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It existed.

It did not live. Without a host, it had no life of its own, no way to grow or change.

It did not die, even though its last host had been destroyed—just as all previous hosts had, in the end, been destroyed. It was not able to die.

It remembered nothing, although it contained the memories of all its hosts. Without a host, it had no thoughts of its own, no means of thinking or remembering.

It had kept those hosts alive, one after the other, through countless battles and accidents on countless hostile and unknown worlds, but in the end it was always the same. The destruction of that last host had been little different from the others. In that last, fiery, uncontrolled descent, it had been powerless as its host literally disintegrated from around it, flaming away in a shower of incandescence.

It had been powerless to do anything but withdraw, as it had done so often before, retreating within itself, into a tiny, self-contained universe, invisible and indestructible, a timeless bubble tucked away from the mainstream of existence, isolated from the real universe except for the tendrils of perception that were the only senses it possessed in its own right, the only links to reality that did not depend totally upon a host.

It was powerless to do anything but exist—and wait.

Wait—far longer than those who had been its hosts and who had sometimes imagined themselves to be its creators, would have believed possible.

It existed and waited, neither alive nor dead, while on the planet around it, new life grew and evolved.

New and different life...

The First Death

CHAPTER 1

To Jeremy Case, airplanes had always been the best magic in the world. There had been an aura of time and distance about them all, from the tiny single seaters that had buzzed overhead on their way to the local airport to the huge jets that left their ghostly vapor trails billowing through the stratosphere. To one day ride in one had been a dream of Jeremy's for at least fifteen of his twenty years.

Now the dream had come true but the magic was not there. He was barely aware of the three dozen other passengers. He hardly felt the vague discomfort caused by wedging his hundred and eighty pounds into the narrow seat and jamming his knees against the back of the seat ahead. All he could see was the face that would be waiting for him at the end of the journey. All he could feel was the pain he knew would soon be with him.

And all he could remember were the times he had been with her. For more than five years, until his father, now remarried, had come to collect him, she had been both his mother and his father—and, he realized, his friend.

Now she was dying. There was something inside her, something wrong and evil, something that should not be there! Something that Jeremy hated with all his being. But hating would do no good. He knew that. Hating the thing that lived within Aunt Jessica's body would do no more good than loving Aunt Jessica herself. She would still be destroyed.

Nothing would do any good. Jeremy could only hurt and ache and try to hold back the tears.

And come a thousand miles when she called.

Something touched Jeremy's shoulder lightly. He blinked, his eyes slowly focusing on his own reflection in the tiny window. For a moment he stared at it as if the face that floated before him belonged to a stranger: Reddish, sandy hair cut short; soft oval face; full lips with an inch-long horizontal scar almost hidden beneath the slightly protruding lower lip; the nose, bent at a slight angle in the same accident that had produced the

scar. He blinked again, forcing his eyes to look beyond the reflection to the real world of blackness and blinking wing lights that lay beyond the double layer of glass.

"Sir." Again there was the touch on his shoulder. He turned toward the voice.

"Sir, we will be descending for landing shortly. Please fasten your seat belt."

The stewardess, tiny and brunette, pointed to the signs at the front of the passenger compartment. Both "No Smoking" and "Fasten Seat Belts" glowed brightly.

Jeremy nodded slowly. After a moment, the stewardess started to lean over the empty aisle seat next to Jeremy and reach for the belt where it lay over the arm dividing the seats. "Your seat belt."

His eyes went to the belt, and, as he took it in his hand, his fingers brushed against the woman's.

"I'm sorry," he said, fumbling for the other half of the belt. "I wasn't listening, I guess."

"Quite all right, sir." She hesitated a moment longer, watching as Jeremy located the rest of the belt and fastened it. Then, satisfied, she continued on down the aisle.

Jeremy turned back to the window and leaned close, trying to see beyond his own distorted reflection, trying to find something that would keep his mind from returning immediately to the ordeal ahead. If they were about to land, he thought, maybe he could see the lights of the city, or at least of the airport.

But there was nothing, only the seemingly endless blackness and the tiny lights blinking endlessly on the wing.

How long? he wondered. How soon would they be—

Abruptly, the whole plane lurched and Jeremy was jammed downward into his seat. His forehead thumped against the window. Outside, he could see the flaps on the back of the wings snap up, and the wings themselves

seemed to bend upward so far that Jeremy was sure they would break.

And the sound of the engines, normally a constant drone, suddenly became a roar, just as they had done on the ground a few moments before beginning the takeoff.

Something flashed past outside the plane, only yards away!

A tree!

They were going to crash, Jeremy realized, and for the first time in his short life, he felt terror. But even in that instant of terrified realization, there was a tiny spark of relief. He would not have to suffer through the ordeal he had been so dreading. He would not have to watch Aunt Jessica die.

The plane lurched again, sideways this time, jamming Jeremy against the wall and the window. From somewhere came the sound of tearing metal, and an instant later a blast of cold air struck him like a wave.

Then there was darkness as the plane's lights went out, and then a different, searing light as flames shot out in all directions. A thousand sounds pounded at his ears, and he felt himself flying through the air, spinning madly, smashing against unseen objects on all sides. He felt his body being battered and cut and ripped.

Then he felt nothing.

It awakened.

It had no conception of how long it had lain hidden and dormant, for without a host, it had no sense of time.

It had no conception of where it lay, for without a host, it had no sense of location.

It did not know what it was, for without a host, it had no sense of identity.

It knew only what its tendrils of perception told it, that a dozen potential hosts were nearby. And it knew that if any of these potential

hosts were to survive, it must reach them quickly, before inexplicable, irreversible changes occurred.

It moved.

It was not suited for motion outside a host, but it moved, slowly and blindly, filtering through the maze of energies and stresses and directions in which it had existed for so long. It moved, away from the tiny universe that had held it, through the porous matter that surrounded it and separated it from the potential hosts.

Now that it had a destination, it moved.

It touched the nearest host, and the tenuous link hardened and strengthened, bringing with it the beginnings of new life and new perceptions, even the beginnings of thought and memory.

And the first message generated was: Different! This host is different from all previous hosts. Different in a million ways, both physically and mentally.

But the differences were not so great as to be insurmountable, surely. This host had lived and it had thought, and a trace of that life, an echo of those thoughts, still clung to its mind. And in every cell of its body was the pattern of its construction.

No, the difference, the alienness, was certainly not total. Adaptation—physical adaptation, at least—was possible.

It entered the torn and shattered body of the host, and though hampered and slowed by the alien environment ' . which it found itself, it sent out feelers.

Slowly, experimentally, it began its work.

The Second Death

CHAPTER 2

Jeremy became aware of his own existence.

He floated in nothingness. There was no sight, no sound, no feeling. He knew that he must have a body but he could not feel it. It was, he thought, like the time he had gone to a dentist and they had shot his jaw full of Novocain. He knew the jaw and cheek were there but he could not feel them or move them.

But now it was everything, every part of his body.

If he had a body.

And he wondered, calmly: Is this death?

Would he float like this forever, neither seeing nor feeling, only thinking?

Suddenly, there was light, and he realized that, at the very least, he had eyes and they were open.

But there was no form to the light. It was only a bland and colorless background, telling him no more than had the blackness of a moment before.

He tried to move. Now that he knew he possessed eyes, he imagined that he also possessed a body, and then he tried to move it.

And, as suddenly as the light had appeared, his body came into existence. He felt his torso, his arms, his legs, his hands, his feet. He felt their existence but that was all. No sensations of heat or cold or pressure reached his mind.

His body existed, just as his eyes existed, in a neutral background but it gave him no information.

Again he wondered: Is this death?

He remembered the plane, the trees shooting past, the rending and tearing metal, the impossible jumble of sound and flames and shock, and he knew that this *must* be death. To live through something like that was impossible.

But if it was death, then where was he? In life, he had never known what to believe. His stepmother had constantly threatened him with an

afterlife of eternal torture if he didn't behave as she thought he should. His father had scoffed at such ideas, but his own predictions of eternal nothingness had been little more comforting to Jeremy than eternal torture.

Suddenly, he knew.

In an instant, sensation returned to all parts of his body, and the sensation was pure agony. Every inch of his body, inside and out, was aflame. Every nerve ending sent only one message: Pain!

Eternal, unbearable pain!

Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone. And with the pain went the light, the feeling, the awareness of his own existence.

It began again. First there was the awareness, then the light, then the feeling that his body again existed.

But this time the pain did not come.

Instead, slowly, the light dimmed and shifted, and forms began to emerge and move. Colors came into existence: green and blue and white. The green of a tree, like the one he had seen through the window of the plane. The blue of sky, and the white of a cloud that floated high above him.

Then came feeling, and he cringed in his mind, awaiting a new onslaught of pain.

But it did not come. Instead, he felt a gentle pressure on his back and his arms, and he realized that he was lying on a thick carpet of grass. He could feel the blades tickle his hands where they lay stretched out at his sides. He could hear the branches of the tree above him moving in the breeze, and he could feel the air as it brushed lightly across his body and his face.

And he thought: This can't be death after all. Somehow, I must have lived. I must have been thrown clear of the plane.

He tried to move, to shift his head so he could see where he was, where the plane was. Where the other passengers were.

Nothing happened. His field of vision didn't change by even a fraction of a degree.

He tried his arms, then his legs, but still nothing happened. Nothing moved, no single muscle anywhere in his body contracted, no matter how many orders he sent.

Soon, he stopped trying and simply absorbed the feelings and sensations as they came in. The pressure on his back. The wind blowing lightly across his body. The grass brushing against his fingers. A stone—or something hard and sharp—pressing against the back of one leg. The clouds moving slowly across the sky.

Once again, the same thought returned: Is this death?

And as the thought came, darkness and nothingness closed in yet again.

For the third time, awareness returned to Jeremy. This time it was complete. Sight and sound and touch all were present instantaneously.

A breeze still blew lightly, moving the branches of the tree over him, pushing clouds across the sky beyond. But now the clouds were tinged with red and the tree was in shadow and the breeze was cold and uncomfortable.

And the sounds were of human voices.

"Is that all? All accounted for?" A man's voice, harsh and grating.

"I think so. Some of these, it's hard to tell." Another man's voice, softer, almost trembling.

"Your first crash?" The first voice, less harsh now.

"Yeah."

A pause. "It'll be okay after while. You get used to it."

"But there are so many!"

"Just take it easy. I told you, you'll be okay. Just relax."

The sound of breath being drawn in. "All right. How soon will the rest get over here?"

"Half hour or so. They're not far away. Now why don't you just sit down and try to relax until they get here? Okay?"

"Okay. You're right. I'll—"

Jeremy tried to speak, to call to them, but only an unintelligible moan came from his throat.

"Did you hear that?" The second voice, the softer one.

"What? Hear what?"

"A voice! A moan!" Sharply. "Someone's alive!"

A harsh laugh. "Forget it!"

"I heard something!"

"Knock it off, Jim! People don't survive crashes like this."

Jeremy tried again, more loudly, almost a wail.

"There it is again! You *had* to hear it that time!"

Silence.

"It came from over here, I know it! Come on, Frank! Help me look!"

"But we looked! We saw them all already!" Harsher than ever, but with an edge of nervousness, disbelief.

A third time, Jeremy forced a sound from his throat.

"Here! Here he is!"

The sound of feet pushing through the tall grass, thumping on the

ground. A face appeared above Jeremy, staring down at him, its eyes wide. In the deepening shadows, the features were hard to make out but the face seemed young and unlined.

The face came closer and then disappeared from Jeremy's field of vision. He felt something touch his chest, and he tried to raise his head to see. The effort produced only a palsied trembling.

Abruptly the face reappeared, and Jeremy felt the touch shift from his chest to his shoulder.

"Just lie still," the face said. "Don't try to move. We'll get you to a hospital right away."

The face turned away, shouting: "Frank! Is there a doctor in that bunch that's coming?"

Silence for a second, then two. "I don't know. But I'd better check."

There was a click, and then: "Harry, this is Frank. You still coming?"

A tinny, distant voice, saying things Jeremy couldn't make out.

"There's a survivor, Harry. Can you get a doctor?"

Again the tinny voice, louder but no more understandable.

"All right, that sounds good. How soon?"

Another brief rattle from the radio.

"Okay, we'll be waiting. There's a clearing just below where the plane hit; probably flat enough for a copter to land. We'll stick out a couple of lights. Probably have to talk them down."

A final rattle, then silence.

"They're calling Merrill Field. Sending a copter to pick him up. Let's get him to that clearing down the slope."

The face, which had been hovering over Jeremy while the other talked on the radio, vanished, and Jeremy heard footsteps moving away. Overhead, the clouds were shifting from red to deeper shades of purple,

almost black. The branches of the tree he lay half under were becoming silhouettes.

The voices came again, lower this time, speaking softly. Jeremy couldn't make out the words. They continued for what seemed to Jeremy a long time. He tried to turn his head toward them, but he could still produce only a trembling of the muscles in his neck.

He heard the men moving away then, exchanging an occasional word. Finally, as the first stars winked into being, one of the voices, the harsher one, shouted:

"Here's something that's all in one piece. Looks like the door to the John. It'll make as good a stretcher as anything."

The sound of men approaching him again, and the softer voice saying, angrily, "Why the hell didn't we bring a stretcher *with* us?"

"All the way up here from the valley? For a one-in-a-million—hell, *one-in-a-billion*—chance like this?"

Something hard and solid thudded to the ground next to Jeremy, and a light shone on him from somewhere.

Hands slid under his shoulders, behind his head.

"Just take it easy, fella. Just relax. Don't try to move or do anything. Leave it to us. We'll do it all."

Slowly, carefully, he was moved, first his shoulders, then his feet, and he felt a hard, flat surface beneath his back. Then a strip of something lay across his chest and another across his legs, and he felt them being tightened.

"Easy," one of the voices said, "just enough to keep him from falling off."

A pause, more tightening and shifting of the straps.

"Ready?"

The light shifted away from him, leaving only the stars high above.

Then, as he was being lifted, as the sky and the silhouette of the tree swayed crazily back and forth, consciousness faded once again.

CHAPTER 3

The fourth and last time, Jeremy was thrust into consciousness abruptly. One instant there was nothing, and the next he was fully aware of his surroundings. There was no transition, no gradual awakening.

Directly above him was a white, spotless ceiling. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see equally blank walls. An antiseptic, medicine-like smell permeated the air. Crisp white sheets covered his body up to his chin.

He turned his head to one side and found, to his surprise, that he could move. A small table sat next to the bed, and on the opposite side, a movable table like a giant TV tray that could be slid over the bed in front of him. Something that looked like a small TV camera was mounted on the wall above the foot of the bed.

A hospital.

Once, many years ago, his father had taken him to a hospital and a room that looked a lot like this one to visit his mother. He had cried, he remembered, and did not go back after that first time. He had barely been tall enough to see over the edge of the tall bed, and his mother, even when he spoke to her, had said nothing. She had only lain there, pale and silent, tubes taped to her face and arms. Once she had stirred, her head moving from side to side, but that was all.

A door opened not far from the foot of the bed, and a woman—a nurse, Jeremy realized—looked in.

"Ah, awake already, are we?" Her voice was professionally cheerful, her middle-aged face smiling blandly. "How do you feel, Mr. Case?"

Jeremy opened his mouth, not sure that he could speak. His tongue felt dry and thick.

"All right, I guess," he said. His own voice sounded different to him but he didn't know what the difference was.

The nurse blinked. "Very good, very good. Doctor will be in to see you in just a few minutes."

"Thank you," Jeremy said, not knowing what else to say.

Then he remembered, and he felt his stomach twist violently. Aunt Jessica! How long had he been here? Was she still alive?

And he remembered what he had thought the instant before the crash: he wouldn't have to watch her die after all. He hated himself for having the thought but he could not help hoping, even now, that it was all over.

"How long has it been?" Jeremy asked. "How long since the crash?"

The nurse's eyes widened, a momentary crack in the bland mask she wore.

"The doctor can answer all your questions, Mr. Case. He'll be here very shortly."

With a final reassuring half smile, she backed through the door and shut it after her.

Jeremy waited, watching the closed door and wondering: Was Aunt Jessica dead? Why was *he* alive? How could he be alive?

Experimentally, he raised his head. It felt normal. The movement was normal, not the palsied trembling that had resulted the last time he had tried. And he found he could move any part of his body—hands, feet, arms, anything.

He levered himself up onto his elbows, raising the entire upper half of his body. Still everything felt normal. No pain, no stiffness, no aches.

He lay back down, pushed the sheet down a few inches and brought his arms out from under it.

He looked at his arms—and gasped.

They weren't his arms! They couldn't be!

He held them up, moved his hands closer to his face, flexed the fingers. Fear and confusion raced through him. These arms weren't his! They

belonged to a circus freak, a professional thin man. His had been thick and muscular. In these, the bones were barely below the skin, and the muscles and tendons stood out like strings.

He pushed the sheet farther down, looking at the body that lay wrapped in the white hospital gown. It was like the arms. He could feel every rib. The stomach was sunken, seeming to touch the spine. The hip bones stood out like desiccated cliffs.

But there were no bandages, no cuts and no scars. There were not even any bruises that he could see or feel. There was only the body, a body that couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds.

A body that couldn't possibly be his.

Yet the nurse had called him Mr. Case.

An odd calmness came over him, and he wondered: *How long have I been here? How long did it take for me to get into this shape?*

The door swung open quickly and a doctor appeared and moved briskly to the side of the bed. He frowned when he saw the sheets pushed down, Jeremy half sitting up.

"Now, now, Mr. Case, you must relax. Just lie back and rest. Let me check you over again."

Docilely, Jeremy lay back. Some of the fear and confusion seemed to be banished by the mere presence of the doctor. He would be able to answer Jeremy's questions. He would know what had happened. He would know what to do.

The doctor took Jeremy's sticklike wrist and felt for the pulse.

"Very good," he said after a few seconds. "Quite normal again." He stood back, looking down at Jeremy. "How do you feel? Any aches or pains?"

Jeremy shook his head. "No, sir. I feel pretty good."

The doctor smiled, the same bland smile the nurse had assumed. "From the position you were in when I came in, there's no need to ask if you can

move."

When the doctor hesitated, Jeremy said, "Yes, sir, I can move." Then: "How long has it been since the crash?"

The doctor's eyes widened but not quite as much as the nurse's had. And he didn't run away the way the nurse had.

"You remember what happened, then?" The faintest trace of the professional smile appeared again as the doctor spoke.

"The crash? Yes, sir. The plane crashed into... well, I saw some trees out the window just before it happened."

The doctor nodded. Yes, it was fairly high up in the mountains. You remember the crash itself, do you?"

"A little. The plane shook a lot, and then I remember there was a lot of fire everywhere, and I was flying through the air, I think..." He paused, frowning. "I think I kept hitting things, and then, the next thing I remember..."

What *was* the next thing? That first awakening? With the pain? The second, when he couldn't move? The third, when the men had found him? Or had the first ones been dreams? Nightmares?

"That's all I remember, until those men found me."

The doctor nodded again, a mechanical, meaningless gesture. "I see."

In the silence, as the doctor continued to merely nod and smile, Jeremy worked up the courage to ask his question again.

"How long has it been? The nurse said you could answer my questions."

The smile faltered momentarily. "Yes, of course, but you really should rest. You must still be very weak after what you've been through."

Jeremy swallowed nervously, and his throat felt dry. He had to know. "How long? Please, can't you tell me?"

"Of course, of course." Soothingly. "About three days. You've been here in the hospital a little over a day."

"My aunt. Is she—"

"There's nothing to worry about, nothing at all. We notified your father. And a Mr. Walters has called. Your cousin, I believe?"

"Yes. But my aunt is dying."

"There's no need to worry. I'm sure she will have been notified."

"You don't understand!" Jeremy felt the ache that preceded tears grasping at his throat.

The doctor's smile seemed to grow larger and blander as he leaned forward. "Everything is all right, Mr. Case. There's nothing for you to worry about except getting well. And to do that, you'll have to rest and relax."

"But I have to know!" Forgotten were his emaciated body and the fear he had felt. He could think only of Aunt Jessica. He had to know!

He tried to sit up again but the doctor put a hand on his shoulder, holding him down expertly.

"You really must rest, Mr. Case!" he said, his voice carefully admonishing. He turned his head briefly to one side. "Nurse."

She must have been waiting just outside the door, for she appeared almost immediately. She carried an antiseptic looking tray with a hypodermic needle and other equipment on it. She quickly set it on the bedside table, picked up the needle and, while the doctor kept his restraining, gentle hands on Jeremy, slid it smoothly and painlessly into his arm.

"You'll be able to sleep more easily now, Mr. Case." Again the bland, professional smile. "I'll be in to talk to you again in the morning."

For a time, Jeremy struggled, first to raise himself from the bed against the doctor's hands, then to hold himself awake. Slowly, he lost both struggles and slept.

He awakened. Abruptly, as it had before, awareness flooded over him.

He was still in the bed, still in the hospital room. The door was open and he could hear voices. He recognized the doctor's bland, reassuring tones.

"As you saw, Mr. Walters, he's asleep. The sedative we gave him a few minutes ago should wear off by morning, so if you would care to look in then—"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose that would be best." It was Harry's voice! His cousin's voice!

"He was asking about an aunt," the doctor went on. "He seemed quite anxious."

Jeremy forced himself up in the bed, threw the sheet back, and swung his legs over the edge. He hesitated as he saw that his legs, below the short hospital gown, were as emaciated as the rest of him, and for a moment the fear returned.

But only for a moment. Harry, his cousin Harry, was out there. He had to talk to him. He had to find out about Aunt Jessica!

His feet touched the floor and he stood up. He swayed for a moment, bracing himself with both hands against the bed. Then he walked. The length of the bed. Then to the wall. Finally, to the door.

He leaned against the door frame. His whole body trembled with weakness.

Harry and the doctor stood a half-dozen feet away. The doctor, facing toward Jeremy, stopped in the middle of a word. His eyes widened and the smile vanished.

"Mr. Case!" The doctor rushed past Harry and grabbed Jeremy by the arm. Harry spun around.

"I thought you said the sedative—"

"I did! I don't understand it!" The doctor's voice was sharp, his face grim. "Come now, Mr. Case. We have to get you back to bed. Back into bed! Do you understand?"

The doctor's hands gripped Jeremy tightly, forcing him back into the

room. Jeremy, barely able to stand, could offer no resistance.

"Aunt Jessica!" He turned his face toward Harry. "How is Aunt Jessica?"

Harry blinked, his square, tanned face puzzled as he looked from Jeremy to the doctor and back.

"About the same," he said finally. "You know, Jeremy."

About the same. Jeremy slumped onto the bed, giving up even the token resistance and letting the doctor lift him into the bed. About the same. He had not escaped the ordeal after all.

He would still have to watch her die.

Suddenly, Jeremy was awake. As it had the last two times, full awareness returned in an instant, like a light switch being flicked on. *More* than full awareness. Not only did he take in his surroundings immediately but he somehow knew that several hours had passed since he had last been conscious, since the doctor had lifted him back into bed.

Since Harry had told him that Aunt Jessica was still alive.

There were footsteps in the hall, and the doctor entered. Harry, moving hesitantly, came just behind him.

"Ah! Awake again, I see." All the doctor's professional cheer was back. "Your cousin is here to see you again, Mr. Case."

Harry stood awkwardly by the side of the bed, his eyes not quite meeting Jeremy's.

"Hi," he said finally. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good." Then he remembered—his body. "What happened to me? How did I get like this?"

A brief glance between Harry and the doctor. "I thought you remembered, Mr. Case," the doctor said. "Last night you said..." The doctor's voice trailed off, inviting comment.

"The crash, yes, I remember that. But this?" Jeremy pulled an arm from under the sheets. "How did I get so thin?"

Another exchange of glances. "How much did you weigh before the crash, Mr. Case?"

"Just before? I don't know, exactly. Last week it was about a hundred and eighty."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, that would be normal for someone of your size and heavy bone structure."

"But what happened to me? I don't understand."

"We don't either, Mr. Case. You're sure it was just last week that you weighed one-eighty? The first week in August?"

"Yes!" Irritation flared through Jeremy. Why couldn't they just tell him what had happened! Surely they must know!

"Do you feel up to eating anything this morning, Mr. Case?"

With the doctor's words came the realization that his stomach ached with hunger. Until now, it had been masked by the ache he still felt for Aunt Jessica and by the apprehension he felt for himself. But now, once the thought of food had entered his mind, the hunger struck at him like a physical blow.

"Yes, I feel like I could eat a bushel." One of Aunt Jessica's phrases.

"Good. We won't give you quite that much, not right at the start anyway." The doctor gave a mild, controlled chuckle to make sure everyone knew he was joking. He turned toward the door. "Now, Mr. Walters, why don't you keep your cousin company for a moment. I'll have the food brought in shortly."

Harry nodded. "All right."

The doctor left, and Harry stood by the bed. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Jeremy."

Jeremy was silent for a moment, wondering about the tension between him and Harry. They had always talked so freely before. Harry had

been—well, not like a father but like an older brother all those years Jeremy had stayed with him and Aunt Jessica. But now, it was almost as if they were strangers. Could the years have made that much difference? Or was it Jeremy? His condition?

"Why won't they tell me what happened, Harry?"

"What do you mean?" Uncertainly. "The crash—"

"I know about the crash! I mean this!" Jeremy thrust out his arms. "Me! How did I get like this? Why can't they just tell me?"

"It's not that easy, Jeremy. They just don't know."

"But they must! They're doctors!" He looked down at his arms again. "How could this happen in three days?"

Harry shook Ms head. "They just don't know. They were really worried about you, too." Some of the nervousness and reticence seemed to fade as Harry began to talk. "They said they couldn't get their intravenous gadget to work. I guess that's why the doc is so glad to hear you want to eat something. And why they're giving you something even if it isn't the regular feeding time around here."

"How do you mean, they couldn't get it to work?" They had used one of those on his mother, Jeremy remembered. He hadn't known then, but later, much later, they had told him that that was what one of the tubes had been. She had been too weak to eat, so they had put the food directly into her blood.

Like they would be doing with Aunt Jessica soon, if they hadn't begun already.

"I don't know," Harry said. "They just said it wouldn't work on you. Said they tried it a half-dozen times. They'd get you all hooked up and come back an hour later, and none of it would've gotten into you. The bottles were always still full."

"How could that happen? I thought those things always worked."

Harry shrugged, a small grin pulling at his lips, "So did they. I was here when they tried once last night. You never saw such a confused nurse. And

the doctor wasn't much better."

Jeremy responded with a grin of his own, and he wondered how the grin looked, if his face was as much a skeleton as the rest of him. But he didn't ask for a mirror.

"When can I get out?"

"They won't say." The grin widened on Harry's broad face. "I don't think they know quite what to make of you. When they first brought you in, they said you'd never make it through the next hour. Said you had a fever they couldn't believe. But they sure changed their minds fast. Just a few hours, and they said you'd be okay. They thought."

Again Jeremy remembered the earlier awakenings. *If* they had been real awakenings and not just dreams.

"Was I like this when they found me? Up there on the mountain?"

"Pretty much, I guess. Your picture looked like it when they brought you down. I almost didn't—"

"My picture? What picture?"

"They haven't told you yet? You're quite the celebrity, Jeremy. Only survivor of that plane crash. They had TV and newspapers and everything down there at the bottom of the hill waiting for you."

"But I haven't seen anything here. Nobody said anything."

"They're guarding you pretty well here at the hospital, keeping the reporters and the rest away from you. They don't much care for all the publicity, I can tell you that. Why else do you think you rated a private room all to yourself?"

"Does Aunt Jessica know?"

Harry's face straightened. He shook his head. "She doesn't have too many times when she knows what's going on. I just hope we can get you out of here before it's too late. Seems like every time she clears up, even if it's just for a minute, the one thing she's sure to do is ask for you."

That other ache, the so-familiar one, pushed Jeremy's hunger aside for

a moment, and once again he felt tears beginning to form. He clamped his eyes tightly shut, trying to force the tears back, but it was no use. The dozens—hundreds—of memories were too strong. The hours she had spent reading to him before he learned how to do it for himself. The winter evenings she had taught him to play dominoes and checkers. The countless times she had simply been there when he had needed her.

"Here we are, Mr. Case!"

The nurse's cheerful contralto came loud into his ears. He swiped at his eyes with the sleeve of his hospital gown as he opened them. The nurse rolled the over-the-bed table into place in front of Jeremy and set the tray on it. The tray held a bowl of pale-looking broth, some orange juice, and a small dish of milky gelatin.

"Now we had better take it easy at first, Mr. Case. Just take it slowly. Your stomach hasn't taken anything in for at least three days, so it may have to get used to the idea all over again."

The tone and the words irritated Jeremy. It was the same way a lot of his teachers had talked to him, as if they didn't think he could understand anything. He knew he was slower than most people at times, but that didn't mean everyone had to talk to him like he was a complete idiot. But he had also learned, long ago, that to object or show that he was angry only made things worse.

"All right," he said and obediently picked up the large spoon next to the broth. He could feel his mouth watering at the smell, but he restrained himself and dipped out a spoonful and slowly raised it to his lips.

As he took it into his mouth, he frowned. It tasted funny, not at all the way it smelled. He swallowed, and he could feel the warmth it made as it moved down his throat, could feel it even as it arrived in his stomach.

Abruptly, he felt dizzy, and the room seemed to blur. A wave of nausea struck at him, and he dropped the spoon.

"Is something wrong?" The nurse moved forward quickly, leaning toward Jeremy.

"No, nothing." He shook his head. As quickly as it had come, the nausea was gone as well as the dizziness. The nurse must have been right after all.

His stomach would have to get used to the idea of food all over again.

He picked up the spoon again and started to dip it into the soup.

He stopped, frowning again, suddenly aware of an overwhelming urge—an urge to gulp down the entire bowl of broth as quickly as he could!

No! It was silly, impossible. He would just hurt himself. The nurse had warned him, and the momentary nausea had convinced him that she had been right.

But the urge was still there, so strong that he could not overcome it. The smell became overwhelmingly attractive, and his mouth began watering in anticipation.

He picked up the bowl, warm but not too hot to touch, put it to his mouth and, in a half dozen hungry gulps, drained it. The nurse, stunned into a frozen silence until he had finished, grabbed the empty bowl from him.

"Mr. Case!" The fixed pleasantness on her face had faded, and her eyes were wide. She stared at Jeremy for a moment and then turned and hurried from the room.

"Jeremy, what the hell are you doing?" It was Harry, still standing by the bed, looking as confused and concerned as the nurse.

"I don't know," Jeremy said after a brief hesitation. He reached for the orange juice and sipped a few drops. Again there was the momentary nausea but not nearly so strong this time. And this time he was ready for it.

With the nausea gone, he downed the orange juice in a single gulp.

As the nurse returned with the doctor, the last of the gelatine was disappearing into Jeremy's mouth. The doctor opened his mouth to speak, the apprehension clear on his face.

But he stopped. The damage—if it did prove to be damage—was done. And Jeremy did not appear to be having any adverse reactions. The doctor forced a smile onto his face.

"You must have been pretty hungry, Mr. Case."

Jeremy nodded. "I still am. Could I have some more?"

The doctor hesitated. "Let's wait a few minutes, shall we? Let's give us a chance to check you over again, just to be sure everything's still all right."

"I feel all right," Jeremy said. "I'm just hungry, that's all." '

"Yes, I'm sure you are. But we had better check just to be sure, now hadn't we?" He turned toward Harry. "Perhaps you could wait in the lounge, Mr. Walters? I'll let you know when we're done."

Harry hesitated, looking from Jeremy to the doctor, but finally he nodded and left the room.

For the first time since it had joined with the host, new material was being taken in—new material that could be used to rebuild the masses of tissue it had been necessary to utilize in the initial emergency repairs to the host.

It took only a moment to analyze the material and, using the hosts own body and the patterns provided by the body's cells, to begin to convert the material into new tissue that would be indistinguishable from the old.

It continued until, far too soon, the material was exhausted.

After a half hour of tests, the only abnormality the doctors could find was a temperature of 99.5 degrees, less than a degree above normal. Everything else, aside from Jeremy's obvious emaciation, was well within normal limits. In the end, they brought Jeremy another bowl of broth and watched carefully as he consumed it.

This time, Jeremy noticed, there was not even the initial nausea he had felt when he had tasted the first bowl. After he finished, many of the tests were repeated and another bowl was brought. Before the doctors called a halt, Jeremy had consumed five bowls of broth as rapidly as they had been

brought to him. Jeremy insisted that he felt fine and was still hungry. The only evidence to the contrary that the doctors could find was that Jeremy's temperature had risen another degree and now stood at 100.5 degrees.

"Let's just wait a while, Mr. Case," one of the doctors said after Jeremy had requested a sixth bowl. "Give us a chance to run some more thorough tests. We don't want to rush into anything as long as there's the slightest risk."

Jeremy, seeming to grow hungrier with each swallow, said nothing. He knew that he had no choice. The doctors were in charge, and they should, after all, know what was best. Besides, he was feeling a lot better now than he had before—aside from the hunger, of course.

There were more blood tests then, and X rays. In the first of the X rays, there were a number of curiously opaque areas, particularly in the skull, but a second series showed nothing. Despite the protests of the X-ray technicians, the doctors decided that the first film must have been defective. Finally, within a half hour of the last bowl of broth, Jeremy's temperature dropped to 97 degrees and stayed there.

The next time he ate, his temperature moved up to about normal for a few minutes, but then it dropped back to 97.

At last, totally baffled, the doctors decided to let Jeremy have as much as he wanted while they monitored all of his vital signs continuously. They started with more of the broth, but after two more bowls, they also offered him solid food, largely meat and vegetables. His heart rate went up to a hundred and held steady, beating strongly. His blood pressure also rose and leveled off, and his temperature hit 102 and remained at that level.

After consuming the equivalent of five normal meals, Jeremy stopped. He was no longer hungry. His temperature, blood pressure and heart rate remained high for approximately four hours, then dropped back to near normal levels. When they did, Jeremy announced that he was hungry again.

And this time he told them what it was that he wanted— which of the things he had eaten before he wanted more of, which he wanted less of. He didn't know why he had these preferences. He could only say that he "felt like having more" of this, or "felt like not having as much" of that.

And so it went. For three days, every three or four hours, Jeremy ate the equivalent of four to six full meals.

The entire medical staff grew more puzzled by the hour, and no one could come up with any theory that made the least bit of sense. Most baffling of all, perhaps, was the fact that very little waste material was produced, less even than would be produced by a normal person on a normal diet. It was as if his body had suddenly become nearly one hundred percent efficient, able to convert everything it took in into either energy or body tissue.

Equally puzzling was the fact that Jeremy seemed to sleep only a few minutes a night, and no amount of sedatives had any effect on him—other than to produce, the first time each was given to him, a moment of nausea.

By the end of three days, Jeremy weighed a hundred and sixty pounds, approximately twenty pounds less than he had weighed before the crash. There was very little fat now, and the muscle had excellent tone and strength despite the fact that Jeremy spent almost the entire time in bed, barely moving.

Once Jeremy reached the hundred and sixty mark, his periodic hungers abated, and his vital signs all retreated to normal or slightly below.

The hospital would very much have preferred to keep Jeremy for further observation and study, but after a day of delays and arguments, Jeremy and his cousin, Harry Walters, insisted he be released. Since none of the doctors could find anything wrong with Jeremy, they had no choice but, reluctantly, to release him.

Once the repairs to the hosts body were completed, a new process began, a longer, more complex process that might never be completed. This process, a "settling in," an integration, was not simply the mechanical rearrangement of molecules and cells into new physical patterns. This process involved not only the body but the mind as well, and not only the mind of the present host but the minds—the memories—of past hosts as well.

Slowly, carefully, working unseen behind the walls that the host itself seemed to erect, making use of the vast unused portions of the new hosts brain, the process began.

CHAPTER 4

Jeremy and Harry had no trouble leaving the hospital despite the half-dozen news people who still haunted the lobby nearly a week after the hospital had imposed its news blackout. Jeremy, at a hundred and sixty pounds, looked nothing like the skeletal Jeremy Case who had been brought down from the mountain less than a week before. Harry was unknown to them because the hospital had given out only the names of Jeremy's father and stepmother a thousand miles away. Jeremy and Harry simply walked past the photographers and reporters in total anonymity.

The day was sunny and warm, and Harry had the windows of his ancient Checker sedan rolled down as they drove the hundred and fifty miles from the Elton City Hospital to the valley town of Reelsville. Physically, Jeremy felt better than he ever remembered feeling before, and he couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't just his imagination. Maybe, because of the crash and his seemingly miraculous survival, he was now able to feel things more sharply, to see things in more detail, to simply appreciate more fully the fact that he was alive. The illusion would soon be over, he was sure.

As they descended the last long, curving slope to the edge of Reelsville, both Jeremy and Harry were silent. They had talked themselves out on the subject of Jeremy's impossible recovery. Neither of them knew any more or any less than the dozen or more doctors who had kept watch over Jeremy, and both were, in their own ways, dreading the ordeal that Jeremy now had to face.

Aunt Jessica had faded even further during the week Jeremy had been in the hospital, and the family doctor, who had visited her regularly in the nursing home, had recommended that, for these last few days, they take her home. It might make it easier on her if she were at home, in familiar surroundings, able to see things and people she would recognize during her increasingly rare moments of lucidity.

The house was just as Jeremy remembered it from nearly ten years before, although, naturally, it seemed smaller to his twenty-year-old eyes

than it had to those of a ten-year-old. The yard, with its cherry and pear and crab apple trees and lilac bushes and oaks, seemed more like a yard now than a huge playing field, as it had then. The house, with its peaked roof and two-story frame structure and L-shaped porch running along the front and one side, seemed more like an everyday house than a mansion. Four rooms downstairs and three upstairs, beyond the crooked, enclosed stairway, had been spacious indeed to a boy who had, until then, seen nothing larger than a three-room apartment in which two of the rooms were separated by nothing more than a line of kitchen cabinets and bookcases.

Harry parked in the garage, something that had been added since Jeremy had last seen the place. An old, nearly collapsing smoke house had stood in its place a decade ago. The barn, fifty yards to the south, still remained but it looked as if a good wind would send it toppling to the ground. None of the outbuildings had been used even when Jeremy had stayed there. His Uncle, Art Walters, had quit farming just after the war, when it became apparent that at best, his few acres could be nothing more than a slightly profitable hobby. He had sold the farmland to another farmer, one who was gradually buying up several hundred acres in the area and working it all with modern, expensive equipment.

Uncle Art, who had always been as interested in repairing and tinkering with his tractors as in driving them, had gone to work as a mechanic in one of the larger garages in Reelsville and had stayed there until his death three years ago. Not long after Art's death, Harry and his wife Carolyn had, at Jessica's insistence, moved in. Though it was never written down or even verbally agreed to, everyone involved knew that Harry and Carolyn would stay there and take care of Aunt Jessica as long as she lived and then would continue to live there afterward. In small communities, this sort of thing—family taking care of family—still happened now and then.

And it still happened that, occasionally, a dying woman would be brought home for her last days, just to make her more comfortable. And a relative that the woman continually asked to see might be sent for, even if it meant going a little into hock for the plane fare.

As Harry and Jeremy walked across the yard to the kitchen door, neither of them said anything. In his mind's eye, Jeremy could already see Aunt Jessica and then, as Jeremy reached the steps, the kitchen door

opened and Carolyn came out to stand on the porch for a moment. She had on a print apron, tied in the back, and for an instant her face was the face of Aunt Jessica as it had been that time Jeremy had first seen her fifteen years before.

Jeremy mounted the steps, and they stood looking at each other. Carolyn brushed back a loose strand of blond hair, and Jeremy thought he could see a redness around her eyes.

"Jeremy." Slowly, unsteadily. Then, with a sudden, jerking motion, she grabbed his hand. "Come on in. She was asking for you again this afternoon."

Through the kitchen, the small living room, up the boxed-in stairs, now looking tiny and cramped, and into a large room at the head of the stairs. A bed stood next to the one large window in the room. Filmy white curtains billowed slightly in the breeze. Lilacs, taken from the bushes in the yard, stood in a glass of water on a low table next to the bed. Sunlight slanted across the foot of the bed, and Jeremy could see the dust motes in the air.

Her head propped up on two pillows, Aunt Jessica was frail and shriveled, her skin like wrinkled parchment. Her hair, beginning to go gray when Jeremy had last seen her, was totally white except for a few yellowish spots that looked more like stains than natural coloring. Her arms, laying on top of the colorful patchwork quilt that Jeremy remembered seeing her make herself, were like sticks.

Like his own had been.

He shook his head and moved across the room to the bed. He looked down at her. Her eyes were closed but after a moment they fluttered open. At first they were blank and unseeing.

Jeremy blinked and glanced back toward Carolyn, who stood silently at the head of the stairs.

"You have to wait a minute," she said. "It takes her a minute, that's all."

He nodded and looked down again at the ravaged, ancient face. He held his entire body stiff and tense, straining to keep silent, righting to keep sobs from exploding out of his throat.

"Jeremy?"

Her voice was barely a whisper, and her hands fluttered for a moment, then raised themselves toward him as if pulled by invisible strings.

"Yes, Aunt Jessica. It's Jeremy." He took the hands in his as they reached up. They felt as fragile as the dried stick figures they resembled.

He sensed a slight pressure from her hands, pulling him toward her, and he sat down softly on the edge of the bed. He didn't know what to say, and he wasn't sure he could get the words out even if he did know.

"Jeremy," the faint voice said again, this time calm, not questioning. "I waited for you."

For a moment the clouded eyes were clear, and the smile somehow softened the face that was little more than a skull. "You've grown," she said. "My, how you've grown!"

"It's been a long time, Aunt Jessica." Surprisingly, he managed to get the words out, though his voice was barely louder than hers. Behind him, he heard Carolyn turning and going slowly down the stairs. He started to call to her, to ask her not to leave him alone but he couldn't.

For a minute, then two, they stayed like that, motionless and silent. Aunt Jessica's eyes looked into his, and her hands exerted a soft pressure on his. There was no need for words, and once again memories bobbed to the surface of Jeremy's mind. His first year in school, when he had fallen off the schoolyard slide, right on his face. The older kids greased it to make it slide faster, and he had gone over the side about halfway down, falling face down into the gravel. He remembered the blood and the fussing teachers and the staring, curious kids, but mostly he remembered Aunt Jessica as she came storming into the tiny room where he lay. One of the teachers was still trying to get his nose to stop bleeding and hadn't even noticed the huge cut below his lower lip, where his teeth had bitten completely through. The blood from it had mixed with the blood from his nose, and no one had noticed it. No one but Aunt Jessica. She stormed around, using language Jeremy hadn't understood for another two or three years, until finally they saw the other cut, much more serious than the bleeding nose, and called a doctor. And later, all the while the doctor was stitching up the cut, she sat next to him, holding his hand, which helped just as much as the anesthetic they had given him before starting.

Holding his hand, the way he was holding hers now.

Then, even as he watched, her eyes faded and became unfocused, staring blankly past him into the distance. The pressure on his hands eased and her arms hung limp.

Softly, under his breath, Jeremy swore, using all the words Aunt Jessica had used that day, and others he had learned since but had rarely used until now. He cursed the *thing*, the horrible, evil thing that lay within her, eating at her, robbing her minute by minute of her body and her mind and even her spirit. He cursed it, knowing that it was useless, that he was helpless, and then he cursed that helplessness.

Finally, he cursed his own "miraculous" escape and recovery. Here, lying before him, was the one who should have been saved. He would never, Jeremy knew, amount to anything or be of any great value to anyone—besides Aunt Jessica. He never had been smart, and he never would be. He had been told that often enough—by everyone except Aunt Jessica. Another dozen years for her would mean more to everyone than another fifty for Jeremy Case.

Slowly, he lowered her hands onto the quilt.

And he remembered another time. He had lain in a bed in the next room, just a few feet from where he now sat. It had started out as a cold, but he had ignored everyone's advice, and it had turned into something worse. In later years, he realized that there had never been much of a chance of his actually dying, not with the miracle drugs that were coming into common use then, but to a seven-year-old who had never had anything worse than a mild case of flu, it had been terrifying. The coughing, the constant difficulty in breathing, the constant fear that next time he wouldn't be able to force the breath into his lungs at all, the weakness that spread through every limb—to a seven-year-old, it was as if his entire world had turned upside down. Everything was different and frightening.

Everything except Aunt Jessica.

She had sat by his bed for what seemed like hours, until he had finally fallen asleep. She had held his hands, she had read to him, she had convinced him that his world was not, after all, coming to an end, that there was at least one thing—herself—that had remained constant and

always would.

And now, when the situation was reversed, there was nothing he could do to return all that she had done for him. He could only sit helplessly and watch as she was slowly devoured from within.

He leaned low over the bed and kissed her cheek lightly. He could feel her breath on his own cheek, could feel the faint whisper of sound as the air moved in and out in short, fluttering currents.

Still leaning close, he put his hands on her shoulders and lowered his face into the pillow next to hers. His cheek lay against hers, and he cried.

And as he cried, something stirred within him. He was barely aware of it, for its only effect was to blur his vision and blunt his other senses for a moment. If he had been standing, he might have felt a slight dizziness but half lying down, his face buried in the pillow, he felt and saw nothing that registered permanently in his mind.

Then, a moment later, Aunt Jessica stirred again. Her arms, which had been limp as string, moved and a faint moan came from her lips.

Slowly, he raised himself to a sitting position again. He blinked and wiped the tears away with his sleeve and looked down at her face again. Was she coming out of it again? For another few minutes or seconds?

She groaned again, and stirred, her head rocking slowly back and forth in the pillow. But her eyes were closed.

Dreaming, Jeremy thought. Asleep and dreaming. Or delirious.

He sucked in a deep breath and stood up. Harry and Carolyn would be waiting downstairs. Slowly, his feet half scraping on the floor as he walked, he left the room.

For a moment, another host had been present, linked to the first, and all other activity ceased. The continuing integration, the examination and comparison of thought and memory and reality, stopped, overwhelmed by the intensity of this external contact.

The host's mind had issued no explicit orders, either for aid or destruction, and yet the link had been, for those few moments, so close and so complete that, even without orders, rudimentary repairs had been begun.

Because the link had been so brief and because explicit orders had not been given, only the most simple repairs had been made to the secondary host. But processes had been set in motion, reactions had been triggered, and in time they would make themselves felt.

Then the link was broken, and the host was alone once more.

The integration, the examination of mind and memory and reality, began again, but now it took a different direction. It began to concentrate on the relationships among the hosts themselves, for in none of the memories of previous hosts had such relationships existed.

CHAPTER 5

Dr. Harris, the same G.P. who had looked after Jeremy thirteen years before, stopped by shortly after supper that evening. A puzzled frown clouded his face as he emerged from the stairway. Jeremy and Harry and Carolyn, who had heard him cross the floor upstairs and start down the steps, were waiting for him in the kitchen.

Dr. Harris, a small, gray man, shook his head as he set his bag on the kitchen table.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," he said.

"What?" All three pairs of eyes were riveted on him. "Has something happened?"

Again he shook his head. "I don't know. I really don't know, not yet, but..."

He looked at the three of them, one at a time, and his eyes stopped on Jeremy. "Did you just get here today?" the doctor asked.

Jeremy nodded. "This afternoon. They just let me out of the hospital."

The doctor's eyes widened. "Oh, yes, I remember now. It was in the

papers a week or so ago but dropped right away. Said you were the only survivor of that plane crash up past Elton." He looked Jeremy over with sharp, clear eyes. "Sure doesn't look like it did you any permanent damage."

"No, sir, I guess it didn't."

"But I thought it said something about you being practically starved, like a skeleton."

"You know how they exaggerate," Harry put in hastily. "And he is about twenty pounds lighter than he usually is."

The doctor nodded. "Better off that way. Look better and live longer."

"You were saying, about Mother—" Carolyn said.

"Oh, yes. Well, as I was saying, I don't really understand it, and I don't want to hold out any false hopes to you. But, since yesterday, her pulse is much stronger, her breathing is easier, and her temperature is closer to normal."

Jeremy's stomach lurched. Was it possible? Could his wishes, his prayers have been so strong that—?

But the doctor was still speaking.

"Like I said, I don't want you to get up any false hopes. It's most likely something temporary. This happens every so often, particularly when—"

He looked toward Jeremy again. "Particularly when someone they've wanted to see does finally come. You'd be surprised what the mind can do, at least for short periods of time. So let's take this a day at a time. I'll stop by first thing in the morning, before I go in to my office, even, and see how she's doing then."

"You think it's possible?" The words were Harry's, but Carolyn's face echoed them. "She might get better?"

The doctor shook his head again. "I told you," he said, his voice taking on a sharpness that didn't fit the words, "don't go getting your hopes up. I've heard of these things, but I've never seen one myself, never. Sometimes

they last a few hours, sometimes a few days. I even heard of one over in Clayton that lasted over two years."

"But what is it? What's happening?" Jeremy's voice was loud in the small room.

Dr. Harris looked at him, and after a moment a smile creased his face.

"You know as much about it as I do, Jeremy. No doctor understands it. They just give it a name. They call it 'spontaneous remission,' which is just their way—our way—of saying, 'It happened but damned if we know why.' That's all. It could be the fact that you're here. She was asking for you, you know."

"I know."

"Well, that might be it, the whole thing. Somewhere down inside, she had a little pool of strength left, a little piece she was saving. And now that you're here, she's using it."

He shrugged. "I don't know. But I'll be back first thing in the morning, count on it."

The faint smile pulled at his thin lips again. "If anyone ever deserved a 'spontaneous remission,' it's her. Don't get your hopes up but keep your fingers crossed. It can't hurt anything."

For the first time in nearly a week, Jeremy slept that night. He simply willed himself to sleep. He did not want to have to lie there throughout the long night, waiting hour after hour, wondering every minute how Aunt Jessica was.

He awakened suddenly, completely, knowing exactly where he was and why. The sky in the east was red, and he could see the lone oak tree through his window.

He threw the covers back and stood up. For a moment he hesitated, afraid to go upstairs, afraid that what had started last night would have vanished. But he had to know. Without waiting to change out of his pajamas or even to put on his shoes, he padded across the front room,

through the living room, and up the stairs. He could hear Harry still snoring lightly in the room on the right, the room he used to share with Harry when he had first lived here.

The large room, its window facing south, was still in shadow, and Jeremy moved cautiously across the floor. He stopped at the edge of the bed and, not wanting to make the slightest noise, knelt down on the floor next to it. He leaned forward, as close as he could without disturbing the bed.

Was it his imagination, or could he see the covers moving up and down in time with her breathing? Was she breathing that deeply and regularly now? Yesterday, even in the bright sunlight, the motion had been almost undetectable.

He listened, and he could hear the air as it moved in and out of her lungs, evenly and strongly.

Suddenly, he felt like crying, not out of sadness but for joy. Yet he held back. He didn't want to waken her. Not yet.

He raised himself, stood looking down at her in the semi-darkness, then turned to go.

"Jeremy?"

He spun around. The voice was not the faint whisper with which she had spoken yesterday. It was, almost, the voice she had used ten years ago, when he had seen her last.

He knelt down again, his heart pounding. Let it be true! Let it be true! His mind shouted the words.

"Yes, Aunt Jessica." His own voice trembled.

"You were here yesterday, weren't you?" Still it was the voice from the past, the voice he had been sure he would never hear again.

"Yes, I was. How are you feeling?"

A smile creased her parchment face. "Hungry," she said.

Jeremy's face split into a wide grin, and he stood up abruptly.

"That's great! That's really great!" He leaned down and kissed her soundly on the cheek. "That's just great!"

He turned and ran across the room and down the stairs to the kitchen, not caring if he woke anyone or not.

"I'm still not promising anything," Dr. Harris said, standing in the kitchen as he spoke to the three of them. "Not predicting, rather. Whatever is happening, it's none of my doing. Things like this never are a doctor's doing. But whatever it is, I think we had better get her into the hospital, just to check her out a little more thoroughly."

"But if you say she's getting better—" Jeremy began to protest.

"We just want to be sure," the doctor said, "that's all." He hesitated. "You can come with her, if you want. It might help."

"All right." The words shot out without hesitation.

Again the doctor shook his head, as he had been doing off and on ever since he had come down from seeing Aunt Jessica a few minutes before.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I've never even *heard* of anything happening this fast, let alone seen it" He turned again and pushed open the screen door that led out to the porch. "I'll have an ambulance out here in a couple of hours. I'll call when it's coming, so you can get her ready."

With a final shake of his head, he left. Behind him, Jeremy glanced at Harry, who returned the look, a look that was an odd combination of secret knowledge and total puzzlement. Both were remembering what Jeremy had gone through only days before. And each was wondering, in his own way, what had happened. And what *was* happening, now, upstairs.

The porch swing moved gently back and forth. Jeremy sat on the concrete floor of the porch, his back against one of the pillars that supported its roof. A gentle west wind brought odors of a dozen different plants and trees, odors Jeremy had almost forgotten over the last decade.

In the swing, sitting on the same tattered cushion she had used ten years ago, was Aunt Jessica. Her face was still thin, almost skeletal, and she still looked every one of her seventy years. But there was a color to her cheeks, a spark of life in her eyes as she moved the swing slowly back and forth.

And she had walked out to the swing by herself.

Once again Dr. Harris was shaking his head. He stood next to his car where Jeremy and the others had hurried to meet him.

"I don't understand it. No one does. It happens in rare cases, and this apparently is one of those cases. That's all I can tell you." There was yet another shake of the head. "I can also tell you that I have never heard of one that happened this fast or this completely."

"You're trying to say she's cured?" It was almost a chorus, the slightly different phrasings that each of them used stumbling over each other.

"I'd never say that. 'Cure' implies that it's the result of something we did. And it also implies that it won't recur. Whatever it was that happened, I had nothing to do with it. I only watched. All I can say is that every one of the tests we ran—*every one!*—was completely negative. No lingering pockets, nothing. It's gone, as if she had never had it."

"But—"

"No buts! No more damn questions! I don't *know* what happened! I probably never will. Hell, probably no one ever will! Just take it, don't ask questions. That's my business, to ask questions, not yours."

He waved a hand vaguely in the air. "And keep a close watch on her. If anything—and I do mean *anything!*—the slightest bit out of the ordinary happens, let me know. No matter what time it is or what I'm doing. Understand?"

All three nodded, and Dr. Harris climbed back into his car. Up at the house, fifty yards away, the kitchen screen door opened. Aunt Jessica came out, saw the doctor, and waved.

CHAPTER 6

"It was *you*, Jeremy! I know it! Inside me, I know it. *You* cured me."

The road was dusty, but to both of them it smelled good. The patch of wild strawberries that grew along the side of the road looked even larger than it had the last time Jeremy had picked any, and he wondered if anyone had bothered with them in the past ten years.

He looked straight ahead, not looking down at the still-thin form as it moved beside him.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Aunt Jessica. You know what Doc Harris said. It was a 'spontaneous remission.'"

"All that means is that I got over it, whatever it was. He told me so himself. He told me he didn't know what happened."

She looked up at him as they walked. "But *I* do. I know what happened. You cured me, Jeremy. You healed me."

"Don't be silly. Nobody can do that. Oh, sure, like Doc says, maybe just the fact that I was here gave you a little strength. But that's all. That's all it could be."

She shook her head vigorously. "That's not all. Don't argue with me. I felt it that day that you came. When you took hold of me, I felt it. Something happened."

"You were asleep. You couldn't have felt anything. You just dreamed it."

His voice sounded positive, more positive than it usually sounded, perhaps because inwardly he, too, had his doubts. *Had* he felt something that afternoon? It was impossible, of course, totally impossible—just as impossible as Aunt Jessica's sudden recovery had been.

Just as impossible as his own survival and recovery had been.

No, apparently not impossible. Just billion-to-one chances. *Almost* impossible but not quite.

"I don't care if I *was* asleep. I still remember, and I know what happened."

They were silent then. The road at that point was cut through a hill,

with brush-covered banks five or six feet high on each side. In the midst of the brush on the west side were strawberries. Jeremy pushed through the shallow ditch and began to pick, handing the berries back to Aunt Jessica to put in the basket she carried. When they had a quart, Jeremy climbed back onto the road and they started back toward the house.

"You remember Lissa Martin?" They had gone half of the two hundred yards down the road when she spoke again.

"Lissa Martin?" He thought for a moment. Lissa Martin. Then a face appeared in his mind. Long, sort of skinny, spotted with freckles, framed with reddish pigtails. Lizzie, they had called her. She had been a grade behind him when he had gone to school here, at Woodrow. Unlike a lot of the other kids, she hadn't laughed—well, not quite as loudly as the others—when he made dumb mistakes in school.

"I remember her. She must be going to college by now. She was always pretty smart."

The old woman shook her head but kept her eyes on the dusty ground ahead of her.

"She's dying."

It was as if someone had struck Jeremy solidly in the stomach. He suddenly felt drained and weak, and the pigtailed face spun in front of him.

"What happened? Why?" His voice sounded as weak as he felt.

"They call it cystic fibrosis. They just found out a couple of years ago."

The weakness increased, and Jeremy found a clear spot in the bank alongside the road and sat down. Aunt Jessica stood watching him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded. "Does she know?"

"She does. She probably knew before anyone else did. Like you said, she was always pretty smart."

He sat for another minute, until the strength returned to his legs, and

then got up. They were almost to the steps leading up from the road to the yard when Aunt Jessica spoke again.

"I want you to go see her," she said.

"See who?" Jeremy knew who she meant.

"Lissa Martin. I want you to go see her."

"What for?" He shook his head. "I didn't know her that well, not really. And she probably wouldn't want anyone..." His voice trailed off as his objections ran out. He knew why Aunt Jessica wanted him to go.

And he knew that he would do what she asked.

CHAPTER 7

"Hi, Jeremy."

She was no longer a freckle-faced kid with pigtails. The freckles were still partially there but the hair was shoulder length, flowing, a beautiful reddish blond only a few shades lighter than Jeremy's own. The face was no longer skinny, only slender. There was a paleness that made the few remaining freckles stand out, and a hesitancy that Jeremy didn't remember from school. But she looked reasonably healthy, and Jeremy thought, *Maybe they're wrong.*

"Hi, Lizzie." And, feeling dumb the instant the words started, "How are you?"

"Pretty good. And you? I read about you in the papers. That must have been a pretty frightening experience, the crash and everything."

"I didn't have time to get scared, I guess."

Not like you, he thought. You've had years to get scared.

"It wasn't so bad," he went on. "I didn't really know much of anything until I woke up in the hospital."

An uncomfortable silence, and then: "I was glad to hear about your aunt—that she got better like that."

Jeremy nodded, his eyes averted. "The doctor doesn't know what happened."

"I know. Spontaneous remission, it's called. I guess it happens now and then."

But not for you, Jeremy thought. For what you have, there are no remissions, spontaneous or otherwise.

"Aunt Jessica wanted me to stop by and see you," he said, still not looking directly at her.

"I know. She told me." Her eyes lowered for a moment and then looked at Jeremy. "She thinks you cured her."

"I know. I tried to tell her it was impossible, but..."

A faint smile pulled at her lips. "That's the surest way to lose an argument with her, tell her it's impossible."

Another silence, and Jeremy asked: "Did she tell you why she wanted me to come and see you?"

Lissa nodded, laughing. "To hear her talk, you'd think I was going to fall over dead next Wednesday afternoon."

"She said—"

Lissa shook her head. "I'm pretty sure what she said. It's probably what I thought when I first found out, too. But it's not that hopeless, Jeremy, not any more. Why, with the medication and the mist tent each night, it's not bad at all."

"Mist tent?"

"Like an oxygen tent, only it's filled with special moisture. If I use that each night, I'm good for most of the day. And I've talked to people just like me who are in their thirties already. I just have to be a little, careful, that's all."

She paused, shrugging lightly. "So you see, I'm not that desperately in need of your particular brand of help, Jeremy."

"I'm sorry. It was just that Aunt Jessica—"

Again she shrugged. "I know. She told me. She thinks you cured her and now she wants you to take a shot at me. Right? Well, I must say, you certainly have a different approach for a faith healer. I thought you people were always brimming over with confidence. I saw Brother Jacob when he was in town last year, and he—"

Jeremy backed away, his face growing hot with embarrassment. He couldn't bring his eyes up to meet hers.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and then, half stumbling as he turned, he started to walk away, not really seeing where he was going.

Abruptly, she was standing beside him, a hand on his arm.

"I'm the one who should be sorry, Jeremy," she said when he stopped. "I shouldn't have said that. It was mean. I guess I get that way every so often. You understand." Her voice was soft, reassuring.

"I understand," he said, his eyes still downcast. "I'd get meaner than that, probably."

"I doubt it. You were always so even-tempered. I don't remember you ever getting mad, even when those bigger kids used to pick on you."

"What good would it do?" He raised his eyes toward her face.

She smiled. "I suppose you're right. What good would it do?"

Another silence, and she reached out and took his hands in hers, looking down at them.

And he knew. As her hands closed over his, he knew that she was afraid, that fear, despite what she had said, was never far from her thoughts. The fear of uncertainty, the fear of having to be careful every minute, the fear of never knowing when—

He returned the pressure on her hands.

"I can try," he said hesitantly. "If you want me to."

She shrugged again, but he could feel the nervousness that she

concealed so well.

"What've I got to lose? After all, if your Aunt Jessica believes you can do it—well, who can argue with her?"

She moved forward, and Jeremy could still feel the fear that welled up in her. She leaned her head against his chest. His heart was pounding, his mouth dry.

Hesitantly at first, he put his arms around her. She raised her head, standing almost on tiptoes, and laid her cheek against his. He could feel the sweat forming under his arms, and he felt like turning and running.

Instead, he clung to her, partly to overcome the fear that he felt in her, partly to hide his own nervousness and embarrassment. He tried to remember how he had felt that afternoon with Aunt Jessica. There had been the love he had felt for her, for the hundreds of things she had done for him and been to him. And there had been the hate for the thing within her, the thing that had been gnawing at her, devouring her day by day, hour by hour.

Suddenly he saw Lissa as she had been, and for an instant, from some forgotten crevice in his memory, came her face, crowded in with a dozen others. And he recognized the scene, the background. It was the same one he had recalled before, the kids all clustered around him as he slowly got up from the gravel next to the slide, the blood already dripping down his chin and onto his shirt. There were curious faces and shocked faces, even laughing faces, but there had been, he realized, only one sympathetic face.

Lissa's.

Or was it his imagination? Did he remember it that way now only because he held her tightly in his arms and felt her labored breathing, felt the touch of a tear on his cheek and couldn't tell if it was his or hers?

But it made no difference. Whether the memory was real or imagined, it was, at that moment, *real to him!*

For an instant, just an instant, he swayed, a peculiar dizziness sweeping over him, and then stiffened as he felt a new wave of fear engulf him.

"Are you all right?" Lissa's muffled voice was only inches from his ear.

He steadied himself, forced himself to relax, and released her. His eyes were still downcast. He shrugged, embarrassed again.

She put out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"Don't worry about it, Jeremy. If it worked, it worked. If it didn't—" She shrugged. "As I told you, it probably isn't as bad as your aunt made it sound."

But it wasn't true, Jeremy knew. As he turned and hurried away, afraid to look her in the face, he knew that it was every bit as bad as Aunt Jessica had said.

Again there was the link, brief and transient, yet so strong that for one instant it was as if the two hosts had merged into a single being. Again, without conscious, explicit orders from the host, simple repairs were begun, processes were triggered that would, long after the link itself was broken, continue to operate.

And the analysis, the integration, continued. Gradually, as more and more of what the host saw as reality became accepted in that other, previously unused section of its mind, the nature of that fleeting, unbreakable link became less mysterious but no less astonishing.

Slowly, the integration was proceeding.

"Jeremy?"

"Yes. Lissa?"

"Today's the day I go in for my checkup. You want to go with me?"

He had been dreading this moment for the last three days. Since he had seen her that one time, he had avoided her. He had not even talked to her, despite Aunt Jessica's frequent questions and pleas.

"If you really want me to," he said. His voice was almost inaudible.

"I do." A hesitation, and for several seconds there was only the hum of

the phone lines in his ear. "I *think* it worked, Jeremy."

His stomach twitched and an icy tingling spread over his entire body. He wasn't sure which was the more frightening, for it to have worked or for it to have failed.

"I hope it did," he said finally.

"I didn't have to use the mist tent last night," she said, "and I've barely coughed at all today. I could never get away with skipping a night before this. Not for a year, anyway."

Jeremy swallowed audibly. "What time are you going to see the doctor?"

"Two this afternoon. I'll pick you up about one-thirty. All right?"

"All right."

"And thank you. For everything!"

"Don't thank me yet!" A strange combination of anger and fear swept through him. Much as he wanted her— and Aunt Jessica—to get well, he didn't want to believe that he was responsible. He didn't want something like that thrust upon him. "Wait till you know you've got something to thank me *for!*"

He hung up and hurried out into the yard and toward the woods that still filled several acres on the other side of the road.

Jeremy waited in the car, silently. Lissa *had* looked better but then, she hadn't looked that bad before. And her breathing had sounded better, and she seemed more energetic.

But all those things could be psychological, he told himself, even her being able to get along without her mist tent for a night. It could be with her the way Doc Harris had thought it was with Aunt Jessica. It could be anything.

He glanced up at the clock in the court house tower. Almost three. She had been in there nearly an hour. Usually, she had said, it took only a few

minutes. Dr. Richardson would just check on her condition, make sure she had been taking her medication, give her some more, and make a few notes. So maybe that meant something good, the fact that she'd been in there nearly an hour...

In the outside rearview mirror, Jeremy saw the door burst open across the street. He jerked around in his seat, banging his elbow on the steering wheel. It was Lissa, coming through the door.

And she was running!

His heart pounded, and once again the painful tingling spread over every inch of his body. Whatever she would have to say, he didn't really want to hear it. But he had to. There was no getting away from it

Then she was next to the car, and he could see that she was grinning from ear to ear.

"It worked, Jeremy! It worked! Richardson won't admit it, not until he makes more tests, and he wants me to check into a hospital for a day or two and—"

The rush of words stopped, and she pulled in a breath. "It's gone, Jeremy! I know it is! I'm all right!"

Her hands were on his arm where it lay in the window of the car, and he could feel her fingers working, kneading the flesh. And, somewhere within himself, he could feel the joy, the sudden sense of freedom flowing out of her along with the words.

But there was also an apprehension, a nervousness. Jeremy looked back to the door she had just come through. A middle-aged man, tall and slender, stood looking out. Behind him, looking over his shoulder, was a younger woman. Jeremy could feel their eyes on him.

"Did you tell them about—"

She laughed, a joyous sound. "No, not yet. Who would believe it? Who would *ever* believe it? Besides Aunt Jessica and me?"

"You better drive," he said, pushing the door open. "I'm a little shaky."

"And I'm not?" She laughed again, but she slid in behind the wheel as Jeremy moved around to the passenger's side. Her face was more serious as he got in. She looked at him before starting the car.

"But I guess you have a different kind of shakes than I do," she said softly. "My troubles are over, thanks to you. But yours are probably just beginning..."

"What are you going to do, Jeremy?"

They sat in the car, still a mile from Lissa's house, pulled off to the side of the road into an unused drive that led back into the woods.

Jeremy shook his head. "What exactly did they say this time? Now that they've done all their tests?"

A grin, slightly mischievous, crossed her face. "They don't know what to say. The only thing they all agree on is that I don't have it anymore. The experts they brought in from Capital City say that the local doctors obviously made a mistake. It was something else I had all these years. After all, for quite a few years they thought I had nothing worse than a bad case of asthma."

She laughed, which she did a lot of these days. "Doc Richardson says it's impossible to have been mistaken, not with the tests he gave me. But he doesn't sound quite as positive about it as he did at first."

"Is it possible? That they've been wrong all the time?"

"I don't know. I'm no doctor, but from all I've read, well, they all say the sweat test is pretty definite. Not much chance for error." Another laugh. "Unless they got my sweat mixed up with someone's else's on the way to the lab. Three times."

"But it's possible?"

"Anything's possible, Jeremy. Doctors aren't any more perfect than anyone else is. To tell the truth, I think Richardson is half afraid I'll join the parade and try to file a malpractice suit. 'Years of mental anguish because of a totally incorrect diagnosis.' "

She paused, her eyes looking away from his, her face becoming serious as she looked down the dusty road that led toward the lake.

"But I don't think they were wrong," she went on quietly. "I think they were right—then and now. It was real, and now it's gone."

He didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say, how to deny it, no matter how strongly he wished that he could.

"The same way they were right about your aunt," she continued after a brief silence. In the distance, maybe a half mile away, a faint buzz was the only sound that floated through the hot, dry afternoon. A powerboat on the lake was starting up.

"The same way they were right about you at the hospital in Elton, Jeremy."

He looked at her sharply.

"I talked to Harry," she went on. "He didn't want to say anything, but then..." She shrugged. "He said you had a fever of almost a hundred and ten when they brought you in. Nothing they did could get it down for over twelve hours. And anything over a hundred and five or six for any length of time is fatal. That's what the doctors told him there, and so did the ones at the hospital here."

Still Jeremy said nothing. He only sat uncomfortably, trying not to believe what she was saying. Trying not to believe what he already knew was the truth.

"And he said you went from practically a skeleton to the way you are now, all in three or four days. Almost sixty pounds in three days."

He looked toward her again. He tried to remember what she had been like when he had first seen her barely a week ago, but it was hard. Her face was now so full of vitality, her eyes literally flashing with it, that the pale, withdrawn face of the days before seemed unreal. She had not, then, appeared particularly sick, but compared to the way she looked and acted now...

She was, Jeremy realized, beautiful. But that didn't matter, he told himself hastily, one way or the other. What mattered was that she was

healthy once again, that she wasn't going to die. Not for many, many years, at least.

And what also mattered was that in her face there was a quality that Jeremy could not remember ever having seen in a face before, except possibly Aunt Jessica's. A quality of understanding? He didn't know. It had been there when she had been a child in school, he thought, but never to such a degree as it was now.

Or could it be only his imagination?

He didn't make a conscious decision to speak, but suddenly the words began rushing out, stumbling over each other in their haste.

"I haven't slept since the hospital, either. Except when I want morning to come faster. It's like I don't have to sleep anymore, ever, unless I want to. And I saw the clothes I had on when the plane crashed. Someone showed them to me. They were torn to pieces. Completely soaked with blood. I couldn't have—"

He stopped as abruptly as he had begun. When Lissa didn't say anything, his mind slid further back, beyond the time in the hospital to the days on the mountain, to the crash itself, to the nightmarish series of partial awakenings that followed. He didn't know how to describe them. He could only say:

"I think I died. Up there on the mountain, before anyone found me, I was sure I had died. I think I really did."

He looked toward her again, half expecting to see her laughing. But her face was serious, perhaps a little sad.

"If you did, you came back..."

A strange look crossed her face, and Jeremy thought he saw a trace of fear in her eyes.

"It was my imagination, that's all," he said.

Again she was silent for a long moment, as if struggling within herself, as Jeremy himself was struggling.

"I think we should find out for sure, Jeremy," she said. "For absolutely sure."

"Find out what?" He knew the answer, but he had to ask the question anyway.

"If you really are responsible for curing me. And your aunt."

"How? How could we find out anything like that?"

"It won't be easy, Jeremy. But what you did for me wasn't easy either, was it?"

He shook his head, remembering the embarrassment and the pain. "No, it wasn't."

"Do you *want* to know, Jeremy?"

"I—" He shook his head again, looking away from her. "I don't know what I want. It scares me."

She took his hand. "I know. It scares me, too. But I think—if I were you—it would scare me a lot more *not* knowing."

Another silence, longer this time. He felt the fear she had spoken of, a fear of the unknown—a fear of *himself*.

"All right," he said finally. "Whatever you say."

She leaned over and kissed him lightly, squeezed his hand. He didn't feel quite as frightened as he had before.

Or quite as alone.

CHAPTER 8

"He doesn't know. You do understand that, don't you?"

The woman, worn and haggard at less than thirty, spoke sharply to Lissa and Jeremy as they stood in the hospital corridor.

"I understand," Lissa assured her.

"I heard about you, Miss Martin. I guess all of us have over here. How you all of a sudden got better." A statement, not a question. Almost an accusation.

"I was lucky, very lucky."

The woman nodded, her motions sharp and jerky. "Just remember. He doesn't know. And he's not going to! Just because you were lucky—"

She turned abruptly and walked away. After a few paces, her ramrod-straight back slumped and the tiredness returned to her walk.

Motioning for Jeremy to follow, Lissa pushed open the door to the room and stepped in. The boy—Bobby—lay propped up in the bed. A book lay closed on the over-the-bed table, and the TV set on the wall at the foot of the bed was blank. Bobby looked to be about seven. He was pale and seemed to be half asleep when they opened the door. By the time they were inside, he was fully awake, looking at them curiously.

"Hi," he said. His voice was a little weak. "Did you come to visit me?"

"That's just what we did, Bobby," Lissa said. "How are you feeling?"

A shrug, like any other boy's except not quite as elaborate or energetic. He looked at the book lying in front of him.

"You going to read to me?"

"If you want us to, Bobby. Is it a good book?"

Another shrug. "Pretty good. But I get tired when I read too long." He looked from one to the other. "Who are you? You're not relatives, are you?"

"Just friends of your mother."

He nodded as if that explained everything. "She must have a lot of friends."

"I'm sure she does. Now, where do you want me to start?" Lissa picked up the book.

"At the beginning. I don't remember it too well anyway."

Lissa laughed, lightly. "All right, we'll start at the beginning."

She looked at Jeremy. "This is Jeremy," she said. "Would you like him to hold you while I read to you? You must get tired, just sitting in that bed all the time."

"Uh-huh."

There was a large chair alongside of the bed. Jeremy moved it down toward the foot, in line with the room's one window, then rolled the over-the-bed table out of the way and leaned down to pick up Bobby. He stood by the window with him for a moment before sitting down, while Lissa began reading.

At first, Jeremy felt nothing. Bobby was just a weight on his lap, but then he looked at his face more closely. At one time it had been round, Jeremy was sure, but now the roundness, the softness was gone. It was pale—paler than Jeremy had thought at first. The sunlight, he thought, the sunlight from the window accentuates the paleness.

For a moment the face blurred and swam before Jeremy's eyes, and, against the swirling background, another face appeared. An older face, an adult face, and there were tears running down its cheeks.

Abruptly, Jeremy recognized the face—the woman in the corridor, Bobby's mother. But the face was different— less tired, less drawn. Her face as it had been—how long ago?

Then the moment was over, and Bobby's face was before him again, looking at him curiously.

"Don't you feel good, Mister?"

"I'm all right, Bobby. You just listen to the story." Lissa had hesitated, but now she continued.

Bobby knew. Jeremy was sure of it. No matter what Bobby's mother said, the boy knew. Not the details, not the name, but he knew that it was there, draining him gradually of his strength.

And Bobby knew that it would be over soon. He didn't know exactly what would happen, not in any kind of detail, but he knew that he would

be getting weaker and weaker and that he would not be getting any better, ever.

Jeremy didn't know why he was so sure of this, why he was so positive that, despite all Bobby's mother had tried to do, she had not succeeded in keeping the truth from the child.

Jeremy simply knew. When he had touched Bobby, had looked into his face and into his pale blue eyes, he had known. Just as, when Lissa's hands had taken his, he had known of the fear that lay cold and hidden beneath the surface.

From somewhere, the sadness came. Something in his mind twisted and stretched tight and, in place of Bobby's face before him, came Lissa's and Aunt Jessica's. The sadness he had felt for them, he felt again. He didn't know how or why; he only knew that he felt it.

There was a slight blurring of his vision, as if his eyes had gone out of focus for a moment, and he felt the chair sway beneath him.

Then it was gone.

Lissa's voice went on, filling the room with fantasy images. Bobby looked out the window at the fields that lay across the highway from the hospital. Jeremy couldn't tell if he was listening to what Lissa was reading or not.

This time the link was less strong, but stilt it existed for an instant, long enough for the invisible tendrils to dart forth, start their slow but unstoppable chain reactions in the secondary host, and withdraw.

And the thought came: Soon the barriers between us must begin to come down. Soon the host must begin to become aware that he is no longer alone...

"What do you think?"

Jeremy could only shake his head at Lissa's question as they began the

drive back to Reelsville.

"Did you feel anything?" she persisted.

Again he shook his head. "I don't know. I don't even know if I really felt anything with you or with Aunt Jessica."

"But you *thought* you did. *I* did; I felt something. Just a little dizziness, and for a second my stomach was upset." It was the first time she had spoken of this directly. "Although I suppose you could say it was my imagination. I was pretty nervous."

Jeremy tried to remember, but everything was blurred. He remembered the feeling of sadness, but that was all. And Bobby's mother's face...

But that had been his imagination. He didn't even know what she had looked like before this happened. He could only have imagined it, made up the picture from what he had seen during the few minutes he and Lissa had talked with her outside Bobby's room.

"I don't know," he repeated stolidly. "I just don't know."

Lissa sighed. "Well, we'll just have to wait and see, I guess. Wait and see."

Jeremy was shaking when he hung up the phone. Through the kitchen window he could see Aunt Jessica pottering around in the back yard where the garden used to be. It was too late to put one in this year, but she was already laying out plans for next spring.

Jeremy pushed through the screen door to the porch, toward the front of the house, away from the garden. He didn't want to see Aunt Jessica or anyone else, not until he stopped shaking.

He held a hand out in front of him. It felt weak, but when he willed it to be steady, it steadied.

He blinked. Is that the way it works? he suddenly wondered. I just say, in my mind, "Let it happen!"— and it happens. Is that it?

He thought: I'm perfectly steady. I'm not weak and shaky.

And he wasn't. Not physically. Inwardly, mentally, he was suddenly shakier than ever. But there was nothing he could do about that.

"Bobby recovered."

Those were the only words Lissa had spoken on the phone when he had picked up the receiver, but they had been enough.

Five days ago, he had had a few months at most to live. Leukemia had been well advanced and unmistakable. No doctor held out even the slightest hope.

Today: "Bobby recovered."

For five days, Jeremy waited. One night he would will himself to sleep for eight, even ten hours, hoping that when he awakened, he would know. Another night, he would stay awake, hoping to drag the time out, afraid that when morning came, he would know.

And now he knew.

Aunt Jessica had recovered.

Lissa had recovered.

And now, Bobby had recovered. His mother had called Lissa, wanting her to share in her joy and wanting her to know that, somehow, a second miracle had happened.

As he stood in the front yard, beyond the porch, a car came over the hill and slowed to a stop. The mailman. When he saw Jeremy, he waved, and instead of putting the mail in the box on the opposite side of the road, he held them out for Jeremy to take.

"How's Jessica?" the mailman asked as Jeremy took the handful of circulars and magazines. It was still Bill Gordon, the same man who had delivered the mail on this route ten years before, and probably ten years before that. He wasn't quite as old as Aunt Jessica, but he had to be near retirement by now.

"Pretty good," Jeremy said. "She's out in the back, planning next year's

garden."

Gordon laughed. "That's Jessica for you. Nothing can keep her down. You know, I always said, if anyone can lick something like that, Jessica's the one."

Jeremy only nodded uncomfortably and, after a few seconds' silence, the mailman put the car back in gear and pulled away down the hill. "Give her my best," he called back through the open window.

Slowly, Jeremy walked back to the house. No letters, he noticed. All ads, just like in the city, and a couple of magazines. And the Capital City Times.

Jeremy dumped the mail on the porch and sat down, leaning his back against one of the pillars. He unfolded the paper, wondering if there would be anything about Bobby in it.

But there wasn't. It had happened in a hospital more than a hundred miles from Capital City, and no one would pay much attention to it. Unless you were Bobby, or his mother. It would probably be in the Reelsville paper when it came out on Friday, since Bobby lived in the county. A local item, nothing of statewide importance.

Then he noticed the obituaries, and almost against his will, his eyes moved down the columns slowly, picking out names and ages. Arliss, 83. Belman, 72. Forest, 64. Jenkins, 79. Miller, 41.

Again he felt the shakiness becoming physical, and he willed it to stop as he laboriously read the last entry. Peter J. Miller, 41, at the Clarkton hospital, after a lengthy illness. Survivors included a wife, Janet, 38, and three children, Peter Jr., 15, Betty, 13, and Anne, 12.

If he and Lissa had gone to Clarkton instead of Peru, would Peter J. Miller be alive today? And would Bobby be dead? If not today or tomorrow, then next week or next month?

He folded the paper neatly, as if it had never been opened, and took it and the junk mail into the kitchen. He didn't know what to do. He had never felt so totally helpless in his life.

Then he thought of Lissa, and a faint spark of hope stirred within him.

She would certainly have *some* idea of what to do.

"There's only one thing you can do, Jeremy." Lissa's voice was calm and steady, but even Jeremy could see the tension in her face. Or was it, as in himself, fear?

"Only one thing," she repeated. "You'll have to go to a hospital—maybe the one you were in after the crash, where they'll remember you. And they'll have to find out *how* you do it."

He shook his head, but only partly in denial.

"Don't you see, Jeremy?" she went on. "If they can find out how you do it, maybe they'll be able to figure out how to do it themselves. That way, you won't be the only one anymore."

He didn't want this power, whatever it was, not anymore. Once he had cured Aunt Jessica—and then Lissa— that was enough. He didn't want it anymore.

And he certainly didn't want to be the *only one*.

"I'll think about it," he said, his voice barely carrying the few inches to her ear. "Would you go with me?"

She smiled. "Try and stop me! Don't forget, I'm one of your prize witnesses."

"What was it?" Jeremy could see that Lissa was disturbed as she hung up the phone in the kitchen.

"I don't know. It was Mother. She just said something was happening, and that I should get home right away."

"I'll come with you." It was automatic. In the last few days, they had been inseparable. Jeremy had come to look to Lissa and to depend on her as much as he had ever depended on Aunt Jessica.

There was a single light on the porch when they arrived at Lissa's

house. Her mother was standing on the porch, waiting.

"What is it, Mother?" Lissa hurried across the yard ahead of Jeremy.

"Just come inside."

"But—"

"Just come inside!"

Her mother took her by the arm and half propelled her up the steps and across the porch. She opened the door to the darkened living room.

"Mother, I—"

Then, as she stepped inside, the lights flooded on and the next instant the air was filled with the sound of dozens of people shouting: "Surprise! Happy birthday! Surprise!"

Jeremy, seeing the mass of people crowding around her, held back, staying in the near darkness at the foot of the steps. It was not until Lissa broke away from the throng surrounding her and came back to take his hand that, still hesitantly, Jeremy entered the house.

Once he was introduced, Jeremy recognized a lot of them from when he had gone to school in Reelsville. For the most part, they shook hands and greeted him cheerfully enough, but many of them, in that first instant of recognition before they had complete control of their reactions, looked rather surprised. A number of them glanced down at Jeremy's hand, held tightly in Lissa's, and a puzzled frown crossed their faces.

Near the end of the evening, one of the men that Jeremy recognized as having been a couple of grades ahead of him in school—and one of the "big kids" who had greased the slide that time—motioned Jeremy to one side, toward the door to the porch. With a glance around the room for Lissa, who had until a minute ago stayed close to him the entire evening, Jeremy followed the man outside into the comparative darkness.

"Well, Jeremy, are you back in Reelsville for good now?" The man's name, Jeremy remembered now, was Ken Felter.

Jeremy shook his head. "I'm just visiting for a while. I'll have to get

back pretty soon."

"Staying with your cousin, I hear. And your aunt. Jessica, isn't it?"

Jeremy nodded.

"She's all right now, is she? Your aunt, I mean."

"She's fine." Jeremy glanced toward the door uneasily, wondering where Lissa was.

"That's great. A grand old lady, from what I hear. Though I don't know her very well myself, of course. My folks moved into town about the time you left Reelsville, I think. We hardly ever get out in this direction anymore."

Again Jeremy nodded. As always, except when he was with Lissa, he didn't know what to say. He could only wait, uncomfortably, until the other went on.

"I'd heard," Felter finally continued, "that she wasn't very well off a few months ago. I heard the doctors didn't hold out much hope for her, there for a while."

"She was pretty sick, I guess," Jeremy agreed.

"Yes, well, you'd never know it to see her now. Spry as anything. I guess she got a lot better when you came to visit her."

Something clutched at Jeremy's stomach, and he again looked nervously toward the door.

"Almost a miracle, some people were saying," Felter went on, and even Jeremy noticed that Felter himself seemed uncomfortable despite the flow of words. "Like Lissa, almost. Now *that* was a real surprise—a real welcome surprise. All of a sudden she's okay, after the doctors had given up on her."

Jeremy started to back away, to get a better look inside the house, but Felter reached out and put a hand on his arm.

"Wait up a minute, Jeremy." The voice was low and uncertain, totally unlike the Felter that Jeremy remembered.

"I've got to be going pretty soon," Jeremy managed to get out. "I'd better go and tell Lissa that I—"

"Please, Jeremy. Will you wait a second?" The hand was still on Jeremy's arm, holding him back.

Jeremy shook his head nervously. "I really better—"

"Jeremy! Listen to me!" The voice was an urgent whisper. "My cousin works for Doc Richardson. She told me about you and Lissa. And she told me about the two of you going up to see Bobby Carlson."

Silence. There was nothing to say.

"Jeremy?" Felter's fingers tightened on Jeremy's arm, digging into the flesh. "Have you gotten the Power, Jeremy? Like Brother Jacob? Is that it?"

"No!" Automatically, reflexively, the word shot out, as much to himself as to Felter. He jerked away, feeling Felter's fingers scraping at his arm as he pulled.

Then, abruptly, Jeremy was released. He stumbled backward, half falling against the door. He glanced inside once and saw Lissa across the room, surrounded by a half dozen others. Felter still stood a yard away, his hand only now falling to his side.

Jeremy turned and bolted down the steps, into the darkness beyond, not knowing what he was running from.

From Felter?

From whatever it was that lurked, unseen, unknown, within him?

"You see how it will be, Jeremy?" Lissa held both of his hands in hers as they sat in the car in the cool morning sun. "Now that it's out, things like last night will be happening all the time."

"But how did he find out? What made him think it was *me*?"

She lowered her eyes. "I guess it was my fault, Jeremy. That last time I

went in to see Richardson, I asked his nurse—Ken's cousin—about Bobby. I knew about him; he'd been a patient of Richardson's. But I didn't know where he was now. So I asked. I shouldn't have, I know that now. But I knew Bobby's case was hopeless, and that if we were going to find out..."

She looked up at him. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. But the damage is done. And maybe it's for the best. You've seen what it could be like if you stay around here. If you stay anywhere that they know about you—or even guess about you, like Ken did."

"You still want me to go back to that hospital? So they can study me?"

"So they can find out what it is you do. That's all."

"You think they can?"

"I don't know, Jeremy. But if they can't, who can?"

And Jeremy wondered: Can anyone? And if they can find out, do I really want to know?

CHAPTER 9

Jeremy sat at the back of the audience, near the open tent flap. At the front, nearly a hundred feet away, on a stage made from the decorated flatbed of a truck and a steep set of steps at one side, Brother Jacob alternately talked and whispered and shouted and pleaded and questioned. Though none of what he said touched Jeremy, it apparently reached much of the audience, for answers came loudly and on cue. For every "Do you believe?" a dozen responses—"Yes, Brother Jacob!"—came back, ranging from shouts to barely audible moans.

Then, at the end, a dozen or more stood up in the audience and, following Brother Jacob's exhortations, formed a line at the left of the stage. Like a bizarre cheerleader, Brother Jacob kept the responses coming as he stalked down the steps to the line of waiting believers.

Amid the tumult, Brother Jacob's voice rose above all the others as he grasped the first person in the line, an overweight middle-aged woman. His head went back, the muscles in his bare forearms stood out as if he were trying to crush the woman's very bones. Her own voice sobbed out some words that neither Jeremy nor anyone else, except possibly Brother

Jacob, could hear. Then, as he continued the same litany he had shouted out before, the woman twisted in his grip as if tortured, as if someone were jabbing red hot needles into her body.

She screamed once, and then seemed to go limp. Brother Jacob, still talking, still shouting, held her upright for a moment until an assistant could help her away.

Gradually, as Brother Jacob went on to the next in line, the woman seemed to come to herself. She shook off the assistant's arm and stood by herself. She raised her right arm and held her hand out in front of her face. Then, for the first time, Jeremy noticed the hand. Even at this distance, he could see that it was stiff and twisted.

Slowly, the fingers moved and straightened. Then she flexed them into a fist and straightened them again. Her face registered ecstasy, visible to everyone.

A man, middle-aged and graying, ran up from the audience and stood for a moment looking at the woman. Suddenly, their arms were around each other tightly and the man half picked her up and whirled her around. His own face was as ecstatic as hers.

Together, as one, they merged back into the audience.

And Jeremy continued to watch as each of the dozen in line moved through similar performances, some more dramatic, some less, some with no signs of external change, showing that something had happened only by the expressions on their faces.

Then it was over. The last of the line had passed Brother Jacob, and they, along with the rest of the crowd, were filing out. And Brother Jacob himself had disappeared somewhere, perhaps through the flap in the tent behind the stage.

And Jeremy wondered, as he moved out of the tent with the crowd: Are the things I do the same as Brother Jacob does? Did he ever find out how he does what he does?

Am *I* the same as Brother Jacob?

A light was still on in the Felter house as Jeremy pulled to a stop across the street. He sat silently, the lights and engine off, hoping that the light would be turned off before he could get out of the car and walk across the street.

But it stayed on, and Jeremy was forced to move.

For another minute, at least, he stood on the small step by the front door, his hand moving toward the door-bell, then away, then back. He had never felt like this before, so totally alone and afraid, so completely cut off from all sources of comfort and help.

Yet he had to do it.

He rang the doorbell, and a moment later Ken Felter opened the door.

Felter's jaw dropped when he saw Jeremy, and he darted a glance over his shoulder, back into the living room. Before Felter could say anything, Jeremy plunged ahead with his words:

"You wanted something last night, at the party." He barely recognized his own voice; it was so stiff, so tense.

Quickly, Felter eased himself out onto the small porch, closing the door behind him. He took Jeremy's arm, and they moved across the lawn toward the garage. Felter opened a small door in one side and urged Jeremy inside.

Once inside, Felter heaved a sigh of relief and switched on a dim light.

"I'm glad you're here, Jeremy, but, well, Sue doesn't know anything about it."

"About what?"

"It's my eye. I've been to a couple of doctors, and they don't know what it is. That is, they know what's happening—the retina is bleeding—but they don't know why. They don't know what to do about it. They gave me cortisone and a lot of other things, but nothing helps. Pretty soon, if it keeps up, I won't be able to see a thing out of that eye."

He stopped, shuddered. "But what scares me is, they don't know what it

is, and they can't say for sure it won't happen to the other eye, too."

Jeremy stood silently and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Why did you come?" Felter asked. "The way you ran off last night—"

"I don't know." Jeremy's voice was still tense, and he had to fight to keep the panic he felt from boiling up and ripping all control away from him.

"*Can* you help me?"

Jeremy shook his head, more violently than he had intended. "I don't know!"

"But you can try. Can't you?"

He nodded, again more vigorously than he had intended. He held out his hands, remembering how Brother Jacob had done it.

But he couldn't do it that way. He couldn't! Just being here, trying to do it at all, was torture enough.

He took Felter's hands in his own, and he could feel them trembling.

And Jeremy thought: Let him be cured!

But he felt nothing. It was not the same as it had been with the others.

Jeremy closed his eyes, trying to remember how he had felt and what he had thought when he had been with Aunt Jessica and Lissa and Bobby.

But this was different. Felter was not dying, and Felter was not a person with whom he felt comfortable.

But that should make no difference. He had never seen or heard of Bobby Carlson until the day he and Lissa went to the hospital. And he *had* known Felter more than ten years before.

Images appeared in his mind, as they had with Bobby and with Lissa. But these were different. They were flat and unemotional. They were simply images—faces that Jeremy didn't recognize. A woman, in her twenties, pretty, but she meant nothing to Jeremy. An older woman, in

her fifties—Felter's mother?—hair graying, concern on her face, but nothing was communicated to Jeremy. No emotion.

A dozen others, all the same—except one.

Superimposed over them all, for just an instant, was the laughing face of an eight- or nine-year-old Ken Felter, laughing as Jeremy was led from the playground that day more than a decade before.

Was that it? Were Jeremy's memories of his troubles with Felter ten and fifteen years before blocking him? Or was it something else?

Whatever the reason, no matter how hard Jeremy tried, he could feel nothing: no pity, no love, not even hate. There was only the embarrassment of standing there, trying to do something he now knew he could not do at will.

He released Felter's hands.

"Is that it?" Felter looked startled. "Did it work?"

Jeremy shook his head. "I don't know. I never know."

But this time he did know. This time, he knew that it hadn't worked.

Before Felter could ask more, Jeremy turned and rushed out of the garage and ran across the street to the car.

For a moment it seemed as if another link would be made. Each time, the linking had seemed easier, more predictable, almost under the conscious control of the host, but this time it did not work. Instead, at the last moment, a barrier sprang up between the hosts, a barrier of the same inexplicable non-material, of the same strength as the links themselves. A barrier that seemed to come into existence against the conscious will of the host...

And the thought came: Can the barrier between us be lowered? If this host, without even being aware of what he does, can raise such barriers against others of his own species....

"Maybe it's gone." Jeremy's voice was flat, emotionless, hiding the turmoil within him.

"Maybe," Lissa said. "Do you want it to be gone?"

He shook his head. "I don't know! I don't know what I want!" The agitation showed through in his voice now.

"Why did you go to see Felter?"

Again a shake of his head. "I had to. He wanted me to help him."

"There are hundreds of people right here in Reelsville that would want your help. If they knew about you. If they believed in you. And millions in other places all over the world, Jeremy—millions!"

"I know."

"You can't help them all, Jeremy, not that way."

"Maybe I can't help anyone anymore."

"Maybe not. But even if you can, the only possible way to help more than a handful is the way I told you before."

"Go to the hospital? Get studied?"

She nodded and covered his hands with hers.

"But if it's gone, what's the use?"

"They can tell you for sure whether it's gone or not." Her words were more positive than her thoughts.

In Jeremy's mind, images of the hospital, of Lissa and Aunt Jessica and Bobby, of Ken Felter—and of Brother Jacob—spun and whirled.

Finally, slumping, he nodded.

They found nothing.

And it wasn't from lack of trying. Most of the staff at the hospital remembered Jeremy very well and were more than happy to have a chance to run more tests, ask more questions. Even the ones who had not seen Jeremy but had just heard about his remarkable stay at the hospital, wanted a chance to check him out, to do their own particular tests, to have a chance at seeing what made him tick.

For the most part, though, they dismissed the thought of his being able to "heal" anyone, even after they had talked to both Richardson and Harris. Such things were not only impossible but were based only on hearsay evidence. The word of other people, even other doctors, could not be taken as gospel. Spontaneous remissions did happen, they all knew. Mistaken diagnoses were made, they all knew.

But they found nothing. Every test, every machine, every doctor came to the same conclusion. Jeremy was the healthiest, most normal person they had ever tested. In fact, his very health was the only abnormal thing about him. Almost everyone, if they were subjected to the number and kind of tests Jeremy was subjected to, would have been found to have *something*, no matter how minor, wrong with him. An occasional headache, a sore joint, a hangnail—*something!*

But not Jeremy.

After a week they sent him home, many of the doctors beginning to doubt their own memories about Jeremy's previous stay.

"I'm sorry," Jeremy said. "I guess it was all a mistake."

Ken Felter shrugged. "I didn't really expect anything to happen, not really."

He half turned back toward his car, parked in the driveway. He glanced toward Jeremy's aunt, who could be seen in the kitchen, wiping at one of the windows with a cloth.

"Just a bunch of coincidences," Felter said, turning the rest of the way to his car.

Jeremy nodded, hating himself for ever having raised false hopes in

Felter. He should never have gone back that next night. He should have simply lied, saying he had nothing to do with any of the "cures" Felter had heard about. Because, after all, if whatever "power" he had had for those few days was now gone, it was, for Felter, the same as if he had never had it. It made no difference now. Felter's car spit gravel as it backed out of the drive and sped back down the road.

It was to be Jeremy's last day in Reelsville. He hated to leave, but he felt that he had to. Arnold, his boss, had held Jeremy's assembly line job open as long as he could, juggling vacation schedules and even filling in himself a couple of times, but it was getting close to the point at which a replacement would have to be hired if Jeremy didn't return soon. It wasn't a particularly good job, but it was probably as good as Jeremy would ever get, and it was one he had, over the last three years, become comfortable with. He didn't dare risk losing it by prolonging his visit even more than he already had.

It was a Sunday and the entire family—and Lissa—were having a picnic in a state park a dozen miles from Reelsville. Despite everyone's protests, Aunt Jessica had stayed up until nearly midnight the night before, fixing her own special brand of fried chicken, and today, as they finished the last of it, they were glad that she had paid no attention to their protests.

For Jeremy, it was almost as if he were back ten years in the past, when he and Aunt Jessica and Cousin Harry had come here at least once a month every summer. Even the presence of Ken Felter in a group of twenty or thirty in an adjoining section of the park failed to bother Jeremy. The only shadow that hung over the group was the fact that, the next morning, Jeremy would be returning home.

Near the middle of the afternoon, as they were gathering things together for the return trip, there was a squeal of tires from the parking lot a hundred feet away. A moment later came a much more frightening sound, a dull, almost inaudible thud. And then a high-pitched half yelp, half bark.

Then briefly, there was silence, and the yelping began again, louder and more piercing.

To Jeremy, the sound was like a knife jabbing into his body, and he

could almost feel a physical pain himself as another scene from a dozen years ago poured into his mind. He had been walking along the road on the way to town, nearing the Zellers' house, when a car tore by him in a cloud of dust. A hundred yards ahead, Gulliver, a brown and black part-airedale, charged out of the yard as it always did a dozen times a day, darting along the edge of the road, barking frantically. Jeremy had started to grin, as he always did when he saw Gulliver successfully drive off another intruding car, but this time the grin was cut short.

Instead of continuing in a straight line down the middle of the road, this car suddenly swerved to the right. A moment later came the thud, and then the screaming yelp as Gulliver was battered through the air and into the ditch.

Jeremy had started to run forward, but then, as the sound of the dog, half yelping, half whining, continued, he stopped. From where he was, he could see the dog lying in the ditch, its hind legs motionless, its front legs clawing at the ground in an effort to drag itself back toward its own yard.

And he could hear it.

Jeremy had stopped, suddenly sick at his stomach, and then he had turned and run, and he had not stopped until he had outdistanced the sound. He didn't look back and he didn't tell Aunt Jessica or Harry when he got back home. He only said he wasn't feeling very good and then went to lie down.

The next morning, when the school bus went by the Zellers' house, Jeremy could only manage a sideways glance out the window at first. Only when he knew the dog no longer lay there could he bring himself to look directly at the spot.

And now the same sound beat at his ears, and the same sickness twisted at his stomach. But now he was full grown, and he couldn't turn and run.

When Jeremy reached the parking lot, a small crowd had already gathered. An old blue sedan, at least ten years old, stood in the aisle between the rows of parked cars, and a middle-aged man was standing beside it. A few feet away was the dog, small and furry, a terrier of some kind. A boy, maybe seven or eight, was standing frozen a few feet from the dog, much as Jeremy must have stood motionless those twelve years

before.

Another man, younger, was leaning over the dog, touching it lightly. The yelping softened to a whine, and the dog tried to twist around and raise its head toward the man, but it couldn't. The man reached down and stroked its head lightly, looked at the man standing by the car.

"His back is broken," the younger man said quietly. "Somebody will have to—"

"I couldn't help it!" The older man spoke for the first time, his voice shaky. "It ran right out in front of me!"

"I've got some chloroform at home," a third man said. "I only live a mile or two down the road. I can get it in a few minutes."

As they had been speaking, Jeremy had reached the animal, and now he knelt down next to it, between it and the boy. The younger man who had been standing by the dog stepped back and moved toward the boy.

Still the whining continued, and the animal nuzzled Jeremy's hand. He could hear a murmur from the people still standing around, watching, and the beginning of the boy's sobs.

Again the dog nuzzled Jeremy's hand wetly, and he stroked the animal's head with his other hand. Then, sitting down and stretching his legs out in front of himself, he let the dog rest its head on his lap while he continued to stroke it gently.

A car pulled out of the line of other cars. It was probably the man who had offered to go for the chloroform.

As Jeremy sat there, he realized he had never found out how long Gulliver had had to suffer before someone found him. He had never asked. He had never admitted that he had seen it happen. He had never even thought of it, and now, twelve years later, he was—

A momentary dizziness flowed over Jeremy, but he continued to stroke the dog, to make up for what he had not done that other time.

Finally, the car returned, and the man got out, a bottle of colorless fluid in one hand, a towel in the other. He came and stood next to Jeremy and

then knelt down. He unscrewed the cap and poured a generous amount of the chloroform on the towel. Jeremy slid his legs out from under the dog's chin, and the man slid the towel under it.

"This'll put him out. Then we can—"

The dog jerked, puffing back.

"Hold him still! I don't—"

Again the dog jerked back, powerfully. Simultaneously, Jeremy and the man with the towel realized that the dog was using its back legs in the effort.

"What the hell!" The man looked around angrily and located the young man who had been standing over the dog at first. "You said its back was broken!"

"It was!"

"Like hell! Look at that!"

He tossed the chloroformed towel to one side. The dog was struggling to its feet. Its back legs were unsteady, but they were definitely working, supporting the dog's weight. It stood for a moment, then turned. It stumbled once but got back to its feet and made its way toward the boy.

"I tell you, it was broken!" the young man shouted, almost pleading for belief. "I felt it!"

It *had* been, Jeremy thought; it *had* been broken!

The fear he had thought was gone came flooding back, twisting at his stomach. He scrambled to his feet, looking frantically around the crowd for Lissa, needing her comforting presence. Instead, he saw a dozen unknown faces, their eyes seeming to be riveted on him, their expressions unreadable.

But one face he recognized, and as he did, the fear changed to something else, something that punished him more than simple fear.

Then, an instant after their eyes met, Ken Felter turned and pushed his way violently, unseeingly, through the remains of the crowd.

A link! Once again there was a link!

But this time there was no other host present, no other mind. The link was not with another potential host, but with—

With what?

A different species? A species not even remotely related to the hosts?

It was impossible, of course, just as the previous links with other hosts had seemed impossible at the time.

It was impossible, and yet it was happening.

The pounding on the kitchen door, two rooms away, awakened Jeremy immediately, but it did not stop then. It continued, growing louder and more violent by the second.

Hastily, Jeremy climbed out of the couch-bed and, not waiting to throw on anything over his pajamas, ran through the intervening rooms and into the kitchen. Even before he threw open the door, he knew that Ken Felter would be standing on the other side. He tried to be angry, but he could not. He knew how, in Felter's place, he would feel.

Felter, swaying unsteadily, had one fist upraised to continue the pounding when Jeremy opened the door. He stopped, still swaying, and stared at Jeremy. His face was flushed, his mouth hanging partially open.

"There you are!" Felter's voice was slurred, triumphant. "There you are, damn you!"

Jeremy could only stand helpless, knowing why Felter was there, knowing that he could do nothing for him. He held up his hands in a futile, shushing gesture.

"Don't tell *me* to be quiet, damn you! Now are you going to help me or not? I saw you this afternoon! You know that, don't you? I saw you and that damned mongrel!"

"I tried with you," Jeremy said. "I tried. It didn't work."

"Try again! If you can fix a damn, worthless dog, you can fix me!"

Jeremy shook his head. "It won't work. I know it won't!" Overhead, he could hear someone moving about.

"I don't give a damn what you 'know'! I saw what you *did this* afternoon!"

Felter lurched forward, his hands grasping at Jeremy. Jeremy could smell the liquor on his breath, sour and stale. He tried to pull back, but Felter had hold of his hands, lifting them, forcing them up to Felter's face.

Suddenly, Jeremy yielded, and a moment later his hands were cupping Felter's cheeks. He could feel the stubble of his beard and the cold film of sweat over the heat of the flushed face. He could feel the muscles and tendons in the cheeks, throat and even the sides of his head, every one tense and stiff, like tiny iron rods under the skin.

He tried.

As best as he could, Jeremy tried. He tried to feel as he had felt that afternoon, but he could not. No matter how he tried, no matter what images he called forth, no matter what images appeared, he felt nothing, no connection, no link between himself and Felter.

And suddenly Jeremy thought: If I have the power to heal certain ones, the ones for whom I feel love, do I have, equally, the power to hurt others? Those for whom I don't feel love?

Violently, he jerked his hands back, afraid of what he might be doing, afraid of what might be happening inside Felter's body even as he stood there. The things he had drawn out of Aunt Jessica and Lissa and Bobby—were they lurking inside him, waiting to claim new victims in place of the ones he had stolen from them?

"I'm sorry," he said in a half whisper as he backed away, "it doesn't work. There's nothing I can do for you."

For a moment Felter stood silently, blinking.

Then, cursing loudly and steadily, Felter grasped at Jeremy, yanking him off balance through the door and onto the darkened porch. Jeremy's protests went unheard as Felter shook him and then, releasing him, began swinging his fists wildly.

Jeremy, who had never been in a fight in his life, cowered backward, raising his arms clumsily in front of himself in a vain effort to ward off the blows. Still cursing, Felter kept after him, landing blow after blind blow on Jeremy's arms, his chest, anything his fists could reach.

Then, behind Felter, in the lighted kitchen, Jeremy saw Harry running toward them. Not thinking, Jeremy started to drop his arms and, in that instant, one of Felter's drunken blows smashed him full in the face.

Pain exploded in his mouth and nose, and he stumbled backward. His foot hit something, and he felt himself falling helplessly. His hands shot out behind him, but they found nothing to grasp, and a moment later a second burst of pain shot through him as the back of his head smashed against the corner of one of the square concrete pillars that supported the porch roof.

But the pain lasted only an instant. Then, as if someone had hit a switch, everything was blackness, and then, a moment later, nothingness, nonexistence.

Immediately, it began its work once more.

This time the mending would be easier, faster. Before, because it had been new to its alien host, because of the vast extent of the injuries, it had worked slowly and inefficiently, literally feeling its way.

But now, physically, it had adapted almost completely. Even the brief contacts with other hosts had helped to fill out the picture of what this species of host—physically— was like, how in certain minor ways this host could be improved. This time it would be a matter of minutes, not hours.

But still the integration was only starting. Still the mind of the host remained beyond reach in many ways. It was as if there was something more here, something beyond the straightforward mental processes that

all previous hosts had engaged in. Something that made the linkings possible.

Before integration could be complete, before the host could take full advantage of what lay within itself, the barriers would have to come down. The host would have to be given—give itself—access to previously inaccessible parts of its mind. Parts which had previously lain dormant—or was that strictly true?—but which now acted as the unknowing storehouse of memories of past hosts.

Yes, the barriers would have to come down before integration could be complete. But it would have to be done slowly, ever so slowly and cautiously, for there was something about this host...

The Final Death

CHAPTER 10

Awareness returned to Jeremy, but this time it was a more complete awareness.

First, he was aware of his body, his entire body, aware that it was complete and in good working order.

Second, he was aware of his surroundings even before he opened his eyes. He could feel the rough concrete of the porch beneath his back, and the cool night air all around him, filtered through the layers of material that lay loosely over him.

And finally, he was aware that, for minutes, his body had been dead.

The only thing he was not aware of was the reason he was once again alive.

He shuddered and, opening his eyes, sat up. He pushed back the blanket that had covered him from head to toe and stood up. There were lights in both the kitchen and the living room next to it, and Jeremy walked to the nearest window. There was no one in the living room, but he could hear voices now, coming from the partially open kitchen door at the end of the porch.

He hesitated, standing silently, looking toward the door. Again he shuddered, and the fear he had felt before redoubled itself. And now it included a fear of himself, of his own body and whatever it carried within it.

And the people in the house? What would *they* do when they saw him, when he stepped in through the door, back from the dead?

He drew back, seeing their faces in his mind, seeing the shock and terror.

But he couldn't simply wait out here, until one of them came out. That would be worse.

Slowly, he moved down the porch toward the door, and the voices reached him now.

First Carolyn's, tremulous and grieved: "But we *have* to call the police! It may not have been deliberate murder, but you saw—"

Then Harry's, cutting her off: "I know, Carrie, but let's calm down first. All right? Before we call anyone, we should—"

"It was an accident! I keep telling you—" It was Felter's voice, and a strange, leaden feeling replaced the fear in Jeremy.

Forcing himself to move, much as he had forced himself the night he had waited outside Felter's door, Jeremy pushed open the kitchen door.

The three of them—Harry, Carolyn, and Ken Felter— sat around the kitchen table in the far corner of the room. They looked up sharply as Jeremy entered. All three sucked in their breath, gasping, but Harry, raising an eyebrow, did not look overly surprised. Carolyn went pale, all the color draining from her face, her eyes widening in shock.

Felter stood up suddenly, his chair clattering over onto the floor. His mouth fell open and he began to back away, half stumbling over his fallen chair.

"No!" he muttered, half under his breath, and kept repeating it as he continued to move away, fumbling for the kitchen's back door. Then, as he found it, he yanked the door open and ran, stumbling and lurching, into

the night. A few seconds later, a car door slammed and an engine roared into life. Tires spun on the gravel and headlights flared on and bobbed erratically up and down as the car shot backwards crookedly, one wheel bouncing into and then out of the ditch at the side of the road. The engine raced madly for a second, and then the gears caught again and the car shot down the road, barely missing the opposite ditch as it tried to straighten itself.

Jeremy felt a hand on his arm.

"Come on in and sit down, Jeremy." It was Harry. All surprise was gone from his face, replaced by a look of understanding, or perhaps just of acceptance. "It's all right, Carrie," he went on as Jeremy followed him obediently to a chair by the kitchen table.

"But he was dead! You said—" Shock and relief were righting in her face.

"I know what I said. I guess I was wrong. I'm not a doctor, after all, and it's pretty easy to miss a pulse."

Carolyn swallowed loudly, but some of the color seemed to be coming back into her face. After a moment, she stood up and started across the floor.

"I'll call Doc Harris."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

"But if you thought— And look at that blood! The back of his pajamas is soaked!"

"I'll clean it off and see how it looks," Harry said hurriedly. "If the cut looks bad, we can call Harris. But it's two in the morning right now."

She looked uncertainly at Harry, and then briefly at Jeremy. She closed her eyes and turned away at the sight of the blood, just beginning to dry and mat in his hair.

"Come on, Jeremy," Harry said. "Let's go get that cleaned up and see how it looks."

Jeremy nodded, and Carolyn winced at the motion of his head. "I'm okay," he said to her. "I feel okay."

She stood near the phone for several seconds, saying nothing.

"All right," she said finally, reluctantly. She turned to the door and, slowly, went outside and picked up the blanket that had been spread over Jeremy. Carefully, she folded it so that the darkened stains were inside the bundle.

"See? It was nothing."

Harry displayed Jeremy's newly cleansed head and hair to Carolyn. It was still damp, curling slightly, but there was no trace of new blood, no mark of any kind to indicate what had happened.

"We would've gotten Harris out of bed for nothing if we'd called him," Harry said.

"But the blood—where did the blood come from?"

"Ken hit him in the nose, that's all. You know he used to have pretty bad nosebleeds."

"But so much of it was in the back, not in the front."

Harry took in a breath, glanced at Jeremy and then shrugged. A faint grin pulled at his lips.

"I didn't think she'd buy a nosebleed, but I kept hoping." He nodded toward the chairs around the table. "You better sit down, Carrie."

"Sit down? For what?" She looked from one to the other, her face a mixture of puzzlement and growing apprehension.

"For the explanation." Harry snorted sharply. "Explanation! Overstatement if ever I made one. Wild guess is more like it. Except for one or two stray facts."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sudden irritation flared in Carolyn's voice. "Jeremy? Do *you* know?"

"A little." Jeremy hesitated, looking toward Harry.

Harry took another deep breath. "I wasn't mistaken out there." He nodded toward the porch. "Jeremy *was* dead."

She sat down heavily, her face whitening again. "What? I don't understand."

"We don't either. We probably never will. But this is the second time it happened. Or that's what Jeremy thinks, anyway."

Harry sat down on the chair next to Carolyn and took her hands. They were cold, beginning to tremble. Jeremy sat down across the table from them, not looking up.

For more than an hour, they talked, and when they finally returned to bed, Jeremy was the only one who could—by simply willing himself to do so—sleep. His only wish was that, when he again awoke, someone would have decided what he should do.

But he knew that no one would. That was something he would have to do himself, whether he felt capable of it or not.

But in a case like this, where no one had any experience, he could do no worse than anyone else.

CHAPTER 11

Sitting on the edge of the truck-bed stage, dressed in a loose gray sweater and dark blue slacks, Brother Jacob seemed smaller to Jeremy than when he had been pacing furiously back and forth in front of the audience. He couldn't have been more than five-and-a-half feet tall, and his weight couldn't have been much more than a hundred and twenty. In the bright sunlight that poured in through the open tent flaps, he looked older—older and more tired. The lines that had been hidden by the shadows and by his continuous frenetic motion, were clear and distinct now. The hair, an artificial black, seemed out of place on the thin, aging face.

Still, even before the man spoke, there was something about him, Jeremy thought. His eyes, maybe. They looked out from beneath the heavy brows as if they were observing the world from hiding, but they seemed to

look deep within Jeremy nonetheless.

"So you think you've got the power. Is that what you're trying to tell me?" The older man's face was amused, as if he welcomed any break in a dull, routine day, no matter how outlandish.

"I don't know what it is. I just know what's happening, that's all."

"And what's that? What's been happening? A relative and a couple of friends recovered unexpectedly? Is that it?"

"Just about." Jeremy hadn't told him of his own deaths, even though he was more positive of those than of the other "healings."

"And what do you want me to do about it?" The amusement on the lined face had deepened.

Jeremy shook his head. "I don't know. I just thought—" He stopped, not sure what he had thought. "I just wanted to know what it was like for you. I guess."

Brother Jacob laughed. "It's a hard grind, that's what it's like. I've been here a couple of weeks, and it's about over. Next week we go to Sharonville. At least we're supposed to. I heard that someone in the sheriff's office over there's taken a dislike to me, so maybe we won't. I won't know till I get there. And even if we do, it's only for a few days. Then we go somewhere else, halfway across the state. I don't even remember where right now. That is, we go if the truck and everything hold up and if we collect enough to keep it running." A touch of bitterness had crept into the voice.

"No, I didn't mean that. Your power..."

"Yes? What about it?" Brother Jacob leaned back, amused again.

"How does it work? How did you get it?"

Brother Jacob laughed again, loudly. "Why was I 'chosen'? Is that what you mean?"

"I guess so."

"Who knows? God works in mysterious ways, or hadn't you heard?"

"But you must—"

"Must I? Must I indeed? All right, let *me* ask *you*" Brother Jacob leaned forward, his legs dangling over the edge of the stage. "How does *yours* work? How and when did you get your power, Brother Jeremy?"

Jeremy shook his head. His face was burning by now, but he continued anyway. It had taken him half a day to work up the courage to come, and he was not going to let himself be driven away by sarcasm.

"I don't know how it works or how I got it. But I do know when."

Brother Jacob shrugged, still grinning. "Well, one out of three isn't a total loss, I suppose. All right, when did you get your power?"

"A month ago, when the airplane crashed."

Abruptly the grin faded and was replaced by a frown. "What airplane? What crash?"

"The one up in the mountains, up north of Elton."

A brief hesitation. "What did you say your name was?"

"Jeremy Case."

"Yeah, I remember reading about you now." The voice was thoughtful. "And a couple of people—Yeah, you were the only survivor, right?"

Jeremy nodded. "Yes."

"I saw a picture in the paper, when they brought you in. You looked like you didn't have any flesh on your bones at all."

"I didn't have much. They told me I weighed about a hundred pounds."

"And that was only a month ago? You gained all that weight back in that short a time?"

Jeremy looked down, averting his eyes again. "I gained it all back before I even left the hospital. Three or four days."

Brother Jacob started to laugh, but stopped with his mouth half open.

"Four days? Can't happen."

"I know," Jeremy said. And he wondered: Should I tell him the rest? Or will it just make it worse?

Brother Jacob was silent for several seconds. He took in a breath.

"All right, Brother Jeremy, you say four days, it's four days. It's not that much harder to believe than four weeks, I guess. And certainly no harder to believe than that you survived that crash. I saw pictures of that, too." He frowned. "But how'd they ever let you on the plane in the first place? In your condition—What were you, a circus thin man?"

"I wasn't that way when I was on the plane. When the plane crashed, I was heavier than I am now."

"Sure you were! You gained all that weight—what? Fifty? Sixty pounds?—in less than a week? And you lost it in how long? How long was it before they found you up there? A couple of days?"

"That's what they said. About two days."

"I suppose it was so hot it just boiled it all out of you."

"No, sir. It was kind of cool when I woke up the last time up there."

Again Brother Jacob laughed. "I must say, Brother Jeremy, you don't have your story worked out very well. No explanation. No visitation from an angel. No mysterious, majestic voice telling you that you have been the one chosen to heal the world's sick. Nothing. Who do you expect to convince with a story like that?"

"I don't want to convince anyone. I just wanted to find out—"

"I know: How does *my* power work? But why should I tell you? What makes you think I know any more than you do?"

"But it works all the time for you. I saw you last week. Everyone who came up got helped."

"Sure they did." The voice was heavy with sarcasm again. "Hell, half of them didn't have anything wrong with them in the first place. You've heard of psychosomatic illnesses, haven't you?"

Jeremy nodded. "Lizzie—Lissa told me about it. She said she thought that was mostly what you cured."

"Smart girl, this Lizzie. Girlfriend?"

Jeremy shook his head.

"Well, whoever she is, she's a smart girl. She knows what she sees, all right. She from around here?"

"Yes, she is, sir. But there must be more than that. Isn't there?"

Brother Jacob shrugged. "Sometimes, I guess. If I talk hard enough, and make them believe hard enough, yeah, I guess something really happens now and then. You'd be amazed at what a mind can do to a body if it really believes it can." He laughed. "No, I guess maybe you wouldn't be very amazed. I forget, you're the boy who lost and gained over fifty pounds in less than a week. It would take a lot to amaze you after something like that."

Jeremy felt sad. It had been pretty much the way Lissa had said it would be. Brother Jacob would be no help. He was more honest than Lissa had expected him to be, but he would still be no help.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," Jeremy said, and turned to go.

"No bother. But wait a minute, Bro— Wait a minute, Jeremy. Tell me more about this power of yours."

"You wouldn't be interested."

"Let me decide that, all right? Now come on back here. Or better yet, let's get out of this blasted tent and into a little fresh air. And you tell me all about it. I'll let you know when I get bored."

Jeremy looked at him uncertainly, wondering if Brother Jacob was still making fun of him. He looked different, somehow. The smile was still on his face, but it was not so derisive now. It was almost understanding.

But it didn't really matter. As long as he was willing to listen and to talk, Jeremy would stay.

The woman who opened the door of the tiny, frame house was at least in her forties, more than a few pounds overweight, and holding herself erect with a pair of heavy canes that were, with the metal clamps that held them to her wrists, almost crutches. She frowned as she saw Brother Jacob standing beside Jeremy.

"If you need another handout to get your truck fixed, you're out of luck, John." She didn't quite slam the door in their faces, but the intent was plain in her face.

Brother Jacob—John—slipped past the woman and leaned over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Nothing like that, Sarah, nothing like that at all."

"Then what?" She glanced suspiciously from one to the other. "Don't tell me you and your friend just happened to be in the neighborhood."

"Not quite. We're still in Reelsville for another day or two. Then we go to Sharonville. No, Sarah, I got myself a sort of protégé here. His name is Jeremy Case."

Jeremy nodded to her, uncertain what he should do.

She looked at Jeremy, shaking her head. "How'd you get mixed up with a crook like this cousin of mine? You look like too nice a kid to mess with the likes of him."

"He is, Sarah, he is. Jeremy, this is my cousin, Sarah Reese. She thinks I'm a complete phony. The last few years, anyway."

She looked at him darkly as he uttered the last words, but then she laughed harshly. "And I suppose you're here to prove you're not? What are you going to do, heal me? It's a little late for that, Cousin John. Or Brother Jacob, if you prefer."

A faint smile remained on Brother Jacob's face, but Jeremy could see the pain behind it.

"As a matter of fact, Cousin Sarah, you're not too far wrong." He raised a hand to hold back the outburst that his remark precipitated. "But it's not going to be me. It's Jeremy here."

Sarah turned her scowl on Jeremy. "You another phony like my cousin here? Is that it? What do you really want?"

"Come on, Sarah!" Jacob put his hands on her shoulders. "Lay off the kid. He really thinks he's got some kind of power. You can remember what it's like to really believe something, can't you, Sarah?"

Her scowl softened slightly. "That right, Jeremy? You really think you can fix people up?"

"Sometimes," he said. "Not always."

She laughed, glancing at her cousin. "Doesn't sound very sure of himself, does he? Doesn't sound very 'commercial.' How's that going to sound to the faithful as they line up in front of him? Well, maybe I can help you if I'm lucky." She laughed again and turned back to Jeremy. "Come on, kid, you better go back to your regular job. Or to school."

Jacob sighed. "Sarah, sometimes you're too skeptical for your own good."

"For *your* good, you mean."

"All right, have it your way. I'm not here to argue about my shortcomings. We both know what they are. I just want to see if Jeremy is for real. And maybe do you a little good if he is."

Another humorless laugh. "You want him to pray over me instead of you? You're sending in the second team, is that it?"

"Call it whatever you want. What can you lose?"

She shrugged. "That's true. I don't have much left to lose, that's for sure. A couple of years? If I'm lucky. Okay, you—what'd you say your name was?"

"Jeremy, ma'm."

"Okay, Jeremy, have at it. Ill warn you, though, you'd better be good. Your teacher here is a real pro when it comes to the laying on of hands—even if he never has made a financial success of it. How do you work?"

Jacob touched Jeremy on the arm. "How about it? Ready?"

Jeremy sucked in a deep breath. His face, as it had been for some time, was red with embarrassment.

"I guess so," he said.

"You want me to kneel or something? That might be a little hard, with these things." Sarah indicated the metal canes.

Jeremy shook his head. He reached out and took her hands in his. The apprehension he felt was like a lead weight in his stomach. Would it work this time? Or was he simply making a fool of himself again?

He gripped her hands tighter, partially replacing the support she normally got from the canes. He tried to banish apprehension, tried to feel something else, something that would—

Abruptly, he did. A dizziness swept over him and he found himself swaying, his eyes closed tightly. As before, images flowed through his mind, but this time, instead of a stream, it was a torrent. Instead of a half dozen faces and scenes, there were a hundred, shooting past and changing so rapidly that none stuck in his mind, so fast that none could even be recognized. He felt as if he were drowning in them, not simply seeing or experiencing them.

And yet, somehow, he knew. Without knowing any specific facts, he knew that, despite the sharp, abrasive exterior, the woman whose hands he held was a friend.

And he knew that she was dying. The paralysis would become greater and greater, and then...

Again, as suddenly as the first wave had come, a second wave of dizziness rolled over him, sharper than any he had yet experienced.

Then it was over.

It felt to Jeremy as if, after a pounding, lashing thunderstorm, the clouds and wind and rain had suddenly been shoved aside, leaving only quiet and calm air behind it.

He opened his eyes, and he felt the remnants of tears trickling down his cheeks. For a moment, the room still seemed to sway, and then it steadied. Sarah Reese's face was only inches from his own. Her mouth was partially open, her eyes locked on his face. There was no laughter, no derision in her face now.

He released her hands, letting out a huge sigh as he did. For several seconds, it was the only sound in the room.

Sarah shook her head as if to clear it, and time seemed to go into motion again.

"I will say this, Jeremy Case," she said, her voice softer than it had been before, "you may not come on very strong at first, but you sure pack some kind of wallop once you get going."

"It worked?" It was Jacob, still standing behind Jeremy.

"I don't know," Jeremy said. "I think so."

"*Something* happened," Sarah affirmed. Again she shook her head. "But I still..."

Slowly, she moved a halting step forward. Her weight was still supported almost totally by her arms on the canes. Jeremy could see the muscles tightening in her arms.

"It doesn't work right away," Jeremy said, "even when it does work. It takes a while, usually."

"But you think..." Jacob's voice trailed off.

Jeremy nodded. "I think so."

Jacob was silent for a time. Then he seemed to pull himself together, to put on the shell that he normally wore. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper and threw it on a small table by the door.

"This is Jeremy's number," he said. "You can let me know if—"

Some of the hardness returned to Sarah's face. "Haven't gotten the radiophone installed in your truck yet, John?" The sarcasm, too, had returned. "I thought you were—"

"Come on, Jeremy." It was Jacob again. "It's a long way back to Reelsville, and I've got another 'performance' to put on tonight."

As they left, Sarah stared after them, silently, expressionlessly, leaning heavily on the metal canes.

Once again, briefly, a link to another host sprang into existence, and once again the tendrils darted out and did their work. Faster this time, a little more completely, for —physically—the integration was nearly perfect now.

But still there was the barrier, almost completely separating the two parts of the host's own mind.

The phone rang about 8:30 that evening. Harry answered it and, a moment later, he held the receiver out to Jeremy.

"Jeremy Case?" He didn't recognize the voice, but he knew who it had to be.

"Yes. Sarah Reese?"

"That's right. And guess what?" Her voice was no longer subdued, no longer hard and abrasive. Instead, it was—lively? Playful?

"It worked?"

"You're damned right it worked! Would you believe I'm standing here at the phone—and those damned canes are clear across the room!"

"I'm glad."

"*You're* glad?" She laughed, not the harsh, humorless laugh of that afternoon, but the joyful laugh of someone who had been reborn. "Look, can you and John get back up here tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I'll tell him it worked."

"Okay, you do that. And tell him if he needs that damned truck of his

repaired again, I've still got a couple of bucks hidden away."

When Jeremy hung up, Harry and Carolyn were watching him, waiting. He told them, and then hurried out. And he wondered: *Am I glad? For myself?*

"If you have your mind made up, I don't suppose I can stop you, Jeremy, but I think you're making a big mistake."

Lissa put a hand on his as they sat in the car. "You're real," she went on. "Brother Jacob isn't. You just won't mix."

"But what else can I do? I tried the hospital, and it didn't work."

"You could give them another chance. Once you learn how to control this thing that's in you, so you can do it at will, they'll have to believe you. And look that much harder to see how it works."

He shook his head. "But what good will it do even if they believe me? They made every kind of test they could think of last time, and they didn't find anything."

She was silent for a time. "But why *this!* Why Brother Jacob? He's nothing but a con artist. He'll just find a way to use you, that's all. You're nothing to him but a way to make easy money. And a way to get into the big time."

"Maybe you're right. I don't know." He thought back to the afternoon with Sarah Reese, remembering the impressions he had gotten then—impressions that, he realized now, had included not only Sarah herself but Jacob as well. Maybe not the Jacob that existed now, but the Jacob who had existed at one time, many years before. But still it was Jacob. And Jeremy remembered one of Jacob's remarks at Sarah's:

"You can remember what it's like to really believe something, can't you, Sarah?"

Maybe Jacob was, here and now, little more than a con man, but at one time he had been something more. And that "something more" seemed to still hover around him, waiting for a second chance.

Or maybe not, Jeremy thought. Maybe I'm just fooling myself. Maybe

this thing that's in me, this thing that gives me glimpses of things I shouldn't ever see, is fooling me, for whatever reason it might have.

Still, whether Jacob was a con artist or not, whether his motives were high or low or in between, Jeremy was going with him. With Jacob, at least, the responsibility for the use of the power would no longer be Jeremy's.

It would be Jacob's, and Jacob's alone.

CHAPTER 12

"I don't *know* why! I just know it won't do any good!"

Jeremy kept his eyes downcast, concentrating on the trampled grass beneath his feet. Out of the corner of his eye in the faint moonlight, he could see the tent as it was being lowered by the half dozen Reelsville teenagers that Jacob had recruited.

"Come on, Jeremy!" Brother Jacob, back in his everyday clothes after his last performance, waved his arms irritably. "I *saw* how you worked with Sarah! You weren't like that at all with Horton! You just weren't trying!"

Jeremy shook his head. "I was! But it's no good! It just wasn't the same with him. It was like it was with—" He broke off, not wanting to even mention Felter's name.

"Yeah? Like it was with who? Come on, Jeremy, let's get it out in the open. I thought you were being honest with me."

"I am!"

"All right, then, tell me: Like it was with *who*?"

"Ken Felter." The name came out stiffly. "It felt the same way it did with him, and it just wouldn't work. I just didn't *feel* anything for him, I guess. I didn't know him."

"He was a stranger? Is that what you're saying? You can only heal your friends?"

Miserably, Jeremy shook his head. "I don't know *what* I'm saying!"

"Sarah was a stranger. And she certainly didn't act too friendly at first."

"I know. But when I touched her, I felt—"

"Felt what? Come on, Jeremy. Out with it! Don't hold back with me. Remember, *you* came to *me*. Maybe I can help you, maybe I can't. But you'll never find out if you don't level with me."

"I just don't have any words for it. I just *knew* that she was—that it would work with her."

Jeremy hesitated again, glancing up at Jacob's face. "And I knew that it would work with you, too."

"Me?" Silence for a moment. "How do you know about me? You haven't tried anything on me. Hell, we've barely shook hands."

"It was from Sarah."

"You read her mind? Is that it? You knew that, down deep, under all that bitterness, was a 'good person'?" Jacob's voice held a touch of sarcasm, but beneath it there was something else.

"Something like that, I guess," Jeremy said.

Jacob sighed. "But not Horton. He's not a good person? He's certainly a rich person, which means he could be good for us. But that doesn't matter?"

"I don't know, I told you. I guess I never know until I actually try with someone."

"Sort of a haphazard way of doing business."

"I never *said* I could do it all the time!"

"No, I guess you didn't, at that." Jacob sighed again. "Okay, Jeremy, I guess it's your ball, so you can make up the rules if you want to. But how do we find out before it's too late? If we bring a half dozen people in and strike out with every one, you'll be out of business. And so will I."

Jeremy stood silently, wondering: What *was* different about Ken Felter? About Horton? With Felter there had been the memories of the two of them as children, the unpleasant memories. But Horton had been a complete stranger. Jeremy knew nothing about him; he'd never even heard of him. What possible reason could Jeremy have for not wanting to help Horton? What reason could the thing within him—and he had, in the last few days, begun to think of it even more as a thing, a separate entity from himself—what reason could this thing have for not wanting Jeremy to help Horton?

But that only brought up the more basic question of what the thing itself was, and how it could hide so successfully from an entire hospital full of trained doctors and researchers. And Jeremy wanted to think of that even less than he did of the possible reasons for his failures.

And if he failed continuously...

"All right," Jeremy said finally. "If you want to try it again. But I don't think it will work."

Jacob grinned. "Good enough. Horton's coming back about midnight. That gives us a couple of hours to work on you."

"To work on me?" Jeremy frowned, looking up at Jacob.

"Time to do a little digging. Instill a little faith. Get you over this mental block you've developed."

He took Jeremy by the arm. "Come on, let's walk around a little and get away from all this commotion." He nodded toward the tent, now nearly completely down.

Jeremy followed, not sure if he wanted Jacob to succeed or not.

Albert Horton was a big man, over six feet tall, and weighed well over two hundred. The string tie and western hat he had worn before were gone, and the expensive shirt he wore was open at the neck. "Gonna work this time, Jake?"

"We'll give it our best shot, Al; that's all I can say." Horton shrugged.

"Nothing to lose, I guess." He winced. "There it goes again. Damn thing anyway! Like I say, nothing to lose. Doc Forman says that one more time with the bleeding and he takes out about half my stomach." He looked around. "So, what do I do this time? Anything different?"

Jacob shook his head. "Just let Jeremy get his hands on you. And try to think good thoughts."

"Good thoughts? Like what?"

"How should I know? You must've had some, once upon a time."

The big man's brow wrinkled briefly, but then he grinned again. "Sure, once upon a time." He paused a moment, then held out his hands. "You're sure this is all you need?" He looked at Jeremy, who stood by silently, his eyes still downcast.

Jeremy nodded, and then, as Horton stood before him, he reached out and grasped the man's hands.

And Jeremy tried. After all the talk, all the analyzing, all the guessing, all the exhorting that Jacob had done in the last two hours, that was all Jeremy could do: try.

As before, the thing that came first was the stream of images, all shooting past at a rate that made them all but invisible. And Jeremy waited for the feeling that he was almost certain would not come, the feeling that had come so easily and quickly with Aunt Jessica and Lissa and even with Bobby and Sarah, both' strangers as much as Horton.

And, as he had known, it would not come. There was no feeling of "involvement," no feeling that he was somehow linked with the person standing before him.

And it was that feeling, that "linking" of his body and mind with theirs that passed the power from his own body to theirs. It was that feeling of kinship that triggered it and—

Or was it?

Startled at his own thought, Jeremy loosened his grip on Horton's hands for a moment. His mind, Jeremy realized for the first time, seemed

to be working more clearly than it ever had before, making associations it never would have made before.

Was it the emotion, the intense feeling of kinship that made the healing possible? Or could it be something else?

Jeremy realized more clearly than ever that he *knew* nothing about his power. He didn't know how it worked or why it worked, any more than the doctors had known. It didn't have to be the emotion that made it work. It could be something else.

It could be anything else! Even something as simple as the conscious desire to make the power work.

But he had tried that with Felter, and it hadn't worked. Or *had* he tried it? No, he realized, he hadn't, not completely. With Felter it had been different. With Felter, there had been the memories, and they had blocked the desire. With Horton, there were no memories, so there should be nothing to stop him.

All right, Jeremy thought, surprised at his own coolness, let's try: sheer willpower and nothing else.

He tightened his grip once again on Horton's hands, squeezed his eyes more tightly closed, and tried to see and feel the massive ulcer that lay in Horton's stomach, constantly demanding, constantly expanding.

Whatever it is that is in me, Jeremy thought, his brow furrowing in concentration, his muscles straining against one another in tension—whatever it is in me, go! Do your work!

Suddenly, Jeremy felt it.

It was not the swaying dizziness, not the painful emotional link he had felt before, but something else. He could almost feel an invisible tendril, as insubstantial as his own thoughts, flow out of his body, through his fingers, and into Horton, darting and probing into every corner of the huge body.

Suddenly, a great weakness swept over Jeremy, and it was all he could do to retain his grip on the man's hands. At the same time, as if from an impossible distance, he heard Horton scream, and he felt the man's hands

tighten on his own until he felt the bones would snap under the pressure.

Then, as abruptly as it had come, the weakness departed. Like an impossible rubber band, the invisible tendril retreated into Jeremy's body. As if someone had yanked a sheet of translucent glass from in front of his eyes, the shadowy, moonlit world snapped into sharp focus once again.

And he felt Horton's hands suddenly going limp and sliding from his grip. He saw the man collapse, completely limp, onto the ground.

"Jeremy?"

It was Jacob's voice, only inches from his ear, and he felt the man's hands on his shoulders.

"I'm all right," Jeremy said, and his voice sounded different, even to himself. He pulled away from Jacob and knelt over Albert Horton, lying huddled on the damp, matted grass.

"Mr. Horton? Are you all right?"

At first there was no sound, no movement. Then, after a second, there was a slight grunt, then a tremor that shivered through the entire body. Slowly, the huge form uncoiled itself and, taking Jeremy's hand, Horton climbed to his feet. Jacob stood next to Jeremy, looking from one to the other.

"Al?"

Horton blinked and shook his head. He took a deep breath.

"What the hell happened, Al?" Jacob reached for Horton's arm.

Again Horton shook his head. "Damned if I know. Just for a second there, it felt like that damned ulcer caught fire, and then my whole stomach burned." He shuddered. "I hope I never—"

Horton stopped. He swallowed. A frown furrowed his brow, and he brought a hand to his stomach. He swallowed again, pressing his fingers deeply into the folds of flesh.

"Son of a bitch!" Horton's words were not a curse but were touched with awe. "I think it's gone!" He laughed, a short, sharp bark. "Can you

believe that? I really think the son of a bitch is gone!"

"Jeremy?" Jacob took hold of Jeremy's arm again. "Is he right? Did it work?"

"I think so." Hesitantly, uncertainly. "I think it did."

"But you said it didn't work that fast. And with Sarah—"

"It didn't, before. But this was different." Jeremy looked again at Horton, who was now grinning happily in the moonlight. "This time it was different."

Abruptly, without warning, the barrier between primary host and secondary host went down, and in the same instant, the barriers between parts of the host's mind lightened as well.

A new kind of link was established, not the narrow link that allowed only a touch, a series of triggering actions in the secondary host, but a broad, open link that, for a moment, seemed to be a total merging, so total and complete that there was little distinction between primary and secondary hosts. So complete that, in the few moments the link existed, the secondary host could be—physically— completely restored. There was no time for the caution, the suppression of reaction and pain that could be observed in the secondary host's body, but the work could be done, completely if not painlessly.

But then the barriers leaped up once more. Once the work was completed, the barriers were restored.

Almost...

In the host's mind, the barriers seemed less solid, the two parts of the mind less completely separated. Slowly, ever so slowly, the memories of previous hosts began to drift through the weakening barriers.

From that point on, everything was different. Jeremy no longer had to feel emotionally linked with a person to heal him.

And all the healings were almost as fast as Horton's had been, and all were, to one extent or another, painful. It was as if, in this new mode of operation, comfort was sacrificed for speed. The diseases were cut out without anesthetic or delay.

But it worked. Not once after working with Horton did Jeremy fail.

For Jeremy, suddenly and unexpectedly, life was once more almost as comfortable and routine as it had been before the crash, before this thing had been thrust upon him. He had a job, which he now had confidence that he could do. He had a boss, Brother Jacob, who told him when he was to do that job, and for whom he was to do it. As long as he could keep himself from thinking too long about the countless others whom he was not helping, it was like any other job. And that was, he told himself, the way he wanted it. He had never asked for the power, and, once he had used it on the one—no, the *two*—persons he cared for, he would just as soon it had disappeared. In fact, he often remembered the relief that flowed through him when he had thought, after the failure with Felter, that the power had vanished. Each time he remembered, he realized that at least a part of him would be much happier if the power really had vanished. Partly out of habit and partly to avoid the thoughts that came to him in the dark and lonely hours of the morning, he began to sleep regularly again.

At first Jacob continued his own performances and used Jeremy only for those people who, like Albert Horton, could not bring themselves to get up in front of a shouting, half-hysterical mob but who still had enough faith in Brother Jacob—or were desperate enough—to pay good money for a private session. Then, as Jeremy's successes continued in town after town, Jacob dropped the tent shows altogether and relied totally on Jeremy. The tent and truck were abandoned, and often with Sarah accompanying them, they began to travel in a car and stay in hotels.

At first, letters from Lissa occasionally found their way to Jeremy, but, when he could not bring himself to reply, they soon stopped. The last news was that, now that she had a future to plan for, she was starting college. She would start at the State University in Clarkton in January. Letters from Harry, mainly detailing Aunt Jessica's latest activities, continued, though they, too, decreased in frequency as the months went by and Jeremy didn't reply.

And always, whenever Jeremy chose to sleep, there were the

dreams—dreams that inevitably ended in some form of violent death, of total destruction. Most often it was a crash, but it was not the crash of the plane. He remembered that crash, his own first death, vividly, and this was different, what little he could remember after awakening from the dreams. The dream crash was more violent, he was sure, and before the crash, for long seconds before the final impact, there was the burning, as if someone were playing a huge torch over his entire body, peeling it away layer by layer. Yet it was not painful. Though he was experiencing it, he was still somehow detached, as if he were only observing. Both observing and participating.

And the memory of a journey was always there, and the images of a strange, impossible kind of darkness that moved and twisted and eternally changed. A darkness that he moved through, yet which somehow carried and supported him.

And finally, his body...

It was then, when he became aware of his body, that he inevitably awakened, and it was the one thing he could never remember, even vaguely. As he lay there each time, fully and immediately awake, Jeremy *knew* that it was the sudden awareness of his dream body that had thrust him out of the dream world, but that was all he knew. Why the awareness should produce this effect, each and every time, he couldn't guess. What the body was like, he could not even imagine. In a way it was like dreams he had had most of his life. He always knew when he dreamed, but he could never remember what about. The memories lurked just around the corner, just out of sight. He knew they were there, but he could not reach them.

And, as the weeks and months slipped past, as Jeremy's use of his abilities grew more and more routine, the conviction that he was not alone, that his body—and his mind—were shared by another being, an unseen companion, grew from a suspicion to a certainty.

And he wondered—every time he felt the power flow through him, every time he lay alone in the dark, afraid to put himself to sleep until morning, he wondered:

Did he control it?

Or did it control him?

"Jeremy!" A hand was on his shoulder, shaking him. As always, he came instantly and completely awake. Jacob, already fully dressed, stood looking down at him. "Come on, Jeremy, we're going on a trip."

"Where? I thought we were staying here another week."

Jacob laughed. "Forget about staying around here! We're in the big time now. Really big!"

Unbidden, Lissa's words that last day in Reelsville came back to him: "He'll find a way to use you. He just wants you so he can make it into the big time."

"Where are we going?"

"The big city, where else for the big time? Capital City!" Jacob stood back from the bed. "Let's get going. It's a long drive."

Obediently Jeremy sat up. "Who is it we're going to see?"

Jacob shrugged. "Someone who's heard of us. Someone with a lot of money."

As Jeremy stood up, Jacob turned away, walking to the window. "Lots of money," Jacob added.

Jeremy frowned. Something was wrong. He didn't know what and he didn't know how he knew, but something was wrong. There was something about Jacob, not something Jeremy could see or hear, but...

"What is it, Jacob?"

Jacob turned back to Jeremy. "What's what?"

"What's wrong?"

"What the hell makes you think something's wrong?"

Jeremy hesitated. "I don't know. I guess I just feel it."

Jacob laughed, more harshly than before. "Then don't worry about it."

Save your feelings. They're what got you in trouble in the first place, remember? Not being able to heal anybody unless they 'felt right'!" Sarcasm tinged Jacob's voice now.

Jeremy lowered his eyes. "All right. I just wondered—"

"Never mind wondering! And leave the feeling to me. Okay?"

"All right." But it wasn't. Even without the feeling, Jeremy could see that Jacob was tense.

"Okay!" Jacob watched Jeremy for a second, as if about to say something else, but then he turned abruptly toward the door. "Just get ready. It's a long trip."

"Is Sarah coming with us?"

Jacob faltered as he reached for the door.

"No, Sarah isn't coming with us." He didn't look back at Jeremy, and a moment later the door slammed shut behind him.

It was dusk when they reached Capital City, and fully dark by the time Jacob located the house he was looking for. It was large and, if not quite a castle, at least a mansion. There were high iron fences on all sides and a wide iron gate across the drive, the only entrance to the grounds. The gate opened with a buzzing sound, and they followed the drive back through dozens of trees and came to a stop a few yards from the front door. Most of the front of the house and the trees that filled the yard beyond the drive were lit by a pair of lights, almost as large as street lamps, one at each end of the house.

The front door opened even before the car rolled to a stop, and a pair of men in shirt sleeves hurried down the steps. Both were young and strongly built.

"This way, please," was all they said as they ushered Jacob and Jeremy up the steps and into the house.

Inside, they moved down thickly carpeted halls, up a broad staircase,

and finally into a large bedroom. Out of the corner of his eye, Jeremy thought he caught glimpses of other people, both women and men, watching curiously from behind nearly closed doors.

In a king size bed, propped up with huge pillows behind his back, sat a man. He could have been in his forties or his sixties, and almost instantly Jeremy realized that there was the same sickness that had been in Aunt Jessica. Not quite as far advanced, but still the same.

But there was something different, something that went beyond the richness of the surroundings, something that set Jeremy's skin to tingling. Something that hung in the air like an invisible mist...

"Mr. Reese?" The man's voice was weak but steady. The two men who had escorted them in stood by the door.

Jacob moved to the side of the bed, motioning for Jeremy to follow. "That's right. And this is Jeremy Case."

The man looked at Jeremy, his sunken eyes moving slowly over Jeremy's body and finally settling on his face. He nodded and, with a slight motion of his hand, waved his two men out of the room. Without a word, they left, the door closing silently behind them.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Mr. Case. I've heard that you never fail. Is that true?"

Jacob nodded, and Jeremy could feel once again the tension that had hovered over Jacob sporadically since he had first awakened Jeremy that morning.

"A hundred percent," Jacob said.

"And you?" The man kept his gaze on Jeremy. "Do you agree? Do you guarantee results?"

Jeremy glanced toward Jacob, who, for once, was himself keeping his eyes down, seeming to avoid Jeremy's.

"It's always worked so far," Jeremy said finally.

The man started to laugh but stopped with a grimace. "How—" he

began but stopped abruptly, shaking his head.

"No, none of that matters. I don't want to know. All right, let's get started."

When Jeremy hesitated, Jacob urged him forward, his hand in the small of Jeremy's back. Still Jeremy sensed the tension, almost a physical thing. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Jacob had always been calm, totally in control.

"Go on, Jeremy." Jacob's voice was tight, the words clipped. "And remember," he went on to the man on the bed, "there will probably be a certain amount of pain involved. Be ready, and don't let it bother you."

The man waved a hand weakly in the air in a gesture of dismissal, and Jacob stepped back a short distance, leaving Jeremy alone.

Jeremy sat on the edge of the bed and took the man's hands. They were thin, though not as thin as Aunt Jessica's had been, and there was still a strength in them as they gripped Jeremy's in return. The man's eyes were like tiny fires, focusing directly on Jeremy.

Jeremy closed his eyes, trying to block out the tension that, even now, he felt radiating from Jacob. He tried to concentrate only on the man before him, on the hands he gripped in his own.

Suddenly, it was as if he had been submerged in a rushing, pounding river, the intensity immeasurably greater than any he had experienced before. He shuddered, physically shaken by the sudden assault of impressions, images and feelings. It had never been like this before, never this powerful.

And the images were sharper, more forceful despite the speed at which they rocketed through Jeremy's mind. Literally, he was swept away by them, twisting and tumbling.

Images: Rats squealing and fighting in a darkened, ragged bedroom, shared with a half-dozen other children. Fists smashing into his face. His own fists, weighted down by chunks of lead or iron, smashing at other faces and bodies. A woman's face, haggard and worn, old at forty, hovering over him, alternately crying and cursing. A gun, gripped tightly as he stood waiting in a garbage-strewn alley. And this house, the one in

which he now sat.

These images and a thousand others were not simply seen, but lived!

But over them all, hovering behind every image as it flashed past, was another, a single image: a man's face, young and square, the eyes wide, the mouth pleading. Each time the face appeared, there was a deafening explosion, louder than any gun had a right to sound, and he felt his own finger squeezing the trigger. And always a name, echoing as loudly as the cannon crash of the gun:

Frank!

Involuntarily, Jeremy jerked backward, pulling his hands from the man's grip. He stood up, staggering. A pair of hands gripped his arms.

"Jeremy! What happened?" It was Jacob's voice, almost in his ear. Then, like an afterthought: "Are you all right?"

Jeremy blinked and opened his eyes. He felt weak. The man on the bed was watching him, a scowl on his face.

"What the hell are you two trying to pull?" The man's voice was louder now, but there was a quaver in the tone.

"Nothing!" Jacob's nervousness was obvious as he tried to reassure the man. "Jeremy! What happened?"

Jeremy shook his head. A little strength seemed to be returning.

"I don't know," he said.

"That name! What did you mean by that name?" The man's voice cut in harshly.

Again Jeremy shook his head. His mind was still reeling. "Name?"

"Frank! What do you know about Frank?"

"There was a gun. A gun. It—"

"Reese! What the hell is this?" The voice no longer quavered, but had gathered strength from somewhere. It was sharp and commanding.

"I don't know!" Jacob said. "I swear I don't know!" He pushed Jeremy forward again, roughly. "Now do it! Just do it! For me!"

The man put a hand out, touching a button that lay on the covers next to him. Instantly the door opened and the two men stepped inside, alert and ready.

"No, wait!" Jacob's voice was a notch higher. "It's all right! He'll do it! Just give him a chance!"

The man was silent, eyeing Jeremy closely. "Where the hell did he get that name from?" he asked abruptly.

"It doesn't mean anything," Jacob assured him. "He gets confused sometimes, that's all. He comes up with all kinds of crazy things when he works. Hallucinations, I suppose. Maybe that's how—" Jacob stopped, seeming to realize that he was close to babbling.

Again the man was silent, thinking. He grimaced once, as if from a sudden pain, then looked again at Jeremy.

"He's right?" he asked. "You get these things out of your head?"

Jeremy nodded. "I don't know where they come from." Not strictly true, but from Jacob's expression, Jeremy knew it would be unwise to tell any more. "They just sort of pop up. Usually they don't mean anything. Or I can't make sense out of them, anyway."

"And that's all you got just now? That name? What was it? Frank?"

Again Jeremy nodded, half afraid to speak for fear that his voice would betray him.

Another silence, and finally: "All right, Jeremy. Let's get on with it. And you two," he added to the men by the door, "you stay where you are."

The man raised his hands toward Jeremy again, waiting. Jeremy glanced at Jacob, whose eyes pleaded with him to go on.

Jeremy sat down again on the bed. As he reached for the man's hands, he braced himself physically against the onslaught he knew would come again. He braced himself to do his work, and, somehow, he did it. Despite

the torrent of impressions, despite the overwhelming feeling that he should drop the hands and turn and run—despite all that and more, he forced his own mind to say:

Go! Do your work!

Suddenly, more completely than ever before, all the strength went out of Jeremy. He slumped forward onto the bed and, if it hadn't been for the viselike grip of their hands, he would have rolled sideways onto the floor. The man did not scream, but his teeth ground audibly and every muscle and tendon in his body stood out. It seemed impossible that the bones would not snap under the strain.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the seizure was gone. Their hands fell apart, and Jeremy collapsed onto the floor next to the bed. The man let his breath out in a huge sigh. His arms fell limply to the covers beside him, and his head lolled sideways on the pillows propped up behind him. The two men by the door had, at the start of the spasm, darted forward. Both stood only inches from Jeremy and Jacob now.

Slowly, as strength began to return, Jeremy climbed to his feet and stood swaying by the bed. He could hear the man in the bed breathing heavily, and he knew it had worked.

Despite everything, it had worked.

As always, the link was complete, the work was swift and successful.

But this link was different, because this time the secondary host was different. Though it was of the same species, it was somehow alien, and the link had to be forced, driven through the barrier that separated them, the barrier that the hosts own mind had erected in an automatic defense against what it had found in that other mind.

Six months before, even a month before, that barrier could not have been penetrated. Only the hosts continued practice in establishing the links made it possible.

But in the process of establishing that link, in the explosive release of energy that was necessary, the other barriers, the barriers between this

host and the memories of past hosts, were weakened once again.

And those memories, those personalities, the lingering curiosities of those past hosts, began to have their effect.

CHAPTER 13

"Who was he, Jacob?" Except for the radio and the drone of the engine, the long drive had been silent. Only now, as light began to brighten the sky over the hills to the east, did Jeremy say anything.

"Does it matter?" Jacob's voice was sharp. "He paid us damned good money. Just think about that."

"I have. Who was he, Jacob?"

"Look, damn it! You agreed you'd work on whoever I picked! Remember? You want to make a new arrangement? You want to start picking them yourself? You want to go along the street, grabbing people by the arm and asking them if they have anything they want to be cured of?"

Jeremy shook his head stubbornly. "I just want to know who he was."

"Forget it! You're better off not knowing. And while we're on the subject, just what the hell was all that babbling you were doing back there? You almost blew the whole thing right there. You realize that?"

"I couldn't help it. The things I got from him were so strong."

"Well, in the future, you be a little more careful about it. Understand? Don't let them know you're picking things right out of their heads—if that's what you're really doing, and not just making it all up. Some people wouldn't understand. In fact, *nobody* would understand—at least nobody would like it!"

"But I don't mean—"

"I know you don't mean to do it. That's just the way it works. You can't help it." Jacob pulled in a deep breath, stifling a yawn, and maneuvered the car toward the edge of the road. "You want to drive a while? I think I'll catch a few winks before we get back. Okay?"

When the car stopped, Jeremy dutifully got out and walked around to the driver's side and got in. Jacob crawled into the back and made an effort to curl up on the back seat.

Though Jacob closed his eyes and remained almost totally motionless, Jeremy knew that he wasn't asleep. Like an electrical charge, tension still hovered in the air.

"Look, how would you like it if we took a week or two off? Just a little vacation?"

It had been nearly two days since the trip to Capital City, but Jeremy could still sense the tension every time Jacob spoke. After the first day, Jeremy had given up trying to find out who the man was they had gone to see, and, apparently, Sarah knew no more than Jeremy did. She, on the other hand, seemed just as happy not to know. And, as far as Jeremy knew, she had never even asked Jacob about it.

Sarah shrugged as she put down the remnants of her sandwich on the tray attached to the door of the car. "Why not? I'm sure Jeremy could do with a rest. It's probably harder on him than it is on us."

"Well, Jeremy? How about it? A few days off appeal to you? Anything special you'd like to do? We got enough money to indulge ourselves for a while."

"I suppose," Jeremy said, and then he thought: Aunt Jessica. I haven't been back since we left last fall. "I'd kind of like to go back to Reelsville for a while, if that's okay."

"Sure, why not? You go on back there, Jeremy. Sarah and me, we'll—well, we'll see. Right, Sarah?"

"Sure. There are lots of places I'd like to see that I never thought I'd get the chance to see. Out west, maybe."

"Out west. Yeah, that sounds good." Jacob nodded. "Good time of year for it. Sure you don't want to come along, Jeremy?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I'll just go back to Reelsville for a

while."

"Okay, whatever you want. Maybe after we finish in Tarlton at the end of the week. That's the last we're committed to for a while. Then we'll take off for a couple of weeks."

"All right." Jeremy nodded again. Still, even with the seemingly relaxed talk of vacationing, the nervousness, the tenseness still hovered in the air. Jacob was controlling it better, but it was still there.

And once again Jeremy wondered: Who? Who had the man been?

The picture, on the back page of the newspaper, was obviously several years old, but Jeremy still recognized it. The face was many pounds heavier, the hair was thicker and darker, and there was a small mustache, but it was the same man.

Painstakingly, he read the story that went with the picture, and as he read he realized that, no matter what Jacob had said, Jeremy's feelings had been right. When he finished, he sat, unmoving, for a long time.

As evening approached, there was a brief knock on the door, and Jacob stepped into the room. His eyes fell on the newspaper where it lay on the floor next to Jeremy's chair.

"You saw it." Jacob's words were a statement, not a question.

Jeremy nodded without looking up. The afternoon sun slanted through the window, making the room barren and sterile.

"I wasn't sure you'd recognize him." Jacob sat down on the bed. "He sure looked different when we were there."

Again Jeremy nodded. "Why?" he asked, not looking up.

"I told you, Jeremy. He paid us. A lot. And look, you can't believe everything you read in the papers. You know that. What does it say? That he's a 'reputed syndicate boss.' Or is it 'alleged'? And even if it were true, that doesn't mean what it used to. Most of them are as legitimate now as any other businessman."

"I felt it. I felt what he was like."

Jacob blinked at Jeremy's words. "You're saying what? That you read his mind? And you saw what?"

"Everything they say is true. And more."

"So you believe all the things you grab out of the air now?" Jacob forced a laugh. "You really believe you're picking things out of their minds?"

Jeremy only nodded.

"So? What are you going to do. Go to the police? 'I read this guy's mind the other day, while I was curing him of terminal cancer, and I found out about all the terrible things he's done.' Come on, Jeremy! Be realistic!"

"Frank. Frank was his brother. He killed him."

A flicker of fear crossed Jacob's face, and again he forced a sharp laugh.

"So that's what set him off when you mentioned that name. Look, Jeremy, there's nothing you can do about it. Nothing! The best thing you can do is just forget about it."

Jeremy swallowed. He felt a lump in his throat. "We didn't have to cure him!" His voice was strained.

Jacob sighed loudly. "So that's it. I thought you'd gotten over that sort of thing. You cured someone you don't like, and— And what? You're feeling guilty? You want to do a few charity cases to make up for it? Is that it?"

Jeremy shook his head. He didn't say anything. He knew he couldn't argue with Jacob. No matter what he said, Jacob could twist it and make it sound foolish. He knew he couldn't argue. But he also knew that, this time, he was right and that, no matter how foolish Jacob could make him sound, he couldn't be talked out of how he felt.

But what could he do about it? He knew that, in most other things, Jacob was right. Without Jacob, he would be lost.

Even as Jacob continued to talk, justifying his actions as much to himself as to anyone else, Jeremy retreated further within himself until

the words were a distant murmuring that could not touch him.

The door to Sarah's room burst open and Jacob stormed in. He looked around the small room, much like his own and Jeremy's.

"Have you seen him?"

"Jeremy? Not since last night when you two got back from Denton's. How did it go?"

"Fine." Impatiently. "But where the hell has he gotten to?"

"He's not in his room?"

"Sure, he's in his room!" Jacob's voice was harsh, sarcastic. "That's why I'm in here asking you where he is!"

Sarah frowned. "Look, John, what's been going on between you two? Jeremy's been so damned quiet the last few days. He hardly says a word."

"He never says much. You know that."

"I know, not much. But he's not normally like this. He's hardly ever out of his room. What happened on that trip you two took?"

Jacob shook his head angrily. "You going to start in on me, too? If you want to be useful, help me find him!"

"So it *was* something that happened that night? What was it, John?"

"All right, damn it, you want to know, so you can give it to me, too? Jeremy tried to pull his 'the man's evil' act, that's what happened. And he's been brooding about it."

Calmly. "*Was* he evil?"

"How the hell should I know? He had the money, lots of it. And I thought every life was worth saving. Isn't that what you used to say?"

She nodded. "I used to say a lot of things, before I met Jeremy."

"Come off it, Sarah! Don't go mystical on me."

She laughed. "Mystical? Considering what Jeremy's been doing for you—what he did for me— isn't mystical a pretty tame word?"

"Just because he's picked up a little power doesn't make him any brighter than he ever was!"

"You're sure about that?"

He stopped, staring at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't know any more than I do about how he got that power. Or what it is. You don't even know what it was *you* had, back when you started, and it was nothing compared to what Jeremy has."

"Never mind what *I* had!" His voice was bitter and harsh.

Sarah lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry, John. But all I'm saying is, none of us know what it is that Jeremy has. Or how it could be affecting him."

"So? Have you seen any evidence that he's becoming a great brain?"

She shook her head lightly. "I didn't say I had. But I didn't know what he was like before. And we don't have any idea of what's going on inside his head."

"Or that anything is going on in there! You see how he follows me around, how he always does everything I tell him to."

"*Did* do everything. But lie doesn't seem quite so agreeable these last few days."

"That has nothing to do with him getting any brighter! He just picked up some rotten stuff out of that guy's mind, that's all, and he's got this wild idea that he shouldn't have cured him. That's all."

Sarah was silent for a moment, looking at Jacob. "Was he right? Who was it, John?"

"Just a man with money!" The words snapped out and Jacob shook his head exasperatedly.

"Jeremy was right, then?"

"Just because he had money doesn't mean—"

"I know it doesn't. But the fact that you won't tell me who he was does mean something."

Suddenly Jacob threw up his hands, then let them flop tiredly at his side. As he turned to face Sarah, he seemed older than he had a moment before.

"All right. I can see I won't get any help from you if you don't find out everything. All right. Maybe Jeremy was right. Maybe. Anyway, yesterday he found out who the man was. He saw his picture in the paper."

Her eyes widened. "Shupe?"

He nodded.

"The article said he was supposed to have been dying of cancer," she said.

"He was. Another month or two, and that would have been it."

"And Jeremy saw what was in his mind?"

"Same as he saw some stuff in yours—he says. And in everyone else's that he works on."

"No wonder Jeremy was upset, if a tenth of what they say about Shupe is true."

Jacob looked toward the window. "According to Jeremy, that's only a part of it."

They were both silent then. After a minute, Sarah came to him as he stood by the window, looking out over the deserted afternoon street, and put a hand on his arm. For a moment, the understanding that had existed between them two decades before existed again. "Let's go look for him," she said softly.

They didn't find Jeremy that day or the next. They called his relatives in Reelsville and they called Lissa, but they had not seen him. They called all the people Jeremy had cured, but the few they could reach had neither seen nor heard from him.

On the third day, Shupe's men contacted Jacob.

CHAPTER 14

There had been maps in every newspaper story about the crash, so it was not difficult for Jeremy to pinpoint the exact location. Getting there was more difficult, but in late afternoon of the third day after leaving Jacob and Sarah, he reached the site. It was several miles from the nearest road, and his path led mostly through thickly wooded hills and finally up the slope of the mountain itself. Jeremy had had no experience in hiking through wilderness areas before, so it did not strike him as particularly odd that, despite all the twists and turns and detours he was forced to take, he never once had any doubt that he was going in the right direction.

The crash site was on a relatively gentle slope, almost a small plateau, covered mostly with pines and a few mountain maples. The plane had plowed a corridor through the trees at least two hundred yards long until the slope had abruptly increased again, and what was left of the plane had smashed into the steeper slope. The shattered remnants of many of the trees had already begun to disintegrate after a long winter, and the grass and weeds were beginning to hide some of the smaller pieces of the wreckage. Many of the plane's pieces had been picked up by helicopter to be taken away for examination as part of the crash investigation, and the few remaining larger sections, mostly unrecognizable except for one section of seats that had, remarkably, survived intact, lay scattered and twisted and torn, mixed with the splintered wreckage of the trees.

Jeremy realized it was probably a hopeless search, but he began looking for the spot on which he had lain. He had been under the fringe of a tree, he remembered, one of the maples, not a pine. And there had been some bushes not far away.

He looked around, and something nudged his mind. This way?

Yes, this way. The internal something—his companion?—seemed to nudge him again, gently but insistently, and he moved on. First he drifted

to the south, out of the corridor of devastation, then up the gentle slope to the east until he came to the point at which the slope resumed its precipitous climb.

Here?

Yes, here. Not words, but a feeling. Here was the place.

He looked up, and a sudden dizziness swept over him as he recognized the view. It was the same scene that had filled his eyes nearly a year before.

He stood silently, not knowing why he had come here, not even knowing how he had managed to come to this one specific spot.

He looked down at the ground, thinking: this is where I lay, nearly dead.

And again: No. This is where my body lay, dead.

And this is where, somehow, I returned to life. The memory of those first awakenings returned again, and for a moment his entire body felt the pain he had felt then.

How? he wondered. And why? Of all the people on that plane, why Jeremy Case? Had someone—or some thing—chosen him above all the others? Above all others, not just on the plane but on Earth?

He shook his head, trying to wipe out the thought. The idea that he had somehow been selected intentionally only accentuated the feelings that had driven him to leave Jacob. To misuse a power that you had received accidentally was bad enough, but to misuse a power you had been selected to receive...

Jeremy looked around again, forcing the feelings down, wondering once again why he had come here. What had he hoped to find? The being—the spirit?—that had given him the power?

Deep inside himself, something "felt right." And he wondered, suddenly: had that thing that existed within him brought him here deliberately?

Jeremy shivered despite the warm breeze and bright afternoon sun. He had not thought, consciously, of the thing, the companion, since he had left Jacob and Sarah, but he had known it was there. For months he had known it, and for months he had, when he could avoid the thought no longer, continued to wonder which of them was in control. Whether Jeremy Case still had the freedom to do as he pleased, or whether his every action was determined for him by the thing that lived within him.

And now, in this one action, at least, he knew: It had controlled him. It had led him here. But for what reason?

Suddenly the wild, irrational thought came: It's brought me back so it can leave me! It had to return here, to where it entered into me, so that it can leave me!

Elation and guilt battled within Jeremy. He had failed in his use of the power, but he would no longer have the responsibility of making further efforts to use it better.

In an instant, the thought was gone. The companion was not leaving him, he somehow knew. That was not the reason he had been brought here. The companion would be with him as long as—

As long as he lived? It had already been with him longer than that. He had died at least once since it had come to him, and it was still with him.

Jeremy closed his eyes, trying to force himself to stop thinking. Such thoughts were new to him, as were the unwanted responsibilities he felt because of his power. A year ago, such thoughts would have been impossible for him.

Suddenly, he looked back at the Jeremy that had existed before the crash, and he wondered if he was the same person, or if he had just inherited an earlier Jeremy's memories. The thoughts that the earlier Jeremy had had seemed slow and cloudy in comparison to the thoughts that rushed through his mind now. But the realization did not make him elated. Compared to many, such as Lissa and Brother Jacob, he was still slow.

And he had failed in his use of the power.

But if the companion had not led him here in order to leave him

because of his failure, then why? Why had he been brought here?

Again Jeremy felt a faint nudging inside his mind, and he turned toward the steeper slope that began a few yards away. There, almost directly in front of him, was an irregular crater, several feet across. Some part of the plane— an engine?—had smashed into the slope, driving its way several feet into it. But now it was gone, carried away by the crash investigators months before, and there was only the craterlike imprint it had made.

He moved forward until he stood directly in front of the crater, and for a long moment he stood silently, looking. Then he leaned forward, half into the crater. He touched its sides. Unlike the rest of the area, the inside of the crater was bare. No grass or weeds grew there yet, nothing but dirt and rock.

Crouching, Jeremy crawled half into the crater, exploring the sides with his hands, not knowing why, knowing only that something urged him forward.

Then, at the deepest point, the earth crumbled away under his fingers, seeming to fall back onto itself, and he touched something hard and cold. For an instant, his fingers felt frozen, and then they felt nothing. It was as if they didn't exist.

He started to jerk his hand back, but before he could, blackness closed in. Abruptly, without warning, he was back in the world of his dreams, falling and spinning and burning. But this time a thousand other impressions poured through him, but in a torrent so overpowering that, by comparison, the impressions he had received during his healings, even from Shupe, were like a placid stream. No individual images stuck in his mind, for his mind was not designed to accept such images. Whatever impressions and images and ideas were being thrown at him were being rejected, the way a color-blind eye rejects red and green and violet and sees only gray.

Only one impression came through, and that was an impression of time—unbelievable amounts of time. Not days or years or centuries or even millennia, but something beyond Jeremy's conception, something to which numbers could perhaps be assigned but which was nonetheless inconceivable.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, it was over, and as he had after the crash, Jeremy lay in nonexistence.

But this time it lasted only a few seconds. Almost immediately, Jeremy once again existed and awakened. There were no memories of what had happened since he had eased himself into the crater. There was only a hazy feeling that, somehow, a great deal of time had passed.

And that, despite the companion that still lived within him, he felt alone.

Turning his back on the crater, Jeremy began the long trip back down the mountain.

It had been so long! So very, very long!

The thoughts, still not fully shared by the present host's conscious mind, echoed through the ghostly memories of a dozen previous hosts.

As the host had touched the shattered remains of the tiny, hidden universe that had held those memories since the destruction of the last host, there was another link, brief and tenuous, a link with something that still lay hidden deep within the twists and loops of space and time that formed this miniature universe—something that said:

The universe has changed. Time has passed. You are alone.

Then it was gone. Its message had been delivered. Gradually, that message would be accepted by the remnants of past hosts that now lived only in the still inaccessible areas of the present host's mind.

And gradually, that knowledge and all the rest would seep through the ever-weakening barriers that still separated those past hosts from the present one.

CHAPTER 15

"All I want to do is talk to him, Mr. Reese. Surely you can understand that."

Shupe was still thin, almost skeletal, but there was a glow of health

about him. His two men stood discreetly a few feet a way, not far from the lobby door. Jacob, who had just come down from his room, couldn't help but eye them nervously.

"What do you want to talk to him about? Didn't the healing work?"

Shupe smiled professionally, but his fleshless face gave him the look of a grinning death's head. He held his hands out from his sides, palms up. "Of course it worked. Would I be standing here if it hadn't?"

"What, then?" Jacob was sure he knew the reason for Shupe's visit, but he had to keep up the pretense of ignorance as best he could. For Shupe, even in his improved health, to have come all the way to this out-of-the-way town, there could be only one reason.

"Let's just say I have to satisfy my own curiosity about certain things he said that night, that's all."

"Certain things?"

"Come now, Mr. Reese. You remember as well as I."

Finally, Jacob nodded. "I told you, he comes up with some wild things whenever he works. You know how these things are. He doesn't know what he's saying half the time. He's almost in a trance when he works. And those healings take a lot out of him."

"I realize that. But, as I said, I would just like my curiosity satisfied." Shupe's tone had grown harder despite the smile that remained on his skeletal face. "Now where can I find him, Mr. Reese?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him for almost a week. Five days, to be exact."

"Oh? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I've been looking everywhere for him myself."

Shupe was silent for several seconds, glancing somberly toward his two men, then back to Jacob.

"When did you say he left?"

"I told you. Five days ago."

Shupe nodded. "Why did he leave? And why didn't he tell you where he was going?"

Jacob shrugged, trying to conceal his nervousness. "We had been talking about taking a few weeks off, a sort of vacation. Maybe he just took off a little early. Probably didn't think we'd worry about him."

"But you did worry?"

"A little, I guess. Jeremy's no great brain, don't forget. Oh, he can take care of himself, but yes, I was a little worried." A forced laugh. "After all, he is my bread and butter these days, now that I've more or less retired myself."

Again Shupe nodded, more thoughtfully this time. "Yes, I see your meaning. But he said nothing to you? Nothing to give you any hint why he might be leaving? Or where he might be going?"

"Not a word." Jacob hoped that his years in front of audiences were standing him in good stead and that he sounded convincing.

"Does he have any friends? Any relatives? Anyone he might go to?"

"Not in this area. And we checked everyone we could think of." Jacob laughed. "We even checked with some of the other people he had worked on. No luck."

"I see." Again Shupe smiled faintly. "I trust you will notify me if you locate him? Or if you hear from him?"

"Of course. Where will you be staying?"

"You can reach me through my office at any time."

"Of course. Any time. And if *you* hear anything, you'll be sure to let *me* know."

"Of course." Jacob watched as Shupe and the two men moved from the lobby to the street outside. None of the three looked back.

"Do you think he was telling the truth?" Sarah looked at Jacob anxiously.

"How should I know? But yes, I think he was. For now, at least. Once they find Jeremy—if they do—and talk to him, it will all depend on what Jeremy says."

"They certainly wouldn't try to kill Mm, would they?" A harsh laugh, humorless. "They wouldn't 'try,' no. They're more efficient than that."

"But things like that just don't happen," Sarah protested. "They don't? Check your newspaper some day."

"But why would they want to kill Jeremy? You said yourself he couldn't prove anything, even if he did decide to go to the police."

Jacob shrugged. "I didn't say they were going to kill him. I just said, *if* they don't like what he says when they talk to him, they may kill him. If they can't take care of the problem any other way."

"But if you know what they intend to do—"

"As you said, Jeremy couldn't really prove anything, but he could be troublesome enough to make them want him out of the way. I couldn't prove anything either—and I think they know me well enough to know that *I* won't be foolish enough to try causing trouble. They don't know that about Jeremy—yet. Neither do I, for that matter. He was pretty upset about curing Shupe the last time I talked to him."

"You think he might be trying to get the police to listen to him? Or a newspaper?"

Jacob shrugged again. "With Jeremy, anything's possible. I told you, he was pretty upset. I didn't tell Shupe, but maybe Jeremy has already done something like that."

"But wouldn't we have heard? Wouldn't Shupe have been questioned? Or something?"

"Not necessarily. If Jeremy went to the police, I suppose they could be keeping it quiet until they can do some investigating on their own, looking for proof to back up what Jeremy said." Jacob laughed. "Or they could

have just thrown him out—or locked him up—as a nut. Police aren't the most imaginative breed around, any more than newspaper people."

Then, abruptly, a new thought struck Jacob, and his stomach twisted.

"Or," he said slowly, "there's always the possibility that Shupe has already found Jeremy. Five days ago."

Sarah's eyes widened in sudden shock. "But if they already have him, or have had him killed, why would they be here now, pretending to look for him?"

"Alibi, of course. Or rather, to avert suspicion, what little there might be." Jacob felt tired. He pulled in a deep breath in an effort to settle his stomach. "But there's nothing we can do about that. We have to assume Jeremy ran off on his own. And we have to find him before Shupe does. And try to talk some sense into him."

He went to the phone, and with a glance out the window and down to the street, he began repeating the calls he had already made.

"Lissa Martin?" The voice on the phone was thin and distant, but Lissa recognized it easily.

"Yes, Brother Jacob. But I still haven't heard from Jeremy. And my parents are still on their vacation trip, so I'm sure they haven't heard from him either."

There was a crackling silence on the line for a moment. "I know how you feel about me, Lissa, and I can't really say I blame you. I sometimes feel the same way about myself these days. I know you think I'm a phony, and most of the time I am."

"And what brings on this sudden attack of honesty, Brother Jacob?"

"Jeremy could be in danger."

Despite herself, Lissa reacted sharply. "Danger? From whom?"

"Just take my word for it."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"I'm not asking you to tell me where he is the instant you find out—if you do find out. If you haven't found out already. That would be best, but I realize it's not realistic, not the way you feel about me. All I'm asking is that you make sure Jeremy calls me—or Sarah. One of us will be available at any time. And make sure he does it the first thing! Before he does anything else, no matter what. It's important, believe me!"

She was taken aback by the intensity of his voice, but then she remembered the intensity he had always put into his tent show performances.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell him, if he contacts me."

"If he contacts anyone, it will be you, I'm sure. He trusts you more than anyone. Certainly more than he does me—now, at any rate. And believe me, the danger to him could be very real."

"If you would just tell me—"

A harsh laugh. "I know it's a cliché, but you'll be a lot better off if you don't know. I sometimes wish to hell *I* didn't know. If you hear from him, and if you have any interest at all in keeping him out of serious trouble, have him contact me—by phone. I don't want him coming around here. Remember—by phone."

A click, and finally the dial tone returned. Slowly, puzzled and concerned despite herself, Lissa hung up.

"Are you Lissa Martin?"

The two men at the door wore dark suits, the ties loosened slightly in the heat. They looked totally out of place, like a pair of city salesmen who had suddenly found themselves transferred to a country territory.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"Could we come in for a minute?"

"What are you selling?"

One of them blinked in puzzlement. "Nothing," the other man said. "We

just would like to ask you a few questions."

"About what?"

"About a friend of yours. Jeremy Case."

She frowned. "Are you from Brother Jacob? I've already told him—"

"No, we have no connection with Mr. Reese."

Suspiciously. "But you're familiar enough with him to know his right name, I see."

"We were talking to him yesterday, Miss Martin. You see, we, too, are trying to locate Mr. Case."

"Just like Brother Jacob? In any event, I can't tell you anything. I don't know where Jeremy is. I haven't seen him since he went away with Jacob Reese last fall. I haven't even heard from him since then, so you had better not waste your time talking to me. Mr. Reese will have a lot more answers than I do."

"We have to cover every possibility, you understand. We were just talking to Mr. Case's cousin earlier today, and his aunt."

"They haven't seen him either. Or heard from him as far as I know. Now if you'll excuse me." She reached for the door and started to swing it shut.

"Just a couple more things, if it's not too much trouble."

She sighed. "All right. What is it?"

"Is there anyone else Mr. Case might contact? Or any places you can think of he might have gone?"

She shook her head. "If he hasn't contacted me or his aunt or Brother Jacob, I have no idea who else he might talk to. Nor of where he may have gone."

"Or any idea of why he might have left? It was very abrupt, we understand."

"I told you, I haven't heard from him since he left Reelsville last fall. At that time, he left to go with Brother Jacob. I have no idea why he left Brother Jacob, but I hope it means that he realized the sort of person Brother Jacob is."

"I see." The man who had been doing all the talking glanced at the other. "I don't suppose we can do any more here. We had better be getting back." He turned back to Lissa. "Could we possibly use your phone?"

She frowned again but, after a short hesitation, pushed open the screen door.

"Thank you." The man, several years older than the quieter, larger one, stepped into the kitchen. He spotted the telephone on the wall just beyond the door. "Thank you very much."

He picked up the receiver and dialed.

"Could you spare a glass of water?" The other man, still on the porch, asked. "We're not used to this sort of running around, I'm afraid."

Lissa watched him for a moment. "All right. Why don't you come inside? I'll get the water."

"Thank you." He pulled open the screen door and came inside, staying near the door.

Lissa crossed the kitchen to the sink, found a pair of glasses and filled them from the tap over the sink. She brought them back, handing one to each man. They both nodded a thank you. The man at the phone was frowning.

"No answer," he said. "Oh, well, I guess we can just go back into town." He hung up, drank down the water, and handed the empty glass back.

"Again, thank you," he said. "And if you hear from Mr. Case, please contact us." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small card and handed it to her. It was blank except for a pencilled-in phone number, including an area code. "Call collect, of course."

With a final thank you, they were gone.

When Lissa called for information, the operator would only tell her that the number was unlisted.

CHAPTER 16

The first two days after returning from the crash site, Jeremy stayed in Elton, the same city he had been brought to after the crash. Since he had no real need to sleep, there was no reason to waste money on a hotel, so the money he had with him was enough to last him at least a week. In that length of time, he told himself, he should certainly be able to decide what to do. After two days of aimless wandering, however, he was beginning to have doubts. He was no nearer to an answer than he had been when he had left Jacob and Sarah. He had not, as he had half hoped, gotten any help from his trip up the mountain. It was something he had had to do, something his—companion—had engineered, but it had done nothing for Jeremy, and he didn't think it had helped the companion either.

He had to admit to himself again that without Jacob or someone like him, he was lost. He had tried, briefly, wandering the halls of one of the city's hospitals, thinking that there would certainly be uses for his power there—good uses. But it hadn't worked. He had picked up occasional impressions, but they were of little help. They told him nothing about the person from whom they came. To learn much, apparently, he needed a physical contact. And even if the impressions that occasionally floated into his mind had told him what he wanted to know, if they had told him who he should try to help, who was most desperately in need of his help, he soon realized that he would still be helpless. If he simply walked into a hospital room and grasped a perfect stranger by the hands, he would be thrown out at best, arrested at worst. And any attention that came to him would eventually get back to the other hospital in Elton, and probably to Jacob.

And that was something he didn't want, not now.

Only once during those two days was he able to help someone. A woman struck by a hit-and-run driver survived because Jeremy happened to be within a block of her when it happened. Even then, he had almost been arrested when a policeman showed up and all the witnesses insisted that Jeremy had ignored their warnings that touching or moving the woman could easily kill her. Only when the woman herself got up and insisted that, despite appearances, she was all right, did they let Jeremy

go.

Three days later, nearly a week after he had left Jacob and Sarah, he admitted to himself what he had known all along—that without Jacob, he could do little or nothing with his power.

And he knew that he had to do something about the knowledge he had gotten from Shupe's mind. Again, he knew that Jacob had been right, that there was little chance that he could do anything effective, but as the days went by and his memory of the images he had seen and felt seemed to grow stronger, as if by his very thinking of them they were intensified, he became more and more positive that he could not simply forget it as Jacob had advised him to do.

On the fourth day in Elton, he phoned Lissa.

"Jeremy? Is that you? Where are you?"

"Elton."

"What have you been doing? I heard you left Brother Jacob."

"I guess I did."

"Why?"

"I've got to talk to you."

"All right. Are you coming back to Reelsville?"

"I guess so. Yes."

"What do you want to talk about? You make it sound important. Does it have anything to do with your leaving Brother Jacob?"

"Sort of. But it isn't his fault, not really."

"What isn't his fault?"

Jeremy was silent for a second. "I can't do any good without him."

"I can't believe that. But is that what you want to talk to me about?"

"Partly, I guess."

"All right, we can talk about anything you want. Incidentally, Jacob wants you to phone him. The very first thing, he said."

When there was only a silence on the line, Lissa went on. "He said you could be in danger."

"Did he say what was wrong?"

"He wouldn't say much of anything." A quick, sarcastic laugh. "He said I'd be better off not knowing what was going on."

Another pause, and Jeremy said, "He was probably right."

"What?" There was surprise in her voice.

"I said, Jacob was probably right."

And Jeremy thought: What right do I have to put this on Lissa? I could be putting her in danger myself, just by talking to her.

"I'd better not see you after all," he said abruptly.

"Jeremy, wait! Don't hang up! Jeremy? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now don't be silly about this. I literally owe you my life, so don't worry about some silly talk of Brother Jacob's about danger. Even if it were true—which I don't believe for a minute—it wouldn't make any difference."

"I don't think—"

"I told you, Jeremy, don't worry! I *want* you to come back. I want to help you if I can!"

"All right," he said finally. "But I'd better not come to your place. Not right at first, anyway."

"Don't tell me you're going to be melodramatic too, like Brother Jacob?"

She doesn't understand, he thought. She hasn't seen what was in Shupe's mind.

"It would be safer," he said, "for both of us."

"If you say so, but frankly I think you're exaggerating." Then she stopped, remembering the other two men.

"Somebody else was looking for you, too. They came around a couple of days after Brother Jacob called."

"Who?" Immediately, Jeremy knew.

"They didn't say. They just left a number for me to call if you got in touch." She gave him the number. "From the area code," she went on, "it's clear at the other end of the state, but it's unlisted, so I couldn't find out anything from the operator."

The other end of the state. "Capital City," he said, half to himself.

"You know it? The number?"

"No, but that part of the state—"

"You *do* know it. Who is it? Who's looking for you besides Brother Jacob?"

A difficult hesitation. "I can't tell you," he said, "not now."

"All right, Jeremy. You can tell me when I see you. When will you be here?"

"I can't come to your place. I don't want to take the chance."

"Come on, Jeremy, there's nothing to worry about. Whoever they were, they didn't look dangerous."

She hadn't seen Shupe's mind, he thought again. "I just don't want to take any chances," he said, "for either of us. I'll meet you somewhere else."

She tried to laugh, but something in his voice stopped her. Something she had never heard in his voice before.

"All right," she said. "Where, then?"

"Could you drive to Belle Fontaine? It's the first town north of Reelsville on the bus line."

"Sure, if I have to."

"All right. If I can catch the next bus, I should get there about midnight."

"I'll be there."

"Be careful," he said.

Again she had the impulse to laugh at the ridiculous melodrama of his warnings, but something in his voice, something indefinable but compelling, stifled her impulse.

"I will," she said softly, wondering at the odd feeling of—closeness?—that seemed to sweep over her as she spoke. "You be careful, too."

For an instant, just an instant, there was a new kind of link, a link even stranger than those that had already occurred so many times.

For just an instant, there had been a link between two hosts that were not physically touching.

For just an instant, over the miles, the minds of two separate hosts had touched.

"Jeremy? Where the hell are you?" Jacob's voice was sharp and irritated.

"Are they looking for me?"

"Who? You mean Shupe's bunch? You're damned right they are!"

"What do they want?"

"Shupe *says* he just wants to talk to you, to make sure you understand everything."

"Do you think he means it?"

"How should I know? Maybe. If you can convince him it was all just a coincidence or an hallucination, the way you popped out with his brother's name."

Silence.

"Are you still there, Jeremy?"

"I can't do that, Jacob." The voice was determined. It didn't have the slightly petulant sound that Jacob was used to hearing when Jeremy was insisting on something.

"Of course you can! I've got him half way believing it already."

"I can't, Jacob. It isn't true."

"So? What's the point in insisting on it? I told you a dozen times, there's nothing you can do about it, no matter what you *think* you know. You can't prove anything. All you can do is stir up trouble—more for yourself than for anyone else! Forget it! Come back and we'll both go talk to Shupe. I'll convince him for both of us."

"I'm sorry. I can't help it. I can't forget it, not what I saw in his mind."

"You can forget *anything* if you try hard enough! Damn it, Jeremy—"

"Goodbye, Jacob."

"Jeremy, wait! *Jeremy!*"

There was only silence to answer him.

"Lissa, whatever you do, don't hang up on me!" Jacob's voice came over the wire in a rush. Outside, the last traces of a gray, overcast twilight were fading.

"What is it, Brother Jacob?"

"I heard from Jeremy."

"That puts you one up on me."

"I don't believe you, Lissa. He called you before he called me."

"Did he say so?"

"Maybe not, but your voice says so, right now."

"Strange. I didn't hear it say anything like that. Now, what is it you want?"

"Jeremy trusts you. You have to convince him to be sensible."

"And what do *you* consider sensible, Brother Jacob? Coming back to make more money for you?"

A hesitation. "I think he wants to go to the police with something he *thinks* he knows. It—"

"Something about you, Brother Jacob?"

"No, not about me!" Exasperated, but not irritated. "This is something he—something he thinks he picked out of the mind of someone he worked with."

"Someone he healed?"

"Yes! Now take my word for it, no matter what Jeremy thinks he knows, he can't prove a damned thing."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"It's not me I'm worried about! Just listen a minute, please! All Jeremy can do is cause trouble, bad publicity, for this person. But this person can cause a lot worse trouble than that for Jeremy, believe me! He can—and he *will!*"

"For Jeremy? Or for you?"

"For Jeremy! For you, if you get involved! For all of us!"

"You make it sound pretty dangerous." She kept the tone light, almost sarcastic, but inside herself, she was beginning to believe in the melodrama that both Jacob and Jeremy insisted was real. "Just who is this person we're supposed to be in danger from?"

There was another silence as Jacob thought: Do I have to tell her the whole thing before she'll listen to sense? And even then, once I've told her, will she believe me? But Jeremy will tell her anyway, and she will certainly believe him. And even if—

"I'm driving down to see you, Lissa," he said abruptly. "Don't do anything until I get there. Don't go to meet Jeremy anywhere. And if he comes to see you, keep him there, out of sight. Do you understand?"

"I understand what you're saying, but—"

"Then do it! For Jeremy's sake, if not your own! Just wait for me. I'll be there in an hour."

He hung up, knowing that further words would have no effect. She would either wait for him or she would not.

CHAPTER 17

The car was crossways in the road, totally blocking it, a half mile from Lissa's house. It was just far enough beyond the curve so that, when Jacob saw it, he had enough time to stop but no more. Before he could get his own car into reverse, another's headlights had appeared behind him and a gun was shoved through his open window and jammed against his head.

"No foolish moves," a voice said from behind the gun, and at the same time the passenger's side of the car in front opened and another man slid out. He, too, had a gun, and a minute later he was seated next to Jacob.

The first man withdrew and walked back to the car blocking the road and got in.

"Turn it around," the man next to Jacob said, "and drive back to the highway."

"Shupe?" Jacob asked, and even the single syllable trembled.

"Just drive." The man, young, in a conservative suit with the tie loosened slightly, sat with his back against the door, the gun pointed directly at Jacob's midsection.

Once the decision had been made—or at least the first step toward a decision—Jeremy felt better.

For a while.

He would have to be careful, of course. Very careful. No matter what he did, in the end, he would have to keep them from knowing that he had talked to Lissa about it. And he would have to keep much of the truth from her, too, even as he talked to her. He would have to discuss what he knew with her without actually letting her know too much, and he wondered if he was capable of it. Could he tell her enough so that she could help him make a decision, and still hold back enough so that she would not be in danger herself?

The thought made him tremble. He didn't trust himself, not even his seemingly new self. He could think more clearly than he had been able to a year ago, but he realized that he was still far from being as bright as Lissa or Jacob. He could not think as fast or as intricately as either of them.

And he wondered: Once he was actually face to face with Lissa, could he hide anything from her?

And again: Surely they wouldn't harm her, just because she talked to me, even if they did somehow find out.

The images from Shupe's mind flickered through Jeremy's memory again, and he shuddered. The thought of getting off the bus at the next town and returning to Elton—or anywhere away from Belle Fontaine and Reels-ville—forced itself into his mind.

He looked out the darkened window of the bus, but he could see little but his own reflection in the window. His own reflection, alone, skimming through the darkness.

In the distance, on a road paralleling the highway a half mile away, he saw the lights of a farmhouse, a tiny island in the darkness, moving slowly past, far out of reach. Isolated. Alone.

And he saw himself, as he had been the last week, isolated and alone, unable to make contact with anyone. Besides Lissa.

And he knew that, regardless of the consequences, he had to see her again. If not now, then next week or next month. He hated his inability to exist alone, to make new contacts, and he hated whatever it was in him that drew him back to her and would force her to share whatever dangers he himself faced. He hated it all.

But he hated the idea of being alone even more.

She couldn't wait any longer. It was an hour's drive to Belle Fontaine, and it was already after ten-thirty. Inwardly she was relieved that Brother Jacob had not shown up, that she would not have to face him and decide again whether or not to trust him. After the times she had seen him operating his "healing extravaganza" over the years, she rather doubted that she could ever trust him, even if she knew he was telling the truth.

For the first time in as long as she could remember, she locked the door of the house as she left and got into her five-year-old Chevie.

"How did you know I would be coming?" Jacob was calmer now, sitting in the motel room facing Shupe. One of Shupe's men stood, inevitably, by the door, but no guns were currently in sight.

"Simplicity itself. In these electronic days, it is but the work of a moment to plant something in a telephone."

"A bug? You've been listening to her calls?" Jacob tried to remember what he had said to Lissa, if there had been anything that Shupe could interpret as a threat.

Shupe nodded complacently but said nothing.

"Then you know that she doesn't know anything about you," Jacob went on.

"We know. And by stopping you from telling her, we may very well have saved her life. And yours."

"Mine?" Shupe's words, spoken so quietly, had more shock effect on Jacob than if they had been shouted. "I don't understand—"

"Again, Mr. Reese, simplicity itself. If you had told her, and if she had insisted on 'going public,' as it were, and if we had had to do something to prevent that action..."

Shupe shrugged before going on. "We know you well enough, Mr. Reese, to know that you will not expose yourself to serious danger for anything as quixotic as Mr. Case's desire to conduct a crusade against me. However, if we were forced into taking some action against Miss Martin..."

Again Shupe shrugged, and Jacob noticed that, though Shupe was still thin, he seemed noticeably heavier than he had been only a couple of days earlier. "We do not know you quite well enough to predict your reaction to that, and we are not inclined to take more chances than are absolutely necessary. You understand, of course."

"But Jeremy will tell her! I'm sure he's been in touch with her."

"Oh, of course, Mr. Reese. Mr. Case called her several hours ago, not long before your last call to her. He is coming on the last bus from Elton tonight. He will be arriving in Belle Fontaine, where she is to meet him, shortly after midnight."

"But if you know that—"

"Don't worry, Mr. Reese. She won't keep her appointment."

Shupe leaned back in his chair and smiled blandly.

Lissa had gone less than a half mile when the car began to handle oddly, tending to swerve exaggeratedly at every curve. At two miles, still a half mile short of the highway, she heard the "flop-flop" sound that confirmed her suspicions and made her curse silently as she pulled the car as far to the side of the road as she could without going into the ditch. She would never make it to Belle Fontaine in time now, not unless changing a

tire had gotten a lot easier since the last time she had tried it.

Still swearing under her breath, she glanced at the right front tire, completely flat now, and hurried to the trunk. If worse came to worse, she thought as the trunk lid came up, she might be able to stop somewhere and phone the bus station and leave a message for Jeremy. If he arrived, and she wasn't there...

She reached for the spare, lying loose on the floor of the trunk, and, as she touched it, she broke into a new round of silent cursing.

The spare, too, was flat.

"Just sit back and relax, Mr. Reese. It's nearly an hour's drive to Belle Fontaine."

Shupe settled back comfortably into the luxurious seat of the limousine, as if to demonstrate his request. In the front, in addition to the driver, sat the young man who had stood silent guard at the door of Shupe's motel room.

"There's nothing to worry about as long as you do your job well and efficiently," Shupe concluded.

Jacob closed his eyes for a moment. "But I've told you, I tried to talk Jeremy into forgetting it once before. I don't think he will listen to me."

Shupe shrugged lightly, but said nothing.

"What will you do if I can't talk him into it?"

A faint smile crossed Shupe's features. "You don't really want to know, do you, Mr. Reese?"

But Jacob did know. He had known all along, he supposed. He looked at Shupe again. The man's eyes were watching him with a glint of—amusement?

And Jacob thought: Jeremy was right.

But it was too late now.

"Lissa?" Harry Walters's eyes were still full of sleep as he peered through the door onto the porch. "What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I've got a very special favor to ask of you."

Harry blinked and shook his head, still trying to come fully awake. "Sure, anything. You know that, but couldn't it wait until morning?"

"I'm afraid not. My car broke down—I had a flat and the spare is flat, too. I got the last mile or so here on the rim."

She hesitated, getting up the nerve to ask. "What I want is to borrow your car for a couple of hours."

He frowned. "Tonight?"

"Tonight. It's important to me."

"What is it?" And a sudden thought came to him, and his stomach sank. Abruptly, he was fully awake.

"It's not—" He faltered. "You're not going to see a doctor, are you?"

She looked blank for a moment before she realized what he meant. She smiled faintly.

"No, I'm not having a relapse," she assured him. "I'm in perfect health as far as I know. This is something else. Something I have to do tonight."

Relief, as sudden as his suspicions, washed over him. "Can I drive you somewhere?"

She shook her head. "No. I have to do this by myself."

He started to laugh, partly a reaction to the sudden relief of a moment before, but something in the deadly seriousness of her voice stopped him.

"You're sure?" he asked. "Can't you at least tell me what it's about?"

"Not right now. I'll tell you when I bring the car back—if you'll let me

have it."

And she thought: if Brother Jacob and Jeremy are, by any chance, right in their melodramatics, I won't be dragging anyone else into danger with me this way.

Harry stood silently for a second. "All right," he said finally. "I'll get the keys for you."

A minute later, feeling dwarfed by the huge interior of the Checker sedan, she pulled out onto the road past her own stalled Chevie and headed toward the highway and Belle Fontaine. Unless another disaster struck, she might still make it by midnight.

The tiny bus station in North Manchester was locked and deserted except for a young boy, probably in his middle teens, sitting on a wooden bench outside the station door, waiting. A large, lighted clock over the door said eleven-thirty.

My last chance, Jeremy thought as he watched silently through the bus window, my last chance to turn around and go back. My last chance to spare Lissa the burden of my own troubles.

But he knew he would not turn back. He had committed himself when he had gotten on the bus—when he had picked up the phone and talked to Lissa. After hearing her voice, feeling the way it so easily pierced the self-imposed shell he had held around himself all that week, he knew that he could not stay away.

And anyway, he thought irrelevantly, she's already half way to Belle Fontaine by now. If I didn't show up, I'd just worry her that much more. And nothing is going to happen to her. Nothing is going to happen to either of us.

For an instant, as he sat silently, thinking of Lissa— and of Jacob—he felt something.

He blinked and looked around to see if anyone was watching him. No one was, but the feeling persisted.

He looked out the window again, at the deserted bus station. The boy was standing next to the bus driver, who was unlocking the door to the baggage compartment in the side of the bus. The boy was watching the driver, not Jeremy.

But there was something.

Again he looked around. There were only a half dozen people scattered on the bus. A young couple in the rear seat sat close, their hands locked together, their eyes seeing only each other. An old man, grizzled and unshaven, shirt open at the collar, sat across the aisle from Jeremy, leaning back and to one side, his head propped up in the corner made by the back of the seat and the window. He was snoring lightly. A woman, her perfectly coiffed head erect, sat a couple of rows ahead of Jeremy, staring straight ahead as if the rest of the bus did not exist. A man, middle-aged and overweight, wearing a loud sport jacket, was dozing a couple of rows ahead of the woman.

And that was all.

But still there was the feeling that—

Suddenly, Jeremy recognized it, and a shiver ran up his spine. It was the same as when he cured someone, but this feeling was so much softer, so much lighter that it was barely recognizable. But it *was* a mind that he felt, a mind that touched him lightly and distantly.

It was a mind—but whose?

Again, across the miles, there was a brief touching, and then a longer, surer contact. Longer, and yet somehow different...

It was as if, once a single such contact had been made, the process became easier, the contacts became stronger. Even the host itself, hesitantly at first, was becoming aware of the contacts, just as it had become aware of the physical links, just as it was still becoming aware of the powers that lay hidden behind the ever-weakening barriers within its own mind.

The bus station in Belle Fontaine was also the lobby of the Arlington Hotel. The registration desk doubled as ticket counter, and the only person in the lobby, a thin, balding young man in a short-sleeved shirt, was putting a wide, industrial-size broom into a rear hallway as Jacob and Shupe's two men entered. Shupe himself stayed outside in the car, parked at the curb a few yards from the door. Except over the desk, the lights in the lobby were dim. Three or four floor lamps next to the chairs and couches were little more than night lights, and the remainder were turned off altogether. Shupe's men stayed near the door, where the shadows were deepest. Their eyes remained on Jacob every second.

"Anything I can do for you?" The young man behind the desk was looking at Jacob. "A room? A ticket?"

"Neither one," Jacob said. He moved to the desk. Neither of Shupe's men made a move to follow him. "Just waiting to meet someone on the midnight bus from Elton. Is it on time, do you know?"

The young man shrugged. "Usually is. Never more than a few minutes late, unless they break down somewhere. That happened once last year, but I hear they've gotten the busses overhauled since then. Who you meeting? Somebody from around here?"

Jacob shook his head. "Reelsville."

"Oh? Why're you meeting him here? The bus goes right on to Reelsville from here."

Jacob glanced toward the two men. He could see their hands shifting in their pockets, and one of them shook his head in a negative gesture.

"Actually," Jacob said to the boy, "we live about half way in between. It's just handier to pick him up here."

The boy nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense." He looked at Jacob more closely, a frown beginning to line his forehead. "Hey, do I know you from somewhere?"

Another glance toward Shupe's men. Their hands were still in their pockets, but, somehow, in the very way they stood, the way their shadowed faces looked at him darkly, their threat was plain.

And Jacob admitted to himself what he had known for the last hour but had, until now, managed to rationalize away. Shupe was not going to let either him or Jeremy go. There would be no attempt to talk Jeremy into keeping quiet. With Jacob as "bait," Jeremy would be shoved into Shupe's limousine, and he and Jacob would be taken somewhere.

And not returned.

Jeremy was simply too unpredictable for Shupe to take a chance on. And, once Jeremy was taken care of, it would be necessary to do the same for Jacob. Even Jacob himself could not predict whether or not he could bring himself to keep quiet if Jeremy was murdered.

Jeremy had been right. He had seen into Shupe's mind, and he had seen what it was like. He had been right to draw back, to want to leave. He had been right to leave Jacob, to disappear.

The only thing Jeremy had been wrong in was his decision to come back.

As the bus moved farther south, toward Belle Fontaine, the feeling grew stronger in Jeremy, and he grew more uneasy by the minute. It was definitely someone's mind reaching out to touch his, but, because there was no physical contact, it was vague and indistinct.

At first he had thought it must be one of the other people on the bus, but now he knew that it was not. It was coming from somewhere else. And he wondered: Could it be Lissa? When he had healed her, had their minds been linked permanently, not just for the brief moment in which his power had been acting on her?

But he had felt nothing exactly like this before, not even when, last fall, they had spent so much time together. And why should it start now?

Jeremy forced himself to lean back in his seat. He closed his eyes, trying to cut off the sights and sounds of the bus, the occasional headlights that flashed by in the darkness, the steady drone of the bus's motor, the faint jangle of music from the transistor radio in the shirt pocket of the boy who had gotten on at North Manchester. He tried to cut off everything but the impressions and vague images that fluttered through his mind

from—somewhere.

Involuntarily, he shuddered, wondering what other surprises this thing within him held in store.

The traffic lights had quit cycling through red and green and were simply flashing yellow or red warnings at the intersections when Lissa reached Belle Fontaine. The courthouse clock clanged out its midnight peal as she drove slowly past, her eyes scanning the deserted street ahead for the bus station. It was, she knew, in the lobby of one of the hotels, but she couldn't remember which, the Karns or the Arlington.

There, halfway down the next block, was the Karns, small and dingy, the neon sign over the door flickering and buzzing. No, it must be the Arlington, but where?

She spotted it too late, and it slid by on her right. There was no neon sign, only the name "ARLINGTON" in dark gold letters on the large plate glass window facing Main Street. There was nothing to indicate it was also the bus station except for the large, marked off parking area just around the corner on the side street. A huge black car sat next to the curb on Main, a few yards from the lobby door, and for a moment Lissa wondered who it could be. The car looked big enough to be chauffeur driven, and certainly there couldn't be many people who could afford something like that in Belle Fontaine.

And if they could afford a limousine like that, why would they be traveling by bus?

She shook her head as she swung the Checker around the corner onto the side street. It must be the hour and the deserted streets, she told herself irritably—and all the melodramatic warnings she had been getting from both Jeremy and Brother Jacob. They were enough to make her suspicious of every shadow, if she let herself think along those lines.

But it was all nonsense, of course. Brother Jacob had always been melodramatic. To be a healer—Brother Jacob's kind of healer, at least—you had to be melodramatic. It was all part of the act. And he had just scared Jeremy somehow, that was all. In trying to scare Jeremy into coming back to him, he had made him think things were worse than they

really were.

Still, as the Checker rolled past the side of the hotel and she prepared to make another turn onto the street that ran a half block behind the hotel, she couldn't completely suppress the apprehension she still felt.

The clock over the lobby desk had reached midnight, and Jacob realized, for the hundredth time in the last half hour, that time was running out. If he was going to do something, it would have to be now, before Jeremy's bus arrived.

But what could he do? How could he save himself, let alone Jeremy? Even if he could, himself, escape, it would not save Jeremy. And probably not even himself. Shupe had too many people, too many eyes and ears, for either of them simply to remain hidden. And there was Lissa. And Sarah. They could get to Jeremy, at least, through the two women.

If only he could talk to Jeremy and somehow convince him what would happen if he persisted. Maybe, just maybe, if he were allowed to do what Shupe pretended he was going to allow him to do, if he could actually convince Jeremy, then they could in turn convince Shupe that it was safe to let them go. Maybe they could make up some kind of insurance policy, in the form of letters to police and newspapers, arranged to be delivered only if they were killed—or disappeared.

If...

But to do anything like that, not only would Jacob have to escape, but so would Jeremy, and that would be impossible once Jeremy arrived. The only possibility—

Could he stop Jeremy before he got here? Could he escape from Shupe's men and somehow waylay the bus? Get Jeremy off the bus before it reached the station? Or keep the bus going without stopping at Belle Fontaine?

Plans whirled through Jacob's mind. Could he get away? Could he stop the bus?

Suddenly, he decided. He had nothing to lose. If he did nothing, he was

positive he would be dead within an hour, along with Jeremy. *Really* dead, methodically dead at the hands of men who were efficient and knowledgeable, not "temporarily" dead from a minor head injury or a freak plane crash.

He glanced toward the two men by the door, then toward the hallway that ran from one side of the registration desk to—to where? He sidled closer to the desk, leaned on it, and looked toward the hall out of the corner of his eye.

At the far end of the hall, maybe fifty feet away, was a door with frosted glass in the top half.

Still slowly, Jacob moved to one end of the desk, picking up one of the tourist brochures that lay spread out on the desk. He glanced up at the clock, wondering how long until the bus pulled in and it was too late.

He tensed himself, his stomach churning, and he thought: It's just like stage fright, before a tent meeting. Calm down, or you're through. You may not make it in any case, but if you don't calm down, you won't have a chance.

He swallowed once, breathed in deeply a couple of times—and bolted.

Past the desk, into the hall, toward the door at the end. Behind him he heard footsteps pounding after him, but there were no voices, no one shouting at him to stop. The skin on his back crawled in anticipation.

But there was nothing, and the door was suddenly open and he was in the alley, running with a speed he never realized he had. The intersection of the two alleys was only a dozen yards away, and for the first time in the last half dozen seconds, he began to feel he might make it.

Almost losing his footing on the rough bricks of the alley, he rounded the corner to the left, away from the back of the hotel. Behind him, he heard the back door slam open again.

But the end of the alley—if he could make that before they saw him, before they saw which way he went. There were houses there, yards, dozens of places to hide, and cars that, if he could remember how to hotwire one, he could take. But he had to reach the end of the alley first.

There was no sound—the gun must have been silenced—as the slug plowed into his back. He felt the pressure that threw him forward and made him stumble, but not the pain.

CHAPTER 18

Jeremy sat up sharply in the bus, his eyes snapping open, a cry only half stifled in his throat. The young boy a few seats ahead looked around for a second, but no one else seemed to notice.

The bus hurried on through the darkness.

Lissa turned the Checker onto the street that ran behind the hotel. She had intended to continue on around the block and park in front of the hotel, but now she hesitated. No matter how irrational it seemed, she could not shake the apprehension she felt, particularly after seeing the black limousine parked at the front.

Perhaps, just to be on the safe side, she should park back here and walk back to the lobby. She could look in through the lobby window before going in, just to see who was there. Perhaps...

She slowed and was pulling toward the curb when a man lurched out of the alley only a few yards ahead of her. For just an instant, she thought he was simply a drunk, but then, as the man managed to regain his balance and turn toward her, into the beams from the headlights, she saw who it was.

"Brother Jacob!"

Suddenly, all the warnings he and Jeremy had given her, all the warnings that she had dismissed as nonsense, came flooding back through her, intensified by the apprehension she herself had been feeling. Without really thinking, she jammed down on the accelerator. The car lurched forward and then skidded to a stop almost directly across Jacob's path. She reached across the seat and threw open the door.

"Get in!"

His face was deathly pale, and she could see the blood on his shirt front

as he half fell against the car.

"Get in!" she repeated.

"Lissa!" His voice was a hoarse whisper, barely audible, his eyes wide in surprise. For an instant, he seemed about to push away from the car and stagger back into the street, but then he tumbled inside, sprawling on the seat. The sudden acceleration of the car, as much as Jacob's hand on the door, pulled the door shut.

Jeremy's heart was pounding and his entire body, inside and out, seemed to tingle as if from an electrical charge. Ahead, somewhere in the night, someone was dying, and the only person he could think of was Lissa.

Someone was dying, and he would be too late.

As they rounded the corner, the Checker swaying dangerously, Lissa glimpsed a man appearing at the end of the alley they had just passed. In the instant he had been in sight, she couldn't tell if he had seen the car or not. If he had, it would be easy enough to identify. In these days of sleek, inefficient cars, the high, box-shaped Checker stood out like an ugly duckling.

"A doctor—" she began, but Jacob's harsh whisper cut her off.

"The bus—you've got to stop the bus! Shupe is back there waiting for Jeremy! They'll kill him!"

"But you—"

"I know. I—All of a sudden, I feel—" For an instant, his eyes seemed to light up as the car sped past a street light in the middle of the block. "Maybe Jeremy's my only chance, if I can last long enough."

The eyes lowered themselves, as if he were forcing himself to look down at the bloody shirt front, and then they closed. His breath went out in a bubbling sigh and was not drawn back in.

Jeremy waited, forcing himself to sit still. There was nothing he could do here, nothing until he reached—

Reached Lissa?

He could only wait, his knuckles white as his hands gripped the edge of the seat. He could only wait, helpless, feeling the life draining out of him as it drained out of—

He shook his head violently until his vision swam, but he could not force the thoughts out of his mind or the feelings out of his body.

Lissa forced herself to think rationally as the Checker rocked to a stop at the intersection with Main Street. If she turned north, to meet the bus, she would have to go directly past the Arlington—and the huge limousine that stood waiting. Shupe's limousine, she was sure.

She shivered in every part of her body as she involuntarily glanced sideways at Brother Jacob's body.

Pushing the accelerator to the floor, she shot directly across Main and continued on to the next street before turning north. If that man had seen her, and if Shupe guessed where she was going...

But there was nothing she could do but try. At midnight the streets were almost deserted, and she barely slowed for the cross streets. It seemed like an hour but actually was less than two minutes when, after a dozen blocks, she pulled back onto Main and headed north.

Behind her she could see no headlights, and by the time she reached the city limits after another half dozen blocks, the speedometer read 70. She wasn't worried about a policeman lying in ambush, but would welcome one.

But there was nothing. No other cars, no other lights, and she began to think that the immediate danger might be over.

As long as the man hadn't seen the Checker as it disappeared around

the corner.

As long as Shupe didn't figure out where she was going.

Then, about a quarter of a mile ahead, rounding a long, sweeping curve, came the distinctive lights of the bus.

Jeremy's body shook, the contact was so strong. It was almost as intense as it was during the healings, but now, instead of ending after a few seconds, it continued and continued, growing ever more intense by the second.

But there were no images or visions shooting past his inner eye now. There were only feelings, and he knew that those feelings meant death. And that whoever it was whose death he felt was approaching, swiftly.

He forced himself to sit up straighter, ignoring the trembling and the nearly unbearable tingling that shot through his body like a thousand tiny electric currents. He forced himself to look forward, past the driver and through the broad, flat windshield.

Whoever it was, was out there somewhere, dying. Or— and the thought struck at him like a physical blow— already dead.

Then, abruptly, as the bus rounded a curve, a pair of headlights appeared.

And he knew: It was *there!*

"Stop!" He leaped up and ran down the aisle to the front of the bus. "Stop the bus! Let me out here!"

The driver shot a puzzled glance over his shoulder. "There's nothing out here," he said. "It's another five miles to Belle Fontaine at least."

"I said let me out here!"

The driver shrugged. "It's your ticket." The air brakes hissed as the bus slowed without pulling off the highway onto the shoulder.

Ahead, the oncoming car seemed suddenly to swerve across the road toward them, its lights blinking rapidly on and off.

The bus was stopping! Even before Lissa had begun flashing the Checker's headlights, it had begun slowing down.

Still flashing the lights, she swerved into the opposite lane in front of the oncoming bus. Fifty yards away, it came to a stop and the door popped open. A second later, a man leaped out and, without hesitation, ran toward the car. In the glare of the headlights from both bus and car, she could see that it was Jeremy.

And she felt, somewhere deep in her mind, a faint tickling of contact.

It was the Checker—Harry's Checker! What was *it* doing here? Had it been Harry—

But no, it couldn't have been. It had to be Lissa!

Jeremy jerked open the door and saw that Lissa was driving—and saw Jacob, slouched low in the seat, the front of his shirt crimson, a trickle of blood coming from the corner of his mouth.

For an instant, he stared, his mind working as it had never worked before.

It had been Jacob in his mind. *And* Lissa. And who? Shupe?

But Jacob—was he dead? Was Jeremy too late?

No! He couldn't be! It was his fault, Jeremy's fault, whatever had happened to Jacob. And from somewhere, the name Shupe popped into his mind again, and he felt the bullet tearing through his own body as it had, minutes before, torn through Jacob's.

All this and more in less than a second, and then Jeremy was grasping Jacob in his arms, lifting him out of the front and laying him gently on the broad, flat floor of the Checker's back seat.

"Shupe!" Lissa was saying as Jeremy climbed into the back. "His men

did it. They're waiting for you at the bus station."

Then, appearing from the direction of Belle Fontaine, coming around the receding form of the bus, a pair of headlights appeared. Lissa and Jeremy both saw them and both knew what it meant. They knew that if they were to survive the night, they had to get away.

Lissa floored the accelerator again and shot back onto the highway. She knew the Checker could never outrace the limousine she had seen in front of the Arlington, but there was nothing else she could do.

In the back, Jeremy knelt on the floor next to Jacob, holding the limp hands tightly, blocking out everything from his mind but the thought:

I can't be too late! It's my fault that this happened. If I hadn't been so stubborn, so damned righteous, he would still be alive.

Once again, Jeremy felt as he had when he had touched Aunt Jessica and Lissa and Bobby and Sarah. It was not an emotionless order, as it had been with the others since then, but it was an order nonetheless. An order backed up with the emotion that flowed out of him like a stream.

Something happened.

Jacob's body stiffened, as if jolted by an electrical shock. Simultaneously, Jeremy slumped and almost collapsed onto Jacob's body, but somehow he managed to hold himself up and keep his hands clamped tightly around Jacob's.

Abruptly, Jacob's eyes snapped open, and Jeremy thought: It's working! I wasn't too late!

"Jacob!" Jeremy felt the tears begin. "You're going to be all right!"

Then, as Jacob struggled to sit up, the contact came, between his mind and Jeremy's. The contact, the flow of impressions and images and memories, dominated by Jacob's last minutes, by the breathless dash down the hall, the stumbling run through the semi-darkened alley, the impact of the bullet as it plowed through his body.

Jeremy stiffened, overwhelmed not by the flood of memories but by the terrible coldness that clothed them. Not by the blood that still soaked the

front of Jacob's shirt and trickled from his mouth, but by the blankness of his face, by the emptiness that looked at Jeremy out of Jacob's eyes.

The mouth moved then, and the voice spoke Jeremy's name, but Jeremy knew that this was not Jacob. This was Jacob's body, given a strange kind of half life, able to move and speak and perhaps even to think—but it was not Jacob.

Jacob's personality, his being—his soul?—was not here. It had been too long since the body had died. It could be temporarily resurrected, but the inner being that had been Jacob was gone.

Slowly, Jeremy released Jacob's hands, and as he did, Jacob's eyes glazed over once again. For a moment the blank eyes stared at Jeremy, seeing and yet not seeing, and Jeremy shivered, afraid of the animated shell that sat before him, its mouth still forming his name.

Then it was over. "The pseudo-life that Jeremy, had forced into it had drained away, and the shell sank back to the floor.

The breathing stopped.

And Jeremy wondered: In those few minutes of death, where had "Jacob" gone? Did he float in the air somewhere, watching and listening? Not wanting to return to the shell even though he had been given the chance? Was he already being born again in some hospital or house or hut half way around the world?

The car swerved, throwing Jeremy solidly against one of the doors. Quickly, he scrambled into the front seat, slipping on the still-wet blood on the back of the seat. Easily keeping pace with the Checker was a large, black limousine.

"Shupe's men," Lissa said, but Jeremy already knew. But, though he knew, there was still nothing he could do but watch.

The limousine pulled slightly ahead and then swerved sharply toward them, forcing them toward the ditch, deep and treacherous to the right. At the last second, Lissa straightened the Checker in a desperate move, and the Checker's left front fender grated against the right side of the limousine.

But it was no good. Despite the Checker's solid body, which would have held its own against any standard car, it was no match for the huge, specially constructed limousine. The limousine, heavy and driven by an expert, could force them off the road easily. After the brief clash of metal against metal, the limousine resumed its inexorable move sideways.

And suddenly Jeremy thought: If I can talk to Shupe for just a second, if I can just touch him—

Jeremy opened his mouth to shout over the roar of the engines and the scrape of metal, but before he could say anything, he realized that Lissa already knew. The link between them still existed, and she was jamming on the brakes. The limousine shot ahead momentarily, but then its brake lights flared and by the time the cars came to a stop they were only inches apart.

The back door of the limousine popped open and a young man leaped out, a gun in his hand. The driver remained at the wheel, ready in case Lissa started the Checker again. The man with the gun came to Jeremy's door and yanked it open. A sideways glance into the back seat was the only indication that he saw Jacob's body. He said nothing as he stepped back to allow Jeremy out of the car.

"This side," the man said sharply to Lissa, who slid obediently across the blood-covered seat and got out behind Jeremy.

Once they were both out of the Checker, two more men got out of the limousine. Jeremy recognized one of them as the still-thin Shupe although a wide-brimmed hat put his face largely in shadow.

Shupe approached Jeremy and Lissa carefully as the other two men held their guns on them.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Case," Shupe said, stopping less than a yard from Jeremy. "I truly am grateful for what you did for me, and I wish I could see a way out of this that did not involve your death."

Jeremy said nothing. He felt Lissa standing close beside him; he could feel her trembling.

"And you, Miss Martin," Shupe went on, "I tried to avoid this, I really did. If only Mr. Reese had not attempted—"

He stopped, shrugging sadly.

Jeremy moved his left hand slightly, and Lissa, without seeing it and without a sound from Jeremy, took it tightly in her own.

Then, slowly at first, Jeremy extended his right hand out toward Shupe. For a moment the man shied back. Then he smiled, putting out his own hand.

"I see you understand, Mr. Case. There are very few men who would in a situation like this. I act only out of necessity—the necessity of survival."

Their hands touched, and Jeremy's closed sharply on Shupe's.

For an instant there was nothing, and then Jeremy felt the power flow out of him. He felt the creature that lived within him dart out, probe, and pull back. Simultaneously came the dizziness, the swaying, and, on Shupe's face, a sudden grimace of pain and surprise.

Shupe gasped, staggering. Even in the pale reflected light from the headlamps of the two cars, his face darkened and flushed for a moment and then paled to a deathly, ashen gray.

Shupe fell, knowing what had happened, knowing that what Jeremy had taken from his body barely a week before, Jeremy had now returned. Even as he fell, he felt it eating at him as it had during those long months before, but now it was moving faster, devouring him at an impossible rate.

He tried to cry out, to tell his men to stop, to not kill the only person on earth who could save him.

But he could not speak. He could only croak wordlessly as the renewed disease spread through him like fire. He could only watch helplessly through rapidly clouding eyes as his men, acting automatically as they saw him fall and shrivel before their eyes, emptied their guns into Jeremy and Lissa.

In an instant, the barriers, both internal and external, fell.

The final merging of the hosts, both past and present, could now

begin, but the mind of the present host was oblivious to all but the single thought that, in its intensity, had caused those barriers to fall:

SAVE HER!

And with that command, the unseen, unfelt tendrils spread throughout both bodies as if they were one.

The Beginning

CHAPTER 19

Awareness returned to Jeremy, and with it came a calmness, for he knew that, even as he was awakening, so was Lissa.

Then, as if to confirm that knowledge, he felt her hand stir in his.

And her mind... he felt her mind as well, felt it stirring and joining to his, even as their hands joined.

And the companion...

For the first time, Jeremy—Jeremy/Lissa—were fully aware of its existence and of the multiplicity of minds (remnants of minds) that were now linked to theirs.

The companion? No, that was the wrong word. It was not a companion, not a separate being, but a part of himself—of themselves. It had no memories of its own, yet a thousand memories, a million images, hovered at the edges of their mind, waiting to be grasped, waiting to be assimilated and used and understood.

There were not only the hideous forms of death that had filled Jeremy's dreams for so long—though they were, now, the most prominent, simply because of their familiarity and intensity. There were also the lives that had preceded those deaths. Lives on dozen worlds—or was it a hundred? a thousand? Someday perhaps they would know.

Someday, when all the memories had been sorted through, perhaps they would know.

They might even know, someday, how the companion had begun, although they could see even now that the memories of the earliest host were as blank concerning the companion's origins as the memories of all later hosts.

Perhaps they might even, someday, discover its purpose—if it had one.

Perhaps they could, someday, discover why their own minds—human minds—seemed unique, why human minds were the only ones that could, even without a physical link, unite and become one.

Perhaps, if more minds became linked with theirs, minds not only here on Earth, but on other, distant worlds... But that was for the future.

For now, for this moment, the memories of other minds and other times and other worlds were forced aside. Their own memories, the warm, living memories and minds that were uniquely Lissa and Jeremy, flowed into each other. For now, for a few brief minutes, they reveled in the all-encompassing warmth and comfort and total understanding that the union brought.

And, as they thought of the future and all the unknowns that it held, they rejoiced in the knowledge that, no matter how far they would travel, no matter how far they might be separated, no matter how much they would learn, no matter how much they might seem to change, there would still be, underneath it all, at the core of their being, the living memory—the reality—of this first and total joining.