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Prologue

I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.

And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone. When the police released Kevin, he came to the hospital and stayed with me so that I would know I hadn't lost him too.

But before he could come to me, I had to convince the police that he did not belong in jail. That took time. The police were shadows who appeared intermittently at my bedside to ask me questions I had to struggle to understand.

"How did you hurt your arm?" they asked. "Who hurt you?" My attention was captured by the word they used: Hurt. As though I'd scratched my arm. Didn't they think I knew it was gone?

"Accident," I heard myself whisper. "It was an accident."

They began asking me about Kevin. Their words seemed to blur together at first, and I paid little attention. After a while, though, I replayed them and suddenly realized that these men were trying to blame Kevin for "hurting" my arm.

"No." I shook my head weakly against the pillow. "Not Kevin. Is he here? Can I see him?"

"Who then?" they persisted.

I tried to think through the drugs, through the distant pain, but there was no honest explanation I could give them—none they would believe.

"An accident," I repeated. "My fault, not Kevin's. Please let me see him."

I said this over and over until the vague police shapes let me alone, until I awoke to find Kevin sitting, dozing beside my bed. I wondered briefly how long he had been there, but it didn't matter. The important thing was that he was there. I slept again, relieved.

Finally, I awoke feeling able to talk to him coherently and understand what he said. I was almost comfortable except for the strange throbbing of my arm. Of where my arm had been. I moved my head, tried to look at the empty place . . . the stump.

Then Kevin was standing over me, his hands on my face turning my head toward him.

He didn't say anything. After a moment, he sat down again, took my hand, and held it.

I felt as though I could have lifted my other hand and touched him. I felt as though I had another hand. I tried again to look, and this time he let me. Somehow, I had to see to be able to accept what I knew was so.

After a moment, I lay back against the pillow and closed my eyes. "Above the elbow," I said.

"They had to."

"I know. I'm just trying to get used to it." I opened my eyes and looked at him. Then I remembered my earlier visitors. "Have I gotten you into trouble?"

"Me?"

"The police were here. They thought you had done this to me."

"Oh, that. They were sheriff's deputies. The neighbors called them when you started to scream. They questioned me, detained me for a while—that's what they call it!—but you convinced them that they might as well let me go."

"Good. I told them it was an accident. My fault."

"There's no way a thing like that could be your fault."

"That's debatable. But it certainly wasn't your fault. Are you still in trouble?"

"I don't think so. They're sure I did it, but there were no witnesses, and you won't co-operate. Also, I don't think they can figure out how I could have hurt you . . . in the way you were hurt."

I closed my eyes again remembering the way I had been hurt—remembering the pain.

"Are you all right?" Kevin asked.

"Yes. Tell me what you told the police."

"The truth." He toyed with my hand for a moment silently. I looked at him, found him watching me.

"If you told those deputies the truth," I said softly, "you'd still be locked up—in a mental hospital."

He smiled. "I told as much of the truth as I could. I said I was in the bedroom when I heard you scream. I ran to the living room to see what was wrong, and I found you struggling to free your arm from what seemed to be a hole in the wall. I went to help you. That was when I realized your arm wasn't just stuck, but that, somehow, it had been crushed right into the wall."

"Not exactly crushed."

"I know. But that seemed to be a good word to use on them—to show my ignorance. It wasn't all that inaccurate either. Then they wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I didn't know . . . kept telling them I didn't know. And heaven help me, Dana, I don't know."

"Neither do I," I whispered. "Neither do I."

The River

The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him for the first time.

Kevin and I had not planned to do anything to celebrate my birthday. We were both too tired for that. On the day before, we had moved from our apartment in Los Angeles to a house of our own a few miles away in Altadena. The moving was celebration enough for me. We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking because I didn't hear his typewriter. Finally, he came out to the living room where I was sorting books into one of the big bookcases. Fiction only. We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some kind of order.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Nothing." He sat down on the floor near where I was working. "Just struggling with my own perversity. You know, I had half-a-dozen ideas for that Christmas story yesterday during the moving."

"And none now when there's time to write them down."

"Not a one." He picked up a book, opened it, and turned a few pages. I picked up another book and tapped him on the shoulder with it. When he looked up, surprised, I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. He stared at it unhappily.

"Hell, why'd I come out here?"

"To get more ideas. After all, they come to you when you're busy."

He gave me a look that I knew wasn't as malevolent as it seemed. He had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant and angry whether he was or not. He used them to intimidate people. Strangers. I grinned at him and went back to work. After a moment, he took the nonfiction to another bookcase and began shelving it.

I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, "What happened?"

I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. "Something is wrong with me," I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming . . .

Drowning!

I reacted to the child in trouble. Later I could ask questions, try to find out where I was, what had happened. Now I went to help the child.

I ran down to the river, waded into the water fully clothed, and swam quickly to the child. He was unconscious by the time I reached him—a small red-haired boy floating, face down. I turned him over, got a good hold on him so that his head was above water, and towed him in. There was a red-haired woman waiting for us on the shore now. Or rather, she was running back and forth crying on the shore. The moment she saw that I was wading, she ran out, took the boy from me and carried him the rest of the way, feeling and examining him as she did.

"He's not breathing!" she screamed.

Artificial respiration. I had seen it done, been told about it, but I had never done it. Now was the time to try. The woman was in no condition to do anything useful, and there was no one else in sight. As we reached shore, I snatched the child from her. He was no more than four or five years old, and not very big.

I put him down on his back, tilted his head back, and began

mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I saw his chest move as I breathed into him. Then, suddenly, the woman began beating me.

"You killed my baby!" she screamed. "You killed him!"

I turned and managed to catch her pounding fists. "Stop it!" I shouted, putting all the authority I could into my voice. "He's alive!" Was he? I couldn't tell. Please God, let him be alive. "The boy's alive. Now let me help him." I pushed her away, glad she was a little smaller than I was, and turned my attention back to her son. Between breaths, I saw her staring at me blankly. Then she dropped to her knees beside me, crying.

Moments later, the boy began breathing on his own—breathing and coughing and choking and throwing up and crying for his mother. If he could do all that, he was all right. I sat back from him, feeling light-headed, relieved. I had done it!

"He's alive!" cried the woman. She grabbed him and nearly smothered him. "Oh, Rufus, baby . . ."

Rufus. Ugly name to inflict on a reasonably nice-looking little kid.

When Rufus saw that it was his mother who held him, he clung to her, screaming as loudly as he could. There was nothing wrong with his voice, anyway. Then, suddenly, there was another voice.

"What the devil's going on here?" A man's voice, angry and demanding.

I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy's life. I was going to die.

I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy. My vision blurred so badly I could not distinguish the gun or the face of the man behind it. I heard the woman speak sharply, but I was too far gone into sickness and panic to understand what she said.

Then the man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished.

I was kneeling in the living room of my own house again several feet from where I had fallen minutes before. I was back at home—wet and muddy, but intact. Across the room, Kevin stood frozen, staring at the spot where I had been. How long had he been there?

"Kevin?"

He spun around to face me. "What the hell . . . how did you get over there?" he whispered.

"I don't know."

"Dana, you . . ." He came over to me, touched me tentatively as though he wasn't sure I was real. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and held me tightly. "What happened?"

I reached up to loosen his grip, but he wouldn't let go. He dropped to his knees beside me.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"I would if I knew what to tell you. Stop hurting me."

He let me go, finally, stared at me as though he'd just recognized me. "Are you all right?"

"No." I lowered my head and closed my eyes for a moment. I was shaking with fear, with residual terror that took all the strength out of me. I folded forward, hugging myself, trying to be still. The threat was gone, but it was all I could do to keep my teeth from chattering.

Kevin got up and went away for a moment. He came back with a large towel and wrapped it around my shoulders. It comforted me somehow, and I pulled it tighter. There was an ache in my back and shoulders where Rufus's mother had pounded with her fists. She had hit harder than I'd realized, and Kevin hadn't helped.

We sat there together on the floor, me wrapped in the towel and Kevin with his arm around me calming me just by being there. After a while, I stopped shaking.

"Tell me now," said Kevin.

"What?"

"Everything. What happened to you? How did you . . . how did you move like that?"

I sat mute, trying to gather my thoughts, seeing the rifle again leveled at my head. I had never in my life panicked that way—never felt so close to death.

"Dana." He spoke softly. The sound of his voice seemed to put distance between me and the memory. But still . . .

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. "It's all crazy."

"Tell me how you got wet," he said. "Start with that."

I nodded. "There was a river," I said. "Woods with a river running through. And there was a boy drowning. I saved him. That's how I got wet." I hesitated, trying to think, to make sense. Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently.

I looked at Kevin, saw that he held his expression carefully neutral. He waited. More composed, I went back to the beginning, to the first dizziness, and remembered it all for him—relived it all in detail. I

even recalled things that I hadn't realized I'd noticed. The trees I'd been near, for instance, were pine trees, tall and straight with branches and needles mostly at the top. I had noticed that much somehow in the instant before I had seen Rufus. And I remembered something extra about Rufus's mother. Her clothing. She had worn a long dark dress that covered her from neck to feet. A silly thing to be wearing on a muddy riverbank. And she had spoken with an accent—a southern accent. Then there was the unforgettable gun, long and deadly.

Kevin listened without interrupting. When I was finished, he took the edge of the towel and wiped a little of the mud from my leg. "This stuff had to come from somewhere," he said.

"You don't believe me?"

He stared at the mud for a moment, then faced me. "You know how long you were gone?"

"A few minutes. Not long."

"A few seconds. There were no more than ten or fifteen seconds between the time you went and the time you called my name."

"Oh, no . . ." I shook my head slowly. "All that couldn't have happened in just seconds."

He said nothing.

"But it was real! I was there!" I caught myself, took a deep breath, and slowed down. "All right. If you told me a story like this, I probably wouldn't believe it either, but like you said, this mud came from somewhere."

"Yes."

"Look, what did you see? What do you think happened?"

He frowned a little, shook his head. "You vanished." He seemed to have to force the words out. "You were here until my hand was just a couple of inches from you. Then, suddenly, you were gone. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there. Then you were back again and on the other side of the room."

"Do you believe it yet?"

He shrugged. "It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts."

"I reappeared wet, muddy, and scared to death."

"Yes."

"And I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They're no crazier than yours."

"I don't know what to think."

"I'm not sure it matters what we think."

"What do you mean?"

"Well . . . it happened once. What if it happens again?"

"No. No, I don't think . . ."

"You don't know!" I was starting to shake again. "Whatever it was, I've had enough of it! It almost killed me!"

"Take it easy," he said. "Whatever happens, it's not going to do you any good to panic yourself again."

I moved uncomfortably, looked around. "I feel like it could happen again—like it could happen anytime. I don't feel secure here."

"You're just scaring yourself."

"No!" I turned to glare at him, and he looked so worried I turned away again. I wondered bitterly whether he was worried about my vanishing again or worried about my sanity. I still didn't think he believed my story. "Maybe you're right," I said. "I hope you are. Maybe I'm just like a victim of robbery or rape or something—a victim who survives, but who doesn't feel safe any more." I shrugged. "I don't have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don't feel safe any more."

He made his voice very gentle. "If it happens again, and if it's real, the boy's father will know he owes you thanks. He won't hurt you."

"You don't know that. You don't know what could happen." I stood up unsteadily. "Hell, I don't blame you for humoring me." I paused to give him a chance to deny it, but he didn't. "I'm beginning to feel as though I'm humoring myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it's beginning to recede from me somehow. It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand."

"Or like a . . . a dream?"

I looked down at him. "You mean a hallucination."

"All right."

"No! I know what I'm doing. I can see. I'm pulling away from it because it scares me so. But it was real."

"Let yourself pull away from it." He got up and took the muddy towel from me. "That sounds like the best thing you can do, whether it was real or not. Let go of it."

The Fire

1

I tried.

I showered, washed away the mud and the brackish water, put on clean clothes, combed my hair . . .

"That's a lot better," said Kevin when he saw me.

But it wasn't.

Rufus and his parents had still not quite settled back and become the "dream" Kevin wanted them to be. They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it. I had been afraid that the dizziness might come back while I was in the shower, afraid that I would fall and crack my skull against the tile or that I would go back to that river, wherever it was, and find myself standing naked among strangers. Or would I appear somewhere else naked and totally vulnerable?

I washed very quickly.

Then I went back to the books in the living room, but Kevin had almost finished shelving them.

"Forget about any more unpacking today," he told me. "Let's go get something to eat."

"Go?"

"Yes, where would you like to eat? Someplace nice for your birthday."

"Here."

"But . . ."

"Here, really. I don't want to go anywhere."

"Why not?"

I took a deep breath. "Tomorrow," I said. "Let's go tomorrow." Somehow, tomorrow would be better. I would have a night's sleep between me and whatever had happened. And if nothing else happened, I would be able to relax a little.

"It would be good for you to get out of here for a while," he said.

"No."

"Listen . . ."

"No!" Nothing was going to get me out of the house that night if I could help it.

Kevin looked at me for a moment—I probably looked as scared as I was—then he went to the phone and called out for chicken and shrimp.

But staying home did no good. When the food had arrived, when we were eating and I was calmer, the kitchen began to blur around me.

Again the light seemed to dim and I felt the sick dizziness. I pushed back from the table, but didn't try to get up. I couldn't have gotten up.

"Dana?"

I didn't answer.

"Is it happening again?"

"I think so." I sat very still, trying not to fall off my chair. The floor seemed farther away than it should have. I reached out for the table to steady myself, but before I could touch it, it was gone. And the distant floor seemed to darken and change. The linoleum tile became wood, partially carpeted. And the chair beneath me vanished.

2

When my dizziness cleared away, I found myself sitting on a small bed sheltered by a kind of abbreviated dark green canopy. Beside me was a little wooden stand containing a battered old pocket knife, several marbles, and a lighted candle in a metal holder. Before me was a red-haired boy. Rufus?

The boy had his back to me and hadn't noticed me yet. He held a

stick of wood in one hand and the end of the stick was charred and smoking. Its fire had apparently been transferred to the draperies at the window. Now the boy stood watching as the flames ate their way up the heavy cloth.

For a moment, I watched too. Then I woke up, pushed the boy aside, caught the unburned upper part of the draperies and pulled them down. As they fell, they smothered some of the flames within themselves, and they exposed a half-open window. I picked them up quickly and threw them out the window.

The boy looked at me, then ran to the window and looked out. I looked out too, hoping I hadn't thrown the burning cloth onto a porch roof or too near a wall. There was a fireplace in the room; I saw it now, too late. I could have safely thrown the draperies into it and let them burn.

It was dark outside. The sun had not set at home when I was snatched away, but here it was dark. I could see the draperies a story below, burning, lighting the night only enough for us to see that they were on the ground and some distance from the nearest wall. My hasty act had done no harm. I could go home knowing that I had averted trouble for the second time.

I waited to go home.

My first trip had ended as soon as the boy was safe—had ended just in time to keep me safe. Now, though, as I waited, I realized that I wasn't going to be that lucky again.

I didn't feel dizzy. The room remained unblurred, undeniably real. I looked around, not knowing what to do. The fear that had followed me from home flared now. What would happen to me if I didn't go back automatically this time? What if I was stranded here—wherever here was? I had no money, no idea how to get home.

I stared out into the darkness fighting to calm myself. It was not calming, though, that there were no city lights out there. No lights at all. But still, I was in no immediate danger. And wherever I was, there was a child with me—and a child might answer my questions more readily than an adult.

I looked at him. He looked back, curious and unafraid. He was not Rufus. I could see that now. He had the same red hair and slight build, but he was taller, clearly three or four years older. Old enough, I thought, to know better than to play with fire. If he hadn't set fire to his draperies, I might still be at home.

I stepped over to him, took the stick from his hand, and threw it

into the fireplace. "Someone should use one like that on you," I said, "before you burn the house down."

I regretted the words the moment they were out. I needed this boy's help. But still, who knew what trouble he had gotten me into!

The boy stumbled back from me, alarmed. "You lay a hand on me, and I'll tell my daddy!" His accent was unmistakably southern, and before I could shut out the thought, I began wondering whether I might be somewhere in the South. Somewhere two or three thousand miles from home.

If I was in the South, the two- or three-hour time difference would explain the darkness outside. But wherever I was, the last thing I wanted to do was meet this boy's father. The man could have me jailed for breaking into his house—or he could shoot me for breaking in. There was something specific for me to worry about. No doubt the boy could tell me about other things.

And he would. If I was going to be stranded here, I had to find out all I could while I could. As dangerous as it could be for me to stay where I was, in the house of a man who might shoot me, it seemed even more dangerous for me to go wandering into the night totally ignorant. The boy and I would keep our voices down, and we would talk.

"Don't you worry about your father," I told him softly. "You'll have plenty to say to him when he sees those burned draperies."

The boy seemed to deflate. His shoulders sagged and he turned to stare into the fireplace. "Who are you anyway?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

So he didn't know either—not that I had really expected him to. But he did seem surprisingly at ease with me—much calmer than I would have been at his age about the sudden appearance of a stranger in my bedroom. I wouldn't even have still been in the bedroom. If he had been as timid a child as I was, he would probably have gotten me killed.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Rufus."

For a moment, I just stared at him. "Rufus?"

"Yeah. What's the matter?"

I wished I knew what was the matter—what was going on! "I'm all right," I said. "Look . . . Rufus, look at me. Have you ever seen me before?"

"No."

That was the right answer, the reasonable answer. I tried to make myself accept it in spite of his name, his too-familiar face. But the child I had pulled from the river could so easily have grown into this child—in three or four years.

"Can you remember a time when you nearly drowned?" I asked, feeling foolish.

He frowned, looked at me more carefully.

"You were younger," I said. "About five years old, maybe. Do you remember?"

"The river?" The words came out low and tentative as though he didn't quite believe them himself.

"You do remember then. It was you."

"Drowning . . . I remember that. And you . . . ?"

"I'm not sure you ever got a look at me. And I guess it must have been a long time ago . . . for you."

"No, I remember you now. I saw you."

I said nothing. I didn't quite believe him. I wondered whether he was just telling me what he thought I wanted to hear—though there was no reason for him to lie. He was clearly not afraid of me.

"That's why it seemed like I knew you," he said. "I couldn't remember—maybe because of the way I saw you. I told Mama, and she said I couldn't have really seen you that way."

"What way?"

"Well . . . with my eyes closed."

"With your—" I stopped. The boy wasn't lying; he was dreaming.

"It's true!" he insisted loudly. Then he caught himself, whispered, "That's the way I saw you just as I stepped in the hole."

"Hole?"

"In the river. I was walking in the water and there was a hole. I fell, and then I couldn't find the bottom any more. I saw you inside a room. I could see part of the room, and there were books all around—more than in Daddy's library. You were wearing pants like a man—the way you are now. I thought you were a man."

"Thanks a lot."

"But this time you just look like a woman wearing pants."

I sighed. "All right, never mind that. As long as you recognize me as the one who pulled you out of the river . . ."

"Did you? I thought you must have been the one."

I stopped, confused. "I thought you remembered."

"I remember seeing you. It was like I stopped drowning for a

while and saw you, and then started to drown again. After that Mama was there, and Daddy."

"And Daddy's gun," I said bitterly. "Your father almost shot me."

"He thought you were a man too—and that you were trying to hurt Mama and me. Mama says she was telling him not to shoot you, and then you were gone."

"Yes." I had probably vanished before the woman's eyes. What had she thought of that?

"I asked her where you went," said Rufus, "and she got mad and said she didn't know. I asked her again later, and she hit me. And she never hits me."

I waited, expecting him to ask me the same question, but he said no more. Only his eyes questioned. I hunted through my own thoughts for a way to answer him.

"Where do you think I went, Rufe?"

He sighed, said disappointedly, "You're not going to tell me either."

"Yes I am—as best I can. But answer me first. Tell me where you think I went."

He seemed to have to decide whether to do that or not. "Back to the room," he said finally. "The room with the books."

"Is that a guess, or did you see me again?"

"I didn't see you. Am I right? Did you go back there?"

"Yes. Back home to scare my husband almost as much as I must have scared your parents."

"But how did you get there? How did you get here?"

"Like that." I snapped my fingers.

"That's no answer."

"It's the only answer I've got. I was at home; then suddenly, I was here helping you. I don't know how it happens—how I move that way—or when it's going to happen. I can't control it."

"Who can?"

"I don't know. No one." I didn't want him to get the idea that he could control it. Especially if it turned out that he really could.

"But . . . what's it like? What did Mama see that she won't tell me about?"

"Probably the same thing my husband saw. He said when I came to you, I vanished. Just disappeared. And then reappeared later."

He thought about that. "Disappeared? You mean like smoke?" Fear crept into his expression. "Like a ghost?"

"Like smoke, maybe. But don't go getting the idea that I'm a ghost. There are no ghosts."

"That's what Daddy says."

"He's right."

"But Mama says she saw one once."

I managed to hold back my opinion of that. His mother, after all . . . Besides, I was probably her ghost. She had had to find some explanation for my vanishing. I wondered how her more realistic husband had explained it. But that wasn't important. What I cared about now was keeping the boy calm.

"You needed help," I told him. "I came to help you. Twice. Does that make me someone to be afraid of?"

"I guess not." He gave me a long look, then came over to me, reached out hesitantly, and touched me with a sooty hand.

"You see," I said, "I'm as real as you are."

He nodded. "I thought you were. All the things you did . . . you had to be. And Mama said she touched you too."

"She sure did." I rubbed my shoulder where the woman had bruised it with her desperate blows. For a moment, the soreness confused me, forced me to recall that for me, the woman's attack had come only hours ago. Yet the boy was years older. Fact then: Somehow, my travels crossed time as well as distance. Another fact: The boy was the focus of my travels—perhaps the cause of them. He had seen me in my living room before I was drawn to him; he couldn't have made that up. But I had seen nothing at all, felt nothing but sickness and disorientation.

"Mama said what you did after you got me out of the water was like the Second Book of Kings," said the boy.

"The what?"

"Where Elisha breathed into the dead boy's mouth, and the boy came back to life. Mama said she tried to stop you when she saw you doing that to me because you were just some nigger she had never seen before. Then she remembered Second Kings."

I sat down on the bed and looked over at him, but I could read nothing other than interest and remembered excitement in his eyes. "She said I was what?" I asked.

"Just a strange nigger. She and Daddy both knew they hadn't seen you before."

"That was a hell of a thing for her to say right after she saw me save her son's life."

Rufus frowned. "Why?"

I stared at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you mad?"

"Your mother always call black people niggers, Rufe?"

"Sure, except when she has company. Why not?"

His air of innocent questioning confused me. Either he really didn't know what he was saying, or he had a career waiting in Hollywood. Whichever it was, he wasn't going to go on saying it to me.

"I'm a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that's it."

"But . . ."

"Look, I helped you. I put the fire out, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"All right then, you do me the courtesy of calling me what I want to be called."

He just stared at me.

"Now," I spoke more gently, "tell me, did you see me again when the draperies started to burn? I mean, did you see me the way you did when you were drowning?"

It took him a moment to shift gears. Then he said, "I didn't see anything but fire." He sat down in the old ladder-back chair near the fireplace and looked at me. "I didn't see you until you got here. But I was so scared . . . it was kind of like when I was drowning . . . but not like anything else I can remember. I thought the house would burn down and it would be my fault. I thought I would die."

I nodded. "You probably wouldn't have died because you would have been able to get out in time. But if your parents are asleep here, the fire might have reached them before they woke up."

The boy stared into the fireplace. "I burned the stable once," he said. "I wanted Daddy to give me Nero—a horse I liked. But he sold him to Reverend Wyndham just because Reverend Wyndham offered a lot of money. Daddy already has a lot of money. Anyway, I got mad and burned down the stable."

I shook my head wonderingly. The boy already knew more about revenge than I did. What kind of man was he going to grow up into? "Why did you set this fire?" I asked. "To get even with your father for something else?"

"For hitting me. See?" He turned and pulled up his shirt so that I could see the crisscross of long red welts. And I could see old marks, ugly scars of at least one much worse beating.

"For God's sake . . . !"

"He said I took money from his desk, and I said I didn't." Rufus shrugged. "He said I was calling him a liar, and he hit me."

"Several times."

"All I took was a dollar." He put his shirt down and faced me.

I didn't know what to say to that. The boy would be lucky to stay out of prison when he grew up—if he grew up. He went on,

"I started thinking that if I burned the house, he would lose all his money. He ought to lose it. It's all he ever thinks about." Rufus shuddered. "But then I remembered the stable, and the whip he hit me with after I set that fire. Mama said if she hadn't stopped him, he would have killed me. I was afraid this time he would kill me, so I wanted to put the fire out. But I couldn't. I didn't know what to do."

So he had called me. I was certain now. The boy drew me to him somehow when he got himself into more trouble than he could handle. How he did it, I didn't know. He apparently didn't even know he was doing it. If he had, and if he had been able to call me voluntarily, I might have found myself standing between father and son during one of Rufus's beatings. What would have happened then, I couldn't imagine. One meeting with Rufus's father had been enough for me. Not that the boy sounded like that much of a bargain either. But, "Did you say he used a whip on you, Rufe?"

"Yeah. The kind he whips niggers and horses with."

That stopped me for a moment. "The kind he whips . . . who?" He looked at me warily. "I wasn't talking about you."

I brushed that aside. "Say blacks anyway. But . . . your father whips black people?"

"When they need it. But Mama said it was cruel and disgraceful for him to hit me like that no matter what I did. She took me to Baltimore City to Aunt May's house after that, but he came and got me and brought me home. After a while, she came home too."

For a moment, I forgot about the whip and the "niggers." Baltimore City. Baltimore, Maryland? "Are we far from Baltimore now, Rufe?"

"Across the bay."

"But . . . we're still in Maryland, aren't we?" I had relatives in Maryland—people who would help me if I needed them, and if I could reach them. I was beginning to wonder, though, whether I would be able to reach anyone I knew. I had a new, slowly growing fear.

"Sure we're in Maryland," said Rufus. "How could you not know that."

"What's the date?"

"I don't know."

"The year! Just tell me the year!"

He glanced across the room toward the door, then quickly back at me. I realized I was making him nervous with my ignorance and my sudden intensity. I forced myself to speak calmly. "Come on, Rufe, you know what year it is, don't you?"

"It's . . . eighteen fifteen."

"When?"

"Eighteen fifteen."

I sat still, breathed deeply, calming myself, believing him. I did believe him. I wasn't even as surprised as I should have been. I had already accepted the fact that I had moved through time. Now I knew I was farther from home than I had thought. And now I knew why Rufus's father used his whip on "niggers" as well as horses.

I looked up and saw that the boy had left his chair and come closer to me.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "You keep acting sick."

"It's nothing, Rufe. I'm all right." No, I was sick. What was I going to do? Why hadn't I gone home? This could turn out to be such a deadly place for me if I had to stay in it much longer. "Is this a plantation?" I asked.

"The Weylin plantation. My daddy's Tom Weylin."

"Weylin . . ." The name triggered a memory, something I hadn't thought of for years. "Rufus, do you spell your last name, W-e-y-l-i-n?"

"Yeah, I think that's right."

I frowned at him impatiently. A boy his age should certainly be sure of the spelling of his own name—even a name like this with an unusual spelling.

"It's right," he said quickly.

"And . . . is there a black girl, maybe a slave girl, named Alice living around here somewhere?" I wasn't sure of the girl's last name. The memory was coming back to me in fragments.

"Sure. Alice is my friend."

"Is she?" I was staring at my hands, trying to think. Every time I got used to one impossibility, I ran into another.

"She's no slave, either," said Rufus. "She's free, born free like her mother."

"Oh? Then maybe somehow . . ." I let my voice trail away as my thoughts raced ahead of it fitting things together. The state was right, and the time, the unusual name, the girl, Alice . . .

"Maybe what?" prompted Rufus.

Yes, maybe what? Well, maybe, if I wasn't completely out of my mind, if I wasn't in the middle of the most perfect hallucination I'd ever heard of, if the child before me was real and was telling the truth, maybe he was one of my ancestors.

Maybe he was my several times great grandfather, but still vaguely alive in the memory of my family because his daughter had bought a large Bible in an ornately carved, wooden chest and had begun keeping family records in it. My uncle still had it.

Grandmother Hagar. Hagar Weylin, born in 1831. Hers was the first name listed. And she had given her parents' names as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something Weylin.

"Rufus, what's Alice's last name?"

"Greenwood. What were you talking about? Maybe what?"

"Nothing. I . . . just thought I might know someone in her family."

"Do you?"

"I don't know. It's been a long time since I've seen the person I'm thinking of." Weak lies. But they were better than the truth. As young as the boy was, I thought he would question my sanity if I told the truth.

Alice Greenwood. How would she marry this boy? Or would it be marriage? And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white? If they knew. Probably, they didn't. Hagar Weylin Blake had died in 1880, long before the time of any member of my family that I had known. No doubt most information about her life had died with her. At least it had died before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left.

Hagar had filled pages of it with her careful script. There was a record of her marriage to Oliver Blake, and a list of her seven children, their marriages, some grandchildren . . . Then someone else had taken up the listing. So many relatives that I had never known, would never know.

Or would I?

I looked over at the boy who would be Hagar's father. There was

nothing in him that reminded me of any of my relatives. Looking at him confused me. But he had to be the one. There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related. Still, now I had a special reason for being glad I had been able to save him. After all . . . after all, what would have happened to me, to my mother's family, if I hadn't saved him?

Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth.

Again, what would have happened if the boy had drowned? Would he have drowned without me? Or would his mother have saved him somehow? Would his father have arrived in time to save him? It must be that one of them would have saved him somehow. His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense.

But somehow, it didn't make enough sense to give me any comfort. It didn't make enough sense for me to test it by ignoring him if I found him in trouble again—not that I could have ignored *any* child in trouble. But this child needed special care. If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox.

"You know," he said, peering at me, "you look a little like Alice's mother. If you wore a dress and tied your hair up, you'd look a lot like her." He sat down companionably beside me on the bed.

"I'm surprised your mother didn't mistake me for her then," I said.

"Not with you dressed like that! She thought you were a man at first, just like I did—and like Daddy did."

"Oh." That mistake was a little easier to understand now.

"Are you sure you aren't related to Alice yourself?"

"Not that I know of," I lied. And I changed the subject abruptly. "Rufe, are there slaves here?"

He nodded. "Thirty-eight slaves, Daddy said." He drew his bare feet up and sat cross-legged on the bed facing me, still examining me with interest. "You're not a slave, are you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. You don't talk right or dress right or act right. You don't even seem like a runaway."

"I'm not."

"And you don't call me 'Master' either."

I surprised myself by laughing. "Master?"

"You're supposed to." He was very serious. "You want me to call you black."

His seriousness stopped my laughter. What was funny, anyway? He was probably right. No doubt I was supposed to give him some title of respect. But "Master"?

"You have to say it," he insisted. "Or 'Young Master' or . . . or 'Mister' like Alice does. You're supposed to."

"No." I shook my head. "Not unless things get a lot worse than they are."

The boy gripped my arm. "Yes!" he whispered. "You'll get into trouble if you don't, if Daddy hears you."

I'd get into trouble if "Daddy" heard me say anything at all. But the boy was obviously concerned, even frightened for me. His father sounded like a man who worked at inspiring fear. "All right," I said. "If anyone else comes, I'll call you 'Mister Rufus.' Will that do?" If anyone else came, I'd be lucky to survive.

"Yes," said Rufus. He looked relieved. "I still have scars on my back where Daddy hit me with the whip."

"I saw them." It was time for me to get out of this house. I had done enough talking and learning and hoping to be transported home. It was clear that whatever power had used me to protect Rufus had not provided for my own protection. I had to get out of the house and to a place of safety before day came—if there was a place of safety for me here. I wondered how Alice's parents managed, how they survived.

"Hey!" said Rufus suddenly.

I jumped, looked at him, and realized that he had been saying something—something I had missed.

"I said what's your name?" he repeated. "You never told me."

Was that all? "Edana," I said. "Most people call me Dana."

"Oh, no!" he said softly. He stared at me the way he had when he thought I might be a ghost.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I guess, but . . . well, you wanted to know if I had seen

you this time before you got here the way I did at the river. Well, I didn't see you, but I think I heard you."

"How? When?"

"I don't know how. You weren't here. But when the fire started and I got so scared, I heard a voice, a man. He said, 'Dana?' Then he said, 'Is it happening again?' And someone else—you—whispered, 'I think so.' I heard you!"

I sighed wearily, longing for my own bed and an end to questions that had no answers. How had Rufus heard Kevin and me across time and space? I didn't know. I didn't even have time to care. I had other more immediate problems.

"Who was the man?" Rufus asked.

"My husband." I rubbed a hand across my face. "Rufe, I have to get out of here before your father wakes up. Will you show me the way downstairs so that I don't awaken anyone?"

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know, but I can't stay here." I paused for a moment wondering how much he could help me—how much he would help me. "I'm a long way from home," I said, "and I don't know when I'll be able to get back there. Do you know of anyplace I could go?"

Rufus uncrossed his legs and scratched his head. "You could go outside and hide until morning. Then you could come out and ask Daddy if you could work here. He hires free niggers sometimes."

"Does he? If you were free and black, do you think you'd want to work for him?"

He looked away from me, shook his head. "I guess not. He's pretty mean sometimes."

"Is there someplace else I could go?"

He did some more thinking. "You could go to town and find work there."

"What's the name of the town?"

"Easton."

"Is it far?"

"Not so far. The niggers walk there sometimes when Daddy gives them a pass. Or maybe . . ."

"What?"

"Alice's mother lives closer. You could go to her, and she could tell you the best places to go to get work. You could stay with her too, maybe. Then I might see you again before you go home."

I was surprised he wanted to see me again. I hadn't had much con-

tact with children since I'd been one myself. Somehow, I found myself liking this one, though. His environment had left its unlikable marks on him, but in the ante bellum South, I could have found myself at the mercy of someone much worse—could have been descended from someone much worse.

"Where can I find Alice's mother?" I asked.

"She lives in the woods. Come on outside, and I'll tell you how to get there."

He took his candle and went to the door of his room. The room's shadows moved eerily as he moved. I realized suddenly how easy it would be for him to betray me—to open the door and run away or shout an alarm.

Instead, he opened the door a crack and looked out. Then he turned and beckoned to me. He seemed excited and pleased, and only frightened enough to make him cautious. I relaxed, followed him quickly. He was enjoying himself—having an adventure. And, incidentally, he was playing with fire again, helping an intruder to escape undetected from his father's house. His father would probably take the whip to both of us if he knew.

Downstairs, the large heavy door opened noiselessly and we stepped into the darkness outside—the near darkness. There was a half-moon and several million stars lighting the night as they never did at home. Rufus immediately began to give me directions to his friend's house, but I stopped him. There was something else to be done first.

"Where would the draperies have fallen, Rufe? Take me to them."

He obeyed, taking me around a corner of the house to the side. There, what was left of the draperies lay smoking on the ground.

"If we can get rid of this," I said, "can you get your mother to give you new draperies without telling your father?"

"I think so," he said. "They hardly talk to each other anyway."

Most of the remnants of the drapes were cold. I stamped out the few that were still edged in red and threatening to flame up again. Then I found a fairly large piece of unburned cloth. I spread it out flat and filled it with smaller pieces and bits of ash and whatever dirt I scooped up along with them. Rufus helped me silently. When we were finished, I rolled the cloth into a tight bundle and gave it to him.

"Put it in your fireplace," I told him. "Watch to see that it all

burns before you go to sleep. But, Rufe . . . don't burn anything else."

He glanced downward, embarrassed. "I won't."

"Good. There must be safer ways of annoying your father. Now which way is it to Alice's house?"

2

I decided not to go to the library with Kevin to look for forgeable free papers. I was worried about what might happen if Rufus called me from the car while it was moving. Would I arrive in his time still moving, but without the car to protect me? Or would I arrive safe and still, but have trouble when I returned home—because this time the home I returned to might be the middle of a busy street?

I didn't want to find out. So while Kevin got ready to go to the library, I sat on the bed, fully dressed, stuffing a comb, a brush, and a bar of soap into my canvas bag. I was afraid I might be trapped in Rufus's time for a longer period if I went again. My first trip had lasted only a few minutes, my second a few hours. What was next? Days?

Kevin came in to tell me he was going. I didn't want him to leave me alone, but I thought I had done enough whining for one morning. I kept my fear to myself—or I thought I did.

"You feel all right?" he asked me. "You don't look so good."

I had just had my first look in the mirror since the beating, and I didn't think I looked so good either. I opened my mouth to reassure him, but before I could get the words out, I realized that something really was wrong. The room was beginning to darken and spin.

"Oh no," I moaned. I closed my eyes against the sickening dizziness. Then I sat hugging the canvas bag and waiting.

Suddenly, Kevin was beside me holding me. I tried to push him away. I was afraid for him without knowing why. I shouted for him to let me go.

Then the walls around me and the bed beneath me vanished. I lay sprawled on the ground under a tree. Kevin lay beside me still holding me. Between us was the canvas bag.

"Oh God!" I muttered, sitting up. Kevin sat up too and looked around wildly. We were in the woods again, and it was day this time. The country was much like what I remembered from my first trip, though there was no river in sight this time.

"It happened," said Kevin. "It's real!"

I took his hand and held it, glad of its familiarity. And yet I

From the chapter
THE FALL

wished he were back at home. In this place, he was probably better protection for me than free papers would have been, but I didn't want him here. I didn't want this place to touch him except through me. But it was too late for that.

I looked around for Rufus, knowing that he must be nearby. He was. And the moment I saw him, I knew I was too late to get him out of trouble this time.

He was lying on the ground, his body curled in a small knot, his hands clutching one leg. Beside him was another boy, black, about twelve years old. All Rufus's attention seemed to be on his leg, but the other boy had seen us. He might even have seen us appear from nowhere. That might be why he looked so frightened now.

I stood up and went over to Rufus. He didn't see me at first. His face was twisted with pain and streaked with tears and dirt, but he wasn't crying aloud. Like the black boy, he looked about twelve years old.

"Rufus."

He looked up, startled. "Dana?"

"Yes." I was surprised that he recognized me after the years that had passed for him.

"I saw you again," he said. "You were on a bed. Just as I started to fall, I saw you."

"You did more than just see me," I said.

"I fell. My leg . . ."

"Who are you?" demanded the other boy.

"She's all right, Nigel," said Rufus. "She's the one I told you about. The one who put out the fire that time."

Nigel looked at me, then back at Rufus. "Can she fix your leg?"

Rufus looked at me questioningly.

"I doubt it," I said, "but let me see anyway." I moved his hands away and as gently as I could, pulled his pants leg up. His leg was discolored and swollen. "Can you move your toes?" I asked.

He tried, managed to move two toes feebly.

"It's broken," commented Kevin. He had come closer to look.

"Yes." I looked at the other boy, Nigel. "Where'd he fall from?"

"There." The boy pointed upward. There was a tree limb hanging high above us. A broken tree limb.

"You know where he lives?" I asked.

"Sure. I live there too."

The boy was probably a slave, I realized, the property of Rufus's family.

"You sure do talk funny," said Nigel.

"Matter of opinion," I said. "Look, if you care what happens to Rufus, you'd better go tell his father to send a . . . a wagon for him. He won't be walking anywhere."

"He could lean on me."

"No. The best way for him to go home is flat on his back—the least painful way, anyhow. You go tell Rufus's father that Rufus broke his leg. Tell him to send for the doctor. We'll stay with Rufus until you get back with the wagon."

"You?" He looked from me to Kevin, making no secret of the fact that he didn't find us all that trustworthy. "How come you're dressed like a man?" he asked me.

"Nigel," said Kevin quietly, "don't worry about how she's dressed. Just go get some help for your friend."

Friend?

Nigel gave Kevin a frightened glance, then looked at Rufus.

"Go, Nigel," whispered Rufus. "It hurts something awful. Say I said for you to go."

Nigel went, finally. Unhappily.

"What's he afraid of?" I asked Rufus. "Will he get into trouble for leaving you?"

"Maybe." Rufus closed his eyes for a moment in pain. "Or for letting me get hurt. I hope not. It depends on whether anybody's made Daddy mad lately."

Well, Daddy hadn't changed. I wasn't looking forward to meeting him at all. At least I wouldn't have to do it alone. I glanced at Kevin. He knelt down beside me to take a closer look at Rufus's leg.

"Good thing he was barefoot," he said. "A shoe would have to be cut off that foot now."

"Who're you?" asked Rufus.

"My name's Kevin—Kevin Franklin."

"Does Dana belong to you now?"

"In a way," said Kevin. "She's my wife."

"Wife?" Rufus squealed.

I sighed. "Kevin, I think we'd better demote me. In this time . . ."

"Niggers can't marry white people!" said Rufus.

I laid a hand on Kevin's arm just in time to stop him from saying

whatever he would have said. The look on his face was enough to tell me he should keep quiet.

"The boy learned to talk that way from his mother," I said softly. "And from his father, and probably from the slaves themselves."

"Learned to talk what way?" asked Rufus.

"About niggers," I said. "I don't like that word, remember? Try calling me black or Negro or even colored."

"What's the use of saying all that? And how can you be married to him?"

"Rufe, how'd you like people to call you white trash when they talk to you?"

"What?" He started up angrily, forgetting his leg, then fell back. "I am not trash!" he whispered. "You damn black . . ."

"Hush, Rufe." I put my hand on his shoulder to quiet him. Apparently I'd hit the nerve I'd aimed at. "I didn't say you were trash. I said how'd you like to be called trash. I see you don't like it. I don't like being called nigger either."

He lay silent, frowning at me as though I were speaking a foreign language. Maybe I was.

"Where we come from," I said, "it's vulgar and insulting for whites to call blacks niggers. Also, where we come from, whites and blacks can marry."

"But it's against the law."

"It is here. But it isn't where we come from."

"Where do you come from?"

I looked at Kevin.

"You asked for it," he said.

"You want to try telling him?"

He shook his head. "No point."

"Not for you, maybe. But for me . . ." I thought for a moment trying to find the right words. "This boy and I are liable to have a long association whether we like it or not. I want him to know."

"Good luck."

"Where do you come from?" repeated Rufus. "You sure don't talk like anybody I ever heard."

I frowned, thought, and finally shook my head. "Rufe, I want to tell you, but you probably won't understand. We don't understand ourselves, really."

"I already don't understand," he said. "I don't know how I can

see you when you're not here, or how you get here, or anything. My leg hurts so much I can't even think about it."

"Let's wait then. When you feel better . . ."

"When I feel better, maybe you'll be gone. Dana, tell me!"

"All right, I'll try. Have you ever heard of a place called California?"

"Yeah. Mama's cousin went there on a ship."

Luck. "Well, that's where we're from. California. But . . . it's not the California your cousin went to. We're from a California that doesn't exist yet, Rufus. California of nineteen seventy-six."

"What's that?"

"I mean we come from a different time as well as a different place. I told you it was hard to understand."

"But what's nineteen seventy-six?"

"That's the year. That's what year it is for us when we're at home."

"But it's eighteen nineteen. It's eighteen nineteen everywhere. You're talking crazy."

"No doubt. This is a crazy thing that's happened to us. But I'm telling you the truth. We come from a future time and place. I don't know how we get here. We don't want to come. We don't belong here. But when you're in trouble, somehow you reach me, call me, and I come—although as you can see now, I can't always help you." I could have told him about our blood relationship. Maybe I would if I saw him again when he was older. For now, though, I had confused him enough.

"This is crazy stuff," he repeated. He looked at Kevin. "You tell me. Are you from California?"

Kevin nodded. "Yes."

"Then are you Spanish? California is Spanish."

"It is now, but it will be part of the United States eventually, just like Maryland or Pennsylvania."

"When?"

"It will become a state in eighteen fifty."

"But it's only eighteen nineteen. How could you know . . . ?" He broke off, looked from Kevin to me in confusion. "This isn't real," he said. "You're making it all up."

"It's real," said Kevin quietly.

"But how could it be?"

"We don't know. But it is."

He thought for a while looking from one to the other of us. "I don't believe you," he said.

Kevin made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "I don't blame you."

I shrugged. "All right, Rufe. I wanted you to know the truth, but I can't blame you for not being able to accept it either."

"Nineteen seventy-six," said the boy slowly. He shook his head and closed his eyes. I wondered why I had bothered to try to convince him. After all, how accepting would I be if I met a man who claimed to be from eighteen nineteen—or two thousand nineteen, for that matter. Time travel was science fiction in nineteen seventy-six. In eighteen nineteen—Rufus was right—it was sheer insanity. No one but a child would even have listened to Kevin and me talk about it.

"If you know California's going to be a state," said Rufus, "you must know some other things that are going to happen."

"We do," I admitted. "Some things. Not very much. We're not historians."

"But you ought to know everything if it already happened in your time."

"How much do you know about seventeen nineteen, Rufe?"

He stared at me blankly.

"People don't learn everything about the times that came before them," I said. "Why should they?"

He sighed. "Tell me something, Dana. I'm trying to believe you."

I dug back into the American history that I had learned both in and out of school. "Well, if this is eighteen nineteen, the President is James Monroe, right?"

"Yeah."

"The next President will be John Quincy Adams."

"When?"

I frowned, calling back more of the list of Presidents I had memorized for no particular reason when I was in school. "In eighteen twenty-four. Monroe had—will have—two terms."

"What else?"

I looked at Kevin.

He shrugged. "All I can think of is something I got from those books we looked through last night. In eighteen twenty, the Missouri Compromise opened the way for Missouri to come into the Union as a slave state and Maine to come in as a free state. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about, Rufus?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so. Have you got any money?"

"Money? Me? No."

"Well, you've seen money, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Coins should have the year they were made stamped on them, even now."

"They do."

Kevin reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of change. He held it out to Rufus and Rufus picked out a few coins. "Nineteen sixty-five," he read, "nineteen sixty-seven, nineteen seventy-one, nineteen seventy. None of them say nineteen seventy-six."

"None of them say eighteen-anything either," said Kevin. "But here." He picked out a bicentennial quarter and handed it to Rufus.

"Seventeen seventy-six, nineteen seventy-six," the boy read. "Two dates."

"The country's two hundred years old in nineteen seventy-six," said Kevin. "Some of the money was changed to commemorate the anniversary. Are you convinced?"

"Well, I guess you could have made these yourself."

Kevin took back his money. "You might not know about Missouri, kid," he said wearily. "But you'd have made a good Missourian."

"What?"

"Just a joke. Hasn't come into fashion yet."

Rufus looked troubled. "I believe you. I don't understand, like Dana said, but I guess I believe."

Kevin sighed. "Thank God."

Rufus looked up at Kevin and managed to grin. "You aren't as bad as I thought you'd be."

"Bad?" Kevin looked at me accusingly.

"I didn't tell him anything about you," I said.

"I saw you," said Rufus. "You were fighting with Dana just before you came here, or . . . it looked like fighting. Did you make all those marks on her face?"

"No, he didn't," I said quickly. "And he and I weren't fighting."

"Wait a minute," said Kevin. "How could he know about that?"

"Like he said." I shrugged. "He saw us before we got here. I don't know how he does it, but he's done it before." I looked down at Rufus. "Have you told anyone else about seeing me?"

"Just Nigel. Nobody else would believe me."

"Good. Best not to tell anyone else about us now either. Nothing about California or nineteen seventy-six." I took Kevin's hand and held it. "We're going to have to fit in as best we can with the people here for as long as we have to stay. That means we're going to have to play the roles you gave us."

"You'll say you belong to him?"

"Yes. I want you to say it too if anyone asks you."

"That's better than saying you're his wife. Nobody would believe that."

Kevin made a sound of disgust. "I wonder how long we'll be stuck here," he muttered. "I think I'm getting homesick already."

"I don't know," I said. "But stay close to me. You got here because you were holding me. I'm afraid that may be the only way you can get home."

I said good-bye to Rufus the day my teaching finally did get me into trouble. I didn't know I was saying good-bye, of course—didn't know what trouble was waiting for me in the cookhouse where I was to meet Nigel. I thought there was trouble enough in Rufus's room.

I was there reading to him. I had been reading to him regularly since his father caught me that first time. Tom Weylin didn't want me reading on my own, but he had ordered me to read to his son. Once he had told Rufus in my presence, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! A nigger can read better than you!"

"She can read better than you too," Rufus had answered.

His father had stared at him coldly, then ordered me out of the room. For a second I was afraid for Rufus, but Tom Weylin left the room with me.

"Don't go to him again until I say you can," he told me.

Four days passed before he said I could. And again he chastised Rufus before me.

"I'm no schoolmaster," he said, "but I'll teach you if you can be taught. I'll teach you respect."

Rufus said nothing.

"You want her to read to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you got something to say to me."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Read," said Weylin to me. He turned and left the room.

"What exactly are you supposed to be sorry for?" I asked when Weylin was gone. I spoke very softly.

"Talking back," said Rufus. "He thinks everything I say is talking back. So I don't say very much to him."

"I see." I opened the book and began to read.

We had finished *Robinson Crusoe* long ago, and Kevin had chosen a couple of other familiar books from the library. We had already gone through the first, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Now we were working on *Gulliver's Travels*. Rufus's own reading was improving slowly under Kevin's tutoring, but he still enjoyed being read to.

On my last day with him, though, as on a few others, Margaret came in to listen—and to fidget and to fiddle with Rufus's hair and to pet him while I was reading. As usual, Rufus put his head on her lap and accepted her caresses silently. But today, apparently, that was not enough.

"Are you comfortable?" she asked Rufus when I had been reading for a few moments. "Does your leg hurt?" His leg was not healing as I thought it should have. After nearly two months, he still couldn't walk.

"I feel all right, Mama," he said.

Suddenly, Margaret twisted around to face me. "Well?" she demanded.

I had paused in my reading to give her a chance to finish. I lowered my head and began to read again.

About sixty seconds later, she said, "Baby, you hot? You want me to call Virgie up here to fan you?" Virgie was about ten—one of the small house servants often called to fan the whites, run errands for them, carry covered dishes of food between the cookhouse and the main house, and serve the whites at their table.

"I'm all right, Mama," said Rufus.

"Why don't you go on?" snapped Margaret at me. "You're supposed to be here to read, so read!"

I began to read again, biting off the words a little.

"Are you hungry, baby?" asked Margaret a moment later. "Aunt Sarah's just made a cake. Wouldn't you like a piece?"

I didn't stop this time. I just lowered my voice a little and read automatically, tonelessly.

"I don't know why you want to listen to her," Margaret said to Rufus. "She's got a voice like a fly buzzing."

"I don't want no cake, Mama."

"You sure? You ought to see the fine white icing Sarah put on it."

"I want to hear Dana read, that's all."

"Well, there she is, reading. If you can call it that."

I let my voice grow progressively softer as they talked.

"I can't hear her with you talking," Rufus said.

"Baby, all I said was . . ."

"Don't say nothing!" Rufus took his head off her lap. "Go away and stop bothering me!"

"Rufus!" She sounded hurt rather than angry. And in spite of the

situation, this sounded like real disrespect to me. I stopped reading and waited for the explosion. It came from Rufus.

"Go away, Mama!" he shouted. "Just leave me alone!"

"Be still," she whispered. "Baby, you'll make yourself sick."

Rufus turned his head and looked at her. The expression on his face startled me. For once, the boy looked like a smaller replica of his father. His mouth was drawn into a thin straight line and his eyes were coldly hostile. He spoke quietly now as Weylin sometimes did when he was angry. "You're making me sick, Mama. Get away from me!"

Margaret got up and dabbed at her eyes. "I don't see how you can talk to me that way," she said. "Just because of some nigger . . ."

Rufus just looked at her, and finally she left the room.

He relaxed against his pillows and closed his eyes. "I get so tired of her sometimes," he said.

"Rufe . . . ?"

He opened weary, friendly eyes and looked at me. The anger was gone.

"You'd better be careful," I said. "What if your mother told your father you talked to her that way?"

"She never tells." He grinned. "She'll be back after while to bring me a piece of cake with fine white icing."

"She was crying."

"She always cries. Read, Dana."

"Do you talk to her that way often?"

"I have to, or she won't leave me alone. Daddy does it too."

I took a deep breath, shook my head, and plunged back into *Gulliver's Travels*.

Later, as I left Rufus, I passed Margaret on her way back to his room. Sure enough, she was carrying a large slice of cake on a plate.

I went downstairs and out to the cookhouse to give Nigel his reading lesson.

Nigel was waiting. He already had our book out of its hiding place and was spelling out words to Carrie. That surprised me because I had offered Carrie a chance to learn with him, and she had refused. Now though, the two of them, alone in the cookhouse, were so involved in what they were doing that they didn't even notice me until I shut the door. They looked up then, wide-eyed with fear. But they relaxed when they saw it was only me. I went over to them.

"Do you want to learn?" I asked Carrie.

The girl's fear seemed to return and she glanced at the door.

"Aunt Sarah's afraid for her to learn," said Nigel. "Afraid if she learns, she might get caught at it, and then be whipped or sold."

I lowered my head, sighed. The girl couldn't talk, couldn't communicate at all except in the inadequate sign language she had invented—a language even her mother only half-understood. In a more rational society, an ability to write would be of great help to her. But here, the only people who could read her writing would be those who might punish her for being able to write. And Nigel. And Nigel.

I looked from the boy to the girl. "Shall I teach you, Carrie?" If I did and her mother caught me, I might be in more trouble than if Tom Weylin caught me. I was afraid to teach her both for her sake and for mine. Her mother wasn't a woman I wanted to offend or to hurt, but my conscience wouldn't let me refuse her if she wanted to learn.

Carrie nodded. She wanted to learn all right. She turned away from us for a moment, did something to her dress, then turned back with a small book in her hand. She too had stolen from the library. Her book was a volume of English history illustrated with a few drawings which she pointed out to me.

I shook my head. "Either hide it or put it back," I told her. "It's too hard for you to begin with. The one Nigel and I are using was written for people just starting to learn." It was an old speller—probably the one Weylin's first wife had been taught from.

Carrie's fingers caressed one of the drawings for a moment. Then she put the book back into her dress.

"Now," I said, "find something to do in case your mother comes in. I can't teach you in here. We'll have to find someplace else to meet."

She nodded, looking relieved, and went over to sweep the other side of the room.

"Nigel," I said softly when she was gone, "I surprised you when I came in here, didn't I?"

"Didn't know it was you."

"Yes. It could have been Sarah, couldn't it?"

He said nothing.

"I teach you in here because Sarah said I could, and because the Weylins never seem to come out here."

"They don't. They send us out here to tell Sarah what they want. Or to tell her to come to them."

"So you can learn here, but Carrie can't. We might have trouble no matter how careful we are, but we don't have to ask for it."

He nodded.

"By the way, what does your father think of my teaching you?"

"I don't know. I didn't tell him you was."

Oh God. I took a shaky breath. "But he does know, doesn't he?"

"Aunt Sarah probably told him. He never said nothing to me though."

If anything went wrong, there would be blacks to take their revenge on me when the whites finished. When would I ever go home? *Would I ever go home?* Or if I had to stay here, why couldn't I just turn these two kids away, turn off my conscience, and be a coward, safe and comfortable?

I took the book from Nigel and handed him my own pencil and piece of paper from my tablet. "Spelling test," I said quietly.

He passed the test. Every word right. To my surprise as well as his, I hugged him. He grinned, half-embarrassed, half-pleased. Then I got up and put his test paper into the hot coals of the hearth. It burst into flames and burned completely. I was always careful about that, and I always hated being careful. I couldn't help contrasting Nigel's lessons with Rufus's. And the contrast made me bitter.

I turned to go back to the table where Nigel was waiting. In that moment, Tom Weylin opened the door and stepped in.

It wasn't supposed to happen. For as long as I had been on the plantation, it had not happened—no white had come into the cookhouse. Not even Kevin. Nigel had just agreed with me that it didn't happen.

But there stood Tom Weylin staring at me. He lowered his gaze a little and frowned. I realized that I was still holding the old speller. I'd gotten up with it in my hand and I hadn't put it down. I even had one finger in it holding my place.

I withdrew my finger and let the book close. I was in for a beating now. Where was Kevin? Somewhere inside the house, probably. He might hear me if I screamed—and I would be screaming shortly, anyway. But it would be better if I could just get past Weylin and run into the house.

Weylin stood squarely in front of the door. "Didn't I tell you I didn't want you reading!"

I said nothing. Clearly, nothing I could say would help. I felt myself trembling, and I tried to be still. I hoped Weylin couldn't see

And I hoped Nigel had had the sense to get the pencil off the table. So far, I was the only one in trouble. If it could just stay that way . . .

"I treated you good," said Weylin quietly, "and you pay me back by stealing from me! Stealing my books! Reading!"

He snatched the book from me and threw it on the floor. Then he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me toward the door. I managed to twist around to face Nigel and mouth the words, "Get Kevin." I saw Nigel stand up.

Then I was out of the cookhouse. Weylin dragged me a few feet, then pushed me hard. I fell, knocked myself breathless. I never saw where the whip came from, never even saw the first blow coming. But it came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin . . .

I screamed, convulsed. Weylin struck again and again, until I couldn't have gotten up at gunpoint.

I kept trying to crawl away from the blows, but I didn't have the strength or the co-ordination to get far. I may have been still screaming or just whimpering, I couldn't tell. All I was really aware of was the pain. I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing as he beat me. By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain.

I vomited. And I vomited again because I couldn't move my face away.

I saw Kevin, blurred, but somehow still recognizable. I saw him running toward me in slow motion, running. Legs churning, arms pumping, yet he hardly seemed to be getting closer.

Suddenly, I realized what was happening and I screamed—I think I screamed. He had to reach me. He had to!

And I passed out.

brary and gave him a new dress for Carrie, a new blanket, and a new suit of clothes for himself.

"See," Nigel told me later with some bitterness. "'Cause of Carrie and me, he's one nigger richer." But before the Weylins, he was properly grateful.

"Thank you, Marse Tom. Yes, sir. Sure do thank you. Fine clothes, yes, sir . . ."

Finally he escaped back to the covered passageway.

Meanwhile, in the library, I heard Weylin tell Rufus, "You should have been the one to give him something—instead of wasting all your money on that worthless girl."

"She's well!" Rufus answered. "Dana got her well. Why do you say she's worthless?"

"Because you're going to have to whip her sick again to get what you want from her!"

Silence.

"Dana should have been enough for you. She's got some sense." He paused. "Too much sense for her own good, I'd say, but at least she wouldn't give you trouble. She's had that Franklin fellow to teach her a few things."

Rufus walked away from him without answering. I had to get away from the library door where I had been eavesdropping very quickly as I heard him approach. I ducked into the dining room and came out again just as he was passing by.

"Rufe."

He gave me a look that said he didn't want to be bothered, but he stopped anyway.

"I want to write another letter."

He frowned. "You've got to be patient, Dana. It hasn't been that long."

"It's been over a month."

"Well . . . I don't know. Kevin could have moved again, could have done anything. I think you should give him a little more time to answer."

"Answer what?" asked Weylin. He'd done what Rufus had predicted—come up behind us so silently that I hadn't noticed him.

Rufus glanced at his father sourly. "Letter to Kevin Franklin telling him she's here."

"She wrote a letter?"

"I told her to write it. Why should I do it when she can?"

Carrie and Nigel named their thin, wrinkled, brown son, Jude. Nigel did a lot of strutting and happy babbling until Weylin told him to shut up and get back to work on the covered passageway he was supposed to be building to connect the house and the cookhouse. A few days after the baby's birth, though, Weylin called him into the li-

"Boy, you don't have the sense you—" He cut off abruptly. "Dana, go do your work!"

I left wondering whether Rufus had shown lack of sense by letting me write the letter—instead of writing it himself—or by sending it to the wrong place. After all, if Kevin never came back for me, Weylin's property was increased by one more slave. Even if I proved not to be very useful, he could always sell me.

I shuddered. I had to talk Rufus into letting me write another letter. The first one could have been lost or destroyed or sent to the wrong place. Things like that were still happening in 1976. How much worse might they be in this horse-and-buggy era? And surely Kevin would give up on me if I went home without him again—left him here for more long years. If he hadn't already given up on me.

I tried to put that thought out of my mind. It came to me now and then even though everything people told me seemed to indicate that he was waiting. Still waiting.

I went out to the laundry yard to help Tess. I had come to almost welcome the hard work. It kept me from thinking. White people thought I was industrious. Most blacks thought I was either stupid or too intent on pleasing the whites. I thought I was keeping my fears and doubts at bay as best I could, and managing to stay relatively sane.

I caught Rufus alone again the next day—in his room this time where we weren't likely to be interrupted. But he wouldn't listen when I brought up the letter. His mind was on Alice. She was stronger now, and his patience with her was gone. I had thought that eventually, he would just rape her again—and again. In fact, I was surprised that he hadn't already done it. I didn't realize that he was planning to involve me in that rape. He was, and he did.

"Talk to her, Dana," he said once he'd brushed aside the matter of my letter. "You're older than she is. She thinks you know a lot. Talk to her!"

He was sitting on his bed staring into the cold fireplace. I sat at his desk looking at the clear plastic pen I had loaned him. He'd used half its ink already. "What the hell have you been writing with this?" I asked.

"Dana, listen to me!"

I turned to face him. "I heard you."

"Well?"

"I can't stop you from raping the woman, Rufe, but I'm not going to help you do it either."

"You want her to get hurt?"

"Of course not. But you've already decided to hurt her, haven't you?"

He didn't answer.

"Let her go, Rufe. Hasn't she suffered enough because of you?" He wouldn't. I knew he wouldn't.

His green eyes glittered. "She'll never get away from me again. Never!" He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "You know, Daddy wants me to send her to the fields and take you."

"Does he?"

"He thinks all I want is a woman. Any woman. So you, then. He says you'd be less likely to give me trouble."

"Do you believe him?"

He hesitated, managed to smile a little. "No."

I nodded. "Good."

"I know you, Dana. You want Kevin the way I want Alice. And you had more luck than I did because no matter what happens now, for a while he wanted you too. Maybe I can't ever have that—both wanting, both loving. But I'm not going to give up what I can have."

"What do you mean, 'no matter what happens now?'"

"What in hell do you think I mean? It's been five years! You want to write another letter. Did you ever think maybe he threw the first letter out? Maybe he got like Alice—wanted to be with one of his own kind."

I said nothing. I knew what he was doing—trying to share his pain, hurt me as he was hurting. And of course, he knew just where I was vulnerable. I tried to keep a neutral expression, but he went on.

"He told me once that you two had been married for four years. That means he's been here away from you even longer than you've been together. I doubt if he'd have waited as long as he did if you weren't the only one who could get him back to his home time. But now . . . who knows. The right woman could make this time mighty sweet to him."

"Rufe, nothing you say to me is going to ease your way with Alice."

"No? How about this: You talk to her—talk some sense into her—or you're going to watch while Jake Edwards beats some sense into her!"

I stared at him in revulsion. "Is that what you call love?"

He was on his feet and across the room to me before I could take another breath. I sat where I was, watching him, feeling frightened, and suddenly very much aware of my knife, of how quickly I could reach it. He wasn't going to beat me. Not him, not ever.

"Get up!" he ordered. He didn't order me around much, and he'd never done it in that tone. "Get up, I said!"

I didn't move.

"I've been too easy on you," he said. His voice was suddenly low and ugly. "I treated you like you were better than the ordinary niggers. I see I made a mistake!"

"That's possible," I said. "I'm waiting for you to show me I made a mistake."

For several seconds, he stood frozen, towering over me, glaring down as though he meant to hit me. Finally, though, he relaxed, leaned against his desk. "You think you're white!" he muttered. "You don't know your place any better than a wild animal."

I said nothing.

"You think you own me because you saved my life!"

And I relaxed, glad not to have to take the life I had saved—glad not to have to risk other lives, including my own.

"If I ever caught myself wanting you like I want her, I'd cut my throat," he said.

I hoped that problem would never arise. If it did, one of us would do some cutting all right.

"Help me, Dana."

"I can't."

"You can! You and nobody else. Go to her. Send her to me. I'll have her whether you help or not. All I want you to do is fix it so I don't have to beat her. You're no friend of hers if you won't do that much!"

Of hers! He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl—help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn't think much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself.

"Do it!" hissed Rufus.

I got up and went out to find her.

She was strange now, erratic, sometimes needing my friendship, trusting me with her dangerous longings for freedom, her wild plans

to run away again; and sometimes hating me, blaming me for her trouble.

One night in the attic, she was crying softly and telling me something about Isaac. She stopped suddenly and asked, "Have you heard from your husband yet, Dana?"

"Not yet."

"Write another letter. Even if you have to do it in secret."

"I'm working on it."

"No sense in you losing your man too."

Yet moments later for no reason that I could see, she attacked me, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!"

I never really got used to her sudden switches, her attacks, but I put up with them. I had taken her through all the other stages of healing, and somehow, I couldn't abandon her now. Most of the time, I couldn't even get angry. She was like Rufus. When she hurt, she struck out to hurt others. But she had been hurting less as the days passed, and striking out less. She was healing emotionally as well as physically. I had helped her to heal. Now I had to help Rufus tear her wounds open again.

She was at Carrie's cabin watching Jude and two other older babies someone had left with her. She had no regular duties yet, but like me, she had found her own work. She liked children, and she liked sewing. She would take the coarse blue cloth Weylin bought for the slaves and make neat sturdy clothing of it while small children played around her feet. Weylin complained that she was like old Mary with the children and the sewing, but he brought her his clothing to be mended. She worked better and faster than the slave woman who had taken over much of old Mary's sewing—and if she had an enemy on the plantation, it was that woman, Liza, who was now in danger of being sent to more onerous work.

I went into the cabin and sat down with Alice before the cold fireplace. Jude slept beside her in the crib Nigel had made for him. The other two babies were awake lying naked on blankets on the floor quietly playing with their feet.

Alice looked up at me, then held up a long blue dress. "This is for you," she said. "I'm sick of seeing you in them pants."

I looked down at my jeans. "I'm so used to dressing like this, I

forget sometimes. At least it keeps me from having to serve at the table."

"Serving ain't bad." She'd done it a few times. "And if Mister Tom wasn't so stingy, you'd have had a dress a long time ago. Man loves a dollar more than he loves Jesus."

That, I believed literally. Weylin had dealings with banks. I knew because he complained about them. But I had never known him to have any dealings with churches or hold any kind of prayer meeting in his home. The slaves had to sneak away in the night and take their chances with the patrollers if they wanted to have any kind of religious meeting.

"Least you can look like a woman when your man comes for you," Alice said.

I drew a deep breath. "Thanks."

"Yeah. Now tell me what you come here to say . . . that you don't want to say."

I looked at her, startled.

"You think I don't know you after all this time? You got a look that says you don't want to be here."

"Yes. Rufus sent me to talk to you." I hesitated. "He wants you tonight."

Her expression hardened. "He sent *you* to tell me that?"

"No."

She waited, glaring at me, silently demanding that I tell her more. I said nothing.

"Well! What did he send you for then?"

"To talk you into going to him quietly, and to tell you you'd be whipped this time if you resist."

"Shit! Well, all right, you told me. Now get out of here before I throw this dress in the fireplace and light it."

"I don't give a damn what you do with that dress."

Now it was her turn to be startled. I didn't usually talk to her that way, even when she deserved it.

I leaned back comfortably in Nigel's homemade chair. "Message delivered," I said. "Do what you want."

"I mean to."

"You might look ahead a little though. Ahead and in all three directions."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, it looks as though you have three choices. You can go to

him as he orders; you can refuse, be whipped, and then have him take you by force; or you can run away again."

She said nothing, bent to her sewing and drew the needle in quick neat tiny stitches even though her hands were shaking. I bent down to play with one of the babies—one who had forgotten his own feet and crawled over to investigate my shoe. He was a fat curious little boy of several months who began trying to pull the buttons off my blouse as soon as I picked him up.

"He go' pee all over you in a minute," said Alice. "He likes to let go just when somebody's holding him."

I put the baby down quickly—just in time, as it turned out.

"Dana?"

I looked at her.

"What am I going to do?"

I hesitated, shook my head. "I can't advise you. It's your body."

"Not mine." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "Not mine, his."

He paid for it, didn't he?"

"Paid who? You?"

"You know he didn't pay me! Oh, what's the difference? Whether it's right or wrong, the law says he owns me now. I don't know why he hasn't already whipped the skin off me. The things I've said to him . . ."

"You know why."

She began to cry. "I ought to take a knife in there with me and cut his damn throat." She glared at me. "Now go tell him that! Tell him I'm talking 'bout killing him!"

"Tell him yourself."

"Do your job! Go tell him! That's what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That's why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years. You be running the whole house when the old man dies."

I shrugged and stopped the curious baby from sucking on my shoe string.

"Go tell on me, Dana. Show him you the kind of woman he needs, not me."

I said nothing.

"One white man, two white men, what difference do it make?"

"One black man, two black men, what difference does that make?"

"I could have ten black men without turning against my own."

I shrugged again, refusing to argue with her. What could I win? She made a wordless sound and covered her face with her hands. "What's the matter with you?" she said wearily. "Why you let me run you down like that? You done everything you could for me, maybe even saved my life. I seen people get lockjaw and die from way less than I had wrong with me. Why you let me talk about you so bad?"

"Why do you do it?"

She sighed, bent her body into a "c" as she crouched in the chair. "Because I get so mad . . . I get so mad I can taste it in my mouth. And you're the only one I can take it out on—the only one I can hurt and not be hurt back."

"Don't keep doing it," I said. "I have feelings just like you do."

"Do you want me to go to him?"

"I can't tell you that. You have to decide."

"Would you go to him?"

I glanced at the floor. "We're in different situations. What I'd do doesn't matter."

"Would you go to him?"

"No."

"Even though he's just like your husband?"

"He isn't."

"But . . . All right, even though you don't . . . don't hate him like I do?"

"Even so."

"Then I won't go either."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. Run away?"

I got up to leave.

"Where you going?" she asked quickly.

"To stall Rufus. If I really work at it, I think I can get him to let you off tonight. That will give you a start."

She dropped the dress to the floor and came out of her chair to grab me. "No, Dana! Don't go." She drew a deep breath, then seemed to sag. "I'm lying. I can't run again. I can't. You be hungry and cold and sick out there, and so tired you can't walk. Then they find you and set dogs on you . . . My Lord, the dogs . . ." She was silent for a moment. "I'm going to him. He knew I would sooner or later. But he don't know how I wish I had the nerve to just kill him!"

"I don't know what I'm doing here, Rufe. I never do until I find out what's wrong with you."

He stared at me for a long moment. His eyes were red and under them were dark smudges. Finally, he grabbed me by the arm and led me back the way he had come. We were on the plantation not far from the house. Nothing looked changed. I saw two of Nigel's sons wrestling, rolling around on the ground. They were the two I had been teaching, and they were no bigger than they had been when I saw them last.

"Rufe, how long have I been gone?"

He didn't answer. He was leading me toward the barn, I saw, and apparently I wasn't going to learn anything until I got there.

He stopped at the barn door and pushed me through it. He didn't follow me in.

I looked around, seeing very little at first as my eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light. I turned to the place where I had been strung up and whipped—and jumped back in surprise when I saw that someone was hanging there. Hanging by the neck. A woman.

Alice.

I stared at her not believing, not wanting to believe . . . I touched her and her flesh was cold and hard. The dead gray face was ugly in death as it had never been in life. The mouth was open. The eyes were open and staring. Her head was bare and her hair loose and short like mine. She had never liked to tie it up the way other women did. It was one of the things that had made us look even more alike—the only two consistently bareheaded women on the place. Her dress was dark red and her apron clean and white. She wore shoes that Rufus had had made specifically for her, not the rough heavy shoes or boots other slaves wore. It was as though she had dressed up and combed her hair and then . . .

I wanted her down.

I looked around, saw that the rope had been tied to a wall peg, thrown over a beam. I broke my fingernails, trying to untie it until I remembered my knife. I got it from my bag and cut Alice down.

She fell stiffly like something that would break when it hit the floor. But she landed without breaking and I took the rope from her neck and closed her eyes. For a time, I just sat with her, holding her head and crying silently.

Eventually, Rufus came in. I looked up at him and he looked away.

"Did she do this to herself?" I asked.

"Yes. To herself."

"Why?"

He didn't answer.

"Rufe?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Where are her children?"

He turned and walked out of the barn.

I straightened Alice's body and her dress and looked around for something to cover her with. There was nothing.

I left the barn and went across an expanse of grass to the cook-house. Sarah was there chopping meat with that frightening speed and co-ordination of hers. I had told her once that it always looked as though she was about to cut off a finger or two, and she had laughed. She still had all ten.

"Sarah?" There was such a difference in our ages now that everyone else my age called her "Aunt Sarah." I knew it was a title of respect in this culture, and I respected her. But I couldn't quite manage "Aunt" any more than I could have managed "Mammy." She didn't seem to mind.

She looked up. "Dana! Girl, what are you doing back here? What Marse Rufe done now?"

"I'm not sure. But, Sarah, Alice is dead."

Sarah put down her cleaver and sat on the bench next to the table. "Oh Lord. Poor child. He finally killed her."

"I don't know," I said. I went over and sat beside her. "I think she did it to herself. Hung herself. I just took her down."

"He did it!" she hissed. "Even if he didn't put the rope on her, he drove her to it. He sold her babies!"

I frowned. Sarah had spoken clearly enough, loudly enough, but for a moment, I didn't understand. "Joe and Hagar? His children?"

"What he care 'bout that?"

"But . . . he did care. He was going to . . . Why would he do such a thing?"

"She run off." Sarah faced me. "You must have known she was goin'. You and her was like sisters."

I didn't need the reminder. I got up, feeling that I had to move around, distract myself, or I would cry again.

"You sure fought like sisters," said Sarah. "Always fussin' at each other, stompin' away from each other, comin' back. Right after you

left, she knocked the devil out of a field hand who was runnin' you down."

Had she? She would. Insulting me was her prerogative. No trespassing. I paced from the table to the hearth to a small work table. Back to Sarah.

"Dana, where is she?"

"In the barn."

"He'll give her a big funeral." Sarah shook her head. "It's funny. I thought she was finally settlin' down with him—getting not to mind so much."

"If she was, I don't think she could have forgiven herself for it."

Sarah shrugged.

"When she ran . . . did he beat her?"

"Not much. 'Bout much as old Marse Tom whipped you that time."

That gentle spanking, yes.

"The whipping didn't matter much. But when he took away her children, I thought she was go' die right there. She was screaming and crying and carrying on. Then she got sick and I had to take care of her." Sarah was silent for a moment. "I didn't want to even be close to her. When Marse Tom sold my babies, I just wanted to lay down and die. Seeing her like she was brought all that back."

Carrie came in then, her face wet with tears. She came up to me without surprise, and hugged me.

"You know?" I asked.

She nodded, then made her sign for white people and pushed me toward the door. I went.

I found Rufus at his desk in the library fondling a hand gun.

He looked up and saw me just as I was about to withdraw. It had occurred to me suddenly, certainly, that this was where he had been heading when he called me. What had his call been, then? A subconscious desire for me to stop him from shooting himself?

"Come in, Dana." His voice sounded empty and dead.

I pulled my old Windsor chair up to his desk and sat down. "How could you do it, Rufe?"

He didn't answer.

"Your son and your daughter . . . How could you sell them?"

"I didn't."

That stopped me. I had been prepared for almost any other answer—or no answer. But a denial . . . "But . . . but . . ."

"She ran away."

"I know."

"We were getting along. You know. You were here. It was good. Once, when you were gone, she came to my room. She came on her own."

"Rufe . . . ?"

"Everything was all right. I even went on with Joe's lessons. Me! I told her I would free both of them."

"She didn't believe you. You wouldn't put anything into writing."

"I would have."

I shrugged. "Where are the children, Rufe?"

"In Baltimore with my mother's sister."

"But . . . why?"

"To punish her, scare her. To make her see what could happen if she didn't . . . if she tried to leave me."

"Oh God! But you could have at least brought them back when she got sick."

"I wish I had."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know."

I turned away from him in disgust. "You killed her. Just as though you had put that gun to her head and fired."

He looked at the gun, put it down quickly.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Nigel's gone to get a coffin. A decent one, not just a homemade box. And he'll hire a minister to come out tomorrow."

"I mean what are you going to do for your son and your daughter?"

He looked at me helplessly.

"Two certificates of freedom," I said. "You owe them that, at least. You've deprived them of their mother."

"Damn you, Dana! Stop saying that! Stop saying I killed her."

I just looked at him.

"Why did you leave me! If you hadn't gone, she might not have run away!"

I rubbed my face where he had hit me when I begged him not to sell Sam.

"You didn't have to go!"

"You were turning into something I didn't want to stay near."

Silence.

"Two certificates of freedom, Rufe, all legal. Raise them free. That's the least you can do."

4

There was an outdoor funeral the next day. Everyone attended—field hands, house servants, even the indifferent Evan Fowler.

The minister was a tall coal-black deep-voiced freedman with a face that reminded me of a picture I had of my father who had died before I was old enough to know him. The minister was literate. He held a Bible in his huge hands and read from Job and Ecclesiastes until I could hardly stand to listen. I had shrugged off my aunt and uncle's strict Baptist teachings years before. But even now, especially now, the bitter melancholy words of Job could still reach me. "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not . . ."

I kept quiet somehow, wiped away silent tears, beat away flies and mosquitoes, heard the whispers.

"She gone to hell! Don't you know folks kills theyself goes to hell!"

"Shut your mouth! Marse Rufe'll make you think you down there with her!"

Silence.

They buried her.

There was a big dinner afterward. My relatives at home had dinners after funerals too. I had never thought about how far back the custom might go.

I ate a little, then went away to the library where I could be alone, where I would write. Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn't say them, couldn't sort out my feelings about them, couldn't keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no one else. Not even Kevin.

Rufus came in later when I was nearly written out. He came to the desk, sat down in my old Windsor—I was in his chair—and put his head down. We didn't say anything, but we sat together for a while.

The next day, he took me to town with him, took me to the old

brick Court House, and let me watch while he had certificates of freedom drawn up for his children.

"If I bring them back," he said on the ride home, "will you take care of them?"

I shook my head. "It wouldn't be good for them, Rufe. This isn't my home. They'd get used to me, then I'd be gone."

"Who, then?"

"Carrie. Sarah will help her."

He nodded listlessly.

Early one morning a few days later, he left for Easton Point where he could catch a steamboat to Baltimore. I offered to go with him to help with the children, but all that got me was a look of suspicion—a look I couldn't help understanding.

"Rufe, I don't have to go to Baltimore to escape from you. I really want to help."

"Just stay here," he said. And he went out to talk to Evan Fowler before he left. He knew how I had gone home last. He had asked me, and I had told him.

"But why?" he had demanded. "You could have killed yourself."

"There're worse things than being dead," I had said.

He had turned and walked away from me.

Now he watched more than he had before. He couldn't watch me all the time, of course, and unless he wanted to keep me chained, he couldn't prevent me from taking one route or another out of his world if that was what I wanted to do. He couldn't control me. That clearly bothered him.

Evan Fowler was in the house more than he had to be while Rufus was gone. He said little to me, gave me no orders. But he was there. I took refuge in Margaret Weylin's room, and she was so pleased she talked endlessly. I found myself laughing and actually holding conversations with her as though we were just a couple of lonely people talking without the extra burden of stupid barriers.

Rufus came back, came to the house carrying the dark little girl and leading the boy who seemed to look even more like him. Joe saw me in the hall and ran to me.

"Aunt Dana, Aunt Dana!" And a hug later, "I can read better now. Daddy's been teaching me. Wanna hear?"

"Sure I do." I looked up at Rufus. *Daddy?*

He glared at me tight-lipped as though daring me to speak. All I had wanted to say, though, was, "What took you so long?" The boy

had spent his short life calling his father "Master." Well, now that he no longer had a mother, I supposed Rufus thought it was time he had a father. I managed to smile at Rufus—a real smile. I didn't want him feeling embarrassed or defensive for finally acknowledging his son.

He smiled back, seemed to relax.

"How about my getting classes going again?"

He nodded. "I guess the others haven't had time to forget much."

They hadn't. As it turned out, I had only been away for three months. The children had had a kind of early summer vacation. Now they went back to school. And I, slowly, delicately, went to work on Rufus, began to push him toward freeing a few more of them, perhaps several more of them—perhaps in his will, all of them. I had heard of slaveholders doing such things. The Civil War was still thirty years away. I might be able to get some of the adult slaves freed while they were still young enough to build new lives. I might be able to do some good for everyone, finally. At least, I felt secure enough to try, now that my own freedom was within reach.

Rufus had been keeping me with him more than he needed me now. He called me to share his meals openly, and he seemed to listen when I talked to him about freeing the slaves. But he made no promises. I wondered whether he thought making a will was foolish at his age—or maybe it was freeing more slaves that he thought was foolish. He didn't say anything, so I couldn't tell.

Finally, though, he did answer me, told me much more than I wanted to know. None of it should have surprised me at all.

"Dana," he said one afternoon in the library, "I'd have to be crazy to make a will freeing these people and then tell you about it. I could die damn young for that kind of craziness."

I had to look at him to see whether he was serious. But looking at him confused me even more. He was smiling, but I got the feeling he was completely serious. He believed I would kill him to free his slaves. Strangely, the idea had not occurred to me. My suggestion had been innocent. But he might have a point. Eventually, it would have occurred to me.

"I used to have nightmares about you," he said. "They started when I was little—right after I set fire to the draperies. Remember the fire?"

"Of course."

"I'd dream about you and wake up in a cold sweat."

"Dream . . . about me killing you?"

"Not exactly." He paused, gave me a long unreadable look. "I'd dream about you leaving me."

I frowned. That was close to the thing Kevin had heard him say—the thing that had awakened Kevin's suspicions. "I leave," I said carefully. "I have to. I don't belong here."

"Yes you do! As far as I'm concerned, you do. But that's not what I mean. You leave, and sooner or later you come back. But in my nightmares, you leave without helping me. You walk away and leave me in trouble, hurting, maybe dying."

"Oh. Are you sure those dreams started when you were little? They sound more like something you would have come up with after your fight with Isaac."

"They got worse then," he admitted. "But they started way back at the fire—as soon as I realized you could help me or not, just as you chose. I had those nightmares for years. Then when Alice had been here awhile, they went away. Now they've come back."

He stopped, looked at me as though he expected me to say something—to reassure him, perhaps, to promise him that I would never do such a thing. But I couldn't quite bring myself to say the words.

"You see?" he said quietly.

I moved uncomfortably in my chair. "Rufe, do you know how many people live to ripe old ages without ever getting into the kind of trouble that causes you to need me? If you don't trust me, then you have more reason than ever to be careful."

"Tell me I can trust you."

More discomfort. "You keep doing things that make it impossible for me to trust you—even though you know it has to work both ways."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I never know how to treat you. You confuse everybody. You sound too white to the field hands—like some kind of traitor, I guess."

"I know what they think."

"Daddy always thought you were dangerous because you knew too many white ways, but you were black. Too black, he said. The kind of black who watches and thinks and makes trouble. I told that to Alice and she laughed. She said sometimes Daddy showed more sense than I did. She said he was right about you, and that I'd find out some day."

I jumped. Had Alice really said such a thing?

"And my mother," continued Rufus calmly, "says if she closes her

eyes while you and her are talking, she can forget you're black without even trying."

"I'm black," I said. "And when you sell a black man away from his family just because he talked to me, you can't expect me to have any good feelings toward you."

He looked away. We hadn't really discussed Sam before. We had talked around him, alluded to him without quite mentioning him.

"He wanted you," said Rufus bluntly.

I stared at him, knowing now why we hadn't spoken of Sam. It was too dangerous. It could lead to speaking of other things. We needed safe subjects now, Rufus and I—the price of corn, supplies for the slaves, that sort of thing.

"Sam didn't do anything," I said. "You sold him for what you thought he was thinking."

"He wanted you," Rufus repeated.

So do you, I thought. No Alice to take the pressure off any more. It was time for me to go home. I started to get up.

"Don't leave, Dana."

I stopped. I didn't want to hurry away—run away—from him. I didn't want to give him any indication that I was going to the attic to reopen the tender new scar tissue at my wrists. I sat down again. And he leaned back in his chair and looked at me until I wished I had taken the chance of hurrying away.

"What am I going to do when you go home this time?" he whispered.

"You'll survive."

"I wonder . . . why I should bother."

"For your children, at least," I said. "Her children. They're all you have left of her."

He closed his eyes, rubbed one hand over them. "They should be your children now," he said. "If you had any feelings for them, you'd stay."

For them? "You know I can't."

"You could if you wanted to. I wouldn't hurt you, and you wouldn't have to hurt yourself . . . again."

"You wouldn't hurt me until something frustrated you, made you angry or jealous. You wouldn't hurt me until someone hurt you. Rufe, I know you. I couldn't stay here even if I didn't have a home to go back to—and someone waiting for me there."

"That Kevin!"

"Yes."

"I wish I had shot him."

"If you had, you'd be dead yourself by now."

He turned his body so that he faced me squarely. "You say that as though it means something."

I got up to leave. There was nothing more to be said. He had asked for what he knew I could not give, and I had refused.

"You know, Dana," he said softly, "when you sent Alice to me that first time, and I saw how much she hated me, I thought, I'll fall asleep beside her and she'll kill me. She'll hit me with a candlestick. She'll set fire to the bed. She'll bring a knife up from the cook-house . . ."

"I thought all that, but I wasn't afraid. Because if she killed me, that would be that. Nothing else would matter. But if I lived, I would have her. And, by God, I had to have her."

He stood up and came over to me. I stepped back, but he caught my arms anyway. "You're so much like her, I can hardly stand it," he said.

"Let go of me, Rufe!"

"You were one woman," he said. "You and her. One woman. Two halves of a whole."

I had to get away from him. "Let me go, or I'll make your dream real!" Abandonment. The one weapon Alice hadn't had. Rufus didn't seem to be afraid of dying. Now, in his grief, he seemed almost to want death. But he was afraid of dying alone, afraid of being deserted by the person he had depended on for so long.

He stood holding my arms, perhaps trying to decide what he should do. After a moment, I felt his grip loosen, and I pulled away. I knew I had to go now before he submerged his fear. He could do it. He could talk himself into anything.

I left the library, went up the main stairs, then the attic stairs. Over to my bag, my knife . . .

Footsteps on the stairs.

The knife!

I opened it, hesitated, then slipped the knife, blade still open, back into my bag.

He opened the door, came in, looked around the big hot empty room. He saw me at once, but still, he looked around—to see whether we were alone?

We were.

He came over and sat next to me on my pallet. "I'm sorry, Dana," he said.

Sorry? For what he had nearly done, or for what he was about to do? Sorry. He had apologized to me many times in many ways before, but his apologies had always been oblique, "Eat with me, Dana. Sarah is cooking up something special." Or, "Here, Dana, here's a new book I bought for you in town." Or, "Here's some cloth, Dana. Maybe you can make yourself something from it."

Things. Gifts given when he knew he had hurt or offended me. But he had never before said, "I'm sorry, Dana." I looked at him uncertainly.

"I've never felt so lonesome in my life," he said.

The words touched me as no others could have. I knew about loneliness. I found my thoughts going back to the time I had gone home without Kevin—the loneliness, the fear, sometimes the hopelessness I had felt then. Hopelessness wouldn't be a sometime thing to Rufus, though. Alice was dead and buried. He had only his children left. But at least one of them had also loved Alice. Joe.

"Where'd my mama go?" he demanded on his first day home.

"Away," Rufus had said. "She went away."

"When is she coming back?"

"I don't know."

The boy came to me. "Aunt Dana, where'd my mama go?"

"Honey . . . she died."

"Died?"

"Yes. Like old Aunt Mary." Who at last had drifted the final distance to her reward. She had lived over eighty years—had come over from Africa, people said. Nigel had made a box and Mary had been laid to rest near where Alice lay now.

"But Mama wasn't old."

"No, she was sick, Joe."

"Daddy said she went away."

"Well . . . to heaven."

"No!"

He had cried and I had tried to comfort him. I remembered the pain of my own mother's death—grief, loneliness, uncertainty in my aunt and uncle's house . . .

I had held the boy and told him he still had his daddy—please God. And that Sarah and Carrie and Nigel loved him. They wouldn't

let anything happen to him—as though they had the power to protect him, or even themselves.

I let Joe go to his mother's cabin to be alone for a while. He wanted to. Then I told Rufus what I had done. And Rufus hadn't known whether to hit me or thank me. He had glared at me, the skin of his face drawn tight, intense. Then, finally, he had relaxed and nodded and gone out to find his son.

Now, he sat with me—being sorry and lonely and wanting me to take the place of the dead.

"You never hated me, did you?" he asked.

"Never for long. I don't know why. You worked hard to earn my hatred, Rufe."

"She hated me. From the first time I forced her."

"I don't blame her."

"Until just before she ran. She had stopped hating me. I wonder how long it will take you."

"What?"

"To stop hating."

Oh God. Almost against my will, I closed my fingers around the handle of the knife still concealed in my bag. He took my other hand, held it between his own in a grip that I knew would only be gentle until I tried to pull away.

"Rufe," I said, "your children . . ."

"They're free."

"But they're young. They need you to protect their freedom."

"Then it's up to you, isn't it?"

I twisted my hand, tried to get it away from him in sudden anger. At once, his hold went from caressing to imprisoning. My right hand had become wet and slippery on the knife.

"It's up to you," he repeated.

"No, Goddamnit, it isn't! Keeping you alive has been up to me for too long! Why didn't you shoot yourself when you started to? I wouldn't have stopped you!"

"I know."

The softness of his voice made me look up at him.

"So what else do I have to lose?" he asked. He pushed me back on the pallet, and for a few moments, we lay there, still. What was he waiting for? What was I waiting for?

He lay with his head on my shoulder, his left arm around me, his right hand still holding my hand, and slowly, I realized how easy it

would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk. But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times. So hard to kill . . .

He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently—for me? The red hair was neatly combed and a little damp. I would never be to him what Tess had been to his father—a thing passed around like the whiskey jug at a husking. He wouldn't do that to me or sell me or . . .

No.

I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once.

I twisted sharply, broke away from him. He caught me, trying not to hurt me. I was aware of him trying not to hurt me even as I raised the knife, even as I sank it into his side.

He screamed. I had never heard anyone scream that way—an animal sound. He screamed again, a lower ugly gurgle.

He lost his hold on my hand for a moment, but caught my arm before I could get away. Then he brought up the fist of his free hand to punch me once, and again as the patroller had done so long ago.

I pulled the knife free of him somehow, raised it, and brought it down again into his back.

This time he only grunted. He collapsed across me, somehow still alive, still holding my arm.

I lay beneath him, half conscious from the blows, and sick. My stomach seemed to twist, and I vomited on both of us.

"Dana?"

A voice. A man's voice.

I managed to turn my head and see Nigel standing in the doorway.

"Dana, what . . . ? Oh no. God, no!"

"Nigel . . ." moaned Rufus, and he gave a long shuddering sigh. His body went limp and leaden across me. I pushed him away somehow—everything but his hand still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching sickness.

Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on

my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving.

Something . . . paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it incomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped.

I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard.

And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed.

Epilogue

We flew to Maryland as soon as my arm was well enough. There, we rented a car—Kevin was driving again, finally—and wandered around Baltimore and over to Easton. There was a bridge now, not the steamship Rufus had used. And at last I got a good look at the town I had lived so near and seen so little of. We found the courthouse and an old church, a few other buildings time had not worn away. And we found Burger King and Holiday Inn and Texaco and schools with black kids and white kids together and older people who looked at Kevin and me, then looked again.

We went into the countryside, into what was still woods and farmland, and found a few of the old houses. A couple of them could have been the Weylin house. They were well-kept and handsomer, but basically, they were the same red-brick Georgian Colonials.

But Rufus's house was gone. As nearly as we could tell, its site was now covered by a broad field of corn. The house was dust, like Rufus.

I was the one who insisted on trying to find his grave, questioning the farmer about it because Rufus, like his father, like old Mary and Alice, had probably been buried on the plantation.

But the farmer knew nothing—or at least, said nothing. The only clue we found—more than a clue, really—was an old newspaper article—a notice that Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was partially destroyed. And in later papers, notice of the sale of the slaves from Mr. Rufus Weylin's estate. These slaves were listed by their first names with their approximate ages and their

skills given. All three of Nigel's sons were listed, but Nigel and Carrie were not. Sarah was listed, but Joe and Hagar were not. Everyone else was listed. Everyone.

I thought about that, put together as many pieces as I could. The fire, for instance. Nigel had probably set it to cover what I had done—and he had covered. Rufus was assumed to have burned to death. I could find nothing in the incomplete newspaper records to suggest that he had been murdered, or even that the fire had been arson. Nigel must have done a good job. He must also have managed to get Margaret Weylin out of the house alive. There was no mention of her dying. And Margaret had relatives in Baltimore. Also, Hagar's home had been in Baltimore.

Kevin and I went back to Baltimore to skim newspapers, legal records, anything we could find that might tie Margaret and Hagar together or mention them at all. Margaret might have taken both children. Perhaps with Alice dead she had accepted them. They were her grandchildren, after all, the son and daughter of her only child. She might have cared for them. She might also have held them as slaves. But even if she had, Hagar, at least, lived long enough for the Fourteenth Amendment to free her.

"He could have left a will," Kevin told me outside one of our haunts, the Maryland Historical Society. "He could have freed those people at least when he had no more use for them."

"But there was his mother to consider," I said. "And he was only twenty-five. He probably thought he had plenty of time to make a will."

"Stop defending him," muttered Kevin.

I hesitated, then shook my head. "I wasn't. I guess in a way, I was defending myself. You see, I know why he wouldn't make that kind of will. I asked him, and he told me."

"Why?"

"Because of me. He was afraid I'd kill him afterwards."

"You wouldn't even have had to know about it!"

"Yes, but I guess he wasn't taking any chances."

"Was he right . . . to be afraid?"

"I don't know."

"I doubt it, considering what you took from him. I don't think you were really capable of killing him until he attacked you."

And barely then, I thought. Kevin would never know what those last moments had been like. I had outlined them for him, and he'd

asked few questions. For that I was grateful. Now I said simply, "Self-defense."

"Yes," he said.

"But the cost . . . Nigel's children, Sarah, all the others . . ."

"It's over," he said. "There's nothing you can do to change any of it now."

"I know." I drew a deep breath. "I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together—maybe stay with Sarah."

"You've looked," he said. "And you've found no records. You'll probably never know."

I touched the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on my face, touched my empty left sleeve. "I know," I repeated. "Why did I even want to come here. You'd think I would have had enough of the past."

"You probably needed to come for the same reason I did." He shrugged. "To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane."

I looked back at the brick building of the Historical Society, itself a converted early mansion. "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane."

"We are," he said. "And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way."