

Once upon a time in New York City...

there lived a girl
with skin as white as snow
and hair as black as night.

Her name was Blanche Brier
and she was loved by a Bear.

But one lonely summer,
when he was far away,
a jealous Queen took a
sudden dislike to her,
a dislike that was
inexplicable and violent.

And soon the girl found herself
alone
and running for her life.

Black as Night

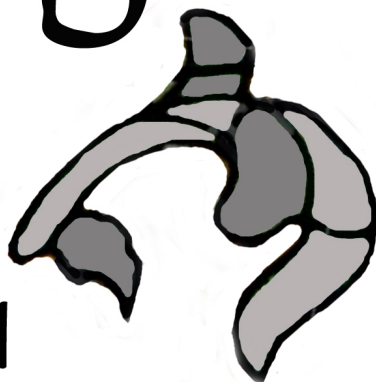
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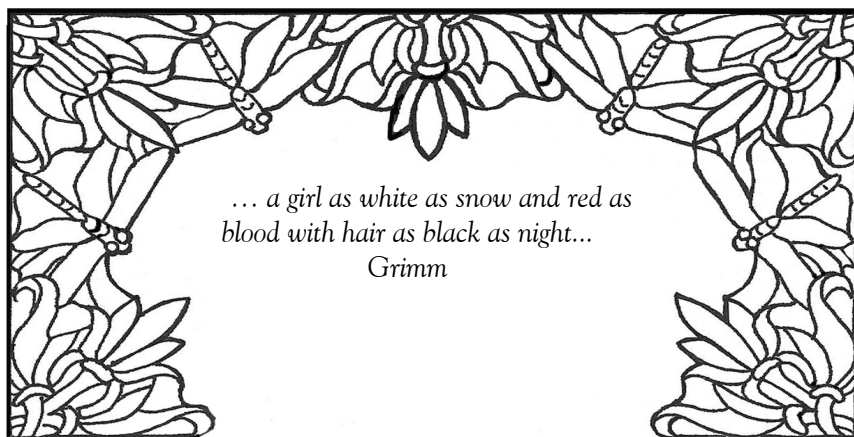
tale

retold

by regina doman



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Chapter One



It was night.

In most places, Night is a time for sleep, calm, and mystery. But not in New York City.

In the tangled thicket of the urban landscape, millions of streetlights, arcade signs, neon tubes, and incandescent bulbs conspired every evening to murder the night, shedding their unearthly glow. The glow grew stronger as Night slipped in with her gray wool cloak and dropped it softly over the streets and subways.

The subway train rushed through the hot summer night like a sleepless dragon bellowing and hurtling along its metal track towards West 55th Street in the Bronx. Two youths slipped like phantoms from car to car, casing each jointed metal compartment for easy cash.

The older, fair-haired one first noticed the girl through the door window in the swaying car ahead. She looked lost, frozen. She didn't see the two vicious denizens of the Night, but they saw her—and they saw the purse clutched tightly in her lap.

This was it. This girl with her short, ragged, black hair, white skin, and eyes red from crying was their hit. She was alone in the car, staring at the floor, apparently not aware of anything around her. It was after three in the morning. As if on cue, the boys both checked over their shoulders to see if they were watched, grinned at each other and pushed through the separating door.

She looked up when they came in and she saw. At once. What they intended to do.

Her cry of surprise and fear was lost as the rocking car made a rough and deafening turn on the tracks. She stumbled to her feet, prepared to run. But there was nowhere to go.

It was too easy. They were fifteen and nineteen years old, and used to violence. The bleach-blond nineteen-year-old shoved her onto the car's dirty linoleum floor. She fell, her pale yellow flowered print dress splatting under her like a smashed flower. The younger, bigger one, with the earring, grabbed her bag.

The girl didn't seem to care. She scrambled to her feet, resurrecting quickly and silently, and jumped for the emergency cord. He lunged after her and knocked her against the seats. A wail and moaning seemed to break forth from the beast's belly, as the tunnel walls suddenly widened out. The girl screamed and shoved him away from her. He fell onto the seats and banged his head against the edge.

It was time to move. The train was coming to a halt, a station careened towards them. The bigger boy stuffed the purse inside his light jacket and burst through the doors as they opened. He leapt to the deserted platform, a slab of concrete in a burned-out neighborhood. The fair-haired boy was still staggering to get to his feet, furious. The girl dodged around him, and ran out of the dragon's belly, an escaping yellow flame. Surprisingly, she didn't stop to call for help. She just ran.

That was odd. Cursing, the fair-haired one regained his feet, looked after her and felt his blood stir to the chase. He sped across the platform after the fleeing form of the girl.

Greasy streetlights looming above in the humid night. Trash crushed in all the crevices of the broken concrete. No one around in the artificial light pools. Nocturnal creatures or nocturnal scavengers moving from shadow to shadow. A bleach-blond boy easily trailing a yellow cowslip girl, whose footsteps hammered to the beat of the cacophony of hidden nightlife, looking for someplace to hide.

His big pal joined him from out of a narrow alley, grabbing at his arm. "What're you doing?" he hissed, jogging to keep up with the other's smooth lope.

The fair one didn't even bother to answer, his eyes fixed on his prey. The girl had paused at a corner and looked around, breathing hard. She saw them, and darted down another street.

"She's not from this part of town. She's gotta be lost. She can't go anywhere," the fair one said, by way of explanation. He ran on, pulse racing. His companion followed.

Down beneath the train tracks, the dragon's skeletal feet, she ran, crossing a street, in and out of crosshatched shadows. Past a string of closed

and barred and spray-painted stores—pawnshops, long-distance phone places, drug stores—

She had to be slowing down soon, the fair one figured. Soon she would be too disoriented and too beat to go much further...

Unexpectedly she halted and took off in a new direction, as though inspired.

They could see the girl was staggering now. A faint flickering figure with not much left in her... The two boys ran on, feeling sure that they were closing in. They wore sneakers, were used to racing for their lives.

Then the fair boy saw the church. It loomed in front of them, a gray-slabbed old mausoleum of heavy oak doors and a huge round window like a black spoked wheel that seemed to float ominously above their heads. The fair boy actually paused, but his pal, now intent on their goal, jerked him onward.

Ahead, the girl was running, stumbling, yanking at the neckline of her dress. She was hurrying up the steps; she was jamming something into the lock...

The fair one had seen that move before, a lady they had mugged shoving her car keys into the lock of her car, leaping in to make an escape...But this was a *church*, he thought. What sort of girl kept keys to a church?

Incredulous, the boys watched the door open, swallow the yellow and white and black figure, and close, like a mouth obstinately shut.

Cursing out of sheer disbelief, the boys jumped up the steps and seized the door handles. Locked. Neither door would budge.

"She's gone."

They hardly knew which had spoken. It was like a drug haze. Around them, the City continued in its dead sounds of machines and boom-box music sliding in and out of the streets, in and out of consciousness.

The bleach blond stared and finally turned to his friend. "Did we just follow a girl out here?"

"We swiped her purse." He tugged at the zipper of his jacket.

The church stood silent before them, betraying no secrets. No echo issued from beyond its walls.

At last, the older boy shook his head. "Some kind of weird. Like it never happened."

"But it did. Lookit!" the big boy had fished out the purse, unzipped it, and thrust it at his older companion.

A mass of hundred dollar bills stared out at them. Gingerly, the fair-headed boy touched one as though it were enchanted. But it was real, thick green and white paper beneath his fingers. This was something they understood.

They didn't know how or why a girl would come to be carrying thousands of dollars of cash in her purse in a subway late at night. And they didn't care. The important thing now was to move quickly, before she could call the police. Once again, in unspoken unity, the boys wheeled away from the door—their astonishment already forgotten in the hurry to get to a safe place to gloat over their treasure.

The church stood a silent soldier against the slow destruction of the night.

II

Brother Leon whistled softly to himself as he strode down the corridor in his bare feet after morning Mass. It was Sunday, and today it was his job to make breakfast for the six other hungry men in the friary, who would soon be finishing morning prayers.

Swinging the heavy knotted rope he wore as a belt, he loped into the kitchen with an easy stride and swung the refrigerator door open. Out on one hand came a box of cracked eggs, on the other dangled half a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Sliding them all onto the chipped linoleum counter, he flipped open the freezer door and flung out a squashed frozen orange juice, catching it in his other hand as though it were a basketball.

Still whistling that morning's hymn, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," he twisted the dial on the stove to "medium-high," slid the frying pan from the shelf to the burner, daubed in a hunk of margarine, and began cracking the eggs into the soon-sizzling pan and tossing the shells into the sink in syncopation, so that the hymn sounded like the bridge to a rap song.

Brother Leon's eyes and hair were dark; his skin was a warm brown, the result of a happy marriage between a Puerto Rican and a Jamaican. He was short and wiry. Like the other friars of the community, he kept his head shaved Marine recruit style, but he wasn't able to match their full beards. As he scratched the itchy fuzz that was all the beard he had been able to grow, he discarded the last shell, chucking it over his shoulder from halfway across the kitchen as he went to get a lid. He knew, without looking, that he had made it. Years of basketball gave you that sort of intuition.

Speeding up the rhythm of his whistling, he scrambled the eggs till they were fluffy. Stove off. Lid on top. Pam! OJ in the pitcher, water on. Stir. Sloshing orange juice and water until the liquid deepened to a golden whirlpool, he ended the vigorous exercise with a tap of the wooden spoon on the counter and tossed it over his back into the sink. This time, his throw was off. He heard the spoon glance from the counter to the floor and sighed.

Shrugging, he headed for the refectory with the breakfast. From the corridor came the slap of bare feet and sandals and the vocalizations of six men hoping for coffee and eggs.

Coffee! Leon slapped himself on the forehead as he set down the food on the pine plywood refectory table. *Leon, how could you forget again?* Groaning, he turned back to the kitchen, only to see the ancient coffee maker sputtering out a stream of brown brew. Brother Matt, glass coffeepot in hand, was gathering the precious drops in a mug.

"What the—" Leon shook his head, bewildered. "I could have sworn I forgot to do that!"

"You did," Matt set the pot down calmly, smiling through his curly blond beard. "Typically, morning people like yourself who don't need a drug to wake them up forget about making coffee."

"Whew!" Leon heaved a sigh. "Well, thanks—you saved my skin. If I forget again, I'm sure Father Francis is going to write flogging back into the Franciscan constitutions!"

"Probably," Matt grinned, his blue eyes snapping. The head of the order was notably short-tempered where his coffee was concerned. "I have to admit there was a less charitable motive behind my making coffee for you."

"What's that?" Leon rummaged through the drawers, piling spoons, forks, knives, and plates into his arms.

"There are two kinds of religious brothers in the world, Leon. Those who can make coffee, and those who can't. I'm sorry to have to tell you which category you're in."

"Hey, I haven't attained my earthly perfection yet. That's why I'm here. But thanks all the same, Matt."

"Any time," Brother Matt looped his cord over his arm and carried the coffeepot and his own share out to the refectory where the other brothers were taking their seats.

Leon halted in the doorway as Father Bernard, the lithe dark-haired friar who was the resident mystic, murmured a blessing over the meal and the cook. After the fervent "Amens," Leon stepped forward and began hurriedly to pass out the plates and silverware.

"Sorry, there's no toast yet," he apologized. "It's coming."

"Who has the margarine?" Father Francis peered round the table over his coffee cup, his bushy grey brows twitching.

"Coming!" Leon quickly left and re-emerged with a plate piled high with toasted bread and the tub of cheap margarine. The eggs had already mostly vanished from the pan, and the toast quickly dispersed throughout the gray-robed crowd. Leon took one last look around and then pulled back his chair with a sigh. There was a sizable garbage bag on it.

"What's this?"

Brother Herman, a portly older friar who looked like Santa Claus on vacation, wrinkled his forehead. "I forgot. Clothes donation. I meant to bring it to storage last night. Here, I'll get it."

Despite the twitches of irritation that ran through his innards, Leon heaved the bag on to his shoulders. "Naah, I'll get it. I'm up." Sighing inwardly, he heaved the bag on to his shoulders and went out the door.

Religious life was filled with little frustrations like this one. You had to learn to live with the shortcomings of other men. *Besides*, he reflected as he ambled down the corridor, *this can be my penance for forgetting to make coffee again.*

Ah, who said that loving your neighbor was easy, anyhow? He swung into the small hallway that connected their house, an old rectory, with the church. The temporary clothes storage room was the vestibule of old St. Lawrence Church. It was packed with garbage bags stuffed with coats, shoes, socks, and underwear that generous families from six parishes had donated to the homeless. *Someone ought to organize this room*, Leon scowled as he looked around in the dim light for a bare place to stick the new bag. Well, at least someone had started to sort out the men's jackets into a pile on the floor.

Then Leon froze, his jaw dropping.

When he recovered, he spun on his heel, and darted back into the hallway. Luckily, Father Bernard had already left the table and was in the hall, talking quietly to Brother Matt. Leon caught Father's eye and motioned in bewilderment. Nodding to the other brother, the priest came down the hall, his gray habit billowing behind.

"What is it, Leon?" Father scrutinized Leon's face.

Leon led him into the storage room without a word and pointed.

Brother Charley was lumbering by, having come from answering the doorbell. Big, burly, and slow, he had led a wild life long enough to have a nose for trouble. He followed the other two friars into the storage room, towering over them. "What's up?" he asked, and then his eyes widened as he saw.

There's something about the atmosphere of a small friary that speeds up communication. As Brother Leon hurried up the passage to get Father Francis, he nearly bumped into Brother Herman, who was apparently seized by curiosity at the furtive movements of his brothers.

"Something going on?" the older friar asked confidentially.

"Just a crisis—in the storage room," Leon inched around him.

"Another rat colony?" Brother Herman's face wrinkled into a grimace as he glanced at Matt. "We'll have to get out the slingshots." The rats of the South Bronx were legendary in size, and the friars had been waging an unsuccessful war against them for possession of the church and friary.

“Uh—Father!” Leon waved at Father Francis, who was still nursing his coffee cup at the table.

A few moments later, Leon was leading Father Francis back to the storeroom. Charley was still there, squatting before the lump in the corner. Herman and Matt were trying to get a better view. In front of them, Father Bernard looked clearly lost. The whole community was gathered in the vestibule now—even reclusive Brother George had left his chores to peer around the doorjamb. The silence was almost funereal.

“All right, move aside. Who said we needed group support here?” Father Francis said, elbowing his fellow friars aside. Brother Leon saw Father Francis’s bushy white brows shoot up his wrinkled forehead as he saw the object: a slim, white ankle nestled on the sleeve of a jacket. “Heaven help us,” the community’s founder muttered, and Leon knew they were both thinking the same thing—that someone had dumped a body in their friary. He could see the headlines now: BODY OF YOUNG WOMAN FOUND IN FRIARY. POLICE FILE MURDER CHARGES. “Just what we need,” Leon murmured to himself, sweating slightly.

Brother Herman was frowning. He had edged closer to the pile of coats and was leaning his chubby frame over the body; turning his red, round face this way and that. Finally, he leaned back heavily with a sigh. “I think she’s just sleeping,” he said in a stage whisper to Father Francis.

There was an almost audible group sigh. “Well, that’s something to be thankful for,” said Father Francis briskly, in a soft voice. “But why should she be sleeping here?” His blue eyes traveled over the somber, bemused faces of his brothers. “Did anyone let her in?”

Six bearded friars shook their heads. Brother George’s face was quite red.

“Well, I suppose we should wake her up,” Father Francis straightened, and then, for once, looked uncertain. Nobody seemed inclined to disturb the owner of the white foot.

Leon, who had grown up with three sisters, swallowed and put out a hand to touch the coat-covered body. But before his hand touched the coats, the sleeper moved.

III

There are many beautiful churches in Italy, and even the tourists who walk in and out of them become pilgrims, of a sort. Bear tried to figure out, as he sat in the church of Santa Cecilia in Rome, whether he could classify himself as a particularly devout tourist or a rather casual pilgrim. He had been sitting there for a good forty-five minutes in the nave of the church lit by the natural light coming from the dome above. In the beginning, he had been consciously praying, but his stream of meditation had dissipated into

random thoughts in the haven of the ancient stone structure. The last Sunday Mass had ended some time ago, his brother had gone back to the hotel, and now he was mostly alone, studying the ceiling structure and support pillars of the church, trying to picture how the building process had transpired. The thought of building a church like this one was fascinating to him.

Just across from him was the hallmark statue of Saint Cecilia. Despite the fact that he had now seen thousands of souvenir replicas of it on the street for sale, it had not lost its ability to move him. Father Raymond, his late mentor, had once told him the story. The statue had been carved in 1599, when Cecelia's tomb had been discovered, and her body found to be miraculously incorrupt. She had been the victim of a botched beheading around the third century.

The statue below the altar showed the slim body of a young girl lying face down on her side, her veil swept gracefully back, her head barely attached to her body. But despite the grisly detail, her form lay curled up as serenely as though asleep, her arms, carelessly thrown to one side. Her pose was deceptively accidental, for her fingers were curled in two deliberate symbols. On one hand, one finger points out, and on the other, three, proclaiming One God, Who is Father, Son and Spirit.

Despite his fascination with the architecture, Bear found his eyes drawn repeatedly to the smooth white form of the statue. It was mysterious to him. He wondered with bemusement what it could really mean. A girl. Death. Witness. Beauty. How they could all go together at once.

And as usual, his thoughts went from the statue of a girl to the real girl waiting for him on the other side of a stormy ocean, and he pondered again if it was time.

He had come to Europe to escape some problems and to find some answers. About a year ago, his life circumstances had changed drastically—he and his brother had been cleared of a crime they hadn't committed, and because of this, the substantial inheritance they had received when their mother had died had been restored to them, somewhat grudgingly, by their father. Bear's father had made it clear in his communications that he still wanted nothing more to do with his crazy religious sons, but the brothers' financial difficulties were taken care of, at least for the next few years.

But the sorting-out period had been difficult and prolonged, with legal proceedings and at least two court cases to get through before his life could be called "normal." After a while, Bear had felt the intense need to escape, and had arranged a long trip to Europe. He had spent most of his time wandering in and out of churches and other buildings like this one, looking at the bones of the architecture and wondering if he could become a stonemason or a sculptor. It had given him a long-needed rest after the stress,

uncertainty, and danger of the past few years, but it had taken him away from her.

He thought of Blanche, a slender girl with white skin and black, black hair, long and shining like a dark wet rope down her shoulders. Blue eyes. Deep eyes, which said, even though she still might look like a child, she was almost a woman.

What did you do with a girl like that? Especially when she looked at you as though you were greater than you suspected you actually were, and you still didn't know who exactly you were.

Of course, as more worldly men knew, if you had a girl like that, you could look at her body and avoid her eyes, and thus avoid the whole question of who you were, or who you would be if you stayed with her. But he just couldn't do that.

Because of that, he didn't let himself touch her very often. Granted, that was difficult. Still, he didn't think it would be fair to her to do otherwise.

* * *

At the airport, he had asked her, just before he got onto the plane, "Does it bother you that I'm leaving?"

"Yes," she said at last, quietly.

"Do you want me to stay here?" he asked, worried.

"No," she said, and pushed back her black hair. One strand ran down her white cheek like a black ribbon. Her eyes were looking down. "I understand."

He didn't know what to say to her, and felt like a jerk, that he was leaving. Letting him go was a big thing for her to do. He was grateful.

He ran a finger down that black ribbon of hair. "I'll be back before you know it," he said.

"Will you?" she asked, looking up at him unexpectedly, and he saw then that she knew what he was thinking. That was the way Blanche was, almost preternaturally sensitive. Her intuition was very strong.

"As soon as I get things sorted out, I promise," was all he could say. Before he had gotten to this moment, he had thought about kissing her goodbye, but now it didn't seem right. Instead, he touched her fingers. As he shouldered his backpack and turned away onto the gray tube of the plane, he thought for a moment what it would have been like to kiss her, and even though he knew it wouldn't have been fair, that missed kiss hovered in the air before him. When he

turned to look back at her, she was still watching him. She smiled at him.

And receiving that smile was as good as a kiss.

* * *

Now, in the church of fair Cecilia, the brave young girl of long ago, he studied the knuckles of his hands, knitted together. His hands were big, like Father Raymond's had been. And for the longest time, he had thought, when everything had sorted itself out, that he would become a priest.

Was that what Father Raymond would have wanted? Bear felt he knew his mentor's mind so well, but he had never been able to figure that out, when the man was alive. He remembered asking once, "Do you think I'm the sort of guy who would make a good priest?"

He could still remember the smile that creased Father's face. "So what are you trying to say, Arthur?" the priest had asked, and thrown the basketball over his head.

"I'm just wondering," was probably what he had replied, as he dodged to catch the ball. They were on the court, their usual routine after high school. Bear had never cared much for sports, but the priest, a tall, energetic man, shot hoops every day from 2:30 to 2:45 in the school gymnasium or the rectory parking lot. And Bear, who was called Arthur back then, and his brother had found it was the natural time to talk with Father, right after school let out. Sometimes the talks that began on the basketball court continued as the priest went on to his other tasks.

That day, they were in the rectory parking lot, and his brother wasn't with him, probably delayed in the library. "What makes a man a good priest—or a good husband—is being a real man. What distinguishes a real man is that he is able to give all of himself, without reservation, to the call. He doesn't just *want* to be able to give his whole self, but is actually able to, without holding anything back," Father Raymond had said, twisting the ball between his capable hands. "You need to be able to give your whole self."

Bear had thought about those words for a long time. Certainly he had felt that desire to give himself whole-heartedly to do a single thing. For example, when Father Raymond had been murdered, he had seen what he was supposed to do for the next few years. But once that was over, the free-floating fuzziness that had haunted him as a teenager returned.

Perhaps Blanche had sensed this. As the months went by, she had seemed to withdraw a bit, watching him, waiting for him to decide. It seemed to make sense to take some time off, go to Europe, remove himself from

everything familiar for a while, in order to think and see if that call was really real, or just his imagination.

So he had traveled around Europe, sat in churches, tried to listen, tried to recover some sense of what it was that this mysterious God might expect of him. But he couldn't say the experiment had been a tremendous success. He did feel a little less restless, much less agitated, but he didn't feel any closer to knowing what his task was.

He had been writing to Blanche frequently. Always preferring the low-tech option, he had decided to use pen and paper to communicate with her instead of email. Besides, Blanche didn't have a computer in her home. He had sent her quite a few letters over the past few weeks. She hadn't sent him quite as many, although since he was moving around and she was remaining in the same place, it was natural that it would be harder for her letters to reach him than for his letters to reach her. He had tried to call regularly, since he usually enjoyed talking with her, as he always had.

Now it was the beginning of August, and he was starting to think about returning home. For one thing, the smell of the hot pavement in Rome reminded him awfully of the heat of New York City.

He had persuaded his brother to come over to Rome for vacation so they could do some sightseeing together before he returned home. Fish, as usual, was in total contrast to his older brother. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life: study history and literature. He had jumped into university studies with characteristic intensity, announcing his intention to finish his undergraduate degree in two years, to make up for lost time.

It had been hard to extricate Fish from his summer schedule of classes and papers, but in the end, Fish came to Italy. He reported that Blanche, who had offered to water the plants in their apartment while he was gone, seemed a bit stressed and anxious. But she was occupying herself with working and visiting old people in her spare time, and was going to be happy to see Bear again. Bear was glad, but he still did not yet know what he was going to say to Blanche when he saw her.

A letter had arrived that morning from Blanche, but Bear hadn't yet read it. Again, he wasn't quite sure why. Now he drew it out of his pocket and turned it over. Somehow he knew when she was sending him a "heavy" letter. Their last talk had been a bit heavy, too.

Chastising himself for delaying, he opened the card and read it quickly.

Bear,

I was thinking about our last conversation.

I don't know if I told you before that this summer at work I met a man who is dying, and I've been visiting him. He has no visitors except for me. Why? Because he won't forgive the people who hurt him, including his relatives and his sons. Now he's dying alone—well, practically alone. I'm the only visitor he has, and he doesn't seem to be well taken care of, so I've kept visiting him, even though it's sad to be around someone so bound by the past. It's very sad and so senseless. Even terrifying.

All I can think is that I don't want to see you become like this. I don't want to see you hardened, like this man is, by years of unforgiveness.

Not that I want to change you. But it seems that your past has a hold on you. Do you think that maybe you can't find peace and direction in your life because, on some level, you won't forgive?

I can only say this to you because you're my friend. Maybe seeing so much this summer has made me bolder. Or just more anxious that my friends and family don't end up like this man.

I'm sorry if this hurts you. But I thought you should know.

*With love,
Blanche*

He turned over the card in his hand, creasing it shut with a touch of resentment. He had to admit it wasn't altogether unexpected, given the tenor of their last talk, a week ago.

Thing is, Blanche had no idea how hard it had been. Well, he hadn't told her much, but she seemed to sense more than he was letting on, as usual. She wanted him to talk about it. He just wanted to put it behind him.

He rose and genuflected, a little distracted, before turning toward the door. As he did so, a curious disquiet came over him. Why did he suddenly feel as though he were running away?

All right, he thought, looking back at the white marble statue of the fallen girl and speaking to it as though she were Blanche. *All right. You want me to talk about it? We'll talk.*

Mentally he said a token farewell to St. Cecilia. Once out in the courtyard, he flinched at the heat of the afternoon day as he walked back to

the hotel. It was siesta time by now—for everyone except the crazy Americans.

Up in his room, he quickly dialed Blanche's number, after calculating the time change. It would be six hours difference—after nine by now. But Blanche usually worked at her catering job till past midnight on Saturday nights, and now she would still be sleeping. *I should wait a few hours*, he told himself, reining in his sudden emotion.

Frustrated, he sighed and replaced the receiver. He unfolded the letter and read it again. She was only saying to him what Father Raymond had told him before. And he knew he should do it, but it was going to be difficult.

Something was odd about the letter, but at first he couldn't make out what it was. He studied it more closely.

Blanche's penmanship was usually precise and perfect, as good as calligraphy. She was a perfectionist that way. But this handwriting was more erratic, almost sloppy. If he hadn't known before opening it that the letter was from Blanche, he might not have recognized the writing as hers.

Something's really agitating her. Had she just been nervous about writing him the letter? Or was it something else? He picked up the phone again and pushed the numbers of the Briers' home number. He remembered that Blanche's mom and sister were on vacation, and that Blanche had been alone in the house for the week. All the more reason why he should call to make sure she was all right.

As the phone made the connection and started to ring, he tried to come up with something to say to Blanche, to explain this unusually timed phone call. *If something's really disturbing her, I'll hear it in her voice*, he told himself.

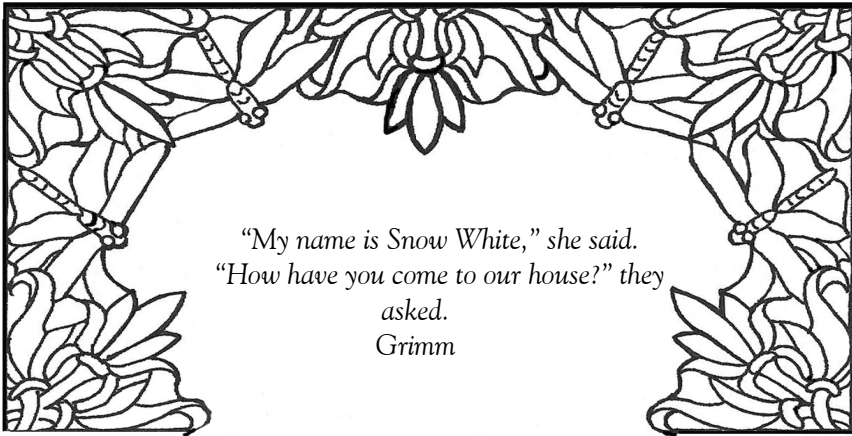
And if she *was* all right...? He wished he could say something groundbreaking to her, but he couldn't think of any way to begin except, "I got your letter..."

The phone rang, and rang, and rang, and rang. The answering machine came on. He hung up and dialed again.

And again.

And again.

There was no answer.




*“My name is Snow White,” she said.
“How have you come to our house?” they
asked.
Grimm*

Chapter Two

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading, treading, till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through.*

*And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum,
Kept beating, beating till I thought
My Mind was going numb.*

 he was aware at once that she was no longer alone. Something had changed in the air—it was alive with breathing and stifled whispers. All of her muscles tensed, and she froze for a moment. *No. I have to face this.* Then, taking a deep breath, she sat up and turned, her hair sliding over her eyes.

She saw what seemed like half a dozen male faces peering down at her in the dim light. Two young faces stared at her from her feet. The rest looked over boxes and around bags. But there was something different about these faces. For a second, she thought it was an illusion, and then realized that it was real. But all of the faces had beards, and none of them seemed to have any hair on their heads.

The sight was so odd that she forgot to be afraid for a second, and she almost smiled. The men continued to look at her, and she realized that they must be as startled as she was.

“H—Hi,” she said, recovering her voice.

“Uh—hi,” said the Hispanic one nearest her. Above him, a round red face creased into a smile and waved a hand.

For a moment, there was an awkward silence. She was extremely conscious of being someplace she shouldn't be. She had thought that this church was still abandoned. But it clearly wasn't.

“Sleep well?” asked the round red face, embellished by a long white beard and round gold-rimmed spectacles, making him look like Santa Claus.

“Yes, thank you.” She protectively pulled the coats around herself, even though she was fully dressed. Her heart was still beating fast.

“We were just surprised to find a guest in our vestibule. Sorry if we alarmed you,” the older man went on, his white beard twitching as he talked.

“Oh—no, not really.” She tried to smile, and the man beamed back at her.

“Relax,” he said. “We're not skinheads. This is a friary.”

“A friary?” she looked about her in bewilderment.

Muffled laughter erupted in several places around the room. “Yes. Believe it or not, this ruin is now a religious house. We just moved here,” the Hispanic said.

“Oh!” she murmured, turning red. Of course. A friary was a sort of monastery, and that's what the church had been turned into. In her disoriented state, she had thought for an instant that a friary was some type of restaurant.

“Yeah, it sort of looks more like a Rent-A-Storage,” the Hispanic one grinned at the others. “Not a bad idea for an apostolate. How about it, Father Francis?”

The oldest friar, who seemed to be Father Francis, smiled grimly as the others chuckled. “I'm Father Francis. This is the friary of St. Giles. We're Franciscan brothers in the Catholic Church.”

“Oh!” she said. “I'm sorry—I really shouldn't be here,” she murmured.

“How did you get in?” Father Francis asked her.

She gazed at him and swallowed. “I got lost last night. I was on the subway, and I—I got mugged.” Her voice caught at the memory, but she went on relentlessly, steadying her voice. “They took my purse, and I ran. They chased me, and I came here. I knew this place, before, when it was empty. I had a key—”

“A key?” several voices asked at once. She put a hand to her neck and held the brass key on a gold chain, the one asset she had left.

“Yes—I happened to have the key—I'm sorry, it's a long story—” she said faintly. “I didn't know anyone would be here or I wouldn't have bothered you—”

Thoughts were whirling in her brain. *I'm in deep, deep trouble, and I don't want to get anyone else in trouble with me. Not my family. Not these monks who are being so kind...*

II

"You've had a very rough night, I can see," Father Francis's voice had lost its edge completely. "I'm sorry, but I'm glad you found your way here."

Brother Herman leaned down and gently touched her black head, his face all sorrow. "What's your name?"

She looked at his sympathetic face, and something flickered across her pale one—a spasm of shame or pain. Then she paused, and the edge of a smile touched her lips. "You can call me Nora."

"How about some breakfast, Nora?"

"Yes—thank you." Her voice recovered its stability and held onto it at last.

The brothers helped her up out of the coats, pushing back some of the piles. Brother Leon saw now that she was dressed nicely—or had been. Her dress was a thin yellow print of a good material. Her hair was cut short in a jagged way he supposed New Yorkers considered fashionable. There were faint traces of makeup on her face—not a lot, just the tasteful amount that girls who knew how to wear makeup put on. Everything about her—her poise, her watch, her small pearl drop earrings, her voice—said that this was a girl from the nicer side of town. Completely out of her element here.

"I'm sorry," she said apologetically. "But could you tell me your names?"

She was not so distraught that she couldn't be polite, Brother Leon thought. "I'm Brother Leon," he offered her his hand. She took it firmly, and smiled at him, a bit hesitantly. He returned it, liking her.

"I'm Brother Herman. Father Francis is the head of our little community," Brother Herman directed her gaze to the crusty old man. "Don't worry, he doesn't bite."

"Not visitors, at any rate," Father Francis shook her hand with a wry smile through his bushy white beard. "Novices, on the other hand, aren't as lucky." He shot a glance at Leon, who immediately tried to look pious and innocent. "Watch out for that one," Father Francis said, referring to Leon. "He forgets to make coffee." Nodding to her curtly, he made his way out of the room.

"This is Father Bernard," Brother Herman went on as the slim dark monk with an aristocratic black beard took her hand and shook it solemnly. His face was gaunt and dark-eyed, but his soft voice had a Long Island twang. "Very good to meet you, Nora. Let us know if there's any way we can help you."

"Thank you very much," she said, subdued by his deep, icon-like eyes.

"And that's Brother George," Brother Herman directed Nora to the scowling older man with bushy red hair who lifted a hand and vanished down the hallway, back to his dishes. "He's—a bit shy."

"Hi, I'm Brother Matt," the blond novice came over and shook her hand. "Hope you've recovered okay."

She looked at him in surprise. "Where are you from?"

"Indiana," he said, and laughed. His voice definitely had a drawl when contrasted to the sharp New York accents of the other friars. "I'm the first imported novice. All the other guys in the order are from the New York area. Father Francis gave a talk at my college and I came out to join." He grinned. "I made the coffee this morning, so don't worry, you won't be poisoned or anything."

She laughed a little, and found her hand enveloped in the clamp of two large hands. "Hi," a deep voice said above her. "I'm Charley."

She looked up at the brown-bearded face and green eyes. The accent was Brooklyn.

"Believe it or not, Brother Charley's in the seminary. Can you picture him a priest?" Matt said. "He used to be a Hell's Angel."

"Really?"

"Well, almost." Brother Charley flushed a little, and began to talk rapidly. "I sure spent a lot of my life trying to be one, but I never quite made it in. And then God caught up with me, and the rest is history, as they say."

"Was God driving a hot rod?" Brother Leon elbowed him. "Yeah, we're a new order, so we let in the riffraff."

The ex-biker said nothing, but smoothly put the smaller friar into a headlock and gave him a Dutch rub. Leon made choking noises and Charley released him with a smile.

"Come, sister, if we keep standing here, these fellows will keep talking until lunch time. I believe there's still some breakfast in the kitchen." Brother Herman steered her away from the three boisterous novices.

"I'll make more if there's not enough," Leon came up behind them as they walked down the friary corridor. "I haven't had my breakfast yet, either, Nora."

In a few minutes, he had set a plate of eggs—his portion—and toast before her at the refectory table. She started in hungrily. In the hallway, he could hear Matt and Charley joking with each other as they went upstairs to the bedrooms. Father Bernard passed by the dining room door, smiled kindly at the girl, and then vanished into the chapel.

Brother Herman settled his round Friar-Tuck bulk into a chair opposite the girl and chatted comfortably while she ate. When Leon came in with a plate of toast and a day-old bagel, he was telling her about their new

foundation, their current ministry, and their plans for the buildings the archdiocese had just given them: the old church of St. Lawrence, the rectory, and an adjoining high school, St. Catherine's, which had been closed down by the diocese last year because of school consolidation.

"We're hoping to clean up the school, repaint it, and furnish it as apartments for the homeless, so that up to thirty homeless men can live there at one time." He looked wistful. "There's so much we could do—there's such a great need here in the South Bronx, you know. It will take a lot of work to clean the buildings before we can begin, but most of our time right now is taken up with distributing the food and clothing we get from the parish ministries around here. From time to time we get some laypeople to help us with the big cleaning work. All we've done so far is clear out some of the offices in the basement of the high school for our volunteers to use for bedrooms whenever they come down."

She nodded, eating. Brother Leon sat down beside her.

"So, Nora, where are you from?" Brother Leon helped himself to some toast.

She evaded his eyes. "Around here," she said quietly.

Brother Leon caught a slight warning in Brother Herman's eyes and reined in his curiosity. Apparently Brother Herman didn't think this was a good time for personal questions.

"I'm from the City myself. I'm sorry you had such a bad experience last night," he changed his tack.

"It was stupid of me," she murmured. "I got on the wrong train going towards Gun Hill Road, and I was trying to go back to Grand Central. I never should have been in this area so late at night. I really do know better than that."

Brother Herman nodded sympathetically. "Those things happen," he said, pausing a moment. "You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"No, just a little bruised. It happened so quickly—all they did was snatch my purse, really." She looked at her eggs, her cheeks turning red suddenly.

"Thank God that's all," Brother Herman said heartily. "It must have been a terrible experience for you."

"It was," she said, rubbing the back of her neck. "You've been very kind. And this food is very good." She looked at Brother Leon with a small smile.

"Thanks. Hey, do you want us to take you to the police station?" Brother Leon asked. "You could give a description of the guys—maybe they'll be able to find them. You never know."

She hesitated. "No, thank you," she said at last. "There wasn't anything really important in the purse. Just cash. And that will be gone forever."

Brother Leon dropped his eyes. She didn't want to go to the police. *Another strange thing.*

"Can we help you get back home?" Brother Herman asked.

"No, thank you," she said, and began blinking again. "I can't go home just now, and I don't know what to do next—"

Brother Herman offered, "If you need a place to stay, we do have those bedrooms in the basement of the high school that we mentioned," he said. "One of our ministries is offering lay people a place to stay and do service for the poor, as we do. Could you use something like that? Of course, I'll need to check with our superior, but I'd be happy to."

She raised her head, bewildered. "You would let me stay? Even though—I mean, do you let women work here?"

"Oh, yes. The bedrooms are in the building next door to us—it's completely separated. And no one's using them this week."

"That's very generous of you," she said with an effort. "But, I'm not sure you should. You don't know anything about me."

"What, are you a leper?" Brother Leon asked.

She looked at him, tears in her eyes, and was forced to smile at his expression. "Not yet," she said.

"Then at least wait and find out if it's okay." Brother Leon said casually. "It might be a temporary answer for you anyway."

"Well—I'd be glad to help clean up around here," she said, pushing back her hair. "But I'd like to get to Sunday Mass. Would you be having—?"

Brother Herman shook his head. "We already had our Sunday Mass at seven, but I'll check with the Fathers—that's Father Francis and Father Bernard—and see what they suggest. There might be a Mass nearby you could go to, but if not, I'm sure one of them would be glad to say Mass for you."

"That would be too much trouble," the girl objected.

"No, they consider it part of their duty. That's why they're priests."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

At least, she was Catholic and observant enough to want to keep her Sunday Mass obligation. Brother Leon got to his feet and said, "Hey, if you're done, give me your dishes, and I'll wash them for you." He had to finish cleanup. "Keep your coffee mug until you're finished with it. There's more in the kitchen."

"Thanks," she said, cupping her hands around it and looking past him out the refectory window. The sunlight made her eyes pale blue in her white face. Her thin, small eyebrows and thick lashes were black, but her eyes were still red from her tears.

He admitted to himself that she was quite beautiful, in a fragile, luminous way. But beneath that lovely surface he suspected lay some deep problems. Troubled, he scooped up the plates and went back to the kitchen.

III

*...White Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies,
With a voice like any mermaid—*

*Nay, never ask this week, fair lord,
Where she has gone, nor yet this year,
Except with this for an overword—
But where are the snows of yester-year?*

Where was Blanche?

Bear sat by the window in his hotel room and stared out unseeing at the dark, empty cobblestone streets of the Piazza Navona, pocked with pools of streetlight. The book of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry he had been reading to distract himself had fallen to the floor, its lyrics having turned traitor on him. Once again he picked up the phone and dialed.

It was past midnight in Rome, but still daylight in New York City. Maybe Blanche was away for the weekend. Maybe the New York phone service was down. Maybe she was just at her summer job. But the feeling that something was wrong persisted.

He paused, and dialed her home phone again slowly, letting it ring on till the answering machine picked up the call. She still wasn't there.

Now he leaned back heavily in the upholstered chair, his six-foot broad-shouldered frame creaking the hotel furniture. He ran his large hands in his longish, and now thoroughly ruffled, black hair, and stared at the floor, unseeing.

He must have drifted off to sleep, because he was startled awake some hours later by his brother shaking him.

"I know—I need to go to bed," Bear murmured, half-asleep.

"Go to bed if you want," Fish said. "But it's morning now."

Startled, Bear looked around the hotel room, blinking at the morning sun coming through the windows. Rubbing his sore neck, he looked around the sitting area of their hotel suite.

"Rough night?" Fish said, half-smiling. He was dressed in a paisley lounging robe that, for some reason or other, always made Bear think that his brother was dressed up as Sherlock Holmes. Fish, as his brother was nicknamed (his real name was Benedict), certainly had that air of intellectual detachment, and like a fish, he was swift and hard to pin down. Younger by a year, he was in many ways a shorter, thinner, lighter-haired shadow of Bear, despite his sharper, more uneven features.

"Did anyone call?" Bear asked, trying to stretch the criks out of his spine.

"You were the one guarding the phone," his brother remarked, "But no. I take it you haven't gotten a hold of Blanche."

Bear shook his head, and Fish sank into the chair opposite thoughtfully. "Very strange," he said. "Not at all like her. Is there any chance she wouldn't be returning your calls for some reason?"

"Not that I can think of."

"I thought you said you two had a 'sort-of fight' last time you talked."

"It wasn't really a fight," Bear responded, defensive.

"I was quoting your exact words," Fish said blandly.

"It was really more of an intense conversation," Bear explained, toying with Blanche's card, which he had been using as a bookmark in his poetry book.

"Your story is changing," Fish remarked, picking up the book from the floor and turning the pages. "Who is this? Oh, Rossetti. Pre-Raphaelite poets again. You must be depressed. I'm sticking with your first explanation."

"I just don't know what to do," Bear said. "In a more specific sense than usual. Is this an emergency situation or not?"

"Why not call Mrs. Brier and check with her?"

"I already thought of that, but I have no idea where she and Rose are on vacation. I know they're in California, but I don't know what city. Now that I think of it, Blanche said they were going to be traveling around to different parts of the state, visiting different relatives."

"Call information and look for any Briers in California," Fish suggested.

Bear shook his head. "They're her mom's relatives," he said. "And I have no idea what Jean Brier's maiden name was."

"Well, that's bad luck," Fish remarked. "But I suppose if she's really missing, the Briers will probably notice it before you do and call you first."

"I don't want to risk that." Bear bit the edge of the card in his hand. "Fish, if I can't get a hold of her by morning—I think I should go back."

"Look, if you're that worried, call the police and see if they can check the house."

"Suppose they don't find anything there?"

"Then, obviously, we can all start worrying," Fish said calmly, ringing the bell for breakfast.

Groaning, Bear got up and went to his room to dress.

Reflections Banquet Hall, he thought as he fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. He had taken her there once for dinner, and she had ended up getting a summer job as a receptionist in the large restaurant/banquet hall on Long Island. Maybe they would have someone there who would answer the phone even at two in the morning. New York parties could run late. *I'll call and find out if she had been at work this weekend, and if she's scheduled to work on*

Monday morning, he thought. *Maybe she's even at work right now, still cleaning up after some party.*

Hurriedly he called information in the States, got the number for Reflections Restaurant and Banquet Hall, and was connected.

"Reflections." A deep woman's voice answered, sounding a tinge irate.

"Hi. I'm trying to get in touch with Blanche Brier, who works there, and I was wondering if you could tell me..."

The woman's voice came back after the transatlantic pause. "I'm sorry, but she doesn't work here any more."

"Excuse me?"

Pause. "She doesn't work here."

He fumbled for words. "She told me she was the receptionist there..."

"Yes, she was. But she doesn't work here any more."

"When did that happen? I mean, when did she stop working there?" his own voice had a slightly ghostly echo.

"I don't know."

"Could you check the schedule for me?" he asked, tinged with impatience.

"She's not on the schedule."

His words overlapped with hers. "When was the last time she worked?"

Pause. "I can ask someone."

"Yes, that would be great."

The phone was set down and the fuzz of static buzzed and rumbled in Bear's ear, like the sound of some electronic ocean.

A more cheerful voice came on the line. "You're looking for Blanche?"

"Yes."

"Hold on and let me see when she's working next," the voice said. There was a pause, and the voice returned. "Funny, I don't see her on the schedule at all for this week. Sorry."

"Listen," Bear said. "I know that. They said she doesn't work there any more."

"She doesn't? Oh, that's real strange."

"Could you tell me when the last time she worked was?"

"Sure thing. Lemme check."

Another thump and more static. Then the voice swam back towards him. "I saw her on Friday when I came on to my shift, but she might have done some weekend hours..." another pause. "Yeah, she got off work Saturday at midnight."

"And she didn't work Sunday?"

"The schedule goes from Saturday to Saturday, and she's not on this week's schedule. You say she's not working here any more?"

"That's what I was just told."

“Well, not everyone here knows what’s going on. Maybe she’s just on vacation this week. It’s August, after all, and it’s been real hot around here.”

“Was she going on vacation?”

“Well, you know, she never mentioned it to me. But I don’t really know for sure. You might want to call back in the morning. The day manager will be in then, and he’ll have the full story for you.”

“Thanks very much,” Bear said.

“Hey, no problem. Have a good night.”

Bear hung up the phone, his ears ringing.

After the turbulent transatlantic phone trip to past midnight in New York, he paced back to the sitting room and tried to mentally readjust to morning in Italy. Blanche wasn’t working at the banquet hall any more. She wasn’t there. She wasn’t at home. Where was she?

Now, feeling acutely concerned, he phoned the Bronx police department and explained the situation—could they send someone by to check the house? They agreed to send a patrol car over, and he left his number so that they could call him back. Then he hung up the phone.

There was a knock and he opened the door. A hotel worker swept in with a breakfast tray, set it on the coffee table, and exited.

Fish, who had been reading in the chair, set down the poetry book and with mild irritation surveyed the Italian rolls, tea, and fruit. “Continental breakfast—a big name for ‘not much,’” he muttered. “Is there any place around here to order eggs and bacon and pancakes at this hour?”

“I seriously doubt it,” Bear said. He dialed the phone number for the airport and confirmed that there were available flights leaving for New York that afternoon. When he hung up, his brother was dumping several spoonfuls of sugar into his tea with a melancholy expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” Bear asked.

“I’m getting a feeling of my own. You’re not going to find Blanche this morning, which means that we’ll be flying back to New York this afternoon.”

“Fish, I didn’t ask you to come back with me. You should stay and finish your vacation,” Bear said, surprised.

“No, no,” Fish said, sounding like a martyr dying of slow suffocation as he spread jam on his roll. “I’ll go with you. I don’t have a girlfriend, but I still get to suffer the effects of having one.”

Bear heaved a sigh. “Fish, I might go back and discover out that everything’s fine—that Blanche just went away to a friend’s house for the weekend or something. This time she just didn’t tell me, that’s all. You might be coming back for nothing.”

“In that case, I’ll just go back to taking my classes,” Fish said wearily. “No, I’m coming. Knowing you, you’ll walk right into some huge mess. And

you'll need me to extricate you from it, again. So you called that place where Blanche works?"

"Yes. They said she wasn't on the schedule. I think that means she was let go. The girl I talked with sounded surprised herself."

"The mystery deepens." Fish tasted his tea and added a few more grains of sugar. "Especially as Blanche is not the type to get fired. She's quiet, she works hard, most likely shows up five minutes ahead of time every day—no reason to fire someone like that. Yet, apparently, she has been fired. And now she's missing. Even stranger." He started sipping his tea and looked at his brother keenly. "I think you're ready to go home now anyway, aren't you?"

"I'm still not sure," Bear confessed. "But I think I should."

Fish humphed but kept his thoughts to himself.

Once again Bear opened the card and studied her agitated handwriting. Perhaps Blanche had gone away for the weekend, which might be understandable, if she had lost her job. *But why hadn't she called him if she was in trouble?*

He came back to reality and realized Fish was saying again, "Are you going to eat your roll or can I have it?"

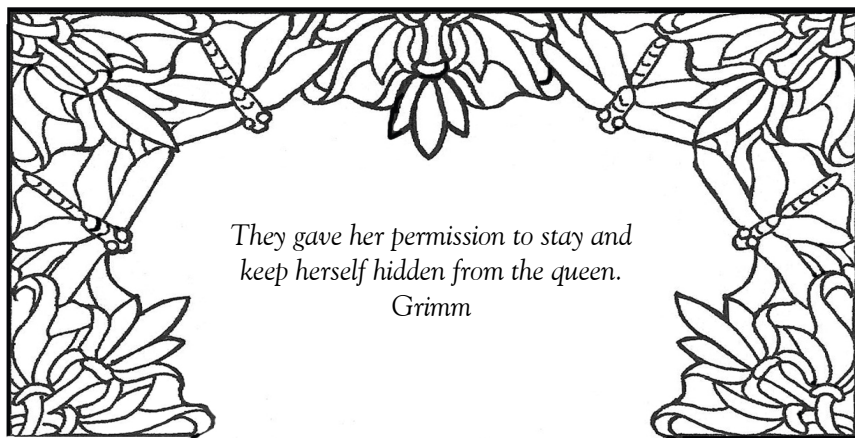
"I want it," Bear answered evenly.

Fish eyed it critically. "I'll fight you for it."

"Not a chance," Bear said, cracking a smile at his lightweight brother.

Fish sighed and reached for the hotel phone. "How do you say, 'Bring me steak and eggs or I'll slit your throat' in Italian?" he asked.

"Look it up in the phrase book," Bear said absently, and glanced out the window at the sky, whose clouds were streaked like white marble. *I've been gone for too long.*



*They gave her permission to stay and
keep herself hidden from the queen.*

Grimm

Chapter Three

She woke up in a fright when the el train went by, roaring on its elevated tracks like an airborne dragon. And then she remembered where she was. In a ground floor room at the back of St. Catherine's High School, in what had formerly been a dismal office cubicle—as she had reason to know—but which had now been transformed with pale paint and soap into a room with a distinctly monastic air. There was nothing in the room but a cot and a chair and a small crucifix on the wall. For the first time in a long while, she felt safe.

Breathing deeply, she blinked at the glow of a streetlight coming in through the one window high up in the sturdy thick block wall. It was still night outside, and she could hear the screeching of tires and the thudding of boom boxes. It was perhaps twenty-four hours since her escape.

Eventually the rattle and screech of the metallic dragon passed, vanishing into the night. The subdued aftermath passed for silence, enough for her to think about sleeping again. At least it was cooler in this basement room.

It was a paradox. St. Catherine's was her old high school, the place she had dreaded going to for an entire wretched senior year and which she had sought refuge from, day after dreary, miserable day. And now, in a surprising reversal, it had become the place of refuge for her. Here, of all places, she now felt safe.

Everything in my life is turning into its mirror image. I'm not safe at home or with my family. I'm only safe in the dark and tangled woods of the City where no one I know can find me. I'm on the other side of the looking-glass...

Stop thinking, she told herself curtly. Stop extrapolating. Stop drawing connections between things that aren't really connected. The whole point is, you're safe.

Curling up on the hard but comfortable cot-bed, she tried to get herself to relax again. Safe. An ironic term. Particularly when part of the enemy was herself. Her intuition. Her imagination.

But there is a real enemy out there, she told herself. Hadn't last night confirmed just that?

You've been jumping at shadows and seeing threats in ordinary conversations all summer, the other side of her said sternly. Calm down. Don't think about it now. Just let it go.

But no, no, no! I'm not deranged! Someone really was after me!

But why? It makes no sense.

In an attempt to explain herself to herself, she tried to rebuild the events of the preceding days like a tenuous house of cards, trying to see if the structure would hold. It was still wavering.

Would you really be thinking that this was anything but a freak incident if you hadn't been working off the supposition that you were in danger in the first place?

That's not the point. The point is, I'm in trouble. All right, most likely I'm in trouble. How can I escape?

A partial answer emerged from her construction work, a face card balanced tremulously on two others. *I could go to him. I need to talk to someone, and he might understand, even though ... it involves him.*

Rubbing the back of her head painfully, she sat up and looked around for a clock to check the time, and then realized there was none. She had no way of knowing what time it was. But even if she was crazy, she was rational enough to know that this time, the witching hour of the City, was no time to go outside alone. No matter how important it was for her to get help.

I'll wait until tomorrow morning, she thought. I can slip out sometime tomorrow, and come back here if I need to. At least one more time, I've got to go and see him, and tell him everything that's happened.

The realistic side of her concurred. *At the very least, you need to get a second opinion. Since you can't reach Mom or Rose, and Bear isn't here...*

It was ludicrous, ludicrous to think she could begin to handle this by herself, without her family or her friends. *But I'm alone, both sides of her merged into agreement. For better or for worse, this is my battle. For sanity. For my life.*

Mentally discarding the pack of cards and her efforts to reconstruct the past few days, she closed her eyes, wishing for sleep. She tried to think about something that had nothing to do with this situation, nothing to do with the cold black and red calculus of jacks, queens, kings, and aces.

Her hand on her heart, she tried to breathe deeply again. She could never remember dreaming, but perhaps she could escape into memories, memories of things that had been, that were wound up with wishes of how things might be—

Remember before this all happened, she told herself. Back when you felt like you were a princess and that nothing terrible was going to happen to you ever again...

* * *

Till it has loved, no man or woman can become itself... Emily Dickinson had said that, and it was true. At least, the girl felt it was true.

Holding his hand. Walking close to him, in the enclosed garden, shielded from the wind. They had been at a museum, and he had suggested they go outside and walk in the cloister gardens, even though it was the beginning of January.

"I love walking in gardens in the winter time," he had said abruptly, as they paced around the perimeter of the perfectly square garden, cut into four shapely but simple quadrants.

"Why?" she had asked, leaning against his dark brown overcoat.

"Because in the winter time, you can see them for what they really are. Their true shape. They say a truly well-designed garden is beautiful even in the winter, when to the eye, all its growth is barren and sleeping," he said. "Can't you tell?"

She looked around. It was not a particularly elaborate garden. At the center of its four quadrant beds was a font of water, drained at this time of year. There were a few trees, the winter remnants of plants and a lawn, and the arches of the medieval-style architecture surrounding the little space. The winter air made everything seem gray, black, and silver—the roof tiles, the pillars, the forked branches of the naked trees. "It's very simple."

"It doesn't need to be more complex," he said. "Does it?"

"No, you're right," she said with a sigh. "It's irreducible beauty."

She had been perfectly happy that day, wearing the white dress he had given her, still in that festive mood of the days that followed Christmas like trailing banners. Once again, she wondered how she, a very ordinary girl, had found herself in this situation. There was nothing particularly unusual about her. She didn't think she was extraordinarily beautiful or fascinatingly charming. For most of her life, she had been utterly typical—a rather shy, not noticeably talented person who did fairly but not unusually well in school, played the piano with average talent, a girl who was inclined to be bookish but certainly not a genius. And from time to time, she had odd senses about things, senses that were troubling, but usually accurate.

And yet somehow she had acquired a rather extraordinary boyfriend, and she still wasn't sure how that had happened.

"I still feel as though a unicorn has followed me home and wanted to be my friend, and I'm not sure what to do next," she murmured.

He had laughed at her analogy as he pushed back his dark unruly hair, shorn of its recent dreadlocks but already growing shaggy again. "Why a unicorn?" he asked, feeling his forehead. "Is it the horn?" They had just seen the Unicorn Tapestries a few minutes ago, so the image should have struck him as natural.

She laughed a little. "It's just that—I've always liked unicorns, but I've always been afraid of them at the same time." She felt silly, explaining. What she meant was that there was a mystery and a wonder about Bear, even now.

"I never believed in them before," she said truthfully after a moment. "I always thought they were myths. I never thought I'd find someone like you."

He had looked at her then, with his dark brown eyes, which always seemed to see more of her than she saw of herself. And as usual, she felt self-conscious, and a bit afraid, mixed with a generous amount of pleasure at being appreciated. To hide her

feelings, she traced a finger around the cold edge of the empty stone font. It was astonishing how different it was to be close to a young man. She still hadn't gotten over how fundamentally unlike girls guys were.

"Do you know, I never believed that girls like you still existed either?" he said, running his own larger hand over the beveled rim of the bowl. "Not today. Not anymore."

She couldn't help smiling at him. "We were laboring under the mutual impression that our species were mythological."

He grinned. "Well, now that we have met each other, let's make a bargain. I'll believe in you if you believe in me. Is that fair?"

"That sounds fair to me."

"Should we shake on it?"

And so they did, shaking hands over the font. But he held onto her hand a bit longer than the handshake demanded, and searched her face. Again, she wondered, fleetingly, if this would be the moment they would kiss. He had never really kissed her before. Now as he looked at her, she felt her heart quicken, but for some reason, he seemed to be holding himself back. At last he squeezed and released her hand and turned slowly away.

"Unicorns can be dangerous companions," he had said, walking to a further quadrant of the garden, leaving her standing in the center. "I wouldn't want to hurt you, Blanche. After all, in some ways we are different species."

She had thought at first he was referring to the danger she had encountered when he was tracking down a ruthless criminal, but his last remark was cryptic. She waited, to see if he would explain.

He didn't. Gazing through the fork of one of the four trees, he looked over at her, a shadow of the old secretiveness about him still. "If I'm taking this slow, can you understand why?"

"I think I can," she said, in a small voice. She looked up at the peaked roofs around them, feeling a bit hurt nevertheless. She didn't understand why he

seemed so unsure. Granted, it would probably be difficult for anyone to settle back into normal life after serving an unjust prison sentence, living on the streets, and engaging in a risky undercover investigation for a year or two. Being a witness in two criminal trials hadn't helped him either. She could appreciate why he was finding it hard, but his uncertainty hurt, even though she knew he wasn't trying to hurt her.

He paced around the perimeter of the garden in silence for a few minutes. She watched him from the center, and thought to herself that he was still like a creature of the wild in some respects. "You want to finish college, right?" he had said, apparently changing the subject.

She was quiet before she answered. "I don't know."

"Why not? I thought you said you wanted to become a nurse, like your mom."

She looked at the ground. "I'm not so sure anymore."

What she meant, but she couldn't say it, was that she had been wondering if she really wanted four years of school, only to take a job she wouldn't be working at very long, because what she really wanted was just to—

"I thought that if you went to college, maybe I might—try it out too, for a while," he said at last.

"Are you sure that college is something that you should just—try?" she asked.

"Well, it's not as though I can't afford it. I'm just not sure if I want to go yet."

She was quiet. Despite the fact that according to contemporary mores, there was no difference between men and women, she was realistic enough to realize that his not being sure if he should go to college had entirely different ramifications than her own uncertainty. For one thing, when he talked like this, she started to wonder if they should even be dating. It was frustrating, that her college decision was hanging on his. If he went, she wasn't sure she would go, but if he wouldn't go, and wouldn't engage

in any kind of decision towards his life direction, she knew she probably should go ahead and make her life plans, regardless of him.

But yet, she had this inexplicable (and from the modern point of view, foolish and dangerous) urge to plan her whole life around his. She kept wondering if the modern point of view was ultimately the more practical one.

“I suppose it’s one of the risks of getting involved with unicorns,” she murmured to herself.

That fabulous monster paced towards her again, frowning. The wind rushed between them, stirring her white skirts around her ankles. She shivered inside her gray cloak.

“You know I have an errand to do in Europe,” he said at last, kicking at a loose twig on the path.

“Donating Father Raymond’s treasure to the Vatican Museums,” she said softly.

“Yes. I’m going to bring them over personally. But once that’s done with, I’ve been thinking of staying over there for a while. Would you mind that very much?” He wasn’t looking at her, but at the twig.

“No,” she had said, and realized that Bear extending his trip was not altogether unexpected. There had been a lot of tension building up in him over the last few months. Bear still couldn’t talk about much that was troubling him, but she was beginning to see part of it. Maybe better than Bear could see it himself.

He ruminated, and then looked hopefully at her. “Maybe—if I stay till the summer—maybe you and Rose could come over and visit me. We could do some hiking together. That would be fun.”

She had to smile at his sudden eagerness, but she dropped her eyes and shook her head. There was the whole issue of money, which hovered constantly between them. Bear was independently wealthy now, and her family had never been well off, particularly since her father had died. She couldn’t afford to go to Europe—she couldn’t even afford to go to community college without student loans—and she

didn't want to remind Bear of that, because it would seem as though she were asking him to pay her way to Europe. He would, in a heartbeat, but she didn't want to ask. "I don't think I could," she said. "I've got to work this summer if I'm going to keep taking classes in the fall. Rose is going to be working too. It just wouldn't be possible, Bear. I'm sorry."

"Well, at least you could keep it open as an option," he said hesitantly. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too," she said, almost automatically. Miss him! Of course she would miss him. More accurately, she would struggle in the void without him.

* * *

So in the middle of February, he had gone overseas to do his errand, and remained in Europe traveling while she took classes at a community college, finished her first year, and started looking for a summer job. He wrote to her frequently, but still did not seem inclined to come back home.

When the summer began, he brought up the possibility of a European trip again, a tantalizing possibility for her. Even if she had had the money, she doubted the wisdom of going, without knowing where Bear was at. So she stayed at home and worked. *Back to normality. Back to where I have always been.*

But it wasn't normality, after all. Something fundamental had changed, and she spent most of the summer trying to figure out what it was. Again, her imagination mocked her. *You've gone through to the other side of the looking-glass and everything is a chess game...*

Perhaps it's a good thing you haven't seen Bear. Would he turn out to be something different, on the other side of the mirror? A peril instead of a protector?

In the black early hours of the new day in that unexpected shelter in the City, she shivered.

II

On Monday Brother Leon had woken to the relative silence of the early morning in the Bronx. It was not yet excruciatingly hot, probably the most pleasant time of the day. He opened the window, which he had left closed last night in order to sleep. Now there were no boom boxes growling in the background, and he sighed, breathing in the smell of cooled-down concrete

and fumes from the cars snarling at each other during the A.M. rush on the Cross Bronx expressway. "New York," he said simply. It was home.

He slipped his heavy gray habit over his head (the outfit was comfortable now but he knew it would get hotter as the day wore on), wrapped a length of rope around his waist for a belt, kissed the cross of his rosary, which had been lying beside his bed mat, and looped the brown beads around the rope. Kneeling down, he fastened his sandals, and he was dressed.

Going downstairs, he slipped into the church, got to his knees and bent down, kissing the holy ground where the presence of the Lord resided. Getting up, he ambled over to his usual pew, genuflected and sat, pulling his hood deeply over his face to block out the view of the world, and began to focus his mind on his God.

He resisted the impulse to look up when he heard others coming into the church for the Office of Readings.

By the time prayer started, he was completely focused. After the Office was over, there was an hour of silent meditation, then Morning Prayer, then Mass. The friary prayer schedule was fairly rigorous. So it came as a total surprise to him, after prayer was over, to discover Nora sitting in the pew behind him. Not that he had forgotten about her, but he hadn't really expected to see her until about nine in the morning. It wasn't even eight.

She was still looking drained and apprehensive, but she smiled briefly at him in greeting, though she still seemed a bit uncertain. There was a prayer book on the seat of the pew beside her, and he wondered if she had been there for the entire two hours of prayer. Brother Herman came to her and leaned over to tell her something. Brother Leon guessed that he was inviting her to breakfast. She smiled and shook her head.

Apparently she didn't have much of an appetite, because she appeared at the refectory door only after they were finishing breakfast, a pale figure with her white skin and yellow dress.

"Good morning. Want something to eat?" Matt asked her after they had all said good morning, but she shook her head.

"I'm fine, thank you. I just came to find out when I could start helping with the cleaning."

"Not for about fifteen minutes. Would you like to change into some other clothes?" Brother Herman asked her.

Nora glanced down at her yellow dress, and half-smiled. "You're all wearing the same thing you wore yesterday. Isn't that the routine here?"

Several of the friars laughed. "If you'd like to help with the cleaning, perhaps you'd better change out of that nice dress. We do have quite a bit of donated clothing in the vestibule, as you probably saw," Brother Herman said. "You're welcome to help yourself. Most of it is men's clothing, but there might be some women's things or something you could wear."

“Thank you,” Nora said. “I’ll go take a quick look right now.” She turned and vanished into the hallway like a ghost.

Leon was about to say something to Brother Matt—some sort of joke about having a yellow dress for a habit—when he caught a glimpse of Brother George’s face. The older friar’s blue eyes were sullen beneath his red hair. Catching Leon’s eye, he scowled.

“I don’t think we should have a woman living in such close quarters to us,” he muttered. “This idea of giving mission opportunities to the laity is all very well, but I don’t think we should have them popping in on us like this.”

“Well, I guess the Fathers are still figuring out how this is going to work,” Leon said flippantly, referring to the priests—Father Bernard and Father Francis—by their house nicknames.

“These are the sorts of things that should be settled on right away,” Brother George said in a low voice. “Wasn’t it St. Francis who said, ‘The Lord sent me brothers but it may be the devil who has sent me sisters?’”

“Well, it turned out that the Lord sent him St. Clare,” Leon felt obliged to say.

Brother George sniffed. “This girl doesn’t seem like a potential nun to me.”

Thinking that it was better to end the conversation here, Leon got up. “Can I take your plate?” he asked, and the older brother handed it to him. Leon took the two plates and silverware into the kitchen. “Where are we meeting for class?” he asked Father Bernard. As the friary was still being renovated, the rooms for the novices’ classes changed occasionally.

“In the office,” Father Bernard said, referring to the room where Father Francis paid bills and kept accounts. “We’ll start in a few minutes.”

Leon nodded and started to the chapel to get his notebook. On the way, he met Brother Herman coming from answering the door. “So what’s up for this afternoon?” he asked Brother Herman, who was in charge of setting the work schedule.

“We’re working in the high school again,” Brother Herman said as they went down the passageway to the church. “I suppose Nora can help us out there. I should find something for her to work on now.”

They saw Nora emerge from the vestibule holding some folded-up clothing, and Brother Herman said heartily, “Did you find anything?”

“I did, thank you,” Nora said. She hesitated. “The vestibule—did you—could you use—well, *it* could use some straightening out.”

“Yeah, to put it mildly,” Leon said. “Looks like a truck sort of dumped it everywhere, doesn’t it?”

“I could go through it for you,” Nora said.

Brother Herman went into the vestibule. “It would be great if you could put them into different piles—shirts, coats, pants, that kind of thing. And all

the women's and children's clothing in separate piles—we'll send them over to the women's shelter downtown. Eventually I'd like to get things sorted out by size."

"I could do that easily," Nora said. So they left her to her work, and Leon wondered if she wanted to be alone as he retrieved his notebook from his usual pew.

"Do you think there's more to her problems than just a mugging?" he asked Brother Herman abruptly as they walked away.

Before the older brother could reply, there was a banging at the front door of the friary. "The day is starting," Brother Herman said with a sigh. All day long, people knocked at the door of the friary, asking for food, money, clothing, or just because they needed someone to talk to.

"It's probably Fernando," Brother Herman muttered. "Father Bernard said he would be coming by to get some shoes. Why don't you sit with him while I find him some?"

Leon nodded. It was an unspoken rule that most visitors were not to be left alone in the friary, as too many of them would steal anything that wasn't nailed down.

As Brother Herman greeted the old man at the door with a smile and listened to that morning's list of woes, Leon let his mind wander. It occurred to him that they had left Nora alone in the vestibule, sorting clothes, and wondered if that was wise. *We don't know much about her*, Brother George had said. He admitted the older brother was right.

III

A girl with hair as black as night and skin as white as snow...

The airplane roared through the clouds over the Atlantic Ocean, and Bear, knowing he should be sleeping, but unable to force his stubborn body to comply with the change of time zones, drifted in a stupor of memories. He was seated by the window, and looking out at the billowing cloudscape below.

Drifting in a netherworld that was neither heaven nor earth, he hung suspended, not sure of where he was supposed to be. He couldn't do anything else until he got home, and the anxiety of wanting to do something and not being able to do anything put him into a coma of inaction that paralleled the larger inaction of his life.

He hoped, he prayed Blanche would be there at her mother's house when he got back, a little surprised to see him so soon, wondering if he had yet made up his mind. She had a right to know what to expect from him—

*Princess, like a rose is her cheek,
And her eyes are as blue as the sky,*

A fragment of a poem by Andrew Lang came back to him now. He had thought of it the first time he had ever seen her. That had been during his dark days, and rough living had made him rough. She hadn't known what to make of him when they first met, and couldn't figure out if he was a good person or a bad person. Being with her and her family had begun to civilize him again. He owed her a lot.

He thought about the contents of her letter. Maybe she was right. But he wasn't anxious to go digging into the squalid wastes of the past. Even after six months abroad, he wasn't ready.

Finally he broke from semi-sleep to realize that they were descending to New York City. The trip was over. He felt lassitude and resignation hanging all over him like weary and petulant children, and tried to shake the feelings off. His body thought it was seven o'clock in the evening, but on this side of the ocean, it was merely one in the afternoon. It was going to be a long day.

Fish closed the book he had been perusing and thrust it into his carryon. "Rats. I forgot to get Rose a postcard of something or other in Rome she wanted."

Bear smiled. Blanche's younger sister Rose had an unusual relationship with his brother. "What did she want?"

"Some sort of Sibyl from the Sistine Chapel." Fish took off his hat and rubbed his hair wearily. "You know she was going to be in some sort of play this summer?"

"Yes, Blanche told me. She got the lead in a summer stock production of *Through the Looking Glass*. She was playing Alice."

"Yes, that's it. Well, apparently it was critically important to her that I attend one of the performances. When she found out I was going to be out of the country and would miss the whole thing, she said I'd have to come back with a postcard of this Sistine Chapel Sibyl thing or—or something terrible would happen to me. Such as her never speaking to me again. And now I've forgotten the postcard altogether. So I suppose that's the end of my association with Miss Rose Brier."

"Well, allow me to be your savior," Bear said, feeling in his jacket pocket. "I got her one."

"You did?"

Bear held up the postcard of the Delphic Sibyl from the Sistine Chapel. "She asked me about it too. She said she had asked you but was sure you would forget."

"That redheaded girl knows me uncannily well," Fish muttered, taking the card and dropping his hat back on his head. "Thank you. I think."

They passed through the ordeal of customs and security with the usual hassles. After they reclaimed their luggage, Bear said, "Your car is back home, right? So I guess we need to call a taxi." He started looking around for a pay phone.

"I'll take care of it," Fish pulled out a cell phone, turned it on, and dialed. He glanced at Bear after he had made the call. "You really should have your own cell phone, you know. I don't know how I'd survive without one."

"I prefer to be low-tech," Bear said.

His brother rolled his eyes. "So our plan of attack is to drop off our luggage and get over to Blanche's house, right?"

"Yes," Bear said. "I have the keys to her house back at our apartment. Let me try her number again." He glanced around the airport terminal again, irrationally, as if he expected Blanche to be there, waiting for him. But of course, she wasn't.

There was no answer at the Briers' number, so the brothers went down to meet their taxi. Bear gave the driver his address and said, "Get us there as fast as you can."

He regretted his words soon, as the driver took this as free license to commit even more traffic violations than was usual for New York cabbies. As their taxi wove wildly in and out of traffic down the highway, Bear's anxiety over finding Blanche took on a faster tempo.

"Actually seems calmer here after the traffic in Rome," Fish said jokingly, holding onto the door and the back of the seat. "Why do you have the keys to Blanche's house?"

"Her mom gave me a set when I watched their house for them over New Year's, before I took off for Europe," Bear said. "Don't you remember?"

Fish shook his head. "I don't know why I'm surprised. I've seen that pile of metal you carry around in your pocket. Looks like you've kept every key that's ever passed through your hands."

"It's been useful," Bear said, feeling heaviness come over him again.

"I'd rather just stick with my set of skeleton keys," Fish said. He glanced at his brother, and attempted to change the subject. "Father Raymond said an international trip changes a person forever. So, do you feel changed?"

"I probably won't notice until this crisis is over." Trying to take his mind off the tension, Bear looked out the window at the passing buildings. "One thing for certain—most structures over here are pretty ugly by comparison with some of the old buildings I saw in Germany and France and Italy. Could you believe the beauty of some of that stonework in Venice?"

"Stonemasonry and stone carving is a dying craft in America, or so I'm told," Fish observed. "Even if we wanted to make buildings like those, we wouldn't know how."

“That’s a shame,” Bear said, and turned that thought over in his mind for the rest of the ride.

As they pulled up at their apartment building, Fish said suddenly, “Blanche was watering our plants for us. I wonder when the doorman saw her last.”

“Nobody gets by Ahmed,” Bear agreed. They had known the doorman since they had been children. “He notices everyone who comes into the building.” He got out of the taxi while Fish paid the driver, and hurried inside to speak to the short Arabian man in his dark green doorman’s uniform.

“Ahmed, have you seen Blanche Brier lately?” he asked, forgetting that the man would be surprised to see him after so long an absence.

The man started and dropped his eyes. “No,” he said. “I have not seen her since Friday.” He seemed distinctly uncomfortable.

“When you saw her, did she seem—upset or anything?” Bear asked, a bit awkwardly.

“No, she—well, she seemed as she usually is,” the doorman said. “Excuse me. I must go speak to the manager.”

Fish raised an eyebrow as the man hurried off. Bear was bewildered.

“Something’s bothering him,” Fish remarked, getting into the elevator, lugging his bag. “Not at all like him.”

“I should have at least said hello first,” Bear recollected his manners. “Maybe I just startled him.”

“Humph.”

The elevator reached the top floor, and Fish pulled out his own keys authoritatively. He unlocked and opened the cream-paneled door to their penthouse apartment and then paused, as though he was an animal who had caught a strange scent.

Bear passed him with barely a glance around. “Grab your car keys and let’s go.”

He hurried up the staircase that curved around the living room to the loft bedrooms at the top, tossed his luggage in his bedroom, and, rummaging around in his top dresser drawer, retrieved his key ring, which he had left here while he had been gone in Europe. As Fish had remarked, it was pretty heavy. One of these days, he should thin it out...

“Bear,” Fish said from downstairs. “Something’s wrong. Look around.”

Struck by his voice, Bear walked to the staircase balcony and looked down at the beautifully furnished apartment that had been his mother’s, now a significant part of their inheritance from her. It was a gracious living space, which his mother had designed herself and poured out her artistic talent into creating. Bear had been grateful that his father hadn’t changed it during the time when it had been in his possession.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in a low voice.

"I don't know—yet," Fish said, striding past the exquisite European Madonna panel hanging in the entranceway. He paused and looked around the living room as though he were afraid to go in, in case he tripped an unseen alarm. "My antennae are going crazy. Someone's been here since I left."

"Blanche has—" Bear said, and, spurred on by a sudden worry, he turned and searched through the bedrooms and bathrooms on the top floor, looking for what he dreaded finding—Blanche's body, wounded or even dead. But there was no sign of her.

He returned from his hurried search, telling himself to calm down, only to find his brother prowling through the rooms like a wary cat sniffing a strange dog.

"Something is wrong, but I don't know what," Fish was saying to himself again.

"Is something missing?" Bear asked, coming down the steps.

"If so, I haven't figured it out," Fish said. He stared at the rose-brocade antique sofa and suddenly crossed the oriental carpet and pointed.

"Someone's been under that sofa cushion," he said softly.

Bear looked at the seat cushion. It was slightly askew. Feeling odd, he looked at the ivory chaise lounge. The seat cushion there was also slightly lifted, as though it hadn't been put back correctly.

"Maybe Blanche was looking under the cushions for something she dropped," Bear suggested.

"The pillows," Fish pointed at the two dark velvet pillows thrown haphazardly on the floor next to the mosaic-inlaid coffee table. "What girl leaves sofa pillows like that?"

"Blanche was the last person who had access to this place, right?" Bear asked. "You haven't called in a housekeeper or anything?"

"Not since I left, no," Fish said. "No point in cleaning a house no one's living in, is there?" He glared around the room. "Someone's ransacked this place and put everything back," he said. "*But why?*"

"And how would they have gotten in?" Now on his guard, Bear stepped into the kitchen to see if anything was amiss. He looked at the herbs growing in the carved boxes arranged at the base of the kitchen's floor-to-ceiling windows. The ones Blanche had been watering. They looked slightly askew, as though someone had dug them out of their pots and dropped them back in without much care. "Look at these."

Fish fingered the plants gently, and then got up. "Check out that cabinet door," he pointed. The cabinet door over the refrigerator was slightly open. "Not shut right. And neither is that one over there," he said, pointing to another cabinet over the sink.

There was a knock on the door, and Fish and Bear instantly pivoted towards the door. Bear's heart pounded as he walked to the door and opened it.

"Arthur Denniston?" asked the tall, brown-haired man who stood there, pulling out a badge. There were two other men behind him, hands in their jackets, possibly covering their weapons.

"Yes," Bear nodded almost automatically.

"I'm Morris Tang, special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration." He looked at Fish. "Are you Benedict Denniston?"

"That's correct," Fish folded his arms. "Is there a problem?"

The man gave a wry smile. "You are the owners of this apartment?"

"Joint owners, yes," Bear said. *It's either bad news, or trouble.* At first he had thought it was bad news—had Blanche been found dead? —But the sight of plainclothes policemen gave him an entirely different feeling. He had been here before.

"I'm here to advise you of the fact that federal agents found caches of controlled substances hidden in the cushions of your living room furniture this past Saturday, August the seventh," the man said. He pulled out a photograph, and Bear saw a picture of a man standing in front of their apartment door, holding up a plastic bag containing dozens of blue and pink pills.

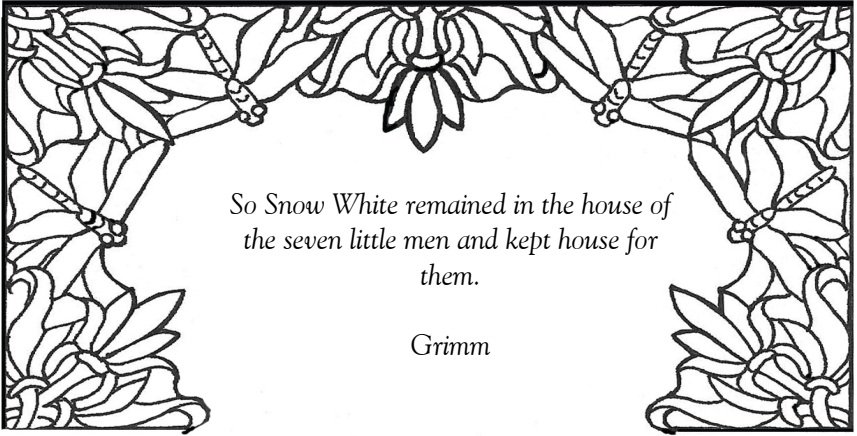
"What the heck—" Bear said angrily. He glanced at his brother's face, and saw Fish had gone pale.

"Oh my God," Fish said quietly. "I didn't think it was this."

The agent looked at them carefully. "The pills in the photograph are metadylene-dioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA, otherwise known as Adam, or Ecstasy. MDMA is an illegal substance on the federal schedule. As the owners of the apartment, the government is holding you liable for the contents. I have arrest warrants here for both of you."

Bear felt a rush of strong emotion, which he crushed quickly and forcefully. "The drugs aren't ours," he said. "I'd like to call our lawyer. Someone's framed us."

Again.



Chapter Four

Having fled down the labyrinthine ways, breathing hard, knowing it was a risk to come here, she hurried up to the house and knocked on the door.

A nurse came to the door, not—she noticed—the same nurse that had been there last time. His nurses had been changed again.

“Is Ms. Fairston in?” she asked cautiously.

“No ma’am,” said the nurse, looking at her suspiciously.

“Can I see Mr. Fairston? Please? It’s very important.”

“He’s not seeing anyone.”

“Please. He told me to come and see him. Tell him Blanche is here.”

“Just a moment.”

Waiting, the girl unaccountably shivered in the summer’s heat, praying that her chance would succeed.

In a few minutes, the nurse returned and said, “Come with me.”

She followed the nurse across the black-and-white marble-tiled floor and up the steps.

“How is he?” she whispered.

“As well as can be expected for a man in his condition. I’m told he hasn’t been out of bed in a month.”

Then she’s been told wrong, the girl said to herself. But as usual, she was silent.

She walked over the thick carpet of the hallway, trying to stop her hands from trembling. If only she still had her purse to hold onto. She had been fortunate to find a few subway tokens in her pocket for the ride over.

The nurse led her into the small bedroom at the back of the house where a television chattered, and left, shutting the door behind her. The girl noticed that she barely glanced at the frail figure on the bed. *Not good help*, the girl thought, leaning over to straighten the twisted pillows on the bed.

"Blanche. It really is you," Mr. Fairston said, blinking his left eye and twisting to sit up. Only one side of his face was active. The other side was frozen, motionless, a prefigurement of death. With his left hand, he turned off the television with his remote. "What happened to your hair?" He spoke with difficulty, but the girl was used to his accent by now, and had no trouble understanding him.

The girl tucked a stray strand behind her ear and tried to figure out how to answer. But the reality of what she had to tell him appeared to her now in all its ugliness, and she didn't know where to start. To put off the hard part, she checked the glass on his bed tray and found it was bone dry. She stepped to the small refrigerator in the corner to fill it from the pitcher she had suggested keeping there.

"Thank you—how did you know I wanted that?" the man asked gratefully, taking it with his left hand. His right was shrunken and lay useless by his side. One side of his body was paralyzed. His gray hair, as usual, was bushy and unruly.

She smiled as she gave him the water. "Those medications for your tumor make you thirsty. It says so on the labels."

He tilted his head to the left. "You're such a caregiver. How do you remember these things?"

She warmed at the compliment. "Perhaps it's in the genes. Remember, my mother's a nurse."

"That's right—I keep forgetting that."

"Plus, whenever I come to read to you, you always ask for something to drink, even though I'm the one doing the reading. Hasn't this nurse been making sure you're hydrated?"

Half the man's face grimaced in an expression the girl found comical. "She says I'd be better off getting water intravenously, but I can't stand IVs." He paused. "This isn't your usual day to come by, is it?"

The girl shook her head, and swallowed. "Actually, I am in a bit of trouble. I thought I'd, well, find someone to talk to..." She started to pick up the books and magazines that had dropped from the bed to the floor.

The concern that had been in the man's eyes returned, and his voice became lower. "My wife told me you had been arrested."

"What do you mean?" She turned back to him, her mind reeling.

Mr. Fairston convulsed in a cough. "She said you were caught with drugs at your workplace, and with thousands of dollars of stolen money."

Fortunately her hands were busy, and she managed to keep her voice calm. “Well, she’s mistaken, isn’t she? I admit things have been difficult the last few days, but I haven’t been arrested. If I had, I wouldn’t be here with you, would I?”

“Is that the truth, Blanche?”

“Yes.” She sounded confident, but inside she was shaking.

The man rubbed his head with his good hand, and stared at her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I should be so suspicious. I guess it’s just that...I suppose I can blame the medication. Or the condition. You’re going to think I’m paranoid.”

“Well, sometimes it is hard to know what to believe these days.” The girl finished tidying up the magazines and put them in a stack on a nearby shelf, using the time to collect herself. Now even this friendship was in jeopardy.

“But my wife seemed so sure,” the man said wonderingly. “How could there be a mistake?”

“I don’t know,” the girl shrugged, glanced at the mirror on the wall, and saw that she was paler than ever. She quickly looked away. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrible,” the man said with a half smile, trying to put aside the conversation, but she could see the doubt hovering in his eyes. “Not going gently into that good night...” he quoted Dylan Thomas again and sighed. “I guess it gets closer every day. The realization that there’s not much time left for me. Before the tumor takes over and my brain goes blank. I—” he paused. “I was quite upset to hear this about you. But perhaps it was only a dream, after all. Some trick of my brain.”

“Perhaps.” She forced a smile.

“I don’t like it when that happens,” he said, his eyes looking up at the ceiling. “It’s been happening more and more often lately. I don’t like it when I can’t trust reality any more. It scares me. I wish I could stop it. But—”

She was reminded of how it had been to lose her own father to cancer, realizing that the gentle giant of her childhood memory had shrunk into a weak, dying man—a man who had eventually become a corpse, and then a memory. Suddenly, being here was like losing her father all over again.

And he couldn’t help her, after all. More alone than ever, she had to go beyond herself or risk cracking. “Would you mind if I prayed with you, Mr. Fairston?”

“Still berating me for being an agnostic?” he smiled at her wryly.

“Of course not. Just being myself.”

He leaned back. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just listen. It’s—peaceful.”

She prayed, on the edge of that darkness and confusion. She prayed an entire decade of the rosary, feeling dry and barren within, hearing the faint reverberation of her voice on the walls in that cheerless sickroom. This was

how it had been, for a long time now—comforting others, responding, smiling, going through the motions of her life, but inside feeling nothing but the echo of emptiness. The fear began to come upon her, and she struggled to keep her composure.

But as usual, the prayers seemed to soothe him. He stroked her hand as she finished. “You know, sometimes I think you’re like the daughter I should have had, if I had had a daughter. I’m glad you came by, Blanche.” His eyelids were growing heavy.

“I am too,” she said, and this was sincere. She had always enjoyed visiting the elderly, but Mr. Fairston had become more than a work of mercy. He had become a friend.

*If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one life the aching
Or heal one pain
...I shall not live in vain.*

“You left your book on Emily Dickinson here again,” he said, rousing himself and reaching shakily for the book on the bedside table. “I was looking at it while you were gone.”

“Keep it,” she said. “It’s a gift.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. Keep it, until—”

There was a silence, the usual breaking-off of sentences. It was understood what the silence meant.

“I’m sure my wife will get it back to you. She’s been saying I shouldn’t see people, that it hastens my decline. But if you want to come, even if I’m not responding—I think I would like to hear you reading, still.”

“I’ll be back to read it to you,” she said. “I promise.”

He took her hand and squeezed something into it. “I know you will. In case you need it—” His voice grew faint, and she saw he was falling asleep.

Looking down at her hand briefly, she saw a door key.

“Thank you. I’ll come back.” She put it in her pocket—later on she would put it on her neck chain—and got to her feet, still stiff from her bruises. Gently she laid her hand on his forehead. His lips moved, but he didn’t speak again. Her eyes traveled over the untidy and inexplicably dirty room, and she wished she felt safe enough to stay and clean it more thoroughly. How did the nurse stand it?

She got down on her hands and knees again and picked up the used tissues, bits of plastic wrappers, and paper scraps that littered the carpet, and put them into the overflowing wastebasket. She packed it down to keep it

neater, and while doing so found a medicine bottle, white with its label missing. It wasn't empty—there were two ordinary looking white pills in it. At first she thought it had fallen from the cluttered bedside table, but as she looked at the medication and vitamins there, she could see this bottle was different from the others. Perhaps the white bottle was some sort of pain medication he had been taken off. After some hesitation, she thrust it into her pocket. *When I see my mom again, I'll ask her*, she thought fleetingly. Then, *Mom has no idea what's going on with me now*.

Quietly she let herself out of the room. Alone, she glanced around the dim hallway uneasily. She didn't like this house, as upscale as it was. At least she had managed to come during a time when Mr. Fairston was relatively alone. She didn't want to meet—

At the base of the staircase was a huge mirror, trimmed in stained glass flowers, and dragonflies. Its vast glassy surface had the smoky gray look of an antique. After coming down the steps, she couldn't help stopping to look at her reflection, and saw a girl with a pale face and unevenly-cut soot-black hair. Whose eyes were still red. *I look haunted*, she thought. *Not beautiful. Not any more. Surely no one would still think I was beautiful*.

"This has been a looking-glass summer," her sister had said flippantly, referring to the play she was in. "I feel like it's taken over my life."

Yes, that was how she felt—as though she had vanished through a looking-glass into a mirror-image world which seemed the same as normal life, but where everything was backwards. Where she wasn't even sure who she was any longer. She didn't even think she looked the same.

Blanche has been replaced by a fugitive from justice, a girl who's too scared to tell others her own name.

She paused, as though she had heard something close to her, and stared into the depths of the mirror. Once again, she felt it—the sense of a malignant presence studying her. As though the mirror were alive, with a personality—a—

Just another doorway into madness, she thought, and pulled her eyes away. Her imagination had become her enemy lately, and she hurried to the door and let herself out.

II

After the morning class was done, Leon had stopped by the vestibule to see Nora, but there was no sign of her.

"Hey, where's Nora?" he called to Brother Herman, who was busy planning the renovation and repairs on the church.

Brother Herman held up a piece of sketch paper to the light and said, "Hm? Nora? She left some time ago. She said she had an errand to run and would be back soon."

"Oh," Leon said, and shrugged aside his suspicions. *Why shouldn't she run an errand if she needs to?* he scolded himself. Brother George was sweeping the aisles with a broom, and looked over his shoulder at Leon. But seeing Leon's noncommittal expression, he turned away.

Leon's attention was distracted by a knock on the friary door. He started towards it, but Brother Matt, who was on porter duty, emerged from the refectory and got to the door first.

At the door was a tall, agitated black woman in a short denim skirt, holding a kid by each hand. Her scowl changed to relief when the friars opened the door, and she burst into a torrent of Jamaican *patois* mixed with English. Matt held up his hands with a confused smile.

"Hold on—let me get someone who can help you—Le—! Oh! Here you are," Matt started to bellow as Leon elbowed him aside.

"Yeah, you need the expert here—Aay, Marisol! *Wha a gwan?*" Leon queried, hitching up his rope belt. "Aay Donovan! Aay Jacky!" The kids grinned and started reaching for the dangling knots and the rosary beads.

Marisol yanked them back firmly with a sharp word. "*Nu bodda di priest! Dress back! Mi grammadda a visit, an shi need fi catch one flight tomorrow, but di taxi-man too tief! —*"

Leon listened attentively, "Her mom needs a ride to the airport," he relayed to Father Bernard, who had come out of the classroom. "They can't afford the taxi." The kids were reaching for his rosary again. "It's all right," he assured their mother, who barked, "*Mi seh no touch it!*"

"What time does she need to go?" Father Bernard asked, and looked at the woman.

"*Wha times yuh need fi leave ya?*" Brother Leon queried.

"Tomorrow. Two o'clock," she said.

"I think someone can do it," Father Bernard said, glancing at the novices. "How about you two take her tomorrow?"

"Sure," Brother Leon said, glancing at Matt, who hesitated.

"Yes," he said at last. Leon guessed Matt had something else planned, but as they were novices, they had to obey the novice master's orders.

Leon, who had his hands full with the kids, said to Marisol, "*Nuh worry. And where do you live again?*"

While the woman talked and gestured, Leon found his eye caught by a white car driving slowly along the streets. Nice cars driving in this area usually were either lost or belonged to drug dealers. But the dealers he knew of didn't drive white cars.

He focused in on what the woman was saying, and by the time he had gotten a sense of where she lived, the car had moved on.

“High school duty this afternoon,” Father Bernard said, closing the door after they had said their farewells. “Let’s go start Midday Prayer first.”

After praying Midday Prayer, the friars who were in the friary gathered for lunch. Leon noticed that there wasn’t much for lunch, just bean stew. And not much of it.

“We’re almost out,” Brother George said, scraping the last of the pan. “I think this was supposed to be dinner, too.”

“God will provide for His poor,” Father Bernard said easily. “Someone might send a food donation soon. And we can always fast.”

After lunch, Leon helped Brother Herman gather cleaning supplies and mops and started over to the high school to continue the massive project of cleaning the abandoned building. To Leon’s surprise, Nora emerged from the vestibule suddenly, wearing jeans and an oversized red shirt.

“Hey, there you are!” he exclaimed. “How’d your errand go?”

She seemed surprised at the question, and dropped her eyes. “As well as I could expect,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t get so far with the vestibule. Can I help you now?”

“Certainly. Follow the train,” Brother Herman said, starting down the narrow hallway. “We’re working in the high school today.”

Leon gestured for Nora to go ahead of him. “You had lunch?” he queried as they walked down the aisle of the church.

“I’m fine. I had Danish and toast for breakfast in my room and I just had the rest for lunch,” she said. “Father Francis sent them down to me last night.”

“Day-old bread and pastries. We usually get tons of them from the bakeries,” Brother Leon agreed. “Pretty much a staple around here. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” she said, a bit distantly.

“You look fine,” he said, not believing her.

She glanced over at him. “I feel alone,” she said flatly.

“Ah,” Brother Leon said. “Well, give yourself a reality check. You’re not alone.”

That seemed to get through to her, and she said quietly, “I suppose you’re right.”

They followed Brother Herman out the back door of the sacristy, and walked down some steps into the courtyard linking the church, friary, and high school. Brother Herman unlocked the door to the high school.

“You said this was a new order?” Nora queried.

“We’re part of a reform movement of the Franciscans,” Leon explained. “I was in one of the established Franciscan orders before, as a novice. But

when I heard about Father Francis and Father Bernard starting this new order, I left to join this one.”

Brother Herman pulled open the creaking metal door, then stepped aside to let Leon, Matt, and Nora through. “We’re cleaning out the classrooms so we can partition them into bedrooms. Let’s start on the top floor and work our way down. That way, hopefully we’ll be in the lower, cooler halls by the time it starts to really get hot.”

“It’s hot already,” Matt pointed out.

The high school buildings had four stories, and just about all of them were in poor condition after a year of disuse. After they had trooped upstairs, Brother Herman looked around while Leon and Matt opened the windows to get some air circulating throughout the rooms. “Okay, I guess the first thing to do is get all the furniture into the hallways and stack it up. Then we’ll mop.”

For the next half hour, they worked at pushing all the school desks into the hallway and stacking them in piles. Soon Brother Charley came up to help them, setting the metal desks carefully into piles that towered up in the hallway. “Careful not to knock any of these over,” he warned.

“Excellent!” Brother Herman said, wiping his brow as they finished clearing the room. “Now for cleaning the bathrooms.”

The group moved into the third floor girls’ bathrooms to start. Charley took the broom and started sweeping, and Matt and Leon took the mops. “What should I do?” Nora asked.

Brother Herman gave her a bottle of window cleaner and a rag. “How about you do the sills and panes? I’ll do the radiators.”

Leon was bursting with curiosity about where Nora had been and what had brought her here in the first place. Since Nora was looking pensive, he decided to try to draw her out of herself. *She’s got to talk about what’s bothering her*, he thought.

“So Nora, what do you think of our new order so far?” Leon asked, as he started on a tough spot on the gray and brown tiled floor.

“Well, I’ll say one thing. You certainly are—different from what I thought friars would be like,” she said, with a trace of a smile.

Brother Leon immediately put an enraptured look on his face and began to chant in Latin. Brother Herman didn’t miss a beat and joined in.

Matt made a face. “Hasn’t anyone told you Franciscans can’t sing?” he groaned. “Don’t even try.”

Leon turned the chant into a rap beat and began to cut loose with the mop until Nora laughed, which was what he wanted. “You just haven’t been around very many religious, that’s all,” he told her.

“Well,” Nora said, wiping off her window, “I certainly didn’t expect you to take me in. It’s very generous of you to let me stay here.”

“Well, we needed someone to test-drive our hospitality rooms to make sure they’re shipshape,” Leon said flippantly. “So we need you to tell us, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the vestibule storage room compared with the bedrooms in the basement in terms of comfort level? Otherwise the homeless and our volunteers will be sneaking around in the middle of the night to find our storage rooms. It could be a problem, you know.”

She almost smiled, and said, considering, “Actually, they were both pretty comfortable.”

“Glad to hear that. We’ll send the data to our marketing department,” Brother Herman said solemnly.

Leon had been hoping to follow up with a question about how she had come to their house in the first place, but Nora cut him off at the pass.

“Can I ask you something?” She stared down at the gray water dotted by white bubbles in Leon’s bucket.

“Shoot,” Brother Herman said easily, squirting another section of vent.

“Does it bother you if I don’t tell you much about myself?”

She knew what I was about to ask, Leon thought. He glanced at Brother Herman.

“Sure it’s all right,” the older friar assured her. “Just tell us if you need any help.”

“Thanks. I’d like to tell you more, but—I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. I guess if you knew the circumstances, I keep thinking you might feel differently—” she pushed back a strand of ragged hair with the back of her hand. “It’s a very odd situation.” Leon noticed her hand was trembling.

“We don’t have to know everything about your situation. If you want to tell us—if you feel it would help you—that’s fine. But don’t put yourself under pressure,” Brother Herman said.

“Thanks,” she said, wiping away something from her face, maybe just a bit of over-spray from the window cleaner.

III

The day of his transformation, there had been policemen at his high school....

...Arthur caught a glimpse of an officer in the principal’s office as he passed, and a thin current of nervousness passed through him. He wondered why he should be nervous.

He was opening his personal locker when his backpack toppled out onto the floor, and smoothly, a plastic packet slid out of it. A white plastic packet. Frowning, he dropped to his knees to examine it. It

was a clear plastic zip lock bag, with what looked like Styrofoam balls inside. Except they were heavy.

Picking it up, he stared at it, trying to remember if he had put it there, or what type of joke this could be. It was then that he noticed the feet of the policeman standing over him.

As they walked into the principal's office, he saw his fifteen-year-old younger brother Ben, who was fuming. "I've never seen this before in my life!" Ben snapped at the officer, tossing a bag on the table as Arthur came in. "This is ridiculous! Someone's set me up!"

"Like who? Who would put it in your desk?"

"I don't know—one of the other kids, I suppose." Ben rubbed the acne on his face and shook his head vigorously. "All I know is, it's not mine."

"Do you know anyone else who uses crack?"

"No. Not anyone that I know of. This is ludicrous. I've never even *seen* crack before. The officer who dragged me in here had to tell me what it was."

"You claim that you don't even recognize the substance in the packet?"

"It could be sugar balls for all I know. Do I sound like a user? Can I call my father's lawyer?"

The officer paused as his partner led Arthur into the principal's office.

"What's going on?" Arthur asked.

Ben rolled his eyes and glared at the officer. "What a mess," he murmured.

"Hold a minute while I take your brother into the other room," the officer said, putting a heavy hand on Ben's shoulder. Ben obeyed, although Arthur could see he was still steaming.

"Sit down," the officer said. He tossed the plastic packet on the desk in front of Arthur. "I'm going to inform you of your rights, and then perhaps you could tell me what's going on here."

Arthur stared at the pure white crystals. "I have no idea."

"Boy, this stinks," Fish murmured.

Bear was inclined to agree. They sat in the waiting area of the district courtroom, awaiting the magistrate who was going to hear the complaint against them. After that, they had been told that they would be sent to the jail for the next three days until the court decided whether or not to post bail. Bear was still trying to adjust to the idea that he couldn't just get up and walk out to Blanche's house to find her. He was under arrest.

"I knew something was eating Ahmed," Fish said softly, shifting position on the hard bench. "That's what was going on. The manager told him to look out for us. Poor guy."

"Just doing his job," Bear said. He looked at the agents who were flanking them. "Can't we have the cell phone back to make one phone call?"

The man shook his head gruffly.

"I thought we were allowed one phone call," Fish said pointedly.

"The timing of your one phone call is at the discretion of the Agency," the man said. "The magistrate will call you at any minute. When they bring you to the jail tonight, you'll be able to make as many phone calls as you please."

Bear persisted. "It's an emergency. It could very well have some bearing on our case. Can't you speak to someone—?"

The agent glared at him. "The timing of your phone call is at the discretion of the Agency," he repeated warningly.

"Calm down," Fish whispered to Bear, who was still bristling. "They've been about as friendly as we can expect."

"Friendly?"

"Well, at least they didn't handcuff us like they did last time," Fish said cheerfully.

"I guess we can be glad about that," Bear admitted. Even though the memory was five years old, it still made him wince.

* * *

Five years ago, he had become an outcast. Abruptly, with no forewarning. In his school sweater, uniform shirt and skewed tie, he struggled into the police car with difficulty because his hands were pinned behind his back and thought, *They've got to realize we didn't do this. We're innocent. They'll find fingerprints on our lockers that will show who really planted the drugs. They can't really believe we're drug dealers...*

He knew that almost everyone in the high school was looking on, and the humiliation was excruciating. As his grim-faced younger brother was pushed into the car beside him, he was trying to be optimistic. *Dad won't let them do this to us. Even if he doesn't care much about us, at least he'll be concerned about the family reputation, and he'll find out the truth. He's got to know we wouldn't do this.*

But his father had not listened to their explanations, and had refused to believe them. A coldness and fear had started to grow in him then, a realization that they were in serious danger and that no one of influence was going to be putting themselves to the trouble of finding out the truth of the situation...

* * *

"One thing is different now," Bear said to himself, and realized he had spoken aloud.

"What did you say?" Fish asked.

"Our dad disinherited us last time, but he gave us back our money from Mom's estate when we cleared our names. This time, we can pay our own bail."

"Yeah. Great. At least you're not paying for tuition like I am," Fish muttered. "You think they'll let us out on bail?"

"They will. They've got to," Bear said. "We have to find Blanche. I'm sure her disappearance has something to do with this mess."

Fish drummed his fingers on his knee. "No juvenile record this time. If we get convicted on this charge, we'll be living with the record for the rest of our lives. Let's call Charles Russell first. The sooner we talk to our lawyer, the happier I'll be."

"I wanted to call Mrs. Foster and ask her to go over to the Briers' house for us," Bear said.

"Not a bad idea," Fish said. He looked up as a brown-haired man holding a briefcase approached them. It was the same agent who had arrested them, Mr. Tang.

"While we're waiting, I'd like to present you with a few facts and in return, I'd like to ask you a few questions," the man said, sitting down and taking out a file folder.

"You can tell us whatever you like, but we're not going to answer any questions without our lawyer here," Fish said pleasantly.

As though he hadn't heard them, Mr. Tang took out a piece of paper. "The manager of your apartment building found the drugs hidden under the sofa cushions on Friday, and called the authorities. We obtained a search warrant, and when we searched the apartment, we found the drugs just as he described them. Do you have any idea of how the drugs got there?"

"Hold on—why was the manager of the building searching our place to begin with?" Fish demanded. "We're owners, not renters. Looking over the apartment while the owners are away for several weeks is one thing—but going through the cracks in the sofa? Come on! What possessed him to do that?"

"He told us he had an anonymous call," Mr. Tang said. "And he figured he'd take a look for himself."

"An anonymous call?" Bear repeated. "What sort of justification is that?"

The agent nodded. "I'm merely repeating what he told us. Can I ask you to verify your statement here that you've never seen these drugs before?"

"Again, we're not going to say anything without our lawyer," Bear said flatly.

"Can you verify that neither of you have been in the apartment for the past week?"

"No comment," Fish said. "Sorry, not until we talk with Charles."

Mr. Tang, nonplussed, turned over another piece of paper. "According to the anonymous call the manager got, the drugs were being delivered to your apartment by a courier who had been making several deposits over the course of the past week. Do you have any knowledge of such a person?"

"Again, how is the manager justified in making all these accusations based on anonymous information?" Fish persisted.

"We have been working with the security of your building to try to determine who has had access to your apartment over these past weeks, and they have identified a suspicious person, not a resident, who made several trips to your apartment over the past week. As it turns out, this person is a suspect in the embezzlement of several thousand dollars from a Long Island restaurant."

He removed a photograph from his folder and passed it over to the brothers. "Do you recognize her?"

It was a black-and-white image captured from their apartment building's security camera by the elevator. The girl was turning, looking past her backpack over her shoulder as though she sensed someone behind her and was afraid. Her black hair and pale skin were all too familiar. Blanche.

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