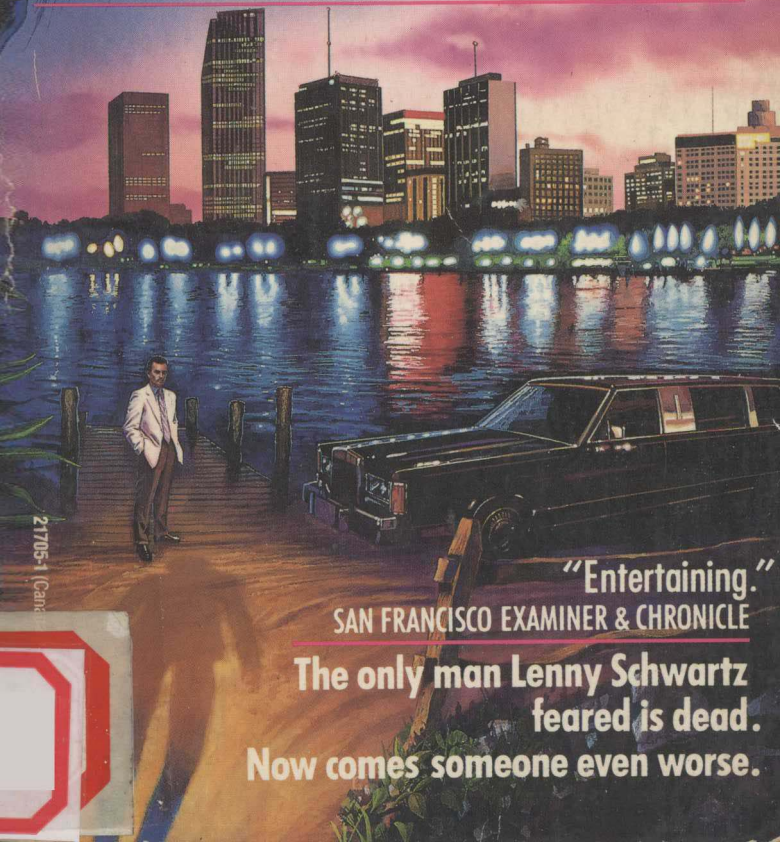


IRVING WEINMAN

Author of VIRGIL'S GHOST

EASY WAY DOWN



21705-1 (Can)

"Entertaining."

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER & CHRONICLE

**The only man Lenny Schwartz
feared is dead.
Now comes someone even worse.**



Irving Weinman

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books
Copyright © 1990 by Irving Weinman

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-82330

ISBN 0-449-21705-1

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Hardcover Edition: January 1991

First Mass Market Edition: July 1992

More praise for Irving Weinman and **EASY WAY DOWN**

“There is some great stuff in **EASY WAY DOWN**—funny jokes, interesting characters, kinky sex and a very fancy finale including a hurricane, alligators, machine guns and two truly awesome redneck criminals.”

Newsday

“The crimes are puzzling in just the right amount, [and] life among the Jewish retirees is done with style and humor.”

The Houston Post

“A start-to-finish treat . . . The prose is always crisp and the story involving.”

The Wilmington News Journal

“Lenny is a genuine winner—part harassed mensch, part confirmed smart-mouth in the grand tradition.”

Booklist

“Lenny Schwartz is back to delight old fans and acquire new ones.”

Publishers Weekly

Also by Irving Weinman
Published by Fawcett Books:

VIRGIL'S GHOST

TAILOR'S DUMMY

HAMPTON HEAT

To my dear sister
JEANNETTE

BOOK I

Schwartz blew his nose and looked out the car window. The place was like other derelict buildings on Avenue B: pocked brick, cement-blocked windows, and where the door had been, a space with two crossed four-by-eights filigreed in razor-blade barbed wire. But this building wasn't empty.

In minutes, Bob Malinowski would lead a team in to arrest two . . . what? Slime? Scum? No, Schwartz insisted the world only made sense if they were genuine, full-fledged men. Two men, then, who between them had murdered eleven people. People, he insisted, because though it was all crack-gang killing, if it wasn't *people* murdering *people*, no one should be arrested and mayhem should reign. All very well, but still he had no business being here.

"You know, Lenny, you have the authority, but you shouldn't be here," Gallagher said. "You're a detective inspector."

"My very thoughts, Tom. But if I shouldn't, you really shouldn't, Deputy Chief."

In the driver's seat, Gallagher looked straight ahead and shifted his weight. The car rocked. "Yeah, well, I'm here to keep an eye on you being here. How the hell you think Malinowski feels? He's a captain, for Christ's sake. You're treating him like a rookie."

Schwartz turned to look at Gallagher. His flak jacket pulled against his chest. "Malinowski is my best man. You know I trust him."

"So who don't you trust?"

Schwartz wondered if the killers holed up here belonged to Cruz. He looked into his right hand as if trying to read his palm.

The radio came on. "Malinowski, sir. We're in position, ready to go in."

"Okay," Schwartz said. "Go . . . No, wait. I'm coming."

Gallagher shook his head. "You going into that war zone with your dinky .38?"

Schwartz opened the door. "And my flak jacket *and* my rapid-fire wit."

Gallagher leaned over. "Lenny, take care." He put his head out the window. "Lenny, you're a jerk."

Schwartz ran to the side of the building where the bricks were down.

If Cruz *was* out to kill him, was it fair to let Malinowski lead the arrest team? A policeman dressed like a marine motioned with his automatic rifle and whispered, "Sir, the captain's waiting for you on the second floor. Remember the broken stairs."

Schwartz whispered, "Thanks. Remember Iwo Jima." He stepped out of the sunlight, ducked, and shut his eyes hard to the gloom. The place smelled of plaster and piss.

He opened his eyes. Maybe Malinowski wasn't up there. Maybe one of Cruz's gang was waiting there for him. Stupid. Nerves. The banister swayed under his hand. One stair, two stairs. The third sank down and the fourth . . . His foot swung through air. No fifth step, either. Maybe that was how they planned to kill him, like the kid in *Kidnapped*. But from a fall of three feet? He was out of his mind. With fear? Yes, more stairs now, a landing.

But it wasn't fear of *this* situation. It was . . . Jesus! Now he was hallucinating a gigantic thing, some monstrous apparition—

"Sir?"

"Bob!" Schwartz whispered back. "I thought you were Godzilla or John Galbraith. How many men are up there?"

"Three, waiting for me."

“Okay. Bob . . . Bob, I know how damned polite you are. Remember: you don’t *have* to knock first when there’s cause to believe it could endanger your life. Right?”

“Right. Are you—”

“No, I’ll wait here. I’m interfering too much as it is. Just remember that getting in there fast and completely surprising them is your best chance of getting arrests rather than autopsies. Good luck.”

“Thanks, sir.”

Schwartz watched Malinowski cut across a shaft of light then disappear up the dark. He listened to a slight creaking overhead.

This was just a crack gang, probably nothing to do with Montanares’s cocaine ring, Roberto Cruz’s ring now that Montanares was dead. But if they *were* connected, Roberto would have good reason to kill him. No, he already had good reason: Montanares was dead. Schwartz hadn’t killed him, had even warned him away from the danger, but that needn’t be Roberto’s thug logic.

Schwartz listened. Nothing. Too quiet? Wasn’t all this a setup to get not only himself but the best part of his homicide section?

How long, how long? Seconds, minutes? Too long and too quiet. Malinowski didn’t deserve this.

Cold drops of sweat rolled down his rib cage. Cruz would *need* to kill him to show he was in full command of Montanares’s organization. So what better opportunity . . . ?

Damn it! Why wasn’t anything happening? Maybe for Bob’s sake they should leave the building, make contact from outside with bullhorns. . . .

Schwartz heard a click. He shouted, “Wait, Bob!”

There was a gunshot, a scream, and running feet. Then an explosion, shouting, and plaster falling. Schwartz was running up the stairs. He tripped, banged his chin, got up, pulled out his gun running to the doorway, and jumped through, crouched in firing position.

“It’s all right, sir,” Malinowski said from the floor beside

him. His hand was at his neck. He lifted it. His neck was slick red.

“Bob, Jesus!”

“Just a nick, sir. Really.”

Beyond Schwartz, two officers stood over two men handcuffed from behind, facedown on the floor. A third officer was admiring a smoking three-foot hole in the wall.

Schwartz crouched to look at Malinowski's neck. It was only grazed. “What happened?”

Malinowski shrugged.

The policeman by the wall said, “We were all set. The damn door wasn't even locked. The captain had turned the handle and was about to throw it open for us when some asshole—”

“Morrissey!” said Malinowski.

Schwartz said, “Go on.”

“Some asshole shouted, ‘Wait!’ and tipped these animals, who got off a round. An inch to the left and the captain would be dead. Christ! Anyhow, sir, we jumped in and I shot off a high-explosive round and these two slimes fell to the floor, saying, ‘Don't shoot.’ But if I find out—”

“That's all, Morrissey,” said Malinowski.

Schwartz put his hand on Malinowski's. His fingers slid on the blood. “Officer Morrissey, I'm the asshole who shouted. I put everyone here in jeopardy, even your prisoners. I'm sorry.”

Loud thumps came up the stairs and the room filled with police.

“Take care of the captain,” Schwartz said, leaving. “He's had some good luck, considering the bad luck he's had.”

Outside, Schwartz looked at his right hand. Bob's blood had streaked rust red across three fingers. He pulled up the waist of his windbreaker and unfastened the flak jacket. November air slapped his belly like an ice pack.

Two small crowds were gathering behind police barricades on both sides of the building. Schwartz didn't want to guess the odds on whether they'd cheer the good guys or the bad.

“Went okay, I heard,” Gallagher said as Schwartz slid into the car.

“Like hell. It didn’t go as badly as it could have.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Gallagher held out a stick of spearmint gum to Schwartz, who he knew never chewed gum. Schwartz took it, unwrapped it, and folded it into his mouth. Then he took it out and dropped it into the ashtray.

“Tom, you know, before I went up there, you asked me who I don’t trust?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s me. I’m so preoccupied with this Cruz thing that I don’t trust myself anymore.”

“Oh,” said Gallagher, chewing gum. Then he said, “Well, if it’s any consolation, I don’t trust you, either.”

From the Bal Harbour Surf Club, the last of the storm appeared as a wall of gray, south, out over the Gulf Stream. It hadn't swung close enough to cool; the temperature was in the high eighties, up where it had hung for months.

The man with the thin mustache and streaked blond hair spooned ice into his beer and said, "There goes Lavinia."

"Where?" Roberto Cruz asked, looking from his folded hands back toward the swimming pool. "Who's this Lavinia, some piece of yours?"

"No, the storm, the one that missed us."

Cruz stared at the man. "You nuts, Jaime? You bothering me with some *clouds* out there and we're waiting to hear we been burned two million dollars! Why don't they call back?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because it's Santo Domingo, an international call, and this is only a cordless phone. . . ." He picked the phone from the table, studying it.

"You're nuts, completely nuts. Why you think that's a bad phone? You know what we pay for these each month?" Cruz flapped the lapels of his black silk jacket to fan a breeze.

"No, I don't know. That's Tony's job, accounts." Jaime frowned at the phone. He put on sunglasses. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry. And what's *your* job, besides being my brother-in-law, besides *that* well-paid profession?"

Jaime glanced at a passing woman in a bikini and looked back mournfully at the telephone's cordlessness.

Cruz pulled out his pocket handkerchief and wiped the

sweat pouring down his large, round face. "Your job is to be on your toes. Get it? How long since I changed?"

Jaime looked at his watch. "Forty minutes."

"Well, I don't know. This shirt and jacket's drenched already. You bring the gray suit and shoes?"

"Sure, and the pink shirt and the tie we got yesterday at the Shops. If you wore cooler clothes—"

"Don't start that again." Cruz flattened his hands on the table. Sweat glistened on the ridges of blue veins. "I'm the president of this organization now. I dress like it, with respect."

"But Montanares had that weird thing, always cold. He never sweat a drop, let alone running like some hose—"

"Jaime, shut up. Just go and get the clothes from the car."

Cruz watched Jaime pick his way through the poolside section dense with sunbathing young women. Why could he handle men twice as tough and ten times smarter but somehow be brought down by his brother-in-law to this stupid rage? Jesus, he thought, Jaime: his head's either in the clouds or some woman's tits. Hot; it was hot in the sun, but this was Montanares's table and now, goddamn it, it was his and—

The phone buzzed.

Cruz reached across. The ice bucket tipped over.

"Hello, hello! *Sí?*" he said.

A waiter approached.

"Go away!" Cruz yelled, waving his free hand.

"*No, nada, nada,*" he said into the mouthpiece. "*Sí, soy Roberto Cruz.*" He curled his wide shoulders around the telephone. Cold water trickled onto his trousers.

"*Porfirio? Qué passa?*" he whispered.

"*Nada?*" he said.

"*Nada?*" he shouted.

"*No, no, nada,*" he said.

"*Comprendo. Luego, Porfirio,*" he whispered.

He shut the phone and looked down at his trousers.

Jaime came to the table with the clothes bag over his arm.

"You get the call?"

"I got the call, yes. The phone works good. We been

ripped off two million dollars, cash. That's some real money your pal Captain Bob has stole. You know?" Cruz looked out at the empty sand.

"Maybe—"

"Don't say maybe. Twenty-four hours' late delivery in this business is good-bye. Never, nothing, *nada*."

"He's always delivered before, but . . . Hey, we have to get him."

Cruz looked up slowly. "Sure, right, Bob's gonna come back here to the Surf Club and say he's sorry!" Cruz put his hands on his thighs. His trousers were very cold. "Your buddy's in Rio or Hong Kong now, you great blond-streaked tithead!"

Jaime looked at the chrome bucket on its side, at the cordless telephone on ice. He wondered if he should do something. "You should do something, Roberto."

"I'm gonna."

Jaime said, "Maybe Bob's crew will turn up. I mean, I hear he uses crazies—*Marielitos* and rednecks. I could, you know, have some people watch out for crew throwing money around."

He was pleased to be on his toes again with good advice.

"What shit you talking now, Jaime? You think Bob's gonna give a good fock we got a couple of his fockin' rednecks? *Red fockin' necks*, Jaime?" Cruz's neck went red, his head seemed to swell. Then, in a lower voice, he said, "No, we're gonna give Captain Bob a warning he's gonna listen to *whenever* the fock he is: we're gonna find one of his big-wheel backers and we're gonna—we're gonna do something so Bob and every focking one else learns they can't rip me off. Everyone!"

Jaime was counting the rectangles on his crocodile shoe. He still felt it was a good idea to look for Bob's rednecks and—

"I got to change," Cruz said, standing.

Jaime said, "Holy shit, I seen you sweaty before but not like you pissed your pants!"

Cruz stared at Jaime. His face seemed to grow even big-

ger, rounder. Then he grabbed the clothes bag and, holding it close to his trousers, walked slowly through the lunchtime crowd.