

SHAMUS AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

MAX ALLAN COLLINS

The Dark City

AN ELIOT NESS MYSTERY

"ELIOT, I WANT TO OFFER YOU A JOB ..."

Ness uncrossed his legs and crossed them the other way. "Go on."

"I figure I can't clean up Cleveland," Mayor Burton said, "until the police department itself is clean."

"That makes sense to me."

"I need a strong man to reorganize—to transform—that pitiful excuse for a police department into a modern, honest law enforcement agency. You've shown yourself to be a tough cop, who doesn't flinch in dangerous situations—and wading into our corrupt force will be dangerous as hell."

Ness sat forward. "What job are we talking about, Mayor? Chief of Police?"

Burton shook his head. "No—I'm talking about the Director of Public Safety. The top slot."

Ness smiled, just barely. "That's a job I'd be interested in."

Eliot Ness novels
By
Max Allan Collins:

The Dark City
Butcher's Dozen
Bullet Proof
Murder by the Numbers

**THE
DARK
CITY**

AN
ELIOT
NESS
NOVEL

MAX ALLAN COLLINS

SPEAKING VOLUMES, LLC

NAPLES, FLORIDA

2011

THE DARK CITY

Copyright © 1987 by MAX ALLAN COLLINS

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

ISBN 978-1-61232-029-8

For my friend
Dominick Abel
the
Eliot Ness of literary agents

This is a novel based upon events in the life of Eliot Ness. Although the historical incidents in this novel are portrayed more or less accurately (as much as the passage of time, and contradictory source material, will allow), fact, speculation, and fiction are freely mixed here; historical personages exist side by side with composite characters and wholly fictional ones—all of whom act and speak at the author's whim.

Table of Contents

ONE

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

TWO

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

THREE

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

FOUR

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[**A Tip of the Fedora**](#)

ONE

DECEMBER 11-17, 1935

CHAPTER 1

A smoky, cloudy haze hung over the city, turning the afternoon into night. Crane your neck back as far as you liked, you still couldn't make out the top of Terminal Tower, the Van Sweringen brothers' fifty-two-story tribute to the city and them-selves. The Vans were broke now, or claimed to be, and their tower complex—with its department store, office building, bank, hotel, and restaurants—loomed over the city like a joke, an ironic middle-finger reminder of more prosperous times, when the Depression wasn't hanging over the city like the smoke and clouds that for almost a month now had made every day a night.

Traditionalists continued to call it "the Forest City," and the Chamber of Commerce flacks were insisting it was "the Vacation City"; but the papers were calling Cleveland "the Dark City," and not only because of these sunless days. Times were hard. On Public Square, amid statues of the city's founder Moses Cleaveland and legendary mayor Tom L. Johnson and various Civil War heroes, near the foot of a lavishly decorated, gaily lit giant Christmas tree, panhandlers and prostitutes prowled, often seeming to outnumber pedestrians. Those pedestrians seemed weary, cloaked in cynicism, as gray as the afternoon night around them, seldom speaking to one another, the cold wind from Lake Erie chilling their bones.

Not that everyone in Cleveland, on the afternoon of Wednesday, December 11, 1935, had given in to depression, either emotional or financial. At least one man was feeling good. He was one of the lucky ones: he was employed. More than that, he liked the line of work he was in, even if in recent months his job had begun—he would have to admit, if pressed—to bore him.

But not this afternoon. This afternoon, this bleak gray afternoon, he was smiling with anticipation. It was a tight smile, a poker player's barely-there smile, though the laugh lines around his gray-blue eyes gave him away. He was eager. He could smell the kill. He was handsome, in a boyish, almost baby-face manner, with a trail of freckles across his nose, and his Norwegian stock was apparent, despite the dark brown hair. He was a young man of thirty-two who stood six feet but seemed taller, possibly because he was so slim. This slimness belied his powerful arms and shoulders, the legacy of a stint in one of Chicago's South Side auto plants dipping radiators in his youth. His tan camel-hair topcoat seemed a bit big for him, but the snap-brim fedora gave him the proper air of authority for the Chief Agent of the U.S. Treasury Department's Alcohol Tax Unit.

He was sitting on the rider's side of a ten-ton flatbed truck, the back of which was loaded with scaling ladders, the front of which was a specially constructed metal prow, an ugly sideways v whose point was aimed forward. The truck was moving in low gear down Sweeney Avenue, just outside Cleveland's industrial flats along the winding Cuyahoga River, through an area of ware-houses and working class housing, rumbling over miles of railroad tracks. Two carloads of agents were already at the large red brick building on Sweeney Avenue, having preceded the truck by a minute or so. Agents from these cars would unload the ladders, once the steel bumper had burst open the door of the suspected distillery.

Eliot Ness had done his homework on this one. But the agent behind the wheel of the truck—a heavysset, grizzled veteran named Bob Hedges, who didn't much like his

college-boy boss—had done most of the legwork. A week ago Hedges had walked Ness around the building at Sweeney and Fifty-third, on an afternoon as gray as this one.

"Take a look," Hedges had said, pointing to the back of the brick building where yellow-stained icicles hung like frozen urine.

Ness had nodded. The staining was characteristic of an illicit distillery. Steam and fumes seeped through the walls and discolored the ice.

"Bob, we've had this place under surveillance for months," Ness said, shaking his head, digging his hands in his topcoat pockets. "We've never seen any molasses or sugar go in, and nothing ever seems to come out."

Hedges lifted a thick finger and lectured his chief. "But they got a guard on the front door. A regular gorilla. *Something's* the fuck up."

Ness sighed. He didn't much like Hedges and his rough manner, but he did respect the hard little man's instincts. Hedges was a good, honest cop. Ness didn't ask for anything else from his men.

And there indeed was a guard posted at the big brick building, except for occasional lunch and supper breaks like the one the guard was on now, giving Ness and Hedges the opportunity to case the joint.

Also, the location was perfect for a mob distillery. It was roughly halfway between the Woodland Avenue neighborhood, home of many Italian-Americans, some honest and some not so, and Newburgh Heights, where just beyond the city limits wide-open gambling joints like "Shimmy" Patton's Harvard Club and "Gameboy" Miller's Thomas Club flourished. As a cost-cutting measure, the Mayfield Road mob had been supplying their clubs with tax-free bootleg hooch, often filling and refilling bottles that had once contained legal liquor and retained the proper labels.

Ness found a broken window to peer in. He could see nothing, except what appeared to be a cinder floor.

"Looks empty in there," Ness said.

"It's a still, I tell you," Hedges said. "The mother of all stills."

Ness nodded noncommittally. "Let's get out of here before the gorilla gets back."

Hedges shook his head in frustration, but he brightened in the car, when Ness told him, "I think you're right about that place. And I think I know what's going on back there ..."

He had directed Hedges to check the records in the city engineer's office at City Hall. "Look for any abandoned sewer line that might be near the Sweeney Avenue building."

"Bingo," Hedges had said, entering Ness' small office in the Standard Building without knocking. He had blue-prints in his arms; he spread them out on Ness' battered rolltop desk, on top of the other papers there. "Abandoned sewer—brick construction, with an interior diameter of five feet. Runs right by the place."

Ness looked over the blueprints. "The same sewer runs past Molaska Products, I see."

"I noticed that too," Hedges said and grinned. "That's Mo Horvitz's molasses company."

"It sure as hell is," Ness said, sitting up. "And we know what they're up to, don't we. They're pumping molasses through the old sewer line from their storage tanks to the

basement of the Sweeney Avenue building."

"Agreed. But how the hell are they getting the alcohol out?"

Ness reexamined the blueprints. "I don't know. Is there a gas station in the area?"

"It don't show on there," Hedges said, waving at the blueprints, "but yeah, there's a couple. You think they're pumping the booze out of the basement through these old sewer pipes, to a gas station?"

Ness nodded. "Old Chicago trick. Big tank truck comes into the station, supposedly to fill the station's storage tanks. Only the tank trucks come in empty . . . and go out full."

"But not of gasoline."

"Not hardly," Ness said.

Now they were nearing the padlocked double front doors of the brick warehouse, the truck in second gear. The burly but sleepy guard bundled in an overcoat and sitting on a barrel reading the Police Gazette, suddenly sprang to, his eyes round as poker chips, and yelled, "Hey!", and headed for the hills.

Ness braced himself on the dashboard as the wooden doors grew larger before him, and then with a splintering crunch the steel prow and the truck behind it flattened the doors and rolled right over them, into the big, open—and very empty—warehouse.

Ness hopped out of the truck, yanked his .38 from under his arm, and called back to his agents. They were pulling the ladders off the back of the flatbed, to cover the roof, where most distillery escapes were made. Several agents were already posted in back and around the building.

Hedges climbed down from the cab of the truck and his feet scuffed at the cinders on the floor.

"Let's find the basement," Ness said, and Hedges tagged along, an axe in his hands.

The axe carved open the basement door, and the two men headed downstairs, into another massive open area.

"Shit," Hedges said. "They've cleaned it out."

It was cold down there; their breath was smoking.

"Not quite," Ness said.

The stills had been dismantled and moved out, but their shadows remained in the cement; there had been six of them, each around four feet in diameter. A major setup. Doing some quick math, Ness figured that when they were up and rolling, they were turning out two thousand gallons daily, minimum.

A massive operation like this one could only have been pulled off with the collusion of Cleveland's celebratedly corrupt police force. Those sons of bitches made Chicago's bent cops look straight.

"Look at this," he said to Hedges. The smaller man came over as Ness pointed up to a galvanized iron pipe, a flume containing several electric blower fans. "We need to find out where this leads."

"There's a metal company next door," Hedges said. "Probably there."

"Makes sense," Ness said. "Smoke from the boilers and fumes from this distilling room could be passed off as coming from the metal works."

Ness prowled the basement further, discovered five workmen in the boiler room, all of them cowering near one of three massive boilers, several with tools in hand.

"What is this?" one of them said, shrinking back.

Ness laughed shortly, put his .38 away. "A federal raid, but I wouldn't worry about it. You boys are dismantling these boilers, I take it?"

"Yeah," the spokesman said. He was a beefy guy with five o'clock shadow and close-set dark eyes. "We're with Acme Boiler and Welding. We been working all week, dismantling these three steam-boilers."

"Well, go on with your work," Ness said.

Hedges bristled. "Christ on a crutch! Are you kidding? Let's take 'em in for questioning."

"Dismantling a steam boiler is not a federal offense," Ness said. "Let's see what's going on upstairs."

Hedges shook his head in disgust as the men resumed their work, and the sound of clanging metal followed the pair upstairs, where the other raiders had found nothing to speak of. No suspects, no alcohol, no nothing.

A few minutes later, one of Ness' men did discover a six-inch water line that had been run across Sweeney Avenue to a railroad roundhouse, and connected with the city's water mains. Water for the operation of the distillery, then, had been heisted off the city of Cleveland. Probably with the complicity of city officials, Ness thought. Well, at least that goddamn Davis administration was past history now. Unfortunately, the city's tarnished coppers seemed to thrive no matter whose administration was in power.

"I scratched my initials on one of those boilers," Hedges told Ness. The heavy set little agent had ducked back downstairs for a while,

"Why did you do that?"

"It'll turn up again, when they set this big still back up someplace else in town, and I'll be able to identify it."

Ness shrugged. "Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?"

"I think this operation may simply be shut down."

"Bullshit! We didn't move fast enough on this, and they got wind of our raid, and they're moving it!"

"Or maybe they're just out of business. Maybe they figure the risk isn't worth it."

"Don't talk stupid."

"It's over, Agent Hedges. Show's over. It's getting too late in the day to be a Prohibition agent—considering Prohibition's been over for, how many years now?"

"The Mayfield Road boys ain't gettin' out of the alcohol business," Hedges insisted. "There's still dough in it."

"You may be right," Ness said. He didn't want to argue the point.

And to a degree, Ness knew, Hedges probably was right. The illegal product was cheaper than legal, what with federal and state taxes added on. Bootlegging would continue.

But not like before. Not like Chicago. In both Chicago and more recently, in Cleveland, where the flow of liquor from Canada was the primary concern, there had been enough activity to keep the life of a "revenooer" lively. It had taken a long time after the advent of Repeal for a steady supply of good, legitimate liquor to reach the market, for the American liquor industry to gear back up and serve its public. The mob had been taking care of that public for a long time, and a transition period was to be

expected.

That transition period was over. These days the Cleveland boys—the Mayfield Road mob—were moving into gambling and numbers and union racketeering. Just like the Capone outfit back home. To Ness, the huge, empty warehouse on Sweeney Avenue, and the remnants of the mammoth distillery that haunted it, were symbols of an era's end. And proof that the job that had once done him proud was now a force. It just wasn't about anything anymore.

He checked his watch. It was nearly four; he would have to get one of his raiders to give him a lift. He had a four-thirty meeting at City Hall with newly elected Mayor Burton, but he had no idea what it was about. Coordination between federal and local law enforcement perhaps.

That would be a joke, considering the state of Cleveland's infamous police force. The boys in blue, not to mention the plainclothes dicks, had helped make Ness' job as a fed damn near impossible whenever he worked within Cleveland city limits. How he'd like a crack at those venal sons of bitches.

Eliot Ness walked out into an afternoon that was turning into evening, though the difference was indiscernible. He tugged at his fedora, keeping his face out of the chill wind, not realizing that he had just raided his last still.

CHAPTER 2

On the northern edge of downtown Cleveland, a whisper away from Lake Erie, two buildings faced each other like granite reflections: the Courthouse and the City Hall. Between them was an expansive park, a continuation of the Mall, that 104-acre tract of land around which various public buildings gathered like pompous old men. The greenery was brown at the moment, except for the occasional fir, with patches of snow littering the expanse of lawn. On this afternoon the imposing structures were lost in the fog like everything and everybody else in the city; they were ghosts of the boom that had followed the Great War, fading stone memories of a Cleveland with a future.

Harold Burton, mayor of Cleveland for just over a month, stood at a tall, wide window in an office that struck him as damn near decadent, and looked out at his gloomy city. He was not a naive man, and the gloom did get to him. But he felt nonetheless that the town could be turned around.

Many years ago as a Harvard law student, he'd been inspired by what he'd read of Tom L. Johnson, the Mayor of Cleveland just after the turn of the century. Johnson was a man of money who waged war against the privileged class, a mayor whose four terms became the embodiment of progressive government in America. Young Harold Burton had decided Cleveland would be a fine place to establish a law practice, and besides, it was where his girlfriend Selma came from. A picture of Selma and their four children was on his desk nearby.

He went to that desk but did not sit. From a plain wooden box amid many papers and between two telephones, Burton withdrew a big black Havana cigar. He lit it and puffed at it with some gusto. He never felt more the mayor than when he was puffing one of his big black cigars.

Burton was just short of tall, a wedge-shaped, broad-browed man with short, prematurely white hair, a strong jaw and placid gray eyes above dark circles. He was forty-eight years old and looked every year of it. His brown suit was rumpled and the only natty thing about his apparel was the yellow-and-gold tie with the ruby stickpin (Selma's work).

He felt ill at ease in the sprawling, lavish office with its high, ornately sculptured plaster ceiling. It was known as the Tapestry Room, after the five massive tapestries depicting the Indians of the Western Reserve in the wilderness days, draped here and there above the room's fancy oak paneling. His desk was nestled in the corner between a tall, wide, beige-draped window and a fire-place, its mantel covered with more pictures of Selma and the kids. One hundred thousand on relief, Burton thought, and I sit here like Nero fiddling. Only he wasn't sitting, nor was he fiddling. He was pacing, waiting for the man who could enable His Honor to carry out his top-priority campaign promise, if that man said yes to the job Burton planned to offer.

Unfortunately, Burton felt the odds of this man's taking the job were slim. But goddammit, he had to try....

Burton had been elected as a reform mayor—a Republican who had run as an independent, steamrolling over both parties' machines. Elected by the largest majority ever won by a mayoral candidate in Cleveland's one hundred years, Burton had a clear mandate. But the political waters where he had to swim remained muddy.

The Republican mayor he replaced, Harry L. Davis, had used his two years to turn

Cleveland into a wide-open town, with the loosest of standards at City Hall. Not only had crime increased, particularly gambling and vice, but the business of government had, through Davis' patronage tactics, gone all but bankrupt. Scrip was issued to meet city payrolls. Deficiency taxes were levied in order to have some cash on hand. Meanwhile, Davis spent much of his time out of town, and the newspapers, with which he'd feuded from the beginning, gleefully, and correctly, labeled him an absentee mayor.

Burton had promised a return to efficiency in government; he had promised to bring a businesslike approach to City Hall.

But he had promised more than that.

He stalked the office, puffing the cigar, checking his watch. At four-thirty, he checked with his secretary.

"When Ness arrives," he told her over the intercom, "send him right in."

"Mr. Ness has been here for ten minutes, Your Honor."

He didn't snap at the girl; he hadn't been in office long enough for his staff to learn to read his mind. He'd give them another week to do that.

"Send him in," he said, and clicked off the intercom and put out his cigar. He smoothed his suit as best he could, and walked to the door to greet Ness as he came in. The slim man in the tan camel-hair topcoat, open to reveal a rather natty gray-striped double-breasted suit and maroon tie, slipped in, hat in hand, from among a horde of waiting politicians and job-seekers, the likes of which had thronged Burton's office doorstep for weeks.

Burton hoped his disappointment didn't show. From all he'd heard about Eliot Ness in the past two weeks, he had expected someone more physically impressive. In his mind's eye, he'd been picturing, foolishly, he knew, the movie actor Chester Morris. But this was no movie tough guy.

This was a man who looked even younger than his thirty-two years. This was a man who looked like he should be wearing a college graduation mortarboard, not a headful of pomaded, parted-in-the-middle hair, a dark disobedient comma of which made its way down his forehead.

"Your Honor," Ness said, his voice soft, husky, "allow me to be the last to congratulate you on your election." With a smile, he extended a hand.

Burton took the hand, shook it, relieved that the grip was as strong as it was.

He said, "I'm glad to finally get around to meeting you, Mr. Ness. I've heard so much about you, I feel I already know you."

Again Ness smiled, almost shyly Burton thought, and stood and waited until the Mayor rather awkwardly moved across the spacious office, gesturing toward a chair waiting opposite the desk in the corner.

"Sit, please, sit," Burton urged, taking his place behind the desk.

Ness sat, keeping his topcoat on, in apparent anticipation of a brief meeting. He crossed his legs, ankle on knee. Good, Burton thought: he wasn't nervous. He might look like a collegian, but he didn't intimidate easily.

"Smoke, if you like," Burton said, trying a smile out on the young Treasury agent.

"No, thanks. I don't smoke cigarettes."

Burton opened the cigar box on his desk. "Perhaps you'd like one of these Havanas?"

"No. Thanks. Go ahead, though."

Burton smiled tightly and shook his head no and shut the box. Then he said, "I do hope you have some vices. I don't trust a man who's too goddamn pure."

"I'm known to take a drink now and then."

"Ah. That's reassuring somehow. The most famous Prohibition agent of them all is a drinking man."

Ness lifted an eyebrow. "I've never had anything against drinking. The Prohibition law was a lousy piece of legislation."

Burton smiled again, not tightly this time. "That's interesting, coming from a man in your line."

Ness leaned forward a little, turning his hat in his hands restlessly. "The trouble with Prohibition was that so many people didn't believe in it. They were either against it or figured it was for the other guy. A law like that breeds contempt for the law in general. That helps make the underworld very strong, very wealthy. It gives them plenty of money to corrupt the law."

"So it's the . . . 'underworld' you've been after."

"I've never put John Q. Public in jail, Your Honor. I did put some gangsters out of business though."

"Al Capone, for instance."

Ness smiled, shrugged.

"And you're proud of that."

"It's going to be a hard one to top."

Ambitious. Burton liked that, too. That would help.

Feeling more at ease, Burton reached for the cigar box and withdrew and lit a Havana. He puffed it regally. "Do you know," he said, "that I've had you under investigation for two weeks, now?"

"No," Ness said, with mild surprise. "But where in hell did you find a Cleveland cop up to the job? No offense meant—to you."

Burton smiled and shook his head. "None taken. But truer words were never spoken. I had to rely on myself and some handpicked staff members. We've been checking around. Dwight Green speaks highly of you."

Dwight H. Green was Federal Prosecutor in Chicago.

"I'll speak highly of Dwight," Ness said, "if given half a chance."

"Frank Cullitan is another booster," Burton said.

Frank T. Cullitan was Cuyahoga County Prosecutor.

"Cullitan's a Democrat," Ness said.

"Does that matter?"

"Not to me."

Burton blew out a dark cloud of cigar smoke. "Every phone call I've made—Joe Keenan with the FBI, for instance—has resulted in high praise for Eliot Ness."

Ness smiled faintly, a hint of cockiness in his expression. Burton didn't mind that, either. That trait, too, would be necessary if this man were to take this job.

Actually, Burton would have been greatly surprised if Ness hadn't been at least a touch arrogant. The young man's record was impressive, to understate the case. Ness had been just twenty-six when he was recruited by the Justice Department to head up a special independent Prohibition Unit in Chicago that was designed as part of a two-

pronged federal effort, born in the White House, to put public enemy/public embarrassment Al Capone away. While the other prong, a crack IRS team, worked to build a tax case, Ness and his raiders hit Capone's breweries, confiscated trucks and equipment, and made numerous arrests. This distracted Capone, dented his bank account, and disrupted his business practices by limiting the amount of payoff money available, without which countless crooked cops—both local and federal—had gone off the take.

The ten men in Ness' unit, handpicked by himself after poring over hundreds of government records, were widely respected as that rarity among big-city cops in this damn Depression: they couldn't be bribed. These "untouchables," as the Chicago papers had dubbed them in the aftermath of Capone's fall, routinely turned down bribes, at times being offered weekly payoffs damn near as large as their yearly salaries.

After Capone's conviction, Ness was appointed Chief Investigator of Prohibition Forces in Chicago, a post he held down till mid—1933, when he transferred from the Justice Department to the Treasury and became a "rev-enoer," closing down hundreds of hillbilly stills in the moonshine mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio. In August 1934 he became Chief Investigator of the Treasury Department's Alcohol Tax Unit in the northern district of Ohio, working out of Cleveland.

He'd attracted some publicity in Cleveland, though Burton had only been vaguely aware of Ness until two weeks before, when several newspaper reporters, including Sam Wild of the Plain Dealer and his city editor Phil Porter, began touting Ness. They knew Burton was shopping around for the right man to clean up the police department, and Ness—who was relatively new in Cleveland, and had no political ties or interests—seemed ideal for the job.

"The people will eat it up," Wild had said. A tall wiry guy right out of The Front Page, Wild had worked in Chicago and knew Ness from there. "He's the perfect P.R. move, and he can probably come as close to getting the job done as anybody."

Now Eliot Ness was sitting across from Burton's desk, and the question was whether or not Burton could convince the young G-man to take one hell of a gamble.

"Do you know why I've called you here?" Burton asked.

"Coordination between your people and mine?"

"No. I want to offer you a job."

Ness uncrossed his legs, then crossed them the other way.

"Go on," he said.

"My top priority right now," Burton said, "is law and order. Do you know what I mean by that?"

Ness lifted an eyebrow slightly, set it back down. "Frankly, it's usually just a political catch phrase."

"Granted. But what I mean is, I want this city to have a real police department again. Let me put it another way. I figure I can't clean up Cleveland until the police department itself is clean."

Ness sat forward. "That makes sense to me."

"I need a strong man to reorganize—to transform—that pitiful excuse for a police department into a modern, honest law enforcement agency. You've shown yourself to be a tough cop who doesn't flinch in a dangerous situation. And wading into our

corrupt force will be dangerous as hell. The corruption is firmly entrenched. You won't just be stepping on toes, you'll be stepping on livelihoods."

"And lively hoods," Ness said, wryly.

Burton smiled momentarily, then soberly said, "It isn't just the Eliot Ness who drives trucks through locked doors that I'm interested in. It's the Eliot Ness who is a scientifically trained criminologist. The Ness who was an honor student at the University of Chicago, the site of some of the most advanced thinking in America, as regards social concerns. Your major fields of study, my investigation has revealed, were commerce, law, and political science."

"What job are we talking about, Mayor? Chief of Police?"

Burton shook his head no. "We have an honest chief. He happens to be rather ineffectual, but never mind. He is well-liked, and I would have some difficulty pulling him out without stirring up a political fuss that would just get in our way. No, I'm talking about the Director of Public Safety. The top slot."

Ness smiled, just barely. "That's a job I'd be interested in."

Burton pressed on. It was too early for such an acceptance. Ness didn't know the facts yet. "You'd be the youngest Director of Public Safety in the city's history. I consider you the ideal candidate to direct the investigation into, and purging of, our corrupt police department . . . but your role would be much more wide-ranging than that. You'd be in charge of twenty-four hundred men in the city's police and fire departments. It's a big job for a young man. Are you up to it?"

"Yes," Ness said.

"I think you are, too. I don't think there's a better man for this job."

"Do I sense a 'but' in all this?"

Burton sighed, nodding gravely. "You do. In all honesty, this job is not a plum. In effect, I'll be tossing you a hand grenade and you'll be smothering it with your body."

"Frankly, Your Honor, I'm not exactly following you."

Burton stood. Almost absently, he said, "You realize, I'm sure, that I may well owe my election to the previous Director of Public Safety ..."

Safety Director Martin J. Lavelle, a former police captain who had driven a Rolls Royce, had been present last summer at a wild, drunken party on a boat on Lake Erie, where a young woman had fallen overboard and drowned. The safety director had failed to report the death, and when the papers got hold of it, several days later, there was hell to pay for the Davis administration.

"I think," Ness said, smiling with wry self-confidence, "I can get you just as much publicity, but with a slightly different slant."

"That's what I'd be counting on. Frankly, your publicity value is as important to me as your credentials, impressive as they are. I'm not unlike a theatrical producer in this, Mr. Ness. That is, I'm looking for a star. And you're it."

Ness shrugged. "The headlines'll happen. I'm not worried."

"But you should be. You'll be under the gun. The clock will be ticking'."

Ness frowned, in confusion, not displeasure. "What clock will be ticking?"

Burton went to the window. He brushed back a beige curtain and looked out at his dark city. "You'll be up against possibly the most corrupt police force in the nation. And they're a well-established part of the city's landscape. The Detective Bureau and the precinct commanders in particular have strong political ties."

"Excuse me, but what do you care? This is your administration now."

Burton looked at the young G-man and smiled. "You really aren't political, are you, Mr. Ness? The city council is going to be up for grabs. The reform Republicans, with whom I'm shakily aligned, will go toe-to-toe with the old-line Republicans, while a couple varieties of Democrats sow dissent and pursue their own vested interests. All the while former mayor Davis will be working behind the scenes to make me as unsuccessful as possible, largely but not exclusively through his friend Councilman Fink."

"Could make for merry hell."

"Could make for merry hell indeed. For me to accomplish anything as mayor, I'm going to have to hold onto this office for several terms. And to survive this term, I have campaign promises to keep."

Ness nodded. "Chief among them, cleaning up the cops."

"Exactly. But corruption isn't our only police problem. We've got a badly out-of-date, poorly equipped police force whose very squad cars are falling apart. The fire department's in similarly sad shape."

"So it comes down to money."

"Money. Budget. Take the job, and you'll have to submit budgets on both the police and fire departments within two weeks." Burton sat back down. "Budget hearings will begin shortly after the first of the year. By early March, the council will vote. And if we don't get our budget you'll be hamstrung from the outset. You won't be able to get a damn thing done. You'll be an automatic lame duck."

Ness breathed out slowly. "By that you mean you'd have to let me go at the end of your term, and try again with a new safety director."

"I'd most likely let you go before that. And I think you know what it would do for your career in law enforcement. Having come in with great fanfare in the press and then accomplishing nothing, you'd look a fool. I won't pretend otherwise. I won't sugarcoat it. Meanwhile, I'd most likely bring in a new safety director about this time next year and, I would hope, find someone else with impressive credentials who might help me land the budget I need next time around."

"I see what you meant about that hand grenade."

"I'm not sure you do. What this comes down to is that you would have to get results in the police corruption investigation—spectacular results—before March. That's your ticking clock. You'd have barely more than two months to produce. You'd have to fill the headlines with such derring-do and miraculous modern police work that even a politically divided and quite possibly corrupt city council cannot ignore your budget demands."

Ness shifted in the chair. "Specifically, what sort of results would you expect?"

"There are, obviously, some high-ranking police officers in this city who are up to their brass buttons in graft. Rumor has it that a sort of 'department within the department' exists, ruled over by men such as these. You'll have to identify, and suspend, and then arrest, at least one of them."

"Before March."

"Before March," the mayor said.

"That won't be easy. There's a code of silence among cops. Even the honest ones tend not to 'rat' on the bent ones."