A few days later we learned the mountain lion that killed the jogger was a female who had given birth a couple weeks before to a single kitten. Once she’d been killed and the kitten had been captured, there were all kinds of theories about why she’d done what she did. The correct one was that she was hungry, that she was hunting not just for herself but for her kitten, and was therefore less choosy than usual about the species of prey she attacked. Parenthood will make you do the damnedest things.

What it made me do, after I left Sadie’s, was pay a visit to Val. I had whipped myself into quite a froth, thinking about Edward. After that, desperate for distraction, I’d turned my attention to Sadie, deciding that I would watch her sit. Her face surprised me, pleasantly at first. When she was a child I used to see it at rest every night when I checked the kids on my way to bed. But I hadn’t seen it that way in years. It had gotten longer, I noticed, the chubby circle of childhood chiseled into a womanly oval. Her cheekbones stood out strongly, her eyes were set fairly deep, there was a charming bump halfway down her narrow graceful nose. She really had changed. And as I sat studying her there crept upon me this disturbing feeling that she was still changing, right before my eyes. She was changing, of course. She wore her dark hair straight now, where it used to be permed. She had thrown out all her make-up. Also her perfume, which she gave up in favor of the essential oils I was still trying to get used to smelling in her company. But what I saw now made a more immediate statement than the new look and smell, the new job, even the new beliefs. This was right on her
Her face? If so, then this was a *her* I didn’t know. When I’d started watching her there had been a pair of shallow wrinkles mussing her brow, and a tightness to her mouth that marked her as the daughter I knew, responsible Sadie, concerned, caretaking Sadie. But those places loosened as I watched, as if under the skin thousands of tiny knots were being untied. Her forehead turned smooth as an eggshell, her lips curled into a delicate smile, and she looked not just restful but positively beatific. I sat there stunned a minute, and then I started grasping for some kind of explanation for what I was seeing, the cause behind this effect. The first thing that came to me was Val—the way Sadie’s voice had lifted when she’d spoken of him in the kitchen. I heard that in my mind’s ear and I knew I must go and have a look at him.

So after I left I rode back into Old Olives and found his place on a shady little street a couple blocks off the park. All the other houses on the street had been quaintified, but this one was unredeemed. I walked up the shaky wooden porchsteps and found the front door open. I reached in and knocked on it, but got no answer. I knocked again, then yelled hello. Nothing stirred, so I stepped into the little entryway and paused for a minute looking around.

The walls of the entryway were bare and needed paint. The wood floor was dirty, but recently swept. Straight ahead of me was a staircase; to my right was a shut door, and to my left a doorway that had no door to shut. I stepped across to the open doorway and hovered there, looking in at the bare wall on the other side of the room. The room’s light made me aware of the air between me and that bare wall. Not bright, not dim, it had some kind of body to it, some of that palpable quality humid air has.

I leaned across the threshold. Looking left, I noticed the blind hanging over the large street window. It was made of a heavy paper that reminded me of the rice pancakes they give you when you eat Chinese. Sweeping right, my eyes traveled the length of the empty rectangular room and lit at last on a man sitting in
Sadie’s posture on the floor near the back wall, facing the window across the room. His eyes were closed, his feet bare.

“Hi there,” I said, “I’m looking for Val.”

The head seemed to dip forward slightly.

“That you?” I said, and walked toward him, my nostrils filling with Sadie’s new scent. Approaching him was a little like driving toward a distant mountain. Arriving takes longer than you expect because the mountain’s massive size makes it seem closer than it is. This Val was built on a monumental scale. Although he was sitting down his head came up past my waist. The skull was completely bald on top, but the face was mostly covered by a bushy red-blond beard. The skin was pale, on the blue side of white.

The lids lifted off eyes the startling color of the sky seen from high altitudes.

“Hi there,” I said. “Charlie Sayers.” I lifted my hand, but let it drop before it got into shaking range. For the first time it struck me that I had no idea what I was going to do. I couldn’t just tell him I was Sadie’s dad and I’d come to look him over. The truth was not an option. Unfortunately I hadn’t armed myself with a lie. So like a dope I just stood there.

After a minute he unfolded his legs and stood up also. He must have been six and a half feet tall. His white trousers were cut like surgeons’ pants, but their fabric was different. Its texture made me think of whole wheat. His T-shirt was made of the same fabric. It was big, but not so big it hid the contours of his splendid upper body. A strange kind of excitement seized me as I gazed at the broad shoulders and the deep chest, at the pale powerful arms and the great veiny hands that seemed made for doing legendary deeds.

“Undress, please,” he said in an ageless tenor. “Leave your underwear on if you like.”

What I did next seems to throw a shadow of doubt over my stated motives. If I had really come there to play the protective father this was the only opening I needed. Oh, I could have said in a voice lacquered with righteousness, I’ll bet that’s just how you
started things off with my Sadie. And what was your next move, Mr. Healer Man? Did you have her sit on your lap and tell you where it hurt?

But I said no such thing. I didn’t speak a word. I simply swung my head back to the left and right, making sure I hadn’t overlooked a bathroom or screen or some other facility a person might use to undress in private. Then I bent down and took off my shoes and socks. Next came my pants and shirt, which I folded atop the shoes. I felt oddly hopeful as I stood in my shorts next to the pile of what I’d shed.

Thanks to Jean, the walls of our house are heavily reflective—hardly a room in the place lacks a mirror. So I could imagine all too vividly what Val’s eyes were taking in as he began to look me over. He moved to my left and instantly I inflicted upon my inner eye the perspective he was getting: the sixty-two-year-old vessel covered with its grey moss of body hair, the limbs slim and sinewy but the belly surprisingly soft, bulging the way a snake’s does after a meal.

He paused a while at my left side, now squatting, now standing, like a sculptor checking a stone he wants to carve. The pale giant worked deliberately, but I worried that at any minute he might spring into violent action. I could see him finding the spot he was looking for, lifting me up, flopping me over one knee and folding me into a shrieking pretzel.

When one of those great hands lit upon my left shoulder every muscle in me clenched, every organ seized up. “Sorry,” I said after a second, letting my shoulders drop.

Val didn’t answer. The hand stayed on my shoulder and it wasn’t heavy, wasn’t painful in any way. It wasn’t like any hand that had ever touched me before. I considered turning, to make sure it was his hand I felt, but I decided to be still. I closed my eyes. Now I had the feeling something was radiating heat where his hand touched—heat and light. It was as if a lamp hung close to my skin. The warmth left my shoulder after a minute and I could feel it moving past my neck to the other shoulder, then down and
around my back, across my buttocks and along each leg in turn. At the back of my right knee it paused a while. As it rose from there my curiosity got the better of me and I asked Val what he was doing.

“Paying attention,” he said.

I opened my eyes. “To what?”

He was quiet a minute, not touching me, but evidently concentrating on me. Finally he said, “Tell me about your right knee.”

“What about it?”

“How was it injured?”

“Oh, you noticed that. I wrenched it pretty bad in high school, playing football. They told me if I wanted to play again I’d have to get it operated on. That was the end of a very mediocre football career.”

“And your left shoulder,” he said, “what happened there?”

This was strange. The knee injury I remembered clearly, that knee had bothered me off and on over the years. But I never had any trouble from the shoulder. Until he asked I’d completely forgotten Irene, the old cow that kicked me when I was trying to milk her. That was a very long time ago, when I first went to live on my grandparents’ farm and was still a novice with the animals. I told Val about it.

He stood quietly in front of me then, not speaking but evidently concentrating.

“So tell me how it works,” I said. “You feeling tissue damage in those places?”

For a moment he stood there looking preoccupied, like a man listening to the last part of a song he likes. Then the blue eyes returned from where they’d been and rose to meet mine. “I pay attention,” he said.

“Yeah, but to what? You must be feeling for something, some kind of damage.”

“Do you think I should be?”

“Well,” I said, feeling more undressed than I had at any moment since taking off my clothes, “I hope damage is what
you’re looking for. You won’t find much else in this old sack of bones.”

He just stood there, erect but easy. “May I touch your abdomen?”

“Sure.”

One of his hands came at me, palm first. Just before it reached my belly I slapped it away.

“Sorry,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“No, not right now.”

I insisted.

“There’s no need,” he said.

“What? You found out all my secrets already?”

Val lowered the hand to his side. “The only way I would know your secrets is if you told them to me.”

“Is that what this is about?” I said.

“Is it?”

I looked down at my clothes, missing them. “I don’t know. I have no idea what you’re doing here.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“What are you doing here?”

For a second I felt he was making fun of me. I checked his eyes for signs of mischief, but they were totally limpid and still.

“Look,” I said, “I’ve been feeling really...I don’t know, bad. Anxious. Maybe I’m sick. Maybe I’m...Hell, I don’t know.”

I bent down for my pants and started to put them on.

“Anyhow, what do I owe you.”

Val was sitting again. “What has it been worth to you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, buckling my belt. “That’s an honest answer. I’ve never done anything like this before.” I reached for my shirt.

Val said, “I don’t think you should pay anything this time.”

This time? I pretended deep involvement with my shirt, trying to work out my next move. I wanted to give him some money, a fixed sum that would square things between us now and forever.
How much? I had no idea. Besides, Val didn’t seem the type to refuse payment out of politeness. Which made me think it would be the height of crassness to whip out my checkbook now.

When I had my shoes and socks on Val thanked me for coming in.

“Sure,” I said, held still for a moment by the stunning blue of his eyes.

“See you,” he said.