

CHAPTER FIVE

Danse Macabre

SOMETHING WAS GOING ON, Bod was certain of it. It was there in the crisp winter air, in the stars, in the wind, in the darkness. It was there in the rhythms of the long nights and the fleeting days.

Mistress Owens pushed him out of the Owenses' little tomb. "Get along with you," she said. "I've got business to attend to."

Bod looked at his mother. "But it's cold out there," he said.

"I should hope so," she said, "it being winter. That's as it should be. Now," she said, more to herself than to Bod, "shoes. And look at this dress—it needs hemming. And cobwebs—there are cobwebs all over, for heaven's sakes. You get along," this to Bod once more. "I've plenty to be getting on with, and I don't need you underfoot."

And then she sang to herself, a little couplet Bod had never heard before.

*"Rich man, poor man, come away.
Come to dance the Macabray."*



"What's that?" asked Bod, but it was the wrong thing to have said, for Mistress Owens looked dark as a thundercloud, and Bod hurried out of the tomb before she could express her displeasure more forcefully.

It was cold in the graveyard, cold and dark, and the stars were already out. Bod passed Mother Slaughter in the ivy-covered Egyptian Walk, squinting at the greenery.

"Your eyes are younger than mine, young man," she said. "Can you see blossom?"

"Blossom? In winter?"

"Don't you look at me with that face on, young man," she said. "Things blossom in their time. They bud and bloom, blossom and fade. Everything in its time." She huddled deeper into her cloak and bonnet and she said,

"Time to work and time to play,

Time to dance the Macabray. Eh, boy?"

"I don't know," said Bod. "What's the Macabray?"

But Mother Slaughter had pushed into the ivy and was gone from sight.

"How odd," said Bod, aloud. He sought warmth and company in the bustling Bartleby mausoleum, but the Bartleby family—seven generations of them—had no time for him that night. They were cleaning and tidying, all of them, from the oldest (d. 1831) to the youngest (d. 1690).

Fortinbras Bartleby, ten years old when he had died

(of *consumption*, he had told Bod, who had mistakenly believed for several years that Fortinbras had been eaten by lions or bears, and was extremely disappointed to learn it was merely a disease), now apologized to Bod.

"We cannot stop to play, Master Bod. For soon enough, *tomorrow night* comes. And how often can a man say that?"

"Every night," said Bod. "Tomorrow night *always* comes."

"Not *this* one," said Fortinbras. "Not once in a blue moon, or a month of Sundays."

"It's not Guy Fawkes Night," said Bod, "or Hallowe'en. It's not Christmas or New Year's Day."

Fortinbras smiled, a huge smile that filled his pie-shaped, freckly face with joy.

"None of *them*," he said. "*This* one's special."

"What's it called?" asked Bod. "What happens tomorrow?"

"It's the best day," said Fortinbras, and Bod was certain he would have continued but his grandmother Louisa Bartleby (who was only twenty) called him over to her, and said something sharply in his ear.

"Nothing," said Fortinbras. Then to Bod, "Sorry. I have to work now." And he took a rag and began to buff the side of his dusty coffin with it. "La, la, la, *oomp*," he sang. "La la la, *oomp*." And with each "oomp," he would do a wild, whole-body flourish with his rag.

"Aren't you going to sing that song?"

"What song?"

"The one everybody's singing?"

"No time for that," said Fortinbras. "It's *tomorrow*, tomorrow, after all."

"No time," said Louisa, who had died in childbirth, giving birth to twins. "Be about your business."

And in her sweet, clear voice, she sang,

*"One and all will hear and stay
Come and dance the Macabray."*

Bod walked down to the crumbling little church. He slipped between the stones, and into the crypt, where he sat and waited for Silas to return. He was cold, true, but the cold did not bother Bod, not really: the graveyard embraced him, and the dead do not mind the cold.

His guardian returned in the small hours of the morning; he had a large plastic bag with him.

"What's in there?"

"Clothes. For you. Try them on." Silas produced a grey sweater the color of Bod's winding sheet, a pair of jeans, underwear, and shoes—pale green sneakers.

"What are they for?"

"You mean, apart from wearing? Well, firstly, I think you're old enough—what are you, ten years old now?—and normal, living people clothes are wise. You'll have to wear them one day, so why not pick up the habit right now? And they could also be camouflage."

"What's camouflage?"

"When something looks enough like something else that people watching don't know what it is they're looking at."

"Oh. I see. I think." Bod put the clothes on. The shoelaces

gave him a little trouble and Silas had to teach him how to tie them. It seemed remarkably complicated to Bod, and he had to tie and re-tie his laces several times before he had done it to Silas's satisfaction. Only then did Bod dare to ask his question.

"Silas. What's a Macabray?"

Silas's eyebrows raised and his head tipped to one side. "Where did you hear about that?"

"Everyone in the graveyard is talking about it. I think it's something that happens tomorrow night. What's a Macabray?"

"It's a dance," said Silas.

"*All must dance the Macabray*," said Bod, remembering. "Have you danced it? What kind of dance is it?"

His guardian looked at him with eyes like black pools and said, "I do not know. I know many things, Bod, for I have been walking this earth at night for a very long time, but I do not know what it is like to dance the Macabray. You must be alive or you must be dead to dance it—and I am neither."

Bod shivered. He wanted to embrace his guardian, to hold him and tell him that he would never desert him, but the action was unthinkable. He could no more hug Silas than he could hold a moonbeam, not because his guardian was insubstantial, but because it would be wrong. There were people you could hug, and then there was Silas.

His guardian inspected Bod thoughtfully, a boy in his new clothes. "You'll do," he said. "Now you look like you've

lived outside the graveyard all your life."

Bod smiled proudly. Then the smile stopped and he looked grave once again. He said, "But you'll always be here, Silas, won't you? And I won't ever have to leave, if I don't want to?"

"Everything in its season," said Silas, and he said no more that night.

Bod woke early the next day, when the sun was a silver coin high in the grey winter sky. It was too easy to sleep through the hours of daylight, to spend all his winter in one long night and never see the sun, and so each night before he slept he would promise himself that he would wake in daylight, and leave the Owensens' cozy tomb.

There was a strange scent in the air, sharp and floral. Bod followed it up the hill to the Egyptian Walk, where the winter ivy hung in green tumbles, an evergreen tangle that hid the mock-Egyptian walls and statues and hieroglyphs.

The perfume was heaviest there, and for a moment Bod wondered if snow might have fallen, for there were white clusters on the greenery. Bod examined a cluster more closely. It was made of small five-petaled flowers, and he had just put his head in to sniff the perfume when he heard footsteps coming up the path.

Bod Faded into the ivy, and watched. Three men and a woman, all alive, came up the path and into the Egyptian Walk. The woman had an ornate chain around her neck.

"Is this it?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Caraway," said one of the men—chubby and white-haired and short of breath. Like each of the men, he carried a large, empty wicker basket.

She seemed both vague and puzzled. "Well, if you say so," she said. "But I cannot say that I understand it." She looked up at the flowers. "What do I do now?"

The smallest of the men reached into his wicker basket and brought out a tarnished pair of silver scissors. "The scissors, Lady Mayoress," he said.

She took the scissors from him and began to cut the clumps of blossom, and she and the three men started to fill the baskets with the flowers.

"This is," said Mrs. Caraway, the Lady Mayoress, after a little while, "perfectly ridiculous."

"It is," said the fat man, "a *tradition*."

"Perfectly ridiculous," said Mrs. Caraway, but she continued to cut the white blossoms and drop them into the wicker baskets. When they had filled the first basket, she asked, "Isn't that enough?"

"We need to fill all four baskets," said the smaller man, "and then distribute a flower to everyone in the Old Town."

"And what kind of tradition is that?" said Mrs. Caraway. "I asked the Lord Mayor before me, and he said he'd never heard of it." Then she said, "Do you get a feeling someone's watching us?"

"What?" said the third man, who had not spoken until now. He had a beard and a turban and two wicker baskets.

"Ghosts, you mean? I do not believe in ghosts."

"Not ghosts," said Mrs. Caraway. "Just a feeling like someone's looking."

Bod fought the urge to push further back into the ivy.

"It's not surprising that the previous Lord Mayor did not know about this tradition," said the chubby man, whose basket was almost full. "It's the first time the winter blossoms have bloomed in eighty years."

The man with the beard and the turban, who did not believe in ghosts, was looking around him nervously.

"Everyone in the Old Town gets a flower," said the small man. "Man, woman, and child." Then he said, slowly, as if he were trying to remember something he had learned a very long time ago, "*One to leave and one to stay and all to dance the Macabray.*"

Mrs. Caraway sniffed. "Stuff and nonsense," she said, and kept on snipping the blossoms.

Dusk fell early in the afternoon, and it was night by half past four. Bod wandered the paths of the graveyard, looking for someone to talk to, but there was no one about. He walked down to the Potter's Field to see if Liza Hempstock was about, but found no one there. He went back to the Owenses' tomb, but found it also deserted: neither his father nor Mistress Owens was anywhere to be seen.

Panic started then, a low-level panic. It was the first time in his ten years that Bod could remember feeling abandoned in the place he had always thought of as his home: he ran

down the hill to the old chapel, where he waited for Silas.

Silas did not come.

"Perhaps I missed him," thought Bod, but he did not believe this. He walked up the hill to the very top, and looked out. The stars hung in the chilly sky, while the patterned lights of the city spread below him, streetlights and car headlights and things in motion. He walked slowly down from the hill until he reached the graveyard's main gates, and he stopped there.

He could hear music.

Bod had listened to all kinds of music: the sweet chimes of the ice-cream van, the songs that played on workmen's radios, the tunes that Claretty Jake played the dead on his dusty fiddle, but he had never heard anything like this before: a series of deep swells, like the music at the beginning of something, a prelude perhaps, or an overture.

He slipped through the locked gates, walked down the hill, and into the Old Town.

He passed the Lady Mayoress, standing on a corner, and as he watched, she reached out and pinned a little white flower to the lapel of a passing businessman.

"I don't make personal charitable donations," said the man. "I leave that to the office."

"It's not for charity," said Mrs. Caraway. "It's a local tradition."

"Ah," he said, and he pushed his chest out, displaying the little white flower to the world, and walked off, proud as Punch.

A young woman pushing a baby buggy was the next to go past.

"Wossit for?" she asked suspiciously, as the Mayoress approached.

"One for you, one for the little one," said the Mayoress.

She pinned the flower to the young woman's winter coat. She stuck the flower for the baby to its coat with tape.

"But wossit *for*?" asked the young woman.

"It's an Old Town thing," said the Lady Mayoress, vaguely. "Some sort of tradition."

Bod walked on. Everywhere he went he saw people wearing the white flowers. On the other street corners, he passed the men who had been with the Lady Mayoress, each man with a basket, handing out the white flowers. Not everyone took a flower, but most people did.

The music was still playing: somewhere, at the edge of perception, solemn and strange. Bod cocked his head to one side, trying to locate where it was coming from, without success. It was in the air and all around. It was playing in the flapping of flags and awnings, in the rumble of distant traffic, the click of heels on the dry paving stones . . .

And there was an oddness, thought Bod, as he watched the people heading home. They were walking in time to the music.

The man with the beard and the turban was almost out of flowers. Bod walked over to him.

"Excuse me," said Bod.

The man started. "I did not see you," he said, accusingly.

"Sorry," said Bod. "Can I have a flower as well?"

The man with the turban looked at Bod with suspicion.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"Oh yes," said Bod.

The man passed Bod a white flower. Bod took it, then said, "Ow," as something stabbed into the base of his thumb.

"You pin it to your coat," said the man. "Watch out for the pin."

A bead of crimson was coming up on Bod's thumb. He sucked at it while the man pinned the flower to Bod's sweater. "I've never seen you around here," he told Bod.

"I live here, all right," said Bod. "What are the flowers for?"

"It was a tradition in the Old Town," said the man, "before the city grew up around it. When the winter flowers bloom in the graveyard on the hill they are cut and given out to everybody, man or woman, young or old, rich or poor."

The music was louder now. Bod wondered if he could hear it better because he was wearing the flower—he could make out a beat, like distant drums, and a skirling, hesitant melody that made him want to pick up his heels and march in time to the sound.

Bod had never walked anywhere as a sightseer before. He had forgotten the prohibitions on leaving the graveyard, forgotten that tonight in the graveyard on the hill the

dead were no longer in their places; all that he thought of was the Old Town, and he trotted through it down to the municipal gardens in front of the Old Town Hall (which was now a museum and tourist information center, the town hall itself having moved into much more imposing, if newer and duller, offices halfway across the city).

There were already people around, wandering the municipal gardens—now in midwinter, little more than a large grassy field with, here and there, some steps, a shrub, a statue.

Bod listened to the music, entranced. There were people trickling into the square, in ones and twos, in families or alone. He had never seen so many living people at one time. There must have been hundreds of them, all of them breathing, each of them as alive as he was, each with a white flower.

Is this what living people do? thought Bod, but he knew that it was not: that *this*, whatever it was, was special.

The young woman he had seen earlier pushing a baby buggy stood beside him, holding her baby, swaying her head to the music.

"How long does the music go on for?" Bod asked her, but she said nothing, just swayed and smiled. Bod did not think she smiled much normally. And only when he was certain that she had not heard him, that he had Faded, or was simply not someone she cared enough about to listen to, she said, "Blimmen 'eck. It's like Christmases." She said it like a woman in a dream, as if she was seeing herself from the

outside. In the same not-really-there tone of voice, she said, "Puts me in mind of me Gran's sister, Aunt Clara. The night before Christmas we'd go to her, after me Gran passed away, and she'd play music on her old piano, and she'd sing, sometimes, and we'd eat chocolates and nuts and I can't remember any of the songs she sung. But that music, it's like all of them songs playing at once."

The baby seemed asleep with its head on her shoulder, but even the baby was swaying its hands gently in time to the music.

And then the music stopped and there was silence in the square, a muffled silence, like the silence of falling snow, all noise swallowed by the night and the bodies in the square, no one stamping or shuffling, scarcely even breathing.

A clock began to strike somewhere close at hand: the chimes of midnight, and they came.

They walked down the hill in a slow procession, all stepping gravely, all in time, filling the road, five abreast. Bod knew them or knew most of them. In the first row, he recognized Mother Slaughter and Josiah Worthington, and the old earl who had been wounded in the Crusades and came home to die, and Doctor Trefusis, all of them looking solemn and important.

There were gasps from the people in the square. Someone began to cry, saying, "Lord have mercy, it's a judgment on us, that's what it is!" Most of the people simply stared, as unsurprised as they would have been if this had happened in a dream.

The dead walked on, row on row, until they reached the square.

Josiah Worthington walked up the steps until he reached Mrs. Caraway, the Lady Mayoress. He extended his arm and said, loud enough that the whole square could hear him, "Gracious lady, this I pray: Join me in the Macabray."

Mrs. Caraway hesitated. She glanced up at the man beside her for guidance: he wore a robe and pajamas and slippers, and he had a white flower pinned to the lapel of his robe. He smiled and nodded to Mrs. Caraway. "Of course," Mr. Caraway said.

She reached out a hand. As her fingers touched Josiah Worthington's, the music began once more. If the music Bod had heard until then was a prelude, it was a prelude no longer. This was the music they had all come to hear, a melody that plucked at their feet and fingers.

They took hands, the living with the dead, and they began to dance. Bod saw Mother Slaughter dancing with the man in the turban, while the businessman was dancing with Louisa Bartleby. Mistress Owens smiled at Bod as she took the hand of the old newspaper seller, and Mr. Owens reached out and took the hand of a small girl, without condescension, and she took his hand as if she had been waiting to dance with him her whole life. Then Bod stopped looking because someone's hand closed around his, and the dance began.

Liza Hempstock grinned at him. "This is fine," she said,

as they began to tread the steps of the dance together.

Then she sang, to the tune of the dance,

"Step and turn, and walk and stay,

Now we dance the Macabray."

The music filled Bod's head and chest with a fierce joy, and his feet moved as if they knew the steps already, had known them forever.

He danced with Liza Hempstock, and then, when that measure ended, he found his hand taken by Fortinbras Bartleby, and he danced with Fortinbras, stepping past lines of dancers, lines that parted as they came through.

Bod saw Abanazer Bolger dancing with Miss Borrowes, his old former teacher. He saw the living dancing with the dead. And the one-on-one dances became long lines of people stepping together in unison, walking and kicking (*La-la-la-oomp! La-la-la-oomp!*) a line dance that had been ancient a thousand years before.

Now he was in the line beside Liza Hempstock. He said, "Where does the music come from?"

She shrugged.

"Who's making all this happen?"

"It always happens," she told him. "The living may not remember, but we always do . . ." And she broke off, excited. "*Look!*"

Bod had never seen a real horse before, only in the pages of picture books, but the white horse that clopped down the street towards them was nothing like the horses he had

imagined. It was bigger, by far, with a long, serious face. There was a woman riding on the horse's bare back, wearing a long grey dress that hung and gleamed beneath the December moon like cobwebs in the dew.

She reached the square, and the horse stopped, and the woman in grey slipped off it easily and stood on the earth, facing them all, the living and the dead of them.

She curtsyed.

And, as one, they bowed or curtsyed in return, and the dance began anew.

"Now the Lady on the Grey

Leads us in the Macabray,"

sang Liza Hempstock, before the whirl of the dance took her off and away from Bod. They stomped to the music, and stepped and spun and kicked, and the lady danced with them, stepping and spinning and kicking with enthusiasm. Even the white horse swayed its head and stepped and shifted to the music.

The dance sped up, and the dancers with it. Bod was breathless, but he could not imagine the dance ever stopping: the Macabray, the dance of the living and the dead, the dance with Death. Bod was smiling, and everyone was smiling.

He caught sight of the lady in the grey dress from time to time, as he spun and stomped his way across the municipal gardens.

Everyone, thought Bod, *everyone is dancing!* He thought it, and as soon as he thought it he realized that he was mistaken. In the shadows by the Old Town Hall, a man was

standing, dressed all in black. He was not dancing. He was watching them.

Bod wondered if it was longing that he saw on Silas's face, or sorrow, or something else, but his guardian's face was unreadable.

He called out, "Silas!" hoping to make his guardian come to them, to join the dance, to have the fun they were having, but when he heard his name, Silas stepped back into the shadows and was lost to sight.

"Last dance!" someone called, and the music skirled up into something stately and slow and final.

Each of the dancers took a partner, the living with the dead, each to each. Bod reached out his hand and found himself touching fingers with, and gazing into the grey eyes of, the lady in the cobweb dress.

She smiled at him.

"Hello, Bod," she said.

"Hello," he said, as he danced with her. "I don't know your name."

"Names aren't really important," she said.

"I love your horse. He's so big! I never knew horses could be that big."

"He is gentle enough to bear the mightiest of you away on his broad back, and strong enough for the smallest of you as well."

"Can I ride him?" asked Bod.

"One day," she told him, and her cobweb skirts shimmered. "One day. Everybody does."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

And with that, the dance was done. Bod bowed low to his dancing partner, and then, and only then, did he feel exhausted, feel as if he had been dancing for hour after hour. He could feel all his muscles aching and protesting. He was out of breath.

A clock somewhere began to strike the hour, and Bod counted along with it. Twelve chimes. He wondered if they had been dancing for twelve hours or twenty-four or for no time at all.

He straightened up, and looked around him. The dead had gone, and the Lady on the Grey. Only the living remained, and they were beginning to make their way home—leaving the town square sleepily, stiffly, like people who had awakened from a deep sleep, walking without truly waking.

The town square was covered with tiny white flowers. It looked as if there had been a wedding.

Bod woke the next afternoon in the Owenses' tomb feeling like he knew a huge secret, that he had done something important, and was burning to talk about it.

When Mistress Owens got up, Bod said, "That was amazing last night!"

Mistress Owens said, "Oh yes?"

"We danced," said Bod. "All of us. Down in the Old Town."

"Did we indeed?" said Mistress Owens, with a snort. "Dancing is it? And you know you aren't allowed down into the town."

Bod knew better than even to try to talk to his mother when she was in this kind of mood. He slipped out of the tomb into the gathering dusk.

He walked up the hill, to the black obelisk, and Josiah Worthington's stone, where there was a natural amphitheater, and he could look out at the Old Town and at the lights of the city around it.

Josiah Worthington was standing beside him.

Bod said, "You began the dance. With the Mayor. You danced with her."

Josiah Worthington looked at him and said nothing.

"You *did*," said Bod.

Josiah Worthington said, "The dead and the living do not mingle, boy. We are no longer part of their world; they are no part of ours. If it happened that we danced the *danse macabre* with them, the dance of death, then we would not speak of it, and we certainly would not to speak of it to the living."

"But *I'm* one of you."

"Not yet, boy. Not for a lifetime."

And Bod realized why he had danced as one of the living, and not as one of the crew that had walked down the hill, and he said only, "I see . . . I think."

He went down the hill at a run, a ten-year-old boy in a hurry, going so fast he almost tripped over Digby Poole

(1785–1860, *As I Am So Shall You Be*), righting himself by effort of will, and charged down to the old chapel, scared he would miss Silas, that his guardian would already be gone by the time Bod got there.

Bod sat down on the bench.

There was a movement beside him, although he heard nothing move, and his guardian said, "Good evening, Bod."

"You were there last night," said Bod. "Don't try and say you weren't there or something because I know you were."

"Yes," said Silas.

"I danced with her. With the lady on the white horse."

"Did you?"

"You saw it! You watched us! The living and the dead! We were dancing. Why won't anyone *talk* about it?"

"Because there are mysteries. Because there are things that people are forbidden to speak about. Because there are things they do not remember."

"But you're speaking about it right now. We're talking about the Macabray."

"I have not danced it," said Silas.

"You saw it, though."

Silas said only, "I don't know what I saw."

"I danced with the lady, Silas!" exclaimed Bod. His guardian looked almost heartbroken then, and Bod found himself scared, like a child who has woken a sleeping panther.

But all Silas said was, "This conversation is at an end."

Bod might have said something—there were a hundred

things he wanted to say, unwise though it might have been to say them—when something distracted his attention: a rustling noise, soft and gentle, and a cold feather-touch as something brushed his face.

All thoughts of dancing were forgotten then, and his fear was replaced with delight and with awe.

It was the third time in his life that he had seen it.

"Look, Silas, it's snowing!" he said, joy filling his chest and his head, leaving no room for anything else. "It's really snow!"