

THE LURE

by

Felice Picano



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ONE

FIXING THE BAIT

1

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The serene icy morning was shattered by a scream. Noel Cummings swerved his ten-speed bicycle to a stop at the railing and listened. One sneakered foot remained tight in the metal clamp of the bike's pedal, the other dangled gingerly on the thin concrete abutment.

Nothing.

Despite the frigid wind flapping off the Hudson River, he pulled down the hood of his sweatshirt to hear better.

Still nothing.

The wind whistling through those loose metal flaps of the crumbling warehouses on his right? Perhaps. Or perhaps an early morning driver screeching his tires as he sped around a corner below, on West Street.

He peered over the railing of the elevated West Side Highway, closed to traffic south of Thirty-fourth Street since a nearby section had collapsed almost a year before. Closed to car and truck traffic, that is. Still open to pedestrians; or, more common, to bicyclists like Noel, alone this early March morning at a quarter after six. Below him he could make out the back of a crawling Sanitation Department truck.

It must have been a hallucination, he decided, and put up his hood again.

Looking east, through lines of building walls sheer as cliffs, the night's blackness had begun to give way to a pale cobalt at the horizon. Dawn soon.

Then the scream repeated. Even with his hood up, he knew it was no hallucination. It was so clear, so close, Noel could make out its direction—to the right, in front of him—and even a few terrified words—

“No...didn't mean it.”

A light flickered on in the second-story warehouse window, level with where he stood. With it the scream ended.

Noel shot across the road to the right-hand railing. Light flickered in the third window; like matchlight, or a cigarette lighter guttering in the wind.

Then he heard the man's voice again, lower, pleading, punctuated by what seemed to be gasps.

Noel leaned far over the metal railing to look in. Debris all over the floor, loose beams hanging half torn from the walls and ceiling. All he could make out were shadowy figures—one shrinking back, two others looming on either side of him. One's arm was extended; something sharply pointed in his hand jabbed forward again and again, each thrust followed by a gasp, a cry, another "No."

"Hey! What's going on in there?" Noel shouted. "Stop that."

The light flickered off.

Out of the sudden blackness someone shouted, "Help me! Please! They're killing me!"

"Finish him off," someone muttered.

"Help me!" the man shouted again. "Please!"

Then Noel heard what sounded like stumbling over broken glass. Was the man escaping in the dark?

Noel calculated the distance from the railing to the open window: a good ten feet. Too far to jump. Debris and broken glass to land on if he did. Glass that twinkled and cracked in the reflected streetlight as the shadows moved over it. He had to help him. But how?

"I'm coming in," Noel shouted. He detached the heavy flashlight he carried clamped to his handlebars, flung it into the corner he thought the attackers were in. It smashed against something, thudded to the floor.

"...getting out of here," he heard one voice say.

"Are you finished?" another asked.

Broken glass crunched under several pairs of feet. Then the man's cries, his gasps again.

How could Noel get in there? "Leave him alone!" he yelled.

It was a quarter mile to the nearest exit. He'd have to chance it. They were scared by now. They'd leave.

He shouted once more that he was coming in, then spun around on the Atala Grand Prix and shot off north toward Eighteenth Street, adjusting his gears for the highest speed. In seconds he was moving so fast he almost missed the turnoff. He swerved right, swept over the broken concrete exitway like a ski jumper going off a lift, then down the ramp so suddenly the breath was whipped out of him. Lines of white and gray at the bottom of the ramp caught his eye—wooden police horses, obstacles. He had only

an instant to avoid them. He jerked left, felt his right trouser leg brush one, leaned over almost horizontal to the road, regained his balance, then turned sharply and was skimming along West Street, over cobblestones, in and out of the steel pylons that supported the highway. One row of warehouses flashed by. Then the open space opposite Westbeth, telephone labs turned into artists' housing. The second line of warehouses began, glimmering ominously in the yellow light of the mercury streetlamps.

He swung the Atala to a soundless stop. Now what? He'd expected to see fleeing figures, a car taking off.

Instead the street was empty, the cobblestones gleaming with ice. Jesus! and he'd gone over this road at forty miles an hour. What now? There was a man hurt somewhere upstairs. More than likely the men who attacked him, too. *What am I doing here?*

He had to go in, find the man, help him. But first park the bike where they would not see it when they came out. The other side of the building.

He spotted one doorway at street level, the door knocked in, hanging on a hinge, so black inside it might be completely enclosed. This can't lead upstairs, he thought. Too much of a trap anyway. Farther along?

He jumped onto the concrete loading platform. Graffiti scrawled on the outside wall in large wavering letters: Keep Away. Pickpockets Inside.

There were more than pickpockets inside.

One wide garage door was opened just high enough to crawl under. Noel edged over and peered in.

It was lighter inside. Huge. These warehouses had been used for loading and receiving from ships; the piers they were built on extended hundreds of feet out into the river. The far end of this one was sagging, as though crushed by a giant hand. The dark western sky looked lighter against the building's darker jagged-metal bulwarks. At least he'd be able to make out someone coming at him.

He slipped in and crouched, accustoming his eyes to the gloom. No one. A jumble of fallen beams. The frosty glitter of glass—or was it ice?—everywhere. Good thing he was wearing his Adidas. He'd hear them before they heard him.

A dozen or so feet inside, he saw that the place was even more immense than it seemed at first: two football fields long, he guessed, from the street to the river end. Concrete floors. Safe for walking, except for the glass. This must have been a driveway. An inner loading platform to his right. Beyond it, darkness. To his left what seemed to be another, smaller building within the larger one: a half dozen windows, half that many doors, all the glass smashed out of them of course, all the doors off their hinges.

What was that darker double-sized doorway? A stairway. The way up to the hurt man. And to the other men, waiting for him.

This is insane, Noel told himself, then started up. The stairs were remarkably clear of litter and glass, as though much used. At the first landing, he stopped. Anyone might get at him from around the corner. He waited, poised to leap aside or back down the stairs. Not a sound. Could this little corridor be the way to the man?

It wasn't. The corridor nearly circled the inside building, going three-quarters around, ending in a pile of stacked beams and one ghostly white urinal stinking to high heaven, graffiti chalked on the walls around it, indecipherable in the darkness. But from here, he could look down on the open warehouse floor below. He saw no one.

He made his way back to the stairway, ascended warily, a step at a time, hugging the railing, until his eyes reached floor level. A huge room. Empty. To his left a bare wall some fifty feet away. Much closer on his right a series of doorways: some closed, some open. These must have been warehouse offices.

He sidled to the nearest doorway. He could see the elevated highway out the window, about chest high. It was the right floor. Now where was the man?

It was lighter in the room now: he could see a robin's-egg blue at the horizon. Couldn't he wait here a few minutes until dawn?

No. Go on. Go in.

A tiny room opened off this doorway. Some newspapers bunched up in a corner he took at first for a crouching man. On one wall were the stenciled words: Dressing Room.

Why was it so quiet? Where was the man? And the others, where were they? Waiting for him behind any doorway. Their shadows thrusting, deadly. The man's cries and gasps. Noel had to find him, not let him die. Insane or not, he had to help him.

He crept forward, edging into first one doorway, then another. At each he waited, slid quietly inside, waited again, poised to jump aside, alert for a movement, an attack. He peered into each darkness, made certain no one was in the shadows, checked the outer room again, slipped out, moved to the next.

At the fifth one he saw the flashlight. The dull burnished shine of its cylinder made him shudder. This was the room.

He paused, looked for a long time at the flashlight's dented side, then slipped into the room and stood still. No one. Just a sign, Smoking Lounge,

on the wall opposite the windows. Several discarded doors were thrown into the far corner. The flashlight sat on a pile of debris.

Here I am. Now where the hell are you!

Expecting at any moment to be pounced upon, he retrieved the flashlight, grabbing it as if it were a hot potato, though it felt cold through the lightweight racing gloves he wore. Heavy, substantial: real. What about the rest of it—the man stabbing, the victim’s scream, his pleading? Was that real? There was nothing to prove it. Nothing but the flashlight.

He wondered if the flashlight still worked, and switched it on. Its glare was blinding, and he swung it down.

The circle of light rested on the doors stacked in the corner. The top one was pale green, speckled darker from top to bottom as though someone had begun to paint it and stopped halfway. The dark layer gleamed wet, looked freshly painted.

Cautiously, he touched the door. It was wet, sticky. Christ, it must be blood! He wiped it off on a pants leg and swung the flashlight in a slow, low arc, half dreading to see what it would show him. At the bottom of the pile, he made out some material, and coming closer, one trousered leg that extended out from behind the doors. It, too, gleamed from the knee to the socks, which—once white—were now dyed dark. A wetly brown loafer was twisted half off a foot.

Noel stood back, holding the flashlight on the leg, unable to move.

Then he went to the door and began to move it. As he did, the leg pulled slowly in. What was that sound? Like a small dog whimpering. Noel heard a dry wheezing. The man was still alive! He’d come in time.

“Don’t be afraid,” Noel said quietly. “It’s me. The guy from the highway. They’re gone now. I threw the flashlight to scare them off. I’ll get you out.”

The wheezing continued, louder now. Noel wedged the flashlight between some loose boards on the right wall, aiming it at the corner to see better. Then, using both hands, he lifted off first one, then another, setting them quietly flat down on the floor.

When the last door was aside, he saw the man.

He lay like refuse thrown in a corner. Both legs were extended, both arms dangled on the floor. His head was fallen forward so that Noel could see only the top of his lank, light hair. He sat in a dark puddle. His sleeves and trouser legs were dappled with dark spreading stains. He’d been stabbed everywhere, over and over.

The man raised his head slightly and Noel heard the sharp intake

of breath, the fluttery wheezing, and, barely audible, the muttered words, “Didn’t mean it. Didn’t.”

With that, the man’s head fell back all the way against one corner wall. Was it only a trick of the dim light that Noel could not make out a single feature of his face? No, the flashlight shone fully on him. And Noel saw that where the man’s nose and eyes and mouth ought to have been was just a dark wetness that seethed and bubbled and welled up. And he realized why he could not see the man’s face: they had cut it to ribbons.

“*Oh, my God!*” Noel whispered it under his breath, feeling his stomach knot and constrict, feeling his throat begin to contract. “Christ, help me.”

The words helped, and he clenched his eyes shut, feeling the flashlight’s dented side, found the button and flicked it off.

Better in the dark. Better not seeing what ought not be seen. He felt a little better already.

He bent down and talked quietly, fast.

“Listen. You’re hurt very badly. I’ve got to get a doctor. You’re bleeding. I’ve got to get help.”

Noel felt wetness seep under one knee as he talked. He jerked it up and hunkered.

“They’re gone. They won’t be back. Just stay still. I’ve got a bike. I’ll ride and get help. I’ll only be a few minutes, I promise. Stay still, very still.”

“Ssszzz,” Noel heard among the wheezing, then he felt a hand brush against his ankle. It made him shudder.

Then, the hissing sound again: “Ssszzz.”

“I can’t understand you.”

The man held Noel’s ankle in a loose grip. He reached down and took the hand, holding it in his own. It, too, was wet, bleeding.

“Listen,” the man managed to say in a sharply asthmatic voice, very low. “Go...cross...street.”

“I’ll get help. Don’t worry.”

“Cross...street...” the man repeated slowly, with great effort. “Cross...street.”

“Across the street?”

The fingers tightened in his hand.

“Across West Street?”

Yes, the fingers replied, tightening again.

“Directly across?”

“Yes,” the man said now.

“Why? What’s there? Not the police station? That’s on Tenth Street, isn’t it?”

“Cross...street.” The man’s fingers tightened once more in Noel’s. He was wheezing badly again, unable to talk.

Noel looked at him. Then, remembering, and afraid he might see his eyes or what remained of them, he looked away, toward the dull gleam of the flashlight he’d hung on the wall.

“All right. I’ll go across the street. Don’t worry. Just stay still. Don’t move. All right?”

The man’s fingers relaxed, and Noel thought he must have lost consciousness, but the wheezing continued. He laid the man’s hand gently on the soaked trouser leg, and stood up.

He was shaking so badly, he had to hold on to the doorjamb.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, not sure whether the man heard him or not. The room was getting lighter: the sun was about to rise.

Noel half staggered out the doorway, and ran heedlessly down the stairs. Only at the first landing did he come to his senses and remember to be wary. There was no proof the other men had left the building. So he edged along the lower offices, then crawled under the barely open garage door onto West Street.

It was still night below the elevated highway, the cobblestone road lighted yellow.

Across West Street, the man had said. Noel strode across, looking back as he did, to make certain no light went on again in the upper-story window. The man’s whimpering rang in his head. His wheezing breath. No face. He had no face left. Stop it, Noel told himself. Concentrate on getting help.

Opposite the warehouse, on the other side of the highway, were two buildings, neither very likely to contain help. On Noel’s left was a whitewashed warehouse, seven stories high, the windows painted closed black. One black garage door, locked. One doorway, up four steps, locked, too. Deserted.

The other building was red brick aged with layers of soot. Cages covered the high, deeply set, opaque glass windows from the ground floor all the way up to the fifth level, which appeared to be a huge wire mesh tent, like a gymnasium atop a public school. There was one deeply set doorway with a heavy-looking metal door labeled, Danger: Moving Door. Even the bulky, greenish air-conditioning unit was enclosed in a meshwork cage.

Then Noel remembered: this was the Federal House of Detention

where men awaiting federal trials in New York City were held. Hadn't it been closed a while ago? Sure: he'd read about it in the *Times* four or five months before.

Directly across the street, the man had said. Had he thought he was somewhere else? What was supposed to be here? What would he look like if he lived: his face a mask of scars, or what? Jesus, how the blood had bubbled up.

The door gave a hollow booming response to his knock. Noel held himself ready for it to shoot open. It didn't. He pounded on it again. And again.

Could the man have been so crazed by pain he'd made a mistake? But no, didn't shock set in, and with it, drastic reduction of pain? Noel hoped so, for the man's sake.

Maybe another door. But there was nothing on this side but the caged windows. Around the corner? Nothing here either. Then he saw another sign, this one painted on the wall: Federal Parking. Employees Only. Well, that confirmed what the place was. Or had been. Another doorway, set deep like the one on West Street. Barred over, so he couldn't even reach in to knock. More brick wall. A corrugated garage door. He knocked there, too, but got no answer. I'm wasting time here. I'd better get the bike and ride to the police station, he thought. Now he had reached the end of the building. One more doorway: the delivery entrance.

A sooty glass slot at eye level revealed a small inside foyer, then another glass door too distant and too dirty to see into. To Noel's surprise, this outer door opened at his touch, swinging in easily, well counterbalanced despite its weight.

It was a foyer, all right, dark beyond the glass door. Locked, of course. Pure fluke the outer one was open. A dull institutional corridor stretched beyond the glass door. Empty.

He set up a tattoo, knocking with his ringed knuckle. No answer. No running feet. No anxious faces. I'd better go to the police station, now, he told himself and turned to open the outer door.

He was jerked back so fast he stumbled backward, as hands pulled at him. Before he could get to his feet, he was behind the glass door, in the corridor he'd been looking at, and hauled around a corner, into pitch darkness.

They'll mangle my face, too, he thought, and his hands went up to protect his eyes.

He could feel two or three of them, holding him securely against the wall, breathing.

“What are you doing here?” The voice was sharp, cold, toneless.

Noel stiffened. “The man...” he began.

“What man?” another voice asked, close to his left ear.

“Across the street,” Noel managed to get out. “He said to come here for help. He’s hurt.”

“What man?”

“I don’t know who he is.”

“What’s going on here?” yet another voice asked.

“He sent you here?” the first, the cold-voiced man asked Noel.

“Yes. He’s hurt very badly.”

“Who’s hurt?” the newer voice asked.

“I don’t know. Who’s out tonight?” The cold voice again.

“No one. Wait, wasn’t Kansas out?”

“He was linking tonight,” the man on Noel’s left said.

“There?”

“Where is he?” the cold-voiced man asked Noel, pushing him roughly against the wall.

“Across the street. In the abandoned warehouse. Second story up. Fifth doorway on the right when you get up the stairs. I was riding by and...”

“We’d better take a look,” the cold-voiced man said, interrupting Noel’s explanation. Then, with another push against the wall, he asked Noel to repeat his directions.

As Noel answered, he heard more men arriving in the dark corridor. There were many voices mumbling around him now, talking hurriedly in low tones.

“I was riding by on the elevated highway,” Noel tried to explain again. He was interrupted by another hand slamming him against the wall.

“Shut up!” the man on his right said.

“Who’s got a bracelet?” someone else asked.

Noel was seized by the shoulders, spun half around, while someone else grabbed his hands together. He felt something cold, then heard a click. He was handcuffed.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “You don’t understand. I didn’t do anything. I was just riding by and saw it.”

“Dry this one off till we get back,” the cold-voiced man said. “Where’s medical?”

“Outside already,” someone answered. “Everyone’s out.”

“Get the Fisherman,” the cold-voiced man said. “And dry this one off.”

“Come on,” someone else urged. “Let’s go!”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Noel protested. The glass door slammed and he was dragged back by the hands, then pushed in another direction so hard he almost fell. As he was getting to his feet, a heavy door slammed shut inches away. In front of him, he could see a tiny barred window.

“But I didn’t do anything. I was just riding by and saw it happen and went to help him.”

“Sure, buddy,” a flat, older voice replied from the other side of the barred window. “Haven’t you heard? They closed the highway.”

“I was on a bike. I was riding a bike. It’s at the warehouse right now!” he shouted, but he could hear the man’s footsteps receding and a minute later, another sound: a door closing. He was alone.

He inched about in the murky darkness. This must be a cell. Not very large. Damp. Cold. Jesus! Here’s a case study on the inadvisability of helping people in trouble. No wonder no one else did.

He was shivering, and had to use the wall to nudge up his sweatshirt hood. That was marginally better. But his breath still frosted. His eyes were acclimated to the light now, but there wasn’t much to see, just a bare cell with two metal shelves long enough and barely wide enough to hold a man.

This is crazy, he told himself. Crazier than seeing someone being stabbed. But they’d find the man and come back and release him. Realize he was trying to help, then let him go.

After what seemed an interminably long time, he heard noises in the corridor. They were returning. Good. Now they’d let him go. Good thing. He was freezing here.

The cell door opened with a clang, and several men entered.

“Will he be all right?” Noel asked.

“As all right as ground round,” the cold-voiced man said, and Noel felt himself lifted off his feet and slammed against the wall.

He was held there, shaken, pummeled. Questions came fast and he could hardly get his breath to answer them.

“Who was with you?” the cold voice asked.

“No one. I was alone.”

He was punched in the stomach. “Who was with you?”

“I was riding by on my bike. I was alone.”

“Let me do the asking,” someone said, shoving in front of the other man. “I was in ’Nam. We had methods.” With one hand he held Noel’s head back, against the wall, his eyes glittering very close to Noel’s. “Now, I’m going to ask you some questions, and for every wrong answer, you’re going to have your head bounced off this wall. You hear?”

“No, please. I was alone. I was trying to help him,” Noel begged. “I was riding by and saw them attack him.”

“How did you know who he was?”

“I didn’t. I don’t.”

“Hey,” someone else said, “let me ask. I’ll get it out of him.”

Noel felt another punch, hard in his ribs.

“Let me,” a new voice said. He was punched again, lower.

They were crowding him, all of them pushing and trying to hit him, shifting positions to get at him. They were going to kill him. Kill him here in this freezing cell.

“No! Let *me* ask him!” The voice came from behind them. Instantly all of them stopped.

“It’s the Fisherman,” someone muttered. They all moved away from Noel.

“That’s right,” the new voice said. It was authoritative, slightly accented. “Now suppose you tell me what all this ruckus in the dark is about?”

“They got Kansas,” someone said.

“What happened?” the man they called the Fisherman asked.

“Looks like a dozen meth freaks with a case of broken glass got at him.”

“Bad?”

“Dead.”

“Two,” Noel offered. “There were two of them. I saw.”

“And you were one of them,” one man said, punching Noel in the side.

“Who’s he?” the Fisherman asked.

“He came snooping around here. Said Kansas sent him.”

“Leave him alone. Get some lights on. What is this, a medieval torture chamber? Go on. Back to your posts. All of you. Out.”

Noel felt himself being lifted up against the wall.

“Don’t hit me,” he pleaded. “I didn’t do anything.”

A light came on in the room, blinding Noel for an instant.

“Out, I said,” the Fisherman repeated. “All of you. Mack, stay at the door. I want to talk to him.”

Noel was shivering now, sore all over from the assault. The one man remaining in the cell took him gently by the shoulders and sat him down on the metal shelf.

“I didn’t do anything,” Noel said. “I was just trying to help him. Why were they hurting me?”

“Because they’re angry one of their friends is dead. You’re all they had to vent their feelings on.”

“But I was trying to help him.”

“Just rest awhile,” the man said. Then: “You cold?”

“Yes.”

“Mack, get a blanket.”

A blanket was brought in. The Fisherman arranged it around Noel’s shoulders, then sat down on the opposite metal shelf.

“Now relax a bit, young man, then I want you to tell me how you came here.”

“He told me to get help across the street,” Noel said.

“I see,” he said, sounding unconvinced. “Go on. I’m waiting.”

“I thought this building was closed,” Noel said.

“It is. Tell me everything that happened.”

“I was riding my bike on the elevated highway,” Noel began, gaining confidence now that he wasn’t shivering anymore.

As he talked, he looked over the man they had called the Fisherman. He was fifty-five or sixty years old. Middle-sized, he seemed solid looking, although with the dark gabardine overcoat and heavy woolen pants tucked into rubber galoshes, it was difficult to ascertain how heavy, how solid he was. He was bareheaded, and his hair was thinning but ungrayed brown, slightly creased all around as though he had been wearing a hat and had taken it off. A square, clean-shaven face, with thickish lips, heavy jowls, slightly reddish skin, as though from drinking, with a large, fleshy aquiline nose. The brow was strong, squarish, the eyebrows thick and bushy. Only his eyes were a soft, doelike brown, betraying the easier treatment Noel had just received at his hands. Altogether an authoritative man: the boss. Noel trusted him, as much as he could trust anyone in this absurd situation. He would not hurt Noel, nor let him be hurt.

“That’s all he said, to come here?” the Fisherman asked when Noel was done.

“He was having trouble breathing,” Noel said. “His voice was very hoarse. I guess it was too hard for him to talk anymore so he squeezed my hand, and I asked if he meant directly across West Street, and he squeezed it to say yes. That’s the only reason I came here, because I promised him. I was going to the police station.”

“That makes sense. Nothing else? He said nothing else? No names?”

“No. No names. But when he was being stabbed he pleaded with them to stop, naturally. When I found him, he must have thought I was one of them returning, that’s when he said he didn’t mean it.”

“He didn’t mean it?” the Fisherman asked.

“That’s what he said.” Noel could hear the broken wheezing again, see the man’s bloody facelessness. This man, the “Fisherman,” inspired confidence, and Noel suddenly blurted out, “Perhaps it’s better he died.”

“Why?” There was a threat in the word, the first time Noel had felt hostility from his questioner.

“I just mean he was cut up so badly. His face was... I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. What would he look like if he lived?”

The Fisherman stared gloomily at the floor.

“Do you think he’d been stabbed in the lungs?” Noel wondered. “Could that be why he wheezed so badly?”

“More than likely. Was his throat cut?”

“I don’t know. It was just blood from his forehead on down. They’d stabbed everywhere. Everywhere. They wouldn’t stop,” Noel said, seeing again those deadly pointed shadows on the wall.

Someone tapped on the cell door and the Fisherman signaled him to come in. It was a tall, youngish man with a heavy beard, in denims and a forest-green ski parka.

“We found this in the room with Kansas,” he said, in that same cold voice of the man who had so cruelly interrogated Noel. In the dark, he had seemed much older.

He handed Noel’s flashlight to the Fisherman.

“That’s mine.”

“It was wedged into a wall,” the man reported, ignoring Noel. “Just above eye level.”

“I put it there to see,” Noel explained. “He was behind some doors. I needed both hands to move them.”

“You see any doors?” the Fisherman asked.

“Three of them. On the floor. The light was out when we got there. Not burned out either.”

“I shut it off,” Noel said. “I couldn’t bear to look at him while I talked to him. I got nauseous.”

“Yeah,” the younger man said, “either that, or you turned it off after you were sure he was wasted.”

“He was alive when I left that room!”

“That’s enough,” the Fisherman said. “Get back over there and go over that place. All of it. I want answers.” The young man turned, glared at Noel, then walked out. “By the way,” the Fisherman stopped him, “is there a bicycle there?”

“A ten-speed,” Noel said. “Atala Grand Prix.”

“It’s there.”

“Bring it here,” the Fisherman said. “Go on. Go. Comb that place.”

When the man had gone, the Fisherman turned to Noel. "What were you doing up on the highway?"

"I ride it every morning. For exercise."

"Why so early?"

"I have early classes. Sometimes nine, today at eight."

"Where?"

"New York University. The Washington Square campus. I teach sociology. Social change in action, inner-city problems. A basic penology course."

"So you were riding by as usual and heard a scream?"

"And saw the light."

"I thought you said the flashlight was yours?"

"It is. I saw flickering light. One of them must have been holding a cigarette lighter or something. I threw the flashlight in to scare them off. I told them I was coming in, too. But I couldn't jump it."

The Fisherman listened, then stood up and went to the cell door.

Noel panicked, thinking he would be left there, or the other men called in again. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Why shouldn't I believe you," the man said, not hiding his disgust. "It's the same old story."

He talked in a low voice to someone outside the cell, then came back with a pad and ballpoint pen. "Give me your name, address, and phone number. Also where you work."

"I can't. My hands..." Noel turned to show them manacled.

The handcuff key was found, and Noel wrote down the required information. "Here's your flashlight, Mr...Cummings, is it?" he asked, reading the paper.

"I just wish I had hit one of them when I threw it. That might have been one or two minutes less for them to stab. He might have lived then, mightn't he?"

"Why bother thinking about what might have been?" The Fisherman led Noel out of the cell, through the corridor, and into the little foyer outside the glass door. No one else appeared. "I have to apologize for the others. Sometimes they're like animals," he said, taking Noel's hand and shaking it.

Noel took the hand, shook it, looked into the man's sad brown eyes, and said he understood. He was halfway out the metal door when he had a thought. "Shouldn't the police be notified?"

"We are the police," the Fisherman said, closing the glass door with a click.