

Past Imperfect

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Poisoned Pen Press



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To Richard

Acknowledgments

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I

Constable John McIntire leaned into the rail on the *Frelser's* forward deck, closed his eyes, and let the sharp morning air ease into his lungs. A brief and violent spasm engulfed his body. The barely perceptible rolling of the boat did nothing to ease the more pronounced waves in his stomach, and he breathed a prayer of thanks that the call had at least come before breakfast. Eight months into his career as keeper of the peace in St. Adele township, and already this was the second death to require his sanction. He didn't feel himself in danger of getting blasé about such missions, but right now he wasn't sure which caused his greater anguish, the lifeless body in the cabin below or its unfortunate location on a boat. *Any* boat.

Anchored in the wide mouth of Huron Bay, nose to the open lake, the *Frelser* faced a boundless expanse of mirror-smooth water. Phantoms of mist waltzed over its unruffled surface, filtering the rays of newly risen sun and wrapping the scene in a soft luminescence. It was a setting to inspire poets and painters, mysterious, serene, and, as far as McIntire was concerned, purgatory on earth. Ten more minutes on this tub and he'd be as prostrate as the man he'd come to see.

He thought of the day, now literally a lifetime ago, when he first met Nels Bertelsen. *Met* was not exactly the right word; the boy had come to ask for water and had spoken

only to McIntire's mother. It was Nels' hair, milk-white and almost to his shoulders, that had so fascinated the six year old Johnny McIntire as he watched from his observation point on the woodpile, waiting while his mother split the kindling that he would carry to the kitchen woodbox. McIntire could see him still, trotting into the yard on an enormous black workhorse, his bare feet dangling, and those gossamer locks flying out behind, like the fairies in his Granny Kate's nightmare-inducing tales.

This stranger had answered Sophie McIntire's questions solemnly, in accents not unlike her own. His family had just come today. Yes, it was they who had bought the Association farmland. He had a sister who was twelve. Her name was Julie. No, his father wouldn't be looking for work in either the lumber camps or the mines—they were going to plant apple trees.

McIntire smiled to himself as he remembered his mother's reaction when she realized that the newcomers intended not only to *plant* apple trees—everybody did that—but to make their living at it. As she put it to her husband, "Those simpletons will starve to death long before they even get a sniff of their first apple."

Ole Bertelsen hadn't quite realized his dream of becoming Michigan's most prosperous fruit producer, but he didn't starve either. If in some winters the family had little more than potatoes and the occasional piece of deer meat on its table, they were not that much different from most of their neighbors. And Nels, at least, had survived and gone on to oversee the orchard operation himself before abandoning it to take up his father's original occupation, fishing.

McIntire hadn't been around to witness Bertelsen's transformation from fruit grower to fisherman, but had not been surprised when he heard of it. Like the rest of the Bertelsens, the young Nels had been a slave to the family business. But regardless of the hours he put in pruning, planting, and picking, it was never too late, too dark, or too cold to squeeze in

some time on the lake. His allergy may have been the goad that pushed him from the fields to the water, but McIntire couldn't imagine that he had needed a very forceful push.

From the first day of the spring fishing season, Bertelsen had been persistent in inviting McIntire to spend a day on the *Frelser*. McIntire was equally emphatic in declining. The last boat trip he and Nels had taken together was the one that carried them across the Atlantic in the fall of 1917 aboard one of the world's largest luxury liners, unhappily pressed into service as a U.S. Army troop ship. Memories of that passage had kept McIntire out of anything bigger than a rowboat since. The mere sight of a whitecapped wave was sufficient to send him plummeting back through time to those interminable nights spent curled in a cramped bunk in the belly of the *Leviathan* as she plunged in darkness through cold black seas. He was only half joking when he said it was that hellish experience that had kept him from returning to the United States until air travel became a reasonable option. He'd found that air sickness was also no picnic, but flying cut the trip and the view was almost worth the loss of a little gastric lining.

Nels, McIntire recalled, had suffered no such agonies during that long ago voyage. On the few occasions that McIntire had left his evil smelling cot to stagger to an open deck—and hastily to a railing—Nels had been there ahead of him, ruddy face to the wind and an expression that clearly showed he'd fallen in love. "Someday," he'd informed McIntire, "we'll be taking a ride on *my* boat." The inward smile came again, a rueful one. Since his return McIntire had discovered that it was a rare event in St. Adele to hear the name Nels Bertelsen uttered without the added designation, "that bullheaded Norwegian," and Nels had stayed true to his reputation to the end. He'd gotten his damn boat and had lured McIntire on board it at last, even if he had to die to do it.



A half dozen gulls wheeled and careened past his ears, engaged in a fray over some distasteful looking flotsam a few yards off the bow. Their shrieks were countered by a chest-wrenching cough, reminding McIntire that he was not alone on the tiny deck. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth, pushed his glasses farther up on his nose, and turned to Simon Lindstrom, an elderly man of dwarfish proportions and gnome-like features, features rosy and unlined, belying a lifetime spent on the water.

Lindstrom sat hunched on the rail, resplendent in yellow waterproof overalls and a red wool shirt. He nodded to McIntire and emitted another stream of raucous coughing, rocking on his perch and crowing like a brilliantly hued rooster. McIntire swallowed bile and the urge to leap forward and yank the old man down to a more stable position. “Thank you for waiting, Mr. Lindstrom,” he said. “Was it you that found him?”

Lindstrom struck his chest with his fist, cleared his throat, and leaned at a perilous angle to spit over his shoulder. His response, when it finally came, was in a creative merging of languages that took McIntire several seconds to unravel as, “Oh no, not me. It was Jonas there.” He waved the stem of his pipe in the general direction of two skiffs snuggled up like nurslings to the *Frelser’s* side. In the stern of the nearest, an anemic-appearing youngster huddled in his Mackinaw, picking at a frayed spot on the knee of his dungarees. “My son Benjamin’s boy. He’s work with Nels two year now.” Lindstrom added this last with eyes cast down, the better, McIntire supposed, to negate any unbecoming note of grandfatherly pride.

“You mean Jonas was here on the boat with Nels when he died?” No wonder the kid looked so peaked.

Lindstrom shook his head. “Nah, we just come out. I come in the skiff here, to pick my bait nets, and I take the boy

along to Nels. Then he don't need no ride to Nels' place, you know. I go home to bait-on for Ben and me, but with this big fancy boat Jonas just sit by the stove and cut bait while Nels take her to the banks."

But Simon had not gone home, and it was tragically evident that Nels Bertelsen hadn't taken anything much of anywhere on this morning. McIntire braced himself against the rail and pressed on. "Let me be sure I've got this straight. Nels was waiting for Jonas and netting bait fish here in the bay before going out to the fishing banks. You intended to drop Jonas off at his boat when you came to pull in your own bait nets?"

"Ya," Lindstrom's head bobbed emphatically, "that is what I just tell you. We pull up to the *Frelser* here, but damn if we see Nels nowhere. His nets is just hangin' out the hatch, and still the fish is in, and nobody is pulling. We yell out, and Nels, he don't say nothing. So the boy, he climb in the hatch too, and was right back out, quick as a wink. 'Nels is just sittin' with his pants down,' he says, 'and he ain't breathin' aytall.' So I get on board and by golly there sits Nels, dead as the doornail. I tell Jonas he better hop back in that skiff and high-tail it home lickety-split. 'Call the constabulary,' I tell him, 'Talk fast and talk Swede!'"

The boy had indeed talked "Swede" when he made that crack-of-dawn call. It was a common ploy when ringing the constable on his six-party line with information the caller hoped to keep confidential. It seldom kept anything really interesting out of the public domain for long, but might have worked in this case. Jonas's Swedish had been considerably less comprehensible than his grandfather's English.

"Go ahead and talk Swede too, if you like," McIntire suggested, and began to do so himself. "What time was it when you found Nels?"

Lindstrom nodded and replied in the vaguely Gallic tones of his native Varmland. "It was getting pretty light already, after four, maybe almost four-thirty. I don't wear a watch on

the lake—might lose it, you know. Jonas was out of here like a shot. I suppose it took him about twenty minutes to get home and call you.”

“So Jonas went for help immediately after you found the...after you found him?”

“Well, yes, he did. What do you think, we stopped for coffee? Maybe read the paper?”

“I mean,” McIntire explained, “did you try to revive him or anything?”

Lindstrom dismissed the question with guttural “ech,” and a flip of his chin. “There was no chance of that; I could see right away that he was dead. If I hadn’t been sure of it, I’d have told Jonas to get the *doctor*. But I see you brought him along anyway.” He paused briefly, as if to underscore the folly of summoning a doctor to minister to a dead man, before going on. “What did he say happened? Was it a heart attack? Nels was still young. But he was a great one for letting himself get all worked up over things. That’s not good for the old pump, they say.”

Dabbling at four o’clock every morning in the liquid ice that was Lake Superior water couldn’t be too beneficial to that “pump” either. “I don’t think he’s done with his examination yet,” McIntire told him. “To tell the truth, it was Dr. Guibard brought me out. I don’t have a boat.” McIntire’s confession of boatlessness brought a droop to Lindstrom’s mouth, an expression of profound pity mirroring McIntire’s feelings toward those who *were* compelled to travel on water.

One of Lindstrom’s remarks still mystified him. When he’d first boarded the *Frelser* and entered the dark cabin below, he’d tripped over a wooden box—a box that was stacked to the rim with the posterior halves of small herring, each wearing a large hook where, in the natural order of things, its head would be. It accounted for the seagulls’ breakfast, but didn’t quite fit with Jonas Lindstrom’s aborted plan to “sit by the stove and cut bait.” Not that it really mattered,

but if McIntire was going to be here he might as well make some pretense of filling his office.

“I understood you to say,” he said, “that Nels and Jonas caught their bait here in the bay, and Jonas baited the hooks while they were on the way to their fishing grounds. But there’s a box of baited hooks down there. Does that mean that Nels was waiting longer than usual for Jonas? Did he have time to string up those herring himself before he died?”

“Oh, no. Like I said, Nels only got his nets half pulled in. But he made a good catch, and he sure won’t be needing any bait today, so I kept myself busy while I was waiting for you to get here. And I can save my nets for tomorrow.” Lindstrom pushed himself off the rail, landing with a thump and setting in motion a shudder that ran along the deck and rippled upward through McIntire’s stomach to his throat. While the fisherman’s complexion might have escaped the ravages of icy wind and water, his joints obviously hadn’t. McIntire could almost hear the grating as Lindstrom painfully shifted from roosting position to standing. He then settled the suspenders of his overalls more securely on his shoulders and rapped the bowl of his pipe on the rail, sending a smoldering black lump hissing into the water. A sharp-eyed gull swooped in and downed the tasty morsel in a gulp. Lindstrom stuffed the pipe into his pocket and rubbed his hands briskly together. They were as gnarled as cedar roots with knuckles the size and color of ripe plums.

“I have to be going now,” he announced. “I fish with Ben, you know. He’ll think it’s me that’s had the heart attack if I don’t get back soon. We should have been on our way an hour ago.” He called down to his grandson, “Jonas, get your ass in gear! Bring that skiff up now. Then I think you take the *Frelser* on.”

So, if McIntire had deciphered this correctly, he wasn’t expected to pilot the big boat back into town himself. It was the best news he had gotten so far that day, but it was adding

to his growing suspicion that Lindstrom's reasoning was as convoluted as his speech. "Mr. Lindstrom," he asked, "if your grandson can handle this boat, why didn't he just head back into St. Adele when you first found Nels? Why make two trips?"

And why drag me all the way out here to risk losing half my guts in the lake? he might have added, had he been a less charitable man.

"Well, hell, I think I can't let Jonas do that all by himself. And Nels, he ain't in no shape to have the whole town come trooping in to have a look." Lindstrom's overlarge boots made a hollow sound as he crossed the deck, then turned once more to McIntire. "Nels Bertelsen was ornery as they come, but... well, you know, he didn't hafta hire just a dumb kid like Jonas."

With that, he disappeared into the vessel's pilot house. Seconds later, he emerged through the hatch in the side of the hull and dropped with a grunt into the skiff. Jonas scrambled in through the opening and heaved the bait box out to his grandfather, who settled it lovingly against his knees. The outboard roared, the little boat gave a leap, and Simon Lindstrom sped off toward the brightening shoreline.

II

McIntire took one last lungful of air and himself reentered the cabin.

It was as if a bag had been pulled over his head. The *Frelser's* interior was a murky cavern choked with odors of coal smoke, motor oil, and fish, overlaid with the acrid smell of human excrement. McIntire felt his gullet threaten to erupt and edged nearer to the open hatch. The space would not accommodate his entire height, and he stood with knees slightly bent and his head and shoulders painfully cocked to one side as he regarded Dr. Mark Guibard, semi-retired physician and Flambeau county coroner.

The doctor had apparently completed his examination and had assumed a similarly contorted position, not from any lack of headroom, but the better to sight along the deck and under the pot-bellied heater in the attitude of one who had dropped a dime and wasn't sure where it had rolled to.

Behind him, in a weak pool of electric light, Nels Bertelsen sat on the damp deck boards with his back against the door of an unpainted pine cabinet, and his feet, in heavy rubber boots, extended before him. His wool shirt lay discarded at his side, and his waterproof overalls and woolen longjohns were pushed down to bunch around his knees, exposing a torso that glowed stark blue-white, ironically reminiscent of the fish he had come seeking. The pallor of this ample mid-section gave way abruptly

to a deep purplish-brown on his throat and forearms. The contrast was even more pronounced between his weathered face and the fringe of white hair that straggled, scarecrow style, from under the tattered gray stocking cap. His eyes, staring out through the hatch, were the hazy blue of a winter sky. Fully clothed, Bertelsen's stockiness, ruddy cheeks, and snowy hair had always given him something of a clown-like appearance. This morning the watery light revealed chest and shoulders wrapped with muscles like steel bands—a body that radiated vigorous masculinity. McIntire could scarcely comprehend that there was no life in it.

The doctor turned back to Bertelsen and tugged at the overalls to cover the soiled underclothing. He picked up the hypodermic syringe that rested against the lifeless fingers, and stood erect, his feet wide apart on the wet deck boards. At the sight of the constable, he boomed, "Christ Almighty, if you weren't more or less standing up, I'd think I had two corpses on my hands! I'd sure as hell hate to see what you'd look like if we were actually out in the lake—in a moving boat—with maybe a wave or two thrown in."

McIntire put a hand against the boards of the hull to steady himself. "I'd hate to be feeling what I'd feel like if we were really out in the lake, and I'd appreciate it if you'd avoid making references to undulating water."

The doctor chuckled at McIntire's discomfort, his verbiage, or both. He could afford to laugh, McIntire thought. For all that Guibard had spent a lifetime dealing with death, disease, and traumatic injury, it seemed that such human misfortunes could never touch him personally. He had the body and constitution of a man half his age. And the vanity. Even this morning he was pressed and polished and brushed to perfection, and exuded a cloying aura of Old Spice and Wildroot Cream Oil. McIntire would have paid money to see how he had managed to effect such sartorial splendor between the time his call had roused the doctor from his bed and the

fifteen minutes later that he had come charging over the water to snatch McIntire off the end of Bertelsen's dock.

"Don't worry," Guibard advised, with a hint of a smile still lurking in his eyes, "I know it's hell, but in all my years of practice, I've never seen anybody die of *mal de mer*." He dropped the syringe into his bag. "I have come across quite a few who would have liked to, though." His expression became marginally more sympathetic. "But take a few deep breaths and try to pull yourself together. We're going to have to lay him out straight before too much rigor sets in. And the term 'dead weight' is an apt one; he'll be heavy and every bit as uncooperative as he was in life. You think we should get...?" He nodded toward the thin back of Jonas Lindstrom, just visible through the opening to the pilot house.

McIntire considered, and shook his head.

A deck a few feet wide ran around the perimeter of the boat's interior. Straight down the center was an area open to the bowels of the vessel, revealing the engine, some components of the steering mechanism and, McIntire supposed, a place for holding fish. The boards on which Bertelsen sat were water-soaked and slimy with the residue of Simon Lindstrom's "baiting-on."

"Let's get him over to a dry spot." McIntire stepped over a pile of soggy netting and grasped the slick, rubber-clad legs, leaving the exposed flesh of the shoulders to the other man. Together, accompanied by panting and grunts, they maneuvered the body along the deck and around the still hot potbellied stove to place it in front of a closed hatch opposite the one where Nels had been retrieving his catch. As the doctor eased his burden gently to the deck, McIntire retrieved the fisherman's crumpled shirt and slid it under his head.

Guibard extracted a gleaming white handkerchief from his coat pocket and pressed it daintily to his brow. "I'll zip back into town and call for the ambulance. I'd as soon get well back into the bay before the wind starts to kick up. Simon

tells me Jonas drives this beast all the time, so he should be able to get you back okay. But take your time, eh? Once I get in, it'll be at least another half an hour before the ambulance can make it out from Chandler. We don't want to be hanging around the dock attracting a crowd any longer than necessary." He made a circuit of the deck, frowning slightly as he surveyed the surroundings a final time, peering down into the greasy mechanical innards. He turned back to McIntire with abrupt severity. "Oh, and be sure you leave everything the way you find it here. Don't take anything off the boat." Before McIntire could respond he added in a milder tone, "If Nels had life insurance there might be questions."

McIntire nodded. Curses! The looting and pillaging would have to wait for another day. He pulled the string that switched off the single naked bulb, plunging the cabin into twilight. They didn't need a dead battery. "Will you be doing an autopsy? Hold an inquest or anything?"

"What for? There's no doubt about what killed him. I'll give him another once-over when I get in some better light, see if I can find the stinger. But bees don't always leave their stinger behind." The doctor looked down upon the inert body. "He spent the last ten years of his life scared shitless of this happening. Took every reasonable precaution and a hell of a lot of unreasonable ones, and for what? Made life miserable, looking over his shoulder every minute, and in the end one of the little buggers nailed him anyway. We might have been able to desensitize him, but he went into convulsions every time I brought the subject up. Wouldn't have anything to do with it. Damn fool."

"What about the antidote or whatever you call it? Didn't he give himself the shot?"

"Epinephrine—adrenaline. He must have gotten some of it in anyway. There's a mark on his leg from the injection. But there are no guarantees." He pulled the bib of the dead man's waterproofs up a little higher over the pale abdomen.

“Not a very dignified way to die, eh? I told him to put the shot in his thigh. I wanted him to get it into a good-sized hunk of flesh. If he’d tried to jab himself in the shoulder and tensed up, he’d have snapped that needle like a toothpick. His muscles were like concrete.”

McIntire swallowed. “How long would you say...?” He let the question trail off.

Guibard shrugged. “Oh, I’d figure he’s been dead between an hour and an hour and a half—not more than that for sure. It couldn’t have happened very long before he was found. He’d already started to pull in the nets when he died, and he wouldn’t have got out here much ahead of the Lindstroms.”

It didn’t take a coroner to figure that out. “I meant to ask,” McIntire said, “how long did it take for him to die? *How*, exactly, did he die?”

Guibard rubbed his palms with his handkerchief and gazed out over the water. McIntire followed his line of sight. The sun had burned away the last of the vapor. Superior stretched away to merge imperceptibly with the horizon, interrupted only by the distant Huron Islands, the interplay of light and shadow on their steep cliffs creating misty castles suspended in air, unreal as a desert mirage. A light breeze was now teasing the lake with sporadic gusts, sending intermittent streams of ripples skipping across its surface.

The doctor cleared his throat and touched the handkerchief to his lips before he spoke. “Anaphylaxis is a complicated reaction, but basically it boils down to one thing, the tissues swell and cut off the airway and the victim chokes to death. I can’t say he never knew what hit him, but he wouldn’t have suffered long. If the epinephrine had no effect at all he would have passed out within fifteen minutes or so and probably not lived long after that.”

Fifteen minutes? The way Nels had been sitting it didn’t look like he’d lasted much more than fifteen seconds. “But why wouldn’t the epinephrine have an effect? Why didn’t it work?”

“How the hell would I know? I’m a doctor, not a magician!” Guibard balled the handkerchief and stuffed it into his pants pocket. “Maybe the sting went straight into a vein or artery. Maybe he didn’t get the shot in soon enough. Maybe some of it ended up on the floor. The shot didn’t help much. If it had, he’d have had time to get his pants on and start to head back in. At least he’d have still been alive when Jonas showed up.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t?” McIntire asked. “He might have only been unconscious. Maybe if they’d put *him* in that motorboat and gone in ‘lickety-split’ you could have saved him.”

The doctor picked up his bag. “It’s possible, but not very likely. It looks like he lost consciousness within minutes. The syringe was lying like he’d just dropped it. Simon was sure he was dead. He did what he thought was best; that’s all you can ask.”

“It sounded a bit to me like old Simon did what he thought would be the least time consuming. Did you notice that he even went so far as to help himself to Nels’ hooks and bait? Sat right next to him and chopped the heads off those fish, couldn’t even be bothered to cover the poor man, just let him lay there half naked in his own...”

“*Shit*, John. You can say it. You’re not in some duchess’ drawing room now.” Guibard looked at McIntire with an air of astonishment mingled with that same patronizing sympathy he had shown at his sea-sickness. “And, Jeez, come down to earth. The Lindstroms weren’t headed out to make a few casts and have a goddamn picnic lunch. This time of year they’re working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, just to stay alive. The time Simon spent hanging around here means it’ll be midnight before he gets to bed tonight, and he’ll be up again at three o’clock tomorrow morning.”

The wiry coroner climbed up into the pilot house, lowered himself with enviable agility out the narrow door into his bobbing motorboat and departed, leaving a somewhat

chagrined McIntire alone with a fourteen-year-old boy and the body of his childhood friend.



McIntire slid the door of the hatch into place and called up to Jonas that they could go. Without a word, the young man cranked up the anchor and started the engine. They moved off at an agonizingly slow crawl. Guibard need have no worries about their having a long wait for the ambulance.

With the hatch closed, the *mélange* of odors combined with the monotonous grumble of the engine to make the space even more claustrophobic. The only light entered through the narrow doorway to the pilot house and four tiny portholes, two near the bow, two in the stern. McIntire bent his head under the low ceiling and shuffled unsteadily toward the rear, where an arrangement of cupboards covered by a wide shelf for a countertop made a rudimentary kitchen. The “galley,” he reminded himself, and wondered why ordinary things always seemed to have out-of-the-ordinary names when they happened to be found on a boat: the galley, the cabin, the head. Sailors were, by and large, a pretentious bunch.

The boat gave a sudden lurch, and McIntire lunged for a small hinged box that came skipping across the counter toward him. Its interior was cushioned and contained a long strip of soft rubber, a small bottle with a handwritten label—“isopropyl alcohol”—a wad of absorbent cotton, and a hypodermic syringe with a piece of adhesive tape wrapped around the barrel about a third of the way up. These were accompanied by a folded paper which proved to be a typewritten list of instructions. Bertelsen was to have used a tourniquet between the site of the sting and his heart, if possible. He was to fill the syringe to the level of the bottom of the tape, and, after swabbing off the spot with alcohol—a step Nels had apparently chosen to omit, the cotton was dry—inject the entire contents into the thigh area. He should then

briskly rub the area around the site of the injection to improve absorption, and immediately seek medical attention. McIntire held the syringe up to the beam of light coming through the porthole. It was empty and appeared to be dry, not the one Bertelsen had used that morning. A spare maybe? The instructions didn't say anything about a second injection, just admonished Nels to SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION. There was no sign of a bottle or other container that might have held the epinephrine. Maybe Guibard had taken that, too. He returned the syringe to its case and snapped it shut.

The only other objects in evidence were a barn-shaped black metal lunch pail and a red thermos, held in place by a sort of wooden box affair nailed to the counter. A folded copy of *Grit*, dated February 7, was wedged between them. He stuck the bee sting kit in next to the thermos, and, grasping the edge of the counter to steady himself, opened the cupboard doors one by one until he located a slightly musty blanket woven with a flamboyant Indian-inspired design.

As he started to turn away, he became aware of a barely audible but persistent buzzing noise, higher pitched and independent of the steady rumble of the engine. It was only inches from his ear, and seemed to come from the clothing that hung on the wall, a yellow slicker, a couple of shirts, and the top half of a set of wool underwear. He listened for a moment, then reached over and shook out the tucked-up sleeve of a heavy plaid shirt. A bee emerged at the wrist and began a laborious climb toward the shoulder. Its fat body was banded with yellowish brown stripes. It was an unremarkable insect, hardly McIntire's idea of an instrument of death.

McIntire contemplated its sluggish movements. Did bees really die after they sting someone? He picked up the flimsy tabloid and rolled it into a tube. "Well, here's one that will," he murmured. A swat sent the insect spiraling to the counter where it continued its angry buzzing, twirling helplessly on

its back. He gave another whack, somewhat harder than necessary, and tucked the paper, with the squashed bee fused to page one, back into its spot. Then he clutched the blanket to his chest and teetered back to where the fallen fisherman lay.

Kneeling beside the body, he unfolded the blanket over it. When he reached the smooth, hairless chest he stopped. A narrow bluish scar snaked from the dead man's collar bone across his shoulder, a relic of another battle perhaps, one that had a happier outcome. McIntire placed the palm of his hand on one of the sun-browned cheeks. There was unexpected warmth in the skin and he recoiled as if burned. He sat back on his heels and contemplated the features: the network of tiny broken veins, the stubble of beard, the deeply carved lines around the slack mouth. There was nothing left of the intensity, the determination—admittedly the obstinacy—that had been written on that face in life. It was the face of a tired and defenseless old man—the old man that Nels Bertelsen would never be.

“Well Nels, you stubborn son-of-a-gun, if you're listening, I'm here on board the *Frelser*. You got your way, as usual.” His words were swallowed up by the grumble of the engine. “But I really think you've gone to extremes this time.”

The *Frelser*, savior, liberator. An ignominious death was surely not what Bertelsen had anticipated when he shucked off the burdens of his father's farm and took to the open waters.

McIntire reflected with regret on the limited acquaintance he had had with the adult Nels Bertelsen. That wood sprite on the fiery stallion was more real to him than the body lying here with the warmth of life ebbing away. “*Farvel, gamle venn, og takk for alt.*” Thanks for all, old friend. He smoothed back the hair and pulled the blanket up over it.

III

McIntire decided to take a short detour on his way to take the news of her bereavement to Lucille Delaney, Nels Bertelsen's...Nels Bertelsen's what? She was popularly referred to as his "mail order bride." This was a misnomer on at least one count; while Lucy had shared Bertelsen's home for quite a few years, she had not become his wife. On the other hand, the romance may well have been conducted with the aid of the U.S. Mails. Bertelsen had not been known to travel far abroad—at least not since his soldiering days—and Lucy was definitely not a locally grown product. Her background was shrouded in secrecy, although universal speculation held that she was Southern.

McIntire considered himself a compassionate and tactful person, but he had little faith in his ability to console a grieving widow, legitimate or not, and no desire to be closeted alone with Lucy Delaney under the best of circumstances. It wouldn't hurt to have a woman along, someone to provide comfort and sympathy. His own wife would be that perfect someone, but Leonie preferred to live by what she called the "continental clock." The time it would require to render her upright and functional before ten in the morning was time that probably shouldn't be spared right now. He turned off the aptly named Orchard Road, which would have taken him from Bertelsen's dock straight to his home, and traveled a

half mile or so down the township's main thoroughfare, the Swale Road. With any luck he might recruit the notoriously early rising Mia Thorsen.

McIntire asked himself, as he had many times before without receiving a satisfactory answer, what demon could possibly have been in possession of his faculties when he agreed to this constable business. He had been astonished when the contingent of neighbors descended on him the previous autumn to request that he complete the tenure of the venerable George Armstrong "Walleye" Wall, who had suffered a fatal heart attack when attempting to hoist up a large hog for butchering.

They were most persuasive in their arguments. As a "military man," and the flesh and blood of Colin McIntire, he was the perfect choice for the job. The constable, they emphasized, wasn't reviled the way, say, a game warden was. And after all, how hard could it be? Track down a stray cow now and then, break up the occasional beer party at the gravel pit. Anything really serious was a job for the county sheriff. Old Walleye had handled it okay, and he was past eighty when that sow had taken her revenge. Besides, only a few months were left in his uncompleted term.

There were also added benefits: a telephone at township expense, the opportunity to keep up on the latest news of the neighborhood, and a little extra cash from the odd fine. They graciously avoided mentioning that, unlike most of the able-bodied men thereabouts, John McIntire appeared to have plenty of time on his hands.

Admittedly, McIntire was not only surprised, but more than just a little flattered, although not particularly encouraged by the implied comparison to his late father. Most of all he welcomed the opportunity to become an active member of the community. So after demurring only as strenuously as courtesy demanded, he had allowed himself to be persuaded. "Allowed himself"? Hell, he had pounced on it like a cat on spilled milk.

The job had kept him busier than he had anticipated and was far more burdensome than the pittance in compensation reflected. He had not endeared himself to the town's adolescents, but once their fall party season had drawn to a close and the countryside became buried under several feet of snow, he expected things to settle down. He had neglected to consider the resourcefulness of the Upper Peninsula folk. Hardly a day—and, more to the point, a night—went by that he wasn't dragged away from the warmth of his home to investigate some nefarious goings-on or settle some petty squabble, invariably finding, upon reaching the scene of the alleged crime, that the issue had resolved itself. The frequent summonses came to a suspicious halt following the December town board meeting, where he had presented a meticulous report of each incident, along with a detailed record of the expenses he had incurred. Not a single further call had come until that night in mid-February when things did indeed turn serious. A local farmer was bludgeoned to death with a manure shovel, without a doubt a job for the county sheriff, if there had happened to be one handy. On this particular evening, Sheriff Koski and his deputies were up to their armpits in snow some thirty miles away. By the time they reached St. Adele around noon the next day, McIntire had, through some fortunate alignment of the stars, apprehended the criminal who had obligingly confessed.

Shortly after this event, when the constable's term was drawing to a close, the McIntires embarked upon an extended sojourn in warmer climes, giving St. Adele's criminal element free rein. After a month spent visiting McIntire's mother in Florida and driving leisurely through a southern spring of soft warm nights and hills ablaze with mountain laurel, they had returned to find Northern Michigan still held in winter's implacable embrace, and John McIntire elected to a full term as constable on a near unanimous write-in vote.

It was barely possible that this vote of confidence was the result of his rapid resolution of the homicide, but McIntire couldn't help but feel that he somehow had been the victim of a well organized version of "put one over on the new guy"—a sort of civic snipe-hunt. Well, at least the blackfly hatch had been a bit early this year, nipping the spring gravel pit parties in the bud.

He left his car at the end of the Thorsens' rutted driveway and walked up to the house.

He had driven past many times since his return, but, for one reason or another, had not actually visited. And his passings-by hadn't given him a clear view of the structure, shielded as it was by a grove of spruce. Now he stopped in the shelter of those trees and gazed with interest upon the familiar slate-gray asphalt siding and solid brick chimneys of the house in which he'd spent the first six years of his life.

It was within those walls that, from the time he first realized that *minulla an jano* would get a dipperful of water from Mama Saarinen as quickly as *jag ar torstig* did from his own mother, he began the love affair with languages that had become such a dominant force in his life. It was also here that he'd formed that other bond that had played its own part in shaping his destiny...he pushed the thought aside.

Except for the screening in of one of the two wide porches, the home looked much as it had in his boyhood.

The sound of a light but steady hammering intruded on his thoughts and reminded him of the reason he had come. The tapping emanated from a building added since his youth, a low-roofed structure of unpainted concrete block, sunk deep in the shadows of spruce and giant hemlock. Even on this bright June morning a faint glimmer of electric light showed through the open doorway. This must be the new workshop, which Mia insisted upon referring to as her "studio."

His approach took him past a garden in which the first shoots of green beans and sweet corn were emerging optimistically

from the earth, but appeared to be condemned from the start by an already flourishing crop of pigweed and quack grass. He reflected that if Mia Thorsen's garden was any indication of her nurturing skills, her childless state might not be a complete tragedy. He had some fleeting second thoughts about the wisdom of asking her to minister to Lucy.

Four or five geese lounged near the pumphouse that stood at the end of the garden, taking advantage of a brief period of sunlight reflecting off the white walls. It was clear that the fowl frequented this path, too. McIntire grimaced and stepped carefully as he crossed to the studio and stood in the doorway. He searched the gloomy space for the source of the light. It proved to be a single lamp at the end of a long arm, aimed at a littered work bench where the angular figure of Mia Thorsen was bent over a piece of wood, hammer and chisel in hand. As a child, McIntire had once heard his father voice the baffling opinion that young Mia Vogel looked "like she'd been conceived through a sheet." In the dusky workshop, with the meager lamplight imparting a frosty translucence to her silver-gray hair and fair skin, her aspect was even more wraithlike than usual. He held his breath until the delicate tapping sounds ceased, and Mia straightened up. "Come on in, John, you're blocking the light."

"What light?" McIntire questioned. "It's darker than the inside of a cow in here, as Ma used to say. It beats me how you keep from chopping your fingers off."

Mia bent to blow the piece she was carving free of shavings, and squinted critically at her work. "This is a clock case for *Madame* Sylvia Hollander. What Madame wants Madame gets, and she wants it to look 'just like Eban did it himself.' If I want to carve like Papa did, I have to see like Papa did. He used kerosene lamps, and his eyesight was almost as bad as yours. But he was sure a heck of a lot more observant." She dropped the tools onto the bench and held up her hands, which were curiously out of keeping with her overall

appearance of fragility. They were square, blunt-nailed, and strong, and bore the healed scars of a score or more minor mishaps and at least one major calamity: they comprised nine and a half fingers.

She waggled the stub of her left forefinger. "This is what happens when people sneak up on me."

She switched off the light. "But come on out, I was about to take a break anyway. How're things going with you?"

"Maybe you should get a watchdog, if you don't want unexpected visitors," McIntire stalled. For reasons he wasn't telling himself, he shrank from bringing up the purpose of his visit.

"That's what the geese are supposed to be for."

McIntire looked at the droppings that littered the path and the grass of the yard. "I would imagine they do keep the Fuller Brush Man on his toes," he observed.

"Worthless critters. Arnie Johnson swore to me that they would sound the alarm the minute anybody set foot in the yard, *and* they'd keep the weeds out of my garden, too. 'You'll never pull another dandelion,' he said." At McIntire's inadvertent glance in the direction of the garden, she smiled. "And you can see, he was right about that."

She removed her canvas apron and began vigorously shaking out the collection of sawdust and shavings, but McIntire's expression must have been easy to read; looking directly at him for the first time, she froze in mid-shake.

"I take it this isn't a social call," she said. "Don't tell me Nick's run afoul of the law again. What's he done this time—dumped the Sears catalogs in the lake?"

Her tone remained light, but her grasp on the apron had accelerated to a deathgrip.

McIntire hastened to reassure her, "So far as I'm aware, your husband hasn't been treating either Sears-Roebuck or the mighty Gitche-Gumme with anything other than the respect they deserve."

Mia looked at him through narrowed eyes before she tossed the apron in the general direction of a peg inside the door, shrugged when it landed on the concrete floor, and brushed off the sleeves of her flannel shirt. She wore baggy twill work pants that obviously belonged to her husband, barely reaching mid-calf, but bunched up where they were belted around her narrow waist. McIntire had never gotten quite used to seeing grown women wearing trousers, and he stared in fascination as he followed her to the porch.

“He did have his so-called barber shop quartet practice last night,” she was saying. “There’s no telling what those yahoos will get up to when they get turned loose together. I thought when Wylie joined them he’d kind of keep the lid on things, but he’s turned into a regular Good Time Charlie himself. They’re worse than a bunch of high schoolers, and they must have made quite a night of it last night; this morning Nick could hardly keep awake long enough to make it out the door. Well, he always says he can drive that route with his eyes closed—and no doubt he has, many times. I thought I noticed a new dent or two in the car, too, but it’s kind of hard to say.”

When McIntire was seated on one of the worn wicker chairs with Mia regarding him expectantly across a scarred metal table, he hesitated once more. In his anxiety over the necessity of informing Lucy about Bertelsen, he hadn’t considered what Mia’s reaction might be. She, too, had known Nels since they were children. They had lived practically within shouting distance of each other for over forty years. She might have much stronger feelings about the tragedy than Lucy herself, who, after all, was a relative newcomer, practically a stranger by comparison. For that matter, McIntire himself was a stranger in many ways. He felt the familiar pang of envy that always struck when he was reminded that St. Adele and its inhabitants had not been sealed in a time capsule on the day he boarded that ship in

Hoboken. They had inconsiderately lived on for thirty years without McIntire's participation, or even observation, except through his mother's letters. The sadness that he felt at Bertelsen's passing was for a young man who had been dead and gone for three decades. Mia had just lost someone who had been a consistent presence over the entire course of her lifetime, a circumstance McIntire could not even imagine.

"How much longer are you going to keep me hanging?" she finally asked. "Let's have it."

Undiluted terror, transient but unmistakable, leapt into Mia's eyes when she heard that Nels Bertelsen was dead, but her only response was a stiff, "How?" The news that he had died from a bee sting brought an incredulous look. Silence then descended, a silence that McIntire attempted to fill by relating the story of the morning's events in scrupulous detail. When he finished up by lamely informing her that Nels seemed to have netted quite a few herring that morning, she remained unmoving, her water-blue eyes fixed on his, frowning slightly while she slowly wound her single long braid around the fingers of her right hand in the old familiar gesture McIntire remembered from high school. She could appear to be concentrating furiously, but whether she was comprehending, or even listening, was impossible to tell. He wondered if this compulsion might be the reason she continued to wear her hair in that juvenile style, defying the dictates of fashion and, in his admittedly non-authoritative opinion, good taste.

When she spoke, her voice sounded tired and distant. "I just didn't think it would happen so soon."

"You were expecting this?"

"No, no." She waved her free hand impatiently. "I mean *us*, people our age. We just buried Nick's mother last fall. She was the last of our parents. It would have been nice to have a little breather before our own generation started dropping off."

“Nels didn’t exactly die of old age, Mia. It could have happened any time. When you think about it, it’s probably surprising that it didn’t happen sooner.”

Mia stared in the direction of two towering white pines that stood at the edge of the yard and twisted the braid more tightly. “I realize that, and I know that none of us is going to live forever. But if anybody could, I’d have put my money on Nels Bertelsen. He was just too ornery to die. I know he was allergic to bees. Cripes, he was so blasted picky about staying away from them that he could drive you nuts. Well,” she admitted, “he did get really sick from bee stings once. He hit a nest of yellow jackets with a mower, and was stung about a dozen times. He was in a coma for a couple days.”

“A dozen stings? From yellow jackets? Hornets?” Yet he’d survived.

Mia nodded. “How many stings did he get this time?”

“Only one, so far as I know,” McIntire told her, “and that was from an ordinary bee.” And minutes later he was dead. An allergic reaction would get worse with each exposure, but this was still remarkable. “When he was stung by the yellow jackets, how long did it take before he lost consciousness?”

“Why? What difference does it make?” Her fingers froze on the braid and the foggiest passed from her eyes.

“No difference, really.” McIntire searched for an answer. “I was just hoping that Nels didn’t suffer too much.”

“Oh. I don’t know how long he was conscious. He was alone. He managed to stay upright long enough to drive into Karvonens’ store and get help. It was after that happened that he decided to lease the orchards to Wylie and take up fishing. I always thought it was just a convenient excuse to quit farming. I couldn’t see that it would keep him away from bees anyway. Papa used to use dead fish to trap wasps.”

She turned to McIntire almost accusingly. “Who would have thought just one bee sting could actually *kill* him? How much poison can there be in one of those dinky little things,

anyway?" She gave up persecuting the braid and leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "It seems so unfair. Anybody with the guts to survive being young should be guaranteed the right to grow old." She gave him a limp smile. "How's Lucy taking it?"

McIntire was relieved to change the subject to more practical matters.

Once they were in the car, Mia's remoteness returned. She sat stiffly at his side, her hands gripping the edge of the seat as if she expected the modest Studebaker to suddenly rocket off over the treetops.

"Lucy might have already heard, you know," she finally said. "She takes that hike into town every morning to pick up her mail, and once the ambulance showed up the news would be out."

"I hadn't thought of that." McIntire slowed down and swerved to avoid a snowshoe hare that bounded erratically ahead of the car before it disappeared into the bushes at the roadside. "Maybe we won't need to be the ones to tell her after all."

She turned to him in amazement. "Are you actually saying that you prefer that Lucy hears about this through gossip, or maybe sees them packing the body into the ambulance?" She shook her head. "What is it about Lucille Delaney that seems to strike fear into the hearts of even the bravest men?"

"Besides the fact that she's a witch, you mean?"

Mia's whoop of laughter momentarily dissolved the years and transported McIntire back to earlier spring mornings when this road was only a wagon track winding between stump-strewn fields and their travels down it together had been on foot.

"I've heard plenty of Lucy stories," Mia said, "but witchcraft is news to me. Well, you're a man of the world. I guess you would know."

McIntire assumed his most superior tone. “Are you actually so gullible that you think it was mere coincidence that Elsie Karvonen slipped and broke her ankle at her own birthday party, to which, incidentally, Lucy had not been invited? And what about the time that Otto Wilke put his car in the ditch right after he passed Lucy on the road without offering her a ride? ‘If you treat people badly, bad things happen to you,’ that’s what Lucy told Leonie. Naturally she denied wishing Elsie and Otto any bad luck, she said that’s just the way things work out. ‘As ye sow, so shall ye reap.’ Of course Lucy didn’t use those exact words. I don’t suppose witches go around quoting from the Bible.”

“Kind of makes you wonder,” Mia remarked, “what poor old Nels did to get that bee sicced on him.”

“What could possibly be worse than providing bed and board to a witch?”

Mia’s laughter this time was cut short. “Lord, will you just listen to us? No wonder people used to find us so aggravating. Nels probably isn’t even cold yet and already we’re making jokes about it.”

They traveled the rest of the way in silence.



Until this morning, McIntire had not really thought about just how much Nels’ allergic condition might have affected his daily life, but now he saw the Bertelsen home from a new perspective. The house was set back from the road, a narrow, tidy building covered with the ubiquitous asphalt “brick siding.” No trees shaded its green-shingled roof; no shrubs or flowering plants obscured its stone foundation. The closely-trimmed lawn that spread out around it was interrupted only by a border of evenly spaced spruce stumps along the north side. Several outbuildings occupied the clearing: a garage which dwarfed the residence, a diminutive white painted structure that McIntire remembered as the “summer

kitchen,” and the long, low greenhouse and with its attached fruit-packing shed. This cluster of buildings, along with various implements of modern husbandry, of which McIntire was able to identify *tractor* and *wagon*, was enclosed by a low white board fence.

On the other side of the fence, contrasting exuberantly with the bleak homestead, lay the orchards. Hundreds of trees were now in full bloom. Billowing clouds of pink and white sprawled over the hillside and out of sight. The air was filled with their perfume and with the twittering of cedar waxwings as they fluttered from tree to tree in an avian feeding frenzy. A half dozen ewes, looking diminished and vulnerable as a consequence of being freshly denuded of their winter wool, lay under one of the nearer trees, placidly chewing, while their lambs formed a line to take turns trotting up the slanted bed of a two-wheeled cart to leap with abandon off the higher end.

Into this scene of bucolic tranquility suddenly strode Lucy Delaney. Her squat body advanced down the slope with a wobbling gait which, combined with the red and blue stripes of her skirt, gave the effect of a child's top teetering in its rotation just before it comes to a complete stop. Her hair, black and wiry, flared out above her ears like the cap of a mushroom. Sagging beige-colored stockings covered her legs, and on her feet were sturdy men's boots.

“Mine eyes have seen the glory!” McIntire said under his breath. “She looks like a stump all got up for the Fourth of July.”

“Careful!” Mia warned. “You don't want to spend the rest of your life squatting on a lily pad munching flies.”

If Lucy felt any surprise at seeing her two visitors, she gave no indication of it, but greeted them heartily, ushered them with dispatch into her kitchen and strapped on a yellow-flowered apron. She had gotten down the cookie jar and filled the coffee pot with water before McIntire was able to break

into her stream of pleasantries. On hearing his news, she stood staring from his face to Mia's for a full minute before she seemed to crumple like the stuffing was being sucked out of her robust body. She dropped into the nearest chair, put her face in her apron, and commenced sobbing, her body shaking with violent spasms.

Mia took over the brewing of the coffee and, after giving Lucy's shoulder an awkward pat, McIntire moved to the window. The lambs had given up their attempts at flying and were expending no less energy in nudging their mothers to their feet to provide a mid-morning meal. As he stood watching, a sudden breeze stirred the trees, creating a shower of petals that swirled like mammoth snowflakes to the ground.

When the sobs had subsided to an occasional hiccup, McIntire turned back to Lucy. Her broad face with its florid complexion was little altered by the extended bout of tears, but her usually strident voice had fallen to barely more than a croak.

"He was always so careful, especially when the trees are blooming. He never went anywhere without his medicine. Why didn't it work? Why were there bees on the boat, anyway?" She looked up at McIntire. "What can I do now? Will I have to find somewhere else to live?"

McIntire had no answer for any of this, and after his feeble attempts at consolation were waved away by Mia, he left the two women and went home to write out a report for the town board.