

rites of Spring

Lisa Goldstein

"Rites of Spring" was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the March 1994 issue of Asimov's, with illustration by Steve Cavallo. Lisa Goldstein is a Bay Area writer who won the American Book Award for her first novel, The Red Magician, and who has subsequently gone on to become one of the most critically acclaimed novelists of her day with books such as Tourists, The Dream Years, A Mask for the General, Strange Devices of the Mind, and Moon and Summer King, Winter Fool. Her most recent book is the novel Waking the Labyrinth.

She is less prolific at shorter lengths, although her elegant and incisive stories, many of which have appeared in Asimov's, and which were recently collected in Travellers in Magic, are well worth waiting for—as is true of the work in general. The story that follows, in which a detective hot on the trail of a Missing Person finds that that trail leads into territory very far indeed from the kind of Urban Mean Streets that Private Eyes are accustomed to travel...

I'm sitting at my desk catching up on paperwork when there's a knock on my office door. "Come in," I say.

The door opens and a woman steps inside. "Have a seat," I say, filing one last piece of paper.

"Are you Ms. Keller?" she asks.

"Liz Keller. And you are—"

"Dora Green." Wisely, she picks the more comfortable of the two office chairs. "I want to find my daughter."

I look across the desk at her. She has an oval face, dark gray eyes. Her hair is medium-length and black, with a little gray at the temples. She doesn't look much like a parent of a missing child. She doesn't play with the handles of her purse, or light a cigarette. I nod, encouraging her to go on.

"My daughter's name is Carolyn-Carolyn Green," Ms. Green says. "At least it was. I suppose her husband's made her change it."

I try not to frown. In most missing children cases the child is much younger. "Are you sure she wants to be found?" I ask.

"I'm certain. Her husband forced her into the marriage, you see."

"Was she pregnant?"

She doesn't flinch. "No."

I look over this possible client for a moment. She's very well dressed—she wears a soft green pullover and a skirt with a print of entwining leaves and vines and flowers. I remember that it's St. Patrick's Day today, though I would bet that she's not Irish. She smells a little like

some flower too, a subtle, expensive perfume. Golden earrings dangle from her ears.

"Look," I say. "Before I can take your money I need you to be clear about some things. I promise to do my best to find your daughter. Whether she wants to be found is up to her. I'll give her a message from you, whatever-

"She has to get away from him."

"I can't do that. Your daughter's of legal age-She is of legal age, isn't she?"

"Yes."

'All right then. If she tells me herself that she wants to end the marriage-

"She does-

"Then I'll help her. But not otherwise. If she won't leave him I can give her the name of a women's shelter. I know a counselor there. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

'Okay. I need to know some things about your daughter- her husband's name, their last address if you know it. Do you have a picture of them?"

She does. The photograph she shows me must have been taken shortly after the two eloped. The daughter is wearing what looks like a bridal wreath, a circlet of flowers. She is beautiful with light brown hair and blue eyes. I can't tell what she's thinking; she has the vacant expression of the very young. Her mother seems to have gotten all the wisdom in the family

Her husband looks nearly twice her age. He is unsmiling, almost grim. He has long grey hair, a short beard, and wears a black leather vest over a T-shirt. He stands a little in front of her, casting her partly in shadow. "What does she do?" I ask.

"Nothing, as far as I know," Ms. Green says. "He won't let her leave the house."

"What about him? He looks like a Hell's Angel."

"I wouldn't be surprised." For the first time she looks away from me, down toward her feet. She smooths her busy skirt. "I don't like to think about it."

"How long has she been with him?"

"About four months. They got married right after they met."

"Where did she meet him?"

Ms. Green looks away again. "She says it was in a park."

We talk a little more, and then I give her my standard contract and explain about my fees. She signs the contract and writes a check for my retainer.

As soon as she leaves the nausea I've been fighting the past few weeks returns. I run down the hallway to the bathroom and make it just in time to throw up into the toilet. As I stand and catch my breath I wonder why the hell they call it morning sickness. Mine seems to go on all day.

I make my way back to the office. I've got to do something about this, I think. I've got to decide. I flip through the calendar on my desk. The doctor's appointment is in two days, on March 19.

Dora Green had given me the last address she had for Carolyn and her husband, and had told me that her daughter had been taking classes at the university. It's past four o'clock, though, and in this sleepy northern California town the university is probably closed for the day. I decide to visit Carolyn's neighborhood.

Before I leave I call a contact in the Department of Motor Vehicles and ask her to run a check on Jack Hayes, Carolyn's husband; on Carolyn Green; and on Carolyn Hayes. Then I pick up my coat and purse, lock the office door, and step out into the hallway.

The landing smells even worse than usual, frying grease and floor polish. They say that your sense of smell improves when you're pregnant, but in the past few weeks I've discovered that this doesn't nearly go far enough. What I think actually happens is that your entire skin becomes a giant olfactory gland.

The temperature outside is in the thirties, and the sun is barely visible through the clouds. It's the coldest March people in this town can remember. Wind burns my ears. My well-dressed client, I remember, wore a plush padded overcoat. I wrap my thin cloth coat around me and get into my car.

The car's heater kicks in just as I drive up to Carolyn's address. I sit in the car a moment longer before going out to face the cold. Iron bars front the windows of some of the houses around me; other houses are boarded up or burned out or covered with graffiti. Five or six teenage boys walk down the street, drinking something from a paper bag and laughing loudly. An old man stands at a bus stop, talking angrily to himself.

I turn off the car and step outside. The wind chills me almost instantly, and I huddle into my coat. The address Ms. Green gave me is an apartment building, and I see the apartment I was facing the landing on the second floor. I climb the outside stairs and knock. Music plays from the first floor.

There is no answer. I knock again, louder. The door to the nearest apartment opens and a man steps out. "What the hell do you want?" he asks. "Can't a man get a little sleep around here?"

Despite his words he is not angry—he sounds weary, as if he has been certain something would wake him up sooner or later. His blond hair is lank and greasy, his face an unhealthy white. People pay a lot of money to get jeans as scuffed as his are, with just those holes at the

knees. He might-just might-have a night job, but the odds are against it.

"Do you know Jack Hayes?" I ask. "Or Carolyn Hayes?"

"No. Who the hell are they?"

"They live here, in this apartment. Or they did."

"Oh, those guys." He leans against his doorjamb, suddenly disposed to talk. I see now that he is younger than I first thought, in his early twenties. A child somewhere in the building cries, and someone shouts for quiet. "Those guys were weird, let me tell you. They belonged to some cult or some-thing. Satanists."

"Satanists?"

"Yeah. They had all these people coming and going at all hours of the day or night, all of them wearing black. Lots of chanting, lots of strange smells. Incense, maybe."

I sniff the air. There is a whiff of something, though it's harsher than incense. My stomach roils.

"You said 'had,' " I say. "Past tense. Are they gone?"

"I don't know, man," he says. "Now that you mention it I haven't seen them around for a couple of days. Weeks, maybe. You a bill collector?"

I give him one of my cards. He squints at it, as though he has grown unused to reading. "Private investigator, huh?" he says. "Isn't that dangerous, you being a woman and all?" He smiles, as if he thinks he's said something witty.

"Asking personal questions is always dangerous," I say. He squints again; he knows that I've insulted him, but for the moment he doesn't get how. "Call me if they come back, all right?"

He mumbles something and retreats back into his apartment. I try Carolyn Green's doorknob, but the door is locked.

I drive back to the office. There is a message on my machine from my contact at the DMV; she can find nothing for any of the names I gave her. I frown. It's hard to get around in this town without a car, though it is just barely possible. So much for the Hell's Angel theory-I had specifically asked her to check for motorcycle licenses. Maybe they're using aliases, I think, and I frown again.

I had been looking forward to finding Carolyn, to discovering why she had run away with such an unsuitable man. One thing I learned in this business is that people are far stranger than you would ever think, that they almost never do what you would expect. Now I wonder if I will ever get to meet her.

The next day I wrap myself in my coat and two scarves and head out toward the university.

It's even colder than yesterday, and a heavy rain begins while I'm driving. The rain turns to snow as I pull up to a parking garage. It hasn't snowed in this town since I moved here ten years ago.

I show the woman at the registrar's office my Pi's license and ask about Carolyn Green. "I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head. "It's against university policy to give out information on students."

She doesn't look sorry at all; she seems delighted to be able to enforce a rule and cause trouble at the same time. Her face is unremarkable, with faded blue eyes and sprayed straw-colored hair, but her glasses are unfortunate-narrow and black, with upswept tips. She must have been in a terrible mood the day she visited the optometrist.

The office is overheated; I shed first one and then the other scarf, and open my coat. I try to appeal to the woman's emotions-missing daughter, frantic mother-but she is unmoved.

It feels good to leave the office, to walk down the hall and push open the door to the cold outside. The snow has stopped. Students are scraping up the thin snow and trying to make snowballs. Someone slips on the grass and goes down; his friends laugh. I'm not foolish enough to think that I'll run into Carolyn Green, but just in case I stop several people and show them her picture. No one recognizes her.

I go to the student store to buy a pair of gloves, and then return to the registrar's office. Ms. University Policy has left, probably for lunch, and a young woman who looks like a student has come in to replace her. Her eyes widen as I show her my license, and before I even finish my story she is calling up Carolyn's name on the computer.

"Here-I'll give you a print-out of her schedule," the young woman says. "And here's her address, at the top."

The address is the one Ms. Green gave me, but the list of classes could be useful. I thank the woman and leave.

The first class on Carolyn's schedule is Classical Literature, taught by Professor Burnford. Once again I am amazed at how strange people are, how complex. Who would have thought that the woman in the photograph would be interested in such a thing?

I find the building where Carolyn studies Classical Literature and go inside. Professor Burnford's office is on the third floor; a sign on the door says that his office hours are from 12:00 to 2:00. It's five to 12. I lean against the wall to wait.

A few minutes later the professor comes toward me, followed by a student who tries in vain to keep up with his long strides. Burnford says something over his shoulder to the student following him. "Rabbits!" I hear him say as he reaches the door. "Rabbits are fertility symbols!"

Burnford nods to me as I step forward, and without stopping he says, "I can see you af

talk to Joe here. Late Etruscan burial customs, isn't it?"

It isn't, but before I get a chance to tell him so he's un-locked his door and ushered poor me inside. I wait a bit more, and then wander down the hallway and read the notices and cartoons posted on office doors. It's all fairly interesting, in a sort of anthropological way. I never finished college myself.

Five minutes later Professor Burnford's door opens and Joe emerges, looking wrung out. He does not meet my eyes as he leaves.

"Sit down," Burnford says as I enter. His hair, eyes and skin are very nearly the same shade of color, and he wears a sand and black hound's-tooth coat. I wonder if he matched his coat deliberately to his face or if it's just a coincidence.

"I hope you don't mind if I eat my lunch while we talk," he says. He opens a brown paper bag and takes out a plastic-wrapped peanut butter sandwich. "I have no time otherwise."

The mention of lunch, and the smell of peanut butter, make my stomach turn again. The doctor's appointment is tomor-row, I think.

"I'm sorry," he says, taking a bite of the sandwich. "I don't remember your name."

"I'm not a student here, Dr. Burnford," I say. I take out my license and show it to him. "I'm looking for one of your students. Carolyn Green, or Carolyn Hayes."

He nods, his mouth full of peanut butter.

"Do you know her?" I ask.

"Of course I know her. Brilliant girl. You don't get too many under-graduates that good at ancient Greek."

Brilliant? I show him the photograph. "Yes, that's her," he says, taking it from me. "Don't know who the man is, though."

"That's her husband," I say. "Jack Hayes."

"Husband?" He puts down his sandwich, for which I am grateful, and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "So that's what happened to her. I'm sorry to hear it."

"What do you mean?"

"She stopped coming to class a few months ago. I don't usually stick my nose in my students' business, but I was worried about her and I went to the registrar's office to get her phone number. She doesn't have a phone, it turns out."

I nod. I had already noticed that.

"So I thought, that was that," he says. "Husband, you say. Sometimes you get a man who

pull his wife out of school, even in this day and age."

I say nothing. He'd be surprised if he knew what goes on in this day and age.

He gives me the photograph back. "Shame," he says, shaking his head.

"Do you know anything about her?" I ask. "Any friends you might have seen her with? Acquaintances?"

"No. I never saw her outside of the classroom or my office."

I thank him and leave. The professors of her other two classes aren't in, so I scribble something on the backs of two business cards and push them under the doors. As I drive back to the office I turn on the radio; someone is explaining how to put on snow-chains.

There are two messages waiting for me at the office. A company I've worked for before asks me to run a credit check, and a friend wants to go see a movie tonight.

I should call both of them back. Instead I take out a legal pad and write down columns of numbers. Stroller, car seat, crib, play-pen. So much for clothing, so much for medical expenses. College, and classes in Classical Literature with Professor Burnford. I'm staring at the pad of paper when the phone rings.

I let the machine catch it. "I'm sorry I was angry with you the other day," a voice says, not to my surprise. "We should talk. Please call me."

It's my mother. She's wrong, though; we have nothing to talk about.

"Your test results came back," the doctor says. "They're positive."

I take a deep breath. "That was quick," I say.

"Oh, we're very efficient these days," she says. She smiles; I guess she's trying to put me at ease. "We don't have to kill rabbits anymore."

For some reason this makes me think of Dr. Burnford, shouting at his student about rabbits and fertility symbols.

"Can I ask-" The doctor pauses. "Is this welcome news?"

I've checked the box marked "Single" on the intake form. "I don't know," I say slowly. "It was a one-night stand, really. A friend came into town unexpectedly. I don't-"

The vastness of what I've gotten into hits me; I have to stop and take another breath. I'm going to break down in front of this woman, though; I'm not going to treat her the way my clients sometimes treat me, as if she's a wise-woman capable of solving all my problems. I start I'll end up telling her about the screaming fight with my mother, about all my doubts, and God knows what else. "I'd just like some time to think about it," I say.

The doctor nods. She puts me up in those awful cold stir-rups and examines me, and then when I'm dressed, gives me some vitamins and a list of foods I should and shouldn't eat, and a pamphlet on abortion. "Do you need to talk to some-one?" she asks. "I can recommend a good counselor."

I can't remember the number of times I've said the same thing to my clients. I've always prided myself on my ability to manage my own life, to stay out of the kinds of messes my clients seem to get into. I shake my head.

Dora Green is waiting for me in front of my office. I nod to her and unlock the door. "I wanted to know if you made any progress," she says.

I feel very weary. It's far too early for her to expect results. I motion her inside the office and sit at my desk. "I'm sorry," she says, taking the chair opposite me. Today she's wearing a green print dress that's even busier than her skirt, more leaves and flowers and what looks like little animals peering through the foliage. "I should have waited."

"Your daughter seems to have moved, and she's stopped going to classes," I say. "Other than that, I can't tell you anything yet."

She nods. Her calm expression does not change. I wonder if she's had the same thought I had, that her daughter is dead, killed by her husband. Satanic rituals, I think.

"I'm meeting someone for lunch," she says. "You must be hungry too. Can I get you something to eat?"

You're supposed to eat enough for two when you're pregnant, but at the same time you're usually sick to your stomach. Just another example, I think, of how impossible the whole thing is. "I've already eaten," I say.

For a moment I think she knows I'm lying; worse, that she knows everything about me, including where I went this morning. I have never felt this way about any of my clients; usually it's the clients who feel the need to justify their behavior.

"Come with me anyway," she says, smiling a little.

The animals on her print dress are moving. I shake my head, trying to focus, but the hallucination doesn't go away. A badger or something shoulders aside a flowering vine and pads forward, its nose twitching.

I look away. I'd better eat something. "All right," I say, and we head out into the street.

She stops at a restaurant a few blocks from my office, and we go inside. I have never seen this place before; probably it's new. There are posters of flowers on the walls, and vases full of flowers with bright flowers at the table.

Her friend is already there. "This is Mickey," Ms. Green says as we sit down. "Mickey, this is Liz Keller."

Mickey nods at me, amused at something. He is slender, with curly blond hair and light gray eyes. There is a slight family resemblance, and for a moment I think he is Carolyn's brother. But surely Ms. Green would have told me if there were others in the family. I wonder who he is, how they know each other.

The waitress comes soon afterward. I study the menu, trying to remember the list of food the doctor gave me. I could use a cup of coffee, but I'm almost certain the doctor would disapprove. "I'll have some tea," I say.

The waitress takes the rest of the orders and leaves. "How do you know Ms. Green?" I ask Mickey.

"We're related," he says. "Cousins. What about you? How do you know her?"

"She's hired me in a professional capacity," I say. It's all I can tell him without breaking my client's confidentiality.

"Ah," Mickey says. "You're the new detective."

"New detective?" I say, looking at Ms. Green. The animals on her dress are motionless now, thank God. "You didn't tell me about this. What happened to the old one?"

"She wasn't very good," Ms. Green says.

"And time is running out, isn't it?" Mickey says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

We're interrupted by the waitress, bringing food for Mickey and Ms. Green and a teapot and cup for me. "So," Mickey says. He reaches over and pours me some tea. "What have you found so far?"

"I can't discuss it without my client's permission," I say.

"Oh, Mickey's family," Ms. Green says. "You can tell him anything you tell me."

I sip my tea, enjoying the warmth. My stomach feels fine now. I remember the first time I met Ms. Green, when she came to my office to hire me, and how the nausea had disappeared then too.

I tell Mickey about my trip to Carolyn's old apartment, my visit to the university. He's smiling. I'm almost certain he's hiding something, that Ms. Green is wrong to trust him. He seems to feel very little concern for his missing cousin.

He pours me another cup of tea. "What do you plan to do now?" he asks.

It's a good question. I've pretty much run out of leads, but it doesn't do to say so in front of the person paying your salary. I take a sip of tea. "Did you know her husband?" I ask him.

"A little," he says.

"Did you like him?"

Mickey laughs. "Like him? The boyfriend from hell?"

"Why do you think she married him?"

He shrugs.

"They seem very different," I say, pushing him.

He pours more tea. I look at the small teapot; it can't possibly hold that much. I lift the lid. It is filled to the brim.

I look up quickly at Mickey. He's grinning, as if daring me to confront him. "How did you do that?" I ask.

"Do what?" he says.

He must have switched teapots somehow, maybe while I was looking at Ms. Green. "Good fly," he says. He stands and kisses Ms. Green on the cheek. "It was good seeing you."

I watch him go. My earlier suspicions of him become a certainty; he knows something he's not telling. "I've got to go too," I say. I stand and hurry through the restaurant, trying to keep him in sight.

He hasn't gotten that far ahead of me. He turns left out the door and heads east. A few meters farther on is Carolyn's old apartment. I drop back a little, keeping him in sight. Surely he doesn't intend to walk the entire distance.

He continues on for about a mile. The neighborhood slowly changes; the shopfronts here are dingier, and several of them are boarded up. Some of the buildings are painted three or four colors in a vain attempt to cover the graffiti; they look as if they have mangled. A man moves to block me, his hand held out. "Spare change?" he asks.

I sidestep him and continue on. Mickey is still in front of me. He is hurrying a little, as if he's getting closer to his destination.

He comes to a corner. He stops for a moment, as if trying to make up his mind. Then he turns and looks directly at me, grins, and goes right.

I take the corner after him. I've never had anyone spot me, never, not in any of the dozens of tails I've done. How had he known?

There is no one at all on the street. Grimy warehouses face each other, some protected by corrugated doors or iron gratings, all of them locked. One warehouse has rows of tiny windows on the second floor; about half of them are broken, as if they'd been the target in some game. Trees with branches like sticks line the street. No one seems to work here.

I walk up and down the street for over an hour, looking for Mickey in likely and unlikely places, but he is gone.

I go back to my office to get Ms. Green's phone number. I need Mickey's address, need ask him a few questions.

The phone rings as I'm paging through my files. I pick it up. "Liz Keller, Private Investigations," I say.

"Liz?" the voice at the other end asks.

It's my mother. I don't need this right now. "What?" I say.

'Did you get my message?"

"Yeah."

"I want to talk to you. I want-I changed my mind. I had no right to interfere with anything you do. It's your life."

"I've always thought so."

"Did you see a doctor?"

She promises not to interfere, and then the first thing she says is interfering. "Yeah," I s

"What did-"

"The test is positive." Even over the phone lines I can feel her straining to ask a question I haven't decided what to do yet."

"Did you think about what I said?"

"No."

"If you're going to have a child-"

"I thought you said you weren't going to interfere."

"Well, I just thought that you could take less dangerous work for a while. At least until child is born."

"I've told you before. This is what I want to do."

"I know that. I'm not saying you should stop being a de-ctive. But maybe you could tal different cases-"

I sigh loudly. My mother has never held a job in her life, and yet she thinks she knows everything about everything. If she meets a jeweler she'll talk with great authority about gem-stones. If she meets a car mechanic she'll go on about what the best makes of cars are.

can't correct her misconceptions; she feels absolutely no embarrassment when she finds out she's wrong.

Now she wants to tell me how to run a detective agency. "There are no safe cases," I say. "You can never tell how a case will turn out."

"Well, then, maybe you can stop-"

"No."

"I've talked it over with your father-we can afford-"

I hang up. Next thing she'll suggest I move back in with her and my father, into the old bedroom they've kept for me all these years.

Angry now, I pull Dora Green's file. I start to dial her number and then change my mind and going to go visit her. If Mickey's been hiding something then who's to say she hasn't been? What do I really know about her anyway?

I put on my coat and two scarves and leave the office, slamming the door behind me. My stomach has started to feel queasy again.

There are huge plants on Ms. Green's lawn, pushing **up** against her outside wall. Somehow they have managed to **put**

forth a few leaves, though the trees on the sidewalk are bare. I ring her doorbell, wondering what it is about this woman and flowers.

Her house is light and warm, with wooden beams and hard-wood floors, and, of course, pots of plants placed to catch the sun. Red and green and blue weavings cover the backs of white couches and hang from the walls. She leads me to one of the couches and sits across from me.

Once again I notice how calm she is, how composed. There is a stateliness to her that I don't associate with the parents of missing children. "Have you found my daughter?" she asks.

"No, not yet. But I have found-well, I wonder how much you know about Mickey."

"Mickey?"

"Yes, your cousin. He didn't seem very concerned about Carolyn at the restaurant. I wonder if he's holding something back."

"Mickey." She sits back on the couch and smooths down the edge of the weaving. "I've been thinking the same thing myself. I think that's one of the reasons I asked you to lunch, so you could meet him and form your own impressions. I don't think he's telling me everything he knows."

"Do you have his address?"

"Yes, of course." She recites his address from memory. It's in a very mixed part of town with apartment buildings and middle-class houses and small neighborhood shops all jumbled together. It's miles from the warehouse district he led me to this afternoon.

I thank her and start to leave. "Take care of yourself," she says.

Once again I get the unsettling feeling that she knows all about me. For a moment I want to tell her everything, to pour out the things I held back from my mother and the doctor.

Why on earth did Carolyn Green run away from a mother like this?

Suddenly I realize that it's not the financial aspects of having a child I'm worried about. That would be tough, but I can handle it. What I'm terrified of is being the kind of mother my own mother was, interfering, small-minded, unable to let go. What other example do I have?

As I go back to my car I see that the streetlights are starting to come on. I've wasted more time than I thought following Mickey. I go home, and turn the heat up as high as it will go.

The next day I am parked across the street from Mickey's house. There is a car in the driveway, a late model Mercury. He might be out on one of his long walks, but I gamble that the car means he's still home.

Time passes slowly. My car is freezing, but I can't risk turning on the engine to start the heater. Finally the front door opens and Mickey steps out. He passes the car in the driveway and heads for the sidewalk. Another walk today, I think.

I let him get half a block ahead of me and then ease open the car door. This time I am certain he hasn't seen me. He walks slowly, as though he has no destination in mind; it is easy enough to keep him in sight.

He continues this way for several miles. He shows no sign of stopping. Finally he turns down a main street and I see that he is heading toward the warehouse district he visited yesterday. He is moving faster now.

I follow, hurrying to keep him in sight. He comes to the corner at which I lost him and then I take the corner after him. He is still in front of me, moving very fast now, almost running.

The rain starts again, lashing the bare trees. He goes half-way down the street and pushes on one of the warehouse doors. I run after him, but by the time I get there the door is closed. I try it; it opens with only the slightest squeak of rusty metal.

I step inside and close the door quickly. The first thing I notice is the smell of corroded metal. I can see nothing; even minutes after I have shut the door the warehouse is pitch dark. I can hear nothing either, not Mickey, not anyone he has come to meet. After a few minutes I make out the distant sound of water dripping on metal.

A flare burns suddenly across the room, too dim to reach me. I move toward it cautiously, keeping close to the shadows by the wall.

As I get nearer I see two huge chairs made of rusted metal. One is empty; a man sits in the other. It is too dark to tell, and I am too far away, but I am almost certain he is the man in the photograph, Carolyn's husband. The sight of the empty chair makes me uneasy.

The light flares higher, and now I see Mickey among the shadows, standing before the man in the chair. The man wears a crown made of iron; its points catch the flames and glow red.

I feel the nudge of an elusive memory, a story I once heard or a lesson I learned in school. I know this place: the dark hall, the two chairs, the harsh smell of rusting metal. But before I can remember it fully the man in the chair speaks.

"Greetings, cousin," he says. "What news do you bring me from the upper world?"

"She knows nothing," Mickey says. "She is unable to find her daughter."

"Good. Her daughter is mine, gained by lawful means."

"Of course," Mickey says.

The red light erupts again. The shadows fall back. The man in the chair looks up and sees me. "Who is that woman?" he asks.

I turn and run. I find the door to the outside, but it is stuck, locked. I am still pulling on the handle when Mickey comes up behind me.

"Come, Liz," he says. "This is no fit way to greet the King of Hell."

I turn and face him, look beyond him to Jack Hayes. "King of Hell," I say scornfully. "Is that King Jack, or King Hayes?"

"Hades," he says. It is a while before I realize that he is correcting my pronunciation.

"Where is Carolyn?" I ask.

"My wife is safe."

"Where is Carolyn?" I ask again.

"She is not Carolyn," Hayes says. "Her name is Kore. Some call her Persephone."

"I don't have time-"

"I will tell you where she is," he says. "I first saw her many years ago. She was gathering flowers, and she had wandered too far from her companions. I fell in love with her then-I thought that she would bring light to my dark lands. I rode my chariot up from Hell, and I seized her and bore her down to my kingdom. Her mother Demeter searched all the earth for her but could not find her, and in her sorrow called down the chilling winter. It was Hermes who led Demeter to her daughter, that first winter so long ago."

"Hermes?"

Mickey bows toward me mockingly. "The Romans called me Mercury. The messenger, quick-witted one, the god of commerce. And also-" he grins "-the trickster, the god of thievery."

I wonder if they are both crazy. But it doesn't really matter; the important thing is making sure that Carolyn is safe. "Where is she?"

"You *are* persistent," Mickey says. "She chose well for a change, Demeter did."

"What do you mean?"

"Demeter searches every year for her daughter. She will not end her winter until Kore is found, and we made the search more difficult than usual this year." Mickey shakes his head almost in admiration. "This is the first time she's hired a private investigator, though. I made sure that the one she found was incompetent, but apparently she tried again without my help."

"Why didn't you just tell her where her daughter is?"

"Some years I do, some years I don't. You can't trust me, really." He grins engagingly. "Do you know the Little Ice Age, during the Middle Ages? That was my doing. And now-she should have gone to you sooner. She's left it far too late."

"Where-"

Jack Hayes raises his hand to stop me, then waves to a corner of the room still in shadow. Carolyn comes toward us. She is very pale; even her blue eyes seem paler, and there are dark circles under her eyes. Her long white dress is torn and dirty.

Suddenly I remember the rest of the Greek legend. "You've had your time with her," I say to Hayes. "She ate four pomegranate seeds-that gave you four months with her. It's spring now, time for her to go home."

Hayes nods. The foul light slowly diminishes. Before he can change his mind I grab Carolyn by the wrist and hurry toward the door.

Mickey is standing there, blocking the way. I didn't even see him move; I would have sworn that he was still behind me. "No," he says. He's still smiling; it's all a game to him. "Let's have another Ice Age. The last one was such fun."

I let go of Carolyn and turn to look at Hayes. It's a mistake; Mickey shoves me toward the throne and tries to force me to the floor.

I sidestep him, sliding to one side and crouching down. He is still lunging forward, and when he moves in front of me I punch him in the kidney.

He doubles over. Before he can get up I run for the door, taking Carolyn with me. The door opens easily.

We step outside. It's raining hard; we are drenched within seconds. I slam the door behind

me and run down the street, taking Carolyn with me. As we reach the corner a taxi comes toward us. I hail it and we get inside.

I give the driver Dora Green's address and sit back. Carolyn stares through the wiper blades at the streets outside. There is a trace of sadness on her face, and-what seems worse-me-resignation. What does she think, having been delivered from the terrors of that warehouse? Has it happened before, as Mickey said? For how many years has she had to take this ride home?

A few minutes later we drive up to Ms. Green's house. I pay the driver and we walk up to the front door. I ring the bell.

The door opens. Dora Green steps outside and sees her daughter. She goes toward Carolyn and holds her close; they stand motionless for a long time. I cannot read the expression on her face.

The rain stops. A warm wind courses from somewhere, heavy with the scents of flowers and oranges. Tiny green leaves are budded on the branches of the trees; I hadn't noticed them before. They open as I watch.

After a long moment Dora releases her daughter and turns the full regard of her gaze to me. The air burns around her, bright as gold. She seems to read my entire life in an instant, both past and what is to come. Her expression is perfectly balanced between joy and sorrow.

I want to fall to my knees before her. The goddess of earth, of fertility. "I thank you," Demeter says.

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I am taking a leave of absence from my job, at least until the child is born and is old enough for daycare. Demeter has been more than generous in settling up her bill, and Hermes, the god of commerce, seems to have shrugged off the incident in the warehouse and has offered me a loan. He is also, as he was good enough to warn me, the god of thieves, but I've dealt with crooks before. I am very glad not to have to take money from my parents.

The doctor tells me the child will be a girl. I am going to call her Demetra.