

CHAPTER THREE

Smack! The puck crashed onto center ice, and Peter angled it off the boards, hoping the center was far enough forward to get it.

The center drew the goalie out, and the fierce little ferret of a left wing skated behind the net. The center fed him the puck, and by the time the goalie got back into the crease, the left wing had wrapped around and shot the go-ahead goal. In celebration, he and the center tapped their sticks on each other's helmets.

Peter hung back. He wasn't a regular. The next week, the next year, the ferret and the center still would be slapping pucks down the ice at five on Sunday mornings. For them, the goal meant more glue in their New-Bristol-lifer bond, and he wasn't part of that.

The referee motioned him over for a face-off against a vicious puck hog with a braid snaking out of his helmet. He blew beer breath at Peter as they waited for the puck to drop.

Peter got it and skated two steps before a brutal stick check somewhere in the region of his seventh thoracic vertebra sent him sprawling. Damn, there was nothing to do but get up. His legs felt like jelly. At the other end of the rink the puck hog was maneuvering in easy syncopation with his own center whose beard hung over his jersey like a red-gray rag. He shot and scored, erasing the goal the ferret had just made. In the lobby, figure skaters like the ones Peter used to ogle as a teenager were running in place, waiting to get on the ice. Suddenly the puck shot past him and caromed off the boards. The ferret trapped it behind the net. And then the braid was there, too, elbowing the ferret in the chest, and finally getting the end of his stick under the ferret's chin, giving a vicious jab. The ferret collapsed and the braid skated out from behind the net with the puck. Peter's went for it, got it, and drove it between the braid's legs, knocking

him down. The ferret had recovered, got the puck, and shot. It went in. The referee's whistle screamed. Down the ice, Peter heard the Zamboni revving up.

"We got thirty-three seconds, Steve," the braid shouted in the machine's direction.

Thirty-three seconds could be critical, Peter knew. The protocol had changed since he was a teenager. Now, in addition to paying for ice time and beer, everyone put ten dollars into a kitty for whoever scored with a bonus for whoever got an assist or scored last. Thirty-three seconds could mean more beer money for later in the week. But there was no budging the Zamboni driver. The game was over. Peter got off the ice just before the braid.

The rink was so old it didn't have proper locker rooms, only sections of the lobby draped with blankets so the innocent eyes of the figure skaters wouldn't be sullied by the sight of hockey players' sweaty bodies.

The ferret was stumbling over sticks, helmets, gloves, bags and skates, trying to divvy up the kitty. He came up to Peter grinning as if he were bestowing an incalculable gift. "Here, you got an assist." He handed him twenty dollars. "You from around here?"

"Used to be," Peter said. The braid had opened a cooler and was tossing beers around.

"Thought you looked familiar. Where'd you go to school?" the ferret asked.

"Allegheny."

"Before it was Consolidated or after?"

"After."

"Me, too. Thought you looked familiar."

A can flew past Peter's ear and he turned to see the guy with the red beard grab it.

"Good catch," said the braid, and then to Peter: "Want one?"

“Sure.” Figure skaters were darting over the ice like barn swallows. His beer came high and wide and Peter was still in his skates. He missed it and had to lumber over to fish it out from under a bench.

“Sorry about that,” the braid grinned.

“No problem.” The whole game Peter heard some sort or low muttering every time he took the puck off one of them, a hostility beyond what you’d expect to be meted out to an outsider. But he’d chosen to ignore it, wanting to believe that they were just pissed off because he played better than they’d thought he would. He started unlacing his skates.

“So where are you from when you’re not from New Bristol?” the braid asked.

“Baltimore.”

“Baltimore?” The braid barking out the “BAL,” making Baltimore sound like an outrageous, unthinkable place.

“Christ, Baltimore.” Red Beard shook his head and let out a low whistle. “Jeeze Louise. How’d you stand it?” His equipment bag had a “Remember Billy Reilly” bumper sticker plastered on the side.

Braid and Red Beard were a team, Peter sensed, feeding each other assists on the ice and off. “Baltimore’s okay,” he said.

“It’s not so bad. I got an uncle lives there. It’s got the Orioles and Ravens,” the ferret said.

“Yeah, I’ll say. It’s got them other birds, too. Them Black birds,” Red Beard said.

“Yeah, that’s what it’s got,” Braid said. A mean Greek chorus of chortles snickered through the changing area. Peter put his skates into his bag and found that someone had pushed his shoes way under the bench. When he leaned backwards for them his back felt like it would

crack at the spot where the stick had hit it. And his beer fell off the bench. It rolled into Red Beard's Billy Reilly bumper sticker.

"You sure have a hard time holding your beer," he said, but Peter didn't answer. He started putting on his shoes. Braid started whistling "Bye, Bye Black Bird."

"Yeah, you got to call them black birds or jungle bunnies, or somethin'," Red Beard said. "'Cause 'niggers' hurts their feelings."

Peter grabbed his gear and stick. He hadn't tied his right shoe, but he couldn't be bothered. He had to get out. He should have guessed it. They probably knew Larry Durham was his stepfather, and in New Bristol Larry Durham was either famous or infamous, depending on your perspective. The trial where Larry defended the accused killer of Billy Reilly had been five years ago, but in New Bristol time, five years was yesterday.

Peter wrestled his bag and stick out the door and waddled across the parking lot, cursing that he couldn't just beep his second-hand, ten-year-old Mazda open. Someone called, "Hey, you forgot your beer," and a can came sailing. Peter ducked.

Damn, they'd been setting him up the whole game. The slams into the wall. The tripping. The check across his back. He wished one of them had gotten hurt so there'd been a reason to use his "doctor." How sweet it would have been, one of them with a puck in his eye, or better, a heart attack, and to stand over him, watching him trying to lift his jersey, his padding, even his own ribs off his desperate, fluttering heart, and to say, "Do you need some help? Well, I'm your doctor. Me, the jungle bunny's brother."

But he'd done what was sensible. Any fool knows they want you to go after one of them, so they can all jump on. All his life he'd had to fight the misperception that because he was big, he was a bull when all he'd ever wanted was to get along. But now maybe he'd gone along too

far. They'd ridiculed his brother, his stepfather, and he'd done what? Nothing. What kind of man doesn't defend his family? And what was worse, any of those goons would have defended his own to his last breath.

He drove toward his mother's. The only lights, gauzy pinpricks through the mist from farmhouse kitchens or barns. To the east, where the night was lightening to gray the mountains emerged as round-shouldered silhouettes. But to the west, the sloping valley floor paid homage to the higher range still hiding itself in the dark. Even the grade of Ludman Turnpike held a westward slant.

Peter steered with his knees and dug his fingers into his supraspinatus muscles. If they knotted any tighter, his shoulders would swallow his ears. It seemed impossible that less than twenty-four hours ago, he'd had only two worries: whether accepting the Ravens' tickets from Little's father was ethical. And whether he'd make it home from Baltimore in time for his mother's party. Now Baltimore seemed like a lifetime ago, and what was worse, he didn't know whose lifetime it was. The twenty-seven year old's who burrowed into his research? Or the asswipe's who let goons make fun of his family?

Through the mist he could make out the plumb lines of Ruth Bledsoe's stone farmhouse and the restored log cabin where her mother lived. Maybe he could talk to Ruth about Joachim before he left for Baltimore. Or maybe not. He wanted to have one more try at talking to Joachim himself. Hell, he could get back to Baltimore a little late. The important thing was to make Joachim understand that he had to get his act together.

By the Bledsoes' field, Ludman's Turnpike dipped, and the mist collected into a dense pool. He had to swerve to avoid a figure wearing a crimson anorak and flapping its arms to get him to stop.

Every physician's nightmare, stopping to help someone and having them find out you're a doctor, and then being expected to perform a miracle, only the emergency isn't in your specialty. He was training to be a pediatric cardiologist. What could he do for what had to be some sort of barnyard mangling? The fellow in crimson, with his dark complexion and silky hair looked too exotic to be a Pennsylvania farmer, but still, out here, what else could he be? Peter lowered his window.

"Quick, there's a girl over there." The fellow waved vaguely in the direction of the Bledsoes' "A girl. She's hurt I think."

"Hurt how?"

"I don't know. I saw her lying there. Come. Come, quickly." He sprinted away before Peter could tell him to fish out his cell phone from his hockey gear while he went to see the girl. He calculated: the suspenders on his hockey pants would work as a tourniquet. If he had to, to prevent shock, he'd commandeer that crimson anorak. Then the wind started toying with something white, lifting it from the ground and dropping it. Even from a distance, he knew what it was. Angel hair.

"I saw her here. I don't know . . . I was walking," the fellow was saying. "I do that, walk before my sermons. You know, to collect myself." When the fellow stooped to the girl, Peter saw he wore an Anglican collar.

She lay on her back, her body twisted, and below her jacket, her baby doll dress hiked up. There was no hope of a pulse. Peter could see that. She was in rigor. Even her jacket was stiff. But, still, he had to try. He listened for her heart. Nothing. Checked her eyes. Nothing. Still, he had to try. He'd been a doctor long enough to know that the precise nanosecond of transition from life to not-life, that secret death keeps to itself. The bullet had hit her forehead; her eyes still

held dim surprise. He moved her head just a little: the back of her skull was gone. On her panties, he saw a stain that looked like menstrual blood but couldn't be sure.

"I found this," the priest said, holding out a scrap of paper. "I don't know. I was just walking, rehearsing my sermon. I looked up at a hawk. And then, when I looked down, I saw her. I found this in her pocket. I thought it might be something."

Peter took it: New Bristol Women's Health Services, Nov 5, 11 a.m.

"I know her, but I don't know which one she is," the fellow was saying. "Two sisters . . . they come to St. David's. I'm sorry. I get them mixed up. The Grymes girls . . . I don't know which she is." The fellow had a clipped way of talking, too melodic to be British, but close.

"This is Ashley," Peter said.

"Of course. Ashley. Ashley and Audra. This. . . this. I don't know what to do. I'm sorry, I haven't a phone."

Peter was about to tell him to get his own phone in his hockey gear, when he saw Ruth Bledsoe coming across the field., wearing a puffy vest over a sapphire robe and looking like an Anatolian princess. About her an Irish setter leapt and barked in mindless joy at the morning.

"Pandora!" Ruth kept calling. "Pandora! Pandora, come."

But her calls to the dog set off an implacable escalation. Every fresh corpse Peter had ever seen gave off the sense of a lingering essence, as if the person were still present just beyond reach, and the dog's barks were puncturing whatever tissue-thin sense of Ashley remained. The dead girl's eyes begged him to close them, but he knew he shouldn't. He hated denying her that.

"We had a conversation," the priest was saying.

"What?"

“Just last Sunday, we had an unusual conversation. About Christmas carols. She wanted to know what Christmas carols I was planning.”

“Is something wrong?” Ruth called.

“Don’t come any nearer,” Peter shouted. “Not with the dog.”

But Ruth must not have heard. She kept on, and her dog, too.

It bounded toward him. He tried catching it, but the setter might have been one of the circling crows for all the attention it paid him. The priest finally managed to grab its collar.

Ruth moved toward Ashley like an automaton. Even before reaching her, the therapist’s knees were bending, her robe billowing out like a sapphire sail. As if they radiated some healing force, her palms traced gentle air ellipses over the body.

“Ashley. Ashley,” she cooed. “Ashley, what’s happened? Oh, Ashley.”

“I think she’s been shot.” Peter said. “We have to call the police. I have to get my phone.” He tried to help Ruth up, but she stayed on her knees.

“She’s a patient of mine.”

“Your patient?”

“Every Wednesday.” Ruth’s eyes were as empty as those of a cancer victim who’s just received such bad news she can’t remember her name.

Peter took the dog from the priest. “I have to get my phone,” he repeated.

Ruth had gotten up. Her robe was smeared with mud, but her body had straightened, the academician’s daughter reasserting herself. “Use ours. Ours in the house. We still have a landline.”

All the way across the meadow, the thawing field sucked at her big green boots, and when her husband stepped onto the porch, Peter noticed how she honed toward him.

“Call 911, Warren.” She shouted. “I have to get Mother. Call 911. There’s been an accident”

Warren Bledsoe took the dog from Peter, set it on the ground, and twisted its collar until the animal’s tongue hung out. “What sort of accident? What the hell’s going on?”

Ruth started going toward Madeline Harmon’s log cabin. “Just call 911, Warren. I have to get mother.”

“What sort of accident? Has someone been hurt?” Bledsoe called after her, but she didn’t seem to hear.

“Ashley Grymes,” Peter told him. “It looks as if she’s been shot.”

“My God. Did you say shot?”

“It looks that way.”

“My God. You hear about these accidents all the time. Crazy hunters. Half the time they’re so pie-eyed they can’t tell their trigger finger from their asshole.” Peter followed him inside. Bledsoe called the police with a phone in the hall while Peter went into the parlor that doubled as Ruth’s waiting room. Out the window, he saw the priest appearing to pray over the dead girl.

Bledsoe came in from the hallway. “The police are on their way. I told them that you said someone’s been shot. They started asking all sorts of stupid questions. I just told them to get here. My, God, this is so awful. Poor Richard and Cynthia.”

Bledsoe kept droning on, but to Peter the music professor sounded like someone talking from behind a heavy, velvet curtain. Everything seemed a dimension removed. The pictures in their silver frames. The French doors to Ruth’s office. The shelves of books. He felt incorporeal,

as though he were watching, but not seeing. He focused on the bronze statue of Mercury on the mantle and made himself burn the image of winged ankles into his cornea.

Bledsoe kept going on. “These damned hunting accidents. A friend of mine in Carlisle nearly lost his wife when she went to find pinecones for a wreath. Some of these local yokels, they’re so liquored up, yet there they are, tramping around with guns.”

Peter just let him rattle on. If Warren Bledsoe needed to believe it was a hunting accident, let him. But he knew otherwise. During his rotation in Baltimore’s shock trauma unit he’d seen the damage handguns do, mostly to the flesh of young Black men. The bullet enters cleanly, then rips its way out, blasting every organ in its path. Ashley’s wound, where he had touched the back of her head, felt like one of those.

Bledsoe went to the window. “Well, wouldn’t you know.”

Peter saw a dark green SUV heading from the direction of Madeline Harmon’s cabin. It drove across the back end of the field toward a break in the tree line bordering Stevens Road.

“Anthony,” Bledsoe said. “His grandmother is my mother-in-law’s housekeeper, Some Sundays he drives Florence to church. She stays overnight here more and more, now that Madeline is—how should I put it?—failing. If Florence is with her grandson that means Ruth’s alone with Madeline. I better go check.”

Peter saw blue lights strobing through the scrub along Stevens Road.

Bledsoe went to the hallway, then turned back. “Listen, tell the police I’ll be right there. Just let me make certain my mother-in-law’s okay.”

Peter heard the back door close. He knew he should go out to the body but didn’t. The summer Larry Durham left his mother, to avoid her wrapping the mantle of man-of-the-house

around his fifteen-year-old shoulders, he had begun sleeping any time he wasn't eating. But then his mother had read an article on teenage depression and decided he needed to see Ruth Bledsoe.

The room where he had waited for her had changed so little. Everything orderly and fine. He almost expected to hear one of Warren's students playing "Green Sleeves" in the studio below. He ran his fingers over the book spines. *Anna Karenina*. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. the one on the constellations Ruth had found him reading.

"You're interested in the heavens, Peter?" she'd said. "Well, we'll have to get you up to the widow's walk. Warren has a telescope up there. He uses the downstairs for his students, but he composes up in the widow's walk. It's more inspirational."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. For a few months he'd dated a fellow intern named Jin Khang. He had found her one evening staring out the window at the end of the hospital corridor. When he asked her what she was doing, she'd told him, "Giving myself a respite. Just look at that sunset. I know it's just light refracting off all the crap in the atmosphere, but it's still beautiful." A gentle leave taking and a knack for giving himself one-minute respites were the gifts Jin left him.

He breathed in once, twice and tried relaxing his shoulders. He'd come home to horror, but it wasn't *his* horror. Ashley. Joachim's snarky disaffection. They would impinge on his life only as much as he let them. The question was, where was the limit? When he opened his eyes the room's harmony held no answers. He went out.

A young policewoman was talking to the priest, and an even younger cop who looked like his high school diploma was still in the frame shop was stringing crime scene tape. A silver sedan with blue flashing lights was almost upon them.

The policewoman interrupted the priest to turn to young cop. “Kenny, Bushmiller’s almost here.” Peter saw them trade commiserative looks. She and Kenny formed one unit, , and whoever they called Bushmiller was another.

A long, lanky middle-aged man unfolded himself from the sedan. Before he had even closed its door he was saying, “Now let’s see if it’s possible to screw things up any more than you two have. Jeeze, trample around here a little more, why don’t ya?” A large turquoise and silver belt buckle rode his paunch, and his mustache didn’t droop quite far enough to camouflage his underdeveloped chin. “Why don’t ya bring in a herd of cows? Or Clydesdales, maybe. Call and see if you can get some Mummies from Philly, for Christ’s sake.”

Like something abandoned, Ashley’s body lay on the field. Like something this Bushmiller person would get around to when he was good and ready. Establishing the pecking order, that was what was important to the Bushmillers of the world. Peter wanted him to cover the girl’s face, to have the decency to pull down her baby-doll dress. Even the crows were screaming, but Bushmiller went to the priest and started questioning him.

When Peter’s turn came, as soon as he dropped in his “Doctor,” he felt contempt sputter through Bushmiller’s mustache. For the cop, any “Professor” this or “Dean” that was raw meat.

“So what, Doc? You’re runnin’ around New Bristol dressed up like that for what? Halloween?”

“Hockey.”

“Hockey?”

“Yeah. Pick-up.”

“So tell me what happened, Hockey Doc.” The cop was enjoying himself.

Should he go back to the little girls who'd lost their rabbit? Or to the performance at his mother's party? Peter decided to limit himself to what had transpired on the field. Anything about the party would drag in Joachim, and he sensed that the less Joachim was linked to Ashley the better.

"So tell me, Doc, you couldn't tell she was dead? You had to touch her? You couldn't just tell by lookin'? You bein' Hockey Doc and all?"

"I just needed to make certain."

"Of what?"

"Of no hope." That answer, Peter thought, would get this Bushmiller person to focus on Ashley. Instead, the cop twisted his mouth, rubbed his mustache, and asked him why he was in New Bristol.

"My mother's birthday."

"And who's that? Your mother?"

"Kit. Katherine Durham."

"So you're one of Kit's boys. Well. Well." A wave rose and fell along the cop's mustache as his tongue traveled over his upper teeth, apparently finding something tasty. Bushmiller asked how long he was going to be in New Bristol, and Peter told him until that evening.

Finally, dismissed, Peter lumbered toward his car, his swishing hockey pants making him feel like a five year old swaddled in a snowsuit. He couldn't get into his old Mazda fast enough, but once he did, he didn't want to go home. He didn't know how to tell Joachim about Ashley. . He rubbed his stubble and let the car idle in first.

Chapter Three, Sunday Morning

Suddenly, the policewoman and the young cop alerted like hunting dogs. There were shouts, faint at first, then louder. Around the corner of the Bledsoes' farmhouse, Madeline Harmon came running, her gray hair streaming. Warren Bledsoe after her. Nightmare figures under a bright October morning sky.