

"No one's going to make it for me," he says.

He pours black coffee from his thermos into a mug, while I drink milk from a small carton.

"What are you reading these days?"

"Natsume Soseki's Complete Works," I say. "I still haven't read some of his novels, so this is a great chance to read them all."

"You like him enough to want to read everything he wrote?" Oshima asks.

I nod.

Steam's rising from the cup in his hand. It's dark and cloudy outside, but at least the rain's stopped.

"Which of his novels have you read since you came here?"

"I finished *The Miner*, and now I'm on *Poppies*."

"*The Miner*, eh?" Oshima says, apparently searching out a vague memory of the book. "That's the story of a college student from Tokyo who ends up working in a mine, isn't it? And he goes through all these tough times with the other miners before returning to the world outside? A sort of medium-length novel, as I recall. I read it a long time ago. The plot isn't what you normally expect from Soseki, and the style's kind of unpolished, too. Not one of his best. What do you like about it?"

I try putting into words my impressions of the novel, but I need Crow's help – need him to appear from wherever he is, spread his wings wide and search out the right words for me.

"The main character's from a rich family," I say, "but he has an affair that goes sour and he gets depressed and runs away from home. While he's wandering around, this shady character comes up to him and asks him to work in a mine, and he just tags along after him and finds himself working in the Ashio Mine. He's way down underground, going through all kinds of experiences he never could have imagined. This innocent rich boy finds himself crawling around in the dregs of society."

I sip my milk and try to piece together the rest of what I want to say. It takes a while before Crow comes back, but Oshima waits patiently.

"Those are life-and-death-type experiences he goes through in the mines. Eventually, he gets out and goes back to his old life. But nothing

"I'm guessing that you're not thinking of a hotel or inn?"

I shake my head. "Money's a factor. But I'm also hoping not to be too conspicuous."

"To the juvenile department of the police, I bet."

"Yeah."

Oshima thinks it over for a time and says, "Well, you could stay here."

"In the library?"

"Sure. It has a roof, and a vacant room, too, that nobody uses at night."

"But do you think it's all right?"

"Of course, we'll have to make some arrangements first. But it is possible. Or not impossible, I should say. I'm sure I can manage it."

"How so?"

"You like to read good books, to work things out on your own. You look like you're in good shape physically, and you're an independent kind of guy. You like to lead a well-regulated life and have a lot of will-power. I mean, even the will-power to make your stomach smaller, right? I'll talk with Miss Saeki about you becoming my assistant and staying in the empty room here at the library."

"You want me to be your assistant?"

"You won't have to do much," Oshima says. "Basically help me open and close the place. We hire professionals to do the heavy cleaning or to input things on the computer. Apart from that, there's not a whole lot to do. You can just read *whatever* you like. Sound good?"

"Yeah, of course it does . . ." I'm not sure what to say. "But I don't think Miss Saeki's going to go for it. I'm only 15, and a runaway, which she doesn't know anything about."

"But Miss Saeki's . . . how should I put it?" Oshima begins, then uncharacteristically comes to a halt, searching for the right word. "A little different."

"Different?"

"She has a different take on things from other people."

I nod. A different take on things? What does *that* mean? "You mean she's an unusual person?"

Oshima shakes his head. "No, I wouldn't say that. If you're talking



"You don't mind going so far?"

"It's OK. It's a straight run, and it's still light out. And I've got a full tank."

We drive through the twilight city streets, then join the highway heading west. Oshima changes lanes smoothly, slipping in between other cars, effortlessly shifting gears. Each time the hum of the engine changes slightly. When he shifts gears and floors it, the little car's soon zipping along at more than 90.

"The car's specially tuned, so it's got a lot of pickup. This isn't your ordinary Miata. Do you know much about cars?"

I shake my head. Cars are definitely not my speciality. "Do you enjoy driving?" I ask.

"The doctor made me give up all risky sports. So instead I drive. Compensation."

"Is something wrong with you?"

"The medical name's pretty long, but it's a type of haemophilia," Oshima says casually. "Do you know what that is?"

"I think so," I say. I learned about it in biology class. "Once you start bleeding you can't stop. It's genetic, where the blood doesn't coagulate."

"That's right. There's all kinds of haemophilia, and the type I have is pretty rare. It's not such a bad type of the disease, but I have to be careful not to get injured. Once I start bleeding I have to go to the hospital. Besides, these days there're problems with the blood supply in hospitals. Dying a slow death from Aids isn't an option for me. So I've made some connections in town to supply me with safe blood, just in case. Because of my disease I don't go on long journeys. Except for regular check-ups at the university hospital in Hiroshima, I rarely leave town. It's not so bad, though - I never did like travelling or sports all that much anyway. I can't use a kitchen knife, so doing any real cooking's out, which is a shame."

"Driving's a risky enough sport," I tell him.

"It's a different kind of risk. Whenever I drive I try to go as fast as I can. If I'm in an accident driving fast I won't only end up getting a cut finger. If you lose a lot of blood, there's no difference between a haemophiliac and anybody else. It evens things out, since your chances