

INTERLUDE

The Convocation

A SMALL SIGN IN THE hotel lobby announced that the Washington Room was taken that night by a private function, although there was no information as to what kind of function this might be. Truthfully, if you were to look at the inhabitants of the Washington Room that night, you would have no clearer idea of what was happening, although a rapid glance would tell you that there were no women in there. They were all men, that much was clear, and they sat at round dinner tables, and they were finishing their dessert.

There were about a hundred of them, all in sober black suits, but the suits were all they had in common. They had white hair or dark hair or fair hair or red hair or no hair at all. They had friendly faces or unfriendly, helpful or sullen, open or secretive, brutish or sensitive. The majority of them were pink-skinned, but there were black-skinned men and brown-skinned. They were European, African, Indian, Chinese, South American, Filipino, American. They



all spoke English when they talked to each other, or to the waiters, but the accents were as diverse as the gentlemen. They came from all across Europe and from all over the world.

The men in black suits sat around their tables while up on a platform one of their number, a wide, cheery man dressed in a morning suit, as if he had just come from a wedding, was announcing Good Deeds Done. Children from poor places had been taken on exotic holidays. A bus had been bought to take people who needed it on excursions.

The man Jack sat at the front center table, beside a dapper man with silver-white hair. They were waiting for coffee.

"Time's a-ticking," said the silver-haired man, "and we're none of us getting any younger."

The man Jack said, "I've been thinking. That business in San Francisco four years ago—"

"Was unfortunate, but like the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la, absolutely nothing to do with the case. You failed, Jack. You were meant to take care of them all. That included the baby. Especially the baby. *Nearly* only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades."

A waiter in a white jacket poured coffee for each of the men at the table: a small man with a pencil-thin black mustache, a tall blond man good-looking enough to be a film star or a model, and a dark-skinned man with a huge head who glared out at the world like an angry bull. These men

were making a point of not listening to Jack's conversation, and instead were paying attention to the speaker, even clapping from time to time. The silver-haired man added several heaped spoonfuls of sugar to his coffee, stirred it briskly.

"*Ten years*," he said. "Time and tide wait for no man. The babe will soon be grown. And then what?"

"I still have time, Mister Dandy," the man Jack began, but the silver-haired man cut him off, stabbing a large pink finger in his direction.

"You *had* time. Now, you just have a deadline. Now, you've got to get smart. We can't cut you any slack, not any more. Sick of waiting, we are, every man Jack of us."

The man Jack nodded, curtly. "I have leads to follow," he said.

The silver-haired man slurped his black coffee. "Really?"

"Really. And I repeat, I think it's connected with the trouble we had in San Francisco."

"You've discussed this with the secretary?" Mr. Dandy indicated the man at the podium, who was, at that moment, telling them about hospital equipment bought in the previous year from their generosity. ("Not one, not two, but *three* kidney machines," he was saying. The men in the room applauded themselves and their generosity politely.)

The man Jack nodded. "I've mentioned it."

"And?"

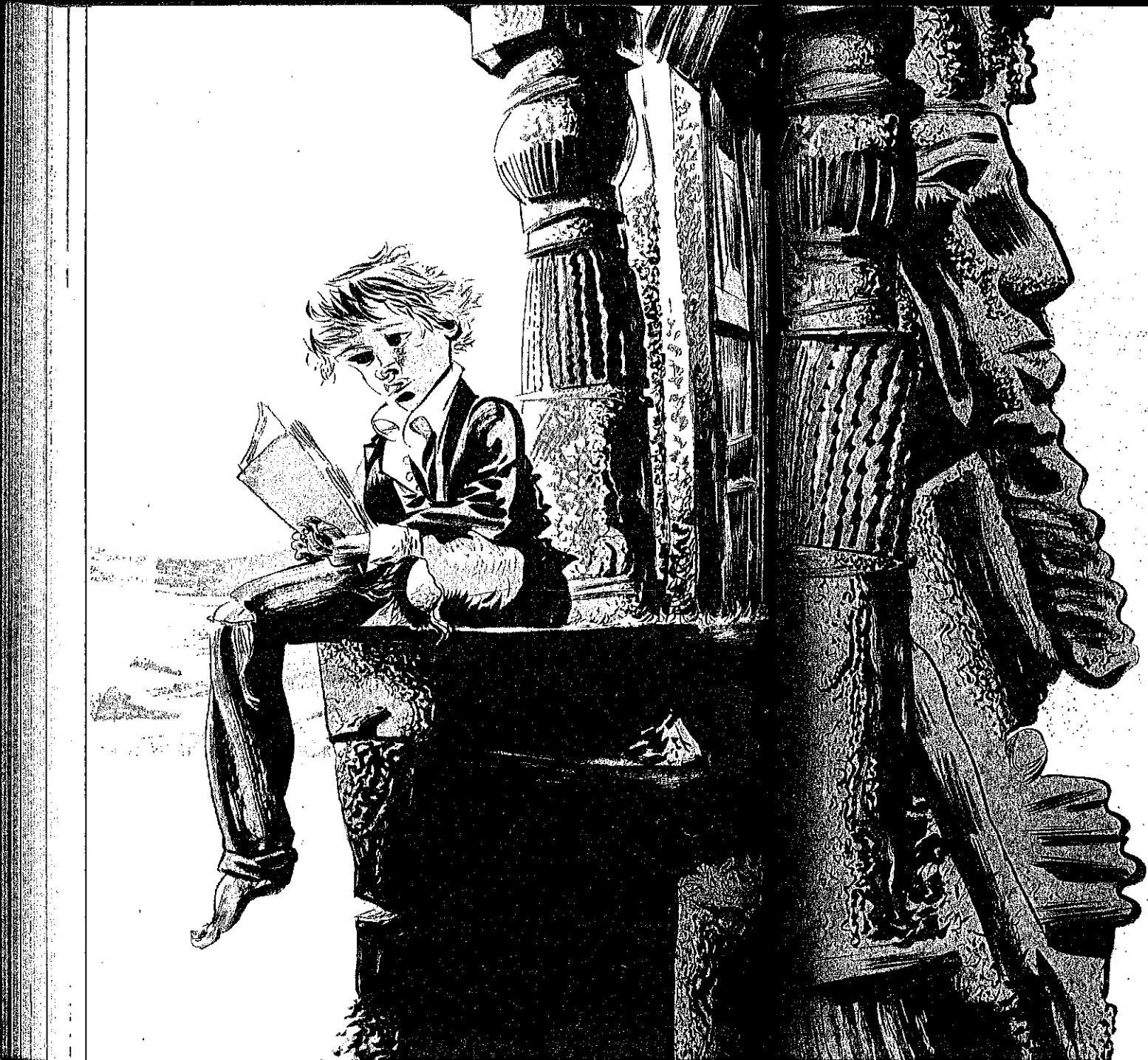
"He's not interested. He just wants results. He wants me to finish the business I started."

"We all do, sunshine," said the silver-haired man. "The boy's still alive. And time is no longer our friend."

The other men at the table, who had pretended not to be listening, grunted and nodded their agreement.

"Like I say," Mr. Dandy said, without emotion. "Time's a-ticking."





CHAPTER SIX

Nobody Owens' School Days

RAIN IN THE GRAVEYARD, and the world puddled into blurred reflections. Bod sat, concealed from anyone, living or dead, who might come looking for him, under the arch that separated the Egyptian Walk and the northwestern wilderness beyond it from the rest of the graveyard, and he read his book.

"Damm'ee!" came a shout from down the path. "Damm'ee, sir, and blast your eyes! When I catch you—and find you I shall—I shall make you rue the day you were born!"

Bod sighed and he lowered the book, and leaned out enough to see Thackeray Porringer (1720–1734, *son of the above*) come stamping up the slippery path. Thackeray was a big boy—he had been fourteen when he died, following his initiation as an apprentice to a master house painter: he had been given eight copper pennies and told not to come back without a half-a-gallon of red and white striped paint for painting barber's poles. Thackeray had spent five hours

being sent all over the town one slushy January morning, being laughed at in each establishment he visited and then sent on to the next; when he realized he had been made a fool of, he had taken an angry case of apoplexy, which carried him off within the week, and he died glaring furiously at the other apprentices and even at Mr. Horrobin, the master painter, who had undergone so much worse back when *he* was a 'prentice that he could scarcely see what all the fuss was about.

So Thackeray Porringer had died in a fury, clutching his copy of *Robinson Crusoe* which was, apart from a silver sixpence with the edges clipped and the clothes he had formerly been standing up in, all that he owned, and, at his mother's request, he was buried with his book. Death had not improved Thackeray Porringer's temper, and now he was shouting, "I know you're here somewhere! Come out and take your punishment, you, you thief!"

Bod closed the book. "I'm not a thief, Thackeray. I'm only borrowing it. I promise I'll give the book back when I've finished it."

Thackeray looked up, saw Bod nestled behind the statue of Osiris. "I told you not to!"

Bod sighed. "But there are so few books here. It's just up to a good bit anyway. He's found a footprint. It's not his. That means someone else is on the island!"

"It's my book," said Thackeray Porringer, obstinately. "Give it back."

Bod was ready to argue or simply to negotiate, but he

saw the hurt look on Thackeray's face, and he relented. Bod clambered down the side of the arch, jumped the last few feet. He held out the book. "Here." Thackeray took it gracelessly, and glared.

"I could read it to you," offered Bod. "I could do that."

"You could go and boil your fat head," said Thackeray, and he swung a punch at Bod's ear. It connected, and it stung, although judging from the look on Thackeray Porringer's face, Bod realized it must have hurt his fist as much as it hurt Bod.

The bigger boy stomped off down the path, and Bod watched him go, ear hurting, eyes stinging. Then he walked through the rain back down the treacherous ivy-covered path. At one point he slipped and scraped his knee, tearing his jeans.

There was a willow-grove beside the wall, and Bod almost ran into Miss Euphemia Horsfall and Tom Sands, who had been stepping out together for many years. Tom had been buried so long ago that his stone was just a weathered rock, and he had lived and died during the Hundred Years War with France, while Miss Euphemia (1861-1883, *She Sleeps, Aye, Yet She Sleeps with Angels*) had been buried in Victorian times, after the graveyard had been expanded and extended and became, for some fifty years, a successful commercial enterprise, and she had a whole tomb to herself behind a black door in the Willow Walk. But the couple seemed to have no troubles with the difference in their historical periods.

"You should slow down, young Bod," said Tom. "You'll do yourself an injury."

"You already did," said Miss Euphemia. "Oh dear, Bod. I have no doubt that your mother will have words with you about that. It's not as if we can easily repair those pantaloons."

"Um. Sorry," said Bod.

"And your guardian was looking for you," added Tom.

Bod looked up at the grey sky. "But it's still daylight," he said.

"He's up betimes," said Tom, a word which, Bod knew, meant *early*, "and said to tell you he wanted you. If we saw you."

Bod nodded.

"There's ripe hazel-nuts in the thicket just beyond the Littlejohns' monument," said Tom with a smile, as if softening a blow.

"Thank you," said Bod. He ran on, pell-mell, through the rain and down the winding path into the lower slopes of the graveyard, running until he reached the old chapel.

The chapel door was open and Silas, who had love for neither the rain nor for the remnants of the daylight, was standing inside, in the shadows.

"I heard you were looking for me," said Bod.

"Yes," said Silas. Then, "It appears you've torn your trousers."

"I was running," said Bod. "Um. I got into a bit of a fight with Thackeray Porringer. I wanted to read *Robinson*

Crusoe. It's a book about a man on a boat—that's a thing that goes in the sea, which is water like an enormous puddle—and how the ship is wrecked on an island, which is a place on the sea where you can stand, and—"

Silas said, "It has been eleven years, Bod. Eleven years that you have been with us."

"Right," said Bod. "If you say so."

Silas looked down at his charge. The boy was lean, and his mouse-colored hair had darkened slightly with age.

Inside the old chapel, it was all shadows.

"I think," said Silas, "it is time to talk about where you came from."

Bod breathed in deeply. He said, "It doesn't have to be now. Not if you don't want to." He said it as easily as he could, but his heart was thudding in his chest.

Silence. Only the patter of the rain and the wash of the water from the drainpipes. A silence that stretched until Bod thought that he would break.

Silas said, "You know you're different. That you are alive. That we took you in—*they* took you in here—and that I agreed to be your guardian."

Bod said nothing.

Silas continued, in his voice like velvet, "You had parents. An older sister. They were killed. I believe that you were to have been killed as well, and that you were not was due to chance, and the intervention of the Owenses."

"And you," said Bod, who had had that night described to him over the years by many people, some of whom had

even been there. It had been a big night in the graveyard.

Silas said, "Out there, the man who killed your family is, I believe, still looking for you, still intends to kill you."

Bod shrugged. "So?" he said. "It's only death. I mean, all of my best friends are dead."

"Yes." Silas hesitated. "They are. And they are, for the most part, done with the world. You are not. You're *alive*, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential. Once you're dead, it's gone. Over. You've made what you've made, dreamed your dream, written your name. You may be buried here, you may even walk. But that potential is finished."

Bod thought about this. It seemed almost true, although he could think of exceptions—his parents adopting him, for example. But the dead and the living were different, he knew that, even if his sympathies were with the dead.

"What about you?" he asked Silas.

"What about me?"

"Well, you aren't alive. And you go around and do things."

"I," said Silas, "am precisely what I am, and nothing more. I am, as you say, not alive. But if I am ended, I shall simply cease to be. My kind *are*, or we are *not*. If you see what I mean."

"Not really."

Silas sighed. The rain was done and the cloudy gloaming had become true twilight. "Bod," he said, "there are many

reasons why it is important that we keep you safe."

Bod said, "The person who hurt my family. The one who wants to kill me. You are certain that he's still out there?" It was something he had been thinking about for a while now, and he knew what he wanted.

"Yes. He's still out there."

"Then," said Bod, and said the unsayable, "I want to go to school."

Silas was imperturbable. The world could have ended, and he would not have turned a hair. But now his mouth opened and his brow furrowed, and he said only,

"What?"

"I've learned a lot in this graveyard," said Bod. "I can Fade and I can Haunt. I can open a ghoul-gate and I know the constellations. But there's a world out there, with the sea in it, and islands, and shipwrecks and pigs. I mean, it's filled with things I don't know. And the teachers here have taught me lots of things, but I need more. If I'm going to survive out there, one day."

Silas seemed unimpressed. "Out of the question. Here we can keep you safe. How could we keep you safe, out there? Outside, anything could happen."

"Yes," agreed Bod. "That's the potential thing you were talking about." He fell silent. Then, "Someone killed my mother and my father and my sister."

"Yes. Someone did."

"A man?"

"A man."

"Which means," said Bod, "you're asking the wrong question."

Silas raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Well," said Bod. "If I go outside in the world, the question isn't 'who will keep me safe from him?'"

"No?"

"No. It's 'who will keep him safe from me?'"

Twigs scratched against the high windows, as if they needed to be let in. Silas flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve with a fingernail as sharp as a blade. He said, "We will need to find you a school."

No one noticed the boy, not at first. No one even noticed that they hadn't noticed him. He sat halfway back in class. He didn't answer much, not unless he was directly asked a question, and even then his answers were short and forgettable, colorless: he faded, in mind and in memory.

"Do you think they're religious, his family?" asked Mr. Kirby, in the teachers' staff room. He was marking essays.

"Whose family?" asked Mrs. McKinnon.

"Owens in Eight B," said Mr. Kirby.

"The tall spotty lad?"

"I don't think so. Sort of medium height."

Mrs. McKinnon shrugged. "What about him?"

"Handwrites everything," said Mr. Kirby. "Lovely handwriting. What they used to call copperplate."

"And that makes him religious because . . . ?"

"He says they don't have a computer."

"And?"

"He doesn't have a phone."

"I don't see why that makes him religious," said Mrs. McKinnon, who had taken up crocheting when they had banned smoking in the staff room, and was sitting and crocheting a baby blanket for no one in particular.

Mr. Kirby shrugged. "He's a smart lad," he said. "There's just stuff he doesn't know. And in History he'll throw in little made-up details, stuff not in the books . . ."

"What kind of stuff?"

Mr. Kirby finished marking Bod's essay and put it down on the pile. Without something immediately in front of him the whole matter seemed vague and unimportant. "Stuff," he said, and forgot about it. Just as he forgot to enter Bod's name on the roll. Just as Bod's name was not to be found on the school databases.

The boy was a model pupil, forgettable and easily forgotten, and he spent much of his spare time in the back of the English class where there were shelves of old paperbacks, and in the school library, a large room filled with books and old armchairs, where he read stories as enthusiastically as some children ate.

Even the other kids forgot about him. Not when he was sitting in front of them: they remembered him then. But when that Owens kid was out of sight he was out of mind. They didn't think about him. They didn't need to. If someone asked all the kids in Eight B to close their eyes and list the twenty-five boys and girls in the class, that Owens kid

wouldn't have been on the list. His presence was almost ghostly.

It was different if he was there, of course.

Nick Farthing was twelve, but he could pass—and did sometimes—for sixteen: a large boy with a crooked smile, and little imagination. He was practical, in a basic sort of way, an efficient shoplifter, and occasional thug who did not care about being liked as long as the other kids, all smaller, did what he said. Anyway, he had a friend. Her name was Maureen Quilling, but everyone called her Mo, and she was thin and had pale skin and pale yellow hair, watery blue eyes, and a sharp, inquisitive nose. Nick liked to shoplift, but Mo told him what to steal. Nick could hit and hurt and intimidate, but Mo pointed him at the people who needed to be intimidated. They were, as she told him sometimes, a perfect team.

They were sitting in the corner of the library splitting their take of the year sevens' pocket money. They had eight or nine of the eleven-year-olds trained to hand over their pocket money every week.

"The Singh kid hasn't coughed up yet," said Mo. "You'll have to find him."

"Yeah," said Nick, "he'll pay."

"What was it he nicked? A CD?"

Nick nodded.

"Just point out the error of his ways," said Mo, who wanted to sound like the hard cases from the television.

"Easy," said Nick. "We're a good team."

"Like Batman and Robin," said Mo.

"More like Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde," said somebody, who had been reading, unnoticed, in a window seat, and he got up and walked out of the room.

Paul Singh was sitting on a windowsill by the changing rooms, his hands deep in his pockets, thinking dark thoughts. He took one hand out of his pocket, opened it, looked at the handful of pound coins, shook his head, closed his hand around the coins once more.

"Is that what Nick and Mo are waiting for?" somebody asked, and Paul jumped, scattering money all over the floor.

The other boy helped him pick the coins up, handed them over. He was an older boy, and Paul thought he had seen him around before, but he could not be certain. Paul said, "Are you with them? Nick and Mo?"

The other boy shook his head. "Nope. I think that they are fairly repulsive." He hesitated. Then he said, "Actually, I came to give you a bit of advice."

"Yeah?"

"Don't pay them."

"Easy for you to say."

"Because they aren't blackmailing me?"

The boy looked at Paul and Paul looked away, ashamed.

"They hit you or threatened you until you shoplifted a CD for them. Then they told you that unless you handed over your pocket money to them, they'd tell on you. What did they do, film you doing it?"

Paul nodded.

"Just say no," said the boy. "Don't do it."

"They'll kill me. And they said . . ."

"Tell them that you think the police and school authorities could be a lot more interested in a couple of kids who are getting younger kids to steal for them and then forcing them to hand over their pocket money than they ever would be in one kid forced to steal a CD against his will. That if they touch you again, you'll make the call to the police. And that you've written it all up, and if anything happens to you, anything at all, if you get a black eye or anything, your friends will automatically send it to the school authorities and the police."

Paul said, "But. I can't."

"Then you'll pay them your pocket money for the rest of your time in this school. And you'll stay scared of them."

Paul thought. "Why don't I just tell the police anyway?" he asked.

"Can if you like."

"I'll try it your way first," Paul said. He smiled. It wasn't a big smile, but it was a smile, right enough, his first in three weeks.

So Paul Singh explained to Nick Farthing just how and why he wouldn't be paying him any longer, and walked away while Nick Farthing just stood and didn't say anything, clenching and unclenching his fists. And the next day another five eleven-year-olds found Nick Farthing in the playground, and told him they wanted their money back,

all the pocket money they'd handed over in the previous month, or *they'd* be going to the police, and now Nick Farthing was an extremely unhappy young man.

Mo said, "It was *him*. He started it. If it wasn't for him . . . they'd never have thought of it on their own. He's the one we have to teach a lesson. Then they'll all behave."

"Who?" said Nick.

"The one who's always reading. The one from the library. Bob Owens. Him."

Nick nodded slowly. Then he said, "Which one is he?"

"I'll point him out to you," said Mo.

Bod was used to being ignored, to existing in the shadows. When glances naturally slip from you, you become very aware of eyes upon you, of glances in your direction, of attention. And if you barely exist in people's minds as another living person then being pointed to, being followed around . . . these things draw attention to themselves.

They followed him out of the school and up the road, past the corner newsagent, and across the railway bridge. He took his time, making certain that the two who were following him, a burly boy and a fair, sharp-faced girl, did not lose him, then he walked into the tiny churchyard at the end of the road, a miniature graveyard behind the local church and he waited beside the tomb of Roderick Persson and his wife Amabella, and also his second wife, Portunia, (*They Sleep to Wake Again*).

"You're that kid," said a girl's voice. "Bob Owens. Well,

you're in really big trouble, Bob Owens."

"It's Bod, actually," said Bod, and he looked at them. "With a D. And you're Jekyll and Hyde."

"It was you," said the girl. "You got to the seventh formers."

"So we're going to teach you a lesson," said Nick Farthing, and he smiled without humor.

"I quite like lessons," said Bod. "If you paid more attention to yours, you wouldn't have to blackmail younger kids for pocket money."

Nick's brow crinkled. Then he said, "You're dead, Owens."

Bod shook his head, and he gestured around him. "I'm not actually," he said. "*They* are."

"Who are?" said Mo.

"The people in this place," said Bod. "Look. I brought you here to give you a choice—"

"You didn't bring us here," said Nick.

"You're here," said Bod. "I wanted you here. I came here. You followed me. Same thing."

Mo looked around nervously. "You've got friends here?" she asked.

Bod said, "You're missing the point, I'm afraid. You two need to stop this. Stop behaving like other people don't matter. Stop hurting people."

Mo grinned a sharp grin. "For heaven's sake," she said to Nick. "Hit him."

"I gave you a chance," said Bod. Nick swung a vicious fist

at Bod, who was no longer there, and Nick's fist slammed into the side of the gravestone.

"Where did he go?" said Mo. Nick was swearing and shaking his hand. She looked around the shadowy cemetery, puzzled. "He was here. You know he was."

Nick had little imagination, and he was not about to start thinking now. "Maybe he ran away," he said.

"He didn't run," said Mo. "He just wasn't there anymore." Mo had an imagination. The ideas were hers. It was twilight in a spooky churchyard, and the hairs on the back of her neck were prickling. "Something is really, really wrong," said Mo. Then she said, in a higher-pitched panicky voice, "We have to get out of here."

"I'm going to find that kid," said Nick Farthing. "I'm going to beat the stuffing out of him." Mo felt something unsettled in the pit of her stomach. The shadows seemed to move around them.

"Nick," said Mo, "I'm scared."

Fear is contagious. You can catch it. Sometimes all it takes is for someone to say that they're scared for the fear to become real. Mo was terrified, and now Nick was too.

Nick didn't say anything. He just ran, and Mo ran close on his heels. The streetlights were coming on as they ran back towards the world, turning the twilight into night, making the shadows into dark places in which anything could be happening.

They ran until they reached Nick's house, and they went inside and turned on all the lights, and Mo called her

mother and demanded, half crying, to be picked up and driven the short distance to her own house, because she wasn't walking home that night.

Bod had watched them run with satisfaction.

"That was good, dear," said someone behind him, a tall woman in white. "A nice Fade, first. Then the Fear."

"Thank you," said Bod. "I hadn't even tried the Fear out on living people. I mean, I knew the theory, but. Well."

"It worked a treat," she said, cheerfully. "I'm Amabella Persson."

"Bod. Nobody Owens."

"The *live* boy? From the big graveyard on the hill? Really?"

"Um." Bod hadn't realized that anyone knew who he was beyond his own graveyard. Amabella was knocking on the side of the tomb. "Roddy? Portunia? Come and see who's here!"

There were three of them there, then, and Amabella was introducing Bod and he was shaking hands and saying, "Charmed, I am sure," because he could greet people politely over nine hundred years of changing manners.

"Master Owens here was frightening some children who doubtless deserved it," Amabella was explaining.

"Good show," said Roderick Persson. "Bounders guilty of reprehensible behavior, eh?"

"They were bullies," said Bod. "Making kids hand over their pocket money. Stuff like that."

"A Frightening is certainly a good beginning," said

Portunia Persson, who was a stout woman, much older than Amabella. "And what have you planned if it does not work?"

"I hadn't really thought—" Bod began, but Amabella interrupted.

"I should suggest that Dreamwalking might be the most efficient remedy. You *can* Dreamwalk, can you not?"

"I'm not sure," said Bod. "Mister Pennyworth showed me how, but I haven't really—well, there's things I only really know in theory, and—"

Portunia Persson said, "Dreamwalking is all very well, but might I suggest a good Visitation? That's the only language that these people understand."

"Oh," said Amabella. "A Visitation? Portunia my dear, I don't really think so—"

"No, you don't. Luckily, *one* of us thinks."

"I have to be getting home," said Bod, hastily. "They'll be worrying about me."

"Of course," said the Persson family, and "Lovely to meet you," and "A very good evening to you, young man." Amabella Persson and Portunia Persson glared at each other. Roderick Persson said, "If you'll forgive me asking, but your guardian. He is well?"

"Silas? Yes, he's fine."

"Give him our regards. I'm afraid a small churchyard like this, well, we're never going to meet an actual member of the Honour Guard. Still. It's good to know that they're there."

"Good night," said Bod, who had no idea what the man was talking about, but filed it away for later. "I'll tell him."

He picked up his bag of schoolbooks, and he walked home, taking comfort in the shadows.

Going to school with the living did not excuse Bod from his lessons with the dead. The nights were long, and sometimes Bod would apologize and crawl to bed exhausted before midnight. Mostly, he just kept going.

Mr. Pennyworth had little to complain of these days. Bod studied hard, and asked questions. Tonight Bod asked about Hauntings, getting more and more specific, which exasperated Mr. Pennyworth, who had never gone in for that sort of thing himself.

"How exactly do I make a cold spot in the air?" he asked, and "I think I've got Fear down, but how do I take it up all the way to Terror?" and Mr. Pennyworth sighed and hurried and did his best to explain, and it was gone four in the morning before they were done.

Bod was tired at school the next day. The first class was History—a subject Bod mostly enjoyed, although he often had to resist the urge to say that it hadn't happened like that, not according to people who had been there anyway—but this morning Bod was fighting to stay awake.

He was doing all he could do to concentrate on the lesson, so he was not paying attention to much else going on around him. He was thinking about King Charles the First, and about his parents, of Mr. and Mrs. Owens and of the

other family, the one he could not remember, when there was a knock on the door. The class and Mr. Kirby all looked to see who was there (it was a year seven, who had been sent to borrow a textbook). And as they turned, Bod felt something stab in the back of his hand. He did not cry out. He just looked up.

Nick Farthing grinned down at him, a sharpened pencil in his fist. "I'm not afraid of you," whispered Nick Farthing. Bod looked at the back of his hand. A small drop of blood welled up where the point of the pencil had punctured it.

Mo Quilling passed Bod in the corridor that afternoon, her eyes so wide he could see the whites all around them.

"You're weird," she said. "You don't have any friends."

"I didn't come here for friends," said Bod truthfully. "I came here to learn."

Mo's nose twitched. "Do you know how weird *that is*?" She asked. "Nobody comes to school to *learn*. I mean, you come because you have to."

Bod shrugged.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said. "Whatever trick you did yesterday. You didn't scare me."

"Okay," said Bod, and he walked on down the corridor.

He wondered if he had made a mistake, getting involved. He had made a mis-step in judgment, that was for certain. Mo and Nick had begun to talk about him, probably the year sevens had as well. Other kids were looking at him, pointing him out to each other. He was

becoming a presence, rather than an absence, and that made him uncomfortable. Silas had warned him to keep a low profile, told him to go through school partly Faded, but everything was changing.

He talked to his guardian that evening, told him the whole story. He was not expecting Silas's reaction.

"I cannot believe," said Silas, "that you could have been so . . . so stupid. Everything I told you about remaining just this side of invisibility. And now you've become the talk of the school?"

"Well, what did you want me to do?"

"Not this," said Silas. "It's not like the olden times. They can keep track of you, Bod. They can find you." Silas's unmoving exterior was like the hard crust of rock over molten lava. Bod knew how angry Silas was only because he knew Silas. He seemed to be fighting his anger, controlling it.

Bod swallowed.

"What should I do?" he said, simply.

"Don't go back," said Silas. "This school business was an experiment. Let us simply acknowledge that it was not a successful one."

Bod said nothing. Then he said, "It's not just the learning stuff. It's the other stuff. Do you know how nice it is to be in a room filled with people and for all of them to be breathing?"

"It's not something in which I've ever taken pleasure,"

said Silas. "So. You don't go back to school tomorrow."

"I'm *not* running away. Not from Mo or Nick or school. I'd leave here first."

"You will do as you are told, boy," said Silas, a knot of velvet anger in the darkness.

"Or what?" said Bod, his cheeks burning. "What would you do to keep me here? *Kill me?*" And he turned on his heel and began to walk down the path that led to the gates and out of the graveyard.

Silas began to call the boy back, then he stopped, and stood there in the night alone.

At the best of times his face was unreadable. Now his face was a book written in a language long forgotten, in an alphabet unimagined. Silas wrapped the shadows around him like a blanket, and stared after the way the boy had gone, and did not move to follow.

Nick Farthing was in his bed, asleep and dreaming of pirates on the sunny blue sea, when it all went wrong. One moment he was the captain of his own pirate ship—a happy place, crewed by obedient eleven-year-olds, except for the girls, who were all a year or two older than Nick and who looked especially pretty in their pirate costumes—and the next he was alone on the deck, and a huge, dark ship the size of an oil tanker, with ragged black sails and a skull for a figurehead, was crashing through the storm towards him.

And then, in the way of dreams, he was standing on

the black deck of the new ship, and someone was looking down at him.

"You're not afraid of me," said the man standing over him.

Nick looked up. He *was* scared, in his dream, scared of this dead-faced man in pirate costume, his hand on the hilt of a cutlass.

"Do you think you're a pirate, Nick?" asked his captor, and suddenly something about him seemed familiar to Nick.

"You're that kid," he said. "Bob Owens."

"I," said his captor, "am Nobody. And you need to change. Turn over a new leaf. Reform. All that. Or things will get very bad for you."

"Bad how?"

"Bad in your head," said the Pirate King, who was now only the boy from his class and they were in the school hall, not the deck of the pirate ship, although the storm had not abated and the floor of the hall pitched and rolled like a ship at sea.

"This is a dream," Nick said.

"Of course it's a dream," said the other boy. "I would have to be some kind of monster to do this in real life."

"What can you do to me in a dream?" asked Nick. He smiled. "I'm not afraid of you. You've still got my pencil in the back of your hand." He pointed to the back of Bod's hand, at the black mark the graphite point had made.

"I was hoping it wouldn't have to be like this," said the

other boy. He tipped his head on one side as if he was listening to something. "They're hungry," he said.

"What are?" asked Nick.

"The things in the cellar. Or belowdecks. Depends whether this is a school or a ship, doesn't it?"

Nick felt himself beginning to panic. "It isn't . . . spiders . . . is it?" he said.

"It might be," said the other boy. "You'll find out, won't you?"

Nick shook his head.

"No," he said. "*Please* no."

"Well," said the other boy. "It's all up to you, isn't it? Change your ways or visit the cellar."

The noise got louder—a scuttling sort of a scuffling noise, and while Nick Farthing had no idea what it was, he was utterly, completely certain that whatever it would turn out to be would be the most scary terrible thing he had ever—would ever—encounter . . .

He woke up screaming.

Bod heard the scream, a shout of terror, and felt the satisfaction of a job well done.

He was standing on the pavement outside Nick Farthing's house, his face damp from the thick night mist. He was exhilarated and exhausted: he had felt barely in control of the Dreamwalk, had been all too aware that there was nothing else in the dream but Nick and himself, and that all Nick had been scared of was a noise.

But Bod was satisfied. The other boy would hesitate before tormenting smaller kids.

And now?

Bod put his hands in his pockets and began to walk, not certain where he was going. He would leave the school, he thought, just as he had left the graveyard. He would go somewhere no one knew him, and he would sit in a library all day and read books and listen to people breathing. He wondered if there were still deserted islands in the world, like the one on which Robinson Crusoe had been shipwrecked. He could go and live on one of those.

Bod did not look up. If he had, he would have seen a pair of watery blue eyes watching him intently from a bedroom window.

He stepped into an alley, feeling more comfortable out of the light.

"Are you running away, then?" said a girl's voice.

Bod said nothing.

"That's the difference between the living and the dead, ennit?" said the voice. It was Liza Hempstock talking, Bod knew, although the witch-girl was nowhere to be seen. "The dead dun't disappoint you. They've had their life, done what they've done. We dun't change. The living, they always disappoint you, dun't they? You meet a boy who's all brave and noble, and he grows up to run away."

"That's not fair!" said Bod.

"The Nobody Owens I knew wouldn't've run off from the graveyard without saying so much as a fare-thee-well

to those who cared for him. You'll break Mistress Owens's heart."

Bod had not thought of that. He said, "I had a fight with Silas."

"So?"

"He wants me to come back to the graveyard. To stop school. He thinks it's too dangerous."

"Why? Between your talents and my bespellment, they'll barely notice you."

"I was getting involved. There were these kids bullying other kids. I wanted them to stop. I drew attention to myself . . ."

Liza could be seen now, a misty shape in the alleyway keeping pace with Bod.

"He's out here, somewhere, and he wants you dead," she said. "Him as killed your family. Us in the graveyard, we wants you to stay alive. We wants you to surprise us and disappoint us and impress us and amaze us. Come home, Bod."

"I think . . . I said things to Silas. He'll be angry."

"If he didn't care about you, you couldn't upset him," was all she said.

The fallen autumn leaves were slick beneath Bod's feet, and the mists blurred the edges of the world. Nothing was as clean-cut as he had thought it, a few minutes before.

"I did a Dreamwalk," he said.

"How did it go?"

"Good," he said. "Well, all right."

"You should tell Mr. Pennyworth. He'll be pleased."

"You're right," he said. "I should."

He reached the end of the alley, and instead of turning right, as he had planned, and off into the world, he turned left, onto the High Street, the road that would take him back to Dunstan Road and the graveyard on the hill.

"What?" said Liza Hempstock. "What you doin'?"

"Going home," said Bod. "Like you said."

There were shop-lights now. Bod could smell the hot grease from the chip shop on the corner. The paving stones glistened.

"That's good," said Liza Hempstock, now only a voice once more. Then the voice said, "Run! Or Fade! Something's wrong!"

Bod was about to tell her that there was nothing wrong, that she was being foolish, when a large car with a light flashing on the top came veering across the road and pulled up in front of him.

Two men got out from it. "Excuse me, young man," said one of the men. "Police. Might I ask what you're doing out so late?"

"I didn't know there was a law against it," said Bod.

The largest of the policemen opened the rear door of the car. "Is this the young man you saw, Miss?" he said.

Mo Quilling got out of the car, and looked at Bod, and smiled. "That's him," she said. "He was in our back garden breaking things. And then he ran away." She looked Bod in the eye. "I saw you from my bedroom," she said. "I think

he's the one who's been breaking windows."

"What's your name?" asked the smaller policeman. He had a ginger mustache.

"Nobody," said Bod. Then, "Ow," because the ginger policeman had taken Bod's ear between finger and thumb, and had given it a hard squeeze. "Don't give me that," said the policeman. "Just answer the questions politely. Right?"

Bod said nothing.

"Where exactly do you live?" asked the policeman.

Bod said nothing. He tried to Fade, but Fading—even when boosted by a witch—relies on people's attention sliding away from you, and everybody's attention—not to mention a large pair of official hands—was on him then.

Bod said, "You can't arrest me for not telling you my name or address."

"No," said the policeman. "I can't. But I can take you down to the station until you give us the name of a parent, guardian, responsible adult, into whose care we can release you."

He put Bod into the back of the car, where Mo Quilling sat, with the smile on her face of a cat who has eaten all the canaries. "I saw you from my front window," she said, quietly. "So I called the police."

"I wasn't doing anything," said Bod. "I wasn't even in your garden. And why are they bringing you out to find me?"

"Quiet back there!" said the large policeman. Everyone was quiet until the car pulled up in front of a house that had to be Mo's. The large policeman opened the

door for her, and she got out.

"We'll call you tomorrow, let your mom and dad know what we found," said the large policeman.

"Thanks, Uncle Tam," said Mo, and she smiled. "Just doing my duty."

They drove back through the town in silence, Bod trying to Fade as best he could, with no success. He felt sick and miserable. In one evening, he had had his first real argument with Silas, had attempted to run away from home, had failed to run away, and now failed to return home. He could not tell the police where he lived, or his name. He would spend the rest of his life in a police cell, or in a prison for kids. *Did they have prison for kids?* he didn't know.

"Excuse me? Do they have prisons for kids?" he asked the men in the front seat.

"Getting worried, now, are you?" said Mo's uncle Tam. "I don't blame you. You kids. Running wild. Some of you need locking up, I'll tell you."

Bod wasn't sure if that was a yes or a no. He glanced out of the car window. Something huge was flying through the air, above the car and to one side, something darker and bigger than the biggest bird. Something man-size that flickered and fluttered as it moved, like the strobing flight of a bat.

The ginger policeman said, "When we get to the station, best if you just give us your name, tell us who to call to come and get you, we can tell them we gave you a bollocking, they

can take you home. See? You cooperate, we have an easy night, less paperwork for everyone. We're your friends."

"You're too easy on him. A night in the cells isn't that hard," said the large policeman to his friend. Then he looked back at Bod, and said, "Unless it's a busy night, and we have to put you in with some of the drunks. *They* can be nasty."

Bod thought, *He's lying!* and *They're doing this on purpose, the friendly one and the tough one . . .*

Then the police car turned a corner, and there was a *thump!* Something big rode up onto the hood of the car and was knocked off into the dark. A screech of brakes as the car stopped, and the ginger policeman began to swear under his breath.

"He just ran out into the road!" he said. "You saw it!"

"I'm not sure what I saw," said the larger policeman. "You hit something, though."

They got out of the car, shone lights around. The ginger policeman said, "He was wearing black! You can't see it."

"He's over here," shouted the large policeman. The two men hurried over to the body on the ground, holding flashlights.

Bod tried the door handles on the backseat. They did not work. And there was a metal grille between the back and the front. Even if he faded, he was still stuck in the backseat of a police car.

He leaned over as far as he could, craning to try and see what had happened, what was on the road.

The ginger policeman was crouched beside a body, looking at it. The other, the large one, was standing above it, shining a light down into its face.

Bod looked at the face of the fallen body—then he began to bang on the window, frantically, desperately.

The large policeman came over to the car.

"What?" he said, irritably.

"You hit my—my dad," said Bod.

"You're kidding."

"It looks like him," said Bod. "Can I look properly?"

The large policeman's shoulders slumped. "Oy! Simon, the kid says it's his dad."

"You've got to be bloody kidding me."

"I think he's serious." The large policeman opened the door, and Bod got out.

Silas was sprawled on his back, on the ground, where the car had knocked him. He was deathly still.

Bod's eyes prickled.

He said, "Dad?" Then he said, "You killed him." He wasn't lying, he told himself—not really.

"I've called an ambulance," said Simon, the ginger-mustached policeman.

"It was an accident," said the other.

Bod crouched by Silas, and he squeezed Silas's cold hand in his. If they had already called an ambulance there was not much time. He said, "So that's your careers over, then."

"It was an accident—you saw!"

"He just stepped out—"

"What I saw," said Bod, "is that you agreed to do a favor for your niece, and frighten a kid she's been fighting with at school. So you arrested me without a warrant for being out late, and then when my dad runs out into the road to try and stop you or to find out what was going on, you intentionally ran him over."

"It was an accident!" repeated Simon.

"You've been fighting with Mo at school?" said Mo's uncle Tam, but he didn't sound convincing.

"We're both in Eight B at the Old Town School," said Bod. "And you killed my dad."

Far off, he could hear the sound of sirens.

"Simon," said the large man, "we have to talk about this."

They walked over to the other side of the car, leaving Bod alone in the shadows with the fallen Silas. Bod could hear the two policemen talking heatedly—"Your bloody niece!" was used, and so was "If *you'd* kept your eyes on the road!" Simon jabbed his finger into Tam's chest . . .

Bod whispered, "They aren't looking. Now." And he faded.

There was a swirl of deeper darkness, and the body on the ground was now standing beside him.

Silas said, "I'll take you home. Put your arms around my neck."

Bod did, holding tightly to his guardian, and they plunged through the night, heading for the graveyard.

"I'm sorry," said Bod.

"I'm sorry too," said Silas.

"Did it hurt?" asked Bod. "Letting the car hit you like that?"

"Yes," said Silas. "You should thank your little witch-friend. She came and found me, told me you were in trouble, and what kind of trouble you were in."

They landed in the graveyard. Bod looked at his home as if it was the first time he had ever seen it. He said, "What happened tonight was stupid, wasn't it? I mean, I put things at risk."

"More things than you know, young Nobody Owens. Yes."

"You were right," said Bod. "I won't go back. Not to that school, and not like that."

Maureen Quilling had had the worst week of her life: Nick Farthing was no longer speaking to her; her uncle Tam had shouted at her about the Owens kid thing, then told her not to mention anything about that evening ever to anyone, as he could lose his job, and he wouldn't want to be in her shoes if that happened; her parents were furious with her; she felt betrayed by the world; even the year sevens weren't scared of her any longer. It was rotten. She wanted to see that Owens kid, who she blamed for everything that had happened to her so far, writhing in miserable agony. If he thought being *arrested* was bad . . . and then she would concoct elaborate revenge schemes in her head, complex and vicious. They were the only thing that made her feel better, and even they didn't really help.

If there was one job that gave Mo the creeps, it was cleaning up the science labs—putting away the Bunsen burners, making sure that all test tubes, petri dishes, unused filter papers and the like were returned to their places. She only had to do it, on a strict rotation system, once every two months, but it stood to reason that here, in the worst week of her life, she would be in the science lab.

At least Mrs. Hawkins, who taught general sciences, was there, collecting papers, gathering things up at the end of the day. Having her there, having anybody there, was comforting.

"You're doing a good job, Maureen," said Mrs. Hawkins.

A white snake in a jar of preservative stared blindly down at them. Mo said, "Thanks."

"Aren't there meant to be two of you?" asked Mrs. Hawkins.

"I was supposed to be doing it with the Owens kid," said Mo. "But he hasn't been to school in days now."

The teacher frowned. "Which one was he?" she asked, absently. "I don't have him down on my list."

"Bob Owens. Brownish hair, a bit too long. Didn't talk much. He was the one who named all the bones of the skeleton in the quiz. Remember?"

"Not really," admitted Mrs. Hawkins.

"You must remember! Nobody remembers him! Not even Mr. Kirby!"

Mrs. Hawkins pushed the rest of the sheets of paper into her bag and said, "Well, I appreciate you doing it on your

own, dear. Don't forget to wipe down the working surfaces, before you go." And she went, closing the door behind her.

The science labs were old. There were long, dark wooden tables, with gas jets and taps and sinks built in to them, and there were dark wooden shelves upon which were displayed a selection of things in large bottles. The things that floated in the bottles were dead, had been dead for a long time. There was even a yellowed human skeleton in one corner of the room: Mo did not know if it was real or not, but right now it was creeping her out.

Every noise she made echoed, in that long room. She turned all of the overhead lights on, even the light on the whiteboard, just to make the place less scary. The room began to feel cold. She wished she could turn up the heat. She walked over to one of the large metal radiators and touched it. It was burning hot. But still, she was shivering.

The room was empty and unsettling in its emptiness, and Mo felt as if she were not alone, as if she was being watched.

Well, of course I'm being watched, she thought. *A hundred dead things in jars are all looking at me, not to mention the skeleton.* She glanced up at the shelves.

That was when the dead things in the jars began to move. A snake with unseeing milky eyes uncoiled in its alcohol-filled jar. A faceless, spiny sea creature twisted and revolved in its liquid home. A kitten, dead for decades, showed its teeth and clawed the glass.

Mo closed her eyes. *This isn't happening,* she told herself.

I'm imagining it. "I'm not frightened," she said, aloud.

"That's good," said someone, standing in the shadows, by the rear door. "It seriously sucks to be frightened."

She said, "None of the teachers even remember you."

"But you remember me," said the boy, the architect of all her misfortunes.

She picked up a glass beaker and threw it at him, but her aim went wide and it smashed against a wall.

"How's Nick?" asked Bod, as if nothing had happened.

"You know how he is," she said. "He won't even talk to me. Just shuts up in class, goes home and does his homework. Probably building model railways."

"Good," he said.

"And you," she said. "You haven't been at school for a week. You're in such trouble, Bob Owens. The police came in the other day. They were looking for you."

"That reminds me . . . How's your uncle Tam?" said Bod. Mo said nothing.

"In some ways," said Bod, "you've won. I'm leaving school. And in other ways, you haven't. Have you ever been haunted, Maureen Quilling? Ever looked in the mirror wondering if the eyes looking back at you were yours? Ever sat in an empty room, and realized you were not alone? It's not pleasant."

"You're going to haunt me?" Her voice trembled.

Bod said nothing at all. He just stared at her. In the far corner of the room, something crashed: her bag had slipped

off the chair onto the floor and when she looked back, she was alone in the room. Or, at least, there was nobody that she could see in there with her.

Her way home was going to be very long and very dark.

The boy and his guardian stood at the top of the hill, looking out at the lights of the town.

"Does it still hurt?" asked the boy.

"A little," said his guardian. "But I heal fast. I'll soon be as good as ever."

"Could it have killed you? Stepping out in front of that car?"

His guardian shook his head. "There are ways to kill people like me," he said. "But they don't involve cars. I am very old and very tough."

Bod said, "I *was* wrong, wasn't I? The whole idea was to do it without anybody noticing. And then I had to get involved with the kids in the school, and the next thing you know, there's police and all sorts of stuff. Because I was selfish."

Silas raised an eyebrow. "You weren't selfish. You need to be among your own kind. Quite understandable. It's just harder out there in the world of the living, and we cannot protect you out there as easily. I wanted to keep you perfectly safe," said Silas. "But there is only one perfectly safe place for your kind and you will not reach it until all your adventures are over and none of them matter any longer."

Bod rubbed his hand over the stone of Thomas R. Stout (1817–1851. *Deeply regretted by all who knew him*), feeling the moss crumble beneath his fingers.

"He's still out there," said Bod. "The man who killed my first family. I still need to learn about people. Are you going to stop me leaving the graveyard?"

"No. That was a mistake and one that we have both learned from."

"Then what?"

"We should do our best to satisfy your interest in stories and books and the world. There are libraries. There are other ways. And there are many situations in which there might be other, living people around you, like the theater or the cinema."

"What's that? Is it like football? I enjoyed watching them play football at school."

"Football. Hmm. That's usually a little early in the day for me," said Silas. "But Miss Lupescu could take you to see a football match the next time she's here."

"I'd like that," said Bod.

They began to walk down the hill. Silas said, "We have both left too many tracks and traces in the last few weeks. They are still looking for you, you know."

"You said that before," said Bod. "How do you know? And who *are* they? And what do they want?"

But Silas only shook his head, and would be drawn no further, and with that, for the time being, Bod had to be satisfied.