

FIRST AVENUE

A Novel by

L O W E N C L A U S E N

WATERSHED BOOKS

For Pat and Sonya.

*I wrote this book because of a baby's cry
that I never heard and never forgot.*

—LC

Chapter 1

The sky showed no hint of morning as his double-bladed oar grabbed the water and pushed the kayak east toward the bright city lights. From the reflection of those lights, he saw the swelling, falling, living surface of the sea. Beneath him the water was black and impenetrable. Only twice had he overturned with the kayak and felt the blinding, cold water envelop him. He had fought frantically the first time to right himself; he had laughed underwater the second.

As he crossed the bay, he carried a battery-powered lantern stowed between his legs to announce his presence to large ships, but he seldom used it. It would do little good anyway. While the kayak could turn quickly and easily, large ships took miles to change course. If the pilots could see him, and they likely could not, they would think he was out of bounds to take so small a craft into their territory. He didn't care. Here on the water, he strayed out of bounds.

Sometimes when the alarm rang longer than normal, he would stare at the ceiling, although there was nothing to see, and would consider taking the car to work and giving himself another thirty minutes of sleep. Discipline, he would tell himself—he was used to talking alone. Once on the water he would not wish for sleep. He would take the kayak even when the weather was marginal and the water rough, when the kayak would lunge and bounce its way across the surface instead of gliding smoothly and sinuously as it did this morning.

He cut a diagonal line across Elliott Bay and passed the grain terminal where a ship was being loaded. Conveyor belts hummed a chant over the water, and grain dust rose into the work lights like ashes in the wind. He pushed across the last open stretch of water just as the ferry left its Seattle dock at 4:00 A.M. For a few cars and a few sleepy people, the ferry, ablaze in lights and horn shrieking, sent out shock waves from its propellers. He thought it should slip out quietly, compatibly with the hour, instead of making such a fuss. He waited for it to pass, and his kayak rose and fell in its wake. The day was beginning.

A spotlight flashed on him as he approached the dock. He saw the police car on the street above the dock and signaled back by lifting his paddle. The driver's door opened and Murphy got out. She walked down the steps onto the floating dock and stood at the spot where he landed. He tossed her a rope, and she pulled the kayak tightly against the wood planking.

"Good morning, Sam," she said with a bright smile on her face.

He was not sure what to make of this greeting. Murphy and her partner, Bill Hennessey, worked his district on the shift before him. Several times during the last few weeks, they had met him on the dock and had given him a lift up the hill to the police station. It had always been on the nights when Murphy was driving.

"Did you have a good paddle?" she asked as he steadied himself in the kayak before scooting onto the deck.

"I had a fine paddle," he said, looking up to her. "Busy night?"

"Not busy enough."

He remembered that feeling. Now he approved if Radio chose to leave him alone. It would take a while before she understood. Murphy was one of the new ones. Her leather gear was shiny, and her shirt looked fresh even at the end of her shift. Her face looked bright and fresh, too, and her short brown hair was combed neatly in place. Cops had looked different when he worked nights. He might have stayed if they had looked like Murphy. He worked alone now, the morning shift, the quiet shift.

Her first name was Katherine, but he had begun cutting it short to Kat. Beneath the blue shirt and bulletproof vest and heavy leather holster, there was little room for her. That was irrelevant now, they said, and it was certainly true that he had seen enough big cops make a mess of things. Still, he wondered what would happen if somebody punched her in the nose.

“The week’s almost over, Kat,” he said to her as he pulled the kayak out of the water and tied it upside down on the deck.

She started for the car, carrying the bag he had tossed onto the dock, and he caught up with her and took it from her hand. She gave him a strange smile as she released the bag, one beyond interpretation, one that flickered so briefly he had no chance to return it.

Hennessey was swearing from the passenger’s side when Sam opened the back door. The blue vinyl back seat was loose from its anchors and rocked forward when Sam slid in.

“We got a call at the Donald Hotel,” Hennessey said after they closed the doors. “Suspicious circumstances. Occupant hasn’t been seen for a while. Odor coming from the room. Probably some old drunk who croaked. Jesus, why couldn’t they wait another fifteen minutes?”

“Maybe it’s just some rotten food,” Sam Wright said.

“Want to bet?”

“No,” Sam said. “I’ll ride along.” He unzipped his bag and pulled out the snub-nosed pistol he kept there together with a towel and emergency dry clothes. He shoved the holstered pistol into his pants and pulled his sweatshirt over it. “I’ll handle the paperwork if it comes to that.”

“It’s not your call,” Katherine said. “You haven’t even started yet.”

“Hey, let’s not get too generous here when I’m doing the paper,” Hennessey said. “Wright can handle it if he wants. He’s got all day.”

Sam saw the muscles clench in Katherine’s jaw as she backed the car into the street and drove silently away. He was reminded why he worked alone.

The Donald Hotel was north of the Pike Place Market on First Avenue. It had a wide urine-treated stairway that led up to a lobby on

the second floor. There was a tavern on the ground level—a convenience likely appreciated by many of its tenants. The manager stood waiting for them inside the front office. It had a barred window that looked out to the stairway. Inside the open door an old woman sat in a stuffed green chair that took up half the office. The manager was slightly less drunk than she.

Sam looked around the ill-lit, paint-peeling corridor. He had the feeling something might crawl up his pant leg or drop from the ceiling into his hair. He was careful not to brush against the walls. From fresh sea air to a pit like this in five minutes. It took a little pleasure off that morning smile.

“You call?” Hennessey asked in a terse tone that revealed his distaste.

The manager nodded but said nothing as he looked suspiciously past the blue uniforms to where Sam was standing.

“He’s with us,” Hennessey said, not offering to explain anything more. “Which room is it?”

“It’s next to mine,” the drunken woman said. “I told Ralph he ought to check. I ain’t heard nothing for days. It smells real bad. I told Ralph he ought to check.”

“Did you check?” Hennessey asked him.

“I thought I ought to wait for the cops.”

“That baby crying all the time. I couldn’t stand it,” the woman said.

“There’s a baby in there?” Hennessey asked, his voice rising sharply.

“A mother and her kid,” the manager said as he rubbed his right hand nervously across his stretched dirty T-shirt. “She didn’t owe rent. Never caused trouble.”

“Never mind that. You got a key?”

“We got keys to all the rooms,” the manager said and pulled a ring of keys from a decrepit desk drawer.

“That baby crying all the time. Night and day. I couldn’t stand it.” The woman shook her head and looked at them with bleary eyes.

“You stay here,” Sam told her. He was already sick of listening to her. “Stay here and be quiet.”

There was no mistaking the odor as they stood in front of the door on the fourth floor and waited for the manager to find the right key. Sam wished he had a cigar to cover the smell. He kept a few in his briefcase, a trick learned from the coroners, but his briefcase was still in his locker. No smell was more repugnant than decaying flesh, and the three of them were already swallowing hard as they waited outside the door.

“Give me those keys,” Sam said, impatient with the manager’s fumbling.

“It’s this one.”

Sam jerked the keys away from the drunken manager and lost track of the one he had selected. “You wait down there,” he said and pointed toward the end of the hall.

“She never caused no trouble.”

“Never mind about that,” Hennessey said. “Just wait down there like the officer said.”

Sam found a key marked with the room number and slipped it into the lock. Before turning the key he paused and looked at Hennessey and Katherine.

“Murphy, you stay by the door and don’t let anybody in. Lend me your flashlight, will you. Hennessey, we don’t touch more than we have to.”

Hennessey and Katherine nodded agreement. Slowly and reluctantly Sam opened the door. The stench rolled out of the room like a fog, and he swore softly and consistently to hold back the gagging. With the flashlight he found the light switch and flipped it on. A single bulb hung from a cord in the middle of the ceiling. Sam stood in the doorway, trying not to breathe, and used his flashlight as though the room were still dark. There was a baby crib beside a single bed, and a tiny lifeless form lay inside the crib.

“Try to get those windows open,” he told Hennessey. He pointed with his flashlight to the two wooden windows on the outside wall.

He walked carefully toward the crib, looking around but never averting his true attention from the huddled form behind the rails. He had stopped swearing and tried to stop everything as he stood above it. The baby—not more than a few months old—lay face down on the mattress, clothed only in a diaper, legs curled under it, the side of its face blackened unevenly. Dried mucus hung from its nose and mouth. He didn't touch the baby. There was no need.

"It's been dead a long time," he told Hennessey, who joined him at the crib. He didn't know whether to call the baby a he or she and didn't want to think of it that way. "Call the sergeant. We'll need Homicide, too. Tell them 1-David-4 is with you and will handle the paper."

"Never had a chance," he said softly. He stood beside the crib after Hennessey had left and allowed himself to come dangerously close to thinking about the baby instead of holding it away. "Never had a chance."

He turned away, intending to not ever look back, and tried to see the rest of the room the way a cop was supposed to see it. There was little to see. A dresser with most of its handles missing. Several cans of food on top of it. A hot plate beside the sink. A washed plate and bowl, a fork and spoon stacked neatly on a towel on the other side of the sink. A baby's spoon. Inside the single closet, there were clothes on the floor, probably the mother's—blue jeans, shirts, and a woman's underwear.

Who was the mother? he wondered as he bent down to inspect the clothes. They needed to know what had happened to her, why she had not come back. If she had abandoned the baby intentionally, she was a murderer, but something else may have happened. Crying night and day, the old woman had said.

Hennessey had gone out to the hallway to use the radio, and Katherine stood at the doorway looking in. Her face was without color in the insufficient light, and her hand shielded her nose. Sam had forgotten her. He shook his head when he saw her eyes.

"We'll lock it up and wait for the sergeant. Do you want me to get a First Watch car up here?"

“No,” Katherine said. “We’ll stay and finish this.” Hennessey, standing beside her in the doorway, nodded his agreement.

“Might as well start getting statements then,” Sam said. “Do you want the manager or the woman?” he asked Katherine.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Take the woman. See if you can get some idea how long that baby cried and when it stopped. Find out if she knows anything about the mother. We want a signed statement for Homicide. Hennessey, you take the manager. Keep him away from the woman. I’ll start banging on doors.”

Even without his uniform, he was now in the familiar police mode. Training took over. They would find out what had happened, but that was probably all they could do.

With his fist, he beat on the door of the adjoining room so hard that the whole frame shook. He told himself to take it easy, to think only about what he had to do. There was no answer. He went to the room on the other side and banged just as hard. A man opened the door, and other doors up and down the hall opened cautiously.

“Police,” he said, showing the man his badge. “Seattle Police,” he shouted to the eyes peering at him from darkened rooms. “Keep your doors open. We need to talk to everybody.”

The man who had opened the door returned to his bed and sat down. He lit a cigarette and coughed violently. He thought he might have heard something, some sort of noise from the room, but could not remember when. “Was the noise like a fight, like a struggle?” Sam asked. Might have been. Like a radio? Might have been that, too. Ever hear a baby crying? Was there a baby in that room?

Sam went from room to room. Each one was similar—paint stained by layers of yellow tobacco smoke, a small worn-out bed. In most there were bottles on the floor, bottles on the dresser, sacks overflowing with bottles. Through all the rooms there was a sense of impermanence. There were no pictures on the walls, although in two or three of the dingy rooms, small framed photographs were propped

up on the dressers. When he was a young cop, he might have picked up a picture and found out who it was. Now he simply wanted to get the necessary information and get out.

The First Watch sergeant, his sergeant, found Sam in the hallway on the fourth floor. The sergeant was from the old school so he still wore a hat when he got out of the car. He was old enough that he usually made Sam feel like a young cop. Sam led him to the locked door and told him what they knew. Sam also explained how he happened to be with 3-David-4, the night crew.

"I already called Homicide," Sam said. "I didn't think I needed to wait."

"It's your call," the sergeant said, reaffirming an unspoken agreement between them. As long as Sam's decisions brought no heat to the sergeant, he could make decisions as he wished. According to the book, wherever that was, the sergeant was supposed to make that call.

Sam inserted the key in the door lock. "We haven't touched anything inside," he said. "The baby is face down in the crib. It looks like it's been there a long time."

"Abandoned?" the sergeant asked, taking a deep breath. He was still breathing deeply after the four flights of stairs.

"I don't know."

Sam opened the door and stepped back. The sergeant turned his head away as though to shift the impact of a blow. It was a bad place to be out of breath. The sergeant stood for a moment in the doorway to steady himself.

"We opened the windows," Sam said. "It was even worse before."

Sam waited at the door for the sergeant to finish his brief inspection. There was no need for him to go into the room again. He had investigated crimes where half the police department had tromped by to look, like spectators at a car accident. That was before he learned to lock the door.

When the sergeant rejoined him, Sam pointed to the small stack of washed dishes beside the hand sink.

“Would the mother wash the dishes if she didn’t intend to come back? Would she stack them to dry? If you were going to abandon your baby, would you care about dirty dishes?”

“Who knows what some people think?”

“She’d have to be awfully sick to do that.”

“There are plenty of sick people around here.”

“I guess so. I’m getting the names of everybody on this floor. Nobody knows much, not yet anyway. Hennessey is taking a statement from the manager. Murphy is getting one from the old woman who notified the manager. She’s so drunk I’m not sure what we’ll get, but she lived next door and heard the baby crying—sounds like for days. Then she noticed the smell.”

“Jesus Christ,” the sergeant muttered, shaking his head slowly, uttering a curse that was a prayer at the same time.

There were footsteps on the stairway, and they both turned to look at Hennessey coming up the last few steps.

“Take a look at this,” Hennessey said, holding up a sheet of paper. “Can you believe they actually fill out a rental application in this dump? Look where our Miss Sanchez worked.”

Sam took the paper from him and skimmed down to the employment line.

“The Donut Shop. She worked for that son of a bitch, Pierre. Alberta Sanchez. I know who she is,” Sam said. “Do you know the girl?”

“I don’t get to know these people,” Hennessey said.

“I’ve seen the baby, too,” Sam said, passing over Hennessey’s remark. “I even held her once. Jesus, that’s the one.”

Not more than a few weeks before he had been standing at the window inside the Donut Shop looking out at the street when Alberta had come to the door. As he remembered, she had gotten part of the day off. She had a grocery bag from the Market in one arm and the baby in the other. He had hurried over and opened the door for her. That was all he had done, and yet she had seemed so surprised, so touched. He told her how pretty her baby looked with her pink cap

pulled down over her ears. Alberta asked if he wanted to hold her. He forgot for a moment that he was in Pierre's dirty little donut shop at First Avenue and Pike Street and awkwardly held the little girl, holding her away from his gun belt and bulletproof vest, smiling and trying to get a smile in return. He remembered Alberta's face, the brief happiness of a mother whose child has cast her amnesiac spell over another adult. Alberta was not like the others in the Donut Shop who were afraid to say anything to him, who slinked into the corners whenever he walked in the door. Then he remembered the baby's smile and the uncompromising delight in her eyes.

Sam also remembered Pierre at the cash register, staring, even when he handed the baby back—staring with open hatred, not trying to conceal it with his usual fake smile. Hate all you want, you bastard, he had thought, but Alberta handed me this baby and I made her smile. The anger rose in him again as he remembered Pierre's face. He wished he could hold on to that anger until he was out of this hallway, out of this run-down hotel, away from this street, but the anger melted away and he was left with the nearly weightless impression of the child.

Why had Alberta given him her baby? Maybe she had forgotten his blue uniform for a moment. Maybe she had looked only at his face, or maybe she didn't care. And the father? Who was he? Where was he? How could a father leave the mother and child in a place like this? He could answer none of his own questions. He knew only that Alberta had not abandoned her baby.

When the sergeant left, the three of them stood by the stairs and waited for the detectives. Sam could have begun his report, but the hallway was too dark and oppressive to think.

It was a half-hour before the two detectives arrived. They had been called from home, from comfortable beds. Sam knew Markowitz well, the older of the two detectives. He didn't know the other one. While Markowitz looked as if he had just gotten up and thrown on a pair of pants, the other detective was trim in his new suit and neatly brushed

hair. He had an evidence case in one hand and a camera in the other. He didn't have time for introductions.

"Which room is it?" he asked Hennessey.

"Four-oh-three."

The detective went to 403 and put his case on the floor. The others followed. He tried to open the door.

"Anybody got a key?" Unless Sam was mistaken, there was a touch of sarcasm in his voice. There was a touch of something that grated.

Sam fished in his pocket and pulled out the set of keys. He selected the one for 403 and let the others dangle from the key ring. He handed the keys to Markowitz.

"The girl who lived here worked at the Donut Shop at First and Pike," he told Markowitz, who had time to listen. "A lousy place, but the girl seemed okay. I talked to her a few times there. I haven't seen her for about three weeks. It's her baby in the room. A little girl. She's been there quite a while. We have statements from the manager and the woman who called it in, and I have the names of the people who live on this floor. Nobody saw or heard anything. Just Hennessey and the sergeant and I have been in the room. Hennessey opened the window, but we didn't touch anything else."

"Are you working plainclothes now?" Markowitz asked.

"No. First Watch. Hennessey and Murphy had just picked me up and were giving me a lift to the station when the call came in. I'm handling the paper so they can get out of here."

"That's a good idea for all of us," said the other detective, still waiting for the door to be unlocked.

Markowitz chuckled softly. "Jim likes these wake-up calls. He just came over from Auto Theft."

Jim did not share Markowitz's humor or else did not appreciate that he was labeled the new guy.

"Do you want us to wait for the coroner?" Sam asked.

"Damn right," Jim said. "They might be in Mukilteo for all we know."

“Mukilteo is in Snohomish County, Jim,” Markowitz said, his patience fraying a little. “We’d appreciate it if you would,” he told Sam.

“No problem,” Sam said. “I’ll call them right now.”

The coroners were not in Mukilteo or anywhere far away and arrived long before the detectives finished. When the coroners saw their mission, they returned to their van and brought back only a black rubber bag, leaving their stretcher behind. They folded the heavy rubber bag in half, and the older of the two men carried the tiny body down the stairs. Even folded in half, the bag was still too big.

It was nearly seven o’clock when Sam, Katherine, and Hennessey walked out of the hotel. Daylight had come while they were inside. Sam blinked his eyes rapidly to adjust to the bright, harsh, inhospitable light.

Katherine drove south on First Avenue. Sam watched a small group of pedestrians start against a red light but step back onto the curb when they saw the police car approaching from the north. Some in the group laughed nervously as though caught in a prank.

“Where do you suppose all these people are going?” he asked nobody.

Hennessey looked at him with a puzzled face. Sam saw it but chose not to repeat his question, which was not meant to be answered. He saw Hennessey turn back to the front and raise his eyebrows to Katherine in a way that clearly showed what he thought. Sam turned his head even farther so he would not see her response.

“I don’t mind doing the report,” Katherine said as she looked back over the car seat at him and pulled his attention away from the street.

“No,” Sam said. “You guys turn in your statements and shove off. You’ve had a long night already.”

“It was our call,” Katherine said. “I’m not tired anyway.”

“I am,” Hennessey said. “Damn, I forgot to call my wife. You know, you guys are lucky you don’t have to account for every minute of your life. Hey, so there wasn’t a phone there, right?”

“There was one in the hallway,” Katherine said.

“What? In that fleabag joint? Not possible.”

At the station Sam began the report. He tried to remember the baby’s name. Alberta had told him the name the day he held the baby. He was usually good with names, but it wouldn’t come to him. The detectives may have found the baby’s name written on some form, but he had not thought to get it from them. It didn’t matter anyway—not for his report. Still he sat for the longest time in front of the manual Royal typewriter and tried to remember. He called the victim “Baby Sanchez.”

The report was simple, hardly different in form from any of the hundreds of other reports that would be written that day—easier in some ways because the detectives had gathered and marked all the evidence. There were no suspects to list, although it took half a page to list all the witnesses, or non-witnesses, who saw nothing and heard nothing and knew nothing except for one drunken woman who could no longer stand the smell.

It took longer to write the officer’s statement. What he saw and what he did were the easy parts. What he thought was something altogether different. The officer’s statement was the place to say what he thought as long as it made sense. He believed the child had not been intentionally abandoned, that there was another reason for the mother’s disappearance even if she had not shown up yet as a name in the coroner’s files. Why? Because she washed her dishes? Because she had handed her baby once to a cop for a few minutes and had looked on with such pleasure and fondness that it was inconceivable she would voluntarily turn away from her child? But living in that room with a baby? He heard the doubts of those who would later read his statement and wondered if he should doubt, also.

“It is my opinion,” he hammered on the old sticking typewriter keys, “based upon my previous observations of the mother and victim, that the mother, Alberta Sanchez, did not voluntarily abandon her baby.”

He tore the page out of the typewriter and almost hit Katherine on the nose. She was bent over his shoulder and had been reading as he typed.

"Sorry. I didn't know you were that close," he said.

"That's okay," she said.

He signed the statement and put it on top of the stack of papers he had assembled. Katherine didn't move and looked down at the paper on the table. He slid his chair sideways so he could see her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It got to you, too, didn't it?"

They were alone in the report room. She should have left by now.

"It gets to everybody."

"How can something like this happen? We were in that tavern last night below the baby's room, and I remember laughing about something as we walked out. We were down below talking and laughing and going to one nothing call after another, and that baby upstairs is crying and crying and crying. And we can't hear it," she said.

Her voice was unsteady, and he was afraid she might cry.

"The baby had been dead for a long time, Kat. It wasn't crying last night. You couldn't have heard anything."

"I know that. That wasn't what I meant."

He knew what could happen if she started thinking about herself as part of the whole cycle. What could she do? What could any of them do? Walk into every hallway, every night, listening for babies crying? If you were going to survive, you had to shield yourself from it with leather gloves and a shiny badge and an impenetrable face. Most of the time, anyway.

"Well, look," he said, deciding to keep his advice to himself. "We've had it for today. What do you say we go someplace and get a good stiff drink? It's after nine o'clock," he said, checking his wristwatch. "It's okay to have a drink after nine. Wright's law."

"Sounds good to me," she said, her face brightening a little. "Where shall we go?"

“How about my place? You can give me a ride home. I’m going to skip early.”

“What about your boat?”

“The kayak? I’ll leave it on the dock. I’m not in the mood for paddling. Why don’t you change while I get this stuff signed. By the way, Kat,” he said, knowing he didn’t want to say it, “you probably don’t want to leave your uniform in the locker.”

She looked down at her blue gabardine shirt as the brightness faded from her face, then nodded slowly in agreement. He should have kept his mouth shut.

“I wish I could take a shower,” she said.

“Go ahead. I don’t mind waiting.”

“No towel. I never thought I might need one.”

He unzipped his bag, pulled out a towel, and tossed it to her.

“I’ll wait for you here.”

“You sure you don’t want to use it?”

“I’ll wait until I get home. Go ahead. It’s all right.”

“Thanks. I’ll hurry,” she said, and she was hurrying already as she went out the door to the locker room.

His sergeant was in the patrol office waiting for the paperwork to be brought to him. Sam placed the slim stack in front of him and sat down in a chair beside the sergeant’s desk. The reading glasses that rested low on the sergeant’s nose made the old veteran look scholarly. When he wanted to look at Sam, he lowered his head a little more and peered over his glasses. He took them off and stuck one of the bows into his mouth.

“So, you’re sure we’ve got two homicides here?”

“I think that’s likely.”

“Likely.” The sergeant repeated Sam’s word, not as question, and not as a statement either. “You knew this Alberta pretty well?”

“I knew her a little.”

“Don’t you think you could just walk upstairs and give the detectives the benefit of your opinion? You’re kind of telling them here what

they should do. They don't usually like that. What if you're wrong about the mother?"

"Then I'm wrong. It's no big deal."

"Maybe. So why not let them find her first? They'll be looking for her anyway."

"They might not look in the right places. I think it should be written down. It seems like we owe her that much."

The sergeant nodded his head, the contour of his mouth slowly revealing a decision. He signed the report and handed the papers to Sam.

"Drop them in the box, will you?"

"Thanks, Sarge. Mind if I take a few hours of comp time? It feels kind of late to hit the streets."

The sergeant looked at the round wall clock above the door.

"Don't worry about the comp time. Give it back to me later."

Sam waited for Katherine in the report room. He propped his worn tennis shoes on top of the table and shielded his eyes from the fluorescent lights overhead. The dark green chair on which he sat and the table beneath his shoes had not changed in the fifteen years he had assembled reports here, and the walls were the same lime color they had always been. Somebody had been fond of green. The typewriters had not changed either, and it was difficult to find one that had both a ribbon that printed legibly and keys that didn't stick. This morning it was a particularly dreary place. He had heard that there were plans to remodel the whole building, to bring it up with the times and make it more efficient. It was said they were going to use soothing colors in the holding rooms to make the prisoners easier to handle. He thought they should use the same colors in the report room.

Fifteen years ago he had not thought about colors in the police department. He had not thought about much of anything. The police job was only to be a temporary fill-in until he decided what he was really going to do. When he was twenty-one, nobody could have told him how quickly thirty-six comes, how time would stumble forward,

day by day, paycheck by paycheck, until one day he would find himself wondering why he was still around.

It was more interesting, he remembered—those first years back in the early seventies when he took literature classes at the university during the day and stood against his fellow students on the streets at night. He remembered the riot gear, the plastic shield of his helmet, and the long ironwood riot stick. With that stick he could block a blow aimed at him or strike one if necessary—maybe even if not so necessary. Cracking books by day and heads by night, he was quite certain then he could travel in both circles and not be touched by either. During that strange time, it did not seem strange that in neither circle could he admit he was in the other.

The divisions were not as clear anymore. There were no lines of men in blue—there were only men then—and angry crowds in paisley. And it was a good thing. None of them, neither side, could have stood it much longer. Still he realized that he missed the feeling that came with it—a feeling that he was somehow special. “Special?” he asked aloud. He looked around to make sure there was no one to answer, then snorted and leaned back in the green swivel chair and stared up at the seasick green ceiling.

When Katherine returned, her wet hair was shiny and flat against her scalp, and her face had regained some of its color. She was pretty out of uniform, he thought. She was pretty enough in it.

“I’ll wash this and bring it back to you,” she said, meaning the towel under her arm.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I want to. I think you saved my life. I can’t believe how much better I feel.”

“You look like a million.”

“I look like a drowned rat.”

“Hardly. What do you say we get out of here?”

They walked through the garage to Cherry Street and then up the steep hill toward the freeway that separated the downtown from the

neighboring hill above it. There was free parking beyond the freeway underpass, and the cops working headquarters laid claim to it with one shift slipping in when the previous one left. Their steps became slow and exaggerated as they climbed the hill, and each began to reach deeper for breath. The sunshine was in their faces.

It was September weather, and he especially liked Septembers. There was something left of summer, but the air was sharper in the mornings and gave notice to prepare for winter. He had nothing to prepare. Still the warm afternoons of September seemed like a time of grace.

He lived a few miles northwest of downtown. The street to his house dropped precipitously from the arterial road and passed new big homes carved into the hillside. Each of the new houses stretched for a glimpse of Elliott Bay that began at the end of the road. His house was on the beach, one of a dozen or so built as summer houses in a protected cove back in a time when the three-mile trip to Magnolia Bluff was an excursion out of the city.

“What a great place!” she said when she turned into his driveway off the remaining single lane.

“I bought it ten years ago. It was a bad time for real estate. Good for me, though. I couldn’t touch it now.”

“I believe it,” she said.

“The real estate guy said I should tear the house down and build something suitable for the location. He didn’t know it took every penny I had just to make the down payment.”

“Why would you want to tear it down?”

“You should have seen it. There isn’t much left of the original house, but the view hasn’t changed.”

“It’s fantastic,” she said.

“Come on, I’ll show you around.”

He opened the front door and escorted her through the house to the deck in back. They stood at the railing and looked out to the water, which was now smooth in the quiet lazy weather.

“So this is where you bring that kayak,” she said.

“In good weather. When it’s too rough, I go down a little ways where there’s more beach. Those rocks can make a rough landing.”

He pointed to the rocky beach below that reached out to a sliver of sand.

“The water is so calm.”

“There’s no wind. Believe me, it can change. When the tide comes in, there’s hardly any beach here. You can’t get here from anywhere else.” He pointed to a solid rock bluff that rose out of the water to the west. “That rock is our Gibraltar.”

“You can see the buildings downtown, but it seems so far away.”

“That’s why I like it. Sit down,” he said, pointing to the deck chairs. “What can I bring you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Whatever you have.”

“Whiskey or vodka?”

“Whiskey would be fine.”

“I have beer, too.”

“Whiskey,” she repeated.

In the kitchen, where he kept his liquor, he poured an ample shot over ice for both of them, and then, as an afterthought, added a little more. He carried the glasses out to the deck and handed one to her.

“This will take the hair off your chest.”

He sat down in the chair beside her and took a healthy sip. She took a smaller one and then a deep breath.

“What a night,” she said, her voice nearly flat. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m cut out for this.”

“Nobody is cut out for that. You did a good job.”

“Did I? It seemed to me that you did most of it, and I just hung around in the corners, afraid to look.”

“You did what you were supposed to do.”

She nodded slowly as she looked past him out to the water. “Maybe you’re right. Anyway, what the hell am I worrying about me for? Do you ever wonder what you got yourself into, with this job, I mean?”

“I don’t think about it anymore. That’s what I like about the kayak. I sweat it out of me before I get here. By the time I’m home, I’ve forgotten all about First Avenue. It’s a whole different world, and I don’t belong there.”

“Maybe I should get a kayak.”

“It doesn’t work very well on concrete.”

“I’m not sure it would help anyway. Sometimes I can’t forget things.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll learn how to do it.”

He left unsaid the danger if she did not. He had seen that, too. Better to hold it away, to forget.

He made sure she was comfortable, that she had a fresh glass of whiskey, and then he excused himself to take his shower. He was overdue for that. He shed his clothes, and as he pulled the sweat-shirt over his head, the death smell passed by his nose again. It was impossible to get rid of it. He stuffed his clothes into a plastic garbage bag and tied the end into a knot. This time he would not even try to wash them.

When he returned to the deck, she was asleep—the second glass of whiskey half consumed on the table beside her. He sat down carefully in the other chair. She seemed so small curled up on the recliner, so fragile, her wrists and hands hardly bigger than a child’s.

Out in the Sound a tugboat was passing. It pulled an empty barge toward the grain terminals, its diesel engines pounding a war dance rhythm across the water. Seagulls swooped down to the barge and squawked their disappointment when they found it empty.

On his deck a silent guest arrived without invitation. There was no extra chair for her. She sat alone, off to the side, too small to stand. He would not look at her and rubbed his eyes hard with the palms and fingers of both hands. Even so he could not push her away. He squinted into the sun and remembered.

“Olivia. Olivia Sanchez.”

That was the baby’s name. He mouthed the name silently to himself as his fingers drummed the cadence of the diesel engines on the arm of the deck chair, taking him back, taking him to that other world where he did not belong.