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People in northern Kentucky would say later that they had never seen snow fall so thick. A storm, the third of the season, had been predicted for the evening of January 28 of '52. But nothing like the one that showed up, a monster of a storm made of ice and cold and, most of all, a snow that wouldn't let up. A snow that mounded almost before it hit the ground; at least, that's the way it seemed to the people of Willow Creek.

It came on so quickly that farmers who had gone to their fields to check on their cattle got stranded and blinded, wading back to their houses half frozen. The town whore got stuck overnight in a barn with a hired hand. Cars slid off the roads or came to a halt right where they were, their drivers staggering toward the nearest houses they could find, their own or neighbors'. In most houses, the electricity was out and people couldn't watch *I Love Lucy* on TV, one of the worst things that could happen to a body on a Monday night.

Inside The Two Sisters' Café, the lights were on and the two sisters, Alma and Vannie, had long finished with the main crowd. Only two customers still lingered.

One of them, a teenage boy, sat alone in an upper dining room booth, his back to the fire, eyes fixed moodily on the front door. Such eyes—a brew pot of all that was young and old, both explosive and saddened, at once hard and vulnerable. He was a singer and a poet and a fighter and a

problem at school. He had big plans tucked away inside a shabby suitcase in the seat opposite his in the booth and in the beat-up guitar case stacked on top of it. Plans long in the making. They had started practically the day, now over five years ago, that he had picked up his first old guitar and found himself plucking on the three remaining strings, tuneless and full of dust that blew in all directions under his fingers. Playing and humming, he had pictured a future that took him out of this town. The dream was close now, almost close enough to touch.

Yet, here he sat with the possibilities motionless inside him as he stared at the door. In this moment, instead of joy, he felt yearning and pain and growing anger. This, too, he kept inside, sitting rigid, buried under that unnatural silence in one so young. Only his hand moved, rubbing slowly across the gunnysack that lay beside him on the red leather seat.

Below him in the lower dining area, Burris McCarthy lingered at the counter hunkered down over his coffee, his peach cobbler scraped clean off the plate in front of him, staring out at the white wilderness that had come swirling out of nowhere.

Sister Vannie cleared the plate and asked Burris if he wanted more. He said no, meant yes, but only if it was on the house. She looked at his pot-belly and didn't offer free seconds.

"Damned if I can see my house out there," Burris said, turning to squint out the farthest window.

Vannie pointed out the window and said, "It's right across the road, you dang fool cuss."

At the wave of her hand, Burris caught a glimpse of his house, a little gray bungalow with a rock and gem shop attached, standing there snug and sturdy against the storm. "Well, I still can't get there," he said, not stirring. "Damndest thing I ever heard, to see your house with your own eyes and know you can't get to it."

Vannie almost sent him packing but thought better of it. He could get to the house alright, she could see to that. But she knew he didn't want to go there. Not tonight. There were a lot of times lately he didn't want to be

inside his own house. It frightened him with its ambiance since Mattie, his wife of forty-odd years, had recently died. Part of the time the place scared him with its emptiness, and part of the time it scared him with the feeling that it was haunted. Once he woke in the middle of the night and heard the sound of rocks being poured into the sorter. He went into the shop, but as he'd expected, there was no one there. Yet, a gaudy stone with more prisms than any diamond ever mined rolled gently across the counter. Not a costly stone, but the sort of huge sparkly thing that Mattie had liked to wear. He'd never been able to afford to give her anything but a small diamond cluster, not that it had bothered her. She liked the fake stuff just as well. She said in a way nothing was fake. It was all part of the world, wasn't it? That was something she'd heard the sisters say as she sat drinking coffee at the café and displaying her gems on the counter, occasionally selling something, either to the sisters or to a customer.

"Well, just sit there," Vannie said comfortingly. "Alma and I aren't going anywhere. She's cooking, and I'm doing my pies." She poured him more coffee, thinking of the adventure that was heading down LaGrange Road, coming straight toward the café. She could see it in her mind's eye; see the man at the wheel staring into the blizzard, cussing as the car swerved out of control.

Not yet, she told him in the telepathic language she spoke so well and believed to be the only true language of the world. She saw the driver blink, saw him pull the car out of the skid and keep driving. He was on his way. It was the thought of what was to come that had almost made her send Burris across the road, but she figured a good adventure would be just the thing to raise his spirits.

Voices that Burris couldn't hear suddenly rang out. Vannie smiled, looking her best tonight in a gray tailored dress covered by a hand-crocheted apron, a cameo pin at her neckline, her silver-and-brown hair piled on top of her head. Her purple eyes grew keen as she glanced through the front window. The forces were in good form tonight, bringing in dynamics of snow, ice, wind, and spectacular shades of darkness punctuated by in-

tense flashes of light.

In the front room of The Two Sisters' Café, the two old-fashioned pin-ball machines and the shuffleboard were quiet and dark, and the door to the adjoining gas station was shut tight. Andy Poole had turned off the station lights, closed up, and beat the storm up the road to his brick house, where Liz waited for him with dinner, homemade cookies, and a pot of coffee. The upstairs dining room was lit in low overhead bulbs that hung down from an old wagon wheel, glowing neon from the jukebox, and a fire that crackled in the grate. The café was usually a lot brighter, but not tonight. The dimness was appropriate tonight.

Still, what needed to be seen could be seen. Light glinted on the candy counter up by the cash register, on the long slab of mahogany where Burris drooped almost sleeping over his coffee, and on the old cards and placards that were tacked up over the wooden partition that made a huge square opening between the country kitchen and the counter, through which customers and proprietors could talk. At the bottom of the partition was a wooden serving slab, empty save for an old black dial telephone.

Vannie went up the two steps that separated the lower front room from the upstairs dining room, stopping by the parrot's cage on the top step to take a cracker from her apron pocket. Banshee looked up alertly, sensing escalating excitement in the world. He accepted the cracker without swearing, a sure sign he realized something was up. His green scraggly feathers, sparse and limp with great age, were ruffled, his ancient eyes wide-open.

"He's coming," Vannie whispered so quietly that the teenager, sitting in the back booth on the right, could not hear. "It's begun." The bird blinked back at her.

She went on past his cage to the huge grate and stopped by the young boy's table. "I do wish you'd let me bring you something," she said gently. She had paid him earlier for a month of singing. For over a year he had been featured in what the sisters called "the nightclub," but what was really just a large room up back of the café with varnished wooden floors, a few dozen round Formica tables, and a small stage with a microphone. He was

supposed to sing again next weekend, but instead he had apologetically explained that he might not be in town and had asked for his back pay. It was shortly after Vannie had handed it over that the blizzard hit full force, barreling in like a locomotive.

Would the nightclub ever be the same after he left? She and Alma had often wondered about that and had decided the music would remain even if the boy didn't. He had created an incandescent light in that room that would burn forever. Over and over again, he had entranced the locals, who would get lost in his magic, only to emerge from it startled when he stepped from the stage and they caught whiff of the smell of cow that never left him and remembered who he really was. There were girls, of course, who never forgot his impact up on that one-man stage. He had sung his way into the heart of one girl in particular.

The boy's eyes jolted from the door to Vannie's face as if just noticing her. "Oh, thank you, Sister. No, I'm not hungry. But is it alright if I stay awhile longer?" His voice came out in a bottom-of-the-barrel bass that startled anyone hearing it for the first time. You did not expect such low rolling thunder in so young a voice. Nor did you expect the pits of gravel that spit into some of his words. It was an oddly pleasant sound, as mesmerizing in its way as his singing voice that would become even more weathered as the years wore it down, taking on the sound of nails and broken glass. Yet that beaten-up hometown sound would make people moan with its greatness and the underlying dark poetry of the artist that could make grown men cry. Such was the possibility that lay inside this eighteen-year-old boy who had so little of anything excepting only just that: possibility.

"Stay as long as you want," Vannie murmured reassuringly. She went on to the fireplace, pausing there to add a thick log to the already roaring fire and to poke at the burning wood. Stoking the fire was one of her favorite jobs. Like stirring up dreams, it was. She stuck the bottom log with her poker and fireflies flew through the air, hissing and sputtering. She knew that language, too.

The room was ready now. Clean. Shadowy. Rife with atmosphere. It

remained only to put the jukebox on. Without coins, she stood by the Wurlitzer, its neon tubes bubbling in yellow, orange, and green. Considering, she punched here and there. Soon the gaudy box was doing its stuff.

“Hey, good lookin’, whatcha got cookin’?” Hank Williams wanted to know. A nice touch. It was the right music, too. The right music for the right man.

Vannie smiled as she left the young boy staring at the front door and danced down the steps past the somnambulant Burris, slipping around the counter and into the country kitchen to take her place at the huge work-table where she started mixing pie dough. “How’s about cookin’ somethin’ up with me?” she hummed. Orange juice in the crust. It made the pastry flakier than you could imagine. People never ate Vannie’s crust without talking about it. Pretty soon, she added flour to her board and started laying out her dough for the rolling.

Alma was at the stove mashing potatoes and frying chicken and okra. Vannie’s cherry pie went sliding into the hot black oven alongside an apple and a rhubarb. Alma whistled softly, knowing whose name was on that cherry pie. A man who wasn’t there yet, but was close. Real close.

“He’ll want ice tea,” Vannie said in a low voice, but Burris, clearly visible through the opening between kitchen and counter, couldn’t have heard her had she screamed out the words, because the words weren’t intended for him. “Even on a night like this, ice tea. Can you imagine?”

“Right there, darlin’,” Alma crooned, waving her long fork at a frosty glass of tea on the table. Nights of magic were even better than days of magic. She wore a printed fringy dress, casual but somehow dressy, and an apron deep in the same high quality of hand-crocheted lace that Vannie wore. Her dark hair was done up with bone hairpins; her hazel eyes glittered with anticipation. Alma had seer’s eyes, eyes reflecting elemental forces.

Vannie looked at her sister closely, knowing she was plotting ways and means. “With a crash, you think, Alma?”

“Yep-a-doodle. Let it crash like thunder in the sky. Let it shoot forth

bolts of lightning till the Earth shakes.”

“Don’t go gettin’ carried away.”

Alma speared a golden-brown piece of chicken from the grease, laid it on a platter of beaten metal, and started laughing. Nobody on Earth (or anywhere else) could laugh like Alma. Sparks danced in her eyes as she held herself up on the edge of the huge butcher-block worktable that filled most of the kitchen. Behind her was the entrance of what they called the “Little Room.” It was, in fact, just a little room. It contained a square table with three chairs, its fourth side snug to a window. A pot-bellied stove and a rocking chair sat beside a unit of storage shelves. A back door led to a storage room, and a front entrance overlooked a small courtyard that was enclosed by a low white brick wall where Banshee’s cage sometimes sat when the sun was shining. But the Little Room was a special place in its own right. It was an intimate place, perfect for telling secrets. Not just anybody was invited into it.

Alma’s head lifted alertly. Without so much as glancing out the window, she sensed, actually saw, the snow fall over three counties. Heard people shiver. Saw the same car that her sister had seen zigzagging all over the road. “Not long now,” she whispered.

Vannie nodded. “He’s just a few miles away. There he goes, turning onto Pendleton Road. Sliding like a goose on butter.”

“Chicken’s ready, okra’s on the platter.” Alma brimmed over with eagerness. “Should I set his place, darlin’?”

“Yes, dear, why don’t you? Upstairs dining room, second booth to the grate, don’t you think?”

“*Per-fect*,” Alma concurred. “I’ll put the mashed potatoes in a bowl family style and carry up the okra and the chicken. And the tea, of course. Oh, criminy, I almost forgot the coleslaw. For the last twelve years, the man’s been dreaming of good coleslaw.”

“And yours is the best. Then, of course, there’s my cherry pie.” Vannie smiled complacently. There was no question about what he would think of her cherry pie, served with hand-cranked vanilla ice cream.

Minutes later, it was done. All was in readiness. Sugar Curtis's place was set for him, just as he had set his own in life. And his arrival came with a crash, like a thunderbolt. There were no bolts of lightning, but the Earth did shake. It hadn't been overdone. Alma smiled, and Vannie gave an excited little laugh.

"What in Sam Hill?" Burris muttered from the counter. He was a lazy man, but he toyed with the idea of getting up to see what had happened. It sounded to him like the end of the world, but if so, he wasn't sure he really wanted to know about it. Better on the whole, he thought, just to wait it out. If it was the end of the world, he would find out about it soon enough.

Behind the counter, the two sisters touched hands and waited. Just at that moment, Sugar Curtis crawled free of his wrecked car, cast a suspicious look at the gas tank with which he had collided, wondering if it might explode, then galloped through the deep drifts alongside the white brick building and kicked his way through the front door.

"Always a flair for the dramatic." Alma's look at the man was indulgent, rather than fearful. She hardly glanced at the gun held so tightly in his rough, scarred hand.

Burris at the counter showed more respect, cowering down on his stool, both hands hovering over his coffee cup, as though, despairing of securing his own safety, he had at least decided to save his coffee. "Lord a'mighty," he moaned.

Vannie's hand descended onto his shoulder. "Don't make a big thing out of a little bit, honey."

"*Little* bit?" Burris swallowed hard and shut up. Neither he nor any other person in Willow Creek tried to make sense of the strange occurrences that often happened when the sisters were around. Added to that, they had a habit of showing up unannounced in any part of the county just when a body found himself in the most need. Seconds after he had seen Mattie dead in bed that morning, there had come a rap at the door and the sisters had let themselves in, walking directly into the bedroom where he still held his wife's body in his arms, his head buried in her gray hair.

"Everything's alright, you know, Burris," Sister Alma had said, as matter-of-fact as ever.

And the damndest thing was . . . he'd believed her, just as he now found himself believing Sister Vannie, who had just observed a lunatic toting a gun and said not to make a big thing out of a little bit.

"Okay then," he muttered, and noticed Vannie take a fresh plate of peach cobbler from the serving window and slide it next to his coffee cup. Without a word, he picked up his fork and started eating. Best stuff in the world, he thought, hardly aware that the lunatic was waving his gun everywhere.

Sugar Curtis's life had been out of control for a long time. But a gun evened things out. Made people who wouldn't look at you look. Made people who wouldn't do as you said do it. On this particular night, he'd used a guard's own gun to kill him and make his escape from the pen. The whole thing had gone wrong. He had been off-balance and scared. The guard got spooked and tried to draw his gun as Sugar jumped from the laundry cart with the prison-made knife for which he had paid four cartons of cigarettes. The guard's gun stuck in the holster and Sugar wrestled him for it. Somehow it went off, and, before he knew what happened, the bullet exploded and blood started pumping from the man's chest. He bent over him, trying to breathe air into his lungs, but it was no use. The guard's eyes were wide open, seeing nothing but his maker.

With human blood dripping from his fingers, Sugar staggered through the open door where the laundry truck waited, its driver frozen at the wheel, and ran past it, charging the wall. There was almost no hope of escape, not with the tower full of guards with loaded rifles. But just then the snow began to fall like a thick curtain around the very wall he needed to climb. Heart thudding, he heaved himself over it and ran down the deserted road. Not half a mile from the prison, he found an abandoned car someone had left running and jumped in. Putting the car in gear, he breathed steam and took off, remembering the cold freedom of his youth, freedom that had felt like a cage on those winter mornings and early evenings when he'd go

milk cows on two different farms. He wouldn't have minded milking his own family's cows, if there had been any to milk, but how he'd hated running down the road to go milk his neighbors' cows. He had once been kept after school for writing a composition called "Somebody Else's Cow." The teacher found "milk squirting from the cow's teats" no way acceptable, accounting it to being uncomfortably close to speaking of a woman's unmentionables. He hadn't meant it like that and saw nothing vulgar about "Warm milk foamin' on my wrists. Dirty tail in my face. Oh, if only, if only, it was my own cow's tail." In prison, he made up other words about ownership when some grumbling fool kept raving over and over how he'd shot his wife in a jealous rage and should have got off on a passion plea. Damned faithless bitch. Wasn't even that pretty. Truth to tell, she had a face like a warthog's. Eyes the color of snot.

"I'm sick of hearing about her," Sugar had finally declared. "If she wasn't dead, I'm damned if I wouldn't kill her myself. But be fair, buddy! I already done my own murder."

The other prisoner made the mistake of trying to knock his head off first chance he got. Everybody knew you didn't come out very clean when you fooled around with Sugar Curtis. This time was no exception. Not that he particularly cared who his fellow inmate had murdered. Truth was, though he had killed someone himself, he felt more of an expert on cows than on murder. One of the preachers who regularly visited the reformatory had asked him if he hadn't bothered to look for God's true destiny for himself, and Sugar said yes, and he'd found a piece of it looking up one old cow's ass and the rest of it up another's.

Suddenly Sugar Curtis frowned. This was sure as hell no time to be raking up past memories. His stolen car had wrecked, and with it his chances of fleeing from the cops. They'd be after him right now even in this snow.

"It's a very thick snowfall, though, don't you think?" murmured the taller of the two women who faced him so calmly. She was of indeterminate age and compelling in a different way from the women in the lewd maga-

zines smuggled into the prison. Her strong mysterious face was so oddly familiar to him that he couldn't look away, but he couldn't remember where they had met. He hoped that she, too, had forgotten. There was both shame and danger in recognition.

A wave of melancholy swept over her haunting face as she stared back at him. Then with a sudden smile, she started to speak.

"I don't want to hear nothin' from you," he told her before she could get it out. "Not from you either," he added threateningly to the smaller, silvery-brown-haired woman beside her. She, too, looked familiar, but he couldn't remember meeting her either. He heard the wind howling outside and thought absently that the café was the warmest refuge anybody could ask for.

Neither woman said anything, merely looked at him expectantly.

He glanced at the black telephone sitting in the serving window that connected the front room to the kitchen. *I'd better cut the wire*, he thought and took a step toward it.

"Don't bother," the tall woman said. "The lines are all down anyhow."

The lack of fear in either woman caused a strange reaction inside the convict's breast. Though he would never have admitted it, he had grown a little afraid of *them*. "I've killed before," he blustered. "Tonight and—"

"We'll talk about that later," the smaller woman said. "There's plenty of time. I'm Vannie, dear, and this is my sister, Alma."

"Happy to see you, darlin'," Alma said.

"What the hell are you smiling about?"

"Oh, we smile a lot. But never mind that, you're hungry. A hungry man is a grouchy man. Your dinner's on the table. Upstairs in the dining room, second booth from the fire. Come on, we'll walk you up. You like fried chicken, don't you?"

At the sound of the chicken, his fury lost its edge. He found himself walking between the two women, his gun aiming first at one, then the other. He had no idea what to do if either of them gave him any trouble. He'd never killed a woman before. Until the guard tonight, he had only killed

one person, the man he tried never to think of. Now there was the guard to lay on top of his already over-burdened conscience. Still, if they gave him any trouble, he knew what he had to do. And was prepared to do it.

Neither woman appeared to notice the gun as they guided him up the steps leading to a larger dining room full of booths and tables. He frowned, noticing a boy in the next booth, who sat facing the front of the café. Though the boy stared through him toward the front door, he didn't trust him. He also didn't trust the women, no matter how nice they might seem, or even the parrot that turned on its perch to stare at him. It was an ugly old bird, probably the worst looking parrot he'd ever seen, its skin hanging on its shrunk bones. *Great God, it's all familiar. Even the parrot.* Yet he remembered nothing. Nothing.

"I'm Alma May," the taller sister told him. "And my sister is Vannie May. May isn't a middle name; it's our last name. It indicates a willingness, don't you think? While you are with us, you *may* do pretty much as you like."

"Well, thank you very much," Sugar sneered, waving his gun at her.

"You're so welcome, darlin'—"

"—Absolutely," her sister said on top of her, their voices mingling like two bell chimes swaying against each other in a mild breeze.

His gaze moved from one sister to the next. One taller and darker. One smaller and lighter. "In case you don't know it, you're both hostages." He waved his gun toward Burris down at the counter and at the boy in the last booth. "Them, too."

"That happened to a woman down the road, Dottie Boynton," Vannie said. "Lives way down one of those deserted country lanes. Isn't even screaming distance to another house. When Dottie got taken hostage, she hid razor blades on her private person, don't you know. The man was another convict; you'd be surprised how often one of y'all busts out. Anyhow, she hid the razor blades so's she could cut herself loose if the man tied her up. And of course, he did that very thing. Tied her and the kids and her husband up and left them there, so it was lucky she had the razor blades,

wasn't it? Though if he'd come out shooting, those razor blades wouldn't have done doodly."

He began to sweat. A fragrant odor drifted toward him from the fireplace, reminiscent of herbs and spices and making his head swim.

"Go ahead," Alma said. "Sit. Eat."

"What?" He stopped waving his gun and concentrated with sudden fierceness on the jukebox that had begun to play. It was an old instrumental. Strange jukebox material. *You Made Me Love You*, featuring the golden trumpet of Harry James. Of all songs to be playing. Lord, he'd been a teenager when he first heard that song. It was different from the country music he usually listened to. He'd been half out of his mind in love that night with a girl from one of the few big houses in Henry County up close to the Oldham County line. Margie Roberts was her name. She was the kind of girl you knew it was dangerous to notice, because she'd only break your heart and leave you for somebody more suitable. After all, her people were educated. Her father owned property and a big general store in LaGrange. Margie would grow up to have somebody clean her house and be somebody. Probably, she'd marry a doctor or something and have a life that made some sense. Except she had eyes for him.

It was something both of them knew, that they had something big for each other, but neither of them said anything about it. How could you say anything about it when it couldn't lead to anything except getting your heart broke? So, they just looked at each other and kept their distance. Until that night. The only night in his life where the magic had happened for him instead of someone else. There he and Margie were, sitting on opposite sides of the Roberts' finished basement, since she had one of those righteous sets of parents who believed that when you had a party, you invited the whole class, regardless of who they were. And then somebody had put on an old record from the family collection.

And that sound had poured out.

Sugar had come out on top in a lot of fistfights. But never before had he been attacked by a jazz trumpet. It was more than music. Before he could

remind himself that this sentimental, sappy song was not his style, the horn's warm syrup had poured into him. Too late, already drowning in feelings he could no longer push away, he realized this was the kind of sound that cried in you, shook in you, brought down your walls.

He didn't know the words, but he *felt* them. Before he knew it, he was out of his chair, standing there with a bellyful of molten gold, and Margie was on her feet, too, drifting toward him and singing the words he'd been feeling, her sweet, young voice blending in with the trumpet until you'd think it was playing just for her.

"You made me love you . . . I didn't wanna do it . . . I didn't wanna do it."

Sugar shivered like a fool, looking into her blue eyes as she went on singing to him in a voice that sounded like birdsong on top of the throbbing gold under it. He was being melted until he almost would have thought he was afraid, except he was never afraid.

"You made me want you . . ." Margie sang softly, her eyes daring him to admit it. "And all the time you knew it . . . I guess you always knew it."

He knew better than to let his defenses down like this. Most of the time he wore a sullen closed-off look that a girl in his class said drove her crazy. His brother had told him everyone thought he was going steady with a girl in LaGrange and that was why he didn't date any girls at school. He'd glowered all the more and didn't explain that he didn't even know any girls in LaGrange, except for a couple of store clerks. With your head stuck up a cow's ass, who had time for girls? And even if he did, what girl in her right mind would want to have anything to do with a Curtis?

Yet, there was Margie, standing in front of him with moist eyes, her voice trembling, but still singing along with the James trumpet: "You made me happy sometimes . . . You made me glad . . . But there were times, dear . . . You made me feel so bad."

She held out her arms to him, and before he knew what he was doing, he was holding out his wrong-side-of-the-town arms to her, too. When he felt Margie's arms wrap around him, he knew he was lost. There had never

been anybody before her; he was sure there could never be anybody ever again. He was young, but he was fierce. The fierce knew how to hang onto love, just like they knew how to hang onto hate.

They danced, and Margie went on singing, but into his ear now, with half the other kids dancing and not even watching them, and the rest too struck dead with shock to say a word about it.

“You made me sigh for . . . I didn’t wanna tell you . . .” He felt her warm breath on his throat. Heard the trumpet throbbing. Then in a single second, as life must leave the body at the instant of death, it all went away, the music, the girl, the room.

He was back in the café’s upstairs dining room, without Margie in his arms. The jukebox had gone silent and dark. He stood between the sisters, the gun limp in his hand. And for some unknown reason, he was staring straight into the eyes of the boy in the end booth, who seemed to notice him for the first time.

“I . . . I need to go now,” Sugar mumbled. Yet, he allowed himself to be seated in the booth facing the boy and the fire beyond.

“Eat now, Johnny.” It was Sister Vannie. “You’re very hungry. Food comes first right now, and this is the best you’ve tasted in a long time. Everything you like.” Her eyes gleamed with the kind of light that had startled him when he had first seen it in Sister Alma’s. And she had just called him Johnny. Nobody except his closest family had ever called him that, and them not since his earliest school days.

He suddenly noticed his gun was lying on the table beside his plate. He made a grab for it, but Alma said in a quick burst of energy, “For heaven’s sake, just *eat*, will you? Nobody’s going to run off with your old gun. Nobody wants it around here.”

“Why would we want a gun?” Vannie agreed. “Go ahead and enjoy your dinner. You’ve been waiting a long time for it.”

As both sisters headed down the stairs, Sugar’s hand covered his gun once again. But with only the boy in front of him, a boy who seemed to take little or no notice of him, he relaxed and his hand fell absently away

as he stared at the food. Beautiful chicken, fried to a crisp. Okra, his favorite. He popped a piece of it into his mouth. Unbelievable. His mama had made it a few times, but not much of it and not often. And it hadn't been like this. He seemed to remember food like this somewhere, but couldn't place where he had eaten it. He loaded his fork with more okra, then tore into the chicken. Then ate half a plate of coleslaw in absolute bliss. Biscuits, warm to the touch and full of melted butter, followed. Then more chicken. He lost awareness of everything else while he ate. The room faded, even as he took one last glance over his shoulder at the old man downstairs at the counter, who was eating cobbler as hungrily as he was attacking his own food. His awareness of the boy and the two sisters faded, too. There was just him and the food.

And Harry James again. A King of Swing in his day, without doubt. Startled, he looked back at the jukebox and saw that the neon tubes had lit up, sending all kinds of colors coursing through them. The familiar sound rolled over him and into him, and he could not get away. Yes, Margie and the golden trumpet had caught him with his defenses down. Then and now.

"You made me sigh for . . . I didn't wanna tell you, I didn't wanna tell you. . . I want some love, that's true, yes, I do, 'deed I do, you know I do."

His eyes filled with tears. Stupid, crazy tears. For Margie Roberts who, wherever she was, ought to be thirty years old now, several months younger than himself. He hadn't seen her since the last time in court. Hadn't said one word to her since . . .

Since he'd killed her daddy. Tears gathered in large pools and ran down his cheeks. He heard himself sobbing. If he could, he'd change everything about himself since before he'd shot Margie's daddy that night. He'd go at things differently, not from such an in-your-face attitude. That was the only way he'd ever thought he could get anything. He had learned it from his own father. But maybe, after all, there had been another way. He could still see Margie's eyes. Sad. Hurt. More hurt than angry, and that's what had surprised him that day in court when he turned and found himself staring

at her and her staring right back. Her mouth had trembled like a late rose of summer left swaying in an autumn breeze. Maybe there had been a better way to get her, after all, other than that hotheaded belligerence that had set off her daddy like a lit firecracker.

He shook his head, wondering where that kind of thinking had come from. What other way had there ever been for a boy on the wrong side of town to get anything except to grab it in the roughest, toughest way? It was how the Curtis family had lived for generations untold. What was he thinking? That if he'd acted like a nice kid that sooner or later Margie's folks might have given in and invited him into their big house again as their oldest daughter's boyfriend? He must be mad to think such a thing, even all these years later.

"Take a nice big drink of ice tea, darlin'," Alma said. "It's your favorite, you know." Obliging, he half-drained the glass. God, it was good. Lemony and icy and thirst-quenching like nothing else in the world.

She sat in his booth, facing him across the thick slab of oak wood that bore the scars of generations of carved initials and even full names. Lovers, mostly. Hearts and promises and heartache carved right into the tabletop. From the looks of things, Alma and Vannie didn't mind their customers treating their tables like wild oak trees.

Vannie came back upstairs and put a plate of cherry pie and vanilla ice cream in front of him. She sat beside Alma, and the two of them watched him take the first bite. He almost groaned with pleasure. Warm pie with the flakiest crust he had ever tasted. Hand-cranked ice cream. Wind howled down the chimney, and he looked up and frowned. What kind of restaurant cranked ice cream in the middle of a blizzard with wind whistling down the chimney?

"Something's not right here," he said, but with no real force behind the words. The room shimmered hazily. Probably from the firelight, he told himself. But there was more to it than that. He turned to look more closely. Everything seemed to have added dimensions. The upper dining room now seemed composed of many rooms, one leading into another. It seemed pos-

sible to step from one world into another one, from one time into another, or even into timelessness. He should have felt frightened. Well, perhaps he did, in a way. But part of him had simply surrendered shortly after he'd kicked in the café's front door in that high-handed way of his. He leaned over and took a good look at the door. It, too, had acquired other dimensions, becoming other kinds of openings, into all sorts of places. From that door, one might walk into another kind of existence.

"Oh, Lord," he moaned, the piecrust flaking tenderly in his mouth. Cherry juice, semi-tart and delicious, squirted onto his tongue as he chewed. "What is this damn place, anyhow?" He met Alma's eyes, positive she knew exactly what he was talking about. More than he did, for that matter.

Her eyes sparkled at him. "In the restaurant business," she began, as if she were part owner in a world-class premium establishment, "you meet lots of people. All heading different places, you know."

Vannie nodded thoughtfully. "All at different crossroads."

"Crossroads," he repeated. Saying the word sent a chill up his spine.

"We've been in business in other places," Alma said. "You'd be surprised if you knew how long we've been feeding others. And where."

"And *what*," Vannie added in an undertone of merriment that caused her sister's mouth to quirk. Their eyes fastened intently on his face.

Sugar put down his fork. *Oh, my God, something very weird is happening here. They're going to put me in a pot and boil me for somebody's supper.* He grasped his gun firmly. Neither sister reacted. It didn't seem to bother them that it was they who were unarmed and he who had the gun. The music kept coming at him, finishing what Harry James and his instrument of pain had started: "Give me, give me, give me what I cry for . . . You know you got the brand of kisses that I'd die for . . . You know you made me love you!" The best part of him had died from his longing for those kisses, alright. Other parts of him had died, too. Tears came unbidden, rolling down his cheeks like he was a kid. Scorching tears.

"You knew I was coming here tonight," he said brokenly. He dried his tears against his sleeve. "How could you know?"

“Like we have told you,” Alma said gently, “we run across many people in our business. We have acquired . . . well, I suppose you could call it a kind of extrasensory perception in a way. If that’s what makes sense to you. Sense is so important to people,” she added with an indiscernible pause before the last word. “Now you listen to me, Johnny Curtis . . .”

He stared at her. “How did you know my—?”

“Never mind. Let it go. It’s time to let it all go. You remember Vannie mentioned crossroads. Well, Johnny, you’ve come to your own. You see that, don’t you?”

He lowered his head. The image he’d been holding in his heart, the one of the prison guard, that look of surprise and dread a second before he fell, faded. The pain receded some, too.

“You didn’t want to do it, Johnny,” Vannie murmured soothingly. “You didn’t want to do any of it. Life is very confusing, isn’t it? It’s one of the flaws of the human experience that people can rarely figure out life until it’s passed them by, although that makes it all the more exciting. Challenging.”

“Now eat.” Alma’s voice was calm with authority.

He ate silently, unable to bring himself to protest. The gun ended up on the seat beside him. Another song came on the jukebox. He froze, but this time the room was flooded with Peggy Lee singing *I Only Have Eyes For You*. He and Margie had danced to that song, too. “Are the stars out tonight? . . . I don’t know if it’s cloudy or bright . . . I only have eyes for you . . .” Right this minute, he could look through her blue eyes, see her deeper than anyone he had ever seen. And she was seeing him the same way.

The last of his defenses began to melt like the edge of the ice cream that touched his warm cherry pie. He had always thought losing his defenses was the worst thing that could ever happen to him. But instead of being afraid, he felt a delicious rush as the tension in his gut, a tight-fisted ball of misery and rage that had been there as long as he could remember, suddenly relaxed. He tried to remember if there had been a time it had not been there. Except that night when he’d danced the party away holding

Margie close, and their stolen moments together after that. They had promised each other they would be together forever, no matter what. But she hadn't been able to keep that promise.

"About the guard," Vannie began. "If you had it to do again, you wouldn't . . ."

Tears gushed out of his eyes, and this time he didn't try to restrain them, didn't even make an effort to dry them. "Everything got messed up," he wept. "You take what you need. I learned that from my daddy, he learned it from his daddy. My granddaddy was the meanest bastard that ever lived."

"Corman Curtis," Alma said, nodding. "He was mean alright, but he didn't hold the record. I could tell you stories . . ."

"You knew my *granddaddy*?" he almost shrieked.

"Knew of his existence, anyway. He was taken out of his reality by a fishbone lodged in his windpipe. Had a nasty few minutes of it." She shook her head as though to clear it of a vivid image.

"Who the hell *are* you?" His tear-soaked eyes darted frantically from one sister to another. In so doing, he caught sight of the man at the counter, head slumped down over his plate. He looked limp. He looked . . .

"Dead!" Sugar shouted, pointing. "He's dead, isn't he? What did you do, poison him? Is that what you do here? Am I poisoned? Am I going to die? What did you put the stuff in? The mashed potatoes? The pie?"

"Hush!" Alma said sternly. "Nobody's dead here. This is not a place for death. He's asleep, dreaming of his wife. They'd been married forty-four years when she died. He's been unhappy lately, but it's not time for him to move on just yet. Goodness, everyone needs some time away from their spouse, don't they? I doubt he'll be married at all next time. Forty-four years would do you for at least a couple of lifetimes, wouldn't you think?"

Sugar looked at her. Then suddenly the words poured out of him. He couldn't stop himself from telling the sisters. All of it. "Don't you understand?" he growled when they had listened to every word of his miserable

life story without venturing a comment. "I've killed two men. What do you say about *that*?"

He looked for judgment in their eyes and couldn't find it. Instead, that same look of sadness he had first seen on Alma's face down by the counter was there again. When she spoke, there was a catch in her voice, and she put a hand to her chest, as if finding it hard to breathe.

"I will agree," she said, "that taking a life for no reason except to forward your own needs is . . . well, let's just say it can never have a good result. It brings unhappiness to all, and the most to the one who pulls the trigger. Or uses the knife or whatever other means is employed. No one gets away with a thing. Not one thing."

"That's in your opinion." He used the nastiest voice he could muster.

"I spend a lot of my life in observing," Alma said. "And over the years, I have acquired what you might call a certain perspective. But you haven't sung for us yet, Johnny."

"Sing? Me?" At her words, Sugar felt himself floating, him and Peggy Lee, words drifting around him. "Are the stars out tonight? I don't know if it's cloudy or bright. I only have eyes for you . . . dear . . ." But when he tried to sing along, the words came out of his mouth like growling bears, tearing up the atmosphere like all his music had done in the days he used to sing. Since prison, there had been no music at all. He had never sung one note since he killed Margie's father. Until now.

It was a song of prison that ground through his lips. Of hope slipping away like blood down a drain. Of violence and love gone wrong. Of a wasted life. Of regret deeper than the ocean and thicker than a quagmire. And the shame that rolled on and on, like a train roaring down an endless track to nowhere.

Vaguely, he saw the boy rise. There was a strange expression on his face, trouble boiling in his eyes. The boy's hands were fisted, as if intent on knocking him out of all time and space, and his own fury rose in response. But the sisters stepped between them.

"No," Sister Alma said clearly. "Do not touch."

Confused, Sugar felt himself stalled; the boy swimming in front of him also froze, fists raised, eyebrows pointed together over raging eyes. There was a horrible grinding as time stood still and the Earth jolted to a stop. A lot had happened to him. Terrible and shameful things; abuse and poverty. Loss of love and self-respect. But in all of his life, standing shaken and confused on a planet that had ceased to move, he knew he had never been this terrified. The boy looked frightened, too. And for just a few seconds, another feeling traveled through the misery and fear, something deeper and more profound than anything Sugar had ever felt before. *Love*, he thought numbly. *I love this boy.*

The boy wobbled, the only movement in this strangely still café.

"To stand on a motionless planet is a dizzying thing," Alma said softly. "You stand suspended in the liminal . . . in a place between this world and another. Between death and eternity. It can be very dangerous, yes, or very safe. One step, and you may fall into a precipice. I must warn you that if you take it, you won't survive."

But the pit of his stomach told Sugar he had already taken this step. That even now he was falling. It was too late to survive. *If only I'd understood. Everything would have been different.* He saw the boy's eyes screw tight together as though he could not bear to watch. Felt the Earth begin spinning again, but faster and faster, a merry-go-round out of control. He tried to steady himself, made a grab for the boy. But the force shot him backward through the dining room in a great explosion of energy, catapulting him past the parrot's cage and down the steps. Then zoomed him backward even faster past the man at the counter, who goggled at him with bulging, terrified eyes. He took one look at the three people who stood together in the upper dining room staring down at him. Then the force whipped him around, and he saw the door swing open in front of him.

For just a second or two, he tried to resist, but it was no use. He knew what he had to do. Almost gratefully, he surrendered to the unknown and agreed to whatever conditions it demanded of him. Felt the contract signed, sealed, and executed. Then he was swept out into the blistering elements.

He dimly heard the door slam shut behind him as he flew into the whiteness of the night. He couldn't feel the cold anymore, felt only the amazing grace surrounding him, comforting, and then swamping him. The blood slowed in his veins and clotted. His arms and legs grew numb. There was only one thought left in his head, and he couldn't any longer even understand what it meant.

You know you got the brand of kisses that I'd die for . . .

And then his heart stopped beating, and the interior of him grew as still as the frozen world.

The boy stirred. A coil unwound deep inside of him. He felt both pain and release. Surely, some part of him had died and something had been reborn. Yet, he could not say how either of these things had happened, only that he was sure they had. His eyes opened. Dazed, he looked up at the sisters' faces. He had thought somehow that his girl had made it through the storm, had come to meet him after all. Margie. But she hadn't come.

"Sisters? What—?"

"Shh," Alma murmured softly. "Eat, Johnny. We fixed your favorite meal, you know."

The young Sugar Curtis stirred and looked at the food in front of him. Fried chicken, okra, and mashed potatoes. Biscuits and coleslaw. Cherry pie and ice cream. Ice tea. With the sisters watching his every bite, he ate all of it. Only when he finished the last crumb of pie, the last sip of ice tea, did he remember the strange man. It must have been a dream. A bad one. It gave him pause.

"Yes," Vannie said approvingly. "That's it exactly. Pause. Think about what you are leaving."

"Margie . . ."

"What else?"

Gradually, he remembered. The fear and the poverty. His mother's strained face, the frightened looks of his younger brothers and sisters. His sister Sarah with that glow in her eyes that would surely die one day. But

so far it hadn't. He had always held Sarah in his heart in a special way. Not that he loved her more than the rest, but he sensed that in some way she held the key to his family's survival. He could almost feel her watching him now.

"Sarah," he said urgently. "She's . . ."

"Very special," Alma finished for him. "And you will help her."

"How?"

"With your music and your freedom and your love. You will show her that anything is possible."

The life he was about to leave coursed through him. Old names came and went. Faces, some half-remembered. Daddy's face glowered at him. Then came Granddaddy. Choking on a fishbone. He could actually see the old man, though he had only been a baby when it happened. He was raging. Then scared. Then real scared. In the end, that was how the old tyrant went out—full of fear.

Margie Roberts came forward, her lips all shiny, her hair falling around her shoulders like gossamer. Her hands reached through the mist. Reached out and touched him. He could swear he felt her fingers on him as he sat there dreaming.

"It's time," Vannie said urgently. "The bus is almost here."

"Bus?" Even in his daze, he knew it had been snowing. But Vannie was sliding a ticket across the table. He suddenly remembered the café was a Greyhound bus stop. "Where's it to?"

She smiled. "You'll figure it out. You don't need us to tell you. Don't forget your suitcase and your guitar, boy. And don't forget to sing for your sister. She'll be listening for you. Alma and I will be listening, too! Hurry, now. Go!"

He was on his feet, his suitcase in one hand, the guitar case in the other, suddenly spotting Burris McCarthy down at the counter. Burris stirred and sat up. The parrot moved in his cage and muttered, "Bastard! Move on, stupid bastard!"

Did parrots say such things?

“Wait!” He stopped on the steps. “There was a man! There!” He pointed back toward the second booth.

“He will be just a memory fragment, nothing more,” Alma murmured. “Just a flash of a dream. But if you let yourself feel that man’s pain, you will feel the pain of mankind. You might decide to take it into your music and help heal the wounds of anyone who listens to you sing. Are you ready now?”

He drew in a breath, held it, and released it. “I think so, yes.”

“Then bless you, Johnny Curtis,” Alma said. “Now you can be on your way. Peace go with you. And remember, it will all be up to you. Make this decision count. Don’t forget—it could have gone the other way. We call such a moment as this a crossing. One of those forks in the road. A second chance at rethinking a choice you had made. Ah . . . you did leave the gunnysack behind, didn’t you?”

He thought of the gun up there, loaded and hidden away. He remembered his rage at Margie’s father, who had surely stopped her from meeting him tonight.

The sisters studied him.

“I left it,” he said firmly.

“Fine,” Alma said. “We’ll take care of it.”

He nodded absently, and then he remembered the dinner he had eaten. The chicken. The pie and ice cream. He reached into his pocket and began to take out the money they had paid him for his singing.

“Not tonight,” Vannie said. “This one is on the house.”

“But . . .”

“Accepting gifts is another way of showing generosity, don’t you know.”

“As another kind of payment to us,” Alma said playfully, “give all you have to give when you get to your destination, you hear me now?”

“How will you—?” He shut up. He knew they’d know. He couldn’t figure out how exactly. But he knew they would. “I guess it’s goodbye then.”

“Goodbye is an awful long word.” One of them said it as they each shook the hand he held out in farewell. He would never remember who. Then the green door swung open on its hinges without him touching it. Light snow swirled beyond it as he stepped into it. He took the cold breeze full face without flinching though his jacket was open, his shirt unbuttoned at the neck. The snow was nowhere close to as deep as he’d expected, but a white mist flowed between the sisters and him. Suddenly, he could hardly see them anymore, but the music followed him from the place. Not Peggy Lee. The old Swing King again.

“Give me, give me, give me, what I cry for . . .” He smiled and turned. “Margie? Are you there?” She wasn’t, but he felt her urging him on. *Get on that bus—don’t you dare turn back!* He saw the headlights from afar traveling down Highway 42 and crossed in front of them to the bus stop. The bus came closer and stopped. He climbed up the steps. The double doors shut behind him just as he heard the last words: “You know you got the brand of kisses that I’d die for . . . You know you made me love you!”

Behind him, the two sisters closed the café door. It was time to give Burris one last refill and close up for the night. Time to go lie down in their bedrooms across the road and listen to the snow fall and the wind swirl.

“It was a successful crossing, Alma.” Vannie smiled as they went up to carry Sugar’s dishes into the kitchen. “He’ll keep going. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, he’s chosen his path, but he’ll have to make a thousand other choices to stay on it, right, hon?”

“You can say that again,” Vannie said, musing. “I swear that’s an easy one to forget. To make supporting choices. Hey, Sister?”

“He’ll get there!” Alma pinched her sister’s cheeks. The melancholy that sometimes haunted her was far at bay. Joy crackled in her eyes.

As the snow drifted, the two sisters danced a bit in the lower dining room. They danced for Sugar. A man whose future was not what it used to be. Stepped off a bit of the Virginia reel for a young man who would soon understand what it meant to be . . .

Free. To do what he did best. Sing his heart out. And to make not just one girl love him, but perhaps a waiting world.

At the counter, Burris scooted his stool around and squinted through the window across the room, ignoring the fact that the two sisters were engrossed in a Virginia reel, barreling down the length of the lower dining room to the front door and back again, feet flying, hair loosening from their upswept chignons and falling freely around their shoulders. “By God, I see my house. You can see your house, you can get to it, right, Sisters? Did I fall asleep? I think I was dreaming about finding a big piece of fool’s gold. That would be a nice addition to my rocks, wouldn’t it? A big barrel full of fool’s gold. It shines brighter than the real stuff.”

The sisters moved seamlessly from their dancing into end-of-the-day chores, working, cleaning, washing, and putting away as they heard Burris shuffle toward the door, whistling the same tuneless song he whistled so often. When the door closed behind him, the front room lights went off. The Two Sisters’ was closed for the night.