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Alice in Jeopardy

Ed McBain

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Extract

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1.

WHEN THE SAME NIGHTMARE awakens her, she sits bolt upright in the middle of the bed.

Where am I? she thinks.

And blinks at the bedside clock.

7:15 A.M.

She is instantly wide awake.

"Kids!" she yells. "Jamie! Ashley! Up! We're late! Up, guys!"

She hears grumbling down the hall. Ashley's voice. Jamie hasn't spoken for almost eight months now.

"Guys, are you up?" she shouts.

"Yes, Mom!" Ashley calls.

Ten years old, the elder of the two. Her eyes and her hair brown, like Alice's. Eight-year-old Jamie favors his father. Blond hair and blue eyes. She can never look into those eyes without recalling that terrible day.

She shakes off the nightmare and gets out of bed.

IN THE SHOWER, she realizes she set the alarm's wakeup time, but neglected to slide the ON-OFF switch to the right. Hurrying to lather, she drops the soap, the heavy bar falling onto the little toe of her left foot. Yelping in pain—it feels as if someone has hit her with a hammer—she yells, "Damn it to hell!" and bends down to recover the slippery bar. Her butt hits the HOT-COLD lever on the tiled wall. The water turns

instantly ice cold. She straightens in surprise, drops the soap again, missing her foot this time, and backs away from the icy stream, thinking *None of this would be happening if Eddie were still alive.*

But Eddie is not still alive, she thinks, Eddie is dead—and almost bursts into tears.

She reaches through the slanting curtain of frigid water, and turns off the shower.

THE KIDS ARE SUPPOSED to be at school at eight-fifteen. She is twenty minutes late getting them there. Jamie has forgotten his lucky red cap, so she has to drive all the way back to the house for it, the traffic on U.S. 41 impossible even now in the off-season. By the time she brings the cap to him at school, and then drives to the office on The Ring, it is almost 9:30. Her appointment with Reginald Webster is at ten. She barely has time to check her e-mail, go over the new listings that Aggie has placed on her desk, put on some lipstick, which she didn't have time to do before they left the house, visit the ladies' room one last time, and here he is!

Forty-three years old perhaps, tall and somewhat good-looking in a dissipated way, suntanned from hours spent aboard his thirty-foot Catalina. He is looking for a house on deep sailboat water.

"People call me Webb," he says. "Better than Reggie, don't you think?" Holding her hand. "Anything's better than Reggie. Have you found some good houses for me?"

"I think so," she says, and withdraws her hand. "Would you care for some coffee, or should we just get started?"

"I wouldn't mind a cup, if it's already made," he says.

She buzzes for Aggie and asks her to bring in two cups of coffee. While they are waiting, she shows Webb pictures of the dozen or so houses she's pulled from the internet. He seems interested in two of them on Willard, and another one out on Tall Grass. The two keys are at opposite ends of Cape October. It is going to be a long day.

Aggie comes in carrying a tray with two coffee cups, a creamer, and a sugar bowl on it. As she is placing the creamer and sugar bowl on the desk, she accidentally knocks over Webb's cup, spilling the contents onto his left trouser leg. He jumps up, bellowing in surprise, and then immediately recovers his cool.

"That's okay," he says, and laughs. "I'm about coffeed out, anyway."

SHE IS STARTING TO TELL Reginald Webster how Cape October got its name. They have already seen the two houses on Willard Key, and are driving out to Tall Grass.

"Because that's when the first tourists come down," Webb says. "October."

"No, no," she says. "Actually, the name is an odd combination of Seminole and Spanish."

She goes on to explain that when the Spaniards first came to southwest Florida, the Seminole word *tha-kee* for "big" was already in place, and they added the Spanish word *cabo* to it, and came up with the name "Cabo Tha-kee," or "Big Cape." This eventually became slurred and contracted to "Cab'Otha-kee," which was then finally Hispanicized to "Cab'Octubre," which of course was "Cape October" in English.

"Or so the story goes," she says, and turns to him and smiles.

The eastern rim of October Bay is jaggedly defined by U.S. 41, more familiarly known as the Tamiami Trail. Frank Lane, the owner and sole proprietor of Lane Realty, believes that "Tamiami" is redneck for "To Miami." Alice doesn't know if this true or not. But if you follow 41 south, it leads eventually to Alligator Alley, which then crosses the Florida peninsula to the east coast and, of course, Miami. So maybe he's right.

There are four keys off the Cape's mainland. Beyond these so-called barrier islands lies the vast Gulf of Mexico. Sail out due west from the Cape, and eventually you'll make landfall in Corpus Christi, Texas. If you're lucky.

"So how old are you, Alice?" he asks her. "May I call you Alice?"

"Sure," she says.

"So how old are you, Alice?" he asks again.

She doesn't think that's any of his business, but he is a client, and neither does she wish to appear rude.

"Thirty-four," she says.

"Married?"

"Widowed."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Yes," she says.

"Any children?"

"Two, a boy and a girl."

"Tough break."

"Yes," she says again.

"How long ago?" he asks.

"You know," she says, "I'm sorry, but I'd rather not talk about it."

"Okay," he says, and shrugs. "Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude."

"That's okay," she says, and then softens her tone. "It's just that it's still painful."

"Must've been recent then, huh?" he says, and when she doesn't answer, he says, "Sorry."

They ride in silence for several moments.

"Was it an accident?" he asks.

She doesn't answer.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about it," he says. "I figure he had to've been young, right? I mean, you're only thirty-four. So it had to've been either a heart attack or some kind of accident, am I right?"

"He drowned eight months ago," Alice says, and Webb remains silent for the rest of the trip to Tall Grass.

"THE HOUSE WAS BUILT in 1956," she tells him. "Named for Jennifer Bray Healey, who had it designed by Thomas Cooley and his son. They're famous Cape October architects."

"Never heard of them," Webb says.

"They designed a great many of the buildings downtown, I'll take you to see some of them later, if you like. The Healey house is considered a hallmark of the Cape's modern architectural movement."

They are standing in the oval driveway in front of the house. Alice is deliberately postponing that moment when she unlocks the front door and opens it onto the spectacular panoramic view of Little October Bay. It never fails to knock the socks off any prospective buyer.

"The house fell into disrepair after Mrs. Healey

died," she says, searching in her bag for the key to the lockbox. "The present owners—Frank and Marcia Allenby—bought it two years ago. They've been renovating it ever since, all in accordance with historic guidelines. The rules are that you can make changes provided you don't alter any 'historically or architecturally significant aspects of the design,' quote unquote."

"Sounds like bureaucratic red tape," Webb says.

"Well, no, not actually. The regulations are there to protect the environment and the property itself. This is a landmark house, you know."

"Mm," he says.

"Ah, here it is," she says, and finds the key to the lockbox, and then opens the box, and removes the key to the front door. "The owners are up north," she says over her shoulder, "they also have a home in North Carolina." She inserts the key into the lock on the front door, twists the key, opens the door, turns to him, and says, "Please come in."

The view is truly breathtaking.

From just inside the front door, one can see through the living room to the sliding glass doors at the rear of the house, and beyond those doors to the wooden platforms that drop gradually from one to the other, down to the dock where a thirty-two-foot Seaward Eagle is moored to the pilings. Out over the bay, a squadron of central casting pelicans swoop low over the calm silent waters.

"Nice," Webb says.

"And you get this same magnificent view from every room in the house," she says.

"Was it a boating accident?" he asks.

"Yes," she says briefly, and leads him through the living room, past the fireplace . . .

"That's fossil stone," she says. "The chimney's been restored, with a new flue and top. The cedar floors are new, too, throughout the entire house."

"Out here on the Bay?" he asks.

"The Gulf," she says, again briefly, and opens one of the sliding doors. "All the windows and doors were replaced during the renovation, this hardware is all new," she says, and steps out onto the first of the platforms.

"The decks were all replaced and enlarged, too," she says. "Highest grade, clean-cut, dense dry wood and stainless steel screws . . ."

. . . and walks him down to the dock itself.

"Note the swimming pool and privacy garden just off the master bedroom," she says.

The Allenbys' power cruiser sits bobbing gently alongside the dock.

"The dock is new, forty feet long. It can hold one large and two small boats, or a second boat up to twenty feet. Dual 50 AMP service to the dock. Full access to the Gulf of Mexico, no bridges on the way."

"When did you start selling real estate?"

"Almost six months ago," she says.

"Lots of widows in the real estate game," he says.

"I hadn't noticed."

"Widows and divorcées. Keeps them busy, I suppose."

She wants to tell him that this is more than busywork, this is her way of starting a new life, her way of coping with the aftermath of her husband's senseless death, when her very existence was shattered . . .

She catches herself, looks out over the water.

"It's so utterly still here," she says.

She allows him to stand on the dock in silence for a while, savoring the solitude and the majestic view.

"Come," she says, "let me show you the rest of the house."

Inside again, she shows him the kitchen with its custom teak countertop and hand-built, hand-painted kitchen cabinets, its Miele and Thermador appliances . . .

"A water softener has been added to the entire house," she says, "and there's a new two-zone air-conditioning system with all new ducts. All the plumbing and plumbing hardware was replaced, too, including a new line to the street. There's a new irrigation system, a new well pump, a new shell driveway. In effect, you'd be getting a brand new house that just *happens* to be a historic landmark as well."

She takes him into the large room on the southern end of the house. From Frank Allenby's spacious desk, the view over the bay is spectacular.

"This is actually a second bedroom," she says, "it has its own private bath. But the Allenbys live here alone, so Frank uses it as an office."

"They say it takes a year," Webb says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"To get over a divorce or a death."

She says nothing.

"I've been divorced for nine months now. You suppose they're right?" he asks.

"I have no idea."

"Are you over it yet?"

"I get by," she says.

Which isn't true. She is struggling. She is struggling mightily.

"The master bedroom is at the other end of the house," she says. "It's identical to this one. Think of the house as a beautiful butterfly, the living room and dining room as its body, the two bedrooms as its wings."

"How large is the living room?"

"Twenty by thirty. That's a good-sized room."

"And the bedrooms?"

"Each fifteen by twenty. Come, let me show you the other one. Total square footage under air is a bit over three thousand."

She leads him through the house again, past the living room, and into the dining room, and then through to the master bedroom.

"From the bed, you can look right down into the privacy garden and the pool," she says.

"How much are they asking?"

"A million-seven. They've been offered a mill-four but they turned it down. I think they might be willing to let it go for a mill-six, somewhere in there."

"That's a lot of money," he says.

"Not for this location."

"For *any* location," he says. "A million-six comes to more than five hundred dollars a square foot."

"You've got to figure a million for the property alone," she says. "You won't find many other views like this one."

"Well, I'll have to think about it," he says, and her heart sinks.

SHE GETS BACK TO the office at a quarter past noon.

They exchange phone numbers, and Alice promises to have some new houses to show him by tomorrow morning at nine, when they'll go out looking again. She hopes he might call before then with an offer on any of the three houses she's shown him, but she knows this is unlikely.

He'd told her he was looking for something that would cost no more than a million, a million-five, and she'd assured him that getting an eighty percent mortgage would be no problem. That means he would have to come up with $320,000 in cash if he goes for the Healey house at a million-six. She knows for certain that Frank and Marcia Allenby will never budge below a million-six, never.

Of the seven percent commission on the sale, the agency will keep three and Alice will take home four, which comes to $64,000. She figures that will carry her through a good year and more, even if she doesn't make another sale, a likelihood in that she hasn't made a sale thus far, and she's already been working for Lane Realty for almost six months now.

She took the job at the end of November, when she realized she wasn't going to be able to make it on the scant savings she and Eddie had managed to accumulate since their move to Florida. The house she still lives in with the kids is in a good school district, even if it does cost $1,600 a month, which at her present rate of cash flow she will no longer be able to afford come June, unless Mr. Reginald Webster or somebody or anybody *buys* something. Or unless, of course, the insurance money comes through. It was supposed to come through a month and a half ago.

She picks up the phone, dials a number by heart, and waits.

"Briggs, Randolph and Soames," a woman's voice says.

"Mr. Briggs, please," she says.

"May I say who's calling?"

"Alice Glendenning."

"One moment, please."

She waits.

"Hi, Alice," a man's voice says.

"Hello, Andy, how are you?"

"Good, thanks, and you?"

"Fine, Andy. Andy, I hate to keep bothering you about this . . ."

"It's no bother at all," Andy says. "I'm as annoyed as you are."

"Have you heard anything from them?"

"They're still stalling."

"It's been eight months now," she says. "What proof do they *need*?"

"A certificate of death, they say. Which is absurd in this case. The man drowned at sea, his remains were never . . . forgive me, Alice," he says.

"That's all right."

"But the facts . . ."

She knows the facts. Eddie took the sloop out for a moonlight sail. It was a small boat, the waters on the Gulf were very high that night. There was no one aboard when the tanker came across her the next morning, still under sail. Eddie had either fallen overboard or been washed overboard. Those were the facts.

"Garland has no right to withhold payment," Andy says.

"But they are."

"Yes, because there's a lot of money involved here. And because they're in trouble financially, this goddamn administration. With the double indemnity clause, the death benefit comes to two . . . by the way, no one at Garland is claiming that drowning at sea doesn't qualify as an accident."

"Well, they'd be foolish to do that."

"They're foolish to try wriggling out of this in the first place. Other insurance companies *are* paying the same sorts of claims, you know. It's not as if nothing like this has ever happened before, Alice . . ."

"I know."

"Some are taking more time than others, but they *are* honoring their obligations. Quite frankly, Garland's position is contemptible."

"So what do we do, Andy?"

"I'd like to give them till the end of the month. If they don't settle by then, we'll have to bring a suit."

"The end of the month," Alice says.

"Yes. I'll call them again on June first. Does that sound okay to you?"

"I suppose."

"Alice?"

"Yes?"

"We'll get the money, I promise you."

"I hope so."

"I promise."

"Okay, Andy, thank you. We'll talk soon."

"I'll let you know the moment I hear anything."

"Thanks, Andy."

"Talk to you later," he says, and hangs up.

She holds the receiver in her hand for a moment, and then puts it back on the cradle, and suddenly she

is weeping. She yanks a tissue from the box on her desk, blows her nose, and dries her eyes.

Well, she thinks, the first day of June is less than three weeks away, and I've certainly got enough in the bank to last me till then. But I don't know what to do *after* June first, because by my calculation the account will be getting very low by that time. I suppose I can always get a job waitressing, she thinks, but that would mean having to pay Rosie even more than I'm paying her now. But at least I'll have a steady salary and tips, and I wouldn't have to count on commissions. So far, there has been what one might call a dearth of commissions. So far, the commissions have totaled zero, *nada,* zilch.

She picks up the phone again, dials her home number, and waits. Rosie Garrity picks up on the third ring.

"Glendenning residence," she says.

"Rosie, hi, it's me."

"Hello, Mrs. Glendenning, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Everything okay there?"

"Yes, fine. What time is it, anyway?"

"A quarter to one."

"Good. I want to bake a pie before the kids get home."

Rosie comes in at noon every weekday, in time to clean the house and put it in order before the children get home at two-thirty, three o'clock, depending on traffic. By the time Alice gets home at five, Rosie has everything ready to put up for dinner. Rosie works full-time on Saturdays and Sundays, a broker's busiest days.

"Did you see the chicken I left in the fridge?" Alice asks.

"Yes. Will you be wanting the spinach, too?"

"Please. And if you could get some potatoes ready for browning."

"Sounds good. Can you stop for some ice cream on the way home? Go good with the pie."

"What kind of pie?"

"Blueberry."

"Yum. I'll pick some up."

"See you later."

"Bye."

It is almost one o'clock.

She decides to go to lunch.

GROSSE BEC IS A man-made island that serves as a luxurious stepping-stone between the mainland and Willard Key. If Cape October can claim a Gold Coast shopping area, the so-called Ring on Grosse Bec is it. The rest of the town is all malls. Alice's office is on Mapes Avenue, just off the circle that serves as Grosse Bec's center.

She is just crossing Founders Boulevard, familiarly called Flounders Boulevard by the natives, when she hears a horn blowing, and then the squeal of brakes, and then a woman's voice shouting, "Oh God!" She whirls in time to see the red fender of a car not six inches from her left hip. She tries to spin away again, too late, and then thrusts both hands at the fender in desperation, as if trying to push it off her, away from her. Bracing herself for sudden impact, she feels the bone-jarring shock of metal against flesh, and is suddenly hurtling backward off her feet, landing some three feet away from the car's right front wheel. She feels agonizing pain in her left leg, tries to twist away

from the pain, and then does in fact twist away from the car itself, as if it were still a menace.

"Oh God, are you all right?"

The woman is crouched beside her now. Alice looks up into an elegant face, long blonde hair trailing on either side of it, blue eyes almost brimming with tears.

"Are you okay?" the woman asks.

"No," Alice says.

The woman's looming face vanishes. Alice hears a car door opening. Then some clicking and beeping sounds, and then the woman's voice again.

"Hello," she says, "there's been an accident."

She is talking into a cell phone.

"Can you send an ambulance, please?"

The ambulance gets there some five minutes later.

The police still haven't arrived by the time the paramedics load Alice and drive off with her.

THE EMERGENCY ROOM DOCTOR at October Memorial tells Alice she's broken her left ankle. He tells her he will put her foot in a so-called cuff cast, which will look like an oversized white ski boot. He assures her she will still be able to drive because all she needs for the accelerator and brake pedals is her right foot. He tells her walking will be awkward and cumbersome, but he doesn't think she'll need crutches. He is smiling as he tells her all this. He seems to think she is very lucky.

It takes an hour and twenty minutes for them to clean the wound, and dress it, and put her foot and ankle in the cast. It is almost three o'clock when she limps out of the emergency room. Cumbersome and awkward is right.

The woman who knocked her down is waiting there for her.

"I'm Jennifer Redding," she says, "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Alice guesses she is a good ten years younger than she herself, twenty-four or -five, in there, a willowy blonde wearing tight white bell-bottom pants with a thirteen-button flap like sailors used to wear, or maybe still did; Alice hasn't dated a sailor since she was nineteen. The pants are riding low on Jennifer's hips, a short pink cotton sweater riding high. In combination, they expose a good four inches of firm flesh and a tight little belly button as well.

"I'm glad you're here," Alice says. "I never got your insurance information."

"Why do you need that?"

"Well, there's been an accident . . ."

"There must be a card in my wallet someplace."

"Didn't the cops ask you for it?"

"What cops?"

"At the scene."

"There weren't any cops."

"Didn't you call the police?"

"No. Was I supposed to?"

Alice suddenly realizes she is talking to a ditz.

"Didn't *anyone* call the cops?"

"What for? The ambulance came, you were already gone."

"I hate to break this to you," Alice says, "but if you drive away from the scene of an accident, it becomes a hit-and-run. If I were you . . ."

"But I wasn't running from anything. I drove straight here to the *hospital.* To see how you were."

"The police may look at that differently. Get on your cell phone again, dial 911, and tell them—"

"Is it broken?" Jennifer asks, looking down at the cast.

"Yes, it's broken."

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't have come around that corner so fast. There's a stop sign there. You should have at least slowed down."

"I did. But you walked right into the car."

"I *what*?"

"You seemed to be in some kind of a fog."

"Is that what you're going to tell the cops? That I was in some kind of a fog?"

"I'm not going to tell the cops anything."

"Well, I *am,*" Alice says.

"Why?"

"Because I've had experience with insurance companies, thanks. And there are going to be hospital bills, and I want to go on record about what happened here. Especially if you're going to claim I was in a fog and walked into your car."

"I even blew my horn at you. You just kept walking."

"Jennifer, it was nice of you to come here, really, but I *am* going to report this to the police. You'd be smart to call them first. Otherwise you might find yourself facing criminal charges."

"Oh, don't be silly," Jennifer says. "Have you got a ride home?"

"No, but I'll call my office. My car's—"

"I'd be happy to give you a ride."

Alice looks at her.

"My car's at the office," she says. "On Mapes Avenue. If you can take me there . . ."

"Oh sure," Jennifer says, and grins like a kid with a lollipop.

SHE DOESN'T GET BACK to her house on the mainland until almost four that afternoon. She has extracted from Jennifer the promise that she will call the police, but she is eager to call them herself as well. She knows all about claims. She has filed enough insurance claims since Eddie drowned.

North Oleander Street resembles a jungle through which a narrow asphalt road has been laid and left to deteriorate. A sign at the street's opening reads DEAD END, appropriate in that North Oleander runs for two blocks before it becomes an oval that turns the street back upon itself in the opposite direction. Lining these two short blocks are twelve shingled houses with the sort of glass-louvered windows you could find all over Cape October in the good old days before it became a tourist destination for folks from the Middle West and Canada. The houses here are virtually hidden from view by a dense growth of dusty cabbage palm and palmetto, red bougainvillea, purple bougainvillea, white bougainvillea growing in dense profusion, sloppy pepper trees, pink oleander, golden allamanda, trailing lavender lantana, rust-colored shrimp plants, yellow hibiscus, pink hibiscus, red hibiscus, eponymous bottlebrush trees with long red flowers—and here and there, the one true floral splendor of Cape October, the bird-of-paradise with its spectacular orange and bluish-purple crest.

Rosie Garrity greets her at the front door.

Round-faced and stout, in her fifties, wearing a flowered housedress and a white blouse, she glances down at Alice's foot, shakes her head, and says, "What happened to you?"

"I got run over," Alice says.

"Is it broken?"

"The ankle, yes. Where are the kids?"

"I thought maybe you'd picked them up."

"What do you mean?"

"They weren't on the bus."

"Oh dear," Alice says. "Was there a mix-up again?"

She limps into the kitchen, takes the phone from its wall bracket over the pass-through counter, and dials the school's number by heart. Someone in the administrative office picks up on the third ring.

"Pratt Elementary," she says.

Unless a kid is lucky enough to get into Cape October's exclusive public elementary school "for the gifted," officially called Pratt by the school board but snidely referred to as "Brat" by the parents of children who have not passed the stringent entrance exams; or unless a kid is rich enough to afford one of the area's two private preparatory schools—St. Mark's in Cape October itself, and the Headley Academy in nearby Manakawa—then the elementary school educational choices are limited to three schools, and the selection is further limited by that part of the city in which the student happens to live. Jamie has not spoken a word since his father drowned, but he and Ashley are bright as hell, and after the family moved down here both kids passed Pratt's entrance exams with ease.

"Hi," Alice says, "this is Mrs. Glendenning. Did my kids get on the wrong bus again?"

"Oh golly, I hope not. Which bus were they supposed to be on?"

"Harry Nelson's."

"Let me see if I can reach him."

There is a silence on the line. Rosie raises an inquisitive eyebrow. Alice shrugs. She waits. The voice comes back on the line again.

"Mrs. Glendenning?"

"Yes?"

"Harry says they didn't board his bus. He thought you might've picked them up."

"No, I didn't. Can you find out which bus they *did* board?"

"It might take some time to reach all of the other drivers. I got lucky with Harry."

"Last time, they called me from Becky Feldman's house. They got off there when they realized they were on the wrong bus. Would you know which route that might be?"

"I can check. Why don't you call the Feldmans meanwhile? I'll get back to you."

"Thanks," Alice says, and puts the phone back on its hook, and then opens the Cape October directory and looks under the F's for Feldman. She thinks Becky's father's name is Stephen, yes, there it is, Stephen Feldman on Adler Road. She dials the number, and waits while it rings once, twice, three times . . .

"Hello?"

"Susan?"

She can hear children's voices in the background.

"Yes?"

"Hi, this is Alice Glendenning."

"Oh, hi, how are you?"

"I don't suppose my kids are there again, are they?"

"No, they're not," Susan says. "Did you misplace them again?"

"It would seem so. I don't suppose I could talk to Becky, could I?"

"Just a second."

She hears Susan calling her daughter to the phone, hears Becky approaching, hears her picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Becky, this is Ashley's mom."

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Glendenning."

"Did you happen to see Ashley and Jamie after school today?"

"No, I din't," Becky says.

"Getting on one of the buses maybe?"

"No, I din't."

"Okay, thanks a lot."

"Did you want to talk to my mom again?"

"No, that's okay, thanks, Becky, just tell her bye."

"Okay," Becky says, and hangs up.

Alice replaces the phone on the wall hook. It rings almost instantly. She picks up.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Glendenning?"

"Yes?"

"This is Phoebe Mears at Pratt?"

"Yes, Phoebe."

"I checked with the loading area guard. Man named Luke Farraday. He knows both your kids, says somebody picked them up after school."

"What do you mean, somebody picked them up?"

"Around two-thirty, yes, ma'am."

"Well . . . who? *Who* picked them up?"

"Woman driving a blue car, Luke said."

"Picked up my *kids*?" Alice says.

"Woman in a blue car, yes, ma'am."

"I don't know anybody with a blue car," Alice says.

"What is it?" Rosie asks.

"Is he still there? The guard. Luke Whoever."

"Farraday. No, ma'am. I reached him at home."

"Well, I . . . can you let me have his number, please?" She listens as Phoebe reads off Farraday's number, writing it onto a pad on the counter. "Thank you," she says. She puts the phone back on its cradle, hesitates for a single uncertain instant . . .

"What is it?" Rosie asks again.

. . . and is reaching for the phone again when it rings, startling her.

She picks up the receiver.

"Hello?" she says.

A woman's voice says, "I have your children. Don't call the police, or they'll die."

There is a click on the line.

Alice puts the receiver back on the cradle. Her hand is trembling. Her face has gone pale.

"What is it?" Rosie asks.

"Someone has the children."

"Oh my God!"

"She told me not to call the police."

"A woman?"

"A woman."

"Call them anyway," Rosie says.

"No, I can't."

"Then what . . . ?"

"I don't know."

The house seems suddenly very still. Alice can hear the clock ticking in the living room. A big grandfather clock that used to belong to Eddie's mother.

"A blue car," she says. "A woman driving a blue car."

"Call the police," Rosie says.

"No. Do you know anyone who has a blue car?"

"No. Call the police."

"I can't do that! She'll kill them!"

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"Nothing. Nothing. She just hung up. Oh my God, Rosie, she's got the children!"

"What'd she sound like?"

"I . . . I don't know. A woman. I . . ."

"White? Black?"

"I don't know. How can anyone tell . . . ?"

"*Everyone* can tell. Was she white or black?"

"Black. Maybe. I'm not sure."

"How old?"

"In her thirties maybe."

"Call the police. Tell them a black woman in her thirties has your kids. Do it now, Mrs. Glendenning. A bad situation can only get worse. Trust me on that."

"I can't take that chance, Rosie."

"You can't take any other chance."

The women look at each other.

"Call them," Rosie says.

"No," Alice says.

"Then God have mercy on your soul," Rosie says.

ALONE IN THE HOUSE NOW, Rosie gone in a flutter of dire predictions, Alice first begins blaming herself. I

should have bought Ashley the cell phone, she thinks, and remembers her daughter arguing like an attorney for the defense.

"But, Mom, *all* the girls in the fifth grade have cell phones!"

Oh, sure, the same way all the girls in the fifth grade are allowed to wear lipstick and all the girls in the fifth grade are allowed to date, and . . .

"No, Ashley, I'm sorry, we can't afford a cell phone just now."

"But, Mom . . ."

"Not just now, darling, I'm sorry."

Thinking now, I should have bought her the phone, how much would it have cost, anyway? If Ashley had a cell phone, she'd have called me at the office before getting in a car with a strange woman—what on earth *possessed* her? How many times had Alice told them, her and Jamie both, never to accept anything from a stranger, *never,* not candy, not anything, never even to stop and *talk* with a stranger, certainly never to get in a *car* with a stranger, what was *wrong* with them?

No, she thinks, it isn't their fault, it isn't my fault, it's this *woman's* fault, whoever she is, this woman driving a blue car, do I know anyone who drives a blue car? She tries to remember. She's sure she must know *someone* who drives a blue car, but who remembers the color of anyone's car unless it's yellow or pink? A blue car, she thinks, a blue car, come on, who drives a blue car, but she can't think of a single soul, and her frustration leads once again to unreasoning anger. Anger against herself for not having bought the goddamn cell phone, anger at her children for getting into a car with a strange woman, but especially anger at this undoubtedly crazed

person, whoever she is, this woman who probably has no children of her own, and who has now stolen from Alice the only precious things in her life, I'll *kill* her, she thinks. If ever I get my hands on her—

The phone rings.

Alice picks up the receiver at once.

"Hello?" she says.

"Mrs. Glendenning?"

The same woman again.

"Yes," Alice says. "Listen, Miss—"

"No, *you* listen," the woman says. "Don't interrupt, just listen. We want a quarter of a million dollars in cash. Hundred-dollar bills. Get the money together by noon tomorrow. We'll call again then. Get the money. Or the kiddies die."

And she hangs up.

Alice puts the receiver back on the wall hook, and stands silently at the kitchen counter for what is perhaps thirty seconds. Then she reaches for the phone again, and immediately calls Charlie Hobbs.