

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



EXCEEDINGLY WELL MADE," SAID the man who was running a warm cloth over Edward's face, "a work of art, I would say – a surpassingly, unbelievably dirty work of art, but art nonetheless. And dirt can be dealt with. Just as your broken head has been dealt with."

Edward looked into the eyes of the man.

"Ah, there you are," the man said. "I can see that you are listening now. Your head was broken. I fixed it. I brought you back from the world of the dead."

My heart, thought Edward, my *heart* is broken.

"No, no. No need to thank me," the man said. "It's my job, quite literally. Allow me to introduce myself."

I am Lucius Clarke, doll mender. Your head ... may I tell you? Will it upset you? Well, I always say the truth must be met head-on, no pun intended. Your head, young sir, was in twenty-one pieces."

Twenty-one pieces? Edward repeated mindlessly. Lucius Clarke nodded. "Twenty-one," he said. "All modesty aside, I must admit that a lesser doll mender, a doll mender without my skills, might not have been able to rescue you. But let's not speak of what might have been. Let us speak instead of what is. You are whole. You have been pulled back from the brink of oblivion by your humble servant, Lucius Clarke." And here, Lucius Clarke put his hand on his chest and bowed deeply over Edward.

This was quite a speech to wake up to, and Edward lay on his back trying to absorb it. He was on a wooden table. He was in a room with sunshine pouring in from high windows. His head, apparently, had been in twenty-one pieces and now was put back together into one. He was not wearing a red suit. In fact, he had no clothes on at all. He was naked again. And he did not have wings.

And then he remembered: Bryce, the diner, Neal

swinging him through the air.

Bryce.

"You are wondering, perhaps, about your young friend," said Lucius, "the one with the continually running nose. Yes. He brought you here, weeping, begging for my assistance. 'Put him together again,' he said. 'Put him back together.'"

"I told him, I said, 'Young sir, I am a businessman. I can put your rabbit back together again. For a price. The question is, can you pay this price?' He could not. Of course, he could not. He said that he could not.

"I told him then that he had two options. Only two. The first option being that he seek assistance elsewhere. Option two was that I would fix you to the very best of my considerable abilities and then you would become mine – his no longer, but mine."

Here Lucius fell silent. He nodded, agreeing with himself. "Two options only," he said. "And your friend chose option two. He gave you up so that you could be healed. Extraordinary, really."

Bryce, thought Edward.

Lucius Clarke clapped his hands together. "But no worries, my friend. No worries. I fully intend to

keep my side of the bargain. I will restore you to what I perceive to be your former glory. You shall have rabbit-fur ears and a rabbit-fur tail. Your whiskers will be repaired and replaced, your eyes repainted to a bright and stunning blue. You will be clothed in the finest of suits.

“And then, some day, I will reap the return on my investment in you. All in good time. All in good time. In the doll business, we have a saying: there is real time and there is doll time. You, my fine friend, have entered doll time.”