

Chapter 1

New York City

Greta prances down the subway stairs, rushing to catch up. The momentum and rhythm of her steps speeds her down the stairwell to the clatter of her own footsteps—so loud, so noticeable, as she descends. Where is everyone? Where’s Gabriel? She continues down the stairs to the echoey clacking of her shoes against the stairs—a lilting rhythmic patter against cement steps, but now with little halts, bits of doubt; questions reverberating under the high ceiling of the station. She takes the last few steps, and stops. Because it’s dark. Because it’s late—too late for young girls to be traipsing down dark empty subway tunnels.

She took a wrong turn. She shouldn’t have taken these stairs—this is not the right place at all. No train is coming here. She is completely alone. But wait—there are shapes in the dark—the dark shapes of men. She catches her breath. Five, maybe six—a half-dozen troll men, all around her in the dark. Their shadows move with them, toward her. They move like slime—steady, quiet, surrounding her—big-shouldered shadow men from the subway tunnel, shaggy hair like weeds gone to seed, beards of hay. The smell of earth, of goats; foul breath. Close, too close, these ghouls of the night with eyes like owls.

Run. That’s all she can think—just run fast. Jump. Up the stairs. Don’t fall, don’t stumble, just keep going. Don’t freeze. Her heart pounds, her legs are rubbery, yet she leaps, almost dives upward through the air, taking three stairs at a time. Her lungs are on fire and she gasps for breath as she reaches the top of the stairs, nearly

breathless, near tears; flying. Into Gabriel's arms.

"Greta."

"Gabriel, oh Gabriel." she whispers. She can't stop shaking. He holds her, wipes the sweat from her forehead, strokes her hair, until her heart returns to normal. They walk toward the light to join the other dancers, waiting in their little group, jabbering, sipping Evian.

Greta falls asleep as soon as the plane leaves La Guardia. Gabriel is asleep in the window seat beside her when she wakes. The flight attendant smiles kindly and Greta accepts a fuzzy wool blanket. She wants to wake Gabriel. She needs to talk and wants him to understand, but she lets him sleep, tucks the blanket around herself, and slips off her shoes. How did she do that? So foolish. To come out of the ladies room at Penn Station, get turned around like that, worried they would all be waiting for her and so rush off in the wrong direction. It was the excitement and the confusion of the station, and the exhilaration of being in New York City and seeing Gabriel dance. It was the first time she had seen him dance professionally. It seemed amazing, yet natural considering his talent; that he would be dancing in New York while still a student. Of course she had seen him dance all year at school performances, and she knew he had danced in New York before, even Paris. She knew all this, but still this trip to New York made her giddy, out of control. Her spine tingled, remembering the concert hall and Gabriel leaping across the stage. But the bad part she wants to forget—how she had run down those steps to the mole people; potato people—the sooty yellow lights of the subway glazing their skin a ghoulish green. Greta pictures the subway men hunched together for a group photo for a horror movie; grinning their ghoulish grins, their potato

The Ice Dancer

flesh made up like green-skinned trolls. Yes, think of them as actors, not real men who actually live in the subway, and were about to.... Greta pulls the blanket tight across her shoulders, hugging herself. *Just men gone mad, gone hungry, that's all.*

She closes her eyes, grateful, so grateful for her escape. She got away. But now she'll have to pay, won't she? Pay for getting away, for being so foolish, for being the youngest dancer in the troupe—chosen by Gabriel as his dance partner, his friend—the other dancers so jealous, always waiting for her to make a mistake. But they were nice. They were concerned—glad to see her. So tired. Exhausted. Her mind jumps with a confusion of trolls and dancers and the recirculated air of the plane laced with de-icer, plastic, and old coffee, mingling and settling into one substantial headache. Greta moans softly to herself. Gabriel reaches over and takes her hand.

Chapter 2

Greta in Canada

Five years have passed and Gabriel is dead. Someone told her so. But is it true? Does she dare find out? These crazy dreams are driving her crazy. Another one last night...

It's cold. Greta watches the smoky figure of Gabriel's ghost on the shore through her own icy breath. He turns and walks into the water, into the silky moonlight on the surface of the lake. She listens to the quiet lapping of waves against his thighs. He walks further and further out along the shallow sandbar toward the center of the lake, until he becomes a sleek black horse with a blue-black mane and sky blue wings. She's not surprised by his turning into a winged horse, and watches the apparition flap its wings and rise above the water, flying slowly and gracefully up into the night sky until she is alone beneath a sky filled with countless stars.

Greta returns to the fire and warms her icy hands before she walks from fire to fire to greet her friends, out so late at night, waiting too, in their dreams.

She doesn't mind the dreams, after all, they're just dreams. It's really the daytime she's concerned about. For a week now, she's had the sensation of being followed. This morning, for instance, it seemed someone was in the back seat of her car while she drove into town to pick up a package at the post office. And later, when she stood in the checkout line at the library and paused to glance at her watch, she sensed a presence beside her, trying to see the time on her watch. Was it Gabriel? Gabriel's ghost, spirit;

ethereal presence? Was she going crazy? It felt like it was Gabriel. Why was she listening so carefully, as if he were about to whisper in her ear? And what about last night, when she was reading in bed—hadn't something urged her to wait to turn a page until he had finished reading? Or had she just been tired, and dozing between the lines?

This afternoon she is sorting stacks of old papers and magazines in an attempt to throw out some of the clutter. She really has no reason to keep the outdated ballet magazines. She subscribed the year after she moved to Red Otter, not quite having let go of her past life.

The last time she actually saw Gabriel was in the hospital after she shattered her knee, a month after New York. She winces, recalling those days in the hospital, and the pain of her wrecked life. How sweet Gabriel had been, coming every day, bringing her a rose or a handful of wild flowers picked from behind the school—daisies and Queen Anne's Lace, or a half dozen brown-eyed susans. He would sit on the chair beside her bed and listen to whatever she wanted to talk about, and then he would tell stories; fascinating stories. He said they were just stories he made up, but they seemed so real and she loved to listen, though she sometimes drifted in and out of sleep. Then one day he touched her toes, gently, each toe of the foot in the casted leg, and then he paused, as if ready to say something important, but instead just looked at her and said nothing. After he left that day she kept seeing his face with that expression. And all that night she thought of his eyes and his silence and by morning she had decided to go away. It was true they could still be friends, but she could no longer dance. Not dancing was too much; too sad. It was pity she had seen in his eyes that she couldn't face again. Not from Gabriel.

As soon as she was released from the hospital Greta left by train, choosing a town at random from the station list, a name she'd never even heard of; Red Otter. She

bought a ticket, got on the train and sat down, not so much ready to go on to a new life as to leave the old one behind. The train raced north into the forest and away from her life as a dancer, leaving Gabriel behind without a partner. Leaving herself without a friend.

She tosses the ballet magazines into a cardboard box, then, feeling guilty, like she is throwing Gabriel away, she retrieves three magazines and hugs them to her chest, and realizes she's blushing. All these years later she's blushing as though she had just left Winnipeg an hour ago, rather than five years past.

She never talks about her past. She always leaves it vague; unable to tell even her best friends about Gabriel, and how she left Winnipeg without a word to anyone. She was never good at forgiving herself. The only way she can deal with her flight is to concede that she was young. Just seventeen. She was young and smart; otherwise they would have found her. Someone would have. She sighs, sorry that she wasn't found, but still she wouldn't want to know how hard they'd tried. She's sure Gabriel tried to find her, tried very hard, even though he was in Copenhagen when she left the hospital, and Paris after that. And of course she changed her name—how *could* anyone find her? As soon as the train pulled out of the station she became Greta Winters.

On the train she sat beside an old woman named Leena, and it was this stranger, Leena, whom she told her new name. It felt good too, saying the name—Greta Winters. Yes, now she was Greta Winters. Greta smiles, remembering the hardtack Leena shared with her—a homemade rye cracker big as a plate and aptly named. Greta crunched and chewed and christened herself into a new person. Greta Winters. Greta LaJeune, the dancer, no longer existed.

Greta had shown Leena her knee, pulling her skirt up to reveal the scar with its feathery incision tracings

fanning out like stars. Leena grimaced and told Greta she had spiders too. After looking up and down the aisle of the train, Leena pulled down a thick gun-metal gray stocking and showed Greta a small scar on her ankle, which she tapped, pointing out how you can see the “spiders” just under the surface of the skin. After they rearranged themselves, they sat back and finished the hardtack in silence. They both looked out the windows for the rest of the train ride, but now comfortably so. Occasionally Leena would smile in a kindly manner, as if to say, “yes, we two have spiders, and isn’t it bad and isn’t it nice too, the two of us like that, here on the train with our spiders.” Even now she sometimes remembers Leena when she looks at the scar on her knee.

Greta reshuffles the magazines, saving the ones with her favorite pictures—Gabriel’s picture is in several of the magazines—she knows the issues well. It was late fall when she left the hospital. In the hospital there were no seasons. On the train the bright colors of fall were dazzling. Greta watched mile after mile of trees as the train rolled along: bright maples and oaks, and stands of white birch, all measuring the miles like second hands on a clock. A child behind her mimicked the sound of the train softly to himself, a jazzy little phrase, *ajugga, jugga, ajuggajugga*. Lulled by the repetitious rhythms of the train and the endless trees, she stared out the window, conscious that she was moving toward the new. Toward a new home? The ballet school had been her home, her family, and Gabriel—she had been his partner; he had chosen her. She had it made, everyone said. She had a future.

She had a headache on the train. The buzzing and humming of the train and her headache had seemed like one, like a train in her head, until the headache started to fade with the miles. The further north she traveled the more it faded, and the better she felt. It was as if North

itself was the healer; a home toward which she traveled like a homing pigeon. Rubbing her head, and repositioning herself against the seat back, she thought of Gabriel and the horrendous headaches he used to get. Migraines. He would know ahead of time by flashes of light that came before the constrictions that signaled the start of a migraine. Doctors couldn't help him; all he could do was suffer. It was hard to watch; hard to be around him during those episodes. They were all so young, and they adored Gabriel, especially the girls. West Birch School of Dance was the best ballet school in the country, and Gabriel was its star. Even the teachers were in awe of Gabriel, though they didn't show it like the students did. They all did what they could for him, which was very little.

If he had one of his headaches during class or rehearsal, he went off to the side of the tent, or to the back of the hall. Once he sat down and howled, actually howled. It was a low animal moan, and then he more or less collapsed, resting his head in his arms on the back of a chair. No one said a word, which Greta thought made it seem worse. They finished the last five minutes of class, going through their routines like robots, and afterward Mary Lou started giggling as she laced her boots, and then she hid her face in her hands and started sobbing loudly like her heart had been broken. She was the newest member of the class, and she acted out how Greta felt. One of the guys said the devil was punishing Gabriel. Who did he think he was anyway? A gazelle? But he was just jealous. Still, if Gabriel was on stage, he never let the headaches stop him. Everyone said he was a trooper.

Greta's legs are numb from sitting in one position for too long. Too much remembering. She feels shivery as she

gets up. Again, that feeling of Gabriel being in the room with her. *Probably I'm going crazy. Why is he following me? Was he only able to find me as a ghost? Maybe I am going crazy.* Greta shrugs and almost laughs. If she has to have a ghost following her around, looking at her watch, resting in the back seat of her car, turning up right here in her house, she would just as soon it be Gabriel. Of course, she'd rather he were alive. Looking out toward the lake she admires the pale orange late afternoon sky.

Pausing at the table she studies a drawing of a swan. She knows she's changing. She can see it in her embroidery designs. Each week she sends off one or two new cross-stitch or embroidery designs to the publisher in Winnipeg. She makes good money selling the designs, which are mass produced and sold in kits all over Canada and in the States, but her new love is stained glass. Just this last week she worked from the swan drawing, creating a round wall hanging of the graceful swan on a glassy lake of blue, with a purple and violet sky, bordered by bare black trees. It doesn't have anything to do with ballet, or with Gabriel, she's pretty sure.

Greta stores the piles of magazines in the hall closet and dumps the few items she's managed to toss out into the trash bin. Tonight is a skating night. By late November the lake has frozen over and her neighbor, Karloff, has cleared a portion of the lake by his dock for a rink and moved his old ice house into a corner for changing from boots into skates. His dock light is bright enough to light most of the rink at night, which is when they skate. It was Gabriel who showed Greta how to lace her ballet slippers, taught her how to tighten them gradually, to grip both edges firmly with one hand, and hold her foot just right—not too stiff yet not too relaxed, as she finished the lacing. She thinks of her slippers every time she laces her skates.

Tonight Karloff is skating slowly around the rink in

his lumbering but elegant manner, hunched slightly forward in a great black coat, his long arms swaying back and forth rhythmically; right, left, right, left. His heavy dark pants are bunched up above his gray wool socks, and it's hard to tell where his black cassock hat ends and his thick grisly beard begins. Their mutual neighbor, Latos, calls Karloff *Bearloff*, or just Bear. Long ago, in Winnipeg, and long before Greta was a ballet student, Karloff was a hockey player. Now, like Greta, Karloff relives his past on the rink. Two nights a week after the rink is readied, each Tuesday and Saturday night, unless the temperature dips below -20° , they skate, silently gliding around the rink in circle after circle. They never talk while they skate. Sometimes the howl of a wolf from the other side of the frozen lake lingers over the silence of their cold spot-lit rink. Otherwise the only sound is the rhythmic glitch, glitch of the metal skate blades on hard ice, punctuated at regular intervals by Greta's quick cutting turns that scar the ice, and if her knee isn't bothering her and she is in an exuberant mood, an occasional clattery spin.

Karloff keeps a coffee can full of hockey pucks in the ice house, and a couple of hockey sticks in the corner which appear to be made entirely of black tape. But he never uses them when Greta skates with him, they just skate in circles. Tonight is Saturday night, and Greta and Karloff have taken off their skates in the ice house and walked the short stretch up the hill to Karloff's cabin. The moon is nearly full, making the snowy path bright and the white birch trees particularly noticeable. As usual, Greta hangs her skates on a nail on Karloff's porch for next time. Her white wool socks dangle out of the skates above a big sack of dog food.

"You ought to give someone that dog food," she tells Karloff as she leaves the porch.

"Yah, I suppose," he says, but knows he won't. He'll

just let it get stale. Bandit has been dead now nearly six months, and the near-full sack of dog food sitting on the porch next to the stacks of newspapers is a comfort to him.

“See you at Latos’s,” Greta shouts out through the cold as she heads down the driveway past Karloff’s old pickup.

Karloff waves and says nothing, but stands to watch her walk to her car to see if it starts okay. The Volvo starts readily, and Greta is glad she had the tune-up in town Friday and put in high octane gas. By the time she took off her skates she could tell without a thermometer that it was already well below zero, probably -15° , at least. Greta drives straight to the lodge. She, Karloff and the other permanent residents who have houses on this side of the lake go over to Latos Lodge each Saturday night. Saturday night is sauna night. Greta has been honoring this Saturday sauna ritual for four years now, starting the second year she moved to the lake.

Walking to the sauna she can smell the smoky birch fire that Latos prepared earlier in the day, as he does each Saturday. Up here, families sauna together and parents and children are comfortable with a healthy, robust nudity, but the unrelated groups at Latos Lodge split up among the sexes, with the women going first and the men afterward. In summer people swim in the warmish water of the lake after the sauna, and in winter, a few of the old-timers enjoy an invigorating roll in the snow.

Greta likes sitting on the warm, steamy wooden shelves with the other women. She finds it a comfortable, primitive situation unlike anything she’s known, and she likes being part of this group of women so unlike herself in many ways, but still like herself in some basic way. She is relaxed here as she is nowhere else, and likes this older and simpler way of life. In the sauna they talk a little, joke a little, but mostly just sit and enjoy the sauna—its unique

woody incense, the pleasant damp cedar boards beneath them, and the heavy moist air. Here they share a human warmth which seems animal-like to Greta, like foxes in a den.

Later, back in the lodge, they are refreshed and hungry again, even though most everyone came early and already had venison stew and cornbread before sitting in the sauna. The women take off their boots and settle into easy chairs around the big stone fireplace. Millie, the twin with nine toes, brings a bottle of Moosehead beer and a glass to each of the five women, and places a big bowl of peanuts on the small wooden table near the fire. She sets aside a second bowl for the men, who are having their turn in the sauna.

Sipping beer, they catch up on the events of the week. Tillie and Millie thawed blueberries and baked fifteen blueberry pies for their church bizarre. Mable canned a dozen quart jars of venison stew, and a half dozen pints of partridge. She uses lemon rind with the venison, plus carrots, onions and potatoes, and bay leaf in both the stews. And Faun is nearly done with her fall weaving for a shop down in Thunder Bay. Greta tells about her swan stained-glass window, while thinking it would be nice to make small stained-glass window hangings for all of her sauna friends this year, though she knows there isn't enough time, she would have had to have started last summer, in August at the latest. Tonight, resting quietly in front of the fire in stockinged feet, before the men return from the sauna, the women are content, relaxed from the steam and the beer, and another simple, productive week. Greta feels at ease for the first time all week, and is thinking of telling them how Gabriel has been visiting her from beyond the grave. Mable often speaks of her weekly visit to the town cemetery to talk things over with her beloved Johnny. But then she hears the sauna door slam and decides maybe next week, if Gabriel isn't gone by

then, and besides, she could use more time.

The men are talking quietly as they enter the lodge, their faces red and shiny from the sauna. They open their beers at the bar, except Otto, who no longer drinks and settles for a root beer. At nine o'clock, the bird in the cuckoo clock begins to count out the hours, and they are all settled in their chairs by the time the crooked little man with the cane and the bent women with a cat in a basket come out from the wooden clock door and move jerkily around to a second door, which closes neatly behind them.

In the summer Latos plays the piano on sauna nights, but hardly ever in winter, except at Christmas. He says his hands get too cold and stiff in winter weather, so they sit and drink and talk a little, not much, unless someone has a story. Mainly they sit and look at the fire, which crackles and flickers its light over the gold logs of the lodge room and over the bear and timber wolf skins tacked to the walls. At nine thirty, though later in summer, Latos plugs in the jukebox and plays a song to end the evening—usually the *Tennessee Waltz*, but sometimes, *What'll I Do*, or a Swedish waltz that's been on the jukebox ever since Greta started coming to the sauna evenings. It was Faun who first invited her. The rest of the songs on the jukebox are current popular songs left over from the previous summer when the lodge is open for dinner until eight o'clock and the bar stays open until eleven on weekends.

On the way to the car they pass Latos's husky team in their kennel. A few of the dogs are awake and pace back and forth. Shadow, who is half wolf and half Siberian Husky, and the only pup to survive from last spring's litter, stops to watch as they pass by. He has one blue eye and one yellow-brown eye, a white masked face and a heavy black body with a wolf's lanky legs. Last week Shadow followed Faun and Greta down to their cars and nudged Greta hard. She had nearly fallen in her rush to get away from the dog and into her car, though she's

known Shadow since he was a few weeks old. He was one of the pups Latos let wander around, and he still roams around on his own most of the time, as he did last week.

Greta finds herself wondering if Latos keeps Shadow in the pen with the others during a full moon, and is surprised at the spooky feeling she has tonight. She's never paid much attention to Shadow before—before this past week anyway. In winter the dogs take on a wildness you don't notice so much in summer, which makes her wonder just how wild they really are, just what they might do, and particularly Shadow. When Faun says his eyes are half wolf and half human, Greta is silent, but she thinks about Shadow as she drives home that night.