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She was a pretty front for the vice syndicate

DEVIL'S DAUGHTER

FLOYD SHAW



COMPLETE &
UNABRIDGED

she lived on park avenue

New York's richest street. But it wasn't her real world.

Her world was a tawdry place of phone calls in the night, rotting tenements with walls reeking of marijuana smoke, callous men whose ruthlessness had carved an empire in crime and vice—

ALL THE GLITTER OF PARK AVENUE
COULD NEVER WASH HER CLEAN
OF THE STAIN OF BEING A "PARTY
GIRL" FOR ONE OF NEW YORK'S
MOST VICIOUS RACKETS!

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DAUGHTER

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Chapter One

"MISS BRADSHAW?"

"Ye-es?"

The rising inflection turned her reply into a cautious question. She did not open the door fully; a metal chain spanned the aperture. The brown eyes of the girl studied me. I shifted my stance.

"May I come in, Miss Bradshaw?"

"What do you want?" If her tone wasn't exactly icy, it had a wintry wind in it. "Why didn't you telephone first?"

"Mr. Kramer sent me," I said.

Then it happened: a quick quiver of emotion passed over her rather unconventional, handsome face, a light flickered into her eyes—a frightened light. I frowned. Kramer had affected me that way, too. But the mere mention of his name seemed to rouse a quick terror in the girl, intense and personal.

"Kramer?" she repeated, and I didn't like what I saw in her face. No girl's face should look like that. She didn't seem to breathe.

"Look, Miss Bradshaw," I said then, "we can't talk like this."

"You work for Kramer?"

"I only met him an hour ago."

"Oh."

It took her a long moment to think it over as though she had to make up her mind whether to believe me or not. It gave me a chance to examine her face, framed in the gleam-

ing gold hair. Her eyes were wide-set, liquid brown in long lashes; she had a good, simple nose, not full, not narrow; her cheeks were high-boned, soft, sinking slightly but interestingly at the corners of her generous, scarlet mouth. Her whole face and neck were tanned a tawny gold color, as from a hundred August-suns. In February. She was altogether young and exciting in a haunting out-of-the-ordinary way.

There was only one thing wrong with the picture. She was not the girl I was looking for. I could feel the shock of disappointment in the empty space under my ribs. I'd come all this way, spent all this time, wasted all those strange contradictory emotions—and this was not the girl.

"Look, can't you make up your mind whether I'm going to rob you after I'm inside, Miss Bradshaw? I'm not here for that purpose, you know."

"I know," she said, and unsnapped the chain. For the first time her voice sounded natural—a bit husky, musical, even a little taunting. "I realize that now. But Kramer never sends anyone here. Directly, that is."

The word *directly*, added like that, lodged in my mind but I didn't have time to think it over. Not just then. The room reached out and folded me in. It was that kind of a room. It purred, it soothed, it invited. After some of the rooms I'd been in recently, the impact was terrific. Sensual and heady. It breathed luxury from the deep-piled carpet to the gleaming furniture. The drawn curtains over ceiling-high windows, filtered the late afternoon sun, wintry and dull outside, into a warm, golden glow in the room.

"Sit down, please," the girl said easily, watching me now in a different way, an expectant, contemplative expression in her eyes as I removed my overcoat in the small foyer. "Would you like a drink? Martini? Whisky?"

This was more like it. "Whisky," I said, entering that room, feeling it around me. "With water." But even as I spoke, something went wrong. At first she wouldn't let me in; now, without so much as asking my name, she was offering a

drink. Well, hell, it was New York. There was time enough for questions. And I needed that drink.

She strolled to a miniature bar in one corner. For the first time I noticed her clothes: a tight-sheathing, honey-colored dress—the knitted, sweater-like kind. It molded and revealed every line of her slender, feminine body. And the color, blending with her hair and skin, was perfect—warm and sensual and heart-stopping. I couldn't take my eyes from her back as she stood pouring whisky. Nor could I breathe as freely as I had when I walked in. For the first time in a month I completely forgot the girl I was looking for.

When she turned to me with the two glasses, her face again impassive, a quiet mask, lovely in its own special way, I stepped to her and took my highball. There were neat pearl buttons down the front of the dress, the top one glittering at the shadowy cleft between her high, full breasts. She sat down in a huge chair, leaned back luxuriously and waved a hand toward the sofa. I sat down across the glassy lake of cocktail table from her.

"You're young," she said, as though it was a thought she had been toying with in the silence.

"Twenty-four," I said stiffly.

"*Very* young," she breathed softly.

I didn't feel particularly young. I hadn't felt exactly young since this thing, whatever it was, had taken hold of me in Vienna and sent me stumbling along the twisted path that had led me here—to this dead-end—this slowly exciting but strange and puzzling dead-end. "I'm as old as you are," I told her, feeling boyish and foolish.

"I *should* be insulted. You're older—by three years. But I don't insult easy."

I watched her face when she said it, and had a nagging, growing conviction that everything about this whole conversation was getting stranger by the minute. She lifted her glass. I lifted mine. What the hell, maybe the kid was lonely. Rich gal, Park Avenue address. I'd seen them around, looking exactly like this—svelte and self-contained. In a few min-

utes her father or mother would come in from Wall Street or the club, there'd be introductions. It was all new to me but I could handle myself. I was enjoying it.

"You don't even know my name," I said.

"I don't usually ask," she replied. "If you want to tell me—" She let it hang there.

"Hewitt. Lon Hewitt. Lon for Leonard."

Then my mind added the word *usually* as she'd just spoken it, to the word *directly* a few minutes ago—both puzzlers. *But Kramer never sends anyone here. Directly, that is.* How would a girl like this even know a slob like Kramer? Was she in some kind of trouble at his club? Afraid Papa would find out? It would explain her sudden fright when she thought I was from Kramer.

No matter how you cut it, though, it didn't click together just right. Any of it. I could feel the whisky moving in my blood, warm and good. Miss Bradshaw crossed her legs; there was a flash of tan knee, only the slightest suggestion of thigh. It was crazy. I felt my heart thumping. The room glowed. The girl glowed. She watched me in silence, her face still, inscrutable.

"Would you like another?" she asked.

I glanced at my glass. It was almost empty already. "Fine. But look—"

"Yes?"

"Later," I said. *Why spoil it?* I added to myself.

While she threw the whisky and water together, she spoke, her voice warming, throbbing in a way that made me straighten, frowning. "As many drinks as you like, Lon. But not too many. Too many make a man feel foolish, or awkward, or worse." She turned, bathed in the glow. "Then, afterwards, they blame the girl."

Then I got it. For the first time. God, what a fool. What an unsophisticated, blind, damned small-town yokel idiot! I felt my face twisting into a self-taunting grin as I accepted the glass and looked at her, up and down, slowly, completely, for the first time. Suddenly everything had changed. She

had her head tilted a bit to one side, and she seemed to be drinking in my look. When I met her eyes, she smiled—a startling white flash against the soft tan.

The silence in the room seemed to hum. It was lush and deep and exciting.

“Satisfied?” she asked, but there was no mockery in her tone. It was a simple, direct question. “Will I do?”

I still couldn’t believe it. Twenty-one years old, one of the most attractive girls I’d ever met. Waiting. Waiting like that.

“Well,” she said, “make up your mind, Lon.”

I took a long drink. Afterwards, I could breathe no better.

But I decided then, on the spot, that I wouldn’t tell her that I was here looking for someone else. I should have told her straight out, but I couldn’t. Later, perhaps.

“Do little boys visiting New York have fifty dollars to throw away?” she asked then, as simply and directly as before. As businesslike.

“Fifty?” I hated myself for revealing the surprise, but the girl only laughed and sat down next to me on the sofa.

“Kramer didn’t mention the price?”

“I’ve got the price,” I said, and for some reason I couldn’t put my finger on, my voice sounded grim. I realized that, in spite of the throbbing through my brain and body, I was angry. It didn’t make sense.

“Are you rich then?” She was still laughing a little under the words—a deep, tantalizing, slightly scornful laugh. “Rich little boy in the big city. How’d you happen to get to Kramer?”

The anger, or whatever the hell it was, moved up to my throat. My stomach squirmed. She was close. Her face was six inches away. I was conscious of the blood beating steadily in her slender throat, of the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed, of the soft, full lines of her crossed legs as she leaned back on the sofa then, away from me.

But the anger was there between us. I couldn’t control it. I stood up.

She looked up, surprised. Then at once her eyes understood. *You're embarrassed*, her woman's eyes said, *you feel uncertain, you are not used to this sort of thing. I shall help.* But her eyes were wrong. I wasn't accustomed to this sort of thing. That much was true. I'd never had much to do with prostitutes.

But the reason I was standing above her now, glaring down, aware of the every detail of her inviting, expectant loveliness, was more complex. I wanted her. But I was damned if I wanted her as a customer, even at fifty bucks!

"Look, Miss Bradshaw," I began harshly—

"My name is Kay," she said, the smile still there, the knowing womanliness still gentle and faintly superior in her girl's face.

"Kay, then. I didn't come here for this. I didn't even come to see you. I'm looking for a girl named Brezofski. Stella Brezofski."

Then the silence roared. I realized my fists were clenched. Even though I knew I'd been tricked, not by her but by my own naiveté, I didn't like the sour taste on my tongue, the raging torrent of my blood. I watched the secretive, knowing expression fade from her face. Her brilliant mouth came open slightly; light caught glittering on her teeth.

Her face went hard. She tightened all over.

"Have you ever heard of her? Do you know Stella Brezofski?"

"What do you want with her?" she asked in a clenched voice.

"That's a long story," I said evenly. "I'll tell you if you know where she is."

"Yes, I know," she said. She sounded bitter and hurt and sad all at once. "Yes, I know . . . Stella Brezofski's dead."

That stopped me like a hard blow to the stomach. At first I couldn't believe it, simply because Stella, whom I really didn't know, had already been a real and living human being to me. Then my mind refused to believe it. My voice told her so. "Go on."

She shrugged. "That's all. She's dead. There's nothing after that, is there?"

"Yes, there is," I heard myself say evenly. "There's when did she die and how did she die and how do you know?"

She frowned, hesitating. "Did you know Stella?"

It was a feint. I was having none of it. "How did she die?"

"Pneumonia."

"When?"

"Two months ago. Maybe three . . . Did you know her?"

Her eyes were on mine, unflinching, brightly sincere. I sank to the chair across from her. Dead-end. More of a dead-end than I'd expected, though. I couldn't find the voice to answer Kay Bradshaw's question.

"Stella and I roomed together," she went on then, probably realizing that I'd accepted the simple, frustrating fact. "She came in one night, late, shivering all over. I put her to bed. But . . . but she died. That's all."

"What hospital?"

At this Kay Bradshaw stood up. She walked away, not strolling this time, her back rigid with sudden arrogance—or suspicion. "Are you from the police?" She turned to me, the tight hardness on her face again, her scarlet lips straight.

I was getting my breath back now—very fast. "No," I said. "I'm not from the police." I was able to stand up then. "But that's an interesting question. That's the third time I've been asked it today."

"Third? Who else—?"

I caught the surprise—or fear. It added to my suspicion. "This is my second day in New York, looking for Stella. I've been chasing down blind alleys, one after the other, ever since I got back to the States. But why should you be so concerned about the police? Why should Kramer be? If Stella died of pneumonia, there must be a record of her death."

And as I spoke—as the finality of the thought penetrated—I felt a certain freedom. For over a month, ever since the night in Vienna, I'd been a prisoner of the thought: Stella

Brezofski. Thought or curiosity or plain desire—whatever it was. But now, abruptly, I wanted to believe Kay Bradshaw. I wanted Stella Brezofski to be dead. That was a fact I could accept. I longed to accept it. Then I could go home free and take up the life I was running from now.

"Do . . . did you know Stella Brezofski yourself, Mr. Hewitt?"

"You asked that before."

"Well?" She was studying me.

"We're from the same town. Let's leave it at that."

"You're from Scranton?"

"Scranton, Pennsylvania."

"She . . . she never mentioned your name."

"Whose name did she mention? Matt Dunson?"

Kay Bradshaw frowned. "Yes. A few times, I think. Is that why you're here?"

"Yes."

A smile rippled across her face. "And I thought you were a customer."

The idea struck me hard again, I felt the room close in—the intimacy, the luxury, the girl standing before me. "Maybe I still am," I said, and my throat was dry.

"Then why don't we forget Stella, Lon? She wasn't a particularly charming girl anyway, you know."

"No, I don't know."

Kay Bradshaw came closer. "No. She was gauche and clumsy—physically clumsy, slightly fat, even—oh, clumsy in all kinds of ways."

"You sound as if you liked her a lot."

"She was vulgar." She made the word sound loathsome.

I remembered the photograph that Matt Dunson had shown me in Vienna. Vulgar? Well, possibly. But look who was talking. Kay Bradshaw, call-girl. Kay Bradshaw, fifty bucks a whirl. I realized I was growing angry again—and even more intensely conscious of the girl's strange loveliness.

"Oh, she admitted it herself," Kay Bradshaw continued. "She was very unhappy practically all the time—and when

she got pneumonia, I don't think she wanted to get well." She was very close now, looking into my face. "Do we have to go on about it, Lon?"

I was a fool. I knew I was a fool. But Stella Brezofski had been with me too long—a deep, disturbing, driving part of me for over a month—and I couldn't leave it at that. Even for Kay Bradshaw. Even for what she was offering. I could feel her breath on my face. I stepped away, cursing myself silently.

"Yes. We have to go on about it. I want the whole story—as you know it."

She whirled away and threw herself onto the sofa, tossed one leg over the other; again the flash of tanned knee, the hint of smooth thigh. "Why?" she demanded.

"Because that's what I came for."

"I've told you all I know." She reached for a cigarette on the cocktail table.

"I don't happen to believe that," I said softly, striking a match for her.

Her eyes in the spurt of flame glinted hard and questioning, startled. For a split second she looked completely different—not soft at all, not lovely.

"If I believed your story," I said, "I'd have to discount Kramer's. And I'd have to forget that everyone seems so damned worried about the police."

She took a deep drag on the cigarette, inhaled. We both waited for the smoke to disappear. When it did, in a blue swirl, she said, "Just why are *you* so interested? I'll have to know that first."

I sat down opposite her, leaning forward in the deep chair. I fought down the tumult that looking at her produced. I struggled with the knowledge that she was there, waiting, that I could have her; the knowledge, too, that I wanted her. Sitting there, she was innocent as childhood and brazen as a shout, her brown eyes on me, full of questions but challenging too, and her lips slightly parted.

But at the same time every smooth, disturbing line of her body was tense. Why?

"I'll give it to you," I said, "Just the way it happened to me. Then you'll do the same. Exactly the same. Got me?"

For answer she blew smoke in a hazy cloud straight across the glimmering expanse of table toward my face.

So I told her the story. I skipped the details, but as I spoke, my own mind kept filling them in for myself. And I didn't tell her how I had become personally involved. That would have been impossible—because that part I didn't understand myself.

Chapter Two

TWO WEEKS ago I was discharged from the Army, I began. But before that on my last leave in Europe was when it really started. I had a chance to go to Vienna. I took it because I'd never been there and also because Matt Dunson was stationed there. I've known Matt for years, kind of off and on ever since we were kids. Well, Matt—he's a sergeant—took me to a quiet little bar in the Kärtnerstrasse . . .

Outside, it was snowing. The light flakes were falling into the twisting, windless streets, slowly turning Vienna white.

Matt had smuggled a bottle of strong, bitter cognac into the bar under his coat and he kept spiking the sweet, weak chocolate liqueur they served there. The brandy bottle was half empty.

Matt's big friendly face woke memories in me. In his uniform he was ugly as ever—or maybe he was handsome. I didn't know. Girls always thought he was attractive, anyway, with his solid head, broad nose, pale blue eyes, his stubble of almost-blond hair. His hand, massive around the bottle, reminded me of the way he could pass a football.

His hunched bulky shoulders made me think of the way he stood while fighting: toe to toe, a slugger.

"Lucky bastard," he grinned. "Goddamned Lieutenant on top of it. Going home." He had begun to slur words together already. "Always got the breaks, didn't you? Christ, I didn't know I could be so glad to see a guy." He poured more brandy into my glass. "I can look at that good-lookin', damned pan of yours and almost smell the streets at home. The blackboards of old P.S. thirty-seven. The popcorn in the lobby of the Empress Theatre. The gals' perfume—"

"If I get stinko and one of these MPs ducks his head in here, I won't see Scranton for three months," I warned him, laughing.

"You can't get tight. You're not the type. I started at noon, at the Post. You think *you* got worries?"

"Not me," I said. "I got no worries, no cares. I'm going to be a free man."

"Yeah. Yeah. Imagine that."

I did for a blurred moment, while the brandy seeped through me. "Funny thing, though—when you go in, all you can think about is the day you're out. Everything else is a vacuum till that day. Then when it stares you in the face—the vacuum's still in front of you."

"I wish it was me. I wish to God it was me."

"Oh, I'll be glad to see the folks. Even got a job waiting for me. Job, hell—a whole business. Insurance. My father's. But—"

There was no way of putting it into words. Especially to a guy who still imagined that a discharge was *open sesame* to the rest of life. The excitement was there but it wasn't right—not the excitement you expected for four years. It was fuzzy, somehow, and there was a growing panic in it.

"What about that gal?" Matt demanded. "The one with the black hair and the skinny rump and the bobby-sox shoes?"

"June?"

"She waiting?"

"Yeah," I said, but without sadness or regret. "Yeah—with a husband and two kids."

Matt smacked his fist to the table. The sound was like the report of a gun. The glasses shook and rattled and I glanced toward the bar. The tall, gaunt Austrian was polishing glasses steadily, his frown on us. Otherwise, the bar was deserted.

"Bitch!" Matt growled. "Goddam bitch."

"You didn't ever know her," I said.

"Doin' that to a guy."

"She didn't do anything to me," I said.

"They're all alike."

Then I got it. He wasn't referring to June. He uttered a short expletive of disgust and took a drink, a long one, straight from the bottle.

As he set the bottle down, he glanced around the room. I didn't like the look in his eyes. I knew that look—it was mean, threatening even. I didn't want Matt sparring for a fight and landing us both in the brig, not with my discharge coming up.

"Your girl get married on you, Matt?" I asked quickly, trying to wipe that searching look from his face.

The barkeep was gazing away now, still frowning, uncertain.

"I don't know," Matt answered loudly, and his voice changed. Bewilderment replaced the truculence. His fists clenched and unclenched on the table top. "That's the truth, man. I don't know. That's what gets me." He stared across at me, his eyes trying to focus. "You know her. You met her. She was in high school same time. I remember you meetin' her." He blinked heavily. "Stella? Stella Brezofski?"

I thought a second, ransacking my memory, wishing I could oblige. "Afraid not, Matt."

"Hell yes, you met her. One night out at LaRue's—that joint on the edge of town. I was dancing with her. Christ, how she dances!" Then he broke off, and blinked again, his

forehead wrinkling. "How she used to dance," he said then in a half-whisper. "She can't write, though." His voice rose. "Damn her, she *used* to write. She won't write any more! My letters keep coming back. What's the matter with her? Least she ought to answer my letters, even if she's married. *Whatever's* happened to her?" He was no longer speaking to me. "I don't know what's happened to her." He spoke softly now, the words twisting their tortured way out between the straight line of his lips. His head sank deeper between his huge shoulders. "I just plain don't know what's happened to her. I thought—hell, we were in love. She—Christ, Lon, that girl on the back seat of my old jalopy! Or like on the riverbank." He glanced at me. "But that's not all. Not just that. I guess I got an idea what you think of me, Lon. We haven't seen much of each other since—since when? First, second year high school, when I dropped out. You always thought I was a no-good bastard, didn't you?"

"Hell, yes," I laughed. "Worse than that."

He waved a hand. "Yeah, go on—laugh. I know, though, see. I know. You didn't hang around LaRue's, joints like that. Always ambitious. College even, I hear?"

"Two years."

"Still, you come to Vienna, you look up Matt. How come?"

"You're my friend, Matt," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now shut up and give me another slug of that brandy. I might get looped after all."

Matt poured. "I been saving this stuff. For something like this. We're celebrating, Lon—that right?"

"Damn right."

He stared across at me as I drank. "How good a friend, Lon?" he asked abruptly.

I knew it was coming. Right then, I knew. But he was my pal, one of the first I ever had. We'd worked a summer in the coal pits together, too; he'd shown me the ropes. He'd licked a guy who kept pushing me around. I could still

taste the coal dust on my tongue and feel the blood smearing under my eye that hot afternoon, and I could still see Matt lighting into the guy when I was down. I could hear the heavy, ugly sound of body blows and the cracking soft-flesh and hard-bone sound of his fists on the guy's face. It was like Matt, though, not to mention this. "As good a friend as you got," I told him.

Matt shook his head. "I got another year. One whole goddam year. Man, I'm not gonna last it out. I'd go AWOL tomorrow if I could get a hitch back to the States. I got to know, Lon. Not just because of what I said about her on the seat of a car. It's not all like that. There're other things. You know. Other things, too, between a guy and his girl. I thought she was my woman, Lon! Honest to God, I was all set to get hitched. I love that gal. I really love her." He paused, smiled like a kid who's just used a fancy word whose meaning he doesn't quite understand. "You ever been in love?"

"I thought I was. I guess I won't know till I get back and see those two kids and the husband."

"You don't care, though. Lucky bastard. If you cared, you'd be eaten up with it—way I am. It's like poison. All the time poison in your blood, and you can't move without it hurting you." He shook his head sideways on his bull neck, his eyes jerking around the room again. "Look at that bastard staring at me. The kraut behind the bar. Lost the war, those sonsabitches. Never know it, superior way they act." Then he lifted his voice and shouted, "Superman!"

"Why don't we go some place else?" I suggested.

"How good a friend?" Matt asked again, focusing on me. "You tell me."

"You're a crazy, wild sonofabitch," I said quietly, "but just tell me what you want."

He looked at me a long time, till I started shifting about on the smoothly worn wood of the seat. Then he seemed to make up his mind. He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a battered wallet. I didn't know what was com-

ing. If I'd known—well, maybe I wouldn't have carried it any further. He drew from the wallet a dog-eared photograph.

He didn't look at it himself; it was as though he couldn't trust himself to so much as glance at it. But he laid it face down on the table, his beefy hand over it, and he leaned closer. "A guy in barracks found this once. He had a great laugh." Matt's face looked square and grim. "I broke his jaw. I got three months for breaking his jaw, and if he hadn't been shipped out when I got out, I'd of killed the sonofabitch." It was almost a warning. "He's only one ever saw it but me."

He shoved the photograph across the table, removed his hand. When I picked it up, he reached for the bottle again. I turned the picture over.

I hadn't expected this. It was the picture of a girl, not a clear, good photograph, but what took my breath was the fact that she was lying on the grass, facing up, and she was stark naked. One arm was thrown over her eyes, either to shade them from the sun or in a futile embarrassment; it concealed her face.

"Guy like you," Matt said, "guess you're shocked?"

I couldn't take my eyes from the picture. I may have been shocked, but that wasn't all of it. I wanted to smile—at Matt, at the thick-hipped, slender-legged girl with her ankles crossed, her indeterminate-colored hair caught about her head in a peasant braid, her rather heavy, protective arm slightly blurred, as though it alone had been moving across her face. Her breasts were full. But my smile caught in my throat. The smile and an abrupt desire. She might have been one of the German girls I'd known recently, or she might have been Stella Brezofski. I knew, though, that this was Stella.

Matt's hand reached across the table and his thick fingers dug into the flesh of my arm. "Lon, I got to know what's happened, see. I got to." And as he spoke, his voice hushed and intense, his own need, his long painful hunger

and passion seemed to seep across that table and into me. I didn't lift my eyes. "She was always talking about going to New York, gettin' a job while I was overseas. Waiting for me like that. She wanted New York and money more than me, I think. I asked her to marry me. Christ, I begged her. Me, a sergeant! She laughed. I coulda hit her. We had five days then. I wanted to smash her. Sometimes I wish I had. I wish I had."

The girl was not beautiful, not in any conventional sense, anyway. But it started then. All that followed came from those few minutes while Matt talked, almost pleading, and I studied the picture. It may have been my own loneliness, or it may have been the drinks I'd had, or the fact that I hadn't had a woman for a long time. But what haunted me during the weeks that followed was the kind of an afternoon that that picture suggested: alone with a girl, completely alone, in a field, perhaps along a river, no one for miles about, just the two of you, laughing, loving, pagan and unclothed under the open sun. There must have been a tree above her because a mottled pattern of sun and leaves fell across her body. Looking at the picture, I could almost see the leaves trembling, the shadows moving on the smoothness.

Whatever the reason, that picture stayed with me after Matt had replaced it in his wallet. Long after. And all the time.

"She went to New York. That's the address I got." With a stub of pencil that he seemed to have produced from nowhere, he printed laboriously on the back of an empty envelope. "But my goddam letters keep coming back, Lon. She ain't there."

Then he paused, shaking his head as though suddenly ashamed and enraged at the same time. I saw the baffled expression turn into the old rebellious, hurt ugliness in his face.

"That bastard keeps starin' at me," he growled, deep in

his throat, looking toward the bar. "Goddam kraut." He stood up.

That's when I knew we were in for it. There was no stopping it then, but I tried. I reached for Matt. He shrugged my hand off. Shoulders hunched, he lumbered toward the bar. Even though I was afraid then, I could feel the pain in him driving him, the frustration and animal bewilderment that had to smash its way to the surface. His legs were unsteady as he bore down on the bartender.

I shoved the envelope into my pocket and went after Matt. Fast. But not fast enough.

"You been starin' at me all night, kraut. What's the pitch?"

The Austrian behind the bar was very tall, very thin; he was about forty, with pale eyes that retreated filming over with fright. In a quick motion, even smiling faintly, he stooped to reach under the bar.

Matt muttered and sprang just as I reached him. He dived across the bar, his feet off the floor, and grabbed the man's shirt front with one hand. The shirt ripped. Matt's right hand caught the Austrian's wrist, out of my sight. I saw the club only a moment before I heard it fall with a wooden thud behind the bar. With a short oath Matt brought his left elbow up under the man's chin.

There was an ugly, cracking sound, and a groan, and then I was on top of Matt, my arm around him in a hammer-lock. I pulled him backwards, but the Austrian was going down anyway. He crashed into the back of the bar, smashing it to the floor in a deafening clatter of broken glasses and bottles. Matt twisted, rolling sideways on the bar, pushing and kicking at me.

I lost my grasp and staggered back, but not down.

"Who the hell won the war?" Matt asked, the words slurred together. "What're you doing?"

"God's sake, man," I said, bracing myself, thinking for an instant that Matt was coming at me.

I could see the bartender skittering along behind the bar, plunging into the back room.

"Let's get out of here, Matt," I said.

"Thought you was my friend," Matt said unsteadily, his voice blurred, but his eyes brilliant and challenging and hurt. I'd never seen so much confused pain in a man's eyes before in my life. "You my friend?" he demanded drunkenly.

I could hear the bartender on the street outside now, shouting in German, his shoes clicking on the cobblestones.

"Come on," I commanded.

Then Matt changed. He leaned against the bar and he whispered, "You go, Lon. You find her. Find Stell for me, will you? Will you, Lon?"

"I'll find her," I said, stepping toward him.

"You go out the back way. I'll take care of the MPs." He picked up a bottle.

"We can both—"

"You want to get away, don't you? You want to get back to the States right away, don't you? Scram."

"But you—"

"I want to know where Stell is!" he cried. "I want to know what's happened to Stell!"

He hadn't moved. I realized he wouldn't. One fist was clenched. He held the bottle in the other hand. That wounded, confused look was still in his eyes, but there was no meanness now, no threat.

"I got to know, Lon. I'm cracking. Man, I'm beat. Find out, will you? Find Stell for me."

Then, hearing the MPs approaching on the run, I took one last look at Matt. "I'll find her, pal." And I plunged toward the back room, jumping over the scattered, broken glass.

Matt grinned then and smashed the bottle against the surface of the bar, still holding the neck of it with the jagged edges.

I didn't wait. I ran through the stuffy-smelling living

room behind the bar and out the back door. I didn't stop running until I was sure I was safe. My feet sent up little puffs of white snow from the cobblestones.

Then I slowed down to a walk on the dim, twisting street, panting. The crazy damn fool. He'd fight it out—he had to. He was fighting all the time inside and he had to keep finding someone, something, to smash his fist into. He'd wind up in the brig for this.

With his picture of that girl.

The picture that was still in my mind as I remembered with a sharp stab of excitement the promise I'd made. I suddenly felt I had a reason for going home. . . .

Chapter Three

MY THIRD day in Scranton (I continued to Kay Bradshaw)—*after I'd seen the usual people, and my folks—I went over to the other side of town where Stella Brezofski used to live . . .*

What I didn't describe to Kay Bradshaw, because it was too deep and strange and puzzling, was the way I felt at home. The house seemed too small, although I knew it wasn't a small house at all. I seemed to look at all the familiar things from a distance. And after a while, this filled me with a gnawing restlessness. That photograph of Stella Brezofski was on my mind, too. I couldn't shake it. I didn't know why. It wasn't like me at all, to feel this way about a picture; but it was coming between me and my father's enthusiasm, my mother's relief and joy.

I spent an afternoon in my father's office. It was cramped and stuffy. But I was to be his partner in the insurance business, a lucky break, and then, when he retired in ten years at sixty-five, the business would be mine: twelve to fifteen

thousand a year. Where could I do better? But somehow the whole prospect filled me with gloom. I couldn't get my feet on the ground. My mind kept going one way, telling me how lucky I was and how sensible the arrangement was—I wasn't like the other poor slobs who'd come out and had no place to hang their hats, have to start pounding the pavements looking for work. But my feelings kept running in a different direction, pulling me away, urging me to escape the dullness some way, any way I could find. And my promise to Matt Dunson was the escape, at least temporarily.

I saw June too, and I felt less than nothing. I saw her on the street while I was in my father's car. She was wheeling a baby carriage and a small boy played along beside her. Strangers, all of them. She couldn't wait. Had I asked her? I couldn't even remember, and it didn't matter. I didn't even bother to wave.

Then I drove over to the house where Stella Brezofski had once lived. All the while I kept telling myself that I was doing it for Matt, and to break the monotony. But in my head was that picture: the sunny day, the naked girl stretched out, the crossed ankles, girlish and protective, the dappling of the leaves over the smooth flesh.

The house was on a steep, slanting street between two other houses that were almost identical down to the layers of dark soot over the once-white clapboards. The Brezofski house—I'd looked up the address in the phone book—had the distinction, though, of being the most ramshackle and beat-up of the lot. The two-by-four porch sagged at one end, and there was still a torn, rusted screen on the front door. Bleak patches of sooty snow lurked in the bare earth of the front yard. At first the only sign of life was a dog, a small pathetic-looking mongrel tethered by a chain to a metal stake. He hopped about, keeping an injured back leg off the ground, as I went up the walk to the porch. Before I could mount the two steps, the door creaked open and a figure appeared behind the door screen.

"What do you want?" The figure, a small woman with a wizened face old beyond its natural years, wore a sleazy housecoat.

I asked whether Stella Brezofski still lived here—knowing better, of course, already aware that I'd get no help from the hostile woman who looked me over slowly, taking in the newness of my clothes, my age, my growing uneasiness.

"No," she said. Just that. But she didn't close the door.

"Are you Mrs. Brezofski?"

"Yes."

"Stella's mother?"

"Her mother's dead. I'm her aunt."

The tiny unkempt woman with straggling gray hair spoke in a high sour voice that challenged me with every word.

"Do you know where I can find Stella?"

At this the woman turned away and I realized that she was holding a whispered consultation with someone inside the house. I wished I hadn't come. I should have gone directly to New York. I felt, strangely, that I should not see this house, this life—as though this grubby background, at such odds with the healthy beauty of the reclining figure of the photograph, somehow sullied that loveliness.

Finally the woman turned to me again. "Why do you want to know?"

"Matt Dunson wants to know."

The woman drew in her breath, not quite gasping, but frowning. There was a movement in the room behind her and then, out of the dimness, a man emerged, shunting aside the small figure of the woman. He came out onto the porch, a tall, skinny-looking, middle-aged man in his late forties. He stopped, though, when he saw me.

"You're not Matt Dunson," he charged.

"I didn't say I was."

"Now, Steve," the woman warned, a thin edge of fear in her high voice.

The man shoved his hand into the pockets of his dull

work pants and stared down at me; he wore no shirt, and his long-sleeved underwear was the same color as the house. "Where's Matt Dunson?" His words came out in puffs of steam in the cold.

"In Austria."

The man almost chuckled then—a dry, flat, mirthless sound from between his thin lips. "So he don't know, either? Ain't that too bad now?"

"Come back in," the woman pleaded from behind the screen. "You'll catch cold. You stayed off work 'cause you was afraid you was catching—"

The man ignored her. "You tell Matt Dunson something for me," he said to me. "Tell him Stella's uncle says it. You tell him I hope he never finds her. You tell him, by God, whatever's happened to Stell, it's his fault."

"Steve!" the woman shrilled. "That ain't the truth and you know it!"

The uncle twisted his head around. "Shut up. Close the door."

"I don't want to think about her," the woman pleaded. "I don't want to talk about Stella, Steve."

There was a cutting wind, but I was colder than I should have been. I was freezing all the way through, watching the spurts of steam from the man's mouth as he growled: "Then shut up!" He fixed his small, angry eyes on me. "You—you stay away from Stell, see. Stell woulda been a good girl if it hadn't been for Matt Dunson. I shoulda killed him. I almost did, once. I wish to God I had."

"Please, Steve—"

"I don't know anything about that," I said then, coldly, because I was sore now, and anxious to get away. "But I'm going to find her. If you won't help, I'll get help. The last address Matt had was in New York, but his letters keep coming back."

"So do ours," the woman cried behind the man's back. "We don't know, either."

"I'll put the New York police on it," I said.

"See!" the woman shrilled. "See, Steve!"

"You do that," the uncle said then, low and ugly. "You go ahead, young fellow. And if you find out anything, you let us know. I'm still that girl's legal guardian."

"That's more like it," I said. "What's the last address you have?"

"She's not there."

"What's the address?"

He mentioned an address on West Fourth Street. "I still got a few things to say to that girl myself," he snarled.

The address matched the one Matt had given me.

"You said enough," the woman put in. "You said too much. Calling her those names. If she'd gone to prayer-meeting with me more instead of—" Her voice trailed off forlornly.

The man, ignoring her, came down one step. He was very close. Even in the crisp February air, the stench of tobacco, sweat and whisky reached me. And something else—something evil. I almost stepped back from him.

"You find her," he said, and there was a strange light behind his eyes, a light I'd seen in men's eyes many times in the army—when they wanted or needed a woman. "You let me know. I'll bring her home where she belongs."

"She'll never come back to *you*," the woman whispered from inside. "She better not," she added bitterly.

"You don't know anything about it," the man said, facing me but addressing the woman. "What the hell do *you* know?"

All I wanted was to get out of there. Remembering Matt in that bar, though, I also wanted to smash a fist into the narrow stubble-bearded face before my eyes. The dog in the yard started to howl for no reason, a high, shrill keening that sent a shiver down my spine. I glanced from the man to the animal. The dog was standing on three legs, gazing directly at the man, and uttering this steady, screeching sound that might have been pain or loneliness or terror.

I'd had enough. I turned and went back to the car and

climbed in. As I drove away, I saw the man still standing at the bottom of the steps. He turned to the woman and said something I couldn't hear. Then he walked toward the dog.

I didn't look back.

But I wasn't sure just why I was speeding away. I told myself that I was running from the ugliness, gloom and half-hinted evil of that house, but I couldn't entirely escape the thought that what I had seen reflected in the man's eyes—that hunger and desire—was also a part of me now. No matter what, I was going to find Stella.

Chapter Four

AT THE ADDRESS in New York I didn't have much luck at first. The superintendent had taken over the building a couple of weeks ago and he didn't know anyone who wasn't living there now . . .

"But there's a guy lives upstairs, fifth floor, all the way up—he might remember," the super told me. "Painter-fellow."

I walked up the stale-smelling, narrow stairs. When I knocked, a voice shouted for me to come in. The sharp odor of turpentine and oil paints was refreshing after that hallway.

Chuck Hoffman was stretched out on a cot in one corner of the large, high, skylighted room. The harsh light from above emphasized the bareness of the studio. In one corner there was a small gas burner on a packing box. In the center was Hoffman's easel, draped now in paint-stained rags and cloths. All around the walls, some in frames, were canvases.

At first Hoffman didn't stir. He might have been dead. Or he might simply have gone back to sleep.

"You ever hear of a girl named Stella Brezofski?"

Hoffman wasn't asleep. As soon as he heard the name, he sat up, straight. He had a thin, sallow face with two of the smallest, brightest eyes I've ever seen. "Who wants to know?" His voice, however, was friendly.

"My name's Hewitt. I used to know Stella once. In her home town."

"Put some coffee on, will ya? I'm hungover." He threw his long legs off the cot and stood up. He was tall, very tall, taller than me, but he was thin. "I'd offer you a drink if I had any left. But it was cheap wine, anyway. You wouldn't have liked it."

Watching him cross to the small sink, I decided he was not so much thin as lean—hard and lean.

"Don't let these clothes fool you," I said, feeling better in this relaxed, masculine atmosphere, the barrenness of the room reminiscent of army barracks. "I'm just out of service and I couldn't fit into any of my old duds."

Hoffman was dousing his face and head with water from the tap, his whole head; he sniffed and blew and puffed and then straightened and turned. "What do you want to know about Stella?"

He dragged up a straight chair, straddled it, and looked at me while I poured the coffee. His eyes didn't look hung-over; they were too damned bright. This struck me again but I couldn't make much of it.

"Everything you know," I said.

So we sat drinking the black coffee, bitter and scorching, and he told me what he knew—or what he thought I should be told. . . .

She had been living in the room just below his for perhaps a month before he even found out her name. It was spring then—April or May, he guessed. He'd seen her on the stairs and once or twice in the street, but she didn't so much as nod to him.

"Women interest me in either of two ways," Hoffman explained. "To paint, or to sleep with. And this Stella Brezofski didn't have what adds up in my book for either one. If she's your girl, I apologize. I'm a professional."

"She's not my girl," I said.

"She wore sloppy, cheap clothes—all too tight, too revealing and too damn awkward. Her legs were too big, not bunch-big with muscles, like a dancer's, but kind of fat-looking. Ditto the hips. The bosom—well, a painter soon learns to mistrust the bosoms modern women throw around. Anyway, here was a girl that if you saw her on the street, you wouldn't look twice. Even her hair was dull and she wore it twisted some crazy old-fashioned way around her head that only made her look more small-town and ordinary. The only thing that got me—and I admit it did, but I'm damned if I know why—is the tired look she always wore. No glow, no life, no spirit—like maybe she'd been kicked too hard or too often and had to go on remembering it all her life."

It was that look that finally caused him to speak to her. Hoffman had sold a painting that afternoon—a rare occurrence—and he was feeling fine, he wanted to celebrate. He met her on the musty-smelling narrow stairs, alone as usual, and that look roused the impulse to ask her to have dinner with him. At first she looked pleased in a distant sort of way, but when she saw the bag of groceries in his arm and realized he meant dinner in his room, she froze up and refused.

"She was damn polite about it, though. But she'd jumped to the wrong conclusions awfully fast, it seemed to me. So I laughed and reassured her and promised to keep the door open, all that rot. And I finally convinced her I wasn't out to seduce her."

She helped him prepare the meal, even running down to the delicatessen for some condiments he'd never heard of, and then she ate ravenously. Hoffman didn't expect anyone but himself to act that way about food; he was a glutton

himself, when he could afford to be—which was seldom—but he was startled at the way she went after the dinner. They drank wine, a great deal of wine, and he kept watching her.

“I can usually look right through a woman’s clothes. And while she told me about her attempts to get jobs—acting, or modeling, or dancing, she said—I got kind of unhappy. New York was full of girls from places like Scranton who can dance or who imagine they can act—it’s always some glamorous, phony thing like that—but this Stella just didn’t have it. And that made me sad. That and the wine. Sad as hell. I said maybe she could get a waitress’s job, or in a factory, and she blew up. Those eyes came to life then, by God. She got up and walked around, swearing she’d never set foot in a factory again. Again, she said, and she was bitter about it. It was late then. The house was quiet. And as she walked around, I got an idea. I began to think about painting her—not the way she looked now in those damned clothes—but the way she was. Maybe I’d had too much wine. Maybe it was the dim light. But she had a good face, not pretty but kind of unusual. At first I thought I’d just do a study of the face—give it a funny, murky kind of light effect—but then I said hell, no. Her body wasn’t beautiful, but combined with that face—well, it might make a damned interesting oil. I decided to make her into a peasant, leave that hair that way, and with that broad, strong body—anyway the idea took hold of me and I asked her.”

He paused. I was thinking again of the photograph Matt Dunson carried. I knew the kind of painting Hoffman must have had in mind.

“But no dice. She even started to walk out right then. I gave her a pitch about how artists looked at things differently from other people, but she only shook her head and thanked me for the dinner. Finally I got sore, I guess, and said something about not wanting to go to bed with every woman I painted, which is more or less true. I offered to pay her and I told her she’d be modeling—which is what she

said she wanted to do. Still she refused. She said I was very kind and perhaps I was right, but she couldn't, even if she did need the money. So I said goodnight and let her go downstairs."

Hoffman had forgotten about the offer the next morning. He was at work on a still-life, sweating and cursing himself as he painted, when she knocked at his door. Before he realized why she had come, he offered her coffee and asked her to sit down and was generally relieved at the excuse to knock off work. But she didn't sit down.

She stood studying him with quiet determined eyes, still filled with questions, and told him that she had come to pose for him. Looking at her in the cold light of morning, Hoffman almost regretted his magnanimity. She wore a plain, white blouse, a tight-fitting skirt, the sheerest of hose, and shoes with spike heels. She didn't ask him, though, to repeat his promises. She only asked him when he was ready to begin?

Hoffman removed the still-life canvas from the easel, selected a clean one, placed it in position and shrugged. In his mind, he admitted to me, he was estimating what it would cost but he covered this for her sake and told her he was ready. He also told her that it was a hard job, that she would have to sit or stand perfectly still for at least a half-hour at a time, longer if possible, and that until he was far along with the job, they would not be able to talk: this was the way he worked. The professional coldness seemed to reassure her, and he felt her relax a little and was glad.

"You want all?" she asked.

"Everything."

"Here?" she asked.

"It's only one room. I don't even have a screen. I'll step outside if you like."

"Do not bother," she said stiffly, and sat down on one of the chairs and kicked off her shoes.

Hoffman turned away and began to clean his brushes. But he watched, too, out of the corner of his eye. She

crossed her legs and peeled down the stocking from one leg. Hoffman was pleased to note that her upper legs were not too heavy—firm and strong. She pulled off the other stocking and stood up. She was not looking at him. Her eyes were far away, as though she had somehow detached herself from the moment and was staring either into the past or the future. She unbuttoned the blouse, not hurrying, but without fumbling. The room was still. Hoffman sloshed the brushes about in the turpentine and began to dry them. Stella pulled the blouse out of the skirt and it hung loosely, open down the center. She wore no bra, and the lift of breasts held the white cloth away from her body. She un-snap-ped the buttons on the sleeves.

Then, for the first time, she glanced at Hoffman. His eyes were on her. She paused briefly, a tiny frown creasing her forehead, her brows drawn together over her suddenly uncertain and questioning eyes. Hoffman didn't smile. He didn't move.

Stella seemed to make up her mind. With a slight shrug, her gaze retreating again, she threw the blouse off and it dropped to the floor. Her skin was smooth and clear, almost translucent, white but tinted with a mellow richness of color. Her shoulders were rounded, not square and muscular as Hoffman had imagined; and her breasts, while full, had a gentle swell to them, an uptilted thrust, at once girlish and womanly. While he watched, the nipples lost their softness, became vivid and pointed.

Then she unbuttoned the skirt and ran her hands, palms against her thighs, under the skirt-top. She pushed the skirt down, bending forward slightly.

Hoffman looked away.

"Where do you wish me to stand?"

When he turned to her again, she was nude. Her eyes met his, waiting. As he studied her, she lifted one hand slowly to her face, the back of the hand to her lips. In a slight gesture of uncertainty or embarrassment, she nibbled briefly at her knuckles. Then she dropped her hand away so that

both arms hung loosely, casual and smooth, along either side of her body.

She stood with her feet together. He had been right about her legs. They were smooth-flowing, gleaming in long curves from wide hips, the thighs rounded, the calves slender now without the distortion of clothes, the ankles delicate and perfect. He masked his astonishment as well as he could, but he had not expected this.

"Here," he said gruffly. "Stand here." He stepped away from the easel, assumed a position facing it. In his mind were pictures of the Titian nudes—the lustrous glow of flesh, the rounded grace. "Try it so."

Without embarrassment now, Stella followed his instructions. He did not touch her. When he asked her to shift a foot, to lift an arm, he only walked around her and gave his instructions verbally. Finally, satisfied, he returned to the easel.

"Tell me when you're tired," he said then, "but don't move. Tell me first."

"I will."

And Hoffman went to work.

By the third day, everything was sailing. Stella was convinced that Hoffman meant to keep his original promise and she had arrived at the point at which, during the breaks and rests, she didn't bother to slip into the worn robe she had brought up from her room. They would sit having tea together. He had discovered that she hated coffee and she would make tea for them, buying it herself, mixing it with a sober sort of pleasure that delighted him.

"Maybe you have friends," she said. "Maybe I could get other jobs." She was stretched out on the cot, teacup in hand, the robe thrown over her feet. It was a warm day, almost summerlike, but her feet, she had told him, were always cold. "I am all right as a model, Hoff?"

"If I can sell this one, I'll hire you again myself."

Then she smiled. "Meanwhile, though, to play safe, you'll recommend me to someone?"

"With reluctance," Hoffman said. "Now — back to work!"

As it turned out it was not necessary for Hoffman to recommend her. That afternoon he had a visitor, a man whom he knew only slightly, named Tommy Gladstone. There was a short, quiet knock on the door, then it opened and Tommy entered the studio.

Stella, posing, looked startled, glanced questioningly at Hoffman, then dropped the pose and went hastily to pick up the robe. With her back to them, she pulled it on and tied the belt.

Tommy was smiling. "I'm sorry," he purred. "I should have waited." Then he looked from Stella's back— she still stood staring away from them—to Hoffman. "Usually, your models are not so modest, HOFFIE."

When Hoffman told me this, he described Tommy Gladstone. He was a young man, not yet in his middle twenties, always extremely but conservatively well-dressed. His shirts were usually silk, his suits custom-tailored, his ties flowed neatly at his throat. His face was too handsome to be believable — perfectly molded, with wide sensual lips, a straight classic nose, a ruddy, healthy-looking color. His eyes were blue, startlingly blue in a man's face. Altogether, Hoffman said, Tommy Gladstone was an abstraction of male beauty. "The kind the movies try to foist off on us as typical, the kind of a guy that you or I would be suspicious of on sight, but that women crawl for when they meet 'em in the flesh. He'd never be caught without his shoes shined so bright they'd dazzle your eyes. He looked like maybe he shaved twice a day."

Hoffman claimed that Tommy Gladstone was a mystery to him. How he made his money, if he ever had to make it, and where he lived, and how and with whom—Hoffman knew none of it. All he did know, and all he really cared about until that day, was that Tommy Gladstone loved art, understood it, could talk it brilliantly; and perhaps more

important to Hoffman, he had the money with which to buy it.

"I'm shopping again," Gladstone said that afternoon. "Thought I'd like to look over your new work, Hoffie, if the young lady doesn't object. You go on with your work."

Hoffman frowned at Stella's back. "You go to your room, Stella. We'll go on later."

"No," said Gladstone. "In that case I'll leave."

Then Stella turned to them. Hoffman saw her look at Gladstone; he saw at once the expression that crossed her normally passive face—the shock at first slowly turning into something else as her eyes traveled from Gladstone's movie-handsome face down his square-shouldered, solid frame, then back up to his eyes. What that glance turned into, Hoffman thought, was desire.

At first he thought he was imagining all this but then Stella said, her voice deep and low and completely changed: "I don't mind, Hoff. He doesn't need to go." Then, lifting her brows, she added without taking her gaze from Gladstone, "unless he wants to."

Gladstone smiled. It was the kind of smile that probably stopped a woman's heart but it set a man's teeth on edge; an intensely white, intensely personal flash, illuminating his face. "I'd be delighted to stay. But don't bother with me, either of you. I'll look through the canvases. Who knows?"

Stella stepped to the center of the floor where she had been standing. Then, very slowly, her eyes glazed now, strange to Hoffman, she untied the belt. The robe fell open. She was still looking directly at Gladstone as her hands pushed it back. She stepped out of it, gracefully.

But when Hoffman tore his eyes away to glance at Gladstone he saw, with a start, that Gladstone was already stepping up to the paintings, his back half turned to the room. He seemed not in the least interested.

Hoffman, himself angry now for reasons he couldn't untangle, returned to the painting. But he noted, too, that the nipples of Stella's breast always round and soft after the

initial embarrassment three days before, were again pointed and brilliant red. Growling, he worked at least forty-five minutes without a break.

He laughed a little when he told me about it. "Christ, I don't know what got into me. The whole thing just made me sore as hell. I still don't know why because I didn't give a damn about Stella as a woman. At least I don't think I did. But that afternoon was the beginning of something. You sure you want to know all this?"

"Yes," I told him numbly, "as much as you can remember. Every detail might be important."

Hoffman shrugged and went on.

He had worked swiftly and in silence for nearly an hour, acutely aware of Gladstone's quiet presence, of Stella's rigidity—a rigidity that made his work all the harder, but which he refused to correct or mention. Then, after he felt that perhaps he was punishing Stella unreasonably by continuing, he stepped back, took a deep breath, and said, "Let's have some tea."

The tension in the room, of which Gladstone didn't seem conscious, broke only slightly.

"I like this," Gladstone said, displaying a landscape that Hoffman had done weeks before. "It's nostalgic without being sentimental. Is it for sale?"

"Everything's for sale," Hoffman told him. "I'm in business."

Stella, picking up the robe and tying it about her, retreated to sit, stiff and cross-legged, in a huge, carved chair in one corner of the room. She was not staring at Gladstone, however; again her eyes had taken on that distant, detached expression.

Hoffman completed the deal with Gladstone, pocketed the money and promised to send or bring the picture to the address Gladstone gave him. That address was engraved on a neat card with the name *Thomas Gladstone, Jr.* above it.

"I'd take the painting along," Gladstone said in that

always soft, always relaxed voice of his, "but I'm on my way downtown. Do you mind?"

"For that price, no," Hoffman told him.

Gladstone picked up his hat, a narrow-brimmed, precisely creased felt, and crossed to stand in front of Stella. She lifted her head and their eyes met. Hoffman could see only Gladstone's back, but he could watch Stella fully. Her arms rested along the carved, wooden arms of the chair; she looked relaxed and without feeling. But her fingers, outstretched, were stiff and her head was very still, her eyes also unmoving. It was a moment of suspension.

"I hope I didn't interfere too much," Gladstone apologized smoothly. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Stella said, not stirring, in the same hushed voice Hoffman had heard earlier. "Mr. Gladstone," she added.

When the door had closed after Tommy Gladstone, she remained in the chair. Hoffman poured a cup of tea and crossed to her, puzzled, that odd anger still eating him. "You need this," he said, offering the cup.

She reached up for the cup. But her hand was trembling. She made a snatch at it when she realized it was dropping, but it was too late. The cup crashed; the liquid streamed across the floor.

Stella stood up. For the first time Hoffman saw that she was quivering all over. There was a throbbing in her lovely throat and ripples of excitement spread down her neck and into the deep slash where the robe came together across her firm breasts. Again her hand lifted to her face in that odd gesture of uncertainty. In that instant Hoffman knew that if he so much as touched her, she would have collapsed into his arms.

"You've been so kind, Hoff," she whispered. "It's all right. You've been so kind to me."

Hoffman smiled reminiscently but ironically, when he told me. "Even as I reached for her, then," he said slowly,

his eyes narrowed, "I knew that I could have been any man, any man at all. The guy she really wanted was Tommy Gladstone."

Knowing it, pulling the robe from her creamy shoulders, dropping it to the floor, Hoffman didn't care. . . .

Listening to Hoffman's story, filling in the details for myself, I found that every word he had said had only added to the wild, driving curiosity that I had begun to feel even before leaving Europe.

"Where . . . where is she now?" I asked Hoffman.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. But the day after Gladstone's visit when I was getting ready to deliver the painting, I couldn't find the engraved card, the one with the address on it. I looked for quite a while, like an idiot before I realized what had happened to it. Then I went downstairs to ask Stella. I had remembered the address by then but I wanted to know. She wasn't in her room. Whether she came back at all that night, I don't know. But by evening of the next day, she'd moved away—without so much as saying goodbye."

"Did you deliver the painting?"

"Another funny thing. That address didn't fit Gladstone at all—my picture of Gladstone. It was an ordinary brownstone walk-up, not much better than this shambles, and when I asked to see him, the landlady said he'd told her to accept the painting."

"Do you still remember that address?"

Hoffman grinned and told me. "What gets me—and you tell Stella if you find her—is that she didn't so much as say goodbye. I guess she figured she'd already paid me for my kindness, so-called. And Christ, she had. More than paid me."

Chapter Five

THE ADDRESS *Hoffman* gave me was on a littered sidestreet. Practically a tenement.

While I spoke, sometimes pacing up and down, Kay Bradshaw simply listened—quiet, unmoving except to stub out her cigarette and light another. She didn't stop me, but she didn't seem particularly interested, either. I gave her the story swiftly, skipping the details that interested and still puzzled me the most; but I went over them, too, in my mind as I spoke—especially the look I found in that landlady's eye.

After I rang the bell and waited over five minutes, an old woman opened the door....

She was as ugly and sick-looking a human being as I'd ever seen. She wore a printed housedress that must have been twenty years old. She had black hair plastered thinly to her scalp in swirls. But her eyes disturbed me the most. They hardly seemed to live.

When I mentioned Gladstone's name, then repeated it twice, she said he'd moved away. She made me repeat Stella's name only once.

Then she said, "Who're you?"

"Does she live here?"

"No."

"Has she ever lived here?"

"Who're you?"

The dullness of her flat tone reflected in her gaze. It was withdrawn, light years away in space or time, glazed—a wall. And behind that wall there seemed to exist a world from which I and everything else, was excluded. It made me nervous looking into those black, distant eyes that

either refused or could not look back at me. She wasn't blind, that much was evident, but the filmy wall was darkly impenetrable.

"If you don't talk to me," I told her then, "I'm going to the police."

She didn't reply at first. But she didn't close the door. Finally she said, as though her mind were trying to break through that hazy expression. "How do I know you ain't police?"

That gave me the idea. I was tired by then, anyway, and I was especially tired of this kind of run-around. I thought of Stella's uncle and aunt on the porch in Scranton, and I decided it was time to stop being the meek little kid begging and asking questions. "Maybe I am the police," I said. "Maybe I'm not. Where will I find Stella Brezofski or Thomas Gladstone?"

She went through a struggle, the sluggish mind working in that hidden world behind the glaze, and then she said, "Talk to Kramer."

"Kramer?"

"Club Cicero. He knows all you cops. Talk to Kramer."

She closed the door in my face.

So I talked to Kramer. The Club Cicero was like a thousand other clubs of its sort in New York. In midafternoon, it gave the impression of being deserted, at rest; at the same time I realized, sitting across the shining table from Kramer, that we were capably surrounded. By then I was a little angry, but most of all I was excited. I remembered Scranton, and my family's quiet house, my father's office; and watching Kramer, I felt alive. That was the right word: alive. The mirrors around the walls glittered faintly in the dim hush. The white leather seats looked lush and comfortable. And Kramer seemed a part of all this. His silk shirt, his flaming tie, his square-shouldered, box-like striped suit, his flabby face—all seemed an intrinsic part of the Club Cicero. It was a new world to me, repelling and fascinating.

He had met me with bland good humor, shaking my hand, ushering me to a table in the deserted room. He was still smiling at me, jovial, waiting, interested—as though he entertained some secret, boyish joke behind the high wide forehead, a joke that he wished you could share with him. His hands were flabby and almost feminine, with stubby fingers and manicured nails, and he rested them easily on the table top.

But I noticed, as we settled down, that a man entered from the back room through leather-covered, swinging doors with a pail and mop, and began sloshing water over the floor, not far from the table. And almost in the same instant, another man appeared behind the bar on my left and went to work counting bottles, making businesslike notations on a pad. Somehow, though, their casual appearance at that time alerted me, and for the first time I felt that Kramer, for some reason, was taking no chances.

"You're looking for someone named Stella Brezofski?" Kramer said easily, his little black marble eyes on me. "How'd you happen to come to me? I don't know anyone of that name. I've never even heard the name before. You'll have a drink with me?" It was not quite a question; he lifted one soft hand and dropped it to the table, a casual gesture but a command.

"What about Gladstone?" I asked.

Then I caught, or imagined I caught, a fleeting flicker pass across that heavy-jowled face, travel into the marble eyes, and disappear quickly. "Gladstone?"

"Thomas Gladstone."

"I have met him."

"Is that all?"

"If you mean, do I know anything about his business, I don't. I have my suspicions, but I don't know anything."

The man from the bar appeared with two old-fashioneds, and placed the two enormous, heavy-bottomed glasses on the table. Kramer said nothing, but picked up his drink, and the barman—if he was the barman—retreated. I had

had a good look at him, though. He was enormous, tall and heavy, with bushy black brows over narrow scowling eyes. He wore a striped shirt with a tight-pinchd tie knotted at his throat. And he had glanced at Kramer, covertly, as though asking for a signal; when Kramer didn't even turn to look at him, he had returned to the bar. And as I lifted my glass, I realized that the man mopping the floor had moved to a position behind my back.

"Where will I find him?"

"Why ask me?"

So I told Kramer about the old woman in the tenement doorway. A hard glitter passed across the eyeballs, faded. He grinned.

"When'd you graduate?" Kramer asked pleasantly.

"Graduate?"

"God, they hire 'em young nowadays, don't they?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Young and dumb. You shoulda checked with the Inspector before you come barging in here, copper."

"I'm not a cop."

Kramer still grinned. "Finish your drink, kid, and roll on."

"Not until I find out what I came for. And I'm no copper."

"I don't believe you, boy. But even if I did, I told you all I know."

"I don't believe *you*."

Kramer, his glass to his flabby lips, paused. The grin faded. His face, soft-looking as it was, seemed to harden, a muscle flaring in one jaw. "Bright young copper, just out of school. Tell Casey I said you should have flunked."

"I don't know any Casey."

"Inspector Casey."

I shook my head. The whisky was working in me. I felt tense, though, all through, conscious of the silence behind me, the feigned disinterest of the man behind the bar. At the same time, I wondered, in a flash, just why the hell

I'd come here? And why I was talking this way? The unlikelihood of the whole situation gave me a lift. I felt that all Kramer had to do, some time when that grin failed him, was to lift a finger and I'd wake up in the alley out back—if I woke up at all. Then I told myself I was being silly, that sort of thing didn't happen, and not to me, anyway, or to people like me.

Kramer polished off his drink, waiting.

"Cop or not," I said, then, "I'm getting to the bottom of this. And Gladstone is the only one who can help me now. You know Gladstone. You've already admitted that."

"Gladstone," Kramer said then, "is a thing I carry my dirty shirts in from one hotel to the other." With this he burst into wild guffaws of laughter. He took a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and wiped away the idiotic tears, the laugh still burbling in his chest.

I'd had enough. I stood up. I whirled swiftly, holding the heavy glass in my hand, and stepped away a few strides so that the mop-man and the barman and Kramer were all in front of me.

"Kramer," I said, "I'm no cop. If I was, why wouldn't I show you my badge? But you don't want trouble and I don't want to have to give it to you."

Kramer was no longer smiling, but he hadn't risen. The mop-man and the barman were waiting for him to move.

"All I want is to find a girl named Stella Brezofski. I think you know her, maybe even know where she is. Now it might be just as tough for the police to find her as for me, but I'm going to the closest police station and I'm going to meet up with this Inspector Casey and there's going to be trouble. You don't want trouble."

"Kid," Kramer said wearily, "if I didn't want you to walk out that door, you wouldn't."

The barman stepped to Kramer's side. I tensed. "He's only a junkie," the barman said.

I estimated the distance to the foyer, tried to remember the distance from there to the front door. The mop-man,

small and thin with a pockmarked face and wearing a vest, was the closest one to me. I still held the old-fashioned glass and it was very heavy.

Kramer took a deep breath, almost a sigh, and rose heavily from his chair. No one else moved. I waited.

"I don't want any of Tommy Gladstone's trouble," Kramer said softly. "I'm not mixed up in that stuff, see? That's the only damn reason you win, kid. This time." Kramer stepped toward me.

I took half a step backwards, clutching the glass. Kramer, surprised, stopped. Then he laughed again. The mockery of that laugh worked its way inside me. In that instant I hated him and knew I'd go on hating him forever. But I was scared, too. I knew his laughter was justified. I didn't have a chance.

"What the hell's that number on Park Avenue?" Kramer asked the huge barman without turning his head. "Kay Bradshaw's?"

The barman gave it to him, still looking at me. He, too, was grinning now—a triumphant, school-boy sort of grin. I'd met a thousand like him—in the streets, at school, in the army. The big guy with the muscles, no brain, and a mountain of hate packed inside.

"You heard him," Kramer said. "Ask Kay Bradshaw about your troubles."

He grinned again then, but this time it was different—a misshapen, scornful twist of face, the black eyes sinking between the low, dark brows above and the purplish puffiness below.

"You want to stay healthy, kid, you find other ways of getting at the stuff. You got me? I don't mix with it. If you're a copper, tell Casey that. He should know it by now. If you're not, just keep your distance. And don't threaten me with glasses. I don't like to be threatened, one way or the other, but I'm damned if I'll take any of it from a bastard junkie."

I walked to the bar and set down the glass, feeling fool-

ish—but more than foolish; still scared and sore at myself and bewildered. Without looking back at them, I walked swiftly from the club.

Kramer's laugh didn't follow me to the street. I left only silence behind.

Before I hit the sidewalk with the February wind slapping at me, I was cold. After I'd hailed a cab, I sat shivering in the back seat, going up Park Avenue. I was wondering just what the hell I'd let myself in for. And more than that, with the word *junkie* echoing in my ear, as Kramer had spit it at me in suppressed rage and utter disgust, I felt that, in some odd way, I was carrying with me the slime of a world I'd never known. This feeling, mingling with a growing apprehension, shut out the sense of adventure and even erased from my mind the memory of Stella Brezofski. I was ready to give up. I was ready to go home.

The cab stopped in front of the Kay Bradshaw apartment house.

Chapter Six

"THAT BRINGS me here, Miss Bradshaw," I concluded to the girl, who had not stirred, not even to sip her highball.

The room was silent for a long time, softly quiet, with the sun gone and the dusk outside seeping through the handsome drawn curtains. I couldn't help wondering whether she had even heard my story.

"The word police seems to have a certain magic," I said after a time in the shadowy dusk. "Maybe you can tell me why—if Stella died of pneumonia."

Kay Bradshaw moved then. She stood up and picked up my empty glass. She laughed shortly, a derisive explosion

of sound in the hushed apartment. "You think she was murdered? Something like that?"

"I don't know what to think," I admitted.

She crossed to the small bar. "Only a half one this time, Lon," she said as she poured.

I stood up and followed her. When she turned with the glass, she found me beside her. She smiled then, but very faintly, almost scornfully. I didn't like that smile. I was fed up with the whole deal, and she'd used the word murder, not I.

"Where was she buried?" I asked.

"You're a persistent boy, aren't you?" The way she said it, she might have added aloud, *And such a fool.*

"Never mind the boy stuff. Or me, for that matter."

"Did you mean it when you said you had fifty dollars, Lon?"

I took a short step away. I hadn't expected this—not again and not like this.

"Because sometimes," she said softly, "if you don't, when someone appeals to me—sometimes I make exceptions."

The crazy desire came flooding back, just like that; and again I could feel the throbbing excitement surging in my veins. Suddenly she came to me in a single, flowing motion of her body, one step only, and she was against me, her breasts lifting sharply, her legs flush against mine, her face wavering in my vision. Her breath was short, coming in little gasps all of a sudden, soft against my cheek; then her face was against mine and her arms around me, clutching at my back, moving up and down, her hands grasping.

I had stopped thinking. There was no more Matt Dunson, Stella Brezofski, Kramer. There were only the two of us here in this unlikely, exciting apartment. I grabbed her and crushed her against me.

Slowly, she began to move. Her head fell back and her face swam in front of me, soft and filled with life, tanned and stirring. And her body melted into mine. My hands could feel the straight back, the warm flesh under the

knitted cloth. Her face came slowly, hazily toward mine.

Her lips moved over mine, reaching, moist and moving, open. The room swirled, sweeping away everything but the girl flush against me, probing and delicious.

She leaned back in my arms, her back arching in my hands, her lids heavy now, the liquid eyes hazy and uncertain. "You wait, please," she whispered, and disentangled my arms gently, with promise.

I watched her cross into the bedroom, her chin high, every line of her slenderness clear and sharp in the dusky light. She left the door open.

The bedroom light flashed on, dim but golden-warm. Then I saw the bedroom door and I could not have moved had I wanted to. The door, instead of swinging into the bedroom, was swung back into the living room, and the bedroom side of the door was all mirror, top to floor. The bedroom was reflected in it, fully, and the girl stood framed in it, looking back at me. Her face held the same flushed breathlessness of her kiss as she stood quite still, as though making sure that I was watching.

I was watching. Unmoving, without volition, I was rooted to the deep-piled carpet.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, crossed her legs and peeled down one stocking to the ankle, drew it off. After she'd repeated the motion slowly, baring the other leg, she stood up. I glanced once at her face; it was without expression now. She reached for the top pearl-colored button. Her fingers worked easily, smoothly. The buttons opened down to her waist. For just a brief moment then, she dropped her arms to her side, making sure I got the full, exotic impact of the deep tan flash between the still-invisible breasts.

Only then did she unbuckle the narrow belt that defined the slenderness of the waist above the flare of hips.

As she reached upwards, her hand sliding across the flesh of shoulder under the dress and pushed it off—there was a bright golden flash of shoulder first—I felt a quiver run

over me. I saw the dress fall, slipping off first one full breast, then the other. She slid both hands under the skirt of the dress, palms against her thighs, and pushed it down to the floor. She wore nothing underneath. Her legs were curved and perfect, incredibly perfect, and every small inch of her body had the same tanned glow as her face. Acutely conscious of every move, every inch of the woman in the bedroom, my mind still wavered.

Before she reached for a flimsy blue negligée that lay outspread on the bed, she frowned—a brief instant of frown—and lifted one hand to her face. Incredulous, stunned, I saw her nibble the back of her knuckles in a very young gesture of uncertainty and embarrassment. Then she had the negligée about her, she was tying the ribbon at the waist and moving into the living room.

She was coming toward me.

The silence of the room set up a humming in my ears. The silence and the sudden knowledge that my suspicion was right.

She moved in long, sure strides, the transparent negligée enhancing every detail of her body. The warm sun tan shone tantalizingly through. She stopped a yard away.

"I've been in Florida for a month. Do you like my tan?"

My throat was tight and dry. "I haven't missed a thing," I said, and my voice was all out of whack, not my voice at all. She caught the hardness in it, and blinked, then she stepped closer. This time I was having none of it. "Did you have fun in Florida?" I asked.

That did it. The soft, pleased mockery faded. She turned into a statue. A cold statue, only six inches from me.

Slowly then, as I watched, she lifted her hand to her lips again, biting at it. "You've known all along?"

"Maybe I should have. But not until just now." I slapped her hand and it came down. "If I'd known all along, do you think I'd have let you—?"

The hand clenched into a fist. "Yes, I do. I think you would have because you've wanted me all the time. *Me.*"

"That's a lie."

"Did Matt show you that picture he carries?"

"No," I lied—because I hadn't told her that part of the story.

"You came in here wanting me. I saw it in your face. Not for Matt, for *yourself*."

Because what she said was true, my anger flared higher. "I've already got what I came for."

"You're like all the others. You lie to yourself." She whirled away and pulled the negligée close about her throat. "All you want, all any of you ever think of, is what I have to *sell*! I see it in your eyes on the streets, in the cocktail lounges, when I get into taxis, everywhere. Yet you're ashamed of it. And maybe afraid a little, too. You are all fools."

"That's not what I'm ashamed of," I said. "Sure, a minute or two ago—when you tried to pull this off so I'd feel too damn guilty to write Matt the truth—"

"That isn't true, Lon! That wasn't the reason at all—"

"Or because you don't want me asking any more questions—like why did Kramer call me a junkie? And what business is Gladstone in?"

"None of that is your business! You've found me. Isn't that what you came for?" She was turned on me, one hand clutching the negligée, but her legs parted angrily; and her fierceness, which I hadn't expected, only made her more alluring, more desirable. "Or was it to blame me? To try to make me feel guilty? Well, you can't." She stepped closer. "Look at me, Mr. Lon Hewitt. You've seen me before. We met once on a cheap dance floor in a cheap joint, dancing to a cheap band. You looked right through me because I was a dime a dozen—a too-fat, too-plain girl who thought a roll on the riverbank with Matt Dunson was living. Any damn thing to get the taste of the factory out of my mouth."

She paused for breath. I couldn't move. "You saw my house, didn't you? You met my charming uncle, didn't

you? Dear Uncle Steve. You may be too naïve to put two and two together, little boy—just the way Matt was. Only I was scared to tell Matt the truth for fear he'd murder him. Just like Uncle Steve once started out to kill Matt. For the same reason! That's what my life was; that's what I ran away from. You think I should have stayed in that beat-up shack with them? With Aunt Lottie looking the other way and running off to church? You going to tell me I should have stayed at home?"

Still I could hardly breathe. What was there to say? The shock of discovery had numbed me to her anger, but not to the beauty of her as she spoke.

"What . . . what about Matt?" I asked finally.

"Matt?" The anger died, faded. She smiled faintly. It was a tender smile, speaking silently of past pleasures, of nights and days well remembered.

Christ, Lon, that gal on the back seat of my jalopy. Or like on the riverbank.

"Matt," I said, the anger returning slowly.

"Poor Matt. He should have known. What could Matt ever give a woman?"

"He loved you. He still loves you. He's cracking up over it."

"Oh, what a crazy idiot!" she cried then, her tone harsh again. "Why should I wait for him? I told him I wouldn't. I told him I couldn't. For what? To sit home and have six or eight kids and never enough dough and live on soot and die of TB, the way my folks did! Bowling once a week in a smelly old hole. Is that it? Is that what he expects? Or you? Where the hell do *I* come in?"

"Where do you come in now."

For answer she made a sweeping gesture that included the gleaming, tufted furniture, the luxurious carpet, the glowing grandeur of the room. "Look for yourself," she said quietly.

"At fifty bucks a throw," I said, the taste of ashes against my tongue.

"Who are you to get so moral about it?" She was speaking softly now. "You were willing." She came toward me. "You're still willing. More than willing. It's in your face even now."

"With a setup like this," I said evenly, "you can't be so hard up. You even said you'd lower the price. Why? What'd you hope to accomplish?"

"I planned to tell you. Afterwards."

"Why?"

"So you could write the truth to Matt. So you'd either feel so lousy with that pretty little conscience of yours, that you'd sit down and write him the truth and I'd never have to go through this with him—or else, afterwards, I could have convinced you to forget the whole thing and to write to Matt and tell him the lie I told you. I hadn't made up my mind."

"It was an act, then. The whole damn thing! A professional act. You didn't want—" I broke off.

"You? I . . . I guess I didn't. At first, anyway. But I thought you were kind."

"You were wrong."

"I'm not sure."

"Hoffman was kind, too. You're just a pushover for anyone who's either kind or has fifty bucks, or preferably both."

"That's enough," she warned in a strained voice, going suddenly limp all over. She sank to the sofa. "You can go now. Tell Matt whatever you damn please."

"I'll lie," I said.

"See? You are kind." But there was no triumph in her tone.

I went to pick up my coat in the foyer. Then I returned to stare at her. She had lifted her legs to the sofa and she lay on her back, her head forward, her chin resting on her chest. She had flung one arm across her forehead.

She was an incredible vision of loveliness. It was hard to get the truth straight and clear in my mind. Twenty-one

years old—Stella Brezofski, Kay Bradshaw. Yet I couldn't tear myself away. I wanted to lash her because I felt I hadn't reached her yet, and because of Matt—and because I still wanted her. I wished nothing had come between. Why hadn't I waited? What had been gained?

She sensed my brooding presence in the hallway, my eyes on her; on the bowed, blonde head that glistened even in reflected golden light from the bedroom, on the breast that, under the transparent blue, lifted with the upswept arm across her forehead, on the neat joining of legs and torso, and the smooth flow of hips into slender calves. It was not the same body as the one in the photograph—slimmer, smoother, much more conventionally alluring. She lifted her head and glanced across at me. She wore again the half-smiling mask, unexpectant, knowing.

"Is there more?"

I felt a fresh quickening all through me. "Are you satisfied?" I demanded in a strange voice, no longer edged with anger. "Are you happy like this?"

She waited an instant before she replied.

"As happy as I expect to be. Happier than Stella Brezofski ever was, Lon. She's dead, you know. She's really dead."

"Goodbye."

"I hope so, Lon. I can't help doubting it but I do hope so. For both our sakes."

"Goodbye," I said again, and went out.

As I closed the door sharply, I met a man in the hall. He was approaching the door. I stepped away, my mind charging ahead. I could see him ringing the bell, I could see her rising, opening the door to him, ushering him into the apartment, offering him a drink, waiting, smiling—

I felt suddenly sick. It should have meant nothing to me.

Then I heard the buzzer: two shorts, a long wait, then a long ring. A signal. He had been here before. A regular customer, probably. I halted, turned. The man was standing at the door, waiting.

And he smiled at me cordially, not the grin I might

have expected. A flash of glittering white teeth in a ruddy face. I recognized him at once.

The kind the movies try to foist off on us as typical. The kind of guy that you or I would be suspicious of on sight but that women crawl for when they meet 'em in the flesh.

Tommy Gladstone.

There was only one thing wrong. One thing Hoffman had failed to mention. Gladstone's eyes, as startling a blue as Hoffman had claimed, were glazed over with the same opaque film that I had met only once before in my life—earlier in the day, in the door of that tenement house where Gladstone had once lived. That old woman. That dirty, half-scared, only half-sane old woman. The same milky look in her eyes.

Then the door opened and I turned away. I heard the door close. I went to the elevator and went down.

I was out of it, completely out of it. I was done with it. I was going home to a dull, safe office in a dull, safe town. I'd write Matt the truth—he'd have to take it. His woman was a party girl, a call girl. He'd have to accept it whether he loved her or not.

I sensed depths here darker and uglier than I had ever thought about. But I was climbing out. I hadn't gone down. I hoped I never would.

Chapter Seven

IN MY HOTEL ROOM I looked at myself in the mirror. Nothing had happened. Not to me, anyway. But why hadn't I told the desk clerk I was checking out in the morning?

I sat down and wrote the letter to Matt. It was all lies, phony as hell from start to finish. Then I tore it up and

tried again. This time I told the truth, straight and brutal. I ripped that one up, too.

I went down on the elevator and had a drink in the bar, then two more in a hurry, and went out and walked the foreign New York streets. It had begun to snow, and I remembered Vienna, and Matt.

There was a crazy, nagging hunger in my stomach. It was late. I stopped in a glittering bar, loud with drunken voices and hazy with smoke, and had a couple more. Maybe three. Then I walked again, knowing I should eat. Once, I thought I caught sight of a girl who looked like Kay, or walked like Kay, or was Kay. She was on a man's arm. They walked fast. I followed them, going all sick and empty inside—until they turned in under the blazing marquee of a theatre and I saw her face fully. She was smiling up at the man. She didn't look like Kay at all. (Kay or Stella—already I was thinking of her as Kay.) The girl looked happy and excited and in love, clinging to the man's arm.

I tried to eat in a noisy Broadway restaurant, gave it up, shoved the food aside and had another whisky. When I was pretty well plastered, well after midnight, I went back to the hotel and fell across the bed and drifted into a tiring, haunted sleep.

In the morning I was more tired than ever, and sick. Afterwards, I tried to pack. I laid out the suitcase on the bed and started to throw my clothes into it, but after a while I gave that up.

I sat down at the desk and wrote a note to the family on hotel stationery. Having a fine time, think I'll stay a few more days. You should see New York from the top of the Empire State. You should see the Statue of Liberty. My damned conscience twisted a little, at even these small lies, and I had to smile at myself. If only they knew the truth. If only I knew it myself.

In the chill morning light that cascaded through the windows, I tried again to write to Matt, cold sober and unexcited, but it was no good. It was no good any of the thirty

or fifty times I tried during the next two days and nights, drunk or sober—and I was usually drunk. Each morning my wastebasket was filled with ripped hotel stationery.

What was I doing? Why was I staying? The reason was simple, I lied to myself: I had to have the rest of the story before I could write to Matt and be free. I had to be able to explain the change in Stella, and I had to be able to explain it logically and fully and in sequence. There were too many missing links now.

What, for instance, had happened between the time Kay moved into the brownstone tenement and the time she went into her present business?

And how had Tommy Gladstone, the handsome dream-boy Gladstone, figured in the metamorphosis? Tommy Gladstone with the milk-blue haze in front of his handsome blue eyes.

The landlady's faraway look and Gladstone's were the same. The same. Then, harder than any blow, Kramer's words hit me: *You want to stay healthy, kid, you find other ways of gettin' at the stuff. I don't like to be threatened, and I'm goddamned if I'll take it from a bastard junkie.*

Junkie.

What a fool I'd been. Why hadn't I put it together before this? Junkie—the landlady and Gladstone. And Kay? Stella Brezofski?

The peasant girl naked and free and happy under the sun, under the dappled shadow of a tree in an open field? Now the slender, sophisticated New York party-girl—that much I had accepted. She was a prostitute.

Junkie. Dopefiend was the common word I'd heard—someone who existed in a world apart from any I'd ever be likely to know.

I glimpsed even darker depths opening below—swirling beckoning depths of degradation and evil and corruption.

I was pacing the floor of the hotel room again, a caged beast. Every minute you stay, I told myself coldly, reasonably, you only get yourself in deeper. But—fascinated, hor-

rified, oddly excited, I couldn't draw back. I longed to run; the longing was an ache through my legs, my loins. But I was caged.

My quivering mind churned up pictures: Matt dancing with her on that unremembered night in the roadhouse near Scranton. And afterwards, in his car—

The thought, almost a personal memory, sent my blood racing.

Gladstone. Kay didn't have that milkiness in her eyes. Not yet.

Even Kramer? The thought of Kramer, anyone like Kramer, with Kay, a girl like Kay—

And Kay herself. I hated her most of all, a weakening poison in my blood. I remembered her hand going to the top pearl button, the V slash of tan to her waistline, the shrug of her shoulders and the breasts emerging, then the palms of her hands sliding along her thighs as she pushed the dress down—

And I remembered, too, her lips on mine, open, her back arching and rippling under my hand—

Are you satisfied? Are you happy like this?

She hadn't answered. She said she was happier than Stella Brezofski had ever been. It was no answer. But why had I asked the question? What did it matter when all I wanted, all I had ever wanted from the beginning, was that body. That slim, lovely, womanly body. That was all. The end. *Kaput*. Once I had had that—if only once—

She was available. Two short rings, a long pause, a long ring. The door would open. So it was decided. That was what I wanted, only that—not Stella Brezofski, not Kay Bradshaw. Only that desirable, beautiful body.

At fifty bucks—but I had to have her.

Feverish, perspiring, hardly recognizing the glimpse I caught of my own thin-lipped face, drawn and set and flushed in the mirror as I threw on my coat, I stepped into the dead center of the hurricane that had been whirling around me for three days and nights.

Walking through the hotel lobby, waiting for the cab, I felt calm. I had fought my way or been hurled into the heart of the hurricane, the quiet heart where I was safe and certain and no longer confused. I gave the driver the Park Avenue address and sat back.

Chapter Eight

EVEN WHEN THE TAXI pulled up in front of the apartment house, even as I rode up on the sleek, quiet elevator, and while I pressed the buzzer, using the signal that was now a part of my mind, I wondered if, after all, feeling this calm, I could go through with it.

The door didn't open immediately, and below the strange new tranquility I felt a faint quiver of panic. A distant part of my mind hoped that she would not be in. Finally, though, when the door caught on the span of the chain and she stood frowning at me from inside, the quivering died. A narrow line formed between her brows. The recognition was barely a flicker in the brown depths of her eyes. There was no pleasure in it, no surprise.

"Let me in," I said. My voice reflected the utter quiet, the certainty. It was almost gentle.

"I'm going out," she said. "I have a date."

"You have a date here," I said evenly, hardly recognizing the level command in my tone.

She unlatched the chain and I stepped in. She wore a green suit-like dress under a light-colored fur coat, open down the front. She stood there, polite, detached, ladylike, her face lovelier than my wildest memory. lovely in that odd way that was not beautiful. In her hand was a hatbox, the badge of the modeling profession around New York. It was a ludicrous disguise but I didn't feel like laughing.

"Only for a minute, then," she said finally. "I can't be late."

"He'll wait." I looked her over, every inch of her. She stood tensely, her feet together on the thick carpet. "He'd be a fool not to wait."

"What do you want now?" she asked.

I took out my wallet. I counted out two twenties and a ten and I stepped to the table in the foyer and placed the money next to the telephone. Then I looked at her, waiting.

She was studying me. A slight trembling passed over her face—astonishment, fear or panic?—and then she placed the hatbox on the floor and came closer. I found myself tensing. "What's happened to you, Lon?" she asked. "What have you been doing? Have you been drinking? Your face looks—"

She seemed about to reach toward me. I could almost feel the impulse in her arm. The same primitive, womanly concern that I'd seen on her face once before was again written softly across her features. But I twisted my face as though she'd actually reached. Streetwalker, my mind said slowly as I looked at her, up and down. Whore.

"Take off your coat," I said.

She backed into the sitting room, her hand going to her mouth.

"Take off your coat," I said again.

Without moving, standing now in the center of the room, she whispered, "All right, Lon." And she shrugged off the coat. It fell into a heap around her feet. "All right?"

I smiled then. The male smile of triumph and superiority—knowing, needing, masking the need with the automatic show of dominance. I stepped to her, and she didn't move. I put my arms around her and kissed her on the lips. Her mouth was still and unyielding, moist but unresponsive, her breath held between her lips.

I held her body close against me and leaned back. "Kiss me," I said between clenched teeth. "Kiss me. I'm paying for it."

She moved her head back and forth, sideways, as though in pain or shock, and all the while trying to escape my lips.

"Damn you," I said. "Damn you."

Then I walked away and to the lamp. I switched on the light. Then I went to all the other lamps and flipped them on, too. In a moment the room blazed with light, brilliant light. When I turned to her again, across the room, my breath held tight and hurting in my chest, she had not stirred. The unreal blonde hair framed her face—her tanned, lovely, innocent-looking face. I strode to her.

She wasn't looking at me now. She seemed to be looking at nothing. This enraged me. The quelled fury rose up again, the seething madness of the last three days.

I reached to her, to the neck of her green dress where it buttoned over a folded yellow scarf. I ripped the scarf away, baring the glowing throat, the slender neck. The scarf felt silken and luxurious and feminine in my hand. I let it flutter to the floor. I was in no hurry.

I lifted two hands to the neck of the suit, grasped the heavy cloth in my two palms. Her flesh against the backs of my fingers was hot, violently hot, and soft.

With one savage wrench I tore the dress away from her body, the cloth-covered buttons flying, falling, and the dress opening down the front, all the way. I slid my hands down a little and ripped again. The sound of the tearing cloth was the only sound in the room.

She wore nothing underneath the dress. I had somehow known this. Bitch, my mind said cruelly, lashing at me.

I took a step backwards. The green cloth remained on her shoulders, hanging straight down, pendant over the swell of breasts, not touching her body.

She wore high sheer hose, rolled above the knees on either thigh.

She closed her eyes. Her head again moved sideways, shaking slowly. Her fist came up to her mouth.

I reached out and slapped her hand away. Her arm fell to her side. Then, very slowly, I slid my hands under the

cloth at her shoulder, slipped it up and off. The dress fell to the floor.

The pent-up breath in my chest was like a knife.

"Damn you," I said again, "damn you," and stepped closer, grabbing her, one hand moving over every ripple of her back and over the incredibly slim waist and the flare of hip—while my other hand caught her chin, held it firmly in place. I kissed her.

Then it happened. She went slack in my arms, sagging against me, full against me, and slowly her arms came up and wrapped themselves about my shoulders, slid down my back, clutching me to her. Her lips parted. One hand clamped itself over the back of my neck, pressed my lips hard against her mouth, harder and harder. I heard a faint whimper deep within her. And the wildness came swooping down.

The savage darkness reached her first. She was moving in my arms. She clung to me, half-sobbing, and something told me that everything had gone wrong—not as I expected, but better, incredibly better, impossibly wild and primal and almost brutal in the climax that came an eternity later. . . .

Later—how much later I didn't know—rising to consciousness again, gray streaking the blackness, I heard a door open and close. I stirred, twisting on the bed. She lay beside me on her back. The room was dark except for the yellow light creeping under the closed door from the blazing sitting room. I could hear her breathing, quiet now, steady. For a moment, while I felt myself emerging from depths, I thought she might be asleep.

"Don't bother," her voice said.

My eyes were becoming accustomed to the dimness. I could make out, hazily, the outline of her quiet, outstretched body. I wanted to touch her again. But I didn't.

"Someone came in the door," I said quietly, already tensing.

"No," she said. That was all.

"But—I heard—"

"Someone went out," she said, and didn't move.

It didn't seem possible. I couldn't believe it, or wouldn't. I was feeling purged and clean, hesitant to return to the old tormenting words that described her, what she was and how she came to be here beside me. As I lay there, I was a man, remembering the thumping in my veins. But already in the far reaches of my mind, I was assuming the character of Lon Hewitt again. Lon Hewitt, nice guy, reserved, well brought up, shockable, shocked—and guilty.

"Do you mean there's been someone else in the apartment all this time?" I demanded, sitting up, gazing down at her.

"Oh, why talk about it?" she said, twisting over irritably.

Feeling her movement on the bed, I felt a strange tenderness spreading through me. "But my God, Kay, if there was someone here—"

"He doesn't care," she said, her arms stretched above her head. "There are cigarettes on the table next to you. But please don't turn on the light."

The appeal touched me. I was beginning to dislike the shy gentleness that was filling the vacuum inside. I fumbled about on the table, found the cigarettes and a lighter. "Who's he?" I asked, snapping the lighter.

Then, in the quick flare, I turned to her, cigarette extended, and caught the strange hardness that leaped to her eyes. I knew then, without asking.

But I asked. "Gladstone?"

She took the cigarette, dropping her gaze, placed it between her lips and inhaled deeply. The spill of light fell down her body, and everything flooded back—the suspicion, the hatred, the desire, the love, the guilt. I felt like hell.

"Gladstone?" I repeated, my tone icy.

She caught the ice all right and blew out the lighter flame. "What's it to you? You've had what you came for,

haven't you?" It was a simple question, the accusation not bitter in it, subdued.

But the answer was not so simple, so I said, "He's been in the other bedroom ever since I came in?" I was too astonished to cover up. "Does he live here?"

"Oh, Lon!" she said and rolled off the bed and stood up, staring down at me and the flame between us. "Lon, what difference does it make to you?"

"None," I said, and I thought I meant it. At the moment I did. "No difference at all. But—" Then I stopped.

She turned and crossed to the closet, opened the door, fumbled inside. "Or are you still kidding yourself that you're here because of Matt? All right, kid yourself, Lon. I'll string along." She drew out a negligée, solid black, and climbed into it, wrapping it tight about her. "You came here today on your own and you know it."

"You knew I was coming. You knew I'd have to come back. You expected me, didn't you? You broke your date. You broke it because you wanted to stay here with me."

"Yes." She stood nodding, the cigarette between her fingers.

I leaped off the bed. "But what about Gladstone? How does it stack up?"

"It figures," she said, "but I'm not sure you'd ever get it straight in your Scranton, Pennsylvania book." She threw open the sitting room door, stood blinking in it, the light slashing across her through the black robe. Then she disappeared. "Tommy," she said from the other room, "Tommy doesn't care. He . . . he doesn't want me this way. Like us. Now do you understand?"

I was fumbling my way into my clothes. "No," I said shortly.

There was the sound of a glass, the gurgle of liquor. "Tommy's my—manager."

I sat down on the edge of the bed, weak, my head spinning. "He got you into this?"

"If I tell you about Tommy—about Tommy and me—will you go home and forget the whole damn thing?"

"That's what I intend to do," I said, knowing it was a lie, knowing that if she'd acted like a whore with me, if she'd been cold, unresponding, I might have been able to. "Is that what you want me to do?"

Her voice sounded low and lifeless. "Yes."

"Let's have it, then. I'll tell Matt, and that will be that. Only one thing, Kay—" I came into the living room where the lights were now dimmed—"only one thing; if you really wanted to get rid of me, why did you—?" I didn't need to say more.

She was sitting, glass in hand, cigarette dangling between her lips, on the sofa, her legs crossed. "I meant to. I wanted it to be wrong that way." She looked away. "But I couldn't."

That did it. It was too much. The old male triumph rose hot and swelling through me and I walked to the bar and poured a straight slug, drank it off. I no longer felt like hell, and somewhere in the back of my hazy mind I knew that was bad.

"You won't like it," Kay said then, "but I couldn't help myself. It happens like that every once in a while."

I crossed toward her, but halfway across the room I stopped.

"I guess maybe that's why I'm a successful tramp," Kay said slowly.

But I hardly heard her words. I was remembering the painter Hoffman. I was remembering what he had said about her—the way she was trembling that day after Gladstone had left the studio. *Even as I reached for her then, I knew that I could have been any man. Any man at all. The guy she really wanted was Tommy Gladstone.*

"So, you see," Kay was saying, "that's all I am. You thought you could make me feel guilty about it, didn't you, the way you feel now because of Matt? Well, you can't, Lon." With one slippered foot she kicked at the rag of a

green dress on the floor. "I don't feel cheap at all. That dress will cost you extra. Plenty."

I whirled and went to the bar and poured another. It began to swarm through me, warm and bracing. I had asked for it, and I had had it: Gladstone only roused her, other men satisfied her. Simple, wasn't it? No mystery about that. A twist of human nature. But how the hell did Gladstone fit in? "Gladstone get jobs for you, too?" I asked brutally, wondering where the tenderness of ten minutes ago had gone.

"No," she said. "He loves me. That's all."

I laughed shortly.

She stood up. "Yes, Lon—love." She stared at me with hostile glinting eyes, not warm, not soft at all. "You call what we had love when you hate me? It's in your eyes now. You're like all of them. You loathe me. Why? Because I'm here, because I can give you what you want and are ashamed of. Tommy can't. Or doesn't want to. You don't imagine you love me, do you? Any more than all the others."

"Stop saying *all the others*," I warned her.

That stopped her. But only for a moment. "Stop kidding yourself, I told you!" she cried. "Stop it. You don't love me. I doubt that you love anyone—any more than the others do."

"I'm warning you," I said, stepping closer, taking her upper arm in my hand, hard.

"See," she said. "See!" Then she wrenched herself away. "Murder—that's all you feel. Murder and fight. That's all any of you want or know how to give—the kind of murder we had a while ago. Even your wives. We're no good to you unless you can crawl into bed with us! Yet you want to find fancy names for it!"

"And what about Gladstone? What is he—some kind of a queer or something?"

She went pale under the tan of her skin. "You'd like to

say that. That's what you'd like to believe. Just because he knows how to love a woman. Because he can care for a woman!"

I was out of my depths. I knew it. "Isn't he jealous? Doesn't he give a damn at all?"

"You can't understand that. You never could if I tried explaining for a million years."

"No," I agreed, "I can't." Then I took a wild stab in the dark. "You don't understand it yourself, do you?"

She turned and walked away a few steps. "I admit I didn't at first—couldn't—"

"You still don't." I pressed on, sure of myself, but still baffled. "You want to, but you can't, and it hurts, doesn't it?"

She whirled on me. "Damn you, Lon! Leave me alone. I'll tell you about Tommy. He's a strange sort of man, I admit—but he helped me, he goes on helping me. I went to him because I had never met or seen such a man before. He hurt me, yes, at first, by not wanting me the way you and Matt and everyone else wants me. But he loved me, he loved me enough to help me. He taught me how to talk, how to dress, how to lift a fork, how to sip a cocktail. He taught me how to lose weight and walk straight up and down."

"He had his reasons," I said brutally. "Practical reasons."

"Damn you!" she shouted, her voice going high and wild and crazy all at once, "damn you, stop saying that! I've been through all this. I know Tommy and what he feels and what he's like—gentle! Really and honestly gentle, clear through." She rubbed her arm where my fingers had dug in cruelly. "I'm satisfied with that. It's what I need." Then she grew quiet, and there was a suggestion of weeping in her voice as it dropped. "Go ahead—laugh; but that's the way it is, and you can't change it and Matt can't change it. Tommy gave me what I wanted, what I've never

had. Gentleness and—" Her eyes flashed around the room. "And this. Maybe you've always had a place like this to live in. I don't know. Or care. But I haven't. And I like it. Tommy's more of a gentleman than you'll ever be, for all your goddam moral lying to yourself."

"A gentleman who introduced you to Kramer," I said, knowing suddenly, seeing the connection, the story all pieced together in my mind now.

Startled, her eyes narrowing with a strange, suddenly cautious and withdrawn look, she said, "What do you know about Kramer?"

"I know he scares you. I know the mention of his name scares hell out of you."

"Kramer doesn't scare me," she said. "I get along with Kramer finely."

The wild suspicions of the last three days flared in me again. "Kramer, too." I poured still another drink and realized I hadn't eaten a full meal for a long time.

"Not that way," she said. "Not the way you mean—although you do make too damn much over nothing!"

It was true. I knew it was true. She was a prostitute talking. And here I was in her apartment, talking with her, trying to convince her that something must be wrong with a man who didn't take her as other men took her. Here I was probing and digging and hurting her and myself—and for what? Why? Wasn't I free now?

I set down my glass and crossed to the sofa where I had thrown my coat. I put it on. It was over. I'd had what I came for. All this meant nothing. She loved Gladstone. It was a strange sort of love, way beyond my ken, but there it was.

So what? It meant nothing to me. I was going back where I belonged.

"Goodbye," I said.

She was standing with her empty glass in her hand. "Goodbye," she said quietly.

I gazed at her a long moment. She had been right about

one thing. Everything else was still hazy and vague in my mind—Gladstone, Kramer, the rest—but she had been right when she said that what I felt was not love. Not love but a kind of murder.

I felt empty clear through, drained and purged, but that was all.

Then, for the first time, her voice took on the harsh, common ugliness of the lowest streetwalker: "How about paying for the dress, mister?"

I smiled a little. She was making sure. I saw through it. "Charge it up," I said coldly, grateful for her attempt but half angry that she couldn't have left it on a quiet note.

She was making sure I'd remember her like this—a common whore. "Cheap skate," she said with a low bitter laugh. "Get the hell out and don't come back. Don't ever come back. Or send Matt. If you send Matt, you'll be sorry."

"Matt'd tear this place apart," I said at the door.

"Matt'd get torn apart," she said. "I could see to it. I would, too."

"I believe you would," I said—but even then, with the light falling over her and through the negligée, carving every line of her body, I was sorry I was going. I turned away.

Then the buzzer sounded—once, a long steady buzz that seemed to go on and on. I turned to Kay again. She was frowning. The sound stopped.

Kay made a gesture with one hand, a command to silence. I didn't move. Then the buzzer started again, jarring my head, working on my nerves. When it stopped, there was a knocking on the door.

"You might as well open up, Bradshaw," a voice said from the hall—and I recognized that voice at once as soon as Kay did. "I'm coming in," Kramer said.

Again Kay blanched under the Florida tan. She lifted the back of her hand to her mouth. Suddenly, watching her, with Kramer's voice still mingling with the buzzer-

sound in my ears, I felt myself go tense, but faint. The drinks only made me feel weaker. The buzzer started again—short spurts of sound, urgent, demanding. Kay crossed slowly to the door. . . .

Chapter Nine

"Look who we find," Kramer said as he strolled in. He walked with a light, rolling gait, graceful despite his weight. His marble eyes rolled over me, then around the sitting room; apparently satisfied, he removed his homburg. He wore a black box-like overcoat. "Look who's present, Chico."

Chico was the tall man from behind the bar of the Club Cicero. He grinned, an ugly twist of his face muscles, and revealed dark brown front teeth. "The junkie," he said quietly. "Yeah."

My eyes met Chico's. I felt my fists balling up automatically. His gaze was bleak and shadowed.

"You remember Hewitt," Kramer said to the other man who remained by the door.

The man didn't grin. He was looking at Kay. He was staring quietly and steadily. In spite of the flashy tweed overcoat and bright looped muffler and jaunty gray hat, I recognized him as the man with the mop at Kramer's club. The way he looked at Kay, who was now standing very still, sent a shiver down my spine.

Kay must have felt it, too, because she turned, her shoulders back, and started toward the bedroom door.

"No hurry, Bradshaw," Kramer said easily, and his big lips worked themselves into a smile that was meant to be ingratiating. "No hurry at all. Just a friendly little visit. Didn't know you had company." When Kay halted, say-

ing nothing, Kramer took a step toward me. "Maybe he ain't a junkie, after all, Chico, or a copper, either. Maybe Hewitt's just a innocent caller. He dropped in for tea. You like your tea, boy?"

At the door the little man snickered.

"What do you want with Kay?" I asked.

"Tough," Kramer said, feigning astonishment, stepping back as though intimidated. "There he goes again, Chico. Tough already. Chico, get the boy an old-fashioned glass. He don't look just right getting tough without an old-fashioned glass."

Chico tore his eyes from me and was at the bar in three long strides.

"Lon was just leaving," Kay said quickly.

"Sure he was," said Kramer. "He's just leaving. But first—" He turned to Chico, who now stood at his side, and took the glass from him and extended it to me. "Take it."

I didn't take it. I was frozen with fright, but I was damned if I'd take the glass without smashing it into that flabby, smiling face.

"Stubborn," Kramer said, but the smile flickered without fading entirely, and again I felt that quick slimy hatred of him. "Brick," he said to the man by the door, "frisk the boy."

"Wait a minute, boss," Chico said then. "What if he is a bull?"

Kramer turned slowly, very slowly, to Chico. His glassy marble eyes pitied Chico. "He ain't. I investigated."

"He's only a friend of mine," Kay said quickly. "From my home town. That's all."

"Brick," Kramer said to the little man who stepped up to me from the door.

I waited till he got close, tempted to slug him, knowing I was outnumbered, trembling deep inside with the kind of fear I'd never known before. Brick, who had taken off his hat, had a narrow pointed hairline that receded on both sides of his pinched, pockmarked face and slid down over

his low forehead almost to his nose. He glanced once into my eyes to make sure I wasn't going to move, then he frisked me, quickly. I stood very still, longing to bring my knee up against his chin as he bent before me.

"Just a wallet, boss," Brick said, returning to stand by the door again.

Kramer extended a pudgy hand. I reached in and drew out my wallet and handed it across. Kramer took the wallet, still smiling in that nasty way, and dropped to the sofa. He didn't bother with the money compartment but went through my papers.

"He's a hero," he said at last. "Big Army hero, Chico. In case you're interested."

"I had an experience once with a lieutenant," Chico said dully, his stiff black brows in a straight line over his very pale blue eyes. "I was a hero, too. But he didn't think so. Till after we was both out of the Army."

"Is that supposed to interest me?" I asked.

Chico's face hardened. "You want me to get him outa here?" he asked Kramer, who was still studying my papers and driver's license. I caught the hopeful note in Chico's voice.

Kramer stood up. "He's going to go quiet-like. I can tell. He's going back to Scranton, Pennsylvania. That right, Hewitt?"

"He's only a customer," Kay said then.

"A customer for what?" asked Kramer, surprised. "I thought it was tea."

Behind me, Brick snickered again. "Tea," he said. "Pretty hot, boss."

Kramer seemed to be enjoying himself as he grinned at Brick and handed me the wallet. "Brick has a sense of humor. Nothing I can do about it. Y'know, Hewitt, I think I had you wrong all the time. You're just a small-town punk who stumbled in on this."

"Stumbled in on what?" I asked.

Kramer stopped smiling all of a sudden. "Get out, punk. I'm tired of looking at you."

I tore my gaze away and stepped to Kay, feeling Brick tense, catching Kramer's silencing gesture to Chico. "Look, Kay," I said, "if you'd like to come along, I—" Then I stopped.

Kay stepped back half a step. The back of her hand was at her mouth, her eyes very still, almost lifeless. But she was quivering all over.

"No," she said. "You've paid, Mr. Hewitt. Go on. Get out."

"Good advice," said Kramer, "Fine, sensible advice, punk."

"What do you want with Kay?" I asked Kramer.

"Kay?" Kramer asked. He unbuttoned his overcoat and threw it to the sofa. "So it's Kay, is it? You sound worried, punk. Kay looks worried, too. Now the question is: why should either of you look worried if you're only a customer? What the hell do you care about Bradshaw?"

I couldn't answer that. The answer was too complete and too puzzling—but I knew I did care in some strong feverish way that wouldn't let me walk out that door. "The other day you called me a junkie," I told Kramer, feeling the trembling in my stomach quicken, "and today you keep calling me a punk."

Kramer laughed then. "Give the boy the old-fashioned glass," he said wearily to Chico. Then to me, in a different tone: "Are you drunk or crazy?"

"That's all," Kay said quickly. "He's tight. I've been trying to get rid of him for hours."

I glanced toward her. Her eyes were pleading. Suddenly I had the impression that, in some way, I was making it harder on her. So I pocketed my wallet and went to the door. There I turned. Kramer was now lowering himself heavily to the sofa, but his eyes had not left me.

"I could go to the police," I said—a last feeble effort to stop feeling like a coward.

Chico whipped into position in front of me, his shoulders squared. I tensed, my fists clenching harder in the pockets of my coat.

"Chico!" Kramer barked, and Chico stepped out of the way. "You do that, Hewitt. Right away. Only stop threatening me. I warned you about that before. What interest would the cops have up here? You want to get your girl friend in trouble, do you?" He laughed. "Hell, we're just paying a call. They never arrest the customers, y'know."

I looked at Kay for the last time. She had backed against the wall, and even across the room I could see her shaking. Then I started out. But I paused a split second in front of Brick. He didn't even see me. His eyes were on Kay. Except when he had frisked me, he must have been staring at her all the time. The eyes were dull, almost dreamy in a contemplative, knowing, cruel way that revealed a slow-burning excitement deep inside.

Bewildered, going sick at the pit of my stomach, I went out and closed the door behind me, hearing the lock snap into place. Then I walked to the elevator, trying to control the empty trembling inside. When the elevator arrived, I stepped in like a sleep-walker and descended.

In the lobby of the building, though, I paused, lighting a cigarette slowly until the elevator went up again. I hadn't made up my mind what to do. The doorman was in the outer foyer, his back to me, stamping his feet and rubbing his ears. I made a sharp right turn and found the stairway. Running up the stairs three at a time, trying to control my breathing. I had no idea why I was running back. Wasn't it all over for me? Wasn't I well out of it?

When I reached Kay's floor, I stopped, glanced down the corridor. It was dimly lighted and empty. On the soft carpet I moved along the wall to Kay's door, stood listening, tensed for flight.

Kramer's voice reached me faintly, but I could distinguish most of the words in the silence. My heart was hammering and my breath was an inflating pain in my chest.

"... maybe not your fault, Bradshaw. I got a hunch it's Gladstone, all right."

"No," Kay's voice protested.

"But in this business I take no chances, see. I don't like good-looking rich boys like Gladstone—or like that punk just got out—and I don't like doing business with 'em. But you gals always insist on keeping them around."

"Tommy hasn't done anything," Kay said, still from a distance, her voice a thin, wavering line of sound.

"Somebody's been holding out," Kramer said, almost amiably. "You or Gladstone, or both. That right, Chico?"

Chico mumbled something I couldn't hear. My body was flattened against the wall, and the tightness in my loins was growing.

"So somebody's got to learn it don't work. I got enough trouble with you cats. Rich boys looking for thrills—"

"Tommy's not a rich boy," Kay said, with a quiver still in her tone. "He used to be, but he's not. His family won't even speak to him."

"... looking for thrills," Kramer went on as though she hadn't spoken, "only make my work harder. I treat everybody square. That's why I can handle this business. But it's my business, see. Mine. Not Gladstone's. Not yours. So when somebody holds out, I got to have discipline."

The easy way he talked, with the slow throbbing excitement that was creeping into it, made me sweat. I could feel the cold perspiration at the back of my neck and dripping down my legs.

"You never been disciplined yet, have you, Bradshaw?"

"What're you going to do?" Kay asked, on a note of panic.

I could hear Kramer's heavy sigh as he lifted his soft bulk of body from the sofa. "You never heard? None of the cats told you? I warned you myself, Bradshaw." His voice was moving away—toward Kay. "Some of the gals even like it."

"Don't touch me," Kay said. "Kramer, tell that ape not to touch me."

"Chico? He don't hurt you. He only holds you."

I couldn't move. I remembered the lock clicking when I left. If I ran down and found a cop, it would be too late, anyway. Or worse, Kay would be arrested. If I barged in, that wouldn't stop them, either.

Kramer said, from a distance, "Chico, tie the kimono around her mouth. We don't want no yelling."

Inside the room, then, there was a violent ripping sound, as of cloth tearing, and I heard Kay's gasp.

I lost control. I started hammering on the door. I banged and pounded till my fists shot pain up my arm. I could hear nothing from inside the room now. I stood panting, pounding frantically, feeling a shout rising to my throat, waiting for it.

The shout never came. The door swung open abruptly and I was staring into darkness. Before I could move a shadow moved in front of me and a hand clutched at my coat and I was stumbling forward into the room. I caught sight of the bedroom lamp reflected in the mirrored door and then behind me I heard the outer door close sharply.

A shadow moved in the light. And that was all. A crashing pain caught me behind the ear and I was plunging forward into the darkness, waiting for the next blow. Whether it came or not, I don't know because I felt only the carpet harsh against my cheek, then nothing.

Chapter Ten

I WAS CLAWING my way upwards. It was my head that wouldn't lift. A solid block of pain. And heavy. My neck ached, but it was nothing to the throb in my head. The

ceiling stared back at me, still and motionless. Then I remembered and wanted to close my eyes again. I stopped clawing, wanting unconsciousness, needing it, the fear stirring.

"Try this," a voice said, and even unconscious, I would have recognized that voice. "They've gone, Lon."

Her arm was under my head, over my shoulders. I felt the intense heat of the liquid on my lips, in my mouth, scalding down into my stomach. Her face was above me. Kay's face. But with a difference. Her eyes. Something about her eyes—

"Drink some more," she commanded. Her voice sounded irritated, almost petulant. Kay was annoyed, annoyed at me. There was a small ugly laugh forming in my midsection. "Only hurry. Hurry."

I hurried. I sat up, and the weighted pain behind my ear threw me off balance. Her arm went away. I dropped my head between my raised knees and felt the waves of unconsciousness threatening to return.

Then, when my eyes cleared, I twisted about to look at her. She was standing now with her back half turned to me, fully dressed, staring furtively out the window at the edge of the curtains.

"They're down there," she said quietly, as though in answer to my unspoken question. "They're waiting."

"What did they do to you, Kay?" I asked, trying to stand. My voice sounded very far away, and shaky. As shaky as my legs felt.

Kay turned to me then, slowly, and the expression in her face came clear. Writhing, burning pain—and behind it, deep in those brown eyes, something else, something worse. Frantic, naked fear.

"I'll show you," she said bitterly. "You want to know?"

With a sudden movement of both hands she lifted her dress high, above the fine knees, exposing the once-smooth, once-lovely thighs. There were deep red and blue welts across her legs, horizontally.

"Good God," I breathed.

"All over," she said in that same quiet tone. "All over."

"Christ," I muttered savagely, feeling murder in my blood and an abrupt choking uprush of pity, mingled with revulsion.

"It's nothing to what they'll do to Tommy, though," she said, dropping her dress and turning again to the window.

I slumped to the sofa. What was this, and what the hell was I doing in the midst of it? Her legs were still in my mind. Then, as her words sank in, my anger twisted and turned on her.

"Did you try to double-cross Kramer?" I asked evenly.

"No. I didn't even know what—" Then she stopped.

I tried to rise, but my head rocked and the room swirled mistily and went momentarily dark. "No. Then it was Gladstone. He must have held out. Your . . . your goddam pimp!"

"Don't say that!" she cried, and it was not a plea but a command, harsh with a certain puzzling dignity. "Names won't help now, Lon." I felt her coming toward me, over the deep, soft rug. "Don't you see? They're waiting for him. Or for me to lead them to him. You were lucky—all you got was a tap on the head."

"Is that all?" I inquired. Then I managed to stand up. "But I didn't do anything, damn it. I didn't try to pull anything. Gladstone did. And a hell of a lot more." But I was looking at her then, seeing the misery in her face and almost feeling the terrible fire that lay in strips all up and down her body. I took a step. "What did—who did it, Kay?"

"Kramer. The other two held me. Especially that Brick. He held me all right."

"God!"

"I'm not thinking about that, though. That's over. I've got to get word to Tommy."

"The hell you do!" I exploded. "Let Gladstone paddle his own canoe. Haven't you had enough—because of him?"

She was shaking her head, not in reply but in confusion and pain, just turning it slowly back and forth with her eyes closed.

"Look," I went on and took hold of her arms. "Look, Kay, now you know. You can see where it'll lead. This is only the beginning. If you got into this before you knew what it was, okay. But now—"

She only shook her head, and drew away. "You're hurting me," she said and I snatched back my hands, almost feeling the swollen, ugly welts under the cloth of the long-sleeved dress.

"Let's get out of here, Kay," I said, speaking before I was able to think, but not sorry as the words took on their meaning and she stopped shaking her head and opened her eyes wide and stood staring at me in surprise and sudden caution. "Anywhere," I went on. "Anywhere where they can't find you."

"Do you mean that, Lon?"

"I do."

"All right."

Just like that. It was sealed. It was done. *All right.*

"Anywhere you say, Lon. Only—"

Then I saw it. I saw it and denied it, even then, but her eyes held a sly calculation, the pain gone, the frantic worry pushed back, only a shrewd knowing narrowing, a sharpening of the dark pupils. It was my warning, and I took it and threw it away, refusing to accept it. I'd hold her to it, I told myself. She wouldn't get out of it.

"Only what?"

"Someone has to warn Tommy, Lon. Someone has to. He . . . he couldn't take anything like this. You don't know him."

"You want me to find him?"

"I know where he is. Will you go?"

I was thinking of her as I'd known her earlier, in the bedroom, the soft giving warmth of her body, the mounting

excitement, *her* excitement, and the crazy wild plunge into darkness—

"Yes," I heard myself answer.

"I meant it, Lon," she said hurriedly then, breathlessly, stepping closer, her head back, her hair glistening. "I'll go. Anywhere. For as long as you like."

I was past thinking now, past considering, caught in a wave of remembering and hoping, thrust under, my breath caught and still and bursting in my chest.

"You're damned right you will," I told her.

She threw herself against me then, full against me, and I couldn't think of the pain this must have cost her because I was clinging to her, remembering, and looking ahead.

Not until I was stealing down the stairs, my head still bulging unnaturally behind my ear, my coat wrapped up around my neck, hat pulled low—not until then, thinking of the back exit that I had to find, did I have time to halt a moment. What the hell was I doing?

And why?

I paused in the downstairs foyer. The dark car was across the street. If I walked out, would they think of following me?

I was not breathing. It seemed hours since I had drawn a full deep breath.

I could see a light, delicate snow falling outside the huge glass doors. The doorman was not in sight.

They might follow me.

I slithered against the wall to the rear of the building. I heard the elevator moving, not far above, a click, whirr and hum. The door under the exit sign was not locked.

Behind the building was darkness and the falling snow. And a wooden wall or fence, enclosing a postagestamp backyard. The wall looked impossible.

Then, as my eyes accustomed themselves to the pale dimness, I saw the tin garbage cans. Four of them. Neat and high. Against the wall.

And then I got my breath. Even the throb in my head

eased. I crossed swiftly to the cans, conscious of the dark trail I left in the new snow.

Standing on the cans, my legs braced, I could reach the top of the wall with ease. In what seemed like a single movement, I was up and over—and into another small yard with a single door. Behind the door was light. And a corridor.

Beyond was the street and freedom. Or a trap.

Regardless, I had to enter that door. I had no choice now. I tried telling myself once again, that I was doing this for Matt Dunson. But the lie didn't really hold water. I knew why I was doing it. I knew and I didn't care.

I found my way to the street and after walking three short blocks, I found a taxi. I gave the cabbie the address.

"That's Harlem, buster," he said. "You want to go to Harlem?"

"I want that address," I told him, resting my burning head against the back of the seat, twisting it so my flushed face was against the icy leather. "And no talk."

"It's your funeral," he said. I agreed with him.

Chapter Eleven

THE FIRST thing I noticed, even before I took in the appearance of the slender young man behind the door, was a faint, delicate odor. Musk, or incense, or something I'd never smelled before. It seeped through the aperture into the evil-smelling hallway, like part of the dim light that fell over the young man's slender shoulders.

"Mr. Gladstone not here," the young man said, and his voice fitted his shoulders and the smell and made me go queasy inside.

"I'm a friend," I said, lying, hating the lie as I hated Gladstone.

"No."

He spoke in soft tones, too soft, with a slight accent—Cuban or Mexican or Spanish—and he seemed braced there behind the door, determined and grim.

I kicked the door sharply and it flew open, the young man staggering backwards in surprised, mincing steps. Then, in the light of the room, with the smell almost overcoming me, I got a good, straight look at him. He wore a dressing gown with a scarf knotted at his throat; the colors of both were soft—pastels. Under the swarthy skin of his high-cheeked face there was a paleness that came through. His dark eyes were hot and angry and scared, and he seemed so small and helpless, backing against a handsome carved chair, that I felt like reassuring him.

"I've got a message for Gladstone, that's all," I said. "Where is he?"

"Mr. Gladstone gone," he mumbled, but there was a razor-blade sharpness in his voice now, a strength that surprised me.

"Where?"

"Just gone. Out of town."

I glanced around. The room had a quiet atmosphere, a grace and charm, but the young man had one hand to his face, the fingers spread along his cheek, and that gesture like the room, struck me wrong. If it hadn't been clear before, it came clear now. All of it fell into place: Gladstone, his relationship with Kay, this delicate little guy with the frightened eyes.

"Christ," I mumbled. I felt like laughing but the heavy odor of the room clogged my nostrils, my mouth, seeped like some heady, deadening poison through my whole body and mind.

Two curtains separated the living room from the rest of the apartment. Oriental in design, they blended with the

Japanese prints on the walls, with the Ming tree and odd pieces of sculpture that decorated the spindly tables.

The Cuban saw me glance at the curtains and he lowered his hand. That did it. I stepped to the curtains and ripped them apart. There was a small gasp behind me.

In the light of a small shaded lamp, I caught sight of the figure on the bed—and of the face. I knew that, no matter how long I lived, I'd remember this face forever—if you could call it a face.

Instinctively I turned away. "Gladstone?" I asked the Cuban.

He was still now, standing perfectly still, his own features grave, only his eyes alive. Suspicious and filled with dark fire, they drilled into me. Slowly he nodded.

I took another look, I had to. The purplish soft blob of flesh lay motionless. The mouth—or what had once been a mouth—was open, and I could see the gaping darkness of crushed and missing teeth. He had been crudely and amateurishly bandaged, a short length of adhesive holding together the split and sagging lower lip. The nose, once classically handsome, lay to one side, dark and swollen and broken. The eyes, framed in darkness, were closed. Only the rhythmic lift of his chest gave any indication that the wretched wreck of humanity still breathed.

My stomach turned over, slowly, and I let the curtains drop into place and looked at the Cuban.

He looked sick. It was as though he had been forced to look again at the man who was Tommy Gladstone lying on the bed, to look at him through my eyes, and for a split second we shared the same revulsion—and rage.

"Kramer?" I heard my voice tight and hard.

The delicate shoulders shrugged and the slight figure sank to the sofa.

"Did Kramer do this?" I demanded.

"I do not know Mr. Kramer," he said.

I stepped to him. "Look, I don't know who the hell you

think I am, or why I'm here, but I want some information. Has Gladstone talked to you?"

"He talk."

"Did he mention a man named Kramer?"

"Brick. He say Brick. Not Kramer. My name Ricardo. Rick. At first I think he mean me. He crying, me crying, hard to understand. But he say Brick. You know some Brick?"

I nodded. "I know a Brick."

I was remembering the little guy in Kay's apartment, the parted lips, the moist lips, the low-growing hair, the tense excitement, the fixed eyes. I was thinking, too, of those hands holding her, grasping her hard while—

"I take care Tommy," Ricardo said.

"The hell you say. He needs a doctor. If ever a guy needed a doctor—"

"No doctor!" The words exploded in the quiet of the room. "Me. Ricardo. No doctor!"

"He'll die."

"He sleep. I give him what bring sleep. Good sleep. You no worry. Doctor mean police. Tommy can't see police. No questions."

"Christ," I said, "you can't be sure!" Then I caught myself. What did I care? What did it matter to *me*?

The handsome Gladstone was out of the way. He was done for. The involuntary thought crossed my mind but it brought no relief, no pleasure. No longer the handsome guy women'd crawl for—not the man Kay would crawl for. But that didn't seem to matter, either.

"The poor bastard," I said, dropping into a chair, feeling my stomach turning again. "You got a drink?"

Ricardo started in surprise, then stood up and crossed to a handsome cabinet. "Vermouth? Gin?"

"Whisky."

"No whisky. This better." He offered me a glass of heavy purplish liquid.

I took the glass, sniffed it, felt the weakness return in an

abrupt and threatening wave to my stomach. "No, thanks."

"Very sorry no whisky." He took the glass himself and sat down again on the sofa and crossed his legs and sipped at it. His eyes, angry as before, studied me. "You friend? Tommy's friend?"

I caught the note of suspicion—of waiting, trembling jealousy—and wanted to laugh. But I shook my head.

"You know Tommy long, perhaps? Boyhood friend—Providence, Rhode Island?"

Again I shook my head.

"Perhaps Tommy's father send you?"

"Why should he?"

"He wouldn't. No. Not likely. Tommy hate father, father hate Tommy. Bad business."

I couldn't help glancing around the room—the apartment on the edge of Harlem. "You said it, Rick."

"I think about calling up father long distance. What I say? Your boy hurt. Your boy have trouble? Fist fight?"

"You got me. What?"

"Tommy's father very rich important man in Providence. Perhaps he help." Suddenly he stood up. "What shall I do? You tell me. All I do is make him sleep. What when he wake up? What when pain come back?" He was pacing, the dressing gown making a silken sound in the room, working on my nerves. The soft voice rose: "Father hate Tommy. Throw him out. No money. Nothing. Father cruel man. No understand Tommy. So hate him. Tommy not like other boys, so father say, 'Go, get out, you spoil my house.'" He set down the empty glass and, when I looked up at him finally, I saw a tremor in his eyes and at first I didn't understand. "What am I going to do?"

I stood up. My legs felt rubbery and heavy but the odor in the room was making me sick. I had to get out. Perhaps it wasn't only the smell. It was the room. It was this guy Ricardo. The mass of crushed humanity in the next room. It was a whole underside of life.

I could see it all. The rich boy going fairy, the baffled

father, the man angered at a mysterious fate; the boy begging for understanding, taking refuge in defiance; the violent words in the respectable house. The defiance carrying the boy on to this—to Ricardo, to a flat in Harlem, to peddling dope. Hunting for thrills. Searching for love, any kind of love, all kinds—Ricardo's kind, Kay's kind.

Kay was the one who mattered. None of this was part of me. Of me and Kay.

"You lay low," I advised Ricardo. "Steer clear. Keep Gladstone here."

"You maybe tell me where this Brick. Who is Brick?"

I walked to the door. "You lay off, kid."

"Brick with this man Kramer?"

"Lay off," I said. "Look, you try anything with Kramer or that mob and you won't be lying in there sleeping with a busted face. You'll be stretched out on a slab in the morgue or at the bottom of the river. You got that? You take care of Gladstone, but keep your own nose clean." It was pitiful, this thin kid with the grave face thinking he could tackle Kramer or Brick or Chico.

Yet I understood his impotent rage. I recalled my own feelings when Kay lifted her dress and I'd seen the flaming and purple welts on her legs.

Even the dusty ancient smell of the hallway was welcome after the cloying sweetness of the air in that room. As I closed the door, I saw Ricardo standing in the center of the room, his hands trembling, his eyes dark and still on fire—a helpless, frantic figure.

I was feeling better by the time I got into the cold air of the snow-covered street.

Chapter Twelve

AFTER THE cold streets the telephone booth was steaming hot. But my head had cleared a little and I could feel the tightening along my body as I listened to the buzz of the telephone ringing in Kay's apartment.

"Yes?" Cautiously.

"Kay?"

"Who is it?"

"Kay, it's Lon."

"Oh." Almost a gasp of relief. "Lon, have you . . . did you . . ."

Her voice cut like a whip. My own voice hardened. "I saw him."

"Is he . . . were you in time, Lon?"

"No."

For some reason the silence that followed pleased me. I couldn't help it. Nor did I want to. All at once, hearing the concern in her tone, picturing her at the telephone, clutching it until her hands whitened, seeing the tense grace of her body in my mind—all at once, I wanted to hurt her.

Gladstone. Always Gladstone.

"Lon! Talk to me. Tell me! Please."

The *please* touched me, flicked at some tender part of me buried deep beneath the aching anger and revulsion. "They must have got to him before they came to you, Kay. He's . . . not pretty. They beat him pretty badly."

"Oh God," she said at the other end of the line. "Oh God, no. Why did they have to do that? Why couldn't they have punished me and left Tommy alone?"

The motherly note of concern cut the whip across me again, deeper, harder this time. And I understood a little

but just a little, of her love for Tommy—and more importantly, of his love and need, for her. The mother. The woman. The mother he had been denied. While Ricardo, the delicate little Ricardo, was his love. Not Kay. Not Kay, ever. Not that way.

Relief flooded through me.

"When do you want to go?" I asked. "Tonight? I think we'd better get out now. Fast."

"Get out?" she echoed faintly.

But it was all she needed to say. I had known all along, really. She had had no intention of keeping her promise.

"You heard me!" I shouted into the telephone. "You know what I mean, Kay!"

"But Lon," she said, "I can't go now. You must see that. Someone has to take care of Tommy."

"Someone's taking care of him, all right," I said, lowering my voice grimly.

"Please, Lon. I'm sorry. But if you mean—"

"I mean Ricardo," I said brutally. "Ricardo with the tiny wrists. You know who I mean. You knew even when you sent me there!"

"He won't know what to do."

And then I gave up. I couldn't disentangle the crisscross of motives, of passions that lay under the relationship. And, my forehead resting weakly against the cool glass pane of the booth, I felt myself let go. Deep inside there was a wrenching. And I was free, too tired to fight or to consider what I wanted, or why I needed it, or whether it was worth the effort. The hell with all of it. It was another world.

"Lon, are you still there?"

"Yes."

But I wasn't. Already I was home in my familiar bedroom, in my father's office, on the solid clean front porch on a summer's evening. Already I was back in the dull routine of life that suddenly now seemed desirable—more desirable than Kay.

"Goodbye, Kay," I heard my voice saying feebly, and

even as I said the words, I couldn't picture her at the telephone and I couldn't remember her arms around me.

I heard the click of the telephone, and it was like a lock snapping open. A door swinging wide. I was free.

I went into the street and started to walk.

For the first time since I had met Kay Bradshaw—or Stella Brezofski—I felt like myself again, Lon Hewitt, insurance broker. Ordinary man. Free.

Vienna seemed a long way off. And Matt Dunson. To hell with him, too.

The wind blew my mind clear and clean. . . .

It was morning and I was in my hotel room packing again, only this time it was final. I was on my way. I'd already showered and telephoned the desk, and my breakfast was set before me, with the morning papers alongside my ham and eggs. I had slept heavily, and as I opened the papers, I was not thinking, only acting.

Then I was staring at the front page of the tabloid. At first the picture held no meaning for me, just a gory black and white photograph of a fallen figure with a couple of cops in the background and the feet of curious, bloodthirsty onlookers. The body lay twisted, a man in a dark suit. My eyes dropped to the caption. Something about another gang-slaying. Only then, when I was about to turn the page, did I see the face that stared out at me from the small inset in the lower right corner of the page. Under the picture were the words: *Victim: Harold (Brick) Topaz.*

The small face, the hair growing into a point low on his forehead, the same small beady eyes that had watched me that day in Kramer's club, the same abstracted, pleasure-filled, excited eyes that had watched Kay yesterday, knowing what was coming.

Brick dead. Knifed. In the morgue now. Lifeless, stiff, ugly and anonymous. And I was glad.

Even his photograph filled me with that slimy feeling,

and I was glad he had got it. The hands that had held her, the eyes that had devoured her—

I pushed back the table, spilling coffee, and stood up.

I finished dressing quickly, my mind leaping ahead to the train trip. Once on the train, once out of the city, with the wheels clicking across Jersey, I'd forget it all.

What if she had done it? Kay probably had it in her. Enraged, sickened, appalled, staring at the never-to-be-handsome-again face, she would be capable of anything.

But what the hell did it mean to me?

I was ready. Suitcase in hand, I flung open the door.

"Going somewhere?"

"In a hurry, Hewitt?"

I stopped. They were just standing there, legs apart, hands in pockets, one tall and thin, the other short and squat, in dark suits, hats tipped back a bit. A cigarette drooped between the lips of the tall one. The little guy chewed gum.

I glanced down the corridor.

"I don't recommend it, Hewitt," the tall one said, and I knew he meant it, so I backed into the room and set down my suitcase and made sure I was near the telephone. "Going without eating your breakfast?" the tall one asked.

I sized him up. I could handle him. At least I had a chance. But not with Squatty leaning against the door, chewing his gum, idly searching the room with lazy eyes.

The tall guy picked up a piece of toast, munched it delicately, his small pale blue eyes fixed on me as I waited. "You oughta eat, Hewitt. Sit down and eat. We'll wait."

"What's the deal?" I said then, flatly, knowing. More of Kramer's mob. My hand was near the telephone.

"You tell me," the tall one said, and examined my ham and eggs. He picked up a knife and ran his finger along the blade. "I see you been reading the news."

"If Kramer thinks I'd knife a guy," I said, "he's crazier than I thought he was."

"Kramer? Kramer? Bix, you ever hear of anyone named Kramer?"

Squatty shook his head. "What's his business?"

"Comedians," I said, but I was tense, my breath a great balloon in my chest. "What do you want?"

"You're coming along with us, Hewitt," the tall one said then, his voice crisp and cold and businesslike all at once. He reached into his pocket, and I thought he was going for his gun but it was too late to move. His hand came out with a wallet; he flipped it open before me. Pinned inside was a badge. "You got any objections?"

For the first time in days I smiled. "Hell, no," I said with relief. "I was going to catch a train, but—" I shrugged.

The cool blue eyes flicked over my smile, taking it in, knowing its meaning, and the eyes warmed just a trifle. "Inspector Casey wants a few words with you. Trains can wait."

I started toward the door.

"Playing it smart," said Bix, the little one, going out first, carefully. "Doesn't even ask why Casey wants to see him. You walk ahead, Mr. Hewitt, toward the elevators. That's a nice boy."

In the elevator I stood between them.

"I'll bite," I said then, "What does Casey want to see me about?"

"Murder," said the tall one softly.

"Suspicion of murder," Bix corrected, chewing his gum. "With a knife."

Chapter Thirteen

AS I ENTERED the police station, those last words of Bix's were hanging over me and I was no longer smiling. It didn't seem possible, but here I was, the two plainclothesmen at

my back while I stood in front of a huge desk and Inspector Casey was looking me over. Behind me the office door was open and the clatter of voices, a ringing telephone, the shuffle of feet formed a steady obbligato of sound that hemmed me in as much as the barred windows. I was deep in the stone heart of a metropolitan police station, and some incredulous, conventional part of my mind still warned me that it wasn't so.

But it was.

"You don't stay home much," Inspector Casey said, his gray eyes taking in every detail so that I would have been willing to bet on the spot that he could describe the color of my tie and socks months later.

He reminded me of a CO I'd had once: short, sharp, brittle-looking, gray at the temples, lips that barely moved when he spoke. But the CO's voice had been as hard and tough as his face. Inspector Casey spoke quietly, smoothly, in almost fatherly tones. Gentle.

"No," I said, and almost added *sir* instinctively.

"Take last night, Leonard. What time would you say you came in?"

"I don't know exactly," I told him truthfully. "Late, I think."

He lifted gray bushy brows and glanced at the two men behind me. "You *think*?" Then he addressed the two. "Leonard make any objection to dropping in for our chat, boys?"

"Leonard's a wise boy," little Bix said, no longer chewing.

"Nat?" Inspector Casey inquired of the tall one with the dangling cigarette.

"None at all," Nat said. "I even got the impression he might be relieved about something. He thought we were a couple of Kramer's boys."

"You work for Kramer?" Casey asked mildly.

I laughed shortly. And Casey let a tiny smile flicker along his harsh lips.

"You scared of Kramer, Leonard?"

"Sure. Without a badge or a gun. Sure."

The smile tightened. "You scared of Topaz?"

"Not any more."

"You know Chico Gonzales?"

"We've met."

"I can't say I respect the people you know around New York, Leonard. That your name—Leonard?"

"Lon, usually."

"That ain't what he means," a voice said behind me, and I turned to look into a large heavy face, red and shining. "The Inspector means—what's your other monickers? In Scranton, f'rinstance."

I reached into my pocket and came up with my wallet and tossed it to the desk in front of Casey, ignoring the newcomer.

"This," said Casey, picking up the wallet and jerking a thumb at the big guy with the badge pinned to one suspender, "this is Lieutenant Harkness."

"Handy Jack Harkness," the man said, moving in. "You ever hear of me?"

"No." But I saw the way Bix and Nat stepped back, out of Harkness's way, respectfully.

"No?"

"No."

Harkness, unlike Casey, looked fatherly. Or more like a fat jovial monk. But, in contrast to Casey, Harkness was mean. Hard clear through. His eyes joked with you, and his mouth smiled, but all the time his tough little mind was working you over, trying to take you apart.

"You want me to question Mr. Innocent Bystander?" Harkness asked Casey without taking his smiling eyes from me. "I like 'em like this. Mr. Hewitt here, he knows nothing. He was asleep in his room all night. Only nobody at the hotel remembers taking him up to his room last night. What about that, Hewitt? Don't that strike you kinda queer?"

"I had my key," I said. "But I came up on the elevator." I met his gaze, and the emptiness of my stomach grew into

a small pain, dead center. "The elevator operator would remember."

Handy Jack Harkness turned to Casey and leaned across the desk. "Give me fifteen minutes, Inspector. I like the way this guy talks. I like these Innocent Bystander types."

Casey shook his head wearily and his eyes snapped up into the round eager face of Harkness. "No rough stuff, Jack. Christ sake, what we got on the boy?"

Handy Jack shook his huge head and swiped a hand over his bald pate. "What we got on anybody? Goddam clams, all going back to their holes. And that bastard Brick getting colder every minute."

"Where's the girl?"

I stiffened, waiting, and Harkness turned his grin on me. "What girl you think he means, Hewitt?"

"Answer my question," Casey said sharply. "Did you release her?"

Harkness doubled his fists. "You said to send her home."

"And Kramer?"

"He left with his mouthpiece five minutes ago." Once again he whirled on me, the weariness and defeat working murder in his eyes. "And you think you get off so easy?"

"Don't take it out on the kid," Casey said.

"Walking out," Harkness said, weary again. "All of them. Technicalities, legal hogwash, plain crap. While we hold shoplifters and pickpockets . . . I'm hungry. Bix, where's the coffee?" Then to me: "Your girl friend walk the streets, we'd have her in two minutes flat. Hiding behind Kramer, we—"

"That's enough, Harkness!" Casey said, and Harkness subsided. "I know what I'm doing." He stood up, a small man, all muscle—face, neck, body, hands. "Lon, you better be clean, that's all. We're checking. You ever been printed?"

"Printed?"

"Just *ten* minutes," Harkness pleaded, walking up and down. "Just ten. Please. Such innocence makes me sick to my goddam stomach."

"Not fingerprinted," I said to Casey, ignoring Harkness. "No."

"Ten minutes," Harkness muttered. "Please, God, *five*." His fists were red hairy balls at his side.

"You got any objections to being printed, then?" Casey asked.

"Yes, he has," a voice from the door said.

I turned. So did Harkness. Casey glanced up, and his body tensed. Inside the door now stood a tall thin man, neat black mustache, double-breasted suit, flowered tie.

"Who let you in here, Busch?" Casey snapped.

"I'm representing Mr. Hewitt," Busch said, nodding at me as though he'd known me all his life. "I'm here to protect him. And to remind you of his constitutional rights."

I couldn't take it lying down. I had seen the question flash into Casey's face. "Who the hell are you?" I asked.

Handy Jack Harkness was at my side then, his voice a tight ugly whisper in my ear. "Stop stalling, kid. I'll get to you in time. Only cut the act."

"What's the charge against my client?" Busch asked, his voice oily.

Casey sat down. "No charge," he said. "Take him away."

Harkness pleaded, "Casey, don't let him walk—"

"Lon!" Casey said suddenly. "Go home, see. Go back to that hotel. Only stick around town. If you're clean, stay that way. If you're not, we'll meet again. But my advice is—stick around."

"That's advice my client might or might not take," put in Busch.

Harkness was grinning again, his yellow teeth bare, and that grin was worse than his pacing rage. "Yeah, Lonnie-boy, you listen to this crooked mouthpiece. You take his advice and Kramer's. Only remember the payoff's coming."

"Let's go," Busch said to me, his tone a command.

I turned to Casey. He nodded, his gray eyes watching sadly.

"One more question," Harkness said then, and I stopped

on my way to the door. "If your father confessor here won't mind." Harkness came close, the odor of his breath bad as he stared me in the face. I could see the small dark pores in his flaming red skin. "Who beat up the girl?"

"Never mind that," Busch said quickly. "We've been through all that. If she won't place charges—"

"Shut up, Professor," Casey said. He was watching me closely.

"I don't go around beating up women," I told Harkness.

"That ain't the question, Hewitt."

I considered. They probably knew anyway. On the other hand, squealing on Kramer now would do no one any good—Kay or me or anyone. And it would bring more questions. Already, they had me pegged as part of Kramer's mob, a criminal without a crime. And they were waiting to close in; that was coming.

"Do I have to answer that?" I asked.

Casey shook his head then. "Forget it, Lon. But I changed my mind about something. You go back to Scranton. Quick."

"That was my idea," I said. But I was wondering now whether I could do it.

Handy Jack Harkness was slumped in a corner chair, all two hundred pounds of him. "Anyone who'd do that to a woman, even a whore, ain't fit for human company. Not a man at all. Not a human being man. I saw the marks. D'you see the pretty scars, Hewitt?"

"You're trying to intimidate and trap this man," said Busch. "I protest this sort of treatment, and unless you're placing a legal charge against Mr. Hewitt—"

"Oh, stick it," Harkness said. "I'm hungry."

"Coming, Lon?" Busch asked.

I followed him out, with Casey's sad eyes following me. I could feel them on my back, hard, but charged with pity.

Even then I knew I had made a mistake. Casey might be with me, perhaps even Nat; but the others had placed me with Kramer—and with Kramer's mouthpiece.

"I guess I should thank you." I said to Busch on the street.

He had forgotten me completely. "Thank Kramer," he said.

"I won't be seeing Kramer," I said as Busch started off, down the street.

"Write him a letter," he advised.

I watched the slender back of the human automaton, the bought man, the legal-spouting nonentity, and I shuddered.

Chapter Fourteen

I HAD BREAKFAST in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, eating ravenously, drinking four cups of black coffee.

Now she was in worse trouble, and the police were waiting to close in. Kramer was boss of a huge vice ring. Kay was only one cog in the mechanism. But when they had Kramer—and I no longer doubted that Casey would have him in time—they would have Kay. But hell, she was twenty-one, free to make her own decisions. For whatever reasons she held to this life, it was her choice. And she was still holding to it.

I strode along the crowded street, knowing that Casey was wise. Casey knew the truth, and I was going to follow his advice.

Even after last night, she was staying. What if she hadn't stayed? Where would we have gone? I could see more clearly now what I had almost let myself in for. I was well out of it.

Still, the memory of that body, those passionate hands, the swift upsurge of desire in her—all right, I'd had it. I had it once, anyway. It was over.

But what if she did actually kill Brick? If she did, it

wasn't because he had held her while Kramer beat her. It wasn't because she hated him or Kramer for what they had done to her. It was because of Gladstone—the motherly instinct all mixed up with a desire that couldn't be fulfilled.

I could have been any man. Any man at all.

Then I was in the elevator again, going up to my room, my mind no longer clear, but the ache in my stomach gone and my blood pumping strong again. I unlocked the door and went into my room.

Kramer wore his grin. Chico didn't.

"Come right in," Kramer said. "Make yourself at home."

"And close the door," Chico added.

Kramer's flabby bulk was resting on the bed, his enormous head propped up on two white pillows. Chico straddled a chair against the wall. There were no weapons in sight.

But I did as I was told. I had no choice. It flashed through my mind that ever since I had first heard the name Stella Brezofski and seen that photograph in the Vienna bar, I had told myself that I was making one decision after another—when all along I had had no choices, really.

"Hewitt," Kramer said, not moving, after the door latch snapped, "Hewitt, you been getting in my hair. All along I been thinking you was a dumb bastard—dumb and harmless. Now I been sitting here trying to make up my mind. Dumb, sure—but harmless? Chico here thinks you stuck the plunger in Brick. Me, I ask myself: does he have the guts?"

"Don't take guts," Chico growled.

"Then," Kramer went on, not even glancing at Chico, "then, by God, he goes in there to Casey and he stands up to Harkness and he don't spill his guts to nobody, and I gotta say this guy ain't so dumb, after all."

"I didn't need *your* help," I said through tight teeth, but the knob behind my ear was beating crazily again.

"Busch?" Kramer was still grinning. "Busch was glad to be of service. I just had his report."

I crossed to the suitcase and closed the lid. "Then he can send you his bill."

Kramer laughed. "Still tough. Still holding onto that old-fashioned glass."

"Boss," said Chico, "let's don't waste time." He stood up.

I locked the suitcase and picked it up.

"Relax, Hewitt," Kramer advised easily, not stirring. "You, too, Chico." And when I simply stood there facing Chico, Kramer lolled back. "Chico got the idea you put Brick on ice. What do you think about that, Hewitt?"

"Why should I?"

"Maybe you didn't like the idea of Bradshaw getting what she had coming. You had to pile in on that when you wasn't invited, remember?"

With my free hand I touched the bulb of tender flesh behind my ear. "I don't give a damn what happens to Kay."

"Maybe that's true, and maybe it ain't. Chico thinks you picked on Brick because maybe you was afraid to try him. Or me."

I glanced at Chico, just letting my eyes flick over him, and all the hatred must have come through because I saw the muscles go taut around his mouth and down his neck. But I said nothing.

"But even when the bulls give up," Kramer explained, "I gotta get to the bottom of it, see. One thing going wrong like this, just one little thing, and big things start toppling. You follow that, Hewitt?"

"Casey won't close in," I said, "till he's got enough to do the complete job."

"Smart, see. Not dumb. So I ask myself: harmless? Maybe not. Let's find out, Chico."

Chico didn't wait for more. I saw his face move to one side and then I saw, but too late, the arm moving upward. The blow exploded alongside my head and I knew I was going down, but something clicked inside, and I knew that if I did, I was done for. I heard the suitcase fall before I realized that I'd banged it down on Chico's instep. It

couldn't have hurt much, but it caught him by surprise and he opened up, bending forward slightly, and I took my chance, knowing it was suicide, and let him have a right, all I had in me, up from my knees and under his chin. The huge bulk wobbled backwards and I stepped closer and used my left and then my right, surprised when he backed against the door, amazed when he slid down. Then I saw those marks on Kay's body—they shot through my head swift and burning as a bullet—and I stepped toward him, seeing the bewilderment on his square face, and drew back again. But in the abrupt rage, I'd forgotten Kramer.

A wild, blinding pain caught me on the shoulder, exactly on the nerve, and I went limp. And as I went down, I saw Chico coming up against the wall and moving in. I lay quiet on the floor, while the room swirled over me, and I closed my eyes, hoping, and feeling the pain easing while the numbness and paralysis set in. But the hoping was no good because even as Kramer shouted "Chico," the shoe was coming at me and I couldn't squirm away. I heard the sickening sound and saw the body above me, the long swinging pillar of leg and the shoe going back for another blow, and I reached for the darkness that kept trying to close in. I hoped for it, gave myself over to it, but it wouldn't come until that massive shoe came swinging the second time. . . .

I tasted blood first, and wondered at the taste. Then slowly, my whole body scalded with pain, my neck raw, my chin open and bleeding, I came up again, out of the dark, into a light that I didn't want. But it was there anyway, and in it swam Kramer's face. I turned away, sick, spitting blood.

"Sit up, you bastard," Kramer said. "Sit up and listen."

He jerked me into a sitting position on the floor and I heard his voice wobbling, echoing.

"I find out you did it, I won't stop Chico next time—"

"Nobody's gonna stop me next time!"

"Shut up, Chico! Listen, Hewitt, you bastard. Listen good. This doesn't happen to my boys, see. You're tougher'n

I thought but not tough enough. When I find out you use that knife, you don't go home." I felt his palm against my cheek. I heard the sound it made; but the pain was nothing compared to the cry of my bones. "You, Bradshaw, nobody gets away with it. Got that? I don't work my whole life for something to have a shamus like you poke a hole in the dam!"

Then he shoved and I went back, flat, and above I could see the shadows of two men moving. I could hear the steps of four legs; then the click of the door lock after it shut. And then silence. Only the humming in my brain.

Slowly, afterwards, while I spit blood in the bathroom and rinsed my broken mouth, it all came back to me, not in little pieces, but whole. Kramer was growing desperate. Scared, he was more dangerous than ever. And now he thought what I had been thinking—that perhaps Kay had done it.

That's where he was going—to Kay. And so was I. . . . So was I, like hell.

I was going home. I was taking Casey's advice. Kramer didn't give me orders.

I changed into a clean shirt, threw the bloody one away, snapped the suitcase shut again. I'd get the next train out, even a freight.

The trick, of course, was to concentrate on the pain, not to think. That oughtn't to be hard but it was.

The next train to Scranton left Penn Station at 7:05. Hours to waste, to kill. I turned from the Information Desk and looked around.

I checked my bag and went outside. The streets were desolate in the dirty snow, frozen like the unfriendly, uncaring faces.

I found a movie house. Inside, it was warm. I found a seat and sat in the human warmth of a hundred other bodies—all separate, all intent, all turned in upon themselves, looking for an hour's escape in the tinted unreality of the screen. For five minutes, perhaps ten, perhaps more,

I slumped down in the seat and basked in the security of the crowd. But it didn't last.

They were going to Kay.

An hour passed. Two hours. I was staring at the same technicolored scene again.

At a drugstore I bought some more aspirin, swallowed three at the soda fountain, staring blankly at the bubbling coffee urns, the dry packaged sandwiches, the flat-faced counterman who might have been Chico's brother.

What would they do to her?

I could go to Casey. I could explain the whole thing, straight through, honestly. He'd handle Harkness, who'd already made up his mind. Casey might even understand. He'd have no record on me from Scranton.

It was snowing. And I was walking. The lights of the city were coming on, misty in the dusk. The incredibility of the situation struck me again.

She was a whore. She'd doublecrossed Matt, she'd doublecross me in a minute, she was no damn good.

But what would they do to her? Chico and Kramer.

I turned into a bar, had three Bourbons, straight and fast. The burning liquor hit my stomach and scorched. Maybe if I got tight—

But the whisky caused the blood to batter at my wounds, and I ached again, all over, all the wounds opening. Even my legs throbbed with pain now.

Chico's foot. If I saw him again, I'd kill the bastard. I'd never killed a man. By the time I was in the Army, the killing was all over. I'd learned how, but I'd never used the knowledge. I'd never really wanted to until now.

But what they'd done to me was nothing. Only my body remembered that. What they'd done to Kay—what they might be doing now, this minute, this second, while I—

I paid for the drinks and rushed outside. The snow was deeper now. Steam rose from the sidewalks.

I was like Kay. I didn't give a damn what happened to me, just the way she didn't care what had happened to her.

All she gave a damn about, in the whole world, was Gladstone. And all I gave a damn about—

I began to wave for a cab, still walking. They crept by, ignoring my hand. The rush hour.

But I had to get to Penn Station, 7:05. Scranton, 7:05. Home.

Finally, a half-hour later, the noisy snarl of Times Square clamoring and deafening in my ears, I saw a parked taxi. Without a driver. I opened the door and climbed into the back seat and leaned over and pressed on the horn.

When the cabbie arrived, scowling, and dropping behind the wheel, I sat back, weak and grateful.

Then I heard myself give him the address. The cab turned in the slush and headed in the direction of Park Avenue.

Chapter Fifteen

WHEN SHE saw my face she was startled, and for a split second I saw—or imagined I saw—her hand go up and out, impulsively. But in her face was none of the frantic concern that had been there when she begged me to find Gladstone, none of the horror I'd heard in her voice on the telephone when I reported what I'd found at Ricardo's apartment. Not that my face looked anything like Gladstone's. But when her expression changed into quick annoyance, just a tremble of shadow over the handsome features, I felt my anger stir inside. Anger as much at myself as at her.

"Kramer thinks you killed Brick," I said flatly, my feet planted in the soft carpet.

While I tried to keep my eyes on hers, searching for a hint of what might have happened, I was conscious, de-

spite my own racking pain, of the soft flowing grace and loveliness of her body under the soft sweater and skirt.

"Did you, Kay?"

Slowly she shook her head, and I was a fool for believing her, yet I did.

"No." Her voice was slow, too. "But I could have. You saw Tommy. I could have."

"Kramer's going to find out who did. He's coming here."

Again her head shook and the blonde hair glinted, shone, gleamed. "He sent Chico."

The tumult inside rose. "Christ."

"He just left," she said softly.

I sank down to the sofa then and kicked the snow off my shoes. I rested my head and stared at the familiar ceiling.

"He believed me," Kay said, not moving. "I convinced him. It gives me a little time."

My blood stopped. I felt the jolt along every aching muscle and bone. "How . . . how did you convince Chico?"

"I did. That's all. It's enough for now, anyway. I did."

I stood up weakly. I had to know. I already knew but I had to hear her say it. "*How?*"

"There are ways, Lon," she said.

And my breath came back with a smash.

"But it won't last. It won't work again. Kramer's got to pin it on somebody." For the first time she moved; she walked, her body rippling, to the bar. "I wish to God I'd told him. Next time maybe I will."

"Then you know."

"Of course. Don't you?"

"No." I took a lurching step toward her. "No."

I reached for her, and she faced me then, fully, her eyes not defiant, not blazing, yet not soft and submissive, either. I had the sudden wild impression that she was some delicate, trapped animal, bewildered, sensing the end.

My hands closed on her arms.

There was a sound at the door. Not a knock, and not

the buzzer. The light, repeated scraping of fingernails against the wood, a scrabbling animal sound. Kay stiffened; I felt her arms go taut under my hands. The sound came again; tentative, frightened, desperate.

And Kay's face changed. She stepped past me toward the door, her face lighting with relief.

I went to the bar and picked up the full bottle of whisky, grasping it at the neck in readiness. But the way she moved should have told me. And the eagerness with which she fumbled at the lock, her hands trembling. Instead of hefting the bottle, I opened it and poured a stiff drink.

"Tommy," I heard her whisper. "Oh, Tommy, Tommy darling."

I lifted the glass as the door swung open, and I was cursing him again, savagely, under my breath. Until I saw his face.

Then all I could do was down the drink and try to turn my eyes away, hoping I wouldn't be sick again. Gladstone stepped toward the bathroom.

"Tommy—"

Gladstone closed the door sharply in her face, and she stood staring at the blankness of it. She had forgotten me completely.

In the bathroom there was the sound of running water. Otherwise, silence. I poured another drink and took it to Kay. She didn't even see my hand.

"Take it," I commanded.

She took it automatically, casting only a shadowy smile up at me.

Then the bathroom door opened and Gladstone stood there. His half-closed eyes flickered with a smile. His old charm in the grotesque mask of torn face. I felt myself shudder.

"You'd better go, fellow," he said to me. His voice was still silken, but I caught the thin note of terror behind it.

"Darling," Kay said, shoving the glass toward Gladstone. "Tommy, what is it? What—"

"They're following me."

"Who?"

Gladstone set the glass aside and sank down on the sofa, his shoulders hunched forward.

"Kramer?" Kay persisted, kneeling at his knees. "Chico? Who?"

"One of the narcotics' boys," Gladstone said. He hadn't touched the whisky.

"Have you got anything on you?" Kay asked, her hand going to that broken, pitiful face.

"Not now."

And that explained the hurried trip into the bathroom. He had had it on him; now he didn't. The milky blue eyes, glazed. I knew what that meant, now, too. Hell, I'd learned a lot in a few days. Maybe too much. Maybe, once you've learned these things, once you've let yourself down into these depths, you are never the same. I'd never look into a pair of eyes now without wondering, without searching.

"They got Rick," Gladstone said in a whisper to Kay. He, also, had forgotten me.

Kay stood up abruptly. "Too bad," she said, and her tone was low and mean and bitter. "Tough."

Gladstone waved a weary hand, loose at the wrist now. "I know, I know," and his voice was tired, distant.

Already he was retreating into the world that left everything behind, all reality, all threat.

"Kramer was bound to catch up with him," Kay said, and then she picked up the glass and took a long drink.

"Not Kramer," Gladstone said, his voice blurred and distant, moving away from us. "One of the government boys. Not Kramer."

Kay smiled at me. It was a smile filled with triumph, taunt, despair. "Tommy's right," she said. "You'd better leave, Lon."

I tore my eyes from her sad, lovely face and studied Gladstone. He was still sitting hunched forward, his head to one side, his eyes half-closed in their purple pouches. I forced

myself to look at the twisted nose, the torn, sagging lips, the blue and purple and red of his flesh, the black vein-streaked bruises.

"Kay," he said—a drift of sound, a boyish plea. "Kay—"

Immediately she was with him. She sat down beside him. I looked at the door. I was leaving. The whisky made me slow. The whisky and some horrible fascination that I couldn't understand.

"I'm here, Tommy." As simple as that. "I'm here."

And she would always be there. No matter what it meant. No matter what happened to her.

"Kay, they're after me."

"You're clean," Kay said. "You're safe, Tommy."

"Not this time. He's tailing me."

"Don't worry, Tommy."

"Prison."

"No, Tommy. I won't let that happen."

I couldn't take any more. In another minute, I'd be feeling sorry for the guy. I set down my glass on the bar and moved toward the door. Neither of them saw me.

My hand went to the knob. I said nothing. What was there to say? I snapped the lock.

I opened the door.

That was my mistake. It was what Chico had been waiting for. He pushed me backwards hard, and entered, closing the door softly behind him.

Then his dull eyes in the flat brutal face moved lazily around the room. His face twisted into what might have been an attempt at a grin. "I don't want no trouble. Just quiet. I been waiting for somebody to open that door soft and easy like." His eyes stopped on me, and a gleam of vengeful malice raked over me from head to toe. "Thanks, punk." Chico produced a gun. It was flat and black and ugly and he handled it with ease and pleasure and experience. "It started out just a little party. Gonna be a big one now."

Gladstone had lifted his head; now, seeing Chico through

whatever veils and curtains he had thrown up before his eyes, he sat back, far back, cringing.

"Kramer's waiting downstairs," he said to Gladstone. "Stand up."

"Hasn't he had enough revenge?" Kay demanded, rising, every line of her body stiff and rebellious. "Tommy's going to leave town."

Chico shrugged his mountainous shoulders. "Orders, Bradshaw. Only orders. You can stay here with the punk. On your feet, Gladstone."

Despite myself, I felt relief. I said nothing. Chico was in front of the door. But could he walk out with Gladstone and leave Kay and me?

Already that thought had begun to penetrate the dull massive brain. A blank question mark took form in his square face.

"What does Kramer want?" Kay asked, and there was a certain baffling quiet dignity in her manner now. "Tell him to come up here if he wants to talk to Tommy."

"He don't want to talk," Chico said. "You remember Brick? Kramer and me got a score to settle with Gladstone."

Then Kay gasped and her hand went to Gladstone's shoulder which was quivering as he drew himself up on the sofa, sitting on his legs now.

"Tommy had nothing to do with that," Kay protested.

"No talk," Chico said, and the uncertainty was working in him while his eyes kept darting from Kay to me and back again to me. "Get up, goddam you, get up offa there on your feet."

"Please, Chico." Kay murmured in a completely different voice, husky and inviting. "Please, Chico, if I—" She was near him now, very close, looking up into his face, her eyes promising.

Chico grinned then. A tight smirk. "I already had it, baby. Only reason I let you get away with it last time was Kramer needed time. He was investigating."

Kay tried to twist away then, her face contorting, but

Chico, still with that grin, had one big arm around her waist, one hand moving on her back, while the gun in his other hand covered the room.

It was Kay's chance—a slim one, but she took it. Still struggling under the exploring arm, her blonde head under the block of chin, she twisted and bent and sank her teeth into the wrist of the hand that held the gun. Hard. Chico uttered an oath of pain and surprise, and the automatic fell to the carpet. He pushed Kay backwards, but she caught the gun with her foot and it slid across the carpet.

I thought of the growing uncertainty in Chico's eyes—what the hell was he going to do with us? And I knew I had one chance. I moved in, fast, as Chico bent down, snarling, for the gun. I brought my knee up full into his face, bone crunching against bone. But as he staggered backwards, I knew I'd been too late.

He already had the black gun in his hand. He lifted it. Kay screamed then, shrilly, and Chico hesitated a split second before he fired. I dropped to the floor at the same instant I heard the explosion.

Behind me, glass crashed.

Chico stepped closer, lowering the black metal at my head for the second shot. I stared into the bruised malignant face.

Then Kay screamed again, and in the distance, almost an echo, another woman's scream sounded.

I saw Chico's face change above me. Bewilderment set in. Caught in his rage and indecision, he hesitated.

Silence then and breaking into it, a whimpering sound from the sofa where Gladstone huddled. Chico tore his flat black eyes from me. He glanced from Kay to Gladstone and the indecision turned into panic. He wiped blood from his face with the back of his hand.

Abruptly making up his mind, he stepped to me, the gun still lowered at my face and kicked me in the ribs.

"Get up, you sonofabitch," he ordered. "We're gettin' outa here. You're comin' along."

His mind was working then, perhaps faster than mine.

I couldn't get my breath, but I managed to get to one knee, gasping, my eyes on the shaking gun.

It went through my mind that the bullet had penetrated the window behind me. That echo of a woman's scream told him it had been heard. He couldn't finish me now. And he knew it.

So, seeing his foot almost lifting from the floor, the gun still quivering in his hand, I stood up. Chico reached with one huge paw and lifted Gladstone to his feet and pushed him to the door. He never took the gun off me. Kay followed Gladstone, grabbing a coat as she went out.

Chico faced me, blood streaming from his nose. "You want it here, punk?"

I didn't. I went out and down the stairs, the gun probing my ribs, Chico's breath on my neck, Kay helping Gladstone, soothing him with her voice, ahead of me.

The foyer downstairs was deserted. The doorman was not in front. Chico saw me glancing hopefully about.

"Push it, punk. Fast. I'll spill you here if I have to."

Park Avenue was dim, cloaked in snow. A long, dark car zoomed to a stop as Kay and Gladstone emerged. A door opened.

Chico stabbed me with the gun. Hard. So hard that I wondered whether he'd chipped a rib. I followed Kay and Gladstone into the car.

There was a fourth figure in the back seat, against the far window, sitting stiff and thin, with a delicate chin lifted. That was all I could see of him as I sat down next to Kay.

Chico climbed into the front seat and turned the gun on the four of us as the car sped up Park Avenue.

The driver was a man I'd never seen. His head was small and narrow and he sat gripping the wheel like a race car driver. Between him and Chico, whose eyes were on us, was another head. A big one. A round one.

Slowly the center head turned around and two marble-like eyes looked us over.

"Christ!" Kramer said. "Chico, I didn't say bring the whole family."

"I had to," Chico said. "What in hell was I gonna do?"

Kramer was staring back at me. "Some bastards just don't know when they had enough."

"S-h-h-h," Kay said to the trembling Gladstone on the other side of her. "S-h-h-h, darling. I'm here."

"All I wanted," Kramer said, looking forward again, "was Gladstone and Ricardo."

Only then did I recognize the still, stiff figure on the far side of the spacious car. Rick, the kid in whose apartment I had found Gladstone.

"All I wanted was the two fairies."

It was all clear then. Why the hell hadn't I realized before? Gladstone was incapable of murdering Brick. And Kay—I had thought she might have, without ever really believing it. But it had been done quickly, expertly, quietly, with a knife. Rick, of course. Gentle Rick, angered at what Brick had done to Gladstone.

"Who the hell was it, then?" Kramer was saying.

"Looked like a copper to me," the driver answered in an accented voice.

"One of Casey's men?" Kramer asked.

"No, I know Casey's men."

"Then who?"

I didn't like Kramer's voice. There was a strange note of panic in it, more frightening than his cool grimness or his phony heartiness. A new note. I tensed still more, listening.

"Who you talking about?" Chico asked.

"Some squeaker standing in the doorway across the street," the driver explained. "Like he was waitin' for you to come out. Just standing there."

"We didn't have no tail," Chico said, surprised, alert. "I know I didn't."

"Vice squad, maybe?" Kramer suggested.

"Could be," grunted the driver who was maneuvering the

car between stop lights, never once coming to a full stop, gliding it under the green signals.

"Damn it, Chico, I didn't say bring the cat. Maybe they're tailing the cat."

I was remembering Gladstone's entrance. *Not Kramer. One of the narcotics' boys. He's tailing me.*

A little shiver of hope stirred in my stomach. I twisted to look out the rear window. There were a few cabs, one or two pleasure cars.

"Four of 'em," Kramer said. "Now we got four of 'em."

"Just as easy as two," Chico assured him. "It'll be a pleasure."

Kramer's steadily mounting apprehension turned to disgust, directed at Chico. "Two's twice as hard as one. And four's twice's hard as two."

"It'll be a pleasure," Chico said.

Kramer's voice exploded. "You and your goddam trigger!"

"Take it easy, boss," Chico soothed, and I was surprised again. "Take it easy. Where we're going they won't even know we been there. They won't even find 'em till spring. Nobody goes in those woods till it gets warm."

There was a steadiness in his tone, a coldness, that contrasted to Kramer's fidgety growls of annoyance and fear. But if Chico was the cooler, Kramer was the smarter. He knew what he was up against.

"Let me think," Kramer said.

"Cut through the park," Chico said to the driver. "Up to the bridge."

The car eased to the left. Then, when Kramer spoke, it swerved again to the center of the traffic lane.

"Who the hell gives the orders? Chico, you givin' orders now?"

"No, boss. Only—"

"You takin' orders from Chico now?" Kramer demanded, turning his bulbous head toward the driver.

"No, boss."

"If that was a copper back there, we ain't crossing no bridge with this load." But the panic was there, naked, and when I twisted about to look out again and no car followed us, I felt the hope fade. That panic scared me. And I could feel Kay's leg against mine, shuddering, quivering. Scared, trapped, uncertain, Kramer was more dangerous than ever.

"We can't just keep drivin'," Chico said coldly, and Kramer snapped around to face him.

"Who the hell piled this gang in on me?" Kramer was almost shouting. His voice rocked through the closed car.

"All I mean is—"

"Stop thinking," Kramer ordered coldly. "If I paid you for thinking, you'd be out of a job."

The driver spoke then, almost in a whisper. The accent blurred his words, but when Kramer turned full around to stare out the back window over Kay's head, I knew what the driver had told him.

"Maybe," Kramer whispered. "Maybe."

"No maybe," said the driver.

"It was a cop all right," Kramer growled then. "Tailing *somebody*! Now they got a goddam prowler car on us."

There was a sudden flash of red glinting through the whole car, and I slumped, pulling Kay down toward the floor.

"Sit up," Kramer yelled then. "All of you. Up straight!"

The muscles in Kay's arm tensed but I held tight. By now Kramer had forgotten us.

"Cut left," he ordered the driver. "And step on it for God's sake."

When the motor picked up speed, another sound pierced the stillness. A siren. Ricardo sat as before, staring forward. Gladstone's whimpers had subsided, and he might have been asleep. Kay twisted so that she faced Gladstone, her back to me. For a brief instant I was conscious of her body—until, cursing myself, I realized that I was here because of that body.

The car turned, throwing her against me. I was still holding her arm. The red light behind us was no longer so close. The siren, however, repeated its demanding wail.

Then there was a shot. The car plunged into the park.

I saw Chico lift his gun, directing it through the rear window, but Kramer's big hand came up and brought it down. No words were spoken now.

There was another shot. I could even hear its whine outside the car. Then another, the bullet clanking into metal over our heads. But the siren was farther away now.

Kramer was giving the driver orders that I couldn't hear, and Chico was swearing, his face set. The car twisted and turned. There was the sound of angry horns, and the shrill ugly squeal of brakes as astonished drivers attempted to pull aside. Our driver sat hunched over the wheel, his head low. His turns seemed meaningless to me.

For the first time, then, I heard the horn of the car in which we were riding, a long hollow sound. I slipped down farther, bracing my legs for the crash. When it came, it was slight, and the car whipped about at the same moment that the metal met, scraping and tangling. But we kept moving. Plunging. My throat was tight, my mouth dry. Kay was holding Gladstone now, close against her.

I heard the crash behind us, not far behind, above the snarl of motor and scream of burning tires. It was more jolt than sound, but even before I heard Kramer's long slow breath of relief, I knew what had happened.

The prowl car had crashed.

"Slow down now!" Kramer screamed, grabbing the driver's arm. "Slow down."

After that, silence—a whining, incredible silence. Slowly, our breaths returned. Kay let go, lay limp and crumpled, half on the floor.

Kramer hissed an order to the driver then, and Chico was grinning down at me over the black gun.

"Whatsa matter, Lieutenant?" he said. "I thought all

lieutenants was brave bastards. You ain't a brave bastard?"

"I'm not a lieutenant now," I said, meeting his gaze, knowing the showdown was coming, and soon, but reckless now, only waiting.

Chapter Sixteen

THE CAR stopped very briefly, then sped on down the street. We were on the ice-caked sidewalk a moment; then, under Chico's gun and urged by Kramer's growl, we were mounting the steps of an old brownstone that looked, even in the dimness, vaguely familiar. Chico gave me no time to think about it. He kept the gun working on my bruised ribs. The door was opened by a shadowy figure.

Then we moved up the stairs. Gladstone was weak, mumbling boyishly in the circle of Kay's supporting arm. Rick walked ahead, his head still lifted, his face impassive. Kramer followed Chico, muttering a string of foul oaths and curses. His rage and frustration were mounting, and he was breathing in grunts and puffs when we reached the top floor. I'd counted four landings; we were on the fifth floor.

The door closed behind us and a light flashed on. I saw Kay's face then as she glanced around at the filth. The stench was overwhelming. A tremor of distaste and disgust passed over her features.

"Sit and don't talk," Kramer ordered, between animal grunts. He pulled the kitchen table about and laid his gun on it. "Chico, stick by the door."

It was a one-room tenement apartment: a frayed, dirty rug, soot-stained windows, a hot plate on a shelf in one corner, cracked plaster walls, a narrow daybed shoved into one corner. And hanging over the filth and squalor was a strange odor—not the musty smell of the hallway, not an animal smell, either.

From his position behind the table, Kramer commanded a view of the street below. Chico grinned at me from the door. Kay was helping Gladstone toward the daybed.

"On the floor with the junkie," Kramer said—and his voice was jumpy.

"But he's sick," Kay said. "For God's sake, Kramer—"

Kramer glanced toward Chico, who straightened, not quite taking a step. "He can be sicker, Bradshaw."

Gladstone shrugged away from Kay and went to sit on the floor near Rick, who was squatted against the wall, his knees up in front of him; his arms hugged his bent legs and his eyes studied Chico blankly from above his knees. Kay crossed to a straight kitchen chair and sat down.

"What about a cigarette?" she asked.

I tapped one out of my pack, offered it to her. She glanced up at me when she took it, and I remembered instantly, the house in Scranton where she'd spent her miserable childhood and adolescence. Was it any worse than this? Could it have been?

"Poor Lon," she said sadly, waiting for my light. "I warned you to go home."

I lit hers, then mine and blew smoke, glancing around the room again. There were two windows on one side behind Kramer, looking down on the street below. There was one door, against which Chico lounged. And there were two guns—one on the table near Kramer's puffy hand, the other, almost hidden in Chico's beefy palm.

"You sit, too, punk," Kramer said to me.

I sat. It was the only soft chair in the room, but the springs were breaking through on the seat and along the arms, and it smelled of age.

My mind was working but it did no good. This was no time to go exploring the strange road that had brought me here. Perhaps Kay had known all along that it would end like this, that it had to. When she said "Poor Lon" in that pitying, resigned way, maybe she'd been trying to say that

she herself might have expected this or something similar, but that I had no reason to be here at all. Yet, even now, as I saw her covertly watching Gladstone, who sat with his head back against the wall, I doubted that she'd really been able to picture an end like this. No one ever knows what lies at the end of the road that looks so smooth. I remembered the grace and luxury of her apartment.

But while my mind roamed, I was aware that I was concentrating on the wrong person. Kramer was the man. Silent, staring into the street, his jaw slack, he was thinking, too. Perhaps he was realizing the impossible situation into which he also had stumbled. Four prisoners. Not two—four—and himself trapped, waiting for the return of his driver. I'd heard him mumble, "Get back here fast, but if you're tailed, ditch the car."

Then, out of nowhere, another thought struck. What would happen if—or when—Kramer found out that it was the narcotics' agent trailing Gladstone who had turned in the alarm? What would Kramer do when he learned that Gladstone was the cause of his predicament? Stubbing out my cigarette in the silence, I shuddered. It was coming for sure, and all I could do was sit and wait, knowing.

Then there was a rap on the door. Chico swerved about, the gun coming up. Kramer reached for his.

"Charlie?" an old voice said in the hall. "Charlie, let me in."

The voice was familiar, too, but until Kramer laid down his gun and Chico opened the door and the old lady stepped into the light, I didn't recognize it. When I did, I realized where we were in the brownstone tenement.

The old lady wore a housedress, tattered around the neck where the muscles looked like tight thongs under the pale, loose skin. The face itself was shriveled, twisted, but the eyes brought back the memory: they were filmy, withdrawn, all expression lost behind a dark glaze.

I turned to Kay. She was also staring at the old woman.

"What you want?" Kramer growled.

"You can't stay here." Just that, no more. Blankly, flatly.

"Go on downstairs."

"Don't talk to me that way, Charlie." She pleaded. "You know you can't stay here."

"Scram."

"You got no respect." She cast a hurt, pathetic glance around the room. "Guns. He brings guns into his mother's house. No respect."

Kramer stood up then, his bulk outlined against the dark windows behind him. His heavy jowls worked, the muscles leaping up his jaw, before he was able to speak. "Don't give me that respect crap. You and your goddam junkies. I mighta known you send me a cat, she'd be tied in with hopheads. I shoulda known."

The bitterness of his tone and the glare he turned on her made me sure, underneath the racing of my mind that was piecing the story together, that Kramer knew what he was up against. And, raging at the universe, he had found a target. Someone to blame.

Gladstone stirred. He tried to rise, found he couldn't. When he spoke, his voice as broken as his face. "Ma Kramer—"

The old woman took a few steps toward Gladstone. She bent down, and I could almost hear the old bones creaking.

"Ma Kramer," Gladstone said faintly. "You got any? I need it."

Kramer was around the table before the old woman could straighten up. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and almost threw her against the door. Then, panting, he whirled on Gladstone, whose arms came up over his head as he shrank away from the expected blow.

"You goddam right she got it, junkie. She always got it. But you ain't gettin' any, see." He drew back his gun and Gladstone whimpered.

Kay was already on her feet. "Kramer! I'll scream!"

With gun drawn back, ready to lash down at Gladstone's face, Kramer paused and turned slowly to Kay. He lowered the gun, and a smile flickered faintly, evilly, over the gross features. "You go right ahead, Bradshaw. You scream loud. It'll be your last."

"I know that," Kay said quietly. "But where do you think you'll be?"

The smile wavered, died. Kramer, his authority questioned, glanced toward Chico, whose face remained expressionless.

"Why, it's Mr. Gladstone!" Kramer's mother said, her voice shocked for the first time. "Mr. Gladstone! Who did this to you, Mr. Gladstone?"

"Get out, I said. Get the hell out!" Kramer pocketed his gun and picked the brittle old body up, half-pushing, half-carrying the old woman to the door. He shoved her through the door and slammed it shut. Then he turned on Gladstone and the Cuban. "I hate you bastards. Christ, how I hate you sonsabitches! Sticking needles in your arm, pumping yourselves full. I'd like to kill the lot of you."

But he made no threatening movement. His heaving shoulders went slack, and a cloud of uncertainty passed over his eyes. From deep inside came a low, defeated groan, half gasp, half shudder.

"Take it easy, boss," Chico said then.

Immediately the cloud passed from Kramer. Reaching for his gun, he whirled on Chico. "I'm takin' it easy," he said in low, even tones. "Don't start givin' *me* orders, Chico."

Chico glanced down at Kramer's gun. He grinned. But behind the grin I caught the flash of knowledge. In the showdown the boss was cracking. He, Chico, was not. He didn't move.

"I'll cover 'em," Kramer said, in full control again. "You go down and call the club. Telephone in the hall. Find out what the hell's happened to Louie."

"Sure, boss." But Chico sounded almost lighthearted. Already, inside, his superiority had asserted itself.

And as he turned and went out the door, strolling, I realized that the struggle between Kramer and Chico could be our delivery . . . or disaster. Kramer glared at the closed door a long moment before he resumed his chair behind the table, the gun directed steadily at my stomach.

"You, punk," Kramer said in his familiar oily voice, "you sittin' so quiet. What you thinking, punk? You figurin' on getting tough again?"

I met his gaze. I could play it either way now. I could play it quiet, just waiting, or I could work on those quivering exposed nerves, already frayed and lashed by his own fear and frustration.

"Answer me when I talk!" he cried suddenly and stood up and came lurching around the table to face me close.

Still, I said nothing.

"What you thinking of, wise guy?" Behind him, forgotten, Ricardo moved in total silence.

I made up my mind. Sitting, waiting, meek and licked, I had no chance at all. I hadn't counted on Rick. But it was the Cuban who had killed Brick, wasn't it?

"Is there some law says I got to tell you my thoughts?" I asked Kramer, meeting his eyes.

"This law," Kramer said, "only this one, punk!" He extended the gun.

It was inches from my chest.

"You fire that," I said, "and the game's up, Kramer. You'll have the whole neighborhood up here in ten seconds flat. And the cops."

Kramer looked baffled, but his voice was firm. "It might be worth it."

Behind him, Rick had returned to his place on the floor next to Gladstone. He had not made a sound. As he sat down, though, I saw the reason for his move. I saw the flash of blade as he slipped the butcher knife under his

jacket. His face had not changed, even slightly, as he stared ahead again.

"I'm thinking," I said to Kramer, "It's going to be a long night."

The door opened quickly and Kramer twisted heavily about to cover it. Chico entered. He was not grinning.

"They musta picked up Louie," he announced. "He ain't at the club."

"Give him time," Kramer said. "I trust Louie."

"I don't trust nobody when that Harkness goes to work on him," Chico said sourly.

"He ain't got Louie."

"Handy Jack Harkness," Chico said, and there was respect in his tone for the huge detective I'd met at police headquarters. "He'll get it out of Louie."

Kramer shouted, "YOU heard me! I trust Louie. Even if Harkness got him, he won't spill. He's tough, that Louie."

"He can drive a car. That's all." Chico seemed to have made up his mind. "Ain't nobody as tough as Handy Jack, you in the back room with him. I know."

"All right, all right, okay!" Kramer cried, "YOU call it, Chico. You wanta make a run for it?"

"I'm thinkin'," Chico said—and in that simple sentence the command passed from the trembling Kramer to the stolid Chico.

Kramer, realizing this, began to pace, muttering. Only a few words were distinct but the drift of his thoughts was clear. He was back again in this stinking hole that he had once called home. He had used all his shrewdness and cruelty to pull himself up and out—yet here he was, trapped. Trapped, not knowing what to do, while his hired gun was doing the thinking.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, his foot crashed out and into Gladstone's side. "Hophead, goddam hophead bringing me his cat!"

Immediately Kay was at Gladstone's side. Ricardo didn't stir.

"Lay off," Chico demanded from the door—and Kramer stepped back, whirling on Chico then.

I tensed. This was the payoff, and I knew it. But there was no way out. I was grasping the chair with both hands, ready to spring up when the time came.

"You telling me what to do?" Kramer demanded of Chico.

Kay was on the floor next to Gladstone who was writhing in pain.

Chico, in a movement so quick that I didn't even see it, dropped to one side and, ducking, came up holding Kramer's wrist. The gun clattered, unfired, to the floor, and Kramer, with a look of animal frustration and astonishment on his flabby features backed away from Chico. Now Chico had both guns and he was grinning.

"I ain't gonna get killed, Kramer, just cause you're scared, see."

Kramer looked at both guns and knew it was over.

Then Gladstone's voice rose. "Ricky," he said. "Ricky, help me. Ricky, I'm hurt."

Kay straightened up. Gladstone was pulling himself over to Rick, ignoring Kay completely. She stood above him and her drained face looked like death itself. Tight and empty and ugly. Lifeless.

Gladstone was next to Rick now, and Rick had reached toward him, holding him.

Kramer and Chico were watching, too.

Then, for the first time since I'd known her, I saw tears appear in Kay's eyes. She was in this because of Gladstone. She was here because of Gladstone. But he had turned to Rick.

Even before she spoke, I knew what she was going to say. It was her only way of lashing back and she was beyond caring now, so she lashed.

"Kramer," she said, and her voice was the ugly snarl of any harlot rejected on the street corner, "Kramer, you know who that was watching the house? You know why those cops followed us?"

I was prepared to leap. I wanted to stop her. But it was too late now. Kramer only grunted, waiting.

I heard my voice whisper the warning. "For God's sake, Kay—"

"Federals," Kay told Kramer. "Tailing Tommy. He had a load."

"Kramer!" Chico barked—a warning and a threat.

But it was too late. Kramer moved toward Gladstone again, but this time he bent down, his fists working, and he stood with his pillar-like legs apart, beating the blubbing body of Gladstone.

I heard the blows but my eyes were on Kay. For an instant her eyes lighted with a cruelty I had never seen in them before—a vengeful, satisfied gleam. But as the blows continued, she began to shake her head, slowly, back and forth and then she closed her eyes.

"No. Please. Don't."

"Kramer!" Chico barked again, the two guns pointing.

Nothing could stop Kramer. His arms moved piston-like against Gladstone's body, but Gladstone, half-slumped against the wall, was unconscious.

Kay glanced wildly around. I looked at Chico. I took my eyes from Kay only a moment. But it was not until I heard the crash that I realized what had happened.

Kramer straightened up and turned to the broken window. His breath was coming in harsh puffs. The crash of the broken window still reverberated. Chico stood staring at him in stunned immobility.

Kay had picked up and hurled a vase through the window. The glass had shattered, and little slivers of it were still falling to the street below.

The meaning of that smashed window and the noise swept across the room in an instant.

"You bitch," Kramer said, not moving, struggling for breath.

And those were his last words.

Behind him Ricardo seemed simply to stand up. Kramer was between him and Chico. Slowly then, Kramer's body slumped to the floor, the handle of the kitchen knife protruding from between his ribs.

Before Chico had time to realize what had happened, Rick dropped full length to the floor behind the hulk of fallen body. Chico shot, anyway. The bullet meant for Rick entered Kramer's body and the body jerked.

From the street below came the sounds of shouts.

Chico, one gun covering the room, leaped to the windows. I estimated the distance.

When he glanced down into the dark street, I leaped. The gun fired but the bullet slammed into the wall behind me.

My hand caught him full across the throat, smashing his Adam's apple, and my knee came up into his groin. He fired once more, grimly, in desperation, but he went down.

I picked up the flat gun. Chico was groveling on the dusty floor, moaning.

Should I let him have it?

Even in his pain he was looking up at me with hatred. I had the gun on him.

I should have fired. I knew it before I felt him grab my ankles. He heaved himself up in a terrific effort and pinned my legs. I lifted the gun and brought it down on his head, but the gun was small. The head kept rising; he was climbing up my body, clawing, and I could feel his weight pulling me down.

There was the burning smell of the gunshots in the room, closing out the other stench—the odor of the dope. A police whistle shrilled on the street below. I tried to kick him away, but the flat face kept rising and the hands kept grasping. He was pulling himself up on my belt.

I pointed the gun at his forehead. It didn't stop him.

The shouting on the street was an uproar now, punctuated by the sound of windows slamming open.

I heard a siren wailing in the distance, and I pulled the trigger. A neat, small hole appeared on the expanse of forehead. You poor bastard, I said to myself, watching the surprised look come over the big face.

I fired again. The hands let go then.

I turned to Kay. She was standing against the far wall, quivering all over. I went to her.

I took hold of her arm.

But her eyes widened and she shrugged away, swiftly, and threw herself over Gladstone where he lay. Puzzled, I whirled about.

Then I heard the explosion and saw the flash. Kramer, with the other gun in hand, was lying with his arm outstretched along the floor, the gun pointing at Gladstone. It fired again. Neither bullet struck Gladstone. Both entered Kay Bradshaw.

I swept the little automatic up to get Kramer, but before I could fire, his hand went limp, the gun fell aside, and he lay still.

So did Kay Bradshaw.

In the far corner of the room Ricardo was plastered against the wall, his eyes wide. His gaze met mine through the blue powdery smoke. He looked as though he expected me to lift the gun at him.

I bent over Kay. She lay across Gladstone and she was already dead.

I ripped the door open and went into the hall. Down the stairway I could hear the clatter of voices. I thought of Casey then. I remembered Harkness. Would either of them believe me now?

There was a door across the hall. I plunged through it.

Chapter Seventeen

THEN I WAS on the train. Somehow I'd made it—through that darkened room, through a window, onto a slippery dusty-white roof, across it, down the evil-smelling dark stairs of the tenement on the next street. As I emerged from the doorway of that brownstone, still hearing the clamor behind me but in the distance now, I was just another ordinary citizen, moving out of a house, going to the corner, looking for a cab. I settled for a subway. No one followed.

Finally, sitting in the coach, staring into the dawn outside, it had hit me. All of it. The explosions. The heaped bodies. Kay's eyes blank and still and the odor of that room clinging to me like slime.

I was sweating and shivering. But deep inside, in spite of the racking shudders that passed down my body in waves, I was numb and still and dead.

You killed him, I told myself. You killed a man.

I went to the men's room, thinking I might be sick.

I straightened my tie. I took a deep breath and then doused my face and combed my hair.

Leonard Hewitt, nice guy; insurance business. Ex-lieutenant. Address: Scranton, Pa.

But as I went back up the aisle, lurching to my seat, I realized that I would never be quite the same again. It didn't happen that way. You don't put a bullet through a man's head without remembering.

You don't fall in love with a girl like Kay Bradshaw without becoming, at least for a while, a completely different person.

Sleep came swiftly with the rhythm of the train wheels, so swiftly that I was not able to enjoy the warming, steady-
ing approach of its oblivion.

Chapter Eighteen

NO ONE ever knew—not my father, or my mother, or anyone in Scranton.

And not Matt Dunson.

I wrote Matt a letter on the typewriter in my father's office three days later, after I was sure that I was safe. After I'd stopped jumping when the telephone rang, starting and stiffening at every knock on the door. After I'd read in the New York papers that the case had been closed.

Kay's picture had been in the papers . . . but it was the face of Kay Bradshaw, not Stella Brezofski. No one had claimed the body.

There were photographs, too, of the tenement in which she had died. Like Kramer, she had worked and schemed and wormed her way ruthlessly up and out of the squalor of places like that dirty room. Even her home in Scranton was more respectable and worthy of human habitation. Yet both she and Kramer had ended their lives in the very heart of the ugliness that both had tried so hard to escape.

I felt detached and free, but it was a freedom without the joy and sense of exultation that I had always associated with the word.

Even the letter to Matt didn't accomplish what I hoped it would. I simply told him that, after investigation, I had learned that Stella Brezofski had died of pneumonia in New York. As I wrote, I remembered that first lie, that first day in the luxurious apartment—and I couldn't help remembering what followed.

But I watched Kay Bradshaw and myself from a great distance, as though we were actors on a stage, viewed from the topmost row of the balcony—puppet-like, unreal.

I had hoped that the letter to Matt would blot out all memory of the girl whom I had known as Kay Bradshaw. It only helped to make the memory impersonal.

Nothing can remove the slime that still seems to cling to my mind, and I shall go on forever seeing the battered face of the playboy Tommy Gladstone, the small hole in the high flat forehead of the brutal Chico. I shall go on forever inhaling the odor of that strange narcotic and the burnt acrid smell of gunsmoke in the attic room. And at the oddest times the picture of Kramer's hulk staggering and sinking with the knife-handle in his back leaps before my eyes.

Most vivid of all, however, is the memory of the stranger that was Lon Hewitt, in the midst of it all.

In my father's office—with my own name below his on the door now, a member of the Lions, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary—I can't quite believe that I had any part in the tragedy of Kay.

And many questions haunt me. Not about Kay, now; her history is clear in my mind. But about myself.

Was it necessary for me to kill the man Chico? Was it actually self-defense or was it hatred and revenge? I have to tell myself that I did it to save my own life.

But I have to tell myself many lies, now. As I look into the friendly, ordinary, self-respecting faces of my friends and business associates—as I look into my own father's face—I have to tell myself over and over that what I see is true—that the faces they turn to the world are honest ones. But I see a shadow around each familiar face now—the shadow of that other face that they, like me, keep turned away from the world, hidden in shame, knowing.

Do they know that what happened to me could happen to them?

Her name need not be Kay. . . .

The End

by the author of

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NEVER LEAVE ME

By Harold Robbins

In *A STONE FOR DANNY FISHER*, Harold Robbins introduced you to the vicious, brutal world of New York's lower East side. In *NEVER LEAVE ME*, he shows that the somewhat fancier, frantic world of Manhattan's Madison Avenue is no less vicious or brutal . . . and he does it by telling you the private relations of a public relations man.

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FLOYD SHAW

DEVIL'S DAUGHTER

She was a pretty front
for the vice syndicate



570

III

"THEY'RE DOWN THERE"

she said. "Waiting." "What did they do to you, Kay?"

I asked. Kay turned to me then, her face contorted with writhing, burning pain and something worse — frantic, naked fear.

"I'll show you." She lifted her dress above her knees and I saw the deep red and blue welts across her legs. "All over," she said. "All over me."

**THIS WAS THE BEGINNING —
THE BEGINNING OF A CRIME
SYNDICATE'S PAYOFF TO A
WOMAN ON THEIR PAYROLL...**



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