

WHO AM I?

A Supernatural Mystery

Oleksandr Panasiuk

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English-language edition of the Ukrainian novella «ХТО Я?»

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons or events, except where explicitly presented as historical background, is coincidental.

*Sometimes all a soul needs is a name
to finally find its way into the light.*

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PROLOGUE

The Deep Ravine

In early June 1945, the war was over, but the village still dared not speak of peace.

Not all the men had returned from the front. In many homes, all that remained of them were death notices folded into quarters. Shell craters scarred the vegetable gardens, half-filled trenches lay behind the old school, and now and then exhausted soldiers passed along the road, not yet knowing where they were supposed to go.

That morning Marfa Kovalchuk ran out of her house barefoot, wearing nothing but a linen shift.

“The Germans!” she screamed. “Dear God, the Germans have come back!”

Seven armed Nazi soldiers had appeared at dawn. They were filthy and unshaven, their uniforms in tatters. They took bread, lard, two jugs of milk, and an old sheepskin coat from Marfa’s house. When she tried to snatch a little bundle of flour from one of them, he struck her with the butt of his rifle.

After that, the strangers headed toward the old forest.

Several hours later, soldiers arrived from the district center. Three local men who knew the forest paths joined them. The oldest was Matviy, a taciturn, gray-haired hunter whose face was covered in scars.

When the commander pointed toward the forest, Matviy shook his head.

“If they went toward the marsh, we’ll find them,” he said. “If they made for the rocky hill, we’ll find them there too.”

“And if they went into the ravine?” one of the villagers asked.

The hunter gave him a look that silenced him at once.

The Deep Ravine lay several miles beyond the village. Ancient oaks grew so close together there that the ground remained in shadow even at noon. Thick moss covered their trunks, and their twisted roots rose out of the earth like enormous fingers.

A narrow stream ran along the very bottom of the ravine. Its water was clear and icy cold even in the hottest summer weather. People said it sprang not from beneath the earth, but from another world.

Long ago, villagers had gone to the spring to draw water. Then livestock began disappearing in the ravine. A shepherd searching for a lost heifer vanished. Two hunters never returned. And one autumn night, the people living on the outskirts of the village heard a child crying in the forest.

From then on, even the bravest tried to give the place a wide berth.

Nobody spoke of the ravine by day; after sunset, people were afraid even to say its name.

The search went on for two days.

They found broken branches, heavy boot prints, and scraps of German uniform. Marfa Kovalchuk's empty milk jug lay beside an old pine. A little farther on, they found a half-eaten loaf of bread.

It looked as though the fugitives had suddenly abandoned their food and fled.

But no one knew what they had been running from.

On the third day, a dog brought by the soldiers led the search party to the edge of the Deep Ravine. There it stopped, whined, and pressed its belly to the ground.

The handlers tugged at its leash and ordered it forward, but the dog fought to get away, buried its muzzle in the grass, and trembled uncontrollably.

"There's something down there," the commander said.

Matviy knelt and touched the earth. Tracks left by seven men led down the slope.

Not a single track led back up.

"We'll wait until morning," the commander decided.

They set up camp nearby, lit a fire, and posted sentries. The night was warm and still, but around midnight such a bitter cold rose from the ravine that white frost formed on the grass.

A young soldier was the first to hear a child laughing.

He lifted his head and listened.

"There's a child out there."

"What child?" his companion grumbled.

The laughter came again out of the darkness. Soft, clear, and very close.

Then a twig snapped.

A small white figure flashed between the trees.

The sentry grabbed his rifle.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

With a single movement, Matviy knocked the weapon from his hands.
“Don’t call out!” he whispered. “And whatever you hear, don’t answer.”

At that very moment, a gunshot rang out from deep in the forest.

Crows erupted from the treetops. The black flock circled the ravine several times before vanishing into the darkness.

No one slept for the rest of that night.

At dawn, a thick, milky fog hung over the ravine. The search party descended slowly, staying close together. Wet leaves slipped beneath their boots. The ancient oaks stood like giants, their heavy branches interlaced overhead, shutting out the morning sun.

The farther down they went, the colder it became.

At the bottom of the ravine, they found the Germans.

All seven were dead.

One lay beside the stream with his hand submerged in the icy water. Another sat beneath an oak, his knees drawn up to his chest. A third had clapped his hands over his ears. One had managed to draw his pistol, but instead of firing at an attacker, he had shot high into a tree.

The others lay nearby.

There were no bullet wounds or knife wounds on their bodies. No one had strangled or beaten them. Their weapons, food, and ammunition were still with them.

Yet the faces of the dead silenced even the men who had survived the entire war.

Their mouths hung open in soundless screams. Their eyes stared ahead as though, just before dying, they had seen something that should never have existed in this world.

The youngest German lay at the roots of a gigantic oak. His fingers had been scraped bloody: before he died, he had desperately clawed at the earth.

Something small and pale showed in the shallow hole.

The commander bent down.

“Don’t touch it,” Matviy said.

But the commander had already picked it up.

It was a wooden horse with one leg broken off. Old and blackened by the soil, it might have lain beneath the oak for years.

And then a cry came from under the roots.

A tiny cry, almost like a newborn baby’s.

The men stepped back. Someone crossed himself. The young soldier dropped his rifle.

The crying stopped abruptly.

On the far side of the stream, a little barefoot boy stood in the fog. He wore a long white shirt. Wet hair clung to his forehead, and his lips, blue with cold, barely moved.

Matviy stared at him without blinking.

The others could make out only a vague white shape.

“Mama...” the child whispered.

The boy reached out his arms.

The commander took a step toward him, but the hunter seized his shoulder.

“Don’t go.”

The child slowly raised his head.

Large, sorrowful dark eyes stared out of his pale face.

“Who am I?” the boy asked.

No one answered.

The fog shifted, veiled the child, and he vanished.

The men carried seven bodies out of the ravine. The wooden horse, the child’s crying, and the little boy were never mentioned in the report.

Matviy returned home looking years older, his hair gone gray. For the rest of his life he never entered the old forest again, and he never told anyone what he had seen beneath the oak.

Once more, the villagers kept their distance from the Deep Ravine.

Years passed. New houses rose, children were born, and the last witnesses of the war died. The old story became a frightening village legend.

But the boy beneath the ancient oak had not gone anywhere.

He was cold. He cried. And he waited.

He waited for someone who would be able to see him.

For someone who would finally answer his one question:

“Who am I?”

CHAPTER 1

The Old Prohibition

Fifty-three years had passed.

The village of Vilshany lay between two hills, nestled beside a little river. Fields stretched away on one side, while an ancient forest rose on the other. In the mornings, the scents of fresh bread, smoke, and cut hay drifted over the village. By afternoon the streets grew empty; only chickens scratched in the dust, and now and then a tractor rumbled past.

The forest began just beyond the last vegetable gardens.

From a distance it looked green and welcoming. Young birches grew along its edge, clusters of rowan berries glowed red, and paths familiar to every village child hid among the hazel bushes.

Farther in, however, the trees grew older and darker.

That was where the Deep Ravine began.

Fifteen-year-old Daryna lived almost at the edge of the village. From her family's yard, she could reach the first trees in ten minutes. Sometimes at night, when the wind blew from the forest, she heard the old oaks creaking.

She liked that sound.

It was as if the trees were speaking to one another in a language people could not understand.

Daryna's father, Vasyly, worked as a mechanic with the tractor brigade. He could repair an engine, assemble one working mower from two broken ones, and tell from the sound which bearing needed replacing. Even at home, his hands smelled of grease and metal.

Her mother, Natalia, worked as a nurse at the village clinic. She knew about every illness, every family quarrel, and nearly every secret in Vilshany, yet she never repeated at home what she heard at work.

Daryna also had a younger brother, Maksym—a restless nine-year-old who was forever coming home with a scraped knee, a scratched nose, or somebody else's puppy tucked under his shirt.

Daryna herself was unlike either her father or her brother.

She loved silence, books, and long walks. While the other girls gathered at the bus stop in the evenings to talk about boys and listen to music on an old cassette player, Daryna could spend hours beside the river or wandering along the forest's edge.

That was why her classmates thought she was strange.

"Here comes the bookworm!" Serhiy Kravets sometimes called after her.
"Careful, or the trees will start talking!"

Daryna never answered.

In truth, she wasn't at all afraid the trees might speak.

She almost wished they would.

That August afternoon she was returning from the shop, carrying bread, salt, and a box of matches in a canvas bag. The sun was merciless. Hot air shimmered above the road, and dust clung to her bare feet.

A group of people had gathered at the old well.

Uncle Hrytsko was saying something, waving his arms. Two neighbors stood beside him, along with Granny Uliana, the oldest woman in the village. People said she was past ninety, though no one knew her exact age.

"She was still tied up last night," Uncle Hrytsko was saying. "I checked myself. This morning both the goat and the rope were gone."

"Maybe she broke loose and wandered into the forest," one woman suggested.

"The rope was new. You couldn't tear that with your bare hands."

"Wolves?"

"Wolves in August? And there aren't any tracks."

Granny Uliana remained silent. She was not looking at Hrytsko, but toward the dark band of forest.

"Where did you look?" she asked at last.

"Everywhere. I went as far as the dead oak."

The old woman turned sharply toward him.

"Which oak?"

"The one above the ravine."

Both women fell silent at once.

Granny Uliana crossed herself.

"What possessed you to go there?"

"I was looking for my goat."

"If the ravine has taken her, you'll never find her."

"What do you mean, taken her?" Hrytsko smiled. "Ravines don't eat goats."

"Don't laugh. It's waking up."

Daryna stepped closer.

"What's waking up?"

Granny Uliana flinched as though she had not noticed her before.

"What are you doing, eavesdropping?"

"I'm not eavesdropping. You're talking in the middle of the road."

The old woman approached and unexpectedly seized Daryna by the wrist. Her fingers were dry and cold.

"Stay away from the ravine."

"Why?"

"Just stay away."

"Does somebody really live there?"

Granny Uliana's expression changed. For a moment, fear showed in her eyes.

"Live there?" she repeated. "If only it were alive..."

She let go of Daryna's wrist, snatched up her bag, and hurried away.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Uncle Hrytsko said. "Uliana frightens all the children with that ravine. She used to frighten my mother too."

But he was no longer smiling himself.

Daryna started home, only to be caught up near the bend by Serhiy Kravets and Bohdan Melnyk. They were riding bicycles, their wheels throwing up clouds of dust.

"Heard about Hrytsko's missing goat?" Bohdan asked.

"I heard."

"They say the little boy took her," Serhiy said.

"What little boy?"

The boys exchanged glances.

"Don't you know? The one who lives in the ravine."

"And steals goats?"

"Not just goats. People too."

Serhiy jumped off his bicycle and lowered his voice.

"My grandfather said they found seven Germans there after the war. All dead, without a single wound. And their faces..."

He suddenly bulged his eyes and twisted his mouth into a grimace.

Bohdan laughed.

"Nonsense," Daryna said.

"If it's nonsense, go and see for yourself."

"Why should I?"

"Because you're scared."

"I'm not scared of anything."

"That's what everyone says. But nobody ever makes it to the old oak."
Daryna felt the heat rise in her face. She knew the boys were teasing her on purpose, but she didn't want to back down.

"I'll go there if I have to."

"When?"

"When I feel like it."

"Which means never," Serhiy laughed.

They rode away. Daryna stood watching them for a long time.

At home, her father was repairing an old motorcycle. The dismantled engine lay on the workbench, while Maksym hovered beside him, handing him the wrong wrenches.

"Dad, the twelve-millimeter?"

"I asked for a ten."

"This one?"

"That's a fourteen."

"What about this?"

"Maksym, go give the chickens some water instead."

When he saw Daryna, her father wiped his hands on a rag.

"Did you bring the matches?"

She handed him the box.

"Dad, have you ever been to the Deep Ravine?"

Her father's hand went still.

Only for a moment, but Daryna noticed.

"Who told you about it?"

"Everybody knows about it."

"Have you been there?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Why?"

Her father looked carefully into her eyes.

"No reason. Just don't go there."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

Vasyl bent over the engine again, making it clear that the conversation was finished.

At dinner, Daryna decided to ask once more.

Her mother set potatoes, a bowl of cucumbers, and a jug of milk on the table. Her father ate in silence. Maksym was telling them about a grass snake he had seen by the pond, as long as a man's arm.

"Mum, can I go blackberry picking tomorrow?" Daryna asked.

"Of course. Ask Svitlana to go with you."

"There are more berries near the Deep Ravine."

The spoon slipped from her mother's hand and clinked against the edge of her plate.

Her father slowly raised his head.

"What did I tell you today?"

"I was only asking."

"And I answered. Don't go near that ravine."

"But why?"

"Because it's dangerous."

"How is it dangerous?"

"You could fall down the slope," her mother cut in. "There are holes, roots, marshy ground."

"I'm not a little girl."

"Which is why you ought to understand the first time you're told," her father snapped.

"Everybody knows something, but nobody will tell me. Granny Uliana says the ravine is waking up. Serhiy talks about dead Germans. And you make up stories about holes in the ground."

Maksym stopped chewing.

"What Germans?"

"Eat your dinner," his mother ordered.

"Did they really find dead people there?" Daryna persisted.

Her father put down his spoon.

"Listen carefully. You are not to go near the Deep Ravine. Not alone and not with your friends. If I hear you've so much as gone to the dead oak, you won't leave this yard for the rest of the summer."

Daryna had never seen him like this.

He wasn't shouting. He spoke calmly, yet something stronger than anger could be heard in his voice.

Fear.

"All right," she said quietly.

"Promise me."

"I promise."

Her mother breathed a sigh of relief.

After dinner Daryna went to her room. Crickets chirped beyond the open window. A round yellow moon was rising over the gardens, and beyond them the forest lay dark.

She took out a book, but couldn't read. All she could see was her father's face.

She had never seen him afraid of anything: not a furious bull, not a fire in the neighbor's barn, not even a tractor that had nearly rolled over with him inside it.

Yet one word—ravine—had been enough to make his hands tremble.

At about eleven, Daryna went to the kitchen for a drink of water. Her parents were talking quietly in their bedroom.

"We should have told her long ago," she heard her mother say.

"No."

"Vasyl, she'll find out anyway."

"From whom?"

"From Uliana. From the other children. Secrets don't last long in a village."

A silence followed.

"She promised not to go there," her father said.

"So did you once."

Daryna pressed her shoulder against the wall.

"That was a long time ago," he replied dully.

"Some things never become the distant past."

The bed creaked. Daryna quickly returned to her room, lay down, and pulled the blanket all the way up to her chin.

So her father had been there.

And he had seen something.

She closed her eyes, but sleep would not come.

Outside, the crickets abruptly fell silent. The dogs stopped barking. Even the leaves on the apple tree ceased rustling.

A cold wind blew from the forest.

It brushed the curtain, moved through the room, and settled on her face like an icy breath.

And then Daryna heard laughter.

A child's laughter, soft and distant.
She sat up and looked out the window.
At the far edge of the vegetable garden stood a little boy in a white shirt.
His bare feet were hidden in mist.
Daryna blinked—and the figure vanished.
Only the old forest stood dark beyond the last houses.
Somewhere deep inside it, a child was crying softly.

CHAPTER 2

Escape into the Forest

In the morning, Daryna woke up absolutely convinced that there had been no little boy.

It had been a bad dream, nothing more. Before going to bed, she'd listened to too many stories about the Deep Ravine, then happened to glimpse something white between the trees, and her imagination had supplied the rest.

That was how she explained away the nighttime visitor.

Yet the moment she stepped outside, she headed straight for the edge of the vegetable garden.

The ground there was dry. She found no barefoot tracks. Only beneath the old pear tree was the grass flattened, as though someone had been standing in the same place for a long time.

Daryna touched the grass with her palm.

It was cold and wet with dew, even though the sun had already risen above the houses.

"What are you looking for?" her mother called from the porch.

Daryna straightened quickly.

"Nothing."

"Don't be late for school. Your form teacher asked everyone to come at nine."

There were three days left before the new school year. The pupils were supposed to wash windows, dust the desks, and help carry textbooks from the school library.

Daryna did not want to go.

After yesterday's conversation with her parents, she wanted to stay home and press her father for the truth. But Vasyl had left for the tractor brigade at dawn, and her mother was hurrying to the clinic.

"Have some breakfast," Natalia said. "There's milk and some pastries on the table."

"I'm not hungry."

"Daryna, has something happened?"

"Nothing."

Her mother came over and touched her forehead.

"No fever. Didn't you sleep well?"

"I just didn't get enough sleep."

Daryna took her canvas bag and set off for school.

On the way, she tried not to look at the forest. But the harder she tried not to think about it, the more often her eyes drifted toward the dark trees.

In daylight, the forest no longer seemed frightening.

Birds wheeled over the oak tops, the sun turned the leaves to gold, and a herdsman drove cattle along the road to the pasture. Everything looked ordinary.

Only over the Deep Ravine, despite the clear weather, a thin band of mist still lingered.

Several bicycles were already parked by the school. Voices and laughter floated from the open windows. The classroom smelled of damp rags, chalk, and paint.

"At last," said their teacher, Olha Ivanivna. "Daryna and Svitlana, wash the windows. Boys, move the books. And be careful not to break the glass."

Svitlana was standing on a windowsill, rubbing the pane with an old newspaper.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I've already washed half of them myself."

"It's only just nine."

"Serhiy said you wouldn't be coming today."

"Why would he say that?"

"Because you went to the ravine last night."

Daryna almost dropped her bucket.

"Who told him that?"

"He's only joking. Don't pay any attention."

Just then Serhiy and Bohdan entered the classroom carrying an armful of old textbooks.

"And here's our very own ghost hunter!" Serhiy announced grandly.

Several pupils laughed.

Daryna turned back to the window.

"Leave me alone."

"Well? Did you go to the oak?"

"No."

"Yesterday you said you weren't afraid of anything."

"I said I'd go when I wanted to."

"Just admit you were scared."

"She wasn't scared," Svitlana interrupted. "Her father forbade her."

Serhiy laughed even louder.

"Fifteen years old and Daddy still holds her hand!"

Daryna spun toward her friend.

"Why did you tell him?"

"What's the big deal?" Svitlana shrugged. "Everybody knows we're not supposed to go to the ravine."

"Not everybody," Serhiy said. "Just little children and cowards."

He set the books on a desk and noticed Daryna's bag. A blue-covered notebook was sticking out of it.

"What's this?"

"Don't touch that!"

Daryna wasn't quick enough to stop him. Serhiy snatched the notebook and sprang away.

"Give it back."

"I only want to look."

He opened the first page, then the second.

In this notebook, Daryna wrote down her thoughts, fragments of dreams, and drawings. She had never shown it to anyone—not even Svitlana.

"Well, well," Serhiy drawled. "Writing poetry, are you?"

"Give it back!"

He flipped through the pages rapidly, keeping it out of her reach. Suddenly the smile disappeared from his face.

"Who's this?"

Daryna saw the open page and froze.

On the paper was a drawing of a little boy in a long white shirt. He stood among the trees, but where his face should have been there was only a dark blank patch.

Daryna did not remember drawing him.

Beneath the picture, in her own handwriting, were the words:

WHO AM I?

"Give that to me!" she shouted.

Serhiy held the notebook above his head.

"Look, everybody! She's in love with a forest ghost!"

The classroom erupted in laughter.

"Bride of the dead!" Bohdan chimed in.

"Shut up!"

Daryna tried to grab her notebook, but Serhiy retreated toward the door.

"Maybe he comes to visit you at night," he went on. "Sits by your bed and says, 'Daryna, do you love me?'"

"Give me my notebook."

"And if I don't?"

"Serhiy, that's enough," Svitlana said uncertainly.

"First let her tell us her ghost's name."

He looked at the drawing again.

"What, you don't even know his name? Maybe it's the little boy from the ravine. They say he's looking for a new mummy."

Daryna slapped him.

Her palm cracked loudly against his cheek.

The classroom went silent.

Serhiy slowly lowered the notebook. A red mark appeared on his face.

"Are you crazy?"

He shoved Daryna in the shoulder. She stumbled over the bucket, fell to her knees, and spilled dirty water across the floor.

At that very moment, Olha Ivanivna came into the classroom.

"What's going on here?"

No one answered.

The teacher's eyes moved from the spilled water to Daryna, then to Serhiy's reddened cheek.

"She hit me," the boy said.

"He took my notebook!"

"I only picked it up off the floor."

Daryna looked at Svitlana.

"You saw what happened!"

Her friend lowered her eyes.

"I don't know... You were both shouting."

"Daryna, apologize at once," the teacher ordered.

"But he—"

"I don't want to hear it. First mop up the water, then apologize."

Serhiy held out her notebook. The corner of one page had been torn.

Daryna snatched it, thrust it into her bag, and stood up.

"I'm not going to apologize."

"Then I'll speak to your parents."

"Go ahead."

"Daryna!"

She ran out of the classroom.

Someone called after her, but she didn't stop. She raced down the stairs, crossed the schoolyard, and turned onto the path toward the river.

Tears blurred her vision.

She felt humiliated, hurt, and bitter—angry with Serhiy, with Svitlana for not defending her, with the teacher for refusing even to listen. Most of all, Daryna was furious with herself.

Why had she hit him?

Now Serhiy would tell everybody she drew pictures of a dead little boy. By the first of September, the whole school would know.

Daryna reached the river but didn't stop there either. Two women were doing laundry beside a wooden footbridge. They immediately fell quiet and stared at her.

She didn't want to go home. Her mother would start asking questions, and by evening Olha Ivanivna would certainly turn up or send a note.

Daryna turned toward the forest.

She had no intention of going to the Deep Ravine. She only wanted to sit in a familiar clearing where an old viburnum bush grew. As a child, she had often gone mushroom picking there with her father. The ravine was far from that clearing.

So she wasn't breaking her promise.

Beneath the trees it was pleasantly cool. Sunbeams pierced the leaves and little birds hopped along the path. Daryna wiped away her tears and walked on.

Before long, the voices from the village faded.

She knew the way well. First she had to pass the forked birch, turn by a large rock, then go down to the stream. Beyond the stream lay the Round Clearing.

She found the forked birch easily.

But there was no rock beyond it.

The path divided in two. The left fork disappeared into dense hazel, while the right descended between ancient oaks.

There had never been a fork in this path before.

Daryna looked around.

She must have missed the correct turn. Lost in thought, she'd taken the wrong way.

She retraced her steps.

A few minutes later, the same forked birch appeared ahead of her.

Daryna stopped.

A long pale scratch marked its trunk. There could be no mistake.

She turned back again, this time studying every tree carefully. She walked at least a hundred paces.

And for the third time, she found herself beside the very same birch.

The birds had stopped singing.

Even the rustle of leaves was gone.

Daryna took the red ribbon she used to tie back her hair from her bag and fastened it to a low branch.

"I'm just lost," she said aloud. "There's nothing to worry about."

Her own voice sounded unnaturally muffled.

She chose the path on the right.

The trees grew ever thicker. Moss covered their trunks, and roots rose from the earth to catch at her feet.

After a few minutes, Daryna saw a flash of red ahead.

Her ribbon was hanging from the branch of an old oak.

But it wasn't the birch.

She touched the ribbon. The knot was tied exactly the way she'd tied it.

Mist began to rise from the earth.

At first, thin white strands wound through the grass. Then they enveloped the trees and blotted out the sun. The air turned cold, as though late autumn had come.

Daryna pressed her bag against her chest.

"Is anybody here?"

A twig snapped somewhere ahead.

"Serhiy, if that's you, this isn't funny!"

There was no answer.

Daryna took a few steps and noticed tracks in the damp ground.

A child's bare footprints.

They began in the middle of the path and led into the mist.

She remembered the figure beside the garden. The little boy in the white shirt. The strange drawing she couldn't remember making.

She had to turn back immediately.

Daryna spun around, but the path behind her was gone. Fallen trees lay between the oaks, entangled with blackberry brambles. There was no way through.

"Daryna!" Her mother's voice called from the mist.

The girl froze.

"Mum?"

"Daryna, come here!"

The voice came from the left, very close.

Relieved, Daryna took a step toward it. Then she suddenly remembered: her mother was at the clinic. She couldn't possibly be standing in the middle of the forest.

"Darling, I'm here!"

The voice changed.

It grew low and hoarse.

"Come to me..."

A tall, dark figure formed in the mist.

Daryna backed away.

Behind her, a child laughed softly.

She whirled around but saw no one.

"Don't go that way," said a little boy's voice, right beside her.

"Who are you?"

For several seconds, everything was silent.

Then the answer came out of the mist:

"I don't know."

CHAPTER 3

The First Encounter

“I don’t know,” the boy’s voice repeated.

Daryna peered into the fog, but all she could see were the dark trunks of the oaks.

“What don’t you know?”

“Who I am.”

Her mother’s voice came again from the left.

“Daryna, sweetheart, come to me!”

The dark figure was drawing closer. It was too tall to be human, and it moved strangely—not walking but seeming to float above the ground. The mist ahead of it darkened, gathering into heavy clouds.

“Don’t answer her,” the boy whispered.

“Who is that?”

“I don’t know. She always comes when someone loses their way.”

“Daryna!” Her mother’s voice grew louder. “Help me!”

The girl took an involuntary step forward.

“Stop!” the boy cried. “That isn’t your mother!”

A long, dark arm reached out of the fog. Its fingers twitched, straining toward her.

Daryna jumped back.

An icy hand seized hers.

“Run!”

She had no time to see anything clearly. Someone small was pulling her through the trees, leaping easily over the roots. Daryna ran behind him, using her free hand to shield her face from the branches.

Dry undergrowth cracked behind them.

The dark figure was pursuing them.

“This way!” the boy commanded.

They left the path and started down a steep slope. Earth crumbled beneath their feet. Daryna nearly fell several times, but her unknown guide did not release her hand.

His fingers were icy.

Water glimmered ahead.

The boy jumped across a narrow stream and pulled Daryna after him. The instant she reached the far bank, something behind them gave an angry shriek.

It was no longer her mother's voice.

The sound was like a child's crying, a dog's howling, and the creaking of an ancient tree all at once.

Daryna covered her ears.

The mist above the stream twisted as if caught in a violent wind. The dark figure stopped on the opposite bank. It could not—or would not—cross the water.

For several seconds the creature watched them through the white haze.

Daryna could not see its face, but she could feel its gaze.

Then the shadow retreated and dissolved among the trees.

Silence fell.

The boy released Daryna's hand.

"She won't follow us now."

"What was that?"

"I don't know."

"You keep saying you don't know anything."

"Because I really don't."

At last Daryna was able to look at him properly.

He appeared to be seven years old, perhaps eight. He was slight and short, with dark hair falling across his forehead. He wore a long white shirt without buttons. Its hem was stained with earth, and the sleeves were torn in places.

He stood barefoot on the wet stones.

His skin was unnaturally pale. His lips were blue with cold, yet he was not shivering.

He was the same boy Daryna had seen near the vegetable garden the night before.

"It was you," she whispered.

"When?"

"Yesterday. You were standing near our house."

The boy tilted his head.

"I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"You heard me."

"I heard someone crying."

"That was me."

He lowered his eyes.

"I was cold."

Daryna looked at his bare feet.

"Where are your shoes?"

"I don't know."

"And where is your home?"

The boy glanced back at the old oaks.

"Here."

"In the forest?"

"By the water. And under the tree."

He pointed upward.

An enormous oak towered above the stream. Its roots wrapped around the slope and reached almost to the water. Some of the earth beneath them had fallen away, leaving a dark hollow.

Daryna remembered Serhiy's story about the dead Germans.

They had been found by an old oak.

"Is this the Deep Ravine?" she asked.

The boy nodded.

Daryna felt a chill spread through her whole body.

She had broken her promise.

Unintentionally, perhaps—because of the fog and the vanishing path—but she had come to the very place her father had forbidden her to visit.

"I need to go home."

Daryna turned toward the slope but could see no path. The same trees stood on every side, and the fog hung between them like a motionless white wall.

"You can't go now," the boy said.

"Why not?"

"She's waiting."

"That creature?"

He nodded.

"She knows voices. First she calls in your mother's voice. Then your father's. If you don't answer, she starts crying like a little child."

"And what happens if you follow her?"

The boy was silent for a long time.

"You never come back."

Daryna looked toward the fog again.

"How do you know?"

"I saw it."

"Saw whom?"

He frowned as though trying to remember something.

"People. A long time ago. They came with guns. They shouted, fired shots, dug beneath the oak. And then they saw..."

The boy fell silent.

"What did they see?"

He pressed his palms against his temples.

"I can't remember. When I try, it hurts."

Daryna stepped closer.

"Don't force yourself. You can tell me later."

"Later?"

There was a flicker of hope in his voice.

"If you want to."

The boy looked at her with his large, dark eyes.

"Will you come back?"

Daryna did not know what to say.

She ought to have been frightened. Here was a child who lived alone in a forbidden ravine, could not remember his own name, and appeared outside other people's houses at night.

Yet, for some reason, she was not afraid of him.

There was something strange and inexplicable about the boy, but nothing evil. He had saved her from the dark creature. Without him, she might have followed her mother's voice and vanished into the fog forever.

"Maybe," Daryna said.

"That's what people always say."

"Say what?"

"'Maybe.' And then they never come back."

He crouched beside the spring and skimmed his hand over the water. Ripples spread out from his fingers.

"They're afraid of me."

Daryna stood beside him.

The water was so clear that she could see every pebble on the bottom. She bent over and saw her own reflection: disheveled hair, a scratched cheek, frightened eyes.

The boy ought to have been reflected beside her.

But there was no one else in the water.

Daryna straightened with a start.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You aren’t in the water.”

The boy looked into the spring.

“I know.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Daryna took a step back.

The boy noticed her fear and smiled sadly.

“Are you going to run away too?”

“I’m not running away.”

“You’re afraid of me.”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“Because you have no reflection. You don’t know where your home is. You can’t remember your parents, and you come to my window at night.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t.”

He turned away.

Daryna looked at his thin shoulders. In his damp shirt he seemed smaller still.

“Are you a ghost?” she finally dared to ask.

“What’s a ghost?”

“Someone who has died but hasn’t left this world.”

The boy considered this.

“I don’t know whether I died.”

“Do you remember when you were born?”

“No.”

“How old are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What was your mother’s name?”

He shook his head.

“Your father’s?”

Another shake of the head.

“Do you remember anything at all?”

The boy closed his eyes.

“Darkness. Cold. The smell of earth. Someone singing.”

“Singing what?”

“I don’t know the words. Only the voice.”

He softly hummed a few notes.

Daryna had never heard the melody before, but it made her heart ache. It was a lullaby.

“Was that your mother singing?”

“Maybe.”

“And what happened afterward?”

“Then she cried. I cried too. And someone said I should never have existed.”

Suddenly the boy clutched at his throat.

His eyes opened wide.

Daryna saw dark marks on his pale neck—the impressions of someone’s fingers.

“What’s happening to you?”

She touched his shoulder.

The world around her vanished.

For an instant Daryna saw a dark room. A candle burned on a table. A young woman lay on a bed, calling for her child. An older woman stood with her back to her, holding a white bundle.

The baby’s crying stopped abruptly.

Then came the night.

A spade sank into wet earth.

Someone’s hands placed a tiny body beneath the roots of an oak.

Daryna screamed and recoiled.

The vision disappeared.

She was standing beside the spring again. The boy sat on the ground with his hands pressed to his chest.

“Don’t touch me!” he cried in terror.

“I saw something.”

“So did I.”

“A woman with a candle?”

“I don’t know who she is.”

“And a baby...”

“Be quiet!”

His voice rolled through the ravine like a clap of thunder.

The water in the spring turned dark. The great oak’s branches began to sway although there was no wind. A low groan rose from beneath the earth.

Daryna backed away.

The boy saw her terror and immediately calmed down.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to.”

The water became clear once more.

“When I remember things, the ravine gets angry.”

“A ravine can’t get angry.”

“This one can. It hears everything.”

The boy raised his head and looked at the old oak.

“And it doesn’t want me to remember.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

This time there was neither irritation nor hurt in his answer, only boundless sadness.

Daryna sat beside him, leaving a little space between them.

“What should I call you?”

“Nothing.”

“Everyone has to have a name.”

“I don’t.”

“Maybe you’ve simply forgotten it.”

“Then why doesn’t anyone come looking for me?”

Daryna had no answer.

The boy turned toward her.

“Do you know who I am?”

Those were the very words written beneath the drawing in her notebook.

Daryna slowly shook her head.

“No, I don’t.”

The hope faded from his eyes.

“But I can help you find out.”

“How?”

“We’ll look. We’ll ask people questions and search old records. Someone must know what happened here.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

Daryna glanced at the fog, the dark oak, and the icy spring.

“I am,” she answered truthfully. “But I’ll help you anyway.”

The boy smiled.

For the first time, his face resembled that of an ordinary child.

He held out his ice-cold hand.

“Does that mean we’re friends?”

Daryna hesitated, then shook it.

“Friends.”

At that very moment, something woke beneath the roots of the ancient oak.

A faint tremor passed through the ground. Tiny waves covered the spring, and a deep, displeased voice rose from the depths of the ravine.

“Give her back...”

The boy jumped to his feet.

“We have to go.”

“Where?”

“I’ll show you the way out of the forest.”

“Will you come with me?”

He looked toward the place where the village lay beyond the fog.

“I’m not allowed.”

“Why not?”

“If I go too far from the oak, I get terribly cold.”

He squeezed Daryna’s hand.

“And one more thing: don’t look back on the way. Whatever you hear, don’t look back.”

Behind them, a root cracked.

The voice rose again from the dark hollow beneath the oak.

“Give her to me...”

CHAPTER 4

The Way Home

Something stirred heavily beneath the old oak.

The roots cracked. Earth spilled from the dark hollow, and the spring turned black, as though someone had poured ink into it.

The boy tightened his grip on Daryna's hand.

"Don't look back," he repeated. "And don't answer if someone calls you."

"What if it's a real person?"

"There are no real people here."

The voice rose again from beneath the oak.

"Give her back..."

It was quiet, yet Daryna felt it throughout her body. The words seemed to sound not in the air, but inside her head.

The boy pulled her along the stream.

"Step where I step."

He moved quickly, springing lightly from stone to stone. Daryna could barely keep up. Wet branches struck her face, and brambles caught their thorns in her dress.

Heavy breathing came from behind them.

Someone was following.

Slowly, confidently, as if certain they would never find the way out.

Daryna kept her eyes on the boy's feet. His bare soles touched the earth but left no tracks.

"Daryna!" Svitlana's voice called from behind.

The girl shuddered.

"Wait! I want to apologize!"

Daryna almost turned her head.

"That isn't her," the boy whispered.

"How do you know?"

"She can't come this far."

Svitlana's voice became plaintive.

"Daryna, don't leave me here alone!"

The boy left the path and led Daryna between two moss-covered oaks.

"Faster."

“I can’t go on.”

“If we stop, she’ll find us.”

The stream was behind them now. They were climbing the slope, and the fog was so thick Daryna could not even see the treetops.

Suddenly someone laid a hand on her shoulder.

She nearly screamed.

“Don’t be frightened,” her mother’s gentle voice said. “It’s me.”

The fingers on her shoulder grew heavier.

“Come home, darling.”

Daryna shut her eyes and kept walking.

The hand slowly slid away from her shoulder.

“Don’t you love me?” asked her mother’s voice.

Daryna bit her lip.

“Don’t listen,” said the boy.

Someone began to cry behind them.

At first it was her mother. Then Maksym joined in. Then Daryna heard her father’s voice.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Daryna, it’s dangerous there!”

He sounded so real that she involuntarily slowed.

“That’s Dad.”

“No.”

“I can hear him!”

“She’s heard your father before. Now she knows his voice.”

“How?”

“Through you.”

Daryna did not understand, but there was no time to ask.

The creature spoke in Serhiy’s voice.

“Lunatic! Bride of a corpse!”

Then in Olha Ivanivna’s voice.

“I’ll tell your parents everything!”

Dozens of voices mingled together. They laughed, cried, threatened, and pleaded with her to stop. Some belonged to people Daryna knew. Others were complete strangers.

Among them, she heard a baby.

Its crying sounded directly behind her.

The boy stopped abruptly.

His hand trembled.

“What is it?”

He was staring straight ahead, but he no longer seemed to see the path.

The crying grew louder.

“Don’t listen,” Daryna said.

“It’s calling me.”

“It’s that creature. You told me yourself it knows how to deceive people.”

“No. This is different.”

The boy began to turn.

Now it was Daryna who caught his hand.

“Don’t look back!”

He looked at her in confusion, as though he had only just awakened.

“Come on,” Daryna ordered. “You promised to get me out of the forest.”

The boy nodded.

They set off again.

To shut out the voices, Daryna began humming the melody the boy had remembered beside the spring. She did not know the words, so she simply repeated a few melancholy notes.

The boy listened.

“I’ve heard that song before.”

“You hummed it to me.”

“No. Long ago. When it was still warm.”

“You’ll remember later.”

“If there is a later.”

“There will be. We made a promise.”

He did not answer, but quickened his pace.

At last the fog began to thin. Sunlight broke through the trees. The voices fell far behind them, then faded completely.

The boy led Daryna to two rowan trees growing on either side of a narrow path. Their branches intertwined to form a low archway.

He stopped.

“You have to go on alone.”

Beyond the rowans lay an ordinary forest. Daryna recognized the path leading to the Round Clearing. She could find her way back to the village from there easily.

“Why can’t you come with me?”

The boy reached forward.

The moment his fingers touched the invisible boundary between the rowans, the air shuddered. He cried out and jerked his hand back.

A red burn marked his pale skin.

"I'm not allowed."

"Who's stopping you?"

He glanced back toward the ravine.

"I don't know. Perhaps the forest. Or whatever lies under the oak."

"You came to our garden yesterday."

"Sometimes the boundary grows weaker. When the fog comes, I can go a little farther. But not for long. Then the cold pulls me back."

The boy blew on his burned fingers.

"Does it hurt?" Daryna asked.

"Not the way it would hurt you. It just gets even colder."

She pulled a handkerchief from her bag and tried to bandage his hand, but the boy hid it behind his back.

"Don't. It won't help anyway."

"I'll bring you something warm."

"Warm?"

"A shirt, a sweater, or a blanket."

He smiled.

"Will you really come back?"

"I promised to help you."

His smile disappeared.

"Don't tell anyone about me."

"Why not?"

"Because people will come to the oak."

"Maybe they'll be able to help you."

The boy shook his head.

"They've come before. With shovels, axes, and guns. Some wanted to find treasure. Others wanted to cut down the tree. Whenever they dug, the ravine woke up."

"Was that after the war?"

"I can't remember. Winter has come many times here. The trees fell asleep, woke up, fell asleep again. And I stayed."

"My parents wouldn't hurt you."

"They wouldn't believe you. And if they did, they would never let you come to me again."

He was right about that.

If her father learned that Daryna had not only entered the Deep Ravine but also spoken there with a mysterious boy, he really would lock her in the house.

“All right,” she agreed. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Promise me.”

Daryna remembered that she had already made one promise—to her father—and broken it that very day.

“I promise.”

The boy studied her eyes, as if trying to decide whether she could be trusted.

“Even if you see me in a dream?”

“Can you visit dreams?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I see people when they’re asleep.”

“Then come. Just don’t scare me.”

“I’ll try.”

“And don’t stand outside our garden at night anymore. Mum might see you.”

“Only you can see me.”

Daryna wanted to ask how he knew, but a man’s distant shout came from the direction of the village.

“Daryna!”

It was her father’s voice.

She froze.

“Is that her again?”

The boy listened.

“No. That voice isn’t coming from the ravine.”

“Daryna!” Vasyl called again.

Now she heard dogs barking and the voices of other men.

They were looking for her.

“I have to run.”

She stepped between the rowans and turned back.

The boy stood on the far side of the invisible boundary.

“Will you come tomorrow?” he asked.

“I don’t know if I can.”

His face grew sad.

“But I will come back,” Daryna added quickly. “I promise.”

"I'll wait by the spring."

"What if the fog leads me astray again?"

"Call me."

"How? I don't know your name."

He lowered his head.

"Just say you've come."

Daryna nodded and ran along the path.

The Round Clearing was bathed in sunshine. Grasshoppers chirred in the grass, and birds were singing. Nothing suggested the fog, the dark creature, or the voices that had pursued her through the ravine.

Only the hand that had held the boy's remained ice-cold.

"Daryna!"

Her father was very close now.

"I'm here!" she shouted.

Vasyl burst through the trees. Behind him came Uncle Hrytsko, two more neighbors, and Maksym, who could barely keep up with the grown men.

When he saw his daughter, Vasyl stopped for an instant, as though he could not believe his eyes. Then he rushed to her and held her tightly against him.

"Where have you been?"

Daryna had never heard his voice shake like that.

"I got lost."

"We've been looking for you for six hours!"

"Six?"

It seemed to her that she had spent no more than an hour in the forest. Her father held her at arm's length and examined her from head to toe.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Where did you get lost?"

"Near the Round Clearing."

Vasyl glanced at her shoes. Black, damp earth clung to the soles, and green moss stained the hem of her dress.

The ground at the Round Clearing was dry and sandy.

Earth that black was found only at the bottom of the Deep Ravine.

"Did you go down to the stream?" her father asked quietly.

Daryna remembered her promise to the boy.

“No.”

“Look me in the eye.”

She raised her head.

“I wasn’t at the ravine.”

For several seconds her father said nothing.

“Come on. We’re going home.”

All the way back, Maksym talked without stopping about how the entire village had been searching for his sister. Their mother came running in tears, hugged Daryna, and immediately began checking her for cuts and broken bones.

“You’re freezing,” she said. “As if you’ve been outside in winter.”

“It’s cool in the forest.”

“Not that cool.”

Her mother made her drink hot milk and go to bed. Her father asked no more questions, but Daryna could tell he had not believed a word she said.

That evening, Olha Ivanivna came to the house. She said nothing about the quarrel at school. She sat beside Daryna, stroked her head, and told her the important thing was that everything had ended well.

But Daryna knew this was only the beginning.

When darkness fell, she took her notebook out of her bag.

The drawing of the boy was still there. Beneath it were the same two words:

WHO AM I?

Daryna turned the page.

A wet oak leaf fell from the notebook. A fine white frost edged its surface.

On the hand the boy had held, the marks of little fingers were beginning to show.

Daryna covered them with her other hand.

Beyond the wall, she heard her father say quietly to her mother:

“She was in the ravine.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I remember that cold.”

Daryna held her breath.

“Maybe it’s time to tell her the truth?” her mother asked.

“No. If he has seen her, it’s too late to tell her anything.”

“What do you mean?”

Her father did not answer for a long time.
“Now he won’t let her go.”

CHAPTER 5

The First Dream

For the next three days, Daryna was scarcely allowed out of the house.

Her mother said she needed to rest after spending so long in the forest. Her father gave no explanation, but whenever his daughter ventured into the yard, he found another chore for her.

First she had to sort potatoes in the cellar. Then she helped her mother with the washing, picked apples, fed the chickens, and looked after Maksym.

Daryna understood: her father was simply afraid she would go back into the forest.

Several times during lunch she caught him watching her closely.

“Dad, who won’t let me go?” she finally asked.

Vasyl stopped chewing.

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard you talking. You told Mum, ‘Now he won’t let her go.’”

Her mother turned pale.

Her father slowly put down his fork.

“You dreamed it.”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Then you misheard.”

“Who were you talking about?”

“No one.”

“Do you know about the boy?”

Maksym’s eyes widened.

“What boy?”

“That’s enough,” their father said sharply. “There are no boys in that forest.”

Daryna nearly confessed that she had seen him, spoken to him, and held his hand. But she remembered her promise.

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“You are. The moment anyone mentions the ravine, you become a different person.”

Vasyl rose from the table.

"This conversation is over."

He went outside, slamming the door behind him.

"Why did you upset him?" her mother asked.

"I want to know the truth."

"Sometimes it's better not to know certain things."

"Who decided that? You?"

Her mother glanced at Maksym.

"Go and play outside."

"But I haven't finished eating."

"Take your bread and go."

The boy grabbed a slice and ran out.

Natalia sat opposite her daughter.

"Listen to me, Daryna. Every village has places people should stay away from. Not because of ghosts or witches. Simply because something terrible happened there once, and people remember."

"What happened in the ravine?"

"I don't know."

Her mother answered too quickly.

"You do know."

"All I know is that people disappeared there. Your father got lost in that forest when he was a child. They found him the following morning near the dead oak. He was unconscious and nearly frozen, even though it was summer."

"What did he see there?"

"He doesn't remember. Or doesn't want to."

"Mum, was there a boy?"

Natalia looked away.

"Don't ask anything else."

So her father really had been to the Deep Ravine.

And he had come back with the same cold Daryna had felt after meeting the nameless boy.

The boy had saved her that night. So why was her father so afraid of him?

On September first, Daryna woke before dawn.

Her freshly ironed school uniform hung over a chair. Beside it lay a bouquet of dahlias for her homeroom teacher. After the quarrel and her

disappearance into the forest, she did not want to return to school; but staying home under constant supervision was even worse.

Daryna dressed, braided her hair, and opened the window.

Cool air drifted in from the forest.

“You promised you’d come,” she said quietly.

There was no answer.

Her father had spent the whole day before the celebration working around the house. That evening, he personally closed the gate and checked the bolt on the door. Daryna could see that he was waiting for something.

She went to bed early but lay awake for a long time.

A clock ticked beyond the wall. Maksym breathed noisily in the next room. The low voices of her parents came from the kitchen.

Daryna thought about the icy spring, the ancient oak, and the boy waiting for her in the ravine.

Gradually, without her noticing, the ticking of the clock became the sound of dripping water.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Daryna opened her eyes.

Water was running through the middle of her room.

A narrow stream crossed the floor, curved around the bed, and vanished beneath the wall. White mist lay above it, and slender trees were growing out of the mist.

“Mum!” Daryna called.

No one answered.

She sat up and realized at once that she was dreaming.

The bedroom walls disappeared. A night forest surrounded her instead. The moon hung low above the trees, illuminating school desks arranged among the oaks.

A barefoot boy stood beside a blackboard.

“You came,” Daryna said.

“You called me.”

“I called you this morning.”

“Here there’s no morning or evening. In dreams, time moves in circles.”

He ran his finger along the blackboard. Numbers appeared in chalk by themselves:

$$(x + 1)/(x - 2) + (x - 2)/(x + 1) = 5/2$$

Daryna frowned.

“What is that?”

“A problem.”

“I can see that. But why is it here?”

“Tomorrow a gray-haired man will write it on the board.”

“Mykola Stepanovych?”

The boy shrugged.

“I don’t know his name. He sleeps beside an open window. There’s a notebook with these symbols on the table in front of him.”

“You were in his house?”

“No. I saw his dream.”

“You can enter other people’s dreams?”

“Only when they leave their windows open.”

“And if they close them?”

“It makes no difference to dreams,” the boy said with a smile. “I just like open windows.”

He sat down at one of the desks.

“You have to solve it.”

“Why?”

“Tomorrow the man will call you to the board.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s already decided. You missed the last lesson before the holidays, so he wants to see whether you’ve forgotten everything over the summer.”

Daryna approached the blackboard.

“I don’t know how to solve equations like that.”

“You do. You’re only afraid of fractions.”

“And what are you afraid of?”

“Something else.”

The boy took several pebbles from a table and laid them out on the desk.

“First find what they have in common.”

He pointed to the denominators.

“Then multiply the entire equation so the fractions disappear. But remember: you can’t use these two numbers.”

“Which ones?”

“Two and minus one.”

Patiently, the boy explained every step. When Daryna made a mistake, the writing vanished from the board and they started again.

At last she found two roots:

$x = 5, \quad x = -4$

“Correct,” the boy said.

“How do you know all this?”

He touched her forehead.

“From here.”

“From my head?”

“When you sleep, I can see things you once knew but forgot. Like lost objects on the bottom of a stream.”

“Can you see who you used to be?”

The boy lowered his hand.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you have no memory of me.”

The forest grew darker.

“Are you angry because I didn’t come?”

“I waited.”

“My parents won’t let me leave the house.”

“They’re afraid of the ravine.”

“My father was there when he was little. Do you remember him?”

The boy considered this.

“One summer a boy came. He was a little older than me. He fell by the stream and slept for a long time.”

“That might have been my dad.”

“I wanted to play with him, but he started screaming.”

“Did you frighten him?”

“I didn’t mean to. I only asked if he knew my name.”

“What happened then?”

“She came.”

“That dark creature?”

The boy nodded.

“I hid him beside the water. In the morning, people carried him away. He couldn’t see me, but he heard me.”

Daryna was beginning to understand her father's fear. Vasyl might not remember the boy himself, but the voice had remained somewhere deep in his mind.

"I'll come to you," she said.

"When?"

"As soon as I can."

"Bring something warm."

"I will."

The boy smiled, then suddenly looked over her shoulder.

A tall, dark figure had appeared between the trees.

"It's time for you to wake up."

"Wait! I still want to..."

The boy struck the blackboard with his palm.

It split in two.

Daryna woke.

Outside, dawn was breaking. Her room was back to normal; the stream had vanished. Only the floor beside her bed was still wet.

She sat up and repeated the equation she had seen in the dream. Then she wrote down every step in a notebook, afraid she might forget.

A small white pebble lay on the notebook's first page.

Pebbles like it covered the bottom of the spring in the Deep Ravine.

Music played in the schoolyard. First-graders held bouquets, and adults chatted beside the entrance. Serhiy and Bohdan stood nearby, but neither approached Daryna.

After the opening-day assembly, the ninth grade gathered in the mathematics classroom.

Mykola Stepanovych welcomed the pupils, distributed new textbooks, and then announced:

"The holidays are over. Let's see what's left in your heads after three months of rest."

He picked up a piece of chalk.

Daryna held her breath.

The very same equation appeared on the blackboard.

Every number was in exactly the same place as it had been in her dream.

"Who wants to try?" the teacher asked.

The class remained silent.

Mykola Stepanovych looked around.

“Daryna hasn’t answered a question in a while. Come to the board, please.”

Serhiy snickered quietly behind her.

She stood up.

She knew what would happen next. The teacher would put the register on the edge of his desk, wipe the chalk from his fingers, and say that she should begin by stating the values for which the expressions were defined.

That was exactly what he had done in her dream.

“Don’t forget to establish where the expressions are valid,” Mykola Stepanovych said.

Daryna took the chalk.

Her hands did not shake.

She wrote that x could not equal two or minus one, found a common denominator, cleared the fractions, and solved the resulting quadratic equation.

“Five and minus four,” she said.

The teacher checked her work.

“Correct. Well done.”

The classroom was silent.

Serhiy was no longer laughing. Svitlana stared at Daryna in amazement.

“Have you been studying mathematics all summer?” Mykola Stepanovych asked.

“No.”

“Then you have an excellent memory.”

Daryna returned to her desk.

A small white pebble lay on its surface.

The very one she had left at home.

She closed her fingers around it and felt the familiar cold.

Far away, beneath the ancient oaks, a barefoot boy laughed softly.

CHAPTER 6

The Examination Ticket

After the mathematics lesson, Daryna remained at her desk for a long time, clutching the white pebble in her palm.

She tried to find an ordinary explanation for what had happened.

Perhaps the equation had appeared somewhere in a textbook, and she had seen it before and forgotten. During the night, her memory had brought it back, and the teacher had happened to choose the same problem.

Even the pebble might have slipped into her pocket in the forest. In the morning she could have put it in her notebook without noticing, and now merely imagined she had left it at home.

Everything could be explained.

Almost everything.

“Daryna, stay for a moment,” Olha Ivanivna said.

The other pupils left. Serhiy said nothing as he passed Daryna, but he cast a disbelieving glance at the blackboard with its correctly solved equation.

The homeroom teacher sat down at her desk.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Nothing hurts after what happened in the forest?”

“No.”

“Your mother said you got terribly cold.”

“I’m all right now.”

Olha Ivanivna studied the girl, but asked no more questions about her disappearance.

“Do you remember your postponed examination?”

Daryna sighed.

In the spring, two weeks before the end of eighth grade, she had developed pneumonia and spent nearly a month at home. She had managed to make up all her end-of-year assessments except the oral examination in Ukrainian history. That had been rescheduled for early September.

“I remember.”

“It’s the day after tomorrow, at ten o’clock, in the headmaster’s office. There will be three teachers.”

“I’ve been preparing.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll draw a question ticket and have twenty minutes to prepare. If you forget something, we’ll ask supplementary questions.”

The teacher smiled.

“After today’s mathematics, I’m not worried about you.”

But Daryna was worried.

At home, she took out a list of twenty-five examination tickets. She knew most of the topics well. She loved stories of princes, Cossacks, and ancient cities. Dates, the names of treaties, and administrative changes were harder to remember.

Ticket number nineteen was the most difficult:

1. Ukraine during the Second World War.
2. The German occupation and the liberation of the region.
3. Wartime and postwar events in our local area.

There was almost nothing about the last question in her textbook.

Daryna went to her father. He was working in the shed, holding a metal part in a vise.

“Dad, for my examination I need to know what happened in our village during the war.”

The file stopped moving in his hands.

“Ask old Korniy. He was already a teenager then.”

“Don’t you know anything?”

“Only what everybody knows. The Germans arrived in ’41 and retreated in ’44.”

“What about the seven soldiers found in the ravine?”

Her father laid down the file.

“Who told you about them?”

“Serhiy.”

“Don’t listen to Kravets’s gossip.”

“So it’s true?”

“For your examination you need real historical events, not village tales.”

“Were they really found dead?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t even born then.”

“But your father might have told you.”

“He didn’t.”

Vasyl returned to his work.

Daryna knew she would get nothing more out of him.

She spent the rest of the evening bent over her textbooks. The dates blurred together in her head. The names of battles displaced one another, and ticket nineteen seemed more difficult by the minute.

Before bed she placed the list beneath her pillow.

"If you really can enter dreams, please help me," she whispered.

Nothing happened.

Rain rustled outside her window. Her room was warm, but for a long time she could not warm her left hand—the one the boy had held.

She fell asleep after midnight.

This time the dream began in a school corridor.

Daryna stood outside the headmaster's office. There were no doors or walls around her. Ancient oaks rose in their place. Wet leaves hung from the ceiling, and spring water ran along the floor.

The boy sat on a windowsill, swinging his bare feet.

Twenty-five folded sheets of paper lay in front of him.

"You haven't come for ages," Daryna said.

"I came yesterday."

"I didn't see you."

"You weren't asleep. You were only pretending."

"Why didn't you appear sooner?"

"There's no path between us when you're angry."

"I wasn't angry."

"You were angry with your father."

Daryna did not argue.

"Do you know which ticket I'll draw?"

The boy jumped off the windowsill.

"This one."

He touched a folded sheet. The number nineteen appeared on the paper.

"The worst one," Daryna groaned.

"Why?"

"I barely know it."

"You will now."

"What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not wrong."

"How can you know?"

The boy gathered the papers and tossed them into the air. They turned into white birds and flew away between the trees.

"The dark-haired woman has already put the tickets in a red folder."

"Olha Ivanivna?"

"I don't know."

"How am I supposed to find the right one? They all look the same."

"It will be cold."

"What?"

"Touch the paper. Your ticket will be colder than the others."

Daryna shook her head.

"That's cheating."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to draw one at random."

"You still have to learn the answers."

"But I'll know beforehand what they're going to ask."

"You asked me to help."

"I did."

"Then study."

The boy clapped his hands.

The forest changed around them.

Daryna saw a village street along which foreign soldiers marched.

Strange flags hung on the houses, and a military vehicle stood beside the school. People hid behind their closed windows.

"Is this our village?" she asked.

"I don't know. In dreams, places begin to resemble one another."

"Do you remember the war?"

The boy stood in the middle of the road, watching the soldiers.

One of them suddenly turned his head.

A tall, fair-haired man saw the boy and froze. Terror distorted his face.

"Do you know me?" the boy asked.

The soldier backed away.

The dream shuddered.

The street vanished. Daryna was back in the forest, but now seven dead men lay beneath the old oak.

"Is that them?" she whispered. "The Germans they found after the war?"

The boy pressed his hands over his ears.

"Don't ask."

"Did you kill them?"

"I don't know!"

Thunder rolled over the forest.
The roots beneath their feet stirred. A baby cried somewhere underground.

Daryna caught the boy by the shoulders.
This time no vision appeared, but the cold pierced her arms.
“Listen to me. I don’t think you’re bad.”
“You don’t know anything about me.”
“That’s why I want to find out.”

He slowly lowered his hands.
“Learn ticket nineteen,” he said. “Ask the old teacher about the soldiers.
He knows more than your father.”
“Which old teacher?”

The boy did not answer.
The trees began to disappear. Water rose around Daryna’s knees.
“Wait! Who is this teacher?”
“Come to the spring.”
“I will.”
“And bring something warm.”

The water covered the boy.
Daryna woke.

The room was dark. The rain had stopped.
Beside her bed was the damp footprint of a barefoot child.
Only one day remained until the examination.

Daryna put all the other topics aside and concentrated on ticket nineteen.
She copied the dates, read the chapter on the occupation several times, and found the directions of the armies’ advances on a map.

The textbook said nothing about what had happened in Vilshany.
After lunch she visited old Korniy. He sat outside his cottage shelling beans.

“For an examination, you say?” he asked.
“Yes. I have to talk about what happened in our village during the war.”
“A great deal happened back then.”
“Do you remember the Germans in the Deep Ravine?”
A bean slipped from his fingers.
“Who told you about that?”
“People talk.”
“People talk about many things.”

“Were there really seven of them?”

Old Korniy was silent for a long time.

“Seven.”

“How did they die?”

“Nobody knows. Not a wound on their bodies, but their faces were such that the men who saw them couldn’t sleep for nights afterward.”

“Did you see them?”

“From a distance. I was twelve. They wouldn’t let us children near.”

“Did the old teacher know anything about them?”

Korniy looked up in surprise.

“What teacher?”

“I don’t know. I was told he might remember.”

The old man thought for a moment.

“Stepan Andriyovych. He taught history for many years, and now he lives near the old mill. He collected documents about the war. He might know something.”

Daryna felt a chill run down her spine.

The boy had been right.

The next morning she arrived at school early.

In the examination room, the headmaster, Olha Ivanivna, and the history teacher sat at a long table. A red folder lay in front of them.

Exactly like the one in her dream.

“Don’t be nervous,” Olha Ivanivna said. “Choose any ticket.”

The folded sheets of paper were spread across the table.

Daryna passed her fingers over the first, then the second.

Ordinary paper.

The third was warm too.

When she touched a sheet near the edge of the table, the cold burned her fingers. Frost appeared on the paper, then melted at once.

Daryna picked up the ticket.

Unfolded it.

In the upper corner was the number:

19.

Everything had happened just as the boy had shown her.

She sat at a separate desk and began to prepare. Her hands shook a little, but the answers rose into her memory on their own.

Twenty minutes later, Daryna spoke about the beginning of the war, the occupation of Ukraine, and the liberation of the region.

“And what do you know about wartime events here in Vilshany?” the history teacher asked.

“After the war, seven German soldiers were found in the Deep Ravine. They died of unknown causes. There were no wounds on their bodies.”

The headmaster frowned.

“That sounds more like a legend.”

“No,” the history teacher said unexpectedly. “That really happened. I saw a reference to it in an old district newspaper.”

“Where can I find that newspaper?” Daryna asked.

“Perhaps Stepan Andriyovych has it. Our former teacher. He collected everything about the village’s history.”

The old teacher again.

Daryna felt a light, cold touch on her shoulder.

She looked around.

The barefoot boy stood at the window, smiling.

No one else could see him.

“Daryna, are you all right?” Olha Ivanivna asked.

The girl turned back to the examination panel.

“Yes.”

The history teacher gave her the highest grade.

When Daryna glanced toward the window again, the boy was gone. Two tiny wet footprints remained on the floor.

She no longer looked for ordinary explanations.

The boy existed.

He entered her dreams, saw things she could not see, and remembered the war, even though he did not know his own name.

Daryna left the school and looked toward the ancient forest.

She had to return to the spring.

But first she had to visit Stepan Andriyovych.

CHAPTER 7

Return to the Ravine

Stepan Andriyovych lived at the far end of the village, not far from the old mill.

Daryna found his house easily. Small and leaning, with blue shutters, it was almost completely hidden behind apple trees. A padlock hung on the gate.

“You’ve come for nothing,” a neighbor called over the fence. “Stepan Andriyovych has gone to visit his daughter in the district town. He might be back on Sunday.”

“Do you know whether he keeps old newspapers?”

“He keeps everything. Newspapers, books, photographs. The house will soon collapse under all that paper.”

“Thank you.”

Daryna headed home.

Sunday was three days away. She could wait, but the boy had asked her to come to the spring. He had helped her in the examination, and now he was waiting.

Her parents would not let her go anywhere near the forest. That meant she would have to go secretly.

The next morning, her father went to repair a tractor in a neighboring village. Her mother was at the medical station, and Maksym had gone swimming with his friends.

Daryna took an old checked shirt out of a chest. Maksym had worn it once, but he had outgrown it. Their mother intended to pass his old clothes on to Aunt Hanna’s younger son, so no one was likely to notice immediately that the shirt was gone.

In the kitchen, Daryna cut a thick slice of fresh bread, wrapped it in a clean handkerchief, and spooned some honey into a little jar.

She still needed a toy.

A wooden box in Maksym’s room was full of broken toy cars, soldiers, and colored pebbles. Daryna searched through it until she found a little red car.

One wheel did not turn properly, and the paint on the doors was scratched. Once it had been Maksym's favorite toy, but he had not mentioned it for two years.

Daryna packed everything in her bag and left her mother a note:

"I've gone to Svitlana's to borrow a notebook. I'll be back by lunchtime."

She was ashamed to lie, but she saw no other way.

She walked through the vegetable gardens toward the forest to avoid meeting anyone she knew. The day was sunny and warm. After the night's rain, the air smelled of mushrooms and wet earth.

She stopped at the first trees.

Here began the familiar path to the Round Clearing. It was on this path that she had lost her way last time.

The girl gripped her bag strap.

"I'm here," she said quietly.

Nothing happened.

"Can you hear me? It's Daryna."

A woodpecker hammered far away. A lizard rustled in the grass.

Daryna walked on.

The forked birch stood where it should. Beyond it lay the large stone she had been unable to find before. The path neither vanished nor divided.

Perhaps the boy appeared only at night.

Daryna was about to turn back when something red flickered between the trees.

Her ribbon hung from the branch of an oak.

The same ribbon she had used to mark her way in the fog.

She took it down.

It was wet and cold.

The boy peered out from behind the tree.

"You took a long time."

Daryna stepped back in surprise.

"You mustn't scare me like that!"

"I wasn't trying to scare you. I was waiting."

He wore the same white shirt. Earth stained his bare feet, and dry leaves were tangled in his hair.

"You really came," he said, as though he still could not believe it.

"I promised, didn't I?"

The boy looked at her bag.

“What’s in there?”

“You’ll see when we get to the spring.”

“Can I carry it?”

Daryna handed him the bag.

As soon as he touched the fabric, droplets of water appeared on it. He lifted the bag easily and slung the strap over his shoulder.

“It’s warm.”

“Because it was in the sun.”

“I’d forgotten what that felt like.”

“What?”

“Warmth.”

He led her along a different route.

This time there was no fog. They walked between oaks, went down a narrow path, and stepped over fallen trees. The way to the ravine proved much shorter than Daryna had imagined.

Soon she heard running water.

It was quiet beside the old oak. Sunlight hardly penetrated the branches, so the bottom of the ravine lay in cool half-light.

The boy set the bag on a large stone.

“Show me.”

Daryna took out the checked shirt.

“This is for you.”

He touched the fabric carefully.

“What do I do with it?”

“Put it on.”

“Over this one?”

“You can take the old one off.”

The boy shook his head.

“It won’t come off.”

At first Daryna thought he was joking.

“What do you mean?”

He caught the hem of his white shirt and pulled. The fabric would not move, as though it were part of his body.

“I’ve tried,” the boy said. “It’s always with me.”

Daryna helped him put the checked shirt on over the white one. It was a little too big, so she rolled up the sleeves.

“Do you feel warmer?” she asked.

The boy closed his eyes.

He stood motionless for several seconds.

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“I can feel that the shirt used to be warm. But the warmth itself isn’t there.”

He pressed the cloth to his chest.

Frost began forming on the checked shirt. First the collar whitened, then the sleeves. Within a minute the entire garment had stiffened with ice.

Daryna touched it and snatched her hand away.

“Take it off. You’ll only get colder.”

“Let me keep it.”

“Why, if it can’t keep you warm?”

“Because you brought it.”

The boy smiled.

Daryna turned away so he would not see the tears in her eyes.

“I have something else.”

She unwrapped the bread.

The boy leaned closer and sniffed it.

“Can you eat that?”

“Don’t you know what bread is?”

“I do. People often bring it to the forest. They leave it beneath the trees or throw it to the birds. But I’ve never tasted it.”

Daryna broke off a piece and held it out.

The boy took the bread. It did not fall or pass through his fingers.

He took a cautious bite.

“Well?”

The boy chewed slowly, paying close attention to the sensation.

“Like dry leaves.”

“But it’s fresh.”

“I know. I just can’t taste anything.”

Daryna opened the honey jar and spread some on another piece.

“Try it like this.”

The boy bit into it.

His eyes widened in surprise.

“Did you taste something?”

“A little.”

“Sweet?”

“I don’t know what it’s called.”

“Honey.”

“No. Something else.”

He thought for a moment.

“As if the sun were shining through my closed eyelids.”

He quickly finished the piece, but when he took a second, the sensation had vanished.

“Leaves again,” he said sadly.

“Next time I’ll bring sweets.”

“Don’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to forget what that sunshine felt like.”

He wrapped the bread in the handkerchief and tucked it between the oak roots.

Daryna took out the last present.

“It’s a car.”

The boy took the little red vehicle and examined it.

“A small one?”

“A toy. You play with it.”

“How?”

Daryna placed it on a flat stone and pushed. It rolled a short distance, its damaged wheel squeaked, and it stopped.

The boy copied her.

The car rolled toward the edge of the stone. He caught it just in time and burst out laughing.

For the first time Daryna heard him laugh like an ordinary child.

Not the distant, eerie sound that echoed from the night forest. Now it was the laughter of a child receiving his first toy.

They spent a long time rolling the car across the stone. Then they built a road from twigs, dug a little tunnel, and made a bridge over the stream.

The boy forgot about the cold.

He raced along the bank, invented adventures for the car, and argued with Daryna about where the bridge should go. At such moments she barely noticed his pale face, bare feet, or missing reflection in the water.

He was simply a seven-year-old boy.

Only when she accidentally touched his hand did its icy cold remind her otherwise.

“Did you have toys before?” she asked.

The boy shook his head.

“Nobody brought you any?”

“Sometimes people left bread, coins, or flowers beneath the oak. But they weren’t for me. They were asking the ravine not to touch their children or their animals.”

“Have you ever taken anyone’s livestock?”

“No.”

“People?”

The boy lowered the car.

“I’ve never taken anyone.”

“Then who has?”

He looked toward the dark hollow beneath the roots.

“The one who called you in your mother’s voice.”

“Does she live under the oak?”

“She is everywhere there’s no light. But her home is under the oak.”

“Why doesn’t she take you?”

“Because she needs me.”

“What for?”

The boy frowned again.

“I don’t remember.”

A faint rustling came from beneath the roots.

He quickly tucked the car into his shirt.

“Let’s not talk about her. She doesn’t like us mentioning her.”

Daryna sat beside the spring.

“I found the old teacher you told me about.”

“Does he know my name?”

“I don’t know yet. He’s away. He’ll be back on Sunday.”

“Don’t tell him about me.”

“Why?”

“Old people hear the forest better. If he gets frightened, the ravine will hear him too.”

“I’ll only ask about the Germans.”

The boy held the toy car against his chest.

“One of them knew me.”

“The fair-haired one I saw in my dream?”

He nodded.

“When I look at his face, it hurts here.”

He touched his throat.

Dark finger marks appeared on his skin again.

“Maybe he knew your mother,” Daryna said.

“Did I have a mother?”

“Of course.”

“Did she love me?”

Daryna remembered the young woman in the vision, lying on a bed, crying and calling for her child.

“I think she did.”

“Then why doesn’t she come?”

Daryna could not answer that question.

A branch snapped above them at the edge of the ravine.

The boy raised his head.

“It’s time for you to go.”

“It’s still early.”

“Someone has entered the forest.”

“Perhaps mushroom pickers.”

“No. They’re looking for you.”

Daryna remembered the note she had left her mother. She would never get home by lunchtime now.

The boy led her to the rowan trees.

“Don’t take off the shirt,” Daryna said.

“I won’t.”

“And look after the car.”

He held up the red toy.

“Does it have a name?”

“Sometimes people give cars names.”

“What’s its name?”

Daryna thought for a moment.

“Spark.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s red. And because you need at least a little warmth.”

“Spark,” the boy repeated.

He pressed the car against his frost-covered shirt.

“Come tomorrow.”

“I don’t know if I can. Mum’s probably read my note by now.”

“The woman you pretended to visit said you weren’t at her house.”

Daryna looked at him in surprise.

“How do you know?”

“I heard her dream.”

“Svitlana doesn’t sleep in the middle of the day.”

“She isn’t Svitlana.”

The boy was staring at something behind Daryna.

“Then who is she?”

Something cracked behind the trees.

A woman with long green hair flickered across the path.

“My friend,” the boy replied. “She’s wanted to meet you for a long time.”

CHAPTER 8

The Mavka

The woman stopped between the trees.

At first Daryna took her for an ordinary girl—tall, slender, and dressed in a long green gown. But as the stranger approached, Daryna noticed that her dress was woven from fine blades of grass, young leaves, and silvery spiderwebs.

Dark green hair fell below her knees. Tiny white flowers gleamed among the strands, and her large eyes kept changing color: brown, then green, then black as night.

She walked barefoot over dry branches, yet not one of them cracked.

“Don’t be afraid,” the boy said. “This is Ruta.”

“Ruta?” Daryna repeated.

The girl in green gave the faintest smile.

“That’s what he calls me. A short human name is easier for him to pronounce.”

“What’s your real name?”

“True names are never spoken in the forest.”

Ruta came closer and examined Daryna carefully. Her gaze paused on the bag, then on the hand with which the girl had touched the boy.

“So you’re the one who heard him.”

“She did more than hear me,” the boy boasted. “She can see me.”

“I can see that.”

“And she brought me a shirt.”

He spread his arms to show off his new clothes. Frost still whitened the checked fabric.

“And bread with sunshine in it, and Spark.”

The boy took out the red toy car.

The mavka touched it with one finger. For an instant the red paint shone brighter, and the broken wheel turned by itself.

“Did she give you this of her own free will?” Ruta asked.

“Yes.”

“Then it will stay with you longer.”

“What do you mean, ‘longer’?” Daryna asked warily.

“Everything belonging to the living slowly dies in this ravine. Iron rusts, wood rots, cloth turns to dust. But gifts remember the warmth of human hands.”

The boy hugged the car to his chest.

“Spark won’t disappear.”

“Everything disappears one day,” the mavka replied.

“Don’t say that!” he protested.

Ruta stroked his hair.

For an instant the mavka’s green locks wrapped around his shoulders like a warm blanket. But immediately they were covered with frost. The flowers wilted, the leaves blackened and fell to the ground.

The mavka withdrew her hand.

“You see? Even the forest cannot warm you.”

The boy turned away.

“Daryna will find a way.”

“Humans always imagine there is a way to do everything.”

“I really do want to help,” Daryna said.

Ruta turned her gaze on her.

“Do you? Or are you merely curious?”

“He saved my life.”

“So now you’re paying a debt?”

“He’s my friend.”

The mavka laughed quietly. Several fireflies rose from the grass at the sound.

“A human girl and a child from beneath the oak. A strange friendship.”

“I’m not from beneath the oak,” the boy protested.

“Then where are you from?”

He opened his mouth but could find no answer.

Ruta crouched before him.

“Go to the spring, Little One. Show Spark the bridge you built.”

“I want to stay.”

“We need to talk.”

“About me?”

“About you.”

The boy frowned.

“Just don’t frighten her.”

He ran to the stream, looking back now and then. Ruta waited until he was far enough away.

“Don’t call him Little One,” Daryna said. “He needs a real name.”

“A real name must be recovered, not invented.”

“Can’t we simply give him one?”

“You can. But then he will be bound to your word, not to his own fate. He’ll become your shadow, follow you through dreams, drink your warmth, and gradually forget that he was once human.”

Daryna looked at the boy. He was driving the toy car across the wooden bridge and telling himself some cheerful story.

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you live in this forest. Surely you remember where he came from?”

“We found him during the great war. One night the forest heard a baby crying. Fresh earth stirred beneath the old oak, but we could not approach. The thing beneath the roots had already taken him.”

“So they buried him there?”

“His body, yes.”

“And his soul?”

“It remained between the roads.”

“What roads?”

Ruta reached toward a shaft of sunlight. Her fingers became transparent, and Daryna could see the leaves through them.

“There is the world of the living. There is the road of the dead. And there is the forest, which receives those who belong to earth, water, trees, and wind.”

“Does the boy belong to the forest?”

“No. The forest sheltered him, but it cannot make him one of its own.”

“Then he ought to go to the dead.”

“They cannot hear him there. He has no name. No prayer was said over him, no one mourned beside his grave. To the living, he never existed; to the dead, his time has not yet come.”

“But none of that is his fault.”

“The other world knows nothing of blame. It knows only order.”

“What a stupid order.”

The mavka’s eyes turned black.

“Careful, human child. Do not call foolish what you do not understand.”

“And don’t call him Little One as though he were some lost thing.”

Ruta watched Daryna for a long time.

Then her face softened.

“Very well. Perhaps you truly will be his friend.”

“Tell me how to save him.”

“I don’t know.”

“You too?”

“The forest can hide, heal, and punish. But it cannot open the road for human souls.”

“Someone must know.”

“Perhaps. But first you must learn who he was. Find the woman who gave birth to him. Hear the name she wanted to give her child.”

Daryna remembered the vision: the young woman on the bed, the candle, and the white bundle in the old woman’s arms.

“I saw his mother.”

“Where?”

“When I touched the boy. It was like a memory.”

“Don’t do that again.”

“Why not?”

“His memory lies too close to the darkness. When you open one door, others may open with it.”

“There was an old woman. She held a baby. Then someone buried the body beneath the oak.”

Ruta lowered her eyes.

“I saw only the end. A woman came in the night. She was alone, carrying something wrapped in white cloth. The earth received her secret, but it could not hold the baby’s crying.”

“Did you see her face?”

“Human faces fade quickly from the forest’s memory. I remember only the smell of fear.”

“And the German soldiers?”

“They dug up the grave.”

“Did the boy kill them?”

“He showed them what they had brought with them.”

“What was that?”

“Their own memories.”

Daryna remembered the frozen horror on the faces of the dead.

“They died of fright?”

“Not every heart can bear the truth about the person who owns it.”

The boy laughed beside the stream. The red car slipped from a stone, and he ran to catch it.

“Is he dangerous?” Daryna asked softly.

Ruta did not answer at once.

“For now he is a child. Lonely, wronged, and very powerful. He can open other people’s dreams, touch their memories, and show them what they fear most.”

“He helps me.”

“Because he likes you.”

“And everyone else?”

“When he is sad, fog gathers in the forest. When he is angry, trees and animals grow sick. When he hates...”

The mavka looked toward the ancient oak.

“Then the thing beneath the roots wakes.”

“What does she want?”

“To escape the ravine.”

“What does she need the boy for?”

“A nameless soul can become a doorway.”

Daryna felt cold.

“A doorway to what?”

“Between her darkness and your world.”

Ruta moved closer.

“Your friendship makes the boy stronger. Every present, every conversation, every dream restores something human to him. But the darkness holding him grows stronger too.”

“Then should I stop coming?”

“If you abandon him now, despair will destroy the last human part of him.”

“And if I keep coming?”

“You might save him. Or you might open the door.”

“Can’t you say anything plainly?”

A faint smile touched the mavka’s lips.

“Straight roads grow only through human fields. In a forest every path has two ends.”

The boy ran up to them.

“Have you finished talking?”

“Yes,” Ruta replied.

“Did you scare her?”

“A little,” Daryna admitted.

The boy glared at the mavka.

“I asked you not to.”

“And I asked you not to bring living people to the old oak.”

“She isn’t like the others.”

“That is the only reason I still allow her to stand here.”

Ruta lifted her head and listened.

“Her mother has already come back from Svitlana’s. She’s standing at the gate, wondering where to look for her daughter.”

Daryna flinched.

“I have to get home.”

“I’ll take you by the short way,” the mavka said.

“I can do it myself!” the boy protested.

“Your way takes two hours. Mine takes a few minutes.”

Ruta took Daryna’s wrist. Her hand was not cold like the boy’s; it was warm and rough, like bark heated by the sun.

“Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because if you see all the forest’s paths at once, you will no longer know which one brought you here.”

Daryna closed her eyes.

The trees roared around her. She felt as though she were falling through leaves, flying over streams, passing through trunks and roots.

“Remember,” Ruta whispered. “The child does not belong to the forest. But the world of the living will no longer take him. Look for the third road.”

“Where?”

“Among those who remember the war.”

The noise ceased.

Daryna opened her eyes and saw the familiar path behind her family’s vegetable garden. The house was no more than a hundred steps away.

Neither Ruta nor the boy was beside her.

Her mother stood at the gate.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“I went to see Stepan Andriyovych. Then I went into the forest.”

“In your note you said you were going to Svitlana’s.”

“I lied.”

Her mother said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Daryna said. “I didn’t want you and Dad to lock me in the house again.”

“Were you near the ravine?”

Daryna remembered her promise.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“I can’t. Not yet.”

Pain appeared in her mother’s eyes.

“The secrets of that forest have never brought our family anything good.”

Natalia went into the yard.

Daryna remained by the gate.

A soft metallic sound came from her bag.

She looked inside.

At the bottom lay a tiny wheel from the red toy car. It was covered with rust, as though it had lain buried for years.

Daryna closed her hand around it.

Everything belonging to the living slowly died in the Deep Ravine.

If she could not find a road for the boy, one day the same thing would happen to him.

CHAPTER 9

The Forest Spirit and His Rules

For two days the boy did not appear in Daryna's dreams.

She went to sleep thinking of him, left her window open, and placed the white pebble beneath her pillow, but nothing happened.

Only once, in the middle of the night, did she think she heard someone scratching at the glass. Daryna got up and looked outside.

A tall, dark figure stood beneath the apple tree.

It wore her mother's face.

"Open the window, darling," the figure pleaded.

Daryna glanced toward the door. Her real mother was asleep in the next room.

When the girl looked back out of the window, there was no one beneath the tree. Only a long black streak remained on the glass, as though someone had drawn a wet finger across it.

The thing living beneath the old oak had found its way to the village.

On Sunday, Daryna prepared to visit Stepan Andriyovych. Before leaving, she showed her mother her empty bag and promised to be home by lunchtime.

This time she did not lie.

She really was going to see the old teacher. But first she wanted to visit the ravine and return the missing wheel of the boy's toy car.

The forest was quiet. Dew shone on the spiderwebs, and long morning shadows stretched between the trees. Daryna reached the two rowans and stopped.

"I'm here."

The boy did not appear.

"I've got Spark's wheel."

A short whistle came from behind the trees.

Ruta stepped onto the path.

Her green hair was braided into a long plait decorated with red leaves. This time, instead of a grass dress, she wore a dark cloak that resembled the folded wings of a great bird.

"Come," said the mavka.

"Where's the boy?"

“By the spring.”

“Why didn’t he come to meet me?”

“He was forbidden.”

“By whom?”

“By one older than the oaks.”

Ruta headed into the forest. Daryna followed.

“I need to be home by lunchtime.”

“If Grandfather wishes it, you will be.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then the sun may rise and set many times before you find your way.”

Daryna stopped.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

The mavka looked back.

“Grandfather doesn’t like a living person walking paths that belong to the forest either. Yet he agreed to speak with you.”

“What for?”

“He wants to decide whether you should be allowed to visit the boy again.”

“He can’t forbid me.”

The trees rustled around them, though there was no wind.

“Never say that in an ancient forest,” Ruta said quietly. “Here every path, every tree, and every stone obeys him.”

They left the familiar trail.

Ruta walked quickly, parting branches with her hands. After a few minutes Daryna could no longer tell which way the village lay. The sun appeared first on her right, then suddenly behind her.

At last the trees parted.

An enormous old stump stood in the middle of a small clearing. It was twice Daryna’s height, covered with moss and tiny mushrooms. Beside it sat a little gray-haired man.

At first Daryna thought he was a child. But when he raised his head, she saw a deeply wrinkled face, a long nose, and bushy eyebrows. His gray beard reached the ground and tangled with the roots. He wore a coat of dry leaves around his shoulders and held a staff made from a crooked branch.

The boy stood nearby.

His checked shirt was completely white with frost. He held the red toy car against his chest.

“Daryna!” he cried happily.

“Don’t move, Nameless One,” the old man ordered.

“Don’t call him that,” the girl said.

The gray eyebrows rose.

“Then what should I call one who has no name?”

“We’ll find his name.”

“People go looking for many things. Most often, they find trouble.”

The old man stood.

Upright, he barely reached Daryna’s waist. Yet when he straightened his shoulders, the surrounding trees bowed their branches, and the forest spirit’s shadow grew enormous, covering the whole clearing.

“I am Grandfather Dubovyk,” he said. “I have guarded this forest since before your village existed. I’ve watched trees be born and die. I remember people whose names have long since worn away even from their stone crosses.”

He circled Daryna, examining her closely.

“You smell of smoke, milk, and human lies.”

“I’m not lying.”

The forest spirit struck the earth with his staff.

A note fell out of Daryna’s bag—the one she had left her mother the last time:

“I’ve gone to Svitlana’s to borrow a notebook.”

It lay on the grass, although Daryna had seen her mother throw it into the fire at home.

“Nothing burns without a trace in the forest,” Dubovyk said.

“I apologized to my mother.”

“But you didn’t tell her where you’d been.”

“I made the boy a promise.”

“You had already made a promise to your father. Which one was real?”

Daryna was silent.

“Both were real when I made them.”

“Words are not leaves. You cannot scatter them and then expect the wind to sweep them away.”

The boy moved between them.

“Don’t scold her. She came to see me.”

“That is precisely why I scold her,” Dubovyk replied. “Because you are already growing attached.”

“She’s my friend.”

“And when she leaves this place? When she grows up? When she forgets you?”

“I won’t forget,” Daryna said.

The forest spirit looked at her with sad amber eyes.

“All living people believe that. But time takes away even what people swear to remember forever.”

Daryna took out the rusty wheel.

“I came to return this.”

The boy snatched out his car. One wheel was indeed missing.

“Spark’s broken.”

“Things belonging to the living age quickly in the ravine,” Dubovyk reminded them. “Especially iron. It remembers fire, the hammer, and human blood. Darkness loves such things.”

“But it’s only a toy,” the boy objected.

“To you, a toy. To the one beneath the roots, a little door.”

Daryna held the wheel against the car. It slipped onto the axle by itself, and the rust disappeared.

“Did you do that?” the boy asked in amazement.

“No.”

Dubovyk tapped his staff crossly.

“A gift given with kindness can sometimes heal itself. But keep Spark away from the old oak.”

The boy tucked the car into his pocket.

“Why did you summon me?” Daryna asked.

“So that you might hear the rules.”

“What rules?”

Grandfather Dubovyk drew his staff across the ground. A circle appeared in the grass, and inside it lay yellow leaves, bits of ice, and a few white flowers.

“The Deep Ravine does not sleep forever. For most of the year its paths are closed, and the Nameless One lies beneath the roots, dreaming other people’s dreams.”

The boy lowered his head.

“When does he wake?”

“In spring, when the ice begins to move. During Mermaid Week, when the waters call those who never returned home. And in autumn—from the first mist until the Feast of the Protection.”

“It’s autumn now.”

“The first fog has already come. That is why the boy can leave the oak, visit your window, and touch the living.”

“And after the Feast?”

“The ravine will fall asleep again. The cold will draw him beneath the roots until the next awakening.”

The boy gripped Daryna’s hand tightly.

“It’s dark down there,” he whispered. “I don’t want to fall asleep again.”

“This year is different,” Dubovyk went on. “He has found a human who can see him. And your warmth strengthens more than just the boy.”

“That creature is waking too?”

“Each night she comes closer to the forest’s boundary. Before the Feast of the Protection, the ravine will open completely. If the darkness claims the nameless soul, it can leave together with him.”

“How can we stop her?”

“By keeping the rules.”

Dubovyk struck the ground with his staff.

The first small light appeared in the grass.

“First: visit the ravine only by daylight. After the owl has called for the third time, every path belongs to something other than humans.”

A second light appeared.

“Second: never answer a voice unless you can see the face of whoever is calling. Darkness has no voice of its own, so it steals the voices of those you love.”

A third light.

“Third: take nothing from beneath the old oak. Not a coin, a toy, or a bone. Everything beneath those roots is bound to the ravine.”

A fourth light.

“Fourth: do not invent a name for the boy, and never invite him across the threshold of your home. A false name will make him your shadow. An invitation will open a path for more than him.”

A fifth light appeared.

“And last: do not let him punish the living.”

The boy released Daryna’s hand.

"I don't punish anyone."

"Not yet," Dubovyk replied.

"Why is that so important?" the girl asked.

"His resentment feeds the darkness. His anger opens doors. If he wishes someone dead, the one beneath the oak will gain a face."

"Whose face?"

The forest spirit looked at the boy.

"His."

The clearing grew cold.

"I won't do anything bad," the boy said. "Daryna is kind to me."

"Not everyone will be kind to her."

"I'll protect her."

"Protection and revenge are not the same thing."

"If someone hurts her, they must answer for it."

"That is exactly what I feared," Dubovyk whispered.

Daryna knelt before the boy.

"Promise me you won't hurt people."

"Even bad people?"

"Even bad people."

"And if they hurt you?"

"I'll take care of myself."

He did not reply.

"Promise," Daryna repeated.

"I'll try."

"That's not a promise."

"You won't get another answer."

Daryna recognized the words her father had spoken to her a few days earlier.

Grandfather Dubovyk extinguished the lights with a stroke of his staff.

"Do not demand an oath from someone who does not yet understand the difference between justice and vengeance."

"How can I teach him?"

"Show him that power can be used for more than punishment."

"What should he do?"

"Help someone without expecting anything in return. Save someone who cannot repay him."

The boy frowned.

"I saved Daryna."

"Because you wanted her to stay with you."

"That isn't true!"

"Isn't it?" Dubovyk asked.

The boy wanted to answer but said nothing.

Suddenly a bell sounded deep in the forest.

A faint, uneven ringing, as though someone were walking between the trees with a tiny bell.

Ruta grew alert.

"Livestock have crossed the boundary."

"Uncle Hrytsko's goat?" Daryna asked.

"No," Dubovyk replied. "A calf. It's caught near the dried-up marsh."

The boy listened.

Along with the bell came a desperate cry.

"Help!"

A child was shouting.

"Someone's out there," Daryna said.

The forest spirit's face darkened.

"A young herdsman went looking for the calf. The fog has already found them both."

The boy looked at Daryna.

"We can help."

"You can," Dubovyk answered. "But remember: the darkness heard that cry too."

He raised his staff.

A narrow path opened between the trees, filled with white mist.

"Here is your first chance, Nameless One. Show us what your power is for."

Another child's cry came from the depths of the forest.

This time it cut off in the middle of a word.

CHAPTER 10

The First Good Deed

“Olenka!” Daryna shouted.

She had recognized the child’s voice.

Six-year-old Olenka was Serhiy Kravets’s younger sister. Their family lived near the pasture and kept a cow and a young calf. The little girl often helped her mother take the animals out to graze.

“Do you know her?” the boy asked.

“Yes. We must hurry.”

Grandfather Dubovyk handed Daryna a short rowan branch bearing three red berries.

“Hold this in front of you. As long as the berries stay red, the ground beneath your feet is real.”

“And if they turn black?”

“Stop. Your next step may be your last.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?”

“This must be his good deed, not mine.”

The forest spirit looked at the boy.

“Remember: you’re not helping to earn gratitude or to make the human girl stay with you. You’re saving someone because the living belong among the living.”

“I understand,” the boy answered.

“Not yet. But perhaps you will on the way.”

Ruta touched Daryna’s shoulder.

“Don’t let go of the branch. And don’t trust the first person you see in the fog.”

“Not even Olenka?”

“Especially not Olenka.”

Daryna wanted to ask what she meant, but the boy had already run down the path.

“Wait!”

She hurried after him.

The fog thickened quickly. Within minutes the clearing, the forest spirit, and the mavka had vanished behind a white wall.

A tiny bell was ringing ahead of them.

“Olenka!” Daryna called.
There was no answer.
The boy stopped and put a finger to his lips.
“Don’t call out.”
“But she needs to know we’re coming.”
“She already knows.”
“Who does?”
The boy pointed at the fog.
The bell rang on the right. Then on the left. A moment later, dozens of invisible bells were ringing on every side.
“Which one is real?” Daryna asked.
“Don’t listen with your ears.”
“What should I listen with?”
He knelt and put his palm against the ground.
“Animals can’t lie.”
Daryna crouched too, but felt only the cold moss.
The boy closed his eyes.
“The calf is frightened. It’s pulling at its rope and can’t get free. The ground there is wet.”
“A swamp?”
“Dry on top. Alive underneath.”
He turned left, toward the place where hardly any bells could be heard.
Daryna looked at the rowan branch. All three berries were still red.
They walked in silence.
The path descended lower and lower. Black earth covered with a thin layer of green grass appeared beneath their feet. The trees grew farther apart, but their trunks were twisted and half-dead.
Daryna noticed a scrap of blue fabric on a branch.
“That’s from Olenka’s dress.”
A little farther on lay a small woven basket with apples scattered inside.
“She was here,” Daryna said.
“She was.”
“Why do you say that as if she’s gone?”
The boy did not answer.
Crying came from the fog.
“Daryna! Help me!”
A small figure in a blue dress appeared ahead.

“Olenka!”

Daryna started toward her, but the boy blocked her way.

“Stop.”

“It’s her!”

“Look at the branch.”

One berry had turned black.

The figure drew closer. It really did look like Olenka: fair hair, a scraped knee, and a blue dress with a piece torn from it.

“I’m frightened,” the little girl sobbed. “Take me home.”

Daryna gripped the rowan branch more tightly.

“Show me your face.”

“This is my face.”

The little girl raised her head.

Where her eyes should have been were two deep black holes.

“Come with me,” the creature whispered.

The second berry turned black.

The boy stepped forward.

“She doesn’t belong to you.”

The fog spun around the false Olenka. Her child’s body stretched taller, her arms lengthened, and the blue dress turned black.

“You are mine,” the creature said. “Come back beneath the roots.”

“No.”

“Without me, you don’t exist.”

The boy took the red car from his pocket.

Spark began glowing in his palm—dimly at first, then brighter. Red light touched the dark figure.

The creature shrieked and dissolved into the fog.

The black berries turned red again.

“The toy is glowing,” Daryna said in amazement.

“It remembers your warmth.”

The boy hid the car.

He seemed even paler than before.

“Are you all right?”

“We have to find the child.”

They walked on.

Soon a dark clearing appeared between the trees. A thin covering of grass lay over an old bog. In the middle was a fallen trunk, which the real Olenka was clinging to.

The calf was stuck beside her. Its rope had tangled around a dry root. The terrified animal struggled, sinking deeper and deeper into black mud.

“Don’t move!” Daryna shouted.

Olenka raised her tear-stained face.

“I can’t get out!”

Daryna stepped onto the grass.

The first berry turned black.

She stepped back quickly.

“It’s swamp all around.”

“I’ll go,” the boy said.

“You might sink.”

“I’m lighter than the living.”

He stepped onto the grass.

The surface of the bog did not even stir beneath his bare feet. He walked easily to the fallen trunk.

Olenka saw him and stopped crying.

“Who are you?”

The boy froze.

Daryna realized that Olenka could see him too. Perhaps because she was so close to the Deep Ravine. Or perhaps because fear had opened her eyes to things the living usually could not see.

“He’s my friend,” Daryna answered for him.

“He hasn’t got any shoes.”

“I’m not cold,” the boy said.

It was a lie.

“Will you help me?” Olenka asked.

He looked at Daryna.

“He will,” she said.

The boy approached the calf. At first the animal thrashed even harder, but he laid his palm on its head.

“Don’t be afraid. I want to go home too.”

The calf stopped struggling.

The boy bent down and tried to untangle the rope. His fingers passed through the knot without feeling its coarse fibers.

"I can't."

"I'll come to you," Daryna said.

She laid a dry branch on the bog. It sank immediately.

The third berry on her rowan branch began to darken.

"Don't come!" the boy shouted.

"Then bring Olenka to me."

"She's heavy."

"I'm not heavy!" the little girl protested.

"You're alive," he explained. "All living people are heavy."

Olenka wrapped her arms around his neck.

The boy swayed. For an instant his feet sank into the grass, but he held his balance.

"I'll lead her," he said. "Where should I step?"

Daryna raised the rowan branch. The berries glowed with a faint red light. Small patches of dry ground began to appear, one after another, across the bog.

"Can you see them?"

"Yes."

The boy took Olenka's hand and led her toward the bank.

With each step he became more transparent. Daryna could see the trees and fog through his checked shirt.

"Faster!" she called.

Halfway across, Olenka slipped.

The boy caught her, but fell to his knees. The grass parted beneath him, and black hands rose out of the bog.

They gripped his bare legs.

"Let him go!" Daryna screamed.

She threw the rowan branch.

It landed on the black hands. There was a hissing sound. The fingers loosened and disappeared into the mud.

The boy got up.

He practically carried Olenka the last few steps.

Daryna seized the little girl and pulled her onto firm ground. Then she reached for the boy.

His palm was so cold that the touch hurt.

"The calf!" Olenka cried. "We can't leave it!"

The rope still held the animal.

The boy could barely stand.

“I’ll go back.”

“You can’t,” Daryna said.

“It’s alive too.”

He stepped onto the bog again.

This time his feet sank almost to his knees. He took out Spark and set the toy car on the grass.

The red car began to roll by itself.

It circled the calf, crossing over the rope. Little sparks flashed wherever its wheels touched the fibers.

The rope broke.

Freed, the calf slowly climbed out of the mud and followed the red light toward the bank.

The boy fell.

“Look after Olenka!” Daryna ordered the calf, as though it could understand her.

She stepped onto the bog.

The rowan branch lay too far away, but the dry patches were still visible. Daryna jumped from one to the next until she reached the boy.

He weighed almost nothing.

She lifted him and carried him toward the bank. Icy cold seeped through her clothing, but she did not let go.

When they reached firm ground, an angry woman’s voice rose from deep within the bog.

“He belongs to me!”

Black hands stretched from the fog.

The boy opened his eyes.

“To the stream,” he whispered. “She can’t cross water.”

Daryna took Olenka’s hand. The boy walked beside her, leaning on her shoulder. The calf limped along behind them.

The fog came alive.

Familiar people emerged from it: her mother, father, Maksym, Serhiy, and Olha Ivanivna. They called, reached out their hands, and promised to show her a shorter way.

Daryna did not answer.

An owl hooted ahead.

Once.

“Faster,” the boy said. “After the third call, the paths will close.”

“But it’s daytime!”

“Not in the ravine anymore.”

The owl hooted a second time.

The trees began moving together, closing the path. The fog rose higher, and Daryna could no longer see the sky.

The boy took out Spark.

Its red glow was terribly faint.

“It’s going out,” Daryna said.

“So am I.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Follow the light.”

The little car rolled down the path.

Daryna pulled Olenka after her. The calf ran behind them, its little bell ringing.

They heard rushing water.

The owl gave its third cry just as the stream came into view.

Daryna and Olenka jumped to the other bank together. The calf stepped into the water.

The boy remained behind.

Black hands emerged from the fog and reached for him.

“Jump!” Daryna screamed.

“I can’t.”

“You can! You’ve crossed the water before!”

“I had more strength then.”

The darkness drew closer.

Suddenly Olenka held out her hand to him.

“Come to us.”

The boy stared at the child’s outstretched palm.

He gathered the last of his strength, ran, and jumped across the stream.

The instant his feet touched the earth, the black hands vanished and the fog retreated.

The boy fell on the bank.

His body was almost transparent.

“What’s wrong with him?” Olenka asked fearfully.

“He’s tired.”

“Does he need a doctor?”

“A doctor can’t help him.”

The boy opened his eyes.

“We have to get her back to the people.”

“I’ll do that. You go back to the oak.”

“No. Grandfather said we had to go to the village.”

He struggled upright.

Daryna wanted to object, but saw the determination in his eyes.

The journey to the rowans took nearly all his strength. Several times the boy vanished and then reappeared beside her. The red car no longer glowed. Its paint had darkened, but Spark still rolled ahead, showing them the way.

Human voices sounded near the forest’s edge.

“Olenka!”

“Where are you?”

“Answer us!”

The little girl recognized her mother’s voice.

“Mum!”

She ran forward.

People came out from behind the trees. Serhiy and his father were in front. Neighbors carrying ropes and long poles followed them.

Olenka’s mother rushed toward her daughter.

“Where have you been? We’ve had the whole village searching!”

“I followed Zirka, and then there was a bog. Daryna found me.”

Serhiy approached the calf and took its rope.

“How did you get out?”

Olenka pointed behind her.

“The boy led us out.”

The people looked into the forest.

The boy stood between the rowans, but only Daryna could see him. He swayed and leaned against a tree.

“What boy?” Olenka’s mother asked.

“A barefoot one. He had a white shirt and a checked shirt. And a little red car.”

Daryna felt the silence fall around them.

Grandmother Ulyana, who had come with the others, slowly crossed herself.

“There wasn’t any boy,” Daryna said. “Olenka imagined him because she was frightened.”

The old woman looked straight into her eyes.

“And you?”

“I imagined him too.”

The boy slid down the trunk to the ground.

Daryna wanted to go back, but he shook his head.

Go, his lips formed soundlessly.

Then he vanished.

A tiny red toy car remained in his place.

Grandmother Ulyana saw it lying among the roots.

“He’s awake,” the old woman whispered. “And this time he has brought someone with him.”

CHAPTER 11

Punishing the Tormentor

When Daryna returned home, her father was already waiting by the gate.

News that Olenka had been found spread through the village faster than the searchers could return from the forest. The little girl's mother was telling everyone that Daryna had saved her daughter and led the calf out of the bog.

Vasyl did not look pleased.

"Come inside," he said.

Her mother was sitting in the kitchen. A cup of long-cold tea stood before her.

"You went into the ravine again?" her father asked.

"I went to see Stepan Andriyovych. He wasn't home."

"And so you turned toward the forest?"

"I heard a child crying."

"Where exactly did you find Olenka?"

"Near the dried-up bog."

Her father went pale.

"There's no direct path to that place from the old mill."

"I got lost."

"Again?"

Daryna was silent.

"Olenka keeps talking about a barefoot boy," her mother said. "She says he led you through the fog."

"She imagined it."

"She described the same white shirt Grandmother Ulyana spoke about," her father said.

"She was frightened."

"And the red toy car?"

Daryna felt her palms turn cold.

"What car?"

"The one lying by the rowans. Maksym says it's disappeared from his toy box."

Daryna lowered her eyes.

"I took it."

“Who for?”

“I just took it with me.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

Vasyl struck the table with his palm. The cup jumped, spilling tea onto the cloth.

“Enough!” her mother said. “She brought a child back alive. You could at least thank God it ended well.”

“Nothing has ended.”

“Dad, what are you so afraid of?”

“Something you don’t yet understand.”

“Then explain it!”

Vasyl turned toward the window.

“From now on, you come straight home after school. Don’t go near the forest. This is your last warning.”

Daryna wanted to protest, but her mother shook her head.

“Go to your room.”

That evening Olenka’s mother came to visit. She brought a jar of sour cream and pastries wrapped in a towel.

“Thank you, my dear,” the woman said, embracing Daryna. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t found her.”

Serhiy stood at the gate. He did not come inside or even look at Daryna.

By the next morning the entire school knew about the adventure.

Younger children gathered around Olenka and asked her to tell them about the forest boy. She showed them how tall he had been, described the white shirt, and talked about the red car.

The adults said fear had made her imagine everything.

The children believed every word.

“They say you walked straight across the bog,” Svitlana greeted Daryna.

“Not straight across.”

“Was the boy really there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Olenka couldn’t have invented all that.”

“She could.”

“Why are you protecting him?”

“I’m not protecting anyone.”

Daryna went into the classroom and sat at her desk.

Soon Serhiy and Bohdan appeared, arguing about something. When Bohdan noticed Daryna, he nudged his friend.

“Thank your rescuer.”

Serhiy reddened.

“Leave me alone.”

“She dragged your sister out of the forest while you sat at home.”

“I was searching with everybody else!”

“Yet Daryna was the one who found her.”

Several boys laughed.

Serhiy threw his bag onto a desk.

Daryna realized he felt ashamed—not of his sister, but because he had been unable to save her himself.

“Serhiy, I found her by accident,” she said. “Stop arguing.”

“Nobody asked you.”

“I only wanted—”

“What, do you fancy yourself a hero?”

“No.”

“My sister went into the forest because of you!”

Daryna stood up.

“What are you talking about?”

“You told her about the boy. So she decided to go looking for him.”

“I hardly ever talk to Olenka.”

“Then you lured her there some other way.”

The classroom fell silent.

“Why would I do that?”

“So everyone could praise you afterward. You led her into the bog yourself, then brought her back.”

“You know that isn’t true.”

“How would I know? You’re always going to the ravine, drawing dead people, and talking to yourself.”

Serhiy came to Daryna’s desk and snatched up her notebook.

“Give it back.”

He found the page with the boy’s drawing.

“Here he is, your great rescuer!”

Bohdan laughed.

Serhiy raised the notebook for the class to see.

“Look! She’s still writing ‘Who am I?’ Maybe she’s friends with a corpse because nobody living wants to be friends with her.”

“Shut up,” Daryna said.

“Even your own father is afraid of you. Everyone knows he came back from that forest mad when he was little. Now you’re just the same.”

Tears gathered in Daryna’s eyes.

“Give me my notebook.”

“Take it.”

Serhiy tore out the page with the drawing, crumpled it, and threw it at her feet.

“People like you belong in a graveyard, not a school. At least you’d have someone to be friends with there.”

Daryna slowly picked up the crumpled sheet.

This time she did not hit him.

Silently, she put the notebook in her bag and left the classroom.

Svitlana caught up with her on the stairs.

“Wait.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Serhiy’s an idiot. He had no right to say those things.”

“But he said them. And everyone listened.”

“Not everybody laughed.”

“You didn’t say anything either.”

Svitlana lowered her head.

“I was scared.”

“Of what?”

“That he’d start laughing at me.”

Daryna wiped her tears.

“Now do you understand what it feels like?”

Her friend nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

Olha Ivanivna made Serhiy return to the classroom and apologize. He said the required words while staring at the floor, but Daryna did not believe a single one.

At home she repaired the torn page with thin strips of paper. The dark blot where the boy’s face should have been seemed blacker than before.

Daryna hid her notebook and went to bed early.

In her dream she found herself beside the icy spring.

The boy sat beneath the oak. Without the checked shirt, almost transparent, he rolled the red car with its single wheel along a stone.

"You're still weak," Daryna said.

"I'm better now."

"Where's the shirt?"

"It fell apart."

"I'll bring another."

"Don't."

He raised his head.

"Who hurt you?"

"No one."

"You were crying."

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

The spring darkened. An image of the school classroom appeared on the water.

Serhiy was holding Daryna's notebook.

"Maybe she's friends with a corpse because nobody living wants to be friends with her," his reflection repeated.

The boy froze.

"He called me a corpse."

"Don't listen."

"He said you belong in a graveyard."

"He was upset about his sister."

"We saved her."

"That's exactly why you mustn't do anything to him."

"Why does he hurt you when we did something good?"

"People sometimes say cruel things when they're ashamed or afraid."

"Then he should hurt too."

"No."

Daryna sat beside him.

"Do you remember the fifth rule?"

"Don't let me punish the living."

"Promise you won't touch Serhiy."

The boy stared into the dark water.

"Promise."

"I won't kill him."

“I said don’t touch him.”

“He won’t die.”

“That’s not an answer.”

The boy drew his finger across the surface of the spring. Ice spread over the water.

“I only want his skin to feel what your soul felt.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Daryna seized his hand.

A satisfied laugh rolled out from beneath the old oak.

The boy smiled, but it was not his smile.

“It’s too late,” he said.

Daryna woke.

Her room smelled sharply of nettles and wet earth. The crumpled drawing of the boy lay on the windowsill.

The dark blot where his face should have been was now smiling.

Serhiy arrived at school the next day in perfect health.

During the first lesson he sat behind Daryna, whispered to Bohdan, and snorted with laughter several times.

In the middle of the class, Serhiy began scratching his arm.

At first a small red mark appeared. Within minutes a rash covered both his hands and climbed to his elbows.

“Stop scratching,” Olha Ivanivna told him.

“I can’t.”

Large red welts rose on his neck. His face began to swell.

Serhiy got to his feet.

“It burns!”

The children recoiled.

The rash spread before their eyes. Fresh welts appeared on his hands and face, as if invisible nettles were striking him.

Olha Ivanivna ran to fetch the nurse.

A few minutes later Daryna’s mother rushed into the classroom. She examined Serhiy, gave him an injection, and ordered an ambulance from the district hospital.

“Is it an allergy?” the teacher asked.

“It looks like acute hives.”

“What caused it?”

“I don’t know. Has he eaten anything?”

Serhiy shook his head.

“Touched any plants?”

“No.”

Daryna stared at his hands.

The red lines intertwined to form the outlines of little fingers.

Serhiy noticed them too.

He looked up at Daryna with terrified eyes.

“You did this.”

“I haven’t touched you.”

“Witch...”

The instant he said the word, the rash spread over his lips.

The boy screamed.

In the windowpane Daryna saw the barefoot boy’s reflection. He stood behind her, though there was no one there in the classroom.

He looked stronger now—no longer transparent, with color in his cheeks.

Only his eyes were completely black.

“He won’t hurt you again,” the boy whispered.

The roots of the ancient oak writhed beneath his bare feet.

CHAPTER 12

A Dangerous Protector

Serhiy did not come to school the next day.

He was kept in the district hospital. The rash had begun to fade, and he could breathe normally again, but the doctors still could not identify what had caused the severe allergic reaction.

It was all anyone in the classroom could talk about.

When Daryna entered, the voices stopped at once. Her classmates watched her with a mixture of curiosity and fear. Some hid their hands behind their backs, as though afraid they might accidentally touch her.

Only Svitlana did not turn away.

"Don't pay attention," she said quietly. "They'll find something else to talk about in a few days."

"They think I did it."

"Not all of them."

"Do you?"

Svitlana hesitated.

"I don't know what to think. Serhiy insulted you, and the next day he ended up in hospital."

"I didn't curse him."

"I believe you."

But her friend sounded uncertain.

During the break, Bohdan approached Daryna. He was Serhiy's best friend and had laughed with him at the drawing of the boy.

"Happy now?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Serhiy's in hospital."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"He says you did something."

"Serhiy was frightened."

"Show me your hands."

"Why?"

Bohdan caught her wrist.

"You should have a witch's mark somewhere."

Daryna pulled free.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Or what? Will I break out in a rash too?”

Several pupils stopped nearby.

Bohdan held out his palm.

“Go on, curse me.”

“Go away.”

“Can’t do it?”

“I said go away.”

He leaned closer.

“If anything happens to Serhiy, my father and Kravets will go into the forest. They’ll chop down your old oak and burn whatever’s hiding under it.”

Daryna went pale.

“Don’t you dare go there.”

Bohdan smiled.

“So there really is something there.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“For whom? Us or your dead little friend?”

A white figure flashed in the window behind him.

Daryna turned sharply.

There was no one in the corridor.

“What, has he come?” Bohdan laughed. “Let him listen. On Saturday we’re going to the ravine to dig up his bones.”

A thin layer of ice spread over the windowpane.

Daryna felt the familiar cold.

“Bohdan, stop.”

“Or what?”

“Just stop.”

He released her and went to class.

The print of a small palm appeared on the frozen glass.

Daryna touched it.

“Don’t do anything,” she whispered. “Do you hear me? He’s only boasting.”

The icy handprint slowly faded.

After lessons, Daryna left school with Svitlana. Bohdan stood near the gate.

Beside him gleamed a black Minsk motorcycle belonging to his older brother. Bohdan was not allowed to ride it, but he often took the keys secretly.

“Have you even got a license?” Svitlana asked.

“Don’t need one.”

“Your brother will kill you if you wreck it.”

“He’ll have to catch me first.”

Bohdan started the engine. The motorcycle belched a cloud of blue smoke.

“Want a ride?” he asked Daryna.

“No.”

“Scared?”

“You don’t know how to ride.”

“At least I don’t fly around on a broomstick at night.”

He roared away, showering the girls with dust.

“Idiot,” Svitlana said.

Their paths separated near the well. Svitlana went toward the village center, and Daryna turned onto her street.

Soon the engine roared behind her again.

Bohdan caught up and rode so close that his handlebar struck her bag.

“Stop it!” Daryna shouted.

He turned around and rode back toward her.

“Tell your ghost I’m coming to see him on Saturday!”

“Stay away from the ravine!”

“Then maybe I’ll go today!”

Bohdan accelerated again.

The road bent near the old mill. Willows grew on one side, and the ground fell steeply toward the river on the other.

Daryna moved to the verge.

“Enough! Go home!”

Bohdan laughed and opened the throttle.

At that moment a barefoot boy appeared in the middle of the road.

He stood with his back to Daryna, holding a red toy car.

The motorcycle was racing straight at him.

“Move!” Daryna screamed.

The boy did not stir.

Bohdan saw him.

Terror twisted his face. He jerked the handlebars to the right, then tried to straighten the motorcycle, but its front wheel suddenly locked.

The motorcycle overturned.

Bohdan flew over the handlebars, struck the ground, and rolled toward the edge of the road. The machine crashed into a willow with a grinding screech.

Daryna ran to him.

The boy lay in the dust. Blood was seeping from his temple, and his right leg was twisted at an unnatural angle.

“Bohdan, can you hear me?”

He groaned.

“Don’t move. I’ll get help.”

Daryna took off her scarf and pressed it against the wound on his head.

“He... he was standing in the road,” Bohdan whispered.

“Who?”

“A boy.”

Daryna lifted her head.

The Nameless One stood by the wrecked motorcycle. He was no longer weak and transparent. His cheeks had color, and his bare feet looked almost alive.

The ancient oak was reflected in his black eyes.

“Did you do this?” Daryna asked.

Bohdan did not understand whom she was speaking to.

“Who are you talking to?”

The boy came closer.

“He wanted to frighten you.”

“Did you stop the wheel?”

“I only stood in front of him.”

“You knew he would fall.”

“He won’t die.”

Daryna shuddered at how calmly he said it.

“How can you know?”

“I heard his heart. It will keep beating for a long time.”

“He could have broken his neck!”

“But he didn’t.”

“That doesn’t matter! You had no right!”

The boy frowned.

“He insulted you. He threatened to dig up my grave.”

“He was only showing off.”

“He rode straight at you.”

“He wanted to pass close by.”

“You were frightened.”

“And now I’m frightened of you!”

The boy froze.

Daryna regretted the words at once, but could not take them back.

“Of me?” he asked.

She did not answer.

A man on a bicycle appeared in the distance.

“Help!” Daryna shouted. “There’s been an accident!”

The boy stepped toward her.

Daryna involuntarily recoiled.

He lowered his outstretched hand.

“I was protecting you.”

“I never asked you to maim people.”

“You asked me to do nothing. But then they’ll never stop.”

“It’s my life. I’ll decide how to deal with them.”

The boy’s eyes grew dark again.

“What if they kill you?”

“They won’t.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Neither can you!”

He looked down at Bohdan.

“I could have made sure he never woke up again.”

“Don’t you even think about that.”

The man on the bicycle was almost upon them.

“Go to the medical station!” Daryna shouted. “Tell them Bohdan’s had an accident!”

The man dropped his bicycle and ran toward them.

The boy began to fade.

“Don’t come to me tonight,” Daryna said.

“Why?”

“I need time to think.”

“Are you going to abandon me?”

Once again, he sounded like a lonely child.

“I don’t know.”

“You promised.”

“And you promised to try not to hurt people.”

“I did it for you.”

“That’s exactly what frightens me.”

The boy vanished.

Where he had stood lay the red toy car. Its front wheel was broken just like the motorcycle’s.

Help soon arrived. Bohdan was carefully laid on a door removed from the old mill and carried to the medical station. He had a broken leg, a dislocated shoulder, and a severe concussion.

The doctor said he was very lucky to be alive.

Daryna knew it had not been luck.

The Nameless One had deliberately allowed him to survive.

That evening she sat beside the window. Fog rose above the forest. From time to time a little white figure appeared in it, but it did not approach the house.

After midnight Daryna heard the boy’s voice.

“You’re the only one who can see me. If I don’t protect you, they’ll take you away from me.”

“You can’t punish people for every cruel word,” she answered softly.

“I was punished just for being born.”

Daryna did not know what to say.

“I don’t want to be evil,” the boy went on. “But when I’m angry, I feel warmer.”

“That warmth isn’t yours.”

Silence fell outside the window.

“Then whose is it?”

A woman’s laugh came from the direction of the old forest.

“Mine...”

The boy disappeared into the fog.

And a black handprint from a child’s palm remained on the glass.

CHAPTER 13

A Warning in a Dream

After Bohdan's accident, Daryna's father forbade her to leave the house alone.

He did not say that he blamed his daughter. He mentioned neither the boy nor the old forest, but every evening he checked the gate, shut the windows, and left an axe by the door.

Rumors spread through the village.

Some said Bohdan had simply lost control of the motorcycle. Others recalled Serhiy's rash and whispered that Daryna had punished both boys.

Worst of all, she herself could no longer deny it with certainty.

The Nameless One did not come for three nights.

Daryna both longed for and feared his appearance. Before going to sleep she looked out of her window, but there was neither boy nor fog beneath the apple tree. Only the black handprint remained on the outside of the glass. Neither water nor a cloth would remove it.

On the evening of the fourth day, a thunderstorm broke over the village.

Wind bent the trees, lightning illuminated the yard, and the old electric light in the kitchen repeatedly went out. Her father worried that the power surges might destroy the engine he was repairing in the shed.

"I'll check the wiring after the storm," he said.

"Do it tomorrow," her mother replied. "Don't go poking about there in the dark."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Maksym sat on the floor playing with the reddish-brown puppy he had recently brought home. Their father had allowed him to keep it, but not inside the house. At night, Rudy slept in the shed on an old sheepskin coat.

"He's scared of storms," Maksym said. "Can't he stay in here tonight?"

"No," his father replied. "He'll make puddles everywhere."

"I'll clean them up."

"You always say that."

When the thunderstorm passed, Maksym carried the puppy back to the shed.

Before bed, Daryna checked her brother's room. He was already asleep, his arms spread wide. Her mother turned out the hallway light, and their father sat in the kitchen for a long time.

Daryna fell asleep almost at once.

She dreamed the old forest was burning.

Flames raced up the trunks, leaped from tree to tree, and swallowed the dry leaves. Yet there was no smoke. Instead, white mist drifted between the oaks.

The boy stood amid the fire.

In his hands was the red toy car. Spark burned but was not consumed.

"You came," Daryna said.

The boy did not answer.

A tall woman appeared behind him. Her face constantly changed: now it resembled Daryna's mother, now Ruta, now Daryna herself.

"He's angry with you," the woman said.

"I'm not talking to you."

"You called him dangerous. You turned away when he reached for you."

"He nearly killed someone."

"For you."

The boy stood silent, staring into the flames.

"Come with me," Daryna called.

"Don't come near," he said.

"Why?"

"This isn't a dream."

The fire grew brighter around them.

"Wake up, Daryna."

"What's happening?"

"Your shed is on fire."

The woman laid her hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Let it burn," she whispered. "If her father dies, no one will forbid her to visit you anymore."

Daryna felt everything inside her turn to ice.

"Where's Dad?"

The boy closed his eyes.

"Inside."

"And Maksym?"

"He went for the dog."

“Help them!”

“Your father wants to take you away from me.”

“He’s frightened! But he doesn’t wish you harm!”

“He’s going to leave the village. I heard him talking to your mother. They’ll take you to the city.”

Daryna had not known that.

“If you let them die, I’ll never forgive you.”

The dark woman bent toward the boy’s ear.

“Don’t listen to her. The living always leave. She will leave too.”

The boy looked at Daryna.

His eyes were black, but a tiny spark of light flickered at the center of each one.

“Wake up,” he said. “You have very little time.”

Daryna opened her eyes.

Her room smelled of smoke.

She could not see the shed through the window. In its place was a black wall, pierced by an orange glow.

Daryna leaped out of bed.

“Fire!”

She ran into her parents’ room. Her mother woke, but her father’s bed was empty.

“Where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know. What’s wrong?”

“The shed’s on fire!”

Her mother ran outside.

Daryna rushed to Maksym’s room. His blanket lay on the floor, but he was gone.

“Maksym!”

A dog barked near the shed.

Daryna ran after her mother.

Flames were already raging beneath the shed roof. Thick black smoke poured from the gaps between the boards. The main doors stood open, but a wooden rack engulfed in flames blocked the entrance.

“Vasyl! Maksym!” her mother shouted.

Something fell inside.

“They’re in there!” Daryna said.

“Run to the neighbors! Tell them to call the fire brigade!”

Her mother grabbed a bucket and rushed to the well.

Daryna ran toward the gate but saw the barefoot boy at the corner of the shed.

He stood right in the smoke, pointing toward the back wall.

"There's a small window there," he said. "Under the old pear tree."

Daryna raced around the shed.

Among the branches she could see a low window, half covered by a board. Hay had once been passed through it, but her father had nailed the board in place long ago.

Someone coughed inside.

"Dad!"

"Daryna?" Vasyl answered hoarsely. "Keep away!"

"Where's Maksym?"

"Here with me. He's unconscious."

The boy appeared beside the window.

"There's a latch on the left. Knock out the lower board."

Daryna seized an old hoe lying beneath the pear tree and struck the board. It did not budge.

"Again," the boy said.

The second blow loosened the nails. With the third, the board flew off.

A cloud of smoke burst through the opening.

Daryna dropped to her knees, coughing.

"Dad, pass Maksym to me!"

Her father's arms emerged from the darkness, holding the unconscious boy.

Daryna caught her brother beneath the armpits and dragged him outside. Maksym was heavy, his face black with soot.

"He's not breathing!"

"He is," the Nameless One said. "Faintly, but he is."

Daryna hauled her brother away from the shed. Her mother knelt beside him.

"Maksym! My boy, open your eyes!"

Natalia cleared his mouth and checked his breathing. A few seconds later, he coughed.

"Dad's still inside!" Daryna cried.

She returned to the window.

A burning beam crashed down inside. Vasyl cried out.

“I can’t get through!” came his voice.

“There’s a barrel to the right of the window,” the boy said. “Tell him to climb onto it.”

Daryna repeated the instructions.

“How do you know?” Vasyl asked.

“Just do it!”

Vasyl pulled an empty metal barrel into place, climbed onto it, and pushed his arms through the window. The opening was narrow. The frame scraped his shoulders, and his clothes caught on a nail.

Daryna seized her father’s hand.

“Pull!” he shouted.

Two neighbors came running. Together they dragged Vasyl out an instant before the shed roof collapsed.

A column of sparks rose into the sky.

People carried water, but the shed could no longer be saved. Flames reached the woodpile. Neighbors soaked the house roof to keep the fire from spreading.

The fire engine arrived forty minutes later.

By then only charred walls remained of the shed.

Maksym sat on a blanket, hugging Rudy to his chest. The puppy was trembling but unharmed. Their father’s burned hands were bandaged, and he had a wound on his head from a blow.

“How did you wake up?” her mother asked Daryna.

The girl looked at the barefoot boy.

He was sitting beside the scorched pear tree. His body had grown transparent again, and his white shirt was streaked with soot.

“I had a dream.”

Her father followed her gaze.

“Is he here?”

Daryna flinched.

“Who?”

“Don’t lie. Not now.”

She slowly nodded.

“By the pear tree.”

Vasyl looked there. He could not see the boy, but he seemed to sense his presence.

“He showed you the window?”

“Yes.”

Her father was silent.

“If it hadn’t been for him, we couldn’t have saved you,” Daryna said.

Vasyl bowed his head.

“I know.”

Later they learned that the fire had begun in the old wiring. The storm had damaged its insulation. A spark had fallen on oily rags lying beside a fuel can.

Maksym had awakened to Rudy’s barking and slipped out to the shed. When the fire broke out, he panicked and hid behind the workbench. Their father noticed the smoke and rushed in to save him, but a falling beam blocked the exit.

A few more minutes and both could have died.

When the neighbors had gone, Daryna approached the scorched pear tree.

The boy was still sitting there.

“Thank you,” she said.

He did not look up.

“You saved them.”

“I only warned you.”

“If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have woken.”

“Are you no longer afraid of me?”

Daryna sat beside him.

“I am.”

The boy shuddered.

“But now I know there is goodness in you.”

“And darkness too.”

“Every human has darkness inside.”

“I’m not human.”

“You were once. And you can remain human.”

He looked toward the burned shed.

“The one beneath the oak didn’t want me to wake you. She said that when your father died, you would stay with me.”

“And what did you think?”

The boy was silent for a long time.

“At first I thought she was right.”

Daryna felt the cold but did not move away.

“And then?”

“I remembered how you pulled me out of the bog. You could have saved only Olenka, but you came back for me.”

“Because you’re my friend.”

“So I came back for your family too.”

He held out his hand.

Daryna hesitated, then covered it with her own.

His fingers were still icy.

But this time, somewhere deep beneath the cold, a faint genuine warmth glimmered.

“When the darkness wakes inside you, come to me,” Daryna said. “I’ll remind you who you are.”

“But you don’t know who I am yourself.”

“I know the most important thing.”

“What?”

“You’re the one who saved my family today.”

The boy smiled.

A tall black shadow appeared behind him. It reached out long arms but could not touch him.

In the ashes between the boy’s bare feet, a small green blade of grass pushed through.

CHAPTER 14

The Old Healer

After the fire, Daryna could not get warm.

The September days were mild, but she wore a woolen cardigan and slept beneath two blankets. Her mother took her temperature several times. The thermometer read thirty-five point two degrees.

"That isn't right," Natalia worried. "We need to go to hospital."

"I'm not ill."

"Your hands are freezing."

"I'm just cold."

"Cold from what? It's twenty degrees outside."

The cold was worst at night.

As soon as Daryna fell asleep, a shadow appeared beside her bed. It had no face, but she felt its gaze. Sometimes it spoke in the boy's voice:

"Open the window."

Daryna never answered.

The real Nameless One no longer visited her dreams.

On the morning after the third sleepless night, Grandmother Ulyana came to see them. She brought a jar of goat's milk and studied the burned shed for a long time.

"The fire took everything but spared the house," the old woman said. "Someone turned disaster aside."

Her father said nothing.

Ulyana entered Daryna's room. At the sight of the black handprint on the window, she crossed herself.

"How long has this been here?"

"Since Bohdan's accident," Daryna answered.

The old woman touched the glass and immediately drew back her hand.

"That isn't his mark."

"Whose is it?"

"The one standing behind him."

Grandmother Ulyana went into the kitchen.

"Take the girl to Myron."

"That's all we need," her father said. "I'm not taking my child to a village sorcerer."

“You didn’t refuse his help when you came back from the ravine yourself as a boy.”

Daryna looked at her father.

“He treated you?”

Vasyl pressed his lips together.

“Your mother brought you to Myron half-dead,” Ulyana went on. “For three days you wouldn’t open your eyes, and you kept asking about some little boy.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“Myron remembers.”

The old woman turned to Daryna.

“If he can still help, it must be now.”

Old Myron lived beyond the river, in a small cottage surrounded by a neglected orchard. He was well past ninety, yet people still came to him for herbs, salves, and advice.

Some called him a healer; others, a sorcerer. He himself said he simply knew how to see what everyone else walked past with their eyes closed.

Her father agreed to go only after Daryna’s fingers turned blue.

He did not speak on the way.

Two old rowan trees grew beside Myron’s gate. Red threads, tiny bells, and bunches of dried herbs hung from the branches.

“That won’t help,” Vasyl muttered.

“Then why have we come?”

Her father did not answer.

The door opened before they could knock.

A thin old man stood on the threshold in a white linen shirt. Long gray hair fell to his shoulders, and his light eyes were remarkably clear.

“Come in, Vasyl,” he said. “You’ve brought the same cold to me for a second time.”

Her father went pale.

“Did you know we were coming?”

“No. But your daughter’s shadow has been standing at my gate since morning.”

Myron looked at Daryna.

“You may come in. She will have to stay outside.”

“Who?” the girl asked.

“The one who came for you.”

Daryna wanted to look back, but the healer raised a hand.

“Don’t turn around.”

He took a little copper bell from the doorway and rang it gently. An angry whisper came from behind Daryna.

A cold hand touched her hair.

“She’s mine...” hissed a woman’s voice.

Myron struck the threshold three times with his staff.

“You shall not cross this threshold uninvited.”

Something retreated behind Daryna.

“Now come in.”

The cottage smelled of dried herbs, apples, and wax. Old icons hung on the walls, and the shelves were crowded with books and clay pots.

Myron sat Daryna at a table. He put a bowl of clear water in front of her and lit a beeswax candle beside it.

The flame immediately turned blue.

“Lay your hands beside the bowl, but do not touch the water.”

Daryna obeyed.

Her reflection appeared on the surface.

Over her right shoulder stood a barefoot boy in a white shirt. His eyes were shut, and thin black roots coiled around his neck.

Behind him towered a dark female figure.

Vasyl turned abruptly away.

“That’s him,” her father whispered. “I saw him.”

“When?” Daryna asked.

“When I was a child.”

“You said you didn’t remember.”

“I didn’t want to remember.”

Myron pinched out the candle with his fingers. The water in the bowl grew clear again.

“Tell me everything, girl.”

“What exactly?”

“From the first meeting. Hide nothing. Secrets have fed this trouble long enough.”

Daryna glanced at her father.

She had promised the boy she would not tell anyone about him. But now silence might harm not just her, but the Nameless One himself.

Daryna told them everything.

About the fog, the icy spring, and the boy who did not remember his name. About the dreams, the examination ticket, the red toy car, and Ruta the mavka. About rescuing Olenka, punishing Serhiy, and Bohdan's accident.

When she reached the fire, Myron nodded.

"So the human part of him still lives."

"He's good," she said. "Just lonely, and he doesn't understand what he does."

"A child can be good and dangerous at the same time. Especially one who has spent many years beside another's hatred."

"Who is he?"

The healer lit the candle again.

"In our folklore such souls were called *poterchata*. Children who died unbaptized, left without a name or a prayer."

"But he looks seven. In my vision he was a baby."

"A soul does not grow like a body. It takes the shape of the age it longed to reach. Your boy has never run, spoken, or played with a toy car. The forest made him a childhood out of other people's dreams."

Daryna remembered how he had not known what to do with the shirt or the bread.

"Was he killed immediately after birth?"

"It seems so."

"By whom?"

"That I cannot see."

Myron pointed at the water.

"A cold shadow stands between him and his past. It feeds on the shame, fear, and silence of those who buried the child. As long as the truth remains hidden, the shadow will keep him beside the oak."

"Is that the faceless woman?"

"She is not a woman. She only wears a woman's form because the first human the boy saw before dying was a woman."

"His mother?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps the one who took his life."

Daryna looked down at her hands.

"Why is the shadow following me?"

“You gave the boy something he never had: friendship, presents, care. Through you he touched the world of the living again. Now you have become a bridge.”

“Ruta said he could become a doorway.”

“A bridge leads both ways. If the child crosses it, he may find freedom. If the darkness crosses, it will find a road to the village.”

“How can I tell the boy from her?”

“The boy asks. The shadow commands. The boy may make mistakes, become angry, and even do evil, but afterward he regrets it. The shadow never regrets.”

Myron took a lump of wax and placed it on Daryna’s palm.

Frost covered it at once.

“His cold is already inside you. Every dream you let him enter gives him part of your warmth.”

“I can’t abandon him.”

“I’m not telling you to. If you turn away, the darkness will claim him sooner.”

“Then what should I do?”

Myron went to an old chest and took out a small linen pouch.

“First find his true story.”

“I was going to speak to Stepan Andriyovych.”

“Good. He collected war documents. Look for a woman who gave birth during the occupation. She may still be alive.”

“If I find his mother, will he remember his name?”

“If she had time to give him one.”

“And if she didn’t?”

“Then a name must be given to him. But not by you or me.”

“By a priest?”

“That is still a long way off. First find the truth, the grave, and at least one person who will acknowledge that this child lived.”

The healer tied the pouch with red thread and gave it to Daryna.

“It contains rowan, St. John’s wort, and a piece of candle wax. Wear it close to your heart. It won’t protect you from the boy, because he isn’t your enemy. But the shadow will find it harder to speak in his voice.”

“How much time do I have?”

“Until the Feast of the Protection.”

Daryna remembered Grandfather Dubovyk’s words.

“How do you know?”

“Because it was on the night before that feast, many years ago, that a baby was buried beneath the old oak.”

The room fell silent.

“Then his mother gave birth in autumn,” Daryna said.

“On the night of October thirteenth to fourteenth, nineteen forty-three.”

“You know more than you’re telling us.”

Myron lowered his eyes.

“I only know what I heard from someone who has been dead a long time. She never named the mother.”

“Who told you?”

“The woman who carried the boy to the oak.”

Daryna rose.

“You saw her?”

“Many years afterward. Before her death, she came to me and begged me to lift a curse.”

“And you didn’t ask whom she’d killed?”

“I did. But the shadow stole her voice before she could answer.”

Myron opened the door.

A thin layer of frost lay on the threshold. Small bare footprints marked it. They led from the gate to the cottage but did not cross the doorway.

“He’s waiting for you,” the healer said.

Daryna went outside.

The boy stood beside a rowan. Black roots circled his neck, but his eyes were those of a child again.

“You told him about me,” he said sadly.

“Otherwise I won’t be able to save you.”

“Do you know who I am now?”

Daryna approached him.

“Not yet. But I know where to start looking.”

The boy touched the linen pouch close to her heart. The black roots around his neck twitched and loosened.

Vasyl came out of the cottage.

He could not see the boy, but he turned his head in his direction.

“Did you save me back then, when I was little?” her father asked quietly.

The Nameless One nodded.

“And last night too?”

The boy nodded again.

“Thank you,” Vasyl said.

For the first time in many years, tears appeared on the boy’s face.

They rolled down his pale cheeks and fell to the ground as tiny pieces of ice.

CHAPTER 15

The Terms of Salvation

“Wait,” Myron said as Vasyl and Daryna were about to leave. “I haven’t told you everything.”

The old healer stood on the threshold, looking toward the boy crying beneath the rowan tree.

“There is less than a month until the Feast of the Protection. You must know what will happen that night.”

Vasyl glanced at his daughter.

“Let’s go back inside.”

“The boy can’t cross the threshold,” Daryna said.

“And he mustn’t,” Myron confirmed. “We’ll talk outside.”

He carried a low wooden table out of the house and placed it beneath an old apple tree. Then he brought four things: a handful of earth, a blank sheet of paper, an unlit candle, and a small bowl of water.

“What are those?” Daryna asked.

“Four keys.”

Myron put the earth in the middle of the table.

“The first key is the grave. You must find exactly where the child lies.”

“We know,” Daryna said. “Beneath the old oak.”

“There’s more earth under that oak than in your vegetable garden. Over the years the roots have shifted, the slopes have crumbled, and the stream has cut a new course. Besides, the darkness will hide the true place.”

“How can we find it?”

“A wooden toy was buried with the child. A little horse with a broken leg.”

Daryna remembered the old story about the German soldiers.

“They found a horse like that after the war.”

“The hunter Matviy found it. He took it out of the ravine because he understood it had belonged to the child. Before he died, Matviy gave the toy to someone he trusted.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. But if you find the horse and return it to the oak, it will show you the burial place.”

The boy approached the table. He could see the objects but hesitated to touch them.

“Did I have a little horse?”

“Perhaps the only gift anyone ever gave you,” Myron answered.

“Who gave it to me?”

“That too we must discover.”

The healer placed the blank sheet beside the earth.

“The second key is truth. You must establish who gave birth to the child, who took his life, and why his body was secretly buried in the ravine.”

“Isn’t finding the grave enough?” Vasyl asked.

“No. It isn’t the earth holding him, but lies. People concealed the baby’s birth, death, and very existence. Until the secret is spoken aloud, the cold shadow will remain powerful.”

“What if all the witnesses are dead?”

“Letters, parish registers, photographs, old newspapers remain. Sometimes human memory outlives the people who carried it.”

“Stepan Andriyovych collected documents like that,” Daryna said.

“Begin with him. Question those who remember the occupation. But don’t tell them at once whom you’re looking for. The darkness listens to more than trees.”

Myron picked up the unlit candle.

“The third key is the name.”

The boy stood very still.

“Mine?”

“Yours.”

“What if I never had one?”

“Your mother may have called you something in her heart. She may have written a name in a letter, or whispered it when she first held you.”

“What if she didn’t want me?”

“Then someone who accepts you as their own, out of love rather than fear, must give you a name.”

The boy looked at Daryna.

“Can she?”

“Only if no real name ever existed,” Myron said. “But we must not hurry. The wrong name will not free you; it will bind you to the one who gives it.”

Daryna remembered Ruta’s warning.

"He'll become my shadow."

"Yes. At first he'll come into your dreams. Then he'll take your warmth. Eventually your memories will mingle, and neither of you will know where one soul ends and the other begins."

The boy backed away from Daryna.

"I don't want to take your warmth."

"I know."

"Then don't give me a name."

"First we'll find your mother."

Myron lit the candle. Its flame was small but steady.

"The last key is prayer."

"Does he need to be baptized?" Vasyl asked.

"The dead are not baptized. No honest priest would call what we must do an ordinary baptism. But a prayer can be said over the child who has been found, his grave can be blessed, a cross placed upon it, and he can be remembered by name for the first time."

"Will that be enough?"

"If the boy himself wants to go."

Daryna looked at the Nameless One.

"What if he doesn't?"

The candle flame shivered.

"No prayer can free a soul by force," Myron answered. "He must renounce vengeance, forgive those who denied him life, and leave the ravine of his own free will."

"I don't want to go," the boy said.

"You don't even know where that road leads."

"Daryna won't be there."

"But neither will the cold."

"I'd rather be cold."

Daryna came closer.

"Don't say that."

"You want to send me away."

"I want to save you."

"So you won't have to see me again?"

"So you can be free."

The boy pressed Spark to his chest.

"What if freedom means being alone again?"

Daryna could not answer.

Myron placed the bowl of water in front of him.

“Look.”

The old oak appeared reflected on its surface. Under its roots lay a child wrapped in white cloth. A dark figure bent over the tiny body.

Beyond it stretched a road of light.

It began on the other side of the stream and led to a place bathed in the warm morning sun. Someone stood waiting there with outstretched arms.

The person’s face remained indistinct.

“Is that my mother?” the boy asked.

“Perhaps.”

He reached toward the water.

The dark figure in the reflection jerked its head around. Long arms rose from the bowl and seized the boy’s wrist.

The Nameless One screamed.

Daryna rushed toward him, but Myron threw the water onto the ground.

The black hands vanished.

Dark marks remained on the boy’s wrist.

“She heard us,” the healer said. “Now she knows we are searching for a road.”

A dull blow sounded from the forest.

The earth shuddered beneath their feet. Leaves fell from the apple tree, and the candle went out.

“What was that?” Vasyl asked.

“The ravine turned over in its sleep.”

“Is it opening already?”

“Not yet. But cracks have appeared.”

Myron gathered the four objects and wrapped them in white linen.

“On the evening of October thirteenth, the paths in the ravine will meet at the old oak. At midnight, the roots will part and the road between worlds will open.”

“How long will it stay open?” Daryna asked.

“Until the first church bell before dawn.”

“What happens if we’re too late?”

“The darkness will take the boy beneath the roots. When he wakes again, he will no longer be a child.”

“What will he be?”

Myron looked toward the forest.

“A new face for the thing living in the ravine.”

The boy touched his own cheeks.

“I’ll become her?”

“If you let anger win.”

“I won’t.”

“She won’t ask permission. She will come speaking in your mother’s voice, Daryna’s, or someone else’s you long to hear. She’ll promise a name, warmth, and friendship forever.”

“I won’t believe her.”

“You believed her already when she helped you punish those two boys.”

The Nameless One stepped back.

“I did that myself.”

“With her power.”

The boy’s eyes turned black.

“They deserved it.”

A black shadow crept across the ground from the rowan tree and touched his bare feet.

“Don’t listen to her,” Daryna said. “Remember Olenka, the calf, my father, and Maksym. You saved them.”

The darkness stopped.

The boy’s eyes returned to normal.

Myron watched him closely.

“That is why he needs more than the grave, the truth, the name, and the prayer. He needs you.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“At the decisive moment, remind him who he has chosen to be.”

“What if he chooses the darkness?”

“Then run and do not look back.”

“I won’t abandon him.”

“If he ceases to be a boy, there will be no one left to save.”

The Nameless One heard these words.

He turned and ran toward the rowans. Daryna rushed after him, but Myron caught her arm.

“Not now.”

“He thinks I want to get rid of him!”

“You won’t convince him with words. Only deeds.”

“What deeds?”

“Find proof that he lived. Give him back the story stolen from him.”

The boy stopped by the gate. He looked back for an instant, then disappeared among the trees.

Spark remained beneath the rowan.

Daryna picked up the car. Almost none of its former red color remained. The toy had turned gray and cold.

“Why did he leave it?” she asked.

“Because he’s beginning to prepare for loneliness,” Myron replied.

“Don’t let him believe it’s inevitable.”

Vasyl put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

“Tomorrow we’ll go to Stepan Andriyovych together.”

Daryna looked at her father in surprise.

“You’ll help me?”

“I’ve been silent far too long. Perhaps it was our silence that allowed the ravine to become so powerful.”

A child’s cry came from the forest.

Daryna pressed the cold car against her heart.

Now she knew what it would take to save the boy.

Before the night of the Feast of the Protection, they must find the grave, establish the truth, restore his name, and bring a priest to the old oak.

Twenty-seven days remained.

CHAPTER 16

Village Legends

The next morning Vasyl and Daryna returned to the house with the blue shutters.

This time there was no padlock on the gate. A tall, thin man wearing an old hat stood in the garden, picking apples and placing them carefully in a wicker basket.

Stepan Andriyovych was eighty-two. He walked with a cane and wore thick glasses, but his memory was excellent. He had taught history at the village school for almost forty years, and after retiring he had collected old documents, photographs, and stories from the people of Vilshany.

“Vasyl?” he said in surprise. “You haven’t visited me for a long time.”

“I’ve brought my daughter. She wants to ask you something.”

The teacher looked closely at Daryna.

“You’re the one who found the Kravets girl?”

“Yes.”

“And got her out of the old bog?”

“Not by myself.”

Vasyl cleared his throat.

“May we talk inside?”

“Come in.”

There was almost no empty space in the house. Books, bundles of newspapers tied with string, boxes of letters, and old photographs lay on shelves, chairs, and even the floor.

Stepan Andriyovych cleared the papers off two chairs.

“What would you like to know?”

“About the Deep Ravine,” Daryna said.

The teacher removed his glasses.

“Better not to take an interest in the ravine’s history.”

“We have to.”

“Everyone says that. Some are hunting treasure, others want to summon spirits. Then people disappear, and the old forest gets the blame.”

“We’re looking for a child,” Daryna replied.

The teacher’s hand froze.

“What child?”

“A baby buried beneath the old oak in the autumn of 1943.”

The room seemed colder.

Stepan Andriyovych slowly put his glasses back on and looked first at Daryna, then at her father.

“Who told you that?”

“Old Myron.”

“He’s still alive?”

“Yes.”

The teacher went to the window and closed the vent.

“Village people love inventing legends.”

“But you wrote them down,” Daryna observed.

“I did.”

“So you didn’t think they were entirely invented.”

Stepan Andriyovych smiled.

“A legend is a truth whispered from one person to another for so long that it no longer resembles itself.”

He took a thick folder from a cupboard.

“I never found any official documents about the child. But the record of the seven Germans remains.”

The teacher placed a yellowed newspaper clipping before them.

A short notice reported that in June 1945, the bodies of seven German servicemen had been discovered in the forest near Vilshany. No signs of violent death were found. The cause was attributed to poisoning by an unknown substance.

“Were they poisoned?” Daryna asked.

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“My father helped carry the bodies out. None had been vomiting or writhing in pain. They died of fright.”

“Can that happen?”

“A person can die of fright. But what would you have to show seven armed soldiers to frighten them all to death?”

Daryna remembered Ruta’s words: the boy had shown them what they had brought with them.

“Did one of them dig up the child’s grave?”

The teacher raised his head sharply.

“How do you know that?”

“I guessed.”

Stepan Andriyovych looked at Vasyl.

“Can your daughter see him too?”

Her father did not answer.

“See whom?” Daryna asked.

“The boy in the white shirt.”

Something tapped softly in the hallway.

The teacher opened the door, but no one was there.

“After that incident, the hunter Matviy wrote down his testimony,” he continued. “Nobody accepted it officially. At the district office, they decided the old man had gone mad.”

Stepan Andriyovych produced a thin notebook with a cloth cover.

Written in an uneven hand on the first page were the words:

“They were digging beneath the oak. One of them knew why the child was crying. The boy stood beside the water and asked who he was. No one answered.”

“What does ‘one of them knew’ mean?” Daryna asked.

“Matviy never explained. Or he never had the chance.”

“Who might know the truth?”

The teacher thought for a moment.

“A few people remain in the village who were children during the occupation. But each will tell you a different story.”

“We’ll listen to them all.”

Their first visit was to Grandmother Orysia.

The old woman lived near the cemetery. When she heard the question about the baby, she crossed herself three times and ordered the door shut.

“It was autumn,” Orysia began. “Already cold. One night someone heard a baby crying near Paraska Boychuk’s house.”

“Who was Paraska?” Daryna asked.

“A widow. Her husband died before the war. She lived with her daughter Hanna.”

“Was Hanna pregnant?”

Orysia pressed her lips together.

“People said so. She hardly ever left the house. Paraska hid her from the neighbors.”

“Who was the father?”

“Some said a German. Others said one of our own policemen.”

“What happened after the birth?”

“The baby cried that night. I heard it myself. By morning it was quiet. Paraska said it had been stillborn.”

“Did you believe her?”

Orysia glanced at the closed door.

“No. Dead babies don’t cry.”

“What happened to Hanna?”

“They said she died in childbirth. Or perhaps her mother took her to relatives. I never saw her again.”

“Who buried the baby beneath the oak?”

The old woman crossed herself.

“Nobody saw that. But a few days later Paraska burned a bloody shirt and carried an empty cradle out of the house.”

From Orysia’s cottage they went to old Korniy.

He listened to Daryna and struck the floor angrily with his cane.

“Everyone blames that child for everything! The ravine was a bad place long before the war.”

“What happened there before?”

“My grandfather said sacrifices used to be made under the old oak, before Christianity came. The tree grew where there had once been a pagan shrine.”

“Human sacrifices?”

“Who knows? Animals perhaps. Or people. The roots of that oak don’t drink water.”

“What do they drink?”

Korniy leaned toward Daryna.

“Fear.”

“Did you see the boy?”

“No. But I heard him.”

“When?”

“In ’45. The night the Germans died. Such crying came from the forest that the cows tore their ropes in the stalls.”

“Who was the baby’s father?”

“A German officer. He often came to the Boychuks’ house.”

“Was he in love with Hanna?”

Old Korniy laughed.

“Does an occupier ask permission? He took what he wanted and left.”

The third person they visited was Grandmother Solomiya, a former village midwife. She was nearly blind and lay in a little room near a warm stove.

When Daryna mentioned Paraska Boychuk, the old woman stirred.

“She came to me.”

“When?”

“The day before the birth. Asked for herbs to stop the baby being born.”

“Did you give them to her?”

“No. I told her I wouldn’t take that sin upon my soul.”

“Did you attend the birth?”

“Paraska wouldn’t let me in. I came when I heard Hanna screaming, but the door was locked.”

“Was the baby born alive?”

Solomiya closed her blind eyes.

“I heard him. The boy cried loudly.”

“Are you sure it was a boy?”

“Paraska herself shouted, ‘What am I supposed to do with a German bastard?’ Then the child suddenly went quiet.”

Daryna felt the linen pouch beside her heart grow cold.

“What happened afterward?”

“In the morning Paraska said the baby had died. Hanna lay unconscious and knew nothing.”

“Where did they take the body?”

“I never saw.”

“And Hanna?”

“She survived. A few weeks later Paraska took her out of the village. Where, I don’t know.”

“Why do people say she died?”

“Because that’s what her mother told them.”

A baby’s quiet crying came from somewhere in the room.

Solomiya shuddered.

“Is he here again?”

Daryna looked around.

The boy stood in a dark corner. Finger marks were black on his throat.

“Can you see him?” she asked.

“No. But I’ve heard him for fifty-five years.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

"I did tell people. They didn't want to listen. Everyone was afraid of the Germans, the policemen, and one another. Afterward they were ashamed to admit that an entire village had heard a baby crying and not one person had broken down the door."

The boy approached the bed.

"Did she know me?"

"She heard you," Daryna replied softly. "But she couldn't help."

The old woman turned her head toward the voice.

"You haven't come alone?"

"I'm with my father."

"No. Someone else is standing beside you."

Vasyl went pale.

Solomiya held out her hand. The boy tried to touch it, but his fingers passed through the old woman's palm.

"Forgive us, little one," the midwife whispered. "We all betrayed you."

A tiny piece of ice appeared on the blanket.

When Daryna and her father returned to Stepan Andriyovych, the sun was already sinking toward the horizon.

"Well?" the teacher asked.

"One person says Hanna died, another says she was taken away. Some talk about love with a German, others about violence. Old Korniy thinks the oak was cursed from the beginning."

"I warned you."

"How can we tell which is true?"

Stepan Andriyovych poured tea.

"Don't discard any legend completely. Each one has preserved a fragment of what happened."

"Then Hanna Boychuk gave birth to a living boy. Paraska told everyone the baby died, then took her daughter away. The father was a German soldier who visited their house."

"That gives us a direction."

"But we have no proof."

"There is one book."

The teacher stood and took an old photograph from a shelf.

It showed several village girls. One held an embroidered towel. On the back, in ink, were written the words:

"Hanna Boychuk. Spring 1943."

Daryna looked at the girl.

Hanna could not have been more than eighteen. Her dark hair was in two braids, and her large eyes looked straight into the camera.

Somewhere nearby, the boy softly hummed a lullaby.

“Did he recognize her?” Stepan Andriyovych asked.

“I don’t know. He remembered a song.”

The teacher handed Daryna the photograph.

“During the occupation, the old priest, Father Fedir, secretly recorded births, deaths, and marriages. Even those people begged him to keep quiet about.”

“Where’s the book?”

“After the church was closed, it was hidden in the bell tower. Now Father Oleksiy keeps the archive.”

“Will he let us see it?”

“If you come with me.”

Stepan Andriyovych went to an old chest, unlocked it, and took out a small bundle.

“Matviy gave this to my father. He asked him to keep it until someone came searching not for treasure, but for a child.”

The teacher unwrapped the cloth.

A small wooden horse with a broken leg lay on the table.

The boy appeared beside Daryna.

He reached toward the toy but did not touch it.

“I remember it,” he whispered.

“Who gave it to you?”

Pain twisted his face.

For a moment Daryna saw a white room, a young woman, and a German soldier placing a wooden horse beside a baby’s cradle.

Then the vision vanished.

“Him,” the boy said. “The one who died beneath the oak.”

The wooden horse turned its head by itself.

A small tarnished button from a German military tunic fell out of its hollow side.

CHAPTER 17

The Old Church Register

The old Church of the Protection stood on a hill above the village.

It had been built before the revolution and closed several times afterward. During the Soviet years the church was used to store grain and fertilizer. Its bells were removed, villagers took away the icons, and the parish registers were supposed to be burned.

Someone had managed to hide part of the archive in the bell tower.

When the church was returned to the congregation, the yellowed books were found beneath old floorboards. Moisture had damaged most of the pages, but the wartime records might have survived.

The following morning, Stepan Andriyovych took Daryna and her father to see Father Oleksiy.

The Nameless One followed them.

The others could not see him, but Daryna felt the familiar cold behind her. He carried the wooden horse the old teacher had allowed them to take.

“Do you remember anything?” Daryna asked.

“No.”

“But yesterday you said you’d seen this toy before.”

“I had. It lay beside me when it was dark.”

“In the grave?”

The boy held the horse against his chest.

“I don’t know. After that I remember only earth.”

As they approached the church fence, a bell began to ring.

The boy stopped.

The first stroke made his body shudder. At the second, frost appeared on his white shirt. After the third he fell to his knees.

“What’s wrong?” Daryna rushed to him.

“I can’t go any farther.”

Vasyl looked back.

“Is he here?”

“Yes. The bell hurts him.”

Stepan Andriyovych crossed himself.

“Let him wait by the old linden. Unclean spirits cannot cross a churchyard fence.”

"He isn't an unclean spirit," Daryna protested.

"That isn't what I meant."

The boy raised his head.

"Go. I'll wait."

"I'll be quick."

"Find my name."

He sat under the linden, outside the fence.

Father Oleksiy met them at the entrance. He was a middle-aged man with a short gray beard and observant eyes.

"Stepan Andriyovych, you should have warned me," he said. "These books are very fragile. They can't be handled over and over."

"We're looking for one entry."

"Which one?"

"The birth of a child in October 1943. The mother was Hanna Boychuk."

The priest looked at Daryna.

"Why do you want that record?"

"The child wasn't buried in the cemetery. His grave is in the forest."

"How do you know?"

"He's asking us to find it."

Father Oleksiy frowned.

"The dead ought not speak to the living."

"What if they have no one else to speak to?" Daryna asked.

The priest did not answer.

Stepan Andriyovych laid Matviy's notebook and the newspaper clipping about the seven Germans in front of him.

Father Oleksiy read the account.

"The boy in the white shirt," he said quietly. "I've heard that legend."

"It's no legend," Vasyl said. "He's saved my life twice."

The priest raised his eyes.

"Have you seen him?"

"I heard him as a child. Now my daughter can see him."

Father Oleksiy was silent for a long time.

Then he unlocked a side door.

"Come with me."

A narrow wooden stairway led into the bell tower. A thick layer of dust lay on every step. Beneath the roof stood two large cupboards and several chests.

The priest opened one of the cupboards.

"The books are arranged by year. But the records were kept irregularly during the occupation."

He took out a heavy book bound in cracked leather. A barely legible inscription marked its spine:

1941–1944

They laid it on a table beside a small window.

Father Oleksiy turned the pages carefully. Entries had been written in different inks. Some letters had blurred, and mice had eaten parts of the leaves.

Daryna read names of people who had long been dead.

Baptisms. Marriages. Burials.

Behind each brief entry was an entire life.

They reached the autumn of 1943.

September ended with a record of two villagers executed for helping partisans. The next page was blank.

"There's nothing here," Vasyl said.

"October should follow," Stepan Andriyovych objected.

Father Oleksiy ran his finger along the binding.

"The pages have stuck together."

A thin layer of black wax lay between the sheets. It was hard and cold.

Daryna felt Myron's pouch warm against her heart.

"Don't touch the wax," she said.

"Why not?"

"She hid the entry."

A child's voice came from a dark corner of the tower.

"Daryna..."

She turned.

The boy stood behind the old beams.

"How did you get in?" she asked.

He reached out to her.

"Help me."

Daryna took a step, then remembered Grandfather Dubovyk's rule: never answer a voice if you cannot see the face of the one calling.

The boy's face remained in shadow.

"Come into the light."

"It hurts."

“Show me your face.”

The figure stepped forward.

Beneath the dark hair, where its face should have been, was smooth, pale skin.

“Don’t open the book,” the creature whispered.

Daryna backed away.

Father Oleksiy seized a small wooden cross from the wall.

“Who’s there?”

The figure lunged toward the table.

Daryna took off her pouch, tore the red thread, and scattered the dried rowan and bits of candle wax over the book.

The black wax hissed.

The bell overhead began ringing by itself.

The faceless figure screamed and disintegrated into black dust.

The stuck pages parted.

A date appeared on the right-hand page:

October 14, 1943.

“Found it,” Stepan Andriyovych whispered.

Father Oleksiy tilted the book toward the light and read:

“In the household of the widow Paraska Boychuk, a male child was delivered to her daughter Hanna Petrivna. The infant was born alive. Baptism was not performed owing to the family’s opposition.”

The space where the name should have been was blank.

“And the father?” Daryna asked.

The priest read the next line.

““Father unnamed. According to the midwife’s testimony, a serviceman of the German army.””

“So it’s true,” Vasyl said.

Below, another entry had been made in different ink.

““On October fifteenth, Paraska Boychuk reported the infant’s death. The body was not brought to church. No burial place was specified.””

“Why didn’t the priest check?” Daryna asked.

“He had no way of doing so during the occupation,” Father Oleksiy answered. “Armed men were stationed in the village. Everyone feared for their families.”

Stepan Andriyovych pointed to small writing at the bottom of the page.

“There’s something else.”

The priest brought the book closer to the window.

“The infant’s mother remained unconscious after childbirth. The death was reported by the child’s grandmother. No church burial took place.”

Daryna ran her finger beside the empty space.

“She didn’t even name him.”

“Perhaps she did, but Paraska forbade it to be written down,” Stepan Andriyovych said.

“There is no evidence here that the child died a natural death,” Vasyl added.

“There isn’t even proof of a burial,” the priest answered. “If the family had brought the body to church, Father Fedir would have made a separate entry.”

Daryna turned several pages. The nameless infant was not among those recorded as dead in October.

“To the church, he was born but never died,” she said.

Father Oleksiy looked at the blank space in the register.

“As though he remained between two entries.”

A soft toll came from the church.

“He’s waiting,” Daryna remembered.

She ran down the stairs and out into the yard.

The boy sat under the linden, the wooden horse on his knees.

“Did you find it?” he asked.

Daryna stood beside him.

“You were born on October fourteenth, nineteen forty-three.”

“On the Feast of the Protection?”

“Yes.”

“Was I alive?”

“The book says you were born alive.”

The boy touched his chest.

“Did my heart beat?”

“It did.”

“Did I breathe?”

“Yes.”

Tears appeared in his eyes.

“So I really was human.”

“And you still are.”

“And my name?”

Daryna could not answer immediately.

“The space is blank.”

The boy lowered his head.

“She didn’t want to name me.”

“We don’t know that. Your mother was unconscious after the birth. Your grandmother reported your death.”

“My grandmother?”

“Paraska Boychuk.”

The moment Daryna spoke the name, the wooden horse fell from the boy’s hands.

A vision flashed before her eyes.

A dark room. A young woman lies in bed, weakly asking for her child. Paraska stands by the door.

“He died,” she says coldly.

“I heard him cry...”

“You imagined it.”

“Let me see him.”

“Forget it. You never had a child.”

The vision vanished.

The boy stood with his face buried in his hands.

“She said I never existed.”

“But the book proves otherwise.”

Daryna turned toward the church.

Her father, Stepan Andriyovych, and Father Oleksiy stood in the doorway.

The priest could not see the boy, but he was looking straight toward him.

“If we find his grave, will you say a prayer over him?” Daryna asked.

“An ordinary baptism cannot be performed. But I can bless his burial place and pray for a child whose name is known to God.”

“Will you come to the Deep Ravine?”

Father Oleksiy looked toward the dark forest.

“First find the truth and the name. Then I’ll give you my answer.”

Stepan Andriyovych opened the church register again.

At the edge of the page Father Fedir had left one more barely visible note:

“After recovering, Hanna Boychuk came to church. She did not believe her son was dead. She asked to see his grave. Paraska forbade anyone to speak to her.”

“She was looking for him,” Vasyl said.

The boy slowly lowered his hands.

“Mum wanted to find me?”

“Yes,” Daryna replied. “And perhaps she left a letter or some other record.”

Stepan Andriyovych closed the book.

“The old Boychuk house still stands beyond the mill. No one has lived there since Paraska’s death.”

“Why not?”

“At night a baby could be heard crying inside. People thought the place was cursed.”

Daryna picked up the wooden horse.

Something rustled faintly inside it.

“There may be a letter there,” she said.

“Or the thing that didn’t want us to find this entry,” Stepan Andriyovych answered.

As they left the churchyard, Daryna looked back toward the old book.

The empty space was waiting for a name.

CHAPTER 18

A Mother's Letter

The Boychuks' house stood beyond the old mill, almost at the edge of the forest.

A road had once led to it, but only a narrow path remained, overgrown with nettles and brambles. The roof had collapsed in several places, the windows were boarded up, and the old orchard had run wild.

Even in daylight the house seemed dark.

"After Paraska died, a family from another village tried to settle here," Stepan Andriyovych said. "They stayed three nights."

"Why did they leave?" Daryna asked.

"Their little daughter kept waking and saying that a baby was crying beneath the floor."

The Nameless One stood by the gate holding his wooden horse.

"Do you recognize this place?" Daryna asked.

He stared at the boarded windows.

"I'm frightened here."

"We can go back."

"No. My mother was here."

He entered the yard first.

Vasyl opened the door with a metal bar. The rusty lock broke, but the door itself would not move.

"Something's holding it from inside," he said.

A slow creak came from within the house.

The door opened by itself.

Stepan Andriyovych crossed himself.

"Perhaps we really ought to come back with more people."

"If a crowd comes, the shadow will hide everything," Daryna replied.

They went inside.

The entrance hall smelled of dampness, rotting wood, and smoke extinguished long ago. Bunches of blackened herbs hung on the walls. Dry leaves covered the floor, though every window was closed.

The Nameless One crossed the threshold.

His body became more distinct.

"It's warmer here," he whispered.

“Can you feel warmth?”

“No. But I remember there used to be warmth.”

To the right was a kitchen with a large stove. To the left was a little room. A rusty bed stood in its center, and an old loom could be seen against the wall.

A baby’s swaddling cloth hung from one of the pegs.

Daryna took it down carefully.

The fabric had almost rotted away. A small flower had been embroidered in blue thread in one corner.

The boy touched the cloth.

A vision rose before Daryna’s eyes.

Young Hanna sat sewing beside a window. Her belly was already large. Paraska stood beside her.

“Throw that into the fire,” the mother ordered.

“No.”

“You will not bring a German bastard into my house.”

“This is my child.”

Paraska snatched the cloth and threw it onto the floor.

The vision vanished.

Daryna swayed. Her father steadied her.

“Did you see something again?”

“Hanna wanted to keep her child. Paraska was against it.”

“We can’t treat visions as proof,” Stepan Andriyovych reminded her.

“Then let’s find real proof.”

They began searching the room.

A wardrobe held several women’s shirts, an old sheepskin coat, and a box of buttons. Embroidered towels, mouse-damaged books, and yellowed photographs lay in a chest.

Daryna recognized Hanna in one photograph. She stood beside Paraska, a severe-looking woman with tightly pressed lips.

No man appeared in the picture.

“Nothing,” Vasyl said after searching the chest.

The boy walked around the room, holding the horse out in front of him.

Near the old bed the toy suddenly stirred in his hands. Its one intact front leg tapped the floor several times.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

“Here,” the boy said.

Vasyl knocked on the floorboards. One sounded hollow.

He pried it up with the bar.

A small tin box was hidden beneath the floor. It was rusty, but its lid opened.

Inside were sheets of paper tied with a blue ribbon, a small photograph of a German soldier, and an unfinished envelope.

Written on the envelope were the words:

“To my Aunt Maria.”

“That’s Hanna’s handwriting,” Stepan Andriyovych said, comparing it with her signature on an old school photograph.

Daryna untied the ribbon.

The first page was dated September twenty-fifth, 1943.

She began reading aloud.

“Dear Aunt Maria,

“I don’t know if I’ll dare send this letter. Mother forbids me to leave the house and tells everyone I’ve gone to stay with relatives. But I must tell the truth, if only to paper, because I’m afraid that soon I too will be forced into silence.

“People in the village say I willingly went to a German soldier. Don’t believe them. His name is Karl Berger. Last winter he came to our house with other servicemen. They were looking for partisans and taking food. When Mother ran to the neighbors for help, he stayed with me.

“I begged him not to touch me. He did not listen.

“Afterward I wanted to die. Mother gave me bitter herbs and told me we had to get rid of the child before anyone noticed. I drank one cup, but I couldn’t bring myself to drink any more. The child is not to blame for who his father is.

“When I first felt the baby moving beneath my heart, I understood that I wanted to live. If it’s a boy, I’ll teach him to be different from that man. If it’s a girl, I’ll do everything I can to make sure no one ever hurts her the way I was hurt.

“Mother says that after the birth she’ll take the baby away. I don’t know what she has planned. I beg you: if you receive this letter, come and take us into your home. I’ll work and won’t be a burden to anyone. Just don’t let her take my child away.”

Daryna stopped.

The room was so quiet that she could hear a dry branch scratching the roof.

The boy sat on the floor beside her feet.

"She wanted me," he whispered.

"She did."

"I wasn't a punishment to her?"

"No."

Vasyl turned toward the window.

Stepan Andriyovych removed his glasses and polished them with a handkerchief to hide his tears.

Daryna continued:

"Karl came twice more. I would not let him in. The last time, he left a wooden horse by the door and said it was for the child. I haven't forgiven him, and I never will forgive what he did. But I kept the toy. Not for him—for my son.

"I already know what I will call the boy. I won't write the name here because I'm afraid Mother might find the letter. I'll tell my son myself when I first hold him.

"Auntie, come before the Feast of the Protection. I can feel that the baby will be born soon.

"Your Hanna."

That was the end of the letter.

"She never got to send it," Vasyl said.

"Or Paraska wouldn't let her," the teacher replied.

Daryna picked up the photograph of the German soldier.

On its back was written:

Karl Berger

One button was missing from his uniform.

Daryna took out the tarnished button that had fallen from the wooden horse. It matched the others in the photograph.

"That's him," the boy said.

"Do you remember him?"

"I don't know. I saw his face by the old oak."

"Was he among the seven dead soldiers?"

The boy closed his eyes.

The smell of wet earth filled the room.

Daryna saw seven armed men in the ravine. One of them, Karl Berger, knelt beside disturbed earth, holding the wooden horse.

“No...” he whispered. “This can’t be...”

A barefoot boy appeared behind him.

“Do you know who I am?” the child asked.

Karl screamed.

The vision broke off.

Daryna dropped the photograph.

“He knew whose grave it was.”

The boy pressed his palms to his temples.

“I made him look.”

“At what?”

“Everything he’d done.”

“Did you kill him?”

“I don’t remember.”

A woman’s voice came from the kitchen.

“You killed him...”

Paraska stood in the doorway.

She looked just as she had in the photograph, except that her face was deathly pale and black soil coated her fingers.

“Can you see her?” Daryna whispered.

Vasyl and Stepan Andriyovych stared at the empty doorway.

Paraska’s figure reached for the letter.

“Give it back.”

Daryna pressed the papers to her chest.

“No.”

“It is our family’s shame.”

“It’s the truth.”

“The child should never have been born.”

The boy rose.

Dark finger marks appeared on his throat.

“Did you do it?” he asked.

Paraska retreated.

Her face blurred, turning into a smooth white mask.

“She isn’t real!” Daryna cried.

The faceless creature lunged.

The linen pouch near Daryna's heart flared with warm light. The figure shrieked and dissolved into the air.

At the same instant, the front door slammed and the floor shuddered.

An old icon fell from the wall.

Behind it was a narrow recess.

Inside lay another envelope, blackened by time and sealed with a drop of wax.

Vasyl carefully took it out.

Written on the envelope in a trembling hand were the words:

"To Father Fedir. Confession of Paraska Boychuk."

Daryna looked at the boy.

He stood motionless, clutching the wooden horse.

Now they had a letter from the mother who had wanted to save her child.

And in Vasyl's hands lay the confession of the woman who might have taken the boy's life.

CHAPTER 19

The True Culprit

The envelope had lain behind the icon for more than half a century.

The wax seal had blackened and cracked. The impression of a small cross could still be made out upon it.

"It's dangerous to open it here," Stepan Andriyovych said. "Let's take it to the church."

"No," Daryna objected. "If we take it out of the house, the shadow may destroy it."

"And it can't destroy it here?"

Daryna looked toward the doorway where the Faceless One had just stood.

"It can. That's why we must read it now."

Vasyl carefully broke the seal.

Inside were several pages covered in a trembling hand. The ink had run in places. At the top of the first page was a date:

May 12, 1966.

Below it were the words:

"Father Fedir, if this letter ever reaches your hands, I ask that you read it to the end. I dare not call it a confession, for I have not the courage to speak my sin aloud. But I shall soon die, and every night the crying of a child comes nearer."

"Father Fedir no longer served in the village then," Stepan Andriyovych said. "The church had been closed and he had been sent away."

"That's why the letter stayed here," Vasyl replied.

Daryna continued reading.

"On the night before the Feast of the Protection in 1943, my daughter Hanna gave birth to a boy.

"The child was born alive and healthy. He cried loudly. Hanna heard him, smiled, and asked me to give her her son. I said I had to wash him first.

"In truth, I had already decided what I would do.

"The whole village knew about the German soldier. People whispered that Hanna had invited him herself. I feared that when our forces returned she would be branded a German's mistress and the child an enemy's

bastard. I feared we would be driven from our home or punished for relations with the occupier.

"I thought neither of my daughter nor of the baby. I thought only of people's tongues and my own fear."

The boy stood beside the bed.

Blue finger marks appeared on his throat. He touched them, as if understanding their cause for the first time.

"Don't read any more," he pleaded.

"We have to know the truth."

"I already know."

"Only part of it."

The boy turned to the wall.

Daryna looked at the letter again.

"When Hanna lost consciousness, I wrapped the child in a white swaddling cloth. The little boy was warm. He moved his hands and searched for his mother.

"I could have called Solomiya. I could have carried him to the church. I could have left him on the doorstep of another house. There were many other paths open to me.

"But I chose the most terrible one.

"I covered the baby's mouth and nose with the cloth. He was so small that he did not struggle for long.

"When he stopped breathing, I heard Hanna calling for her son."

The boy screamed.

The windows shattered. An icy wind burst into the room. Photographs and yellowed papers flew into the air.

"Be quiet!" he shouted at Daryna.

His eyes turned black.

Roots stirred beneath the boards. They broke through the floor and crawled toward the letter.

Vasyl seized his daughter's shoulder.

"We have to get out!"

"If we stop, the darkness will hide the truth again."

Daryna raised her voice above the wind.

"I placed the body in an old basket. Beside him I left the wooden horse the German had brought. At midnight I carried the child to the Deep Ravine.

"The earth beneath the oak was soft, as though someone had been waiting for me. I dug a pit between three large roots, laid the basket in it, and covered it with earth.

"When I threw in the last handful, crying came from underground.

"I knew the child was dead. I myself had stopped his breathing. Yet he cried.

"Then a woman's voice spoke out of the darkness: 'Go. He belongs to me now.'"

The black roots stopped at Daryna's feet.

A tall woman's shadow appeared on the wall.

"He is mine," it repeated.

The Nameless One turned toward the figure.

"Did you make her kill me?"

"I merely received what was freely given."

"I'm not a thing!"

"To the living you were a disgrace. To me you will be a son."

The shadow reached for him.

"I'll give you a name. I'll call you mine. I'll warm you with the fire of others' fear. Anyone who harms you or your friend will fall dead."

The boy took a step toward her.

"Don't listen!" Daryna said.

"She won't abandon me."

"She doesn't love you. She needs your power."

"The living never needed me."

Daryna held up his mother's letter.

"Hanna needed you. She wanted to keep you. She begged her aunt to save you both."

"But she didn't save me."

"Because she was unconscious! She didn't even know what Paraska had done!"

The shadow took on young Hanna's appearance.

"My son, come to me," it called tenderly.

The boy froze.

"That isn't your mother," Daryna said. "The real Hanna has a face. This one doesn't."

The boy looked closely.

The young woman's face blurred into a smooth white mask.

"You're not my mother," he whispered.

"I'm the only one who will stay with you forever."

"No."

The Nameless One took out the red car. Spark flared in his palm.

The dark figure retreated.

"You'll still come back beneath the oak," she hissed. "On the night of the Feast, you'll beg me yourself to give you a name."

The boy directed the red light toward the shadow.

It tore in half and vanished.

The roots withdrew beneath the floor. The wind died away.

The Nameless One fell beside the wall. His eyes were a child's again.

Daryna wanted to approach, but he raised his hand.

"Finish reading."

She returned to the letter.

"In the morning I told Hanna that the boy had been born dead. She did not believe me. She begged to see the body and the grave, but I said I had buried the child in the village cemetery.

"For several weeks my daughter walked among the graves, looking for a small cross. Then she began hearing crying from the forest. I was afraid she would find the ravine, so I took her to my sister Maria in the town of Berestove.

"Hanna lived there for many years. Later she married Ivan Levytsky and took his surname. I never told her the truth.

"I do not know whether my daughter is still alive. If she is, may she someday forgive me. Though I have never forgiven myself."

"Hanna Levytska," Stepan Andriyovych repeated. "Now we know whom to look for."

On the final page Paraska had drawn the old oak and three great roots. A small cross marked the space between them.

"The child lies on the eastern side of the oak, beneath a flat stone. I scratched a cross on the stone. The wooden horse was in the basket with the boy.

"After the war, German soldiers found the horse. Among them was a man called Karl Berger. When he saw the toy, he knew whose grave it was.

"I was watching from the edge of the forest. I saw the fog surround the soldiers. I heard their screams. Then a child's voice asked: 'Who am I?'

“Ever since, the boy comes to me every night. He does not take revenge. He merely stands beside my bed and waits for me to name my crime.

“Father Fedir, I killed my daughter’s son.

“Paraska Boychuk.”

Daryna lowered the letter.

No one spoke.

The Nameless One sat on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees.

“Why did she do it?” he asked.

“She feared what people would say,” Vasyl answered.

“Is fear more important than a child?”

“No.”

“Then why do you living people let fear make your decisions?”

Vasyl had no answer.

“Was she my grandmother?”

“Yes,” Daryna said.

“Am I supposed to forgive her?”

“Not now. First you have a right to be angry and to mourn the life taken from you.”

“Grandfather Myron said I can’t leave without forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness can’t be ordered. It has to come in its own time.”

The boy looked down at his bare feet.

“What if it never comes?”

“We’ll keep searching for a way.”

Stepan Andriyovych carefully put both letters into his folder.

“Now we have proof: the parish record, Hanna’s letter, and Paraska’s confession.”

“And the exact location of the grave,” Vasyl added.

“All that remains is to find the mother.”

Daryna picked up young Hanna’s photograph.

“In 1998 she would be around seventy-three. She might still be alive.”

The Nameless One raised his head.

“Will she know my name?”

“The letter says she did.”

“Find her.”

“I will.”

“Before the Feast?”

“I promise.”

The boy approached Daryna and hugged her.

He was still cold, but this time she felt his heart beat once inside his chest.

Thump.

Just once, faint and distant.

Yet that was enough for the old dead house to smell of warm milk and fresh bread for several seconds.

At the bottom of the tin box they found one more envelope. An old address was written on it:

18 Sadova Street, Berestove.

For Maria Soroka.

It was to that very address that Paraska had taken Hanna so many years ago.

Daryna slipped the address into her pocket.

Now they knew where to search for the last living witness to the nameless boy's birth.

His mother.

CHAPTER 20

The Last Witness

Only one bus went to Berestove, and it left in the morning.

Daryna sat by the window with the bag of letters, the photograph, and the wooden horse on her lap. Her father sat silently beside her.

The Nameless Boy occupied the empty seat across the aisle.

The other passengers could not see him. Whenever someone sat in that seat, he vanished, only to reappear beside Daryna.

"Is she really alive?" he asked for the third time.

"We'll soon find out."

"What if she's dead?"

"Then we'll find people who knew her."

"Will she remember me?"

"A mother doesn't forget her child."

The boy turned toward the window.

The glass reflected the passengers, the seats, and Daryna herself. There was no reflection of him.

"She never even saw me," he whispered.

"She heard you cry. And she searched for your grave."

"Maybe she's forgotten by now."

"You haven't forgotten her, even though you can hardly remember anything."

They reached Berestove at about ten. It was a small town: a few apartment blocks in the center, older houses on the outskirts, a market, and a railway station.

They found Sadova Street without difficulty.

An unfamiliar family lived at number eighteen. The woman of the house listened to Vasył and shook her head.

"Mariya Soroka died about twenty years ago. We bought the house from her son."

"Do you remember Hanna Boychuk?" Daryna asked.

"Hanna Levytska?"

"Perhaps."

“She lived here with her aunt for a long time. Then she married and moved closer to the station. Her husband died years ago, but Hanna Petrivna herself is still alive, I think.”

The woman wrote an address on a scrap of newspaper.

Hanna's house stood at the end of a quiet street. It was small and neat, with grapevines by the porch and autumn asters flowering in the garden.

Daryna stopped at the gate.

The boy stood beside her, so pale that the fence boards showed through his body.

“Come on,” she said.

“I'm frightened.”

“So am I.”

Vasyl knocked.

A short, gray-haired woman opened the door. She looked a little over seventy. She leaned on a cane but held herself upright.

“Hanna Petrivna Levytska?” Vasyl asked.

“Yes.”

“We've come from Vilshany.”

The woman's face went pale.

Her gaze settled on the bag in Daryna's hands.

“Why?”

“We need to speak to you about your mother. And about the child you gave birth to in 1943.”

Hanna grabbed the doorframe.

“Go away.”

“We found a letter,” Daryna said. “The one you wrote to your aunt Mariya.”

“I never sent it.”

“It was still beneath the floorboards of your old house.”

Hanna was about to shut the door when she spotted the wooden horse poking out of the bag.

“Where did you get that?”

Daryna took out the toy.

The old woman reached toward it with a trembling hand.

“The little horse...”

She touched the broken wood and began to weep.

“Come in.”

The room was warm. Family photographs hung on the walls. An old piano stood near the window, and a pair of spectacles rested on the table beside an open book.

The boy halted on the threshold.

"Can you go in?" Daryna asked.

He stretched out his hand. No invisible barrier pushed him back.

"There's no darkness here."

He stepped across the threshold.

Hanna turned.

"Who are you talking to?"

Daryna glanced at her father.

Vasyl nodded.

"Your son."

The old woman slowly sat down.

"Don't make a joke like that, child."

"I'm not joking. He's standing by the door."

Hanna pressed a hand to her chest.

"What does he look like?"

"About seven. Dark hair, big eyes. Barefoot, in a long white shirt."

"Is he cold?"

"Always."

Hanna closed her eyes.

"I've seen him in my dreams. Just like that. He stood beneath an oak tree and asked who he was."

The boy came closer.

"She heard me?"

Daryna nodded.

"He wants to know whether you heard him."

"Every night, for years and years."

"Why didn't you answer?"

Hanna looked toward the place where the boy was standing.

"I did answer. I called you by name, but a black-clad woman always appeared between us. She covered your ears and led you back into the forest."

The boy sat down at her feet.

"Is she my mother?"

"Yes," Daryna said, passing on the question.

Hanna reached out, but her fingers passed through the boy's hair.

She felt the cold and shivered.

"He really is here..."

Daryna placed the letters on the table.

"Your mother lied. Your baby wasn't stillborn."

"I knew."

"Paraska strangled him and buried him beneath the old oak."

Hanna stared for a long time at the envelope containing her mother's confession.

"Read it," Daryna said.

"I can't."

"You deserve to know the truth."

"I've lived with it all my life."

"You suspected. Now you have a confession."

Hanna picked up her mother's letter.

Her hands shook as she read the first page, then the second. When she came to the description of that night, she laid the pages down.

"I heard him," she whispered. "I was terribly weak after the birth, but I remember his crying. I begged Mother to bring him to me. She said he'd died."

"You didn't believe her?"

"At first I did. Then I began looking for his grave. I walked the whole cemetery. Mother said the priest had buried him without me, but she couldn't show me where."

"Why didn't you come back to the village later?"

"I did."

Hanna wiped her tears.

"Two years after the war ended, I returned to the old house. Mother was still alive. I demanded the truth, but she wouldn't speak. That night I heard crying from the forest and followed the sound."

"Did you reach the ravine?"

"No. A tall, faceless woman appeared on the road. In my mother's voice she said, 'If you enter the forest, your son will kill you.' I was frightened."

The boy lifted his head.

"I would never have hurt her."

"He says he would never have harmed you."

"I know that now."

Hanna reached out again. This time the boy placed his own hand in hers. She could not feel his fingers, but a delicate film of frost appeared on her skin.

“Forgive me, my little son.”

“What for?”

“I should have found you.”

“You didn't know where I was.”

Daryna passed on his words.

“A mother's heart should have known.”

“It did know. You heard him in your dreams.”

Hanna wept.

Vasyl quietly went out onto the porch, leaving the three of them alone.

When the old woman had grown calmer, Daryna asked the question that mattered most.

“Had you given your son a name?”

Hanna raised her head.

“Yes.”

The room fell silent.

Even the clock on the wall stopped ticking.

“What did you call him?”

The old woman looked toward the boy.

“Maksym.”

At that single word, the windowpanes rang.

The boy flinched.

“Maksym?” he repeated.

“I named you Maksym while you were still beneath my heart,” Hanna continued. “It was my father's name. He was a good man, and he died before the war. I wanted you to grow up like him.”

“Say it again,” Daryna asked.

It was as though Hanna heard her son.

“Maksym.”

The boy closed his eyes.

The black rootlets on his neck began to crack.

“Again,” he whispered.

“Maksym, my son.”

A wave of warmth passed through the room.

For the first time, his reflection appeared in the window.

Hanna saw the boy.
Only for a few seconds.
She dropped to her knees before him.
“Maksym...”
The boy stared at his mother with enormous dark eyes.
“Mother?”
Hanna embraced him.
This time her arms did not pass through his body. For a moment he was almost alive. A heart beat inside his chest.
Thump.
Thump.
Thump.
He clung to his mother and cried.
Not the icy tears he had shed before, but ordinary tears—warm and salty.
A wind rose outside the windows.
The Faceless One appeared by the gate. She rushed at the house but could not cross the threshold.
“He is mine!” the darkness shrieked.
Hanna held her son more tightly.
“No. He is my son. His name is Maksym.”
The Faceless One struck the window with both hands. Black cracks spread across the glass.
“Say his name again!” Daryna cried.
“Maksym!”
Golden light rippled through the room at the sound of his name.
The dark figure was flung away from the house and dissolved in the street.
The boy grew transparent again, but his reflection remained in the window.
“I’m Maksym,” he said.
“Yes,” Daryna replied. “Now you know who you are.”
“Why am I still cold?”
“Because the grave and the prayer still remain.”
Hanna stood up.
“I’m coming to Vilshany with you.”
“It will be difficult for you,” Vasyl said as he came back inside.

"I have waited fifty-five years for this. I will not abandon my son a second time."

She went to an old wardrobe and took out a small bundle.

Inside was a baby's cap knitted from white wool. The letter M had been embroidered on it in blue thread.

"I made it before you were born," Hanna said. "Mother didn't know. When she sent me to Berestove, I hid it beneath my clothes."

She held the cap out to the boy.

Maksym took it.

No frost formed on the wool.

"It's warm," he whispered in amazement.

"Because your mother kept it for you," Daryna said.

Maksym pulled on the cap. It was a little too small, but his smile was so genuine that all three adults began to cry.

"There's something else," Hanna said.

She took a folded sheet of paper from an old book.

"This letter arrived in the spring of 1945. It was from Karl Berger."

"Did you read it?"

"Yes. Karl wrote that his unit was retreating. He asked whether the child was alive. I wrote back that Mother claimed the boy had died, but no one had ever seen a grave."

"Did he receive your reply?"

"I don't know. I sent it through a man who worked at the German command office."

Daryna unfolded the sheet.

At the bottom, Karl had drawn a wooden horse and written a few words in German. Stepan Andriyovych would be able to translate them later.

"He was looking for the grave," Daryna said.

"Perhaps. A few months later, I learned that seven dead Germans had been found in the Deep Ravine. Karl was among them."

Maksym touched the soldier's photograph.

The return of his name unlocked a part of his memory.

He saw seven men beneath the old oak. One held a wooden horse. The others laughed as they dug in the earth and pulled out tiny bones.

Karl suddenly dropped to his knees.

"This is my son," he whispered.

The mist closed around the soldiers.

Maksym dropped the photograph.

“I remember,” he said.

“What?”

The boy looked at Daryna.

“Why the seven Germans died.”

CHAPTER 21

The Truth About the Germans

The return of his name had unlocked the boy's sealed memories.

Maksym stood in the middle of the room, pressing the wooden horse to his chest. His eyes looked far beyond the walls, beyond the long years of loneliness.

"What do you see?" Daryna asked.

"The forest."

"As it is now?"

"No. The trees are younger. There's smoke in the village, and armed men are walking along the road."

The boy held out his hand to Daryna.

"I don't want to watch alone."

She took his cold fingers.

The room disappeared.

Daryna found herself in the old forest.

It was the summer of 1945. Sunlight filtered through the oak crowns, but seven men in German uniforms walked so far beneath the trees that they could not be seen from the air.

One of them was Karl Berger.

He looked exhausted. Dark stubble covered his cheeks, and his uniform sleeve was torn. Karl walked at the rear, glancing over his shoulder again and again.

"They already know we're in the forest," one soldier said.

"We'll rest here until morning, then head west," the senior man replied.

"This is a bad place."

"Every forest is a bad place to you when you have to walk."

The men laughed.

Karl did not.

He recognized the countryside. Two years earlier, he had served at the German command post in Vilshany. Hanna's house stood somewhere nearby.

After what he had done to the girl, Karl had returned twice. He begged forgiveness, brought food, promised to help. Hanna would not open the door to him.

On his last visit, he had left a wooden horse he had carved himself on her doorstep.

Not as an offer of forgiveness—he knew he deserved none. It had merely been a coward's attempt to silence his guilt.

The soldiers reached the old oak.

“We'll stop here,” their leader ordered.

They dropped their belongings, unpacked the food they had stolen in the village, and posted a sentry. One man began digging a pit to hide some of their weapons.

His spade struck a flat stone.

“There's something here.”

Beneath the stone lay a half-rotted basket.

“Maybe the villagers buried valuables,” another soldier said.

They started scraping away the earth with their hands and knives.

First they found the remains of a white swaddling cloth.

Then tiny bones.

One of the soldiers tossed an infant's skull aside.

“Just a grave.”

“Dig beneath it,” the leader ordered. “They may have buried gold with the body.”

He stepped on the edge of the basket.

At that moment, something ancient awakened beneath the oak.

White mist rose from among the roots.

Karl bent down and lifted a wooden horse from the earth. Its front leg had been broken by the spade.

He recognized the toy.

“No...”

“What's wrong?” asked the soldier beside him.

Karl fell to his knees.

“It's Hanna's child.”

“What Hanna?”

“My son.”

The soldiers laughed.

“You've found your little German-peasant brat?”

One man flicked a child's bone with the toe of his boot.

“Bury it again and let's go.”

Karl struck him in the face.

“Don't touch him!”

They grappled. The others pulled them apart, shouting and swearing. None of them noticed the boy standing on the far bank of the stream.

He was barefoot and wore a long white shirt. He looked about seven, though the buried baby had not even lived a full day.

The forest had given his soul the shape of a childhood he had never known.

“That was me,” Maksym whispered.

Daryna saw the past through his eyes.

The boy did not understand who the armed men were. He knew nothing of war, death, or revenge. He only saw them scattering his tiny bones.

“Who am I?” he asked.

The soldiers did not hear him.

He stepped nearer.

“Do you know who I am?”

Karl raised his head.

He saw the child.

“My son,” the German whispered.

“What's my name?”

Karl said nothing.

He did not know the name.

The Faceless One emerged from the mist.

“They know who you are,” she told the boy. “They simply refuse to say.”

“Why?”

“Because they're afraid of the truth.”

“I want them to answer.”

“Then show them what they've hidden in their memories.”

“How?”

The dark figure placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Just look into their eyes.”

The boy turned toward the first soldier.

Suddenly the man no longer saw the forest. He saw a village house he had set on fire, with people trapped at the windows—people he had refused to let escape.

The soldier screamed and covered his face.

Maksym looked at the second.

Before that man appeared an old prisoner whom he had beaten to death because the prisoner could walk no farther. The dead man stood close, silently offering him a bloodstained spoon.

The second soldier collapsed.

The third saw again the ditch beside which civilians had been shot. But this time he was not behind the machine gun. He stood among the condemned.

The fourth heard the cries of children from whom he had stolen the last scraps of food.

The fifth saw the young man he had hanged beside a school.

The sixth was surrounded by the faces of people he had tortured in the command post basement.

Every crime the men had tried to justify with orders, war, or fear for their own lives came back to them.

They could not escape.

The forest stretched without end. Whichever way they ran, they found themselves beneath the old oak again.

One drew his pistol and fired at the boy.

The bullet passed through his body and lodged in the tree trunk.

Maksym did not touch a single one of them.

He only watched.

The men's hearts could not endure the weight of their own memories. One after another, they fell without a wound.

Karl was the last to remain standing.

"What did you do to my mother?" the boy asked.

Karl saw a winter night in the Boychuk house.

He saw Hanna begging him to leave her alone. He heard his own voice ordering her to be silent. He saw her tears and terror.

Then everything he had never known appeared before him.

Hanna refusing to end her unborn child's life.

Paraska covering the baby's face with a white swaddling cloth.

The old woman carrying a basket to the ravine.

Earth falling onto the wooden horse.

Karl dropped to his knees.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

"For what?"

“For what I did to your mother. For making you come into the world surrounded by fear.”

“What's my name?”

Karl pressed the wooden horse to his chest.

“I don't know.”

“Then who am I?”

“My son.”

“That isn't enough.”

Karl reached out, but could not touch the boy.

His heart stopped.

He fell beside the disturbed grave.

The Faceless One laughed.

The mist filled with the fear of seven dead men. The dark figure breathed it in, and her body grew stronger.

“You killed them,” she told the boy.

“I didn't touch anyone.”

“You showed them the truth.”

“They were frightened of it themselves.”

“This is your power now. Anyone who hurts you will see the thing he fears most. Anyone who hurts your friend will pay.”

The boy looked at the seven bodies.

“I didn't want them to die.”

“But you feel warmer.”

It was true.

For the first time since his death, Maksym no longer felt the cold. Other people's fear burned inside him like fire.

The Faceless One extended her hand.

“Come with me. I'll teach you how to keep warm.”

The boy backed away.

“No.”

“You'll come back. Loneliness always drives children into the dark.”

The vision vanished.

Daryna was standing in Hanna's room once more. She was still clutching Maksym's icy fingers.

The boy was crying.

“I killed them.”

“You never touched them.”

"If it hadn't been for me, they'd still be alive."

"They died of terror at their own crimes."

"But I opened their memories."

Hanna could no longer see her son as clearly as she had when his name returned, but she could hear his voice.

"Maksym," she said, "you were a child. The darkness used your pain."

"Karl was my father."

"By blood, yes."

"Did you hate him?"

Hanna was silent for a long time.

"I hated what he did. He destroyed a part of my life. His remorse could never give those years back to me."

"Did I remind you of him?"

"No. You were my son. Not his crime."

Maksym raised his head.

"Were you ashamed of me?"

"Never."

Daryna handed over Karl's letter.

"There are some words in German here. Stepan Andriyovych can translate them."

The following day, the old teacher read the final lines:

"I know I have no right to ask forgiveness. If the child is alive, tell him just one thing: he is not to blame for the way he came into this world."

Stepan Andriyovych also found a copy of the 1945 medical report.

"It says there were no wounds on the bodies, no signs of poisoning or a struggle. All seven hearts simply stopped."

"From fear?" Vasyl asked.

"The doctors had no other explanation."

Maksym stood by the window.

"The Faceless One told me it was my power."

"Your power doesn't decide who you are," Daryna replied. "What matters is how you use it."

"I punished Serhiy and Bohdan."

"You did what the darkness taught you."

"They could have died, like those soldiers."

"Yes. They could."

The boy clenched his fists.

“I don't want to warm myself with anyone else's fear ever again.”

“Then don't listen to the Faceless One on the night of the Feast of the Protection. She'll offer you that fire again.”

Maksym put the wooden horse on the table.

By itself, the toy turned its head toward the old forest. Its unbroken leg struck the wood three times.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

“It's showing us the way to the grave,” the boy said.

Hanna picked up the white cap with the embroidered M.

“I'm ready to return to Vilshany.”

Nine days remained until the eve of the Feast of the Protection.

They knew the truth.

They had found his mother.

They had given the boy back his name.

Now they had to find his body, persuade the priest to go to the Deep Ravine, and open Maksym's path into the light before the Faceless One claimed him.

CHAPTER 22

The Priest's Refusal

Hanna's return to Vilshany did not go unnoticed.

The moment she stepped off the bus, people began gathering at the stop. The older villagers recognized in the gray-haired woman the eighteen-year-old girl who had vanished from the village in the autumn of 1943. The younger ones had only heard her name in frightening tales of the Deep Ravine.

Grandmother Orysia was the first to approach.

"Hannusya?"

Hanna nodded.

"So you're alive."

"I am."

"And the child?"

Hanna looked at Maksym.

He stood beside her, wearing his little white wool cap embroidered with an M. Only Daryna and his mother could see him.

"He is, too," Hanna replied. "Just not in the way he ought to be."

The villagers crossed themselves.

"His name is Maksym," she said. "Remember it. Not 'the German's bastard,' not 'the boy from the ravine,' and not 'an unclean spirit.' Maksym."

The boy went to his mother.

Each time someone repeated his name, his shape grew clearer.

That same day, they went to see Father Oleksiy.

Vasyl, Stepan Andriyovych, and old Myron accompanied them. The healer walked slowly, leaning on his staff, but refused to stay home.

Maksym stopped by the church fence.

"I'll wait beneath the linden tree," he said.

"Don't go anywhere," Daryna asked him.

"I have a name now. She can't take me."

"That's exactly why she'll try."

Maksym sat beneath the tree, setting Spark and the wooden horse beside him.

Father Oleksiy was waiting inside the church.

The old parish register lay on a table, open to the entry for October 14, 1943. The space for the infant's name was still blank.

Hanna placed her letter, Paraska's confession, and Karl Berger's photograph before the priest.

"My son's name is Maksym," she said. "I gave him that name before he was born."

Father Oleksiy read both letters, then sat silent for several minutes.

"We've done what was required," Daryna said. "We found his mother, discovered the truth, and restored his name. All that's left is the grave and the prayer."

"You're asking me to baptize a dead child."

"Yes," Hanna replied.

The priest shook his head.

"I cannot."

Silence filled the church.

"Why?" Daryna asked.

"The sacrament of baptism is performed for the living. A person who died fifty-five years ago cannot be baptized."

"But he's here!" the girl cried. "He thinks, talks, helps people. Doesn't that mean he's alive?"

"His soul exists. But his earthly life has ended."

"Through no fault of his own."

"I know."

"Then make an exception."

"I have no right to call something baptism when it is not."

Hanna knelt before the priest.

"Father, my son died without his name because his own grandmother wouldn't even let me hold him. They buried him in the woods like something no one wanted. Will the Church turn its back on him, too?"

Father Oleksiy helped her to her feet.

"The Church is not turning its back on your child. But I cannot change the past."

"We're not asking you to," old Myron said. "Help his soul get out of it."

"Out of the ravine?"

"Out of another being's darkness."

The priest turned to the healer.

“Are you certain this is a child's soul, not some force pretending to be one?”

“If the darkness wanted to deceive us, it wouldn't save people at the cost of its own strength.”

“This child has also punished the living.”

“Because for fifty-five years he's known nothing but pain. Yet Maksym can choose. It's that choice we're fighting for.”

Father Oleksiy went to the window.

Beneath the linden tree he could make out nothing but a hollow in the air, marked by cold. Frost lay on the grass around the invisible boy.

“What happens on the eve of the Feast of the Protection?” the priest asked.

Myron set his staff against the wall.

“At midnight, the old ravine will open. The Faceless One will try to steal Maksym's name and leave the forest in his likeness.”

“How can we stop her?”

“Find the remains, speak the truth at the grave, say the prayer, and let the boy choose his own path.”

“And if he chooses darkness?”

“Then no prayer will save us.”

The priest stared at the old parish register for a long time.

“There will be no ordinary baptism,” he repeated. “I will not compromise on that.”

Daryna clenched her fists.

“Then why did we even come here?”

“Let me finish.”

Father Oleksiy took a clean sheet of paper.

“I can pray at his grave for God's mercy toward an innocent child. I can bless his burial place, consecrate the remains we find, and set up a cross. Afterward, Maksym must be buried with dignity in the village cemetery.”

“And his name?” Hanna asked.

The priest dipped his pen in ink.

He did not alter the original record in the old register, but added a note beside it:

“In 1998, the child's name was established from his mother's testimony: Maksym. Son of Hanna Petrivna Boychuk. Born alive on October 14, 1943. Burial site still being sought.”

“From this moment,” Father Oleksiy said, “his name lives not only in your memories. It has returned to the human world.”

As the pen made its final mark, a bell rang above the church.

No one had touched the rope.

The old candles before the icons flared to life all at once.

A tiny golden spark rose from the parish register. It passed through the wall and flew toward the linden tree.

Maksym saw it.

The spark touched his white cap. The embroidered M began to glow.

The boy smiled.

At that instant, a woman's voice came from the forest.

“Maksym...”

He flinched.

“Don't listen,” Daryna whispered, although she was still inside the church.

In Hanna's voice, the Faceless One called again.

“My son, come to me.”

Maksym looked toward the church doors. His mother had not come out yet.

He knew it was a trick.

“You're not my mother.”

Laughter drifted out of the woods.

“Now I know your name. I can call you the way you've always longed to be called.”

Black mist crept toward the church fence.

Maksym snatched up Spark and the wooden horse.

“You can't come across here.”

“I don't need to. You'll go back to the oak yourself.”

The mist stopped a few paces from the boy.

Daryna's face appeared within it.

“The priest has rejected you,” the Faceless One said in her voice.

“They'll all abandon you. Come home.”

“The ravine isn't my home.”

“You have no other.”

The church door opened.

Daryna ran outside.

“Maksym!”

There was no one beneath the linden tree.
Spark lay in the grass. Its red paint had turned black.
Nearby were the prints of bare feet, leading toward the forest.
“He's gone,” Hanna whispered.
Myron bent over the tracks.
“Not alone.”
“Has the Faceless One taken him?” Daryna asked.
“Not yet. She can't take him by force as long as his name survives in human memory.”
“Then why has he gone back to the ravine?”
The healer picked up the wooden horse. Its head was turned toward the old forest.
“She convinced him there was no way to save himself.”
Daryna snatched up Spark.
“I'll find him.”
“You mustn't go now,” old Myron warned. “The sun is setting.”
“If we leave Maksym alone, the darkness will break him before morning.”
Father Oleksiy came out of the church carrying a cross and a lighted candle.
“She's right.”
“You'll come with us?” Daryna asked.
The priest looked toward the black mist above the forest.
“I refused to perform a false baptism. I did not refuse the child.”
He locked the church doors.
“Show me the way to the Deep Ravine.”

CHAPTER 23

Maksym's Disappearance

The black mist above the forest grew thicker.

"We'll need ropes, lanterns, and an axe," Vasyl said. "We're not going in unprepared."

"If we take too long, we'll lose him," Daryna objected.

Old Myron raised the wooden horse.

"Ordinary light won't help in the ravine. And an axe may awaken things best left undisturbed."

Father Oleksiy handed Stepan Andriyovych the keys to the church.

"Stay here. Once the sun sets, begin ringing the bell. One stroke every few minutes. Its sound will show us the way back."

"And if you aren't back by midnight?"

"Keep ringing."

Hanna took Daryna's hand.

"I'm going with you."

"It will be difficult," Vasyl said.

"Maksym waited for me beneath that oak for fifty-five years. This time I won't stay somewhere safe."

They set off toward the forest.

The sun was already touching the horizon. Long tree shadows crossed the road, and the first white ribbons of mist appeared above the grass.

Daryna stopped at the two rowan trees.

Their red berries had turned black.

"That never happened before," she whispered.

Myron touched a trunk.

"The Faceless One has closed the ordinary path."

Father Oleksiy lifted his cross.

"Then we'll enter anyway."

"A cross protects someone who believes," the healer replied. "But the forest is under no obligation to believe along with you."

"Then what do we do?"

Ruta stepped out from behind the trees.

Her green hair had darkened, and dry leaves were tangled among the summer flowers.

"Give me the horse," the mavka said.

Myron handed her the toy.

Ruta set it between the rowans. Three times the wooden horse struck its surviving leg against the ground.

A narrow path appeared between the trees.

"Maksym is in the deepest part of the ravine," Ruta said. "A place even we never enter."

"Has the Faceless One taken him?" Daryna asked.

"He went of his own accord."

"Why?"

"She spoke in your voice. She said the priest had refused him, his mother would soon die, and you would grow up and forget him."

"He couldn't have believed that."

"People are most ready to believe the things they fear most."

Hanna clutched the white cap Maksym had lost beside the church.

"Take us to him."

Ruta stared into the dark forest.

"You must leave the ravine before the owl's third cry. After that, the paths will close."

"We've heard that rule before," Daryna said.

"Tonight the third cry may come before the first."

They stepped onto the path.

As soon as the last of them passed between the rowans, the road behind them vanished. Mist rose to their waists. Indistinct figures stirred inside it.

Ruta led the way. Behind her walked Daryna and Maksym's mother. Vasyl supported Hanna. Myron and the priest brought up the rear.

The first stroke of the church bell sounded far away.

The mist shuddered.

For a few seconds, a bright thread appeared between the trees, leading back to the village.

"Don't lose the sound," Myron instructed them.

Somewhere to the right, an infant began to cry.

Hanna stopped.

"It's him."

"Maksym isn't a baby anymore," Daryna said.

"To me, he'll always be one."

The crying grew louder.

“Mama...”

Hanna stepped sideways.

Ruta blocked her path.

“Don't look.”

“He's calling me!”

A woman holding a baby appeared in the mist. She stood with her back to them.

“Hanna, take him,” the figure said in Paraska's voice. “I can't bear his crying anymore.”

Hanna trembled.

“Mother?”

“Look at her feet,” Ruta said.

The figure's feet were turned backward, heels facing forward.

Father Oleksiy made the sign of the cross over the mist.

The apparition fell apart into dry leaves.

“From here on, she'll show each of you what you most desire or fear,” Myron warned. “Don't leave the path.”

The second stroke of the bell was fainter.

The trees grew older around them. Oaks rose like black walls. Human faces showed between the roots, but whenever Daryna looked closely, they became knots in the bark.

Laughter sounded ahead.

“Daryna!” Maksym called.

A boy in a white cap ran onto the path.

“I'm here!”

Daryna moved toward him, but the wooden horse in Ruta's hands did not stir.

“That's not him,” the mavka said.

“How do you know?”

“The toy doesn't recognize him.”

The false Maksym held out his arms.

“You promised you'd save me.”

Daryna stood her ground.

“What's your name?”

The boy smiled.

“The Nameless Boy.”

“Wrong. His name is Maksym.”

The apparition's face split open. A white mask showed beneath the child's skin.

Ruta swept out a hand, and her green hair coiled around the figure. It shrieked and vanished.

"She still isn't used to his name," the mavka said. "That's our advantage."

The third stroke of the bell was barely audible.

Suddenly the wooden horse wrenched free of Ruta's hands and ran along the path.

"Follow it!" Daryna cried.

The toy moved strangely, hopping on three wooden legs, falling and rising again. It led them to the brink of the Deep Ravine.

The old oak stood at the bottom.

The tree looked larger than ever. Its branches hid the sky, and its roots wrapped around the entire slope. A narrow black fissure had opened between them.

The horse went down to a flat stone and stopped.

A scratched cross could be seen on the stone.

"Here's the grave," Hanna said.

She knelt and touched the soil.

A voice rose from under the roots.

"Mama..."

"Maksym!"

"I'm here."

Daryna ran to the black fissure.

Deep inside, far beneath the earth, stood the boy. Black roots bound his arms, legs, and throat. The Faceless One towered beside him.

"Let him go!" Daryna shouted.

"He came willingly," the darkness replied.

"Maksym, tell us you want to come out!"

The boy raised his head.

"I do. But I can't."

"We'll get you out."

Daryna reached into the fissure.

Myron seized her shoulder.

"Don't touch the roots."

"Why?"

"The ravine hasn't opened completely. Pull him now, and you'll tear his soul apart."

"Then what can we do?"

"Wait for the night before the Feast of the Protection."

"Nine more days!"

"When the passage between worlds opens, the roots will weaken. Then Maksym can leave by himself."

The Faceless One ran a palm over the boy's hair.

"In nine days he won't remember any of you."

"I will," Maksym said.

"You won't. There's no time here. No morning, no evening. Only cold."

Hanna stepped up to the fissure.

"Maksym, listen to my voice."

She pressed the white cap against her chest.

"You are my son. Your name is Maksym. You were born on October fourteenth. I wanted you, and I loved you even before you were born."

The black roots loosened.

Father Oleksiy lit a candle.

"Maksym, your name is recorded among the living. Darkness has no claim to it."

Light entered the fissure.

The Faceless One recoiled.

"Pray all you want," she hissed. "When the ravine opens, he'll choose me himself."

"I won't," the boy replied.

"You don't yet know what I'll show you."

An owl cried from deep in the forest.

The first cry.

"We have to go," Ruta said.

"I won't leave him," Daryna protested.

"If you stay, the Faceless One will take you both."

"Maksym, we'll come back," Hanna said.

"When?"

"On the night before your birthday."

"Will you really come?"

"I promise."

The boy looked at Daryna.

“You, too?”
“I’ll come, even if the entire forest turns against me.”
The owl’s second cry rolled across the ravine.
The trees began to draw together, closing the path.
Myron lifted the horse.
“Hurry!”
They started up the slope.
The Faceless One laughed.
“Daryna already broke a promise to her father once. Why do you believe she won’t break hers to you?”
Maksym closed his eyes.
“Because she came back for me in the swamp.”
The black roots tightened around him again.
“And keep saying your name every day!” Daryna shouted. “Don’t let her take it away!”
“I am Maksym!”
The fissure began to close.
“Hanna’s son!” his mother added.
“I’m Maksym, Hanna’s son!”
The roots met.
The owl’s third cry caught them halfway up the slope.
The path vanished.
White child-shaped figures rose all around them. Dozens of boys in long shirts stretched their hands toward Daryna.
“Help me!”
“I’m the real Maksym!”
“Don’t leave me!”
Ruta threw the wooden horse onto the ground.
The toy ran between the apparitions. Daryna followed it, and the others followed her.
The village bell was almost inaudible.
Hanna fell.
Vasyl lifted her into his arms.
“Don’t stop!” Myron ordered.
A great black shadow moved behind them. It took on the shape of a boy but grew taller with every step.
The two rowan trees appeared ahead.

The horse leapt over the invisible boundary. Ruta let the humans go first, then turned toward the darkness.

Her hair became green whips, striking the shadow.

“Go!”

Daryna burst out of the forest with the others.

The moment Myron crossed the boundary, the path vanished. Black mist slammed against the rowans but could not pass.

Dawn was breaking over the village.

To them, barely an hour had passed in the ravine. In truth, they had been there all night.

Stepan Andriyovych was still ringing the bell.

Father Oleksiy looked toward the old forest.

“Until the Feast of the Protection, we’ll ring it every morning and evening.”

“Why?” Vasyl asked.

“So Maksym can hear the way home.”

Hanna held the white cap to her heart.

“And I’ll speak his name every day.”

Daryna picked up Spark and the wooden horse.

“We know exactly where the grave is. We need to prepare for that night.”

Myron shook his head.

“You can prepare for the forest, the cold, and the mist. But not for what the Faceless One will show each of us.”

Deep beneath the roots, Maksym sat in the darkness.

“Who are you?” the Faceless One whispered.

“Maksym.”

“No one can hear you.”

A church bell sounded far away.

“They can.”

“They’ll forget.”

His mother’s voice sounded in the darkness.

“Maksym, my son...”

The boy smiled.

“I’m Maksym, Hanna’s son. And they’re coming back.”

CHAPTER 24

Opening the Portal

For nine days, the church bell rang over Vilshany every morning and evening.

People stopped in the streets, took off their hats, and looked toward the Church of the Protection. No one knew why Stepan Andriyovych climbed the bell tower twice a day to strike the bell exactly seven times.

After each stroke, Hanna stood by the church fence and called out: “Maksym, my son, I remember you.”

Daryna repeated:

“Your name is Maksym. We're coming back.”

For the first few days, the forest was silent.

On the fourth morning, after the bell's final stroke, a child's voice sounded from the Deep Ravine.

“I can hear you.”

On the sixth day, black frost fell on the village in warm weather. It covered only the road between the forest and the church. Wherever people walked, barefoot footprints appeared on the ground.

On the eighth night, the Faceless One came to Daryna's window.

She wore Maksym's face.

“Don't come tomorrow,” the figure pleaded. “I've already chosen her.”

Daryna did not answer.

Then the face changed. Her own mother stood beyond the glass.

“If you go to the ravine, your father will die.”

Daryna took out Myron's little linen pouch.

“Show me your real face.”

The figure slammed its head against the glass and disappeared.

In the morning, the window was intact, but three long scratches remained on the outside.

The entire village was preparing for the eve of the Feast of the Protection.

Vasyl made a small white coffin. Hanna lined it with a towel she had embroidered before her son was born. Father Oleksiy prepared a cross, candles, and water to bless the grave.

The cross bore the inscription:

MAKSYM BOYCHUK

OCTOBER 14, 1943

An officer from the district police and a doctor examined the documents and the burial site. After Paraska's confession and the church record, there could be no doubt: a murdered child truly lay buried beneath the old oak.

They agreed to move the remains to the village cemetery after the prayer.

On the evening of October thirteenth, people gathered outside the Church of the Protection.

Most were to remain in the village. Only Daryna, Vasyl, Hanna, old Myron, and Father Oleksiy would go to the ravine. Stepan Andriyovych climbed the bell tower.

"Start ringing at midnight," Myron instructed him. "Don't stop until sunrise, whatever you hear."

"And if some of you don't come back?" the teacher asked.

"Keep ringing anyway."

Natalya embraced her husband and daughter.

"Come home."

"We will," Vasyl promised.

Daryna made no such promise.

She understood now how dangerous any promise made before entering the old forest could be.

Ruta and Grandfather Dubovyk met them beside the rowans.

The mavka wore a black cloak of dead leaves. In her hands she held Spark. The little red car was no longer black; a faint redness had returned beneath Ruta's fingers.

"Daryna will need it," the mavka said.

Grandfather Dubovyk walked around the group.

"Leave all iron here. Knives, axes, keys—everything."

"Why?" Vasyl asked.

"When the ravine opens, every iron object will remember the blood from which it was born. Darkness will use it against you."

Vasyl laid his folding knife and keys beneath a rowan. Father Oleksiy removed his metal watch. Even Hanna took the hairpin from her hair.

"From here, hold on to the rope," the little forest spirit said. "If someone familiar appears beside you, touch the rope first. The Faceless One can copy a voice and a face, but she can't hold something tied by living hands."

Vasyl tied the rope around each person's wrist.

Ruta opened the path.

The forest greeted them with silence.

No birds sang, no leaves stirred. Even their footsteps made no sound. Among the trees stood people who had died long ago, watching the little procession in silence.

Daryna recognized the hunter Matviy, though she had seen him only in an old photograph. Seven German soldiers stood nearby. Karl Berger held his hands to his chest and stared at the ground.

“Are those really them?” Daryna asked.

“Only the forest’s memories,” Dubovyk replied. “Don’t speak to them.”

The wooden horse moved ahead of them.

As the sun touched the horizon, they reached the old oak.

An open grave waited beside the flat stone. The soil had been carefully removed that day in the doctor’s presence. Between three roots lay the remains of a rotted basket and tiny bones wrapped in fragments of white cloth.

Hanna dropped to her knees.

“My son...”

She neither screamed nor wept. She only reached toward the grave, unable to bring herself to touch the remains.

Father Oleksiy stood beside her.

“We’ll move him after the prayer.”

Vasyl set the little white coffin beside the stone. Daryna placed the wooden horse inside it. Ruta laid Spark beside it.

Old Myron drew a circle around the grave with a rowan branch.

“No one steps outside this circle before midnight.”

“And Maksym?” Daryna asked.

“When the roots open, he’ll be on the other side. Only his mother and you will be able to call him.”

“Why?”

“Hanna gave him life and a name. You restored the memory of both.”

Father Oleksiy lit four candles.

He placed one at the child’s head, another at his feet, and gave the third to Hanna. Daryna took the fourth.

“What will you do?” she asked the priest.

“Pray.”

“And if prayer doesn’t help?”

“Then we'll pray louder.”

Night fell.

At first, nothing happened.

Hanna sat beside the coffin, humming a lullaby. Daryna recognized the tune Maksym had remembered all those years.

Around eleven, the water in the stream stopped flowing.

Ruta raised her head.

“It's beginning.”

The water began to flow backward.

The stones on the streambed shifted. Cold rose from beneath the oak and extinguished three of the candles.

The candle in Hanna's hands continued to burn.

“It cannot touch a mother's flame,” Myron said.

The old oak groaned.

Its roots slowly drew apart, opening a black cleft. There was no earth beyond it. Another road stretched there, lit by a pale moon.

The first stroke of the church bell sounded.

Midnight.

The darkness in the cleft shuddered. The road widened.

The second stroke.

Small footprints appeared along it.

The third.

Maksym stepped out of the portal.

Black roots still encircled his body, but the white cap embroidered with an M remained on his head.

“Mama,” he called.

Hanna raised her candle.

“I'm here, my son.”

Maksym took a step toward her.

The Faceless One appeared behind him.

Now she had the face of young Hanna.

“Don't go,” the darkness said. “Your mother is old. In a few years she'll die, and you'll be alone again.”

“No,” Maksym answered. “Someone is waiting on that road.”

“You don't know who.”

“But it's warm there.”

The Faceless One tightened the roots.

The boy cried out and fell.

Father Oleksiy began to pray:

“Lord, You know the name of every soul, even when people have forgotten it. Receive the innocent child Maksym, who was denied the chance to live his earthly life...”

Darkness roared.

Figures of the dead appeared around the grave. They stretched their arms toward the living, calling in familiar voices and trying to cross the rowan circle.

Dubovyk struck the ground with his staff.

A wall of living roots rose from the earth.

Ruta shook out her hair. Green strands wrapped around the circle, strengthening its defenses.

“We can't hold them for long!” the mavka cried.

Daryna stood at the portal's edge.

“Maksym, look at me!”

The boy raised his head.

“I can't get out.”

“You can. You've escaped her before.”

“I didn't have a name then. Now that's what she holds me by.”

The Faceless One laughed.

“You handed me the key yourselves. While he was Nameless, I possessed only his cold. Now I'll have everything.”

Hanna held her candle close.

“I gave him his name. You have no right to it.”

“You surrendered your child to your fear.”

“No. My mother did that.”

“And you believed her and ran away.”

Hanna swayed.

The candle flame dwindled.

“Don't listen!” Daryna shouted. “She feeds on your guilt!”

The Faceless One turned to the girl.

Her face changed.

Now Maksym stood before Daryna.

“If you want to save me, come inside,” he said. “I can't come out alone.”

“That's not him,” Myron warned.

Deep inside the portal, the real Maksym reached toward her.

“Daryna, don't come in! She's lying!”
The Faceless One held out her hand as well.
Two identical boys stood before Daryna.
Both wore white caps. Both held little red cars. Both looked at her with familiar dark eyes.
“Which is the real one?” Vasyl asked.
Daryna remembered their first meeting by the spring.
“What did you say when I promised to help you find your name?”
The first boy answered:
“That we were friends now.”
The second shook his head.
“I asked, ‘Will you come back?’”
Daryna recognized him.
She pointed Spark at the first.
The false Maksym shrieked and dissolved into black smoke.
The real boy remained behind the roots.
“I can see you!” Daryna said.
“Don't come in here!”
The Faceless One loomed over him.
“No dead soul may leave without a living one. That is the law of the doorway.”
“What is she saying?” Daryna asked.
Myron went pale.
“To bring Maksym back, one of the living must cross the threshold willingly.”
“No!” Vasyl shouted.
Daryna untied the rope from her wrist.
“I promised I'd come for him.”
“If you enter, you may never return,” Myron warned.
“Then keep the doorway open.”
She handed her candle to her father and took Spark.
“Daryna, don't you dare!” Vasyl cried.
But the girl had already stepped into the portal.
Icy darkness swallowed her.
The roots closed behind her, cutting off the road home.
Daryna was alone with Maksym and the Faceless One.

CHAPTER 25

The Final Temptation

Daryna fell into darkness.

She felt no ground beneath her feet, saw no sky, and heard none of the voices of those waiting beside the grave. Only Spark trembled in her palm, glowing like a faint red ember.

Then the falling stopped.

Daryna found herself at the bottom of another forest.

The trees grew with their roots pointing upward. Black crowns plunged into the ground, while roots tangled far overhead. Human shadows wandered among them.

Some wept. Others called for loved ones. A few repeated the last words they had spoken before dying.

“Maksym!” Daryna called.

Spark shone more brightly.

A red beam showed her the boy. He stood beside an upside-down oak, entangled in roots. The Faceless One rested a hand on his shoulder.

“So you came after all,” she said.

“Let him go.”

“I’m holding no one. Maksym came home of his own free will.”

“This isn’t his home.”

“Ask him.”

Daryna moved closer.

“Maksym, come on.”

He would not meet her eyes.

“I can’t.”

“We’ll get those roots off you.”

“It’s not the roots.”

The Faceless One stroked his hair.

“The boy finally understands what awaits him beyond the road of light.”

“What?”

“The unknown.”

Golden doors appeared around them.

Beyond them blazed a dazzling light, but there was no telling what lay inside.

"They call it freedom," the Faceless One continued. "Yet no one has ever returned to tell us where that road leads. Perhaps there's nothing beyond it."

"There won't be any cold," Daryna said.

"And will you be there?"

Daryna fell silent.

"Will you go with him?" the darkness asked.

"I'm alive."

"Precisely. Maksym will lose his only friend. His mother will soon die. And once again he'll be alone, among strangers' souls."

The boy raised his head.

"I don't want to lose you."

"You won't lose us," Daryna said. "We just won't be able to see each other the way we do now."

"Then I will lose you."

The Faceless One smiled.

"I can offer another road."

She clapped her hands.

The upside-down forest vanished.

Daryna stood in a sunny meadow. A small white cottage with blue shutters stood nearby. Apple trees grew beside it, flowers bloomed, and silver fish swam in a clear stream.

Maksym stood next to her.

Now he looked like an ordinary little boy. There was color in his cheeks, and his feet were no longer bare. Instead of the white shirt, he wore clean clothes.

"I'm warm," he said in wonder.

Daryna touched his hand.

It was alive.

A pulse beat beneath the skin.

A young Hanna came out of the cottage.

Not a gray-haired woman in her seventies, but the very girl from the photograph. She opened her arms to her son.

"Maksym, come home."

The boy ran to her.

Hanna hugged him and kissed his hair.

"Mama, you're young!"

"No one grows old here."

Daryna's parents and younger brother appeared beside the cottage. All of them were healthy, smiling, and happy.

"Stay with us," her mother said. "There will never be fires, sickness, or death here."

"That's not true," Daryna whispered.

"Are you unhappy?"

Fresh milk, honey, and warm bread stood on a table outside the house.

Maksym broke off a piece.

"I can taste it!"

He ate and laughed.

Daryna watched him.

It was everything he had ever dreamed of: a mother, warmth, a home, food, an ordinary childhood.

"All you have to do is stay," the Faceless One said in Hanna's voice.

"What's the price?"

"Nothing."

"You always take something."

"Only time. But why would you need it in a place where no one grows old?"

Daryna looked at the clock inside the cottage.

Its hands did not move.

Birds sat in the apple tree. Their beaks opened, but they made no sound. The flowers did not stir in the breeze. Water flowed through the stream, yet its surface stayed still.

Daryna took a piece of bread.

It was soft and warm, but turned to dry earth in her mouth.

She spat it out.

"Maksym, it's a lie."

"But I'm warm."

"Not with warmth of your own."

The Faceless One stepped out from behind an apple tree.

Now she had the face of a beautiful woman.

"Does it matter where warmth comes from if the child is no longer cold?"

"Yes. You warm him with other people's fear."

"There'll be enough fear in the world of the living to last forever."

She showed Daryna another scene.

Serhiy lay in a hospital covered with a rash. Bohdan groaned with a broken leg. One by one, the people who had laughed at Daryna fell before Maksym.

"No one will ever hurt you again," the Faceless One said. "The boy will protect you from every enemy."

"Then he'll become like you."

"He'll become powerful."

Maksym looked at his hands.

"Could I protect her parents?"

"From fires, illness, and death."

"And my mother?"

"She will never grow old."

"Don't listen!" Daryna said. "That's not your mother. It's only her likeness."

Young Hanna approached the boy.

"Aren't my hands warm?"

Maksym touched her palm.

"They are."

"Don't I call you my son?"

"You do."

"Then stay."

Daryna lifted Spark.

The little red car remained cold and dull.

She put it on the ground.

Spark rolled away by itself, from the white cottage toward the dark edge of the meadow.

"Look, Maksym. The toy remembers true warmth. If this place were your home, it would have stayed."

The boy looked at the bread in his hand.

Earth trickled from it.

Young Hanna's face began to fade.

"Don't go, my son," she said.

"My mother would call me Maksym."

"Maksym..."

"She knows the lullaby."

The figure fell silent.

"Sing it," the boy asked.

The Faceless One opened her mouth.

Instead of a song, the screams of hundreds of terrified people poured out. Maksym recoiled.

The sunny meadow turned black. The white cottage crumbled, the apple trees became dead roots, and young Hanna turned back into the Faceless One.

“Ungrateful child!” she roared. “I kept you warm for fifty-five years!”

“With other people's fear.”

“You had no other warmth!”

“I do now.”

Maksym lifted his white cap, with its embroidered M.

His real mother's voice reached them from the distant world.

“Maksym, my son...”

A church bell rang all around them.

Each stroke opened a little crack in the darkness. Candlelight shone through.

The Faceless One turned to Daryna.

“Do you think you've won?”

“Not yet.”

“Then listen to the truth about your own future.”

Darkness showed Daryna years that had not yet come.

She saw herself grown up. Her parents aged and died. Hanna was gone. The village changed, and the old forest was cut down. People forgot Maksym.

Daryna stood alone by a small grave.

“Everything ends,” the Faceless One said. “Friendship, love, memory. Stay here, and you'll never lose anyone.”

“If nothing ever ends, nothing ever begins.”

“Fine words. But when you're alone, you'll regret them.”

“Maybe. But it will be my life.”

Daryna held out her hand to Maksym.

“Come on.”

He did not move at once.

“Will you really forget me someday?”

“I might forget your voice or your face. But I'll never forget what you became to me.”

“And if I follow the light, will I see you again?”

"I don't know."

"You always tell the truth."

"I'm trying to, now."

Maksym took her hand.

"A short, real friendship is better than an everlasting lie."

The Faceless One screamed.

Roots coiled around their legs. Darkness dragged Daryna and Maksym deeper into the portal.

On the other side, Vasyl tried to force the roots apart with his bare hands.

"Daryna!"

"Don't touch them!" Myron stopped him. "She must find the way herself!"

Father Oleksiy went on praying. Hanna held the candle, its flame growing ever weaker.

Suddenly a branch snapped nearby.

Serhiy was standing outside the rowan circle.

His face was still pale from his time in the hospital. He had secretly followed the adults, wanting to learn the truth about the one who had saved his sister and punished him.

"Daryna!" he shouted when he saw the open portal.

Olenka's voice came out of the mist.

"Serhiy, help me!"

The boy turned.

His little sister stood beyond the circle.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm scared. Take me home."

"That isn't her!" Vasyl shouted.

But Serhiy had already stepped across the rowan line.

The false Olenka seized him.

Black roots wrapped around his arms and dragged him toward the portal.

"Help!"

Serhiy fell into the darkness.

He landed at Maksym's feet.

The Faceless One laughed.

"And here is the real price."

She lifted Serhiy into the air.

“One living soul stays here, one dead soul goes free. Give me the boy who tormented you, Maksym, and I'll release you and Daryna.”

Serhiy saw the boy and recognized him.

“It's you...”

Maksym stared at the one who had called him a corpse, insulted Daryna, and threatened to dig up his grave.

The Faceless One extended her long black fingers.

“You don't even have to kill him. Just do nothing.”

The roots began to crush Serhiy's chest.

“Help me...” he whispered.

Maksym faced his final choice.

Save the boy who had hurt him and surrender his strength once more.

Or allow him to die and at last escape the cold ravine.

CHAPTER 26

The Good Choice

The roots crushed Serhiy's chest.

He struggled to get free, but the black tendrils only tightened. One wound around his throat, another covered his mouth.

"Help..." he rasped.

Maksym stood motionless.

He saw the classroom again. Serhiy held Daryna's notebook, laughed at her drawing, and called him a corpse.

Then Maksym saw his own grave, dug open.

"On Saturday we'll go to the ravine and dig up his bones," Serhiy's voice repeated.

The Faceless One bent toward the boy.

"He came to keep his promise."

"That's not true!" Serhiy cried.

The roots freed his mouth.

"Then why did you follow us?" Daryna asked.

"I wanted to see the boy. Olenka talks about him every day. She says he saved her."

"And you thought you'd laugh at him again?"

"No!"

Serhiy looked at Maksym.

"I wanted to ask why he saved my sister after everything I'd said."

"Olenka never hurt me," Maksym replied.

"But I did."

"Yes."

"Was it you who gave me that rash?"

The boy nodded.

"I wanted you to hurt."

"I did. I thought I was going to die."

"Then you know how I felt."

"I do."

The Faceless One laughed.

"He's lying. People only ask forgiveness when death is staring them in the face."

The roots began tightening again.
Serhiy screamed.
“Maksym, save him!” Daryna pleaded.
“Why?”
“Because he's alive.”
“The German soldiers were alive, too.”
“They murdered people. Serhiy said cruel, stupid things.”
“His words hurt you.”
“But I don't want him dead!”
The Faceless One stood behind Daryna.
“He'll hurt you again. People like him never change.”
“Maybe he'll change.”
“And if he doesn't?”
“That will be his choice.”
Maksym looked at Serhiy.
“And I can choose not to save him.”
“You can,” Daryna agreed. “But then your anger will make the choice for you.”
“I'm tired of being kind to people who fear me.”
“You don't have to do it for them. Do it for yourself.”
“If I save him, I'll have to stay here.”
“We'll find another way.”
“Myron said a living soul had to stay.”
The Faceless One smiled.
“The old man wasn't wrong. Give me Serhiy, and you and Daryna may leave.”
A bright path opened before Maksym. At its end stood Hanna, arms outstretched.
“My son, come to me,” she called.
This time the voice was real.
Maksym took a step toward the path.
The roots tightened around Serhiy's throat.
Daryna caught the boy's hand.
“Think of Olenka.”
He stopped.
“What has she got to do with this?”

"If Serhiy dies, his sister will spend the rest of her life waiting for her brother. Just as Hanna waited for you."

Maksym remembered little Olenka standing in the swamp, begging for help. He remembered her reaching out to him beside the stream.

"Would she cry?" he asked.

"Every day."

"Serhiy isn't worth her tears," the Faceless One said.

"That isn't for you to decide," Maksym replied.

The bright path began to dim.

"If you refuse now, you'll be cold again!" the darkness shrieked.

"I know another kind of warmth now."

Maksym took from his pocket the white cap embroidered with an M.

"My mother kept this for fifty-five years. Daryna came back even when she was afraid. Olenka held out her hand to me. You can't steal that warmth."

"They'll leave you all the same!"

"Perhaps. But I won't become you just to keep them."

Maksym approached Serhiy.

"I haven't forgiven you yet."

"I understand," the boy whispered.

"But I won't let you die."

Maksym pressed his palms against the black roots.

The Faceless One screamed.

"Don't touch them! They're holding you, too!"

"Not anymore."

"You belong to me!"

"My name is Maksym. I'm Hanna's son."

The white letter on his cap glowed.

The roots began to smoke. They tried to coil around his arms, but Maksym would not let go.

"Daryna called me her friend," he went on. "Olenka called me her rescuer. The priest wrote down my name. You have no power over me."

One root snapped.

Then another.

Serhiy fell to the ground.

"Run toward the light!" Daryna cried.

He tried to stand, but his legs would not obey.

The Faceless One grew enormous. Her arms became black branches, blocking the exit.

“No one leaves!”

Maksym picked up Spark.

The little red car burst into real flame. It did not burn, but it drove back the darkness.

The boy set it on the ground.

“Show us the way.”

Spark rolled toward the exit, leaving a trail of red light.

Maksym hauled Serhiy upright.

“I can't walk,” Serhiy said.

“You're alive. Living people are always heavy.”

The boy slipped Serhiy's arm over his shoulders.

His own body grew transparent.

“I'll help,” Daryna said.

Together they dragged Serhiy after Spark.

The Faceless One reached for them. Maksym turned and looked into her eyes.

“Want to show me my crimes?” she laughed. “I've committed more than all the human wars put together.”

“No. I'll show you something you've never had.”

Maksym's memories rose before the Faceless One.

Daryna returning to the ravine with warm bread.

Olenka reaching across the stream.

Hanna speaking her son's name for the first time.

Vasyl thanking an invisible boy for saving his life.

True warmth filled the darkness.

The Faceless One screamed.

She could feed on fear, shame, and hatred, but she could not endure gratitude.

Cracks spread across her body.

“Stop!”

Maksym showed her more memories.

His mother embracing him.

Daryna calling him a friend.

The priest writing his name into the parish register.

The cracks widened. White light poured through them.

"I am not yours!" Maksym shouted.
The Faceless One crumbled into black dust.
The portal's exit opened.
From the other side, Vasyl saw his daughter.
"Daryna!"

He reached for her, but the distance between the worlds remained too great.

"The rope!" Myron ordered.

Vasyl threw into the portal the end of the rope that had bound them together on their way to the ravine.

Daryna caught it and tied it around Serhiy.

"Pull!"

Vasyl and Father Oleksiy hauled the boy back into the rowan circle.

The moment Serhiy reached the grave, the black marks on his neck vanished. He coughed and opened his eyes.

"Maksym's still in there," he said. "Help him."

Inside the portal, Daryna held the boy by his shoulders.

Maksym had almost disappeared. Nothing remained of him but a faint child-shaped outline.

"You've given away too much of your strength," she said.

"Is Serhiy alive?"

"He's alive."

The boy smiled.

"Then I did the right thing."

The ground split beneath them.

The Faceless One rose again from the darkness. She no longer had a human shape. Where her face should have been, a black void churned.

"You've broken the law!" she roared. "A living person went in—a living person must stay!"

Beyond the rowan circle, Grandfather Dubovyk answered:

"That isn't a law. It's your lie."

Myron lifted a candle.

"Self-sacrifice opens a third path. The one darkness cannot see."

A narrow golden walkway appeared between Daryna and the grave.

"Go!" Ruta cried.

Daryna stepped onto it, supporting Maksym.

The Faceless One rushed after them.

With every step, the golden path crumbled behind them. Spark rolled ahead, showing the way.

Only a few steps remained to the exit.

Maksym fell.

"I can't go any farther."

Daryna lifted him.

Once again, he weighed almost nothing.

"This time I'll carry you out."

The Faceless One reached for them. Her fingers were already brushing the white cap.

Hanna raised her candle.

"Maksym!"

The boy heard his mother's voice and summoned the last of his strength.

He pushed himself off the golden path.

Daryna fell with him beside the open grave.

The portal began to close.

The Faceless One remained on the far side. She battered the invisible boundary and screamed:

"He will not go into the light! He hasn't forgiven! He's still mine!"

The roots of the old oak drew together, but a black shadow lingered beside the grave.

Maksym lay in his mother's arms.

His body was cold and transparent. There was no heartbeat anymore.

Father Oleksiy stood before the small white coffin.

"It's time to finish the prayer."

Hanna kissed her son's forehead.

"You saved someone you had every reason to hate. That is the greatest kindness a wounded soul could show."

Maksym opened his eyes.

"I don't want to be like the people who took my life."

"Now you know who you are," Daryna said.

He nodded.

"I'm Maksym. And I chose not to become darkness."

The first ray of light appeared above the old oak.

But the Faceless One still clung to his shadow.

CHAPTER 27

The Name

The black shadow clung to Maksym's feet.

It could no longer bind his body with roots or speak in his mother's voice. Yet it remained joined to his own shadow, like a long, hideous tail.

"He hasn't forgiven," the Faceless One repeated. "You may call his name, pray, and light candles, but hatred will bring the boy back to me."

Maksym lay in Hanna's arms.

He was almost transparent. The oak roots showed through his white shirt. Only the embroidered M on his cap still glowed.

"Don't listen to her, my son," Hanna said.

"I'm not listening. But she's speaking inside me."

"About what?"

"Paraska."

The Faceless One assumed an old woman's form.

Paraska stood beside the open grave, holding a white swaddling cloth.

"You remember how she stopped your breath," the darkness whispered. "You remember the cold earth. She went on living for many years, while you were not even given one full day."

Maksym's eyes began to darken.

"It's unfair."

"Yes. Call her soul. I'll give her to you. Let her feel every moment of your cold."

"Maksym, look at me," Daryna pleaded.

He did not respond.

"She took my life."

"And if you let hatred take your soul, Paraska will defeat you a second time."

The boy turned toward Daryna.

"I can't say I've forgiven her."

"You don't have to lie. Just refuse to let her crime become your life."

The Faceless One laughed.

"Fine words from a living girl. She hasn't spent fifty-five years buried underground."

Hanna held her son against her chest.

"I can't forgive my mother either. But I don't want her to keep us prisoners even after her death."

Maksym looked at Paraska's figure.

"I won't forget what you did."

The darkness reached toward him.

"Then come with me."

"And I won't pretend you had the right."

The hand stopped.

"But I don't wish you dead anymore. I don't want to see your fear or hear you scream. You took my life, but you won't have my soul."

The image of Paraska began to crack.

"I'm letting you go," Maksym said. "Not for your sake. For my mother's. For Daryna's. For my own."

Behind the Faceless One, the real Paraska appeared.

Neither young nor terrifying. A bent old woman stood with her head lowered, hands trembling.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

"I can't forgive you yet," Maksym replied. "But I won't keep you beside me anymore."

Paraska fell to her knees.

Gray light appeared around her. It enveloped the old woman, and her figure slowly dissolved.

The Faceless One screamed.

The black shadow tore free of the boy's feet.

"He is mine!"

Father Oleksiy stepped between her and Maksym.

"No. This child does not belong to you."

The priest raised his cross.

"It's time to speak the truth at the grave."

Vasyl and Myron carefully lifted the remains of the rotted basket from the earth. Inside lay tiny bones, scraps of cloth, and a few blue threads.

Hanna watched without turning away.

"This is my son," she said. "I won't let him be hidden from the world again."

They placed the remains in the white coffin.

Hanna unfolded the towel she had embroidered as a young woman and covered the child with it. She laid the wooden horse beside him.

Daryna held Spark.

"Shall I put this in, too?" she asked.

Maksym shook his head.

"No. Spark is yours."

"I brought it for you."

"It has done what it was meant to do. Keep it to remember that even a little warmth can show the way."

Daryna held the little red car against her chest.

Father Oleksiy sprinkled holy water over the grave and coffin.

The drops fell on the dark soil and turned to tiny sparks.

The Faceless One drew back.

"Water won't erase what happened!" she cried.

"We're not erasing anything," Daryna replied. "We're telling the truth."

She unfolded Paraska's confession and read aloud:

"On October 14, 1943, Hanna Boychuk gave birth to a living boy.

Paraska Boychuk, fearing the judgment of others, smothered the infant and secretly buried him beneath the old oak. She told his mother that the child had been stillborn."

With every word, the Faceless One grew smaller.

Hanna continued:

"My son was conceived through a crime, but he himself was not a crime. He was an innocent child. I wanted him, loved him, and waited for him."

Father Oleksiy opened his prayer book.

"I cannot give him back his earthly life. I cannot perform a sacrament for someone who has already crossed the boundary of death. But I can bear witness before God and humanity: this child lived."

The priest knelt beside the coffin.

"Merciful Lord, You knew this child even before he was born. People denied him baptism, a grave, and the dignity of being remembered. Receive the innocent soul we return from darkness today."

The Faceless One rushed at him.

Grandfather Dubovyk struck the earth with his staff. The roots of the old forest wound around the dark figure.

"This ravine is no longer yours," the forest spirit said.

Ruta held out her hands. Her green hair became a thousand slender branches, binding the Faceless One tightly.

"Say the child's name!" Myron shouted.

Hanna took her son's hands.

“Maksym.”

The church bell sounded from the village.

Father Oleksiy repeated:

“Maksym, Hanna's son.”

A second stroke.

Daryna came to the boy.

She had called him Maksym before. In dreams, beside the spring, inside a stranger's house and a dark portal.

But now, for the first time, she spoke his full name before his open grave, his mother, the priest, the living, and the old forest:

“Maksym, son of Hanna Boychuk.”

The third stroke of the bell rolled over the trees.

White light flared at the sound of the name.

It passed through the coffin, the grave, and the old oak's roots. Green moss covered the black earth. The stream began to flow in the right direction again.

The Faceless One shrieked.

“He was mine!”

“You only had his loneliness,” Daryna replied. “He isn't alone anymore.”

The light struck the dark figure.

Her white mask cracked. There was no face underneath—only a void filled with other people's fears.

The voices of everyone she had lured into the ravine burst from the Faceless One. They rose above the forest as little lights and flew toward the sky.

Darkness shrank and shrank until nothing remained but a single black rootlet.

Grandfather Dubovyk picked it up and tossed it into the stream.

The icy water carried the rootlet away. It crumbled into black sand and vanished.

The old oak sighed deeply.

A bullet fired by a German soldier in 1945 fell from its trunk. Fresh bark closed over the hole.

Maksym stood up.

He was no longer transparent.

Before them stood an ordinary seven-year-old boy: dark hair, rosy cheeks, a clean white shirt. His bare feet touched the earth, but no frost spread from them now.

Hanna embraced her son.

“Are you cold?”

Maksym listened to the feeling inside him.

“No.”

“Not at all?”

He smiled.

“I'm warm.”

The sky above the trees began to brighten.

The golden road Daryna had seen in Myron's vision appeared beyond the stream. Indistinct figures of light stood at its far end.

“They're waiting for me,” Maksym said.

“Do you know who they are?” Daryna asked.

“Not yet. But I'm not afraid anymore.”

Father Oleksiy finished the prayer.

They closed the coffin. After sunrise, it would be carried to the village cemetery and buried beside the grave of Hanna's father.

Maksym looked toward the bright road.

“Is it time for me to go?”

Myron shook his head.

“The road will stay open until the first ray of sunlight. You have a few minutes.”

The boy turned to his mother and Daryna.

“Then I want to say goodbye.”

CHAPTER 28

Farewell

Very little time remained before sunrise.

The road of light began beside the stream and disappeared among the trees. It grew brighter with every passing minute.

Maksym went to his mother first.

Hanna knelt before him. Now she could not only see her son but touch him. Her fingers caressed his dark hair, his cheeks, and his little warm hands.

She tried to memorize every feature.

"I've had so little time to be your mother," Hanna said.

"You've been my mother all my life."

"I wasn't there for you."

"But you called my name in your dreams. The Faceless One just wouldn't let me hear you."

"If only I'd come back sooner..."

"Don't."

Maksym wiped away her tears.

"Daryna taught me that you can't change the past. You can only refuse to let it steal the future."

Hanna smiled through her tears.

"You don't speak like a seven-year-old at all."

"I'm fifty-five years and one day old."

"You didn't even live one full day."

"Then I don't know how old I am, either."

They both laughed.

Hanna took off the white cap embroidered with an M, straightened it, and put it back on her son's head.

"Now it fits just right," she said.

"Can I take it with me?"

"It's yours."

Maksym hugged his mother tightly.

"Don't cry after I leave."

"I can't promise that."

"Then cry, but don't blame yourself."

“All right.”

“And visit my grave.”

“Every day.”

“Not every day. You still have a life of your own.”

Hanna kissed his forehead.

“I love you, Maksym.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

He stepped away while his mother still had the strength to let him go.

Serhiy stood beside the grave. He could stand on his own now, though red marks from the roots still circled his neck.

“Can I say something?” he asked.

Maksym stopped.

“Go ahead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what, exactly?”

Serhiy lowered his head.

“For laughing at you. Tearing Daryna’s drawing. Calling you a corpse and threatening to dig up your grave.”

“Were you really going to do it?”

“At first I was. Then Olenka told me how you’d saved her. I felt ashamed.”

“Is that why you followed us?”

“I wanted to see you and apologize. But I did another stupid thing instead.”

“Your stupidity almost left me trapped in darkness.”

Serhiy said nothing.

“And you saved me anyway.”

Maksym looked at Daryna.

“She asked me to.”

“If you hadn’t wanted to, my asking wouldn’t have changed anything,” Daryna said.

The boy turned back to Serhiy.

“I won’t forget what you did. But I don’t want to punish you anymore.”

“So you forgive me?”

“Not completely. But I think I might someday.”

Serhiy nodded.

“I’ll take care of your grave.”

"Take care of your sister instead. She's braver than you, but she keeps wandering into places she shouldn't."

Serhiy smiled for the first time.

"Deal."

Father Oleksiy blessed Maksym.

"I'm sorry I couldn't give you what your mother asked for."

"You gave me a prayer."

"I hope it was enough."

"If it hadn't been, the road wouldn't have appeared."

The boy thanked old Myron.

"You knew about me for years."

"Not enough to save you."

"But you told Daryna what to look for."

"She wouldn't have given up even without me."

Myron offered him a small wax candle.

"Take this. If the road grows dark, light it."

Maksym touched the wick.

The candle burst into a little golden flame.

"I'm not afraid of the dark anymore."

Grandfather Dubovyk stood beside the old oak. His beard had woven itself into the roots again.

"Who's going to play with the woodland animals now, and leave toy cars under my trees?" he grumbled.

"Will you miss me?"

"Forest spirits don't miss people."

Dew shone in his amber eyes.

Maksym embraced the old spirit.

"Thank you for not letting the forest forget me."

"The forest never forgets. It simply doesn't always tell its stories."

Dubovyk gave the boy a little acorn.

"Plant it on the other side of the road."

"What will grow from it?"

"You'll find out."

Ruta waited beside the stream.

Her hair was green again. White flowers bloomed among its strands, though it was the middle of autumn.

Maksym approached the mavka.

"You were my first friend."

"I was your nursemaid."

"You said you didn't like children."

"I still don't. They're noisy, never follow the rules, and bring iron toys into the forest."

"And me?"

Ruta looked away.

"I tolerated you. Sometimes."

Maksym laughed and hugged her.

The mavka closed her eyes. A few clear drops fell from her hair and turned into flowers.

"Go," she whispered. "Before I change my mind and hide you in the deepest part of the forest."

"Look after Daryna."

"She could look after anyone herself."

Maksym approached Vasyl.

"Are you still afraid of me?"

"Yes," the man answered truthfully. "But not because I think you're evil. I'm afraid of forgetting what you did for my family."

"Daryna won't let you."

Vasyl held out his hand.

Maksym shook it.

"Thank you for my daughter," Vasyl said.

"She's the one who saved me."

"You saved each other."

Daryna was the only one left.

She stood beside the coffin, clutching the little red car. All this time she had tried not to cry, but now her tears came on their own.

Maksym went to her.

"You promised to bring me sweets."

Daryna laughed through her tears.

"I'll bring some to your grave."

"I won't be able to taste them."

"Then the village children can eat them."

"Bring lots, in that case."

They fell silent.

"I don't want you to go," Daryna said at last.

“And you were the one who said friendship shouldn't be a prison.”
“I was. But it doesn't make this easier.”
Maksym held out his hand.
This time it was warm.
“Remember what I asked you by the spring?”
“Do you know who I am?”
“Now I do.”
“Who are you?”
The boy smiled.
“I'm Maksym. Hanna's son. Your friend. Someone who was afraid of the cold for a long time, but wouldn't let the darkness turn him cruel.”
“I'll never forget you.”
“Don't promise what you can't know.”
“Then I'll put it another way: for as long as I remember you, I'll remember you with warmth.”
“That's better.”
Daryna offered him Spark.
“It's your toy.”
Maksym shook his head and returned the car.
“Keep it. It will remind you that I'm near.”
“Will you be able to visit me in dreams?”
“I don't know. Maybe sometimes.”
“How will I know it's really you and not the Faceless One?”
“The darkness is gone.”
“Tell me something only the two of us would know anyway.”
Maksym leaned forward and whispered a few words in her ear.
Daryna smiled.
“It's a deal.”
The boy embraced her.
The forest disappeared around them. For a moment, Daryna saw the icy spring, their first meeting, and the barefoot child in the mist.
Only now, Maksym was no longer cold.
The first ray of sunlight appeared over the horizon.
The road beyond the stream blazed gold.
A tall man stood at its far end. Hanna recognized her father—the very Maksym after whom she had named her son.
The man reached out to the boy.

“Your grandfather has come,” she said.

Maksym crossed the stream.

His face was reflected in the water.

On the far bank, he looked back.

“Goodbye, Mama!”

“Goodbye, my son!”

“Goodbye, Daryna!”

“Goodbye, Maksym!”

The boy took his grandfather's hand.

Together they walked along the golden road. Their forms grew brighter with each step until they dissolved in the first rays of the sun.

The road disappeared.

Birds sang above the old forest.

For the first time in many years, sunlight reached the bottom of the Deep Ravine. It touched the spring, the old oak, and the little white coffin.

The cold retreated.

Daryna opened her palm.

Spark lay there. The little red car was warm.

A tiny golden letter had appeared on its door:

M.

EPILOGUE

A Warm Dream

Twelve years passed.

No one feared the Deep Ravine anymore.

The old oak still grew beside the spring, but its roots no longer stirred at night. People and livestock stopped disappearing in the woods. Mist was just mist again, and the laughter of a child sometimes heard among the trees no longer frightened anyone.

Ruta occasionally appeared beside the stream. Children glimpsed green hair among the leaves, but grown-ups never believed them.

Grandfather Dubovyk continued watching over the forest paths. Beside the two rowan trees, the villagers left a sign:

“DO NOT ENTER THE DEEP RAVINE AFTER SUNSET.”

Even with the Faceless One gone, the old rules remained rules.

Maksym was buried in the village cemetery.

On a small white cross were the words:

MAKSYM BOYCHUK

OCTOBER 14, 1943

Below them, Father Oleksiy asked for two more words to be carved:

HE LIVED.

Hanna returned to Vilshany and spent seven years living near her son's grave. She told the truth to everyone willing to listen, and before she died, she asked to be buried beside Maksym.

At her funeral, two white birds circled over the forest for a long time.

Daryna graduated from university, became a history teacher, and returned to the village school. She collected old letters, photographs, and people's memories, determined that no hidden story should ever become a curse again.

Serhiy changed, too.

He tended Maksym's grave, helped elderly Hanna, and never again laughed at anyone unable to defend themselves. Olenka grew up, but never stopped insisting that a barefoot boy with a red toy car had rescued her when she was little.

Every year on the Feast of the Protection, Daryna brought white flowers, bread with honey, and a few sweets for the village children to the grave.

She kept Spark.

The little red car stood on her writing desk. The golden M on its door never faded, and its wheels sometimes turned by themselves whenever a warm wind came from the forest.

Maksym did not appear in her dreams for a long time.

At first, Daryna waited every night. She left the window open, placed Spark beside her pillow, and listened to every rustle.

Then she understood: if the boy did not come, it meant he was happy.

On the twelfth anniversary of Maksym's deliverance, Daryna came home from the cemetery late in the evening.

She put the little red car on her desk, opened her notebook, and continued writing the story of the Deep Ravine. She reached the first meeting beside the spring but spent a long time searching for the right words.

Around midnight, Daryna fell asleep at her desk.

She dreamed of the old forest.

Sunlight filled the oaks. The spring gurgled between the stones, and on the far bank sat a boy in a white shirt and a wool cap embroidered with an M.

He was wearing shoes.

"So you've finally put some shoes on," Daryna said.

Maksym laughed.

"It's not cold to go barefoot here. But Grandfather said you should look presentable when you visit someone."

"Why did you stay away so long?"

"I wasn't allowed."

"By whom?"

"There are rules here, too."

"As strange as Dubovyk's?"

"Stranger."

Maksym crossed the stream. His face was reflected clearly in the water.

"Have you brought the bread with sunshine again?" he asked.

Daryna smiled.

Those were the very words the boy had whispered to her when they said goodbye. That was how she would recognize him if he ever returned in a dream.

"It really is you."

“Did you doubt it?”
“After the Faceless One, I check everything.”
They sat on the stones beside the spring.
“How's your mother?” Daryna asked.
“She's with me. She doesn't cry anymore.”
“And Grandfather Maksym?”
“He's always trying to teach me to fish. But the fish here know we'll let them go anyway, so they won't bite.”
Daryna laughed.
“Are you happy?”
“Yes.”
“Then why have you come?”
“You spend too much time over your books and hardly go anywhere.”
“Have you turned into my father?”
“Someone has to remind the living that they're supposed to live.”
Maksym took a little slip of paper from his pocket.
Six numbers were written on it:
7 — 14 — 19 — 28 — 43 — 45
“What's this?”
“Tomorrow they'll be selling lottery tickets beside the bus station. Choose these numbers.”
Daryna stared at him.
“You've come from the other world to give me lottery numbers?”
“Not just that.”
“Will I win?”
“Enough to finish your book and restore the old school library.”
“Will there be anything left for me?”
“Enough for a new dress.”
“How generous.”
Maksym pretended to be offended.
“I can take the numbers back.”
“I'm not giving them up.”
The boy smiled.
“You'll meet a man in a gray jacket by the kiosk. You'll drop Spark, and he'll pick it up.”
“And then?”
“Don't walk past him.”

“Is this my destiny?”

“Destiny isn't a person you happen to meet on the road. It's what you both do after meeting.”

“What's his name?”

“I'm not telling.”

“Why not?”

“You can't give away every answer. Otherwise life would be like an examination where you always know which question you'll draw.”

Maksym stood up.

“I have to go.”

“Will you visit again?”

“When you need me.”

“And if I just want to see you?”

“Look at Spark. Or come to the forest during the day. I won't appear, but I'll hear you.”

He hugged Daryna.

“Finish our story.”

“People might not believe it.”

“What matters is that they remember.”

Maksym ran toward the road of light.

“Wait!” Daryna called. “Are you quite sure you know who you are now?”

The boy looked back.

“I do. Do you?”

Daryna woke up.

The sun was rising outside the window.

On her desk lay a sheet of paper with six numbers. Spark stood on top of it, although she had left the little car at the far end of the desk before going to sleep.

That day, Daryna went to the bus station.

At the newspaper kiosk, she bought one lottery ticket and chose the numbers Maksym had given her.

As she tucked the ticket into her bag, Spark fell to the ground.

A stranger in a gray jacket picked up the little red car.

“Is this yours?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Strange. I had one exactly like it when I was a child.”

They started talking.

A year later, the man became Daryna's husband.

The lottery ticket was a winner. The money paid for repairs to the school library, publication of Daryna's first book, and a small house near the old forest.

She called the book:

“WHO AM I?”

On the first page she wrote:

“To Maksym—the boy who needed only a name to find his way into the light.”

Daryna brought the first copy to his grave.

She laid the book beside the white flowers, with Spark beside it.

A warm wind turned the pages.

The little red car rolled forward a few inches on its own and stopped beside Maksym's name.

A child's laughter sounded from the old forest.

This time it was bright and full of joy.

