



Nine

Edward had scarcely noticed students during the nocturnal life that ended with the Migra raid, but once he was on the lookout, they appeared omnipresent. Students had rooms in a handsome old brownstone building with heavy arched windows and community college classrooms on the lower floors_ he often saw them passing with their books and groceries, pumping music directly to their ears with little white tubes. On every nice day, they appeared in the park with balls and colorful plastic sailing disks and paraphernalia for sunbathing. At lunch time or between classes, they moved in noisy groups through the center, crowding the grease-hung food shops, and sitting at the sidewalk tables near the Old State House, flirting, laughing, talking on their cell phones. Edward made it a habit to detour along Main Street every day on his way to work, asking likely boys and girls if they knew Kara Wistley _ “pretty, reddish hair, lots of freckles.” Interrupted in their conversations _ or occasionally

their books _ they shook their heads, and he was beginning to lose faith in Joseph's certainty, when a wide awake looking girl with straight dark hair and large blue eyes, asked, "Freckles? Red hair? I don't know her last name, but there's a Kara at the Gallows."

"Gallows?" Edward asked with some alarm. The night raid and its aftermath had brought home to him the inhabitants' recklessness and violence.

"It's a café up near Trinity College. She's there most afternoons."

Edward was so excited that work was just a blur. He barely remembered the evening set up or the dinner rush or, indeed, anything before the next afternoon, when, after forcing himself to delay through what he guessed might be a busy lunch hour, he walked up a steep hill past a cemetery to the broad, iron fenced lawns of the college. This was a private outfit, old and expensive; the picturesque buildings were ornamented with spires and turrets, and students in bright colors passed along arched galleries on their way to class. Overhead, a ringing carillon echoed his heart: he was going to Kara. It was her, he knew it was, he knew she would be there, and these baseless certainties set his nerves ajitter with expectation, despite his difficulty locating the café. Finally, a boy in a team uniform and clattering athletic shoes pointed left down a cross street. Within minutes, Edward spotted the Gallows Café, with Tarot packs, crystals, and books of vegetarian recipes in its bowed windows. Inside, the smell of good coffee, fennel, cinnamon, and garlic drifted over round metal tables and bentwood chairs, a counter with an elaborate coffee machine and glass cases for pastries and cakes, and, just emerging from the back bearing plates of sandwiches, Kara. His Kara.

Edward let out a cry, lunged to the counter, and put his arms around her. "Kara!"

Two heavy china sandwich plates clattered onto the marble surface. A tall, powerful man with dark skin and a concerned expression rose from his chair. Kara, startled, put her hands on Edward's shoulders, looked in his eyes with an expression of shock turning to surprise, turning, at last, to recognition. "Edward!"

“Yes, yes! I’m been looking for you for weeks. Weeks! Everywhere. Library, directories, asking students. And here you are!” Giddy with joy, he bumped into one of the counter stools.

“There a problem, Kara?” That was the black Old Stock fellow, very large and rather a heavy presence.

“No, no, Austin. Edward’s an old friend. From _ home.” At her introduction, they shook hands warily. Austin was clearly displeased to meet Edward, who, without eyes for anyone but Kara, found him an irrelevance and a distraction. “Austin is in IT, studying programming and computer systems,” Kara said brightly. When the men continued to glower at each other in silence, she mentioned that Edward had worked in resource management.

“What time do you get finished?” Edward asked abruptly.

“Not until six, but work’s flexible. We’re pretty well done now with lunch. We could sit for a bit.”

She came around the counter as if to join Austin’s table, but Edward took her arm. To sit beside the glowering Austin and these other strangers would be unendurable. Even to sit inside was impossible when the sun was shining and he was so full of joy. “Let’s walk instead; it’s nice out today.”

With the briefest hesitation Kara unfastened her apron and called to someone in the kitchen that she would be back momentarily. Edward held the door for her, and as soon as it closed behind them, he threw his arm around her and kissed her. “I’ve looked for you such a long time.”

“Was that why _”

“Of course. I knew you were here,” he said. “I came here to find you.”

“Oh, Edward!” She took his arm. “Such a risk. For me.” For a moment, tears in her eyes, she seemed overcome, and his hopes soared. He’d had a moment, just the tiniest instant in the café, when he wondered if she was really happy to see him, if she was the same, if, most awful of all, she had forgotten just what they’d meant to each other. There were gaps

and chutes in his consciousness, black holes of understanding. He realized that. But that he could forget Kara _ or that she could forget him _ was impossible. He could see that now, and he almost skipped for joy.

“Where are we going? We can’t be gone too long.” She sounded keyed up and anxious.

“You said work was flexible.” He drew her onto the college lawn and, sheltered by a large pink flowered rhododendron, kissed her again. Memory blossomed in the instant and brought all his body alert. “Where do you live? I share a room above a garage _ impossible at this time of day.”

“Oh, Edward, I need to get back before I lose my job. Meghan’s useless with the sandwiches.”

“The hell with the sandwiches.” He drew her into his arms again and things were progressing in an interesting way when she drew away sharply.

“We’re right by a classroom building. All the students know me.”

Edward glanced around. In his present state of mind the distant shrubbery, the cemetery he’d passed, even the shadows of one of the deep arcades merited consideration.

Kara slipped from his arms. “When are you off work?”

“Mornings and early afternoon. I’m free Sunday and Monday.”

“I come in around nine a.m.,” she said with what sounded like regret.

“I’ll come for lunch every day. I’ll see you then.” He took her hand eagerly.

“Come for dinner Sunday. You can meet my friends. You’ll like them.”

Meeting her friends was not at all Edward’s priority, but her smile was so sweet and the idea gave her so much pleasure that he arranged his face as best he could and said, “All right. That will be good.”

“Sunday is better than Monday, because Mondays I have rehearsal. But you can come see us,” she added when she saw his disappointment.

“Rehearsal?”

“I’m in a play. I get to sing, too. They don’t sing here as much as we do, Edward, so they think I’m terrific.” Her confiding tone was the first acknowledgement of their anomalous status, of their bond, and, reassured, he put his arm around her shoulders. When she turned back toward the café, he did not resist.

“The play’s such fun,” she said.

“What is it about?”

“It’s a famous old play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and I have such a good role: I’m the step-daughter who winds up with an assignation with her step- father! Big melodrama! There’s a little singing and dancing and my music is lovely.” She started humming a melody, sweet and wistful, with unfamiliar intervals.

Edward could see that she was happy, Melankol defeated, her *feet on dry land*, as the old saying went. That was good, a relief, although as they walked back along the sidewalk beside the college’s high iron fences, he wished she had said, *Come in for lunch everyday; stop by as soon as you get up; I want to see you every minute*. Instead, she was talking about the play, about this little theater, “a wonderful space” with fun colleagues. She worked at The Gallows, she said, so that she would have time for the rehearsals.

They were only yards from the café when Edward asked what he had not wanted, had not dreamed of needing, to ask. “You are glad to see me, aren’t you, Kara?”

“Yes,” she said, without looking at him, “but it’s a bit of a shock. Didn’t you feel a shock when you saw me? Just at first?”

“I felt joy,” he said.

“Oh, Edward.” When she turned to him, she had tears in her eyes. She pressed his hand and kissed him. “I have to go, really I do. One person can’t work the counter alone. Come, come Sunday. Early’s fine. Four, five. You can help me cook.”

He hugged her again, quick and hard, then she was hurrying to the café, turning, waving from the door, gone. Edward stood readjusting his breathing and remembering the touch of her breasts, the long curve of her back. Her hair smelled different, as if it had picked

up the spicy smell of the café and some unfamiliar soap. And otherwise? Was she the same? Edward alternated between euphoria and doubt all the way downtown to the restaurant. Yes, she was the same, lovely as ever but healthy and happy, like the Kara he had known in the early days. That would be one block. By the next, he could feel the black obverse of euphoria, the fearful doubt which haunted his whole venture. She was not the same, she had lost her eagerness to see him, she was sorry he had come.

At one point Edward felt so distraught he actually turned back toward the café, but caught himself halfway past the long college lawns. She had, after all, been here longer than he had. She had found a sort of life, just as he had; she had made new acquaintances, new friends. Perhaps more than friends, a treacherous doubt suggested: He could hear the dark man asking, *There a problem, Kara*, as he rose from his chair, protective and perhaps possessive. But no, Edward told himself, she couldn't have forgotten so quickly, she couldn't and she hadn't. She'd said, *They don't sing here as much as we do*; she remembered that, so she remembered a different past, most likely as he did, without detail or color or much more than the fact of a hidden history. She'd had a surprise, even a shock with his arrival; she needed time, and he would just have to tread carefully.

Although it pained him to wait even a day, Edward decided that he wouldn't turn up for lunch as he longed to do; he'd stay away from the café and arrive as invited on Sunday, and then _ then things would be all right. He was sure of it, though it was ironic that, in his innocence, he'd once believed everything would be clear once he found Kara. Not likely. He'd have to find a way back into her life, and he would. He told himself that as he made his way toward the restaurant, and repeated it while he bussed the tables, and reminded himself again when he stood, trim and neat in his bus boy's white shirt and his light pants on the porch of a brick and shingled three family house very like the one that had sheltered him and Hector the night of the raid. He pushed the doorbell and heard a chime deep inside, then footsteps, hurrying just short of a run.

“Edward. Come in, come in. Oh, for me?” She took the flowers (painstakingly culled from Saturday night’s tables at the restaurant) eagerly, then leaned over and kissed his cheek, as if to say, *you remembered*. “They’re beautiful.”

The foyer was a high, square space with a complicated wooden staircase rising in tiers to the upper floors. A bicycle shared one corner along with several soccer balls and an unfamiliar type of game stick. There were shopping baskets, two cartons of beer can empties, a laundry bag, a table laden with books and magazines, and, in a row of near the door, a variety of hats and jackets both feminine and masculine. The wood floor was worn and dusty, and the air of clutter and improvisation was compounded by the penetrating bass lines of competing stereo systems on the upper stories, and, somewhere closer by, the high sounds of a flute.

“Excuse the house,” Kara said in a breezy way that seemed new. “We’re all supposed to pitch in, but the longer the semester goes, the worse the housekeeping. I’m cook today, so no worries.”

She led the way into the kitchen, big, as many ancient rooms seemed to be, and rather untidy, with ugly brown cabinets, and much stained linoleum and appliances. Kara found a vase for her flowers and set them on the table, which held an assortment of vegetables and a bag of rice. Nervous, and uncertain quite where to begin and how much he might take for granted, Edward lifted one of the cabbages and pretended an interest in the squashes and some fine hard onions. “It’s hard to find vegetables where I eat.”

“You don’t have kitchen access?”

He shook his head.

“I didn’t at first.” She was silent for a moment and though Edward longed to know all her adventures, she just shook her head. “This is a nice group,” she said. “We each cook once a week, though I usually trade off cleaning and cook more often. You can help me prepare if you want.”

He took off his jacket and began pulling withered leaves from the cabbages. "I'm working in a restaurant," he said.

She gave a soft laugh. "You never cooked much."

"I have to take what I can get. Without papers."

"You need to get papers," she said in a serious tone. "Though you won't be asked except for work, because your Ancient English sounds perfect. Mine, too, don't you think?"

Edward detected the barest hint of her old anxiety. "You're perfect in every way." He leaned over and kissed the back of her neck.

"We need to get this ready." Her regretful tone made Edward smile. He'd been right not to press her, and he got busy at top speed with the knife, chopping and dicing so fast that, reading his mind, she laughed. She seemed much more relaxed; perhaps it had just been shock the other day, the surprise of seeing someone from 'home'.

Soon the others began straggling in: Meghan, a tall, round faced girl with big capable white hands. She was the flute player and Kara's friend at the café. "Meghan found me this place," Kara said. She told Meghan and the others that Edward was a school friend thinking about moving to the area. He was "between jobs" and "working in a restaurant," which seemed to satisfy them. Soon Andrew, a lanky engineering student with frizzy auburn hair under a team cap, sat down at the table and began picking at the raw vegetables, while filling Kara in on the details of some TV show they both enjoyed. Next came Sam, small and neat with a lot of long blonde hair and a compact swimmer's physique; she was a physical therapy student, who entered with Matt, the owner of one of the booming stereos. He wrote advanced poetry, Kara said, and he smelled of the cigarettes that he smoked out on the porch.

John, thin and dark, was a business major and an athlete. He arrived laden with books and almost jumpy with excess energy. Before dinner, he persuaded Sam to go out to the back yard, where they tossed a white rubber ball gently between them, catching it in the webbing of their game sticks. Edward stood by the sink, watching them trot back and forth, struggling,

with much shouting and laughing, to keep the ball from bouncing into the neighbor's yard or endangering the lavish expanse of glass on every house wall. Every so often, they were able to keep the catch going for a considerable time, and then they were quiet, as if wholly concentrated in the moment, in motion and balance and reciprocity. Their game seemed to Edward the very image of happiness, but his mind only rested there for a moment, before, by a train of associations probably triggered by John's dark features, he returned to the afternoon at the café. "And your other friend," he asked Kara. "What was his name, Austin? Does he live here?"

"No, he lives at his sister's on the other side of town. He comes by sometimes for dinner but I don't think he's coming tonight."

Edward studied the lawn outside and smiled.

At dinner, the students crowded around the table noisy and cheerful with prodigious appetites. Edward was uneasy at first, expecting questions and awkward conversations, but they accepted him without curiosity. Sam did ask if he'd known Kara long. Forever, he said. And John wondered if he'd heard the Red Sox score. He hadn't. Edward exchanged few words with Matt on poetry, and he was on the verge of defending narrative verse when he caught himself. What did he know about such things but the fact of them and certain phrases: *Pull, pull, pull for safety*, which he associated, irrationally, it struck him, with sunshine and fun. Instead, he smiled and nodded at Matt's pronouncements on the state of modern poetry, so that once the poet gave up on him, Edward was able to turn his full attention to Kara, seated next to him, so close he could detect the faint fennel and cinnamon odor of the café.

"This is good," he said, barely more than a whisper.

"I made it for you."

Happiness descended like a radiant bubble, enclosing them safely. Despite the others noisy around them, passing bread and plates of rice and vegetables and jars of hot sauce, joking, laughing, arguing, Edward felt an extraordinary intimacy with Kara. He had the sense, at once peculiar and enjoyable, that they were invisible to the others, that their words went

unheard beyond their ears. He went so far as to ask if Sam and John were Committed _ he couldn't for the moment remember the Ancient English word _ and Kara said 'no' and explained about roommates and renting etiquette, which interested Edward but alarmed him too: Austin's absence might not be such a good sign after all. She began telling him about the café, about the play, about some trifling but amusing misadventures, which he countered with the Migra raid. When she laid her hand on his arm as he described how he and Hector had escaped, all his doubts vanished. She was his Kara again, his very own.

It was Matt's turn for cleanup and Meghan, who seemed a good sort, got out a dishtowel and helped with the drying. The others scattered to books or TV, a picture machine of the sort Edward had noticed through some windows. He stood in the doorway for a moment, fascinated, though the images moved so fast he felt his perception falling behind, then Kara touched his back.

“Would you like to see my room?”

He put his arm around her and they went up the creaking stairs. Posters for concerts were plastered on the wall and a philodendron with yellowing leaves decorated the window sill on the first landing. Edward was aware of the cracks in the plaster, smudges of paint on the white risers, dust motes floating in the low, evening light, myriad details made sharper by the sound of his blood pounding behind his ears. Up a second flight, then a short corridor with rooms on both sides. Kara opened a door and he saw flowered curtains, a mattress on a low platform, a chair and a table, all perfectly neat. Kara's uniform for the café was hanging in one corner, along with a winter coat and a shirt, which he guessed was pretty much her wardrobe.

“The windows look out into the trees,” she said and just for an instant, he remembered another apartment, a view toward the Highlands, before he took her into his arms. Onto the mattress, untangling clothing, her hair spilling over his hands, her shoulders, the low reddish light as he touched her face, then an ecstatic darkness filled with the surge of their bodies, strong enough, strong enough surely, to carry them both away and home and

back to the lives they left behind. He didn't open his eyes until it was half dark; Kara's bright curtains were deep shades of gray, and the rectangle of the window held only the faintest light. He thought for a moment that it was morning elsewhere, *before*, before with Kara, for he could hear her quiet breath and feel the curve of her flank, then he heard the high reedy music of the flute and the metallic laughter of the TV and was astonished that such a discharge of energy and emotion had not been sufficient, that they were still in Kara's house in the ancient city.

She felt him stirring and rolled over to put her arm around his waist. "This is good," she said. "This is perfect with you here. Or nearly perfect _ you need papers to be safe."

"Kara, you're well; we're together. We can go anywhere. We don't need to stay."

She sat up, her figure pallid in the moonlight, her dappled face bewitching. "But I want to stay," she said. "I never want to leave this place."