

SIDNEY
SHELDON

If
Tomorrow
Comes



Sidney Sheldon
If Tomorrow Comes

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The international bestseller from the master of suspense. A mafia conspiracy and one woman against the world. Tracy Whitey is on top of the world. Young, beautiful, intelligent, she is about to marry into wealth and glamour – until, betrayed by her own innocence, she finds herself in prison, framed by a ruthless mafia gang and abandoned by the man she loves. Beaten and broken, but surviving with her dazzling ingenuity, Tracy emerges from her savage ordeal – determined to avenge those who have destroyed her life. Her thirst for revenge takes her from New Orleans to London, from Paris to Madrid and Amsterdam. Tracy is playing for the highest stakes in a deadly game. Only one man can challenge her – he’s handsome, persuasive and every bit as daring. Only one man can stop her – an evil genius whose only hope of salvation is in Tracy’s destruction...

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IF TOMORROW COMES



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Dedication

For Barrywith love

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Part One

Chapter One

New Orleans Thursday, 20 February – 11:00 P.M.

She undressed slowly, dreamily, and when she was naked, she selected a bright red negligee to wear so that the blood would not show. Doris Whitney looked around the bedroom for the last time to make certain that the pleasant room, grown dear over the past thirty years, was neat and tidy. She opened the drawer of the bedside table and carefully removed the gun. It was shiny black, and terrifyingly cold. She placed it next to the telephone and dialled her daughter's number in Philadelphia. She listened to the echo of the distant ringing. And then there was a soft 'Hello?'

'Tracy ... I just felt like hearing the sound of your voice, darling.'

'What a nice surprise, Mother.'

'I hope I didn't wake you up.'

'No. I was reading. Just getting ready to sleep. Charles and I were going out for dinner, but the weather's too nasty. It's snowing hard here. What's it doing there?'

Dear God, we're talking about the weather, Doris Whitney thought, when there's so much I want to tell her. And can't.

'Mother? Are you there?'

Doris Whitney stared out the window. 'It's raining.' And she thought, *How melodramatically appropriate. Like an Alfred Hitchcock movie.*

'What's that noise?' Tracy asked.

Thunder. Too deeply wrapped in her thoughts, Doris had not been aware of it. New Orleans was having a storm. *Continued rain*, the weatherman had said. *Sixty-six degrees in New Orleans. By evening the rain will be turning to thundershowers. Be sure to carry your umbrellas.* She would not need an umbrella.

'That's thunder, Tracy.' She forced a note of cheerfulness into her voice. 'Tell me what's happening in Philadelphia.'

'I feel like a princess in a fairy tale, Mother,' Tracy said. 'I never believed anyone could be so happy. Tomorrow night I'm meeting Charles's parents.' She deepened her voice as though making a pronouncement. 'The Stanhopes, of Chestnut Hill,' she sighed. 'They're an institution. I have butterflies the size of dinosaurs.'

'Don't worry. They'll love you, darling.'

'Charles says it doesn't matter. *He* loves me. And I adore him. I can't wait for you to meet him. He's fantastic.'

'I'm sure he is.' She would never meet Charles. She would never hold a grandchild in her lap. *No. I must not think about that.* 'Does he know how lucky he is to have you, baby?'

'I keep telling him.' Tracy laughed. 'Enough about me. Tell me what's going on there. How are you feeling?'

You're in perfect health, Doris, were Dr Rush's words. *You'll live to be a hundred.* One of life's little ironies. 'I feel wonderful.' *Talking to you.*

'Got a boyfriend yet?' Tracy teased.

Since Tracy's father had died five years earlier, Doris Whitney had not even considered going out with another man, despite Tracy's encouragement.

'No boyfriends.' She changed the subject. 'How is your job? Still enjoying it?'

'I love it. Charles doesn't mind if I keep working after we're married.'

'That's wonderful, baby. He sounds like a very understanding man.'

'He is. You'll see for yourself.'

There was a loud clap of thunder, like an offstage cue. It was time. There was nothing more to say except a final farewell. 'Good-bye, my darling.' She kept her voice carefully steady.

‘I’ll see you at the wedding, Mother. I’ll call you as soon as Charles and I set a date.’

‘Yes.’ There was one final thing to say, after all. ‘I love you very, very much, Tracy.’ And Doris Whitney carefully replaced the receiver. She picked up the gun. There was only one way to do it. Quickly. She raised the gun to her temple and squeezed the trigger.

Chapter Two

Philadelphia Friday, 21 February – 8:00 A.M.

Tracy Whitney stepped out of the lobby of her block of flats into a grey, sleety rain that fell impartially on sleek limousines driven down Market Street by uniformed chauffeurs, and on the abandoned and boarded-up houses huddled together in the slums of North Philadelphia. The rain washed the limousines clean and made sodden messes of the rubbish piled high in front of the neglected row of houses. Tracy Whitney was on her way to work. Her pace was brisk as she walked east on Chestnut Street towards the bank, and it was all she could do to keep from singing aloud. She wore a bright-yellow raincoat, boots, and a yellow rain hat that barely contained a mass of shining chestnut hair. She was in her mid-twenties, with a lively, intelligent face, a full, sensuous mouth, sparkling eyes that could change from a soft moss green to a dark jade in moments, and a trim, athletic figure. Her skin ran the gamut from a translucent white to a deep rose, depending on whether she was angry, tired, or excited. Her mother had once told her, ‘Honestly, child, sometimes I don’t recognize you. You’ve got all the colours of the wind in you.’

Now, as Tracy walked down the street, people turned to smile, envying the happiness that shone on her face. She smiled back at them.

It’s indecent for anyone to be this happy, Tracy Whitney thought. I’m marrying the man I love, and I’m going to have his baby. What more could anyone ask?

As Tracy approached the bank, she glanced at her watch. Eight-twenty. The doors of the Philadelphia Trust and Fidelity Bank would not be open to employees for another ten minutes, but Clarence Desmond, the bank’s senior vice-president in charge of the international department, was already turning off the outside alarm and opening the door. Tracy enjoyed watching the morning ritual. She stood in the rain, waiting, as Desmond entered the bank and locked the door behind him.

Banks the world over have arcane safety procedures, and the Philadelphia Trust and Fidelity Bank was no exception. The routine never varied, except for the security signal, which was changed every week. The signal that week was a half-lowered venetian blind, indicating to the employees waiting outside that a search was in progress to make certain that no intruders were concealed on the premises, waiting to hold the employees hostage. Clarence Desmond was checking the lavatories, storeroom, vault and safe-deposit area. Only when he was fully satisfied that he was alone would the venetian blind be raised as a sign that all was well.

The senior bookkeeper was always the first of the employees to be admitted. He would take his place next to the emergency alarm until the other employees were inside, then lock the door behind them.

Promptly at 8:30, Tracy Whitney entered the ornate lobby with her fellow workers, took off her raincoat, hat and boots, and listened with secret amusement to the others complaining about the rainy weather.

‘The damned wind carried away my umbrella,’ a teller complained. ‘I’m soaked.’

‘I passed two ducks swimming down Market Street,’ the head cashier joked.

‘The weatherman says we can expect another week of this. I wish I was in Florida.’

Tracy smiled and went to work. She was in charge of the cable-transfer department. Until recently, the transfer of money from one bank to another and from one country to another had been a slow, laborious process, requiring multiple forms to be filled out and dependent on national and international postal services. With the advent of computers, the situation had changed dramatically, and enormous amounts of money could be transferred instantaneously. It was Tracy’s job to extract overnight transfers from the computer and to make computer transfers to other banks. All transactions were in code, changed regularly to prevent unauthorized access. Each day, millions of electronic dollars passed through Tracy’s hands. It was fascinating work, the life-blood that fed the arteries of

business all over the globe, and until Charles Stanhope III had come into Tracy's life, banking had been the most exciting thing in the world for her. The Philadelphia Trust and Fidelity Bank had a large international division, and at lunch Tracy and her fellow workers would discuss each morning's activities. It was heady conversation.

Deborah, the head bookkeeper, announced, 'We just closed the hundred-million-dollar syndicated loan to Turkey ...'

Mae Trenton, secretary to the vice-president of the bank, said in a confidential tone, 'At the board meeting this morning they decided to join the new money facility to Peru. The up-front fee is over five million dollars ...'

Jon Creighton, the bank bigot, added, 'I understand we're going in on the Mexican rescue package for fifty million. Those wetbacks don't deserve a damned cent ...'

'It's interesting,' Tracy said thoughtfully, 'that the countries that attack America for being too money-oriented are always the first to beg us for loans.'

It was the subject on which she and Charles had had their first argument.

Tracy had met Charles Stanhope III at a financial symposium where Charles was the guest speaker. He ran the investment house founded by his greatgrandfather, and his company did a good deal of business with the bank Tracy worked for. After Charles's lecture, Tracy had gone up to disagree with his analysis of the ability of third-world nations to repay the staggering sums of money they had borrowed from commercial banks worldwide and western governments. Charles at first had been amused, then intrigued by the impassioned arguments of the beautiful young woman before him. Their discussion had continued through dinner at the old Bookbinder's restaurant.

In the beginning, Tracy had not been impressed with Charles Stanhope III, even though she was aware that he was considered Philadelphia's prize catch. Charles was thirty-five and a rich and successful member of one of the oldest families in Philadelphia. Five feet ten inches, with thinning sandy hair, brown eyes, and an earnest, pedantic manner, he was, Tracy thought, one of the boring rich.

As though reading her mind, Charles had leaned across the table and said, 'My father is convinced they gave him the wrong baby at the hospital.'

'What?'

'I'm a throwback. I don't happen to think money is the end-all and be-all of life. But please don't ever tell my father I said so.'

There was such a charming unpretentiousness about him that Tracy found herself warming to him. *I wonder what it would be like to be married to someone like him – one of the establishment.*

It had taken Tracy's father most of his life to build up a business that the Stanhopes would have sneered at as insignificant. *The Stanhopes and the Whitneys would never mix*, Tracy thought. *Oil and water. And the Stanhopes are the oil. And what am I going on about like an idiot? Talk about ego. A man asks me out to dinner and I'm deciding whether I want to marry him. We'll probably never even see each other again.*

Charles was saying, 'I hope you're free for dinner tomorrow ...?'

Philadelphia was a dazzling cornucopia of things to see and do. On Saturday nights Tracy and Charles went to the ballet or watched Riccardo Muti conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra. During the week they explored New Market and the unique collection of shops in Society Hill. They ate cheese steaks at a pavement table at Geno's and dined at the Café Royal, one of the most exclusive restaurants in Philadelphia. They shopped at Head House Square and wandered through the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Rodin Museum.

Tracy paused in front of the statue of *The Thinker*. She glanced at Charles and grinned. 'It's you!'

Charles was not interested in exercise, but Tracy enjoyed it, so on Sunday mornings she jogged along the West River Drive or on the promenade skirting the Schuylkill River. She joined a Saturday

afternoon t'ai chi ch'uan class, and after an hour's workout, exhausted but exhilarated, she would meet Charles at his apartment. He was a gourmet cook, and he liked preparing esoteric dishes such as Moroccan *bistilla* and *guo bu li*, the dumplings of northern China, and *tahine de poulet au citron* for Tracy and himself.

Charles was the most punctilious person Tracy had ever known. She had once been fifteen minutes late for a dinner appointment with him, and his displeasure had spoiled the evening for her. After that, she had vowed to be on time for him.

Tracy had had little sexual experience, but it seemed to her that Charles made love the same way he lived his life: meticulously and very properly. Once, Tracy had decided to be daring and unconventional in bed, and had so shocked Charles that she began secretly to wonder if she were some kind of sex maniac.

The pregnancy had been unexpected, and when it happened, Tracy was filled with uncertainty. Charles had not brought up the subject of marriage, and she did not want him to feel he had to marry her because of the baby. She was not certain whether she could go through with an abortion, but the alternative was an equally painful choice. Could she raise a child without the help of its father, and would it be fair to the baby?

She decided to break the news to Charles after dinner one evening. She had prepared a *cassoulet* for him in her apartment, and in her nervousness she had burned it. As she set the scorched meat and beans in front of him, she forgot her carefully rehearsed speech and wildly blurted out, 'I'm so sorry, Charles. I'm – pregnant.'

There was an unbearably long silence, and as Tracy was about to break it, Charles said, 'We'll get married, of course.'

Tracy was filled with a sense of enormous relief. 'I don't want you to think I – You don't *have* to marry me, you know.'

He raised a hand to stop her. 'I want to marry you, Tracy. You'll make a wonderful wife.' He added, slowly, 'Of course, my mother and father will be a bit surprised.' And he smiled and kissed her.

Tracy quietly asked, 'Why will they be surprised?'

Charles sighed. 'Darling, I'm afraid you don't quite realize what you're letting yourself in for. The Stanhopes always marry – mind you, I'm using quotation marks – "their own kind". Mainline Philadelphia.'

'And they've already selected your wife,' Tracy guessed.

Charles took her in his arms. 'That doesn't matter a damn. It's whom *I've* selected that counts. We'll have dinner with Mother and Father next Friday. It's time you met them.'

At five minutes to 9:00 Tracy became aware of a difference in the noise level in the bank. The employees were beginning to speak a little faster, move a little quicker. The bank doors would open in five minutes and everything had to be in readiness. Through the front window, Tracy could see customers lined up on the pavement outside, waiting in the cold rain.

Tracy watched as the bank guard finished distributing fresh blank deposit and withdrawal slips into the metal trays on the six tables lined up along the centre aisle of the bank. Regular customers were issued deposit slips with a personal magnetized code at the bottom so that each time a deposit was made, the computer automatically credited it to the proper account. But often customers came in without their deposit slips and would fill out blank ones.

The guard glanced up at the clock on the wall, and as the hour hand moved to 9:00, he walked over to the door and ceremoniously unlocked it.

The banking day had begun.

For the next few hours Tracy was too busy at the computer to think about anything else. Every wire transfer had to be double-checked to make sure it had the correct code. When an account was to be debited, she entered the account number, the amount, and the bank to which the money was to

be transferred. Each bank had its own code number, the numbers listed in a confidential directory that contained the codes for every major bank in the world.

The morning flew by swiftly. Tracy was planning to use her lunchtime to have her hair done and had made an appointment with Larry Stella Botte. He was expensive, but it would be worth it, for she wanted Charles's parents to see her at her best. *I've got to make them like me. I don't care whom they chose for him*, Tracy thought. *No one can make Charles as happy as I will.*

At 1:00, as Tracy was getting into her raincoat, Clarence Desmond summoned her to his office. Desmond was the image of an important executive. If the bank had used television commercials, he would have been the perfect spokesman. Dressed conservatively, with an air of solid, old-fashioned authority about him, he looked like a person one could trust.

'Sit down, Tracy,' he said. He prided himself on knowing every employee's first name. 'Nasty outside, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, well. People still have to do their banking.' Desmond had used up his small talk. He leaned across his desk. 'I understand that you and Charles Stanhope are engaged to be married.'

Tracy was surprised. 'We haven't even announced it yet. How -?'

Desmond smiled. 'Anything the Stanhopes do is news. I'm very happy for you. I assume you'll be returning here to work with us. After the honeymoon, of course. We wouldn't want to lose you. You're one of our most valuable employees.'

'Charles and I talked it over, and we agreed I'd be happier if I worked.'

Desmond smiled, satisfied. Stanhope and Sons was one of the most important investment houses in the financial community, and it would be a nice plum if he could get their exclusive account for his branch. He leaned back in his chair. 'When you return from your honeymoon, Tracy, there's going to be a nice promotion for you, along with a substantial rise.'

'Oh, thank you! That's wonderful.' She knew she had earned it, she felt a thrill of pride. She could hardly wait to tell Charles. It seemed to Tracy that the gods were conspiring to do everything they could to overwhelm her with happiness.

The Charles Stanhope Seniors lived in an impressive old mansion in Rittenhouse Square. It was a city landmark that Tracy had passed often. *And now*, she thought, *it's going to be a part of my life.*

She was nervous. Her beautiful hairdo had succumbed to the dampness of the air. She had changed dresses four times. Should she dress simply? Formally? She had one Yves Saint Laurent she had scrimped to buy at Wanamaker's. *If I wear it, they'll think I'm extravagant. On the other hand, if I dress in one of my sale things from Post Horn, they'll think their son is marrying beneath him. Oh, hell, they're going to think that anyway*, Tracy decided. She finally settled on a simple grey wool skirt and a white silk blouse and fastened around her neck the slender gold chain her mother had sent her for Christmas.

The door to the mansion was opened by a liveried butler. 'Good evening, Miss Whitney.' *The butler knows my name. Is that a good sign? A bad sign?* 'May I take your coat?' She was dripping on their expensive Persian rug.

He led her through a marble hallway that seemed twice as large as the bank. Tracy thought, panicky, *Oh, my God. I'm dressed all wrong! I should have worn the Yves Saint Laurent.* As she turned into the library, she felt a ladder start at the ankle of her pantyhose, and she was face-to-face with Charles's parents.

Charles Stanhope, Sr., was a stern-looking man in his middle sixties. He *looked* a successful man; he was the projection of what his son would be like in thirty years. He had brown eyes, like Charles's, a firm chin, a fringe of white hair, and Tracy loved him instantly. He was the perfect grandfather for their child.

Charles's mother was impressive looking. She was rather short and heavy-set, but despite that, there was a regal air about her. *She looks solid and dependable*, Tracy thought. *She'll make a wonderful grandmother.*

Mrs Stanhope held out her hand. 'My dear, so good of you to join us. We've asked Charles to give us a few minutes alone with you. You don't mind?'

'Of course she doesn't mind,' Charles's father declared. 'Sit down ... Tracy, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

The two of them seated themselves on a couch facing her. *Why do I feel as though I'm about to undergo an inquisition?* Tracy could hear her mother's voice: *Baby, God will never throw anything at you that you can't handle. Just take it one step at a time.*

Tracy's first step was a weak smile that came out all wrong, because at that instant she could feel the ladder in her hose slither up to her knee. She tried to conceal it with her hands.

'So!' Mr Stanhope's voice was hearty. 'You and Charles want to get married.'

The word *want* disturbed Tracy. Surely Charles had told them they were *going* to be married.

'Yes,' Tracy said.

'You and Charles really haven't known each other long, have you?' Mrs Stanhope asked.

Tracy fought back her resentment. *I was right. It is going to be an inquisition.*

'Long enough to know that we love each other, Mrs Stanhope.'

'Love?' Mr Stanhope murmured.

Mrs Stanhope said, 'To be quite blunt, Miss Whitney, Charles's news came as something of a shock to his father and me.' She smiled forbearingly. 'Of course, Charles has told you about Charlotte?' She saw the expression on Tracy's face. 'I see. Well, he and Charlotte grew up together. They were always very close, and – well, frankly, everyone expected them to announce their engagement this year.'

It was not necessary for her to describe Charlotte. Tracy could have drawn a picture of her. Lived next door. Rich, with the same social background as Charles. All the best schools. Loved horses and won cups.

'Tell us about your family,' Mr Stanhope suggested.

My God, this is a scene from a late-night movie, Tracy thought wildly. *I'm the Rita Hayworth character, meeting Cary Grant's parents for the first time. I need a drink. In the old movies the butler always came to the rescue with a tray of drinks.*

'Where were you born, my dear?' Mrs Stanhope asked.

'In Louisiana. My father was a mechanic.' There had been no need to add that, but Tracy was unable to resist. To hell with them. She was proud of her father.

'A mechanic?'

'Yes. He started a small manufacturing plant in New Orleans and built it up into a fairly large company in its field. When father died five years ago, my mother took over the business.'

'What does this – er – company manufacture?'

'Exhaust pipes and other automotive parts.'

Mr and Mrs Stanhope exchanged a look and said in unison, 'I see.'

Their tone made Tracy tense up. *I wonder how long it's going to take me to love them?* she asked herself. She looked into the two unsympathetic faces across from her, and to her horror began babbling inanely. 'You'll really like my mother. She's beautiful, and intelligent, and charming. She's from the South. She's very small, of course, about your height, Mrs Stanhope –' Tracy's words trailed off, weighed down by the oppressive silence. She gave a silly little laugh that died away under Mrs Stanhope's stare.

It was Mr Stanhope who said without expression, 'Charles informs us you're pregnant.'

Oh, how Tracy wished he had not! Their attitude was so nakedly disapproving. It was as though their son had had nothing to do with what had happened. They made her feel it was a stigma. *Now I know what I should have worn*, Tracy thought. *A scarlet letter.*

'I don't understand how in this day and –' Mrs Stanhope began, but she never finished the sentence, because at that moment Charles came into the room. Tracy had never been so glad to see anyone in her entire life.

'Well,' Charles beamed. 'How are you all getting along?'

Tracy rose and hurried into his arms. 'Fine, darling.' She held him close to her, thinking, *Thank goodness Charles isn't like his parents. He could never be like them. They're narrowminded and snobbish and cold.*

There was a discreet cough behind them, and the butler stood there with a tray of drinks. *It's going to be all right*, Tracy told herself. *This movie's going to have a happy ending.*

The dinner was excellent, but Tracy was too nervous to eat. They discussed banking and politics and the distressing state of the world, and it was all very impersonal and polite. No one actually said aloud, 'You trapped our son into marriage.' *In all fairness*, Tracy thought, *they have every right to be concerned about the woman their son marries. One day Charles will own the firm, and it's important that he have the right wife.* And Tracy promised herself, *He will have.*

Charles gently took her hand which had been twisting the napkin under the table and smiled and gave a small wink. Tracy's heart soared.

'Tracy and I prefer a small wedding,' Charles said, 'and afterwards –'

'Nonsense,' Mrs Stanhope interrupted. 'Our family does not have small weddings, Charles. There will be dozens of friends who will want to see you married.' She looked over at Tracy, evaluating her figure. 'Perhaps we should see that the wedding invitations are sent at once.' And as an afterthought, 'That is, if that's acceptable to you?'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' There *was* going to be a wedding. *Why did I even doubt it?*

Mrs Stanhope said, 'Some of the guests will be coming from abroad. I'll make arrangements for them to stay here at the house.'

Mr Stanhope asked, 'Have you decided where you're going on your honeymoon?'

Charles smiled. 'That's privileged information, Father.' He gave Tracy's hand a squeeze.

'How long a honeymoon are you planning?' Mrs Stanhope enquired.

'About fifty years,' Charles replied. And Tracy adored him for it.

After dinner they moved into the library for brandy, and Tracy looked around at the lovely old oak-panelled room with its shelves of leather-bound volumes, the two Corots, a small Copley, and a Reynolds. It would not have mattered to her if Charles had no money at all, but she admitted to herself that this was going to be a very pleasant way to live.

It was almost midnight when Charles drove her back to her small flat off Fairmount Park.

'I hope the evening wasn't too difficult for you, Tracy. Mother and Father can be a bit stiff sometimes.'

'Oh, no, they were lovely,' Tracy lied.

She was exhausted from the tension of the evening, but when they reached the door of her flat, she asked, 'Are you going to come in, Charles?' She needed to have him hold her in his arms. She wanted him to say, 'I love you, darling. No one in this world will ever keep us apart.'

He said, 'Afraid not tonight. I've got a heavy morning.'

Tracy concealed her disappointment. 'Of course. I understand, darling.'

'I'll talk to you tomorrow.' He gave her a brief kiss, and she watched him disappear down the hallway.

The flat was ablaze and the insistent sound of loud fire bells crashed abruptly through the silence. Tracy jerked upright in her bed, groggy with sleep, sniffing for smoke in the darkened room. The ringing continued, and she slowly became aware that it was the telephone. The bedside clock

read 2:30 A.M. Her first panicky thought was that something had happened to Charles. She snatched up the phone. ‘Hello?’

A distant male voice asked, ‘Tracy Whitney?’

She hesitated. If this was an obscene phone call... ‘Who is this?’

‘This is Lieutenant Miller of the New Orleans Police Department. Is this Tracy Whitney?’

‘Yes.’ Her heart began to pound.

‘I’m afraid I have bad news for you.’

Her hand clenched around the phone.

‘It’s about your mother.’

‘Has – has Mother been in some kind of accident?’

‘She’s dead, Miss Whitney.’

‘No!’ It was a scream. This *was* an obscene phone call. Some crank trying to frighten her. There was nothing wrong with her mother. Her mother was alive. *I love you very, very much, Tracy.*

‘I hate to break it to you this way,’ the voice said.

It was real. It was a nightmare, but it was happening. She could not speak. Her mind and her tongue were frozen.

The lieutenant’s voice was saying, ‘Hello ...? Miss Whitney? Hello ...?’

‘I’ll be on the first plane.’

She sat in the tiny kitchen of her flat thinking about her mother. It was impossible that she was dead. She had always been so vibrant, so alive. They had had such a close and loving relationship. From the time Tracy was a small girl, she had been able to go to her mother with her problems, to discuss school and boys and, later, men. When Tracy’s father had died, many overtures had been made by people who wanted to buy the business. They had offered Doris Whitney enough money so that she could have lived well for the rest of her life, but she had stubbornly refused to sell. ‘Your father built up this business. I can’t throw away all his hard work.’ And she had kept the business flourishing.

Oh, Mother, Tracy thought. I love you so much. You’ll never meet Charles, and you’ll never see your grandchildren, and she began to weep.

She made a cup of coffee and let it grow cold while she sat in the dark. Tracy wanted desperately to call Charles and tell him what had happened, to have him at her side. She looked at the kitchen clock. It was 3:30 A.M. She did not want to awaken him; she would telephone him from New Orleans. She wondered whether this would affect their wedding plans, and instantly felt guilty at the thought. How could she even think of herself at a time like this? Lieutenant Miller had said, ‘When you get here, grab a taxi and come to police headquarters.’ *Why police headquarters? Why? What had happened?*

Standing in the crowded New Orleans airport waiting for her suitcase, surrounded by pushing, impatient travellers, Tracy felt suffocated. She tried to move close to the baggage carousel, but no one would let her through. She was becoming increasingly nervous, dreading what she would have to face in a little while. She kept trying to tell herself that it was all some kind of mistake, but the words kept reverberating in her head: *I’m afraid I have bad news for you ... She’s dead, Miss Whitney ... I hate to break it to you this way ...*

When Tracy finally retrieved her suitcase, she got into a taxi and repeated the address the lieutenant had given her: ‘Seven fifteen South Broad Street, please.’

The driver grinned at her in the rearview mirror. ‘Fuzzville, huh?’

No conversation. Not now. Tracy’s mind was too filled with turmoil.

The taxi headed east towards the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway. The driver chattered on. ‘Come here for the big show, miss?’

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she thought, *No. I came here for death.* She was aware of the drone of the driver’s voice, but she did not hear the words. She sat stiffly in her seat, oblivious to the familiar surroundings that sped past. It was only as they approached the French

Quarter that Tracy became conscious of the growing noise. It was the sound of a mob gone mad, rioters yelling some ancient berserk litany.

‘Far as I can take you,’ the driver informed her.

And then Tracy looked up and saw it. It was an incredible sight. There were hundreds of thousands of shouting people, wearing masks, disguised as dragons and giant alligators and pagan gods, filling the streets and pavements ahead with a wild cacophony of sound. It was an insane explosion of bodies and music and floats and dancing.

‘Better get out before they turn my cab over,’ the driver said. ‘Damned Mardi Gras.’

Of course. It was February, the time when the whole city celebrated the beginning of Lent. Tracy got out of the cab and stood at the curb, suitcase in hand, and the next moment she was swept up in the screaming, dancing crowd. It was obscene, a black witches’ sabbath, a million Furies celebrating the death of her mother. Tracy’s suitcase was torn from her hand and disappeared. She was grabbed by a fat man in a devil’s mask and kissed. A deer squeezed her breasts, and a giant panda grabbed her from behind and lifted her up. She struggled free and tried to run, but it was impossible. She was hemmed in, trapped, a part of the singing, dancing celebration. She moved with the chanting mob, tears streaming down her face. There was no escape. When she was finally able to break away and flee to a quiet street, she was near hysteria. She stood still for a long time, leaning against a lamp-post, taking deep breaths, slowly regaining control of herself. She headed for the police station.

Lieutenant Miller was a middle-aged, harassed-looking man with a weather-beaten face, who seemed genuinely uncomfortable in his role. ‘Sorry I couldn’t meet you at the airport,’ he told Tracy, ‘but the whole town’s gone nuts. We went through your mother’s things, and you’re the only one we could find to call.’

‘Please, Lieutenant, tell me what – what happened to my mother.’

‘She committed suicide.’

A cold chill went through her. ‘That’s – that’s impossible! Why would she kill herself? She had everything to live for.’ Her voice was ragged.

‘She left a note addressed to you.’

The morgue was cold and indifferent and terrifying. Tracy was led down a long white corridor into a large, sterile, empty room, and suddenly she realized that the room was not empty. It was filled with the dead. Her dead.

A white-coated attendant strolled over to a wall, reached for a handle, and pulled out an oversized drawer. ‘Wanna take a look?’

No! I don’t want to see the empty, lifeless body lying in that box. She wanted to get out of this place. She wanted to go back a few hours in time when the fire bell was ringing. *Let it be a real fire alarm, not the telephone, not my mother dead.* Tracy moved forward slowly, each step a screaming inside her. Then she was staring down at the lifeless remains of the body that had borne her, nourished her, laughed with her, loved her. She bent over and kissed her mother on the cheek. The cheek was cold and rubbery. ‘Oh, Mother,’ Tracy whispered. ‘Why? Why did you do it?’

‘We gotta perform an autopsy,’ the attendant was saying. ‘It’s the state law with suicides.’

The note Doris Whitney left offered no answer.

My darling Tracy,

Please forgive me. I failed, and I couldn’t stand being a burden on you. This is the best way. I love you so much.

Mother

The note was as lifeless and devoid of meaning as the body that lay in the drawer.

That afternoon Tracy made the funeral arrangements, then took a taxi to the family home. In the far distance she could hear the roar of the Mardi Gras revellers, like some alien, lurid celebration.

The Whitney residence was a Victorian house located in the Garden District in the residential section known as Uptown. Like most of the homes in New Orleans, it was built of wood and had no basement, for the area was situated below sea level.

Tracy had grown up in that house, and it was filled with warm, comfortable memories. She had not been home in the past year, and as her taxi slowed to a stop in front of the house, she was shocked to see a large sign on the lawn: FOR SALE – NEW ORLEANS REALTY COMPANY. It was impossible. *I'll never sell this old house*, her mother had often told her. *We've all been so happy together here*.

Filled with a strange, unreasoning fire, Tracy moved past a giant magnolia tree towards the front door. She had been given her own key to the house when she was in the seventh grade and had carried it with her since, as a talisman, a reminder of the haven that would always be there waiting for her.

She opened the door and stepped inside. She stood there, stunned. The rooms were completely empty, stripped of furniture. All the beautiful antique pieces were gone. The house was like a barren shell deserted by the people who had once occupied it. Tracy ran from room to room, her disbelief growing. It was as though some sudden disaster had struck. She hurried upstairs and stood in the doorway of the bedroom she had occupied most of her life. It stared back at her, cold and empty. *Oh, God, what could have happened?* Tracy heard the sound of the front doorbell and walked as if in a trance down the stairs to answer it.

Otto Schmidt stood in the doorway. The foreman of the Whitney Automotive Parts Company was an elderly man with a seamed face and a body that was rail-thin, except for a protruding beer belly. A tonsure of straggly grey hair framed his scalp.

'Tracy,' he said in a heavy German accent, 'I just heard the news. I – I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

Tracy clasped his hands. 'Oh, Otto. I'm so glad to see you. Come in.' She led him into the empty living room. 'I'm sorry there's no place to sit down,' she apologized. 'Do you mind sitting on the floor?'

'No, no.'

They sat down across from each other, their eyes dumb with misery. Otto Schmidt had been an employee of the company for as long as Tracy could remember. She knew how much her father had depended on him. When her mother had inherited the business, Schmidt had stayed on to run it for her. 'Otto, I don't understand what's happening. The police say Mother committed suicide, but you know there was no reason for her to kill herself.' A sudden thought stabbed at her. 'She wasn't ill, was she? She didn't have some terrible –'

'No. It wasn't that. Not that.' He looked away, uncomfortable, something unspoken in his words.

Tracy said slowly, 'You know what it was.'

He peered at her through rheumy blue eyes. 'Your mama didn't tell you what's been happening lately. She didn't want to worry you.'

Tracy frowned. 'Worry me about what? Go on ... *please*.'

His work-worn hands opened and closed. 'Have you heard of a man called Joe Romano?'

'Joe Romano? No. Why?'

Otto Schmidt blinked. 'Six months ago Romano got in touch with your mother and said he wanted to buy the company. She told him she wasn't interested in selling, but he offered her ten times what the company was worth, and she couldn't refuse. She was so excited. She was going to invest all the money in bonds that would bring in an income that both of you could live on comfortably for the rest of your lives. She was going to surprise you. I was so glad for her. I've been ready to retire for the last three years, Tracy, but I couldn't leave Mrs Doris, could I? This Romano –' Otto almost spat out the word. 'This Romano gave her a small down payment. The big money – the balloon payment – was to have come last month.'

Tracy said impatiently, 'Go on, Otto. What happened?'

‘When Romano took over, he fired everybody and brought in his own people to run things. Then he began to raid the company. He sold all the assets and ordered a lot of equipment, selling it off but not paying for it. The suppliers weren’t worried about the delay in payment because they thought they were still dealing with your mother. When they finally began pressing your mother for their money, she went to Romano and demanded to know what was going on. He told her he had decided not to go ahead with the deal and was returning the company to her. By then, the company was not only worthless but your mother owed half a million dollars she couldn’t pay. Tracy, it nearly killed me and the wife to watch how your mother fought to save that company. There was no way. They forced her into bankruptcy. They took everything – the business, this house, even her car.’

‘Oh, my God!’

‘There’s more. The district attorney served your mother notice that he was going to ask for an indictment against her for fraud, that she was facing a prison sentence. That was the day she really died, I think.’

Tracy was seething with a wave of helpless anger. ‘But all she had to do was tell them the truth – explain what that man did to her.’

The old foreman shook his head. ‘Joe Romano works for a man named Anthony Orsatti. Orsatti runs New Orleans. I found out too late that Romano’s done this before with other companies. Even if your mother had taken him to court, it would have been years before it was all untangled, and she didn’t have the money to fight him.’

‘Why didn’t she tell me?’ It was a cry of anguish, a cry for her mother’s anguish.

‘Your mother was a proud woman. And what could you do? There’s nothing anyone can do.’

You’re wrong, Tracy thought fiercely. ‘I want to see Joe Romano. Where can I find him?’

Schmidt said flatly, ‘Forget about him. You have no idea how powerful he is.’

‘Where does he live, Otto?’

‘He has an estate near Jackson Square, but it won’t help to go there, Tracy, believe me.’

Tracy did not answer. She was filled with an emotion totally unfamiliar to her: hatred. *Joe Romano is going to pay for killing my mother*, Tracy swore to herself.

Chapter Three

She needed time. Time to think, time to plan her next move. She could not bear to go back to the despoiled house, so she checked into a small hotel on Magazine Street, far from the French Quarter, where the mad parades were still going on. She had no luggage, and the suspicious clerk behind the desk said, 'You'll have to pay in advance. That'll be forty dollars for the night.'

From her room Tracy telephoned Clarence Desmond to tell him she would be unable to come to work for a few days.

He concealed his irritation at being inconvenienced. 'Don't worry about it,' he told Tracy. 'I'll find someone to fill in until you return.' He hoped she would remember to tell Charles Stanhope how understanding he had been.

Tracy's next call was to Charles. 'Charles, darling –'

'Where the devil *are* you, Tracy? Mother has been trying to reach you all morning. She wanted to have lunch with you today. You two have a lot of arrangements to go over.'

'I'm sorry, darling. I'm in New Orleans.'

'You're *where*? What are you doing in New Orleans?'

'My mother – died.' The word stuck in her throat.

'Oh.' The tone of his voice changed instantly. 'I'm sorry, Tracy. It must have been very sudden. She was quite young, wasn't she?'

She was very young, Tracy thought miserably. Aloud she said, 'Yes. Yes, she was.'

'What happened? Are you all right?'

Somehow Tracy could not bring herself to tell Charles that it was suicide. She wanted desperately to cry out the whole terrible story about what they had done to her mother, but she stopped herself. *It's my problem*, she thought. *I can't throw my burden on Charles*. She said, 'Don't worry. I'm all right, darling.'

'Would you like me to come down there, Tracy?'

'No. Thank you. I can handle it. I'm burying Mama tomorrow. I'll be back in Philadelphia on Monday.'

When she hung up, she lay on the hotel bed, her thoughts unfocused. She counted stained acoustical tiles on the ceiling. One ... two ... three ... Romano ... four ... five ... Joe Romano ... six ... seven ... he was going to pay. She had no plan. She knew only that she was not going to let Joe Romano get away with what he had done, that she would find some way to avenge her mother.

Tracy left her hotel in the late afternoon and walked along Canal Street until she came to a pawn shop. A cadaverous-looking man wearing an old-fashioned green eyeshade sat in a cage behind a counter.

'Help you?'

'I – I want to buy a gun.'

'What kind of gun?'

'You know ... a ... revolver.'

'You want a thirty-two, a forty-five, a –'

Tracy had never even held a gun. 'A – a thirty-two will do.'

'I have a nice thirty-two calibre Smith and Wesson here for two hundred and twenty-nine dollars, or a Charter Arms thirty-two for a hundred and fifty-nine ...'

She had not brought much cash with her. 'Have you got something cheaper?'

He shrugged. '*Cheaper* is a slingshot, lady. Tell you what. I'll let you have the thirty-two for a hundred and fifty, and I'll throw in a box of bullets.'

'All right.' Tracy watched as he moved over to an arsenal on a table behind him and selected a revolver. He brought it to the counter. 'You know how to use it?'

‘You – you pull the trigger.’

He grunted. ‘Do you want me to show you how to load it?’

She started to say no, that she was not going to use it, that she just wanted to frighten someone, but she realized how foolish that would sound. ‘Yes, please.’

Tracy watched as he inserted the bullets into the chamber. ‘Thank you.’ She reached in her purse and counted out the money.

‘I’ll need your name and address for the police records.’

That had not occurred to Tracy. Threatening Joe Romano with a gun was a criminal act. *But he’s the criminal, not I.*

The green eyeshade made the man’s eyes a pale yellow as he watched her. ‘Name?’

‘Smith. Joan Smith.’

He made a note on a card. ‘Address?’

‘Dowman Road. Thirty-twenty Dowman Road.’

Without looking up he said, ‘There is no Thirty-twenty Dowman Road. That would be in the middle of the river. We’ll make it Fifty-twenty.’ He pushed the receipt in front of her.

She signed JOAN SMITH. ‘Is that it?’

‘That’s it.’ He carefully pushed the revolver through the cage. Tracy stared at it, then picked it up, put it in her handbag, turned and hurried out of the shop.

‘Hey, lady,’ he yelled after her. ‘Don’t forget that gun is loaded!’

Jackson Square is in the heart of the French Quarter, with the beautiful St Louis Cathedral towering over it like a benediction. Lovely old homes and estates in the square are sheltered from the bustling street traffic by tall hedges and graceful magnolia trees. Joe Romano lived in one of those houses.

Tracy waited until dark before she set out. The parades had moved on to Chartres Street, and in the distance Tracy could hear an echo of the pandemonium she had been swept up in earlier.

She stood in the shadows, studying the house, conscious of the heavy weight of the gun in her handbag. The plan she had worked out was simple. She was going to reason with Joe Romano, ask him to clear her mother’s name. If he refused, she would threaten him with the gun and force him to write out a confession. She would take it to Lieutenant Miller, and he would arrest Romano, and her mother’s name would be protected. She wished desperately that Charles were there with her, but it was best to do it alone. Charles had to be left out of it. She would tell him about it when it was all over and Joe Romano was behind bars, where he belonged. A pedestrian was approaching. Tracy waited until he had walked past and the street was deserted.

She walked up to the house and pressed the doorbell. There was no answer. *He’s probably at one of the private krewes balls given during Mardi Gras. But I can wait*, Tracy thought. *I can wait until he gets home.* Suddenly, the porch light snapped on, the front door opened, and a man stood in the doorway. His appearance was a surprise to Tracy. She had visualized a sinister-looking mobster, evil written all over his face. Instead, she found herself facing an attractive, pleasant-looking man who could easily have been mistaken for a university professor. His voice was low and friendly. ‘Hello. May I help you?’

‘Are you Joseph Romano?’ Her voice was shaky.

‘Yes. What can I do for you?’ He had an easy, engaging manner. *No wonder my mother was taken in by this man*, Tracy thought.

‘I – I’d like to talk to you, Mr Romano.’

He studied her figure for a moment. ‘Certainly. Please come in.’

Tracy walked into a living room filled with beautiful, burnished antique furniture. Joseph Romano lived well. *On my mother’s money*, Tracy thought bitterly.

‘I was just about to mix myself a drink. What would you like?’

‘Nothing.’

He looked at her curiously. 'What was it you wanted to see me about, Miss –?'

'Tracy Whitney. I'm Doris Whitney's daughter.'

He stared at her blankly for an instant, and then a look of recognition flashed across his face.

'Oh, yes. I heard about your mother. Too bad.'

Too bad! He had caused the death of her mother, and his only comment was: 'Too bad'.

'Mr Romano, the district attorney believes that my mother was guilty of fraud. You know that's not true. I want you to help me clear her name.'

He shrugged. 'I never talk business during Mardi Gras. It's against my religion.' Romano walked over to the bar and began mixing drinks. 'I think you'll feel better after you've had a drink.'

He was leaving her no choice. Tracy opened her handbag and pulled out the revolver. She pointed it at him. 'I'll tell you what will make me feel better, Mr Romano. Having you confess to exactly what you did to my mother.'

Joseph Romano turned and saw the gun. 'You'd better put that away, Miss Whitney. It could go off.'

'It's *going* to go off if you don't do exactly what I tell you to. You're going to write down how you stripped the company, put it into bankruptcy, and drove my mother to suicide.'

He was watching her carefully now, his dark eyes wary. 'I see. What if I refuse?'

'Then I'm going to kill you.' She could feel the gun shaking in her hand.

'You don't look like a killer, Miss Whitney.' He was moving towards her now, a drink in his hand. His voice was soft and sincere. 'I had nothing to do with your mother's death, and believe me, I –' He threw the drink in her face.

Tracy felt the sharp sting of the alcohol in her eyes, and an instant later the gun was knocked from her hand.

'Your old lady held out on me,' Joe Romano said. 'She didn't tell me she had a horny-looking daughter.'

He was holding her, pinning her arms, and Tracy was blinded and terrified. She tried to move away from him, but he backed her into a wall, pressing against her.

'You have guts, baby. I like that. It turns me on.' His voice was hoarse. Tracy could feel his body hard against hers, and she tried to twist away, but she was helpless in his grip.

'You came here for a little excitement, huh? Well, Joe's going to give it to you.'

She tried to scream, but her voice came out in a gasp. 'Let me go!'

He ripped her blouse away. 'Hey! Look at those tits,' he whispered. He began pinching her nipples. 'Fight me, baby,' he whispered. 'I love it.'

'Let go of me!'

He was squeezing harder, hurting her. She felt herself being forced down to the floor.

'I'll bet you've never been fucked by a real man,' he said. He was astride her now, his body heavy on hers, his hands moving up her thighs. Tracy pushed out blindly, and her fingers touched the gun. She grabbed for it, and there was a sudden, loud explosion.

'Oh, Jesus!' Romano cried. His grip suddenly relaxed. Through a red mist, Tracy watched in horror as he fell off her and slumped to the floor, clutching his side. 'You shot me ... you bitch. You shot me ...'

Tracy was transfixed, unable to move. She felt she was going to be sick, and her eyes were blinded by stabbing pain. She pulled herself to her feet, turned, and stumbled to a door at the far end of the room. She pushed it open. It was a bathroom. She staggered over to the sink, filled the basin with cold water, and bathed her eyes until the pain began to subside and her vision cleared. She looked into the cabinet mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and wild looking. *My God, I've just killed a man.* She ran back into the living room.

Joe Romano lay on the floor, his blood seeping onto the white rug. Tracy stood over him, white-faced. 'I'm sorry,' she said inanely. 'I didn't mean to –'

‘Ambulance ...’ His breathing was ragged.

Tracy hurried to the telephone on the desk and dialled the operator. When she tried to speak, her voice was choked. ‘Operator, send an ambulance right away. The address is Four-twenty-one Jackson Square. A man has been shot.’

She replaced the receiver and looked down at Joe Romano. *Oh, God, she prayed, please don’t let him die. You know I didn’t mean to kill him.* She knelt beside the body on the floor to see if he was still alive. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing. ‘An ambulance is on its way,’ Tracy promised.

She fled.

She tried not to run, afraid of attracting attention. She pulled her jacket close around her to conceal her ripped blouse. Four blocks from the house Tracy tried to hail a taxi. Half a dozen sped past her, filled with happy, laughing passengers. In the distance Tracy heard the sound of an approaching siren, and seconds later an ambulance raced past her, headed in the direction of Joe Romano’s house. *I’ve got to get away from here,* Tracy thought. Ahead of her, a taxi pulled to the curb and discharged its passengers. Tracy ran towards it, afraid of losing it. ‘Are you free?’

‘That depends. Where you goin’?’

‘The airport.’ She held her breath.

‘Get in.’

On the way to the airport, Tracy thought about the ambulance. What if they were too late and Joe Romano was dead? She would be a murderess. She had left the gun back at the house, and her fingerprints were on it. She could tell the police that Romano had tried to rape her and that the gun had gone off accidentally, but they would never believe her. She had purchased the gun that was lying on the floor beside Joe Romano. How much time had passed? Half an hour? An hour? She had to get out of New Orleans as quickly as possible.

‘Enjoy the carnival?’ the driver asked.

Tracy swallowed. ‘I – yes.’ She pulled out her hand mirror and did what she could to make herself presentable. She had been stupid to try to make Joe Romano confess. Everything had gone wrong. *How can I tell Charles what happened?* She knew how shocked he would be, but after she explained, he would understand. Charles would know what to do.

When the taxi arrived at New Orleans International Airport, Tracy wondered, *Was it only this morning that I was here? Did all this happen in just one day?* Her mother’s suicide ... the horror of being swept up in the carnival ... the man snarling, ‘You shot me ... you bitch ...’

When Tracy walked into the terminal, it seemed to her that everyone was staring at her accusingly. *That’s what a guilty conscience does,* she thought. She wished there were some way she could learn about Joe Romano’s condition, but she had no idea what hospital he would be taken to or whom she could call. *He’s going to be all right. Charles and I will come back for Mother’s funeral, and Joe Romano will be fine.* She tried to push from her mind the vision of the man lying on the white rug, his blood staining it red. She had to hurry home to Charles.

Tracy approached the Delta Airlines counter. ‘I’d like a one-way ticket on the next flight to Philadelphia, please. Tourist.’

The passenger representative consulted his computer. ‘That will be Flight three-o-four. You’re in luck. I have one seat left.’

‘What time does the plane leave?’

‘In twenty minutes. You just have time to board.’

As Tracy reached into her handbag, she sensed rather than saw two uniformed police officers step up on either side of her. One of them said, ‘Tracy Whitney?’

Her heart stopped beating for an instant. *It would be stupid to deny my identity.* ‘Yes ...’

‘You’re under arrest.’

And Tracy felt the cold steel of handcuffs snapped on her wrists.

Everything was happening in slow motion to someone else. Tracy watched herself being led through the airport, manacled to one of the policemen, while passersby turned to stare. She was shoved into the back of a black-and-white squad car with steel mesh separating the front seat from the rear. The police car sped away from the curb with red lights flashing and sirens screaming. She huddled in the back seat, trying to become invisible. She was a murderess. Joseph Romano had died. But it had been an accident. She would explain how it happened. They had to believe her. They *had* to.

The police station Tracy was taken to was in the Algiers district, on the west bank of New Orleans, a grim and foreboding building with a look of hopelessness about it. The booking room was crowded with seedy-looking characters – prostitutes, pimps, muggers and their victims. Tracy was marched to the desk of the sergeant-on-watch.

One of her captors said, ‘The Whitney woman, Sarge. We caught her at the airport tryin’ to escape.’

‘I wasn’t –’

‘Take the cuffs off.’

The handcuffs were removed. Tracy found her voice. ‘It was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill him. He tried to rape me and –’ She could not control the hysteria in her voice.

The desk sergeant said curtly, ‘Are you Tracy Whitney?’

‘Yes. I –’

‘Lock her up.’

‘No! Wait a minute,’ she pleaded. ‘I have to call someone. I – I’m entitled to make a phone call.’

The desk sergeant grunted, ‘You know the routine, huh? How many times you been in the slammer, honey?’

‘None. This is –’

‘You get one call. Three minutes. What number do you want?’

She was so nervous that she could not remember Charles’s telephone number. She could not even recall the area code for Philadelphia. *Was it two-five-one?* No. That was not it. She was trembling.

‘Come on. I haven’t got all night.’

Two-one-five. That was it! ‘Two-one-five-five-five-five-nine-three-zero-one.’

The desk sergeant dialled the number and handed the phone to Tracy. She could hear the phone ringing. And ringing. There was no answer. *Charles had to be home.*

The desk sergeant said, ‘Time’s up.’ He started to take the phone from her.

‘Please wait!’ she cried. But she suddenly remembered that Charles shut off his phone at night so that he would not be disturbed. She listened to the hollow ringing and realized there was no way she could reach him.

The desk sergeant asked, ‘You through?’

Tracy looked up at him and said dully, ‘I’m through.’

A policeman in shirt-sleeves took Tracy into a room where she was booked and fingerprinted, then led down a corridor and locked in a holding cell, by herself.

‘You’ll have a hearing in the morning,’ the policeman told her. He walked away, leaving her alone.

None of this is happening, Tracy thought. *This is all a terrible dream. Oh, please, God, don’t let any of this be real.*

But the stinking cot in the cell was real, and the seatless toilet in the corner was real, and the bars were real.

The hours of the night dragged by endlessly. *If only I could have reached Charles.* She needed him now more than she had ever needed anyone in her life. *I should have confided in him in the first place. If I had, none of this would have happened.*

At 6:00 A.M. a bored guard brought Tracy a breakfast of tepid coffee and cold oatmeal. She could not touch it. Her stomach was in knots. At 9:00 a matron came for her.

‘Time to go, sweetie.’ She unlocked the cell door.

‘I must make a call,’ Tracy said. ‘It’s very –’

‘Later,’ the matron told her. ‘You don’t want to keep the judge waiting. He’s a mean son of a bitch.’

She escorted Tracy down a corridor and through a door that led into a courtroom. An elderly judge was seated on the bench. His head and hands kept moving in small, quick jerks. In front of him stood the district attorney, Ed Topper, a slight man in his forties, with crinkly salt-and-pepper hair cut en brosse, and cold, black eyes.

Tracy was led to a seat, and a moment later the bailiff called out, ‘People against Tracy Whitney’, and Tracy found herself moving towards the bench. The judge was scanning a sheet of paper in front of him, his head bobbing up and down.

Now. Now was Tracy’s moment to explain to someone in authority the truth about what had happened. She pressed her hands together to keep them from trembling. ‘Your Honour, it wasn’t murder. I shot him, but it was an accident. I only meant to frighten him. He tried to rape me and –’

The district attorney interrupted. ‘Your Honour, I see no point in wasting the court’s time. This woman broke into Mr Romano’s home, armed with a thirty-two-calibre revolver, stole a Renoir painting worth half a million dollars, and when Mr Romano caught her in the act, she shot him in cold blood and left him for dead.’

Tracy felt the colour draining from her face. ‘What – what are you *talking* about?’

None of this was making any sense.

The district attorney rapped out, ‘We have the gun with which she wounded Mr Romano. Her fingerprints are on it.’

Wounded! Then Joseph Romano was alive! She had not killed anyone.

‘She escaped with the painting, Your Honour. It’s probably in the hands of a fence by now. For that reason, the state is requesting that Tracy Whitney be held for attempted murder and armed robbery and that bail be set at half a million dollars.’

The judge turned to Tracy, who stood there in shock. ‘Are you represented by counsel?’

She did not even hear him.

He raised his voice. ‘Do you have an attorney?’

Tracy shook her head. ‘No. I – what – what this man said isn’t true. I never –’

‘Do you have money for an attorney?’

There was her employees’ fund at the bank. There was Charles. ‘I ... no, Your Honour, but I don’t understand –’

‘The court will appoint one for you. You are ordered held in jail, in lieu of five hundred thousand dollars bail. Next case.’

‘Wait! This is all a mistake! I’m not –’

She had no recollection of being led from the courtroom.

The name of the attorney appointed by the court was Perry Pope. He was in his late thirties, with a craggy, intelligent face and sympathetic blue eyes. Tracy liked him immediately.

He walked into her cell, sat on the cot, and said, ‘Well! You’ve created quite a sensation for a lady who’s been in town only twenty-four hours.’ He grinned. ‘But you’re lucky. You’re a lousy shot. It’s only a flesh wound. Romano’s going to live.’ He took out a pipe. ‘Mind?’

‘No.’

He filled his pipe with tobacco, lit it, and studied Tracy. ‘You don’t *look* like the average desperate criminal, Miss Whitney.’

‘I’m not. I *swear* I’m not.’

‘Convince me,’ he said. ‘Tell me what happened. From the beginning. Take your time.’

Tracy told him. Everything. Perry Pope sat quietly listening to her story, not speaking until Tracy had finished. Then he leaned back against the wall of the cell, a grim expression on his face. 'That bastard,' Pope said softly.

'I don't understand what they were talking about.' There was confusion in Tracy's eyes. 'I don't understand anything about a painting.'

'It's really very simple. Joe Romano used you as a patsy, the same way he used your mother. You walked right into a set-up.'

'I still don't understand.'

'Then let me lay it out for you. Romano will put in an insurance claim for half a million dollars for the Renoir he's hidden away somewhere, and he'll collect. The insurance company will be after *you*, not him. When things cool down, he'll sell the painting to a private party and make another half million, thanks to your do-it-yourself approach. Didn't you realise that a confession obtained at the point of a gun is worthless?'

'I – I suppose so. I just thought that if I could get the truth out of him, someone would start an investigation.'

His pipe had gone out. He relit it. 'How did you enter his house?'

'I rang the front doorbell, and Mr Romano let me in.'

'That's not his story. There's a smashed window at the back of the house, where he says you broke in. He told the police he caught you sneaking out with the Renoir, and when he tried to stop you, you shot him and ran.'

'That's a lie! I –'

'But it's *his* lie, and his house, and your gun. Do you have any idea with whom you're dealing?'

Tracy shook her head mutely.

'Then let me tell you the facts of life, Miss Whitney. This town is sewn up tight by the Orsatti Family. Nothing goes down here without Anthony Orsatti's okay. If you want a permit to put up a building, pave a highway, run girls, numbers, or dope, you see Orsatti. Joe Romano started out as his hit man. Now he's the top man in Orsatti's organisation.' He looked at her in wonder. 'And you walked into Romano's house and pulled a gun on him.'

Tracy sat there, numb and exhausted. Finally she asked, 'Do you believe my story?'

He smiled. 'You're damned right. It's so dumb it has to be true.'

'Can you help me?'

He said slowly, 'I'm going to try. I'd give anything to put them all behind bars. They own this town and most of the judges in it. If you go to trial, they'll bury you so deep you'll never see daylight again.'

Tracy looked at him, puzzled. 'If I go to trial?'

Pope stood and paced up and down in the small cell. 'I don't want to put you in front of a jury, because, believe me, it will be *his* jury. There's only one judge Orsatti has never been able to buy. His name is Henry Lawrence. If I can arrange for him to hear this case, I'm pretty sure I can make a deal for you. It's not strictly ethical, but I'm going to speak to him privately. He hates Orsatti and Romano as much as I do. Now all we've got to do is get to Judge Lawrence.'

Perry Pope arranged for Tracy to place a telephone call to Charles. Tracy heard the familiar voice of Charles's secretary. 'Mr Stanhope's office.'

'Harriet. This is Tracy Whitney. Is –?'

'Oh! He's been trying to reach you, Miss Whitney, but we didn't have a telephone number for you. Mrs Stanhope is most anxious to discuss the wedding arrangements with you. If you could call her as soon as possible –'

'Harriet, may I speak to Mr Stanhope, please?'

'I'm sorry, Miss Whitney. He's on his way to Houston for a meeting. If you'll give me your number, I'm sure he'll telephone you as soon as he can.'

'I –' There was no way she could have him telephone her at the jail. Not until she had a chance to explain things to him first.

'I – I'll have to call Mr Stanhope back.' She slowly replaced the receiver.

Tomorrow. Tracy thought wearily. *I'll explain it all to Charles tomorrow.*

That afternoon Tracy was moved to a larger cell. A delicious hot dinner appeared from Galatoire's, and a short time later fresh flowers arrived with a note attached. Tracy opened the envelope and pulled out the card. CHIN UP, WE'RE GOING TO BEAT THE BASTARDS. PERRY POPE.

He came to visit Tracy the following morning. The instant she saw the smile on his face, she knew there was good news.

'We got lucky,' he exclaimed. 'I've just left Judge Lawrence and Topper, the district attorney. Topper screamed like a banshee, but we've got a deal.'

'A deal?'

'I told Judge Lawrence your whole story. He's agreed to accept a guilty plea from you.'

Tracy stared at him in shock. 'A *guilty* plea? But I'm not –'

He raised a hand. 'Hear me out. By pleading guilty, you save the state the expense of a trial. I've persuaded the judge that you didn't steal the painting. He knows Joe Romano, and he believes me.'

'But ... if I plead guilty,' Tracy asked slowly, 'what will they do to me?'

'Judge Lawrence will sentence you to three months in prison with –'

'Prison!'

'Wait a minute. He'll suspend the sentence, and you can do your probation out of state.'

'But then I'll – I'll have a record.'

Perry Pope sighed. 'If they put you on trial for armed robbery and attempted murder during the commission of a felony, you could be sentenced to ten years.'

Ten years in jail!

Perry Pope was patiently watching her. 'It's your decision,' he said. 'I can only give you my best advice. It's a miracle that I got away with this. They want an answer now. You don't have to take the deal. You can get another lawyer and –'

'No.' She knew that this man was honest. Under the circumstances, considering her insane behaviour, he had done everything possible for her. If only she could talk to Charles. But they needed an answer now. She was probably lucky to get off with a three-month suspended sentence.

'I'll – I'll take the deal,' Tracy said. She had to force the words out.

He nodded. 'Smart girl.'

She was not permitted to make any phone calls before she was returned to the courtroom. Ed Topper stood on one side of her, and Perry Pope on the other. Seated on the bench was a distinguished-looking man in his fifties, with a smooth, unlined face and thick, styled hair.

Judge Henry Lawrence said to Tracy, 'The court has been informed that the defendant wishes to change her plea from not guilty to guilty. Is that correct?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'Are all parties in agreement?'

Perry Pope nodded. 'Yes, Your Honour.'

'The state agrees, Your Honour,' the district attorney said.

Judge Lawrence sat there in silence for a long moment. Then he leaned forward and looked into Tracy's eyes. 'One of the reasons this great country of ours is in such pitiful shape is that the streets are crawling with vermin who think they can get away with anything. People who laugh at the law. Some judicial systems in this country coddle criminals. Well, in Louisiana, we don't believe in that. When, during the commission of felony, someone tries to kill in cold blood, we believe that that person should be properly punished.'

Tracy began to feel the first stirrings of panic. She turned to look at Perry Pope. His eyes were fixed on the judge.

‘The defendant has admitted that she attempted to murder one of the outstanding citizens of this community – a man noted for his philanthropy and good works. The defendant shot him while in the act of stealing an art object worth half a million dollars.’ His voice grew harsher. ‘Well, this court is going to see to it that you don’t get to enjoy that money – not for the next fifteen years, because for the next fifteen years you’re going to be incarcerated in the Southern Louisiana Penitentiary for Women.’

Tracy felt the courtroom begin to spin. Some horrible joke was being played. The judge was an actor typecast for the part, but he was reading the wrong lines. He was not supposed to say any of those things. She turned to explain that to Perry Pope, but his eyes were averted. He was juggling papers in his briefcase, and for the first time, Tracy noticed that his fingernails were bitten to the quick. Judge Lawrence had risen and was gathering up his notes. Tracy stood there, numb, unable to comprehend what was happening to her.

A bailiff stepped to Tracy’s side and took her arm. ‘Come along,’ he said.

‘No,’ Tracy cried. ‘No, please!’ She looked up at the judge. ‘There’s been a terrible mistake, Your Honour. I –’

And as she felt the bailiff’s grip tighten on her arm, Tracy realised there had been no mistake. She had been tricked. They were going to destroy her.

Just as they had destroyed her mother.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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