

NAMELESS



a novel by
Sam Starbuck

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Chicago, IL

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By Sam Starbuck

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For the 2500. They know who they are.

ONE

IT IS A natural human urge to settle in certain formations, which can be repeated in a village of six hundred even more easily than a city of five million. The village is merely the city stripped to its basic component parts, after all: places to gather, places to buy and sell, places to live, places to play. The church, the shops, the houses, the park.

Low Ferry's major road was a two-lane blacktop lined with storefronts, the only reliably-plowed street in the winter. During the summer the cheap asphalt sometimes melted and stuck to people's shoes. My bookstore, and my little apartment above it, stood midway down the road in the heart of our bustling retail district: Dusk Books, the hardware store, the cafe, a general-goods store with a grocer's built into one side of it, and two antique stores that only opened for the tourist season. There were a few old boarded-up buildings to the south, as well, evidence that some folks had gone bust and moved on and nobody new was filling their place. We had a school and a church at the north end of the street, and most people seemed to feel we didn't need much more.

The first week in September that year saw the heat of summer not yet faded in Chicago, which was where our television signals and our official weather reports came from. In Low Ferry, on the other hand – far from Lake Michigan and with wider, clearer skies – we could see autumn closing in and a cold winter hard on its heels.

Across from my bookshop, the cafe was storing flour in airtight tubs and freezing surplus meat for when the roads washed out and no deliveries would come through. I was stocking my own shelves with new books to fill the days when the television signals would slack and die and the impassable roads meant no trips to the nearest movie theater, three towns south and across the river. Many of the stores had generators to take over during the winter power outages, and the town mechanic was keeping busy checking them all before the foul weather set in.

We were in that transition time, when we put the heat on at night but left the windows open during the day, and through my windows I could half-hear music from the radio in the cafe. Over that came the occasional sound of a car driving past, and footsteps on my gravel walk.

I glanced up from unpacking my shipment of books, saw who it was through the window, and sang out:

*"L'amour est un oiseau rebelle
que nul ne peut apprivoiser – "*

Carmen, the victim of my serenade, laughed and pushed open the glass door into the shop.

"Don't sell the bookstore," she advised, walking right up to my counter. She had her daughter Clara propped on one hip – the spit and image of her, a small tanned girl with big dark eyes – and began digging in her pocket with her other hand, first the front of her apron and then the jeans underneath.

"A man can dream, Carmen," I said, leaning on the counter. "I think I should get points for effort. Not to mention recalling anything about the opera at all."

"I think you learned what you know about opera from cartoons, like the rest of us," she said, rifling her back pockets.

"Better than knowing nothing about it," I said. I'd once held a season pass to the Lyric Opera in Chicago, in another life. "What can I do for you today? Book for the squirt? New shipment came in but the magazines won't be delivered until next week."

Carmen finally gave up and set Clara down near the low rack of children's books so she could double-check her apron pockets. Clara immediately discovered a book about dinosaurs and began mauling it.

"I need some change," she said, producing two wrinkled twenty-dollar bills. "We're running low at the cafe and the bank's closed because Nolan's all alone over there and the man has to eat lunch sometime."

"Sandra and Michael still off sick?" I asked.

"Yeah, poor kids."

"Don't pity them too much. No bets on how they both came down with it at the same time," I said with a conspiratorial look.

"Really? Sandra and Michael?" she inquired.

"Well, I heard it from Leanne who got it from Nolan's little sister, who says she saw them necking in the safety-deposit vault. But I hear Sandra's parents don't think much of Michael, so I suspect they're keeping it a secret."

"You know everything," she said, while I counted out ones and fives for her.

"People tell me things." I shrugged and stuffed her change in an envelope.

"Bet you didn't know Leanne has a crush on you," Carmen said, grinning at me and swiping at some stray brown hair, loosed from her braid and hanging in her eyes.

"I did so. Leanne's not subtle," I remarked. "She's also twenty-one."

"So? You're only thirty."

"Where I come from, Carmen, that's cradle-robbing."

"Well, this is the country," she said reasonably.

"Yeah, and everyone's armed. If I tried anything with her there'd be firearms involved before long," I told her. "Besides, I'm not interested."

"Well, who *are* you interested in?" she asked, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

"Nice try," I said. "Change of subject. You keeping Clara at the cafe today?"

"Actually, I was just about to deliver her to Paula."

"Paula?" I asked. "Really? You know people don't childproof hardware stores."

"Well, my regular babysitter's back in school now, she can't take Clara until three-thirty. They don't let her wander around the bulk nail bins, and Paula doesn't charge me as long as I bring her some dinner. Unless you want to –"

"I love you like a sister, but I'm not going to babysit your hurricane," I said quickly.

"Then you don't get to judge Paula. Thanks for the change," she replied, holding up the wad of bills. "Clara!"

Clara looked up from the book she was mangling and reached out for her mother. Carmen, who will never be lauded for her observational skills, took her hand and led her out the door, down the porch steps, and across the gravel walkway, book still dragging from Clara's other hand. They passed under the green-and-white striped awning of the cafe where Carmen worked, stopping briefly so Carmen could check her reflection in the wide plate-glass windows before they continued up the block. The rusty bell on the slightly shabbier front door of the hardware store clanged as they passed inside.

I was considering closing up and getting a late lunch myself when I caught movement through the window. A stranger was standing on the pavement outside, studying the sign that hung off the front porch – *Dusk Books: Books Bought, Sold, Repaired*. His arm was cocked so that his fingers rested against the back of his neck as he shifted from foot to foot.

He was a tall man, hardly old enough to have left off being a tall boy, in a battered tan jacket and blue-jeans. I probably wouldn't have noticed him if we'd passed on the street. He had hair the same pale brown as his jacket and he was a little gangly, his spine stiff with tension. A nice face but not particularly unique: firm features, ordinary chin and nose, wide brown eyes. After a moment, he climbed the steps and crossed the porch, pushing the glass door open.

Unlike most people, he didn't pause when he stepped inside. Even someone who knows what they want and how to find it will usually stop to orient themselves, to look at the new-books display at the front and the magazines next to the counter. The step, the pause, the glance, the turn, the search; a shopkeeper learns quickly how to recognize it.

This was different. He looked around for people instead of books and he did it on the move, already ducking not-quite-furtively behind the nearest shelf (Cookbooks). I was the only person in the store, which he must have seen, but it was obvious he was going to hide from me, too. I remember wondering if he was planning to steal something. I decided not – it's hard to come up with many reasons people would steal books, especially this far out in the country. They have a low resale value, after all, and you can't eat them.

He pretended to read the cookbooks for a while, then drifted past Science Fiction to the rack of art books near the roped-off back stairway that led to the second floor. He spent a while there, tilting his head to study the spines, fingers drifting along them slowly. He did finally reach for a book, but it was in the Home Improvement section, above and to the left of the art books. I had a relatively large stock of home-improvement books, given the size of my shop, but Low Ferry is a town of do-it-yourselfers.

He looked up to see if I was busy, then ducked out of the protective shelter of the shelves and crossed the open floor. He was reaching into his pocket for his wallet even as he hurried over, well before he set his chosen prize on the counter.

Unfortunately – more for him than anyone – Carmen burst into the shop just as he reached me. Clara was in her arms, squealing in outrage and clutching the book she'd lifted from my shelves. Carmen hustled up next to him and pointed to the unhappy child in her arms.

"Christopher, she took the book. I'm so sorry, you know how she is," she said. "I didn't even notice – "

"Hey, it's all right," I said. My prospective customer silently backed away a few steps. "I could have stopped her. She seemed to like it."

"Well, let me pay you – "

"I'll put it on account," I said, bundling up the home-improvement book into a narrow paper bag. What I thought was the home-improvement book, anyway. "Pay when you have cash on you."

"Are you sure?" she asked, relief already dawning on her face.

"Of course, Carmen. Say no more." I glanced at my silent customer, smiled, held out my hand for the cash, and counted exact change into the register.

"I really am sorry," Carmen said. Clara continued to wail.

"It's no problem. Clara, sweet child, be silent before I make you eat that," I said, and Clara shut her mouth abruptly. "You see?" I said to Carmen, absently handing the stranger his bag. "It's all in the tone."

"You're the best, Christopher. See you tomorrow!"

She left, Clara rustling the pages of the book and taking a renewed interest in it. I glanced around, but the silent young man in the tan jacket had disappeared as well.

It wasn't a momentous occasion. People bought books from me every day. Low Ferry had working farms and flower shows and things in summer, which pulled in tourists. During July and August I made most of my sales to strangers. Some of our visitors could be a little standoffish, uncomfortable with the closeness of the locals. As far as I knew, the young man was a flower enthusiast or a backpacker passing through. I didn't think much about it until we saw each other again a few days later.

I was in the cafe, sitting at one of the window tables that faced out into the street. I ate in the cafe a lot; cooking for one isn't much cheaper, and the cafe was so much more sociable. From a table at the long front window I could keep an eye on my store, greet friends as they came in,

and watch life revolve around me while I ate. The food wasn't bad, either: sweet tomatoes, ripe apples, fresh bread, glorious yellow onions, chicken that had been squawking and scratching the day before.

By the time I was done with dinner, the streetlamps and the store-window lights were coming on. My shop was eventually the only unlit storefront, which meant it was time I should be getting home. I was just putting on my coat when I happened to glance up and see him again, standing on the sidewalk. That same brown jacket and short hair, the same hesitation, shoulders pulled in, tense and shy. He waited until a crowd of people left the cafe before he tried to enter, then caught the door on the back-swing and stepped inside, reaching behind him with his other hand to keep it from slamming when it closed.

"Sorry, excuse me," I said with a friendly smile, allowing him room to pass. He ducked his head and hurried on, then stopped just past me. He looked as if he wasn't sure whether he should seat himself or wait for someone to help him. I turned for a backwards glance and saw Carmen guide him to another window table, sweeping up my plate and payment as she returned to the kitchen.

I was so distracted in looking back at him that I nearly ran into a young boy on the doorstep of the cafe. He looked like he was about twelve years old, a farm kid with hand-me-down clothes and a sleek, short cap of blond hair. I couldn't immediately place him, but I thought maybe he was one of the Ardval kids – they went to school in Low Ferry but the clan did its shopping and churchgoing in the next town south of us. He seemed to know me, anyway.

"Scuse me, Mr. Dusk," he said.

"No, my fault," I replied. "Are you going in?"

"Do you know who that is?" he asked, peering around me at the window where the young man sat, half-hidden from the street behind a low curtain.

"Of course not," I answered. "Do you?"

"Not yet!" the boy said cheerfully. "He just moved here."

"Has he?" I gave him a look of renewed interest. He glanced up, caught me, and immediately looked away.

"The old cottage at The Pines," the boy said. "You haven't spoken to him at all?"

I shook my head. "I sold him a book," I said. "I don't think he said two words to me, actually. What do you want with him?"

"Nothing!" the boy said, and bolted off down the street to join his friends, who were hollering and gesturing at him from the open window of a car. He climbed in and they drove off as I cast a last look at the shadow in the cafe window.

Back in the bookstore, I switched on the lights and settled into one of the chairs near the door, feet propped on a battered ottoman. I had planned on reading, but the boy's information had distracted me. This young man was a new neighbor, then, though not exactly a close one.

Low Ferry's main street was surrounded, for the most part, by a

vague oval of shady avenues with pleasant grass-yarded houses, none more than a decent half-hour's walk from the center of town. To those who grew up attending the little school next to the church and cemetery, it must have seemed tedious to spend eighteen years with the same forty or fifty faces. Or maybe it was reassuring. I couldn't say; I'd gone to school in Chicago, where the faces changed from year to year.

Beyond the village, the back roads stretched between low hills and fields, threading around farms and across the Illinois side of the northern Mississippi river, which routinely flooded out the roads during the spring thaw and autumn rains. The stand of weedy trees known locally as The Pines was off to the west, on a dirt road near a crumbling barn. Past the flatlands there was a small hill, and halfway up the hill stood a cottage that had been built and then abandoned by the same man who had built the crumbling barn.

It's difficult to find a reason for either to exist or a reason anyone would stay at the cottage, since a wide stretch of field lay between the cottage and the edge of the village. In the winter it was cut off without a four-wheel-drive or a long cold hike on snowshoes, and it had no apparent advantage in its isolation. Unless, I suppose, you counted the isolation itself. At any rate, the house on the hill had stood empty since last winter. It rarely had renters even in the summer, when the walk was pleasant and warm.

It was a strange choice, especially for an out-of-towner with winter on the way, but it wasn't really my concern. Obviously he didn't mind the journey, and at least it would be something to talk about when business was slow. I gave up on this new puzzle after a while, closed the store, and went upstairs to bed.

I was woken the next morning by gravel rattling against my bedroom window, directly over the porch roof and thus visible from the street. I waited until another handful had smacked into the glass and then opened it before anyone could reload.

"What time do you call this?" I shouted down. The figure on the walk below glanced up.

"Seven o'clock!" he called back. "Come on, Dusk, out of bed! I've already milked the cows and goats and got the eggs! Brought you some!" He held up a small wire basket.

"Be down in a minute," I said, and shut the window again. I put on enough clothing to be decent and clattered down the stairs, just as he walked into the shop – my door's never locked – and flicked the lights on.

"Breakfast," he said, setting the basket on the counter.

"No croissants?" I asked. "Classless, Jacob."

"Wondering if you'd do me a favor," Jacob replied, ignoring my teasing and hitching a hip against the counter in a farmer's lean. I always feel oddly breakable next to Jacob – my whole family's Chicago Irish,

black hair and blue eyes, usually pale and almost always slightly weedy. Jacob's a head taller than me and a good deal broader in the shoulder, years of heavy farm-work showing in his build. He made a spare gesture, flicking his fingers at my worktable. "You got all those...book tools."

"Binding equipment, yes," I said, ducking under the counter. "Need something bound?"

"Well, I got my dad's *Farmer's Guide*," he said, laying a dusty, crack-spined book on the table. I whistled and picked it up.

"Ah, the old rural Bible. This looks like a first printing," I said, carefully thumbing some dust out of the spine's cracks.

"Couldn't speak to that, but it's got some family things in the front, see," he said. I opened it and the cheap binding creaked ominously. On the reverse of the frontispiece was a series of names in various hands and shades of ink, a family tree in list form.

"This wasn't just your father's," I said, looking up at him.

"Nah. Grandfather's before him," he agreed.

"Definitely a first printing. Family treasure?" I asked.

"Sorta. He'll be sixty next week."

"If you don't look after this –"

"Yeah, kinda why I came in," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "Thought you might put a new cover on it, fix some of the loose pages."

I let the book fall open to a random page. Most books will open to the page that's looked at the most – in this case, a chapter on diseases common to children.

"How many brothers have you got, Jacob?" I asked, studying the stitching on the pages.

"Three brothers," he said, perplexed. "Two sisters too. Couple of 'em went to Chicago a few years back. Why?"

"No reason," I said. "I can do one of two things with this."

"Yeah?"

"I could take out the frontispiece," I said, flipping back to the first page, "and coat it in acid-free sealant. There was a new edition of the *Farmer's Guide* out last year. If you bought a new one I could sew it in..."

"I don't think Dad'd much go for that," Jacob said.

"Probably not. The other option..." I closed the book and tapped my fingers against the spine, "...is to take the cover off, remove the damaged sections, restitch them if they're durable enough, and put a new cover on. Paula's got some nice leather for embossing. But that's repair rather than conservation, Jacob. It'll decrease the value of the book."

"Leather cover? You could do that?" he asked.

"Sure. It's not difficult."

"That'd be something else," he said, looking impressed. "Dad'd be pretty proud to have a *Farmer's Guide* with a leather cover. You do all that by next week?"

"I don't see why not," I said, setting the book down on the counter. "Longest wait is for the glue to dry."

"How much you charge for something like that?"

I studied the cover, already thinking about the work. Slice with a scalpel there, and there. Fresh white waxed twine for the new stitching, not too tight or it'd rip the paper. Maybe some reinforcement or sealant on the brittle pages. Not difficult, and I had plenty of spare time to do it in. And there's a pleasure in restoring a well-loved book.

I looked up at Jacob – studying him, too. The last few years hadn't been easy on the farmers, though Low Ferry survived better than most. Things were a little dear in the outskirts and liable to get worse before they got better.

"Tell you what, run down to Paula's when she opens up, get some of that leather she sells – here, these dimensions," I said, scribbling out rough measurements on a scrap of paper. "You pay for that and bring me some of that cheese you make in spring and we'll call it even."

"You sure about that?" he asked, with all the rural suspicion of an easy deal.

"It's really good cheese, Jacob," I assured him.

He laughed. "When's Paula get in?"

"About an hour," I said, picking up the little basket he'd brought. "Come on upstairs, I'll make you some of these eggs."

"Nah, I got to make some deliveries. Bring you the leather this afternoon?"

"Suit yourself," I said, putting the book in a desk drawer, behind the one functional lock in the entire building. "I'll be here all day."

He let himself out while I carried the basket upstairs. There was a small jar next to the eggs, packed full of salted butter. I put a pan of water on to boil and cracked two eggs into a bowl, leaving the rest in the fridge. Fresh poached eggs and buttered toast are worth a wake-up call at seven in the morning any day of the week.

After breakfast I opened the store, not that there was anyone waiting, and settled down with the *Farmer's Guide*. I spent the better part of the day getting the cover off and dissecting the text block, looking through each portion for ripped pages. Most of the twine that had originally held it together was rotting. A really thorough job would mean picking out the stitches and re-sewing all of it, which took a delicate touch. No time like the present to start.

I was working carefully with the thread-clippers, inch by narrow inch, when my silent customer slipped in again, right past me as I was picking the twine out of a few very delicate pages. I didn't dare look up until I'd finished and could set the segment aside, and by then he was nothing but a shadow behind a shelf. I set the little scissors down and checked the clock. Nearly three, which meant –

Even as I thought it, a crowd of students crashed into the shop, fresh from school and still carrying their backpacks.

"Hey!" I called, and most of them looked up. My customer did too, a sudden, startled movement. "Backpacks off, you know the rules."

They rolled their eyes and piled their bags in an untidy heap near the counter, flocking around the magazines and comics. Among them was the

boy who had questioned me the day before, ruffling his pale hair in consternation as he studied the newest arrivals. The children weren't interested readers, except for a handful who had more books than friends. I didn't know many of them by name, but all of them lived for the day the comic books came in.

The little demons were learning economics, at least. I didn't know who had come up with the idea, but the children had discovered that if each of them bought a different comic, they only needed to buy one or two each – they could share them around and read all the comics they pleased for a small price. The negotiations over who would buy what were always very much in earnest, and were also cutting into my weekly profits.

While they were dickering in the corner, my customer stalked behind the shelves until he had circled them and was facing me in the clear, with the children on his right flank and the door, an easy retreat, to his left. He stood there, indecisive, until desperation drove him out into the open and up to my counter.

He set the book down and offered me a small smile along with his cash as I rang up the total. It was an odd amount, something I'd seen recently, and I looked at the book again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Didn't you already buy this book?"

He looked surprised. "No, I...no. Another book."

"No, I'm sure it was this one," I insisted, tapping the cover. "Was it defective?"

"No, it wasn't this book," he mumbled.

"Because if it was, you could return it," I continued. "Weren't you satisfied with it? It didn't fall apart or something, did it? Was it inaccurate?"

"I – don't know," he confessed. "Actually, you gave me a different book."

"I did what?" I asked.

"There was a mix-up when..." He held his hand up to show Carmen's height. "The woman and girl came in. You gave me another book while you were dealing with her. I should have checked my bag. I don't want to return it," he said, so quickly I almost didn't understand him. "I liked it."

"Did I overcharge you for it?"

"Oh, no, not really," he said, giving the children an anxious glance.

"What did I give you?"

"Greek myths. Ovid."

"One of these?" I asked, holding up a copy of *Selected Myths of Ovid's Metamorphoses*. The high school was using it for a literature course that fall.

"I didn't want to complain, it's just that my roof leaks. I don't blame you or anything," he added clumsily.

"I'm sorry – here, take it at my cost," I said, offering it to him.

"No, I'd really rather pay..."

"But it's my fault. Let me make it right," I said.

"I don't – " He cut off abruptly as several of the children swarmed

around him, insinuating themselves against the counter so that I'd see them first when he left. He suddenly found himself engulfed in a sea of adolescents while trying to argue a point of pride with me. I felt a certain amount of pity for him.

"Please, I don't mind, I enjoyed it, it doesn't matter," he said, offering each excuse in a sequence, as if he wanted me to pick one I liked. He set the money on the counter and pulled his hand back, nearly elbowing one of the children in the nose as he did so. The boy from before had sidled up on his other side, comic books held tightly against his chest, and now he craned his head up and around the stranger's ribcage.

"Hello," said the boy with a curious look.

"Hello..."

"You've moved into the cottage, haven't you? You buy a lot of books," the boy continued.

"Please, go first," the stranger said. The boy beamed at him and offered me his comic books, which meant all the other children began jockeying for place behind him. My customer withdrew again, back to the cookbooks, leaving his money and his book behind. There wasn't much for me to do but ring up the children as quickly as possible and break apart a scuffle that started when a girl grabbed the wrong bag by mistake and knocked its rightful owner flat after he socked her in the arm.

When the last of them were gone my patron was still there, pretending to have been reading the backs of books the entire time. He waited another few minutes before he set a paperback down, carefully using his sleeve to rub his fingerprints off the slick cover, and returned to the counter.

"You should have gone first," I said. "They're impatient little monsters sometimes."

"I don't mind," he stammered. "May I have my book now?"

"Of course," I said, giving up on restarting our argument about payment. I offered him the book wrapped in a clear plastic bag, normally reserved for rainy weather or people with a lot to carry. "See? So you can make sure you have the right one this time."

He looked down at the title through the plastic. "Yes, I see," he said gravely, clearly uncertain whether or not I was joking.

"So you've moved into the cottage at The Pines?" I asked, as the ancient cash register spat out a receipt. I tore it off and handed it to him. He shoved it in a pocket absently.

"Word travels fast," he said.

"We don't see many new faces here. You'd better get used to it. I'm Christopher," I added, offering him my hand.

"Lucas," he replied, hesitating briefly before shaking.

"Staying the winter?" I asked, while he glanced around nervously.

"Probably through spring at least."

"You working in town?"

"Not really," he said abruptly. "Thank you – have a nice day."

He was out the door and down the steps before I could get another reply out.

Paula, who owned the hardware store, was the second person to ask me about Lucas. She came over the day after I was commissioned to repair the *Farmer's Guide*, bringing with her a mallet and a stylus set I'd asked to borrow so I could emboss the new leather cover. I capped the scalpel I was using, set it somewhere I'd remember to find it later, and joined her at the counter.

"Tools for the master," she said, passing them over. "Whaddaya give me for them?"

"My undying gratitude?"

"Can I eat gratitude?"

"Fine, grab a few magazines," I said, waving a hand at the rack while I looked through the box of oddly-shaped implements.

"So have you heard about the new boy in town?" she asked, studying the golf magazines. There weren't any golf courses within forty miles, but we had lots of wide open fields.

"Lucas?" I asked.

"Is that his name? He didn't introduce himself," she said. She thumbed through one of them and put it back. "Just gave me a list and asked where he could find it all. Kinda rude, I thought."

"What did he buy?" I asked.

"Aluminum, some three-quarter nails, all-weather caulking, shingles. Do you know what he's doing here?"

"Patching a roof, from the evidence," I said with a grin, picking my way through the small metal embossing tools. It's nice to know things others don't.

"Funny. You know what I mean," she said. "Who is he?"

"Well, if you wanted intel in return for the loan of your tools, you should have said so." I blew a mote of leather off the point of a long, hooked stylus.

"I'll pay for the magazines," she sighed.

"Good. Man's got to earn a living somehow." I closed the lid of the box and set it on the workbench. "His name is Lucas, he's living at the cottage out at The Pines, and he has a leaky roof. Aside from that, he's terrified of children and direct questions."

"Sort of a gawky kid, isn't he?" she asked.

"We can't all be grace and charm like you are," I answered. She snickered.

"He made me nervous," she continued. "Skulking around the shelves, always half-behind something."

I accepted the magazines she'd chosen and rang them up. "I don't think he has any intention of stealing anything, if that's what you're asking. He paid at my place, anyway."

"Unless he's casing us for a midnight attack."

"Yes, Low Ferry is a prime target for hardened criminals," I drawled. "He'll score a life-changing forty-seven dollars from my cash register."

"You never know."

"He's a stranger here. I'm sure he's just feeling his way."

"Maybe. Anyway, he won't get far without a hammer or a caulk-gun."

"I imagine he might have a hammer," I said.

Paula gave me a look. "The man had to buy nails, Christopher."

"All right, maybe not. Why didn't you try to sell him one?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I didn't think about it until later. I told you, I was unnerved."

"Find it in yourself to be re-nerved." I offered her the magazines with her change on top. "Listen, why don't you package up a caulk-gun and a hammer and I'll take them out to him. It's a long walk into town. I don't think he has a bicycle."

"Wouldn't work very well on that rutty old dirt road anyway," she sniffed. "You haven't got a bicycle either."

"I don't mind the walk."

"You're either too unselfish or too curious for your own good."

"I can't be both?" I asked with a smile. She made a face, but twenty minutes later she had returned with a metal bucket. Inside was a strange, skeletal contraption I took to be the caulk-gun, a generic cheap hammer, and a pair of wicked-looking snips for the sheet aluminum.

"What's the bucket for?" I asked.

"In case he gives up on the repairs," she replied, chuckling.

It was nearly dark at that point and I didn't particularly relish the idea of walking down a dirt road or crossing a pitted field with only the moon to guide me, so I put the bucket near the front door to remind me in the morning. I guessed that a single night wouldn't make any difference, even if the smell of early-autumn rain was on the wind.

I felt differently the next day, when the heavens opened at around five in the morning and the rain came pelting down. I didn't mind a little wet, personally, but it was true that I liked my wet to stay firmly outside and away from my books. If I were a young man with a leaking roof, I would be frustrated not to have the proper tools.

So, I dug my umbrella out of the closet and picked up the bucket, made sure the sign on the door read *Closed*, and set off. I followed the main street south, past the general store, the gas station and mechanic's, and the little firehouse that served us and three other towns besides. After I passed the side-by-side offices of Doctors Kirchner (human) and Malone (animal) I could almost look down the straight road all the way to the train station. I turned west onto one of the residential roads instead, ambling along until I'd left the houses well behind.

Halfway across the wide field that led to The Pines, the asphalt ended abruptly where Low Ferry's municipal authority did. Instead there

was a dirt road carved up with tire tracks, leading off to The Pines. The cottage was just barely visible as a blot on the side of the hill.

The fields had long grass that caught some of the water; it might get my pants wet but it would mean avoiding the oil-slick mud on the road. I set out at an angle to the dirt track, heading directly for the hill and the small building clinging to the side of it. From the field I could see the holly bushes around the back door into the kitchen and the east-facing windows, designed to catch the morning sun, one of the few wise choices its builder made. The rest of the house would be in shadow early in the evening, long before sunset touched the rest of the field below.

In addition, the roof leaked.

I was almost at the incline when I realized there was a figure on the roof: Lucas, in a pair of thick-soled boots and several layers of clothing, kneeling on the shingles. He had a rope tied around his chest, the other end hitched to the chimney to keep him from breaking his neck if he slipped.

"Hiya!" I called, when I thought I might be close enough to be heard above the steady patter of the rain. He looked up and over his shoulder, curiously.

"Hi," he called back. "Are you lost?"

"Not at all! I've brought you some tools," I replied. The words were just barely out of my mouth when I decided it sounded kind of absurd, but Lucas didn't seem amused so much as grateful.

"Thank God," he answered, and untied the rope from around his chest, walking carefully to one edge of the roof. Before I had time to be surprised, he had dropped over the eave and was hanging with one hand on the guttering, measuring the distance down with a glance. The roof was only about fifteen feet off the ground to start with, and he fell into the soft soil below with hardly a grunt. It wasn't graceful, but he did land on his feet.

I held up the bucket by the handle. He let out a short, sharp bark of laughter, startling me.

"That's not what I expected," he said, and then blushed. "I mean, thank you."

We stood there awkwardly for a minute, the rain dripping off my umbrella, Lucas looking anxious and uncertain. Finally, he swallowed.

"Would you – uh, come inside? Out of the rain, and..." He stuttered into silence for a second. "Out of the rain?"

"Sure," I said, though he was already moving. I followed him through the weather-battered door into a bright yellow kitchen. We stamped the mud off our boots on the mat just inside and Lucas removed an enormous ragged coat, revealing a corduroy shirt buttoned up over a turtleneck underneath, the collar and wrists dark where they'd gotten wet. He threw the coat on a chair next to the little breakfast table and invited me with another gesture to set my umbrella out to dry.

The kitchen didn't look very lived-in, nothing on the walls but a few pans hanging on hooks, no visible food on the counters. The only

personal touch was a small planter box filled with green sprouts. They didn't look like they'd survive another week, let alone the winter. The door to what I assumed was the living room was closed tightly.

Lucas went to a high shelf near the stove and took down two mugs, back turned to me as he spoke.

"I called the shop to ask what I was missing," he said, talking so fast it was almost babbling. "I was told someone would bring out what I needed. They didn't say you would do it. Not that I mind, I'm grateful someone did, I mean I could have come back to town –"

"I volunteered," I interrupted, and he subsided with an almost grateful look. "I wanted to see what you'd done here."

"Not much," he said, taking a pan off a hook and setting it on the stove. "I have hot chocolate, or coffee...only instant though..."

"Hot chocolate?"

"Yeah. I...like hot chocolate?" he ventured.

"That's fine," I reassured him.

He nodded and took a bottle of milk from the fridge, pouring it into the pan. "Sit down if you want."

I pulled out a chair and sat, stretching my legs towards a heating vent while he lit the gas on the stove. "Live alone out here?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered shortly. He took a makeshift hammer out of his belt, a wooden mallet wrapped in leather, and set it on the counter, replacing it with the hammer from the bucket I'd brought. Next he studied the caulk-gun for a while, then picked up the tube of caulk and fitted it in with a single, efficient gesture and a soft *snap*.

"Not your first time fixing a roof?" I asked, noticing the deftness with which he handled the tools.

"Oh, no, I mean, yes it is," he answered. "It's not something I've run into a lot." He disappeared into the living room and returned with a wide piece of thick cloth, wrapping it around the aluminum snips before shoving them in his pocket.

"Is this the first time you've lived alone?" I asked. He stopped and looked directly at me.

It wasn't that he seemed particularly malicious. There was surprise in his stare. At the same time, however, it was almost as if he were trying to look past me – searching for another version of me, another kind of Christopher who had asked a different question and had gotten a much more satisfactory answer than I was likely to get.

"This is the first place that's been mine," he said finally. He jerked the pan's handle lightly and the milk hissed as it slapped against the hot dry sides. He turned off the heat and added spoonfuls of dark powder to the mugs before pouring precisely half the milk into each, stirring as he poured. He passed me one and leaned on the counter nearby, blue light through the window picking out shine in his wet hair.

"The leaks don't seem to be serious," I said, to make conversation. "Did you need to be up there fixing it in the rain?"

"They aren't so bad," he allowed. "They'll rot the ceiling, though,

and they come through here and there." He opened a cupboard by way of example. Water was dripping from the top of it down into a bowl on the highest shelf.

"Rain can't last that long, though," I answered. "You could have waited until it was clear, couldn't you?"

"It's better to do it this way. At least then I know if I've actually stopped the leak or not," he said.

"And have you?"

"Stopped the leaks? Two so far. There's one bad hole, that had to be sealed from the inside."

"You didn't climb up to the roof to begin with, then," I said, gesturing upwards with my mug.

"There's a trap-door into the attic, and a gable-window on the far side lets out onto the shingles," he said, still in a rush but with less desperate speed. He seemed more confident, in his own kitchen and on relatively solid factual ground. "I got up there yesterday. I had to clear out some birds."

"Yeah, the place has been empty for a while."

"I didn't want to make them go," he added, either ignoring me or uncertain how to reply. "There were five or six of them – yellow, you know? With black bands."

"Waxwings, probably," I said. "They're all over the place around here. Usually they migrate for the winter. Might have thought your holly bushes were a safer proposition."

"I thought maybe. That they should be migrating, I mean. I wanted them to go to the little birdhouse around the other side but..." he gave me a hapless look. "Most of them just took off. All but one."

"They'll find somewhere to roost. Culligan farm's south of here, there's a barn there," I said. He nodded, and awkward quiet settled on us for a minute until he drew an abrupt breath.

"Who's watching your store?" he asked, as if grasping for something to say.

"Nobody," I said. "I closed it before I came."

He looked upset. "Will you lose business?"

"I doubt it. It's the middle of the day, and it's raining. There's hours until school lets out."

"The children like you," he said.

"They like my comic books."

"I need to give you money," he said, taking another sudden conversational swerve. I felt a little dizzy, trying to follow. "For the woman at the hardware store."

"Paula. She'll put it on account for you. I mean, she does know where you live. Or she'll...hold your change," I said, as he pressed a few battered bills into my hand.

"I like to pay promptly," he said.

"Then Paula will like you," I answered, tucking the cash into a pocket. "Do you want some help with the roof?"

"No, there isn't much more to be done," he said. "You're welcome to stay if you want, until the rain stops. It'll only be muddier going back. But you have your store," he added, more to himself than to me. "You'll want to get back to your store."

"I'm used to mud," I said. "I don't mind. Sure you don't want help?"

"No, thank you," he answered quickly, and set his empty mug in the sink. "I'll, um, walk you down to the field."

When we stepped out of the kitchen door, there was a rustle and a small crash and then a whirr of wings – a little tan-yellow bird fluttered up around my head, scolding briefly before he arrowed off around the side of the house on black-tipped wings.

"That's the stubborn one," Lucas said, twisting to follow its movement. "Sorry."

"Definitely a Waxwing. No harm done," I said, though my heart had skipped a few beats in surprise.

He left me at the base of the hill, in rain that was softening from vicious to merely steady. It isn't wise to ignore where one is going, walking across a muddy field, but I turned around every so often to see if he had started his repairs again. By the time he returned to his patching, I was halfway home and his coat was a dark speck on the distant roof.

When I returned to Dusk Books I changed out of my muddy clothes, opening the store and padding around the ground floor in clean socks and an ancient sweater and jeans. The boy who was so curious about Lucas arrived with his friends, but he wandered away from the table where they were doing their homework – or at least where they were folding their homework into paper airplanes to throw at each other. He ducked one particularly well-aimed shot and leaned his elbows on my counter, hoisting himself up a little and then dropping down again.

"You went to see Lucas today," he said.

I set down the *Farmer's Guide* and looked across at him. "Yes, I did – how'd you know?"

"I saw your boots," he replied. "He done patching his roof yet?"

"You're quite the Sherlock Holmes," I said.

"That's the sort of thing people tell me when they think they shouldn't have to answer me because I shouldn't know enough to ask," he said solemnly.

"I'm sorry," I replied, a little taken aback. "He was patching it when I left. He'll do better now that he has a real hammer."

"That's good," the boy gave an approving nod. "Are you going to buy firewood for winter?"

"Probably," I said. "Why?"

"Phil MacKenzie's got some split and seasoned cords for sale. Give you a half-cord for credit."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you brokering for him?"

"He wants to shift it. He said if I helped him out and sold some for him I could sell a cord for myself and I want credit here. My dad says it'll make me read more."

Nameless

"Do you think it will?"

The boy grinned. "More comic books, anyway. Half a cord, okay?"

I laughed. "Done deal."

He offered a hand and I shook it.

"Do you think Lucas needs some?" he asked.

"I'd think so. He might not know he does, though. You're a salesman, sell him some."

"Okay, I will," he said, and went back to his friends, ordering them imperiously to be quiet and behave.

TWO

I WAS PLEASED with the progress I was making on Jacob's bookbinding commission, and I found the work soothing, but I couldn't be at it as much as I'd have liked. I had a shop to run and shelves to stock, and even when nobody was buying there was always someone stopping by to say hello.

"Halloooo, Christopher!" Charles called, banging the glass door behind him as he entered. I put my head through the doorway from the storeroom.

"Just a minute, Charles," I replied. "Make yourself at home!"

"I already have," he said, and I heard him shuffling through the papers on my counter. "Had breakfast yet?"

"Ron ran toast and bacon over from the cafe this morning, and I had some of the eggs Jacob brought me a few days ago," I replied, tossing the last of the shipping boxes in a corner and studying the troubling books on the storage shelf, hands on my hips. "Was that an invitation? Need something?"

"Well, I can talk here just as well as I can there," he replied, as I emerged. "You look annoyed."

"My seller mixed up an order," I said.

"What happened?"

"Sure you want to know?" I asked. "Don't want to offend your delicate reverend ears."

"I can almost promise you I've heard worse," he said with a smile.

"I have twenty anthologies of erotica," I announced, "when I should have thirty-five assorted True Crime."

His smile widened. "Six of one, half dozen of the other, I'd say."

"I hate to think what your congregation would say to that," I scolded.

"It's all voyeurism, is what I mean," he explained.

"I'm shocked you even know that word."

"Oh, you kids think you invented sex and atheism!"

"Not concurrently," I drawled.

Charles is a large man with a barrel chest, and when he laughs he scares flocks of birds miles away.

"I assume sex and atheism aren't what you came here to talk about," I continued, when the sonic boom had died away.

"Just thought I'd drop in. Keeps me out of trouble and the missus doesn't get suspicious."

"Ah! I'm an alibi."

"Well, no. But I was over at the hardware store buying saddle soap and some liniment – "

I held up a hand. "I want you to stop and think about what you just said."

"What? I was at the hardware store."

"Saddle soap and liniment. You're so...*country* sometimes."

"Oh, big city boy! Do you want to hear my story or not?"

"I want to hear your story, Charles," I said, in my best humble voice.

"That's better. So I was at the hardware store and I heard from Paula that you'd said Sandra and Michael – at the bank?"

"Yes, I know who Sandra and Michael are."

"Well, you'd said they were an item and I wanted to know your sources."

"Is this going to be a lecture about telling tales out of school?" I asked.

"No, but Sandra's parents'll hear about it, and I thought I'd set you right, because Leanne is talking about them. But everyone else says that Nolan's sister says she never saw anyone kissing on the loading dock."

"Oh, I heard it was the safety-deposit vault."

"See? My point is, Nolan's sister doesn't like the way Sandra's treating Nolan, so she might not have told the whole truth."

"Sandra and *Nolan*?" I asked, surprised.

"That's only what I hear."

"But I always thought he was..." I hesitated.

"Was what?"

"Well, you know. Closeted."

"Come again now?"

"I'm sure we young whippersnappers didn't invent homosexuality, Charles."

"Oh! Nolan, do you think?" he asked.

"It's only a personal opinion," I said hurriedly, just realizing that the religious leader of Low Ferry might not be the person to speak to about such matters.

"He *was* in the Navy..." Charles looked thoughtful.

"Now that kind of thinking is why people say we're backwards out in the country," I said, shaking a finger at him. "Don't give him any trouble, Charles."

He shrugged. "None of my business unless he wants to tell me about it himself. Anyway, Michael's not going to boast about seeing Sandra but he's probably not going to deny it if someone asks him, even if it isn't true. I'd be careful who I tell."

"I'm going to need a chart for this soon," I remarked.

"Well, make sure you take a poll on Nolan." He winked.

"I'm not going to poll Low Ferry about Nolan's sex life," I retorted. "You sure Nolan's sister isn't just embarrassed she told Leanne and Leanne told the whole world?"

"It's possible. You'll keep your ear to the ground, won't you?" he asked.

"Of course. I promise you'll be the first one I tell if I find out Leanne's lying."

"Then I'll take my leave," he said, putting his hat back on. "See you on Sunday?"

"See me sleeping in on Sunday."

"Heathen."

"Evangelist. Have a nice day!" I called after him as he left. I returned to the back room, and to my dilemma.

I was sure that plenty of people in Low Ferry would be interested in erotic books, but none of them would admit to it and certainly none of them would ever come to Dusk Books asking for them. There were three or four people in town I could mention them to, on the sly, but something like that could give all kinds of wrong impressions. Besides, some bookstore out there, probably in Chicago, was looking for them.

I could call the supplier, but that would be an endless parade of *please hold* and *press four for more options*. I could package them up and ship them back, but I didn't want to pay postage for someone else's mistake.

Or...I could call Marjorie. She knew everything. She'd know exactly who to talk to, and any excuse to call Marjorie was a good one.

"Eighth Rare Books, Marj speaking," she answered, when I called. I heard the clacking of her pencil against her newspaper in the background.

"Marjorie, this is the exile," I said.

"Christopher!" she exclaimed, sounding pleased.

"Country mouse reporting in."

"Why do you break an old woman's heart, Christopher? I haven't heard from you in weeks," she said.

"*Mea culpa*, Marj. I've been busy."

"So, you've had two whole customers this week, you don't have time for me?"

"Three," I said.

"Oh, well, never mind then," she answered with a chuckle. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"You know me, I'm always fine. And you? Eighth Rare is thriving?"

"Christopher, I've been running this store for thirty years. If it failed now it wouldn't be my fault."

"What if a Borders moved in across the street?"

"Wouldn't matter," she sniffed. I could see her doing it: nose wrinkled, hair in its tidy white braid, head bowed to look over her glasses at the object of her scorn (real or imagined). "I don't sell to the Borders crowd. My books don't smell like boiled coffee and cardboard pastries."

"I hear they sell aromatherapy kits now," I teased.

"Bite your tongue."

"You could always move out here with me and live the simple life."

"No thank you, dear, I'd know I was old, then."

"I'm not old, and I live here."

"You are older than you know, Christopher. Anyway, what's on your mind? It's early for a social call."

"I have a botched delivery," I sighed.

"Oh?"

"They sent me porn, Marjorie."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

"What were you trying to get, Christopher?"

"True Crime. And it's not funny," I added, as she laughed.

"Of course not, sweetheart. We wouldn't want your patrons' delicate eyes damaged by the concept of free sexual expression." Marjorie came of age in the sixties. "What kind of pornography?"

"Literotica anthologies. Classy stuff, but not really our bag here in Low Ferry, prime export corn and dairy, population six hundred and thirty-four."

"It was six hundred and thirty-two the last time you called."

"The twins are due in a few months, I'm anticipating the jump."

"Oh my *god*, Christopher. Nothing ever happens there, does it? You can recalculate your population based on one pregnancy."

"It's been three years, Marj, you should be used to me telling you these things by now."

"And yet," she said drily. "All right. True Crime, you said? I think Anna said she got a bad shipment yesterday."

"Anna, Anna...owns the Lesbian bookstore on Clark?" I tried.

"As if there's only one? And no, she has a little place out in Oak Park. Bored suburbanites and horny teenagers," she said. "Yes, here we go...I meant to call about that. Tell you what, let me talk to Gary in shipping, he'll give you both postage credits and you can just ship them to each other. Do you know Anna? She's great. Pack up the erotica and I'll have her call and give you her address. Do you have an address, or should I just have her ship it to Nowhere, Illinois?"

"You're a gem, Marj," I said, ignoring the jibe. She knew my address, because she'd mocked me for months over it – Christopher Dusk, Dusk Books, Main Street, Low Ferry. "I owe you."

"I know. Which reminds me," she said, "some of your friends came by to see me yesterday."

I was sure I'd heard her wrong, and also that she wouldn't spring that kind of thing on me. "What?"

"The crowd you ran with here. They come by sometimes." Well, wrong on both counts. "They always buy something. I suppose that's their price for information."

"They ask you about me?" I asked.

"No, they ask me about the economic status of Japan. Yes, about you."

I fingered the edge of the leather cover for Jacob's father's book. "What do they say?"

"They want to know how you are."

"Please don't lie. I'm not stupid, Marj."

"Nobody said you were, sweetheart," she replied, which made me feel like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum. "They ask about you, they say you should come back. They think three years is more than enough time to find yourself or whatever it is you're doing in the boondocks."

"And what do you reply?"

"That they should tell you, not me. Do they ever call you?"

"No, not really."

"Not 'really'?"

"Well," I said, wishing I hadn't asked her not to lie to me, "even in the boondocks we have caller ID. I don't pick up, usually."

She sighed. "Christopher."

"Because they probably *would* say that to me, and I don't want people to tell me I'm an idiot on some kind of...Kerouacian quest. Bad enough they think it."

She was quiet.

"Marjorie?" I asked.

"Did you just say *Kerouacian*?"

"Marj!"

"Christopher, child of my heart," she said. "I'm not going to carry messages back and forth for your friends. All I'm saying is that they come here and ask about you, and I thought you'd like to know."

"Do you agree with them?"

"I don't pretend to know whether I should. I think you could come back. If you wanted. You know I'd help you."

"And do what?" I asked, breathing deeply to calm myself.

"What do you do there? Sell books, do some binding on the side. There are a few places around here that are looking for someone to buy them out."

"Not in the city. It's too cutthroat there," I hedged.

"Big fish in a little pond, eh?" she asked.

"Something like that."

"Well, the offer stands, there's no expiration date. I won't mention it again. Do you suppose they ever read the books they buy from me?" she added lightly.

"They might. I should go, Marj."

"Ah yes. Your bustling clientele." She wasn't fooled for a minute. "I'll have Anna send you the address for the naughty books. Though if I were you I'd consider nailing some of the interesting parts to the church door."

Marjorie always knows how to end a conversation on a high note.

"I knew you'd come through for me, Marj. Have a good day."

"Look after yourself, Christopher. Bye," and she hung up.

I tossed the phone back in its cradle and leaned against the counter, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Headache coming on – and no doubt more upset than was good for me. Not Marjorie's fault.

My city friends probably weren't reading the books they bought from her. Nobody has enough time in a city to do everything, after all, so

we'd always divided up our duties, and reading had been my job. The friends I'd had in the city might attend a lecture with me or ask my opinion about a book, but they didn't read much. To be fair, I didn't listen to a lot of music or pay any attention to fashion or politics, outside of what they told me over dinner or cocktails or brunch. Splitting up our culture saved our own most precious resource in the city: time.

The thing is, time is thick on the ground in small towns, where there's so much less need for meticulous expertise. There were no readings, nightclubs, or jazz concerts in Low Ferry. That makes it sound boring, but I didn't care. There's something to be said for having the time in which to become truly experienced in something, instead of merely knowing a little about everything, passed on second-hand.

In the end, the friends I'd had in the city didn't have much in common with me, or even with each other. What we'd shared there was just...geography.

"Mr. Dusk! Mr. Dusk!"

They never show up during business hours.

I could have happily stayed curled up in my chair, working on the *Farmer's Guide*, except that the lights were on in my apartment which meant people knew I was there. The shop technically closes at five, but when you live where you work there's always the hazard of latecomers. You can't just ignore people when everyone in town knows you.

The boy was calling up from the street, and when I glanced out the window I saw he was standing on the back of a pickup truck full of wood, with stocky young Phillip MacKenzie at the wheel.

He saw my face at the window and gave me a broad grin and two thumbs up, then bent to speak to Phillip through the window. The truck made a lurching turn and pulled around the building next door, heading for the little loading alley in back of my place.

"You're our last delivery today," the boy said, hauling piles of logs from the back of the truck's bed to the gate, where Phillip was tossing them into a rough pile under the eaves. "You want 'em here?"

"Sure," I said, emerging barefoot onto the porch. "Hi, Phil."

"Christopher," Phillip said, nodding to me as he worked.

"How's business?"

Phillip grinned. "Kid here's a natural salesman."

"Hard work, splitting all this?"

"Beats kicking cows around the pasture."

"I can imagine. Must keep you busy though," I observed.

"Yes sir. Would have been here sooner but we had to drive out to The Pines and you know the roads ain't great."

"Lucas bought some wood from you, then?"

"Yep," the boy interrupted. "Gave him a good deal too."

"Oh?"

"Sold him the other half-cord I got coming," he said. "Did another deal like yours. He's gonna tutor me."

"Who, Lucas?" I asked, baffled. "Is he a teacher?"

"No, but he knows a lot. I said, what'll you gimme for the wood, and he said he didn't have much money on him, and I said he could do my homework for me, as a joke."

I chuckled. "I bet he took that well."

"Well, he said he'd show me how to do it myself. He knows a lot," the boy added. "About history and stuff."

"Aren't you interested in history?" I asked.

"Only *interesting* history," the boy replied.

"Oh, well, interesting history," I agreed, passing a tip to Phillip, who doffed his ball cap and climbed back into the truck, dusting splinters and wood chips off his thick work-gloves. I circled around to the truck's gate and crooked my finger at the boy until he crouched at the edge and regarded me with sharp dark eyes, strange under his pale hair.

"What's he like around you?" I asked. "Lucas, I mean."

"What do you mean, like?" the boy asked back.

"You know. Is he shy? He seems shy around most people."

"Nope, not really. Trick is not to care if he is," the boy replied.

"Why would I care?"

The boy beamed. "Exactly. See you 'round, Mr. Dusk. Give you my invoice tomorrow!"

I stepped back to let the truck pull out into the alley, then went out to the front to watch it pull away, the boy perched on a pile of tarps in the back. Across the street, the cafe was looking interestingly busy, and I hadn't really eaten dinner, so I put on some shoes and ran over. Besides, I wanted to see if anyone else had heard gossip about Lucas.

Instead, when I stepped inside the bustling restaurant, I found Lucas himself. He was seated at the window table I usually claimed, studying a menu while the rest of the cafe studied him. He looked jumpy, and he was at my table, so I took a menu from the rack near the door and rested my hand on the chair across from him.

"Evening," I said. He looked up. "Mind if I sit down? Room's a little scarce right now."

"Oh, well, no – I don't mind," he replied, inching backwards, as if his legs might be taking up too much room under the table. "Are you sure?"

"That I want dinner? Yes," I said, giving him a friendly smile. "I'm pretty sociable, but if you want me to leave I can."

"No, I don't mind. I'm not much of a conversationalist," he said.

"You don't have to be. I talk enough for both of us."

"Seems everyone here does," he murmured, bending back to his menu. "What do you talk about?"

"Oh, farm business and the weather, Charles's Sunday sermon, whatever's been featured in the magazines this month. Patching leaky roofs," I said, and he smiled faintly.

"*You* eat alone, though, sometimes," he said. "I've seen you. With a book. And people come up to talk to you."

"Well, I've lived here for a while, and I own the only source of printed material for miles around," I answered, as Carmen appeared at my elbow with two glasses of water. Around us, people were watching even more intently than they had been, and I felt a certain amount of pride in being the one to actually go and sit with Lucas.

"Know what you want yet?" Carmen asked, looking from me to Lucas and back again. "Dinner's on me, Christopher. Payback for Clara's book."

"Hope she likes it," I said, as Lucas practically hid behind the menu.

"She loves it. I think because she stole it."

"Better curb that young, or she'll be boosting cars before you know it."

"Ah, glory days," Carmen winked. "Takes after me."

"Then she'll do fine. Have you tried the soup, Lucas?" I asked. He flicked his eyes up.

"No, not yet."

"It's good tonight, split-pea with ham," Carmen said.

"I think I'll have that," I told her.

"And for you, hon?" she asked, turning to Lucas.

"Um," he stammered. "Soup too please. Thank you. Thank you," he repeated, when she took his menu. She gave him a small smile, then gave me a *what the hell?* look and walked off.

"I always worry I won't like something when I come here, and the cook will notice and be offended," Lucas said. "I've seen him, I think he lives on the road I take into town."

"If it helps, he's used to people insulting his food. We all tease him about it," I said. "That's the price you pay for living in a little place like this. It's hard to be anonymous. Everyone learns what you like and dislike, after a while."

"I hadn't thought about that when I moved here. You haven't lived here always."

"No. Three years."

"Why'd you move here?" he asked, then blushed. "If I can ask."

"I needed a break," I said, and sipped my water so I wouldn't have to talk about it further. He just watched me, a growing desperation in his eyes to fill the silence. I set my glass down.

"Listen, we don't have to talk," I said. "Ever eaten dinner with a farmer? Total silence. I'm used to it."

Relief filled his face. "Is it that easy?"

"Do you mind if I talk?"

"No, not at all."

"Good," I smiled, and then immediately came up blank with anything to say. He glanced out the window, and I grasped the first thing that came into my head. "It's starting to cool down out. Won't be long until winter, this year. Should have snow before Halloween."

"I look forward to it. The start of winter, I mean," Lucas said. "Thank you," he said again, as Carmen put two bowls of soup down in front of us and added a dish of fresh hot rolls. He buttered one neatly, not spilling a crumb, while I dug into the soup.

"So you like long winters?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied eagerly, then stammered a little. "I like snow."

"You won't like it after three months of it," I predicted.

"That's what they always say in the city, too. I don't like storms," he added, making spirals with the back of his spoon in his soup.

"Exciting, though."

He looked up and a rueful look crossed his face so quickly I nearly missed it. "They don't say *that* in the city."

"It's quieter here. Less excitement to begin with. You must like quiet, though, living all the way out at The Pines."

"It's all right. I've only ever lived in apartments," he said, then twisted a scrap of bread nervously, licking his lips as if he weren't certain he wanted to continue. "Houses just seem vulnerable after living in a building with other people all your life. You're so much more of a target."

"A *target*?" I asked, laughing a little.

"Well, you know. In an apartment building, if someone breaks in, they might pick someone else's apartment to rob. If someone breaks into a house, it's just you." He hesitated. "Not that I want someone, I mean anyone, to be robbed..."

"You *have* lived in the city too long," I said. "The last theft we had was – oh, two years ago, someone stole a few bicycles Paula was selling."

"Did she catch them?"

"No – we guess it was an out-of-towner."

He laughed a little. "So the last theft you had was two years ago and it wasn't even someone who lives here?"

"I have a theory if you want to hear it."

He gestured with his spoon, so I continued.

"Small towns have a maximum capacity. The ratio of people to jobs is pretty steady – I didn't even open a new bookstore, just renamed the old one. When there are more people than the town can support, some go away. Chicago's a big temptation. People only steal when they can't afford something, or when they're discontented and think whatever they steal is going to make them happier."

"And everyone's already happy here?" He looked skeptical.

"Well, if they aren't, they think it's the town's fault and they leave. It's not perfect, but on the whole, yes. I think people are happy here."

"You left the city," he said. Then he winced, as if at his own stupidity.

"So did you. But that's two people in three years fighting the flow, and ten or fifteen going the other direction. Happy people don't steal bicycles. Unhappy people leave, if they can. Besides, nobody in this town is stupid enough to do that, everyone would notice they had a new bike. But if you really want to feel safe you could get a dog."

"I could," he agreed, and then lapsed into silence.

"I hear you bought some firewood," I said, to change the subject. "That boy's been selling it all over town, on commission from MacKenzie. Says you offered to tutor him for it."

"It seemed fair."

"You won't mind?"

"It gets me into town. He seems smart. He wouldn't really take no for an answer."

I laughed and scraped up some soup with a bit of bread. "He's a good salesman."

"Yeah," he said, still drawing odd patterns in his soup, only occasionally taking a bite. "They gave me a ride in, too."

"Charge you for it?" I asked. He smiled.

"No, but I'll have to get back again under my own power. I don't mind."

We were quiet for a while, his eyes flicking up to my face every so often, apparently to see if I really was fine with the silence. I gave him a reassuring look and kept eating.

"I saw you working in the store, the other day," he blurted at last. "You were sewing a book."

"Oh yes – Jacob, he's one of the farmers, he brought me a book to be repaired. It's a gift for his dad. I had to restitch some of the sections into the text block."

"Do you do that kind of thing a lot?" he asked.

"Well, not out here. I've taken a few classes in it."

He gave me an odd-half smile. "So you're – you're a craftsman."

I laughed. "I wouldn't go that far. I'm better at repair than binding new, I never get the pages cut right. But I can fix what's broken, usually."

He nodded, considering this, and fell silent once more.

It was dark by the time we'd finished. The wind, hot during the day, was turning sharp. Lucas eventually paid and left me to my coffee, turning his coat-collar up as he set out for The Pines. I lingered, watching through the window as he headed south. About five minutes after he disappeared, Elaine – older sister of Nolan, and therefore a secondary spoke in the gossip wheel at the moment – slid into the chair Lucas had left.

"Hi Elaine," I said. "How's your evening?"

"Oh fine, fine. Sip of your coffee?"

I offered it to her and she drank from the other side of the cup, leaving faint lipstick marks.

"How's yours?" she added, passing it back.

"Very interesting. Had some wood delivered. They drop any off at your place?"

"Nah, we cut our own this year," she said. "Saw Phil gave that new man a ride into town."

"Lucas? Well, it's a long walk in from The Pines," I said.

"Who is he?" she asked. "He's nobody's relation in town."

"I wasn't when I moved here, either," I pointed out.

"But you were buying Ferry Books, that's almost like being family. Why's he here?"

"Couldn't say," I said, grinning a little into my coffee.

"Bet you could, Christopher. You had dinner with him, didn't you? Is he a friend of yours?"

I glanced around. People at nearby tables were ducking their heads slightly – subtly listening in. When a village regular has dinner with a mysterious stranger, it's almost as good as television.

"He bought a book from me about a week ago," I said. "No, not quite that long, since Jacob brought me his dad's old *Farmer's Guide* to be rebound right after that – you didn't hear that, though, because it's a birthday present – and that was –"

"Christopher!" she said, annoyed.

"Elaine, if you're going to pump me for information, at least give me a chance to enjoy myself a little at your expense," I replied. She looked momentarily abashed. "I don't know much about him. He moved out to The Pines from Chicago, he's pretty good with his hands but doesn't know much about carpentry, and he's shy. Leave him alone – he won't like being talked about."

"He'll just have to get used to it," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "Do me a favor. Tell everyone who asks you that Lucas at The Pines is a stranger from Chicago and if anyone starts rumors about him I'll write scurrilous anonymous editorial letters to the *Ferryman* libeling them."

Elaine smiled. "Point taken. Come have dinner at our place sometime, Nolan says you eat too much cafe food."

"I'll take you up on that. G'night, Elaine. *Goodnight, Low Ferry*," I added loudly, and several people turned back to their dinners without a hint of shame in their faces.

Jacob came to pick up his father's re-bound copy of the *Farmer's Guide* four days later, when the glue was barely dry on the binding. He arrived at a decent hour this time, after his deliveries, and stayed to chat for a while.

"Hear you had dinner with the new man," he said, while I signed for a package delivery and set the small box aside.

"I invited myself," I replied. "I've since eaten lunch with Charles and made plans to have dinner tomorrow night with Elaine's brood."

"Grumpy," Jacob grinned. "Didn't mean anything by it, Christopher. Just curious like everyone."

"Yes, well – hey! *Hey!*" I said, as several children raced into the shop, bringing a breeze and a flurry of dead leaves with them. "Backpacks by the counter!"

Jacob chuckled as the children trooped back to the counter and dropped their bags, digging in them for grubby notebooks and shucking

their coats and hats on top. I went to the workbench to retrieve the *Farmer's Guide* and presented it to him while the children bunched around the comics rack or settled at the tables. He smoothed a callused hand over the embossed leather admiringly.

"Looks brand new," he said, opening it. "Dad'll think I threw his old one out till he sees the family page. How'd you do it?"

"A lot of paste," I said. "Careful, the cover's still curing. Let me wrap it up for you."

"Sure all I owe you's some cheese?" he asked, as I carefully tied the book up in brown paper and twine.

"It's really really good cheese," I repeated.

"Got myself a bargain, then. Thanks," he said, holding up the paper-wrapped book. "See ya round, Christopher."

I turned around to watch the children, who were still arguing by the comic books, though most of them would probably settle down in a little while and start at least pretending to do their homework. Some were avoiding chores at home, and others had parents who worked late and wanted them under a watchful eye, so they spent plenty of afternoons in the store. I didn't mind – they amused themselves, worked, and wrestled a little when they thought I couldn't see. Their parents were loyal customers and it kept the kids out of trouble, at least.

The boy was there that day too, though he wasn't always. If he was from the outlying farms, he was old enough to be considered a paid farmhand, doing any odd jobs his parents couldn't. He probably wanted to put them off as long as possible. I hoped he had started his tutoring with Lucas, since it seemed like it would be good for both of them. Farmers are friendly but quiet, and I thought Lucas would fit comfortably with people who didn't see the need to talk much.

When most of the kids were finally ready to leave, he seemed to hang back – stood behind the others, paid last, and insisted on going over the "book" I'd been keeping of his credit, checking the deductions for comic books against the amount I would have been charged for the firewood. By the time he'd satisfied himself, most of his friends were already in their coats, hopping up and down impatiently by the door.

"Come on, come on!" one of them ordered, as the boy placidly signed off on the new deduction and packed his new comic books away into his bag.

"Are you coming or not?" another yelled.

"Keep your pants on! This is *business*."

"He's waiting for his booooyfriend," one girl sing-songed.

"You want to go? Go," I said. "Go on, shoo. There's no teasing in my shop."

"Doesn't matter," the boy said, as they trudged out. "They were only playing."

"So, who are you waiting for?" I asked, leaning on the counter.

"Lucas, duh," he said. "They're just jealous. He's really cool. Have you seen him?"

"Not today, but he ought to be here soon if he's coming at all," I answered. The boy's face brightened. "Have you started your tutoring with him?"

"Twice a week. He said he'd meet me here today."

"Enjoying it?"

He gave me an oddly mature look. "Well...some of it's confusing."

"Such as?"

"History." He set his bag down and leaned against my counter, hands shoved in his pockets. "See, Mr. Blake – he's the history teacher – "

"I know," I said. "He likes model trains. He buys books on electrical engineering sometimes."

"Yeah, him. He says you have to learn the dates and the names and things, and then you know History."

It wasn't an unusual sentiment for lower-school history, especially out in the country. I didn't like Blake, but it wasn't good to meddle in the boy's opinion of him. He still had to learn from him, after all.

"And Lucas disagrees?" I asked.

"He says History is always happening," the boy complained. "And you can't really know anything about an Event until you know why it happened, which is a bunch of other Events and people and places and stuff. It makes my head hurt."

"Good," said a new voice. Lucas, who must have passed the rest of the boy's classmates on his way up the walk, was standing in the doorway. Now he stepped inside and shut the door. "Shows you're using it."

"Hi," the boy said.

"Hi. Hi, Christopher," he added quickly.

"Afternoon," I said. "We were just talking about your tutoring. How's the roof?"

"Sealed tight," he replied, as he moved to his favorite defensive position behind the cookbooks. From there he could see the doorway and out through the window, but nobody in the shop could see him unless they sat in the chairs at the front. I resumed my conversation with the boy, who had settled in a chair and was watching Lucas while trying to pretend like he wasn't.

"Which theory do you like?" I asked the boy.

"Theory?" he asked.

"Of history."

"Um." His eyes darted to Lucas. "I dunno. Memorizing a bunch of names seems a lot easier."

"Not according to your grades, I bet," I said. He grinned.

"It's not as much *fun*," he said.

"Admitting history is fun? Lucas, what have you done to him?" I called. He put his head around a shelf, smiled at me briefly, and went back to his browsing.

"I guess..." the boy said slowly, "I mean. I've got to learn the names and dates for school. So I might as well do that. But I can remember them if I know other stuff about them, you know? They're more real."

"They're stories," I agreed.

"Yeah."

"Does Lucas like history?" I asked mischievously.

"I think so," the boy answered.

"What kind?"

"I can hear you," Lucas called from the back, where he was adventuring into Horror and True Crime.

"Well, *you* won't talk," I answered. That earned me a soft laugh as he emerged into an aisle, still keeping the edge of a shelf between himself and the open space around the counter.

"I like stories," he said. "I don't mind if the books aren't completely true. Lies are usually more interesting."

"Try telling Mr. Blake that," the boy muttered.

"Which reminds me that we should go," Lucas told him, tipping his head at the doorway. "Come on."

"Man," the boy whined, but stood and shouldered his bag. "Where're we going?"

"Out to the river."

"What *for*?"

"What do you think?"

"Biology class," the boy said. "I already know about nature."

"Good. Now you'll know more. See you, Christopher," he added.

"You know where to find me," I said gesturing around the shop.

Lucas nodded to me and then almost ran into the door before fumbling it open. He recovered badly and stepped back to let the boy open it before following him through. I stayed, surveying the shop and thinking about what Lucas had said.

I'm not so blind to my own nature that I can't admit impure motives. Information is power in a little town, and I was a keeper of information. As much as I didn't want people talking about Lucas, that made the tidbits I could get out of him myself all the more valuable.

But also I just plain...wanted him to like me. I liked seeing him in my shop. The only way I really knew to make people like me was to give them information. There's a reason I sell books for a living.

I went into the back room and picked up a trade catalog, the kind I received a half-dozen times a year from various publishers as an encouragement to order their wares – the internet might be the future, but the literary world has been slow to attach and anyway we all like something we can hold in our hands.

I opened it and began paging through it, waiting for something to catch my eye. When it did, I smiled and set down the catalog to make a phone call.

THREE

IT WASN'T LONG before Low Ferry was in the full grip of autumn weather. A few days after Jacob's father's birthday we even lost power briefly. High winds, probably; they sometimes knocked down wires or blew debris into the energy transformer. I brought my sleeping bag out from the closet and spread it on a narrow camp-pallet near the fireplace, then lit a fire and settled down to sleep in the glow of its warmth. It wasn't the first time I'd done it, and certainly wouldn't be the last.

I almost thought the winter had begun, then. It was definitely coming, but the windstorm wasn't quite the start of it. When the power came on the next morning it was to a heavy blanket of humidity lying on the town, making everyone wish for rain to break it up. As days passed we could feel the pressure building slowly, especially those who had lived in Low Ferry a long time. It was the last calm before what promised to be a terrific thunderstorm, and it wasn't a true calm at all.

Not even the children stopped at Dusk Books anymore. Being natives of Low Ferry, they knew instinctively what was in the air and they didn't want to be caught out in the storm whenever it finally hit. Those that could go home did, and those whose parents didn't want them home alone found friends to spend their afternoons with. Once in a while I caught the boy glancing at Dusk Books as he passed, but usually he was either hurrying on his way alone or in the middle of a knot of noisy fellow-students.

I wondered how his lessons were going and whether he was causing trouble in school yet because of his growing awareness that teachers did not know everything. I wondered how the walk from The Pines, along the rutted dirt road, was treating Lucas. It was hard to go outside when the air was too thick to breathe.

The humidity lasted past three days, then four and five, stretching for a full week. Tempers ran short. The owner of the grocery store punched Ron at the cafe, in a matter of honor apparently concerning the price of milk, and a couple of farmers fired up old land feuds. Thankfully none of them involved rifles, just sharp remarks and one slightly vandalized tractor, before Charles waded in and knocked a few heads together.

Paula fired her store assistant and the poor young man's mother came around and shouted at her until they were both hoarse and I had to intercede. Paula and I sat and drank coffee in my store and talked about how some people in Low Ferry weren't as safe as we were – how

sometimes kids were the ones working to support the family when the crop hadn't been good. She grudgingly gave him his job back, but they snapped and snarled at each other continually. I privately thought an air-conditioner would have solved most of their problems.

Nolan and Michael got into some kind of fight, too – some said over the fickle Sandra, some said because Michael was saying nasty things about Nolan's sister. Apparently there was a subsection of the town that thought Michael might be dating said sister. Sandra seemed to keep out of it, which didn't always give townfolk a good opinion of her, either.

People faithfully brought me the news, and Charles just as faithfully showed up a few days after I'd heard it to tell me why I shouldn't tell anyone any of it. Paula commented on every rumor with a dry wit that made her brief visits to the shop a pleasure.

The boy actually came into my bookshop on a Saturday, which was a miracle in itself, and as he browsed the racks he told me that all his teachers were arguing with each other over matters of discipline. He bought nine comic books.

"Trying to corner the market?" I asked, as he laid the thick stack of comics on my counter. "The investment isn't worth it, y'know. Comic books are a renewable resource."

"Everyone gave me money," he said, producing the entire amount in small change.

"Do you want to pay with that...wealth, or keep it and put the whole amount on your tab?"

"It's not a tab," he said, rolling his eyes. "It's credit."

"Sorry. And?"

"Take the quarters, I'm not lugging them all around."

"Much obliged," I informed him, and counted it out into the cash register while he straightened the comics and reached across to grab a plastic bag from my counter.

"Why are you acting as everyone's agent today?" I continued, studying the grime left on my fingertips by the change.

"Gonna storm soon, now," he said, while I rummaged for some clean-wipes stolen from the cafe the last time they did a barbecue. "Everyone's going to Neil's house."

I smiled. "Storm party?"

"Mhm. They got a generator."

"What luxury. Hot baths for all."

"Okay," he said doubtfully, not quite old enough yet to think hot water was more important than electric light for comic book reading.

There was a deafening crash of thunder outside. The boy tucked the comics under his coat.

"That's it," he said excitedly.

"Go on. Say hello to everyone for me."

He ran out and nearly collided with Lucas, who was coming up the walk to the door. With a hasty apology the boy backed up and continued on his way.

"If you come in, be prepared to stay," I said, turning to the comic books and straightening them slightly.

"Oh? Why's that?" Lucas asked, closing the door behind him.

"Didn't you hear the thunder?" I asked. "The storm's about to break."

"Is it?" he said, turning to gaze out the glass door. "Should I have stayed home?"

"Well, lightning strikes the tallest thing around. If you walk home, you'll take your life in your hands."

"Funny expression, isn't it?" he observed, shoving his hands in his pockets. He was staring at the new-release shelves across the aisle from my counter. "Who wouldn't want their life in their hands? Why do we think that's something we ought to consider dangerous?"

I looked at him, surprised. Talkative *and* philosophical.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I drop things all the time," I managed, sitting down behind the counter and counting my receipts. "Did you want something?"

"No, I – just felt like a walk. Will it be a bad storm?"

Thunder rolled again. He looked startled.

"There's your answer."

He walked to the door and looked out again. A bolt of lightning broke the sky. "I always thought lightning came before thunder..."

"Wait," I said, without looking up. The crack and boom came just after I said it. A second later, the rain started.

"Will it last long?" he asked, hurrying away from the door.

"Don't know. Probably not many in town do," I said.

"What about the weathermen? The hotel down the road has a television in its bar."

"It's all from Chicago, though. Does it really matter?" I asked. He hesitated.

"No, I guess not." He looked at me curiously. "It's just I thought that if it were raining I should know for how long."

"City thinking. You were raised there, weren't you?"

He nodded. "Parents're still there. Dad teaches. Mom's retired, she used to sell...things."

"Things?" I repeated, curious.

"I never paid much attention."

"Do you get to see them much?"

"No," he said briefly. "Maybe I should stay in town tonight."

"Well, if you really want to know, you could go down to the hotel and check the TV, like you said. I don't have one. Cafe might have the radio going."

"I wonder what they did before weathermen," he said, still staring out at the rain.

"Oh, there were ways. Red skies at morning, sailors take warning, that kind of thing. That reminds me, I found something I thought you'd like."

He looked at me uneasily. I held up a finger and ducked into the store-room, digging on the shelves to find the book I'd stashed there. It had come with the last mail delivery before the storm, and there probably wouldn't be another for a while if the weather continued. They'd sent it free as a sample after I requested it, which was a bonus.

"It just came in," I said. "I remember that you liked the high school version, but they cut a lot of the interesting parts out. This is Ovid's unexpurgated *Metamorphoses* with concordance and notes by a translator. The Latin is on one side, see, with the translation on the other."

I offered it to him and he craned his neck, studying it. "Do – do you read Latin?" he asked.

"No, but – "

"Oh, sorry – "

" – I think it looks nice," I finished with a smile, over his unnecessary apology.

He studied it for a minute, shifting with discomfort at having interrupted me. "You're right, it does."

"Take it home and read it, see what you think," I said. "You don't have to keep it if you don't like it."

He frowned. "No, I'm sure I will – thank you," he said, taking out his wallet without even looking at the price. I felt a little proud, and then a little foolish for feeling so proud. "And a copy of the golf magazine, please."

"Of course." I rang up the cost of the magazine. "Book's free, it was a publisher's sample. I didn't have you marked down as a golfer, Lucas."

"I like the drawings of the greens. May I have a bag? No, wait," he said, a sudden amused look in his eye. "Wrap them in brown paper instead."

I raised an eyebrow, but he bit his lip at that so I didn't pursue it any further. I had brown paper below the counter and it was a moment's work to wrap it, tie it with twine, and present it to him. With a little thought, I understand why he wanted it wrapped – then, when he finally did get home, he'd have the pleasure of unwrapping a package for himself.

"Do you want – will you come eat with me?" he asked as I presented it to him. I shook my head.

"I just ate, and the rain's bound to bring people in. They'll want reading material while they wait out the storm," I said, gesturing to his book.

"Oh," he said, looking a little crestfallen. "All right. Can I bring you something, then? Coffee or something?"

"Just make sure you get home all right, or stay in town if it's not safe."

He left just as another bolt of lightning flashed overhead. I saw him stop on the front porch, probably in surprise. He stood there, tall and gangling, with a pack on his back and his parcel under his arm. He was staring up at the sky as if he'd never really seen it before, with such an expression of thrilled wonder that perhaps he really hadn't.

In flat country with no skyscrapers, you take the sky for granted. The same's true in the city, since you can't see enough of it to really understand it. But in that space between times, before you're a resident and after you're a stranger, everything is new and remarkable. I envied him.

The next day, I opened the shop at seven with a plate of waffles in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. I hadn't even finished breakfast before Lucas returned.

"Didn't go home?" I asked, around a mouthful of food.

"Rain never stopped," he said, jerking his thumb at the wet street outside. His hair was wet too, and the shoulders of his coat.

"Hopefully soon. It looks like it's about blown itself out," I observed. "One benefit of living where you work, the commute is easy."

"You could sell books in your pajamas if you wanted to," he observed.

"I've often considered it, but it's a little too gentleman-of-leisure. I don't want to be the town eccentric." I washed a bite of waffle down with some coffee. "You stayed at the hotel last night?"

"I thought I should," he said. "There's so much I don't know about this place, and I've learned to listen when people warn me."

"It's not a battlefield, Lucas!" I laughed.

"No, but..." He spread his hands. "There are rules for survival everywhere. And they change."

"I like to think I've moved past survival, but I see what you mean. You wouldn't have walked around Chicago at midnight flashing hundred dollar bills."

"Not some parts, anyway."

"At least you weren't a cheerful idiot who went home in an electrical storm and got struck by lightning. Though fate protects fools. Charles told me about this one time..." I trailed off, because he'd ducked behind a shelf. A second later I knew why – there was a creak as Leon, whose farm lay two south from Jacob's, pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"Morning, Leon," I said, turning away from where Lucas was pretending to be absorbed in cookbooks again. "How's things?"

"Muddy," Leon answered sourly. "Can't get a truck through."

"You come in on horseback?"

"Yup. She's stabled in the pastor's garage."

"What can I do for you today?"

"Couple of romance novels for my wife, you know the type," he said, consulting a slip of paper from his pocket. "And...Teen Pulse?"

I lifted an eyebrow. Leon blushed. "It's for our Maureen. Can't fathom sixteen-year-olds."

"They're a mystery to us all," I agreed, crossing to the shelf of romance novels and pulling down some with less visibly lurid covers than

the usual. Leon's wife liked them, but she always insisted she didn't want the Naughty Ones. Which really translated to the fact that she *did* want the naughty ones, she just didn't want the covers to proclaim to her whole family that they were naughty. Bookselling is a delicate art.

"Here you are, and one...Teen Pulse," I said, grabbing a magazine featuring the young hot pop star of the moment from the rack. "Got any news I can pass along?"

"Seen Nona recently?" he asked. I shook my head. "Stopped at Steve Harrison's place on my way in. Nona's starting to show the babies." He cupped his hands in front of his stomach to emphasize it. "Small to be carrying twins, least I think so."

"What's Dr. Kirchner say?" I asked.

"Well, he don't say anything to me directly, naturally, but he told Harrison she oughta be in town if she can when the babies are due."

"Want me to ask around about someone she can stay with?"

"Sure Harrison'd appreciate that," Leon said.

"Consider it done. That's...sixteen-fifty even for the books."

He paid with a crisp twenty-dollar bill, glancing out the window as he did so. "Nasty weather. Snow won't be far behind all this."

"No, I don't suppose it will. You see Nona or Steve, tell them I'm looking around," I replied. "Have a nice day, Leon. Stay dry."

"Look after yourself," he replied. He zipped the bag of books into his coat and doffed his hat as he left.

I pretended to be distracted by tidying the counter until Lucas emerged.

"They're really friendly, you know," I said, when he'd relaxed a little. "Everyone in Low Ferry is. We're nice people."

"Thought I saw a book I wanted," he said sheepishly. I let the fiction pass. "The guy at the hotel gave me some good advice about the storm when I checked in last night, though."

I glanced up. He looked wistful. I wondered what it had cost him to ask a stranger about the weather.

"He said if I were ever in an open field in a storm I should lie down in a low part so that I wouldn't attract the lightning, but not so low that it might flood if it rained for too long. Although someone else said that anyone struck by lightning is a natural dowser and can see ghosts." He laughed a little, nervously.

"They believe a lot of strange things out in the country," I said. "Ever seen a dowser work?"

"No, but I'd like to."

"It's not as fascinating as you'd think. Anyway, I can't really approve of that kind of thing," I remarked.

"Really?" he asked, looking interested. "Why not?"

"Well, it seems silly to me. I'm as ignorant as the next man about the mysterious workings of the universe, but I don't believe in crystals and talking to bees and stuff, either."

He smiled a little. "It sounds interesting, though."

"I like sources and facts."

"And now you run a bookstore. Kind of fitting."

"I like to think so."

"I actually came in for something yesterday, then forgot about it," Lucas said awkwardly, into the silence that followed.

"Oh? How can I help you?" I asked, giving him a businesslike look.

"I need to order a book. It's kind of uncommon, I can't even find it online, and the publisher went out of business years ago. I was hoping you knew where I could get a copy."

"Do you mind getting it used?"

"I don't think you'll find it otherwise." He took a sheet of tightly-folded paper out of an inside pocket of his coat and opened it, smoothing out the creases before passing it across the counter to me. There was a title, an author, a date and a publishing house. Enclosed in the paper was a photograph as well. Dark blue, hard-cover, and rather small.

"It has some interesting illustrations," he said, as if to explain away why he needed it. "I used some of them as models when I was in school."

"Models? Are you an artist?" I asked, surprised.

"Not really," he replied. I looked down at his hands and saw that there were calluses on the inside edges of his forefingers and thumbs. The cuticles of his fingertips were discolored with paint stains, and he curled his fingers under his palms before he continued. I pretended I hadn't just been staring.

"I'd like to get it before real winter sets in," he said. "I didn't think I'd need a copy of my own – that's a copy I took out of the library in the city, that photograph – but now I think I will."

"No problem. I'll put the order in today and we'll see if we can't get it before the roads close again," I answered. "Is that the only one? If you order a few at once, it saves on postage."

"Does it?" He looked down at the photograph thoughtfully. "Yes – whoever you buy it from, ask if she has other volumes she'd recommend as companions."

"Or he," I said with a smile.

"Or he," he agreed. A little too quickly, looking back.

"Any price limit?"

"Well, the book shouldn't cost much, it's not that valuable," he said. "That and one or two recommendations. Before postage and whatever fees you charge."

"That's a decent budget," I said, making a note of it on the paper he'd given me. I saw a fleeting grin cross his face before he adjusted the strap of the bag he was carrying on his shoulder.

"Looks like the rain's letting up, doesn't it?" he asked.

I glanced out the window. "Some, yes. Heading home?"

"I should, as long as there's no lightning."

"Dowsing is probably fun, but getting struck by lightning isn't," I agreed. "I'll check around about the book. Want me to call you when I know?"

"No," he said, glancing around. "I'll be in town pretty regularly, I'll check in."

"Your tutoring," I guessed.

"Yeah. He's doing well," he added. "I should go. Thanks, Christopher."

"My pleasure. Safe journey, Lucas."

He smiled a little, thanked me again, and walked out into the street, where the rain was nothing more than a light drizzle and the sun was even threatening to emerge.

"Christopher, I've been thinking," Marjorie said, when I called to ask her about finding the book for Lucas. "I keep planning to lure or berate you back to the city, but so far it hasn't worked. I'm beginning to blame myself for you moving away in the first place."

"Jeez, what brought that on?" I asked. "By the way, thirteen down, yesterday's paper – five letters, pounding tool."

"Anvil. Bad clue."

"Yeah," I said, copying it into the crossword.

"The thing is," she said, as I wrote, "I remember telling you that you should buy a bookstore because you'd only really be happy if you were around books."

"Pretty good advice," I said.

"I think so. But I guess it was some sort of chivalry on your part that you didn't buy one in the city. You know, politeness, moving to the country so we wouldn't be in competition."

I must have been busy gaping at the telephone, because she continued before I could reply.

"I know that's not the *only* reason, but don't you think three years is long enough? Not that I'm in total agreement with your friends, but still. I don't know why you're punishing yourself."

"Punishing myself, Marjorie? Does that sound like me?"

"I don't know, dear," she sighed. "Not normally, but maybe over how things were with your father, those last few years."

"It's not like he disinherited me. I bought Dusk Books with the money he left me."

"Yes, I seem to recall you said he told you not to spend it all in one place. Which, sullen child, you did."

"Not all of it," I argued. Admittedly, it was a weak argument.

"Don't change the subject. You can't bury yourself in obscurity all your life, Christopher."

I gathered my wits and managed a startled laugh. "Marjorie, I'm not punishing myself! I'm happy here. I like the quiet life."

"I don't see how you can be. Don't you starve for stimulation?" she asked. She sounded worried, almost.

"I have books," I said.

There was another sigh on the other end of the telephone line. "You are stubborn, Christopher. You fight life too much."

"Believe me," I said, setting the crossword aside, "fighting is the last thing on my mind."

"It seems like such a wasteland, though."

"You'd be surprised. You should come to see me, Marjorie."

"You know me, Christopher, I never leave the city," she said.

"I'll have to visit you, then. In the meantime, I need a book."

There was an amused snort. "I don't know if I can help you with that, Christopher."

"Very funny. It's for a friend and it's a little new-age, so don't tease me about finally discovering the mystical in life."

"I wouldn't dream of it. What friend is this?"

"He just moved here, used to live in the city. I think you'd like him. He's an odd duck."

"Oh?"

"He's good at hiding. Anyway, he asked if I'd dig up an out-of-print title. You ready?"

"Of course," she said, sounding mildly insulted.

"It's called *Ancient Games*. It's a book about folklore," I added, and gave her the author and publisher. "Plus he'd like recommendations – companion pieces, that kind of thing."

"I think I know who to call. Is there anything else you'd like from the city? I don't think fast food would keep, but then you never know what preservatives they load into it."

I considered for a moment. The city does have some comforts that one misses, having grown up there. Nightclubs at midnight, cheap greasy food stands at three am, and all my accompanying sins came back to haunt me. Loud music, dim bars, the elevated trains, the bitter cold canyon-effect where the winds cut through the gaps between high downtown buildings, chilling any exposed skin to the bone. My apartment building, my office building. The hospital.

"No," I said. "There's nothing else I need."

"So long as you're sure. You only need to call, Christopher."

"Thank you, Marj. Save the receipts and send them on."

I could picture her smiling on the other end of the telephone. "You miss the ephemera. I see. Goodbye."

"Thanks again."

Marjorie had never failed to find a book, and I knew to expect the package in pretty short order. I had thought that would probably be the end of it, since the book Lucas had asked for didn't look particularly expensive. I imagined the next communication from her would be in the form of a letter, shoved inside a book arriving in the mail.

Instead, I had a telephone call two days after I placed the order.

"Christopher, it's Marjorie," she said, the line crackling and popping behind her voice.

"Are you on a payphone?" I asked.

"Worse – my cellular."

"Oh, *Marjorie*."

"I know – I'm ashamed of me too, but I had to crack and get one. Anyway, this isn't the kind of thing I could borrow a phone for."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"Well, I've found a source for the book you're after, but she's...eccentric."

"God, no."

"Yep, one of those. Her whole store *reeks* of cigarette smoke."

"I'm so sorry to send you there, Marj."

"Well, we all make sacrifices for literature. That isn't the problem. I assume your client can handle a little smell."

"He doesn't seem picky," I said. "What's the problem?"

"She won't sell unless she talks to you. She says she doesn't sell to just anyone and that she wants to see what you're made of first. I didn't tell her it was for a customer of yours."

"Thank you. Should I call her?"

"Well, I'm standing outside the shop now – I can put her on the phone with you."

"I'll owe you my soul," I promised her.

"I don't want it second-hand from the devil, you'll have to owe me something else."

I laughed. "Go ahead, put her on."

There was a loud staticky sound, the slam of a door, and then a querulous voice on the other end of the line. "Who is this?"

"Ma'am, my name's Christopher Dusk," I told her, toying with the corner of the cash-register's receipt spool as I spoke. "You've been speaking to my friend Marjorie; I'm the one who asked her for help. You have a copy of a title I'm looking for, I think?"

"I own it," she snapped.

"So Marjorie says," I said, laying on a little bit of a country accent. "I guess you have some reservations about selling?"

"I do! I do, young man," she said. Her voice rose and fell creakily. "What do you want this book for?"

"Well, ma'am, to be honest, I had it recommended to me."

"By who?"

I drummed my fingers on the counter. "An old friend of mine. If you don't want to sell, I won't try and make you. It's just that they said it was a great book, and I wanted to read it myself. I'm a big reader," I said.

"Are you an artist?"

"A...what? No, ma'am, I'm – " I hesitated for only a split second before plunging ahead, "I'm a roofer, ma'am."

"A what?"

"A roofer – you know. Shingles, tar, caulking."

She hemmed to herself thoughtfully, *muh, muh, muh*. I thought of the way Lucas had phrased his request – *ask if she has other volumes she'd recommend as companions*.

As if he knew the trouble I'd run into, and who I'd run into it with.

"If you're worried I can't afford it..." I left the words dangling.

"Money on the spot," the woman said. "Cash."

"Of course – Marjorie will pay for it there and ship it to me. I live outside the city."

"Aha!" she said, as if she'd uncovered a mystery. I was worried for a minute that she'd recant on her offer to sell, but she added, "I knew you didn't sound like a city man."

I was flattered a little by this. "Thank you, ma'am. You wouldn't happen to have any other books that you think would go well with it?"

There was another loud noise, and I was abruptly cut off. I stared down at the phone, then hung up and stared at it some more. It rang again five minutes later.

"Marjorie?" I asked, picking up the receiver.

"Well, whatever you said must have been the right thing – I have book in hand, or rather in bag."

"Did she put any other books in with it?"

"Not unless you count an incredibly aged and *fragrant* bookmark. You must be very fond of this young history scholar."

"He's a customer, that's all."

"Huh. Christopher, this phone is giving me brain cancer as we speak. I'm going to hang up now."

"I'll look forward to that package," I said, and the line went dead for the second time.

Unfortunately, for me and for Lucas, the first storm wasn't an isolated incident. That week there were three more. Even if there hadn't been any lightning, the dirt roads outside of town saturated until they couldn't hold any more water. They turned into mud, then into a kind of filthy swamp, and then into quick-flooding murky pools. The field between The Pines and Low Ferry became a water meadow and soon enough the real roads began to wash out too. The mail was held up for a week solid. It was getting colder and it looked like we'd have snow for Halloween, as I'd thought.

But when the mail did arrive my package came with it, damp on the outside but in relatively good condition. Charles brought it down from the post office, with Carmen on his heels – he'd sweet-talked her into helping him on her day off, while her boyfriend was watching Clara.

"Postmaster said I could play mailman," he said, as he deposited the damp box and sodden letters on my counter. "Thought I'd save him from lugging it around all afternoon."

"He'll have enough trouble when people see things like this," I said, holding up the bundle of wet envelopes. I carefully cut off the rubber band holding them together and peeled them apart – ad, bank statement, ad, ad, credit-card offer, ad.

"Vital affairs of state?" he asked, as I picked up a wrinkled free-coupon booklet by one corner.

"I could save twenty cents on three boxes of pasta," I said, tilting

my head at it. "If I took the train to Chicago and bought them there, anyway. I think I'll pass. You both look like you've been through the wars," I continued, indicating his wet coat and her muddy shoes. "Can I get you something hot to drink?"

"Charles is going to buy me something at the cafe for helping him out," Carmen replied. "But I wanted to see you first. Did you hear about Jacob?"

"No, what about him?" I asked, dropping the worst of the wet mail into the trash.

"Skidded out on the road trying to get into town," Charles said.

"What?" I asked, worried. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine, Kirchner patched him up. Startled more than anything, I think," Charles said. "Nothing broken, but his truck's in the shop. Might be there for a while. Cars aren't cheap to fix."

"Passing the plate on Sunday for him?" I asked, opening the cash register. Charles nodded, and I handed him what I could spare.

"You're a good soul, Christopher," he said, tucking it in a pocket securely.

"Jacob'll be all right," Carmen said. "Moneywise, I mean, in a few months. His oldest is sending some back from the city. But," she added, grinning at me, "he had to borrow Michael's pickup until his is fixed up."

"Don't tell me he found nudie photos of Sandra," I rolled my eyes.

"Carmen," Charles said disapprovingly.

"Come on! Know what he found?" she asked me, ignoring his disapproving look. "He found a coat he swears belongs to Nolan's sister."

"It's not our business," Charles scolded.

"Hang on, how does he know it belongs to Nolan's sister?" I asked. Carmen gave me a dry, cynical look. "Oh my. I'll have to get out that diagram I was working on."

"Carmen, I think it's time we went and got that drink," Charles said.

"Fine, fine. You can catch me up later," she said, following Charles to the door.

"Have a good day. I'll let you know if I hear anything about it," I called after them.

When they were gone, I turned to the box they'd brought, slitting the packing tape and pulling the flaps up. Inside, between layers of tissue paper and packing peanuts, I found a whole host of treasures.

In addition to receipts for purchase and postage, Marjorie had included a couple of handbills for interesting Chicago events, a letter full of literary talk, a bar of toffee chocolate from Vosges, a tote bag with the logo of her shop printed on it, and a bag of biscotti from a nearby bakery I used to visit when I was her customer instead of her protégé. I thought of calling her and joking that the biscotti had gone stale, but instead I unpacked her gifts and sorted through the handful of books she'd sent. She'd thoughtfully wrapped Lucas's book in plastic and stuffed sage and bay leaves between the pages to try and de-smoke it a little. It helped, in a way – now the book smelled like *herbs* and cigarette smoke.

Two more books lay in the bottom, both with sticky-notes on them. One said *Thought you'd like this* and the other *Want your opinion*. I set them aside, however, and picked up the book Lucas had requested: *Ancient Games*. It needed a good airing, and there's a certain guilty pleasure in reading books that someone else bought.

I unwrapped it carefully and studied the plain blue cover, stamped in faded gold with the title and author. It was fairly unimpressive, just another cheap book about myths and superstitions. It was probably inaccurate, considering the date on the imprint was 1944. The art inside was good, though: slightly faded color plates of Egyptian hunting-scene frescoes, black-and-white photographs of old mosaics (*opus vermiculatum*, very delicate work) depicting battles, Greek vases covered in musicians and game-players, Roman paintings of women engaged in some kind of ball game. I could see why an artist would be attracted to them – he'd said he wasn't an artist, but hands don't lie.

The chapters were divided with scholarly neatness: games for play and games in earnest, one on witchcraft and one on "charms". I turned to "games in earnest", but it still seemed vaguely silly to me, the idea of reading serious mythological consequence into dead games. Of course you learn a lot from the games a culture plays, but only about the culture itself. If there is a hidden world beyond ours, old myths and games and playacting are not the likely key to it.

At least, that was what I thought before the winter came.

FOUR

MOST OF THE roads were still flooded when that first shipment of mail made it through, and the walk out to The Pines that day would have been dangerous. There would be slippery mud and the possibility of sinkholes. Even a little quicksand wasn't unknown in the wilder flatlands around Low Ferry. I *wanted* to walk out and deliver Lucas's book personally, but I decided to wait. If the sun stayed out, the road would probably be safe, if not enjoyable, by the following day.

The boy came by that afternoon and confirmed my suspicions.

"It's flooded all the way from the asphalt to the hill," he said, popping gum and leaning on my counter.

"How do you figure that?" I asked, holding out a tissue. He rolled his eyes and spat into it.

"Well, I went out there," he said. "I saw it for myself. Don't think anyone could get through today. Why're you going, anyway?"

"Lucas ordered a book, and it arrived with the mail. I hadn't seen him in a while," I said, tossing the gum out.

"Yeah, he's been stuck up there. Phone's out, too. What's the book?" he asked, before I could ask him how he knew. The outlying farms had probably all lost their connection.

"You'll have to ask him that," I said. "It's his business. You think I should go look in on him?"

"Can't hurt," the boy nodded. "I'll see him Friday anyhow. Maybe he'll show me the book he got if I show him all the stuff I've done. Got an A on my history paper."

"Oh yeah? Good for you. I'm sure he'll be pleased," I said, and the boy beamed. "You buying, or just kibitzing?"

"What's that?"

"Making small talk."

"Kibitzing," he said, testing the word out, then grinned at me as he shouldered his backpack. "Thanks. I gotta go."

I spent that night restless, to be honest. In storm country you learn not to fret when someone's telephone has died or they are otherwise not where they ought to be, but most of the time you also know that they've survived other storms. Lucas, as far as I knew, might never have seen a field of unplowed snow before coming to Low Ferry. Living out in the wilds, in a ramshackle cottage with a disconnected phone and no car, he was not necessarily safe.

I woke early, not that I'd slept very soundly to begin with – it was

more that I finally gave up, around six in the morning, on getting back to sleep. I washed and made myself some breakfast, keeping one eye on the clock. If I was efficient and the roads were safe, I could be at The Pines at a reasonable hour.

After I ate, I sorted out the paperwork from Marjorie, stapling the receipts together and tucking them inside the book. On consideration, I wrapped up the book in brown paper and tied it with twine.

Book prepared and securely tucked in my backpack, I let myself out the back of the store and smiled cheerfully in the cold. There might be snow on the walk home. I like a walk in winter, with the air sharp and the snow crunching under my boots.

It was easy enough going, as long as I stayed on the pavement or the asphalt. Once I reached the dirt road out to The Pines I stuck to the edges, where the ground was firmer and the raised ridges kept me out of puddles that would be dangerous ice by nightfall.

I didn't stray into the field itself, however, until the cottage's kitchen door was well in sight and the road would have forced me around the hill before I reached the house. Spattered with mud to mid-calf, my boots crusted and my spirits high, I knocked on the door in the optimistic hope that there would be hot chocolate and a warm kitchen awaiting me. There was no reply, except for the chatter of a bird in the bushes – the little Waxwing, watching me with its head cocked to one side.

"What?" I asked the bird, then felt stupid. I put my hand on the doorknob and rattled it, but it was locked tight. The bird whistled, ruffled its wings, and took shelter in the eaves of the house.

It was past time most people would be awake, though he could have been sleeping. Still, I wanted to be sure before I tried the front door or had to walk back with the book still in my bag. I knocked again, and this time I heard a faint yell. I waited while a door slammed somewhere, and then the lock clicked back in its mount and the door opened.

"Jesus," I said, "Did you die or something?"

Lucas smiled tiredly at me and rubbed his raw, chafed nose with the sharp angle of his wrist. "I know," he said. "Come in."

The kitchen was not much warmer than outdoors. I used the door-jamb to knock the worst of the mud off my boots and left them on a mat.

"Try the living room – there's a fire," he said, gesturing to the tightly-shut door as he struck a match and lit a burner on the stove.

"Is there a reason your kitchen is subzero?" I asked, taking the bag off my shoulder. Lucas picked up a carton of milk sitting on the counter and poured some into a pan, setting it on the burner.

"Power's out, heater's not working," he answered. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "It's all right – the living room's small and the fireplace puts out enough heat."

"Your heater's gas," I replied. "If your stove works, your heater should."

"Try it for yourself," he said, waving his hand at the metal grate in the kitchen wall. I pulled the grate away and examined the mechanism.

"I didn't mean you should actually..." He stopped, watching me. "You don't have to."

"Your heat's off because your pilot light's out," I said.

An interested, curious look crossed his face. "Is that why?" he asked. The look I gave him in return was probably more pity at his clear lack of common sense than anything else. He frowned. "I didn't know. I was going to ask next time I was in town. I've been sick, that's all."

"Yes, so I see," I answered. His skin was an unhealthy gray, eyes red-rimmed and nose a mass of chapped, irritated cracks. "How long has your heat been out?"

"Only two days," he answered, coughing.

"And the power too? I'll have to look at your breaker next," I muttered.

"My what?"

"You'd better give me those matches," I said, holding out my hand for them. It didn't take long to re-light the pilot, though I was nervous about blowing something up the entire time. When it was finally lit, I leaned back and replaced the grating.

"That ought to take care of the heating," I said, locating a small metal door in the opposite wall, the access hatch to the circuit box. When I opened the door, three of the switches were in the wrong position. I flipped them and the kitchen lights went on.

"That's all that was wrong? Those great big light switches?" he asked.

"Haven't you overloaded a circuit before?" I said. "You plug one thing in and the power goes out to the whole room?"

"No," he replied, looking vaguely guilty.

"Well, now you know," I said.

"Does one of those switches control the phone too?"

"No – your line's probably down, just bad luck," I replied. "I should have come to see you earlier – I knew you'd need help out here alone."

"Oh, is that why you're here?" he asked, and I realized that I had barged in without explaining why I was visiting in the first place. "I didn't realize there was so much involved in just keeping the power on."

"Actually, I came to bring you the book you ordered," I said, a little embarrassed. "You know how to shingle a roof but not how to work a circuit box?"

"The home-repair book didn't cover that," he said. "Or, well, it probably does, but I didn't think to look. It's in my desk somewhere."

The milk was beginning to steam in the pan. I washed my hands and shed my coat while he made the hot chocolate.

"What on earth were you doing that you blew out three circuit-breakers and your pilot light?" I asked.

"Come into the living room," he said, carrying the mugs. "It's warmer in there."

"Fine, but I'm still curious," I answered. I picked up my backpack and held the door, gesturing for him to go first since his hands were full.

That was why, the first time I saw his workshop, it was with Lucas standing in the middle of it. His back was to me as he set one of the mugs down on a bare space on one table.

There was a bed in the corner, probably moved there when the heat went out. Next to the bed stood a grandfather clock that had, like most of the furniture, come with the house. A desk sat under one of the windows, the only one that wasn't covered with heavy drapes to keep the cold out. On the desk was the window-box from the kitchen, the sprouts looking larger but just as sad as ever.

The sofa had been pushed back against a wall, and two wing-chairs as well. They'd been moved to make room for the tables – a long workbench on rickety sawhorses, several small round end-tables, probably brought in from all over the house, and two folding card tables draped with drop-cloths. None of this was what struck me silent, though.

Jumbled on the bookshelves, piled on one chair, scattered around on the tables and hanging from long ropes hooked over the ceiling beams were dozens of masks. Enormous beaked bird-faces, beaded half-masks on sticks, pale ovals covered with ribbons, garish children's masks shaped like animals and monsters. Incomplete ones sat on molds on the workbenches or in puddles of dried paint on the smaller tables. Blocks of clay, piles of rag fabric, bags of plaster-powder and heaps of ribbon sat amid bottles of paint and glue. The fire, flickering in the hearth, threw shadows on the walls and made the nearest masks look as if they were subtly alive.

Lucas, who hadn't turned around, reached out and switched on a lamp, which killed the shadows. He blew out a pair of fat candles burning on one table, then three more on the desk.

"At least if the power actually goes out, I'll know what to do," I heard him say, but I was still looking at the masks. Lucas turned to see why I was silent and gave a scratchy, hoarse laugh.

"It sometimes takes people that way," he said. "I should have warned you. I forgot you hadn't seen my workshop yet."

"Did you make all of these?" I asked.

"Most. A few are models I bought."

"You said you weren't an artist," I said, still distracted.

"I'm not, really," he said. "More like...I dunno. I don't call myself that. I just do things. Like you with your book repairs. You said you don't call yourself a craftsman really, but it's...kind of the same?"

"This is a little more than rebinding a book." I looked around in awe. He reached up to a cluster of masks tied to a rope and untied one, offering it to me to examine.

"I...I call myself sort of a blacksmith," he said shyly, as if he were a little mortified to admit it. "I make tools."

"Tools for what?" I asked, stroking the silk ribbon tied through a hole punched in stiff painted leather. The face that looked up at me was narrow and studious, with high cheekbones, bushy eyebrows, and a thin nose. Perched on the nose were false glasses made from thin copper wire.

"*Dottore*," he said, pointing at the mask. "It's Italian, from the *Commedia*. The educated fool."

I grinned and held it up to my face. He took it out of my hands before I could fit it over my nose completely. I picked up another one, a wide-mouthed, smiling face.

"Is this how you make your living?" I asked.

"It isn't really a living," he said, looking down at the *Dottore* in his hands. "I had a job in the city. I used to sell the masks before I came here, but just to keep them from piling up. It wasn't a career or anything."

"They seem to have started piling," I said. He coughed into his sleeve before replying.

"Yes," he answered, looking up and away at a cluster of masks hanging on another rope, all of which looked very similar – snoutish black grotesques decorated in a variety of ways, some made of what looked like painted leather, some made of velvet or stiffened paper on wire frames. "But I don't think Low Ferry is really the place to sell masks."

"Halloween is nearly here."

He nodded absently.

"They're wonderful," I continued, looking around. "You have real skill. How long have you been making them?"

"Since I was fifteen," he said. He sat on the bed and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, watching me. "Thank you, I mean. Most people find them frightening. The first time the boy came out to the cottage he looked in here and then hid in the bathroom. He thought they were looking at him. He still won't study in here."

"Well, children, you know. Still enjoying tutoring?" I asked.

He shrugged. "He isn't interested in history, but he studies because he doesn't like me to disapprove of him. Sometimes he's frustrating, but...I think he likes me."

"He talks to me about you."

"Does he?" Lucas looked pleased.

"He says you think differently than his teachers do."

"Oh." His look of pleasure vanished. "I – I don't want to cause trouble with his teachers..."

"I doubt you will. They have a whole herd of children to care about. He doesn't seem the type to inspire a rebellion. Besides, this is still civilization. We don't burn people at the stake for having new ideas."

"Seems like civilization's exactly where people do that," he murmured. "But it doesn't matter. The one you're holding..." he said, indicating the mask in my hands. "I'm calling him Socrates. He's not finished yet. I'm waiting for the plants to finish growing."

I looked over at the window box. "The plants?" I asked, setting Socrates down and walking to the window. The green stalks swayed gently.

"Please don't – they're delicate," he said, as I reached out to touch one. I drew back and caught his excruciatingly embarrassed look. "Sorry, I mean, I just..."

"It's fine," I said. "Honestly. What kind of plants are they?"

"Hemlock," he stammered. "People mistake it for parsley."

"Ah," I said, looking back at Socrates. The real Socrates had been executed by the state, ordered to drink brewed hemlock. "Yes, I see."

"I thought I'd decorate the mask with it. It's interesting to try growing it, anyway."

I opened my mouth to ask him if these masks were why he wanted the book, and then I caught sight of the ceiling.

"How the hell did you do that?" I asked, looking up. There was a charred spot in the plaster about three feet wide, spreading across one of the beams as well.

"I..." he glanced up. "Little accident. I thought when I was feeling better I'd re-plaster it. Plaster, I'm good with," he said, gesturing at the worktables. "You said you brought my book?"

"Here," I said, setting my backpack down in a clear space on one table and digging out the package. "A friend of mine in the city found it."

"Wrapped and everything," he said with a sudden smile, fingers plucking at the twine. "You didn't have to come all the way out here."

"The boy said your telephone was dead, and you're not used to living in these conditions – it's just as well I did," I answered, rubbing the back of my head and looking up at the dark spot on the ceiling again. "At least now you'll know how to fix a flipped circuit."

He looked upset, and what I'd said made me uncomfortable, too. I picked up another mask, fiddling with the decoration around the edge as Lucas tore the paper off and opened his book. He was quickly engrossed in it – feeling it, turning the pages, running his fingers down the columns of text with a possessive air. It was as if he'd forgotten I was there.

He turned to a page with a bright color plate of a funeral mask on one side, and his face lit up with a private smile. Then he turned the page again and frowned as he encountered one of the bay leaves Marjorie had stuffed it with.

"Amazing she's stayed in business, smoking around the books like that," I said casually.

"I think she bleaches her teeth too – " He stopped mid-speech and looked up at me.

"I assume that her reluctance to sell to an artist is your fault," I continued. "I told her I was a roofer. What a roofer would want with a book on classical history I couldn't say, but she swallowed it all right."

He was quiet for a while. I wasn't sure what I even wanted. Not a confession or an apology, certainly. Acknowledgment, maybe. I don't know.

"She wouldn't sell to me. She thinks it's a dangerous book," he said finally. "I wish I'd just stolen the library's copy."

"Why didn't you?"

"Didn't want to go back into the city, and stealing from libraries is pathetic anyway." He snuffled and turned his head to cough, away from the book.

"You knew I'd find her copy," I said.

"I thought so. I offered her twice what it's worth. She still wouldn't sell." He put the bay leaf back and closed the book, pressing his hand flat over the cover.

"It's not exactly top-secret," I said. "I don't see how it could be dangerous."

"No, of course not. Maybe she just didn't like the look of my face. I'm sorry I lied," he said. "What do I owe you? I – I won't bother trying to buy your respect, but you should have something....you slogged up here through the mud and fixed my home, even."

"We don't charge extra for delivery," I said with a small grin. "It's all right, really, Lucas. You wanted the book, she wouldn't sell it to you. I know how it is when you want a book you can't get."

"Well, I'm still sorry."

"Lucas, really," I said, and he looked up at me again. There was a little color coming into his cheeks from the heat of the fire. "It's fine."

He seemed to consider, then nodded. Probably didn't want to press his luck, now that he had his book.

"Do you want lunch, at least?" he asked. "The kitchen'll be warm enough to cook in, pretty soon."

"What've you been doing, roasting things over the fire?"

"Haven't been very hungry. I've been eating crackers and...stuff," he said vaguely. "That's a good idea, using the fire. I've never had a fireplace before."

"Really?" I asked. "Never?"

He shrugged, tucking his knees up against his chest so he could wrap the corners of the blanket around his feet. "Always lived in apartments. Central heating. Super took care of...the big light switches or whatever."

"Circuit breakers."

"Those."

"You got the fire going, though," I pointed out.

"The boy sold me some starter-logs when I bought the wood."

I laughed. "Good for him. I'll heat something up for us."

"I can –"

"Lucas, for God's sake, stay there. It's not exactly a trial," I said. He closed his mouth, giving me a wary look. I turned to go into the kitchen and heard him call after me that there was canned soup in the pantry.

The kitchen was still cold, but not the icy-frigid it had been when I came in. I closed the door between kitchen and living room and put the milk away in the fridge.

There *was* soup in the pantry, but not much else. I put it on the stove to heat and then poked around curiously for as long as I could justify. There wasn't much to see. Very little food, no personal touches, not even any dirty plates...Lucas might cook in the kitchen, but unlike most of Low Ferry it wasn't the center of his domestic life – that was obviously his workshop.

"Well," I said, returning to the living room with two bowls of soup, once it finished heating. "You're out of just about everything. I'll send the boy up with some groceries – he wants to see you anyway. You're in no condition to be wandering around in the snow."

"Snow?" Lucas asked, looking alarmed.

"Probably this evening. I doubt it'll be very much, but they don't plow your road."

He ate a spoonful of soup, hissing when it burned his tongue.

"Tell him I'll pay commission," he said, when he'd swallowed.

"He'll like that, but you don't have to."

"I want to. I should pay you too – by the time you get back your whole day will be wasted," he said regretfully.

"I don't think it's wasted," I answered. "And even if it were, it's my choice. Besides, I got to see your workshop."

He gave a nervous chuckle.

"All these masks," I said. "They don't make *you* nervous at all?"

"No. But I made them, so..." He glanced around and gave me another shrug. "Do they scare you?"

"I wouldn't say scare, but I wouldn't sleep in here. There's just...a lot of them. They are beautiful, though," I added, picking up *Dottore* again and admiring the thin wire glasses and the high cheekbones.

"I don't suppose you want one," Lucas said. I looked over the edge of the mask at him.

"You're really determined to pay me, huh?" I said.

"I just think you should have something," he muttered.

"Can I have this one?" I asked, holding up *Dottore*. He looked at it nervously.

"Wouldn't you rather have *Arlecchino*, though? I have some good ones..." He stood, still carrying his bowl in one hand, and reached up to a high shelf. The mask he took down had bulging cheeks and an intricate copper-and-white design, with a large knob on the left of its forehead. "The clever clown," he explained.

"If you'd rather not give me *Dottore*, that's all right –" I began.

"No...I just thought you might prefer this one," he said hastily. He didn't seem to regret giving up the mask – there was no possessiveness in his gaze or his voice. It was more that he didn't want to give it to *me*. But, whatever mask fit Lucas best, I was no doubt destined for the educated fool.

"I'll wrap it for you," he said, taking it out of my hands and bundling it in a piece of cheap white muslin from the workbench, padding the eyes with little folds of the cloth before tying the corners into a thick knot in the concave hollow at the back. As he was working I sat down and began eating, so that when he was finished he could join me without too much discomfort.

There was plenty to look at, while we ate. Long flats of thin leather lay in a pile next to a huge pot on a complicated-looking hot plate. Nearby, a wooden upright had a wire structure built around it faintly

resembling a face, and next to that were several dried lumps of clay that could be assembled into a nose, mouth, forehead, even ears if you squinted. I caught myself glancing at Lucas, studying the shape of his nose, the way the lamp cast triangular shadows below his eyes.

When the wind began to howl in the eaves I realized that I should be heading homeward if I didn't want to become a house-guest for the night. He saw me to the door through the now-warm kitchen.

"I hope you feel better," I said, carefully shouldering the bag with the mask inside it. I put my boots on, the dried mud cracking off here and there.

"I'm sure I'll be fine in a few days," he answered. "I'll come to see you soon."

"Well, don't push yourself. Get well first. If you start to feel worse, the Culligan farm's closest – head south where the asphalt starts, they'll drive you in to see Dr. Kirchner."

"Thanks, Christopher," he said, and gave me a smile before he closed the door behind me. I looked for the little Waxwing who'd declared himself kitchen-door guardian, but he was nowhere to be found.

Outside it was still cold and the clouds were turning the light to blue, making the wet earth look almost black beneath the grass. Snow began to fall while I was still walking and, by the time I reached the edge of the village, my hair was dusted lightly with white flakes. Children were out and running around in the snow, scraping the thin buildup off the pavement and hurling it at each other. The boy was among them, in fact, and I waved him over to where I stood on the opposite side of the street, avoiding the snowball-fight.

"You come from The Pines?" he asked. "How is he?"

"He's been sick," I said, wondering from his tone if he knew that already. "I want you to take him some food tomorrow, when you go up for tutoring. He says he'll pay you."

His chest puffed out proudly. "I'll do it. You think the snow will stick?"

"At least for a day or two. Ask the grocer to fix up a package of food for the man at The Pines and put it on Christopher Dusk's account. Butter, eggs, some canned soup, bread, some vegetables. Tell Lucas he can send the payment back to Dusk Books with you, or settle next time he's in town. Matters of high finance, now. Are you certain you're up to it?"

"Of course I am!" he said. A stray handful of snow fell nearby and he turned to shout an insult at the girl who'd thrown it. "I better run or they'll hit you too. See you tomorrow!"

I walked on, down into Low Ferry proper, where people were less jubilant and went everywhere with their collars turned up, muttering about the weather. I was glad to get back to the warmth of my home and unpack *Dottore*, setting him on the kitchen table upstairs. The way Lucas had handled him made me treat him with a little more respect than I had at first, and I wasn't certain where I wanted to display him yet.

The door clattered in the shop below and a voice called my name – there'd be plenty of time to decide what to do with him later, while I was serving my customers. I yelled back, gave *Dottore* one last look, and went down the stairs to the shop.

I soon had other artistic concerns regarding the decoration of the bookstore as well. Dusk Books actually had two front doors, one against the other: a wooden door that opened out and a glass door that opened in. In the summertime I only used the glass door, hooking the wooden one permanently against the outer wall. When the cold weather set in I usually reversed them, unhooking the wooden door so that it swung shut and propping the thin, uninsulated glass one against the inner wall until spring.

The wooden door was faded and peeling a little, as it usually was come autumn, and I'd been waiting for weeks to paint it. I'd wanted to do it before the snow started, but the humidity rolled in so fast that I hadn't had the chance. In wet weather it would dry too slowly and peel too quickly.

After that first flurry of snow, we had a handful of clear and reasonably dry days and Paula started to harass me about the sorry state of my storefront. So, four days after the snow melted, when the weather seemed likely to hold for a little while longer, I went down to the hardware store and bought a gallon of green paint. I dug the old sanding-block, brushes, roller, and primer out of my closet, set them outside with the paint, and then began loading up a rolling shelf with books.

Considering that a new layer of paint on the door in the winter and a touch-up to my store sign in the spring were the extent of my yearly upkeep on Dusk Books, I felt that I had the right to enjoy them a little. Thus, twice-yearly, Low Ferry's main street was treated to my out-of-doors book sale when the paintbrushes came out.

I set out the second rolling shelf as well, with a pot of coffee and some pastries from the cafe as a lure to get people up the walk and onto the porch to investigate the books. I offer good bargains when I'm in a painting mood, and business is usually brisk.

"Good morning, Christopher!" Charles called, as I was fitting sandpaper into the block and deciding where to begin my attack. "Sanding the door?"

I paused and considered his question. He chuckled.

"That's a yes," he said.

"Something like that," I agreed. I knelt and smoothed my hand over the wood at the bottom of the door.

"Going to start from the bottom or the top?"

"Well, that's always the question. Do I sand top-down and save the crouch-work for last, or do I start at the bottom so that I can be stretching by the time I'm done?" I asked. "Have some coffee."

"Don't mind if I do," Charles said, helping himself to a cup and a danish before stepping back. "Just on my way to see Old Harrison about some firewood."

"Oh yes? For the bonfire?" I asked, lying down and squirming onto one shoulder, starting to sand the base of the door.

"Bottom-going-up, hm? Yes, bonfire – I thought his boys could build it for us this year. Are you coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I replied.

"What about the dancing afterwards?"

"Oh, I don't know, it's really for the youngsters, huh?" I grunted, working at a knot in the wood.

"What do you think you are? I don't ask for myself, actually, there are a few women in the village who think it's high time you settled down."

I laughed. "Everyone seems to think that. Who's been asking?"

"Sandra, actually."

"Sandra! Doesn't she have enough trouble on her plate with Nolan and Michael?"

"I get the feeling she's not asking for herself. Anyhow, it all seems to have calmed down now."

"Oh? Did she pick someone?"

"I don't know," Charles said vaguely, just as Jacob appeared on my walkway, still sporting a spectacular bruise on his face from his car accident.

"Mornin'," he said, stepping around the paint cans and helping himself to a pastry. "Painting the door, Christopher?"

"Yep," I replied, sighing.

"Going to seal it?"

"Think so."

"Before or after?"

"Both," I said, to stop him from giving me advice.

"Shouldn't seal before if you're going to seal after."

Sometimes, the effort is pointless.

"Jacob, just the man I wanted to see," Charles said. "Now, I was wondering what you think of the church buying a new coffee urn. I know we have three, but one of them's gasping its last..."

They talked and drank coffee, watching as I sanded dirt, mold, and the worst of the cracked and peeling paint off the door. Others came and went as well, while my shoulders cramped and my clothes became covered in a thin film of green powder.

People like to watch other people work. There's something soothing in seeing someone use their hands and muscles to make a thing beautiful. They'll stop to watch someone build a chair or brick a wall or paint a door, and the sale on books gave them a good excuse. They took books and put money in the canister I'd set out for it and hung around drinking coffee, criticizing my technique with the sanding block until I'd finished.

The end result was, if not attractive, at least smooth enough to hold a few more coats evenly. I thought some day that poor sad piece of wood

was probably going to crack from all the weathering and sanding and probably the bugs living in it, but it hadn't yet.

When I'd finished sanding, I wrapped my sore red hands in rags and reached for an empty bucket, pouring equal amounts primer and brand-new paint into it. Even watered down with grayish primer, the first layer looked nice against the previous year's old coat, streaked here and there where the wood showed through from sanding. I put the primer on with a roller, ignoring the door's little fiddly bevels and edges for now.

"How many times today has someone asked you if you're painting a door?"

The question came just before noon, as I was sitting on the ground with one leg splayed and the other drawn up against my chest, finishing off the bottom. Lucas, of course.

"Numbers untold," I answered. "Buy a book?"

"I own one already, thanks," he replied. He sat sideways on the steps, his back against the porch roof's support post. I looked at him over my shoulder. His eyes were a little less fever-brilliant and his nose was definitely closer to the right color.

"You're on the mend," I said.

"I am. The boy said the food was put on your account."

"I didn't think you had one," I answered.

"No...that would require speaking to the grocer," he said with a small smile. Two elderly women came up the walk and he drew his legs against his chest tightly, though there was plenty of room for them to pass. They began to pick over the books on the shelves, glancing at me occasionally. They deposited a few dollars, took some dusty science-fiction novels, and waved as they departed.

"Is there any reason for such...meticulous caution?" I asked, when they were gone.

Lucas didn't even bother asking what I meant. "Not what you could call reason," he said with a shrug. "I just don't like talking to people. Does the green help the door at all, or is it only decoration?"

"The paint helps, but it comes in a variety of colors," I replied. "I don't believe it has any particular qualities, green."

"It's unusual," he pointed out.

"It's cheerful. People like it," I said, spilling paint on the dropcloth under the door as I gave the edge one last swipe. I dropped the roller into a bucket of paint thinner, stretched, and stood up. My spine cracked, rolling up from hips to shoulders, satisfyingly loud and solid. The paint at the top was already drying, but it could wait a while before the next coat.

"Is it time for lunch yet?"

"More or less." He offered an envelope to me, not standing or even quite looking at me. He looked tense and uncertain, perched on the edge of the porch. "I estimated. If there's any extra, you could open an account for me here," he said, as I counted the money in the envelope.

"I'll find out – I didn't ask," I replied. "This is about right, probably. Come and have lunch, if you want."

"The cafe?" He looked apprehensively at the very crowded cafe across the street.

"No – I have food upstairs," I said. I left the books out but collected the money-tin, setting it on the counter inside. Lucas followed me upstairs, hands stuffed in his pockets.

I think at some point Dusk Books, and my apartment above it, must have been an ordinary residential house. The bookstore was reasonably well laid-out, given bookstores in general, but the upstairs apartment seemed crammed in, as if it were never designed to be a full residence. The stairs from the shop led straight into the kitchen, and the fridge door opened into the stairwell at an angle. The kitchen itself was pretty much a hallway, with stove and sink on one side and a counter on the other side, obviously the dressed-up remains of a solid wall.

Beyond the kitchen, the rest of the upstairs was one large room, with ridges and rough spots in the ceiling where other walls had been knocked out, and one load-bearing wall blocking the bathroom off. It was pretty well filled with my bed, a comfortable chair for reading, a table for working and eating at, and a couple of bookshelves for my personal collection. I like to think I'd decorated it nicely, kept it simple, but sometimes I wondered if it wasn't a little bit bare.

"This is where you live?" Lucas asked, as I stripped the rags off my hands, running them under the hot water in the kitchen sink for what good it would do.

"Home sweet home," I said.

"I like it," he remarked.

"It works. I don't spend much time here."

"Why not? It's nice."

"It's small," I replied. "I like my store better. Besides, I can't really see many people from here unless I lean out," I added, gesturing to the chair under the window.

"What's so awful about that?"

"I don't like looking down to people. It reminds me of the city. You probably understand that, don't you?"

He leaned against the counter. "I don't think you left the city for the same reasons I did."

"You don't mind looking down."

"I prefer not having to look at all."

I took out a package of turkey, setting it on the counter between us. "Sandwiches?"

"That sounds fine."

"There's bread in the cupboard on your left."

He turned to his right for a moment, then stopped and turned the other direction, finding the bread without too much difficulty.

"There isn't a tomato to be had at the moment, but I have onions if you want them," I said.

"Thanks."

"Slice the cheese?"

"Of course."

I watched his fingers wield the knife more skillfully than most, spread mustard on the bread, pluck shreds of turkey apart and layer them evenly. Two white plates, brown bread, end of an onion slice, the bright yellow tang of cheese. He didn't enter the other room until I did, and he kept his eyes on the table where we sat. He must have been curious, but I can imagine he thought it was rude to look around the single room I lived and slept in.

"So you came here," I said, swallowing a bite of food, "to escape people, then."

"I thought so," he shrugged.

"But you haven't. If anything..."

"Yes." He laughed a little. "All I escaped was anonymity, which...wasn't what I wanted at all."

"No more crowds to hide in."

"I never really know how familiar to be with anyone here," he admitted. "They all seem to know me much better than I know them. I think they pity me. Or they think I'm weird. That's what the boy says."

"Oh yes?"

"Well, not in so many words. People ask him about me."

"They've asked me too," I said.

"I thought they would."

"I would think it would drive you back to the city."

"Oh, no. It's a small price," he mumbled.

"A small price for what?"

He didn't answer for a while. "Nothing. I mean. It's a lesser evil. I thought I wanted to get away from people – really I wanted to get away from people who knew me, and of course that didn't work. But...well, things change, don't they?"

It occurred to me, quite suddenly, that Lucas was once again hiding something from me. It wasn't my business – it wasn't as though he had made any kind of promise to be truthful to me. Still, it was unnerving. He hid from the rest of the world but I had thought he was beginning to stop that around me, at least a little. I might have done more harm than good, letting him know that I'd caught on to his trick with the book he wanted and couldn't have, but I also hoped he'd moved past that. I didn't want him to be afraid to speak to me.

I wondered if Lucas had ever actually had the escape he so desperately wanted – not from people but simply from all of it. Did he want to crawl into a dark place and hide like an animal? Did he want a *person* who would be his harbor?

I didn't know what he wanted. Most people's wants are so common and transparent that you hardly think about them. Some want fame, some want money, most want love. I couldn't puzzle out Lucas at all, though. Refuge is not something people want, just something they need because their other wants aren't met by the crowded heat of humanity.

"Christopher?" he asked, worriedly. "Did I say something stupid?"

"What? Of course not," I answered. "I'm sorry – the paint fumes, they make me a little dizzy. Is your sandwich all right?"

"It's good, thank you."

"You like it here in the country, don't you?"

"I don't suppose it's really a matter of like or dislike," he answered.

"Isn't it?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"You can't be too unhappy, if you didn't think about it at all," I prompted. "If you'd hated it, you'd have left by now."

"I like my cottage. I spend most of my time there."

"You don't get lonely?"

He gave me a searching look. "I keep my own company. Do you ever get lonely? You live alone."

"In the middle of Low Ferry. I never have the chance."

"Loneliness isn't necessarily..." He seemed to be groping for words. "Some people are incapable of being alone – you can't blame them for it, it's just the way they are. Some people like it too much." He glanced around quickly and pushed his plate away. "Thank you for the sandwich, but I should go. The boy will be expecting me. I have errands to run, too."

"Sure," I answered, a little startled by the sudden change in subject. "I'll walk you out."

At the bottom of the stairs he stopped and turned, looking up at me where I stood a few steps above. He was frowning more in thought than in concern.

"I'm not fond of being alone. It's just necessary sometimes," he said. "You're welcome to visit whenever you want."

"I never thought otherwise," I reassured him, as he walked to the front door. "Are you enjoying your book, by the way?"

"Very much, thank you," he said. "It's an education."

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry, I really should go – thanks again," he called from the porch step. As he walked out towards the street I came forward and touched the door. It was dry at the top, only a little tacky at the bottom. Time to start painting again. I wanted to be finished that day, so that it wouldn't be on my mind on Halloween.

I picked up the bucket of paint, found a wide paintbrush without too many bristles missing, and set to work on the soothing, pleasing business of painting my door. I like using a paintbrush more than a roller; there's more weight to it. There are many more pleasant duties in life than painting a door, but few that end with such satisfaction.

As I worked, I noticed that a little Waxwing had alighted on the plate that had earlier held pastries, and was picking at the remaining crumbs. I grinned and let it be.

FIVE

IT COULD NOT be doubted that Low Ferry was devoutly and not very diversely religious. The one church was the center of many peoples' lives, particularly the older people and the farmers – sometimes it was the latter's only regular social contact with someone outside of their family from week to week. They drove in every Sunday when the roads were good, and when they were flooded out or snowed under they rode in on horseback, stabling the horses in a spacious garage near the church.

Still, as with so many small towns where farmers have been the bedrock of the economy for generations – especially in Low Ferry, where most of the families had emigrated from Europe in the last two centuries – there were deeper currents below the surface. Christianity sat on the village like the snow and there was a great deal of brown, earthy tradition underneath. As their most recent immigrant, except for Lucas, I could see it clearly. I don't know if those born and raised in Low Ferry even knew it was there. It showed the most at Halloween.

Unlike Chicago, with its spook stories about poisoned candy and very real stories about kids getting hit by cars, there wasn't much to fear on Halloween in Low Ferry. Nobody was even *in* a car after dark on October thirty-first. The only reason that the church held a Halloween Party every year was that we all needed somewhere to gather. It might as well be under the wide ceiling of the cavernous church basement, close to the cemetery. It gave the adults an excuse to dress up, at any rate.

I planned to dress up myself, that year, in my *Dottore* mask if nothing else. I didn't really have anything to go with it, but when you're wearing a handmade replica of a seventeenth-century costume prop there's only so much you really need.

As I left Dusk Books I ran into Carmen and her boyfriend coming out of the cafe and joined them for the short walk up the street to the church. Clara, toddling along between them, was dressed up as a kind of elaborate combination of dinosaur and unicorn, some of it already smeared with chocolate.

"She did it herself," Carmen confided to me. "I asked what she wanted to be, and she said she wanted her dinosaur pajamas and her unicorn hat."

"It's not a bad look," I said, waving to Jacob as he passed. Others were streaming up the street, the families coming from trick-or-treating, the older kids from god-knows-where. The single adults in the village, like myself, exchanged sheepish what-are-we-doing-here looks as we went.

"Aren't you cold?" Carmen asked, pointing to my scarf, wrapped around the mask I carried instead of around my throat.

"It's not so bad out," I answered. "Bracing, that's what it is."

"You sound like Charles."

"May I live to be his age," I intoned, and Carmen laughed.

"Hello Paula!" she called, as the door to the hardware store opened and Paula emerged. She was certainly shiny, in a heatproof silver welding-apron and a headdress made out of bolts and needle-nosed pliers. "What are you?"

"The spirit of industry," Paula replied. "You?"

"The parent of a unicorn-asaur," Carmen said.

"Christopher?" Paula lifted an eyebrow at my clothes – plain black denims and a black jacket. "Johnny Cash?"

"I haven't put mine on yet," I said.

"Fair enough. Be my date tonight?" she asked, offering me her arm.

"Never happier," I replied, and took it cheerfully as we continued up the street.

The church was dark for the most part, but lights blazed around the back-entrance, down a narrow road that divided the church from the cemetery. Carmen chased after Clara, who was running on ahead, while I stopped to greet a few farmers and Paula wandered off to say hello to Bert, who owned the grocery store.

"Christopher!" Charles called from the doorway, where he was wrestling one of the coffee urns into submission. "Come inside, son! Aren't you cold?"

"Not much," I answered, but I joined him inside and caught the top of the urn as it began to slide off. I carried it after him down the half-flight of stairs and into the lower level of the church. The warm gathering hall below the sanctuary smelled like dust and stale tea, coffee, pastries, and chafing-dish fuel.

"Care to help me?" he asked. I nodded and trailed after him, past the partygoers and into the mysterious depths of the basement, through a couple of unmarked doors and into the kitchen's storeroom.

"I don't know that I told you," he grunted, as he hauled the large cylinder along, "but we've got a new Sweeper this year for the festivities. New Fire Man, too."

"Oh?" I asked, elbowing a door open for him. "Well, don't spoil the surprise. Are you Straw Bear?"

"Of course," Charles said. "Give me a hand?"

"Do you ever worry that it's all a little...I don't know. Not quite in the spirit of the church?" I asked, turning a high tap and bracing the urn as the water sloshed and gurgled into it.

"What, the Straw Bear? Not in the least. It's just entertainment, really. And I'd much rather have everyone here for Halloween than off drinking somewhere or causing trouble. No, I don't find it irreligious at all. No more than being friends with you, heathen," he added, elbowing me in the ribs. I grinned at him.

"Well, as long as you don't mind," I said, and helped him ease the filled urn back against his shoulder.

"Pick up those mugs? Thanks," he said. I collected a tray of chipped coffee cups, setting my mask on top. "So," he continued, as he carried the urn out into the larger room where the partygoers were, "you don't look like you're in costume, Christopher."

"Right here," I said, nodding at the mask. He began settling the urn in place and I put the cups down, picking up *Dottore* and unwinding the scarf. I turned away, pulled it on, tied the straps, and faced him again. Now my eyes were framed by circles of copper wire, thin nose protruding, bushy eyebrows caught permanently mid-waggle. Charles laughed.

"Oh, that's wonderful," he said. "Did Lucas make it?"

"You know him?" I asked, surprised, and then felt stupid. Of course he knew him – even those who hadn't met Lucas knew at least *about* the peculiar recluse at The Pines. The mask shifted and settled against my face as I spoke.

"Sure," Charles said. "He was up here just last week, asking me about the Straw Bear."

"Really," I said, intrigued. "He showed you his masks, I guess."

"A few. He said he had more." Charles was staring almost disconcertingly at my mask. "I thought he wasn't very articulate, or maybe just nervous – he does have a deft touch, I guess you could say. It looks like you."

"What?" I asked, studying my reflection in the big silver urn.

"Your mask. Well, a little bit. Not the eyebrows, but the face."

"Huh." I hadn't noticed, but without the glasses perched on *Dottore's* nose I supposed the narrow, scholarly face would look like mine. "Is Lucas here?"

"I haven't seen him yet, but he'll probably show up." Charles set up the water to heat and people began to crowd around us, picking at the trays of food on the table. The children were more concerned with the games that a couple of industrious youngsters were running, where you could win a few pieces of candy or a small toy. The adults wanted coffee to keep them awake later.

I felt faintly superior to most of the others there – their masks, if they wore any, were cheap plastic things well below the level of craftsmanship Lucas had put into mine. I got a lot of compliments on it, and a few outright stares.

The children were in much more elaborate outfits than the adults, chasing each other through the room or huddling in groups to plot mischief. I looked around for the boy but didn't see him; I looked for Lucas too, but he was nowhere to be found. I ended up moving from group to group, saying hello-how-are-you, picking up news and redistributing it. All of the players in that year's live-action soap opera – Michael, Nolan, Sandra, Leanne, Nolan's younger sister and one or two other minor characters – were drifting around the party as well, being watched by the village and watching each other warily.

Around nine o'clock, with night well-fallen and some of the younger children already taken home by their parents, people began to slip outside. The cold evening air was almost a relief after the heat of the basement, and the sense of anticipation among the adults began to grow. I took off my mask and tied it carefully to a belt-loop, joining them in the cemetery.

In small crowds, bringing their children with them or following them out, the adults began to gather inside the cemetery gates, off to either side of the dirt road that wound around and between the headstones. A group of young teens lounged near the few mausoleums, some ways off. The children stood at the gates, watchful, either remembering past years or having been told by older siblings what was about to happen. In the distance, looming darkly, stood the start of a forty-acre forest that marked the cemetery's west boundary.

Some of the adults had gone missing in the bustle. Charles, for one, and Leon – Jacob's wife as well. I thought perhaps Leon was the new Sweeper. Probably for the best, since the schoolteacher who had done it for years was laid up with lumbago worse than ever and it was time she passed the broom, so to speak.

It occurred to me that Jacob's wife might be the Fire Man this year. Low Ferry wasn't a paragon of gender equality, but the Fire Man needed to be nimble and light. By and large the men of Low Ferry were built on huge broad lines, good for farming but not for the relative acrobatics the Fire Man needed. The part was usually played by a young man, once in a while by a woman, always by someone who could move quickly if needed. I'd been asked to do it myself, the year before, but I'd had to decline.

My speculations were cut short as the Sweeper appeared, hooting and coughing his way down from the main road. It was Leon, dressed in layers of burlap tied on with bits of yarn and old worn belts. He swept the loose top layer of dirt on the road with his broom aimlessly, clearing any little remnants of snow to the sides. He shook his head as he came, setting off the bells tied to the wispy straw wig bound in a topknot and hanging down over his ears. Once inside the gate he moved his broom more vigorously, occasionally shoving a giggling child off the road.

Four mounted riders followed, the horses kicking up mud from the melting snow, ruining the crazy patterns the sweeper had left. There was Jacob's wife, along with three young men – one of the Harrison brothers and two I couldn't place in the darkness. The riders threw sticks into the crowds for people to catch, long poles made of balsa and a few of hollow painted plastic, not too hard or heavy, hardly dangerous at all. Their horses, decorated with ribbons and more bells, snorted impatiently. A few children play-fought with the sticks or went haring off into the darkness, already looking for the Straw Bear. Eventually the adults herded them into a group that trailed loosely down the road after the riders.

We walked through the cemetery hollering and whistling, following the riders until they abandoned us at the edge of the trees. They wheeled the horses, well out of range of the children, and broke into a galloping race back to the front gates.

The rest of us turned to the trees. There was a collective moment of anticipation, and then a few brave souls stepped forward, pushing the low brush aside and starting to look in earnest for the Straw Bear. We followed, hesitant, quieter in the forest. Sometimes we could hear the rise of a bird from the brush or the scuttle of a small animal fleeing hastily ahead of us, but that was all.

It was eerie, and a few of the children looked scared, but for the most part people seemed to be enjoying the shadows – venturing into the darkness to beat winter back, to beat back chill and death. This was our ritual, deeper than any church service, all-encompassing. If nothing else, it brought the village together – *tied* them together, in an experience that most of Low Ferry had shared since they could walk.

Leon was there, still in-character, brandishing his broom to make the children laugh. Paula kept poking Nolan in the back with her stick until he swatted at her with his own and wandered off, annoyed. Nona Harrison, well along in her pregnancy, was tolerating with good humor the protective escort of several chivalrous junior members of the extended Harrison clan. Carmen was carrying a tired-looking Clara on her shoulders. It was, in fact, pretty crowded in the trees.

I held back a little, wandering away from the others, content to look up at the stars through the tree branches and listen for the inevitable shout of *Straw Bear! Straw Bear!* once someone finally found him.

I'd managed to lose sight of everyone, which is no mean feat even in the dark, when I heard a bird-cry off to my left. It was followed by what I thought was the rustle of wings, and instinctively I turned to look for the source of the noise. There was no sudden flight against the sky, however, no fluttering feathers – instead I came face to face with a wide sheath of plaited straw, behind which a pair of eyes flashed and darted wildly.

I suppose if we were less serious, if it really were a children's game like we pretended, Charles would have winked and lifted his mask. *Hello Christopher, where's the rest? Run along and don't tell. I hope I look all right.*

I might have winked back and told him he was terribly fearsome and said *Good luck scaring the children*, but I didn't. Because it wasn't a game, really, not in Low Ferry.

Instead the figure growled and raised his arms, surrounding me in the musty-sweet smell of dry grass and the shifting shadows of his braided costume. Fear rose in my throat, real terror, and I yelled in answer to his low groan.

"Straw Bear! Straw Bear!"

From all around me came the immediate sound of crashing as would-be rescuers ran through the undergrowth. I shied back from the figure and shouted *"Straw Bear!"* even as I fell on my elbows, staring up at him. Two women arrived on the heels of my shouting and batted at the upraised arms of the bear with their sticks, driving him off. He howled and shambled away while they gave chase.

"Straw Bear!" they shouted, terribly serious, more people joining them as they went. I could hear the groans and growls receding in the

distance as I was helped to my feet – they sounded like they were moving back towards the cemetery now, as they should be. My heart was beating fast and my breath came short, knocked out of me by the fall.

"You okay, Christopher?" Jacob asked, arriving in a cluster with a few other farmers, and now there were grins all round.

"Fine," I gasped. "Let's go on, we'll miss the Fire Man – which way is it?" I added, rubbing my chest with one hand.

"This way," someone else said, and we walked back in the direction of the cemetery, following the noise, Michael offering me a shoulder to lean on as I stumbled along. I couldn't seem to get my breath back.

We emerged from the trees to see the Straw Bear at bay near a lumber-pile in the center of the cemetery. The sticks fell in uneven rhythm on his arms and chest, not the random attacks of children but the purposeful, symbolic drumming that others in Low Ferry's past had used to drive off evil –

Thud-ump-ump-thud-ump
Thud-ump-ump-ump-thud-ump

Even as we arrived the Bear roared defiance and the straw suddenly parted, revealing a disheveled and sweating Charles underneath. He shrugged the suit backwards and off, crying out in a very human voice, "Help me! Help me!"

Those who had attended other Halloweens in Low Ferry all knew where to look even before the torch flared to life. Behind the low graveyard wall was a sudden red glow, and a lithe body vaulted over the stone and ran across the graves, carrying a flickering torch made of rags wrapped around a long stick and dipped in pitch. He darted through the crowd, the flame trailing out behind him, and touched the torch to the Straw Bear costume as he ran past. It flared up bright, crackling merrily. The new Fire Man was good. He hadn't even broken stride.

He turned before he reached the firewood and ran back, leaping straight through the flame of the burning straw. The Fire Man's leggings were thick leather and he didn't wear a shirt which could have caught fire, so it was safe enough. Clearly at some point in its history the village had figured out that it was a good idea to keep the youths from setting themselves aflame, and had arranged a dress-code accordingly.

It was a wonderful sight, as it always is. The Fire Man's mask looked new, made of brilliant strips of red and orange silk stretched across a wire frame. It came to me as he jumped a second time, twirled and danced, and jumped across the flame again that I had seen that kind of mask in the workshop at The Pines. Hard on the heels of that thought came the realization that Lucas had finally shown up for the village revels.

He was the Fire Man, leaping through the burning remains of the Straw Bear's costume, laughing at the children who clapped and kept time for the dance steps on either side of the leaps. I recognized the cut of his hair and the visible shape of his chin and throat, even if I had never seen

him move so quickly or smile so openly. He was different – no tension in his body, no hesitant looks or slouched shoulders.

My chest tightened further, but not with sentiment – it was still hard to breathe, even if I tried to inhale on the rhythm of the clapping hands and stamping feet. Lucas jumped the flame one last time and ran to the wood piled for the bonfire, throwing the torch into the center of it. The whole crowd burst into spontaneous applause as it exploded in light and heat. I was busy trying to get enough air in my lungs to call for help.

The problem was, in the end, that my heart had yet to stop beating triple-time since Charles ambushed me in the forest. I tried to keep up with the clapping, the shouting bounced around and around in my head, but I couldn't. I *wanted* to see the bonfire and see Lucas pull his mask off and pick a girl for the dancing, but everything was narrowing down to a pinprick of light. Pain was flaring in my chest and my throat felt like it was closing off.

It was in the middle of Low Ferry's oldest ritual, then, that it happened: my heart gave out entirely, from the strain and shock, and I died.

Fortunately for me, it was a short death. Which is not to say that the process of dying was short (though that too) but rather the time I spent dead could be measured with a wristwatch instead of the Millennium Clock.

Everyone nearby knew immediately that something was wrong. People have occasionally passed out at the revels, but I was not known for my impressionable spirit or any kind of religious fervor. I'm told that my eyes rolled up in my head and I simply dropped straight down in a heap with very little fuss, which seems pretty much like me.

Immediately a crowd gathered around and just as quickly they were shoved away by Charles and Jacob, so that Dr. Kirchner had enough room to drop to his knees and revive me. Or perhaps resurrect is the better word, since I had no pulse and wasn't breathing at the time.

Needless to say, I don't remember any of it. A sort of false memory has settled in my mind, though, built up from stories I heard later on. It seemed like nobody's life was complete that winter until they'd come to see me and tell me their version of events. The tales varied wildly, as these things do: in one memorable account of the Temporary Death of Christopher Dusk, my spirit was seen to leave my body as a bright orange glow. I try to ignore that one.

What I recall after the lighting of the bonfire is mainly a sharp, sudden pain, followed by constricting tightness in my chest and then nothing – a void, a gap, until it was replaced with the sensation of bone-deep warmth and a voice. Dr. Kirchner's deep bass, reassuringly calm.

"Really, Lucas, he's resting quietly. I don't mind you staying here, but you should at least wash your face. You're covered in ash."

"I don't care. He might wake up."

"Sooner or later he will, but it'll be all right if you aren't here. I'll let him know that you were waiting for him."

I tried to move, to show them I was awake, but when I shifted my weight the muscles in my chest twinged alarmingly. I did get my eyes open, and made a surprised noise when a face loomed close to mine.

"Hello, Christopher," said Dr. Kirchner, smiling reassuringly. "How are you feeling?"

"I...why are you – in my bedroom?" I asked, and he laughed uneasily.

"We're not in your bedroom," he said. "You've had an episode. Are you breathing comfortably?"

"Yes," I answered. "Should I be?"

"It's good that you are. The roads aren't great and I'd hate to have to helicopter you to the hospital."

"I don't need a hospital," I replied. And then, stupidly, "I want to go home."

"I know, but I have to make sure you're all right first."

He helped me to sit up and I saw that we were in Charles's small office in the church – I was lying on his couch, covered in a couple of tattered blankets. Lucas was standing in a corner, near the window, still in the Fire Man's leggings. He was holding my Dottore, turning it around and around in his hands – I was vaguely glad to see it hadn't come to any harm when I fell. He was also wearing a shirt three sizes too big for him, obviously borrowed from somewhere, and there was grease and ash-dust on his arms and face. A very pale face, under the grime.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I answered.

"Well, now that's out of the way, back here please," Kirchner said, tipping my chin back so that I was looking at him. He rattled through a series of questions that were both soothingly easy and incredibly invasive, which I answered more or less honestly. I may have lied a little about how well I felt, but I wanted to convince him that I should be allowed to go home. It seemed very urgent at the time.

For a while I forgot Lucas was even in the room, until he moved to leave and gave me a small, shy wave from the doorway. I found out later that he'd been the major conduit of information between the doctor and the rest of the bonfire party, in the first few minutes after they moved me to the church and, well, panicked a whole lot. Just then, I assume, he was leaving to tell them I was awake.

"I'm going back to my office to get you a heart monitor," Kirchner said finally. "I want you to stay still and rest until I come back. I'm going to have Charles keep an eye on you, all right?"

I nodded and might have drifted off for a minute or two, since the next thing I recall is Charles, bending over and poking me in the forehead.

"Christopher?" he boomed, and the echo bounced around between my ears for a while.

"What?" I groaned.

"Just making sure you're still alive," he answered, and mercifully leaned back. Beyond him, it seemed like half the town was assembled – though, looking back, it was probably only a few of the church elders and pillars of the community, the kind who always get front-row seats in Low Ferry's dramatic moments.

"Do you need anything?" Charles asked. I thought about asking for water, but one of the elders piped up before I could.

"What you need are peppers," he said, voice firm and resolute. "Good for the circulation, get you back on your feet in no time."

"What if circulation's not his problem?" Jacob asked. His father, behind him, gave an emphatic nod. "He needs to see a city doctor."

"A little modern medicine couldn't hurt," Paula agreed, crossing her arms. "Have you thought about getting a blood pressure monitor, Christopher?" she asked, a little more loudly than she needed to. I'd been dead, not deaf.

"Blood pressure? Why?" another man asked.

"Do you like peppers?" the first inquired.

"Not really," I said slowly.

"Hmpf! Proves my point!"

"Well, we don't know what the problem is," Charles said. "Best not to meddle too much until –"

"Mustard poultices every night and brisk walks in the cold are good for the constitution."

"Brisk walks in the cold? What do you think tonight was?" Paula inquired.

"Brisk walks in the cold where nobody jumps out at you from behind a tree, maybe," I suggested weakly, not that any kind of walking appealed at the moment.

"Sorry about that," Charles said. "That isn't what did it, is it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Maybe it's pneumonia," Jacob's father ventured. "I think vitamins."

"Peppers have vitamins!"

"Can't I go home?" I asked Charles.

"It's past midnight, and Kirchner wants to hook you up to a bunch of machines," Charles said. The argument – peppers versus bed rest versus Modern Medicine – looked to be getting into really full swing in the background.

"What is going on in here?" a new voice demanded, and everyone fell silent. I turned my head just enough to see Dr. Kirchner standing in the doorway, a bundle of wires in one hand. "Charles!"

"What?" Charles demanded.

"He's not a circus sideshow! Out, all of you."

"He wanted to see us," Paula protested, even as Charles began sheepishly herding them out of the room.

"I don't care if he wanted the moon!" Kirchner retorted as Charles boomed, "Everyone out!"

They filed out, still bickering, and Kirchner closed the door behind them. The silence was a deep relief. I relaxed and breathed slowly, my muscles objecting every time I inhaled. The CPR, probably, raising bruises on the skin that I could feel but not see. I didn't want to sleep lying on my back, but the chances of actual movement were pretty slim. Especially with Kirchner attaching all kinds of patches and wires to my body.

"So," I said, while he fitted a monitor onto my index finger. "How bad was it this time?"

He glanced up at my face, then went back to fiddling with the machine. "You should rest, Christopher."

"I died, didn't I?"

"Your heart stopped briefly. That's why they call it heart failure."

"For how long?"

"Briefly," Kirchner said, his tone firm and final.

"So you're saying I did die," I replied. I've never really known when to stop poking at things like that.

"Christopher..." Kirchner looked frustrated, not that I blame him. At the time, however, I was sick and scared and didn't have much room in all of that to think of someone else's feelings. "Yes, medically, you were dead for a little under a minute. That's not very long. Now, are you going to stay calm about all this or do I need to give you a sedative?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm not dead *anymore*."

"Good. Try and sleep."

I was out cold by the time Kirchner finished his work, and I didn't wake again until well into the following morning. Even then, I suspect the only reason I woke up was because Kirchner had to readjust some of his machines.

"You know, heart patients are supposed to be kept calm," he said, as I watched him pull various things off my chest and hands. "So I don't want you to think I'm shouting at you, here."

"About what?" I asked, half-awake.

"I know you don't like hospitals, but you really should get to one as soon as you can. Make sure there's no new damage to your heart, maybe look into some new treatments."

"I hate hospitals," I sighed.

"I know, but I also know you're not a stupid man, Christopher, and I don't think you have a death wish."

"Not much. You really think it needs to be soon?" I asked. He got an arm behind me and helped me to sit up.

"I could say that you should go within the month, but ideally you should go as soon as you think you can travel," he said. "I'm not going to nag you, but I can't speak for everyone else if you don't go."

"Fine," I grumbled. "But I don't have to go *now*, do I?"

He laughed. "No. You don't have to go now. Though I think we should kick you off the couch if you feel up to a brisk walk in the cold as far as my car."

"Will there be peppers?" I asked. He shook his head, grinning, and

helped me to my feet. "Then away we go. Are you sure you're medically qualified? I'm not positive the best solution for a man arisen from the dead is to put him on a church sofa for a night. Even with machines."

"Well, your vocal cords aren't damaged," he answered, easing me down the hallway to the exit. "And there's clearly no neurological dysfunction. You're doing very well, Christopher, considering the situation. I think you'd be happier at home, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I admitted. I leaned heavily on his shoulder as we walked to his car.

I don't recall much of the drive down the street to Dusk Books or getting up the porch steps, not to mention the staircase from the back of the store to my kitchen. I don't remember Kirchner leaving, either. What I remember next, after this briefly lucid exchange, was waking in my bed to find someone sitting in a chair next to it.

"Are you here to check the machines again?" I asked, confused.

"He unhooked you," Lucas answered. Yes, of course he had, I remembered that.

"So I could have died in my room and nobody would have known," I grumbled.

"No," Lucas replied. "Dr. Kirchner stayed here for a few hours, then he called Charles and me and I told Charles I'd come watch you, since I know where you keep your sandwich stuff."

"Vital," I said. He was wearing ordinary clothes again, and he tilted his head to indicate an empty plate on the windowsill next to the chair. "How the hell long have you been here?" I asked.

"Not too long."

"You didn't have to. I wasn't planning on dying again."

"You scared everyone. I'd rather be here anyway, I'm tired of hearing them talk about you."

"It's awful, isn't it?" I asked. "A man can't fall over in his own municipal cemetery without –"

"Christopher, please."

I closed my mouth, startled. We stared at each other for a while.

"Of course," I said. "That was tasteless."

"Brought your mask," he said, pointing to where it sat on my table.

"Thanks – it wasn't damaged, was it?"

"No. I'd have fixed it if it was. Are you feeling all right?" he asked suddenly. "Really, I mean, just between you and me."

"Yes, mostly," I answered, sitting up and wincing. "My chest hurts a little. I'm sorry about Halloween. You looked like you were having a good time."

"Oh, I was!" he said, briefly enthusiastic. "It was a lot of fun. They don't have anything like that in the city, you know? I couldn't believe Charles let me do it, but I think I did all right. Although –" he seemed to recall that he was speaking to an invalid, which I had managed to forget for a moment too, enjoying his pleasure in the event. "I mean, you don't have any reason to apologize, I don't think you planned to...pass out."

"No – I would have done it somewhere a little more forgiving," I said, rubbing the bruise where the back of my head had knocked against a grave plaque. My shoulders felt sore as well, like I had a sunburn under my skin. "But it's still a shame. I had no idea you were going to be the Fire Man."

"I asked Charles," he said. "It's actually one of the reasons I moved here."

"Is it?" I replied.

He looked indecisive. "I should call Dr. Kirchner and let him know you're awake."

"I thought you moved here to get away from city life for a while," I said, as he crossed the room to pick up the telephone.

"I thought the same of you," he replied, dialing from a number written on his hand.

"I asked first."

He smiled. "I – Dr. Kirchner? Um, sorry, can I speak to him? Thanks." He touched the little table the phone rested on, waiting. "Hi. He's awake. Christopher, I mean. No, he seems okay. So, I'm going to – yeah. Okay. Okay, bye...bye." He hung up and looked at me sheepishly. "I don't like phones much."

"You were going to tell me why you came here?" I prompted.

He sat down again, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his thighs. He bowed his head, lacing his fingers across the back of his neck.

"I liked the idea of it. I'd read about it in a book about – well, anthropology and stuff. I'm interested in things like the Straw Bear, even when they're sort of watered down like they are here. Transformation rituals, I guess you could call them. That sounds like a non-stupid way to say it. I thought it would be neat to see this one. And I did want to get away for a while."

"From...?"

"Everything," he said, eyes still on the floor. "I chose Low Ferry because of the Straw Bear, but also because you always get cut off for at least some portion of the winter. I liked that idea. Too many distractions in the city."

"Distractions from what? Your masks?"

"Sort of," he said.

"Living out at The Pines, being the Fire Man in the Halloween festivities...none of that was accidental, then?"

"No," he said quietly. "I didn't really expect things to end up the way they did, though. With you, and with the boy and everything. And Charles has been really nice, I didn't expect that."

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring grin, although between my bad color and the headache starting to make itself known in the back of my skull it probably looked more like a grimace.

"Your turn," he said.

"Lucas, you know why I came here," I said. "I wanted a break from city life too. I've never made any secret about that."

"You're not even thirty-five," he answered. "You have a heart condition."

"That isn't why," I insisted. Lucas fixed me with a look that I had never seen, nor ever expected to see, on his face: cynical disbelief tinged with indulgence, like a parent catching their child in a lie.

"Why else would you?" he asked.

"I was tired of the city, that's all."

"Nobody just leaves the city for no reason," he replied.

"Well, if it comes to that, what's yours?" I asked. "It's fine to say you like the way things are here, but you must have had one too, or you'd have just come to visit for Halloween."

"I'm working on a piece, an art piece, and I needed quiet and time to think. And you're avoiding the question."

"Because I don't have an answer for you. Sometimes people just *do* leave the city," I said tiredly. "Burnout, change of pace, call it whatever you want. I just thought about it for a while and then did it. My father'd died a few months before, I'd just had a bad breakup and –"

It really was no use. The cynicism was back, and I hated seeing it on his normally innocent, reserved face.

" – and a very negative and frightening electrocardiogram," I finished with a sigh.

"Is it serious? Are you dying?" he said.

"Aren't we all?"

He looked hurt and embarrassed, and I regretted the question as soon as I'd asked it.

"It's not what's killing me any more than anything else at the moment," I said gently. "My heart gets confused sometimes, that's all, and beats a little faster than it should. I wouldn't let them operate to fix it – it's a dangerous procedure and there isn't really any need. Well, there wasn't. It hasn't been fatal before. Not fatal for me, anyway."

"Is that what your father died of?" he asked.

"My family's got bad hearts."

"So you left the city because...?" Lucas prompted.

I ducked my head. "It was healthier for me here. I didn't want to live the rest of my life not doing what I wanted – resisting temptation – but if I'm in a place where what I want to do is limited by what it's possible to do, and what it's possible to do can't hurt me..." I shrugged. "Besides, I didn't want to be The One With The Disease. My friends would have looked at me differently."

"Do they know? Your city friends?"

"No," I said.

"Who does?"

"Well, unless the gossips piece together a few slips I've had over the years...pretty much me, Dr. Kirchner, my city doctors, and you."

"Nobody in Low Ferry knows?" He looked shocked.

"That's sort of the point," I drawled.

"That's pretty brave of you."

"Cowardly. What people don't know can't change the way they see me, and I like being normal."

"You're not normal, Christopher."

"In their eyes I am," I said, knowing better than to think that was an insult – just his occasionally awkward way of putting things. "It doesn't have to be a valid reason for you, I'm not interested in defending myself. But I don't like being the odd one out, the man people stare at and whisper about. Neither do you."

"I suppose so," he said, glancing away. I touched his arm, and he looked back sharply.

"But you enjoyed yourself?" I tried, hoping to change the subject.

"It was..." He looked lost for a minute as he groped for words, then gave up. "It's hard to explain. It seems unreal, all the excitement and then all this."

"Well, don't worry about me," I told him. "The roads are a little rough right now, but there should be a dry spell in a week or two and I'll see a doctor in the city when I can."

He opened his mouth and it looked like he would say something, but for the longest time he didn't speak. Finally he cleared his throat.

"We should make sure you don't get any more shocks – no sudden surprises," he said.

"I don't want a completely boring life. And I don't want to be handled, though I don't see how I'll be able to help that." I tried to look reassuring. "I don't want you or anyone else to be afraid of what might happen to me. I can look after myself."

He did seem heartened by what I'd said, which made me glad. It had taken time to get to know Lucas, and I didn't want him pulling back again just because he thought I couldn't cope.

"As soon as the roads are decent again, I'll have everything looked at," I said, then glanced around in search of a clock. "What time is it anyway? What day is it?"

"November second," he answered. "About dinnertime. Want me to bring you some?"

I slid my legs off the bed and tried standing up – reasonably steady, given everything. Lucas reached out, hesitated, pulled his hand back, then grabbed one of my arms, steadying me as I stumbled.

"I need a change and a wash first," I said. "If I feel tired I'll call the cafe, they'll bring me something."

"Do you – " He was about to ask if I wanted some help, but he must have seen the annoyed resignation in my face. He stopped himself and let go of my arm. "If you need anything, I'm staying at the hotel."

"Thanks, Lucas," I said. He left me alone with an absent farewell that seemed to indicate his mind was on other matters.

It was a relief, actually, to have a few minutes to myself. I did wash up a little and managed to ease into a pair of loose pajamas, but making or even ordering a meal was beyond me, and soon I was asleep again.

SIX

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, while I was settling back into my normal rhythm and the pain from the bruises was fading, there was a sudden, unexpected spell of heat in the village. It was brief and powerful and gave way after a very uncomfortable few hours to a startling evening freeze. This melted most of the snow and at the same time hardened all the mud it left behind, clearing the roads handily. It was as though someone had heard me speak.

The weather which allowed me to leave the village safely was strange, but I had told Lucas I would go and so I had to. On the day after the freeze I closed up the shop and let Charles drive me as far as the train station outside Low Ferry, with the promise that I would call him when I needed to be retrieved in a few days' time. I caught the train across the wide flat plains of northern Illinois, and made it in to Union Station in Chicago by early afternoon.

I took a cab to the hotel, which was clean and cheap but most importantly near the hospital. I ate a quick meal, brushed my hair, changed my clothes, and went out to get on the El, to make my pilgrimage to Marjorie's bookstore.

Eighth Rare Books is, as you may have guessed, on Eighth Street in the Near South neighborhood of Chicago. Even when I lived in the city it was well out of my way – my family lived exclusively on the north side, sent me to school on the north side until I was grown, did all our shopping on the north side. Not that there's anything wrong with the north side of Chicago, but you miss a good half of the city if you never go south of downtown, where the east-west streets stop being names and start being numbers.

The bookstore is tucked down one of Chicago's ubiquitous narrow side-streets near the Harrison El stop, in a college district but not *my* college district, which was much further south. I had to make friends with a girl who was studying at Columbia before I discovered it. The books were cheap there and Marjorie took a shine to me, so I kept coming back even after my Columbia connection disconnected. Chicago has plenty of good bookstores and a couple of famous ones – Powell's, the Seminary Co-op – but secretly, from behind a desk in a shop on Eighth Street, Marjorie rules them all.

When I walked in, most of the tables near the front were taken up with college students cramming for exams out of books they couldn't afford to buy while a couple of their professors stalked the academic

shelves towards the back. Marjorie, bent over the crossword, didn't look up until I cleared a pile of books off a chair next to her desk and threw myself into it, sighing blissfully.

"Who do you think you – Christopher!" she said, beaming suddenly. A few heads across the shop raised at the sound of her voice. "What on earth...?"

"Had to come into the city," I said. "Thought I'd stop and see what you're selling these days. Nasty crowd you get in here, Marj."

"Suppose that says something about you, then," she replied tartly.

"Don't be cruel! I've come to profess true love and sweep you away to my country estate."

"Hands to yourself," she ordered, then promptly leaned forward and hugged me. "Prodigal son. If you'd given me a little warning I'd have found a fatted calf."

"Well, if you can't find it in Chicago..." I grinned. "How are you, Marj? I know it's been too long."

"Overjoyed to see you, otherwise as well as ever. Business is down a little, though. Nobody reads anymore, Christopher."

"I know it," I said. "It's this newfangled television contraption, I hear it's quite the rage with the youngsters."

"It's a fad," she said complacently. "You look like hell, by the way."

I glanced at her, then past her to where someone on the other side of a bookshelf was straining to hear us talk. Everyone loves gossip, even about people they don't know.

"I had a heart attack," I said. There was a gasp from the bookshelf.

"Jesus, Chris," Marjorie said, laying down her crossword puzzle.

"Almost. I have the resurrection thing down. Kirchner – my doctor in the village, remember, I told you about him?"

"Something, yes. Bona fide house-calling, chickens-for-payment country doctor?"

"He said I should get looked at by specialists. I think he recruited a friend of mine to help convince me, so I couldn't disappoint."

"Oh? What friend is this?" she asked, looking amused.

"New local. Lucas, the one who wanted a book we had to lie to get."

"The history scholar. Well, that's good, someone ought to be looking after you if you won't look after yourself."

"But I am! Anyway, I'm fine, it's just a routine checkup. I'm much more interested in *your* medical complaints. Is it the rheumatism or your spleen nowadays?"

"A properly vented spleen never acts up," she answered primly, and I was relieved she took the incredibly unsubtle hint to steer clear of my health.

I stayed for barely half an hour, though it was a good half-hour. Marj had a dinner she couldn't avoid attending, and I wanted to get an early night. I was meeting my old circle of friends for brunch the following morning, then spending the rest of the day being jabbed and scanned at the hospital.

My hotel room was almost eerily silent when I returned to it. You always hear stories about how hard it is to sleep, transitioning between country (too quiet) and city (too busy), but I've never been troubled by either. Perhaps because I was raised with the noise, and because I love the quiet too. The room was sterile and strange after the grit-crusted snow outside and my beloved but grimy El trains, but on the other hand it was a place to rest and I was nearly worn out.

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands and let myself drop onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Why had I even called my city friends? I couldn't say, other than that I knew they always had a Sunday brunch and had thought, in a fit of insanity no doubt derived from my recent brush with death, that it would be fun to see them. It probably would be, but that night I couldn't fathom having the energy to get off the bed and undress, let alone leave the hotel and socialize with friends I hadn't seen in years. Even the hospital would be less tiring. At least at the hospital they let you lie down on a bed most of the time.

Finally, however, I pushed myself upright long enough to change into pajamas and pull the blankets back. I was unconscious not long after my head hit the pillow, and the next thing I knew was the alarm on the nightstand buzzing me insistently awake the following morning.

There were ten of us at brunch that Sunday, myself and seven people I knew plus two new additions I'd never met before. One of them, Derek – a bespectacled and earnest man about my age – was clearly my replacement. We met at a storefront restaurant in Uptown, trendy but intimate, with the kind of huge windows that are open all summer and tightly shuttered all winter.

Most of my friends hadn't changed much, except in circumstance: those who had been single were now married, and those who had been married were either parents or divorcees or both. Gone, too, was the champagne, which was what used to make our Sunday brunches last well into Sunday dinner sometimes. There were too many children toddling around the chairs for drinking to be an approved activity, apparently.

Oh yes, there were children. Two infants and a toddler, plus a seven-year-old that Angie was babysitting for a coworker.

"There's a new play at Steppenwolf, Chris," she said, chewing on a piece of fruit from the huge bowl of fruit salad in the middle of the table. "You'd like it. I think it's about the metropolitan identity or something."

"It's tedious," my replacement added. I grinned at him. "Old ground, shiny new costumes."

"I think he'd probably like to go out, though." Mara waved a forkful of sausage before taking a bite. "Remember that jazz club we used to go to on the south side?"

"I think so," I said. "The one with the rotten bartender who watered your margarita if you asked for it blended?"

"Where Angie did a striptease for the pianist," Steve said. Angie elbowed him and pointedly rolled her eyes at the kids.

Had that been me, in the club, cheering that business on? I remembered it, so it must have been, but it seemed more like something I'd watched on television once. Television itself seemed like something I'd read about in a book. I didn't own one in the village. A television, I mean. I owned a lot of books.

"Anyway, Chris, it's closed up but the little Chinese place next to it is now a *bookah bar*," Mara continued.

"A what?" I asked.

"Turkish food and hookahs. All legal, of course. Tobacco only."

"Yes – let's take him there, he'll love it," Brent said.

"Chris the romantic," Angie added, winking at me.

"You liked *Casablanca*, didn't you?" Steve asked.

"*The Germans wore grey, you wore blue*," Mara quoted dramatically.

"I'm afraid I can't," I answered, hoping I didn't sound as sharp as I suspected. A roomful of smoke would get me no gold stars from the doctor. "Business, you know how it is. I'm not in town long enough for much pleasure."

"Business? What business?"

"Oh, dinners and meetings and things," I said vaguely. They were dissatisfied with this reply, but nobody protested too loudly. After all, they'd found a new replacement Chris, which was just as well.

I sat back and listened as they moved on to other topics. Angie's husband seemed nice, and Steve's wife apparently got him to stop drinking so much. Mara and Thomas and Brent were working their way up their respective career paths, the kind I'd once been on: money, a pretty spouse, a nice home, a big car. Thomas had already put a down payment on an expensive condo in the fashionable Gold Coast district and was moving in with his boyfriend. The children were adorable, and Derek knew enough about literature to pass muster. They were getting along just fine without me.

The one true redeeming quality of that morning's brunch was that it gave me something noisy and distracting to play back in my head later that day. I'm not one to say that modern medicine is a horrible thing, as I've reaped my share of benefits from it, but there is some terror involved. Terror! Giant whirring machines – x-rays bouncing off my insides – tubes where tubes should never be – sterile jars, cold stethoscopes, paper gowns, biopsy needles, and thick folders with charts stapled to them. The whole ghastly mess, in some kind of cyclical rerun of the time when my father's heart was failing him in the hospital and the doctors whispered to me that I ought to have mine looked at, if I really had been feeling uneven beats for a few months. I hadn't wanted to die like dad, so I'd put it off – until I realized that putting it off was probably what had killed *him*.

All this sounds more dramatic than it actually was, but I spent that day and most of the next in the hospital, while my health-insurance agent probably groaned and made a note to raise my rates. My city doctors

showed me into an office at the end of it and shrugged at me. Stress-induced heart failure, yes, but there was no further damage to the heart itself. I should learn to expect the arrhythmia. I could try surgery, but –

No, I couldn't. I didn't want to. I was scared, and why shouldn't I be? The mortality rate was high, the cost prohibitive, the return uncertain...and I lived a quiet life.

More shrugging. *It's your health, Mr. Dusk.*

And with that I fled, signing all the forms and collecting all the paperwork and running away to Eighth Rare Books. It was the next best thing to home – my village, my bookshop, my bedroom and tiny kitchen.

Marjorie understood, of course, so she coddled and entertained me while I nursed the bruised places where they'd poked me and the bloody places where they'd stuck me. We sat and talked about the usual subjects (books, writers, politics) until we were both talked out and her customers had grown annoyed with the rumpled young man who was taking up all of her time.

Thankfully, the weather held while I was in the city, so that I could see a few sights and recuperate after the hospital. I walked along the Chicago river, ambled up Michigan Avenue to the Water Tower, caught the El out to a diner I used to like on the northside (it was closed – turned into a clothing store). I went down for half a day to the big central library on Jackson and wandered for a while, pleased by the sheer volume of books but just slightly horrified, as ever, by their utter lack of organization. I spent a good deal of every day in Marjorie's shop, letting her pester me into shelving her new shipments or ringing up customers when she was busy. I picked up a few second-hand volumes that Marjorie wouldn't initially buy off the sellers, with the intent to re-bind them and send them back to her to sell as art pieces when they were ready.

The scenery on the train ride back to Low Ferry that Friday was pristine and beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that I stepped onto the platform at my stop without having gathered my wits properly or prepared the spare change I'd need to call Charles for a ride. I'd just come from the warm, comforting rocking of the train onto a windswept platform, and I was hurrying for a windbreak, rummaging in my bag, when a voice called my name.

"Hi! Hello there, Saint Christopher! Come and say hello!"

I looked up and stopped dead. A young woman in a thick woolen dress and dark heavy boots was running towards me. Beyond her, an older man was securing the door of a camper-trailer hooked to a large, battered pickup truck. One of the Low Ferry boys was loitering around the camper, looking curious.

"Gwen!" I said, startled. "Is that you?"

"Who else?" she asked, stopping in front of me and looking me up and down. "Well. I heard you'd died but you don't look resurrected."

"Who told you – never mind," I said, because the boy at the edge of the camper had turned around. It was Lucas's student, the one who'd sold me my half-cord of firewood.

"Come on, then," Gwen said, hands on her hips, and I grinned and shoved my arms through them, hugging her. She hugged back, tight enough for me to swing her up and around while she laughed. "Oh, Saint, it's good to see you."

Gwen has been in love with me – or so she claims, though I'm skeptical – since the first year I lived in Low Ferry. She comes from a traveling clan, five or six enormous extended families in total, called the Friendly. They sell their wares and skills from Michigan down to mid-Texas, depending on the time of year, following the work when it's going, following their own whims when there isn't work. They pass through Low Ferry every winter, and Gwen always has a sweet smile for me.

During my first winter in the country, the Friendly had made camp at The Pines when a cousin of Gwen's caught pneumonia and was looking pretty grim. In a howling storm they managed to get a call through from the Culligan farm, but Kirchner couldn't go alone – earlier that year he'd been thrown by a horse and broken his leg. I'd volunteered to drive him and we wrestled an old manual-transmission van out to the Culligan place so that Kirchner could get Benjamin some antibiotics and an IV drip. Kirchner saved his life, but Gwen imprinted on me. When they learned my name was Christopher, none of them would stop calling me Saint.

"I didn't think you'd make it through for another month, this year," I told her, when she'd given up trying to hug the life out of me.

"Well, the road was good and we'd worn out our welcome where we were," she said, dragging me towards the trailer. "We're on our way to make camp. Do you need a ride?"

"I do, as a matter of fact," I answered, allowing myself to be pulled into the front seat of the truck after Gwen. Her father, Tommy, shut the door on the trailer and slapped my shoulder in greeting as he climbed into the driver's seat. The boy crawled into the back of the cab, looking excited. The warmth was a welcome relief, as was the grunt and purr of the engine.

"Good to see you, Saint," Tommy said, easing the truck out of the train-station parking lot.

"You too, Tommy. I see you brought the whole clan," I said, as Tommy pulled the truck neatly into a slow-moving line of cars and campers of various sizes and ages, all of them muddy and weather-beaten. "You just get into town?"

"Manner of speaking," Tommy replied with a grin, not taking his eyes off the road. "Buyin' supplies."

"From whom?" I asked. Tommy tapped the side of his nose. The train station was a popular place for truck-drivers to pull up for the night. Unscrupulous drivers sometimes sold some of what they had to people who needed it. They got to pocket the cash, after all, and insurance covered the loss.

"Lucky we found you," Gwen continued, as the caravan made its way out onto the road. Mud and snow pocked the surface, making it a little perilous, and the campers moved slowly. "Been to city?"

"Just came back," I said. To the Friendly, City is less an article than a generalized location, like Here or There – they try not to go near the big ones if they can avoid it. "And where've you been?"

Gwen shrugged cheerfully. "We've been round and about. Do you need any chickens?"

A loaded question requiring a cautious answer: "Dead or alive?"

"Prefer 'em dead?" Tommy asked.

"Usually. I'll take a few, but not for a few days," I said, as the truck grumbled its way towards Low Ferry. When the Friendly pass through they usually settle in the field out by The Pines and drive in to sell their goods: clothing sewn by hand, chickens and rabbits raised on the move, sometimes knickknacks picked up from other small villages. They have a man who sharpens knives and scissors, and a couple of leather-workers who are good at fixing tack or shoes. And they have the most remarkable storyteller I've ever met. It's worth paying more, for their goods, because their company comes with it for free.

"Is it long, the train to city?" Gwen asked.

"Not really. City itself's a little tiring, though," I replied.

"So I hear," Tommy observed.

"Which reminds me, how come you're hanging around with these troublemakers?" I asked, turning to the boy.

"Came to see the Friendly," the boy piped up. "Bernie MacKenzie said they were coming."

"Your parents know you're taking rides from strangers?" I inquired.

"Do yours?" Gwen asked, elbowing me.

"Oh, I'm a latchkey kid," I answered. The boy leaned over the seat, watching the road. "Good to see you though, Gwen."

"Is it now?" Gwen replied. "Were you waiting for the Friendly, or for me?"

I laughed. "No other woman for me but you, Gwen."

"Easy, boy," Tommy put in.

"It's just his cat's tongue," Gwen said complacently. "He's a city boy, they love their land more than their women."

"Unkind!" I said. "Don't tell me you don't love the road more than your man, Gwen."

"Haven't got a man," she replied. "Besides, it's different. People change when they own land."

"Well, we can't all live as free as the Friendly do."

"Isn't it true!" she laughed. "And we're not all born to it. Do you know Don's granddaughter?"

"Irene, right?" I asked.

"Well, what do you think but she went to the University two years ago and now she's marrying a land-owner and keeping his house."

"Irene didn't really like caravanning, though, did she?"

"It's not for those who can't do with their hands," Tommy grumbled. "And there's no excuse for mooching around with your head on crooked."

"Which just goes to show," Gwen reflected, "that the Friendly are chosen people and it's nothing to do with blood or mothers."

"Chosen by whom?" I inquired.

"Well-asked," Tommy said. "Your wit's as sharp as ever."

The first of the caravan passed the turn for the main road then. Tommy pulled out of the string, making for my shop.

"Hear there's a man out at The Pines," he said, as we drove up the road. It was quiet, not many people on the street, and those who were stopped and watched with equal amounts of pleasure and anxiety as the truck came past. The relationship of the Friendly to Low Ferry is...complicated.

"I suppose you have this kid to thank for that," I said, tilting my head to the side and knocking the boy with it. He took the hint and leaned back. "Why, are you setting up camp out there?"

"Thought we might. Think he's liable to chase us off?"

"Just a renter," I replied. "Name's Lucas. He's not likely to try and talk to you, let alone make trouble."

"Very good," Tommy decided. "We're not in a way to offer much of a bribe."

"Bad year?"

"Not so bad as some," Gwen said.

"Well, wait around here a while, I'm sure you'll do decent business," I said. "Pull up – come in for a little while? Make you a hot drink and let you put your feet up."

"Won't say no," Tommy said, parking the truck camper in front of Dusk Books with accustomed ease. The boy jumped out of the truck and ran off to the cafe, probably to spread the word of the Friendly's arrival. I held the front door for Tommy and Gwen, then led the way up the stairs and into my kitchen. Tommy sat down at the table, stretching out his legs and leaning back comfortably. Gwen, entirely unself-conscious, sat cross-legged on the bed after shedding her muddy shoes on the kitchen mat.

"So you aren't in good health," Tommy said, as I rummaged in the cupboards.

"Tea or coffee? No, I'm fine," I replied.

"Tea please."

"English Breakfast or Jasmine?"

"Jasmine, and don't change the subject," Gwen interrupted. "A trip to city and a tired look and the boy said you'd been ill. Doesn't look like influenza to me, or gout or – one of Cupid's diseases, maybe?" she asked with a sly look.

I laughed and shook my head while I ran the water. "Just a matter of the heart."

"Oh," Tommy said, raising his eyebrows. "My father had matters of the heart. He took the nitroglycerine. Died in bed, though."

"Well, that's a peaceful way to go, eh?" I asked, putting the kettle on the stove.

"Not according to his wife," Gwen said with a giggle.

Tommy coughed. "Tell us more about this man at The Pines."

I hesitated, feeling oddly unwilling to discuss Lucas with them. He'd be terrified of a band of strangers camping on his doorstep and I didn't want to arm them any more than they already were by dint of his shyness and silence.

"He won't run you off, but you're best settled not too close to the cottage," I said finally. "He's shy and from City. He doesn't take easily to strange people."

"Low Ferry like him?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Don't dislike him, anyway." It occurred to me that more people spoke to me about Lucas than spoke to Lucas himself. "But if you take my advice you'll leave him in peace."

"Scared for us or for him?" Gwen asked.

"I'm not scared for anyone," I protested.

"What's he do?" Tommy asked.

"He's an artist."

"Oho!" Gwen laughed. "Painter? Photographer?"

"More of a sculptor," I said. "He makes masks. He was Fire Man at the Halloween celebration this year."

"We were sorry to miss that," Tommy said. "Like to meet this fellow, I think."

"You can come with us," Gwen offered. "To make sure nobody needs your services as a knight."

"Well, wait a little while, at least," I said. The kettle began to whistle. "I'm dead on my feet."

"Oh, we'll be setting up tonight at any rate," Tommy said. "Won't go up to see him till tomorrow."

"Probably just as well." I passed him a mug and held one out for Gwen, who got off the bed and came to the table.

Talk turned from The Pines to news of the village, and then to news of the Friendly. Their family connections are wide and varied, traveling as much as they do, but that isn't always a good thing. There are plenty of Travelers in America, if you know where to look, and not all of them have an honest reputation. Some specialize in theft and fraud. Still, the Friendly are good people and don't deserve the cold looks they occasionally get from those who don't know them yet.

"We should go," Gwen said, when their tea was done and mine was getting cold. "Others'll complain if we aren't there to help set up camp. You will come visit tomorrow, Saint Christopher?"

"Of course," I said, and hugged her again. "Looking forward to it. I'll bring my wallet," I added with a wink.

"Good man. We'll show ourselves out," Tommy said, and they clattered down the stairs. I watched from the window as they climbed into Tommy's truck and pulled away.

When they were gone I poured out the remains of the tea, put the mugs in the sink, and lay down for a minute, just to stretch out before I unpacked my bag. I was asleep almost immediately.

I woke, disoriented, to the telephone ringing. I hadn't turned any lights on and it was already dark; the only illumination came through the window from the street. I fumbled towards my desk, almost knocked both the lamp and the phone over, got the lamp switched on, and answered just before my answering machine would have picked up.

"H'lo," I mumbled, throwing myself into the chair.

"Christopher?" a hesitant voice on the other end asked.

"Lucas?" I said. My breath was coming short and I felt a little bit like I was falling apart. I inhaled deeply, relieved when I found that I could.

"Hi," Lucas said apologetically. "Bad time?"

"No, sorry, I just woke up."

"Is it late? I didn't think...it's not very late..."

"I got home from the city and fell asleep," I told him. "Are you okay?"

There was an awkward cough on the other end of the line. "Yeah, I – think so. I don't know."

"You don't...know?" I prompted.

"Christopher, there's a bunch of people here, they're outside my house," he said. "Down in the field, below the hill."

I rubbed my face and laughed halfheartedly. "Is that all?"

"It's not *all*, there are strange people in the field!" he said, and I caught a note of hysteria in his voice.

"Sorry," I said. "But you don't need to worry, they're just the Friendly."

"How do you know that, they –"

"Not friendly, *the* Friendly. I know them, they're okay."

"Who are they, though? I was coming back from the village and they were all there, and I had to go around and there are fires and –"

"Lucas, calm down. They're just travelers. They come through every winter."

A long silence. "Oh."

"They're harmless, they won't hurt you. I spoke to them this afternoon, they know you're there."

"What did you tell them?"

"I just said you were there, asked them to leave you alone. They seemed interested in you. I told them you make masks."

"Why'd you tell them that?" he asked worriedly.

"Well, they asked, and I didn't think it was a secret," I replied. "Take a deep breath or two. They won't bother you tonight, they just needed someplace to camp and they usually camp out there."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. Two of them gave me a ride in to town from the train station."

"Oh – god, Christopher, I'm sorry, how are you? Are you okay?"

I laughed again. "Relax, Lucas."

"But I – "

"I'm fine. You're safe tonight. I'll come out tomorrow, say hello, introduce you to them."

"Well, I – I'd like to see you and hear about it. I would," he said, a note of shy pleasure creeping into his voice. "But maybe you shouldn't, you should rest – and anyway you don't have to introduce me. You don't, do you?"

"Kiddo, either I introduce you to them or they're going to come introduce themselves," I said, amused. He was silent for so long that I asked, "Lucas? Still there?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You'll like them. I'll be out tomorrow to visit, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly.

"Good. Now. I'm going to go back to bed."

"Okay," he repeated. "Uh. Bye..."

"Goodnight, Lucas," I said, and hung up the phone.

When I woke, late the next morning, some of the Friendly were already in town. They were working their way down the street, store by store, asking to put handcrafts on display for sale or barter goods for things they couldn't make themselves, like hammers and rubber boots. Others would be out visiting the farms, peddling their services as hired hands or carpenters.

I opened the store after breakfast and was immediately swamped – not by Friendly, but by townspeople who had seen me return the day before or heard about it from others.

"So," Paula said, as she browsed. "How was the big city? Get mugged?"

"No," I laughed, delicately cutting the cover off one of the books I was re-binding. "It's not that dangerous."

"You can't be too careful," Nolan said, laying down a stack of magazines to purchase.

"Well, that's true, about being careful," I allowed. "But I grew up in Chicago, you know."

"What was that like?" Nolan asked.

"Busy," I said absently, leaving my work to ring him up.

"Why'd you go for so long, anyway?" Paula asked. "You didn't even bring any books back."

"I did," I said, pointing to the one I'd been dissecting.

"Not big boxes of them though, like you normally get in the mail," she replied.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Ron saw you last night, said all you had with you was your bag," Charles answered shamelessly. "Getting out of a Friendly truck, he said."

"Nothing wrong with that. They saw me at the station, thought I'd save you the drive."

"They camped at The Pines?" Paula asked. "Lucas won't like that."

"Lucas is fine," I said, shoving Nolan's magazines into a paper bag and handing them to him.

"All right, no need to be cranky, I'm just saying," Paula replied.

"He can look after himself," I assured her.

"Doubt that," Charles remarked. "He checked your store every day while you were gone."

"Flattering, but not an indication of his dependence on me."

"Oooh, see, he goes to Chicago, comes back with a lot of big words," Nolan teased.

"You, scram, before I use some of them on you," I replied.

"Yes *sir*, city boy," he called, as he left.

"So," Paula came up to the counter and leaned against it, crossing her arms. "You went to Chicago. And...?"

I glanced from her to Charles to the three other people in the shop, all of whom were listening intently. I sighed.

"I saw some doctors," I said.

"*And?*" Charles asked.

"They're still waiting on some tests, but apparently I'm fine," I said, not quite meeting his gaze. "And if we could *all* pretend," I drawled, catching a few guilty looks, "that Halloween never happened, I'd appreciate that."

Paula grabbed my chin and pulled me around to look at her. She was serious for a moment, but eventually a smile spread across her face.

"People talk," she said. "Don't dish it if you can't take it, Blue-Eyes."

"Duly noted," I replied. "Now, everyone, pay up or move on – I have errands to run. Go on, out."

The eavesdroppers sheepishly set down the books they'd been pretending to read. As they left, Charles handed me a mystery novel and took out his wallet.

"You're not telling us something," he said.

"Remind me to tell you about the hideous beast my ex is involved with," I answered lightly. "Go on, Charles. Go ye and spread the good news of my continuing health."

He shook his head, but he put his hat on and stepped back out into the cold, briskly windy morning. I went to put my tools away and set my workbench to rights before heading out to The Pines.

Once outside, I enjoyed the brisk weather. It was a clear day, and clear days were becoming rare. I could have kept the shop open and done good business, but people would still need books that afternoon. I'd made a promise to Lucas. He probably hadn't slept very well.

On the way out of town I happened to see the boy, perched – for whatever arcane reasons children have – in the branches of a snow-covered tree. I stopped underneath it and stared upwards while his progress down from the weaker limbs shook snow onto the street.

"What on earth are you doing up there?" I asked, shading my eyes.

"Looking for you," he said.

"Well, I'm not usually up trees."

"It's a lookout post," he said, unconcerned. "Coming down!"

He slid off the branch, landed on another one below, swung out to grasp a low branch over the sidewalk, and dropped the last eight feet into a pile of powdery snow.

"What did you want me for?" I asked.

"Thought you might be going to see the Friendly. Can I come?"

"Did your parents say you could?"

"I'm safe with you, aren't I?"

"That's not an answer," I said.

"Wasn't meant to be," he replied cheerfully.

I shrugged and walked on. "Your funeral if you get grounded for it."

"I won't be," he said confidently, as we strolled down the narrow sunken path in the snow. "Will you see Lucas too?"

"I'm going out there to see him – have to open formal diplomatic negotiations between him and the Friendly, or he'll hide in his little den and they'll poke well-meaning sticks through the bars."

"Gwen's really nice."

"She is. He'll like them once he gets to know them," I said, in part trying to convince myself.

"Everyone at school says their parents won't let them go out to the camp because they think they'll be stolen."

"I doubt it," I answered. "When I was a kid my mom threatened to sell me to the gypsies if I was bad. I always thought it sounded pretty exciting."

"Gwen says we're not supposed to call them gypsies."

"Gwen's very right, and I apologize in absentia."

"What's that?"

"Latin."

He scowled at me and ran on ahead, plowing through the snow. In the distance the Friendly's camp was already visible, a low and uneven black skyline of trucks and campers and shoveled snow. Smoke rose from a handful of cook-fires.

By the time we actually arrived, the boy was coated in snow from the waist down and happily windblown, eager to see everything and everyone. It was hard to deny that the Friendly camp was an adventure for a village boy, full of dark places to explore and unusual things to see.

"Hello, Saint Christopher!" called a voice, and I turned from the boy, in conference with a handful of Friendly children, to find Tommy's brother Pete bearing down on me.

"Good morning, Pete," I said, offering my hand. He shook it and then clapped a book into it triumphantly.

"I have books to trade to you," he said, pointing at it. I opened the book. The pages were blank, but the binding was exquisite – soft suede leather, the paper block tightly stitched.

"Where did this come from?" I asked. "Your work?"

"Good god no. My son. Keen craftsman, very good fingers. There are twenty in all, more can be made."

"I don't think I could sell more, but I'll buy your lot of twenty. How much are you asking?"

We haggled, of course. With the Friendly one must. On the other hand, as disgusted as I pretended to act over the final price, it wasn't a bad deal. It would take a while – maybe a year or two – to shift twenty leather-bound journals, but Christmas was coming. And I like to do business with the Friendly, especially with Gwen and her family.

"Come have some hospitality," Pete said, gesturing me over to one of the cook-fires. There was bean stew bubbling in the embers, and some mysterious mulled drink warming nearby. He poured out two helpings of whatever-it-was and passed me one of the mugs.

"Glad to see you in good health," I said, as we stood in the cold and sipped, watching the daily activity of the camp go on around us.

"It's been decent this year. Tight, but not so bad as some," he said.

"So Gwen told me," I replied, looking around at the people building low walls from the snow, stirring pots over other fires, taking advantage of the spaciousness of the field to do a little cleaning in their campers.

"You seem well too, though Gwen tells me you've been sick," Pete said. I shook my head.

"I do just fine, Pete."

"Gwen tells me also that you're the guardian of the man up the hill," he added, nodding towards the cottage. "Saw him last night, watching us."

"Did you? I wouldn't credit Lucas with spying from behind the curtains."

"No, nor he did," Pete agreed. "Slunk out late at night and did a little circle – reminded me of an animal looking for handouts but not willing to come close-to. Gwen gave him a chance to make himself known, didn't take it."

"No, he wouldn't."

"Does he need your defending?" Pete asked. "You should know by now that Gwen's a kind woman. Grown woman too," he added, with a sidelong grin.

"Yes, I know."

"It's a shame you're a land-owner. She thinks very highly of you."

I laughed. "Was that a proposition of marriage from a near male relative?"

"You could do worse. Are you really happy here? The same faces, the same trees, the same buildings year after year?" Pete asked.

"One doesn't think about it much, as a land-owner," I said. "Though everyone else apparently thinks of it for me."

"Saint Christopher!" another voice called, and Gwen came running across the camp, hauling the boy after her. "Good morning!"

"Yes, it is," I answered, allowing her to tackle me in a hug and give me a kiss on the cheek. "And how are you?"

"Very good. Looking forward to meeting your mysterious Lucas," she answered, brushing hair out of her eyes.

"Ah, that was a hint," I said, amused. "I'm ready to run up to the cottage when you are."

"Just have to summon father. FATHER!" she called, and Tommy put his head out of one of the campers.

"Just coming now," he said, climbing down into the snow. "Good morning, Saint."

"Morning, Tommy. Pete, you coming along?" I asked.

"Fraid not – got some chores to mind," Pete said. "Run along with you."

"Running along," I said. Gwen took my hand in hers, Tommy eyeing us suspiciously as we made our way towards the cottage on the hill.

"You have to be nice," the boy said, trotting along next to Gwen.

"I am always nice," Gwen replied loftily.

"But really nice. He's shy."

"I'd never have guessed," Tommy said drily.

"He knows a lot. Like everything about history," the boy continued.

Gwen looked amused. "Whose history?"

The boy opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again with a snap, surprised. I shot Gwen a smile, leaned forward, and knocked on the kitchen door.

There was the scrape of a chair on the floor – Lucas must have been waiting in the kitchen. I could easily picture him vacillating between wanting to sit quietly and wait, or wanting to work to take his mind off things. I heard his slow footsteps before he opened the door.

"Christopher," he said, relieved. "I thought –"

His gaze flicked past my shoulder then, and I could see the barest rush of fear behind his eyes.

"Good morning, Lucas," I said. "I've brought some friends who wanted to meet you."

He recovered well and stepped back, gesturing us inside. "Please, come in."

"This is Tommy and his daughter Gweniveve –"

"Call me Gwen," she said easily.

"– and you know the kid," I added with a grin, as they came inside and the boy shut the door behind them.

"H'lo," Lucas mumbled, ducking his head.

"Pleasure," Tommy said, and Gwen held out her hand. Lucas wiped his palms on the tail of his shirt, then looked horrified at his own actions and shook her hand hastily.

"I don't suppose, being new, you'll have heard about us," Gwen said, as Tommy peered around the bare kitchen.

"No – no," Lucas confessed. "Are you, uh, staying long?"

"A bit," Tommy said. "Not through the winter."

"Being the local land-owner and all, we thought we'd come say hello, ask permission to stay," Gwen announced. Tommy frowned at her.

"It's, uh, it's not my land," Lucas stammered. "I just pay rent. I don't even pay rent on the field."

"Well, better to ask," Gwen replied. "We're in sight of your windows, after all."

"It isn't my place to say," Lucas murmured.

"Do you have visitors often?" Tommy asked.

"Not to speak of. Christopher and my student," Lucas said, and then blurted, "I don't care, honestly, I don't think you'll rob me and I haven't got anything worth stealing anyway."

Tommy and Gwen glanced at each other before bursting out laughing. The boy elbowed Lucas in the ribs.

"It's all right, Lucas. They know," I said gently.

"Just...so that you do," Lucas continued, flushing red.

"There's no reason to be scared of us," Gwen said. "Or worry overmuch about our opinion. That's something land-owners do."

Lucas looked at her, shy still but no longer paralyzed by it. "I suppose it doesn't matter as much when you don't have the same neighbors from one day to the next."

"Was on the tip of my tongue to say," Tommy agreed. "You could learn from him, Christopher."

"I already have," I agreed.

"We're told you're an artist," Gwen continued. "Do you barter at all? Or are you wealthy already?"

"I...never have but I could, I guess. Would you....would you like to see?" Lucas asked, gesturing to the doorway into his workshop. Tommy, already standing near the door, leaned through with interest, Gwen bending around his shoulder.

"Ooo-ho," Tommy said, impressed. "Did you make all of those?"

"All but a few," Lucas replied, as they stepped into the workshop. He followed them, the boy pushing ahead, and I stood in the doorway and watched, pleased.

"You must spend a fair amount of time at work," Tommy observed, reaching up to one long rope of masks and pushing it gently to make it sway.

"Most of my time, usually. Less, in the past week or two," Lucas replied. Gwen reached out for one of the barely-finished masks on the table. "Watch the paint, it's still wet."

She carefully balanced the edges of the mask on her fingertips, admiring it. I don't remember what question she asked him, but it led to another and another – both her and Tommy peppering him with inquiries about his craft and his materials, while the boy played somewhat nervously with leather scraps and glue at one of the tables, avoiding looking directly at any of the masks.

With every sentence, the tension in Lucas's shoulders seemed to relax a fraction. His voice settled down from a tight, nervous tone into his natural register, and he started moving quickly among the worktables, fear forgotten as he picked up other masks or materials to show them. The

Socrates mask had been finished, and he showed it off – it did look wonderful, painted a deep cream shade and haloed in dried hemlock.

"That man is born Friendly," Tommy said to me in an undertone, watching Gwen admire Socrates as Lucas held it to the window-light to show her how the shadows fell. "Some fool's ruined him, is all."

"Ruined him?" I asked.

"Some teacher. Or his father, maybe, that happens sometimes. Could be natural temperament, I suppose. He likes to sell his wares, though."

"He likes to talk about his masks. That's different."

"Not to my family," Tommy replied. "Nor to him. Lucas!" he called.

"Yes?" Lucas asked, looking up from the mask.

"Are you in need of any cold-weather clothing?" Tommy asked. "We make our own and sell it. Also carved wood toys, some leather working, some food. Rabbits and chickens for cooking."

"You want masks?" Lucas gave Gwen a confused look. "What for?"

"Well, for beauty's sake, and they'll sell well," she said, beaming at him. "We'll take 'em next town over, put 'em up for sale there."

"I could use a new coat," he said, a trace of self-consciousness creeping back in. "Would that be expensive?"

"Not for you," Tommy clapped him on the shoulder. "Come down to camp this evening and we'll fit you."

"Oh I – I could do that," Lucas agreed. Gwen picked up a half-finished mask – clay, on a wire armature – and laughed at the puff-cheeked face on it. Lucas took it, pointing out details to her, even smiling a little. He'd taken to Gwen much faster than anyone else he'd met, myself included.

I had a moment of concern that it was Gwen, and not the Friendly, which interested him and made him forget himself for a while. Little good comes of land-owners chasing after pretty Friendly girls. They're like the old stories about selkies: they might stay awhile if they liked the look of you, but it was never for life. To enjoy the *idea* of the Friendly was fine, but it was dangerous to take their easygoing affection too personally. Gwen's older sister had broken hearts in Low Ferry before.

Honestly, I shouldn't have worried. Lucas protected his heart well. He was interested in love, I think, in the way we express and attract it, but I don't believe he saw that he had a share in it. As fascinated and confused by people as he was – the way they came together, the way they cared for each other – it seemed to me that his fascination was almost always the quiet, envious analysis of a forced outsider.

When Gwen and Tommy finished asking questions and started to talk about going back to camp, I let them go ahead of me into the kitchen and hung back a little. I caught Lucas by the arm, stopping him before he could follow them.

"You'll be all right with them, won't you?" I asked quietly. He looked through the doorway at them, then at me, and gave me a hesitant smile.

"I think so," he said. "Thanks for...coming up and stuff."

"My pleasure. I'm glad – "

"Christopher!" Gwen called, and I let go of Lucas's arm. "Are you coming back with us, Saint?"

"Be right there, Gwen," I called back, and smiled at Lucas. "See you in town."

He nodded and moved aside so I could pass through to the kitchen. Gwen and Tommy were waiting for me at the door.

"Does your maskmaker in there know there's a bird living in his holly?" Gwen asked, smiling.

"The Waxwing? Sure," I said, following Gwen's gaze to where the little black-banded yellow bird was watching us, head pulled in, feathers fluffed complacently. "He scared out a nest of them when he fixed the roof, that one hung around. Smug young thing, isn't it?"

"With good reason, I reckon," Tommy said cryptically. "Come on down to camp, Saint, and we'll drive you in to town."

"Sure. Where'd the boy go?" I asked, as we made our way down the hill.

"Ran off," Gwen said. "Probably cutting through a field or two to get home."

"Should have waited, you could have taken him as far as the asphalt," I said.

"Oh, I'm sure he's used to looking after himself," Tommy remarked, and we returned to the scattered cars of the Friendly camp just in time for a hot lunch.

SEVEN

AS THE WINTER grew colder, an increasing number of people in Low Ferry began to appear in the colorful clothing that the Friendly made, either newly-purchased or taken out of storage from previous years. They were beautiful things, well worth the cost: gloves with buttery leather on the palms, quilted coats decorated with brass buttons and fleecy lining, straps covered in beads and bells that fitted over snow-boots to make them look more festive. The Friendly would sell for cash or barter for goods, and for a small fee would tailor the clothing too.

A few days after the Friendly arrived, in the middle of a snowstorm that had already dumped enough on us to close the roads, Nona Harrison had her twin babies. We'd wanted to get her into town for it – Nolan's mother said she could stay with them – but the babies came a little early and caught us all by surprise. Kirchner was only halfway to the farm, bumping over unplowed snow, at the moment they drew their first breaths. Fortunately Low Ferry had a midwife who lived out that way and tended to sit up with expectant mothers late in the pregnancy, just in case. Betsy looked after Nona just fine during the birth, and anyway home birth's pretty common in our part of the country.

We were all glad the babies and Nona were healthy, of course, and happy for an easy birth. We expected the population of Low Ferry to increase by two, just like I'd told Marjorie it would.

But it didn't. Not quite.

"Did you know Betsy?" Paula asked me, when the news finally hit town. "She wasn't born here, you know. Came out in the seventies, my dad says. I think she was a hippie."

"More *of* her than *know* her, she's not a big reader," I answered, as I stitched some new thread into one of my repairs. I cut the thread, applied a little glue, and set it on the workbench to dry. "She...wasn't a big reader, I mean. But I'm sorry she's gone, of course."

"Me too, but..." Paula looked uncertain.

"But?" I said, coming to the counter. She shook her head.

"It's weird to say it out loud. Maybe I shouldn't even mention it," she said.

"Is this gossip, or just a personal judgment?" I asked. "Nobody in town had a problem with her, did they?"

"No! That's not it at all. Nobody's happy about it, that I know of," Paula said. "It's just...yeah, it's terrible she died. But everyone's sort of thinking..." she gave me a troubled frown.

"At least it wasn't Nona or the babies?" I asked gently.

"Yeah." She plucked at a loose sliver of wood on the counter's worn edge. "I'm sorry to lose Betsy, but it's always harder when a baby dies. I'm glad Nona's boys are healthy."

"Well," I said, and then stopped and glanced away myself.

"What?"

"Have you heard people talking about them?" I asked.

"About the boys?" she said. "Not much. What's going on?"

"Listen, I don't believe this, you know I'm a practical guy. But I don't exactly set policy in the village," I said, lowering my voice. "People sort of...they think there's something wrong with them. Spiritually."

Paula cocked her head. "Really? Why?"

"I don't know exactly, but Kirchner's been out to see Nona and he says she's not doing as well as she could, which I think is stress but other people think is...sinister, you know? Steve Harrison says he's worried about her. Some of the church women won't go out there, or won't go alone..." I shrugged. "I think they think the babies killed Betsy."

"Killed her!" Paula looked shocked.

"Well, she did die at the Harrison place, and it wasn't very long after the birth. I'm only telling you what I've heard," I said, as Lucas and the boy entered the shop. I put a finger to my lips and Paula nodded. Lucas hung his coat up on a hook near the door, gave Paula a nod, and vanished into the shelves. The boy examined the comic books critically.

"When are you getting new ones?" he demanded.

"The roads are out, kid," I said. "Unless they're planning on airlifting them in, it'll be at least a week. Buy a real book, feed your mind."

"My mind's full already," he replied.

"No such thing," Paula ruffled his hair and turned to leave. "See you around, Christopher."

"You know where to find me," I answered. When the door closed behind her, I called, "She's gone now, Lucas, you can come out."

He gave me a sheepish smile around the corner of a bookshelf. "Force of habit."

"No skin off my nose. Nice coat, by the way – is that the one Gwen and Tommy sold you?" I asked, coming around the counter to examine it on its peg near the door. It was thick and gray, with black hook-and-eye fastenings and a soft black lining on the pockets and hood. He gave me a proud nod.

"I gave them eight masks for it, promised two more," he said. "Cheap at the price."

"Ten masks will sell for a lot, though – what did they ask you for?"

He gave me a blank look. "Ten masks."

"You didn't haggle?"

"No...should I have?" he asked.

"Well, yes. It's expected."

"Ah," he said, flushing a little. "That explains why Gwen looked at me funny."

"Undoubtedly," I drawled.

"Doesn't matter," he added bravely. "I feel like I got a fair price and it's not like the masks were doing me any good."

"Well, as long as you're happy," I said, ducking behind my counter. The boy rummaged in the magazines before coming up to the register.

"Any news today?" he asked, giving me an expectant look.

"Nothing for your tender ears," I answered. He scowled. "Unless you hadn't heard about Betsy."

"I heard she died," he said.

"And I've heard half-a-dozen rumors about it, but I'm not believing any of them yet," I replied.

"I wouldn't take your job for the world, Christopher," Lucas told me. "All that talking."

"Well, it isn't for everyone," I allowed. "How can I help you today? Or are we just browsing?"

"We've just been visiting the Friendly," the boy said.

"Oh yes?" I asked.

"They want you to come have dinner. There's a big meal," he added. I glanced at Lucas, who coughed.

"Gwen said they'd like to see you at the camp," he said. "And their storyteller specifically asked about you. He wasn't happy he'd missed you when you visited earlier."

"Well, of course I'll come," I replied. "When did they say they were having it?"

Lucas and the boy exchanged a look.

"In about forty minutes," Lucas said. "Sorry about the short notice."

"Typical Friendly," I grinned. "You two keep an eye on the shop while I get my coat, all right?"

I ran up the stairs and fetched down a coat that had been given to me two years before – it had been pressed on me by one of Tommy's sisters, who insisted I should be paid for driving Kirchner out to treat young Benjamin. Gwen said the blue brought out my eyes, but sometimes I felt it was almost too bright – like when I was walking out to The Pines with Lucas in his deep gray and the boy in a faded black hand-me-down parka. Still, the Friendly would be pleased to see me in it and it was a good winter coat.

By the time we reached the edge of town we could see thin columns of smoke rising from the cooking fires, smudging dark against an already gray sky. The trailers and cars had been arranged in a loose three-quarters circle, designed to block as much wind as possible. It worked remarkably well: there was a moment when we passed into camp and actually felt the temperature change, the wall of warmer air enveloping us.

Gwen and Tommy greeted us with shouts. I braced myself as best I could and managed not to fall over when ten-year-old Benjamin dashed out of nowhere and tackled me around the waist.

"You didn't say hi last time," he said, looking up at me. "Storyteller's mad with you."

"You big liar, no he isn't," I answered. "I had very important business to attend to. You're growing up too fast, Scrawny."

"Welcome back," he grinned, before grabbing my hand to haul me over to one of the fires. Several chickens were roasting on spits over it, and a nearby flame had potatoes boiling in an enormous pot.

Seated on a rickety folding chair in front of the many spit-handles at the fire was an older man with a hawk-like nose and bushy white eyebrows. A cane hung on the back of the chair and he was wrapped in a few layers of blankets, but he looked like nothing so much as a king surveying his lands. Benjamin nodded respectfully at him, gave me a wave, and ran off.

"Christopher," I said, bending to shake the old man's hand. "It's good to see you again."

"Likewise, Christopher," he replied with a wide grin. "Come sit with an old man. I didn't see you when we made camp."

"I snuck in," I said.

"And I was hiding from being put to work," he answered. "You, boys, you two, come here," he added to Lucas and his student. "Can't have too much company when you're doing nothing. Keeps me from being interrupted."

"I don't believe a word of it," I said. "You're managing the whole family from your seat next to the chickens, Storyteller."

"If only I had such power," he chuckled. "Lucas, sit by me if you please."

I dusted off a low wooden bench and sat down on it, the boy claiming the rest for himself in a sprawl. Lucas followed the other Christopher's gesture and sat next to him, perching unsteadily on a rickety folding chair.

"Unlike you, your friend is a very intent young scholar," Christopher said to me. "He comes every day to listen to me babble. He has, if nothing else, learned how to sit very still."

"I'm not surprised," I answered. "Lucas likes to listen. And I'd have come out if I could get away, but the shop –"

"Oh, don't talk to me about shops!" Christopher laughed. "You should have come sooner, Saint."

"I'm here now," I pointed out.

"So you are, thanks to my spies." Christopher beamed at the boy, who beamed back. "And you have many new stories to tell me, I imagine."

"A few," I said. "What about you?"

"Oh, lad," he said. "You should know by now all my stories are the same."

"Well, we'll see," I said. "Did Lucas tell you he played the Fire Man at Halloween this year?"

Christopher turned his shaggy head to Lucas. "He did not. Nor did you," he added to the boy. "Now, what's all this? You're not ashamed, Lucas? It's a sacred duty, you know."

"Never really came up," Lucas mumbled.

"Well, I suppose it's not to be taken or talked of lightly, and I like you more for not being a braggart, but still. *You* should have told me," he said to the boy. "I wish we had come early enough to see it, but sometimes fate bars the way. I remember the Straw Bear from last year, though – and many years before that. We always like to come to Low Ferry for the celebration."

"We're your favorite," the boy suggested.

"Because of the Straw Bear? Well, there are other villages and even some with other rituals, but none so...potent as yours. It's good to drive out the evil before the winter starts."

"Drive out the evil!" I repeated, laughing.

He fixed me with a sober look. "People are kept too closely together when the snow binds them up, especially land-owners. If there's poison, that's when you'll see it seep out. Disputes between neighbors, between a husband and wife – suspicions of theft and ill-intent, and in other times accusations of witchcraft, too."

"What does the Straw Bear do about it, though?" the boy asked, as I thought about the fights that had broken out earlier in the year, when we were waiting for the storm to come.

"A Straw Bear," Christopher said, leaning forward, "is the spirit of evil, wrapped around a man's soul. That's why you burn the straw, you know – you take the evil away and purify it. And that's our young Fire Man there, taking joy in the purifying. And Saint Christopher too, I'd bet."

"I've never been Fire Man," I said. "It's just something fun to do on Halloween."

"Mmh, still the skeptic," he said, fixing me with a steady look. "But you had your part to play regardless."

"Oh? And what was that?" I asked.

"You carried the evil away yourself."

"Christopher!" I laughed again. "The boy's been telling you stories."

"But you did," the storyteller insisted. "There are times it goes into a person, deep in –"

"Are you saying I'm evil?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"No," he said, with the air of a patient parent trying to talk sense with a child. "The evils of a place. They can go into a person, but a good soul throws them off again. You have a good soul, Christopher. You carry your burdens, just like your namesake. Our namesake."

"The evil went into him?" the boy asked excitedly. He looked at me, apparently expecting my head to burst into flames.

"And out again. We're told your heart gave way," Christopher said, leaning in to examine my face.

"It's an old problem. Not worth a mention," I said.

Christopher eyed me for a while, but then he leaned back and looked at the boy.

"A long time ago," he said, with the skill and cadence that made him the caravan's storyteller, "winter was a frightening time. Not like your

books say," he added to Lucas, "not because they were afraid the spring wouldn't come again. They weren't fools, and they understood the cycle of time and nature. They knew spring would come. How long the spring *took* in the coming, what their fortunes would be when it came, whether they would survive the winter...*that* was frightening, eh? Uncertainty scares us. Makes us wary of each other, makes us selfish. People think they made sacrifices to please the gods, but I don't believe it. Farmers are pragmatists, like us – they have to be."

"Then why?" Lucas asked.

"Exorcism. Freedom from fear. I think a strong man took the whole of the burden of the people on himself and died to rid them of it." Christopher shook a finger at me when I opened my mouth. "I know what you think, Saint, that it's fairy tales from old men and superstitions for the gullible. We've had that argument. But you died all the same."

"The Friendly are mystics, Lucas," I said, grinning at Christopher's solemn expression. "They believe in things like curses and ghosts and the occasional god."

Lucas just gazed back at me gravely and nodded. It made me feel small, to have ridiculed an old man and expected Lucas to join in. Christopher, on the other hand, paid us no mind.

"We believe what we have reason to believe. You stay in one place for so long, you land-owners, but out in the world you might see things your books can't explain," he said. "It hurts no-one for me to believe, and helps no-one for you to be skeptical."

"No, perhaps not," I agreed. The boy's eyes were round as saucers, staring at him. Lucas looked intently thoughtful, as if an idea had just occurred to him.

"So, there's no more evil to chase out this winter?" I asked.

"Not in Low Ferry," Christopher replied, smiling back at my indulgent expression. "Perhaps there will be, in time. We've heard things."

"You've heard about the twins," I said. "And Betsy."

"Two baby boys born in hard winter, with the midwife dead not long after. I imagine such a thing frets at a mother."

"She'll get over it," I said. "She can't worry forever."

"Where children are concerned," Christopher said, "one can always worry. Still, things will sort themselves out," he added, standing with a grunt. "Come along. Dinner's ready."

We ate with the rest of the Friendly gathering around, elbow-to-elbow with us for the warmth the fires could give. They talked about the next village they were headed for when they broke camp at Low Ferry, and the likelihood of the roads being passable soon. Gwen mentioned that Lucas had fixed his roof himself – I don't know when he told her that – and that led to a debate about the best methods for insulating trailers and cars against the cold.

The Friendly are one of the few traveling clans that don't find a place to settle for the coldest winter months, but of course that gives them an advantage: they can sell their goods all summer and all winter

too. And if sometimes the wind howled against the thin walls and the snow piled dangerously high against the wheels, that was only the way their life was. As charming as a road-bound existence might seem to land-owners, it takes a certain sort of mind to live the way they do.

That night there were fires and blankets to keep out the chill and plenty of good food – chicken and potatoes but also cheese and fresh bread, ginger cookies with jam, coffee and chocolate. Lucas seemed to enjoy himself, and I had no complaints.

When we were settled down with hot drinks and full stomachs, Gwen came to sit by me and nudged me with her elbow.

"Forgetting something?" she said, and I shook my head.

"I never would, Gwen," I replied, and took a fifty-cent piece out of my pocket. They're not common, but the bank stocked them and I always made sure to go and get a few when the Friendly arrived. I showed it to her and received an approving nod.

"Christopher storyteller," I called out, and across the fire he lifted his head from a serious discussion with a handful of small children.

"Oh aye what, Landowner?" he called back.

"Tell us a story," I said, and flicked the coin across the fire to him. He caught it with a speed that always came as a surprise, given his age and the arthritis that made it difficult for him to walk. He held up the fifty-cent piece, bit it for show while the Friendly laughed, and then tucked it away in a pocket.

"Well," he said, addressing the entire assembled family, the stragglers drawing closer and settling down as he spoke. "What story should I tell this landowner, hm? Landowners in a friendly camp. Saint Christopher wants a story – what story should I tell him?"

The children shifted restlessly where they sat, waiting for the story to start. The adults wore indulgent smiles, sitting with their kids or huddling together against the wind. Lucas, on my other side, pulled his coat a little tighter and watched it all with fascinated eyes.

"There was once, and not very far from here, a ferryman who made his living helping cross the Mississippi," he began, swinging an arm wide to where the river curved eastward, briefly, before running south parallel to Low Ferry's border. Everyone's head turned to look, and he chuckled a little – I suppose it's a powerful sensation, commanding a crowd that way. "Back when Low Ferry wasn't much more than a wide place in the road, long before you, or your parents, or even I was born."

The children giggled as he pressed a hand to his chest, bowing his head over it.

"This ferryman saw people coming through from the east, going west – farmers and merchants, wanderers, gold-miners, thieves. Not us though, eh?" he asked, and there were laughs and cheers from the Friendly. "Up and down the Mississippi we went, and saw a good deal more of the country than most, I imagine."

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Lucas said to me in a low voice, bending so his head was near mine.

"Binds them together," I replied. "They know their history, even when the stories aren't theirs."

"Is this true?" Lucas asked, as Christopher extolled the virtues of the ferryman: *a good heart, a sturdy wooden raft, and strong rowing shoulders.*

"Well, Low Ferry used to be a crossing point," I shrugged. "Might be. Shh, listen."

"But there was one thing this ferryman didn't have," Christopher said, holding up a finger. "What was the thing he didn't have?"

"A wife," a couple of the Friendly called, and the rest laughed.

"A wife," Christopher agreed. "Because he was a ferryman, and never saw a woman or man for longer than the crossing of the river, and they were all on their way. To where?" He shrugged. "No-one but them could know. All day the Ferryman carried his cargo back and forth, with his good heart, his sturdy wooden raft, and his strong rowing shoulders." Some of the children chimed in on the last few words.

"One day, he was thinking about his dilemma, and he thought to himself, the most faithful woman in the world is this river right here. She never leaves. She's always talking to keep me company! We understand each other, the River and me. This is what the Ferryman thought, and he grew to be content, in the way you do, when you've solved a problem," Christopher said. "He looked around and said to himself, this place is a pretty good place to live, and I'm happy here, with my good heart and my sturdy wooden raft and my strong rowing shoulders."

"I think it's about you," Lucas whispered to me, as the children all joined in on the catechism.

"Can't be," I whispered back, grinning. "I've got a bad ticker."

"Poetic license," Lucas said dismissively.

"By and by, he grew to be very particular about his wife the River, and used to talk to her, and fight with her if she misbehaved, and spend his nights on the riverbank. And what do you think happened?" Christopher asked the children. "One night a storm blew up across the plains, and the Ferryman hid in his house well back from the banks. The wind howled and the rain fell down and the River rose fast. The Ferryman was terrified, and wondered if his raft or his hut would be swept clean away. The wind blew all day and all night and the water rose, and rose..."

"...and rose..." the children, and a good half of the adults, chimed in.

"...and kept rising until it lapped at the very door of the Ferryman's little house," Christopher said. Gwen, next to me, was gripping my wrist tightly. "Then, just when he thought the water would rise up into his house and he'd have to climb out a window, he heard a noise like a baby crying. So he opened his door, and the wind blew in, and the rain came in, and what do you think he found?"

"A baby," the children chorused.

"Well, do I need to tell this story at all?" Christopher asked, laughing at them. "Yes, he found a baby from his wife, the River, and the storm was already dying down. So the Ferryman took the baby in, and fed him on milk warmed on a fire, and started to raise him."

He took a breath, and cast a stern eye over his audience. "Now, this was no ordinary boy. He was the son of the River, and he could work magic. He could turn into a fish, or a little fox cub, or into a bird in the air and fly away. But he always came back to the Ferryman at night, for his supper. Soon, though, the Ferryman's house wasn't the only house at the River anymore," he added.

"Here comes Low Ferry," Lucas whispered.

"Some folks were finally settling down at this wide place in the road, to sell supplies to those still passing through, or to stake out some farmland for themselves," Christopher said, and I nodded agreement with Lucas's prediction. "The more people put up houses, the more the Ferryman's wild river boy had to hide, for fear someone would see him changing into a fish, or try and shoot at him when he was a fox-cub. So the Ferryman went down to have a talk with his wife about it." Christopher slapped his thigh as if he were the frustrated ferryman. "Wife, he said, our boy's got to make a choice! Is he going to be a ferryman or a fox? But his wife just murmured and babbled a bit – " this got a laugh from some of the adults, " – and that was no help at all."

I watched, more than listened, as Christopher told how the Ferryman contemplated his son's troubles and considered what was to be done. The Friendly live a reasonably modern life, but they value stories. Every face in the ring of the firelight was paying fierce attention – even Lucas, when I looked at him. His student, sitting at his feet, was calmer than usual but looked almost...hungry, drinking in the words.

"Finally the Ferryman sat down with his son and asked him what they should do. His son thought about it for a while, and smiled a little, and he said, he knew what should occur."

Lucas drew a breath, a little sharp, and I glanced at him.

"I must be who I am," Christopher said, but Lucas's lips moved with him. I thought, at the time, that Christopher must have told him the story before. "You have a good heart and a sturdy wooden raft and strong rowing shoulders, but I have a wild spirit. And he left his father there, on the banks, and was never seen as a boy ever again. But a little bird – no more than this big," Christopher said, holding up his right hand, thumb and forefinger extended, "too small for a farmer to bother shooting, came to live in the juniper trees near the Ferryman's house, and was ever after the spirit of this place. And in the evening, when the Ferryman went down to sit with his wife, the little bird came and chattered, and the River murmured, and the Ferryman with his good heart and sturdy wooden raft and strong rowing shoulders was content. For, if a man loves a wild thing, he sees it as it truly is, and wishes for none other."

There was a round of applause, followed by the sound of people standing, stretching, gathering up their children and the plates they'd eaten from. Gwen gave my hand a squeeze and kissed my cheek, then went to help her father round up the cooking pots.

Lucas, on my other side, was stock-still. I bumped him with my shoulder and he started out of it, turning to look at me.

"He's a good storyteller," I said, and Lucas nodded. I nudged the boy with my shoe, gently. "Come on, delinquent. You need to get home."

"Aww," the boy moaned, but he stood up and dusted the seat of his pants. "See ya, Lucas."

"Be good," Lucas told him, standing too. Now that the Friendly were moving, chattering and laughing with each other, he seemed to pull back slightly, inwards into himself.

"Get home," I said. "Sleep well. I'll see you in town in a day or two?"

He gave me a smile and nodded. "See you then."

I stopped where Christopher was still sitting in his chair, drinking deeply from a cup. I grinned and shook his hand.

"Better than ever, Storyteller," I said. You don't ask the Storyteller about the story. It just isn't done, though that night I wanted to ask how much of Low Ferry's history he really knew.

"I'd hope," he replied. "Otherwise I'd have to pay you that coin back. Safe walk home, Saint."

"Thank you. Hope to see you again before you go," I said. "Come on, kid, let's head back."

I left the boy where the dirt road became asphalt, turned towards Dusk Books, and wandered back to Low Ferry in very good cheer.

Thanksgiving was not far off, and I wasn't surprised when Charles, in his official role as pastor of the Low Ferry congregation, appeared in my shop the next day with a handbill for the church's holiday dinner. What did surprise me was what else was on the program.

"Prayer meeting?" I said, looking down at it. "For the Harrisons?"

"I thought I'd tell you first," he confided. "I know you talk to everyone, Christopher, so I hope you'll spread the word about that, too."

"What, like an exorcism?" I asked him. He looked uncomfortable.

"No, just some praying, and maybe a few hymns. And the baptism."

"That's probably good," I said. "I like you, Charles, but you don't strike me as someone who's very experienced at wrestling demons for the souls of men."

"You've got me there," he admitted. "It wasn't my idea. Some of the elders thought it'd settle her mind, not to mention her husband's."

"Did you ask them about it first? The Harrisons, I mean."

"Steve thought it would be a good idea. She's too tired to think much of anything, I imagine."

"What do you think about it?" I asked.

"Well...doctrinally, possessed babies are ridiculous. But there's a fine line between religion and sociology sometimes. Whether some spirit has hold of them doesn't matter so much in the face of whether their parents believe it's true."

"You'd have made a good atheist," I said. He laughed.

"You'd have made a fine preacher. But I think we're both better where we are. Don't forget to spread the word."

"Got it all right here," I said, holding up the handbill. "See you on Thanksgiving."

Most of Low Ferry, if you ask them to remember that winter, will remember a few events. My collapse on Halloween, unfortunately, is one of them. Another is the prayer meeting for the Harrisons, although a significant minority will remember that it was also the winter that Charles decided it might be fun to deep-fry the Thanksgiving turkeys for the church dinner.

"How bad do you suppose this is going to be?" Lucas whispered to me, as most of the village stood around the church parking lot in the cold, hands tucked in our armpits, breath freezing in the air. In the middle of the throng stood two enormous metal drums with electric burners glowing bright red beneath them.

"Oh, no, there's no way this is going to be bad," I said. "Either we're going to be eating fried turkey for dinner or we're going to watch two grown men set themselves on fire. It's really win-win, if you ask me."

"I heard that if you try to fry a frozen turkey it can explode," the boy said placidly, standing next to Lucas. In front of us, Jacob and Charles had each picked up their turkey by the thick baling wire tied around the birds' legs.

"Ready?" Charles said cheerfully. "On three!"

Several parents pulled their children further back, and the edges of the crowd withdrew slightly. Paula, standing behind me, grabbed the back of my shirt and tried to pull me away.

"Don't faint again!" she hissed.

"I'm not going to faint!" I retorted.

"One! Two! Three!"

They lowered the turkeys in unison into the oil, which immediately began to spit and hiss. There was an ungratifying lack of fire, however, and once both Charles and Jacob had released the wire and stepped back from the frying drums we all decided that watching turkeys fry was a lot less entertaining than watching them explode. Nearly everyone wandered back into the church fairly quickly.

Fried turkey is actually very good.

We were in joyful spirits that evening, between the successful turkeys and the rest of the meal. Even Lucas smiled at the jokes being told at our end of the communal table, and actually spoke to Carmen long enough to ask for the potatoes and agree that the gravy was good. There really shouldn't have been any alcohol, but several battered flasks circulated covertly while Charles turned an indulgently blind eye.

"So," Carmen said to Sara, a middle-aged woman who ran a dairy outside of town. "What are we thankful for?"

"Safe cattle and good milk," Sara replied.

"No major repairs to the industrial dishwasher," Carmen agreed.

"Snow days!" the boy insisted, and glanced at me.

I shrugged. "Good company and good health? Lucas?"

Lucas, caught with his mouth full of pumpkin pie, tried to indicate that he was chewing. Carmen laughed, then subsided quickly when he flinched. He swallowed hastily.

"Dry roofs," he said.

"Amen!" Sara toasted him and turned to their next victim. I kept eating, unaware for a second that Lucas had leaned towards me.

"You, alive," he whispered in my ear.

"Take it for granted. I'll be around for a while," I answered, filling with warmth.

"Excuse me," Charles called, standing at the front of the room and clapping his hands together. "I'm sure we are all grateful for this food we've received – if I could have a brief round of applause for the Farmer's Association and the Low Ferry Christian Ladies' Committee –"

He was interrupted by the requested accolades, with hoots and cheers from some of the rowdier participants.

" – thank you. And of course, the giver of plenty..." He jerked his thumb towards the ceiling, getting a round of laughter.

"I hope he's not going to ruin everything with a sermon," Carmen whispered across the table.

"He hasn't yet," I whispered back.

"Now, as you know we are holding a prayer meeting tonight, to give thanks for the bounty visited on Low Ferry this year and to pray for the Harrison family. They have been in our thoughts already," he said over a wave of low muttering, "considering how their welcome arrival was followed by a loss to our village family. If you'd like to join me upstairs in about fifteen minutes, we'll be saying a prayer for the children, followed by a christening for both little Abe and little Noah."

"Well, they didn't pick those out of a Bible or anything, did they?" Paula observed.

"Faithful men of God. No, no symbolism there," I agreed, folding my napkin. "Care to accompany me to the symbolic naming ritual and ceremonial placebo for emotional unrest?"

"Don't mind if I do, Christopher."

"Excellent. Lucas?"

"Of course," he said.

People drifted into the sanctuary casually, as if they hadn't really meant to attend, they just sort of found themselves there. In reality, nobody would have missed it. Things like that, especially if something amazing happens, are talk of the town for years to come. I fully expect they'll still be talking about me collapsing at Halloween when Noah and Abe Harrison are starting high school.

I lost Lucas for a moment in the crowd gathered at the side-entrance to the chapel, then gave up as one of the older townspeople asked for help pushing through to get to a pew. When I went to find Lucas again he had retreated to the back of the high-ceilinged sanctuary and was staring out the wide windows set in the front doors.

"What do you see?" I asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Guests," he answered, pointing through the glass.

There was the glimmer of headlights in the dark, moving up the main street. At first I could only see two or three cars, but eventually more appeared behind them, until I wondered how many people could possibly have missed the Low Ferry Thanksgiving extravaganza but still be attending the prayer meeting.

Then I realized whose cars they were, as they began to pull into the little turnaround in front of the church and park haphazardly wherever there was room.

"Charles," I called over my shoulder. He was struggling into his vestments at the front of the room, but he lifted his head and gave me a questioning look. "You might want to come say hello to a few people."

Everyone else drew close and Charles had to push through the crowd to reach us. I stood aside so he could see. The Friendly were just climbing out of their cars. Gwen, I saw, was helping Christopher out of the back seat of Pete's truck.

"Are they Christians?" Charles asked. "They've never come to church before."

"I honestly don't know," I replied. "They call me Saint, but I don't think that means much."

"Doesn't matter, I guess. You aren't either, after all." Charles winked at me. "Go on, Lucas, open the door."

Lucas silently swung the doors open, and Charles walked out into the cold. I followed, and Lucas darted through – probably to escape the onlookers inside.

"Evenin'," Charles said, meeting them on the steps. Tommy and Pete were in front with Christopher. Most of the Friendly families hung back a little, including Gwen and a knot of young Friendly at the rear. Even the children were there.

"Evening, Reverend," Christopher said, making his way arthritically up the steps.

"Charles, please," Charles said, holding out a hand. Christopher took it gratefully and hauled himself up the last few steps. "What can Low Ferry do for you this evening?"

"Won't mince words," Tommy said, joining Christopher on the landing outside the front door. "We've come about the boys."

"Abe and Noah?" Charles asked.

"S'right, Reverend," Tommy said. "Come to help see to them with you folks. If you don't mind."

Charles smiled. "Nobody's turned away from this door. Come along. You there, inside, move back! We have some friends who've come to pray with us for the boys. Move along, make room – that's the spirit."

"I don't know about pray, exactly," Christopher said to me, as I helped him down the central passage of the chapel.

"I'd guess more than half the village isn't really interested in praying either," I answered. "Seat down front?"

"Please," he said. Behind us, the townspeople were settling into pews and making room for the Friendly. Gwen wrapped her arm around my waist.

"You'll sit with us," she said firmly. Paula made room for us and Gwen squeezed in next to me, with Lucas next to her on the aisle. "We figured those poor babies need all the help they can get."

"You think they're cursed?" Paula asked. "Everyone says they are."

"Well," Christopher said, leaning back. "I don't know. This midwife of yours wasn't a young woman. Could be, as some of our skeptics would have it," he prodded me with an elbow, "that the stress of helping at a birthing was just too much."

"I don't think they're cursed," I said. "I think Nona's just a tired new mother who caught a bad break."

Steve Harrison and his wife hadn't been at the dinner, but they were walking in from a side-entrance even as we all settled down. Nona did look tired, and her husband and his brother were the ones carrying the boys. They stopped near the altar, uneasy in their Sunday-best clothing. Charles said a few words to them, over the wailing of the babies.

"Are they sick?" Carmen asked, leaning back from the pew in front of us and turning her head so I'd hear her.

"Kirchner said they were fine," I answered.

"Sometimes babies cry," Gwen said. "They sound healthy enough."

"Shhh," Christopher said to them, as Charles turned to the assembled...congregation, I suppose. It felt more like an audience.

"There's been talk in Low Ferry," Charles said, "that the death of Betsy O'Brien has some significance for these two children. Now we all know that losing Betsy was a tragedy, both for those who were her friends and for those who depended on her services. But we've eulogized Betsy and committed her into the hands of God, so tonight we gather here to consider these children. Some would even tell you they think the children are cursed from that death."

"Or they're the cause," someone called from the back. Charles stared in their direction with all the vigor of a man who'd given sermons to unruly congregations for a decade. Nona, onstage, wrung her hands.

"No-one," Charles said, his voice deep and clear, "wants to blame two babies for the death of a grown woman. No-one here should think for one minute that these children somehow chose for Betsy to die. So I'd like to suggest that we are here tonight to reaffirm our commitment, as a village, to cherishing Low Ferry's newest citizens as welcome sons of ours and of the Heavenly Father."

"He goes a little heavy on God," Gwen whispered.

"He's a preacher, that's what he does," I whispered back. All over the church, people were shifting fretfully, uncomfortable with the pair of wailing babies before them.

"Christopher," Charles said, and both myself and the Friendly's patriarch looked up. "Christopher *Dusk*," he amended, smiling. "Would you come up here, please?"

"You...uh...me?" I asked. He nodded. "Okay..."

I stood and edged past Gwen and Lucas, then hesitated.

"Come up," Charles said. "They won't bite you."

Nervous laughter. I joined him near the altar.

"What are you doing?" I hissed at him.

"Christopher, as all of you know, has been something of an intimate of death, lately, isn't that so?" Charles said to the congregation. I blinked at him, uncertain whether I was insulted that he'd brought it up now or confused that he'd brought it up at all. "And Low Ferry respects your opinion, Christopher, as an educated man. I'd like you to have a look at these children and see what you think of them."

"I really don't..." I began, but he was already leading me inexorably towards the Harrison twins. Nona touched my hand as I passed.

I leaned over first one baby and then the other, trying to ignore their continued wails of discontent. They had feathery baby hair, light eyes, wide mouths, snub noses, ears of regulation size. They were not especially beautiful babies, but they weren't disfigured or particularly ugly, either. They looked like *babies* to me. Unhappy babies, but that was all.

"They, uh, don't seem unusual to me," I said, loud enough for the rest of the congregation to hear.

"Not familiar at all?" Charles asked.

"Familiar? I – no, of course not. I've never seen them before," I said. "They favor the Harrison side, though."

Steve gave me a strained smile.

"I mean, they're...you know, they're kids," I continued. Charles nodded encouragingly. "Just kids."

"Just kids," he repeated. "Thank you, Christopher. Anyone else like to examine them? Make sure they have no horns, that kind of thing?"

Awkward silence from the congregation. Charles gave me a gentle shove back towards my seat.

"I am going to lead you all in prayer," he continued, as I slid past Lucas and Gwen. "And when we have finished, I hope you'll stay to witness Abe and Noah Harrison being christened and welcomed into the church. Let us pray. *Our Father, who art in Heaven...*"

As the villagers mumbled their way through the prayer, Charles trying to ignore the crying of the children, Lucas started to fidget. I reached across and clamped a hand on the back of his neck, which startled him into stillness for a moment, but then he shrugged it off. While the last rumbling *Amen* was dying away, he cleared his throat.

"Uh," he said, and every head turned to our pew. Next to me, Christopher gave a low *ha!* of approval.

"Yes, Lucas?" Charles asked. Lucas stood up.

"Can I look at them?" he asked.

Charles glanced at Nona. Lucas smiled uncertainly at her, and she nodded. He stepped out into the aisle and walked up to the altar, giving Charles a brief look as he passed. He studied one of the babies for a long minute while everyone in the church held their breath.

"Your midwife," he said to the Harrisons. "She was an old woman. I think she was tired. I think it's a hard job."

There was an emphatic *mm-hm* from the congregation – Betsy's former assistant, now her replacement.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with them," Lucas continued. "And I believe in that kind of thing. Not like Christopher."

A ripple of nervous laughter was cut abruptly short when Lucas reached out and touched one of the children, pressing his broad, paint-spattered hand over the baby's chest. It wouldn't have been easy to see from any further back, but there was a look of thoughtful concentration on his face. The baby abruptly stopped crying, subsiding into gurgles. Lucas took the other child in his own arms, rocking him gently, while Steve Harrison stared at his silent child in shock.

The silence when the crying stopped completely was sudden and surprising. Outside, the wind howled. Lucas carried the baby to Nona, set him in her arms, gave her a reassuring smile, and stepped back.

"Excuse me," he said, and walked quickly down to the congregation, hurrying out through the side-door.

"Well," Charles said, staring at where Lucas had just disappeared into the maze of back-rooms behind the sanctuary. "God be with him."

Nobody was looking at Charles, though. They were all looking at me, as if I was somehow Lucas's keeper. Gwen silently scooted her legs to one side, an implicit suggestion that I should pass.

I stood up again and edged past her, then sidled my way down to the altar and around to the side-door. As it closed behind me I heard Charles announce that it was time to christen the boys.

Lucas was leaning against the wall outside, both hands over his face, breathing deeply. I walked slowly, not wanting to startle him, and coughed to let him know I was there. He nodded, but he didn't look up or take his hands from his face.

"You okay?" I asked. Another nod, and I moved to stand in front of him. "I think that's the first time I've seen you talk to more than two people in an hour."

"Oh, my god," he mumbled, into his palms, but he laughed a little, too. "I won't be able to look anyone in the eye for a week."

He was trembling slightly, and I touched his arm for permission before pulling his hands down, holding his wrists between us.

"It's fine," I said. "That was really good, actually. Did you see the way they –"

"Looked at me? Yeah, I saw that," he said, chewing on his lip. "Did I say anything especially dumb?"

"Lucas," I said. "You know you really almost never say stupid things. No more than anyone else does."

"Not to you, maybe."

"You were great. Nobody's going to look at you funny, I promise."

He almost managed to make eye contact for a second before looking away and drawing another deep breath.

"Think about it," I said reasonably. "Remember when you were Fire Man? You weren't afraid of anyone then."

"I had my mask," he muttered. "That was different."

"Not so different. Anyway, they weren't looking at you just now, they were looking at the babies," I said. I wanted to ask how he'd done it, but he was in no kind of condition to answer, and I could wait. I let go of his wrists and he crossed his arms, tucking his hands under them.

"You want some water?" I asked, really starting to worry. "Or we could go back to my shop. You can sit down for a while."

"No, I'll...I can walk home, it'll do me good," he said, starting to pull away.

"At least wait until the christening's over," I said. "One of the Friendly can take you back."

"No need to wait," said a new voice, and I glanced up to find Tommy standing in the hall too, watching us. He shrugged and grinned. "Not much on churchgoing. I can take you back now, if you want."

Lucas glanced at me again, looked down, nodded. I stepped back and let Tommy pass between us. He slapped Lucas on the shoulder so hard he almost fell over.

"I'll get him home, Saint. You just worry about that bunch in there," he said, jerking his thumb at the sanctuary door as he led Lucas away. I sighed, decided I could give the rest of the service a miss, and sat down outside the door to wait for the closing benediction.

When the christening was over I slipped back in and found myself walking Christopher to his truck, surrounded by a veritable honor guard of the Friendly. They offered to take me up to the cottage, but I thought it was probably wise to stay away for the night. Tommy would make sure Lucas was settled, and I didn't think he needed any more disturbance just then.

I don't know if people talked about it the night it happened, though I know nobody talked to me about it. The next morning the story was all over town, but not with the usual exuberant flair that accompanied gossip in Low Ferry. People whispered about it to each other, compared notes, spoke quietly in the cafe. Charles came in to tell me they were calling it a miracle, and Paula came in to tell me they were calling Lucas a witch.

"Not that anyone cares," she added.

"Nobody wanting to burn him at the stake?" I asked. I was joking. Mostly.

"They'd have to go through the Harrisons first, and nobody'd dare. I heard Nona went up to get some groceries today and told Bert at the store she got her first good night's sleep since the birth."

"And the twins? What do they say about that?"

"Well, I don't know. I haven't listened. I mean, *I* never believed a word of it," Paula assured me, a little too thoroughly.

I grinned at her. "Of course not."

EIGHT

SO IT WENT – quietly, circumspectly, and in hushed tones. Lucas didn't come into town the next morning, which wasn't exactly surprising, but Tommy stopped by to let me know he'd seen him and all seemed well. I worked on my inventory, finished two bindings, set the books aside to send back to Marjorie, and tried not to worry too much. I didn't allow myself to fret until the following day, when Lucas still hadn't come in, and the day after that I started making a plan to go out to The Pines. I could stop and get some groceries, maybe bring him up a book or something –

Which of course was when he showed up, knocking snow from his boots on the door-frame before stepping inside.

"Afternoon," I said, and he looked up at me with what could almost be called a grin. "I've been wondering when you were going to turn up."

"Couldn't stay away forever. I snuck in for tutoring," he confided.

"Probably for the best," I said, shifting some books off the counter. "Get one of the Friendly to give you a lift?"

"You didn't hear?" he asked, frowning. "They left last night."

"Ah – what a shame, I thought they'd stay another week or two," I sighed, though there was an odd relief, in the back of my head, a feeling that I wasn't entirely comfortable with. "Still, can't blame them – the weather's good and the next town over has better roads."

"I'm surprised they didn't come down to say goodbye to you," he remarked, looking puzzled.

"Oh, they never do if they don't have to."

"They didn't really make a fuss about it," he said thoughtfully. "If I hadn't seen them leaving they probably wouldn't have told me, either."

"It's just their way," I said. "You get used to it. Hey, school won't be out for a little while yet. I haven't eaten. Want to go to the cafe?"

"I do, actually," he agreed. I got my coat and turned the sign to closed, following him across the street. Inside, Carmen waved at us from the kitchen and gestured for us to pick our seats – the lunch rush was well over and the place was nearly empty in mid-afternoon, just one or two people at the counter reading newspapers. We took a pair of menus and sat at my usual window-table in companionable silence.

"You hear the news?" I asked Carmen, when she emerged to take our orders. "Friendly took off."

"Yeah, someone mentioned it this morning. I thought you knew," she replied. "You hear they did a headcount at the school? Just in case, y'know. What'll it be? Meatloaf's good today."

"I thought the meatloaf was good yesterday," I teased.

"Well, it's good on a sandwich today. Fresh bread!"

"Sold. Some of that," I said. "And hot cider if you have it."

"Lucas?" she asked, giving him an especially winning smile. He looked at her, confused, and then down at his menu, fingers twitching along the edges.

"Uh. Soup?" he tried.

"Chowder or chicken?" Carmen asked, still smiling.

"Chowder – and some water," he mumbled. "Thanks."

"Comin' up. Seeya, boys," she said, and walked back to the kitchen to relay our order.

"What was that about?" Lucas asked me, leaning forward.

"What?"

"She smiled at me," he said, still in the same anxious whisper.

"Why shouldn't she?" I asked.

"This is why I didn't want to come in to town," he said, rubbing his forehead. "Is everyone going to do that?"

"Probably. Don't worry about it. It'll die down," I assured him.

"Word travels fast. I wonder why nobody thought to tell me the Friendly were leaving," I added, trying to change the subject. "You'd think I'd have at least heard about the school doing a head-count."

"Why would they do that, anyway?" Lucas managed, though I could see he was still watching for Carmen to return.

"A roll-call? Make sure nobody's missing," I said. He turned to look at me, startled.

"Missing?" he asked.

"You know, because the Friendly left," I told him.

He gaped at me. "They don't really think the Friendly would grab a kid, do they? They've got enough as it is."

"Most people don't think that about the Friendly, but these are practical folk. Why wonder, when ten minutes with a roll sheet can give you the answer?" I said. "We're a clannish little place, we don't trust outsiders."

"But you're an outsider."

"To a degree," I said. "I own a store in town, I've been here for a few years now. Though I guess it'll be another decade or two before they stop calling me *the city boy* when they think I can't hear." I grinned at him, and a thought occurred to me. "To be honest I'm surprised the Friendly didn't spirit you off with them."

"Oh, no." He shook his head, and I smiled. I had been – concerned, I suppose, that he would leave when they did. They seemed to appeal to him and...well, if Lucas had left without saying goodbye, that would have been hard in an obscure way I couldn't identify. Harder than Gwen and Christopher and Tommy leaving each year.

"My rent's paid through spring, and I don't think I could live like that," he was saying, while I considered this new idea. "Too many new people to meet – thanks, Carmen," he said hesitantly, as she set our drinks

down. I could see him stifle a cringe when she smiled again, and he waited until she was gone before continuing. "Besides, there's no good way to set up a workshop like mine in a trailer."

"I suppose not," I agreed, blowing on my cider to cool it. He turned to look out the window at the empty street.

"Gwen did say," he said slowly, "that she'd find me a nice Friendly girl to marry if I'd come along with them."

"Marry!" I laughed into my drink.

"That was what I thought. They're nice enough, and most of them think I'm nice, but that's not exactly a basis for commitment."

"The Friendly love easily," I said. "They might never stay in one place, but they're closer to each other than we are even in the village. If she wanted you to go with them, she wanted you to be securely fastened to someone. You could do worse."

"I'm not sure they actually wanted me for myself," he murmured, turning his water-glass around and around.

"You think they think you're a witch. Some in town do," I said.

"So I heard."

"You're not upset?"

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. People've thought worse, I suppose."

"Maybe, but they've been talking about you," I pressed. He didn't look up. "About the night you laid hands on the Harrison twins."

"That's a pretty dramatic way of putting it," he said.

"Well, that's the way they see it."

"And you?" he asked, glancing up without raising his head.

"I don't know what to think, to be honest," I said. He looked down again. Carmen returned with his soup and my sandwich, smoking hot, and gave Lucas an extra packet of crackers. He smiled a little and tapped them with his fingers.

I took a bite of the sandwich – Carmen was right, still pretty good – and then set it down. "Listen...it wasn't the time to ask, that night, but..."

"Yes?" he asked, picking up his spoon.

"How did you get the babies to be quiet like that? There must have been some kind of trick to it."

"I guess you could call it that." He was doing it again, drawing little spiral patterns in his soup, only now and then taking a taste.

"What was it?" I asked.

"I just thought..." He took a bite, swallowed, drew a breath. "There was probably a reason they were blamed. She died a couple of hours after they were born, not the minute they started breathing. And...I think a lot of people are scared of their children at first. You know, doing something wrong or whatever. But you're not supposed to be afraid, are you? So if it were me I'd find a good reason to be scared, like the midwife dying."

"Yes, but...that doesn't explain what you did," I pointed out.

"They're only babies, they don't really understand emotion. They only know what they want," he continued. "Their parents are afraid of them, nobody else wants to go near them – just in case. Charles is pretty

smart, that's why he called on you. He knew you'd say they were just babies."

"He knew I was a skeptic," I said, licking some sauce off my thumb.

"And you saying what you did probably would have worked, eventually, but it was easy enough to make them stop crying so that everyone would be sure."

"But how...?"

"They want to be loved," he said quietly, setting down his spoon. "That was all I did, really. Just touched them without being afraid of them. They were just upset because everyone was scared of them. Now their mother thinks they've been blessed or cured or something. She thinks they're special."

I studied him as he took another bite of soup. "Psychology."

"What does it matter? They're safe now, as safe as anyone in the world is."

"Well, that's a point," I said. We were silent for a while as we ate.

"Christopher, I'd rather not lie to you," Lucas said suddenly. "That isn't the whole truth. It's just that I can't tell you the whole truth, not here. And not quite yet."

"Lie to me?" I asked. "About what?"

"Lies of omission, nothing more," he said hurriedly. "There's something I have to tell you, and I don't quite know how yet. If you can wait..."

"I wouldn't even have known if you hadn't told me this much – yes, I can wait," I told him. He was starting to look truly anxious. "It's fine, Lucas. Really."

He nodded. "Good. That's good, then – and there's school letting out," he said, glancing out the window at the children who were beginning to wander down the street in little groups and gangs. "I should be going."

"So should I. I'll pay – you can buy next time," I said, eyeing his half-finished soup. He accepted awkwardly, as he always did when I paid, and wandered out into the street where the boy was leading a cadre of companions towards Dusk Books with an intent look in his eye. I hurried to pay the bill and open the shop once more while Lucas distracted them by, somewhat uncharacteristically, starting a snowball fight.

Watching him with the students, I wondered what in the world he could have been lying to me about. Lies of omission, something he hadn't told me...I didn't know what it could be, but of course my mind immediately set to work coming up with possibilities. Something related to Abe and Noah Harrison, or to the church, or to the Friendly perhaps?

He had never spoken much about his parents or what he'd done in Chicago before coming to Low Ferry. I didn't know if he'd had a girlfriend – or a boyfriend, or a spouse. I didn't know if he had children himself. I did wonder if that could be it: if his way with the Harrison babies had been because he was a father. But at the same time I couldn't imagine Lucas falling in love or marrying. I couldn't imagine him wanting children.

No, actually, I could imagine him wanting children, small helpless things that he could love, that wouldn't laugh at his awkwardness or expect him to act in ways he didn't understand. I just couldn't imagine him wanting them enough to suffer through the process of finding someone to have them with. And certainly I could never imagine him abandoning his children to come to Low Ferry and live in the middle of nowhere.

I am certain that the village as a whole must have noticed that I was distracted and aimless in the next few days, my thoughts always elsewhere than the task at hand. I rang up prices wrong, I ruined the binding on one of my books, and I sometimes forgot to close the shop until well past time, engrossed in reading or in my work. I think it likely that they chalked it up to bad health and didn't dare ask me for fear I'd collapse again. Lucas was too busy to come to the shop, tutoring the boy and, according to some of the students, two other children as well. Exams were coming up, and the boy wasn't the only one worried about his grades.

At any rate, this deep in winter the village had bigger problems to deal with, and eventually my distraction faded as the question of what Lucas wasn't telling me stopped occupying my every moment. There was snow to be shoveled and pavement to be salted. We had to fill evening hours normally spent watching television, as the signal was still out, and make sure we could keep our homes warm during the blackouts that came with the high winds. Christmas was coming, and there were decorations to be hung on the street and in the stores, not to mention shopping for gifts.

In a small community it's hard to keep Christmas gifts a secret. Carmen's boyfriend, in particular, was the talk of the town when he bought the one diamond ring in the little jewelry case at the all-goods store. He asked me to make him a fake hollow book to hide it in when he gave it to her. I picked a copy of *The Joy Of Cooking* that had been gathering dust on the shelf since before I bought the shop. He thought that was pretty funny.

While I cut the middles out of pages and glued them together and sold books in-between tasks, the rest of the town was also paying a certain amount of attention to Sandra, of the infamous Bank Love Triangle, and what was being bought both by and for her. Nolan and Michael seemed to have declared some kind of cease-fire, but neither of them appeared to have been chosen or to have staked a permanent claim.

"Now, if she's buying a present for a boyfriend," Paula said to me one day in mid-December, "she's keeping it pretty general. She did buy a scarf yesterday."

"Nothing from the hardware store?" I inquired, with dry politeness.

"Don't tease," she said.

"Well, what about Michael and Nolan? Either of them buying shiny toys a girl like Sandra would enjoy?" I asked.

"If they do, it wasn't in Low Ferry. Didn't Nolan ride up to Dubuque a little while ago for something-or-other?"

"Couldn't say," I said. "I know Michael went hunting last week, but it's not like he's going to give her an elk for Christmas. Though it would be practical, there's good eating on elk."

"Did he *shoot* an elk?" She looked horrified. "Season ended in September!"

"Relax, Paula, I don't think he shot anything. Not really that surprising, this time of year," I said. "Hiya, kid," I called, as the boy entered the shop, eddies of snow following him inside.

"My cue to get back to work," Paula said. "Seeya, Christopher. Find out about that elk!"

"Elk?" Lucas asked, as he passed her on the way in. She gestured at me, and he gave me a confused look.

"Long story," I said. "Come in, defrost yourself. Buying today or just browsing?"

"Browsing," Lucas said, already hidden behind a shelf. "The boy wanted to come in – not that I didn't!" he added, leaning around briefly. The boy smirked at me.

"You buying?" I asked him.

"Maybe," he said, peering at the assortment of bookmarks in a little display on my counter.

"Christmas shopping?" I asked in a low voice.

"For Lucas," he whispered back.

"Get him this one," I said, pointing to a thin brass bookmark with a bent top that would clip over the edge of a page. He examined it, checked the price, and nodded. I put it quickly into a bag for him, deducted it from his running tab, turned the paper around so he could check my math, and put it away without a rustle. Lucas was either indifferent to the silence from the front of the shop or studiously ignoring it because he knew exactly what we were up to.

"Lucas said he'd walk me far as the south junction towards home," he said, when we were finished. "Said you might want to come along."

"I can offer you dinner and a stiff drink of something," Lucas told me. He looked pale, and as anxious as he had the day I questioned him about the Harrison twins over lunch. I realized he was offering me the chance to hear a confession from him – those lies of omission he'd talked about. It didn't take me long to get my coat and turn the front-door sign to Closed.

The days are very short in winter, and darkness was already starting to creep up the horizon by the time we left the boy at his crossroads, heading south, and turned our own faces west. In a soft gray hat he'd bought in the village and the gray coat he'd bought with his masks, Lucas looked as though at any minute he might disappear into the snow and sky.

"You wanted to talk, I think," I said, as we walked.

"I wanted to," he agreed.

"Finding it kind of hard now?" I asked kindly. He ducked his head.

"You..." he began, then started over. "You don't go to church."

"No," I said. "I like to sleep in."

"And you told Christopher the storyteller you don't believe in superstition," he continued.

"It's nothing he didn't know," I answered. "Nothing you didn't know, come to think of it. I don't think people are fools to believe in it, particularly, but I don't."

"Would you believe in it if you saw it?" he asked.

I considered it, and took the coward's way out. "I don't think we can know how to answer that until we're faced with it."

"But you can't outright say that you'd always think it was a sham."

"Well, I like to think I have at least a little bit of an open mind. Why?"

He shrugged.

"You're not angry at me for being a skeptic, are you?" I asked. "You told me yourself that your help with the twins was a trick. I don't think you go to church, either, do you?"

"No, not usually," he agreed. He was walking with shoulders hunched and head down, watching our feet crunch through the frost on the road. "I'm trying to decide how to say things, that's all. I'm not good at saying things, you know that."

"I think you're fine at saying things."

"Not...not in ways most people understand, though," he said. "You're different."

"So you've said. And, well, thank you, but I don't know how true that is."

"It's just difficult to know where to start."

I put my hands in my pockets, idling along at the slow pace he'd set. "All right, that's fair. Can I tell you something that might help?"

"Sure, if you think it will."

"You know I used to live in Chicago."

"Sure."

"But I didn't own a bookstore there. I worked in business – I made a lot of money, actually," I said, remembering the sixty-hour weeks I'd put in, hating every second of it. I sure did like the money though, and I'd liked what it bought me. "I wouldn't be able to keep Dusk Books if I hadn't. Most years I barely break even, after taxes."

"This is a very weird way of reassuring me," he said.

"Sorry, I wandered. I studied economics at school – what's so funny?" I asked, when he laughed.

"I just pictured you as the English Major type. Maybe History."

"My parents were paying for college, they wanted a businessman. Then around the time I realized it wasn't for me, my mother died and I didn't want to stress my dad out, and the pay would be good. Still not the point," I interrupted myself. "The point is that I had this internship during school at a big office building. Filing. Dad thought it'd get me a foot in the door. There was a huge room full of files and cabinets, and a bunch of us spent most of the day sorting and filing them."

"That really doesn't sound like you, Christopher."

"It isn't. Not anymore. Anyway, I was working with this one woman – I think she was fond of me. We talked a lot, as we filed, because it wasn't really a job two intelligent people need all their brainpower for."

"What did you talk about?"

"This and that, I suppose. She was religious, she knew I wasn't – I didn't tell her that, someone else probably did. One day she asked me if I believed in God."

"What did you say?"

"I remember it because it seemed like such a good answer at the time," I said, smiling ruefully. "I told her that I'd never really needed to believe in God."

"What?"

"I said I'd depended on myself instead, and if I could get by without His help I didn't see why I should ask for it."

"Oh, Christopher," he sighed. "Even I know better than that."

"I know! How arrogant could I be? I managed to dismiss her entire faith and imply that she needed an emotional crutch all at once. I feel like an asshole about it now. What I mean, though, is that it's still kind of true, but these days I just think *everyone* has a crutch. Some people believe in God, some believe in magic, some believe in science...we all have something to get us through the day."

"What do you believe in?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Books, I suppose."

"That's good news for me. You trust books."

"I trust books to always be what they are," I qualified cautiously. "I don't always believe what they say, but I believe in their power to speak. The nice thing about books is that the same book will always show you the same words. It's up to you to figure out what they mean."

"And you love them," Lucas suggested. "You take care of them."

"I try to. I don't get to do much physical work anymore, except for when I fix a book. I like that. You understand, you work with your hands – it's a lot the same, isn't it? Sewing, gluing, leatherwork. Just different end results, I suppose," I mused.

Lucas nodded and fell silent. We continued on with the comfortable crunch of the snow in our ears until, finally, he cleared his throat and spoke again.

"The book you helped me find," he began hesitantly, "It has information in it. Things people have forgotten or don't believe in anymore. It...definitely speaks to me."

"Oh, like myths and stuff?" I said. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"More than that. I believe in it. I think there aren't just myths. *They* aren't just myths. They're...processes. Ways of changing things. Like in the *Metamorphoses* you gave me," he said earnestly, which put me off a little. I frowned.

"Well, I admit I thought you'd be a little too sensible for that kind of thing, but it's no business of mine if you believe in them," I said.

"More than believe. I've tried some. They work."

"Oh, Lucas, come on now," I told him, small alarms going off in my head at the confidence in his voice. Lucas was rarely that confident about anything, let alone myths he'd read in a book.

"I have," he insisted. "When my circuits flipped and I blew out the pilot light and my phone died, remember? That was because I was trying something – it went wrong, yeah, but it still happened, Christopher. I know, because there's that burn mark in the ceiling. And – other things. I'm going to try again when I can. That's why I need to tell you, because if it – " He swallowed, hesitating. I gave him a worried look.

"The telephones go out all the time around these parts," I said, trying to apply a little logic to his thinking. "I'm sure the wiring in that cottage wasn't really very professionally done. The kinds of things you're talking about don't really work, you know that."

"I think they do," he replied flatly.

"Lucas, they're as good a way to be religious as any, but you can't expect me to think *magic spells* actually produce results. Not the kind of thing you can hold in your hand," I said, beginning to be really concerned now. He was so – serious about it, so completely filled with belief.

He looked resolutely forward. "But they do. I know they do. I told you – these are things we've forgotten, that's why we don't believe."

"Lucas, you're worrying me," I told him, as if that would stop him.

"I'm sorry, Christopher. I don't mean to do that, I really don't," he said, but it was the kind of apology given when someone's going to do something anyway. His next words confirmed it: "It's just that it's true, and I want to tell you. I'm working now on something really big – the biggest thing. I think I can do it."

Logic and guilt had failed me. I tried a direct attack, which is not something I'm proud of. I was acting on instinct, out of fear. "You're alone too much out here," I said.

"I haven't been – the boy's always around for tutoring and the Friendly were here, they came to see me every day. *They* believe," he added, still infuriatingly calm. "I said I was learning things that hadn't existed in a long time, and they believed me."

"They're country folk – they come from a different way of seeing the world," I told him.

"You mean they're primitive, and don't know any better," he replied.

"That's not what I said, Lucas!" I replied, annoyed, because really, it sort of was.

"No," he answered bitterly. "It certainly was not what you *said*."

"Listen, really, it's not healthy for you. Come stay in the village for a little while," I cajoled. "You can sleep at my place or I'll pay for a few days at the hotel – if you're out among normal people for a week or two you'll see what kind of madness you're talking."

"I'm not crazy," he said. "I grew up in Chicago too, I can be just as cynical as you can. But this is real, Christopher, it exists. I have to try it."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, anger overriding concern. "What's real? What do you think you're going to do?"

"I think...if it works...there are ways of changing. Being something new – an animal, maybe, like a totem or something. Anyway, I'm sure it works, it's just a question of *making* it work."

I stopped, standing still against the wind, my shoes covered in mud and snow. The world felt more real, in an odd way, standing there listening to what I thought – knew – to be ridiculous superstition.

"You're absolutely insane," I said. "People don't turn into animals, Lucas!"

"Plenty have," he answered, his voice still controlled while mine was rising with each passing minute. "Look at all the stories – werewolves, Greek gods, all those Egyptian paintings of men with animal heads – just because nobody's done it recently...and maybe they have, for all I know. I think you're proving just why nobody would talk about it if they had."

"I'm not going to argue about myths and...and people turning into animals with you," I retorted. "For God's sake, Lucas, you're talking about *were*wolves!"

"Well, just because they've been in horror movies doesn't mean they're any less mythical than Zeus turning into a swan," Lucas replied. There was a defensive tone in his voice that should have been a warning to me, but I plowed on ahead, ignoring it.

"And you don't think that isn't ridiculous too?" I shouted. "You're not a god, Lucas. You're just afraid of everyone and so you lock yourself up in some shack in the middle of nowhere. It's not good for you to be alone like that."

I was trying to hurt him, and I think that was when I succeeded. I didn't really want to – nobody ever does, in a fight like that – but I saw no other way through to him.

He was standing very still by then, his breath hardly even misting the air in front of him.

"I suppose I should be like all the normal people," he said, and to this day I'm uncertain whether there was more anger or more sadness in his tone. "Live in a crowded city with everyone else close enough to bump elbows and spend all my time in the middle of it, even if I'm alone in my head all the time anyway. At least then people wouldn't be able to fling my solitude at me as a reason to dismiss what I say."

"If you had any distance on this, Lucas, you'd welcome company more," I said. "Be alone, then, if that's what you want. When you've come to your senses, come by sometime."

His eyes widened fearfully. "Christopher –"

"Go home, Lucas," I told him, afraid that if I heard any more I'd be angry enough to try and haul him back bodily. "This is as far as I go."

I turned and began the walk back to the village before he could stop me, and either out of shock or shyness he didn't try. I shouldn't have said some of the things I did, and I don't think that ordinarily I would have, but he was so *calm* about it all. Like nothing he was saying was out of the ordinary. Like he just expected me to believe him – and maybe on some level I did, which didn't help my anger any.

The wind picked up as I walked, whipping across the flat ground and threatening to knock me off my feet. I struggled through it and stomped my way back to the village without once turning around.

The wind that fought me as I walked home turned out to be an early herald of a blizzard, which blew up out of nowhere and into the startled village later that evening. I was already in a foul mood, made worse by the knowledge that I shouldn't have walked away from him, and I swore a lot about the storm.

It wasn't just a constant snowfall, which we'd already had a few times that winter, but a full-blown storm, the kind that sends down power lines and breaks windows if the wind blows the wrong way. It caught us all by surprise. The schools closed and business came to a standstill. When I looked out the upstairs window, in the rare moments the snow didn't block out everything, the street below looked like a ghost town.

The first day of the storm, I kept a fire going downstairs and the lights on, though I knew it would be insane for anyone to try and push through the weather just to get to the bookstore. On the other hand, if someone did try to go out in this and got stuck, they might conceivably see the light and find safe haven. All of Low Ferry left its doors unlocked in a storm like that, just in case. I kept myself busy, cleaning and taking inventory, which worked for at least a little while.

The second day, I started to worry.

Most of the people in the village had weathered storms as bad as that one, or worse, in the past few years. My first winter in the village, it had been so cold that my doors froze shut and Paula had been forced to come rescue me, skidding her way over the thick sheets of ice on the street with a blowtorch in one hand and an ice pick in the other. Jacob lost half his chickens that year when they froze solid in the hen-house.

But Lucas hadn't. If he'd grown up in Chicago he'd know a little bit about harsh winters, but not the kind Low Ferry dished out. Not the kind you could face half-crazy in a cottage on a windswept hillside.

Perhaps I overdramatized it a little. Still, I worried about him. Knowing that I couldn't do anything even after the storm blew itself out and the plow came through (if the plow could *get* through) didn't help at all. At least I knew that even Lucas, with his incomplete grasp of how to cope with rough weather, would know not to go out in this, and stay home until help came to him. We'd lost people before when they'd gotten turned around in a blizzard while trying to go the ten feet from their front door to their garden gate.

On the other hand...well, it was a relief that we couldn't speak. The awkwardness bound to follow the fight – or I suppose it was more of a lecture, given how little he fought back – had been postponed by the storm. I wouldn't have to think about what I'd said too much, and I could put off being ashamed of it. I couldn't help but think Lucas would see the

blizzard as a welcome intervention as well.

That second day of the storm I also had no power, but I did have a couple of camp lanterns to light the place with. And, surprisingly, I had customers. There was a momentary lull in the afternoon, with another huge cloud already ballooning on the horizon, and people scrambled to get out of the house – to the grocery store and the hardware store, to the cafe for a hot meal and to my place to see if I had any news to share. Some had been caught by the storm and spent the night at the hotel or on cots in the cafe, their cars immobilized on the main street. They came and went, hanging gloves and hats by the fire to dry, asking me if I'd seen this person or if I'd pass on a message to that one if they came by. The last customer left ten minutes before the wind picked up again.

I was quite content to remain in the shop, sleeping near the hearth at night so that I could feed the fire and not be bothered with restarting it. I had long since hung my *Dottore* mask above the fireplace, and it gazed down on me with foolish benevolence as I slept. Lucas used to say that seeing a mask on a wall could frighten people, but to me it wasn't exactly a mask. It was a sculpture an artist had given to me, and it had something of him in it – in a strictly non-literal sense it was halfway to being a photograph. It held the same general function, anyway.

On the morning of the third day of the storm, with the snow still pelting down, Charles came into the shop and stomped the snow off his boots into the puddle of melting ice on my welcome mat.

"Hi," he said. "Got any batteries?"

I lifted my eyebrows. "Get lost on the way to the hardware store, did you?"

"No," he scowled. "They're at ground level. It's all snowed over. Looked outside lately?"

"Paula must be stuck at home, or she'd have the blowtorch out," I said, rummaging in my desk.

"She does love her blowtorch," he agreed.

"What kind of batteries do you need?"

"For the thing," he said, and I paused.

"The thing," I repeated.

"You know, the little thing that tells you where to go."

"A street sign?" I hazarded.

"No, the little hand thing," he said, and took a GPS locator out of his pocket.

"Ah, of course, the little hand thing," I said, accepting it and prying the back off. "Double-As, got it. What are you doing out in this mess, anyway?"

"I was out northwest, checking on folk. Making sure everyone had firewood, food, that kind of thing. Wife gave me that for an early Christmas. Pretty handy, in all this."

"I can imagine it would be," I said, pulling out the dead batteries and replacing them from a package in my desk drawer. "Anyone in trouble yet? You need anything?"

He glanced around at the bookshelves.

"Okay, well, I take your point, but don't sass the man who gave you batteries," I said.

"Nobody's in trouble as far as I know – why, what do you hear?" he asked.

"Nothing, really." I hesitated. "I don't suppose you've seen Lucas around."

"Lucas? No – he'd never go out in this weather, would he? I'd have seen him if he were trapped in town."

"I'm sure he's out at The Pines. I just wondered, living alone..." I trailed off.

"He's probably all right – besides, if he isn't, nobody's going to be able to help him in this weather," Charles said, and then eyed me up and down. "I'm surprised you stayed here. What if you have another attack?"

"I won't," I answered. "Besides, Kirchner looked after me last time."

He gave me a skeptical look.

"Listen, I managed three years here without a major attack," I said, beginning to lose patience with the village's unending attention to my cardiac health. "Let's have another three before everyone becomes my doctor, all right?"

"All right, Christopher," he soothed, fiddling with the device to reset it. "Things are calming down, anyway. I don't think there'll be trouble unless someone panics. And," he added, rubbing his reddening cheeks, "I should be going. Are you really concerned about Lucas?"

"Not enough that you should go check on him, that's a trip I wouldn't wish on an enemy," I said. "I just think he's alone more often than he should be."

"I'll go up to see him when the weather clears, if you want." He straightened his clothing and wrapped his scarf around his face, preparing for the struggle outside.

"Do – ask him down to the village for a few days. Offer him a job. Something at the church, maybe. He needs it," I said.

"You think so too, eh?" he asked. "He seems to enjoy his solitude, though."

"He needs to be around people more."

"Well, we'll see. I'll keep you abreast of things and tell him you'd like to see him."

"Thanks, Charles," I said, and held the door for him as he ventured back out into the elements.

He was the only visitor I had for the rest of the day, and around seven I finally gave up expecting anyone else. I spent the evening in a wing-chair with a book, eventually nodding off and allowing the book to drop to the floor.

When I woke again the fire was in embers, and someone was standing next to it: Lucas, barefoot on the hearth, holding *Dottore* in his hands. He looked as if he were waiting for something, and also very tired.

"Hi," he said.

"Lucas?" I asked. "Did you come in to Low Ferry in this storm?"

"I wanted to talk to you," he said, shrugging.

"About what?"

"What we discussed."

"Through the storm? How did you even get here?"

"Christopher, that's not important," he said, looking exasperated.

"The point is I wanted to say –"

He stopped and swallowed, and I thought he might be about to apologize until he spoke again.

"I want you to understand what I'm doing. Not just dismiss it," he said, when I opened my mouth to speak. "I want you to be curious about it. I want you to know."

"The only thing I'm curious about is how this happened in the first place," I said. "I don't really think you're sick, or insane –"

"Oh! That's good!" He beamed.

"– but I do think there's a problem," I finished. His face fell.

"Lucas, it's nothing you've done. You're just not thinking clearly about things. You're spending too much time alone with books."

He looked at me, and then he started to laugh.

"It's serious, Lucas –"

"No – it's just – you live in a bookstore!" he said.

"In the middle of a town!" I replied.

"Where you talk to everyone about everyone, but not ever about anything," he drawled.

I was about to answer angrily, but he raised his hand to his face, pressing his palm to his forehead. I watched in horror as he slid his hand down over his face. The skin changed color, subtly, and then the shape of his brow, the width of his nose and cheeks, his lips and chin –

The thing about masks and mirrors, so I learned from Lucas at some point or other, is that when we look in a mirror we do not, in fact, see ourselves. We see a reverse image which we imprint as ourselves because we see it so often. Photographs are sometimes unsettling for this reason: that is the true us, not the mirror-image, and no face is perfectly symmetrical. Symmetrical faces are strange and terrifying if carried too far.

Masks can reflect that perfect symmetry, or they can reflect the minute irregularities of our own faces. A model of one's face, made by another person, looks peculiar and amateurish because we are looking on our face as a real object instead of the usual flat photograph or backwards reflection in the mirror.

I looked on my own face, worn like a mask over Lucas's, and my stomach turned.

This was, of course, the point at which I woke up.

The fire had all but gone out. I was freezing, and so the dream was forced to take second place to rekindling. When the flame was crackling again, or at least doing its best, I sat back on the bedroll in front of it and pressed the heels of my hands to my forehead. The slight, sharp ache of palm-on-skin told me that this, at least, was no dream.

It took a good ten minutes for me to notice that it was silent in the room and outside it, and that light was filtering through my windows. The storm had stopped, and morning was already dawning. When I peered out through the gaps in the shutters, I was met with a world of white.

The snow was piled high enough that my shop no longer looked like it stood above the street. A flat blanket of snow spread like a highway up to my door and even a little above the threshold, just barely covering the floor of the porch. Other less-elevated shops were buried up to their doorknobs or higher, but at least the blizzard was over – the sky outside looked clear and sunny.

I ran upstairs to dress, washing in a basin of cold water, and made myself a cup of tea over the fire. Ron, across the street at the cafe, was already shoveling the doorway free, cursing with each deep sharp crack as the shovel sliced through the snow. It was past time I should be shoveling out, too, but I stood on the porch with my tea and watched, the snow crackling occasionally under my boots.

It wasn't long before the plow came through, cutting a single narrow lane down the two-lane street and pushing the snow up high on either side, so that the remaining parked cars stood behind huge walls of packed white powder. Once it was gone, I ducked back inside for my hat and gloves, then stepped out onto the porch and began kicking away the snow that buried the shovel that I'd left leaning against the porch railing.

I considered clearing off my entire porch, but only briefly. The weight of the snow was bad for the elderly wood but frankly it would be harder on my shoulders to shovel it all. The walkway to the street would take long enough and I wouldn't have many customers for a few hours anyway, I suspected. People would want to get out and about, but they'd rather go to the cafe or stock up on groceries first.

I had only managed to clear a path down the porch, chipping the thin layer of snow up with the edge of the shovel, when I heard a yell. I looked up to see Carmen wading her way down the sidewalk, hip-deep in snow, wearing vivid pink quilted snow-overalls and a long parka.

"Christopher!" she shouted, horrified. "What are you doing?"

I looked from her to the shovel and back. "Shoveling out?" I said uncertainly.

"What – kind of crazy – man do you – think you are?" she huffed, climbing over the low, snow-covered garden wall and plowing through my yard, up to the porch. "Do you have a death wish?"

"No," I said, confused.

"You're going to hurt yourself," she told me, and reached for the shovel. I held it back, out of her grasp, and she stomped up the steps, shaking snow off her overalls. "You can't shovel snow."

"Yes I can," I said, jerking the shovel back when she made another grab for it. "What's wrong with you?"

"Me! You'll give yourself another episode," she insisted. I groaned, which gave her time to get a grip on the shovel and try to wrestle it out of my hands. I held firm.

"Carmen, I'm not going to have a heart attack shoveling – let go of my shovel!" I said, when she tugged on it.

"No!" she retorted. "Don't make me punch you!"

I considered this. I was pretty sure I was strong enough to hold onto the shovel in a grab-fight, but Carmen's got an arm on her. When she threw her useless wife-beating husband out, right before Clara was born, she hit him so hard she broke two of his ribs. (Kirchner was not gentle in providing medical care before kicking him out of the office and into the waiting arms of half of Low Ferry, who escorted him firmly out of town.) If Carmen socked me there was a good chance I'd go down.

I let go of the shovel. She huffed and gave me a shove anyway.

"Crazy fool," she muttered, digging the shovel into the first step and tossing it aside. "Shoveling out, he says."

"Carmen, you don't have to shovel my snow," I told her, hovering around, trying not to get brained as she vehemently threw snow off the path. "You're going to be late for work."

"Do you see where I work?" she demanded, stopping briefly to wave a hand in the direction of the cafe. "You see anyone there? HEY, RON," she called, returning to her shoveling.

"YEAH WHAT?" Ron shouted back from across the street.

"SHOUT IF YOU NEED ME," she yelled.

"OKAY! SIT DOWN BEFORE YOU FALL DOWN, CHRISTOPHER!" he added. I rubbed my forehead, exasperated.

"This is why I left the city, you know," I told her. She'd already cleared the steps and was working on the first light powdery layer of snow on the path.

"So I could shovel your walkway?" she asked, tossing aside another shower of snow.

"So that I wouldn't be treated special," I said. "I'm not delicate, Carmen."

"Nuts," she retorted. "There's no reason in the world for you to be doing this. There are dozens of able-bodied people in this town."

"And I'm one of them! Carmen, honestly." I made a grab for the shovel and she pushed me again.

"You can give me that book about Santa that Clara wants, if you want to pay me, but if you don't I'm still going to do this," she said. I watched nervously as she chipped up the lower layer of hard-packed snow.

"Well, I will then," I said, sulking.

"Well, good."

I continued to hover as she made her way down the walk, until she had shoveled almost half of the pathway. It was...it was *nice* to know people cared about me, and of course nobody really *wants* to shovel snow if they can get someone else to do it, but I felt guilty for even thinking that way. Low Ferry might care a great deal about the state of my heart, but I couldn't bring myself to be as cautious as they were.

Finally, Ron put me out of my misery.

"CARMEN, CUSTOMERS," he shouted, and she straightened, propping the shovel in the snow.

"I have to go to work," she said loftily. "But don't think I won't come over here and smack you on the nose with a newspaper if you try to do the rest. Get one of those schoolkids to do it, or Charles or someone. I'm serious, Christopher," she added.

"I'm okay," I said weakly, and she glowered. "Fine! Fine, I'll find someone to do the rest."

"Good."

"Stop by and get the book later," I offered.

"Okay, I will," she replied. She gave me one last warning look, then waded back the way she'd come, staggering precariously through the waist-high snow between two cars and walking briskly across the street to the cafe's now-cleared doorway.

I rubbed the back of my head, trying to decide what to do about the rest of my walk. I probably would have picked up the shovel again in another minute and earned myself Carmen's eternal displeasure but, at that moment, a cold, wet snowball hit me square in the ear.

I scooped up a handful of nearby snow without thinking, turned to throw it, and saw Lucas standing in the sidewalk's packed-down snow. He looked startled.

"The boy!" He said, pointing at a black blur disappearing quickly down the street. "It wasn't me!"

"No doubt," I said drily, as ice began to slide down my neck and underneath my collar. I dropped the snowball and wiped off my neck. "Good to see you in town," I added, not quite meeting his eyes.

"Some storm," he agreed, hesitantly. "Did your power go out?"

"Still is." I waved a hand at the shop.

"Oh. Mine's back on. I thought maybe in town it wouldn't go out."

The conversation reminded me of something, and it didn't take long to put my finger on it. It felt as though it was the end of summer again, when Lucas had only just arrived. He stood outside the garden wall, a pair of snowshoes strapped on his back and his hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders slumped, eyes cast downwards. He was fumbling for words, trying to make small talk without any clue how. I turned from the half-shoveled path and sat down on the porch step. We regarded each other across the yard.

"How do they get out?" he asked, pointing to the snowbound cars.

"They dig 'em out," I said. "Or drive them out, one at a time, starting at the south end of the street."

"They plowed this morning, as far as the asphalt goes. I thought that was good of them," he said. "Charles came to see me."

"Oh yes?" I asked. "Bring you all the news?"

"He offered me a job at the church, shoveling the yard and trimming the trees. I said no."

"Lucas – " I started, but I didn't have the energy for more and he interrupted me anyway.

"Please, Christopher," he stammered. "I know you're ashamed of shouting at me –"

This stung. "I am not!"

He winced. "Sorry," he muttered. When I didn't reply, he spoke again. "I just – I want to say stop and forget it all, all what I said, but I'm not taking the church job and – and it's not a lie."

"I never said it was a *lie*, Lucas."

"You think it isn't true, which is the same thing. But I know I can do it – I can prove it to you," he said, taking a step forward. The gate to the walkway was still snowed in, and he couldn't come any further without climbing over the wall like Carmen had done.

"Prove it to me?" I asked. "How? What are you going to do, turn into a fox in front of me?"

"No!" he shouted, frustrated. "Will you please just *listen* to me!"

I had only once before experienced anger from Lucas, and never heard him raise his voice. I had not seen, or maybe had not wanted to see, that he was furious with me – that his face was dark and his whole body tense, not with anxiety but with anger.

"All right, Lucas," I said quietly. "You might as well come through, if you can."

It was something of a challenge, and I half-hoped he'd leave, seeing the snow he'd have to push through to get to me. Instead, he pressed his gloved hands into the snow until he found the wall, then stepped up onto it and stood, ankle-deep, studying it. I thought that he would probably just drop into the footsteps Carmen had left and slog through, but instead he took a step forward and eased his foot down into the snow next to her thigh-deep footprints. It packed down firm before he sank more than half an inch, and he put his weight on it hesitantly.

"I've learned things," he said, stepping forward, again easing his foot down carefully. The snow didn't even come up over the toes of his shoes.

He was half a man's height off the ground on a snowbank that was soft loose powder, but he wasn't sinking in. Eight slow steps brought him to the shoveled walkway, and he let himself gracefully down into it using the handle of the shovel for balance. I watched, confused and a little unwilling to believe what I was seeing.

"It's all right if you think it's impossible, I wouldn't blame you," he said, crunching over the frozen gravel. "I don't mind. But I don't want you calling me a liar and I don't want you thinking that I'm unbalanced."

"What else *do* you want me to think, Lucas?" I asked, looking up at him from the steps.

"Think that I'm playing pretend, like children do, or maybe that I'm open-minded enough to try an experiment. Just...I don't want you to ignore me," he pleaded. "I wouldn't know what to do. I don't want you to treat me like a stranger, Christopher. I don't ask much of people, I don't even ask this much of most others. Please."

No one likes to admit they're wrong, particularly after shouting about it, and no one likes their irrational anger to be met with such quiet

steadfastness. By the same token, I was pleased that Lucas did want me to think well of him, me specifically. That he was fond of me.

"Why?" I asked, stalling.

"Why what? Why try it?"

"Why do you care so much that I believe you?"

"Dunno about believing," he said, kicking at the gravel. "It's important that someone know. So if something goes wrong, you at least have an idea of why."

"Goes wrong?" I asked, suddenly alarmed. "Lucas, what do you mean, *goes wrong*?"

"Well..." He laughed, a sharp and not entirely cheerful crack of noise between us. "If you don't believe it works, there's nothing to worry about. It's not like I'm going to try and shed my mortal shell or something. It's not that dramatic."

"Really, please stay here for a few days," I said. "It's a long hike out, and you can't think you'll be able to carry many groceries back with you."

"I don't need many groceries," he said softly. "But if it would make you happier, Christopher, I can stay for a few days. There's probably rooms down at the hotel now that the storm's over, right?"

"Probably," I said carefully.

"That's fine, then." He gnawed his lip and looked around. "When will the shop be open?"

"Did you want something?" I asked.

"I was just wondering."

"Well, it's open now if you need it, you know that," I said.

"I don't," he insisted, rather more forcefully than really necessary. "I just wanted to know. I thought I'd come by and have a look around later."

"All right," I said. "The rest should be shoveled in a little while, and then I'll open the store. Where are you going in the meantime?"

"Down to the general store for some clothes. I'll be back later, I guess."

I nodded and watched as he climbed carefully back onto the snow, using the same slightly-sunken impressions as before. I stayed where I was until he had disappeared down the street.

After he was gone I walked carefully down to the edge of the unshoveled snow. One of the footsteps he'd made was near enough to touch and shone oddly in the overcast light. I leaned over and examined it.

Disbelieving, I slid my fingers around a smooth, solid, rounded edge. With a slight tug, the whole thing came free and I held a clear chunk of ice in my hands. It was wide enough to disperse a man's weight and an inch thick, flawless as glass. The pattern of a boot-print was delicately etched in the top. Even as I stared, it slipped out of my hands and fell to the gravel, shattering into fragments.

I stood there for a while, dumbfounded, until Michael walked past on his way to the bank. He stopped and gave me a skeptical look.

"You're not shoveling that yourself, are you?" he asked.

"Oh, for God's — no," I said. "Carmen won't let me."

He chuckled. "Her too, huh? Well, there's not much left and you shouldn't strain yourself. I'll do it for you."

"Here," I said, digging in my wallet and holding up a ten dollar bill. "Leave the shovel on the porch when you're done. I'm going to go inside and moan over my invalid state."

Michael shrugged, slogged through Carmen's makeshift path to take the money from me, and picked up the shovel. I walked inside, so that I wouldn't have to see him working or see the iced-over footprints beginning to melt and crack. I threw myself down in a chair, picked up a book, and pretended to read until customers started showing up.

Neither Lucas nor I mentioned it when he came back later that day to browse in the shop. Not what I'd said, not what he'd said, not the ice footprints that had melted since that morning. We didn't talk about much, but he seemed less tense. Not talking was something we were good at, after all. He showed me the shirts and shaving kit he'd bought at the store, and that was about it.

Maybe we should have talked. But, for once, I had no idea what I would have said.

NINE

"WHAT DO YOU do for Christmas, in the village?"

I looked up at Lucas through the steam rising from my coffee cup. It was reassuringly hot, a nice contrast to the frost-patterned window of the cafe and the snow that still clung to my boots and trouser-cuffs. I'd caught him just ordering dinner as I came in for a little warmth and society on Christmas Eve, and he'd actually invited me to come sit with him – though he'd interrupted Carmen taking his order as he called out to me. He'd been cringing about his faux pas for several minutes.

Things between us had settled back to normal again, or at least we were pretending they had. Lucas had stayed in town well past the "few days" I'd asked for. Snow had continued to fall gently most evenings, which made walking back to The Pines especially difficult. But, judging by the bags of clothing and groceries under the table and the snowshoes leaning against the wall, he was planning on going back tonight. Probably just as well. He seemed to be itching to make sure nothing dire had happened to his cottage and his masks.

"Christmas," he prompted, and I realized I'd been studying him without really listening.

"Not much," I said. "We're a New Year's Eve kind of place."

"Really? Wait, let me guess," he said, holding up a finger and closing his eyes. "Cookout at the church."

"Close. Pot-luck dinner at the cafe," I answered, and he opened his eyes with a knowing look. "You knew you moved to a small town, Lucas."

"I didn't know I'd moved to a picture-postcard."

"Well, it's not fireworks and a rock concert, but it's nice. They hold it here, at the cafe. There'll be music and dancing. *Tons* of food. More than Thanksgiving, even."

"Idyllic," he said. "Sometimes I wonder if Low Ferry's going to turn out to be some kind of country-town horror novel, but I just can't see it."

I smiled. "We have our problems, but I don't think there's anything that macabre. Unless you count the Straw Bear."

"Maybe the Straw Bear didn't used to be symbolic."

"Maybe not. Then again, most places have something in their past that's best left there," I said. It never occurred to me that it wasn't the false violence of the straw bear he meant, but rather the transformation. "It's all an eternal puzzle, Lucas. But you will come to New Year's?"

"I guess so – I mean I should, and maybe it'll be fun," he said, though he looked doubtful. "Do I have to bring something?"

"Well, no one *has* to. I don't think anyone would care if you didn't. We all know how far away you live. Are you going back today, by the way?"

"Yes – just screwing up my courage," he said. "I'll see you on New Year's if I'm not back sooner."

"Quite a walk back to your place," I said. "Can't someone drive you down to the end of the asphalt?"

"It's out of the way for nearly everyone. I don't mind."

"You will, halfway there with nowhere to put your bags down. Let me close the shop and I'll come with you," I said.

Lucas glanced at me, then nodded nervously, setting out some money for the meal. "You don't have to come help, you know."

"It's been a while since I strapped on my snowshoes," I said cheerfully. "Business is slow. I'll make sure your heating is still working..."

"I know how to re-light a pilot now," Lucas replied, but his grin was as wide as mine. "Come on then, but I won't tip you."

I was rummaging through the storage room, where I was sure I'd stashed my snowshoes sometime last winter – and where a wrapped package for Lucas happened to be – when the door slammed and I put my head out to see who it was. Lucas was still loitering near the home-improvement section. My guest was the boy, who leaned on my counter and waved at me.

"Hiya," I said. "Looking for something?"

"Saw you come in," he answered. "I thought I'd say hi."

"Well, hi," I replied, pressing the package into his hands and pointing at the bags by the door. "Haven't seen you around since school let out. How'd exams go?"

"Tell him about your History test," Lucas called. The boy quietly snuck the package into a bag.

"I was really fast, I was third done in History," he said, beaming hugely at me. "And I got done first in Art."

"You had a final exam in art?" I asked, rummaging under the counter.

"Had to write an essay about our favorite piece of art," the boy said.

"What'd you choose?" I asked, looking up.

"That one." The boy pointed over my shoulder at a poster on my back wall. It had come from Chicago with me, years before: a reprint of an old propaganda piece from the forties, extolling the virtues of riding the elevated train. "Lucas says it's early modernist graphic design repopularized by ironic nostalgia."

"Did you say that in your paper?" I gave him a startled look. He shook his head.

"Don't know what it means. I just said I liked the colors and shapes."

"Well, that'll probably earn you a B at least. Aha!" I added triumphantly, as the snowshoes clattered out from behind the glass door. "Found 'em, Lucas!"

"Great!" he said. He glanced up at the boy, who radiated innocence. "We're going out to The Pines. Want to come?"

"Can't today," the boy said. "Gotta go. Merry Christmas!"

"See you at New Year!" Lucas called after him, as the door banged shut again. "Five bucks says he gets an A on his art test."

"Not a bet I'd take," I replied, as I hooked the snowshoes over my shoulder.

"He got me a Christmas present. But I think you probably know that," Lucas added with a shy look.

"I had hints," I agreed. "So, are we going or what?"

Ten minutes later we were at the edge of the village, on the last few feet of asphalt before it gave way to a thick blanket of unplowed snow. We set down the bags and began putting the snowshoes on, Lucas with more care and deliberation – he'd used them a few times, I think, but I had two full Low Ferry winters on him and I was up on the snowbank by the time he had his first shoe on. I offered him a hand up when he was ready, and we were on our way again.

"It makes me want to keep a sled," Lucas said, carrying a bag in one hand and swinging his other arm for balance, like I was. "I'm surprised more people don't have snowmobiles, or those ATV things."

"And do what with them the rest of the year? Horses can haul carts or carry packs in the summertime. ATVs are expensive, and pretty dangerous," I replied. "Besides, snowmobiles aren't all that useful on mud."

"Guess so," he said. "I wonder what it's like here in the summer. I suppose you know."

"Hot," I grunted. We walked on in silence until the cottage became visible, a dirty blot on the white surrounding it. Snow had piled up against the back, between the rear wall and the incline of the hill, spilling down on either side. From the holly bush by the door, the little yellow self-appointed guard-bird of the cottage sang out a warning.

"You'll come in, won't you?" he asked. "You can't come all the way out here and not at least warm up a little before you go back."

"It's going to be freezing in there," I said.

"I left wood ready in the fireplace and I didn't turn the heat all the way down. I wasn't planning on staying in town this long."

He bent and scooped some of the snow away from the kitchen door, undoing his snowshoes. Before he opened the door he turned around, looking over my shoulder, and I followed his gaze.

There was a band of blackish blue forming on the horizon above the town, where the setting sun's rays no longer quite reached. We were already standing in the shadow of the hill, the rest of the meadow and the edges of the town touched with gold. You think you never remember it right, that light doesn't work that way – that the world can't look so gold or blue. But once or twice in your life you catch it, and it *is*.

"Do you know what the French expression for dusk is?" Lucas asked, behind me. "The phrase is *Entre chien et loup*."

"That's not literal, surely?"

"No – it means *between the dog and the wolf*. Uncertain times," he said. "Not one way or the other yet. Come in," he added, opening the door.

The house was as cold as I'd imagined it would be, but Lucas went straight into the living room and lit the paper under the kindling in the fireplace. I switched the lights on and looked around while he watched the kindling begin to scorch and burn.

There were still masks everywhere, completed or in progress. I could see all the little boxes of feathers and trim, bottles of glue, sacks of plaster, lumps of clay. Most of it, however, had been pushed aside or relegated to shelves, and on the main workbench there was a wide clear area with only one occupant, an odd handmade armature with a half-finished mask on it. The mask was nothing more than a series of sewn-together scraps thrown across the mold, leather and cloth with wide gaps here and there. No attempt had been made to hide the seams – they were done in thick black twine in an even-patterned diagonal stitch. Other pieces of leather lay nearby, apparently waiting to be added. Behind the workbench was a chair from the kitchen table, over which Lucas had thrown his coat. At the moment, the assembled parts looked like beginning of an animal's muzzle, shaped around the wooden mold.

"What's it going to be?" I inquired.

"I'm not really sure yet. I'm still working on it," he replied. "It's taking some time. Other things keep distracting me."

He pointed to one of the tables, where a series of smallish oval masks were apparently waiting to be finished.

"Japanese?" I asked, recognizing the motifs vaguely.

"Yes – *Noh* masks. They're a sort of symbol," he said. "They say the mask unlocks the actor's talent. You join with the mask and all the learning you've done, the untapped potential, becomes manifest."

"You seem very interested in them," I said. There had to be at least a dozen different styles, some with horns or fangs, others with delicate painted accents, but all sharing a basic similarity of shape and size.

"I like them," he said. "They're a perfect fusion of use and beauty. One day I'll understand them."

I looked at him, and he gave a small shrug and a smile. "Those aren't real *Noh*, anyway, you have to do a lot more studying than I've done to make a real *Noh* mask. Cheap imitations, but pretty. By the way," he added, and dug a small package out of the desk. "I got this for you."

I looked down at it and grinned – it was plain brown paper, but it had a nice ribbon and *Merry Christmas* was scrawled in one corner. I tore it open and had to catch a handful of straps as they all but fell out. Beaded and bell-decked – some of the shoe decorations the Friendly sold when they passed through, meant to be buckled over boots to brighten them in the winter.

"For your shoes," he said.

"I guessed," I replied, with a smile. "Thank you, Lucas, they're great – I'll wear them home. I have something for you, too..."

I rummaged the bag I'd been carrying and came up with the package the boy had hidden there for me – slightly better wrapped, but not much larger. He took it, looking delighted and amused.

"Book?" he asked, holding up the oblong packet and studying it.

"Might be," I answered. "Open it."

He unfolded the ends carefully and pulled the paper away, running his hand down the smooth, worn paper dust jacket.

"I thought you might not have that one," I said.

"*The Book of the Werewolf*," he read aloud. "I – wow. This is out of print, way out of print."

"You know it?"

"I tried to find a copy in Chicago, once. The library doesn't even let you take theirs out of the building."

"I have connections," I said, watching as he paged through it, then closed it and set it carefully on the edge of the workbench.

"Thank you," he said, and I found myself in a warm, wholehearted hug. He smelled like cheap soap, dust, and still just a hint of plaster, even after all his time away from his workshop. They weren't unpleasant scents at all.

"Well," I said, when he stepped back and looked overwhelmingly embarrassed. "Merry Christmas, Lucas."

"Merry Christmas. Can you stay for a while?"

"I shouldn't, it's getting dark," I said regretfully. "I don't want to freeze on the walk home."

"I'll walk you out," he replied. I noticed, pleased, that he took the book with him as we went. "Stay warm once you get back."

"I plan to," I replied, strapping the decorations he'd given me around my boots. They jingled, and we grinned at each other for a moment before I put the snowshoes on over them. "I'll see you for New Year's if I don't see you before, right?"

"Definitely," he said, and I stepped back out into the crisp Low Ferry night.

The first year I spent in Low Ferry, I didn't get why people were so excited about New Year's. I'd already been welcomed by the Friendly and blindsided by the Halloween festivities, but I thought with Christmas I was on pretty solid ground. In Chicago – especially in Chicago, City of Big Retail – Christmas was the main event. Wasn't it that way everywhere? New Year's was just an excuse to drink and ride the El for free and watch fireworks. Which is all fun, don't mistake me, but not nearly as important as Christmas. And anyway, I didn't see how a potluck at the local cafe could really compare to Chicago for sheer entertainment value.

This is because I was still a city boy at the time.

Christmas in Low Ferry is a strictly stay-at-home event, except for the Christmas Eve service at the church. Everyone confided in me that it

was really for the kids, and I'd get it when I saw the New Year's party. This didn't go far towards comforting me when I spent Christmas day alone in my pajamas, reading, but I had to admit that it was pretty relaxing. Still, it bothered me until that first New Year's, and then they were right: I got it.

The New Year's party, held in the cafe with all the chairs and tables pushed back, was less formal than the Straw Bear. It really was a time for the adults – food, talking, company with which to welcome another year. There were usually one or two fights, of course, because there was also plenty to drink, but nothing ever came of them and usually being tossed in the snow by the rest of us was good for a quick, sobering cool-off.

That third year in Low Ferry, Lucas's first, Carmen had apparently gone a little stir-crazy and distracted herself by decorating. The rafters were hung with all kinds of bizarre streamers and banners, and the windows were covered in paint proclaiming, in a messy unprofessional hand, a Happy New Year to all. The extra unused tables and chairs had been stacked in a careful pyramid in one corner and then, as a finishing touch, strung with about a million Christmas lights.

Clearly she hadn't been the only one who was bored in the deep winter, either. There were roasted chickens, kettles of stew and soup, eight or nine kinds of meat pie, casseroles, one glorious soufflé, breads galore, bean dips and cheese and home-baked crackers, potatoes prepared in every imaginable way, cakes and cookies, ice cream, some unidentifiable fried things...

"Brings a sort of tear to your eye, doesn't it?" Charles asked, as I stood contemplating the food in awe. "Watch the onion casserole, that'll *really* do it."

"It's not just me, is it? There wasn't this much last year?" I asked.

"Oh, yes there was, you've just forgotten. Come through to the back; that's where the real party is, and a nip will do you good."

Charles and I collected two heaping plates of food and carried them through to the back. There, a dozen other hand-picked guests were drinking in the little loading yard behind the cafe, avoiding the crowd inside that was fast spilling into the street out front. They swooped down on our plates and took whatever looked good, then pressed a stoneware mug into my hands with the promise of alcohol as soon as they could locate a bottle.

It's a very clear memory, that one: the scavenged chairs and benches in the snow, the uneven light, a crowd of men and women sitting around and talking with their breath freezing in the air as they sipped from their mugs. It was cold, but it was quieter than inside and a good place to have a drink, smoke a cigarette, and gossip. Someone finally dumped the last of a bottle of whiskey into my mug.

"Last glass! Married by this time next year!" Charles announced. "Come on, Christopher, we all know it's well past time."

"He has his eye on that Friendly woman," someone said.

"Nothing of the kind," I answered cheerfully, knowing that anger

would only make them certain of it. "She won't settle and I won't roam. She's much better off finding some – ugh, this is awful," I interrupted myself, having tasted the whiskey in my mug.

"Yes. It was very cheap," agreed Charles gravely. The others laughed. A shadow moved behind Paula's shoulder, and Lucas leaned forward into the little circle of light, his face oddly sharp-edged against the dark.

"We've been playing a game with it," he said, smiling at me.

"Hello, Lucas!" I said, pleased to see him. "You beat me to the party, well done. What game?"

"Favorites!" Paula crowed.

"How do you play that?" I asked.

"What's your favorite thing, Christopher?" Lucas said, by way of an answer. His face was a little flushed from the alcohol. He seemed more relaxed than usual, even if he was hiding behind most of the crowd.

"Reading," I answered him. One of the men nearby snorted with laughter.

"After books," Lucas pressed.

"I don't know. What kind of a game *is* this?" I asked.

"He hasn't had enough to drink," Paula said, tipping my mug up so that I was forced to either drink or spill the alcohol on my boots.

"I like trains," I said, when I had swallowed and the heat in my stomach subsided a little.

"Trains?" came the demand from all sides.

"Why shouldn't I like trains? You disqualified reading as an answer. In fact, I like reading *on* trains," I said. "Especially subway trains."

"Never been on a subway," Jacob said thoughtfully, as he opened a new bottle of alcohol. "Noisy, aren't they?"

"Not once you're on them," I objected. They all looked skeptical. "You asked, and I told you."

"Why?" Lucas inquired.

"Why what, why trains?" I asked. Jacob leaned forward and refilled my mug.

"Yes," Lucas said.

"What's wrong with trains? You always know where you're going, and if you go to the wrong place you get off and walk across the platform and you can get on a new train to take you back the way you came. In the city, trains are a straight line between two points. They have maps, and all you have to know is the map. Do you know," I said, sipping from my mug and warming to my captive audience, "do you know that my entire knowledge of the city is based on El stations? The whole city is just...circles, to me, going outward from train stations. In my head. I know the whole city that way."

"To trains," Charles said, raising his mug.

"Trains and certainty," Lucas agreed.

"I'm starving," I added, and ducked inside again to fill another plate, having gotten almost nothing from the first one. Then I got distracted, of

course – it was nice to stop and speak with people, nice to be able to eat and drink and roam a little. When the town assembled, things fitted together differently. You could see how people had changed – who'd gotten bald, who'd lost weight, who had hit it off, who had broken up. Everyone said hello. People danced with each other, talked and sang and ate.

I thought of Lucas, joking about the horrible secrets of small towns, but all I saw were ordinary people, in their everyday clothes, working to get by and dancing in the meantime. Maybe it hadn't been our best year, and maybe some people weren't there who had been the year before, but we did the best we could to look after each other and there'd be time to worry about everything else soon enough. On New Year's Eve, everyone ate well – and there was a lot of room to dream.

At about a quarter to midnight it was getting a little crowded inside for me, and I thought some fresh air might do me good before the count-down to the new year. The loading yard was emptying as people came inside, and I passed Lucas while I was pushing through to the back. He grinned and handed me the half-full mug he'd been holding.

There certainly didn't seem to be anyone outside when I stepped through the door. I stood in the darkness and took a sip from the mug, inhaling, enjoying the momentary silence. I almost closed my eyes, but at the last second I caught movement – a shadow near the wall, behind a scrubby little tree covered in snow. I looked closer as my eyes adjusted, and that was when I solved the mystery of the Great Bank Love Triangle. Two-thirds of it, anyway.

Nolan and Michael were standing under the tree, fingers twined together, heads bent very close, kissing in the quiet cold. I gaped for a minute and tried to turn and retreat, to give them their privacy, but of course I chose that minute to slip on a patch of wet snow and tumble backwards, arms flailing, the mug shattering against the brick wall as it flew out of my fingers.

"Who's there?" Nolan called, while I tried to push myself up on slick ice. There was a hiss from Michael – "Shut up!" – and one from Nolan – "Don't be an idiot!" – and then Nolan was emerging from the shadows. When he saw me, flat on my back on the ice, a comical look of panic appeared on his face.

"Aw, Jesus, I think we killed him again," he said, running over to kneel next to me. I gave up trying to push myself to my feet and turned my head.

"I'm not dead, I tripped and fell," I said. "Help me up already."

"Well, thank God for small favors," Michael grunted, crouching on my other side and offering me a hand. I took it and hauled myself up, Nolan supporting my other shoulder and dusting snow off my coat.

"Thanks," I muttered, swiping at the snow on the seat of my pants.

"Are you okay?" Nolan asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I was just – " I looked up then, guiltily, and both young men were watching me.

"Glad you're okay," Michael said in a conversational tone. "You can't have seen anything very clearly before you tripped and fell, huh?"

"Michael," Nolan began warningly, but Michael held up a hand.

"And you wouldn't want to trip and fall again because you were trying to tell someone about anything you did think you'd seen, would you?" he continued.

I stared at him for a minute and then burst into laughter.

"Oh, lord," I said. "Michael, are you *threatening* me?"

"Apparently not very," he replied, face falling.

"No, it's fine, don't worry," I said, looking between them. Nolan looked worried, but Michael looked terrified. "Boys, honestly. I know I talk a lot, but I know when to keep my mouth shut, too." I grinned at Michael and wrapped one hand around the back of his neck, shaking lightly. "I guess you aren't as bothered by the gossip that's out there now as you would be by this, huh?"

"It's nobody's business," Michael said, shrugging out of my grip.

"Relax. I don't care," I answered.

"Lots of people do," Nolan murmured.

"Well, they're fools."

"We're moving to Chicago," Michael blurted. "Soon as I help my dad with the spring crop."

"And there will be fools in Chicago, I promise you," I answered.

"Still, you might have a point. Tell you what, come by the shop in a few days. I'll get you some guidebooks," I said. Nolan gave me a strained, grateful smile. "All right?"

Nolan nodded. Michael didn't.

"Michael?" I asked. He narrowed his eyes and glanced at Nolan.

"All right," he said.

"Good. So. Let's go in, it's almost midnight," I said, opening the door and stepping inside. "They're going to think you were dunking me in the snowbank – HEY, WHAT'S THE TIME?" I called across the crowd.

Most of the eyes were on the cafe's single clock – not perhaps the best timepiece in history, but at least one they could all agree on. I looked around for Lucas but didn't see him; after a few seconds I was swept up in counting-down to the New Year and the melee of inappropriate affection that usually follows things like that.

I did see Nolan and Michael, casually drifting to opposite sides of the room as the new year came in. Young men moving on, moving up – moving to Chicago in the spring, where there was a little more acceptance and a lot more people, and if someone saw you holding hands it wasn't all that likely they'd even know who you were.

It's hard to find a place you fit, sometimes. I felt grateful for mine.

There was the usual ten or fifteen minutes of jubilation, of course, followed by a sort of expectant feeling that nobody quite knew what to do with. I always think that secretly everyone wants to turn to their companions and ask, "What now?" before they make the hesitant decision to leave.

Plenty of people were headed for the hotel, preferring to sleep there rather than risk freezing to death on the walk home or crashing their cars on the road. As excellent as the cold was for sobering people up, there was no point in being reckless. I was recruited by Charles to help get a few recalcitrant partygoers to the hotel, and with that final duty done I turned back towards home. As I walked up the street I waved to others, or stopped to exchange the usual lame jokes – *seems like it's been a year since I've seen you* and the rest.

The cafe was turning out the last of the lights by the time I reached my front walk, but the streetlamps were on and the snow almost glowed against the dark wood of my porch. The contrasts made the world seem flat and unreal, and the alcohol I'd had probably didn't help. I blame it all for not noticing anything unusual sooner.

By the time I saw the animal huddled on my porch step, I was so close to the door that I almost tripped over it. There was a yelp and a scrabble of claws on wood in the dark, and then there was a large furry shadow pressing itself up against the green door in surprise.

"Hey, now," I said unsteadily, pausing on the step and leaning forward, bracing myself on the railing-post. I peered into the darkness and held out my other hand. "What's there?"

I thought for a second it might have been a wolf, but they're pretty rare even in our part of the country. It was too big for a coyote, much too big for a raccoon or a possum. A dog, then – large, with long powerful legs and a wide chest. When he hesitantly nosed forward, the first thing I saw was a pair of luminous eyes set in two dark patches of fur with an almost comical pale stripe between them. A sled dog of some sort, with eyes that arctic blue.

"Hello," I said, turning my hand over for the animal to inspect, but he trotted past it and sat down facing me, nose barely half a foot from mine. He had short, bristling fur that was a uniform pastel gray on his back, blending into white on his legs and tail. The only dark fur was on his muzzle and around his eyes. "Who belongs to you, eh?"

He whined and backed away, staring so pointedly at the door that I laughed and opened it, waving him inside. Not even a dog bred for sledding should be out in the bitter cold of the new year's first night, and his owner was probably already asleep, unaware their dog had slipped away.

I'd left hot embers glowing in the bookshop fireplace and banked them with kindling, so it was still warm on the lower floor. I shed my coat and hat, watching in amusement as the big, pale-gray dog trotted to the fireplace and threw himself down in front of it.

"Just as well. I don't want dog hair all over my bed," I said to him, leaving my boots next to the door. The upstairs was not quite so warm, but my bed was piled high with blankets and man invented flannel pajamas for nights like that.

I'll tell you a secret, because it's one I thought about a lot that night before I fell asleep. The real reason I like trains – and I could never have

made the others understand this – is that they are the last common form of surrender granted to us in an age of self-determination. You can't control where a train goes or how fast it gets there. You can't even talk to the driver, like you can in a taxi. Your last conscious decision is to step on board, and the only decision you can make once you're on is the decision to get off again. Between those two events, you submit completely, and you're free from responsibility.

I wouldn't like to live my life without any choice. In a small town you do lose some, like you do on a train – there are some things you just can't do, which is fine, but there are also some things that it's dangerous to do, like Nolan and Michael's secret tryst. Still, the life I lived in Low Ferry was full of them, and once in a while it's nice to have fewer choices, to give up a little bit of the burden. Sometimes I used to dream about the trains in Chicago. That night I did.

When I woke in the morning, at the dawn of the new year, it was several minutes before I thought of the dog downstairs. I had already put water on the stove to heat and cracked two eggs into a frying pan when I remembered my guest. Not wanting to burn the eggs, I finished cooking them before descending to the shop with a plate and a mug of tea, only to find the fire burnt out and the dog nowhere to be found.

Now, a full-grown sled dog does not simply vanish when placed in a small country bookstore. There are very few places for a dog of that size to hide, and I knew them all from the times when children had occasionally made the attempt. I checked the bathroom, the rear storage room, the cupboards under the counter, and the shadowy, dusty hollow under the stairs. The downstairs doors were closed but unlocked, like always, and the windows were latched.

I stood in the middle of the floor and rubbed my head in thought, eggs and tea forgotten. Finally I stepped into my boots without bothering to lace them, went outside, and stood at the edge of my porch.

There, in the fresh snow that had fallen sometime after midnight, were wide-spaced dog tracks. I glanced back at the door, then slowly stepped down into the snow and touched one of them. The bottom of the paw-print was smooth and hard. When I tried to pick it up, the thin layer of clear, pure ice – like glass – cracked away and crumbled in my palm.

TEN

WELL, ASIDE FROM me, nobody's fooled for an instant, are they?

It's easy to see in hindsight, but at the time all the things that make it obvious were obscured by everyday life: other worries, other people's opinions, things that seemed bigger at the time and aren't even very memorable now. There are plenty of people who wouldn't believe such a thing was even possible. It's not hard to deduce that I didn't *want* to know what Lucas had done. I never made the connection. Call me an idiot if you want, but it's true.

Business was sluggish in January. With the snow heavy on the ground and no school in session for the first part of the month, I didn't see – nor did I expect to see – much of Lucas, either. The weather was, after all, the reason that the cottage at The Pines had stood empty for so many winters. It was a long trek in by snowshoe, impossible by car, and the sort of people who owned snowmobiles were not the sort of people who found our little village very interesting. He came in perhaps twice in two weeks, and while I was always glad to see him I understood why he wasn't in town more often.

The mystery dog, however, was around all the time. A few days after New Year's I encountered him begging for scraps of the hot apple tarts the cafe was selling, being spoiled by half a dozen small children and one or two of their chaperons.

"Do you happen to know whose he is?" I asked the boy, who was apparently helping to mind the younger children.

"Nope," the boy answered. "They're going to be annoyed when he throws up apple all over, though. He must've had eight or nine helpings by now."

I gave the dog an absent pat with one hand, gently maneuvered two children out of my way, and continued on to the cafe. Certainly the dog couldn't be a stray. Where would he have strayed from, and where could he be sleeping at night? Unless he'd learned how to let himself into my shop, and even then I'd only kept fires downstairs in the early evening, putting them out when I went to bed.

December's steady snow was carrying over into January, still not the incapacitating storm-blitz from earlier but steady, light dustings on a regular basis. Around the same time school started again I decided that the snow on my front porch had finally built up to intolerable levels. It was time to clear it off before the entire structure caved under the weight. I waited until the cafe was busy, not wanting a repeat of last time.

The mystery dog, who seemed to spend a lot of time on my porch, was pleased by this turn of events. He danced around the handle of the shovel while I worked and chased after the snow I flung into the yard below, snarling and biting at it playfully. I was almost entirely done with my shoveling before anyone caught me at it.

"You'll kill yourself that way," Paula said to me, but at least she wasn't as intense about it as Carmen had been. I stopped shoveling, glanced at her, and then kept going.

"I'm going to see Dr. Kirchner," I said, a little out of breath, "and make him give me a note I can put on file with all my friends, that says I'm perfectly fit for light snow-shoveling."

"If you were doing anything more than light, I'd have taken over for you already," she said. "You're the only person I know who would object if someone else tried to shovel snow for them."

"I'm not doing a triathlon or something, it's just snow," I told her.

"Fine, whatever. Anyway, you're going to need a new porch soon," she told me, leaning against the recently-cleared railing as I scraped the last of the snow up off the scarred and weathered wood.

"I think it has about two more winters left," I said, stopping to lean on the shovel. The dog did figure-eights, circling my legs and then the shovel and then my legs again.

"Why wait till you have to replace it, though?" she asked reasonably. "Come springtime, I'll put it in for you myself if you want. I work cheap."

"Not that the vision of you and power tools isn't overwhelming to the senses, Paula, but I don't know yet. I might try building one myself. I'll buy the lumber from you, anyway," I said.

"Do you want it done right, or do you want to lose a finger?" she asked, then pointed at the dog as he nipped and gnawed on the of the shovel. "Seriously, by the way, is he your dog?"

"He's not my dog," I said, fending off the dog's playful advances. He gave up and began circling Paula, begging for pets but not standing still for long enough to receive them. "I don't know whose dog he is."

"We know every dog for miles around, I'm pretty sure, and I don't know who owns him. He seems to like you. You might not have a choice," Paula said.

"I don't need a dog."

"Nobody *needs* a dog, Christopher," she said, hauling the dog back with one arm around his throat and scruffing his head affectionately. "Besides, he needs a collar."

"Put a collar on him, his owners'll probably call you and complain."

"Good, they can pay for all the scrambled eggs the cafe keeps feeding him. If they exist."

"He can't just be a stray," I said, kicking little piles of snow through the porch railing. "He's too clean. Besides, where's he going to sleep in this weather and not freeze to death, if he hasn't got somewhere to go?"

"You sound like you're trying to convince yourself. "

I whistled and he broke away from Paula, pulling so hard against her

arms that she tumbled to the ground. He skidded to a stop in front of me and sat obediently, tongue lolling out.

"Good dog, Nameless," I said, patting his head. Paula called me a filthy name and pushed herself up.

"See?" she said, as she brushed snow off her clothes. "You've named him."

"I call him *Nameless*. By definition, I have given him a lack of a name."

"Not true. You call him that, so it's his name."

"But it describes the state of not having a name," I said.

"You can be as fancy as you want about it, city boy, but you call him something and he answers to it, that's a name," she said. "Isn't that right, Nameless?"

He lifted his muzzle and howled, *auwb auwb woo*. Paula gave me a smug look.

"Well, I'm not buying him a collar," I said. "I'm not going to be arrested for attempted dognapping."

"Suit yourself, I'm sure, Cranky," Paula grumbled.

"I'm not cranky!" I insisted.

"Cranky Christopher!"

I threatened her with the shovel and she ran down the steps, laughing. "Don't sic your dog on me!"

"Go sell some hammers!" I shouted.

She walked off, swaggering a little until the snowball I threw hit her in the back of the head. Then she yelped and flung one back, which gave her enough cover to escape across the street.

I left the shovel against the wall of the shop and came to stand at the top of the steps, leaning against a post. Nameless inched his way around my legs until he was curled up with his head just below my hip, shoulder pressed up to my thigh, so I gave in to the inevitable and rubbed him behind the ears with my fingertips. A couple of children, on their way home from school, waved at us as they passed. Another dog trotted by – Laurie-from-the-hotel's dog, I think – and growled briefly. Nameless showed a little tooth in reply, and the dog continued onwards.

A wave of dizziness caught me off-guard just as I was about to head inside, and I gripped the support-post tightly. A second later came the familiar feeling of panic – the too-fast beat of my heart and then arrhythmia as it tried to regulate itself. It was bad, almost as bad as it had been at Halloween, and the world tilted and spun as my chest constricted painfully. Nameless whined and nudged me with his muzzle. I was going to collapse on my own front porch and, even more embarrassing, Carmen and Paula had been *right* to try and stop me from shoveling snow –

Then my vision began to clear and the sickening spin of the world settled back into stillness. My heart had caught a rhythm again and my pulse was fast but steady in my ears.

I took a few deep breaths as my heart slowed. The cold air made my throat ache.

"I'm fine," I said, slowly releasing the post. My fingers throbbed where the edges of it had bit into them as I held myself upright. "Inside, I think, for me. I'm fine. Run along," I added, sweeping my hand in an arc towards the street. Nameless obediently stood and thumped down the steps, swatting me with his tail as he passed.

When Lucas walked in ten minutes later and seemed more attentive than usual, I didn't give it a second thought.

Near the end of January it stopped snowing so often, and I started taking walks in the early afternoon when I wouldn't have had any customers anyway. I'd had no new episodes since I stopped shoveling snow altogether, but I thought if people saw me walking around town maybe they'd lay off about my delicate health a little.

Once in a while I went out to The Pines to see Lucas. He'd given up on the Noh masks and was preparing a shipment of handmade pieces to send to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. His workshop was filled with color and texture, bright glass beads and rich fabric. Sometimes we drank coffee and talked in his kitchen, but more often I kept him company while he worked, reading in one of the wing-chairs as he sculpted clay or pinned leather or stitched ribbons cleverly into fabric seams. It was a busy time for him, but for me the world was slowing as I began to measure more carefully what activity my body would tolerate. He can't possibly have been oblivious to what I was doing, but we didn't discuss it.

More often, when I walked, I just made an erratic loop through the town, passing the school and church and then wandering through the residential streets, across the road that led to the train station and then up the main street, back to Dusk Books. Sometimes Nameless tagged along, or we met while I was walking and he gave up whatever canine errand he'd been on to escort me.

I'd noticed that he was a loner among the dogs of Low Ferry. They mostly ran wild during the day, an odd pack of village pets, hunting dogs, herders, and the kind of scruffy mutts that are so good at patrolling the outlying farms. I didn't think anything of it, however, until I encountered Nameless trying, and failing, to make friends.

The other dog was a smart, solid-built retriever belonging to one of the schoolteachers. Nameless had just come out of a side street and loped over to say hello; as soon as he got within five feet of the retriever, there were bared-teeth and flattened ears. Nameless, undaunted, inched forward, only to jerk back when the other dog snapped at him.

"Hey!" I shouted, and both dogs looked up at me. "Break it up!"

Nameless twitched his ears as far forward as they could go and started to run past the retriever towards me, but another snarl sent him scuffling backwards. He was large enough that he probably could have subdued the other dog with a well-placed snap of his jaws, but for whatever reason he wouldn't.

"Manners," I said, getting close enough to nudge the retriever with my knee. He snapped again, more out of instinct than any real desire to hurt me, then looked abashed and sidled past, out into the street. With a last backward look and his hackles still raised, he sauntered off.

I crouched and held out my hand, palm down. Nameless nosed it briefly before allowing me to rub the soft fuzz on the crown of his head.

"Not very popular, are you?" I asked. He butted against my fingers. "Can't win 'em all, I guess."

He followed me back to Dusk Books after that, trotting obediently at my side. We passed three more dogs on the way, and each time they barked at him from their yards or crossed the street to avoid us both. When we arrived back at Dusk Books, the boy was perched on the top step, waiting eagerly for us.

"Hi!" he called breathlessly. "Hi, Nameless!"

"Afternoon," I said. "It's cold out to be stalking me."

"I wanted some comic books," the boy answered, scrambling up as I opened the door.

"You could have gone inside, in the warm."

"You weren't here," he scolded.

"As if that's ever stopped anyone," I observed, picking up a slip of paper on the counter.

*Christopher,
Needed change for a customer.
Left ten dollars, took all your ones
and most of your quarters.
Carmen*

"Poetry," I added, pointing it out to the boy. He grinned and went to the comic-book rack. Nameless nudged him in the small of the back, and he obediently stroked the dog's shoulders as he examined the offerings. "Maybe you should adopt him," I said, nodding at Nameless.

"He's not the kind of dog you adopt," the boy replied, without turning around. "He does the adopting."

"He seems well-kept."

"Should be. They're always brushing him in the hardware store. He gets by all right."

"Dogs are pack animals, though. Strange to see one without a pack," I said. Before he could reply, one of his friends put his head in and yelled for him to hurry up. He sighed, laid a stack of comics on the counter, and signed the deduction from his tab. Nameless gave me a look, ambled past the counter, and followed the boy out the door.

It was another few days before Lucas came into Low Ferry again, snowshoes on his back and a bag of masks over his other shoulder. We

ran into each other, me coming out of the hardware store and him idling down the street.

"Looking for somewhere to sell them," he said, lifting the top flap of the bag to show me the jumble underneath – it looked like the Noh masks, mainly, and one or two small animal masks, designed to fit children's faces. "My shelves were filling up. Time to cull the collection again."

"Would you like me to sell some?" I asked, lifting out one of the slightly eerie horned masks to examine it.

"If you'd like," he answered shyly. "You don't have to."

"They'll look good in the shop," I replied. "Come walk with me – haven't seen much of you lately. Getting along all right?"

"More or less," he answered.

"Lonely, out at The Pines?"

"You know me, I don't get that lonely. Just..." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as we walked. "I'm trying to see things differently, and it's – well, it's not what I expected."

"Surprised you see much of anything, out there."

"It's not so bad," he said with a smile. "I keep busy. You remember the students I had in December? They've stayed on."

"How does the boy like that?"

"He's not happy about it, but he isn't throwing fits. Even if they're both *girls*," he drawled.

I laughed. "Give him a few years."

"He's already older than he ought to be," Lucas said, sobering. "I think it bothers him. The teachers don't know what to do with him anymore."

I glanced sidelong at him. His head was bowed, eyes fixed on the ground as they so often were.

"You must know what it's like," I said.

"Being young and smart? Sure," he agreed.

"Bet your teachers didn't know what to do with you either."

"They were fine," he answered, still looking down. "My parents never quite knew, though. They used to think I was slinking off to smoke cigarettes and have sex."

"Were you?"

He glanced up at me and smiled mischievously. "No. I was making masks in the school art room. I'm not sure which they would have preferred. The masks creep them out."

"Want some lunch?" I asked, stopping at the corner before we could cross the street to my shop.

"Sure. It'll give me time to dry off before I track mud all over your floor. Besides, I need to – um, talk to you about something."

"All right," I said, leading the way to the cafe. When we entered, he picked a booth near the back instead of my usual window-table. I walked past it and peered through the kitchen hatch at Carmen on the other side, dishing out soup into bowls.

"Hiya!" she said.

"The service here is terrible," I replied.

"Watch it! I'll set my fiancé on you," she threatened.

"Yes, Carmen, we all know you're getting married," I drawled.

"Anyway, what'll it be?"

"Lucas!" I called.

He looked at me, startled. "Uh, hamburger please."

I turned back to Carmen. "Hamburger, no pickles, fries, chicken salad sandwich on toast – make that two fries."

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "You boys want to split a shake?"

"Two waters and one hot tea, and don't start trouble, Trouble," I replied, and went back to sit down. Lucas smiled briefly, idly drawing invisible circles on the surface of the table with his fingertips. "So. You wanted to talk."

"Yeah..." He cut his eyes away, looking nervous. "After last time we...had one of those talks, I thought maybe it'd be better in town. We might shout less."

"One of those talks – when we talked about your project," I said. He nodded. "If I remember, I did most of the shouting last time."

"I didn't mean –"

"No, you don't have to explain. I'm sorry. I was only worried about you..." I trailed off, because what he'd actually said had only just caught up with me. "Uh. So we're talking about that? Again?" I asked.

He couldn't do it. I understand now *why* he couldn't; he couldn't say the words. Sometimes we can't. Even when they don't sound like madness.

"Things aren't the way I thought they would be," he said finally. "I see that now. I'll get used to it, I'm sure I will, but...Christ." He rubbed his forehead. "Maybe we shouldn't talk in public after all. Thank you," he added shyly to Carmen as she set down our water glasses and my tea.

He was unhappy with the silence, I could see that. He looked anxiously for something to talk about and, in his nervousness, came up blank.

"What do you think would sell best in the shop?" I asked, nodding at the bag of masks by his feet. "I can sell them on consignment, or if you want I'll buy them for credit."

"I'll pick some out, I guess." He looked uncomfortable.

"You don't have to. Business between friends can get a little awkward," I said.

"Oh, no, I just...sometimes feel weird asking for money for them. I see all their flaws, you know?"

"Worried people will want their money back?" I asked. "Lucas, the Friendly are good judges of quality. If they'd take your masks in payment, you have nothing to worry about from Low Ferry. Pick me out some good ones and I'll sell them for you."

He nodded. Carmen emerged with our food and set it down, plates steaming a little.

"Enjoy," she said, winked at Lucas, and walked away before she got the full, glorious view of his ears turning bright pink.

"Are you tutoring today?" I asked, around a mouthful of food.

"Yep," he replied. "English today, shouldn't be too hard."

"What are they studying?"

He smiled – small but honest, full of pleasure. "Term projects. They're doing a report on fairy tales. The boy's idea."

"That should be interesting. I have a copy of Hans Christian Andersen back at the shop," I added. He chuckled.

"They're more interested in the Brothers Grimm," he said. "I think the boy's looking forward to finally getting to shock his teachers a little. The heroine's step-whatevers dancing themselves to death in hot iron boots, bad children being eaten by monsters, that kind of thing."

"Brutal little kiddies. I approve," I answered, and took another bite of food. "Right up your alley, anyway, huh? The truth behind the pleasantries?"

He gave me a strange look, full of regret and an odd kind of resolution. "Suppose so. Anyway, the boy wants to put on a play..."

We talked about school theatrics and fairy tales and books in general until we'd finished eating. He quietly insisted on paying and I thought he was coming across to Dusk Books, but he hesitated on the sidewalk outside the cafe.

"I'll come by this evening before I leave for The Pines, drop off some masks," he said. "Will you be around?"

"Where would I go?" I asked with a grin.

That evening I left the lights on in the shop and carefully did not hang the *Closed* sign, though I gave discouraging looks to my few evening patrons. It was well past dark and I was beginning to think Lucas had forgotten – or had decided to stand me up, which given his shyness about some things wouldn't have been entirely unexpected – when Nameless appeared on my porch. He pawed politely, not at the easily-scratched green paint on the door itself but on the weathered wooden frame. I opened the door and he snorted, shaking snow off his feet as he walked in.

"Hiya, Nameless," I said, shutting the door behind him. "Staying the night?"

He turned to face me and whined, backing towards the fire as if inviting me along. I went to pick up a book and he barked; chastised, I glanced down at him, then crouched and rubbed his fur just below his ears.

"What's up?" I asked, looking for any signs he'd been hurt. He pulled out of my grasp and backed away again, then began to scratch at his muzzle as if he had something caught in his nose. I reached out to help, but he growled at me and I began to worry.

He managed to get his front paw behind his ear, right at the line where the black marking on his face ended, and it seemed to catch. It was a few more seconds before I realized, in a dreamlike way, that the black

fur was *coming off* – and by then it was not black fur anymore at all. It was smooth black suede, laced to an ear made of black leather and part of a forehead that looked like thick, doubled-over white linen.

I don't actually remember seeing the change. So much happened at once. I recall seeing the fur, and then seeing that it was not fur at all, but after that I remember only the soft noise the mask made as it fell to the floor and the look in Lucas's eyes as he stared up at me, sitting on my hearth, wearing the gray coat he'd bought from the Friendly and a battered pair of black pants.

The world began to tip precariously. It seemed to have an erratic pulse of its own that caught me up – *thud-ump, thud-ump-ump-ump, thud-thud-ump...*

"Christopher, your heart," he said, eyes widening. I must have looked terrible, because he scrambled up off the rug and took me by the shoulders. I couldn't breathe. "Are you all right?"

I looked at him, mute and panicking. I wasn't sure what I was thinking or how to say it and my pulse was too fast, much too fast –

Lucas put a hand on my chest and pressed, his other hand holding onto my arm. I stumbled back but he held me up, and then there was a sharp pain, like a muscle spasm or a cramp.

The black tunnel that had been forming in my vision cleared and my heartbeat evened out, much more suddenly than it ever had before. I could feel it under Lucas's palm, strong and solid, and I felt sure he could feel it too.

There was a long silence between us.

"I did this thing," Lucas said slowly, head bent over the hand still resting on my chest. "The greatest thing. Out of a book, with my own hands, I did it."

I drew a quick breath, my lungs still expecting to aid a failing body, then had to let it out again. I cautiously took a few more. Lucas removed his hand, gave me a searching look, and then bent to pick up the mask still lying on the floor nearby.

"I thought I'd better just show you," he said apologetically. "I didn't think about your heart."

"That's all right," I heard myself say, distantly. "I think it's fine."

"Are you okay?" he asked. I stared at the mask, mind utterly blank. "Christopher?"

"I'm...I need to sit down," I said, still staring. He was blocking the most direct way to the chairs near the fireplace, and I was in no condition to come up with detours. I stood there until he moved aside, then made my way to the nearest seat and sat down, leaning forward, elbows on my knees. My eyes came to rest about a foot above the fireplace, near *Dottore*.

Strangely, I had no urge to question what he'd done. Tricks were beneath Lucas, and even a skeptic knows –they know best – that life is too short to ignore what we see with our own eyes. It never occurred to me that Lucas had not actually done what I had just seen him do. The ice-prints I could rationalize away, but there was no rational excuse for this.

He took off his coat, laying it over the back of a chair across from me before he sat down in it and regarded me carefully. "Are you sure you're all right, Christopher?"

"Yes," I answered. And then I stopped talking until I thought of something new to say. He just watched me, waiting, or perhaps too afraid to speak.

"How long? Since New Year's?" I asked. He nodded. The world began to settle a little more with every word I spoke. "Magic, huh?"

"Sort of," he said ruefully. "I don't know what to call it, exactly."

"Can I see the mask?"

He offered and I took it, turning it so that the ears were right-side-up and the muzzle faced me. It was a friendly face: black and gray and white, made of scraps stitched tightly together, molded into the shape of a dog's head, the finished product of the mess of scraps I'd seen on Christmas Eve. On a man it would fit high on the forehead and extend down over nose and upper lip, leaving the chin free to speak – actually it would have looked a little silly, I think.

There was no strap to hold it on with, which struck me as strange until I understood what it meant. He had made the mask with remarkable faith, gambling on the fact that it would never need to be secured. Because it would never be worn in the way an ordinary mask would.

"Have you told anyone else?" I asked. "Has anyone else...tried it?"

"God, no," he said, looking horrified. "I don't think it would even work on another person. The mask doesn't have any real power, it's –"

"– the actor. I remember."

He looked embarrassed and unhappy.

"Why tell me now?" I asked softly.

"I...felt like I was lying to you," he said.

"Only to me?"

"Well, the dogs all know, of course – I don't act right." And he looked so heartbroken that I felt for him, even through the numbness and confusion. "You saw. They don't like me. People don't really think about it. I feel guilty about taking their food, sometimes. I suppose that's lying, so it's not just you. But it felt worse, because you matter more."

I stared at him. "What? Why?"

Lucas rubbed his forehead, then spread his hands. "You liked me anyway. Most of the others think I'm strange. Some of them think I really am a witch."

I leaned back, fingers tapping on my knees, and tried to think rationally. "I wouldn't tell anyone else, if I were you," I said, because it was at least good advice. "It wouldn't exactly help that opinion."

He smiled a little. "I don't plan to."

I looked up at the ceiling, breathing deeply.

"Christopher –"

"I'm all right, Lucas," I said, holding up a hand before he could rise from the chair to check on me. "My head just hurts a little. I don't know what to ask next."

"You don't...really have to ask anything, if you don't want," he said hesitantly. "We don't even need to talk about it again. I just wanted you to know, so that you'd....know. Like I did before. It's just important to me."

"I'm not important, though. I'm just a shopkeeper."

"You're my friend. Everyone likes you, but you picked me. You didn't push me out, anyway."

"Nobody in town pushed you out, Lucas. Charles made you Fire Man. That's an honor."

"But they don't talk to me."

"You don't talk to them."

"I know that!" he said, frustrated. "I don't know *how*."

"All right, we'll just go in circles if we start that up," I said, trying to calm him. I didn't have the energy to have a fight. The mask was heavier in my hands than I thought it would be. Beautiful, weighty – a real thing, that Lucas had made, that held some part of him.

"You knew what it would be," I said, looking down again at the sharp, pointed ears, the haphazard pattern of blacks and grays and whites. "You always knew it would be a dog."

When I looked up, his eyes were fixed on mine. He nodded slowly.

"Everyone loves a dog," he said.

I wasn't sure I understood, then, but there was only so much I could absorb in one night. That he had succeeded in what I thought was madness, that he had somehow stopped my own heart's attempts to kill me, that he sat in front of me afraid I was angry with him – these things I was managing, but not much more. His bare toes tapped anxiously on the floor.

"You're barefoot," I said.

"Yes," he answered. "It doesn't work with shoes on."

I tried not to laugh hysterically. "It doesn't work with *shoes on*? What kind of ridiculous logic is that?"

"I don't ask. I don't question. I'm not like you, Christopher. I want to think there's wonder in the world. It's just hard for me to find."

"I'm fully capable of appreciating beauty," I said.

"It's not quite the same thing," he replied, and there was an almost bitter twist to his lips. "It doesn't matter."

"The ice," I said. "You walked on the snow."

"It's all tied up together. The winter and the weather and this. I don't pretend to understand it, really."

"You did it twice," I said, hardly listening. "Once after the blizzard – and then again after New Year's when you were –"

"Nameless," he supplied. "Nice name, by the way."

"You've been working on this for months."

"I said I was. You wouldn't believe me. I'd already done...some things," he said, suddenly looking guilty. "When I blew out the circuit-breakers, I told you I did that, and you didn't believe me then. And when the thaw came through so you could go to Chicago, I did that. And um. I mean, I didn't mean to do it. But the storm, sort of."

I stared. "You can't seriously be taking credit for a blizzard, Lucas."

"You saw the news reports after. Nobody knew it was coming. Nobody expected it. I was so angry with you." He twisted his fingers together. "Can I have my mask back?"

I held it up and he rose, taking it quickly and sinking back into the chair, hands spread possessively across it. I watched for a while as his fingers smoothed and re-smoothed the grain of a soft, fuzzy piece of gray flannel set over one eye.

"So what now?" I asked.

"What now what?"

"What now? What do you do now? What do we do?"

He chewed on his lower lip. "I don't know. It wasn't what I thought it would be. I don't even know what I thought it would be. I thought it would fix me, somehow. But it didn't."

He looked close to tears, and still so afraid, with his shield against the world clenched in his hands and his body pulled in as far as he could.

"Maybe you should stay tonight," I heard myself say.

"In town?"

"No, here. Stay here, with me, Lucas."

He glanced up, and suddenly his eyes were luminous – not animal or afraid, almost triumphant, certainly relieved. As a man his eyes were dark, but just for a second I suddenly saw Nameless's bright ice-blue superimposed over them.

Good dog.

"Just, if you're going to – " I gestured at the mask. "Wait until I'm upstairs?"

"Of course," he agreed. I stood, rubbing the back of my head. "Goodnight, Christopher."

"Goodnight," I answered automatically. I was halfway up the stairs, in a daze, before his voice stopped me.

"Christopher?"

I ducked down to look at him. "Yes?"

"I'd like..." He stopped himself. "I can sleep on the hearth if you want."

Of course. I closed my eyes.

"Come up when you want to," I said. "I guess the foot of the bed's more comfortable than the hearth."

His smile was wide and pleased. "Thanks."

I nodded at him and continued up the stairs, hardly bothering to strip off my socks and belt before I crawled into bed still mostly-clothed. After a minute I heard claws clicking on the hearthstones, then on the stairs. The bedsprings creaked as he leapt onto the blankets. There was a contented canine sigh and a heavy weight near my feet.

"I hope you don't have fleas," I mumbled, but the shock of revelation had exhausted me and the slow, regular beat of my heart pulled me down into sleep much faster than I expected.

ELEVEN

NAMELESS – LUCAS – NO, Nameless – was still there in the morning, though not on my bed. He was sitting patiently in the store when I came downstairs, ears pricked forward to listen for my descent.

Without thinking, I rubbed the soft bristling short hair on his head and scratched behind his ears. I would never have touched Lucas so personally without asking permission first, but this was Nameless and he was not afraid to ask or receive, as Lucas had often seemed. There was no diffidence, no awkward shyness in his direct blue gaze.

I brought breakfast back from the cafe for both of us, feeding him by hand just as I would have a week ago, a day ago. He accepted the food from my fingers with a canine smile and a wagging tail. As well as I knew that it was Lucas looking out from behind his eyes, I couldn't find it in myself to treat him differently than I would treat any other dog. Sometimes, now, I think that we treat human beings much less charitably than pets.

He left after breakfast. I watched him trot across the snow and saw the tell-tale refraction of sunlight on the smooth hard ice that formed under his paw-pads, preventing him from sinking too deeply in the powder.

And...nothing changed.

Nor, in the end, do I see why it really should have. Lucas came around more often, true, but he had to – by the end of February we had much less snow, and what we did have melted sooner, making it easier for him to come in to town. The little cluster of chairs and tables in my shop was a natural place for him and his trio of children to do their tutoring, so I saw him frequently.

Nameless was usually around as well, still begging food from the cafe, still keeping guard on my porch and surveying the people passing like a king. He was petted and loved, brushed, fed, often hugged and once, somewhat disastrously, hitched to a sled. The result was a handful of small children tipped feet-up in the snow with Nameless barking madly and leaping about nearby, good-naturedly attempting to shake the makeshift harness from his shoulders.

But the dogs wouldn't go near him.

And, true, though Lucas was in town more he was somehow there less – even when he was among people he was so obviously in his own head that few in Low Ferry approached him. He was quieter, even less given to human interaction than before. He sat in the back of the cafe

when he ate there, never met his students at the school anymore, and spent even more time hiding behind the shelves when other people were in my store. Low Ferry let him be, from some mixture of awe and fear and confusion that I could see clearly on their faces and hear in their voices when they occasionally asked me how he was.

Lucas and I did not discuss what he'd told me about Nameless, and in some ways I began to wonder if it hadn't been some strange hallucination – until I looked at the dog and saw the human intelligence in his eyes.

It was a relatively warm day in early March when Nameless came trotting into the shop on the heels of a customer, accepting the attention and admiration of my younger patrons with gracious dignity. I didn't think much about it, other than to note that the fur he'd shed was becoming conspicuous and I would have to start sweeping it up soon. As usual, the boy and his schoolmates were there, trading insults and doing homework. I happened to know that they had school projects due which required book-research and so there was no end of browsing, comparing, and secretive copying-of-text when they thought I wasn't looking. The boy bought two books, then dawdled with the girls Lucas was also tutoring while the rest disappeared.

"Isn't Lucas coming?" he asked finally. I glanced at Nameless, lying on the hearth.

"Were you supposed to meet him today?" I asked.

"Yes – it's a tutoring day. Have you seen him?"

"No," I said, as Nameless lifted his head and stared right at me, his ears flat against his skull. I stared back, confused. He heaved a sigh and rested his head on his paws again, looking disconsolate.

"He's not usually late," the boy continued. "Can we wait here?"

"Oh – wait a minute," I said, when it became obvious that Nameless would be of no help. "He – that's right. He called, I'd forgotten." It sounded lame, even to me, but I'm not a bad liar. "He said he wouldn't make it in today – feeling under the weather, I guess. I'm really sorry, I completely forgot."

"That's all right," the boy said easily. "Day off, right?"

"You might as well go home – but I'll know if you tell your parents you finished your homework at tutoring!" I called after them, as they threw their bags over their shoulders and ran down the steps. They passed Michael on his way up the path.

"Afternoon," he said, closing the door behind him. I gave Nameless a look that told him he had better stay right where he was, then turned to Michael.

"Good afternoon, Michael. Thought you'd be at the bank today," I said.

"Sandra's taking my shift. I had to go out to the train station down south of ours," he said, a hint of pride in his voice. He laid down two slick train tickets on my counter – Low Ferry to Chicago on the express, mid-April.

"Wow," I said. "Really going, huh?"

"Yep." He bounced on the balls of his feet. "Had to tell someone. And you've – you haven't told anyone at all about us. So I thought you'd like to know."

"I do like to know, thanks," I smiled at him. I really hadn't told anyone, not even Lucas, and I hadn't actually talked about Michael or Nolan or Sandra at all. Charles thought I was turning over a new leaf, giving up gossip for Lent or something. He ought to know better, but we see what we wish to see. "You set for money?" I asked.

"I got a little put by. Nolan's got some from when his granddad passed," he said. Nameless pricked his ears forward.

I winced inwardly, but I couldn't let it show. "Place to stay?"

"Buddy of ours is at school out there, said he'd put us up till we found our feet. Lots of banks in Chicago. Lots of work."

"What about Sandra? Leaving her a little high and dry at the bank here, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "Nolan's sister's about ready to take over for him. They'll be fine."

"You going to tell your parents?"

That stopped him bouncing, at least. He frowned.

"Yeah. Before we go. *After* Nolan takes his inheritance out," he added.

"Are you sure you want to leave Low Ferry? I know what small towns are like," I added, before he could reply. "I do know. But Chicago's pretty far away, and a lot bigger than here."

Michael shrugged. "We'll get by."

"Just – don't be too much of a stranger, huh? Being away...changes things," I said. "You lose things when you leave."

"Good."

"You say that now," I said, but I smiled too. "Listen, if you do need money, let me know. And..." I took out a pen and uncapped it, scribbling the address of Eighth Rare Books on the ticket envelope. "The owner's a friend of mine. She'll give you a hand if you ask."

"That's decent of you," he said, studying it before tucking the tickets away. "See you round, Christopher," he added, and walked out. I held up a finger and pointed it at Nameless as soon as he'd gone.

"Don't even think about saying anything," I said. He huffed indignantly. "You keep that well to yourself, and don't talk to me about it. You and I have other things to discuss."

Nameless eased his head down onto his legs, cocking it slightly. I walked around the counter to where he lay and sat down on the floor next to him.

"You should tell the boy yourself, if you don't feel like tutoring," I said. He whined and rested his head on my knee. "That wasn't very polite, and definitely irresponsible."

He inched forward and heaved another sigh. I scratched the ruff of fur just above his shoulders.

"Some days it's easier to be a dog," I continued. "At least I guess it must be. But don't forget you're not. You were human first, and you'll always be human. You can try as hard as you like to lose it, but all you'll do is bury it, and that isn't the kind of thing you can bury forever."

I wish I hadn't said those words. I was trying to help. He seemed lost to me, stuck between a human craving love and an animal who was loved for a lie. I was trying to cajole him out of his silence. I was doing what I thought was right for my friend, who was confused and afraid.

I wish I had stayed silent and stroked his fur and let him be, or at least pretended that his seeming was the same as his being, that the change meant something beneath the surface. Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference in the end, but I wish I had kept my damn mouth shut. Whatever would have changed if I had – I never wanted to hurt Lucas the way those words did.

I got up and went back to the counter, where I had been pricing books before I was interrupted. After a moment, there was the sound of a throat being cleared.

"I couldn't face them today," Lucas said. When I looked over he was sitting by the fireplace, legs pulled up to his chest, chin on his knees, bare toes curled against the floor. The mask lay next to him, face-down. "It takes so much effort sometimes. I've never run away before. I think I'm allowed, just once."

"Of course you are," I agreed. "But you could have left a note for them."

"Sorry. I didn't want to make you lie for me."

"I chose to lie," I answered easily. "I could have just said I hadn't seen you, and it would have been truth of a sort."

He rubbed his eyes. "It's so easy to be Nameless, and so difficult to be Lucas sometimes. People love dogs."

"No-one hates you, Lucas."

"My words are all wrong."

"I didn't mean –"

"No, I didn't either," he said quickly, apologetically. "I don't end up finding very good words for things. The words are more difficult. People are so complicated."

"And dogs are so simple?"

"No, but – dogs are simple to people – you see?" he said, frustrated. "But I am sorry, and I'll make it up to them."

I glanced at the door, then reached out and turned the sign to *Closed*. "Come upstairs. I'll make you something to drink."

He followed me into my kitchen, leaning quietly against the counter while I put a kettle on the stove.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, setting out mugs and tea bags. "We don't have to talk about it anymore, but I'd like to know."

He spread his hands, nodding.

"How'd you manage it?" I asked. "Did you get the idea from the Straw Bear?"

He shook his head. "I knew before I came here. The book I wanted from Chicago...I used to make masks from the pictures. I just liked the designs. Strange things used to happen to those masks," he added, with an odd nostalgic look that I barely caught. "I think because I believed in it. Or didn't disbelieve, anyway. Most people, when they read a book, they decide to believe it or...um, not. I never have. Whether it was true didn't matter to me, as long as it got me away for a little while."

"Away? From what?" I asked, reaching above him to take the sugar down from a cabinet.

"Everything. You're a reader, you can't possibly misunderstand that," he said, turning his face towards me. I settled back, the box of sugar held in one hand, eyes almost on a level with his and very close.

"No," I said, and then returned to the mugs. "I guess I can't."

"When you're in the city it's hard to think clearly," he continued after a moment. "I knew I wanted...somewhere small, somewhere I could be alone to think. So I came here, because I could be alone, because traditions aren't quite dead here....men still turn into animals."

"The Straw Bear," I said, looking up. He nodded, then cut his eyes away.

We were quiet until the kettle whistled and I poured the water into the mugs, handing him one. He spooned some sugar into it and then stirred, watching as the tea slowly tinted the water. I mostly watched him.

"I thought...." He closed his eyes. "I looked...I was so – lonely, in the city. I kept thinking about animals. How effortless it is for them to accept affection, how much they offer in return without anyone being scared of it. Nobody suspects a dog of ulterior motives."

"Everyone loves Nameless," I said.

"Wouldn't you strive for that, if you didn't have it?" he asked, voice strained.

"Do you suppose that I do have it?" I said, sipping my tea.

"It's easy for you. You talk to people, shake hands, flirt with them, hug them, you know everything about them – it's so simple for you. It's so simple for *them*," he said, stretching out his hand to point out the window towards the street below. There was a note of almost hysterical envy in his voice. "The boy – you should see him and my other students. I don't understand how they can be so close, how they always think of – of things to talk about, games to play – how they never bore each other or feel awkward together. I don't know how people do that, and sometimes it's just...difficult to watch."

"But he idolizes you. He wants to be like you."

"I want to be like *him*," Lucas replied. "Or like you."

"It's not easy for me either," I said. "Not always, anyway. I don't think it is for anyone, at times. You'll figure it out, Lucas, you're a smart man."

"Thanks," he said. He pushed away from the counter and set his mug down. "I think...I'm going to go home for a while. Would you uh...turn around?"

"Okay," I answered, and turned away. There was a soft noise, and then the scratch of claws on wood. When I turned back, Nameless was sitting at the top of the stairs, ears awry, head carefully ducked. I smiled and rubbed his ears as I passed, leading him down the stairs and through the shop, opening the door for him to pass through.

I watched from the doorway as he loped through the last of the snow, dodging around afternoon shoppers and the occasional schoolchild.

Two days later, I heard a car pull up outside my shop and looked out the window to see a familiar battered pickup truck. I hadn't expected the Friendly, but it made sense – a thaw was sweeping south, an early end to winter, and they were following for as long as it lasted. Gwen practically leaped out of the truck and was up on the porch by the time I opened the door. She threw herself into my arms, laughing.

"Hello!" I called to Tommy, who saluted from the street and came up the path with a little more dignity. "Hello," I added to Gwen, who kissed my cheek and let me go. "You're awfully close to civilization, miss Friendly."

"Came in for a hot meal," Tommy explained, leaning on the porch rail. "Gwen insisted."

"It's good food at the cafe," she replied, in a tone that said they'd had this fight a few times already. "And we're not here long."

"Oh?" I asked.

"Just for tonight. I wanted to make sure I saw you," she said.

I looked down at her. "Why the rush?"

"Construction work down south," Tommy answered. "Good money while it's on."

"Can't argue with that," I said, as Gwen wrapped an arm around my waist and leaned against me. "How's the family?"

"Christopher sends his greetings. Stuck in bed right now, sciatica's actin' up. Couple of the boys got married off, lost one of 'em to a landowner. Otherwise can't complain."

"How's Low Ferry?" Gwen asked.

"Better for having you in it," I replied.

"And Lucas? We're going up to see him tonight, after dinner."

I smiled. "That'll do him some good. He hasn't been himself lately."

Gwen gave me a searching look. "Yeah. Didn't think he would be."

"Why's that?"

"We know things. I'd like to tell him thank you, though."

"Thank you? What for?"

She and Tommy exchanged a glance, hesitant, almost conspiratorial.

"You had good weather going north, huh?" I asked, and Tommy looked relieved.

"Told you then, did he?" he said. I realized, with a pang of jealousy and guilt, that they'd known. He'd told them, or they'd figured it out. And

they'd believed him. No shouting, no dismissal. The Friendly had known what Lucas was up to and they'd believed him, long before I ever had.

"He did more than tell me," I answered. "He succeeded."

"Oh!" Gwen looked pleased. "I'm glad he did."

Tommy didn't look quite so joyful. "How's he find it?"

"You'd have to ask him that."

"Didja know he can make it rain?" Gwen said. "Come on, Saint! Fetch me some books. We made a little pile up north with those masks."

I fixed Gwen up with a little literature, a couple of books for the clan's young children, and some fashion magazines before they left. Once they were gone I found I had a lot to consider. Lucas had told the Friendly he was – what, working magic? Drawing up power? I didn't even know the word for it, but he'd told them he was doing it long before he'd told me. I had to decide what I thought of that, and whether I had any right to the jealousy that had struck me sharply when I found out.

In the end, I laughed at myself for having spent so long thinking about it. By evening it seemed like a small thing, compared to the rest. Someone I loved could turn into a dog and here I was wondering if I should be angry they'd told someone else first. Besides, he'd known I was a skeptic and not likely to believe him at any rate. I found myself hoping that Nameless would get some choice scraps from the Friendly cookfires that night. I didn't see him the next morning, but I expected he was with the Friendly, probably telling their Christopher a few stories of his own.

Around four o'clock that day, while I was contemplating closing up and taking a hike out to the Pines at any rate, the boy came running into my shop. He was out of breath, his hair ruffled and disordered, and he looked like hell was chasing him.

"He isn't here, is he?" he demanded.

"Who, Lucas?" I asked.

"Of course!" he said impatiently. "Who else?"

"No need to be rude," I replied. "He's not here. What's the matter?"

"He's missed tutoring again and he's not answering his phone, and I think you'd better go see what's wrong."

"I'm sure it's just temporary," I replied. "Maybe his phone died. Might be some mud on the road. The Friendly are back, did you –"

"You should go. Now."

I looked up at him sharply. No child in the village had ever spoken to me that way, but his stare was direct and he looked so much older than he was that I automatically moved to obey. I was putting on my coat before I realized what I was doing.

"I'll come with you," he offered, when I paused again. "But you have to go see what's wrong with him."

I looked outside. It had been sunny all day, even if it hadn't been very warm. Now clouds were gathering, almost too quickly to be believed, and rain was beginning to streak down the window.

"Fuck," I said under my breath, and flipped the sign to *Closed*. "Come on."

The rain got harder even as we stepped outside – the most miserable kind of rain, intense and merciless. It fell straight down with no wind to soften it and had wet the pavement to slickness within minutes. The boy started running to keep up with me, and then I started running, dodging around muddy patches and darting across streets with hardly a look to see if there were cars coming. Other people, taken by surprise in the rain, stood under awnings or hurried into shops to find shelter. There were more than a few puzzled looks as we went racing past.

I didn't think we'd be able to run the entire way there, but I decided that as long as the boy was running I could too. We turned on the road leading out to The Pines and kept going, even though my breath was hitching and I figured any moment my heart would probably decide it'd had quite enough of this nonsense.

By the time we reached the rutted dirt road we were both wet to the skin. Rain ran down the back of my neck and soaked my coat, flattened my hair, dripped off my eyebrows onto my cheeks. The boy didn't complain, though the fields we were running through were perilously slippery. It seemed like whenever he slipped and was about to fall he'd catch himself, and the speed carried us both along, though the mud splashed around our ankles and flicked up to coat our clothing as well.

I couldn't even see The Pines through the curtain of rain around us, and I tried not to think about what Lucas might have done to cause this. Instead I thought of anything else: my life in the city, full of trains and small apartments, street markets in the summer, the spires of the downtown buildings and the sharp wind that blew between them. I thought of my shop, warm and brightly lit. I thought of the titles on the literature shelf, the cookbooks, the tables and chairs in the front. I thought about the comic books and the magazines.

The hill loomed up suddenly before us, and in my surprise I put a foot wrong, down into a muddy track left by the already-departed Friendly. I couldn't quite keep my balance and I fell, scrambling to get up again in the mud. The boy thrust his shoulder under my arm to help, and together we staggered up the slick path to the kitchen door.

"It's locked," I said, leaning against the door for what meager shelter the wall provided from the rain.

"Try it again," he urged.

"Did you hear me? It's locked – " But even as I said the words, I jiggled the knob and the door opened. I staggered inside. The rain had been pelting my body for so long that to be free of it was almost like silence in itself, though it still drummed on the roof.

"Lucas?" I called, dripping rainwater and mud on the floor. "*Lucas?*"

The boy darted under my arm, into the kitchen and through the door to the living room. I followed cautiously.

The living room had changed drastically. No light or heat danced in the fireplace. Most of the furniture had been pushed back into its proper place. The worktables were gone, the masks piled into boxes in a corner. Even the little planter-box on the window-sill was empty.

In front of the bare fireplace sat a battered sofa. There was a body lying on it, and for a moment the world stopped.

Then I saw his hands, artist's hands with calluses and paint-marks and cuts, twitching convulsively against the blanket he was wrapped in. They clutched and released uncontrollably, in time with spasms that were shaking his body.

"Go to the telephone," I said without thinking. "Call 911. Tell them to contact any hospital in Chicago and have them send a helicopter. Can you give them directions?"

The boy ran into the kitchen while I grabbed Lucas by the soft white shirt he wore and pulled him up into a sitting position. His eyes were rolled up in his head.

I glanced at the window-box again. The empty window-box, where he'd been growing hemlock for Socrates.

"You *bastard*," I said.

A year before, two of Leon's horses had died from eating wild hemlock in a field near his farm. I knew the symptoms well enough; I'd heard them described every day for a week after it happened. *Two good horses lost. Should have seen them shake. Teeth chattering, kept falling over – too late for charcoal. Such a mercy when he finally shot them. Two good horses.*

I got an arm around his chest and lifted him to his feet, dragging him into the kitchen. The boy danced anxiously around us as I bent the limp body over the sink.

"Look for a first-aid kit," I said, turning on the taps.

"I've called the hospital."

"Good, now find me a first-aid kit. Look for ipecac or something labeled *emetic*. E - M - E - T - I - C. Or charcoal," I added, bracing Lucas against the sink and lifting his head up slightly with one hand.

"What's happened? What are you doing?"

"He's taken hemlock," I said, and the boy's eyes widened. "Go find the damn ipecac!" I shouted, wrapping my right arm around Lucas's forehead. His teeth were chattering but his jaw wasn't yet so tense I couldn't work my hand into his mouth.

I pushed my fingers past his tongue, as far back as they would go. His teeth latched into my palm and he bit me, hard enough to draw blood. I waited until his jaw loosened, jerked my hand away from his teeth, and pushed again. This time, his jaw couldn't close as tightly and he gagged. I could feel the spasm low in his chest – once, twice, and then he heaved and finally threw up. He shuddered and his hands came forward, gripping the edges of the sink as bile and grit and flecks of green landed wetly in the swirling water.

I took my hand out of his mouth and held it under the tap, gritting my teeth as the cold water poured into the bloody bite-mark. The imprint in the skin looked oddly canine, a sharp crescent across the back of my hand.

Lucas heaved again, and there was another sickening wet smack as more hemlock came up. It smelled vicious and foul, and I had no doubt

some of it had gotten into the wound, but I couldn't be bothered to care just then.

"I can't find anything!" the boy wailed, running back into the kitchen. Lucas, now half-conscious, was mumbling curses under his breath.

"Get out of here. Go as fast as you can back to Low Ferry and find Charles," I said. "Tell him what's happened and that I'm going to the hospital with Lucas. Ask him to close up my shop. Then go home and stay there, all right?"

He nodded and ran for the door. I turned my attention back to Lucas, whose twitching convulsions were subsiding. I cupped my uninjured hand under the tap and brought water up to his mouth, but it leaked back out again. I tried a second time, but his legs gave out so suddenly that I had to lunge to catch him.

We fell to the kitchen floor in a heap, his legs loosely splayed, my arms around his chest, his head knocking against mine. We were both smeared with the mud I'd fallen in and I was shivering with cold; I pushed myself up against the cabinets below the sink and held him across my lap. He'd passed out, but at least the terrible shaking had stopped.

I counted ten breaths, then loosened my death grip on his chest and made sure he was breathing too. That done, I eased him down to the floor and turned him on his side, shedding my coat and sliding it, mud and all, under his head for a pillow. When I was sure he wouldn't roll over and choke if he threw up again, I staggered into the living room.

His sculpture supplies were in an open box next to the masks, including strips of burlap he used for reinforcing plaster castings. I soaked one with rubbing alcohol from the box and tied it around my hand as well as I could, hissing as the alcohol stung the wound, then looped another strip around the first.

Then there was silence of another sort, and I looked up through the kitchen window.

The rain had stopped.

There was snow in its place, falling peacefully to the ground in little eddies but increasing in speed every second. It wasn't normal or rational or natural, but then neither had the world been, not since – since New Year's, since Halloween, since Lucas.

I didn't dare turn around to see if he was still alive. The thaw and the rain had both been his doing, and this wasn't the kind of snow we should be seeing this late in the year. I didn't know what it meant, but either way I couldn't turn around.

I stood at the window, watching the snow fall, until I heard the hospital helicopter in the distance – until the paramedics began to pound on the kitchen door.

TWELVE

AT THE HOSPITAL in Chicago they took the makeshift bandage off my hand and disinfected the bite, then stitched up the worst of the ripped flesh. I didn't see what had happened to Lucas, but I assumed they were doing whatever it was they did to poison victims. The doctor in the emergency room, once he saw the shape of the bite mark, ordered them to give me three or four bruising injections, including a Rabies vaccine. They took my muddy shirt away but left me my pants and my dignity, more or less.

I nursed my needle-wounds for a while, my hand wrapped in a proper white bandage and throbbing distantly through the painkillers, until someone brought me a scrub shirt. I put it on, then slipped away from the exam bed and found a pay-phone.

I called Charles in Low Ferry, intending to let him know where we were, but nobody answered to accept charges. I tried Paula and then Carmen but I guessed the phones had gone down when the snow blew in. I tried Eighth Rare Books and got no answer there either, which was surprising until I checked a clock on the wall and found it was past eight in the evening.

After wracking my brain I managed to remember Marjorie's home number. To my relief, she answered the phone and accepted the collect-call charge.

"Christopher, is that you?" she asked in greeting. "Why are you calling collect?"

"I'm at the hospital," I said. "In Chicago."

"Oh, my god, your heart –"

"It's not my heart."

"Well..." She trailed off. "Were you mugged?"

"I wasn't mugged," I said. "I'm fine, Marj, just shaken up."

"You sound exhausted. I didn't know you were in town."

I laughed, which probably sounded horrible. "I wasn't, this afternoon. I was airlifted in."

"What do you need?" she asked immediately. "Money? A ride home? If you need a kidney, sweetheart, I'm good for it."

"No, Marj, nothing like that. Can you come down?"

"Of course. I'll leave now."

"Can you bring me a book?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"Did you just ask me for a book?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sorry – "

"Any particular book?" she said sharply.

"Yeah. Plato. Anything with *Phaedo* in English. Please."

"Christopher, what – " she started, but I was already hanging up. It must have frightened her, and I still feel bad about that, but I wasn't trying to be rude or obscure. I was tired, and I didn't have the mental strength to explain any further.

A young doctor with a clipboard in her hand was standing nearby, watching me patiently. When I let go of the receiver, she smiled.

"Mr. Dusk?"

"That's me."

"I have good news," she said. "Your friend's in intensive care. They've pumped his stomach for good measure, but he should be fine."

I slumped onto a nearby bench, suddenly finding it difficult to stand. "Well, that's something," I said. She frowned, then dismissed it.

"You're fast," she continued. "The paramedics said you made him vomit, which was smart. Although I have to say, you weren't very gentle about it. He has some bruising on his chest and face."

"I was more worried about the poison."

"Still good thinking. I hate to have to ask this right now, but..." She tapped her pen against her clipboard. "Are you his next-of-kin?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Don't you have this stuff on file somewhere?"

"Well, that's the thing. He hasn't got any ID on him, so we haven't been able to find his records yet. If you could fill out his information, that would be really helpful."

She held out the clipboard and I took it, looking down at the admission form. Height and weight I could estimate, hair and eye color I knew, and I was pretty sure he didn't have any allergies. It was the bit at the top that was giving me trouble.

"I don't know his last name," I said finally.

"But you do know him?" she asked.

"We're friends. I thought we were, anyway."

"What about his address?"

"He doesn't really have one. He was living outside of town, he never got any mail. I don't know what his address in Chicago was, but he used to live here. I can find out," I added, when she tried to take the clipboard back. She let go when she saw I wasn't going to release it. We sat in silence for a while.

"Mr. Dusk, he didn't eat that hemlock accidentally, did he?" she asked finally.

It wasn't that I didn't want to admit what he'd done. He was going to get an earful about it from me when he woke up, and I was the reason he was going to wake up at all. Well, really the boy was. But the point was that I wasn't in denial. I just didn't want to make any trouble for him.

"Do we need to put him on a suicide watch?" Her tone was gentle, but the message was there – she'd ignore this if I asked, but otherwise Lucas was going to be here for a while.

"He's shy," I said. "He's private, he doesn't like people bothering him. I don't want them to try and commit him. He's not crazy. He's just a little messed up."

"You'd be surprised how often I hear that," she said. "Though not usually from someone who nearly lost a thumb being heroic."

"Please," I murmured.

"I'll have the nurses keep an eye on him, how's that sound?" she asked.

"Good," I said. "I'll...fill this out and give it back to you."

She patted my arm and left me there, pen clenched in my fingers, cheap plastic clipboard resting on my knee. Nearby, in the waiting room for the ER, a shabbily-dressed man was sleeping in a chair and a woman with three small children was plying the older ones with crackers, trying to rock the youngest to sleep. I set the pen down and twisted the hospital bracelet around and around on my wrist. I didn't really have any confidence that I could find someone who knew anything more about Lucas than I did – and I didn't think the doctor believed I could either. If I didn't know his last name, who in Low Ferry would?

Marjorie arrived while I was still pondering it. To this day I don't know how she found which hospital I was in, but then she has her sources. She looked worried and a little furious as she swooped down on me, hugged me, forced me back into the seat I'd just stood up from, and picked up my left hand, cradling it carefully.

"My poor Christopher," she said, wrapping her other arm around my shoulders. "What happened?"

"I was bitten," I said, wiggling my thumb. It throbbed.

"By what?" she asked. "A horse?"

"Another person," I answered.

"For god's sake, what do they do in that evil little village? I hope you've had all your shots."

"Yeah, they gave me a bunch," I said. "It's not what you think."

"Good, because my first thought on hearing that someone *bit* you is that you were nearly a sacrifice in some kind of ghastly ritual," she replied.

"Did you bring the book?" I asked. She gave me an exasperated huff, rummaged in a bag slung over one shoulder, and produced a paperback copy of Plato's *Dialogues*, of which *Phaedo* is the fourth. I turned through the pages, searching for the passage I thought I remembered.

He walked about until, as he had told us, his legs began to fail. Then he lay on his back in the way he had been told, and the man who had given him the poison examined his feet and legs. Soon he pressed his foot hard and asked him if he could feel it, and Socrates said "No"; then he pressed his leg, and so upwards, showing us that he was cold and stiff.

And then Socrates felt for himself, and said "When the poison reaches the heart, that will be the end."

"Fool," I muttered. "Classics for *why* to kill yourself; botany for *how*."

"Kill yourself?" Marjorie asked, really alarmed now.

"Lucas – the history scholar, I ordered that werewolf book for him for Christmas? He tried to. Kill himself. I think," I said, only half-aware I was even talking.

"Oh, dear me." Marjorie looked stricken.

"It's more violent than Plato thinks," I added, closing the book and turning to meet her eyes for the first time. "I had to make him throw up, hence..." I held up my hand.

"You..." She pointed at her open mouth. I nodded. "That requires a certain amount of fortitude. Not that I thought you'd have anything less." She squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. "Will he be all right?"

"According to the doctors. He might not be once I get through with him," I said. Marjorie touched my arm lightly.

"Christopher, let me buy you something to eat," she said. "Somewhere away from here."

"I should stay with Lucas, I'm the only one he knows. Besides, I have to find out what his name is," I said.

"His name?"

"His last name, I mean, I don't know it and they need it for..." I gestured at the clipboard. She waved dismissively.

"They just want to know what insurance to charge. I imagine he hasn't got any."

"God, I don't know..." I rested my face in one hand, the injured one still half-holding the book. I have never felt so at sea – not after my father died, not when I first came to Low Ferry, not during the long malaise that was my life in the city.

If Lucas, who could control the rain and snow, who could grow ice where he walked, who spent his whole life making beautiful things – if Nameless saw the world so darkly that death was preferable...

"Come along, Christopher," Marjorie said. "Just for a few minutes. You've done enough for him."

She took my arm and led me out of the hospital, fetching an old tattered coat from her car so that I wouldn't freeze. We crossed the parking lot and the wet early-evening street, passing under the warm yellow circles of the streetlamps. I stopped for a minute and turned my head to look up, but I'd forgotten that the light of the city eclipses the stars. Marjorie threaded her fingers in mine and tugged me gently onward.

We ate in a cheap sandwich shop near the hospital, drinking bad coffee and speaking very little. I don't know what she must have thought, but my own thoughts were taken up with an endless, uncertain cycle. He was in a hospital bed and not a body bag, and I was proud to be the one who'd saved him. But at the same time I wondered if he wouldn't hate me for it. And I believed – I still do – in allowing another person to make their own decisions. Always within reason, of course, but that night I was so confused and tired and hurt that I didn't know where suicide fell on the scale of "within reason" anymore.

There was no doubt he was naturally shy and awkward, but not as Nameless. He stammered and fumbled for words, but Nameless was never required to speak. And these things, you know, are not things to kill oneself over. But the other dogs avoided Nameless, and even the people...

No one had tried to put a collar on him. No one had tried to own him. Not even me. I'd tried not to, actually.

Lucas didn't need me. He lived alone, came and went on his own, made his own decisions, and kept his own counsel. There was a world that existed for him that didn't exist for me or for anyone else. And that was terrifying, because then what hold did I have over him? Why should he care that I'd grieve if he died?

When we returned to the hospital, Marjorie gave me a hug at the entry door.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" she said. "Or I have a guest room, you could –"

"No," I said. "Thanks, Marj. I'm staying here tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"I need to," I said.

"I'll come by tomorrow," she replied, and patted my cheek before she walked away.

I found a police officer outside Lucas's door, and another one inside rolling ink on his unresponsive fingers to take prints. They looked at me suspiciously as they left.

I settled onto a vinyl-upholstered bench in the hallway, curled up with the side of my head resting against the wall, and read Plato for hours, not really seeing a single word of it.

At some point, while I was reading, I fell asleep with the book wedged between my knee and wrist. When I woke it was to soft voices nearby.

I opened my eyes and saw a new doctor, standing in front of Lucas's door and speaking to a middle-aged couple: a neat man in khakis and an oxford shirt, a tidy woman with fashionable hair and subtle makeup, even at whatever-time it was in the morning.

They were talking about money, I think – insurance, and how Lucas didn't have any, how they were perfectly able to pay his bills. I lifted my head a little, and the movement of my body dislodged the book. It clattered to the floor and all three of them turned to look at me.

"Mr. Dusk," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," I moaned, uncurling my legs from the bench and tilting my head to pop the bones in my neck.

"That's to be expected. I'll have a nurse bring you some painkillers. These are Lucas's parents, they'd like to speak to you," he said, sweeping a hand at the fashionable woman and the tidy man. "This is Christopher Dusk, he's the one who brought your son to the hospital."

"Pleasure to meet you," Lucas's father said, offering his hand. I shook it, wanting to tuck my bandaged left hand behind my back but not sure how to do it subtly. "Though not under the circumstances."

"No, of course not," I agreed, as his wife came forward and clasped my hand in both of hers, briefly, limply.

"We're so grateful to you for helping Lucas," she said. "Did they make you stay on that bench all night?"

"Hm?" I asked, looking down at it. "Oh, I wanted to...uh, in case he woke up. Has he?"

"Not yet," his father said. "He should soon."

His mother invited herself to sit on the bench next to me, though she carefully avoided touching my mud-spattered pants.

"I thought this might happen," she confided. "Goodness knows we've tried everything."

"Best psychiatrists, best schools," his father added. "Did everything right."

"We just don't know how he ended up so lost," his mother sighed. I glanced sidelong at her. She seemed to expect me to say something. "But, well, I suppose you can't babysit them forever," she said, when she saw I wasn't going to reply. "People make their own choices, don't they?"

"Lucas certainly did," I said bitterly. As soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted them, but his parents didn't look hurt. They didn't look anything, really. Mannequins, stiffly playing a role.

"I told him moving all the way out to the country like that – no offense – wouldn't be good for him," his mother continued, and continued, and continued in a monologue of parental remonstrance and dissatisfaction for a good ten minutes, punctuated with interjections from his father. Oh, they expressed all the proper concerns and said all the things people are supposed to say, but with a disaffected air that spoke volumes about Lucas's childhood. That a passionately creative man should be the product of two such lifeless drones never fails to perplex me – but it tells me a lot about why he was so hesitant, so completely immobilized at the thought of interacting with others. He had grown up in a world where there was a single way of doing things, and every action had a proper response. Outside of their small sphere he was lost and confused: for every situation, a new code to decipher, for every person he met a new set of memorized ways of speaking and acting. No wonder he preferred masks. When the talk turned to money, and the cost of the hospital bills, I was just grateful they didn't offer to pay me for my services.

"Has he ever tried this before?" I asked abruptly, interrupting her monologue about some long-ago ingratitude he'd showed them, and both of his parents shot me a sharp look.

"No," his father said.

"Though I always thought..." His mother tapped a finger against her lips. "I thought he was waiting for something. Maybe for the right time," she added with a shrug. "What do you do in your little town, if I can ask?"

"I sell books," I said. "I have a shop."

"Oh, he likes books," she said.

"Apparently not enough," I murmured. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, we're looking into clinics," his father began. "For this kind of thing, you know. We'll get him into the best program possible."

I thought about Lucas being put in a clinic, in a program – no privacy, no way to avoid human interaction. I didn't really think it would do him much good and, on the off-chance it could, it might kill him faster than it would help him.

Fortunately I was saved from replying by a doctor, who put his head in the doorway to Lucas's room and then leaned out again.

"He's awake, if you'd like to see him," he said.

"Mr. Dusk?" his mother asked.

"Oh – no, I don't think so, you go first," I said, because I saw someone coming down the corridor and knew I was about to be dragged out of the hospital anyway. "I'll see him a little later."

They didn't seem inclined to argue. They ducked inside the door and let it close behind them, though I could hear their voices distantly. I turned away, to where Angie, Brent, and Mara were standing in the hospital corridor.

"Well," said Angie, putting her hands on her hips, "your insane friend Marjorie wasn't kidding about you, was she?"

Angie, once I was out of the hospital, told me what had happened: Marjorie had called her, the only person whose number she had, and ordered her to take me out for breakfast. Angie had called the rest of the circle, all of whom were cheerfully skipping work to attend – including my replacement, Derek. We met at some trendy downtown restaurant I don't remember the name of now, the men in suits and ties, the women in businesslike skirts and heels. They gasped at my bandaged hand, and shook their heads when I told them there had been an accidental hemlock poisoning. I played up their impressions of Low Ferry as a little country-bumpkin crossroads, if only to keep any of them from ever visiting there. They found the subject more interesting than I did.

"It must be nice, though," said Steve, picking to pieces the expensive fusion breakfast sandwich he'd bought. "I mean, we can make fun of it all we want, but your veggies must be really organic and stuff."

"Who cares about organic?" Mara asked. "I don't want bugs in my bananas and herbal death in my salad, thanks."

I studied the pancakes I'd ordered, pushing around a small pool of syrup with my fork. "We get a lot of stuff trucked in, anyway, especially in winter."

"Is it expensive to live there?" Angie inquired.

I thought about that for a while. "What we buy costs more sometimes, I guess. But we don't buy as much."

"No malls, huh?" Angie said

"No, no malls."

"Do you miss the city?" Brent asked. The others glared at him as if he'd made an indecent suggestion.

"Yes, of course I do," I answered automatically. "But I like the village, too."

"I'd hope so, Chris. You pulled up stakes quick enough when you moved there. We figured you'd gotten someone pregnant and were trying to avoid her or something."

I laughed a little. "No. I – " I hesitated. I knew they weren't expecting much of me, which was why they were making the whole thing into a joke. Marjorie must have told them – they must have seen – how tired I was. So it probably wasn't fair, what I did, because they were being kind to me, and I didn't return their kindness with the distant vagueness they were expecting.

"Well, obviously, it was after your dad died," Angie prompted.

There was a murmur of sympathetic agreement.

"Dad had a heart condition," I said. "So did I. So do I."

"What, like – "

"I left because the doctors told me if I stayed in the city and kept going like I had, I'd be dead in six months." I folded my napkin and set it next to my plate. I still hadn't looked any of them in the eye. "The air's better in the village and it's quieter there, that's all."

They burst into speech but mostly to each other, asking who knew, who I'd told, if I'd told anyone, who hadn't told if they did know. The food was forgotten – and so, apparently, was I.

"I didn't tell anyone," I said, slightly more loudly than I really had to. They stopped talking, at least. "I didn't tell anyone. I just wanted to...go. And that didn't really work anyway, because when I was here last time it was because I'd passed out and had to go to the hospital, so everyone in Low Ferry knows anyway."

There was an expectant silence.

"So that's why I went there," I said. "It's not why I stayed, I stayed because I love it there, but that's why I went there. And yeah, I missed the city and the idea that I'd make a pile of money and meet someone and have kids here, but I don't miss it very much anymore. I have books and friends in the village and – I have a life there. More than I ever had here."

"I'm so sorry, Chris," Angie said, completely ignoring what I'd just told them. I'd known three years ago that she'd say that if I told her. I didn't want to hear it, but there was no escaping them now. I'd told Lucas as much. You can want to be something other than who you are, but you can't get there by running away.

"I think I should go back to the hospital," I said. They wanted to ask questions, they wanted to come with me, but what we had been in the city and what we were now were too different, and they didn't fight too hard. Angie drove me back to the hospital and left me with a careful, pitying hug I didn't want.

When I walked in, the doctor from the night before was looking for me. Someone in Emergency had dug up my medical records, finally, and called one of my doctors, and he'd shouted at them for probably longer than they deserved: I should have my heart examined immediately and be under constant care, the strain of travel to the city and my injury liable to kill me if someone wasn't watching over me.

"So," she said breathlessly, as she explained the situation, "we want you in the hospital for another few hours. An electrocardiogram at least."

"What does my insurance say?" I asked sourly.

"I imagine your premiums are high enough," she replied, smiling slightly. "Mr. Dusk, if you want to be certain you're not going to drop dead of heart failure tomorrow, you should have the tests done."

"And what if they tell me I'm going to drop dead of heart failure tomorrow?" I asked. She studied me, fingers twining up the stethoscope's tubing into loops.

"Well, we just won't let that happen," she said finally. "How's your hand feel?"

"My hand feels fine," I answered.

"Good. Come this way."

They put me through a few basic tests, and I was too experienced with them and too tired to worry much about the indignity of sitting in a waiting room in a hospital gown. When we were finally done another doctor wanted to examine my hand, so I had to sit still while he unwound the bandage, prodded at the ragged wound, and gave me a scrutinizing look.

"Looks like a dog bite," he said finally.

"Well, it's a person-bite," I answered. I may have been sharp, but I was more than ready to be done with hospitals for a while.

"See these canines here?" he asked, pointing to two especially deep punctures.

"Look, I got it when I shoved my fingers down someone's throat and they had a spasm," I snapped. "They gave me plenty of shots, so if you could wrap me up again I'd appreciate it."

"Hm. Don't shoot the messenger," he answered, but he bandaged the hand again quickly. "You need the name of a hand specialist?"

"No, thank you."

They left me alone after that, and I rubbed the throbbing heel of my hand against my hip as I made my way back to Lucas's room. The volume of Plato was sitting on the bench where I'd left it when Angie came to take me to breakfast. I picked up the book and stood at the door, hand resting on it at chest-height, then pushed it open.

Lucas was leaning against the bed, his back to me. He was easing a hospital pajama shirt over his shoulders, and his hair stuck out in all directions as his head emerged from the collar. He moved slowly, as if he were tired and in pain.

"My parents are gone already," he said, before I had a chance to speak. "They spoke well of you."

"I'd hope so," I said. "I stopped their moron son from killing himself."

"Christopher, please don't –"

"Too late," I said. I hadn't meant to be angry; you weren't supposed to be angry when things like this happened, but I was, and Lucas always found a way through the bland shell of what I was *supposed* to be and do. "What the hell were you thinking?"

He turned then, eyes big and dark in his face, the bed between us. "What was I *thinking*? Isn't that pretty obvious?"

"No, it's not!" I shouted. He glanced nervously at the door and I lowered my tone. "It's not obvious what you were thinking because nobody in their right mind – who *does* that? Did you even know what would happen? Did you think about it at all?"

"*Every waking moment*," he hissed.

"Oh, so you thought about how I'd feel?"

"This wasn't about you!" he answered.

"You made it about me! You made me your secret-keeper. We're friends. I thought we were friends. I care about you. And even if it wasn't about me, did you consider the possibility that the boy might be the one to find you? Because he did find you," I said, circling the bed, stepping well up into his personal space. He flinched but didn't pull back. "The boy dragged me out to The Pines. He called the helicopter to come get you. Right now he's probably back in Low Ferry wondering if you're alive or dead."

"I didn't mean for that to happen," he murmured, turning to lean against the bed.

"Guess what? It did anyway. And it's *your fault*," I snarled. "I don't really care right now what you *meant* to happen, Lucas."

He hung his head, hands folded across his thighs. I could practically see Nameless, see the drooping tail and flattened ears. I saw the misery in every line of his human body.

"Are you going to try this again?" I asked, trying to calm down. He shrugged. "Bullshit, Lucas. I'm not playing games here."

"No," he whispered. Which, frankly, surprised me into silence. He took a breath like he was going to speak again, then let it out slowly.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Sore," he replied. "I feel stupid."

"Your parents yell at you?"

He shook his head.

"They should have," I told him.

He looked up at the ceiling. "Probably. They're going to put me in a clinic somewhere."

"For *this kind of thing*."

"I see they haven't been secret about it," he said bitterly. I sighed and leaned on the bed as well, rubbing my face with my hands. He cast a look over, caught the bandage on my left hand, winced and looked away.

"You don't take after them, much," I said, after a while.

"Nope. I'm a throwback," he replied. "My father's father. Musician. Died in a mental institution. Nobody talks about him. I look like him."

"Well, then it must be fate," I drawled. He glanced sidelong at me. "I'm not done being pissed off at you."

"Sorry I bit your hand," he muttered.

"Good. It hurts."

"Well, I am, okay? What do you want me to say?"

"I don't want you to say anything, Lucas, I want you to not have tried to *kill yourself* yesterday. I want to stop trying to explain to the doctors that the dog bite on my hand came from you."

"Nobody forced you to do it," he muttered. "Nobody wanted you to do it."

"*Everyone* wanted me to do it but you!"

"You took a poll, did you?"

"For fuck's sake, Lucas!"

"I can't be a stray dog all my life," he blurted. "And I can't be a man and know how much better people treat their dogs. I can't live in two worlds and it doesn't matter because either way I don't belong. I don't know what to do."

"You seemed pretty sure of that last –"

"Will you punish me and get it over with already? Either shout at me and finish the job or give up on it. You don't want to play games, don't make snide remarks and then pretend you're trying to help me."

I shut my mouth sharply.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking shocked at his own words. "Obviously I can't ask for any favors right now. Can't even kill myself properly. I think maybe I belong in a clinic."

"No you don't. You don't think that."

"No, I don't, but where else am I supposed to go? You want me to thank you for saving me? Thank you, Christopher, I looked death in the face and I didn't want to die after all so thank you, and please feel free to shout at me all you want because I'm still alive to hear it. But there isn't really any place for me in this..." He made a frustrated gesture. "This stupid life, either. I don't know. Four walls and tranquilizers three times a day isn't the worst thing that could happen to me."

"Yes, so we've proved," I replied. He lapsed into silence again.

"I'm just saying, maybe I can admit that they know better than me, this time," he said, after a while.

"They'd take your masks away," I replied, and he made a soft, sharp noise of distress. "They wouldn't let you make any more. Well," I said, trying to ease the blow a little, "whatever you could manage out of paper and safety scissors."

I glanced at him. There was a small smile dawning on his face.

"Glue sticks if you're really lucky," I added.

"Christopher, that's not nice," he murmured.

"Of course you'd have to give them to the therapist and he'd tell you what your deep down inner feelings are –"

"Stop it!" he said, over what almost sounded like a snicker.

"Lucas, you used the black crayon again! What have I told you about using the black crayon?" I said in a stern voice, and he covered his face with his hands and whimpered with laughter. After a few seconds he bumped his shoulder against mine and then leaned harder, so that I took some of his weight. I wrapped my arm around him to hold him there, letting him tense and then relax into it before I spoke again.

"What am I going to do with you?" I asked.

"It's more what I'm going to do with myself," he answered.

"Lucas, you –"

"No!" he said, looking up at me, distressed. "I didn't mean – just – I don't know where to go, Christopher. I don't know how to fix it."

"Well, we're going to have to break you out of this joint anyway, huh? Not doing you any good sulking here," I said, ruffling his hair and releasing him. "You can just sign yourself out, you know. You don't have to wait for your parents to decide what they're going to do with you."

"Well," Lucas said doubtfully. "It's just...I don't know where my pants are, for one thing."

I was trying to think of a way to reply to that when there was a soft knock on the door. I twisted around and saw Marjorie looking in.

"Good morning, Christopher," she said, as calm and collected as if she were greeting a patron in her store. "And you must be Lucas," she added, coming forward. Lucas glanced at me, anxious, confused.

"Lucas, this is Marjorie, she's an old friend – helped me buy your book for you," I explained, giving him a slight shove to get him to move forward. "Marjorie, this is Lucas."

He offered his hand silently, and she took it. Marjorie has a firm handshake – I could see him wince a little.

"I didn't know how long you boys were likely to hang around this edifice of disease and death, but I thought I'd see how you were," she said. "Or, if you're staying, see if I could bring you anything. Some books? From what Christopher's told me, you have a unique taste in literature, Lucas."

"Not really," Lucas mumbled. "I was working on a project. I like history," he said awkwardly.

"Do you?" she asked, amused. "And are you planning to become part of it?"

This brought a smile to his lips.

"Not just yet," he said softly.

"Good," she said. "How long are they going to keep you here? I'd like to see Christopher around my shop sometime, and he apparently can't be more than ten feet away from you or his head explodes."

Lucas blinked at me.

"Oh," she said knowingly. "He didn't tell you he slept on the bench outside your room last night, did he?"

"Hey," I said, as Lucas's eyes widened. "Just because I'm pissed off at you doesn't mean I don't *care* or anything."

"It's just...why?" Lucas asked.

"Don't make me slap you in the head," I said.

"Shall I give you some privacy?" Marjorie asked, grinning.

"We could bust you out right now," I said. "Marj has a car. I'll buy you some pants."

"Two things not often said in the same breath," Marjorie observed. Lucas bowed his head and I was reminded of Nameless again. I wondered how long his movements had been so doglike, or if it was just that Nameless himself was a particularly *human* dog.

"My parents are coming this afternoon," he said finally. "If I'm not here, they might worry."

"Mostly about the bill," I replied. He gave me a wounded look. "Oh, come on, Lucas. I'm not going to tell you that your parents screwed you up, but they certainly didn't help."

"All the best schools," Lucas murmured.

"Yeah, I was there for that conversation, too."

"Is this some kind of code?" Marjorie asked, and Lucas and I looked at each other. "Clock's ticking, boys, and my crossword is waiting."

"I still need pants," Lucas said, looking distressed. Marjorie sighed and walked out the door. "Is she leaving –"

"She's going to go talk to the doctor," I said, peering through the half-open door. "She'll find you something."

"Where am I going to go?"

"Back to Low Ferry, with me, if you want. If you want to stay in the city, Marj can find you a place. Please come back with me," I said.

"Why? What good is it going to do?"

"What harm is it going to do? It'll make me happy."

He nodded, and almost smiled again, and that was when Marjorie appeared with a set of green hospital scrubs and the triumphant cry of "Pants!"

It took half an hour for Lucas to finish all the paperwork and sign himself out, looking over his shoulder every minute to see if his parents were coming. Not long after that, we found ourselves in Eighth Rare Books at Marjorie's table, huddled together and working our way through a box of fried chicken from the greasy snack shack around the corner. Lucas watched everyone who came near with a wary sort of suspicion, but nobody bothers those chosen souls who sit with Marj as she rules the literary world and thoroughly destroys the Trib crossword.

"Thank you, Marj," I said, around a mouthful of food. "I didn't really pack my wallet for a surprise trip to Chicago."

"My pleasure, Christopher," she said, ruffling my hair. "Do you two need money for the train?"

"I can send you a check."

"Let me buy you a train ticket. You save your money to buy one back to see me a little sooner than sometime-next-year."

"She's very generous," Lucas said in an undertone, as Marj turned to answer a question from a patron.

"She likes me," I replied. "You, she probably thinks you're weird."

"Well, I am," Lucas answered.

"Send her a mask. She'd love that," I told him. "Keep you busy, too."

"I'm not going to try again. I promise," he said, watching Marjorie wander off with her patron in search of whatever they wanted – if they even knew. One of the joys of a bookseller's life is knowing what someone wants to read before they do.

When we were finished eating, and during a lull in Marjorie's business day, she counted out more than enough money for two train tickets back to Low Ferry, tucked it into the pocket of a battered backpack, and slung the pack onto my shoulder.

"Books, for you," she said, kissing me on the cheek. "Some nice light murder mysteries and some gory classics. And biscotti, too."

I gave her a tight hug while Lucas stood by awkwardly. When we were finished, he offered his hand, leaned in when Marjorie went to hug him, then decided at the last minute to shake her hand, and ended up not doing anything. The tips of his ears reddened with embarrassment as he stood very still and allowed her to hug him.

I imagine his parents found out about his disappearance while we were on the train that afternoon, but I don't know for certain – and it would be difficult for me to care less about them than I do. We were quiet on the train, Lucas buried in one of Marj's books, me staring out the window at the landscape rolling past.

At some point, Lucas shifted so that his arm was tucked up against mine, the side of his head tilted onto my shoulder as he slowly turned the pages of the book.

THIRTEEN

WHEN WE ARRIVED in Low Ferry, I left Lucas huddling against a wall to avoid the wind while I went to find the payphone. I was only halfway there when I saw a car pull up – Charles's elderly four-wheel-drive, with Charles at the wheel and someone in the passenger's seat. I waved at him and he blew his horn, so I gestured for Lucas to follow me down.

"Heard you were coming back in," he said. I gaped as his companion jumped out and pulled open the back door – the boy, grinning and pointing for Lucas to take the front passenger's seat.

"How?" I asked, climbing into the back after the boy.

"Kid told me," he said. I looked down at the boy, who gave me a solemn stare in return. "Good timing, huh?"

"Good timing," I echoed, still staring at him as Charles pulled onto the road into town.

"How was Chicago?" Charles asked easily, with a friendly smile for Lucas. Lucas caught my eye in the rear-view mirror, obviously as confused as I was.

"Cold," I told him, settling the pack Marjorie had given me on the floor of the car. "We, uh. Well, it was...educational?"

"Oh? See those museums they have?"

"No, we mostly just visited," I said, and decided to forestall further questions. "How's Low Ferry?"

"Oh, getting on. You left your lights on in the shop, by the way – Paula ran over last night and closed it down for you."

"I'll have to thank her," I murmured.

"I told him you went to Chicago to get your hand looked at," the boy piped up, but there was a note in his voice that said he was trying to tell me something.

"Yes! I trust it's nothing serious," Charles said.

"No, just a dog bite," I replied.

"Not one of ours?"

"A stray," I said quietly. Lucas was very still in the front seat, staring out the window.

"Well, I'll take you back to your place first," Charles assured me. "I can drop you off on the way to The Pines," he added to the boy.

"I'll walk home. I gotta talk to Mr. Dusk," the boy said.

"Long way home for you, though?" Charles said uncertainly, as if he wasn't sure where the boy lived.

"Not so far, I'll cut across a few fields," the boy answered.

"As the crow flies," Charles smiled. "The only way to go around here. Which reminds me, Leon's on the warpath about his foxes again..."

He chattered about Leon's problems and Jacob's thoughts on the matter of foxes until we pulled up outside Dusk Books a few minutes later. The boy climbed out after me and knocked on Lucas's window to make him roll it down.

"Look after yourself," Lucas said, reaching out to disorder the boy's neat blond hair.

"Course," the boy answered. "See you soon?"

"I hope so."

"Take care, Lucas," I added. "Thanks, Charles!"

Lucas rolled the window back up, and the truck pulled away as I opened the shop and gestured the boy inside. Across the street, Carmen waved at me from the cafe, then almost dropped the tray she was carrying when she saw the bandage on my hand. I wagged my fingers – I'm fine, nothing to worry about – and closed the door. The boy was sitting on my counter, legs swinging.

"You didn't tell Charles what happened," I said. He shrugged.

"Not my place," he replied. He had that same look about him that he'd had when he told me to find Lucas – not quite authority, not quite age, but something that said this was not going to be a conversation with a child. Maybe not even with an equal. "Lucas can tell if he wants."

"And calling the hospital?" I asked. "With the telephone out?"

He shrugged. "Must've been working for him. It's cold in here."

"I usually start a fire in the morning. What would have happened if Lucas had died?" I demanded.

"But he didn't."

"He could have."

"No. You saved him," he said with a smile.

"And how'd you know to come get me so I could?"

He leaned back, heels drumming gently on the counter-front. "The Friendly said he might. Christopher the storyteller told me Lucas had the melancholy."

"He didn't tell me that."

"Maybe he didn't have time."

I rested my arm on the cash register, staring at him. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't know he'd do it any sooner."

"Goddammit!" I shouted. "Give me a straight answer!"

He widened his eyes, innocently. "What straight answer do you want? All the things you've seen, you still don't see there aren't any?"

"He's my friend," I said through gritted teeth.

"Oh?" He tilted his head. "That what he is?"

"I would have helped him."

"You would have tried. He had to see. Now you have to see." He held out his hand. I stared at it. "Lemme look at your bite."

"No," I said, pulling my left arm against my chest.

"Then what will you do now?" he asked. "How are you going to help him?"

"I don't know! It's not like I know what to do," I said. "It's not my job –"

"– to put a collar on Lucas?"

"Nameless," I said, before I thought about it. He laughed and I wanted to hit him, but – he was just a kid. He looked like one, anyway.

"What did you want to say to me?" I asked coldly. He twitched his fingers, still outstretched for my hand. I hesitated, but it was obvious he wasn't going to move or speak until I did what he wanted. Finally, with a warning look, I put my wrist into his hand. He turned it over, studying the bandage across my palm.

"Lucas is a mystic," he said, tracing the fingers of his other hand in the air above mine, not touching, following the lines of the bandage. "But you don't believe."

"I believe what he's done is real," I protested.

"Only 'cause you've seen it. You make an exception. Doesn't matter, I guess," he added thoughtfully. "That kind of thing...it's not just believers. You can touch it too."

"I don't want to," I said, scared now.

"You will," he answered. "Let me give you something," and he pressed his hand flat over my palm. Under the bandages, my skin tingled.

"You don't have to believe. You just have to care," he said. He let go of my hand and slid off the counter, walking around me to the door. I turned, but only in time to see the door close. When I looked out the window I didn't see him at all.

I stood there for a while, the palm of my left hand still extended and upturned, then closed my fingers as far as they would go and rested the knuckles on the counter.

I left the lights out in the shop, though dark was falling on Low Ferry pretty quickly. I didn't want to answer the same questions over and over, not until I'd had a good night's sleep. I thought – hoped – that Charles had warned people to leave me alone for the evening. Eventually I walked into the back storage room and leaned against a bookshelf, forehead pressed against an uneven series of book-spines, inhaling the smell of binding glue and paper. It felt like I'd been gone for weeks instead of a single day.

I wanted to help Lucas. I did. For all his assurances that he wouldn't try anything again, I knew that if he didn't fix the broken thing inside him he would. I wished I knew *how* to help him. Obviously he'd placed all his hope in Nameless, in somehow being able to join everything he was excluded from if he could just change his shape.

It hadn't worked. I'd told him as much. Not any more than coming to Low Ferry had kept me safe from my own heart.

It was almost as if all his maskmaking was to compensate for something, some missing part of him. Some invisible mask everyone else

had, a protective shield that we're born with but which he seemed to have missed. Lucas turned a very wise, very clever, but very naked face to the world. It was too easy to hurt someone so unprotected.

My hand still felt strange under the bandage, a pinprick tingle that wasn't the throbbing pain from the bite but was becoming impossible to ignore. I flexed my fingers a few times, leaned back from the bookshelf, and looked down at my palm. The bandages were tight and pale against my skin, wrapped awkwardly around the base of my thumb, extending up past my knuckles.

If I could make Lucas a mask, one he could always wear – if I could give him the means to protect himself instead of protecting him...that would be a fine thing. Even just a symbol would be something.

I walked out into the dark shop and reached for a piece of paper on the desk, then stopped. I wasn't an artist, and paper masks are children's toys anyway. I looked up, casting around the shop. The *Dottore* mask hanging over the fireplace seemed to leer knowingly at me. I ignored him and went to my workbench, where my bookbinding tools lay – scissors, glue, clean waxed thread, needles, punches, sharp scalpels and dull bone paper-folders. There was nothing there that would help. I was a book-binder, not a maskmaker.

But I had my hands and they weren't unskilled. If Lucas could make a mask in his desperation to be loved, I could make one in desperation to save him. Without his book (which I had never believed in) and without his tools (which wouldn't be of any use in my hands) I could make him *something*. One thing, even if I didn't believe. For Lucas.

I clenched my left hand as tightly as I could, which made the lacerations under the bandages throb and pull away painfully from the sterile cotton. But I could feel something hard and solid in my palm, something forming to the shape of my fingers. When I opened my hand again it rested there like a weight even though I couldn't see anything.

I picked it up in my right hand – invisible, but for a strange shimmer of light across it from the streetlamp through the window. I pressed my hands together and it flattened, slowly, stubbornly. When I ran my thumb over it, shaping it, it seemed to smooth and stretch. I gripped it tightly for a moment and then set to work.

I don't remember much about that night, except that I worked through it, exhausted, still filthy from the mud and the hospital and the train ride back to Low Ferry. My left hand was almost useless in the bandage – I do remember eventually finding scissors at the workbench and slicing the cotton off, unwrapping it from the bite. It drew fresh blood when the scabs pulled away. The blood dripped onto the mask I couldn't see, spattering briefly or smearing under my fingers and then disappearing as well.

I wanted it perfect. I wanted to make it beautiful, even if it couldn't be seen.

I know it sounds insane. I know that. It sounds as if I had some kind of breakdown, and perhaps I did, but I know what I felt, too. There

was something real under my hands, something solid. It had weight, it had a smooth texture like glass, and it fought me every step of the way – sprung back when I tried to press it out, closed over when I tried to mold holes in it for eyes. It may have been shaped under my hands but it was slow going, and my shoulders and wrists were aching in earnest around the time the sun was coming up. My fingertips were already raw and bruised.

I began to cry in frustration, like a child who can't make a painting look the way they want it. I let it drop to the workbench, resting one hand on the smooth curved surface as I sat down and rubbed my face with the other. Static crackled in the air, shocked me where my fingertips touched my skin – it would be a dry day outside, cold and sunny and brutal.

My hands were bloody, grit under the fingernails, the sharp crescent of the bite still oozing a little. There was nothing to be done, and I couldn't be seen like this. I climbed the stairs slowly, turned on the shower, and scrubbed my hands clean while the water warmed up.

Under the hot water, my muscles began to relax and then to shake. It was all I could do to dry myself off and crawl into bed. That was the last I knew for hours.

I woke to Jacob's voice, calling my name in the shop below. I flailed out of bed, dragging the blanket with me as I walked to the stairs.

"Down in five minutes!" I called.

"I can wait!" he shouted back. I pulled some clothing on with numb, exhausted fingers, and then looked down at my hand again. The scabs had held but seemed grotesque and misshapen. I wrapped a dishtowel around my palm as I hurried down the stairs.

"Sorry," I said, as I reached the bottom. "Just cleaning my –"

Jacob was standing at the counter, paging through a book, but all my senses focused on the workbench and the slight shimmer in the air where the mask lay. I looked nervously at him, but he didn't appear bothered. Didn't even see it – not that there was anything to see. But to me it seemed – better than it had earlier. It didn't seem as imperfect as I'd thought it was. We have no objectivity when we're tired.

"– hand," I finished weakly, holding it up.

"Carmen said you'd hurt yourself," Jacob replied, frowning in concern as he set the book down. "Anything serious?"

"No, just – just a dog bite," I lied, tucking the towel-wrapped hand behind my back. "I – ran into a nasty stray on my way to The Pines."

"Town folk were worried when your lights weren't on this morning. Isn't like you to disappear," he said. "Thought I'd come over and see."

"Long night." I rummaged in the shelves behind the counter and finally came up with an old elastic bandage. There was some cotton wadding on my workbench, and I picked that up as well. "I told the boy to tell people I got bitten, but he only told Charles."

"Ah," Jacob said. "Which boy?"

"You know, the one Lucas tutors," I said. He gave me a vague nod that told me he didn't have much of an idea who I was talking about. "Did you need something?"

"Nope, just to see you were well," he answered. "Come on over to the cafe, Carmen's been worrying. Buy you lunch," he added.

"Lunchtime already?" I asked.

"Pretty nearly. Whole town's been wanting to stop by all morning."

"Gratifying," I said with a light smile. "Let me get my boots."

Carmen threw her arms around my neck when we walked in, nearly knocking me over, and then wouldn't let us sit down until I'd shown her my bandage, assuring her that they'd given me all my shots at the hospital. Everyone asked a lot of questions, but I answered evasively and eventually they must have figured out that I didn't want to talk about it.

On the way out, I caught Carmen's elbow as she passed.

"Hey," I said. "You know the kid that's always running around with Lucas?"

"Sure," she replied, with the same distracted look Jacob had given me. "He comes in for a soda sometimes."

"Anything about him ever strike you as a little weird?"

She laughed. "Weird? Nah. He's just one of the town kids, you know."

"I thought he might be from one of the farms."

"Could be. Who is he again?"

I looked at her, frowned, and shook my head. "Don't worry about it. I'll see you later."

"Feel better!" she called after me as I left.

I walked back across the street to Dusk Books and pushed the door open, though I didn't intend to stay long. More people would want to come see me that afternoon, which was fine – but I wanted to be sure Lucas was all right. And I wanted to give him the mask, which sang out almost audibly when I walked into the shop.

How to give it to him was the question. Standing there holding out empty air would look ridiculous, but then so was the entire idea of Nameless. Wrapping it in paper didn't work – believe me, I tried – and it didn't seem right to just sling it into a box or a bag and carry it.

I picked it up from the workbench, turning it over in my hands, then quickly set it down again when the wooden door to the shop creaked open.

"Christopher?" Michael called, putting his head around the door.

"Come on in," I told him, walking back to the counter. "Afternoon, Michael."

"Afternoon," he said, standing in front of the counter, eyes darting down to my hand. "Heard you were hurt. Word going around is you got a dog bite."

I held up my hand. "Nothing serious. Looks kind of gross, though. Caught a stray on a bad day."

"Only stray around here's that big husky," he remarked. "That the one?"

"Who, Nameless? No." I shook my head. "Just some dog."

"Well, what'd he look like?"

"I don't remember much about it."

He gave me a searching look. "How's your heart?"

I laughed. "My heart's fine, Michael. How's yours?"

That got me a grin. "Fine too. Better than fine."

"You need anything?"

"No, just wanted to make sure you didn't need us to go find Nameless. Whatever it was, it drew blood – got to put down a creature like that, before it gets a kid or something."

"Long gone by now, I guess – don't think it was local to start with," I said hastily.

"I can put word around if you want. You know Low Ferry," I said.

"Mm. Yeah, I do. I think I'm closing up today – I'd appreciate it if you told folks not to bother Nameless if they see him."

"Sure. Where you headed?"

"Out to The Pines." I tried to keep my voice steady. I think I mostly succeeded.

"Drive you far as the road goes," Michael offered.

"No," I said, thinking of the mask. "I'll walk. Nice day for it."

He gave me an uncertain look. "Sure?"

"Yeah. I love that walk. Next time though, maybe?"

A small smile. "Sure. See you round, Christopher."

He left, the door banging shut behind him. I turned back to the mask. This time, when I picked it up, something brushed against my fingers and I almost dropped it in surprise. I looked down, which was stupid, then brought my other hand up to explore the edge, discovering something dangling next to one of the eye-holes.

A ribbon. Another on the other side.

I almost burst out laughing, but instead I tied the ribbons together and looped them around my hand, letting the mask dangle from my fingers in a way that was almost unnoticeable. I glanced furtively at *Dottore*, whose leer from above the fireplace was more of a benevolent smile in the daytime, and left for The Pines.

I didn't see many people as I walked, none once I left the main street. The world seemed still, silent, empty. Mask swinging from one hand, I left the asphalt behind and walked out into the fields that divided The Pines from town, the grass still sodden and pocked with snow.

When I reached the kitchen door I knocked a couple of times, waited, knocked again, shouted up to Lucas, and then tried the door. It was unlocked, for once, so I hurried inside. I half-expected to find him dead on the kitchen floor, but it was empty – and clean, no mud or mess anywhere. The sink where he'd thrown up the hemlock had been cleaned too, though I noticed a spot of blood – my blood, I thought distantly – on the edge.

I looked into the living room and did see a body on the couch there, but my first rush of panic subsided quickly when I saw his chest moving rhythmically with deep inhales and exhales. I touched his wrist where it rested on the back of the couch. His skin was warm, pulse slow and even. He was sleeping. He didn't wake up or even shift when I touched him.

The boxes he'd packed hadn't been moved, and the room seemed very bare without his supplies and masks strewn everywhere. I came around to the other side of the couch and sat down on the heavy coffee table, watching him.

"Lucas," I said softly. His hand twitched. "Wake up a little, huh?"

He didn't move. I ran the tips of my fingers along his cheekbone, down to his jaw. He just exhaled slightly and slept on.

"All right," I said, almost relieved. "Sleep if you have to. I brought you something..." I set the mask on the table next to me, straightening it so that it rested on its edges, facing him. "Come see me when you want. You know where I am."

No reaction, just the soft sound of breathing.

If he found the mask, well, that was fine. If he didn't, then it was all in my head anyway. But I hoped he would.

I got up, hesitated, then bent and kissed him on the forehead before leaving. I flicked the lights off on my way out, shut the kitchen door firmly behind me, and turned my face to the chilly wind outside the cottage.

That was the last time I saw Lucas for almost two months.

Sandra brought the news to me the next day, when I was still trying to set my internal clock back to waking before noon. I'd already eaten lunch by the time I opened the shop, and a delivery of new comic books had taken up an hour or two after that. I was busy cutting myself a new, more precise bandage with a scalpel when she came in.

"Afternoon," I called from the workbench. "With you in just...one...second. Trust me, you don't want to see the Grim Hand of Christopher Dusk."

She laughed, resting her elbows on my counter. I got up from the workbench, wrapping the wadding around my hand and securing it with the elastic bandage as I came to stand on the other side of it. "Better make sure it wasn't a werewolf," she said.

"I think I'm safe in Low Ferry," I answered, hiding a pang of – conscience, or regret, or something. I don't know. "What can I get for you today? New magazines came in a few days ago."

"Great! I hoped they would," she said, as I collected her usual assortment and set them on the counter. She flipped through them while I rang up the total. "Took the afternoon off from the bank. Just me and my magazines and some of Carmen's coffee."

"Nice for some. Nolan and Michael handling things?" I asked.

"Yeah." She laughed again. I caught her eye, saw the mischief in it, and stared at her.

"You know about them," I blurted, stopping in the middle of totaling her cost.

"*You* do?" she asked, equally surprised.

"I imagine we're the only two who do," I replied, hastily printing her receipt. "Twelve twenty-two."

"I bet we are," she said, handing me the exact change. "How'd you find out?"

"I have eyes everywhere," I whispered. She grinned. "But if you knew – all the rumors last autumn about you and them..."

"Well, I do like Michael an awful lot," she said, a hint of regret passing over her face. "Nolan, too, but I really liked Michael. Still, they're happy, so why not give them a hand? You know they're leavin' town in a month or two. You won't make trouble for them, will you?" she asked earnestly.

"I haven't yet. What about you? Could be trouble when they go."

"Why?" she asked, frowning.

"Well, people might think you were covering for them," I said.

"So what? Let 'em," she replied, lifting her chin defiantly. I began to sense that I had grossly underestimated Sandra. "Besides, if I have to I can act all heartbroken for a little while. I'll get Alex Culligan to comfort me."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Alex Culligan, huh?"

"Yep," she beamed. "Oh, which reminds me – you know Lucas? That weird guy out at The Pines, the one who's always lurking in here?"

"He's not weird," I said, annoyed.

"Whatever – he disappeared!"

I felt a pit open up in my stomach. "He – what?"

"He's gone," she announced, with the kind of relish that often accompanies such gossip. "I had lunch with Alex. He says his dad went up from their farm because their well was out, to see if The Pines had any water. The place was cleared out. He looked around inside and everything."

"Cleared out – how do you mean?" I demanded. She shrugged.

"All his stuff was gone, is what Alex said. Just a couple of empty boxes and the furniture that rents with the place."

I stared down at the glossy magazines on the counter, trying to keep my breath slow and even.

"You were friends, weren't you?" she asked.

"As much as one can be, with Lucas," I replied, hoping I didn't sound completely crazy.

"That's the truth. Anyway, Alex figures maybe he skipped on his rent or something. He says they saw one of those Friendly trucks passing through, maybe he went with them."

"I – maybe," I said numbly. "He liked them."

"Anyway, thanks for the magazines," she said. "I'll tell the guys you said hello."

"Yeah...do that," I told her. She left with a smile over her shoulder for me and a slam of the wooden door. When she was gone, I leaned heavily on the counter.

The first thing I did, and perhaps I'm not entirely proud of this, was take my pulse, just in case. It helped to feel the steady beat under my fingers, reassuring me that my heart was fine. Then I walked through the shop, grabbing my coat from the peg near the door, and flipped the sign to closed. For the third time in four days I took off for The Pines.

It wouldn't have taken very long to load what little he'd brought with him into one of the Friendly's pickups. Their Christopher would have been pleased to have him traveling with them. One more mouth isn't so much to feed when you already have twenty or thirty.

I wasn't quite outside of town yet when there was a tug on my arm. I stopped walking and looked down. The boy stood there, one hand in his pocket and the other on my sleeve, looking up at me expectantly.

"You're going out to The Pines," he declared. I felt my left hand clench, as if I expected there to be something in my grip.

"Yeah, I am," I replied. I tugged my sleeve out of his grip and kept walking.

"You won't find him there," the boy said, running to catch up to me. "Alex Culligan says he's gone."

"I know that!" I shouted, turning around to face him. "What do *you* know about it?"

He tilted his head, dark eyes studying me.

"You're still going?" he asked.

"I need to see for myself," I said sullenly.

"I know," he sighed. "All right. Go and see, then. Can I come?" he added, with such typical boyish enthusiasm that I wondered for a moment just whether I'd imagined all of it – Nameless, the mask I'd made, the way the boy had looked at me sometimes.

"I can't stop you," I said, and kept walking.

He walked next to me, hurrying a little to keep up with my strides, down the street to the end of the asphalt and then onto the fields. It was a pretty day out, but I wasn't paying much attention. I walked up to the kitchen door of The Pines, pulled it open without knocking, and stepped inside.

The kitchen had always been sterile, but there was an added emptiness now. I pulled the cupboards open one by one – there was a water stain where one of the leaks had been before he fixed the roof, but the dishes were neatly stacked. There was no food in the pantry. The refrigerator was empty, too.

I walked through the open living room door and found it was similar: the furniture was in place, the floor swept clean, most of the boxes gone, the remaining ones empty. Not a trace, not a sign of the workshop Lucas had kept there.

I looked up. The burn-mark on the ceiling was still there, but it was the only sign anyone had done *anything* in the cottage. I didn't even bother

looking in the bedroom, just sat down on the couch and bowed my head. After a second, I saw the boy sit down on the coffee table out of the corner of my eye, facing me. A book was thrust into my line of vision.

"This was on the table," the boy said, offering it to me. I took it from him with my good hand, thumb rubbing the edge of the cover. A small blue book, hardbound, imprint 1944, still smelling slightly of cigarettes. *Ancient Games*.

I opened it, holding the pages down with my left hand, and checked the flyleaf. There was a price scrawled in the upper right-hand corner, leftover from its time in the second-hand store in Chicago, and a single word in Lucas's tidy handwriting: Christopher.

I closed the book and pressed it tightly against my chest. After a while, I looked up at the boy.

"I don't even know what this means," I said, only half-conscious I was talking. "I – does he – is he coming back?"

"Probably not today," he answered pointedly. I looked around at the clean, empty living room and nodded. I didn't want to stay there. It wasn't Lucas's home anymore.

The boy led the way through to the kitchen and out the door, but I stopped on the threshold, looking back. My hand tightened around the book until the edges of the cover bit into my palm. Quiet Lucas, with his hidden world and his missing piece, had filled the rooms with color and light. Without him it was pretty empty.

When I turned back, the boy was gone. There was a soft flutter of wings, though, and the little Waxwing who had spent the winter in the holly bushes by the door was perched there now. He regarded me with small sharp eyes, his yellow, black-banded head tilted slightly. He warbled at me.

"How is this supposed to help?" I asked him. He hopped along the branch, spread his wings, bobbed once or twice, and then took off, straight up into the air. I followed his flight until he disappeared in the distance.

Easing my way down the hill to the field, I could see the fresh tire tracks and muddy footprints – yes, the Friendly had been here, a truck with a camper. Maybe the boy had somehow fetched them, too. They came and took Lucas away. If I was lucky, I'd see him again next winter.

Perhaps he'd be married to a Friendly woman by then. Who knew?

I zipped the book into my jacket, against my chest, and walked back to the village, tripping a little on the ridge of asphalt when the road became Low Ferry's again. I took a side-alley to the back of my shop, let myself in, left my shoes by the back door and went upstairs.

From the window I could see most of the street. Ron emerged from the cafe to have a smoke on the front bench. Further on, Leon was poking around in the scrap bins in front of the hardware store. A couple of schoolchildren ran past, down to my front door, then stopped at the bottom of the steps when they saw the *Closed* sign. Their faces all turned upwards. I set the book down carefully and opened the window.

"Hey Mr. Dusk," one of them yelled. "You got new comic books in?"

"Yeah," I said, surprised at how steady I sounded. "Go on in, I'll be down in a second. Bags by the counter!" I added, as they flocked onto the porch and momentarily out of sight.

Downstairs they were already engaged in a debate over who would buy what, but they fell respectfully silent when I appeared. Their eyes, as one, tracked down to my left hand.

"Is it true you got attacked by a dog?" one of them asked.

"Just a bite," I told him.

"My mom said you went to Chicago to get it fixed."

"That's right," I answered, willing them to find their comics and go.

"What's Chicago like?" a girl asked. I looked down at my hand.

"Big," I said. "Old. And very far away."

I called Marjorie that night, after I'd closed the shop and gone back upstairs to the troubling sight of the book on my bedside table. She answered on the first ring.

"Eighth Rare Books, Marjorie speaking," she said.

"Marj, it's Christopher," I said.

"Christopher, how are you?" she asked warmly. "How's the hand?"

I held up my left hand, studying it. "It's fine. Healing, I guess. Hurts a little."

"I'm glad you're on the mend. And your history scholar?" she asked. I glanced at the book on the table. "Christopher? Still there?"

"I..." I wasn't even sure what to say.

"Oh, god, did he try to –"

"No!" I interrupted, understanding what she must have assumed. "No, he – I don't know how he is. He disappeared yesterday."

"Disappeared?" she demanded. "How do you mean?"

"His place is empty. He cleaned out and left. Probably with the Friendly. They're nomads, they pass through every once in a while."

"Nomads? This isn't the desert, Christopher."

"They're just Travelers. They wander. They must have taken him with them," I said lamely. "He didn't say goodbye. They never do."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"No, Marj, I don't think I am," I said softly.

"Sweetheart, I know your heart is broken in a couple of ways, but this kind does heal," she said. "And maybe he'll be back. He's young, he might just need to find himself a little. He didn't seem very happy in his own skin."

I laughed, though I think it probably sounded more like I was crying. "Yeah. You have no idea."

"You could file missing-persons," she suggested. "Do you think he'd try to hurt himself again?"

"No, he sort of promised he wouldn't. Besides, if he went then it was because he wanted to," I replied. "I just...don't know what to do."

"Nothing you can do, love, unless you want to look for him. I don't think you do, do you?"

"No," I replied. "I meant I don't even know what to think."

"Why should you think anything?" she asked. "Have yourself a cry or a drink or a religious conversion –"

This time my laugh was more sincere. "Hardly that," I said drily.

"Fine. Then you keep on selling your books in your quiet country-mouse life, and if that gets a little unbearable you can come see me," she said. "You know you're always welcome here, Chris."

"I know."

"Are you going to be okay? Should I call some farmer or something to come sit up with you?"

"I'll be fine. Confused, but fine," I promised her. "Thank you, Marjorie."

"Call anytime, sweetheart."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye now."

I hung up the phone and threw myself into the chair by the window, staring up at the ceiling. I felt like I'd been going for days, like I hadn't stopped running since the boy came into my shop and told me to find Lucas. Running to something, running from something, both, I couldn't be sure. I was tired. Maybe that was how Lucas had felt, too.

I got a glass of water, made myself drink the whole thing, and then dressed for bed. I slid between the covers and lay on my side, looking at the window and the long strip of light thrown into the room from the streetlamp outside. And the book, on the bedside table. I switched on my lamp and picked it up, paging through to the opening chapter.

I only managed a few paragraphs before I was asleep, exhausted, the book still in my hands.

For the next week, at least, I ran more or less automatically, not thinking much about anything. A lot of people came into the shop – it felt like the whole village came sooner or later – but not in the way they would have, in crowds. Just a few at a time, asking if it was true about the dog bite, about going to Chicago, about Lucas. Gossip travels fast but I think they wanted to hear it from me, so even if they knew they kept asking. And I kept answering – *I don't know where he's gone, probably with the Friendly. Yes, he did like them. No, I can't be sure; all his things were gone.*

I asked some of them about the boy, and they seemed to be conscious of him, but every time they answered they had that same disconnected look. As if they weren't sure what we were talking about even as we talked about it. Some thought his family had sold up and moved away, others that he was being sent to the school in the next village south. Wasn't he one of the Ardval kids? Maybe, maybe not.

I know I never saw him again. With the warmer weather the birds were all migrating back, so it wasn't even as if I could pick one small

Waxwing out of a flock and say, yes, that's probably the Ferryman's son, or the spirit of Low Ferry or whatever he was. I felt ridiculous even thinking of it, though I've seen enough, now, not to swear outright that I know the answer. I'm no less of a skeptic than I ever have been, but maybe I'm a little less arrogant about it than I was.

I wish I could tell him thank-you. Though I'm sure he knows it, wherever he is.

I missed Lucas intensely. I missed his company, and I missed being...special, being chosen. I wished there were things I'd said to him. I wished I could have asked him not to go. But Lucas, for all his reserve, his secret need for love, was also stubborn. Maybe he would have gone anyway, and if he'd stopped to say goodbye I think it would have been irrevocable. At least, with that unsaid between us, nothing was quite so final.

Every evening I closed up the store and went across to the cafe, to waste a few long evening hours in a place where I had to talk with people. I tried not to be alone, and I told myself I was just keeping busy. Everyone says that's healthy, not sulking or brooding. When I was finished at the cafe I'd go back to Dusk Books, work a little if there were books to sort or repairs to make, and then go upstairs for bed. Often I'd pick up *Ancient Games* and read a few pages, but when I did I never got very far before I fell asleep.

I didn't learn much. The words just seemed to wash past me. Still, they were some comfort against the loss.

FOURTEEN

MARJORIE HAD BEEN right, at least, that metaphorical broken hearts are easier to fix than physical ones. All they need are sufficient applications of time. Act normally for long enough, and you actually start to feel that way.

As the days passed I found that I wasn't quite so tired as I had been, and that the yawning pit in my stomach was closing up a little. While days turned to weeks I discovered I could see Nona Harrison shopping with her two babies and I would still think of Lucas, but it didn't send a twinge up under my ribcage like it had at first. It didn't instantly make me worry that he was out there somewhere, struggling to protect himself. I could hear a dog bark and I wouldn't always look to see if it was Nameless. I started to hope the Friendly would make one of their rare summer-runs up to Low Ferry, instead of just missing them, and him.

It was a strange sort of half-life, learning how much I could tolerate. I had no choice, after all, and I at least tried to keep it personal. The only time it ever affected my shop was the occasional night where I'd be up late, having conversations in my head I couldn't stop because there were so many things I wanted to say to him – and a couple of fights I wanted to have. I sometimes overslept the next morning, but nobody seemed bothered if the shop sometimes opened a little late.

Kirchner called me up one morning in March and asked if I'd come down – nothing urgent, but he wanted to see me when I had a moment. Since I had nothing but moments, really, I told him I'd come down as soon as I got my boots on.

"Step on in," he said, holding the door to his office – not his exam room – open for me. "How are you?"

"Pretty good," I said, sitting down in front of the desk. He leaned against the edge rather than sitting on the other side and looked down at me thoughtfully. "I'm hoping I *should* be feeling pretty good."

"I think so, yes," he said. "How's the hand?"

I held up my left hand and waggled the fingers. The bandage I wore was lighter now, just a pad with medical tape to hold it on, and the stitches had all fallen out. "Healing up."

"I'll get you some scar cream before you go," he said.

"But that's not why I'm here, is it?" I asked. He shook his head.

"No. I've finally talked the city hospital into sending your most recent tests out here – it took me a while but I thought I should make sure you hadn't incurred any extra damage."

"I didn't have an attack," I said.

"You mean when you went out to Chicago?"

"Yeah."

"Funny thing about that trip to Chicago," Kirchner said. "In your records, your injury is listed as a human bite wound, not a dog. And it says you were airlifted in with another patient. Who..." He shuffled through some paperwork on his desk, picking a file out of the chaos. "Is also a patient of mine."

"Ah," I said, trying to calculate how much trouble I was in. "Lucas."

He nodded, opening the file and studying it. "A very...unique boy, Lucas. I hope he's well. All of this is by way of saying I know more about what happened than most. Confidentiality, of course, requires me not to share any of this," he added. "Besides, it's not really the point."

I watched him, bewildered now. "What is the point, then?" I asked.

"You say you had no attack when you were bitten."

"That's right."

"Can you tell me when the last time you felt any arrhythmia was?" he asked.

I thought about it. "Not recently."

"How long?"

"I don't know," I said. I did know – but I didn't really want to admit I'd had at least two arrhythmias without telling him. After all, they'd said to expect them...

He looked at me.

"Three months, maybe," I said.

He nodded and got up, walking around his desk and picking up an oversized envelope, which he passed across to me. Still confused, I pulled out the papers inside, the x-ray films, the charts and graphs. It looked to me like gibberish.

"Listen, I don't have a medical degree," I said, spreading them out in front of me.

"Those are the results of tests performed on you when you were in Chicago," he said. "They're not what anyone expected, which is why it took me a while to get them. They had to do some verification that there hadn't been a mix-up."

"Oh," I said in a small voice. I thought, *I should have known better*. For a moment, thinking of the night Lucas had touched my chest to steady my heart, I really believed I might have been cured. But of course belief wasn't for me, a luxury I couldn't have – I needed facts.

"So, six months?" I asked, looking up at Kirchner, a hollow feeling settling in my stomach. Kirchner frowned. "Or three? Should I be in hospice care?"

"What – no!" he said, looking startled. "No, Christopher – sorry, I'm so sorry, that wasn't what I meant at all. You're not in any danger."

I exhaled with relief. "Then what do these say?"

"They say...well, they say they've found nothing," he said, sitting down to face me across the desk.

I blinked at him. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Well, it is, and it isn't. It's perplexing," he explained. "These tests show a perfectly healthy heart. No irregularities, nothing at all wrong with the tissue itself. None of the weakness that we should be seeing, especially after Halloween. Far as they can tell you're a perfectly healthy young man."

"Did they mix up my tests?" I asked.

"That's what I thought, but they assure me they double-checked, hence the delay. And I have to say, having been your doctor for three years...this is your heart, Christopher," he said, reaching over to pick up what looked to me like a blobby, grainy green-and-black photograph of someone's thumb. "Only thing I can think is that maybe you got some hemlock in it when you – went with Lucas to Chicago," he added, giving the words a slight sardonic twist. "But there aren't any known applications of hemlock for heart conditions, so that's basically hoodoo, and I can't explain it. Can you?"

I looked down at my hand, turned it over so that it was palm-up. I didn't even know what to think. I wondered if it was possible to be an atheist and still have a crisis of faith.

"I think I know what happened," I said, after a while.

"Well, you could share it with me," he replied, looking annoyed. I smiled.

"Frankly, I don't think you'd believe me," I told him. "Do you need me to do any more tests?"

"They'd like to see you in the city again, just to confirm some of their findings."

"Immediately?"

"Soon would be better, but that's up to you. If you feel well, Christopher, that's what matters," he told me. "Let me get you that cream, and you can get out of here."

I stopped him with a hand on his arm as he was headed for his supply cabinet.

"Does this...happen to people?" I asked. "I mean, is this documented or anything?"

He shook his head. "When you moved here I did a lot of reading. God knows I'm no heart specialist, but I know just about as much as anyone does about yours. You shouldn't have expected it would go away – you shouldn't now, until you've confirmed your results. If you're healed I won't ask too many questions, but if you're not..." He gave me a regretful look. "You know you'll be lucky to make it another ten years, Christopher. You have to know that."

"Yeah," I said. "Appreciate the honesty, Kirchner."

I let him go, stood there and waited, gripped the tube of scar cream when he pressed it into my hand.

"You all right, son?" he asked. I nodded.

"Fine. Thanks for the news. I'll see what I can do about getting up to the city soon," I said. I put on my coat, stepped out into the cold, and

walked back up the street to Dusk Books. Inside, I took my pulse, fingers pressing lightly against the artery at my throat.

Steady and even. Seventy beats per minute. I put my hand over my heart and could imagine Lucas's hand there under it. A good heart meant I had a choice. I could leave if I wanted, permanently leave. I could go back to Chicago, which I'd missed in my first year in Low Ferry with a desperate longing that had only begun to fade with my second summer in the village.

But...it *had* faded. And I'd already made my decision.

In Chicago, they joke that "Spring'll be on a Tuesday this year," but in Low Ferry Spring comes earlier and stays longer. I promised myself I'd visit the city soon, but it was April before I knew it. I propped my green door open permanently and began using the glass door again. One sunny morning, I borrowed the ladder from the cafe and hauled a bucket of black paint and a brush up the ladder to retouch my sign.

"Hiya, Christopher!" Paula called, as I was carefully going over the curve of the *u* in *Dusk*. "Nice day for painting!"

"Yup," I called back, turning the brush a little to keep it from dripping as I pulled it back. I started on the upright. "Spring's early this year."

"Are you complaining?" she asked, climbing the steps and leaning against the support-pole nearest me.

"Not at all. You must be doing good business."

She laughed. "Yeah, everyone's fixing all the things they've been putting off because of winter."

"Nice work if you can get it. All my customers are out sniffing roses and wandering the fields and stuff." I refreshed the brush and dabbed at a stubborn knot in the wooden sign that never took paint well.

"Tourists'll be in soon enough," she said.

"Don't I know it. Bert just had a whole shipment of antihistamines come in for the city folk."

"I stocked up on tire irons and tent patch kits," she agreed. "What about you?"

"Flower identification guides," I said, absently thumbing away a smear of misplaced paint in one curve of the *s*. "Camping handbooks. Lots of picture books to keep the kids busy."

"And a pretty new coat of paint on your sign," she said, smiling up at me.

"That too," I agreed. "You have to look nice for the city folk."

"You really want to look nice, you'll –"

"– rip out the porch and put in a new one, yeah. Maybe in the summer," I told her. "And I'm going to do it myself. It'll be good."

"What about your heart?" she asked. I carefully applied myself to the fickle angles of the *k*.

"I haven't had an episode in months," I said. "I'm going up to Chicago sometime, but I think the worst of it's past me, you know? I feel better than I ever have."

"Low Ferry worries about you," she said seriously.

The weird thing is, that felt good. No twinge of regret that I was different, no irritation over being handled. Low Ferry worried about me, because I was one of theirs – even if it might be another decade before I wasn't also *the city boy*.

"I know," I answered, climbing down the ladder to shift it over so I wouldn't have to stretch to reach the *s* in *Books*. "And I'm glad. Just...don't worry too much." I gave her a smile. "I'm okay, Paula. Really."

She hugged me, careful not to spill the paint.

"Well, I'm glad," she said. "Now, how much lumber can I get you for that porch?"

What finally sent me to Chicago for those tests the doctors wanted was a phone call to Marjorie, which in turn was spurred by another Low Ferry departure. I'd all but forgotten that Michael and Nolan were leaving in mid-April, so it caught me off-guard when Carmen brought me a plate of pancakes and a mouthful of hot gossip early one warm morning.

"Did you hear yet?" she asked, as I sliced up the pancakes and, to my delight, found two links of sausage underneath them.

"About what?" I said, mouth half-full.

"The boys at the bank?"

I swallowed sharply and cleared my throat. "Nolan and Michael?"

"They ran off last night," she said, leaning forward and whispering, eyes wide.

"I hope they didn't rob the place," I said.

"No, but I hear they cleaned out their bank accounts. Nolan's little sister says they went to Chicago."

"Really," I said innocently.

"Together!" Carmen added, a hint of scandal seeping into her voice.

I admit to a little mischief. After the last few months, I felt I was owed that much. "Well, it's better to travel in pairs."

"No! Like, *together*."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Is that so. I suppose I can see why they'd run off, then."

"You mean aside from Michael's dad throwing him out of the house?"

"Well, this just gets more and more operatic. Did he really?"

"That's what I hear."

"What do you think of it?" I asked, honestly curious. She glanced at me, frowned, and looked out the window nearby.

"Some people are meant for the city, I guess," she said. "But we look after our own folk, don't we?"

"That we do," I replied.

"So...things're changing. Maybe they just change here a little slower." She grinned. "Says something that Charles is fit to be tied at Michael's dad, huh?"

"Is he going to excommunicate him?" I winked.

"Well, he's right out of the choir and the Farmer's Association are thinking of taking measures too. Everyone sort of thinks it isn't really right, what he did to his boy."

I nodded. "What about Nolan's parents?"

"Haven't heard yet. If they don't know now, they will soon. Nolan's mother's liable to go down to Chicago with a shotgun and haul 'em both back, though, don't you think?"

"I hope not," I said.

"You liked those boys," she said – a half-question.

"I still do," I replied. She twisted her fingers together, looking from the window to me and back to the window.

"If you could go back to Chicago, would you?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"Just wondering." She tried to act casual, and mostly failed.

"Chicago wasn't perfect either," I told her.

"What if...you know..." she prompted, and I frowned.

"What if what?"

"What if Lucas came back?"

I stared at her, openmouthed.

She gave me a dry look. "Wasn't exactly a secret, Christopher. Plenty of people worried for your state of mind after he took off."

"I..." I said, blinking. "Low Ferry's my home, Carmen. Whether he's here or not. And if he did come back – this'd still be my home."

"Good," she said, all smiles now. "And you know Charles would tan anyone who came after you, and I'd be back of Charles with a baseball bat unless the Harrisons beat me to it."

"Comforting," I said. "But I don't think it's needed. You've got a line, by the way," I added, pointing to the cafe, and she swore and yelled "Bye Christopher!" as she ran out the door.

I sat at my counter and thought about it for a while: what she'd said of Michael and Nolan's flight, how she'd asked if I would go too, what it meant to say I was putting down roots here, to say it to someone in Low Ferry who mattered to me.

Marjorie answered almost before I realized I had the phone in my hand. Her cheerful "Eighth Rare Books, Marj speaking" startled me, and I stuttered over my hello.

"Christopher," she said. "Your ears must have been burning, I was just saying to someone that I should call you."

"Oh yes? What can Dusk Books do for you today?" I inquired.

"Nothing at all, as you well know. No, I was just saying I wanted to invite you up to Chicago soon," she said. I heard her pencil tapping on the newspaper in the background.

"Well, I thought I might come up, actually. Play tourist a little, that kind of thing. My doctor wants me to have my heart looked at."

"Oh?" Her voice turned concerned. "Have you had another attack?"

"No – not for a long time, actually. That's why they want to take a look. It'll depend on when I can get into the hospital to get seen, but I'll swing by when I'm in town. How does that sound?"

She hesitated then, which I didn't think much of at the time. I assumed she was checking her calendar, or ringing up a patron.

"Come when you can," she said finally. "But I'd like to see you soon."

"You too, Marj. Look after yourself."

"Same back. Bye, Christopher."

"Bye," I said, and hung up. Then I went to look for the phone number of the hospital, to set up an appointment so that they could sample and study my healthy heart for as long as they wanted.

There's really no good way to get to the El from Union Station, the central train terminal in Chicago. Somewhere between laying out the El and situating the ordinary train tracks, they forgot about the Chicago river. The nearest El station is over the river and three or four blocks northeast, further if you're trying to get to the Red Line. Still, when it's not freezing or snowing it's a nice walk. The river's pretty when it thaws.

I took the El south when I reached it, down to the hospital where they received me with a mixture of skepticism and interest. Heart troubles are tricky; there are lots of ways for them to hide, and from the thoroughness of the tests they were determine to look in every dark corner of my cardiovascular system. I spent the night there, aching from all the various invasions, and was finally kicked out the next afternoon with the assurance that Kirchner would get my results in a couple of days. They asked if I wanted to go over them with someone, but I didn't see the point. The looks on their faces told me all I needed to know. Science, I've learned, is not perplexed by the unknown, but magic tends to throw it for a loop.

I was tired by the time they released me and desperately in need of dinner and intelligent conversation, so I made for Eighth Rare Books with speed. Eighth Street wasn't far by El, and as I came down to street level from the train I joined the loose crowds of students emerging from the last classes of the day at the nearby colleges. I stood back and let them go ahead, well aware that this was Marjorie's busy spell and she'd have more time for me once she'd settled her patrons a little.

There was a coffee shop across the street, one of the few holdouts against the chain-store invasions, and I bought a cup of tea to kill a little time. I was about to grab a newspaper and settle in somewhere when I glanced up at the wide plate-glass window next to the entrance to Eighth Rare Books – and froze.

Lucas was standing in the window. The same shaggy light-brown hair, the same sharp and ordinary profile. It was a shock to see him, and then when I'd recovered from that came the second surprise.

He was speaking to a young woman, hands moving quickly, sketching out shapes in the air. His face lit up as he explained something to her. She was listening, smiling, responding occasionally. Even as I stared, she brushed her hair out of her eyes in a sort of coy flip that made it very clear her question, while perhaps important, was designed to get something more than just information out of him. She was flirting with him, and he – well, perhaps he wasn't openly flirting back, but he certainly wasn't running away.

I watched him pick up a book, hand it to her, and send her off with a broad, charming smile. Then he busied himself at a display next to the window, frowning in concentration as he rearranged the books to his satisfaction.

I must have stood there in the coffee shop for a good five minutes, staring at him, getting in the way of the other patrons and going totally unnoticed by Lucas across the street. The last time I'd stood on Eighth Street I'd been in muddy clothing, my hand bandaged up in a large white paw, Lucas next to me carrying our dinner in a plastic bag.

Eventually the heat from my tea started to bleed through the doubled paper cup and make my hand uncomfortably warm. I glanced down at it, threw it still-full into a trash can, crossed the street, and pushed through the door into the warm dust-and-paper smell of Eighth Rare Books. Marj was ringing someone up and missed me amid the crowd near the entrance. I stopped and looked around.

The shelves were the same, but hanging on the end of each row were two or three easily recognizable masks. Lucas's masks – animals, grotesques, dazzling paste-jeweled Mardi Gras faces, and even a couple of Dottores. I crept around one shelf and read the little placard pinned underneath – *For Sale by Artist, Inquire At Front Desk*.

I circled, crossed at the back of the shop, and came around behind Lucas where he was fussing with another book display.

"Excuse me, do you work here?" I asked.

"I do, can I hel..." He trailed off as he turned, and the ready help-the-customer smile on his face dropped into surprise. "Christopher!"

"See, I'm looking for a book," I said casually. "But this store is kind of small and it doesn't even have a coffee stand in it –"

"Oh, the hell with you," he laughed, and wrapped me in a warm, tight hug. He still smelled like plaster. "My god. It's good to see you, Christopher."

"You too," I replied, stepping back. "You look good, Lucas."

"*You* look exhausted. Did you come up on the train?"

"Yesterday. I was at the hospital," I added, and he looked grim.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. No, honest truth," I added, when he opened his mouth.

"Well – not fine. But physically I'm okay."

"Not fine?" he asked. I looked at him.

"It's good to see you," I said, by way of answer. He cut his eyes away and nodded.

"You have every right to be angry," he said, but then he turned back to me and the faint hint I'd had of his usual reticence was gone. "I'll make it up to you. I'm sorry I disappeared. I'm glad you came up to Chicago." He gave me a wide, engaging grin, so unlike anything I'd ever seen from Lucas that I found myself grinning back. "Did Marjorie –"

"Christopher!" Marjorie shouted from behind me, interrupting. I turned to look her way. "Stop harassing my staff!"

"But I need a book!" I shouted back, well-aware that everyone in the store was staring at us. Enjoying it, actually.

"You need your ears boxed, come over here," she ordered.

I raised an eyebrow at Lucas and crossed the floor, bending to hug her before dropping into the chair next to her desk. Lucas leaned against the side, beaming at both of us.

"You, layabout, back to work," she said, and he shot her an indulgent look.

"Find me before you leave," he said to me, and wandered off to interrupt a pair of students browsing the history textbooks.

"This is a nice surprise," Marjorie continued, offering me her half-finished crossword puzzle. "Forty-five across. You never tell me when you're coming to town."

"Mm," I said, writing in the answer and handing it back. "I didn't want you fussing over me at the hospital. Next time I'll give you a warning."

"Oh – how did that go?" she asked.

"Pretty well. I think I baffled them," I said with a grin. "And you, Marj, you're in trouble."

"For what!" she asked, indignant already.

"You didn't tell me Lucas was here."

"Well, I did tell you to come see me," she said. "He didn't seem like he wanted you to know, and it's not my business I'm sure."

"Everything's your business. That's why we get along so well," I scolded.

"Besides, it was good to give him some settling-in time," she continued, ignoring me.

"How long's he been here, Marj?"

"A little over a week. Showed up here with a change of clothes and a box of masks. I understand some of your Travelers dropped him off."

"Good people."

"No doubt. You can ask him where they took him before he stepped off in Chicago; he hasn't told me much about it. He traded on his friendship with you and coerced me into hiring him."

I laughed. "Another protégé? You're starting a collection."

"I needed an assistant. I can't run this place on my own forever, and you won't come back, so. Someone's got to show you youngsters how it's

done. He's a good boy, Christopher," she told me, as if I weren't aware of the fact. "Much more charming when he's not recently out of the hospital. Besides, I thought someone ought to keep an eye on him."

"I'm glad he found you again."

"So am I, he's very useful. All the patrons adore him."

"Has he seen his parents?" I asked. She frowned.

"I'm not his keeper, Christopher. Ask him."

"I plan to. In fact, I'm about to take him to dinner. Do you mind?"

"If you can tear him away," she said, tipping her head at Lucas. He was leaning over someone's shoulder at one of the desks at the front of the shop, pointing out a passage in a book.

"Lucas," I called. People all over the shop turned to look my way, but I was only watching Lucas, whose head shot up. I felt a little smug when he smiled at the customer he was helping and excused himself.

"Had your gossip?" he asked, cheerfully.

"Just a bit," I said. "How's Gwen?"

He ducked his head a little – that was more like the Lucas I knew. "She's fine. They all say hello."

"Good," I said, standing up. "Come on, Marjorie's giving you the evening off."

He looked to her for confirmation, then turned and followed me towards the door. Chicago was chilly, but not quite heavy-coat weather; he took his old tan jacket off a hook near the door of the shop and shrugged into it as we stepped outside.

"Where are we going?" he asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Dinner," I said. "Know anywhere good around here?"

"Yeah, this way." He guided me north, along the wide greenbelt that skirts Lake Michigan all the way through downtown. There were joggers and tourists out, people walking their dogs, and plenty of children playing near the weathered old circle of Buckingham Fountain. He turned east when we reached the fountain's plaza. I shot him a questioning look, but he just kept walking, nodding at a hot-dog vendor in the corner.

"I did tell you I was paying, didn't I?" I said, as we made our way to the greasy little stand.

"I like it here. Two, everything," he told the man behind the cart, and I passed over a ridiculous amount of money for two hot dogs.

"You know this is a tourist trap," I remarked, accepting my hot dog. The vendor gave me a dirty look.

"Nothing wrong with tourism," Lucas answered. "You see things you wouldn't normally notice. Come on, over here."

We walked and ate until we'd almost passed through the narrow park. To the east, across the street, Lake Michigan glittered in the afternoon light. I waited patiently until he took a breath.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry, but I didn't know how," he said. "I hope you didn't worry."

"Well, I did, but I figured you ran off with the Friendly. I knew they'd look after you," I answered.

"They let me come along. Just for a few weeks. I wanted to come back to Chicago but...they take the slow path, you know how they are."

"I know they never come to the city," I said.

"I paid them to bring me here. Gwen and Tommy dropped me off at the fountain," he said, nodding back towards it. "Gave them nearly all my masks, except for what Marjorie's got up in the shop."

"Pretty steep fee."

"Worth it. Anyway, I can always make more masks." He hesitated, then forged ahead. "Marjorie's letting me stay with her, until I can get a place. I put up a workshop in her garage. I'm doing an installation next month at a gallery on the north side."

"I'm glad to hear it." I licked mustard off my fingers. "I missed you, Lucas. You could have left a note."

"I left you my book," he said.

"Didn't exactly explain it though, did you?" I replied. "Just my name. Was I supposed to keep it? Was it proof you weren't coming back?"

He frowned. "No – it was a gift. For you. Because I didn't need it anymore, and I thought...maybe it would help you. When you thought you didn't see enough wonder in the world. God knows I can't show you any."

"Why do you say that?" I asked. He looked out over the lake, the wind ruffling his hair.

"When someone gives you a gift, and you throw it away, you don't usually get it back," he said. "I earned the power I had in Low Ferry but it was also something...special. Something people don't get very often. I didn't appreciate it. Just not using it would have been one thing, but I treated it – myself – like I wasn't enough for the world. Life teaches hard lessons." He fell silent, watching the cars move back and forth, watching the shallow waves break on the concrete barriers beyond.

"What happened to Nameless?" I asked softly. He snorted.

"It sounds stupid," he said. "I buried him. Out in the field below The Pines, before I left to go with the Friendly. It wouldn't work anymore, you know. None of it. Not the rain, not the snow, not the mask. I threw away all that power, and I got my life saved..." A shy grin for me. "But that's all I got back."

"That's a hell of a lot, Lucas. Your life."

"I didn't used to think so," he said thoughtfully. "Things are different now."

"That boy you used to tutor – " I started, but I couldn't figure out how to say what I meant.

"Is he angry?" Lucas asked.

"No, he disappeared. About the same time you did."

"Disappeared?" he asked, looking faintly worried.

"Nobody knows where he went. I don't think he was...I don't know what he was, but he wasn't normal. Have you ever noticed you can't think of his name?"

Lucas frowned, brow furrowing. I watched as a familiar sequence of emotions passed over his face – concentration, confusion, forgetfulness.

"What were we talking about?" he asked, after a while. I shook my head.

"Doesn't matter," I said, though it did. It mattered that I was the only one with a clear memory. Which meant that the boy had not necessarily been there – the Waxwing had not always stood guard over the door – for the sake of Lucas. Some part of that magic had been mine. "Have you seen your parents, since you came back?" I asked carefully.

He looked rueful. "Couple of days ago. They tried to talk me into a clinic until I told them Marjorie gave me a job. Now I'm on an installment plan for paying off the hospital bill."

"Pulling no punches," I said.

"Must learn responsibility," he answered, managing to look amused and regretful at once. He glanced down and kicked against the cement a little. "So, is this how it's going to be? Polite and friendly?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what you want, Lucas, except that you wanted to run away from me."

"No – no," he said, giving me a hurt look. "That wasn't what I wanted. Christopher, you don't think that."

"You left," I said. "You didn't tell me why, you didn't call me when you got to Chicago. Marjorie thought you didn't want me to know. If you want me to go back to –"

"I found the mask you made," he blurted, words running together. I stared at him. "You didn't even give it to me yourself. You didn't wait until I woke up."

"I...didn't know how," I said, startled.

"Welcome to the club," he replied. "I left because I was *scared*. Christopher, do you even understand what you did?"

"I thought so," I said. "But then you left, so I didn't know. I didn't even know you'd found it. Half the time I thought I was crazy."

"I'm so sorry," he said, and there was real regret in his eyes.

"What did you do with it, anyway?" I asked. Slowly his face transformed – sadness into a kind of secretive joy.

"What do you think?" he asked, and reached up to the back of his head. I thought he was scratching it for a minute, and then he cupped his other hand carefully over his face. When he brought it down again there was that same shimmer in the air, a sense that the whole world was focused on the empty space in his palm.

I looked up from the mask and saw his shoulders slumping inwards, his head automatically dipping, eyes now trained anywhere but my face.

"Your heart," he said, which I hadn't been expecting. I looked down at his hand, where a mask no-one could see dangled by invisible ribbons. "It's healed, isn't it."

"You should know," I said. "You did it."

"I thought I might have, but I couldn't be sure. So...I gave you this thing, health, and the right to choose – even if you chose Low Ferry instead of Chicago," he said. "And you gave me this. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm...still me, but I'm not afraid."

"So why run?" I asked gently.

"I wasn't sure you'd want to see me the way I am now. You liked me the way I was."

I almost laughed – would have, if I hadn't spent the last two months grieving a loss, only to find it restored to me. "I like you, Lucas," I said. "I always have. It doesn't matter to me."

"Good. Because then I don't have to wear it around you." He lifted his face a little, into the wind. "Would you come back to the city? No, you won't, will you," he said, before I could tell him.

"Low Ferry is my home," I told him. "The city can't give me anything I want, not anymore."

"Nothing?" he asked, still staring at the lake.

"Well. I'd like to see that gallery show of yours," I ventured. "And hear what you did with the Friendly."

"Yeah?" A faint smile.

"Yeah. And you know me..." I grinned at him. "If I had a good reason to visit the city, it wouldn't be any trouble to come up a few times a month. If you wanted to see me, say."

"I do," he said quickly. "Marjorie too."

A couple of kids ran past through the park, trailed by a panting mutt of a dog, all wispy terrier hair and lolling tongue. Behind us, the fountain's central jet began to plume.

"I love the city," Lucas said. "I love everything about it. I fit here. So...thank you."

"My pleasure," I said, and meant it. How often do you get the chance to give someone a city? "Lucas...I have a train to catch soon. I need to go home. I'll come back, though. I'll stay longer next time."

He smiled and finally, finally looked at me without the mask.

"I'll meet you at the station," he said. "We can take the El from there. I can show you the gallery I'm going to be in."

"That sounds fine. And – don't wear the mask," I added. "Not with me."

His free hand brushed my wrist, tracing down over the scar on my left hand. His fingers, tangled up in mine, had paper-cuts on them from Marj's books, paint and plaster under the fingernails from his masks.

"Nothing's perfect," I said. "Doesn't mean it can't be good. Right?"

He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it, lips brushing the thin raised scars – then turned and kissed me, like some kind of benediction.

"Come back quickly," he said.

"Of course," I replied.

Darkness fell when I was still on the train, halfway between Chicago and Low Ferry. Outside the window the moon was rising. The stars were coming out bright and clear, thousands more than you can see in the overshadowing constellation of the city lights.

Nameless

An hour ahead of me lay home: my shop, my books, the village. In a week there would be Lucas waiting for me in Chicago, maskless, with a shy smile and a whole city to give back to me. He could come to Low Ferry again sometime, too – everyone would like to see him. He'd get to see summer in my little town.

Happy endings are pretty rare, but I think that's because things don't really end very often. Time moves you forward regardless, and all you can do is choose where it takes you. There were plenty of things to worry about between Low Ferry and Chicago, but there wasn't anything I could do about them on the train. So, why bother?

No endings, then – just happy moments, in-between places where life is bright and good. That was a lesson I had from Lucas, if I hadn't already had it from Nameless.

I've always liked trains, anyway.

I settled lower in the seat, closed my eyes, and slept.

POSTSCRIPT:
Talking With Twenty Five Hundred

You have to want to write, I say, not to want to be a writer.

– Alex Haley

"INCUNABULA" IS THE term for, among other things, a book printed in the infancy of the printing press. It is perhaps most well known to readers of the late great Dorothy Sayers, whose hero Lord Peter was a collector of incunabulae. The word is fascinating to me: it implies a birth, an incubation, a step from the restriction of knowledge in enclosed communities to its expansion into the wider world. Books are power, and incunabulae symbolize a transfer of power to the masses.

In the summer of 2008 I was playing with the concept of the "next incunabulae," the free dissemination of information on the internet. I was writing a story in which several characters are dropped into The Library, a super-library in the fifty-first century, courtesy of *Doctor Who*. One of the characters was about to go exploring and, being a lover of books, he wanted to look at new turning-points for literature:

"Fine," Nicholas says. "If you need me I'll be in Extribula."

"Exwhat?" Donna asks.

"Look it up!" Nicholas calls over his shoulder, wondering actually how many volumes the OED now runs to.

Extribulum – *ex*, out from; *tribulum*, a machine. The opposite of the incunabula. Works that exist in electrical form, at the cusp of the rise of the e-published book.

At the time I was just messing around, not to mention using some truly degenerate dog-Latin, but it did seem useful. It became a handy term and acquired a definition, as these things do. Extribulum, plural extribula, are books published first on the internet – not books merely created on a computer, but books whose first printing was entirely digital and which were only afterwards printed in hardcopy ("dead tree") format.

About eight months after the term *extribulum* was coined, I dusted off an old manuscript I'd written years before, gave it a brush-up, and decided to post it for critique with the intent to eventually self-publish. I have some unique advantages over the average online talking-head, in that

I have a wide readership: according to my stats, about 2500 people read my online journal regularly, which means I am capable of asking for the thoughts of a diverse public without the fetters placed on a published writer. A professional, especially an established one, usually trusts an editor or a very small group of readers, and only gets to hear criticism from a wide and self-selecting readership after the book has been printed. Which must be very frustrating, really.

Giving literature away for free and then expecting and embracing reader-criticism is not a tradition of any kind. It is not something that is *done* in the literary world. Why should it be? Most people who sell literature for a living can't afford to give it away for free. And, to be honest, it's not like I planned what happened when I began posting *Nameless*. I just I wanted to share a story and see what everyone thought of it, and instead I opened a dialogue about structure and interpretation and the author-reader relationship, about how to rewrite a book based on the thoughts and feelings of readers. Throughout the process, people said to me, *Isn't this weird? Have you ever seen anything like this?* and I haven't.

What we did when *Nameless* first went up wouldn't even have been possible in the days before an easily-accessible internet, or if it was possible would have been heinously expensive. I don't know that a published writer has ever tried putting a "finished" work in front of the public and saying, "Tell me what's wrong." Very few writers have ever even attempted to overhaul a published work because of public criticism. Stephen King released an extended-cut of *The Stand*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley rewrote a book she published twenty years before, but those are rare exceptions and at any rate not quite the same. George Lucas may have revamped *Star Wars*, but I'm pretty sure he did it over the protest of his fans, not in response to them.

With *Nameless*, I said from the start that this was a book I intended to publish, a completed book that I wanted feedback on. This gave people a mindset with which to approach it: they treated it as a "real" book they wanted to discuss as if they were reading it at a book club. They pulled no punches, and this is a better book because of it. I'm a measurably better writer than I was at the start.

Chapter by chapter, people told me what was wrong – sometimes a typo, sometimes a major structural issue. I learned what I was doing right, which is a heady sensation, but more importantly I learned where my weak points were. My dialogue to action ratio was off, my characterization sometimes suffered from a lack of depth, and my cryptic arcs weren't always sharp enough to draw a reader in from the start. The importance of the first chapter in a book has never been lost on me, but now I understand how to build something immediate. Not everyone is going to trust a writer long enough to get to the good stuff. A relationship with the reader has to be forged early.

An author can't accept all criticism wholesale, of course. You have to pick and choose, but your readers tend to know which way the wind is blowing. If a dozen people notice a single flaw, then it's not a single flaw.

It's a problem that needs to be fixed. There was some give and take, some debate, but overwhelmingly the advice was good advice because it was readers giving it. Readers know what throws them out of a book, or why they don't trust a character or theme.

It requires a great deal of self-possession to undergo this process and come out sane. Even if the majority of your readers like your book, you are never going to please all of the people all of the time. If you try, you'll end up with a very bad book. Still, you still need to appreciate all viewpoints. You might not act on to what someone says, but you need to take it into account, process it, and thank them for it. They are offering you their honest opinion, which is a precious thing to a writer.

All of this requires control on the part of the writer: controlling a knee-jerk "but you don't get it!" reaction, controlling impulses brought on by reader-response, learning how to direct and manipulate a readership that is responding in real-time. I don't mean manipulation in a negative sense at all, but rather in the sense of guiding your readers along the path you've chosen, accounting for their unexpected reactions as you go. Every night I read over the notes I'd been given that day and prepped the next day's chapter of *Nameless* for "publication." Most nights I found myself rewriting portions of the new chapter or adding portions that had not been there before, because the story needed them. The readers needed them in order to follow where I was leading.

I have come to believe that control is the most basic tool in a writer's skill set, but not just control of the prose. It seems to me that, as the gap between writer and reader widens, sensible *self*-control becomes increasingly uncommon. Some writers have become infamous for refusing to accept critique from their readers. Others have rejected the internet, as a whole, because it is so uncontrolled. I theorize that they don't have the patience or understanding to accept that the burden of responsibility for reader reaction is on them now. I theorize that they fear losing the illusion of control they have had because they were insulated from the wild, organic humanity of the digital community.

But really, who knows? What I know is that I have accomplished more by exerting control over my shallower impulses, both towards my readers and towards my writing, than I ever accomplished under the assumption that because I was a Writer I knew everything.

Ironically, it's hard to articulate how I feel about what happened with *Nameless*. People worried sometimes that I was hurt, that the criticism was crushing, but I didn't feel that way at all. I was too overwhelmed by what was happening, by what a unique experience it was for me. I felt like I was watching an extribulum come to life. *Nameless* was a book published online, destined for print but open to examination and feedback prior to its final incarnation. I was looking at another inching step into the future of publishing, where a real dialogue could go on between a writer and a reader and that dialogue, rather than a writer's monologue, could be what went into the final print.

We beta-tested my book. How weird and wonderful is that?

Regardless of the quality of the narrative, regardless of whether you like me or like this book, *Nameless* is an extribulum. Twenty-five years ago there was no possibility for it to exist. It is a symbol of a new thing, the incunabula of the internet age. This book was written and typeset by the author and mass-produced by an online self-publishing website, but the text is the result of people from all over the world reading and responding and communicating, with their author and with each other.

I highly doubt *Nameless* will set the world on fire, but it is one small part of the future: someday an extribulum will change our entire human experience purely because it will be available on a scale "dead-tree" publishers only *dream* of. I'm not afraid; I hope I'm there to see it happen.

Nameless is what you get when one person talks and twenty-five hundred people listen...and then talk back.

I could not be more proud.

