



Welcome to Muse....

Stranded when his car breaks down, Killian Dain Fox overhears a cop and a gas station clerk discussing murder and the exchange of money. Although he tries to believe he misheard the conversation, by the time K.D. meets a few more of the locals, he's convinced the entire small town is inhabited by a gang of murderers.

Between the massive storms that threaten to flood the town, a would-be killer on the loose, and his growing attraction to the town's pretty mayor, Killian Dain Fox is on a rollercoaster of a ride in a place he least expected it... Nebraska.

[Available through the Holly Lisle Bookstore](#)

1

There weren't supposed to be any hills in Nebraska. That's why he came this way.

Killian stomped on the gas pedal and the engine revved like a race car, but the power never reached the wheels. Momentum alone kept him moving towards the top of the steep hill while gravity relentlessly dragged at the back bumper. He didn't think old Rosie the Rambler could scale this one.

And just to make certain Killian knew that all the world and God stood against him tonight, lightning flashed almost directly overhead. Thunder rolled through the air, and a wind gust sent dirt and twigs rushing ahead of the car. Everything moved faster than him tonight.

Row upon row of corn stretched out on both sides of the road. Caught in the car's lights, the stalks moved back and forth like demented stick men drawings come to life.

By some miracle, Rosie reached the crest a moment later, but in the next flash of lightning he saw an even higher hill ahead of him -- just before the rain began to fall in torrents. He would

never make the top of that one, even with a good run at it.

Maybe he would get struck by lightning and he wouldn't have to go the rest of the way to Chicago and work for KKGO -- *The television station on the Go!* -- as their third shift news commentator. Maybe fate, God and Rosie the Rambler were all conspiring to keep him from the damned job.

Lightning branched through the sky from east to west in a continuous line across the horizon. His breath caught at the sight. Lightning flashed again over the hill that trapped him here --

Gas station sign.

"Holy shit, Batman! We're saved!"

The glowing neon sign sat just a little off the road between the hill he was on and the taller one ahead. He marked the spot and stomped down on the gas pedal. The car inched forward. He didn't worry about being hit. The last car he'd seen had been a black Corvette heading like a bat out of hell in the opposite direction. Probably an omen and he'd been too stupid to read the signs.

The car crested the top and started down the hill. And damn

they were moving fast! He turned on the windshield wipers, for what little good they did in this deluge. At the bottom of the hill he turned the car sharply to the left by a sign that read 'Welcome to *something* and onto the side road. He could see the gas station on the right, the glowing red Quickshop sign above a doorway looking like the gates to heaven tonight. Rosie coasted to the edge of the sloped driveway. Knowing he wouldn't make even that small incline at this speed, Killian pulled off to the side, miring the car in mud and weeds. She'd gotten him this far, and he could walk the last half block to the entrance.

Killian leaned over to the backseat, pulling his hooded jacket out of the debris of food wrappers and discarded maps. Then, looking at the upward curve of the driveway, and considering the wind and rain, he wrestled his cane out as well. No use taking any chances.

The cane turned out to be a really good idea. The asphalt from the street to the gas pumps looked like the cratered field in a war zone; potholes nearly put him down three times. Someone hurried out of the building and into a car, driving away in a

splash of puddles.

He had feared for a moment that the place was closing, but reaching the pumps he could finally see two people inside -- and hell, one of them was even a cop! He spotted the police car parked beside building next to what might be a an ancient Gremlin.

If not the gates of heaven, he had at least reached help. And it included a coffee dispenser at the wall opposite the door. The thought of even *bad* hot coffee appealed to him right now.

Killian hurried across the last few steps and pushed open the door to a flood of air-conditioned and coffee-scented air.

The tall, lank clerk barely glanced in his direction before turning back to the shorter, dark-haired cop who leaned against the counter.

"No, I can't do that, Tom," the clerk said shaking his head. "I did that with Angela. It has to be unique for George. Strange. Different."

"That's your problem, Don," the cop answered. "Maybe you should try for something less exotic this time."

Killian went past the two, glad to have a chance to reach the

coffee first. The cop didn't look likely to go charging off at any moment, at least.

"Oh yeah. That's easy for you to say," the clerk answered, sounding desperate. "You don't have another five people to kill."

Killian, a Styrofoam cup in hand, stopped and looked at the clerk. He must have misheard. Killian purposely turned away and poured the coffee, putting the lid over the top before he started back to the register.

The cop leaned on the counter shaking his head. "You're running out of time."

"I know I'm running out of time! I've managed three unique murders already. They really can't expect more from me!"

"You took the money. You could try giving it back."

"You know I can't. And what would I do if I could? I'd have to change my name and start over, if I could even get a contract like this again. No. I have to come up with a way to kill him!"

Killian took a step backward, but the clerk looked up, suddenly startled as though he hadn't even seen Killian walk in. "Oh! Sorry, I thought you were in a snit when you came in!"

The cop slowly turned around. Killian didn't think he could get past both of them.

"You didn't drive up. Let me guess." The cop shook his head as he looked out at the storm. "Car problems? Always happens on nights like this, doesn't it?"

Words didn't want to slip past Killian's lips. He forced sounds out, trying to calm the wild speculation rushing through his head. At least he had the cane for whatever protection it might be. "Ah. Yeah. Car problems. I coasted as far as the drive."

"You're lucky you made it here. There's nothing else open in this area for another fifty or sixty miles." The cop sounded normal. Killian convinced himself that he must have misheard *something*. "I'm about to make my midnight run into town, so I can give you a lift to Prince's place. He's our town mechanic. Unless Alicia roused him, he's probably still working at the garage. If not, we'll figure something out."

"I'd be grateful," Killian said. He felt numb and cold. He put the coffee on the counter and reached for his wallet.

"On me," Don the clerk said, waving him away. "Just go with Tom. He'll take care of you."

Not exactly the words he really wanted to hear just then, but he nodded his thanks.

"I'm Tom Nullin," the cop said, holding out his hand.

"Killian Fox," he answered automatically and shook hands.

"Wow. Great name," Don said. He grabbed a small battered notebook from under the counter and flipped it open. "How do you spell that? Two l's? Two x's?"

"Two l's, one x," he said, wishing the man hadn't gone odd again, and wasn't writing his name in a book.

"Thanks!"

"No problem."

Tom grabbed his hat from the counter and went to the door.

Killian picked up the coffee cup again, holding so tight he felt the to the side start to indent.

"Just relax, Don. You'll figure out how to do it," Tom reassured the man behind the counter as he pushed the door open for Killian.

Don nodded and kept scribbling in the notebook.

"Damn bad night," Tom said as they slipped outside.

Killian, with thoughts about George's murder, looked back at

Don. He followed the cop out into the storm, but he couldn't say he had made the better choice.

2

The rain had slowed to a soft drizzle in the few minutes he had been inside. Water ran from the roof edge and over the gutters like miniature waterfalls, splattering the ground at every few steps. Killian dodged them as best he could, wishing he could sip the coffee instead of just letting the thin cup warm his hand. He could still see bright flashes of lightning not far off to the southwest, the harbinger of more trouble. He couldn't outrun it. Tom Nullin stopped by the police car and looked at the storm, shaking his head in obvious dismay. "Sure hope the rest of the system goes south of us. They had three tornadoes over in Gage County tonight, although the damage seems to be confined to farm outbuildings. I'd hoped that it would all die down by now."

"I wondered how bad it would get when I saw the front moving in behind me," Killian said. The cop unlocked the front side door. Killian slipped in, setting his cane beside him. He pushed

back his hood and uncapped the coffee, finally taking a long drink. Really good coffee, he realized.

Tom threw himself in the other side, and Killian barely kept from slopping coffee all over the interior. He quickly put the lid back in place and copied Tom's move to grab the seatbelt. As the car started, the police band radio came to life and cackled in tandem with the lightning flashes. He thought he could hear voices, but nothing very clearly.

Tom backed the car up, hitting a couple of those potholes, before he turned and started down the drive.

"You from around here?" Tom asked.

Killian thought about lying, but they were going to drive right past the Rambler with the Colorado plates, so that didn't seem like a good idea.

"From Denver," he said. They hit another pothole.

"That's tough, breaking down out --" Tom pulled the car to a stop at the end of the drive and looked past Killian to his car.

"Tell me you weren't driving from Denver in *that*."

"Hey, that's a 1966 Rambler Classic 660. Nearly completely refurbished."

"Uh huh. And you expected to get *where* in it?"

"Chicago," he admitted and then panicked, remembering Don, lists and victims. "They're expecting me for a new job. I should probably call and let them know where I am."

"Yes, good idea," Tom said. Nice. Normal. No reason to worry. "A shame the phone lines are down and the local cell tower took a direct hit. I hope the phones are back up tomorrow. How did you end up here? We're a little off the track to Chicago."

"By the time I reached the Nebraska border I could feel the clutch going out. The car wouldn't do more than sixty, and those semis on the Interstate would have run me over. I took the state highways that paralleled the Interstate, but about seventy miles from here I started hitting flood and storm damage."

"Yeah, we've had quite a few bad storms going through here the last few nights," Tom said. He still hadn't pulled out into the road.

"I had intended to cut through Omaha and on to Des Moines and then north. I'm not that far off."

"No, you aren't far off." He shook his head, and Killian realized the cop had been staring off at the sky where distant lightning flashed. Tom finally started out onto the road, turning toward the right and away from the highway. A moment later he honked the horn, startling Killian again.

"Sorry." Tom waved a hand toward the big, white house on the opposite side of the road. "Just letting my wife know I'm making my midnight run through town. That way she knows I'll be home in the next hour."

"Oh. Right."

The narrow, slick road curved away from the gas station, with cornfields still on both sides. Those quickly gave way to two hills bare of corn and topped by several large trees. The road dipped and curved again as it headed downward into a small, tree-lined street -- and as suddenly as that they had reached the edge of a town. Killian suspected he wouldn't have seen it nestled down here, even during the day.

A few old, yellow globe streetlights dotted the road ahead, outlining a huge statue that stood squarely in their path, bathed in sallow light and weak shadows. On the left side of the road

another small hill had metamorphed into a huge stone building with a tall towered façade.

"What the hell is that!" Killian demanded, craning his neck to look at it. The building stood completely dark, except for a single flickering streetlight at the far end of the grounds.

Tom glanced to the left and chuckled as he slowed. "Sorry. That was my reaction the first time I saw it, too, even though I came through on a bright clear spring day. We should put up warning signs on the hill -- *damn big strange building, approach with care*. That is the main building of St. Aslem's College. It hasn't been used for about twenty years now. A shame. I have to go in now and then to make certain the kids aren't vandalizing the place. It's gorgeous: marble floors, oak woodwork, and fretwork along the halls to take your breath away. It belongs to the nuns, and they haven't decided what to do with it yet."

"The nuns?"

"We have a half dozen in a small nunnery back behind the college buildings." They had reached the statue and the road curved around it. "'That's St. Aslem himself," Tom said.

"Uh huh." Killian refused to look up for fear that the statue

would look back down. It had been that kind of night. He carefully peeled back a corner of the cup he held and took another sip of the remarkably good coffee.

Tom took the fork to the right around the statue. They passed a couple typical Midwestern houses; two-story, white walls, screened porches. The homes looked dark and deserted too, but given the late hour, the people likely just slept. They passed an old brick church and in the next block they reached downtown and the rough, cobblestone road. The place looked like dozens of other small, Nebraska towns he'd passed through today. A hodgepodge of buildings lined the street, in styles that ranged from late 1800's to the late 1960's. The town had not done well in the last half century.

The lone newer building (probably a decade or less) was squat and made of beige brick. It turned out to be a combination city hall and police station. Tom drove past and slowed as they came to a bridge, stopping midway across it. Killian's heart began to pound harder again as Tom rolled down his window and pulled up a flashlight, shining it down into the stream.

"Still rising. Damn. Sure hope most of tonight's rain goes south

of us."

He rolled the window back up and drove on, two blocks later turning into the driveway of an auto shop. White florescent light flooded from the open doorway where a few moths had gathered out of the rain. Tom started to get out, and then stopped and mumbled a curse under his breath.

"Damn. I'd like to have a single night without a drunk snit on my hands." He waved toward the left where a shadowy figure of a man stood swaying as he stepped out towards the street.

"Go on in. Prince'll take care of you. I'll come back after I sort this mess out."

Killian, still holding the coffee in one hand, fumbled his way out of the seatbelt and opened the car door. Should he feel safer getting away from Tom? He slipped out, taking the cane in one hand, and the coffee cup held so tight in the other he feared he would crush the cup.

"Thanks for getting me here," he said, hoping it sounded normal.

"Part of my job. I'll catch up with you as soon as I get this sorted out."

Killian slammed the door shut and watched as Tom backed out and drove the block and a half to where the drunk had stopped in the middle of the street. Tom put the flashing police lights on before he got out of the car. A couple others, looking no less drunk, stepped out of a nearby bar with bottles in hand. Killian watched, but the group seemed orderly, even if the people staggered a bit.

Killian turned to the repair shop, taking the few careful steps on the rain and oil slick drive. He paused just inside the open door.

"God damn!"

The deep, powerful voice reverberated through the bay. Three cars stood lined up in the garage, all with hoods up and two on jacks: a yellow Chevette, an ancient black Oldsmobile, and some kind of pickup that had been cobbled together like Frankenstein's monster. However, Killian could not see Prince at all.

"Shit." Something loud clanked off to the right, behind the hood of the Chevette. "*For we lost our innocence in fields of blood.*

God damn that wrench! *And we shall watch no more -- Piece of*

shit car. Should be melted into scrap metal! *And we shall march no more. No watch. Damn! Not the filter again. What the fuck does she do with this car? And we shall march no more in streets of love.*"

Killian stood still, listening to what sounded like someone with a double form of Tourette Syndrome that bounced between cursing and free form poetry. Maybe he should back up very quietly and --

"Call forth the old ways -- God damn --"

A man suddenly stood up straight and stepped around the side of the car -- a very large man, black skinned and bare-chested. A dragon tattoo of red and green glistened from mid-chest to his right shoulder. He held a wrench in his huge hand. Killian looked up -- the man stood at least a foot taller than his own five foot nine inches -- and into a bearded face, hair gone a little long, and a smudge of grease on his nose. A big diamond earring sparkled in his right ear lobe.

"Yes? What is it?" the mechanic demanded, waving the wrench.

"It's..." Words failed him. Just utterly failed him. "It's a broken

car."

"Ah." The black giant tossed the wrench across the room where it hit the brick wall with a loud thunk and tumbled down amid what looked like a pile of discarded tools. "Good. Get me away from this piece of crap Mary calls a car. Where is it?"

"Out..." He waved his coffee cup feebly toward the door. "Out by the Quickshop."

"Okay. Nothing simple like a flat tire, right?"

"It wouldn't... go."

"Ah." The man -- Prince, he guessed -- stared at him with a frown. "You all right? You look pale."

"Yeah, fine." At least Prince seemed to be under control now.

"Sorry. Odd night. Tom brought me here. He said you could help?"

"Maybe. You look soaked. Drink your coffee. I'll get the tow truck and bring it around front. It'll take me a minute to get the damned thing started."

Killian nodded and watched as Prince grabbed a towel off the fender of the car and rubbed some of the grease off his hands. He held out his right hand. "I'm Prince."

Killian juggled the cane and coffee and took the hand. "Killian Fox."

Prince got that odd look too, like he committed the name to memory. Then he grabbed a tee shirt from the back of a chair and pulled it on with a slightly muffled curse as it caught on his hair. A giant cat's face now stared at Killian from Prince's chest. "Be right around. Drink your coffee. You look cold."

"Sure." He nodded affably. Don't upset any of these loons. He watched as Prince headed out through a back door into the dark wet night. He didn't like being here alone in this room. He backed up to the entrance, leaned his cane against the wall, and rested his back against the open door frame.

He sipped at the cooling coffee, watching the gathering around the police car down the street. Voices rose now and then, but no one looked particularly upset.

He heard a large vehicle start, die... *Piece of shit truck* echoed very clearly through the nearly silent town. The gathering of people looked toward the shop and then away. The engine caught in the next try. Gears ground in a teeth-aching cacophony of sound before Killian heard it coming down the

little alley to the left of the building. He gulped down the last of his coffee and looked around until he found a little trashcan by the desk. By the time he had crossed to it and come back, Prince had arrived at the door.

"You ready?" Prince asked.

"Yes, thank you." He started to ask about cost and decided it didn't matter. He'd probably have to get a loan from KKGO at this point, but since they'd screwed him out of his moving costs, it shouldn't be a problem. If it was, he still had family, as much as he would hate to turn to them.

He had trouble climbing up into the high cab of the tow truck. Even though he used his right leg for leverage, the left one ached at the movement, and the cane didn't help. He was aware of Prince hovering behind him, just in case he slipped, but he climbed up without incident and slid onto the torn and cracked upholstery of the seat.

Prince shoved the door shut, came around the other side and climbed in, slamming his door. He eased down on the gas, but the truck sounded like the inside of a jet engine as they moved.

"You left the door open," Killian shouted, waving back to the

shop.

"It's all right. We won't be gone for long!"

Killian had heard about small towns and unlocked doors, but he thought it a myth until now.

"Needs a muffler. Or put out of its misery," Prince yelled above the sound as they hit the street, bouncing over the cobblestones. Prince looked into the cracked rearview mirror and shook his head. "Poor Tom. Another shit-faced snit."

Snit seemed to be a popular word here. Maybe that also came from small towns, though he didn't think Prince fitted into the profile very well.

The truck needed a muffler, shocks, a new seat and windshield wipers. Killian didn't have a pleasant ride back up the hill, past the castle keep and guardian statue. As they reached the Quickshop it began to rain again, quickly followed by pea-sized hail pinging off the windshield and roof.

"Well, this is pleasant," Prince said, shaking his head. He slowed as they neared the gas station, the sign a red glow through the water running down the glass. "Where -- *Oh*. Tell me you're joking. Tell me Tom set this up, right?"

The truck lights had found the Rambler. Prince pulled up in front of it, and looked at Killian. He still had a bit of grease on his nose. And he stared, waiting, and finally sighed.

"Not a joke," Prince finally said. "How the hell far did you get in that...*car*."

"From Denver."

"No shit? Wow?" He shoved the truck into reverse and began maneuvering it around to hook onto the front bumper. "I'm impressed. Seriously. You're a lot braver than you look."

"It's a good car. Just at the moment it's a good *dead* car."

Prince got out, and waved a hand back before he shut the door. Rain already pelted him, but Prince didn't look bothered.

"Just stay put. I'll hook the car up and we'll head back for shelter. Good front bumper. Rust? Do I need to worry about it tearing off?"

"Just replaced about two months ago," Killian said. "I'll come out --"

"Just sit there. No use both of us being out here like fools. And this is my job."

Prince slammed the door and walked away while the storm

pelted the truck with rain, small bits of hail, and pieces of leaves. Killian watched, still trying to convince himself that he'd been lucky to find this place.

Up the hill he could see the outline of Don the killer clerk standing in the Quickshop doorway watching them. Killian still couldn't believe that he had heard things properly. Maybe it was a game. Right. A game where money exchanged hands for murder and if you failed you had to change your name. One in which they wrote down the names of intended victims...

Prince gave Don a wave before he scrambled back into the cab of the truck, dripping water over everything. He threw the vehicle into gear again and they surged forward.

"Damn bad weather," Prince said, pulling a leaf from his dripping hair. "We don't need any more damn rain."

Lightning flashed across the sky. Hail fell in larger chunks, hitting the window like rocks.

"Have I mentioned that the Gods hate me?" Prince asked. The car came loose of the mud behind them, and he slowly drove back toward town. "Well, at least we don't have far to go. What the hell are you doing traveling in a car like this?"

"It's the only car I own," Killian said. Prince glanced at him, the dark face barely illuminated by the dim lights of the dashboard, but Killian could clearly see the look of disbelief. "All right. It's the only car I own *after the divorce*. Everything else left to me is packed in it. I have a new job in Chicago, and I'm just trying to get there. I'm sure the clutch has gone out."

"Life will just give you shit like that, sometimes." They hit several potholes as they neared the statue. "What kind of work do you do?"

"Reporter."

"Really." Prince glanced at him and away as he shifted gears again. "Newspaper?"

"That was my last job, at a small independent that got bought out. Before that I was in TV."

"What kind of job you heading for?" Prince asked.

"Television." The distaste must have come through in his voice. Prince looked curious again, which was better than the last look that had bordered on mistrust. "It's a job. I needed out of Denver before I did something really stupid."

"Ex-wife problems?"

"Both her and her new lawyer. They already got everything I worked my ass off for. Everything I bled for. I don't know what the hell else they thought I had but I finally just gave up the fight and decided to move on."

"Sometimes that's the best you can do," Prince agreed. They had reached the edge of town, the truck bouncing over the cobblestones once more. "I hate this poor excuse for a road. I'm going to shove that piece of crap truck I'm working on out of the bay, and we'll put your car inside. No use leaving everything you own out in this weather. I won't be able to work on it before tomorrow at the earliest, though. Stay put."

He'd pulled up to the driveway and leapt out before Killian could say anything at all. The storm still dumped rain, but the wind had died down, at least.

Tom and his police car no longer stood in the middle of the street. He glanced out the back window and saw it at the police station now -- unless this town had a second car, which seemed unlikely for a place so small. The resurgence of the storm probably drove everyone to quickly finish up the encounter.

When he looked toward the garage, he found Prince literally

shoving the truck out of the stall. Killian grabbed his cane and climbed out. He helped by getting in and turning the wheel while Prince pushed the truck off the side of the driveway.

Then, after Prince got the Rambler lined up, Killian helped push it inside.

"Thanks," Killian said, checking the tarp. A corner had torn up, but he'd packed everything on top in plastic crates, and they looked like they'd stood up to the hail and wind. Time to get past the inevitable groveling, though. "Prince, I'm going to have to call my new boss and get some money they owe me. I don't know how long that will take --"

"No problem." Prince waved his hand in dismissal as he pulled the garage door closed again. "Damn nice car, really. A couple dings from the hail, maybe, though. Did you do the restoration work yourself?"

"Most of it. Labor of love," Killian said and patted the hood. "My wife hated the thing, but I think she would have gotten even it in the settlement if she hadn't listed the Rambler as one of the straws that broke the camel's back."

Prince walked around the car and leaned over, peering inside.

He nodded again. "Despite how it looks around here, I love good old cars. I've got a nearly restored 1962 Corvette in my garage at home."

"No shit? Wow."

"Almost entirely original replacement parts too --"

The lights flickered.

"Well, that's it," Prince said. "That's the warning. We're going to lose power. You best to get to the door. There's so much crap on the floor you could fall and break your neck. I don't think my insurance guy would be happy with me."

Killian went to the door, watching the lightning and listening to the ominous roar of wind. Prince worked behind him, mumbling what sounded like poetry again...

It suddenly occurred to Killian that he hadn't a clue what he was going to do once he left the shop. He stared out into the growing storm, wondering if he could just find some place safe to hide... but he had no car to get away in, even if he stayed out of sight for the night.

The storm looked dangerous again, the wind picking up and rain starting to fall in torrents once more. He suspected the weather,

though, would still be the least of his problems.

3

Prince had grabbed a few things before the lights flickered again. He cursed and worked faster. Killian wondered if he could get his sleeping bag out -- and then do what? Camp out here in the rain?

Apparently satisfied, Prince finally moved away from the cars. Killian couldn't see any appreciable difference to the garage, though.

"Come on. I'll take you over to City Hall and let Tom get you squared away for the night."

"I can get there. It's not like I'm going to get lost."

"I'm sure," he said and grinned. "But I want a look at the creek anyway, and it's not that much out of my way for my walk home."

"You're going to walk?"

"I don't dare drive that damned loud tow truck home. If I woke the kid, Alicia would hang my balls out on the line before

morning. I'll walk, even in this weather. Besides, it's probably safer tonight, considering the state of the roads in this town. We're going to have mud from St. Aslem's all the way to the river before morning."

Prince stepped outside, locking the door behind him this time.

The wind and rain pummeled them as they moved down the street, pausing at the bridge. From this angle Killian could see the lines of sandbags along the edge of the creek, stretching into the darkness and disappearing where the creek turned.

The water rushed beneath them, and Prince didn't seem anxious to stay and look for long.

Killian saw Tom step out of the doorway to the City Hall building as they neared. Lights flickered behind him, giving the scene an eerie, surreal look that Killian really didn't need tonight.

"Damn storm," Tom said. He stepped aside, letting the two inside the shelter of the doorway, just out of reach of the rain and wind.

Killian looked down a long, narrow hallway with a teller window on the left and posters on the right. He thought there might be a door in the shadows, and the hall must have turned somewhere

in the back. The faltering lights made it impossible to get a clear view of anything.

"What's the word?" Prince asked, sounding anxious.

"Looks like we're going to get lucky again. A tornado touched down at the Margo Farm a few minutes ago -- that's about fifteen miles from here, Killian. The system moved southeast, so unless it spawns more twisters, I think we're going to get through tonight with just a little more rain than we like."

The lights died as he said it and didn't come back up. He snorted in amusement.

"Well, rain and the lights going out. Lines are down all over the place out there. It might be a day or two before NPPD gets them all restrung again."

"Damn," Prince said. "What about the farm? Anyone hurt?"

"Doesn't sound like it. The county deputies have it in hand."

Someone screamed behind them. Killian jumped, but both Prince and Tom only looked back down the hall with an odd air of indifference that sent chills up his arms again.

The screamer ran out of breath, and then began to curse. And yelled. Killian wondered if he could push past Tom and Prince,

and how far he could get. The dark night might help --

"God is my savior! Satanists! Avenging angels let me out of here...Kill you all!"

The voice subsided into less intelligible words, but Killian had gotten the idea. He glanced at his two companions, both of whom stood there shaking their heads.

"Sometimes you just have to wait until he runs out of breath," Tom said.

"Sounds like Hank had a snoot full tonight," Prince added.

"Damn man gets louder the older he gets."

"Yeah and short of shooting him, or tying him down and gagging him, we're stuck for the night. The idiot took a couple swings at me, and I'm not going to let him walk away from that one. I was going to put you up here for the night, Killian, but you'd have to listen to Hank, and you'd never get any rest. We've come up with a better plan."

"He's a reporter," Prince said, his voice gone unexpectedly quiet.

"Yeah, I know." Tom patted Prince's arm with reassurance. "I already ran a quick check on you, Killian -- before the power

started going. Nice to have someone with an odd name -- makes it easy. The data came through very quickly. You have no current wants and warrants and no record. Everything I learned about you came back clean. So the mayor is going to put you up in a spare room at her place tonight. Parka! Here's the guy!"

Killian heard a very soft sound in the shadows behind him. His hand tightened on the cane, preparing for --

Well, not for the woman who came around the far corner, a candle in her hand, shielding it against the wind from the door. She quickly became more than just movement in the shadows; long dark hair framed an aquiline face. Her eyes caught the flickering light of the candle and danced with flecks of gold. She looked ethereal and delicate.

"Hi. I'm Mayor Parka Greywolf," she said, her voice rich and her smile bright.

"Killian Fox," he answered with a bow of his head.

"Yeah, Tom told me. *Great name.*"

"Thanks." It didn't sound so bad coming from her. And if she wrote it down, it was before he got here. She seemed, in fact, a

nice normal person.

"I'm afraid we don't have a hotel in town, and if we called Carly at the Bed and Breakfast, she'd panic and still wouldn't have a room ready for you before dawn."

"The Bed and Breakfast is on the creek. Might not be the best place to be staying tonight," Prince said.

"True." The Mayor looked out into the night sky as thunder rolled over them. "I'm going to put you in my bare room tonight. I haven't gotten all the work done in there yet, but at least it gets you out of the rain."

"I could --" Prince said, looking a little worried.

"It's all right, Prince," Tom assured him. "You don't want to have to wake up Alicia, right? Parka will be fine. And -- nothing personal Killian -- she knows how to protect herself."

He suspected that might be very wise in this town. At least she seemed remarkably rational. He felt a little welling of hope at last.

"Thanks for taking me in," he said, and meant it.

"No problem. We better get moving, though. This is about the best weather we're likely to get." The mayor looked out into the

falling rain. The wind picked up again and thunder growled, louder than before. "We're going to get some bad winds, but the rains should let up at least for the rest of the night. The storms might reform at dawn, though."

"It's going to be a short night," Prince said, looking out at the weather and shaking his head.

"Tom is going to give us a lift home. Want a ride, Prince?"

"No. I'm going to run home. Alicia might hear a car, but I have a chance of slipping in without waking her if I go on foot." He flashed a bright grin and dropped a huge hand on Killian's shoulder, his fingers tightening for a moment. "Talk to you later, Reporter."

"Thanks for all the help."

"Hey, it got me away from Mary's piece of shit car." He stepped out into the dark, wet night, all but the cat tee shirt swallowed up in the darkness. "See you later."

Killian could hear him jogging away for a few yards, but that quickly disappeared in the storm.

"Prince likes you," the mayor said. She blew out the candle and sat it on the teller window. "That's good. I heard about your

odd car. You probably won him over just with that."

"I had that impression," Killian admitted.

"You are an idiot, though, for driving it this far. I thought I ought to mention that just in case you think I'm impressed." She laughed a little and patted his arm. "Ready, Tom?"

"Yeah. Barry has the fort. He should have the emergency generator kicked on before I get back. We're going to have to replace it, Parka. On a night like this -- being out of touch --"

"I know," she said. They stepped out into the windy night again, Tom leading them to the police car. Someone yelled in the building once more, and Killian gladly left it behind, even for the unknown. "I'll see if I can get it on Monday's agenda. What was the last word on the creek?"

"We should be all right through tonight, but we better check first thing in the morning. Marty has the watch until dawn, just in case. If it gets too high, he'll let us know. The rains tonight went mostly southwest so far."

"Good."

The mayor took the backseat and Killian the front. He rested the cane between his knees, trying to ignore the persistent ache

in his leg.

The radio cackled as Tom started the car. Killian could again hear distant, indistinct voices. Tom fiddled with it for a moment, but the reception never improved.

"I was listening to the county deputies on the big receiver before the power went out," Tom said. "Sounds calm again. They went ape shit when the tornado touched down, though. One of them saw it hit the Margo barn. He ended up with a pig on his windshield."

"Oh, that had to be unique," Parka said, leaning forward.

"Not as unique as the language he used, and over the air, too. But he'll probably not get more than a slap on the fingers, under the circumstances."

"I assume it was Harry," Parka said as Tom pulled back out onto the cobblestone road.

"No, Luke Harper, the minister's son." He gave a little laugh. "It made an entertaining couple minutes once we figured out no one had gotten hurt. The pig may have totaled the car, though.

"That's a shame. I know the county is as strapped for funds as we are," Parka said. "I wonder how they'll file the insurance on

that one. Flying pig totaled police car?"

Killian laughed. He would have liked to write that one up for a newspaper. Maybe he could freelance it somewhere for a little cash.

"Yeah, well, flying pigs are their problem tonight," Tom stopped as they went over the bridge again. Wind hit the car, bouncing it a little as Tom stared down into the water. He finally drove on. "The problem with this damn town is that it's almost entirely built on bluffs overlooking the river. You can't see it tonight, Killian, but the view is lovely. It just makes it a bitch to drive in this weather."

"And in winter," Parka added.

"Oh yes. *Winter*. Thank you for that reminder, Parka. I try to block the horrors of that season from my mind as much as possible." He slowed as they neared a street corner, and shook his head. "No, we are not going up Villette Street."

"Mud?" Parka asked.

"Looks like we could plant corn there in the morning. We'll go up past the college and around."

As Tom drove through town, Killian watched the dark shadows

of houses hidden in among the trees. He saw candles in several windows, and people standing on porches, watching the storm. A few waved. The car slipped on a patch of mud at one corner, bounced across more cobblestones in the next block, and finally came to a stop in front a lovely home. Two brick planters framed the start of a walkway to the porch, the entire path lined with small solar-powered lights that gave off a pale white glow.

A screened in porch sat at the front of a large, two story white house. It looked dark but inviting after so harrowing a day. A branch from a large maple had fallen in the yard, barely missing the porch.

Mayor Greywolf looked at it and shook her head. "That was way too close."

Tom had gotten out and Killian pushed his own door open, swinging his legs around and preparing to stand. He could already tell that the leg didn't want to hold him at all. And damn - - the pain pills were back in the car, of course.

The wind roared through the trees and he wasn't the only one who glanced at the big maple, worried about more branches

coming down. Tom opened Parka's door, offering her a hand. She slipped out of the car with a laugh. "Always a gentleman, Tom. You all right, Killian?"

"Yes." He stood, holding tight to the cane and forcing himself to take the step away from the car. His leg hurt like hell, but he stayed to his feet. At least the house wasn't far away,. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem. I needed to take a look around and make certain things are all right anyway," Tom said. He went back to the other side of the car and looked over the top. "I'm sure I'll see you before you leave town again. Get a good rest tonight."

Parka started forward, going up three small steps before she paused, looking back at Killian. Tom had gotten back into the car, but hadn't driven away yet.

"I'll be fine," he said to Parka, trying not to feel frustrated -- or spooked still. He didn't like having the cop sitting there, watching. "Just been a rough day."

"I bet," Parka said.

Once he had gotten up the steps, she turned away and went to the house, though she waited at the screen door for him,

holding it open against the wind that seemed to be getting worse. He slipped into the porch feeling drenched, cold and rather put out with the world.

Tom finally drove off. He wasn't sure if that helped.

"I have a flashlight just inside the door," Parka said loudly.

Something banged against the side of the house, either a shutter or a tree branch. "Be careful in there. I wasn't expecting company -- or a power loss. I have a couple piles of books by my chair in the living room. How about I get you to the kitchen for a Coke or a beer while I go up and clear the boxes off the bed?"

"Coke would be fine. And a couple aspirin would be very nice if you happen to have any."

"I can manage that much."

She grabbed the flashlight and led him from the front of the house to the back, the thin ribbon of light not giving him much of a view of the place, except that he had a feel of large rooms and hardwood floors.

The kitchen seemed large as well. She pulled out a chair at the table and signaled him into it, and then moved to a cupboard

and the dark refrigerator. She sat the aspirin bottle before him and the Coke beside it.

"This just wasn't your best day, was it?" she asked.

"No, I'm afraid not." He tapped the aspirin bottle. "Thank you."

"No problem. Well, except for one. I hope you don't mind sitting in the dark because this is the only flashlight I have, and I forgot to buy more candles. Or you could come up with me, but I got the feeling that maybe sitting down for a while would be nice."

"If you don't mind me sitting here," he said. "I appreciate that you took me in. I was beginning to think I would end up sitting outside Prince's place all night."

"Small town hospitality." She laughed and started away.

"Relax. I'll be back in a couple minutes."

Parka hurried out of the room. He heard her going up some stairs a minute later. They squeaked, and he found that somehow reassuring.

Sitting in the kitchen proved the first moment of calm he'd felt since he left Denver at dawn. The pounding on the side of the house eased for a moment as the wind let up. Lightning

flashed, but somewhere in the distance, giving only a momentary shadowy light. He could see the window over the sink, the edge of what looked like a pine tree, and the garage just beyond. Bird chimes sang softly in a momentary lessening of the wind.

He had found a peaceful spot in a world gone mad. Killian opened the aspirin bottle by feel, and then the Coke. He sipped, popped two aspirin into his mouth, and swallowed them down with a long, cool drink. Horrible, stupid day. He shook his head, convincing himself that no matter what he'd heard at the Quickshop, it had to have been a misunderstanding. Granted, Prince's reaction to his job as a reporter still made him a little uneasy...

Wind chimes caught a stiffer breeze and sang a warning of trouble to come. Killian had no idea how late it was as he heard Parka come back down the stairs. He took another long drink of the Coke and grabbed the cane, ready to stand again.

"Got the room as ready as it's going to be," she said, coming into the kitchen. "Sorry for the mess."

"You have no reason to apologize. I'm grateful." He drank the

last of the Coke and slowly stood. "I guess I was lucky Tom was out at the Quickshop when I walked in."

"He hangs out there with Don quite a bit," she said, leading him back through the house, and this time to a set of stairs. Wind made the building creak, and the pounding started again.

Killian thought he heard Parka mumble a curse.

Killian decided to forge ahead and get the worst out of his head before he tried to sleep.

"I think they were talking about killing George when I came in," he said and realized he sounded like a total loon.

"Are you joking?" She looked back at him from the top of the stairs, the flashlight brightening the narrow stairwell and leaving her mostly in shadow. "Don hasn't even decided how to do it yet? Good God."

A moment of hope died fluttering in his stomach and turned into stone. He nearly lost his balance on the stairs and looked back to see how far it was to the door out -- but he couldn't even find it in the dark.

"Don's been bugging all of us about that for weeks,' she said, waiting until Killian reached the top of the stairs and then

heading down a hall. Whatever pounded had to be almost directly over them. A branch after all, he hoped, and looked upward. "I'm going to have to get someone to climb up there and cut back that tree. That's going to drive me nuts."

"Yeah," Killian said, still trying to sound calm.

She sounded flustered as she pushed open the door, to a room. "Don's just going to have to make up his mind and get the work done. We can't keep giving him tips. It's not like we don't need them for our own work. Here you are." She flashed the light inside and he saw the faint outline of a bed and chair.

"Bathroom is right across the hall, but don't shower tonight -- not with the lights out."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said, with a sudden, heart-stopping vision of *Psycho*. The pounding on the roof did not help. Nor the wind that came up, howling like a banshee around the house.

"If you need anything, I'm just down the hall." She swung the light in that direction.

"I'll be fine." Killian knew he'd never make it down the stairs. Better to just slip into the room and pretend nothing could be

wrong.

She gave him a final nod and started down the hall, the flashlight's beam bouncing with each step. Killian slipped into the room and closed the door, standing in the dark for a moment. Distant lightning illuminated the window across from the small room. He saw a chair beneath it, some boxes along the wall, and the edge of the bed. He made it as far as the bed but didn't sit down just yet.

He put his jacket on the chair, then picked the chair up and carried it back to the door, wedging it under the doorknob. Killian went back to the bed, slipped off his shoes, and laid down on top of the blankets. The tree still pounded on the house, and the wind made the house moan and creak. He would not be getting much sleep tonight.

4

Gunshots, loud and sharp... people yelling as Killian's knee radiated pain like fire up through his leg and back. He gasped and grabbed at his knee as he woke.

Beady, dark eyes staring at him, people shouting, shots --
Panicked, he started to scramble away, but his head collided with something hard and the creatures began to leap at him before he could get away. He grabbed the nearest before it could catch hold of him, and hurled it across the room and another --

And... Teddy bears.

Bare room.

Bear room.

"Oh shit. He looked into the cute fuzzy face of the brown and white bear he had been trying to strangle and guiltily eased up on the grip around its furry neck. Blinking away the last dregs of sleep, he looked around to find teddy bears sitting on shelves that lined every wall. Others sat on boxes and along the floorboard. He had no idea where the two he'd thrown had landed.

The shots came again, startling him until he realized that he actually heard someone pounding on a door below his window. He could hear people down there now as well, loud and unhappy. The gray light showed that it could not have been

much past the dawn. He thought right then that he might want to kill someone for waking him up so early... but that only reminded him of the nightmare he'd walked into in this town.

Killian carefully sat the teddy bear down on the pillow and eased himself out of the quilt he must have pulled up sometime during the night. By now he could hear Parka in the hall outside the room. He looked across to find the chair still wedged in place. She paused by the door and he held his breath, uncertain what to do.

"I assume the bastards woke you up too, Killian?" she said from the other side of the door.

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'm going to go down and deal with them and I'll make us some breakfast."

"You don't have to do that --"

But he could already hear Parka heading down the stairs.

Looking out the window he could see a half dozen people at the door below. An odd group, but somehow that didn't surprise him much: two men and a woman in bib overalls, a woman in an ornate, flowery dress with her hair immaculately arranged, a

minister with his high collar with a Bible in hand, two teens of indiscriminate gender in loose shirts and jeans.

He could clearly see the street now, too -- pretty looking town, with tall trees, old fashioned houses, and large well-kept yards. He could see a hill to the right of the window. To the left the street dipped downward and he thought he could see a glimpse of a larger building downtown, and maybe just a hint of blue that would be the river far down the bluffs.

A moment later Parka opened the door below him and stepped out. Everyone backed away. So did he, not anxious to see the woman who had been kind enough to take him in turn into some kind of hellion. Voices rose and died down as he stood, carefully testing his leg and only wincing a little. It didn't feel as bad as he had expected. He returned the chair to the place by the window, listening as Parka said something about harassment.

The bathroom door stood open across the hall from him. He crossed and tried the light switch, but the power appeared to still be out. However, enough light came from the large north facing window though, that he could see clearly enough. He

closed and locked the door, feeling safe for the moment.

He washed up, not looking too closely at the mirror to see the first day stubble of a beard, or the dark shadows beneath his eyes. It had not been a good day, and he couldn't believe that today would be better.

A rooster announced the dawn. Just a bit late, but then they'd all had a long night. Killian brushed his hair with his fingers, straightened ruffled clothing and hoped he had a chance to get something clean out of the car. Then he finally unlocked the door and eased it open again.

Faced with the inevitable, Killian slowly made his way downstairs. His knee felt a little stiff, but it had weathered the storm (so to speak) pretty well. He paused at the bottom step and noted the living room where stacks of books sat haphazardly by the chair and the sofa. Around the right side of the stairs was an archway that led through a pretty dining room with bow windows and a huge antique table. The kitchen stood just the other side. Parka had stepped back inside the kitchen door, and the group of people still stood out in the dawn light.

"And I don't give a damn -- if I hear that rooster in my backyard

one more time, somebody is going to find it stuffed up his ass, and he'll be cockadooing all the way to emergency."

Someone protested and other voices rose, but Parka shut the door and turned around with a bright smile. "Good morning!" "Morning," he said, acknowledging at least that much. *Good* didn't seem like a word he should use yet.

He could, at least, see Parka Greywolf clearly for the first time. She stood about half a head shorter than him; tan face, dark hair and eyes, and in that nebulous age somewhere between thirty and forty. Native American, he realized, and wasn't surprised given her name.

"Go ahead and sit down while I cook." She waved toward the small kitchen table where the aspirin bottle and empty Coke can still sat.

"You don't have to cook anything," Killian protested.

"Actually, I really do." She pulled the fridge open. "Power is still out and looks like it will be for at least another day. I want to get some of this stuff cooked up before it goes bad. So, you up for a big country breakfast?"

"Sure." He sat down facing the door and could still see people

milling around outside, though not close to the door. "What was that all about, besides the rooster?"

"Hank spent the night in jail. Hank used to be the mayor, and they think I have some kind of vendetta against him and I ordered it done. I only knew about the arrest because I was in the office looking over some reports on weather damage from up north when they dragged his sorry ass in. Again. He spends so many drunk nights in jail they ought to charge him rent." She began removing things from the refrigerator and cupboards, and arranging them on the counter in an arcane pattern that included ingredients, bowls, and spoons. "I don't know what those people expect from us, sometimes. I really don't."

Killian, with his feelings toward the people he had met here, had an unexpected appreciation for their plight.

In a few short moments, the scent of food began to fill the room. Killian hoped she couldn't hear his stomach start to rumble as bacon fried and pancakes flopped from the pan to a warming plate. He hadn't had a *real* breakfast since he married Ruth. She had immediately insisted on low cholesterol, low fat, and no taste foods. He had forgotten that meals were

supposed to have scents and flavors.

Parka began to pile food on the table. "Go ahead and get started," she said with a wave of the spatula. "Don't let the eggs get cold."

"Okay." Probably would have been polite to wait for her, but if he did he would start slobbering like a dog.

The first bite tasted like the food of the Gods. Absolute ambrosia. So did the second. He slowed down, fearing he'd be fighting her for the last of the pancakes before she even finished the work.

Parka finally settled across from him, poured herself some almost cold orange juice, and sipped it. "Hot work."

"I appreciate it, though." He smiled. At that moment, he didn't care what she did when she left this room. The food made up for any other indiscretions in her life. "I haven't had a meal like this in years. You're being too kind to a stray who showed up in a storm."

She laughed as she began to pull a pancake over to her own plate. "Well, after last night I figured you could use a little something nice, Kill-ian. People don't call you Kill, do they? Kill

Fox, or God help us, Killer?"

"Not often, and never after I have words with them. It's usually Killian or KD."

"Ah. And the D stands for?"

"Dain. Killian Dain Fox."

"Really." She stopped with the bottle of syrup in hand, her eyes getting that same odd distant look he saw too often around here. "Very nice."

"I'll let my mother know you approve."

She laughed and began to arrange the food on her plate. They had a pleasant talk about farm fresh eggs, and living in a small town. It felt like a calm, normal morning that could chase away all the insanity of the day before. Twenty-four hours ago he could not imagine that he would be sitting down to breakfast with a lovely woman as his companion.

"I spent a lot of summers here, growing up. Breakfast was my favorite meal, although Aunt Pearl only made stuff like this on Sundays. Then I made a stupid mistake and --" She stopped and shook her head. "I left for a few years."

He didn't ask where she went, or what the charges had been.

He didn't want to know.

"Tom's here." She stood and opened the door. Killian hadn't heard him pull up, but the man came hurrying in, wiping his feet on the rug. He nodded to Killian who hoped that the magic of the kitchen spread to him as well.

"Well, they're in a mood today, aren't they?" Tom asked, nodding toward the people who still stood gathered across from the house.

"Like this is something new? Breakfast?" Parka offered, waving a hand toward the table.

"Oh God, no. We're facing the same problem at home. I think Ann started cooking at about four this morning and kept plying us all with food from the moment we got up. Even the kids begged me to get them out of there this morning. No school today with the lines down, though. They're stuck."

Parka laughed. "What brings you here?"

"Aside from getting out of the station before I grabbed Hank by the throat and ripped his vocal cords out?" he asked as he sat down. "Storms hit up in Otoe County about half an hour ago. Nebraska City is getting some lowland flooding already. We

need to check the sandbags and the bridge before the next storm blows in."

"Damn. Coffee? Jamaica Blue Mountain."

"Oh, that sounds good," Tom said nodding. "Have to wait for the rest of the city council to get here anyway. They were meeting at Bart's place and walking up."

"Good. We have plenty of time, then."

"Long walk?" Killian asked.

"*Nothing* is a long walk around here. The town is only about fifteen square blocks," Parka said as she brought Tom a cup of coffee and sat it down in front of him. "But it won't matter how early Tom sent word to him, Bart will not be ready when the others arrive. And then, just when he thinks he's ready to go, he'll decide he's going to need his notebook and pen, which will take another fifteen minutes to find."

"And then he'll insist everyone else has paper and pen, no matter how often the others wave their PDAs in front of him," Tom added. "And that will take another ten minutes."

"We've got plenty of time." Parka gave Tom a cup of coffee and settled back into her chair. "You're welcome to stay here

when we go to check the bridge, if you like."

As inviting as it was to hide out here -- even with those glaring people still gathered outside the door -- Killian knew from experience that he wouldn't be wise to just sit down and rest this morning.

"I'll walk along, if you don't mind. I need a bit of exercise before my leg goes stiff."

"Don't mind at all," Tom replied, sipped the coffee, and sat the cup down again. "It's only about five blocks, but there's a hill between us."

"No problem."

They chatted about the weather. Nearly half an hour later the city council people finally arrived, all five of them carrying notebooks and pens. Killian tried not to laugh when someone handed Tom a set as well, and the cop rolled his eyes.

Despite his decision to go with them, Killian reluctantly followed the two outside into the already muggy morning. He didn't like leaving the magic aura of the kitchen, which had seemed the only normal place in town he'd found so far.

The air felt thick and threatening, even though Killian could only

see a few fleeting clouds overhead. Only three of the people remained from the first group -- two bib overalls and the minister -- and they obviously were prepared to walk with them. In fact, it seemed as though much of the hostility of so short a time before had disappeared.

Killian saw people turn his way with open curiosity.

"This is Killian Fox," Tom said. "His car broke down last night."

Killian saw about half the people start scribbling on their paper pads.

"Killian *Dain* Fox," Parka added. She patted him on the arm.

"Remind me to make you some cards on the computer when we get back. It'll make the introductions far easier."

"Right." Killian glanced over his shoulder and wondered if he could he back up to the magic kitchen and that feel of normality that had already started to slip away before they'd even gone half a block?

"Excuse me," a man in a baseball cap said. He waved a pen.

"Is that --"

"Two I's and one X," Killian said.

"Thanks."

"KD, this is Bart, Roger, Taffy, Steve and John."

Everyone nodded polite hellos, but no one seemed interested in him beyond his name. Killian found that reassuring as they started walking up a hill, heading off into the street when the sidewalk stopped at the edge of Parka's property.

Mud and leaves had amassed in large clumps at the corners. Steve and Bart talked about how to get the debris cleaned before it got worse. Taffy and John discussed a tree that had gone down in someone's yard. Normal stuff. Killian couldn't decide why that put him so much on edge.

They hiked up the cobblestone paved street, past huge old-fashioned houses with wrap around verandas and screened upper porches and most had huge yards. Tall old trees stood sentinel and some might have been there before the hundred-year-old homes.

They reached the first crest of the hill at the next corner, though it still rose in an almost equal distance beyond this cross street. Killian turned to look back -- and stopped to take in the view. He could see almost straight down, past rows of dark green trees and gray house roofs descending down the steep bluffs to

a line of blue river winding far below.

Tom stopped beside him and looked back as well. "I said it was a nice view."

"Gorgeous."

"You should see it in the fall when the leaves change. Hell, you should see it in winter, just after a storm. Incredible, even if you do have to hike up here to take a look."

Killian nodded, half imagining the scene. He forced himself to turn away and follow the others, stealing glances toward the river whenever he could until the street curved and houses and trees cut off the view.

At the next corner a few cats began to join the trek. One at first, and then two, and then two more... cats of different colors and shapes, a half dozen swarming in around the humans who obviously did not find this in the least bit surprising.

"Shakespeare!" Roger said with exasperation and tried to push a large gray cat away when it nearly tripped him. "Hey, looks like Thoreau is going to have kittens again!"

"Someone really ought to think about changing her name," Parka suggested. "And get her to the vet to be spayed after this

litter and before it happens again. The one thing this town doesn't need -- aside from more rain -- is more cats. I get dibs if there's a yellow kitten, though. Shakespeare! All right, all right! I'll carry you!"

Parka picked up the huge gray cat, and it immediately draped over her arm and watched everyone with indolent golden eyes, obviously pleased with life. Far too fat to be a stray, Killian realized. It looked perfectly content to have the human carry it through the streets, as though that were humans only real job in the world.

But they started up another slight incline in the road, and though not nearly as steep as the hill had been, it proved a little difficult for Killian. He didn't want to fall behind, but the cane slipped on the growing layer of debris. Parka dropped back with him, though, and they didn't have far to go.

"Damn, damn. I can hear the creek all the way up here! It's already running high!" Tom said and hurried forward.

The others picked up speed as well. They passed a deserted house with a small ash tree growing up through the porch roof. A shame, since it looked like it had been a nice place at one

time. The house next to it looked in even worse shape; the roof had gone and the windows were broken out. He thought he could see another behind it, huge and going to ruin as well. He wondered how much of the town had been abandoned down through the years.

The road dipped down toward more houses, and he could see a brown line of muddy water cutting into the ground in a winding pattern. A huge maple tree appeared to have fallen into the creek -- a recent disaster since the roots still dripped with mud. Someone stood by it, and looked back at the group, waving them over.

"Doesn't look good," Parka said. She shifted the cat, but didn't put him down. The entire group -- humans, and cats -- descended to a grassy yard behind a newer, two story house. This one had a deck that reached almost to the creek bed and was bolstered with dozens of sandbags.

"Tom -- look there. The embankment's given way," Taffy said, pointing past the house.

"Everyone stay back! I don't want to have to fish any of you out!"

Tom won a few desultory agreements, though Steve went closer anyway. The others began to work their way through other yards, following the path of the creek though well back from the edge. The bank had given way in a couple other places and the water rushed over the newly formed obstacles and had already worn a few of them down. It obviously wouldn't take much more rain to push the creek completely out of its bank.

"The bridge is just up over the next rise," Parka said. Even she sounded a little breathless and the others had slowed enough that Tom caught up and overtook them. "It had partially washed out a few days ago but we had already been sandbagging there and saved it from total destruction. From the looks of this, it's going to be worse, though. I don't know why Marty hasn't already sent word."

And it was worse. They topped the last rise and Killian could see the bridge had been battered into three pieces. Muddy water spread out around the wreckage and over the sandbags. Even Killian cursed as they hurried toward the disaster, passing through a stand of trees that might not be standing much longer,

considering how soggy the ground felt beneath his feet. Even his cane sunk in, and he ended up putting it over his arm and keeping balance against tree trunks when he needed to.

"Shit, shit, shit," Parka mumbled under her breath. She still held the cat who plainly didn't want to be put down in this muck. The other cats had turned back, wiser than the humans. "This is *not* good, especially with more rain on the way. We could get flooding all the way to St. Aslem's."

"We better send word to the nuns," Tom agreed, slowing down to walk by the two of them. "The church might get flooded this time."

They'd arrived at what might be a road, though Killian only guessed that since the trees didn't reach this far and the ground had become even muddier. Tom went on until he sank up to his ankles in mud and water, and he hadn't even reached the sandbags yet. Water rushed over the makeshift wall.

"We need to contact the county people and see if we can get more sandbags. This is going to be rough. We aren't the only town with problems," Tom said.

"Yeah," Parka agreed.

Someone staggered out of the line of trees to the right, mud covered and swaying as he slipped in the muck. He barely caught his balance, a hand on a tree. Killian had started toward him before he even saw the blood mixed with mud across the man's chest.

"God!" Parka yelled and dropped the cat. Shakespeare yowled as he hit the ground and took off, leaping onto the first tree to get out of the mud.

Killian reached the swaying man first. He fell against Killian, cold fingers catching tight hold of his arm

"Mis..." the man said looking up. His pale face, half hidden behind a shaggy beard, looked young. "Mis --"

"George?" Killian said, holding tight to the stranger, and looking for Don, who had obviously found his way to kill the man --

"Mar-ty," the man said. He shook his head looking confused, but Killian thought this guy really couldn't be any more confused than he felt right then. The stranger's eyes started to flutter.

"Marty... I'm Marty. Listen -- important -- Mis -- me -- miss -- ed me."

He crumpled, taking Killian down into the mud with him.

Want to read more? You can find the book here: [Available through the Holly Lisle Bookstore!](#)