

IRA LEVIN'S
A KISS BEFORE DYING
(Excerpt)

CHAPTER 11

The lower eight floors of the Blue River Municipal Building were given over to the offices of the city and of Rockwell County, of which Blue River was the county seat. The remaining six floors were rented to private tenants, most of whom were lawyers, doctors and dentists. The building itself was a mixture of modern and classical architecture, a compromise between the functional trend of the thirties and resolute Iowa conservatism. Professors teaching the introductory architecture courses at Stoddard's College of Fine Arts referred to it as an architectural abortion, causing freshmen to laugh self-consciously.

Viewed from above, the building was a hollow square, an airshaft plunging down through the core of it. From the side, setbacks at the eighth and twelfth stories gave it the appearance of three blocks of decreasing size piled one atop the other. Its lines were graceless and stark, its window lintels were traced with factitious Grecian designs, and its three bronze and glass revolving doors were squeezed between giant pillars whose capitals were carved into stylized ears of corn. It was a monstrosity, but on alighting from the streetcar Dorothy turned, paused, and gazed up at it as though it were the cathedral at Chartres.

It was twelve-thirty when they crossed the street, mounted the steps, and pushed through the central revolving door. The marble floored lobby was filled with people going to and from lunch, people hurrying to appointments, people standing and waiting. The sound of voices and the surf of shoes on marble hung susurrant under the vaulted ceiling.

He dropped a pace behind Dorothy, letting her lead the way to the directory board at the side of the lobby. "Would it be under R for Rockwell County or M for Marriage?" she asked, her eyes intent on the board as he came up beside her. He looked at the board as though oblivious of her presence. "There it is," she said triumphantly. "Marriage License Bureau—six-oh-four." He turned towards the elevators, which were opposite the revolving doors. Dorothy hurried along beside him. She reached for his hand but the valise was in it. He apparently did not notice her gesture, for he made no move to change hands.

One of the four elevators stood open, half filled with waiting passengers. As they approached it, he stepped back a bit, allowing Dorothy to enter first. Then an elderly woman came up and he waited until she too had gone in before entering. The woman smiled at him, pleased by his air of gallantry, doubly unexpected from a young man in a busy office building. She seemed a bit disappointed when he failed to remove his hat. Dorothy smiled at him also, over the head of the woman, who had somehow got between them. He returned the smile with an almost invisible curving of his lips.

They left the car at the sixth floor, along with two men with briefcases who turned to the right and walked briskly down the corridor. "Hey, wait for me!" Dorothy protested in an amused whisper as the elevator door clanged shut behind her. She had been the last to leave the car, and he the first. He had turned to the left and walked some fifteen feet, for all the world as though he were alone. He turned, appearing flustered, as she caught up with him and gaily took his arm. Over her head he watched the men with the briefcases reach the other end of the corridor, turn to the right and vanish down the side of the square. "Where you running?" Dorothy teased.

"Sorry," he smiled. "Nervous bridegroom." They walked along arm in arm, following the left turn the corridor made. Dorothy recited the numbers painted on the doors as they passed them. "Six-twenty, six-eighteen, six-sixteen . . ." They had to take another left turn before they reached 604, which was at the back of the square, across from the elevators. He tried the door. It was locked. They read the hours listed on the frosted glass panel and Dorothy moaned dejectedly

"Damn," he said. "I should have called to make sure." He put down the valise and looked at his watch. "Twenty-five to one."

"Twenty-five minutes," Dorothy said. "I guess we might as well go downstairs."

"Those crowds . . ." he muttered, then paused. "Hey, I've got an idea."

"What?"

"The roof. Let's go up on the roof. It's such a beautiful day, I bet we'll be able to see for miles!"

"Are we allowed?"

"If nobody stops us, we're allowed." He picked up the valise. "Come on, get your last look at the world as an unmarried woman."

She smiled and they began walking, retracing their path around the square to the bank of elevators where, in a few moments, there glowed above one of the doors a white arrow pointing upwards.

When they left the car at the fourteenth floor, it happened again that they were separated by the other alighting passengers. In the corridor, they waited until these had hurried around the turns or into offices, and then Dorothy said "Let's go," in a conspiratorial whisper. She was making an adventure of it.

Again they had to make a half-circuit of the building, until, next to room 1402, they found a door marked Stairway. He pushed it open and they entered. The door sighed closed behind them. They were on a landing, with black metal stairs leading up and down. Dim light sifted through a dirt-fogged skylight. They walked upwards; eight steps, a turn, and eight more steps. A door confronted them, heavy reddish-brown metal. He tried the knob.

"Is it locked?"

"I don't think so."

He put his shoulder to the door and pushed.

"You're going to get your suit filthy."

The door rested on a ledge, a sort of giant threshold that raised its bottom a foot above the level of the landing. The ledge jutted out, making it difficult for him to apply his weight squarely. He put down the valise, braced his shoulder against the door and tried again.

"We can go downstairs and wait," Dorothy said. "That door probably hasn't been opened in . . ."

He clenched his teeth. With the side of his left foot jammed against the base of the ledge, he swung back and then smashed his shoulder against the door with all his strength. It gave, groaning open. The chain of a counterweight clattered. A slice of electric blue sky hit their eyes, blinding after the obscurity of the stairway. There was the quick flutter of pigeons' wings.

He picked up the valise, stepped over the ledge, and put the valise down again where it would be clear of the door's swing. Pushing the door further open, he stood with his back to it. He extended one hand to Dorothy. With the other he gestured towards the expanse of roof as a head waiter gestures towards his finest table. He gave her a mock bow and his best smile. "Enter, mam'selle," he said.

Taking his hand, she stepped gracefully over the ledge and onto the black tar of the roof.

CHAPTER 12

He wasn't nervous at all. There had been a moment of near-panic when he couldn't get the door open, but it had dissolved the instant the door had yielded to the force of his shoulder, and now he was calm and secure. Everything was going to be perfect. No mistakes, no intruders. He just knew it. He hadn't felt so good since—Jesus, since high school!

He swung the door partly closed, leaving a half inch between it and the jamb, so that it wouldn't give him any trouble when he left. He would be in a hurry then. Bending over, he moved the valise so that he would be able to pick it up with one hand while opening the door with the other. As he straightened up he felt his hat shift slightly with the motion. He took it off, looked at it, and placed it on the valise. Christ, he was thinking of everything! A little thing like the hat would probably louse up somebody else. They would push her over and then a breeze or the force of the movement might send their hat sailing down to land beside her body. Bam! They might as well throw themselves over after it. Not he, though; he had anticipated, prepared. An act of God, the crazy kind of little thing that was always screwing up perfect plans,—and he had anticipated it. Jesus! He ran a hand over his hair, wishing there were a mirror.

“Come look at this.”

He turned. Dorothy was standing a few feet away, her back towards him, the alligator purse tucked under one arm. Her hands rested on the waist-high parapet that edged the roof. He came up behind her. “Isn't it something?” she said. They were at the back of the building, facing south. The city sprawled before them, clear and sharp in the brilliant sunlight. “Look”—Dorothy pointed to a green spot far away—“I think that's the campus.” He put his hands on her shoulders. A white-gloved hand reached up to touch his.

He had planned to do it quickly, as soon as he got her up there, but now he was going to take it slow and easy, drawing it out as long as he safely

could. He was entitled to that, after a week of nerve-twisting tension. Not just a week,—years. Ever since high school it had been nothing but strain and worry and self-doubt. There was no need to rush this. He looked down at the top of her head against his chest, the dark green veiling buoyant in the yellow hair. He blew, making the fine net tremble. She tilted her head back and smiled up at him.

When her eyes returned to the panorama, he moved to her side, keeping one arm about her shoulders. He leaned over the parapet. Two stories below, the red tiled floor of a wide balcony extended like a shelf across the width of the building. The top of the twelfth story setback. It would be on all four sides. That was bad; a two story drop wasn't what he wanted. He turned and surveyed the roof.

It was perhaps a hundred and fifty feet square, edged by the brick parapet whose coping was flat white stone, a foot wide. An identical wall rimmed the airshaft, a square hole some thirty feet across, in the center of the roof. On the left side of the roof was a vast stilt-supported water storage tank. On the right, the KBRI tower reared up like a smaller Eiffel, its girdered pattern black against the sky. The staircase entrance, a slant-roofed shed, was in front of him and a bit to his left. Beyond the airshaft, at the north side of the building, was a large rectangular structure, the housing of the elevator machinery. The entire roof was dotted with chimneys and ventilator pipes that stuck up like piers from a tarry sea.

Leaving Dorothy, he walked across to the parapet of the airshaft. He leaned over. The four walls funneled down to a tiny areaway fourteen stories below, its corners banked with trash cans and wooden crates. He looked for a moment, then stooped and pried a rain-faded matchbook from the gummy surface of the roof. He held the folder out beyond the parapet—and dropped it, watching as it drifted down, down, down, and finally became invisible. He glanced at the walls of the shaft. Three were striped with windows. The fourth, which faced him and evidently backed on the elevator shafts, was blank, windowless. This was the spot. The south side of the airshaft. Right near the stairway, too. He slapped the top of the parapet, his lips pursed thoughtfully. Its height was greater than he had anticipated.

Dorothy came up behind him and took his arm. "It's so quiet," she said. He listened. At first there seemed to be absolute silence, but then the sounds of the roof asserted themselves: the throbbing of the elevator motors, a gentle

wind strumming the cables that guyed the radio tower, the squeak of a slow-turning ventilator cap . . .

They began walking slowly. He led her around the airshaft and past the elevator housing. As they strolled she brushed his shoulder clean of the dust from the door. When they reached the northern rim of the roof they were able to see the river, and with the sky reflected in it, it was really blue, as blue as the rivers painted on maps. “Do you have a cigarette?” she asked.

He reached into his pocket and touched a pack of Chesterfields. Then his hand came out empty. “No, I don’t. Do you have any?”

“They’re buried in here someplace.” She dug into her purse, pushing aside a gold compact and a turquoise handkerchief, and finally produced a crushed pack of Herbert Tareytos. They each took one. He lit them and she returned the pack to her purse.

“Dorrie, there’s something I want to tell you . . .”—she was blowing a stream of smoke against the sky, hardly listening—“ . . . about the pills.”

Her face jerked around, going white. She swallowed. “What?”

“I’m glad they didn’t work,” he said, smiling. “I really am.”

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. “You’re glad?”

“Yes. When I called you last night, I was going to tell you not to take them, but you already had.” Come on, he thought, confess. Get it off your chest. It must be killing you.

Her voice was shaky. “Why? You were so . . . what made you change your mind?”

“I don’t know. I thought it over. I suppose I’m as anxious to get married as you are.” He examined his cigarette. “Besides, I guess it’s really a sin to do something like that.” When he looked up again her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glistened.

“Do you mean that?” she asked breathlessly. “Are you really glad?”

“Of course I am. I wouldn’t say it if I weren’t.”

“Oh, thank God!”

“What’s the matter, Dorrie?”

“Please . . . don’t be angry. I—I didn’t take them.” He tried to look surprised. The words poured from her lips: “You said you were going to get a night job and I knew we could manage, everything would work out, and I was counting on it so much, so much. I knew I was right.” She paused. “You aren’t angry, are you?” she beseeched. “You understand?”

“Sure, baby. I’m not angry. I told you I was glad they didn’t work.”

Her lips made a quivering smile of relief. "I felt like a criminal, lying to you. I thought I would never be able to tell you. I . . . I can't believe it!"

He took the neatly folded handkerchief from his breast pocket and touched it to her eyes. "Dorrie, what did you do with the pills?"

"Threw them away." She smiled shamefacedly.

"Where?" he asked casually, replacing the handkerchief.

"The john."

That was what he wanted to hear. There would be no questions about why she had taken such a messy way out when she had already gone to the trouble of obtaining poison. He dropped his cigarette and stepped on it.

Dorothy, taking a final puff, did the same with hers. "Oh gee," she marveled, "everything's perfect now. Perfect."

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her gently on the lips. "Perfect," he said.

He looked down at the two stubs, hers edged with lipstick, his clean. He picked his up. Splitting it down the middle with his thumbnail, he let the tobacco blow away and rolled the paper into a tiny ball. He flicked it out over the parapet. "That's the way we used to do it in the Army," he said.

She consulted her watch. "It's ten to one."

"You're fast," he said, glancing at his. "We've got fifteen minutes yet." He took her arm. They turned and walked leisurely away from the edge of the roof.

"Did you speak to your landlady?"

"Wha—? Oh, yes. It's all set." They passed the elevator housing. "Monday we'll move your stuff from the dorm."

Dorothy grinned. "Will they be surprised, the girls in the dorm." They strolled around the parapet of the airshaft. "Do you think your landlady'll be able to give us some more closet space?"

"I think so."

"I can leave some of my stuff, the winter things, in the attic at the dorm. There won't be too much."

They reached the south side of the airshaft. He stood with his back against the parapet, braced his hands on the top of it, and hitched himself up. He sat with his heels kicking against the side of the wall.

"Don't sit there," Dorothy said apprehensively.

“Why not?” he asked, glancing at the white stone coping. “It’s a foot wide. You sit on a bench a foot wide and you don’t fall off.” He patted the stone on his left. “Come on.”

“No,” she said.

“Chicken.”

She touched her rear. “My suit . . .”

He took out his handkerchief, whipped it open and spread it on the stone beside him. “Sir Walter Raleigh,” he said.

She hesitated a moment, then gave him her purse. Turning her back to the parapet, she gripped the top on either side of the handkerchief and lifted herself up. He helped her. “There,” he said, putting his arm around her waist. She turned her head slowly, peeking over her shoulder. “Don’t look down,” he warned. “You’ll get dizzy.”

He put the purse on the stone to his right and they sat in silence for a moment, her hands still fastened upon the front of the coping. Two pigeons came out from behind the staircase shed and walked around, watching them cautiously, their claws ticking against the tar.

“Are you going to call or write when you tell your mother?” Dorothy asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I think I’ll write Ellen and Father. It’s an awfully hard thing to just say over the phone.”

A ventilator cap creaked. After a minute, he took his arm from her waist and put his hand over hers, which gripped the stone between them. He braced his other hand on the coping and eased himself down from the parapet. Before she could do likewise he swung around and was facing her, his waist against her knees, his hands covering both of hers. He smiled at her and she smiled back. His gaze dropped to her stomach. “Little mother,” he said. She chuckled.

His hands moved to her knees, cupped them, his fingertips caressing under the hem of her skirt.

“We’d better be going, hadn’t we, darling?”

“In a minute, baby. We still have time.”

His eyes caught hers, held them, as his hands descended and moved behind to rest curving on the slope of her calves. At the periphery of his field of vision he could make out her white-gloved hands; they still clasped the front of the coping firmly.

“That’s a beautiful blouse,” he said, looking at the fluffy silk bow at her throat. “Is it new?” “New? It’s as old as the hills.”

His gaze became critical. “The bow is a little off center.”

One hand left the stone and rose to finger the bow. “No,” he said, “now you’ve got it worse.” Her other hand detached itself from the top of the parapet.

His hands moved down over the silken swell of her calves, as low as he could reach without bending. His right foot dropped back, poised on the toe in readiness. He held his breath.

She adjusted the bow with both hands. “Is that any bett—”

With cobra speed he ducked—hands streaking down to catch her heels—stepped back and straightened up, lifting her legs high. For one frozen instant, as his hands shifted from cupping her heels to a flat grip against the soles of her shoes, their eyes met, stupefied terror bursting in hers, a cry rising in her throat. Then, with all his strength, he pushed against her fear-rigid legs.

Her shriek of petrified anguish trailed down into the shaft like a burning wire. He closed his eyes. The scream died. Silence, then a godawful deafening crash. Wincing, he remembered the cans and crates piled far below.

He opened his eyes to see his handkerchief billowing as the breeze pulled it free of the stone’s rough surface. He snatched it up. Wheeling, he raced to the stairway door, grabbed hat and valise with one hand and pulled the door open, wiping the knob with the handkerchief as he did so. He stepped quickly over the threshold ledge, pulled the door closed and wiped its inner knob. He turned and ran.

He clattered down flight after flight of black metal steps, the valise banging against his legs, his right hand burning over the banisters. His heart galloped and the image of whirling walls dizzied him. When he finally stopped he was on the seventh floor landing.

He clung to the newel post, gasping. The phrase “physical release of tension” danced in his mind. That was why he had run that way—physical release of tension—not panic, not panic. He caught his breath. Putting down the valise, he reshaped his hat, which had been crushed in his grasp. He put it on, his hands trembling slightly. He looked at them. The palms were dirty gray from the soles of . . . he wiped them clean and jammed the handkerchief

into his pocket. After a few straightening tugs at his jacket, he picked up the valise, opened the door, and stepped out into the corridor.

Every door was open. People rushed across the corridor from offices on the outer circumference to those on the inner, where windows faced the airshaft. Men in business suits, stenographers with paper cuffs clipped to their blouses, shirt-sleeved men with green eyeshades; all with jaws clenched, eyes wide, faces bloodless. He walked towards the elevators at a moderate pace, pausing when someone darted before him, then continuing on his way. Passing the doorway of each inner office, he glanced in and saw the backs of people crammed around the open windows, their voices a murmur of excitement and tense speculation.

Shortly after he reached the bank of elevators, a down car came. He squeezed in and faced the front of the car. Behind him the other passengers avidly exchanged fragments of information, the customary elevator coldness shattered by the violence at their backs.

The easy bustle of normality filled the lobby. Most of the people there, having just entered from outside, were unaware of any disturbance. Swinging the valise lightly, he made his way across the marbled expanse and out into the bright noisy afternoon. As he jogged down the steps that fronted the building, two policemen passed him, going up. He turned and watched the blue uniforms vanish into a revolving door. At the foot of the steps he paused and examined his hands once again. They were steady as rocks. Not a tremor. He smiled. Turning, he looked at the revolving doors, wondering how dangerous it would be for him to go back, mingle with the crowd, see her . . . He decided against it.

A University streetcar rumbled past. He walked doubletime to the corner, where the car was detained by a red light. Swinging himself on, he dropped a dime in the box and walked to the rear of the car. He stood looking out the window. When the car had gone about four blocks, a white ambulance clanged by, the pitch of its bell dropping as it passed. He watched it grow smaller and smaller and finally cut through traffic to pull up in front of the Municipal Building. Then the streetcar turned onto University Avenue, and he could see no more.

(End of excerpt)