

CHAPTER SEVEN

Peter squinted against the pounding water, groped for a towel, and pulled—no resistance. An end of the towel rack had detached itself from the wall and swung like a withered arm. Damn, another thing falling apart. He'd expected to be in Baltimore, attacking data sets by now, but he'd woken with a sour stomach and muzzy brain, and here he was, still in New Bristol.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and went into his room. Through the floor, his mother's voice rose and fell as she went back and forth from kitchen to dining room—those homey old rhythms. He got dressed and went to see Joachim, who opened one eye and pulled his pillow over his head.

"Hey, I just want to say good-bye," Peter said.

From under the pillow came a mumbled "Go away." Joachim's sneakers were out of the closet again and all over the floor. So was his laundry bag. And the cover was off the hatch to the pipes. Christ, the kid had been hunting for his grass, Peter thought. Suddenly, their mother's voice rose in hot, insistent irritation, but he couldn't make out what she was saying.

"Come on, Joachim. You'll miss your bus."

The pillow spoke. "What's time?"

"Quarter to eight."

"Already gone."

"Look, maybe your father will drive you. Or maybe Mom." From downstairs, they heard Larry give a sharp bark.

Joachim took the pillow off his face and smiled. "Old times. Sounds like old times, doesn't it?"

"You were little when they split. You can't remember."

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“The shit I don’t.”

“Will you just get up? I’ll drive you, okay? Just get up and shower.”

Joachim swung out of bed and stumbled over his sneakers toward the bathroom. Peter waited until he heard water running and went to finish packing. What to do with his hockey pants and their pocketful of grass? Between Baltimore and New Bristol there were a million places he could get rid of it, but none felt safe. Toss it out the window, as he drove, someone might see him. Same with a Dumpster. With his luck, he’d probably have an accident, spend two weeks in a coma, and be arrested as soon as he came out. He shoved the pants into his hockey bag, took it and his suitcase downstairs and set them near the front door.

Through the arch between the living and dining rooms he saw his stepfather gobbling forkfuls of fluffy eggs, and across the table, his mother stirring her coffee with a manic motion.

“Sit down,” she said to Peter. “I’ll make you something. Your brother’s up?”

“Don’t bother, Mom. I’ve got to go. I’ll drop Joachim off at school.”

She nodded toward Larry. “He wants me to go to work. So we all can look *normal*. Like it’s perfectly normal for the police to come to your house at one a.m.”

“That’s what I mean, Kit. Everyone will know about the police, so we have to act like everyone.”

“It’s just that I’ve got a meeting tomorrow about funding for some convocation Warren Bledsoe is supposed to be putting together. I can work better at home.”

“Then by all means, work at home. Work wherever you want. The rest of us, though, have to be out and let people see us acting like we’re just dandy. And if you’re going to work at home, maybe you’ll find some time to look for that receipt for that gun.”

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Joachim came downstairs, wearing the same shirt he'd worn the night before and carrying no books.

"Sit down," their mother said. "You've missed the bus, but still you better eat something."

Larry pushed his plate away. "See, that's just the sort of thing he can't afford to do . . . miss the bus. All the other kids are on the bus. But not the kid the police came to see. How does that look?"

Peter picked up his suitcase and hockey bag. "Come on, Joachim. I'll take you. We'll get something on the way."

"I don't want to go to the Ionia."

"Okay, okay, no Ionia."

Outside, the air felt two degrees above hard frost, and Joachim hadn't worn a jacket. Peter considered sending him back for one, but Baltimore was slipping farther and farther away. "Come on, get in."

Joachim slouched into the shotgun seat and stared out the window. No seatbelt. No books. No anything. "Remember no Ionia," he said.

Peter drove toward the Quik-E-Mart. "That Anthony's really got you shook, doesn't he?"

"Sorta."

"You know I found your stash in the pipes."

Joachim turned from the window. "So that means you're keeping it?"

"That's not the point, Joachim. You need to stop messing with it. I mean you spent all yesterday getting high with that girl Kensheena, and you keep a stash at home, that's pretty bad." Peter downshifted into the traffic merging around the square in New Bristol's heart.

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The bandstand had its annual pumpkins, he noticed, their sizes graduated, shrinking proportionately as they ascended. Every year, those pumpkins simply appeared. Maybe by magic.

“That stuff you found is prime Kush you know,” Joachim said.

“Well, I guess you can always call the college and get more from KushMan Jeremy. Am I right?”

“How’d you know Jeremy’s at MacMaster?”

Peter slapped the wheel. “Aha! I *was* right. The diagnostic powers never fail.”

“Did you tell my father?”

“No.” Peter slipped into third. The Quik-E-Mart was only two blocks away.

“My stepmother’s going to have a baby.”

“Yeah. Mom told me.”

“Another half.”

“What?”

“The baby’ll be half of me. Same as you. You’re a half. . . . the baby’s a half. We’re a family of halves. Where’s the whole, that’s what I want to know.”

Peter pulled into the lot full of vehicles belonging to women with harried faces and hazardous high heels and men with keg-sized bellies. Joachim said he didn’t want anything; he’d just wait in the car.

“Fine.” Peter went in past a pickup and a Jeep with two “Remember Billy Reilly” stickers on its rear bumper. He got a large coffee and waited to pay behind a big man with hair hanging six inches over the collar of his flannel shirt. On the TV above the cigarettes, a pop-eyed blonde

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reporter was chirping: “The police were keeping mum about New Bristol’s first murder in three years.”

“Poor thing, she probably never stood a chance,” said the woman behind the register. She had lank gray hair and serious edema that probably meant a serious heart condition. The man in the flannel shirt laid two packs of pink cupcakes on the counter and grunted toward the rotisserie. As tenderly as if they were newborns, the woman wrapped three shriveled hot dogs in aluminum foil for him. “Wouldn’t surprise me . . . if it was one of them you-know-who,” she said.

“Or you-know-whats,” the man said. They both laughed.

Peter dumped his coffee into a receptacle.

“Hey, you got to still pay for that,” the woman called, but Peter was already halfway out the door.

“Didn’t you get anything?” Joachim said.

“Line’s too long.” He drove up Forge Road past the tire and body shops and the hair and nail salons forming New Bristol’s northern boundary. Out past the cemetery he could pick up Scout’s Ridge Road and get to the high school from there. But he had forgotten about all the stoplights—damn, he wouldn’t get to Baltimore before eleven.

He was waiting for a light when an SUV pulled beside him. Joachim glanced at the driver and said “Go. Just go.”

“I can’t, Joachim. The light’s red.”

“Nobody’s coming. Just go.”

The guy in the SUV was Black, looked too small for his car, and smiled a gotcha grin.

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“I can’t . . . your damn Kush is in my trunk. What if a cop sees me going through a light?”

The guy in the SUV was honking his horn and waving at Joachim. Then he was getting out, banging on Joachim’s window, and Peter was reaching over, making sure Joachim’s door was locked, and then reaching back, taking a broken hockey stick off the back seat. Then getting out, but staying on his side of the car and saying, “Hey, you have a problem?” The guy ignored him, kept pounding on Joachim’s window: — “You owe me. Kensheena, I know she’s good, but what about you?” The light had changed and other cars were pulling around them, driving away.

Peter felt abandoned. He went around and stood over the guy — it would be so easy to punch him, or slam the stick in his thorax. “Get away from my brother.”

“Your brother? Now ain’t that sweet? White boy . . . Black brother. Real sweet.” But the guy stopped pounding. Peter could almost see his menace seeping away, puddling at his feet. Peter swung the stick toward the SUV, not hitting it, but close.

“Hey!”

Peter swung again, closer. “You got a problem with my brother?”

“He just owes me something, that’s all.”

“How much would you owe for one of these headlights? I bet a lot. Now, how much did you say my brother owes you?”

“Shit,” the Black guy said and got into his SUV. The light was red again but he drove away anyway.

Peter waited for green, then drove, not saying anything until he turned west where Scout’s Ridge Road ran along an elevated ridge above the valley floor. Joachim was slouched in

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shotgun. His dreadlocks had drawn themselves over his face so Peter couldn't read it. He waited until he was nearly to the high school that sat like a yellow brick blister on the valley floor. "So?"

"Sew is what they teach in human ecology class."

Peter ratcheted the gears down, turned the wheel hard right, and heard the tires spewing gravel — no real shoulder on the road. "Shit, Joachim, what have you gotten yourself mixed up in? I mean shooting off guns! Smoking grass! Guys threatening you! What the hell did he mean you owed him?"

"He's Kensheena's brother, that's all. It was his stuff we smoked yesterday, and he's pissed."

"Jeese, Joachim, how much are you into this? I mean you just seem to be digging yourself in deeper and deeper."

"What the hell do you care? Some big doctor, 'Ohhh, Joachim, I was going to get Mom something at the hospital gift shop, but I was too busy. Ohhh, Joachim, I got free tickets to a football game. Maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get to go.' It's not like you're ever here. Not like anybody's ever here. Just me and Mom, and most the time she's got to work or something. So why don't you do me this great big favor you're doing and get me to school?"

Peter swung back onto the road. He hated leaving with the rift between them even wider than when he came home, but he had to get back to the lab.

The buses had all left, but a few stragglers in their own cars were still pulling into the drive. A slight girl with purple braids got out of a shiny black Lexus driven by a man with white cuffs flashing from suitcoat sleeves and an impatient jawline. The wind snatched at the three balloons the girl trailed behind herself to the makeshift memorial of flowers, candles and stuffed toys piled at the monument with "Alleghany Consolidated High School" etched into its

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concrete. Peter saw the policewoman with chestnut eyes examining the mound of grief offerings.

“Shit,” Joachim said. “I don’t have anything. All that stuff ‘s for Ashley, and I don’t have anything.”

“It’s okay, Joachim. You can leave something tomorrow. Or even tonight. Mom would drive you.”

“It’s not okay. I knew her better than anyone. All that crap out there? Half those people didn’t even know her name. They were always coming up, calling her Audra. She hates that.”

The girl with the purple braids was struggling to find something to anchor her balloons to. Her father made a grab for them, but the policewoman took them from the girl’s hand. Peter watched her tie them to a candle, where they bobbed in the wind. Green and white, Consolidated’s colors, Peter remembered. “You ready?”

“Not yet. I don’t want to see her.”

“Who? That girl with the braids? Why? Is she Kensheena’s competition?”

“That girl with the braids . . . I don’t even know who she is. We just call her the Weird One. She hangs out with all the other Weird Ones.”

“So, who don’t you want to see?”

“That cop. She’s the one who got me with the gun last summer.”

“I suspect Geri Jones has seen much worse.” — no sense in telling him that Geri Jones and her partner had been the first cops to see Ashley.

“Geri Jones? Who says her name is Jones?” Joachim said. “She’s Geri Maas.”

“What?”

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“She’s married to Scotty Maas. Her name is Maas. They’re married. Or were married. They’re separated now.”

So that was what Maurice had meant by Scotty’s “starter marriage.” Scotty Maas living with his Daddy. Scotty Maas on Luddy Mountain. Scotty Mass, who made Ashley think she was pregnant. Scotty Maas who probably inscribed *Watership Down* to Joachim. Son of a bitch. Scotty Maas.

Peter wanted to ask Joachim about him but his brother had enough to carry. They watched Geri Jones pick up a Teddy bear from the memorial, read something on it, carry it to her cruiser and throw it into the trunk.

“I wonder what that was all about,” Peter said.

“How should I know?”

“Want me to go in with you . . . explain why you’re late?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Things will be all right.”

“Sure.” Joachim got out. Peter watched him going toward the school, his head down and only misery to keep him warm.

Deep in the bowels of the hospital was a wing for prisoners from the state penitentiary. Peter’d seen some of them, who, even as they shambled in leg irons, looked less despondent than his own brother at that moment. He got out of the car and caught Joachim by the arm. “Hey, what about I stay for today? I can go back to Baltimore tomorrow.”

“Fine. It’s a free country.”

“Okay, then. Just for today, though.”

“Whatever.”

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They were by the memorial. The whole mound seemed like sentimentality feeding on itself, a tacky testimonial compared to the reality of a young girl's twisted body. What did balloons and stuffed animals have to do with that?

Peter watched Joachim go into the school, then drove into town and bought some Neusmann's apple turnovers to take to his mother, but halfway down Hasting Street he knew he should just keep driving past her house. At the curb his stepfather's golden Lexus still lolled.

His freshman year of medical school, the Friday before the long President's Day weekend Peter made an unannounced visit back to New Bristol. He didn't even notice the unfamiliar, shiny car in front of his mother's house. By then, Larry was a mere blip on Peter's awareness, just someone who called Joachim now and then. Even when his mother said that Larry was defending T-Do Hayes for the murder of Billy Reilly, Peter hadn't paid much attention. T-Do, the murder, Larry, the trial, they were background noise compared to bones and blood counts.

But, then, he'd come home unannounced.

The house had been too quiet, and the only light came from the fireplace, where logs checkered with squares of red and ash sighed and slipped from the grate. Over a dining room chair, draped a man's topcoat. And in the kitchen wineglasses still held little reservoirs of red. And all Peter could think of was Where's Joachim?

When their mother came downstairs, she almost shimmered with satisfaction. Larry had been more subdued. Peter watched him give her a proprietary kiss before saying he'd see her Monday—closing arguments were Monday. As an afterthought, he asked Peter how med school was going. He had his topcoat on before Peter got an answer out.

As soon as he'd left, Peter turned toward his mother. "Where's Joachim?"

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“Where he always is. Over playing with Ashley.”

Now there would be no glowing logs, no man’s topcoat, no wine, but Peter knew the two of them were in their old bed. All the tension that morning about going to work, not going to work, even Joachim missing the bus, just had been prelude to sex. Make-up sex, the best way to forget your troubles and make the world go away.

He drove toward the Bledsoes—he needed to know why Ashley had such a hold on his brother. At their field a corner had been cordoned off with yellow police tape and in front of their big stone farmhouse Warren was tossing a briefcase into a cream-colored Studebaker.

Back when he’d been Ruth’s patient, from her office, Peter would see Warren’s slight frame bent over the Studebaker’s fender as he restored its engine, the fender always covered with a white towel laid out with tools arranged so precisely Bledsoe could reach for them without looking.

“I see you’ve got it finished,” Peter said.

“Three . . .four years ago. Of course, it’s a constant job maintaining it. . . constant.” Warren Bledsoe was wearing a tattersall shirt with a knit tie and had the slashed mouth of a passionate smoker.

“I was hoping to see Ruth. I guess I should have called first.”

“She’s down in back in Mama’s cabin.” Bledsoe took the cap off an antique fountain pen and wrote something in a little leather notebook.

Peter remembered his mother describing him as a Fred Astaire Wannabe. But, unlike Astaire’s, Bledsoe’s elegance was so exaggerated it almost was a cartoon.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Peter. “I’ve got to rush. I’ve got a class, and I’ve been saddled with a convocation. I was supposed to be working with Rich Grymes, but, now, well . . . God,

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this is so awful. I was just there, at Rich's. I wanted to let them know that Ruth and I will do anything for them. Anything."

"How are they holding up?" Peter had never seen leather as soft as the Studebaker's. God, what devotion had been lavished on that machine.

"Oh, I didn't see them," Bledsoe said. He got into the car but didn't start the engine. "Cynthia's sister, I think it was, opened the door. She told me she'd tell Rich I'd come by. Just go down to the cabin. Ruth's with Mama." He started the engine and backed up, and Peter started toward Madeline Harmon's little log cabin.

The summer his stepfather had moved out and his mother had sent him to Ruth Bledsoe Peter had sat before the therapist with her black lashes and jangling jewelry, and fallen in love. A fifteen-year-old's ferocious passion. What was he supposed to tell her? That his own father hadn't called from California in a month? Or that Larry had canceled his weekend visit with Joachim? Or that just the other morning his mother had said to him, "Just let your brother see you naked once in a while. He has to know that all men have weenies."

Ruth must have guessed his problem because she suggested that her mother, the renowned classicist and MacMaster faculty star, needed someone to help lay a flowerbed and paint some shutters. He'd never know if Ruth was only being tactful or if Madeline Harmon really did need all that help. All he knew was that as soon as the shutters were painted, there was a trellis to fix or a rosebush to transplant. Everything took twice as long because Madeline was always interrupting him, asking his opinions on population control or the Electoral College, and she'd always listened as though what he thought mattered. Plus she chatted about Agamemnon and Hector as if they had offices down the hall from hers, and was always giving him books

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—”Here, read this on Alexander the Great.” And then there was the food, a summer of peach-cake heaven.

Ruth opened the door, and he saw, what he hadn’t realized as a boy, that most of her beauty originated from her cheekbones, prominent, yet softly rounded, a firm defense against gravity’s pull. The television across the room was on, and over the back of a blue couch, he saw the gray crown of Madeline’s head. When he stepped in, the room was redolent with that easy feminine intimacy he’d seen nurses share, and he hated puncturing it.

“I came down Mom’s to get away from seeing that police tape,” Ruth said. “I don’t know why they had to mark off so much. And I’m worried Pandora will get out and get into it.” The Irish setter by the TV raised her head. “Mother, you remember Peter. He worked for you one summer. You remember . . . you and Florence used to make peach upside down cakes for him.” Her tone was coaxing, almost as if she were trying to elicit “Bye-bye” from a toddler.

Madeline turned from the TV. “Why, yes, of course, Peter . . . Peter. Of course, I remember.” But true understanding had absented itself from Madeline Albright’s eyes, and Peter sensed she was mouthing words because she sensed they were what Ruth wanted. Over the back of the couch, she grasped his hand and held it as though she could squeeze understanding from his fingers. Then, suddenly, the curtain separating her eyes from their inner light lifted: “Why, of course, ‘Peach Cake Peter,’ that’s what we called you—Florence and I. Oh yes, Peach Cake Peter.” She spoke with a slight sibilance and, with the curtain lifted, her eyes could still do mischief. She gave him a sideways glance: “But I probably shouldn’t call you that, should I, Peach Cake Peter?” In her day, she could have been Dido.

From the bedroom came the sound of drawers being opened and slammed. Something fell.

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Ruth tsked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Florence,” she said, “she’s looking for something in there. I better see what I can do.” She went into the bedroom and Peter sat beside Madeline. Under a series of windows was a bookcase with shelves of slim volumes bound with faded cloth covers. Across the bookcase’s top, little bronze Greek gods and goddesses paraded against a backdrop of fall fields and mountains. But the most vibrant thing in the room was the TV. Now it played a report on the Rocky Mountain region’s first blizzard. Madeline pointed at the screen. “Thursday. If we get any snow, it will be Thursday.” She turned toward him and he could see her eyes had lost their light again.

“Maybe we won’t get it,” he said.

“Get what?”

Ruth and Florence came out of the bedroom. Behind their thick glasses the housekeeper’s eyes were wide with worry. She trundled past the back of the couch as if Peter’s head and shoulders weren’t towering above it until Ruth stopped her. “Florence, we have a visitor.”

The housekeeper collected herself. Peter rose from the couch and extended his hand — Florence had made the peach cakes. “Florence, good to see you. You’re looking wonderful.” It was a lie; her breathing was rapid and her forehead was beaded with sweat. Her blood pressure was probably soaring.

“I understand it’s *Doctor* Peter Farley now. I must say, I’m impressed,” she said. “You know my granddaughter Kensheena goes to school with your brother. I think maybe they’re a little sweet on each other.”

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He hoped his eyes broadcast commiseration to the old woman. Maybe her “sweet on each other” was her way of not looking at two kids who had spent Sunday getting stoned.

Maybe the old housekeeper couldn't cope with that.

“Do you still make those cakes?” he asked

“I'd make one in a heartbeat for you, but unfortunately it's apple season now.” A report on the theft of Sicilian antiquities came on the TV. She turned toward Ruth and together they smiled. “She'll love this,” the housekeeper said about Madeline as if Madeline weren't there.

Ruth touched Florence's arm. “Sit with her. I'll get the coffee.”

Peter'd been hoping to talk to Ruth alone. Ashley had been her patient; she'd been shot on Ruth's property. He wanted to know why. He followed Ruth into the cabin's little kitchen where a bygone era's fruit and flowers were strewn over the wallpaper and dishtowels. He tried shrinking himself into a chair tucked up to the table lined with prescription vials, salt and peppershakers and a little china figurine of a strawberry.

Ruth stuffed a filter into a coffeemaker's plastic basket and reached for a green canister. “You'll like this blend. Mom has it sent specially from a shop in Harrisburg.” Ruth wasn't very tall, but had a tall woman's angularity and moved with a tall woman's grace. Her scapulars poking out from that back of her cherry red turtleneck formed a natural channel for her black cascading hair flashing with silver. She poured water into the coffeemaker, then sat across from him and began running a finger over the strawberry's cordate shape. “Mom's had this thing since we lived in Philly,” she said. “I remember it on the kitchen table there. Funny how things come back . . . I'd be asleep and get up for a drink of water or something and there, she'd be typing away . . . typing all night after teaching all day. Of course, she wasn't teaching college then. Just high school. I was only a kid. I didn't know she was writing *Gods and Mortals* and even if I

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had, it wouldn't have made any difference. You don't think of your mother as a scholar when you're a child." The dog padded into the kitchen and startled Ruth back into the present. She rubbed the animal behind its ears. "Mom's got Alzheimer's, you know. Or dementia. I have to get her checked, but with Mom, that's not the easiest thing. And now Florence is getting on."

He wished he'd brought the pastries he'd left in his car. "Florence is getting forgetful, too?"

"Oh, you mean, about what I said about her looking for something? No. No. Florence's mind is fine. What she was looking for . . . that was something else. That was about her grandson. He works at the Ionia, sweeping or something. Florence raised him and Kensheena since they were little. Let's just say that when Anthony was little, so were his problems, and now that he's big, his problems are too."

Peter didn't mention the run-in with him at the stoplight earlier that morning—Ashley, he needed to know about Ashley.

"And now some of Anthony's problems are finding their way here," Ruth said. "And I can't have that. As much as I love Florence, I can't have that." The coffee had dripped through the grounds. She got up, set out saucers and blue-rimmed cups. "But that's enough of the therapist pouring her heart to a patient, or former patient, I should say."

He told her that Joachim had had a fight with Ashley and watched Ruth's eyes contract as if the dead girl's name had stabbed her. "Ruth, is there any chance she might have been coming to see you Saturday night?"

"I don't know. I've never had a patient show up out of the blue. If Ashley were coming to see me without an appointment, it would have been a first."

"So you have no idea of what she was doing here?"

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Ruth's finger sought the strawberry again. "None. I've asked myself that a dozen times. Warren thinks it was a hunting accident, or that she may have been running away. Who knows?"

"What about you? If she was running away, why to here?"

"She was fifteen. Fifteen-year-olds are capable of doing anything. Ashley . . . well, you saw her at your mother's party. If she was capable of doing that, who knows?"

"When you saw her and Joachim put on their little show, what did you think?"

"Peter, you know I can't talk about her anymore. I've probably said too much already. She was a patient. I'm sorry, I just can't talk about her. You're a doctor. You should know that." She got up to refill her cup.

He hated playing on her sympathy, but it was all he had. "I'm sorry, too, Ruth. I shouldn't have put you in this position. It's just that Joachim . . . well he was with her that night. I'm afraid for him. The police have been talking to him. My stepfather's getting a lawyer."

She looked out the window toward the mountains. "Every time I see that tape . . . from my office, from our bedroom . . . I ask myself if there was something I should have done. What was I missing? I kept . . ."

"You kept what?"

"Nothing," she smiled. "Really, it was nothing." She added a dash of dismissal to her smile. Peter took a final swallow and got up. Ruth followed him to the living room where Madeline and Florence were still watching TV. Only Florence, not Madeline, could pull herself away to say good-bye to him. At the door he turned to Ruth. "Why do you think she singled people out?"

"What do you mean?" Ruth opened the door.

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He stayed put. “That show Ashley and my brother put on . . . she singled out Maurice Maas and Warren.”

“Nice try, Peter. But I still won’t talk about her,” she said. When he left, the cabin’s door thudded shut behind him.

He’d forgotten how the Bledsoes’ stone house towered over the backyard. Four stories tall, it rose out of a steeply graded hillside that left the back of its basement exposed. From the front, the house was handsome, maybe even elegant, but here, in the back, it was merely big, almost menacing. For Madeline in her little cabin, the best view was definitely toward the mountains across the valley. Not toward her daughter’s home.

He tramped up the hill and around the farmhouse to his car. Across the field, the yellow tape flapped with a come hither wave. He went toward it, thinking that if the cordoned patch of field were a black hole bending and slowing time in the center, Ashley would have been dead little more than a day, but a hundred yards from the hole’s edge, where his car was parked, she would have been dead nearly forever. The more he surrendered to the hole’s gravitational pull, the closer he got to her. He didn’t believe in ghosts but didn’t believe in the utter dissolution of the spirit either. Who was to say if some essence of Ashley didn’t linger?

He was halfway across the field when a police cruiser pulled up, no lights strobing, but, still, an intrusion, shattering the solitude he’d been hoping for.

The policewoman with the chestnut eyes got out. Peter wanted to turn around and go to his car, but didn’t want to act like he needed to avoid her, either.

“We meet again,” Geri Jones said. She took off her visor and ran her hand through her hair. He knew that hair but couldn’t place it. Every wave sprang back into the place assigned to it by her genes. So Geri Jones had been the wife in Scotty Maas’s starter marriage. Damn.

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“I felt, I don’t know, drawn here,” he said.

She looked across the field. “I know what you mean. I’m not officially on the case. That belongs to my boss. But you think you’re going to spot something different, and everything will become clear. I should have known better. That sort of Eureka moment only happens on TV.”

“I feel like this shouldn’t have happened, and that if I had been here a little sooner, it wouldn’t have.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. From the way she looked she’d been shot some time before you and that priest came along.”

“It’s not that. The night before, at my mother’s house, she obviously was a kid heading for trouble.” He felt Ashley’s “*babies*” about to burst out of his mouth and had to choke it back — he’d promised Joachim. Yes, Geri Jones had chestnut eyes, a butterscotch voice, and, he noticed, a slow, sardonic smile, but she’d also taken a Teddy bear from the heap at the school, and tossed it into her cruiser. He felt better keeping Ashley’s “*babies*” to himself. “I have to go,” he said.

He’d almost reached the end of the field when she called. “Dr. Farley?”

“What?”

“What hospital are you at?”

“The University of Maryland. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

When he drove away Geri Jones was still in the field, still looking at the spot where the body had been. He played back what he’d told her. And the only thing he came up with was that Ashley was troubled. Nothing new there. Nothing that could reflect on Joachim. Still, maybe it wouldn’t hurt to call Kevin Little. In Baltimore, with its big city murder rate, a

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homicide detective would know what was critical to a case, and what wasn't. Maybe Kevin Little would have an idea about why a policewoman would take a Teddy bear from a memorial, and go see the crime scene of a case she wasn't involved in.

At Hasting Street the space at the curb where his stepfather's Lexus had been was empty. Good, the only post-coitus small talk he'd have to deal with would be his mother's. But when he went inside, she was gone, too, and a dreary silence had taken command. He didn't mind quiet. In fact, in the lab he even liked it, but this was silence so profound the only sound was his own reverberating loneliness.

He ate a Danish and took a leftover party plate of buffalo wings from the refrigerator. They were cold and greasy and tasted good beyond his dreams. He was getting up for a second helping when he noticed on the counter an envelope with **For Peter** written in a handwriting not his mother's. He opened it and took out two one hundred dollar bills and a note. "Get your mother something nice for her birthday" signed "Larry."

Well. fuck him, Fuck them both. They fuck each other and he has to buy the pimp present. Fuck that. He tore up the note and put the money in his wallet. He didn't feel hungry anymore.

Out the window he saw the Grymeses' backdoor open. The girl who stepped out could have been Ashley, only a taller, more languorous version. Audra Grymes wore high-laced boots and a skirt so short that her legs looked as if they'd been surgically stretched. She came down the steps, gave the rope dangling from a tree branch an idle swat and lit a cigarette.

He didn't want to intrude on her, but he knew that sooner or later he'd have to see the Grymeses and offer his condolences. He wiped his hands and crossed the alley. Audra regarded him through her blowing hair and kept smoking.

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“I just wanted you to know how sorry I am,” he said.

She exhaled, “Yeah, well, it’s tough. It hasn’t really sunk in. I guess.”

“It must be awful.”

“You were there, weren’t you? That priest came by this morning. He was here last night, too, actually. He said you were there.”

“Yes, I was there.”

“So you saw what she was wearing? The news said there was no sign of molestation. So, I assume she was fully clothed. You must have seen what she was wearing.”

The wind was whipping the white cloud of her hair, blending it into her drifting smoke, and he felt he was talking to a chimera, to a girl who hid her true self in constant change. The only steady thing about her were her eyes, gray-green and flecked with glowing specks of yellow. Whether from grief or rage he couldn’t tell.

“She had on boots. Combat boots. A dress and a jacket. A motorcycle jacket.”

“I thought so.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She ground out her cigarette. “I hear it’s crazy at the school. TV trucks and everything. They were at our house, but my father wouldn’t let anyone talk to them. I guess that’s why they’re at the school. They must want someone who knew her. My friends sent pictures.” Audra’s skirt looked like it couldn’t hide a paperclip, let alone a cell phone, but she pulled one out and showed him a picture of TV trucks marshaled in front of the makeshift memorial, like a convoy just waiting to invade. And their target, he feared, was Joachim.

“I can show you more.” Audra offered.

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“No . . . no . . . I’ve got to go. Tell your parents, well, tell them I’m sorry, very, very sorry.”

“Yeah, sure.”

In his car, he searched the glove compartment for a comb, found none and did the best he could with his fingers. He found a napkin and cleaned the dirt from the Bledsoes’ field off his shoes and ran his finger over his teeth to clear out any chicken-wing scraps. He had to look as in control as possible. He couldn’t let Joachim walk out of the school and into a firing line of cameras and reporters.

Audra had been right; in front of the school were trucks with satellite dishes, and by the memorial a pert reporter in a pink coat smiled into a camera. Peter pulled around to the side nearest the gym but the door was locked, so he had to walk all the way around to the front, and then through a phalanx of media to get in the door.

The office secretary had an American flag by her stapler and a bouquet of pens stuck into a Penn State mug next to her computer. Her breasts bounced around under a knitted sweater vest over her white ruffled blouse.

“No one from the media allowed,” she said.

“I’m not from the media. I’m Dr. Peter Farley here to pick up my brother, Joachim Durham.” Her computation of white brother, Black brother took longer than either Tim Weir’s or Anthony’s had. “We don’t release students to unauthorized personnel,” she said.

“Check with Maurice Maas. I really am Joachim’s brother. I don’t want him to have to deal with all those news people out there.”

She sighed, blinked behind her bifocals twice and said, “I’ll check with Dr. Jeffries. He’s our new principal.” She flounced into what had been called the Inner Sanctum when Peter had

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been a student. On a plaque over a trophy case were the names of Consolidated's valedictorians. If it had listed salutatorians, too, Cathryn LeBow's name would have been inscribed.

Dr. Jeffries came out and shook Peter's hand. Compact, and sandy haired, he had the scarred face of an acne-riddled youth. Most of his authority came from his voice that sounded like an easy listening disk jockey's. "So you're Joachim's brother. And you want to take him home."

"There's so much media out front. My brother was Ashley's friend. I don't want them zeroing in on him."

"But it's against policy to release a student to someone not his guardian."

"Well, my mother I think is at work, and I'm certain she wouldn't want Joachim exposed to all those reporters."

"Yes, but you're not authorized, and there's only fifteen minutes until the bell rings. Couldn't you wait?"

"That's my whole point. Once the bell rings, and Joachim doesn't know I'm here and he goes out, he'll just be fodder. I have my car out back."

But it's School Board policy . . . "

The secretary's phone rang. She told the principal that his wife was on the other line, and Peter watched him almost swoon with relief. "I have to take this," he said.

"Dr. Jeffries," the secretary said to his departing back, "what do you want to do about Joachim Durham?"

"Oh, all right. Get him. Get him."

Peter watched Joachim coming toward him down the hall. Everything about him dragged. His pants, on the floor. His deadlocks over his face. He's retreated into passivity, Peter

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thought. He didn't even say anything when Peter put his hand on his shoulder and steered him out the side exit to the old Mazda.

In the school's rear, behind the tennis courts, a secondary road connected to another running along the base of the western mountains, and they drove without talking past a patchwork of old farms, and then farms interspaced with forest, and then only forest. Just going somewhere, seemed a better option than going to their mother's.

Suddenly the forest gave way to fields again, and up ahead Peter saw the old gas station he remembered as being ancient even when he was in high school. But now it had a neon sign flashed "Good Food to Go."

"You hungry?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, I am." He left Joachim in the car. The section of the service station that once had once been the garage had been boarded over and fitted with windows where strings of pumpkin lights blinked. When he opened the door, a bell rang and a woman with short silver hair and calm, gray eyes came from the back. A small gold cross hung over her soft blue sweater, and she tilted her head to smile. He realized she wasn't much older than his mother, but instead of his mother's flash, this woman radiated steadiness.

Over a wooden block counter hung a chalk board of improbable sandwiches: Smithfield ham with plum chutney; basil chicken salad; portobello mushrooms with sundried tomatoes and goat cheese. By an electric heater a brown rabbit slept in the belly curl of a yellow retriever. And in a box by the refrigerator two turtles had made a newspaper nest.

"I'll be back in a minute," Peter told the woman and went to Joachim. "You've got to see this."

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“Why?”

“Just come.”

Joachim got out and shouldered his sullenness into the station. When the rabbit woke up and hopped over and examined his shoelaces, and the woman said that was a sign that he wanted to be petted, so Joachim hunkered down and petted the rabbit and said he'd have a ham sandwich. And the woman said she had some cold cider, and did they want some? The whole place seemed charmed by some benign force Peter didn't understand, but felt he never wanted to leave. “Had this place long?” he asked the woman.

“Six years. I had a partner. One day she and I saw this place and got the idea of gourmet-to-go. Fast food and gasoline, what else do you need? But now my partner's gone . . . breast cancer. So, I've got my animals, and my customers.” A woman from a van carried a toddler into the shop, and he wobbled over to the rabbit, and petted it with Joachim until Joachim stood up. Peter took the sandwiches and told Joachim to get the cider.

They ate in the Mazda. “I need to ask you something,” Peter said.

“What?”

“When you and Ashley put on that show at Mom's party, what was that all about?”

“You're really stupid, you know?”

“So you never stop telling me.”

“How many Black people did you see there? I mean that party wasn't exactly hip-hop nation.”

“Come on, Joachim, they were people Mom works with. Who was she supposed to ask?”

”

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“It’s not like Black people don’t exist. Even in New Bristol we exist. Only you don’t see us. Nobody does.”

“So that’s it? It was purely political? Nothing personal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Ashley, she singled out Maurice and Warren Bledsoe.”

“I don’t know why she did that. She just said she wanted my raccoon tail for something special, but I never got around to asking her exactly for what.”

The sun was setting and Peter drove toward New Bristol, heading toward home, taking back roads he hadn’t driven in more than a decade. “So how’s you’re driving?”

“I’m not sixteen yet.”

“Look, I admit I was a dork, but I’m not an idiot. Even I drove when I was fifteen, so how much have you?”

“A few times.”

“Well, how about you practice? The road’s flat here.”

“You’ve got a shift. I can’t drive that.”

“So whose automatic have you been driving?”

“Someone’s. Nobody’s. Just a friend’s”

“Listen, an automatic, that’s just for putt-putt go cars, but a standard, that’s a thinking man’s car.”

“Yeah, then what you were thinking when you bought a heap like this? How you gonna get any patients once people find out you were so stupid you went to medical school and can only afford this piece of junk?”

“Here, put your hand on the gear shift. You have to learn the pattern.”

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“People will think we’re a couple of faggots, holding hands. Me and my big faggotty big brother.”

“People can’t see our hands.”

“They’ll see us sitting so close.”

“Shut up and concentrate on the pattern, Joachim.” Peter shifted and under his hand felt Joachim’s synchronize with his own.

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