheryl was away for a week, visiting her parents. He went into the kitchen and put on coffee, wandered idly over to the TV set and turned it on. He channel-surfed around the dial, waiting for something to catch his interest. After fifty-one channels, he turned off the TV, rolled a joint for later, and went back into the kitchen for his coffee. The milk in his refrigerator had gone sour, so he had to drink it black. He put his robe on and went to the window.

There was a softball game going on in the small playing field down the street. He smelled eggs cooking and home fries from the Greek coffee shop around the corner on Hudson Street. He looked up and down the street for the van. He didn't see it. The Jeep was gone, too . . . Maybe they'd changed cars.

From what Al had indicated, from all he seemed to know about Tommy, it was a sure thing he was being watched . . . Tommy looked up at the windows of the front apartments across from him. He tried to see past the trees into the playground next to the softball field. He looked at each parked car, each truck, each pedestrian visible from his window and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

That guy Al had really upset him . . . Thinking about it now made his palms sweat. They really were following him. Al had talked about a file. He even knew where Tommy ate breakfast. Tommy looked over at the phone and wondered if it was tapped . . . Tommy looked up at the windows of the front apartments across from him. He tried to see past the trees into the playground next to the softball field. He looked at each parked car, each truck, each pedestrian visible from his window and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He went into the bathroom, showered, and shaved. While he shaved, he realized how much he wanted to tell somebody. But there was no one he could tell. Cheryl was here. Not that there was anything he could tell her . . . There was a loud bang as a newspaper was delivered across the hall, hitting a door, and Tommy jumped.

He went out onto Morton Street and was looking up and down for any sign of the van or that Jeep with the tinted windows when he saw Skinny.

He was standing behind the Cyclone fence in the playground across the street, looking straight at him. Tommy didn't know what to do. His first instinct was to pretend he hadn't seen him; keep walking, not acknowledge he'd seen him. But it was already too late for that. Skinny had already lifted a finger to his lips, telling Tommy to be quiet, act natural, then he'd motioned with his thumb in the direction of Hudson Street, wanting Tommy to follow.

Tommy walked slowly down Morton to the corner. He stayed close to the buildings on the uptown side of the street, trying to see around the corner to where Skinny had gone, trying to get a preview of what was waiting for him.

He saw Skinny walk straight across to the west side of Hudson without looking back. He stopped in front of a brown Lincoln double-parked in front of a renovated apartment building and gave Tommy a quick glance before getting behind the wheel. Tommy approached the car, saw a solitary figure in the back seat.

He approached the Lincoln slowly, crouching a little as he got closer, trying to see who it was in the back seat. He could make out a dark business suit and wide shoulders, a tie with a gold tie-clasp. It wasn't Sally, that was for sure.

Tommy looked at Skinny behind the wheel, a quizzical expression on his face. Skinny jerked a thumb toward the
rear of the Lincoln. Tommy took this to mean he should get in the back seat. Back seat. That's a good sign, he was thinking. If Skinny was to be in the back and I was to be in the front, now that would be a bad sign. Somebody wants to talk to me, that's all.

Tommy opened the rear door on the street side and got in.

It was Danny Testa sitting in the seat next to him. All dressed up, like he'd been to church. He was smiling, not in itself a good or a bad sign . . . He patted Tommy on the thigh with a big hand a few times and said, "Hey, Tommy . . . good to see you. Thanks for comin'."

Skinny started the car and took off up Hudson Street, his eyes meeting Tommy's in the rearview mirror. After Skinny had taken them over to the river and turned downtown on West Street, Tommy said, "I'm gonna be late for work."

"Sorry kid," said Danny. "You're just gonna have to be a little late." End of discussion. Skinny gave Tommy another look in the rearview.

They drove in silence down the West Side, Danny looking behind them periodically, Skinny speeding up and then slowing down, changing lanes, seemingly at random. They swung around the Battery and were soon heading uptown again on the FDR Drive. Tommy noticed they passed the exits for Canal, then Houston, and were still heading uptown. When Fourteenth Street disappeared behind them, Tommy turned to Danny and, in as friendly and as disinterested a way as he could, asked him what was happening.

"Can I ask you where we're goin' here, Danny? I haven't seen you in a long time . . . You pop up outside my place, take me for a cruise in your car . . . You mind if I ask why?"

Danny put his fingers to his lips, much like Skinny had done.

"Later," he said. "Wait'll we get there."

A few more minutes of silence. The car passed Forty-second, went through a tunnel, passed Gracie Mansion. Skinny slowed the Lincoln down, as if to take the exit, even putting on the directional. Then at the last second, he stomped on the gas, wheeled the big car left across three lanes of traffic, right directional still blinking, before slowing the car down to a crawl again.

Trying to smile, Tommy said, "Can I at least make a phone call? Call work, tell them I'll be late?"

Danny didn't respond. He was looking out the back window again . . .

At 125th Street, Skinny stomped on the gas, back across the three lanes, no directional this time, and sped down the off-ramp. At the bottom of the ramp, he touched the brakes for a split second and then accelerated, plowing through an intersection against the light. Tommy was bounced around in the back seat next to Danny, almost falling onto his lap. Tommy tried to hold on to the seat, his sweating hands leaving wet prints on the red leather.

Skinny was taking them west now. At intervals, he would turn off and head in another direction, wheel the car uptown a couple of blocks, back-track east on a side street. Once he gunned the engine and took them the wrong way down a one-way street, one eye looking in the rearview mirror the whole way.

Arriving at the corner of Broadway and 125th, they turned left and headed downtown again. Another turn without warning at 116th and they were headed uptown on Riverside Drive, the trees in the park whizzing by Tommy's window as he looked apprehensively at the river, wondered if he'd be floating in it in a few hours. By the rotunda on Riverside, Skinny bore right and barreled down Claremont the wrong way. Halfway down the street he stomped on the brakes, Tommy's head bouncing off the front seat, and pulled the Lincoln into a space in front of some stone steps leading up to a small park.

Danny smiled at Tommy and said, "We're here . . . Let's take a walk." Danny led the way, Tommy behind him. Skinny trailed at a distance. They walked up the stairs to the park, an oblong, sparsely landscaped place with a commanding view of the approaches on all sides and the passing tugs on the Hudson River. There were two women with strollers on the far end of the park, but they were headed away toward Riverside Church. Tommy was alone with Danny, Skinny around fifty yards away, walking in wide circles around them, his back to them, guarding the perimeter.

"We can talk here," said Danny as they walked. "In the car . . . I don't talk inna car. I keep it inna garage, an' the niggers they got workin' in there . . . anybody could get in. Guy I know used to talk in his car, he got in a lotta trouble. He had a pretty bad surprise, he heard himself talkin' when they played it back for him in court. Got a lotta other fellas in trouble too. Ya can't be too careful. I got responsibilities."

Danny sat down on a bench, facing the river, and Tommy, after a quick peek to see where Skinny was, sat down next to him. He wished the bench faced in another direction. He wanted to keep an eye on just where Skinny was going to be every second.

"Danny," he asked, "what is it? I gotta tell you, you're makin' me fuckin' nervous."

He looked back again at Skinny. He was standing at the edge of the park, looking down at Claremont.

"Well," said Danny, "I been axed to talk to you . . . Actually, nobody axed, but I thought maybe I should have like
a word with you, look into things on some other people's behalf. Axe you about a few things, see what's goin' on in your life."

Tommy looked puzzled. Danny smiled, made him wait.

"You was with Sally and Skin for that thing . . . You know, that thing that happened over there, when they had to do a thing . . . You know which thing I'm talkin' about?"

Tommy nodded carefully. "Yeah . . . " He felt his stomach sink.

"When they tol' me you was there, I was surprised. Don't get me wrong . . . I wasn't upset or nothing . . . I was just surprised, bein' how in the past . . . in the past, I heard you didn't wanna be involved in things. For reasons of your own which ain't none a my business . . . The old man was surprised too . . . Did Sally give you some money? Some people thought you should have some, since you was there, since you helped them out with the problem . . ."

Tommy didn't know what to say, what the right answer was going to be. He tried to read Danny's expression and saw nothing that would be of any help. So he told the truth. "He offered. I didn't take it . . . Nothing personal... I mean I didn't mean anything by it . . . I just . . . I just thought . . . I didn't know what was gonna happen. It was a favor. They asked me to do a favor so I did the favor. I didn't expect any money, so I didn't take it."

"That's what I heard," said Danny. "So . . . you haven't changed your mind about nothin' . . . You ain't comin' in with your uncle, is that right?"

"Well..." said Tommy, not wanting to say anything to offend Danny or implicate Sally in some breach of protocol. "You don't want to come in with him, that's your own business. I respect that. You do your own thing, that's fine with me. It's fine with everybody. Nobody's gonna tell you do something you don't wanna do. You wanna be a regular jerk, that's fine. And I don't mean that in a bad way . . . y'unnerstan'."

Danny took a paper bag out of his pocket and began to sprinkle bread crumbs around for the pigeons. None came.

"I used to keep pigeons," he said. "I had my own coop up onna roof a my buildin. . ."

"I remember," said Tommy. "When I was a kid. My mother was always bitchin' 'cause they'd crap on her laundry."

"Well, a lotta time gone by since then. I got responsibilities now. Things I gotta take care. I gotta see that things that get done, that they get done a certain way, that nobody makes a mistake that's gonna cause any other persons to get hurt. Now, I like your Uncle Sally, we been friends a long time . . . but, I just wanna make sure, for his sake you unnerstan', that maybe he didn't make a mistake without knowin' it. That's what I'm tryin' to find out."

"What do you mean?" asked Tommy innocently.

"Well, the fact he used you . . . I just wanna make sure. Just wanna talk to you, make sure he didn't make a mistake."

Tommy tried to look shocked, even offended.

"I mean, you're a grown man, now, right, Tommy. And you still don't want nothin' to do with us, right?"

"It's nothin' personal, Danny," said Tommy. "It's just, just . . . there's other things I wanna do with my life."

"I mean, I been thinkin', talkin' to some people . . . I hope you don't hold no kinda a grudge what happened to your father. I hope you don't hold nothin' against nobody. There was nothin anybody coulda done about that, I hope you know that, right?"

"I don't know what happened . . . " said Tommy, surprised at the mention of his father. "He was just gone one day. That's all . . ."

"Well. . . you know . . . and I'm telling you this straight, what happened to your old man had nothin' to do with anybody, with anybody you know. Just so you got that straight in yer mind. I just wanna know you ain't holdin' no grudge against nobody else. You don't have no grudge or nothin' do you, Tommy?"

Tommy was confused. "No, no, no. Not at all. My father did what he did. Something happened, he knew it could happen and it happened."

"So, that didn't have nothin' to do, you not wantin' to come in with your uncle?" said Danny, looking at him.

"No," said Tommy. "It was a girl, actually."

This seemed to take Danny by surprise. He laughed uproariously. "A girl . . . A girl!? What, some chick tell you she ain't gonna put out for you, you keep bouncin' around with your friends? You let some broad pussywhip you inta leavin' your friends, your neighborhood, people love you, take care of you your whole life? I don't believe it . . . It hadda be somethin' else."

"It wasn't just that," said Tommy. "It was a lotta things. Sally got me that job out in the restaurant that time and I really liked it. It made me feel good. I like what I'm doing . . . It's my thing. My own thing, not somebody else's. Nothin' to do with anybody. No bad feelings."

"How about Sally?" Danny asked carefully. "How you feel about him?"

That was a tough one. Danny was Sally's friend, wasn't he? He tried for a safe answer.

"He's my uncle. I love him. He took care of me, looked out for me after my father was gone. He asked me to do a
favor for him and I did it. I didn't want to do it. I admit . . . I didn't wanna get involved in that. I sure didn't know what was gonna happen, I can tell you that. . . But that's his business. His problem. I didn't do nothing I feel too bad about. That's Sally's business, it's not my business. If there's a problem, somebody's got a problem, it's not my problem. I put it behind me."

Danny looked pained. "What I'm askin' here, Tommy . . . is . . . Let's say there is a problem. For whatever reason, if it became your problem all of a sudden. If let's say some cops come around and wanna talk to you . . . Say you get picked up, they bring you down the station and wanna ask you all sortsa questions. Then it is your problem. I'm not sayin' that's gonna happen. Just, what if it did? You say it ain't your problem. What happens the cops come roun' askin' you questions, what do you do?"

"Is that going to happen?"

"I told you," said Danny. "I'm not sayin' that's gonna happen. I'm askin' if it did happen, what would you do? How would you handle that?"

"I . . . I . . . guess I'd keep my mouth shut and call a fuckin' lawyer," said Tommy.

"What lawyer you thinkin' about callin'?" asked Danny, looking suddenly concerned.

"I'm not thinkin' a' callin' anybody, Danny," said Tommy, realizing he'd made a slight misstep. "I never even thought about it . . . what lawyer. I hadn't thought about it a second till you fuckin' mentioned. I just said, I just said I'd talk to a lawyer 'cause that's what you do when the cops ask you questions . . . What lawyer . . . I dunno what lawyer. I don't know any fuckin' lawyers. Why don't you tell me . . . You got somebody in mind? Am I gonna be needin' a lawyer? If I am, I'd appreciate it you give me his name."

Danny nodded and reached into his jacket. He handed Tommy a business card with the names of Benson, Richardson, Hale, and Clawson and a telephone number.

"Okay, Tommy," said Danny. "You got a problem, somebody axe you any questions, you call this number and axe for this guy Benson. You don't talk to nobody else. Benson. Costs you any money, we take care of it for you. This is one smart guy. He's known to certain people. You don't talk to nobody else. No other lawyers. I don't care how fuckin' cheap they are, if you seen 'em ona television, or if they're some friend a yours, somebody recommended 'em . . . This is the guy you call. He'll know what to do."

"Sure, Danny. . . Thanks."

"Okay," said Danny. He stood up from his bench, kicked a few uneaten bread crumbs off the top of his shoe. Skinny came over from where he'd been standing by a water fountain and preceded them to the head of the stairs that led to Claremont and the car.

"Okay . . ." said Danny, like he was trying to convince himself of something. "I'm glad we had this talk together. Cleared the air a bit. I hadda take a look at the situation, you know. Always thinking . . . that's me." He tapped the side of his head with a finger. "I'm glad we talked. I don't think I seen you since . . . since that dinner over at your mother's place, the one when Charlie burned the sauce . . . You remember that, Tommy? Jeez—was he pissed. I thought your mother was gonna kill him. How is she anyway? He's always axing . . ."

"She's fine," said Tommy. "She's good."

"Good to hear it," said Danny. "Good to hear it."

Nobody spoke on the ride back. Tommy wondered if Danny was satisfied with his answers. He saw Skinny looking at him again in the rearview mirror. He didn't think so. They dropped him off around the corner from the restaurant. Tommy felt dizzy. He hoped he could make it into the restaurant before his knees started to go.
Tommy,” said the chef “Take a walk with me. I gotta talk to you.”

Tommy was filleting a salmon. He looked up from the cutting board. "I'm wrestling with this, gimme a second." He zipped a long, thin knife along the length of the fish and deftly lifted the pink fillet free of the backbone. He repeated the movement on the other side of the bone. Holding the skin at the tail with a kitchen towel, he worked the knife blade along in a gentle, rocking motion under the meat, removing the skin. Then, with a pair of needle-nose pliers, he plucked the translucent rib bones out of the fillets. He worked quickly, leaving a little pile of the bones on the cutting board. He took a larger knife from a shelf and, using an ounce scale, cut the fillets into seven-ounce servings.

There was a tall stockpot on low flame on the stove filled with water, lobster shells, and mirepoix. Tommy put in the rack, skin, and head from the salmon. He sprinkled whole cloves, peppercorns, bay leaves, thyme, crushed red pepper, fennel seed, and a bit of saffron into the pot. He found some leek tops and parsley stems in the reach-in and a halved head of garlic, and he threw those in, too. He checked the flame under the stockpot for a final time and walked into the chef's tiny office.

"You wanted to talk to me?" asked Tommy.
"Yeah," said the chef. "But not here. Let's take a walk."

Still dressed in their whites, the chef and Tommy walked west on Spring Street toward the river. It was a cool afternoon, and the smells from the restaurant kitchens along Spring wafted out over the street.

"Burnt garlic," said the chef as they passed the Count's Villa Nova. "Sons of bitches don't know how to handle garlic. Disgraceful for an Italian restaurant. You smell that?"

"So what's up?" asked Tommy. "What do you want to talk to me about? I do something wrong?"
"Tommy," said the chef. "I don't know how to say this—but I'm in trouble. You're in trouble."

"What, are we getting canned?"

"No, no. Worse trouble. Worse than that, a lot worse. Legal trouble. Police trouble. Found dead in the trunk of a fuckin car kinda trouble," said the chef.

"Oh," said Tommy.

"Yeah," said the chef, shaking his head.
"I know I've got trouble," said Tommy. "What's your problem?"

"I had a conversation with somebody from the FBI yesterday," said the chef. "He works for some federal strike force they got."

"Big guy?" asked Tommy. "Guy named Al?"
"That's the one," said the chef. "He talked to you?"

"Fucking guy ambushed me at breakfast the other day," said Tommy. "What did he say?"
"Tommy," said the chef, "he says you're involved in some kinda murder or something."

"Fuck!" said Tommy. "Fuck, fuck, fuck . . ."

"Tommy, he says you're in a real world of shit. He says you could be arrested, subpoenaed—"

"I don't see why he's tellin' you this shit. What's he tellin' you for? Why's he gotta go around talking to my friends for?"

"Don't get mad, okay? Please don't get mad at me. But I gotta tell you, I got popped a few months ago. They got me comin outta Checkmate with a few bags of dope. Before I was on the program. They cuff me and hauled me downtown. They were gonna throw me in a fuckin' cell and I was sick like a dog. I was sick before I even scored and they hauled me down there and made me watch them put my dope in the evidence baggies and take it away. I didn't have a chance to do anything. I didn't want to—I couldn't kick in a fuckin' cell . . . I just couldn't do that the way I was. That guy Al comes down and talks to me. He says they'll let me skate on the possession charge if I tell them some things."

"What did you tell them?" asked Tommy.

"I told him what I knew, which was fucking nothing. I didn't know anything! They wanted to know about you and your uncle. I tried to tell them some things about Harvey. They didn't want any of that. I told them I'd seen Sally around, that I knew him to say hello, but I didn't really know the guy. I didn't know anything to tell. Even if I wanted to. And I didn't want to."

"Shit!" said Tommy.

"I told them you're a friend. I told them you're my sous-chef, that you're a good guy. I didn't want to talk about
you at all, but that's all they were interested in, was you. I didn't wanna detox in a fuckin' holding cell, Tommy. That was the thing. I couldn't do that."

"Maaan."

"I didn't tell them anything bad," insisted the chef.

"Anything you tell them is bad," said Tommy.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's alright. It's alright. It's not your fault."

"So this guy Al, he's giving me a really hard time. He's got my balls in the fuckin' vise. He says he's gonna throw me in fuckin' jail I don't talk to you. He was gonna throw my case back to the cops. Just when I got off dope. Just when I was beginning to see a little fuckin' light at the end of the tunnel. Tommy, he says you're involved in this thing. He says if I don't get you to come in and talk to them, he was gonna throw me back in it. He said everybody would find out about the dope. I'd never work after that, he said. He meant it. People be saying, maybe I got AIDS or some shit, they don't want me cookin' their food. He says you don't talk to them, they're gonna throw you in jail. They'll come and drag you off to the grand jury or something and make you testify and if you don't do that, they're gonna put you in prison. Not some tennis camp. Attica, some place like that."

"Fuck them," said Tommy.

"He said your uncle'll probably kill you," said the chef.

"They don't know shit about shit," said Tommy.

"Tommy, he said they'll call you before the grand jury. That could happen. He says you know something, Tommy."

"I don't know anything I want to tell them," said Tommy.

"Tommy, you're not a fuckin' wise guy, right? You don't want that. I'm right about that, right? Maybe you saw something, you did somebody a favor one time. I don't know. But why does it have to be you who goes to jail? Why you?"

"They want me to rat on my uncle," said Tommy.

"Okay," said the chef. "Don't tell me. What I mean is, you didn't do anything. Not really. I told them that, that you wouldn't. You didn't do anything yourself. I'm right about that, right Tommy?"

"They want me to rat on my uncle for something. That's what this is. They want me to help them put my mother's brother in jail."

"But, you do know something? They think you know something. They say they know you know something. They wouldn't be doin' all this shit otherwise, right? This guy, Al, he wasn't kidding. He's fuckin' serious. They're really going to do what he said."

"Shit," said Tommy. He stopped walking, sat down on the stoop of an empty storefront, and put his head in his hands.

"I saw them do it," he said.

"Oh, shit," said the chef. "Don't tell me that. Don't say that."

"I saw them kill a guy," said Tommy.

"Don't be fucking saying that! What guy? Where? How'd you get yourself—"

"They killed a guy right in the kitchen," said Tommy.

"I don't want to know this," said the chef. "I don't want to know this . . . MY KITCHEN??!! They killed a guy in MY kitchen?"

"I didn't know it was gonna happen till it happened. They told me they were just gonna like talk to this guy," Tommy said, speaking to the sidewalk.

"So, it's not like it's your fault or anything. You didn't know. You didn't know anything," said the chef, hopefully.

"They whacked a guy out right in front of me, for Chrissakes. They chopped the guy up right there on the dishwasher."

"You saw them do it?" said the chef, incredulously.

"I saw them kill the guy. I didn't see them cut him up. I was in the office then. They made me clean up after." "Oh, shit. . . Tommy, Tommy . . . What are we gonna do? We're fucked," said the chef.

"I don't know. I don't know."

"What am I gonna tell them now? I can't tell them this. What am I gonna say?" Tommy didn't respond; he remained sitting, head in his hands, staring at the pavement. "What are you gonna do?" said the chef. "You saw it. You saw it happen. Your uncle's gonna kill you."

"I could go to this guy I know. He's like Sally's boss. He likes me. He could get me a lawyer. Maybe he could
"Help," said Tommy.

"How's that gonna help? You trust these guys?"

"I don't know, alright? I don't know."

"What do I tell this guy Al? What do I say to him now? I can't tell him this shit," said the chef.

"I gotta think," said Tommy.

"If you don't talk to them, I'm gonna be washing somebody's socks for them out there."

"I've got to think about the situation for a while. This is a pretty fucked-up thing. I gotta think about it."

"Does Cheryl know anything?" asked the chef. "You been seeing her, right?"

"No, she doesn't know anything. I mean she knows who my uncle is. She knows that, but the other thing, no."

"Tommy, he said he's gonna take you away in fucking handcuffs. They'll subpoena you. They'll indict you. Grand juries do whatever the prosecutor wants them to do. They'll indict you. It's not even you they want. You're gonna have to tell them something."

"I'm not gonna rat on my uncle. What's my mother gonna think she sees me sending her brother to prison? What happens then? Where do I live? What do I do? What am I gonna say to my mother?" Tommy was looking in the chef's eyes.

"What's she gonna think if you go to prison?" asked the chef.

"I'll break her heart. What do you think? She's not going to like it at all," said Tommy.

"You gotta do something. You can't just sit there, waiting for something to happen . . ."

"What am I gonna do? Run away? Split for South America? Live in Argentina like some sort of fugitive Nazi under another name? Shit . . . I lived around here my whole fucking life. I don't even speak Spanish! What am I gonna do, I run away down there? Where am I gonna go?"

"Shit," said the chef. "I speak Spanish. I'll go with you. We can make a break for it together."

"Yeah, right," said Tommy. "What are you gonna do for methadone down in Argentina or Brazil?"

"I hadn't even thought about that," said the chef.

"I don't even like the food," said Tommy, starting to break into an embittered laugh.

Soon they were both laughing, tears rolling down their faces. The chef began to cough uncontrollably. When he recovered, he wiped the tears out of his eyes. "That guy Al," he said. "Is he a piece of fuckin' work or what?"

"He's some kind of asshole, that's for sure," said Tommy. "He tracked me down to the Pink Teacup the other day, just to ruin my breakfast."

"How did they do it?" asked the chef. "You know, how did they kill the guy? If you don't mind me asking about it."

"They shot him," said Tommy. "Then they stabbed him, here." He pointed to an area below the solar plexus on his chef's coat.

"Right there in the kitchen," said the chef. "Right there in the fuckin' kitchen. I still can't believe it. Where? Behind the line? What?"

"The garbage area. Then they dragged him over to the dishwasher. They put him in the trash." Tommy started to laugh again.

"What?" said the chef. "What's so funny?"

"They used your knife. I figured it out when I came back. I saw what happened to your knife, I figured it out they must have used it to cut the guy up. Sorry, it's not funny, I know. I just can't help it.

"They used my knife? My knife?"

"Chopped him into hunks with it. I guess that's why your knife was so fucked up. Sorry, man."

"Wooooah," exclaimed the chef. He pondered for a moment and then started to laugh, too. "And it's hangin' over my fuckin' desk right now! It's still hangin' over my fuckin' desk!"

"Sorry, man," said Tommy. "I didn't know until I came back to work and saw it. After they killed the guy, I just sat there in the office, sucking down the vodka. I was sort of reevaluating things at that point, I can tell you."

"Jesus, Tommy," said the chef. "I gotta say this, you've turned out to be a pretty interesting dude to know. I mean, I've had sous-chefs mishandle my knives before—but this"—he exploded in laughter—"this is fucking ridiculous."

"It wasn't me, it wasn't me," said Tommy. "I'm sorry I couldn't say anything. I mean, what am I gonna say, 'Sorry chef, I had a couple of friends over last night and they sort of chopped a guy up with your knife and I think it's maybe damaged a little bit?'"

"I know, I know," said the chef. "I knew it couldn't have been you. I'm sure you didn't do it. You know you use a boning knife, with something that big. Shit, I don't even break down chickens with that knife."

"It's not funny," said Tommy.

"So how come we're laughing?"

"I don't know."
"Let's walk some more. People are gonna talk, they see us standing here like a couple of hysterical babies," said the chef.

They crossed Hudson street. It was starting to get dark. "Who's minding the store?" said Tommy.
"Fuck it," said the chef. "We'll make it back for service. Ricky'll set up the stations if we don't show up in time."
"I guess," said Tommy, dubiously.
"So what did . . . what happened to the body? I remember the place was a fuckin' mess when I came in," said the chef.
"They threw him out with the garbage," said Tommy. "In pieces. They broke him down into his primal sections and put him in the garbage."
"You didn't come in that day. I remember. So, that was when—Wait a minute . . . You mean the whole day, that whole day you didn't come in, I'm walking around and there's a dead guy in there somewhere?"
"Yeah, the porters were off, the garbage didn't go out until that night, the next night," said Tommy. "That was the reason, that was one of the reasons I didn't show for work."
"I still can't get over it," said the chef. "A guy chopped up with my knife."
"Yeah . . . well, it's been driving me fuckin' nuts. You don't know what it's been like for me. It's not like I've seen anything like that before . . . It totally blew my mind," said Tommy. He paused. "I can't believe I'm even telling you this."
"What do you mean?" asked the chef, defensively.
"I mean, five fucking minutes ago, you tell me you're talking to the fucking FBI, and here I am telling you all this shit that happened."
"I won't say anything to anybody," said the chef. "You don't tell me it's okay first, I won't say a word."
"Who are you kidding? You're gonna have to, sooner or later." Tommy sighed, "I'm an idiot, get myself in the shit like this."
"Really," said the chef. "I won't say anything."
"You gotta understand. They fuckin' lied to me. They said they just had to talk to the guy. That wasn't too hard to believe. They're always talkin' to guys like that, having meetings in walk-ins, in cars, places nobody is gonna see. I didn't like it. I didn't want to do it, but I went ahead and did it anyway. I let them in the door and they go ahead and kill a fuckin' guy."
"We're talking about your uncle, right?" asked the chef abruptly.
"You figure it out, okay?" said Tommy. "I don't want you to know for sure anything. I told you what happened. That's enough for right now."
"That's alright. That's okay. I understand," said the chef.
"No. You gotta understand. I fuckin' freaked after. It's been driving me crazy. I can't sleep. I get stuttering fucking drunk every fucking night. I got so drunk . . . I got so drunk the other night, I went downstairs with Stephanie."
"Duuuude!" exclaimed the chef.
"I know, I know," said Tommy, sheepishly.
"Well, that's the least of your worries, right?"
"It's another one. I really like Cheryl. I really like her. I'm worried she finds out when she gets back."
"Well, Stephanie at least won't be hanging around your balls gettin' all cow-eyed on you," said the chef.
"No," said Tommy. "She's not like that."
"So, maybe you'll be okay," said the chef.
"I don't think so. She'll find out. You know how the place is. It'll be all over the place. Cheryl's not going to be too happy with me."

They crossed West Street and walked along the stretch of abandoned piers. There was a strong breeze from the Hudson. The chef wrapped his apron around his shoulders, and Tommy buttoned up his chef's coat.
"I don't want to go to jail," said the chef.
"Believe me, I don't want to go to jail either," said Tommy. "Who wants to go to jail?"
"Who was the guy?" asked the chef.
"What guy?"
"You know . . ."
"I don't know. I know his first name 'cause they introduced me. But I never seen him before."
"Wild," said the chef.
"My uncle's an asshole. Drops me in the shit. Funny thing. My whole life he treats me like I'm some sort of retard for not getting with the program. After this thing happened, he showed up, with some money, all proud of me."
"Did you take it?" asked the chef, alarmed.
"Fuck, no. I was pissed."
"I don't want to go to jail," repeated the chef.
"You're like a fuckin' broken record. I don't want to go either, okay? I don't want to go either. I was in a holding
cell for an hour, one time in my life. I didn't like it there. It smelled," said Tommy.
"I bet the food sucks," said the chef.
Tommy chuckled, "I hadn't thought about that."
"Maybe we could say we're Muslims or something, Orthodox Jews . . . Maybe we'll get better food," said the chef.
"Yeah. Now I'm all cheered up. That's a consolation. Thanks."
"On the other hand, then we'd miss pork chop night. My old junkie buddies at the clinic say that's a big thing out
there. Major event of the week," the chef said with a smile.
"The thing of it is . . . the thing of it is, I just can't give up my uncle. That's a real problem I have. I know he's an
asshole. I know that. I know what he's done to me. I'm not stupid. I can see how things are. But, it's my mother's
brother. I just can't do that."
"Would she have to know? If you just talked to the guy. If you talked to Al. Just a few things."
"That would be sort of a break with tradition in my family, you know—talkin' to the FBI," said Tommy.
"Actually, it's the U.S. Attorney's office," said the chef.
"Same shit. Either way. I don't think they'll be satisfied with me if I just want to whisper a few things in their ear.
I'm gonna have to testify to make them happy."
"You don't know that," said the chef, "Give me a break," said Tommy.
"Unusual problems require unusual solutions," said the chef.
"Unusual? That's the thing. This isn't so unusual. For me it's unusual. For Sally and them? Sally went away for
five fuckin' years 'cause he wouldn't talk about another guy. Five fuckin' years for a guy he didn't even like. He hated
the guy! And he went away for him. Five years on a contempt charge, couple a' other things, without so much as a
peep. That's what's expected."
"Yeah, well, fuck that," said the chef. "I did everything that was expected of me, I'd be the chef at Lutece or some
shit."
Tommy grunted.
"Am I your friend?" asked the chef.
"Yeah, man. You're my friend," said Tommy.
"We gotta make some kind of pact. That we're not going to do anything to hurt each other. That we're gonna
figure some way to get out of this shit where you and I end up okay, and nobody gets hurt."
"Nobody we like, you mean," said Tommy.
"Right," said the chef.
"Somebody always gets hurt. People are gonna get hurt over this," said Tommy.
"I'm sorry, Tommy," said the chef. "I'm sorry about before. You know. . . right? I had no choice when I did it,
when I talked to them. We'll figure out something."
"Sure, Chef."
"Nobody's gonna shoot me in the head or anything, are they?" asked the chef.
"'Cause of me?" said Tommy. "'Cause of what you told me? I'm not going to say anything to anybody."
"'Cause I don't want to die."
"Who does? I don't," said Tommy.
"But, I'm like okay with you now, right?" said the chef.
"You're okay. I'm not even mad. I'm not gonna say anything.
Who'm I gonna tell, anyway? My uncle? My fuckin' uncle? Then maybe he will kill me. No, forget it. You did
what you had to do. I just gotta get things straight in my head. I gotta get this FBI guy off our backs, so I can live
like a normal person."
"Me too, me too," said the chef.
"Maybe you should go talk to this Al. Tell him you talked to me. Tell him I'm thinking about it. Tell him anything
you want. I just need more time."
"I don't know," said the chef.
"You know how to get in touch with the guy, right?"
"Yeah . . ."
"Well, buy us a little time. Tell him I'm thinking about it," said Tommy.
Thirty

Tommy stood by the information booth at Grand Central Station. He watched the recent arrivals pour off the platforms and merge with the crowd of commuters on the station floor. When he saw that the Westchester train was due to arrive, he pushed through the streams of business suits and moved closer to the platform. Cheryl was one of the last people off the train. She stood gathering her possessions, a single strand of auburn hair hanging over into her eyes. She was dressed in a long cable-knit sweater, black leggings, and ankle boots. She had an overnight bag slung over one shoulder, a handbag over the other, and she carried a bulky plastic trash bag that looked like it contained clothing. Tommy slipped up behind her and said, "Can I help you with that?"

"Jesus!" she said. "It's you. I was about to go for my can of mace."

"Sorry," said Tommy. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"This is a surprise," she said. "What are you doing here?"

'I figured I'd come by and meet you, maybe take you downstairs to the Oyster Bar for some Wellfleets and a bottle of wine," said Tommy.

She handed over the plastic trash bag. "Sweaters," she said. "My mother. She goes to some flea market up there with her friends and buys me sweaters. I say, 'Ma, no more sweaters please,' but she won't stop. I got sweaters with ducks on them, sweaters with moose, elk, reindeer, little bunny rabbits. I thought, maybe she'll run through the animal kingdom and it'll stop. But she's back on ducks. I got four more of them in the bag."

"Do you ever wear 'em," asked Tommy.

"Are you kidding me?" said Cheryl. "I give them to the church on the corner. I walk around my neighborhood now, I see these guys with cardboard cups bummin' money in my sweaters."

"So how do you feel about some oysters? They've got Wellfleets," said Tommy.

"How did you know which train?" asked Cheryl.

"I knew you were coming in this morning so I just hung out. There were only two trains."

"You waited here for two trains waiting for me? What are you being so nice for?"

"I don't know," said Tommy. "I felt like it. I missed you." He avoided her gaze.

"You're acting suspicious," she said, stopping in her tracks. "Did something happen? Somebody die? Am I fired?"

"No, no, no, everything's fine," said Tommy. "C'mon, let's get some oysters, I'm starving."

"Did the restaurant close?"

"No. I just felt like meeting you at the train, taking you out to lunch," said Tommy as he turned toward the stairs. Cheryl cocked her head and spoke to Tommy's back. "Did you fuck somebody? Is that what this is about? You fucked somebody, didn't you?"

Tommy stopped and turned around. He started to say something, then hesitated.

"You fucked somebody didn't you?" said Cheryl. "You can say so, I won't be mad."

Tommy attempted an ingratiating smile. "Well..."

"Who did you fuck?" asked Cheryl. "Somebody at work?"

"C'mon, please," said Tommy, half turning. "Can we talk about it over lunch—"

"Did you fuck STEPHANIE?"

Tommy looked down at the floor and didn't deny it. "Well he said. He put down the plastic bag and moved toward Cheryl.

"You fucked Stephanie!" she said. Cheryl coldcocked him with a right hook that seemed to come up off the floor. Tommy stumbled backward, tripped over the plastic bag, and went down. He ended up sprawled flat on his back on the crowded station floor. Hurrying commuters stepped over and around him saying "Sorry" and "Excuse me." One chunky woman in a blue dress with running shoes stubbed her toe on Tommy's head. It took him a few seconds to get to his feet. He looked around for Cheryl. She was gone. Tommy picked up the bag of sweaters and headed for the exit.

He managed to wave down a taxi on Forty-second Street and directed the driver to Cheryl's Perry Street address. She had hit him below the left eye, and he reached up and felt the swelling. The left eye was tearing, and his vision out of that side of his head was blurry. He wiped a tear off his cheek with his sleeve and saw the driver looking at him in the rearview mirror. Tommy twisted in his seat so he could catch his own reflection. There was a large reddening welt and the eye itself was bloodshot. Tommy tried to smile, and shook his head ruefully.

The cab driver, a pale, craggy-completed man with a greasy blond ponytail, caught his glance in the mirror.

"Somebody really popped you one there, buddy," he smiled. "You want to go to Emergency?"
"No, I'm fine," said Tommy. He slid down a ways in his seat and tried to avoid the driver's glance. "I walked into a door."
"Sure," said the driver. "I hate when that happens."

Tommy was standing there in the hall, holding the bag of sweaters, when Cheryl answered her door.

"Don't be upset," said Tommy.
"I'm not upset," said Cheryl. "I'm mad."
"Please," said Tommy.
"I'm grossed out," said Cheryl, standing in her doorway, one arm blocking the way. She looked at Tommy's eye.

"Wow!" she said. "I did that?"

"It was a nice punch," said Tommy. "You really got your shoulder into it."
A fat tear rolled out of the bloodshot eye. Tommy made the most of it, dabbing at the eye with his sleeve.

"You fucked that cunt," said Cheryl. "Anybody else, I wouldn't mind so much."

"I'm sorry," said Tommy. "I was drunk."

"That cunt. I should bust her in the fucking mouth too," said Cheryl.

"I'm sorry," said Tommy. "I'm really sorry. I was really, really drunk. It just happened."

"You are a complete fucking asshole," said Cheryl, taking a longer look at the eye.

"I know," said Tommy.

"That looks really bad," said Cheryl. She stepped back into the apartment, unsure what to do. "Can you see out of it? You're not going to go fucking blind on me or something like that, are you? Even though you fucking deserve it."

"No, I'll be fine," said Tommy, sliding through the open door. "I could use some ice, though. Its swelling up like a motherfucker."

Cheryl went over to the refrigerator and took out a tray of ice cubes. She found a towel hanging on the bathroom doorknob and emptied the ice into it.

"You better do it," said Cheryl. "I'm not inclined to be gentle right now."
Tommy took the towel and pressed it against his eye. He tilted his head back and slowly sat down on the double bed in the middle of the room.

"If I owned a chair, I'd be telling you to get off my fucking bed," said Cheryl.

"I'm sorry, Cheryl. I'm really sorry," said Tommy from underneath the towel.

"Fuck me, fuck my friends, is that it?" said Cheryl. "You're getting the bed all wet."

"You're not the injured party here. I'm the injured party. Me," said Cheryl.

"I think this qualifies as an injury," said Tommy. "The cab driver on the way down asked if I wanted to go to Emergency."

"All right, all right, let me see it," said Cheryl. She lifted a corner of the ice pack and peeked at the eye. "That's not that bad," she said, wincing slightly. She put the ice pack back on the eye. "You gonna sue me now? Call up one of those lawyers on TV? Maybe you can garnish my tips."

"Ouch!" said Tommy.

"So everybody in the restaurant knows, right?"

"Nobody knows," said Tommy.

"Yeah, right. Nobody knows. That cow has told everybody on the floor by now, are you kidding me? She's back there with a fucking bullhorn right now probably, in the waiters' station. 'Ladies and Gentlemen. Please be advised: I fucked Cheryl's boyfriend!' I feel like I'm gonna throw up."

"I didn't know for sure I was your boyfriend," said Tommy, sitting up in bed.

"Well, let's see," said Cheryl. "We've been sleeping in the same bed for the last four months. I seem to remember we were having sex on a regular basis . . . I guess . . ." Cheryl slapped herself in the face. "What the fuck am I saying? What am I, an idiot? I can't believe what I'm saying, am I some sort of whining little airhead? You're right—I'm not your girlfriend. What the fuck does that mean? You can fuck anybody you want?"

Tommy reached over, but she pulled away.

"I want you to be my girlfriend," he said. "I don't know what the fuck that means, but you know . . . partners in crime and all that. We never talked about that, you know? It's not an excuse. I did something wrong. I know that. It's bad manners. Bad form. I know. Whatever it is we are . . . I betrayed you kind of. And I'm sorry about it. I was
drunk, I was depressed, you were away. It never would have happened if I hadn't been so drunk. All this shit has been going on lately and I just got all fucked up in my head."

"What shit has been going on?" asked Cheryl.

"I've been having some problems with my uncle," said Tommy.

"The gangster? That uncle?"

Tommy nodded.

"What does your uncle have to do with your fucking Stephanie? That is utter fucking bullshit. That is really lame, Tommy. You're having trouble with your uncle and you have to fuck Stephanie? Is that what you're saying?"

"I can't really. I don't want to talk about it," said Tommy. "Okay? I'm having big problems? I don't want to get into it, but I'm having really serious problems right now with shit that has nothing to do with the restaurant or you or me or anything else. Guinea problems. I got into some trouble and I'm worried about some things."

"Was she any good?"

"What?"

"Was Stephanie any good? She seems to think she is."

"I can't remember. I was drunk."

"So it was bad?"

"I told you it . . . I told you—I was drunk. It lasted around twelve seconds."

"So you do remember," said Cheryl.

"I remember that it was unmemorable," said Tommy.

"So where did you go? Where did you do it?"

"I really don't want to talk about it, okay? I'm embarrassed."

"You did it in the fucking restaurant, right?"

"Downstairs," said Tommy.

"Dry humping in the dry-goods area? Delightful."

"I'm sorry," said Tommy. "I'm sorry it ever happened. If I could go back in time and fix it, I would. There's a lot I'd do over again."

"What does that mean?"

Tommy sat up completely, feet on the floor, and held the ice pack over the towel. "I'm in a lot of fucking trouble, alright? A lot of trouble. I've never been in so much trouble my whole fuckin' life, that's how much trouble. The cops could come and take me away any fuckin' minute, that's what kind of trouble."

"What? Are you gonna tell me you're in the fucking Mafia or something, now, Tommy? 'Cause that's bullshit. You're a fucking cook, okay? You're gonna have to do a lot better than that."

Tommy looked her in the eyes and put one hand gently up to her elbow. "I'm in serious shit. Serious, serious shit. I've been going nuts for over a month now, worrying about it. I've been going so nuts I thought I was gonna lose my mind. The other night, I was drunk and I was lonely and I wanted somebody to hold me and tell me everything was gonna be alright."

"So, instead you took Stephanie downstairs and threw it in her. That's what your mother's for, Tommy. Go home and cry on her shoulder."

"It's my mother's brother, my Uncle Sally, who got me into this, okay? I can't talk about it. I can't tell anybody. The fucking FBI came and talked to me the other day. Alright? The FBI . . . I'm sitting there having breakfast and the FBI comes right up to my table, right there in the Pink Teacup, and starts messing with me, dickin' around with my head. They got files on me and everything. Can you believe that? They even know where I eat breakfast!"

Cheryl looked surprised. "Are you shitting me? Are you kidding? You're not kidding, are you? The FBI?"

Tommy nodded.

"What do the FBI want with you? What do they want, a fuckin' recipe?"

"They want to know about something my uncle might have done."

"You didn't do anything, right? Why are they bothering your"

"Cheryl, I don't know. I don't know. Because I'm there. Because they feel like it. Because they think I did something with him. They want me to rat on my uncle, alright?" Tommy ran his hands through his hair, put the ice pack back on his eye, and flopped back down on the bed.

"So why don't you tell them?" asked Cheryl.

"It's a fucked-up situation," said Tommy.

"They're not going to put you in jail," said Cheryl.

"They said they will," said Tommy.

"Just 'cause you don't talk to them, they can't put you in jail . . . They can't do that. Can they?"

"I think they can."
"Why? What is your problem? Why don't they just arrest your uncle, he did something wrong?"

"They think I saw something. They want me to be like a witness," said Tommy.

"Witness to what?"

"I really don't want to talk about this," said Tommy. "I shouldn't have really said anything at all."

Cheryl moved closer to Tommy and lay down, resting on one elbow, beside him. "Listen, Tommy," she said, "You were doing real well there for a while. I was almost forgetting about what a sleaze-bag you've been. Almost, but not quite... Now what is it that's so bad that you have to get drunk and fuck the house slut for?" She took the ice pack off Tommy's eye and tossed it in the sink. She ran her fingers through Tommy's hair, through the wet strands near his eye, pushing them back off his forehead. "You're gonna have to tell me. If you don't tell me, I'm gonna go in there tomorrow and kick Stephanie's ass into outer fuckin' space."

So he told her.
HARVEY ARRIVED at the restaurant early. He had been jogging: three times around Washington Square Park and then down to the Dreadnaught. He wore a white terrycloth sweatband, a T-shirt with the name of a health club on it, faded blue shorts with HORACE MANN printed in small white letters on one leg, and a pair of running shoes, no socks. His face was shiny from exertion, and once inside the door, he wiped himself off with a clean dinner napkin and headed straight back to the bathroom. As he passed Cheryl and Hector setting up for brunch in the dining room, he nodded hello.

Inside the bathroom, Harvey stood in front of the urinal and feigned taking a piss. He took a white paper bindle out of his shorts pocket, rolled up a bill, and packed both nostrils with generous snorts of cocaine. Now he felt healthy.

When he got out of the bathroom, Harvey sat down at a stripped deuce at the front of the dining room. He asked Cheryl for a double cappuccino and watched her as she made it, tapping nervously on the table with a pen. He took a small notebook out of his pocket and wrote himself a little reminder—"Can we make our own muffins for brunch? Ask chef"—and waited for his coffee. Cheryl arrived with his cappuccino, and he grasped both sides of the small table with his hands and rocked it back and forth. It wobbled.

"What? Am I on the fuckin' Titanic here? Tell Hector to chock this table, okay? Where is he? He was just here a minute ago."

Cheryl gave Harvey an accommodating smile, "He's on the pay phone. You want me to get him?"

"Yes, I want you to get him . . . He's always on the phone this kid. I don't want him using the phone during business hours. I don't want him using the phone period. It's ridiculous, the amount of time he spends on the phone. Enough. Tell him to get off that thing and set up for brunch. I've got the band coming in and I want everything to look right. And please, get him to chock these tables . . . I'm getting seasick just sitting here."

"Karen called in, she's going to be a little late," said Cheryl.

"Fabulous . . . just fabulous," said Harvey "When she comes in get her started on the specials board right away, then send her in to see me. I'll be in my office."

IN HIS OFFICE, Harvey finished the last of his cocaine. He pushed some papers around on his desk, forsaking a tall stack of bills and past-due notices for a catalog advertising gelato machines. After a few minutes he left the office and walked down the steps to the kitchen.

The chef was squeezing blood oranges into a mixing bowl full of hollandaise for sauce maltaise. Mel was toiling over the Hobart with his bare hands, shoving great chunks of corned beef into the grinder for hash. Harvey found Big Mohammed bent over a two-compartment sink washing salad greens.

"The bathroom . . . the bathroom, Mo', please," said Harvey. "Clean for me please."

Big Mohammed was up to his arms in the sink full of cold water and salad. He stood up, dried his hands on his apron, and looked at Harvey with an indulgent smile. "Is clean. I clean," he said.

"Clean again," said Harvey. "No clean inside . . . Inside . . ." He struggled for a word to describe urinal. For the second time this morning, Harvey found himself mimicking the act of pissing. "Urinal, u-rin-al . . ."

Big Mohammed giggled. "Okay, okay Mr. Harvey. I clean."

Harvey turned and left the kitchen, casting an uncomfortable glance at Mel, who seemed to be flirting dangerously with dismemberment over the Hobart.

WHEN TOMMY ARRIVED at two o'clock, there was a trio of musicians in the front cocktail area. Three white men—a pimpled young bass player with taped horn-rimmed glasses, a wrinkled piano player, and a clarinetist with visible dandruff—were playing Dixieland music to a nearly empty dining room.

Two regulars in Yankee warm-up jackets sat at the far end of the bar, away from the musicians, drinking Bloody Marys and reading the sports pages. A stick-thin young man, sweating in his leather jacket, was engrossed in conversation with Karen. Hector was on the pay phone. Cheryl was standing at the service bar, talking to the bartender.

"I don't believe it," said Tommy when Cheryl came over.

"Thought he'd forget all about it?" said Cheryl, looking at the musicians.

"I hoped he'd forget it," said Tommy. "And Dixieland . . . I hate Dixieland . . ."

"Oh, they play other music too," said Cheryl. "Somebody requested 'Girl from Ipanema before. You missed it."
"Oh, no . . . No, no, no . . ." groaned Tommy.

"Yes, yes, yes . . ." said Cheryl.

"All we need now is for somebody to request 'Happy Birthday,'" said Tommy.

Cheryl indicated four adults sitting with two loud children in the rear of the dining room. One child was in a stroller; his mother, a large woman in a Busch Gardens T-shirt, pushed him back and forth with one free hand while she shoveled eggs Benedict into her face with the other. The other child, a paunchy little boy of six or seven, ran in circles around the tables making engine noises.

"Maybe it's one of those darling children's birthdays . . . Should I ask?"

"I'll kill you," Tommy shook his head and walked over to the bar for a Bloody Mary. The bartender was cutting fruit for mimosas and other champagne cocktails with a boning knife.

"Expecting business?" Tommy inquired.

"Maybe tomorrow," said the bartender, putting down the knife to make Tommy's Bloody Mary. "How do you want it? You like 'em spicy?"

"I want mine strong. Blow my fuckin' head off. I want my head to bounce off the bar when I finish it," said Tommy.

Cheryl patted Tommy on the ass as she headed back to check on her table.

"How many we do today so far?" asked Tommy.

The bartender shrugged. "It's been dead." He pointed at the musicians, just beginning 'La Bamba.' "We've had three walkouts . . . Not music lovers . . ."

Tommy took his drink off the bar, threw his celery garnish into the bartender's trash can, and walked through the dining room and down the steps to the kitchen.

When Harvey came out to the bar, the waitress with the nose ring didn't even bother to get up. Hector was still on the phone. The musicians were halfway through a tortured rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In," and an older couple had joined the four adults with the children in the rear of the dining room. The couple were clearly arguing between bites of omelette, but the music drowned them out.

"Isn't this great," said Harvey expansively. "Aren't they good?"

Cheryl just nodded and grinned.

"It takes time," said Harvey, looking around the restaurant. "Takes time for the word to get out. Once people hear about the music, about the food . . . they'll come in. They'll come in. It takes a little time. I'm putting an ad in the Voice: Jazz Brunch. Ten dollars with free choice of Bloody Mary, Mimosa, champagne cocktail. I'm thinking of like a New Orleans theme . . ." He took the little notebook out of his pocket again and wrote "New Orleans Brunch. Creole Food. Talk to chef."

Cheryl took the opportunity to slip away to the waiter station. She had stashed a book behind the cappuccino machine. Through the curtain, she caught a glimpse of Harvey, standing in the front window, wringing his hands and watching the street traffic.
It was an unusually cool, gray late-summer afternoon. Harvey emerged, flushed and glowing from a half-hour sun-treatment at the Rising Sun Tanning Salon on Greenwich Street. He walked slowly downtown, stopping in front of each restaurant to read the menu in the window. He wore a white dress shirt that made him look even tanner than he was, a blue blazer with gold buttons with little anchors on them, new blue jeans with the crease still in them, dark socks, and brown loafers. He looked at his watch, saw it was four-thirty, and picked up his step toward the Dreadnaught.

There was a basketball game on the courts on Sixth Avenue. A large crowd was gathered around the high Cyclone fence, watching a group of big black men in sweats and T-shirts running up and down the court. When somebody made a basket, the crowd erupted with cheers of approval and cries of exasperation. Harvey stopped to look, but his view was blocked by taller, wider people in front of him. He checked his watch again and continued walking down Sixth, eventually turning east on Spring Street. He rounded the corner and crossed over to the downtown side of the street. A block away from the Dreadnaught, a voice called out to him from a dark green Buick parked in front of a hydrant at the curb.

"Harvey!" said the voice. He stopped, took a few steps back, and approached the car. He leaned over to look inside. Sally Pitera's oversize hand darted out the passenger window and fastened itself to Harvey's collar. He was yanked off his feet, losing a loafer in the process, and pulled, headfirst, into the car. "OW!" he exclaimed.

His face came to rest awkwardly on the floor of the Buick, pressed up against the mat. His feet still stuck out the window at an angle. Sally pulled him up off the floor and into a disheveled but upright position in the seat. Sally slapped him hard across the face. Then he slapped him again, twice. Then again and again as he snarled, "Motherfucker. Motherfucker. Dirty little kike. I'm gonna kill you. I'm gonna cut out your fuckin' heart. You know what you done? You know what you done, you dirty little prick? You know what you done to me?"

"What? What? What?" Harvey whined. "I didn't do anything!" He put his hands up in front of his face, but Sally pushed them away and continued to hit him.

"I didn't do anything!" protested Harvey.

"The fuck you didn't," said Sally. He grabbed Harvey's upper lip between thumb and forefinger and twisted it around in a tight corkscrew. Harvey squealed. Still holding him by the lip, Sally swatted him across the ears.

"What did I do? What did I do?" implored Harvey.

Sally let go of the lip and began to run his hands around inside Harvey's blue blazer. He moved his fingers up Harvey's back, around the sides, down his front, over his stomach. He felt inside Harvey's thighs, he patted his crotch. He felt inside his pockets, turned them inside out, pulled his shirttails out of his pants.

"Wha', wha', wha'd I do?" asked Harvey, again.

"Are you wearing a wire?" demanded Sally. "Are you wearing a fuckin' wire, Harvey?"

"No!" protested Harvey, in an indignant tone. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you what I'm fuckin' talkin' about," said Sally. "I'll tell you what I'm talkin' about. I'm talkin' about money. Money is what I'm talkin' about. You piece of shit. Cock sucker. Brooklyn money. That's what I'm talkin' about, you piece of crap. You little ball of dried-up shit!"

Sally hooked his beefy fingers around Harvey's throat and forced his head back, over the seat. Harvey's face, already red, became even redder, turning bright crimson, his eyes bulging out of his head and sweat breaking out over his forehead. "Sop it! Stop it . . ." he gurgled.

"How much?" asked Sally, squeezing harder and pushing Harvey's head further back over the seat. "How much a their money you take?"


Sally released his grip. Harvey coughed into his hands, struggling to breathe.

"Twenty thousand dollars . . . " said Sally. "You go to them for twenty thousand dollars when you owe me. When I told you . . . when I told you to stay away from those guys. Didn't I tell you that before? Didn't I tell you that before? Didn't I tell you to stay away from those people? Didn't I fuckin' tell you that?" Sally slapped him again. Harvey cringed against the door.

"I needed it," Harvey said. "I needed it to pay you."

"What else you done, Harvey?" demanded Sally, fixing him in a terrible stare. "What else you done I don't know about? You talkin to any cops lately, Harvey? You talkin' to some FBI maybe? 'Cause, so help me . . . Are you a fuckin' rat?" Sally feigned a couple of blows at Harvey's face, stopping short each time. Harvey winced and pulled away as much as he could with each near blow.
"Are you a fuckin' rat?" Sally continued. "'Cause I know you're a treacherous, lying little cocksucker. I know that about you already. How 'bout it? You a rat, too? You been tellin' somebody some things?"

"No, no, no," insisted Harvey, gingerly feeling his upper lip. "I didn't say anything to anybody."

"You been talkin' to somebody about our business?"

"No, I swear," said Harvey.

"Them guys from Brooklyn . . . What's their names?"

"Dominic . . . Dom and Frank," said Harvey. "I don't know their last names."

"And you told them . . . you told them you owe me, right?" said Sally. "You told them that? They have to know that, don't they . . . And don't fuckin' lie to me, Harvey, 'cause I can make a fuckin' phone call and find out, I have to. Don't make me do that. You told them you owe me, right?"

"I didn't," Harvey said. "They knew already. They knew."

"Those miserable . . . " Sally muttered. He leaned out his window and signaled a young man standing across the street. He was of medium height with black hair combed straight back. He wore a loud checked jacket; a pink dress shirt, unbuttoned at the collar; and beige, pleated slacks. He had a thin gold chain around his neck with a tiny gold cornucopia hanging down in his chest hairs. His shoes were white patent leather with decorative perforations on top. He crossed the street and came around the car, crouching down by Harvey's window.

"This is Victor," said Sally. Victor smiled, showing a silver-capped tooth. He didn't extend his hand. "Hi," he said.

"Victor's gonna be your new manager," said Sally. "Starting Monday, he's gonna be lookin' after my interest. He's gonna work with you, help you out, get the situation over there straightened out.

"But, but . . . but, Barry," stuttered Harvey.

"I don't care who you got over there, now. Give 'em their fuckin' walkin' papers. By Monday," growled Sally.

"I gotta give him some notice, I can't just cut him loose," said Harvey.

"Listen, asshole," said Sally. "I'm not gonna give you any notice when I shoot you inna fuckin' head."

Harvey looked silently down at his hands.

"Victor, here, is gonna be with you in there. He's gonna be right there lookin' after things. And me, I'll be comin' aroun'. We are gonna be sittin' on your fuckin' head every fuckin' minute and take every fuckin' dollar every fuckin' way we know how, until you straighten out what you owe. You don't make no more payments to them . . . When is your next time you gotta see them? When's the next payment?"

"Tuesday," said Harvey, weakly.

"Tuesdays . . ." mused Sally, "Tuesdays. I let you pay Fridays . . . You don't pay them no more. You don't have to see them. Fuck them . . . Got that?"

Harvey nodded.

"I told you before. I told you and you didn't fuckin' listen," said Sally. "Now you gotta listen to Victor. You do what Victor says. He tells you to sign somethin', you better fuckin' sign it. He tells you the place needs a fuckin' cargo container of fuckin' asswipes, you better order 'em. He says you need a thing for the restaurant, you better believe you fuckin' need it. Understand? You understand, Harvey? 'Cause I'm gonna tell you somethin' right now for free—the only thing that's keepin' you alive right now is I want my fuckin' money. That's the only thing keepin' you outta the fuckin' meat-grinder."

"I been paying . . . I been paying on time," Harvey said hopefully.

"You been fuckin' around with me is what you been doin'. I told you not to do something and you went out and did it anyway. I let you pay on Fridays, not Tuesdays like everybody else. I covered you outta my own fuckin' pocket. Things are gonna be different now."

Sally leaned in close to Harvey, shifting his bulk in the seat. "Lemme tell you somethin' else . . . I don't trust you. I don't believe a fuckin' thing comes outta your mouth. You're a thief. You took money outta my pocket. You borrow money from some other guys—that's stealing from me. That makes you a thief. You can be a thief, you can be a rat. That's the way I see it. You better hope I'm wrong about that."

Sally put his fingers around Harvey's skull like he was holding a basketball and banged it against the door frame. He leaned across Harvey and opened the door. Victor stepped back a few feet. "Have a nice day," said Sally. He pushed Harvey out of the car onto the sidewalk. Victor helped him to his feet, holding him at the elbow. Harvey found his errant loafer and put it back on. Sally roared away from the curb, the power steering shrieking as he turned the wheel.

Harvey did his best to rearrange himself. He tucked his shirt into his pants and patted down his mangled lapels.

"See you Monday," said Victor. He released his grip on Harvey's elbow, wiped his hand on his pants, smoothed his hair, and walked slowly across Spring Street.
Thirty-Three

SALLY FIDDLED with the dial on the car radio. There was only the sound of static. "I can't get nothin' on this thing," he complained. Skinny, sitting next to him in the front seat of the parked Ford, lit one cigarette from the lit end of another and said, "You gonna run down the battery, you keep playin' with it like that. That would be real great, you can't start the fuckin car."

Rain was coming down in sheets. The water ran in streams across the windshield, concealing the occupants. It was twelve-thirty at night, and the Brooklyn street was empty except for a few parked cars. Sally and Skinny sat hunched down behind the dashboard, their hands cupped around the glowing ends of their cigarettes, eyes fixed on the trailer office of Calabrese Construction Company in the building site across the street. There was an office building going up, its dark skeleton looming up in the rain.

Sally and Skinny watched the trailer through an open gate. A short driveway of wet, rutted earth led from it to the street, the deep tire tracks from trucks and earthmovers filling with rainwater. There was a hastily thrown together cinder-block landing under the trailer door, and a few wooden planks disappeared into the muddy pools in front of it. Behind the louvered window of the trailer, dark shapes moved in front of a light.

"When are these guys gotta leave?" muttered Sally. "They don't have homes, these people?"

"Maybe they're fuckin' each other," offered Skinny.

Sally stubbed out his cigarette in an already overflowing ashtray and moved his hands impatiently up and down the barrel of the big shotgun on his lap. It was an Ithaca Mag-10 Roadblocker, with a distinctive rubber butt-guard. Sally lit another cigarette. He drummed his fingers on the dashboard. He picked his nose.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," said Sally.

"They'll be comin' outta there any minute," said Skinny, the barrel of a Mossberg Bullpup just visible from under the folds of his rain poncho. "They gotta go by Joey Balls's place before closing," said Skinny. "Joey closes his place at one-thirty."

"Maybe they're not goin' tonight," worried Sally. "Maybe they want to eat Chinese tonight."

"Joey's their skipper. They gotta be there," said Skinny. "Every night they come here, they go there later. Every night. Joey doesn't like no once-a-week. He wants it every night . . ."

"I wish they'd hurry the fuck up in there,'" said Sally. He looked over at the silver Seville parked a few car-lengths down the street.

"I'm sure," said Skinny.

"What time you got?" asked Sally. Skinny looked at his watch. "FT minutes after the last fuckin' time you asked me."

"I think they're comin,'" said Sally. "They're comin now." He squirmed around in the driver's seat.

The trailer door opened and two men in Brioni suits stood illuminated in the office light. They looked up at the rain, then down at the muddy pools of water. The taller of the two men disappeared back into the trailer for a moment, reappearing with a single umbrella. He held it over the other man, reached back and flicked off the light, and they both stepped carefully onto the cinder-block landing. The shorter man snapped closed a padlock on the trailer door.

When they reached the sidewalk, the shorter man kicked mud off his shoes before stepping off the curb and into the street.

Sally reached for the door handle.

Skinny, in a calm, low voice, said, "Wait a minute . . . wait . . . wait . . . okay, now. Let's do it."

The two men were halfway across the street, making for the Seville. Sally and Skinny got out of the Ford. The interior dome light did not go on; masking tape kept the buttons in the doors depressed. They left the doors open and moved toward the two men.

The shorter man saw them first. Leaving the taller man alone under the umbrella, he bolted for the Seville. The taller man turned, a confused look on his face, in time to see Skinny coming at him in the rain, the barrel of the Mossberg rising up and out from under his poncho.

"Shit!" he said.

The first blast from the Mossberg took him in the left knee, knocking his leg out from under him. He teetered for a second before flopping over onto the wet asphalt. He rolled, gasping, over onto his back, trying frantically to pull
himself across the street with his arms, the shredded leg dangling limply below the knee. Skinny took another few steps and put a wet foot down firmly against the man’s throat. He pressed the Mossberg barrel against the man’s chest and pulled the trigger. The man’s body bucked violently, the one good leg kicking up into the air and then falling with a wet slap back onto the pavement.

Skinny looked off to his left. He watched as Sally, all 280 pounds of him, trotted after the shorter man. The man was struggling with the driver’s side door of the Seville, saying, "Please, please, please," under his breath as he fumbled with the key. He gave up on the door and had just started to move away from the car when Sally let loose with the Ithaca. The powerful round caught the man at the hinge of his jaw, blowing most of the top of his head onto the roof of the Seville and shattering the driver’s-side window. He was knocked against the door, and as he slid to the ground, Sally fired again, hitting him in the neck. He fell sideways onto the street, what was left of his head folded over onto his shoulder at an unnatural angle, a ruined, leaking shell.

"WOW!" exclaimed Sally. "You see that?"
"That's why they call it a fuckin' Roadblocker," said Skinny.
"Well, it sure knocked his fuckin' block off... Marrone!

Sally and Skinny walked back to the Ford. As Sally started the car, Skinny retrieved an old army-surplus duffel bag from the back seat and put the two shotguns inside. He removed the ashtrays and dropped them in the duffel with the guns. Sally stepped on the gas and roared down the street, slowing down slightly to pass the two left wheels over the dead man in the middle of the street. There were two dull thuds as the car bounced over the corpse.

"You shouldn't a done that," said Skinny. "That's bush."
"Fuck him," said Sally, grinning from ear to ear.
"Guy could get caught up in the wheel well or the bumper. Next thing you know, were draggin' a fuckin' stiff halfway across Brooklyn."
"Fuck him," said Sally.
"It's bush," said Skinny. "I don't like it. Now you got forensics onna tires. I really don't like that."

**T**hey drove the Ford to the parking lot of the Acropolis Diner near Cadman Plaza. They parked next to a green Mercury. Skinny removed the masking tape from inside the door frames, got out of the car, and put the duffel in the trunk of the Mercury. He took off his poncho and crumpled it in a ball and threw it in the trunk. Sally found the key to the Mercury in the exhaust pipe and got behind the wheel. Skinny returned to the Ford and, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped down the steering wheel, dashboard, ignition key, and the door handles, inside and out. Then he got in the Mercury next to Sally.

"You leave the doors unlocked?" asked Sally.
Skinny nodded.
"Good," said Sally. "Maybe some mouli'll steal it."

Sally pulled the car slowly out of the parking lot, not turning on the headlights until he was out in the street. He drove toward the Brooklyn Bridge and the lights of Manhattan.

"You see the fuckin' car those pricks were drivin'?" he asked.
"That's the new Seville," said Skinny, his eyes on the rearview mirror.
"New Seville. Fuckin' cherry. They got a fuckin' cherry Seville to drive and I get another Buick. There's no fuckin' justice in this world no more."
"They ain't drivin' nowhere tonight," said Skinny.
"You got a point," said Sally.
"Drop me at the garage, right? I gotta get rid of the guns," said Skinny. "Then leave the car. Where you parked?"
"I got my car parked over the West Side there, on 125th under the highway," said Sally.
"You park legal?"
"Yeah, I parked legal," said Sally. "What am I, a fuckin' moron?"
"Good, you don't want no tickets tonight. There gonna be a space nearby? Someplace for this one?"
"Yeah, yeah. The spot I picked is perfect. I leave this one, walk half a block and I drive home. Bing, bing, bing."

Sally turned on the radio. "At least this one works," he said, turning to a news channel. There was nothing yet on the radio about the shooting. After a few minutes, Sally said, "That is some beautiful gun."

"Which one?"
"Mine. The one I used. That is beautiful. I couldn't believe it. You see what it did to that guy's fuckin' head?"
"They make that gun to shoot cars with," said Skinny. "I think you supposed to be able to shoot through the engine block and hit a guy behind the wheel. I think it's for state troopers."
"It's a beautiful gun," said Sally.
"I hope you ain't even thinkin' about holdin' on to it," said Skinny. "Cause there's no way. An hour from now, it's
gonna be all crushed up and on its way with the other one. You smart, you get rid of your clothes, too. Burn 'em. Shoes too. That's the smart thing to do. You can't get naked when you gotta piece of work, you should burn the clothes. That's the next best thing."

"Saves money on the dry cleanin', right, Skin?" joked Sally.
The Metro Grill on East Twenty-ninth Street was packed with its regular lunchtime crowd of executives. Waiters, captains, busboys, and a wine steward moved gracefully between the generously spaced tables. Colorful arrangements of Casablanca lilies, birds-of-paradise, irises, and wild orchids were scattered artfully around the large dining room. Tommy and Al sat in the rear smoking section, their empty show-plates still in front of them. Tommy drained the last of his third Stoli on the rocks. Al sipped from a half-empty bottle of Heineken.

"I thought you guys lived on doughnuts and coffee," said Tommy.
"I get out now and again," said Al. "I know how to eat with a knife and fork. I won't embarrass you."
"The waiter hates you already," said Tommy. "Drinking outta the bottle."
"I hate beer in the glass," said Al. "Makes it warm. Loses its bubbles."

Tommy's Pacific oysters arrived. The waiter put a plate of New York State foie gras down in front of Al, who eyed it suspiciously. "You're sure I'm gonna like this, huh?" he said.
"Oh, yeah," said Tommy. "I woulda ordered a nice glass of chilled sauterne with it, but I guess you're on a budget."
"I'm fine with the beer, thank you very much," said Al. He took a big bite of foie gras, following it with most of a crustless toast point. "That's not bad."
"You know how they get the goose liver so big and tasty like that?" said Tommy.
"Why do I think I don't want to know this," said Al.

Tommy slurped down an oyster. "They nail the goose's feet to a board, right? Then"—he put his hands up to his neck, mimicking the struggles of a helpless goose—"then they cram all this rich food and truffles and stuff down the goose's throat. Twenty-four hours a day, day in and day out, for weeks, they're stuffin' food into this goose. So the liver, it swells up like a fuckin' football, until it weighs like more than the goose. That's how they do it. Good stuff, huh?"

"It's good, it's good," said Al, not entirely convinced.

"Hey, I always liked to cook. From when I was a kid. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen—you didn't have a lotta choice about that if you were in my family. You wanted to see my mother, you found her in the kitchen, roasting peppers, makin' sauce. She'd cook stuff just to give it away. People would come over sometimes and bring some food and they'd cook something up special and my mother would cook somethin' else and then everybody would sit down together and eat. It was like a big social thing at my house, people always droppin' by, say hello, maybe they stay and eat something. My mother was a pretty good cook. Everybody in the neighborhood thought so. A lot of food production in my house, I can tell you . . . So, a lot of times, I'd help her out in there, or somebody would come over with a lot of food and my mother would tell me to give them a hand.

"Anyway, one summer I got this summer job out at one of those big fish houses they got in Sheepshead Bay. You know the kinda place—fried fish, fried scallops, fried shrimp, steamers, a lobster tank in the window—that sorta place. So I did that one summer and then when I got outta high school, I went back there for a job. They had a new chef they just hired and this guy has got his own ideas about food. They got him straight outta the CIA—you know what that is?"

"The Culinary Institute, that's the place up there in Hyde Park, right?"
"Right," said Tommy. "So, anyway, this new chef is there and he's not crazy at all about the six different kindsa deep-fried bullshit they been serving at this place. He wants a new menu. He wants better food. He's right outta school and he's ambitious and for him, the sky's the limit. He wants to get famous, and fast. So, all of a sudden, this place where I been working, where I thought I was pretty hot shit, dunkin fries and steamin lobsters, all of a sudden we're makin' real food."

Tommy paused while the waiter filled his wine glass.

"So, the chef, he's not too popular with some of the old-timers in the kitchen. They're used to makin' things their
own way and in their own sweet time. So when the chef needed something special, like when we got some parties comin’ up, these weddings and banquets, he needed somebody to help him and that turned out to be me.

"And I liked it. I had a lotta fun. I’d never seen half the stuff this guy was making before. I had to play some serious catch-up just to keep up with the guy . . . So, there I am, learning a lotta new shit and I was havin’ a good time doing it. People were impressed. Course he was drivin’ the fuckin’ place outta business with the kinda food he was ordering, but that’s another story. Nobody gave a shit about food cost in those days.

"So, we’re doin’ all these parties together, me and this guy. We’re holing up in the walk-in sometimes twelve, thirteen hours at a clip, spooning aspic and chaudfroid onto whole poached fish and turkey breasts and hams. We’re makin’ pates and galantines and decorating them with all these cute little garnishes the guy taught me. We're wrappin' stuff up in pastry, and making flowers and leaves out of the dough. And I gotta say, a lotta the stuff was fuckin’ gorgeous.

"Looking back, I see a lotta the stuff was outta style. But at the time, when you've been droppin' breaded scallops into a Frialator six nights a week, this was pretty exciting stuff. Some of the things he showed me knocked my fuckin’ socks off. And I was happy to learn. I was getting pretty cocky myself by this time, and soon, like, every time we booked another party, me and this chef would try to like outdo each other. We tried everything. Even if we didn't know what the fuck we were doing, we did it anyway. We'd tell the client, 'Sure! We can do that. No problem,' then we'd look it up in the book and wing it. I started reading up on things, going to the food shows. Me and this chef, we'd come into the city and eat around at places he knew about. And you gotta remember, I never ate in places like this before. This was a whole new fuckin’ world.

"So there I am. I'm eighteen years old, and suddenly I'm marchin' around in one of those nice uniforms, the cotton ones, no polyester. The new chef hated the polyester. I've got the jacket with the Chinese buttons on it. I'm wearing one a those coffee-filter chef hats on my head, and I think I'm Superchef."

Tommy emptied his wine glass. A waiter came over and refilled it. Al sat quietly, letting Tommy talk.

"And I'm makin' money. I'm gettin' paid off the books. I guess I shouldn't say that, but I'm gettin' paid off the books like everybody else back then . . . I've got hot and cold running waitresses all over the place, and at the end of work, everybody would hang at the bar—the kitchen staff, the floor, some of the bar regulars . . . Everybody would hang out at the bar, drinking for free, gettin' fucked up. I'm makin' the bucks, I'm getting laid like I never thought was pos sible, and people are impressed with the food I'm makin'. People are treating me like I'm hot shit. So, after a few months of this, I'm thinkin' this is not such a bad life. I'm learning a skill, I've got money, there's the sex. The world is my fuckin oyster. I go home and see my old friends from the neighborhood, they're still doin' the same shit, boosting cars, selling firecrackers to kids from Jersey, runnin' errands for people. Like they're still kids."

"So, you didn't want any of that?" said Al.

"Fuck, no," said Tommy. "Course they thought I was some kinda faggot or something. But I saw what they were doing. I didn't want that."

"You still see any of them?" asked Al.

"Not really. I see a few guys I used to know occasionally. They look at me like I'm from fuckin' Mars. Fuck them. I was proud of myself. . . My mother was proud of me. There were a few friends who thought it was cool what I was doing. Friends of the family, they'd come over like before, but this time, my mother would let me like show off. She'd just sit there at the table and I'd do the cooking. I'd try to blow them away with a good show."

"So, what happened the place you were working," asked Al. "How long you stay there?"

"That place folded after a year. He musta had a food cost like eighty percent. He was throwing crabmeat and wild mushrooms and all sorts of imported fish around like it cost ten cents a pound. This guy had to have number one tuna, sushi quality, nothing else would do. If the dry-goods people didn't have what he wanted, he'd come down to the city and buy it retail at Dean and DeLuca or Balducci. That's a fast way to go broke, right there. In the end, I think what the customers really wanted after all was the fried scallops."

"So where did you go after that?" asked Al.

"I got a job at the Rainbow Room. Big, big kitchen. A lotta cooks. I ran the lunch buffet in the Rainbow Grill, I stayed there a couple years, learned some things. They moved me around on the stations. I'd fill in on sauté some nights, on the grill. I even worked in the pastry shop for a while, decorating cakes and shit. I moved on a couple a other places, tryin' to move up a little, looking for a job as a sous."

"You never went to college?"

"Nah . . . never made it," said Tommy.

"How come? You're a smart kid," said Al.

Tommy made a face. "Lotta reasons. I was hooked on the money for one. I saw the few guys I knew who did go to college—they were all fuckin’ waiters where I worked. So, I thought, who needs that? I just didn't see it . . . Maybe the CIA would have been a good idea. I think I would have liked going there. I coulda got off doing that . . ."
"So, why don't you go? It's not too late," said Al.
"You sound like my mother," said Tommy.
"So you met Michael at the Dreadnaught, or you know him from someplace else?" asked Al, leaning over to refill Tommy's wine glass.
"The chef? I met him there. I got the job through a friend of a friend—"
"Your uncle got you the job," interjected Al.
"Yeah, my uncle got me the job. This place I was workin' uptown folded and I was looking for a sous-chef's job. He gave me a call one day and says go by this place, I hear they need a sous-chef. That's where I met the chef, Michael... I guess I was kinda forced down his throat. I'm sure he couldn't a been too pleased when I showed up. Most chefs, they like to bring in their own sous. They move to a new place, they like to hire away all the people they worked with at the last place they worked. But, he was pretty cool about it. He went to school in Paris, you know that? He went to La Varenne. That's like the best place there is for cooking."
"I didn't know that," said Al.
"Oh, yeah... He's good, the chef. He's worked all over the place. He's worked at Windows, he's worked at La Cote Basque, in the Caribbean, in France... So, I really busted hump for the guy when I first got there. I mean I worked. I came in early, stayed late. I kept my eyes open and my mouth shut and I didn't give him any attitude. After a while, he saw I was into what I was doing. I wasn't standin' around with my cock in my hand waiting for a paycheck like a lotta guys. I showed up on time every day and I didn't make him look bad when he wasn't around. So we started to get along. We started to hang out after work, goin' out to the clubs together. We'd talk about food. He introduced me to people, other chefs who were friends of his. He taught me a lot. He's good people."
"You probably covered his ass for him when he fucked up," said Al.
"He's a nice guy, then..." said Al. "For a junkie."
"He's off that," protested Tommy. "He's in rehab. You know that, right?"
"Yeah, yeah," said Al. "I know."
"What you guys did to him, that's not right. He doesn't deserve that. He's trying. You're not makin' it any easier," said Tommy.
"Like you said, Tommy. Everybody's got problems," said Al. "I've got problems. You've got problems. My problem is your uncle the fuckin' Wig. That's what my problem is right now."
Tommy and Al sat silently while a busboy took their appetizer plates away. The waiter brought a bottle of red wine and opened it neatly. He poured a little in Tommy's other glass for him to taste. Tommy rolled a sip around in his mouth for a second, and smiled and nodded. The waiter filled his glass. Al ordered another Heineken. A few minutes later, the entrees arrived. The waiter put Al's plate down first. It was a carefully shingled fan of sliced duck breast, blood rare, laid around a mound of two different kinds of chutney and some braised lentils. A plumage of baby greens towered over the plate.
Tommy had a plate of whole roasted squabs, boned out and spread-eagled atop a wild rice pilaf. The edges of the plate were drizzled with a dark sauce studded with chanterelles and black truffles.
"Wow!" said Al, gaping at his plate. "I don't know whether I should fuck it or eat it. You weren't kidding, this place."
"I fuckin' love it," said an ebullient Tommy. "This really turns me on, food like this."
"I knew you weren't gonna be a cheap date—but this is fuckin' ridiculous. This is wild," said Al, putting a forkful of duck breast into his mouth. "Jeez, that's good. That's really good."
"I'm not going to rat on my uncle for a free lunch," said Tommy, attacking his squab.
When the entrees were gone and the empty plates cleared away, the table decrumbed, and another bottle of wine ordered and consumed, after the cheese and the dessert and the tiny cups of espresso, Tommy sat blissfully sipping cognac from an enormous snifter. Al, who had mortified the waiter by ordering a post-dessert beer, loosened the top snap on his pants and settled into his chair with a groan.
"You tryin' to get me drunk, Al?" asked Tommy with a crooked smile. "'Cause I'm a quiet drunk. I'm a sentimental drunk. Some people, other guys, they're loud drunks, they wanna tell you their life story, get in a fight, tell everybody what's wrong with the world. Me, I get quiet, I get philosophical. I get sentimental when I'm drunk. You tryin' to get me drunk, Al? Is that what you're doin'?"
"Maybe a little bit," said Al, raising his beer bottle in a mock toast, then taking a drink from it.
"I'm more than a little bit drunk," said Tommy.
"You got a girlfriend, Tommy?" asked Al.
"Kind of," said Tommy.
"Somebody from work?"
"Yeah. Somebody from work. You prolly know that already, right? Like you know where I eat my breakfast. From twistin' the chef's nuts. You prolly know all about it."

"Yeah," said Al with an apologetic smile. "I gotta admit, you're right about that. She's a pretty girl. What's her name again?"

"Cheryl. Her name's Cheryl," Tommy tried to sit up straight. "You know her name. Don't play with me. It's not nice."

"Sorry," said Al. "Just tryin' to establish rapport here. Next, I'm supposed to tell you about my wife or my family, you know, commiserate a little. I guess you don't want to hear about that."

"No, no," said Tommy eagerly, seemingly happy to change tack. "I'd like that. Tell me about your wife. Does she cook?"

"Sure she cooks," said Al.

"Yeah? What does she cook?" asked Tommy, slurring his words now. "What does she cook when it's like your birthday, special occasion, and she really wants to lay it on right for you? It's gotta be . . . there's gotta be one thing she makes for that, right? One thing she does real good. Something special. With my mom, it was veal saltimbocca. She'd go down to the store and bitch at the guy till she got the right piece of veal, fight over the price, then she'd come home and pound the shit outta that veal with this mallet she had . . . I guess it wasn't that good, to be honest. I seen a lot of veal saltimbocca since then. But I loved it. I still love it. Moms are like that. They get themselves a small repertoire of things they think they do real well and then they do it over and over."

"Roast beef," said Al.

"Roast beef?" said Tommy with a grin.

"Yeah. Roast beef with Yorkshire pudding," said Al. "First time she got that Yorkshire to rise up in the pan right, and stay up, she was so happy. Now she's a pro at it. Makes a sauce, a gravy, to go with it. Outtasight."

"Lumps?"

"What do you mean?"

"The gravy. It's gotta have lumps you eat gravy at home. No good without the lumps. It's like mashed potatoes, you gotta have the lumps or people think you're back there mixin' up Instant Potato Buds or something, some shit like that. Gotta have those lumps. So what does she make for dessert? After the roast beef?"

Al blushed slightly and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"C'mon, Al," Tommy persisted, "What does she make for dessert?"

"She makes Jell-O. With fruit in it," said Al.

Tommy laughed out loud. Al looked even more uncomfortable.

"The red stuff or the green stuff?" asked Tommy, still laughing, tears running down his cheeks.

"The red," grumbled Al.

"With what?" Tommy pressed on. "With what kind of fruit? Sliced bananas?"

"Fruit cocktail," said Al. "Del Monte can a fruit cocktail you gotta know. Laugh if you fuckin' want. I love it."

"I know what you mean," laughed Tommy, struggling to regain his composure. "I know what you mean. I love it, too."

Al called for the check. It arrived a few moments later in a leatherbound book on a silver tray. Al took out a credit card. The waiter took the card and returned.

"How much I give this frog-swallower for a tip?" asked Al.

"Straight twenty," said Tommy. "These guys live on tips."

"I thought you double the tax. Twenty percent of this check, I could put my kid through college," complained Al.

"Twenty percent. That's what I do. Restaurant people, they go out to eat, they leave twenty percent . . . unless the waiter's a screamin' fuckin' asshole."

Al signed the credit card slip after adding in 15 percent. He waited for the waiter to return with the carbon, then made a notation in a small spiral-bound book. He put the carbon in his wallet, shook his head, and exhaled loudly.

"You gonna have a problem justifying this on the old expense account, there, Al?" said Tommy, visibly enjoying himself. "This wasn't exactly lunch at the Sizzler."

"No problem, Tommy," snapped Al. "I got you down as 'A Potential High Level Source with a Unique Perspective on the Inner Workings of a Major Organized Crime Family'".

"That's kinda an exaggeration, isn't it?" said Tommy.

"We'll see," said Al. "I'm an optimist."

Al retrieved an ancient Burburry trenchcoat from the coat-room, remembering to discreetly button up his pants again. They stepped out onto the sidewalk, and Al gestured toward the red Alfa, parked across the street.

"Lemme give you a lift," said Al. "There's some things I want to show you in the car."

Wobbly on his feet, Tommy agreed. Once inside the Alfa, Al reached under the driver's seat and removed a
I just want to show you a few pictures," said Al. "You don't have to say anything. Just look at the pictures. Like Show and Tell. I'll show and I'll tell. Won't hurt a bit.

"This here's your uncle, Sally Wig," said Al, holding up a grainy black-and-white surveillance photo. "That's Charles Iannello, or Charlie Wagons, as we've come to know and love him, standing next to him there. I understand he knew your father. You must have seen him around. I love the bathrobe, don't you? Pretends to be nuts. Looks like he's kinda pissed off in this picture, doesn't it? Maybe he's mad at the Wig. There's not a lot of love there, I understand."

He held up another picture, "Here's another . . . Sally Wig and friend, out taking the air. The friend, I think maybe you've seen this gentleman around, too. A Mr. Gaetano "Skinny" di Milito. Not a very nice man, from what I can tell. You know he dragged a box cutter across his teacher's face a couple a' times in shop class a few years back. Course, he was a juvenile, back then. Nine months in Spofford for Skinny. A hundred sixty-eight stitches for teacher. I guess Skinny musta got frustrated tryin' to make a wallet or something."

He showed Tommy another picture, this one in color. It was a close-up of the teacher's face, a polaroid, taken in the hospital. The face was swollen and purple, bits of suture visible around the wounds; patches of oozing gauze covered the worst parts.

He held up another. "Oh, here's one. This is some of Sally's work. Some that we know about, that is. This guy was insensitive enough to take Sally's parking space. Foolishly thought he could park some where just 'cause it said Public Parking on the sign. Wrong . . . Sally was kind enough to show him the error of his ways. Broke his collarbone and both elbows with an axe handle. He looks kinda like a lobster in those casts, doesn't he?"

Tommy turned his head away. "I don't wanna see this shit," he said.

"Just a few more," said Al. "Here's a couple of new ones. You might be interested to know this happened just the other night in Brooklyn. Maybe you've seen these two gentlemen around the Dreadnaught. They were regular customers of yours, apparently. They musta been customers, right, 'cause they were sure in and out of there a lot in the past few weeks. It's hard to recognize them now, though." He held up a crime scene photo of the two men in the Brioni suits. They were lying in the street, two heaps of dark, wet rags on fields of black blood.

"We still don't know what they used on this guy," said Al, showing Tommy a close-up of a man's head, teeth showing through exploded gums, a half-empty skull.

"Looks like they used a fuckin howitzer . . . They're still sponging bits a this one out of his car. Found a right incisor stuck into a telephone pole, fifteen feet away, if you can believe that."

"You wanna make me throw up in your nice car?" said Tommy. "Keep it up . . . I don't like this. I don't know why you want to do this to me. Enough, alright? . . . Enough."

"We don't know for sure your uncle did this," said Al. "I'm not making any allegations, here . . . Not now, anyway . . . I'm just tellin' you, man to man—we have reason to believe your Uncle Sally was angry at these two men. We know he was angry. Let's just say, we think he had a compelling reason. We know that . . . So, what we think has happened, is that one day, Sally gets angry. The next day, they turn up like this."

It was another close-up. A dead man's face, white and wet, a tire track running diagonally across broken cheekbones. "Whoever done this is a terrible driver You know if Sally's got his license?"

"Alright!" shouted Tommy angrily. He reached for the door. "Stop it, or I'm getting outta the fuckin' car. I'll take a cab."

Al dangled a last picture in front of his face. It was an old mug shot of Freddy Manso. Instead of the corpulent alcohol-ravaged face Tommy had seen at the Dreadnaught, the face in the photo was of a young man, smooth-completed, almost feminine, with dark eyes, carefully combed ducktail, and a hint of baby fat around the cheeks and jaw. Freddy looked defiantly at the camera, holding up his name and number with a casual tilt of the head. But there was a softness, even fear, in the face, too . . . Tommy turned away and looked out the window.

"Okay, Tommy, here's how it is," said Al. He put the pictures back in the Manila envelope and put the envelope back under his seat. "Here's how it is . . . No bullshit, alright? I'm gonna drop you off downtown . . . You go home and think about things for a few days. You think hard for a day or two or three, and then we'll have another talk. It's time to shit or get off the pot . . . I had a nice lunch with you today. I enjoyed it. I think you're a nice kid. I had fun. But I don't want to be lookin' at a picture of you lookin' like that one of these days . . . You talked to Michael. You know what the score is . . . Things are gonna be gettin' pretty bad for the people around you in the next few weeks. People you know are gonna start gettin' subpoenas. They're gonna have to go to a grand jury where other people are gonna be askin' them questions. And some of these people, the people that are gettin' asked the questions . . . they're gonna start worryin' about who else but them knows the answers to those questions."

"We have reason, good reason, to believe that your uncle, Sally, is gonna be worried about you. About something that happened to this man, Freddy Manso. I know you've met Freddy . . . Sally is gonna be worried. His friend
Skinny is gonna be worried. Their friends are gonna be worried. And me and the people in my office are gonna be givin them a lot to worry about. I think they're gonna start worrying about you.

"When we start asking these people about what happened to Freddy Manso in front of a grand jury, what do you think is gonna be runnin' through their minds? What do you think Skinny's gonna be thinking about when he's up there on the stand, committing all kindsa perjury? They're gonna be thinkin' about Tommy Pagano. I think they're gonna be sayin' to each other, 'Hey, is Tommy gonna stand up when they haul his ass up here, give him limited-use immunity, direct him to testify?'

"You know what, Tommy? I think they're gonna say, 'Hey, Tommy's got this cookin' thing he's got goin'. He's got a girlfriend . . . Maybe, maybe we don't know what's in Tommy's mind Sure, sure . . . Sally's your uncle, he's blood and all that . . . But you know what? I seen a lotta guys get clipped over the fuckin' years, Tommy . . . Blood doesn't seem to count for all that much anymore . . . You know what I'm talkin' 'bout? It happens . . . " Al let it all hang in the air a few seconds.

"You're talkin' about my fuckin' uncle," said Tommy. "He practically raised me . . . He's my mother's brother . . . You want me to rat on somebody I known my whole life."

"You are a sentimental drunk," said Al. "I just don't see Sally and Skinny and that crew as sentimentalists. Sally, Skinny, Danny, Charlie, and them, they don't strike me as the trusting type. They strike you that way? I see them more as the type a guys who like to be sure about a thing."

Tommy said nothing, he sat there in his seat, arms crossed in front of him.

"So, don't rat," said Al. "Fine . . . I'm not saying you have to do anything, right this second. But the grand jury's another thing. Go home and think about things . . . When you've thought about things a while and you think maybe you're in need of a friend, give me a call. Here's a card, you call this number anytime, day or night, and you don't have to give your name. You just tell the guy who answers your name is Aaron and you wanna talk to Al. He'll connect you . . ."

Tommy took the card.

"No matter how bad it is, Tommy, we can make it right together. No matter how bad . . . I just want you to know I'm there when you want a way out. You've got a friend if you need one."

Tommy began to retch. He quickly opened the door, leaned out over the street, and threw up. Al slid over. He patted him gently on the back. "That's alright..." he said. "That's good . . . You'll feel better."
THERE WAS YELLING in Harvey's office. Downstairs, in the kitchen, Tommy and the chef cleaned squid and listened. Tommy stripped the skin off the squid, then removed the head and entrails, tiny undigested fish spilling out from the squids' hollow centers. He tore off the fins at the tail and removed the translucent, quill-like spines. The chef pinched each severed head, squeezing out the little balls of cartilage; cut away the tentacles from the eyes. Black squid ink squirted on his apron and ran off the cutting board, collected in pools on the stainless steel work table. He took the cleaned bodies and cut them into rings. When the pile of rings built up, he swept them off the cutting board into a bucket of water at his feet.

"What's goin on up there?" asked Tommy.

"They just fired Barry," said the chef.

"They just fired Barry," said the chef. "This new guy, Victor, is in. Barry's out."

"Who the fuck is Victor?" asked Tommy, lighting a cigarette with wet hands.

"I don't know," said the chef, still concentrating on the squid. "I've never seen the guy before."

"Where does he come from," asked Tommy. "Where has he worked?"

The chef, annoyed, turned from the squid. "He was introduced to me as a manager slash consultant. . . That's pretty much all I know. He knows the Count. He talks about the Count's place like he built the place."

"Young guy? Not too tall? Hairy chest?" asked Tommy. "Is that Victor?"

"Yeah," said the chef. "You know him?"

"I think so . . . He's got dark hair, slicked back?"

"That's the guy," said the chef.

"I know him," said Tommy. "He works for my fuckin' uncle."

"Maybe we should discuss this in the war room," said the chef.

The chef stepped into his office for a moment, reaching all the way back in the center drawer of his desk for a joint. Turning to Tommy, he said, "Hydroponic . . . from California. Saving it for a special occasion."

A few moments later, they stood in the walk-in, surrounded by cooling buckets of chicken stock, fish fumet, demiglace, and soup. The chef lit the joint, took a hit, and passed it to Tommy.

"So, I take it this does not portend well, this Victor guy?"

Tommy shook his head, slowly exhaling smoke. He took another hit and passed the glowing joint back to the chef. "No . . . This is bad. This is really bad. I know the guy. He went to my high school. I think he got expelled."

"So is he an asshole or what?" asked the chef.

"He's worse than an asshole," said Tommy. "He's half a wise guy . . . He's half an asshole . . . He's a fuckin' half-wit. When he's not makin' pizza over at Frank's, he runs errands for my uncle and those people. He's a fuckin' moron . . . He doesn't scratch his own nuts, my uncle doesn't tell him first."

"He didn't say anything about pizza. He talks like he's in the restaurant business," said the chef.

"He is in the restaurant business," said Tommy. "He's the guy who comes to your restaurant and collects the money you owe for bein' in the restaurant business. He's a flunky, a bottom feeder . . . He works for Sally—what else do you wanna know about the fuckin' guy?"

"So, what does this mean?" said the chef. "Are we workin' for your uncle now? Is that what this is? 'Cause Harvey was all hyped up about a new menu this morning . . . Am I gonna be serving baked ziti and veal parms here a week from now?"

Tommy ran his fingers through his hair and sat down on a bushel of spinach. He reached for the joint, took a long hit and let it out. A thought struck him, he sat bolt upright. "What's the squid for?" he asked, an exaggerated look of abject terror on his face. "Tell me we're makin' Portugee squid stew . . ."

"Harvey wants me to run fried calamari for an app tonight," said the chef.

"Red sauce?" asked Tommy.

"He said any way I wanna try it," said the chef. "It's like an experiment."

"It's only a matter of time," said Tommy. "Next comes the red sauce. You seen the shit they serve next door? That's what they want . . . That's what they want us to serve."

The chef smirked. "So, I fucking humor him. Big fuckin' deal. Listen, Tommy . . . the days are gone when I'm gonna burst a fuckin' blood vessel over principle. Long gone . . . Harvey tells me he wants fuckin' zeppoli on the
fuckin' menu, I'll say, 'Sure Boss, why not? . . . Let's give it a try' Then I tell the waitrons not to sell it. I'll tell them, every time some bonehead orders it, they should look up at the ceiling and roll their eyes and sigh a lot—Are you sure you wouldn't prefer the fritures?"

"It's not like that," explained Tommy, "You're not dealing with Harvey, some late night he gets gassed up on coke and wants to try something and then he forgets about it . . . He didn't get up, ram some coke up his nose, and read about the wonders of calamari in Cuisine while he had his morning dump. That's what I'm tryin' to tell you . . . Victor told him he wants calamari . . . Victor wants what Sally tells him to want . . . You understand? . . . You see? It's Sally. Sally loves that shit.

Tommy got up and paced back and forth in the crowded walk-in. "It's over, man . . . Fucking fried calamari . . . Have you had that shit they got next door? Have you ever tried it? Have you seen that shit?!"

"Chill out," said the chef. "I'm sure it's fucking awful. But, I . . . we got bigger problems . . . So, we start looking for work. We still gotta hang here till we find something else. There's no rush, right? I mean, are we gonna get canned? I need the money right now . . . Is this guy gonna get us fired?"

Tommy stopped pacing and considered matters. "I don't think so. I mean I know what they'd like to do, what they usually do. They'd like to shit-can the whole lot of us, the whole kitchen, and hire a buncha Mexicans or Chinamen to work for cheap, get a couple a illegals in here to slop out the overcooked pasta, bread the frozen veal cutlets, ladle a little red sauce over . . . They need a chef, they get some moke from the neighborhood in, some guy too stupid to steal cars . . . That's what they'd like to do." Tommy sat down again and lit a cigarette. "But, I think we got a little while. Sally won't wanna piss me off too much right now, I don't think. They won't fire me. And they won't fire you 'cause we're friends. They're just gonna make workin' here such a miserable fuckin' experience that everybody's gonna quit. That's what's gonna happen."

The chef dropped the roach into the drainboards. He sat down on a box of oysters. "Shit," he said, "I really need the money."

"Shit, I need the money too," said Tommy. "But what really gets me . . . what really chaps my ass is the food . . . I like the food here. I like cookin' this food . . . I don't wanna be slopping some shit out, some fucking mung like they got next door. We make nice fuckin' food here . . . I feel good at the end of the day. I don't want to sink outta here at the end of the day, wondering who's gonna get diarrhea . . . I hate that. I'd rather choke to death on my own fuckin' puke than make that kinda food anymore. I'd rather suck fuckin' turkey necks in hell than make that shit, work for those people . . ."

"And wait'll you see the friends. Wait'll you see Sally's friends show up. Hangin' at the bar, drinkin' for free, feelin' up the waitresses. Every inbred motherfucker with a tracksuit an' a gold chain gonna be hangin' out here like at the Count's . . . Why don't they just shoot me in the head—put me outta my fuckin' misery . . ."

The chef looked alarmed. He struggled to put a good face on things. "I worked places before . . . You know, mob places. The food was okay. They weren't hangin' around all the time. You'd see them once in a while, but nobody got in the way—"

"Those places were makin' money. Some place pullin' down ten, fifteen million bucks a year feeding tourists is different. We're not even makin' our nut here. The place has been fuckin' dyin' for months . . . Harvey's gotta be into Sally for some serious bucks if they come in and tell him to start runnin' squid tonight. It's different. The big places, that's a long-term relationship there. Everybody's makin' money, everybody's happy. Here, nobody's makin' money —and I guess he ain't makin' it fast enough, he sends Victor over here."

"You sure this is the same guy? You haven't even seen him yet. Maybe you should wait and see if it's the same guy before you start freakin' out," said the chef.

Tommy stood up again and took off his apron. "I'll go up to the bar, see if I can get a peek. You want anything?"

"Yeah, sure, bring me a Heineken," said the chef.

Tommy walked back through the kitchen and up the stairs. He passed Harvey's office. It was quiet inside. He crossed the empty dining room and walked up to the bar. He slid back the door on the beer cooler and reached in for two Heinekens. He looked over at the men sitting at a table in the empty cocktail area in the front of the restaurant. Sitting in front of the fish tank, a single dead fish floating belly-up behind his head, was Harvey. He was sweating, nodding his head enthusiastically. The tabletop was covered with menus from other restaurants, a binder, a pile of invoices. Next to Harvey sat Victor. He saw Tommy at the bar, and he moved his head slightly in recognition, a smirk on his face. Tommy clenched his teeth and closed the cooler door. He half-turned to head back to the kitchen, beer bottles in hand, when he caught a good look at the third man at the table. Sitting against the wall, his face partially obscured by a flower arrangement, was the Count.

"Well," said the chef, when Tommy returned to the walk-in, "how'd your reconnaissance mission go?" He took a beer from Tommy, opening it with the end of a slotted serving spoon. "Is it him?"

Tommy nodded. He opened his own beer the same way. He made sure the heavy walk-in door was closed. "I've
decided," he said. "I'm gonna drop a dime on my uncle." He laughed bitterly. "I'm gonna rat my uncle out over a plate of fuckin' squid."
The Jacob Javits Convention Center on the west side was crowded with men in cheap suits. They wore color-coded identification badges and they elbowed each other to get at the free samples of portion-controlled remaki and fish sticks and Swedish meatballs and barbecue chicken wings on the trays and in the chafing dishes around them.

Harvey and Victor wore green badges identifying them as CEO and GM of Neptune Restaurants, Inc., a fictitious restaurant chain. Harvey said they'd get better treatment from the sales reps, and he was right. The two men strolled past the latest model infrared broilers, convection ovens, dishwashing systems, nonstick waffle irons, and electric potato peelers. A busty woman with a wine-colored birthmark on her neck blocked their way and insistently offered them some cheese-filled cocktail franks. Harvey waved her away and headed purposefully to the escalator, Victor close behind him.

Detective Czerny finished his third mini-chimichanga while he watched Harvey and Victor ride the escalator to the second floor. Detective Alvarez wiped his mouth with a cocktail napkin.

"What is that in there? Shrimp and avocado?" he asked.

"I dunno," said Czerny. "It all tastes the same to me. I can't tell, chicken, shrimp, it all tastes like the same shit."

"You're eating enough a them," said Alvarez.

"They're still good. I don't have to know what a thing is to like it. Look, they're going in upstairs."

The two detectives wiped their fingers and headed slowly for the escalator.

The Salon Gastronomique was a curtained-off area on the second floor. Classical music played through distorting speakers. It was the third day of the competition, and the prizes for excellence in garde-manger, charcuterie, chocolate, pastillage, pastry, and entrees had already been awarded. Harvey stood in front of a long table filled with rapidly decomposing pates and galantines and held his nose.

"We should of come the first day," he said. "It always stinks by the third."

Victor curled his lip and turned away. "Smells like rotten pussy in here."

"It gets ripe sitting under the lights three days," Harvey explained. "Will you look at that shit. . . It's getting brown at the edges." He pointed at a long pâté en croute with a clock face painted in aspic on the slices.

"This is some fuckin' food show," complained Victor. "There's nothin' here I'd wanna eat."

Harvey ambled over to the pastry area, to a table full of wedding cakes, chocolate sculptures, pulled sugar bouquets, and marzipan fruit cornucopias. He stopped in front of a pastillage cake. In the center of the cake, painted in chocolate, was a portrait of Marlon Brando as Vito Corleone. Harvey chuckled. "You know, last year, I was here, I saw one a these chocolate paintings . . . You know what they had on it? Reagan on the phone with Gorbachev. Can you believe that? One side a the cake they had Gorby, and the other side they had Reagan, and they're both holdin' telephones. All painted in chocolate. Like somebody'd ever eat that. . . Just what I wanna do, nibble on Reagan's face. Talk about unappetizing."

"Don't knock Reagan," said Victor. "He's alright, the guy."

They walked to the next table and a life-size tallow sculpture of a bullfighter snapping back his cape in front of a charging bull.

"That's like six hundred pounds of beef fat you're lookin' at there," said Harvey.

"You can see the bull's dick," said Victor, leaning over for a better view. "You ain't supposed to eat that?"

"No, no . . ." said Harvey. "They used to put 'em in the center of the table as like decoration. When you're doin' a banquet . . . A few places, you'd get a small one, a little Eiffel Tower or somethin' as a centerpiece."

"That's fuckin' disgustin'," said Victor. "What do I want a pile a fuckin' beef fat sittin' there onna table for? They charge money for that? I can get all the fuckin' beef fat you need."

They moved away from the display.

"Are we through here? It smells like fuckin' low tide," said Victor. "I got somethin' I gotta do later." He shot his cuffs and straightened his tie.

Harvey took a last look around the room. "Sure . . . I just wanna look at a few more things downstairs. I wanna take another look at that rotisserie they got. I think that would be great for the restaurant, don't you? We got a new menu comin' and all. I think that would be a real, nice touch. Unique. We could do a lot with one a those things. We could put all sortsa stuff on there. You could do rib-eyes, chickens, ducks. They do that in Italy, don't they? In the North?"
"Fuck if I know," said Victor, distractedly. He was looking at his watch.

Harvey and Victor managed to squeeze through the crowd and approached a triple rotisserie. Two capons and an overcooked whole tenderloin spun slowly in front of a gas-fed heating element.

"I really want one of these for the restaurant," said Harvey. "It could be a signature kind of thing. People would know us for it. And it's light. That's the thing—it's light. It's not fried or sauteed or anything. You just season the thing, slap it on there, and it cooks. People can watch it goin' round an' round. It's right there in front of 'em. That's gonna be the key to the new menu. Light cooking . . . No butter, no heavy sauces. Nothing fattening. Lotta chicken. You ever notice how much chicken gets ordered? It's the ladies, they order the chicken. Chicken, salad, fish. We get one of these things, maybe we get one of those grills with the volcanic rocks, throw some a that mesquite in there. We'll be back in business. That's all we need. We'll be beatin' 'em away with a fuckin' stick."

Harvey's face shone under the track lighting. He took a napkin off a tray full of Hawaiian chicken kabobs and wiped his face. "I gotta go to the can," he said.

Victor started to say something, hesitated, and then looked at his watch again. "Hurry up, alright?" he said. "Don't be all fuckin' day in there. I gotta see somebody later. You wanna meet at the door?"

Harvey looked around the room again. "How about I meet you over there by the grills . . . It's on the way out. I just wanna take a quick peek at this thing. I'll be there in a few minutes, alright?"

Victor made a face and threw his hands up, exasperated.

"WHERE'S HE GON?" said Detective Czerny.

"He's headed for the can, I think," said Alvarez. "Should we split up? I take him, you keep an eye on the other guy?"

"We got a good position here. We can keep an eye on both. We split up, we get lost in the crowd, we'll never hear the end of it. HEY—get me one a those fish sticks!"

ALONE IN THE TOILET stall, Harvey took a Sno-Seal of cocaine from his jacket pocket, dumped most of it onto the back of his hand, and snorted it. He licked the remaining crumbs and ran his tongue around over his gums.

When he left the toilet cubicle, he checked his appearance in the mirror. There was a large white smudge under his nose, and he wiped it with a tissue from his pocket. He threw some cold water in his face, dried off with a hand towel, and left the bathroom.

Just outside the bathroom door, he looked around for a phone. There was a pay phone to his left, but Harvey rejected it. Down a flight of steps, behind a column, he found another one. He took a handful of change out of his pants pocket and made a call.

"Hello," said the voice on the other end.

"This is Moses," said Harvey. "Lemme speak to Al. Now."

"Alright, he's been expecting you. Hang on just a second. I'll connect you."

When Al came on the line, he sounded distracted.

"Hi. . . uh . . . What's up?"

"Alright, start right in on him. "That's it. I've had it. I can't take anymore. You gotta get me out."

"Whoa . . . Slow down," said Al. "Slow down. What's the big problem?"

"What's the problem? What's the problem? I'm hiding in a fuckin' phone booth like a fuckin' fugitive. This Victor person, this creep they got babysittin' me, is out there somewhere wanderin' around the fuckin' floor wonderin' where I am . . . I can't take it. I can't take it anymore."

"Wait a second. Where are you? You at the Javits thing?"

"Yeah, yeah . . . I'm at the Food Show. I thought I'd get a little fuckin' peace and quiet here, look at some things I wanna get for the restaurant—they send this, this killer, this animal with me. This guy won't let me fuckin' breathe. I can hardly take a fuckin' piss without the guy wantin' to hold my dick."

"So where does he think you are right now?"

"I said I hadda go to the bathroom."

"Where is he?"

Harvey looked nervously around him, peeking out from behind the column. "I think he's over by a display. I told him I'd meet him. I don't have long. You gotta get me outta here."

"You're not wearin' the wire or anything, right?"

"Are you crazy? Are you crazy? You think I'm outta my fuckin' mind? I don't wanna live? That, that animal, the other animal, he tore my clothes apart lookin' for it last time I saw him. You realize what woulda happened to me he found one? I wouldn't be talkin' to you, that's for sure . . ."

"Just hang on. Hang on."
Hang on. I'll be hangin' on by my fuckin' nuts somewhere. You think I don't read the papers? I saw what happened out there . . . in Brooklyn . . . I saw what they did! That could happen to me. It's gonna happen to me I don't get out of this. I want to get out. You said you'd get me out. I wanna go somewhere, California, Florida, someplace warm . . . I want protection. You promised me . . .

"Harvey, you're worried. I can understand that—"

"Worried? I'm worried. You're damn fuckin' right I'm worried. Two times I get roughed up for you. TWO TIMES! I'm not lookin for the hat trick. People are gettin' fuckin' killed. He's gonna kill me. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow, but he's gonna kill me. I know it. He as good as said so."

"Harvey. What do you have to worry about. You're not wearin' the wire. You drive there in your car?"

"Yeah, I drove here in my car. What the fuck does that mean?"

"Listen . . . Calm down for a minute and listen to me."

"They know! I know they fuckin' know! The fuckin' guy said so. You should see the way this fuckin' guy looks at me . . ."

"Okay, okay . . . Listen. We got a beeper in your car. You can't go anyplace we don't know where you're goin. I got people watching out for you. Nothing's going to happen. You just gotta hang in there a few more days . . . A few more days and we'll pull you out. You don't want the whole case to go down the drain now, do you? You want our friends to go away to prison for a long time where they're not going to bother you, right? You just have to hang in there. We're this close. Two days, three days most."

"They're tryin' to take the restaurant away from me. That Sonny character. That TV guy, the Count, he's comin' around tellin me how to run my business. They wanna take it away from me . . ."

Al sighed, "Listen, Harvey. We'll fix it so he doesn't get his hands on it. We can fix it so he goes down with them. You pull out now, you go weak in the knees now, what's to stop the guy? Humor him. Cooperate. He's not getting his hands on your place. I'll get the liquor authority lookin' at his license. All those disreputable types he hangs out with, they wont let him run a bar."

"He's runnin' a fuckin' bar now!" shouted Harvey.

"Yeah, but once we indict his buddies, it'll be different."

"I don't know. I'm worried. I'm goin' to fuckin' pieces and you won't do anything."

"Listen, Harvey, when all this is over, think of all the heads you're gonna have in your collection. It's fourth quarter here, pal, you're rackin' up the points, you're ahead . . . Don't drop the ball now. Go for it. You don't like Victor? Not crazy about the Count? Think how much fun you're gonna have seein' 'em all runnin' outta central booking with their coats over their faces. After this is all over you can go on TV, tell Geraldo all about your courageous effort that put away a major crime crew. You can write a book . . . Relax, for Christ's sake. Think about who you want to play you in the movie. I was thinking Al Pacino."

"Al Pacino?" Harvey thought about this for a second. "He's Italian."

"Pacino can play Jewish. Okay. You don't like Pacino, how about Jack Lemmon? Richard Dreyfuss?"

"Jack Lemmon's too old . . ."

"Dustin Hoffman . . ."

"I dunno . . . I was thinking, I was thinking Michael Douglas. I want somebody who's more, like, sexy."

"Fine. Michael Douglas. You want Michael Douglas, I'm sure you can get Michael Douglas. Heroic restaurateur slash dentist goes undercover to beat the mob. I'm sure they'll all be dying to play you. There you go—think about it . . . sitting out there by the side of the pool, gettin' your helmet polished, all those starlets fighting over who gets to play the love interest."

"Hmmmm . . ."

"See what I mean? We can't have the hero of the picture slinkin' off to protective custody they haven't even put the bad guys away yet. C'mon!"

"I want the Dreadnaught. When this is all over, I want the restaurant. I'll get the money. I'll find backers. The place has got a lot goin' for it. We got a new menu comin' in. I'm lookin' at some new equipment . . . I'll drive that fuckin' Count next door right outta fuckin' business."

"There you go, Harvey. That's the guy I know and love."

"Alright, a few more days. After that no more."

"Okay. You got my word on it. Now get out there and knock 'em dead. You're a star."

Harvey hung up and headed out onto the main floor to find Victor.

"CAN WE FUCKIN' GO NOW?" said Victor. "I been waitin' so long I thought you fell in in there."

Harvey looked around the convention floor, looking to see if he could pick out his backup.

"I wanted to see the grills," he said.
"There they are," said Victor. "Good. Now you seen 'em. Now can we go? I got an appointment."

"Alright," said Harvey. He followed Victor to the front door, his head turning left and right at the shiny new equipment all around him. They passed through the glass doors and stood by the curb while Harvey felt around in his pocket for his car keys. Victor signaled to somebody in a tan Chevy who was idling by an entrance ramp around fifty yards away. He took Harvey by the arm firmly as the car approached at a slow roll and stopped directly in front of them. Skinny sat behind the wheel. Victor stepped forward and opened the rear door.

"Get inna car," he said to Harvey.

"I got my car here," protested Harvey. "It's parked right over there. You don't want me to drive you—"

"Get inna fuckin' car, Harvey," said Victor. His grip on Harvey's arm tightened as he bundled him into the back seat.

Detective Czerny helped himself to an eggroll and thanked the girl.

"This looks good, you gonna try one?"

"He didn't come outta the bathroom yet. You think I should go in and check?" said Detective Alvarez. Detective Czerny looked down onto the main floor. "I don't see the other guy either. Where'd he go?"

"Oh, shit. Don't tell me this . . ."
U.S. ATTORNEY SULLIVAN leaned back in his chair and gazed up at a shelf of football trophies on the wall of his office. Above the trophies was a photo of a grinning Sullivan at the helm of his sailboat, a bottle of Red Stripe in one hand. Next to it was another photo, this one of two sunburned young boys, blond and wearing little white sailor caps, bailing water out of a rubber dinghy with plastic pails. Sullivan let out a long sigh and tossed a copy of the morning paper across the table at Al.

"You read this yet?" Sullivan asked.
"Yeah," said Al. "I read it."

On the front page was a photograph of two dead men, lying in a Brooklyn street. The headline said, BROOKLYN KILLINGS TIED TO SECRET GRAND JURY PROBE.

"Apparently the Brooklyn DA is not happy with the level of cooperation he's getting from this office," said Sullivan, rubbing his temples and speaking to the ceiling. "You'll notice where it says 'an informed source in the Brooklyn DA's office complained of a lack of cooperation between the Federal prosecutor and other arms of law enforcement'?"

"I don't get it. That's who leaked it?"

"Remember I said I'd give the Brooklyn DA a lay-up awhile back on that Brooklyn stuff we were getting? I let him know in a roundabout way that we had come across certain information about Calabrese people coming over here, making loans. I mentioned it over lunch . . ."

"He settled for that?"

"He did then. But when these guys show up dead in his backyard, it's a different story. Now he wants to know who our snitch is, what else he's telling us. He makes a formal request for any 'documentary or recorded materials'—blah blah blah—that will have a bearing on his homicide investigation."

"And you told him to go piss up a rope."

"In the nicest possible way, yes," said Sullivan. "So what happens is his office is getting cluster-fucked by the press and the TV people and somebody out there got the idea to throw them a bone, let it be known how we've been less than helpful . . . that it's our fault they don't have anything, that we're hamstringing their investigation in our quest for personal glory. So, some enterprising reporter calls here for a comment."

"And somebody commented . . ."

"AUSA Shergold," said Sullivan flatly "I had him in here on the carpet an hour ago. In tears. He says he only spoke on the understanding it was for deep background, whatever the hell that means . . . Says he was just trying to get this reporter to see things our way. Thought he was taking some heat off me, putting it back on Brooklyn where it belongs. That there were other concerns . . . we're not stifling the DA out of personal pique or anything. So, he did some winking and hinting, trying to get this reporter to hold up on the story, suggested the man should wait for the other shoe to drop. He implied, he says, that if this reporter could hang on to the story a couple a days or so, he'd get a better one. Told him he wasn't aware of the big picture, didn't want him to go ahead with an incomplete or inaccurate story. Of course they went right to press with it."

"I spoke to Harvey today," said Al. "He's ape-shit over the story. He got slapped around a little by Sally again and he was screaming for us to pull him out."

"What did you tell him?" said Sullivan, alarmed.

"I gave him the pep talk. Told him to hang on, it won't be much longer."

"Can he hold his mud until we indict?"

"I think I managed to calm him down. I told him we put two guys on him, got the beeper in his car, that he's safe . . . What else was I gonna say?"

"Fabulous . . ."

"What about Shergold? You gonna do anything to him? I don't want to be reading this conversation in the fuckin' Post tomorrow," said Al, bitterly.

"That's just what we need now, a 'disgruntled former member of the Strike Force' rolling around loose on the deck. No, I can't do anything about him now. Put that aside for a rainy day."

Al sat glumly in his chair without saying anything.

Sullivan got up and looked out the window for a minute. Finally he turned to Al. "So, give me some good news. I need some good news. You saw Tommy Pagano. You have a nice talk?"

"Oh, yeah, we had a nice talk, me and Tommy. I took him out to the Metro Grill. The chef suggested it. Said it's
Tommy's favorite. You know the place?"
  "Yeah. It's expensive isn't it?"
  "You could say that . . ."
  "Great," said Sullivan. "Some little street guinea gets a freebie at the Metro, I'm here eating macaroni in the cafeteria. You get anything from him?"
  "He's gonna flip. He hasn't yet. But he will. A good wind'll blow him over."
  The veins around Sullivan's nose became redder, and he pounded his fist on the back of his chair. "I can't wait for a good wind! We gotta get on the stick here! You can't just sit around on your ditty-box waiting for him to make up his mind! This whole thing is in danger of coming unraveled . . . Every day goes by without an indictment is gonna be like getting nibbled to death by gerbils! It's just gonna get worse. We have to be seen to be doing something. I need some results! Haul the little bastard in and squeeze him! What are you afraid of, hurting his feelings?"
  "It's hard for him," said Al, flustered. "Even a scumbag like Sally Wig . . . It's his uncle."
  "Yeah, well you told me we could flip the kid! Right here in this office you said we could flip Tommy, get his uncle to trade up. You remember saying that? I mean what's the point of this whole exercise. I'm gonna look pretty damn silly this case ends up with only Sally the fucking Wig!"
  "Tommy's gonna give us Sally and Skinny on the Manso killing," said Al. "He just doesn't want to go too easy. He's going through the motions best he can. It'll make him feel better later, he makes a show of standing up now. We've seen that before."
  "He was there? Definitely? He saw it?"
  "The chef told me. Tommy confessed to the chef . . ."
  "We're not going to find out later Sally and Skinny only held the guy down while Tommy did the killing? There's no indication anything like that happened, is there? I grant this Tommy immunity and it turns out something like that happened . . ."
  "No, no, no . . . The kid's a weeper. A crybaby. He's never killed anybody. Look—where's he gonna go? He just found out his best buddy's been diming him, he's gonna get his ass hauled before the grand jury any minute, maybe get tossed in jail. . . He's startin' to worry about maybe Sally and his pals maybe killin' him . . . He's got a lot on his mind."
  "What, are you thinking about adopting the little tyke or something?"
  "He's a nice kid," said Al. "I like him."
  "I guess so. Takin' him out to the Metro. Wining and dining him. You're sure he's not a flight risk? He's not going to bug out on us all of a sudden?"
  "Where's he gonna go?" repeated Al. "I talked to Ricard, the chef. I called the State Department. Tommy's never been outta this country . . . I doubt he's even been outta state. Mighta been to the Jersey shore once or twice as a kid. No, he's not goin' anywhere. In a couple a days he's gonna be right downstairs, cryin' his little eyes out and tellin' us all about his mean Uncle Sally and his evil friends who led him astray. He's gonna cooperate. I mean we need him to testify, right? We want a nice cooperative witness pointing his finger at Sally and them. We bring out the rubber hoses now, who knows which way he'll go . . . I don't want him whistling the Italian national anthem on me all of a sudden. Not when we're this close. Why rush into rape? The seduction is going so well . . . I'm telling you . . . the kid is gonna flip. He'll make a good witness."
  "I hope so," said a worried Sullivan. "When this meeting is over, I want you to go back to your office and put down on paper the substance of what you just told me. I want a memo for the record."
  Al groaned, "So it's like that . . ."
  "Damn right it's like that! I'm not going to see this whole investigation go down the tubes 'cause you've fallen in love with a source. I'm holding this whole thing up on your assurances . . ."
  "Hey, if I remember correctly, you were the one wanted to make this into a big RICO case. We coulda had a nice, tidy little extortion case, if you'd wanted it . . . You didn't want it."
  "Alright, alright. . . Calm down, nobody's blaming anybody. I just wanted a little reassurance. I've been taking it from all sides here today. So once Tommy comes in, what happens next, the way you see it?"
  "I guess we make some arrests, send a forensic team down the restaurant to swab the drains, collect physical evidence. Hey, it's not all bad news. We've been getting some tapes outta the Dreadnaught office . . . some interesting stuff. Some new additions to the cast. Sally's got this guy Victor LoFaro babysitting Harvey. It sounds like Sally's making a move on the restaurant. And another name—you remember Sonny Roman? The Count?"
  Sullivan's expression brightened a little. "The guy who was on that TV show?"
  "He owns . . . he runs the Villa Nova next door to the Dreadnaught. Mobbed up for years and years but we never really came across anything. The state tried to reject his liquor license a few years back, because of his unseemly associations."
"So what's he done?"
"Well it looks like he's gonna be Harvey's new partner."
"Oh, I see... Okay... okay..."
"He'll make a nice picture in the paper if that makes you feel any better. Lovable TV character arrested for racketeering. The state'll love you for it. They got real embarrassed he got himself a license. They say he had somebody up in Albany. His place has been a must visit on the Wise Guy Tour for ages. There's a lot of people who'd like to see him closed down."

Sullivan nodded, a smile beginning to creep across his face. "That would be fun... That was the show with the cute kid, right? The vampire adopts him or something?"
"Heart-warming comedy ensued..."
"Okay... I like it. See? You managed to make me feel better."
"I just need a couple more days to land Tommy."
"Alright, alright... How about the other one, the chef, this Ricard character?"
"We can use his affidavits for the grand jury. I'm not crazy about the idea of using his testimony in a trial."
"Why not? Tommy confessed to him I thought..."
"Sure, but it's hearsay, and there's other things to consider. His credibility on the stand. I don't think in a trial he'd be very good on cross to say the least. A defense attorney could make much of his drug use. It could be pointed out that we tolerated, even overlooked his use of heroin to get him to implicate others. He'd be a bad witness for us. You put him on the stand, you open all sorts of doors..."
"But he's seen a lot, hasn't he?"
"Nothing we can't use another source for—tapes, Harvey, Tommy. There's things he could say on the stand we don't want to get into, like the drugs, like Harvey skimming. Even the weapon used in the Manso killing. It could be suggested he planted it. To get drugs, stay out of jail. I'd rather not use him if we don't have to. He could undermine other witnesses on the stand."
"Any Brady material?"
"Not to my direct knowledge."
"Okay, we'll leave that for the time being. Hopefully we won't have to use him. You really think we have a shot at Sally?"
"Once he's facing life without possibility for the Manso thing? We have a shot. Charlie hates him. I imagine the feeling's mutual. Sally feels like he's gotten the short end of the stick for a long time, doing all the dirty work. We got some tapes of Charlie talking about Sally. Nothing incriminating... But if we were to play them for Sally on top of a murder indictment, make it look like he's gonna be the one holding the bag again..."
"Uh-huh..."
"How about you? What are you going to do about the Brooklyn DA? The two DBs out there?"
"I'm going over to see him this afternoon. Hopefully, I can bring him around. I'll make it clear we have to have first bite of this thing, that I can't jeopardize our investigation. I have things to trade. I can make it a lot easier for him with his case. I'll tell him 'bout that tape of the two Calabrese goons talking to our guy, show him some pictures if I have to... I can make things a lot easier on him and he knows it. After we get our indictments, he can call a news conference and tell how he's cracked the case out there all by his lonesome. I think he'll see reason. Like everybody else, he wants to be mayor someday. Torpedoing a major federal investigation for reasons of jealousy won't look good on his resume. I'll whet his appetite. He wants our CI to testify in the Brooklyn case, back up the tapes, he's going to have to make nice, take a few more days to conclude his investigation. It'll be worth it in the end. I'll make it worth it."
"He'll be discreet?" asked Al. "I don't want anything to happen to our sources here. Harvey's ready for a rubber room... Any more leaks he could dry up on us, run away, or worse. Sally's stupid, but he's not that stupid. He's already breathing down his neck."
"He'll be discreet. I won't tell him too much. I'll keep it within certain bounds of... of good sense."
"I hope so," said Al. "I told him to put away the wire, to just lay low, hang tight."
"Good. Don't worry about the Brooklyn DA. Just make sure we have Tommy Pagano sitting down there by the weekend. That's as far as I can go. After that, I can't promise anything. Don't forget the memo. Copy me on that."
"Right."
There were three men in the room with Harvey in the basement of Testa Produce, Inc. Danny Testa stood in the open doorway of the refrigerated room, blowing cigar smoke through an opening in the plastic curtain. Sally stood on one side of Harvey, pulling on the end of a length of metal wire. The wire was wrapped once around Harvey's neck. Skinny stood on the other side, the other end of the wire wrapped around his gloved hand. Harvey sat in a chair, his wrists tied behind him with duct tape. His ankles were taped together also, and a rope around his waist kept him lashed to the chair. He was making a rattling sound as Sally and Skinny tugged on the wire, and his pants were wet.

"Look at that," said Skinny. "He pissed himself."

"Couldn't hold it?" said Sally, giving the wire another jerk. "Witta baby couldn't hold it? I told you, you shoulda gone before we left."

Sally laughed and gave his end of the wire another tug. The rattling sound stopped. He let go of the wire. Skinny, wearing a full-length apron, took a short length of coaxial cable and a miniature baseball bat from Danny. He gave the cable to Sally and held on to the bat.

"What the fuck is this?" said Skinny.

"I got it at Bat Day at the stadium," said Danny. "Don't fuckin' knock it. Use it right, it hurts."

Harvey sat trembling and wheezing in the cold room, his breath condensing in the refrigerated air.

"Hurry up," said Danny. "I got the day crew comin' in in a few hours. I got a fuckin' business to run here, I don't want this to take all fuckin' night. Find out what we gotta find out and we can go home."

Skinny brought the little bat down sharply across Harvey's nose. There was a crunching sound as the nose broke. Harvey shrieked, and blood ran down over his lips and dribbled off his chin. The refrigerated room was packed floor to ceiling with crates of vegetables, cases of Chinese fireworks, and two racks of men's suits. They absorbed the sounds of the bat as Skinny brought it down twice more, once on each knee. Harvey shrieked again. Sally whipped the coaxial cable across Harvey's cheeks a few times, back and forth. Harvey's screams tapered off into a broken moan, then a whimper. He sat, head bowed, crying silently in pain. Sally stomped on the arches of his feet, eliciting another scream. Skinny leaned in close and pressed the narrow end of the bat against Harvey's broken nose. "Ask him," he said to Sally.

"What did you tell them, asshole," demanded Sally. "What . . . did . . . you . . . tell them?" Skinny pressed the bat harder against the bloody nose.

"I had no . . . no choice," spluttered Harvey.

Sally hit him in the mouth with the cable, shattering teeth.

"Don't hit him inna fuckin' mouth, Sally," admonished Danny. "The fuckin' guy's gotta talk."

Skinny gave Harvey another tap on the nose.

"How long, asshole?" asked Sally. "How long have you been talking to the fuckin' cops?"

"Thinna beginnin,'" said Harvey, through broken teeth. "Thinna beginna . . ."

Skinny whacked him another time with the bat, on the right knee. Harvey jumped in the chair. Skinny hit him in the left knee.

"Tapes . . ." said Danny. "Ask him if they got tapes."

"Tapes," said Sally, his upper lip trembling near Harvey's ear. "They got tapes?"

Harvey nodded, and Sally punched him in the jaw.

Danny shook his head.

"The fuck's been wearin' a fuckin' wire, you asshole," he said to Sally. "They got you on tape." He gave Sally a fierce look.

Sally punched Harvey again. It made a wet, slapping noise.

"I don't think they got much," he said. "I was careful."

"Whaddaya mean, they don't got much?" yelled Danny. "They prolly got the fuckin place wired up like a fuckin Christmas tree! Jerk!"

Sally put his face up close to Harvey's. "How long?" he asked. "How long they been listenin' to me?"

"The begin . . ." managed Harvey.

"You already know that, you fuckin' moron," said Danny, disgustedly. "It's a sting, got it? He was workin' with the fuckin' feds from the start. You been lendin' our fuckin' money to the fuckin' feds, unnerstand?"

Sally stepped back, fuming. He started to take another swing at Harvey and backed off. He stood, blinking with
rage in the cold room, opening and closing his fists. "They had that beef with the clinics hangin' over him," said Danny. "He's been with them from the fuckin' start."

Sally walked over to a stack of cartons stamped MADE IN MACAO and ripped off the top of one. He rummaged around inside for a moment, withdrew his hand and tore open another carton.

"What the fuck are you doin'?" said Danny.

Sally turned away from the carton with a handful of cherry bombs.

"Hey, I get money for those," complained Danny. "They don't fuckin' buy 'em, the box is open."

"You eat yet, Harvey?" said Sally. "You eat yet?" He reached over and pinched Harvey's nostrils closed. Harvey's eyes raced around the room. He began rocking back and forth in the chair, straining violently at the rope around his waist, trying to keep Sally's other hand away from his face.

"Hold him!" yelled Sally. "Will you fuckin' hold him!" He pressed the handful of cherry bombs roughly against Harvey's mouth.

"I'm holdin', I'm holdin'," said Skinny, pulling back on the twisted metal wire around Harvey's neck. Harvey struggled to keep his mouth closed. Skinny raised the bat high up over his head and smashed it down against his collarbone. There was a sharp snap and Harvey passed out; his head fell forward onto his chest and his mouth opened, bloody spittle running onto his shirt.

Sally pulled his head up by the nose and crammed the cherry bombs into his open mouth, distending his cheeks. Two of the cherry bombs rolled out and fell on Harvey's lap. Skinny looked over at Danny, raising an eyebrow. Danny nodded at him. "Finish him," he said.

Skinny walked over to a shelf, reached behind a case of escarole, and removed a brown paper bag. He took a .22-caliber Colt Woodsman out of the bag.

Sally was on his knees, in front of Harvey, fumbling with a book of matches. The draft from the cooling-system compressor kept blowing them out. He tried to light one of the fuses in Harvey's mouth, but the blood and saliva extinguished it.

"'Wait, wait," he said. "I almost got it lit."

"C'mon, Sally, we don't got time for this," said Danny. "We know what we gotta fuckin' know."

Skinny shook his head without expression.

"I almost got it that time," said Sally, lighting another match. "Fuckin fuses are fuckin' wet. Keep gettin' blown out . . ."

Danny looked at Skinny and nodded again. Skinny pressed the barrel of the .22 against the back of Harvey's head at an upward angle and squeezed the trigger. He moved the gun in a semicircle along the base of Harvey's skull, letting off round after round. The room filled with the smell of cordite, the smoke blowing quickly around in the draft from the compressor. When the hammer clicked on a spent cartridge, Skinny put the pistol back in the brown paper bag and took off his apron. He wrapped the bag in the apron and tied the strings neatly around the package with a bow.

"Go get Victor," said Danny. "Get Victor and them upstairs. Tell them they can take him out to the place and dump him."

Sally still crouched in front of Harvey with the matches.

"C'mon Sally," said Danny. "What's the point?"

A few sparks sputtered out of Harvey's mouth, followed by a plume of smoke. There was a loud hiss. Sally stepped back and covered his ears, and Harvey's cheeks blew apart, spraying bits of flesh and enamel around the room.

"Jesus fuckin' Christ!" said Danny, wiping the corner of his eye with his pinky. "I got fuckin' food in here!"

"The fuck," said Sally. "The fuck! . . . He really put me innit, didn't he?"

"What the fuck you do that for?" asked Danny. "You didn't hafta do that. It's a fuckin' mess in here. Look at this fuckin' place!"

"I hope he felt that," said Sally.

"He didn't feel nothin'," said Danny. "The fuckin' guy was dead."

"Maybe he felt it," said Sally. "You never know."

"You can be a real fuckin' asshole sometimes," said Danny. "Now go upstairs with Skinny and tell Victor, get a hose down here and clean this fuckin' place out. It's a fuckin' mess."
At the law offices of Benson, Richardson, Hale and Clawson, James Benson wiped a coffee ring off the heavy glass conference table and waved his hand disapprovingly in front of his face. "There's no smoking in here," he said.

Danny Testa, sitting in an upholstered chair at the table, opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and stubbed out his cigarette in his empty coffee container. Benson, dressed in a white squash outfit, picked up the container with two buffed and manicured fingers and dropped it in a trash can next to his desk.

"So I guess you've been reading the papers? That's what this is about?" said Benson, sitting down at the head of the table.

Danny nodded. "Whaddaya think?" he asked.

"What I think," said Benson, "is the man is going to be having some problems. You too. And maybe some others as well."

"What do you hear?" asked Danny.

"What I hear," said Benson, "what I hear is there's a grand jury meeting in secret about to indict any day now. United States versus a bunch of John Does . . . " He brushed a few imaginary crumbs off his lap.

"What does that mean . . . John Doe?"

"That means they don't want you to know who's the person going to get indicted, simply put," said Benson. "I gather they've been hearing testimony for some time now."

Danny nodded gravely and cleared his throat.

"Now on the face of it," said Benson, "it doesn't look too good. You can be pretty sure for starters that they're going to get their indictments. They almost always do."

"So, what are you gonna do?" asked Danny.

"I need a better picture of what they have before I can do much. I have to identify the problem areas. Maybe you can help me with that."

"Whaddaya think they have?"

"Well, if they've been hearing testimony in secret, it's a good bet somebody is talking to them. They've got informer testimony, somebody on the inside, somebody close enough to provide probable cause for wiretaps, that sort of thing. I'd have to say they have that at the very least."

"So, you're sayin' we got a nigger in the woodpile," said Danny.

"I don't know if I'd put it exactly like that," said Benson. "But it looks that way. I know Sullivan pretty well, as you know, and I can see him going before the grand jury without that. In order to get court approval for wiretaps, he's got to demonstrate . . . he's got to have somebody submit an affidavit stating that there's reasonable expectation of criminal activity—specific criminal activity, mind you—that is going to show up on the tapes. You understand? He's got to show what kind of activity. To me, that says there's an informant."

"Okay," said Danny. "Okay, I see that."

"Good . . . " said Benson. He leaned closer to Danny. "Now, would you have any idea who that person might be? That would be helpful..."

"We got a couple ideas," said Danny.

"That's good. That's good. Because you can be sure they have tape recordings. You have to assume that. . . Now, the tapes, whatever they are, in and of themselves are not an insurmountable problem. There's ways to get around that. Maybe I can have them excluded. Failing that, tapes are ambiguous. Especially the way you guys talk to each other. No offense . . . Without a real live witness, somebody to give context to the tapes, somebody who was there for the conversations, who can explain them to the jury, well, an argument could be made that it's all a bunch of guys sitting around bullshitting each other. If it's just tapes they've got, we have a good chance of beating them."

"Okay. I see what you're sayin'," said Danny.

"Now this thing that happened in Brooklyn, that's something else . . . I don't think they have anything there or they wouldn't be crying to the newspapers, pointing the finger at each other. Clearly it's the U.S. Attorney in the Southern District you've got to worry about right now. The federal case—that's the case we have to concentrate on."

"I'm thinking if we solve the one problem, we won't have no problems with the other," said Danny.

"Really? Well that is good news. That would make things much easier. Are you certain there's only one problem area?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in my experience, when I was working for the prosecutor's office, I had a person with an allegedly criminal
past for a witness, somebody who may have even taken part in some of the activities for which I'm prosecuting some other people . . . well, I always liked to have more than one, if you see my point. Corroboration. Juries tend not to like informers, people who testify against their former associates, to get off scot-free. It's always better for the state's case to have some corroboration. Is that possible? That there's more than one:

"Well, counselor," said Danny. "It's possible. The one guy we think could hurt us . . . the one guy . . . I don't think he's gonna be a problem. I don't think you gotta worry about the one guy I'm thinking of . . . There is another guy . . . I can see that. I talked about it with the man. I mean, there is another guy I'm not so sure about. . . But the old man, he says this person is not somebody who would hurt us. That's what the old man says."

"But you're not so sure," said Benson.

"I'm not so sure," said Danny.

"It would be better for everybody if you could be sure."

"I'll talk to the man," said Danny. He took a thick manila envelope out of his jacket pocket and left it on the table when he got up. "Thanks for seeing me on short notice," said Danny.

CHERYL WAS HUMMING the “Final Jeopardy” theme in the shower. She used it, Tommy knew, to time the conditioner after she shampooed her hair. He listened, smiling to himself, for a few seconds before his thoughts returned to Al and when it was that he was going to call him.

The phone rang, and Tommy was grateful for the interruption. He didn't like thinking about Al. He picked up the phone thinking he'd call him tonight.

It was the chef calling.
"They closed the restaurant for the week," he said.
Tommy was taken aback. "No shit! How come?"
"Closed for renovations. Victor called."
"So, we don't have to go in? What about the food? It'll go bad."
"I don't know. They want us to come in today. Just you and me. They want to have a meeting, talk about the menu, some changes."
"Uh-oh," said Tommy.
"Yeah," said the chef.
"What time?"
"Eleven . . . Listen, is Cheryl there? They probably tried to reach her at home. Tell her she doesn't have to go in today, I guess they'll get back to her on the schedule. You want to meet at the corner of West Broadway and Spring? We can go in together."
"Yeah, sure."
"See you there at eleven."

WHEN TOMMY and the chef walked in the door, Sally, Victor, and the Count were seated at a table in the front cocktail area, examining a stack of payroll sheets and invoices. Skinny sat apart from them at the bar, drinking coffee from a glass and leafing through the paper.

The Count gave them both a big smile. "Tommy," he said. "Have a seat!" Victor pushed back his chair and jumped to his feet to intercept the chef.
"Hey, chef," he said. "Why don't we go downstairs. There's some things I wanna talk about with you."

The chef shot Tommy a curious look and followed Victor across the empty dining room.

Tommy took this as an ominous sign. He looked around the room for Harvey. He saw only Skinny at the bar, which gave him no comfort. He sat down in Victor's chair, across from the Count, painfully aware of Skinny's presence behind him.

"Where's Harvey?" Tommy asked.
"He ain't comin' in I don't think," said Sally. "Vic said he wasn't feelin too good yesterday." At the bar, Skinny made a snorting sound that could have been a laugh.

The Count was wearing reading glasses. He pushed them up over his large, liver-spotted forehead. He sighed melodramatically and moved his hands over the pile of papers in the center of the table.

"Tommy, this place is a fuckin' mess. We been goin' over some papers, me and your uncle, and you wouldn't believe how bad things are. We're gonna be makin' some changes . . ." He smiled obsequiously at Sally. "Yer uncle here has axed me to come over and see what I can do to help out, try and get this fuckin place back on its feet."

Tommy, thinking of the chef downstairs alone with Victor, tried to keep from wincing. Here it comes, he thought. "This place been losing money like it was nothin," said the Count. "This guy Harvey's run the fuckin' place inta the fuckin ground. He owes everybody. You got no idea . . ."

He owes Sally, Tommy was thinking. That's what this is about.

"He owes rent, he owes for food, half these guys want COD now . . . He owes power, gas, water. They're this fuckin' close to shottin' off the telephone . . . This can't go on."

Tommy nodded politely, trying to tune in on what the Count was really saying. Were they going to close the restaurant? Was that what this was about? Was the Count going to buy it? Villa Nova II?

Tommy examined Sally's expression. He looked relaxed, his dark, close-together eyes narrowed to lazy slits; he was leaning back in his chair, content to let the Count do the talking. Tommy wondered if he was about to be fired. He continued listening without much interest. How long had the chef been downstairs with Victor? That was what concerned him.
"Even a fuckin' blind man can see what's been happenin' here," the Count was saying. "I mean lookit some a this shit this guy has been buyin'."

The Count held up an invoice from Amazon de Choix, a specialty food purveyor. The Count read from a list of items: "Black truffles . . . chestnut puree . . . imported flageolets, whatever that is . . . nasturtium flowers—What the fuck is that? . . . Candied fuckin' violets . . . " He held up another invoice. "And this fuckin' tomato bill. . . Guy's buyin' Jersey vine-ripes for sixteen fuckin' dollars a box. Sixteen dollars! What for? You use 'em for fuckin' sauce?"

"We use 'em for sauce, yeah . . . Tomato Provencale . . . some other things . . . " said Tommy.

"Tommy, you need tomatos for sauce, I can get you innna can for practically nothin'," said the Count.

"You can get 'em for nothin'," interjected Sally with a chuckle.

"I mean, that's just throwin' money innna fuckin' garbage. I may not be a financial genius . . . I come inta this business, I didn't know shit. But I learned. I learned what you gotta do to make a dollar. I gotta good fuckin' business goin' over there now. You know what kinda business we do in a week there? Guess..."

Tommy shrugged disinterestedly. The Count droned on.

"A fuck of a lotta money. Me and my partners, we take a nice piece a money outta that place every week. Whatever you might think about my place, we do all fuckin' right over there. 'Cause I work. 'Cause I keep an eye on things. 'Cause I don't buy no tomatoes sixteen dollars a fuckin' box . . ."

Tommy tried to tune the Count out. He hoped it would be over soon. By this time, he was sure he was going to be fired. That was what was happening downstairs, he guessed. Victor was canning the chef. He sat half-listening to the Count, more concerned with Skinny at the bar. He looked out the window, hoping to see the chef standing outside on the sidewalk, waiting for him.

"And the crew you got down there . . . What's he been payin' people . . . " the Count was saying. "It don't make no sense! Marrone! What I wanna pay a fuckin' dishwasher that kinda money for? Minimum fuckin' wage? An American gets that kinda money. . .You don't pay these fuckin' sand-niggers that kinda money! They ain't even fuckin' legal. . . You spoil 'em!"

The Count held up a recent payroll sheet between two fingers like it would contaminate him. "And that ain't the worst of it. That ain't the worst of it. Now, I dunno you friends with this chef or what . . . But I gotta tell you—this guy, he's paddin' the fuckin' payroll. He's gettin' money for stuff he says he's gotta buy and he don't buy it. I can read these things. You gotta, in this business. I can count. Vic been keepin' an eye on who been workin' an' who ain't been workin', and this chef you got, he been skimmin' . . . Nobody works no seven days a week here, Tommy. Am I right or what?"

He didn't pause to let Tommy answer. He dismissed any possibility of disagreement with a flick of the wrist. So, that's definitely it for the chef, thought Tommy. He wished they'd hurry up and fire him, too. He wanted this all to be over with. He could go out for some drinks with the chef, compare notes, try to find something to laugh about.

DOWNSTAIRS, the chef walked through his kitchen, Victor at his side. The chef had a pretty good idea of what was coming as he walked toward his office, his mind on the bottle of methadone in the center drawer of his desk. He had put his Sunday take-home bottle in there the night before and had forgotten to take it with him when he left. Just outside the office, Victor stopped and took his elbow.

"They want you out, chef," he said.

"Where the fuck you think you're goin'?" said Victor, putting a hand against his chest and blocking his way.

"I gotta get something outta my desk," said the chef, trying his best to sound nonchalant, though in fact, his heart was racing. He was startled by the physical contact of this hand on his chest. Things were escalating in a way he
didn't like. His forehead broke out in a sweat. He had to have that bottle . . . If he didn't get his dose, he'd be sick in a few hours. Worse, far worse, he'd lose the bottle itself. If he didn't return the empty bottle to the clinic tomorrow, he was going to be in deep, deep trouble. Losing his job would be nothing next to that . . . They could kick him off the program for mishandling his methadone. He'd have no job, no money, and a habit he couldn't afford. His head swam with the implications.

"Where's Harvey?" said the chef.

"You don't fuckin' worry about Harvey," said Victor. "I'm tellin' you you're out. Nobody else gotta tell you—" I'm tellin' ya."

The chef flashed on Mr. James, his counselor. He tried to imagine explaining to him how he came to lose his bottle. It would be a disaster. Mr. James would disbelieve him as a matter of policy. Junkies lie. He imagined the things he'd have to do if he were kicked out of the program. It meant he'd be back scoring on the street again. His mother; he'd have to hit her again for money, and so soon after the last time . . . He had nothing left to sell but what . . . his TV set, the CD player. The chef thought of the look on his mother's face when he came crawling to her for money; the disappointment in her eyes, the bony white hand reaching across a table holding a check. Christ! he thought; even before the check cleared, he'd be in full-bloom withdrawal. He decided to dig in his heels. He wasn't leaving without that fucking bottle. Better Victor than Mr. James.

Tommy was barely listening to the Count. He focused on the dust motes floating in the light from the Venetian blinds over Sally's head. He tried to avoid Sally's gaze, hating him. When was the Count going to get to the point? Couldn't they just get it over with? He imagined the Count was taking his time, explaining things to him before the axe fell, out of delicacy to Sally. He thought he wouldn't. He wanted to reach across the table and shut him up, break his glasses over his nose . . . Him and his lousy food; his lousy, ridiculous restaurant; his idiotic television show, still showing in perpetual syndication, invading even Tommy's home. And Sally . . . he'd call Al tonight, Tommy decided. Definitely tonight, you fat, fucking embarrassment. He saw in his mind what the Dreadnaught would become under the Count's less-than-tender mercies: canned tomatoes, deep-fried breaded veal cutlets, the same specials night after night every time somebody dropped by with a load of hijacked frozen lobster tails . . .

The chef tried again. "I got something in my desk I gotta get," he said, "It's mine."

"That ain't your desk no more, asshole," said Victor, the hand still planted on his chest. "You can walk out that fuckin' door right now and consider yourself fuckin' lucky."

"My check . . ." said the chef. "What about my last paycheck?"

"You must be fuckin' kiddin' me," said Victor. "You owe me. I don't owe you nothin'. . . . The door, that's what you get. You been gettin' plenty around here . . . now you get zippo . . . goose-egg . . . nuh-thing. Got it? You got that, asshole? The door, that's what you get.

Vicor removed his hand from the chef's chest to point forcefully at the trapdoors to the street. His eyes fixed beyond Victor's shoulder, on the center drawer of the desk, the chef charged past Victor and into the tiny office. He managed to get the drawer open and pawed at the little orange bottle, aware of Victor coming up behind him. His hand was in the drawer, fingers curling around the bottle, when Victor shoved him hard from behind and kicked the drawer closed. The chef felt his fingers bend backward; a sharp pain shot up his arm to his elbow. He pulled himself up off the desk with his right hand and turned to face a smirking Victor.

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chef stepped in and head-butted him on the bridge of the nose.

Victor stumbled into the hallway, bleeding from the nose and ear. He spat a long stream of pink saliva onto the floor and reached into the waistband of his pants. The chef saw the butt of a revolver and he felt the anger drain out of him and turn to fear.

This wasn't supposed to happen like this, thought the chef. This was not how it went in the movies . . . Victor was supposed to be unconscious now, lying in a heap on the floor. He'd hit him with a bottle. He'd head-butted him as hard as he could. Why wasn't the man unconscious? The chef's first instinct was to yell "TIME OUT!" like he had when he was a kid when somebody got hurt. Or "DO-OVER!" so he could hit Victor again with the bottle.

Instead, in a mad panic he ran gracelessly into the kitchen. He slipped onto all fours, scrambling to get away. His back burned him, as if anticipating the bullets he imagined would come tearing into his spine at any second. He made it a few more steps. He was aware of a hand grabbing him by the collar, then he felt the pistol butt come crashing down against his skull.
Forty-One

THIS COULD BE a nice fuckin' place," said the Count while Tommy squirmed uncomfortably. "But we need somebody
down there handlin the food. Somebody knows what they doin', ain't gonna stab us inna back every time we turn
around, tryin' to grab a piece for himself. We need somebody we know down there. With some experience . . . This
could be a real good thing for the right person. Bein' a chef is a important responsibility . . . We can't have some
fuckin' jerk down there don't know what he's doin. We need somebody who can work with us . . ."

Tommy was staring at Sally, trying to imagine what he'd look like when he found out he'd been betrayed. He tried
to picture Sally at the defense table, looking up at Tommy in the witness stand. A shudder of pleasure went through
Tommy.

". . . That's why we want you to be the new chef," said the Count.

"Congratulations, Chef," said Sally.

WHEN HE NEXT NOTICED that he was still alive, the chef was being hauled up off his knees. Victor's foul breath was in
his nose, the hand with the gun knotted up in his hair. The chef's injured left hand was twisted up behind his back,
between his shoulder blades, and Victor was leaning into it, every painful jerk squeezing tears from the chef's eyes.

He felt himself being guided down the line by his hair, head first, his arm twisting in its socket, his hip banging
noisily against the speed rack, the bottles jingling. He was being propelled forward and down, he saw, straight
toward the rotary slicer.

SALLY WAS GRINNING at Tommy. "What did I tell ya?" he said. The Count clapped him on the shoulder. Tommy sat
blinking dumbly. How could they be so blind? So stupid? Sally knew he hated the Count, hated everything about
him . . . How could this be happening? How could they even ask such a thing, much less announce it like he was
expected to be happy, even grateful? Tommy wondered what Skinny thought about all this, sitting behind him at the
bar. He couldn't be too crazy about it. Tommy shook his head in disbelief. Sally was mussing his hair now, saying,
"It's a big step up inna world for you . . . Whaddaya say?" when a dreadful sound came from downstairs. His cat had
made a sound like that once when she got her paw caught in a door hinge. Tommy knocked his chair backward onto
the floor as he bolted to the kitchen.

VICTOR HAD THE CHEF bent over, still working the twisted arm like a rudder for everything it was worth. The chef felt
the side of his face rammed into the stainless steel safety guard on the rotary slicer. The guard moved forward a
little, rolling smoothly along on its ball bearings. The pain from his twisted arm sent shock waves up into the chef's
brain. With one eye, the chef could see that Victor had changed the setting on the slicer, opening it up all the way,
widening the space between the razor-sharp circular blade and the safety guard, like you would for cutting prime rib.
The chef thrashed and twisted, trying to pull himself back from the blade, but Victor had a firm grip on his hair,
keeping his face pressed against the cold metal. There was a momentary relaxation on the arm as Victor reached
down and flicked on the switch. The big blade began to spin, making its metallic, whirring sound. The chef tried to
brace himself against the work table with his free arm, tried to straighten the elbow, get away from the blade, but
Victor shoved the other arm up hard against his shoulders and his face banged down once again against the sliding
steel guard. He felt himself being pushed forward into the blade.

He screamed. He felt his knees buckle, and as his head moved forward, he slipped down and back a bit, suddenly
a dead weight in Victor's grip. The blade took him just below the right eye; a glancing but thick slice across the
cheekbone. Blood sprayed up into the chef's eyes. A thick slice of the chef's cheek fell neatly away from the bone,
dropping with an audible slap onto the tray below.

The chef fell to the floor. He was vaguely aware of Victor standing over him, his mouth moving, tugging at his
clothes, cursing, trying to get him to stand up. There was something in his eyes, he knew that, and he thought he
heard noises, somebody cursing in the distance. Then he saw a pair of legs moving across his narrow field of vision.
In a second, they were planted on both sides of him like the Colossus of Rhodes. They looked like Tommy's legs. He
thought he recognized the boots.

WHEN TOMMY CAME charging into the kitchen, he saw Victor standing by the slicer with a gun, the chef sliding to the
floor at his feet. Tommy vaulted the steamtable, surprising himself, and knocked Victor above his hip as fiercely as
he could. The revolver flew from Victor's hand, landing in the cold grease in the Frialator. Tommy yanked open a
utility drawer, pulling it completely out of its housing, scattering knives and utensils everywhere. He reached for the
first thing he could find and came up with the short, five-pronged ice shaver. He lunged forward and buried all five steel teeth up to the hilt in Victor's armpit.

"You miserable fuckin mutt!" he heard himself say, and he yanked the wooden handle toward himself, ready for another thrust. The steel teeth stayed in the arm. They raked down the underside from armpit to elbow, leaving five bloody trenches.

Victor took a few steps back and stumbled over the chef's semiconscious body. He lost his balance, put a hand out to steady himself and fell into the slicer. There was a terrible, grinding peal as the still-whirring blade chewed through Victor's fingernail. It changed pitch, a lower tone, as it continued lengthwise up the finger, halving it to the second joint.

His shirtfront and neck spattered with blood, Victor managed to pull back his hand and take a few wobbly steps. He stood there, one good hand wrapped tightly around the wrist of the other, gaping at his ruined finger and the blood sprinkling out of his elbow. The color started to drain out of his lips, and his face became blotchy, then white. He did a sort of dispirited jig, no sound coming out of his mouth, and flopped helplessly to the floor, coming to rest at Sally's feet.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" said an incredulous Sally, taking in the carnage.

The Count stood behind him, his eyes bulging. He seemed to shrink back, looking for an exit. Skinny stepped forward past the Count, seemingly unconcerned. He walked behind the line, saw the chef lying there, bleeding from the face, a silver-dollar-size patch of white cheekbone visible through the blood. Skinny reached over and calmly turned off the slicer. He looked down at Victor, who was getting whiter by Sally's feet. And there was Tommy, still standing over his chef, the bloody ice shaver in his fist.

Tommy felt ready to kill them all. He looked down at Victor and considered whipping out his cock and pissing on him. Instead, he took a deep breath, looked straight at Skinny, and with a shaking voice said, "We had a work-related accident here. We're gonna say there was an accident with the slicer . . . the chef's feet slipped . . . That's what we're gonna say. I'm gonna take him to St. Vincent's." He pointed at Victor on the floor. "He's goin' inta shock it looks like. You don't get him to a hospital, he'll probably fuckin die. Per sonally, I don't give a shit . . . But if he don't get that hand, the arm wrapped up, you're gonna be lookin' at a dead guy. I don't know how you feel about the guy," he said, "but I'd get him to Emergency pretty quick. I recommend Beekman. He doesn't look too good."

"Jesus, Tommy," said Sally, "I didn't know ya had it in ya . . . You're right, he don't look too good."

"I'll go bring the car around," said the Count. He scampered up the stairs, happy to get away.

Tommy noticed that Skinny was smiling at him. He looked almost affectionate.

He spoke directly to Skinny, encouraged by the amused look on his face. "So we're not gonna have a problem with this, I hope. The man was in the wrong. We gotta stick up for our friends, right Skin?" Tommy turned his back on the others and helped the chef to his feet. As he started walking him slowly to the delivery entrance, he noticed the little orange bottle, still grasped tightly in the chef's hand. He pried loose the chef's fingers and gently placed the bottle in a front pocket. "It's okay, Chef," he said. "Everything's gonna be okay. No problem."

"No problem," repeated the chef weakly.

When Tommy and the chef were out of the room, Skinny got an apron from the laundry room and threw it down over Victor's hand.

"Get yourself together, Vic," he said. "We're takin' you to a hospital."

Sally bent down and reached under his arms to lift him up. Victor howled in pain, suddenly awake.

"Sorry, Vic," apologized Sally. "I didn't see it."

Blood dripped freely from Victor's elbow onto Sally's sneakers. Skinny stepped back, not wanting to get blood on his suit.

"Jesus, Tommy," Sally called after him. "I guess this means you don't want the fuckin' job."
Sally sat in a black leatherette recliner, feet up, in front of the television. *The Flintstones* was on, Fred and Barney propelling their Stone Age vehicles with rapidly moving feet. Sally was dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms. There was an open box of Froot Loops on the carpet next to his chair and a half-empty glass of Slim-Fast wedged between his meaty thighs. He wiped his fingers on the front of his T-shirt, leaving brightly colored pink-and-blue trails of Froot Loop dust across his belly.

Sally threw the lever on the side of the recliner and brought his feet down to the floor. He rocketed back and forth a few times, gathering momentum to get out of the chair, and then hauled himself to his feet. He lumbered into the bathroom and returned with a toenail clipper. He was just starting in on the big toe of his left foot when the doorbell rang. It was Skinny and Victor.

"You're early," said Sally. "I'm just eatin' breakfast. You bring some crullers or somethin' at least?"


Victor's arm was heavily bandaged above the elbow, and his hand was in a cast. There was an aluminum splint on the middle finger; it extended out from the hand in a fixed reproach, the gauze around it stained with yellow antiseptic and dried blood.

"How's the hand?" asked Sally. "You ever gonna be able to play the violin again?"

"S'Alright," said Victor, settling into the recliner. "It's my fuckin' arm that's killin' me. They wanted to keep me overnight inna hospital. It throbs like a motherfucker. They gimme some pills . . ."

There were some dark threads from the stitching running along the top of Victor's right ear. His nose was swollen, and he had two black eyes. "I'd like to kill that fuckin' nephew a yours . . ."

Sally chuckled. "You gotta admit, the kid showed he had some balls . . ."

"I'd like to cut his balls off. Feed 'em to a fuckin' dog. Did anybody find my fuckin' gun?"

Sally shook his head. "Why don't you just relax a little bit there, Vic. You look like shit."

"Yeah . . ." said Victor, turning his attention to *The Flintstones*. "Fuckin pills they gimme got me buzzed."

"We gotta be in his office in an hour," said Skinny.

"He said eleven o'clock. He said eleven yesterday, didn't he?" asked Sally.

"It got moved up," said Skinny. "He's got another client he's gotta see, so we got moved up."

"I'll get dressed," said Sally.

Sally went into the bathroom and shaved with an electric razor. He slathered Bijan for Men all over his face and neck, and went into the bedroom and laid out a V-neck sweater and a Members Only bomber jacket on his unmade bed. He kicked off his pajama bottoms and put one foot in a pair of black, pleated slacks. He was having trouble bending over his belly to reach the other leg of his pants when Skinny came into the room. Skinny was naked, holding a Sig Sauer nine-millimeter automatic in one gloved hand. The rubber nipple from a baby bottle was stretched over the muzzle.

Sally had time to look up at Skinny with a puzzled expression and wonder how he got undressed so fast before the first round crashed into his forehead. The gun made a loud *fwap-fwap* sound as Skinny kept firing, the noise getting louder as the rubber nipple disintegrated. His pants around his ankles, Sally was knocked backward between his night table and his bed, an ashtray falling to the floor. He crashed down onto the carpet in a heap, his arms pushed forward from his shoulders in the narrow space. Sally's shiny black wig slipped down over his face, blood running out from under it, soaking his T-shirt. The colorful pink-and-blue trails merged with the spreading blood and disappeared.

Skinny walked back to the living room, took off the single glove, and put it in the brown paper bag with the gun. Victor was engrossed in *The Flintstones*, still sitting in Sally's leatherette recliner. Skinny put on his clothes, then walked back into the bedroom and collected the shell casings from the floor. He put them in the bag and put the bag in his jacket pocket.

"That was loud," said Victor.

"So's the television," said Skinny. "This neighborhood, we should be okay."

"Do we gotta wipe the place down?" asked Victor, his eyes still on the screen.

"No," said Skinny. "We're here alla time. It's normal they find prints. Long as nobody sees us comin' in or out. Try and keep your hand in fronta your face onna way to the car."

"That's good . . . My fuckin' arm . . . I don't feel like cleanin' no apartment the way I feel . . ." Victor jerked a
thumb toward the television. "You believe this Betty Rubble? The dress she got on? You can almost see bush unner there!"

"We're all done," said Skinny.

Victor got up from the chair. "Wilma's not too bad . . . " he said. "But that Betty, she's got it all over the other broad. Barney's got the better piece a ass hands down. I'll bet she's better inna sack too."

"Let's go see the lawyer," said Skinny.

They let themselves out the door and closed it behind them. They left the television on.
“They got grabbed comin outta Sally's place,” said Charlie Wagons.

“A terrible thing,” said Danny Testa, shaking his head.

The two men walked, side by side, down Elizabeth, Charlie in his bathrobe and slippers, Danny in a dark double-breasted suit that was snug around the shoulders. Danny stepped around a dog turd.

“Fuckin people should clean up after their dogs,” he said.

“The cops were right across the street,” said Charlie. “They were listening the whole time. They heard it happen. Got it on tape, the whole fuckin' thing. They been there—who knows how fuckin' long they been there . . . They could hear every goddamn thing in the apartment. Sally farted in his sleep, they could hear.”

“I read the paper,” said Danny. “What really happened?”

“What happened is they walk outta Sally's and a million fuckin' cops come runnin outta the place across the street. You know the bakery there? They were up there in the apartment over the store. Takin' their pictures, listenin' in . . . Vic and Skinny aren't even in the car yet, they got cops swarmin' all over 'em. Squad cars, plainclothes, feds . . . They still had the gun . . . everything . . . Skinny had the gun in his pocket when they grabbed him.”

“You talk to them?”

“No,” said Charlie. “The lawyer called me. I hadda walk five blocks to the pay phone, call the guy back. It don't look good. They got 'em cold. They gonna have to go away for a while.”

“Son of a bitch,” said Danny.

“Yeah . . .” said Charlie.

“So is there a problem for us?”

“From them? From Skinny and Vic? No . . . They ain't gonna be able to separate them from the lawyer, and the lawyer's gonna do what I tell him to do.”

“Skinny did the actual work . . .”

“Skinny, forget about, he ain't gonna say nothin' . . .”

“And Vic?”

“He'll do what the lawyer tells him.”

“There's nothin' we can do?”

“On this? Nah . . . I don't think so . . . Looks like they gotta go to the can.”

“That's too bad. Skinny's a great guy,” said Danny.

“Skinny's worried about the other thing,” said Charlie. “He's got the one count hangin' over him he's gonna go away for . . . He's thinkin' about the other thing. The thing he done with Sally.”

“The guys the other night?”

“Nah, that's no problem. The other guy. You know that guy? The one—”

“The one from the fish market?”

“That guy,” said Charlie. “Skinny's worried about the nephew, Tommy. Sally's gone, so he has no worries there. But he's thinkin' about the nephew. The kid was there, he said. He saw everything that happened. Skinny doesn't want another charge.”

“How about us?” asked Danny. “Can the kid hurt us?”

“No,” said Charlie. “That was the only thing, that one time. That's been handled. You talked to Sally. Sally's gone. So you don't have a problem.”

“What does Skinny wanna do?”

“He wants the kid clipped . . . One conviction, one count, he's out in fifteen years. Two, he's gonna grow old in there. So he's worried.”

“Can't blame the guy,” said Danny. “So, you want me to do something about it?”

“No right now,” said Charlie. “The way things are, with this rat dentist gone, Sally gone, those two inna can, the lawyer says he thinks they gonna lose interest in the racketeering thing. All they had there was Sally and them, and Sally ain't around to prosecute no more. The dentist ain't gonna be talkin' to nobody, so the lawyer says we should be okay. I don't wanna do nothin' makes 'em interested again.” Charlie stopped walking and wrapped the bathrobe closely around his neck, “Fuckin cold,” he said.

“What about the kid?” asked Danny.

“You ain't listenin' to me or somethin'?” said Charlie. “I don't wanna do nothin' right now . . . I got enough shit right now with that fag out there in Brooklyn all pissed at me and the fuckin' lawyers callin' me every ten fuckin'
minutes. Let's give it a fuckin' rest... We don't have no problem... Somethin' needs to be done, we can do it later. The lawyer'll let me know they callin' witnesses. He thinks of a thing before the fuckin' prosecutor even thinks of it. The cops got a nice easy case to try. They're happy. I want 'em to stay happy."

"The lawyer told me it would be good if the kid wasn't around," said Danny.

"He said that?"

"He said it would be better. You know how they talk."

"Listen," said Charlie. "I hadda fuckin' dime for every time some smart fuckin' lawyer told me maybe somebody or other should get clipped, that maybe it would be a good thing... I... I'd be a rich man. As it is... I gotta pay this prick a hundred thousand bucks and the son of a bitch is gonna end up pleading anyways... Fuckin' lawyers. They watch too many fuckin' movies out there in Scarsdale, wherever they live... Always wanna whack a guy first... You know, I pay those pricks cash? You think they tell the tax people about that? I tell you, Danny, that's who the real fuckin' gangsters are, the fuckin' lawyers."

"Can he do somethin with the jury?" asked Danny. "He's gotta plead?"

"I told him I didn't wanna do that. I don't wanna go that route. First of all, it costs. Second of all, it's just gonna piss everybody off, the cops, the feds, it'll be all over the papers I pull somethin' like that. They don't get a conviction, there's gonna be all kinda problems. Then they come after you and me... Who needs that? They gonna do that thing with the jury anyways—where they lock 'em in a fuckin' room, nobody knows the names, they put 'em up in a Holiday Inn somewheres till the trial's over. They catch somebody you know, any friend of ours even talkin' to somebody who knows somebody on that jury and there's gonna be all sortsa problems. Nah... even Skin don't expect me to do nothin' about that... I don't need that right now. They just gonna have to suck it up and do some time."

"What about the restaurant? What happens there?" asked Danny.

"The place is closed. When the cops are done snoopin' around down there they'll probably sell it, put it onna block, take care a the people this guy owed money to. A course I ain't gonna see dollar one. You watch, those people in Brooklyn are gonna get fifty cents on the dollar for haulin' trash... Me, I'm stuck for around ninety long. Fuckin' Sally. Been givin' my fuckin' money to the fuckin' feds. I ain't gonna see nothin' outta there. Fuckin' Sally... I'd like to kill that pile a shit all over again. 'Solid' is what he tells me... this guy, the dentist, he's 'solid people,' that's what he says... They done business before, made some money onna clinics, that thing they had goin' on with the union awhile back. He doesn't say nothin' about no indictment hangin' over the guy's head. Sally doesn't tell me that... He's too busy talkin' inta little microphones..."

Charlie took a deep breath of air and looked up at the late afternoon sky. He turned to Danny and squeezed his shoulder affectionately.

"I tell ya, Danny. Even with alla problems I got comin' up, I feel like a new man with that prick outta my hair. I don't gotta sit there and watch that guy eat no more... I feel like I just had a good fuckin dump just knowin' that guy is inna ground. I can breathe the air again."

Charlie started back to the Evergreen, a little more spring in his step, his bedroom slippers making a flip-flop sound on the pavement. Danny had to hurry after him to catch up.

"You hear about the Count?" asked Charlie, laughing. "They got him for receiving. Can you believe that? They down there searchin' the place for that guy from the fish market and they don't find nothin'. So some smart-ass cop opens up the freezer and they find a load a shrimps gone missin' awhile back. Somebody musta lost a truck. Count's gonna get off with a fine, but he's gonna have problems now with the license. That's okay 'cause we got somebody else run it for him. Did you see the picture they had inna papers?"

"No," said Danny. "I missed that."

"Looks like they got the poor bastard outta bed. You shoulda seen the guy, swingin' at the photographers, he's got his gut hangin' outta his pants, and the best part, he ain't got his fuckin' teeth in... I saw it onna TV at the club. We had a good laugh."
TommY AND THE CHEF sat on the step in front of the Dreadnaught. The chef had a large, square piece of gauze taped over his right cheekbone. There was a star-shaped welt in the center of his forehead, and his left arm was inside his jacket, supported by a makeshift sling.

There was a marshal's notice taped to the front door saying the restaurant had been seized. The picture window had been covered on the inside with newspaper; a framed copy of the menu lay on its side on the windowsill, trapped like a dead insect between the paper and the glass.

"Ricky got a job at the Lion's Head," said the chef.

Tommy shrugged, "Good for him . . . At least somebody's working . . ."

"Cheryl find anything yet?" asked the chef.

"Not yet," said Tommy. "She doesn't know what she wants to do. I think she wants to get out of the restaurant business."

"You never called the guy, did you?" said the chef.

"No," said Tommy. "I never did."

'Cause I saw you on the phone in the emergency room. I thought you were calling him . . ."

"No. I was calling somebody else," said Tommy.

The red Alfa Romeo pulled up with a screech in front of the curb. Al got out, the Rolling Stones' "Memo from Turner" escaping from the car when he opened the door. He approached Tommy and the chef, a sheepish smile on his face, palms turned up at his sides in a kind of frozen shrug.

"What happened to you?" said Al, noticing the chef.

"I fell down some stairs," said the chef sourly.

Al took a deep breath, then looked around, letting the air out slowly. After a minute, he said, "So, what are you kids gonna do?"

"Unemployment," said Tommy and the chef in unison.

"Sorry guys . . ." said Al. "Was gonna happen anyway. One way or the other. Harvey or Sonny, makes no difference. They were ordering up enough shit to fill a fuckin' warehouse . . . That wouldn't a lasted long. I see Sonny's still open . . ."

"I just saw him goin' in over there. He's gonna have his cousin run it for him, take over the liquor license," said Tommy. "Nice case . . . He says it's been good for business. I read he's gonna plead, have to pay a fine."

"Yeah, well," said Al. "Sometimes you have to take what you can get.

"So what's gonna happen to the restaurant—this one?" asked Tommy.

"They'll sell it at auction," said Al. "Some other genius'll buy it. Maybe you can work there again . . . Who knows?"

"No way," said Tommy.

"No hard feelings, I hope?" said Al.

"I'll miss lunches at the Metro," said Tommy sarcastically.

Al laughed. "You weren't gonna get too many more a those."

"I won't miss you," said the chef. "I won't miss you a bit. I think you suck. I hope I never see you again."

"No reason you should, Chef . . ." said Al. "No reason at all."

"What about me?" asked Tommy. "You done with me or what?"

"Nothing has been decided officially," said Al. "I just wrote a memo on that this morning . . . I gotta hear back before I can say for sure. It would be nice if you were available for questioning, I guess . . . should it ever come to that. Unofficially . . . my best guess? They'll pretty much leave you alone. Your uncle's dead. They got a nice, easy dead-bang homicide case against Skinny and Victor and it probably won't even be my office that prosecutes . . . I think in a few days or so, you'll be off the hook. Don't quote me." He winked.

"What happened to Harvey?" asked Tommy.

Al grimaced. "I don't know . . . That's a good question."

"He's landfill, right? He's out at Fresh Kills," said Tommy.

"Is there anything you can tell me—" Al began. He looked at Tommy and the chef, their faces closing up like a door slamming. "Ah . . . forget it . . . It's just that his chick Carol has been raising hell. She called her congresswoman. It's a fuckin' mess."

"Nobody's gonna be mad at me . . . mad at Tommy, are they?" asked the chef.
Tommy turned and looked at the chef, shaking his head at him, exasperated. “Nobody’s mad at anybody. Nobody gives two shits . . . We didn't do anything wrong. Right, Al?”

"Sure, Tommy. It's all on the record. You told me to go fuck myself. End of story. Some hard-on from the Manhattan DA wants to ask you questions about your uncle's death, you do what you think is right. I'm out of it. Any of Sally's old friends, any problems you think you might have with them, I don't know about. You know better than me . . . If I hear of anything should concern you, I'll give you a call. You're still at the same number?"

Tommy nodded.

Al turned to the chef. "So, how's things with you? You behavin' yourself?"

The chef nodded and stood up. "Let's go," he said to Tommy. "I don't wanna miss the movie."

Tommy stood up and gave Al a long last glance. Al offered his hand to Tommy. Tommy turned away as if he hadn't seen it.

"Awwwww," chided Al. "Don't be like that. . . Don't go away mad . . ."

Tommy and the chef walked down Spring Street without saying anything. Al got back in the Alfa. In the rearview mirror, he could see the two of them, standing next to each other in West Broadway traffic, Tommy's arm outstretched, hailing a cab.
Forty-Five

CHARLIE WAGONS was wearing a red chef's hat that had been puffed out, then flattened and pushed slightly to one side. He reached under the fire with the worn Dexter meat fork and speared a veal chop. He pressed the center of the chop with his thumb and then licked the thumb. The broiler in the rear kitchen area of the Evergreen was a pull-out Garland of the old kind, and Charlie had it fired up all the way. Humming cheerfully, he pulled the grill out and located another chop. He stuck the big fork in between the thin layer of fat and the lean veal, then swung around with a practiced ease and deposited it with a thud on Tommy's plate. He put the other chop on his own plate and, with his hip, nudged the grill back under the flame. The chops smelled of fresh rosemary and garlic, and Tommy's stomach growled.

"I heard that," said Charlie, with an easy smile. "Smells fuckin' good, don't it? I bake the garlic now, like you said. I wrap it inna foil an' I put it inna oven. Sweet. I squeeze a little a that on there—"

"That's fresh rosemary you got there," interjected Tommy, pleasantly surprised.

"Damn right, it is," said Charlie. "I don't use none a them fuckin' pine needles they sell inna supermarket. Fresh." Charlie smiled affectionately at Tommy, sitting at the small, round table in his jacket and tie.

"You didn't hafta dress up for me, you know, Tommy," said Charlie. "I don't think I seen you in a tie since you was a kid."

"I thought it was right," said Tommy.

"Well, that was nice," said Charlie. "That was nice, but, you see what I'm wearin' . . . My fuckin' lawyers say I gotta wear this alla time . . . a fuckin' bathrobe. They make me out like I'm simple in the head if I gotta go to court."

Tommy laughed and leaned over his veal chop for a sniff.

"Is that some beautiful veal, or what? Look at that," said Charlie proudly. He put a large white bowl filled with steamed artichokes in vinaigrette down on the table.

"It's gorgeous," said Tommy.

Charlie took off the red chef's hat and padded off to a double-doored Traulsen reach-in. He opened the right-hand door and pulled out a large wooden bowl filled with salad.

"What have you got there?" asked Tommy.

"Ho, ho," beamed Charlie. "I got some radicchio, I got some Belgian endive, I got some arugula, a little red-tip lettuce, a little romaine." He put the salad down in the center of the table. He went back to the refrigerator and returned with a small glass bowl of roasted red peppers. "Somebody makes these for me down the street . . . " He brought a plate of sliced vine-ripened tomatoes over. "None a that shit they grow in the fuckin' greenhouse, that shit they spray with the gas . . . " He reached up on a shelf for a box of Genoa toast. "I like this better than croutons," he said. He put some black olives on the table with some extra-virgin olive oil and a bottle of vinegar.

"I forgot the mozzarella," said Charlie. "You gotta try this stuff, it's outta this world . . . They put just the right amount a salt." He placed a dripping ball of fresh mozzarella on the large wooden butcher block next to the broiler and took a ten-inch Wiisthof chef's knife out of a well-stocked utility drawer. He unhooked a steel from a hook on the shelf and honed the blade with a few quick strokes. He put the steel back on the hook and hovered over the mozzarella. Grasping the cheese with his left hand, his fingers perpendicular to the knife, the tips tucked in and away from the blade, he began to slide the knife through. "Am I doin' it right, Chef?" he asked. He sliced four perfect thin slices onto the board.

"You handle that like a pro," said Tommy. "You don't need me to tell you that."

Charlie beamed at him. He arranged the slices of mozzarella on a plate and put it next to Tommy's veal chop. Then he reached for a serving fork and spoon from the table. He took them both in one hand and expertly served the salad.

"Who showed you how to do that?" asked Tommy. "I didn't show you that."

Charlie laughed and poured some red wine into their glasses. "Some things you don't forget how to do. I worked tables for my brother-in-law Bobby when I was a kid. Out there on City Island, a rug joint. All the waiters hadda wear these little green jackets with the tails on 'em. Bow ties, the whole nine yards . . . You know, I musta been about fifteen years old . . . And did that fuckin' joint do business. They worked us like we was animals at that place. You hadda make the Caesar salads right there onna floor. You hadda do the thing with the egg, get the yolk out, grind up the anchovy and all that . . . and you hadda do everything with a fork an' spoon. No hands . . . You shoulda seen this fuckin' place . . . They had these carts for everything . . ."

"Gueridons?" asked Tommy.
"That's those carts you cook on, right? Yeah, they had those. They had a cart for everything. You had your salad carts, your dessert cart, your cheese cart. . . You had those things you cook on with the sterno, the gueridons. The fuckin' waiters hadda do everything. Mosta these kids workin' there, they're doin' it like a summer job, or maybe they know somebody who wants to give a friend a job . . . they don't know what the fuck they're doin' out there. They hadda make these things, these crepe suzettes, steak inna brandy sauce, all sortsa flamin coffees . . . And these punks are lightin' themselves up like the fuckin' Human Torch on a regular basis. Right there inna fuckin' dining room, they spill the fuckin' sterno all over the place, they light a match and—Boom! Or, like they lean over the burnin' brandy and the hair goes up—happened at least once a fuckin' week, these jerks . . . Customers dumpin' water outta the water glasses tryin' to put their fuckin' waiter out 'fore he burns the fuckin' place down. You wouldn't'a believed it . . . How's your veal?"

"Outstanding," said Tommy, chewin' enthusiastically.

"Try the artichokes," suggested Charlie. "Anyways . . . they had alla these carts . . . And, like I said, this is a very busy place. The customers come in six-thirty, seven o'clock and then all of a sudden everybody wants cheese, coffee, dessert at the same fuckin' time . . . There ain't enough carts for everybody, so all the waiters gotta fight over them. So, it's like fuckin' bumper cars at the amusement park in there—guys smackin' inta each other, pushin' and pullin' their carts around real fast. It was like a fuckin' demolition derby. More than once, a guy'd go back there in the kitchen, some other guy'd come through the swingin' doors, and he'd take a poke at him. Guys whalin' on each other on the kitchen floor, cooks hafta break 'em up . . . A fuckin' zoo.

"So that's where I learned the bit with the fork and spoon." Charlie held the fork and spoon up and clicked them together a few times in his hand.

"This is really good," said Tommy, nibblin' on an artichoke. "You ever think about opening your own place?"

"Nahhh . . ." said Charlie, with a scowl. "One thing I learned in the restaurant business is I never want to be in the restaurant business. You do better goin' out to the fuckin' track and puttin' your money on a horse. No shit . . . The percentages are better, you might come out of it with some money. Somebody wants to borrow money from me, open a restaurant, that's fine. But, me? My own place? No fuckin' way."

"I thought about it a few times," said Tommy, taking a bite of salad. "I've thought about my own place someday. In the future. I guess I gotta see how things turn out."

Charlie pulled his chair closer to the table, and his demeanor changed. 'Listen, Tommy. The way I been thinkin', I don't think there's gonna be any problem for you. I been givin' it a lotta thought. I mean, you're outta work and all, and that's rough. But we gotta talk about some other things . . . First of all, I'm sorry about your uncle. I'm sorry all this shit that happened hadda happen. Your uncle wasn't a very smart guy. He made a lotta mistakes. I guess you know that. He got you involved in somethin' he never shoulda got you involved in. If I was payin' more attention, if I'd a thought about it some more, things woulda been different. He shouldn'ta got you involved. There's always another way to do things. You made a decision a long time ago not to come in with your uncle . . . I shoulda respected that. I feel real bad about that . . . I appreciate you didn't say nothin' to nobody. Your mother woulda been real pissed, real disappointed, she knew. You know how I feel about your mother, God bless her . . . I sent her a basket a fruit the other day . . . You know she got that alright?"

"Yeah, she got it," said Tommy. "She said to say thank you."

"Well, you know how I feel about that. I think the world of that lady Always did, always did. When your father was gone—well, that's another story. Things don't always turn out the way you want them. That's life, though, right?"

"She likes you, too, Charlie," said Tommy. "Really."

"Yeah, well . . . I hope there's no hard feelin's there," sighed Charlie. "Anyways . . . This thing goin' on right now . . . I talked to some lawyers I got. These guys are pretty sharp, and they tell me there ain't gonna be any problems with that thing that happened. They said they're shuttin' down this grand jury that was makin' such problems for everybody . . . Okay, Skinny and Victor, they got a problem. But they ain't gonna be talkin' about anything to anybody, so you don't have nothin' to worry about there.

"The feds don't like to get embarrassed—this one fuckin' U.S. At torey in particular don't like it—so, there might be some bad feelings, all the money they spent tryin' to put a guy away who ain't even around anymore. They got fuckin' nothin', they got no case . . . So, they could, like, bust your balls for a little while, they want to, but the lawyer says in the end, they'll probably forget about it. Still, they could be hangin' aroun' your neck for a while, and that, you don't need. Right?"

"Right," said Tommy.

"So, here's the thing . . . I was thinkin' maybe you should take a nice trip somewheres . . . For a couple years. Take a nice trip down there, the Caribbean. Take the girlfriend. You hang around the beach, get yourself a suntan. Maybe, when you're down there, you wanna look a few places over. You see some nice little shack onna beach somewhere,
it's gotta few chairs, a bar, right onna beach there . . . you give me a call. You know how to call me. I send you down a few bucks, you can start your own place."

"Charlie, that's awful nice a you," started Tommy, "but——"

"No, no, no . . ." said Charlie. "It's not like that. You don't owe me nothin'. I'm talkin' about some mom-and-pop type a' place, you serve a few pina coladas to the tourists when you're not out gettin' a tan. This'll be your place and yours alone. You won't owe me nothin'. You manage to make yourself some money, good for you . . . You lose money, also good. No obligation."

Charlie reached across the small table and took Tommy's hand. "You see, kid, you'd be doin' me a favor. We gotta get you outta town. You see? There ain't gonna be any problems with the law, but some of the fellows don't feel too good you walkin' around seein' what you seen. Skinny and Victor and Danny, they get to talkin' with the lawyers and you know, with that case comin up . . . Skinny and Victor's case . . . Well . . . I know how these guys think. You gotta get outta town. It's better for you, it's better for me. You unnerstan' what I'm sayin' to you here?"

"I understand," said Tommy.

"So, is that gonna be alright with you? I give you a few bucks, you go downa beach for a while? Start up a little joint down there, look at the waves, scratch your balls under a palm tree? That don't sound too bad to me . . . Somebody offer that kinda thing to me, I was your age, I woulda grabbed it with both hands. Whaddaya say?"


"Well, alright," said Charlie, slapping his palm on the table. He refilled their glasses with wine and held his up to Tommy. "Salud," he said.

"Salud," said Tommy.

"See, I knew there was a solution to everybody's problems. Just do me a favor, okay? Don't tell your mother I'm involved. You make it sound like it was your idea. Tell her you been savin' up. I'd appreciate it."

"Sure, sure," said Tommy. "No sweat."

"Maybe we can get her down there for a weekend over the holidays or somethin'."

"That would be great," said Tommy.

"Okay. That's that . . . Now eat your fuckin' veal chop."
A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

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