

# Compulsion by Meyer Levin

## Chapter One

Nothing ever ends, and if we retrace every link in causation, it seems there is nowhere a beginning. But there was a day on which this story began to be known to the world. On that day Judd Steiner, slipping into class late, took a back seat for McKinnon's lecture in the development of law. Judd sat alone in the rear row, raised a step above the others, and this elevation fitted his inward sense of being beyond all of them.

There was still, from yesterday, a quivering elation, as when you catch your balance on a pitching deck. Not that he had ever for a moment felt in danger of being out of control. No. In the moment of the deed itself, he had been a bit shaken. Artie had been superb.

Judd only wished Artie were here with him now, so they could share a quick wink, listening to McKinnon's platitudes.

McKinnon was being what the fellows thought was brilliant. He was producing one of his sweeping summaries, casting his eye over the entire structure of the law.

From the early and primitive Hebrew concept of an eye for an eye, McKinnon said dryly, "Rather bloodthirsty, these Semitic tribes"—from that early concept to our law of today, was there really a great advance? Instead of an eye, it was the value of an eye, the value of a tooth, the value of a life, that was now exacted from the criminal. And in some cases the ancient primitive code remained intact, a life for a life.

Many of the fellows were making notes—especially those who were taking the

Harvard Law entrance tomorrow. Directly in front of Judd, Milt Lewis was feverishly putting it all down, the hairs standing disgustingly on his fleshy, bent neck.

As the professor talked, Judd's pen too became busy in his notebook. Over and over he drew a hawk. The hawk was streaking down, talons open . . . Where was Artie? Judd had passed Artie's house, and driven past the frat, and he had looked around on campus. Surely nothing had gone wrong. Artie was purposely putting him on pins and needles . . . Judd drew a vulture. The page filled; he turned it and drew a huge, elaborate cross, with an unfurled inscription. In Sanskrit, he wrote, "In Memoriam." At the base of the cross, in elaborate Old English capitals, he drew his initials: J.S.

Then he glanced through the mullioned window. Artie might pass. In any case, Artie had better be on hand after the ten o'clock, as they had agreed. They had everything still to do.

McKinnon had come to a pause; he had lifted up the entire structure of human law and was holding it aloft for them to admire, perhaps not so much the structure itself as his Atlas feat in lifting it. Judd could not help, now, tickling the outstretched arm.

"But granted that the law applies to the ordinary person in society," Judd said, "how would it apply in the case of the superman? The concept of an *Übermensch* in itself means that he must be above ordinary society. If he abided by ordinary laws he could never produce the actions that might in the end prove of the greatest benefit to humanity—not that even benefit to humanity should be a criterion."

McKinnon smiled patronizingly. "By a superman I suppose you mean a powerful historical personality like Napoleon."

Judd was going to interrupt, to debate Napoleon, for wasn't Napoleon's failure a

proof per se that he was not a true superman? But Milt Lewis, always eager to hitch on to someone else's idea, had filled in for McKinnon. "Didn't many of the great American pioneers and industrialists consider themselves above the law?"

"Not exactly," said McKinnon. "Often such a powerful figure, a conqueror or a revolutionist, considered that he was bringing law to the lawless, or adapting old laws to newer human ways. But always you will find such persons at pains to justify their actions in terms of law, rather than by pretending to be above the law." And in the grand sweep of history, he pointed out, even these tremendous and commanding personalities were incorporated, for the general concept of right and wrong, of crime and punishment, remained organic with the social order, resisting individualistic innovations.

"In fact that's a case in point—*Crime and Punishment*. The hero considered himself a kind of superman, and yet he broke down and yielded to the law," parroted Milt Lewis, always ready to switch sides.

"But that's no superman! That's not the conception!" Judd cried. What was Raskolnikov after all but a weak sentimentalist, full of moral and religious drivel? What was his crime but a petty attempt at theft, motivated by abysmal poverty? Where was the superman conception? Raskolnikov's was only a crime with a motive—his need for money. All he had done was to rationalize the murder by declaring that his need was greater than that of the miserly old female pawnbroker's. To be above, beyond mundane conception, a crime had to be without need, without any of the emotional human drives of lust, hatred, greed. It had to be like some force beyond the reach of gravity itself. Then it became a pure action, the action of an absolutely free being—a superman.

Too dense to grasp a concept, they all began gabbling: How could there be such a

person? . . . They didn't get the concept at all; the whole idea was beyond them. Judd almost found himself yelling out the proof to them—"Look at Artie! Look at me!" But instead, he relished the situation inwardly. This was the true enjoyment. To see things from another area of knowledge, from a fourth dimension which none of them could enter.

"Well, it is an interesting speculation," McKinnon was saying with his tight little smile; the hour was over. "As you put it, Steiner, it is a pure concept, something in the abstract. However"—he strove for his summarizing line—"a society of supermen would undoubtedly in turn evolve its own laws."

"Superlaws!" Milt Lewis hawed.

In the corridor, Judd tried to dodge away from Lewis. He had almost got out of the Law building when he felt the thick paw on his arm. Always physically touchy, Judd overreacted, wrenching away.

"Say, Junior, how about a little session, going over those notes?" Milton said.

"I never cram before an exam," Judd stated. "My system is to go out and dissipate."

Milton made some inane remark about geniuses.

Halfway across to Sleepy Hollow, Judd saw Artie—Artie stretched on his elbow on the grass amidst a group of co-eds, who squatted with their legs folded under them. Myra was there and a stupid new little girl, Dorothea, who had a crush on Artie . . . Judd felt a surge of envy amounting almost to hatred. Judd raised his wrist, pointedly looking at his watch. Artie only rolled over, patting the ground for Judd to squat. This Dorothea was reading aloud from *Jurgen*, and all of them had on such knowing smirks, they tittered each time her pink tongue lingered on a reference to Jurgen's sturdy "staff," relishing the

double meaning.

It was one of those moments when Artie looked so golden, so perfect, stretched in his powder-blue pullover, that Judd had an urge in front of all of them to call him Dorian. But he again restrained himself, saying, “Hey, Artie, we’re late.”

“Late for what?” Dorothea asked vapidly.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Artie said, rising to a sitting position.

Judd nearly giggled. If they knew!

“Don’t forget your staff!” Dorothea remarked daringly, rolling her eyes from her *Jurgen* to a silver Eversharp that had dropped from Artie’s jacket on to the grass.

“Thought you girls might want to use it,” Artie said, sending them all into a panic, even Myra smiling. Then Artie was coming along with him to the car. But that silly Dorothea jumped up, smoothing her swishing pleats, and came hurrying after them, calling to ask which way were they going . . .

“This is man stuff.” Artie gave her his dazzling grin, and they left her standing there, holding her *Jurgen* to her chest.

“Some little pest!” Artie lighted a cigarette, exhaled. Judd didn’t inquire how Artie felt. In a sense they were like two medical experimenters who have injected themselves with an untried drug. In himself, it had perhaps produced a slight quickening, but he was holding it well, Judd was sure. In Artie, there was not the slightest sign of an effect. But then, had not Artie secretly tried a dose once or twice before?

“Got the letters?” Artie asked in his voice of snappy action.

Judd tapped the pocket of his sports jacket. He had placed one letter on each side, to avoid any mistake. In the right-hand pocket was the letter telling the victim’s father to go

to Hartmann's Drugstore and wait for a telephone call. In the left-hand pocket was the final letter that would tell him where to drop the ransom. Their job now was to prepare the treasure hunt, leading the father from place to place as he picked up these letters.

"You should have seen me shake your friend Milt Lewis," Judd said. "He wanted to come over tonight and study for the exam."

"That jackass would be a perfect alibi!" Artie said. "You should have let him."

"I thought we'd have something better to do." Judd glanced at Artie, and they both snickered. Then Artie told him to take Ellis Avenue.

The Kessler house was only a block out of their way. Judd would not have driven past that house; in fact, he would have gone out of his way to avoid it. But it was in just such boldness that Artie had it all over him.

As they neared the big yellow brick-and-timber residence, Artie leaned halfway out of the car to get a good look. By now their first letter, the special delivery demanding the ransom, had surely arrived.

The street looked normal. You'd never imagine anything unusual had happened to anyone in that house. Thus, the flash idea came to Judd that fourth-dimensional activities could be taking place within and through all human activity, and leaving no trace.

Even as they coasted slowly past, the Kesslers' limousine turned the corner and pulled into the driveway. "Stop! Hold it!" Artie snapped, but Judd drove on, swearing under his breath, "You gone daffy!"

Artie squirmed around on the seat so he could watch behind. Mr. Kessler got hurriedly out of the limousine—he was carrying a swelling brief case, Artie glowingly declared—and right after him came a tall man whose head angled forward. Artie

recognized him—old Judge Wagner—guessed he was the Kesslers’ family lawyer.

“He’s just been to the bank and got the money!” Artie bounced around, laughing, and squeezed Judd’s knee. “He’s got Judge Wagner with him. Hey, I forgot to tell you, Jocko. Mums told me this morning. The two of them were tearing around the neighborhood last night looking for Paulie. They even came to our tennis court—wanted to know if the kid had been playing with Billy!” Billy was Artie’s little brother, of the same age as the boy they had kidnapped. “Old man Kessler and the old Judge even dragged out Fathands Weismiller!” That was the gym teacher at the Twain School. “They had him bust into the building with them. I think Fats crawled through the window!” Artie leaned back and laughed at the image. “They thought maybe the kid got locked in taking a leak. I told Mums my theory is, Paulie’s run away from home.”

Judd felt slightly piqued that Artie had not come over, first thing in the morning, to share all this with him. “Mums was in a stew this morning,” Artie said. “She was even worried if she should send dear little Billums off to school!”

They had by now reached Judd’s house, an ornate, gabled mansion on Greenwood Street. But instead of stopping, Judd drove on a block to where they had last night, after the deed, parked the rented Willys.

“Every mamma with a brat in Twain is a-twitter.” Artie laughed.

But this disturbed Judd. Surely all the worried mothers would be telephoning the Kesslers. “They’ll keep the phone line busy,” he pointed out.

It was a detail they had only partly foreseen. For to carry out their carefully timed ransom schedule, the Kessler line had to be open for their call. Indeed, their special-delivery letter had instructed Charles Kessler to keep his line unused.

“Ishkabibble,” said Artie.

It was an expression Judd hated. He had wanted this to be a perfect day between them. Sometimes—even in a big thing like this—Artie could suddenly act as if he didn’t care a damn.

But as Judd pulled behind the Willys, Artie glanced up and down the street in his professional way. He was in the game again.

They approached the rented car. It stood in front of a nondescript apartment house, for this block was already outside the exclusive Hyde Park area of mansions. How anonymous, how perfectly innocent the car looked! Gratification arose in Judd at the correctness of their planning. The rented car, the fake identities, were masterful ideas. And just as this car, this shell of metal that contained their deed of yesterday, had been left a totally unaltered entity by the deed, so was the deed meaningless within themselves.

“You want to drive, Mr. Singer?” Judd used the alias, giving Artie a you-first-my-dear-Gaston bow while opening the door. But as he took hold of the door handle, Judd noticed a few small, dark blotches. No, they were surely from something else. But suppose on the wildest chance the car were discovered and under chemical analysis the spots proved . . . ? Last night, in the dark, the washing they had given the automobile, using Artie’s garden hose, had been altogether hasty.

Conquering the sickening repugnance that blood always raised in him, Judd looked into the rear of the car. There were stains on the floor.

“Aw, it could be any kind of crap. Every car is dirty,” Artie said.

“They’re brownish.” Judd felt suddenly depressed.

“All right, we’ll wash it out!” Artie jumped behind the wheel, heading for Judd’s



driveway. Judd hesitated; but it was the noon hour, and Emil would be upstairs at lunch. Anyway, what he did was none of the chauffeur's business.

Artie pulled the Willys up to the garage entrance. Judd glanced at the house. Huge, silent, with most of the shades drawn, the way his father insisted since his mother had died, it had an unoccupied air.

Artie had seized a pail and was running water into it. The maid came out of the house to ask if Cook should fix lunch for the two of them.

Judd felt spied on. "We're busy," he said, keeping his voice polite. "Thanks, but never mind. We'll pick up a sandwich downtown."

"I'll just put some cold chicken on the table." And she gave him that devoted smile of a female who knows better than men what men want.

Artie sloshed the pail of water on to the rear floorboards. Taking a rag, Judd began to rub the spots around the door handle. How could they ever have got there? The image from yesterday, the jet of blood, the whole dreadful mess, intruded for an instant, but he ruled it out from his mind. It was instantly supplanted by an image of himself as a child watching a doctor with a syringe starting to take blood from his mother's arm, and a swooning sick feeling echoed up in him. Judd ruled it all out, out from his mind. He had full control; he could master his emotions completely. He held his mind blank, like breath shut off.

Artie was swearing—the bloody crap wouldn't wash out—and at that moment Emil came down the garage stairs, still chewing on something. "Can I help you boys?" he said through his food.

"No. Never mind. We're just cleaning up a car I borrowed," Artie said, pulling his

head out of the tonneau. “Boy, some party! I guess we kind of messed it up.”

“What are you using, only plain water?” Emil asked, coming close and looking.

“You could use some Gold Dust.”

“It’s wine spots. We spilled some Dago red,” Artie said, laughing.

Emil turned to fetch a box of Gold Dust. “Let me do it for you.”

“No, this is good enough,” Judd said. “It’s nothing. Don’t let us interrupt your lunch.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Emil. But finally the stupid Swede seemed to get the idea; he started back upstairs. Yet he paused to ask if Judd’s Stutz was running all right today, if the squeak that Judd had complained about when he left it in the garage yesterday was gone. “I put a little oil on the brake,” Emil said. “Not too much.”

“It’s fine now—fine, thanks,” Judd said. And to Artie: “Let’s go.”

Artie took the wheel and backed out with a roar. “Christ, you never could back a car! Watch out!” Judd complained.

They drove to Vincennes. The corner they had selected for the first message relay was a large vacant lot at 39th and Vincennes. At the curb stood one of Chicago’s metal refuse boxes, about the size of a hope chest, painted dark green. On one side, stenciled in white, were the words, Help Keep The City Clean.

They got out. Judd drew the letter from his pocket. There were few people on the street, and anyone observing them might think they were only throwing some junk into the box.

Judd lifted the lid. He had brought along a small roll of gummed stationery tape, and now he tried to tape the letter to the underside of the lid. The tape didn’t stick. “Hold

the damn lid!” he snapped at Artie.

“That junk will never hold,” Artie criticized. “Jesus, I can’t leave a single thing to you! Where’s the adhesive, that roll of adhesive!”

It was a roll Judd had taken from the bathroom yesterday, to wind around the chisel blade, the way Artie said, so the wooden end could be used as a club. “You told me to use the whole roll, to make it thick.”

“You stink!”

“We’ve got time to drive over and buy some.”

“Hell with it!” Artie cried. He let the lid drop, nearly catching Judd’s hand. He snatched the envelope from Judd. “We’ll leave out this stop.”

“Then how’ll he know where to go next?” Judd objected.

“When we phone him at home,” Artie snapped, “instead of sending him to this box we send him straight to Hartmann’s Drugstore for the next instruction. That’s all this crappy letter tells him to do anyway.”

“We can’t make any last-minute changes—everything will get all balled up!” Judd felt suddenly panicky. The spots on the car had been dismaying. Now he was becoming depressed.

This Help Keep the City Clean box had seemed to give the entire adventure the proper sardonic flavor, this garbage box of life. The idea had been his own contribution, too. It had come to him a few months ago during one of their sessions. How to make the ransom collection foolproof had been the problem.

Artie, half tight, had got off the subject, telling about some asinine frat party with a new stunt, a “treasure hunt” in which kids were sent all over town to the craziest places,

and in each place they picked up a clue to where they had to go next.

Suddenly Judd had seen it. An actual treasure hunt in reverse! The father chasing from one place to another for his instructions to deliver the ransom! And in the same instant, as the idea itself came to him, Judd had visualized the refuse box. First stop! A portly man, he had imagined him, because during that time they had figured Danny Richman as the victim, and Danny's father—that stuffed shirt, who never opened his mouth except to make a speech full of noble precepts, Polonius in person, even worse than Judd's own old man, if possible—Danny's father was *it*!

Artie had loved the idea. They could just see Richman *père* waddling toward the Help Keep the City Clean box, bending his carcass, pulling up the lid, putting on his pince-nez to read the instructions!

Artie had been wonderful that night, planning all sorts of mad surprises for the father. “Hey, how about he pulls up the lid—we have a jack-in-the-box, a great big jock that jumps up at him!”

Judd improved on it. They could rig up a spring, so that when the box was opened it squeezed a bulb and—right in the face!—a fountain!

But even as Artie had gone on, with more and more ghoulish ideas, another image had crowded into Judd's mind. He had seen the box as the place for the body itself. He had no thought of it as something dead. He had merely visualized the shape, curled up, fitting inside snugly. Of course he had dismissed the image as impractical. In a street box like this, nothing could remain hidden for more than a few hours; someone would come along and open the lid. And afterwards, Judd had thought of the real place, the perfect receptacle for the body. Nevertheless, more than once the image had returned, the curled

boy in the box.

“C’mon!” Artie was already in the car. He was tearing up the letter that should have been in the box, letting bits of it fall to the street.

“Hey! For crissake!” Judd grabbed for his arm. Artie started the car with a jolt and let the bits of paper flutter out a few at a time from his hand, laughing goadingly.

He drove to the main I.C. station at Twelfth Street. There the other letter, containing their final instructions, had to be placed in a certain spot on a certain train.