



# I

'You're my friend, ain't you?' the giant asked.

He had a voice that whined like a round saw cutting through a pine knot.

'What do you need with a friend, as big as you are?' the dwarf kidded.

'I is asking you,' the giant insisted.

He was a milk-white albino with pink eyes, battered lips, cauliflower ears and thick, kinky, cream-colored hair. He wore a white T-shirt, greasy black pants held up with a length of hemp rope, and blue canvas rubber-soled sneakers.

The dwarf put on an expression of hypocritical solicitude. He flicked back his sleeve and glanced at the luminous dial on his watch. It was 1:22 a.m. He relaxed. There was no need to hurry.

He was a hunchback with a dirty yellow complexion, shades darker than that of the albino. Beady black eyes that could not focus on anything looked out from a ratlike face. But he was dressed in an expensive blue linen, handstitched suit, silk-topped shoes and a black panama hat with a dull orange band.

His shifty gaze flicked for a moment on the rope knot at the giant's belly, which was on a level with his own eyes. The giant could make four of him, but he was not scared. The giant was just another sucker as far as he was concerned.

'You know I'm your friend, daddy-o. I'm old Jake. I'm your

real cool friend.' He spoke in a wheezing voice that was accustomed to whispering.

The giant's battered white face knotted into a frown. He looked up and down the dimly lit block on Riverside Drive.

On one side was a wall of big dark buildings. Not one lighted window was visible. On the other side was a park. He could make out the shapes of trees and benches, but he could only smell the flowers and the recently watered grass. A block away was the squat dark shape of Grant's Tomb.

None of that interested him.

The park sloped sharply to the West Side Highway. He saw the scattered lights of late motorists going north toward Westchester County. Beyond the highway was the Hudson River, flickering vaguely in the dark. Across a mile of water was the New Jersey shore. It might have been the Roman walls for all he cared.

He put his ham-size hand on the dwarf's small bony shoulder. The dwarf's back seemed to bend.

'Don't give me that stuff,' he said. 'I don't mean no real cool friend. You is everybody's real cool friend. I mean is you my sure enough, really and truly friend?'

The dwarf wriggled irritably beneath the weight of the giant's hand. His shifty gaze traveled up the huge white arm and lit on the giant's thick white neck. Suddenly he realized that he was alone with a giant halfwit on a dark deserted street.

'Look here, Pinky, ain't Jake always been your friend?' he said, pumping earnestness into his wheezing whisper.

The giant blinked like a dull mind reacting to a sudden apparition. Knobs of scar tissue shading his pink eyes moved like agitated lugworms. His cauliflowered ears twitched. His thick scarred lips drew back in a grimace. Rows of gold-crowned teeth flashed like a beacon in the semidark.

'I don't mean no always-been-your-friend friend,' he whined angrily, his grip tightening involuntarily on the dwarf's shoulder.

The dwarf winced with pain. His gaze flicked up toward the giant's agitated face; but it bounced right off. It lighted for a moment on the twenty-two-story tower of the Riverside Church, rising in the dark behind the giant's back. He became increasingly apprehensive.

'I mean is you my friend through thick and thin?' the giant insisted. 'Is you my friend through smoke and fire?'

The sound of a fire engine sounded faintly from the distance.

The dwarf heard it . . . *smoke and fire* . . . He began to get the connection. He struggled to break from the giant's grip.

'Turn me loose, fool!' he cried. 'I got to split.'

But the giant held on to him. 'Can't split now. You got to stay and back me up. You got to tell 'em for me, friend.'

'Tell who what, you fool?'

'The firemen, thass who. You got to tell 'em how my pa is gonna get robbed and murdered.'

'Shit!' the dwarf said, trying to push the giant's hand from his shoulder. 'Ain't nothing going to happen to Gus, you mother-raping idiot!'

But the giant only tightened his grip; his first finger and thumb closed about the dwarf's neck.

The dwarf squirmed like a pig in a sack, becoming panic-stricken; his beady black eyes bulged from their sockets. He hammered at the giant's thick torso with his puny fists.

'Turn me loose, you big mother-raper!' he screamed. 'Can't you hear those sirens? Are you stone-deaf? We can't be seen together on this plushy street. We'll get nabbed for sure. I'm a three-time loser. I'll get life in prison.'

The giant leaned forward and pushed his face before the face of the dwarf. The scar tissue on his blurred white face seemed

to be jumping with a life of its own, like snakes in a hot fire. His body trembled and his nostrils flared and his eyes gleamed like pink coals as he stared into the beady black eyes of the dwarf.

‘Thass why I been asking is you my friend through thick and thin,’ he whined in a desperately urgent whisper.

The quiet environs of Riverside Drive were shattered with ear-splitting noise as fire engines and police cruisers poured into the street.

The dwarf stopped beating futilely at the giant’s torso and began frantically to fish little square paper packets from his own pockets and eat them up. He stuffed them into his mouth, one after another, chewed desperately and swallowed. His face turned purple as he began to choke.

At the same instant, firemen jumped from the still-moving engines and rushed toward the church, brandishing axes. Some burst through the front doors and rushed about in the black dark 215-foot nave, stumbling over pews and banging into pillars, looking for burning timbers to chop away. Others rushed around the sides of the building, searching for other accesses.

The fire captain was already in the street, shouting orders through his megaphone.

A church sexton came from a dark recess beside the huge front doors where he had been hiding.

He leveled an accusing finger at the giant albino and cried, ‘There’s the man who put in the false alarm!’

The captain saw him but could not hear him. ‘Get that civilian out of the danger zone!’ he shouted.

Two prowl car cops on the alert for trouble rushed forward and seized the sexton.

‘All right, buddy, get back,’ one of them ordered.

‘I am trying to tell you,’ the sexton said through gritted teeth. ‘That big man there put in the fire alarm.’

The cops released the sexton and turned toward the giant.

'What's going on here? Why are you choking that shrimp?' the vocal one asked in a hard voice.

'He's my friend,' the giant whined.

The cop reddened with anger.

The dwarf gurgled as though choking and his eyes popped.

The cop looked from one to the other, trying to decide which one to slug. They both looked guilty, he had no choice.

'Which one of you guys put in the alarm?' he asked.

'He did,' the sexton said, pointing at the giant.

The cop looked at the giant and decided to call the fire captain.

'We got the man who put in the alarm, sir.'

The fire captain called back, 'Ask him where the fire is!'

'Fire?' the giant said as though he didn't know what it was.

'Fire!' the sexton echoed in outrage. 'There isn't any fire! That's what I been trying to tell you.'

The two cops looked at one another. All these fire engines and no fire, they thought. Suddenly one was reminded of that song by Louis Armstrong, 'All that meat and no potatoes . . .'

But the fire captain purpled with rage. He moved toward the giant with balled fists.

'Did you put in the alarm?' he asked dangerously, his chin jutting forward.

The giant released his grip on the dwarf and said, 'You tell him, Jake.'

The dwarf tried to run but one of the cops caught him by the neck of his coat collar.

'I saw him when he did it,' the sexton said.

The captain wheeled on him. 'Why didn't you stop him? Do you know what it costs the city to put all these engines into operation?'

'Hell, look at him,' the sexton replied. 'Would you have stopped him?'

They all looked at him. They understood what the sexton meant. One of the cops flashed his light into the giant's face to see him better. He saw the white face with the Negroid features and white hair. He had never seen an albino Negro. He was astonished.

'What the hell are you?' he asked.

'I'm his friend,' the giant said, pointing at the dwarf struggling in the other cop's grip.

The captain's eyes stretched. 'By God, he's a nigger!' he exclaimed.

'Well, kiss my foot!' the first cop said. 'I thought there was something damn funny about him to be a white man.'

The dwarf took advantage of the distraction and broke from the other cop's grip. He ran around the rear of the fire captain's car and started across the street.

Brakes squealed and a fast-moving car slewed sidewise to keep from running him down.

Two big loose-jointed colored men wearing dark battered felt hats and wrinkled black alpaca suits emerged in unison from opposite sides of the front seat and hit the pavement in identical flat-footed lopes.

They came around the front of their little black sedan and converged on the running dwarf. Coffin Ed reached out a hand and caught hold of a thin, bony arm. It felt as though it might break off in his hand. He spun the hunchback around.

'It's Jake,' Grave Digger said.

'Look at his face,' Coffin Ed said.

'He's been eating it,' Grave Digger observed.

'But he ain't digested it yet,' Coffin Ed concluded, gripping the dwarf from behind by both arms.

Grave Digger hit the dwarf in the stomach.

The dwarf doubled over and began to vomit.

Grave Digger took out a handkerchief and spread it on the ground so that the dwarf vomited into it.

Half-chewed packets of paper came out with bits of boiled tongue and dill pickle.

Suddenly the dwarf fainted. Coffin Ed carried him over to the edge of the street and laid him on the grass border.

Grave Digger carefully folded the vomit-filled handkerchief and inserted it into a heavy manila envelope which he stuck into his leather-lined side coat pocket.

They left the dwarf lying on the ground and moved over to see what the commotion was about.

The giant was saying to the fire captain, 'Jake can tell you, boss. He's my friend.'

'Jake ain't talking,' Grave Digger said.

The giant looked stunned.

'He's a halfwit,' one of the white cops said.

By now the giant was encircled by several cops and a number of firemen.

'Halfwit or not, he's going to answer my question,' the captain said, pinning his bloodshot gaze onto the giant's pink eyes. 'Why did you ring the fire alarm, boy?'

Sweat flowed down the giant's cheeks like tears.

'Boss, I didn't go to start all this,' he whined. 'All I wanted was for somebody to come and stop 'em from robbing and murdering my pa.'

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed tensed.

'Where at?' Grave Digger asked.

'He works for the janitor of the apartment house three doors up the street,' the sexton volunteered.

'He's my pa,' the giant said.

'Shut up, all of you, and let me ask the questions,' the fire captain grated. He leaned toward the giant. He was over six feet



tall but he only came up to the level of the giant's flat nose. 'I want to know why you came here and rang the special fire alarm for Riverside Church?' he insisted. 'You're not such an idiot that you don't know there is a special fire alarm just for this famous church.'

'He told you,' Coffin Ed said.

The fire captain ignored him. His teeth clenched so fiercely the muscles knotted in his purple-tinted jaws. 'Why didn't you phone the police? Why didn't you put in a police alarm? Why didn't you ring some other fire alarm? Why didn't you just yell for help?'

The giant looked bewildered. His flat white face began twitching. He licked a pink tongue across colorless lips.

'It was the closest,' he said.

'Closest to what?' the fire captain rasped.

'Closest to where he lives, obviously,' Grave Digger said.

'This is my business!' the fire captain shouted. 'You keep out.'

'If it's murder or robbery it's our business,' Grave Digger replied.

'Do you believe this idiot?' a white cop asked scornfully.

'It won't take long to find out,' Coffin Ed said.

'I'm going to find out first why he rang this alarm and got all these engines out here,' the fire captain said.

He reached forward with his left hand to clutch the giant in a vise, but he didn't find any place to take hold. The giant's T-shirt was too flimsy and his sweaty white skin was too slippery. So the fire captain just held out his hand with the palm forward as though to push the giant in the chest.

'Who's trying to rob your pa?' Grave Digger asked quickly.

'There's an African and my stepma; they is teaming up on him,' the giant whined.

The fire captain rapped him on the chest. 'But you knew there wasn't any fire.'

The giant looked about for help. There wasn't any.

'Nawauh, boss, I didn't exactly know there wasn't any fire,' he denied. He glanced at the captain's face and admitted, 'But I didn't see any.'

The fire captain blew his top. He hit the giant in the stomach with all his might. His fist bounced back as though he had hit the tire of a truck.

The giant looked surprised.

'There ain't no need of that,' Coffin Ed said. 'He's willing to talk.'

The fire captain ignored him. 'Let's take him, boys,' he said.

A fireman took hold of the giant's right arm while the fire captain looped a left into his hard rubber stomach.

The giant grunted. He reached out his left hand and took the captain by the throat.

'Easy does it!' Grave Digger shouted. 'Don't make graves.'

'Keep out of this,' a white cop warned him, drawing his police revolver.

The captain's eyes bulged and his purpling tongue popped out.

A fireman hit the giant in the back with the flat of his ax. A sound came from the giant's mouth like a wet cough.

Another fireman raised his ax.

Grave Digger caught it by the handle in midstroke and drew his long-barreled, nickel-plated, .38-caliber revolver. He swung the barrel against the back of the giant's hand. The pain went through the giant's hand into the captain's Adam's apple and the captain's head filled with a shower of blue-pointed stars.

The giant's grip went slack and the captain fell.

At the sight of the captain on the ground, tempers flared.

The fireman snatched his ax from Grave Digger's grasp and made as though to chop at him.

From the other side, Coffin Ed's revolver flashed in the dim

light as he warned, 'Don't do it. Don't lose your head. Your ass goes with it.'

The fireman whirled his ax and hit the giant a glancing blow across the back of the neck.

The giant cried like an enraged stallion and began to fight. He elbowed the fireman on his right in the jaw, knocking him unconscious. He couldn't close his left hand, but he flailed out with his left arm and flattened two firemen with axes.

Firemen reversed their axes and began whaling at him with the hickory handles. Some were getting through and making deep purple welts on the giant's sensitive white skin. Firemen were going down from the giant's pumping right fist and bodies were piling up as though a massacre were taking place. Still others closed in. The giant showed no signs of weakening, but he was slowly turning black and blue.

The sexton was standing to one side, wringing his hands and beseeching the irate firemen, 'Be calm, gentlemen, it's divine to forgive.'

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed were doing their best to stop the fracas.

'Easy does it,' Grave Digger was repeating. Coffin Ed was imploring, 'Let the police have him.' But their pleas had no effect.

A fireman hit the giant across the shins. He went down. Firemen swarmed over him, trying to pin his arms behind him. But the muscles beneath his greasy purpling skin were rock hard. Fingers couldn't get a grip. It was like trying to hold a greased pig at a state fair.

The giant got to his hands and knees and pushed to his feet, shaking off firemen like a dog shedding water. He put his head down and started to run, plowing through a rain of blows.

'The son of a bitch ain't human,' a fireman complained.

He got across the sidewalk and stepped onto the grass. His

foot sunk into the belly of the unconscious dwarf. Globules of vomit spewed from Jake's mouth. No one noticed.

He vaulted over the hood of a fire engine and got a lead on his pursuers.

'Stop him, he's getting away,' a white cop shouted.

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed had moved out into the street, anticipating the breakaway. They had the giant blocked.

The giant drew up as though skidding on his heels. For an instant he stood like a cornered animal, his back to the fire engine, looking for a way out. He had the bruised, bleeding, bewildered look of a bull when the picadors have finished.

'Shall we take him?' Coffin Ed asked.

'Hell, let him go if he can make it,' Grave Digger said.

They drew apart and let the giant through.

Cops and firemen were closing in from both ends of the fire engine. The detectives' car stood obliquely in the street and two prowler cars flanked the other side.

The giant leaped onto the hood of the little black sedan. His rubber-soled sneakers gripped. His next leap took him to the top of a white-and-black prowler car. For a brief instant he was caught in the glare of a fire engine spotlight, a grotesque figure in the strained, shocking, ugly position of panic-stricken flight.

Automatically, as though the target were irresistible, a cop drew a bead with his service revolver. At the same instant, as though part of the same motion sprung from another source, Coffin Ed knocked his arm up with the long nickel-plated barrel of his own revolver. The cop's pistol went off. The giant seemed to fly from the roof of the prowler car and crashed into the foliage of the park.

For a moment everyone was sobered by the sound of the shot and the sight of the giant crashing to earth. All were gripped by the single thought – the cop had shot him. Reactions varied; but all were held in a momentary silence.

Then Coffin Ed said to the cop who had fired the shot, 'You can't kill a man for putting in a false fire alarm.'

The cop had only intended to wing him, but Coffin Ed's rebuke infuriated him.

'Hell, you killed a man for farting at you,' he charged.

Coffin Ed's scarred face twitched in a blind rage. It was the one thing in his career which touched him to the quick.

'That's a goddamned lie!' he shouted, his pistol barrel flashing in a vicious arc toward the white cop's head.

There was just time for Grave Digger to catch the blow in his hand and spin Coffin Ed around.

'Goddammit, Ed, control it, man!' he said. 'It's a joke.'

The white cop was being forcibly held by two of his uniformed mates. 'These two black bastards are crazy,' he mouthed.

Coffin Ed allowed himself to be drawn off by Grave Digger, but he said, 'It ain't no joke to me.'

Grave Digger knew that it was useless to explain that Coffin Ed had shot a different boy, one who was trying to throw perfume into his face. He had thought the boy was throwing acid; and he already bore the scars of one acid bath in his face. Everyone in the department knew the straight story, but some of the white cops distorted it to needle Coffin Ed.

The fracas didn't last more than a minute, but it gave the giant a chance to get away. The park dropped steeply from the manicured fringe bordering Riverside Drive through a rocky jungle of brush down to a wire fence enclosing the tracks of the New York Central Railroad's freight lines and the elevated platform of the six-lane West Side Highway.

A cop heard the giant threshing through the brush and shouted, 'He's making for the river!'

The pursuit commenced again. No one had believed the giant's story of robbery and murder taking place.

'Let 'em go,' Grave Digger said bitterly.

'I ain't stopping 'em,' Coffin Ed said. 'With the start he's got now they won't catch him anyway.'

Grave Digger took off his heavy felt hat and rubbed his palm across his sweat-wet short kinky hair.

They looked at one another with the unspoken communication they had developed during the years they had served as partners.

'You think there's anything in it?' Grave Digger asked.

'We'd better try to find out. It'd be a hell of a note if somebody was being murdered during all this comedy we're having.'

'That would be the story.'

Coffin Ed walked over and looked down at the unconscious dwarf. He bent over and felt his pulse.

'What about our friend Jake?'

'He'll keep,' Grave Digger said. 'Let's go. This halfwit Pinky may be right.'

By that time Riverside Drive was wide awake. Vaguely human shapes hung from the dark open windows of the front apartments like an amphitheater of ghosts; and the windows of the back apartments were ablaze with lights as though the next war had begun.

The apartment house they sought was a nine-story brick building with plate-glass doors opening into a dimly lit foyer. The night latch was on. There was a bell to one side above a shiny chrome plate announcing: SUPERINTENDENT. Coffin Ed reached toward it, but Grave Digger shook his head.

Even though the street was packed with fire engines, prowler cars, uniformed cops and firemen, the residents peering from the upper windows watched the two black men suspiciously.

Coffin Ed noticed them and remarked, 'They think we're burglars.'

'Hell, what else they going to think about two spooks like us prowling about in a white neighborhood in the middle of the night?' Grave Digger said cynically. 'If I was to see two white men in Harlem at this time of night I'd figure they were looking for whores.'

'You would be right.'

'No more than them.'

At the side of the building was a narrow cement walk closed

off by a barred iron gate. The gate was locked.

Grave Digger grabbed the top bar with one hand, put a foot on the middle crossbar, and went up and over. Coffin Ed followed.

From somewhere above came the sound of an outraged gasp. They ignored it.

Halfway down the side of the building was a barred window on a level with the sidewalk. Purple light poured out onto the opposite wall in a rectangular bar. They approached it quietly and knelt, one on each side.

The window opened into a room that appeared to have been furnished by the castoffs of decades of tenants. Nothing had escaped. Lowboys and highboys were stacked against the walls, interspersed with marble statuettes, grandfather clocks, iron jockey hitching posts, empty birdcages, a broken glass aquarium, two moth-eaten stuffed squirrels and a molted stuffed owl. On one side was a round-topped dining table, surrounded by a variety of dilapidated chairs, and covered by a faded red silk curtain. Between two doors opening to the kitchen and bedroom respectively stood an old-fashioned organ, atop which was a menagerie of china animals. Opposite were two out-of-date television sets, one atop the other, crowned by a radio from the pre-television age. An overstuffed davenport, flanked by two overstuffed armchairs, was drawn up before the television sets close enough to reach through the screens and manhandle the performers. The linoleum floor was piled with threadbare scatter rugs.

A lamp with a blue bulb burned on a lowboy, vying with a red-bulbed lamp on the dining table. A small fan atop an oak-stained highboy was stirring up the hot air.

The television screens were dark but the radio was playing. It was tuned to a late record program. The voice of Jimmy Rushing issued from the metallic sounding speaker, singing: *'I got that old-fashioned love in my heart . . .'*