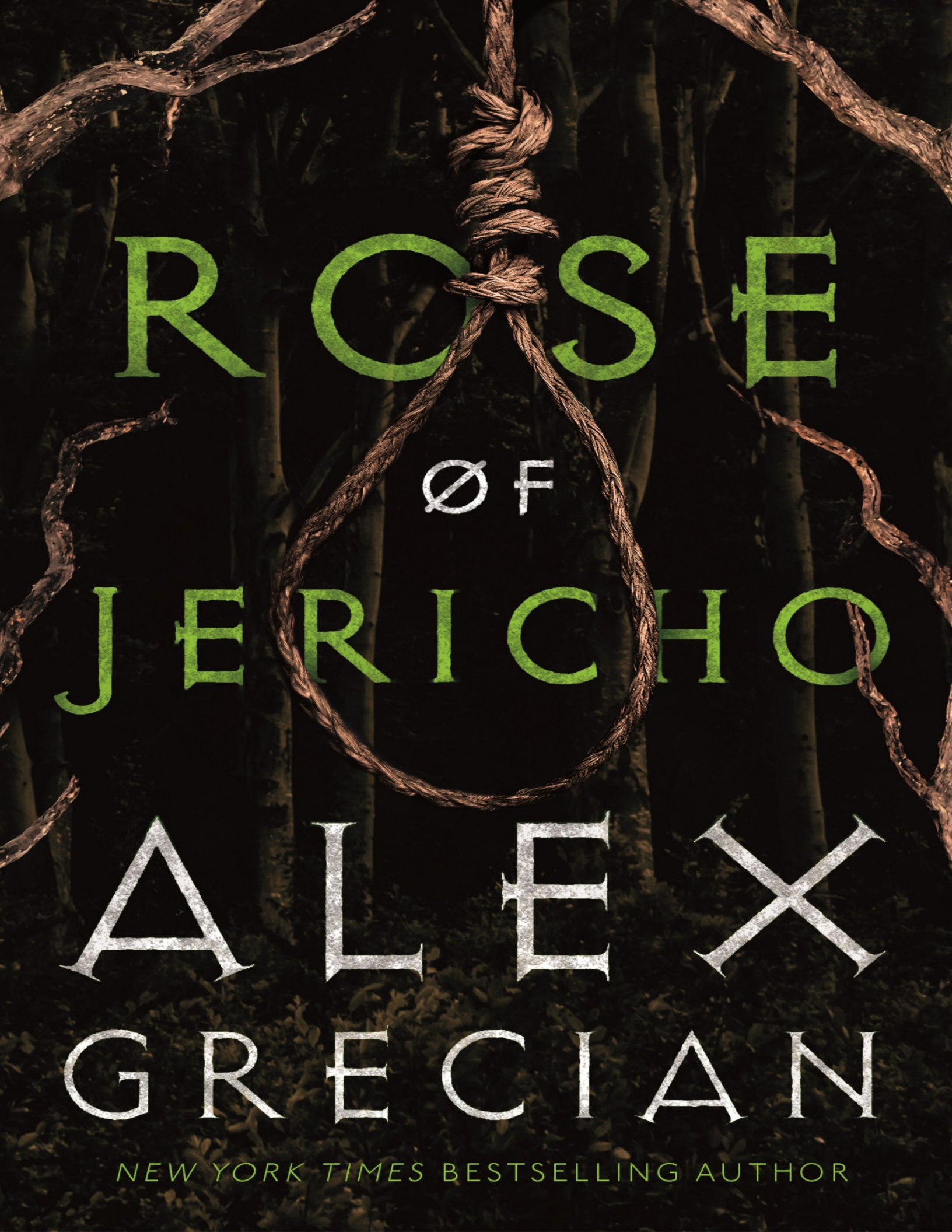
ROSE
OF
JERICHO
ALEX
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROSE OF JERICHO

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NIGHTFIRE

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For Christy

She had the perpetual sense,

as she watched the taxi cabs,

of being out, out, far out to sea and alone;

she always had the feeling

that it was very, very, dangerous to live even one day.

—Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE JOURNEY

Moses Burke, a former Union soldier

Katie Burke, Moses's wife

Esmerelda Rosas, an abandoned child

Frank Smiley, a notorious cardsharp and horse thief

Poppy Buckland, believed to be a witch

THE VILLAGE

Rose Nettles, a former schoolteacher, widow, and heiress

Sadie Grace, Rose's partner

Rabbit Grace, Sadie's daughter

Clarissa Sinclair, Rose's estranged cousin

Benjamin Sinclair, Clarissa's son

Alice Anders, Clarissa's nurse

Lucy Knox, in love with Benjamin

Prosper Knox, Lucy's father and the village pharmacist

Charles Bowden, works at Prosper's drugstore and helps at the train station

Dr Timothy Rumpole, the new village physician

Sergeant Newton Winter, the village constable, retired

Reverend Samuel Cotton, the village clergyman

Mr Mulacky, the village milkman

Jessica Hudson, the village innkeeper

James Doolittle, an itinerant handyman

BETHANY HALL

Housekeeper

Cook

Butler

Coachman

Gardener

Alexander, our narrator

Bell, his rival

1881

NICODEMUS, KANSAS

Moses Burke met Katie Foster at a Fourth of July potluck in a meadow beside the churchyard. It was a hot day, and Moses had taken off his shirt. A bandanna tied around his neck soaked up the sweat rolling off his scalp. He spotted Katie across the freshly mowed field of dandelion stalks, her hair clipped short, her dark face shiny as a river rock. She looked up and he looked away, embarrassed to be caught, and when he looked again she was making her way toward him, carrying two plates mounded high with beans and potato salad. Her shoulders were bare and her hips swayed, and Moses could almost smell the heat coming off her skin. She stopped three feet from him and held out one of the plates.

"I don't know about the beans," she said. "But I made the potato salad myself and you shouldn't eat it. I think the mayonnaise was off."

When he laughed, she frowned at him and shook her head. "I'm serious," she said.

"Then why bring it?"

"My Aunt Vida said I had to bring something."

He took a bite anyway, holding the fork up first so she would see he'd speared a big chunk of potato. The flavor was disagreeable, sour and tangy,

and he swallowed without chewing, then scooped up another forkful. Katie grabbed the plate from him and tipped it, sliding its contents into the grass.

"Okay, then," she said. "If you don't die, come by Vida's home after church next Sunday and I'll walk with you, but I won't go farther than the mill."

Moses nodded and watched her walk away before he wiped his tongue on the sweaty bandanna. Then he found his mother and made her show him Aunt Vida's house.

Moses and Katie were married that autumn. They bought a small farmhouse down the road from his mother and they painted it blue. Moses—who could climb a tree like a squirrel but did not like being on ladders—painted the ground floor and watched from below as Katie painted the second story, climbing halfway up to hand her brushes and pails and rags, ready to catch her if she fell. In the evenings he filled the bathtub and scrubbed cornflower paint from her arms, from her face, from her hair.

He built furniture. A three-legged stool that wobbled unless it was placed on uneven ground, a sofa with one arm that came loose when they leaned on it. He built fires. Katie would lay with her head on his shoulder and they would talk about their lives before they found one another. Each of them had seen hardship and evil, in other places, in other times, but hardship and evil were distant memories now, miles away from their little blue home.

They made love on a thin green rug his mother had stitched from scraps of old dresses and skirts; they made love on bare wooden floors, and laughed as they plucked splinters from one another's backs. They made love standing up and sitting down and in fields covered with scratchy hay. They made love with a glance, with a smile, and with a whispered word.

A month after their anniversary, Katie got sick.

She wasted away over the winter. She was twenty-nine years old, and her husband was a decade older. Moses had been to war and had seen men die, but this was different, and he didn't know how to help or what to say. He hid his sorrow from his wife, and he hid his anger, and they spoke of a future they knew they would never see.

Neighbors brought dishes covered with warm towels, and Katie accepted the food gracefully, though she no longer ate. Moses took the unasked-for casseroles to their tiny kitchen and left them there. He let the dishes pile up. The food rotted and the towels blossomed with mildew.

That Christmas he held Katie's arm as she stepped carefully over muddy ditches caked with thin layers of ice. She stopped and laid her head on his arm.

"We can go back home," he said.

"I'll be fine," she said, and took another small step forward. "The morning sickness is making things worse today."

Moses stuck his foot in an icy puddle. Water filled his shoe. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

"I wasn't sure at first," Katie said. "The doctor in Dodge City confirmed it. He said I'll be showing soon. I'm going to get so fat." She leaned in and whispered, "Huge."

Because she said it with a smile, it didn't occur to him that she was delivering more bad news. When they arrived at his mother's house, Katie leaned on the porch railing while she caught her breath.

"I've been calling him Junior," she said. "Only until we think of something better."

"I can already think of twelve names better than Junior," Moses said.

When she was ready, he opened the door and they stood breathing in the scent of ham and potatoes until one of the littlest nephews came and grabbed their hands and led them farther inside, where Cordelia Burke greeted them with kisses.

"Finally!" she said. "The children have been waiting to open their presents!"

Cordelia ushered Katie to a chair by the fire. Moses watched his wife from across the room as she greeted all the little nieces and nephews. He imagined her standing in a room filled with light, holding their child in her arms. He caught Katie's eye and winked, and she waggled the tips of her long fingers at him.

Walking home that night, she said: “You know why I married you, Moses Burke?”

He shook his head. He had no idea.

“You ate my bad potato salad. You accepted your fate without question.” She grinned up at him. “I decided you wouldn’t last much longer without me.”

He nodded. It was true. He felt his throat close up and he wiped his eyes with the palm of his hand.

“Stop that,” she said. “I won’t be an excuse for you to mope around. This child’s gonna need a father. I want you to promise me something. When I’m gone, you have to promise you’ll be strong for this little one.”

She patted her abdomen and Moses nodded. He couldn’t speak. He wiped his eyes again and took her elbow and helped her home.

★ ★ ★

Katie died on a gray day in February, two minutes after the death of her premature child.

At the moment his wife drew her last shuddering breath, Moses heard the jangling of spurs and saw a dark figure from the corner of his eye. When he turned his head there was no one there.

That night he buried his wife and child behind the blue farmhouse, breaking through the frozen soil with a hatchet, and fashioning markers for their graves from planks he pulled off his wagon. The following morning, before the sun rose, he set out after Death. The Grim Reaper had a head start on him, but Moses had a fast horse and a broken heart.

It had snowed for the better part of a week, and Death’s mount had left a trail of deep hoofprints. Beside the hoofprints were the prints of a wolf or a large dog, and Moses had no trouble following them. For five days and five nights he rode, and he observed that Death had stopped many times ahead of him. Moses saw men digging fresh graves in distant fields, but he didn’t

slow. He pushed his horse onward, determined to catch the villain who had taken his wife.

He came upon Death on the morning of the sixth day. Fog had settled in a shallow valley between two limestone ridges, where the first rays of sunshine couldn't reach. Death was squatting beside a small campfire, rubbing his hands together and staring into the flames. A yellow dog sat beside him at the edge of the fire, and a pale horse stood nearby, tethered to the trunk of a bare elm.

Death looked up as Moses approached.

"Come, friend," Death said. "Warm yourself by my fire."

Moses drew his pistol and shot Death through the eye. The Grim Reaper fell without a sound and rolled into the campfire, stirring up a shower of sparks. Moses turned to shoot the yellow dog, but it was already running. He fired at it anyway, but the distance was great and his hand was shaking with the cold.

He pulled Death's body out of the fire, then sat and waited to see if the dog would come back. Having murdered the Angel of Death in cold blood, Moses thought he ought to feel something. Triumph or regret or fear. The fire warmed his face, and a cold breeze tickled the back of his neck, but all he felt was a hollowness in his chest. Katie was dead, and his promise to her had ended two minutes before she drew her last breath. There was no reason to go forward, and there was nothing to go back to except an empty farmhouse that had been painted cornflower blue in happier times.

He checked his pistol and saw that it still held four bullets. He set the muzzle against his forehead and pulled the trigger. He heard a click as the hammer struck, and the muzzle jerked against his skull, but there was no flash of light, no instant of pain, no sharp drop into oblivion.

Confused, he cracked the pistol open and checked the chamber again.

It held three bullets and a spent casing.

"Strange," he said to Death's corpse.

After a while, he stood and approached the pale horse. He untethered it and removed Death's saddle and bags, heaving them into the fire, where the

old leather smoked and sputtered. He slapped the horse on its flank and watched it gallop away.

He fetched a short-handled shovel from his gear, and broke through the crust of ice, then dug a trench, and buried the body. It was hard work. Death was big-boned and heavy, and the snow was deep.

When he had finished, Moses scattered dirty snow over the campfire, and stowed his shovel, then he mounted his old Appaloosa and rode away.

> ***I am sent to wait for Moses Burke at his eventual destination. It will take him more than seven days of travel, by your reckoning, to reach me. On a whim—I swear it is a whim—I decide to pass the time until he arrives by chronicling the end of Death and what will come after.***

SEVEN DAYS REMAINING

Benjamin Sinclair loitered outside the train station of Ascension, Massachusetts, waiting for the eight o'clock local. Beyond the tracks, at the top of Vinegar Hill, the big house also waited. Bethany Hall had sat vacant for a decade until a Philadelphia lawyer, acting on behalf of an unnamed client, purchased it from the village council. The house was the oldest structure in the county and had loomed high on the hill overlooking the village for more than a century, casting its long shadow down the wide avenue that stretched from the train station to the post office.

Grackles had built a nest in the porch lamp; the garden was overrun with tasseled weeds and volunteer trees. The stained glass window above Bethany Hall's front door had been broken, and roughly a quarter of the shingles had blown off the roof in a storm the previous winter. The village had voted against spending the money to replace them.

It was widely believed that the house was cursed, but the council declined to have it torn down for fear the curse might be passed to them.

Three days after the Philadelphia lawyer left Ascension, a crew of workmen had arrived and begun restoring the house. The temperature dipped below freezing at night, and a blanket of snow covered the path that led up to the house, but the sounds of sawing and hammering could be heard around the clock.

Early one morning in February the workers marched back down Vinegar Hill to the train station. The next day, five strangers arrived. They were tall and stooped; they wore identical black overcoats and wide-brimmed hats that obscured their features. They stood for a long moment on the station platform before trudging up the hill. The villagers saw lights in the windows that night as Bethany Hall's new servants went about preparing its rooms.

Benjamin Sinclair had decided to stake out the train station in hopes of meeting the house's new owners. There was little else to interest a teenage boy in Ascension. Anticipating a long wait, he had brought his telescope, but heavy black clouds hid the sky from view, and lightning flashed at the horizon. Thunder built and rolled, rumbling across the icy fields and shaking the platform under his feet. He took shelter beneath a wide green awning just as the heavens opened and rain hammered down on the station's roof.

A few minutes later a black carriage rolled up out of the gloom. The coachman pulled his dripping cloak around him and lowered his hat, hiding his face in shadows. Two of them waited in silence.

The eight o'clock train arrived on schedule, and three passengers debarked. The first was a thin woman dressed all in black, with graying hair pulled back tight against her scalp. When Benjamin leapt forward to offer his arm, she smiled and pressed a nickel into his hand. She was followed off the train by a girl with short brown hair tucked up under a waterproof cap. Benjamin thought at first she might be his own age, but something in her dark eyes made him decide she was much older than she appeared. She refused his arm and looked away down the tracks, frowning and tapping her foot.

The last passenger to step onto the platform wore high leather boots, tan trousers, and a thick bear fur coat that looked so heavy Benjamin wondered how she could stand upright. Her red hair hung loose around her narrow face, and she looked at Benjamin with an expression of amused curiosity. She took his arm and opened her umbrella, moving it to cover him.

"Who might you be?" she said.

"Benjamin Sinclair, ma'am. I was—"

"Benjamin?" The older woman interrupted. "Are you Clarissa Sinclair's boy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How wonderful! I haven't seen you since you were very small. I'm your cousin Rose."

Benjamin blinked in surprise. "My cousin bought that house?"

“Tell me,” Rose said. “How is your mother? Has there been any improvement in her condition?”

Benjamin shook his head. He was still considering the novel idea that he was related to the owner of Bethany Hall, and it had begun to dawn on him that he might get a chance to finally see the inside of the house.

“I wish I could have come sooner,” Rose said. “I was making arrangements for the house when I got a letter from your mother’s nurse. I rushed things along as quickly as I could, but…” She raised a hand to her cheek. “Oh, I’m sorry. This is my … Well, this is my friend Sadie Grace and her daughter, Rabbit.”

“Rabbit?”

The silent coachman climbed down from his high seat and lurched up the steps to the platform, his black cloak dripping. He took Sadie’s umbrella and offered his elbow, but all three women ignored him.

“Please tell your mother we’ve arrived at last,” Rose said to Benjamin.

“She sleeps most of the time,” he said. “I never know if she can hear me.”

“I’ll visit her tomorrow. Whether she hears you or not, please tell her that. Tell her I’ve missed her dearly and I’ll be staying here in the village now. I’ve taken a position as schoolteacher.”

“Teacher?” The village had been without a schoolteacher for many months, and Benjamin had not considered that someone new might assume the job.

“I imagine we’ll be seeing quite a lot of each other now,” Rose said. “I’m looking forward to catching up. I can’t believe how tall you’ve grown.”

“Can I help with your luggage?” Benjamin hoped he would be invited up the hill.

“Thank you, no,” Rose said. “Coachman will see to the luggage.”

“We’ll see you soon, Benjamin,” Sadie said.

She kissed him on the cheek, then rapped her knuckles against the faded green planks of the station wall. The pitter-patter of rain on the awning slowed, then stopped. The clouds above them parted, and sunlight slanted across the platform.

“You’d better run along before it starts up again.”

Benjamin nodded and lifted his hat to them, then he turned and hopped down the platform steps to the icy road. His left foot slid out from under him, and his telescope banged against his leg, but he regained his balance and moved into the spiky grass, where there was better traction. He didn’t look back to see if his cousin had watched him stumble.

★ ★ ★

Prosper Knox stood behind his new soda fountain scooping ice cream and cracking eggs into tall glasses for a crowd of young villagers. When Benjamin entered the drugstore, Prosper grabbed another glass from the counter behind him and spooned in a dollop of bright red syrup.

“What’s the good news, Young Master Sinclair?”

Charles Bowden yelled, “Do tell, Benji!”

“Settle down, boy,” Prosper said.

“There’s three women moving in up there,” Benjamin said. Lucy Knox was sitting at the counter, and he reached past her to accept a cherry soda from her father.

“One of them is my mother’s cousin,” he said. “I guess she’s going to be the new teacher. There’s another lady with her, and a girl who might be about my age.”

“Is she pretty?” Lucy said. She tried to sound as if it didn’t matter to her, one way or another.

Benjamin shrugged. Outside, the clouds had rolled back in, and what he could see of the sky through Knox Drugs’s big front window was dark and ugly. Lightning abruptly turned the air white, as thunder shook the rafters; rain lashed at the window and pounded on the roof, searching for a way in. Benjamin’s eyes opened wide, remembering that Sadie Grace had rapped her knuckles against the wall of the station just as the rain had let up. The storm had subsided exactly long enough for him to return to the village and find shelter.