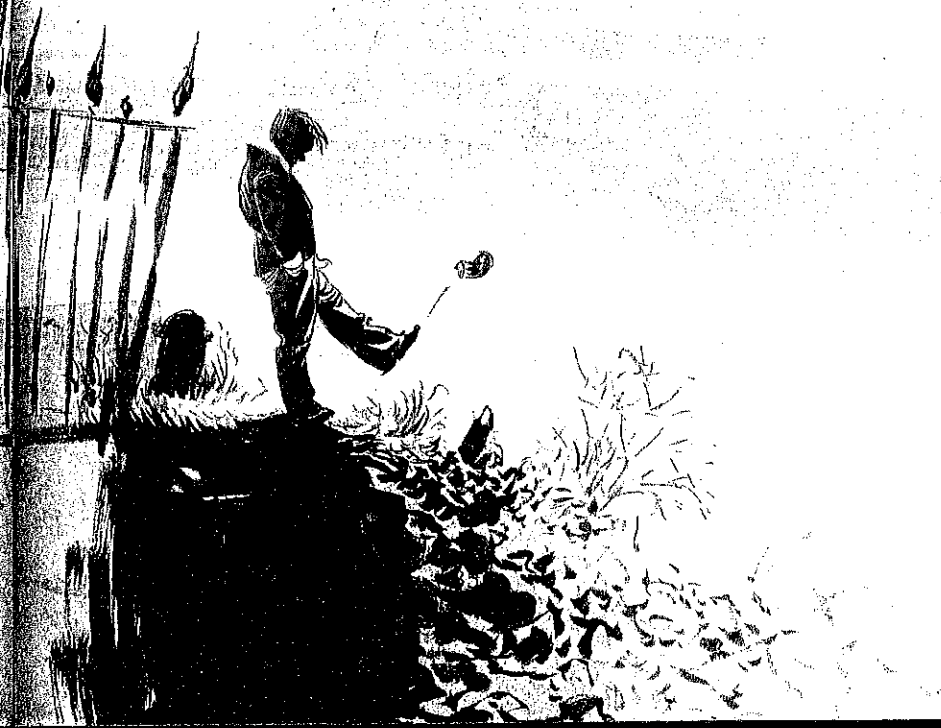


CHAPTER TWO

*The New Friend*

**B**OD WAS A QUIET child with sober grey eyes and a mop of tousled, mouse-colored hair. He was, for the most part, obedient. He learned how to talk, and, once he had learned, he would pester the graveyard folk with questions. "Why amn't I allowed out of the graveyard?" he would ask,





or "How do I do what *he* just did?" or "Who lives in here?" The adults would do their best to answer his questions, but their answers were often vague, or confusing, or contradictory, and then Bod would walk down to the old chapel and talk to Silas.

He would be there waiting at sunset, just before Silas awakened.

His guardian could always be counted upon to explain matters clearly and lucidly and as simply as Bod needed in order to understand.

"You aren't allowed out of the graveyard—it's *aren't*, by the way, not *amn't*, not these days—because it's only in the graveyard that we can keep you safe. This is where you live and this is where those who love you can be found. Outside would not be safe for you. Not yet."

"*You* go outside. You go outside every night."

"I am infinitely older than you, lad. And I am safe wherever I am."

"I'm safe there too."

"I wish that that were true. But as long as you stay here, you *are* safe."

Or,

"How could you do that? Some skills can be attained by education, and some by practice, and some by time. Those skills will come if you study. Soon enough you will master Fading and Sliding and Dreamwalking. But some skills cannot be mastered by the living, and for those you must wait a little longer. Still, I do not doubt that you

will acquire even those, in time.

"You were given the Freedom of the Graveyard, after all," Silas would tell him. "So the Graveyard is taking care of you. While you are here, you can see in the darkness. You can walk some of the ways that the living should not travel. The eyes of the living will slip from you. I too was given the Freedom of the Graveyard, although in my case it comes with nothing but the right of abode."

"I want to be like you," said Bod, pushing out his lower lip.

"No," said Silas, firmly. "You do not."

Or,

"Who lies there? You know, Bod, in many cases it is written on the stone. Can you read yet? Do you know your alphabet?"

"My what?"

Silas shook his head, but said nothing. Mr. and Mrs. Owens had never been much for reading when they were alive, and there were no alphabet books in the graveyard.

The next night, Silas appeared at the front of the Owenses' cozy tomb carrying three large books—two of them brightly colored alphabet books (A is for Apple, B is for Ball) and a copy of *The Cat in the Hat*. He also had paper and a packet of wax crayons. Then he walked Bod around the graveyard, placing the boy's small fingers on the newest and clearest of the headstones and the plaques, and taught Bod how to find the letters of the alphabet when they appeared, beginning with the sharp

steeple of the capital A.

Silas gave Bod a quest—to find each of the twenty-six letters in the graveyard—and Bod finished it, proudly, with the discovery of Ezekiel Ulmsley's stone, built into the side of the wall in the old chapel. His guardian was pleased with him.

Every day Bod would take his paper and crayons into the graveyard and he would copy names and words and numbers as best he could, and each night, before Silas would go off into the world, Bod would make Silas explain to him what he had written, and make him translate the snatches of Latin which had, for the most part, baffled the Owenses.

A sunny day: bumblebees explored the wildflowers that grew in the corner of the graveyard, dangling from the gorse and the bluebells, droning their deep lazy buzz, while Bod lay in the spring sunlight watching a bronze-colored beetle wandering across the stone of G<sup>es</sup>. Reeder, his wife, Dorcas, and their son Sebastian (*Fidelis ad Mortem*). Bod had copied down their inscription and now he was only thinking about the beetle when somebody said,

"Boy? What're you doing?"

Bod looked up. There was someone on the other side of the gorse bush, watching him.

"Nuffing," said Bod. He stuck out his tongue.

The face on the other side of the gorse bush crumpled into a gargoyle, tongue sticking out, eyes popping, then returned to girl.

"That was good," said Bod, impressed.

"I can make really good faces," said the girl. "Look at this one." She pushed her nose up with one finger, creased her mouth into a huge, satisfied smile, squinted her eyes, puffed out her cheeks. "Do you know what that was?"

"No."

"It was a pig, silly."

"Oh." Bod thought. "You mean, like *P* is for Pig?"

"Of course like that. Hang on."

She came around the gorse bush and stood next to Bod, who got to his feet. She was a little older than he was, a little taller, and was dressed in bright colors, yellow and pink and orange. Bod, in his grey winding sheet, felt dowdy and drab.

"How old are you?" said the girl. "What are you doing here? Do you live here? What's your name?"

"I don't know," said Bod.

"You don't know your name?" said the girl. "'Course you do. Everybody knows their own name. Fibber."

"I know my name," said Bod. "And I know what I'm doing here. But I don't know the other thing you said."

"How old you are?"

Bod nodded.

"Well," said the girl, "what was you when you was last birthday?"

"I didn't," said Bod. "I never was."

"Everybody gets birthdays. You mean you never had cake or candles or stuff?"

Bod shook his head. The girl looked sympathetic. "Poor

thing. I'm five. I bet you're five too."

Bod nodded enthusiastically. He was not going to argue with his new friend. She made him happy.

Her name was Scarlett Amber Perkins, she told him, and she lived in a flat with no garden. Her mother was sitting on a bench by the chapel at the bottom of the hill, reading a magazine, and she had told Scarlett to be back in half an hour, and to get some exercise, and not to get into trouble or talk to strangers.

"I'm a stranger," pointed out Bod.

"You're not," she said, definitely. "You're a little boy." And then she said, "And you're my friend. So you can't be a stranger."

Bod smiled rarely, but he smiled then, hugely and with delight. "I'm your friend," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Bod. It's short for Nobody."

She laughed then. "Funny sort of a name," she said. "What are you doing now?"

"ABCs," said Bod. "From the stones. I have to write them down."

"Can I do it with you?"

For a moment Bod felt protective—the gravestones were *his*, weren't they?—and then he realized how foolish he was being, and he thought that there were things that might be more fun done in the sunlight with a friend. He said, "Yes."

They copied down names from tombstones, Scarlett

helping Bod pronounce unfamiliar names and words, Bod telling Scarlett what the Latin meant, if he already knew, and it seemed much too soon when they heard a voice further down the hill shouting, "Scarlett!"

The girl thrust the crayons and paper back at Bod. "I got to go," she said.

"I'll see you next time," said Bod. "Won't I?"

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Here," he said. And he stood and watched her as she ran down the hill.

On the way home Scarlett told her mother about the boy called Nobody who lived in the graveyard and had played with her, and that night Scarlett's mother mentioned it to Scarlett's father, who said that he believed that imaginary friends were a common phenomenon at that age, and nothing at all to be concerned about, and that they were fortunate to have a nature reserve so near.

After that initial meeting, Scarlett never saw Bod first. On days when it was not raining one of her parents would bring her to the graveyard. The parent would sit on the bench and read while Scarlett would wander off the path, a splash of fluorescent green or orange or pink, and explore. Then, always sooner rather than later, she would see a small, grave face and grey eyes staring up at her from beneath a mop of mouse-colored hair, and then Bod and she would play—hide-and-seek, sometimes, or climbing things, or being quiet and watching the rabbits behind the old chapel.

Bod would introduce Scarlett to some of his other friends. That she could not see them did not seem to matter. She had already been told firmly by her parents that Bod was imaginary and that there was nothing at all wrong with that—her mother had, for a few days, even insisted on laying an extra place at the dinner table for Bod—so it came as no surprise to her that Bod also had imaginary friends. He would pass on their comments to her.

"Bartleby says that thou dost have a face like unto a squishèd plum," he would tell her.

"So does he. And why does he talk so funny? Doesn't he mean squashed tomato?"

"I don't think that they had tomatoes when he comes from," said Bod. "And that's just how they talk then."

Scarlett was happy. She was a bright, lonely child, whose mother worked for a distant university teaching people she never met face-to-face, grading English papers sent to her over the computer, and sending messages of advice or encouragement back. Her father taught particle physics, but there were, Scarlett told Bod, too many people who wanted to teach particle physics and not enough people who wanted to learn it, so Scarlett's family had to keep moving to different university towns, and in each town her father would hope for a permanent teaching position that never came.

"What's particle physics?" asked Bod.

Scarlett shrugged. "Well," she said. "There's atoms, which is things that is too small to see, that's what we're all made

of. And there's things that's smaller than atoms, and that's particle physics."

Bod nodded and decided that Scarlett's father was probably interested in imaginary things.

Bod and Scarlett wandered the graveyard together every weekday afternoon, tracing names with their fingers, writing them down. Bod would tell Scarlett whatever he knew of the inhabitants of the grave or mausoleum or tomb, and she would tell him stories that she had been read or learned, and sometimes she would tell him about the world outside, about cars and buses and television and aeroplanes (Bod had seen them flying high overhead, had thought them loud silver birds, but had never been curious about them until now). He in his turn would tell her about the days when the people in the graves had been alive—how Sebastian Reeder had been to London Town and had seen the Queen, who had been a fat woman in a fur cap who had glared at everyone and spoke no English. Sebastian Reeder could not remember which queen she had been, but he did not think she had been queen for very long.

"When was this?" Scarlett asked.

"He died in 1583, it says on his tombstone, so before then."

"Who is the oldest person here. In the whole graveyard?" asked Scarlett.

Bod frowned. "Probably Caius Pompeius. He came here a hundred years after the Romans first got here. He told me

about it. He liked the roads."

"So he's the oldest?"

"I think so."

"Can we make a little house in one of those stone houses?"

"You can't get in. It's locked. They all are."

"Can *you* get in?"

"Of course."

"Why can't I?"

"The graveyard," he explained. "I got the Freedom of the Graveyard. It lets me go places."

"I want to go in the stone house and make little houses."

"You can't."

"You're just mean."

"Not."

"Meany."

"Not."

Scarlett put her hands into the pocket of her anorak and walked down the hill without saying good-bye, convinced that Bod was holding out on her, and at the same time suspecting that she was being unfair, which made her angrier.

That night, over dinner, she asked her mother and father if there was anyone in the country before the Romans came.

"Where did you hear about the Romans?" asked her father.

"Everybody knows," said Scarlett, with withering scorn. "Was there?"

"There were Celts," said her mother. "They were here first. They go back before the Romans. They were the people that the Romans conquered."

On the bench beside the old chapel, Bod was having a similar conversation.

"The oldest?" said Silas. "Honestly, Bod, I don't know. The oldest in the graveyard that I've encountered is Caius Pompeius. But there were people here before the Romans came. Lots of them, going back a long time. How are your letters coming along?"

"Good, I think. When do I learn joined-up letters?"

Silas paused. "I have no doubt," he said, after a moment's reflection, "that there are, among the many talented individuals interred here, at least a smattering of teachers. I shall make inquiries."

Bod was thrilled. He imagined a future in which he could read everything, in which all stories could be opened and discovered.

When Silas had left the graveyard to go about his own affairs, Bod walked to the willow tree beside the old chapel, and called Caius Pompeius.

The old Roman came out of his grave with a yawn. "Ah. Yes. The living boy," he said. "How are you, living boy?"

Bod said, "I do very well, sir."

"Good. I am pleased to hear it." The old Roman's hair was pale in the moonlight, and he wore the toga in which he had been buried, with, beneath it, a thick woolen vest and leggings because this was a cold country at the edge of

the world, and the only place colder was Caledonia to the North, where the men were more animal than human and covered in orange fur, and were too savage even to be conquered by the Romans, so would soon be walled off in their perpetual winter.

"Are you the oldest?" asked Bod.

"The oldest in the graveyard? I am."

"So you were the first to be buried here?"

A hesitation. "Almost the first," said Caius Pompeius. "Before the Celts there were other people on this island. One of them was buried here."

"Oh." Bod thought for a moment. "Where's his grave?"

Caius pointed up the hill.

"He's up at the top," said Bod.

Caius shook his head.

"Then what?"

The old Roman reached down and he ruffled Bod's hair. "In the hill," he said. "Inside it. I was first brought here by my friends, followed in their turn by the local officials and the mimes, who wore the wax faces of my wife, taken by a fever in Camulodonum, and my father, killed in a border skirmish in Gaul. Three hundred years after my death a farmer, seeking a new place to graze his sheep, discovered the boulder that covered the entrance, and rolled it away, and went down, thinking there might be treasure. He came out a little later, his dark hair now as white as mine . . ."

"What did he see?"

Caius said nothing, then, "He would not speak of it. Or

ever return. They put the boulder back, and in time, they forgot. And then, two hundred years ago, when they were building the Frobisher vault, they found it once more. The young man who found the place dreamed of riches, so he told no one, and he hid the doorway behind Ephraim Pettyfer's casket, and went down one night, unobserved, or so he thought."

"Was his hair white when he came up?"

"He did not come up."

"Um. Oh. So, who is buried down there?"

Caius shook his head. "I do not know, young Owens. But I felt him, back when this place was empty. I could feel something waiting even then, deep in the hill."

"What was he waiting for?"

"All I could feel," said Caius Pompeius, "was the waiting."

Scarlett was carrying a large picture book, and she sat next to her mother on the green bench near the gates, and she read her book while her mother inspected an educational supplement. She enjoyed the spring sunshine and she did her best to ignore the small boy who waved at her first from behind an ivy-covered monument, then, when she had resolved to no longer look at the monument, the boy popped up—literally, like a jack-in-a-box—from behind a tombstone (Joji G. Shoji, d. 1921, *I was a stranger and you took me in*). He gestured towards her, frantically. She ignored him.

Eventually she put her book down on the bench.

"Mummy? I'm going for a walk, now."

"Stay on the path, dear."

She stayed on the path until she was round the corner, and she could see Bod waving at her from further up the hill. She made a face at him.

"I've found things out," said Scarlett.

"Me too," said Bod.

"There were people before the Romans," she said. "Way back. They lived, I mean, when they died they put them underground in these hills, with treasure and stuff. And they were called barrows."

"Oh. Right," said Bod. "That explains it. Do you want to come and see one?"

"Now?" Scarlett looked doubtful. "You don't really know where one is, do you? And you know I can't always follow you where you go." She had seen him slip through walls, like a shadow.

In reply, he held up a large, rusted, iron key. "This was in the chapel," he said. "It should open most of the gates up there. They used the same key for all of them. It was less work."

She scrambled up the hillside beside him.

"You're telling the truth?"

He nodded, a pleased smile dancing at the corners of his lips. "Come on," he said.

It was a perfect spring day, and the air was alive with birdsong and bee hum. The daffodils bustled in the breeze and here and there on the side of the hill a few early tulips nodded. A blue powdering of forget-me-nots and fine, fat



yellow primroses punctuated the green of the slope as the two children walked up the hill toward the Frobishers' little mausoleum.

It was old and simple in design, a small, forgotten stone house with a metal gate for a door. Bod unlocked the gate with his key, and they went in.

"It's a hole," said Bod. "Or a door. Behind one of the coffins."

They found it behind a coffin on the bottom shelf—a simple crawl space. "Down there," said Bod. "We go down there."

Scarlett found herself suddenly enjoying the adventure rather less. She said, "We can't see down there. It's dark."

"I don't need light," said Bod. "Not while I'm in the graveyard."

"I do," said Scarlett. "It's dark."

Bod thought about the reassuring things that he could say, like "there's nothing bad down there," but the tales of hair turning white and people never returning meant that he could not have said them with a clear conscience, so he said, "I'll go down. You wait for me up here."

Scarlett frowned. "You shouldn't leave me," she said.

"I'll go down," said Bod, "and I'll see who's there, and I'll come back and tell you all about it."

He turned to the opening, bent down, and clambered through on his hands and knees. He was in a space big enough to stand up in, and he could see steps cut into the stone. "I'm going down the steps now," he said.

"Do they go down a long way?"

"I think so."

"If you held my hand and told me where I was walking," she said, "then I could come with you. If you make sure I'm okay."

"Of course," said Bod, and before he had finished speaking the girl was coming through the hole on her hands and her knees.

"You can stand up," Bod told her. He took her hand. "The steps are just here. If you put a foot forward you can find it. There. Now I'll go first."

"Can you really see?" she asked.

"It's dark," said Bod. "But I can see."

He began to lead Scarlett down the steps, deep into the hill, and to describe what he saw to her as they went. "It's steps down," he said. "Made of stone. And there's stone all above us. Someone's made a painting on the wall."

"What kind of painting?"

"A big hairy C is for Cow, I think. With horns. Then something that's more like a pattern, like a big knot. It's sort of carved in the stone too, not just painted, see?" and he took her fingers and placed them onto the carved knotwork.

"I can feel it!" she said.

"Now the steps are getting bigger. We are coming out into some kind of big room, now, but the steps are still going. Don't move. Okay, now I am between you and the room. Keep your left hand on the wall."

They kept going down. "One more step and we are on the rock floor," said Bod. "It's a bit uneven."

The room was small. There was a slab of stone on the ground, and a low ledge in one corner, with some small objects on it. There were bones on the ground, very old bones indeed, although below where the steps entered the room Bod could see a crumpled corpse, dressed in the remains of a long brown coat—the young man who had dreamed of riches, Bod decided. He must have slipped and fallen in the dark.

The noise began all about them, a rustling slither, like a snake twining through dry leaves. Scarlett's grip on Bod's hand was harder.

"What's that? Do you see anything?"

"No."

Scarlett made a noise that was half gasp and half wail, and Bod saw something, and he knew without asking that she could see it too.

There was a light at the end of the room, and in the light a man came walking, walking through the rock, and Bod heard Scarlett choking back a scream.

The man looked well-preserved, but still like something that had been dead for a long while. His skin was painted (Bod thought) or tattooed (Scarlett thought) with purple designs and patterns. Around his neck hung a necklace of sharp, long teeth.

"I am the master of this place!" said the figure, in words so ancient and guttural that they were scarcely words at all.

"I guard this place from all who would harm it!"

His eyes were huge in his head. Bod realized it was because he had circles drawn around them in purple, making his face look like an owl's.

"Who are you?" asked Bod. He squeezed Scarlett's hand as he said it.

The Indigo Man did not seem to have heard the question. He looked at them fiercely.

"Leave this place!" he said in words that Bod heard in his head, words that were also a guttural growl.

"Is he going to hurt us?" asked Scarlett.

"I don't think so," said Bod. Then, to the Indigo Man, he said, as he had been taught, "I have the Freedom of the Graveyard and I may walk where I choose."

There was no reaction to this by the Indigo Man, which puzzled Bod even more because even the most irritable inhabitants of the graveyard had been calmed by this statement. Bod said, "Scarlett, can you see him?"

"Of course I can see him. He's a big scary tattooey man and he wants to kill us. Bod, make him go away!"

Bod looked at the remains of the gentleman in the brown coat. There was a lamp beside him, broken on the rocky floor. "He ran away," said Bod aloud. "He ran because he was scared. And he slipped or he tripped on the stairs and he fell off."

"Who did?"

"The man on the floor."

Scarlett sounded irritated now, as well as puzzled and

scared. "What man on the floor? It's too dark. The only man I can see is the tattooey man."

And then, as if to make quite sure that they knew that he was there, the Indigo Man threw back his head and let out a series of yodeling screams, a full-throated ululation that made Scarlett grip Bod's hand so tightly that her fingernails pressed into his flesh.

Bod was no longer scared, though.

"I'm sorry I said they were imaginary," said Scarlett. "I believe now. They're real."

The Indigo Man raised something over his head. It looked like a sharp stone blade. "All who invade this place will die!" he shouted, in his guttural speech. Bod thought about the man whose hair had turned white after he had discovered the chamber, how he would never return to the graveyard or speak of what he had seen.

"No," said Bod. "I think you're right. I think this one is."

"Is what?"

"Imaginary."

"Don't be stupid," said Scarlett. "I can see it."

"Yes," said Bod. "And *you* can't see dead people." He looked around the chamber. "You can stop now," he said. "We know it's not real."

"I will feast on your liver!" screamed the Indigo Man.

"No, you won't," said Scarlett, with a huge sigh. "Bod's right." Then she said, "I think maybe it's a scarecrow."

"What's a scarecrow?" asked Bod.

"It's a thing farmers put in fields to scare crows."

"Why would they do that?" Bod quite liked crows. He thought they were funny, and he liked the way they helped to keep the graveyard tidy.

"I don't know exactly. I'll ask Mummy. But I saw one from a train and I asked what it was. Crows think it's a real person. It's just a made-up thing, that looks like a person, but it's not. It's just to scare the crows away."

Bod looked around the chamber. He said, "Whoever you are, it isn't working. It doesn't scare us. We know it isn't real. Just stop."

The Indigo Man stopped. It walked over to the rock slab and it lay down on it. Then it was gone.

For Scarlett the chamber was once more swallowed by the darkness. But in the darkness, she could hear the twining sound again, getting louder and louder, as if something were circling the round room.

Something said, WE ARE THE SLEER.

The hairs on the back of Bod's neck began to prickle. The voice in his head was something very old and very dry, like the scraping of a dead twig against the window of the chapel, and it seemed to Bod that there was more than one voice there, that they were talking in unison.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Scarlett.

"I didn't hear anything, just a slithery noise. It made me feel strange. All prickly in my tummy. Like something horrible is going to happen."

"Nothing horrible is going to happen," said Bod. Then, to the chamber, he said, "What are you?"

WE ARE THE SLEER. WE GUARD AND WE PROTECT.

"What do you protect?"

THE RESTING PLACE OF THE MASTER. THIS IS THE HOLIEST OF ALL HOLY PLACES, AND IT IS GUARDED BY THE SLEER.

"You can't touch us," said Bod. "All you can do is scare."

The twining voices sounded petulant. FEAR IS A WEAPON OF THE SLEER.

Bod looked down at the ledge. "Are those the treasures of your master? An old brooch, a cup, and a little stone knife? They don't look like much."

THE SLEER GUARDS THE TREASURES. THE BROOCH, THE GOBLET, THE KNIFE. WE GUARD THEM FOR THE MASTER, WHEN HE RETURNS. IT COMES BACK. IT ALWAYS COMES BACK.

"How many of you are there?"

But the Sleer said nothing. The inside of Bod's head felt as if it were filled with cobwebs, and he shook it, trying to clear it. Then he squeezed Scarlett's hand. "We should go," he said.

He led her past the dead man in the brown coat—and honestly, thought Bod, if he hadn't got scared and fallen the man would have been disappointed in his hunt for treasure. The treasures of ten thousand years ago were not the treasures of today. Bod led Scarlett carefully up the steps, through the hill, into the jutting black masonry of the Frobisher mausoleum.

Late spring sunlight shone through the breaks in the masonry and through the barred door, shocking in its brightness, and Scarlett blinked and covered her eyes at the

suddenness of the glare. Birds sang in the bushes, a bumblebee droned past, everything was surprising in its normality.

Bod pushed open the mausoleum door, and then locked it again behind them.

Scarlett's bright clothes were covered in grime and cobwebs, and her dark face and hands were pale with dust.

Further down the hill somebody—quite a few somebodies—was shouting. Shouting loudly. Shouting frantically.

Someone called, "Scarlett? Scarlett Perkins?" and Scarlett said "Yes? Hello?" and before she and Bod had a chance to discuss what they had seen, or to talk about the Indigo Man, there was a woman in a fluorescent yellow jacket with POLICE on the back demanding to know if she was okay, and where she had been, and if someone had tried to kidnap her, and then the woman was talking on a radio, letting them know that the child had been found.

Bod slipped along beside them as they walked down the hill. The door to the chapel was open, and inside both of Scarlett's parents were waiting, her mother in tears, her father worriedly talking to people on a mobile phone, along with another policewoman. No one saw Bod as he waited in the corner.

The people kept asking Scarlett what had happened to her, and she answered, as honestly as she could, told them about a boy called Nobody who took her deep inside a hill where a purple tattoo man appeared in the dark, but he was really a scarecrow. They gave her a chocolate bar and

they wiped her face and asked if the tattooed man had ridden a motorbike, and Scarlett's mother and father, now that they were relieved and not afraid for her any longer were angry with themselves and with her, and they told each other that it was the other one's fault for letting their little girl play in a cemetery, even if it was a nature reserve, and that the world was a very dangerous place these days, and if you didn't keep your eyes on your children every second you could not imagine what awful things they would be plunged into. Especially a child like Scarlett.

Scarlett's mother began sobbing, which made Scarlett cry, and one of the policewomen got into an argument with Scarlett's father, who tried to tell her that he, as a taxpayer, paid her wages, and she told him that she was a taxpayer too and probably paid *his* wages, while Bod sat in the shadows in the corner of the chapel, unseen by anyone, not even Scarlett, and watched and listened until he could take no more.

It was twilight in the graveyard by now, and Silas came and found Bod, up near the amphitheater, looking out over the town. He stood beside the boy and he said nothing, which was his way.

"It wasn't her fault," said Bod. "It was mine. And now she's in trouble."

"Where did you take her?" asked Silas.

"Into the middle of the hill, to see the oldest grave. Only there isn't anybody in there. Just a snaky thing called a Sleer who scares people."

"Fascinating."

They walked back down the hill together, watched as the old chapel was locked up once more and the police and Scarlett and her parents went off into the night.

"Miss Borrowes will teach you joined-up letters," said Silas. "Have you read *The Cat in the Hat* yet?"

"Yes," said Bod. "Ages ago. Can you bring me more books?"

"I expect so," said Silas.

"Do you think I'll ever see her again?"

"The girl? I very much doubt it."

But Silas was wrong. Three weeks later, on a grey afternoon, Scarlett came to the graveyard, accompanied by both her parents.

They insisted that she remain in sight at all times, although they trailed a little behind her. Scarlett's mother occasionally exclaimed about how morbid this all was and how fine and good it was that they would soon be leaving it behind forever.

When Scarlett's parents began to talk to each other, Bod said, "Hello."

"Hi," said Scarlett, very quietly.

"I didn't think I'd see you again."

"I told them I wouldn't go with them unless they brought me back here one last time."

"Go where?"

"Scotland. There's a university there. For Dad to teach particle physics."

They walked on the path together, a small girl in a bright orange anorak and a small boy in a grey winding sheet.

"Is Scotland a long way away?"

"Yes," she said.

"Oh."

"I hoped you'd be here. To say good-bye."

"I'm always here."

"But you aren't dead, are you, Nobody Owens?"

"Course not."

"Well, you can't stay here all your life. Can you? One day you'll grow up and then you will have to go and live in the world outside."

He shook his head. "It's not safe for me out there."

"Who says?"

"Silas. My family. Everybody."

She was silent.

Her father called, "Scarlett! Come on, love. Time to go. You've had your last trip to the graveyard. Now let's go home."

Scarlett said to Bod, "You're brave. You are the bravest person I know, and you are my friend. I don't care if you *are* imaginary." Then she fled down the path back the way they had come, to her parents and the world.