

The interior of the garage was a jumble of tools and supplies: rakes, brooms, garbage pails, the lawnmower Hamilton had borrowed last week.

Hamilton shook his head. "What?"

Conway squinted, then gave a strained smile, as if he'd forgotten the punch line to a joke. His lips were slick with spittle.

"I know how it starts." He lifted his beer and steered it toward Hamilton. "First a good-looking woman, then a wife. Soon a kid. Next a second kid, right? Four walls and a mortgage, a garage full of chores." Conway scowled. "You don't even see it, Russ, but there it is." Conway set the beer on his knee, and when he looked up at Hamilton, the whites of his eyes carried a sickly ultraviolet tint from the bug zapper. "Andy's okay, right?"

"He's okay," Hamilton said. "But—"

"I know." Conway nodded. "You're pissed, you're going over there."

"Yeah."

Conway snickered, and then finished his beer in two swallows.

"I wouldn't."

Hamilton spread his hands. "What, then?"

"Listen, something's wrong with that kid. He's a savage. Runs around naked in the yard, howls like a monkey, bites your son. Where do you think kids get this from?" Conway shook his empty beer can. "Besides, Ruiz is two of you. What do you figure he weighs—two-eighty, three hundred? The man's a full load."

It was true. Hamilton had seen Ruiz walking in his yard on occasion, the short man taking mincing little steps, hobbling as if he were carrying his bulk across a bed of nails. He'd been standing with Conway—it was Hamilton's first time mowing the lawn, and Conway was showing him how to operate the borrowed mower—and they'd watched as Ruiz left through the side door of the house, tottered down the brick steps, and waddled to his automobile, an old Lincoln which sagged when he climbed inside. The engine roared, and Ruiz backed out of the driveway so fast that the rear bumper scraped the street. Conway whistled as Ruiz drove away, passing them. "Guy never missed a meal," he'd said.

Hamilton stared into Conway's open garage. Things in some way seemed rigged.

"I've got to talk to them," he said.

"Why not wait?" Conway held up his hand before Hamilton could