

IRA LEVIN'S

SLIVER

(Excerpt)

CHAPTER 1

It was a good Monday morning to begin with—the Hoffmans slugging it out again, Dr. Palme on the phone with a suicidal ex-patient, the Coles' maid getting it off with one of their vibrators, Lesley and Phil meeting in the laundry room—and then it got even better. MacEvoy came into the lobby with a woman who looked like Thea Marshall, the same oval face, the same dark hair. Obviously she was there to look at 20B, repainted the week before.

He watched them ride up in the number-two elevator. She was beautifully built, tall and bosomy, in a good-looking medium-dark suit. Threw a glance his way then stood with a hand on her shoulder bag watching MacEvoy spieling about the central air conditioning and the Poggenpohl kitchen. Thirty-five or -six. A strong resemblance.

He put the 20B living room and bedroom on the masters and watched her come into the foyer and across the bare living room, her heels twanging on the parquet. She looked good from behind too as she went to the window and stood facing out over the lower buildings across Madison. “It *is* a glorious view,” she said, and her voice, melodic and throaty, echoed Thea Marshall’s.

He couldn’t spot a wedding ring but she was probably married or living with someone. He was going to approve her no matter what, of course, assuming she decided she wanted the apartment. He crossed his fingers.

She turned from the window, looked around, smiled. Raised her face. Coming closer, she looked right at him—Thea Marshall looked right at him—knocking him breathless.

“WHAT A LOVELY light,” she said. The shallow glass ceiling dish was sculpted in Art Deco curves. In its chrome center her small raspberry-clad reflection hung face down looking at her.

“Isn’t it?” Mrs. MacEvoy said, coming up beside her. “They’re all through the building. Truly, no expense was spared. It was planned as a condo originally. The rent is a bargain, considering.”

The rent was high but not impossible. She walked back toward the

foyer, turned, surveyed the room—freshly white-painted, twenty by twenty-two, the window wide and large, the floor parquet, a pass-through to the kitchen. . . . If the rest of the apartment was on a par, she would have to make a decision then and there, first shot out of the classifieds. Did she *really* want to leave Bank Street? Go through all the hassle of moving?

She went on to the foyer.

The kitchen was handsome—tan laminate, stainless steel. Fluorescent lighting under the cabinets, appliances trim and foursquare. Good counter space.

The bathroom beyond it was glitzy but fun. Black glass walls, black fixtures, chrome hardware; a large tub, a stall shower. Tube lights by the over-the-sink cabinet; another chrome-centered Art Deco dish in the black glass ceiling, smaller than the one in the living room.

The bedroom, at the end of the foyer, was almost as large as the living room, freshly white too, the left-hand wall all accordion-doored closets. Another wide window at the back, another great view—a slice of the yellowing park and part of the reservoir, the roof of a Gothic mansion on Fifth. More than enough space for the desk against the right-hand wall by the window, with the bed, of course, across from the window and facing it. She sighed at her upside-down self in the ceiling light, at Mrs. MacEvoy waiting in the corner by the door. “This is the first apartment I’ve looked at,” she said.

Mrs. MacEvoy smiled. “It’s a gem,” she said. “I wouldn’t let it slip through my fingers.”

They went back into the foyer. Mrs. MacEvoy opened the linen closet.

She took another look around, thinking about her beautiful apartment on Bank Street with its high ceilings and working fireplace. And its rock club on the corner, its roaches, its two years of Jeff and six years of Alex.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

Mrs. MacEvoy smiled. “Let’s go back to my office,” she said. “You can fill out the application and I’ll put it right in the works.”

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HE GOT ANTSY waiting for Edgar’s call. It didn’t come till late Wednesday afternoon. “Hello, Edgar,” he said, killing both masters, “how are you?”

“Getting on tolerably well. You?”

“Fine,” he said.

“The September statement is on its way; considering how the market’s been behaving, I think you’ll be pleased. About the building: I had Mills speak to Dmitri again about the lobby.”

“Tell him to try it in Russian,” he said. “That piece of marble is still there. I mean those two pieces.”

“I’m sure the new piece is on order, I’ll check and get back to you. And Mrs. MacEvoy has an applicant for twenty B. Did I tell you it was going vacant?”

“Yes,” he said, “you did.”

“Kay Norris. Thirty-nine, divorced. She’s a senior editor at Diadem, the publishing house, so she ought to be nice and quiet. Credit history and references first-rate. Mrs. MacEvoy says she’s good-looking. She has one cat.”

“Is Kay her name or her initial?” he asked. “Her name.”

“Kay Norris.”

“Yes.”

Printing it on the clipboard, he said, “She sounds ideal. Tell Mills to see that everyone takes extra good care of her.”

“I will. There’s nothing else at the moment. . . .”

“Then don’t let me keep you,” he said. Hung up.

Underlined it: KAY NORRIS.

Older than he’d thought, thirty-nine.

Thea Marshall had been forty when she died; he drew a breath, sighed a long sigh.

He switched on the masters and put her living room on 1 and her bedroom on 2, the same as Monday morning. The bedroom glared, sunlight pouring through the bare window. He turned the brightness down. Up a little in the living room.

His hands on the console, he gazed at the two empty rooms on the twin masters. The monitors spread away in multitiered wings, blue-white, flicking with movement here and there.

SHE CALLED ALEX on Thursday night and told him to come get his books.

“Oh God, Kay, I know I keep saying it but this is *really* the worst possible time, the semester starting. You’ll have to keep them just a few

more months.”

“Sorry, I can’t,” she said. “I’m moving a week from tomorrow. Either pick them up or I’m putting them outside. I’ve lost my interest in medieval architecture. God knows why.”

He hadn’t heard about her breakup with Jeff. He sounded genuinely sorry. “It’s *good* you’re moving, it’s a fine idea. Start fresh. What have you found?”

She told him about it. “And it’s on the next-to-the-top floor,” she said. “You can see some of the East River from the living room and a piece of Central Park from the bedroom. Daylight galore. It’s a lovely neighborhood, lots of well-kept old buildings, low ones, and the Cooper- Hewitt Museum is a block away.”

“Thirteen . . . Hundred . . . Madison . . .”—in the musing tone he used before putting her down. “A sliver building? Narrow site?”

She drew breath and said, “Yes . . .”

“Kay, that’s where the man was decapitated in the elevator machinery last winter. Remember? The super? There’ve been three or four deaths there and it’s only a few years old. I remember thinking it’s a pity the address is Thirteen Hundred because it reinforces superstition. That was the lead-in they used on TV, ‘Thirteen hundred is an unlucky number on Madison Avenue’ or some such. Of course you’re—” “Alex,” she said, “I knew about that. Do you think that *I’m* superstitious? Why did you expect me to mention it?”

“I was about to *say*, of course you’re *not superstitious*, but I thought you would want to know anyway, if you didn’t.”

“The books, Alex,” she said.

They agreed he would come pack them on Sunday afternoon and have them removed during the week. They said good-bye, she hung up.

Old Reliable. Negative, negative, negative.

It was awful about the super but the apartment was great nonetheless. She certainly wasn’t going to let Alex and some tabloid-TV newscaster sour her on it. Three or four deaths over three years wasn’t remarkable; two apartments on a floor meant forty altogether, with couples, probably, in most of them—sixty or seventy people. Without counting the turnover. And the staff.

Felice rubbed against her ankle. She picked her up, cradled her on her shoulder, nuzzled purring calico fur. Said, “Ooh Felice, are *you* in for a

surprise! A whole new world. No more roaches to play with. Poor you. At least I hope not. You never know.”

CHAPTER 2

A man in a light blue sweater hurried ahead of her, straight-armed the thick glass door, and leaning, braced it open for her. She was carrying two flat cartons of precious breakables, one atop the other, and the doorman was getting someone with suitcases into the cab she'd gotten out of, so she was grateful. She smiled and thanked the man as she passed his arm. He was young and blue-eyed, good-looking.

A kneeling workman chip-chipped at the marble floor by the entrance to the mailroom. Above the elevator doors, B and 15 glowed in red digits.

The young man had crossed the lobby after her and was standing a few feet away on her right. She side-glanced at him as he looked from one indicator to the other, an I-Heart-New-York bag of groceries hanging from his hand. Reeboks, jeans, the light blue pullover. He was trim and clean-cut, her height, with reddish-brown hair. Twenty-five, twenty-six. He turned and said, “I could take one of those. . . .”

“They're light,” she said. “But thanks.”

He smiled at her—a dynamite smile, wide, bracketed with dimples, his blue eyes vivid.

She smiled and looked at the indicators—B and 15.

“Somebody's holding them,” the very young man said, and turned and went to the side of the lobby, where security monitors glowed screens-upward in a tan marble block banked with greenery. The doorman came in—Terry, husky in his gray uniform, ruddy-faced. She had given him a ten-dollar handshake the last time she was there. He looked sadly at her and said, “Sorry I couldn't get the door.”

“No problem,” she said.

“The guy on fifteen is holding the elevator again,” the young man said.

Terry shook his head on his way to the monitors. “Them Hoffmans . . .” He bent and peered, jabbed a button. Jabbed it longer, turning toward her. “Dmitri is just now putting the pads up in the other car,” he said.

“It’ll be a while before they get here,” she said. “They were stopping to eat.”

He headed for the door. “I’ll buzz you when I see ’em.”

“Mother Truckers!” she called over the cartons.

A howling police car raced up the avenue flinging red and white light as Terry opened the door for a jogger in a hooded sweatsuit. “It’s coming,” the young man said, returning. “Are you moving in?”

“Yes,” she said. “In twenty B.”

“I’m in thirteen A,” he said. “Pete Henderson.”

“Hi,” she said, smiling over the cartons. “Kay Norris.” The jogger was watching her, jogging in place a few yards away; as she glanced at him, he looked toward the chip-chipping and watched that. Rawboned cheeks and a sandy mustache, fortyish.

“Where are you moving *from*?” Pete Henderson asked. “Bank Street,” she said to him. “In the Village.”

The elevator door slid sideward and a schnauzer shot out pawing marble, leashed back by a woman in a blue denim pantsuit, mirror sunglasses, and a white kerchief. The man behind her wore mirror sunglasses and a baseball cap, a bomber jacket, chinos. He caught up with the woman and they hooked fingers as they followed the schnauzer toward the door.

She carried the cartons into the tan leathery elevator and turned around. Pete Henderson touched the 20 and 13 buttons alight, glancing at her. She smiled. He nodded to the jogger, who nodded back, touched 9, faced the closing door. Dark blotches spined his gray sweatsuit.

She looked at the changing number above the door, at the video-camera perched in the corner. Frowned at it. They were useful, of course, surveillance cameras, reassuring even—yet disquieting, with their intimation of unseen watchers.

The door slid open. The ninth-floor hallway was the same as the twentieth and the others she’d seen—a tan Parsons table and a gilt-framed mirror against a black-and-white-checked wall, brown carpet. The hooded man went to the right, to the A apartment, as the elevator door slid closed.

“I know the neighborhood pretty well,” Pete Henderson said, “so if you need any information about stores or anything . . .”

“How’s the market across the street?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said. “These are from there. There’s a Sloan’s over on Lexington that’s cheaper.” The door slid sideward.

“Good to know,” she said as he went out into the thirteenth-floor

hallway—black and white checks, brown carpet.

Turning, he put a hand across the door's edge and smiled his dynamite smile. "Welcome to the building," he said. "I hope you enjoy living here."

Smiling at him over the cartons, she said, "Thank you."

He smiled at her, holding the door open.

She said, "They're getting heavy. . . ."

"Oh God, I'm sorry!" His hand flew; the door slid sideward. "See you!" he said.

"See you," she said as the door slid closed.

She smiled.

Cute, Pete Henderson.

Twenty-seven, tops.

AFTER THE MOVERS had gone and she had put the trash down the chute on the stairway landing, she washed up, poured herself a diet soda, and gave the place an objective survey. In the mellowing late-afternoon light her mix of contemporary and Victorian furniture looked far less grungy than she had anticipated. With the worst pieces replaced—maybe by something Art Deco, tying in with the ceiling lights—and with the cartons gone, books shelved, paintings and curtains hung, with the light and the views and the post-Ice-Age kitchen and bathroom and the *blessed quiet*, the apartment was definitely going to be all-around-better than the old one. And memory-free! The only thing she would miss was the fireplace. Felice would miss it too; she had always come hurrying at the sound of the screen's chain. . . .

She phoned Roxie and offered to pick Felice up that evening, but Roxie was working and wanted to leave things as planned: she would bring her over the next afternoon and help with the unpacking. Maybe they'd have dinner, Fletcher was away. Felice was fine.

She touched base again with Sara and listened to messages, not many and none that couldn't wait till Monday for action. With forecasts promising an ideal Indian-summer weekend, the day had been quiet even for a Friday. She told Sara to go home.

She decided to pick up the groceries she needed before starting to work on the cartons; unpacked the answering machine and connected it to the desk phone, checked it out and left it on. Found her maize sweater and pulled it on over her shirt; fluffed her hair, did a one-two with lipstick and blush in the

bathroom mirror, tucked her wallet and keys in the pockets of her jeans.

A tall balding man in a business suit came into the elevator on seventeen. They nodded and he reached to the lighted L button, stayed his hand, stepped back. On eight a square-jawed woman in dark green came in—stocky, with black bangs and straight hair. She eyed Kay with a week’s worth of mascara and silver-blue eyeshadow, turned and faced the door. Her handbag and high-heeled pumps were snakeskin; the suit looked pricey too. Perfume suffused the air—Giorgio, a major overdose.

In the lobby, she saw Dmitri standing over to the right, his fists on his hips, his shaggy head down. She went to him, following in the Giorgio wake of the woman in green, who went into the mail room.

Dmitri raised his head; she thanked him for helping the move-in go smoothly. She had shaken his hand the other day at double the doormen’s rate.

“Glad,” he said, smiling, apple-cheeked. “I hope all is how you like, Meese Norris.”

“It is,” she said. Looked down at the new span of marble. “That looks good.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “Manager will say is too light. See? All around not-so- light, here *too* light. Will say is no good.” He heaved a sigh.

“It’s awfully close,” she said.

“You think?” His dark eyes looked at her.

“It gets my vote,” she said. “Thanks again.”

“Glad, Meese Norris,” he said. “Please. Any problem, you call.”

She went to the door and pulled it open. The tall man who had been in the elevator waited under the rim of the canopy while the doorman, one she hadn’t seen before, blew his whistle and waved at the traffic coming up the avenue. She held the door open behind her for a gray-haired man in a Beethoven sweatshirt; he caught the door’s edge, looking at her with dark-ringed eyes. Smiling, she turned and went to the corner, Ninety-second and Madison.

(End of excerpt)