CHAPTER ONE

It was the middle of the afternoon, January 1969, and a half-hearted rain dampened San Francisco and cast a gloomy pall over the hallways of the Social Welfare building.

Len stood waiting for his life to change. He was a skinny man with a long face that showed its creases despite the stubble on his chin and cheeks, and he kept moving his hands from the brim of his cap to the pockets of his jeans as though he couldn't be held responsible for what they might do if left unsupervised. Finally a door creaked open and a young woman edged into the hall.

"Sir?"

Len lurched forward. He stopped abruptly when he saw the boy. This one? He was barely a child. They'd said he was three, but Len hadn't . . . were three-year-olds that tiny? Len had expected something along the lines of a good-sized calf, seventy pounds or so, take a little muscle to roll—but this kid would have a tough time toe-to-toe with the goose that patrolled the ragged edges of Len's yard. Did geese hurt children?

Len said, "Hey." He meant to sound friendly, but his voice caught in his throat and sputtered like a gas engine with a lazy spark.

The boy turned his face to him, and Len peered closely. He hadn't seen Lisa Fay since he'd married her sister fifteen years back, but there was something of the family resemblance in the snub

nose, in the delicate oval curve of the chin. There was little else that seemed delicate on this boy. In spite of his small size he was robust and muscled. His pale hair was cropped short and badly, and his corduroy pants were bunched by a belt at his waist, the elastic gone slack. Kid had the right to look bedraggled, Len thought, yanked from his mother that young. He had the right to look forlorn. This boy didn't look forlorn, he looked ferocious. Len cleared his throat and glanced away.

The plain truth? He hadn't wanted a kid. Had no idea, with Meg the way she was, what to do with one. This boy was too small to bring to work with him and too young to leave on his own and would probably not take kindly to being penned up all day. Len looked sideways at the young woman who had maneuvered the boy into the hall. There was no other kin to take him, she'd said. Of course, if Len preferred he be raised by strangers—

"Do I sign something?"

Miss Hanson flashed him a weary smile. "Why don't you and Wrecker take some time to get acquainted?" She gestured toward the boy. "I'll meet you in ten minutes in the office and we can take care of the paperwork."

It was settled, then. Len took a hesitant step forward. His body was a compact knot from thirty years of working the woods, cramped worse from six hours in the truck on the drive south. "Okay." He grimaced upon squatting down. "All right." Should he call him sport? Son? Fifteen years to go, and already ten minutes seemed like an eternity. He reached out his hand. It looked giant and threatening, even to him, and he slid it back into his pocket. The kid stood his ground. Battle-worn, renegade—Len wasn't a praying man, but a few minutes alone in the company of this boy and it was starting to feel like something a good bit bigger than he'd bargained for. "I'm your uncle Len."

The boy made a low sound, mixed outrage and dismay.

That about summed it up, Len thought.

Len drove north out of San Francisco and watched the city fall away behind them. He followed the line of traffic across the Presidio and over the water, gray and choppy, that flowed beneath the Golden Gate. On the far side the truck rumbled past the entrance to San Quentin Prison. Len snuck a glance sideways. The boy's absent mother was shelved someplace like that. Lisa Fay had been sentenced for so long to the state slammer that they might as well have thrown away the key. Len frowned, and his fingers itched for a cigarette. He hadn't smoked in years, but it had been a very long day.

A muffled snore escaped from the boy, and Len risked a look in his direction. Wrecker. What kind of a name was that? Slumped against the door with his neck bent at an unnatural angle and his short legs jammed straight out on the seat. Len shifted his grip on the wheel and blinked his gaze forward. The highway buckled into green hills between each sleepy little town. Two hours down, now, and they still had four to go, a hundred miles north on narrow roads before they turned and threaded night-blind through the giant trees, up and down the winding mountain nearly to the sea. When the few buildings of Cloverdale loomed ahead, Len pulled in and parked in the lot of a diner. He was too weary to make a straight shot of it. "Boy?" Len said, and reached a big hand to jiggle the kid's shoulder. Wrecker. It would take some getting used to. "You want something to eat?"

Wrecker blinked a few times and reached a hand to wipe away the spit that dampened his cheek. Len hadn't noticed the boy's blue eyes before. Stormy. The color of sea-squall, not clear sky. "I have to pee."

"Pee? Oh." Len wrinkled his forehead. "That." He got out of

the truck and crossed to the other door and unbuckled Wrecker and lifted him down, and they stood there awkwardly for a moment, while Len wondered if he should carry the boy, or take his hand, or simply walk ahead and hope he would follow. He had settled on the last when the door to the diner flapped open and two men and a woman walked out.

Len sagged. Four hours from home, and his Mattole neighbors were marching straight at him. Charlie Burrell bleated a greeting, and his wife moved in to lay a sympathetic hand on Len's elbow. "Hullo, dear," she said. Greta was a decent woman with a face as broad and bland as a saucer. "How's Meg?"

Len's gaze swerved aground. Six months had passed since his wife had gone in for a root canal and come home with an infection that spread into her brain and rampaged like a wild beast. Penicillin saved her life, but it couldn't save her mind. "Meg?" Len answered gruffly, glancing back up. "Meg's fine." The same, he clarified. The doctors didn't think she'd change much from how she was now.

Charlie shuffled and grunted. "Hell of a thing," he mumbled. He glanced at his wife, and his voice veered toward belligerence. They'd had some news. "Junior got his draft notice," he announced. The son, thick and sullen, stood behind and pretended deafness. "I believe he'll go, but Greta here . . ."

Len watched the woman's lips tighten and her body inch away from her husband's. She kept her gaze trained on a spot just past Len's shoulder, and answered in clipped tones. Their neighbor had troubles of his own without them burdening him with theirs, Greta said. She flashed Len a quick glance, and her voice softened slightly. He should take care of himself, now. She would stop over to see Meg soon. Len nodded. He breathed out as they left. He settled his cap back on his head, paused a moment to reset his balance, and remembered the boy.

"Wrecker?"

Len circled the truck and scanned the parking lot.

"Kid?" He called twice, his voice tight and low. He swung his head toward the road to make sure the boy wasn't trapped in traffic, and then he hurried across the lot at awkward angles, checking between the cars. Len rushed inside and anxiously searched the faces. A boy, he stammered, taking hold of the waitress. Had she seen him? A little one. His eyes lit on a stool at the counter. "Maybe this tall."

"Whoa, there," she said, steadying him. "You lost your kid?" She studied Len's panicked face and then turned to the diners. "Any y'all seen this man's boy? 'Bout yay high." She gestured to her hip and then turned back to Len. "How old?" Her eyes widened. "Good God. Get looking," she shouted. "Three years old and on the loose. Spread out," and the people left their napkins by their plates and did as she ordered. "Norton," she yelled to the cook. He came out wiping his hands on the dingy apron that girdled his body. "Check down by the river. And fast."

Len felt his heart seize. If anything had happened to the boy—

"You set there," the waitress said. She placed a hand on his shoulder and forced him into the cracked padding of a booth. "You look like death. Can't have him see you like that," and Len felt himself collapse under her soft push.

The room emptied. Len counted slowly to five, forcing each breath into his lungs. And then he stood and followed the cook's broad back down a path to the river. He paused when Norton did, watched the cook straighten from his bearlike slump, tap a cigarette loose from a crumpled pack, hold it to his mouth. Norton leisurely cupped his hands to light the cigarette and drew a noisy, satisfied lungful of smoke.

Len strained to see past the brush that blocked his view. Wrecker stood on a boulder not ten paces away, throwing smaller

rocks into the swiftly flowing stream. He had a powerful overhand and imperfect aim.

Norton ignored the kid and smoked with gusto. Then he snubbed out the cigarette on the sole of his shoe, tossed the butt into the bushes, and roared, "All right, Champ. Come on with me."

Len watched Wrecker lift his chin and glance at the fat man in the apron. His gaze swept around to gather Len as well. He kept throwing his rocks into the water.

Norton tapped his foot. "You want a cheeseburger?" he bribed. "I can make you a cheeseburger." The boy didn't stir, and Norton yawned, his mouth opening wide as a walrus's. "Fine," he said, unperturbed. "Hide out down here and eat these weeds. It's all the same to me." He started back up the trail. "Hold your nose when you chew on them," Norton shouted helpfully. "Helps cover the fish shit."

Wrecker held on to the rest of his pebbles. "Fish don't shit."

Len lifted an eyebrow. He hadn't been raised to use language like that. Hadn't been raised to wander off, either.

Norton snorted. "Don't kid yourself." He spit out of the corner of his mouth. "Everybody shits. You get hungry, come on up," and lumbered past Len back up the trail to the diner.

Wrecker threw the rest of his rocks, one by one, into the flow. Then he turned and followed the heavyset cook back to the diner.

Len couldn't eat. He watched the boy tuck into his burger, kneeling on the booth seat to be tall enough to reach the table, and thought, Oh. What in the world have I done.

It was half past ten when Len made his careful way at last down to the Mattole. He felt happiness swell a lump into his throat. Every part of him ached and his mind was frozen with fatigue, but he'd made it home.

The Mattole Valley lay nestled in the rain-soaked western reaches of Humboldt County. It was a bump high on the California coast that jutted into the Pacific and sheltered bear and mountain lion in a kind of sleepy, soggy paradise of the ages. Sure, Len thought. Until the nineteenth century roared in. He'd read his history. That was a new age, a freight train fueled with the promise of fortune, and lumber barons and oil drillers and commercial fishermen and cattle ranchers caught wind of a fine opportunity and came to gather what they could of the rewards. By the time Len and Meg arrived in '55, the biggest trees had been felled and the oil played out and what was left was just enough range to run a few hundred head of cows. The river rose in '56, wiped whole towns off the map. Nobody was getting rich anymore.

That suited Len fine. He came looking for remote and he found it, a sweet little forty-acre spread at the end of a dirt road the county quit fixing after the first ranch and behind four gates he had to get out and open, move the truck through, then climb back out and shut to keep the cattle from wandering off their range. He didn't keep cows, himself. Couldn't abide them. He had a hunting rifle his father gave him when he left Tennessee twenty-odd years before, and he rarely had to go farther than his own wood lot to bring down a deer. One animal would keep them through the winter, and one more let him trade with the fishermen up in Eureka. Every summer Meg kept a garden, and Len had his cordwood business and the little lumber mill to bring in some cash. Of course, that was when Meg had been well. Len felt the worry squeeze the box of his ribs. This was the first time he'd been out past dark since her accident.

The third gate was Bow Farm, and Len eased down to push the rickety thing aside. He peered down the rutted track that led to the farmhouse. There'd been stories of trespassers chased off the land by women bearing shotguns. In the stories they were

always big women. Big shotguns. Len had lived next door long enough to have figured out that the girls weren't all that big, or half as threatening. They weren't nuns, or Amish, or cult members, or all sisters with widely ranging fathers, as the rumors had variously claimed—and since the tree hugger had joined them, one of them was a man. Len had to hand it to them. Nobody thought they'd stick, coming up here from the city, paying too much for that run-down spread. It was too hard a life. Too wet in the winter and hot in the summer, too many earthquakes and landslides and wild animals who shrieked and snarled in the night. But they were into their third wet season, Willow and the others, and they had saved him, in a way. He didn't know if he could have borne the heartbreak of Meg's decline without their help.

The fourth gate, left open when he pulled out that morning, was his own. A single light on in the house poured its yellow into the yard. Len opened the truck door and smelled the wet dripping off the trees. Everything was damped-down and quiet. The road quit here in his driveway. Past that were dark trees and steep hillsides and a five-mile hike to the sea.

Len hadn't told anyone quite where he'd gone, or why. He'd asked Willow to stay with Meg until he got back, and he could see her sitting at the kitchen table, her back to the door. He glanced sideways to make sure the kid was asleep but caught sight of the boy's round face, his open eyes. Len swore slightly under his breath. He couldn't count on this one to stay put. He crossed around the front of the truck to the passenger side, scooped the boy against his chest, and carried him like a loose sack of grain into the house.

Willow lifted her head to greet him. She cut an elegant figure, with her honey hair swept up like a movie star's, her pearl earrings, those flat shoes that made her feet look dainty—not the clodhopper boots Ruth and that Melody girl favored. She was the only one of

the bunch to put on lipstick, and anyone could tell she wore a bra. Not that Len was looking. Not exactly. He met her gaze and brushed past Willow to lay the sleeping boy onto the couch by the wood stove. Then he crossed the floor, boards squeaking underfoot, to find his wife asleep in the single bedroom.

Meg's face in the muted light was peacefully asleep. Len felt a wave of love and revulsion. It was easy to confuse Meg's new blankness with peace, but blank was blank. Blank was blank was blank. If the old Meg was trapped in there, Len had no way to get her out. The old Meg was peaceful. She had never talked much but there had been a calm, an ease to her that Len felt comfortable to be around. She was competent and even-tempered and had a way of running a hand under his shirt and up his spine that tingled the base of his brain and made him yearn, without reason, for the chill and tart flavor of raspberry sherbet. She had always been a modest woman, and now, quite simply, she was not. Len did his best to satisfy her but for him the pleasure had gone out of that part of his life. He felt for the wedding band on his left hand. Fifteen years grown into the flesh of his finger, they would have to cut his hand to get it off. Though why would they. There was no need. Len and Meg. Meg and Len. Even their names were similar, brief and to the point, the consonants crowding the short *e*. Len. Bed. Meg. Fed. Pen. Leg. Red.

Dead, he thought, and turned back to the other room.

Willow had her coat on, black wool with the high collar. She had draped the couch throw over the boy and tucked in its edges and was watching him intently, her slender hand stroking the soft blond of his hair. She looked up when Len entered, and he winced at the look on her face. That delicate, quizzical smile.

Len was helpless to answer. The letter had come from the state some weeks ago, and it sat on the kitchen table for days, yielding less and less to each reading until he couldn't even tell what they

wanted, much less what he should do about it. But Len had gassed up the truck and drove the six hours to find out. He held Willow's gaze and then broke from it to turn a bewildered eye toward the boy. That was what he'd brought back. That one, there, inert and lying quiet on the couch. It was all the answer he could give. "It's late, Willow. I could drive you home."

She smiled and shook her head. Her yurt behind Bow Farm was an easy walk away. "I'll see you, Len."

"All right, then."

The open door let in a gust of night air. Len went to the closet and drew out an extra blanket and opened it over the boy, and then he went in to the bedroom and lay down beside his wife and fought for sleep.

A man alone can operate a sawmill if he's smart. Len lay on the narrow strip of bed Meg didn't take up the next morning, and let his mind wander slowly toward waking. Len had done it himself; but he'd had to be smart, Len thought, and he'd had to be careful. With winches and pulleys and roller tables a man could maneuver the logs into place, he could lift the chainsaw carriage and position it onto the timber, adjust the settings to skim the bark slabs first, then quartersaw the log so the wood smell—sharp, sweet, intoxicating—leapt into the air and gave him strength. There was Engelmann spruce in these woods, here and there cedar, lodgepole pine, the strong and stringy Douglas fir. There was redwood, too, but Len left that alone. It took more than one man to handle a redwood, and something about the tree spooked him, the big crowns casting the forest floor in a kind of twilight gloom and the wind in the dead branches above sounding like a dry hinge on a barn door.

A good part of the year it was too wet to get in to the forest. Len worked on the vehicles, then. Patched the roof of his house.

Sharpened the sawteeth. The forest here was wet and deep, and ferns grew tall as a man in places. In winter the creek jumped its banks and flooded the road and only the tallest vehicles could downshift and get across. Then everybody dreamed of the desert. Dreamed of being someplace they could dry out. They plodded along and listened for the suck and rumble of mudslides. They stoked their fires with Len's cordwood and watched the flames for prophetic gestures. Mud caked on their boots six inches thick. They met at the Grange Hall for pancake breakfasts and played top this. These past years, though, too many families had a son in that other wet place, the one they watched on the evening news. Or a son had gone to Canada to sidestep the war. Len had signed up himself in '44; they sent him to basic training and then called the war off and he was dispatched with his buddies to MP in the Philippines. He didn't know what he would tell a son of his to do. A son of his? Len remembered the kid on the couch and swung his legs over the side of the bed, dressed, and went in to restart the fire.

The scatter of blankets had shifted. They were bundled up now in a tangle on the armchair, and through their soft bulk Len could pick out an elbow, the dome of the boy's head, and sticking out of the bottom a bare foot. He stared at that. It was as long as the palm of Len's hand. It would need socks. It would need shoes. It would need flippers for swimming lessons at the Y and basketball sneakers and lace-up oxfords for catechism and how on earth did you size a thing like that, anyway? The kid came with a trash bag half full of who knows what. Len would have to go through that. But not now. He stepped out of the door and the sun poured magnificently over the stoop and he heard a warbler singing hard enough to burst and he was happy.

By ten o'clock Len was gasping for air. Pistol-whipped by noon. Knocked-down defeated by three in the afternoon.

Not that the kid was bad. Not exactly. But there was no way a person over three feet tall could keep up with a thing like that. He had speed on his side and a complete unconcern for his own safety and a kind of smoldering disrespect for the command of his elder—Len—which erupted into outright disobedience and ensued in a ridiculous chase that left Len winded and feeling foolish. The boy looked down at the ground and spoke with such a low voice when he did speak that Len was forced to crank the dial on his hearing aid (the gift of too many years around loud machinery) to top volume and even then found it hard to gather the meaning of the boy's garbled utterances. Len could not understand why he did the things he did. Who in his right mind would climb to the top of a stack of logs three times his own height—the logs themselves well stacked but always subject to tipping under pressure, a log that size a steamroller once it gets started—and let loose with a holler and jump? And then, earnestly *chastised* for his action, the danger *explained* in no uncertain terms, and with the elder in command *watching*—climb to the top and jump again? He was taken with the log truck, with the winch, with the machines. And every time Len turned his back the boy disappeared. Into the woods, into the lumber shed, drawing with a stick in the dirt between the vehicles. And once, it seemed, into thin air.

Len was searching the bushes by the outhouse for the second time, calling for the boy, when he heard a sound from the direction of the house. He stood up to listen. Yes, from the house, and it had to be the kid: not a high whimper like a puppy would make, but closer to a moan. It raised the hair on the back of his neck. He had penned Meg's goose to keep her from harming the boy, but God help him—he'd never thought of his wife that way. He took off at a run, leapt the front steps, and threw open the door.

Meg was no small woman. Broad-hipped and broad-shouldered, she had cornered the little boy and was advancing on him, her arms outstretched to bar his exit. Wrecker huddled in the corner of the room, moaning, his head tucked like a turtle as close as he could get it to his chest and his eyes wide with terror.

"Meg!" Len shouted, and wrapped his arms around his wife.

Wrecker saw his opportunity and shot like a bullet past the two of them, out the door and gone.

Meg slumped her whole weight against Len. He stepped back to support her and shifted his grip and saw where his hands had raised red welts on her forearms. He had never hurt her before, and a wave of guilt and horror crashed over him. He would never do that again. Never. Never.

"Oh, girl—," he started, but Meg opened her mouth wider than he thought possible and drained all the air in the room into her lungs and then let it out in a tremendous bellow so loud Len had to release her and frantically clap his hands over his ears and struggle to adjust the volume on his aid and roll his eyes up into his head to escape the pain of the sound.

And when that breath ended she drew another and bellowed again. And again. For breath after breath, despite Len's every effort to calm her, she kept up her wail. She clung to him as she bellowed, she held him tightly, and when she finally calmed—or tired—enough to stop, she took his face in both hands and said the first two intelligible words she'd uttered since the dental surgery had gone so wrong.

Her eyes wide, bovine, her mouth struggling to meet the unreasonable demands of language, Meg said, "My boy."

Len led Meg into the bedroom and settled her onto the bed. The early evening sun streamed through the window and left a bright patch on the spread. He lay next to her and stroked her hair and

spoke softly. It didn't seem to matter what he said. He told her how he was going to have to borrow the grader to improve the track to the back lot, and how the welding generator would need an overhaul, and that he hadn't quite gotten used to seeing the new red roof on the lumber shed. He said she made the best buttermilk biscuits around and that the latch on the garden gate was working fine now and that he had more business to take care of in the city but that he'd be back as soon as he could. The sound of his voice calmed her, and she closed her eyes.

Len eased himself up from the bed. He'd kept his voice soft, but every nerve in his body jangled, knowing the kid was on the loose. He stepped down into the yard and quickly surveyed the perimeter. The sun was just a few degrees off the horizon and dropping fast. Len checked the log pile and the machinery and then circled the house in systematically widening bands. The shadows lengthened, a hundred pools of darkness that could swallow a boy that small. "Wrecker?" Len called, the name rolling like marbles from his dry mouth. His voice cracked and he called again, and then again as the sweat dried clammy on his neck. He stopped at last with the boy's name ringing in the air. His jaw trembled. What if he'd lost him for good?

And then it was dark, and Len realized he didn't know what to do. It was cold, this time of year, and too dangerous for a boy that small—he was a baby, for chrissakes—to spend the night in the woods. What a mistake he had made, taking this child. A son? A person didn't just collect a *son* from a government office. Len pushed the thought from his mind. When he found him he would load him in the truck and take him back to the city. Surely Miss Hanson would understand. There must be some nice home for a boy like that. A boy like—

Wrecker was asleep on the seat of the truck. Somehow he had gotten himself in. How? When he couldn't even reach the door

handle? And shut the door and buckled himself into the seat belt. His wispy blond hair was plastered to his forehead. Asleep he looked like an angel, not the wild animal, the unbroken young mustang, Len had fought all day. He had Meg's family's chin. He had long eyelashes, and the shoelaces Len had tied for him throughout the day had come undone. He needed a bath and a bedtime story and an end to this nonsense. For god's sake, what was he thinking?

The boy needed a mother.

"Wrecker," Len said, his voice gruff but not harsh. The boy mumbled and turned in his sleep. "Wrecker." Len reached in and gently shook the boy. "Come on, son. Wake up."

Wrecker's eyes fluttered open and he pulled away from Len's touch. He looked around the truck and then back at the man.

"I have to take you back," Len said.

"Home?"

Len made himself meet the boy's eyes for as long as he could before he turned away. "I can't promise you that." His face looked stern, but he was only tired. "Look." He turned back to the boy. "If I go inside and get food and blankets for the trip, will you be here when I get back?"

Wrecker nodded.

Len squinted. "You sure?" he said. "I want you to be sure. Because if you go running off again I don't think I'd have the energy to find you."

Wrecker just looked at him. Len met his gaze and let it hold him up, like a fighter slumped in the arms of his opponent, too weary to punch.

Len returned to the truck with two peanut butter sandwiches and a block of cheese, and Wrecker tore into the food like he hadn't had a meal in days. He was wearing an old sweatshirt of

Len's—there didn't seem to be anything suitable for winter in the bag of clothes—and Len had had to roll the sleeves well past halfway to let Wrecker's hands free. Still, he needed help peeling the orange. He wanted cookies. He was thirsty.

"Let's go see Willow," Len said, and turned over the truck engine. "She'll give you something to drink." Len backed out of the drive and rumbled slowly toward Bow Farm. He pulled in to the small cleared area and parked the truck beside a battered VW bus. He turned to the boy and considered. It would save a lot of time if Len could go alone. "Listen," he said. "I'll come back for you." He furrowed his brow. "But you've got to stay put."

Len paced down the short trail to the log building that served as common space for the inhabitants of Bow Farm. "Hello?" he shouted. "Anybody home?" He stood under the yard light to let them get a good view of him, and waited.

"Who's there?"

Len turned toward the deep bark. "Just me, Ruthie. Len. From next door."

And then from the darkness, Willow's elegant drawl. "Come to borrow a cup of sugar, Len?"

"Something like it, Willow."

The porch lamp switched on overhead, and they stood together in the fringe of light. Len felt like a galoot in his faded work coveralls. Slight, sophisticated, Willow leaned against a porch post as though it were a city lamppost and gazed at him in a way that made him swallow hard. Ruth was neither slight nor sophisticated. Older than either one and broader than both combined, she stood bundled above dungarees in what looked to Len like layers of plaid flannel topped with a lumberjack's vest. Len only had business with Willow, but he knew there wasn't much chance of dodging Ruth. Hearty, helpful, the woman resembled a country monk but was nosy as a fishwife in a gossip den.

"I hate to ask again, Willow," Len said, his hat in his hands and the side of his boot scraping the ground.

Willow's eyebrows arched. "Leaving so soon?"

Len flicked his eyes at her and then at Ruthie, whose arms remained crossed on her chest. He hesitated. "I didn't expect to," he said. The women waited and Len could tell they wouldn't make this easy for him. "It's the kid," he said, blushing. He pointed with his cap to the truck. "I can't keep him."

"What kid?" Ruthie looked confused.

Willow cut her a glance. "Not that it's any of our business, Len," she said, and Len groaned inwardly, knowing he'd have to tell the whole sordid story if he wanted help with Meg, "but whose kid is he, anyway?"

"A kid?" Ruthie repeated.

In the distance the truck door squeaked open and the soft pad of footsteps ruffled the quiet night. They listened intently until the boy resolved out of the darkness and stopped on the trail, a few paces from the porch. Len cleared his throat. "This is Wrecker," he said quietly.

He glanced at the women. Something skittered briefly across Willow's face, something private and complex and beyond his understanding, and Len looked guiltily away. But Ruth's square face lit like the front beam of a locomotive and she followed its trajectory straight for the boy. "Johnny Appleseed! Melody!" she shouted over her shoulder, and a short, lithe man and a gangly woman emerged from the farmhouse at her call. "We've got a visitor." She squatted at his side and bobbed to balance. "Awfully glad to see you," she said. "I'm Ruth." Then she opened her arms, and Len watched, agape, as the boy walked into them. She hugged him close and carried him past Len and Willow and up the rickety porch steps. The screen door slammed behind her.

Willow flashed Len a wry smile. "Don't worry," she said. "The

answer is yes." She laid a cool hand on his forearm. "Come inside, Len. You've got some explaining to do."

From the outside, the farmhouse looked old and dilapidated, with paint flakes peeling off the logs and some of the windowpanes cracked, the putty crumbling out. Len stepped over the threshold and lifted his head in surprise at how welcoming they had made it within. Woven throws and hand-hooked rugs brightened the dark wood. Willow repaired precious carpets for her living, Len knew, but she had a loom, and a love for crazy patterns and color. A giant, calcified whale vertebra propped up a stack of books, and overstuffed armchairs circled a large pillow in the center of the floor. The boy lay fast asleep in the middle, his head cushioned on one arm and small snores escaping his open mouth. Len finished his story. "At least," he said quietly, "that's all they told me. There might be more."

He glanced around at them. Willow's face was serious and composed, and she nodded slowly, running an index finger absently along her lower lip. Ruthie's gaze was focused on the boy. A tear slid over her wrinkled cheek, and she brushed it away with the sleeve of her shirt. She looked up at Len. "Did they say why she's in jail? Or how long?"

Len hesitated. Miss Hanson hadn't told him the whole story, he said. Something about drugs, something about a gun, something about a cop—she'd be in a long time, he said. He didn't tell them she'd done the shooting. He couldn't square it with the picture he held of her, a little girl with an eager smile and anxious eyes. And the bullet had only grazed the policeman.

By the time Wrecker's mother had a chance at parole, Len told them, the boy would be grown.

"Why you?" Melody was the youngest of the bunch, a blunt-mannered blonde girl from somewhere down south. Len pictured

a beach town full of people like her, tall and handsome and trying hard to disguise themselves with odd clothes and messy hair and a way of sloping around like their bones were made of rubber. She had a braying laugh and perpetual bad luck when it came to keeping her car on the road. Three, four times already Len had winched her VW bus from the ditch. Careless, Len had ventured, but Willow would not have it. Haphazard and impulsive, she said. Slapdash. But generous, and as loyal as a person could be.

"What?" Len said, and blinked rapidly.

Willow looked from one to the other. "Meg's sister is Wrecker's mother," she clarified. "So Len is the boy's uncle."

"I know why they asked him," Melody said, dismissively. She sat up and shook her hand as though she were tumbling dice to gamble with. She did this reflexively, the way other people pop their joints or drum their fingers. Len wanted to grab her hands and still them. He wanted to chase after her and pick up all the little piles she left in her wake. He itched to step in and stop her from making so many mistakes—Steer into the slide, he advised her, each time he came to pull her out of the mud—but she turned a deaf ear. This girl listened to nobody. She dropped from the chair to lounge cross-legged on the floor. "Come on, Len. Why would you say yes? I mean—" She stared at him frankly. "Let's face it. You're loaded up with Meg."

Len's brow furrowed. Why? This was a kid, a child with no other relatives to look after him. Wouldn't Meg have said yes? You couldn't leave a child alone in the world. But now Len was saying no. Was this right? How could this be? He looked aside, morose. Accused, somehow. And plainly guilty.

Willow came to his rescue. "You do what you have to do," she said, "and you figure it out later." She looked around at them, challenging anyone to argue. Then she laid a hand on the sleeve of his work shirt and gave a gentle squeeze. "We'll help you however

we can, Len. Why don't you get a good night's sleep, call the agency in the morning, and go in the daylight. We'll take care of Wrecker until you're ready to leave."

"Would you—"

"Of course." Willow nodded. "It's no trouble at all. Meg will be fine until you come back."

Melody yawned. "I'm going to bed. See you all tomorrow." She stood and looked down at the sleeping boy. "You too, buckaroo." She glanced at Ruth. "I'll come take over in the morning. You staying with him tonight?"

The broad woman fluffed the pillow behind her. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." She turned to Willow. "You go on, now, too. He's just a wee thing. I can handle him fine."

"He's giving you the wrong idea," Len muttered. "Wait'll he wakes up. I'm telling you."

Ruthie leaned forward and balanced her hands on her knees. "How bad could he be? Three years old."

"Oh, pretty bad, all right," Willow said, standing anyway. She looked tired, her crow's-feet and laugh lines deeper than usual. "I don't doubt you, Len. At three they're too small to spank, even if you could catch them. But we're not talking a lifetime commitment, here. We're talking about you getting a good night's sleep and a little daylight before you drive six more hours through the trees. After the day you just had."

Len rubbed his balding head. "I could use the rest," he admitted. "I'd keep him at home, only—"

Willow waved him off. The picture he'd painted of Meg's murderous advance was still clear in her mind. "Take your time in the morning," she advised. "Don't worry about him until you're ready to leave." She paused and looked away. "It's been a while since I had a little fellow to look after." Len caught a startled glance from

Ruthie. "Who knows?" Willow added. The corner of her lip turned up, and again Len watched the fleeting expression lightly touch and vanish from her face. "I might even like it."

Len nodded. There were so many things he didn't understand. But Melody had gone, the one they called Johnny Appleseed had evaporated already, unobserved, and Willow was making her way toward the door. He needed to get home to Meg. "I can't thank you enough," he said, and meant it. The boy snuffled in his sleep and rolled onto his side. Len gazed at him. Then he turned on his heel and left.

The cab of his truck seemed oddly empty on the short ride home.

Ruthie slept in the chair that first night, waking often to make sure that the boy was still breathing, adjusting the blankets when he flung them off, once moving him back onto the cushion when his thrashing left him curled like a snail on the bare floor. She was too excited to sink deeply into sleep. His presence felt like an unearned reward, some random jackpot she didn't deserve and couldn't keep but which, however temporary, she was determined to treasure.

By morning her resistance was down. The light filtered in to play on the mottled pink wrinkles of her face, and her snores abraded the silence like the honks and squeaks of raucous waterbirds.

A catch in her own labored breathing startled her and she floundered toward consciousness, rubbing her eyes with both fists and creaking to standing. The boy was still there. Ruthie peered closer. Still there and awake, now. He had the blanket over his head and was observing her through the crocheted eyeholes. She stretched and yawned and looked out the window. "Well, I'll be chicken-fried," she said, loud enough for Wrecker to hear. "Snow?"

She blinked hard to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "I can hardly believe it." She turned to face the couch and said, "Kid. Get up. This'll melt by noon and you don't want to miss it."

A layer of white blanketed the world outside, ice riming the tree branches, the evergreen boughs dusted with snow. Inside, Wrecker froze in place beneath his blanket. Ruthie moved near him. She squatted down and put her face close to Wrecker's, so her eyes filled the eyeholes from the other side. She did something funny with her eyebrows. Then she crossed her eyes, tightened her lips, and wiggled her ears.

"Good morning, Wrecker," she said in a normal voice. "I'm Ruth. I'll be your pilot for this morning, so fasten your seat belt, secure your tray table, and prepare for takeoff."

"I'm hungry," Wrecker said, his voice muffled by the throw.

"Right this way." And Ruth didn't seem to mind that Wrecker followed her into the kitchen with the crocheted throw draped over his head.

Len held on to the pay phone handset so tightly his knuckles were white. He'd never had a line put in at the house. Who had the money for that? When he had a call to make, he'd drive down the mountain and use the booth outside the Mercantile. "Miss *Hanson*," he repeated for the eleventh time. "I'm holding for *Miss Hanson*."

"Please deposit forty cents for the next three minutes," the operator whined. Len searched his pockets. He had thirty-five cents. He dropped it into the coin slots.

"Please deposit—"

"This is Miss Hanson."

"—five cents more for the next three minutes."

"Miss Hanson!" But Len had no more change, and the operator terminated his call.

Len slumped against the grimy glass of the booth. He needed to reach the social worker to let her know he was bringing the boy back, could *not* keep the child. He flapped open his wallet to reveal three worn ten-dollar bills. He would walk over to the Mercantile and get change for one of them. He would return to the phone booth and feed quarters until, come hell or high water, the woman took his call.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said when Len finally reached her again. "Miss Hanson has left for lunch."

"What time do you expect her back," Len asked, weary. He'd been at this all morning. He winced to think what kind of trouble the kid was stirring up at Bow Farm.

"She's scheduled to be out until Tuesday. Shall I take a message?"

"Tell her—," Len said, and then stopped. Tuesday? Len stood there in despair. He could think of nothing to say.

"Sir? Are you there, sir?" A long pause and a sigh.

And then the phone went dead in his hand.

It was not a matter of keeping up with Wrecker. Melody learned early on how impossible a task that would be. She marshaled the efforts of Johnny Appleseed, short and furry and rapid as a squirrel, and woke Ruth from her recuperative slumber and stationed her at the far end of the field, and the three of them kept the boy corralled, herded him toward the others when his curiosity stretched past the boundaries of safety. He didn't speak—they had begun to worry about this—but made noises to keep himself company: the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire, the growls and snarls of wild animals, a tuneless humming that resembled singing but was not. They wondered if he was deaf, so inattentive was he to their directives.

He was not deaf. When Melody shouted across the field, "Johnny Appleseed! Got anything good to eat?" the boy swiveled his head first toward Melody, taller than the others and lanky and so casual in her movements as to appear almost clumsy—watched her with eyebrows raised, extreme interest—and then turned to the compact man they called Johnny Appleseed and watched him dig in the pockets of his pants.

"Some nuts," he called back. "Half a dozen dried figs. What's left of this chocolate bar and a couple of cubes of cheese."

Wrecker made a beeline for him and the others gathered, too. Johnny Appleseed had the sun behind his head. Wrecker squinted up. "Chocolate," he said.

Johnny Appleseed raised his eyebrows in comic surprise. "So you *do* talk?"

"I want chocolate."

Ruth laughed with something like triumph and relief. "Give him that chocolate, man!"

Johnny Appleseed knelt so his face was even with Wrecker's and looked into his eyes. The boy stood stout, his chest high and his face unmoving. Blond hair lay in a tousled mat over his scalp and his bad haircut showed signs of resistance. Pug nose, red lips, blue eyes steady as steel and behind them a whisper of gray Johnny Appleseed locked in on. He knew the language of trees and of wild things and he watched that gray like a deer watches the leaves of the trees for what moves behind them.

Melody flinched for him. Ruth watched, silent, helpless, and her eyes shone with tears. But Wrecker stood stock-still, eyes open.

Johnny Appleseed reached for the hem of the sweatshirt Wrecker wore. He lifted it gently to make a pocket that he had the boy hold. Then he reached into the pockets of his own pants and emptied each into the fold. Cheese, chocolate, figs and nuts, and a piece of polished sea-glass, blue, and a stone in the shape of a heart, and

two pieces of gum still in their wrappers and a folded photo of a dog, the creases gone white, and some lint.

"What's mine is yours, kid," he said, and stood.

It was for the night; and then it was until Tuesday, until Thursday, until the next social worker hired to replace the absent Miss Hanson could review the case and there was quite a stack of folders before Wrecker's and would Mr.—Mr.—would *Len*, all right, please be patient with the department, there were children in far more dire need than his son (*not* my son, he shouted over the phone, driven to distraction)—Very well! Very well then, Mr. Len, but he'd have to be patient, they'd get to it as soon as they could.

Which he gradually understood to mean never.

At Bow Farm they took turns sleeping in the chair beside Wrecker and during the day they traded off spending time with him. What took three of them that first day later required only two, and when they became more adept—more wily, faster, developed more stamina (which is to say when Wrecker grew comfortable enough on the farm to agree to stay, when he began to prefer their company to that of his own, solitary)—one alone could spend the day with Wrecker in relative peace and safety. It's true that his feats acquired the status of legends. The day Wrecker jumped from the barn roof (two stories!) to bounce from the hay bales below. The day Wrecker was lost and they scoured the pond bottom for his body. The day Wrecker climbed into the pickup and released the brake, took it out of gear, and rode it all the way downslope into the field, where a big rock slowed it down by lodging itself in the oil pan. He seemed to need to feel his body collide with the physical world to know he existed. He threw his food, sometimes; he ignored them, he drowned out the sound of their voices by plugging his ears with his fingers and singing nonsense

songs; he sometimes refused to put away the toys they gathered for him; he demanded bedtime stories at breakfast and pancakes at dinner. They couldn't control him and so they gave up trying. But neither could he control them, and he, too, came to understand this, and the shimmering tentative thing that stretched between them those first days thickened into something workable, something like love in overalls, love with a spade in its hand.

The pile of firewood by the barn grew mountainous as Len struggled to repay them for keeping the boy. It had been five weeks, and something had to be done or they would be buried under the split rounds. Willow broached the issue one evening when Wrecker was asleep on the farmhouse floor and the others lounged around, warm-bellied from dinner and eager for spring. "Len's shrinking," she announced. The others nodded gravely.

"That man's between a rock and a hard place," Ruth agreed.

Melody furrowed her brow. "Not exactly *our* rock or hard place," she growled, and the others looked at her, not accusing, just mildly surprised. They blinked and looked back at the boy. Melody persisted. "Look. One more night sleeping in this chair and I'll turn into a lunatic. Where would we even keep him?"

Ruth faced her. "Well, he's too big for a shoebox," she said dryly. "And we'd be arrested if we stuffed him in the oven."

Melody reddened.

Johnny Appleseed, who stayed so silent most times they almost forgot he was there, said softly, "He's too small to sleep by himself."

Willow raised her eyebrows. "Any volunteers to sleep with him?"

Johnny Appleseed shrugged. "Sitka won't mind. She has the pups. I'll make a mattress for him on my floor with the dogs."

Ruth nodded. "Won't hurt him, spend some time in a pack like that." She tipped her head toward Melody. "What do you say? Harbor the fugitive a while longer?"

Melody cast guarded glances at them all. No one else seemed to think it odd, the arrival of this small interloper. None of the others seemed plagued by such rapid-fire emotion at his presence. He set something aflutter in her that was hard to name and harder to ignore. Melody frowned. She rose from her chair and then knelt on the floor beside the sleeping boy. He was curled like a question mark under one of Willow's blankets, his fist clinging tightly to a rusty metal pipe he had salvaged from the yard. Asleep, he threw off heat like a stoked furnace. He was no bigger than her duffel bag packed halfway, no heavier than a crate of oranges, aromatic in the sun. His lips moved and his mouth opened and he gave a long, soughing sigh. Dreaming. Melody understood. She dreamed like that, too. She tilted back onto her heels and faked nonchalance. "If it helps Len." Her voice betrayed her and she shrugged and cleared her throat. "I won't be the one to say no."

And so it was decided. Sooner or later the state would assign him a permanent family, but until that time he could call Bow Farm home. They thought of him as a puppy and they took him in.