

And Then There Was One

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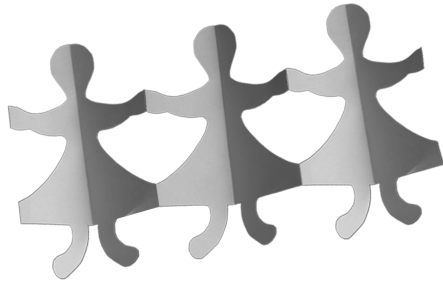
NONFICTION

*What's Next . . . For You?*

(With Robert Gussin)

# And Then There Was One

A Novel



Patricia Gussin

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FIRST EDITION

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To my wonderful grandchildren

Melissa

Mike

Megan

Kris

Courtney

Connor

Will

Sal

Zack

Austen

Sonny

Luke

Nate

Joe

Nick

Rachel

Oliver



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And Then There Was One





## CHAPTER 1

*Detroit Pays Tribute to Monica Monroe in Concert at Fox Theatre.*  
— *Detroit News*, Sunday, June 14, 2009

“Scott, listen to me. We can’t find Sammie and Alex!”

“Can’t find what?” Scott Monroe shouted over the roar of Yankee fans as Derek Jeter approached the plate. The Yankees were pumeling the Mets, battering Santana. “Lucy, I’m in the dugout. I’ll have to call you back.”

“No. Don’t hang up!”

Cell phone jammed against his ear, Scott left the game and headed to the players’ lockers. “Hold on,” he yelled, letting the door slam behind him, feeling his heart start to hammer, all the little hairs rising on his neck. His mother-in-law, level-headed and always composed, calling him during a game? Something had to be wrong. “Okay, it’s quieter in here.”

“Scott, it’s about the girls — ”

“What about them?” He squeezed the phone even tighter to his ear.

“Danielle took them to the movies today. At the mall in Auburn Hills. Sammie and Alex never came out. Danielle called me. I’m at the mall now and there’s no sign of them.”

Scott crouched against the concrete wall and forced a deep breath. *Didn’t come out?* “Okay, Lucy, slow down. You said Alex and Sammie. Where’s Jackie? Aren’t they together?”

“No, they split up. Two different movies. Jackie went to *Star Wars* with Danielle. And Sammie and Alex went to *Night at the Museum* right next door. Both movies ended about the same time, but Sammie and Alex never came out.”

How could two kids *not come out* of a theater?

“Just a minute, Lucy, I’m still having trouble hearing you.” Scott moved deeper inside the hall. Lucy was telling him that two of his daughters were missing. Certainly they’d show up soon. They were nine years old, the age that girls like to hang around malls.

“Before I got here, Danielle asked everyone around,” Lucy continued, breathless, “but nobody saw Sammie and Alex leave. Scott, we don’t know where they are. I called mall security.”

Scott felt his body go limp and he slumped lower against the wall. Where could they have gone? The New York City air was chilly for mid-June, but Scott felt the prickle of ice filling his veins.

“There’re calling in the police,” Lucy said. “Scott, can you come to Detroit? Now.”

“Katie?” Scott hardly dared ask. His wife was a street-smart doctor, but when it came to their girls she had a sixth sense of paranoia — an obsession with their safety. Strange that Katie had let them go to the movies with their cousin, Danielle, even though Danielle was a responsible nineteen year old.

“Where’s Katie?”

Lucy’s voice faltered. “She and Sharon went into Detroit, that charity affair, guests of the bishop.”

Scott remembered. Katie’s sister was the chairperson of the posh luncheon event.

“Their phones are still turned off, but they’ll be at my place soon. You know how Katie is about those girls.”

Scott did know. Katie had grown up in Detroit, her early years in the inner city. Even though Lucy had moved her four daughters to the troubled city’s outer borders and had sent them to a private girls’ academy, Katie, the youngest, had never been able to shake the terror of those early years.

“The police?” Scott heard the echo of his voice in the empty hallway. Trying to think of logical solutions, he slammed into a wall of terror. “Did you check for a lost and found for kids?” he managed. “What about other exits? Don’t they have emergency exits?”

“Yes,” Lucy said. “But nothing.”

Struggling for a sense of perspective, Scott squeezed his eyes shut, trying to focus on the diverse personalities of his identical triplet

daughters. “If they are in the mall and lost, Sammie would never admit it. She’d hold out to the end before asking for help.” Scott paused, “Lucy, you did say that Jackie is okay?”

“Yes, she and Danielle are in my sight. Jackie’s scared, that’s all. And of course, Danielle is devastated.”

“I’m on my way.” Scott opened his eyes and stood. “I’ll charter a plane. I’m on my way.”

“Let’s just hope they’re wandering the mall,” Lucy said, but Scott had already disconnected.

Lucy Jones jerked to attention when the heavysset man in a rumped brown suit barged into the cramped mall security office. She still gripped the phone on the desk with one hand while holding onto her granddaughter, Jackie, trembling at her side. Her other granddaughter, Danielle, stood back, her slim shoulders slumped, her head bent into tented hands.

“Clarence Plummer,” the man announced. “Director of security. You reported a couple of missing kids?” Plummer swung his massive frame into the chair behind the desk, motioning for Lucy to take the lone client chair. She complied, pulling Jackie onto her lap, leaving Danielle standing. “Start at the beginning, ma’am. We’re about to call in the local police, but —”

“Sir, my two granddaughters are missing. They’re only nine years old.” Lucy’s words came out in a gush as she tilted Jackie forward on her lap. “They look just like this little girl here, only one has a ponytail. They’re triplets. They were at the movie and didn’t come out. They —”

“Slow down, ma’am.” Plummer leaned forward, rubbing his shiny bald head, the color of mahogany. “What do you mean? They didn’t come out of the show? That must mean they’re in there. Why didn’t you just go in and get them out?”

A familiar feeling started to settle in the pit of Lucy’s stomach. How could she make him understand that she was not an ignorant black woman, unworthy of his time? When she was representing her clients as a social worker, Lucy felt empowered, but here, as an aging, overweight black woman, she suffered a surge of helplessness. The fact that Clarence Plummer, too, was black gave her little comfort.

“Sir, I’m afraid that they have been taken.” Lucy struggled to enunciate, her voice was shaking so.

Gulping another deep breath, she prayed that she was overreacting, merely oversensationalizing the situation. Certainly the girls would show up any minute and she’d have to apologize for her hysteria. To her surprise, Plummer leaned forward, elbows on this desk, and fixed his eyes on hers. “Ma’am, please, start at the beginning.”

“My other granddaughter, their cousin, Danielle,” Lucy nodded to the older girl, “took all three girls to the movies in the mall. Danielle and Jackie went to *Star Wars* and Sammie and Alex to *Night in the Museum* right next door. When the movie was over, Sammie and Alex never came out.”

“We were supposed to meet on the bench by the fountain.” Danielle spoke for the first time in a voice strained and low. Her brown eyes were smudged with mascara, and when she spoke, one hand kept twisting the charm bracelet on her other arm.

Lucy’s heart went out to her sensitive granddaughter. Danielle was spending her summer break from Vanderbilt with Lucy to help make sure her grandmother was okay after her hip replacement. Tears glistened against Danielle’s caramel-colored skin, and Lucy wished she had a packet of Kleenex to give her.

“Could I have your names, please?” Plummer pulled out a pad and selected a pen from the cluster on his desk.

“Jacqueline Monroe.” Lucy encircled Jackie with both arms. “Her sisters are Samantha and Alexandra. I’m Lucy Jones and this is my granddaughter, Danielle Evans.” Lucy explained how she lived in Auburn Hills, that Danielle lived in Nashville during the school year, and the Monroe triplets in Tampa. She told him that the children were in town with their mother to attend their aunt’s concert in Detroit last night. Their father, Scott Monroe, was on his way here from New York City.

Plummer, writing it all down, paused mid stroke. “Not *that* Scott Monroe, the Yankee catcher? His sister, Monica Monroe, my wife’s favorite singer?”

“Yes.” Jackie looked up at him, eyes brimming with tears. “Mister, can you find my sisters?”

There was now no doubt that Lucy had Plummer’s full attention.

Scott Monroe was still a revered figure in baseball circles even though an injury at the plate had ended his catching career eighteen years ago. “Dang. Yankees beat the Mets fifteen to zip today. He was at *that* game?”

Lucy nodded.

“He’s your dad?” Plummer scrutinized Jackie again. “Okay, let’s start from the beginning.”

“Danielle,” Lucy said, “I want you to tell Mr. Plummer exactly what happened.

Through tears, voice shaking, Danielle repeated the same information, telling Plummer how the foursome had split up just before going inside the theatre. Since the movies were shown side-by-side, Danielle did not think that there was any risk. They planned to meet outside the entrance to the movie theater where there was a prominent fountain surrounded by benches.

After *Star Wars* let out, she and Jackie had waited for a while, and then she’d taken Jackie and they’d gone into the *Night of the Museum* theatre to search for Sammie and Alex. The theatre had been dark and empty, and she’d persuaded the ticket collector to turn on the lights. The space was completely empty. Then they’d gone around asking everybody, but nobody had seen the girls leave. The ticket taker volunteered that the emergency exit had not been breached. Then Danielle called her grandmother. As soon as she hung up, she and Jackie kept asking people in the vicinity of the fountain and movie entrance whether they’d seen the two girls. Nobody had.

“I got here fifteen minutes after Danielle called,” Lucy said, “even though with my new hip I’m not supposed to drive.”

“Jackie and I looked everywhere,” Danielle said.

“Bathrooms?” Plummer asked.

“We checked. Every stall. They were not there. Not in the lobby. Not by the concessions. I figured they must be somewhere out in the mall.”

“Oh, where could they be?” Lucy interrupted.

Plummer creased his brow and gestured for Danielle to continue.

“So I asked Jackie. ‘Where would they have wandered off to?’ Jackie said, ‘Alex wouldn’t wander off, but maybe Sammie. Sammie’s always getting in trouble.’”

Jackie shifted in Lucy's arms, and Lucy pulled her closer.

"It's a big mall. Jackie said maybe they went to get candy. But why? There was plenty of candy at the movies. Jackie said that Alex likes animals, but there's no pet store in the mall. Jackie suggested a sports store."

Plummer raised his eyebrows.

"They're sports fanatics," Lucy said.

"I know this mall like the back of my hand," Danielle said. "I thought about the sneaker store, but Jackie said they just got brand new Nike's. That's when I called my grandmother. I figured that they had to be here somewhere, but if I was late getting them back, their mother would simply freak. Everybody knows how ultraprotective Aunt Katie is about her kids."

Jackie twisted again in Lucy's arms, "Where are they, Grandma?"

"Mrs. Jones, I need details." Plummer consulted his notes. "Alexandra and Samantha?"

"Alex and Sammie," Lucy said, gulping back tears.

Plummer got up and walked around his desk. He knelt at Lucy's side and directly addressed Jackie. His voice was firm, yet kind. "I have a couple of questions for you, Jackie. Okay?"

The child nodded.

"Can you tell me what your sisters were wearing?"

Jackie fingered the butterfly pattern on her blue slacks, then brushed tears from her eyes. "Yes. Sammie had on those awful pants, the ones with a lot of colors and a shirt I told her did not match. She said she didn't care."

"What color shirt?" Plummer asked?

"Yellow," Jackie said. "And the pants had a mix of colors, reds and greens."

"What about your other sister? What was she wearing?"

"A purple dress. Actually, violet. She likes dresses. And a barrette, like mine." Jackie fingered the fake jewel clasp holding the hair back from her forehead. "And Sammie had her hair in a ponytail with a red ribbon."

"I explained all that to the ticket guy," Danielle interrupted. "I told him, 'look at Jackie. Did you see two little girls who look just like her? One with a yellow shirt and multicolored pants. The other



in a purple sundress.’ And I explained that the one in the multicolors had her hair in a ponytail.”

“Alex’s dress was light purple,” Jackie corrected.

“‘Miss, we see so many kids going through here,’ was all he said.”

Plummer got up. “Okay, timing is everything. I need to know exactly when you arrived and exactly when you separated.”

Danielle said that they arrived at the mall at twelve thirty. They hung out for a few minutes then went inside the theatre to buy popcorn and pop. She and Jackie separated from Alex and Sammie at exactly the time the two movies were scheduled to start: twelve forty-five. New tears gathered as she faced Plummer. “And that’s the last time I saw them.”

Plummer patted Danielle on the back. “We’ll find them,” he said. Then he attacked the phone, spewing orders in a voice that bellowed: “monitor all access and egress; station security agents at each of the four mall exits; stop anyone with a child fitting the description of the Monroe girls — healthy nine year olds, black hair, one in a ponytail, the other shoulder length, brown eyes, dark bronze skin; nobody leaves the mall complex without scrutiny.”

Plummer’s next calls were to the Oakland County sheriff and the Michigan State Police. He urged the police not to wait to call in the FBI. The intensity of Plummer’s tone terrorized Lucy as the security director repeated over and over that these first few hours were critical.

Lucy felt her heart race, and she broke into a cold sweat, pulling Jackie even more tightly to her chest.



## CHAPTER 2

*General Motors and Chrysler Bankrupt: Ford Next?*  
— *Detroit News*, Sunday, July 14, 2009

Katie Monroe glanced again at her Piaget watch, an extravagant gift from her husband on the occasion of her forty-fifth birthday. She couldn't suppress the flicker of a smile even though at that moment annoyance was escalating to agitation. Her mother must have taken Danielle and the girls out for something to eat after the movies. She'd given the girls popcorn and candy and soda money. And she wanted them to have an early dinner so they'd get to bed on time. Their flight to Tampa left Detroit at seven thirty the following morning and they'd have to leave her mother's shortly after five a.m.

"Relax, Katie," Sharon said. "Stop trying to control every single minute. So they're a little late. Kick off your shoes. Let's have a cup of tea."

"So I'm a control freak," Katie laughed. "You've been telling me that since I was five, that's as far back as I can remember. I'll make the tea."

She and her sister Sharon sat in Lucy's cozy kitchen, drinking green tea, chatting about their kids, their nieces and nephews, getting caught up with the whirlwind of family gossip. Soon they were plotting the tactics of a surprise birthday party for Lucy. She'd be seventy-seven in December.

"My house in Tampa," Katie said.

"There you go again, little-sister-in-charge," Sharon shook her head with a gotcha smile.

"Who could object?" Katie started to sound defensive, then

grinned. "I promise perfect weather. The college kids will be on break. Mom's hip will be fine for travel by then."

"Just one thing," Sharon said. "Mom's birthday is the anniversary of Anthony's death. She won't leave Detroit because she goes to the cemetery. Every anniversary for Anthony, Johnny, and Dad. Remember, she always took us when we were kids?"

Katie nodded. She hadn't factored that in. She'd been just five when both of her brothers were killed in the Detroit riots. She didn't remember much about them, just how sad her mother and her older sisters were; how awful it was with all the flames and smoke and guns and sirens. A few years later, Lucy had managed to move her family to a house in the outskirts of Detroit, where Katie grew up, and after her daughters were married, she'd moved to a small townhouse in Auburn Hills.

Now Katie was forty-eight and lived with her husband and her identical triplet daughters on Davis Island in Tampa, a neighborhood that was as safe as any neighborhood can be. Katie thought of how different her life might have been. Before Scott, she'd had only one serious boyfriend, Keith Franklin. She still shivered, remembering the vindictive note he'd sent her from prison when he'd found out that she'd married a *white* man. And there had been that out-of-the-blue e-mail from him about a month ago. Just the thought of that made her cringe. She'd immediately deleted it, purged it from her system, and blocked the sender. She'd been more annoyed than concerned, but now...*Katie, I've changed. I need to be with you. I'll leave my wife. I'll take care of your daughters. All I think about is you* —

"Sharon, can you remember them?" Katie asked, getting back to her family, needing to escape the shadow of Keith Franklin on her life.

"Not much about Dad," Sharon said. "Even though I was seven when he died. You were only two. But, yes, I remember Anthony and Johnny. They used to tickle us until we cried. They had lots of friends. Johnny was always playing loud music."

Katie rarely allowed herself to think about her brothers. Now that she was a mother, she couldn't fathom the bottomless pain her mother must have endured. Losing a child had to be the ultimate in human suffering. Just the thought triggered in her a senseless rush of panic.

Not healthy, she knew, as a professional. Her psychiatric training had required a round of psychoanalysis, but that was before she'd become a mother herself, before she'd had any inkling of the intensity of a mother's love for her kids.

"Sharon, I'm getting scared." Katie said, again checking the time. "They should be back by now. And where's Mom? She shouldn't be out so soon after her hip replacement."

"She's probably visiting neighbors. She is supposed to get some exercise. Maybe she walked the girls to the Dairy Queen. You know how Mom spoils the grandchildren. Their every whim —"

"So why aren't they back?" Katie interrupted.

The sisters had migrated to the living room of Lucy's house. Sharon with her feet propped up on the ottoman and Katie perched on the edge of the sofa ready to pounce should the front door open. As the baby of the family, Katie had been more indulged than her three sisters, and they were used to her mild displays of histrionics.

"I just wish she'd get the girls back soon. Scott's flying back to Tampa from New York City tomorrow morning, and the girls and I have such an early flight out of Detroit. Naturally, Scott scheduled little league practice for them. He's fanatic about their baseball. The only girls in the league, and he makes sure that they're better than any of the boys — and I mean *way* better. And, I have to be back to testify in an ugly trial on Monday."

"What's up?" Sharon asked.

"Parental sexual child abuse. Dad's guilty as hell. I'll do my best to nail him, but the testimony of kids is always fragile. A guy with entitlement wealth. One of those narcissistic sociopaths. Charms the hell out of everybody. Anyway, he messed those kids up pretty bad."

"My little sister, the child abuse expert. Who would have thought? You do so much good, Katie. Plus, admit it, you like the theatrics. You always did like to be in charge."

"Give me a break. Growing up with three older sisters, I call it survival."

"Any way about it, you've got the best of all worlds, medicine and law. Or maybe the worst, considering the scum of the earth you put away, but it has to beat labor law. I get to spar with teamsters all day long."

“It does feel good to get back into the swing of practice,” said Katie, positioning herself at the window. “I took too much time off when the girls were born. Once they started school, I lost my excuse.”

“Seriously, those kids you protect — I know much of it is pro bono.”

Katie got up and resumed her pacing, trying to stop her eyes from blinking the way they always did when she was scared. Sharon was right about the worst of humanity. She dealt with the scum — assaults on kids: physical, sexual, emotional. How could such horrors *not* make her overprotective of her children? That, and the ever-lingering fear of racial prejudice that her daughters might ultimately face. Racial prejudice comes in so many flavors, how well she knew that.

“We learned so much from Mom,” Katie said. “She worked hard to get our values right.”

“She worked hard for her clients, too. And for us. Imagine what it must have taken to send us all to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Academy.”

The phone rang and Katie ran to grab it.

“Scott?” Katie breathed a sigh that bordered on relief. She and Scott had one of those mutually supportive relationships where just the sound of each other’s voice brought comfort.

“Scott, the girls are still out with Mom and Danielle,” Katie rushed to say, twisting the phone cord. “We have such an early flight in the morning —”

“Katie —”

Katie failed to breathe as Scott told her that the police were looking for Sammie and Alex at the mall. That Lucy, Danielle, and Jackie were there. That everything would be okay. That he was on his way from New York City to Detroit. That he’d chartered a plane. That the police would be there soon to —

When Katie did take a breath, it came out as a gasp, followed by a muffled scream as she dropped the phone onto the carpeted floor. In an instant, Sharon was at her side, but by then Katie was on her knees, scrambling for the phone, moaning, “No, no, no.”

Sharon grabbed the phone first. “Scott? What is it? What did you tell her?”

Sharon listened as she stood, then whispered, “Danielle?”

Katie, on her feet now, tried to grab the phone.

“Thank God,” Sharon breathed deeply. Then she said, “Yes, Scott, I’ll stay with Katie. What should we do? Go to the mall? Wait here? Oh, pray to God that this is all a mistake. I mean, what do you mean, *missing*? Couldn’t they be lost in the mall? Maybe in one of those arcades? An ice cream shop? Something safe, innocent?”

“My flight is getting ready to take off,” Scott said. “A police car will take you and Katie to the mall.”

Sharon stepped back, shaking her head from side to side as she handed the phone to her sister.

“Scott, what should I do?” Katie’s voice trembled as did her whole body.

The doorbell rang, followed by pounding, and Sharon opened the door.

Katie turned to find a fresh-faced police officer standing at the door, hat in hand. “The police are here, Scott. Please hurry.” She grabbed her purse and rushed out of the door into the waiting squad car.



## CHAPTER 3

*Yankees Sweep Mets: 15–0.*  
— Evening Sports, Sunday, June 14

It was nine thirty when Scott sprinted into the conference room at the Hills Mall, headed for Katie, and pulled her into his arms. Except for the movie complex and three restaurants, the shops in the mall were closed. By then every nook and cranny had been searched by both human and canine species. The girls had been missing for six hours and maybe as long as eight and a half. Hundreds of shoppers and clerks had been interviewed. Pictures of the Monroe girls were being circulated. The parking lots and the surrounding commercial areas were being canvassed. The media had gotten wind of the story and the mall was under the siege of camcorders, bright lights, reporters on alert. Nothing had gone out on the six o'clock news, but if the girls were not located within the next half hour, *Early News at Ten* would lead with the story.

Clarence Plummer, director of mall security, had hit the panic button early, and as it turned out, appropriately so. Local police, Oakland County sheriffs, and Michigan state police were now crawling all over one another. They were waiting on the FBI. Scott Monroe, still wearing a Yankee jersey with navy pin stripes on white, had to bully his way through clusters of them to get to his wife, athleticism and brute force serving him well despite his police escort. He'd been met by the state police at the airport and briefed en route to the Hills Mall. The whereabouts of two of his daughters was simply unknown.

"Scott, they still haven't found them!" Scott felt Katie's body shudder as he held her in a crushing embrace.

"I'm sorry it took me so long." Scott's naturally loud voice seemed

to boom. "I needed to be here with you." Scott ran his hand over Katie's hair, something he did whenever he was upset and needed her near him.

"Where could they be?" Katie said through tears. "I just keep asking myself. Over and over, where could they be? They'd never go off with a stranger. After all we've taught them? But then how? Did someone force them? Just take them? The head security man found a lady who thinks she saw them near the fountain by the movie theater, but she got distracted by her own kids and didn't see where they went. She didn't see them leave the mall. Other than that one lady, the police haven't been able to find any witnesses, so maybe they're okay."

"Babe, where is Jackie?" For the first time Scott glanced around the room. "Is she okay?"

"Yes, I mean, *no*. Mom took her to the restroom. Scott, she blames herself. She and Sammie got into an argument about which movie they wanted to see. So Danielle let them split up. Danielle and Jackie. Sammie and Alex."

"What about Danielle?" Scott asked in a near whisper.

"She's distraught, blaming herself. Everybody's blaming themselves, including me, for going off to that lunch. Letting this happen."

Scott tipped Katie's chin up so he could look into her eyes. "Katie, promise me, no blames. We can't blame anybody, including ourselves. Hell, I ought to have come with you to Detroit." With a handkerchief, he wiped fresh tears off her cheek.

"Dr. Monroe. Mr. Monroe, I'm glad you got here so soon." A man with an authoritative voice appeared at the door.

Still holding Katie close, Scott turned.

"Special Agent Streeter, Tony Streeter, FBI." A man of Scott's height and build and age stuck out his hand. Streeter wore the predictable dark navy suit, a starched white shirt with a maroon striped tie, and smartly polished shoes. The ramrod straight stride, no nonsense crew cut hair, and a steel glint in his blue eyes projected an aura of competence that Scott found reassuring.

Scott reached to shake Streeter's hand.

"Sorry to meet under these circumstances, sir," his tone urgent, but polite. "I'm the agent charged with finding your children. Let me be up front. We suspect they've been kidnapped."



Scott felt Katie sag at his side. He tightened his hold, waiting for Streeter to continue, wanting to hear more, but aching to see Jackie. To see for himself that she was okay.

“Time is of the utmost importance. We need to go over every possible angle with you. We have Dr. Monroe’s statement.” A deferential nod to Katie. “But I want to review everything with both of you.”

“I understand, Agent Streeter,” Scott said, but my wife and I need a few moments with our daughter.

“Understood,” said Streeter. “But quickly, please.”

The mall manager had secured a secluded conference room for Lucy, Danielle, and Jackie. He’d sent in sandwiches wrapped in plastic, a variety of chips, and soft drinks. As Scott and Katie stepped inside, they all rose, one by one, and exchanged silent hugs. All except Danielle, who hung back. When Scott went to her, the sobs she tried to muffle poured out, “Uncle Scott, I’m so sorry. If only I hadn’t left them.”

“None of that, Danielle.” Scott gathered her in his arms. “No blame, promise me?”

Danielle nodded, but didn’t stop crying. Then Scott felt a tug on the pocket of his pants.

“Dad, you have to find Alex and Sam. Mom’s really scared and so am I.”

Scott bent down to pick up Jackie as if she were a toddler. She looked so fragile in her butterfly outfit, trimmed in blue. So alone without her sisters. His girls were always together. Had never spent a night without each other. Although he and Katie kept promising to let each of them, independently, spend a night with a friend, so far they hadn’t. Much to Jackie’s chagrin, she, ever the agitator for more independence.

“Everything will be okay, Jackie,” Scott promised, praying that he was right. “I am so glad to see you, honey. I was worried about you, too.”

“When Danielle and I came out of the movie, they never showed up. The policemen and a nice policelady asked me questions, and I told them the truth. Even though I had to say some things about Sammie — like how she’s naughty a lot.”

“Jackie, you were so helpful,” Katie said, leaning heavily into Scott as he held Jackie in his arms.

“Honey, the FBI have to talk to Mom and me,” said Scott, “so you can go home with Grandma. Okay?”

“Scott,” Katie said, turning her face to his, “I think that Jackie should stay with us. For now, until we know more.”

“I know everything about Sammie and Alex,” Jackie said. “I want to stay here, with you.”

“Tell you what,” Scott said, setting Jackie down. “If the police have a question, they can call you at Grandma’s.”

“Okay,” Jackie said, “but you and Mom just gotta find them. They must be so scared. Especially Alex.”

“You say your prayers,” Scott said, kissing Jackie on the top of her head as Lucy stepped forward to take her hand.

Katie took Jackie’s other hand, gently tugging the child toward her. “She wants to stay with us, and I think it’s best.”

Lucy released her granddaughter’s hand with a sad shake of her head. Scott knew his mother-in-law well. She did not approve, but she was not going to interfere.

On his way to Detroit, alone in the cabin of the chartered plane, Scott had racked his brain. Why would two of his daughters go off on their own? They were sensible nine year olds. He and Katie had always kidded about Sam’s wild streak, but compared to other girls her age, Sam was well behaved and trustworthy. And Alex? Alex personified the obedient and loving child. He and Katie sometimes worried that she was too compliant.

Scott could not even contemplate a life without their three daughters. He and Katie had both been thirty-eight years old and married thirteen years before their daughters were born. He, a professional baseball player, a catcher for the Yankees, until a catastrophic collision at home plate and two cracked vertebrae in his neck ended his career. He’d been twenty-nine years old and devastated. He’d dedicated his whole life to baseball. But in the end, that fanaticism and his popularity with the players landed him a job with the Yankees as manager of spring training operations at George M. Steinbrenner, formerly Legends Field, in Tampa. Over the years, his popularity had not waned as he’d become a sports media personality. When baseball commentary was required, Scott Monroe was the favorite go-to expert. The

reason he was in the Bronx today was to moderate the ESPN pregame show for the much touted subway series between the Yankees and the Mets.

But much more important than baseball to Scott had always been Katie. He'd met her during her medical school surgical rotation when she'd diagnosed his hernia. She'd just ended a long-term relationship, and after their first date, a Detroit Tigers baseball game, he'd known that she was the woman for him. Neither had a problem with the concept of an interracial marriage, and they married a year later. Now, Katie was a forensic pediatric psychiatrist in Tampa. They lived on Davis Island in Tampa and, to their eternally incredulous delight, were parents of nine-year-old triplets. Even more incredulous, the triplets were identical. Identical triplets, conceived without the aid of fertility treatments; the chances of that, an astounding one in two hundred million pregnancies.

Wherever they went, the girls attracted attention. "Are they triplets?" "Are they identical?" "Do multiples run in the family?" "Did you have fertility treatments?" and on and on until Katie and Scott would just laugh and say, "Yes, yes, no, no."

Neither Scott nor Katie minded these questions, but they'd always been wary that their daughters attracted attention in another sense, too. Scott, of European descent was six foot two, muscular, with light, freckled skin, hazel eyes, crew cut brown hair, and a brilliant toothy smile. Katie, an African American, was trim at five foot five, with shoulder-length black hair, creamy dark brown skin, brown eyes, and a gleaming smile. They realized that they were a handsome, but unusual, couple and they'd adopted a nonplussed attitude as they accepted as inevitable the omniscient stares and double takes when they were out and about with their three identical little girls whose skin tones exactly blended Scott and Katie's. But as complacent as Katie was about attracting attention, she was adamant about not letting the girls out of her sight. She'd seen enough atrocities to convince her that evil can lurk beneath a thin veneer of assumed innocence.

Agent Streeter was waiting for the Monroe parents in a small office off the mall manager's suite. Head bowed, he massaged his temples, trying to dispel the irrational. Two nine-year-old girls were missing. How

would he react if they were his? How could he comfort Marianne? Or were the missing girls' parents somehow involved? Too many times things were not as they seemed. Too many times with missing children the parents had been implicated. He tried to recollect details of the Madeleine McCann case, the four-year-old British girl who had gone missing while vacationing in Portugal several years ago. Her parents had been considered suspects, of that he was quite sure. He even recalled the Portuguese term, they'd had *arguido* status.

A knock at the door and Streeter jumped up, smoothing his wiry crew cut, straightening the maroon striped tie, not bothering to button the suit jacket. He was facing two choices. Step up his fitness program or move up to size forty. He acknowledged the Monroes politely, noting that Scott still had that athletic build, lean and buff, the look he used to have back when Streeter and Marianne were still together. Back before a steady diet of junk food.

As the Monroes gathered at the conference table, Streeter hesitated a moment to see what they'd do with Jackie. Dr. Monroe proceeded to settle the child on her lap. Scott Monroe pulled his chair close to them, and Jackie reached out to pat him on his arm, a tender, natural gesture. Could these parents be behind the abduction? Had they for some perverse reason wanted to eliminate two of their three kids? For a long moment he just observed, all his senses tuned to the Monroe parents. All he could feel was their profound distress and Jackie's total trust. His impression: these parents were not faking. How could the confusion and grief etched on their twisted, tear-stained faces not be genuine?

He needed to get started despite his discomfort with exposing the child to uncomfortable questions. Streeter began his interrogation gingerly, then moved to rapid fire: Who would want to do this? How much were the Monroes worth? Answer: comfortable, but not wealthy enough to make them a ransom target. Any enemies? No. What about professional motives? Anything to do with baseball rivalries? No, everybody loved and respected Scott Monroe. How about Katie? Her pediatric psychiatry practice? Testimony in child abuse cases — physical as well as sexual — sending perpetrators to jail, removing children from abusive parents? Sex offenders exposed? How many vengeful adversaries had she accumulated? Plenty.

But nothing in Michigan, Katie insisted as she kept twisting her daughter's hair in and out of a braid. All that was in Florida, and much of it before a five-year hiatus between the birth of the triplets and when they'd started kindergarten four years ago. Wasn't it too much of a stretch to think that a child abuser or sexual pervert would track her to Detroit to abduct her children?

Streeter wondered. The evil he'd seen in human beings defied logic and exceeded the worst horrors that most people could not even dream. Except for Katie Monroe, she'd seen that kind of evil. He could imagine the desperate scenarios that must be playing in her mind.

Streeter's first impression of Katie had been admiration. A woman with the guts to go up against the scumbags of the world in order to protect little children. Tough, raising a family and holding down such an emotionally demanding job. She was different from his ex-wife, Marianne, who seemed exhausted just taking care of their kids.

To him it seemed cruel to keep hammering Katie with questions, but he had to be relentless if he was to find her daughters. After two solid hours, a faraway look crept into Katie's eyes and Streeter realized that he'd hit the point of diminishing returns.

"Let's take a break," he suggested.

As Streeter headed for Plummer's inner office, he knew he'd need to uncover the worst of the child abusers that Katie had helped put away. He'd have the Tampa field office pull court records to generate leads. But his interrogation did identify one glaring person of interest. Dr. Monroe was scheduled to testify in a child sexual abuse case the following week. Guy by the name of Maxwell Cutty.

Streeter picked up Plummer's phone and called the Tampa field office. He spoke to the special agent in charge and asked that Dr. Katie Monroe's cases, whatever was in the public domain, be pulled with immediate attention on Cutty. He asked for subpoenas to access whatever was sealed. It would be a long night in Detroit and in Tampa, too.

Could the abduction of the Monroe kids be racially motivated? Streeter wondered. The Monroes were a mixed-race couple. Could there be a maniac bigot out there who would do the unthinkable? Detroit was a fanatical place and Streeter knew his history; riots in 1943

and in 1967. The city never had recovered from them, and now with the collapse of the auto industry who could predict what might erupt? Hate crimes were on the rise. He searched his memory for details of the bureau's recent briefing on white supremacy organizations and grimaced. The National Socialist Movement (NSM), one of the country's largest neo-Nazi groups, was based right there in Detroit.