

Elmore Leonard
Rum Punch



'The crime writer's
crime writer, King of
all he surveys'

Ian Rankin

Rum Punch

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Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA in 1992 by Delacorte Press
First published in Great Britain in 1992 by Viking Books
First published in paperback in 1993 by Penguin Books
First published in Penguin Classics 2025
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Set in 11.25/14pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-75540-2

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For Jackie, Carole, and Larry

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I

Sunday morning, Ordell took Louis to watch the white-power demonstration in downtown Palm Beach.

‘Young skinhead Nazis,’ Ordell said. ‘Look, even little Nazi-girls marching down Worth Avenue. You believe it? Coming now you have the Klan, not too many here today. Some in green, must be the coneheads’ new spring shade. Behind them it looks like some Bikers for Racism, better known as the Dixie Knights. We gonna move on ahead, fight through the crowd here,’ Ordell said, bringing Louis along.

‘There’s a man I want to show you. See who he reminds you of. He told me they’re gonna march up South County and have their show on the steps of the fountain by city hall. You ever see so many police? Yeah, I expect you have. But not all these different uniforms at one time. They mean business too, got their helmets on, their riot batons. Stay on the sidewalk or they liable to hit you over the head. They keeping the street safe for the Nazis.’

People would turn to look at Ordell.

‘Man, all the photographers, TV cameras. This shit is big news, has everybody over here to see it. Otherwise, Sunday, what you have mostly are rich ladies come out with their little doggies to make wee-wee. I mean the doggies, not the ladies.’ A girl in front of them smiled over her shoulder and Ordell said, ‘How you doing, baby? You making it all right?’ He looked past

her now, glanced at Louis to say, 'I think I see him,' and pushed through the crowd to get closer to the street. 'Yeah, there he is. Black shirt and tie? A grown-up skinhead Nazi. I call him Big Guy. He likes that.'

'It's Richard,' Louis said. 'Jesus.'

'Looks just like him, huh? Remember how Richard tripped on all that Nazi shit he had in his house? All his guns? Big Guy's got more of everything.'

Louis said, 'He's serious. Look at him.'

'Wants power. He's a gun freak,' Ordell said. 'You know where you see different ones like him? At the gun shows.'

Ordell let it hang. Louis was supposed to ask Ordell what he was doing at gun shows, but didn't bother. He was busy watching the Nazigirls, all of them skinny rednecks, their hair cut short as boys'.

Ordell said, 'I got something would straighten them out, make their eyes shine.'

He had people looking at him again. Some of them grinned. Louis moved out of the crowd and Ordell had to hurry to catch him. Louis bigger in the shoulders than he used to be, from working out in prison.

'This way,' Ordell said, and they started up South County ahead of the parade, couple of old buddies: Ordell Robbie and Louis Gara, a light-skinned black guy and a dark-skinned white guy, both from Detroit originally where they met in a bar, started talking, and found out they'd both been to Southern Ohio Correctional and had some attitudes in common. Not long after that Louis went to Texas, where he took another fall. Came home and Ordell had a proposition for him: a million-dollar idea to kidnap the wife of a guy making money illegally and hiding it in the Bahamas. Louis said okay. The scheme blew up in their face and Louis said never again. Thirteen years ago . . .

And now Ordell had another scheme. Louis could feel it.

The reason they were here watching skinheads and cone-heads marching up the street.

Ordell said, 'Remember when you come out of Huntsville and I introduced you to Richard?'

Starting to lay it on him. Louis was positive now.

'That's what today reminds me of,' Ordell said. 'I think it's fate working. This time you come out of FSP and I show you Big Guy, like Richard back from the dead.'

'What I remember from that time,' Louis said, 'is wishing I never met Richard. What is it with you and Nazis?'

'They fun to watch,' Ordell said. 'Look at the flag they got, with the boogied-up lightning flash on it. You can't tell if it's suppose to be SS or Captain Marvel.'

Louis said, 'You got another million-dollar idea to try on me?'

Ordell turned from the parade with a cool look, serious. 'You rode in my car. That ain't just an idea, man, it cost real money.'

'What're you showing me this Nazi for?'

'Big Guy? His real name's Gerald. I called him Jerry one time, he about lifted me off the ground, said, "That's not my name, boy." I told him I'm for segregation of the races, so he thinks I'm okay. Met him one time, was at a gun show.'

Throwing that one at Louis again.

Louis said, 'You didn't answer my question. What're we doing here?'

'I told you. See who Big Guy reminds you of. Listen, there's somebody else you won't believe who's down here. This one a woman. Guess who it is.'

Louis shook his head. 'I don't know.'

Ordell grinned. 'Melanie.'

'You're kidding.'

Another one from that time thirteen years ago.

'Yeah, we kep' in touch. Melanie phone me one day . . . She's in a place I have up at Palm Beach Shores. You want to see her?'

‘She lives with you?’

‘I’m there on and off, you might say. We can drop by this afternoon, you want. Melanie’s still a fine big girl, only bigger. Man, I’m telling you, fate’s been working its ass off, getting us all together here. What I’m thinking of doing, introduce Big Guy to Melanie.’

Leading up to something. Louis could feel it.

‘For what?’

‘Just see what happens. I think it’d be a kick. You know Melanie, she hasn’t changed any. Can you see her with this asshole Nazi?’

Ordell acting like a kid with a secret, dying to tell it, but wanting to be asked.

He said to Louis, ‘You don’t know where in the fuck you’re at, do you? Keep coming out of prison and starting over. I see you got rid of your mustache, have some gray in your curly hair. You staying in shape, that’s good.’

‘What’d you do,’ Louis said, ‘get your hair straightened? You used to have a ‘fro.’

‘Got to keep in style, man.’

Ordell ran his hand carefully over his hair, feeling the hard set, ran it back to his pigtail braid and curled it between his fingers, fooling with it as he said, ‘No, I don’t imagine you know what you want.’

Louis said, ‘You don’t, huh?’

‘Giving me the convict stare. Well, you learned *something* in the joint,’ Ordell said. ‘Otherwise, Louis, that shirt you have on, you look like you pump more gas than iron. Ought to have “Lou” on the pocket there. Clean the windshield, check the oil . . .’

Smiled then to show he was kidding. Ordell in linen and gold, orange crew-neck sweater and white slacks, the gold shining on his neck, his wrist, and two of his fingers.

He said, ‘Come on, let’s go see the show.’

Louis said, 'You're the show.'

Ordell smiled and moved his shoulders like a fighter. They walked up behind the crowd that was held back by yellow police tape cordoning off the steps in front of the fountain. A young Nazi up there was speaking as the others stood facing the crowd in their supremacy outfits. Ordell started to push through to get closer and Louis took hold of his arm.

'I'm not going in there.'

Ordell turned to look at him. 'It ain't the same as on the yard, man. Nobody has a shank on them.'

'I'm not going in there with *you*.'

'Well, that's cool,' Ordell said. 'We don't have to.'

They found a place where they could see enough of the young Nazi. He was shouting, 'What do we want?' And his buddies and the Nazigirls and the rest of the cuckoos up there would shout back, 'White power!' They kept it up until the young Nazi finished and shouted, 'One day the world will know Adolf Hitler was right!' That got voices from the crowd shouting back at him, calling him stupid and a retard. He yelled at the crowd, 'We're going to reclaim this land for our people!' his young Nazi voice cracking. And they yelled back, what people was he talking about, assholes like him? A black woman in the crowd said, 'Come on up to Riv'era Beach and say those things, you be dead.' The young skinhead Nazi began screaming 'Sieg heil!' as loud as he could, over and over, and the cuckoos joined in with him, giving the Nazi salute. Now young guys in the crowd were calling them racist motherfuckers, telling them to go home, go on, get out of here, and it looked like the show was over.

Ordell said, 'Let's go.'

They walked over to Ocean Boulevard where they'd left his car, a black Mercedes convertible, with the top down. The time on

the meter had run out and a parking ticket was stuck beneath the windshield wiper on the driver's side. Ordell pulled the ticket out and dropped it in the street. Louis was watching but didn't comment. Didn't say much of anything until they were on the middle bridge heading back to West Palm. Then he started.

'Why'd you want to show me that guy? He call you a n— and you want his legs broken?'

'That payback shit,' Ordell said, 'you must get that from hanging out with the Eytalians. Ain't nothing they like better than paying back. Swear an oath to it.'

'You want to see where I hang out?' Louis said. 'You come to Olive, take a right. Go up to Banyan, used to be First Street, and hang a left.' The next thing Louis was telling him, on Olive now, 'That's the court building up on the right.'

'I know where the courts are at,' Ordell said. He turned onto Banyan and was heading toward Dixie Highway now. Halfway up the block Louis told him to stop.

'Right there, the white building,' Louis said, 'that's where I hang out.'

Ordell turned his head to look across the street at a one-story building, a storefront with MAX CHERRY BAIL BONDS printed on the window.

'You work for a *bail* bondsman? You told me you with some funky insurance company the Eytalians got hold of.'

'Glades Mutual in Miami,' Louis said. 'Max Cherry writes their bonds. I sit in the office – some guy misses his court date, I go get him.'

'Yeah?' That sounded a little better, like Louis was a bounty hunter, went after bad guys on the run.

'What they want me for mainly, see if I can bring in some of those big drug-trafficking bonds, hundred and fifty grand and up.'

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Ordell said, 'Yeah, I 'magine you made some good contacts in the joint. That why the company hired you?'

'It was my cellmate, guy was in for killing his wife. He told me to look up these friends of his when I got out. I go to see them, they ask me if I know any Colombians. I said yeah, a few. Some guys I met through a con named JJ. I told you about him, the one that got picked up again? I'm staying in his house.' Louis lifted a cigarette from the pocket of his work shirt. 'So what I do is look up these Colombians, down in South Beach, and hand out Max Cherry business cards. "If you ever go to jail, I'm your bail." He's got another one that says "Gentlemen prefer bonds" with his name under it, phone number, all that.' Louis went into the pocket again for a kitchen match.

Ordell waited. 'Yeah?'

'That's it. Most of the time I sit there.'

'You get along with the Colombians?'

'Why not? They know where I came from.' Louis struck the match with his thumbnail. 'They play that cha-cha music so loud you can't hardly talk anyway.'

Ordell got his own brand out and Louis gave him a light in his cupped hands.

'You don't sound happy, Louis.'

He said, 'Whatever you're into, I don't want any part of it, okay? Once was enough.'

Ordell sat back with his cigarette.

'Like you Steady Eddie, huh? I'm the one fucked up that kidnap deal?'

'You're the one brought Richard in.'

'What's that have to do with it?'

'You knew he'd try to rape her.'

'Yeah, and you helped her out of that mess. But that ain't what blew the deal, Louis. You know what it was. We tell the man, pay up or you never see your wife again – 'cause that's

how you do it, right? Then find out he don't *want* to see her again, even for five minutes? Down there in his Bahama love nest with Melanie? If you can't negotiate with the man, Louis, or threaten him, then you don't have even a chance of making a deal.'

'It would've come apart anyway,' Louis said. 'We didn't know what we were doing.'

'I see you the expert now. Tell me who's been in prison three times and who's been in once? Listen, I got people working for me now. I got brothers do the heavy work. I got a man over in Freeport – you remember Mr Walker? I got a Jamaican can do figures in his head. Can add up numbers, can multiply what things cost times how many' – Ordell snapped his fingers – 'like that.'

'You got an accountant,' Louis said. 'I'm happy for you.'

'Have I asked you to come work for me?'

'Not yet you haven't.'

'You know what a M-60 machine gun is?'

'A big one, a military weapon.'

'I sold three of them for twenty grand each and bought this automobile,' Ordell said. 'What do I need you for?'

Monday afternoon, Renee called Max at his office to say she needed eight hundred twenty dollars right away and wanted him to bring her a check. Renee was at her gallery in The Gardens Mall on PGA Boulevard. It would take Max a half hour at least to drive up there.

He said, 'Renee, even if I wanted to, I can't. I'm waiting to hear from a guy. I just spoke to the judge about him.' He had to listen then while she told how she had been trying to get hold of him. 'That's where I was, at court. I got your message on the beeper . . . I just got back, I haven't had time . . . Renee, I'm working, for Christ sake.' Max paused, holding the phone to his ear, not able to say anything. He looked up to see a black guy in a yellow sport coat standing in his office. A black guy with shiny hair holding a Miami Dolphins athletic bag. Max said, 'Renee, listen a minute, okay? I got a kid's gonna do ten fucking years if I don't get hold of him and take him in and you want me to . . . Renee?'

Max replaced the phone.

The black guy said, 'Hung up on you, huh? I bet that was your wife.'

The guy smiling at him.

Max came close to saying, yeah, and you know what she said to me? He wanted to. Except that it wouldn't make sense to tell this guy he didn't know, had never seen before . . .

The black guy saying, 'There was nobody in the front office, so I walked in. I got some business.'

The phone rang. Max picked it up, pointing to a chair with his other hand, and said, 'Bail Bonds.'

Ordell heard him say, 'It doesn't matter where you were, Reggie, you missed your hearing. Now I have to . . . Reg, listen to me, okay?' This Max Cherry speaking in a quieter voice than he used on his wife. Talking to her had sounded painful. Ordell placed his athletic bag on an empty desk that faced the one Max Cherry was at and got out a cigarette.

This looked more like the man's den than a bail bond office: a whole wall of shelves behind where Max Cherry sat with books on it, all kinds of books, some wood-carved birds, some beer mugs. It was too neat and homey for this kind of scummy business. The man himself appeared neat, clean-shaved, had his blue shirt open, no tie, good size shoulders on him. That dark, tough-looking type of guy like Louis, dark hair, only Max Cherry was losing his on top. Up in his fifties somewhere. He could be Eytalian, except Ordell had never met a bail bondsman wasn't Jewish. Max was telling the guy now the judge was ready to habitualize him. 'That what you want, Reg? Look at ten years instead of six months and probation? I said, "Your Honor, Reggie has always been an outstanding client. I know I can find him right now . . ."'

Ordell, lighting the cigarette, paused as Max paused.

' . . . out standing on the corner by his house.''

Listen to him. Doing standup.

'I can have the capias set aside, Reg . . . The fugitive warrant, they're gonna be looking for you, man. But it means I'll have to pick you up.'

Ordell blew out smoke and looked around for an ashtray. He saw the NO SMOKING sign above the door to what looked like a

meeting room, a long table in there, what looked like a refrigerator, a coffee maker.

‘Stay at your mom’s till I come for you. You’ll have to go back in . . . Overnight, that’s all. Tomorrow you’ll be out, I promise.’ Ordell watched Max hang up the phone saying, ‘He’s home when I get there or I have a five-thousand-dollar problem. What’s yours?’

‘I don’t see an ashtray,’ Ordell said, holding up his cigarette. ‘The other thing, I need a bond for ten thousand.’

‘What’ve you got for collateral?’

‘Gonna have to put up cash.’

‘You have it with you?’

‘In my bag.’

‘Use that coffee mug on the desk.’

Ordell moved around the desk, clean, nothing on it but his athletic bag, a telephone, and the coffee mug with still some in it. He flicked his ash and sat down in the swivel chair to face Max Cherry again, over behind his desk.

‘You have cash,’ Max said, ‘what do you need me for?’

‘Come on,’ Ordell said, ‘you know how they do. Want to know where you got it, then keep out a big chunk, say it’s for court costs. Pull all kind of shit on you.’

‘It’ll cost you a thousand for the bond.’

‘I know that.’

‘Who’s it for, a relative?’

‘Fella name Beaumont. They have him up at the Gun Club jail.’

Max Cherry kept staring from his desk, hunched over some. He had a computer there and a typewriter and a stack of file folders, one of them open.

‘Was sheriff deputies picked him up Saturday night,’ Ordell said. ‘It started out drunk driving, but they wrote it “possession of a concealed weapon.” Had a pistol on him.’

‘Ten thousand sounds high.’

‘They ran his name and got a hit, saw he’s been in before. Or they don’t like it he’s Jamaican. You know what I’m saying? They afraid he might take off.’

‘If he does and I have to go to Jamaica after him, you cover the expenses.’

This was interesting. Ordell said, ‘You think you could pick him up down there? Put him on a plane, bring him back?’

‘I’ve done it. What’s his full name?’

‘Beaumont. That’s the only name I know.’

Max Cherry, getting papers out of his drawer, looked over this way again, the man no doubt thinking, You putting that kind of money up and you don’t even know his name? Ordell got a kick out of people wondering about him, this man – look at him – holding back from asking the question. Ordell said, ‘I have people do favors for me don’t even have names outside of like Zulu, Cujo, one they call Wa-wa. Street names. You know what they call me sometime? Whitebread, account of my shade. Or they say just “Bread” for short. It’s okay, they not disrespecting me.’ See what the man thought of that.

He didn’t say. He picked up his phone.

Ordell smoked his cigarette, watching as the man punched numbers, and heard him ask for the Records Office, then ask somebody if they’d look up the Booking Card and Rough Arrest on a defendant named Beaumont, saying he believed it was the surname but wasn’t sure, check the ones came in Saturday night. He had to wait before getting what he wanted, asking questions and filling out a form on his desk. When he was done and had hung up the phone he said, ‘Beaumont Livingston.’

‘Livingston, huh?’

‘On his prior,’ Max Cherry said, ‘he did nine months and is working out four years probation. For possession of unregistered machine guns.’

‘You don’t tell me.’

‘So he’s violated his probation. He’s looking at ten years plus the concealed weapon.’

‘Man, he won’t like that,’ Ordell said. He drew on his cigarette and dropped it in the coffee mug. ‘Beaumont don’t have the disposition for doing time.’

Now Max Cherry was staring again before he said, ‘You ever been to prison?’

‘Long time ago in my youth I did a bit in Ohio. Wasn’t anything, stealing cars.’

‘I need your name too, and your address.’

Ordell told him it was Ordell Robbie, spelled it for him when the man asked, and said where he lived.

‘That a Jamaican name?’

‘Hey, do I sound like one of them? You hear them talking that island potwah to each other, it’s like a different language. No, man, I’m African-American. I used to be Neegro, I was cullud, I was black, but now I’m African-American. What’re you, Jewish, huh?’

‘You’re African-American, I guess I’m French-American,’ Max Cherry said. ‘With maybe some New Orleans Creole in there, going way back.’ Now he was shuffling through papers on his desk to find the ones he wanted. ‘You’ll have to fill out an Application for Appearance Bond, an Indemnity Agreement, a Contingent Promissory Note . . . It’s the one, if Beaumont skips and I go after him, you pay the expenses.’

‘Beaumont ain’t going nowhere,’ Ordell said. ‘You gonna have to figure out some other way to skim, make more than your ten percent. I’m surprised you don’t try to double the fee account of he’s Jamaican . . .’

‘It’s against the law.’

‘Yeah, but it’s done, huh? You people have your ways. Like not refunding the collateral.’ Ordell got up, went over to the man’s desk with the athletic bag he bought at the airport

souvenir shop, and took a bundle of currency out of it, old bills held together with a rubber band. 'Hundred times a hundred,' Ordell said, 'and ten more for your cut. You do all right, huh? What I like to know is where you keeping my money till I get it back. In your drawer?'

'Across the street at First Union,' Max Cherry said, taking the bills and working the rubber bands off. 'It goes in a trust account.'

'So you gonna make some money extra on the interest, huh? I knew it.'

The man didn't say yes or no, busy counting hundred-dollar bills now. When he was done and Ordell was signing the different papers, the man asked if he was going out to the jail with him. Ordell straightened up and thought about it before shaking his head.

'Not if I don't need to. Tell Beaumont I'll be in touch.' Ordell buttoned his double-breasted sport jacket, his canary one he wore over the black T-shirt and black silk trousers this afternoon. He wondered how tall this Max Cherry was, so he said, 'Nice doing business with you,' and stuck out his hand without reaching toward him. Max Cherry rose up to stand six feet and some, a speck taller than Ordell, with a big mitt on him Ordell shook and let go. The man nodded, that was it, and stood waiting for him to leave.

Ordell said, 'You know why I come here, not someplace else? Friend of mine I understand does some work for you.'

'You mean Winston?'

'Another fella, Louis Gara. He's my white friend,' Ordell said, and smiled.

Max Cherry didn't. He said, 'I haven't seen him today.'

'Yeah, well, I'll catch him sometime.' Ordell picked up his bag and started for the door. He stopped and looked back. 'I got one other question. What if, I was just thinking, what if before

the court date gets here Beaumont gets hit by a car or something and dies? I get the money back, don't I?'

What he was saying was, he *knew* he'd get it back. The kind of guy who worked at being cool, but was dying to tell you things about himself. He knew the system, knew the main county lockup was called the Gun Club jail, after the road it was on. He'd served time, knew Louis Gara, and drove off in a Mercedes convertible. What else you want to know? Ordell Robbie. Max was surprised he'd never heard of him. He turned away from the front window, went back to his office to type up bail forms.

The first one, the Power of Attorney. Max rolled it into his typewriter and paused, looking at his problem. It would hit him in the eye every time he filled out a form that had GLADES MUTUAL CASUALTY COMPANY printed across the top.

The Power of Attorney verified Max Cherry as the insurance company's licensed surety-bond representative, here, in the matter of Beaumont Livingston. The way it worked, the insurance company would get one third of the ten percent premium and put a third of it into a buildup fund to cover forfeitures.

If Max wrote fifty thousand dollars' worth of bail bonds a week, he'd clear five grand less expenses and the one third that went to Glades Mutual in Miami. It was a grind, but good money if you put in the hours.

The problem was that after representing Glades for the past nineteen years, no complaints either way, the company was now under new management, taken over by guys with organized crime connections. Max was sure of it. They'd even placed an ex-con in his office, Ordell Robbie's friend Louis Gara. 'To help out,' this thug from Glades Mutual said, a guy who didn't know shit about the business. 'Go after some of those big drug-trafficking bonds.'

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'What those people do,' Max told the guy, 'is skip as soon as they're bonded.'

The guy said, 'So what? We got the premium.'

'I don't write people who I know are gonna forfeit.'

The guy said, 'If they don't want to show up in court, that's their business.'

'And it's my business who I write,' Max told him.

The guy from Glades said, 'You got an attitude problem,' and gave him Louis to hang around the office, a convicted bank robber just out of prison.

Winston came in while Max was preparing the forms. Winston Willie Powell, a licensed bondsman following a 39 and 10 record as a middleweight. He was light heavy in retirement, short and thick, with a bearded black face so dark it was hard to make out his features. Max watched him, at the other desk now, unlock the right-hand drawer and take out a snub-nosed .38 before he looked over.

'Have to pick up that little Puerto Rican housebreaker thinks he's Zorro. Has the swords on his wall? Man lies to his probation officer, she violates him, we bond him, and then he don't show up for his hearing. I called Delray PD, said I might need some backup, depending how it goes. They say to me, "He's your problem, man." They don't want to mess with those women live there. Touch Zorro, they try to scratch your eyes out.'

'You want help? Get Louis.'

Winston said, 'I rather do it myself,' shoving the .38 into his waistband and smoothing his ribbed knit T-shirt over it. 'Who you writing?'

'Concealed weapon. Ten thousand.'

'That's high.'

'Not for Beaumont Livingston. They caught him one time with machine guns.'

‘Beaumont – he’s Jamaican he’s gone.’

‘This African-American gent who put up cash says no.’

‘We know him?’

‘Ordell Robbie,’ Max said and waited.

Winston shook his head. ‘Where’s he live?’

‘On Thirty-first right off Greenwood. You know that neighborhood? It’s kept up. People have bars on their windows.’

‘You want, I’ll check him out.’

‘He knows Louis. They’re old buddies.’

‘Then you know the man’s dirty,’ Winston said. ‘Where’s Beaumont live?’

‘Riviera Beach. He’s hired help but worth ten grand to Mr Robbie.’

‘Wants his man sprung ‘fore he gets squeezed and cops to a deal. I can bring him out when I take Zorro.’

‘I’m going up anyway. I have to deliver Reggie.’

‘Missed his hearing again? They beauties, aren’t they?’

‘He says it was his mother’s birthday, he forgot.’

‘And you believe that shit. I swear, there times you act like these people are no different than anybody else.’

‘I’m glad we’re having this talk,’ Max said.

‘Yeah, well, I’m enough irritated the way you act,’ Winston said, ‘you better not get smart with me. Like nothing bothers you. Like not even Mr Louis Gara, the way you let him waste your time. Let him smoke his cigarettes in here.’

‘No, Louis bothers me,’ Max said.

‘Then throw his ass out and lock the door. Then call that crooked insurance company and tell them you’re through. You don’t, they gonna eat you up or get you in trouble with the state commission, and you know it.’

‘Right,’ Max said. He turned to his typewriter.

‘Listen to me. All you got to do is stop writing their bonds.’

‘You mean quit the business.’

‘For a while. What’s wrong with that?’

‘If you haven’t looked at the books lately,’ Max said, ‘we’ve got close to a million bucks out there.’

‘It don’t mean you have to work. Ride it out. See, then when it’s all off the books you start over.’

‘I got bills to pay, like everybody else.’

‘Yeah, but you could do it if you wanted; there ways. What I think is, you tired of the business.’

‘You’re right again,’ Max said, tired of talking about it.

‘But you don’t see a way to get out, so you act like nothing bothers you.’

Max didn’t argue. Nine years together, Winston knew him. It was quiet and then Winston said, ‘How’s Renee doing?’ Coming at him from another direction. ‘She making it yet?’

‘You want to know if I’m still paying her bills?’

‘Don’t tell me what you don’t want to.’

‘Okay, the latest,’ Max said. He turned from his typewriter. ‘I walk in, I just got back from seeing the judge about Reggie, she calls.’

He paused as Winston sat down and hunched over the desk on his arms, Winston staring at him now, waiting.

‘She’s at the mall. Something she ordered, three olive pots, arrived COD and she needs eight twenty right away. That’s eight hundred and twenty.’

‘What’s a olive pot?’

‘How should I know? What she wanted was for me to drop whatever I was doing and bring her a check.’

Winston sat there staring at him, his head down in those heavy shoulders. ‘For these olive pots.’

‘I said, “Renee, I’m working. I’m trying to save a young man from doing ten years and I’m waiting for him to call.” I try to explain it to her in a nice way. You know what she said? She said, “Well, I’m working too.”’