

Chapter 1

She awakes early, thinking about a cardinal. She saw one perched on her neighbour's fence yesterday, but he flew away before she could get close enough to look. He was ruby against the early snow. She wanted to hear his song, though it was dull enough for a pretty bird. She dreamed about birds last night, an old dream from her childhood where she is flying away from trouble. The bed is hot as a furnace. She hears a whispery sound, rhythmic like breathing, muffled. The bed shifts.

The sound continues, low and undisturbed. She rolls over, props herself on an elbow, looks. The breathing figure is completely covered by quilt. She doesn't know who it is. She has never invited anyone to share this room, it is hers.

She slides from the bed, taking care not to jostle the slumbering figure. On the other side of the bed is the drawer where she keeps her knife. She drops to her knees, crawls over. A cool breeze fans her skin. She is naked. She never sleeps without clothes.

She opens the drawer. Her knife glints crimson in the ivory morning light. Its blades are folded, like still wings.

She unsheathes a blade, stands, peers into the bed. The figure shifts again.
Axel.

A mop of black, wavy, familiar hair protrudes from the quilt. It's Axel. How in the name of the holy mother did he get there? Axel. Christ, she might have stabbed him without looking. Her knees tremble as she shuts the weapon drawer. Her hands tremble as she slips into her bathrobe. Bathing, she tries to remember what happened in the night. Nothing comes to mind.

Back in the room, she leans over the man who is sprawled in a sleeping heap on her bed. "Axel, get up."

He pulls a pillow over his face. *I could tighten that pillow over his nose and mouth, one, two.* She joggles his shoulder.

Knobby fingers, their scent musty like seaweed, tickle her jaw and she rubs her chin along the palm behind them. He asks if he has time to shower.

"If you're quick," she answers.

Sipping her coffee, she hears him get up and start the shower. Too naked, she thinks, as she rummages through the kitchen for some breakfast food.

People get too naked with each other. She pours the dregs from yesterday's wine down the drain.

"The Americans of waste, that's who we are." Axel is practicing a new speech. as he showers, exhorting Canadians to care about producing more garbage than any other Western country. While he. pauses, Kendra dredges some oily peanut butter and a hunk of white cheddar from the fridge. He gave a speech like that the night she met him at the Earthsky benefit two years ago. She and Survivors were the main act. He was the stranger in the limp tweed jacket and faded jeans who mesmerized an entire amphitheatre with only words. The cheddar has nibble marks at the end, which she trims and saves.

Axel is arguing with himself, his voice travelling from bass to falsetto as he parodies questions he expects to hear from his audience and prepares his replies. "Maybe our volume is due to the depth of Canadian purity" (she can see the grin) "which widens our zone of garbage and narrows our zone of acceptability." He claims. he delivers. his best speeches in the shower. She thinks their most successful conversations occur then, too. Just last week, sitting on the toilet lid with layers of plastic curtain, pounding water, and humid shower. air protecting her from his lathered nakedness, she explained why she would still not sleep with him after two years. "I'm thirty-four years old," she said into the steaming hiss, "and I've never had a sexual relationship with anyone. I don't think I can. Not even with you."

Axel pads into the kitchen, towelling his hair. His wine terrycloth robe hangs like an old sock. "Over the moat, and into the fortress," he teases. He is referring to her bedroom. "It wasn't immutable after all."

A vision of him, blue-tongued, swinging from a noose in the basement, crosses her mind. She places a pitcher of hot milk in front of him.

"Did you dream?" He smears peanut butter on a piece of brown toast and gazes at her with inquisitive eyes, lustrous icy blue prisms that break the light into a thousand pieces, like his curiosity breaks up the world.

"Yes," she nods, grateful for a subject she can talk about. "I turned into a bird,. tinier than a sparrow, but larger than a hummingbird, small and swift and beautiful." A cardinal when she awoke. "I could fly anywhere. Not only in air, but through concrete, glass, storm clouds, anything. I think I could also fly across rime and .space, but I'm not sure. It's just a feeling. As if I could fly up and down my own life, and in and out different consciousnesses, my own and other people's too."

"And last night?"

"I flew for a while. Went skimming low and fast across some fields just to feel myself in flight. Then I came back and perched on a telephone wire. I think it was right outside the window." She pours some hot milk into her coffee. Axel taught her to do that.

"I used to dream that dream when I was a child. Night after night I'd fly. off into that blue-black silent bird world." She can hear her own voice drifting, fading, speaking the language of dreams. "It was such an eerie world. I could catch an air current and glide like an eagle, only further, until I was floating on my back in space, watching the soft lighted pathway. of the Milky Way." Remnants of the dream tug at her eyes, pulling them inward. She laughs abruptly. "I used to worry that I'd forget to come back. That when I did, I'd be dead."

"You certainly weren't dead last night."

His eyes would glitter like mucus-polished jewels if 1 forked them out.

"You were wonderful."

He means this as a compliment, she reminds herself desperately.

The jewelled eye prisms gleam at her from a fluffy bed of rice, a golden biryani.

He asks the question she's been dreading: "How was it for you?"

How can she tell him? Mutely, she shakes her head.

"I can't remember a thing."