

Chapter 1

The man stared straight ahead at the gray road with the continuous white line on the right side and the broken yellow line in the middle. He knew it was crucial to stay between the two lines. Every so often sleep invaded his brain like a soft scarf. More than once he had swerved too far to one side or the other. One time he nearly hit a marker. It left him shaking with fear and exhaustion. But he had continued, and now they were nearly there.

The man looked at the little girl next to him. For a brief moment he felt an ache in his chest, right down to his stomach. He had felt it several times during the last few days when he looked at her and she was not aware of it. He didn't know that love could hurt so much. Then the fear came back: what if they were found, if they took her away from him? His lips compressed into a hard line, his eyes squinting against the sun.

The land was flat. Pastures and fields of corn lined both sides of the road. Cows, like black dots, stood behind barbed-wire fences, and a pale sky arched over the huge, empty expanse. It was twilight, and he was driving west toward the sun that hung low on the horizon. As the car purred over the asphalt, the sky in front of him changed from blue to purple with streaks of gold and orange. The road pierced the colors like a straight arrow, and he wondered when they'd reach the town. He glanced at the little girl again. She was still sleeping. An hour ago, she had told him that she was hungry, but he didn't want to stop. He wanted to get to their house. They'd be able to eat something in town and then go home. Home—his thin mouth curved into a bitter smile. He was afraid, not for himself, but for Emma, the little one, who trusted him and could sleep so innocently and peacefully next to him. There was no return now. For a short moment the sun blinded him, and he adjusted the sunshield. And then there was only the road again, straight, rigid, inevitable.

A car was passing him, another was approaching from the

opposite direction. It would not be far to Junction City now. The man strained to see signs of the town, but he could barely penetrate the golden haze which cast an eerie spell over this monotonous land. In the distance, a tower rose beside the road, round and white. A grain elevator. Within minutes the sun disappeared, leaving behind a thin line of light at the horizon. And then that also vanished, and dusk closed in on him. The man felt nervous as the grain elevator grew larger. He could now read the words that were written in big, black letters on the dirty white metal: Junction City Co Op. He drove on, past a lot with used cars, another lot with green and yellow farm machinery, and a Texaco gas station. Then he was downtown. Several blocks of false-front buildings lined both sides of the street.

He switched on his headlights and drove by houses that appeared deserted. For a moment, he was afraid they had arrived in a ghost town, but then he saw the bar with a bright blue neon sign over the door—Dub’s Tavern. Slowly he steered the car toward it and parked between two pickups. The door to the bar was open, and he heard the hum of voices intermingle with the sounds of country music. The man turned around and looked at Emma. To his relief, she was awake now. She didn’t move, but her eyes were open. Curiously she gazed at the garish lights. He wondered how much she knew, how much she guessed. He didn’t know how much a six-year old could understand. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. He was not a religious man, and he had little liking for religious imagery, but if there were angels, they would look like Emma. Her round face was flushed from a deep, untroubled sleep. Her blond, soft curls had become moist and stuck to her temples and forehead. Suddenly the ache was back in his stomach, and he was afraid that it would make him weak.

“Do you want to eat something here, honey?”

She shook her head. “Are we home?”

“Yes, we are. This is our town. You were hungry a little while ago, Emma. You should eat something.”

She looked through the windshield at the bar and shook her head again. He realized she was right. This might not be the place to take a

six-year old for dinner.

“I want to go home.” There was a quiver in her voice, and a tear rolled over her round cheek, and then another and another. The man felt panic rise in him as it always did when she acted in an unpredictable manner. Most of the time she was full of joy, but there were these moments when she cried over nothing or was moody.

The short bout of panic had drained the last of his energy, and he suddenly felt weary. He knew he wouldn't be able to look for the house now. It was nearly dark. He needed to sleep so he could think, make plans, take care of Emma, and feel like a normal person again.

“Honey, there's a motel over there. Let's stay here tonight. I'll get something to eat, and tomorrow we'll go to our house.” He didn't know if he sounded convincing, but he was clever. He knew that Emma loved to stay in motels because he let her eat chips, drink pop and watch TV until she fell asleep.

A smile stole onto her face, and she nodded her head. “Doritos and those round, little donuts,” she said as she wiped her cheeks dry.

He put the car in reverse and eased it back onto the street. A bright sign ahead announced that the Sunshine Motel had vacancies. He sighed as he came closer. By now, he was all too familiar with cheap motel rooms that had mold in the bathroom and unidentifiable spots on the bedding.

It was a long white building. At one end was the office, and next to it were the rooms, not more than ten. A few cars were parked in front of them, but all the windows were dark. A handful of young people were sitting on a bench by the office. He was apprehensive as he steered his car toward them. Quickly he glanced at Emma and was surprised, as he had often been lately, how quickly tears could vanish from a child's face. She was rosy-cheeked now, happy about another night in a motel with junk food scattered around her on a big bed. She would stare at the TV, watch vulgar shows that she did not understand, and fall asleep amid half-eaten donuts and broken chips. He smiled at her. It was time to change her life.

He parked the car in front of the office next to a beat-up blue

pickup. When he told Emma to get out and come to the office with him, she shook her head. He asked her again, but she remained stubborn. This had been another surprise. He had been convinced that a child that looked as perfect as Emma would have an angelic personality. On their long trip, he had learned she could be obstinate. He never liked to scold her because he didn't want her to be afraid of him. He preferred to bribe her.

The people in front of the motel, three men and two women, were watching them. They were young, in their late teens or early twenties. They had stopped talking, and their eyes were dull and hostile. He didn't like to be scrutinized, especially now. Their demeanor was not threatening but not reassuring either.

With the promise of more candy and more soda pop, he finally coaxed Emma to come with him. When they entered the office, one of the women got up and followed them. She stepped behind the counter and looked at them indifferently.

"I'd like a room, two beds." It smelled of stale cigarette smoke in the office, and he wondered if there was a point in asking for a non-smoking room. "Non-smoking."

"For one night?" She was searching for something in the desk drawer.

He nodded his head. He didn't care if there were holes in the blanket or if the room smelled like smoke if he could just sleep. The prospect of stretching out his legs between clean sheets, no matter how threadbare, was like a promise of the good life that he intended to live now. He took Emma's small, sweaty hand into his and smiled down at her.

"How long are you going to stay, sir?" Hadn't she seen him nod his head? The young woman pushed a sheet of paper toward him. There was a guarded weariness in her eyes that he found irritating.

"One night," he said gruffly. He let go of Emma's hand and filled out the form. Name: Michael Barron, Residence: Rural Route 2, Junction City. He observed the woman closely when he handed the form back to her. She looked at it but didn't say anything. There was

no sign of curiosity on her face. Either she had not read his address or she didn't care. She gave him the key to room number six and told him that there would be coffee and donuts for breakfast in the office. He nodded his head, took Emma's hand again, and left.

