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MYSTERY

STORIES™

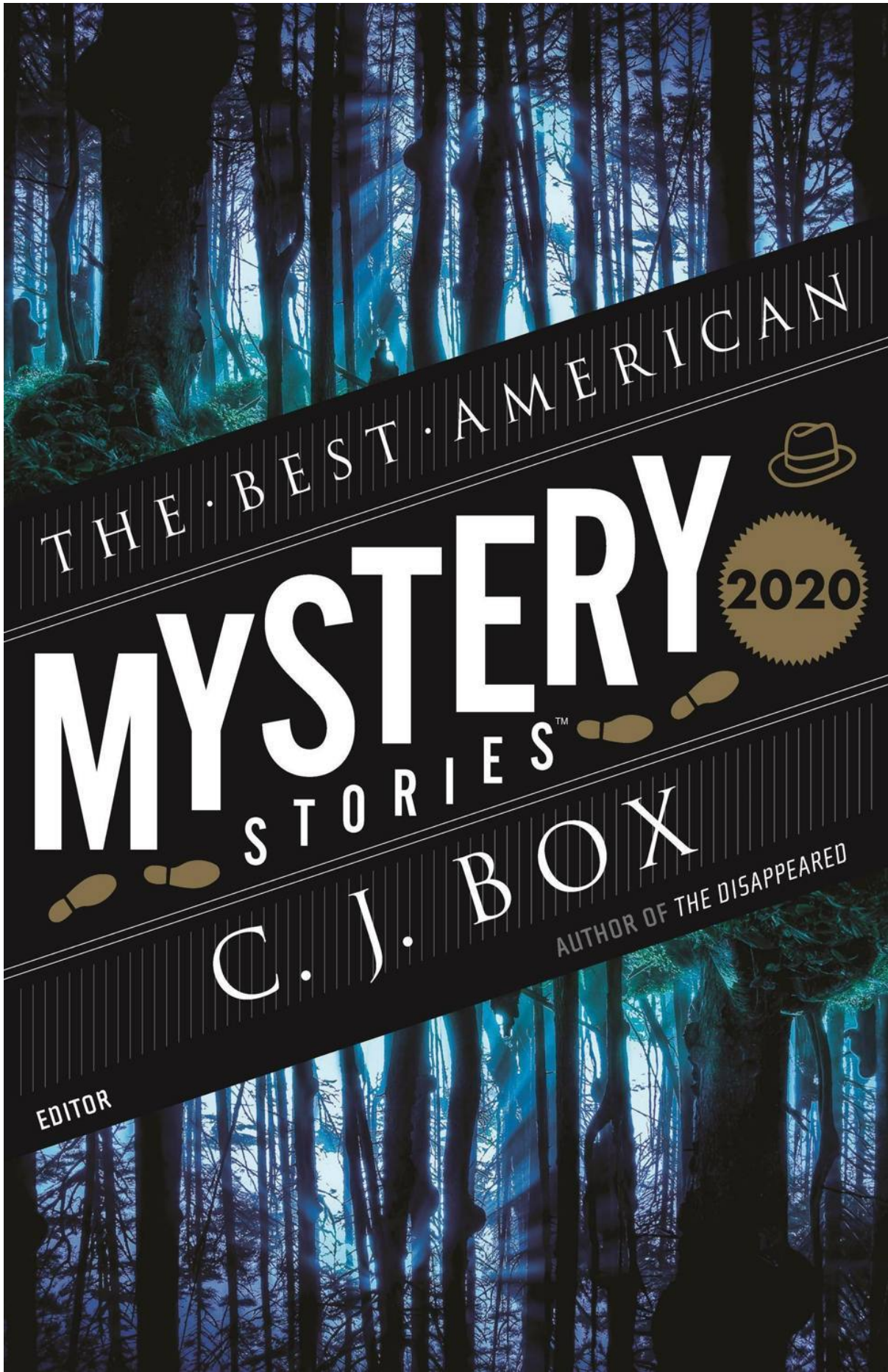


C. J. BOX

AUTHOR OF THE DISAPPEARED

EDITOR





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The Best American Mystery Stories™ 2020

Edited and with an Introduction
by **C. J. Box**

Otto Penzler, Series Editor



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Foreword

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER EDITION of *The Best American Mystery Stories*. Just as each year presents surprises and memorable moments, so does each volume in this prestigious series. It has been my privilege to be the series editor for all twenty-four annual volumes of these monuments to excellence in the realm of the mystery short story.

Writing a good mystery story is no small thing. Many of the novelists I’ve worked with over the years have claimed that it’s harder to produce a good short story, where every word must count so heavily, than to have the expansive luxury of telling the story over scores of thousands of words.

John Dickson Carr, the greatest writer of impossible crime stories who ever concocted a locked-room puzzle, claimed that the natural form of the traditional mystery is not the novel but the short story. It is not uncommon, he pointed out, for a detective story to revolve around a single incident, with a single clue, which can be discovered, divulged, and have its significance explained within a few pages. The rest is embellishment.

While it is redundant for me to write it again, since I have already done so in each of the previous twenty-three volumes of this series, it falls into the category of fair warning to state that many people regard a “mystery” as a detective story. I regard the detective story as one subgenre of a much more inclusive literary form, which I define as any short work of fiction in which a crime (usually murder, as the stakes are highest when a human life is being taken), or the threat of a crime (creating suspense), is central to the theme or the plot.

While I love good puzzles and tales of pure ratiocination, few of these are written today, as the mystery genre has evolved (for better or worse, depending on your point of view) into a more character-driven form of literature, with more emphasis on the “why” of a crime’s commission than the “who” or the “how.” The line between mystery fiction and general fiction has become more and more blurred in recent years, producing fewer memorable traditional detective stories but more significant literature.

As is true every year, I could not have perused the 1,500–2,000 mystery stories that were published and examined last year, and much of the heavy lifting was done by my invaluable colleague, the longtime editor Michele Slung. She is able to read, evaluate, and commit to seemingly lifelong memory a staggering percentage of those stories, culling those that clearly do not belong on a short list—or a long one either, for that matter. She examines twice as many stories as that to determine if they have mystery or criminal content, which is frequently impossible to know merely by reading the title.

The same standards have pertained to every one of the volumes in this important series. The best writing makes it into the book. Fame, friendship, original venue, reputation, subject—none of it matters. It isn’t only the qualification of being the best writer that will earn a spot on the table of contents; it also must be the best story.

After Michele has gathered the stories to be seriously considered, I read the harvested crop, passing along the best fifty (or at least those I liked best, which I like to think is the same thing) to the guest editor, who selects the twenty that are then reprinted, with the other thirty being listed in an honor roll as “Other Distinguished Mystery Stories.”

Sincere thanks are due to this year’s guest editor, C. J. Box, the numberone *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty-seven novels, including the Joe Pickett series. He has won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel (*Blue Heaven*, 2009) as well as an Anthony, a Macavity, a Gumshoe, two Barrys, and the 2010 Reading the West Book Award for fiction. His novels have been translated into thirty languages, and over 10 million copies of his books have been sold in the U.S. and abroad.

This is an appropriate time to thank the previous guest editors, who have done so much to make this prestigious series such a resounding success: Robert B. Parker, Sue Grafton, Ed McBain, Donald E. Westlake, Lawrence Block, James Ellroy, Michael Connelly, Nelson DeMille, Joyce Carol Oates, Scott Turow, Carl Hiaasen, George Pelecanos, Jeffery Deaver, Lee Child, Harlan Coben, Robert Crais, Lisa Scottoline, Laura Lippman, James Patterson, Elizabeth George, John Sandford, Louise Penny, and Jonathan Lethem.

While Michele and I engage in a relentless quest to locate and read every mystery/crime/suspense story published, I live in terror that I will miss a worthy story, so if you are an author, editor, or publisher, or care about one, please feel free to send a book, magazine, or tearsheet to me c/o The Mysterious Bookshop, 58 Warren Street, New York, NY 10007. If it first appeared electronically, you must submit a hard copy. It is vital to include the author's contact information. No unpublished material will be considered, for what should be obvious reasons. No material will be returned. No critical analysis will be offered, nor an explanation of why a story wasn't selected. If you distrust the postal service, please enclose a self-addressed, stamped postcard.

To be eligible, a story must have been written by an American or a Canadian and first published in an American or Canadian publication in the calendar year 2020. The earlier in the year I receive the story, the more fondly I regard it. If it is published near the end of the year, that can't be helped, so please get it to me as quickly as possible. For reasons known only to the dunderheads who wait until Christmas week to submit a story published the previous spring, holding eligible stories for months before submitting them occurs every year, causing murderous thoughts while I read a stack of stories while my friends are trimming the Christmas tree or otherwise celebrating the holiday season. It had better be a damned good story if you do this.

Because of the very tight production schedule for this book, the absolute firm deadline is December 31. If the story arrives one day later, it will not be read. This is neither whimsical nor arbitrary, but absolutely necessary in order to meet publishing schedules. Sorry.

O.P.

Introduction

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I published a collection of my short stories (including a couple of new ones) under the title *Shots Fired: Tales from Joe Pickett Country*. Although I knew my editor wasn't wild about the idea and a majority of regular readers would prefer a new Joe Pickett or Cassie Dewell novel, the collection did well and I'm quite proud of it. When I want to gift a book to someone who isn't familiar with my work, I give that person *Shots Fired*.

What did surprise me (and, to be honest, disappoint me as well) were the number of folks I met along the trail who said things like "Sorry—I don't read short stories," or, worse, "I hate short stories. I prefer the real thing." The real thing, of course, meaning full-length novels.

I tried to gently persuade the former commenters to give them a try. Short stories done well, I told them, can pack a punch like no other form of writing. A few of the people agreed to give them a read.

As for the "I hate short stories" people, I shot them on the spot and stepped over their bodies (after a final double tap) to engage with more pleasant people. Of course, this is a lie.

For years now, the brilliant and legendary Otto Penzler has devoted thousands of hours of his time to studiously reading short mystery stories that appeared the year before in anthologies, collections, and specialty publications. Of those he read last year, he winnowed them down to his fifty favorites and then sent them to me. Having had the real pleasure of reading those works, I think he got it exactly right, and selecting the final twenty was no easy task.

For over a century in America, short stories were a staple of both literary and mainstream magazines and periodicals. Great and popular short story writers were well known and valued, as they should have been. I think that's one reason why this country has such a long tradition of excellent short stories and short story authors.

But things changed. Just try to find a short story in a popular magazine today.

Nevertheless, Otto has kept the flame alight.

And it's an honor for me to have been asked to write this introduction.

I remember when I found out that a short story of mine had been selected to appear in the 2017 volume of this series. The story was called “Power Wagon,” and the anthology was edited by John Sandford. I was absolutely—and maybe disproportionately—thrilled. It’s a badge of honor as well as a validation that’s hard to put into words. I would venture to say that the authors included here will feel the same way.

I’ll confess right here that crafting a good short story is much harder than writing a full-length novel. Not all of the short stories I’ve written are the same quality, damn it. The length and breadth of novels leaves you room to adjust, to fill in, to take a couple of side trips, and all is forgiven in the end. It’s the difference between stringing a series of dissimilar pearls on a string and calling it a necklace and being the oyster who creates a single perfect pearl. This volume contains twenty perfect pearls.

It’s strange how the whims of popular culture go. Albums used to be the thing for music lovers. Now it’s hit singles. These stories are hit singles, literary version.

Take, for example, John Sandford’s brilliant little gem “Girl with an Ax.” How can anyone who loves the genre not want to read *that*? It begins: “The girl with the ax got off the bus at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Gower Street and started walking the superheated eleven blocks down Gower to Waring Avenue, where she lived by herself in a four-hundred-square-foot bungalow with an air conditioner designed and manufactured by cretins.” I love everything about that opening, and it only gets better from there. It’s a wonderful story that can only be described as “Sandfordian.”

I made notes and bullet points next to some of the selections so I’d remember which ones to read a second time later. On a few of the stories, I underlined sentences I *wish* I’d written.

An unscientific smattering of notes includes:

- “On Little Terry Road” by Tom Franklin: “. . . the room so cold he could see the captions of his breath.” The story itself: Desperate. Very, very dark.
- ● “Security” by Jeffery Deaver: A political hit job like no other, ever.
- “Nightbound” by Wallace Stroby: Breathless, action-packed, great sense of place.
- “Home Movie” by Jerry M. Burger: An entire life in five reels of 8mm film.
- “Deportees” by the master James Lee Burke: Evocative, haunting. “She was a beautiful woman and had a regal manner, but she was also crazy

and had undergone electroshock treatments and had been placed in the asylum in Wichita Falls.”

- “See Humble and Die” by Richard Helms: “She looked like someone had wrapped a refrigerator.”
- “Pretzel Logic” by dbschlosser: Clipped, severed, sharp dialogue. A terrific scheme.
- “Second Cousins” by Michael Cebula: Noirish, featuring a woman named Toola. Cool twist ending. I cannot *not* read a story with a character named Toola.
- “Shanty Falls” by Doug Crandell: Dark and mesmerizing. Haunting.
- “Rhonda and Clyde” by John M. Floyd: With a setting in my home state of Wyoming, this is a mini-symphony of misdirection.

And those are just a few of the notes I made on the selections here. The rest are just as tantalizing.

Since you’re reading this introduction and holding this book in your hands, it means you don’t hate short stories. Good for you. It means you can live. It also means you have a special appreciation for this form. For that reason, I can safely say that authors, editors, and fellow short story readers hoist a toast in your honor. Thank you.

C. J. Box

PAMELABLACKWOOD

Justice

FROM *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*

HE HAD NOT been able to sleep, as usual. Even after a day that had started before sunup and ended in the dark as well, a day that had pitted his muscles against five hundred tons of soil, or so it seemed. Judging from the dull ache in his lower back, the soil had won. He had twisted into every position imaginable in bed to ease the pain, curled in like a spider and straightened out flat like a board, and nothing had helped. He had even considered

waking Callie and having her walk on his back like she did sometimes when it was knotting up on him, but it seemed a selfish thing to do, like recalling an angel from heaven to earth. In the long run, it would have made no difference anyway. It was the state of his bed, not his back, that kept him awake for hours each night. No matter how he twisted and turned and shifted, half of his bed was still empty.

He finally left it, pulled on clothes, and made his way to the door without even lighting a candle. The faint glow from the dying fire gave him enough light to find the heavy wooden bolt, and he lifted it and opened the cabin door without making a sound. Once outside, seated on the stone stoop and breathing in the night air, he felt better. He was in the outside world now, the world of infinity. Hannah's new world.

He looked toward heaven, where the preacher said she was, and then looked east, where he knew for a fact she was, at least the part of her he had known on earth. If she were coming home, some evil voice whispered, this is where she would appear to him, stepping out of the forest just beyond the corncrib. Tonight, with his back throbbing, his muscles taut with exhaustion, and his brain unable to rest, William gave in to the wickedness, and his mind set to work. Hannah was coming home again.

She would find her way out of the grave somehow. That was not his concern. Once freed, she would shake off the soil (for his mind insisted on this grisly detail, proof of the evil in it) and start for home. She would walk the three miles from the cemetery, unaffected by the darkness and the cold, her bare feet treading on sticks, and soon she would reach the edge of the forest, where the senseless separation would end.

At this point in the fantasy, the details varied. Sometimes she was holding the baby boy who had died with her, cradling him to her chest against the chill of night and smiling because they'd been blessed with another child. Other times she was alone as she stepped from the forest, always pausing a moment beside the corncrib to catch William's eye, always smiling at the joy of reunion. Then she would come quickly to him and the nightmare would be over.

Some nights William could see her there as clearly as the creamy moon above. He knew it was evil, twisted thinking to imagine her back in a body no longer fit to house a soul, but most nights he couldn't help himself. Tonight he found, with some irritation, that he had the opposite problem. He could not lose himself in the fantasy due to a riot of barking dogs.

He had not given much thought to the racket at first. Since he'd taken to sitting on the stoop at night and thinking about Hannah, he had grown accustomed to hearing dogs barking all around him, at treed possums or the full moon or at some specter of their own creation. It was the lone barkers

that he loved, the lonely call into the night of one creature facing the universe, alone. He thought to them across the pine forests and the freshly turned earth, *Yes, you're right, that's exactly how it feels*, and it seemed to him that at least in that, he had some company.

Tonight was different. The barking was closer, maybe a quarter mile down the road, and it was savage. He held his mind still for a moment and listened. This time it was no midnight loner but what sounded like several hounds working themselves into a frenzy. What made it queer was that's how it had started, just a few moments after he'd seated himself on the stoop. Not with the usual traveling frenzy that either grew or diminished in volume according to the movements of some prey, but a sudden outburst, beginning and continuing in one spot. William thought he was catching voices mingled in with the barking when he heard a sound coming from inside the cabin. Pushing the door behind him open, he heard disembodied sobs, growing louder as Callie made her way down from the sleeping loft.

He pushed himself up from the stoop, brushed his hands together and then against his breeches. When he called Callie's name, the sobbing grew louder and he could hear her bare feet, slapping on each step, hurrying to get to him. Fearful that she would stumble in the dark, he went inside and met her halfway up. Scooping her up into his arms, he returned to the stoop.

It was not a nightmare this time, although they had been common enough since her mother had died. This time he could see the problem right away. In one hand she was clutching a hair ribbon. One of the pigtails he had so inexpertly braided a few hours earlier had come undone.

After waiting through the necessary tears and drama, he took the pink ribbon from Callie, set her on her feet, and turned her around. Working more by feel than sight, he began the task of rebraiding.

His hands, rough and clumsy as a hound dog's paws, were chilly, and the fine dark hair kept slipping from his fingers. When his handiwork dissolved for the third time, he gave up. No hands would work that were chilled such as his and no eyes in such poor light. Five minutes in front of the fire, after a bit of stoking, and the task would be done. Getting to his feet, he watched Callie sit on the stoop and cross her arms.

"Let's go in," he said, and held one hand down for her to grasp. "Papa's hands won't work in the cold."

"No," she said simply, and drew her knees up under her arms. It was her new way, since her mother had died. Not defiance so much as a courtesy, informing him of how things were going to be. William, who never would have tolerated such behavior six weeks earlier, sat back down and put his hands under his armpits.

Immediately Callie jumped up and ran to the well in the center of the yard. He called her name, knowing all the while that it was a useless exercise, then got up and followed her across the swept ground, keeping an eye that the white nightgown stayed on the outside of the circular rock wall that surrounded the well. When he caught up with her, she had hunkered down in front of it. He sat down beside her.

“Look,” she called, and one slender arm flew out from the huddle of nightgown and disordered hair and pointed to the sky. “There’s the dipper,” she shouted, and danced the shape of it in the air with her finger.

“That’s right,” William said, and deciding that he could at least keep her warm even if he couldn’t control her, he stretched out his legs and pulled her onto his lap.

“But there’s no water,” she said, as if her heart would break, and William sensed the beginning of a storm of vexation over this notion. He had discovered that the only way out of these dark fits of anger was a quick distraction.

“Callie,” he said in a loud whisper. He ducked his head and looked from left to right and then at her as if he knew a marvelous secret that no one else must hear. Seeing her eyes open wide, he knew the trick had worked. “What?” she whispered, and he felt her face turn up to his. “You hear those dogs? Those barkers down the road a bit?” She nodded her head, enthralled.

“You know what’s making ’em go on and on like that?”

She shook her head, lips parted and eyes unblinking, all past traumas forgotten. William had no idea what was coming next, but he had learned to improvise like never before in the last few weeks.

“Well,” he said, and looking up to the sky, it came to him. He turned Callie outward and lifted her face toward the stars.

“You see that star up there,” he asked, and aimed her head toward the North Star. At that moment the barking grew to a fever pitch and William imagined that he heard a man shout. But it was all around him now, every dog on every homestead alerted to something in the night, and William, in the cacophony, could hardly be sure of what he heard. He looked back down when he felt Callie tugging on his sleeve.

“I see it,” she said, slightly piqued, and William knew he was in danger of losing ground if he didn’t hurry on.

“That’s the North Star,” he said. “But it’s part of something else too. That star makes up part of a bear up there in the sky. That’s what my daddy, your granddaddy, told me when I was little like you and that’s what’s got those dogs all keyed up. They’re barking after that bear up yonder and there’s nothing more they can do than bark.”

“I don’t see any bear,” Callie said, and stood up, stepping to the left and to the right and all the while squinting upward. “I don’t see a bear,” she said again, her voice smaller this time and closer to tears. William pulled her back on his lap.

“It’s a dipper too,” he added in desperation, and ran his finger along the trail of stars that made up the Little Dipper. “See there?” he said, trying to cover her with his coat. Her bare feet were ice, even through his trouser leg.

“Where?” she shouted, and William ran his finger along the sky trail again, pulling his coat closer around her when she threatened to burst out of it.

Please let her see it, he implored, and finally she saw something, because her head started banging against his chest in an enthusiastic nod.

At that moment the barking stopped, as suddenly and inexplicably as it had begun.

William looked away from the sky, stared into the darkness, and wondered at the oddness of it. Callie began pulling on one of his shirt buttons.

“What’s his name?” she asked, giving all her attention to the button, twisting and turning it and plucking it with her fingers.

“Stop that, Callie,” William said, sharper than he meant to because he’d be more likely to traipse across the moon than be able to sew a button back onto a shirt.

“It pushes,” she said in a high-pitched whine, and William opened his shirt where the button was digging into her head and felt a rush of pleasure at the brush of her soft hair against his bare chest. For now, at least, he still had her and her little sister and he would move heaven and earth and hell to keep them alive. Thinking that perhaps the night air was not the best thing for Callie, he decided to begin the process of putting her back to bed. He savored the touch of her for another moment and then hugged her and set her on her feet.

“What’s his name?” she insisted, stomping one ice foot into the earth and pointing toward the sky.

“Virgil,” William said, thinking of his father’s name and then thinking faster still. “And he has ordered most of these dogs down here to hush up and go to sleep. You hear how those closer ones have gone quiet?”

Dogs were still barking in the distance all around them, but William was hoping that for once Callie would not examine the statement for absolute truth.

“They’ve gone quiet as church mice, haven’t they?” he hurried on, taking her hand. “Most of them, anyway. They know it’s bedtime for dogs and

children. And old Virgil up there, he'd like to see them all go to sleep, all dogs and children as well. Think you can oblige him?"

Some miracle of five-year-old logic stepped in, and Callie nodded. William smiled and counted it as a victory. It was one of the precious few he'd had since being thrust into the uncharted mystery land of children, with scant provisions and no map. He was making his way, but slowly.

They had turned to go into the cabin when he heard it.

A pair of riders were coming down the road, pushing their horses until the sound of hooves hitting dirt filled the night. He heard them coming, heard the desperate clomping pass his property, and heard the sound echo off the trees as the riders pressed on into the distance. Any minute he expected an abrupt end to the sound, as pushing a horse like that in the dark was a fool's game, asking for a misstep that meant death for horse and rider.

In another moment it was as if the sound had never existed. The hoofbeats that had dominated the dark had faded and then were gone as quickly as they had come, returning the night to the barking dogs.

William felt Callie's arms tighten around him and looked down to find her sobbing quietly onto his breeches. When he tried to kneel down, she pressed her face even harder against his thighs.

"What is it, Callie?" he asked, stroking her hair and wondering if he'd ever be any better at this, at the whys and hows of tending children.

She mumbled something but it was garbled by sobs. He bent his head closer and asked her to repeat it.

"Reaper," she whispered, and he knew in an instant what was in her mind. *Like a thief in the night, the preacher had spoken over her mother's coffin, the Grim Reaper comes and takes what he will and then is gone, but our Heavenly Father . . .* William had shut his mind to the rest, having no patience for a justification of Hannah's death.

"No, Callie," he said down to her. "That's just a couple of men on horses, riding down the road in a hurry. That wasn't the Grim Reaper. That was just men like Papa. There is no Grim Reaper." *Just as there is no Heavenly Father,* his mind continued.

They're lying about all of it, but another corner of his mind recoiled in fear at that and still another corner mocked him and said, *Speak it aloud and see for yourself.*

"There is no Grim Reaper," he repeated. "Now let's fix your hair and then maybe I'll tell you a story." She moved her head, which he took for a nod. Lifting her up into his arms, he walked back to the stoop.

No Grim Reaper, the mocker in his head screamed, and William thought back to the mocker, *That's right.* Even so, he shuddered when he saw the

cabin door standing slightly ajar, even while knowing that was surely the way he and Callie had left it.

Drying tears he had quickly become adept at, through lots of practice. In order for them to survive, he had also learned to put something like a meal on the table twice a day, on dishes that had at least been scraped clean of the previous meal. Every garment they owned had been washed at least once since Hannah had died, and he was able to keep the girls at least a stage away from filthy. Hair, it seemed, would be his undoing.

He had started the hair-washing ordeal on the next afternoon, suffering through tears at each stage, from the wetting down to the scrubbing with soap, through the futile attempt at combing out the pair of ravaged birds' nests. Louisa, who shed silent tears in the company of her thumb, had been bad enough. But when Callie had shrieked at every slight pull of the comb, he had given up and placed them both in front of the fire with their dolls until their hair was completely dry. In this decision, even shrieks were powerless against him. He would not risk them getting chilled and then fevered or worse.

Now, getting them ready to go to the tavern, he wondered what Hannah would think of her oldest daughter going out into the world looking like a miniature madwoman, her hair hanging about in tangled clumps. *If you cared, you shouldn't have left me*, he thought, and then wondered at his own sanity. Settling the girls in front of him on the horse, he dismissed the issue as irrelevant. He would have to carry on whether sane or insane, so why even bother to consider it? Nudging Gus gently forward toward the road, he worried over another matter entirely—would the girls be quiet long enough for him to get a swallow of gin and a scrap of adult companionship. At this moment in his life, after five days of working alone, it was all he wanted.

Last time out they had not. Louisa had fretted at the loud men hurting her ears, Callie had seen a witch on the ride over and clung to William's leg the rest of the evening. Tonight, if they could be still at the same time for a slim half hour, he had promised to buy them each a new hair ribbon at the dry goods store. Bribery, he had discovered, was even better than diversion.

Once there, he set them on the floor in the corner of the tavern with two dolls and a bag of marbles and got himself a glass of gin. Taking a chair at a nearby table, he nodded a greeting to one of his neighbors.

"So you still haven't found anybody," Josh Miller said by way of greeting.

"Not looking," William said, stretching his legs out under the table and leaning back. It felt good to sit down, good to be warm, good to have a drink in his hand and a neighborly body to drink it with. "I don't need anybody," he continued, and then took a drink of gin to wash his throat clean of the lie.

“Seems like you do,” Josh said, looking pointedly into the corner at Callie’s matted hair. When William looked daggers at him, he just shook his head. “A man can be too stubborn sometimes, seems like to me. Besides, those two little ones need something better than you to look at.”

“Can’t argue with that one,” William said, and looked over the other patrons in the tavern. The place was crowded with men and boys, with a stray female here and there. One over near the keg seemed to be the centerpiece of a small throng of boys who were vying for her attention with lively words and gestures.

William saw them all as potential murderers, for surely one would win her heart and vent his passion on her until she died. That was the way of the world.

“It’s no use thinking about that one,” Josh said. “Unless you can drop ten years off your body and twenty off your thinking. I doubt she’d be satisfied to tend children, but she might know of—”

“I thought I said, pretty clear, that I wasn’t looking,” William said. “I reckon she’ll die soon enough without coming around me. I’ve killed one already, seems like that’s enough for a while.”

“You stupid fool,” Josh said with feeling but no malice. “If you figure on calling yourself a murderer, I reckon that little baby boy is a killer too. Killed his mama and himself. You reckon that’s the way of it, Will?”

“I reckon some folks need to tend to their own business and keep out of mine. Don’t you have another subject, Josh?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Josh said. “Talking about killing, there was a killing over near your place last night. Ben Pierce was riding early this morning down the Raleigh Road and nearly stumbled over poor old Johnny Grant lying sprawled out beside the road with his throat cut. Been robbed, it looked like. You know that pouch of money he always wore around his neck?”

“Yep,” William said, fighting a numbness that was starting at the tips of his fingers and working up.

“Well, that was gone, and you know he never went nowhere without it, even wore it to bed, they say. That was gone and his old daddy’s pocket watch was gone and that locket that had his mama’s likeness, they took that off him too. I don’t reckon he had much more than that, being an idiot and all. And you know them dogs he always kept running around at his feet?”

William nodded.

“Caught one of ’em with a knife. Ben carried that one home but figured the other one must have got away or crawled off to die, since it wasn’t around nowhere. A damn shame, is what it is. You hear anything at your place last night?”

“Yep. Dogs barking, pitching a fit—late, after ten o’clock. Then a couple of horses running full chisel a few minutes later. I reckon I heard the whole thing.” He had gotten up from his bed to look for peace, to be with Hannah, and had heard a murder. A tiny ember that had been smoldering in his brain sprang to life. “Who do you reckon would kill an idiot boy like that?”

Josh looked at him and tipped his head toward the circle of young people across the room.

William let the gesture lie. “Could have been anybody. Lots of folks knew Johnny took that road home from the sawmill every night. Being the way he was, he’d be easy pickin’s. A stranger could have done it, would have known once he had a word or two with the boy that he wasn’t right in the head.”

“Could have, but didn’t,” Josh said, and with the words came a chill that William sensed in spite of the flames at the tavern’s hearth and the bursts of laughter and easy talk that hummed around them.

“So what are you saying, Josh?” William asked, and then was distracted by Louisa tugging on his sleeve. Her doll, she explained, had suffered a hurt leg when Callie had deliberately dropped her from a dangerous height. William took out his handkerchief and dried Louisa’s tears and then wrapped the doll leg, glancing at Josh and at the rag leg he was tending and then across the room where he’d seen Josh look. Finishing the job, he handed Louisa the doll and told her to run along, but instead she climbed into his lap and lay against him, sucking her thumb and stroking the wounded doll.

“You’re saying it’s somebody we know,” William continued when Josh showed no sign of answering his question. “You’re saying it’s somebody in this taproom, if I’m reading you right.”

“You see that group over yonder?” Josh asked, and dipped his head in their direction again. “Wendell Pike, Jimmy Galton, Eddie Bishop, and all them boys around Mary Ann Graves?”

“I see ’em,” William said. “I’d be blind and deaf not to, the way they’ve been cutting up all night.”

“Well, I been watching them, both before you got here and since. They been cutting up all right, trying to impress that girl, mainly with fancy talk. But some of that fancy talk, a lot of it, I’d say, has centered around Eddie and Wendell and something Eddie keeps bringing out and dangling around to show everybody. I got a good look at it once, when I went out back. It’s a watch.”

“Lots of folks have watches, Josh.”

“That’s so. But what’s so dang funny about that one? He’s showing it off like a square nickel.”

“Could be new to him. Could be his daddy’s or his granddaddy’s or he just bought it himself.”

“It’s new to him, all right. Newly filched off of Johnny Grant’s body. You know and I know that his daddy, being both a drunkard and poor as Job’s turkey, didn’t buy that boy no new watch to show off like that.”

“Maybe the boy bought it himself. He works at the sawmill, doesn’t he?”

“He turns up at the sawmill now and again and Wendell’s daddy might give him a day or two of work if he has it, but that’s hardly enough to go buying a fancy watch when your daddy barely makes enough to keep his own body and soul together, let alone his children’s. That’s Johnny’s watch, I’d bet my head on it.”

“Rather than bet your head, why not talk to the sheriff?” William said. He felt Louisa flinch in his lap when the group in the corner burst into laughter. When she put both fists over her ears and began to whimper, he knew his time at the tavern was almost over.

“I intend to tell him,” Josh said. “Trouble is, that’ll likely be the end of it. Like you said, lots of folks have watches, and who’s around to testify to that one being Johnny’s? The boy didn’t have no family and hardly any friends. Just them two dogs, and they’re good as gone too.”

“He went to the sawmill nearly every day of his life,” William said. “Some of them must have known him.”

“He did do that. He was a pest they tried to run off, and when he came back, they ignored him best they could.”

“Still, some of them must have seen that watch.”

“Course they did. That’s why they figured on robbing him. They saw the watch and they saw the money pouch and then went through the poor boy’s pockets after they’d finished their handiwork on him and took his mama’s locket as well. It’s just a wonder they didn’t open his mouth and check for gold teeth.”

“So tell the sheriff,” William said, and set Louisa down on her feet. Finishing the last of his gin, he gestured to Callie, who studiously ignored him. “That Grant boy is entitled to justice same as any man under this roof. More so, since he was soft in the head and couldn’t defend himself.”

“I agree with you, friend,” Josh said, and after one long last look, he turned his back on the group of young people. “And I will talk to Clayton about it. But the fact is, Wendell Pike’s daddy owns the sawmill and Eddie’s his best friend and Johnny Grant was just an idiot boy who had nothing and no ties and nobody’s going to care much that he’s gone. I reckon he’ll find justice in the end, like the rest of us. Trouble is, he’s going to have to wait till then to get it. Till then, he’s just dead and that’s the end of it.”