Creepers

By

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Ben Johnson had been a subway motorman for thirty years, but nothing had prepared him for what he saw when he opened his compartment door.

The passengers were being attacked. But more than just attacked. They were literally being torn to bloody shreds by creatures who could not be human, yet could be nothing else.

Desperately Johnson locked himself into his compartment. He heard the screams outside fading, to be replaced by an eerie silence. Then, as the buzzing of fear quieted in his brain, he could hear a different sound—a grinding, slurping noise…

…and even as Ben Johnson yanked the throttle to full speed ahead, he knew there could be no escape—not for him or anyone else…

THE ROAR OF THE TRAINS
CANNOT DROWN OUT THE
SCREAMS OF THE VICTIMS

One by one they are disappearing. Men, women, children. Descending into the subways. And never coming out again.

Horror, by whatever twisted beings or unnatural things, is making the grimy New York underground a place of sheer terror. It is prowling the darkness, hiding in the shadows, waiting to strike…

It is waiting to savage its next victim…

It is waiting to commit its next hideous murder…

But soon the waiting will be over, as this shuddering nightmare erupts into the streets of a great city. And there is reason for the entire population to be afraid…
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Jesus Ortiz switched on his transistor radio and an exuberant salsa melody filled the subway token booth where he sat drinking bitter Spanish coffee brought from home. The music made him daydream about San Juan. If he were back in Puerto Rico he’d be drinking beer and playing dominoes with his buddies instead of making change for the locos who rode the subway at this time of night. Or, if he were lucky, he’d be making sweaty love to one of the local girls who found his particular swaggering brand of machismo so appealing.

He lowered the volume with sudden anger. Who was he kidding? The San Juan he dreamed of was for turistas only. Natives didn’t count. He was lucky to be away from there, lucky to be living in a city where he made enough money to buy food and little luxuries like the radio and portable television to keep him company. Jesus Ortiz was no fool. He’d take a lonely job in the New York subway over starvation on the beach any day.

He glanced at his watch. In five minutes, two half-hour episodes of the Mary Tyler Moore show were broadcast back to back. Jesus had a weakness for the good-looking norteamericana who seemed to find the world as confusing a place as he did. She was exactly the kind of woman he dreamed of making his wife and the mother of his children. He shook his head sadly at the thought. If only Mary Tyler Moore were Spanish, the dream would be perfect!

A minute later he turned the television on, but kept the sound off. There was still a minute or two before his favorite sitcom, and the salsa’s jangling rhythm had once again lulled him into a state nearing contentment. Working all night was considered the graveyard shift, but Jesus liked it. It was quiet. It paid more money. And he was working midtown. The poor bastards uptown in Harlem and out in the bad sections of Brooklyn and Queens were sitting targets for any crazy prowling the subway’s darkness. There were enough horror stories of robberies, beatings, even mutilations of token clerks to make Jesus thank God he was working in the IND station at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-third Street. It was a good part of town. A safe part of town-relatively, anyway.

When the Mary Tyler Moore show began, Jesus turned off the radio. It was going to be a peaceful night. The kind of night when nothing happened.

Penny Comstock walked briskly south on Fifth Avenue, heading for the nearest subway station. With each step her resolve not to cry weakened, and by the time she reached Fifty-third Street, tears were streaming down her face. She stationed herself in front of the glamorous Ted Lapidus store and let herself cry very unglamorously. Damn Jack Grenfeld anyway! He was a first-class bastard. She should have recognized it the first time they’d had dinner three months before. Grenfeld was a typical office lothario—a good-looking, snappy dresser with a line that was pure bullshit disguised as sincerity.

Penny sniffed and wiped away a few stray tears. And silly little me fell for it hook, line, and sinker, she thought morosely. It was my own fault. Grenfeld had told her on their first date that he liked her but wasn’t interested in any kind of commitment.

“And what makes you think I want to get involved?” she fired back at him. “Jack, you know, a major problem with today’s men is that they think the responsibility of getting in and out of relationships is entirely theirs!” She sipped her white-wine spritzer and laughed very confidently. “I don’t want any commitments, either.”

“That’s good to hear,” he replied less enthusiastically. “Say, you aren’t one of those women’s-libbers, are you?” His voice betrayed a slightly wounded ego.

“I’m not into labels, Jack. Let me tell you that straight off. I just want Penny Comstock to be happy. And if that means making Jack Grenfeld happy at the same time, so be it.” She shrugged with munificent abandon and that was that.

She slept with Jack that first night as proof positive she stood behind her declaration of independence. And she slept with him two or three times a week from then on, slipping deeper and deeper in love despite his continued warnings. And tonight he’d told Penny he wanted to break it off.

A new wave of despair washed over her and she leaned her forehead against the store window and cried helplessly. It had seemed such a perfect evening—drinks at Harry’s Bar, then dinner at the Russian Tea Room. But it
turned out to be a nightmare. All night long she thought he was going to propose. He proposed, all right—that she get out of his life. His cool rejection caught her off guard and she’d acted like a complete idiot, crying, then calling him names. And to top it off, she’d slapped him across the face and run out of the restaurant.

Well, crying wasn’t going to change anything. She straightened her shoulders and walked to the subway entrance, thinking that a long, hot ride on the E train would end the evening perfectly.

Jesus caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eyes and tensed. When a lone woman came into sight he relaxed. She walked slowly down the few steps opposite him and approached the token booth. She was tall and foxy-black hair, nice tan, and lips painted so red he immediately thought of the hidden parts of her body. She wore a light, gauzy dress that clung to her long legs and outlined her good-sized breasts. Jesus wasn’t a tit man, but he examined them carefully, nevertheless. From the sexy way she swung her hips he guessed this beauty was definitely una mujer bellaca—ready for some hot loving—and he felt a stab of desire in his groin. She wouldn’t be the first customer he’d sweet-talked into bed.

“Two, please.” Penny pushed a twenty-dollar bill under the bulletproof glass that enclosed the upper part of the token booth.

“You got somethin’ smaller?” There was plenty of cash, but Jesus wanted to stall her a little.

“Oh, sure.” She removed the twenty and replaced it with a five.

“It’s hot out there, ain’t it?” She looked blankly at him, then nodded. “It’s nice inside here. Air-conditioned.”

“Lucky for you.” Penny’s voice was heaped with leftover sarcasm from her parting conversation with Jack Grenfeld.

Jesus stared at her a moment, then scowled. She was just another New York bitch. Christ, the class of people he had to deal with! He shoved two tokens under the glass just far enough so Penny had to scrabble for them. Then he poured fifty cents into the trough, folded three one-dollar bills into a long packet, and flicked them so hard they shot past her hand and fell to the floor at her feet. That would show her.

Jesus returned to his television program, forgetting Penny even existed.

Penny hated the subways. She hated the dirt and the noise and the inefficiency of the ailing system. And most of all she hated the people she was forced to ride with, to touch when packed into a crowded car at rush hour. There was a class of New Yorker who seemed to thrive in the subterranean world of the subway. The dark platforms and grim stations were the ideal backdrop for acting out their self-loathing as blatant disregard of the law and violence directed against innocent victims. To Penny, nowhere was it more evident than in the subway that the rabble was quickly, methodically destroying the quality of life in New York City. Still, it was the cheapest and fastest way to travel.

She stepped off the escalator and breathed a sigh of relief—the platform which stretched into the hazy, hot distance toward the Madison Avenue exit was deserted. She was alone. That, at least, was something. Still, just to be safe, she’d station herself near the up escalator after taking a quick look for her tram. She walked to the edge of the platform and leaned out over the tracks, looking down to the right to search for the E. Her feet were well over the yellow danger line, but it hardly mattered. Penny was used to the subways. There’d be plenty of time to step back before the train barreled into the station.

A rustling noise from inside the tunnel to her left startled her. She snapped her head around expecting to see workmen approaching. TA crews often traveled the tunnels late at night repairing sections of track. But there were no lights in the tunnel to indicate men working, only the soft swooshing sound that edged closer and closer to where she stood.

Penny knew there were rats living down here in the filth. Many times she’d seen them scurrying along the tracks, and once on a platform, careening along the wall behind waiting passengers. Rats bothered Penny a lot less than people did, and as the noise became more distinct, she perked up her ears. It was more a rustling sound than anything else, as if something were creeping along the tracks, rubbing against the inside wall of the platform just
below her feet.

The irrational part of Penny wanted her to be afraid, to pull back and to run upstairs. But that was the side of her that had told her to slap Jack’s face in the Russian Tea Room. One dramatic scene was enough tonight! No, she’d stay put. She glanced up and down the platform once again, then over her shoulder to the escalator and back again. She was alone. The sound was rats. Only rats.

Once again Penny edged over the yellow line to survey the dark tunnel. She was tired and hot and she was beginning to wish she’d taken a taxi instead of thinking about saving money. The familiar sound that had kept her company the last few minutes suddenly stopped. Whatever was moving along the roadbed halted directly in front of her, exactly where her shoe tips touched the edge of the platform.

Penny looked down with an almost detached curiosity, not really expecting to see anything, yet somewhere in the back of her mind prepared for the rat scurrying along the tracks. But this time it wasn’t a rodent; no rat was as big as the thing that raised its head before her. At first Penny didn’t recognize as hair the tangled mat of gray that slowly rose up over the edge of the platform. But when she did, her first thought, silly really, was how filthy and wild it was, shooting off in all directions like knotted branches of an ancient tree. The poesy of the image was quickly dispelled as the eyes appeared. The eyes were narrowed against the harsh light of the station and filled with a primitive animal intensity. They were the eyes of a hunter.

Penny wanted to move; she wanted to run down the empty platform, up the stairs and out into the hot New York night. But her reflexes failed. And in that moment of inaction, she was captured by the ankles and held prisoner. Penny screamed and began to fight desperately to maintain her balance; it was futile. With one sharp pull forward, she was toppled. Her head hit the platform with an echoless crack and she lost consciousness.

Moments later, Penny Comstock had been eased off the platform and was being dragged along the rubble-strewn roadbed toward the protective darkness of the subway tunnel.

Jesus thought he heard something. He lowered the television’s volume and listened. Nothing. Then, a scream. A distant woman’s scream. Maybe coming from all the way down two flights on the lowest level. Jesus froze. The hair on the back of his neck bristled as another scream spiraled up to him. Christ, what was he going to do? He wasn’t supposed to leave his post, no matter what. He cautiously opened the booth door and winced as the station’s fetid air invaded his fortress. Another scream rang loud and clear up the escalator. Now Jesus knew what he had to do. The Transit Authority be damned.

He grabbed his keys and a small baseball bat he kept hidden near the door and deserted the token booth. Seconds later, after taking the down escalator two steps at a time, he reached the first level. The platform was vacant. Without a second thought he bolted down the last flight of stairs to the deepest level, steeling himself to encounter a woman passenger being mugged by some punk. Or worse, to find her dead body. But this level was vacant too. No one. Nothing. No signs of a fight.

Fear slowly edged its way into Jesus’ brain. He hadn’t imagined those screams. He’d heard them for real. Then why wasn’t there a woman in trouble? Even the whore with the twenty-dollar bill was gone. Where the hell was she? No train had come in in the last ten minutes. He gripped the baseball bat tighter and backed up to the escalator. Something bad had happened down here tonight. Something he didn’t want to think about.

On his way back to the token booth, Jesus spotted something lying on the dirty floor partially hidden behind a metal girder. He prodded it gingerly with his toe, and when he saw it was a woman’s purse, quickly retrieved it. Besides the usual women’s things inside, there were a wallet and credit cards, all with the name Penelope Comstock. The driver’s license sported a bad photograph of the woman who’d given him such a bad time earlier—the offending twenty-dollar bill was still there along with the rest of the change.

Jesus called the TA police and waited for them to send a man around. Too bad about Señorita Comstock. She was a good-looking woman. With real nice legs. If she’d stopped for a few minutes to be friendly, none of this would have happened to her. Whatever did happen. Jesus shook his head. Women! He’d never figure them out if he lived to be a thousand.
He pocketed Penny's twenty dollars, leaving the three singles to make it look good. Then he tossed her purse onto the counter and returned to Mary Tyler Moore.
September 3, Labor Day
Detective Frank Corelli of the New York City transit police sipped the first cup of coffee of the morning and snifffed loudly. How the hell had he caught a cold when the weather the past three weeks had broken all heat records? Jesus! A sudden sneeze caught him off guard, and the explosive exhalation scattered a handful of week-old reports onto the grimy floor of the oversized broom closet that was laughingly called headquarters.

“Hey, Frank, there’s an easier way to deal with reports. Watch.” Francis Xavier Quinn-just “Quinn" unless you wanted your nose broken-Scooped up the papers and dumped them unceremoniously into the wastepaper basket next to Corelli’s desk. “That way they don’t create a public nuisance, if you get my drift.” Quinn perched himself on the edge of the desk and flashed a warm smile. At thirty-five he was four years older than Corelli, but his freckled Irish good looks and his irrepressible sense of humor most often made him seem the younger of the two detectives.

“I appreciate your help, Quinn, but how do we explain missing TA documents to Dolchik?” Captain Stan Dolchik was their immediate superior. Corelli knew Quinn agreed with his appraisal that Dolchik was a pompous, ignorant bastard.

“Oh, yeah, Dolchik.” Quinn ran his hand through his fiery red hair and thought a moment. “You wouldn’t have to explain. Dolchik is sure to find them. You know, rooting around in garbage is his favorite hobby. There’s only one place to put the reports where he’ll never think to look if you really want them to be missing.” Quinn retrieved the papers, squared them neatly on the desk, and dropped them into Corelli’s “in” basket. “The prick will never find them there.”

Corelli cracked up. “You know, Quinn, without you around here, life would be a lot duller.”

“And without you around, Detective Corelli, life would be a lot simpler.” Quinn deflected the compliment in his usual bantering way, but he was blushing furiously. He’d liked Corelli from their first handshake a couple of years before. Since then the feeling had grown into a solid friendship. Corelli was straight-arrow, an okay guy who forswore the bullshit that so many TA cops-particularly the detectives-handed out. But then, most of the other guys hadn’t become cops for the reason Frank had. Frank Corelli was a man with a mission, and Quinn respected him for it.

“Face it, Quinn, life would be a whole lot simpler all around if we just got out of this rotten job altogether.” His voice suddenly grew serious; it was time to get down to business. “What’s been going down since I got sick?” Four days out of work was a record.

“The usual shit—a spate of purse snatchings, a couple of assaults, and someone tried to knock over the Eighty-first Street token booth.” Quinn yawned with exaggerated ennui.

“So…”

“So Lou Jacobs was checking out the john for perverts. When he returned to the platform, he caught the kid red-handed.”

Corelli shook his head. “Won’t they ever learn?”

“Times are rough, Frank. Hunger and anger is a bad combination.”

Anger. For a moment Corelli tasted the bitter gall that signaled the presence of his personal demon. Five years he’d lived with a blinding rage. Christ, was it really that long since Jean was taken from him? It hardly seemed possible. Five years. When the hell would the pain ever go away? Or would it ever?

“Lots of people are hungry and even more are angry, Quinn, but they don’t go around ripping off their neighbors. Most of the easy targets in this city don’t have much money themselves. Christ, when I think of the number of old ladies these punks manhandle to get a few bucks for the movies…”

“Yeah,” Quinn replied listlessly. He’d heard Corelli’s sermons too many times before to pay much attention now.
“So, how ya feeling?” He veered the conversation toward a safer topic.


“You and an army. The City Council should change the name of Labor Day to Sitting Duck Day.”

“Did Dolchik get in any extra men?”

“Three. But with our roster down by four, that still makes us one short.”

“Who’s not here?”

“DiBattista and Amory are on vacation. Harper’s still in the hospital and Valeriani is still… out.” Quinn pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and began assailing his front teeth. “Need I say more?”

“I’ve heard too much already.” Corelli’s stomach began to twist into a tight knot. “How the hell can we do a good job when we’re understaffed? Don’t those fucks downtown realize the city is being taken over by the yahoos?”

“Tell it to the Marines, Frank.” Quinn slid off the desk. “Glad to see you’re back.” He ambled away to a desk he shared with three other cops.

Corelli stared after him a moment, then shook his head. Jesus, there I go again, spouting off about bureaucratic stupidity. No wonder Quinn beat it. He should get some kind of special recognition from the TA for putting up with two years of my shit. Still, there was a lot to complain about—two cops on vacation when they should be at work. Labor Day is a tough one. The summer is over for most people. Kids are getting ready to go back to school. Everyone is restless, looking for that one last good time before settling down to work for the fall and winter. For some it would be the last blowout-ever. If there were more cops there’d be less trouble. But two men were on vacation, one was in the hospital, and the other was “out”—on suspension.

Corelli turned his attention to the reports Quinn had filed so neatly, but after a minute of rereading the same sentence over and over, he gave in to the uneasiness picking at his brain. This time anger was overshadowed by simple, direct fear. Chick Harper was in the hospital with a bullet wound in the chest. It could have been worse. He was lucky. Still, he had a collapsed lung and a fractured rib and that was no picnic. Frank shook his head in wonder at the ease with which he accepted the ugly status quo of life as a cop in New York. “Lucky” meant being shot by some kid who’d probably never fired a pistol before. A pro would have offed Harper without batting an eye.

That was lucky? It was lucky to live in a city-in a society-where handguns were as available as a pack of cigarettes, and where they were used indiscriminately against innocent people? That’s what scared Corelli. Not that he might be the next one gunned down, but that the basic fabric of the society was unraveling. Every day it became clearer to him that people no longer held themselves—or anybody else, for that matter—in reverence. Dammit, it was the jungle reclaiming the land in an insidious and highly sophisticated form.

And what happened to Detective Joe Valeriani was the lousiest form of that creeping erosion. He’d been caught shaking down the food and newsstand owners at the Forty-second Street access to the crosstown shuttle. It was penny-ante stuff, five bucks a week to be there when help was needed. And it always was. In that particular station the churning rivers of the city’s low life formed a confluence with the homeward-bound middle-class office workers. Some punk was always trying to rip people off, and it was the TA police’s duty to protect them. Yet somehow it became Valeriani’s aim to rip off the very people he was paid to protect. To Corelli Joe was no better than a punk looking for quick cash for a fix. There was no honor in being a punk-less in being a cop gone bad.

Corelli had known Valeriani in police academy. He was honest then; a good cop. Knowing that scared the shit out of Frank. What was to guarantee that he wouldn’t go looking for his palm to be greased one day? Being a TA cop was a thankless job—both financially and spiritually. And it was getting tougher every day. The loss of integrity was a slow-moving, patient process. Corelli often wondered if Joe had felt himself going rotten, or if he just woke up one morning to discover that “us” and “them” had simply become “us.”

Half an hour later Frank had read the reports and forgotten most of them. Quinn was right; it was the usual run-of-the-mill crap that plagued the subway system day after day, year after year. Nothing special. Nothing different.
Except for that one MP-missing person. What the hell was her name? That report was right on top. Penelope Comstock. Her friends probably called her Penny. Nice name. Like Jean was a nice name. He quickly shook off the thought. Not now. There was no time for reliving that night now. He lit a cigarette, and when he still found himself thinking of Jean, headed for the john.

Once inside the tiny, airless room, Corelli flicked the butt into the toilet, stretched, and stared at himself in the cracked mirror over the permanently stained porcelain sink. He’d lost a couple of pounds from being sick, but he’d needed to. Angel’s doughnuts, unlike the coffee, were something special, and two a day, week after week, had begun to take their toll. Corelli worked out three times a week at a West Side gym, but age and the erratic diet of a bachelor were giving his body-building stiff competition. Even so, he was in good shape. He flexed in the mirror, and as the hard definition of his chest and biceps pushed against his shirt, he smiled with satisfaction.

Frank Corelli stood just over six-feet-two and tried to weigh no more than two-ten. He was big, but agile; muscular, but lithe. And he looked less formidable than he actually was. That was good. Punks usually thought they could topple him, and by the time they discovered it was the wrong thing to try, it was too late.

And best of all, Corelli didn’t look like a cop. Quinn called his buddy a handsome sonofabitch. His dark complexion, inky black hair, and piercing blue eyes combined to create a striking appearance; a moody guy who could get deeply involved-when he wanted to. Corelli’s facial impassivity was as much a part of his professional equipment as his badge. But the rare glimmer of fear or love or compassion that flickered in his eyes told that, like the old saw, they were the windows to his soul.

A thick, perfectly maintained mustache capped his heavy upper lip. The facial hair was to disguise his mouth. It was the mouth of a man who would last exactly one minute in the rotten world of subway crime, the mouth of a man who appreciated the better things in life, the mouth of a man who cared deeply about other people… the mouth of a lover.

The bathroom door flew open and bounced against the wall. Corelli instinctively braced himself as his right hand sprang across to his left hip, scant inches below his shoulder holster. His breathing grew shallow, and surprise turned to readiness.

The man blocking the doorway hadn’t missed Frank’s reflex actions. He smiled at Corelli’s hand, then let his eyes travel slowly to his face. “Shit, Frank, I’m just here to take a leak. The way you act, you’d think I was checking to see you weren’t playing with yourself.” Stan Dolchik smirked at the joke and edged into the room. Corelli relaxed and started for the door. “Don’t let me scare you out. You combing your hair or something?”

“Something,” Corelli replied tartly. In his book, Captain Dolchik was a perfect example of a man who had risen far beyond his level of competence. He was ignorant, prejudiced, and looked like a sausage with too much filling for the size of the casing.

Dolchik positioned himself in front of the urinal and kept talking. “Glad to see you’re back after being so sick. I never thought a cold was much to sneeze about. Guess you did, huh?”

They both knew nothing short of pneumonia could keep Corelli from work, but needling was Dolchik’s style. “Next to pig ignorance, the worst thing that can happen to a man is a summer cold, Captain,” Corelli replied.

“You’re a real pisser, Corelli.” Dolchik bellowed with laughter. “I never knew a man with a college degree didn’t think he was king shit.” He gave himself a few exaggerated shakes, zippered up, then flushed. “Round here, brains is just something to get blown out of your head.” He moved to the sink and began washing his hands.

Corelli watched him with contempt. Rednecks like Dolchik still got under his skin. “What’s the story on this M.P.?”

“Which missing person are you talking about?”

“She was snatched from the Fifty-third Street IND.”

“Oh, that snatch.” Dolchik paused, realized he’d inadvertently made a joke, then bellowed with laughter once
“Don’t take no degree to be clever, Corelli. That’s the problem with you guys.”

“Cut the shit Stan, I’m not interested in your sophomoric prejudices.” Using Dolchik’s first name was a sure sign Corelli meant business. “What’s been done on it?”

“Nothing’s been done on it, that’s what’s been done on it,” he mocked. “It was late, it was hot. The token clerk said she’d been crying. Probably ‘cause she didn’t get laid. So she goes down into the station, gets spooked by something, and takes off.” He dried his hands, wadded the soggy paper towels into a ball, then tossed them into the basket “You want to make something of it?”

“She left her purse on the platform.”

“So?”

“So, it was full. Wallet comb, lipstick.”

Dolchik was clearly becoming annoyed by the conversation. “What’s bugging your ass, Corelli? I’m a busy man.”

“The report says the clerk investigated her screams. When he got down there, she was gone, but the purse wasn’t. And you want me to believe she got scared and ran away leaving the one thing women value most, a purse? It’s bullshit, Captain, and you know it.” Dolchik would cut as many corners as possible to make life easy for himself.

“I don’t know nothing, except what the investigating officer reported. He checked the roadbed, he checked the stations, he checked the goddamned cracks in the walls. She was gone. Kaput! You’re the one who’s full of bullshit, Corelli.”

“I want to pursue this further.”

“Forget it.”

“Has anyone tried to contact her since that night? Has she called in to claim her purse?”

Dolchik’s face reddened. “You understand English? I said forget it! The purse is already down at Jay Street. If she wants it back, she can go get it.” He pushed past Corelli and opened the door. “The station was quiet with you out sick, Corelli. No one busting ass, no loudmouth questions, no smart-ass answers. I like it that way, so don’t push me.” He took two long steps away, then turned back. “We got real business today; none of this disappearing-lady shit. So be in my office in ten minutes. And try to act like a cop instead of a drugstore cowboy, okay?”

Corelli watched fat-ass Dolchik waddle across the office and into his glassed-in cubicle. He was the kind of cop who gave cops a bad name with the public. Corelli headed back to his own desk. Dolchik didn’t have enough brains to come in out of the rain, and he was a prick, to boot. But he was honest. And for that reason Corelli was almost able to forgive him the rest.

There were four of them in Dolchik’s office for the meeting: the captain and three plainclothes detectives- Corelli, Quinn, and Hector Hernandez, HH to his friends and co-workers. The cramped office was crowded and Dolchik’s cheap cigar polluted what little air there was with thick strata of gray smoke. Dolchik sat behind a desk waist-deep in unfiled reports, TA memoranda, and old copies of the Daily News. Once a week he usually got a rookie to tidy up, but they were shorthanded this week and the room remained a pigsty. Several filing cabinets against the wall and two scarred and torn naugahyde chairs reserved for official visitors were submerged in the same effluvia. The only personal touch in Dolchik’s office was a carefully hidden collection of photographs from Hustler magazine of nude women apparently preparing for gynecological examinations.

“We’ve got trouble, men,” Dolchik informed the group importantly as he blew a torrent of acrid smoke toward the ceiling. “That cocksucker Willie Hoyte has been onto the press boys again. I wish someone would shut that smart-ass nigger up.” His eyes darted to Hernandez for a second to see if the racial slur would have any effect. HH was of Mexican-American descent and considered himself more white than black.

“What’s the problem with Hoyte now?” HH asked, not batting an eyelash. When he was fourteen years old, he’d
killed a pig just like Dolchik who was trying to rape his sister. But that was back in Texas. And it was many years ago.

“The same thing’s always the problem with him. He’s media-happy. Hoyte’s called every newspaper in town complaining that we’re hassling him. West Side News is sending someone to follow him and his goddamned crew of pickaninnies today. We’ve got to be on our toes.”

“West Side News is nothing more than a pisshole in a snow bank,” Quinn threw in cheerfully. “There’s nothing to fear from them.”

“Don’t be so sure, Francis,” Dolchik said with a sneer. “If they come up with something juicy, the other rags will start sniffing around and pretty soon it’ll be last June all over again.” He sucked on his cigar a few times, discovered it was dead, then threw it disgustedly into an ashtray. “I want you three to keep on your toes today.”

“Such as?” Corelli asked, knowing the captain hated Hoyte because he’d labeled him “a dumb flatfoot” in a New York magazine interview.

“Such as don’t let the reporter think we don’t like Willie and his Sarrybrus.” Dolchik purposely rumbled the pronunciation of the group’s name.

“That’s Cerberus, Captain; Dogs of Hell,” Corelli corrected him. “Hoyte named his group after the three-headed dog that guards the entrance to Hades.” An appropriate name for a group of civilians who volunteered their time to protect subway passengers from crime. “It’s also the name of a popular comic book.”

“I know why it’s called Cerberus,” Dolchik yelled, “And I don’t care if it’s a three-headed prick that guards the entrance to the tightest twat in New York. Willie Hoyte and his Dogs of Hell have caused enough trouble for us already.”

“Dogs of Hell” was the informal name for Cerberus the media had concocted back in June when they sprang to national prominence after a clash with the TA cops. The thirty-five-member Dogs of Hell had been formed the year before as a local uptown group dedicated to protecting elderly subway riders from harm. Its founder, Willie Hoyte, knew as well as anyone in Harlem that many of New York’s muggings were done to blacks by blacks right on their own home turf. The old black credo of slicking together and protecting your own no longer even received lip service in the city’s ghettos. Uptown, midtown, downtown, it was every man for himself. People of every race, creed, color, and age were targets for the malcontents the city churned out like spillage from a defective sewerage plant. The police were helpless to stop the mounting subway crime, so Hoyte decided to lend them a hand.

Dogs of Hell was so successful uptown that Hoyte decided to expand. The members, in their green vinyl windbreakers emblazoned with a snarling tri-headed dog in white, soon became a common sight in the subway system. And the TA cops began to get angry. They didn’t know what to make of this para-police quasi-vigilante group that had sprung from nowhere, eschewing approval from both the city government and the police. Dogs of Hell wasn’t doing anything illegal, but they began to make it look like the ranks of the TA police were composed of a bunch of doddering bozos who couldn’t deal with crime in the subways.

In June two of its members were subduing a young Hispanic purse-snatcher when three TA cops intervened. In the ensuing melee, the mugger escaped and both Dogs of Hell sustained a beating that required treatment in a local hospital emergency room. The cops claimed they hadn’t seen the signature jackets, and the injured men claimed the cops singled them out in an overt act of police brutality. The story caught the eye of local New York newspapers and magazines, and within two weeks Willie Hoyte and Dogs of Hell were front-page news. National coverage followed soon after.

“This Hoyte is nothing but a glory hound,” Dolchik continued, “and he’s dangerous. I don’t want any trouble today. It’s Labor Day and the shit is going to hit the fan, so let’s not let the reporters get anything to report, okay?”

The three detectives stared at him in silence.

“Quinn, I want you to stay at the Circle here. There’ll be a lot of downtown traffic on the way to the beach. A lot of the boys will be working the crowds looking for marks.” Columbus Circle was a main interchange for the Eighth
Avenue IND and the Seventh Avenue IRT lines. The station was a hodgepodge of shops, greasy spoons, and service areas that stretched under four city blocks.

“Hernandez, I want you on the AA shuttling from 125th Street to Fourteenth.” This run was where the most trouble was likely to occur today. To HH and his cohorts it was known with little affection as the “shit chute.” Being assigned to it was generally considered punishment.

“And last-and least-Corelli. You stick by Hoyte’s side all day. I want you there when he’s talking to the reporter, when he’s on the move, when he shakes off the last drop of piss after taking a leak. Today, you’re his shadow. Got it?”

Corelli only smiled. Dolchik needed an articulate spokesman to deal with the press. It was the only time the captain deferred to Corelli’s education.

“Oh, now get moving. The system’s crawling with blues so there’s plenty of help today.” Mentioning cops in uniform was pure bullshit, but Dolchik sometimes forgot who he was talking to and his official persona took over. “And, Corelli, if that shithead Hoyte as much as drops a gum wrapper on the platform, I want you to pinch him. He’s nothing but trouble.”

With a deft flick of the wrist, Willie Hoyte sent a buckwheat pancake sailing toward the kitchen ceiling. It arched lazily just high enough so he had to glance up to track it, made one midair turn, then floated down, where it hit the edge of the frying pan and split in two. One half of the maimed flapjack slid back into the bubbling butter of the skillet, the other half oozed down into the stove’s burner well, where it was immediately incinerated by the gas flame.

“Shеееit,” Willie howled in disgust as he dragged the smoking remnant from the burner. He’d made flapjacks perfectly a thousand times before, but Dolchik sometimes infuriated him. Not only was his jerkoff second-in-command, Ted Slade, nowhere to be found on this important morning, but he was going to be late to meet his men if he didn’t haul ass out of the house soon. But first Willie wanted his momma to have a good breakfast. Of all the people in the world who worked hard for their daily bread, Celia Hoyte topped the list.

He turned off the burner and discarded the pancake. The three warming in the oven would have to do. With the care and skill of a downtown caterer, Willie removed the plate and centered it on the tray set out on the kitchen table. His eyes scanned the setup-knife, fork, spoon, linen napkin, a half-grapefruit with brown sugar, flapjacks, a small pitcher of real maple syrup, and a bud vase with a single rose—it was all there. Momma was sure to like it. If nothing else, it meant today was a holiday, and that meant she didn’t have to work.

As he washed his hands, Willie tried vainly to avoid the small photograph of his father that confronted him from the windowsill over the sink. It was no use. Ralph Hoyte’s brilliant smile and flashing eyes were too provocative. Willie finally gave in and began the ritual of staring his father down in absentia. Everyone said Willie was the spitting image of Ralph, but he didn’t see any likeness. Ralph was broad and well over six feet; Willie was slender and barely five-eleven. Ralph’s skin was as dark as pitch, a throwback to his African ancestors; Willie was so light-skinned he was embarrassed that in his face could be read the proof of two hundred years of mistreatment by-and interbreeding with-whites. Were it not for the same cat-green eyes and the ingratiatingly sly smile, Willie and Ralph Hoyte were as opposite as night and day. More so now that Ralph was doing time for armed robbery.

Willie shook his head in disgust and quickly dried his hands, suspecting he’d never forgive his father. Not that Willie didn’t understand the toll poverty can take on a man’s pride, but shit, he’d risked not only his own future but also Willie’s and, more important, Celia’s when he took part in the robbery of that liquor store. And he’d lost the gamble. He’d been caught less than an hour after the heist in the back room of the same bar on Lenox Avenue where the plans for the job had been made. No, Willie could never forgive his father—because Ralph hadn’t confided in his son before fucking up their lives. And that made Willie feel insignificant. It was a judgment he was still trying to repeal.

“What’s all this, Willie?” Celia asked as he entered her room. She’d been dozing, dreaming of the day Ralph would return.
“Breakfast in bed. What else?” He waited expectantly by the bed as she pulled herself up and fluffed the pillows.

“Boy, sometimes I wonder ’bout you. Sometimes I suspect you ain’t all there.” She tapped a finger mischievously on her right temple.

“Don’t take brains to cook, Momma, just a skillet and some grease.” He began to fidget. A fourth call to Ted Slade had been fruitless. Something was wrong; Slade was a good man, even though he was white. “Come on, Momma, let me put this down so’s I can get goin’.

Bolstered by three pillows, Celia lay back, tingling with pleasure at the attention her only son paid to her. There was a time a while back, just after Ralph went away, when it looked like Willie would be joining his daddy behind bars. Those tense months after Ralph’s sentencing, something got into Willie. He started goin’ bad. It was as if whatever malaise had infected his father was spreading throughout the household. Overnight Willie became a problem and Celia prayed to God to deliver him from his troubles. Then, just as quickly as it’d begun, it was over. Willie had his boys riding the subways and her prayers were answered. Seeing him now all dressed up in khaki slacks, a powder-blue dress shirt open at the neck to display the gold cross on a chain he was never without, and the running shoes he seemed to live in, Celia found it hard to imagine she’d ever worried about him at all.

“You did all this by yourself?” She suppressed a smile. It wasn’t the first or even second time he’d done exactly this.

“Me? You kiddin’?” He balanced the tray on the covers over her legs. “I jes’ told the cook to assemble your favorite eats.”

“You’re a good boy, Willie. Since your father left us, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Her voice faltered for a second, but she quickly recovered. “Who else would serve an old lady breakfast in bed?”

“A woman’s good-looking as you could have her pick of men. You know that, Momma.”

“Now, don’t go spoilin’ it, Willie.” She dug her spoon into the grapefruit and took a bite. There was a time right after Ralph went away that Willie tried to talk her into getting a divorce, then remarrying. She refused to discuss it, and when he insisted, she’d slapped his face for the first time in her life.

“You got somethin’ to do today, Willie?”

“I’m jes’ leavin’. Some reporter’s goin’ to meet me downtown and tag along all day.”

“Be careful, son.”

“Momma, no one wants Willie Hoyte to stay in one piece more than Willie Hoyte himself.” He leaned over the bed and kissed her forehead. “You have a good day.”

“Honey, I already have.” She winked and dislodged a joyful tear.

Fifteen minutes later Willie stood on the south-bound 135th Street IND platform waiting for the AA train to arrive. The station was crowded with knots of people headed for the beach at Coney Island. Everyone seemed to be in a constant state of motion as they impatiently killed time until the local train arrived. Not Willie. He stood with his back rigid, his legs spaced wide apart, and his hands clasped behind his back. And despite the staggering heat and humidity, he’d donned his Dogs of Hell jacket. This was his badge of honor, his claim to fame, the proof that Ralph Hoyte’s son was somebody, after all.

As the AA roared into the station and came to a screeching halt, Willie had an overpowering premonition of danger. It was just like the feeling of dread that had gripped him the night his father was arrested. The train doors opened and the throngs pushed forward into the crowded car, but Willie remained motionless. He wanted to step back, to edge his way out of the dark gloom of the subway into the bright sunlight and the hot summer day. The doors began to close and Willie darted inside, stationing himself as planned at the center door of the fifth car. This was the position of preeminence, of power. This is where Willie Hoyte and only Willie Hoyte stood.
But as the train rattled into the dark tunnel, Willie’s fear began to grow.

By the time the AA pulled into the 103rd Street station there were seven men from the Dogs of Hell elite corps guarding the train. He’d picked up James, Tico, and Henry at 125th Street; Sam and Willie H at 116th Street; Buster at 110th. Miguel and Ernesto would be waiting on this platform, and Ted Slade, if he dared show his white face, at Ninety-sixth Street.

Willie scanned the station, cheered by the sight of his men stationed outside their assigned cars. Somewhere in the crowd Miguel and Ernesto were making their way toward the first and last cars, and that would do it for this ten-car train. Except for the sixth car—the second-in-command’s position. Slade’s place. Another shiver of fear coursed through Willie’s body, but he quickly shook it off as the doors closed and the train began to move.

A moment later Willie looked up and found Miguel Esperanza approaching him. Miguel was almost too short to be a Dog of Hell, but his body was solid muscle and he looked formidable, if not tall. He would have been handsome at twenty had his nose not been broken and rebroken in the numerous street fights that typified his life before meeting Willie Hoyte. Like so many of the Dogs of Hell, Miguel found that his belonging gave some meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. But none of that mattered now. Esperanza was AWOL from his post.

“What the hell you doin’ here, Miggie?” Willie barked incredulously. “Your place is up front.” First Slade, now this.

“I gotta talk to you, Willie. There’s trouble.”

Willie pulled himself taller. “There’d better be a shitload of trouble or your ass is grass. What is it?”

“Slade’s gone.”

“What you mean, gone?” Willie swallowed hard, tasting fear. “You crazy. I talked to him last night.”

“I was with him last night,” Miguel assured Willie. “We was out ridin’ around—”

“In uniform?”

“Shit, no, man. I know it’s against the rules.” Miguel wiped a thick layer of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “We was on the Seventh Avenue express, just shooting the rails between Ninety-sixth and Forty-second. Everything was cool till Slade started staring out the window each time we pulled into Ninety-sixth. Shit, Willie, he looked scared.”

“Scared?”

Miguel nodded. “I asked him what was going down, but he wouldn’t say dick, jes’ kept looking out them windows… said he seen somethin’ outside on the tracks. He got crazy and stood right up front and put his hands like this over the window”-Esperanza leaned his head against the door’s window and shielded his eyes from the inside light-”and all the time he was just staring, sayin’ he saw somethin’.”

“Saw what, man?”

“I don’t know. He jumped off at Ninety-sixth and ran to the end of the platform, you know, at the Ninety-third Street exit, and peers into the tunnel like someone was holdin’ a bag of money up to his eyes. When he said he was goin’ on in, I left.”

“You know, Miguel, if I ever hear of you smokin’ reefer or drinkin’, you’ll be out so fast you won’t know what hit you.” Willie knew he neither drank nor smoked.

“Shit, man, I’m tellin’ you Slade got into some kinda trouble last night. I called him when I got home, and he didn’t answer.”
“There was no answer this morning, either.”

“There was no answer this morning, either.”

“See? You shoulda seen the look in his eyes. He was scared shitless.”

The train began to slow at Ninety-sixth Street. It was the perfect time to hustle Miguel back to his post. Willie had some heavy thinking to do. He didn’t like it at all. No way. One of his best men sees something in a tunnel, goes to investigate, and ends up gone. How? For a second Willie thought of Captain Dolchik. He hated all the Dogs of Hell almost as much as he hated Willie personally. It would be just like Dolchik to arrange a little trouble to discredit him and his men. Say, lure one of them onto the tracks and then…What?

“You get up front where you belong, Esperanza. I’ll handle Slade later; the press is waiting up ahead. Did you tell anyone else what happened last night?”

“I wanted to talk to you first,” Miguel said proudly.

“Good thinkin’.” Willie patted the younger man on the shoulder. “Keep it that way. Now, get goin’.”

The doors opened and Miguel spilled out with the other passengers. He paused for a second, turned back to Willie about to say something, thought better of it, shrugged, and disappeared down the platform to the first car.

Ninety-sixth Street came and went with no sight of Ted Slade.
Corelli made his way through the holiday crowds in the Fifty-ninth Street station. As he sidestepped a Puerto Rican family with children, radios, umbrellas, and beach chairs in tow, he realized he no longer saw people anymore, only crowds. This depersonalization was more self-defense than callousness. Since Jean’s death he’d shied away from all involvements of any kind. There were no women in his life save an occasional and usually unsatisfactory one-night stand that began in a crowded First Avenue bar and ended with a phone number and a promise to call that was as worthless as a thirty-five-cent subway token. Jean had been everything to Corelli and if she were still alive he wouldn’t be underground every day trying to keep order in a city where the law was a joke and where human life was frequently no more than an obstacle between some punk and whatever he craved at that moment. If Jean were still alive.

But Jean was dead.

Corelli was waiting for Willie Hoyte. He was also waiting for Jed Thornbeck, the reporter from West Side News. Moments later a group of black kids ran screaming up the stairs. Corelli watched them closely until they were out of the station. Then he picked up another target—a young white man dressed in a pale tan summer suit, blue button-down oxford-cloth shirt, and red tie. He looked like he was searching for an ivy-covered wall to lean on. He paused, caught Corelli’s eye, then moved directly toward him.

“Mr. Thornbeck?” Corelli correctly guessed. “Name’s Corelli, TA police.” He shook Thornbeck’s hand. “Willie Hoyte should be along any minute.”

“Are you the official police spokesman?”

“The department has nothing official to say, Mr. Thornbeck.”

Thornbeck nodded. “Even I know you and the Dogs of Hell don’t see eye to eye on most everything.”

Corelli smiled at Thornbeck’s ingenuousness. The boy was in the wrong business; he should have been pushing ladies’ toiletries door to door. “I suppose by ‘you’ you mean the department.” Thornbeck’s eyes widened in agreement. “Keeping tabs on a quasi-police force like Dogs of Hell has its problems, as you well know. For one thing, they don’t report to anyone but their own leader.”

This kid has been watching too much television, Corelli thought. Or too many old “ace reporter” movies. “Without official recognition, those kids have no more power than anyone else in the subway. And the punks know it Hoyte has been lucky so far. No one’s been seriously hurt. There have been a few confrontations, of course, but one of these days the Dogs of Hell are going to run into a nut who doesn’t want to get pushed around by some junior G-men. And they’re going to get their balls cut off.”

“Sounds like you care about them, Detective Corelli,” the reporter editorialized with wide-eyed innocence.

“Of course I care, you schmuck,” Corelli exploded. “You think I’d be doing this lousy job if I didn’t?”

Shit, he’d blown it. He’d only been talking five minutes and already he’d mouthed off, after he’d promised himself to keep a lid on his anger. But stupidity always got the best of him. Whether it came from the babylips of some young reporter or from between the snarling teeth of one of the misfits who used the subway as a playground, stupidity touched a core of rage in Corelli that had formed at the trial of Tommy Washington, the punk who’d killed Jean.

“Why’d you do it, Tommy?” the prosecutor asked.

He shrugged and rolled his eyes.

“Come on, son. You don’t just stab someone for no reason at all.”
“She wouldn’t give me her purse. I asked her real nice and she said no.”

“So you stabbed her?”

“She began screamin’. I don’t likes to hear womens scream. They’s supposed to be quiet.”

“So you had to make her quiet.”

Tommy Washington nodded.

“And you stabbed her?”

“It was like stickin’ my blade in butter.”

Stupidity. Dumb, animal stupidity. A conscienceless following of an inner voice that says nothing matters but I want, I want, I want.

The Dogs of Hell marched up the stairs and across the station in a tight pack, Hoyte at the forefront. Though they didn’t walk in unison, there was an air to their demeanor and carriage that gave the impression they were at least thinking in tandem. Each one wore the green signature jacket which, in the heat, looked noticeably out-of-place. Hoyte’s eyes fixed on Corelli and he quickened his pace.

“Morning, Corelli,” Willie said with a totally insincere smile. “Glad to see the TA’s so efficient when the media are around.” He maneuvered his way between the two men and turned his back on the detective. “Mr. Thornbeck? I’m Willie Hoyte.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Hoyte.”

For a moment Willie’s eyes widened at the formality. After a quick appraisal of the suit and tie he relaxed; this turkey wasn’t smart enough to jive Willie Hoyte. “Let’s just make it ‘Willie,’ okay? And these are some of my men.” He half-turned and proudly read the roll call of the elite corps which was always assembled to meet members of the press.

“Very impressive,” Thornbeck commented as he finished writing each name down in his book. “Now, what have you got in mind for today?”

“We’re headed for Coney Island.”

Corelli had watched the exchange with mild amusement. He’d read all the reports on Hoyte-father in prison, mother working her butt off to support herself and her son, a couple of brushes with the law a few years back, but he was clean now. And smart. And Willie Hoyte had an advantage over Corelli and most of the TA cops—for a while he’d been one of them, one of the scum who caused trouble for others, for kicks. Willie understood the workings of that kind of sick mind. He’d tasted the bitter anger and the sweetness of getting revenge on his oppressors. Willie might even understand the workings of someone like Tommy Washington.

“Hoyte, you got a minute?” Corelli moved into his line of vision.

“What you want, Corelli?”

“A few words, that’s all.”

Willie studied him suspiciously. Corelli and his pal Quinn were the only TA fuzz who even bothered to pretend tolerance of him and the Dogs of Hell. Still, Willie would have written him off completely were it not for a little matter of the night Corelli saved Willie’s ass—and his reputation. Willie was alone that night, off-duty, out of uniform, without his men. And he’d been mugged. Some drunken white sonofabitch plastered him up against the wall of the Ninety-sixth Street station while he waited for a train home from Slade’s apartment. Willie was smart enough to see he was helpless against this tall pile of shit, so he just gave up without a fight. He was handing over his wallet when Corelli pushed through the turnstile. He arrested the drunk, sent Willie home, and for the next two
weeks Willie lived in fear each time he opened a newspaper. If word got out about the mugging, his credibility was blown. But nothing ever did appear. Corelli kept his mouth shut. And Willie owed him. Owed him big.

“Tico, you take Mr. Thornbeck downstairs. Answer any questions he has. I’ll be right there.”

Willie’s temporary second-in-command stared blankly for a moment, then began to hustle the Dogs of Hell and the hayseed reporter down the stairs. Why Willie kissed Corelli’s ass was none of his business.

“Okay, Corelli, what can I do for you?”

“You get wind of anything… unusual… going on down here?” Hoyte heard almost as much scuttlebutt as the TA-maybe more.

“Unusual like what?” A shiver of fear traced its way up his spine.

Corelli shrugged. “Can’t say for sure. People getting lost.”

“Shit, man, what’s you talkin’ about?”

“I’m talking about a woman who walked into the subway early Wednesday morning and never walked out, that’s what I’m talking about,” Corelli said hotly.

“I don’t know nothin’ ’bout no womens.” Fear gripped Willie’s chest and he nervously twisted the gold cross at his neck back and forth between his fingers. “You sound kina weird, you know that, Corelli? People gettin’ lost, indeed.” Miguel had said Ted Slade got “lost” in the subway, too.

“Being called weird by you, Willie, is a compliment.” Corelli smiled easily, but he immediately grew serious again. “I want you to keep your eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary. Your boys are everywhere; they hear.”

“And what exactly do I tell them to look out for, Detective Corelli?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking you. Now, come on.” He started toward the stairs.

“You goin’ somewhere?”

“Coney Island. For the rest of the day, Willie, I’m your shadow.”

Willie shook his head and walked swiftly past Corelli to the stairs. “You do what you want, man, but I tell you one thing for positive: no way Willie Hoyte ever gonna have no white shadow.” Despite himself, he smiled, then raced down the stairs.

Louise Hill had mixed feelings about Labor Day. On the one hand, it was a holiday and she could take a day off from work without feeling guilty about not putting in a full eight hours in her textile-design studio. On the other hand, Labor Day meant school was starting and for the next nine months Lisa, her seven-year-old daughter, would be away most of the day. It was only with the prospect of Lisa’s return to school that Louise realized how much she had come to depend on her company over the summer months.

“Lisa, come on or we’ll be late,” Louise shouted down the long hallway that connected the living room to the bedrooms in the back of the apartment.

“How can we be late for a street fair?” came a sweet, disembodied voice.

“Never mind being smart, Miss Hill, just shake a leg.” Louise frowned on mothers who bragged about their children, so she rarely confided to her few friends her belief that Lisa was an exceptionally gifted child. Why bother? It showed in everything the child did-in her vocabulary, in the infinite variety of her interests, even in her skill with that most rudimentary form of artistic expression: finger painting.
Moments later, Lisa appeared dressed in painter’s coveralls dyed a very vocal pink, a violet short-sleeved shirt, and red plastic sandals. She was every inch Louise’s daughter-long black hair framed mischievous brown eyes, a pert nose, and a laughing mouth. When she reached the sunny living room she stopped, leaned up against a wall, and wriggled her foot provocatively at her mother.

“What on earth are you doing?” It was a trap, but Louise asked, nevertheless.

“You told me to shake a leg. Is this one okay?” Lisa’s smile quickly became a convulsive belly laugh.

“Lisa Hill, you are the silliest girl I know.” Louise scooped her daughter into her arms and kissed her. “And I love you very much.”

“Me too, Mommy,” she replied in their special code.

“Now, let’s do get going before SoHo gets too crowded.” At Lisa’s insistence they were going to a street and crafts fair in the downtown section of New York that had grown from a refuge for artists to a fashionablyarty and expensively bohemian extension of the Upper East Side. Louise hated the self-consciousness of SoHo and usually avoided it at all costs.

“Will you buy me something, Mommy?” Lisa asked as they walked across Seventy-eighth Street toward Central Park West.

“I’ll treat you to a ride on the subway. How’s that?”

“Thanks a bunch,” Lisa replied somberly.

Louise smiled, but her daughter’s reply was depressing; she’d phrased the answer just like Dave would have. He had a way of being cute that stung later, like an internal wound that never broke the skin’s surface. Louise rarely thought of her ex-husband anymore, but when it happened, she was always surprised to discover a deep well of resentment even after nearly a year. She told herself over and over she’d pulled through the divorce just fine. She had Lisa and the big West Side apartment, a successful career designing fabrics. But the undeniable fact remained that Dave had left her for another woman. And that hurt.

At the Seventy-second Street Station, they just missed the downtown train and walked down to the steamy lower level to wait for another. With the shocking condition the transit system’s finances were in, plus the holiday, Louise knew she and Lisa might wait up to twenty minutes in the grimy station before another train came.

Five minutes of silence later, Lisa pulled herself from her mother’s grip and sauntered down the platform, ogling the obscenity-covered posters and advertisements on the wall.

“Lisa, come back here,” Louise said, her voice betraying her dampening enthusiasm as the heat began to wilt her.

“I want to look at the pictures, Mommy,” Lisa complained with a touch of defiance in her voice.

“I want you back here now!” Being in an empty subway station made Louise nervous. There were just too many horrible stories for her even to think of relaxing. “Lisa, it’s for your own safety.”

“It’s okay, we’re the only ones here,” Lisa observed as she moved still farther down the platform away from the stairway where her mother had posted herself.

Ten minutes later Louise was ready to call it a day. Her light cotton dress was soaked and her hair was matted across her forehead. Her mood had swung from cautious optimism to angry impatience. The train was late. She could barely breathe. And Lisa was being downright ornery about obeying her orders. Well, let her be stubborn! If something dreadful happened to her, never let it be said Louise hadn’t warned her.

Angry voices from the upstairs station echoed down the stairway and caught Louise’s attention. An unseen man was reviling the token clerk, who, in turn, matched insult with insult over the microphone that linked him with the world outside his booth. The ferocious, mainly sexual imprecations of the argument had an other-worldly quality
that somehow fit the hot subway station perfectly. Louise listened intently for a minute or two, and when the voices ceased, she yawned and returned her attention to her daughter.

The platform was empty.

Lisa was gone.

Louise blinked, and a line of perspiration set free by the gesture trickled into her eyes and forced them shut. With two frantic swipes she cleared them and looked again. Still nothing.

“Lisa?” she yelled, at the same time falling into a walk that quickly became a trot “Lisa? Where are you?” There was another stairway at the far end of the platform. She was probably there playing a trick. Some trick, scaring her mother half to death! “Lisa, are you hiding from me, honey?” She heard the panic in her voice and with that recognition was instantly engulfed in terror. “Lisa, where are you?”

She was running full out now, sailing past the graffiti-covered posters Lisa had been examining, barely noting the same obscenities that, shouted out, had distracted her a few fateful minutes before.

“Lisa, dammit, you’d better come out or…” Louise’s voice shattered the heavy silence. There was no place for her to hide. She had to have left the station, unless…

Louise scrambled to the edge of the platform and nearly tipped onto the tracks from the momentum of her flight. She scanned the roadbed north, then south, almost hoping to see her daughter’s body there; bruised, perhaps, but still within reach, within safety. The tracks were vacant. She peered far into the tunnel, thinking for a moment she’d caught sight of some movement, something that fleetingly captured her peripheral vision. There was a flutter of gray against the blackness, then nothing.

The rumble of an approaching express train grew, and a vortex of dank air forced from the tunnel pressed against Louise like the moist hands of a stranger. Twin lights broke through the darkness as the train roared into the station on the far track and hurtled past her. The sounds of its wheels clattering over the rails grew in an unending crescendo as the noise pierced her brain like a scalpel.

Lisa was gone!

During the infinitesimal moments she’d looked away, something terrible had happened to her daughter. It was her fault! Hers alone!

It was then, as the last car of the express vanished into the darkness of the tunnel, that Louise began to scream.

Corelli popped off the cap of a bottle of Miller’s, poured it into a chilled pilsner glass, and retreated to the small spare bedroom he used as an office and study. The beer went down smooth, constricting his throat, then releasing it with satisfaction. There was nothing like a cold one on a hot night.

He kicked off his shoes and sat down in the reclining chair to catch his breath. It had been a long, hard day. Willie Hoyte had forced that poor sucker Thornbeck to ride out to Coney Island twice before letting him off the hook. The most Hoyte could hope from West Side News was a mention in the “West Side Personalities” column. Corelli chuckled at the irony of it.

He finished the brew with one last long pull, belched grandly, then moved to his desk. There was work to do tonight He was onto something. It had started with the Penny Comstock report that morning. The thought of her disappearance had niggled him all day. Dolchik’s explanation that she’d run from an imagined bogeyman was lamebrained; it smacked of “investigation canceled due to laziness.” Or worse, a cover-up on the captain’s part. Still, the fact remained that this Comstock woman had vanished. A call to Lost Property out at TA headquarters in Brooklyn was a dead end-Penny Comstock hadn’t called about her lost purse, nor had she come down to claim it.

Corelli switched on the light over his desk, flipped on the radio to an easy-listening music station, and opened his briefcase. It hadn’t taken much to find the file he’d wanted. He’d just waited until Dolchik left for the day, then opened the captain’s office door with a credit card. Illegal? Yes. Immoral? Never with Dolchik. The file had been
there, as Corelli expected it would, stuck in the least accessible file cabinet in a bottom drawer near the back. But it was there.

He turned the reddish-brown folder over a couple of times, almost afraid to open it Corelli had a gut feeling about this. His instincts told him he wasn’t going to like what he found; his sense of justice told him that was just too goddamned bad. He was a transit cop. His job was to make the subways safe for the paying passengers, Dolchik or no Dolchik.

He arranged the file right-side-up in front of him. If it hadn’t been for Willie Hoyte, Corelli would probably be reading a book now or maybe watching an old movie on television. But Hoyte inadvertently had tipped him off earlier. It wasn’t so much what he’d said as what he hadn’t said. Not how he’d reacted, but how he hadn’t reacted. Corelli took a moment and remembered Willie’s face when asked about people getting lost in the subway. Hoyte had lied when he said he hadn’t heard anything. There was recognition in his eyes. And fear. Fear most of all. Willie Hoyte at least suspected something was happening in the hell called the New York subway. And just as soon as Corelli finished reading Dolchik’s secret file, he’d know something too.

He readjusted the light to stall for a few seconds’ time, took in a deep breath, then opened the pilfered file marked “MISSING PERSONS.”
September 4, Tuesday

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Corelli stood tensed at the edge of the subway platform. He leaned forward and squinted slightly. He’d seen movement in the tunnel, an almost imperceptible change in the gradation of darkness like shadows passing before shadows. It was about to begin. He’d read Dolchik’s file, knowing that justice would be meted out one day. But why should he be sacrificed when only Dolchik’s blood would balance the scales?

The vague movements took form and shape and moments later an army of faceless men and women staggered forward from the dark tunnel, their outstretched arms wavering in the dank air like antennae of a monstrous new species of insect. These subterranean creatures were the ranks of the missing—the mothers, brothers, lovers, friends who had vanished into the maze of the subway forever. And now they wanted revenge.

As the flailing hands of the leader made contact with Corelli and twisted fingers settled around his neck, a distant buzzer sounded. The ghouls froze, then began to retreat as the noise grew louder and louder and louder and…

Corelli rolled to the side of the bed and punched the alarm clock, immediately silencing it. He stretched to release the tension from his muscles and sat up, wiping a fine gloss of perspiration from his forehead. After a glass of orange juice he’d feel better; he always did. Having nightmares was so familiar that the ritual of getting over them each morning was as automatic as shaving and showering. But this latest terror was different; it had broken an apparently endless cycle of reliving Jean’s death. And for that reason alone Frank knew unequivocally that finding Dolchik’s missing-persons file would be another milestone in his life.

Showered and dressed and still feeling shaky from the dream, Frank concocted a mug of bitter instant coffee and sat down at the table crammed into a corner of his tiny kitchen. He stared out the window down at Hudson Street where it ended abruptly at Abingdon Square; usually he liked this particular view of his Greenwich Village, but today he suspected he wasn’t going to like anything.

Damn Dolchik, he thought to himself, he’s up to something. Keeping track of M.P.’s was no mere parlor game, not when human lives were involved. Yet he’d been secretly collecting missing-persons reports all along like some kid hoarding baseball cards. The reports were all fragmentary, usually based on the testimony of a token-booth clerk or maintenance worker. They followed the same pattern: a lone passenger, waiting for a train late at night, cries for help, then… silence…no one on the platform, and a confused—usually terrified—subway worker. Dolchik obviously had seen a pattern. Many of the disappearances had occurred in parts of the city where he had no business being. He was onto something, all right. But why, yesterday, had he lied about his interest in Penny Comstock when hers was the last—and most recent-name on the list?

Corelli sat back and sipped the coffee thoughtfully. He’d often suspected that behind the facade of Stan Dolchik’s redneck boisterousness there was a cunning and agile intelligence. And now, more than ever, he believed his instinct about the captain was right. Now the question was: What was he going to do about it?

A tapping on the front door roused Corelli from his quandary. It had to be Ralph Myers with the morning newspaper. Corelli had few friends, and those he had never came prowling around at seven-thirty in the morning. He opened the front door.

“How ya doing, Mr. Myers?”

“It’s a fine morning, Detective Corelli,” Myers replied, the hint of a smile on his face. He was the super’s father, a white-haired man in his early seventies who refused to grow old and useless. For Ralph Myers, fetching the morning newspaper for Corelli, then carrying it up six flights to his top-floor apartment, was proof positive he wasn’t ready to be fitted for a shroud quite yet.

“Anything worth reading?” Corelli took the Daily News from the old man and glanced at the front page.

“Wouldn’t know myself. Not much interested in what’s going on in this lousy world.”

“Sounds sensible.” Corelli gave him two quarters. “Want to see this when I’m through?”
The old man shook his head like always and started back down the stairs. Myers had read every word of the paper before delivering it, but never would have admitted to the crime. This was his little game, and in a small way, it usually got Corelli’s day off on the right track. Today the sight of the old man only depressed him.

He made himself a second cup of coffee before scanning the newspaper. Shit, today was going to be a bad one. He’d known it the minute he woke up from the dream, and reading the deep sadness and loneliness in Ralph Myers’ face cinched it. Well, the latest news would certainly take his mind off his own troubles. The inch-high headline “KID GRABBED FROM IND” assaulted Corelli from the front page. Opposite the lurid story was a blurry photograph of a young girl Corelli guessed to be six or seven. Her wide-eyed innocence was deceptive, for even in the grainy black-and-white picture a spark of mischief gilded her eyes. Her name was Lisa Hill. She looked like a nice kid. A smart kid.

But not smart enough.

He read the story, expecting the usual sensation-seeking drivel designed to hold a reader’s interest during a morning subway ride. But as he read the details of Lisa Hill’s “abduction” a second time, Corelli felt the muscles at the back of his neck tense. Lisa and her mother had been alone on the downtown platform, and witnesses on the uptown platform swore that at the time of the child’s disappearance no one had come upstairs! Officials speculated Lisa had to have been taken up the two levels and out onto the street. Any other explanation was absurd.

But not to Frank Corelli.

It had happened again! He cupped his hand thoughtfully over his mouth, exhaled through the fingers while studying Lisa Hill’s picture. The only difference between this and the Penny Comstock disappearance was that with Comstock there was no witness. Lisa Hill had been with her mother. Even if the mother didn’t see anything, she was still at the scene of the crime. And that was a good beginning. But where to go from here?

Corelli downed the coffee in one gulp, grabbed a cigarette, and pulled the phone book from the top of the refrigerator. Goddammit! The TA was a public-service organization. It was supposed to provide transportation and safety. But New Yorkers were beginning to pay extravagantly for the questionable privilege of exposing themselves to the danger and filth of the subway. Somebody was screwing up. Maybe it was Dolchik. Or maybe it went higher-to the TA executive offices on Madison Avenue. But whoever was at fault was callously overlooking the fact that the friends of Penny Comstock-and the parents of Lisa Hill-just might be wondering where the hell they were!

The phone book listed one L. Hill on West Seventy-ninth Street. L for Louise, Corelli thought as he dialed. Maybe a widow. Probably divorced. The Upper West Side was full of divorced women with children, women using only a first initial, hoping to keep their sex and their vulnerability from the cranks and the perverts. After five rings the phone was answered.

“Yes?” The woman’s voice was lifeless.

“Mrs. Hill?”

“What do you want?” A touch of anger lifted her voice momentarily.

“This is Detective Corelli of the New York Transit Police.”

“I’ve answered all your questions.” The life drooped out of it again.

“And I’m sure you’ve been very cooperative, but I’m with the TA-the people who brought you the subway?”

“Thanks a lot,” she replied, not missing the irony in Corelli’s voice. “So what can I do for you?”

“I’d like to talk to you about Lisa.”

Although Louise was beginning to get used to hearing her daughter’s name on the lips of strangers, it was still painful. “I’m not sure I have anything more to say.”
“I could come over now, if it’s convenient,” Corelli cajoled. He’d be late for work, but Quinn would cover for him.

“Does it have to be now? I’m—”

“I’m afraid it does,” Corelli said officially. The case was actually being handled by the city police and as such was out of his jurisdiction. But there was no need to let Mrs. Hill know that there was no love lost between the TA and the NYPD and that he was actually trespassing.

“You have the address, I presume; everybody seems to,” she said listlessly. “It’s apartment 4-F.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Corelli brushed his teeth, packed Dolchik’s reports into his briefcase, called Quinn and had him cover, then headed toward the subway entrance on West Twelfth Street.

With any luck, talking to Louise Hill would be a beginning. Exactly what kind, Corelli wasn’t sure, but a beginning nevertheless.

The apartment house on West Seventy-ninth Street was a large, nondescript gray building whose unimaginative architecture typified the block. Squatting back from the sidewalk, it presented a cheerless facade of dirty stone and smudged windows to the street. Corelli wandered into the sterile and uninviting lobby thinking the co-op more suited for business than for raising a family. The doorman interrupted an animated conversation with an overfed chihuahua to ask Corelli’s business. Seemingly satisfied with the answer, he escorted him into the elevator, punched the button for Mrs. Hill’s floor, then settled back onto a tall wooden stool and yawned with barely exaggerated ennui.

Corelli hadn’t given Louise Hill much thought since talking to her. He expected she’d be emotionally overwrought, and his keen understanding of human nature had prepared him for almost any reception. She’d sounded withdrawn and uncooperative on the phone, but he knew from working in the subway that people under extreme pressure react in myriad ways. What one moment was a respectable, calm specimen of good citizenry turned, the next, into a howling aggressor. However Mrs. Hill had been affected by her situation, Corelli was ready for anything.

He was ready for anything—except what he found when Louise Hill opened the door. When she smiled and said his name, he unconsciously straightened up and ran his hand quickly through his hair. Mrs. Hill was beautiful. Not pretty, not good-looking, but beautiful. She was tall, but comfortably shorter than Corelli, slender but firmly built, as if she were athletic—she probably played tennis. Her face was angular, with high cheekbones, full lips, and eyes the color of burnt sugar. Her nose was small and slightly turned up and her glossy black hair was nearly shoulder-length.

“I hope this won’t be too much trouble, Mrs. Hill,” Frank said as he was shown into a large, sunny living room. It was a long time since any woman had made him wonder how presentable he looked; Louise Hill made him want to go out and start all over again—this time in a new suit, fresh haircut and manicure.

“Trouble? Until you get Lisa back, that’s all I’ve got.” She sucked in a deep breath that lifted her breasts upward, then exhaled with a sigh. “I guess you’re used to this.”

“As a matter of fact, no.” Corelli caught himself looking at her breasts, and, confused by his own crassness, turned and surveyed the living room. He may have been right about the building’s impersonality, but he was wrong in thinking it couldn’t be made homey. The living room reflected care, taste, and that most ineffable quality in decorating—love. “Nice place,” he said, barely aware he’d begun to prolong the interview for a reason that was definitely not business.

“What can I do for you?” Louise fielded the compliment. “I thought I’d answered all the police’s questions.”

“I’m not with the New York Police Department,” he quickly corrected her. “I’m with the Metropolitan Transit Authority—the MTA, usually known simply as the TA.” He shrugged now, almost apologetically. “I work in the subway.”
“I didn’t know there were two different police forces.” For the first time since Corelli had walked in, the veil of
Louise’s own preoccupation lifted and she studied him openly. Satisfied that he was what he said, she indicated a
couch by the window. “I’m sorry, Sergeant Corelli. Won’t you sit down.” She sat on the edge of the chair opposite
him. “I’ve had so many people here, so many strangers asking questions, that I’ve begun to think everyone knows
his way around here… including you.”

“I can imagine it’s been a difficult time for you, Mrs. Hill.”

She stared at him for a moment, then stared down at her feet. “I thought I’d been through tough times before. I
was divorced last year and I wondered how I got through it all. That was nothing compared to this.” She
remembered the old complaint that talking to an American for five minutes elicited everything there was to be
known about him. But, hell, Corelli was in her home. And she’d damn well tell him what she wanted. Besides, he
looked kind, like the type of man who just might understand and sympathize. “I’ve been in New York for eight
years and I’ve always known as well as anyone what might happen to anyone in this city if they were unlucky. I just
never thought it would happen to me.”

Corelli studied her as she spoke. She had a way of speaking off into the distance, as if she were alone, or reciting
lines. But when she finished and lifted her eyes to his, Corelli felt more the center of her attention than if she had
spoken to nun directly. Louise Hill was talking from her heart, not through the layers of defense erected to protect
New Yorkers from the very dangers that had so suddenly broken through to her. The defenses hadn’t worked. She
was totally exposed, and Corelli’s heart went out to her.

“Now, Sergeant,” she pushed on, “what exactly would you like to know?”

“Just tell me what happened-exactly.”

Louise took in a deep breath and, as best she could, recounted the fragmented details of Lisa’s disappearance. She
had already recited the narrative so many times since yesterday that as the words spilled out by rote, her mind drifted
slightly. She now remembered how angry she’d been with Lisa for disobeying her, for walking down the platform
alone. And she remembered her promise to herself that if anything happened to the child, that would be just fine; she
deserved to be taught a lesson. God, why had it taken this horrible tragedy to make her realize that her world began
and ended with Lisa? Teach her a lesson? The lesson was Louise’s, and she was beginning to crumble from its
severity.

“When you reached the upper level of the Seventy-second Street platform, did you see anything unusual?” Corelli
interrupted her thoughts.

“There were a few people waiting for the uptown train; nothing else.”

“Then it didn’t appear they’d just witnessed something out of the ordinary?” The question, while avoiding the
word “kidnapping,” was academic-if Lisa Hill had been abducted against her will and forced out of the station, she
would have put up one hell of a fight. And that would have attracted attention.

“The only thing out of the ordinary they saw was me,” Louise said ironically. “They looked at me like I was
crazy. I guess I really can’t blame them; I was screaming or something. The police have statements: they all said that
until I came, upstairs they saw no one, nothing strange.”

“Is that why you went back downstairs instead of running out into the street? Because they were so calm?” That
wasn’t the real reason, though even Mrs. Hill probably didn’t know it. Corelli guessed that subconsciously she knew
Lisa was still underground.

“I guess that’s why I went back down.” She’d been asked and had answered that question a hundred times. That
was the reason, unless…

“Mrs. Hill?” Corelli asked, sensing she might be remembering something.

“I had this feeling… No, it’s insane.” She shook her head.
Corelli leaned forward. Not only was Louise Hill beautiful, she was sensitive, too, a cut above the usual witness to a crime; that could be useful. “Mrs. Hill, think. What kind of feeling did you have?”

“That Lisa was still down in the subway, that she was close, but I just couldn’t see her.”

Bingo! But now was not the time to tip his hand. Corelli remained straight-faced. “You said the platform was empty, that you looked and she wasn’t on the tracks.”

“No, she wasn’t. Still…” The memory filled her mind, and the terror suddenly began again. Louise clenched her hands and tried to forget, but Corelli pushed on mercilessly.

“Are you sure the downtown platform was empty?”

“Of course I’m sure. What do you take me for? A moron?” Her voice was suddenly sharp and defensive. She was beginning to lose control.

“Mrs. Hill, it’s been my experience that people tend to see more than they remember at first. Sometimes, after the initial shock lessens, their memory improves.” Corelli felt bad about forcing the issue, but he had to. Unlike the NYPD, he had a good idea that whatever had happened to Penny Comstock and all the others had also happened to Lisa Hill. And he was determined to find out exactly what that was. “Please, try to remember any other details,” he coaxed.

“There was no one else on the platform,” she repeated through clenched teeth. “I looked first onto the platform, then into the stairwell, then onto the tracks, and finally down the tunnel…” She paused, stared at Corelli, then turned away and shook her head.

“What was that? Why did you shake your head?” He fought to keep the excitement from his voice. “You remembered something, didn’t you?”

“I just remembered…No, it’s nothing.”

“Let me be the judge of that.” He stood up and went to the window to let her collect her thoughts without being under his scrutiny. “You looked down the tunnel and…?”

“I thought I saw the flicker of something in the dark, something gray, fluttery... like newspapers that had been caught in a breeze. You know, blowing along the tunnel wall about this high.” When Corelli turned around she had raised her hand about four feet from the floor.

“Newspapers? Are you sure?” In the darkness of the tunnel, someone running low to the ground could be mistaken for almost anything—particularly by a witness in Louise Hill’s state of mind.

Louise dropped her hands into her lap. Her shoulders sagged and she sighed again, wearily, hopelessly. “Sergeant Corelli, I’m not sure of my own name anymore. My daughter’s gone. I haven’t slept in twenty-four hours and I’m terribly afraid... and lonely. I’m sorry if I can’t answer your questions the way you’d like.”

Their eyes met for a moment; then Corelli looked away. He wanted to—had to—maintain the optimum of professionalism for his own sake. But Louise Hill was getting to him. Goddammit, he wanted to take her in his arms and tell her everything would be okay. It wasn’t only her beauty that got him. It was her unashamed vulnerability. Jesus! Here he was in the home of a woman who was going through living hell, and he was getting turned on.

But Louise Hill saw none of this as she rose from the couch. “I’m going to make a cup of coffee for myself. May I get you one, Sergeant?”

“That’s ‘Detective,’ Mrs. Hill,” he replied softly. “And the answer is yes.”

Five minutes later the sound of shattering glass and a cry from the direction of the kitchen had Corelli running, his right hand automatically poised to reach for his gun. He didn’t know what to expect, but as he reached the kitchen door he was aware that his heart was pounding in his chest and that his mouth had gone dry.
Louise stood silently in the center of the large kitchen. Her head was bowed and her arms dangled lifelessly in front of her. At her feet were a tray and the shattered remains of a coffeepot, mugs, and a plate of homemade cookies. She looked up uncomprehendingly at Corelli as her eyes filled with tears. “Looks like I can’t do anything right anymore,” she managed to say before a wave of tears washed the words away.

Corelli took a step toward her, feeling like a damned fool. Since yesterday, Louise Hill had obviously been under a great strain, and his incessant questioning had pushed her over the emotional edge. If it hadn’t been for her revelation about the “something gray” in the tunnel, Frank would have felt worse than he did about upsetting her. As it was, he felt like shit. But Louise’s answers might have just given him the start needed to link Dolchik’s file with this disappearance… and then link them all to the same somebody-or somebodies-who preyed on people in the subway.

“Hey, are you going to be okay?” he asked cautiously.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized while frantically trying to erase the stream of tears. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“It’s called delayed reaction. There’s nothing to worry about.” Corelli intended to take her by the hand and lead her back into the living room. Instead, he put his arms around her and pressed her head to his shoulder. Louise tensed momentarily, and when the awkwardness of the moment passed, she relaxed.

“How about giving me a second chance with that coffee?” she finally asked as she extricated herself from his arms.

“Leave that to me. You go sit down.” Louise began to protest. “And I won’t take no for an answer.”

She smiled, pushed aside an errant lock of hair, then left without further protest.

“So, if the NYPD is handling the case, why are you here, Frank?” Louise asked twenty minutes later. Corelli made good coffee, and it revived her almost as much as his earlier kindness had.

“Let’s just say I’m moonlighting. The boys in blue know this town from the surface; I know it from the underground.”

“Some job.” She abruptly changed the subject. “Do you believe that whoever took Lisa is still down there?”

Corelli shrugged in answer, but the question unsettled him. He was beginning to get a feeling about this whole mess—a feeling that told him he wasn’t just dealing with some creep who snatched kids off platforms and dragged them into tunnels.

“Frank, be honest with me. You owe me that much. They took my baby,” she said sorrowfully, “and I cried in front of you. I don’t cry in front of every man I meet-cop or no cop.”

“I really don’t have any theories about what actually happened. It has occurred to me that someone who knew the subway system inside-out might have taken Lisa into the tunnel. The logical thing is to think she was taken upstairs; I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, God,” Louise gasped. “My poor baby.”

“There are two sets of tracks on that particular line-local and express. A knowledgeable man could jump from one set of tracks to the other to avoid oncoming trains; there are also other alternatives. Anyway, once down the line at another station where no one was looking for him, he might easily come up on the platform, then leave.” And as Corelli said it, he knew it was bullshit. Alive or dead, Lisa Hill was still in the subway.

“What are the chances that that happened, Frank?”

“I wish I could tell you, but I can’t.” Jesus, life was so unfair. Why the hell did he have to meet Louise Hill now? Why not later, when this was done with. Or better still, months before, when they could have started a relationship
like two ordinary human beings.

He looked at his watch: he was already an hour late for work. “I’ve got to go.”

Louise saw him to the door, where they hovered a moment or two longer than necessary. “I wish this hadn’t happened, Frank. Not just for Lisa’s sake, but for mine. People shouldn’t have to meet like this,” she admitted softly, echoing Corelli’s thoughts.

“You and me both,” he agreed. “But it’s happened, and I’m going to do my damnedest to work it out. If I need any more help…”

“Call me,” she said without hesitation. “And thanks for being so nice earlier.”

Corelli left with a smile on his face, but back on the street he forced himself to forget Louise Hill and to concentrate on the figure she’d seen in the subway. That was no pile of newspapers blowing along the tracks. It was someone walking, creeping along to avoid detection. He was sure of it. Now all he had to do was prove it.

“He said gray, man. Like a bag of rags dumped near the track. That’s all I can remember.” Miguel Esperanza was no longer intimidated by Willie Hoyte’s gruff interrogation. It was just getting plain boring. Miguel had better things to do than to sit in Willie’s kitchen and drink Cokes while Willie played Perry Mason. Shit, it was one thing to be invited into the home of the Dogs of Hell’s leader; it was another to be second-degreed. Especially when he had a hot date waiting across town for him at that very moment.

“What you mean, he said he saw a bag of rags?”

Miguel sighed dramatically. “I already tolle you, Willie. Ted said he saw somethin’ moving along the wall in the tunnel. I tolle him it was jes’ some workman or somethin’, but he didn’t believe me. He said no workman dressed like that and walked like he was hiding or somethin’.”

For a moment Willie caught sight of his father’s smiling face, and his determination to get to the bottom of Slade’s disappearance was renewed. This was the second day no one had heard from that white sonofabitch, and Willie was going to have answers about what had happened to his second-in-command or else he was going to kick ass.

“I looked out where Slade was peering,” Miguel continued, “but, shit, I didn’t see nothin’ at all. Maybe Slade was smoking reefer.”

“Tell him that to his face, Miggie,” Willie replied angrily. Right about now Miguel would do anything—even lie-to get off the hook. “Why didn’t you stay with him on the platform at Ninety-sixth Street?” Miguel turned away in answer and Willie decided to pursue the question. “You chickenshit or something?”

“I was going to Marylu’s house, that’s why,” Miguel admitted, feeling the blood rise to his face. “Don’t a man get no privacy ’round here?” Miguel loved the way his girlfriend ran her fingers over his chest, all the time cooing about the hardness of his muscles. It was a real turn-on!

“You don’t get shit if you don’t be square with me.” There was really nothing more to say, but Willie’s frustration drove him on. He’d never admit he really cared about Slade—he’d cared about his father once, and look where that got him—but he did care, and Slade’s vanishing into thin air scared him, made him feel his own vulnerability.

Miguel pushed away from the kitchen table. “I’ve had it up to my teeth with you damn fool questions, Willie.” He squared his shoulders and put on his Dogs of Hell jacket. “How many times we got to go over this before you believe me that I don’t know squat about Ted Slade?”

“I believe you, Miggie,” Willie admitted quietly. “It jes’ don’t figure, that’s all.”

“Well, it don’t figure to me, neither, but that don’t mean shit where Slade’s concerned.” Miguel scratched his head and shrugged. “Maybe you should tell your buddy Detective Corelli ’bout Slade’s vanishin’ act.”
Willie didn’t rise to the bait. He knew his men were suspicious of his special relationship with the cop, but that was none of their damn business. Besides, he was personally going to investigate this occurrence himself. Something weird was happening down in the subway. Slade’s disappearance proved it. So did Corelli’s asking Dogs of Hell to keep a lookout for strange things-people walking into the subway and never walking out.

“Let’s go.” Willie beckoned Miguel to the front door.

“I’m seein’ Marylu in half an hour,” Miggie whined.

Willie rolled his eyes. “You got a date at three o’clock in the afternoon? Man, don’t you ever get enough?” Miguel blushed, and Willie pushed him out the door. “If you want to keep your lady smilin’, you’d best call her from a phone booth and tell her you’re gonna be late.”

“Say what?” Miguel said, wishing he’d never heard of Willie Hoyte or of his goddamned Dogs of Hell.

“You’re gonna be a little late, my man, ’cause you and me are goin’ out to find Ted Slade. Now, come on.” And with that he pushed past Miguel and jumped down the stairs two at a time.

The Seventh Avenue IRT subway had four clusters of exits onto Broadway at the Ninety-sixth Street stop: one on either side of the street at Ninety-sixth Street itself, and two between Ninety-third and Ninety-fourth streets. The station was a heavily traveled thoroughfare for uptown and downtown local and express traffic, and during the morning and afternoon rush hours, its platforms were crowded with riders. Even at off-peak hours, Ninety-sixth Street was busy.

Willie was counting on that fact as he and Miguel paid their fares at the Ninety-third Street token booth, pushed through the crowds and down the stairs to the platform. An express train was just pulling out of the station to their right, and in the distance, the lights of a local broke the darkness at the far end of the platform as it approached. He and Miguel lingered near the staircase while scanning the platform for TA cops. As usual, there wasn’t a uniform in sight.

The local pulled into the station, discharged a few stray passengers, picked up many more, then commenced its run south. Willie waited until the last car vanished into the darkness, then darted around the staircase along the narrow catwalk that ran alongside the tunnel. Miguel stood a polite distance behind him, his mouth open with amazement. There was no way he was going in there; no way.

“You crazy, Willie?” Miguel hissed after a moment “You know what happened to Slade foolin’ around like this.”

“I don’t know what happened and that’s what I’m bound to find out.” Willie peered over his shoulder to be sure another train wasn’t bearing down on him. Rush hour was approaching, and with it came extra traffic. Convinced he was safe, he eased himself off the catwalk down onto the roadbed. “Keep a watch out for the TA,” he admonished Miguel.

“Get outta there, man, you gonna get yourself killed. Forget the fuckin’ TA.” Miguel felt a trickle of sweat sluice down his back, leaving a cold trail. Jumping down onto the tracks was exactly what Ted Slade had done- and that crazy sonofabitch had never returned to tell of it.

“You jes’ watch out for Miguel Esperanza,” Willie shouted over his shoulder as he moved in deeper. “And for Christ’s sake, if some cop starts snoopin’ around, don’t stand there lookin’ at me like you see some naked broad in here. Play it cool. Dogs of Hell ain’t no dummies, remember.”

Willie had to talk big to cover his own mounting fear. The tunnel was dark and dank, and the series of signal lights along the wall cast an eerie light into the tunnel. Had it not been for his grudging affection for Slade, nothing could have enticed Willie into any subway tunnel. As a child he’d had an uncontrollable fear of the dark and the terrible things that inhabited it. Now, alone as the thick darkness closed in around him, the old fear took hold.

“Shеееіt,” Willie yelled as he stumbled into an ankle-deep puddle of stagnant water. He was ill-prepared for roughing it in his running shoes, and as the water soaked his foot, he wondered if being here was such a smart idea, after all. Well, it was too late to turn back now.
The flickering halo of light at the Eighty-sixth Street station off in the distance was a beacon to follow. Willie hugged the west wall, always mindful that the third rail, which carried enough electricity to kill him in a second, was opposite him under a protective cover, like a snake hiding under a rock. A vague rustling sound behind him, an intimation that someone else was near, sent a bolt of terror through Willie. He turned around quickly, just in time to see something dart into the shadows; not a figure, exactly, more like a different texture of darkness.

Willie stopped moving entirely. He had to be imagining things. He was alone in the tunnel; he had to be. But just to be sure, he squinted his eyes to help improve his vision; then he scanned the area between the local and express tracks where he thought he’d seen the movement. There was nothing to see. Nothing to be afraid of except his own fear.

“Man, you gettin’ as flaky as Miggie,” he joked aloud to break the tension. “You better get on with it or your ass will be grass.” He knew the local tracks would soon be crowded with trains and that getting out of the tunnel in one piece would be a tough job.

Miguel’s voice, reverberating down from the station, shattered the heavy silence of the tunnel. “Willie, there’s a train coming!”

Willie turned and, once again, saw a flicker of movement behind him; closer now than before. But his attention was drawn back toward the platform by another call from Miguel. “Shut up, Miggie,” Willie complained under his breath. If that damned fool kept up the yelling he would attract undue attention.

And as the thought passed through Willie’s mind, he saw a TA cop in the distance join Miguel on the platform. The cop leaned forward, visored his eyes with his hand, then pushed Miguel out of the way. “Get outta there, you dumb fuck!” the cop screamed.

The policeman opened his mouth again, but his voice was drowned out by the clattering thunder of an approaching local train. Willie hadn’t seen it because he’d been too interested in the cop. But he saw it now and he was so suddenly afraid that he fought to keep back a scream. What the hell was he doing down here? What did he expect to find that was worth risking his own life? Ted Slade hadn’t been seen in two days, but that didn’t mean he’d walked into this tunnel and never walked out. If he’d been bit by a train, it would have been reported and made all the newspapers. But it hadn’t. And as far as Willie knew, that was the only bad thing that could happen to you down here. So far as he knew.

After narrowly escaping the train by jumping onto the express track, Willie felt his resolve to pursue his goal weaken momentarily. “Why am I standing here peeing in my pants?” he asked himself aloud. And as quickly as the question was posed, it was answered: “Because somethin’ bad’s happened to my main man. And Willie Hoyte don’t desert his friends.”

He was about to continue his exploration when he saw the cop speaking into his walkie-talkie. That was bad news. He was probably alerting his buddies, signaling the TA control center to shut off the power in that section of the track so he could chase Willie. And, sure enough, thirty seconds later, the cop jumped down onto the roadbed and started running toward Willie like he had a personal grudge against him and was about to collect.

Willie turned tail and started to run full-out. The Eighty-sixth Street station was his only hope of escape. But it was still a long way, and running down here was tough; it meant leaping over ties, keeping a sure footing on the loose gravel and slick sludge of the roadbed. And most of all it meant keeping away from the deadly third rail. But getting away from the TA was more important than thinking about how tough it was. If that cop caught him, Willie Hoyte would be crucified once and for all. Willie Hoyte, founder of Dogs of Hell-nothing more than a dumb bastard who endangers his own life and that of other subway passengers to play on the tracks. That’s what the TA would say. Damn! He could almost read the headlines now.

The cop was gaining on him. Willie had no idea how far he’d run, but the configuration of the tunnel was changing. Ahead, the wall seemed to fall away into an inky pit of darkness. It looked like a disused station, but Willie’d been riding this line for years and had never seen it before. He knew there were abandoned stations throughout the city, stations that had been closed down because they no longer served any useful purpose. Willie’d seen them but he’d never seen one here. Had Slade seen it? Had Slade seen that gray thing creeping along the tracks...
toward this station? Was that why he’d come here?

The cop was now so close Willie could hear his labored breathing. And as he looked over his shoulder to get a bead on him, Willie’s foot caught on a tie and he fell, tumbling out of control. He reached out, frantically grabbing for something to stop his forward motion. His fingers entwined around something soft and slick, something with enough weight behind it to halt his forward roll. Willie held tight until he stopped; then he turned and stared into the darkness, trying to discern what had stopped him.

At first it looked like a pile of rags. Or a collection of shopping bags carried around by the crazies in the street. On closer inspection, Willie saw it was a body—a crumpled-up body with its head tucked down, knees drawn up to its chest in a gruesome imitation of a fetus. Willie’s mouth filled with salty bile. He swallowed to keep back the fear. The body was clad in a Dogs of Hell jacket. And Willie knew that he’d found Ted Slade.

“Don’t move, you shithead,” the cop screamed as he ground to a halt just behind Willie. “I’m gonna bust your ass, you crazy nigger.” The cop’s hateful eyes followed Willie’s stare to the body by the tracks. “What the hell is that?”

He stepped forward, but Willie caught him by the ankle and stopped him. “Stay away, you. That’s one of my men.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The cop kicked Willie’s hand away.

“I’m Willie Hoyte and that’s one of my Dogs of Hell.” He dragged himself up to face the cop. “I come down here lookin’ for him. And now I found him.”

“You stay right there, mister,” the cop commanded. He stepped around Willie and went to the body. He stared down at it a moment, deciding his next move; then, with the tip of his shoe angled under the corpse’s elbow, he tipped it to its side. Rigor mortis had long since set in, and the body retained its infantile position as it rocked onto its back. The cop pulled a flashlight from his belt and shone it directly at Ted Slade’s head; then he looked away in disgust and turned off the light. But not fast enough. Not before Willie saw his friend and began screaming.

Ted Slade’s face was gone.
September 5, Wednesday
Corelli’s footsteps made dull, thudding sounds as he walked mechanically down the subterranean corridor of New York Mercy Hospital toward its morgue. He remembered those lifeless footsteps; it could have been five years before, when he’d come here to identify Jean’s body. The presence of Death in this part of the hospital, its absolute supremacy over the living, pulled any joy from anyone who entered the precincts. Voices grew muted, smiles quivered on nervous lips, then faded, and gestures became self-conscious.

That was how it seemed to Corelli, at any rate. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he’d already lost too much down here to react any other way. One thing was for sure: he hated being here.

The report of Willie Hoyte’s arrest and the discovery of Slade’s body was filed while Corelli was off-duty the night before. He hadn’t read it until that morning, but five minutes later he was out of the office and on his way uptown to talk to a Mercy Hospital pathologist about Slade. Quinn was covering at the office for Frank, but it was no good this time. Dolchik was downtown on some official business, and the minute he got back and discovered Corelli was AWOL again, the shit would hit the fan.

In the meantime, Corelli returned the missing-persons file—after making a copy—and now had a couple of hours’ leeway before the captain’s return to do some investigating on his own. Hoyte’s statement last night indicated that Slade had disappeared into the subway two, three days before. At least he seemed convinced that’s where he’d gone. Corelli knew this might just be coincidence, but his gut feeling was that the late Mr. Ted Slade was the most recent victim of the same person or persons who had grabbed Lisa Hill. And Penny Comstock.

Corelli sharply turned a corner and was confronted with an unmarked gray door at the end of the corridor. He fought the urge to turn and run out of the hospital without looking back; but the only indication of his emotional turmoil was a tenseness of the muscles along his jaw. Coolheadedness in a crisis was one of the traits that made Frank Corelli a good cop. He paused a minute, then opened the door. He was immediately assailed by a sickly-sweet smell he knew to be a combination of chemicals and death; the morgue’s anteroom reeked of it. For a moment he faltered in his determination to continue. Five years before, Corelli had stood exactly here in the muted antiseptic haze of the lowered lights as a disinterested pathologist lifted a sheet from Jean’s face.

Corelli let the memories wash over him. He’d be okay—in a minute. In romantic fiction, Death arrives as the final messenger with promises of peaceful eternity. Etched on the deceased’s features is the sure sign that he will be waiting patiently for his loved ones beyond the veil. In reality, death can be violent, ugly. It had taken Jean ten minutes to die. Ten minutes in terminal pain and terror. The struggle to survive was carved on her twisted death mask. Corelli had seen that anguish no mortician could disguise. His fiancée’s life had been wrenched from her, stolen viciously even as she fought in vain to save it; fought to stay alive for Frank, to bear their children, to grow old with him. But Jean had lost. Her body had been too severely attacked; her will had been broken.

“Detective Corelli?”

Frank was so startled by the man suddenly next to him that he jumped.

The intruder smiled ruefully. “Sorry if I startled you. I’m Dr. Geary. Tom Geary.” He extended his hand. “Charming place, isn’t it?”

“I’ve seen better,” Corelli admitted.

“Haven’t we all? So, what’s your interest up here? I thought the big boys downtown were handling all cases like this.” Geary’s voice was cozily confidential.

Corelli was immediately on his guard. “Sure they are, but I’ve been watching these Dogs of Hell ever since they got started—I knew Slade.” Corelli didn’t know who the “big boys” were, but there was no need for the doctor to know that; he’d string him along as far as he could.

“Hope he wasn’t a close friend. He got it pretty bad.” Dr. Geary turned and led Corelli through a second door into the mortuary proper. Geary was younger than Corelli, but his salt-and-pepper hair pegged him as years older. It was
his manner that betrayed his youth; he had a snippy, superior attitude that Frank instantly disliked. Geary was a smart-ass, probably fresh from his residency. But why anyone would choose a career in pathology was beyond Corelli. Either the guy was a creep or, more likely, he’d performed so wretchedly on the living that he’d been relegated to working on the dead.

“Welcome to the end of the rainbow,” Geary said cheerfully as they entered the main mortuary. Here the cadavers were stored behind a patchwork of refrigerator doors that covered the far wall. Geary went to one and flung it open.

Corelli swallowed hard as an icy draft of air from the compartment wrapped itself around his shoulders and snaked down his body until it held him prisoner. The air smelled of plastic, of shrouds—a scent, once smelled, never forgotten. Involuntarily Corelli shuddered while Geary withdrew the shallow metal tray on which Ted Slade’s body rested. Bloody drainage had seeped through the shroud; it had collected and solidified around the body in a gelatinous mass.

“You want to look at him here? Or shall I put him on a stretcher so you can have a real good look?”

“This will be fine,” Corelli mumbled.

“There’s not much left to see, anyhow.” Geary stared Corelli straight in the eyes and, without warning, whisked the shroud away from Slade’s head. It was a nasty trick. When Corelli saw the mutilated body, he closed his eyes and fell back against the wall of refrigerator doors.

“Not a pretty sight, is it?” Geary asked with a note of amusement in his voice. “You don’t usually find them so bad at a ritzy joint like this one. The city morgue’s another story. We get the bums whose livers have exploded from cirrhosis, the vagrants someone’s set on fire as a joke, drownings, O.D.’s—it’s all pretty much Dick-and-Jane shit.” He looked down at Slade. “This is a class act.”

“So you’ve spent a lot of time downtown,” Corelli said, feeling his way along carefully. No one got into the city morgue unless he belonged there, unless he was on the city payroll.

“That’s where I usually work,” the doctor admitted happily. “I still think they were wrong to bring the center of operations up here, but you know what the bureaucracy is like.”

“So that’s why Slade is here.” Corelli gave vent to his thoughts. Geary stared at him for a moment, then began to chew his lower lip nervously. Frank saw at once he’d said too much; the doctor was getting suspicious. The best move now was to change gears, get back to Slade. “Let’s have a good look at him,” he said, nodding toward the cadaver.

Geary pulled the shroud back to Slade’s pubic bone; that was enough for Corelli. Slade looked like he’d been put through a meat grinder. Worst of all was his face. From the hairline to the chin, from ear to ear, Slade’s face was gone. Frank forced himself to examine the grisly mess, noting as he did that the edges of the wounds were clean.

“It was done with a knife or something similar,” Geary hypothesized. “Then his face was just ripped off-like a goddamned mask. But, hell, it ain’t even Halloween.”

“Save the jokes,” Corelli said sourly. Geary’s gallows humor was just plain twisted. “What do you make of these wounds?” He pointed to the upper arms, where the biceps had been severed.

“Same thing, a knife, maybe.” Geary’s manner had changed almost imperceptibly. He was wary now, scared. Each time he spoke, his voice betrayed the feeling he might be saying more than he should—and saying it to the wrong person. Geary thought that because Corelli had found the whereabouts of Ted Slade’s body, he knew the rest of the story as well. Now it was quite apparent that he knew nothing. If the others found out he’d talked to Corelli, they’d have his balls for it; on the other hand, if he didn’t tell them… No, it would be just as bad… maybe worse.

“A knife, huh? What kind of a sicko would do something like this?” Corelli examined Slade’s body as if it were a side of beef hung in a butcher shop. The dead eyes staring out from the ravaged remains of his face no longer bothered him. Corelli was too interested in what had happened to let his own queasiness interfere. Slade’s torso had been carved up with care; the biceps were neatly removed, as were the latimus dorsi on both sides. In fact, most of
the thick muscles of the back were gone. “Whoever did this had some knowledge of anatomy,” he finally said. “Let’s see the rest of him.”

“Don’t you think you’ve seen enough already?” Geary’s eyes were shifting nervously around the room.

“The rest, doctor, or I’ll have a court order in here so fast your head will spin.”

Geary angrily disengaged the rest of the shroud. Corelli looked and felt a fountain of bile erupt into the back of his throat. Not only were Ted Slade’s penis and testicles missing, but the upper fleshy parts of his legs had been torn away; what was left of his legs was covered with circular lacerations.

“Jesus…” Corelli gagged, then turned his head. “What the fuck happened to him?”

“We don’t know yet,” Geary said testily as he covered the body and slid it back into the refrigerator.

“No subway train did that to him.” The TA report on Slade said exactly that.

Geary smiled at the thought. “No?” Any other cop might have let the doctor get away with this ignorant act, but Corelli wasn’t just any cop. It was exactly one week since Penny Comstock had disappeared at Fifty-third Street; Lisa Hill had been gone for two days. Any other cop might not have seen the significance of these two puzzles even when combined with the ravaged body of Ted Slade. But Frank Corelli did.

“Who’s your boss, Dr. Geary? Who are these big boys you’ve been talking about?” Geary swallowed hard. “Why?”

“Slade was brutalized, and I want to know why. I also want to know how he was killed so maybe I can find the maniac who did it. You know, Geary, it’s about time City Hall begins to look at the TA as something other than a bunch of glorified conductors. Now, you want to tell me about Ted Slade, or do I have to let the right people know that you’re waltzing any Tom, Dick, or Harry who asks through the morgue?” Playing it so tough was a long shot; Corelli had no authority even to be at New York Mercy. Besides, the men Geary worked for obviously had this operation well-coordinated, and getting rid of a problem named Frank Corelli would probably be easy.

“Okay, Corelli, okay,” Geary finally relented. “Just leave my name out of it. None of the missing masses of tissue were found.”

“You mean whoever did this took hunks of the body away?”

Geary nodded. “Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. As to the wounds in the pubic region and lower body…” Geary’s eyes widened. “They were made by teeth.”

“Teeth?” The word exploded in the room like a cannon shot.

“You wanted the truth. That’s it. Slade’s dick and balls were chewed off. The circular marks covering his legs—teeth marks.”

“How many sets?”

“At least three.” Geary’s smile betrayed his admiration for the astuteness of the question.

“Jesus, are there wild dogs-wolves-in the subway?”

“There’s everything else,” Geary said flippantly. “Detective Corelli, the answers to those questions are your province, not mine. I just examine the hamburger that’s left and file a report.” He edged closer to the outer door.

“Is it possible Slade was killed elsewhere and dumped in the tunnel later?”

Geary shook his head. “Not a chance. The forensic boys did a thorough search of the area. There was too much
blood there for him to have been killed anywhere else.” Geary now opened the door and ushered Corelli back out into the main corridor.

“Did you do a saliva test on the wounds?”

Geary hesitated, then slowly nodded. “Sure, it’s standard procedure.”

“And…?”

“The results aren’t back yet,” the doctor said, averting his eyes. “Now, I’ve really got to get back to work.” Without another word, he turned and went back into the morgue.

Willie Hoyte stepped onto the sidewalk and paused a moment, shading his eyes as he basked in the harsh afternoon light. He’d only been in jail overnight, but in that time he’d seen enough darkness to last him a lifetime. The men’s house of detention—generally known as the Tombs—was not a place he ever wanted to call home, not even for another twenty-four hours.

He shook himself as if discarding the memory of last night, then started down the street, trying to pull himself back into reality. For the past eighteen hours his life had begun and ended with the question: When do I get out of here? Now, striding over toward City Hall on the lower end of Manhattan, Willie found it strange that such a short detention had produced such a strong feeling of isolation and futility. Although the myriad details of his detainment—the call to his mother, the questions, the humiliation of being treated like a new species of vermin, the very injustice of being held without being formally accused—evaporated instantly as the raucous street sounds assailed his ears, that deeper feeling of helplessness lingered on. To be whipped psychologically was new for Willie, and he prayed he’d never again experience it. Willie Hoyte was somebody outside. Inside he was nobody, nothing. And his pride—scratched, but not wounded—still smarted.

He made his way toward City Hall, intending to catch the Eighth Avenue uptown express train. Now that he was free and out from under the law’s thumb, Willie had things to do. Like find out about Ted Slade’s death, for instance. All through the long night Willie had vainly tried to sleep, but each time he drifted off, the grisly memory of his pal’s body seeped back into his consciousness to torment him. After waking three times gasping in terror for breath, his every muscle knotted with fear, Willie gave up trying to sleep and just sat thinking. He’d liked Slade a lot, though he never would have said so to his face. And he last night promised himself he would find the bastards who slaughtered his buddy. Whoever they were. No matter how long it took.

“Hey, Willie,” a voice rang out from behind him.

Hoyte stopped and turned. Frank Corelli was right behind him. Christ, what the hell did he want?

“I just missed you,” Corelli explained as he pulled up next to Hoyte. “How ya doin’?” He extended his hand.

Willie answered the question by ignoring the proffered handshake. “How you ’spect I’m doin’ after spendin’ the night in the lockup?”

“Sorry.” Corelli’s untouched hand fell to his side. “The report said you were causing a public nuisance. Were you?”

“I was lookin’ to see what happened to my man Slade. And I found out. If I caused some nuisance, that’s too goddamned bad.” To his surprise and confusion, tears sprang into his eyes. With a quick awkward motion he jerked his head around and yawned as a cover.

“Too bad about Slade. Did you see him?” The sight of the ravaged body was fresh in Corelli’s mind, too. He wondered what it would have been like to discover the body, not just view it antiseptically in the hospital.

“Sure I saw him. What was left of him, anyhow. But what the hell do you care, anyway?” It now dawned on Willie that Corelli was way off his usual beat. This meeting downtown was no coincidence. “Say, what do you want from me, Mr. Detective?”
“I want your help.”

“Sorry, I’m fresh outta help this morning. Maybe if you come back tomorrow.” He began to walk away.

“Hold it right there, Hoyte,” Corelli commanded. “I know you take Slade’s death personally, but I take it as official police business. Now, shall we do this the friendly way, or would you like to spend a little more time in the cooler for obstructing justice?”

Willie held Corelli’s eyes for a full half-minute. Corelli had him. In his official capacity as leader of Dogs of Hell, Willie Hoyte garnered a great deal of respect and admiration from the public—not from the cops. When it came to real power, his reputation meant nothing more than a hill of beans. Dogs of Hell was just a neighborhood group that had fired New Yorkers’ imaginations. Willie could play king of the mountain with subway passengers and with his men, but not with Frank Corelli.

“What you want from me?” Willie finally acquiesced.

“Let’s talk, that’s all.”

A minute later they sat on a park bench, momentarily caught in a peaceful eddy off the tumultuous mainstream of the street. Early lunch hour was beginning and the streets were filled with pushing, shoving crowds that flowed from the hundreds of office buildings jammed into this part of the city.

“Tell me everything you know about Slade’s death.” Corelli got right to the point.

“You got the report, read it.”

Corelli ignored Willie’s sarcasm. He had to play this one diplomatically. If this case evolved the way it had begun to look, he’d need all the help he could get-Hoyte’s included. Still, he had to emphasize just who was the boss, and who would remain so. “Willie, there’s an easy way to deal with me and a hard way. I prefer the easy way, but if it’ll make you feel more at home, I’ll use force; the choice is yours.”

Willie didn’t want to pass on free information to the TA, but Corelli had made it clear there was no choice. As he recounted Miguel’s story of that night at the Ninety-sixth Street station, Willie felt a certain grim sense of irony that the truth, even in broad daylight, still sounded so much like fiction. That had been the problem last night, too. The cops who’d grabbed him uptown thought he was bullshitting them. They’d handed him over to the NYPD less than an hour after finding Slade’s body. They, in turn, methodically interrogated him, attempting to make him change his story about why he was in the subway tunnel in the first place. But Willie hadn’t changed one word of his story. And the more he repeated that he was looking for something gray that crept along the tunnel wall, the more the cops looked at him like he belonged in the psychiatric ward at Bellevue.

“So, that’s it, Corelli,” Willie finished, a wisp of a smile nudging the corners of his mouth. “Slade told Miguel he’d seen somethin’ in the tunnel, and the way I figure it, he went back to take a closer look-see.” To his utter surprise, Corelli nodded benignly.

“Wasn’t this Miguel more specific about what Slade saw?”

“No way. But hell, he was thinkin’ of his girlfriend the whole time. Miggie’s got a real case of hot pants.”

“I want to talk to him,” Corelli decided immediately. In a way, he was a second witness, like Louise Hill. And this was a new twist. Until last week there had never been any witnesses.

“Talkin’ to Miggie ain’t going to be easy, man.” Willie sighed. Corelli’s eyebrows rose immediately. “You see, Miguel Esperanza don’t much like cops…’specialy white cops,” Willie added with a touch of personal rancor.

“I don’t give a shit what Miguel likes. Arrange for me to meet him–this afternoon–in the subway would be easiest. But if he doesn’t want to be seen with me, wherever he suggests. But I want to meet him later today, got that?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Willie got up and pulled his Dogs of Hell jacket closer to his body. “Corelli, now I got a
question for you: What’s your stake in this? My man ain’t the only dude ever to buy the farm in the subway. You out for a promotion, or what?"

“Just doing my job, Willie, that’s all.” Inwardly Corelli smiled at the thought of promotion. Once he’d considered working his way up into mass-transit administration, but after working in the system awhile he rejected the idea totally. Getting fat behind a desk out in Brooklyn or on Madison Avenue wasn’t Frank Corelli’s idea of advancement—it was a one-way ticket to an early grave. He’d stay put until he had no choice or until he finally caught the ghost he’d been chasing for the past five years.

Willie didn’t accept Corelli’s evasive answer. “Look, man, you want any real help from me, you’ve got to level with me. Don’t go handing me none o’ this ‘it’s my job’ bullshit. It’s ten-thirty in the morning and you’re way off your turf interrogating someone you have no business talking to.”

“Okay,” Corelli sighed, “I’ve got a feeling about your friend Slade. I’ve got a feeling he’s just another victim in a long line of victims that nobody has bothered to connect before.”

“And you got the connection?”

“Let’s say I may see a pattern.”

“And people disappearing-like is part of this pattern?”

“Yup.” Corelli nodded. Willie was smart; he’d remembered the questions about the Penny Comstock disappearance on Labor Day. Not everyone would have.

“And you think all the rest ended up like Slade?”

“I really don’t know. Your friend is the only one who’s turned up at all. The rest are plain gone…statistics.”

Willie shook his head sadly. “This is some goddamned city we live in, Corelli.”

“So, let’s see if we can do something about it.” He pulled out his wallet and removed a business card. “Here’s my number at work. Call me before one and tell me where to meet Miguel.”

“I didn’t know the TA sprang for no callin’ cards,” Willie mused while turning the card over in his hands. “Let’s call it a personal service.” Corelli smirked.

“Nice to see someone in the TA’s got some class.” Willie slipped the card into his jacket. “You’ll be hearing from me.” He pulled himself up a little straighter and headed off toward Chambers Street and the subway entrance.

Miguel Esperanza was exactly what Corelli had expected him to be—a tough, street-wise kid who viewed everyone in authority as a potential enemy and a threat to his safety. The city was full of kids like Esperanza, conscripted soldiers in a ragged army of the poor, downtrodden by the middle classes, who wished to close their eyes, snap their fingers, and have all minorities disappear from New York, and ignored by the rich, who swept through the city with gold American Express cards in limousines with tinted windows. Worst of all, they were exploited by their own, by their peers, the con men and ripoff artists who preyed on the ignorance and fear of their neighbors. The melting pot of New York was boiling over, and kids like Miguel Esperanza were dripping into the fire before anyone had a chance to save them.

But Miguel was lucky. He’d met Willie Hoyte and had had enough sense to see that being a member of Dogs of Hell might be the beginning of another life. Not that Esperanza wanted to make it big in the white man’s world. Still, being a Dog of Hell was a stab at self-respect, and in the Spanish barrio, if you didn’t have respect, you might as well be dead. In the past year Miguel had developed enough machismo for five white guys, and the neighborhood girls were more than ready to be the proving grounds for his budding masculinity. To the world at large, Miguel Esperanza was a tough kid.

But at night, alone in his bed, Miguel prayed to his God to show him the right way. To the teeming public of
Spanish Harlem he was untouchable. But naked at night, he was no more than a child—willing to learn, often scared, lonely sometimes to the point of pain. But he knew he was lucky. He’d met Willie, and every day he was taking more steps away from the pointless life of the street that surrounded him. And he was toying with the idea of returning to school or maybe getting his high-school-equivalency diploma. Serving as a Dog of Hell had rounded the sharp corners of his life. And for that Miguel was grateful.

“I tole you, man, that’s all I know,” Miguel repeated slowly with an edge of bitter sarcasm. He’d already been with this damned cop for fifteen minutes and there was no sign he was ready to let up; fucking Corelli wanted to hear the same story over and over again. “Slade kept looking out the window sayin’ he’d seen somethin’, somethin’ gray like a bag of rags. I thought maybe it was a workman or—”

“Just gray? Nothing more?” Corelli interrupted.

“Gray. Like rags. Creeping along the tracks, that’s all.”

“Are you sure he said creeping?” Miguel nodded. No one who belonged down in the subway crept anywhere; it was too dangerous. The first rule of working in the subway was to make yourself as visible as possible.

“Look, Corelli, I’ve got somewhere special to go. How about giving me a break?” Miguel was getting really pissed now. He had a hot afternoon date with Marylu, and shit, here it was three o’clock and he was still sitting in the waiting room of Grand Central Station. It just didn’t figure, Willie playing cozy with a cop. The whole deal was beginning to smell like Hoyte was selling out to the municipal authorities. Next thing, he’d take an official job and dump Dogs of Hell like so much shit in a sack. Well, that was no skin off Miguel’s nose. He had to do what was right for Miguel Esperanza. And right now that meant getting into Marylu’s pants.

“Can I go now, or what?” he asked sullenly. “Yeah, sure,” Corelli reluctantly agreed. The kid wasn’t much help anyway. “But if you come up with anything else, let Willie know. Hell pass the message on to me.”

“Willie’s getting real good at passing messages,” Miguel said bitterly.

“Don’t underestimate him, Miguel. He’s a good man.” Ten minutes later Corelli still sat in the waiting room, idly watching a few stray passengers find their way to early commuter trains. He hadn’t moved because he needed to think. Before talking to Miguel, Corelli had pictured the kind of misfit who’d take pleasure in a mutilation such as Slade’s. New York was full of sick people, both men and women. People poured from state institutions into the uncaring city, where they found neither the medical attention promised them nor the homes even stray animals usually managed. It wouldn’t have surprised Frank if any of these poor creatures took out their frustration in crimes like Slade’s murder.

But Corelli was forced to discard the notion. Those people acted irrationally; Slade’s death was calculated. The method was precise—except for the damage to his lower torso. That was insane, all right, but to Corelli right then it smacked more of impatience than insanity. Impatience? He turned the word over in his mind. Why had he chosen that word? The surgical wounds on Slade’s upper body had taken time; the others were done quickly, without thought. Maybe someone was coming and time was running out. Maybe a train was bearing down on the killers. That would explain the impatience. They’d have to be in a hurry to remove the flesh before taking it away and… What?

Crazy people, like those who roamed the city streets screaming at imagined devils during the day, and who slept in doorways at night, weren’t crafty, they were crazy. Since talking to Miguel, Corelli had begun to suspect that his adversary was something else, something low and hulking, creeping furtively along the tracks, close to the wall, lying low to avoid detection. It might be mistaken for a bag of rags or a swirling mass of newspapers. That was the idea—to be seen as one thing but to be another. But what? There was a cunning intelligence at work, a mind crafty enough to play on the frailties of human observation. And that meant that whoever was killing people down in the subways was far more dangerous than the average loony tune, for he killed intentionally, for a reason. And Corelli was beginning to think he’d stumbled onto that reason…and he prayed to God he was wrong.

He left the waiting room, heading toward the Lexington Avenue exit. Louise Hill, too, had mentioned seeing something gray she thought was newspapers. It was just possible that under a little friendly pressure she might
remember something more about her daughter’s disappearance. After all, so far she was the only witness who’d actually been in the vicinity during the crime. Corelli checked his watch: three-fifteen. He quickly crossed the station’s cavernous lobby to a double bank of telephones.

As the dime clanged down into the phone’s belly and Frank began to dial, he smiled. So, calling Louise Hill was police business, huh? Just who the hell did he think he was kidding?

Had it not been for Corelli’s call, Louise would have gone to bed with a book and then quickly fallen asleep. She found lately she was sleeping a lot, catching little unexpected naps in the afternoon, dozing off after breakfast, or, worst of all, during work in her studio. She understood that the mind’s defenses are powerful, self-activated shields, and as the days since Lisa’s “accident” dragged on, Louise began to understand how terribly affected she was by her loss. It seemed there wasn’t a waking moment when she was not thinking about Lisa—the way she looked, laughed, told her mommy how much she loved her. And when the images of her daughter momentarily relented, the specter of her own guilt took their place. If only she hadn’t been so abrupt with the child. If only she’d been more watchful. If only she’d seen something. If only…

Louise was glad Frank—that was his first name, wasn’t it?—had called. She needed company, if only for a few minutes. Even if the policeman’s presence reminded her of how and why they had met, Corelli was sympathetic, and right now Louise needed that more than anything. Since the day Lisa disappeared, her friends seemed to have followed suit. Not that they weren’t solicitous-at first. In fact, the night the story broke, the phone never stopped ringing with condolence calls. A few friends even brought food. It was all different now. Louise only heard from the police, and that was only when she called. The news was always the same: no news. She’d called a few friends, but they were “too busy” to talk. The women with children were the worst. It was almost as if Louise had contracted a dread infection that might spread to them if they weren’t careful. She wanted to empathize, to understand their fears, their insensitivity, but every snub made her realize just how alone she was in all this. She had to think of other things.

But there were no other things. Nothing other than her lost baby, whose picture she carried with her throughout the apartment. It was a constant companion during the lost, lonely waking hours that punctuated her spells of sleeping. Even now, as she sat at her bedroom’s vanity table while drawing a brush lazily through her hair, Louise’s vague pleasure at hearing Corelli’s voice was overshadowed by Lisa’s haunting smile. She’d heard stories like her own before, dreaded them in some deep recess of her mind which she never admitted existed—until Labor Day. And now Lisa was gone. Taken from her. In the hands of a stranger. Or worse.

An ennui so seductive she had to stand to fight it engulfed Louise. The call to sleep was not to be denied, but she must! Frank Corelli wanted to question her some more. He hadn’t been specific on the phone, but she guessed from his voice that Lisa wasn’t his sole reason for wanting to see her. Louise hadn’t done much dating since David walked out, but she doubted if the male animal had changed all that much in only a year. Behind his earlier questions was a healthy male curiosity about Louise Hill, about what type of woman she was, apart from her tragic situation. Corelli’s attention had momentarily taken her mind off Lisa, and for that blessing she would gladly talk to him for hours.

The doorman’s buzzing signaled Corelli’s arrival. Startled, Louise took a last fleeting look at herself in the mirror and fled the bedroom to answer the intercom. Two minutes later she opened the door to Frank Corelli. He looked exactly as she’d remembered—a tough, overgrown kid with a quick smile and devastating blue eyes. But he was obviously no kid. His manner was authoritative and direct. He was a man who knew what he wanted and was used to getting it.

“Sorry to bust in on you like this, Mrs. Hill.” The smile showed he was actually happy to be there.

“Not at all.” She led him down the hall to the living room. “To tell the truth, I could use the company. I’ve just made coffee. I’ll get us some.”

While she was gone, Corelli unbuttoned his jacket and leaned back against the soft cushions of the couch. He liked this apartment. He felt like he’d drifted into a country house far from the city. During their first interview Louise Hill had mentioned being a textile designer; that explained the proliferation of floral patterns and prints. Corelli wasn’t much interested in furniture and decorating—as long as there was a comfortable place to sit, he was
happy-but in this room you’d have to be blind not to see the time and taste that had gone into decorating it. Almost against his will, Frank began to wonder what kind of a jerk would divorce someone with as many attributes as Louise Hill.

“This time I promise to keep the coffee off the floor,” Louise joked as she returned with a full tray. “I’m not usually so all-thumbs, but under the circumstances…”

“How do you feel?”

“Numb. Like I’d been shot full of novocaine.” She settled in a wing chair opposite him and poured the coffee. “You take cream, no sugar, right?” He nodded. “I feel these past two days have really been years.”

“It’s a natural reaction.”

“Oh? I didn’t know there were natural reactions to having your daughter kidnapped. Or should I say disappear?” She sipped her coffee. “Have you heard anything, Frank? Off the record? I only get a cold shoulder from the police.”

“Oh,” he said, blushing. He’d forgotten they were on a first-name basis; she made his name sound sexy. “The NYPD is still investigating…it’s a big city.”

“That’s always the reason for everything that goes wrong here, isn’t it—it’s a big city. It’s an unfeeling city, is what you really mean.”

Corelli could see the toll her pain was taking on her. Yesterday, despite the tears, Louise had seemed alert and alive. Today she was bedraggled, like she hadn’t been sleeping or had been sleeping too much. A patina of listlessness was slowly enveloping her. Corelli had seen it happen before. Confronted with a terrible situation with no action to take, the mind often closed down—rolled over and went to sleep, as it were. In its extreme form, catatonia set in, isolating the person totally from the world. In its more pedestrian form, life became dull and the little daily tasks of taking care of oneself grew to monumental proportions. Louise Hill seemed right now on the verge of falling into the abyss.

“You don’t have to give in to it, Louise,” Corelli blurted out, his thoughts a non sequitur.

“What?” She looked puzzled.

“Letting this kill your spirit.” Jesus, he was preaching at her. That wasn’t why he’d come over. Was it?

“And what would you suggest, Detective Corelli?” Her voice was strident, full of anger and embarrassment. “What’s your prescription for what ails me?”

“Fight it, Louise! Stand up against it. You’re dealing with your own anger and it’s dragging you down. For Christ’s sake, if you’re angry, yell, throw furniture, beat someone up…something!”

Louise listened impassively. Corelli had edged forward and now sat at the front of the couch, his coffee cup clasped tightly between the palms of his hands. The muscles of his neck were tensed. She mentally traced them from his collar to his jawline. He was right, but she didn’t believe the answer to what she felt could be so simple. The weight of her helplessness had crushed her; getting out couldn’t be as easy as he made it sound.

“Sounds like you’re talking from experience,” she finally said.

“I am.” He fell back against the cushions and drank from his coffee. “But we’re not here to talk about me, are we?”

“Just why are we here, Frank?”

And suddenly Corelli no longer knew why. The chances were that Louise wouldn’t be able to remember anything new. She was an artist. She was used to observing, looking for details. Prodding her memory was probably useless. He really didn’t need her help any longer. But maybe she might need his. That was it. That was why he’d telephoned
her to invite himself over. Yesterday, in his arms, as the anguish of her loss won out, Louise Hill had needed him. She’d needed him there to tell her it was all right. For the first time since Jean’s death, a woman had needed him. And that was why he’d come back-to let Louise know he was there for her.

“I want to help,” he finally answered, simplifying the complex reasons and emotions.

“Thank you.” She held his eyes for a moment, then stared into her coffee cup. “You’re unique, you know that, Detective Corelli? You’re a transit policeman who seems to spend most of his time aboveground helping ladies in distress, a man who works his off-duty hours. And a man who also happens to make a damned fine cup of coffee.”

“You don’t do so badly yourself.” He drained the coffee. “Now, I want to admit something to you-I just stopped by to see that you’re okay.”

“And I appreciate it, Frank. Right about now I could use a friend.”

“Then you’ve got one.” There was a long, awkward silence. “Look, I’ve still got some things to do. I’d better get going.” He stood up and followed her to the front door. “I know this might be the wrong place and the wrong time, but I never was much good at the social amenities. How about having dinner with me one night? It’ll do you some good.”

“I’d like that,” she said without hesitation.

“When?”

She threw her head back and laughed, sending her hair swirling around her long, graceful neck. God, it felt good to laugh. “How about tonight? That is, if you’re not too busy.”

“I’ll pick you up here, about eight?” She smiled in agreement. “See you then.”

Corelli walked south on Columbus Avenue to give himself time to calm down. Jesus, he was feeling like a high-school kid about to go out on his first date. Louise Hill was a great-looking lady. And she had a head on her shoulders, to boot. There weren’t many women he could say that about. At least not the women he’d spent time with since Jean’s death. The truth was, he hadn’t been looking too hard. Being in perpetual mourning had its advantages, after all. It kept life small and manageable. The pain of loneliness was a familiar if somewhat unpleasant companion. Before today, Corelli never considered that his prolonged grief over Jean’s death might be a way to avoid the responsibility and reality of his own life. He’d always felt a great part of himself had died that night with her—and now he began to feel he wanted that life back. Jean was dead. Frank Corelli was very much alive.
Louise was nervous. Actually nervous! Like a college girl waiting for a blind date. Not that she’d been one of the flighty girls who viewed a higher education as four years of sowing wild oats before getting married. She’d wanted to learn, enjoyed the process. And had gone into Fine Arts because she had a decided talent for drawing and painting. It had paid off in a successful career. Textile design might not be the epitome of artistic endeavor, but it satisfied her creative spirit and it filled her bank account to overflowing.

But now, once again sitting at the vanity table, all the money in the world couldn’t have made Louise feel less nervous about her date with Frank Corelli. She rearranged a wild wisp of hair, wishing, not for the first time, that after her divorce she’d done a little less work and spent a little more time investigating the appealing and slightly frightening world of men. Before her marriage she was always being asked out, but she limited herself to one date a week, even on summer vacation. Only after she met and married David Hill did it occur to her that she was afraid of men-as evidenced by a long series of one-time dates with an endless number of faceless men.

But David hadn’t let her off the hook so easily. He was a grad student in business administration when Louise was in her junior year. He followed her, talked to her, cajoled her, and eventually convinced her she’d be better off with him than without him. Louise acknowledged this barrage of flattery by giving him her virginity during her senior year. And for two weeks after, David avoided her, stopped calling, and refused to answer her calls. Louise was convinced she’d been a fool and had paid the ultimate price for her naiveté. It seemed the classic case of the unwilling virgin seduced and abandoned by the older man. Until David resurfaced with profound apologies and a gushing display of tears that both fascinated and embarrassed her.

“I needed the past two weeks… alone…to think,” he shyly explained over dinner their first night back together.

“Think about what?” she asked coldly.

“You…me…us.” He easily declined the pronouns.

“You mean now that you’ve gone to bed with me, what are you…me…us…going to do about it?” Louise mocked in a voice intended to be lighthearted but that was filled with deep hurt at her betrayal.

“I want to marry you, Louise,” David blurted out. “Look, we both know I’ve been around, but this is the first time I’ve ever felt like this.”

“Oh?” was all Louise could manage to say. The fact was, she didn’t know David had “been around.”

“I know you’re not the kind of woman who plays around, then walks away laughing. You’re serious. And I like that.” He smiled and played with his chin like he always did when he was serious. “So, what do you say? Marry me?”

Louise was a sucker for David’s easy charm. Physically he was her dream man—blond as vanilla pudding; flawless blue eyes, perfectly trimmed mustache flecked with red highlights, and enough nice white teeth for three handsome men. That the attraction on both their parts was mainly physical didn’t become obvious until he started fooling around with other women. But that came years later. After moving to New York City. After Lisa was born.

Lisa.

The tears started automatically. In the past three days Louise had cried more than she had in her entire lifetime. They sprang from her with an ease and volume that reaffirmed her Italian ancestry. Louise now dealt with her tears offhandedly, as she might with a fit of sneezing—she waited patiently until they stopped, mopped up as best she could, and then assessed the damage to her makeup. There was nothing she could do to stop the tears. Lisa was still gone. The police knew nothing. And the gap in her life, like a cigarette burning through a fragile swatch of silk, grew steadily outward, destroying everything, until it threatened the very threads that held it together. If only there were something she could do. She’d do anything…anything…to get her baby back.

Corelli was prompt and even brought flowers. He’d decided while showering that he’d do it up royal, go all the
way. Besides, the activity of selecting flowers and thinking about Louise took his mind off his own frustrated search for answers to these disappearances. Since finding the missing-persons file, he’d thought of nothing else. It wasn’t good. It wasn’t healthy. It reminded him too much of his obsession with Jean’s death. He was becoming obsessed again, and he was powerless to stop it.

Louise was pleased by the flowers. She suggested having a drink before going out, but Frank turned her down. He needed to get out, to walk, to keep his mind from fixating too long on the series of unanswered questions that were beginning to plague him. More than that, he needed to feel like a man once again, not just a policeman.

They walked to a restaurant on Columbus Avenue far enough north of Seventy-second Street to avoid the cute shops and bistro that were changing the neighborhood into an expensive, trendy, and utterly charmless chunk of prime real estate. They sat outside in the cool of the evening, silently enjoying each other’s company.

After a time Corelli raised his glass of wine to Louise, then took a sip. “I prepared a long list of things to talk about,” he said candidly. “I’m not great at making small talk, so I had some questions to ask…about you.”

“Ask away.” Louise now wondered why she’d been so nervous; Frank Corelli was utterly guileless.

“I’ve forgotten every damned thing I wanted to know.” He laughed.

Louise laughed, too. She felt very much at ease with Frank. He wasn’t out to prove anything to her. “Then let me ask you a few things. I think we’ve come that far, don’t you?” His answer was to raise his eyes to hers and smile. “So, what makes Frank Corelli tick? I thought all police were straightforward, uncomplicated types. I don’t get that feeling from you. You actually seem to have feelings.”

“It shows, huh?” He laughed.

“Maybe just to me,” she countered.

Frank stared at her a few seconds, then had some more wine. “I started out on a law career and I got sidetracked. Maybe that explains a few things.”

Louise sensed he was letting her enter personal territory, so she pushed ahead. “Want to tell me why you’re working underground instead of in court?”

“Why not? I’ve been living with it every day and night for five years.” They ordered dinner, and while they ate, Corelli told Louise about Jean. “So, after the trial was over, I kind of went to pieces. I stopped studying and finally dropped out—before they asked me to leave. I bummed around a couple of years, feeling very sorry for myself. Then I decided to become a cop.”

“For revenge?” Louise identified with the need to erase the hurt by taking some action. Getting back to her own work was the only things that kept her mind off Lisa.

“You’d think I’d want to get even, wouldn’t you? But that wasn’t it. I wanted to change things so tragedies like Jean’s death wouldn’t continue.”

“Have you changed things?”

He sadly shook his head. “Evil is inherent in human nature. The most I can do is try to keep the really bad ones from doing too much harm. But there’s no stopping it. It can happen to any of us.”

“I know all about it,” Louise replied wearily. “I wish I could be as understanding as you are. I wish I could forgive the monster who took my Lisa, but I can’t. I don’t even try anymore. I just act like she’s already dead. I’m mourning her while trying to remember that I have to go on living. There’s nothing else I can do but accept the shitty hand fate has dealt me.”

“Looks like we’re in the same boat, Louise,” Corelli said softly, needing the words to bring them closer.
“I kind of thought we had something in common, Frank. When I first met you I suspected there might be someone capable of caring lurking under that tough facade.” Her eyes grew wide with amusement. “But I must admit it took a lot of looking before I was sure. You’ve got your act down pat.”

“Saves a lot of wear and tear on the ego.” He drained his postprandial brandy and paid the check. “How about getting out of here? I’ll walk you home.”

Their eyes met for a moment and Frank recognized in Louise Hill the same gnawing need for love he’d denied in himself for so long. He wanted to go to bed with her when they got back to her apartment. She’d probably readily agree; the past days had broken down her defenses. It’d be easy… too easy. An image of her locked in his arms postcoitus flashed past him, and he knew sex tonight would be a mistake. Sex would turn them against each other, complicate their budding feelings, eventually killing them Their need was raw; it must be tempered with understanding, caring. And for that reason, tonight dinner was enough. There’d be plenty of time for sex later; he’d see to that personally…

He saw Louise to her door and promised to call soon. She thanked him for dinner and for being such a gentleman, which made them both laugh. He left without a kiss.
September 6, Thursday

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Lester Baker strolled up St. Nicholas Avenue with the arrogant strut that was one of his trademarks. Uptown you didn’t act tough unless you were tough, because there was a whole line of punks just waiting to prove they were better than you. Toughness came in many shapes—pimping, dealing drugs, killing people for fun or profit. Lester was aware of this unwritten law of not pretending to be what you weren’t, and as he stopped outside, the Three Bells bar, he knew he didn’t have to worry. He was one tough motherfucker. So maybe he wasn’t a big-time deal and would never get his name in the *Daily News*, but he had the respect of his peers. In fact, the group of four men who waited inside the bar for him plainly worshiped Lester Baker. And that was enough for him. For now.

He pulled the door open and strutted into the smoky darkness without breaking his stride. The air conditioner at the Three Bells was an ancient machine, mounted over the front door, that made more noise than it did cool air. In the summer the bar was usually only a few degrees cooler than outside, but tonight as the city temperature began to dip, the bar was icy cold. Lester shivered as he approached the back booth where his friends Ronny, Jackson, Roy, and Sammy always congregated.

“Here comes the man,” Jackson hooted with pride as Lester came into view through the haze. “Get him a brew, boy,” he commanded Roy, pushing him unceremoniously out into the dirty aisle.

“What’s happenin’?” Lester asked, sliding into Roy’s vacant place.

“You tell us,” Ronny said eagerly. At nineteen, he was the youngest member of Lester’s group, but he was still a good man. And Lester knew that with time Ronny would become as proficient with a can of spray paint as he was.

“I thought we’d jes’ hang out tonight, what say?” Lester said solemnly.

The three men around him groaned. Because they always left the plans for a night in Lester’s hands, they were at the mercy of his moods. Sometimes Lester was flying high and wanted to tear up the streets—and that usually meant invading a subway yard where the cars lay like sleeping anacondas in the night—just begging to be spray-painted. Sometimes Lester was in a quiet mood and he’d just want to sit at the Three Bells and get quietly drunk on beer—tempered with a little reefer, of course. Most often Lester rode on an even keel, like tonight, and the evening could go either way. Only Ronny, who aspired to the group leader’s expertise, was gravely disappointed when they didn’t end up in the yard defacing the subway cars. Lester was Ronny’s ideal.

For Lester Baker was “El Bee,” the greatest subway graffitist in New York. Lester had his signature, striped black and yellow like the body of a bee, adorning more subway cars in more prominent places than any other dude in the city. Lester had fallen into spray painting by accident. Like so many kids, he oftentimes just rode the trains around the city to ease the boredom of his life and to take the edge off the frustration of being poor in a city where wealth meant everything. Lester had dropped out of school at age sixteen, and four years later he’d grown bored with just hanging out on the street. He craved a little excitement, a little meaning to life.

One day Lester bought a Magic Marker pen and took it with him into the subway. For years he’d seen the names and fanciful designs covering every inch of every subway car, but this “artwork” never meant much to him. But that day, as his own pen touched a pristine square of cream-colored wall and the spot under the thick black scrawl of “Lester 131” (his street) became his, something changed in him forever. In this writing there was a pleasure so deep that it centered in his groin as if he were about to make love to a woman. “Lester 131” was no longer just a nameless face in the teeming ghetto; he was something, somebody.

Over the next months Lester practiced his skill with the dedication of a medieval apprentice shooting for a guild membership. He refined his signature, embellished it and transmogrified it to “El Bee,” a pun on his initials, that was further enforced by the hymenopterous colors. Lester fell in with a group of young men for whom “writing” was a way of life. In a short time, he’d risen in the ranks to top man. El Bee knew the ins and outs of the subway yards from the Bronx to Coney Island; he knew the times of night it was safe to spray paint and he knew the best paint, the best time to go, the best way to get there and get out, and the best way not to get caught. In short, “El Bee” knew the best because he was the best.
“We been hangin’ out for three days now, Lester,” Ronny complained loudly. “How’s about doin’ somethin’ ’stead of turnin’ into some kinda winos?”

Lester stared him straight in the eyes, then laughed. The sound of his voice broke the tension, and the others laughed with him. “Maybe you got a point there, my man. What say we hit the yard tonight? Do some real fine work for the peoples of this muthafuckin’ city to “predate?” He contentedly sipped his beer and waited for the expected response from the others.

“Now you’s talkin’, brother,” Sammy threw in. Sammy was the quietest member of the group and had the least talent. But he was good at shoplifting, and it was his duty to supply the paint, rubber gloves, flashlights, face masks—everything they might need to work at peak efficiency.

“Well, come on, what we waitin’ for?” Jackson urged. He was jealous of Lester’s reputation. El Bee was good, but he wasn’t all that much better than Jackson LaPierre. And one day Jackson’d prove it!

Lester appraised Jackson for a second, then eased a slow smile across his face. “We waitin’ for me, Jackson, that’s what we’s waitin’ for. So let’s relax and enjoy this good brew. My treat.” Lester felt expansive tonight, like he did anytime he was going out to do some writing. Nothing ever went wrong when he and his men went into the yards. Nothing.

An hour later El Bee led the way across the tracks toward a string of subway cars corralled at the back of the yard. He chose out-of-the-way cars deep inside the pen; cars that were on the periphery of the compound were dangerous, for it was too easy for even the laziest patrolmen to skirt the edges of the area in their halfhearted search for vandals. Only the most dedicated company man plunged into the middle of the yard looking for trouble, and Lester knew this breed of man was rare indeed.

El Bee paused for a second, holding his hand over his right shoulder to signal the column of men behind him to halt; he thought he’d seen something moving in the darkness. He knew the cops were getting smarter. Sometimes they even hid back among the trains and waited for the graffiti artists to come along; then they jumped them and hustled them off to the office, where all hell broke loose. Most guys who got caught just got chewed out for their mischief, but more and more these days, the authorities were getting just plain mean. They were forcing families to pay for the cleaning of the subway car, and there was no way Lester’s mother could come up with the two hundred bucks; hell, she had trouble scraping together three bucks for a half-gallon of cheap wine.

When he was convinced that he and his men were actually alone, that the motion was nothing more than his imagination playing tricks, Lester signaled his men forward. Each of them carried a small canvas bag that held the essential tools. They were no amateur punks jiving around destroying property for the hell of it. They were professionals, men whose names meant something to the cognoscenti of subway art. This was El Bee and his boys, the crème de la crème of subway graffitists.

The troop rounded a corner behind a line of cars as cautiously as a commando team assigned to take a fortified hill position. Lester’s heart began to race and his breath grew shallow. Before him, in the washed-out light of the moon that hung over the yard, a string of newly cleaned subway cars sat like lambs awaiting slaughter. Lester knew he was home. The familiar rush of adrenaline coursed through his body, moving him ahead faster, lighter on his feet. El Bee was about to strike again.

Fifteen minutes later, their work lights were set up around the various cars like miners’ lamps in a coal field. El Bee and his men had begun to work. Lester worked the first car, knowing this was the one most passengers would see as it pulled into the station. Next to him Jackson agonized over his “High Jack” moniker, and two cars down, Ronny, Roy, and Sammy were working inside a car. They were novices, and as such, weren’t allowed to embellish the full side of a car.

Lester had been working for some time on his own name, carefully spraying the outlines of the letters along the side of the car, so the unblemished windows bisected them evenly. He wasn’t interested in covering the glass; that was sloppy, too easy, the sign of a beginner. He’d just finished the last E when he got the sudden and unmistakable feeling he was being watched. He stopped casually and looked around, trying quietly to alert Jackson; the other three were too far away to signal. Definitely, something had changed in the air. There was the feeling of another presence-
presences—and the hair on the back of Lester’s neck prickled at the thought.

“Jackson, you see anything?” Lester whispered to his nearest companion.

“I ain’t seen nothin’. What’s up?” He barely looked up from his work.

“Never mind.” Lester picked up the first can of yellow paint to fill in his name, but the irritating feeling was still with him. He now had the unmistakable impression he was being observed. The cops had started using dogs to sniff out intruders and to hold them at bay; if they were onto him and his men there was no alternative but to pack up and run. If they were onto him.

Lester carefully stowed his gear in his bag and began a routine check down the line of cars. Shit, if the cops caught them, all hell’d break loose. He already had a long record for defacing city property, and if he got caught again, he surely wouldn’t be able to talk his way out of it. He walked past Jackson, who was completing his work, then on two cars away to the others. Here the three boys worked inside together, their lamps casting eerie, flickering shadows through the windows while they blithely defaced what had taken two transit work crews so long to clean. Obviously they neither heard nor sensed anything wrong, anything unusual. Only Lester was worried, and for the first time in his career, he was getting a case of the jitters.

El Bee was returning to the first car when he saw movement. It came from his right on the opposite side of the car he was passing. Something flashed by the open space between cars at exactly the same time Lester did. He was being followed. But it wasn’t a TA cop. No way. It was something low, creeping along near the ground as it shadowed him. Lester swallowed hard as fear replaced curiosity. He froze in place, then waited.

Nothing.

He keened his ears to catch the foreign sound of movement. Before him, in the darkness, the steady hiss of Jackson’s spray paint played out a familiar tune. Behind him the muted laughter of his three buddies reminded Lester that he’d have to reprimand them later for talking on the job. He listened harder, then heard it. A swishing sound, a rustling, really, as if something were rubbing itself along the car’s far side. It was the sound cloth made when it rubbed against metal, accompanied by the sound of stealthily running feet.

Lester pinpointed the sounds. He wanted to run, but his feet were rooted to the place where he stood trembling. The running sounds fanned out beyond him and Jackson in one direction, to the others behind him. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. There were several of them, possibly four or five, and they were spreading out. If they clambered through the sections between the cars, Lester and his men would be surrounded. Trapped. Jesus, were the cops really getting so much flak from above that they’d actually begun doing their jobs?

In a flash of fear-driven inspiration, Lester dropped full out to the ground as if he were about to do a set of pushups. He peered under the car. Not more than ten feet away, something stared back at him. Instinctively Lester hauled out his flashlight from his belt and flicked it on. The sharp beam exploded out into the darkness, cutting a wedge-shaped slice of black from the night. A growl of anger and surprise pierced the silence as the thing angrily waved its arm at the blinding light, then sprang behind the wheel housing, momentarily disappearing from sight.

Lester scrambled to his feet, allowing the flashlight to tumble from his hand. In the split second before the intruder leaped out of sight, Lester saw it clearly. His mind wanted to label the creature as human, but the thing was like no man he’d ever seen before. Wild shocks of hair framed staring, hate-filled eyes. The snarling mouth was an angry gash in the dead white translucent skin. All the time it had been hunched over in a ball, supporting its weight on the backs of its hands. The hands. It was they that Lester remembered most. The hand that had reached out into the night, snapping at the light from the flashlight, trying to strangle it. The hand whose knobby fingers ended in inch-long fingernails that curled downward like talons. The hand of a killer who waited, a few feet away in the darkness, for the right time to strike.

Lester turned without another thought and ran into the darkness alongside the row of subway cars. He didn’t see Jackson until he collided with him and almost knocked him over.

“What the fuck…?” Jackson began. But the moment he saw the terror carved onto Lester’s face, he instantly
stopped talking.

“There’s somethin’ out there,” Lester shouted. “We gotta get outta here, man.”

Jackson looked over his shoulder. He saw nothing. It wasn’t like El Bee to get spooked. Still…he couldn’t see anything. “You jes’ freakin’ out on that grass, man,” he started to say. He never finished.

A low-slung shape leaped from between cars in front of the two men and landed close to the ground. It rested a moment, then sprang forward. With a single leap from a resting start, it landed seven feet away on Jackson. The thing surrounded him with long arms and squeezed the breath from him. Jackson kicked and punched in desperation as the hot breath of the thing burned his neck, but he was trapped.

Lester started running away, back toward the last car to get his other men. The four of them could overpower the creature who had Jackson. He ran flat-out, realizing as he stumbled along that he’d urinated in his pants. It didn’t matter, though. Nothing mattered but getting out of there. Getting Jackson out. Alive!

He reached the car and peered in. It was empty. His three other men were gone, Lester was alone. He immediately dropped to the roadbed and slid under the car to hide himself. He lay there choking back his breath, terrified that the slightest sound might bring one of those things down onto him. Now it was quiet and dark. Nothing stirred for a minute; then a muffled cry to his right got Lester’s attention.

There was a sound from out there, the sound of something—a body?—wriggling around, thrashing about. Lester craned his head around. In a gray puddle of light spilling out from the subway car, Lester saw Sammy. He was lying on his back. A creature similar to the one that had Jackson was sitting on Sammy’s chest, its prehensile toes clutched to his side for support. Its left hand supported Sammy’s head. As Lester watched in terror, the creature pulled Sammy forward like a lover about to bestow a kiss. But instead of a kiss, the creature raised its right arm high above its head, curled its fingers into a claw, then struck suddenly, like a snake attacking. When it pulled back, a piece of Sammy’s throat the size of a fist hung in its bloody hand. The spark of life faded in the boy’s eyes, then flickered out.

Lester began shaking uncontrollably. From off in the distance a cry of pain and terror shattered the safety of the silence. It was Jackson. The creature spring off Sammy and scurried away, revealing the fates of both Roy and Ronny: Roy’s body was being dragged off into the darkness of the subway yard by yet another of the ghouls, and Ronny’s body was receiving special attention. Two creatures, each expertly wielding a knife, were butchering him by hacking away slabs of muscular flesh, then stuffing the bounty into a plastic bag. They were impatient as they worked, and were soon covered from head to foot with blood. When Lester saw the reason for their haste written on their grimly set features, he turned away. Insanity he could have dealt with. Or hatred. Or even anger. But not what he saw. Not with hunger.

Lester gathered all his courage and strength and scampered out from under the car and ran straight forward across the tracks away from the carnage and death. If he didn’t get out, if somehow he didn’t manage to get away, he was dead, as sure as his friends were. He kept running at a ninety-degree angle to the line of cars where his friends had died. If there were creatures looking for him, he hoped they’d stick close to the side of the cars for protection and not dare to run out into the open as he’d done.

When he finally stopped, he was alone. He looked back and saw the creature who had attacked Jackson dragging his body by the arm along the tracks; it bumped and rocked along the rough ground and was finally passed from one creature to another until it disappeared under a subway car. The thing turned now and stared into the darkness. Toward Lester. Lester knew no human being, even an animal with extraordinary night sight, could see him. Yet he knew in his gut that this fiend was watching him, waiting for the wrong move, any move.

As if to prove his feeling right, the creature straightened up to its full height of five feet, then hunkered down, compressing itself into a solid mass. It placed its weight on the back of its hands, and like some monstrous frog, sat with its body poised between its splayed legs. It sprang and landed a mere five feet away from Lester.

Lester had followed the graceful arc of the creature with horrified fascination. Seconds before, escape had seemed not just possible, but probable. He wouldn’t meet the same fate his friends had. Now, with this creature squatting
before him, all that had changed. Lester recovered his composure enough to stumble back against a nearby subway car, hoping to put as much distance between himself and the creature as possible. He turned and started to run. Yet, not five feet away, he was grabbed by the ankle and toppled over onto the tracks by a second hidden creature.

This creature pulled itself from under the car, using Lester’s leg as balance. The first attacker loped forward to help, its forward propulsion an eerie combination of arm and leg motion that made it appear to be rolling, not walking. The movement of flesh against flesh, clothing against the ground, produced a soft swishing sound.

“Jesus! Get away from me!” Lester yelled, unable to free himself from the thing’s grip.

Its long fingers were like the jaws of a rabbit trap around his legs. Using Lester as balance, it climbed up him so quickly he didn’t realize what had happened until he felt the weight on his chest. And suddenly a hand gripped the back of his neck, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the other arm swing up into the air. He was going to get the same treatment Sammy had gotten!

Lester kept his eyes focused on the creature’s face, and with his free hand dived into his pocket, frantically searching for some means of defense. His fingers wrapped around his house keys. He pulled them out, clutching one tightly between his thumb and forefinger, and releasing all his fear and anger, drove the key into one of the creature’s eyes. The thing bellowed, then attacked, biting a flap of flesh from Lester’s shoulder. But it immediately fell back and dropped in pain to the ground.

Lester ran for his life. Only after he stopped for breath did he realize that in his panic he’d run back into the yard, deeper toward the creatures and farther away from help. But it didn’t matter if he died now. He was exhausted. The pain from the wound was excruciating. He couldn’t go any farther.

A soft swooshing noise from behind him broke the sound of his heavy breathing. Lester spun around just as the sharp teeth tore through the sleeve of his shirt. He wanted to scream, but the sound caught in his throat as the pain raced up his arm, across his good shoulder, and blinded him. His knees buckled under him and he fainted, falling across the tracks in a puddle of his own blood.
“Corelli, get your ass in here.” Captain Dolchik’s raspy voice filled the cramped TA office with unusual urgency.

Corelli looked up from the report of the attack on Lester Baker and stared at Dolchik, whose obese form filled the doorway to his office. For a moment Corelli let himself hate the man; not because he was crude and loud but because Corelli suspected the captain was giving him the runaround about Penny Comstock and the others. Just because Dolchik acted like a Keystone Kop didn’t mean he was one. Maybe he was one of the “big boys” that Dr. Geary had mentioned. Why not? It wasn’t totally preposterous. After all, it was his file that had started Frank on his own investigation.

“Corelli!” Dolchik took two or three threatening steps forward. “Did you hear me? Or are your big brains clogging up your ears?”

Corelli slid the Baker report into his briefcase, then pushed back from his desk, ready to take on his bellicose boss. Reading the attack report had given him a jolt, had touched that sixth sense of his that inexorably was leading him through the maze of disappearances toward a clear answer. He didn’t know what the reporting officers made of the subway-yard attack, but as far as Frank was concerned, it was no different from the others-Comstock, Slade… Lisa Hill—except in one way: Lester Baker was still alive to talk about it.

As Corelli entered the captain’s office, Dolchik assumed his favorite position behind the litter-strewn desk-fat fingers folded over the quivering bulge of his stomach, leaning back precariously in his chair, an insincere smile carved onto his pudgy features. That smile grew with each step Corelli took, and by the time they faced one another, Dolchik was grinning like a maniac.

“Have a seat, Detective,” he offered grandly, indicating one of the torn naugahyde chairs usually reserved for dignitaries. Corelli remained standing. “Have it your own way. You always were an arrogant sonofabitch.” The smile slipped away. “Now, tell me, Detective Corelli, exactly what you’ve been up to for the past two days.”

“What is it you want to know in particular, Captain?”

“What? It must have slipped my notice. Tell me about it,” Dolchik said sarcastically.

“I’ve been tracking a series of unusual occurrences, Captain,” Corelli said with as much respect as he could muster. “And it’s taken more time than I expected.”

“Exactly what “unusual occurrences’ do you mean, Detective?” The smile suddenly reappeared. “If you don’t mind me prying.”

“Not at all.” Frank now slipped into the chair opposite his overstuffed inquisitor. “I’m talking about the very same disappearances you’ve kept so carefully hidden these past months. The attacks late at night on subway passengers you pretend aren’t happening.”

Dolchik’s face hardened instantly. His jowls fluttered to rigid attention as his teeth snapped together. For a moment he silently appraised Corelli before speaking. “Is it possible, Frank, that your job is getting the best of you?
“Maybe you’re working too hard?” He got up and ambled to the open office door and shut it.

“I’m not working hard enough. Not when people are getting hurt in the subway because someone wants to pretend these things aren’t happening.”

“Am I really supposed to know what you’re talking about?”

“You tell me, Captain.”

“No, Detective Corelli, you tell me!”

“I’m talking about the fact that eight days ago a woman named Penny Comstock walked into the Fifty-third Street IND and vanished; I’m talking about a little girl named Lisa Hill who was snatched from a subway platform on Labor Day; I’m talking about the death of Ted Slade, one “of the Dogs of Hell, whose body was carved up like last year’s Thanksgiving turkey; and I’m talking about Lester Baker, and God knows how many others.” Corelli’s anger propelled him through the list of names with machine-gun rapidity.

“Baker? Who’s Lester Baker?” Dolchik’s question was almost inaudible.

“The latest victim. He’s ‘El Bee,’ the subway graffiti king. He’s at Columbia Presbyterian in shock.”

Dolchik’s face paled. “I didn’t know.”

“Baker was attacked last night by a guard dog in a yard while he was spraying some of the cars. The reporting officer said the dog was already crazed before he encountered Baker. Something had gotten under its skin and it attacked without the handler’s command. What do you make of that?”

Dolchik shook his head. He stared at Corelli for a moment, and when he spoke, he’d regained his composure.

“What’s the connection between this and the other names…whoever they were?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to find out; that’s my investigation. And I don’t intend to let you or anyone else fuck me up,” Corelli answered hotly.

“That sounds like an ultimatum, Frank. I don’t like that.” He searched for a fresh cigar, but couldn’t find one.

“You’re really pushing me, you know that? You’ve already stepped on the wrong “toes by questioning Geary…” he began to say, but thought better of it. “Why the hell should I let you go off on this wild-goose chase while the other men get the shit jobs? You wanna explain that one tome?”

Corelli got up slowly, digesting the fact that Dolchik already knew he’d visited New York Mercy Hospital and had talked to the pathologist. But as he walked directly to the file cabinet to Dolchik’s left he didn’t betray his surprise that his movements had been charted already; he had other things to do right now. With one swift movement he stooped down and tried to open the bottom drawer that contained the missing-persons file. The drawer was locked.

“Looking for something special?” Dolchik’s voice was thick with sarcasm.

“The file you’ve kept on the very same disappearances I’ve been talking about, Captain.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Dolchik lied.

“I made a copy of it,” Corelli revealed. It was important now—now that Geary’s name had come up—that Dolchik believe he knew everything there was to know about the missing persons. “So don’t try to bullshit me.”

Dolchik made an aborted lunge across the desk, but Corelli avoided him.

Corelli sat back down and lit a cigarette. “Now, shall we talk, or do we play some more pussyfoot?”

“I’ll have your badge for this, Corelli,” Dolchik sputtered. “Breaking into my office, invading my private files—”
“They aren’t private, goddammit, they’re the property of everyone in this city who’s ever ridden the subway.” Frank slammed his fist down on the desk.

“Jesus, a goddamned knight on a white charger, a one-man savior of the subway.” Dolchik sadly shook his head.

“What’s your stake in this, Stan?” Corelli asked to keep the subject alive.

“I have no stake in anything!”

“You’ve been keeping a file on these disappearances. That means something.”

“I keep files on a lot of things,” Dolchik countered. “Look for yourself. You seem to know where everything in my office is.” For a second the muscles along his jaw fluttered with suppressed rage.

“I suppose I deserve that,” Corelli said with mock humility, “but this goes far beyond my feelings about you, or vice versa. The fact is, there has been a string of disappearances going back well over a year, and you’ve been monitoring them all.”

“This is bullshit, Corelli.” Dolchik pushed his chair back as if the interview were over.

“Sit down, fat-ass,” Frank hissed, momentarily losing control of himself.

“I’ll have your badge for this,” Dolchik threatened, but he resumed his place nevertheless. “I’ve seen punks like you come and go. You’re a dime a dozen, turning the subway into your own private Coliseum so you can do battle with the age-old forces of evil. Well, this is the twentieth century and you’re doing nothing more than interfering with things that are none of your business.” He snatched the remains of a dead cigar from an ashtray, lit it, and blew the filthy smoke directly into Corelli’s face.

“Either answer me straight about the file or I take my photostats of your report along with a report of my own to the mayor, then to every newspaper editor in town.”

Dolchik paled at the suggestion. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s the connection? What links them all together?”

“I don’t know if there is one.” Dolchik shrugged. “Honest, Frank, I’ve kept the file, not knowing if it meant anything or not. You know how it is: it’s a big city, too big. Even the government is out of control. How often do you put two and two together and actually get four?”

“Once is enough,” Frank countered. “And it looks to me like that file is that once.”

“So I put some random reports together. Hell, Frank, you know this office gets more shit dropping into it than the hole in an outhouse. Some of it gets filed, most of it gets thrown away. The missing-persons reports happened to get filed.”

“And stashed away in a locked file cabinet?”

“It wasn’t locked until yesterday; you know that.” Dolchik shook his head. “You’ve got it all wrong. Jesus, you ain’t gonna leave me any secrets, are you?” He squashed the smoldering butt into an ashtray and pulled himself from his chair, exhaling loudly with the exaggerated exertion. A second later he opened the file drawer and reached deep into it and produced a pint bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label Scotch. “With the fucking lushes around here, this little baby wouldn’t stand a chance if it weren’t locked up. Want a hit?”

“No, thanks.” Dolchik was lying through his teeth about the file.

“Guess I’ll pass, too, then.” He returned the bottle and found his place again. “Does that explain the locked drawer good enough for you?”
“It’s an explanation.” Corelli tried to remember if there’d been a bottle in the drawer when he’d opened it. Dammit, he couldn’t remember. The Scotch was a good excuse-too good. Either Dolchik was telling the truth or he was turning out to be one cagey sonofabitch. The first explanation was highly unlikely-and the second scared the shit out of Corelli.

“You know, Frank, you are the most suspicious cop I’ve ever seen. What possible reason would I have for hiding those reports? If I’d hidden them.”

“Maybe you’d begun to see something in the pattern of disappearances that scared you.”

Dolchik laughed too loudly, too brashly. “Scared me? If I don’t get scared every day watching the hoodlums who make this subway their home, how’s a bunch of reports gonna do it?” He choked on the laugh, cleared his throat, then dropped the congenial facade. “Besides, a missing-persons report like the one on that Comstock dame don’t mean shit. Who’s to say she really disappeared? I’ve never cross-checked with the NYPD to see if they stayed disappeared upstairs,” he scoffed, using verbal shorthand for the world of the city outside the subway. “And you can’t trust the word of token-booth clerks. Most of them can’t count beyond ten, anyway. And they’re usually the ones who report these quote missing persons unquote.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” Corelli agreed in his most polished and obsequious voice. Dolchik was busting his ass to put him off the scent; it might be better to let him believe he’d done just that. “Maybe I’ve been letting my imagination run away with me.”

“Glad to see you’ve come around to my way of thinking,” Dolchik said cheerfully. “It’s about time we began to see eye to eye on some things, Frank.” He plucked a fresh cigar from his top drawer, bit off the end, and lit up. “We’ve got enough trouble down in this hellhole without fighting among ourselves, what say?”

“The frustration’s just got to me. I’ve been acting like a real asshole, I guess.”

“Forget it,” the captain said magnanimously. “We’re all entitled to our share of mistakes.”

“I just thought I might be onto something. You know how it is,” Corelli said meekly.

“Hell, the next thing you know, you’ll be telling me the creepers are coming to get us.” Dolchik cackled with laughter.

Corelli smiled at the idea, too. The creepers were subway legend. There were many stories of the wild band of misfits and monsters who haunted the tracks and tunnels of the subway late at night. But so far no one had ever caught one, or even seen one and been able to prove it. No, the creepers were fantasy concocted to while away the long hours underground doing a thankless job. And until the myth was proved real, there was no point discussing them seriously at all.

Dolchik walked to the office door. The interview was over. He waited for Corelli to join him, but he remained where he was, his back to the door. “One more thing, Captain; I need a couple of days…”

“Sure, take them. Get away for a while, shake off the grime of the subway.” Dolchik sounded almost relieved at the thought of having Corelli out from under his feet “But just take a couple of days—today and tomorrow. Saturday morning I want you here full-time. No more shit No more disappearances. No more nothing. You got that?”

“It’s ringing clear as a bell.” Corelli got up lazily and sauntered to the door. “You’re all right, Dolchik.”

“That and a token will get you a ride on the subway,” he said uneasily. “Now, get the fuck out of here, and for Christ’s sake, don’t tell the other guys what a pussy I’ve been with you or they’ll all be in here telling me they’ve seen ghosts they want to investigate.”

Five minutes later Dolchik watched Corelli chat with a couple of the men, go to his desk to get his wallet and briefcase, then leave. Dolchik waited five minutes more before picking up the phone, just to be sure he wouldn’t be interrupted. He dialed and waited. Calling this number was familiar, almost routine. The enormity of the task he and the others were about to embark on no longer scared him. And liaising between the underworld of the subway and
the glittering heights of the most exclusive and clandestine government circles no longer intimidated him. Stan Dolchik was task-force commander for this operation, and as such, that made him one helluva special guy.

“It’s Dolchik…” He lowered his voice when the phone was answered. “I gave him the bottle-of-Scotch bullshit, but I don’t think he bought it.” He took a long, deep breath. “It looks like we’re in trouble. Something’s got to be done about Frank Corelli-fast.”

Corelli made up a list of things to do before the afternoon was over. He had the uneasy feeling that time was running out. Not the two days Dolchik had allotted him, but the leeway that someone else—the unknown quantity, the “big boys”—controlled. He’d called Dr. Geary at New York Mercy to ask a few more questions (and to drop Dolchik’s name) and was told that the doctor was gone for the day. It was possible, of course, but Frank suspected he’d never be able to reach the good doctor again. New York Mercy was a big hospital, with big defenses to protect its own—if need be.

In fact, New York Mercy Hospital itself seemed to be taking on an ominous importance in the case. The TA report on Lester Baker stated that he’d been admitted to Columbia Presbyterian on 168th Street. Yet, when Corelli visited there not more than an hour after leaving Dolchik, the nurse on duty said Baker had been dismissed, sent home. Corelli questioned her, and finally, after a few threats of official reprisals, she’d admitted that Baker had been transferred, not dismissed. Transferred to New York Mercy.

A blaring car horn snapped Corelli back to reality. He nodded good-naturedly at the red-faced driver of the car he’d almost hit, then stepped on the gas. Minutes later, after swerving in and out of traffic, he was in front of New York Mercy Hospital on upper Fifth Avenue. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror and was surprised to see how firmly his jaw was set. Well, what did he expect, after all? A week ago he’d been just another transit cop slogging through the sewer of the subway system, dealing with the crime and the mundane pettiness of the riders. But today he was up to his neck in something he just couldn’t pinpoint. Something was going on around him, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that the cover-up surrounding it was very well-orchestrated. The missing persons. The kidnapping of Lisa Hill. Ted Slade’s death. The attack on Lester Baker. And Dolchik’s threats. They were all tied together, but what the hell did it all mean?

Talking personally to Lester Baker should clear up a few things. Thank God he was still alive. The clerk at the hospital information desk was a woman in her late forties. She was pinch-faced, bespectacled, and wore her shock of yellow hair—the color of banana skins—in a tight bun. As Corelli approached, she examined his handsome face, then surreptitiously slid her glasses from her nose; they fell to her ample bosom, bounced once, then rested in place.

“May I help you?” Her voice was surprisingly deep and rich.

“A friend of mine is a patient here and I’ve forgotten his room number.”

“Happens all the time,” she said cheerfully. “If you’ll just give me the name…”

“Baker. Lester Baker.”

“I’ll check.” She rescued her glasses and slapped them into place, then nipped through the card catalog. A minute later she was still looking.

“Trouble?” Corelli asked helpfully. Either she was a real dunce or she was stalling for time.

“I can’t seem to find the name.” The confidence in her voice was lost.

“It’s Baker. B-a-k-e-r.” Something was wrong. She was obviously stalling, trying to decide what to do next. A slight flush had risen in her cheeks.

“I don’t see the name Lester Baker,” she repeated nervously. “But if you’ll wait, I’ll check the master file…in the office.” The flush had washed over her neck and cheeks. She looked a little frightened, too.

“That’s very thoughtful,” Corelli said. He quickly scanned the lobby for the exits. The only security guards looked bored and listless; there’d be no problem getting by them—if he had to get out in a hurry.
“I’ll be right back, so don’t go away,” she chirped. “Oh, one more thing: may I please have your name?”

“Why?”

“Well, if I find your Mr. Baker…I’m sure he’d want to know you’re here.” Her voice faltered and broke.


The receptionist’s eyes widened, and she blushed deeper. Without another word she turned and headed toward the back office. The minute her back was turned, Frank walked quickly to the front door and left.

While Corelli talked with the receptionist, six floors above them in a private room in the geriatric wing of the hospital, Lester Baker lay in bed, drifting lazily between consciousness and sleep. Fifteen minutes earlier he’d received an injection for pain. The nurse complained he wasn’t due for more medication, but Lester was a good actor. In the end, she gave him a hefty dose of Demerol and made him promise not to give her away. The pain from his wounds wasn’t so bad, he reflected, and the drug sure felt good. And it was legal…and free!

Lester’s private room was quiet and warm. With the Venetian bunds turned against the early-afternoon sun, he felt like a caterpillar dozing in the safety of his tent high in the trees. In the hall outside his room, muted voice and call bells punctuated his languor with a syncopated irregularity. Lester had seen the policeman watching him from the empty room adjacent to his, but he didn’t care. After what he’d told them last night, he was a star witness. The cop was just to protect him from those things. That made sense—as much sense as anything had since the attack started.

Sure they were protecting him from those monsters. What other reason? Why else was he locked away from everyone alone, without being told where he was or how long he’d have to stay? Shit, spray-painting subways wasn’t so bad a crime he had to be treated like a prisoner of war. No, it was all because of those things. Through the Demerol haze, Lester’s mind spiraled backward to last night. He fought to drag himself back into the present, but it was no good. The familiar terrifying images of all his friends being slaughtered took over and skimmed over the surface of his consciousness.

What he saw last night had happened! He’d told the cops, told them everything. They said they didn’t believe him. But who would? Who would believe the story of some drugged-out black kid who talked of monsters killing his pals? Lester wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t been there. But someone had. Why else was he shackled to this hospital bed with a police guard outside? Why else was he told he couldn’t have visitors or make any calls? They believed him, all right. And they were keeping him prisoner because of it.

As his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep, Lester thought to himself: Jes’ let ’em try to keep my friends away. I already put in a word with the right person. I’ll have visitors soon. I’ll tell ’em what happened last night. I’ll tell ’em.

An hour later the door opened and an orderly carrying a tray with a basin of soapy water, a washcloth, and towels stepped gingerly into Lester’s room. He put his equipment on a wheeled table near the door, then pulled it over to the bed. He then roused the sleeping patient.

“Hey, man, rise and shine.” The orderly peered closer, and when Lester’s eyes began to flutter open, he asked, “You awake enough to talk, or what?”

Lester’s eyes flew open now. The horrible dreams had just begun, and for a second the orderly’s face hovering so close might have been that of any one of his friends—except that they were all dead.

“Time to get washed up, my man,” the orderly said with unnatural good cheer.

“Willie?” Lester refocused his eyes, thinking the dope the nurse had given him was some fine stuff. “Willie Hoyte?”

“None other than. I got your message.” Willie’s eyes darted quickly to the door. “We got to talk soft, man. There’s one big muthafucker of a cop outside.”
“The place is crawling with them,” Lester said lazily. “So Bimbo got through to you.” Washington “Bimbo” Calhoun was an orderly in the emergency room. He’d been on duty when Lester was secretly transferred from Columbia Presbyterian. Although the two men had known each other since childhood, they had gone their separate Ways-Bimbo to work, Lester to play. Still, blood and heritage were thicker than water, and when Bimbo saw his old pal in the hands of the police, he wanted to know why. It didn’t take long to discover that Lester Baker was one special patient—he was locked away on the geriatrics floor with a twenty-four-hour guard, his name didn’t appear on the official patient list, and the floor staff and receptionist had been told to report anyone who inquired after him. No matter what they called it, Bimbo knew Lester was being held prisoner. He’d gotten in to see him, then passed along the message to Willie. He also provided Willie with one of his extra uniforms and an identification tag to get him past the security.

“Bimbo said you was in trouble.” Willie dipped the washcloth in the soapy water, then wrung it out.

“What you aimin’ to do with that washrag, Willie?”

“I’m here to wash you up, El Bee. What else?” Lester started to protest, but Willie silenced him. “Shit, man, you’re in a heap o’ trouble and I may be the only one to get you out. So if I gotta wash you to make it look good, you’d better smile and say ‘thank you.’” He untied Lester’s “johnny” top, slipped it off, and began to wash his chest.

“Now, what’s up?”

“They’s all dead, Willie. All my boys—Ronny, Jackson, Roy, and Sammy.” He squeezed his eyes shut and tears seeped through and rolled down his cheeks. “I saw them all die, one by one. Those things got them.” His voice rose in a quivering vibrato.

“Keep your voice down. Want that pig in here?” Willie warned. “Now, tell me everything.”

Lester’s obvious fear had prepared Willie for the worst, but he wasn’t prepared for the devastating story that followed. While he carefully worked, keeping a close watch on the door, Willie listened, wondering if El Bee’s brain hadn’t finally turned to Swiss cheese with all the marijuana and coke he’d pumped into it over the years; it should have gone a long time ago. But Willie quickly discarded the idea. Drug dreams come and go, but hell, even an acid flashback was never this severe. Lester Baker was clearly scared as hell. Willie recognized real fear when he saw it, everyone from uptown did. But a story about monsters?

Willie didn’t get much chance to pursue this thought further, for the cop walked in and shouted, “What’s going on in here?”

“Jes’ finishin’ up, sir,” Willie said meekly.

“You’re doing one hell of a lot of talking. I can hear your voices through the door.” He stepped forward and looked from Willie to Lester, then back to Willie. The cop looked like the kind of guy who would beat the shit out of you first and ask questions later. He stood well over six feet tall and had to weigh 225 if he weighed an ounce. Unlike the standard paunch-bellied, slovenly New York policeman, this guy was solid muscle, tensed, ready to spring. His eyes looked perpetually skeptical and mean. “Just exactly what are you talking about?”

“Who are you? My mother?” Lester asked insolently. “This dude and I are just strikin’ up an acquaintance. That ain’t so strange, seein’ how he’s washin’ my privates.”

The cop blushed at the answer and averted his eyes from the bed. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll save your smart-ass answers.” He stationed himself inside by the door, arms folded across his massive chest. “I want you, boy, out of here…now!” he spit at Willie.

Willie felt a cold rush of fear slither up his spine, cross his shoulders, and race down each arm. If the cop got too nosy, the shit would really hit the fan. Impersonating an orderly wasn’t so bad, but talking to a prisoner the cops wanted out of the way was. He quickly dried Lester, pulled the table away from the bed, collected the tray, and sailed out of the room past the cop.

Halfway to freedom, the cop called to Willie. “You! Stay right there. I want to talk to you.”
Willie froze. The hospital whites and Bimbo’s name tag were a good cover, but the wallet in his pocket said he was Willie Hoyte. Why the fuck did he bring the wallet? How could he have been so dumb? If the cop searched him, the jig was up.

The cop loomed up over Willie, planting his feet widely apart, his hands on his hips, while the fingers of his right hand played a soft tattoo on the worn leather of his holster. “Now, you want to tell me exactly what you and your friend were talking about?”

“I-” Willie began, but he never finished.

“Jesus, help me!” Lester screamed from his room. “Oh, my God, no!” The half-closed door obstructed the cop’s view of Lester, and for one fleeting second he hesitated, unsure whether to grab Willie or to run back into the hospital room. Lester screamed again, and the cop darted into the other room.

Willie heaved the soapy tray onto a nearby chair, where it tilted wildly, then clattered to the floor, spilling its contents everywhere. Willie pulled the door open and ran out into the corridor. At the far end, at the nurses’ station, a lone nurse bent over a chart, writing a medication report. Willie slowed down and walked away from the station, hoping his fast exit hadn’t caught her attention. The nurse did look up momentarily, but then she returned to her work.

He had no idea where the corridor led, but as long as it was away from that cop, it was okay. At best, Lester’s diversionary screams gave him only a minute’s head start. He stayed close to the wall, eyes down, until he reached the end of the corridor, where he turned right. He passed through double doors into another corridor that was dotted with elderly patients. Some were in wheelchairs; others walked along at a snail’s pace, supported by metal walkers. Yet others sat motionless, staring off into space. Willie tensed as he saw he was approaching another nurses’ station, this one populated by several nurses and a black security guard.

“Afternoon,” Willie said cheerfully as he strolled past the station toward a red exit sign halfway down the hall.

“You working here?” a gray-haired nurse inquired after looking him up and down with obvious distaste. “No, ma’am. I’m working down in Pediatrics.” The moment he said it Willie wished he’d kept his mouth shut Saying too much always got him in trouble.

“Then you’re going the wrong way. Pediatrics is in the north wing.” The nurse shook her head and turned to the guard. “Pediatrics doesn’t use a staff orderly, do they, Lem?”

“You’ve got a point there,” the guard agreed. He now looked suspiciously at Willie, who still continued to walk away from them despite the nurse’s imprecations. “Come over here a second, will you, boy?” The guard pulled himself up straight and squared his shoulders.

At that precise moment the cop who guarded Lester rounded the corner, saw Willie, and shouted, “Stop that motherfucker!”

If the suddenness of the outburst hadn’t stunned the group at the nurses’ station, the epithet did. They all-security guard included-stared at the red-faced cop barreling down the corridor like a maniac escaped from the locked ward. “Grab that cocksucker!” the cop yelled in desperation.

By the time the security guard snapped to and started down the hall, Willie was through the exit door, leaping down stairs three at a time. His only chance was to make it to the main floor, then back out to the street before anyone had a chance to contact the hospital’s main security force. He needed to stop and catch his breath; his heart pounded in against his chest and the blood rushed to his head, flashing against his eyes in spurts of white and red. He needed to stop, but the sounds of clattering footsteps behind him kept him running.

On the ground floor Willie pushed against the steel door that led into the main lobby. It was locked! He leaned full against it, shoving with his shoulder-the door stood fast. The sounds of the cops grew closer, and with one final desperate push Willie ran against the door. It sprang open into the busy hallway and knocked over a dietitian carrying a food tray. At the same time, it set off an alarm that rang ferociously down the corridor.
Willie spun into the hallway from the force of his run, nearly tripped, but quickly righted himself and ran full-out toward the exit out onto Fifth Avenue. Once outside, he halted on the sidewalk, temporarily blinded by the sun. Which way should he go? The cops were sure to be converging on the hospital from all directions. Only Central Park across the street seemed a safe escape. He’d run through the park and exit on the West Side. Then he’d decide what to do about Lester.

As he stepped into the street, a car screeched to a halt in front of him and the driver leaned out. “Going somewhere, Mr. Hoyte?”

Willie’s throat constricted so tightly he choked. He peered into the car, his eyes wide with fright. He expected a cop. He expected to be hauled off to jail, then to disappear like Lester Baker because he, too, now knew too much. He expected all that, but what he found was Frank Corelli sitting as impassively as the Cheshire cat in Alice’s nightmare.

Without a moment’s hesitation Willie leaped into the car and pulled the door closed. “Let’s get the fuck outta here, Corelli!”

“Seems I’m in the habit of saving your ass, Willie.” Corelli pulled away from the curb just as the cop and hospital security guard ran out onto the pavement. “Now, maybe you can start returning the favors.”

Twenty minutes later they were silently seated over coffee at one of the many Greek-owned coffee shops that speckle the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Corelli’s patience was about at an end. He was willing to allow Willie all the time he needed to explain why he’d flown out of the hospital like a cannon shot, but it was getting late and Willie was being evasive.

“Want to tell me about it, Willie?” Frank finally probed after ordering a third cup of coffee.

“Tell you about what, man?”

“Tell me why the hell you’re dressed like young Dr. Kildare. And tell me why you left the hospital like the KKK was on your heels.”

“Bug off, Corelli!” Willie replied sarcastically.

Corelli slammed his hand down on the tabletop, jarring the coffee cups and knocking over a napkin holder. Several other patrons, disturbed by the sound, looked up anxiously; then they turned away, pretending nothing had happened; they didn’t want to get involved.

“It looks to me like you’re in one hell of a mess, Willie. You’re wearing someone else’s uniform-Washington Calhoun, if I read correctly-and you’re in trouble with the law.”

“You don’t know no such thing.”

“Save the bullshit for your puppy dogs from hell. I’m a cop. I can smell it when someone’s in trouble, and you stink of it! Now, do you want to discuss it here in this nice, friendly atmosphere, or do I take you back to the hospital and find out just what’s up?”

Willie thought a moment, then relented. “Okay, okay. You proved your point, man. You’re one big tough cop.” He sipped his coffee, trying to ignore his grudging admiration for Corelli. He didn’t treat Willie or his boys like scum, the way so many TA cops did. Corelli was willing to level with him. “I had to get into the hospital to see El Bee,” he finally admitted, waiting for the policeman to ask just what that name meant.

“Did you see Lester?” Corelli, of course, knew Baker’s nickname, had even met him a couple of times. But what got his ass was: just how the hell did Hoyte know where Baker was, when it had taken him all morning to find out? Of course, Washington Calhoun, the orderly. “Well, did you see him?” Willie reluctantly nodded. “And…?”

“They got Lester tied down in bed. He’s so doped up he don’t hardly know where he is. He got the word to Bimbo”—he pointed to the name tag on his shirt—“that he wanted to see me. El Bee and me go way back to Lenox
“Avenue.”

“He’s tied up?”

Willie nodded. “They got him shackled down at the wrists and ankles like when they’re afraid someone is going to try to hurt hisself.”

“Oh get away,” Corelli mused.

“And there’s a cop sitting outside in another room.”

“He’s not in the hall where he can be seen?”

“No, sir. They’s an empty room right next door. You got to get by this big mick to see El Bee.”

“And you just waltzed past him, pretending to be an orderly?”

“I sure did,” Willie replied proudly. “That cop was as dumb as a donkey’s asshole.”

Corelli had struck gold! If the NYPD had Baker confined to solitary at New York Mercy Hospital with an armed guard, that could only mean that he knew something, had seen something—something connected with all the other subway troubles. The TA report was innocuous enough about what had happened: Baker had been apprehended in the car yard after being attacked by one of the guard dogs, and was taken to Columbia Presbyterian. It also mentioned that he’d been hysterical when caught, and Corelli had at first overlooked that point—who wouldn’t be hysterical after being attacked by a German shepherd? Now that particular piece of information seemed more ominous.

Corelli was starting to see that it was Lester Baker who held the key to this puzzle at the moment. He’d sensed it from the start, from the moment he’d read the report. Frank had seen too many routine reports in his time not to be suspicious. It wasn’t so much what the report had said as what it didn’t say. For one thing, guard dogs didn’t just attack without provocation; something had angered or frightened the beast enough to cause it to bite Baker; for another, the mental state of the apprehended is rarely mentioned—unless “hysterical” meant raving mad. And what, in the subway yard, could drive a guard dog into a vicious frenzy and cause Lester Baker nearly to lose his mind?

“What did your friend El Bee have to say for himself?” Corelli asked nonchalantly.

“Nothing much,” Willie answered, just as blasé. Corelli stared at him a moment, then finished his coffee, called for the check, and dug into his pocket for his wallet When he pushed his chair back as if to leave, Willie finally reacted. “What you doing?” he asked suspiciously.

“We’re getting out of here. I’m taking you back across town to New York Mercy.” “Now, hold on, Corelli—”

“You hold on, mister. I don’t know what kind of game you think you’re playing, but count me out. You want to act like a prick, go ahead. But you’re going to have to do it with the men in blue. I’ve had it.”

“You take me back there, and I’m going to disappear like Lester did. There’s some bad shit going down at that hospital that someone don’t want nobody to know about.”

“Then for Christ’s sake, tell me what happened.” Frank settled back in the chair and waited.

Willie started talking slowly, keeping his eyes riveted on the coffee cup in front of him. He now wished he’d never had that call from Bimbo Calhoun, never gone to see El Bee. Willie was wishing that he were far away in a safe place where nothing could harm him. But the old feelings of insecurity tumbled back. He fought desperately to fend them off, but lost. It was like when his father went to prison. Willie’s world fell down around him and left him feeling like he was standing at the top of a flagpole on one foot.

By the time he finished retelling Lester’s story, his voice was trembling with emotion. By El Bee’s bed Willie had forced himself to remain calm while the tale of horror was revealed. But telling Corelli proved too much for him,
and the pure, raw emotion spilled forth. Willie reached for his coffee and spilled it over the table because his hands were shaking so badly.

“Hey, take it easy,” Corelli soothed as he mopped up the mess with a handful of napkins. “You’ll be all right.”

“Sure’s hell I will,” Hoyte replied defiantly.

“It’s all right to be upset. You’ve been through hell in the last couple of hours.”

Willie clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Maybe where you come from it’s cool to bawl like a baby, but where I come from, anyone sees tears and you’re dead.”

“I come from Brooklyn, and the last guy who laughed because I was man enough to show how I felt is now wearing his face on the back of his head.”

“You something else, Corelli.” Willie laughed.

“You’re doing okay yourself, Mr. Hoyte,” he said easily. His flattery wasn’t entirely without purpose; Willie now knew as much as Lester Baker, and that made him valuable—and dangerous. “El Bee said he was with friends when he was attacked? Are you sure of that?” The report hadn’t mentioned anyone else being present.

“He was with four guys. He say they all dead now.”

“Then what happened to their bodies?” Willie started at the word “bodies,” and Corelli immediately regretted being so blunt. “I know it’s tough for you to talk about this, but it’s important.”

“He never got to tell me everything. That cop busted in on us.”

“Well, you’ve done fine, Willie. Just fine,” Frank said sincerely. The fact was there were still things to know, but he’d have to hear them from Lester Baker himself. But that wasn’t going to be easy. He’d been taken to New York Mercy Hospital and was being kept doped up in maximum security. All because he’d been attacked and his men had been killed. By what? Something monstrous. Something too horrible to talk about. Somebody didn’t want him to talk. Somebody didn’t want the story of the things in the subway to get out. Somebody with enough pull in this city to erase the trail that led from Lenox Avenue to the morgue. Somebody who would go to any lengths to keep this quiet.

Any lengths. Corelli wondered just how far they would go when the chips were down. It was important that he know, for he was the one person in New York who had traced the pattern from the subway to New York Mercy.

And that made him a threat! And, goddammit, he’d already bragged to Dolchik about tipping off the newspapers if necessary. And he’d blown his cover with the pathologist, Dr. Tom Geary… and with the nurse at Columbia Presbyterian… and with the receptionist at New York Mercy. If he weren’t careful, Frank Corelli would not only help put the noose around his own neck but also help spring the trapdoor!

But right now there were other things to do than worry about his own safety. “Go home and keep your mouth shut, Willie. Give back the uniform and tell Bimbo that as far as he’s concerned he never saw Lester Baker and that he never saw you. And for God’s sake don’t tell anyone the story El Bee told you.”

Willie shook his head angrily. “Man, these things live in the subway and it’s my sworn duty as a Dog of Hell to protect people riding down there.”

“You ain’t the boss, man.”

“I’ve got a straight line to the boss. You and your Dogs of Hell have been pretty lucky so far, whether you know it or not. You’ve been clever pulling the press in to keep a high profile, but let me tell you something, man,” Corelli leaned forward to emphasize his impending threat. “Anytime the TA gets the notion to shut you down, it will, legally or otherwise. And if you think I’m bullshitting, you’re dreaming. If I hear one story from anyone about
monsters living in the subway, you’ll be fucked so fast you won’t even know your ass was up in the air! Have I made myself clear?”

Willie didn’t reply.

“I repeat: Have I made myself clear, Mr. Hoyte?”

“You sure have, you bastard,” Willie spit out.

Corelli relaxed. The threat had worked. “Glad to see the old Willie Hoyte back once again. Now that we’ve got the intimidation out of the way, I’m going to need your help.” Willie’s eyes brightened at the thought. “I want you and your boys to listen to what people are saying in the subway; watch the tunnels, too, particularly late at night, and report anything unusual to me. We’ve got to find out where these things come from.”

“You mean I’m getting a piece of the action?”

“All you want, but you’ve got to keep it quiet. If you don’t, like you said, you might end up like Baker—tied down in a hospital room with a guard—or like Ted Slade.”

Willie’s eyes blazed with hate at the thought of his buddy and what had happened to him. “No way they gonna get Willie Hoyte that easily. I’ll give the muthafuckers a run for their money.”

Corelli smiled at Willie’s loyalty to his men and to his own ideals. If only there were more Willie Hoytes in New York, the city might not be such a bad place to live. “Let’s get out of here. I’ll drop you home.”

Fifteen minutes later Willie jumped out of the car in front of his apartment building. “You know, Corelli, for a cop—a white cop—you ain’t such a bad dude.” He slammed the door and walked away.

Corelli put the car in gear and headed back downtown. He had a plan. But it wouldn’t work unless he had help. And there was only one place he could go. He just hoped Louise was at home. She didn’t know it yet, but she was about to become the most important person in unraveling this whole mess. Like it or not, Louise Hill was about to put herself in grave danger.

Corelli pressed the doorbell and waited. He should have called Louise, but he was afraid she’d hear the worry in his voice. He had a better chance of getting her help by talking to her in person. The door opened and Louise stood there, amazed by his presence.

“Hi there,” Corelli said easily. Her trim body was hidden under a paint-covered smock, but he stared anyway.

“This is a surprise,” she said.

“I’m full of surprises,” he joked.

Her eyes twinkled mischievously and her mouth puckered into an exasperated pout. “Why is it that that doesn’t amaze me, Frank?” She brushed her hair off her forehead, leaving a vague trail of magenta paint in its place. “Come in, I can use the break.”

He slipped just far enough into the apartment to crowd them both in the vestibule. Almost before he knew what was happening, he’d begun to think of Louise as a beautiful woman once again, instead of the decoy he’d been thinking about all the way downtown. Damn, working with her was going to be harder than he’d imagined. Intellectually, he wanted to keep his distance from her; emotionally, he wanted to put his hands all over her. As a compromise he erased the telltale paint smudge from her forehead with his thumb. He proudly held it up for inspection.

“That’s next year’s hot color in artist’s makeup.” She blushed.

“And this is this year’s hot artist,” he complimented her, and before either of them knew what had happened, Frank pulled her into his arms and kissed her for a long time.
Louise pulled away and shook her head. She looked scared. “You shouldn’t have done that, Frank. I’m in a very dangerous emotional state today and I might just really fall apart on you.”

“Bad news?” He took her by the arm and guided her into the now familiar living room.

“The police called this morning. They have no clues as to Lisa’s whereabouts, but they promised to keep me posted.” She sat down and sighed. “I know what they really meant: Lisa’s gone for good. They’re not even trying to reassure me anymore. I guess they want me to face up to the fact that my baby’s gone… dead.” Louise took in a deep breath and settled back in the chair. “When I hung up, I ran into my studio without giving myself a minute to think. I’ve been working for the past few hours without daring to stop. Why, I’ve designed enough sheets and towels to get me through the next four spring seasons.” She tried to smile, but it crumbled on her lips.

“There still may be a chance,” Corelli said after a minute.

“Don’t say that, Frank. It’s not fair,” she burst out, “not when I’m just beginning to get used to the idea that Lisa is gone for good.”

Corelli sat next to her, and when she didn’t resist, he put his arm around her shoulders. “I’ve been doing my own investigating, looking in a direction the police haven’t explored,” he said softly. “And I think I’ve come up with some answers.”

“What could you possibly know that the police don’t?” “They’ve been looking in all the wrong places. Everyone—including you—believes Lisa was taken from the subway platform, upstairs, and onto the street.”

“And you don’t?” Corelli shook his head. “You think she’s… still in the subway?” The idea had never occurred to Louise; but now that it did, it terrified her. “But that’s impossible. I looked everywhere for her… even on the tracks.”

“Louise, you were hysterical,” Corelli quickly amended. “Of course you wouldn’t think of her in the tunnel—that’s why you ran upstairs. It was the natural thing to do. But, take it from me, there are plenty of places to hide underground along the tracks—workmen’s troughs along the walls, sidetracks, the crawl space under the lip of the platform… even deserted stations.”

Louise thought a moment, then shook her head; “But who knows the subway that well? To be able to hide Lisa while I was right there…?”

“Lots of people. There are even men and women… bums… who live down there. The TA doesn’t publicize the fact that it’s running an underground flophouse, but it’s true.”

“You think some bum grabbed Lisa?” “It’s possible. Someone saw the two of you. You were nicely dressed, maybe they thought they’d kidnap Lisa for blackmail.” It was more like the same one was something, but there was no need for Louise to know that right now.

“If it’s for blackmail, then why haven’t I heard anything?” Louise asked angrily. “Frank, this is beginning to sound like a fairy tale to me.” She pushed his arm aside and sat forward. “You come in here suggesting Lisa is still in the subway at the very time the cops tell me they don’t know where she is. Jesus, I’m torn up inside. They say there’s no hope, you say there is. Who the hell do I believe?” Her trembling mouth dissolved into a sob.

Corelli wanted to recapture her and put his arm around her, but he kept his distance. “I can appreciate how difficult this is for you, but you must trust me. And I’d like you to help me, too. Will you do that?” he asked earnestly. She thought a moment, assessing everything he’d said. “If it means getting Lisa back, I’ll do anything.” She smiled and coughed away the last of her sobs. “What can I do?”

“The cops are holding a black kid at New York Mercy who might know something.”

“About Lisa?” Louise asked incredulously. “In a way, yes.”

Louise shrugged, unable to make even the vaguest connection between her daughter and this unknown black. “What can I do?”
“I want you to go to the hospital, pretending to be a visitor to the wrong room, and see if he’s still there. I can’t afford to blow my cover any more than I already have,” he said sourly, remembering the blond receptionist.

Louise digested the request, then smiled sweetly. “Why is it, Detective Corelli, that I think you’re handing me a line of unadulterated bullshit?”

The question startled him. Once again he’d underestimated Louise Hill’s canny approach to life. He fumbled for an answer. “Because the situation sounds improbable and-”

“No,” she interrupted, “I’m used to the improbable happening these days, but I’m no dunce. Maybe you didn’t notice. Maybe you’re used to dealing only with dumb bimbos who’d follow your big blue eyes to the end of the earth.”

“You’ll have to trust me with this one, Louise. Remember, the only reason I’m here at all now is because I personally took the time to investigate Lisa’s disappearance…and stuck to it.” It was a low blow, but Corelli didn’t have time to soothe her wounded female ego. Whoever was keeping Lester Baker under wraps already knew someone had come to visit him—they’d probably already pinpointed it as Corelli. If Louise kept up this cat-and-mouse game, by the time she got to the hospital, it might already be too late.

“Okay, Corelli,” she responded contritely, “I’ll go. But I want you to know I don’t trust you. I still think you’re conning me.”

“That’s great,” he said, taking her by the hand. “You can tell me what a louse I am in the car.” And with that he pulled her from the couch, gave her a truly impertinent kiss, and barely gave her time to change her clothes before dragging her out of the apartment.
Corelli found a parking spot near where he’d picked up Willie Hoyte two hours before. He’d explained to Louise that she was to play the part of a befuddled visitor, should anyone question her—then she was to get the hell out of the hospital as fast as she could. Frank didn’t bother to tell her not to mention his name should she be caught and detained—whoever was behind this operation would figure that out all by themselves. Nor did he tell her about the peril he was placing her in.

After giving her hand a confident last squeeze, he sent her off to do his dirty work, wondering, if there was a God, just how he’d punish a man who’d taken such willful advantage of a distraught woman…a woman he told himself he was beginning to care about.

Louise darted across Fifth Avenue and went directly to the hospital entrance. Having never been sick enough to require hospitalization, she found the precincts fascinating where others viewed them with dread. It never occurred to her that she might walk in one day and never walk out, as it did to so many patients as they kissed relatives goodbye that nervous first day of their stay. The smells of medicine, sickness, and disinfectant that permeated even the lobby were nothing more to Louise than tangible signs she was in a special world mainly peopled by doctors and nurses. She didn’t identify these creatures in white with pain and suffering, and the hushed quiet of the halls, despite the even, heavy flow of pedestrian traffic, was comforting and relaxing.

Louise followed the helpful signs through the maze of corridors to the bank of elevators that would take her to the geriatrics floor. She stopped en route to buy a small bunch of flowers for camouflage. Upstairs, the open elevator doors revealed yet another of the hushed, neutrally painted corridors that, like arteries in a human body, were the basic stuff of hospital life. Unlike the main floor, however, this part of the hospital was almost bereft of pedestrians. Louise assumed automatically that because it was early afternoon, the elderly patients were most probably napping. Indeed, as she slowly made her way down the hall, peering into the partially open doors along the way, she was presented with a vista of white-haired patients dozing in rooms where the sunlight was mellowed and tamed by translucent drapes that rippled gently in the breeze.

Though she strode purposely ahead as if she knew her way and her destination, Louise was keeping track of the room numbers. She realized as she approached the nurses’ station that her destination—room 630—was beyond it. And she also realized that if questioned about whom she was visiting, she would be at a loss for a name. Bearing this in mind, Louise fixed her eyes on the nurse behind the desk, who lazily doodled in a chart. When she finally caught her eye, Louise looked at the flowers and smiled brilliantly, confidently. The nurse acknowledged the smile but said nothing.

Corelli had said that the black man, Lester Baker, was being held in room 630 and that a police guard occupied the adjacent room, 628. Both these doors were closed. Louise paused outside 628 a moment, hoisted her flowers chin-high, then pushed open the door and strode in. “Sorry I’m late, but…” she said as part of the simple routine aimed at throwing off the police guard: wrong floor, wrong room, wrong patient.

But there was no police guard. Nor was the room empty. Room 628 was dark and cool and the bed was definitely occupied. “Are those for me?” an ancient voice inquired from across the room.


“That’s very thoughtful, Lilly. Bring them closer so’s I can see them.”

Louise hesitated a moment, then went to the bedside. Before her an elderly woman of indeterminate age lay with her hands folded across her middle. Whoever Lilly was, she was obviously someone important, for the old woman smiled and accepted the flowers as if they were her newborn child. “You’re so thoughtful, Lilly.”

“Only because you’re so special,” she ad-libbed as she examined the room. It looked like any ordinary hospital room. “How long have you been here now?” Perhaps the old woman might know what had happened to Lester Baker and the guard.

“Since last June. In this very room.” The woman touched the flowers with her gnarled fingers. “They’re just
lovely.”

“Well, I’m glad you like them.” Louise smiled and edged over toward the door that connected with room 630. Chances were that it too was now occupied by someone other than Lester Baker. Louise was beginning to get a creepy feeling about all this. She still saw no connection between this hospital and Lisa. Still, what other leads did she have? She opened the door to room 630 and peered in. It was empty!

“Looking for something in particular, lady?” a deep masculine voice blared out from behind Louise.

She turned around to find herself mere inches from the biggest cop she’d ever seen. She swallowed hard for the first time since agreeing to Corelli’s wild-goose chase, knowing this wasn’t a kid’s game and that she might be in real danger. “I thought I heard someone cry out,” she managed to lie. “I was just visiting my… great-aunt and, well, I don’t much like hospitals…”

“You say this lady’s your great-aunt?” the cop asked suspiciously.

Louise nodded, and as if on cue, the old woman raised her hand. “That’s Lilly, my niece’s girl. Haven’t seen her for some time now. You a friend of hers?”

“We go back a long way,” the cop replied grimly, like he was disappointed he hadn’t really stumbled onto something. “Now, what’s this about hearing a cry?” He returned his attention to Louise’s story.

“Maybe it was my imagination, Officer,” she said weakly.

“Musta been. There’s no one in the next room.” He pushed past Louise and flung open the door farther.

From where she stood Louise saw that the adjoining room was spotlessly clean. Yet Corelli had been so sure Lester Baker was being held there. It didn’t make sense. And though she smiled in delicate, feminine confusion for the cop’s sake, Louise trembled inside. She didn’t like disappearing patients and feared surly cops. And most of all Louise didn’t like to think all this underhandedness might have something to do with Lisa’s disappearance. Louise Hill lived her life never acknowledging the evidence that the modern world was rife with the forces of true evil at work. She chose to ignore the men and women who alone and in groups were able to reach into ordinary people’s lives, filling them at will with pain and suffering and, in some cases, instant death. But now, staring past the belligerent cop into the empty hospital room, Louise felt she was staring into an abyss created by the very people she pretended didn’t exist.

“Satisfied?” the cop taunted.

“Officer, I only thought someone might be in trouble,” Louise protested. “There’s no need to be rude.”

“The nurses are here to take care of trouble,” he said sourly. Then he switched course and took a different tack. “You say this lady’s your great-aunt? Can you prove it?”

“Sorry, but I left the family album at home,” Louise snapped. “I don’t know what all this is about, but-”

“Show me some identification, please.”

Louise was in no position to demur; she fished her license from her wallet and handed it to him. After a minute he looked her up and down. “Louise Hill? I thought it was Lilly.”

“It’s a pet name,” she lied artfully.

The cop studied the photograph on the license, memorizing the address, then studied Louise again. Finally he handed it back to her. “It’s best to mind your own business, especially in hospitals, miss,” he said rudely.

“Perhaps if you’d minded your own business, Officer, this whole unpleasant episode wouldn’t have happened,” Louise growled.
“Save the smart talk, lady. If you take my advice, you’ll finish your visit and leave.”

“Tell me something, Officer: does the hospital provide an armed guard for all the patients? Or is my great-aunt just one of the lucky ones?” The cop’s composure fell away. He blushed and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. “You know, the director of the hospital is a personal friend of mine,” Louise pushed on bravely. “I wonder if he knows what’s going on here.” She was so caught up in her role that this dangerous ad-libbing seemed perfectly called for.

“Of course the director knows. He authorized the use of the room and…” The cop, realizing he was saying too much, glared at Louise, then lumbered to the door and left without another word.

Louise took in a deep breath, feeling just how scared she’d really been talking to the cop. But she’d held her own and had now bought time to get away without detection. Too bad she’d had to show him her real identification. Corelli wasn’t going to like it, either. But, hell, if she was to play Mata Hari, she’d do it her own way. That little bit of information about the hospital director okaying the cop’s presence might just come in handy.

“We fooled him, didn’t we?” The old lady smiled and waved a talon-like hand in Louise’s direction. “Come here a moment.” At the bedside, she took Louise’s hand. “Lilly was my daughter. She’s been dead nearly twenty years now. I’m just waiting to join her.” She looked off into the distance for a moment, then back. “They moved me into this room about two hours ago. I had a better room before, but what choice did I have? I’m just an old woman waiting to die.”

“You’ll be around for a while yet,” Louise said, hoping to comfort her co-conspirator.

“Don’t even think that, girlie. I’ve been ready to go for years. It’ll be a blessing.” She squeezed Louise’s hand. “Now you’d better leave. Two to one that cop’s checking on you out with the nurse. They all know me here… and they all know I’m all alone in the world.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Louise gave her hand a little tug and went to the door. The cop, indeed, was quizzing the desk nurse. While his back was still turned, Louise slipped out, ran down the corridor to another wing, and took the elevator to the main floor. In no time she and Corelli were lost in the heavy traffic edging down Fifth Avenue.

Half an hour later Frank sipped a tall iced tea while Louise finished recounting her adventures at New York Mercy. He’d suggested drinks at the outdoor cafe at the Stanhope Hotel opposite the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. The café, unlike the usual makeshift conglomerations of tables, chairs, and patrons spilling out onto the already congested sidewalks, was discreetly tucked behind a low fence and a wall of shrubbery that cordoned it off from the outside world. Under the protective canopy, sitting there was truly a pleasure. Even if the news one heard was as disturbing as Louise’s.

“I want to know what’s really going on, Frank. That cop treated me like I was selling state secrets. Who is this black kid you’re so interested in? And, more important, what’s he got to do with Lisa?”

Corelli wanted to lie to her, but like it or not, he and Louise were now in this together. He’d seen to that! The cop—the same one Willie mentioned—had certainly passed Louise’s name on to his superiors—the very same superiors who had arranged with the hospital director to secrete Lester Baker on the geriatrics floor and who had had a hand in allowing Ted Slade’s body to be examined and stored in the New York Mercy morgue.

It wouldn’t take much investigating for men of that caliber to discover that Louise Hill knew Detective Frank Corelli—even Dolchik could verify that. From the looks of it, the fat captain was probably right up to his red neck in this already. So, to lie to Louise now was to expose her to possible danger. It was a long shot, but he’d tell her the truth. What he knew of the truth, anyway.

“You’re joking, of course,” she said hoarsely when he finished. Her throat was suddenly very dry. She had to sip her gin and tonic before going on. “People… things…monsters living in the subway?”

Corelli nodded. “Louise, someone believes it…someone who is trying to keep it quiet. And unfortunately, that now means keeping us quiet.”
“Us?”

“You showed the cop your ID.”

“So now I’m a fugitive from justice?”

Corelli shrugged, relieved that in her confusion Louise hadn’t made the connection between the things in the subway and her daughter—at least for now. Sooner or later she’d piece it together and then all hell’d break loose. “‘Fugitive from justice’ is putting it a little strongly. Let’s just say that until we get this thing straightened out, you’d better stay with me for a while.”

“Where?”

“We can’t go to my place. I’ll fix something up with Quinn, he’s a pal of mine.”

“Doubtless he’s arranged these nights out for others of your lady friends?” she said sardonically.

Corelli smiled, wondering if Louise knew she actually sounded jealous. “Quinn is a regular Irish pimp for me. Why, he’s given my libido a helping hand more times than I can—”

“Frank,” Louise interrupted, “what are we going to do? I’m scared. Suddenly, I’m scared.” Her voice trembled and for a moment she looked just like the photograph of her daughter, Lisa.

“I’d be worried if you weren’t scared. But we’ve still got a jump on them. And that means right now we’re ahead of the game.”

“So what’s our next move?”

“I’m going to call Quinn, then a certain Dr. Geary at New York Mercy. He’s got the autopsy reports on Ted Slade.”

“You said you already talked to him.”

“But he didn’t answer the most important question,” Corelli said cryptically as he rose from the table and disappeared into the hotel.

He was back in ten minutes looking worried, but less worried than when he’d left. “Quinn has a nephew with an apartment in Greenwich Village. He’s away for a week or so and he left the keys with Quinn… something about feeding his cat or watering the plants.”

“And I take it you offered my domestic services?” Louise was relieved that they weren’t going to be spending the night at Corelli’s.

“You’ve got a way with living things, Mrs. Hill…if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Louise smiled. Right in the middle of a growing nightmare, Frank Corelli made her feel almost human again. It was no mean feat; she appreciated his concern and his attention and she wanted him to know it. “Detective Corelli, I don’t think I’d mind much of anything you say.” She finished her drink. “So what do we do now?”

“We drop you in the Village.”

“Not so fast, buster. What will you do while I twiddle my thumbs?”

“I’ll just do a little educated snooping.” He signaled the waiter and paid the check.

“I’m coming with you, Frank. All the way.” She pushed her chair back.

“No way. Thanks to me, you’re in enough trouble. I’ve got too much to worry about without wondering if you’ll be okay.”
She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “If you don’t let me come with you, I’ll go off on my own. Promise.” She now folded her arms over her voluptuous breasts. “Now, you wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Corelli stared at her breasts a moment, then shook his head for dramatic effect. Louise tagging along could only mean trouble. Whoever was behind the growing list of signs pointing to a major conspiracy to keep news of the “things” in the subway quiet was playing for keeps. They were only one step behind him, waiting for him to make the wrong move or to turn the wrong corner. If–when–that day came, Corelli didn’t want Louise by his side.

“Let’s talk about what you’re going to do when we get to the Village.”

“I won’t give up, Frank,” she promised as he led her to the car. “And what happened to your doctor? Did you get the news you wanted?”

Corelli shook his head. “The switchboard said he was on vacation, wouldn’t be back for a month.”

Louise shook her head. “Now I won’t give up for sure. You’re going to need me, Frank.”

Ten minutes later they pulled up in front of Louise’s apartment house. “I thought we were going downtown,” she said suspiciously.

“Still time for you to get some clothes. I don’t know how long you’ll be away.”

Louise wanted to smile bravely, but she couldn’t. It was one thing to sit at the Stanhope sipping a cool drink and talk of “hiding out”; it was another to be running into her apartment to pack a suitcase, wondering if she’d ever get out again. The connection between Lisa’s disappearance and being a fugitive was still too nebulous. Nothing Frank had told her made sense. And now she was running. But she didn’t know why, or from whom.

“Let’s go.” Corelli opened the car door. The street was busy as usual; traffic to and from Broadway buzzed by them. Once inside the lobby, Frank hesitated and glanced back to the street, just to be sure. As he did, a black car pulled up opposite where he’d parked. The two men inside the car didn’t get out. Corelli squinted his eyes but didn’t recognize either man. He did, however, recognize that they were watching Louise’s building.

“Something wrong?” Louise’s voice jolted him back to reality.

“Just an overactive imagination,” he lied, pulling her away from the door. “Come on. I won’t feel good until we get you out of here.”

While Louise packed a few things and arranged with her answering service to take messages, Frank stationed himself at the front window. The car was still there. One of the men had gotten out and was now assiduously studying the menu in the window of a nearby restaurant. By the time he was beginning to look conspicuous, Louise was back.

“I have to make one phone call—to the police.”

“Call from downtown,” he countered harshly. “Is there a back way out of here?”

“There’s a back staircase that leads down to a service entrance.”

“Good. I’m going to leave by the front door. You take your suitcase, walk downstairs, and leave by the service entrance. If you can, don’t let anyone see you.”

“What is it?” Her voice was full of tiny fear.

“Nothing that we can’t take care of.”

Corelli rode down in the elevator. The operator was fixated on a small throaty portable radio that shouted at him in Spanish from a wooden stool in the car’s corner. On the ground floor, Corelli thanked him and sauntered slowly out of the building onto the street. The car and men were still there. As Corelli appeared on the sidewalk, the man at
the restaurant window returned to his companion. They had a brief conversation.

Corelli guessed that Louise’s absence surprised them. To them it must have meant not only that Corelli was unaware he’d been tailed but also that Louise Hill was now alone—and vulnerable. He held his breath. Now was the moment of truth: they either followed him or they stayed to snatch Louise—allowing him time to get back to get her.

Baby, if there’s any justice left in this world, let them stay put, Frank prayed as he started the car and pulled out into traffic. When he stopped at the corner for a red light, he realized just how tightly he was holding the steering wheel and relaxed his grip. He swallowed hard, and hesitatingly, almost daintily, looked into the rearview mirror—the black car was still parked on the street. The two men had fallen for the ruse. And the moment he pulled around the corner, both men left the car and ran across the street to Louise’s apartment house. In another five minutes they’d discover they’d been had. It would be the longest five minutes of his life.

Corelli sped down Columbus Avenue. He was racing against time, and soon Louise would be a sitting duck at the service entrance-unaware she was in danger. He hadn’t told her about the men because she would have panicked, and people do crazy things when they panic-freeze, run the wrong way, get hysterical-things that would endanger her. And in the crunch, if Louise blew it, Corelli would desert her. The idea annoyed him because he genuinely liked Louise, but his affection wasn’t so strong that he’d jeopardize his investigation.

He turned into Seventy-eighth Street and almost ran head-on into a car stopped at the light. Jesus, he’d forgotten…it was a west-east street. He’d have to go all the way to Seventy-seventh, then around the block and up Amsterdam before getting back to Louise. He hadn’t calculated that delay. Shit! A dull panic began to fill his stomach as he swerved back into traffic and ran a red light onto Seventy-seventh Street. But it was no good, for a garbage truck sat squarely in the middle of the block.

Corelli’s hands tightened on the wheel, grinding the hard plastic into the soft pads of his fingers. In his mind he saw Louise with her suitcase waiting for him while four stories above her the two men discovered they’d been had. He imagined her smiling face as she waited for him, staring out into the street as the service door opened behind her and the two men walked quickly, efficiently, silently to her side. She wouldn’t know they were there until it was too late.

He leaned on his horn in a vain attempt to get the truck to move. The truck driver peered out at him from the large rearview mirror, shrugged, then looked away. Corelli ground his car into Park, leaped out, and a moment later stood panting on the running board of the truck.

“Look, you sonofabitch, this is police business. I’ll give you exactly five seconds to move your ass or 111 have you in for obstructing justice!”

The driver’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “Sorry, sir, I-”

“Never mind the excuses, just get going.”

By the time Corelli had his car back in gear, the truck had pulled far enough aside to let him pass. He floored the engine and the car squealed by the truck, leaving a thick track of rubber on the pavement. He ran two more red lights and made it back to Seventy-eighth Street behind Louise’s building in thirty seconds. She was waiting for him up near the service entrance. Corelli swallowed hard to digest his fear, smiled, and waved to her.

She smiled and waved back at him, then hoisted up her suitcase and began ambling toward him. She hadn’t seen his panic. Frank wasn’t much for prayer, but for the second time that day he began reciting every verse he’d ever learned as a child. The two men upstairs had had more than their allotted time to discover that Louise was gone—and where she’d gone. If they were smart, they’d already be quizzing the doorman about back exits. It was only seconds to the back entrance, and…

The service door flew open and the two men ran out into the bright sun. They halted, shielded their eyes, and immediately saw Louise heading toward the car. There was nothing Corelli could do to help her. To get out now was to get himself caught, too. To yell was to scare Louise; she’d panic for sure. He only hoped she had enough sense to run like hell once the men made themselves known.
“Hold it a moment, miss,” one of the men yelled.

Louise turned, saw the two men, and broke into a run. She was little more than halfway between the car and the building, but she had a hell of a lot at stake. She hauled her suitcase to her chest and broke into a flat-out run that had her by the car in seconds. Corelli threw open the door, grabbed the suitcase, and pulled her in. He floored the car and sped away, just as the taller of the two men reached into his jacket for a gun. The second man stopped him and shook his head.

All the way downtown Corelli kept thinking of the man reaching for the gun. This time he was playing for keeps, and the image of the gun pointed at Louise’s back angered him just enough to make him silently vow that he’d win, at all costs.
Bill Quinn’s apartment was in a renovated block of apartments that faced Abingdon Square. As in so many hasty, cheap renovations, the contractors had sacrificed aesthetics for utility and removed all the charming architectural details that once made the building livable. In their place, flat white plaster walls conducted sound from apartment to apartment with a cheerful disregard for privacy. What had once been a three-bedroom apartment of style was now three remodeled one-bedroom apartments as alike as milk containers in a grocery-store cooler. And for the dubious luxury of a wallpapered lobby and non-Hispanic doorman, Bill Quinn paid a staggering monthly rent. Only in New York did one gladly pay exorbitantly for the privilege of being abused and dehumanized.

Louise dropped her suitcase just inside the front door and surveyed her new temporary home. Her artist’s eye immediately saw the devastation that had been visited upon the rooms. But right now her distaste for decoration gave way to her need for security. She’d never been physically chased before, and the unpleasant jolt mat had accompanied seeing the two men behind her still shook her. As she sat down on a couch covered with a cheap Indian cotton bedspread, Louise realized that her hands were trembling.

“Three days ago I’d never heard the name Frank Corelli, and now I’m hiding out with him,” she said lightly in a vain attempt to relieve the knot of tension in her throat.

“If I’d had any idea this would happen…” Frank began. But why bother finishing? He had willingly led Louise into danger. And he would have deserted her if it meant not getting caught himself. Police work was a pragmatic business after all. Betrayal of one kind or another went with the territory. Still, he felt like shit about acting so callously toward someone he was beginning to grow truly fond of.

“Well, it’s not the plants,” Louise said as she examined one skimpy cactus in a clay pot with “Welcome to Acapulco” emblazoned in russet on it.

“What? What about plants?”

“Your friend Quinn was supposed to take care of his nephew’s plants…or pets.” Apparently Quinn hadn’t told Frank which, nor had the doorman when they collected the keys. Louise clucked her tongue loudly, and a matched pair of Siamese cats strolled majestically into the room. “That’s the answer-cats.” Louise held out her hand, and immediately both cats went to her and rubbed against her legs. “They say Siamese are arrogant, but not with me.” She lifted them both into her lap and began stroking them under their chins.

Corelli turned away. He was in no mood for relating to animals. All the way downtown he’d been trying to remember something Dolchik had said yesterday. At the time, it had been meaningless, but in light of what had transpired since then, he’d begun to think the captain had been telling him something-consciously or not. Dammit! He couldn’t remember. So there was only one way to find out-call the bastard himself. Quinn had said the captain had been out all morning, but he should be back by now.

He left Louise with her cats and slipped into the bedroom to make the call. He dialed the office at Fifty-ninth Street, hoping Quinn had returned from the street where they’d rendezvoused. “Detective Quinn,” he instructed when the phone was answered.

“Quinn’s gone for the day,” an unfamiliar voice informed him.

“Then let me speak to Dolchik.” Corelli recognized the voices of all the men in the office; this guy was a complete stranger.

“Dolchik’s on vacation.”

“Vacation?” Corelli shouted. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Quinn would have known about that, and he hadn’t said anything.

“Sorry, that’s the way it is. Can I help you? Who’s calling?”
Corelli almost answered out of anger. Goddammit, he almost fell into the trap. They were waiting for him to call, waiting for him to tell them where he was. “The name’s Duck. Donald Duck,” he carefully enunciated the name. That should jibe with what the hospital receptionist had no doubt reported.

“Is that you, Corelli?”

The sound of his own name sent a shiver of fear up Frank’s spine. Shit, they were waiting for him!

“You can tell me anything you’d tell Dolchik,” the voice confided. “What’s on your mind?”

“Who is this?”

“Doesn’t matter. What does matter is, we’d like to talk to you.”

“Like you wanted to talk to Louise Hill?” There was silence on the other end. “Look, I don’t know what your game is or who you are, but unless you ease up, I’m heading straight for City Hall, with a quick stop at the newspapers on the way—just like I promised Dolchik.” That threat had worked before, and there seemed no reason it wouldn’t work now.

“Go anywhere you want. It won’t do you any good. All we want to do is help you.”

“Like you helped Lester Baker?” He was playing all his cards now, but goddammit, he was angry.

Corelli wasn’t the only one who was angry. “Listen, you smart-ass prick, you’re in one helluva lot of trouble. If you just go our way, you’ll be out in the sun once again.”

“And if I don’t?”

“We just missed you at the Hill woman’s place; the next time you won’t be so lucky.”

“That’s a risk I’ll have to take. See you around the pool.” He slammed the phone down and immediately checked his watch; he hadn’t talked long enough to be traced, so he was safe, momentarily. No one except Quinn knew where he and Louise were, and he’d never tell. Or would he? For one uneasy moment Frank pictured his buddy being pressured and spilling the beans. Everyone knew they were great friends; it was logical he’d call Quinn if he were in trouble, and it was just as logical that they’d question him about Frank’s whereabouts. But Quinn hated the system as much as Corelli did; he’d die before giving his pal away.

Corelli returned to the living room more worried about his time running out than ever, and still annoyed that he wasn’t able to remember Dolchik’s aside. Dammit, that was irritating. Louise was still holding the cats in her lap when he walked into the room. Both animals had their eyes closed and their necks craned out under her loving caresses.

“Right about now I could use some of the same treatment,” he only half-joked.

“I doubt you could sit still that long,” she countered. “These babies are so docile. Siamese cats have a reputation for being vicious. People think they claw and tear at everything. God, how do these myths ever get started?”

Corelli was only half-listening, but Louise’s words stuck in his mind. Like Dolchik’s crack, it was meaningless in itself, but it connected on some level to everything else. “What did you say?”

“I said the cats are so docile—”

“No, after that,” he coaxed.

“I just wondered how these myths get started.”

“That’s it,” he shouted, startling both cats off Louise’s lap.

“That’s what?”
Corelli shook his head. “I’ve got to go out for a while. Lock the door behind me. Stay here and don’t answer the phone or the door. I shouldn’t be too long.”

Louise’s face grew somber at the thought of being deserted. “Where are you going?”

“To the library, of course! Where else?” Corelli was already out the door before Louise could answer.

Corelli strode down Forty-second Street, heading quickly away from the Times Square subway exit. He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that a car running a red light at Eighth Avenue almost clipped him. Goddamned fucking Dolchik! Jesus, Frank Corelli-tough, smart Frank Corelli-had fallen for that redneck act while the captain ran rings around him and made him look like a fool. He was probably still laughing up his sleeve at the way he’d conned him into believing he was too dumb to be anything but innocent in this whole subway mess. But Dolchik had made one mistake, he’d let one bit of information slip, and that was enough to tie him in with this whole lousy plot to get him and Louise, to put them away for good: Dolchik had mentioned the creepers.

Corelli stopped for a light on Ninth Avenue and wiped a patina of sweat from his forehead. Though it was still warm, the humidity at least was below a tropical level; the first hints of autumn’s impending crispness were in the air. He hated summer in New York almost as much as he loved fall. During the brief respite between the Hades of August and the Siberia of February, being alive and in Manhattan was not only bearable but also gratifying. It was typical of New York’s perverseness that the city sprang back to life at the very time when nature shriveled and died. And it was typical of Frank Corelli that he should accept the possibility of something as monstrous as the creepers as fact—not just TA folklore.

He quickened his pace and turned up to Forty-third Street, barely noticing the hookers and derelicts who called this dead part of the city home. This area’s human quirkiness had long since failed to impress or shock him. And in his present frame of mind, nothing short of an explosion could stop him from reaching his goal: the New York Public Library’s newspaper collection just down the block between Tenth and Eleventh avenues. If there was any place in New York he’d get a real bead on the creepers—if they actually existed—it was here where history was reduced to miles of microfilm and the past waited patiently to become present…and future.

Corelli could have shrugged off the whole idea of the creepers with a laugh and a wink of knowing condescension; it was probably what had kept their existence a secret for so many years. After all, anyone looking for the creepers was the type who’d drive into the North Woods looking for Paul Bunyan and his great blue ox, Babe. They, too, were sure to be there if you just looked hard enough. Or maybe you’d get lucky and be the one picnicking by the verdant shores of Loch Ness with a fully loaded Nikon handy when the fabled monster reared its head and posed for a series of candid monsters. And creatures of the night existed to serve specific psychological functions; they externalized the primordial fear, the cosmic fear imbued as sperm collided with egg, and made it fanged and clawed and living under the bed. Then, at least, it wouldn’t eat you alive from the inside out. Monsters were a dime a dozen.

Yet Frank Corelli took the creepers seriously. He was on the verge of immersing himself in the past, as recorded by the New York Times, in search of a legend peculiar to the New York subway system. If it weren’t for everything that had happened in the past week, Corelli never would have wasted his time. And if it hadn’t been for a story Jake Morley had told him a long time before.

Jake Morley was an engineer who’d retired long before Corelli graduated from the academy. He worked part-time at the academy as a janitor—"custodial engineer, if you please"—during the day and would bend anyone’s ear who would listen later, any night, while he held court at the local gin mill. Morley was full of stories, mostly about sex, mostly concerning long-legged women. But occasionally after four or five drinks too many, Jake always told of the night he spilled his “first blood”—the first time his train ever killed a man on the tracks.

“I was just easing up on the local run into Fourteenth Street over on Lexington Avenue when I saw something scurrying along the tracks, trying like hell to get out of the way of the train’s headlights. First I thought it was a dog or some kinda animal, but as we gained on him, I saw it was some kinda man; funny-shaped, though. You know, bent over low along the ground. I blasted the whistle and applied the brakes, but it was too late. This little fellow ran the wrong way and fell under the car. Hell, to this day I can still feel the thump when we rolled over him. You never seen such a mess in your life. And what was left of him was something I never want to see again. One of the old-
timers later told me I’d run over a creeper. I thought he was full of bull. Then I got to rememberin’ what this little fella looked like, and sure enough, I’d be hard pressed to say it weren’t no creeper.”

That particular night Corelli’d bought Morley another shot and a beer and laughed at the story right along with the other rookies. Put a bunch of guys together anywhere, and you’re bound to get tall tales, bullshit, ego-boosters. Climbers have the Yeti, the abominable snowman; campers have Bigfoot; why the hell shouldn’t the oppressed workmen of the New York subway have a creature to call their own? It’d give them something to think about during the long, tedious hours working without sun. Sure, everyone working in the system had heard of the creepers, but no one really had claimed to have seen one. Even Morley never said so, for sure.

Yet here I am, Corelli thought as he entered the grim building in the West Side netherworld once called Hell’s Kitchen, acting like a prize chump chasing bogeymen through the dark. But as the door closed silently behind him and he was enveloped in the hushed world of the recent and long dead, Frank thought of the mutilated body of Ted Slade. And the macabre story Lester Baker had spun. And he knew, in his gut, he was in the right place.

After a short but rancorous argument with a pasty-faced librarian about using the microfilm equipment without having a library card, Corelli prevailed—a sharp threat, accompanied by his TA badge, had done the trick. He was courteously shown to a machine and provided with a stack of microfilms that ran backward in time from the previous year to the mid-1940’s. It was only after being told that the library carried copies of the Times from September 1851 that Corelli realized the Herculean task he’d set for himself. At least he didn’t have to go that far back; the New York subway system hadn’t opened until 1904 and he doubted if the trouble reached even that far back. Still, he was in for a long siege.

Random sampling of the files was the only way not to stay in the library for months. To read every newspaper was impossible, but choosing one issue a month, while scientifically reprehensible, was feasible. Reading back through 1910 or so when the subway was still in its infancy would mean reading through almost a thousand newspapers. It wasn’t an appealing prospect, but it was a move in the right direction. If similar disappearances to what was happening now could be traced back over the years with any regularity, a case might be made for investigating the cause of those disappearances—the creepers. However, if out of the thousand newspapers, nothing was garnered, Corelli promised himself he’d give up there and then, come out of hiding, and proclaim himself a victim of the delusion that one man might affect some change for the good in the monster known as New York City.

By four o’clock Frank was in agony. His shoulders, tensed with anticipation for hours, ached; the back of his neck was stiff, his eyes were bloodshot, and each time he tried to focus on a new page, his vision blurred. Feeling more like an old man than a man in the prime of robust good health, Corelli deserted his table and walked out into the hall for a drink of water. Two hours and I’m only back in the 1950’s, he thought morosely. And even then he’d begun skipping months. The sampling was becoming more scattershot than random.

He massaged the back of his neck and leaned against the wall, wishing he had a cigarette. The newspapers were useless. Sure there were disappearances, but the wrong kinds. He’d become adept at speed-reading headlines, skipping over those with no bearing on what he wanted. It was a grueling task. The weight of thirty years of murders, wars, famines, droughts, suicides, and general human mean-mindedness was starting to take its toll. He felt dirty and depressed, caught up in a sticky universal web of selfishness, the scope of which he’d never begun to imagine before. What he needed right now was something to get him back on the right track. But unfortunately, all he could do was get back to work.

An hour later, exhausted and discouraged, Corelli was ready to call it quits. Rummaging around in the past had been pointless; there just weren’t any stories about people vanishing into the subway and never coming out again. There were kidnappings and missing persons-frantic mothers, husbands, and families—but nothing that could be specifically earmarked as originating underground. It was too much to hope for that a pattern of disappearances would emerge; it would be too much the stuff of television coincidence. There was no pattern, no verification that the creepers were anything more than TA myth. And that meant Frank had failed. Failed himself. Failed Louise.

Disgusted that he’d allowed the irrational part of his brain to get such a foothold and actually give him hope, Frank packed up the packages of microfilm cassettes, prepared to admit defeat. He prided himself on being a rationalist; if he couldn’t hear it, see it, smell it, touch it, or taste it, it didn’t exist. Plain and simple. Cut-and-dried. Yet this once he’d allowed himself the luxury of speculative deduction. And look where it had gotten him- cramped
and grumpy. Christ, maybe I’m going through male menopause, he thought sourly as he pushed his chair back, balancing the microfilms unsteadily in his hands.

As he got up, he saw a lone reel of film he’d overlooked wedged under the viewer. When he attempted to retrieve it, the other boxes spilled down around his feet. “Shit,” he complained in a voice a little too loud for any library. A stranger’s head appeared from the next booth, appraised the red-faced detective, then disappeared back into its own world like a tortoise retracting its head.

“Shit again,” Corelli hissed in the direction of the stranger, just for spite. He collected the scattered boxes, stacked them on the desk, and pulled the errant reel of film from its hiding place. This film was old, out of sequence, years from where he’d given up. He held it in his hands for a moment, then, on a wild hunch, threaded it into the machine and scanned the headlines for November 23, 1911. Nothing. His hunch was a total bust. Only intelligence and cunning were worth a damn. Even the punks in the subway could have told me that, he thought.

Corelli was reaching for the switch to rum off the machine when he saw it—a one-column story that ran half a page in the back of the paper. He scanned the headline twice, sensing a rush of adrenaline that supercharged his body and elevated his expectations to the sky. He read the article and knew he’d found it!
TRIBE OF VAGRANTS FOUND

LIVING IN SUBWAY
It was reported to the Times yesterday by Chief William Blayton of the New York Police Department that a band of derelict men and women had taken refuge underground from inclement weather in the city’s subway system. “It’s almost to be expected,” the chief opined. “Those tunnels provide shelter from bad weather for those poor creatures.” Although this sentiment might sound forgiving, the police have taken a firm stand against such actions by the city’s less fortunate. A recent spate of brutal assaults has been directly traced to this group. Police now have one Theodore Alden in custody. Alden, a man in his late twenties with no fixed address, is the apparent leader of this group, known to the workmen and authorities alike as the “creepers” because they skulk and creep through the tunnels to avoid detection. “They prey on innocent passengers waiting alone in the stations. After robbing them, then hiding in the tunnels, they go outside and pawn the bounty for money to buy food and drink. It’s a regular society they have living down there,” one subway worker was quoted as saying. Alden, who admits to being one of the men who live in the subway, steadfastly refuses to admit he is the group’s leader. He says he has done nothing dishonest other than trespass in the tunnels. When questioned how he and his wife and child, who have also taken to the tunnels, survive, Alden admitted he panhandled for money for food. But Chief Blayton had another theory: “He’s lying. He’s the organizer of the ‘creepers,’ their leader. And you can be sure they’re up to no good. People in the stations are sitting ducks for Alden and his band of savages. Today they only steal from passengers, but who knows what vile things they’ll be up to if we don’t put an end to this straightaway?” Theodore Alden, who is being held without bail, will be tried next week.

Corelli read the article three times, each time feeling its impact more. Curiously, his sense of dread had been not that the “creepers” still existed, but that they didn’t. The existence of descendants of the Alden group—perhaps original “creepers” members surviving as reigning patriarchs—brought a cohesiveness, a logic to the recent disappearances that Corelli’s mind had so desperately needed. It told him that there was something hidden in the subway and that others knew of it, too. What other reason for Dolchik’s evasiveness, for today’s threats over the phone from TA headquarters? What other reason for being chased?

He scanned the following weeks’ news, searching for more of Theodore Alden. He finally found what he wanted on the last page of the Friday edition two weeks later. Tucked between news of several lost sheep in Central Park and a wedding announcement was the following:

SUBWAY DERELICTS’ LEADER FREED
Theodore Alden, accused leader of a pack of thieves living in the subway system, was freed today by Judge Charles Gabush. Police were detaining Mr. Alden after subway patrons complained of being robbed and abused by men and women who had taken up residence below ground. Mr. Alden was let off with a two-dollar fine for trespassing on city property, and was warned that should he or any member of his family be found in similar circumstances again, he would surely be imprisoned. In closing, Judge Gabush suggested Mr. Alden find gainful employment.

Corelli flicked off the light and ruefully shook his head. Times certainly had changed. The idea of suggesting to a vagrant that he find gainful employment was ludicrous. Men like Alden didn’t want to work; that much hadn’t changed in almost eighty years. People like Alden wanted to take. From others. Any way they could. The moral climate of the country had evolved drastically over the years since 1911, but Corelli suspected the code of the outcast and the criminal hadn’t evolved at all. He saw proof of that every day in the faces of the men and women who flooded the subway system. Today’s criminals were the spiritual inheritors of Theodore Alden’s legacy.

And Corelli now believed that there were other inheritors, physical descendants of Theodore Alden and his “creepers.” But unlike their great-grandfather, they no longer sojourned into the world. They stayed underground. And when they attacked lone passengers, it wasn’t because they wanted money to buy food.

It was because the passengers had become the food!
On his way out of the library, Frank put a call in to Louise. The phone rang ten times before he hung up. He’d told her not to go out, not to answer the door. She should have been there!

After overtipping the taxi driver, Frank bolted past the amazed doorman in Bill Quinn’s building. As the elevator rode slowly up, he prepared himself for the worst. He didn’t know what he’d find, in the apartment, but he was up against top professionals. Maybe he’d been fooling himself all along that one TA cop could outsmart them. And maybe Louise would be the price he’d pay to learn that lesson.

The apartment door was unlocked. Corelli flung the door open, at the same time jumping back out of view. Nothing happened. He waited, then dropped low and cautiously peered into the darkened room. A distant whining announced that the two cats were in residence; the darkness told him that Louise was not. He straightened up, reached in, and flicked on the lights. Nothing.

He searched the apartment, looking for signs of a struggle, but nothing was out of place. Louise’s suitcase, still unpacked, stood next to the rumpled bed where he’d made the phone call to Dolchik hours before. Was it possible the line had been traced? No, definitely not. Yet Louise was gone. He closed the front door and turned off the lights. Whoever had done this, whoever had abducted her, would be back. They’d probably seen him enter the building. It was probably the two men who’d followed them earlier. Or maybe not. There might be an army of faceless soldiers waiting to be enlisted in the war against Frank Corelli, the war to stop him from spreading the word about the creepers.

The creepers.

Alone in the dark, his .38 resting in his lap as he sat in the chair opposite the front door, Frank finally allowed himself to contemplate the newspaper articles. It was preposterous, of course. The idea of a band of men and women taking to life underground in the subway system was the stuff of fiction. Many weird things went on in New York every day, but this took the cake. Corelli slowly shook his head. Was it really possible that Penny Comstock, Ted Slade, and all the others were dragged into the subway by descendants of Theodore Alden? Alden began as a thief. But these creatures were something else. Something almost too monstrous to contemplate—cannibals.

Someone turned the front doorknob. Corelli grabbed his gun and leveled it at the door; the shots would take the intruders in the stomach, disabling if not killing them. The next shots, if need be, would kill. The anger he’d been suppressing all day bubbled to the surface, and as the door began to open, he found himself aiming the gun, waiting to pull the trigger. Frank Corelli wasn’t just some two-bit cop who bowed and scraped and turned the other cheek. He didn’t shirk his duty.

As the light flashed on, Frank dropped to one knee, bracing the gun in both hands. He was already squeezing the trigger when he saw Louise’s horrified face.

“No!” she screamed as the grocery bag fell from her arms onto the floor. “Please, don’t shoot, Frank!”

The gun tumbled from Corelli’s hands to the floor. He rested his head against his knee, sick with the knowledge of what had almost happened. One more second and he might have fired. One more second and he might have killed Louise.

She stood in the doorway shaking all over. She stared down at the tins of cat food and Stouffer frozen entrees at her feet; then she began to smile, but it quickly turned to tears. “Look what you’ve made me do, Frank. Look what you made me do.” She pushed the dropped groceries with her foot, moving them aside.

Corelli leaped to his feet, brushed her aside, and slammed the front door. “I told you not to go out. I told you to stay right here and not go out.” His voice was harsh and loud.

“The cats were hungry. And we had to eat,” Louise said almost wistfully. She looked down at the gun, unable to take her eyes off it. Unexpectedly, she turned on him, her fists raised. “You were going to shoot me, weren’t you? You were going to kill me!” She beat against his chest, tears streaming down her face.
Corelli absorbed her blows, too terrified by her outburst to defend himself. It was true. One more second and he would have shot her. And maybe saved someone else the trouble. “I told you not to go out,” he repeated, his voice so low he barely could hear it. “Why did you do it?”

“Because I wanted us to have a nice dinner.” She broke down completely now and fell against him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Frank. I don’t know who you are…or what I’m doing… or…” Her voice trailed off in a series of hiccupping sobs.

“You’re okay,” he soothed, putting his arms around her. “Nothing happened. You’re all right.” He smoothed her hair, then rubbed the back of her neck.

Corelli pulled her tighter, losing himself in the warmth of her body. Soon, between the soothing and the reassuring, he began to kiss her, lightly at first, then with real passion. Louise accepted the kisses and returned them with an ardor that was surprising. She’d been so close to death moments earlier, so close to destruction, that her little caresses and deep kisses seemed to verify that she was still very much alive—and that he was now part of her life.

Without another word, Corelli led her into the bedroom and undressed her. She watched dispassionately as her clothes piled up around her, but when Frank began to undress, she came to life and helped him, then pulled him down next to her on the bed. For a long time they lay pressed against each other, letting their bodies touch as they kissed and fondled each other experimentally, like children. And as the terror of their recent brush with disaster ebbed, their passion and their need for each other mounted.

Corelli’s lovemaking was almost brutal, but Louise’s response matched his fervor. They were two people caught up in something that dehumanized them; their physical coupling proclaimed that they had not been lost… not to each other.

Afterward, while Louise prepared dinner, Corelli decided there were two things necessary to verify the existence of the creepers. The second was actually to capture one of the creatures and bring it aboveground into the daylight—but that would have to wait. The first was far more manageable: get the pathology report on Ted Slade at New York Mercy Hospital It was far too late to contact Dr. Geary again, so there was only one way to get proof positive—go to the hospital morgue tonight.

“Goddammit, you’re staying right here,” Corelli yelled in exasperation at Louise, who sat naked on the bed, arms folded over her breasts. To their mutual surprise they had made love again after dinner, their physical needs aching to be satisfied once again. And once again their union had drawn them closer together… until Frank prepared to leave.

“And I say that from now on, where you go, I go.” She let her arms slip down a few inches, exposing the pink areola of her nipples.

Corelli’s eyes were drawn to them for an instant, causing his determination to waver. “Stop with the tit show,” he said angrily, “it won’t do any good.” He pulled on his Jockey shorts and turned away from her.

Louise leaped off the bed and stepped into her panties. “If you think I’m the kind of woman you can screw and forget, you’ve got another think coming.”

“And if you think I’m the kind of guy who’d do that… Oh, never mind.” Making love to Louise had revitalized him. The ancient burden of Jean’s death was actually lifting, he was beginning to live in the present and not be a prisoner of the past. And it was all because of Louise Hill. Still, he didn’t want her in any more danger than was necessary.

“Then it’s settled,” she said obstinately. “We’re two of a kind. And that means where you go, I go.” She slipped into her dress and turned her back on him. “Help me with this zipper, will you, Detective Corelli?”

He sighed, but acquiesced. Hell, one minute they were running from two thugs, and the next minute they were elbow-deep in a domestic scene played out daily in any quiet suburb. Which was reality? “I’ve already told you; it’ll be tough enough for me to get into the hospital without having some half-witted female along playing detective.” He angrily buttoned his shirt, beginning to suspect that eventually he’d give in to her insane demand that she
accompany him. “Remember, Mrs. Hill, that I’m going to the morgue. Where they keep dead people.”

Louise ignored the snipe, but she couldn’t let her intelligence be questioned. “I resent being called half-witted. Besides, what’s the difference if there are two of us?”

“That’s twice as much chance we’ll get caught.” He pulled on his trousers, tucked in his shirt, and zipped up his fly. “I told Willie Hoyte that his friend Bimbo Calhoun should expect one visitor, not two. He’s taking a big chance sneaking me in on his lunch break.”

“Who eats lunch at one o’clock in the morning?” she asked.

“Don’t change the subject. This is dangerous. Besides, I bet you faint at the sight of dead people.”

Now there was silence. He turned to Louise and saw she was thinking of Lisa. He hadn’t meant it that way, but he might as well let the faux pas stand. It might serve to dissuade her.

“I’ll admit I don’t make a habit of consorting with the dead, but in this case I’ll make an exception. Come on, Frankie, what do you say?” She scooted over to him and rubbed against him seductively.

“Stop acting like some adolescent nympho, Louise. This isn’t daytime television. And my answer is still no.”

She pushed him away with enough force to knock him off balance. “Then let me lay it on the line: if you don’t let me go with you, the moment you’re out the door I’ll call the police.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Yes, I would,” she said defiantly. “You have the nasty habit of forgetting that my daughter is out there somewhere-in the subway with those creatures, to hear you tell it. She needs my help. Sure, you can be cavalier and play cops and robbers and screw the helpless heroine, but what about me? Frank, Lisa is all I’ve got in the world.”

She sat down on the bed and watched him angrily.

Corelli sank down next to her. “Jesus, I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to get hurt, that’s all.”

“Let me worry about me, okay?” He shrugged. “Then you’ll let me go?”

“Do I really have any choice?”

“No, so let’s get going.” She rose from the bed, wiped away her tears, and finished dressing.

At the front door Corelli took Louise in his arms. She felt good there, molding against him in all the right places as she gave in to his protection.

“There’s one thing I have to say before we leave: you said earlier that Lisa was the only thing you’ve got in the world. Well, Mrs. Hill, you’re wrong. Like it or not, you’ve also got me.” He kissed her forehead, then her mouth.

“I like that,” she whispered. “I’ve liked it from the start.”

Corelli gave her a final peck on the cheek, turned off the lights, and led her down to the car.
September 7, Friday

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Ben Mason had been a TA motorman for thirty years and he still loved every minute of it. Each time he moved his train into action, he felt a surge of power that was like no other. He, and he alone, commanded this mechanical monster with its belly full of passengers. And when he set it in motion he was always reminded of his first time. He was only twenty then and the train jerked and bucked and finally halted with a thud. The TA inspector who was overseeing this novice’s first trip was thrown to the ground. Ben still smiled when he thought of that bastard banging on the door of the cab, cursing him for ever being born. But times had changed. Ben Mason could do anything with ten cars now except make them fly.

He got the “go” signal from the conductor—all doors were closed—four cars away and started the train moving. Ben had worked all the different subway lines in his time, but he most loved the long, exhilarating trips from the far reaches of the Bronx to the outlands of Brooklyn. The trip gave Ben time to think. When he was at home with his wife, Martha, privacy was at a premium. Not that Martha wasn’t a good wife—she was—it was just that when he was around she demanded his undivided attention. So Ben revealed in his workday in the subway like other men take to a vacation. He was a good motorman and he knew it. Although he let his mind wander frequently, Ben’s reflexes were coiled, waiting to strike, if need be. Sometimes he worried that in a real emergency he might not be ready, but then he remembered his perfect record and pushed aside any self-doubt. Nothing was going to happen to Ben Mason or his passengers.

Ben was getting older. The pains that often plagued his joints were diagnosed as the first stages of arthritis. Because he was too young to retire, and too proud to leave his job for a desk job, he kept the doctor’s bad news to himself for the moment. It wouldn’t be long before he’d make himself ‘fess up—his passengers’ safety was at stake, and that would always take precedence over anything personal. In the meantime, Ben was happily running a short-route AA train from Washington Heights down to the Chambers Street terminal. It wasn’t like the old days, but it was still being a motorman.

As the train approached Canal Street, Ben eased up on the power, then slowed into the station, stopping so gently it wouldn’t have shaken a bowl of Jell-O. He smiled proudly to himself; that was perfection. While the conductor opened the door, Ben waited, thinking of his and Martha’s anniversary. Twenty-seven years next week, and he still hadn’t bought his blushing bride a gift. Hell, she had everything any woman could need; she still wanted one thing, though. For weeks she’d been hinting about a microwave oven, if you could call leaving a mountain of brochures and magazines on the subject all over the house hinting.

The conductor signaled, and Ben started the train. The run between Canal Street and Chambers Street was fairly long, so he settled back to consider the idea of the microwave for Martha. His eyes instinctively, automatically darted from the power level in his hand to the pulsing control dials, then to the roadbed itself. All signals were still go. As usual the only complaint Mason had ever made to himself about this job as a motorman was that sometimes, when he got caught off-guard and his mind focused on the endless miles of track before him, the work got boring. But right now Ben Mason wasn’t bored, because not more than fifty feet away, something was lying across the tracks.

The tunnel signal lights were green; that meant Control Central knew nothing of this obstruction. Mason automatically slowed the train and peered into the darkness. Lots of shit got sucked down into the tunnels and landed on the tracks. It was usually small stuff, though. This was large. As the train’s lights swept over it, Mason sucked in his breath. This wasn’t a something, it was a someone…lying on his-or her-side, face away from the lights, knees drawn up to the chest, one arm thrown back, exposing a ragged hand.

“Jesus H. Christ!” Mason exclaimed as he cut power and jolted the train to a teeth-grinding halt reminiscent of twenty years before. After he’d caught his breath, he called Jim Lyons, the conductor, and instructed him to come up front. It would take him a minute or so; these subway cars were a new breed and each one was locked fore and aft; only someone with a key could walk the length of the train.

A minute later Lyons tapped on the cab door. Ben opened it. The conductor was twenty-five and loved the subway as much as Mason, despite its recent bad press. “What’s up?” Lyons’ voice was calm. There were
thousand reasons to stop the tram.

“There’s a body on the tracks,” Mason said, feeling his fright for the first time.

“You sure?”

“Take a look yourself.” He pointed out the window.

Lyons stuck his head into the crowded space of the motorman’s cab so as not to alarm the four passengers sitting complacently in the first car. There was no doubt about it, someone was lying on the tracks. “So, what’ll we do?”

“I’ll call control. You go down and take a look.” And suddenly Ben Mason’s peaceful train trip vanished; they were in an emergency situation. The men watching the board at the command center already knew his AA train had made an unscheduled stop. What they didn’t know was why they’d stopped.

When Lyons left, Ben hooked the latch-lock on his door and called in to explain the situation. Over the sounds of the flabbergasted dispatcher he heard Lyons explaining to the passengers over the PA system that there’d be a short delay. Power was cut on that section of the track and Ben peered out into the darkened train, caught Lyons’ attention, and gave him the “go-ahead” signal.

A few seconds later, he’d opened the car door and was out on the roadbed in a shallow puddle of light cast by his pocket flashlight Lyons approached the motionless body very carefully. He’d been with the TA long enough to know the damage a speeding train could inflict on a human body; most often it was like running veal through a garbage disposal. As he got closer, he noticed the body’s small size. Jesus, he thought, it looks like a kid all bundled up. There were no obvious signs of blood—that might be a good sign. Jim hated blood and had once fainted over a badly cut finger. But Ben Mason was watching, and that meant he couldn’t faint; Mason would never let him live it down if he did.

When Lyons was right over the body, he aimed his flashlight down and stared. It was easy to see now that it was a man, not a child. He bent over to take a closer look.

From inside the cab Mason saw the body move at exactly the same time Jim Lyons did, only Ben was twenty feet away and safe when the body on the tracks suddenly sprang to life. Even though the “body” leaped to its feet and straightened up, it was a good two feet shorter than Lyons; not more than four feet, tops. From the way it was dressed-in tatters-it looked like a man, a garden-variety bum, in fact. But even without seeing its face, Mason knew in his gut this thing was no man. Its twisted form radiated evil.

As if to prove Mason’s intuition right, the creature began clawing its way up the front of the conductor until it had a firm grip on his throat. Lyons’ terrified scream shattered the ominous silence of the tunnel as their combined weight pulled Jim down to his knees. He was still screaming for help when the thing pushed him over onto his back, flicked open a switchblade knife, and cut his throat from ear to ear.

“What the fuck is going on down there?” The dispatcher’s voice exploded into the cab. Mason wanted to tell him that the body on the tracks had come to life, that it was some kind of monster, that it was cutting Jim Lyons to shreds... and eating him! But Ben couldn’t move. The microphone fell from his hand, and despite the continued imprecations from TA headquarters, he remained silent, unable to speak.

A new sound filled his ears: people screaming. People nearby, yelling for help. Had the passengers in the first car been so stupid that they’d looked out the front window and seen Lyons’ horrible death? Ben wondered. They’d been told to stay in their places. He craned his head around and peered out through the partially open door into the train. The passengers were no longer alone. Six, eight, maybe ten of the creatures were swarming into the car, making their way in the darkness.

A middle-aged woman in a designer print dress carrying an expensive briefcase stood on the seat with her back against the windows as two of the creatures loped toward her. She looked ready to fight, but she didn’t see the third monster outside. It leaped up to the window, reached its long, slithery arm through the narrow window opening, and grabbed her around the throat, immobilizing her. The other two things acted quickly—they unsheathed their knives and tore into the soft parts of her legs and abdomen, spilling intestines and viscera out into the car.
The other passengers were dispatched as quickly and as easily. A sudden silence told Ben they were dead also. Dead like Lyons. Dead like the woman in the print dress. And he was the only one left. The doors to the other cars were locked. He was next!

He stayed in the cab, unable to move. Every muscle in his body was knotted with tension, and his clothes were soaked with sweat. He breathed shallowly through his mouth, afraid that the air passing through his nostrils might alert those things that there was still one person left alive. In the cab. He keened his ears for some sound, some indication of what was happening in the car. As the buzz of his fear faded from his brain, it was replaced with another sound—a slurping… grinding… tearing. Without looking, Ben knew what it was. The bile rose in his throat, and with loud and horrifying velocity he vomited into the cab, fouling himself and the controls, at the same time obstructing the grotesque scene of the creature outside feasting on Jim Lyons’ body.

Ben wiped his hand across his mouth, then down his pants leg. Tears of anger and fear and disgust clogged his eyes. He had to do something! He leaned forward slightly and edged his face toward the crack in the door. Out of nowhere a scaly hand shot through the opening and held him by the throat. Ben tried to pull back, but the thing seemed to have the strength of ten men. He had to do something!

His face was jammed into the space between the door and the door frame. He wanted to close his eyes and shake his head and say that all this wasn’t happening, but the thing that held him was very real. It began edging closer, moving into his view. Its eyes held him in a mesmerizing gaze. They were covered with thin, translucent lids that flicked open and shut with a slow, almost lazy motion. Its skin, in the faded light, seemed as translucent as an onion’s and revealed a blue network of capillaries pulsing with blood just beneath the surface. Its features were partially obscured by a wild mat of hair, but Ben saw that its nose was flat, with flaring nostrils that pulsed with each breath it took.

Despite the overall grotesqueness of the creature, it was its mouth that held and fascinated Mason the most. The mouth seemed no more than a knife slash through the lower quadrant of the face until the lips slid away from the teeth, enlarging the opening to the size of a big man’s fist. The teeth were widely spaced and with four oversized canines. Once opened, the mouth proved to be bloody and clotted with bits of raw flesh torn from a recent victim.

The thing pulled Mason farther into the partially open door. Then, with one quick movement, it struck, biting his face in a series of snapping lunges, until it finally dislodged a piece of his chin. As the searing pain assaulted Ben’s body, he lost all sense of reality—and self-control. With almost superhuman strength he wrenched himself back full into the cab and reached out for his only hope—the power handle. But something grabbed his arm from the side opposite the door.

Mason spun around; another creature was perched at the open side window. It held onto the window frame with one hand, keeping itself balanced precariously half-in, half-out, while with the other hand it gouged at Mason’s shoulder, quickly drawing blood as the long thick fingernails ripped through the flimsy material of his shirt. Ben lashed out with his left arm and hit the creature in the face. It howled in pain and was hurled back against the tunnel wall by the force of the blow.

Mason grabbed the microphone from the floor and frantically called Control Central. “Give me power! Full power! Jesus, get me the fuck out of here!”

Automatically, unconsciously, Ben Mason rammed the power handle into position and the train lurched, then began to crawl forward. With a sickening thud the first car rolled over the body of Jim Lyons and the thing that sat dining on him. Mason momentarily looked back into the car. One by one, the pack of creatures were leaping from the train, dragging the bodies of the dead passengers with them. Ben was safe now. They were all gone.

The train moved up to full speed and hurtled south over the tracks. Ben remembered now how much he particularly liked the express run on the A or D train as it sailed uptown from Fifty-ninth Street to 125th Street without a stop. How exhilarating to rocket through station after station, waiting passengers nothing more than blurs in the sudden flashes of light from the stations. Who said a subway car couldn’t fly? That was flying!

The red signal ahead told Mason he was coming into Chambers Street—coming into Chambers Street with a cargo of fresh-kill meat and a wild story of monsters with a taste for human flesh. His superiors would never believe
him. They’d say the arthritis had gone to his head, that he was crazy. Flying was better than trying to explain. You didn’t have to explain soaring in the air, you just did it.

He kept his hand on the throttle and his foot pressed down on the dead man’s brake, which automatically stopped the train when it was let up. That would keep him flying away from the terror in the tunnel. But what terror was there, really? The only terror was when it was time to come back down to earth. But Ben Mason had already decided that he wasn’t coming back down. He’d decided that he was destined to sail off into the clouds away from everything.

As his train roared through a second red warning signal into the long Chambers Street station that was the end of the run for the AA train, Ben’s mind was thousands of miles away. And as the train plowed into the metal buttress at the end of the line, crumpling the cab and the first three cars into a grotesque sculpture-like a pop-art trash container full of crushed beer cans-Ben Mason knew seconds before the control panel crushed his chest and a twisted piece of steel from the rammed train decapitated him that he would fly off far away from his fear forever…and ever.
Stan Dolchik, in full captain’s uniform, including cap, elbowed his way through the mob on the Chambers Street platform toward the TA office. If ever there were a pure distillation of pandemonium, this station was it. Police, doctors, paramedics, curiosity seekers, the media, the injured and the dead, all fought for attention at the scene of what was already being called the worst subway accident in history. The air crackled with noise as the horror of the scene translated itself into the confused babble of everyone present.

Dolchik was disgusted with the whole mess. If Russ Matthews, the mayor, had listened to him six weeks ago, none of this would have happened. But no, he and his men had their own plan; they were organizing a team to deal with the creepers, and because of their horseshit, ten people were dead this morning, including the motorman and conductor of the train, seven passengers whose bodies had been pulled from the wreckage of the second and third cars, and an old woman in the last car who’d had a heart attack. And that figure didn’t include the unknown number of victims who’d died in the first car, which, though empty, was sickeningly blood-drenched. Nor did the head count figure in the twelve men and women—and one child—his file listed as missing (and presumed dead).

A woman reporter grabbed Dolchik by the arm and stuck a microphone in his face. “You look like a Transit Authority officer. Can you tell us anything?” She batted her eyelashes provocatively.

“Yeah, sure,” Dolchik snarled. “Fuck off!” He pulled himself away from her and stalked off. It was bad PR to insult the media, but he didn’t have time to be part of any network’s sensationalized breakfast-, lunch-, and dinner-hour newscasts. Besides, he was nearly choked on his own anger. As far as he was concerned, this carnage was the willful result of political high-handedness and inertia.

He stormed into the TA office, ignoring the dazed men and women who talked of nothing but the accident. Their faith in the safety of the system had been shaken to the foundation. Dolchik knew it was as secure as ever, but he wasn’t at liberty to divulge that. He had to protect the real culprits. As overseer of the creeper project, he’d seen to it that a series of malfunctioning safety signals were blamed for the accident. Therefore the trouble was placed squarely on the mechanics of an outdated system and not on the actual cause—the suicide of a hysterical motorman who’d confronted something so terrible that his mind had snapped. Dolchik knew that was what had happened the second the task force recovered the mutilated body of the conductor from the tracks…and the remains of that thing.

“Get the mayor on the phone and tell him I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” he barked at his secretary, a male civilian he’d recruited six months before when this whole situation started to look ominous.

“You want me to call a car?”

“I’ll walk.” City Hall was only a ten-minute walk from Chambers Street, and Dolchik knew he’d need the time to cool off. Cool off! If this didn’t send his blood pressure up over the top, nothing would. “And call Columbus Circle and tell them to get Francis X. Quinn down to City Hall, too.”

“He’s going to meet with you and the mayor?” The secretary’s eyebrows rose dangerously high.

“That prick knows where Corelli is and I want him to be sweet-talked by His Honor. If that doesn’t work, I’ll personally beat the shit out of him. Corelli knows too much, and after this fiasco…” He left the rest unsaid.

Dolchik went to his temporary office, slamming the door behind him. He plunged into a swivel chair, let a fresh Cuban cigar (compliments of Russ Matthews, the mayor), then leaned back and for a moment relaxed. Personally, he’d wanted to bring Frank Corelli in on this case the moment he’d found the missing-persons file. Hell, any man with enough smarts to weave random disappearances into a pattern, and then start looking for a file on the subject, was a good man in Stan Dolchik’s book. He’d liked Corelli from the moment they met, but it wasn’t in the mayor’s game plan to bring any outsiders into the search for the creepers. Dolchik was planted at Columbus Circle because it was a main hub of activity and a good place to monitor the rising tide of disappearances that were now being attributed to mounting creeper activity.

But no one had counted on a Frank Corelli to contend with. And now he knew too much to be left on the street. Now, on the eve of one of the largest covert paramilitary operations in the country’s history, Frank Corelli’s
knowledge was a time bomb. One word from him, and weeks of planning, investigation, and millions of dollars went down the chutes. Dammit! Why did Corelli have to be so dedicated? Any other man would have ignored the subway disappearances as someone else’s business.

Not Frank Corelli. He was dedicated and he was smart. Dolchik had lied to him all along, but he’d seen through it. And found his way to Dr. Geary at New York Mercy Hospital. And to Louise Hill. And, finally, to Lester Baker. And the mayor’s men were so clumsy that Corelli and the Hill woman were tipped to the dragnet out for them and were now in hiding. Corelli could be dangerous, that was for sure. The threat he used was the right one; it had sent terror into the heart of the mayor. Nothing was worse than exposure to the media.

If Corelli got the press and television newspeople to believe that there was something terribly wrong, horrifyingly dangerous, going on in the subway, that innocent New Yorkers were disappearing and being slaughtered, the media would have a field day. And if they found out that the city government had been aware of it for nearly a year, that would blow it. There was no way Russ Matthews could make the networks shut their mouths. What did the Nielsen-crazed executives care that news of the carnivorous mutants would certainly cause a panic in New York the likes of which has never been seen before? The TV moguls wanted ratings, and the rest of the world be damned! And right now Frank Corelli held the key to that panic in his hand…and he didn’t even know it.

Dolchik heaved himself out of the chair, signaled his secretary, and left the office. They walked in silence through the dark, empty streets, both of them thankful to be away from the anguished screams and cries that had filled the last two hours.

During any business day, lower Manhattan’s conglomeration of twisting streets and lanes was congested with workers. But at five o’clock the hordes departed, leaving the financial district desolate—a city whose population has fled to the suburbs and shopping centers. It is a ghost town of darkened buildings and barricaded stores.

Rising out of its own small park, City Hall stands like a Federal wedding cake, an ornate oasis in the middle of the towering office buildings. Tonight, except for a few sprinklings of lights, the building was dark. Dolchik focused on a lighted window on the second floor and imagined Russ Matthews pacing the room like he always did when there was trouble. Stan had known the mayor for years—since they were both at Princeton. He considered Matthews a rational, fair man. But as Dolchik mounted the building’s front steps and showed his ID to an armed guard, he also remembered that Russ Matthews was a game player nonpareil. And in the game of politics, holding onto your job always came first—no matter what idealistic rhetoric said to the contrary. And this creeper business was a very real threat to Matthews’ job, and that made him vulnerable…and that made him dangerous.

Russ Matthews was just fifty years old and looked ten years younger. The inevitable comparisons to New York’s debonair ex-mayor John Lindsay were familiar and not made without reason. Matthews was a New Yorker born and bred, and although his world until the age of seventeen was bounded on the east and west by Fifth and Third avenues and on the north and south by Seventy-second and Fifty-seventh streets, Matthews truly loved the city in all its splendor—and its squalor. He was a reasonable man, except when someone was trying to strong-arm him into changing his mind about a cause he believed—or didn’t believe-in.

“How’s it look?” Matthews asked from behind his desk as Dolchik entered the room.

“Like a charnel house.”

“Did you tell the press about the signal lights?”

For a moment Dolchik remembered the face of the reporter when he brushed her off with the easy obscenity. “Every lying word of it.” He went to the bar and poured himself a drink of Jack Daniel’s without asking permission.

Matthews lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He was handsome, lithe, and in good shape from daily workouts. He was very comfortable being mayor of New York City and he wasn’t about to let anyone—or anything—interfere with that good feeling. “Think the media will buy the story?”

“It’s not the media I’m worried about, it’s everyone else involved. Hell, Russ, the guys who work in the subway aren’t jerks. They know those systems were in working order just as well as they know Mason wrecked the train on
purpose. Sooner or later, despite our threats, someone will open up. Then the shit will hit the fan.”

“Says you.” Matthews leaned forward and fished a manila envelope from under a pile of papers and inched it toward Dolchik. “Take a look at this.”

“Why don’t you just tell me about it, Russ?” Stan sat down and sipped his bourbon. One thing about the mayor, he had a highly refined taste in liquor.

“This is a doctor’s report on Ben Mason’s health. Seems he’s in the first stages of rheumatoid arthritis. And he didn’t bother to tell anyone about it, even his wife.”

“You sure?”

“My men asked his wife; she drew a blank,” Matthews said proudly.

“Shit, and he isn’t even cold yet.” Dolchik took another revitalizing swig of the bourbon.

The mayor ignored the swipe. “We can play it two ways if the lie doesn’t hold: his arthritis crippled him, or he was so distraught over having the disease he killed himself.”

“And took nine others with him?” Stan shook his head. “No one would buy that crap.”

“I’ll see to it they do.” Matthews pushed the folder aside. “Now, tell me about Frank Corelli. You have him in protective custody, I presume. The minute he hears what happened tonight, he’ll know what really happened.”

Dolchik immediately saw red. He slammed his drink down on the table, spilling some of the high-octane fuel on the desk’s shiny surface. “Don’t hand me that holier-than-thou shit, Russ. You know Corelli and the woman got away. It was your men who fucked up. If you’d listened to me, he’d be with us right now, helping us. Now nothing will get him to turn himself in, and I can’t say I blame him. Hell, if I were Corelli, I’d already be at the Daily News.”

“What are the chances of that really happening?” The mayor’s cool facade crumbled.

“Corelli isn’t crazy. He’ll stay put…for a while.”

The intercom on the desk buzzed and Matthews was informed that Detective Quinn was waiting outside. He had Quinn sent in, then leaned back in the chair, once again assuming his “benevolent-leader” pose. “Detective Quinn, come in, come in,” Matthews invited amiably. “You know Captain Dolchik, I believe.”

Quinn was so stunned to see Stan Dolchik, he merely nodded. As far as he knew, the captain was on vacation. And also as far as he knew, the captain was a loudmouth redneck who had no place sipping drinks in the cozy company of New York’s mayor.

“Now, I’ll get right to the point.” The mayor’s benevolent smile vanished. “I need to know where Frank Corelli is.”

“How should I know that?” Quinn meant to sound offhand, but he sounded scared.

“Stan tells me that you’re Corelli’s best friend. And from my own experience, best friends tend to know where the other is most of the time. Am I wrong?”

Quinn shifted uneasily from foot to foot, but didn’t answer.

“Quinn, this is important,” Dolchik added. “Corelli’s in trouble and we’re trying to help.”

Quinn knew Corelli was in trouble without being told so. Why else would he have asked for a safe place to stay with that woman for a couple of days? Frank hadn’t had time to explain exactly what the trouble was, but from the worried sound of his voice, Quinn knew this wasn’t kid stuff. So he’d turned over his nephew’s apartment without question. But now, in the goddamned mayor’s office, he began to sense just how deep was Frank’s trouble. And
unless he was wrong, he knew that the two men who waited impatiently for his reply to the question were the very men Corelli was running from.

“I don’t know where Frank Corelli is, Captain,” Quinn said finally.

“He called you earlier today. What’d he want?”

“He was just checking in,” Quinn stuttered. Shit, they’d even monitored the office calls.

Dolchik sighed ominously. “I know how much you two boys like to play games, Detective Quinn, but right now I don’t have the time or the patience to play hopscotch with you.” Dolchik finished his drink. “Either you tell me where Corelli is right now, or not only will you never work for the city government again, but in ten minutes you’ll find yourself in the Tombs without bail, awaiting trial for obstructing justice.”

“Jesus, this ain’t fair…” Quinn complained.

“Life ain’t fair, Quinn.” Dolchik leaped to his feet and pounded his fists on the tabletop. “Nothing in this fucking world is fair. But if you don’t cooperate, you’ll wish you never heard the name Frank Corelli. You’ve got one minute.” He immediately gazed at his watch and waited.

The minute passed. “Okay, Quinn. Where is he?”

“Goddammit, he’s at my nephew’s place in the Village-628 Bank Street,” Quinn spit out, hating himself for being such a coward. “And I hope like hell he’s gone when your goons get there.”

“That’s a very admirable sentiment, Detective Quinn,” Matthews said. “I know you feel you’ve betrayed your friend, but trust me; you’re doing him-and the city of New York-a big favor.”

Dolchik went over and put his arm around Quinn’s shoulder. “He’ll never know you told us,” he promised.

Quinn shrugged Dolchik’s arm off. “Who else could tell you? He’ll know. Now, if you’re through with me…” He started toward the door.

Matthews pressed a button on his desk, and two uniformed guards entered immediately. “Take Detective Quinn to the visitors’ lounge and get him anything he wants.” Quinn began to protest about being held against his will, but the mayor silenced him. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just that there’s too much at stake here to sacrifice in the name of camaraderie. As soon as we have a fix on Corelli, you’ll be released.” He nodded, and the guards escorted Quinn out.

The moment the door was closed, Matthews turned to Dolchik. “I want you to get Corelli personally. Bring him back here. I have to know how much he knows and if he’s talked to anyone else.”

“He’ll be a good man for the team, Russ,” Dolchik urged once again.

“He’ll be better off out of sight in the Tombs,” Matthews countered angrily. “Now, get going, and don’t come back without him.”

Like an all-night diner catering to those who feel the need for a bite to eat at three A.M., the morgue at New York Mercy Hospital was always open for business. In a hospital as large as Mercy, people died at all hours. It was the morgue’s grim duty to store the cadavers until they were released to the undertakers or until it was time for them to be autopsied.

During the day at Mercy, a full-time attendant took care of human deliveries from various parts of the hospital. But at night when the great building slumbered, the dying were handled less officially; they were shunted downstairs by orderlies who, unused to the work, quickly dispatched their plastic-wrapped packages into the refrigerated storage lockers, then vanished back upstairs, glad once again to be with the living.

Washington “Bimbo” Calhoun was not overly fond of the dead; He’d worked in the ER-emergency room-long
enough to have seen every manner of death the city could provide. He’d washed corpses, tucked dismembered limbs next to bodies before hauling them downstairs, and had even been present at an actual death or two. Bimbo, like everyone else in the hospital, had an automatic shutdown mechanism that slipped into gear each time something truly tragic—or something awfully grotesque and macabre—came his way. Living off emotions in a hospital was one sure way to line up for the next nervous breakdown. Bimbo Calhoun was tough as nails, except when it came to corpses.

Bimbo crept along the darkened hospital corridor with Corelli and Louise right behind. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. The morgue was tucked away in a far corner of the hospital basement, far from the mainstream traffic; it just wouldn’t do to have visitors come face to face with a shroud-covered body as it disappeared into an elevator or around a corner. Even in the daylight the corridor to the morgue was foreboding. There was a different smell from the rest of the hospital down here; it was something visceral, something animal, maybe something to do with death and decay. Whatever it was, Bimbo didn’t like it. And had it not been for the twenty bucks Corelli’d slipped him upstairs, there was no way he’d be down here at night, Willie Hoyte’s personal request or not.

“Here’s where you want,” Bimbo whispered as they reached an unmarked door. “This is the office where they keep records—the stiffs are next door.”

Corelli moved around Bimbo and turned the door handle; it was locked. He twisted it back once again to be sure, then turned to the orderly. “You have a key?”

“The chairman of the board musta forgot to give it to me,” he joked to relieve the fear that was centering itself at the back of his neck.

“Is there an entrance into the office through the morgue?”

Bimbo nodded. “I’m ‘fraid so. You go in. I’ll just stay guard.”

“You come with us. I don’t want you to be seen down here.” Corelli stepped back and pushed Bimbo ahead of them. He then linked arms with Louise and gave her a little squeeze. “You okay?”

“Ask me when I regain consciousness.” She was beginning to wish she’d stayed in the Village. Spending a night in the morgue wasn’t exactly her idea of an exciting way to celebrate the best sex she’d had in years. Far from it.

Corelli winked at her for being brave and followed Bimbo into the morgue. The cool, dank air immediately assailed his nostrils, and for a moment his stomach protested. Corelli knew that if he let himself go he could get bothered about being here, but there was no time for that, no time for squeamishness. The room was depressingly gloomy, and as Bimbo felt his way toward the connecting door to the records office, he bumped against something—it didn’t take two guesses to know it was a corpse-laden gurney, apparently awaiting a late-night autopsy.

“Let me outta here,” Bimbo screamed as he pushed past Corelli.

“Hold it, Calhoun!” Frank ordered, but it was too late. The orderly had already fled and was scampering out of sight down the hallway.

“Think he’ll tell?” Louise asked hopefully. If he did, they’d have to leave. Despite her earlier resolve to be strong, she was terrified. The very idea of being here in a roomful of dead people was enough to give her nightmares for a year.

“He’ll keep his mouth shut. Don’t worry.” Corelli opened the connecting door and walked carefully into the records office. He turned on a small flashlight and shone its faint beam ahead of him, scouring the walls for the filing cabinet. After a moment he found what he was looking for and began to check the alphabetical listings for the name Slade, Ted. If he were lucky, it would still be there.

Louise hung back near the doorway, forcing herself to watch Frank rather than let her curiosity about the morgue get the best of her. But when she heard a slow, steady beat of water dripping into a sink from behind her, it conjured up images of autopsies and fresh blood sluicing down drains, dismemberment and organs lying in trays like variety meats at the A&P. She closed her eyes for a moment, forcing the sounds from her consciousness—if Frank didn’t get
“Find anything?” she asked to shatter the silence. Her voice was weak and childlike.

“Not yet, but… Here it is! Come over here and hold the light.”

Louise gladly deserted her post by the morgue door. She’d begun to hear other noises, and the image of the refrigerator doors being slowly opened by the dead just wouldn’t leave her mind.

Corelli scanned the autopsy report. Most of the medical jargon was meaningless to him. The size and depth of Slade’s wounds were no more than grotesque curiosities; the content of the stomach was merely disgusting; the lividity of the body only showed him how much blood had been lost at death. Corelli was looking for one fact; if that wasn’t there, the whole trip—the whole idea of the creepers—was a bust.

“Here it is!” he exclaimed. “Jesus!” Reread, then reread the report to be sure he hadn’t misunderstood. Corelli had asked Dr. Tom Geary if he’d done tests on the saliva found in Slade’s wounds—and here were the results. It wasn’t canine or lupine saliva that had been found in the wounds. It was human!

He replaced the folder and slid the cabinet door quietly closed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“There’s someone coming,” Louise whispered. As the doorknob to the office turned once, then twice, and a key was inserted in the lock, Corelli grabbed Louise by the arm and pulled her through the door back into the morgue. The unseen visitor was probably just a guard making his rounds; still, explaining their presence would be impossible. The door opened, and Corelli silently closed the door between the two offices and held his breath.

Louise backed away. She was terrified. She heard threatening sounds all around her. And the smell of chemicals was making her gag. What was she doing in such a place, anyway? She belonged away from here, out of the hospital, and away from death. She belonged at home… with Lisa. And with that thought came a new image—Lisa wrapped in a plastic shroud, lying cold and lifeless behind one of the refrigerator doors. Her little girl, chewed up by those things in the subway, dead. That was the truth. Lisa was still in the subway. The monsters had her. And Corelli had known it all along! She’d been used and betrayed.

“No, no…” Louise started to whimper quietly as she edged away from Frank. “They can’t do it to her, not to my Lisa. You lied to me, Frank, you knew all along…” She bit on her knuckles to silence the scream that was welling up in her throat.

Corelli immediately recognized Louise’s hysteria. He’d seen it in subway passengers forced to remain between stations in hot, overcrowded trains. It was a slow process to transform a rational human being into a terrified animal. Goddammit, why had he let Louise talk him into tagging along? It was crazy. Now he was going to pay for it; the guard was still nosing around in the outer office, and as his flashlight swept the glass of the connecting door, it briefly illuminated the morgue and Louise’s terrified face.

“It’s okay. He’ll be gone in a second,” he said as reassuringly as he could. “Then we can leave.”

“They’ve got Lisa,” Louise whimpered. “You knew all along.” She had to get out and save her baby. Just a few steps more and she’d be at the door, then out into the hall, then out into the arms of the dark, inviting night… and finally into the subway. Only a few steps more…

Something poked Louise in the back. She whirled around. The arm of the corpse on the gurney had slipped from under its covering and jutted out over the edge of the stretcher. Its hand touched the front of Louise’s skirt. She opened her mouth to scream, but only a hissing sound escaped. She drew in a deep breath and attempted to scream once again, but something clamped itself over her mouth from behind. The picture of a risen corpse holding her in its arms crowded her mind, and she fainted, falling backward into Corelli’s arms.

The weight of Louise’s fall caught him off balance. He sagged, letting his legs take the weight, but she began slipping through his arms. He twisted, vainly trying to keep her from falling. Their downward motion caught the
edge of the gurney and sent it spinning across the room, where it stopped with a thud against the far wall. As Corelli laid Louise down on the floor, he watched with horrified fascination as the sheeting covering the body fluttered to the floor.

The door to the outer office closed and was locked once again. The guard walked away without bothering to check the morgue. He’s no fool, Corelli thought as he rubbed Louise’s wrists. She stirred, then suddenly sat bolt upright.

“Get me out of here, Frank,” she said weakly. “Please.”

“You’ll be all right. Trust me.” He helped her to her feet.

“Trusting you has gotten me interrogated by the police, thrown out of my home and into the morgue in the middle of the night,” she said angrily. “Trust you? You must be joking. Now, can we please leave?”

“I’ve got one more thing to do.” He wanted to leave the room just as he’d found it, and that meant covering the corpse and returning the gurney to its original place. Whoever was behind the creeper cover-up-and that certainly was the right name-knew their business. Leaving anything out of place was to signpost that Frank Corelli had trespassed and was becoming even more dangerous than they suspected. And that might just mean taking extra precautions to find and to silence him.

He picked up the sheet from the floor and began draping it over the body without looking at the corpse. But his policeman’s curiosity got the better of him and his eyes finally settled on the dead man’s face. Corelli gasped. To be sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him, he shone his flashlight on the face of the dead man.

It was Lester Baker.

Twenty minutes later Louise had calmed down somewhat. Being away from that dreadful hospital morgue in Corelli’s car driving through the twinkling, darkened city allowed her to think more clearly. She had no right to resent Corelli for believing what he did about creatures in the subway or, for that matter, about what had happened to Lisa. For a while he’d even convinced her that these things existed, but now, as the cool night air whistled past the window, she saw the story for what it was-just a story.

She looked at Corelli and smiled, feeling almost motherly toward him now. Like he was a kid who wanted desperately to believe that he’d seen a flying saucer. His grim conviction that monsters truly existed had shaken Louise’s belief that Lisa had been kidnapped by an ordinary mortal. For a while she’d been drawn into his terror story, but now she was free of it. And what was the point of holding his beliefs against him? There was none. Especially now that they’d made love and she was beginning to fall in love with him. If it were essential to Frank Corelli right now that he chase creatures of the night through the subway, she could live with it. In the meantime, she had her own beliefs: Lisa was kidnapped, plain and simple. The idea that she might still be in the subway wasn’t totally illogical-after all, Frank had said there were many places to hide-but that she was a captive of the monsters was ridiculous!

“Frank? Frank? Remember me? I’m the girl you took on the date to the morgue?”

He looked at her absentmindedly, smiled, then returned his attention to the road. Louise wasn’t exactly worried about Corelli’s silence. She didn’t know him well enough to know if it was part of the rhythm of his personality or if it was still the upset of discovering the identity of the body in the morgue. She guessed it was the latter, although he wouldn’t answer her questions. After he’d recovered the corpse and replaced the stretcher, he’d led her silently out of the hospital and into the cold night.

Since then his only response to her string of questions was a string of wordless grunts. Finally she’d given up. But one thing was clear: Frank Corelli was scared. As they drove back downtown to the Village, Louise had the distinct feeling that Frank planned to desert her in that awful apartment and disappear into the night to chase his ghosts. Well, she could hardly blame him. However had she allowed herself to faint?

At Fourteenth Street they turned off Fifth Avenue and a few minutes later turned down Ninth Avenue, slowing as they approached Abingdon Square and Quinn’s apartment house. Ever since leaving the hospital, Corelli’s mind had
been hopscotching from Lester Baker to Louise. El Bee had been very much alive that afternoon, and now he was dead. Frank kept wondering if Baker had died from natural causes or if he’d just been another open door in the creeper cover-up that someone had decided to shut permanently. Chances were he’d never know for sure, and that bugged the hell out of him.

Louise was easier to psych out; she was teetering on the edge of emotional collapse, and that scared him. Her terror in the morgue, followed minutes later by her jovial offhand chatter, was an indication that she was caught in a mood swing of cosmic proportions. Corelli only hoped that if-when, probably-the final break came, he’d be able to keep her from doing any lasting damage to herself and to him. With a game as dangerous as the one they were involved in, a hysterical woman was a one-way ticket to oblivion.

As they slowed to turn the corner into Bethune Street, movement in a parked car off to Frank’s left caught his eyes. He slowed and peered out the rearview mirror. It was a black car-the black car-and it was parked opposite the small triangular park opposite their destination. The car now looked empty, but Corelli suspected it was very much occupied. Shit, they’d found where he and Louise were staying. And there was only one way that could have happened: Quinn had spilled his guts. For a moment Corelli’s anger flared at this betrayal, but it cooled almost immediately. Nothing short of the rubber-hose treatment could get Quinn to reveal Frank’s whereabouts; he just hoped they hadn’t been too rough with his pal.

Frank eased the car past the apartment-house entrance and his suspicions were confirmed. The night doorman was different from the one they’d said good night to earlier. The replacement was in a doorman’s uniform and he was helping a slightly intoxicated tenant into the elevator, but the guy was a cop. Corelli had been around uniformed men too long not to recognize the stance and the watchfulness. The whole apartment house was probably crawling with cops right now.

He swung the car back out onto Hudson Street, then sped up Eighth Avenue. They may have thought they were closing in on Frank and Louise, but he had other ideas.

“Mind if I ask where we’re going now?” Louise had given up on trying to outthink Corelli. She wasn’t at all surprised that he’d abandoned Quinn’s apartment. “Maybe there’s a cemetery you want to visit?”

“You ever been uptown? I mean way uptown?”

Louise shook her head. “With you around, I’m beginning to think I’ve never been anywhere.” She rested back against the seat, realizing how tired she was. Her wild-goose chase had begun only that afternoon, but she hadn’t stopped running since. It was well after two already, and there was no sign that they’d ever come to a rest. She was more tired than she’d been in years, yet at that moment she wouldn’t have traded places with any other woman in the world.

At Ninety-sixth Street and Broadway Corelli stopped to make a phone call. After seven rings the phone was answered.

“Who the hell is it at this hour?” The male voice was clouded with sleep.

“It’s Corelli.”

“Mr. Detective, you’re getting to be a regular pain in the ass.” Now Willie Hoyte’s voice was beginning to snap to.

“Listen, Willie, I don’t have time for your jive talk. I need your help. You got someplace a friend and I can crash for the night?” For half a minute there was silence. “Well?”

“I live with my momma,” he admitted reluctantly to stall for time. Trusting Corelli was one thing; inviting him into his home was another. It just wasn’t done. Not where Willie Hoyte lived.

“Then do you have a friend? I’m in big trouble,” Frank quickly admitted.

That did it. “You can stay here. My momma’s off visiting her sister.” Willie gave him the address and hung up.
He then threw on a pair of pants and a sweater and washed two days’ worth of dirty dishes in the sink, guiltily looking at his father’s photograph. Hell, if Ralph Hoyte knew Willie was having the law, the white law, staying under his roof, he’d bust outta jail and personally strangle him. Willie sneered at the picture. “What the hell did that kinda attitude ever get you, Daddy?” He turned the photo to the wall and strolled into the living room, beginning to wonder if he’d lost his senses inviting that dude into his house.

He probably shouldn’t have asked Corelli over. But the man said he was in trouble with a capital T. Just like Willie’d been in trouble earlier at the hospital when Corelli rescued him. Shit, he and the cop were so busy swapping favors they might just as well become partners. Willie smiled at the idea, then turned his attention to an old Japanese horror film on television that he’d already seen five times before.

When Corelli arrived ten minutes later and was ushered into the Hoyte living room, Willie didn’t immediately see Louise. But when he did, his eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He pulled Corelli aside. “You didn’t say nothin’ ’bout this, Corelli. You want to go catting around, that’s fine by me, but not in my momma’s house you don’t. This kinda trouble I want no part of.” Shit, all along Corelli was playing him for a sucker.

“Willie, this is Louise Hill. Louise, Willie Hoyte.” He stepped aside and left the two of them staring at each other. “You might have read about Louise. Her daughter was kidnapped off the Seventy-second Street subway platform on Labor Day.”

“That’s you?” Willie asked in amazement. “I been readin’ about you and your daughter all week. Have they found her yet?”

“No, not yet.” Louise dropped her eyes. “May I please sit down?”

“Sure. Sure thing.” He led them into the living room and turned off the television. “How’s about something cold to drink? A beer? A Coke?”

They both requested beers, and while Willie was out of the room Corelli caught Louise’s eyes and smiled. There was nothing to say…yet. He’d be talking soon enough. And what he had to tell them both wasn’t going to be easy. The main problem would be convincing the two that the creepers really existed. Willie’d gotten a dose of fear from El Bee’s story, but he still suspected the whole thing was drug-induced. Telling Willie that Lester was dead might change his mind about that. Inwardly Corelli sighed; how do you make the unbelievable sound believable? This was the twentieth century, not the fourteenth. Ghosts and goblins and monsters eating people for dinner were out of style; the real beasts that walked the city streets had made fairy tales obsolete.

Half an hour later Corelli finished talking. It had been more difficult than he’d anticipated and as he pieced together the history of the underground horrors, Frank felt the cold touch of fear. He’d felt many things since this nightmare began, but fear was never one of them. It worried him momentarily. Being afraid was dangerous. It made you an easy target, made you prone to make mistakes, too often fatal ones. Frank had been afraid before, but he’d never let it interfere; this time would be no different. But what about Willie? More importantly, what about Louise?

Willie had remained untouched by Corelli’s recitation until he learned that Lester Baker was dead. He hadn’t flinched at the gruesome memory of finding Ted Slade’s body, and the historical evidence of the creepers supplied by the ancient newspaper articles only bored him. Willie Hoyte already knew evil existed in the city, above the ground and below it. Hell, he’d formed Dogs of Hell to counteract it No, it wasn’t the creepers that bothered Willie, it was Lester’s death. El Bee had died mysteriously in protective custody. And Willie smelled a rat, a rat dressed in a blue uniform with a shiny badge pinned to it. And that made him angry, angrier than he’d ever been in his life. But Willie Hoyte wasn’t about to show his feelings to no one and, had it not been for a nervous twitch of his hands, he appeared as passive as someone watching a police drama on television.

Louise was a different story. At first, as Corelli detailed the long list of missing persons, her brows furrowed and she began to personalize the information. And as he went over the details of Ted Slade’s death and wove in the story Lester Baker had told of his attack in the car yard, Louise began to squirm obviously, finally believing there was a connection between this terror and Lisa. But she was strong right until the end, when he revealed the results of the autopsy saliva test. Then Louise uttered a little cry and closed her eyes. He’d put his arms around her, and she melted against his body.
“One thing I don’t understand,” Willie said a little while later. “Who’s been following you? Who wants you and Louise out of the way?”

“The only people-person-who knows I know anything about this is Stan Dolchik, my superior in the TA.” Corelli shook his head, thinking of the fat man. “But I still find it hard to believe that he has the authority to have me followed.”

Willie shook his head. “Don’t ever underestimate a cop, Corelli. I bet your man Dolchik is up to his ears in this. Who else coulda got your friend Quinn to rat on you?”

Corelli hadn’t had the time to give much thought to that question. Until now he’d been too busy avoiding his pursuers and following up his own leads to take stock of that. Maybe what Willie said was true—the whole mess had begun with Dolchik’s steadfast refusal to investigate the Penny Comstock disappearance, which subsequently led him to the hidden file, which subsequently had led to every other goddamned bit of trouble.

Now Frank considered it. Dolchik behind a group so organized it could snatch Frank Corelli off the streets? Or know where he’d be almost before he knew himself? That kind of authority went far beyond the TA. That kind of authority hooked into the New York Police Department, and that, in turn, had its source at City Hall. And beyond. Jesus, was it possible Stan Dolchik was part of all that?

“Frank?” Louise softly broke his concentration. “Do you think the creepers have Lisa?” Corelli didn’t answer. “I guess I knew all along that she was dead. It’s just that I hoped…” She dropped her head in her hands and began to cry. An hour ago she’d forced herself to believe her baby was okay, but now, under Frank’s damning evidence, all hope vanished.

The sounds of Louise’s sobs filled the small living room with oppressive emotion. Willie looked at her, then to Frank, who nodded his head toward the kitchen. Hoyte excused himself and left Frank took Louise in his arms and kissed the top of her head, then pulled her tightly to his chest.

“We don’t know anything for sure about these things, yet. The people who have disappeared have all been adults. Lisa’s just a child.”

“And not big enough to feed a family of four?” she asked with bitter irony.

“I can’t stop you from thinking the worst, and I can’t pretend this isn’t happening or that Lisa’s chances are good, but we don’t know what these things are like. Remember, they’re descendants of people, real people who once lived in houses, walked the streets, played in the sunlight, just like us.” The thought was grotesque. “We just don’t know what their mentality is, or how intelligent they’ve remained. The fact that no child has ever disappeared before is a good sign.” His mind was working fast now, trying to stay one jump ahead of her fear.

“And why is that?”

“They know that kidnapping is the most heinous crime in our society. It runs against everything we stand for. If they have any cunning left, they’ll realize their mistake and release Lisa.”

Louise pulled away from him. “Oh, for Christ’s sake, Frank. Stop this bullshit! Don’t tell me about intelligent monsters. They’ve got Lisa, and the only thing they want her for, want any of us for, is for food.” She angrily wiped away the tears with clenched fists.

The telephone rang and shattered the silence. Two minutes later Willie reappeared in the living room. “That was Miguel Esperanza; he’s got bad news. There was an accident down at Chambers Street. An AA train plowed into the terminal. Ten people were killed, lots more injured.”

“What else?” Corelli’s body was tensed for the worst.

Willie shrugged. “Some of the passengers are saying the train was attacked, that they heard screaming from the front car. Someone said that before the train crashed, the doors in the front car were open and the floor was already covered with blood!”
Corelli fell back against the soft cushions of the couch. Strangely enough, he was almost elated by the terrible news. If nothing else, it confirmed without a doubt the evidence he’d been collecting the past few days.

The creepers were real.
Stan Dolchik read the two-inch-high bloodred headlines of the morning’s *New York Post*, then threw the paper aside in disgust. This was exactly what he’d been afraid of for months. He’d known that sooner or later this unresolved situation would get out of hand. And he’d tried over and over to convince the mayor to act, but Russ Matthews knew what was best for New York City—and for Russ Matthews’ political career—so nothing was done.

The headline “‘THEY WERE DEAD BEFORE CRASH’ SEZ SUBWAY VICTIM” caught Dolchik’s eye again. Reluctantly he retrieved the paper and opened it to the center-spread feature on “the accident of the century,” as it was being called. There, in a series of gruesome black-and-white photos, was the aftermath of the most devastating accident in the New York City subway’s history. Dolchik didn’t bother reading the captions, but he did reread an accompanying article that focused on the claims by a passenger, Mr. Ray Teal of Kew Gardens, Queens, who was riding in the second car and miraculously hadn’t been killed.

Miraculous, Dolchik thought ruefully. If Teal had been killed, that would have been the miracle. For Ray Teal was telling everyone that he’d seen at least two bloody bodies lying on the floor of the first subway car just before the train started its fatal run into the Chambers Street terminal. Dolchik sneered at the publicity-seeking bastard. If only he’d said something to someone in authority at the scene of the wreck, none of this story would have seen the light of day. If Mr. Ray Teal of Kew Gardens, Queens, had told Stan Dolchik or one of his men what he’d witnessed instead of the goddamned newspapers, Mr. Teal would have disappeared without a trace for a while, at least; probably be listed as one of the dead. But no, Teal had talked to the fucking reporters to get his name in the papers. Now everyone was buzzing about an attempted train hijack—and three fanatical terrorist liberation groups had already claimed responsibility for the accident. The cover-up was becoming more complicated—Teal’s reliability would have to be discredited overtly or by implication (alcoholism always seemed to work), and a lot of innocent people were going to suffer. Still, it was a hell of a lot easier than explaining what actually had happened to the corpses in the first subway car.

The intercom on the desk in his small office at City Hall buzzed, and Dolchik jumped. “Yeah?” he answered gruffly.

“Come into my office, will you, Stan?” Matthews’ voice was breezily cheerful, but Dolchik knew he was on the warpath. The mayor had promised the press to clean up this situation, and it was obvious that this time he’d been forced into a corner and would have to give the order for tonight’s maneuvers to proceed.

Matthews, looking natty in a dark blue suit, pin-stripped tie, and button-down Oxford-cloth shirt, sat calmly behind his oversized desk. He smiled as Dolchik entered without knocking. “You fucked up, Stan,” he said sweetly. “It was your men’s job to segregate the passengers from the media and find out if any of them saw anything.” He pushed a copy of the *Post* across the desk distastefully. “Someone talked.”

“So I read.” Dolchik calmly took a chair opposite the mayor. He’d be damned if Matthews was going to bait him. “So what do we do now?”

“I’ve got Tom Geary on his way up. I want to talk to him before you make any more half-assed decisions.”

They sat in angry silence for a full five minutes before Geary was announced. Geary was attached to the medical examiner’s office and had been working on the case since the discovery of Ted Slade’s body. Dolchik admired the doctor’s forensic skills, but he had a personal grudge against him—he was the asshole who’d let Corelli see Slade’s body when he’d been instructed to clear any inquiries about the death with Dolchik first. That, more than anything, had probably tipped Corelli to the covert operation. And his own slip in mentioning the doctor’s name hadn’t helped, either.

“You know Captain Dolchik,” Matthews said as Geary pulled up a chair. Geary nodded curtly. “So, what have you got?”

“A lot, and it’s not pretty.” Geary opened his briefcase, put on his reading glasses, and settled back into the chair. “I examined the body of the motorman found in the wreckage of the first subway car and that of the conductor brought in from the tracks. The conductor’s body showed signs of the same evisceration the Slade corpse exhibited.
There were no surgical wounds, but I suspect in this case there wasn’t much time to use a knife. Teeth are faster, you know.” He looked up and smiled, but neither man acknowledged him. “The traces of saliva in his body and in the chin wound of the motorman match those taken from Slade. And the viral infection found in the saliva matched that found in the blood of Lester Baker.”

“Hold it, doc,” Dolchik interrupted. “What’s this about Baker? I thought he’d just been bitten by a dog.”

“The autopsy showed-”

“Autopsy!” Dolchik almost leaped from his seat. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Calm down, Stan. I didn’t get the chance to tell you; Baker died last night.” Matthews’ tone of voice was only slightly superior. Stan Dolchik was an okay guy, but he had to be reminded constantly just exactly who was running this particular show. Keeping him in the dark about certain things always worked.

“And why didn’t you tell me this last night?” Dolchik’s eyes narrowed angrily.

“We’ll discuss that later.” He waved aside the captain’s complaint. “Go on, Dr. Geary.”

“We sent samples of the saliva and Baker’s blood down to the Disease Control Center in Atlanta for a full examination, but my guess is that he died from some mutant form of rabies virus.”

“Jesus,” the mayor whispered.

Geary was on the roll now. “As you probably know, in its last stages, rabies attacks the brain cells, causing outbursts of violence and uncontrollable physical attacks. Eventually it causes insanity and a very horrible death. The process normally is a fairly slow one that can be counteracted if caught in time.”

“And in this case?” Matthews had begun to sweat.

“In this case it seems to have run its full course in less than twenty-four hours. Baker began to exhibit signs late Thursday afternoon. That evening he broke out of his restraints, and just after midnight he was in a coma. He went into a series of convulsions later and died about one A.M. I did the autopsy an hour or so later.”

“And that’s what happens to someone who gets bitten by these things?” Dolchik almost whispered.


“Such as?” Matthews inquired.

Geary shrugged. “Who knows? Someone with a stronger constitution might not die so suddenly, might not die at all. The organisms might use the body as host, like it seems they did when all this started.”

“And whoever was bitten would walk around never knowing what was living inside them?” Dolchik didn’t like that idea at all.

Geary laughed rudely. “I doubt that. This virus is very virulent. It might just cause the victim to assume the characteristics of…”

“Those things in the subway,” Matthews completed the thought. “It might turn anyone bitten by one of those things into another one.” Geary nodded. “And what about the thing you found on the tracks next to the conductor’s body?”

“That was something else, let me tell you,” Geary replied proudly. “I’ve never seen such adaptation to environment in the human body before-”

“Human?” Matthews pounded his fists on the desk. “You still want me to believe those things are human?”
Despite the evidence of the saliva tests, he suspected Geary had been wrong from the start. At least, that’s what he hoped. Cannibalism was against everything Russ Matthews stood for.

“With a good cleaning and a new suit and tie, any one of them could be a relative of yours, your Honor.”

Dolchik smiled and shook his head. He couldn’t have put it better.

“Never mind the smart-ass remarks, Geary. I want the rest of this story.”

“It looks like these creatures have simply adapted totally to an underground life—the eyes are more finely attuned to seeing in the darkness than ours are, and the whole skeletal system is bent lower to the ground, thrusting its weight forward onto the backs of the hands for easier propulsion and camouflage, I’d imagine.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a monkey,” Dolchik surmised.

“Not so far off, Captain. The backbone showed slight signs of congenital stooping. If I’d seen just the skeleton, I might have, if the room were dim, put it anywhere between Cro-Magnon man and today’s hero.”

“Any idea how long it might have taken for such a posture to become inherited?” Even Dolchik knew that the slow, time-consuming environmental adaptation of a species could be accelerated by quantitative reproduction-breeding these things by scores…hundreds.

“It probably took several generations, but not going back before 1904, when the subway was opened, eh?” Geary laughed again. It was a singularly inappropriate sound. “Also, we must remember that this stance was most probably taught, chosen, not inherited. There is no evidence at present to suggest that all the traits of this one creature are showed by all. There are probably many distinctly different creatures living down there.”

Matthews was liking this conversation less and less with each passing minute. He particularly didn’t like the phrase “several generations.” In that length of time these things could have bred themselves into a veritable army; hunched over, looking for raw meat, living down there in the darkness. Dammit, he should have listened to Dolchik six months ago and smoked them out and killed them. But the timing was off, that’s all. Everyone was on his back about the financial crises in the city. Dolchik wanted money to send teams into the subway, but Matthews wasn’t willing to part with a red cent at that point. It seemed like throwing it away. Still, he’d organized the investigating team with Dolchik as head. But obviously that hadn’t been enough. There was no way he could bullshit himself out of this one…unless he did something about it right away.

These creatures had taken a quantum leap from rumor to fact, making the headlines-albeit disguised-without an intermediary step. The acceleration from Dolchik’s reports of a few attacks on isolated passengers to the wholesale slaughter in Chambers Street was frightening, and Matthews was beginning to suspect that he—none of them—had heard the worst news yet. “If these things are the carriers of this rabies-like virus, why is it they aren’t affected themselves?”

“Pure chance, I’d say. Some form of natural immunity has been protecting them until now.”

Matthews had sensed it all along; Geary had something to tell him. Goddammit, the smug prick was holding something back until the last minute. Now the shit was going to hit the fan. “Why did you say ‘until now’?”

“From the autopsy on the specimen found on the tracks, I’d say it has been in something like the terminal state of rabid infection for several weeks. The deterioration is evident, but the process seems to have been prolonged. I’d say that thing has been nearly out of its mind since the end of August.”

“And just what does that mean?” Dolchik knew what it meant, but he just wanted it confirmed by the doctor.

“It means that as their immunity weakens—which seems to be happening—and the virus gets a stronger foothold on their systems and brains, these things will become more aggressive and dangerous with each passing day. They’ve escaped detection before by being animal-clever; now they don’t care. All they want is food… any way they can get it!”
Matthews had to get this straight before panicking. “So the insanity and violence are prolonged in the creatures themselves and accelerated in their victims?” Geary nodded wearily. “Was this thing’s brain normal otherwise? I mean, are these things capable of intelligent thought?”

“There’s nothing in my tests to show they aren’t.”

“Is it possible they may know what’s happening to them? I mean, could they sense that they’re dying from this disease, that it’s getting worse?” Dolchik knew that if this were true, they might try anything to save themselves.

Geary only shrugged at the question. “I couldn’t answer that. We know nothing of the societal system they have erected—if they have leaders, if they know their history. If they do know these things and they have managed to retain some humanity, then it is possible they know that constant inbreeding with their own kind is not only perpetuating this disease, but that it is the very thing that is killing them.”

Matthews wiped the sweat from his forehead. To be talking about such creatures so rationally, as if they were human, went against every value he’d grown up with. While he recognized the extremes the human temperament could tolerate, he was not quite willing to believe that a tribe of men and women could choose such a way of life. To him it was preposterous. Still, he had to know as much about them as he could in order to defeat them. “If, and I emphasize the word ‘if,’ they could see their own self-destruction coming, how might they prevent it?”

Geary considered the question a moment, then replied calmly: “They’d have to start breeding with people who were not diseased.”

“For example?”

“Any woman in good health who happened to fall into their greedy little hands.”

Louise had made the decision. She wasn’t sure when it had happened, exactly. Maybe it was while Corelli talked so dispassionately about the creepers and the image of Lisa in their hands blotted out everything else. Maybe it was during the night as she lay awake in Willie Hoyte’s mother’s bed listening to the soft murmur of the city outside the windows. Or maybe it was during breakfast in the sunny Hoyte kitchen as she pushed her scrambled eggs around the plate, unable to think of eating.

When she had made the decision hardly mattered. That she had made it, did.

Now, under the icy needles of a cold shower, Louise slowly and absentmindedly caressed her soapy body. The feel of her nipples slowly hardening under her palms reminded her of yesterday evening when she’d gone to bed with Frank. Funny, but it hadn’t surprised her at all. From that first day he’d held her, comforted her in the kitchen over the spilled coffee, Louise suspected that someone special had walked into her life. Now she was sure of it. And she was also sure that she couldn’t tell Frank of her decision. He had too much invested personally to let her go off on her own. What she intended to do might be dangerous...or fatal.

She lathered her body with more soap, trying to forget the past four days. With all her mental strength she pulled herself right into the moment, felt her hands against her skin, concentrated on the tumult of water immersing her, and deeply inhaled the flowery smell of the soap, so obviously Willie’s mother’s. As she accomplished this, Louise felt the days-old burden of her missing daughter lift for a moment. If only she were able to leave Lisa’s fate to the powers that be, trusting that whatever happened was for the good. If only.

She turned off the water and stood for a moment in the glistening tub, brushing the water beads from her body. It broke the spell, and her thoughts drifted once again to Lisa. Tears welled up in her eyes. What were the chances her baby was still alive? Corelli tried so hard to be kind, but his words secretly illuminated his own fears that Lisa was already dead.

What if she weren’t? What if she were still alive, being held captive by those...things? How would her child’s mind react, deal with that reality? Lisa was only seven years old, a baby. How could she face living with those things in the dark, wet subway amid the grisly carnage? Maybe her mind wouldn’t be harmed by the experience. Maybe the trauma would wash off like the grime from the subway once she was home. Maybe...
Louise shook all thoughts of Lisa from her mind and dried off. She now had only one goal in life: to fulfill it was her destiny. Making the decision had been the easiest decision of her life; carrying it out would be the hardest. After all, what did she know of the New York subway system? Other than the colorful maps that covered the station walls like an arterial diagram in a pathology class, the system’s complexity was a mystery. Louise paid her money, pushed through the turnstile, got on, then off the train. What did she know of tunnels and crawl spaces, workmen’s troughs and abandoned stations? Nothing. But she’d learn tonight when she went back to Seventy-second Street and began searching for Lisa.

Just before breakfast, Corelli went out and bought all the morning newspapers. The style of the three major dailies ran the gamut from the liberalism of the *Times* through the conservative position of the *Daily News* to the bloodthirsty gossip of the *Post*. Despite the three different perspectives on this morning’s subway disaster, they all meant one thing to Frank: the creepers were at work again; this time en masse.

In the past the attacks had occurred late at night, and only while one person waited for a train. The attacks, as though carefully planned, were conservative in their modus operandi. But last night’s attack had broken that mold. The creepers seemed to have forsaken care and caution in favor of visible attack, bloodthirsty slaughter. For generations these creatures had lived lives so geared to hiding their very existence that they eluded even the most scrupulous examination of the system. But because they did exist, and at one time or another were seen by passing motormen or conductors, the myth of their existence, the myth of the creepers had risen to explain the unexplainable. And the pattern was set. And had never varied once. Until now.

And it scared Corelli, for he intuited that this shift in their feeding habits was the signal that the creepers were about to make the transition from myth to hard, cold fact. And that meant that many people would die during the change.

“More coffee, Frank?” Willie called out from the kitchen.

“No, thanks, Willie, but keep it warm. I suspect I’ll be needing it later.”

“You got it,” he called, then went back to cleaning up the breakfast dishes.

Corelli was fostering a deep appreciation of Willie Hoyte. He’d suspected all along that under the facade of smart-ass dude Willie had a heart and soul. The formation of Dogs of Hell proved it. The quest for publicity only proved that he was as human and fallible as anyone else. He’d asked Willie about the photograph of his father, and Willie told him exactly how he felt about the man—without shame, without embarrassment. And Corelli’s admiration had grown.

“What you gonna do, Corelli?” Willie asked as he came into the dining room drying his hands. “You gonna tip off the newspapers about these creepers?” He nodded toward the stack of dailies on the floor.

“And have all hell break loose? Not on your life. Have you ever thought what would happen if I convinced people about the creepers? Can you imagine the panic?”

“I guess you’re right.” Willie dropped the dish towel over his shoulder. “Besides, that news would break the TA for sure. No one in his right mind would ride the subway then. Tokens would go up to ten bucks.”

“And only the rich could afford to ride,” Corelli finished the thought. “Let me tell you something, Willie. If the rich were using the subway, it would run on time, it would be safe and so clean you could eat off the floor.”

Willie shook his head. “It ain’t money, man. It’s pride, self-respect. It’s jes’ too bad poor folks ain’t got none no more,” he said wistfully.

“Can you get your men together today?” Frank asked, changing the subject. Time was running out. He wanted to do something to prove the creepers’ existence, show the right people, let them take care of the problem without causing a public panic. And as far as he could see, there was only one way to do that—catch a creeper!

“My men comes when I call,” Hoyte responded proudly. “What you got in mind?”
“A sweep operation down the Seventh Avenue IRT line from Ninety-sixth Street.”

“You want my men to go into the subway, down on the tracks?”

Corelli shook his head. “No way. Someone would surely get hurt. I want your men stationed at Ninety-sixth Street, Eighty-sixth Street, Seventy-ninth Street, and Seventy-second Street on both the uptown and downtown sides. I’m going into the tunnel alone.”

“Alone with me,” Willie corrected.

“No way. This is my neck, not yours.”

Willie leaned up against the door frame and folded his arms across his chest. “There’s no way I be left out of this action.” Helping to smoke out these creepers would validate Dogs of Hell once and for all. “Corelli, I already been in the stretch of tunnel once, if you remembers. I was the one who found Slade’s body. I spent the night in jail for my troubles, too. And if you think you’re going to get all the glory, you’re one fucking crazy cop.”

“You’ve sure got a way with words, Willie.” Corelli laughed. “Okay, you can come, but no one else. Your friend Slade saw a creeper near the abandoned station up near Ninety-sixth Street, and that’s where his body was, too. So that’s where we’ll start.”

Willie pulled himself up straight and threw the dish towel into the kitchen, where it landed in a heap on the floor. “I’ll get on the phone to my men right now.”

“Not so fast. If we go running into those stations in broad daylight, we’ll all disappear before you can count to ten.”

“How’s that?”

“The someone who wants me and Louise out of the way knows about the creepers. They’ll be watching the subways. They want my mouth shut at any cost.”

“Jes’ like old El Bee,” Willie said mournfully.

“Let’s not complicate the issue. We don’t know how Lester died. It’s easy to imagine that whoever was holding him killed him, but personally I don’t believe it.”

But Willie wasn’t buying that idea. “Man, I was jes’ talking to him a few hours before he croaked. He was jes’ fine, a little whooped up on drugs, but that weren’t nothing unusual. I say he was offed by the man.”

“Forget it, Willie. Let’s concentrate on us. I’ve still got to make a few phone calls before going off the deep end. Maybe, if we’re lucky, this whole operation can be shelved. If not, well…”

“I usually likes action, Corelli,” Willie admitted, “but if you can swing it so I don’t have to come face to face with one of the creeper characters, you gets my vote.”

“Vote for what?” Louise asked as she came out of the bedroom.

Corelli smirked as she strolled into the room, aware of the vague stirring in the pit of his stomach that appeared each time they were together. Louise had been through hell the past four days—but she looked great. He’d worried about her at breakfast; she was withdrawn and sullen and obviously hadn’t slept well, but a morning shower seemed to have done wonders for her.

“We got a plan to get them creepers,” Willie boasted.

“Oh? That’s nice.” Her voice was expressionless.

“Never mind, Willie,” Corelli interrupted. “I’ll handle this.”
“Too late.” Louise smiled as she sank down on the couch. “The cat’s already out of the bag. So what’s this plan, and where do I fit in?”

“You stay right here, that’s where you fit in. Willie and I and his men are going out tonight for a while. You’ll be safe right here.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll be safe anywhere. I can’t go home, I can’t go to my ‘hideout,’ I can’t go out on the street. Guess I’m just a real fugitive from justice,” she said offhandedly.

Louise’s lackadaisical manner was partially feigned; she’d counted on Corelli’s being busy tonight. For four days she’d done nothing, but tonight she would remedy the situation. She was obsessed with Lisa, but that was natural, just as it was natural for any child’s mother to want to take some action. Going into the subway was the answer. Louise had to do it for her own sanity. If she didn’t, she’d never have a moment’s peace for the rest of her life.

But her manner didn’t escape Frank’s notice. Something was wrong. He’d seen it the moment Louise spoke; though her eyes sparkled almost unnaturally, her voice was dead. He’d seen this reaction before in accident or mugging victims in the subway. The trauma is so intense that a mechanism deep inside closes off vulnerability with a thick wall of protection. Sometimes its working shows in the face, oftentimes not. But it always appears in the voice, leaving only the plodding, grinding mechanical sounds of speech.

Because Corelli had seen it so often before, he’d been waiting for it in Louise. God, she was only human, and she’d been under tremendous pressure. That it had taken so long for her defenses to overload was a tribute to her tough spirit. Other women, men, too, would have crumbled long before. But Louise had fought it off…long enough for Corelli to get involved…long enough for Louise to need him. He wondered now if the Louise Hill he was falling in love with was actually a ghost, a persona that evolved to cover the shocking loss of her daughter. Whatever the answer, he had to deal with her objectively now, personal feelings aside. There was too much at stake.

“Look, Louise, tonight is a very special night and it’s going to be very dangerous. I can’t take you with me.” He took her hand and squeezed it, hoping she wouldn’t put up a fight.

“Don’t worry about me, Frank. I’ll find something to do while you’re gone.” She smiled enigmatically, then looked around. “There’s television… and books… and the newspapers”—she poked them with her foot—“I’ll be just fine.”

Corelli wasn’t so sure. He was relieved she’d acquiesced to his wishes, but the rapidity of it bothered him. Louise was a fighter, not a quitter. Damn! It just didn’t feel right. But there was a simple solution to his quandary: later, he’d ask Willie if maybe a woman friend of his or his mother’s might stop over to keep Louise company…and to keep an eye on her.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” he said softly, trying to intuit what was going on behind her eyes; she showed no emotion whatsoever. “Willie, I want to make a phone call.”

“Use Momma’s room, it’s more private.”

Before leaving, Corelli made one last attempt to break through Louise’s lassitude. She finally looked up at him, and all the pain and fear surfaced in her eyes. His heart went out to her. “I know what it’s like to lose someone you love without warning. I know the gaping hole it leaves in your life. Only I’d hoped I might fill it for you before the pain got too bad.” He knelt in front of her chair and took her hands. “You’re a very special lady, do you know that?”

“Maybe you bring that out in me.”

“On the contrary, I’m known around town as “hardhearted Corelli,’ the last true bachelor on earth.”

When she smiled, her lips began to tremble. She pulled his hands to her face and rubbed them against the soft skin. “Oh, Frank, what am I going to do about Lisa?” Her voice trailed off to silence, and the emotion went as fast as it had come.

“It’s okay. You’ve got every right in the world to cry. Let it go.” He squeezed her hands. “You need the emotional
“No, no, I’m all right.” She regained her composure. “I just got carried away.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. “Go make your call. 111 be all right… really.”

Corelli kissed her on the cheek, then went into the bedroom, pausing just long enough to take one last look at Louise. Something definitely was wrong with her. Under the mask of lethargy boiled a caldron of rage. Louise was keeping it contained for a reason. Why? Why did she need to keep herself angry? Well, there was no use guessing now; he had other, more important things to do.

Ten minutes later Dolchik picked up the call in the mayor’s office. The call had been transferred from uptown and was placed on the conference line. Matthews sat at his desk, eyes closed, listening. Corelli had said it was urgent; Dolchik wondered. “What can I do for you, Frank?”

“I want to know what the fuck’s going on, Dolchik,” Corelli said hotly, “I want to know why, in the past twenty-four hours, I’ve been tailed all over this city.”

“I don’t know nothing about no tail, Frank.”

“And don’t give me any more of your redneck deezes, dems and dozes, Stan, I don’t buy it.”

Matthews nodded his head toward Dolchik in acknowledgment of Corelli’s astuteness.

“Frank, you’re blowing this whole thing out of proportion. I—”

“Hold on, Dolchik. Let’s say, for the sake of argument, there was a good reason for you wanting to haul me in. That still doesn’t convince me that my fear of what’s going down in the subway’s ‘out of proportion’—to use your words.”

“Frank, you jumped the gun on this whole thing. Sure, we’ve got a problem downstairs, but if you had come to me with your suspicions, I could have explained… made you one of the team,” Dolchik lied, wishing Matthews weren’t so adamant about Corelli.

“I went to you, Stan. I confronted you about Penny Comstock, about the missing-persons file, and you gave me a load of crap about hiding a bottle of Scotch.”

“So I played it wrong. Give me a second chance, Corelli.”

“Not a shot.” He lowered his voice to a properly impressive level. “I know about the creepers, Dolchik. And I know that Lester Baker is dead. I saw his body this morning in the morgue at New York Mercy.”

“Jesus!” Matthews shouted without thinking about his anonymity.

Corelli’s laugh echoed around the room, amplified by the telephone system. “Dolchik, you’re a real prize. You want to sweet-talk me… right into a trap. Who’s your playmate, fat man?”

“It’s Russ Matthews, you meathead. It’s the goddamned mayor of this fucking city,” Matthews screamed as he leaped from his chair. “I’ve listened to about as much of this adolescent you-show-me-yours-and-I’ll-show-you-mine crap I’m going to. Now, listen to me, you asshole, I want you in my office within the hour or your ass is in a sling.” Matthews hated to drop the Ivy League facade that got him elected, but Corelli was just a dumb wop in his book, and a dangerous one at that.

“Enter your office and disappear in a cloud of smoke, is that it, Mr. Mayor?” Corelli chuckled. “You never did impress me as much more than an overdressed windbag, Matthews, and as a man whose word is worth about as much as the paper it’s written on. So, no deal. You want me, you’ve got to find me.”
“Corelli, you dumb sonofabitch, you’re out of your mind,” Dolchik hissed toward the conference phone.

“Maybe, but until you catch me, I’ve got the upper hand, so now I want you to listen to me a minute. You’ve been sitting on this situation for months, as far as I can tell, and people have died because you haven’t taken any action. I don’t have to tell you the latest mess is the subway situation down at Chambers Street…” He paused to let that bit of information sink in.

Matthews’ eyes narrowed and he shook his head. Dolchik shrugged; what could he do? He’d warned the mayor that Corelli was on the ball.

“We’re working on it, but it’ll take time,” Matthews said evenly.

“That’s just not good enough, Mr. Mayor. I want better…or if you don’t do something, I will. I’ll bring physical proof that the creepers exist up out of the subway and I’ll have your ass for trying to cover it up. It’s your move.” Corelli hung up without giving Matthews a chance to answer.

“That lousy, crusading prick,” Matthews burst out. “He’ll have my ass? I’ll have his balls for this.” He cooled off almost immediately. It was too late for self-righteous anger. “Corelli’s given us no choice, Stan. We have to move tonight for sure.” Until the call, he hadn’t been convinced he’d implement the plan to smoke the creepers out.

Dolchik remained silent throughout all this, hating Russ Matthews’ petty politicking more than ever. It had taken Frank Corelli to get that cocksucker Matthews to take affirmative action; yet it was Corelli who was the fugitive. Where the hell was the justice in that?

“I’ll call the governor and discuss finalizing the plans with him. There shouldn’t be a problem getting the National Guard mobilized.”

“What about me?”

“You round up the team. I want two men at the street-level entrance of every operating station in Manhattan.” Aside from Matthews, Dolchik, Dr. Tom Geary, and a few tactical experts, the team was mainly composed of TA and NYPD cops who were on twenty-four-hour duty for a secret mission.

“No problem getting them together. But what about Corelli?”

Matthews shoved his chair back from the desk and went to the large window that overlooked lower Manhattan. “There’s only one way Corelli can make good on his threat—go into the subway tonight to find one of those things.”

“And?” Dolchik asked uneasily.

“And the Guard will have orders to shoot everything not in uniform—shoot now, ask questions later.” Matthews whirled around, his face an icy mask. “That should take care of Detective Corelli’s crusading. Now, get the hell out of here and get going. We’ve got to get this cleaned up by tomorrow morning first thing.”

For the rest of the day Corelli went over his plans both mentally and with Willie. If the mayor heeded his warning, there would be no need to send the letter he had written after his phone conversation. The mayor had always impressed Corelli as an arrogant sonofabitch who, despite his promises, put his own pleasure and needs before those of anyone else in the city. Matthews’ acid voice over the phone had convinced Frank that the corruption behind the veil of secrecy about the creepers went straight to the top.

The letter would do something in correcting that situation. Addressed to the editors of the city’s newspapers, the letter detailed the events since Labor Day, since Corelli began his investigation of what he discovered later to be the creepers. It detailed Penny Comstock, Lisa Hill, Ted Slade, and Lester Baker, plus connecting them with the accident at Chambers Street. Corelli couldn’t be sure the editors would believe him, but he’d given them enough, cold facts to get an investigation started. The letter was to be delivered by a friend of Hoyte’s only if Frank Corelli disappeared—or was found dead from any cause.

Louise had withdrawn into herself. She huddled in a chair by the window in the Hoyte living room and stared
fixedly into the backyards of the tenements. She was mentally preparing herself for her mission, preparing herself to die in search of Lisa. How, she wondered, have I managed to live through the last days without once losing control? My baby is gone. Dead, probably. Or maybe worse, in the hands of those things.

Thoughts of Lisa were with her now all the time. Once Louise began savoring the memories of her daughter, the torrent of emotion she’d been suppressing gained full power and inundated her. She remembered Lisa that last day, dressed so like a happy child in her painter’s overalls and red shoes. Lisa had been so excited about the trip to SoHo and the prospect of the street fair. Louise remembered the enthusiasm and it made her smile all over again. And right now, feeling so alone in this strange apartment in Harlem, she needed to smile.

Frank had deserted her. No, that wasn’t entirely true. He wanted to comfort her; she knew he saw the change in her, but Louise wasn’t able to accept his ministrations right now. The pain of Lisa’s fate was too new. She needed time alone, to examine the wound, test its depth. Corelli, in turn, went about his business. He and Willie had something planned for later, something that by its very nature, would exclude her. But that was okay. She had things to do herself.

“I’m going to leave this letter with a friend of Willie’s,” Corelli said sometime after ten. “Want to come along? The walk might do you good.”

“Nothing will do me much good right now, Frank.” Louise smiled bravely. “You and Willie go ahead. I’ll be fine right here.”

“Sure?”

She nodded. “In fact, forget about me altogether tonight. You just go. Lettie Jean said she’d be coming back soon.”

Lettie Jean DuChamps was the friend of Willie’s whom Frank had enlisted that evening to raise Louise’s spirits. She’d stopped over for an hour about seven, and was due back soon. At well over two hundred pounds, the twenty-two-year-old Lettie Jean was lead singer in an uptown gospel group called God’s Angels. When she was not singing the praises of the Lord, Lettie Jean was swilling down beer, laughing, and telling dirty jokes. It had been Willie’s hope that Lettie’s boisterous joking would be infectious, and thus cheer up Louise. The fat woman’s caterwauling actually depressed Louise, but she kept that information to herself.

“Maybe we should wait till Lettie gets here,” Frank mused. He still didn’t like Louise’s distant mood.

“Hell, man, time’s running out,” Willie chimed in. “Louise is okay by herself. ’Sides, Lettie’s just down the hall. We’ll knock on her door as we go by.”

There really wasn’t time to quibble. Frank kissed Louise lightly on the mouth, promised to see her later, then took the letters for the newspaper editors and left with Willie.

Bimbo Calhoun smiled broadly as he let Willie and Corelli into his small apartment. “Well, well, if it ain’t the gravedigger hisself.” He laughed raucously. “Welcome to the land of the livin’. Come in, come in.”

Bimbo ushered them into a living room over stuffed with cast-off furniture rescued from the streets. The Dogs of Hell were there waiting. Willie had been able to round up only eighteen of them, but a dozen and a half people in Calhoun’s apartment was more than a crowd.

“I’d show y’all into the ballroom, Willie, but we’s havin’ a cotillion in there tonight.” Bimbo laughed.

“Being here’s good enough, Bimbo. Thanks for the use of the hall.” Willie’s voice fell a half-tone and his back automatically straightened as he talked. He was on his best behavior; he was now acting in his official capacity as revered leader of Dogs of Hell. “This here is Detective Frank Corelli of the TA, in case you don’t recognize him. He needs our help… bad.” Putting it like this was the only way to enlist his men’s support. Most of them had no use for die TA.

“We got a problem in the subway the likes of which we ain’t never imagined. Now, before I go any further, I want
you to know this is a volunteer job. If any of you wants out, that’s okay by me. It don’t mean nothing, and it won’t stand against your record.”

“Dogs of Hell don’t never backs down,” someone shouted.

The cries of affirmation brought a smile to Willie’s face. “That’s good to hear, brother, ’cause we got a ball-buster on our hands. Now, dig this…”

Quickly, expertly, Willie summarized the problem. He expected no resistance and he got none. Willie’s men had grown up in a world where death came in every conceivable form and size. The uncommon was common for them; the bizarre, comfortably familiar. Willie talked about the creepers like they were run-of-the-mill muggers who happened to live down under the ground and also happened to like eating human flesh. He talked about Baker’s death dispassionately and Slade’s death angrily.

“These bastards took out one of our own men. They chewed Ted Slade up like Gravy Tram. I think we owe them one, what say?” The roaring cheer was unanimous. “Now, I want you to listen to Detective Frank Corelli, if you please.”

Corelli sensed the animosity in many of the men, but he ignored it. He didn’t have the time to prove to them that he was one of the boys. Hoyte’s stamp of approval would have to do. “Your friend Slade died on the tracks of the Seventh Avenue IRT line down below Ninety-third Street. He probably discovered something there, and I want to know what. Willie and I will be making a sweep down the tracks starting at midnight. We want you to stand guard at every station between Ninety-sixth Street and Seventy-second Street. You’ll be divided into teams.”

“What we looking for, man?” Miguel Esperanza chimed up from the front row.

“We want to capture one of these things alive, if that’s possible.”

“Then what?”

“Then we have the proof. Then we have the power.”

“Sounds good to me,” Willie joked, and everyone laughed.

“This is the plan; it’s nine-thirty now. At midnight, all the teams of men will go to each subway station. Two or three of you go in the uptown side, same number on the downtown. The point is that we don’t want to attract attention. The leader of each group will have a walkie-talkie.”

“And what if something goes wrong? What if we don’t bear nothing? What if you don’t find one of these things, or the cops get you?” Miguel asked argumentatively.

“Then save your own asses. There’s no room in this operation for heroes. Go home. Forget you ever heard my name, or Willie’s,” Corelli said grimly. If the cops did catch him, he was as good as dead, anyway.

After the Dogs of Hell left, Corelli grew restive. With less than an hour left before going into the subway, he still felt uneasy; it wasn’t like him. He knew it wasn’t fear of what he might confront in the abandoned station where Slade had met his death. It was something else. Something not directly connected with the creeper operation. He closed his eyes and focused all his energy on deciphering his apprehension.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Louise’s face assembled itself in his imagination, and he knew that was it. She’d said she was okay; they both knew she was lying. Maybe he shouldn’t have left her, maybe he should have stayed at Willie’s until Lettie Jean came back. Well, there was one way to deal with that guilt. He called Willie’s number immediately, bracing himself for Lettie’s voluminous alto voice. After ten rings he hung up.

“Willie, what’s Lettie Jean’s home phone number? She and Louise must be over at her place.” But even as he dialed, Corelli knew he was deluding himself. Things never worked out that easily. Human nature wasn’t as straightforward as people liked to believe. Frank knew he wouldn’t call Lettie’s, ask to speak to Louise, and a moment later hear her soft, soothing voice.
“How de do?” Lettie’s voice boomed into his ear.

“It’s Frank Corelli. Is Louise handy?”

“She should be right by your side, Mr. Corelli.”

“Oh?” So, human nature hadn’t failed him, after all.

“Sure ’nuff. I stopped over to chew the fat awhile, and Louise was jes’ as restless as a cat on a hot tin roof. She finally picked up the phone and called you—least I thought it was you.” The shadow of a doubt crept into her voice.

“Then she went out?”

“Like a bat outta hell. Shoot, I figured you whispered some lovin’ words in her ear, Frank.” Lettie’s voice definitely meant to be more than friendly.

“Dammit,” Corelli swore under his breath. “If you see her, Lettie, don’t let her outta your sight.”

“Sure thing, Frank,” she cooed again before hanging up.

Corelli grabbed his coat and was at the front door before Willie had a chance to ask where he was going. Frank wasn’t exactly sure where Louise had gone, but he had a good idea. Goddammit! He should have kept closer watch on her. She’d been acting flaky ever since last night… ever since she’d first heard about the creepers… and imagined her daughter with them.

“Where the hell you goin’?” Willie yelped as Corelli opened the door. “It’s gettin’ late.”

“I’ll meet you at Ninety-sixth Street at midnight.”

“And if you ain’t there?”

“I’ll be there,” Corelli insisted.

“Jes’ speakin’ hypothetical-like…if you ain’t?”

“Then you and your men get the hell outta there. You got that?”

Willie thought a moment, then calmly began toying with the gold chain around his neck. He got it, all right. If Corelli wasn’t there, there wasn’t going to be a party. Well, this time, Willie Hoyte was going to look out for number one. He was going into the tunnel, Corelli or no Corelli. “Hopes you find her,” he said benignly.

“That makes two of us,” Corelli said as he ran out the door, closer to panic than he wanted to admit.

Louise had finally broken. The nightmare had finally become reality for her. And she’d fled, irrationally, terrified, from the safety of Willie’s apartment out into the night. And if her final destination was where Frank feared, her life was in more danger than she’d ever know.

As he leaped into his car, Corelli only hoped it wasn’t too late to save her.
Louise sat huddled in the far corner of the AA train as it rattled downtown. Her walk from Willie’s apartment to the subway had terrified her. Like so many New Yorkers, Louise had no concept of the extent of the devastation that neglect and poverty had taken on uptown Manhattan. All the way to the station she had thought of the bombed-out ruins of postwar Europe. The streets were littered with rubble, trash, and bricks; the buildings were rife with decay and despair. It was a netherworld she never wanted to see again.

And everywhere she walked, there were the eyes—the eyes of the young black men hanging out on the street corners, drinking and drugging, trying chemically to escape the grinding hopelessness of their lives. They clung to their blaring gigantic radios, feeling less insignificant in the teeming, faceless streets. They made love openly to the girls and women who, drawn by their own restlessness and the promise of a drink of cheap wine, descended from the tenements into the street. With each step Louise took, those eyes followed her; curious, resentful, lustful eyes that saw she didn’t belong up here among them. Her demeanor proclaimed it, her walk, her clothes, but mostly the fear on her face.

Yet she made it to the subway unscathed, her breath scorching her throat in time with her accelerated heartbeat. She was sweaty from the fear, and a thin trickle of perspiration from her armpits eased down her sides, sending a cold shiver through her body. As the subway stopped at the station, Louise decided she’d better get used to the fear, for in the next hours it would be her only companion, her only friend. Corelli and Willie were uptown, and Louise was downtown, under the city, searching for Lisa on the tracks.

The train pulled into Eighty-first Street, slowed, and stopped. She sat at the far end of the train purposely. She needed time alone, time to walk down the platform at Seventy-second Street until she was exactly where she and Lisa had stood four days ago on Labor Day. The doors opened, one passenger waiting on the platform entered the train, and on the conductor’s signal, the doors closed and the train left.

Three minutes later Louise was alone at Seventy-second Street. The station was dank and dirty, but cooler than it had been on Labor Day. She remembered that crushing heat and the feel of her sundress clinging to her legs and torso. Oh, she’d been so hot that day. So short-tempered and irritable. And Lisa had been so fun-loving and free.

“Lisa, come back here”—the memory of her own petulant voice drifted back to her now as she walked slowly toward the end of the platform.

“I want to look at the pictures, Mommy,” Lisa urged, sounding a little too like Dave for comfort.

“I want you back here, now!” Her anger had nothing to do with Lisa; it had to do with Dave. But, “Lisa, it’s for your own safety,” was the rationale for giving in to it. And when the child continued to disobey her, Louise had thought the thought that now haunted her every waking moment: If something dreadful happens to Lisa, never let it be said I didn’t warn her. And suddenly Louise was standing at the end of the platform.

The memory of that vow came back with the swift judgmental clout that staggered Louise. Her tears choked her and she leaned heavily against the wall, smudging with her shoulder obscene graffiti that covered a movie poster. For the first time since becoming involved with Corelli, she cried full-out. The tears were unlike those during the first days when the shock of losing Lisa was so new; then something inside needed release, something connected with fear. Now it was simple loss. Standing on the platform, the memory of Lisa as fresh as a newly opened grave, Louise felt violated and abused.

She beat her fist against the wall until the side of her hand was numb. Then she changed hands and began again. “Oh, Jesus God,” she whimpered. “Please, please let me find my baby alive. Please. I’ll do anything if you just grant me this one favor.”

In answer, an express train rumbled toward the station. It appeared at the far end of the tunnel, compressing the air before it until, as it careened through the station, it kicked up a tornado of dust. When the train was gone, the station was strangely silent. And Louise’s tears were gone, erased by a grim determination to find and protect the child who’d been taken from her—and to survive in the offing. If the creepers were going to kill Louise Hill, they were in for the fight of their monstrous lives.
She sat wearily down on the edge of the platform, thinking ironically that her pastel skirt-and-blouse combination was hardly the outfit for tramping around in a subway tunnel. For Vogue it might be the appropriate costume; for Louise Hill, no. But she had no choice. She hadn’t dressed to be an explorer, any more than she’d dressed to be a fugitive. For a moment she just rested, praying no one would come along to interfere. There was always the chance a stranger might call the police, but the greater chance was that a stranger would turn his back on the whole thing. She relaxed.

Louise’s feet dangled mere inches from the slimy roadbed, and every ounce of her good breeding rebelled at the sight and smell of the garbage-strewn tracks. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw something dart through the roadbed’s slushy puddles, and before her imagination got the chance to turn a humble mouse into a monster, she pushed off and landed in the muck.

Corelli had talked about the roadbed and the third rail. He said even a moron was safe if he were careful and didn’t panic. Even a moron could maneuver his way south along the tracks. Panic and irrationality were the dangers down here. The subway was not an obstacle course; it was rationally constructed to allow maximum safety for the workmen. Right now Louise had to think like a TA workman who was used to being on the tracks night after night, stepping back into safety troughs, watching with only detached interest as trains passed mere inches away.

She flicked on Corelli’s flashlight, sending a narrow but powerful beam ahead of her like a scout. The track behind was clear, and a quick search of the near wall revealed several troughs in which to escape should anything unexpected come along. Louise moved slowly, keeping her eyes riveted on the roadbed. One false step might mean a tumble to the third rail or an injury that precluded escape from an oncoming train that would plow into her and tear her body apart under its thundering wheels.

Louise wasn’t quite sure why she was in the tunnel. She wasn’t quite sure what she was looking for; she didn’t expect really to find Lisa down here; at least, she hoped she wouldn’t now, four days later. Yet she was there. She needed to find something, some little clue to give her the courage of her convictions to continue believing her daughter was still alive. Something. Anything.

Ten minutes later Louise had made a little progress through the tunnel. The way was treacherous; more than once she lost her footing and fell, grasping toward the cold, uninviting wall to seek support. She’d expected to encounter rats, snakes, horrible things, but instead she mostly found garbage and refuse that had blown into the tunnel or had been dragged along by the undercarriage of a passing train.

A crunching sound from behind startled Louise. She turned and saw a local train in the distance. But between her and the train she saw something else; it moved ahead, then swerved onto the express track, where it disappeared. At least it seemed to disappear; Louise wasn’t sure. She was more concerned with the approach of the local. Telling herself to remain calm, Louise skittered to the wall and found refuge in the workman’s trough. It was no more than a foot and a half deep, and although Louise wouldn’t have wanted to live there, it sure was a great place to visit.

The train gamed speed out of the station. Instinctively she pressed her body deep into the trough, stretching her arms out against the shallow walls for added support. Like a bolt of summer heat lightning, the train crashed by, sucking an armful of trash up from the roadbed; it wrapped itself around Louise’s legs like a paper snake, then blew up into her face. The train’s terrifying clatter knifed through her brain, and she screamed without knowing it. When the train was gone, Louise waited a moment, then carefully climbed back down onto the roadbed.

Twenty feet south of where she’d escaped the train, Louise’s light revealed something partially hidden in the mud between the tracks. Because it was covered with filth, she’d almost missed it, despite her careful searching. Gingerly, almost daintily, Louise stooped down, and as her hands touched the soft jellylike plastic, she knew she’d found her clue. She quickly rubbed it against her yellow blouse, leaving an angry stain across her left breast. Cleaned, the object proved to be a red plastic sandal. Lisa’s.

Louise became conscious of the running footsteps behind her only when they shattered a piece of glass that lay in the roadbed. Her first instinct was to clutch the sandal to her as if someone were going to steal the one thing linking Lisa to the fantastic story of the creepers. Then, as the sound grew closer, Louise gazed behind her. Someone, something, was skipping over the ties through the darkness toward her. It was running low to the ground, leaning forward as if to streamline itself for added momentum. Louise swallowed hard and felt the tightness of fear in her
throat. If only I can get to the Fifty-ninth Street station, she thought.

She turned and ran toward the distant station lights. They were such a long way off, and the thing was gaining on her. The headlights of an oncoming express pierced the darkness, and suddenly it was rocketing by on the opposite tracks. The shrieking sound of metal clattering against metal filled her head and, it seemed, called her name once… twice. She stumbled, then fell, painfully breaking her fall with the palms of her hands. Lisa’s sandal skittered away from her, and she frantically scrambled for it, ignoring the approaching footsteps.

By the time she’d retrieved the shoe, it was too late to escape. Strong hands slid themselves around her waist and harsh fingers gripped her sides and yanked her up to her feet. She pulled the flashlight from her pocket and spun around, holding it high, the light transcribing an arc in the darkness as it came down toward her attacker’s head.

Corelli averted the blow by grabbing Louise’s wrist and relieving her of the flashlight like he might have taken a lollipop from an infant. She stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then beat her fists against him, her whole body trembling.

“I thought you were a-” she began, but he stopped her.

“You’ve got to get out of here, now,” he said angrily. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me what you were up to?”

“Would you have let me come? Or come with me?” Her voice shook with anger and indignation. “Not a chance,” he admitted solemnly. “That’s why I had to do it on my own. Do you understand that?” she asked sarcastically.

“I understand that you could get yourself killed.” He stared into her eyes, wanting to stoke his anger, but Louise looked so helpless it was deflated. He pulled her close. “If you can’t think of yourself, I’ll have to do it for you. And I’m very selfish where you’re concerned.” He kissed her. “If you get yourself killed, where does that leave me?” She said nothing. “You were lucky… this time. Next time it could be someone… something… else.”

“Never mind all that,” she said impatiently. “I found Lisa’s shoe.” She displayed the little sandal like a trophy. “That means you were right, Frank. Lisa was brought into the tunnel, not taken aboveground.”

The shoe didn’t improve Corelli’s mood. He guessed—feared—that if they were to proceed farther south they might just find incontrovertible evidence not only that Lisa Hill had been brought into the tunnel but also that she had been killed there. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up—”

She pushed away from him. “What the hell do you want? You want me to sit at home chewing my fingernails up to my elbows until I get word that Lisa is officially dead—is that what you want?” She stuffed the sandal into the pocket of her skirt and wrenched the flashlight from his hand. “That’s not my style, Detective Corelli. I’m betting that Lisa is still alive. And I’m going to find her—with or without your help.”

She gave him a moment to answer, and when he didn’t, she flicked on the light and turned her back on him, carefully finding her footing as she walked away.

A minute later Corelli’s voice shattered the silence. “Louise, shine that light back here a minute, will you?”

She stopped and turned in the half-light to face him. “Why?”

“Because, goddammit, if I’m going to help you look for Lisa, I want to see just where the hell I’m walking.” He started walking toward Louise. He couldn’t let her go this alone, but he still had his obligation to Willie and Dogs of Hell. He’d hustle her out at Fifty-ninth Street and get on with real business.

Four expresses and three locals hurtled by them before they saw the lights of Columbus Circle/Fifty-ninth Street station. By that time Corelli and Louise had become adept at preparing themselves for the oncoming trains. They acted mechanically now, skipping over the third rails that lay side by side in the middle of the tunnel to get to the express tracks when a local train was coming—it was easier, and less frightening, than hiding in the troughs. They were successful at not getting hurt, but less successful at gathering more evidence.

Because Louise was now convinced Lisa was still alive, she frantically scoured the tracks for more evidence to
support her theory. Corelli, convinced Lisa Hill had long since been devoured by the creepers, was more interested in finding evidence of their comings and goings, where they hid, where they lived. He suspected their lairs were probably away from main stations, places where there were always passengers, police, workmen. The creepers were smart; their patterns proved that. They would seek out quieter places to live, where they might come and go unobserved. One such ideal place was the abandoned station near Ninety-sixth Street.

Just outside the Fifty-ninth Street station, Corelli tapped Louise lightly on the shoulder and whispered, “This place is a hotbed of TA cops. Let me go first. Right after the next downtown local, we’ll get up on the platform. If I’m seen, ignore me. As soon as you can, call Willie and tell him that tonight’s called off.”

“And what if I get seen?” The question was academic.

“Pretend you never heard of me. I’ll get back to you when this is all over.” It sounded crass because it was crass, but Louise, of all people, understood the gravity of the situation. They had to put success before their own personal feelings.

In the last, lingering second before they moved into the station’s halo of light, Louise took Frank’s hand and squeezed it.

“You know, Mrs. Hill, I’m falling in love with you.”

Before Louise had the chance to reply, a local train rattled by them into the station. A minute later an express pulled up alongside it; two minutes later both trains left. The platform was completely empty and would remain so for at least thirty seconds, maybe more. Corelli emerged from the tunnel and jumped up onto the platform. Louise followed moments later. He took her hand and pulled her up next to him.

“So far so good,” he said softly. “Now all we have to do is get the hell out of here.”

“Get out?” Louise pulled back. “You never said we were leaving.”

“What’d you expect?”

“To find my daughter. Leave if you want to. I’ll be okay on my own.” She walked down the platform away from him.

“Louise,” he hissed at her, but she paid no attention. He hadn’t counted on her being irrational. She was supposed to be helping him and he was supposed to be uptown with Willie. Yet, here he was, nearly forty blocks south of his destination, arguing with the pigheaded woman he loved. She was fucking everything up!

His anger flared wildly. “The hell with you,” he spat under his breath. He stalked away toward the stairs leading up to the Seventh Avenue local stop. But at the top of the stairs he paused. Jesus, he’d just told Louise he was falling in love with her and now he was walking out. She’d been lucky earlier, alone in the tunnel. Next time she might not be so lucky. Next time a train might clip her, or she might stumble and fall on the third rail. Or she might meet up with one of the creepers.

Shaking his head ruefully, Corelli skipped back down the stairs and raced along the platform until he came to a public phone. Louise saw him and waited while he called Calhoun’s number. He let it ring eight times before hanging up. Shit, Willie was gone. He tried Willie’s, and there was also no answer. So he was probably already on his way to Ninety-sixth Street and Corelli wouldn’t be there. The whole plan was getting screwed up royally. He slammed down the phone and joined Louise.

“I should let you go in there alone and get killed,” he said heatedly. “It would serve you right.”

“I know you’re angry, Frank, but… having you here makes me feel good. I’m sorry I’m ruining your own plans, but I’ve got to follow my conscience.”

“Come on, time’s wasting.” He took her by the arm. “But we’ve got to be extra careful. This is a main terminus and the pattern of tracks is like a basket full of snakes.”
“I’m not sure I like that image,” Louise said with a smile. “I’ll just take your word for it.”

Once back in the tunnel, Corelli felt an odd sensation of security. All the while they’d stood on the platform he’d been watching for any one of his TA buddies. There’d be no time for explanations if one of the boys saw him. Dolchik surely had put out the word that Frank Corelli was poison-caught with his hand in the till, or dealing drugs, or worse. Most of the guys felt about rogue cops like Frank did; they wouldn’t hesitate, friend or no friend, to turn him in to the captain. And that meant being turned in to Russ Matthews. And that meant disappearing for a while; perhaps for good.

Just south of the station the confluence of tracks Corelli had warned Louise about presented itself. The tunnel widened, offering vistas of dimly lighted tubes running off in all directions. At this point local and express tracks headed due south but also segued into tracks for the east-bound B and D trains. Corelli wasn’t sure which set of tracks to follow, and he’d just decided to continue due south when he heard the express tram.

Why hadn’t he heard it before? Was he so lost in thought he’d simply ignored it? Or was he so determined to hurry Louise out of the tunnel he’d forgotten everything he knew about being in the subway? About subway safety? It hardly mattered now, for as he turned, the lights of an express train directly behind them blinded him. Instinctively he pushed Louise against the wall to the right as he jumped as far to the left as he could.

As the last car of the train disappeared into the hazy distance, Corelli exhaled and let his shoulders sag. How long had he been on the run now? A week? Two? A year? Hell, no. It had been only two days. But they were the longest two days of his life. Right about now he wanted to forget the creepers and their monstrous appetites. He wanted to forget fat Dolchik and his secret involvements and liaisons with the mayor. He wanted to forget everything-except Louise. For a moment the memory of her warm body suffused his consciousness and he actually felt happy. Louise.

He glanced across the tunnel to where he’d last seen her. She’d first looked surprised as his arm reached out to push her; then she’d looked grateful. Louise’s mind had been miles away too, as the express approached. Probably she’d been thinking of Lisa. Well, maybe the kid was lucky. Maybe she was still alive. Corelli would tell Louise that to bolster her confidence.

He stepped out of his niche onto the tracks, ready to continue his search. Louise was gone. He froze in place, blinking once, then twice, hoping the fumy air was interfering with his vision. Louise had been directly opposite him. He’d seen flashes of her yellow blouse between cars of the express as it barreled past them. The train had also kicked up a mountain of dust; his eyes had been closed for at least thirty seconds, a minute. And in that time something had happened to Louise.

Frank jumped across the tracks and ran his hands over the trough where Louise had hidden, as if she were really there, concealed from sight but not from touch. He stared down the tracks to the display of open tunnels, then back up to the station. A few lone passengers milled around on the platform. But the tunnels were empty. He closed his eyes and shook his head. This wasn’t happening. This just wasn’t happening to him… and to Louise. They’d only been separated by the train for a minute or so, but in that time she’d vanished? It wasn’t possible. Unless… unless she’d been taken by the creepers.

Corelli had actually known her fate the moment he saw she was gone. Only die creepers knew the subway system well enough to make a split-second attack, then disappear without a trace. Generations of living underground had created an instinctive way of dealing with trains… and trespassers. Corelli tried not to think of Louise in the hands of those things, but the idea was too strong for him. In frustration he beat his hands against the cold walls, tears of rage streaming down his cheeks.

“Goddammit, I’ll get you, you bastards, for this,” he cried out into the empty tunnel. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll find you and kill each one of you by hand.”

He brushed aside the tears and quickly headed back to the station. There was only one place to start looking for Louise. One place where death had already visited: the abandoned station between the Ninety-sixth and Eighty-sixth Street stations, the place where Ted Slade had been mutilated and murdered.

Louise kept her eyes closed tightly, still pretending to be unconscious. But she was actually listening to the
scurrying sounds around her. Her body ached, and when she stretched slightly to ease her stiff muscles, the pain expanded, blossoming fully at her wrists and ankles; she’d been bound and gagged with a foul-tasting rag. But none of this worried her as much as the scampering, scurrying sounds around her.

She wanted desperately to open her eyes, if only to vanish the horrible images those sounds evoked, but she was too afraid of what was actually making the noises. She wanted desperately to confront her captors, but she didn’t. When Louise was grabbed as the express train rushed by, she hadn’t seen the thing that held her. There’d only been something clutching at her, and a foul smell—the smell of death and decay—swirling up around her. She’d screamed for Corelli, but the sound of the train drowned her out. And when her captor pulled her down dangerously close to the clattering train wheels, she’d fainted.

She rolled slightly to ease the pain in her ankles, but the movement brought on a fresh bout of agony from the backs of her legs this time. In fact, as she became more and more aware of how she felt, Louise realized that she hurt everywhere—from her toes to the top of her head. She must have been dragged here—her body abused and mistreated along the way. And she was convinced that it was only the beginning.

She counted to ten as slowly as she’d ever done anything in her life. Then she opened her eyes. Louise lay on a filthy floor in a cluttered area the size of her dining room. Except for flickering light shed from a candle stub on a stack of cardboard boxes and wooden crates stacked against the wall, the room was dark. The candle cast a dirty halo of light into the room, the edge of which just touched Louise. She raised her head slightly to look around, unable to discern where she was until she heard the rumble of a subway train as it passed her jail on the same level. She was still in the subway!

Louise peered into the darkness, and the features of the room became clearer—two stairways led off and up at each corner of the room, and in the center was a darkened cubicle... *that had once been a token booth.* This was one of the abandoned stations Corelli had talked about. Oh, thank God, she thought. Frank will figure it out and come save me. It’s only a matter of time. But her optimism sank as quickly as it had risen. There were hundreds of miles of track in the subway, hundreds of places to hide... and how many empty stations? How could Frank ever find his way to this particular station?

A flicker of movement behind the stack of crates in the corner caught Louise’s attention. She lifted her head as a shape, a figure, shuffled out from the corner’s darkness into the muddy candlelight. It could have been a man stooping low, but it was unlike any man she’d ever seen before. It was low and hulking, head bent so far down that it seemed tucked into its belly. It rolled on the backs of its hands as it walked, pushing from behind with short legs and naked feet. It was dressed in the tattered remains of clothing long since gone gray from grease and dirt. Its shaggy hair hung low over a foreshortened forehead, and even in the dark, Louise sensed it was coming her way.

The creeper paused no more than five feet from her and lifted its head, facing her for the first time. Louise’s mouth quivered with the beginnings of a scream, but she couldn’t make any sound. She sucked in her breath and clamped down on the rag in her mouth, praying Corelli would find her. The creeper now rocked back on its heels and stared at Louise. At first it seemed there were no eyes whatsoever, but gradually its eyelids oozed open, exposing bloodshot eyeballs. Louise watched, so fascinated by the monstrosity that even her fear drained away. Its lips pulled back, exposing two rows of stained teeth, which in the half-light seemed more a smile than a snarl.

Louise made two fists and ground her fingernails into her palms. She reduced her breathing, as if it might make her smaller, less vulnerable, less apparent. The creeper stood before her, leering, watching, waiting. But now something else caught Louise’s attention; another creeper appeared from behind the crates, then another and another. Within a minute seven creepers stood before her, rocking back and forth on their downturned hands.

At first Louise thought they were all predatory males; they were all dressed the same, had the same physical conformation, the same manner. But on closer inspection she saw three of them were women. The ragged tops of their clothing exposed thick breasts that swung forward as they moved closer to Louise for a better look. One of the males edged forward and ran the back of his hand over Louise’s cheek. She winced as the scabrous skin raked against hers. As the smell that surrounded the creatures filled her nostrils with its bittersweet rottenness, she screamed against the gag in mute rage.

The aggressive male creeper circled her, touching every part of her body with his foul hands. If she moved, she’d
die. If she protested, she’d be killed and eaten. If she gave in to her disgust, she was as good as dead. But, dear God, if she had to endure this defilement one more minute, she’d lose her mind!

Suddenly a terrifying howl shattered the deadly silence of the deserted station. The gathered creepers instantly cowered and crawled off to the sidelines like crabs on a moonlit beach. And from behind the packing cases came another male. He strode into the center of the floor and howled once again, filling the room with anger. The creepers pushed farther back against the wall in fright.

This male stood taller than any of the others, and as he walked, he was more erect than his semi-simian counterparts. This creeper—the leader?-slithered up to Louise’s side and stared unblinkingly into her eyes. He reached out with his right hand and rubbed her cheek, like the other male had done. But unlike the other male, his skin was smooth, almost soothing. For an instant Louise thought of Corelli’s touch, and she whimpered. God, the anguish he must be going through, she thought, her attention drifting away from her own plight. The creature, mistaking her moan as one of pleasure, quickly proceeded to repeat his feathery touch on her face, her neck and arms, then on her legs, until his long hands danced lightly over her thighs far up under her skirt.

When Louise couldn’t stand it any longer, she let out a scream that was more a howl, a sound that caught in the gag, then broke through it by its sheer animal power. The male who was fondling her leaped back in fear. Then, as fear turned to anger, he raced toward her and with one quick, deft movement slapped her across the side of the head. The force of the blow twisted Louise’s face away from him, and she began to cry uncontrollably.

The creature scurried back away from the sounds of her sobs. He listened intently for a moment, then signaled the others to take Louise away. The subservient males crept up to her and dragged her by the feet to the packing cases on the opposite side of the room. By the time she was left alone in the eerie darkness, Louise hovered somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity. But for the moment, at least, she was safe. And alone. For now.

She knew they’d be back for her. She saw in the dominant male’s eyes lust that looked all too human. He could caress her for as long as he wished, and she could do nothing; her screams were meaningless. She could pray for death to release her from her torment, but she suspected that such a mercy would not be soon coming. In her mind now she felt the creeper’s caresses and knew that should they continue, she certainly would go mad. She was totally, helplessly at their mercy.

Later, when Louise’s initial panic had diminished, she relaxed somewhat and allowed herself to think. Time was important now. Time to be patient and not incite these things against her. Time to wait to be rescued by Frank. At the thought of Corelli’s warm smile, Louise leaned her head back against the wall and took in a deep breath, but the nauseating smell of the room gagged her. The outside area of the station reeked of putrefaction; here the smell was tenfold. It was as if something were rotting nearby.

Louise squinted into the corner, where darkness was gathered like black velvet, and saw exactly what caused the stench: propped up against the wall were three rotting corpses, mute witnesses to the creepers’ evil. She closed her eyes and turned away in disgust, wondering whywe were there. And as she asked herself the question, the answer came to her: they were being stored for future use...as a hedge against bad hunting... against starvation. She was being held in their larder!

Before hysteria had a chance to take hold, something attracted Louise’s attention—a movement near the floor to her immediate left. She thought she was the only one alive here, but as she peered into the darkness she discerned the rustling of a small shape near her. It was wrapped in the long gray remnants of a blanket. Louise edged closer and, with her shoulder, nudged at it. It moved again. A frail voice whimpered as if in a deep sleep. Louise pushed again. This time the little figure turned, reaching out unconsciously. A small hand brushed Louise’s cheek. It was the hand of a child, a child who had been left for dead.

Thinking the unthinkable, hoping for the impossible, Louise shimmied her way closer to the child and positioned herself by its head, barely able to keep down the frustration of not being able to use her hands to whisk aside the cloth that hid its face. Once again she nudged the captive, who now turned away from Louise. But a corner of the blanket caught itself under her body, and as the child moved once again, the covering was lifted from its head, revealing short black hair matted with dried blood. And the sweet, sweet face of the child Louise knew so well...
Willie checked the clock in the living room three times before giving in to his anger. It was 11:45 and Corelli had promised to contact him no later than eleven. Shit, he’d been conned again by a no-good white prick. Willie’s rage propelled him out of the chair into the center of the room. He stood there a moment wondering what to do next. He’d promised Frank he’d sit tight until they made contact by phone. And he had waited at Bimbo’s until forty-five minutes ago. But Calhoun wanted to go out catting, so Willie came home. There was always the chance Corelli had called while Willie was on his way home. Bullshit! It was more likely he was just playing Willie for a fool.

“That Corelli’s some sonofabitch. Big buddy-buddy with Willie Hoyte, shit! And I fell for it,” Willie snarled out loud as he paced into the kitchen, then back into the living room.

He flopped back into the overstuffed chair, hoping the rage would dissipate, but it just lay there, under the surface, like the hard core of a boil. Corelli had pulled a fast one, getting Dogs of Hell into the subway while Willie sat home like some fucking clown. Hell, he’d wanted to be in on the kill with these creeper things, too. The publicity would be good for him and Dogs of Hell, and the personal satisfaction of confronting Slade’s killers would make any danger worthwhile. But all that seemed now out of reach.

As suddenly and violently as the anger took over, the rational side of Willie Hoyte surfaced. He was taking this whole thing too personally, as if Corelli’s absence were a personal slight. Maybe that wasn’t it at all. He wasn’t giving Frank the benefit of the doubt. Corelli was in one hell of a lot of trouble. Maybe whoever had been chasing him had caught him. Maybe Corelli was the one in big trouble now…and that’s why he hadn’t phoned. That wasn’t personal; no way. The thought, unpleasant though it was, relieved Willie. He’d rather imagine his friend in the hands of a captor than believe he’d turned his back on him and a solemn promise to work together.

Deciding that this was exactly what had happened and that he owed Corelli the favor of taking over for him during his absence tonight in the subway, Willie grabbed his coat and bolted out into the hallway, knowing in his gut that he was doing the right thing by going off on his own.

Two minutes after he left, the telephone in the Hoyte apartment began to ring.

Corelli slammed down the phone and cursed Willie Hoyte for his stupidity and his insubordination. Frank had told him not to move until he called. And now the stupid bastard was gone; he wasn’t at Calhoun’s, he wasn’t at home. Corelli shook his head in wonder. Why had he ever let himself believe that someone as self-centered and publicity-happy as Willie Hoyte would follow orders? Hoyte was probably sitting that very minute with the city editor of one of the newspapers, telling him not only about the creepers but also about Corelli and Louise, and, more important, about Willie Hoyte and how he and his Dogs of Hell had uncovered the whole creeper caper.

Corelli ducked under the ancient turnstile at Eighty-sixth Street onto the uptown platform of the Seventh Avenue IRT. He meandered toward the far end of the station, his eyes on the tunnel opening. A young woman in slacks and sandals and a loose-fitting sweater that showcased her nipples watched him cautiously, then stepped back against the wall as he passed. Corelli would have written off her abrupt reaction as healthy female “subway paranoia” had he not looked down at himself and discovered he was covered from toes to shoulders with a thick layer of grime and filth from his exploration of the subway with Louise. It was no wonder the woman backed away; he looked like one of the vagrants or freed mental patients who make the subway their home.

How many of them, Corelli wondered, have come down into the subway looking for a little warmth, only to become fodder for the creepers? No one ever missed the poor and homeless. They had no one to care for them, unlike Louise Hill and her daughter. A pang of loss stabbed him deep in the gut, and he faltered a moment. Twenty minutes earlier, when he discovered Louise was gone, an angry rush of adrenaline had poured into his system, spurring him on to find Louise, to rescue her from a fate no one else had managed to escape. But he’d believed then that this time it would be different; this time Frank Corelli was involved, and Death would turn its head and let him save the woman he loved.

Now he wasn’t so sure. The absolute self-confidence that he could save Louise had eroded. Who the hell was Frank Corelli anyway? Superman? Who was he kidding? Looking for one woman in the maze of tracks and tunnels and the thousands of hiding places in the midst of the New York subway system was pure folly. What were his real
chances of finding her? What were his real chances of walking out of here arm in arm with Louise? Pretty close to zero, he figured now. Still, he had to be sure. For his sake. For Louise’s.

As he reached the far end of the station, a magnified voice oozed into the air over the antiquated loudspeaker system. Forced through wires as old as the system itself, the voice crackled like a talking hen, but the message was loud and clear: “Your attention, please. Your attention. The subway will be closed tonight from midnight to six A.M. for extensive repairs. Please take the next available train. If you are on the platform later than twelve-fifteen you will be forced to leave by the nearest exit. We regret this inconvenience, but it is being done for your safety. I repeat: take the next available train as far as you can. The subway will be closed in ten minutes. Thank you.”

The announcement sent a bolt of fear through Corelli. What the hell was going on? The subway was never closed down completely. Sections of it were closed when major track repairs were necessary, but the whole system? Never. Frank’s gut reaction said Russ Matthews was behind this; Dolchik, too. They knew about the creepers and they had to keep it quiet. He’d forced their hands with last night’s phone call. Now it seemed his threat was about to pay off. What better way to rid the system of the creepers than to close off the subway and… What?

Matthews could do anything he wanted, and the mere mortals who lived in New York were powerless to stop him. If the mayor said the recent disaster at Chambers Street was a good reason for closing the entire subway one night to systematically check it for safety, who would know that his real reason had to do with something far more terrifying and dangerous than any malfunctioning signal? Only Corelli. And they hadn’t caught him…yet.

He waited until the next-and last-train came and left; then he jumped down onto the roadbed and ran into the shadows inside the tunnel. And, as if to give credence to the danger of his situation, two uniformed policemen appeared on both the uptown and downtown platforms. They scanned the station for any stray passengers, then retreated to stand guard at the token booth. And that put an end to any help from Willie and Dogs of Hell.

Corelli scrambled deeper into the tunnel, unable to shake off the fear that squeezed his chest. Time was running out. With this new twist, he’d have to move faster than ever. And he was now alone; no Willie Hoyte, no Dogs of Hell. He’d hoped to capture a creeper tonight, but the mayor had beat him to the punch. And then Louise had been kidnapped. Nothing was going right. With the subway closed, he was a single figure in the darkness, running scared, not sure exactly what he was doing.

But one thing was for sure: either he found Louise—alive or dead—or he’d die trying.
September 8, Saturday

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Dolchik was exhausted, although he’d never let on that he was anything but supercharged. As team leader of the newly agreed-on sweep operation through the subway system, he had to look fit, had to look “in charge.” The several hundred men under his command had to believe he wouldn’t crumble under pressure. And right now there was enough pressure to satisfy Dolchik for life.

He was stationed back in the TA office at Columbus Circle. He chewed on a dead cigar and scanned the subway map before him; the city was secured, the operation was about to get under way, and nothing would stop it once it began. For a moment Dolchik glanced out over the controlled pandemonium in the outer office. His eyes finally settled on Frank Corelli’s desk. Dolchik wondered where the hell Corelli was tonight. In a way, he admired the stubborn cop for not backing down, for not compromising his principles in light of the mayor’s threats.

Any fool could have heard in Matthew’s tone that to give up was to go to jail without collecting two hundred dollars, but Stan suspected that Corelli wasn’t just interested in saving his own skin. He suspected-no, knew-that the bastard actually was altruistic, that he felt it his sworn duty as a TA detective, and as a human being, to protect the New Yorkers put in his care. And that meant stopping the creepers.

Dolchik also suspected that at that very moment Corelli was in the subway somewhere, despite the warnings, ignoring the danger signs, once again mounting his own crusade. Only, this time he’d taken one risk too many. This time there was no way Frank Corelli could escape.

The massive operation of sweeping clean the Manhattan section of the New York subway system was about to become operative. In the twenty-four hours since the Chambers Street incident, Dolchik and Matthews had not only gotten permission from the state government and the federal government to smoke out the creepers but also implemented the plan, in all its complexity.

The city had been divided into quadrants: northeast and northwest, southeast and southwest (the two northern sections, because of their relatively uncomplicated track system, would be easiest to deal with and required the fewest number of men). Troops had been deployed to all of the farthest subway stations of the island. They were to be aided by TA and NYPD cops whose job it was to see that during the sweep nothing got in or out of the island by way of the tunnels and bridges that linked Manhattan with the other boroughs.

The southeast and southwest quadrants presented a real problem. The congestion of tracks, systems, and routes from Fifty-seventh Street south to South Ferry and the accesses to Brooklyn was almost impossible to deal with methodically. Extra men were deployed to the farthestmost stations; these squads of men readied themselves to begin the sweep from the waterfront inland toward the center of the island. The plan was to force the creepers toward central killing grounds: Washington Square station in the Village, the Fourteenth Street stations which ran a straight line across the island from Eighth Avenue to Union Square, and the Thirty-fourth Street stations, which occupied a fairly deserted part of town. At these crucial points, soldiers waited to eradicate the creepers as they fled north in front of the sweep.

It was calculated that the sweep south would force the creatures into position no sooner than the Thirty-fourth Street stations, which, like those on Fourteenth Street, spread across town in an almost even line. These sections of the city, busy during the day, saw relatively little traffic at night. Thus, it was essential that the north-south sweep begin before its south-north counterpart, to avoid the creepers massing beyond Thirty-fourth Street-in areas where there was a high civilian population. That, of course, was to avoid spillage.

“Spillage? What the hell is spillage?” Matthews had questioned Dolchik earlier.

The captain shrugged. “Russ, we have no idea how many of these creepers there are. There may be a hundred…or ten hundred. If we start forcing them toward a central point with our sweeps, they’re going to start massing…and some of them might just get by our men and up onto the street. That’s spillage.”

“Jesus Christ. If any of them escapes…”

“We’re taking every precaution to see that they don’t. Still, we have to consider all possibilities. We’d like
eventually to herd as many of them into the Washington Square station as possible,’ it’s on two levels and handles several different subway lines. A systematic sweep along the eastern side of the island should send ’em running right into our open arms.’

“Just keep them off the street, Dolchik,” Matthews warned. “I want people to know what a great job we’ve done with this after it’s over; not while it’s going on.” He shook his head. “My God, can you imagine the carnage if these things got out and made a break for it?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” Stan admitted as he wiped away a gloss of sweat that had broken out across the back of his neck. “We’re doing everything humanly possible to contain these things, Russ. Just say a prayer that there aren’t too many of them.” Dolchik had his own suspicions about the creeper population, and it scared the shit out of him.

All that had taken place hours ago, when Dolchik was beginning to feel tired. Now, five minutes before the sweep was about to begin, none of it mattered. The subway was empty and the success or failure of the mission was out of his hands.

“Captain, we’re all ready,” Lieutenant Tom Larabee, a tough-looking National Guardsman, interrupted Dolchik’s thoughts.

“Repeat your instructions once again, Lieutenant,” Dolchik demanded. There was no margin for error. This sweep was a one-time thing.

“My men have been notified to proceed inland, following their assigned courses and leaders toward the various central meeting points. They are to have their automatic weapons ready… and they are to shoot anything not in uniform.”

“That last part is most important, Lieutenant We can’t take any chances with these things.” And if Russ Matthews’ luck held, Corelli would go down in flames, too. “Are the men with the flamethrowers in place?”

“They are deployed in advance of each squad of men and will destroy any refuges of the creatures as well as the creatures themselves, Captain.” He smiled now and rested easily. “I don’t know what we’re after, sir, but I’ll tell you, my men will burn the shit out of them. The only thing that’s going to get out of the subway alive is me and my men. And you’ve got my word for that.”

“Very good, Lieutenant,” Dolchik said, barely disguising the distaste he felt for this gung-ho attitude. “Now, you’d better get into position.”

“Yessir.” Larabee saluted and left the office.

Dolchik folded up the subway map and slipped it back into his desk. He took out a fresh cigar, bit off the end, and spit it into the wastebasket. Too bad about Corelli. In his own way he was a likable guy. Dolchik lit the cigar. Now Corelli was just a dead man.

Corelli raced through the tunnel toward the area just south of the Ninety-sixth Street station. In the past five minutes nothing had passed through the tunnels-no expresses hurtling mindlessly through the dark, no locals rocking along like subterranean rowboats on a darkened sea. It was an eerie feeling. It was as if the subway had died. And only Frank Corelli had come to the funeral.

The ominous emptiness around him convinced Frank that he was on the tightest time schedule of his life. It was as if with each step he took, the second hand of a cosmic stopwatch ticked off another second. He fought a growing sense of panic that constantly whipped up inside his gut, then subsided; it was like the wind devils he’d seen dancing over the flat Texas landscape when he was in the Army. He had to remember: panic made people irresponsible…and irresponsibility led to death.

He found the abandoned station sooner than he’d expected. He stood opposite it for a minute, visually scouting out its parameters. Even from the uptown-express track Corelli saw that the station’s platform was littered with rubble and that its walls were crumbling from years of neglect. The station looked totally deserted, forgotten years
before in favor of the larger station at Ninety-sixth Street. It was the perfect place for the creepers to call home.

He sucked in a deep breath and made his way carefully across the tracks, keeping an eye on the third rail, which, he assumed, was still operative despite the lack of train traffic. He crouched low under the overhanging lip of the station’s platform and keened his ears for sounds of movement, speech, anything. But there was nothing. He then edged to the far end of the platform and listened again. Still nothing. In fact, the entire subway system lay soundless under the city. Frank knew he was wasting his time in contemplation; the only course of action was to move.

But he was afraid. Afraid that when he burst into the station he would find nothing. And he knew if Louise weren’t there, if the creepers weren’t hiding her there, then she was lost to him forever.

Corelli shelved his fear and bolted up over the platform’s edge. He huddled low, then scampered toward the door that had been cut through the cheap plywood of an old makeshift wall the TA had set up in front of the station. For a moment his decisiveness wavered; Jesus, what was he doing here? Was he still chasing shadows? Still running after monsters in the subway that no one had seen for real? Was he really staking his life and his sanity on linking a series of ancient newspaper reports to modern-day crimes? It wasn’t rational. It wasn’t sane. Yet, here he crouched, trembling with fear and anticipation.

Without another second’s thought, Corelli kicked open the wooden door and leaped inside, swinging the beam of his flashlight ahead of him. The room was empty. He felt the rush of adrenaline run dry. He was suddenly limp and drained. He’d been wrong about Louise. He’d gambled on finding her, and he’d lost. Jesus! The same feelings that had swamped him the night he’d identified Jean’s body returned. Twice in five years he’d loved, and twice he’d lost. Well, this time he was in charge, and he’d find the bastards who’d taken Louise and kill them one by one...if it were the last thing he’d ever do.

He leaned weakly against the door frame and examined the room. There were scraps of newspapers scattered around the floor, and in a corner, a pile of aged human feces. In another corner a stack of ancient boxes and cartons stood sentinel over nothing. Corelli moved into the room, swinging the light before him. He had been chasing ghosts! There was nothing here for him. Nothing except a foul smell. Corelli inhaled and almost gagged. The air was thick and heavy with the smell of putrefaction. It closed in around him with its flabby arm. He shook his head, pulled out a handkerchief, and quickly put it over his nose. Jesus, he’d never smelled anything like this before.

At the farthest corners of the room, on either side of the derelict token booth, stairways led back and away from the platform, then up toward the street level. There was space there to hide...to be hidden. It was his last hope. He mounted the first stair, praying he wasn’t too late, that maybe this nightmare might have a happy ending, that he might find Louise and break the horrible pattern of his love life.

The stairs were covered with bones. They lay stacked in neat piles according to size. It didn’t take much thought to guess that they were human bones, and as Frank shone the light upward, that guess was proven true: a stack of human skulls crowned the top stair, their hollow eyes and dead, mirthless grins proof that this part of his quest, at least, was a success. He’d found the lair of the creepers. But success? Corelli sneered at the very idea.

A rustling sound behind him sent Frank spinning around in terror. But the room was still empty. Something had moved, he was certain of it. Something had rustled over near the wall. His light caught and held the packing cases. Of course. How stupid he’d been. These creepers were clever. They’d remained hidden from sight for generations. Of course they would be hiding here on their home ground. Had he really expected to waltz into their headquarters and find them waiting, their arms outstretched in anticipation of the handcuffs? Christ, what had he been thinking?

Cautiously, one step at a time, service revolver drawn, Corelli backed down the stairs and walked to the center of the room. He paused, listened, then moved to the edge of the boxes, and, with one quick kick, his revolver cocked, Frank toppled the boxes and leaped aside...landing inches from Louise’s head.

“My God!” he shouted, dropping to his knees beside her. “I thought you were dead.” He slipped his arms under her and pulled her up to him, nearly crushing her with his strength. He ungagged her and kissed her.

“They’re coming back,” she gulped through his embraces. “They went out for fresh food. We’ve got to get out of here.” Her eyes were wide with terror.
“Let me untie you and…” He now saw the small body next to him. “What the hell?”

“It’s Lisa,” Louise cried softly. “She’s unconscious, but still alive. Oh, Frank, you’ve got to get us out of here.”

He’d already begun working on the knots at Louise’s wrists when the platform door flew open and slammed against the wall. Corelli froze. His breathing thickened and his hands once again wrapped around the cold comfort of his gun. He stood up suddenly and flashed his light out into the room.

There were six of them huddled together. They stood around the mangled body of a TA cop whose shredded uniform exposed craters of blood where hunks of flesh had once been. Corelli felt the fear rise in his throat, but it didn’t stop him from acting. Blinded by anger at what the creepers had put Louise through, Frank leaped onto one of the crates and challenged the creepers. “Okay, you sons-of-bitches, come and get me.” He brandished the gun, hoping to bait one or all of the creatures.

They were far more grotesque than Frank imagined they’d be, but they didn’t look all that dangerous. He surmised they depended on the element of surprise, the element of fear when they gathered “food.” Their claw-like hands certainly could rip out a throat, but only a throat at close range. Corelli had the advantage of size, agility, distance… and the gun, of course. This time he had them licked.

“Frank, look out,” Louise screamed as one of the creepers who had hidden in the stairwell slithered along the wall toward him.

Corelli turned toward the creature, but it was too late. The creature uncoiled its powerful leg muscles and leaped onto Corelli’s back, knocking the gun from his hand. The instant it clattered to the floor, the other creepers attacked. Louise screamed until she couldn’t scream any more.

Lieutenant Tom Larabee plucked his walkie-talkie from its holster-type holder and punched the Communicate button. “Larabee, here.”

“It’s Dolchik,” the captain’s voice crackled over the receiver. “All the trains have been stopped. You and your men start moving as of right now.”

“Got it, sir,” Larabee said quickly. He loved being in command almost as much as he loved the idea of killing.

“And remember-”

“Kill everything that isn’t in uniform. Got it, sir. Over and out.” Larabee rammed the receiver into its holder and signaled the thirty men under his command to start moving. As they passed, he nodded in silent approval. Larabee didn’t know what they were after, but an order to kill meant it was big game. That was good, for Tom didn’t really care what they were chasing as long as they could wipe them out, as long as he could squeeze the trigger and end a life. That’s what counted.

As the last of his men marched past him along the subway tracks, Larabee strapped a tank of jellied petroleum on his back, ignited the gaping porous mouth of the flamethrower, and followed the team down into the subway tunnel. Lieutenant Tom Larabee was going hunting tonight, and God help anyone before him who wasn’t wearing a uniform.

Willie kept close to the subway wall, pressing his body against the sticky, dirty surface. Without the trains, being alone here was more frightening than usual. He longed for the rattle and crashing sounds. That, at least, would take his mind off the loud sound of his heart beating in his ears. Willie was scared shitless, more scared than he’d ever been in his life. But it was too late to turn back now.

He’d brought a flashlight, but didn’t need to use it now. Besides, if he met up with a creeper, he didn’t want it to have advance warning of his presence. The flashlight was for later—for running, escaping. His eyes were adjusted to the dim light, but his imagination played tricks on him. With every step he saw something move; a low shape scampering along the wall or across the tracks was the usual mirage. But when he strained his ears to verify what he saw, there was always nothing, nothing but the sound of his own labored breathing.
The deep, dark recess of the abandoned station loomed into view. Willie halted, remembering this was where he’d found Ted Slade. This was where he’d stumbled over the crumpled, mutilated body of his friend. For a moment Hoyte closed his eyes to vanquish the phantom image of the body on the tracks. And when he reopened them, he was no longer alone.

The creeper was crouched on the platform of the station. Willie couldn’t quite make out its shape, but he knew it was what he was looking for. He sucked in his breath and held it; his hand automatically went to the cross at his throat. The creeper sat on its haunches at the edge of the platform. Without warning, it leaped straight out six feet onto the downtown-express track. It paused a moment, then scuttled off into the darkness.

Willie swallowed hard and tasted the bitter gall of fear. Nothing Corelli had told him prepared Willie emotionally for a confrontation with the reality of the creepers. It was one thing to sit in his mother’s homely kitchen discussing these subterraneans, it was quite another to be alone in the dark subway tunnel with the true terror of the creepers within reach. Willie wanted to run out into the streets. But he owed Corelli, so he stayed.

He crept to the edge of the platform and eased himself up onto it, pulling himself over into a dark corner. If there was one of those things here, there were bound to be more. He slid his hand along his thigh and down his leg, feeling the knife sheath he’d strapped to his calf. Inside was a hunting knife with a mean nine-inch blade. Unlike so many of his friends, Willie wasn’t a real expert with a blade, but he knew how to handle it. And when the chips were down, he’d be okay. Now all he had to do was decide where to start.

The platform was slippery with dirt, and it smelled of shit… and of his own fear. Willie moved toward a thin shaft of pale light that spilled out through what appeared to be a door cut in the wooden wall. He pressed his eye up to a crack and peered in. Corelli lay directly before him on the floor. He was bound and gagged, and he looked conscious but dazed. The hair on the right side of his head was matted with a thick, slimy dark substance; Willie didn’t have to look twice to see it was blood. Louise knelt next to Corelli, attempting to comfort him, but each time she did, the largest of the creepers pulled her away with a distinctly proprietary air.

Willie moved back from the door and returned to his dark corner. There were five creepers and only one Willie Hoyte. Corelli was out of commission, and Louise couldn’t be counted on to help. Shit, what the hell was he going to do? The problem wasn’t so much a matter of getting Corelli and Louise out as it was a matter of getting the creepers to abandon their lair long enough to get Willie Hoyte in. But how the hell could he do that?

Willie shifted his weight, and his foot scattered some ancient newspapers that lay on the floor. He thought a moment, then came up with a plan; it wasn’t the best idea he’d ever had, but it was the only one he had now—so it’d have to do. Ever aware that any sound would tip off the creepers to his presence, Willie moved stealthily as he collected a handful of newspapers. Shards of wood and pieces of heavy cardboard blown onto the platform from years of passing trains completed the necessary material. He piled the refuse far enough away from the makeshift door so that when it swung open it wouldn’t be scattered.

You’re one smart sonofabitch, Willie complimented himself as he flicked his cigarette lighter and touched its burning tip to the sides of the pile. The dry paper and wood went up like a gasoline-soaked rag. Within seconds roiling clouds of black smoke covered the platform. Willie cautiously pushed the wooden door, managing to open it six or so inches, and began fanning the smoke into the station. An inward draft, created by a fault in the room’s ceiling, greedily sucked the smoke inside. A second later the room was in suffocating darkness.

Willie crouched at the door, holding the hunting knife tightly in his hand. The creepers scampered out, low to the ground, their high-pitched screeching sounding more like angry mice than cannibals. Their sound didn’t fool Willie; he knew what they were capable of. One of them saw him and leaped onto his chest, knocking Willie over, its hands wrapped around his throat Willie choked with disgust and swung his knife hand around, driving the entire blade into the thing’s spine; then he twisted and pulled the blade out. A fountain of blood cascaded across the floor, and the creeper released him with an unearthly shriek.

The cry alerted the others. Through the smoke they saw Willie and immediately formed a semicircle across the platform in front of him. Willie was backed up against the wall, trapped, literally cornered. The knife now felt light and useless in his hands. But it was his only protection, so he gripped it tighter and waited. The four creepers started in unison to move toward him, their bodies rolling and undulating as if they’d been hobbled. Their eyes were wide...
with anger, and they held their hands out before them, flexing their fingers in such a way that Willie saw only the deadly nails. They bared their teeth, as a rabid dog does, and opened their mouths wide, stretching and loosening the jaw muscles to accommodate flesh. Thick, dark tongues darted over their teeth and flickered out into the air like snakes testing the outside temperature.

As if some unheard signal had commanded them, the creepers all leaped at once without warning. The impact of the four bodies threw Willie against the wall, but he was prepared for the attack and immediately responded by lashing out with the knife. He caught one creeper in the abdomen. With a howl of pain the creature tumbled back and fell off the ledge onto the tracks.

The others ignored their companion with an enraged animal determination to kill his killer. One of them slipped partway behind Willie and fastened its teeth deep into the muscle of his thigh. Willie tried to wrench the monster off, but it had locked itself onto him like a leech. But right now he had other problems—one of the other two creepers rocked back on its haunches, then jumped forward and landed on Willie’s chest, baring its teeth, then biting into the vulnerable muscles of his right shoulder.

The pain so stunned Willie that he almost dropped his knife, but he knew that meant death. And through the torrent of agony he held the knife and swung it up and around the back of the creeper until he held it in an embrace, the knife tip touching his own throat. Then suddenly Willie drew the vicious blade back around the creeper’s neck and across the spine from the jugular vein to the carotid artery. The creeper immediately released him and fell back, grappling with his neck in a vain effort to stem the gushing tide of blood. It staggered a few feet, then fell facedown on the floor.

In response the creeper that still gnawed at Willie’s leg drove its teeth deeper. Willie screamed and raised the gory blade over his head, and with every last bit of strength he had, drove the blade up to the hilt into the creeper’s head, crushing the skull and piercing its brain. He withdrew the knife and attacked—again and again and again, until the blade was slimy with blood and bits of brain. Dead, the creature fell away like the last leaf of autumn.

Breathing heavily, nearly fainting from fear and pain, Willie staggered toward the last creeper, who backed away from him, its eyes now wide with terror. Willie Hoyte was too powerful an adversary to attack. The creeper’s three dead companions were proof that this man was too much for them. The creeper ran to the edge of the platform and leaped out onto the tracks. Willie lifted the knife by its tip, coiled his arm back over his shoulder, and threw. The blade landed squarely between the creeper’s shoulders, with only the stag-horn handle protruding. The monster yelped and fell forward onto the tracks, twisting and turning in a vain attempt to remove the knife. After a minute it stopped, then lay quietly on its stomach, the silence broken only by an intermittent cry of agony. Then there was total silence.

Willie’s leg was bleeding pretty badly. He pulled off his shirt and knotted it above the wound in an effort to stem the flow of blood. Now he had to free Corelli and Louise. All he had to do was make it the last few feet to the creepers’ lair and they’d be home free. It shouldn’t be hard. The creepers were all dead. Willie’d killed them all. Except that one—and there wasn’t much chance he’d be coming back soon.

Willie tied a piece of his shirt over his mouth for easier breathing and plunged into the station, which was still thick with black, acrid smoke. He blinked furiously, dislodging a fountain of tears, and nearly fell over Corelli. Louise had moved to a far corner, her knees drawn up to her chin; she looked dazed, stunned. Even through the haze Willie could see written on her face the damage that this experience had done.

“So, here I am gettin’ you out of a tight squeeze once again, Detective Corelli,” Willie said softly to defuse his own panic. His wounded leg throbbed intensely, and in the past few minutes he’d begun to feel a little light-headed and dizzy.

Corelli wriggled on the floor and frantically shook his head, unable to say anything because of the gag. Mistaking Frank’s frantic warning as playful anger at being at his mercy, Willie took his time ungagging him. “You know, Corelli, maybe I should leave you just like this. We might all be better off if you had less to say.”

Corelli’s eyes widened farther, and Willie laughed again, enjoying the power he had over the cop. It wasn’t a comic scene, but laughing was far better than remembering the terror he’d just been through outside. “Okay, okay,
“Behind you!” Corelli screamed.

Willie feinted to the left and spun around. The knife just grazed his skull as it hurtled against the far wall. Confronting him now, was the biggest creeper Willie had ever seen. The others were toadlike, crawling things; this one stood well over five feet tall and was distinctly human-looking. Still, there was that crazed hate in his eyes that translated as pure animal hunger.

The creeper lunged, and once again Willie feinted, this time to the right. He’d worked out for a while at a local gym and had even been in a few amateur boxing events uptown. His agility came in handy. Seething with anger and frustration, the creeper crouched low for a moment, sucked in its breath, then sprang straight at Willie’s throat. Willie responded by dropping to his knees while driving his fist into the creeper’s belly. The creature landed, crumpled into a ball, clutching its stomach.

At that moment, as Willie watched the thing writhing in agony on the dirty subway floor, something inside him snapped. Willie lunged onto the creeper. It wrapped its legs around him and surrounded him with its arms, but Willie had the advantage.

His hands closed around the creeper’s throat, and he squeezed, digging deep into the thing’s neck until he felt the wildly pounding pulse under the pads of his fingers. The creature’s head snapped forward, the thick tongue darting dangerously close, but to no avail. Willie counted the heartbeats until they slowed, then slowed some more. And when the pulse had dropped nearly to zero, Willie squeezed harder, snapping the cartilage. An immense sense of euphoria welled up inside him, and only when he saw its tongue bulging from its mouth as its heart stopped beating, did Willie realize he had an erection.

“He’s dead, for Christ’s sake,” Corelli yelled through the sooty darkness. “Let go of him… come untie me.” He’d seen men react to death like this before, and it still rattled him.

Corelli’s voice pulled Willie back to reality. He scrambled away from the corpse and untied Frank. And when he was done, Willie fell back against the wall and began to cry. His sobs were a soft counterpoint to the death struggle that he’d acted out minutes before. But Willie’s anguish barely drowned out a new sound—the sounds of footsteps and murmuring voices outside in the subway tunnel.

“Go find out what the hell that noise Is, Willie,” Frank commanded. He had to tend to Louise, who looked as if she were in shock.

But Willie just sat there, his head buried deep in his hands. Corelli noticed the torn pants leg, then the makeshift tourniquet. Shit, Hoyte had been hurt! And he hadn’t said anything, or complained. Frank forgot Louise for the moment and scuttled out of the room to the edge of the platform, where he lay low, watching a sight that sent a shiver of terror up his spine: the tunnel was filled with creepers of all sizes running down the tracks, stumbling over each other, fighting to get away. From what?

Corelli edged farther out onto the platform and peered into the darkness. At first he saw only flickering lights and heard the dull pings of what sounded like automatic rifles. Then, in a burst of burning liquid death from a flamethrower that lit up the tunnel, Frank saw the men, the grim-faced National Guardsmen as they fanned out across the tunnel, sweeping south-right toward this station!

Corelli momentarily considered calling for help, but he knew that to signal the Guard was to invite death. They didn’t have time to distinguish him, or Willie, or Louise from the creepers they were slaughtering. Frank had been in the service; he knew what it meant to be on a perilous mission. You didn’t think, you just acted. You protected yourself and shot everything in your path. You asked questions, sure-after you killed.

“We’ve got to get the hell out of here,” Frank yelled as he stumbled back into the station. Louise now sat next to Willie, holding Lisa in her arms. “The National Guard’s on its way, they’ve got flamethrowers… that’s why the subway is closed.”

“But we—” Louise began.
“They’re going to burn this place to ashes in the next couple of minutes.”

“We goin’ back into the tunnel?” Willie asked, wide-eyed. He pulled himself painfully to a standing position. Man, he felt bad. Something weird was going on in his head.

“We can’t go back into the tunnel; it’s full of creepers, and the Guard’s heading them south.”

Lisa stirred, and Louise kissed her forehead. “Frank, we’ve got to get Lisa to a hospital.”

“Dammit, Louise, we’ve got to get all of us out of here first.” He scanned the station looking for a way out. There were the two stairwells, nothing else. It was possible one of them might be an exit. The creepers might have planned an alternative escape route. It was a long shot, but it was their only shot. “Give me Lisa.” Corelli pulled her from her mother’s arms. “We’re going up the stairway.”

“Which one?” Willie asked.

“That one first.” Corelli pointed to the right side. “If it doesn’t work out, the other one.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s get goin’, man.” Willie slipped his arm through Louise’s for support. He was beginning to see double.

Corelli flicked on his flashlight and started up the stairs. Two steps up, he wished there’d been another way out—if this were a way out at all—for the bones were like a silent testament to the creepers’ appetite. Corelli stumbled on a pile of bones; they dislodged from their resting place and clattered down the steps behind him.

Far out in the subway, the sounds of the advancing troops was growing louder. Corelli stopped and listened; he was able now to distinguish voices and shouted commands. Any moment the Guard would discover the station and—if he remembered anything about the military mind—burn and blast the living shit out of it. With that in mind Frank quickened his pace up the stairs, scattering bones as if they were dominoes. The image of his little group of survivors roasted a golden brown by the flamethrowers pushed him on. No, Frank Corelli wasn’t going to die today. Nor were his friends. Not in the subway. Not because he’d been caught in a dead end.

But the stairway ended abruptly at a wall constructed at the time the station was closed. Corelli put Lisa down and examined the last few feet of wall, hoping to find traces of an opening through which they might escape. There was a fault down here somewhere; the smoke from Willie’s fire had proved that. But where the fuck was it? He was faced with a solid wall. Jesus! He sat on the top step momentarily, wondering how to tell the others he’d failed. How to tell them they were about to be burned to death. Goddammit! There wasn’t even time to explore the other stairway. He pounded his fist on the wall in anger and frustration.

There was a cracking sound; then his fist was covered with a fine white powder. Frank flashed his light where he’d hit the wall; there, about the size of a big man’s torso, was a patch of plaster lighter in color than that surrounding it. Using his fist, Corelli put a hole in the wall in the wall with one swift punch, and a river of chalky silt poured down into his lap. He pounded the wall like a madman, until, a minute later, a shaft of dull gray light filtered onto the stairway.

“I don’t know if this is a way out, friends, but we’ve got nothing to lose,” Corelli said triumphantly. “You wait here.” He climbed into the gaping hole. The room he found himself in was actually the landing of the original stairway where it turned ninety degrees up toward the street. He flashed the light up and ascertained at once that the exit to the street was sealed forever.

But this had to be the creepers’ emergency escape hatch, and as such, there had to be a way out...back to the tunnel...behind the advancing National Guard. A carefully arranged stack of boards leaning against the wall provided the solution: behind them a hole had been cut through the wall. It led into a narrow tunnel and then to... What? It didn’t matter; it was a way out!

Corelli jumped back through the hole and swept Louise into his arms. “I’ve found a way out. Come on.”

But his excitement was overshadowed by the harsh voice of a Guardsman who’d found the outside entrance to the
station. “Burn the fuckers out,” his strident voice yelled. Then it was drowned out by the nauseating sound and smell of the flamethrowers’ fiery tongues.

Corelli pushed Louise and Willie through the hole before handing Lisa in to her mother. Then he jumped in himself as the room began to fill with deadly fumes and inhuman heat from the burning napalm. He guided them through the anteroom, through the narrow opening into the tunnel. They walked, practically running, until Willie finally stopped them.

“I can’t go on, man. I’m too sick.” He was nearly blind from the pain, and his head hurt so bad. He kept thinking strange things now, like he wanted to run away, run deep into the subway, into its loving dark arms. Shit, what was happening to him?

“You can’t stop now, Willie,” Corelli said. “We’re too close to getting out.” He swung the flashlight around toward him.


“No way, Willie,” Frank said.

“Frank, maybe we should. It’s what Willie wants… and don’t forget Lisa.” Louise pulled the blanket up closer around her daughter’s head.

“Listen to your girlfriend, Corelli. Don’t worry about me. Just get the hell out; leave me be.”

Corelli thought a moment, then patted Willie lovingly on the arm and turned away. Louise kissed him on the forehead, and a moment later they began to walk deeper into the tunnel.

Willie closed his eyes. Man, he felt like he was going to die. Every nerve in his body hurt. The wound in his leg felt like someone was poking around in it with a red-hot pair of scissors. Despite the pain, he still felt like running away, getting back into the subway, where it was dark and warm. And strangest of all, he was hungry.

Five minutes later Frank, Louise, and Lisa were in a small workman’s utility room adjacent to the Ninety-sixth Street station. The tunnel had ended abruptly behind another false wall, and it was only a matter of minutes before Corelli had kicked his way through. They both wanted to stop and rest, but they would never be safe until they got out of the subway entirely. Cautiously they left the room and followed a narrow catwalk a few feet above the tracks.

They appeared just as a group of Guardsmen entered the station. Tom Larabee stopped, aimed his rifle, and was about to fire when he took a close second look at this motley group. Something was wrong here. He ran over to them, rifle drawn. “What the fuck are you people doing here?” he screamed as he realized these were normal folks, not those creepy things they’d been cleaning up.

“You know Captain Stan Dolchik?” Corelli demanded.

“Sure I know him—he’s in charge,” Larabee said carefully. “Why?”

“I want to talk to him. I’m Frank Corelli of the TA,” he said arrogantly enough to impress the lieutenant. “But first, you’d better get this little girl to a hospital.” Larabee began to protest, but Corelli cut him off. “We just fought off an army of those things, then narrowly avoided your men with their flamethrowers. I’m in no mood to argue with you, Lieutenant.”

Larabee called one of his men to escort Louise and Lisa out. Corelli promised he’d see her later. After they’d gone, Frank turned his attention once more to Larabee. “You have any special procedures for bites from these things?”

“New York Mercy Hospital is handling that.”

Of course, Corelli thought. But he said, “A friend of mine’s back in the tunnel, and he’s been hurt. Send in some
men and see to it he gets to Mercy right away.”

“Yessir.” The lieutenant snapped to, responding instantly to the sound of authority in another’s voice.

Fifteen minutes and four cigarettes later, Corelli watched as Larabee’s two men returned from the tunnel-alone. “Where the hell is Willie Hoyte?” he demanded, jumping to his feet.

“We don’t know, sir. We followed the tunnel all the way back to the burned-out station. Your friend was gone.” The young Guardsman looked distinctly bored.

Corelli wanted to complain, but what could he say? “Thanks, anyway,” he finally dismissed the two men. Where the hell was Willie? Shit, he never should have left him alone in such a poor condition. If any of the creepers had come back, with Willie being so weak…

After deciding that Willie’s fate was out of his hands, Corelli left the subway station to find Louise. At least she was okay. And Lisa. Maybe now they could begin to forget all the terror and horror, all the tears and death. Maybe now they could begin a real life of their own. The thought gladdened Corelli momentarily. Then, again, he thought of Willie. In his gut Frank knew he’d never hear from the leader of Dogs of Hell again; and he knew he’d never have a minute’s peace because of it.

It was a no-win situation. It wasn’t fair that his new happiness should be overshadowed by Willie’s loss. But where, Corelli wondered as he walked into Lisa’s hospital room an hour later to find Louise waiting for him, where is it written that life is fair? He took Louise in his arms and held her like he used to hold Jean. A new life was about to start for them, and right now that was all that mattered.
Ringo and Marcie LaMarr sauntered down Forty-second Street like a king and queen. Ringo had staked out his territory on the strip years before; he was one of the regulars who’d found a home in the honky-tonk world of Times Square. The forty-year-old Ringo might have held a regular job, had a real home and a loving family, but he’d decided there was a better way to live. He collected illegal welfare payments, lived out of an SRO-single-room occupancy-hotel on the Upper West Side, and had already helped Marcie get three abortions. She was his woman, and a family might be nice, but hell, that would put her out of commission for too long. Not many Johns wanted to fuck a pregnant whore.

The Times Square area was a midtown jungle. The dregs of New York drifted into its ever-changing tidal pools on waves of anger, greed, despair, and violence that everywhere else were only undercurrents. Here, along the gaudy, low-life Forty-second Street strip, sex, drugs, and chemical escape were a floodtide that grew after midnight into a raging torrent. While other parts of the city slept, exhausted from a day’s frantic pace, Times Square writhed in the ecstasy of a self-induced nirvana.

Ringo loved the strip. He loved to saunter with his woman up and down, back and forth, nodding and saying hello, occasionally making a sale of badly cut coke or oregano “marijuana” to the yokels who drifted onto the strip from the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Being recognized on the strip as someone made Ringo feel like a man, for he knew that anywhere else in New York’s career-oriented society he’d be considered no better than any of the stray dogs that are so problematic.

Marcie was just along for the ride. If she weren’t with Ringo, she’d be with someone else. She needed men almost as much as she needed smack to veil her eyes to the strip’s sordid reality. If her father hadn’t raped her when she was only twelve, then run off leaving her mother with four other kids, life might have turned out differently. But he had done those things, and in her own way, Marcie drifted from man to man looking for the security her father had taken with him. As for the tricking, well, Ringo needed money; he was just down on his luck for the moment. He’d pull his shit together one of these days. In the meantime, the world was full of Johns willing to pay for Marcie to be nice to them—for ten or fifteen minutes. Besides that, Ringo was her husband, and if he wanted her to fuck for money, she’d do it.

Ringo nodded to three fat cops lolling around near a porno bookstore. They didn’t acknowledge him, but they knew who he was. Everyone on the strip knew Ringo LaMarr. The cops were out-of-place here—this was the people’s land, not the cops’. They stayed because sometimes there was trouble and they had to break it up. Ringo knew that if it’d been up to the cops, they’d just as soon on the strip killed one another. And for that he hated all cops.

“Where we goin’?” Marcie asked in her petulantly sweet voice.

“Meeting Bubba in fifteen minutes,” Ringo said after checking out his stolen four-hundred-dollar chronograph watch. “He’s to be at the Greek place on Eighth Avenue. We get something to eat and score some grass.”

“You gonna work me tonight?” Sometimes Ringo wanted to be alone and he sent her out on the stroll. They kept a shabby room in a nearby hotel for that purpose.

“Not tonight, baby. I think we gonna party tonight.”

“What’s up, sugar?” Marcie asked, squeezing his arm.

“Jes’ feel likes partying, that’s all,” he responded as they reached the corner of Seventh Avenue. Ringo noticed immediately that something was up. He knew the strip as well as he knew the track marks on his left arm. There were too many cops here tonight. “Scuse me, sir,” Ringo said politely to a policeman standing at the entrance to the subway. “Is there some trouble hereabouts?”

The cop looked Ringo up and down all at once, immediately taking in the purple suit, black shirt with white tie, cherry-colored platform shoes, and oversized white felt fedora. A smile flickered, then died on his lips as he beheld Marcie. She made this dude look like he’d just stepped out of the exclusive Paul Stuart men’s clothing store. “The TA’s doing some work down in the subway. It’ll be closed until six this morning.”
“That so?” Ringo didn’t believe it for a second, but he was shrewd enough to see the cop did. “Well, good luck, sir.” He pulled Marcie back toward Eighth Avenue, where they were to meet Bubba Leroy in ten minutes.

“I never heard of the subway being closed before,” Marcie whined.

“That’s ‘cause it ain’t never been closed before. Mark my words, sugar, something big’s up tonight.”

“What you mean?”

Ringo shrugged. “It’s a feelin’ I gets in my bones. There’s gonna be trouble on the strip tonight, real big trouble.”

Marcie shivered. She didn’t like violence the way Ringo did, although she’d been known to beat the shit out of an unruly John on occasion. “Maybe we should get outta here, honey. You wanna party, let’s do it uptown.”

Ringo roared with laughter. “You shittin’ me, babe? And miss all the fun? No way. Now, come on, I got some wheelin’ and dealin’ to do.”

As Ringo pulled her back down the street, Marcie looked over her shoulder at the subway entrance, where policemen were gathering like vultures over a fresh corpse. Ringo was happy, but Marcie was just plain scared.

Dolchik walked out of the TA office into the long, wide corridor that linked the entrances to the subway with the token booth and turnstiles. His footsteps echoed down the hallway, ricocheted off the walls, then sailed back to him. Never had he seen the subway so empty. New York City never slept, and at any hour of the day or night there was always someone waiting for a train. Always. But not this morning.

The idea of an empty subway system was a fanciful thought that often lulled him to sleep. Now that the dream was a stark reality, Dolchik drew no comfort from it. The subway was empty because of a nightmare, and in the few hours left before dawn, he prayed the nightmare didn’t worsen. He ducked under a turnstile and surveyed the empty station. Tomorrow it would again be full of running people, always running, oblivious of tonight, acting as if nothing had ever happened down here.

“Captain? Captain!” a distant voice called out to him.

Dolchik relinquished his daydreaming as one of his creeper team frantically signaled him from the doorway of the TA office. “We’ve got trouble, Captain. They want you on the walkie-talkie.”

A minute later Dolchik hustled into the office, his face red from exertion and his eyes wide with expectation. He grabbed the proffered microphone and pushed the button. “Dolchik here. What is it?”

“It’s Larabee, Captain. We seem to be running into a timing snag.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Lieutenant?” Dolchik held his breath. This operation was a first-hopefully a last; there were so many things that could go wrong.

“It seems it’s taking everyone longer to move these things than expected, Captain. If you remember, the idea was to corral them no farther north than Thirty-fourth Street.”

“I remember, you shithead,” Dolchik screamed, beginning to sense disaster. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is the other teams pushed these things north, like planned, but we weren’t able to give them a backup. When they got to Washington Square, they just kept going on up the Eighth Avenue line, and there was no one to stop them. Same up at Thirty-fourth Street. Captain, the creepers are headed for Forty-second Street all across town.”

Dolchik held the phone tightly, listening to Larabee’s labored breathing. His computerized mind sifted the information, then reassembled it. It had occurred to him to clear the aboveground areas near the killing ground, but he nixed the idea because he was convinced the Guard could keep the problem belowground. But, goddammit, if the creepers were caught in a squeeze at Times Square, they’d head for the streets, sure as shit. Maybe it wasn’t so bad.
“Larabee, we’ve been pretty much in the dark up here. What’s the count on these things?”

“Captain, they’re like cockroaches in a dirty kitchen on a hot August night. They’re coming out of the fucking woodwork.”

“Jesus,” Dolchik hissed. “You killed any?”

“Hundred, hundred and fifty, maybe. But that don’t touch it. They run and leap like frogs with a firecracker up their ass. Hell, if it weren’t for the casualties, I’d really laugh.”

“How many hurt?”

“One dead, four or five chewed up pretty bad, maybe a dozen or so with superficial wounds.”

Dolchik sat down in his chair. Why hadn’t he expected to hear it? Why hadn’t he thought the creepers would attack to defend themselves? Had he really allowed himself the dream that the Guard would just skip on down into the subway and rout all these things, killing them and neatly disposing of their bodies? Men were being hurt and killed…and that was only Larabee’s report, from one quadrant of the city; there were three others. Christ!

“Have the casualties been taken to New York Mercy?” Tom Geary would have his hands full.

“Yessir. And one more thing, sir. A guy, a kid, and some dame came walking out of the tunnels bigger than life a while back. He said his name was Corelli and that he wanted to talk to you.”

Dolchik actually smiled. So, despite all odds, Frank Corelli was still alive. Well, well. There was no longer any point trying to keep him quiet. From what Larabee had just said, the news would break of its own accord, Corelli or no Corelli. “Where is he now?”

“He’s at New York Mercy. The kid with him was pretty badly banged up, near’s I could tell. The woman looked in shock.”

“Okay, leave it to me. If anything changes, let me know at once.” He signed off and sat back. Woman and child. They could only be Louise Hill…Was it possible the child was Lisa Hill? Alive? Jesus, what next? A picture of Times Square swarming with creepers filled his mind, and he went straight for the phone.

The report from the Disease Control Center in Atlanta had come back late yesterday. The blood sample taken from Lester Baker showed a mutated form of rabies capable of reproducing at nearly a thousand times the normal rate. Anyone bitten by a creeper would be dead—or worse, a carrier of the disease—within twenty-four hours if not injected with a megadose of anti-rabies vaccine.

At least there’s a cure, Dolchik thought while he waited to be connected with the mayor’s office. “Russ, we’ve got a shitload of trouble. There’s a swarm of those things running wild down in the subway and they’ve already taken bites outta some of our men. You’d better send some of your gray-flannel boys to New York Mercy to make sure the victims are quarantined…and to apprise the doctors of the situation.”

There was a long pause, an ominous silence. Then Matthews spoke. His voice was tight with anger. “Dolchik, this is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. I wanted to keep this on the q.t.”

“In that case, you’d better sit down for this one: there’s an army of creepers heading for Times Square.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Matthews exploded. “Can’t you stop them?”

“The best I can do is suggest you get as many men in blue up to Forty-second Street and clear the streets within two blocks of any subway entrance. Word is they’re coming up the Eighth Avenue line, but chances are they’ll fan out onto the Seventh Avenue and Lexington Avenue lines, too.”
“The Lexington Avenue station is in Grand Central Station,” Matthews whispered in awe.

“It’ll be deserted about now, but it’s still a major subway station. You’d better get talking, Russ. And if you believe in God, you’d better put in a personal call to him right away.”

“Up yours, Dolchik,” Matthews yelled, then hung up.

Ringo LaMarr was nicely stoned, nicely mellowed out. He knew the feeling; it was like an old friend, a man’s best friend. Hell, wasn’t getting high what life was all about? As far as he was concerned, it was. That and making love to his lovely Marcie, the center of his world—though he’d never tell her that.

He leaned casually against the wall next to the newsstand just east of the corner of Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue. This was Ringo’s spot, his little slice of Times Square’s wild kingdom. On any night Ringo LaMarr and his woman, Marcie, could be found standing right there next to the stairs that led down into the subway. That is, if he weren’t too high, or the weather wasn’t too bad, or Marcie wasn’t turning a trick in the shoddy hotel room they jokingly called “the bridal suite.”

“We gonna sure have some party later on, Marcie, baby,” Ringo cooed in her ear as his hand slipped under her arm to tug at the outer edge of her breast.

“You the only man’s can make me see sparks.” She giggled. Ringo liked to hear about his sexual prowess; it kinda turned her on, too.

“That’s ’cause I cares about you, Marcie. That’s ’cause I don’t drive you like so many dudes do with their womens.” His hand moved a bit farther, and he cupped her breast through the pink crocheted top of her garish outfit. “You really turn me on, babe. Really.”

Marcie was going to counter with some cute remark about his three-hour hard-on driving her wild, when she heard a low, rumbling sound coming from somewhere to her right. She looked down the street to Eighth Avenue, but didn’t see anything unusual. The same old faces were there, talking to the same old faces about the same old things. Yet, she was sure she’d heard something unusual. Or, more accurately, felt something. Involuntarily the muscles at the back of her neck began to tighten. “You hear somethin’, Ringo? Like lots of folks running?”

“Running? Whatchu talking ’bout, woman?” His voice grew authoritarian like it always did when Marcie said something he couldn’t immediately dismiss as damn-fool women’s talk.

“I don’t know, honey; it almost sounds like the wind down there in the subway.” She moved away from Ringo out onto the sidewalk a few feet and stopped. Her arms automatically clasped themselves around her body in an unconscious gesture of self-protection.

“Come back here, Marcie. You beginning to act crazy.”

“I—” she began, but the words never escaped her mouth. The initial thing that caught her attention was a policeman—a TA cop, actually—running up the stairs from the subway. At first he looked like any other uniformed transit cop, except he wasn’t wearing a cap. Then she looked closer; the left side of his face had been torn away and what was left of his ear dangled down near his chin. The front of his uniform jacket was gone too, his shirt ripped away. Long rivulets of blood streamed over his abdomen and splattered against the concrete stairs with each step.

The cop stopped near the top of the stairs, his eyes wide with fright and agony. His mouth opened to say something, but no sound came out. He arched his back suddenly and flung his left arm over his shoulder, trying to pull something off his back, but he failed. After a moment’s struggle, he pitched forward and fell, his lifeless eyes staring out into the hustle and bustle of Forty-second Street.

It was then Marcie saw the thing attached to the cop’s back. She saw the creature raise its head from a deep wound, spilling blood down its troughlike tongue and over its teeth. It took a moment to grind a hunk of flesh to pulp, swallowed, then stared directly at Marcie. Its eyes opened wider and its hands relaxed its grip on the dead man. The creature rocked back onto its hind legs and sprang.
Marcie watched in frozen silence as the creeper arced through the air toward her. For a millisecond her eyes darted to Ringo, but he’d be no help. He was watching her like he always did, like she was some overgrown pet. No, Ringo couldn’t help her out of this jam, not this time. When she felt the weight of the creeper’s body against her, she looked from Ringo straight into the rheumy eyes of the creeper. Its breath smelled of death and blood and raw meat, but Marcie didn’t mind, really. It would be over soon. She’d heard Death when she heard the rumbling sound; she’d seen it when she saw the policeman at the top of the stairs. And now, here she was staring it straight in the eyes.

Ringo craned his head toward Marcie, trying to see what the hell was going on. Looked like some punk was putting the make on her or something. He quickly stepped forward, squinting to clear his wobbly vision. The grass had rounded the edges of everything, and he wasn’t quite sure what was real and what was his imagination. If it was a punk fooling with Marcie, he’d beat the shit out of him. No one fucked with Marcie LaMarr unless he paid Ringo first. When he finally reached her after what seemed a mile-long chase, Ringo was vaguely aware of the sounds of running and screams coming from behind him near the subway entrance. Hadn’t Marcie said something about running? Maybe she was right, after all. He’d tell her soon’s he fixed this punk who had her by the tits. Jesus, what the hell was this world coming to when you weren’t safe even on Forty-second Street?

“You fucking with my woman, son?” Ringo demanded as he stalked right up to Marcie. The question went unanswered. “You deaf or somethin’?” There was so much shouting he could hardly hear himself think. “Okay, brother, you asked for it.” Ringo reached out and spun Marcie around.

The creeper had clawed through her throat to her backbone where it entered the cranial cavity. There was a lot of muscle here, and cartilage, as well as sinewy veins and arteries that fed the brain. It was a soft part of the body, but surrounded by toughness, like a chicken gizzard. It also made good eating. The creeper yanked its hand back slightly to secure the fingers, then began a systematic wrenching, twisting and turning as it pulled back. Gradually Marcie’s entire throat pulled loose from her body. Her eyes, which were wide with abject terror, clouded, fluttered, then closed. She fell back onto the sidewalk with the creeper still holding tight. And when her body came to rest, her killer sucked the wad of bloody flesh into its mouth, expanding its floppy cheeks like a squirrel hording nuts, and scampered off down the sidewalk.

Ringo dropped to his knees beside Marcie. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. He didn’t believe what he’d seen. But the proof lay in front of him. He started to cry, gradually becoming conscious that the screaming around him was increasing. He looked from Marcie’s mutilated body to the entrance of the subway. The doorway was crowded with the same creatures that had killed his woman. They fought, crawled over each other, clawing and scratching to get out onto the street. It seemed there were hundreds of them, all moving forward.

“You sons-of-bitches,” Ringo shouted at them. “You killed my wife.” He rose unsteadily to his feet and planted his legs wide apart. “You jes’ ain’t foolin’ with a nobody. You foolin’ with Ringo LaMarr and you done killed my wife.”

Without another word, Ringo pulled a switchblade knife from his hip pocket, lowered his left shoulder, flicked the wicked blade open, and ran straight into the pack of creepers, slashing at them with the knife in a last desperate attempt to avenge Marcie’s death. He disappeared into the roiling mass of creepers and, a minute later, what remained of his body surfaced above the turmoil and was discarded against the front of the newsstand.

At that very moment, the same scene was being reenacted up and down Forty-second Street in the vicinity of every subway exit. Hundreds of creepers, driven toward the killing grounds by the advancing National Guardsmen, fought their way up to the street to the very world they had forsaken. Most of the creepers had never seen the light of day except as it filtered down through the subway grates into their lairs. Because of some inborn predisposition, and the memory passed down through Theodore Alden and his descendants, the creatures “remembered” what it was like to live in die world of the sun, though they had never seen it. But to be thrown so suddenly into the world was terrifying for them.

They poured into the aboveground world along Forty-second Street from Eighth Avenue to Third Avenue, scattering like bedbugs under the glare of an unexpected light. They flowed out of the subway stations, quickly destroying the police stationed there as guards. The creepers weren’t hungry, they were crazed, more crazed than they were when they searched for food. A combination of fear and the proliferation of the deadly mutant virus that coursed through their veins reduced the last vestiges of their humanity to rubble. They bubbled out of the subway
into the cool night air, stopping traffic, attacking pedestrians, overrunning everything that stood in their way.

The creepers, caught between the advancing armies of Guardsmen that moved east-west toward a central point, attacked everything in sight. Those civilians who could, ran into shops, buildings, and hotels and locked the doors behind them to keep the monsters out. Those who couldn’t, died. The newspapers later reported that there were between four and six hundred creepers counted dead on Forty-second Street alone when it was all over.

By the time they emerged into the night, the National Guard was being assisted by the NYPD and several truck-loads of men from a nearby Army base in New Jersey. The military cordoned off an area stretching from Twelfth Avenue to First Avenue and from Fiftieth Street to Twenty-eighth Street. But by then it was too late, the damage had been done, the creepers had broken loose and were on the rampage.

The battle between the creepers and the armies lasted five hours. In the end there were forty civilians dead, twenty-five men from the combined official forces, and hundreds of wounded. During the cleanup that followed the next morning as the sun rose shimmery and grainy over the battle scene, a media blackout was enacted. Despite the angry protestations of station managers, network executives, and newspaper editors, the remaining police stood their ground.

The truth, however, was that no television station would have, could have, dared broadcast the scenes captured so vividly on videotape. The carnage along Forty-second Street was appalling. No slaughterhouse would have begun to compare its daily quotas to the death that spilled every gutter and across every pavement on that most famous of all New York streets. The air was filled until midmorning with the plaintive shrieks of ambulances, and the crumpled, twisted bodies of the creepers lay piled four and five deep like dead mice after a fumigation.

The rabies vaccine proved effective in all cases, and a follow-up of survivors a year later showed no unexpected side effects. The subway was completely cleaned up and the number of transit cops was tripled. The new safety precautions for New Yorkers rivaled those of London during the blitz. Subway crime became almost nonexistent, more passengers rode the system, and the TA actually started to show a monetary surplus, a surplus that could be plowed back into the system.

A federal investigating commission set up to study the creeper phenomenon publicly praised Mayor Russ Matthews for his quick thinking in handling such a “strange and unusual” situation. Privately it chastised him for ignoring Dolchik’s repeated warnings and for allowing the situation to deteriorate to the point where dealing with it had proved so costly both in money and in human life. Frank Corelli’s name never appeared in any of the dispositions and, in the end, the committee decided that no one person was at fault for the creeper disaster. It recommended that a monthly spot check of the subway tunnels be made to avert a recurrence.

Russ Matthews was defeated that November by a man who promised “law and order.” Though the word “creeper” was never once mentioned by either side, insiders clearly saw that they were the issue that tipped the election away from the incumbent. Matthews went back to private law practice and left New York for good.

Stan Dolchik retired from the city government a couple of years early and moved to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, with his wife, Marsha, where he opened a private-detective agency that specialized in following errant husbands. Dolchik was fond of saying that he’d traded the creepers of New York for the creeps of south Florida. And, all other things being equal, he preferred the subway variety.

And the people of New York continued their lives as if nothing had ever happened. They clucked their tongues at the bloodbath, shivered momentarily at the thought of riding the subway, and once again thanked God it wasn’t they who’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time—this time, at least. For a few months, “I survived New York’s Creeper Caper” T-shirts and buttons were popular, but with time, people forgot and settled back to their daily lives, confident that such a terror could happen only once.

The creepers were dead.
December 24, Christmas Eve

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“Frank, the tree is perfect,” Louise cooed as she brought him a cup of heavily brandied eggnog. “It’s going to be the best Christmas ever.”

“It’s the first of the best Christmases ever.” Corelli scooped her into his arms and playfully nibbled her ear.

She raised her glass in a toast: “To us, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Corelli, now…and forever.”

They linked arms and sipped from each other’s glass, savoring the fiery alcohol tempered by the rich coolness of eggs and cream.

“Where’s Lisa?” Frank asked. “She should be celebrating, too.”

“She said she wanted to wait and surprise you,” Louise purred. “I promised I wouldn’t tell…but she has a new dress to show her daddy.”

“Aha,” Corelli said understandingly. “Well, I hope she doesn’t wait too long. I’m starved.”

“I’ll bring out the hors d’oeuvres if you promise not to eat them all and spoil your dinner.”

“I promise,” he lied.

While Louise was out in the kitchen, Frank made a few final adjustments to the Christmas tree. It was perfect, and it had cost him only fifty bucks! Jesus, what a ripoff. But Louise liked it, and, more important, Lisa had fallen in love with the lofty Norwegian pine. He reset a string of lights and thought about Lisa, shaking his head in wonder that she—all of them—had made it through that nightmare alive and unscarred.

Lisa had almost died at New York Mercy Hospital that night. The doctors had said a few more hours and they’d have lost her. The concussion that kept her unconscious for nearly a week was bad enough, but nothing compared to the malnutrition and dehydration from not eating or drinking anything. Malnutrition. Corelli shuddered. If Lisa had been conscious, what would she have eaten? It was a thought he was sure had plagued Louise, too, but they never discussed it; never would. In a way, Lisa’s perilous condition saved her, and the whole family, from a greater danger—the crippling psychological effects of being held captive by the creepers. Lisa remembered nothing of what had happened to her after waiting for the subway to SoHo that hot, hot Labor Day.

Frank straightened the star on the treetop and stepped off the ladder to admire his work. Yessir, this was some tree. They’d told Lisa she’d contracted a mysterious virus that had put her in a coma for a week. She’d hear the truth much later, when she was old enough to handle it In the meantime, Louise enrolled her in a private school where she was just another student. Lisa had already been through enough. There was no point subjecting her to an onslaught of publicity or the prying questions of well-meaning friends. Lisa Hill deserved better than to be made a freak to satisfy the curious.

Frank and Louise never talked of the creepers anymore. Never talked of the horror that had brought them together. There was nothing more to say. It was over. The creepers were dead. The subways were safe again. Lisa was safe. They could end that chapter of their lives once and forever.

Now they were just another New York family: Frank, Louise… Lisa. Never in his life had Corelli known a child so loving and so giving. But then, Lisa was the perfect reflection of her mother. He loved to watch the two of them together-laughing, bickering happily, or working on some school project. For the first time in his life Frank Corelli felt really a part of something outside himself. He felt loved and wanted…and needed. And that meant a great deal to him, particularly when it came from the child.

Becoming Lisa’s second father wasn’t an easy step. Lisa was used to monopolizing her mother; now she had to share her. It could have been a problem. The chances of resentment seemed better than fifty-fifty. But at the wedding, Lisa slipped Frank a small package containing a handmade clay picture frame containing a seventy-five-cent photo-booth portrait of herself. The little card with it said simply: “I love you, my new Daddy.”
Louise returned, all smiles, and a moment later Lisa walked regally down the hall to the living room. Being a boisterous child, she usually ran and screamed and got into everything. This demure new persona was something entirely different.

“What’s she up to?” Frank whispered to Louise.

“She’s being grown-up. You’ll see.”

Lisa walked into the living room like a duchess at a tea party. She was decked out in a new party dress the color of grapefruit sherbet, pale yellow shoes to match. An amethyst ribbon caught up her black hair. Lisa’s manner was definitely regal, but there was mischief in her eyes.

“And who, might I ask, is this lovely lady?” Frank asked Louise very loudly.

“I’ve never seen her before. Who could she be?”

When Frank shook his head, Lisa strolled casually over to him and stood solemnly in front of his chair. She batted her eyes seductively; then the faintest of smiles appeared on her lips. “Don’t you recognize me? Really?”

“Can’t say that I do, miss,” Corelli said seriously. “You remind me of someone named Lisa Corelli I once knew, but she was a little girl…you’re a young lady.”

Lisa flew into a fit of laughter. “I am Lisa,” she burst out, and as if to prove she was still a little girl, she leaped up into Corelli’s lap and covered his cheek with kisses.

“So it is you, after all,” he joked. “My, my.”

“Oh, Daddy, you knew all along it was me,” she complained.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. But one thing I do know, Santa Claus brought Lisa Corelli lots of presents. Maybe we can convince your mother to let you open one now.” He turned to Louise. “What say, Mom?”

“Oh course,” she agreed. “Well all open one now.”

Half an hour later they sat down to dinner. And as Lisa recited grace, Corelli bowed his head and, too, thanked God for bringing him the love of Louise and Lisa. And he also prayed, as he did each night, that whatever had happened to Willie Hoyte had been swift and painless. For Frank, Willie’s unexplained disappearance was the most painful thing about the creepers. He knew one day he’d get over the loss of his friend, but right now thinking about Willie still hurt.

And finally Frank prayed that God keep and protect his little family from all forms of danger. And that He keep His eye out that something as terrible as the creepers never, ever happened again.
Epilogue

Marvin Lord was drunk as a lord. He’d promised himself to have only two glasses of Christmas cheer, and look what he’d gone and done! Three glasses of rum punch, wine with dinner, and a rainbow of cordials after. He was shit-faced! Three sheets to the wind. Soused. But, after all, it was Christmas Eve. What better excuse to have a few drinks too many? Now all he had to do was get home and he’d be all right.

He waited on goddamned Lexington Avenue for a good half-hour, trying to flag down a cab in the bitter cold, to no avail. The cabs that were out-and they were damned few-were always occupied. Well, what else could he expect at two o’clock in the morning on…Christmas Day now. Finally, shaking with cold and beginning to sober up, Marvin Lord chose the subway.

He hated the underground, but it was a damn sight better then freezing to death on the street. He overpaid the token clerk, took only one of the four tokens offered him, then staggered downstairs onto the Sixty-eighth Street platform. It was the Hunter College stop and usually the station was hustling and bustling with students. Tonight he was alone.

“There’s absolutely no one here,” he mumbled to himself as he rested unsteadily against the wall. Next time he’d be more careful of his drinking. He lit a cigarette, knowing full well that it was forbidden, but also remembering that no cop cared enough to enforce the law. He’d have to stop smoking, too. Maybe tomorrow.

Marvin walked unsteadily to the edge of the platform and looked up and down the tracks. Nothing. No one on the platform. Nothing on the tracks. Nothing at all. He’d started back toward the steadfast security of the wall when he heard something. At least he thought he heard something. It sounded like a train far off down the tracks in the tunnel. The sound was a whooshing actually, as if something were blowing down the tracks or rubbing up against the tunnel wall.

He looked up and down the platform again. Nothing. Yet, there was still that sound. Lord had grown accustomed to the noise, when it suddenly stopped directly in front of him. Right under his feet. He looked down, and quickly, without warning, two gnarled hands shot over the edge of the platform and grabbed him by the ankles. With one quick pull he was toppled. He fell backward and cracked his skull against the hard floor; the impact knocked him out momentarily. When he came to, his legs were already over the edge of the platform—he was being dragged down onto the tracks!

“My God! Someone help me!” he shouted, but his voice was empty and lonely in the cavernous station.

The thing that held him down on the roadbed leaped onto his chest and slid one hand behind his neck. With the other it pushed Lord’s forehead back to expose the soft vulnerability of his throat. He stared up as the thing’s eyes widened and its lips curled back over gleaming canine teeth. Its mouth opened, and the last thing Marvin Lord saw before his throat was ripped out was the small gold cross that hung suspended from a chain around the creature’s neck.

The End
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