

The Shadow of the Bear

Chapter One

One winter night as they sat at home, there came a knock at the door.

—Grimm

THE TWO GIRLS were alone in their house that night.

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

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

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

Blanche, prosaic in a pale yellow sweater and blue jeans, was wondering again if anything mattered—life, faith—specifically, finishing homework assignments. She twisted her fingers in a long strand of her poker straight black hair and tried to read Camus while ignoring the disturbing thoughts that continually circled inside her head, like Matthew Arnold's ignorant armies clashing by night.

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

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

print curtains and the blinds and pressed her face to the pane, trying to decipher the darkness.

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

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

"Someone's outside with Mother."

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

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

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

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

"A car skidded towards me when I was getting the groceries out and I slipped," Mother explained. "I'm all right, mostly because this man came to my rescue." She smiled sheepishly at her two daughters and handed the bags to Blanche. Then she turned to the looming shape, which hung back in the dark, out of reach of the house light. "Come on in for a minute, sir."

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

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

"Here's your groceries," his rough, deep voice sounded embarrassed.

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

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

Mother asked, looking at him critically. "You look as though you've been outside for a while. Why don't you come in and warm up?"

Blanche, who had been carrying the groceries to the kitchen in order to be closer to the phone, heard this and groaned inwardly. Her mother had no qualms about ministering to poor and homeless people, but it always made Blanche nervous.

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

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

"No problem," the stranger muttered again. "I didn't want to see you get hurt."

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

"Bear," the young man said, after a faint hesitation.

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

"I very much appreciate what you did, Bear. Do you mind if I ask —do you have someplace to go now to get out of the weather?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about me."

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

"It's a little ways, but I'll make it."

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

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

"Bear, you're only wearing canvas sneakers!" Mother exclaimed suddenly.

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

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

Bear turned red but sounded nonchalant. "Well, sort of."

"How long have your feet been numb?" asked Mother.

"Well, maybe a couple of hours."

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

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

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

"Sit down," Rose said, unconsciously imitating her mother's anxious tone, and Bear meekly obeyed, sitting down on the very edge of the sofa. After a moment, he pushed off his hood, revealing a head of long, dark, matted hair in twisted dreadlocks, and a familiar face.

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

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

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

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

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

"Since sometime this morning."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't you recognize him?"

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

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

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the other part?"

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

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

There was a noise from Blanche that sounded like a groan and a snort. Rose knew that Blanche was afraid they were setting themselves up for a con artist to spin them a tale of woe and self-pity.

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

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

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

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

"Drug possession."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bear rubbed his chin. "Well, one day these guys were beating up my brother. When I found them, they had his head in a sink full of water. It looked like they were trying to drown him, just for kicks, though they denied it later. I never used to fight anybody, but I just saw red and threw the three of them against the wall." He winced, whether from the memory or from the pain in his feet, Rose couldn't tell. "I knocked the one guy out and the other two were scared pretty bad. I got sent to the disciplinary unit for two weeks, but nobody ever picked on my brother again. That's when they started calling me the Bear."

"Wow," Rose breathed. "So your brother was in detention too? What's his name?"

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

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

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

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

"What does that mean—'possession with intent to deliver'?" Rose wanted to know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry," Bear said quietly. "What did he die of?"

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

"That's what my mother died of," Bear said.

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

"I'm sorry," said Mother. "It's hard, isn't it?"

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

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

"Um—it really hurts."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She felt odd, seeing his chance vulnerability. Here, on their living room couch, surrounded by their quaint little tables and books and lamps, his hugeness seemed to

make him more clumsy and out of place than threatening. It was hard to remember now how he usually looked, hanging out with the drug pushers in the high school parking lot.

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

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

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

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

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

"This is our first year of regular school. Our parents taught us at home ever since we were babies. Mom always said it was a more natural way to learn. She must be right, because Blanche and I are way ahead of the other kids at school in everything except science and health studies. Blanche almost didn't have to go to high school at all—but the state required that she have one more year of English—even though she didn't really need it, so Mom thought it would be best for us to go to school for at least one year. I don't mind the work, but I don't like the kids, generally. Some of them are okay, but the popular girls like to pick on my sister, and almost all the guys are gross. I don't know why guys are like that. Do you?"

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

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

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

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

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

Does Rose have to discuss my problems with him? Provoked, Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "Something to do, I guess," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Too private to explain?" Rose asked.

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

"So -- how are your feet?"

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

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

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

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

"Thanks," Bear said gratefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Second best to Jane Austen," Blanche murmured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That sounds like Tennyson," Rose said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?" Rose and Blanche both asked.

"That car that swerved in the snow—I could have sworn that it was going after him." But after a pause, she shook her head. "I could be wrong. Still, my instinct was to try to get him off the street for a while, just in case he was in any real danger." She looked at her two daughters and smiled. "It might just have been my overactive imagination. And in any case, we were sheltering the stranger and tending the sick, weren't we?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who knows if we'll even see him again? Rose had asked. Blanche laughed to herself, a little bitterly, feeling caught in the jaws of fate. *Oh yes, we'll see him again. There's no getting out of it now. We've let him in.*

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

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

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

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

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

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