

Chapter 1

THE TWO GIRLS were alone in their house that night. Inside was safe enough—the living room crammed full of the books and comfortable worn chairs from their old country home. But right beyond the window was New York City, vast and dirty and dangerous. And a howling January snowstorm was wreaking its fury upon it.

Where was Mother? It was almost an hour past the time when she should have been home. As Blanche gazed at the blank glass square of the living room window, she couldn't help thinking that if her father hadn't died, then her mother wouldn't have to go out to work in the middle of a blizzard. But of course, then everything would be different.

Rose obviously wasn't worried. In theory her red-haired sister was studying trigonometry, but in reality, she was chanting poetry and drawing lines around the border of her notebook, while her multicolored paisley skirt in a jewel box of colors—blue, purple, green, and gold—lay spread out around her in a perfect half-circle. Blanche seriously doubted that Rose had even noticed that Mother was late.

Blanche, prosaic in a pale yellow sweater and blue jeans, was wondering again if anything mattered—life, faith—specifically, finishing homework assignments. She twisted her fingers in a long strand of her poker straight black hair and tried to read Camus while ignoring the disturbing thoughts that

continually circled inside her head, like Matthew Arnold's ignorant armies clashing by night.

All at once she became aware of the noise of a car—two cars—turning down their street. One car pulled to a stop, and a car door slammed. Maybe that was Mother coming now: but Blanche forced herself to sit still and not jump up to run to the door like an anxious child.

But she did jump an instant later as tires squealed, a woman cried out, and a deep masculine voice yelled just outside their window. Pushing aside the quilt she had wrapped around her legs, she ran to the window, and lifted one of the blinds. The only things she could see in the swirling darkness outside were the window boxes, snow-covered humps where the rosebushes had been. Frustrated, she shoved aside the floral print curtains and the blinds and pressed her face to the pane, trying to decipher the darkness.

On the street, she could just make out their family car. Two shapes were moving around the vehicle. The one that appeared to be Mother was on the ground waving her arms, while the other larger shape loomed alarmingly over her.

"What's happening?" Rose was looking up from her book, finally aware that something was happening.

"Someone's outside with Mother."

Rose got to her feet in one flashing movement, jerked open the door, and dove into the little entranceway, where she began to undo the bolts on the house's outer door. In two seconds, she was creaking it open while Blanche stood, half-paralyzed, wondering if she should make for the door or the phone.

Rose yanked the door wide, letting the full-blast of the storm inside. "Mom!" she cried out.

"I'm all right, Rose," her mother's voice came reassuringly through the wind and snow.

Now Blanche felt safe enough to go to the door beside Rose as their mother came towards them, limping slightly, her arms full of wet plastic grocery bags, her long grey-brown braid trailing out the side of her damp parka hood. But behind her towered a tall dark form.

"A car skidded towards me when I was getting the groceries and I slipped," Mother explained. "I'm all right, mostly because

this man came to my rescue.” She smiled sheepishly at her two daughters and handed the bags to Blanche. Then she turned to the looming shape, which hung back in the dark, out of reach of the house light. “Come on in for a minute, sir.”

The shape approached the steps and started to set down the three plastic bags on their stoop. All Blanche could see of him was a dirty brown winter coat with a furry hood.

“Just bring those things inside,” Mother said, and the shape reluctantly straightened and shuffled up the steps behind them. A moment later, the bulky hooded form filled the little entranceway. Blanche could see that there was a face beneath the fur-trimmed hood—a red face, surprisingly young looking, with large brown eyes, a straight nose, and a scrub beard.

“Here’s your groceries,” his rough, deep voice sounded embarrassed.

“I really appreciate this,” Mother said, pushing the door shut, squelching the noise of the storm. “Could I give you some money?” She fumbled in her pockets for her wallet.

“No, I’m fine,” the hooded form murmured, ducking his head as Rose took the bags from his arms. “I just wanted to help. I couldn’t leave you on the ground there, could I?”

Mother eyed him critically. “You look as though you’ve been outside for a while. Why don’t you come in and warm up?”

Blanche, who had been carrying the groceries to the kitchen in order to be closer to the phone, heard this and groaned inwardly. Her mother was determined to be a ministering angel. If their dad had been alive, Blanche wouldn’t have minded so much. But her mother and sister seemed to forget the serious fact that their family was alone in New York City, with no strong masculine presence to defend them. It was foolhardy to bring this burly stranger into their home under these circumstances.

“I’m okay,” the man said. “I’ll be all right.” But he did seem a little reluctant to plunge back into the cold.

“At least get your breath back,” Mother said. “That was impressive, the way you dashed to pull me out of the way of that out-of-control car.”

“No problem,” the stranger muttered again. “I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Yes,” Mother said thoughtfully, looking him over. “What did you say your name was?”

“Bear,” the young man said, after a faint hesitation.

Blanche mentally raised an eyebrow. What kind of name was that?

“I very much appreciate what you did, Bear. If you don’t mind my asking —do you have someplace to go now to get out of the weather?”

“Oh, yeah. Don’t worry about me.”

“How far is it from here? Do you have to walk?”

“It’s a little ways, but I’ll make it.”

“How about if I give you a subway token? It’s very cold out there.” She turned to Rose, who was hanging on the doorjamb. “Go get me a token from the can, please.”

Rose dashed obediently to the kitchen but Blanche had already dug one out of the tin by the phone and handed it to her. Looking surprised, Rose took it.

“Bear, you’re only wearing canvas sneakers!” Mother exclaimed suddenly just as Rose swirled dramatically to her side with the token.

“Um, yeah.” Bear, who had been scuffing the snow from his feet, looked awkwardly down. Blanche saw that his feet were caked with frozen ice.

“Can you feel your feet?” Mother demanded, kneeling down to examine them.

Bear turned red but sounded nonchalant. “Well, sort of.”

“How long have your feet been numb?” asked Mother.

“Well, maybe a couple of hours.”

“That’s very dangerous! Bear, come inside this house at once,” Mother said imperiously, her blue eyes snapping with authority.

Bear hesitated, and then gingerly came into the living room. Mother shut the apartment door and waved him towards the couch.

“Take off your shoes while I get some water from the kitchen,” she said, hurrying past Blanche.

“Sit down,” Rose said, unconsciously imitating her mother’s anxious tone, and Bear meekly obeyed, sitting down on the very edge of the sofa. After a moment, he pushed off his hood,

revealing a head of long, dark, matted hair in twisted dreadlocks, and a familiar face.

Blanche drew in her breath sharply, and Rose, perched next to Bear on the arm of a chair, looked at her. *He's here*, Blanche thought numbly to herself. *We've let him in...*



Rose was feeling sorrier and sorrier for this person called Bear, who looked a bit overwhelmed at having been dragged into a strange living room and being told to take off his shoes. And right now, he couldn't even do that. He groped clumsily at his laces, and he paused to try to take his grease-spotted gloves off. It was clear he was having trouble getting enough of a grip to pull off the first glove.

"Are your hands frostbitten, too?" Rose asked, almost wanting to lean over and help him.

"I don't know. They hurt a bit, so that's a good sign, I guess," he said, easing the second glove off and then starting to work on his laces with red fingers. Rose, stealing a glance at him through the concealing drape of her hair, decided that he would be good looking if he weren't so scruffy.

"How long have you been outside?" Mother asked as she came into the living room with the basin full of water.

"Since sometime this morning."

Mother's brow was furrowed. "It's been terribly cold out. Several homeless people with severe frostbite were brought to the hospital today." She knelt on the floor and began to help him with his sneakers.

There was silence while she eased off his shoes and peeled off his grubby sports socks in her best emergency room manner. The large feet were red, and the tips of the toes were slightly blue. Rose found herself struck by how much larger a man's feet were than her own. She'd forgotten.

Mother shook her head. "My goodness, I'm glad I made you come inside. If you'd walked home, you'd have had some permanent damage." She sunk his feet into the basin of cold water and began to rub them gently. "I've got to warm your feet slowly or I'll damage the tissue."

The young man said nothing, but his face was as red as his feet. "I'm sorry you're having to be bothering about me—"

"Nothing to be sorry about. This water isn't cold enough. Rose, get me some ice cubes from the freezer."

When Rose went into the kitchen, Blanche slipped in next to her. "Rose. Mom shouldn't have let this guy in the house," she said in a whisper.

Rose stared at her sister, amazed at how rude she was being. "Why not? He's got frostbite! Didn't you see?"

"Don't you recognize him?"

Rose glanced at Bear and stared blankly at her sister's white face framed by her black hair. Blanche was always pale, but now she looked tense and almost scared. "No. Should I?"

"He's one of the guys who always hang out around the entrance to the school parking lot," Blanche whispered, and waited. "Don't you know who I mean?"

"No."

"The drug dealers," Blanche's voice was a bare hush. "He's one of them. I'm sure."

A drug dealer. *Well*. Rose pursed her lips, then shrugged, scooping ice cubes into their pottery salad bowl. "Well, I don't think he'd have any luck trying to sell drugs to us."

Blanche slouched against the counter, exhaling, "That's not exactly the point."

Rose whisked back into the living room and handed the ice cubes to Mother. But despite blowing her nervous sister off, Rose had decided to investigate. Sitting back on the arm of the chair, she smiled casually. "So -- why do you call yourself Bear? Is it because of your hair?"

Bear gave her a faint smile. "That's part of it." Rose decided he had nice eyes. But she pushed on.

"What's the other part?"

Bear stared at the floor for a second. "Well, actually, I spent some time in juvenile detention. I sort of picked up the name there." He looked at her with a half-jesting expression, but his remarkably dark eyes were serious.

"Sounds like you've had a pretty tough life," Mother said.

There was a noise from Blanche that sounded like a groan and a snort. Rose knew that Blanche was afraid they were

setting themselves up for a con artist to spin them a tale of woe and self-pity.

But Bear didn't seem any more anxious to talk about himself than Blanche was to hear it. He cracked his knuckles apprehensively. "Yeah, in a way. Look, I don't want to make you nervous. I could just go to the emergency room."

Mother laughed. "Bear, believe it or not that's where I work, though I did think I was done for the night. But really, it's better for you not to go outside yet."

Rose was grateful for her mom's cool handling of the situation. She felt proud, watching Mother as she knelt there, still wearing her coat, rubbing this stranger's feet with practiced efficiency.

"What were you in juvenile detention for?" Mother asked.

"Drug possession."

A long breath escaped Blanche, but Mother didn't look either surprised or perturbed.

"Funny," she said, squinting at him thoughtfully. "You don't look like someone who uses drugs."

Bear looked her in the face. "I don't."

"Hmph," Mother said. "I'm glad to hear it. Blanche, fill up the spaghetti pot with cold water and bring it out here. And put some water on low heat on the stove. Rose, I'll need you to get me another basin and a coffee mug. I'm going to start taking these ice cubes out and put in some less cold water."

Blanche seemed a little less scared when Rose went to the kitchen, but she kept looking at the phone, as though wondering if she should call the police, just in case. Rose ignored her, collected the items her mother needed, and returned to the edge of the sofa.

"How was it, being in juvenile detention?" she asked, hoping to get Bear talking again.

"It was pretty bad," Bear admitted. "I was glad to get out. I'm trying to make sure that I don't go back again."

"So why did they start calling you 'Bear'?" Rose persisted. "There's got to be a story in that name."

Bear rubbed his chin. "Well, one day these guys were beating up my brother. When I found them, they had his head in a sink full of water. It looked like they were trying to drown

him, just for kicks, though they denied it later. I never used to fight anybody, but I just saw red and threw the three of them against the wall.” He winced, whether from the memory or from the pain in his feet, Rose couldn’t tell. “I knocked the one guy out and the other two were scared pretty bad. I got sent to the disciplinary unit for two weeks, but nobody ever picked on my brother again. That’s when they started calling me the Bear.”

“Wow,” Rose breathed. “So your brother was in detention too? What’s his name?”

A closed look appeared over Bear’s face. He shrugged.

“Was he in juvenile detention for the same reason?” Rose asked.

“Yeah. Same as me. Drug possession with intent to deliver.” Bear paused. “But I’d rather not talk about that, sorry.”

Blanche came out with the pot of water, her dark hair falling like a curtain around the sides of it. She knelt by her mother as she set it down, avoiding Bear’s eyes, then retreated back to the sofa arm. But at least she had come into the room.

“What does that mean—‘possession with intent to deliver’?” Rose wanted to know.

“Possession with intent to sell.” Mother explained, sitting back on her heels for a moment. “It means they were caught with a large amount of drugs on their person.”

“Gee, Mom, you know all about this stuff!” Rose said.

“She probably sees a lot where she works,” Bear said.

Mother tested the water with her hand and put Bear’s feet into some slightly warmer water. “Yes, I do. Too much, unfortunately.”

“Have you lived here in the City all your life?” Bear asked.

“I was born here, but I moved out when I got married. My husband died last year, and my old supervisor offered me a staff management position in the hospital. So we moved back.”

“I’m sorry,” Bear said quietly. “What did he die of?”

“Cancer.” Mother added some warm water to the basin from the pot Blanche had brought.

“That’s what my mother died of,” Bear said.

Rose saw that Blanche glanced at Bear when he said that, but lowered her eyes again quickly.

“I’m sorry,” said Mother. “It’s hard, isn’t it?”

"Yeah, it is." Bear was silent for a few minutes. Then he winced.

"Does that hurt?" Mother looked up at him. "Good! Good!" She continued rubbing. "How sharp is the pain? Faint or does it really hurt?"

"Um—it really hurts."

"Good! Well, I'm sorry to tell you it will probably get worse before it gets better."



As if to distract himself, Bear looked at Blanche and met her eyes. "So, what's your name?"

Those black eyes seemed to see too much of her. She almost flinched, but stopped herself. "Blanche," she said stiffly. The storm continued to roar in the darkness outside, and this person still seemed part of that darkness—and her mother had brought it right inside their house.

"We go to St. Catherine's high school," Rose informed their guest. "Blanche is a senior and I'm a junior."

Blanche chewed her lip. There was Rose, spilling out information. The last thing Blanche wanted him to know was that they attended St. Catherine's. Mother should stop Rose from talking, but Mother didn't know that Blanche knew that Bear was probably a drug dealer. And Blanche couldn't think of any way to tell her.

Wretched but defiant, Blanche got up and walked over to the rocking chair. She picked up her quilt and sat down, folding and smoothing it over her knees.

"How do you like school?" Bear asked, leaning over to gently touch his feet. His jaw line was taut and he shut his eyes just a bit. Blanche noticed that he was really in pain, as much as he was trying hard not to show it.

She felt odd, seeing his chance vulnerability. Here, on their living room couch, surrounded by their quaint little tables and books and lamps, his hugeness seemed to make him more clumsy and out of place than threatening. It was hard to remember now how he usually looked, hanging out with the drug pushers in the high school parking lot.

St. Catherine's was an ugly rectangular block building, four unremarkable stories high. The hallways were long and narrow, and the three stairwells were always crowded between classes. But in the morning, the top of the south stairwell was usually empty, and that was where Blanche went for refuge when she felt besieged by her classmates. It had a window, and it was from there she had seen the guy who called himself Bear.

Sometimes on those mornings, she looked out on the grey cracked square of the parking lot and the surrounding dirty streets and felt trapped and lost. Before homeroom started, different groups of students hung out in the parking lot by the chain-link fence and smoked. Every once in a while, Blanche saw some money change hands, and she would get a hard, cold feeling inside.

Usually standing among the crowd or hanging about on the edges was a tall, burly figure, a kerchief over his lengthy dreadlocks. Blanche had noticed him at the beginning of the school year, mostly because he was someone she wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. He looked like the sort of thug who was hired by kingpins to break arms. But since he didn't seem to be taking orders from anyone, Blanche had decided he had to be working alone. He would pace up and down the periphery with cool indifference, sometimes pausing to talk to a student or another suspicious-looking character. Once she had seen a police car crawl slowly through the traffic near the school, and the guy with the dreadlocks had sauntered casually off.

And this was the same guy who was now sitting in their living room, having his feet washed by her mother. At the moment, he looked more shabby and bewildered than ferocious, but Blanche could not forget his usual appearance of disguised danger. She felt wooden inside, and cornered.

But her blithe younger sister was apparently quite taken with this character of conflicting faces and sat babbling away on the arm of the sofa.

"This is our first year of regular school. Our parents taught us at home ever since we were babies. Mom always said it was a more natural way to learn. She must be right, because Blanche and I are way ahead of the other kids at school in everything except science and health studies. Blanche almost didn't have to

go to high school at all—but the state required that she have one more year of English—even though she didn't really need it, so Mom thought it would be best for us to go to school for at least one year. I don't mind the work, but I don't like the kids, generally. Some of them are okay, but the popular girls like to pick on my sister, and almost all the guys are gross. I don't know why guys are like that. Do you?"

"Simple immaturity, usually," Bear said. He didn't seem to mind Rose's chatter.

"So you think they'll grow out of it?" Rose asked.

"Oh, it's possible," Bear said.

"Well, there's a sign of hope. The boys at school are so degenerate that it makes one feel pessimistic about the future of the male gender in general. Some of the senior boys are nice enough, although I've had to yell at them when they make fun of my sister."

Bear looked at Blanche. "What do they make fun of you for?"

Does Rose have to discuss my problems with him?

Provoked, Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "Something to do, I guess," she said.

He seemed irritated. "Yeah, I used to get picked on myself in school. It's not fun."

Yet another odd feeling came over Blanche. It was hard to picture a guy as burly and muscular as Bear being teased. *But maybe he's just saying that to get my sympathy*, she thought.

Mother had gotten the warm water from the kitchen stove and was pouring it into Bear's basin. He leaned over. "Are you getting tired of rubbing my feet? I can rub them myself. Come on, let me. I feel strange sitting up here just watching."

"Well, if you want to. Rub slowly and gently. You won't gain anything by doing it faster. Yes, that's the way."

After he took over, Mother sat back on her heels. Slowly she began to take off her coat.

"What were you doing outside for so long?" Rose wasn't done with questions.

"Personal business," Bear said briefly, without looking up from his rubbing.

"Too private to explain?" Rose asked.

"Yes," Bear said in a forbidding voice that made Blanche feel justified for her continuing doubts. Even Rose got the hint and changed the subject.

"So -- how are your feet?"

"They hurt, but it's bearable now. How soon can I go, Mrs.— ? I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Brier," Mother said. "Jean Brier. You should probably stay inside until you've recovered total feeling. I'm going to have some dinner. Would you like a sandwich? There's one already made up in the refrigerator."

Bear's resolution seemed to waver. "Well, okay." He straightened up, lifted up a foot from the basin, and hesitantly began to dry it with his dirty sock.

"Here, I'll get you a towel," Rose said as she hopped up and headed towards the bathroom. She returned with one of their good blue company towels. As she handed it to Bear, she caught her sister's disapproving eye and grinned, as if to say, *well, what other company do we have?*

"Thanks," Bear said gratefully.

"Just relax and sit still for a while. And keep your feet wrapped up," Mother said from the kitchen. "Blanche, let him use your quilt."

Reluctantly, Blanche handed him the quilt that Mother had made her when she was seven years old.

Bear wrapped his feet in it carefully enough, and began to look around him. His eyes gravitated towards the wall-to-wall bookshelf at one end of the room. "You folks like books, I see."

"That's only half of our books," Rose informed him. "When we moved here, we had more books than anything else. The rest are upstairs in the hallway and our bedrooms. One of our favorite things to do is go to used bookstores and library sales. We're book addicts!"

"That's great," Bear said. "What authors do you like? Thanks!" He accepted the sandwich and glass of milk that Mother brought to him.

"Oh, Carroll and C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald. Blanche has read more of the classics than I have. She likes the Brontës best."

"Second best to Jane Austen," Blanche murmured.

“Do you like to read?” Rose asked Bear, who was already halfway through the sandwich.

Bear scratched his neck, shaking his dreadlocks. “There’s this guy G.K. Chesterton I’ve read a lot of,” he said at last. “I like him.”

“What, you too?” Rose yelped. “Nobody reads G. K. Chesterton these days!” She intoned,

*“The men of the East may spell the stars
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.”*

“...go gaily in the dark...” Bear’s deep voice repeated the line in harmony with Rose’s. He was smiling in recognition. “That’s the *Ballad of the White Horse*.”

“It is! I love Chesterton’s poetry! Have you read his romances, like *Manalive* and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*?”

“Yeah, I have, though it’s been quite a while,” Bear said. “You’re right, not too many people read him these days.” He looked just as bewildered as Blanche felt. “I like his poetry best, I guess. I like poetry in general.”

“Do you know any? I mean, to recite?” Rose wanted to know, tossing her red head from side to side excitedly.

“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone bewep my outcast state . . .” Bear paused. “That’s Shakespeare. I used to know more of it, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten.” He took another bite of the sandwich.

“Blanche, you say something next. It would only be fitting,” Rose urged, her cheeks flushed with eagerness. Poetry went to Rose’s head like wine.

Softened a bit by Rose’s delight, Blanche searched her mind, and at last said, as dispassionately as she could, “Dust I am, to dust am bending, from the final doom impending, help me, Lord, for death is near.”

“That sounds like Tennyson,” Rose said.

“T. S. Eliot,” said Bear, setting down his glass, empty. “*Murder in the Cathedral*.”

"You're right," Blanche said, surprised yet again. What sort of reading habits did this drug dealer have?

"It's a favorite of mine," Bear admitted.

Rose clapped her hands. "Oh, Bear, you must come visit us again. We haven't found anybody interesting in the City to be friends with and it would be such fun to talk poetry with someone again!"

"Well, maybe I will, if you like." Bear's face reddened.

"Do, please. I beg you," Rose said. Blanche, almost stupefied by her sister's naïveté, said nothing and looked at their mother.

Mother had been sitting on the chair with her dinner tray on her lap, listening to their conversation. "You're welcome to come any time, Bear."

Bear grinned, and Blanche went cold inside again. "Maybe I will. Thank you." He swallowed the last of his sandwich and bent down to put on his socks and shoes.

Mother stopped him. "Wait, you really shouldn't put on those wet socks again. Rose, go look under the stairs for that box of your father's I've been saving for the Goodwill collection. I think you'll find some men's wool socks in there. And see if there's that old pair of overshoes, too. They might fit him."

Bear started to protest. "Look, I couldn't take—"

"You don't really have a choice when Mother makes up her mind," Blanche said, so grimly that Bear was silenced and Mother glanced quickly at her daughter.

"Well, uh—thanks a lot for saving my feet," Bear said awkwardly, accepting the socks and overshoes Rose had brought to him. "I'm really grateful."

"Glad to help. And make sure you come back," Mother said, setting her tray aside and rising. Bear hastily finished pulling on the boots and stuffed his wet socks and sneakers into the pockets of his jacket.

"Goodnight, then," Bear looked at all of them. He smiled, and his face seemed to come alive. He looked far happier than when he had first come in. For a brief moment, Blanche wavered. So she nodded at him with what she hoped passed for politeness as he passed.

"Goodnight!" Rose said, escorting him to the door.

"Make sure you lock your door," Bear said to her, putting on his hood as he went out the apartment door. He shot her a half-mischievous glance. "There's lots of strange people on the streets these days."

"Ah yes, we know," Rose laughed. He shut the house door carefully behind him and tested it to make sure it was locked. Blanche, who had gotten up to peer through the blinds, saw him bound down the snowy steps and disappear into the night, vanishing almost as suddenly as he had appeared.

She shivered again as she turned from the window. Rose and Mother were talking about what a pleasant person he seemed to be and how they hoped he would come back. She retrieved her beloved quilt from the floor and folded it into her arms. It made a warm, comforting bulk against her chest.

"So, you've seen that guy around school?" Rose queried as Blanche started for the staircase.

Blanche, defensive in her frustration at being disregarded, tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "Yes." For Mother's benefit, she added, "I told Rose I've seen him hanging around the school. I always thought he was a drug dealer."

"I was wondering about that," Mother said slowly, sipping at her glass.

"Why?" Rose asked in surprise. "I thought you didn't see any signs of drug use on him." She looked accusingly at Blanche. "If he was using drugs, Mom would know. Right, Mom?"

"I've treated a lot of addicts, that's true," Mother said, rubbing her neck. "I'm not saying I might not be fooled though. It's just that..."

"What?" Blanche said, relieved that her mother hadn't been taken in, but not understanding her reluctance to go on.

"I'm not completely sure," Mother said, after a pause. "But I thought he might be in trouble."

"Why?" Rose and Blanche both asked.

"That car that swerved in the snow—I could have sworn that it was going after him." But after a pause, she shook her head. "I could be wrong. Still, my instinct was to try to get him off the street for a while, just in case he was in any real danger." She looked at her two daughters and smiled. "It might just have been my overactive imagination. And in any case, we were

sheltering the stranger and tending the sick, weren't we?"

"Of course we were," Rose said loyally. "I'm glad we let him in. Who cares what happens next? Who knows if we'll even see him again? And I *liked* him!"

Blanche turned the quilt over and over in her hands, smoothing it to hide her agitation. Mother might think it was her overactive imagination, but she had just confirmed what Blanche had been sensing from the very first moment she had seen Bear on their doorstep. She bit her lip to keep back an acid reply, wishing she wasn't so scared and angry.

Instead she burst out, "I'm just glad he's gone. Anyway, dreadlocks are horrible. Why do people do that to themselves?"

"Oh, come on, Blanche!" Rose said in disgust.

But unexpectedly, Mother seemed to know what was bothering her oldest daughter. "Don't worry, Blanche. I know you're trying to be sensible, and that's very wise of you to be cautious. But we can't judge a person by his looks. And certainly not by his hair." And before either of her daughters could answer back, she set down her glass. "Now, I think it's about time we all went to bed."

A few minutes later, Blanche sat on her bed, brushing out her hair. She could hear her sister in the bathroom doing her nightly facial scrub and humming a sixties song about taking time to make friends with a stranger.

The song irked Blanche. She couldn't help her fears, could she? Rose was one of those people who found it easy to be daring. Try as she might, Blanche couldn't. The world needed sane, prudent people too, didn't it? And Rose didn't have the same kind of perceptions that Blanche had, intuitions that pushed themselves upon her mind whether she wanted them or not.

Who knows if we'll even see him again? Rose had asked. Blanche laughed to herself, a little bitterly, feeling caught in the jaws of fate.

Oh yes, we'll see him again.

There's no getting out of it now.

We've let him in.



The world was a fantastic, marvelous, awesome place; Rose decided again as she threw herself down on her rumpled bed and dug herself comfortably under the covers. She breathed one last breath of the cold bedroom air before snuggling beneath her comforter to think of the swirling world of the storm outside, which tonight had deposited such a puzzling enigma of a person as Bear on their doorstep. She meditated upon this happening, and felt that this was the nature of God's world. You were constantly coming across the unexpected, the unexplainable, the tremendous mystery of creation. It was lovely and romantic to ponder in the dark, while lying in bed, listening to the further mystery of snow and wind, waiting for sleep to come.

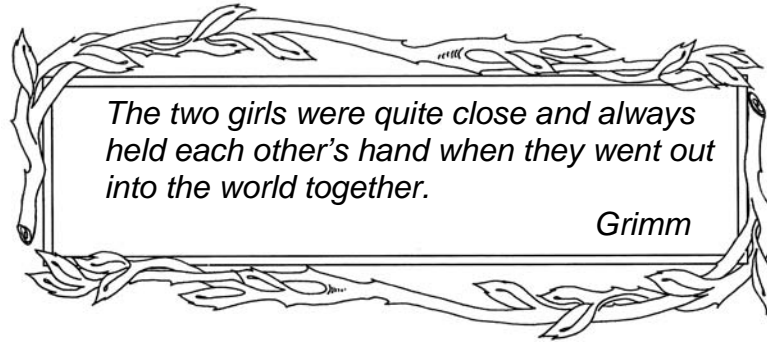
Her deep thoughts were disturbed by Blanche getting up to fumble around the room. "What is it now?" she asked, mildly exasperated.

"Just looking for matches," Blanche explained in a whisper.

"Setting us on fire, are you?" Rose turned over in a hump and watched her sister's shadow huddle over the vigil light on the dresser, trying to kindle it.

"Are you scared?" Rose asked softly, feeling suddenly ashamed of herself and sorry for her sister, who found it so difficult to be brave.

Blanche didn't answer. Rose watched her gaze at the little flame of the votive candle as it licked away at the darkness before her picture of the Virgin Mary. Then Blanche stole over to the window and peered out into the City enwrapped by the night storm. She was still there as Rose dropped off to sleep at last.



Chapter 2

LUNCH TIME was not Blanche's favorite part of the school day.

The day after Bear had come to their house, Blanche sat in the storm of shouting and talking in the crowded cafeteria, trying to read *Jane Eyre* over peanut butter and jelly.

"Hey, Blanche!" a guy shouted at her from the other end of the table.

She half looked up. It was Carl Lester, the pimpled, loudmouthed boy from science class who thought himself a great comedian.

"Can you give me the answers to our homework for Biology?"

Whatever she said, he would play off it, somehow. "I'd rather not," she said at last, brushing the crumbs off of her plaid uniform skirt. Carl's companions laughed.

"Pleeease?" He slid down the bench towards her. He was bigger than her, with an unpleasant and aggressive attitude that he masked with humor. "Come on, Blanche, be my friend."

Tensely, she glanced at him, and his friends burst into laughter.

Confident of his audience, he said, "You got a date for this Friday?"

She bit her lip. With Carl, it always ended up this way. She wished for the umpteenth time that she had some of Rose's

nerve, or at least that she could think of some decent reply to shut him up.

“Aw, playing hard to get, are you? Wanna go out with me Friday night? I could show you a real good time.”

Grimly, she stared at her book, trying not to look frightened. He went on.

“Come on, Blanche. You gotta start sometime. You and I would be good together, I know.” Her face went red as the other boys hooted. She got up as he pleaded, mockingly, “Aw, now don’t run out on me!”

She gathered up her things as quickly as she could while he continued to hassle her, and walked as fast as she dared from the cafeteria, her face scarlet.

It was a relief to find the girl’s bathroom empty. Feeling cold and clammy, she leaned against the nearest bathroom stall and tried to fight off the faintness. The last thing she needed was to keel over on the bathroom floor. “Oh, stop it, please, not now,” she said beseechingly to her body, which always seemed to cave in on her when things became stressful. She undid the top button on her blue oxford uniform shirt. The tiny black specks that had been dancing before her eyes receded, and she breathed deeply. *Thank God for that, at least.*

When she felt more normal, she took some bathroom tissue from the stalls and blew her nose. There was one kid in the school who had seizures, and everyone made fun of him. God forbid they should ever find out about her fainting spells. She had enough strikes against her already.

Still shaky, she stared at her face in the mirror—a round white face with pale blue eyes. It was a child’s face, and Blanche wished that it were still possible to be a child. But here she was, stuck in an adolescent body in an adolescent world, and apparently failing miserably.

And her skin was *very* white, the heritage of an Irish ancestry. She rubbed her cheeks irritably and fumbled in her book bag for the necessary blush. *I look like a china doll without the pink cheeks. Goodness, I could be dead, staring in the mirror, and not know it.* She found her tiny compact and brushed on some of the pink powder. Better, but her eyes and

nose were still red. She wet a paper towel and pressed it to her eyes, feeling very fragile.

The bathroom door banged open, and Eileen Raskin, one of the top girls in the food chain, walked in with her entourage. The blond girl's green eyes alighted on Blanche and her mascara-heavy lashes lowered. "Hey, it's the Immaculate Complexion!" she laughed.

Blanche had no idea why her one blessing—a lack of acne—should have become the target for her classmates' ridicule. She put away her compact and turned from the mirror, hoping that it wouldn't look like she had been crying.

Eileen's sidekick, Lisa, a tall redhead who wore her uniform skirts as short as possible, sneered. "What's up, I.C.? How's the book reading?"

They think I'm their personal chew toy, Blanche thought irritably. "Woof, woof," she muttered below her breath, making her way to the door.

"Have you found a date for the prom yet? Better start early!" Lisa called after her, and Eileen said, "I hear Carl is looking for someone to go with him!" Blanche heard their laughter as the door slammed shut behind her.

Now there was no place to go. Blanche didn't think she could handle the lunchroom again. Slowly she started up the nearest staircase. Maybe she would just hang out in the halls until her next class started. But if she did that, she would risk being questioned by teachers, who seemed to have an inherent distrust of solitary students. As she walked onto the second floor, her eyes fell on the door to the chapel. Without another thought she slipped inside.

In the dark room, a converted classroom with stained-glass windows installed, a red electric light flickered by the round plain tabernacle in the corner. Blanche genuflected and gave the unadorned box a grim smile.

Apparently, once upon a time the chapel had been more beautiful. Blanche guessed the niches in the corners had once held statues, but there were now only artificial ivy plants and a banner for Peace and Justice Month. The altar was a plain wooden square, the crucifix unremarkable. But in the back of

the room stood a lone statue of Mary that Blanche touched lightly with one finger as she passed.

She leaned against the bare wall by the windows—there were no pews, just floor mats—and tried to formulate a prayer. Instead, pictures of her dead father began to flash through her mind—Dad coming home from work, looking tired and relieved; Dad slicing potatoes to make his famous home-fries; Dad reading out loud to them after dinner, his wire-rimmed reading glasses making him look distinguished. Dad had always told her that she was beautiful, and occasionally she had even believed him. *Dang it, this was not the way to stop crying.*

To steady herself, she began to look at the only concession to beauty in the room, the stained-glass windows, a triumphant medley in blue, gold, red, and purple. Today, the winter skies made the colors murky, but the hues still glowed with an unearthly, comforting light.

She rested her hot forehead against the cold glass and tried to find a transparent panel. Through a chink of clear glass, she could make out the parking lot below. Was Bear there today?

She could not see him through her tiny peephole. He might be there, or he might not. If he was not there, where was he?

Turning back to the room, she stared at a dedication plaque, stating that the windows had been donated by friends and faculty to honor the memory of Fr. Michael Raymond, chaplain of St. Catherine's. There was a picture of Fr. Raymond in the hallway downstairs. He was a formidably handsome priest whom the girls said looked like James Dean in his fifties. There wasn't a chaplain at St. Catherine's any more.

The bell rang, shocking Blanche into the present situation. She knelt down before the tabernacle said a quick formal prayer, then carefully opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Blanche straightened her posture in her desk as Sister Geraldine came into the room. The English teacher in her long white Dominican habit and black veil was about eighty years old, shriveled and walking with a cane. She had continued teaching English because she liked to, and had reached the stage where she was no longer offended that many of her

students were not interested in literature. She simply taught the course as if they were all college literature majors, and never graded on a curve. That meant that even the laziest students had to work hard to keep up the pretense of passing. Blanche enjoyed being pushed academically.

Today, Sister Geraldine returned their poems. In general, Sister Geraldine frowned upon “creative writing” as a diversion from studying the classics, but when they had reached the section on poetry, she had reluctantly directed the students to write an original poem in one of three classical styles, just for practice: sonnet, villanelle, or terzanelle.

Blanche had spent long hours laboring over her sonnet, and was dismayed to find it returned covered in blistering red slashes and writing. Sister Geraldine, who seemed to like Blanche in an odd, roundabout way, had criticized the poem harshly. The poem was “technically well done, but suffers from a poor handling of the subject.”

Blanche had written about flowers at sunset, because she could find the most descriptive words to use on this subject. She had some thought about trying to work in her grief over Dad’s death, but the rigid form of the sonnet wouldn’t allow it. Every line she came up with about death that rhymed just sounded stupid. So she got rid of death and just talked about flowers. Sister Geraldine’s caustic remarks hurt, because she had intended the poem to be so much better than it was.

Apparently, she wasn’t the only one who was upset by her grade. Lauren Berger, who had written what Blanche thought was a pretty funny villanelle about studying for an algebra test, raised her hand and complained. Lauren was the top student in the senior class, and was used to getting A’s. Sister Geraldine had never given her more than an average grade, which Lauren resented bitterly. Sister Geraldine listened to Lauren’s hurt remarks for a few seconds, and launched into a lecture which Blanche thought didn’t really answer the question. Sometimes she was sure that Sister was a little deaf.

Well, maybe not. Leaning on her cane and staring at Lauren with beady blue eyes, Sister expostulated, “The problem is not in your technique, which was fairly good, but in the handling of your subject matter. Two qualities of great poetry are that it

deals with a universal subject matter in an original manner. Now, while everyone might be able to relate to the frustrations of studying for a test, your poem didn't adequately convey what we might call the 'human realities' of that sensation. It was clever and even humorous, but was too exclusively 'yours.' You provided your audience with too few avenues through which they might become immersed in the experience and so sympathize, identify, and participate in the poem's sentiments. Now, Miss Brier—" here she indicated Blanche with a wave of a shaking hand "spoke with a familiar voice that the reader could emotionally respond to on a universally significant topic—death—but her thoughts on the matter were poorly formulated and unoriginal, although she handled the sonnet form nicely."

How did she know that I was writing about death? Blanche was silently amazed. Sister Geraldine went on, and Lauren continued to look glum and irritated. At last, Lauren said, raising her hand again, "So I think you're saying that it's impossible to get an A in this class unless we're Shakespeare or something."

The class chuckled, and Sister Geraldine permitted herself a rare smile. "Oh, it's not impossible, just very, very difficult."

She paused. "Actually, if it will make you feel better, I did give out an A to a student poem, once."

Really? Blanche and the rest of the class were interested in the poem immediately.

Sister sensed that, and opened her briefcase. "We had just studied Robert Frost, one of the moderns, and I gave the poetry assignment then. One remarkable student turned in this poem. It is meant as a response to Frost's famous poem, 'Nothing Gold Can Stay.'" She pulled out a folder and paused. "Perhaps it might not make sense to you if you're not familiar with the poem, but I think that it stands on its own."

With her white, veined hand, she took out a piece of paper and read aloud, her thin voice rounding out the words,

*"The first tree-flowers float
wisp on water, though it's air.
Each prism parallel,
Suspended there.*

*Suspended there as sap is rising,
 growing as it stays,
 Bending under sap's height,
 Giving praise.
 Giving praise, but oh, they have been bent
 growing green for which they fade.
 Singing only to be silent.
 To rest laid.*

*To rest, laid low in the earth's brown dust,
 the Autumn grey dust they had been,
 Again themselves to dust, but born
 Again to all things then.*

*Again to all things then they're flying
 tallest mountains, highest skies,
 All things green and good are falling,
 Only to rise."*

She cleared her throat at the end. "Perhaps I was a bit hasty in giving it an 'A,' but I did, so I let it stand. For a student composition, I thought it was excellent." She laid the paper on the desk. "Please open your literature books to page 103."

Lauren turned to a girl across the aisle and whispered. "*That* didn't sound like a villanelle or a sonnet. Huh! I bet the one who wrote that poem was her special pet."

"Must have been, to crack Sister Geraldine," was her friend's remark.

Blanche wasn't sure. She expected Sister Geraldine to be far more objective than that.

As she found page 103, Blanche thought about the images in the poem. The apple blossoms on the farm that was no longer theirs were dead now, though the promise of next year's buds slumbered in the black frozen branches. Would she ever see them again? *There's such a thing as hope*, she thought. *Mom has it. Rose has it. Just not me.*

After class was over, she hesitantly went up to the old nun who sat at her desk, checking off items in her schedule.

“Sister, I wondered . . . might I have a copy of that poem you read us?”

Sister Geraldine looked at her over her bifocals with sharp blue eyes. “Certainly. Take it to the School Office and ask Sister Maureen to make a photocopy of it for you, then bring it right back here.”

She handed Blanche the poem. Blanche did not dare disobey, though it would probably make her late for the next class. As she hurried down the hall, she scanned the poem again. It was signed “A. Denniston.” Blanche wondered if A. Denniston was a boy or a girl.

When she opened the office door, Mr. Edward Freet was talking to the nun who was the office manager, a formidable woman with a stylish haircut. Mr. Freet was a commonplace sight at the school, although Blanche had never been able to figure out if he held an official post there. A short, older man in his sixties with iron-grey hair and a red, wrinkled face, he seemed to be friends with all the teachers and secretaries, although he was more brusque to the students, at least to the girls. In his patterned vests and collared shirts, he was a peculiar and distinctive figure. Blanche had heard he was the principal’s brother and owned an art gallery in Greenwich Village.

“What do you want?” the nun said to Blanche as she approached them.

“A photocopy—for Sister Geraldine,” Blanche faltered.

Mr. Freet looked annoyed at the interruption, but the nun took the poem from her and went to the copier. He continued to talk in petulant tones about art and music.

“You can’t pretend that this trash they’re putting out today is really music,” he was saying. “It’s abysmally inferior to just about anything from the eighteenth century. Take Mozart, for instance. None of these contemporary composers can hold a candle to him!”

“Truth can be found in all times, in many forms, even ugly ones,” the nun intoned mildly.

“Art isn’t about truth, it’s about form,” Mr. Freet said indignantly, rapping on the Formica desktop with his fingernails. “That’s why the absence of a beautiful, structured

form destroys music. Yes, and art, too. That's why I don't hold with your modern churches and their formless abstractions. Garbage and tripe, all of it."

He shot a look over at Blanche, who couldn't help following the conversation with interest, and glared at her.

Blanche swiftly dropped her eyes and pretended to read the fire drill procedure taped to the top of the counter.

"So you would have us remain frozen in admiration of Michelangelo's nudes?" the nun said over the noise of the copier.

"Why not? Stay with the perfect. I agree with the Greeks."

"There were a lot of flaws in the philosophies of the ancient Greeks."

"Oh, I suppose you mean because they revered the male body over the female body as exemplifying perfection," he said. "So what's wrong with that? Here again, Michelangelo is a perfect example. Take his *David* for instance, over his grotesque female nudes."

The nun crossed to Blanche and handed her the poem and its copy with a reassuring smile, then turned back to her conversation. "You see, that's your view of the truth, Mr. Freet. It's perhaps different from other people's point of view."

"Which is why I say art is about form and not truth!"

Blanche closed the door, thoughts whirling around her head. She would have to repeat the strange conversation to the family at home and try to make some sense of it, if there was any sense in it at all. It sounded terribly refined and reasonable, but somehow she found herself lost in the middle of it.

When she came back into the classroom, Sister Geraldine was standing at her desk, rearranging papers in her briefcase with delicate precision. Her cane was on her elbow.

Blanche gave the original poem back to her and asked hesitantly, "How did you know my sonnet was about dying?"

"I read between the lines," Sister said cryptically. "It's a difficult subject for a young person to handle."

Blanche stared at the nun's gnarled hands, and thought, *That may be true, but young people still have to deal with it.* But, of course, she couldn't say that to Sister, who might not

know about her father's death. So, she thanked her teacher quickly and went to her next class.



Rose hurried towards her sister as she saw Blanche leave Sister Geraldine's room. "Hey! How are you doing?"

"The usual." Blanche gave a bleak smile.

"You don't look too good." Rose studied her sister's white face anxiously.

"I was feeling a little dizzy after lunch. That's all."

"Was someone teasing you again?"

"We both know that's the school's second most popular sport."

Rose felt an angry flush pass over her face. "Who? The boys or the girls?"

"Two guesses," Blanche tried to smile and pushed back her hair from her face. "Don't worry about me, Rose."

"I do, though." Rose bit her lip. "You know, the kids in your class must have awfully low self-esteem to get such a charge out of being bullies."

"If we believe Bear, they'll grow out of it someday," Blanche said ironically. Blanche already seemed less tense, being able to talk about it, just as Rose had hoped. Rose was heartened. She and Blanche had always been very different people, but since they had come to this new school together, Rose felt a closer kinship between them. She was Blanche's sole ally in an environment neither of them felt a part of.

"Keep your chin up," Rose urged. "I'll find those boys and pound them." Rose was not afraid of any kind of male creature. She had already made a reputation among the boys at school by bawling them out for harassing her sister. Some of them looked the other way when they saw her coming, but she couldn't care less.

"Sister Geraldine gave me this neat poem," Blanche said, changing the subject. "I'll show it to you at home. It was written by one of her old students. Just our luck—the one student here who seems to have any grasp of the higher things graduated a long time ago. But it's a cool poem."

"We'll read it together tonight," Rose said, smiling at her sister. "Two more hours!" Blanche grinned back. She turned into the doorway of her next class.

Rose had the last lunch period of the school day, which was sarcastically nicknamed "the supper lunch" since it came so late in the day. As she walked down the stairs to the basement where the cafeteria was, she saw Rob Tirsch at his locker. She couldn't help slowing down a bit. Rob was tall, black-haired, and terribly good-looking. Unfortunately, he seemed to know it. He was part of the popular crowd in the senior class, but he had been pretty friendly to Rose.

"Hey, Red," he said to her as she passed him.

"Hi, Rob," she said, smiling, and he turned around.

"What you been up to?" He flashed a smile at her, indicating that he would like to talk.

"Oh, nothing much." Despite herself, Rose leaned against the wall to talk to him, hoping that the three zits on her face weren't too obvious.

"You don't do much, do you?" He slammed his locker shut. "Break's over. Can you believe it? It went by so fast," Rob ran his hands through his curly hair.

Rose, whose Christmas vacation had been lonely, if leisurely, simply nodded. "What did you do over break?"

"Went skiing a couple of times. You ever gone?"

Rose shook her head. "I've done cross-country a few times, but not downhill."

"It's the best. Man, this year is dragging by. I can't wait till I'm out of here." He cast his blue eyes on her again. "You going to the prom?"

"The senior prom? I'm only a junior. Why'd you ask?"

"Just taking a survey." Rob glanced behind him and winked at her. "Hey, bet you didn't know this. See that iron door over there?" He indicated a much painted-over door beside the furnace room.

Rose nodded.

"D'you know there's a tunnel there?" Rob asked.

"Really?" Rose was intrigued.

"Yeah," Rob lowered his voice mysteriously. "It goes over to that abandoned church next door. A long time ago, the two buildings were connected."

"Why was the church abandoned, anyway?"

"Ah, the floor was going to fall in or something. So they closed it down. They say there's all sorts of treasure buried in the basement."

"You're kidding," Rose said, not sure whether to believe him.

"No, no, I'm not." Rob was earnest. "The old priest over there—Fr. Raymond—he used to collect hundreds of chalices and gold stuff for the altar—all the stuff churches were throwing away when they got rid of the Latin in the Mass. He collected it all, and hid it in the church. Then one night, when he was polishing his collection, he was murdered."

"Murdered?!"

"Yeah. Some crazy guy came and shot him in the back, right behind the altar. They say they've never gotten the bloodstains off the floor." He grinned at Rose, who was shuddering. "You're pretty gullible, you know that?"

"Did he really shoot him?" Rose flushed. She *was* gullible.

"Honest, he did. The guy who shot him stole everything. All the gold and stuff. My old man says most of it was junk. They've never found the guy who did it."

"That's horrible!" Rose was indignant.

"Yeah. It happens. They had to close down the church because they said they couldn't raise money to fix it, but it was really because they couldn't find a priest who would work in that church again. You see, it's haunted now."

He looked at Rose to gauge her reaction. She half-believed him.

"It's the truth," he said, cocking his head. "Just be careful when you pass the church after dark. The ax murderer who lives there will get you!"

"I thought you said the priest was shot," Rose accused him. The bell rang.

"Yeah, by an ax murderer who mislaid his ax. Next best thing. Oh, and he strangled the priest, too." Rob grinned,

slapping his books out of his locker. “Must have been a real sicko.”

He punched Rose playfully on the shoulder. “That should put you to sleep at night. Did you know they took the word gullible out of the dictionary?”

Rose made a face at him as he bounced off down the hallway to class.

He was about the only boy at St. Catherine’s that Rose felt a more than passing interest in. It was a pity he acted like a jerk sometimes, usually when he was with his buddies. Blanche disliked him, but Rose found him appealing. He was almost always nice to her, and that was flattering. Just about every junior girl she knew had a crush on him. He had this fascinating charm that melted the hearts of even the most sensible teenage girls. His singling Rose out hadn’t made her terrifically popular among her classmates.

But unlike Blanche, who had resigned herself to occupying the lowest social strata in the school, Rose preferred to stand defiantly outside the structure.

Going into the cafeteria, Rose found a place at a table with some girls from her biology class. Something cold touched the back of her neck right over her collar and she jumped. There was a burst of male laughter behind her, and she turned to see Manny sitting at the next table.

“Hi, Rose,” he grinned, tossing and catching the cold pack he was carrying around for his leg in one hand. He played on the basketball team with Rob and always seemed to be recovering from some kind of injury.

Rose allowed a deliberate look of disgust to come over her face, and cued her eyes. She had chameleon eyes—hazel eyes—and she believed that she could make them change color on command. So now she mentally cued herself. Show temper. Let him know he’s in trouble if he keeps this up. Eye color: stone grey.

With a toss of her red hair, she turned back to her sandwich, took a bite, and began to chew slowly. She rolled her eyes at the girl across from her, who grimaced back.

“Hey, Rose,” Manny leaned over beside her. “You going to the senior prom?”

"Of course not," she said, not looking at him. "I'm a junior."

"Would you go with Rob Tirsch if he asked you?"

Rose's heart almost stopped beating for a minute. *Rob?* She gave a faint gesture. "Probably," she said at last, with feigned lightness.

"Ooh," Manny said, and moved back to say something to his friends, who all laughed.

Probably? She had meant to say "maybe!" She moaned inwardly and crumpled her napkin. *Nothing like looking desperate.* She glanced around at the other girls, most of who hadn't overheard Manny's remarks, and shrugged.

Inwardly she debated about asking Manny what he meant. He was probably just teasing her. Guys thought it was terribly funny when girls had a crush on one of them (Rose, apart from her own situation, found it pretty funny too, considering). Manny was no doubt looking for ammunition to tease Rob with.

Her heart sank inside her. If Rob knew she liked him...how embarrassing! *But he probably has some inkling already,* Rose thought mournfully.

She sighed and tried to join the conversation going on around her. *I won't say anything to Blanche about this unless something real happens,* she decided.

When two-thirty came, Rose bounded the steps to the south door to meet her sister. Blanche was already there, looking out, her petite figure almost overwhelmed by her black hair. Her books were held in front of her defensively as she gazed at the chain link fence at the other end of the parking lot. She looked upset again.

"What's wrong?" Rose asked worriedly.

Blanche nodded with her head towards the fence. "That's where I usually see him standing."

"Who?"

"Bear. He wasn't there today," Blanche said.

"Are you sure it was him the other times?" Rose glanced skeptically towards the fence, where Rob and a group of other guys were standing in clumps, talking.

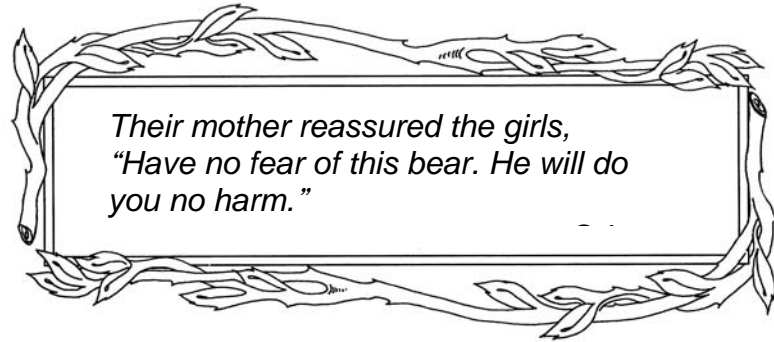
"I'm almost positive." Blanche turned towards her sister, tossing her heavy curtain of hair back over her shoulders.

“Rose, he really might be a drug dealer, for all his talk about poetry and whatnot.”

“Can you picture Bear hanging out with people like those?” Rose asked derisively, mentally excluding Rob from that group.

“I don’t know. There are a lot of contradictions in him,” Blanche admitted as they started to walk home.

“Well,” Rose decided to be amiable, “who knows if we’ll ever even see him again?”



Chapter 3

IT WAS ROSE'S turn to do the dishes that night, so while she and Mother chatted in the kitchen, Blanche slipped out to the living room to play the upright piano that stood in one corner against the wall. She used to practice all the time, but now only played occasionally as a way of consoling herself when she had a bad day. Dad had bought the piano for her and its worn walnut surfaces reminded her of him in a way that was distant enough to be comfortable. She pulled out her sheet music, spread it out in front of her, placed her hands on the keys and began.

First, some scales. Then, Mozart's "Rondo," because it gave her fingers a good workout. Then the "Arabian Dance" from *The Nutcracker Suite*, a Chopin interlude she was learning, and Beethoven's "Für Elise."

She tried her hand at a new duet for piano and violin that Rose had gotten from her violin teacher. Back in the country, she and Rose had often played together for their family and friends. Rose still took violin lessons—now from a teacher at school—but Blanche had laid aside her study of piano, maybe for good. She ran quickly through the piano part of the new duet once, then put it aside and took out the "Moonlight Sonata" by Beethoven.

From far off in the city came a car alarm, and the wailing warning of a police siren. Blanche shivered to herself and

moved the bench closer to the piano. Fingers adjusted, she began to play the first bars of the “Moonlight Sonata” and let the notes murmur from her fingers in a ceaseless repetition that carried her away down a broad river in her imagination. When she felt she had the current going sufficiently, she moved her right hand into the melody, let the notes drop haphazardly from her fingertips, like rain on the surface of a pond with a deep undercurrent. She let the melody slide away until she felt like playing it again, barely glancing at the music. This definitely wasn’t the conventional way to play the “Moonlight Sonata,” but it was very relaxing.

Eventually she began the rising melody of the piece, the uncertain question that drove her eyes back to the notes and made her left hand unsteady. Striving to keep the continual motion of the lower notes, she pounded out the hard, short, anxious notes of the climax, then let her right hand fall. Beethoven never answered the question in this piece. The left hand just kept doing what it had been doing all along, until it eventually sank to the lower end of the keyboard, and then into silence.

Blanche was still, contemplating the vibration of that last low note when the doorbell sounded. The delicate tranquility she had experienced was shattered.

“I’ll get it,” Rose sang out, drying her hands on a dishtowel as she went to the door. Blanche remained on the piano bench, wary.

“Oh, it’s Bear again,” Rose sounded surprised. Blanche heard the house door open, and Rose say, “Come on in, Sir Bear!”

Unsure of what this portended for their family, Blanche stared at the black and white bars in front of her.

“I just wanted to drop off a thank-you gift and bring back the boots and stuff,” Bear was saying.

“Well, come on in!” Rose replied merrily.

Mother came from the kitchen looking like a Swedish housewife in an old denim dress with her long hair braided and pinned up. She stood smiling at Bear. “Welcome again, Bear,” she said.

Bear came into the living room uncertainly, a small package in one hand and a lumpy grocery bag in the other. "I just thought I'd get you a little gift to thank you for saving my toes last night," he said, a bit sheepishly.

"That's very kind of you, Bear," Mother said. "Please take off your coat and stay a while. We were just finishing in the kitchen."

"I was going to make hot chocolate—would you like some?" Rose took Bear's coat, hung it on the old-fashioned coat stand, and skipped to the kitchen to get out the mugs.

"Uh, sure," he said bit awkwardly. With his coat off, he looked a little smaller in a khaki flannel shirt and old jeans. He sat down carefully on the sofa and crooked his fingers through his matted dreadlocks. His eyes met Blanche's as she sat guardedly in her corner. She saw that he realized she knew about him.

"You play piano?" he asked.

"Not in front of other people," she said quickly, getting up from the bench and sitting down on the chair. She lingered tensely to see what he would do next.

"You know, I've seen you before," he said finally, when Mother moved into the kitchen to help Rose.

Blanche said nothing, waiting.

"At St. Catherine's," he said. "On the school grounds."

"I've seen you there, too," she said flatly.

A faint red came into his cheeks. "I keep pretty lousy company, don't I?" he observed, quietly.

"It's your choice," she said offhandedly.

Rose came into the room with mugs of hot chocolate.

"I feel like talking poetry," she said cheerfully. "Blanche, where's that poem you got today?"

Blanche felt aggravated at being forced to share something that she found moving with this outsider. But what could she say without being rude? So she went to fetch the paper.

Mother opened Bear's package. "Italian cookies!" she exclaimed. "Bear, how did you know to get our favorite kind?"

"I didn't know, but I've always liked them, too," Bear admitted, clearly pleased.

“The perfect thing with hot chocolate!” Rose said approvingly, and went to fetch a plate. She arranged them artistically in a spiral on the plate and set them on the coffee table for nibbling. Mother and Rose both ate them with relish, but Blanche didn’t take any until after Bear had helped himself a few times.

Rose read the poem by A. Denniston with interest and passed it to Bear, who perused it with a frown on his face.

“I like the rhyme scheme,” Rose said. “Really good for someone our age. What do you think?”

Bear coughed. “Well, I think it’s a bit overdone myself,” he admitted. “But I can be pretty critical.”

“The images are good,” Mother said, looking it over as she rocked on her rocker.

“Well, what don’t you like about it?” Rose wanted to know, sipping her hot chocolate.

“It’s an okay rhyme scheme, but I get the feeling the guy who wrote it didn’t know much about death, or suffering,” Bear said. “He just seems to answer the question too easily. It’s sort of trite, really.”

Blanche cupped her warm mug in her hands and felt her cheeks flame with annoyance at his criticism, almost as though she had written the poem herself.

“I think it’s a remarkable attempt,” Mother said, taking another cookie. “It makes me think of our apple orchard back home.”

Mother handed the poem back to Blanche as Bear asked casually, “Where’d you find a piece like that?”

“Sister Geraldine read it to us in class,” Blanche said quietly, still hot. “She said it was the best poem she’d ever seen written by one of her students.”

“Did she?” Bear shrugged. “Well, I still like Robert Frost’s poem—the one it’s copying off of—better.” He paused, and quoted, “So Eden sunk to grief. So dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay.”

There was a stillness in the room, and Bear looked so pensive that Blanche almost forgave him for not appreciating A. Denniston’s poem. She admitted to herself that he really did seem to have a genuine love for poetry.

“Sister Geraldine is one of those rare specimens of people,” Rose announced, after some musing. “I don’t think she’s really who she says she is. Well, I suppose that she really is a nun, but she’s more than just an old schoolmarm. I think she was a queen who became a nun. Or better yet, a battle-maiden who forsook her shield and sword for holy vows.” She eyed Bear carefully. “Do you know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure,” said Bear, looking interested.

“Have you ever felt that there was something going on in life that not everyone was aware of?” Rose asked, turning her mug around in her hands. “As though there’s a story going on that everyone is a part of, but not everybody knows about? Maybe ‘story’ isn’t the right word—a sort of drama, a battle between what’s peripheral and what’s *really* important. As though the people you meet aren’t just their plain, prosaic selves, but are actually princes and princesses, gods and goddesses, fairies, gypsies, shepherds, all sorts of fantastic creatures who’ve chosen to hide their real shape for some reason or another. Or have forgotten who they really are. Have you ever thought that?”

“You know, Rose, I think you’re right. I think there’s a lot of people who have forgotten who they are in the larger scheme of things,” Bear said thoughtfully.

“Can you imagine anything more tragic?” Rose asked. “To be born a princess—native and to the manor born—and then to forget who you are and settle for being something horrible like an—an accountant!” Then a terrible thought struck Rose. Turning to Bear, she asked, “By the way, what do you do for a living? You’re not an accountant, are you?”

Breaking into open laughter and subsequently choking on his cookie, Bear asked, “Why? Do I look like one?”

“No. But I didn’t want to hurt your feelings in case you were an accountant in disguise,” Rose explained.

“Well, I just pump gas part time, so you don’t have to worry about me,” Bear chuckled.

“Oh, good. That makes sense,” Rose nodded. “You seem like that type.”

“I’m grungy enough,” Bear agreed.

“No—I mean the type who knows about hard work ennobling the soul,” Rose objected.

“Rose, I don’t think you’re being fair,” Blanche said. “Would it really be so bad to be an accountant? People have to make a living somehow. I don’t see any contradiction for a princess to be a house-cleaner. Or a hairdresser, or a waitress.”

“Yes, princesses are still princesses even if they’re poor,” Rose agreed. “Can you imagine a princess who works as a counter girl in a fast-food restaurant? Imagine if all the people who come in to place orders were to realize that their meal was served by a princess!”

“I think it would be hard for a real princess to have to do menial work like that,” Blanche reflected. “She might think it was beneath her.”

“Oh, but a *real* princess would know that hard work ennoble the soul,” Rose objected. “That would be one of the signs.”

“I think that if a real princess was lost in this modern world, and she could be whatever she wanted, she would be a musician,” Blanche said slowly. “A violinist, or a harpist. That would be the only place where she could find solace for her lost kingdom.”

“So your theory, Rose, as I understand it,” said Bear, “is that everyone in the world just might be something extraordinary, but very few of them know it?”

“Oh, a few know it. Or at least, they have an inkling.” Rose took a generous sip of her hot chocolate and sighed.

“Yes, you can tell Sister Geraldine knows,” Blanche reflected. “Everything *means* something to her. You just look into her eyes and know that she sees things as they really are, not as they seem. She sees the purpose and the implications of everything.”

“Even improper grammar,” said Bear, smiling. “No doubt.”

“Well, of course,” responded Blanche. “You can’t find truth so easily in disorder. Grammar—and biology—and chemistry—and math—they keep things in order. We wouldn’t know much without order. Good grammar *does* matter.”

“It’s as though what we call reality is a huge chess game,” Rose said, still sketching her marvelous vision on the

conversation, “but today, most people don’t realize what’s going on. They don’t know anything about chess. So they don’t understand most things that take place. Only a few people know what’s really happening any more. And even if you do know, it’s hard to keep that inner vision.”

“True,” Mother said. “But when you catch a glimpse of the real meaning of life, it’s easier to find others who also have that insight.”

“That’s why you found us, Bear. You’re one of those kinds of people. You *know*,” Rose told him solemnly. “You could be a handsome prince in disguise.”

Bear said nothing for a moment, looking up at the ceiling. When he looked back down, he said teasingly, “And are you two girls princesses in disguise?”

Blanche and Rose exchanged glances. “I don’t think so,” Blanche mused. “I feel too ordinary.”

“But maybe real princesses feel ordinary,” Bear said.

“Oh, I don’t think so. How could a princess feel ordinary? I think we’re too plain. We’re probably just peasant maidens,” Blanche said.

“Of course, either one of us could have a marvelous destiny in store for us,” Rose added, twisting a strand of hair around her finger.

Bear accepted Mother’s offer of the last cookie and asked, “So what other extraordinary people have you found in the world, aside from nuns and grease monkeys?”

“Well, there’s Mr. Freet with his silk waistcoats and walking sticks,” Blanche said. “Even though they’re out of place in our age, he doesn’t look funny in them. It’s as though he’s dropped out of another era into ours. He doesn’t fit, if you know what I mean.” Blanche glanced at Bear and caught a look of interest in his eyes.

“Yeesss,” Rose meditated upon the empty cookie plate. “He doesn’t fit. And yet, in another way, he does.”

“What do you know about this guy?” Bear asked casually, scratching his head.

“Well, Dr. Robert Freet is our principal,” said Rose, scraping crumbs from the plate and eating them, unconcerned by her breach of etiquette. “Mr. Edward Freet is his brother. I think he

owns an art gallery, and he comes by our school every once in a while to argue with the nuns and scowl at people. He's quite an enigma."

"He says art is about form, not truth," Blanche said, adding as an explanation, "I overheard him say that today to the office manager."

"Art's about truth," said Bear. "Truth and beauty go together."

"But it seemed to make sense when he said it," Blanche argued, but feeling that Bear was right. "Art's almost always beautiful—"

"Because beauty is truth," Bear said.

"But not always," Blanche thought she had at last found a point to contest. "What about beautiful witches and siren songs?" Blanche dug in. "And the beautiful girls in bad advertising and things like that? Evil things often look beautiful."

"But that's because they've stolen the beauty from the good." Bear was looking uncomfortable. "Evil isn't beautiful on its own."

"Well, good people are sometimes ugly—" Blanche said at last.

"I don't know about that. Not really," Bear shook his head. "If the good's there, and you look for it, you'll see it in some way."

"I think Bear is right," Rose said decidedly. "Fairy tales teach you that. No one who's *really* good ever stays ugly. It's always a disguise or an enchantment." She ruminated. "At least Mr. Freet is a lover of beauty, whatever he believes about it."

"I don't like his eyes—" Blanche said, "They're too cold. He's got a very—small soul. I think."

Rose giggled at her, but Bear looked thoughtful. "You may be right, Blanche."

"But I think there's something large about him too," Rose said. "He seems like someone who would understand the deeper meaning. We should try to chat with him sometime."

Blanche didn't agree, but she felt she had been talking too much and remained silent. *If only Dad were here...* She stood up and started clearing off the table.

“Blanche! Don’t take my plate! There’s still crumbs on it!” Rose protested.

“I should be going,” Bear got to his feet.

“A double blow,” Rose said in dismay, but stood up as well. “I’m glad you came over, Bear. I really enjoyed talking with you.”

“Thanks, I did, too.” He looked around at all of them. Blanche met his eyes briefly and went to the kitchen with the mugs.

“You’re welcome to come by again,” Mother smiled at him. “Any time.”

“And don’t just vanish on us,” Rose begged. “We’re starved for company. Come by tomorrow if you can.”

Blanche came back into the room and saw that he was looking at her, a bit uncertainly. *He knows that he makes me uncomfortable*, she realized, and felt guilty for her ungracious attitude earlier.

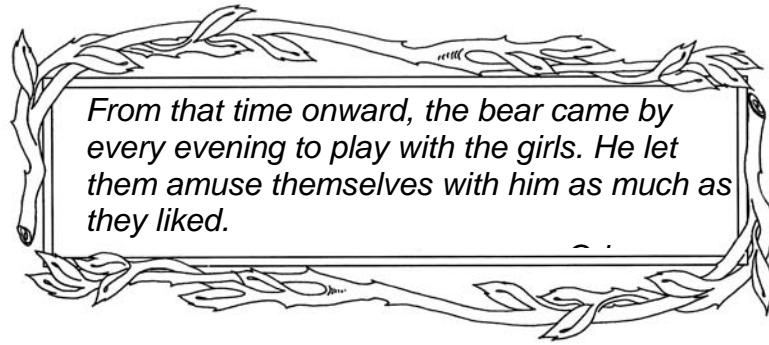
“Yes, please come again,” she said.

To her surprise, he smiled back at her. “I will. Thank you.”

“Oh, good!” Rose said. “Come by tomorrow if you can.” She went to get his coat.

Bear chuckled at her. “All right. I’ll take you up on your offer.” He took his coat from Rose and said good night. Blanche followed after her mother who had walked him to the door. As before, he bounded down the steps and vanished into the shadows of the City.

Once again, he seemed part of the wildness outside, and Blanche couldn’t help but be glad when her mother closed the door and locked it firmly.



Chapter 4

DESPITE BLANCHE'S misgivings, she began to look forward

to what became Bear's frequent evening visits to their home. She never saw him on the school grounds any more, and she began to wonder if he might have reformed. There was certainly an aura of trustworthiness—or just plain *worthiness* about him. And he appeared to enjoy all stripes of their talk—both their deep discussions and their girlish silliness. At least, he tolerated the latter.

As for Rose, she had felt an implicit kinship with Bear from the first moment she saw him—or so she claimed. She didn't discount her sister's occasional doubts about his character, but she found them much less threatening than Blanche did.

"Well, beggars can't be choosers," she would say when Blanche cautioned her. "You've got to admit that Bear is about the closest thing to the only friend we have in this city."

Which didn't make Blanche feel much better, even though it was true.

One Friday night a few weeks later when Bear came by, he looked a bit more mysterious than usual. "An odd thing happened on my way over here," he said. "I was passing by the theater on the way to the subway, and this frustrated guy pointed to me and said, 'Hey, do *you* want these tickets? I'm

ready to give them away!' He would have just thrown them at me, but I gave him some money for them."

"Tickets to what?" Blanche wondered.

Bear flushed again. "Standing-room-only tickets at the Met. They're doing *The Marriage of Figaro* tonight and I was wondering if you all wanted to go."

"Oh!" Rose had jumped to her feet, eyes shining. "Oh, Mom, may we?"

"My, my," Mother said with a smile. "That's a pretty upscale show, Bear."

"There are three tickets, so you all can go."

"Why don't you just take the girls, Bear? They'd love the show, and I'm a bit too tired tonight. It'll be a rare treat for them," Mother said. "They've never been to the Met."

"Would you want to?" Bear asked the girls.

"Sure thing! Oh boy, should we wear gowns?" Rose danced around, all in a tizzy.

"Not for standing-room seats. Just wear what you have on," Mother advised.

"Oh, but that would be too ordinary! Can't I just go change, Bear?" Rose begged. "One doesn't go to the opera every day!"

"Yeah, but hurry! The show starts in a half hour, and it'll take us twenty minutes to get there on the train," Bear urged.

Rose raced up the stairs and Blanche followed her.

Blanche put on her favorite royal blue sweater and brushed her hair back into a loose ponytail while her sister wildly threw clothes out of the closet onto the bed. "Oh, if only I had a black dress!" Rose lamented. "That would be *so* appropriate! How does this look?" She whipped out a purple dress and hung it in front of herself. "Too fancy? Okay, how about this one?"

"Rose, there's no time for going through your whole closet," Blanche insisted. "Here, just wear your black sweater."

"Yes! With a pink turtleneck and my grey silk skirt and black hose! Perfect! I knew I kept you around for some reason." Rose started changing at a lightning pace, then stopped and moaned. "Oh! Rob Tirsch said he'd call me tonight!"

"Well, too bad. Mom'll tell him. Hurry up and get dressed!"

It was amazing that they managed to get downstairs and into their coats within the next five minutes. They hurried out the door with Bear, Rose issuing a stream of orders all the time to Mother about what to tell Rob. Blanche was thankful when they at last got outside into the cold and dark. Heavy white flakes were sifting down from the sky, and even though Christmas was long over, there was holiday in the air.

They had to run to keep up with Bear's long stride. "There should be a train leaving in about a minute. It'll be close—do you have tokens?" he said over his shoulder.

Blanche held up two tokens in her mittened hand. "Yes. Do you?"

"Yes! We're set, then. Be ready to run when we get down the subway. Follow me!"

He pounded down the steps, avoiding all the people coming up, and took off running for the train.

"Augh! He didn't tell us he would run so fast!" Rose wailed, dodging after him through the Friday night crowds in line for tokens. Bear whipped through the turnstile with such velocity that Blanche had to hold it still a moment before she could go through it.

They flew after him down to the lower level where the train to Manhattan had paused, its lights flashing and the "close doors" signal sounding. Bear got onto the packed train and held the doors open for them with his hands as it started to pull away. Blanche and Rose dove beneath his arms and were safely on the train as it began to move in earnest. They stood beside him, gasping for breath and laughing as the train plunged into the tunnel.



"Do you know, I always imagine that the subway trains are dragons," Rose said to Bear as they clung to his coat for support in the swaying car. "Tearing back and forth across the city in their underground caves, devouring people and spitting them out at random destinations."

"Well, they certainly are as loud as dragons," Bear said. He winced as another train passed them in a deafening roar.

“Hey, weirdo,” someone said to Rose, poking her in the back. She went pale, her eyes flashing green. But when she turned, she gasped and the color came back into her cheeks. “Rob!”

It was the man himself, his blue eyes and black brows snapping at her beneath a ski cap.

“What are you doing out here tonight?” he grinned at her. He and his buddies were sitting in a row on the other side of the train, an army in sports jackets and hooded sweatshirts.

“Going to the opera. What are you doing?” Rose wanted to know, turning to face them. She had forgotten all about Bear and Blanche.

“The oh-per-ah!” Rob mimicked. “Getting some culture shock, are you?”

“I thought you were going to call me tonight,” Rose said.

“Well, I can’t. You’re not home, are you?” he said teasingly.

“Yes, but—So where are you going?”

“Ah, over to Lisa’s house for a party. Want to come?”

“No, I’m going—”

“To the oh-per-ah! Yeah, you said that.”



Bear watched Rose talking animatedly with Rob and bent down his head to Blanche. He said in a very low voice, “So this is the famous ‘Rob’?” One couldn’t talk to Rose these days without hearing some allusion to Rob.

“It is,” Blanche affirmed dryly.

“Tell me something. Why does Rose like this guy?”

Blanche shrugged, a bit irritated. “It beats me.”

“He’s just nothing like the type of guy I’d expect your sister to like, with all her talk about princes and gypsies.”

“Rob—is a nice guy. And he’s very popular,” Blanche hedged. Bear’s remark was odd in one respect. Rob definitely fit the image of Prince Charming, with his good looks and style. *He looks more like a prince than Bear does*, she thought. But of course, she couldn’t say that to Bear.

“Well, we’ll catch you later,” Rob was saying to Rose. The train was stopping. His buddies shouldered him out.

“Call me tomorrow night!” Rose called after him. “If you want!”

To Blanche, she turned and whispered, “Oh, can you believe it? What a coincidence! I’m so glad I saw him—I would have felt so bad if he had called and I wasn’t there!”

“He wasn’t going to call you anyhow. He was going to a party.”

“Oh, he would have called from the party. That’s what he said he was going to do. Oh, gosh, I can’t believe I saw him. He’s just *so* good-looking. Doesn’t he look like the man who played *Ivanhoe*?”

“Hush,” Blanche said sharply. Bear was taking them on an outing. It was rude not to include him in the conversation. Besides, she couldn’t help but feel put out with her younger sister who always seemed to be the center of attention.

Standing in the back of the dark opera house and gazing at the huge stage before them, gay with gold-scrolled scenery and sumptuously costumed singers, the air vivid with bright music, was one of the most enthralling experiences of Blanche’s life. For a time, she forgot her doubts about reality in the sheer delight of illusion. But, as Rose reminded her during the intermission, perhaps it wasn’t illusion. Perhaps it was a glimpse of what reality was really like.

It was a puzzle. Which was more true? Their own dark existence or the grace and brilliance of Susanna, Figaro, and the Countess? Most people would say that daily life is more real, Blanche supposed, and that the opera was merely a frivolous and expensive diversion. Then why was the loveliness of Mozart’s creation filling a hungry gap within her that no “reality” could fill?

Many people left after the second act, so Bear suggested that they should snag some seats. Blanche didn’t want to, in case the people came back, but Rose thought it was a good idea. So they found three good seats much closer to the stage and huddled there to enjoy the rest of the show. Despite Blanche’s nervous glances at the ushers, no one ordered them back to their posts at the rear.

“We should always get standing-room-only seats!” Rose gushed when they came out into the frosty night air. “It was wonderful!”

Bear chuckled. “Well, I’ll only accept those kind of tickets from now on, if you say so,” he said.

They all laughed, and Blanche felt the metaphysical heaviness she had been sensing lift. She felt lighthearted suddenly.

“Come on, there’s another subway down this way a bit.” Bear led them off in a different direction. “It’s a little safer this time of night.”

This time, they were in no hurry. The snow continued to come down in heavy showers, and there were fewer people around. The streets in this part of New York were broad and the sidewalks were wide. Huge glass windows looked into all sorts of upscale shops. Rose and Blanche dawdled, looking in the windows of the shops they passed, and Bear let them take their time.

“Oh, just look at that dress!” Rose breathed, coming to a stop and gazing at one of the mannequins in a fashionable boutique. “Now that’s what I would buy if I had the money!”

“Yes, but it would be almost sinful to buy it—it probably costs so much,” Blanche agreed, looking longingly at the dress in question. It was a long white linen dress with a lace collar and covered buttons. The slim mannequin wore white ballet shoes and a modest straw hat with white ribbons trailing down the back.

“Couldn’t you just die? Imagine wearing that—on a windswept field—surrounded by wild flowers—ah, rapture!” Rose whispered.

“Couldn’t you make a dress like that?” Bear asked, looking critically at the motionless figure in white. “I thought you girls sewed a lot.”

“Oh, probably,” Rose agreed. “But it would be so elegant to buy one—just once, you know.”

“The material is nicer than what you can get in the fabric stores, and those dresses really are well made,” Blanche added.

“Although I suppose we could scour the garment district for fabric like that, if we really wanted to . . .” Rose trailed off. “But

it wouldn't be the same, somehow." She sunk into thought as they continued walking, the girls giving a wistful farewell to the white dress.

"It's more the idea of the dress than the actual dress that attracts me," Blanche admitted to Bear as they walked on.

"That's it! I mean, how often do you have a chance to wear a white dress like that?" Rose pointed out. They passed another clothes store where a tall mannequin modeled a fluted silk gown with a long train. "Oh! How exquisite! I intend to have one some day, just to wear around the house for fun." Rose gave another sigh.

Bear whimpered softly and put his hands to his face in pretended despair. "I had no idea you girls thought so much about clothes."

"You should be grateful that we think about anything else," Blanche said with a straight face.

As they reached the opening of the subway tunnel, Bear halted. "Say, would you girls like to see a special place of mine? It won't take long. It's on the way home."

Rose and Blanche exchanged glances. Bear quickly said, "You don't have to come. Not if you'd rather just go straight home. It's just—well, I can't really go there during the day, and—I sort of wanted to show you this place. It means a lot to me."



An adventure unlooked for was staring them in the face. Rose tugged on her sister's hand. This was a chance to find out more about Bear and his mysterious life. Blanche's brow was creased, and she stood stiffly, unsure what to do.

"You're sure it won't take long?" Rose asked Bear.

"It won't, I promise. I just thought—it might be interesting for you."

Blanche started to shake her head, and Bear looked so crestfallen that Rose's heart ached. *Oh, come on, Blanche, she thought. Don't play the grown-up now.*

"All right," Blanche said at last. "But please, let's get home soon."

“All right, then!” Bear gave them a grateful smile and turned eagerly into the subway tunnel.

“I’m still not so sure about this,” Blanche whispered to her sister as they followed him.

“Cut it out, will you? We’ll be fine,” Rose whispered back. “Besides, if we can’t trust someone like Bear, who can we trust?”

“Dad,” Blanche said under her breath, “but he’s dead.”

“He’s still protecting us,” Rose had to point out.

Blanche didn’t respond, but Rose could hear her praying a “Hail Mary” under her breath.



The subways were much less crowded at this stop. The three of them stood waiting in the train’s subterranean cavern, hearing the far off screams of other rail cars in the distance. Blanche stared into the round black tunnel in front of her with troubling thoughts.

Who could you trust, really? Anyone you knew might suddenly turn on you and become someone else. People had free will. Even the holiest saint, however unlikely, could decide to become a devil. The people who seemed most stable might suddenly fall away, swallowed into the earth when you looked away, and not be there when you turned back. Anyone could die. The world was spinning with dire possibilities, and nothing, no one could be relied on.

She heard the roar of the dragon behind her and looked to see the flashing malevolent lights and hissing nostrils of the train. It hurtled past them even as she looked, and halted, snorting, waiting for them to enter its belly.

Rose stepped excitedly inside, her eyes dancing. Blanche could tell that she was exhilarated by the mystery of adventure. Rose sat down in the closest empty seat and Bear and Blanche sat on either side of her.

Blanche sat stiffly, gazing woodenly at their reflections in the window opposite them. Bear was hunched over, his arms folded on his knees, studying the floor. His mood had clearly changed from enthusiasm to reticence. What did that portend,

Blanche wondered. Was he regretting having asked them to come with him? Where was he taking them anyway?

Stations flashed by them, red lights flared in the windows suddenly and vanished, noises tumbled over each other and passed by from dark to dark. The lights in their compartment went out for a minute. Her own image in the reflecting window disappeared. Light slashed across Bear's face like a dagger, and he vanished.

The lights came on again. The world was weaker, yellow. The car rushed on as before, but the squalid interior seemed strange. Blanche could not feel or hear her own body. She, Rose, and Bear had diminished. Only their reflections in the window remained. In the dim light of the grimy car, their images seemed stilted, absurd. They were automatons, substitutes for real people, puppets dangling over a convulsion of dissonance and confusion. She felt dizzy for a moment. The lights flickered off again. Were they gone for good? Would the train ever stop, or would it hurtle on forever, now that it had reduced its passengers to ghosts and shadows? Were they to be prisoners forever in its tumultuous innards? She could not breathe.

The noise changed. The dragon gave in to friction and slowed sullenly, tearing and snapping at the ground. Ordinary light—ordinary city noise poured into the car as the doors opened with a hiss and a bang. The crowd propelled them out of the car onto the pavement. A guitarist was plucking away on the far side of the track, emitting a melancholy air.

They had escaped—for now. Blanche shivered in the wispy breath of the dragon and wished she were safely at home in her bed. The heady joy of the opera had vanished, and she felt even more unprepared than usual for an adventure.