

Praise for *My Thomas* **by Roberta Grimes**

Cast in the form of a diary written by Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha, Grimes's first novel chronicles the years from their courtship in 1770 to her death in 1782. Atmospheric and richly detailed, with exact accounts of such contemporary activities as leaching lye and boiling soap, the novel captures the personalities of two extraordinary people and the tumult of the Revolutionary War that consumed their lives. We view the conflict through the prism of Martha's sharply perceptive mind; the maneuvers of the era's famous men—George Washington, Patrick Henry, and Benedict Arnold—form a well-integrated backdrop to her story.

The novel also traces Martha's evolution from a self-indulgent Southern belle to an outspoken young mother with radical social views; conversations with her slave Betty on the explosive subjects of emancipation and miscegenation are revealing of the complex relationship between white and black Americans in the 18th century. Thomas Jefferson's steady rise as a lawyer, lawmaker, and statesman takes second place here to his role as husband, father, and lover, so shattered by his young wife's death that he never remarried. The moving tale succeeds both as gripping historical saga and powerful love story.

—Publisher's Weekly

***My Thomas* a literary tour de force**

Roberta Grimes's first major novel is a marvel, a historical novel whose detail, scope and depth seem much greater than the book's more than 300 pages. *My Thomas* captures the complicated nature and depth of Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha, who died just ten years after the couple were married and whom Jefferson mourned the rest of his life.

The novel is presented as Martha's own journal of her life with Thomas, and the hand of the author is neither seen nor felt anywhere in the book. The reader is totally immersed in Martha's life, in the person she must have been.

Grimes's mastery of the tone of life in late 18th century Virginia is complete. Her characters live, breathe, and speak with such truth and realism that the reader is drawn unconsciously into the complicated and fascinating lives of Martha and Thomas.

Not since Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the battle of Gettysburg, *Killer Angels*, have I read such a fine historical novel.

—Daniel L. Mallock, *The Patriot Ledger*, Quincy, MA

I loved it... The greatest compliment I can pay this novel is to say I was furious when it ended. I wanted much, much more of Martha, I was so beguiled by her. I have no doubt at all this novel will be an enormous success—after all, how rare is it to find a novel so quiet and yet startling, so dignified and yet passionate, so sincere and so deductive.

—Margaret Forster, author of *Lady's Maid*

Roberta Grimes is a highly intelligent and richly gifted writer. Those with a curiosity about the American past will read *My Thomas* with delight and urge it upon their friends.

—Alf J. Mapp, Jr., author of *Thomas Jefferson: Passionate Pilgrim*

Such a different, interesting and insightful look at the family life of Thomas Jefferson. Martha was truly the love of his life yet I think there were times that in her short life she doubted that. She never failed to support him and stood by his decisions even if she did not agree. Definitely an historical novel must-read.

—Charleysangel, Amazon.com

I don't know how much of this book is factual, but it was very romantic and endearing, exciting with all the moves during the war, sad with all the children Martha lost, and had interesting dynamics between Martha and the slaves. I really enjoyed it. A great read!

—C. Lane, Amazon.com

An excellent book about the life of one of the most elusive of the presidents' wives. I would definitely recommend it for anyone interested in learning more about Thomas Jefferson, and also for anyone who is interested in the presidents' lives and their families.

—Zann A. Gibson, Amazon.com

Loved the book! So well written. I learned so much about that period of history, from the extremely vivid descriptions.

—Rebecca K. Isley, Amazon.com

Rich
& FAMOUS

By the Author

FICTION:

Rich and Famous

My Thomas

Letter from Freedom

Letter from Money

Letter from Wonder

NONFICTION:

The Fun of Dying – Find Out What Really Happens Next!

The Fun of Staying in Touch

Rich
& FAMOUS

ROBERTA GRIMES

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Rich and Famous

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This story is lovingly dedicated to all those who struggled and sacrificed to pass down to us their American dream, and to our grandchildren, for whom it is our legacy.

chapter one

January 28, 1988

Kim stood at her office window. The gray Indianapolis sky beyond her was flecked with snowflakes like cotton lace that flattened weightless against the glass and melted into busy dribbles. Lou watched her lift her head and set her shoulders. He could see that she was frightened. Kim was president and chairman of the board of Taste of Home, a half-billion-dollar corporation she had built around an idea that Lou had been sure would never fly. She was a marketing prodigy and a management genius, but she lacked the stomach for a dirty fight, and she was just twenty-nine. He couldn't bear to tell her everything. If she knew she was about to lose control of the company she had spent six years nurturing like an only child, she might not be able to fight anymore.

She murmured, "How bad is it?" Then she turned, and the sight of her stricken face made Lou shrink a little inside his clothes. She had the delicate skin of a genuine blonde, so the high flush on her cheeks stood out like cute clown dots. The thin white scar down the left side of her face was more noticeable than it had been in quite some time. Kim had never been willing to tell him how she had come by that scar, nor would she consider plastic surgery to correct it. She even had a habit of hooking her hair

behind her ear to show it off. Now she was adding, "Can't we stall until after the board meeting?"

Lou drew a long breath and settled deeper into her sofa, eliciting a whisper of springs. He said, "City papers will have separate stories tonight. By tomorrow it's national news."

"If I get a margin call, I'm dead."

Lou had nothing to say to that. Watching her go through this was agony for him. He saw no way she could take back control of her company; the most she might do was hold on to her job. He flipped open the folder of statistics he had prepared during his hours in the air.

"Well, first the good news. Your inspiration to provide room service for hot-sheet motels is taking off there, too. Thirty-nine franchises in the Northeast is pretty good, considering we've been there just eighteen months. They're already serving a thousand motels and tourist cabins, and I picked up applications for an additional seventeen franchises. Not bad for a kid in pigtails." Kim gave him the smirk he expected as he leaned to hand her the sheet where he had consolidated thirty-nine separate statements. She came for it and looked it over as she headed back toward the front of her desk.

"They're flying, Kim. Our take this year could be fifty million dollars."

She hooked her hair behind her ear and sat against her desk, crossing her ankles, reading. Her hair was so soft that it whispered free strand by strand. She looked at Lou and said, "Do you know what's great about this? I'm used to the fact we can do it here, but having them take our procedures and do it on their own still amazes me." Again she smiled and bit her lip. This was becoming a new mannerism for a woman enjoying undreamed-of success coupled with ever-increasing anxieties.

"The only wrinkle is the Fragonese own at least eleven of those franchises, and not just the two we first suspected."

“But we were careful about that! Weren’t we careful? Didn’t we check those people out?”

“They lied. And we were naive, I guess.”

“We never should have franchised to begin with. We could have waited and done the whole expansion ourselves. Why not? Just a few years more?”

Lou leaned and sipped his cooling coffee. He had a headache coming on, but he could take some aspirin when he went back to his office to shave on his way to the board meeting.

“They’re really running drugs? How long has this been going on?”

“Nearly a year in some places.”

“And we’re just learning about it now?”

“The locals tried to handle it on their own until the Feds decided to stick it to the Fragones. That’s when they started this IRS audit, so that’s when we were finally called. By the time I got there, they were setting up a multi-state raid for last night....”

“We were *raided?*” Kim bounced away from her desk and paced to the window-wall, where she stiffly stood with her hands behind her back. Her blond hair and navy-blue suit made her look like a small, dark fertility sculpture crowned in gold. “I hate this!” She turned to face him. “I can’t stand being mixed up with bums!”

“It’s all right. All they found was a couple of hookers who claimed they were working independently and a little cocaine in a delivery truck. The drivers said they were users. And nobody’d heard of anybody named Fragone.”

“Let me get this straight. The papers are about to say we were raided because there were rumors we were dealing in drugs and prostitution? And they even *found* some girls and drugs, but nobody can link it to the Fragones? So now it looks like *we’re* the crooks?”

“Not crooks”

“I hate this!” Kim paced to her desk, sat down in her chair, then immediately bounced up again.

“Listen to me. It’s a P.R. problem. That happens. You deal with it.”

“I don’t want to deal with it! Not when there are half a dozen stockholders on my board now who turn out to have their own agendas. Sure, I own forty-three percent of the company *now*. But that’s with mortgaging my house and margining my stock and putting up everything I own so I could buy back what I shouldn’t have sold in the first place. If that stock falls five points, I’m going to get margin calls and then I’m dead. I’ll lose everything! How could you do this to me, Lou?” Tears welled in her eyes and she tipped up her chin, looking at him.

He had seen this moment coming for the past six months, ever since it had become apparent that a pair of California investors had accumulated twenty-eight percent of Taste of Home’s stock. Then a franchisee in Newark had received an audit notice, and Kim had remarked that their stockholders and franchisees were becoming more trouble than they were worth. Lou said patiently, “When you have something that works you go national or you watch somebody else crowd you out. If we hadn’t gone public and franchised when we did, Intelco’s Moveable Menu wouldn’t be just our upstart competitor. It would be the whole show.”

“I don’t agree!” Kim snapped. “And now we’re doing frozen food, too? We’ve got to do everything at once?” She fixed him with a frosty-moist glare. “This is just a game to you, isn’t it? Watch your star pupil build her little idea into a not-so-little company so you can play your financial games. That’s all this is to you! What do you care? You can always go back to teaching, can’t you? But Taste of Home is my whole life!”

Lou tried to meet her eyes. He couldn’t. He opened his briefcase and slid his folder in and fussily clicked it shut. In a tiny way, she was right. He had made it a point not to own Taste of Home

stock, and he refused to be employed. A consultant, really, was all he was. His life and his pleasure for the past six years had been the development of this natural business talent and her jewel of a company that she had begun in her Aunt Dagmar's kitchen as an M.B.A. student. He had been eager for her to go public, and tickled by the complexities of a franchise operation. But, a game? He didn't think he saw it as a game. "You know I'd never dream of hurting you," he said as he tried again to meet her eyes.

"Was it deliberate? Or were you just really stupid?"

There was a wounded sparkle in her eyes that made her seem as tender as a child. The corners of her mouth tipped up a little, right on the edge of smiling. Lou loved this woman so desperately that all he wanted to do was spend forever gazing into the enigma of that crying, laughing face, but he had never been able to tell her that. There was a wall of strangeness between Kim and any man she dated that wasn't mistrust, precisely. It was more like an innate cross-gender reserve, like the grill and veiling that hide a nun. He had long ago understood that he could be her friend or he could risk their friendship for the dead-end, meaningless role of her lover.

"I've always been alone. I don't need *you*." Her eyes were moist. "Go on, Lou. Get out of here. Go screw up somebody else's company."

"You need me," he said gently. "I'm the only one in this mess who's on your side."

"Nobody's on my side! But watch me. I'll do it alone. In spite of you. Nobody's going to take my company!"

He couldn't stand the way she was looking at him, like a defiant little badger in a leg-hold trap. He knew that she was only half angry. She was working off some of her fears on him, and it pleased him to know that they were close enough for her to feel able to do that. He said patiently, "I'm sorry. I'll go with you now. We can talk about all this later."

“No. Get out of my way. It’s time I stood on my own two feet.”

She stalked a detour around him, then paused with her hand gentle on the doorknob while she lifted her chin and adjusted her shoulders. She opened the door with a resolute little flourish and left the room.



Sam Denton was hunched to count off the seconds on his diamond Rolex that he wore everywhere, even on horseback and out in the vegetable fields and in the meat-packing plant. It bore a patina of unmentionable dirt that pleased him. “The bitch is now thirty minutes late,” he muttered to Hicks Waverly, who sat slumped like a sack in a stiff French chair where no man could be comfortable. Hicks seemed half-asleep, with his eyes slitted and his chin sunk in rolls on his chest.

Sam saw now that Hicks was studying the woman sitting opposite him across the broad pink-marble table. She repeatedly glared at Hicks and flinched her eyes away, but he just went on looking at her and smiling with the upper part of his face. Then his mouth moved, lazily, as if he were using his tongue to count his teeth. Hicks’s one big flaw was this weakness he had for women who were repulsed by him. He soon lost interest in any woman who was even neutral, but when he met one who showed him an active dislike, he would pursue her with such fervor that surprisingly often he was able to maneuver her into bed. Now Sam watched with disgust as Hicks began another pursuit. This fetish of his was such a waste of his energy.

“Think she’ll show?” Hicks muttered, his eyes still on the woman, who had ostentatiously turned to chat with a sallow man sitting to her right. She was an angular creature whose winter-blue eyes contradicted the Native American look of her high cheekbones and long, dark hair.

“She’d better,” Sam muttered, liking the growl of irrita-

tion in his own voice. He didn't know or care who any of these people were. And now he regretted having bothered to come to this useless meeting of a rubber-stamp board that was about to become superfluous. Sam and Hicks had spent years trying to get into restaurants on a big enough scale to make it worthwhile, and then along had come this kid with her brilliant idea that was revolutionizing the motel business. Her stock was so thinly traded that they should have been able to buy control through straws before she was even aware of them, but six months ago they had found themselves in a bidding war that had driven the price up to a ridiculous fifty times earnings. So now they were taking another tack. Hicks had thought that being on the board would be a source of inside information, but Sam knew board meetings were a waste of time when they were about to force out the major stockholder anyway and be done with it.



Faith Neiquist was smoldering. If that fat cowboy with the head shaped like a pear didn't stop leering at her, she was going to stalk right out of this room. She was bored with the mouse of a man sitting next to her, so she shifted and gazed off through the window at the boxy gray Indianapolis skyline shimmering beyond the spitting snow.

"This has never happened before," fretted the mouse. "They always start the meeting like clockwork."

He was a small man in a three-piece suit with a body oddly shaped like a greyhound's: he had skinny limbs, a barrel chest, and a triangular face that seemed to be all part of the structure of his gigantic nose. His hairline was receding, which made him look as if his ears were pricked. To Faith's amusement, he fished a big gold watch from his vest pocket and took a squinting look at it.

"Have you been on the board long?" she asked.

"Two years. I'm ex-officio. Union."

Faith had no idea what that meant, but she didn't want an explanation. She slipped a Benson & Hedges from her cigarette case as she shot another glare at that cowboy who couldn't keep his eyes to himself. Faith had learned that while she wasn't conventionally pretty, she had an arresting look of wildness about her that some men perceived as great beauty. She looked at the hick as she carefully, sensually exhaled smoke through her mouth and nose. John David Neiquist was such a man. J. D. Neiquist, the textile king, had taken one look at his new public relations director and thrown over marriage and family to take up with a woman forty years his junior.

Kimberly Bonner had stolen from Faith the only man she had ever loved. Had taken him, and then had jilted him so hard that he left college and disappeared altogether. Faith couldn't say when she had first noticed Kim's success, but for years she had followed with gritted teeth all the fawning media attention that bitch surely loved. It had taken J.D. to point out to Faith that Taste of Home's foray into frozen foods was risky, since ninety percent of new food products failed. They had to get space in all the major chains to have any chance at all. So Faith had followed Kimberly's progress in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* as Taste of Home's new frozen foods were test-marketed in Columbus and Topeka. Then, "It sure would be a shame, sugar, if Higgins & Stein passed up your li'l friend's food deal," J.D. had remarked to Faith one evening as he served himself candied sweet potatoes while his butler who was also his valet stood and stiffly held the bowl. Higgins & Stein had more than fifteen hundred stores in the nine southern states. Faith had paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and looked at J.D.

"Can you do that?" she had murmured in the small, sweet voice he preferred.

"Hell, I've been thinkin' of buyin' myself a store or two. Higgins & Stein's as good as any."



Paul Whist slipped his watch from his vest pocket and glanced at it again. My word, they were thirty-five minutes late. But what interested him about the delay was less the cause of it than the fact that there were ten people sitting around this table, none of whom was willing to mention the fact that they had been sitting here for thirty-five minutes. That was odd. And he loved every oddity, every break in pattern, for the insights he could draw from it and use to good effect later on. So Paul was enjoying this delay. It gave him a chance to size up the new members. There had been a surprising consolidation of stock in a few hands during the past year, and the stockholders in their wisdom had voted out the four members of the board who were up for re-election and nominated from the floor a whole new slate.

The woman sitting next to Paul he had easily dismissed as typical. She had told him she owned eight percent of the company's stock, this was her first time on a corporate board, and she lived in Charleston, South Carolina. But she had a Midwestern accent, and the stiff way she held her shoulders and smoked told him she hadn't come from money. So she was the toy of some Southern tycoon who had bought her a toy of her own. Next case.

The fat and skinny cowboys sitting across the table had seemed to be a break in pattern until Paul had assessed their expensive fur coats and jewelry and the lackeys sitting against the wall who apparently belonged to them. So they were a couple of eccentric partners who wanted to do business with the company or hoped to take it over. Next case.

The young man sitting beside the skinny cowboy had seemed at first to be typical, but Paul realized after thirty-five minutes that he was the biggest break in pattern in the room. He was a dark-haired princeling in his early twenties, a soft-faced young

man in a gray chalk-stripe whose finish of buttonholes and fit of sleeves shouted that it had to be a thousand-dollar suit. Maybe two thousand. His baby-full cheeks bore a delicate flush, even though the room was just a little overheated. He was sweating so much that droplets stood on his forehead. But what surprised Paul most was the fact that he neither looked at nor spoke to anyone else. He gave the impression of being utterly alone in some strenuous and painful manhood rite. How very odd.

Paul glanced around at the others again, cultivating a carefully bland expression. He was pleased that the luck of a new slate had unexpectedly given him a lack of history. A couple of times in the past few years he had been forced to press some labor issues with the old board. Now the five older members would remember, but they had generally split on labor issues. And Bonner's mentor, Louis Pointe, was a pragmatist who would know when he was in a box.



Dominick Ashton willed himself to sit absolutely still. His shirt clung to his back and itchily released. This had to be a trap. Why else would all these people sit here waiting for more than half an hour? There even seemed to be a conspiracy among them, a sense of shared smiles that never reached their faces. His plan had been brilliant, and if those brainless thugs his uncle had working for him hadn't screwed it up, there wouldn't have been anything so tacky as a multi-state raid. This room must be a hundred degrees. And what had it been, now? Almost an hour?

Dominick didn't realize the door had opened until there was a blur of heads turning. Then into the room walked a woman so surprisingly young and lovely that he blinked. Kim Bonner's face had appeared on so many magazine covers and television commercials and even billboards that it was impossible not to know who she was, but all her pretty photos and her tycoon image

only made more arresting his first sight of her. She was lovely and slight and graceful, a mere wisp of a woman with a classic, strong-featured face. And she looked as nervous as he was feeling, with her bright-pink cheeks and her hands clasped first in front and then behind her. He was so entranced by the sight of this woman whose company he intended to dismantle that he thought now perhaps she should be part of the deal. He'd have to see. She stood at the head of the boardroom table and said, "Good morning. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but there have been some developments on the East Coast. I waited for details so I could report to you."

Shit! But Dominick's name wasn't Fragone. He thought they wouldn't make the connection. He watched Kim Bonner slide out her chair and sit gracefully, then watched her jump it in little hops to pull it closer to the table. He found that charming.

"Because of the extraordinary nature of what I have to say, we will deviate from the agenda before you." Her voice quaked. She paused to clear her throat. "I will declare this meeting open and go directly to items of new business. Does anyone have anything he wishes to discuss?"

Dominick glanced around the table in surprise as, one by one, every other board member raised a hand.

chapter TWO

August 6, 1971

Kim had waited five years for her thirteenth birthday. When she was eight, her mother's cousin had come from Atlanta to spend the summer, and Kim had watched in mute worship as that worldly beauty with breasts and pubic hair went about all the glorious rituals of womanhood: the leg-shaving and tweezing of eyebrow hairs; the teased hair so high that it became an additional head; the strange and awful and compelling mysteries of the sanitary napkin. When Kim broke from bed to peer into the mirror on that ultimate birthday morning, she didn't look very different, but the mirror over their family dresser was missing half its silver and what was left was so full of morning that it made her squint. A better mirror might show a world of change.

Kim stepped over her brother's trundle bed to get to the closet. He was sleeping on with the same determination that Kim must have shown when her mother got up before dawn. She stood in the rich smell of mustiness and lilac toilet water that permeated all their clothing and shifted hangers on the pole at her mother's end, studying three white uniforms. What was going to be different about her thirteenth birthday was something she couldn't have imagined when she was eight. She would be spending the day working.

For Kim to care about turning thirteen seemed childish now,

when the hoped-for changes in her body had already occurred and she knew from the perspective of her thirteen years that there were more important goals to shoot for. Sixteen, when she could learn to drive. Eighteen, when she could graduate. Twenty, when her mother had had her first child. But Kim swore that her own child would have a father. She washed her face and brushed her teeth in the bathroom lean-to that had been added so long after the house was built that its floor was three inches lower than the bedroom linoleum. The naked sill of the house could be seen, and Kim liked that. She enjoyed knowing how things were put together, and this little glimpse of the bones of the house with axe marks visible and wooden pegs let her imagine all the other posts and pegs still hidden in the walls.

Kim put on her uniform quickly because the first sweetness of stove smoke was reaching her. Her mother's dress was too large for her, but still she could see the jut of breast or hip against cloth so she watched her body in the mirror as she bent and twisted, brushing out her hair. She began two braids at her temples and brought them around to the nape of her neck so she could coil them there and anchor them with hairpins. She saw now that her life would be a series of goals that would become less and less important the closer she came to achieving them; but nevertheless, it seemed to be a kindness to her eight-year-old self to feel pleased about having reached this day.

Kim's mother was in the front room, frying eggs and bacon. She had one of the stove lids out and her cast-iron pan set into the hole, so the hiss of frying was fierce and there was a blue haze of smoke above her head. "Sit, darlin'!" Darcy called as she turned things rapidly in her pan, causing brief interruptions and sputtering resurgences in the sound that could have been rain, Kim thought, as she carried plates to the table.

"Eat quick now, Kimmy. You got to get Mr. Sever's breakfast for seven-thirty." Darcy was wearing an apron made from a

flowered chicken-feed bag over her best navy-blue going-to-Richmond dress.

“It’s my birthday, Mama.”

“Oh, I know it is, darlin’.” Darcy sat down and picked up her fork. “I know it’s hard workin’ on your birthday, but I got to get Timmy to the doctor’s. He’s gettin’ worse. Sometimes I’m really scared for him.”

“It’s just allergies. It gets worse around August,” Kim said as she took a forkful of egg yolk. She was newly delighted every morning by the sunshine taste of eggs fried in bacon grease.

For as long as Kim could remember, she had yearned over her scattered, unstable mother as if Kim were the mother and Darcy the child. Darcy’s constant expression was a tentative smile, as if solemnity or a full smile might be risky. She spoke in a deep twang that sounded like rural Georgia and seemed to embarrass her in central Virginia. But despite the fact that she couldn’t afford a car and she heated her house with her kitchen stove, Darcy kept her long hair tidy and wore mascara and lipstick every day. Kim looked at her mother, feeling wrenched with pity by the effort Darcy had made that morning to part her hair exactly right.

“You don’t mind, do you, darlin’?” Darcy looked at Kim over a forkful of egg. Then she leaned with satisfaction to envelop her food with her round red mouth.

Kim minded very much the reason why she had to work. She had been an only child until the age of eight, and she saw her little brother as an interloper who now complicated every aspect of her life. He couldn’t go looking for berries in the glens below Highgrove, so Darcy wouldn’t do that anymore. He had to be put down at seven, which had meant the end of Kim’s reading in bed. He was allergic to almost everything. And Kim realized now that his dark hair and hazel eyes meant that he must have had a human father, but she couldn’t ask Darcy who it was. Just the fact of that secret made a space of politeness between Kim and her mother

that hadn't been there before. So Kim didn't feel for Timmy the love she thought she would have felt for a genuine brother. He seemed instead to be a tiny, malevolent presence in this house. But no, Kim didn't mind her occasional days of taking her mother's place in the mansion at Highgrove. Just being in those high-ceilinged, heavy-molded rooms, each of which could have held this house twice over, was a pleasure.

"Well," Darcy said after a long silence punctuated by dish clinks. "Kimmy? It's seven-ten. Mrs. Sever will be eatin', too. They're goin' to West Virginia to see to the mines. All she'll have is a fruit salad. It's right there in the refrigerator."



The path to Highgrove twisted through the swamp behind their house and up through a pasture littered with cow-flaps where sometimes there would be dairy cows that Kim eyed uneasily as she walked. Once a heifer had charged her, knocking her hard against the fence and chipping her tooth. Above the pasture was a pine wood that was scary to traverse at night, when the creaking of branches and the click of sap cooling in the trunks sounded like pursuers. The pines stopped at the foot of Highgrove's back lawn.

No matter how many times she saw this house, the fresh sight of it always brought Kim to a standstill at the edge of the woods. She stood there briefly, swiping at the moisture on her lip and catching her breath. The house was two hundred feet away, but it was so enormous on its little hill that it loomed immediately above her head. The massive shade of it made the grass look black and threw blue shadows along its veranda and into the cornices above its windows. High around its tall peaked roof, the brilliance of the sun was an orange radiance.

Kim trudged up the lawn toward the kitchen wing and let herself in at the servants' porch. She hung her mother's key on its peg beside the door and hurried into the kitchen, where she

set about making breakfast with a haste of extra gestures in case someone should need to know she realized that she was late. The kitchen at Highgrove had a big gas stove that frightened Kim a little. With wood, you could see the relationship between fuel and heat, but the fierceness of fire straining against the flimsy restraints of a control knob's commands made gas cooking too miraculous to be safe.

Mrs. Sever came into the kitchen at seven-thirty-eight. She wore white slacks with loafers and a pink silk shell and a pink rayon scarf holding back her pageboy. And even though she was casually dressed for her trip to her husband's West Virginia mines, she wore gold-and-coral chains around her neck and gold-and-coral sprays of earrings. "Are we about ready, dear?" she asked in her perfectly modulated Southern finishing-school voice. Kim loved that voice. When she was tiny, her mother had brought her here while she worked and sometimes Mrs. Sever would read to her.

"Yes, ma'am. Are you sittin' down?" Kim let the gears of her accent slip, so she sounded more like her mother.

"Since seven-thirty. Ordinarily it wouldn't matter, but we promised Darcy a ride to the bus. She has to catch an eight-fifty bus."

Kim carried in the silver urn of coffee first, and then the platter of ham and eggs and the bowl of fruit, and then the orange juice, and then the grits. She filled their coffee cups smoothly before she remembered their need for cream and sugar, so she fetched that with such fluttery haste that when she flapped back through the kitchen door Mr. Sever looked up from his paper and said, "Kimmy, Kimmy, Kimmy," in the same descending tone of mild exasperation he had used when she was small and she forgot herself and ran in the hallway.

"It's all right, dear," Mrs. Sever said patiently. "We do have plenty of time now. Thank you."

When Kim carried in their plate of toast, Mrs. Sever was just saying something about a boy from Bobby's class who was missing in action. The Severs occupied all sides of the Vietnam War, with him a hawk and her a dove and their son unable to care either way, and every meal Kim had served here in the past two years had included some kind of war talk. Their daughter was in Paris for the summer. Miss Colleen shared her mother's views on the war as she also shared her voice and manners and hairstyle. Kim stepped into her place beside the door. They served themselves at breakfast, but she had to be ready to take their cups to the sideboard for more coffee or to duck into the kitchen for another slice of toast.

What money bought was space and light. This dining room was twenty feet square, with a wall of floor-to-ceiling Palladian windows to the east that made its creamy moldings and its painted mural of English castles seem luscious. The sun picked sparkles from so much heavy silver that when Kim served breakfast on sunny mornings she would be blinded repeatedly.

"You've done a fine job with breakfast, dear," Mrs. Sever said then.

"She's a hell of a cook." Mr. Sever shifted back from his plate as he picked his teeth with the silver pick that was part of his standard table setting. He was a thickset man with a heavy head who reminded Kim of a Newfoundland dog; he even had a mat of very dark hair and a patient, sagging sadness about his eyes. "You could be a cook, Kimmy." He swung his head slowly to look at her for the first time. It wasn't protocol for either of them to notice their maid, but Kim had grown up in this house so she occupied an awkward space between servant and poor relation. Mr. Sever settled against the arm of his chair, studying Kim. He added, "My, you're sure growin' up."

"Doesn't she look like her mother?" Mrs. Sever said, sounding pleased.

He pressed, "Is that what you're goin' to do? Be a cook?"

Kim knew what that was all about. She had earned a perfect record of A's since kindergarten, something her mother couldn't resist proclaiming. The Severs felt uneasy about Kim's success because their own children had done so poorly in the best private schools in the South.

"I don't know, sir," Kim said, thinking she would work the fields before she cooked for a living. She was what her art teacher called a water-color prodigy, and what she really wanted to do was paint beautiful pictures.

"We ought to go," Mrs. Sever said as she blotted each corner of her mouth precisely and laid her napkin beside her plate. "You'll be all right by yourself, dear?" Kim had been spelling her mother as a maid in this house ever since she was ten years old, yet each time Mrs. Sever was about to leave her alone there was this momentary reversion to concern for her as a child of the family.

"I'll be fine, ma'am. I'm thirteen now."

"Are you, really? My, my. J. Bob? Shall we go?"



After she washed the dishes and counted the silver into the vault off the back hallway, Kim had only to tidy the rooms a little and make the beds. There was no need to dust, since the heavy cleaning was done by two women who came in twice a week.

By the time Kim had worked her way into the splendid front rooms, it was after nine o'clock. On both sides of a stairway hall were formal parlors, each of them rich with moldings and solemn with the dark, dour portraits of Sever ancestors. Mr. Bobby and Miss Colleen were six and eight years Kim's senior, so they had treated her while she was growing up as a kind of clever pet. When Kim was a tot, sometimes Bobby would carry her in and deposit her in the center of a vast blue Kirman. She would stare

up in horror at all those grim ancestral faces and screw her eyes tight and scream until her mother found her.

Bobby had flunked out of the University of Virginia in May, so now the big family worry was that he was going to be drafted at the age of nineteen. His mother was trying to get him accepted somewhere else. His father was goading him to enlist. Bobby himself was floating along this hot Virginia summer like an aging Huckleberry Finn on a raft, knowing that eventually he would fetch up somewhere. Darcy talked about Bobby constantly. She fretted about the way he slept until noon and went on freakish food binges, granola or Snickers bars or nothing at all. He had grown his hair to his shoulders, and often he wore a bandana around his head. He wore a fringed and beaded leather shirt sometimes, or bell-bottomed jeans with calico inserts, or sometimes a flowing purple caftan.

Kim's attitude toward Bobby had gone through many seamless stages. When she was very young she had been afraid of him, and then in awe of him, and then a worshipful eight-year-old who tagged after him for one whole summer. He was nicer to Kim that summer than he ever had been before or since. He taught her to fish, and even to sit on his lap and drive his father's Mercedes that he wasn't old enough to drive himself. Kim learned that summer what a gentle boy Bobby could be, although he had an edge of petulance that brought on irregular rages if she crossed him.

Kim hadn't seen much of Bobby in recent years, and her attitude toward him depended on how recently she had seen him last. His academic failures in the face of his lucky birth would nurse in her a fine contempt for him, a sense that he was going to need money because he was too lazy and stupid to survive without it. But then she would see him again, and the fey beauty of his face would make her yearn for him inexplicably. For a long time, his face wouldn't leave her mind: she would see shadows of it in the faces of others and confront it on the insides of her eyelids

at night. She had seen him only three times that summer, but that had been enough to make her listen intently to her mother's endless chatter about Mr. Bobby's problems.

Kim paused in the broad front hall. The floor there was of gray-veined marble, and the staircase floated up to the left like a spiral in air and curled around to a landing above the front door. As a child, Kim had run laughing down that curl of staircase as if it were a slide; as a maid, she wasn't supposed to use it. She considered briefly whether using it mattered when she was alone in the house, but her sense of order made her need to go and use the servants' staircase that rose from the dim back hallway.

There were four servants' bedrooms in the kitchen wing of the second floor, and six family bedrooms in the formal part of the house. Kim opened the door off the servants' hallway and stepped out into the broad upstairs hall. Toward the front of the house, the entrance hall opened below a delicate railing. Back here, the hallway was lightly provided with Queen Anne furniture as a sitting room. Kim started for the master bedroom, her feet soft on the Turkey carpet. But even what little sound she made was heard.

"Where the hell have you been?" she heard Bobby call. She stopped at once. His room was just across from where she stood. For no reason that she could imagine now, it hadn't occurred to her that he might be at home.

"Darcy?"

"What?" she heard herself saying, softly.

"Where the hell have you been? They've been gone for hours. Come on. I've got a hard-on that just won't quit."

Kim tiptoed to his door, which was ajar by a foot and showed clothing and records scattered in the dim coolness. She peeked around the edge.

Bobby lay against his pillows with a book open on his stomach and a bowl of peaches on the sheet beside him. He had been eating

them by cutting chunks with the penknife he had carried in his pocket since he was a child. There was a strange, sweet scent in the room that had a smell like old rot under it.

"I've been savin' . . ." he said as he caught sight of Kim. His voice stopped like a needle lifted from a record. "What . . . *Kimmy?* Where's your mother?"

"She took Timmy to the doctor's."

Kim felt so strange to be seeing Mr. Bobby lying in his bed that she had to do something to cover her embarrassment. His laziness and the mess in his room made her feel self-importantly like a parent, so she bent automatically and began to pick up his clothes and records on her way to the window to open his drapes.

"It's comin' up on eleven o'clock." She felt for the cord and yanked it so hard that the drapes flourished like a pretty girl's skirt and there was a flood of radiance into the room.

"Are you crazy?" He threw his forearm over his face.

"You'll ruin your eyes, readin' in the dark like that," Kim said as she headed for the window beside his bed.

"Enough! One's enough."

Kim looked at Bobby. He was lying there studying her with his loose hair dark on his pillow. He had a pained but peaceful look about his face, like someone living on the edge of hurt. The way his eyes were taking in all of her and not politely resting on her face made Kim fidget. She went back to gathering an armload of his clothes and tidying his room.

"Leave that."

Kim looked at him again from the foot of his bed. He had eyes the color of Timmy's eyes, a very light brown. "Dirt-color" Kim had called them to her mother on the day Timmy had ripped up two of her books.

"Come here," Bobby said.

Kim walked around the end of his bed and sat obediently on the spot he patted. When he pushed at the clothing in her arms,

she let it fall to the floor. He was smiling at her now, a tender smile that made his eyes seem so sad that Kim twisted her mouth and looked away.

“Can you take down your hair?”

Kim was proud of her thick blonde hair to her waist. Of course he would want to see it. She groped for the pins that held her braids and slid them one by one between her lips. She let her braids fall warm on her back.

“Can you sit on it?”

“No,” she mumbled. She caught the pins from her mouth and said, “It stops below my waist.”

“Your mama can sit on hers.”

“I know.” Kim suffered a shiver of strangeness to think he should know that about her mother. Having a grown mother who could sit on her hair was an oddity of which Kim was proud and ashamed in equal measure, so she was careful to notice that her mother kept her hair pinned up except when she was at home.

“Let your braids loose, Kimmy. I want to see your hair.”

Kim leaned to place her hairpins on his cluttered side table. She grabbed each braid over her shoulder and pulled off its elastic and leaned and set those down too before it occurred to her that she was supposed to be working. If Bobby told his parents she was taking time, it might cost her mother the day. They couldn't afford to miss a day's pay.

“I shouldn't be doin' this.” She leaned to take back her elastics. Bobby stopped her in mid-gesture with his hand gentle on hers. As she straightened again, he propped himself on his elbow and took one of her braids into his fingers. He ran his hand up the braid, loosening it, watching as he did it.

It occurred to Kim with a flutter of nervousness that there was an edge of propriety here that they had overstepped. She had never before noticed that edge because the position of servant was by its nature intimate and she had grown up in the intimacy

of this extended family. But there was another kind of intimacy happening here. She grabbed her hair out of his hand and stood quickly.

“I think I’ll get a wash in,” she said as she bent to pick up his bundle of clothes.

“Kimmy?”

She looked at him. Her eyes were level with the edge of his bed.

“Shall I tell my mama you came in here an’ undid your hair?”

Kim stiffened. “No! Please don’t tell her.” All she could think was that her mother was going to lose this job. And she didn’t have a car.

“You did, you know.”

“Please,” Kim said as she tidied the top of her braid and re-braided the rest of it with rapid fingers.

“What’ll you give me.” It didn’t sound like a question.

“Please, Mr. Bobby, I”

He smiled at her then. It was a smile so unexpected that Kim’s busy fingers froze on her braid.

“I know. You can give me a kiss.”

Kim used to kiss him pecks on the lips with both of them exaggeratedly puckering after he had teased her to tears and his mother had said they had to kiss and make up. For the last year or two, the memory of those childhood kisses had been coming to Kim at night with the image of his face, lean and dark and sad behind her eyelids.

“Come on,” he said, patting the edge of his bed again. She started to sit, but then he had another idea. He reached and lifted the edge of his blanket. “Come in here.”

“Please, I”

“I won’t tell. Not if you come in here an’ kiss me.”

Kim let out her breath and crept in under the blanket beside him. She understood as soon as she had done it that this gave him

something else to tell his mother about, but she was in so deep now that the only way out was through it.

Bobby took her head onto his shoulder, looking steadily into her face. Kim looked at him bravely, sniffing as delicately as a cat the dark male scent of his skin. She fitted one arm in against his chest and put the other one behind her because she had a suspicion he was altogether naked and she didn't want to know for sure.

"You're growin' up, little girl." His fingers stroked the braid at her temple and tenderly traced her cheek. Kim could smell the sweet rot of peaches on his breath. "I never guessed you'd ever grow up," he added, looking into her face with sad eyes that reminded her of his father's eyes. His fingers were drifting down her neck and over her shoulder.

Kim wanted to say, "Go ahead and kiss me," but she felt so vulnerable that she was afraid to say anything. She knew what she was doing now was worse than her taking down her hair, but anything she did to improve the situation might turn out to be worse than this. And she couldn't make him angry. Then he would surely tell. Once, when she was eight and he was fourteen, she had playfully hidden from him in a dry well near the ruins of the old slave cabins in the pine woods. He had called for her briefly, but hunting for her had been beneath him so he had told Darcy that Kimmy had been throwing rocks at the cattle. That night her mother had felt compelled to switch her.

"Hush."

Kim was whimpering high in her throat because his hand was on her upper chest. She shut her eyes tight and grabbed the sheet behind her as his fingers settled cupped around her breast.

"There now. That doesn't hurt, does it?"

"Please . . ." she managed to say.

Bobby was breathing in long, shaky breaths. He shifted his body closer to hers with a faint creaking of the mattress, and he caught her by the tail of her braids and leaned to envelop

her mouth with his as that morning Darcy had leaned to devour her eggs. This was like no kiss that Kim could have imagined. Bobby's mouth was soft and wet on hers. His tongue that tasted of peaches flicked at her lips and teeth. His head and his whole body moved against hers in a slow, subtle rhythm that produced in her an agony of butterflies. She squirmed her legs together and whimpered. She twisted the sheet in her fist, desperate not to fight him.

"Oh, Kimmy," he moaned into her mouth. His hand was firm at the small of her back. He slid it down over one of her buttocks and squeezed hard enough to hurt while he moved his hips against hers. So then she fought him. She tried with all her strength to push him away. She pummeled him with her free fist while he rocked her harder against him and laughed a hoarse chuckle into her mouth.

"No!" she cried when she was able to twist her mouth free. "Get away!"

"But I'll tell." He grappled and caught her wrist while his body moved against hers, producing shivers of sensation through her belly.

"No, *I'll* tell," she snapped as she struggled to free her wrist.

Bobby stopped moving then and looked at her. "Tell what?" he asked coldly, sounding out of breath. "I'll tell how you came in here an' got in my bed. What in hell will you be tellin'?"

They looked steadily into each other's eyes until Kim flinched her eyes away.

"Please don't tell."

"Look what you did to me."

He shifted his grip on her wrist so he could guide her hand in under the sheet, where he closed her fingers stiffly around his erection. He moved a little, holding her fingers there so she could feel the loose skin and the hot solid core. He sighed.

Kim stared at his face, so honestly amazed that he chuckled

again. The only penis she ever had seen in her life was Timmy's. And she understood that something like this was what happened, but it was so much more enormous than she could have imagined that she cringed her hand away from it.

"Now I've got somethin' else to tell," he said, sounding childishly pleased.

"What do you *want* from me?" Kim wailed. Her eyes filled.

"You think you're better than me, don't you?"

"No, I"

"You always have. This little white-trash kid struttin' around as if she owns the place. I could tell by the way you looked at me you always thought you were better."

"No I didn't." She brought her hand out from under the blanket so she could brush aside the strings of hair falling into his face. "Of course not. You're my friend."

"I am *not* your friend!"

He swung over her and pinned her to the bed so fast that she gasped out a little shriek. Staring up into his face with his hair falling dark on both sides of it, she saw him again as she had been imagining him for all those nights. And beneath her surprised twinge of fear she yearned for him. Even being near him was not enough. She wanted to know him. To be inside him. To *be* him.

"You still don't get it, do you?" He had her wrists pinned to the bed on both sides, which was so uncomfortable that she struggled involuntarily. "You're just a little white-trash slut and I'm the hotshot prince of my hotshot family. You're *nothin'*, Kimmy. And I'll tell you what you can do for me. You're goin' to spread your legs for me right now so we can prove that's exactly what you are."

He settled with one of her arms pinned under him and grabbed her other wrist with his hand behind her head. He slipped his free hand up under her dress. She struggled, staring into his face.

He whispered, "I'll tell," and kissed her on the lips. His fingers

were gentle on her thighs and working in under the elastic at the leg of her underpants.

For Kim, there was a dreamlike unreality to the cool light in the room and the feast of Bobby's sad, elegant face and the sense of being held down just enough so she couldn't fight him. She had to let him do this now. She knew he would tell on her otherwise. And since she had to do it, she wanted to take the experience apart and see how it was made. But she didn't mind what he had called her. He had been saying things like that all her life. When she was tiny, it was one of the ways he used to make her cry, but by the time she was seven or eight it had become just his pet way of talking to her.

He hooked her panties at her waist and had them off so quickly that she couldn't say more than, "Wait . . . !" He settled in on top of her with his legs outside of hers, resting on his elbows so his hands could gently stroke her cheeks.

"Little slut," he said softly, smiling down at her a smile so beatific that she tried to smile, too. His long weight was pressing her into the bed. She wondered whether this might be all there was to it. "I always knew I'd be doin' this. I couldn't wait for you to grow up."

"I'm thirteen today," Kim said bravely. She was finding it hard to breathe.

"*Thirteen?*" He drew away from her briefly, lightening his weight, before he settled on top of her again. "I thought you'd be a little older, though."

"Please, let's not . . . ?"

But he was kissing her so wonderfully that suddenly kissing was her whole world. He was slipping his knees in between hers, moving his body in a rhythm that called forth from her rhythms of her own. He was touching her sensitive places, but she didn't mind that. She was floating on a dreamy cloud of kissing. But then came the pain. Unexpectedly he stabbed deeper and deeper

into her, hurting her more with every thrust so she struggled desperately under him, trying to move up away from him, sobbing, frantic. This couldn't be normal. It couldn't be meant to hurt this much.

Bobby was making a low moaning sound as he moved. Kim's fighting only made him thrust faster and harder until eventually he cried out a little chirp. He hesitated, his eyes closed and his face flushed with bliss, then he settled in on top of her again. "I love you, I love you," he murmured, kissing her ear. He was still moving a little inside her; the friction scraped and stung unbearably. Kim was sobbing so tightly that it took him a minute to realize that she was crying at all.

"Oh, my darlin'. It wasn't too good for you, was it? But it'll get better. And you've got no idea how good you feel, Kimmy, so firm and tight." He pulled out of her and settled on one elbow while she lay clenching her fists and streaming tears. "What? Kimmy?"

She couldn't speak. She was so sore and miserable and frightened and disappointed that all she could do was cry.

"Stop it." His voice was getting an angry edge. His face constricted as if he were holding back tears himself. "It's true, isn't it? You really do think you're better. You've always thought you were better than me, haven't you?"

Well, of course she had. It wasn't just that she knew with a pure conviction that needed no reason that girls were better than boys, but she had always been secretly glad about his unpredictable tempers and his lazy drifting because they showed he was of a weaker stock.

"You're *not!*" he shouted to jolt her into looking at him. She did. She even briefly stopped crying. "You're *trash*, Kimmy! You know it. I know it. Your mother spreads her legs for a dress or a ham but you'll do it for nothin'. You're *trash!*" His voice was thickening. "You're white *scum*, Kimmy. That's what you are!"

Kim stared at him, amazed to see that his eyes were spar-

bling and he was grimacing fiercely. But she was more amazed to realize he *believed* all that! She could hear it at school and not take it seriously in the safe internal place where she lived. She could hear it from him, teasingly, and believe it was another word for love. But Bobby believed it, and his belief shattered some fragile shell within her. For the first time in her life, she believed it, too.

“Nobody’s goin’ to have you.” He started to sob like dry, hollow coughs. He wrestled her under him with a desperate strength and said, “*Nobody*, Kimmy! Do you hear me? You’re mine!” He choked and sniffled and swiped at his nose before he caught her wrist again. For Kim, the sight of any man crying would have been a source of amazement. To see Bobby crying was a horror of inappropriate intimacy so great that she couldn’t stand to look at him. “Look at me!” he raged, sounding frantic. He shook her body under him as if she were asleep. Moisture that must have been a tear hit the side of her face and itched there, but he had her arm pinned so she couldn’t scratch it. “I’m goin’ to make it so *nobody* else will want you! Do you hear me?” he shouted. Then there was a strange gleaming at the edge of her eye that made her turn toward him quickly. A pain like thin fire ran down the side of her face. Bobby leaped away from her, choking, flinging his penknife so it clattered against the wall.

Kim didn’t understand what had happened. She had pain in front of her ear and pain between her legs, and there was blood (could it be blood?) on the front of her dress. And on the bed. There was blood everywhere. Bobby was cringing away from her and slipping off the bed.

Kim crept on hands and bottom to the opposite edge of the bed from Bobby and stood up foggily, feeling strange and light. What she really ought to do right now was fix her hair and pretend none of this had happened. She said, “Goodbye,” and walked out of Bobby’s room, fighting her persistent urge to feel the side of her face. She would clean up first. She could worry about every-

thing else later. But she passed the upstairs servants' bathroom, walking slowly, trailing a finger on the wall. She passed the downstairs bathroom, too. It began to seem more important that she go right home, so she stepped out across the servants' porch into the baking August heat and she stumbled, trembling, toward the pine woods.



They didn't find Kim until after dark. She lay for hours curled six feet down in the slaves' dry well and watched the light grow pale and the shadows rise. Between bouts of hoarse, desperate crying she lay with her hands pillowed neatly under the good side of her face and listened to the wind soughing and the branches creaking and the cooling sap clicking in the trees. It sounded like complaints from the ghosts of slaves whose eyes she thought she could see sparkling overhead. Kim hadn't climbed into the well intending to die there. She had realized as she was passing through the woods that leaving her post in the middle of the day was the worst thing she had done so far, and since she couldn't go back but now she couldn't go home either, the well had been her only practical choice. By day it had seemed cozy and safe. It was only at night that the ghosts of slaves added one more horror to make her quake and tremble in the chilly dark.

She was absolutely going to hell. She had no doubt about that. She never went to church because her mother didn't have a car, but years earlier the Severs had sometimes taken Kim and Darcy to church in the back seat of their Mercedes. Kim's few minutes in church had left a forceful impression. If she messed around with boys this way, she was going to hell. And couldn't she go to hell for making her mother lose her job? Darcy had been hired as a governess when the Sever children were four and six. At that time, the house had been full of black servants, and Highgrove had been a self-sufficient plantation where life had hardly changed

in a hundred years. Now they made do there with cleaning help and the fields were leased to tenants, but for Darcy it was still the gleaming center where she had arrived, poor and frightened, and been given a home.

It was Kim's home, too. She knew she wouldn't be content there forever, but she wasn't prepared to be cast out of it at only thirteen years old. (*Twelve*, her mind kept shouting. *Yesterday I was only twelve.*) Her best hope was that they would forgive at least Darcy. But if they did that, Kim would never see her mother or her little brother again. Just the thought of that brought on a spell of fresh, desperate crying that Kim tried to stifle with her palms over her face. The cut edge of her face was crisped and curling; the salt on her hands made it sting. Nobody had ever explained to Kim that cutting a girl's face was part of losing her virginity. Well, not part of it, precisely, but the two kinds of pain were so linked in her mind that she couldn't imagine one without the other.

Far off, Kim could hear someone calling her name. She had been hearing voices calling, off and on, since about the time when she could no longer make out the top of the well. She thought it might be the ghosts, calling her. Or it might be Death. The bad thing about dying would be going to hell, but even that seemed preferable to having to wander the world without any of her own people.

Light flowed and scattered through the branches overhead and was gone. Then it was there again, brighter. And gone. Kim whimpered with the shock of that and covered her face, forgetting to be careful of the left side. She hit it, and her face rang with pain. She began to cry hoarsely, trying desperately to smother her crying as the rustle of the ghosts came louder and louder. Then the light was full on her face. She could hear and feel and smell it as much as she could see it between her fingers: dusty, buzzing butter. "I knew it," she heard Mr. Sever saying from far away. He

sounded sad and tired. "This is where I'd have put her. I used to play here, myself."

Kim shuddered under the merciless light. If she lay still, perhaps they would go away. Then she heard what sounded like the tenant, Mr. Auberdine, saying, "I think she's breathin', Mr. Sever."

The light probed harder and trembled away. Then there was a hurried scuffling of shoes on rock as someone clambered down the old precarious footholds. Hands turned her. The light examined her with agonizing brightness. She heard Mr. Sever saying, "Kimmy? Are you all right, girl?" The light moved away over her hips and legs. Kim could make out his face in the sudden dark. "It's just her cheek! She seems fine!" Mr. Sever shouted. He sounded glad, which gave Kim a tremble of hope. He gathered her up in his arms, being careful of the sore side of her face, and held her high enough so his hands could reach her from above.

Mr. Sever carried Kim back to the house and into the kitchen wing, where he laid her down tenderly on the brown plaid couch in the servants' sitting room. The stability of indoor air and lamp-light disoriented her after her long hours in the outer dark. Then she heard her mother's voice, sounding frail with shock.

"I knew he didn't kill you. He was just talkin' crazy," Darcy said from close by. Kim opened her eyes to find Darcy crouched beside her, picking pine needles out of her daughter's hair. Darcy glanced at Kim's face and winced her eyes away.

"I'm all right, Mama." Kim was so weary that her mouth could hardly form the words.

"I know you are, darlin'."

Then there seemed to be a break in time, because when Kim opened her eyes again Mrs. Sever was shaking her gently. "Kimmy? Baby? Can you wake up, sweetie?"

Kim opened her eyes a crack. Mrs. Sever was squatting beside the couch. It occurred to Kim to be surprised that she was still

wearing the pink scarf and the gold-and-coral earrings she had put on that morning.

“Kim? Sweetie? You’re goin’ for a ride now, dear. Sully Auberdine is takin’ you to stay with his people in Indiana. They’ll get you help to fix your face,” Mrs. Sever added tenderly, making a graceful gesture as if she were going to touch the wound, but then thinking better of it. “Come on now, dear. Can you sit up?”

Beyond Mrs. Sever’s lamp-lit face, Kim could see in the gloom her mother’s pale face and the sagging, sorrowful countenance of Mr. Sever.

“What?” But then the separate words assembled in her mind. They were sending her away. “No!” She struggled up to sit so fast that Mrs. Sever toppled and caught herself on her hands with a gawky gracelessness that embarrassed Kim. She couldn’t stop causing these people trouble. “Don’t send me away, Mama! Please! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it! I – Please don’t send me away! I’ll never do it again!”

“My dear, this isn’t to punish you, sweetie,” Mrs. Sever said, patting Kim’s leg with a touching awkwardness. “Nobody blames you. I . . .” But then a circuit completed itself in Mrs. Sever’s mind that registered as a stiffening of her face, and Kim knew that they certainly did blame her. Or very soon they would blame her. And they were right. It was her fault.

“Kimmy, he is quite beside himself. The doctor has had to sedate him. He thought he’d killed you, and even after we showed you to him lyin’ here he was still quite demented. You can’t stay here, dear.”

“Mama?” Kim cried desperately.

Her mother floated toward her. In her good navy going-to-Richmond dress and with the lamp-shadow on her hair, her face was the only part of her that Kim could see.

“Darlin’, listen to me.” Darcy’s weariness made her accent so

harsh that Kim was embarrassed for her. "He has a . . . Mr. Bobby has a . . ."

"An obsession," Mrs. Sever put in. "It's just a phase, dear. He'll outgrow it. But until he does, you can't stay here."

"Send *him* away!" Kim blurted. But she knew that even for Darcy, Mr. Bobby's needs came first. "I'll die, Mama! If you send me away, I'll never see you again!"

"Of course you will. Don't be silly. Of course you will."

But even then, Kim was not convinced.