

## *Relinquish*

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The water was boiling vigorously. She had waited too long. On most mornings, she would have been irritated; however, this morning it did not matter. This morning she was too tired to care: she just wanted her tea.

She poured the water into the cup and watched the teabag rise, swirling in circles as the white string twisted and turned, pulling the teabag's tab toward the water. She grabbed the cup and used her thumb to secure the string.

"Good morning!"

He had no right to be cheerful at this time of day. At 5:30 in the morning, no one should be cheerful. Everyone should still be in bed; deep beneath warm covers; head pressed against the pillow; immersed in dreams.

"Is there any hot water left?" he asked as he reached into the cupboard for a mug. "Where's the hot chocolate mix?"

"Todd," she said as she held the hot tea near her lips, "that bright red box right in front of you has the hot chocolate: same place as yesterday and the day before."

"Oh, yeah..."

His voice trailed off as he pulled two pouches from the

box, tore them open, and prepared his extra-strong, good-morning, hot chocolate.

“What’s the matter, Sheila?” Todd asked, as he finished stirring his drink and laid the dripping teaspoon on the counter.

“Ellie was cranky most of the night,” Sheila said as she took the spoon and dropped it in the sink, and then wiped up the drips of hot chocolate scattered across the counter.

“Most of the night?” Todd asked, sounding as if he cared; yet, hinting she might be exaggerating.

“Yeah,” Sheila said, “*most of the night*. She cried at midnight and I gave her a pacifier, she woke at two and I fed and changed her, at three-fifteen, something woke her again and she was wide-awake and crying for half an hour.

“You slept through all of that, didn’t you?” Sheila asked, not expecting an answer.

“Well, some of it.”

“*All of it*,” Sheila said, correcting him as she crossed the kitchen to the dinette, sat down, and stared out the patio doors, searching for the first hints of sunrise.

Todd knew he needed to find the right words: just a few words. He needed something simple, something to repair whatever damage he could repair without creating more trouble. “I’ll fix breakfast while you grab a shower,” he said as he opened a cabinet searching for a skillet. “How’s French toast sound?”

“You think I need a shower?”

“No,” he responded quickly. “I thought it would refresh you; cheer you up.”

“You think I’m grumpy?”

“Oh no,” Todd said, “he is much shorter.”

Sheila allowed the slightest smile to cross her lips and

Todd seized the moment.

“You know, we haven’t had breakfast in the shower for a long time, have we? Are the boots and umbrella still in the hallway?”

“All right,” Sheila relented, “I’ll check on Ellie, shower, and be back in fifteen minutes. Have the French toast ready and be sure to heat the syrup.”

“Right, got it, French toast, and hot syrup. Fine.”

Todd and Sheila Macpherson had been married three years. They were the proud parents of Elaine Michelle Macpherson who had entered the world just two months earlier. She was a tiny girl, who had dominated the household from her very first day out of the hospital.

Todd worked as a 9-1-1 dispatcher. He had worked nights for almost six years and he had managed a promotion to the day shift four months ago. That decision had stirred a little controversy in the office. Two other dispatchers had equal seniority and they believed Todd got the position because his wife was expecting a baby.

Sheila worked as a teller at the State Bank. She had been with the bank for eight years, though many of her co-workers didn’t think she should count her summer employment during high school.

In every way that mattered, the Macphersons were a typical young family. They had a used car, a lot of used furniture, a small yard, and they rented a very old house. In fact, the house was more than one-hundred years old. If someone doubted it was an old house, all he or she needed to see was the winter heating bill or the five box fans that moved the summer’s hot air around the house.

Fifteen minutes later, Sheila returned to the kitchen wearing a thick bathrobe and a towel wrapped around her head. Four pieces of French toast were stacked on a plate beside the stove. Todd hovered over the skillet as he grazed on

what must have been the fifth piece of toast.

“Is Ellie still asleep?” Sheila asked as she reached for a piece of French toast.

“I haven’t heard anything: all quiet for now.”

“I’ll check on her.”

Sheila went to Ellie’s room and returned with the tiny girl, wrapped in her receiving blanket and apparently still too sleepy to fuss about anything.

“You know I start back to work next Monday,” Sheila said as she sat down at the table. “There’s a woman coming by this morning to interview for the nanny position.”

“She needs to know it’s not permanent,” Todd said as he put the plate of French toast on the table and joined Sheila. “Tell her the job lasts ‘till Ellie’s six months old, no longer.”

“I think I can remember to tell her that,” Sheila said. “And it was in the ad.”

“OK,” Todd said. “But, make sure she understands it can’t be longer than four months and we can’t go higher than \$5 an hour.”

“I don’t need to remind you that five people have already turned us down, do I?” Sheila asked as she tossed two pieces of French toast on her plate and began pouring cold syrup on them. “I think we should consider \$7.” Sheila decided not to comment on the cold syrup.

“That would break us,” Todd said. “After taxes and commuting, you bring home \$8.75 an hour and if we pay someone \$7, then you’re working for a \$1.75 an hour.”

“Think long term,” Sheila said. “If I don’t go back to work, I don’t have a job. If we struggle for a few months until we get Ellie into the daycare program at the bank, then it will pay off in the end. Right?”

“I suppose,” Todd said.

“No,” Sheila said. “Don’t suppose: *know*. I keep my seniority, we have more money, and the childcare is deductible.”

“All right,” Todd said. “I believe it. You’re right! We can swing two more dollars an hour; that’s \$90 a week more? In four months that’s... where’s a calculator?”

“\$1,440,” Sheila said.

“How did you do that?” Todd asked.

“Well, 16 weeks is 10 weeks plus 6 weeks, so it’s the same as \$900 plus \$540, and—”

“No, stop,” Todd said, interrupting her explanation. “I was just kidding about wanting to know how you did that.”

Ellie began to fuss and Sheila coaxed her along with a pacifier while they finished their breakfast. Todd left for work. Sheila fed Ellie and put her in her crib for her morning nap. At 10:00 AM, the doorbell rang.

Sheila opened the door and an older woman extended her hand and announced, “I’m Miss Hamilton; we spoke on the phone; I’m here about the nanny position.”

“Come in,” Sheila said as they shook hands. “Can I get you a cup of tea or something?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

The two women walked into the living room. Miss Hamilton sat on the couch and Sheila sat opposite her in a rocking chair.

“You’ve made this house into a lovely home,” Miss Hamilton said. “Do you enjoy living here?”

“Yes, we do,” Sheila said. “It’s an old house; but that’s its real charm.”

“I lived here when I was a little girl,” Miss Hamilton said as she looked around the room and let her eyes settle on the bay window. “I planted that oak tree when I was seven

years old. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm sure you are busy and I know you have questions for me; ask away."

"You know this is a temporary position? Just four months?"

"Yes, I do. That was in the ad."

"We are willing to pay \$5 an hour for a 45 hour work week, and to pay for your meals when you are here."

"That's very generous," Miss Hamilton said.

Sheila was surprised: Miss Hamilton knew the pay and she was still pleasant, perhaps even grateful.

In all of the earlier interviews, when she had told applicants the hourly rate, the conversations had turned sour. Everyone began reciting how the average pay for childcare was \$7 to \$9 an hour and infants were higher. One applicant had even cursed at her for wasting her time.

Perhaps Miss Hamilton was agreeable to \$5. Todd would be surprised.

"Do you have references I could call?" Sheila asked.

"Yes, here," Miss Hamilton said as she handed Sheila a sheet of paper with five names and phone numbers. "Would you like to know about my experiences?"

"Yes," Sheila said. "I would."

"I taught elementary school for 35 years; the first and second grades, and during my last five years, I taught kindergarten. I retired six years ago and I have been caring for very young children, as I am needed. I live about nine blocks from here, on Juniper Street, near the Sandburg Elementary School."

Sheila felt excited. This woman was perfect! She was a teacher and she must enjoy younger children because she

did not appear too concerned about the money.

“Do you have children?” Sheila asked.

“No,” Miss Hamilton said. “I never married. However, when you teach, every child in every class becomes one of your own. You do everything you can for them. They are precious in ways that are hard to understand.”

“I guess you’ve known hundreds of children over the years.”

“You have a daughter?”

“Yes, we do,” Sheila said. “We didn’t have that in the ad, how did you know?”

“Birth announcements,” Miss Hamilton said. “I look for them everyday. When I called and learned your name, it was easy to look back two months and find the notice. You named her ‘Elaine Michelle.’ Is that a family name?”

“Yes,” Sheila said. “Both grandmas: my mom is Elaine and Todd’s mom is Michelle.”

“May I meet Miss Elaine?”

“Yes,” Sheila said, feeling as if Miss Hamilton could be her grandmother. “She’s in her crib: this way.”

The two women walked to the nursery and stood at the door.

“Does she let you sleep?” Miss Hamilton asked quietly.

“Not enough,” Sheila said. “I have not slept through the night since she was born.”

“Does she weigh eleven pounds yet?”

“Right at ten pounds, yesterday, at her two month check-up,” Sheila said.

“She can sleep through the night at eleven pounds,” Miss Hamilton said. “She’ll be big enough to skip the 2:00 AM feeding.”

Sheila did not realize she was staring at Miss Hamilton.

“Oh,” Miss Hamilton said. “That’s not something you pick up teaching school, it’s something you learn from your nephew who’s a pediatrician with five children.”

“When can you start?” Sheila blurted out.

“I’d like to spend a day with you and Miss Elaine. I wouldn’t expect you to pay me. It’s for me. I would like to see your routine and learn where you keep everything.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’d like that.”

“Can you stay for dinner tomorrow night?” Sheila asked. “I know Todd will want to meet you.”

“That’s very kind,” Miss Hamilton said. “I’d be happy to stay for dinner. I’ll be here at eight in the morning.”

At 8:00 AM, the doorbell rang, and Sheila was not ready for company. She and Todd had been up late celebrating their good fortune finding someone to care for Ellie. Ellie woke only once during the night for her 2:00 AM feeding, but when morning arrived, all was chaos. Todd had hit the snooze button so many times that he ended up racing around the house to avoid being late for work. The kitchen was a mess, there was dirty laundry in the living room, and Sheila had been pacing the floor, trying to get Ellie to burp. As Miss Hamilton entered the house, she smiled a knowing smile and announced, “Let me have Miss Elaine and you take some time for yourself.”

Miss Hamilton crossed to the rocking chair, laid Ellie on her shoulder, and began whispering into her ear as she gently brushed her finger’s up and down Ellie’s back. Sheila watched as her daughter stopped crying and proceeded to burp in a manner befitting a Marine.

“Go,” Miss Hamilton said. “Get a cup of coffee and watch the birds or something. We’ll be fine. We could use a little

time together; just us.”

Sheila left the room, walked into the kitchen, picked up her cup of tea, and walked out onto the patio.

Spring was had arrived. The grass was green, the trees were blossoming with leaves, and the sunshine felt so warm. Sheila sat on a patio chair and closed her eyes, listening to a barking dog a few blocks away. *Careful*, she thought, *only a few minutes. Just finish this tea and get back to Miss Hamilton.*

Those minutes passed quickly and she walked quietly back into the living room. Miss Hamilton still had Ellie on her shoulder, but the little girl was asleep. Miss Hamilton was whispering something to her. They both appeared so content and at peace with each other.

Sheila spent the day showing Miss Hamilton where she kept Ellie’s changes of clothing, the spare towels, the baby formula, and the disposable diapers. Miss Hamilton told Sheila that she was glad they use disposable diapers; someday brilliant scientists will find a way to convert disposal diapers into electrical energy and if Ellie hasn’t contributed any disposal diapers, others might think she doesn’t care about the planet.

The day passed quickly and at 5:20 PM, Todd returned from work. He walked in through the front door and called out, “Do we have any beer?” Sheila suspected he had forgotten they had a dinner guest.

“We’re in the living room,” Sheila replied. “Come and meet Miss Hamilton.”

Todd walked into the room and Sheila conducted the introductions. She watched Todd and she was certain he had forgotten Miss Hamilton was staying for dinner, which meant he had not picked up the vanilla ice cream. Fortunately, she had some frozen whipped cream she could substitute on the fresh fruit.

“Why don’t you change clothes while I set the table?” Sheila asked as she stared firmly at Todd with the same look she used when he forgets something important. It didn’t work.

“What can I do to help?” Miss Hamilton asked. “Miss Elaine seems quite content in her basinet.”

“Come out and talk to me while I set the table,” Sheila said. “Everything is ready to serve as soon as Todd gets changed.”

When they sat down to dinner, the conversation was animated and continuous. Miss Hamilton had dozens of stories about the children she had known as a teacher. Four of her students were serving in the state legislature. One of her students had become an astronaut, though she had not had a space assignment, yet.

She had stories about Todd’s boss getting into trouble for throwing crayons and she had taught the younger brother of the governor’s wife. Miss Hamilton had the most vivid recall of each child’s antics in the classroom and his or her future achievements.

They had been sitting at the table for almost two hours when Miss Hamilton announced she needed to be getting home and tending to her dog. Todd drove her home and returned with unbridled enthusiasm.

“How did we get so lucky?” he asked as he walked into the kitchen. “She’s amazing!”

“I can’t believe how many children she can remember,” Sheila said.

“Did you notice she did not have one story about a kid who broke the law or went to prison or anything like that?” Todd asked.

“Well,” Sheila said, searching for an explanation, “I suppose she knows kids who have been in trouble, and she doesn’t talk about them.”

“Can you believe she sent my boss—Mr. ‘Follow the Rules’—to the principal’s office for throwing crayons? That’s so funny.”

“Todd,” Sheila said, “That’s not something you would tell at work, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“No,” Sheila said, “not a strong enough commitment. Promise me you will not say anything about that at work.”

“It’s funny—”

“Do you like working days or would you rather be back on the night shift?”

“All right: I promise; *my mouth is shut.*”

The following Monday, Miss Hamilton arrived at 7:30 AM and Sheila left for work feeling confident all was well with the world. She called twice on her first day away from Ellie. Once at around 9:00 AM to make sure Miss Hamilton had everything she needed, then again, at 3:30 PM to see if she needed to pick up anything on the way home. Each time she ended her conversation feeling even more confident that Miss Hamilton was the perfect nanny for Ellie.

The first week flew by. Ellie was sleeping through most of the night; the nagging concerns over childcare were gone; and when Ellie napped, Miss Hamilton occupied her time with washing-up the dishes.

The weeks and months passed equally fast. Todd commented on how Ellie was growing everyday and how Miss Hamilton was certainly the best possible nanny. Time raced by and Ellie could sit in a high chair and she was eating baby food.

“Miss Elaine is almost six months old, isn’t she?” Miss Hamilton asked as she entered the house on a Wednesday morning.

“Yes, she is,” Sheila said. “Next Monday she will start daycare at the bank. I can’t believe how much she has changed.”

“She’s a very special girl,” Miss Hamilton said as she walked into the living room. “Is she in her crib?”

“Yes,” Sheila said. “She had an early breakfast.”

“I’ll look in on her.”

Sheila began to feel a bit strange, she felt worried, and something about Miss Hamilton’s tone was different. Sheila felt apprehensive and she did not know why.

“Todd is at work?” Miss Hamilton asked as she came out of the nursery carrying Ellie.

“Yes. He left a few minutes ago.”

“And you need to get going too, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” Sheila said.

“I’ll hold her up to the window so she can wave goodbye,” Miss Hamilton said. “I think Miss Elaine would like that.”

Sheila walked out the front door and down the sidewalk. She turned and looked back at the living room window. Miss Hamilton held Ellie up to the window. Something felt wrong; why did Ellie need to wave goodbye this morning? What was so special about today?

Sheila sat in her car and for a moment, she thought about pretending her car would not start. Then she thought, this is silly, there is nothing to be worried over, nothing is going to happen to Ellie, and Miss Hamilton is with her.

When Sheila arrived at work, her apprehension gnawed at every nerve. She called Todd and tried to make small talk. He didn’t pay much attention to her. They decided to meet for lunch. Sheila knew she was probably over-reacting to

something or perhaps even nothing. She needed to talk.

At noon, they met at a deli and took a booth in the corner of the room. While they waited for their sandwiches, Sheila stared at the straw in her glass of iced tea.

“What’s the matter?” Todd asked.

“I don’t know. I’m worried.”

“What are you worried about?”

“This morning, when Miss Hamilton arrived, I had a strange feeling, a feeling like we’re going to lose Ellie.”

“You think she’s going to die?”

“No, not that! It’s a feeling like she’s going to be stolen.”

“What? Kidnapped? Was there something on the news? Has someone been kidnapped?”

“I don’t think so. It’s just a feeling.”

“Did Miss Hamilton say something about a kidnapping?”

“No.”

“What was she talking about when you started to get that feeling?”

“I think she said something about Ellie turning six months old.”

“That doesn’t sound scary. What else did she say?”

“She said she was going to check on her,” Sheila said as she started to feel confused about why she felt fearful.

“Oh, I know,” Todd said. “This is psychological.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ellie starts daycare next Monday and Miss Hamilton not be coming to the house anymore.”

“I suppose that could be it,” Sheila said. “When I left, Miss Hamilton held Ellie up to the window to wave good-bye.”

“See!” Todd said, sounding triumphant. “Miss Hamilton is feeling it too. She’s getting ready for the time when she isn’t coming over any more.”

“OK,” Sheila said. “That’s probably it. I feel better now.”

They ate their sandwiches and left the deli without talking about strange fears or kidnappings. As Sheila drove back to the bank, she felt a compulsion to drive by her house. She didn’t know why. It was twenty minutes out of her way and it would make her late returning to work. If she took the expressway and hit the traffic lights just right, perhaps she would only be eighteen minutes late.

As she pulled onto the street where they live, she saw the huge oak tree standing in their front yard. She slowed down and tried to think of a reason to go into the house. *This is dumb*, she thought, *I don’t need an excuse to go into my own home. I’ll just pretend I forgot something.*

She pulled into the driveway, walked up the steps, and opened the front door.

“Hello?” Sheila called out. “I forgot my grocery list.”

The house was silent.

Sheila went to the living room: no one was there. She went to the kitchen, the nursery, the bathroom, the patio. She was frantic.

“Where are you!” she shouted.

She ran into the backyard: no one in sight. She ran back into the house.

“Hamilton! Where are you!” she screamed. “What have you done with my baby?”

She ran into the living room and dialed 9-1-1.

“Please state the nature of the emergency.”

“I need Todd Macpherson,” Sheila said, choking back tears. “My baby is gone.”

“Ma’am,” a calming voice replied, “any one of us can help you. How long has your baby been missing?”

“I need Todd Macpherson!” Sheila said emphatically. “He’s the father.”

“And you think he has the baby?”

“No, please help me: tell Todd that I was right; Ellie is gone.”

“Ma’am, I will send a patrol car and I will tell Todd and I’m sure he will be home shortly.”

Sheila hung up the phone and it rang immediately. She lifted the receiver and heard Todd’s voice.

“Sheila, I’m on my way. Is anything else missing? Did she take clothes or diapers? Did she take extra formula? Make a list, the police will want to know.”

Sheila began rummaging through magazines and papers, searching for a note pad or scrap of blank paper.

“Where’s a pen?” she asked herself aloud.

“Here,” Miss Hamilton said, handing her a pen.

Sheila gasped. “Where were you?”

“We always walk to my house and let my dog out at lunchtime. I’ve been doing that for four months. What’s the matter? You look terrified.”

“I thought...”

A police cruiser pulled up in front of the house and two officers exited the car.

“Sheila?” Miss Hamilton asked, “Are you in trouble? I’m sure I can help. Why are the police here? Is it something at the bank?”

“Where’s Ellie?”

“She’s in her crib,” Miss Hamilton said. “The fresh air and sunshine usually puts her into a lovely nap on our re-

turn trip in the stroller.”

Sheila let the officers into the house, went to the nursery, and returned with Ellie, who was still in a deep sleep. Todd arrived and Sheila explained to him that she had been mistaken; everything was fine.

Todd was on a first-name basis with the patrol officers and they stood on the front lawn and talked for a while.

When Todd returned to the house, he told Sheila nothing would appear on paper, but he owed them coffee next time they came by the dispatch office. Todd drove back to work. Sheila called the bank and said she would not be back in this afternoon; she needed to take Ellie for a doctor’s appointment that she had forgotten.

“Miss Hamilton,” Sheila said, “I am so sorry I forgot about your noon walks home. I don’t know what happened to me. I felt worried this morning, then when I came by the house to get my grocery list and you were both gone, I thought the worst. I’m sorry.”

Sheila burst into tears and cried inconsolably. She hugged Miss Hamilton and clung to her tightly.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Sheila confessed. “I was terrified someone was going to take Ellie; I would die if I lost her.”

“Go lay down,” Miss Hamilton said. “You need rest. A nap will do wonders for you.”

Sheila went to her bedroom and fell into the bed.

Sometime later, Sheila heard voices; hushed words spoken quickly. It sounded like an argument. She walked to the bedroom door and tried to hear what people were saying. Nothing was clear enough to understand. She opened the door slightly and listened.

“This is not a democracy,” Miss Hamilton said. “I am the team leader and I decide. The child stays here.”

“How can you do that to a child this gifted?” a man’s voice asked. “She will languish in this home.”

“I have spoken,” Miss Hamilton said, “now, all of you get out of here.”

Sheila swung the bedroom door open and ran down the hallway. She stood blocking the living room exit. She counted seven people in the room. Most of them were older people. One appeared to be in her late forties.

“Who are you people and why are you in my home?”

No one spoke.

“I’ll ask one more time and then I call the police.”

“The same police you called earlier?” a man asked. “And what do you tell them? That Miss Hamilton invited some friends into your home and you want them arrested?”

“Earl,” Miss Hamilton said, “you do not need to be rude.”

“Who are you?” Sheila asked again.

“I am going to tell her everything,” Miss Hamilton announced. “I want Jessie to stay and everyone else can go.”

Earl looked angry, but he did not argue. The group left without saying anything and Sheila watched from the living room window as they walked away from her home.

“You two come with me,” Miss Hamilton said. “Let’s have tea.”

“I want to call Todd,” Sheila said.

“You can tell Todd about this later,” Miss Hamilton said. “That is, if you want to tell him. It might be better if he doesn’t know.”

The three women sat at the dinette table and sipped hot tea.

“I want you to know that what I am about to tell you will shock you; however, you must listen to my explanation be-

fore you take any action,” Miss Hamilton said. “Will you promise to hear the entire story?”

“I’ll try, but I will not promise.”

“That’s honest,” Miss Hamilton said. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Do you work for organized crime?” Sheila asked.

“No, we don’t,” Miss Hamilton said. “We are part of a secret society that has existed for more than four-hundred years. A few members claim there are groups like us that have been around for more than one-thousand years, but that would be hard to prove.”

“What’s the name of this society?” Sheila asked.

“You don’t really expect me to tell you, do you?” Miss Hamilton replied and then continued, “You know that if child welfare services believe a child is at risk, they have the authority to take the child away from the family.”

“Yes,” Sheila said, “I know that. What has that got to do with me?”

“It’s a matter of perspective,” Miss Hamilton said. “Think about life two hundred years ago: children worked twelve hour days; sometimes they didn’t get enough to eat; and they were hit with switches or whips when they misbehaved.”

“All right,” Sheila said, “Times were tough; but, what has that got to do with us?”

“Perspective,” Miss Hamilton said. “It is a matter of perspective. If today you saw parents treating their children, as they did two hundred years ago, you would do something. You would rescue the children from their parents even if their parents did not understand why you would do that.”

“Maybe,” Sheila said. “But, that would be kidnapping and the police would arrest me and return the children to their parents. That’s the flaw in your thinking; stealing chil-

dren is a crime.”

“We have the resources and a network of hundreds of families who can move an infant and create a past for them so they can grow up healthy and loved and no one will be suspicious.”

“You are going to steal Ellie!” Sheila said as she pushed herself back from the table.

“Sheila,” Miss Hamilton said. “Listen to the entire story. Please hear the entire story and then I don’t care what you say or do about me.”

“I don’t know what you could possibly say that would repair what you’ve done.”

“I came here to meet Miss Elaine because she was chosen by our organization. For the past four months, we have tested and observed her almost every day at noon, at my house. She is a bright, creative, and talented child. She is part of a change that is happening in some children all around the planet. Some children are being born with extraordinary skills in many different areas. We are in a time of great transformation and Miss Elaine and others like her will lead this reformation.”

“How do you know this?”

“We measured the electrical activity in her brain in response to various sights and sounds and tastes. Miss Elaine is only beginning and her brain is processing millions of pieces of information.”

“She does watch everything I do,” Sheila said thoughtfully.

“I asked Jessie to join us because she can answer any questions you might have,” Miss Hamilton said. “Jessie is an expert on child development and brain functioning.”

“It’s true,” Jessie said. “Miss Elaine’s brain is working constantly and we see unlimited potential in her.”

“Sheila,” Miss Hamilton said. “I know this is difficult; but please consider this: if we do all that we can to make certain that an average child can have an ordinary life, shouldn’t we do even more to ensure that a talented child will achieve all that she can achieve?”

“I don’t like these questions,” Sheila said. “Ellie will have opportunities. I will do everything I can for her.”

“We leave Miss Elaine with you and Todd,” Miss Hamilton said. “We know that you and Todd are the right people to raise her. Promise us that whenever you are with Miss Elaine, you will see her as the extraordinary person she will be. Never let her problems place a veil between you; never let her discouragements make you doubt her. Her world is in the future and beyond our comprehension. She will be a moving force in that world. She only needs parents who believe in her; parents who will insist on seeing a shining future for her when her eyes are dimmed with discouragement.”

Sheila started to cry.

“I don’t know if I can,” she said, sobbing.

“What would stop you?” Miss Hamilton asked. “She is already extraordinary. Keep her safe and nurture her talents. That is all. She will teach herself all that she needs to know; she will only need patience and encouragement from you and Todd.”

“We will do that.”

“Miss Elaine is your daughter,” Miss Hamilton said. “Care for her, don’t burden others with the knowledge you have of her specialness, that will only incite jealousy. See everyone as potential teachers and help her to respect the wisdom every person brings into her life.”

“I will.”

“Now,” Miss Hamilton said. “We must go. Tell Todd about this if you wish or not. That is up to you. I’ll see you

tomorrow and I'll act as if nothing has changed. And on Friday evening, we'll have a celebration dinner at my home in honor of Miss Elaine and her extraordinary parents."

Miss Hamilton and Jessie left the house. They started walking down the street.

"Sheila was my fifth parent," Jessie said. "Every one of them has cried. Is it too much of a burden?"

"No," Miss Hamilton said. "Those were tears of joy; that was the moment Sheila knew she had to relinquish Elaine and let her become who she is."

"I didn't really do anything back there, did I?" Jessie asked.

"I wouldn't say that," Miss Hamilton said. "Like every other parent, Sheila has the highest expectations for Miss Elaine, and like every other parent, Sheila was afraid her expectations were silly or selfish. You erased Sheila's doubts, setting her free to believe in Miss Elaine's greatness; a powerful gift."

"What should I tell her if she sees me at Sandburg Elementary? She'll know I teach Kindergarten, won't she?"

"Just look at her knowingly and say nothing," Miss Hamilton said. "She'll be delighted that you will be Miss Elaine's first teacher, and she will not miss any parent-teacher conferences."

"How many parents have you helped?"

"More than nine hundred," Miss Hamilton said. "However, this was only the third time I have used the secret society angle. These days, parents have more confidence in the reports of ancient mystical societies preparing to save humanity, than in the boundless power of their own love and trust."