

## RAVISHING NEBRASKA

by George Malko

Late in the afternoon, the Italian men drifted into the *Campo dei Frati*; they came one by one, or in pairs. Once settled into chairs, they ordered cups of coffee or small glasses of bitter *Punt e Mes*, and let their eyes drift to the American woman who already sat by herself in a far corner of the cafe's terrace. Some of the men thought it was her eyes, dark, the lashes thick. A few even said so, and small arguments would break out, brief eruptions, muting just as quickly, all of them eventually agreeing that it was her mouth, barely open, her upper teeth lightly grazing her voluptuous lower lip, a small brushing contact that kept it from looking like a pout. And of course the soft droop at the corners of those lips. When she turned in their direction, so rare a thing, she looked about to say something. The men involuntarily edged forward in their chairs, desperate to hear the sound of her voice. But the only thing they heard came from the *Rio dei Frati* nearby where a black and gold funeral gondola disappeared with quick whispers. The American woman turned back to the canal and the notebook open on the table in front of her, and resumed writing. Fingers swam into her abundant dark hair to find and feel fine ends, pushing them absently back off one shoulder. Wispy strands would catch and float momentarily, isolated in the umber light of a dusk where the air carried the scent of fresh-water rain from the mainland. The waiter would swish his napkin across his arm, study the arrangement on his tray, and head for her table. One of the men would stop him, indicating the tray with a small push of chin. "Chamomile tea," the waiter would say. "As before." The others would shake their heads, the torment to know who she was and why she was always alone becoming exquisite agony.

Gavin Chandler, an Englishman, was watching her, too. Like the men, he was

also guessing, his particular conjectures spun out almost voluptuously. Gavin imagined that one of the men had decided that this creature of alluring mystery was writing a long and painful letter to a lover who had betrayed her, a lover she would not forget. The letter went on and on; were it to end, then, truly, it would be goodbye. Gavin paused, pleased with himself, thinking, that is exactly what the longing Italian would be telling himself.

Silence drifted in and became part of the muted humid sheen clinging dully to rock and wall and pavement. Gavin watched as another man turned in his chair to watch the American woman, who continued to write. Maybe she's come here to die, this one could be thinking. He would know it was a popular theme with foreigners. From his former mistress, Gavin decided, who would be a nervous school teacher from *Treviso*. She would have told the Italian there had been a book about it, and then a film. The Italian would start to remember the tight skin of the school teacher's back with its faint line of tiniest dark hairs rising up her spine, feel himself aroused and begin to wonder: what skin did the lonely American have, the possible revelations concealed from him so mysterious, so poignant. Gavin watched the Italian rise and give a small shrug of regret to help settle his silk jacket on his shoulders. When he left, swallows described flattened arcs in the disappearing blue above him. One by one, his companions drifted off with him. A match flared and showed a solitary face above a cigarette glancing back in her direction. Abandoned, the *campo* became a moment forgotten until the American woman turned again, and intently studied where the men had been.

Gavin came out of the shadows and sat down at a table near her. The pale strung globes of light had come on, outlining the terrace. It had not grown cooler, the nearby waterway still breathed its soft moisture. The previous evening Gavin had already been there, reading, when the American woman appeared. The waiter had made humming noises of welcome which she returned with a private smile that

suggested that she, too, came regularly. Gavin hadn't looked up from his book for an instant, not even when the men materialized to watch her.

In the liquid darkness of the nearby canal water slapped stone several times, the passing gondola invisible. Gavin lit a cigarette, then discarded the match with a gesture that beckoned the waiter. In English, he ordered an aperitif, speaking slowly, his head slightly back to look up as he spoke. He let his tone make it a small question, as if inviting the man in the faded striped vest to say if the request was somehow unreasonable. Before the waiter could leave, Gavin looked over at the American woman and then leaned forward. "Would you join me?" She gave a small start and turned. "Would you join me for a drink?" he repeated, saw she had no intention of speaking and added, "Campari and soda?"

"I don't drink," she said. She had a flat, lightly nasal midwestern accent.

"Pity." Gavin's smile was ingratiating, the added gesture made infinitely more regretful than either of them needed. The American woman continued to look at him, as if astonished out of something so profoundly private only her continued polite attention to the moment suspended between them would prevent him from asking about it. Gavin indicated the cup and saucer on her table. "Another of those, then."

"Chamomile tea," the American woman said. She looked at the patient waiter. "*Ancora di thé.*"

Gavin brought his book and pack of cigarettes to her table and put them down before indicating an empty chair. "May I?" He moved into it with her nod. "You speak Italian."

"No."

As if ignoring a rebuff, Gavin nodded and murmured his name, holding his hand out just above the table top, elbow jutting out sideways a little because he was a tall man and the motion was awkward for him. He spoke softly, making it something shared privately, an old intimacy. "Gavin Chandler."

The American woman nodded, not taking his hand. "Hello." She apparently hadn't heard him. Gavin didn't let it matter.

"You have no name?" The small twist to his lips as he put the cigarette back in his mouth made it look as if, at worst, he was pleasantly amused.

The American woman laughed, made it sound as if she were flattered, the idea she might somehow be mysterious preposterous. Gavin decided she thought it might also be a little tantalizing.

"Your admirers have all left," he said with barely a tilt of his head back to the abandoned *campo*.

"Aren't they awful," she said with sudden emphasis, as if awakened. "They make me think of some horrible dance studio, where the instructors all gather at one end and assess the customers with all kinds of nasty little comments, usually about hidden parts of their bodies. I just wish I knew something brilliant to do about them." Animated, there was something childlike about her.

"They're harmless," Gavin said. He was taken by the unexpected images and felt momentarily almost physically aroused. "Unless of course you encourage them."

"I'm petrified to look at them," the American woman insisted. "I won't let myself do it, not for a second. I pretend I don't even know they're there."

"That can be very provocative." There was something bouncing around inside her lovely head, Gavin told himself. It interested him, was worth nagging at. "Not telling someone your name is also provocative. I don't mind, if that's what you want."

The American woman blushed, cheeks awash in a crimson that was astonishing in its redness and the way it appeared so suddenly and bathed her face completely. She covered her eyes as if shading them, her long slender fingers undulating like floating strands of palm leaves. "You're embarrassing me."

Gavin said nothing.

"I wouldn't be like this anywhere else," the American woman said. When Gavin

still didn't respond, she dropped her hand and looked straight at him. "Venice always makes me nervous about who I really am. I'm often not sure what I'm doing here."

Gavin allowed his expression to soften, let her see he was sympathetic. Which he was, for the moment. And very curious.

The waiter brought a fresh pot of tea, replaced the American woman's cup with a fresh one, and began to pour, arcing the pot up as he did, producing a momentary slender spout of liquid which flowed unerringly into the cup with a thin splashing sound, like a small boy urinating against a wall. The American woman watched it with a look Gavin felt was much too grateful. When the waiter left she added a wordless nod of thanks. Gavin lit another cigarette. "What are you doing here?" His eyes, deep-set and inquiring when he wanted them to be, acknowledged her notebook in front of her. "Writing a book?"

The American woman immediately covered the open page with the flat of her hand and gave a quick and unexpectedly vehement shake of her head. "Oh, no. No." The thought was apparently so absurd that she laughed, very brightly, yet ringing with the clear notes of self-mockery.

"What's wrong with writing a book?" Gavin asked. "I do it."

The American woman stared at him, her expression changing with such suddenness that Gavin thought something physical had happened to her; her look suggested a revelation so threatening that she wanted to hide. "You write?" Gavin could barely hear her as she snatched the still-open notebook from the table and clutched it to her bosom with both hands. She looked as if she were protecting a helpless child. "Oh, my God ..." With quick little movements she closed the notebook, located her small purse, and dropped both into the wide gaping mouth of a cloth shoulder bag Gavin had only seen from afar. It looked expensively handmade, its surfaces teeming with brocaded rosebuds. Shouldering the bag, the American woman got to her feet, her eyes barely brushing Gavin with a glance. "Goodbye," she

said softly, and slipped between the several empty chairs as if making a discreetly swift exit through a crowd of people.

Gavin managed to overcome his astonishment and picked up the three bar chits lying next to the tea pot. "I'll take care of these," he called amiably after her. The American woman stopped, her back straightening, stiff with consternation. Gavin held up the chits as she turned back to him. "It's all right," he said and pulled out three-five-thousand lire notes. "Happy to do it." Gavin saw the American woman's face change as she realized that none of her pots of tea had been paid for. The soft line of her lips tightened and drew thin. She actually paled.

Gavin realized the American woman was genuinely embarrassed, and immediately felt obliged to free her from it. He dropped the money on the table and went over to join her.

"I'm so sorry," the American woman said. She sounded mortified beyond bearing.

"I know you are," Gavin said forgivingly and took her under the arm. He felt it go rigid, and then she relaxed. Together, they walked out of the cafe's enclosure and across the campo. At the edge of the cobblestoned square, *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frati's* facade shone with a white light splashed broadly halfway up its height.

Gavin saw the blond young man standing half in shadow by one of the searchlights tilted up at the church in empty supplication. He was watching them. Gavin was going to say something to the American woman about it when she turned her face more fully to him. "I so hope you write books," she said, not breaking stride.

The sense of hidden eyes on him was enough to make Gavin sufficiently uneasy to let her remark go. "Do you know him?" he asked, giving the shadowed figure the same movement of chin he had seen the Italian give her tray.

The American woman turned so fluidly it might have been a dance step. Before she could possibly have seen who it was she was saying, "Oh, hello!" She

spoke very brightly.

The young man stepped out into what light there was. His move was decisive enough to make Gavin slow. But Gavin was being ignored. The young man, his white T-shirt freshly laundered and ironed, nodded to the American woman once, eyes hard. He clearly wanted more from her than a mere greeting.

Her fingers touched Gavin's arm, and then tightened. Barely. "My friend just arrived. From England. I thought he was coming from Paris. That's what I told you." She was speaking gaily. "I was wrong. He came from England." Gavin and the American woman were by now long past the fellow, who turned only his head. The American woman was turning as well, turning and talking. And walking away from the young man. Gavin didn't need her touch to know she was making an escape. "Goodbye," the American woman called out and turned her attention back to Gavin, her animated expression suggesting that a lively conversation between them had been momentarily interrupted.

Halfway down the narrow street she continued to steady herself on his arm. Her pace hadn't slowed. It was too dark to see her eyes. "Is he following us?" she murmured. Gavin stopped to look back. "Oh, my God, don't do that!" There was the shiver of something thrilled in her voice.

"There's nobody there," Gavin said. "What was all that rubbish about expecting me from Paris?"

"I had to tell him that. Are you annoyed?"

"I think so."

The American woman's hand moved off his arm with the same quick flutter that put it there. "I should say goodbye."

"Goodbye? Whatever for?" Whatever brief irritation Gavin had felt evaporated, whisked away by her brazen innocence, her apologetic eyes lowering like dimmed pools of light, all punishments accepted.

"I've taken advantage of you. That's not right. Goodbye," the American woman repeated, turned, and started off into the narrow street's hollow gloom.

"One takes advantage of people one knows," Gavin called after her. "You know nothing about me." Bouncing between the confined buildings, it sounded like an absurd heraldic declaration. The American woman ignored him, sweeping off like someone angrily escaped from the palace of a lesser doge, her body forward, shoulders hunched, moving as if enveloped by a heavy cape.

"This is totally absurd," Gavin said half to himself and went after her. He told himself she simply could be as embarrassed as she was behaving. But the American woman was clearly preoccupied, as if wondering if she had been too abrupt. There might have been alternatives playing through in her head, little spurts of dialogue, brief exchanges with the young man. She surely heard his footsteps behind her, their echo become quite wonderful, transforming them into something remembered out of a dream full of billowing shapes and whispered touches and booming sounds. Gavin saw that the American woman was so absorbed, as if on the edge of letting herself be swept up by this city's countless magical refractions, that she didn't notice the blond young man until he was by her side, grabbing her arm.

"Why do you do this to me?" His German accent made the entreaty sound menacing. The American woman's look suggested that for a bizarre moment she might have let the moment become a part of the magic, spells constantly reweaving themselves wherever she went. Then she realized what was happening and tried to jerk free. "You do this to me for no reason." The conviction of the young man's logic made him even more threatening.

"Don't," Gavin heard the American woman say, her voice strained and drawn so tightly it was almost a hiss. She repeated it. "Don't."

Gavin came up behind them.

"I let you trust me," the young man said. Gavin could hear the note of injury in



his voice, profoundly offended.

"What's going on?" Gavin said.

The American woman twisted her head and saw Gavin and her expression sagged with relief. She began to blink rapidly and tried to break free again. "He's --" but again she could say no more.

"Let go," Gavin said. The young German's head had lowered and he peered at Gavin from beneath brows so pale they were almost invisible in the street's wan light. "I'll call the police," Gavin added. He said it in a voice most reasonable, assuring the young man it would happen.

The German abruptly let go of the American woman and backed off a step. "You can not make a fool of me," he said, addressing Gavin as much as her.

Gavin moved beside the American woman; even as his body touched hers her hand was back on his arm. "Take me away from here, please." She made it sound like the whispered assumption of a secret compact already made. Her grip tightened, urging Gavin to act, confirm his chivalry by doing it before this clean and athletic young brute did something ghastly.

The two of them made their escape up the small street, both of them moving sideways, watching the German whose sullen features were quickly lost in the dim shadows but whose figure was harshly outlined in the light whitening the church and *campo* behind him. The set of his shoulders was challenging, daring them to do anything but flee his presence. Then something in their departure dissatisfied him. Gavin saw it, saw the young man straighten, saw him reach into his back pocket for something and start after them, his hand still in his pocket.

"Shit," Gavin said in a voice so flat the American woman glanced up at him and saw him looking back. The young German's hand was free of the pocket, something he held glinting. Gavin kept his eyes on him and tilted his head closer to hers. "Walk faster." He felt the American woman give a sudden sharp quiver of fear.

"Don't run. Don't do that. Keep walking. He's stupid enough to do the same."

"He's not stupid," the American woman whispered, her voice trembling, head down as if concentrating on the cobblestones beneath her feet. "He's cunning. Very very cunning. He's killed people."

"There's an alleyway up ahead. It goes off to the right. The moment we turn into it, we'll run. Can you do that, will you be able to run?" The American woman didn't stop Gavin when he took the cloth shoulder bag from her. "Will you be able to?"

She barely nodded, head so far down she could catch a glimpse of the German, stolidly following. He must have seen her looking back; he must have decided there was sly triumph in her glance. "You stop!" he called out.

Gavin and the American woman reached the alley. She hadn't seen it and took a step past. Gavin stepped into it and hauled her in behind him. It was pitch dark. "Run," he grunted, and shoved her ahead of him. The American woman was more nimble than Gavin expected and for a second outdistanced him. For a moment he lost track of her. Gavin saw her shape the same moment his outstretched hand touched her shoulder just as angry footsteps clattered into the alleyway behind them.

A small street was just ahead, angling off to the left. The American woman started to turn but Gavin caught her shoulder and steered her straight ahead. She didn't realize the alley continued. Gavin grabbed her hand and yanked her into a doorway impossible to see in the dark. It was almost flush with the alley. The American woman must have thought there was no escape, that Gavin was suddenly desperate with fear and was prepared to sacrifice her. She tried to run again but Gavin held her against the door. With his other hand he felt around. Something behind them gave, and swung open. Gavin pushed the American woman through the oddly-shaped door and swung it shut behind them. Then they waited, Gavin pressing his head to the wooden surface. He was very aware of her fingers close by feeling the rough texture. They both heard the German scuffle by out in the alley.

There was a courtyard behind them, with high walls around it, the court fluting up to reveal night sky and stars high above. "How did you know this was here?" the American woman whispered, her relief edged with a tremor of childish delight she was unable to conceal. "Where are we?" She looked back in the direction of the door they had come through. "Do you think he's still out there looking for us?"

"We won't be going back that way. There's another way out." Gavin led the way, dragging a hand in the air behind him for the American woman to find and be guided. The narrow arched passageway grew darker, and Gavin felt her fingers grab his, and then lighten their hold when they came upon the other door. Gavin opened it, peered out, and ushered the American woman out into the *via della Lucca*.

"I feel I've been in a mad footrace, or some absolutely preposterous athletic event." The American woman's hand was up, fingers resting on her breast as if to calm a fluttering heart.

"Where are you staying?"

"No, no. You've been so sweet, and thoughtful. If we could just find a *vaporetto* I'll be fine."

Gavin shook his head. "Tell me. Are you staying at a hotel?" The American woman gave a small nod, as if unwittingly found out. "Which one?"

"*La Residenza*," she said. "In *Campo Bandiera e Moro*."

"I know it. I think we can walk it more quickly."

The American woman's exhilaration lingered; as she and Gavin walked she threw several guarded glances up at him. Gavin pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lit it without breaking stride, then looked over at her and smiled. "How did you know about that tiny courtyard?" the American woman asked. Gavin said nothing for several moments. "If it's a secret you don't have to tell me. I won't tell anyone we were there."

"It was the scene of one of my disgraces," Gavin began.

"Oh, tell me, tell me."

Gavin was waiting to. "Last summer I met a girl, in that cafe on the *Campo dei Frati*. She was stunning, quite young, shy, something truly demure about her. I remember her eyes, she had very large brown eyes that gazed at me with liquid expectation." By Gavin's side, the American woman made a soft sound, a murmur full of its own expectation. "I remember everything about her very precisely," Gavin said. "Though there wasn't much to remember. She took my hand, never saying a word, and led me out of the *campo*. I was absolutely sure there was nothing to be afraid of. She led me to that doorway in that alley, and leaned against it. And then, still saying nothing, she raised her dress and offered herself silently to me. We made love, right there. When it was over, she opened the door behind her, and disappeared into that courtyard. When I followed, the courtyard was empty. I went through it and came out into the *via della Lucca*."

"I can almost see it," the American woman said, sounding moved, "walking in silence along that small street, and then stopping by that doorway." She sighed quietly. "How very beautiful."

"Yes," Gavin said. "It was."

"Here we are," the American woman said and pointed. They stopped at the hotel's massive front door and she turned and offered him her hand. "I don't mean to keep thanking you, but you've been a true friend. I shan't forget it. Or your wonderful story about that marvelous girl you met. It must be a special memory and I thank you for sharing it with me."

"It is a memory," Gavin conceded, his mouth twisting into a rueful grin. "Two weeks later I came down with the worst dose of clap my doctor had ever seen."

The American woman seemed as if she was trying to be scandalized. Instead she burst into giggles, as if Gavin's misadventure had been some sort of childish frolic, like running around naked in a rain shower. "Oh, I hope that's true," she said. "I

would be absolutely devastated if you had made that up."

"It is very true," Gavin replied. "I went back the other day on the off chance she might still be there."

"Working the turf," the American said, and giggled more loudly. "And there I was."

Enchanted by this reaction, Gavin said, "Have tea with me tomorrow morning."

"Not back there."

"The *Danieli*," Gavin said.

"Oh, yes!" the American woman said, rising on her toes with sudden exuberance, shoulders coming up, too, as if she was about to embrace herself. "The *Danieli*. Those lovely little cookies they make, the thin ones with the edges just barely browned." She turned to go inside, a flouncing swirl of her broad skirt and shoulder bag, moving like someone making a very timely exit from the stage.

For Gavin, this business of being tantalizingly mysterious had suddenly gone far enough. "Why are you avoiding telling me your name?"

The American woman stopped and turned back to Gavin, her expression disconcerted. "I don't think names are very important." Her tone was full of practical candor, like someone admitting they have begun methodically discarding all earthly possessions, beginning with the vanities.

"They are if I'm shouting 'Hey—whoever you are—a big bloody truck is about to run you down!' It helps enormously if I have the person's name close at hand."

The American woman unexpectedly giggled again, as if Gavin's admission of apparent concern was not just charming, but flattering. "I'm 'Brasca," she said most girlishly.

Gavin had been expecting her to be a Courtney, a Sharon. Even something so American as Sue-Ann would have come as no surprise. What he heard made him look startled, and with the kind of respect you look for when exposed to an ethnic

revelation, he said, "I believe that's Jewish, isn't it?"

The American woman's look suggested he had guessed correctly. But he hadn't. She gave a small shake of her head. "God, I hate explaining this."

"No need to," Gavin said, hoping she would.

"When I was a little girl—" the American woman launched into it with the stolid determination of someone who has been given no choice. Her head was down, shoulders set doggedly, the corners of her mouth moving like a reprimanded child suffering to explain. "—I was desperate to be a cowgirl. *Desperate*. I wore cowgirl skirts which had fringe all around the bottom, leather fringe, dripping with it, and fringed vests that had these sublime shiny tin discs sewn to them, like marvelous little astral bodies that were all mine. I had a wonderful cowboy hat, and absolutely heavenly snakeskin boots, dyed white and hand-tooled. My daddy brought them when he came home from a trip to Chadron, this itty-bitty town up in the northwest corner of Nebraska. Each one of them, around the top, had the word 'Nebraska' burned into the leather. That instant, I decided that was going to be my name. My parents thought it was a joke, but I was completely serious about it. When I was twenty-one I changed it legally."

Gavin was fascinated. "When did you shorten it to 'Brasca'?"

"In college. People made fun of me. Dale Evans jokes. You don't know who that is, she was Roy Rogers's wife. On television, once upon a time. And now they're all over the place on these godawful *reruns*. Her Roy was King of the Cowboys. Dale was his Queen."

"What's your last name?" Gavin asked.

"Smith."

"Brasca Smith?" Gavin guffawed. "I'm sorry. Forgive that."

"It really is Smith," 'Brasca said. "From colonial times."

"Not the Mayflower?" Gavin asked and felt a twitch of something like

suspicion.

"I think so," 'Brasca said. She sounded wholly innocent, like one helpless before some massive historic inevitability.

"'Nebraska' is rather nice," Gavin mused. "I might call you that. 'Brasca's brisk, rough."

"That's what I like about it," 'Brasca said.

"Bit too butch for me," Gavin said matter-of-factly. "What's your real name, what were you christened at birth?"

"I'll never ever tell you," 'Brasca said with grand solemnity, turned, and swept into the hotel, the big door swinging shut heavily behind her.

One by one, Wilson Couprie crushed a plateful of the brown-edged cookies, sometimes nibbling one of the broken bits. He had a habit of flicking the point of his neatly trimmed beard whenever he heard something of interest. As Gavin told him about Nebraska Smith and her T-shirt-torsoed German who may or may not have pulled a knife as he pursued them down the darkened alley, Couprie's fingers began to trill the beard's tip like a tongue fluttering an oboe reed. "Oh, put that in your book," he urged in his soft but richly mellow voice and broke the last of the cookies on the plate. "Definitely put it in your book." The way Wilson Couprie emphasized words suggested a background much more southern than a quick Master's Degree from Duke.

"I've wondered how I might do it," Gavin said, saying it in a way that suggested he had been thinking about it at that very moment.

"'Brasca and her murderous kraut,'" Couprie repeated. "Not untasty."

Gavin was going to say something when he caught sight of her. She stood where she had come around the corner and stared at Gavin and Wilson Couprie. She wore a wide full-length skirt and short shoulder cape. Her hair looked fairer in the

sunlight, fanning out in a framing curve from shoulder to shoulder, her face pale against this auburn backdrop. Gavin gestured for her to come over but 'Brasca simply stood where she was. Gavin got up and went over to her. "I'm with a friend I want you to meet. Wilson Couprie."

"He's famous," 'Brasca said in a breathless little voice. "He comes to Venice every summer at this time." She seemed to be more agitated than nervous or apprehensive.

"He's my editor. Come. There's tea. Chamomile." Gavin took 'Brasca's arm but she resisted stiffly. "Come on," he urged almost playfully. "He's desperate to meet you."

'Brasca looked up at him like some creature frightened by a sudden bright light. "Me? Why?"

"I told him about last night. He's fascinated. Wilson loves other people's adventures. You can tell him about all the men in the *campo* watching you. It will make him tingle."

'Brasca blushed. "You're making fun of me." But she no longer resisted

At the table she shyly offered Wilson Couprie her hand, causing him to rise and take it. When he kissed it, 'Brasca moved her body in an awkward self-conscious approximation of a self-effacing curtsy, then sat down in the chair Gavin held out for her. Once tea was poured for all of them, Wilson Couprie sat back and considered 'Brasca, studying her as if appraising some small luscious curio. "Our friend tells me you had a small *experience* together." 'Brasca gave him a look suggesting such flattery that Wilson Couprie sat up and became more serious. "I don't take it lightly."

"Gavin was my simple and total savior, is the only way to describe it," 'Brasca said and then smiled. Wilson Couprie's solemnity evaporated instantly.

"Tell Wilson how you and that fellow met in the first place," Gavin suggested. 'Brasca turned and Gavin saw something betrayed in her expression, along with



small surprise. It took him a moment and then he realized she had called him by name. Gavin wanted to say something but Wilson Couprie was looking at him.

"Do you know?" he asked. Gavin was still looking at 'Brasca and shrugged. Wilson Couprie turned back to her. "How did you meet? You must tell me."

'Brasca spun the yarn almost grudgingly, glossing over the first time the German came up to her in the *Campo dei Frati* and with stiff politeness asked if he might sit at the table with her, but only for a moment. "He seemed gloriously impoverished," 'Brasca said. "And angry. Yet poetic, with something deliciously base about him. The way he asked me the most intimate questions, it was almost like he was accusing me of something. He wanted to know the tiniest details about my life."

"And did you reveal any?" Wilson Couprie asked. His tongue flicked out to briefly wet his drying lips.

"Some." 'Brasca giggled. "Nothing dreadful."

"He just wanted to fuck you," Gavin said conversationally. This woman knew his name and her lacy innocence was starting to annoy him.

'Brasca colored, dipped her head in embarrassment, and surprised Gavin and Wilson Couprie with another giggle as she said, "I guess you're right. You must be. How silly of me to worry if he had enough money to buy himself something to eat."

"Good Christ," Gavin muttered. The weight of her airy artlessness was starting to feel like something cast over him, cutting off his air. "You lent him some money."

"Not very much." 'Brasca raised her eyes just enough to look at both men askance, eyes wide with contrition.

"I adore the image," Wilson Couprie announced. "And commend you for whatever spark of Christian goodness prompted your generosity."

The praise restored 'Brasca. She sat up and smiled broadly. "I don't know how Christian it was. I hoped he might tell me something about himself. I *know* there must be lewd and marvelous secrets he could tell." She turned to Gavin to have him agree.

"You know what I mean, Gavin, don't you?"

Gavin's gesture was half-hearted. "He just wanted to fuck you, dear. You're damned lucky he didn't get you alone, because he would have whether you were agreeable or no. He looks the type who'd cheerfully render you half conscious and then do it."

There was no way for 'Brasca to conceal the tiny sparks of fascination which flashed quickly in her eyes. "Really?"

"You're frightening her," Wilson Couprie cautioned and covered 'Brasca's hand with his.

"She's not frightened," Gavin said and looked at her. "Are you? You're not at all frightened. You think it's a game, of sorts. That's your purpose."

"Are you angry with me?" 'Brasca's eyes were ready to sink with her chin to her chest, the bowed head accepting whatever chastisements he might choose to heap upon her.

"Perish the thought," Gavin said sharply. "You'd given him money, probably let him see you had more, and there I was, just me and him in a pitchblack alleyway. I asked you what he wanted and you said you didn't bloody know!"

"Gavin," Wilson Couprie chided, and with almost an aside said, "Avoid writers, my dear. Especially the vivid ones. Always imagining the worst."

'Brasca took Gavin's hand in both of hers and cradled it as if to consecrate it. "I want you to forgive me," she said. "It was mean-spirited and thoughtless of me, what I did." Gavin wanted to shake it off, but 'Brasca wouldn't let him. "You've been so warm and generous to me, so completely open, I feel ashamed. You protected me, you really did." She turned to Wilson Couprie. "He absolutely spared me from a fate worse than—God I don't even want to imagine it." 'Brasca let go of Gavin's hand and reached for her bag. "I don't want to hear any protest from either of you." Gavin and Wilson Couprie exchanged puzzled looks as 'Brasca billowed open the bag's

huge mouth and shoved her hand deep into it. "I am paying for this tea, for all of us. I want to, and I won't let you talk me out of it."

"My dear, we would never dare," Wilson Couprie said. "You find yourself with gentlemen, not churls."

"I know you are," Brasca said, pulling out a fistful of bills. "I never doubted it for a moment."

"Wilson," Gavin said to his editor, who sat at the bar in *Cipriani's* and held a fluted glass of the peachy pink concoction he so adored and Gavin detested, "you mentioned a book." It was after seven and Gavin was intentionally late.

"It has been the damnedest afternoon," Wilson Couprie said and chewed two soft swallows of his *Bellini*. "Knock me over with a feather."

"What feather?" Gavin asked with a careless smile. He was arrested by Wilson Couprie's convoluted attention span.

The older man slipped several sheets of paper out of his jacket pocket. They were standard foolscap size and had been folded lengthwise. There seemed to be four of them, with neat handwriting covering them from top to bottom and margin to margin, like the trim rows of some harrowed field. "Your friend left this for me at the *albergo*." Wilson Couprie placed them on the counter for Gavin to appreciate or, more probably, pick up.

"What friend is this?" Gavin unfolded the sheets, moving them about with his fingers without seizing them, trying their weight. Just this slight sliding them around, one on top of the other. He knew perfectly well whom Wilson Couprie meant.

"She wants to write a *book*." Wilson Couprie gave the papers, lying on the bar between them like some archaic document neither had the energy to decipher, a tiny wave, fingers flicked as if shaking off some last drops of scented water. "Read what she's written. The poor thing must have labored for hours." He said it with a mix of

admiration and pity.

"The poor thing knew you'd be at the *Danieli*," Gavin said, still avoiding the papers.

"You told her." Wilson Couprie drained the last of his liquid. A moment later his eyes found Gavin. "You didn't?"

"She was to have tea with me. Not *you* and me."

"The rewards of serendipity," Wilson Couprie said as a fresh drink was brought to him unbidden. "Venice does that to all of us, *grazia Dio*. All right, I will *tell* you what she has proposed. *Her* book—and after all it was her experience—is to be about a chance meeting."

"With a German," Gavin said.

"With a German," Wilson Couprie confirmed with a nod that graciously acknowledged Gavin's swift grasp of the obvious. "Scares the hell out of her."

"Fucks her."

"Does that, too," the respected editor confirmed. He took a careful drink from his fresh cocktail. "Several times."

"The fuck was my idea," Gavin pointed out.

"The body ravished is hers," Wilson Couprie replied courteously. "And so is the revenge."

"Why revenge?"

"He only wants her money."

"It took several fucks for her to realize this?" Wilson Couprie responded with one of his small head tilts that was meant to pass for a shrug. "So what's her revenge?" Gavin asked much too casually.

"Absolutely tantalizing. Poetic justice. She arranges for the German to meet an Italian girl, wholly innocent from all apparent appearances, and in the afternoon shadows of a side street she leans back against a door and raises her skirt to him.

Wearing nothing underneath, it is only natural that they make *amore*. The German thinks himself once more the vanquisher. But, six weeks later, he comes down with the worst case of the clap his physician back home in Munich has ever seen!" Wilson Couprie declared. "That sweet young lady friend of yours has a remarkable imagination."

Gavin took out his lighter, put it on the bar, and began twirling it. As it spun slower and slower, he made himself consider the light it threw. Gavin waited for the lighter to swirl to a complete stop. "Are you going to sign her to a contract?"

"I am tempted."

"She will melt with humid gratitude," Gavin said, controlling his voice, turned, and saw 'Brasca come into the bar. Her head was down. It was her way of threading her way through people and tables. "May I watch?"

Wilson Couprie swivelled his head and saw her. "Ah, yes," he murmured. He sounded as if reminded of some tattered detail he hadn't mentioned earlier. "I asked her to come by before she leaves."

"You're leaving," Gavin said pleasantly as 'Brasca arrived to where he stood next to Wilson Couprie, who sat solidly on his bar stool. "I didn't know that." Gavin reached over without looking, found his lighter, and gripped it.

'Brasca saw her four pages on the bar. "Thank you for reading this," she said to Wilson Couprie and reached for them.

"Calm down," Gavin said and put his clenched hand on the pages. "We're all friends here."

"This is truly not what I wanted." 'Brasca attempted an apologetic smile. "Lordy, things just go wrong, don't they?"

Wilson Couprie was puzzled. "They do?"

"How did you let me find you in the *Campo dei Frati*?" Gavin asked.

"I want you to know," 'Brasca said with sudden insistence. It seemed to revive

something in her and she moved closer to Gavin, shifting her bag off her shoulder to let it hang heavily in her left hand. "I saw you at the *Danieli* several days ago, with Mr. Couprie. You can't know how thrilling that was for me."

"Tell me," Gavin said. "Don't pretend to be embarrassed. I'm very flattered you've gone to so much trouble." He pulled an empty stool over and indicated 'Brasca should sit on it.

She made herself comfortable and offered Gavin a confessional smile. "I followed you to the *campo*. I thought it was some favorite secret place you liked, a corner to write in. I came back the next day, and the day after, and you weren't there. I waited. Then the men started hanging around. Those dreadful men with their hot sneaky looks."

"I thought they were rather marvelous," Gavin said. For a moment he saw himself as one of them. "Most cavalier."

'Brasca ignored this. "It was two days before you came back. I had looked at the *Danieli* and couldn't find either of you."

"I was on *Murano*," Wilson Couprie said. It sounded as if he were revealing something barely worthy of privacy.

'Brasca scarcely seemed to hear. Her attention was fixed on Gavin. "When I did see you, I knew it would be all right. It was so decent of you to wait a day to talk to me."

"You knew I would."

"I hoped," 'Brasca insisted.

Wilson Couprie had been listening very carefully. "Barely a risk with our Gavin."

"Well, he did," 'Brasca told Wilson Couprie and looked back at Gavin. "And I felt truly fortunate."

"Blessed," Gavin said curtly.

"Don't make fun of me," 'Brasca said. She was chiding him, even as her tone asked for simple understanding. "This is very important to me. Can you understand that when you told me why you were there, it all seemed to fall together so incredibly! You see that, don't you?"

"No."

"Oh, Gavin, you son of a bitch," Wilson Couprie said with weary amusement.

Gavin ignored him. "Please tell me what was so incredible, so *harmonious*."

"That tiny terrifying little universe from the *campo* to the street on the other side of your little courtyard," 'Brasca replied with sudden intensity. She said it as if determined to touch Gavin's sense of reality. "And when Helmut appeared, I couldn't believe it! He chased us straight to where you and that girl had made love."

"It has some symmetry," Gavin conceded. "The only problem, not about this universe of terror you outline but my Italian girl, is that you want to put it into a book."

"I won't if you don't want me to," 'Brasca said with no hesitation whatsoever.

"You can if you wish," Gavin said. In the same moment, he felt himself begin to relax. "But I've already written it as a story. It was published last winter."

'Brasca gasped and her face went a putty color. She looked as if she had been gut-punched. She sat for several moments, staring empty. Wilson Couprie cleared his throat. It made 'Brasca turn and look at him. Her gaze was still glazed. "I should go," she said quietly. She carefully gathered up the four pages she had given the editor, and just as carefully shoved them deep into the shoulder bag. Then she moved herself off the bar stool. When Gavin offered a helping hand, she shied away with arms and body. She fixed the bag most precisely on her shoulder, and left.

Gavin lit a fresh cigarette, put his lighter on the bar, and began to spin it again. "You must let me see that story of yours," Wilson Couprie said.

Gavin indicated his editor's empty glass with a nod. "Let me order you another."

Wilson Couprie turned as the barman came over. His hand was already out to replace the empty glass with another. Wilson Couprie gave him a nod and turned back to Gavin, who now stood, back to the bar, leaning against it, looking around the crowded room. Wilson Couprie sighed, not at all unhappy. "Well, you are the professional. Who knows what she might have turned in." His hand turned palm up, as if still considering accepting the unknown. "What she proposed was fascinating."

"She has imagination," Gavin agreed.

"But can she write?" Wilson Couprie seized his fresh drink out of the approaching barman's hand. "You can, you do." He rested his left hand carefully on Gavin's shoulder and waited for Gavin to look at him.

It was a moment before Gavin did. He was still shaken, still wondering how 'Brasca would have handled the story, how she would have chosen to tell it. From whose point of view, Gavin wondered. Her own, probably, delivered silkily, with concealed assurance. The kraut's several attacks on her minimized, foreshortened, told in a mist of cool brutality. Saving it all for the revenge, which would be developed extravagantly. Gavin cursed himself for not reading her pages. He should have, the moment Wilson Couprie produced them.

"You deliver," Wilson Couprie said.

Gavin barely nodded. He should have anticipated it; that dark alley, that door against which he had now been the one to lean. It was a great fucking story about fucking. Two years before, the gonorrhoea he had contracted was so bad he'd had to have daily injections. One directly into his prick. Well, Gavin thought with a sudden surge of bitter satisfaction, not this time.