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One Kick

Written by Chelsea Cain

Published by Simon & Schuster

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CHELSEA CAIN

ONE KICK



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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

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First published in the USA by Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2014
First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2014
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978-1-47113-066-3
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-47113-067-0
eBook ISBN 978-1-47113-068-7

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Typeset in Baskerville by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For Marc Mohan, and Eliza Fantastic Mohan,
and Lucy.

I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.

—Bruce Lee

PROLOGUE

They had told her what to do if the police ever came. They had run drills—first thing in the morning; in the middle of the night; halfway through a meal—until she could get to the trapdoor in the closet from anywhere in the house in under a minute. She was an agile kid, and fast, and she practiced. When her father clicked the stopwatch and gave her a proud nod, she felt a heat of happiness burn in her chest.

She knew that he did it all for her. She saw the toll the stress took, the creases at the corners of his eyes, the gray strands in his gold hair; the pink of his scalp showed through where his hair was thinning on top. He was still strong. She could still count on him to protect her. Their property was in a rural county, miles from the nearest house, and he said he could hear a car coming as soon as it turned onto the gravel lane. This is where he had taught her to shoot. How to plant her feet so the .22

would feel steadier in her hands. He told her that if the police ever came, and he wasn't home, that she should shoot anyone who tried to keep her from getting to the trapdoor. He had walked her around the house, showing her where every gun was stashed, making her say the location of each out loud so she would remember. "Under the kitchen sink." "Dining room buffet drawer." "Behind the books on the bookshelf." She wasn't scared. Her father was always home. If anyone needed shooting, he'd do it for her.

Rain battered the fragile farmhouse windows, but she felt safe, already dressed for bed in her cotton nightgown with the giraffes on it, a quilt wrapped around her shoulders. The smell of jar spaghetti sauce and meatballs—her favorite meal—still hung in the air, along with the burning wood crackling in the fireplace. The dining room table had been cleared. Her mother had disappeared into the kitchen. The Scrabble board was set up and she and her father studied their tiles. They played every night after dinner. It was part of her homeschooling. The fireplace in the living room flickered with a warm, orange glow, but they played at the dining room table. Her father said it was better for her posture. He picked up a wooden Scrabble tile and moved it onto the board. *C*. He grinned at her, and she knew that look, knew he had a good one. He put another tile down. *A*. He was putting the next tile down when the sound of someone pounding at the front door echoed through the house.

She could see the fear on his face, the way his eyelids twitched. He dropped the tile. *K*.

Her mother materialized in the kitchen doorway, a yellow dishrag still in her wet hands. Everything went still. Like the moment when a photograph is taken—that pause when the whole world waits, trying not to blink.

"It's Johnson," a familiar voice shouted from outside. "Storm put a tree down on my power lines. Phone's down. Everything. Can I use yours to call the sheriff?"

Her parents exchanged a tense glance and then her father tightened his fists on the table and leaned over them, not even noticing as he knocked over his Scrabble rack and all his tiles skidded across the tablecloth. Her mother had embroidered that tablecloth with bluebells and lupins. The *K* tile from her father's rack sat right there, on a bluebell, right in front of her. That tile alone was worth five points.

"I want you to go to the side window by the piano," her father told her. He said it in the serious whisper voice he used when she was to follow his instructions and not ask questions. His eyes darted toward her mother and then he put his hands through his fine fuzz of hair, so different from her own thick dark mop of tangles. "You should be able to see the Johnson place down the hill just past the lake," he told her. "Tell me if you see any lights on."

This was different from the drills. She could see it in the way her parents looked at each other. She wondered

if she should be frightened, but when she inventoried her body for signs of fear, she found none. Her father had taught her the importance of preparation.

She calmly pushed her chair away from the table, stood, let the quilt fall onto the floor, and made her way barefoot from the dining room into the living room. The fireplace cut an orange circle out of the darkness. She tiptoed alongside her mother's piano and tucked herself between it and the wall. Then she turned her gaze outside the water-streaked window into the blackness beyond. The cold air seeping in from outside made her forget about the fire. She peered in the direction her father had indicated. But there were no lights—only her own faint reflection flickering like a dying ember. She craned her head back toward the dining room. "I don't see any lights," Kick reported. "It's dark down there."

Her mother said her father's name, a little sound followed by a gulp, like she was swallowing it. Her father cleared his throat. "I'll be right with you!" he hollered toward the door.

She heard the grate of the chair legs as he got up from the table, and watched as he made his way to the dining room cabinet and withdrew the Colt from the drawer next to the good silverware. He tucked the gun in the back of the Wranglers her mother had bought him at Walmart.

She saw her mother back slowly into the kitchen.

It was cold by the window. The rain tapped like fingers

against the glass. The man was still pounding on the door. She felt something in her hand, a hard square inch of wood, and was startled to see the *K* tile clutched between her fingers. She didn't remember grabbing it.

Her father scooped her quilt up off the floor and carried it over to her. He draped it around her shoulders, and to her immediate shame she hid the Scrabble tile in her fist, not wanting him to be disappointed in her thievery. He fixed his eyes on hers and put his face so close that she could smell the spaghetti sauce on his breath, the cooked ground beef. "Stay where you are for now," he whispered, his voice cracking. A glint of flame reflected off his eyeballs in the dark. She tightened her fist around the Scrabble tile, its corners digging into her flesh.

As her father crossed the living room toward the door, she saw him touch the butt of the gun at the small of his spine, like he was making sure it was still there. He was wearing the beaded moccasins that he had bought the summer they lived in Oklahoma, the ones made by real Comanche. The soles were animal hide, soft and soundless.

He didn't look back at her as he went through the door to the front hall, but he left the door open a crack. She heard the front door open and the slap and squeak of the aluminum screen slam shut. She heard her father's voice, fake-friendly, and she heard the stomp of Johnson's boots on the welcome mat as he apologized again for being a bother.

Her body relaxed, and she let her grip on the quilt around her shoulders loosen.

She did not have to run.

Their neighbor would use the phone. They would finish their Scrabble game. She leaned against the wall, fingering the Scrabble tile, wondering how long she was supposed to stay there while the men stood around talking about the storm. The flicker of her own reflection caught her attention. She studied it in the wavy farmhouse glass. Her dark hair disappeared until she was just a face in the window, a glint of eyes and teeth. She got closer until her nose was so close to the glass she could feel the air get colder. This close, she could make out her eyes in detail. Every eyelash. Until the images reflecting back at her began to merge together and overlap.

That's when she saw the light.

She stepped back, startled, and blinked hard. But when she opened her eyes, she still saw it. This wasn't firelight. It wasn't a reflection. She stared at the single blurry dot of brightness down the hill, across the lake, trying to puzzle it out even as her heart fluttered. A light. They had a few lights like that on their property, affixed to the top corners of outbuildings. Those lights had motion detectors that sometimes got set off by passing cats or raccoons. Her father had taken the bulb out of one on their property, because it kept coming on outside her window and waking her up at night.

Their neighbor was lying. He still had electricity.

She needed to tell someone. But her father had told her to stay where she was. She looked back at the kitchen door, but there was no sign of her mother. The men's voices still boomed from the front hall—her father laughing a little too loudly.

She could hear the screen door banging in the wind. Johnson hadn't pulled it closed all the way. The screen would rip in the storm. She felt like a knot that someone was pulling tight, her whole self contracting, the air squeezing out of her lungs.

The screen door banged.

The sound was like an openhanded slap. Her lungs expanded, taking in air, lifting her to the balls of her feet. The Scrabble tile dropped from her hand onto the floor.

And she ran. She scurried across the dark living room, the quilt flapping behind her like a cape, and wrenched open the door to the front hall. Her father looked at her, eyebrows lifted, mouth open. He was so tall—he could lift her up to touch the ceiling. Mr. Johnson's back was to her, just a normal-size man. His wet boots sat neatly together just inside the door. His wet raincoat was on the coat tree. He was standing on the rug, drying himself off with the towel her father kept by the door.

"I saw a light," she said, out of breath.

Her father went gray.

The screen door banged again, and the front door burst open like a thunderclap. Her father stumbled back as the men forced their way into the house. They didn't

bother to take off their boots or dark jackets. Water flew off of them, spattering her. They were shouting, barking orders at her father, who cowered in front of them. Someone was trying to pull her backward, away from him. She yelled to be let go and saw her father reach for his gun. But the men had guns, too, and they saw him and yelled "Gun!" and their guns were at eye height, so that everywhere she looked she saw the barrel of one pointed at where her father shrank at the base of the stairs, his Colt trembling in his hand. His eyes were frantic, glistening with tears. She'd never seen him cry before.

It was loud and quiet at the same time, everyone still, the crackle and honk of walkie-talkies, the adults breathing heavily, the rain, the front door.

One of the men stepped in front of her. He was the first one who moved, which meant he was in charge. They were FBI. The letters were printed in white across the backs of their jackets. Federal Bureau of Investigation. State police, local police, DHS, DEA, Interpol, ATF. Her father had taught her to identify them, and which ones to fear most. The FBI, he'd said, was the scariest of all of them. She had imagined them having eyes like goats and angry faces.

But this FBI agent didn't look like that. He was younger and shorter than her father, with a freckled face, reddish beard, and shaggy hair. His wire-rimmed glasses were beaded with water. He didn't look mean, but he didn't look nice either. He was speaking sternly to her

father in a voice that she'd never heard anyone use with him before. His words sliced through the air. "FBI." "Search warrant." "Arrest." "Probation violation."

"I've done nothing wrong," her father sputtered, and the redheaded agent inched toward him, blocking her view, so that all she could see now were those three letters on his back, *FBI*, and one of her father's moccasins.

"Easy, Mel," the redheaded agent said. "You don't want the little girl to get hurt."

Her toes curled, gripping the hardwood.

"Put your hands behind your head," the redheaded agent said, and then he stepped to the side, and she was surprised to see her father lifting his elbows and threading his fingers behind his head like he'd done it before. Her father's Colt was in the redheaded agent's hand. She saw the agent give it to one of the other men. She didn't understand. Her father needed to stand up, to show these men how strong he was.

The redheaded agent cleared his throat. "I've got a warrant to search your property," he said to her father.

Her father didn't respond. His hunched frame quivered.

"How many people are in the house?" the agent demanded.

She willed her father to look up, to give her some instruction, but his eyes were darting around so fast, it was like his focus couldn't alight on anything long enough.

One of the other agents lifted her father roughly to his feet and handcuffed his hands behind his back. "You better start talking, Mel," he said to her father. "You know what they do to people like you in prison." He grinned when he said it, like it was something worth looking forward to.

"Not in front of the girl," the redheaded agent said.

Tiny dots of red and black peppered the floor, beads from her father's moccasins. Her skin felt like it was shimmering, like she was flickering on and off, a dying lightbulb.

Another man was leading her father toward the kitchen. "Let's find someplace to talk," he said, giving her father a shove.

She tried to speak, to call out to her father, but her body couldn't remember how to make words. He was shuffling away from her, moccasins scuffing against the floor, beads trailing him.

"Find the wife," someone said.

Mother. The word stuck in her throat. She couldn't choke it up. Inside her head, she was screaming, but outside, she was motionless, feet rooted to the floor. She watched as the three other men with guns followed his instructions, moving into the house with the guns raised.

The redheaded agent was talking into a walkie-talkie. "We're on the scene," he said. "Things went down early. Still waiting for backup." He stole another worried glance

at her and mopped his brow with a freckled hand. "We've got a kid here," he added.

She made herself swallow. Mr. Johnson cowered just inside the door, eyeing her warily, still in his socks. Her parents had been careful about letting the neighbors see her. If a neighbor stopped by for some reason, she hid. Strangers were never allowed in the house. She pressed the back of her skull into the wall behind her, listening for her father's voice. But the noise of the storm and the static from the walkie-talkie drowned everything out. The harder she listened, the more she couldn't tell one noise from the other. She wondered if her mother had made it out the back door.

The redheaded agent's gun was holstered under his shoulder. He bent his knees and lowered himself to her height. "I'm a police officer," he said. "But you can call me Frank."

Her father was right. Adults lied. "You're an FBI agent," she corrected him.

His eyes flickered with surprise. "O-kay," he said. "You know something about law enforcement. That's good. Good. You can help me." He looked her in the eye. "I need you to tell me your name."

"I told you there was a kid here," Mr. Johnson said.

This was all because of her. He'd seen her. The back of her head hurt. She missed her parents. She moved her hand out of the quilt and up the leg of the hallway cabinet next to her.

The agent named Frank reached out like he wanted to put his hand on her shoulder, but dragged it through his wet hair instead. "Are there any other kids here?" he asked.

She wasn't supposed to answer questions like that. He was trying to trick her, to get her in trouble.

"You're safe now," Frank said.

She found the metal drawer pull with her fingers. Top left.

Then she let the quilt drop. Both Frank's and Mr. Johnson's eyes followed it as it puddled to the floor. The gun was in her hands by the time they looked up.

"Holy hell," she heard Mr. Johnson say.

She planted her feet apart the way her father had taught her and aimed the gun at Frank.

There was a stillness to him, but he didn't look afraid.

"You're safe now," he said again.

She was breathing hard. It made it difficult to keep the gun steady. But the gun gave her courage. She pulled words from her throat. "I want my parents," she said.

"We're going to take you to them," Frank said.

She shook her head back and forth. He didn't understand. "I want my mother and father."

Frank's gun was still holstered. He made a small gesture with his head in the direction of Mr. Johnson. "Step outside, sir," he said.

Mr. Johnson didn't move. She could feel his fear filling up the room, taking up all the oxygen. "Go," she told him. He wasn't supposed to be in the house anyway. Mr.

Johnson nodded and then pulled on his boots and went out the front door without his raincoat.

Even for the .22, her hands were small, and she had to use a special grip, and two fingers around the trigger.

"What's your name, honey?" Frank asked her.

"Beth Riley," she said. She could hear footsteps overhead as the agents stomped around her parents' bedroom upstairs.

"What's your *real* name?" he asked.

Her skin prickled. "Beth Riley," she said again.

A sudden sound made her jump, a crack like the screen door slamming, only louder. A sudden bolt of terror stiffened her spine. She knew that sound from target shooting with her father. It was a gunshot.

It sounded like it had come from behind the house.

"Mother," she said.

Frank lifted the walkie-talkie to his mouth, and she didn't protest, didn't tell him not to move.

"I need a report on that gunshot now," he said into the walkie-talkie.

"The mother just blew her brains out," a voice responded through static.

The storm rattled the windows and the whole house shuddered.

She felt something begin to uncoil inside her and flood her insides with feelings. But the emotions were mixed-up, out of order. She tried to push them all away, but they screamed and twisted to get out.

Frank was looking at her. She wanted him to stop looking at her.

She thought the windows might break. The wind was so loud, she could hear it whistling through the walls. Thunder boomed above them. But this wasn't like other thunder. It was rhythmic. It was getting louder and closer. The hall light fixture trembled.

"Those are helicopters," Frank said above the noise. "The guys from the main office like to make an entrance. Can I have the gun now?"

She was splitting in two. She wanted to give the man named Frank the gun. She wanted to let go.

Then the living room door opened and her father appeared. All her muddy emotions evaporated at the sight of him. He had come to rescue her. He would be so proud of her, remembering where to find the gun. She would shoot Frank for him. She would do exactly what he wanted. She had always done exactly what he wanted. All she needed was a nod and she would pull the trigger and kill Frank and her father would take her away from this.

Frank had his hands in the air. She glanced at her father, waiting for his signal to kill, but her father's eyes were downcast. Then she saw the FBI agent over her father's shoulder. The agent went an angry pink when he saw her gun pointed at his friend. He elbowed her father hard in the back and he fell to the ground.

Terror snaked in her belly. "Daddy?" she said. But he didn't answer.

The agent leveled his gun at her, the black barrel pointing at her. He was yelling, calling out to the others, the men upstairs. Her father was on his stomach, his cheek on the floor, his face turned away from her.

"Lower your weapon, Agent," the agent named Frank growled.

Her eyes darted to her father, but the .22 didn't waver. The helicopters were so loud now, she couldn't think. They sounded like they were landing all around the house.

She could hear the other men coming down the stairs. Everyone was inching closer to her.

"She's just a kid," Frank said. "I've got this."

She had to shoot. She had to shoot them all.

"Daddy?" she asked desperately.

This time her father lifted his chin. His face was sweaty and red, and his wrists were still handcuffed behind his back. But his eyes were sharp and dangerous. "They killed your mother, Beth!" he hollered over the noise. "Autonuke! Now!"

It was like a switch being thrown. All those drills they had practiced. She let her body take over. She flew down the hall, toward the back of the house, slipped into the closet under the stairs, went through the secret wall panel, pulled up the trapdoor on the floor, and scampered down the ladder one-handed, the gun still clutched in the other. She could feel the vibrations of the men chasing her, their boots pounding on the floor, as

she descended into darkness. She jumped from the fifth rung, her bare feet landing on the carpet, and spun around to the desk where the computer screen's aquarium screen saver was the only light in the room. She sat down with the gun in her lap and felt around the desk drawer for the thumb drive. A lionfish swam by. She inserted the thumb drive into the computer like her father had shown her. Then she hit the space bar on the keyboard. In a blink all the fish were gone and a blue window appeared on the screen. She had never seen the blue box before, but she knew what to do. A white cursor blinked at the bottom of it. She typed in one word: "autonuke."

Then she sat back in the desk chair, brought her knees to her chest, and waited.

She could hear the FBI agents arguing above her and she knew that they would come down the ladder soon and lock her up forever, but she didn't care. She had done what she was supposed to do.

Finally, the trapdoor opened, and she glanced up to see Frank peering down at her. She put her hand on the gun.

"Can I come down, Beth?" he called.

She saw other faces behind his, crowding into the rectangle of light, looking at her. New people. The people from the helicopters.

"I still have the gun," she called up.

"I just want to talk to you," Frank said. He said

something to one of the new people and then swung his body over the edge and started down the ladder.

She turned to the blue computer screen. "It's done," she said. "You can't stop it."

Frank's feet landed with a thud. She hoped his shoes weren't too muddy. Her mother didn't like the carpet to get dirty. Frank stepped beside her and peered at the computer screen, his hands on his hips. She saw the words "autonuke complete" reflected in his glasses.

"You deleted the files?" Frank asked. She could tell he was trying not to sound angry.

She made herself small in the chair. The white of her nightgown looked blue in the light from the computer, and the giraffes were faded. It hadn't fit for years. She stretched the hem over her knees.

"Do you have any idea what you've just done?" Frank muttered. He moved so suddenly she thought he might hit her, but he was just reaching for the light switch.

Their basement movie studio lit up. Four sets: a princess bedroom, a classroom, a doctor's office, and a scary dungeon. Beth's father took each set apart into pieces and packed it every time they moved. She wasn't allowed to touch the cameras. She had to be careful not to trip on all the black cords that snaked across the floor.

Frank spun slowly back to her. Her father had said that people would look at her differently if they knew. He said that it would make grown-ups angry. But Frank didn't look mad. He looked a little scared, like she was a

bomb that might explode if he didn't figure out which wire to cut.

"Agent Moony?" a man hollered from above them. "You okay down there?"

Frank took a moment to answer. He probably hadn't seen movie sets before.

"Frank?" hollered the man.

"We'll be up in a minute," Frank called. His eyes moved from one set to the next. "Then you'll want to see this," he added.

The basement air tasted like mildew. The basements always tasted like that.

Frank wasn't saying anything anymore. He was just rubbing the back of his neck.

"Is my mother alive?" she asked.

He took his glasses off and cleaned them on his shirt. "I don't know who your mother is," he said gently.

"Linda," she reminded him. She twisted the hem of her nightgown around her fingers. "She shot herself." She knew about caliber size. The faster and heavier a bullet was, the more damage it caused. Some people survived gunshots to the head. "I'll know if you're lying," she said.

Frank hooked his glasses back over his ears and stared at her for another moment. His eyes were wide. His red eyebrows and beard were streaked with blond, like he'd spent time in the sun. Even his ears had freckles. "She's dead, Beth."

She pulled at the nightgown, stretching the giraffes. "Oh," she said. Hot snot filled her nose, and her eyes burned, but she didn't cry. "She was nice. She couldn't have kids, you know."

"Is that what they told you?" Frank said.

"They took care of me," she said.

Frank knelt beside her chair so that they were eye to eye. "I need to know: Were there any other kids?"

His glasses were octagons, not ovals. His shaggy curls were still wet from the storm; his beard sprouted wildly in all directions. Men were supposed to shave every day. It was a sign of discipline. "I want to stay with him," she said.

Frank looked pained. "I'm sure that your family has never stopped looking for you," he said.

She wondered if that was true.

Frank hadn't done a very good job cleaning his glasses. She could see his fingerprints on the lenses. But his eyes seemed nice enough.

A dog was barking outside. Not theirs. They didn't have any dogs. She wasn't allowed.

"How old are you now, Beth?" Frank asked her.

"Ten." She hesitated. Her chest hurt. It felt like someone was squeezing it. "But . . ."

He raised his sun-bleached eyebrows at her.

She could still hear the barking. Or maybe it was just the screen door banging. She didn't know. Her skin felt hot.

"I had a dog once," she said, remembering.

Frank was motionless. "What was its name?" he asked.

"Monster." She felt warm tears slide down her cheeks. She was shaking. The memories were coming up her throat. She had worked so hard for so long to swallow them down. It was a relief. "My old birthday was in April," she added, wiping her nose with her hand. "Mel changed it. So I guess I'm actually eleven."

Frank squinted at her and tilted his head. He was close, but not too close. "How long have you lived with Mel?"

She thought for a moment, trying to piece the details together. "Monster used to run away. I was in the front yard looking for him, and Mel said he could help me find him. He said he'd drive me around the neighborhood. I was in first grade."

"What's your name?" Frank asked, and she heard the crack in his voice.

Her name. She *knew* it. She could feel it under her collarbone. It was like having a word at the tip of your tongue, when you can see it, the shape of it, but you can't quite remember what it is. She concentrated. "Kick?" she guessed.

He tilted his head more and leaned forward a little. "What did you say it was?"

"Kick?" she tried again. But that wasn't it. Something close to that . . .

"Kit?" Frank said. "Do you mean Kit Lannigan?"

It was like she had touched an electric fence, that feeling of all your cells crying out at once. She scrambled backward in the chair. "We're not supposed to say that name," she whispered.

Frank's eyes ran over her features. "It *is* you," he said.

She was seeing faces, images, flashes of color. She couldn't breathe. Everything was unraveling. "I didn't mean to let Monster out," she said quickly, the words tumbling out. "I opened the door to get something off the porch and he just slid out before I could stop him." She swallowed a wet hiccup and put her hand over her mouth. "It's my fault," she said between her fingers.

"Hey, hey, hey," Frank said. He looked like he wanted to pat her hand but he didn't. "Easy," he said. "It's over. It's over now. No one's mad at you about the dog, I promise you. You're not in trouble." He dug something out of his pocket. "Here," he said, extending his hand, palm up. "I think you dropped this." Her father's Scrabble tile lay in his palm. Kick reached tentatively for it.

"It's okay," Frank said. "Take it."

She plucked the tile from his hand and squeezed it in her fist until her hand hurt.

Frank rocked back on his heels. "Kit Lannigan," he said. "Holy shit." He was blinking at her, mouth open. "You've been away a long time."

Behind Frank, she could see the canopy princess bed, pink and frilly. She was shaking. She couldn't stop. "It's over?" she asked.

Frank nodded. "The worst part is, kiddo." And he smiled at her, and she knew she was supposed to smile back, to be happy, but she couldn't find the right feelings inside.

It was like dying. That's what Mel had said. *Kit is dead*, he'd told her. *Now you are Beth.* But now Beth was dead too. And if Kit was dead, and Beth was dead, then she was someone new, someone who didn't even have a name.

"So what happens now?" she asked numbly.

"Now I take you home," Frank said.