

ROADWORK

Stephen King

writing as Richard Bachman

*With an Introduction by the author,
"The Importance of Being Bachman"*



A SIGNET BOOK

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What happens when one good and-angry man fights back is murder—and then some. . . .

ROADWORK

Bart Dawes is standing in the way of progress. A new highway extension is being built right over the laundry plant where he works—and right over his home. The house he has lived in for twenty years where he has made love with his wife ... played with his son.... But before the city paves over that part of Dawes' life, he's got one more party to throw—and it'll be a blast....

WORKS BY STEPHEN KING

NOVELS

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
The Stand
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Firestarter
Cujo
THE DARK TOWER I:
The Gunslinger
Christine
Pet Sematary
Cycle of the Werewolf
The Talisman
(with Peter Straub)
It
The Eyes of the Dragon
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*The Drawing
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Gerald's Game
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Insomnia
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THE DARK TOWER IV:
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From a Buick 8

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AS RICHARD BACHMAN

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The Long Walk

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Thinner

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Different Seasons

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Four Past Midnight

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Golden Years

Sleepwalkers

The Stand

The Shining

Rose Red
Storm of the Century

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The Importance of Being Bachman

by Stephen King

This is my second introduction to the so-called Bachman Books—a phrase which has come to mean (in my mind, at least) the first few novels published with the Richard Bachman name, the ones which appeared as unheralded paperback originals under the Signet imprint. My first introduction wasn't very good; to me it reads like a textbook case of author obfuscation. But that is not surprising. When it was written, Bachman's alter ego (me, in other words) wasn't in what I'd call a contemplative or analytical mood; I was, in fact, feeling robbed. Bachman was never created as a short-term alias; I was supposed to be there for the long haul, and when my name came out in connection with his, I was surprised, upset, and pissed off. That's not a state conducive to good essay-writing. This time I may do a little better.

Probably the most important thing I can say about Richard Bachman is that *he became real*. Not entirely, of course (he said with a nervous smile); I am not writing this in a delusive state. Except ... well ... maybe I am. Delusion is, after all, something writers of fiction try to encourage in their readers, at least during the time that the book or story is open before them, and the writer is hardly immune from this state of ... what shall I call it? How does "directed delusion" sound?

At any rate, Richard Bachman began his career not as a delusion but as a sheltered place where I could publish a few early works which I felt readers might like. Then he began to grow and come alive, as the creatures of a writer's imagination so frequently do. I began to imagine his life as a dairy farmer ... his wife, the beautiful Claudia Inez Bachman ... his solitary New Hampshire mornings, spent milking the cows, getting in the wood, and thinking about his stories ... his evenings spent writing always with a glass of whiskey beside his Olivetti typewriter. I once knew a writer who would say his current story or novel was "putting on weight" if it was going well. In much the same way, my pen name began to put on weight.

Then, when his cover was blown, Richard Bachman died. I made light of this in the few interviews I felt required to give on the subject, saying that he'd died of cancer of the pseudonym, but it was actually shock that killed him: the realization that sometimes people just won't let you alone. To put it in more fulsome (but not at all inaccurate) terms, Bachman was the vampire side of my existence, killed by the sunlight of disclosure. My feelings about all this were confused enough (and fertile enough) to bring on a book (a Stephen King book, that is), *The Dark Half*. It was about a writer whose pseudonym, George Stark, actually comes to life. It's a novel my wife has always detested, perhaps because, for Thad Beaumont, the dream of being a writer overwhelms the reality of being a man; for Thad, delusive thinking overtakes rationality completely, with horrific consequences.

I didn't have that problem, though. Really. I put Bachman aside, and although I was sorry that he had to die, I would be lying if I didn't say I felt some relief as well.

The books in this omnibus were written by a young man who was angry, energetic, and deeply infatuated with the art and craft of writing. They weren't written as Bachman books per se (Bachman hadn't been invented yet, after all), but in a Bachman state of mind: low rage, sexual frustration, crazy good humor, and simmering despair. Ben Richards, the scrawny, pretubercular protagonist of *The*

Running Man (he is about as far from the Arnold Schwarzenegger character in the movie as you can get), crashes his hijacked plane into the Network Games skyscraper, killing himself but taking hundreds (maybe thousands) of Free-Vee executives with him; this is the Richard Bachman version of a happy ending. The conclusions of the other Bachman novels are even more grim. Stephen King has always understood that the good guys don't always win (see *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*, and—perhaps—*Christine*), but he has also understood that mostly they do. Every day, in real life, the good guys win. Mostly these victories go unheralded (MAN ARRIVES HOME SAFE FROM WORK YET AGAIN wouldn't sell many papers), but they are nonetheless real for all that ... and fiction should reflect reality.

And yet ...

In the first draft of *The Dark Half*, I had Thad Beaumont quote Donald E. Westlake, a very funny writer who has penned a series of very grim crime novels under the name Richard Stark. Once asked to explain the dichotomy between Westlake and Stark, the writer in question said, "I write Westlake stories on sunny days. When it rains, I'm Stark." I don't think that made it into the final version of *The Dark Half*, but I have always loved it (and *related* to it, as it has become fashionable to say). Richard Bachman—a fictional creation who became more real to me with each published book which bore his byline—was a rainy-day sort of guy if ever there was one.

The good folks mostly win, courage usually triumphs over fear, the family dog hardly ever contracts rabies; these are things I knew at twenty-five, and things I still know now, at the age of 25.2. But I know something else as well: there's a place in most of us where the rain is pretty much constant, the shadows are always long, and the woods are full of monsters. It is good to have a voice in which the terrors of such a place can be articulated and its geography partially described, without denying the sunshine and clarity that fill so much of our ordinary lives.

In *Thinner*, Bachman spoke for the first time on his own—it was the only one of the early Bachman novels that had his name on the first draft instead of mine—and it struck me as really unfair that, just as he was starting to talk with his own voice, he should have been mistaken for me. And a mistake was just what it felt like, because by then Bachman had become a kind of id for me; he said the things I couldn't, and the thought of him out there on his New Hampshire dairy farm—not a best-selling writer who gets his name in some stupid Forbes list of entertainers too rich for their own good or his face on the *Today* show or doing cameos in movies—quietly writing his books gave him permission to think in ways I could not think and speak in ways I could not speak. And then these new stories came out saying "Bachman is really King," and there was no one—not even me—to defend the dead man, or to point out the obvious: that King was also really Bachman, at least some of the time.

Unfair I thought then and unfair I think now, but sometimes life bites you a little, that's all. I determined to put Bachman out of my thoughts and my life, and so I did, for a number of years. The next time I was writing a novel (a *Stephen King* novel) called *Desperation*, Richard Bachman suddenly appeared in my life again.

I was working on a Wang dedicated word processor at that time; it looked like a visiphone in an old Flash Gordon serial. This was paired with a marginally more state-of-the-art laser printer, and from time to time, when an idea occurred to me, I would write down a phrase or a putative title on a scrap of paper and Scotch-tape it to the side of the printer. As I neared the three-quarter mark on *Desperation*, I had a scrap with a single word printed on it: REGULATORS. I had had a great idea for a novel, something that had to do with toys, guns, TV, and suburbia. I didn't know if I would ever write it—lots of those "printer notes" never came to anything—but it was certainly cool to think about.

Then, one rainy day (a Richard Stark sort of day), as I was pulling into my driveway, I had an idea I don't know where it came from; it was totally unconnected to any of the trivia tumbling through my head at the time. The idea was to take the characters from *Desperation* and put them into *The Regulators*. In some cases, I thought, they could play the same people; in others, they would change. In neither case would they do the same things or react in the same ways, because the different stories would dictate different courses of action. It would be, I thought, like the members of a repertory company acting in two different plays.

Then an even more exciting idea struck me. If I could use the rep company concept with the characters, I could use it with the plot itself as well—I could stack a good many of the *Desperation* elements in a brand-new configuration, and create a kind of mirror world. I knew even before setting it out that plenty of critics would call this twinning a stunt ... and they would not be wrong, exactly. But I thought, it could be a good stunt. Maybe even an illuminating stunt, one which showcased the muscularity and versatility of story, its all but limitless ability to adapt a few basic elements into endlessly pleasing variations, its prankish charm.

But the two books couldn't *sound* exactly the same, and they couldn't *mean* the same, any more than an Edward Albee play and one by William Inge can sound and mean the same, even if they are performed on successive nights by the same company of actors. How could I possibly create a different voice?

At first I thought I couldn't, and that it would be best to consign the idea to the Rube Goldberg bin and keep in the bottom of my mind—the one marked INTERESTING BUT UNWORKABLE CONTRAPTIONS. Then it occurred to me that I had had the answer all along: Richard Bachman could write *The Regulators*. His voice sounded superficially the same as mine, but underneath there was a world of difference—al! the difference between sunshine and rain, let us say. And his view of people was always different from mine, simultaneously funnier and more cold-hearted (Bart Dawes' *Roadwork*, my favorite of the early Bachman books, is an excellent example).

Of course Bachman was dead, I had announced that myself, but death is actually a minor problem for a novelist—just ask Paul Sheldon, who brought Misery Chastain back for Annie Wilkes, or Arthur Conan Doyle, who brought Sherlock Holmes back from Reichenbach Falls when fans all over the British Empire clamored for him. I didn't actually bring Richard Bachman back from the dead anyway; I just visualized a box of neglected manuscripts in his basement, with *The Regulators* on top. Then I transcribed the book Bachman had already written.

That transcription was a little tougher ... but it was also immensely exhilarating. It was wonderful to hear Bachman's voice again, and what I had hoped might happen *did* happen: a book rolled out that was a kind of fraternal twin to the one I had written under my own name (and the two books were quite literally written back-to-back, the King book finished on one day and the Bachman book commenced on the very next). They were no more alike than King and Bachman themselves. *Desperation* is about God; *The Regulators* is about TV. I guess that makes them both about higher powers, but very different ones just the same.

The importance of being Bachman was always the importance of finding a good voice and a valid point of view that were a little different from my own. Not *really* different; I am not schizo enough to believe that. But I do believe that there are tricks all of us use to change our perspectives and our perceptions—to see ourselves new by dressing up in different clothes and doing our hair in different styles—and that such tricks can be very useful, a way of revitalizing and refreshing old strategies for living life, observing life, and creating art. None of these comments are intended to suggest that I have done anything great in the Bachman books, and they are surely not made as arguments for artistic

merit. But I love what I do too much to want to go stale if I can help it. Bachman has been one way which I have tried to refresh my craft, and to keep from being too comfy and well-padded.——

These early books show some progression of the Bachman persona, I hope, and I hope they also show the essence of that *persona*. Dark-toned, despairing even when he is laughing (despairing *more* when he's laughing, in fact), Richard Bachman isn't a fellow I'd want to be all the time, even if he *were* still alive ... but it's good to have that option, that window on the world, polarized though it may be. Still, as the reader works his or her way through these stories, he/she may discover that Dick Bachman has one thing in common with Thad Beaumont's alter ego, George Stark: he's not a very nice guy.

And I wonder if there are any other good manuscripts, at or near completion, in that box found by the widowed Mrs. Bachman in the cellar of her New Hampshire farmhouse.

Sometimes I wonder about that *a lot*.

—Stephen King

Lovell, Maine
April 16, 1996

In memory of Charlotte Littlefield.

Proverbs 31:10-28.

Prologue

I don't know why. You don't know why.
Most likely God don't know why, either.
It's just Government business, that's all.

—*Man-in-the-street interview concerning Viet Nam, circa 1967*

But Viet Nam was over and the country was getting on.

On this hot August afternoon in 1972, the WHLM Newsmobile was parked near Westgate at the end of the Route 784 expressway. There was a small crowd around a bunting-covered podium that had been hurriedly tossed together; the bunting was thin flesh on a skeleton of naked planks. Behind it, on the top of a grassy embankment, were the highway tollbooths. In front of it, open, marshy land stretched toward the suburban hem of the city's outskirts.

A young reporter named Dave Albert was doing a series of man-on-the-street interviews while he and his co-workers waited for the mayor and the governor to arrive for the ground-breaking ceremony.

He held the microphone toward an elderly man wearing tinted spectacles.

"Well," the elderly man said, looking tremulously into the camera, "I think it's a great thing for the city. We've needed this a long time. It's ... a great thing for the city." He swallowed, aware that his mind was broadcasting echoes of itself, helpless to stop, hypnotized by the grinding, Cyclopean eye of posterity. "Great," he added limply.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

"Do you think they'll use it? On the news tonight?"

Albert flashed a professional, meaningless smile. "Hard to tell, sir. There's a good chance."

His sound man pointed up to the tollgate turnaround, where the governor's Chrysler Imperial had just pulled up, winking and gleaming like a chrome-inlaid eight ball in the summer sunshine. Albert nodded back, held up a single finger. He and the cameraman approached a guy in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. The guy was looking moodily at the podium.

"Would you mind stating your opinion of all this, Mr. . . . ?"

"Dawes. No, I don't mind." His voice was low, pleasant.

"Speed," the cameraman murmured.

The man in the white shirt said, still pleasantly, "I think it's a piece of shit."

The cameraman grimaced. Albert nodded, looking at the man in the white shirt reproachfully, and then made cutting gestures with the first two fingers of his right hand.

The elderly gentleman was looking at this tableau with real horror. Above, up by the tollbooths, the governor was getting out of his Imperial. His green tie was resplendent in the sun.

The man in the white shirt said politely: "Will that be on the six or eleven o'clock news?"

"Ho-ho, fella, you're a riot," Albert said sourly, and walked away to catch the governor. The cameraman trailed after him. The man in the white shirt watched the governor as he came carefully down the grassy slope.

Albert met the man in the white shirt again seventeen months later, but since neither of them remembered that they had met before, it might as well have been the first time.

Part One

NOVEMBER

Late last night the rain was knocking on my window
I moved across the darkened room and in the lamplight
I thought I saw down in the street
The spirit of the century
Telling us that we're all standing on the border.

—*At Stewart*

November 20, 1973

He kept doing things without letting himself think about them. Safer that way. It was like having a circuit breaker in his head, and it thumped into place every time part of him tried to ask: *But why are you doing this?* Part of his mind would go dark. Hey Georgie, who turned out the lights? Whoops, did. Something screwy in the wiring, I guess. Just a sec. Reset the switch. The lights go back on. But the thought is gone. Everything is fine. Let us continue, Freddy—where were we?

He was walking to the bus stop when he saw the sign that said:

AMMO HARVEY'S GUN SHOP AMMO
Remington Winchester Colt Smith & Wesson
HUNTERS WELCOME

It was snowing a little out of a gray sky. It was the first snow of the year and it landed on the pavement like white splotches of baking soda, then melted. He saw a little boy in a red knitted cap going by with his mouth open and his tongue out to catch a flake. It's just going to melt, Freddy, he thought at the kid, but the kid went on anyway, with his head cocked back at the sky.

He stopped in front of Harvey's Gun Shop, hesitating. There was a rack of late edition newspapers outside the door, and the headline said:

SHAKY CEASE-FIRE HOLDS

Below that, on the rack, was a smudged white sign that said:

PLEASE PAY FOR YOUR PAPER!
THIS IS AN HONOR RACK, DEALER MUST PAY
FOR ALL PAPERS

It was warm inside. The shop was long but not very wide. There was only a single aisle. Inside the door on the left was a glass case filled with boxes of ammunition. He recognized the .22 cartridge immediately, because he'd had a .22 single-shot rifle as a boy in Connecticut. He had wanted that rifle for three years and when he finally got it he couldn't think of anything to do with it. He shot at cats for a while, then shot a blue jay. The jay hadn't been a clean kill. It sat in the snow surrounded by a pink blood stain, its beak slowly opening and closing. After that he had put the rifle up on hooks and it had stayed there for three years until he sold it to a kid up the street for nine dollars and a carton of funny books.

The other ammunition was less familiar. Thirty-thirty, thirty-ought-six, and some that looked like scale-model howitzer shells. What animals do you kill with those? he wondered. Tigers? Dinosaurs? Still it fascinated him, sitting there inside the glass case like penny candy in a stationery store.

The clerk or proprietor was talking to a fat man in green pants and a green fatigue shirt. The shirt had flap pockets. They were talking about a pistol that was lying on top of another glass case, dismembered. The fat man thumbed back the slide and they both peered into the oiled chamber. The fat man said something and the clerk or proprietor laughed.

“Autos always jam? You got that from your father, Mac. Admit it.”

“Harry, you’re full of bullshit up to your eyebrows.”

You’re full of it, Fred, he thought. Right up to your eyebrows. You know it, Fred?

Fred said he knew it.

On the right was a glass case that ran the length of the shop. It was full of rifles on pegs. He was able to pick out the double-barreled shotguns, but everything else was a mystery to him. Yet some people—the two at the far counter, for example—had mastered this world as easily as he had mastered general accounting in college.

He walked further into the store and looked into a case filled with pistols. He saw some air guns, a few .22’s, a .38 with a wood-grip handle, .45’s, and a gun he recognized as a .44 Magnum, the gun Dirty Harry had carried in that movie. He had heard Ron Stone and Vinnie Mason talking about the movie at the laundry, and Vinnie had said: They’d never let a cop carry a gun like that in the city. You can blow a hole in a man a mile away with one of those.

The fat man, Mac, and the clerk or proprietor, Harry (as in Dirty Harry), had the gun back together.

“You give me a call when you get that Menschler in,” Mac said.

“I will ... but your prejudice against autos is irrational,” Harry said. (He decided Harry must be the proprietor—a clerk would never call a customer irrational.) “Have you got to have the Cobra new this week?”

“I’d like it,” Mac said.

“I don’t promise.”

“You never do ... but you’re the best goddam gunsmith in the city, and you know it.”

“Of course I do.”

Mac patted the gun on top of the glass case and turned to go. Mac bumped into him—*Watch it, Mac. Smile when you do that*—and then went on to the door. The paper was tucked under Mac’s arm, and he could read:

SHAKY CEA

Harry turned to him, still smiling and shaking his head. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so. But I warn you in advance, I know nothing about guns.”

Harry shrugged. “There’s a law you should? Is it for someone else? For Christmas?”

“Yes, that’s just right,” he said, seizing on it. “I’ve got this cousin—Nick, his name is. Nick Adam. He lives in Michigan and he’s got yea guns. You know. Loves to hunt, but it’s more than that. It’s sort of a, well, a—”

“Hobby?” Harry asked, smiling.

“Yes, that’s it.” He had been about to say *fetish*. His eyes dropped to the cash register, where a faded bumper sticker was pasted on. The bumper sticker said:

IF GUNS ARE OUTLAWED, ONLY OUTLAWS WILL HAVE GUNS

He smiled at Harry and said, “That’s very true, you know.”

“Sure it is,” Harry said. “This cousin of yours . . .”

“Well, it’s kind of a one-upmanship type of thing. He knows how much I like boating and I’ll be damned if he didn’t up and give me an Evinrude sixty-horsepower motor last Christmas. He sent it by REA express. I gave him a hunting jacket. I felt sort of like a horse’s ass.”

Harry nodded sympathetically.

“Well, I got a letter from him about six weeks ago, and he sounds just like a kid with a free pass to the circus. It seems that he and about six buddies chipped in together and bought themselves a trip

this place in Mexico, sort of like a free-fire zone—”

“A no-limit hunting preserve?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” He chuckled a little. “You shoot as much as you want. They stock it, you know. Deer, antelope, bear, bison. Everything.”

“Was it Boca Rio?”

“I really don’t remember. I think the name was longer than that.”

Harry’s eyes had gone slightly dreamy. “That guy that just left and myself and two others went to Boca Rio in 1965. I shot a zebra. A goddam zebra! I got it mounted in my game room at home. That was the best time I ever had in my life, bar none. I envy your cousin.”

“Well, I talked it over with my wife,” he said, “and she said go ahead. We had a very good year at the laundry. I work at the Blue Ribbon Laundry over in Western.”

“Yes, I know where that is.”

He felt that he could go on talking to Harry all day, for the rest of the year, embroidering the truth and the lies into a beautiful, gleaming tapestry. Let the world go by. Fuck the gas shortage and the high price of beef and the shaky ceasefire. Let there be talk of cousins that never were, right, Freddie. Right on, Georgie.

“We got the Central Hospital account this year, as well as the mental institution, and also three new motels.”

“Is the Quality Motor Court on Franklin Avenue one of yours?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’ve stayed there a couple of times,” Harry said. “The sheets were always very clean. Funny, you never think about who washes the sheets when you stay at a motel.”

“Well, we had a good year. And so I thought, maybe I can get Nick a rifle and a pistol. I know he’s always wanted a .44 Magnum, I’ve heard him mention that one—”

Harry brought the Magnum up and laid it carefully on top of the glass case. He picked it up. He liked the heft of it. It felt like business.

He put it back down on the glass case.

“The chambering on that—” Harry began.

He laughed and held up a hand. “Don’t sell me. I’m sold. An ignoramus always sells himself. How much ammunition should I get with that?”

Harry shrugged. “Get him ten boxes, why don’t you? He can always get more. The price on that gun is two-eighty-nine plus tax, but I’m going to give it to you for two-eighty, ammo thrown in. How about that?”

“Super,” he said, meaning it. And then, because something more seemed required, he added: “It’s a handsome piece.”

“If it’s Boca Rio, he’ll put it to good use.”

“Now the rifle—”

“What does he have?”

He shrugged and spread his hands. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know. Two or three shotguns, and something he calls an auto-loader—”

“Remington?” Harry asked him so quickly that he felt afraid; it was as if he had been walking waist-deep water that had suddenly shelved off.

“I think it was. I could be wrong.”

“Remington makes the best,” Harry said, and nodded, putting him at ease again. “How high do you want to go?”

“Well, I’ll be honest with you. The motor probably cost him four hundred. I’d like to go at least five. Six hundred tops.”

“You and this cousin really get along, don’t you?”

“We grew up together,” he said sincerely. “I think I’d give my right arm to Nick, if he wanted it.”

“Well, let me show you something,” Harry said. He picked a key out of the bundle on his ring and went to one of the glass cabinets. He opened it, climbed up on a stool, and brought down a long, heavy rifle with an inlaid stock. “This may be a little higher than you want to go, but it’s a beautiful gun.” Harry handed it to him.

“What is it?”

“That’s a four-sixty Weatherbee. Shoots heavier ammunition than I’ve got here in the place right now. I’d have to order however many rounds you wanted from Chicago. Take about a week. It’s a perfectly weighted gun. The muzzle energy on that baby is over eight thousand pounds ... like hitting something with an airport limousine. If you hit a buck in the head with it, you’d have to take the taxidermy for a trophy.”

“I don’t know,” he said, sounding dubious even though he had decided he wanted the rifle. “I know Nick wants trophies. That’s part of—”

“Sure it is,” Harry said, taking the Weatherbee and chambering it. The hole looked big enough to put a carrier pigeon in. “Nobody goes to Boca Rio for meat. So your cousin gutshoots. With this piece you don’t have to worry about tracking the goddam animal for twelve miles through the high country, the animal suffering the whole time, not to mention you missing dinner. This baby will spread his insides over twenty feet.”

“How much?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. I can’t move it in town. Who wants a freaking anti-tank gun when there’s nothing to go after anymore but pheasant? And if you put them on the table, it tastes like you’re eating exhaust fumes. It retails for nine-fifty, wholesales for six-thirty. I’d let you have it for seven hundred.”

“That comes to ... almost a thousand bucks.”

“We give a ten percent discount on orders over three hundred dollars. That brings it back to nine hundred. He shrugged. “You give that gun to your cousin, I guarantee he hasn’t got one. If he does, I’ll buy it back for seven-fifty. I’ll put that in writing, that’s how sure I am.”

“No kidding?”

“Absolutely. Absolutely. Of course, if it’s too steep, it’s too steep. We can look at some other guns. But if he’s a real nut on the subject, I don’t have anything else he might not have two of.”

“I see.” He put a thoughtful expression on his face. “Have you got a telephone?”

“Sure, in the back. Want to call your wife and talk it over?”

“I think I better.”

“Sure. Come on.”

Harry led him into a cluttered back room. There was a bench and a scarred wooden table littered with gun guts, springs, cleaning fluid, pamphlets, and labeled bottles with lead slugs in them.

“There’s the phone,” Harry said.

He sat down, picked up the phone, and dialed while Harry went back to get the Magnum and put it in the box.

“Thank you for calling the WDST Weatherphone,” the bright, recorded voice said. “This afternoon snow flurries developing into light snow late this evening—”

“Hi, Mary?” he said. “Listen, I’m in this place called Harvey’s Gun Shop. Yeah, about Nicky. I go

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