CALL HIM NEMESIS

By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Criminals, beware; the Scorpion is on your trail! Hoodlums fear his fury—and, for that matter, so do the cops!

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The man with the handkerchief mask said, "All right, everybody, keep tight. This is a holdup."

There were twelve people in the bank. There was Mr. Featherhall at his desk, refusing to okay a personal check from a perfect stranger. There was the perfect stranger, an itinerant garage mechanic named Rodney (Rod) Strom, like the check said. There were Miss English and Miss Philicoff, the girls in the gilded teller cages. There was Mister Anderson, the guard, dozing by the door in his brown uniform. There was Mrs. Elizabeth Clayhorn, depositing her husband's pay check in their joint checking account, and with her was her ten-year-old son Edward (Eddie) Clayhorn, Junior. There was Charlie Casale, getting ten dollars dimes, six dollars nickels and four dollars pennies for his father in the grocery store down the street. There was Mrs. Dolly Daniels, withdrawing money from her savings account again. And there were three bank robbers.

The three bank robbers looked like triplets. From the ground up, they all wore scuffy black shoes, baggy-kneed and unpressed khaki trousers, brown cracked-leather jackets over flannel shirts, white handkerchiefs over the lower half of their faces and gray-and-white check caps pulled low over their eyes. The eyes themselves looked dangerous.

The man who had spoken withdrew a small but mean-looking thirty-two calibre pistol from his jacket pocket. He waved it menacingly. One of the others took the pistol away from Mister Anderson, the guard, and said to him in a low voice, "Think about retirement, my friend." The third one, who carried a black satchel like a doctor's bag, walked quickly around behind the teller's counter and started filling it with money.

It was just like the movies.

The man who had first spoken herded the tellers, Mr. Featherhall and the customers all over against the back wall, while the second man stayed next to Mr. Anderson and the door. The third man stuffed money into the black satchel.

The man by the door said, "Hurry up."

The man with the satchel said, "One more drawer."

The man with the gun turned to say to the man at the door, "Keep your shirt on."

That was all Miss English needed. She kicked off her shoes and ran pelting in her stocking feet for the door.

The man by the door spread his arms out and shouted, "Hey!" The man with the gun swung violently back, cursing, and fired the gun. But he'd been moving too fast, and so had Miss English, and all he hit was the brass plate on Mr. Featherhall's desk.

The man by the door caught Miss English in a bear hug. She promptly did her best to scratch his eyes out. Meanwhile, Mr. Anderson went scooting out the front door and running down the street toward the police station in the next block, shouting, "Help! Help! Robbery!"

The man with the gun cursed some more. The man with the satchel came running around from behind the counter, and the man by the door tried to keep Miss English from scratching his eyes out. Then the man with the gun hit Miss English on the head. She fell unconscious to the floor, and all three of them ran out of the bank to the car out front, in which sat a very nervous-looking fourth man, gunning the engine.

Everyone except Miss English ran out after the bandits, to watch.

Things got very fast and very confused then. Two police cars came driving down the block and a half from the precinct house to the bank, and the car with the four robbers in it lurched away from the curb and drove straight down the street toward the police station. The police cars and the getaway car passed one another, with everybody shooting like the ships in pirate movies.

There was so much confusion that it looked as though the bank robbers were going to get away after all. The police cars were aiming the wrong way and, as they'd come down with sirens wailing, there was a clear path behind them.

Then, after the getaway car had gone more than two blocks, it suddenly started jouncing around. It smacked into a parked car and stopped. And all the police went running down there to clap handcuffs on the robbers when they crawled dazedly out of their car.

"Hey," said Eddie Clayhorn, ten years old. "Hey, that was something, huh, Mom?"

"Come along home," said his mother, grabbing his hand. "We don't want to be involved."

"It was the nuttiest thing," said Detective-Sergeant Stevenson. "An operation planned that well, you'd think they'd pay attention to their getaway car, you know what I mean?"

Detective-Sergeant Pauling shrugged. "They always slip up," he said. "Sooner or later, on some minor detail, they always slip up."

"Yes, but their *tires*."

"Well," said Pauling, "it was a stolen car. I suppose they just grabbed whatever was handiest."

"What I can't figure out," said Stevenson, "is exactly what made those tires do that. I mean, it was a hot day and all, but it wasn't *that* hot. And they weren't going that fast. I don't think you could go fast enough to melt your tires down."

Pauling shrugged again. "We got them. That's the important thing."

"Still and all, it's nutty. They're free and clear, barrelling out Rockaway toward the Belt, and all at once their tires melt, the tubes blow out and there they are." Stevenson shook his head. "I can't figure it."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," suggested Pauling. "They picked the wrong car to steal."

"And *that* doesn't make sense, either," said Stevenson. "Why steal a car that could be identified as easily as that one?"

"Why? What was it, a foreign make?"

"No, it was a Chevvy, two-tone, three years old, looked just like half the cars on the streets. Except that in the trunk lid the owner had burned in 'The Scorpion' in big black letters you could see half a block away."

"Maybe they didn't notice it when they stole the car," said Pauling.

"For a well-planned operation like this one," said Stevenson, "they made a couple of really idiotic boners. It doesn't make any sense."

"What do they have to say about it?" Pauling demanded.

"Nothing, what do you expect? They'll make no statement at all."

The squad-room door opened, and a uniformed patrolman stuck his head in. "The owner of that Chevvy's here," he said.

"Right," said Stevenson. He followed the patrolman down the hall to the front desk.

The owner of the Chevvy was an angry-looking man of middle age, tall and paunchy. "John Hastings," he said. "They say you have my car here."

"I believe so, yes," said Stevenson. "I'm afraid it's in pretty bad shape."

"So I was told over the phone," said Hastings grimly. "I've contacted my insurance company."

"Good. The car's in the police garage, around the corner. If you'd come with me?"

On the way around, Stevenson said, "I believe you reported the car stolen almost immediately after it happened."

"That's right," said Hastings. "I stepped into a bar on my route. I'm a wine and liquor salesman. When I came out five minutes later, my car was gone."

"You left the keys in it?"

"Well, why not?" demanded Hastings belligerently. "If I'm making just a quick stop—I never spend more than five minutes with any one customer—I always leave the keys in the car. Why not?"

"The car was stolen," Stevenson reminded him.

Hastings grumbled and glared. "It's always been perfectly safe up till now."

"Yes, sir. In here."

Hastings took one look at his car and hit the ceiling. "It's ruined!" he cried. "What did you do to the tires?"

"Not a thing, sir. That happened to them in the holdup."

Hastings leaned down over one of the front tires. "Look at that! There's melted rubber all over the rims. Those rims are ruined! What did you use, incendiary bullets?"

Stevenson shook his head. "No, sir. When that happened they were two blocks away from the nearest policeman."

"Hmph." Hastings moved on around the car, stopping short to exclaim, "What in the name of God is that? You didn't tell me a bunch of *kids* had stolen the car."

"It wasn't a bunch of kids," Stevenson told him. "It was four professional criminals, I thought you knew that. They were using it in a bank holdup."

"Then why did they do *that*?"

Stevenson followed Hastings' pointing finger, and saw again the crudely-lettered words, "The Scorpion" burned black into the paint of the trunk lid. "I really don't know," he said. "It wasn't there before the car was stolen?"

"Of course not!"

Stevenson frowned. "Now, why in the world did they do that?"

"I suggest," said Hastings with heavy sarcasm, "you ask them that."

Stevenson shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good. They aren't talking about anything. I don't suppose they'll ever tell us." He looked at the trunk lid again. "It's the nuttiest thing," he said thoughtfully....

That was on Wednesday.

The Friday afternoon mail delivery to the *Daily News* brought a crank letter. It was in the crank letter's most obvious form; that is, the address had been clipped, a letter or a word at a time, from a newspaper and glued to the envelope. There was no return address.

The letter itself was in the same format. It was brief and to the point:

Dear Mr. Editor:

The Scorpion has struck. The bank robbers were captured. The Scorpion fights crime. Crooks and robbers are not safe from the avenging Scorpion. WARN YOUR READERS!

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

The warning was duly noted, and the letter filed in the wastebasket. It didn't rate a line in the paper.

II

The bank robbery occurred in late June. Early in August, a Brooklyn man went berserk.

It happened in Canarsie, a section in southeast Brooklyn near Jamaica Bay. This particular area of Canarsie was a residential neighborhood, composed of one and two family houses. The man who went berserk was a Motor Vehicle Bureau clerk named Jerome Higgins.

Two days before, he had flunked a Civil Service examination for the third time. He reported himself sick and spent the two days at home, brooding, a bottle of blended whiskey at all times in his hand.

As the police reconstructed it later, Mrs. Higgins had attempted to awaken him on the third morning at seven-thirty, suggesting that he really ought to stop being so foolish, and go back to work. He then allegedly poked her in the eye, and locked her out of the bedroom.

Mrs. Higgins then apparently called her sister-in-law, a Mrs. Thelma Stodbetter, who was Mr. Higgins' sister. Mrs. Stodbetter arrived at the house at nine o'clock, and spent some time tapping at the still-locked bedroom door, apparently requesting Mr. Higgins to unlock the door and "stop acting like a child." Neighbors reported to the police that they heard Mr. Higgins shout a number of times, "Go away! Can't you let a man sleep?"

At about ten-fifteen, neighbors heard shots from the Higgins residence, a two-story one-family pink stucco affair in the middle of a block of similar homes. Mr. Higgins, it was learned later, had suddenly erupted from his bedroom, brandishing a .30-.30 hunting rifle and, being annoyed at the shrieks of his wife and sister, had fired seven shells at them, killing his wife on the spot and wounding his sister in the hand and shoulder.

Mrs. Stodbetter, wounded and scared out of her wits, raced screaming out the front door of the house, crying for the police and shouting, "Murder! Murder!" At this point, neighbors called the police. One neighbor additionally phoned three newspapers and two television stations, thereby earning forty dollars in "news-tips" rewards.

By chance, a mobile television unit was at that moment on the Belt Parkway, returning from having seen off a prime minister at Idlewild Airport. This unit was at once diverted to Canarsie, where it took up a position across the street from the scene of carnage and went to work with a Zoomar lens.

In the meantime, Mister Higgins had barricaded himself in his house, firing at anything that moved.

The two cameramen in the mobile unit worked their hearts out. One concentrated on the movements of the police and firemen and neighbors and ambulance attendants,

while the other used the Zoomar lens to search for Mr. Higgins. He found him occasionally, offering the at-home audience brief glimpses of a stocky balding man in brown trousers and undershirt, stalking from window to window on the second floor of the house.

The show lasted for nearly an hour. There were policemen everywhere, and firemen everywhere, and neighbors milling around down at the corner, where the police had roped the block off, and occasionally Mr. Higgins would stick his rifle out a window and shoot at somebody. The police used loudspeakers to tell Higgins he might as well give up, they had the place surrounded and could eventually starve him out anyway. Higgins used his own good lungs to shout obscenities back and challenge anyone present to hand-to-hand combat.

The police fired tear gas shells at the house, but it was a windy day and all the windows in the Higgins house were either open or broken. Higgins was able to throw all the shells back out of the house again.

The show lasted for nearly an hour. Then it ended, suddenly and dramatically.

Higgins had showed himself to the Zoomar lens again, for the purpose of shooting either the camera or its operator. All at once he yelped and threw the rifle away. The rifle bounced onto the porch roof, slithered down to the edge, hung for a second against the drain, and finally fell barrel first onto the lawn.

Meanwhile, Higgins was running through the house, shouting like a wounded bull. He thundered down the stairs and out, hollering, to fall into the arms of the waiting police.

They had trouble holding him. At first they thought he was actually trying to get away, but then one of them heard what it was he was shouting: "My hands! My hands!"

They looked at his hands. The palms and the palm-side of the fingers were red and blistering, from what looked like severe burns. There was another burn on his right cheek and another one on his right shoulder.

Higgins, thoroughly chastened and bewildered, was led away for burn ointment and jail. The television crew went on back to Manhattan. The neighbors went home and telephoned their friends.

On-duty policemen had been called in from practically all of the precincts in Brooklyn. Among them was Detective-Sergeant William Stevenson. Stevenson frowned thoughtfully at Higgins as that unhappy individual was led away, and then strolled over to look at the rifle. He touched the stock, and it was somewhat warm but that was all.

He picked it up and turned it around. There, on the other side of the stock, burned into the wood, were the crudely-shaped letters, "The Scorpion."

You don't get to be Precinct Captain on nothing but political connections. Those help, of course, but you need more than that. As Captain Hanks was fond of pointing out, you needed as well to be both more imaginative than most—"You gotta be able to second-guess the smart boys"—and to be a complete realist—"You gotta have both feet on the ground." If these were somewhat contradictory qualities, it was best not to mention the fact to Captain Hanks.

The realist side of the captain's nature was currently at the fore. "Just what are you trying to say, Stevenson?" he demanded.

"I'm not sure," admitted Stevenson. "But we've got these two things. First, there's the getaway car from that bank job. The wheels melt for no reason at all, and somebody burns 'The Scorpion' onto the trunk. Then, yesterday, this guy Higgins out in Canarsie. He says the rifle all of a sudden got too hot to hold, and he's got the burn marks to prove it. And there on the rifle stock it is again. 'The Scorpion'."

"He says he put that on there himself," said the captain.

Stevenson shook his head. "His *lawyer* says he put it on there. Higgins says he doesn't remember doing it. That's half the lawyer's case. He's trying to build up an insanity defense."

"He put it on there himself, Stevenson," said the captain with weary patience. "What are you trying to prove?"

"I don't know. All I know is it's the nuttiest thing I ever saw. And what about the getaway car? What about those tires melting?"

"They were defective," said Hanks promptly.

"All four of them at once? And what about the thing written on the trunk?"

"How do I know?" demanded the captain. "Kids put it on before the car was stolen, maybe. Or maybe the hoods did it themselves, who knows? What do *they* say?"

"They say they didn't do it," said Stevenson. "And they say they never saw it before the robbery and they would have noticed it if it'd been there."

The captain shook his head. "I don't get it," he admitted. "What are you trying to prove?"

"I guess," said Stevenson slowly, thinking it out as he went along, "I guess I'm trying to prove that somebody melted those tires, and made that rifle too hot, and left his signature behind."

"What? You mean like in the comic books? Come on, Stevenson! What are you trying to hand me?"

"All I know," insisted Stevenson, "is what I see."

"And all *I* know," the captain told him, "is Higgins put that name on his rifle himself. He says so."

"And what made it so hot?"

"Hell, man, he'd been firing that thing at people for an hour! What do you *think* made it hot?"

"All of a sudden?"

"He noticed it all of a sudden, when it started to burn him."

"How come the same name showed up each time, then?" Stevenson asked desperately.

"How should I know? And why not, anyway? You know as well as I do these things happen. A bunch of teen-agers burgle a liquor store and they write 'The Golden Avengers' on the plate glass in lipstick. It happens all the time. Why not 'The Scorpion'? It couldn't occur to two people?"

"But there's no explanation—" started Stevenson.

"What do you mean, there's no explanation? I just *gave* you the explanation. Look, Stevenson, I'm a busy man. You got a nutty idea—like Wilcox a few years ago, remember him? Got the idea there was a fiend around loose, stuffing all those kids into abandoned refrigerators to starve. He went around trying to prove it, and getting all upset, and pretty soon they had to put him away in the nut hatch. Remember?"

"I remember," said Stevenson.

"Forget this silly stuff, Stevenson," the captain advised him.

"Yes, sir," said Stevenson....

The day after Jerome Higgins went berserk, the afternoon mail brought a crank letter to the *Daily News*:

Dear Mr. Editor,

You did not warn your readers. The man who shot all those people could not escape the Scorpion. The Scorpion fights crime. No criminal is safe from the Scorpion. WARN YOUR READERS.

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

Unfortunately, this letter was not read by the same individual who had seen the first one, two months before. At any rate, it was filed in the same place, and forgotten.

III

Hallowe'en is a good time for a rumble. There's too many kids around for the cops to keep track of all of them, and if you're picked up carrying a knife or a length of tire chain or something, why, you're on your way to a Hallowe'en party and you're in costume. You're going as a JD.

The problem was this schoolyard. It was a block wide, with entrances on two streets. The street on the north was Challenger territory, and the street on the south was Scarlet Raider territory, and both sides claimed the schoolyard. There had been a few skirmishes, a few guys from both gangs had been jumped and knocked around a little, but that had been all. Finally, the War Lords from the two gangs had met, and determined that the matter could only be settled in a war.

The time was chosen: Hallowe'en. The place was chosen: the schoolyard. The weapons were chosen: pocket knives and tire chains okay, but no pistols or zip-guns. The time was fixed: eleven P.M. And the winner would have undisputed territorial rights to the schoolyard, both entrances.

The night of the rumble, the gangs assembled in their separate clubrooms for last-minute instructions. Debs were sent out to play chicken at the intersections nearest the schoolyard, both to warn of the approach of cops and to keep out any non-combatant kids who might come wandering through.

Judy Canzanetti was a Deb with the Scarlet Raiders. She was fifteen years old, short and black-haired and pretty in a movie-magazine, gum-chewing sort of way. She was proud of being in the Auxiliary of the Scarlet Raiders, and proud also of the job that had been assigned to her. She was to stand chicken on the southwest corner of the street.

Judy took up her position at five minutes to eleven. The streets were dark and quiet. Few people cared to walk this neighborhood after dark, particularly on Hallowe'en. Judy leaned her back against the telephone pole on the corner, stuck her hands in the pockets of her Scarlet Raider jacket and waited.

At eleven o'clock, she heard indistinct noises begin behind her. The rumble had started.

At five after eleven, a bunch of little kids came wandering down the street. They were all about ten or eleven years old, and most of them carried trick-or-treat shopping bags. Some of them had Hallowe'en masks on.

They started to make the turn toward the schoolyard. Judy said, "Hey, you kids. Take off."

One of them, wearing a red mask, turned to look at her. "Who, us?"

"Yes, you! Stay out of that street. Go on down that way."

"The subway's this way," objected the kid in the red mask.

"Who cares? You go around the other way."

"Listen, lady," said the kid in the red mask, aggrieved, "we got a long way to go to get home."

"Yeah," said another kid, in a black mask, "and we're late as it is."

"I couldn't care less," Judy told them callously. "You can't go down that street."

"Why not?" demanded yet another kid. This one was in the most complete and elaborate costume of them all, black leotards and a yellow shirt and a flowing: black cape. He wore a black and gold mask and had a black knit cap jammed down tight onto his head. "Why can't we go down there?" this apparition demanded.

"Because I said so," Judy told him. "Now, you kids get away from here. Take off."

"Hey!" cried the kid in the black-and-yellow costume. "Hey, they're fighting down there!"

"It's a rumble," said Judy proudly. "You twerps don't want to be involved."

"Hey!" cried the kid in the black-and-yellow costume again. And he went running around Judy and dashing off down the street.

"Hey, Eddie!" shouted one of the other kids. "Eddie, come back!"

Judy wasn't sure what to do next. If she abandoned her post to chase the one kid who'd gotten through, then maybe all the rest of them would come running along after her. She didn't know what to do.

A sudden siren and a distant flashing red light solved her problems. "Cheez," said one of the kids. "The cops!"

"Fuzz!" screamed Judy. She turned and raced down the block toward the schoolyard, shouting, "Fuzz! Fuzz! Clear out, it's the fuzz!"

But then she stopped, wide-eyed, when she saw what was going on in the schoolyard.

The guys from both gangs were dancing. They were jumping around, waving their arms, throwing their weapons away. Then they all started pulling off their gang jackets and throwing them away, whooping and hollering. They were making such a racket themselves that they never heard Judy's warning. They didn't even hear the police sirens. And all at once both schoolyard entrances were full of cops, a cop had tight hold of Judy and the rumble was over.

Judy was so baffled and terrified that everything was just one great big blur. But in the middle of it all, she did see the little kid in the yellow-and-black costume go scooting away down the street.

And she had the craziest idea that it was all his fault.

Captain Hanks was still in his realistic cycle this morning, and he was impatient as well. "All right, Stevenson," he said. "Make it fast, I've got a lot to do this morning. And I hope it isn't this comic-book thing of yours again."

"I'm afraid it is, Captain," said Stevenson. "Did you see the morning paper?"

"So what?"

"Did you see that thing about the gang fight up in Manhattan?"

Captain Hanks sighed. "Stevenson," he said wearily, "are you going to try to connect every single time the word 'scorpion' comes up? What's the problem with this one? These kid gangs have names, so what?"

"Neither one of them was called 'The Scorpions,'" Stevenson told him. "One of them was the Scarlet Raiders and the other gang was the Challengers."

"So they changed their name," said Hanks.

"Both gangs? Simultaneously? To the same name?"

"Why not? Maybe that's what they were fighting over."

"It was a territorial war," Stevenson reminded him. "They've admitted that much. It says so in the paper. And it also says they all deny ever seeing that word on their jackets until after the fight."

"A bunch of juvenile delinquents," said Hanks in disgust. "You take their word?"

"Captain, did you read the article in the paper?"

"I glanced through it."

"All right. Here's what they say happened: They say they started fighting at eleven o'clock. And they just got going when all at once all the metal they were carrying—knives and tire chains and coins and belt buckles and everything else—got freezing cold, too cold to touch. And then their leather jackets got freezing cold, so cold they had to pull them off and throw them away. And when the jackets were later collected, across the name of the gang on the back of each one had been branded 'The Scorpion.'"

"Now, let *me* tell *you* something," said Hanks severely. "They heard the police sirens, and they threw all their weapons away. Then they threw their jackets away, to try to make believe they hadn't been part of the gang that had been fighting. But they were caught before they could get out of the schoolyard. If the squad cars had showed up a minute later, the schoolyard wouldn't have had anything in it but weapons and jackets, and the kids would have been all over the neighborhood, nice as you please, minding their own business and not bothering anybody. *That's* what happened. And all this talk about freezing cold and branding names into jackets is just some smart-alec punk's idea of a way to razz the police. Now, you just go back to worrying about what's happening in this precinct and forget about kid gangs up in Manhattan and comic book things like the Scorpion, or you're going to wind up like Wilcox, with that refrigerator business. Now, I don't want to hear any more about this nonsense, Stevenson."

"Yes, sir," said Stevenson.

The reporter showed up two days later. He was ushered into the squad room, where he showed his press card to Stevenson, smiled amiably and said, "My editor sent me out on a wild-goose chase. Would you mind chatting with me a couple minutes?"

"Not at all," said Stevenson.

The reporter, whose press card gave his name as Tom Roberts, settled himself comfortably in the chair beside Stevenson's desk. "You were the one handled that bank job down the street back in June, weren't you?"

Stevenson nodded.

Roberts gave an embarrassed chuckle and said, "Okay, I've got just one question. You answer no, and then we can talk about football or something. I mean, this is just a silly wild-goose chase, frankly. I'm a little embarrassed about it."

"Go ahead and ask," Stevenson told him.

"Okay, I will. Was there the word 'scorpion' connected with that bank job at all? In any way at all."

Stevenson looked at the reporter and smiled. He said, "As a matter of fact, Mr. Roberts, there was."

Roberts blinked. "There was?"

"Yes, indeedy. There certainly was." And Stevenson told him the full story of the bank job.

"I see," said Roberts dazedly when Stevenson was finished. "I see. Or, I don't see. I don't see it at all."

"Your turn," Stevenson told him. "Now you tell me what made you ask that."

"This," said Roberts. He reached into the inside pocket of his sport jacket and withdrew a business-size envelope, which he handed over to Stevenson.

It was another crank letter, in the same newspaper clipping form as the first two. It read:

Dear Mr. Editor,

The bad boys were captured. They could not escape the Scorpion. I left the mark of the Scorpion on their jackets. Criminals fear the mark of the Scorpion. They cannot escape. This is my third letter to you. You should warn all criminals to leave the city. They cannot escape the Scorpion. WARN YOUR READERS.

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

Stevenson read the letter. "Well, well," he said.

"He says that's the third letter," Roberts pointed out. "We asked around in the office, and we found out who got the first two. They were both back a ways. The first one was early in the summer, and the guy who read it remembered it said something about a bank robbery. So I was sent out this morning to check up on bank robberies in June and July. You're the third one I've talked to this morning. The first two figured me for some kind of nut."

"My Captain figures me the same way," Stevenson told him. "What about the second letter? Or, wait, don't tell me, I'll tell you. It's that guy in August, the one who ran amok over in Canarsie."

"Right you are," said Roberts. "How did you know?"

"I was there. He left his mark on the rifle stock."

"Okay," said Roberts. "So there's something in it, after all."

"There's *something* in it," said Stevenson. "The question is, what?"

"Well," said Roberts, "what have we got so far? Somebody—call it person or persons unknown, for the fun of it—is stepping in every once in a while when there's a crime being committed. He stops it. He calls himself the Scorpion, and he uses some pretty dizzy methods. He melts automobile tires, makes a rifle too hot to hold, makes knives and leather jackets ice cold—how in heck does he do things like that?"

"Yeah," said Stevenson. "And just incidentally, who is he?"

"Well," said Roberts, "he's a kid, that much is obvious. That whole letter *sounds* like a kid. Talking about 'the bad boys' and stuff like that."

"What do you figure, some scientist's kid maybe?"

"Maybe," said Roberts. "His old man is working on something in his little old laboratory in the cellar, and every once in a while the kid sneaks in and makes off with the ray gun or whatever it is." Roberts laughed. "I feel silly even talking about it," he said.

"I'd feel silly, too," Stevenson told him, "if I hadn't seen what this kid can do."

"Can we work anything out from the timing?" Roberts asked him. "He seems to show up once every couple of months."

"Let me check."

Stevenson went over to the filing cabinet and looked up the dates. "The bank job," he said, "was on Wednesday, June 29th. At eleven o'clock in the morning. That Higgins

guy was on—here it is—Friday, August 5th, around noon. And this last one was on Hallowe'en, Monday, October 31st, at eleven o'clock at night."

"If you can see a pattern in there," Roberts told him, "you're a better man than I am."

"Well, the first two," Stevenson said, "were in the daytime, during the summer, when school was out. That's all I can figure."

"Why just those three?" Roberts asked. "If he's out to fight crime, he's pretty inefficient about it. He's only gone to work three times in four months."

"Well, he's a kid," said Stevenson. "I suppose he has to wait until he stumbles across something."

"And then rush home for Daddy's ray gun?"

Stevenson shook his head. "It beats me. The only one that makes sense is the second one. That one was televised. He probably saw it that way. The other two times, he just happened to be around."

"I don't know," said Roberts. "Does a kid happen to be around twice in four months when there's crimes being committed? Now, the Hallowe'en thing, I can see that. A kid is liable to be out wandering around, maybe go off to a strange neighborhood after he's done with his trick-or-treat stuff. Hallowe'en is a good time for a kid to see some other kids breaking a law. And the thing in Canarsie, like you say, he probably saw that on television. But what about the bank job?"

"That was the first," said Stevenson thoughtfully. "That was what set him off. He was there at the time. Just by accident. And he saw they were getting away, so he zapped them. And right away he put the drama into it, right on the spur of the moment he decided to be the Scorpion. Then he sent the letter to your paper. But nothing else happened, and the paper didn't print anything about his letter or what he'd done, and he kind of forgot about it. Until he was watching television and saw the Higgins thing. Pow, the Scorpion rides again. And then it died down again until a couple of nights ago he saw the rumble, and pow all over again."

"What you're saying," Roberts told him, "is that this kid wanders around with Daddy's zap gun all the time. That doesn't seem very likely."

"Face it," said Stevenson. "Daddy's zap gun isn't the likeliest thing I ever heard of, either. I don't know how the kid does this. For that matter, it's only an educated guess that it's a kid we're after."

"Okay," said Roberts. "So what do we do now?"

"Now," said Stevenson, "I think we talk to the captain. And then I have a feeling we'll be talking to the FBI."

IV

Judy Canzanetti was a frightened girl. First, there had been that crazy thing in the schoolyard, and then being dragged in by the police, and then being chewed out by Mom, and now here she was being dragged in by the police again, for absolutely nothing at all.

They were all there, in the big empty room like a gymnasium in the police station, the guys and debs from both gangs, all milling around and confused. And the cops were taking all the kids out one at a time and questioning them.

When the cop pointed at her and said, "Okay. You next," Judy almost broke into tears.

This wasn't like anything she knew or anything she could have expected. This wasn't like after the rumble, with the guys wisecracking the cops, and nothing to worry about but a chewing-out from Mom. This was scary. They were taking people out one at a time to question them. And nobody was coming back into the room, and who knew what happened to you when it was your turn?

"Come on," said the cop. "Step along."

She stepped along, numb and miserable.

There were four men in the room to which she was led. They were sitting behind a long table, with notebooks and pencils and ashtrays on the table. In front of them was a straight-backed armless chair. The cop sat her down in the chair, and left the room.

One of the men said, "Your name is Judy Canzanetti, is that right?"

"Yes, sir." It came out a whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes, sir."

"You don't have to be frightened, Judy," said the man. "You aren't going to be accused of anything. My name is Marshall, Stephen Marshall. This gentleman on my right is Stewart Lang. We're with the FBI. That gentleman there is Mr. Stevenson, and he's a detective from Brooklyn. And that there is Mr. Roberts, and he's a reporter. And we all simply want to ask you one or two questions. All right?"

The man was obviously trying to calm her down, make her relax. And he succeeded to some extent. Judy said, "Yes, sir," in a small voice and nodded, no longer quite so frightened.

None of the four men were particularly frightening in appearance. The two FBI men were long and lean, with bleak bony faces like cowboys. The detective was a short worried-looking man with a paunch and thinning black hair. And the reporter was a cheerful round-faced man in a loud sport coat and a bow tie.

"Now," said Marshall, "you were present at the time of the gang fight on Hallowe'en, is that right?"

"Yes, sir. Well, no, sir. Not exactly. I was down at the corner."

Mister Marshall smiled briefly. "On lookout?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I see. And do you remember seeing anyone present at all aside from the boys in the two gangs and the police?"

"No, sir. That is, not except a bunch of little kids. They came along just before the co—the police."

"A bunch of little kids?"

The detective named Stevenson said urgently, "Did you recognize any of them?"

"No, sir. They weren't from around the neighborhood."

Marshall said, "You'd never seen them before?"

"No, sir. They were just a bunch of little kids. Grade school kids. They were out with costumes on and everything, playing trick-or-treat."

"Did they go near the schoolyard at all?"

"No, sir. Except for one of them. You see, I was supposed to keep people away, tell them to go around the other way. And these kids came along. I told them to go around the other way, but they said they had to get to the subway."

"The subway?" echoed Stevenson.

"Yes, sir. They said they were out too late anyway and it was a long way to go to get home."

The man named Marshall said, "You said one of them *did* go down by the schoolyard?"

"Yes, sir. I told them all to go around the other way and the one kid said, 'Hey, they're fighting,' or something like that, and he ran down the street. I tried to stop him. But he got away from me."

"And then what happened?" asked Stevenson.

"Then I saw the fuzz—the police coming. I ran down to warn everybody. And all the guys were jumping around throwing their coats away."

"And the little boy?"

"I didn't see him at all any more. Except after the police came. I saw him go running around the corner."

"What did this boy look like?" Stevenson asked.

"Gee, I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"No, sir. He was in his Hallowe'en costume."

The four men looked at one another. "A costume," said the one named Roberts, the reporter. "My God, a *costume*."

"Yes, sir," said Judy. "It was all black and gold. Tight black pants and a yellow shirt and a black cape and a funny kind of mask that covered his face, black and gold. And a kind of cap like maybe a skull cap on his head, black, only it was knit. Like the sailors wear in the Merchant Marine."

"Black and gold," said Roberts. He seemed awed by something.

"So you can't identify this boy at all," said Stevenson forlornly.

"One of the other kids called him Eddie," she said, suddenly remembering.

They spent fifteen minutes more with her, going over the same ground again and again, but she just didn't have any more to tell them. And finally they let her go.

Mr. Featherhall and Miss English were distant but courteous. It was, after all, banking hours. On the other hand, these four men were police and FBI, on official business.

"It *has* been a rather long time," Featherhall objected gently. "Well over four months."

"It seemed to me," said Miss English, "that the police took the names of all the people who'd been here at the time of the robbery."

"There may have been other people present," suggested Marshall, "who left before the confusion was over. There are any number of people in this world who like to avoid being involved in things like this."

"I can certainly appreciate their position," said Miss English, reminiscently touching her fingertips to her head.

"Miss English was very brave," Featherhall told the policemen. "She created the diversion that spoiled their plans."

"Yes, we know," said Marshall. "We've heard about what you did, Miss English."

"To tell you the truth," she said primly, "I was most concerned about the boy. To be exposed to something like that at his tender—"

"Boy?" interrupted Stevenson rudely. "Did you say *boy*?"

"Why, yes," said Miss English. "There was a little boy in here at the time, with his mother. Didn't you know?"

"No, we didn't," said Marshall. "Could you describe this boy?"

"Well, he was—well, not more than ten years old, if that. And he—well, it has been a long time, as Mr. Featherhall said. He was just a child, a normal average child."

"Not exactly average," said Stevenson cryptically.

"You said he was in here with his mother," said Marshall.

"That's right. I've seen her in here a number of times."

"Yes, of course," said Marshall.

"Has she been here since the robbery?" asked Stevenson.

"Yes, I believe she has."

"So that you would recognize her if you saw her again."

"Yes, I would. I'm sure I would. She almost always comes in with the boy. Or, no, she doesn't, not any more. Not since school started. But she did all summer."

"She comes in often, then."

"I believe so," said Miss English. "Fairly often."

Marshall produced a small card, which he handed to Miss English. "The next time she comes in," he said, "we'd appreciate it if you'd call us at that number. Ask for me, Mr. Marshall."

"I will," said Miss English. "I surely will."

The four of them sat talking in Marshall's office.

Tom Roberts had his shoes off, his feet on the windowsill, his spine curved into the chair and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He had one eye closed and was sighting between his socked feet at the building across the way.

"The thing that bothers me," he said, the cigarette waggling in his mouth, "is just that I'm sure as I can be that I'll never get to write a word of this story. You gimlet-eyed

types will clamp down on this kid, and that'll be the end of it. Security, by George. National defense. I wonder whatever happened to freedom of the press."

"The press overworked it," Marshall told him.

"The thing is," said Lang, "whatever weapon or machine this boy is using, it's something that the government knows absolutely nothing about. We've sent up a report on the effects of this thing, whatever it is, and there's been the damnedest complete survey of current government research projects you can imagine. There is nothing at all like it even on the drawing boards."

"Whatever the boy is using," said Marshall, "and wherever he got it from, it isn't a part of the government's arsenal of weapons."

"Which it *has* to be," Lang added. "Can you imagine a weapon that selectively increases or decreases the temperature of any specific object or any specific *part* of an object? From a *distance*? I wouldn't like to be sitting on a stockpile of hydrogen warheads with somebody aiming that weapon at me. He simply presses the 'hot' button, and blooey!"

"You see a jet bomber coming," said Marshall. "You point the weapon, press the 'cold' button, and flame-out. That pilot bought the farm."

"What *I'd* like to know," said Lang, "is where he got his hands on this thing in the first place. Not only is there no machine or weapon we know of which can do this sort of thing, but our tame experts assure us that no such machine or weapon is possible."

"Great," said Stevenson. "We're looking for a ten-year-old kid armed with a weapon that no adult in the country could even imagine as possible."

The phone rang at that point, and for a second no one moved. They all sat and looked at the jangling phone. Then Marshall and Lang moved simultaneously, but it was Marshall who answered. "Marshall here."

The others watched him, heard him say, "Yes, Miss English. Right." And reach forward on the desk for pad and pencil. "Right, got it. You're sure that's the one? Right. Thank you very much."

Marshall cradled the phone, and looked at the others. "The woman came in. Her name is Mrs. Albert J. Clayhorn, and she lives on Newkirk Avenue. Miss English said the number would be near East 17th."

"Five blocks from the bank," said Stevenson.

"And about eighty blocks from Higgins' house," said Roberts. "That's why it took him so long to go to work that time. He saw what was happening on television, grabbed his weapon and his trusty bike and went riding out to Canarsie. The Scorpion rides again!"

Marshall looked at his watch. "It's only a little after one," he said. "We can talk to the mother before the boy comes home."

"Right," said Stevenson, getting to his feet.

V

Mrs. Elizabeth Clayhorn was a short, roundish, pleasant-faced woman in a flower-pattern apron. She looked at the identification Marshall showed her, and smiled uncertainly. "FBI? I don't under—Well, come in."

"Thank you."

The living room was neat and airy. The four men settled themselves.

Marshall, uncomfortably, was the spokesman. "I'm going to have to explain this, Mrs. Clayhorn," he said, "and frankly, it isn't going to be easy. You see—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "Well, here's the situation. Someone in New York has a rather strange machine of some sort—well, it's sort of a heat machine, I suppose you could say—and we've traced it, through its use, to, uh—well, to your son."

"To Eddie?" Mrs. Clayhorn was looking very blank. "Eddie?"

"I take it," said Marshall, instead of answering, "that your son hasn't told you about this machine."

"Well, no. Well, of course not. I mean, he's just a little boy. I mean, how could he have any sort of machine? What is it, a blowtorch, something like that?"

"Not exactly," said Marshall. "Could you tell me, Mrs. Clayhorn, what your husband does for a living?"

"Well, he runs a grocery store. The Bohack's up on Flatbush Avenue."

"I see."

Lang took over the questioning. "Are there any other persons living here, Mrs. Clayhorn? Any boarders?"

"No, there's only the three of us."

"Well, is Eddie interested in anything of a, well, a scientific nature? In school, perhaps?"

"Oh, Lord, no. He hasn't had any real science subjects yet. He's only in the fifth grade. His best subject is history, but that's because he likes to read, and history is all reading. He got that from me, I read all the time."

"He doesn't have one of these junior chemistry sets, then, or anything like that?"

"No, not at all. He just isn't interested. We even got him an Erector set last Christmas, and he played with it for a day or two and then gave it up completely and went back to reading."

"The thing is," said Stevenson, with ill-concealed desperation, "he does have this machine."

"Are you sure it's Eddie?"

"Yes, mam, we're sure."

"Mrs. Clayhorn," said Marshall, "the boy does have this machine. The government is very interested in it, and—"

"Well, I don't see how a ten-year-old boy—but if you say so, then I suppose it's so. Of course, he'll be home from school at three-thirty. You could ask *him*, if you want."

"We'd rather not, just yet," said Marshall. "We think it might not be the best idea. As you say, Eddie is very interested in reading. He's been using this machine, and, uh, well, he's been making a big secret out of it, like the characters in comic books. We wouldn't want to spoil that secret for him, at least not until we actually have the machine in our own possession."

"I see," said Mrs. Clayhorn doubtfully.

"Mam," said Stevenson, "we don't have any sort of search warrant. But we would like to take a look in Eddie's room, with your permission."

"Well, if you really think it's important—"

"It is," said Marshall.

"Then, I suppose it's all right. It's the door on the right, at the end of the hall."

The three men, feeling large and cumbersome, searched the boy's room. It was a boy's room, nothing less and nothing more. The closet floor and shelves were stacked with comic books, there were baseball trading cards in the top bureau drawer, there were pennants on the walls. There was no heat machine, nor any hint of a heat machine.

"I just don't know," said Marshall at last.

"Unless he carries it all the time," said Lang.

"Sure," said Stevenson. "That's why he had it with him in the bank that day."

"Maybe," said Marshall. "I just don't know. You know, I don't really believe there *is* a machine."

"Of course there is," said Stevenson. "We've seen what it can do."

"Oh, I'm not denying the boy caused those things. But I just have the completely insane conviction that there isn't any machine." Marshall shrugged. "Ah, well, never mind. Let's go back and soothe the mother."

They soothed her, which took some doing, not because she was at all worried, but because she was so curious she could hardly sit still. But Marshall, by looking very stern and official, and by speaking in round long-syllabled sentences, finally convinced her that the welfare of the nation was absolutely dependent upon her not mentioning anything at all about this visit to Eddie, under any circumstances.

"We'll be back to talk to the boy in a day or two," Marshall told her. "In the meantime, we'd prefer him not to be forewarned."

"If you say so," she said, frowning.

The school principal, a gray battleship named Miss Evita Dexter, was irate. The idea that pornographic materials were being sold in *her* schoolyard was absurd. It was ridiculous. It was unheard-of.

Stevenson assured her that, adjectives notwithstanding, it was happening. And they were going to have a shakedown of the student body whether Miss Dexter liked it or not. Detective-Sergeant Stevenson and his associates, Marshall and Lang, were going to go through the student body with a fine tooth comb.

Neither Marshall nor Lang had mentioned the fact that they were from the FBI.

The search began at nine forty-five in the morning, and ended at ten past twelve.

On the persons of three eighth-grade boys, they found pornographic photos.

On the person of Eddie Clayhorn, they found absolutely nothing....

Abner Streitman Long was a government expert. He was more or less a government expert in the ready reserve, since he had never once been called upon to use his expertise for the government.

Not until now.

Abner Streitman Long was Resident Professor of Psychology at Mandar University. He was also one of the world's foremost and best-known experimenters in the area of parapsychology, also called Extra-Sensory Perception, also called psionics.

The government, as a matter of principle, didn't believe in psionics. But the government, also as a matter of principle, kept a psionics expert handy, just in case.

The "just in case" had maybe happened.

Professor Long sat in Marshall's office and listened stolidly to the problem. The expert was a tall, barrel-chested man with a fantastic shock of white hair exploding out in all directions from his head. His nose was bulbous, his jaw out-thrust, his eyes deepset, his ears hairy, his hands huge and his feet huger. He looked like a dressed-up lumberjack, of the old school.

He listened, and they talked, and every once in a while he nodded, and said, "Huh." His voice was, predictably, basso profundo.

Then they were finished, and Professor Long summed it all up. "He changes the temperature of objects. Yes?"

"Yes," said Marshall.

"You looked for a machine. Yes?"

"Yes, and we didn't find it."

"And your thermodynamics people said no such machine could exist anyway, yes?"

"That's right."

"Then why did you look for it?"

"Because," said Marshall desperately, "we'd seen it in action. That is, we'd seen the result of its use."

"Yes," said the professor. He sucked on his lower lip and abstractedly watched his thumbs twiddle. "Pyrotic," he announced at last.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Marshall.

"Pyrotic," repeated the professor. "Yes? Yes. Pyrotic. Do you know what that is?"

"No," said Marshall.

"Good," said the professor. "Neither do I. But I have a theory. There are more theories than there are phenomena. That always happens. But listen to this theory. The mind reaches into the object on the molecular level, and adjusts the molecules, *so*. The temperature changes. Do you see?"

"Not exactly," said Marshall doubtfully.

"Neither do I. Never mind. I know lots of theories, none of them make any sense. But they all try to explain."

"If you say so," said Marshall.

"Yes. I say so. *Now*. As a psychologist, I will tell you something else. This boy has made this a secret, yes? The Scorpion, he calls himself, and, like his heroes of the comic books, he uses his power for good. Shazam, yes? Captain Marvel."

"Yes," said Stevenson, nodding emphatically.

"Now, what happens if you go to this boy and tell him, 'We know you are the Scorpion? Your secret is out.' What happens then?"

"I don't know," said Marshall.

"Think," suggested Professor Long. "Batman, let us say, or Superman. Quite apart from fighting crime, what is the major task confronting these heroes? That of maintaining the secrecy of their identity, yes?"

The four men nodded.

"Now," said Professor Long, "to the mind of a ten-year-old boy, what is the implication? The implication is this: If the secret of the identity is lost the power of the hero is also lost. This is the clear implication. Yes?"

"You mean this boy wouldn't be able to do it any more if we went and talked to him?" asked Lang.

"I don't say that," cautioned the professor. "I do say this: He will *believe* that he has lost the power. And this belief may be sufficient to destroy the power. Yes?"

"In other words," said Marshall, "you're saying that we can't ask this boy how he manages his stunt, because if we do then he probably won't be able to manage it any more."

"A distinct possibility," said the professor. "But only a temporary possibility. The drama of the Scorpion will not, I imagine, survive puberty."

"But will the *ability* survive puberty?"

"No one can know. No one can even guess."

"Now, here's the thing," said Marshall. "Not downgrading your theories at all, Professor, they are nevertheless still only theories. Frankly, given my choice between an impossible machine and a boy with the power to *think* things hot and cold, I'll give the impossible machine the edge. At this point, accepting the idea of the machine, our next move is simple. We go ask the boy to give it to us. From what you say, we can't even do that."

"My best advice," said the professor, "would be to keep the boy under careful surveillance for the next three or four years. Gradually get to know him, carefully work out a long-range program involving his reading habits, the attitudes of his teachers and parents, the sort of external stimuli to which he is—"

"Fellas," said Roberts suddenly. "Oh, fellas."

They turned to look at him. He was in his favorite pose, shoes off, feet up on the windowsill. He was now pointing at the window. "Do you fellas see what I see?" he asked them.

They saw. The window was frosting. It was a rainy, humid mid-November day, and moisture was condensing on the window pane. It was condensing, and then it was freezing.

It didn't take long. No more than a minute passed from the time Roberts noticed the thing beginning until the time it was complete. And then they watched various specific sections of the window defrost again.

It was a very strange looking window. It was covered with frost, but there were lines of bare window, as though the frost had been scraped away. The lines formed letters, and the letters formed words, and the words were:

POO. MOM TOLD ME.

"My God," said Marshall.

"Well, well, well, well, well," said Stevenson.

"Yes," said Professor Long. He nodded, and turned away from the window to look at the door. "You may come in now, Eddie," he called.

The door opened, and Eddie Clayhorn stood there, in civilian clothes. He beamed at the window. "That was tricky," he said.

"So," said Professor Long. "I was mistaken, eh? Exposure does not spoil things, is that it?"

"Sometimes," said Eddie Clayhorn, "the hero has one or two trusted friends on the police force who know who he is and give him tips about criminals. But they never tell anybody."

"Of course!" said Professor Long. "And we are *your* trusted friends. Yes?"

"Sure. But you can't tell my parents or anybody."

Roberts leaned forward and gingerly touched the frosted window. It was cold, very cold. He turned and looked with awed eyes at Eddie Clayhorn.

Slowly, he smiled. "Scorp old boy," he said, "you can just call me Tonto. Kimosabe!"

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