

## NAMING THE FLOWERS

### Kate Wilhelm

v0.5 by Daj. This is a pre-proof release. Page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, partially formatted and common OCR errors have been largely removed.

Full formatting, spell check and read-through still required.

Kate Wilhelm began publishing in 1956, and by now is widely regarded as one of the best of today's writers—outside the genre as well as in it. Her work has never been limited to the strick boundaries of the field, and she has published mysteries, mainstream thrillers, and comic novels as well as science fiction. Wilhelm won a Nebula Award in 1968 for her short story "The Planners," won a Hugo in 1976 for her well-known novel *Where I-ate the Sweet Birds Sang*, added another Nebula to her collection in 1987 with a win for her story "The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky," and won yet another Nebula the following year for her story "Forever Yours, Anna," which was in our Fifth Annual Collection. Her story "And the Angels Sing" was in our Ninth Annual Collection. Her many books include the novels *Margaret and I*, *Fault Lines*, *The Clewiston Test*, *Juniper Time*, *Welcome, Chaos*, *Oh, Susannah!*, *Huysman's Pets*, *Cambio Bay*, *Death Qualified*, and the Constance Leidl-Charlie Meiklejohn mystery novels *The Hamlet Trap*, *Smart House*, *Seven Kinds of Death*, *Sweet, Sweet Poison*, and as well as the story collections *The Downstairs Room*, *Somerset Dreams*, *The Infinity Box*, *Listen, Listen*, *Children of the Wind*, and *And the Angels Sing*. Her most recent book is a new mystery novel, *Justice for Some*. Wilhelm and her husband, writer Damon Knight, ran the Milford Writer's Conference for many years, and both are still deeply involved in the operation of the Clarion workshop for new writers. She lives with her family in Eugene, Oregon, and is currently at work on *The Best Defense*, a sequel to *Death Qualified*.

Late in September I told the crew at Phoenix Publishing Company that I had had it, I was taking off, I might never be heard from again and for them not to send the cops out looking for me. Gracie Blanchard, my secretary, laughed and said, "Oh. Win. Go on." Then she asked how many cameras I was taking, and Phil Delacourt, the general manager, said he had been practicing my signature until he could forge it on anything that came in. But if I was heading north, he added, he could whip out a list of people I probably should see about this and that. I told him what to do with his list.

We had finished a big catalogue job, and the Christmas catalogues were long gone; the pharmaceuticals were on schedule, even ahead of schedule, and I was tired. And bored. When I started Phoenix seven years ago, it was exciting, but over the past few years it had turned into deadlines, messed up print runs, back orders of paper that never arrived, photographs that were out of focus. . . . The usual fuckups, people told me, the same people who told me seven years ago that I couldn't publish out of Atlanta; all the talent was in New York.

I had no real plans, no itinerary; I simply knew I wanted to be in New England when the foliage was at its best. I would call in now and then, I said to Gracie; keep the fires banked. I took off in my twelve-year-old Thun-derbird with a suitcase, hiking gear, half a dozen books, and four cameras. I didn't tell Gracie about the cameras; I didn't want to see her dimply, knowing smile. Gracie's cute and twenty-five years old. It had alarmed me the day I realized that she seemed terribly young. I was thirty-eight.

I drove along the blue ridges of the Appalachians, and spent a couple of days hiking, but it was too early. The trees would be better on my return trip. I cut over to the coast and paid a call on Atlantic City. I hadn't been there for years and I didn't want to linger this time, I was just curious about how much it had

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I drove along the blue ridges of the Appalachians, and spent a couple of days hiking, but it was too early. The trees would be better on my return trip. I cut over to the coast and paid a call on Atlantic City. I hadn't been there for years and I didn't want to linger this time, I was just curious about how much it had changed, but I made the mistake of arriving on Sunday and when I was ready to leave, so were a million others. I checked into a hotel instead, and then

walked along the beach where it seemed that more than a million kids were playing, enjoying Indian summer. One of them, a little girl, began to walk at my side. I looked at her uneasily, and then looked around for a mother, father, someone.

"Can I have an ice cream?" the child asked. We had drawn near a vendor.

"where's your mommy?" I asked the kid, as I fished out a dollar. She shrugged and gestured toward the casinos. I bought her an ice cream stick, and she walked with me for a few more yards, and then smiled and darted away. I walked faster. \_A man just doesn't buy ice cream for strange little girls, I was thinking, not if he wants to stay out of

trouble. Then I noticed one of the bridges and thought how fine it would look in the early morning sunlight.

The next morning I returned with my old Leica and sat ot-t , \*ill waiting for the light. The same little girl appeared and held up her hands for me to hoist her up to the wall.

"Honey," I said, after she was settled, "didn't your mom tell you not to talk to strangers?" She giggled. It was a cool morning, too cool for her lightweight sweater which was too big and too loose on h.r, and she was too big not to know bettgr than to pick up men and be this trusting with them. I scanned the beach looking for a distraught mother, and saw only a couple of kids playing, a few

people strolling, a jogger. I stood up. "I've got to go now," I said. She held out her arms for me to help her down; I lifted her and set her on the sand. I should take her to the police, I was thinking, turn her in, a lost child. Then, to my relief, a group of \*o-.. appeared, heading our way, and she\_ began to run toward them. The idea or tn. bridge ii sunlight was dead; the light had come and gone again. I left, and that afternoon I was wandering around Gettysburg.

In the car, meandering northward, I played Bach fugues and Sibelius and did not turn on the radio; in the motels I read Fuente or Garc(a Mdrquez or Don Delillo, or a biography of Mann, and did not turn on the television.

On Wednesday night, near Middletown, New York, when I got back to the motel after dinner, a man was waiting for me, lounging against a black Ford. He straightened as I approached.

"Mr. Seton? Winston Seton?"

Not a mugger, I thought; they don't name the victim first. I nodded.

"Mry I have a few words with you? I'm feremy Kersh, FBI."

He flicked open his I.D. ar-rd I wondered which had come first, the many TV agents flicking open the same kind of I.D., or the event itself. I shrugged and opened my door, and he followed me inside. He had a round, soft-looking face, too pink and smooth, as if he had to shave every third day if

that often, and the kind of build that puts more bulk below the waist than above it, but I suspected he was not as soft as he looked. I motioned him to a chair, and crossed in front of him to get to the low dressing table where I had a bucket of ice cubes and a bottle of bourbor-r. He drew in his legs to let me pass. It was the kind of motel that had two chairs, a tiny round table with a hanging larnp that you brained yourself on frequently, a king-size bed, and a dresser with a big nrirror.

"What car-r I do for you, Mr. Kersh?" I asked, taking the shrink wrap off a glass. "Drink?" I eyed the bottle and hoped he would say no; after six days there wasn't much left. He said no, and I

poured myself bourbon, added ice cubes, and edged past him to sit on the side of the bed. He sat with his legs apart, his hands on his knees, leaning forward. He looked uncomfortable.

"You've been following the story about the crash of the Milliken Lear jet, I suppose," he said. I shook my head, and for a moment he appeared confused, as if his game plan had been scrapped without warning.

"You know who Joe Milliken is, don't you?" he asked then.

Every kid knew about Bluebeard, Beauty and the Beast, fuck the Giant Killer, the Hope diamond, the Milliken millions .. I nodded.

"Okay, Mr. Seton. As soon as you

open a news magazine, or turn on the television, or see a paper, you'll get some version of the story. I'll give you ours. Two years ago Milliken's daughter and her baby vanished, and Milliken said it was a kidnapping. Brought us in. We haven't come up with mother or child in all this time, and the case is as open as the Montana sky as far as we're concerned." I held up my hand as memory of the event seeped into consciousness. "I read that the mother took her child and left of her own accord."

"You could have read a lot of things," Kersh said with a shrug. "He, the old man, says they were kidnapped. There's been no note, no ransom demand,

nothing. Even so, it's on the books, unsolved. To complicate things, when mother and child vanished, so did all their hospital records, the child's prints, blood type, everything. Okay. Two weeks ago Mr. Milliken got a phone call, a woman said she had his granddaughter, and that she had sent him a picture that should arrive any minute now. She said she would call back, and hung up. He called our office in Houston, and our men were there when the picture arrived, a Polaroid of a kid with brown eyes and light hair. Like a million other kids. But also like his daughter at that age. He said it was her, his granddaughter. End of argument." Kersh sighed; he looked tired, as if the

past two weeks had been tough. "I'll cut it short," he said then.

"Milliken and the woman struck a deal. She would deliver the kid to him in Houston, no one else, and he called us off, just like that. They planned for her to bring the kid to him in one of his Lear jets. His pilot told him they'd had trouble with the electrical system and he blew up. He wanted that kid in that plane and on her way to Houston right now. So a week ago last night we stood with our thumbs in our mouths and watched a woman and a man take a little girl aboard the Milliken plane in Philadelphia. We had planes in the area and planned to track them every inch of the way, be there when that jet landed.

But half an hour out of Philadelphia the pilot got on the radio; he said something was wrong with the electrical system, and then silence. It went down."

Kersh had left his chair restlessly; he looked like a man who wanted to stamp around and found it frustrating that there wasn't enough room. I thought he wanted a drink, but didn't make the offer a second time. He glanced inside the bathroom, the tiny dressing area, and came back to stand at the foot of the bed with his hands deep in his pockets.

"We recovered the bodies of three women, two attendants and the other woman, and three men, pilot, copilot, the man who boarded with the woman and child. No kid," he said, scowling. "We

had people there within minutes, the whole area was being covered within half an hour or so, but no kid." His eyes had appeared unfocused, now he turned his attention to me. "And you haven't seen it on the news, read about it?"

I shook my head. "What do you want with me, Mr. Kersh?" I asked patiently. "It's an interesting story, and I'll catch up with it in the papers any day now. Why are you here?"

"We want to enlist your help," he said; his attitude, that had suggested nothing more than fatigue a second ago, had become harder, not menacing, but not yielding either.

I wondered if other agents were out in the parking lot, if a chase car was

nearby. I had to laugh to myself at the full-blown scenario that had come to mind. I sipped my drink and waited.

"We think you talked with the child at least twice in Atlantic City," Kersh said. "We want you to return and hang around for a few days, see if she approaches you again." Now I got up, but since he was blocking the only moving-around space there was, I sat down again.

"You've got to be kidding," I said after a moment. "If she's there, pick her up, get an identification, be done with it." Then I remembered the little girl who had mooched ice cream, but the memory only made my temper flare. "You've been watching me? For God's sake, why?"

"only since Monday," he said tiredly, not at all placating me, merely explaining. "Sunday, a local police officer thought he saw the child. We had an APB out, naturally. Anyway, he thought maybe it was her, but she told him she was waiting for her daddy, and she ran to you and you bought her an ice cream. He forgot the whole thing. The next morning, he saw the two of you again, on a seawall or something, and felt that he had been right to put it out of mind. Then he saw you driving off alone—seems you have a noticeable car—and for the first time, he got suspicious enough to do a followup. We checked the license number and came up with you. For all we knew you had the kid

stashed away back with your gear, So " I stared at him. "I don't get it, Kersh. You know where that kid is, go get her. But the kid I saw isn't the one you're looking for. She's too old, four, or close to it. You're looking for what, a two-year-old?" Kersh scowled more fiercely than ever. "I've got a tape recorder out in the car. I'd like you to make a statement, how you came to see the child, what she was wearing, what she said. Will you do that?"

"Sure," I said. "But, Kersh, she's the wrong child." He started for the door. "Then you'll be out of it, won't you? Right back." It was after ten and I was tired and sleepy. I had been in bed by ten every night and up before six every

morning since my trek started. I yawned, but the Milliken story intruded and I remembered more of it now. Soap opera stuff. Daddy had been a brute. Poor little rich girl married someone unsuitable, a tennis player, jockey, grounds keeper, someone like that. It didn't matter who he had been, he had not lived long enough to see his child born. A fatal accident of some sort. I couldn't remember the details. Then, when her baby was a few weeks old, the Milliken daughter vanished with the child, and no one had seen them since as far as I knew. And that meant the child was only about two now. The reward must have climbed up to a million, I remembered, and tried to shrink the kid I had seen down to the

right size. I couldn't; the wrong kid. I yawned again.

Kersh returned with a space-age tape recorder, all silver and black. "What we'd like, Mr. Seton, is for you to begin by stating your name and the date, to the best of your recollection, that you saw that little girl, and then just tell about it in your own words."

"You know the date better than I do."

"Probably, but we want it for the record. Ready?"

It didn't take very long; there was little to tell, after all. When I finished, Kersh asked, "Mr. Seton, will you help us find that child agarn?"

"No," I said firmly. "I'm on vacation. I don't know any way I could be of help."

"She trusted you," he said. "She came to you a second time without fear. We think she might approach you again."

I simply stared at him in disbelief.

Kersh sat there for a moment, then he said thoughtfully, "I wonder what you want, Mt. Seton."

"Aren't you going to turn that off?"

He did something to the tape recorder, possibly even turned it off, but I wasn't particularly interested. I watched him.

"We know that everyone wants something," he went on, still meditative.

"We want your help, of course. But what do you want? Could we appeal to your sense of chivalry? Your sense of justice? An annual income, tax free? Business thrown your way?"

"I want you to get your butt out of here so I can go to bed." When he didn't move, I stood up, put my glass down on the bedside table, and started to unbutton my shirt. "Listen to me, Kersh. That kid I saw is not, repeat not, the Milliken girl. She's too old. She showed no sign of being a kidnappee. I've told you all I can about her, ar-rd I dor-r't want to be involved in any scheme you're working. Now, I'm going to bed, and you can sit there ail night for all I care."

He stood up, smiling slightly. The smile took ten years off his apparent age; he could have been a teacher in a junior college, pleased with his students, pleased with life.

He went to the door and then said, "I

wonder why, when you finally caught up with Steve Falco and your wife, you didn't beat the shit out of him. When I know the answer to that I'll know how to get your cooperation, Mr. Seton. Good night."

When I knew the answer to that, I thought, I'd know the answer to the riddle of the universe. I poured another drink and sat in the chair Kersh had vacated. It was very warm. Twelve years ago my grandfather died and left me a small fortune and his house in Atlanta. I moved to New York, married a model, Susan Lorenza, started a photography, graphic arts business with Steve Falco, and bought the Thunderbird. Batting average way down,

three strikeouts, one home run. Three years later, Susan and Steve had cleaned me out, and headed west. I still had the house in Atlanta—they hadn't known that it was a very fine house—and I still had the Thunderbird. I got drunk and stayed drunk for a long time, two years' worth of drunk, and then I went looking for them, and finally found them in Los Angeles. Susan was still beautiful, but with a Hollywood gloss that was new, and breasts that were also new. She was wearing a yellow sweater that showed them off admirably. "I had to do it," she had said. "I had to try to make it on my own." Her voice was new, also: voice-lessons new; she had learned how to put a little throb in it. The detective I had

hired had reported that she was doing porn movies; I l-radrr't believed him. Now I did. St.u. Falco was-exactly the same, shorter than me by several inches, black hair, dark restless eyes. He snapped his fingers a lot, I remembered, and he was snappilg the"r that day. "we'll make it up to you, kid," he said. "we always said we'd make it up to you, soon as we got the breaks." They were in a sirabby little stucco house with plastic fun-riture. I took a step toward them, huddled together by the sofa, aud Susan screamed, "Don't lit himl Winrlie, please. Let me explain." Steve had cut in, "star quality, tl-rat's what she has, wasted. I'll turn her into the ltevebigge5l—" For two years I had

lived with a pit inside me that was filled with red hot coals, and sudder-ly that day, looking at Susan's new breasts, I felt as if the pit had sealed itself off, the coals were gone, and there was only a hollow place there. I turned and walked out, patted the T-bird, got in it, and drove to Atlanta where I mortgaged the house and started Phoenix Publishing Company.

And I still didn't know why I hadn't beat the shit out of him. It had something to do with the plastic furniture, I thought, pouring the last of the bourbon with regret. Plastic furniture, plastic breasts. That had something to do with it, but I couldn't sort it out more than that.

I remembered the day I called the

Atlanta tenants and asked permission to inspect the house. I hadn't seen it for fifteen years. It had been beautifully maintained, with sparkling white woodwork, gleaming oak floors, and fine furniture. Camellias and azaleas were in bloom out front, and sunlight poured into the spacious rooms like a healing balm. I stood in the wide foyer reassuring the tenants that I had no plans to force them to move, and I was overwhelmed by shame.

When the tenants left two years later, I moved in.

I turned off the lights in my motel room and sat propped up in bed, not ready to sleep, but not willing to let Kersh know his visit was keeping me

awake. He had tried to stir up the ashes, bring something to life that had died a long time ago, until now even the ashes were gone, no embers remained, only a hollow space, and all the poking and prodding he could manage would be as futile as shaking a stick in a vacuum. But he had tried. That was the salient point. He had tried. And I didn't know why. He had tried to arouse what? My anger, frustration, my desire for revenge, retribution, the feeling of betrayal that had colored all the rest? Any of the above, all of the above? Or simply \*y curiosity? I grimaced in the semidarkness. He had done that. I couldn't even guess how many work hours, how many dollars had gone into the background

check they had done on me in just a few days. Why?

I eased myself down into the bed properly and stretched. If they were after the Milliken kid, I thought then, this was a false trail, and Kersh must know it. The child I had talked to was simply too old. I didn't know a lot about children, but two-year-olds were still infants, still in diapers mostly, still doing baby things, and the little girl I had bought ice cream for was well out of that. She was already a little person, not a baby. Not particularly pretty, or even cute that I could recall, but, in fact, I could recall little about her physically. Just a kid with brown eyes and blonde hair tangling in the ocean breeze. But what if

they were simply using the Milliken kidnapping as a cover to get to this other kid, I thought then, and came wide awake again. Slowly I shook my head. I didn't believe that. What could be bigger than Milliken's millions, his influential friends, the power he wielded?

I checked out of the motel early, and when I pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant half a mile away, the black Ford pulled in beside me.

"That's a sweetheart of a car," Kersh said admiringly. He trailed his hand over the silver hood. The car was dirty, but class showed, dirt and all.

"Who's your supervisor, Kersh?" I asked, walking toward the entrance of the restaurant. He told me and I went to a

pay phone near the door and dialed information, then the FBI number in Washington, ar-rd when I got through to them, I asked for his supervisor. When I entered the restaurant itself a few minutes later, Kersh waved me to a booth. There was a pot of coffee on the table, service for two. Only a few other people were eating at this early hour.

"We hoped you'd think of checking," he said. "Thought you might, but if you hadn't I was going to suggest it. I'm having pancakes with blackberry jam. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?" I poured coffee, seetl-ring. Assistant to the Director Leland Murchison had been expecting my call, he hoped I would cooperate, of the utmost importance,

debt of gratitude, national interest. . . . He had had a list of brzz words at hand and used them all. And told me absolutely nothing. The waitress came to take our orders and when she had left again, I said, "Now what, Mr. Kersh? You tried reason, and hinted of bribery. Today do we advance to threats? IRS audits, red tape of one sort or another?"

He laughed. It was disconcerting to see. Scowling, or even simply neutral he was like an actor trying to portray the stern FBI agent, but smiling he could be the guy next door, the good buddy with a six-pack and a brand-new joke.

"No, Mr. Seton," he said then. "Audits take too long, for one thing. And we want 'lour help now. Today. What we

decided to do is tell you the whole story."

Now I laughed.

His expression became rueful. He opened the briefcase on the seat beside him and brought out a sheaf of papers clipped together. "You know how I asked you to start your statement, name and date when you saw the kid. We've done them all the same way. These are preliminary statements, like yours; the questions and answers get a bit bulky, I'm afraid. This should be enough for now." He slid the papers across the table. "Just read through them," he said, and poured more coffee for both of us. I nudged the papers to the side and he looked at me with a glint in his eyes that

I hadn't seen before.

"Read them," he said softly, "or I'll ram my little black F-ord into that big silver baby of yours." I started to read the papers:

*Ruth Hazeltine, Feb. 16*

*I've been a pediatrics nurse for fourteen years, always the graveyard shift. I like it, and now I'm so used to it, it iust feels natural. It gave me the chance to be with my own kids in the evenings, when they needed me most, and I could sleep in the mornings when they were at school. It worked out fine. I was on that night. It was during that bad snow storm and we were shorthanded. cloria Strumm got snowed in, and couldn't make it, but it wds a*

quiet night and Vanessa and I were managing okay. There were nine babies, not counting the preemies, who are in a separate wing so we didn't have to deal with them. It used to be that once you got the moms tucked in for the night, that was it, but we went to feeding on demand ten years ago, and sometimes one of the babies is in with his mom two, three times a night. The Hilyard baby was one of them. While they're in with their moms we straighten up the cribs, change the sheets if they need it, iust tidy up a bit, and I had done that to his crib, had it all ready for him. I wdsn't gone more than three minutes. Walked down the hall to Hilyard's room, collected the

*baby, said a word or two to the mother, and went back, and she, this little baby girl, was in his crib. No diaper, no bracelet, nothing, and sound asleep. I put the Hilyard baby down in a different crib and examined the girl baby; not a mark on her, good professional job with the cord, nice and warm. Born within the past three hours was how she looked to me. Around seven pounds, iust a normal little baby girl. I covered her up and went out to get Vanessa. We called Dr. Weybridge, and he called Security. I didn't see dnyone bring the baby in, didn't see dnyone come on the floor after midnight. Iust me and Yanessa. Silently I went on to the next statement:*

*Vanessa Goldstein, Feb. 16.*

*Nobody passed the nurses' station! I swear it. No one was up there but Ruth and me. Dr. Weybridge examined the baby and said for us to follow the standard routine, and we did. I put the drops in her eyes and the lab sent up Sandra Lewis to draw blood. We printed her and got a diaper and gown on her. I put the Baby Doe bracelet on her, started her chart. She was eight pounds, one half ounces, twenty inches long. Normal reflexes. I glanced at Kersh in annoyance, but he seemed fascinated by swirls in his coffee cup or something. I picked up the next paper:*

*lane Torrance, M.D., Feb. 17.*

*Dr. Weybridge simply made a*

*mistake, that's all. And the nurses were overworked and shorthanded, as they said. I examined Baby Doe at eight-thirty in the morning and found an infant who wcts ctt least ten days old. She was alert and active, her eyes were tracking well. Her cord had dropped off and the navel was healed.*

Feeling exasperated, put upon, ignored by Kersh who was still absorbed by the contents of his coffee cup, I continued to read:

*Lilian Tully, March 12.*

*I took her in. There was all that publicity, people lining up wanting to adopt her, you know. But you cdn't iust farm off a kid like a sack of potatoes or something. There's channels. I run a*

*foster house for kids, specialty is newborns, and I was next on the list, so I got her. And lie! Boy, did they lie! I don't know what they're trying to pull, them social workers, but if that kid wcts a newborn, then so'm I. I mean she already had teeth. Anyways, there she was and at first I thought l'd iust go with it, keep her, start her education. You gotta start them young learning about rules and proper procedures. I teach them, and when they go on their way, they know a thing or two about discipline and obedience. start them young and they stay straight, believe you me. Little kids need schedules, they need routines, but that one! contrary from the day I laid eyes on her. You*

*don't have to spank them or hit them, there's other ways to get their attention, but when I started to pinch her ear a little, to make her stop bawling for food off schedule, she bit me. A real devil she was. sitting up in her bed, watching me like a witch. I couldn't keep restraiits on her for beans. Sometimes you have to do that, keep them still for a little bit. Not her. oh, I called them and told them to come gtet the little devil. Put her in a kennel or something. I didn't wint nothing more to do with the likes of her. I told them to check their records. I specialize in newborns, I told them. I turned to the first page and checked the date there, and the date that was on the*

statement I had just read. Kersh was watching me with a blank expression, as if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. *Marilyn Schlecter, August 20.*

*I don't know how it happened! We're trying to keep up with more than two hundred cdses, and we don't have enough people, or facilities. we don't even have a proper working computer. It eats records, erdses information, misfiles things. It iust happened. Her records got mislaid, misfiled. I don't know what happei:ned to them. I don't even know how many different case workers handled her, none of them comparing notes, and some of them even renamed her. She obviously was not a six-month-otd baby; she was a*

toddler, eighteen months to two years old. She was taken out to temporary homes two or three times until we could place her, and those records were a mess, different names, dates. But our supervisor had left and people were trying to fill it in. No one could blame them for what happened. If we had more people and some office help. . . . Somehow she got in our books as Mary lo Coodman and she was sent to Winona Forbush under that name. I don't know how it happened. But when they tried to get an identification for this other little girl, she turned out to be Mary lo. I called Forbush and explained that a mistake had been made and arranged to collect the child

*the following day, but when I went out to pick her up, the house was empty. That's all I know. I iust know she isn't Mary lo Goodman. I don't know where she is, or who she is. And yes, l'm crying. And I'll keep crying.*

I was reading more slowly, bewilderment and anger in about equal amounts n-ry reaction to the stuff in the statements.

*Max Godel, September, near the end of the month.*

*l'm sittin' there in Sylvie's trailer, you know, reading the want cds. Notfting for me. I'Jever's nothing, but what the hell, I look. And the phone rings and it's Marsha, for chrissake! I mean, Marsha! Man, when she took a*

walk she didn't leave me nothing but a tattoo, and she'd a got that if she'd had a scraper. And there she is, and she goes, is Sylvie at work? She deals blackiack, why'd she be home at ten? And I go, so what? And she goes, wait'll you see. This is the biggest, iust the biggest. I iust got in town. |m coming, over. And I go, no way, babe. But she's already gone, and pretty soon she's pounding on the door, and I open it and she goes, you look good, NMax. Sylvie gone? And I go, get lost, bitch. But she goes, look, Max, what I found. Or what found me. And it's iust a ftid. No two ways about it, Marsha's a fast worker, but this, for chrissake! It's a kid up and walking, and Marsha was with me for a

*couple of years, up to last spring. I mean, not even Marsha can't work that fast, but the kid is holding her hand like she's N4ama, all right. Blonde, brown eyes l"lot the towhead the papers showed, not the saucer eyes either. lust a little*

*kid, two, three years old, I medn little. Marsha sort of shoves the kid inside and she whips the door right outta my hand and slams it and stands pushing it with her back, like the drmy's out there and going to bust in any minute. Play with the cards, kid, she goes, and the kid goes to the table where I been playing solitaire. Before I read the want ads, I mean. And she*

*starts to mess around with the cards, and Marsha goes I need to hang out a coupla days, Max, and I go Ha! Ha! And she goes, it's the biggest thing we ever got us in, Max. Look at her, and I look at the kid and I thini yeah, could be. The papers always get things wrong. And I look at Marsha and I go, you snatched her? You did that? And she goes, no way, Max. I was going back to the city— she thinks Nei York is the only city in the world— from Philly and I heard it on the radio, you know, the crash and aII, and I was almost on top where it happened and I thought what the hell I'd have a look, but there's aII them cops and god knows who else' stopping everything*

*that moves, and I go shit, it's not worth the pain.*

*Know what I mean? And I'm in this line of cdrs, all trying to get the hell out of there, turning around, backing up, like it's crazy. so I turn off to a blacktop road, me and a zillion others, we all turn off, but I stop at this roadhouse for a beer and the place is full of talk about the crash and the kid that's been snatched, and I get an earful and split. All's I can think of is depart, get the fuck out of there, back to the city where you know what's what, and I'm driving, looking for the way back to a highway for god's sake, and she sits up in the back seat and asks dre we going to be home pretty soon? The*

kid's over there at the table messing around with the cards all this time. she's got them all separated in suits. Diamonds, spades, like that, and she's got the face cards lined up and she's working on the rest of them, putting them in order, ten down. I don't know, it makes me nervous. I mean, Ehe's iust a little kjd. Anyways, she ain't dressed in pink pants with flowers on the sides, or a pink shirt, and I shake my head. No way, I go, it ain't her. But Marsha goes she had to buy her something to wear, her stuff was too small. she opens up the bag she's got, and there's the clothes the radio and T V yammered about all day. We gotta talk, she goes and she puts the kid in on the bed and

*closes the door, and pretty soon sylvie comes back and her and Marsha dre screaming and yelling at each other and then both of them screaming at me, and finally I go, we gotta call the cops, for chrissake! And they both scream and yell some more, and for chrissake it's three in the morning, and we decide to get Eome sleep. Marsha puts some covers and a pillow on the fl\*, for the kid and she takes the sofa and me and sylvie hit the hay. And next thing I know the screaming starts again and Sylvie goes you son of a bitch what've ya done with the kid, and I go yoi're c::razy. You know that, you're plain crazy. But the kid's gine, all right. And sylvie goes, this'll lose me my iob, you*

*creep. you kroi that? And she calls the cops.* Breakfast had been delivered while I was reading the last page. I finished reading and then carefully shuffled the papers into a neat -li[le stack and fasten-ed the paper clip back on them before I glanced at Kersh.

"I know. Craziness," he said, eating.

I started on my eggs. Not just graz!, I thought, not just that. creepy. It was crazy and it was creepy. I didn't believe thi implications of what I had read, and if Kersh did he was crazy, but he wasn't alone, he had backup, superiors, underlings, and some of them must have believed it, too, ar-rd that was the scariest part of all. "Two different children," I said after a few minutes of

silent eating. He shook his head. "I wish," he said gloomily. "The link is the woman winona Forbush. we recovered her body from the plane crash, and her boyfriend's body. They found themselves \*ith an unidentified kid and flashed on the Milliken kidnapping and thought they could make a killing." He groaned. "No pun intended."

"That's what I mean. The kid they had obviously was not born last February. The social services office screwed up the records royally. The woman admitted it. It's a screw up all the way." He looked almost apologetic. "We lifted prints from the Forbush house and checked them against the Snow Storm Baby. That was the only child the

Forbush woman had. It's her." I remembered it then, the Snow Storm Baby was what the papers had dubbed her, the child who mysteriously appeared at the hospital last February.

"You must have found out how she got to the hospital, who left her there," I said, working at controlling my anger. I didn't know what he was trying to put over, why he was telling me all this, and it was too much to take in with scrambled eggs and toast first thing in the morning.

"Well," he said mildly, "we weren't involved in that. Reverse kidnapping? What would you call it?"

Anyway, the Philadelphia police didn't find anything, and we didn't start

looking until after the Milliken case opened again. Then we backtracked, and we're still backtracking. One more statement you should see. Saved the best for last." He pulled another paper from the briefcase and held it. "We already have statements from everyone connected with the hospital—workers, the medical staff, visitors, patients—or they're still coming in. It's a lot, Seton. A lot. This one might interest you." I didn't want to read another one. I didn't want to think about this any longer, but my hand took the Paper, and my eyes began tracking the words.

*Rae Ann Davis, February 16.*

*I'm a nurse's aide, in the premature baby ward. I've worked there for*

twenty-four yedrs. The night of the storm we had triplets delivered, poor little things, we knew they wouldn't make it, but you

'Andalway,s act like they have a chance and do everything you can. And we had a drug preemie come in and he needed detox, and we were shorthanded, like everyone else that night. S o we were aII running. So I came back from my break and I went in the bathroim that visitors uEe because if l'd went in the nurses 'lounge they'd have put me to work again and I needed a couple mgre minutes. S o in the bathroom on the counter there was this little bundle, something wrapped in a little towel. I looked at it, and it was

*this preemie. Nof even that yet. More like a fetus, like a miscarriage or abortion, still had the placenta. It wasn't iust right, Iike the cord was too long for one thing. It wouldn't have lived even if she'd carried it ti term. I could have cried. Some poot little girl piobably scared to death by what happened to her, and now ltit. But it'd been cleaned up and wrapped up iust like somebody thought it could haye made it. And they left it in the right place, not the preemie ward, I don't medn, but a Catholic hospital where the nuns would christen the poor little thing. Anyways even if it was still wdrm, it was dead, that's what I thought, and I wrapped it up again in*

*the towel and took it with me to the nurses' station and then one of the real preemies went into a convulsion, and the triplets weren't hooked up yet, and it was like I knew it would be. They had me running with the rest of them for the next hour or more, and I iust forgot about the fetus in the towel. I left it on the counter at the station and forgot it, God help me. And when I seen it again I got scared because I didn't call the head nurse or the nuns or do anything for the poor little thing, and I iust put the towel and everything in my bag. I thought that when I got off work l'd put it on the doorstep, like in books, and let somebody else find it, nowhere near the ward, but out by the door. At twelve*

when I left it was snowing too hard to go home, and a couple others were down at the door talking about sleeping over, and I didn't have a chance to do anything with it, so I went back to the nurses' lounge and it was still in my bag. But I couldn't get any rest until I did something, and finally I went back to the visitors' rest room. I meant to put it back where I found it, only it was different, not so little, more like a real baby, but small. And there's no placenta, like I thought before. Bigger than most of the preemies we get, though. I freaked out and I ran out of there, took the elevator to the canteen and had me a cup of coffee and a smoke. I thought I was going crazy, seeing

*things wrong, seeing things that maybe wasn't even there. Anyway I went back and it was still there, a baby girl, pink, wdrn, big enough for the baby ward, and I knew l'd been working with preemies too long, seeing them where they weren't even there. That's when I tied off the cord. I don't know why, iust seemed like somebody should. I knew that if I waited a little bit Ruth would go get the baby I seen her take to the mother, and I could slip this one in one of the cribs and let them take care of it. I couldn't say I found it, not now. I medn nobody but me had been in the bathroom since nine. They'd ask why I didn't find it before. And that's what I did. They didn't see me and the baby*

*finally got a bed, and it all worked out all right, only I had to take some time off because I kept getting a headache from wonying about seeing things again. After I settled down a little I remembered the macaroni salad I ate that night in the cafeteria and I knew what I'd had was food poisoning, made me Eee things. Neyer seen anything I shouldn't since then.*

Kersh was watching me narrowly when I finished the papers.

"fesus bloody Christ!" I muttered. "You buy that a kid born prematurely last February is the equivalent of a four-year-old now? You chooie to believe that instead of a mess of fucked-up records and two different kids?"

"By the time she left the hospital at least seven nurses and four doctors had examined her, each one giving a slightly different report. Then a dozen social workers, five foster parents had her, had somebody. Not exactly inexperienced observers," he said softly. "To say nothing of Max and crew, and then there's your statement."

The restaurant had filled up by then, and the noise level kept rising. Kersh glanced around, leaned forward, and said in a voice so low I could hardly hear it, "We had a psychologist go over your statement last night. She says you noticed a difference in the child from one day to the next, even if you weren't aware of it at the time. Day one you

treated her like a three-year-old, the where's-mommy routine. Few people know what to say to a child that young. You bought her the ice cream and she skipped away. Day two, you actually talked to her, warned her about strange men. The way you'd talk to a four-year-old."

He picked up the bill. "My treat," he said reaching for his wallet. His tame psychologist was right, I realized. But she didn't know the reason. When I lifted the child up to the seawall, I had been surprised by how much heavier she was than I had expected. That's what made me warn her. I shook my head hard.

"You wanted to know why we asked you to help," Kersh said, getting to his

feet. "Because we might not recognize her; you might not either, but she might recognize you and trust you again. Let's take a walk." We went outside and stopped at the Thunderbird. He ran his hand over the hood as he had done before.

"I don't suppose you let anyone else take it out for a spin?"

"You suppose right."

"You need to think," he said. "You're the kind of man who drives and thinks, but head south, will you?"

Plenty of trees on the way. Like the man said, see one, you've seen them all."

"And you'll be right behind me, I suppose."

"Or someone else," he said, smiling.

"We'll talk again later." I unlocked the door and opened it. His hand held it open for another moment. "Seton, think fast, will you? Milliken has hired a herd of private investigators, and we don't want them to find the child first. We really don't want Milliken to take her."

"Life as a princess? Isn't that what he has to offer?"

"For how long? What do you suppose he'd do when he realized she isn't exactly what he ordered up? In all likelihood he had his son-in-law killed. No proof, no accusation even, but his daughter believed it and ran. We don't want him to have this child, Seton."

"And what will you do with her?" I asked bitterly.

His eyes took on that peculiar steely glint again. "Not my department," he said. "But it would be better than what he has to offer." He closed the car door, patted the top, and then walked away to his black Ford. When I pulled out of the parking lot, he was behind me.

I drove to the Delaware Water Gap where I had planned to spend the day hiking. After only an hour on the trail, I returned to my car and stood looking at the scenery. The trees were turning nicely, but they had not yet acquired the full blaze I had anticipated. They would be better on my way back, I thought, and wondered how many times I had thought the same thing already.

Another car was parked at the

lookout, a white Dodge, with a lean-faced man at the wheel reading a newspaper. I ignored him, just as he ignored me.

They couldn't make me do anything, I was thinking. They couldn't force me at gunpoint to walk on the beach until a little girl begged for an ice cream. No way to win the confidence of a child, parading a man at gunpoint. And why such a cock and bull story? Who was the kid? I could think of half a dozen answers that were more convincing than the story Kersh had told: the president's long-lost granddaughter, heir to the British throne, an oil billionaire's illegitimate daughter, an experimental subject carrying deadly viruses in her

blood. . . .

A wind had come up, whipping through the gorge below, setting the trees adance, and twirling leaves that looked like ciouds of confetti. I had become hot and sweaty hiking, but now I began to shiver. Where was the kid sleeping? Was she staying warm and dry? Who was feeding her? Buying her clothes?

I drove aimlessly through the mountains. Presently I would stop and take some pictures, I told myself, but I drove on and on. And finall,v I started to drive south. I didn't know yet if I could let myself be used by Kersh; I still didn't want to get involved in whatever was going on, but I drove south. I didn't believe his story, and now accepted that

I probably never would know what they were up to, but they were putting in a lot of time on it, and they really did want my help. I laughed out loud when it occurred to me that his tame psychologist might have told him that arousing my curiosity was the key to use. But mostly I was remembering how the little girl had reached out her hands for me to lift her to the wall, and how she had assumed I would help her down again, and how she had giggled when I warned her about trusting strange men. Where was she now?

It was about two when I stopped at a restaurant. Kersh ambled over to my side as I was tossing my hiking boots into the trunk.

"Buy you some lunch," he said amiably. "Your appetat is sure set for different hours than mine. I thought I'd starve before you stopped."

I shrugged, and closed the trunk lid.

"Think of it as a refurrd on your income tax," he said, as we entered the restaurant together. Regular business lunch, I thought, after we had ordered, pastrami on rye, milk for me, ham and cheese on white toast, coffee for him. No busirress talk yet. He looked as if he needed the coffee. He looked exhausted. and as if in confirmation, he yawned widely.

He didn't bring up the matter until we had finished eating and I ordered coffee. Then he said, "You decided to go along

with us?"

"I haven't decided."

"You've got nothing to lose, Seton. Just gain, all the way."

"What gain?"

"Good will. Bundles of good will, and that's not to be sneezed at these days. Get the government agencies on your side, clear sailing all the way."

"She might not even be there any longer."

"Oh, she hasn't left. We know who goes in and who comes out. Atlantic City's easy, not too many ways in and out, unless you want to take a long, cold swim."

"The weather's changed; she probably wouldn't be on the beach now anyway."

"We thought of that. Thing is, she probably hangs out where other kids are. Purloined letter effect. We have a pretty neat city map for you. It'll be in your room. Anyway, you wander around taking pictures of the elementary schools, the playgrounds, the beach, boardwalk. Where there are other kids, she'll turn up. We're betting on it."

He finished his second cup of coffee and motioned to the waitress for a refill. Any minute now he'd start twitching, I thought. Very quietly he said, "Seton, someone's going to find that child. You know it, and I know it." Reluctantly I nodded. "Good. Now, we'll make your reservation for you. You like that place you stayed in before? The Abbey? If not,

say so. We'll put you up at the Taj Mahal, Trump's Palace, whatever you say. Meals, booze, whatever you want, just put it on the tab. No problem. If there are other expenses, keep an account and hand it in. We'll take care of it." The Abbey was relatively small, three or four blocks off the main drag, quiet. I said it would do fine.

"Okay. See, we want you to be comfortable. This might take a few days. She might not spot you right off, or she might hold back a day or two. If she does approach you, talk with her. That's all, iust normal friendly chatter. Then leave, and you're done. From sundown to sunup you're on your own. Play, have fun. She isn't going to show at night. In a

place like Atlantic City a kid by herself at night would stick out like a dinosaur on the beach. Look over the map; we'll mark the places we think she might frequent. If she doesn't show in any of them, then wander about where you think she might turn up. We don't expect you to search for her, just be in places where she might see you." I drank my coffee; it had grown cold and was bitter. "What if she doesn't approach me in a few days?"

"Th.r, we'll think of something else to try," he said tiredly. "On Saturday we'll turn the screws a little. There's going to be one of those unfortunate leaks in time for the news Saturday night, and Sunday's papers. It will hint that the FBI suspects the Milliken grandchild is being

hidden in Atlantic City. and that they intend a house-to-house search." He sighed and spread his hands. "We want to avoid doing that. Let's hope she comes to you tomorrow or by Saturday afternoon." I had an image of a small child being cornered by a flock of FBI agents, a SWAT team, a herd of private investigators, and a million poor sods who knew about the Milliken reward. I stood up. "fesus," I said.

"She's just a little kid!"

"Is she, Seton? Are you sure?"

I started to walk away and he suddenly snorted with laughter. "Good Lord, I just realized why you like the Abbey. They let you park your own car there, don't they? No valet parking." I

kept moving. He caught up with me at the door. "If Falco had taken your car instead of your wife, then would you have beaten the shit out of him?"

He was still laughing, and I was still walking away from him, or he would have known that at that instant my indecision had become resolved.

If the child approached me, and if she was the three-to-four-year-old I had seen before, I'd do what Kersh wanted. Turn her over. You can't leave a small child alone in Atlantic City, or anywhere else. She belonged to someone; presumably Kersh knew who that was, and presumably she would be returned and I would never know more about it than I did then. But if a child approached me

who seemed older, bigger, different in any significant way, Kersh couldn't have her.

Stating this to myself was simple and at the time it even seemed reasonable; following up seemed impossible. I drove and thought and the more I thought the more hopeless it appeared. They had the city sewed up; no one could leave except by boat without crossing a bridge, and it was easy enough to maintain surveillance on a bridge.

Traffic was heavy; I got in the right lane and let everything moving pass me by, and finally caught up with the name Joey Mar. or, „id r phn ihrt might even work. I pulled off at the next gas station/diner complex and called Joey in

Manhattan. Since he worked for one of the biggest ad agencies in the business where he had advanced to dizzying heights, it was easier to get the firm's number from information than to get him at the agency. Finally he came on the line.

"win," he said, "that really you?" I got in a word and then he said, "Hey, man! How you doing? Where are you? Come on over!"

"lo"y, shut up and listen. I need a favor."

"You got it," he said, dead serious.

He didn't interrupt a single time when I told him I needed someone to bring me a car and to fly home again without seeing me.

"I'll need the license number, and make, all that,; I said. „And the keys, natch. If this happens can you be available over the next three nights? [ don't know when or even if I'll need the car."

"Baby," he said soberly, "this sure sounds like big trouble to me. Atlantic City? No problem. You'll want a couple of numbetr \*h... you can reach me."

I let out the breath I hadn't known I was holding. "Thanks, Io.y," I said. "fust thanks." No questions, no demands, just, *You got it*. We talked a few more minutes and when I hung up I felt committed for the first time.

When |oey was thirteen and I was fourteen his family moved from

Brooklyn to Atlanta, where they did not find the over-touted Southern hospitality. foey was no darker than I was, but the kids in high school knew he was black, and he had a funny accent, Spanish Puerto Rican overlaid with Brooklyn. We had a couple of classes together and for the first time I found someone I could talk art with, and he said it was the same for him. He was shy when he wasn't being a strutting macho son of a bitch. We both wanted to be artists; we talked about what we would do: go to the Rhode Island School of Design—neither of us did—spend a year or two soaking up art in Italy—he did, I didn't. When he was fifteen and I was sixteen he was picked up for questioning about a break-

in at a 7-Eleven, and I signed an affidavit saying he had been with me at my folla' cabin at the lake that weekend. [t was a lie. There was a lot of sniggering, a lot of *those* loola, but in the end they turned him loose. I invited him out to the cabin the next weekend and I beat him up out there. It wasn't hard; I had several inches and fifteen pounds on him.

"What'd you do that for?" he rvailed, holding a bloody washcloth to his cheek.

"Because you're a thickheaded *nigger* and I know what they'd do to you." This time he started the fight, and afterward we both cried.

Back in the Thunderbird, driving south, the plan shaped up more and more

firmly. But there was nothing at all I could do about it until I saw the child again.

I checked into the Abbey, showered, changed clothes, and hit the casinos. I played blackjack a little, played with the slots a little, and hit the money machines a lot, three hundred here, five hundred there until I had nearly five thousand in cash. I had dinner late, and then drove up and down the island, in and out of the side streets, along the boardwalk, back, until I finally found the kind of place I was looking for. A round-the-clock store-front bingo game with a hundred players, and a tiny children's area off to one side. Out Front there were two zebras under spotlights, and next door

was a church. Atlantic City. I found two parking lots within two blocks and, satisfied, I went back to the hotel and went to bed. In the morning after breakfast I called foey from a pay phone and told him the addresses of the parking lots, and he told me the kind of car he would drive down if I gave the word. An eighty-nine Toyota Celica, gray. I made a note of the license number; he said he'd be standing by, and that was that. Then I went out to the boardwalk and the beach with my gear.

By three in the afternoon I was ready to start driving anywhere. The sky was cold and gray, threatening rain that didn't materialize, but hung there like a glower. I had taken more pictures than I

had film for, and bttgwas shootilg wit'h an empty camera, which didn't help my disposition. And I had eatEn a hot dog ior lunch and now had heartburn. Not a good day, I was thinking, when I saw a bunch of kids playing on some concrete turtles. Little boys were climbing over the things, kicking at each other, king-of-the-turtle fashion. And behind them a small group of little girls played with a ball. And she was there. The sweater I had seen her in before had been a bit too big; today it was just a little too small. A hot wash, I told myself, unloading the camera, setting up, keeping my eyes on the boys and the turtles. All thi kids stopped to watch me. Don't come near me, I thought to her. Keep your distance,

kid. She stayed back with the other girls. Today she was mingling with the four-to five-year-olds and passing just fine. I focused on the boyr \*ho began to make faces; the girls made faces back at them, taunting them, and I Jaid in a conversational tone, "Your turn next, girls. Let's do the boys first. you know where the zebras are, down by the church?" One of the boys said sure, and I went on, leaning over the camera now,

"Well, tonight I'll be taking pictures there. After dark." The little girls began to move in closer, and I said, still addressing the c-aTer-a, "5..p back. People are watching us, you know." I glanced up at the kids, who laughed. Belatedly she laughed, too. But she

looked frightened. One of the boys was trying to stand on his head; he fell, and they all laughed louder. I pretended to take his picture anyway. One of the girls threw the ball then and they all ran off after it; none of them looked back at me. The boys stopped horsing around and I packed up my gear. "Thanks, fellows," I called, and walked on.

Had it been enough? I had no way of knowing. But, at the very least, no watcher would have had cause to single her out. And for the first time I felt a shiver that was not brought on by weather. I thought of Kersh's words when I protested that she was just a little kid: "Are you iure?" And I knew that I wasn't sure of anything.

I wandered for ten minutes, spotted a coffee shop, and went in. From a pay phone there I called Joey and said, "Tonight," and hung up, then quickly dialed my own office number. Gracie answered and we chatted a minute or two. A tall black woman had moved close enough to overhear and I made no attempt to keep her from hearing. After that I had coffee and a danish. Kersh was waiting in the lobby when I got back to the Abbey. "Buy you a drink," he said. Since for the past half hour all I had thought of was getting inside, getting warm, and having a drink, I shrugged and followed him in; the hostess said, "You look like hell," I said when he sat opposite me at a tiny table. The light

was dim, and seemed to exaggerate the shido\*s under his eyes and the prlTo, that had overcome the pinkness of his cheeks.

"Cold coming on," he said. "I feel lousy. Too damn damp here.,,"

"Tell me about it," I muttered. We ordered and didn't talk until we had our drinks in hand.

"No dice yet," he .sa.id finally. "we really didn't expect it to be quite that easy, you understand."

"I worked my butt off in the cold today."

He grinned fleetingly. "I know. One of the reports stresses how conscientious you were. Well, tomorrow's another dty."

"Why don't you get some sleep," I said, draining my glass. "I'm cold, hungry, and tired. I intend to take a very hot shower for a long time, then eat a good dinner, and then go to bed. I recommend it."

"Maybe it'll end tomorrow," h. said philosophically. "Maybe she'll come up and ask, not for ice cream, not in this weather. Maybe hot chocolate. Hot chocolate today, Coke tomorrow, martini the next day?" He nodded, and looked past me, and for a brief moment, I thought t glimpsed the man behind the nearly babyish face. That man was frightened.

At nine-thirty I returned to the hotel after dinner, retrieved my key from the

desk and was given an envelope that had been left for me. The car key for the Toyota. At a quarter to ten I turned off the room lights and left again, this time heading for the back stairs, not the elevator. I had put on a heavy sweater under my jacket, and my pockets were stuffed with money. I took nothing else with me. If anyone stopped me I didn't want a razor to give me away.

I went out by the side door to the parking lot. Many people were around; it was Friday night, a long fun weekend shaping up. I walked around the building, out to the back street, and started the longer walk to the bingo room and the zebras.

I walked fast, trying to keep warm; a

stiff cold wind was blowing in off the ocean. When I reached the street with the perpetual bingo game I slowed down and even paused a moment to glance inside the store front. It looked like the same bunch of people, only more of them, and the same bunch of bored kids in the little playroom. I moved on past the two zebras, drew even with the entrance to the church, then, as I was getting closer to the corner, a small figure came out from behind a message board. She slipped her hand into mine.

She was icy, shivering hard, still in the sweater that was too small and too lightveight for the weather. Silently we kept walking, her hand in mine. Two blocks, I was thinking. fust two blocks to

the parking lot, a car, a heater, maybe even safety for her. We covered one of them, still not speaking, not \*r[kit,g fast enough to draw attention. There were a lot of people on the sidewalk, in groups, in pairs, bunches of teenagers . I was afraid a few people were Jyeing me reproachfully, eyeing the child. Traffic had jammed io n.rtly r gtidlo.k; drivers were leaning on horns, music blared. Another block. I resisted the impulse to pick her up and run'

We found the car and she got in the back seat. On the front seat in an envelope were the parking ticlet, foey's driver's license and even a credit card, and under the .,,u.tp. was foey's beautiful black glove leather beret that he had

bought in Paris fifteen years ago. It had become almost a trademark with him. I put it on.

I drove the side streets for a few minutes before I stopped. "Are you okay?" I asked the child. "Warm yet?"

She nodded. "I'm hungry, though," she said.

"I'll find something for you to eat as soon as I can." I looked up and down the street, a little traffic, no one on foot, and I got out to inspect what all they had provided. I had asked for a dark blanket, but he had done much better than that. The car was gray with black sheepskin seat covers, black floor rugs, and the blanket was so dark it looked black. There were two sleeping bags, a six-

pack, a styrofoam cooler, a thermos bottle and a pillow. In the cooler were sandwiches, apples, a wedge of cheese, a tin of smoked oysters. I wanted to laugh and to cry.

"Listen," I said to the child, handing her a sandwich, "we'll drive around for a while and then we'll leave the island. After you eat, you have to stay on the floor with the blanket over you, until I say you can come out. Okay?"

"Okay." She bit into the sandwich ravenously.

I got one of the sleeping bags from the trunk and spread it on the rear floor, and as soon as she was through with the sandwich I arranged her with the black blanket over her. It was as if she had

become invisible, the effect was so good. I nodded at her. "What's your name?" She shook her head. "I don't know."

"What do the children call you?"

"Nothing. They don't like me."

"Okay. We'll think of a name for you."

She would fall asleep, I thought, and I would have to remember to check on her to make certain she hadn't worked her way out from under the cover, but as long as she stayed where she was, it would take a very close look to spot her.

I got behind the wheel again and put foey's driver's license and his credit card in my wallet and removed everything that had my name. I owe you, loey, I thought, when I started to drive

again. I wouldn't try to leave the island until the traffic jam was gone; I didn't want to be in a stopped car under the garish lights of the streets leading to the causeway. Instead, I drove the length of the island, poking along, and when I got back it was a little past midnight and the gridlock had vanished. There was still heavy traffic, but manageable now, and I got in it after glancing at the child to make sure she was hidden. She was sound asleep, out of sight.

They stopped me, glanced inside the car, looked in the trunk, called me Mr. Marcos after looking at the driver's license, and then waved me on. I didn't relax until I reached the first toll booth and was stopped a second time and

waved through. I turned west, heading for Wilmington and points west and south. No one looked inside the car again, or asked for ID. Along about three in the morning, when I was afraid of falling asleep at the wheel I pulled off the road into a driveway, and opened the thermos. Steaming hot black coffee. I laughed when I sipped it. foey had spiked it liberally with bourbon. I slept for nearly three hours, woke up freezing and stiff, and finished the coffee. The child was sleeping sweetly, nice and warm under the blanket. I had wanted to be through Frederick, heading south on 340

by morning, but it looked as if I couldn't make it. I had stayed off the

freeways, the interstates, the toll roads, and the roads I had chosen instead had slowed me down. I began to drive again. In a short while she yawned and said she had to go to the bathroom, and she was hungry and thirsty. We stopped at the side of the road and I told her to go into the bushes. She balked, but finally she did, and then we ate the last of the sandwiches, and she started on an apple. I looked at her in dismay. She needed her face washed, her hair combed, clean clothes. . . .

"Why were you hiding?" I asked her then.

"I don't know," she said with her mouth full.

Fair enough, I thought tiredly. If she

asked me why I was hiding her, that would be my answer. "Do you know who is looking for you?"

She shook her head. "Do I have to stay on the floor again?" I knew it would not be as effective during daylight hours. "No. But stay in the back seat. You know that people are looking for you, don't you?" She nodded solemnly. "Okay, if we have to stop, get down there again. We'll be getting to a town pretty soon, and when the stores open, I'll get you some other clothes and a hairbrush. And you'll have to wait in the car for me. Okay?"

"Okay."

When I started to drive again, she sat on the edge of the back seat with her

chin on the passenger seat.

"Where did you sleep when you were hiding?" I asked.

"Places. In a car once. And I saw a dog go in a house and I went in after him. He had his own little door. He was my friend."

A dog door? I got as much from her as she could remember or wanted to tell me; it was hard to say which. She remembered there was a plane wreck, she said, and she saw a lot of people by cars talking and she opened a car door and got in. But she hadn't liked those people much; she had been afraid they would hurt her ears, and she left when they all went to sleep. Then she followed the dog into his house and ate

cereal there. She went in another house but people came back and locked the doors and she hid in a closet all night and slept and when they went away the next day she crawled out a window.

"Why did you ask me to buy you ice cream?"

"I was hungry."

As she talked I was overcome by rage and outrage, but now I felt only a great sadness, a stomach-wrenching sickness. I looked at her in the rear-view mirror; she was watching the scenery intently. Everything was new to her, I realized; she was discovering her world, and her lessons had included the most basic lessons in survival. She had learned them well. We were getting near

Frederick; traffic was picking up, and there were malls finally. I shopped for her and made her change her clothes in the back seat, and then pulled into a gas station where she went into the rest room and washed up and brushed her hair. When she came back I told her to sit up front; it would look more suspicious to have her in back, I thought. Other parents didn't seem to do that. We stopped at a strip mall and I bought her a few more things, and a new worry presented itself. She looked too different from the other kids we saw; everything she had on except her shoes was brand new. Shoes, I thought with disrney. She would need a bigger size.

And I needed to call her something, I

also realized. "When we're around other people," I said in the car,

"you should call me Daddy. Will you do that?"

"Don't you know your name, either?"

"I know it, but little kids don't use names for their parents. They call them Mommy and Daddy. And we need a name for me to call you. What name do you like?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"What did you call yourself if the other kids wanted to know your name?"

"They didn't. Once I said my name was Kid and a girl hit me and I ran away." She gave me a sidelong look, and asked, "Oprah? Can that be my name?"

"No. It's already taken. How about

Sarah? Or fennifer? Or Michelle? Rachel?" She pursed her lips and said positively, "Today my name is Dolly." The sick feeling returned. She didn't know any names. "Dolly," I said. "But just for today." Ahead, I saw a Good Will outlet, and headed for it. Good, serviceable clothes, used clothes, worn clothes, kids'

clothes. Maybe even shoes.

We did better in the Good Will store than we had done before, and I even bought a few things for her

"older sister." She looked at me hard for a second, started to speak, then looked past me. "Can I have a book?"

There was a used-book section that had a shelf of children's books. She

passed over the simple ones, though, and began to page through a book that appeared to me to be for third-or fourth-grade kids. When had she had time to learn to read? She chose four books and we left. She was skipping at my side, smiling. I hadn't seen her smile very often; I liked it.

Driving again, I asked her who had taught her to read.

"I don't know."

"Sesame Street maybe," I suggested.

She brightened and said yes. She had seen Sesame Street, and she went back to the book she was reading.

I bought ice for the cooler, added milk and juice and more fruit, and continued southward. Home free, I thought, not

with any great elation, however. At first I had been completely preoccupied with how, and had given no thought to what next. I had not really expected it to work, I had to admit. Her instincts had told her to hide, and mine had told me to help her. Now what? My instincts had deserted me. I could drive around with her for the next few days and then what? I couldn't take her home, obviously, and I couldn't stay on the road forever.

I glanced at her; she was sounding out a new word silently, pursing her lips, a slight frown wrinkling her forehead. She had asked me for help a few times with new words—doubtful, reluctant, wholesome, joyous. . . . What are you? I wanted to demand. Who are you? A

sport, a mutant? Will the accelerated process of maturation continue? Is it an illness?

I understood why Kersh had been frightened. He had given me a clue when he said she would stand out like a dinosaur on the beach if she went out alone at night. A dinosaur on the beach. Not her, but maybe the rest of us? Were there others like her? Would she have children who would be born weighing a few ounces, and reach maturity in a couple of years? Too many questions, no answers. I knew I should stop at a phone and call Kersh, tell him to come get her, let the scientists have a go at the riddle. And I knew I wouldn't do that. I felt as if my instincts had forced me to jump off a

cliff, and ther-r had deserted me; below, the chasm yawned, and I was airborne.

She closed the book and sighed.

"No good?"

"It's dumb," she said.

"Next town with a mall we'll stop and go to a real bookstore and I'll pick out a few things for you." She flashed me a smile and opened another book. *Winnie the Pooh*, I thought, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Alice in Wonderland*. . . .

Late in the afternoon I made what I planned to be the last stop of the day before we hit a motel. Another mall, this one with a bookstore. I picked out the few books that I wanted her to have, and she was browsing when some teenage boys entered and began talking to a

teenage girl behind the counter.

"Roadblocks, the state cops, Chiefie, and his crew, and a bunch more. Escaped convicts, that's what Clarence is saying, over at the Arco station."

"They stopped Brother McNirney and made him open the trunk of his car," another boy said, and they all laughed.

"Come on," I said to the kid. I took her hand and we walked to the counter to pay for the books. Her hand was shaking.

In the wide aisle of the mall I began to think about the car with stuff strewn about every which way. Paper bags from Good Will with her clothes, department store bags, my shaving stuff in a bag, things she had outgrown. ... I veered

toward a Sears where I bought a suitcase, and then I saw a line of kids and parents at one of those four-in-one theaters. A Disney film was showing.

"Listen," I said to her, "I'll take you to the movie and you stay there until it's over. When you come out, I'll be right here waiting. Okay?"

Her hand tightened in mine and she looked at me for what seemed too long a time before she nodded.

"I'll come back," I said. "I promise."

Many parents were doing the same thing, I realized a few minutes later, as we got our kids settled down with popcorn, and ducked out. Most of the others hadn't bothered with the charade of buying two tickets.

I straightened up the car, packed the suitcase and put it in the trunk along with the blanket and sleeping bags; I put the six-pack of beer and some chips in a paper bag on the back seat, added the can of smoked oysters, and looked it all over. Satisfied that no one would suspect I was traveling with a child, I got in the line of traffic heading south, stopping and starting, stopping again. Finally I was at the head of a double line where the right lane became an access road to the interstate about three miles to the west, and the left lane was local traffic. I was in the left lane, and was not detained very long, but they asked me to open the trunk and they checked the registration foey had left in the glove

compartment. It chilled me more than anything else had done. We were more than three hundred miles from Atlantic City, and they were checking cars. Maybe random checks, maybe they had been tipped, someone had become suspicious, maybe there were escaped convicts. I knew I had to get off the road, stop long enough to get some sleep, and think. I pulled in at a Best Western motel a few blocks farther down and registered for Mr. and Mrs. Marcos and two children; my wife and kids were watching the movie and I would collect them later, I said. The clerk was so bored he hardly even looked up. I returned to the mall by side streets, keeping well back from the highway that

bisected the town, and arrived at the theater a few minutes before the movie ended. Ten or fifteen other adults were also waiting for the children to emerge. I saw the child before she saw me; she was disconsolate and guarded at the same time. She looked like a little girl who had been abandoned. Then she spotted me and her face lighted up; she laughed and ran to me.

"Hi, honey," I said, swinging her up in my arms. She kissed my cheek. That night I watched her sleeping. She could easily pass for five years old, I knew. No one would question the age if I said that. She was smart, maybe brilliant, but ignorant. There simply hadn't been time yet for her to learn about things like

donkeys and owls. I had read *Winnie the Pooh* for a while; she had stopped me repeatedly to ask questions. She needed a library to read her way through, and school books, textbooks, math books, whatever other kids took for granted, no doubt many things I wasn't even aware of. Like names.

My plan to drive around for a few days had to be scuttled. I had to get her somewhere and settle in, stay out of sight, off the roads, but where?

I finally lay down on the other bed and it came to me: Aunt Bett. Not a real aunt of mine, she had been my mother's best friend as far back as I could remember. They had grown up together, had gone to school together, married at

about the same time, and visited back and forth almost daily until twenty years ago when Aunt Bett had moved to Tennessee where she still lived. After that they had paid visits to each other several times a year. When my father died almost instantly from a massive coronary, she had come and stayed for several weeks. A year later, when my mother drove into a tree doing ninety, Aunt Bett had wrapped her arms around me and said I shouldn't blame myself. At nineteen, I found that embarrassing, and until then it had not even occurred to me to attach blame. I had not seen her again until four years ago when I had dropped in to see her on my way to a trade show in Cincinnati. We didn't correspond, or

exchange Christmas cards, or phone calls. She was not listed in my address book. Aunt Bett. About seventy-five, maybe a little more, she lived in a house by herself in an area that had been taken over by developers, leaving only half a dozen of the original residents. Good old Aunt Bett, I said to myself; then I was able to go to sleep.

The last time I saw Aunt Bett the house had needed repairs which she said a hired man would do as soon as he could. The repairs had not been done, and I understood now, with a pang of guilt, that there was no hired man, probably not enough money to hire anyone, and the house was gradually falling apart. Aunt Bett was more frail

than I had expected, close to eighty. She kept up the flower beds, and had a tiny weed-filled garden, but the rest of the two acres had gone to brambles and scrub pine and oak trees. Across the creek that made up one side and the back boundary was an upscale subdivision with a high wire fence.

Aunt Bett was delighted to see us, and started to bustle in an authoritative way. "Of course you'll stay a while," she said. "And, Win, dear, will you see if the upstairs bedrooms are aired out? If you'd just let me know ..." Like that, we were invited to stay as long as we wanted. I told her that Joe Marcos was the father, that his wife had had an accident and would be in traction for a

few weeks, and tl'rey had been desperate for help with the child, who had told me that today she was Alice. Alice Marcos.

"I thought I would keep her for a week or two," I finished. The child had watched me silently as I gave her a father and mother and background in a New York City apartment.

"You're going to leave her alone in that big house of yours while you go off working every day? Winl That's no way to treat a little girl. Come on, Alice, you can help me make supper." At breakfast the next morning the child announced that today her name was Mary. I held my breath, but Aur-rt Bett nodded. "All right, Mary. I like that name, always did.

You want to help me wash up the dishes?" I let out the breath.

I made a list of things that needed doing most—puttying windows, replacing two panes of glass, fixing the front porch rail ... it was a long list. I checked Aunt Bett's groceries and made another list, even longer. Aunt Bett had no idea how much food that little girl could stow away. And Aunt Bett started the child on a new education. "She doesn't know a biscuit from a bread roll," she said indignantly. "She doesn't know a cosmos from a zinnia. What were they thinking of, bringing her up ignorant?"

In the afternoon, I was on the ladder finishing a window when I heard Aunt

Bett naming the flowers to her: Busy Lizzie, Sassy Francie, old man's beard, honeysuckle . . . they moved out of range. Later, from the roof, I saw the child darting here and there, examining everything. She had on a red sweater and her hair was tied back with a red ribbon; she looked like a rare tropical butterfly in the golden sunlight, swooping down, darting away, alighting somewhere else.

She was going through the books in the house at an alarming rate. Aunt Bett's children had left stacks and boxes of books upstairs, and more were in the attic and basement. The child clearly intended to read them all. Whatever she read she remembered, whatever she heard she retained. Her education,

haphazard as it was, advanced like lightning. And she was growing. I worked at fixing up the house and tried to think of what to do with her.

I mowed the lawn and reglazed some windows. I fixed the porch rail and took down the screen door and replaced the screening; I puttied and caulked and put up weather stripping, and I was no closer to a solution than I had been the day we arrived. I was beginning to feel desperate; I had to go home, go back to my own life, my office, my company.

We had been there for six days when a visitor dropped in, the first one all week. "Is Mrs. Markham here?" she asked. She was a prim-looking woman of about fifty whose clothes and car—a

Buick—said money. She was eyeing me with unconcealed hostility.

"Aunt Bett? She's around back, I think."

"Oh, I thought you might be one of her sons."

I had been painting the new wood of the porch, and I stopped, waited for her to go, but she took a step or two toward me instead. "I'm Hadley Pruitt," she said. "[I'm a volunteer worker for the county senior services. Frankly, {1.—"

"Winston," I said.

"Mr. Winston, we are terribly concerned about your aunt living out here alone. I've written to her sons, both of them, but no one seems to be able to persuade her that she should give up the

house, move into something more manageable. She should not be alone, Mr. Winston. Not at her age. And she can't afford a live-in companion."

"Where you do think she should go?" I could imagine Aunt Bett's reaction to any suggestion from this woman. And as for Bob and Tyler, they would both treat Hadley Pruitt with such gracious courtesy she would think she was being courted, but they would then defer to their mother.

"There are government housing developments," Hadley Pruitt said eagerly, smiling now, "especially designed for elderly people. She has a tiny pension, but they base the rent on what the tenants can afford. She could

manage quite well."

"I'll tell her you said so, ma'am," I said very politely.

She stiffened. "Since she has company, I won't bother her today. Goodbye, Mr. Winston." I watched her drive off, and returned to the paint job, but she had given me the first workable idea I'd had. I took the brushes and paint around back to clean up, and saw Aunt Bett on the porch in her old rocker, the sun on her legs, her eyes closed, and the child on the step nearby. I motioned to her, put my finger to my lips so we wouldn't wake up Aunt Bett.

"I'm not asleep," Aunt Bett said, sitting up straight. "I'm trying to figure out a riddle. What has eighteen legs and

bats."

The child was watching her with suppressed glee. She had found a joke book and was going right through it with Aunt Bett who was being a good sport.

"I give up," Aunt Bett said finally.

"A baseball team!" She laughed and Aunt Bett laughed along with her.

"What's your name today?" I asked the child.

"I already told you. Don't you remember?"

"Tell me again."

"Nope. You have to guess."

Aunt Bett winked at her and got up and went inside. I waited until the door closed behind her and then said, "If Aunt Bett wants to take care of you, do you

want to stay here with her for a while?"

"Are you going away?" she asked, instantly sober.

"I have to pretty soon. You know, I have work to do, people who expect me to be there. I can't stay away much longer, and I can't take you home with me. They'll be watching for you."

"It's Francie," she said, looking at her new shoes.

"Sassy Francie?" I asked, smiling.

She shook her head. "fust Francie."

I put my arm around her stiff little figure, and after a moment she buried her face against my shoulder and held onto me. I stroked her hair. "I wish I could take you with me," I said softly.

"That's all right," she said, her words

muffled.

I waited until she was in bed before I brought it up with Aunt Bett, who looked troubled. "What's wrong with her, Win? She isn't foe Marcos's child, is she? Is she yours?"

"No. I wish she were. She has a growth problem, hormones or something. No treatment. All she needs is a place where she can feel safe and wanted. You can imagine what it would be like for her to try to go to school, outgrow everyone in her class, be mocked and teased."

She nodded gravely. "Yes, I can imagine that. Whose child is she? Where does she belong?"

"I don't know for sure," I said after a

moment. Then in a rush I told her, "She's a foundling, and researchers are after her to see what makes her tick. That's all I know about her." It was close enough to the whole truth.

"I've known you from the day you were born," she said. "Tell me the truth, Win. Have you done something wrong?"

I shook my head. "I've done something I probably shouldn't have done in hiding her, bringing her here. But nothing wrong."

The troubled look did not yet leave her wrinkled face. "You know I'll be eighty in March? Eighty," she said in a musing way. "I don't expect I'll be around very much longer, Win. This wouldn't be a permanent home, is what I

mean."

"I don't think she'll need a permanent home," I said slowly.

"Well, then, maybe it'll all come out even. Maybe it will. I'll take good care of her, dear." We talked about money for the child's care, a touchy subject. If I suggested too much Aunt Bett would be insulted, feel that I was treating her as a charity case, but it had to be enough not to impoverish her further. The kid outgrew everything within weeks. And she ate like a horse. Then I had to make certain about communications; they had to be able to get me if necessary; I had to know how she was doing. Io.y Marcos would be the go-between, I decided.

When it was done, Aunt Bett stood up

to go to bed. At the doorway she glanced back at me and paused. "I know why I'm doing this, Win. I'm so lonely, and already I love the child, you see. She could be one of my own grandchildren. But why are you?"

"She needed help, I happened to be there."

Aunt Bett regarded me another moment, then went on to her room, clearly unconvinced. Why? I echoed, alone in the living room. The world was full of kids who needed help; Atlanta was full of them. I gave to good causes, worthy charities, did my civic and moral duty through donations, and tried to put them all out of mind, and most of the time was quite successful at not thinking

of the troubled world. Why? Because I had grown to love her? Maybe, but not the day I took her away in a borrowed car. I certainly had not loved her then, and was not sure I did now. I'd had very little experience in loving another person, after all. I was young enough to have half a dozen or more of my own children if this was a simple paternal urge. I could be married within a week, I knew, father a child within a year. I didn't need a surrogate daughter. why?

The next day I took her shopping for the last time. We bought her a couple of things and then a lot of things she thought her big sister would like. I bought a new television for them, and arranged for cable, paid six months in advance. I

bought her a computer, several programs, and half a dozen computer books, and that evening gave her a few elementary lessons in computing; that went exactly like all her other lessons. She saw no difference in learning the names of the flowers, learning the African tribes'

names, learning computerese.

The following day I started the drive to New York. We did not delay over the goodbyes. No one cried. But when I looked back through the rear-view mirror and saw the ancient frail woman holding the hand of the child for whom age was meaningless, I wanted to cry. Oh, I wanted to cry. In New York I returned foey's possessions and we had

a long talk, and afterward Winston Seton reentered the world. I few home. Special Agent James Hanrahan was my welcoming committee of one. He said Mr. Kersh would like a few words with me, if I didn't mind. I said of course not and we went to the Federal Building FBI offices where I waited for three hours. The room was relatively comfortable, with twin sofas, a coffee machine, magazines, all the comforts, but no telephone. I stretched out on one of the sofas and went to sleep. At first, it was an act, to show how unconcerned I was, but then I was waking up and Kersh was standing over me.

"You son of a bitch," he said in a low voice. He stamped across the room and

opened a door. "Come on." This door had been locked earlier; it opened to a routine office with a government issue desk, several chairs, not much else.

He motioned to a chair and seated himself behind the desk. He set up the tape recorder on the desk but did not turn it on. "Off the record," he said. "How'd you get off the island? Where's the kid? Who's got the kid?"

"No, Mr. Kersh," I said. "On the record. Let's keep everything on the record." He flicked a switch on the tape recorder. "I've had a lot of time these past days," I said. "I thought it would be interesting to write an account of our various conversations in which I insisted that the child I saw was three or four,

too old to be either of the children you claimed to be looking for. I believe Mr. Milliken might become incensed if he learns that the whole FBI is using his personal tragedy as a screen, and it might amuse my correspondents to think of the whole FBI engaged in a manhunt for an infant hiding out by herself on the beach. I think the people I sent the copies to will share my sentiments. I told them all I would be back in town today, and if for any reason I didn't show up, to open the sealed envelopes and read the fairy tale I had written."

He was not impressed. "You see too many movies. One of the things they don't tell you is that we have the advantage of time. Next week, next

month, next year, all the time in the world. We'll find the child, you can be certain of that. But you'll never know when someone will drop by to ask just a few more questions, to clarify another point. You won't like that, Mr. Seton, never knowing if an agent is at the next table with another question. Now, about your statement. ..."

As far as my original statement was concerned, I cooperated fully. I had told him the truth and there was no reason to alter anything. I refused to say anything about where I had gone, how I had left, if I had seen the child again. "Charge me with something and let me call my attorney," I said after four hours. "I want my car back and my various

possessions. Now, if we're done here. ..." I stood up. I knew he had to be as tired and irritated as I was, but his smooth face remained imperturbable. He turned off the tape recorder and leaned back in his chair. "We really don't want her genes in the gene pool," he commented. "Bad, very bad mix. You've stashed her away somewhere, but not alone. Winter's coming on. She's with someone. We'll find out who that is, Seton. As I said, we have the benefit of time. You're free to go."

Cabs didn't cruise in Atlanta; I had to walk several blocks to the Carlton Hotel where I knew I could get one, and on the way I thought about the various people they would find and question. All my

friends in Atlanta, my employees, my relatives. My ex, Susan, and Steve Falco in Los Angeles. Eventually they would get around to foey, ffiY best friend in high school. Would they get to Aunt Bett? I didn't see how. She had been my mother's friend, not mine, and she was not a relative. Then I realized that Kersh would expect me to be worried, maybe to get in touch with someone, give a warning. A grimmer thought followed quickly: Kersh would expect me to figure that out. He was toying with me, trying to make me nervous. And succeeding.

I stepped back into my life as if nothing had changed. Everyone at the office wanted to know why the FBI had

been asking questions, and I said I was as baffled as they were. Gracie, my secretary, said maybe I had robbed some banks up north, and then she dimpled; it bugged the bejesus out of me. Gracie was smart or she wouldn't have had her job, that she did extremely well. But she still thought she could get a bigger payback through being cute. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it. If I told her to stop being so damned cute, she would pout, but prettily. The topic lost interest after a day or two, and routine took over.

I had been home a week, working hard to catch up, taking work home with me, staying at the office after hours. If they were watching, and I knew they

were, there was nothing to report. On the next Saturday Kersh paid me a visit. I was working in my studio at home, in an old sweater, older sneakers, jeans. I opened the door and he was there, carrying his briefcase.

"What do you want now, Kersh? I'm pretty busy."

"You look like it. What a life you lead, this kind of house, work in comfortable clothes like that. I brought your car home. She's a real sweetheart." He held up the keys. "Mind if I step inside?" It was a cold day, not rainy, but threatening, and a blustery wind started and stopped, started and stopped. I pulled the door open wider and stepped aside. He handed me the keys as he

entered.

"It's really nice," he said. "These old houses are the greatest, aren't they?" He was looking past me into the living room.

"Do you want to search it?"

"No reason to. We know you're alone. I'm just admiring it. Mind if I see your studio?" I shrugged and led him through the wide hall into a narrower one and on into one of the back rooms that had once been a sun room, or sewing room, something like that. It had wide windows, no curtains. Even on this overcast day it was bright. It held my desk, piled high with proofs, manuscripts, glossies, mail. . . . The big drafting table was almost buried under

more heaps of stuff, but the smaller drawing table was relatively clear. On a shelf were watercolors that I hadn't touched in several years. I had been working at the light table when he rang, spotting photographs, a job I shouldn't have to do, I groused now and then, but one that no one else did to suit me. I stood in the center of the room and watched him take it all in.

Finally he nodded. "A real work room, isn't it? Brought something to show you, if I can spread it out." He pulled a rolled-up paper from his briefcase and I cleared off the drawing table by picking up the few things on it and dumping them on the floor.

He grinned, and the change in his face

was as remarkable as I recalled. He could change age at will by altering his expression.

He unrolled the paper and spread it out. "You must know more about these things than I do," he said, almost apologetically. "It's how some of our people make projections." What he had unrolled was a simple  $x,y$  graph.

"This upright line here is marked off in apparent age by years," he said, pointing, "and the bottom horizontal line is actual time in months. See?" He drew back and looked at me thoughtfully. "The really fine-tuned ones they're using are in days, but this will do. She was born here, zero day, zero month, zero year. We just added the points we're fairly

sure of, you know, the foster parent who had her at one month, the Forbush woman who had her at six months, your report when she was eight months. Those are the points."

"And the lines?" I asked. My hands were sweating. I understood the lines drawn through the points.

"You know," he chided. "There's some dispute about some of the projections, but they went ahead and prepared them all anyway. For instance, between this one at six months, when she appeared to be a year and a half, to the time you saw her, when she looked three to four, that's pretty steep. But they went ahead and used it for one of the projections, although some of our people

think she was stressed, that the stress resulted in the spurt that isn't her norm. You know, the plane crash, Max and his girl friends, being alone on the beach. Pretty stressful. Anyway, if that's her growth line, see here, she'll reach twelve physically when she's seventeen months old. If you take this one, the average rate of growth through all the points, then she'll be two and a half when she reaches the physical age of twelve." There were other lines and he explained them, but they were meaningless. If these projections were anywhere near right, then between one and a half to two and a half years after her birth, she would become an adolescent.

He rolled up the chart again. "She has a secret, a new way of metabolizing food maybe, something. A hormone, an enzyme, a new combination. Was there a food supply in that placenta, or the long umbilicus, enough to sustain rapid growth for a few hours? What if they could find what let her do that and inject it into livestock? What if they could use it to cure cancer? The men in the white coats are frothing at the mouth for her. Believe me, Seton, they will not harm a hair on that child's head. Hell, she could die of old age by the chronological age of six! They want her now. And they don't want her out there breeding. They'd much prefer her alive, of course, and even bearing children under supervision,

but they'd rather have her body than have her out there breeding." The glint was in his eyes again. I didn't know what it was. Fanaticism? Zeal? Earnestness? Fatigue? Whatever brought it on was well repressed most of the time. I turned away from him. "They don't have a thing to base such coniectures on, and you know it. Hypotheses are cheap, let them dream."

"For now. For now, but not very much longer. Think of what it would do to the population if women had kids that easily, every few months here comes another one. No pain, no sweat. Hell, think what it would do to women, and the way women and men treat each other. And in a couple of years each new

one's out doing it. You can make your own charts. Think about it, Seton. I'll be seeing you." I could make the charts, I thought after he had gone, and God help us all, in many ways he was right. I remembered what he had said about her, like a dinosaur on the beach, and with the memory I found myself at the drawing table sketching a dinosaur, then another, and another until I had a beach crowded with them, with one of them open-mouthed, displaying many dagger teeth, looking down at a rock that a tiny mouse crouched behind fearfully. I stared at it a long time until finally, reluctantly, I drew in the balloon and lettered the words in big, bold caps: **YOU'RE GOING To DO *WHAT?***

What was Kersh waiting for? He knew by now that I had no intention of cooperating. I had read the novels, had seen the movies; I believed they had ways to get information out of people if they had to. Kersh had warned me that they would use whatever means they chose if too much time passed. Why?

He could be gambling that I would panic and get word to her to run again, and that he would be able to intercept that word. Probably that was part of it. But the bigger part, I felt certain, was that they were still using me as bait, dangling me in the water so that eventually she would come to me. I had no doubt they were intercepting my mail and monitoring my phone calls.

Everyone I talked to would be scrutinized; everyone I had lunch with, dined with, went to a show with.

Very quietly I-began to drop out of the social circles that made up my Atlanta. I pleaded work, fatigue, deadlines, whatever came to mind. It wasn't fair to involve anyone else in this. I began to draw again, and even got out the watercolors and played with them, and the waiting game continued. Ioey came down to visit his parents over the holidays, as he usually did, and we had dinner together, as we usually did. I passed him a large envelope addressed to Aunt Bett and asked him to remail it from New York. No questions. Inside the big envelope was a thousand dollars

in mixed bills, for the child, I had written, and another envelope, addressed to her. I was frustrated because I didn't know what name she would be using, and finally I wrote *Francie*. In this letter I expressed -y fears that they would be watching me forever, that she must never try to reach me directly. I warned her about AIDS, herpes, drugs, men .. I told her everything I knew about her early months, the differences between her and other children. I told her that she had to move before fune, and that I must not know where she had gone. They would wait until fune, I prayed. It was parental stuff, I mocked myself, but I wrote it **all** out, and Joey took it to mail In February

I celebrated her birthday by myself with a bottle of champagne. I couldn't even properly toast her because I didn't know her name for 'to,ay.

In April I was home at ten on Saturday night, when the phone rang. "Wir," she said, "Aunt Bett died Monday, and we buried her Wedn.rda!. I left. I'll be all right. I wanted you to know. Thank you, win. Thank you."

That was all. The line buzzed and hummed and I stared at the wall behind the telephone stand. Within the hour Kersh was there. "Who is Aunt Bett?" he demanded. I told him. He regarded me for a time, his face closed, the hard glint in his eyes. "You turned her into a street walker, Seton. She's in New York. It's

little girls like her that grease the wheels that keep the city rolling. How many guys you suppose she'll have to blow tomorrow to make enough bread to stay alive?" I wanted to kill him.

Winter into spring, spring into summer, the pace set in time immemorial; so it went. I put her out of mind; how big was she, how mature, how was she living, was she surviving, had they found her. . . ? There were hours at a stretch that I didn't wonder what her name was today. August, a heavy sultry month, with thunderstorms and windstorms and heat curtains rising from wet pavement, and visible steam at arm-length distance. Kersh came to see me. He was carrying a light-weight

jacket, his shirt moist, his face moist. "You're selling out l-rere?" he asked on the front porch. I motioned him inside where the air conditioner failed to squeeze the humidity out of the air, merely reduced it somewhat. It always felt good for a couple of minutes. "So?"

"Heard you had a tempting offer," he said, and followed me to the living room, where he sank down into a leather-covered chair and sighed. "Can't take the heat," he explained.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing." He held up his hand. "Honestly, Seton, nothing. fust heard you might be selling the business, wondered."

"I might be Haven't decided."

"

"You're not exactly what they call a quick decision maker," he commented. "She's still out there." I shrugged. "You want some iced tea?"

"Yeah that would be good." He followed me to the kitchen and watched while I prepared two glasses of

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tea. "We don't want you to get out of touch," he said lightly. "You know, keep up the friendship, that sort of thing. Tired of the business?"

Tired to death of it, I thought, and did not respond. I squeezed a lemon and added a dash of juice to each glass, handed one over to him. Tired of deadlines, bad photographs, delayed

orders. Irritable with incompetence. Sick of dealing. Tired. Over the last two years I had had three tempting offers, the one he had got wind of, God alone knew how, the most tempting of the lot. The conglomerates couldn't start companies for shit, but they liked to acquire them after they were up and running. What I wanted to do was load up the T-bird and drive, and drive, and drive. Take a picture now and then, sketch something or other now and then, and drive again.

Very politely I waited until he had finished his tea before I asked, "I assume you came to deliver that message? Stay in touch? Anything else?"

He drained the glass and set it down. "I figure, one, she's dead. Six weeks for

an inexperienced kid like that is a lifetime in the Big Apple. Or, two, she's hooked on something. They like to hook them young. They never stray after that. Or, three, she's sick, infected already with half a dozen baddies. The morgue, the hospitals, the jails, they're keeping an eye out. We figure she'll turn up in one of them. But in case she doesn't, we still think she might want to renew old acquaintances with you. When she's sick enough, or broke enough, or hurting enough. That's the message. fust stay in touch. Be seeing you, Seton. I think I can find the front door again."

I let him find it alone. I hadn't told anyone about the newest offer, yet they had found out. What else?

What else was there to learn? I asked myself bitterly. His three possibilities seemed all too real, and they would be the first to know.

August, hurricane month, a hurricane hanging off the coast, bringing torrential rains inland. Atlanta had two inches within six hours, and there was flooding, as usual, and stalled transportation, grounded planes. I stood at the office window watching the wakes being left by cars leaving work before the floods got worse. Gracie had gone already, Phil had left, the building was emptying fast. And the telephone rang. I never used the official answering procedure; I never remembered what it was. I merely said, "Hello."

"Win, darling, is it you? I thought I'd never find anyone I knew."

"Who is this?" I asked, irritated at the whispery promise of the voice.

"Darling, and you said you'd never forget! It's Francie, win, darling. I'm stranded out at the airport." *Francie*. I closed my eyes hard and clung to the telephone as if it were saving me from the abyss below.

"I thought maybe you knew a way to get out here," she went on, husky, suggestive. "I mean, we're grounded, and they don't know when they'll fly. I got a room at the airport hotel, but I'm lonesome." *It's Francie, she said. Sassy Francie? I asked. lust Francie.*

"If you can't," she said, "I mean, really

can't, that's all right, sweetie. I just thought how nice it would be to get together, since I'm here. You know. Talk over old times." She laughed a low dirty laugh. "You never got back to New Orleans, did you?"

"Never did. Look, I'll be out there as soon as I can get through. It will be good to see you after so long." She laughed again and told me the bar she would be in, and hung up. I had broken out in a sweat and my hands were shaky.

I took a deep breath and tried to think. They would have listened, they would be right there with me even if I didn't know who they were. They would pick up a glass she touched, take away the table or chair, lift fingerprints, match

them. ... I told her to stay away from me, I thought furiously. This was exactly what they had waited for. But they wouldn't connect her with that voice, I argued with myself; she sounded just like a New Orleans whore. They would be looking for a little girl, an adolescent girl. And they knew how long it had been since I had been with a woman. It would look even more suspicious if I didn't go; she had practically undressed by phone. Maybe I could smudge any prints she might have left, find out what she was after, send her packing again. . . . I got there faster than I expected; most people were heading for town not the airport, since all flights had been grounded. The wind was gusting around

forty to fifty miles an hour, and the rain was coming down hard enough to put another two inches on the ground before midnight. Her timing, her excuse for calling, everything she had done had been perfectly planned, and when I saw her, the deception seemed total. She looked like a high-priced New Orleans call girl. She had on black lace stockings, gloves to match, a narrow shiny black miniskirt, low-cut frilly blouse, and her hair was long, thick, and black. She fluttered fake eyelashes as she slipped off a bar stool. Every man in the place watched her slithering walk as she came to greet me.

I felt as awkward as if I had entered a cathouse to find it full of Sunday-School

teachers who all knew me. She laughed and took my arm. "Relax, honey. Let's have a little drink and then go someplace quiet where we can . . . talk." One of the men nearby laughed and turned back around; he said something to his companion, who also laughed, and Francie and I found a table.

The bartender came over and called her doll and she called him handsome and ordered Perrier and then said, "Let's see if I remember, Win, darling. It used to be a very dry gibson, vodka gibson. Am I right?" I nodded and she laughed at the bartender, winked, and said, "I never forget the important things." As soon as he was gone I leaned forward and whispered, "We've got to get out of here.

I'm being followed."

She kissed the tip of her finger and touched it to my lips, smiling. "You northern businessmen are always in such a hurry. So impetuous. Let me tell you about the flight, Win darling. I was never so scared in my life when that plane began to rock back and forth, up and down. Why, you couldn't get me back on an airplane with a stick, not until the storm's all the way gone, and the sun's shining and all. And I believe it could go on raining all night, into tomorrow. You know?"

She was perfect, I had to admit. She had the accent down, the flirtatious glances at other men, the way she flirted outrageously with the bartender, Ler

chatter. . . . She had even thought about fingerprints. I drank the gibson, and she sipped her water, and eventually we were ready to leav\_e. She took my arm and held it hard against her when we walked out. Perfect.

In her room I hurried to close the drapes, and she turned on the radio and fiddled with it until she had loud rock, and then we sat on the side of the bed. Slowly she pulled off the black wig, and then peeled off her fake eyelashes. Her hair was brown and short with deep waves. Her eyes were golden brown.

"Why did you come here?" I asked in a low voice. "Is anything wrong?" She shook her head. "I had to see you, let you see me, know it's finished. I don't know.

Aunt Bett died, Win."

"I know. Where did you go? How did you live?"

"She gave me most of the money you had been sending, and I had the other money you sent. It was a lot. She said to tell you thank you. She made me promise to say thank you for her." I wanted very much to put my arm around her, draw her close and comfort her, but this was not the child I had found in Atlantic City. I couldn't touch this young woman and I knew it. We spoke in low voices, sometimes hers was hardly audible as she told me how she had managed. "There was a school for girls, you know, with uniforms. I bought a uniform like theirs and no one paid any attention to

me around there. And there was a big building where a lot of people slept in the halls, under the steps, and I did too." I shuddered, and she said quickly, "It wasn't bad. I bought some toothpaste, the kind without any smell or taste, and I would chew it up a little, mix it with spit, and then make little bubbles at the sides of my mouth, and no one came near me. I learned to roll my eyes funny too. Like this." She rolled her eyes and looked demented.

"Christ," I muttered and ducked my head.

She put her hand on my arm, then hurriedly pulled it away again. "It was okay," she said softly. "Honest, it was. When I grew a little more I got other

clothes and then I hung out around the university, I even got a

motor near there, and after that it was really all right. I went to the library and read a lot. I kept changing, though; you know, growing. Not taller. Just getting more mature. And I began to think about you, and how much I wanted to see you again. ..." Fler's voice trailed off and stopped. After a moment I pointed to the wig at the foot of the bed. "Where did you learn that act?" She laughed deep in her throat. "Wasn't I good! I read things, and saw movies, and I watched the women on the streets, how they -walked, how they talked to men." And never forgot a thing, I finished silently when she stopped again. I stood up and

walked to the window and pulled the drape op." a bit. The rain was pelting down harder than ever. No doubt the aiiporf road would go under water within the hour. I pulled the drape shut and iurned back to hJr. "Now what?" She obviously no longer needed help. Maybe a little money, but no more than that. She could go anywhere, be anyone she chose.

"I don't know," she said in a voice so low that this iime I couldn't hear her over the loud radio, but read her lips, and remembered how she had moved her lips sounding out words less than a year ago. Alrggtly she stood up and came across the room m trk. my hand. She headed for the bathroom with me in tow,

and there she closed the door, and turned on the shower full blast. "The radio was driving me batty," she said with a faint smile. Almost instantly she was somber again. "I know how different I am, Win. It is possible that my mother used a drug that caused chromosomal damage, scrambling, breaks, something of the sort, and this difference will be self-limiting. I won't breed true. But it is also possible that I am a true genetic sport, something new, and my children will be also. In either event, those people who want to study me won't rest until I am dead. They will hunt and hunt. Intellectually, I don't blame them; I would do the same in their place. But I'm not in their place, and I don't know how

it would feel to be like them, like you, like anyone else. This, how I am, feels natural. I don't feel like a freak or a monster."

"God," I whispered. "Oh, God, Francie. You're not a monster. You're a beautiful woman."

"Make love to me, Win. Please. You've taught me so much. Will you teach me that?" She touched my cheek.

I reached past her and turned off the shower, then I picked her up and carried her to bed and taught her about love.

"What I would like," she whispered that night, "is to live on a mountainside with trees all around, and a fresh little brook with fish. And no people. But what would you do in such a place?"

"Oh, I'd keep the house in good repair, cut wood for the fires, and I would paint and take pictures."

"Good," she said with a nod, as if that were settled. "And I would teach the children the way Aunt Bett taught me. I would teach them the names of the flowers, and which plants you can eat, and how algebra works, and how to make biscuits, and where the Serengeti Plains are located. The girls would go out and meet men and pick carefully which ones, and then come home to have their babies." She laughed softly.

"Grandparents."

When she slept, I studied her face in the dim light from the bathroom. How very beautiful she had become, such fine

bones, such soft skin. This, I understood finally, was why I had helped that child on the beach, why I had hidden the girl from the world; to get to this moment I had to do those things, this moment had been determined. I smiled at how foolish that ,our,-d"d, but I believed it. I touched her cheek as she slept and she smiled and moved closer without waking up. Tomorrow I would send her away. I would make her promise never to come near me again, never-to call, or write. She could make it now by herself. I was the only menace for her, and eventually I would betray her. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to look at her, to touch her cheek now and then, to see her smile, but I dozed, and when I woke up she was

moving around the room with a towel'

"What are you doing?"

She came to the bed and knelt by me. "Wiping off my fingerprints. I just thought of it," she whispered. I pulled her into the bed and made love to her again, and I did not tell her, but no prints would be as much a giveaway as finding a full set of clear prints. When I woke up again it was nine in the morning and she was gone.

I knew it as soon as I opened my eyes. Last night her presence had filled the space, and now it was just a bleak and empty hotel room.

September. October. I decided to sell the business the day I stared at spotted photographs and didn't give a damn. I

told my lawyer and my accountant to take care of it, my only real demand was that those who wanted to keep their jobs would be allowed to. Not a big stumbling-block. For a few days I expected -Kersh to come calling, but he didn't; maybe he was walking the streets of New Orleans looking for a black-haired hooker in a shiny tight itltt.

I wanted desperately to hear her voice, to know she was well, and, more desperately, I wanted her to stay away, not to call, not to write. Ope day I found myself sorting books, stacking some, boxing others, and I realized that I had made the decision to sell the house as well as the business. I had to move away so she could not find me.

November. The Thanksgiving homecoming weekend party was to be held at the Carlton Hotel; as it was every year. Our team, win or lose, rah rah. I was home when she called. "H"y, Win," she said in a bubbly voice, "it's Rosalee. You've been hiding out long enough, bubba. Come to the party Saturday. Duck away from the mobs and hit the little parties in eight twenty, six fourteen, and ten thirty. See ya!" Numbly I hung up. She was insane, coming back, calling. She knew they w-ere monitoring my line. She knew they watched me day after day, night after night. I wouldn't go near the Carlton, I thought, and i ejected that. She was in towtt, and might call again, suggest something else, and at least at

the homecoming party there would be hordes of young people. would she come as a cheerleader? A football groupie? Whatever it was, she would blend right in, I knew.

I had been shopping for gifts for everyone at the office; now I shopped - without for just the right present for her. Something I could keep at hand without arousing suspicions. Something I could pass over when I told her I was leaving the city, leaving the state. I tried to figure out what she had meant by the numbers she had given me, and failed. There were always private room parties, always jammed; she wouldn't be planning to meet any of them, and I could not recombine the elements in

any way to make sense. I stalked through stores searching for the gift, and worked with the numbers, and looked at more stuff. Just stuff. Not for her.

Then I found it. A gossamer sheer kimono in gleaming white silk, as soft as a cloud, with a single red rose embroidered over the back, and a delicate gold-thread edging on the front. I passed it up, went back and felt it, and bought it. The box was too big to carry around a party, but it was hers. It looked as if it had been made for her alone, had been in her waiting for me. I had it gift-wrapped and carried it home in a shopping bag.

Saturday night the Carlton was like an asylum with all the attendants out on

strike. The party took up three large downstairs rooms, the dining room, the lounge and bar. I carried the shopping bag in with me and made my way to the cloakroom. I had decided to check it with my coat and pass her the claim check when we met; it seemed the best I could do. Moving through the lobby was a slow business; I knew half the people there, it seemed, and had not seen many of them for a long time. Everyone was happy and loud.

At the cloakroom I waited in line, then passed over the coat and the shopping bag, talking to one of my old teachers and his wife. The young woman behind the counter pressed the claim check into my hand, and at the touch, I pivoted. *You.*

She smiled pleasantly and was already taking the coat of the next man in line. I looked at my hand; I held the claim check, and also a room key. She had told me the time, I realized: ten thirty. Room parties were going on up and down the tenth floor. Men were reliving moments of glory, reenacting plays, throwing a pillow here, a real football there. ... A bunch of them were lined up for the kickoff in the hall. ... I visited one party after another, stayed for a minute or two, then moved on. Nine thirty, nine forty, nine forty-five. I hit another room, accepted another drink that I would not taste, talked to people, and instantly forgot what we talked about and even who they were. I didn't know who was

watching me, but then, I never did. Ten twenty. I got on the elevator on the tenth floor and rode down to six with people I did know. On six I left the group, entered the stairwell, and started the climb up to the fourteenth floor.

If I saw anyone I hadn't known for a long time, I would go to ten, do another party or two, and then go home, I told myself. I was sure that no one had noticed when I entered the stairwell, and you couldn't find anyone in the crowds milling about if you had to. Just to make certain, I left the stairs on eleven and walked the length of the corridor. It was quiet up here; the parties were being confined to ten, eight, and six, and the main floor. I found other stairs and went

up the remaining floors. No thirteen. On fourteen an elderly couple passed me in the hall. We all nodded; they went on to the elevator and I went on to room number fourteen eighteen. At first I thought she wasn't there yet. A small table was near tall double windows that were open to a tiny balcony with a lovely vista of Atlanta by night. Everything out there glittered. On the table was a champagne bottle in a cooler and two glasses. Then she moved into sight on the balcony. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said. She had changed her clothes from the black and white uniform she had worn earlier to a long pale blue skirt and matching sweater. She was more beautiful than I remembered'

"I have a present for you," she said, and picked up a slim package on the table.

"And I checked a present for you."

Her eyes shifted and widened. Staring past me, she whispered, "Promise you'll take them home, Win. Keep the presents as mementoes. Promise. Don't forget me."

I spun around to see Kersh and two other men entering the room without a sound. One of them leaped toward her, knocking me out of the way, but she was on the balcony, the table between her and the rest of us. She looked at me another second, turned, and swung her legs over the railing, and then stepped off.

For a moment no one moved, then I screamed, and lunged toward the balcony. Someone clipped me behind the ear and I fell to my knees.

They took me to a different room where I sat in a large chair while people came and went. I couldn't weep for her; I had no tears, only the dreadful knowledge that I had done it, I had failed her. I failed my mother who drove her car into a tree doing ninety miles an hour. Failed my ex-wife who thought she needed plastic breasts. Failed Aunt Bett who had lived so many years in poverty and loneliness. Failed the little girls who oiled the wheels of New York. Failed the social worker who wept because they wouldn't give her what she

needed to save children. Failed them all.

Kersh brought the little package from the other room and asked me to open it. It was a book with handpainted illustrations of common flowers with their names. He leafed through it and handed it back to me. "Do you want someone to take you home?"

I stood up and started to walk toward the door.

"seton, hold on a second," Kersh said heavily. He regarded me for a moment, then said, "It's over. we aren't going to Lothe you anymore. you understand? You couldn't have prevented Itrir. We've been getting closer for weeks now. we w\_eren't going to wait any longer. Do you f.,d.ritr,ld what fm telling you? cet

in that big pretty .rr of lours and drive, seton. Just drive a long time." Someone went down the elevator with me; although it was after two in the morning, there was still a mob in the lobby, but iubdued, huddling in small groups. No one paid any attention as ttre agent led me through the clusters of people and retrieved my coat and shoppt.,g bag. He went to the outer door with me, and I walked on alone to my car.

It r! a long time before I turned the key in the ignition, a long time before Itl shifted into gea-r and began to drive.. At home, I carried i" ti. fr.krg.r. *Promise. Don't fo\_rget me.* I opened the book but could not focus on the pictures, the words. A gold bookmark was in it. I

opened to that page, and the words seemed to leap at me. " 'sassy Francie,' *saxifraga*. sometimes called Mother of Thousands." I looked up at the shopping bag then, and I knew. I had noticed without conscious awareness, but I knew it held more than I had put in it. My hand was shaking when I reached inside and brought out a small box, the size of a shoebox for children's shoes. It was wrapped in silver foil and had been pierced all over. Carefully I lifted the top and there, our daughter, curled in sleep, clothed in a tiny garment attached to the sides of the box, which was padded and covered with pink silk. Then I wept. She had known it could never end as long as she lived, but our

daughter was free. I would find the mountainside with the forests all around; I would teach her what she needed to know, and her children and theirs. It would take careful planning; no one must suspect until they had scattered everywhere, like seeds on the wind. There would be time to think and plan as I drove.

"Your name will be Rose," I murmured to my child, who would fit in the palm of my hand. I had begun naming the flowers.