

## Chapter 1

White was the last thing he could remember. White brightness and then the icy-cold splash. His eyes opened in shock and amazement to behold the green, shimmering world around him. His body hung suspended in the darkness as he watched the air from his nostrils float to the surface in the form of silver bubbles. Some inner instinct told him to follow them.

Numb from cold, his limbs thrust outward and propelled his body after the bubbles. The black, freezing water seemed reluctant to surrender him as he made the sluggish ascent. All at once, his head broke the surface, and his lungs gasped for air. As he cast his eyes upward, he beheld a million blazing stars.

*I live.*

It was the first coherent thought he could remember.

He continued to kick his legs and arms as he looked about. In the distance he could make out a rough black line, the shore. Instinct took over once again, and he began to swim in that direction. Although his muscles cramped from the intensely cold water, he made good progress with even, well-drawn strokes.

*When did I learn to swim?* he wondered.

It took him twenty minutes to reach the shore. By then his naked body was trembling uncontrollably and his skin had taken on a disturbingly blue pallor. The last few yards of the swim had carried him through broken chunks of ice and slush. Now, on the shore, his bare feet sank several inches into the snow. Wherever he was, it was winter.

Looking around, all he saw were trees and unbroken snow, softly luminous in the starlight. The wooded lake was silent and peaceful. For a moment, the beauty of the scene calmed his trembling as he gratefully breathed in the crisp winter air. The reality of his situation, however, demanded that he take immediate action. He was alone, naked, and soaking wet outdoors in wintertime. He realized that if he did not find shelter, and very soon, he would die.

He struck off, perpendicular to the shoreline, through the woods. He jogged, his feet frozen beyond all feeling. After a while he began to stumble. After the third time it was only with great effort that he regained his feet.

A moment later, he was able to discern an open area with the outline of a house to his left. He ran in that direction.

The house was completely dark, with no cars in the driveway. It appeared to be closed up for the winter. After investigating all the doors and windows, the freezing man picked up a rock and walked up to the back window. Hesitating only for a moment, he hurled the rock, shattering one of the small, rectangular sections. Reaching through gingerly, he unlocked the window and flung it open. He experienced some difficulty maneuvering his large frame through the opening, but at last he found himself in a small bedroom with antique-looking furniture. The single twin bed had been stripped of sheets, but a blanket had been left neatly folded on the end. Like a desperate animal, he grabbed it and wrapped himself up tightly. His teeth were chattering loudly, and he was barely able to stand. Exhausted, he lurched out the bedroom door and closed it behind him, leaving behind the cold wind from the open window. Staggering over to a couch, he collapsed. It took several long minutes for his trembling to finally subside and his breathing to return to normal. Wrapped in the blanket, and pressed into the couch, he closed his eyes and gratefully surrendered to sleep.

He awoke with the first light of morning. Sitting up, he observed his surroundings. The living room was cozy enough with its soft couch and Hitchcock chairs. In the corner on a table sat a black-and-white television set with rabbit ears antennae. The wallpaper in the room was diamond-patterned and very old. The mantle over the fireplace was littered with shells and pinecones collected over summers past.

Holding the blanket tightly around himself, he walked into the bedroom where he had gained access the previous night. This room was several degrees colder than the living room due to the open window. Stepping carefully in order to avoid the shards of glass on the floor, he crossed the room and closed the window. Looking at the shattered pane, he noted that he would need to board it up, as well as, sweep up the broken glass on the floor. At some time, he would also have to make reparations to the owners, whoever they might be.

Right now, he made his way over to the wardrobe in the corner. Although it was mostly empty, he was able to find some paint-spattered trousers, a sweatshirt, and work shoes. Nothing fit properly, and the shoes pinched his large feet, but he realized he would have to make do. Dressed in this way, he went back out across the living room, opened the front door, and walked out into the morning air.

The snow-laden gravel driveway curved through the woods until it met a narrow, unplowed road. From the rear of the cottage, he could make out one arm of the lake as it glistened through the barren trees. Retracing his steps from the night before, he came to the area of shoreline where he had emerged from the lake. Looking up and down the shoreline, he could find no other houses. The only signs of life on the lake were several speckled waterfowl. He remembered that they were called loons.

He was startled by a sudden crash behind him. Turning, he saw that one of the birch trees, warmed by the morning sun, had shed its coating of icicles. They lay sparkling at his feet. A line from a poem came suddenly to his mind:

Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

He remembered the poet, Robert Frost.

He remembered the poet. He remembered the poem. He even remembered the loons.

He wished he could remember his name.

## Chapter 2

The single school bus that served Birchwood, Maine's junior high school crunched up the frozen road, and its brakes whined as it came to a stop. The door folded open, and six children filed out and moved off toward their homes. The Darbys, two boys and their little sister, went off in a pack. Allison McReedy and Jillian Cruise walked together, continuing their conversation from the bus. It was an animated conversation, filled with sudden overdramatic outbursts laced with laughter.

Then came Mary Whitney.

Mary followed the other two girls at a respectable distance until she came to the path where she turned off. To look at her, dressed as she was, in a white parka with its hood drawn closed against the cold, hiding her face, one would not see anything special or different about the child. However, Mary had not joined in any of the conversations or, for that matter, even spoken a word during the bus ride. The other children did not find this at all unusual; Mary had not spoken any word in over a year.

No one could recall exactly when Mary had stopped talking. She had never been very loud or noticeable to begin with. Her elementary school teachers had seen her as meek and somewhat shy, but not alarmingly so. She rarely raised her hand or participated, but she did her work neatly and on time and never got into trouble. She did not seem to have any close friends but appeared to get along with everyone. Two years ago, she began to withdraw even more than usual, until, one day, her mother brought her into Dr. Benton's office and asked if he could do something about her.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"She doesn't talk anymore," Anne Whitney answered flatly.

"Not at all?"

"No."

"When did this start?"

Mrs. Whitney's usual dull expression seemed to fog over even more as she tried to think.

"About a week ago, I guess."

Dr. Benton was disturbed but not surprised by the answer. He wondered how long Mrs. Whitney had been sober enough to notice anything wrong with her daughter. He looked at the child, who stood quietly next to her mother, looking almost ashamed of the trouble she was causing.

"Mary." Dr. Benton addressed the child softly. She looked up dutifully. "Nothing seems wrong with her hearing." He commented.

"She hears fine ... I guess," said the mother dully. "She just doesn't talk anymore."

Dr. Benton gave the girl a full examination, and found nothing physically wrong with her. He wanted to ask some in-depth questions. Several minutes of this proved fruitless however, since the child did not speak and the mother answered in the disjointed fashion of an alcoholic. Although she appeared to be stuck deep within a haze, Mrs. Whitney actually seemed concerned, and, knowing her history, Alistair Benton was impressed that she pulled herself together long enough to make herself look presentable and accomplish the journey into town.

Dr. Benton tried several times to get Mary to speak and even gave her a writing tablet, but the child, though polite and in no way defiant, would not reveal any clue to the mystery of her sudden infirmity. The visit ended with Dr. Benton referring the Whitneys to the school's new psychologist, Aaron Green.

Aaron Green, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate of the local state college, was delighted with the case. He pulled out all of his schoolbooks, which had still not lost their crispness, and pored over them with glee. Born and raised in the town of Birchwood, he had gone off to college a liberal arts major. Returning to his hometown and his mother, he opened an art gallery and coffeehouse in a crusade to bring culture to the town. After one year, he took out another loan and went back to school in order to find something with which he could earn a living.

On his (second) triumphant return to the land of his birth, he was able, with his mother's influence, to convince the town fathers that Birchwood's public school system needed a competent psychologist. Over the ensuing year, his "cases" had been an assortment of class clowns and little girls who absently wondered if they were pretty enough. The school's budget-review board had considered sending Aaron back to college a third time until the day Mary Whitney stopped talking.

Mr. Green had Mary perform all of the tests, looking at inkblots, writing her first response to a barrage of provocative words, and role-playing different scenarios. This last task had been Mary's favorite, since she had always enjoyed pretend games. For weeks, Mr. Green was encouraged by her willingness to act out being poor and unwanted, being mother to a baby, being worried over a missing child, being sad for a loved one who had died. None of this, however, shed any light on why she was not talking. Mr. Green's official analysis ended up being that the child was simply desperate for attention, and that she would certainly begin talking again once the phase had run its course.

Now Mary followed the path that wound through the snow-laden wood. It was not the quickest way home. The most direct way to her house would have been to stay on the bus until it passed through the center of town and made the turn up Linden Hill toward her neighborhood. Mary often got off at this stop, however, in order to walk through the woods that lay between her neighborhood and the town. During the hot summer, the ten-mile walk would only take between two and three hours. In that time, the woods were green and thick with bright splashes of sunlight breaking through the leaves as they rustled in the warm breeze. Now, in December, with over a foot of snow on the ground, she realized that it would be well after dark before she arrived. Of course, she didn't fear getting into trouble, since her father was away, as usual, and her mother never really seemed to know what time it was.

As it began to grow dark, Mary's breath became a more-visible vapor in the freezing air. Her teeth chattering, she realized that today had not been a good choice to take the long way home. She enjoyed the woods because they were quiet and beautiful. At this time of year, everything was covered in a pristine white, which made the woods utterly silent. Mary could sit for hours at a time listening to silence. The playground and cafeteria at school oppressed her with its ongoing cacophony of voices, talking, yelling, and laughing. In class there was whispering and snickering, often directed at her and her mother, whispers about how she was strange and queer and also about her mother's drinking. In town, the ladies would point at her and whisper. She'd catch snatches of things like, "Been drinking for years ... now look at her daughter ... such a disgrace." Because she did not speak, many people seemed to be under some impression that she could not hear or understand the things they said. On the contrary, Mary's hearing was extremely acute, perhaps too good, she often thought. Everything seemed loud to her, especially people. It was this that drove her continuously to the sanctuary of the woods.

One day in the previous autumn, all the children except Mary were thrilled to see a deer charge through the brush along the edge of the playground. The teachers commented that it

seemed strange, and even a little sad, that Mary had not shown much interest in the unusual event. They did not know that Mary had long ago lost count of the deer she had seen while walking in the woods. The local boys liked to play in the woods, but they never ventured far from town and made noises loud enough to clear any wildlife for miles. Mary's afternoons and weekends were often spent miles from civilization. She would sit very still and silent for hours at a time. She was often approached by deer, pheasants, opossums, foxes, and even moose. During the previous summer, she had watched calmly as a four-foot-long copperhead snake sunned itself on a rock not three feet from where she sat.

Today, as Mary walked through the deep snow, she watched as the light faded and first the planets and then the stars began to come out. It was the winter solstice, and darkness came swiftly and suddenly to this northern portion of the world. She was not afraid of being lost, and the woods were even more beautiful under the light of the stars, but it was very cold. Walking home today had been a mistake. Through the trees in front of her she could see a break that she knew was the dirt road that led from town out to Pinniquid Lake. The road was never plowed in winter, since the only places near the lake were summer cottages that had stood empty since September. Increasing her pace, Mary gained access to the road and turned in the direction of her house when, suddenly, she stopped and, like a deer, raised her head to listen.

She could just barely hear ... something. It wasn't so much a sound as a sensation. It was as if she could sense some other presence on the road with her. Looking as far in either direction as she could, she failed to make anything out, but the sensation would not go away. Mary knew that absolutely no one except herself used this road at this time of year. After Christmas, when the water froze, people would ride their snowmobiles the ten miles out to the lake in order to go skating and ice fishing. At this time, however, the large, sometimes turbulent lake was only just beginning to freeze. She imagined it as it had been last weekend when she had walked out, the black, agitated water just gathering slush along the edges.

Walking east along the road, in the direction of her house, Mary continued to strain her senses intently. She stopped more than once to adopt that same animal-like posture of listening. She still couldn't hear anything, but the sensation she had felt earlier grew stronger. She was not alone on this road. Someone was behind her and gaining. Who could possibly be traveling along this road *from* the lake? This was the only road. Anyone coming from the lake now would have to have taken the road west originally to get out there. Scanning the ground, Mary saw that the week-old snow was completely unbroken except for her own footprints.

Making a decision, Mary left the road and moved back into the woods, slipping between the trees. She began to make her way back the way she had come, parallel to the road. By now it was completely dark, and she had to use the starlight to make her way. Anyone less familiar with these woods would have been confused and lost in a moment. Mary, however, had on several occasions spent the entire night out here when her mother, suffering from one of her insomnia spells brought on by New England's hot summer nights, had been sitting with her bottle in hand before the blaring television. On those nights, Mary always found some comfortable spot deep in the cool, sylvan environment, and would sleep there until the eerie, early morning cries of the loons would awaken her. Now, however, the biting cold offered no such refuge. Her hands, balled up into fists within her mittens, had gone very numb. She knew she needed to get home quickly. Still, something compelled her to solve this mystery.

Stopping now, she listened once again and this time was rewarded with the very faint sound of feet, human feet, breaking through the snow further ahead. Crouching low behind a huge hemlock, Mary watched the road, silently shivering. The crunch of footsteps grew

gradually louder until she was able to make out a figure moving up the road, following the path left by her own footsteps.

It was a man, the largest man Mary had ever seen. He stood an easy seven feet high, with broad, muscular shoulders that rolled easily with his stride. His hair was long, reaching down just past his shoulders. He was wearing old work clothes that did not appear to fit him well, and clasped a double-wrapped blanket around himself in place of a coat. His eyes were scanning the ground ahead, and it was obvious that he was following the smaller footprints before him. When he reached the place in the road opposite the hemlock, he suddenly stopped. Mary held her breath as the man slowly looked around and then stood still as if he was listening. From her hiding place, she was now crouched only a few feet from him.

The stars afforded enough light for her to make out more of his features from this distance. She judged him to be in his thirties. His face was smooth, unlined, honest looking, she thought. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes in the starlight, but she could make out a white line, like a scar, across his forehead, just below the hairline. His long hair and eyebrows appeared to be snow-white. Not white like an elderly person's so much as like an animal's coat in the winter.

Once again the man looked around him as if aware of another presence. He scanned the woods on either side of him, and then stopped, facing the hemlock. Mary once more held her breath, wishing she were home. What had she been thinking walking home on such a freezing night as this with the heavy snow to slow her down? Why had she been so curious to find out who or what was behind her? Why hadn't she just quickened her pace as soon as she realized she was being followed, and tried to make it home safely?

Mary's self-recriminations were cut short when the man suddenly moved forward, rounded the hemlock, and stood towering above, looking down at her in the snow.

### Chapter 3

The sun had gone down and he was still following the same road. The shoes he had found, like all the other clothes, were too small and blistered his feet, hampering his progress. He had been walking through the cold after having made the decision to leave the summer cottage and try the road. He started shortly after noon after eating the few things left in the cupboards, a can of beans and a packet of dried soup mix, and had walked for three hours. Now it was dark, and he had almost given up hope of finding any sign of human life, until he had come across the footprints. They were smaller than his and were very fresh. They had come from out of the thick forest to his right, and led in the same direction he was heading. He hurried after them as fast as his frozen, blistered feet would allow him.

Along the way, he had been rehearsing to himself what he needed to say when he found other people. He would tell them that he was a stranger and did not know where he came from or even who he was. He would say that he had been in an accident of some kind and was willing to work or do anything if they would feed him, shelter him, and perhaps help him find the answers he sought. Maybe, if he found people, they would already know who he was. Maybe they could explain to him who he was and what had happened.

Suddenly, he stopped dead and stood listening in the starlight. There was someone here. The footprints he had been following continued onward, out of sight, but he sensed that their owner was somewhere very near. He scanned the forest on either side, but could see nothing. Listening, he thought he could just barely hear the slightest, quietest sound of breathing. He turned toward the tree nearest him on his right, and the sound stopped. In three strides he rounded the tree and stood towering over the figure of a young girl.

She was looking up at him fearfully. The hood from her white parka had fallen halfway back, and, in the blazing light of the stars, he could see her face.

It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

She was a young girl, no more than fourteen. She sat crouched in the shadow of the hemlock, in a strange, wonderful posture that, in some complicated way, suggested that she belonged in the enchanted-looking wood. The wind, which suddenly gusted a white spray of snow against his face, left her unscathed in the shelter of the tree, and seemed to emphasize this. Her hair was light brown, like a deer's, and her face was smooth and pale from the cold. Her eyes were also brown and, although reflecting their present fear, suggested a wisdom as ancient as the giant hemlock beside her.

Opening his mouth, he spoke his first words to her:

“Don't be afraid.”

Something about his voice or manner must have been convincing, for she immediately relaxed and nodded slowly, smiling gently.

He somehow sensed that this was her way of saying hello.

All the things he had rehearsed or considered saying seemed to blow away like a dusting of snow in the wind. At that moment, it was as if the hemlock tree was the center of a universe that only he and the girl occupied. The rest of reality ceased to exist behind the curtains of snow-draped trees, and he began to speak:

“I don't know who I am or what my name is. I remember light, white brightness, and then the lake. It was very cold. I had to swim. The water was black and freezing. I had no clothes. I remember running through birch trees until I saw a house. I had to break in. These clothes, I stole them. I didn't have any choice. I was trying to find people, find help. There was a mirror in the

house. My hair is white, but I am not old, and this scar on my head looks like something that must have happened years ago, but I don't remember how I got it. I don't remember anything about myself before last night, but I do remember some things, strange things, like poetry and the names of trees and animals. I remembered the loons.

"It's a terrible thing not knowing who you are. It's like being lost in a pathless wood in wintertime. The snow swirls around you and makes shapes you want to recognize and make sense of. You wonder what kind of person you are and how others will see you. The stars seem familiar, and I've found I can name every one of them. Some of the names, I think, come from books and observatories, but some of the names are forgotten or unknown. Only I know them. How can I know these things, and yet, not know myself? There is a sound the wind makes as it blows the snow off the trees, and I know that the sound is trying to tell me something. The smells that come from the branches that break beneath my feet are trying to tell me something too. There were loons on the lake; I remembered them. They make the queerest sounds like laughter, but I think sometimes they cry."

He stopped, seeming exhausted from his outpouring. The girl had watched him politely, soundlessly, throughout this speech. She unzipped her school bag, took out a notebook, and wrote for several minutes. When she was finished, she handed it to him:

*My name is Mary. I live in the town at the end of this road. It is named Birchwood, after all the trees around here. The lake that you spoke of is called Pinniquid. It was a name the Indians gave it long ago, but they're gone now. I'm sorry, but I don't know who you are. Perhaps someone in town can help you.*

*It is a terrible thing not to know who you are. The most terrible part is that so many people suffer from your condition. Most of the people in my school don't know who they are. Mr. Green at the counselor's office doesn't know who he is. My mother has been lost in a pathless wood for many years now. Can you tell me the names of the stars? In a book I saw once it said that many of them just have numbers, but I've always known they have names. The things you hear and smell are trying to tell you what you need to know. So many people are so busy talking sometimes that they don't take the time to listen or smell things and so they don't really know anything. You're right about the loons. They do sometimes cry. People say they don't, but they do. They cry when the world is very sad or very hurt or when someone has a broken heart. Not like on TV shows when a couple breaks up, but when someone's heart is so broken by life that maybe it can never be whole again.*

*It's very cold and very late. I think we should go home now.*

The girl, Mary put her notebook away, shouldered her bag, and reached out her hand. He took her hand in his, and together they walked as he told her all the names of all the stars they could see.

## Chapter 4

Sheriff Louis Cranston hunched his shoulders against the cold as he shone his flashlight on the footprints Mary left where she entered the forest. His police car, a 1971 Chevy pickup, bought brand-new the previous year, was parked by the side of the road at the school bus stop. On the door of the pickup was a decal of a mountain covered with birches. Surrounding the picture were the words *Birchwood Sheriff's Dept.* The truck was immaculate. Cranston cleaned it himself every week, and changed the oil every other month. It had been difficult to get the town's budget committee to agree to a new police vehicle, and he intended to keep it in mint condition. The salt used for traction in wintertime will kill a car within ten years if it isn't washed off promptly. Cranston didn't like asking for things, and took personal pride in keeping the things he had in perfect condition. His reputation for personal care and responsibility had earned him a respected place in the community and swayed the budget committee's decision.

Cranston looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. Mrs. Whitney had called him at just past six to report that her daughter had not come home from school. She had sounded somewhat sober on the phone, which was a small miracle in itself. Cranston figured she'd run low on booze, otherwise she probably wouldn't have missed her daughter if she'd been gone all night. His first phone call had been to the school principal, who gave him the number of the attendance secretary, Alice Williams, and the school bus driver, Ralph Lynch. No, Alice had not seen Mary's name on the absent list, which meant she had been to school. Yes, Ralph was pretty sure he remembered seeing Mary on the bus this afternoon. She may have gotten off at his first stop on Washington Street; she often got off there, he reported.

Looking at the footprints, Sheriff Cranston tried to figure out where Mary Whitney might have been heading. It was the wrong time of year for a nature walk, if that's what she'd had in mind. These woods offered nothing for a child her age that he could think of. There was nothing in that direction for at least three miles, and the only thing she would find was the road to Lake Pinniquid, which wouldn't even be plowed. He took a moment to consider his options. The bus had dropped her off at about three fifteen. If she were heading for Pinniquid Road, she probably would have reached it by now. Rather than follow the footprints, he decided to try his luck there.

Getting back into the four-by-four, Cranston pulled back onto the road, following it through the center of town. Birchwood, Maine, was a small town with a population of about five thousand. The center of town contained a pair of gas stations, a hardware store, a department store, a convenience market, a pharmacy, a library, and the town hall. Bisecting Washington was Central Street, which led past the post office, fire station, and Russell's grocery store. Further down, past the town hall, Cranston drove by his own office and continued on toward Linden Hill. On the radio, Johnny Nash sang his new hit, "I Can See Clearly Now."

Louis Cranston was born in a small town in western Massachusetts. When he was nine years old, his father died, and he and his mother moved to Boston to live closer to her family. Louis never acclimated to city life. He enjoyed fishing and being outdoors, and couldn't stand dealing with traffic. After leaving the police academy, he endured four years as a Boston cop, before learning of an opening for a sheriff in a small town in Maine. Birchwood suited him, and the town ended up welcoming him gratefully. The previous sheriff had been dismissed for negligence of duties as well as questionable ethics. It did not take Birchwood long to comprehend the character of Louis Cranston, who once returned to pay for a second cup of coffee the waitress at Norman's bakery neglected to charge him for. The sheriff's office, like the car, was kept immaculate. All the files were categorized efficiently. The fact that he was an

outsider made him more objective when it came to handling disputes, and, from a Birchwood perspective, the fact that he had served as a Boston city police officer generated a feeling of respect and even awe.

After three years, Louis was feeling very comfortable with his position. The job was very low-stress compared to Boston, and he enjoyed the fact that he knew almost everyone in town. He made friends easily and fit in with the slower, more relaxed lifestyle of the idyllic New England town. There was a dark side, however, one that he came to learn about as an adult. When he was a boy, living in western Massachusetts, he had only seen the sunny side of small-town living. Now, as a public servant, he had witnessed the pettiness and meanness that was part and parcel of any small community. Everyone knew everyone, and there were very few secrets. Disputes and grudges could last decades or even generations. Louis knew of two brothers who lived two houses away from one another and had not spoken in fifteen years. Among children, the pecking order was established early on and became unbreakable.

Cranston saw Mary Whitney as a perfect example of everything that was wrong with a small town. Her mom was a lush, and, of course, everyone in town knew it. Cranston was certain the girl had been ostracized long before she developed her own problem. A kid didn't just stop talking for over a year because she was trying to get attention. That moron at the school, Aaron Green, who Cranston strongly suspected couldn't tie his shoelaces without help (which was probably why he always wore loafers), had no business calling himself a psychologist. Green's degree had been in liberal arts, and, according to him, he'd taken a few "key graduate courses" on the history and practice of psychology. Last year at a church spaghetti supper, Cranston had made a lame attempt at conversation by mentioning a book he'd once read on Karl Jung. Green looked at him blankly, and responded that he "didn't know much about modern artists."

When he'd heard about the case and Green's asinine theory, Cranston had asked to speak with the child. He stopped by the school and was allowed to use the vice principal's office to conduct the interview. He asked her if anyone had hurt or threatened her. He told her that it was safe for her to tell him anything, even bad things, because he was a policeman, and part of a policeman's job was to stop people from doing bad things. The interview was unproductive. If any foul play had been going on, she wasn't ready to reveal it. He was struck with how startlingly pretty she was. There was something about her face that had always seemed hauntingly familiar to him. He watched sadly as she walked back to her class alone. *A pretty girl like that should be popular, he thought. She should be laughing with friends, and whispering and giggling about boys, but she lives in a small town, her mom is a drunk, and she doesn't fit in. Maybe that's why she stopped talking.*

Coming to the top of Linden Hill, Cranston swung onto Winter Street and followed it to Pinniquid road. Johnny Nash gave way to the Moody Blues' "Nights in White Satin." The song paused and was in the midst of its eerie monologue when Cranston pulled the car over. *How appropriate*, he thought, snapping off the radio and headlights before turning off the car. Then again, maybe not. There was no cruel orb to rule this night. It was a moonless night, and the only light given came from the stars. There were no houses along this stretch of Winter Street, and no streetlights. Getting out of the car, Cranston turned on his flashlight and played its beam across the entrance to the road. The snowplow had pushed snow up in heaps on either side of the street and he had to climb over this in order to reach Pinniquid Road. There were no other footprints here. If Mary had reached the road from the woods, she was still on it. The sheriff began trudging through the snow, one hand holding the flashlight, the other thrust deep into his coat

pocket for warmth. Every minute or so he would swap hands. It was cold, really cold. The coldest night so far this winter, he figured. A couple more nights like this and the lake would be frozen for certain. It struck him that he should probably have brought an emergency medical kit and blanket in case the girl was lying out there somewhere suffering from hypothermia.

Following a long curve in the road, Cranston thought about the work he wasn't getting done. The back room of the sheriff's office needed to be stripped and repainted. A recent county ordinance had stipulated that lead-based paint had to be removed from all public buildings. In order to save the department money, he agreed to do the job himself in his spare time. Armed with sandpaper and a hand scraper, he had begun the long, tedious process of removing decades worth of old paint layers. After three one-hour sessions after work, he succeeded in removing the paint from one and a half of the four walls. At this rate, it would be another two weeks before he could have the painters come in. Swapping hands again, Cranston dropped his flashlight. Cursing softly, he picked it up, brushed off the snow, and finished rounding the curve. There were two figures in the road ahead.

One of them had to be the Whitney girl, but she wasn't alone. There was a man walking beside her, holding her hand. Cranston called out to the two figures, and jogged forward to meet them. Stopping a few yards from the pair, he flashed his light across their faces. It was Mary Whitney all right, but the man in the ill-fitting work clothes and blanket was a stranger.

*He's ... big,* was Cranston's first thought, and his free hand strayed unconsciously to his gun. "Hello there," he said with authority. "May I ask who you are and what you're doing out here with this young girl?"

The stranger looked like he was trying to figure out how to respond, while the Whitney girl walked forward, leading him by the hand, and stopped a few feet in front of the sheriff.

"Hello," said the man uncertainly. "You're a police officer, aren't you? A ... constable?" He seemed as though he were choosing his words with careful deliberation.

"Sheriff," answered Cranston with level eyes, "and you haven't answered my question. What's your name?"

"I don't know," said the man. "I had some kind of accident out at the lake. I don't remember who I am or what happened. I was trying to find help. This girl, Mary, found me along the road. She told me there was a town near here."

"She ... told you?" asked Cranston.

Mary, meantime, had been writing in her notebook. After a few seconds, she finished and handed it to Sheriff Cranston.

*Hello, Mr. Cranston, I'm glad you're here. I decided to walk home today because I like walking rather than riding the bus. I know the forest very well and I think it's beautiful, especially after a fresh snowfall. Only it was so cold and the snow was so deep that I soon realized that I'd made a mistake and that I wouldn't make it home until late. I'm sorry if my mother was worried; it's just that she usually is very busy and doesn't usually realize when I'm gone. You know what I mean.*

*I found this man on the road. He doesn't know where he is or even who he is. He needs help. I remembered you from the time you came to see me at the school last year and I knew that you would be the person who could help.*

Cranston read the note and looked at the girl. She was looking up at him with a face of total innocence and trust. Again, he found himself struck with her intense beauty, and in an instant, it occurred to him what was so familiar about her. It was like the face of the princess that you imagined in all the bedtime stories you had ever heard as a child.

“Okay,” said Cranston, handing the notebook back to Mary. “My car’s up ahead at the end of the road. Why don’t we all go someplace where it’s warm?”

The first stop was the Whitney house, an innocent-looking ranch-style home on Chamomile Street. Mary’s mother met them at the door, wrapped her arms around her daughter, and clutched her tightly, murmuring, “Thank God, thank God,” under her breath. Cranston watched and again wondered if some kind of abuse might be the cause behind Mary’s condition. He was almost certain, however, that the mother was innocent in this area. He’d seen her, both drunk and sober, on several occasions. Sober, she seemed to be a genuinely loving parent. Drunk, she just seemed detached, more helpless than violent. Cranston strongly suspected that the girl was the caretaker, for the most part, in this relationship. The father was very rarely around. Cranston knew little of him, but decided he would have to make it his business to find out more.

Anne Whitney continued to clutch her daughter, and Mary returned the embrace lovingly. Cranston was saddened by the sensation that this was a rare moment between them. The mother had not even taken note of the white-haired giant who stood behind him. Reluctant to intrude, Cranston cleared his throat softly.

“Mary’s had herself a little adventure tonight. She seems to have found herself a lost sheep out in the woods. I’m going to take him down to my office and see if we can’t find where he belongs. Mary, I’m wondering if you can do me a favor and stop by my office after school tomorrow. I’d like to ask you a few questions. You can get off the school bus at the midtown stop, near the town hall. I’ll drive her home afterward, Mrs. Whitney, if that’ll be all right?”

Both mother and daughter nodded. Cranston, after saying goodnight, headed back to his car with the stranger by his side. Starting the car, he sized up his unusual companion once again and tried to decide if he could take him on if the man turned violent. *No way*, he admitted to himself. The man was big, taller than anyone he’d ever seen in town. The tight, old clothes suggested a lot of muscle and very little fat. He was in pretty good shape for a vagrant, if that’s what he was. Fortunately, he seemed calm, almost serene, and Cranston had to admit the steel-gray eyes had a benevolent look about them. The man’s confusion about his identity seemed genuine, and the girl had obviously not felt threatened by him.

“You look half-frozen. I guess it’s a lucky thing for you Mary was walking your way tonight. She’s a sweet girl.”

“She’s very kind and very capable, but I’m concerned about her, like you.”

“What makes you think I’m concerned?”

“I can tell. I think she can tell too.”

Cranston shifted uncomfortably. “Look, I need to take down your story and check some things to see if we can’t figure out who you are and where you belong. If you walked out here from the lake like you said, I’m guessing you haven’t eaten for a while. Why don’t I stop at Norman’s, pick us both up some dinner, and you can tell me all about it at the office.”

“You’re very kind.”

“Yeah, well, what was it Jesus said about showing hospitality to strangers, least they be angels in disguise?”

“Paul.”

“What’s that?”

“It was Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews.”

“You sure about that?”

“Quite certain. Chapter thirteen, verse two. It’s odd, the things I remember. Whoever I am, I seem to be well read.” He smiled wryly, and Cranston had to chuckle.

“Okay, we’ll get you back to the office, and I’ll run a check on any missing Harvard professors.”

One hour later, Sheriff Cranston, the man from the forest, and Dr. Alistair Benton were all sitting in Cranston’s office on Washington Street. The sheriff had called Benton and told him about the situation. Benton agreed to come and check out the stranger. The man took off his shoes in order to relieve his blistered feet and his shirt in order for the doctor to examine him. Dr. Benton was impressed. He’d measured the man at seven feet, three inches, and weighed him at 250 pounds. He was very muscular and broad shouldered, and didn’t exhibit an inch of fat. His eyes were steel gray and clear, and his hair and eyebrows were snow white. The only marks on his body were the blisters on his feet from the too-small shoes, and the curious white scar on his forehead.

“Well,” said the doctor, putting his things back into his bag, “you seem to be in excellent health, my friend. Any idea where this came from?” he asked, tracing the long, white scar.

“No, I don’t remember.” the stranger answered.

“Looks like it must have been quite a wound. I’ll send over some salve for those blisters, but you really need to find some shoes and clothes that fit.”

“Thank you, but I’m afraid I don’t have any money. These clothes aren’t mine. I . . . stole them.”

Benton looked at the sheriff who then told him the man’s story as he had heard it over dinner. Benton was as amazed as Cranston had been.

“I’m thinking maybe he was ice fishing and fell through,” Cranston concluded. “The shock of the cold water, or perhaps hitting his head, may have caused the memory loss.”

“I don’t see any signs of head trauma,” said Dr. Benton, “but memory loss of this kind can often be attributed to shock. If so, it should clear up with some rest. I’ll send over that salve. Don’t you worry about it, my friend; you look as though you’ve been through enough troubles on your own. From your description, it sounds like you landed in Dr. Ewing’s summer cottage. Dr. Ewing is a dentist who lives in Framingham, down in Massachusetts. He and his family spend the summer here by the lake every year. He’ll be grateful that you boarded up that broken window before you left. If I know Arthur Ewing, I think he’ll be glad you were able to find comfort in his home, and won’t begrudge you a few old work clothes.”

With that, Dr. Benton said goodnight and left, and Cranston explained to the stranger that he could spend the night. There were two bunks in the holding cell. On rare occasions, Cranston would lock up a couple of locals who had had too much to drink at the VFW bar and let them sleep it off, but tonight had been quiet. In the morning he would have Albert Hicks, his part-time deputy who worked at the Esso gas station, take the man to the Salvation Army store, in the next town, to try and find him some clothes that fit. He would also have Hicks call the surrounding communities and check the missing persons bureau. Meanwhile, Cranston himself planned on taking a snowmobile out to Lake Pinniquid to check out his story and see if he could find any clues.

Cranston checked a few things around the office. The radiator was running, ticking, hissing, and sighing as it warmed the rooms. The desk was clear, and the file cabinets were locked. The back room had been swept, and the sandpaper and scraper were sitting neatly on a stool, waiting for the next time he could get back to his project. He made certain that the gun

rack was locked and bolted, just in case. He then picked up his hat, and bade the stranger goodnight.

“I want to thank you for all you’ve done, Sheriff,” said the man. “I would like to do something to earn all that you’ve given me.”

“Just doing my job.”

“No, your job ended when you found the missing child. All of this you’ve done on your own.”

“That’s not true. As sheriff, I’m obligated to help anyone in need. We all get a little lost sometimes.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah.” Cranston thought about the empty house waiting for him at home, and the spare time he filled with scraping paint and doing other jobs. He thought about his mother, who had died three years ago, and his father, who had been gone for many years. He tried to think about Birchwood and how good small-town people could be. Then he thought about Mary and the way she had walked away that time, all alone back to her classroom. “Yeah, everyone.”

The stranger looked at Louis Cranston with his clear gray eyes, and when he spoke, his voice held a warm and comforting tone that reminded Cranston of something he had not heard or felt in many, many years. “Mary said that you would be the person who could help. She also told me that the sounds and smells around me were trying to tell me the things I need to do. She said that there were many people who suffer from my problem, not knowing who they are. I do not believe you are one of those people. You’ve decided that it is your obligation to help, and no one who knows what it is they need to do is in danger of staying lost for very long.”

Cranston nodded slowly, not knowing how else to react, and shook the man’s hand. And then they parted. The sheriff closed the door and walked to his car. He started the engine, flipped on his lights, and drove off into the night.

Inside the sheriff’s office, the white-haired man sat for a moment feeling tired, but he could not sleep yet. The clock on the wall said nine thirty, and, although he had been walking all day, his body still had strength, and he knew he was still good for a few more hours. Moving into the back room, he looked at the scraping tools. Earlier, he had seen Louis Cranston look at these tools while betraying the slightest grimace, and that had told the man what he needed to do. He picked up the sandpaper and scraper, approached the paint-layered walls, and set to work.

Louis Cranston pulled into his driveway at home and shut off the car. The house was dark and empty, just as he’d envisioned it earlier. The wind had died completely, and the silence was broken only by his footsteps as they crunched up the walk. He moved toward his front door and was reaching for his keys when he was stopped by a sudden sensation. He was not alone. He knew for certain that there was someone or something behind him. Although he couldn’t know it, the sensation was exactly like that experienced by Mary Whitney a few hours ago on the old road from Lake Pinniquid. Very slowly, he turned around.

Something, something huge, was squatting on his mailbox.

Taking careful steps, Cranston fumbled for his flashlight, and, for the second time that evening, his free hand strayed toward his gun. He turned on the flashlight and moved its beam across the snow until it reached the post.

“Holy—” breathed Cranston.

Sitting on his mailbox was the largest owl he had ever seen.

It stood over three feet tall and was snow-white. It seemed totally unperturbed by him or the beam of the flashlight. Its eyes were steel gray.

Cranston and the bird stared at one another, the snowy giant blinking its eyes thoughtfully in that curious expression that has inspired poets and dreamers throughout history to imbue his species with the virtue of wisdom. After several minutes, the bird cocked its head at the man and began to hoot a long, lilting chorus that seemed to Cranston like the voice of this very strange night itself. When it finished, it spread its wings, spanning over five feet, and vaulted into the night air. The slap of its wings against the starlit darkness echoed down to the earth as a single, white-plumed feather wafted down from the heavens.