

1952. In the heat of a labor election, a leading candidate and a local reporter are murdered. The police arrest Max Eisen, a young and poor Jewish immigrant working in a steel mill. But Max finds allies. A famous lawyer helps him and his beautiful daughter takes an interest in his cause. Plus, an odd collection of underworld characters and Max's labor gang friends stand with him as he digs into the secrets of Steel Town.

Steel Town

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STEEL TOWN



**HOWARD
TURK**

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Steel Town, 2007

The white-haired man glanced up at what had been the apartments over Heyman's Furniture Store. The windows were all broken now, plywood sheets blocked the front entrance. Mary Jane Cummings was murdered there. A hell of a woman, he thought.

Max Eisen sat in his rented Lexus and gazed at what had been Heyman's and at the remains of Main Street. He had expected Steel Town to be bad, but what he remembered as a thriving, busy street was now a hollow shell of derelict buildings, a few bars, and low end retailers.

"Sorry you came back, Max?" his wife asked.

He half laughed. "Yes and no." He made a so-so sign with his hand. Brash, sassy, dirty Steel Town was gone. "The old place is still in my head. It will always be. The murders too." He smiled at her. "I'm going to walk around a bit."

"Don't be too long. We shouldn't be late for dinner. Not this one."

Max Eisen walked slowly back toward the corner looking to his right and his left as if wanting to record every sight. He had aged well--still straight-backed and as solid as he had been in his youth. In casual clothes he looked younger than his years.

At the corner he shook his head. On the flat land by the river where the huge mill and all the support buildings had stood like smoking giants, not a trace remained. Not a sign. Then a grin lighted his face. Stan's Bar and Grill was still there.

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He strolled down the hill and went inside. Two fat old men sat at the bar, hunched over their beer, not talking. Like the town, Stan's had a gloomy, down-at-the-heels feel to it now. He was flooded with memories. Remarkably, the place looked exactly as he remembered--a long bar, a few tables off to the side, everything old and scarred, half-filled bottles standing in rows against the mirror behind the bar. It even smelled the same--stale beer, cigarettes, and something musty, as if the plumbing leaked a little. The tin ceiling was black with cigarette smoke. Back then almost everybody smoked and the bar was always busy and noisy, a 24-hour gathering place for the lower classes of the mill. If there were closing hours in the town, it was just another law that was ignored.

"Whatever happened to Stan?" Max asked the young bartender.

He looked up from his newspaper. "Sorry, Buddy, I've just been here a couple months." He shrugged. "Maybe some relative owns the place. I don't know. Harry Schmidt, the manager, works nights. He'd know. Can I get you something?"

"No thanks. Just passing through. I spent a lot of time here in the old days."

The young man smiled. "From what I heard they were pretty good."

"Yes, they were."

Max left and walked further down the hill to the rusted railroad tracks. Without landmarks he could only guess where the Lancaster Gate, the main entrance for the mill, used to be. But he remembered Johnny Savio and his pickup truck coming here. Thinking back, Johnny was destined to be the union's top dog or be killed. There was no middle ground.

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To his right, along Wilson Lane, called Lover's Lane by the locals, stood a full street of empty buildings. Once it had been a strip of brothels--black women serving white men--and illegal gambling houses so popular that police had to direct traffic on Saturday night. Steel Town was like that. And, of course, discrimination that pervaded every corner of the mill and the town, with all kinds of unwritten rules and traditions. It took him a while to understand that certain jobs tended to go to certain nationality groups and even bars were that way--Slovaks here, Poles there, Ukrainians at this one, Italians that one. Some bars catered to engineers, others were where first helpers gathered, still others were for masons, or foremen. Where to stop for an after-shift drink was not a casual choice in Steel Town.

One exception was the Bull Gang, where he had worked. It was the absolute lowest form of life in the mill. Anyone could work there--white or black, Slovak, Italian or whatever. All that was needed was a strong back. Max smiled to himself. But it paid \$1.43 an hour (with ten cents more for hot work) which was like finding gold to a kid from a Displaced Persons Camp, fresh off the boat from Europe.

Two

Steel Town, March, 1952

Two years to the day after Max Eisen got off the ferry from Ellis Island, he was standing with three friends outside the main gate of the open hearth mill warming his hands over a fire. The four were members of "Savio's Rebels," campaigning to elect Johnny Savio president of their steel workers local. It had been a hard, nasty campaign. They were waiting for the four o'clock shift change and for Johnny to show up with their leaflets. They hadn't spoken in over half an hour. It was enough just to stand there. A cold, damp wind blew down the hill from Main Street, cutting through Max's heavy jacket as if it were nothing, freezing his back. He turned and warmed his backside, keeping an eye on the police car that was idling 50 yards away near the railroad tracks on Lancaster Street. He counted four cops inside and wondered if there was going to be trouble when they started passing out leaflets.

"Anybody think they're on our side?" Max asked.

"You just wait until they start shooting," said the little man they called Engineer.

The four of them stood exactly 51 feet from the mill's Lancaster Street gate. That was the rule--no union business closer than 50 feet. A handful of guards stood by the gate watching them to make sure they didn't creep closer. After two years at the mill, Max knew most of them. Some of the older guards were okay, even sympathetic, but a few of the younger

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ones looked like they would enjoy cracking heads with their night sticks. That was a worry for Max. The chubby man they called Engineer, was a good guy, but a little crazy from the war (he had been with the combat engineers at Omaha Beach) and carried a gun every now and then when he was flying high.

"Where in the hell is he?" The speaker was Seven Sandwich Muldoon, Seven for short. He was talking about Johnny Savio, who was always late and sometimes wouldn't show up at all. Seven was a small, lean, high-energy man with an unbelievable appetite, typically eating seven sandwiches for lunch. He had been in the Bull Gang the longest of the group, coming in at 16, dropping out of high school to get on the gravy train at the mill. Few in the Bull Gang completed high school. But Seven had done well for himself. After ten years at the mill, he had a little house up on the hill overlooking Main Street, a nice wife, and two small children. Seven also had the most to lose by joining the rebels. There had been talk he was close to moving up to third helper. That would put him up on the main floor, tending one of the big furnaces. It was the route to making real money. Max knew Seven hated the union president, but he didn't know why, and Seven refused to talk about it. Engineer thought it might have something to do with Seven's wife. Whatever it was, Seven had a lot on the line. If Savio lost, it could kill Seven's chance for a big move. In a lot of ways the union and the big boys at the mill scratched each others back.

Not much chance for the fourth man around the fire to move up. He was called Big Al. (There were several Al's in the mill, including one called Queer Al.) Big Al was black, and it was a rare Negro who made it to third helper. No one had ever heard of a black man making it to the heights of

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second or first helper, the men responsible for mixing and cooking steel. Big was a former high school football hero, so large he seemed to Max to fill a doorway, but with knees so bad, he lost his scholarship and was out of college after his freshman year.

Max, who was 22, talked to Big a lot about college. He was the only person he knew who had gotten that far. It's what he hoped to do someday. His parents had pounded into his head that a Jew must have education, but the money wasn't there and he had no high school diploma. It seemed hopeless. Worse, every working day he would ride the streetcar past the university on the way to the mill.

Max checked his watch. It was 3:45. They had already missed some men coming in, but they wouldn't be at the rally that night anyway. The men coming out on the 8 to 4 were their target.

Finally, at ten to four Savio's red pickup came flying down Lancaster, bounced over the railroad tracks, and screeched to a stop. The truck was plastered with taped-on signs with his motto: "Clean Union, Clean City. Vote Savio."

"Go get'em boys," Savio said leaning out of the window with a big grin on his face. Johnny Savio was a hefty, loud, red-faced crane operator. He had been in the mill since the troubles of the late 1930's and all through World War II. Everyone knew Johnny and most liked him. Still, his bid to win the presidency of the local was a long-shot. National headquarters in Pittsburgh had their favorites and Johnny Savio wasn't one of them. Max believed that he was too independent for the suits downtown. There were a lot of things--secret deals and payoffs-- that the union would be happy to ignore.

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Max thought of Savio as larger than life--loud, angry, courageous even, certainly better than what they had now, but not a man Max would like to spend time with.

They grabbed bundles of leaflets from the back of the truck. Savio gave them a wave and shouted, "Eight o'clock at the union hall. Bring a light," and gunned the truck up Lancaster.

"Okay, Professor," Big said to Max as he cut the cord on a bundle of leaflets, "let's see what happens now."

Because he was studying for his citizenship test and had an accent that was not quite a 100% American, Max was called "professor." The name meant a lot to him. He would never mix easily with most of the men in the gang, never be "one of the boys," but anyone who counted in the Bull Gang had a nickname.

The bell rang at four and moments later the 8 to 4 shift began pouring through the gate. Max and the others grabbed armfuls of leaflets and began passing them out. There were some "fuck you's," a few thumbs up, but a majority at least took the leaflets. A tense moment came and went when the police left their patrol car and moved closer. But they stopped far enough away not to be a problem. In Steel Town you never really knew what the police would do.

Three

Steel Town's original and still official name was Steeltin, named for David Henry Steeltin, a pioneer in the area, who operated a ferry over the Monongahela River. Over time, perhaps due to all the immigrants attracted by the iron and steel plants, the name of the town became the easier to pronounce Steel Town. The city was across the river and a bit south of Pittsburgh. Like most mill towns in the Mon (Monongahela) Valley there was the river and flat land next to it where the mill stood. A main street, with the town's important buildings, usually had an edge of the flat. But behind it, the land turned up. No matter how steep, it was always ringed with small houses, encrusted with the smoky grime of the steel business. The mill dominated the towns and people accepted the dirt as part of the game. Over the last two years, Max had heard a hundred times that: "smoke means money in my pocket."

In Steel Town, the top of the hill was flat. There was a small park in the middle, the town's library was at one end and the union hall at the other end. Some of the better homes were here, but it was too dark and Max was too busy to sightsee. He stood next to Savio's pickup truck, which was parked in front of the union hall, screwing on the back plate of the bullhorn. Savio was standing on the flat bed, shading his eyes from a half a dozen automobile lights aimed at the pickup, and joking with a couple of reporters from the *Steel Town Post* and a photographer. One of them, Mary Jane Cummings, was a regular at Stan's Bar. Johnny loved reporters, and they loved him. He was always good for a quote or a story.

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"Hurry up with that thing, Kid," Savio said glancing down at Max. "We got ourselves a real good group here tonight."

"The name is Max, Johnny. Not kid or buddy," he said, keeping his tone light to soften his words.

"Sure, sure, Max," Savio said with a laugh. "You know how I am with names. Gimme time. Head's too hard."

Max handed up the loudspeaker to Savio. "Good luck, Johnny."

"Not about luck, Max. We got'em on the run. Look't this crowd."

Max did and he didn't like it. Too many people, he thought, and not enough organization. Aside from repairing Savio's loudspeaker, neither Max nor anyone else knew what to do. But it was typical of the way Johnny operated. Always "winging it," Max thought, using the latest slang term he had learned. He was at Stan's two nights ago after the 4 to 12 shift when Savio decided to take his campaign right to the local's headquarters. "Show'em what we got," was the way he put it and here they were.

There were about two to three hundred people in the street in front of the union hall and spilling into the park. But it was too dark to get an accurate count. Aside from the automobile lights, a lot of men and women brought flashlights. Some even carried torches which made Max a little uneasy, reminding him too much of the way the Nazis operated in Germany when he was a boy.

Max had spotted Big and Engineer in the crowd, but decided to stay near the pickup in case the loudspeaker failed again. Seven came up to the truck holding the hand of his six

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year old daughter, Molly, who was wearing a party dress and a yellow bow in her black hair.

"Hello, Uncle Max," she said with a big grin.

Seven laughed. "I said it was going to be a big party tonight and Molly wouldn't stop fussing until Kelly said she could come. Ready for the big show?"

"Sure," Max said sarcastically as he bent down and tickled little Molly, who wiggled and giggled. Max straightened up. "It's dumb showing our strength this early in the campaign."

"Give the company spies something to think about." Seven shrugged, looking past Max. "At his worst, Johnny's better than him."

Max turned. Mike Samank, the union president, and a dozen of his circle, officially called the Steering Committee had come out of the hall. Samank was a short, fireplug of a man. To the side some men were setting up a microphone. "Oh great," Max said, "We're going to have a shouting match."

In the dark by the side of the union hall, Chief of Police William "Call me Willie" Harrison, watched the crowd grow. Harrison was a red-faced man of medium height, notable for his basketball-sized stomach that bulged over his belt. He was graying, which added to his costume at Christmas time. He had played Santa for a decade in Shumann's department store on Main Street. With him was most of Steel Town's 27 man police force. Their white patrol cars were parked out of sight behind the hall.

"It has to be done just right," Harrison whispered to a sergeant, named Bobby DiValenti, his unofficial deputy. "You

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and your boys clear the truck. Leave the rest to me." Harrison used DiValenti as his enforcer, a mean six-four with 250 pounds of muscle, who had come down from New York in the early days of World War II. He had told anyone who asked that he was 4F because of a bad ear.

Chief Harrison rested his hands on his belt as he watch Savio for a moment, then turned to the men behind him. "When he begins to speak, we move. Wait for my signal. The charge is demonstrating without a permit." He heard someone snicker out in the dark, but ignored it. "Our job is to get the crowd moving out of here. Polite, but firm." That hokum was for the record. "Got it? Any questions?" There were none.

Savio blew into the speaker two or three times and the sound of it carried across the crowd. He looked down, winked at Molly, gave a thumbs up sign to Max and Seven, and turned toward the crowd. "It's time for a change boys and girls. And I'm here--." He stopped as the police ran out of the shadows of the union hall and began pushing the crowd back from his pickup. DiValenti and two other cops, almost as big as DiValenti, forced Max away from the truck, using their night sticks as rams. "Easy, guys," Max said. "I'm going. No trouble."

Chief Harrison moved surprisingly fast for a man of his size. When Max glanced back at the union hall he had taken over the microphone on the front porch.

"This is Chief Harrison." His voice on high volume boomed over the crowd. "You have no permit to demonstrate here. Go home or be arrested. Go home. Now." Standing next

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to the chief, Mike Samank, the union president, was laughing at something one of his supporters said.

A disaster, Max thought. As he walked backwards, prodded by the cops, his hands up and out away from his body, he looked for Seven and Molly, but they had disappeared.

There was some yelling and arguments as a few in the crowd stood their ground. Max saw some punches being thrown and one man go down after being hit by a night stick. Automobile headlights began going off. Max could feel panic in the air as the noise level rose around him. It was getting more confused by the second as people began running. Max looked up. Savio was still standing in his truck, silhouetted against the porch lights of the union hall. From what he could see, Johnny seemed stunned, standing with his loudspeaker hanging at his side.

"Get out, Johnny," Max yelled. Others near the truck were shouting at him to get down.

"Move it!" DiValenti said and poked Max's chest hard with the end of his night stick.

Suddenly, the double bark of a handgun cut through the noise and the street lamp shattered. "Oh Christ," Max said out loud, as he ducked his head. His first thought was that Engineer had cracked. There was little light in the street now. The young cops with DiValenti seemed unnerved, hesitant, glancing around for the source of the gunshots.

A moment later two more shots rang out and Max saw Savio grab his chest and reach for the cab of the pickup to support himself. But his legs buckled, and he toppled over, out of Max's sight

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Everything seemed to stop. Max looked around. So did the police in front of him. For a moment no one spoke. Then Max heard Chief Harrison shout, "Call an ambulance. Don't let anybody near that truck."

Before the policemen could turn their attention back to him, Max slipped away.

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