

JC
INC
NOVEL

BY JOHN CLARKSON

AND JUSTICE FOR ONE

ONE MAN'S LAW

ONE WAY OUT

NEW LOTS

REED'S PROMISE

AMONG THIEVES

BRONX REQUIEM

John Clarkson

NEW LOTS

A novel of redemption

NEW LOTS

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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PRAISE FOR NEW LOTS

“*New Lots* is prime-time crime fiction. The action starts fast, roving past drug-ravaged streets, deadly dealers, killers hunting their next target. Clarkson writes with fierce reality, pages filled with characters tabloid-fresh, street-corner dialogue vibrating with the fear which populates the hard zone of the city. *New Lots* is a roller coaster thrill ride from the opening riff down to a pulse-shredder of a climax. As with many of the characters he has created, Clarkson has bagged himself a hit. *New Lots* is the proof.”

– Lorenzo Carcaterra, NY Times best selling author

“*New Lots* will satisfy readers looking for a fast-paced cop thriller with sympathetic leads.”

– Publishers Weekly

“Thrillingly complex drug-war novel set in Brooklyn’s Brownsville section...steel-edged dialogue...intensively researched...hard-driving realism.

– Kirkus Reviews

“Clarkson has created an assortment of vibrant, realistic players – not exactly likeable but certainly watchable...recommended for fans of gritty crime drama.”

– Booklist

“Vibrant, realistic players...Clarkson keeps us caring until the end...Recommended for fans of gritty crime drama.”

– American Library Association

*To Ellen, who reminded me
at a crucial moment
that she married a writer.*

NEW LOTS APARTMENT COMPLEX

Parking Area

Building
E

Gangway

Gangway

Building
C

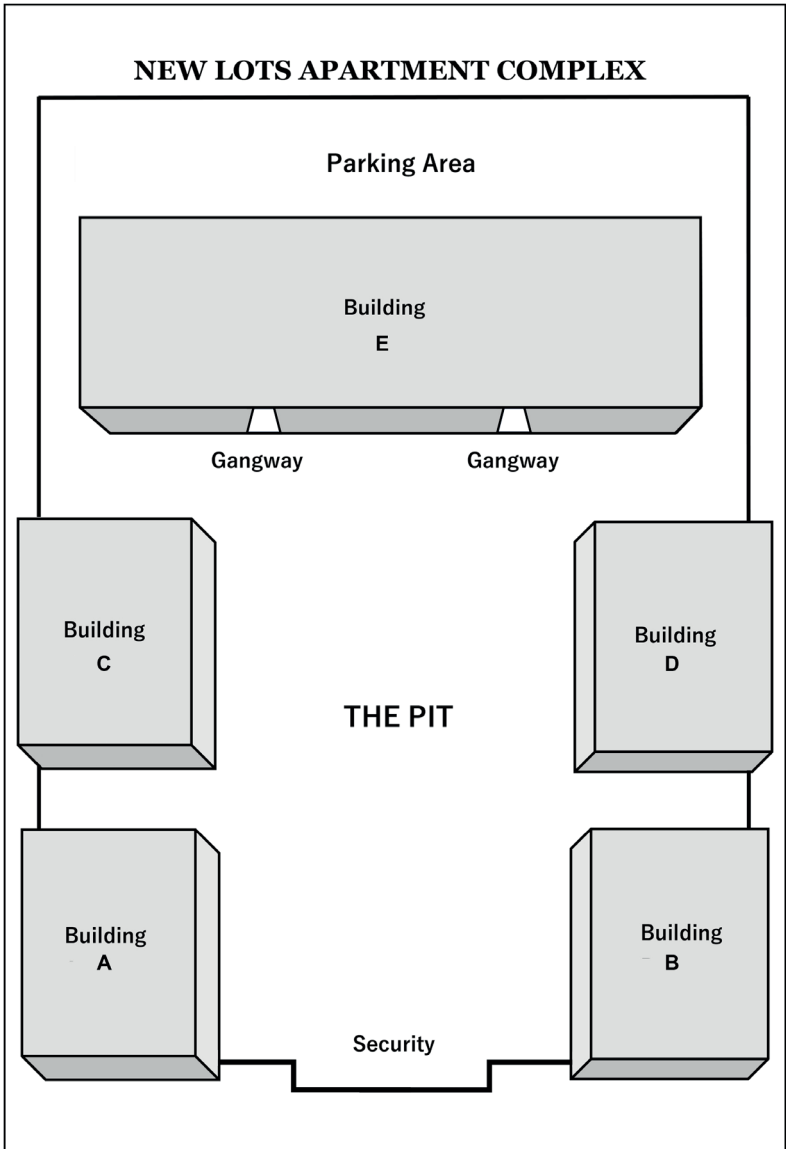
Building
D

THE PIT

Building
A

Building
B

Security



CHAPTER I

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS IN APRIL.

A little out of season, thought Loyd Shaw.

Multicolored, twinkling rope-lights framed the front window of an old neighborhood bar. Behind the window, a sign displayed the words EARL'S PLACE in a glowing red neon script. Behind the neon, black velvet drapes blocked the view into the bar.

Shaw tried to push open the heavy front door. Locked. Yep, he thought, this must be the place.

Shaw rapped on the door. It opened just wide enough to reveal a scowl on the dark, broad face of a white-haired black man.

“Loyd Shaw, friend of Jake’s.”

The frown disappeared, and the door opened.

Shaw stepped into a bar like none he had ever seen. His head bumped into a Christmas ornament hanging from the ceiling. He noted a spray of cardboard shamrocks plastered on a wall, a HAPPY NEW YEAR sign drooped over the back bar, birthday streamers, Valentine’s hearts, tinsel, and more multicolored lights hung on walls and fixtures.

A bar for all seasons.

Shaw breathed in the smell of beer, whiskey, and cigarette smoke. He listened to the Motown music that filled the air.

While Shaw looked around trying to spot Jake Bennett, he thought about all the holidays and occasions represented by the jumble of decorations. Everything but weddings. Shaw smiled. This is a place where wedding vows are broken.

He spotted Big Jake Bennett sitting at the far end of a long wooden bar where it curved around to meet the wall. Shaw politely made his way through the crowd, noticing that, as the only white person in the place, he made a few heads turn his way.

Jake spotted him and yelled out, “Shaw! Get your ass over here, boy.”

Shaw walked into a bear hug. Not surprising, since Jake Bennett was about the size of a black bear.

“I didn’t think you’d come, man.”

“Why the hell not?”

“How’s it going, Loyd?”

Shaw made a face. “The usual shit. Counting the days, brother, counting the days.”

“Until when?”

“Until I put in my damn twenty and get the hell out.”

“Out of what?”

“You know what. The damn job, the bullshit with my wife, all of it.”

“No wonder you’re up in the middle of the night comin’ to see old Jake.”

“These days, there are a lot of nights I can’t sleep, Jake. So why not haul my ass out to Brooklyn and drink down some birthday booze with Big Jake Bennett?”

“And here you are, goddamn it.”

“Here I am. Where am I, exactly, Jake?”

“Bushwick.”

“Sounds right. Whose place is this? This ain’t a regular bar, Jake.”

“No, this is Earl’s place. He only opens it up when he feels like it. Mostly for private parties. Goddamn, I’m glad you came out, Shaw.”

“Me, too. How old are you, man? You been around for so damn long it seems like everything else came after you.”

“Old enough. How’d you get out here?”

“Drove.”

“Shit, now you be careful drivin’ back. Don’t get so drunk you can’t drive.”

Shaw knew that as big and gruff as Jake Bennett was, Jake would, in fact, worry about him driving back.

“I don’t have the energy to get really drunk.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that. What the fuck you lookin’ around at?”

“All these women you’ve got here. Christ, how’s an old man like you get so many good-looking women out here in the middle of the night for your birthday?”

Jake looked sideways at Shaw. “Old? Who the hell you talkin’ to, son?”

“Big Jake Bennett. Three hundred pounds of fun for everyone.”

“Goddamn right. What’re you drinkin’?” Jake shouted at the bartender, “Eddie, get my friend a drink.”

The bartender leaned close to Shaw to hear his order above the party noise.

“Jack rocks, soda back.”

The bartender nodded, grabbed glasses and ice, and started pouring. Shaw looked at his friend Jake sitting on his barstool as if it were attached to his broad rear end, settled in, smiling, sipping double shots of Johnny Walker Black out of a heavy-bottomed old-fashioned glass. Shaw noticed that, as busy as the bartender was, he never allowed Jake’s glass to get empty.

Shaw’s drink and chaser landed in front of him. He took the first cold swig of icy whiskey, leaned back against the bar, and watched a steady stream of friends and relatives come by to wish Jake a happy birthday.

Jake would smile and nod and shake a hand or accept a kiss, then his guest would move on.

Shaw remained standing next to Jake, mostly because he didn't know anybody else in the bar. The partygoers were polite to him, mostly because he stood with Jake.

Shaw kept to himself but couldn't help noticing that one of Jake's female friends seemed to be taking an interest in him. He had no problem returning her gaze, and it didn't seem to make her the least bit uncomfortable.

She was nearly tall enough to look the six-foot-two Shaw eye-to-eye and confident enough to do it without a hint of shyness. She wore a black spaghetti-strap dress that revealed plenty *café au lait* cleavage and long, sleek legs below.

Shaw particularly enjoyed the view when she bent over to kiss Jake's cheek.

She reached out to shake Shaw's hand.

"I'm Denise."

"Loyd. Loyd Shaw."

"Pleased to meet you."

Denise smiled, revealing a right front tooth rimmed in gold. Her smile made Shaw wish she would kiss his cheek, too. The warmth of Denise's smile lingered over him as she turned and melted back into the party. For a moment, Shaw felt less like an outsider.

Jake looked at his friend watching Denise saunter off and said, "It's all that sperm backed up into your brain."

"Maybe I need a black woman, Jakey."

"Why?"

"I have the feeling they are more understanding of a man's needs. A man such as me."

"Dude, you're crazy."

Shaw took a long sip from his tumbler of iced bourbon. "I suppose."

The cold whiskey warmed Shaw's belly. He swung an arm across Jake's broad shoulders. "You are one big happy fucking birthday boy, aren't you?"

Jake laughed a booming birthday laugh that made Shaw laugh, too. He looked around the bar, enjoying the sight of Jake's guests. Although most of the people were Jake's family and close friends, they weren't typical family and friends. Jake Bennett didn't attract typical people. Everybody had dressed with style. Jake wore the only pair of jeans in the bar. These were people who partied in after-hours clubs until dawn. The kind of people who knew about a bar like Earl's Place and were quickly admitted once they tapped on the locked front door.

Suddenly, Shaw felt like an outsider. Like he didn't belong.

"Keep lookin'; you might find something, Loyd. You're welcome to anything I don't want."

"Oh, Jakey, how marvelous it would be. A young, toned, smooth-skinned, voluptuous black girl snuggled up next to me, naked, in postcoital bliss, in some quiet little Bushwick bungalow."

"What kind of bliss?"

"After-fucking-me bliss."

"After laughin' at your..."

"Hey, no racial stereotyping, please."

"And they ain't no innocent women in this bar, Shaw. At least none that I know of."

"Forget innocent. Young is good enough. Young and wicked. Twenties. Late twenties, I don't care. Maybe thirties. Like Denise."

"Oh, boy, here we go."

"What do you think?"

"Hey. It could happen. I saw the way she smiled at you, all nice and friendly. Ask her husband over there; maybe he'll say okay."

Jake's big laugh boomed again. Shaw smiled but didn't laugh back. "Story of my life, Jake. I find no humor in tormenting a man already in torment."

“You wanna get laid, Shaw, just stand where you are and keep drinking with old Jake. I’ll get you laid. Maybe not some young, smooth whatever, but I’ll get the job done.”

“God knows how.”

“So?”

This time they both laughed. But Shaw’s laughter faded quickly. He reached over and picked up his drink from the bar and drained it. The ice had watered it down to the point where it had no bite, but he finished it off anyway.

“Fuck it,” Shaw said. He reached over and squeezed Jake’s meaty shoulder and told him, “So long, big guy. You have a happy birthday. And many more to come.”

“What’s the matter, man? We just gettin’ started.”

“I don’t know. Don’t have the energy to drink until dawn and hope for a miracle. Don’t mind me. Your fat ass is gonna be sittin’ in that spot for a long time, and I want you to enjoy every minute of it.”

Jake answered, “Till the dawn’s early light, brother.”

“Yes, sir, you must meet the first day of your new birth year drunked up, smellin’ of perfumed women and smoke and booze.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“We don’t do that often enough anymore, do we?”

“Wouldn’t still be here if we did.”

“Well, there you go. Blow out the candle, brother, and make a wish. See ya.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, of course I’m okay.”

“Cheer up, Shaw, you’re gonna make it. How long you got left till you’re out?”

“With sick time, vacation days, all that bullshit...thirteen, fourteen months.”

“Shit, you’re good.”

“I am.”

“You know where you are?”

“Yeah, and I know the way home. Have fun.”

“Hey, man, sorry about the situation with Jane. It happens.”

Damn, thought Shaw. Old Jake had to slip that in just as I’m about to leave.

Shaw answered, “I’d say it’s pretty much over. It shits, but what else is new?”

“Hang in.”

“Oh yeah. Not to worry, brother. Take care, Jake. I love you. Happy birthday, man.”

“Thanks for comin’ out to see me.” Jake began to rise from his stool. “Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.”

Shaw pushed him back down. He knew the offer was genuine on Jake’s part, but he said, “No way. I’m not taking you from your party.”

Jake eased back down and gripped his scotch. They shook hands so that no more could be said about the sadness that suddenly surrounded them. Shaw held on to Jake’s solid hand for a couple more beats than he normally would have, then released his grip and headed for the front door. He eased his way through the partygoers. Nobody urged him to stay.

He unlocked the front door himself and stepped out onto the darkened street.

He stood for a moment, letting the cool, early morning April air clear his head a bit, listening to the faint bass beat emanating from the bar. A muffled laugh penetrated the closed door. Denise? Laughing at something her husband said? Shaw heard the lock snap shut behind him.

Now what? he asked himself.

He checked his watch – almost three in the morning. To hell with it, he thought, I’m going home.

He pictured crawling into bed with Jane. He didn’t relish waking her and facing that steely silence that continued to separate them.

Should have built that second bedroom in the back of the loft, he told himself. Nah, no way. That would've just caused open warfare. She'd have started the divorce rolling just to save face. No, he told himself, just go home and keep your distance, pal.

He had parked four or five blocks from the bar. After two blocks, he started looking for his seven-year-old, dark green Mercury Marquis, trying to remember exactly where he'd parked. He passed two black men standing under the streetlight. Seeing them brought to mind that he was a white man walking in a disadvantaged black neighborhood at three in the morning. The two men checked out Shaw. Shaw looked at them for no more than five seconds and judged them to be working men. Maybe four-to-midnight guys getting home after eating a late dinner or an early breakfast. Not a problem.

He started thinking about Jane again and the loneliness her presence caused and the unfulfilled needs. He frowned, wondering just how much longer he could keep the peace. And then the frown deepened into a scowl as he heard the unmistakable low-pitched thud that seemed specifically created to annoy.

Shaw turned and saw the car coming his way. Even at a distance of a city block, he could hear the music. Gangsta rap. Loud. With that booming, thudding bass and the angry, insistent lyrics.

Shaw shook his head. What the hell is that incomprehensible shit? Yelling like that, over and over and over again.

As the car approached, the music blasted out so loudly and the bass boomed so deeply that Shaw could feel the sound waves thudding against his chest. He thought, this is fucking ridiculous.

The car passed by, and three dark faces glared at him, daring Shaw to say something.

He wanted to yell back, turn that shit off. He didn't, but he did say the words in his head. And when they glared at him,

Shaw didn't look the other way. He didn't look down. He lifted his chin and defiantly stared right back at the dark threatening faces. And in his mind, he said, *fuck you, assholes*. In the middle of the night, alone, on the streets of Bushwick.

CHAPTER 2

LESS THAN A MILE FROM WHERE SHAW STOOD GLARING AT THE rolling boom box, six bearded black men wearing knit skullcaps stood in a dark stairwell inside Building A of a five-building housing complex called New Lots Apartments located on Rockaway Avenue in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

Each of the six men occupied a step. At the highest step stood an ex-convict named Walter Harris, who had changed his name to Rachman Abdul X during his last stay at the Eastern Correctional Facility in upstate New York as part of his conversion to Islam.

The five men standing behind Rachman Abdul X were also Muslims. Rachman knew their Muslim names but referred to them as Gunmen. When Rachman pictured each of the men, he thought about how they fired their weapons more than he thought about their names. Efram fired steadily but always squinted at the discharge. Ahmad, a small man, employed a two-handed grip to compensate for his slight size. Abdul, Mahmoud, Suli, each of them had their own quirks.

Rachman had matched each gunman with a specific weapon. The three standing directly behind him gripped Tec-9 guns loaded with thirty-two bullet magazines. The next two held Glock 17 9mm semiautomatics. Rachman gripped a powerful 50 Magnum Desert Eagle. He was the only one strong enough to fire it single-handed. All the weapons had full clips. And each man had a second clip.

Rachman turned to check his gunmen one last time, but the narrow, unlit stairwell was too dark to see anything other than indistinguishable, shadowy forms. He decided they were ready when he heard the last man chamber a round.

Once the weapons were cocked, Rachman slowly led the way up the stairs. He headed for the fourth floor, but by the time Rachman reached the second floor, the blood thudding in his ears made it difficult for him to hear the shuffling footsteps of those behind him. It wasn't just the walk up the stairs that made Rachman's blood pound. The last prison doctor had called it hypertension.

"What's hypertension?" Rachman had asked.

"High blood pressure," the doctor had told him.

More poisonous words from the white devil trying to weaken him. Rachman had ignored the doctor, just as he had ignored all the other prison doctors who had examined him throughout his years in the New York prison system – at Sing-Sing, Dannemora, Attica, Eastern, Rikers, all the way back to the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center which he had entered at the age of sixteen.

Rachman remembered that word now: hypertension. High blood pressure. He didn't need a doctor to tell him living in the New York State prison system would cause pressure and tension. What he felt standing in the darkness with his five gunmen coming up behind him, semiautomatic weapons pressed against their legs, hands on the stair railing, slowly climbing the dark stairs, ready to do what they were about to do – that went way past tension.

Rachman pushed all such thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on climbing up onto each invisible step, slowly, carefully up, up, every so often catching a bit of light seeping out from doors that opened onto the hallways of each floor.

A few more steps up and Rachman stopped outside the door to the fourth-floor hallway.

The sudden stop caused the gunman directly behind Rachman to bump into him. For a moment, the gunman thought he had bumped into the door. Rachman's two hundred-thirty-pound frame hadn't moved an inch.

Rachman hissed, "Careful."

The column stopped without further mishap and stood in the order: Rachman with the .50 Magnum. Then the three Tec-9s. And finally, the two Glockes.

Out in the hallway, about twenty feet from the stairwell, a man named Ellis slouched next to one of the few functioning elevators in the entire five-building complex. Ellis belonged to the crack gang that had taken over New Lots Apartments three months previously. The gang called themselves the Blue-Tops after the color of the caps on their crack vials. They were the ones who had smashed all the lights inside the hallways and stairwells of New Lots Apartments. Less light meant more terror for those who walked the halls of New Lots. The more terrified people were, the easier it was for the Blue-Tops to control New Lots. The darkness also made it easier to keep the cops out of their business inside the dark halls of New Lots Apartments.

Ellis was chosen for his job because of his bulk. Even if someone shot him, he was so big he would block the doorway to the crack apartment.

Rachman stood in the dark stairwell, waiting patiently. He knew Ellis stood outside two apartments commandeered by the Blue-Tops. One apartment for selling crack, the other for smoking it.

He also knew how the Blue-Tops ran their operation. Police pressure and rivalries had driven much of the drug business indoors. It was safer and easier to sell inside rather than out on the street. Steerers surrounded the five-building complex directing customers into the central courtyard, known as The Pit, where gang members would direct them into one of the

five downstairs lobbies. From there, the buyer would take the elevator up to a designated floor, money in hand. Once they entered New Lots, no one was allowed to reach into their pockets. The customer handed the cash to Ellis, who slipped it into a slot in one of the apartment doors. The proper amount of crack would come out the same slot.

Rachman knew everything there was to know about how the Blue-Tops ran their operation. He knew exactly where to send six more of his gunmen so they could cover each of the Blue-Tops working in The Pit and the lobby.

Soon now, Rachman told himself. Soon. He breathed slowly, willing the blood to stop pounding in his ears. For the hundredth time, he pictured the layout of the two apartments. In the first apartment were two rooms. Behind the front door sat one man taking in money and handing out crack – a pair of armed men behind him. In the second room, four people sat around a table measuring and packing the vials of cocaine. Rachman assumed there would also be a runner in that room to fetch more supplies as needed.

Then there was the smoking apartment, next door to the selling apartment: dark, littered with filth, stifling. The only piece of furniture in it was a battered old couch that had been hauled in off the street, something dogs and derelicts had slept on. The windows in the apartment hadn't been opened in four months. Rachman knew that an acrid stench permeated the place, a gagging combination of burning crack, rank body odor, and the human waste deposited in a bathroom that no one ever bothered to clean. He didn't bother estimating how many crackheads might be in there. They did not concern him.

One of the occupants, a glassy-eyed, wasted woman named Marlene who had been smoking for almost two days, worked the crack den. At one time in her life, before she'd lost twenty pounds and her teeth loosened and her skin began to look like

dirty clay and her hair like filthy, rusted steel wool, Marlene had been an attractive girl with a lovely shape. Even now, at three in the morning, she somehow managed to conjure up a smile that helped but wasn't the main attraction. The main attraction was her unbuttoned blouse and lack of a bra.

Marlene had run out of money one hour into her binge and continued to finance her habit by offering oral sex for five dollars. She'd shuffle on her knees between the legs of whatever male crackhead would allow it, kneeling there, stroking his thigh, smiling at him, exposing her breasts while she gently cupped his genitals, softly whispering the required graphic sexual pleas as she asked for five dollars, describing what she would do and how good it would feel and how much she wanted him in her mouth. She'd let them grab her breasts and pinch her nipples, no matter how much it hurt. Anything to make them feel like they owed her something. She asked for five, and some of the men would simply push her away after abusing her for as long as she, or they, could stand it. But some gave her money. Maybe five dollars, maybe only one dollar. And as soon as Marlene had done enough to get ten dollars, she turned those dollars into rock and smoked the crack with frightening need.

Rachman didn't know about the woman working the den, but he knew the misery crack had caused people like her. And when he heard the elevator open out in the hallway, he knew it was almost time to end that misery. For her and for everyone else in New Lots. At least for tonight.

John X stepped out of the elevator and smiled at Ellis. Ellis did not smile back. Nobody smiled when they saw John X. Like the others, John X was bearded, but he wore his beard to hide his pockmarked skin and diminish a pronounced underbite that exposed a badly misshapen row of teeth. John X was bigger than Ellis, which made him very big. Ellis would normally have

pulled his gun the second he saw someone John X's size and demeanor, but John X had been in and out of New Lots buying crack enough times so that Ellis recognized him. As usual, Ellis put out his hand for the money without saying anything.

Unfortunately for Ellis, this time was different.

When John X stepped out of the elevator, he grabbed Ellis's throat with his extra-large left hand and shoved a long-barrel .38 revolver far enough into Ellis's gaping mouth to make him gag.

With the long barrel pressing into the back of Ellis's throat, John X swung the guard around and backed him up against the wall next to the elevator. Ellis instinctively grabbed John X's wrist, but when John X pulled back the hammer of the .38, Ellis froze. John X brought his big, ugly, pockmarked face closer to Ellis and repeatedly nodded at him as if to say, that's right, that's right, don't move. Don't move, and I won't squeeze this trigger and blow off the back of your head.

Rachman heard the sounds of the elevator and Ellis choking on the gun barrel. He shoved open the hall door and walked quickly into the dim corridor, moving fast along the outside wall of the two adjoining apartments. The others followed as he raised the Desert Eagle and fired three booming shots. The high-caliber explosions deafened everybody in the corridor.

Ellis flinched at the booming blasts, likely wondering what the hell Rachman was shooting at, since only he and John X were in the hallway.

But Rachman wasn't shooting people. He was shooting walls. Three shots opened up three holes: one in the cinder-block wall, one in the front door of the selling apartment, and a third in the wall of the smoking room.

The exploding walls and door had the desired effect on the people inside. They dropped as if they had been shot. If they could have burrowed under the hard floors, they would have. One of the Blue-Tops sitting at the table doling out crack rocks

and counting money dove under the table so quickly that his forehead hit the corner, splitting open a gash that ran from just above his eyebrow to his scalp.

The only person who didn't immediately drop down was the strung-out woman in the smoke room. She froze in her kneeling position, hands covering her ears, and began screaming nonstop.

Her screams were not audible for long.