

THE RESCUE

Prologue

It would later be called one of the most violent storms in North Carolina history. Because it occurred in 1999, some of the most superstitious citizens considered it an omen, the first step toward the end of time. Others simply shook their heads and said that they knew something like that would happen sooner or later. In all, nine documented tornadoes would touch down that evening in the eastern part of the state, destroying nearly thirty homes in the process. Telephone lines lay strewn across roads, transformers blazed without anyone to stop them. Thousands of trees were felled, flash floods swept over banks of three major rivers, and lives changed forever with one fell swoop of Mother Nature.

It had begun in an instant. One minute it was cloudy and dark, but not unusually so; in the next, lightning, gale-force winds, and blinding rain exploded from the early summer sky. The system had blown in from the northwest and was crossing the state at nearly forty miles an hour. All at once, radio stations crackled with emergency warnings, documenting the storm's ferocity. People who could took cover inside, but people on the highway, like Denise Holton, had no place to go. Now that she was firmly in its midst, there was little she could do. Rain fell so hard in places that traffic slowed to five miles an hour and Denise held the wheel with white knuckles, her face a mask of

concentration. At times it was impossible to see the road through the windshield, but stopping meant certain disaster because of the people on the highway behind her. They wouldn't be able to see her car with time enough to stop. Pulling the shoulder strap of the seat belt over her head, she leaned over the steering wheel, looking for the dotted lines in the road, catching a glimpse here and there. There were long stretches during which she felt as if she were driving on instinct alone, because nothing was visible at all. Like an ocean wave, rain poured across her windshield, obscuring nearly everything. Her headlights seemed absolutely useless, and she wanted to stop, but where? Where would it be safe? On the side of the highway? People were swerving all over the road, as blind as she was. She made an instant decision—somehow, moving seemed safer. Her eyes darted from the road, to the taillights in front of her, to the rearview mirror; she hoped and prayed that everyone else on the road was doing the same thing. Looking for anything that would keep them safe. Anything at all.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the storm weakened and it was possible to see again. She suspected she'd reached the front edge of the system; everyone on the road apparently guessed the same thing. Despite the slick conditions, cars began to speed up, racing to stay ahead of the front. Denise sped up as well, staying with them. Ten minutes later, the rains still evident but slowing even more, she glanced at the gas gauge and felt a knot form in her stomach. She knew she had to stop soon. She didn't have enough gas to make it home.

Minutes went by.

The flow of traffic kept her vigilant. Thanks to a new moon, there was little light in the sky. She glanced at the dashboard again. The needle on the gas gauge was deep into the red shaded area. Despite her fears about staying ahead of the storm, she slowed the car, hoping to conserve what was left, hoping it would be enough. Hoping to stay ahead of the storm.

People began to race by, the spray against her windshield wreaking havoc with her wipers. She pressed onward.

Another ten minutes passed before she heaved a sigh of relief. Gas, less than a mile away, according to the sign. She put on her blinker, merged, rode in the right-hand lane, exited. She stopped at the first open pump.

She'd made it but knew the storm was still on its way. It would reach this area within the next fifteen minutes, if not sooner. She had time, but not a lot.

As quickly as she could, Denise filled the tank and then helped Kyle out of his car seat. Kyle held her hand as they went inside to pay; she'd insisted on it because of the number of cars at the station. Kyle was shorter than the door handle, and as she walked in she noticed how crowded it was. It seemed that everyone driving on the highway had had the same idea—*get gas while you can*. Denise grabbed a can of Diet Coke, her third of the day, then searched the refrigerators along the back wall. Near the corner she found strawberry-flavored milk for Kyle. It was getting late, and Kyle loved milk before bedtime. Hopefully, if she could stay ahead of the storm, he'd sleep most of the way back.

By the time she went to pay she was fifth in line. The people in front of her looked impatient and tired, as if they couldn't understand how it could be so crowded at this hour. Somehow it seemed as if they'd forgotten about the storm. But from the looks in their eyes, she knew they hadn't. Everyone in the store was on edge. *Hurry up*, their expressions said, *we need to get out of here*.

Denise sighed. She could feel the tension in her neck, and she rolled her shoulders. It didn't help much. She closed her eyes, rubbed them, opened them again. In the aisles behind her, she heard a mother arguing with her young son. Denise glanced over her shoulder. The boy appeared to be about the same age as Kyle, four and a half or so. His mother seemed as stressed as Denise felt.

She was holding on tightly to her son's arm. The child stomped his foot.

"But I want the cupcakes!" he whined.

His mother stood her ground. "I said no. You've had enough junk today."

"But you're getting something."

After a moment Denise turned away. The line hadn't moved at all. What was taking so long? She peeked around those in front of her, trying to figure it out. The lady at the cash register looked confused by the rush, and everyone in front of her, it seemed, wanted to pay with a credit card. Another minute crawled by, shrinking the line by one. By this time the mother and child got into line directly behind Denise, their argument continuing.

Denise put her hand on Kyle's shoulder. He was sipping his milk through a straw, standing quietly. She couldn't help but overhear the two people behind her.

"Aw, c'mon, Mom!"

"If you keep it up, you'll get a swat. We don't have time for this."

"But I'm hungry."

"Then you should have eaten your hot dog."

"I didn't want a hot dog."

And so it went. Three customers later Denise finally reached the register, opened her pocketbook, and paid with cash. She kept one credit card for emergencies but seldom, if ever, used it. For the clerk, making change seemed more difficult than swiping credit cards. She kept glancing up at the digital numbers on the register, trying to get it right. The argument between mother and son continued unabated. In time Denise finally received her change and put her pocketbook away, then turned toward the door. Knowing how hard it was for everyone tonight, she smiled at the mother behind her, as if to say, *Kids are tough sometimes, aren't they?*

In response, the woman rolled her eyes. "You're lucky," she said.

Denise looked at her curiously. “Excuse me?”

“I said you’re lucky.” She nodded toward her son. “This one here never shuts up.”

Denise glanced at the floor, nodded with tight lips, then turned and left the store. Despite the stress of the storm, despite the long day driving and her time at the evaluation center, all she could think about was Kyle. Walking toward the car, Denise suddenly felt the urge to cry.

“No,” she whispered to herself, “you’re the lucky one.”

Chapter 1

Why had this happened? Why, of all the children, was Kyle the one?

Back in the car after stopping for gas, Denise hit the highway again, staying ahead of the storm. For the next twenty minutes rain fell steadily but not ominously, and she watched the wipers push the water back and forth while she made her way back to Edenton, North Carolina. Her Diet Coke sat between the emergency brake and the driver's seat, and though she knew it wasn't good for her, she finished the last of it and immediately wished she'd bought another. The extra caffeine, she hoped, would keep her alert and focused on the drive, instead of on Kyle. But Kyle was always there.

Kyle. What could she say? He'd once been part of her, she'd heard his heart beating at twelve weeks, she'd felt his movements within her the last five months of her pregnancy. After his birth, while still in the delivery room, she took one look at him and couldn't believe there was anything more beautiful in the world. That feeling hadn't changed, although she wasn't in any way a perfect mother. These days she simply did the best job she could, accepting the good with the bad, looking for joys in the little things. With Kyle, they were sometimes hard to find.

She'd done her best to be patient with him over the last four years, but it hadn't always been easy. Once, while he was still a

toddler, she'd momentarily placed her hand over his mouth to quiet him, but he'd been screaming for over five hours after staying awake all night, and tired parents everywhere might find this a forgivable offense. After that, though, she'd done her best to keep her emotions in check. When she felt her frustration rising, she slowly counted to ten before doing anything; when that didn't work, she left the room to collect herself. Usually it helped, but this was both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because she knew that patience was necessary to help him; it was a curse because it made her question her own abilities as a parent.

Kyle had been born four years to the day after her mother had died of a brain aneurysm, and though not usually given to believing in signs, Denise could hardly regard that as a coincidence. Kyle, she felt sure, was a gift from God. Kyle, she knew, had been sent to replace her family. Other than him, she was alone in the world. Her father had died when she was four, she had no siblings, her grandparents on both sides had passed away. Kyle immediately became the sole recipient of the love she had to offer. But fate is strange, fate is unpredictable. Though she showered Kyle with attention, it somehow hadn't been enough. Now she led a life she hadn't anticipated, a life where Kyle's daily progression was carefully logged in a notebook. Now she led a life completely dedicated to her son. Kyle, of course, didn't complain about the things they did every day. Kyle, unlike other children, never complained about anything. She glanced in the rearview mirror.

"What are you thinking about, sweetie?"

Kyle was watching the rain as it blew against the windows, his head turned sideways. His blanket was in his lap. He hadn't said anything since he'd been in the car, and he turned at the sound of her voice.

She waited for his response. But there was nothing.



Denise Holton lived in a house that had once been owned by her grandparents. After their deaths it had become her mother's, then eventually it had passed on to her. It wasn't much—a small ramshackle building set on three acres, built in the 1920s. The two bedrooms and the living room weren't too bad, but the kitchen was in dire need of modern appliances and the bathroom didn't have a shower. At both the front and back of the house the porches were sagging, and without the portable fan she sometimes felt as if she would bake to death, but because she could live there rent-free, it was exactly what she needed. It had been her home for the past three months.

Staying in Atlanta, the place she'd grown up, would have been impossible. Once Kyle was born, she'd used the money her mother had left her to stay at home with him. At the time, she considered it a temporary leave of absence. Once he was a little older, she had planned to go back to teaching. The money, she knew, would run out eventually, and she had to earn a living. Besides, teaching was something she'd loved. She'd missed her students and fellow teachers after her first week away. Now, years later, she was still at home with Kyle and the world of teaching in a school was nothing but a vague and distant memory, something more akin to a dream than a reality. She couldn't remember a single lesson plan or the names of the students she had taught. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn that she'd never done it at all.

Youth offers the promise of happiness, but life offers the realities of grief. Her father, her mother, her grandparents—all gone before she turned twenty-one. At that point in her life she'd been to five different funeral homes yet legally couldn't enter a bar to wash the sorrow away. She'd suffered more than her fair share of challenges, but God, it seemed, couldn't stop at just that. Like Job's struggles, hers continued to go on. "Middle-class lifestyle?" *Not anymore.* "Friends you've grown up with?" *You must leave them behind.* "A job to enjoy?" *It is too much to ask.* And Kyle, the

sweet, wonderful boy for whom all this was done—in many ways he was still a mystery to her.

Instead of teaching she worked the evening shift at a diner called Eights, a busy hangout on the outskirts of Edenton. The owner there, Ray Toler, was a sixty-something black man who'd run the place for thirty years. He and his wife had raised six kids, all of whom went to college. Copies of their diplomas hung along the back wall, and everyone who ate there knew about them. Ray made sure of that. He also liked to talk about Denise. She was the only one, he liked to say, who'd ever handed him a résumé when interviewing for the job.

Ray was a man who understood poverty, a man who understood kindness, a man who understood how hard it was for single mothers. "In the back of the building, there's a small room," he'd said when he hired her. "You can bring your son with you, as long as he doesn't get in the way." Tears formed in her eyes when he showed it to her. There were two cots, a night-light, a place where Kyle would be safe. The next evening Kyle went to bed in that small room as soon as she started on her shift; hours later she loaded him in the car and took him back home. Since then that routine hadn't changed.

She worked four nights a week, five hours a shift, earning barely enough to get by. She'd sold her Honda for an old but reliable Datsun two years ago, pocketing the difference. That money, along with everything else from her mother, had long since been spent. She'd become a master of budgeting, a master of cutting corners. She hadn't bought new clothes for herself since the Christmas before last; though her furniture was decent, they were remnants from another life. She didn't subscribe to magazines, she didn't have cable television, her stereo was an old boom box from college. The last movie she'd seen on the silver screen was *Schindler's List*. She seldom made long-distance phone calls to her friends. She had \$238 in the bank. Her car was nineteen years old, with enough miles on the engine to have circled the world five times.

None of those things mattered, though. Only Kyle was important.

But never once had he told her that he loved her.



On those evenings she didn't work at the diner, Denise usually sat in the rocking chair on the porch out back, a book across her lap. She enjoyed reading outside, where the rise and fall of chirping crickets was somehow soothing in its monotony. Her home was surrounded by oak and cypress and mockernut hickory trees, all draped heavily in Spanish moss. Sometimes, when the moonlight slanted through them just right, shadows that looked like exotic animals splashed across the gravel walkway.

In Atlanta she used to read for pleasure. Her tastes ran the gamut from Steinbeck and Hemingway to Grisham and King. Though those types of books were available at the local library, she never checked them out anymore. Instead she used the computers near the reading room, which had free access to the Internet. She searched through clinical studies sponsored by major universities, printing the documents whenever she found something relevant. The files she kept had grown to nearly three inches wide.

On the floor beside her chair she had an assortment of psychological textbooks as well. Expensive, they'd made serious dents in her budget. Yet the hope was always there, and after ordering them, she waited anxiously for them to arrive. This time, she liked to think, she would find something that helped.

Once they came, she would sit for hours, studying the information. With the lamp a steady blaze behind her, she perused the information, things she'd usually read before. Still, she didn't rush. Occasionally she took notes, other times she simply folded the page and highlighted the information. An hour would pass, maybe two, before she'd finally close the book, finished for the night. She'd stand, shaking the stiffness from her joints. After

bringing the books to her small desk in the living room, she would check on Kyle, then head back outside.

The gravel walkway led to a path through the trees, eventually to a broken fence that lined her property. She and Kyle would wander that way during the day, she walked it alone at night. Strange noises would filter from everywhere: from above came the screech of an owl; over there, a rustle through the underbrush; off to the side, a skitter along a branch. Coastal breezes moved the leaves, a sound similar to that of the ocean; moonlight drifted in and out. But the path was straight, she knew it well. Past the fence, the forest pressed in around her. More sounds, less light, but still she moved forward. Eventually the darkness became almost stifling. By then she could hear the water; the Chowan River was close. Another grove of trees, a quick turn to the right, and all of a sudden it was as if the world had unfolded itself before her. The river, wide and slow moving, was finally visible. Powerful, eternal, as black as time. She would cross her arms and gaze at it, taking it in, letting the calm it inspired wash over her. She would stay a few minutes, seldom longer, since Kyle was still in the house.

Then she'd sigh and turn from the river, knowing it was time to go.

Chapter 2

In the car, still ahead of the storm, Denise remembered sitting with the doctor in his office earlier that day while he read the results from the report on Kyle.

The child is male, four years eight months old at the time of testing. . . . Kyle is a handsome child with no obvious physical deficiencies in the head or facial area. . . . No recorded head trauma . . . pregnancy was described by mother as normal. . . .

The doctor continued for the next few minutes, outlining the specific results from various tests, until finally reaching the conclusion.

Though IQ falls within the normal range, child is severely delayed in both *receptive* and *expressive* language . . . probably *central auditory processing disorder (CAPD)*, though cause can't be determined . . . overall language ability estimated to be that of a *twenty-four-month-old*. . . . Eventual language and learning capabilities unknown at this time. . . .

Barely that of a toddler, she couldn't help but think.

When the doctor was finished, he set the report aside and

looked at Denise sympathetically. "In other words," he said, talking slowly as if she hadn't understood what he'd just read, "Kyle has problems with language. For some reason—we're not sure why—Kyle isn't able to speak at a level appropriate for his age, even though his IQ is normal. Nor is he able to understand language equal to the level of other four-year-olds."

"I know."

The assurance of her response caught him off guard. To Denise it seemed as if he'd expected either an argument, an excuse, or a predictable series of questions. When he realized she wasn't going to say anything else, he cleared his throat.

"There's a note here that says you've had him evaluated elsewhere."

Denise nodded. "I have."

He shuffled through the papers. "The reports aren't in his file."

"I didn't give them to you."

His eyebrows rose slightly. "Why?"

She reached for her purse and set it in her lap, thinking. Finally: "May I be frank?"

He studied her for a moment before leaning back in his chair. "Please."

She glanced at Kyle before facing the doctor again. "Kyle has been misdiagnosed again and again over the past two years—everything from deafness to autism to pervasive development disorder to ADD. In time, none of those things turned out to be accurate. Do you know how hard it is for a parent to hear those things about her child, to believe them for months, to learn everything about them and finally accept them, before being told they were in error?"

The doctor didn't answer. Denise met his eyes and held them before going on.

"I know Kyle has problems with language, and believe me, I've read all about auditory processing problems. In all honesty, I've probably read as much about it as you have. Despite that, I wanted his language skills tested by an independent source so

that I could know specifically where he needed help. In the real world, he has to talk to more people than just me.”

“So . . . none of this is news to you.”

Denise shook her head. “No, it’s not.”

“Do you have him in a program now?”

“I work with him at home.”

He paused. “Does he see a speech or behavioral specialist, anyone who’s worked with children like him before?”

“No. He went to therapy three times a week for over a year, but it didn’t seem to help. He continued to fall further behind, so I pulled him out last October. Now it’s just me.”

“I see.” It was obvious by the way he said it that he didn’t agree with her decision.

Her eyes narrowed. “You have to understand—even though this evaluation shows Kyle at the level of a two-year-old, that’s an improvement from where he once was. Before he worked with me, he’d never shown any improvement at all.”



Driving along the highway three hours later, Denise thought about Brett Cosgrove, Kyle’s father. He was the type of man who attracted attention, the kind who’d always caught her eye: tall and thin with dark eyes and ebony hair. She’d seen him at a party, surrounded by people, obviously used to being the center of attention. She was twenty-three at the time, single, in her second year of teaching. She asked her friend Susan who he was: she was told that Brett was in town for a few weeks, working for an investment banking firm whose name Denise had since forgotten. It didn’t matter that he was from out of town. She glanced his way, he glanced back, and their eyes kept meeting for the next forty minutes before he finally came over and said hello.

Who can explain what happened next? Hormones? Loneliness? The mood of the hour? Either way, they left the party a little after eleven, had drinks in the hotel bar while entertaining

each other with snappy anecdotes, flirted with an eye toward what might happen next, and ended up in bed. It was the first and last time she ever saw him. He went back to New York, back to his own life. Back, she suspected even then, to a girlfriend he'd neglected to mention. And she went back to her life.

At the time, it didn't seem to mean much; a month later, while sitting on the bathroom floor one Tuesday morning, her arm around the commode, it meant a whole lot more. She went to the doctor, who confirmed what she already knew.

She was pregnant.

She called Brett on the phone, reached his answering machine, and left a message to call; three days later he finally did. He listened, then sighed with what sounded like exasperation. He offered to pay for the abortion. As a Catholic, she said it wasn't going to happen. Angered, he questioned why this had happened. I think you already know the answer to that, she answered. He asked if she was sure the baby was his. She closed her eyes, calming herself, not rising to the bait. Yes, it was his. Again he offered to pay for an abortion. Again she said no. What did she want him to do? he asked her. She said she didn't want anything, she just thought he should know. He would fight if she demanded child support payments, he said. She said she didn't expect that from him, but she needed to know if he wanted to be involved in the child's life. She listened to the sound of his breaths on the other end. No, he finally said. He was engaged to someone else.

She'd never spoken to him again.



In truth, it was easier to defend Kyle to a doctor than it was to herself. In truth, she was more worried than she let on. Even though he'd improved, the language ability of a two-year-old wasn't much to cheer about. Kyle would be five in October.

Still, she refused to give up on him. She would never give up,

even though working with him was the hardest thing she'd ever done. Not only did she do the regular things—make his meals, take him to parks, play with him in the living room, show him new places—but she also drilled him on the mechanics of speech for four hours a day, six days a week. His progression, though undeniable since she'd begun with him, was hardly linear. Some days he said everything she asked him to, some days he didn't. Some days he could comprehend new things easily, other days he seemed further behind than ever. Most of the time he could answer “what” and “where” type questions; “how” and “why” questions were still incomprehensible. As for conversation, the flow of reason between two individuals, it was still nothing but a scientific hypothesis, far beyond his ability.

Yesterday they'd spent the afternoon on the banks of the Chowan River. He enjoyed watching the boats as they cut through the water on the way to Batchelor Bay, and it provided a change from his normal routine. Usually, when they worked, he was strapped in a chair in the living room. The chair helped him focus.

She'd picked a beautiful spot. Mockernut hickory trees lined the banks, Christmas ferns were more common than mosquitoes. They were sitting in a clover patch, just the two of them. Kyle was staring at the water. Denise carefully logged his progress in a notebook and finished jotting down the latest information. Without looking up, she asked: “Do you see any boats, sweetie?”

Kyle didn't answer. Instead he lifted a tiny jet in the air, pretending to make it fly. One eye was closed, the other was focused on the toy in his hand.

“Kyle, honey, do you see any boats?”

He made a tiny, rushing sound with his throat, the sounds of a make-believe engine surging in throttle. He wasn't paying attention to her.

She looked out over the water. No boats in sight. She reached over and touched his hand, making sure she had his attention.

“Kyle? Say, 'I don't see any boats.' ”

“Airplane.” (*Owpwane*)

“I know it’s an airplane. Say, ‘I don’t see any boats.’ ”

He raised the toy a little higher, one eye still focused on it. After a moment he spoke again.

“Jet airplane.” (*Jet owpwane*)

“Yes, you’re holding an airplane.”

“Jet airplane.” (*Jet owpwane*)

She sighed. “Yes, a *jet* airplane.”

“Owpwane.”

She looked at his face, so perfect, so beautiful, so *normal* looking. She used her finger to turn his face toward hers.

“Even though we’re outside, we still have to work, okay? . . . You have to say what I tell you to, or we go back to the living room, to your chair. You don’t want to do that, do you?”

Kyle didn’t like his chair. Once strapped in, he couldn’t get away, and no child—Kyle included—enjoyed something like that. Still, Kyle moved the toy airplane back and forth with measured concentration, keeping it aligned with an imaginary horizon.

Denise tried again.

“Say, ‘I don’t see any boats.’ ”

Nothing.

She pulled a tiny piece of candy from her coat pocket.

Kyle saw it and reached for it. She kept it out of his grasp.

“Kyle? Say, ‘I don’t see any boats.’ ”

It was like pulling teeth, but the words finally came out.

He whispered, “I don’t see any boats.” (*Duh see a-ee boat*)

Denise leaned in and kissed him, then gave him the candy. “That’s right, honey, that’s right. Good talking! You’re such a good talker!”

Kyle took in her praise while he ate the candy, then focused on the toy again.

Denise jotted his words in her notebook and went on with the lesson. She glanced upward, thinking of something he hadn’t said that day.

“Kyle, say, ‘The sky is blue.’”
After a beat:
“Owpuane.”



In the car again, now twenty minutes from home. In the back she heard Kyle fidget in his seat, and she glanced in the rearview mirror. The sounds in the car soon quieted, and she was careful not to make any noise until she was sure he was sleeping again.

Kyle.

Yesterday was typical of her life with him. A step forward, a step backward, two steps to the side, always a struggle. He was better than he once had been, yet he was still too far behind. Would he ever catch up?

Outside, dark clouds spanned the sky above, rain fell steadily. In the backseat Kyle was dreaming, his eyelids twitching. She wondered what his dreams were like. Were they devoid of sound, a silent film running through his head, nothing more than pictures of rocket ships and jets blazing across the sky? Or did he dream using the few words he knew? She didn't know. Sometimes, when she sat with him as he lay sleeping in his bed, she liked to imagine that in his dreams he lived in a world where everyone understood him, where the language was real—maybe not English, but something that made sense to him. She hoped he dreamed of playing with other children, children who responded to him, children who didn't shy away because he didn't speak. In his dreams, she hoped he was happy. God could at least do that much, couldn't he?

Now, driving along a quiet highway, she was alone. With Kyle in the back, she was still alone. She hadn't chosen this life; it was the only life offered to her. It could have been worse, of course, and she did her best to keep this perspective. But most of the time, it wasn't easy.

Would Kyle have had these problems if his father were around?

In her heart she wasn't exactly sure, but she didn't want to think so. She'd once asked one of Kyle's doctors about it, and he'd said he didn't know. An honest answer—one that she'd expected—but she'd had trouble sleeping for a week afterward. Because the doctor hadn't simply dismissed the notion, it took root in her mind. Had she somehow been responsible for all of Kyle's problems? Thinking this way had led to other questions as well. If not the lack of a father, had it been something she'd done while pregnant? Had she eaten the wrong food, had she rested enough? Should she have taken more vitamins? Or fewer? Had she read to him enough as an infant? Had she ignored him when he'd needed her most? The possible answers to those questions were painful to consider, and through sheer force of will she pushed them from her mind. But sometimes late at night the questions would come creeping back. Like kudzu spreading through the forests, they were impossible to keep at bay forever.

Was all of this somehow her fault?

At moments like those, she would slip down the hall toward Kyle's bedroom and watch him while he slept. He slept with a white blanket curled around his head, small toys in his hand. She would stare at him and feel sorrow in her heart, yet she would also feel joy. Once, while still living in Atlanta, someone had asked her if she would have had Kyle if she had known what lay in store for both of them. "Of course," she'd answered quickly, just as she was supposed to. And deep down she knew she meant it. Despite his problems, she viewed Kyle as a blessing. If she conceived it in terms of pros and cons, the list of pros was not only longer, but much more meaningful.

But because of his problems, she not only loved him, but felt the need to protect him. There were times each and every day when she wanted to come to his defense, to make excuses for him, to make others understand that though he looked normal, something was wired wrong in his brain. Most of the time, however, she didn't. She decided to let others make their own judgments about him. If they didn't understand, if they didn't give

him a chance, then it was their loss. For despite all his difficulties, Kyle was a wonderful child. He didn't hurt other children; he never bit them or screamed at them or pinched them, he never took their toys, he shared his own even when he didn't want to. He was a sweet child, the sweetest she'd ever known, and when he smiled . . . God, he was just so beautiful. She would smile back and he'd keep smiling, and for a split second she'd think that everything was okay. She'd tell him she loved him, and the smile would grow wider, but because he couldn't talk well, she sometimes felt as if she were the only one who noticed how wonderful he actually was. Instead Kyle would sit alone in the sandbox and play with his trucks while other children ignored him.

She worried about him all the time, and though all mothers worried about their children, she knew it wasn't the same. Sometimes she wished she knew someone else who had a child like Kyle. At least then someone would understand. At least then she'd have someone to talk to, to compare notes with, to offer a shoulder when she needed to cry. Did other mothers wake up every day and wonder whether their child would ever have a friend? Any friend? *Ever*? Did other mothers wonder whether their children would go to a regular school or play sports or go to the prom? Did other mothers watch as their children were ostracized, not only by other children, but by other parents as well? Did their worries go on every minute of every day, seemingly without an end in sight?

Her thoughts followed this familiar track as she guided the old Datsun onto now recognizable roads. She was ten minutes away. Round the next curve, cross the bridge toward Edenton, then left on Charity Road. Another mile after that and she'd be home. The rain continued to fall, and the asphalt was black and shiny. The headlights shone into the distance, reflecting the rain, diamonds falling from the evening sky. She was driving through a nameless swamp, one of dozens in the low country fed by the waters of the Albemarle Sound. Few people lived here, and those who did were seldom seen. There were no other cars on the high-

way. Rounding the curve at nearly sixty miles an hour, she saw it standing in the road, less than forty yards away.

A doe, fully grown, facing the oncoming headlights, frozen by uncertainty.

They were going too fast to stop, but instinct prevailed and Denise slammed on the brakes. She heard the screeching of tires, felt the tires lose their grip on the rain-slicked surface, felt the momentum forcing the car forward. Still, the doe did not move. Denise could see its eyes, two yellow marbles, gleaming in the darkness. She was going to hit it. Denise heard herself scream as she turned the wheel hard, the front tires sliding, then somehow responding. The car began to move diagonally across the road, missing the deer by a foot. Too late to matter, the deer finally broke from its trance and darted away safely, without looking back.

But the turn had been too much for the car. She felt the wheels leave the surface of the asphalt, felt the *whump* as the car slammed to the earth again. The old shocks groaned violently with the bounce, a broken trampoline. The cypress trees were less than thirty feet off the highway. Frantically Denise turned the wheel again, but the car rocketed forward as if she'd done nothing. Her eyes went wide and she drew a harsh breath. It seemed as if everything were moving in slow motion, then at full speed, then slow motion again. The outcome, she suddenly realized, was foregone, though the realization lasted only a split second. At that moment she blasted into the tree; heard the twisting of metal and shattering of glass as the front of the car exploded toward her. Because the seat belt was across her lap and not over her shoulder, her head shot forward, slamming into the steering wheel. A sharp, searing pain in her forehead . . .

Then there was nothing.