

## CHAPTER FOUR

A sense of party past curdled the living room. It caked the rims of plastic cups and tinged the edges of the cheese. Peter passed through the dining room where the leaves around the silver cake slicer lay dried and curled.

His mother sat in the kitchen, staring into a MacMaster College coffee mug. She looked so defeated that Peter thought she'd already heard about Ashley. But, no, her party's disastrous end had been enough to sap her. He hated giving her more bad news, but Ashley's death was probably spreading all over New Bristol, and he didn't want her hearing it from Nannie Albright or TV.

She got up, went to the refrigerator, set out some eggs.

"Mom, don't fix anything."

She reached for a bowl. "Go wake your brother. He'll want to see you before you leave and that way I won't have to cook twice. It's a good thing you're a doctor. Getting up before noon on a Sunday could send him into shock. Do you have any idea what time he came in last night?"

The night before, he'd fallen asleep in his old chair and been wakened by a car door slamming. Only he hadn't been alert enough to say any of the things he'd intended to Joachim, who'd just brushed past him. "I saw him come in but don't know what time."

His mother broke an egg on the little yellow bowl Peter remembered dyeing Easter eggs in.

"There's been . . . something horrible's happened. Sit down, Mom."

She took a jar of jelly from the refrigerator.

“Ashley Grymes is dead.”

“What?” She held the jar and hung onto the refrigerator’s open door.

“Ashley’s dead. She’s been shot. Maybe it was an accident. It happened near the Bledsoes. I saw her. That’s where I’ve been.”

She put the jelly on the counter but let the refrigerator door hang open, as if closing it would seal herself into a new reality. “The Grymeses have to know. Someone has to tell them.” She started toward the backdoor.

“Mom, no . . . don’t go over there. Leave it to the police. We have to tell Joachim.”

“You go. I have to wash my face.” She started toward the little powder room off the hallway. “You go up. If he hears it from me, he’ll always hold it against me. He’ll say I didn’t do it right. That I talked in riddles. Or was too blunt. Just let me wash my face.”

He waited until he heard water running. He gave her what she wanted, a way out of being the bad-news carrier. He’d seen the mothers on the pediatric ward whose worries transformed them into demons of domesticity, knitting with the passion of Madame DeFarge. Well, his mother retreated into vanity. Once her preening like Madame Pompadour had driven him crazy, but now at twenty-seven, he could live with it.

The important thing was to find the right words to tell Joachim. And then to be with him, all afternoon, maybe even stay all night if Joachim wanted that. Sure, he could get up at five and be back in Baltimore by nine. What was important letting Joachim know that someone was there for him.

He switched on the Mickey Mouse lamp on Joachim’s dresser. And the rapper in a pink fur coat and silver G-string stared back at him from over an empty bed.

“Joachim!” He had to be in the house. Somewhere. “Joachim! Joachim!” He opened the closet, threw out the stuffed laundry bag and kicked aside a litter of tennis shoes. In the rear was the hatch giving access to the bathroom’s pipes. It didn’t seem likely but maybe Joachim was pulling that old trick of his.

Whenever their mother had had to work late the easiest way to get rid of Joachim was to play hide and seek. He always hid in the same place, the crawl space to the bathroom pipes. It made no difference if Peter did one trigonometry problem or a dozen, he’d wait until the hatch was opened and then jump out yelling, “Here I am! Here I am!”

Looking there now was crazy, but Peter yanked the hatch open anyway. Nothing. Except something stuffed on top of one of the pipes—something in plastic. And rolled up. He didn’t even have to open it. That dried up green was grass. Shit. Joachim . . . Joachim, what are you doing with your life? He thrust the bag into his hockey pants.

In the hallway, the bathroom door was closed. He didn’t bother knocking. No Joachim. The same in his own room. His mother’s.

“Mom,” he called, “I can’t find him. He’s not here.”

She came to the stairs. “What do you mean he’s not here? Where else could he be?” She climbed up, holding her robe. Peter could see her breathing was shallow. Her right hand flew to her hair. She started searching all the places he just had, then through the ground floor and down to the cellar.

She began looking in impossible places, as if Joachim were still a little boy, who’d squeezed himself under the overturned wheelbarrow or behind that old table top near the furnace. Leftovers of childhoods slumped everywhere. A stack of hockey sticks. A tricycle. Two sleds.

“Where is he? Where is he?” she demanded as if Peter were deliberately keeping the answer from her.

He was afraid she would collapse. She couldn’t stand up straight. He cursed himself for not checking his watch when Joachim came home the night before.

His mother started up the steps, then turned. “You looked, didn’t you? At Bledsoes’? Your brother wasn’t there? You’re sure?”

He lumbered after her. “I told you, Mom, I saw him come in, and, no, he wasn’t at the Bledsoes’.” But, even as he was reassuring her, Peter felt the dawning realization that his brother’s disappearance looked as ominous as a spike in white blood cells.

In the kitchen, his mother began thumbing through a tattered address book. Little papers tumbled out, and she didn’t waste time picking them up. When Peter went for them, she glared—she needed him to find his brother, and that was the best he could do?

“I don’t know who to call,” she whined. “His high school friends’ numbers, they’re not here. These go back to his playgroup. Nobody writes down phone numbers anymore.”

Peter sat at the table and fingered the bag of grass in his pants. Out the window he saw a girl who could have been a slightly taller Ashley step out of the Grymeses’ backdoor. She looked around for a moment and then disappeared from his view, only the smoke rising from the steps signaled that Audra Grymes was having a cigarette.

“He and Ashley stayed close? You know how it is . . . you go to high school and people you thought you’d always be friends with change,” he asked.

“You saw the two of them last night. They were as thick as ever.”

“Friends-with-benefits thick?”

His mother put the address book by the yellow bowl, and pressed her fingers to her mouth. “I don’t know. I don’t know what was going on with them.”

He thought about telling her how Ashley had asked him what he knew about babies, but was afraid she was shutting down, becoming the quiescent and passive zombie-mom he and Joachim had lived with the summer Larry left. “Mom, you going to make those calls?”

She forced nonchalance into her voice, telling someone Joachim would be “Sooooo grounded,” when the front doorbell rang.

Peter signaled her he’d answer it. Through the security panes, he saw Bushmiller and the female officer from the Bledsoes’. Bushmiller never bothered introducing her when she followed him into the living room, but Peter noticed her chestnut eyes registering everything: the dirty plastic cups, the drying cheese.

Bushmiller didn’t waste any time. “Why didn’t you tell me that your brother was with the dead girl last night, Doc?”

Before he could answer, his mother sailed in from the kitchen, “Joachim’s not here, Gil. He’s gone. He’s not in his room.” Her desperation knew no bounds, no discretion, Peter realized. For her, the police were saving angels sent to find her son. Never mind that she hadn’t called them. And what was all this about “Gil?”

She sounded as if she was trying to cash a personal chit with the cop, but if that was the case, the cop wasn’t buying it. “Mind if we have a look in your boy’s room, Kit?” he asked.

They went up, but Joachim’s puddle of tennis shoes and bulging laundry bag didn’t leave a lot of space. Peter hung back, his hand in his pocket with the grass. “Please, God,” he prayed, “don’t let there be any more.”

From under the bed, the policewoman pulled dirty socks, underwear, jeans and more tennis shoes.

“He never wants me to clean in here.” His mother’s apology for her housekeeping sounded pathetic to Peter. When the phone in her bedroom rang, she jerked to it.

“Maybe that’s him.”

As if her hope was too flimsy to bother acknowledging, the police kept looking through Joachim’s drawers, his old CD cases, his backpack.

“Why’s this open?” Bushmiller nudged the hatch with the toe of his boot.

Peter gave the story of little Joachim waiting to be found by his big brother, but the cop’s eyes stayed hard. His mother came back layered with fresh disappointment.

“That was Nannie Albright,” she said. “She wanted to know if I’d heard about Ashley. It must be all over town. I told her about Joachim, but she didn’t know anything.”

Bushmiller raised the shade. “You’re right across from the Grymeses, is that right, Kit? What was your boy’s relationship with the Grymes girl?”

“They were friends.”

“Friends?”

“Just friends.”

Peter watched his mother pull her robe tighter, as if she felt exposed under Bushmiller’s gaze. “I saw my brother come in last night,” he blurted.

“What time was that, Doc?” Bushmiller was scribbling in a notepad.

“I don’t know.”

Even the policewoman's chestnut eyes looked embarrassed for him. Out of Joachim's laundry bag, she pulled a shiny cardboard box and lifted out a silver cup. Beautifully crafted, it gleamed just a shade brighter than the rapper's G-string.

Bushmiller took it and balanced it on his palm at eye level. "You know any reason why your son might be hiding a cup like this, Kit?"

"I've never seen it before."

"There's a seal on the box lid," the policewoman said. "Nannie's What-Nots."

Bushmiller examined the cup's bottom and gave a low whistle. "Sterling. Classy. Classy and expensive."

"It's a christening cup," the policewoman volunteered. She'd taken off her cap to wipe her brow, her hair a series of tight auburn waves. She looked familiar Peter thought.

"Why would a teenager want a christening cup?" Bushmiller asked.

"Who knows? Maybe he just thought it was pretty," Peter said. "Maybe he didn't realize what it was. Our mother's birthday is Tuesday. Maybe it's for that."

"Maybe." Bushmiller picked up a T-shirt off the floor. "Can we have this? The FBI has a new device that can track DNA long distance. Let's hope it never comes to that, but if we need to ask if they'd make it available to us, it would help to have your boy's DNA."

Before Peter could stop her, his mother said "Take it. Take it."

Bushmiller put the shirt into a plastic bag, and they went downstairs. By the time Peter had reached the landing, he realized that in less than a day his expectations for Joachim had fallen from planning a brother-buddy football game to relief over finding just one stash of grass. He had a brother he didn't recognize.

The policewoman went out to the cruiser, but Bushmiller stood in the doorway, a smirk dancing in his eyes. “You still have that gun you had this summer, Kit?”

“I turned it in. I turned it in at the end of August,” she said. She held her robe at her throat with one hand, the other went to her hair.

“If you say so,” Bushmiller said.

“The police had one of those gun-turn-in drives. You know that, Gil. I turned it in.”

“Like I said, if you say so. And what kind was it?”

“I don’t know. A magnum, something.”

“Well, then, just as long as you have the receipt,” Bushmiller said.

“The receipt?” She dropped her hand from her hair, tightened her robe.

“It’s probably not an issue. Just call us when your son comes home.” Bushmiller gave her a card and left.

He wasn’t down the front stairs before Peter felt the laser of his mother’s anxiety. “I don’t know what to do,” she wailed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“He’ll be back, Mom. We just have to wait.”

She started picking up the party mess. Underneath the scrape of plates, the rustle of napkins, the silence was too deep. When she dropped a platter, it registered as a rupture. Everything, even sitting, took effort.

In the kitchen, Peter was certain to take the chair facing the Grymeses’ house—his mother mustn’t have the Grymeses’ horror melding into hers. She got up and set a coffee mug in front of him. Then sat down. Then got up for sugar. Then for milk. Then a spoon. She returned the yellow bowl of broken, uncooked eggs to the refrigerator. “I should have asked the police what to do. There must be something they tell you to do.”

He suggested that she call Maurice, but she didn't move, so Peter called and asked Maurice who Joachim hung out with other than Ashley.

"I can't go into your brother's friends right now, Peter. I've heard about Ashley . . . awful . . . awful. Tell your mother, I'll be over in a bit." Not the response Peter had expected, but then, nothing was what he expected.

His mother didn't even nod when he told her he needed to call his boss and was going to get his cell phone. He felt he was playing a ridiculous role from a TV drama.

When he called Dr. Latterman's voice was cottony with Sunday-morning sleepiness. Forty-seven and divorced, she was the sort of boss who discussed the merits of underwire camisoles with the secretary.

"Do whatever you need to do, Peter," she told him. "Those data sets can wait. Just let me know if there's anything I can do."

In the kitchen his mother was still at the table, still clutching her robe to her throat. For her birthday, he'd get her a new one, he decided. Something warm and soft.

A farm girl with big-boned brothers and grim-faced parents, she had waitressed her way through college, married, had a baby, and then another. And then had seen that second baby, a little girl, die, all by the time she was his age.

Weeks would go by, and then he'd be shaving or picking up his dry cleaning and "I had a sister," would bubble up. How could so much time go by and he not remember his closest genetic link? The thought always filled him with surprise, then shame. All the time in the world could not erase the fact that no one, not even Joachim, was more like himself than that little girl who hadn't lived a month.

How much of his early life—his parents' divorce, his mother's marriage to Larry Durham, Joachim—stemmed from the death of that tiny baby girl. She was here, now, revealing herself in the slump of their mother's shoulders, her vacuous eyes. For her, Joachim's disappearance was a reiteration of that first terrible loss from twenty-five years earlier.

"You don't know what it's like around here, anymore," she said. "There was a rape near the campus last year. The police never got who did it. Then, two houses on Dunkirk were broken into in broad daylight. One, the woman was in her eighties. They tied her up. She was like that for a whole day. She almost died of dehydration."

"So you got a gun?"

"Everyone was getting them."

"But you turned yours in?"

"It seemed like the lesser of two evils."

"How so?"

"I kept it in my bed stand, and your brother got it. I never even told him I had it, but he must have snooped. Anyway, last Fourth of July, Maurice had a cookout, but, of course, Joachim wouldn't go to something like that, not at fifteen. With everyone setting off firecrackers, I guess he thought one more bang wouldn't make a difference. He got the gun and fired it out his window. Someone called the police."

"Jeeze, Mom. I didn't know."

"Well, you had an exam or an interview of something. It was a real picnic. Squad cars, handcuffs, the whole enchilada."

"So what happened?"

“Oh, Larry got some lawyer friend of his to get your brother off with a juvenile record and one hundred hours of community service. That’s how he spent his summer, working in the library.” She got up, took the bowl of eggs out of the refrigerator and began whipping them. He felt nauseated but knew he’d sit at the table and eat whatever she set before him. Last July Fourth, he’d gone with some residents to watch the fireworks in the Inner Harbor and seen Jin Khang with someone else. Meanwhile, his brother had been running around, shooting off their mother’s gun. No wonder all summer, whenever he called, Joachim’s monosyllables grew more clipped and unrevealing, while their mother’s conversations became more chatty and deflecting. She set a plate of eggs in front of him but didn’t eat any herself.

“Mom, you really ought to call Larry.”

“I did. When you were calling your boss.” She began washing the frying pan.

“What did he say?”

“Oh, you know how he is. All objective, asking questions the way he does. Always the lawyer. And besides, he’s oriented in a different direction nowadays. New wife, a new baby on the way. Forty-two and it’s her first. That has to be rough. ”

“He was like that even when you told him about Ashley?”

“I didn’t go into that.”

“Mom!”

She turned from the sink. “I was scared, okay? I’m too fucking scared.” She turned toward the other window, “Look. Look, what’s going on over there.” People were going in and out of the Grymeses’ back door. Some looked like police, but not all. “That’s going on, and I don’t know where your brother is!” She started to cry. Peter got up and held her.

Against his cheek, her hair felt wiry, and her body gave off its fleshy, familiar warmth. She broke away and sat down.

“If I wasn’t so worried, I’d scream laughing at the irony,” she said.

“How so?”

“That cop? . . . I dated him a couple of times before I met Larry. He was divorced and had lost a little girl to leukemia. We had things in common. But nothing jelled. At least not for me.”

So that explained the “Gil” and “Kit” routine, Peter thought.

“And then Larry came along. God, the irony. Larry came and Larry went. Only he returned to defend the kid charged with killing Billy Reilly. And Gil was a witness. On the stand, Larry destroyed him. I still remember Larry crowing . . . you remember that trial, don’t you?”

“Yeah, some.” He’d been in his first year of med school when Billy Reilly, New Bristol’s star quarterback, was shot. A boy Peter remembered as being a year behind himself in high school, Terrence Hayes, was charged, and Larry, living in Philly by then, had come back to New Bristol to defend him.

Out the window, the sky had turned afternoon blue. Nannie Albright, carrying a bag the same color as the box the policewoman pulled from Joachim’s laundry bag, was heading toward his mother’s back yard.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Peter said. Nannie was coming to pry, he knew . . . not the best company for his mother, but at least she wouldn’t be alone.

The water steamed his trachea and lungs and pelted his face. Starbursts exploded on his closed eyelids, and then his mind served him an image white hair floating over an autumn

field. He stepped out, threw on some clothes, and took the bag of dope out of his hockey pants. But he couldn't think of where to put it, so he shoved it back into his hockey pants and went into Joachim's room.

The mess wasn't any greater than before the police had come, but somehow it had been imprinted with suspicion. He returned the christening cup to its box and buried it in Joachim's laundry. Then he took it out again, dumped all the clothes onto the floor and started going through Joachim's jeans and shirts, every pocket, one-by-one. Something had to tell him something about his brother.

But there only were crumpled tissues, failed Spanish quizzes and a note from a vice principal saying "See me." When he moved Joachim's bed away from the wall, dust balls like febrile mice, skittered and jumped onto little scraps of paper. One with algebra problems, Another with a sketch of female genitalia. In the corner, near the baseboard was a paper with wide blue lines, the kind torn from black and white speckled notebooks. "I'm thinking of trying out for the orchestra. Maybe I'll start playing my recorder again." Signed "Ash."

Through the floor, he heard brief phone calls interrupting his mother and Nannie. He couldn't make out their conversation, but after each call the women resumed the same consoling tone he'd heard nurses use with patients.

He began looking through Joachim's bookshelf. Shoved in the back was a folder containing a report on the George Washington's service under General Braddock and a B+ grade. There was a text titled *Introduction to Geometry* and a copy of *Julius Caesar*. Another of *Romeo and Juliet* heavily highlighted. A note from Ashley saying she was thinking of writing an English paper on *Green Sleeves* fell out of *Our Town* And there was a copy of *Watership*

*Down* inscribed with “To My Best Bud. May rabbits rule, and the righteous win. Scotty.”

Scotty who? Couldn't be Maurice's Scotty. That Scotty was way too old.

Peter put the book back and raised the shade. The sunlight filtering through Ashley's lipstick smear on the window had a mahogany tinge.

Of course! That's why he hadn't heard Joachim leave. That creaking stair might have given him away, but not crawling out the window. He and Ashley probably had been climbing up and down the back porch roofs for years, the idea probably implanted in their kindergartners' brains when they first held hands and sang “Go In and Out the Window.” It made sense. And no sense at all.

He kicked Joachim's tennis shoes back into the closet and a telephone number fell out of one: “*For Bubba K. call J.*” and a number. Peter went into his own room, got his cell and dialed. “Is Bubba there?”

“No. Bubba's gone. All out. Next week, maybe.” In the background, Peter heard someone call, “Hey, Jeremy, where's that paper on Savonarola, you said I could copy?” Then the voice at the other end answered something Peter couldn't make out, as if whoever it was, was holding the phone to his chest. When he came back on, Peter asked him if he was Jeremy. The phone went dead.

Damn, who could Joachim know that was writing a paper on Savonarola? Could it be someone at the college, and that odd answer: “Bubba's gone. All out. Next week, maybe,” as if Bubba was a thing, not a person.

He called the Baltimore City Police and asked for Detective Kevin Little, the detective who had given him the Ravens tickets. While he waited, he weighed what to tell and what to hold back, until he reasoned that spilling Ashley's murder, Joachim's disappearance couldn't

do any more harm. So he told the detective the whole story and tried to sound casual when he asked if Little had ever heard of Bubba K.

The pause on the other end of the line confirmed Peter's worst fears.

"I'd laugh, if the situation you just described wasn't so serious," Kevin Little said.

"These names get more inventive all the time, but dope is dope. Bubba K. sounds like shorthand for Bubba Kush to me."

Peter thanked the detective and hung up. Downstairs, Nannie Albright sat across from his mother whose fingers traced up and down a pearl-blue ceramic angel.

"Look, Nannie brought her for me, isn't she sweet?" his mother's cloying voice sounded as if she were retreating into childhood. Across the table, Nannie Albright's skinny arm parted a sea of mugs, cups and crumpled napkins.

"It's Christmas stock for my shop," she said, "but when you're mother told me about Joachim, well, I knew this is where it belonged."

Nothing about Nannie dispelled his impression from the night before. Nannie Albright a hoarded other people's bad news.

"You were the one who found Ashley, Peter?" she asked.

"Not really," he said. "It was a priest. He said he knew Ashley and her sister."

"That would be Graham Malhoutha, He's at St. David's. He's new. He and his wife just came from Princeton. She's supposed to be some sort of mathematical whiz, and I guess the college pressured St. David's into taking Graham. Isn't that how it usually works: Whatever MacMaster wants, MacMaster gets."

His mother told him that *The New Bristol News Dispatch* had called, but she didn't know what to tell them. "I just said, 'No comment,' but I felt like a fool. Like I was talking in a cartoon."

He wanted to be alone with Nannie. He moved a chair and her purple shawl trickled onto the floor. She retrieved it and started wrapping herself in it. "I dread going back home," she said. "I swear I feel the horror of what's happened seeping from the Grymeses' into my house."

"Let me walk you across the alley, Mrs. Albright," Peter said. She protested only as long as it took him to open the door for her. He held her elbow and trundled her through his mother's yard. "I don't know," he said, "if Mom told you, but the police went through Joachim's room. They found a christening cup from your shop. Do you have any idea of why my brother bought it?" He opened the back gate, and kept his hold on Nannie's elbow as they crossed the alley.

"He bought it a few days ago. I thought it was an odd thing for a young boy to buy, but then I thought maybe he bought it to impress Kensheena," she said.

"And who's Kensheena?"

He opened her own back gate, her elbow still settled into his palm. "It's a work-study program with the high school. Kensheena works for me. Joachim was joking around with her . . . you know kids, all hormones, never mind that they're supposed to be working. At least Kensheena was. I thought Joachim just wanted to show her that he had money to spend."

Peter kept his grip on Nannie all the way up her steps, and when she opened her door, he reached in and flipped on the light, and did the manly thing, looking inside to make certain no one was lurking.

"All clear," he said.

Nannie smiled up at him. “Well, thank you, Peter. You know, whatever I may have thought about Rich and Cynthia, and those girls of theirs, despite everything, I wouldn’t have wished this on them. Not on anyone.”

Her answer seemed to implied she held some animus toward the Grymses, but he couldn’t formulate a question to ask. Instead he asked if Nanny had Kensheena’s number. She gave him a saleslady’s smile. “I have it in my shop. I’ll call you with it in the morning.”

“Thanks, Nannie, let’s hope I won’t need it by then. I have to get back to Mom.”

Back in his mother’s kitchen the clock read four-thirty. And she was still wearing her bathrobe, as if even changing her clothes would be admitting that time was moving, and that the gap between Joachim and no-Joachim was widening.

“You should get some rest, Mom,”

At the table, her right index finger began running up and down Nannie’s blue angel. “I should look for that receipt, but I don’t know where to begin,” she said.

He got a plate of chicken wings from the refrigerator. He ate two and put the rest away. He kept looking at the clock, but couldn’t compute the minutes since he’d last checked. If thirteen had passed, was that good or bad? If more than thirteen, but less than twenty, what was that? In the end, the sun became the truest gauge. He had never expected to see it set, and not have Joachim home. That sort of horror belonged in someone else’s headline.

The front doorbell rang, and he went to open it. Maurice bustled in holding the string of a deep, square box. “Neusmann’s,” he said. “Mountains may tumble, but New Bristol will always have Neusmann’s Bakery.” He waggled the box at Peter and went toward the kitchen. Peter followed. At the table, his mother brightened a little. She got up for some scissors to cut the string and started making more coffee. Maurice was fussing about the grief

counselors he said the school would provide. “These overly solicitous fools will only whip our little darlings into higher hysterics. Here, Peter, try one of these cheese-filled. No one makes them as good as Neusmann’s. Rumor has it, that when the MacMaster trustees wanted to fire one of the presidents, as part of his severance he demanded a monthly box from Neusmann’s. Isn’t that right Kit?”

She gave the first smile Peter had seen from her all day. Feeble, but, still, a smile.

“I think I should go up and take a shower,” she said. “I won’t be long.”

Her footsteps hadn’t reached the second floor before Maurice leaned into Peter.

“How’s she doing?”

Peter raised a querying eyebrow in the direction of the Scotch on the counter, and Maurice nodded his ascent. Peter poured two fingers for his old teacher and one for himself.

“She’s doing okay . . . I mean how do you judge these things?”

Maurice took a swallow. “So, the police have been here?”

“This morning. About ten or so.”

“And was that helpful?”

“In what sense?”

“I mean about your brother and Ashley . . . whatever drove them to put on that God-awful show last night.”

Peter sipped his Scotch and broke off piece of a Danish. “Maurice, does Scotty know my brother? Someone named Scotty gave him a copy of *Watership Down*.”

“That doesn’t mean Scott knows your brother. There are dozens of little Scotties running around. You know, Scotty hasn’t had an easy time,” Maurice kept his eyes on his glass. “I hate to use my Eleanor’s dying as an excuse, but some children never get over losing their

mother. They're scarred. Even now, Scotty procrastinates. He has some paper or other due tomorrow and his printer ran out of toner. I had to drive halfway to Harrisburg to find some. It might have been cheaper to buy a whole new printer."

Peter ate his Danish without answering. A snatch of the conversation between his brother and Ashley from the night before had taken hold of his brain. Maybe the Scotch had fueled his imagination, but maybe it had jolted his memory. Either way, he wanted to know. When she came down, his mother gave him a way out.

Through the doorway to the dining room, Peter watched her pick up the blue plastic 50, look at it like it was some numeric code from another planet, then lay it on the dry leaves.. "I called Larry, again," she said. "He's coming."

Peter leaned across the table. "Can you stay with her for a while, Maurice? . All this waiting . . . can you stay?"

Maurice settled deeper into his chair, reached for the Scotch. "Go."

Up and down Hasting Street, witches and Jack O' Lanterns leered and lolled. Peter drove passed them to Luddy Mountain — "We got to get to the mountain," — that's what Ashley had said. Of course that's where she and Joachim went after they left his mother's. For New Bristol teenagers the only mountain was Luddy Mountain, a pinnacle devoted to debauchery and sexual drama. In April of his senior year, he'd been walking down an empty hallway in the high school's north wing. At the far end, a crumpled figure sat on the floor in front of a locker. Cathryn LeBow was sobbing. She looked up at him as if she'd been waiting for him all her life. "I didn't get into Vassar," she said. "I didn't get in."

He sat down beside her and gave her consoling platitudes: that she was too smart for Vassar; that only snobs went there; that Vassar had made a big mistake. Eventually she let

him put his arm around her, and when he helped her up, she said, yes, she'd like a ride home, but then she started crying again, so he drove to Luddy Mountain, where she let him hold her again, and eventually kiss her. Her lips tasted like honey and salt. Two weeks later, when he asked her to the prom, she said she was going with someone else, but she'd see him there.

Now the moon was a big fat tease slowly revealing itself over the eastern mountains, just bright enough so he could see the police tape stretching over the Bledsoes' field. When he got to Luddy the moonlight blanched the old farmhouse the color of a John Doe cadaver pulled from Baltimore's harbor. He parked on the far side. On the side porch hinges hung like stumpy molars where a door should have been. He crossed the floor's minefield of beer cans and bottles. "Joachim! Joachim!" No answer. If Joachim had been there, maybe some hint of what had happened still lingered. Delusional thinking, he knew, but he couldn't give it up—it was all he had. Upstairs three small bedrooms, no closets, a bathroom with a horrible stench. It was hopeless. Stupid. Who was he to think that he and Joachim shared a matrilineal bond so strong that he should be able to sense his whereabouts by telepathy? Especially since he'd disappointed Joachim time and again, not following through with the Penn State games he'd promised to take him to. The same when he got into medical school . . . no trips to Baltimore . . . no anything.

In the hallway, he sat on the top step, and rested his head against the wall. Why hadn't he ever wondered what Joachim's life was like? Books had been his own escape, but what was Joachim's. Luddy Mountain, what a waste of time.

He went downstairs, looked through the rooms once more and was just about to leave when he saw approaching high beams bouncing through the trees. Except for trespassing, he had nothing to hide, but then, someone had shot Ashley Grymes, and his brother was

missing. The headlights raked the side of the house before the car stopped. An SUV like the one he'd seen leaving Madeline's Harmon's cabin that morning. Maybe the same one. Maybe not. Its engine turned off and a door slammed. He pressed himself into the shadows of the kitchen's far end.

Masculine footsteps ran up the stairs and then almost without stopping came right back down.

"It's not there," someone called, "Christ! Ash must have taken it with her. There wasn't anything about it on the news, but that doesn't mean anything. Christ, I got to get my car. Let's get out of here." The person left. Peter went into the parlor, flattened himself against a wall near a window and watched. The driver of the SUV kept his high beams on, while another car backed out of the woods and pulled up beside it. The second driver rolled down his window and waved a teddy bear at the driver of the SUV.

"I must have been so stoned, I didn't remember having it in my car. Can you believe it? It was there all the while."

In the headlights of the SUV, Peter got a good look at the man waving the Teddy Bear. Scotty Maas! Scotty Maas out there with a damn a Teddy Bear. Son of a bitch. The driver of the SUV swung his car around to leave then stopped. His lights had caught Peter's car. He called to Scotty, "See that? That looks like a T-Do car. He says heaps like that keep him under the radar."

"You think he's here?"

"Shit, if I want to know. I don't want to know nothin' about T-Do."

Peter waited until the taillights disappeared down the mountain before going to his old Mazda. He called the police station and asked for Geri Jones. No, she told him, there'd been

no new developments. She'd let him know as soon as there were. He'd just hung up when his mother called. "Where are you? I need you here. Now. You're not going to believe this."

