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Written by Jack O'Connell

Published by No Exit Press

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QUINSIGAMOND NOVEL #1

JACK O'CONNELL

BOX NINE

"A BRILLIANTLY TUNED, MESMERIZING LABYRINTH OF A QUASI-REAL WORLD AS ONLY A MASTER ARTIST COULD DRAW IT... STUNNINGLY ORIGINAL"

JAMES ELLROY



This edition published in the UK in 2015
by No Exit Press, an imprint of
Oldcastle Books Ltd, PO Box 394,
Harpenden, Herts, AL5 1XJ, UK

noexit.co.uk
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN
978-1-84344-647-7 (Print)
978-1-84243-977-7 (Epub)
978-1-84243-978-4(Kindle)
978-1-84344-648-4 (Pdf)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Avocet Typeset, Somerton, Somerset TA11 6RT
in 11.25pt Minion
Printed in the UK by 4Edge Ltd, Hockley, Essex

1

Talk to God. Clean up your slate. The Rapture is coming and your time is running out. Mary is doing all she can to hold back the hand of her son. All but the elect will be chastised.

Lenore lowers the orange foam headphones to her neck and shuts off the radio. Ray, the born-again Nazi from WQSG, has kicked into another screaming rant, another variation on his normal tirade against communism, Satan, and Mayor Welby's latest budget proposals.

She shouldn't have brought the radio in the first place. It's too distracting, a piece of equipment without a purpose. But the thought of spending another night listening to Zarelli debate divorce was too much. It exceeded her tolerance level. She had a hunch things could get ugly if she didn't take some kind of preventive action.

But listening to Ray rasp and suck air till he's overcome and close to vomiting is no solution.

So she sends her partner, Zarelli, across the street early, tells him to look for any surprises, and attempts to concentrate on her food. She's eating some kind of rice and raw tuna dish out of a carton. It's cold and she has no idea whether it's supposed to be served this way or if Zarelli was just suckered again, handed a cold carton of last night's house special out of a kitchen doorway. She can picture a trio of teenage Chinese dishwashers, soaked aprons sticking to their legs, pocketing Zarelli's money and laughing for the balance of their shift.

It's the Monday before Thanksgiving and Lenore is in the basement of a slaughterhouse called Brasilia Beef, sitting on a

splintery shipping crate in the boiler room, hidden behind a double oil tank and an enormous, ancient monster of a cast-iron furnace. This is her third night in the basement. She's listening for sounds, distant voices. She's anticipating the noise of a business transaction, a semi-friendly deal, earnest handshakes over platters of marinated monkey livers and shooters of bourbon.

Across the street from the slaughterhouse is the Plain Jar Café, a new Laotian bar and grill. The place is owned by a new player that everyone calls Cousin Mo. It may or may not be a fresh money bin for a new company setting up in the Park. So far there's been no way to cross-check this information.

Zarelli is sitting at the bar of the Plain Jar. Zarelli's supposed to be sipping club sodas, but when he dropped off her supper, Lenore could smell booze. Now she's starting to think she should have been the one inside the bar. But Zarelli's so bad with the equipment, what he calls *the machines,* and lately he's taken to dozing on stakeout.

Earlier in the night, they managed to wire Zarelli with a voice-activated mike. The tech guys promised Lenore it was the latest thing. She didn't bother to tell them that the equipment she's most worried about is her partner. Right now, Cousin Mo and his meatboys could be sacrificing infants at the other end of the bar and Zarelli would talk right through it, choke himself spitting out his newest jokes about feminists and Orientals.

She pictures him now, her partner and lover, elbows planted on the bar, a long teak slab resting on a pedestal that's hand-carved to look like a parade of elephants, all attached, tail to trunk. She sees him fire a punch line to the barkeep, then fit his mouth around another Genesee cream ale. As always, he's dressed in this sport coat that might as well have orange neon across the back blinking *I'm a cop, I'm a cop.*

She looks down at her own lap and has to smile. She's got on the leather miniskirt that Zarelli's so hot for and a pink tank top under a denim jacket. It's a challenge finding the right outfit,

hitting the perfect note between enough sleaze and not too much theatrics. Last night, sitting on the same crates, Zarelli said to her, "Jesus, you were born to wear clothes like that." She responded by throwing a water chestnut at him. She caught him in the eye. He said it stung all night and she said, "It's just a reminder not to be stupid."

But she knows no amount of eye-poking will help. Zarelli's a stupid guy. It's a fact of nature. Nothing can be done.

The problem with dressing like a hooker, she decides, is that there's no place to put the gun. You can tape a razor up high on the thigh, then spend the rest of the night hesitant about sitting down, a little worried that the only blood you draw might be your own. And besides, down in the Park a razor just isn't going to be enough. In fact, at this time of the night in Bangkok Park, a razor is probably worse than nothing at all. It's all taunt and threat and no backup. No delivery. So she's got a small .38 jammed into the pocket of the denim jacket.

She puts down her carton and fits the black department headphones over her ears. How many nights has she wasted just like this, alone in some basement or attic, waiting hours for some word, some information, a clear sentence from the mouth of another rookie broker overstimulated by speed and the legend of Cortez? Every other week it seems, some new player moves into the Park and wants to kick Cortez off the top of the hill. Last week, Zarelli gave her five-to-one odds that Cousin Mo would be dead before he could take delivery on his new Mercedes. Lenore shook off the bet.

Lenore has her own theories about Cortez, the king of Bangkok Park. She's got ideas that don't jibe with the legend, hunches she won't share anymore. Everyone in the department, Miskewitz included, thinks Cortez is headed for the Cartel Hall of Fame. Lenore thinks this may not be the case, that there's both more and less to Cortez than the current myth allows for.

Through the headphones comes the sound of a door opening

and a volley of unintelligible talk interspersed with a high-pitched laugh. Lenore puts her hands to her ears and wishes she'd listened to that "Intro to Laotian" cassette she bought mail-order. Clearly there's someone in the bar besides Zarelli who enjoys a good, filthy joke.

The sound quality surprises her. She'll have to pat a few backs tomorrow. Usually, she's trying to pick incriminating syllables out of a garbled hiss of grunts and coughs. Tonight, the words come pretty sharp and clear, and she can't translate even one into English. She thinks irony should be added to death and taxes as one more certainty in life.

"What's this? Sit? You want me to sit down?"

It's Zarelli's voice. He's giving his nervousness away like free advice.

"Is there a language problem here? I assumed we'd all speak English. Am I wrong here?"

Cousin Mo speaks English like the Queen. But he probably thinks this is a smart business tactic, rattling the customer. First sign of a short-term player. Cortez will eat this guy inside a month.

"Is there any chance of getting a translator?"

The whole room laughs.

"I say something funny?"

Finally, Cousin Mo speaks:

"Could you do me a favor, Mr. Watt?"

"A favor?"

"A very simple request."

"Yeah. Request?"

"Could you please unbutton your shirt?"

"My shirt?"

"If you would indulge me."

Lenore pulls the headphones off and starts running to the street, thinking, *Zarelli should come with a warning.* She stops herself from bolting into the Plain Jar, looks down the length of

Voegelin Street, and sees two girls in front of El Topo. She looks to the doorway of the Plain Jar and makes her decision, runs to El Topo, and pulls a wad of bills from her jeans jacket pocket.

One of the girls is Hispanic, the other a tall Grace Jones type, all cheekbone and leg. The Hispanic girl is shaking her head, saying, "No, honey, you want Melinda," as Lenore counts off two hundred dollars in tens and twenties. She pulls off her wristwatch, holds it out, and says, "Look, can't argue. This is a real Movado. You can have it and the cash. I need you for ten minutes. You won't even have to take off your shoes."

They walk into the Plain Jar without looking at the bartender and head straight for the stairway. At the top landing is a dim corridor that breaks right and left. At the right-hand end, a meatboy in a bad-fitting suit sits on a barstool before a closed door. Lenore starts an even march toward him, as he rises up off the stool and holds a flat palm up like a traffic cop. She responds with a classic index finger to the lips, a *shush* to an excited child.

The guy puts his hand inside his suit coat and leaves it there as Lenore leans up to his ear and whispers, "Welcome wagon gift from your new neighbor," then she gives his lobe a small lick.

He scrunches his brow to show confusion, but doesn't speak.

Lenore smiles, indicates the girls, who've fallen in behind her, and says, "A little something Mr. Cortez sent over. For the boss. For Cousin Mo. You know—*welcome to the neighborhood*."

He stares at her for a few seconds, holds up a finger to indicate *wait a second,* then gives two knocks on the door and without waiting for an answer turns the knob and sticks his head inside, up to his steroid-enhanced neck. There are some low, guttural barks back and forth and before the meatboy can extract his head and tell her to wait at the bar, Lenore checks her good shoulder into his back and he falls forward onto his knees, throwing the door wide open. Zarelli is on his knees in the center of the room. Lenore jumps over the meatboy, draws out the .38, pulls down

the hammer, grabs Zarelli in a headlock, and pushes the barrel up against his temple.

Suddenly, everyone in the room has a gun drawn, and Cousin Mo clearly isn't sure what's happening. Lenore knows that what she's about to do probably doesn't make much sense, but she's betting that fact won't dawn on anyone, Zarelli included, for another five minutes. She speaks fast, directly to the boss.

"Don't. This guy's a cop, for Christ sake."

Cousin Mo raises both his hands in a weird, nervous, birdlike gesture that seems to restrain his associates.

Lenore tries for a little arrogance. "You should really learn who it is that you're doing business with, my friend."

A long minute passes while Cousin Mo stares and thinks, then he says, "And you are?"

"I'm an employee of your new neighbor, Mr. Cortez. Owns Hotel Penumbra. You might have heard. You now owe him a favor."

Cousin Mo comes forward to his desk. The meatboy is up, dishonored, shamefaced. The guy next to Cousin Mo head-signals him away and the kid closes the office door behind himself.

"Why would my neighbor be so concerned about my welfare?" Cousin Mo asks.

Lenore instinctively tightens her grip around Zarelli's neck, possibly cutting off some air. She gives a sigh and says, "I'm sure he has his reasons. He'll probably be letting you know what they are very soon."

Cousin Mo looks down at Zarelli and then back up at Lenore.

"He's as filthy as they come," she says, "but he's on Mr. Cortez's leash."

"Are you saying Mr. Cortez wants to discuss a deal?"

She loosens up on Zarelli, steps backward, and pulls him to his feet. "I'm saying we're leaving now. And I'm saying you should show a little more discretion in the future. And I'm saying you may be getting a call soon. Any problems with that?"

Cousin Mo looks like he doesn't know whether he's had his ego stroked or his shoes spit on. He looks around at his men, then lowers his voice and says, "I understand."

Lenore nods, puts the gun back in her pocket, lifts the back flap of Zarelli's sport coat, and grabs hold of his belt.

"Someone wants to talk with you," she says to Zarelli's back. "You try to bolt on me and I'll shoot right through your spine."

She starts to move for the door.

Cousin Mo says, "Thank Mr. Cortez for me."

She marches Zarelli out in front of her, a sweaty, shallow-breathing shield, all the way back to her Barracuda. They don't speak until they cross out of the Park, at which point Zarelli smashes his fist into the dash and says, "You put it up to my fucking head—"

She cuts him off and yells back, "Who knows what Mo would have done if I hadn't come in. He's untested. He could have done anything—"

"—my fucking head. Right here." He points to his temple with his index and middle fingers.

"I had to shock them," she yells.

"Shock them? My heart. My goddamn heart."

She pulls the Barracuda into the curb with a screech, jams it into park, and they start to slap each other around the upper torso. This is not the first time this has happened. Things escalate and Lenore loses herself, makes a fist, and comes up under Zarelli's jaw.

He drops his offense, takes his face in his hands, yelling, "The bridge, oh no, the new bridge."

Lenore sinks back in her seat, punches the steering wheel.

"Is it the bridge? Did I break it?" she asks grudgingly.

He doesn't answer right away, sits there stroking his jaw like a shaving cream commercial.

A few minutes go by. Finally, he says, "You know, word's going to get back to Cortez."

She says, "Let me worry about Cortez."

There's another pause and he adds, "Thanks for getting me out of there."

"Sorry about the gun. I probably shouldn't have pulled back the hammer."

"You had to shock them. You had to move quickly."

"I made a decision. I acted on it."

He slides a hand over onto her thigh.

She shakes her head no, shifts back into drive.

"We've got a briefing in about five hours."

He makes a face that says *please,* changes it, pitifully, into *I beg you.*

Lenore stomps the gas and thinks, *I should have popped the weasel when I had the chance.*

2

After she dumps Zarelli, Lenore cruises home to the green duplex. There's no chance of sleep, so she takes a cold shower, pops a hit of crank, and sits on the end of her bed, naked, pumping ten-pound weights and watching metal videos with the sound off. She's waiting for signs of life from her brother Ike, next door.

Lenore lives on the other side of his apartment, in the other half of the green duplex. The arrangement has worked out pretty well, all things considered. They often work different hours, but manage to have meals together a few times a week. Ike thinks their parents would be pleased to know this. They've been dead just over seven years now. They died within six months of one another. Ma went first, a coronary. Dad followed in the fall with a lethal embolism in the front of the brain. A month after the estate was settled—there wasn't much, a small savings account, and the house and car—Lenore and he went in halves on the duplex. She'd gotten a promotion on the force, and things down at the post office looked stable enough for him. They took a twenty-year fixed mortgage and moved in in the spring.

When they do eat together, it's Ike who does the cooking. Lenore, like Pa, enjoys eggs and sausages. Anytime, day or night. Ike tries to warn her about cholesterol and fat intake, but he can't talk to Lenore about crap like that. She takes her life in her hands, and in a big way, like three or four times a week. Last year, down the projects, Zarelli kicks a door in on this upstart smack dealer and Lenore leaps into his pigsty, all pumped up for a big-time collar. But the guy's been tipped, he's expecting them and he's ready around a corner of the apartment, with a gun to Lenore's

head. Before Zarelli can move, the dealer pulls the trigger, but, thank God, the gun is this piece of garbage, unregistered and off the street from, who knows, like Taiwan or someplace, and it explodes in his hands—puts the bullet intended for Lenore into the dealer's own throat.

How do you warn someone about the danger of sausage after a day like that?

A guy on the TV screen with semi-permed, peroxide-blond hair grabs his own behind and makes a face like he's in agony. Lenore gets a kick out of this. Nobody could be more shocked than herself that she's become addicted to heavy-metal music. And like most addictions, she's attempted to hide this new habit from everyone she knows. She thinks she's been fairly successful in this attempt, but it's difficult since one of the inherent factors, and, yes, attractions, of heavy metal, at least for Lenore, is its deafening volume.

She thinks that possibly Zarelli is responsible, at least to some degree, for this pathetic love of the screeching sounds that issue from bands with names like Metallica and Iron Maiden. Here's Zarelli, at twenty-eight, two years younger than Lenore, and he's got this big thing for Tony Bennett. Before Zarelli, Lenore couldn't have named one Tony Bennett song besides "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." But when they started seeing each other, it seemed like she was slowly being indoctrinated in this Cult of Bennett. It got a little depressing. Zarelli drives this old 1972 Lincoln Continental that has the seats all ripped up from his kids and his cats. And the car still has this horrible eight-track cartridge player that should be in a museum. The back seat of the Lincoln was always filled with these old Tony Bennett eight-track tapes, those fat mothers that often cut a song off in the middle of a lyric, then picked it up a few seconds later when it clicked over to the next track. For some reason, Lenore came to despise eight-track tapes. They came to symbolize both inefficiency and obsolescence. She thinks that if you want to really teach school

kids the way of the world, the laws of evolution and adaptability, show them an old, label-peeling eight-track of *Tony Bennett Sings Your Old World Favorites.*

Lenore thinks that she became addicted to heavy metal as a reaction to Zarelli's passion for Bennett. To the best of her ability to date it, the problem began about six months ago, when she and Zarelli were hitting the hottest stretch of their ridiculous romance. One night before bed, she changed the station on her alarm clock to wake herself up with something loud and thrashing. Then she began picking up some new cassettes for her own car, mainstream metal like Twisted Sister and Mötley Crüe. One night last spring, she's at the minimart leafing through magazines to bring on a dull stakeout, and unexplainably, like she was acting on subliminal orders from someone else, she buys *Metal Mania Monthly*, then reads the damn thing cover-to-cover. Within weeks she's sending for these sick catalogues from the classifieds in the back and ordering garage-band cassettes through the mail, stuff recorded on independent labels by bands too far over the line for big corporate companies to touch. They've got names like Severed Artery, and Aryan Warlocks, and Puss and the Gash. Awful stuff. They sing songs, in these weird and ironic yelling-falsetto voices, with titles like "Tonight I Killed Her Parents" and "I Sold You to a Guy Named Phil." She keeps all these tapes in a bottom drawer behind her turtleneck sweaters.

Lenore thinks that no one, not even Ike, has any idea how strange she really is. But *she's* always known it. The feeling stretches back to her earliest memories. Possibly, she thinks, her father suspected it, maybe had a hunch as to some really abnormal brain activity going on in the skull of his female child. She deduces this simply from the occasional look she'd find on his face over the dinner table, a combination of curiosity and fear and confusion. Lately, she's begun to wonder if he suspected his daughter's weirdness only because it ran through his own thought patterns.

Just once she'd have liked to see that look on Zarelli's face. Anytime—sitting in his stupid Lincoln in front of some smack house down in Bangkok Park, eating the veal at Fiorello's where everyone knows him, going at it in the motel room down Route 61 —just once she'd have liked to see that he had a doubt, a vague hunch, a moment of terror regarding her, indicating the fact that he knew nothing about the way she thought or felt or why she continued to work unbelievably hard at a pathetic and ultimately useless job.

Zarelli is a guy who's done pretty well in the nine years with the force. He's never been seriously hurt, never involved himself in any real, over-the-line corruption, kissed enough ass to move up to detective but still kept some camaraderie with most of the bowling team. Zarelli, she knows, is in narcotics because, oddly, it's the department in which he can define himself and keep his compass straight. This isn't to say there aren't corrupting temptations in narcotics. Just the opposite: there are probably more opportunities to go bad in narc than anywhere else. But in narcotics, Zarelli can think and function like a ten-year-old. He can rely on the fact that all the importers, and dealers, and junkies he moves through every day are monsters. Evil. Dark. Bad. And since he is their opposition, he's goodness and light incarnate. He's the other side of the fence. Society will back him up on this. Public opinion will comply with this view absolutely.

Lenore spends all her time as an actress. She feigns belief in this same, simple moral code. Us against them, white hats against black hats. In actuality, she's not so much repulsed by this code, as she is incapable, even for the briefest of moments, of taking it seriously. Of even considering it. It rings so false. It falls in the realm of fantasy.

Not even Ike knows the real reason Lenore does her job. The real reason, or at least the best symbol of the real reason, hangs at this moment inside a leather shoulder holster, from a hook on the inside of her bedroom closet door. Lenore's weapon of choice

has become, sadly, something of a cliché. She finds this annoying but not too important. Let the gangs of the Hollywood brain-dead trivialize and prostitute and unintentionally parody one of the finest examples of craftsmanship and quality she knows about. Just keep them far away from Quinsigamond and the eleven-inch length of her Smith & Wesson.

She's had experience with a variety of both handguns and, lately, more than ever, assault rifles. And she owns a small collection—a Parabellum automatic, a Gewehr 43, an original 1921 John T. Thompson .45 caliber submachine gun, all of which she keeps perfectly maintained and some of which get exercised at the shooting bunker. Her most recent purchase was an Uzi. But for reasons that have to do with instinct and aura, the gun she almost always takes to work is her .357 Magnum Model 27.

She knows about her weapons with a degree of scholarship that makes her a "buff," in the same way other people bone up obsessively on the Civil War or old Corvettes. Ask Lenore over a cup of coffee about the Magnum. She'll nod and start to talk slowly, in a regulated voice that almost gives away its excitement just by the extent of its suppression. She'll forget the time and infect you with her competence on the subject. She'll start in 1935, the year the weapon was introduced, developed by a pistol specialist named Elmer Keith and supported by Major Daniel B. Wesson himself. They used a .44 target model frame, then made the barrel 222.25mm long. The caliber of .357 was used to set the gun apart from all other ordinary .38s. She'll tell you how, at first, the gun was only available by special order, but demand forced it into general production. And how, because of World War II, production had to be suspended in 1941. By that time 5,500 had been forged. Luckily, she'll explain, production started up again after the Axis powers had been slapped down. Her particular gun was built in '74. It's got the shorter 3.5-inch barrel and weighs about two and a half pounds. It's got a standard six-shot cylinder and a rate of fire of 12 rpm. The last statistic she'll

end on, the one she'll let you ponder and hope that you'll attach a vivid image to, is muzzle velocity. She might ask you to guess this factor and swig down the last of her bitter coffee. And when you admit your inability to do so, she'll nod again, bite her bottom lip for just a second, stare into your eyes, and spill it: *One thousand four hundred and fifty freaking feet per second, my friend, with a striking energy of nine hundred and seventy-two joules. It will detach an arm completely off a shoulder. And I ought to know . . .*

Lenore believes in this gun in the manner that others believe in an ancient dogma, or a concept of family or love.

Lenore adores the fact that this gun is so real, so solid and fixable, locatable in a world that seems to be more transient, transparent, and decomposing every day.

Lenore no longer believes in God. She does not believe in an afterlife. She does not believe in some fixed code of divinely transmitted morality. She does not believe in turning the other cheek. She does not believe that the meek will inherit the earth. She now believes in power and persistence. In logic and rational thought. In seizing what you need without regard to the effect of your actions upon others. She hides these beliefs out of what she feels to be wise self-preservation, out of the fact that if others knew her true convictions, it would become pretty difficult to live the way she wants.

It's only in relation to her gun that she allows herself to expose and vent the certainties at the core of her brain, the ones she thinks her father had nightmares about. Lenore has killed one person—a twenty-two-year-old Colombian who fired a shotgun at Zarelli from the shattered back window of a speeding Trans Am—and wounded three others in varying degrees of severity, including blowing the full right arm off a longtime smack broker from down the projects who made the mistake of charging her with a razor in a dark stairwell. In each of those incidents, Lenore has felt a burst of emotion that she can't put a name to, that has no definition in the heart of the average person. She

approximates it every time she pulls out her weapon and draws down on a suspect without firing. It's not the same as actually pulling the trigger, but it's a step in the right direction and more pleasing than frustrating.

But on those occasions when she has pulled the trigger and sent aluminum or lead barreling into the flesh and bone of some challenging, but ultimately weaker animal, Lenore feels like she's been momentarily elevated to a state people only dream of. More than anything, she finds it ironic that she ended up a narcotics cop, since the people she's chronically arresting are in search of a similar feeling, but stupidity or bad luck has brought them to smack rather than the gun. If they only had a clue what they could feel like being on the delivery end of a bullet flying sixteen miles a minute, the streets would be pools of blood and toppling bodies. The air would be continuously filled with duos of muzzleblast and human scream. She finds it funny and appealing to think that just five seconds in the basement shooting range down at the station is about a thousand times better than the best moment she ever had in bed with Zarelli.

Over the past few years, maybe even going back as far as the death of her parents, Lenore has tried to find words that she could hang on her beliefs, her system of looking at the world and her place in it, her particular philosophy. She's never read as many books as Ike—Ike's a real reader, loves those mysteries—but she manages to dip into a dozen or more a year. She drops into the library every couple of weeks and checks something out, usually some fat book she can read chunks of, maybe an anthology of essays or something. Unlike her twin brother, she sticks with nonfiction, often philosophy and history. She knows she's smart enough so that, given enough time and persistence, she can get a handle on almost any line of thought.

What she's discovered in the course of her reading is that though many people have come close to her vision, no one's really hit the bull's-eye. She spent a couple of years on Nietzsche,

boned up on a lot of secondary material, even for a time kept a small notebook to clarify positions and meanings. He still holds a warm, important place in her heart, but she feels like she somehow slid past him, as though some hidden factor—her sex, her language, the century she's living in—has forced them to part like young and bittersweet lovers.

She had a fling with Darwin that she's happy about, but which faded more rapidly than she would have bet. She tried Hegel and got bogged down, found him a little bloodless. She went through a series of liaisons with a parade of lesser, or at least less familiar, names. Sorel, Péguy, Lagardelle. Machiavelli looked like he could be a lifetime match, but last year she came to the realization that her search for a past correlation to her own system was a pathetic one. The thing to do was simply to act purely within that system. Act was the key word. Action over thought. The justification for her life could be found in the rush of feeling that lingered for a few minutes after she walked out of the shooting bunker.

Over a strong black coffee last week, coming home after a forty-eight-hour dead-end shift, she daydreamed that if only the technology existed, her brain could be monitored to find out exactly what happened at the moment she squeezed on the trigger of the Magnum and the bullet exploded out the barrel and into the body of some panicking importer. And that if it could be determined exactly what kind of chemical got secreted, just what synapse got fired, then the process could be synthesized so that she could make it happen at will. She smiled at the thought, thinking that there was probably no way that her body could really tolerate that kind of ongoing stimulation for any extended period, but that even if the feeling proved fatal, it would be the best of all possible ways to die.

For a while, after she first made detective, Lenore was the only woman in the narcotics department. This was before Peirce, and long before Shaw. Because of this, she'd often be the first person inserted into a new investigation. She could play the new

hooker in town so well that Zarelli used to say to her, "I don't know, you make me wonder." So she logged a lot of those first couple of plainclothes years, out on Goulden Avenue, jammed into imitation-leather mini-skirts, these neon-red or lime-green cheap satin halter tops, and break-your-ankles six-inch stiletto heels. Today she would say that she knows the residents and practitioners and hawkers and brokers and generally bent mothers of the Goulden Ave block, maybe better than any cop in the city.

The area is commonly known as Bangkok Park, probably because the number of vices for sale rivals that of the memorable Asian city. Ninety percent of all the drug trade in Quinsigamond takes place in the square mile of Bangkok Park. And so in this day and age, you have to expect to find extensive, cutting-edge weaponry inside every doorway. It used to be that, just like most other medium-sized urban centers, you only had to worry about distribution and use. But you can't beat back the tide of progress that big drug money will ignite and now there are actually good-sized *production* centers right here in the city. So far, the department has found two. The first was a small lab in the basement of an abandoned brownstone on the corner of Watson and West. But the second was in a bricked-off section of the old Verner Warehouse on Grassman. Richmond and Shaw found it by accident while tailing a courier back from the Zone, Quinsigamond's try at a cut-rate East Village. The courier got wise to them at some point inside Bangkok, and managed to lose them by ducking into the labyrinth of the old Verner building. Richmond and Shaw hunted around, realized they'd blown the tail, but inadvertently stumbled onto this huge state-of-the-art setup. This was top-of-the-line, shipped-in equipment, half a million anyway, and it told Lenore just how bad things were getting.

It was after the Verner discovery that she started thinking about the Uzi.

While everyone else in the department thinks of the job as little more than a futile effort that brings them a paycheck, Lenore pretends she's something of a zealot. She's got everyone convinced that she defines each day as a nonstop conflict between darkness and light, and this is why she's never been hesitant to draw her piece and fire away. Her fake attitude creates a problem for Zarelli, especially since the night she told him to dig some Lifesavers out of her purse and he saw the vial filled with speed. Now, every once in a while, he throws the speed in her face like it was some moral paradox that she's not clear on. In those instances, she grabs control of the argument by letting fly a derisive, condescending laugh and explaining, with a show of really strained patience, that there's no paradox whatsoever, since the issue is one of dominance. She completely dominates the drug and if she ever sees, in the briefest of moments, an erosion of her control, she'll kick and be as clean as day one. Lenore feels this is the core of truth in her act. She monitors herself. She'd like to do without the drug, but life is so goddamn crazy right now. The hours are unreal, and everyone has their limit.

She puts down the weight, leans forward, turns up the volume of the set. A voice yelps, *Get on your knees and give me your money.* She turns off the set, gets up, and moves to the bedroom wall. She presses her ear against it. She can hear the radio next door. Ike is up, probably putting the coffee on.