

### 3rd and 110th

Tamzin Merchant

The man in the stolen overcoat offered death with his left hand.

I could tell it was stolen because it had the price tag still on it and a plastic security sensor stapled to the sleeve. Somewhere, I imagined, an alarm had screamed briefly as he'd bolted from the shop.

He said *You're getting to be an endangered species round here.*

Perhaps he'd snuck into cheesy B-movies to get out of this New York cold: stolen in, in his stolen overcoat, and now he was stealing lines from stolen stories.

I couldn't look the gun in the eye. I kept it in the edges of my vision like a snake that might spit.

Around us the winter lights of Third Avenue seemed to wheel like a carousel, all gold and playful and making me feel sick and young.

I said *I guess you want my purse.*

He held out a hand - his right - for it. It shook as if motion from all the traffic coming down through the arteries of the Park was oscillating up through his feet on the concrete sidewalk and agitating his body.

I was shaking just as much.

He said *You cold?*

I said *Yes.*

I said *You?*

He said *Yes.*

The gun said nothing.

I slid the purse down into the crook of my elbow and onto my wrist. My coat made my movements blunt. I held it out on my hand with the purse straps hanging over it, red against white. I'd forgotten my gloves.

He took the bag, weighed it thoughtfully and stuck the gun in his coat pocket. It was my time to run away.

Instead I watched as he peered into my purse, and felt he was peering into my opened chest through my skin, careful as a heart-surgeon. He reached a hand inside and pulled out my wallet. He handed me back the purse and I took it.

*Thank you,* I said.

He opened the wallet and took out a \$20.

*That's all I had in there,* I said.

As snow came down from the dark yellow sky he smiled.

He folded the bill and tucked it into the inner breast pocket of that big square-shouldered overcoat, closed the wallet neatly and handed it back.

*Thank you,* I said again, *Do you have a cigarette?*

He put his hand back in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled packet, tapped one out and lit it in his mouth. He handed it to me between his fingers and dragging on it felt like a kiss. The way he turned made it feel like a song. He walked away down the snowy avenue.

The swing doors were glass and bronze, burnished with light from inside.

My fingers were stinging with sudden warmth and nicotine.

I sat down on the floor of the elevator as it carried me upward.