

## CHAPTER NINE

From the looks of the rectory's brownstone exterior, Peter had expected an elegant, gently worn interior, but once inside, the place appeared downright shabby, the cracked veneer on Graham Malhouta's desk, and padding sprouting from his chair's leather arms. And the little table where Peter had put his soda can ten fifteen degrees south.

"Sorry that I can't offer you a proper glass," Malhouta said. "Gretchen and I have been making do with paper cups. Maybe we'll be done unpacking by Thanksgiving. Who knows? My wife—she's at the college—and well, with classes and all, we just haven't gotten to the glasses yet. We were just married in May. Last night we found a tea set someone gave us. Tonight, who knows what we'll unearth? Maybe, with luck, glasses."

He spoke with a lyrical syncopation and pressed his folded hands to his pursed lips. On the console under the window overlooking College Street was a picture of him on a beach, one arm around a young, sunburnt blonde and the other on the shoulder of an older woman with a sari and simmering, disapproving eyes.

The priest followed Peter's gaze. "My family's from Jamaica," he said. "Out of India. Pakistan until the division. Then India. Then Jamaica. And Michigan. And oh, yes . . . New Jersey. I mustn't forget New Jersey."

Peter picked up his soda. That morning, he'd made certain Joachim caught the bus, kissed their mother good-bye, and been passing the town's square finally on his way to Baltimore when he remembered the note and the priest handing it to him the morning they found Ashley — "*I found this in her pocket. I thought it might be something*" Suddenly Peter realized he couldn't remember what he'd done with it. A block from St. David's, he'd pulled over and searched his

wallet, his pockets—Nothing. The note could be a critical piece of evidence. Or it could be nothing at all. Either way he couldn't have the police thinking was trying to conceal something. How would that look for Joachim? He thought of calling Kevin Little and asking for the detective's advice, but that seemed like an overreaction. In the end, he'd gone up the block and knocked on the rectory door.

Out the study's window, what passed for New Bristol's morning traffic had thinned to a soft hum, and in the study, with its sole crucifix hanging beside a plaster crack over the windows, the atmosphere was dense with a weary, forgiving sanctity. Respite, Peter thought, being here, it's a respite. The note could wait a little.

"I swear," he said, "the other day, suddenly I saw her hair, just like it was on the field. Now, I don't know if there will ever come a time when I won't see it. Not that I see it all the time. It's just that . . ."

"I know what you mean." The priest moved like mercury encased in olive-gold skin. "I'm new at this. I was only ordained in June. I always knew something like this would happen sooner or later, but I was hoping for later. Nothing you learn in seminary prepares you. I don't even know where to sit to make people feel comfortable. Last night, when her father came . . ."

"Richard Grymes was here?"

"He wanted to go over the plans for the funeral. They think it will be this Saturday. He had a friend with him. That guy whose property we found her on. Sort of a weird duck if you ask me."

"Warren Bledsoe? Yeah, guess he is."

"Either that or an asshole."

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Peter settled into his chair—God, it felt good to be in communion with a cynic. “Do you know what happened to the note?”

“What note?”

“The one you gave me. You said you found it in her pocket.”

“Right. I gave it to you. But I don’t think you gave it back to me. That woman with her dog started coming and . . . You didn’t put it back in her jacket?”

“No . . . wait! Cripes!” I know where it is. I’ve got it. You won’t believe it! ”

“Where?”

“I’ll show you. Come on.”

Peter went out and rummaged in the hockey gear he’d thrown in his trunk. The note he pulled from his stomach protector was limp and smelly with perspiration. But still legible: New Bristol Women’s Health Services. Nov, 5 11 a.m. He waved it at Malhouta who lounged in the open doorway. “How’s this for dumb?” Peter called. Malhouta gave a sympathetic shrug.

Peter went up the steps and asked Malhouta for a plastic bag. “I don’t want to take it out of my wallet when I hand it over to the police. That might look like I kept it back deliberately.” Back in the study, the young blonde woman from the picture stood by Malhouta’s desk. Without her sunburn, she was even prettier than her photograph and her black slacks and turtleneck sculpted her into an improbable package for the brilliant mathematical mind Nannie Albright said she had. Peter felt he was a circuit breaker in the electric charge jolting between her and Malhouta.

“I have to get a plastic bag,” Malhouta said, grinning for no reason other than this woman, this wonder, had agreed to be his wife. “We have them somewhere, don’t we? . . . plastic bags.”

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“Third drawer left of the stove,” she said, grinning, too, until Malhouta turned and went down the hall. Then she turned to Peter. “You were with him when he found the girl, weren’t you?”

“He flagged me down. He actually found her first. I was coming from hockey. That’s why this thing is such a mess. I’d stuck it with my hockey stuff.” He held out the note, but Gretchen Malhouta didn’t notice.

As if she wanted to let her husband know she understood how troubled he was by the murder but was too unsure of her wifely role, she talked to his picture, “He’s so upset. He doesn’t act it, but he is. He’s been calling some of his professors from the seminary in Princeton for advice on how to handle things. The murdered girl’s parents are regular parishioners; Graham’ll have to minister to them about this for forever I guess. The other day I woke up early and he was down here, reading St. Augustine. It wasn’t five o’clock yet.”

Malhouta came back with the plastic bag. “I see you’ve set out the stroganoff recipe,” he said to her. “Want me to start it?” He held open the bag and Peter dropped the note in.

“The meat’s thawing,” she said. “I have a faculty meeting at three-thirty. It should be over by five, but you never can tell.” She finally noticed the note. “What’s that?”

“We found it in Ashley’s jacket. It looks like an appointment to an abortion clinic . . . Bristol Women's Health Services,” Peter told her.

“The Health Services is a clinic that provides healthcare to women, if that’s what you mean. And, yes, sometimes that care involves an abortion. One of my students came to me about his girlfriend. That’s how I know. Not exactly the sort of thing I expected to be dealing with my first month of teaching, but you do what you’ve got to.”

Peter put the plastic bag with the note into his pants pocket. He and Malhouta were almost at the front door when he stopped; he needed to lay something haunting him at the feet of the priest. “Ashley was at a party my mother had. She asked me something, something I really can’t talk about. The Hippocratic Oath version of the confessional, I guess. But I wasn’t much help to her. No help at all, to be perfectly honest.”

“A sin of omission.” Malhouta smiled, but his eyes were serious. “In catechism, we teach youngsters a sin of omission is a sin arising out of a failure of observance, but there’s also the failure to transcend our own self-protectiveness when the opportunity arises.”

Malhouta held the front door open. The ten-o’clock bells in the steeple started ringing and Peter gave the priest a quizzical look.

“They’re triggered by an electric timer,” Malhouta said. “Every hour on the hour. Listen, don’t feel too bad about that omission stuff. I have my own version of it. Two weeks ago, after Mass, the Grymeses came up like parishioners do. Usually they just shake hands and say ‘nice sermon’ and so forth. And there’s Ashley looking resentful, as you might expect a teenager who’s just been bored to death. And suddenly she asked if I was planning for Christmas yet. She wanted to know if I was going to include ‘What Child Is This?’ among the carols. I thought it was strange thing to ask, but, then, again, what’s truly strange for a teenager?”

“ ‘What Child Is This’? It’s a carol? Maybe it had a special meaning for her.”

“Well, like I said, maybe that was my sin. Maybe I should have asked her why she wanted it. But I didn’t. I was hungry . . . and the Eagles were playing, so I didn’t ask her.”

“You think it would have made any difference?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll be sure to include it in the Christmas liturgy. As a tribute.”

Peter left his Mazda parked in front of the rectory. The police station was only one block south and across the square. Walking was probably quicker than trying to find a second place to park. New Bristol had slipped into its familiar mid-morning lull. A few people on the sidewalks. Two silver-haired women coming out of the drugstore, their jackets colored to match the leaves under their feet. A man in a MacMaster windbreaker walking two busy dachshunds. Another in a topcoat carrying a big briefcase to the courthouse. The store that Peter remembered as selling lamps now a coffeeshop. Three small tables out front. Their chairs empty. Probably too cold. He was almost past the bandstand when his phone rang. Joachim.

“Can you come get me?”

“Come get you? I’ve got to get to Baltimore. What’s wrong, are you sick?”

“Not really. Here, talk to Dr. Jeffries.”

“Hello, Dr. Farley? Dr. Jeffries here. I’m afraid there’s been an incident.”

“An incident? What sort of incident?”

“I think you’d better come. We’ve had to suspend your brother. You’re mother’s in a meeting. Apparently she can’t be disturbed. And it’s against School Board policy to suspend a student who isn’t under the supervision of a responsible adult. It would be best for all concerned.”

All who concerned? What the hell was Jeffries talking about? Baltimore was slipping away. The police station was so close, just opposite the bandstand, he could just go in there, drop off the note, and go get Joachim, but what if the police had questions about why he’d kept the note: Why hadn’t he mentioned it? Who else knew about it? Why should they believe him? Handing it over should be straightforward, but maybe not. Meanwhile, Joachim would be at

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Consolidated, waiting for him. He retraced his steps to the rectory and drove out of town toward the high school.

Behind to counter barricading the secretary from the public, Joachim slumped in a chair outside of the inner sanctum. The secretary was fastened to her computer.

“I’ll get Dr. Jeffries,” she said to Peter without looking up. She went toward the inner sanctum, walking wide of Joachim, who threw Peter a what-can-you-do? shrug. Peter unlatched the counter’s gate and stepped into the secretary’s space. When she and Jeffries came out of the inner sanctum, the sight of Peter behind the counter made her do a little backward two-step. Peter saw Joachim grin then duck behind his dreadlocks.

Peter held out his hand, “We meet again. What seems to be the problem?”

The principal turned to the secretary. “Do you have what the Hawley boy wrote, Mrs. Tanner?”

She handed the principal a vanilla folder. “Your brother found someone sticking this through the slats of his locker,” the principal said. He tapped the folder. “There was an altercation. A teacher had to step into the hallway and break it up. Students were alarmed.”

“What is it?”

The principal handed Peter the folder. Inside, on a piece of ruled paper was a scribbled poem:

You can run  
But you cannot hide.  
I saw what you did  
On the night Ashley died.

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“You say you know who put this in my brother’s locker,” Peter asked. Joachim wasn’t slouching now. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, cradling his chin in his palms, watching everything.

“Another boy,” the principal said. “Your brother . . . there was a lot of shouting.”

“What happened to the other boy? Is he suspended, too?” The secretary started typing so furiously the little American flag beside her computer shook

”He was reprimanded. Severely reprimanded. You have to understand. The suspension is as much for Joachim’s safety as a punishment. I mean a note like that, you don’t want some form of vigilante mentality forming among other students and him being exposed to that.”

Peter kept the folder with the poem. He saw Jeffries eying it, wanting it back, but not sure how to go about that: principals don’t ask for things.

“So let me get this straight.” Peter said. “My brother’s threatened and to protect him, you suspend him, and ‘reprimand’ the kid who did the threatening. Just let me ask you one question.”

Jeffries’s eyes were downright hungry for the folder now. “What?”

“Was the other kid white?”

“It’s not like that, Dr. Farley.”

“The hell it’s not.” Peter heard the secretary give a little gasp, but Joachim gave a guffaw. Peter took the poem, put it in his wallet and handed Jeffries the empty folder.

“You can’t keep that,” the principal said. “We might need it . . .”

“It’s my brother’s. It was in his locker.” Peter had no idea if his argument was correct, but it sounded convincing. “Now, that we established you’ve ‘severely reprimanded’ the white boy who wrote this, how long have you suspended my Black brother?”

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“Three days.” Jeffries looked like he was going to cry.

“Three days on his permanent record that colleges will see, unlike a reprimand.”

“Maybe we can do two days.”

“Maybe we can do this: I take Joachim home for today. No suspension. Just an exercise on the side of caution. That will give you this afternoon to think how best to protect him in the school he has a right to attend. Meanwhile, I’ll be certain no one but his mother and father hear about this poem. Certainly not the *New Bristol News Dispatch*.”

“It’s not . . . well, the paperwork for his suspension already been processed. But I guess it can be rescinded, isn’t that right, Mrs. Tanner?”

“We send notification of suspensions over to the School Board office. I’ve already processed it, but I’ll let the secretary at the Board know there’s been a mistake. She’s a member of my prayer circle.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Tanner.”

Peter gathered up Joachim and left. Again no books. The kid acted as if he had no clue that maybe he should have books.

“How cool was that?” Joachim said as they were pulling out of the lot. “My big brother playing the race card. My big white brother.”

“I didn’t play anything.”

Yeah, you did.” Joachim was doing everything but slapping his knees and saying, “Oh, Lordy!” A Step-n-Fetch-It parody of himself.

“Who’s this Hawley who wrote the note?”

“Hawley? He’s nothing. He’s okay. We’re in World Cultures class together. He didn’t mean anything.”

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“Then why’d he write it?”

“No reason, I guess. Just to get to me.”

“Well, he did a good job.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Peter took the Stevens Road turn off of Scout’s Ridge Road, and the whole town and the college spread out below them. New Bristol to the left and MacMaster to the right. It was sunny and clear and nearly midday. He wouldn’t get back to Baltimore now. By the time he’d get settled in at the lab, it would be time to go. He fished out his cellphone, called his boss and left a message. In his trunk, he had Joachim’s grass, in his pocket, the note from Ashley’s jacket, and in his wallet, the two hundred dollars from his stepfather for his mother’s birthday. He had to get rid of something.

“We have to get Mom’s present. Your father gave me some money.”

“What? No big whoop-dee-doo present from the hospital gift shop?”

“Shut up, Joachim. Put your hand on the gearshift, so you can learn to downshift.

Watch my foot on the clutch. You don’t want to ride it, or you’ll burn it up.”

“Why don’t you get a real car?” But Joachim put his hand on the gearshift.

They started down Stevens Road. “Now, we’re going to drop it into second,” Peter said.

“Watch my foot.”

“This is so stupid.”

When they reached the bottom of the incline Peter took his hand off the gearshift and told Joachim to put it into third. The first time Joachim ground it, but Peter hadn’t had his foot on the clutch. He depressed the clutch and told Joachim to try again. Again, the kid couldn’t find the pattern, and they were still limping along in second. They’d nearly reached the entrance to

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MacMaster when Peter put his hand over Joachim's and guided the gearshift into third. He hated doing that, hated not letting Joachim find third on his own, but he couldn't risk ruining his transmission.

At the corner by the Ionia, Peter turned onto Market Street, where the mayor had instituted a new system of angled parking. Cars were backing in, pulling out. Not a good place for Joachim to practice. "I better handle it alone," Peter said. He headed toward the square and the police station. He slipped into the last parking place just ahead of a Porsche that the driver, whose grey-hair was Caesar-styled, gunned past them.

"One of the most important things you need to learn about driving," Peter told his brother, "is that he who gets the last parking place is king. No matter how cheap his heap. If he gets the last place, he's king. Why don't you switch to my seat while I'm gone? Depress the clutch and practice the pattern. I'll be back in a minute." Joachim got out and came around to Peter's side.

Peter pushed open the heavy doors to the station and felt a blast of female fury. He waited where the desk sergeant told him, but he couldn't help hearing Audra Grymes. She was telling Geri Jones that she wanted her jacket back. It was hers and she needed it. The police had no right to keep it. What were they doing with it, anyway? Wearing it line dancing? This last, must have crossed some sort of boundary because whatever Geri Jones said quieted Audra down real fast. When the girl stomped out past Peter, she was so mad, she almost singed him.

Geri Jones, when he went up to her, still had hot flashes of amber in her chestnut eyes, and he could see the muscles in her face struggling to calm themselves beneath her smooth skin. Beside the Terry Bradshaw bobblehead doll on her desk, was calendar from the Spina Bifada Association and a picture of herself in jeans laughing with a young girl in leg braces.

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Suddenly he knew where he'd seen her. "Didn't you used to skate?" he blurted. God, how dumb was that? No finesse. No nothing. What an oaf.

She flashed him a quick dimple then tucked it away. "Oh, a long time ago."

"I thought I remembered you from somewhere. You were a great spinner."

"That's about all I was good at. Jumping, well, that's for the bird-boned girls."

"I remember seeing you when I be changing from hockey." Out the window, he watched Audra fold herself into the double-parked Porsche, pulling her long white legs in last.

"You didn't come here to talk about skating, did you?" Geri Jones said. Her butterscotch voice sounded weary. He gave her the note from Ashley's pocket and explained why he had it, what he had done with it and why it was damp and smelled like perspiration. She encouraged him with little nods of the head and half smiles until he began repeating himself and started feeling foolish—so she was Scotty Maas's "starter wife." Damn.

She dismissed him with a "Thank you." And then, something he didn't expect. "When are you leaving New Bristol?"

"I probably should be back to Baltimore already. But, most likely it'll be tomorrow. Early. Very Early. Why?"

"I was just wondering."

When he went down the station steps, Joachim was back in the passenger's seat.

"What's wrong? Still couldn't figure it out?"

"I got bored."

Peter drove to the end of the square and made a left onto Market Street and stopped at the Ionia. "I'm hungry and there's nothing in the house except left over party crap."

"You know I don't want to go there." Joachim juttled his chin toward the Ionia.

“You mean because of Anthony? I know his grandmother. If he gives you a hard time I’ll tell on him. Besides, my hockey stick’s still in the back.”

Joachim looked at him with hard eyes, no irony. “You don’t have any idea of what you’re dealing with, do you?” he said.

Peter had wanted to talk to the waitress who had worked for Dr. Bledsoe, but Joachim’s tone was so knowing that he felt their positions had been flipped, felt that now he was the one who didn’t know the pattern. “I’m not dealing with anything except getting a couple of cheese dogs. If you’re dealing with something, Joachim, you have to let me know. I can’t read minds. Now, you coming or not?”

“I told you No.”

“Well, wait here. I’ll get us something. Then we can get Mom’s present.” When Peter went into the diner, he almost tripped over the broom pushed by Tim Weir.

“Hey, Tim, you filling in for that other guy, Anthony, again?”

“Well, just for today.” Weir leaned on the broom. “Anthony claims he can make more money working nights.”

Doreen, the waitress, came by, supporting a tray with her shoulder. “Gus has got some glasses ready, and I need them now,” she said to Weir. The nod she acknowledged Peter with sent her ghost earrings into bobbing spasms. He took a stool at the counter and, when she had unloaded her tray at a booth full of MacMaster students, ordered four cheese dogs, two orders of fries and two large Cokes, to go. The place was filled with a lunchtime crowd, and she moved at a manic pace, but he had things he needed to ask her, starting with where to find Anthony.

“He lives with his grandmother.”

“But if I don’t want to see him there?”

“He’ll be working here tonight, if he shows up.” She put three glasses in her left fist.”

“He doesn’t always show?”

She scooped ice into the glasses. “Let’s just say that he’s got a more profitable sideline than busing tables.” She filled the glasses under the tap, the water running up her wrist down to her elbow. She set one glass in front of him, the other two before a couple down the counter, then a fist pounded the little bell on the window ledge to the kitchen and she went to it, almost running. She came back with the couple’s orders and took a pumpkin pie from the case and started slicing it in front of Peter.

“You type tapes for Dr. Bledsoe?” he asked.

“Not anymore. She hasn’t called. She said she might, but she hasn’t.”

A woman in a grey pantsuit came in and asked if the order that had been phoned in from the MacMaster Communications and Linguistics Department was ready yet. Doreen went back to the kitchen. Weir came out with a rack of steaming glasses and started stacking them under the counter. “Always somethin’. Always somethin’. I wanted to get in at the college, the grounds crew, but they’re not hiring.”

Doreen came back with a box full of white bags and Styrofoam boxes. “Eighty-five, seventy-four,” she told the woman in the pantsuit.

“Can you help me take it to my car?” the woman asked her.

“I can do it, Doreen,” Weir said.

“Gus needs you to take out the trash. He’s having a fit back there.”

Peter picked up the box. “I can do it. I’m just waiting for my cheese dogs.”

“There’s another box with the drinks,” Doreen said. She got it and followed him out to the woman’s Acura angled in beside his Mazda. Joachim was gone. Peter thought, I didn’t need this. The woman opened her wallet and handed Doreen a dollar. When she took out another one for Peter, he wanted to flip her his doctor, but just said, “I’m only helping out.” And, then, when she put it away, thought he should have taken it and given it to Doreen. But how condescending would that have looked? Christ, where the hell was Joachim?

He followed Doreen back into the Ionia. His cheese dogs were ready. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “I’ll eat two here. The others to go. And give me all the fries.”— screw Joachim, he didn’t want to eat, fine. Doreen started scooping ice cream for a milkshake.

“Ashley Grymes was a patient of Ruth Bledsoe’s. Did you ever type any of her tapes?” Peter asked her.

She put the metal cup on the machine and wiped her hands off on her apron. One of the MacMaster kids was waiting at the register. She started ringing him up. “Sometimes, yeah.”

Weir was clearing the place at the counter that the couple had left. He moved like he did on the ice, almost furtively. With one hand he dumped dishes into a pan that he’d clamped against his ribcage.

Peter’d nearly finished one of his cheese dogs. Doreen took the metal cup off the mixer and began pouring the shake into a tall glass.

“I was wondering if any of Ashley’s tapes ever mention New Bristol Women’s Health Services,” Peter said to her.

The waitress's head snapped toward Weir, as if she expected some intervention from him. But he looked blank. Then she turned toward Peter and became so still even her ghost earrings stopped jiggling. "Why do you want to know that?"

"No reason. I . . ."

"Is that the reason you gave Tim all that money for your check Sunday night, and you made like Sir Galahad, taking that women's drinks out to her car? . . . so you could pump me about the clinic?"

"He don't mean nothin', Dor," Weir said. "He's okay. I went to Consolidated with him."

"You went to Consolidated with a lot of assholes."

"I'm sorry," Peter said. "No, I wasn't buying information. I try to give good sized tips because of my mother was a waitress. It was how she worked her way through college. You never know who's doing that."

"Fat chance I am," Doreen said. She didn't smile, but her earrings sprang to life. She went to take an order from another couple in the last booth.

Weir carried his pan of dirty dishes up to Peter. "Don't mind her. She's just a little sensitive, is all." Peter finished his fries. Across the street, the wind was snapping the witch banner over Nannie's Whatnots. He still had the money from Larry. He'd go to Nannie's, get his mother something for her birthday, and then look for Joachim. He went up to the register, and Doreen took his check.

She sighed into his face. "God, I hate this place."

“Well, maybe there’s something else you can do.” Peter gave her a twenty and shook his head when she handed him change. “Now I *am* bribing you,” he said. “Anthony, he’s supposed to work tonight?”

“If he shows.” She smiled, slipped his change into her pocket, and handed him a Styrofoam box with Joachim’s cheese dogs. “It’s not the job I hate,” she said. “It’s this town. My stepfather, and this town. In that order. And the clinic, when I think about it, so I try not to.”

Outside, in a metal stand, the headline of the *New Bristol New Dispatch* blared: **Police Mum on Murder**. In Peter’s hand, the bag with the Styrofoam box felt heavy and paltry at the same time, as if two greasy cheese dogs were the sum of what he had to offer his brother. He crossed Market Street and, when he pushed open the door to Nannie’s Whatnots, a chorus of bells jangled at him. But he didn’t care because beside a young Black girl holding a little white reindeer in each fist stood Joachim.

“Just get it,” the girl said to him. “You owe for it, so get it.” She never bothered looking to see who had come into the shop, but Joachim did.

“I got tired of waiting,” he said to Peter.

Peter held out the bag. “I got your cheese dog.”

“I told you I didn’t want anything.”

The girl was pretty, and when she reached to set the reindeer on an empty shelf every limb of her stretched to its advantage. And when she bent to get two more reindeer from a box other advantages were revealed. Peter saw Joachim gulp.

“You’re Kensheena. Am I right?” Peter said.

“Yeah.”

“I know your grandmother. I’m Joachim’s brother.”

“Oh, yeah, the doctor. Well, your brother is messin’ with me, and I’ve got work to do.”

“We need to get something for Mom,” Peter said to Joachim. He squeezed past shelves loaded with knitted hats, scarves, and mittens, plus baskets of Christmas baubles and baby rattles. Further back, near a closed door, were racks of robes. He made his way toward them. Behind the door he heard Nannie sounding shrill and ugly. And a man sounding demanding “What do you mean, you don’t know where it is?”

“I had it here. Right here. In that drawer.”

“When did you see it last, for Christ sakes?” the man said.

“I don’t know, I told you. It’s not like I checked it every day. I never wanted a gun in the first place, Gordon. You made me take it.”

Peter took a ruby robe from the rack. Maybe he could cook up some question about it and get his head in the door and to see who was arguing with Nannie about a gun.

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of—keeping a gun in a back room,” the man was saying.

“Not as stupid as what you’re doing, Gordon. You should be ashamed.”

“Don’t go there, Nannie, I’m warning you. Don’t go there. My god! Any fool knows you keep a gun near your register.”

“I had it there, but after I hired Kensheena, I thought it might be better back here.”

“Christ! What were you going to do? Say to some holdup guy, ‘Excuse me. I have to go in the back and get my gun’?”

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“That shows how little you know what I do. You never did. Most of my work, it’s back here. Ordering. Dealing with suppliers. If I need protection, it’s back here. It’s where the bulk of the money is.”

“Money . . . that’s a joke. Any relation this place has ever had to money has been strictly negative.”

Peter put the robe over his arm, picked out some slippers and knocked into a shelf of penguins in Santa caps. Three fell.

“See! That’s how dumb you are, Gordon. Fifty percent of my business is between now and Christmas. That’s why I had to hire Kensheena.”

“All I’m telling you, is you’d better find that gun, Nannie.” Peter saw the door handle turn a little.

“What are you going to do if I don’t? Go to the police and tell them you gave me an unlicensed gun?”

“It’s licensed. Do you think I’d be so dumb as to have an unlicensed gun?”

“Licensed to you, Gordon. But what about to me? And believe me, it wouldn’t be the first dumb thing you’ve done. It’s a wonder the police haven’t picked you up.”

“I told you, don’t go there! After all your therapy, you’re doing what you always did, throwing every vicious thing you can think of. I’m telling you find the fucking gun.”

The door opened. Peter had seen the Porsche, had seen Audra Grymes fold herself into it, and seen Gordon Albright’s grey hair behind the wheel, but hadn’t made the connection to Nannie. He’d been in college when the Albrights had moved next to the Grymeses. The Gordon Albright he remembered dimly had darker hair, didn’t drive a Porsche, and certainly didn’t have a beautiful blonde seventeen-year-old sitting beside him.

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Peter watched him charge out of the shop, slamming the door so hard the bells fell off. Joachim picked them up and handed them to Kensheena, who was shaking her head no— whatever was going on between them, she wasn't giving in.

Peter felt he was drowning in doodads. He picked out a blue robe, then brushed past a basket of bears in green vests like the one Scotty Maas had on Luddy Mountain, like the one Geri Jones had thrown one into her trunk. Everything around him felt perverted. He had to get out.

At the register, he thrust the greasy bag cheesedogs at Joachim, "Here, if you don't want them, throw them away." Compared to the bag, the two one hundred dollar bills nestled in his wallet beside the poem from Joachim's locker were crisp and clean. He noticed Joachim glance at the bills and catch Kensheena's eye. Whatever was going on between those two had something to do with money, but Peter didn't want to know what. He gave Joachim one of them and the robe. "Pay for it".

"Where are you going?"

Nannie looking red-faced and sniveling was coming up from the back of the store.

"I need to call my boss. A lie, but he had to get out. Whenever he told people about New Bristol, he described a town where a kid could count on graduated pumpkins on the bandstand steps every Halloween and singing carols there every Christmas. But now, he felt like he had on Saturday night when he'd stood on his mother's back porch with Maurice — that he had come home to an alien place. Abortion appointments. Abandoned wives. Loose guns. And worse, he felt accusatory pincers closing around his brother. Cake, he just wanted a damn birthcake for his mother.

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

Neusmann's had the same afternoon atmosphere he remembered from high school when he'd stop for an éclair after Science Club. Most of the trays empty. And whatever was left, a little sodden. The salesladies looked the same, too, as if they'd been born with blue hair and liver spots. He suddenly realized he'd left the little cesspool of Nannie's for the bigger one of Neusmann's.

In the display case, he saw the reflection of a man bent over and pointing to the Danish he wanted. Scotty Maas, the well-scrubbed boy, had grown into the well-scrubbed man. Peter remembered how Maurice would send him to school, neat, polite and begging for a punch. When Scotty straightened up, Peter saw he'd zippered his jacket to his chin.

"Hey, Peter, hey. Good to see you. Dad said you were home. Gee. Good to see you."

Scotty must have seen his reflection, too, Peter realized—his greeting sounded rehearsed. That curly hair, those eyes tortured by Mommy-loss—he could understand how some women might find Scotty Maas attractive, might find a man attractive who could tell them "I'm really into fantasy like *Watership Down*. Why knows how rabbits think?" Sleeping with a girl nearly half his age. Seeing him on Luddy Mountain, Finding his inscription in Joachim's book—there was something creepy and secretive about Maurice's son.

The woman behind the counter grimaced with impatience. Peter told her he wanted a birthday cake and turned to Scotty, but the woman said, "Birthday cakes have to be special ordered."

"Good seeing you, Peter," Scotty said.

"Oh," Peter said. "any cake will do."

"Well, we've got German chocolate, lemon with coconut icing, a white cake with a chocolate icing, and another three-layer, two white and one chocolate."

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Well, enjoy,” Scotty said.

“Give me that one,” Peter said.

“Which?”

“The lemon with the chocolate icing. Hey, Scotty, wait. You dad tells me you’re taking an online course, how’s that going?”

“We don’t have lemon with chocolate icing. We only have lemon with coconut icing.”

“It’s okay. You have a lot more flexibility as far as your time goes,” Scotty said.

“Is that the one you want?”

“What?”

“I said do you want the lemon or the white?”

Scotty was almost at the door.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s the one. The white with the chocolate. So you like on-line?”

“Do you mean the three-layer cake, or the one with the chocolate icing?”

Scotty waggled his box of pastries. “On-line’s okay. I have to get these to Dad. He’s a creature of habit, you know. He needs his cheese Danish.”

“How’s the interaction with your professors?”

“In some ways it’s actually more intimate. But I’m just about through. Elementary ed. Following in Dad’s footsteps, I guess.”

“Which one did you say you wanted?”

“That one.”

“That’s the lemon one.”

“Fine. Fine.”

“With coconut icing. No chocolate.”

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“It must be awful for you dad over at the school,” Peter said.

“If you want, I can see if we have a birthday cake in the freezer.”

“No. Just the one I said.”

“I’ll be seeing you, Peter,” Scotty said.

“The lemon one?”

“Right.”

“I just wanted to be sure, that’s all. That’s all I want . . . to be sure.”

“Wait a minute, Scotty. I mean the Grymes girl, that has to be upsetting. It must be hard for the teachers to keep the kids focused.”

Like a ball in a vacuum tube, the cartilage in Scotty’s throat rose out of his zippered jacket, then dropped.

“Well, what can I say? Dad, he’s a real pro. Nothing throws him too much.” Scotty had his hand on the door. Peter plunked twenty dollars down on the counter and told the woman not to bother with string. He grabbed his cake and followed Maurice’s son out onto the sidewalk. “I guess your father told you about the little show my brother and Ashley Grymes put on at my mother’s party.”

“Yeah.”

“I was just wondering, did you know her?”

“Why would I know her?”

“My brother Joachim says you were pretty tight with her. He says you and she had a thing.” But as soon as he said it, he wished he could take it back, wished he hadn’t exposed Joachim. If Scotty had thought Ashley was carrying his baby, would he have killed her? And then kill anyone who’d linked him to her?

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

Scotty sounded overly earnest, like when he'd sworn that he'd done his World Civilization paper, only his computer had crashed. "I don't know why your brother would say something like that. From what I hear, that girl wasn't that stable. In any case, it's not true. Listen, I've got to go."

Son of a bitch, Peter thought. He watched him go up Market Street toward the square, shoulders drawn up against the wind, long, skinny legs in clean jeans. More of a shadow than a man. Such a puerile idiot. A gaggle of laughing MacMaster girls in Halloween get-ups engulfed him, and when Scotty emerged, he looked smaller, as if the girls' energy had sucked away some of his own.

Peter put his mother's cake on the seat beside him and drove toward Hasting Street. When he carried it into the house Joachim was playing a video game in the living room.

"Where's the robe?" Peter asked.

"In the kitchen."

On the counter was a box wrapped in silver paper and tied with a blue ribbon. They hadn't bought a card, which probably would have been something their mother would have kept in her own mother's old sewing basket where she stored their kindergarten drawings and report cards, but at least they had bought her the robe. Peter put the cake next to it sat beside to Joachim.

Giant robots attacked each other, but none stayed dead. Joachim's thumbs danced over the keypad. In a tunnel, one robot was incinerated, then another, then a third burst through the stone floor and doubled in size. He breathed fire on the skeletons of first two and they sprang back to life. The fight continued.

"Cool," said Joachim.

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Joachim.”

“Not now.” His thumbs and his eyes worked in a type of crazy, complementary equipoise: one all movement, the other all concentration. Peter watched the screen. A blast incinerating the robots shot out of walls. If two burned, the third could disappear behind a secret door and reappear to breathe new life into his fallen friends. But only if Joachim remembered which flagstones in the floor were the magic ones. If a stone had been used, it was out of play. There was a clock. All three robots had to make it to the tunnel’s end in time. Thirty seconds left.

Peter waited. Two robots down. The third searching for the secret door, finds it, disappears. Ten seconds. Joachim’s thumbs fly. He finds an unplayed stone. The third robot reemerges. Five seconds. The third robot breathes fire. The other two jump up, and they all sprint to the tunnel’s end.

Peter patted Joachim on the shoulder. “Well played. Well played.”

“Yeah.”

“And I saw the box with Mom’s present. You had it wrapped. Good.”

“Kensheena did that.”

“You really like her?”

“She’s okay.”

“I saw Scotty Maas at the bakery, and, listen, I think you should stay away from him for a while.”

“Why? Scotty’s cool.”

“He’s the one who’s been letting you drive his automatic, isn’t he?”

“So?”

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Doesn’t it strike you as a little weird? I mean he’s as old as I am, and he’s letting you drive, and giving you *Watership Down*.”

“That’s how much you know. The rabbit world is very complex. If you can understand the rabbit world, maybe you can understand ours.”

“It’s just that he said he didn’t know Ashley.”

“Why would he say that?”

“That’s what I mean. I don’t know,” Peter said. He heard their mother’s car pull up to the curb.

When she saw him, her look wasn’t one of unadulterated pleasure. A plastic bag dangled off her wrist, her bulging handbag had slipped from her shoulder and only two fingers held her briefcase. “I thought you’d be back in Baltimore. I only got two.” She held up the plastic bag. “Paninis. One grilled chicken. One spicy beef.”

Peter realized he was getting a glimpse into the life Joachim lived alone with here. Back when there had been the three of them together, she hadn’t been the greatest cook, but they usually had supper together. Now, probably it was all carryout. He wondered if she and Joachim even ate that together.

“I thought I’d wait another day,” Peter said—no sense in telling her about the poem, just now. Let her enjoy her birthday.

She hung her bag over the doorknob just like he remembered her always doing and held up the plastic bag again. “We’ll stretch it.”

Peter waited for what he knew was coming, and he wasn’t disappointed.

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Oh, My God,” she shrieked—she’d seen the present and the cake. Peter caught Joachim’s eye: they’d done good. When they went into the kitchen, even under the dingy fluorescent light, her eyes, her smile were bright.

“Open it,” Joachim said, and she did, folding back the layers of tissue slowly, slowly, prolonging the anticipation.

“Oh, perfect, perfect,” she said when she lifted the robe out.

The three of them ate paninis at the kitchen table and somehow found that place of gentle kidding Peter remembered.

When it was time for the cake, Joachim got the plastic “50” from the dining room and stuck it into the icing. And their mother joked that fifty was the new thirty.

“So does that mean you want us to take the robe back?” Peter said. “Maybe it’s not age-appropriate.”

“Well, I really should test it through one winter,” she said. “Just because the flesh is still looking good, doesn’t mean the bones don’t creak.”

When they began “Happy Birthday” Joachim’s pure falsetto made even the wrought iron owl on the wall perk up. As if they’d been given a dispensation to be silly, they fell into joking. Who was entitled to the bigger piece: the oldest or the prettiest? If the oldest and prettiest were one and the same, what did that leave the others? Did calories count if you ate standing up? What about if you used your fingers? Goofy kidding that almost drowned out the knock on the door.

When Peter opened it, like a pilgrim from another reality, Richard Grymes stood on the porch, his hands in his pockets and flip-flops on his feet, punishing his bones with the Allegheny cold. When he came in, whatever gaiety the kitchen held, his grief quashed.

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

Grymes seemed embarrassed for doing that. No coffee. No . . . no cake, either, he said. But thank you. He was sorry to interrupt. But he'd come for a favor. The police had called. The coroner would be releasing the body in a day or two. He and Cynthia — Mrs. Grymes — had thought about it. The funeral would be Saturday, longer than that, well, would be too long.

His voice was leaden, disengaged. Peter wondered what type of tranquilizer he was on.

Grymes looked as if he couldn't remember why he'd come. A long silence. Then "Cynthia—Mrs. Grymes—and I were wondering if you would give one of the eulogies, Joachim. You were her best friend. You may have had your spats, we know. But we just thought Ashley would have wanted you. We . . . you're the one she would have wanted."

Joachim sat so still not even his dreadlock beads clicked. Peter prayed that he wouldn't answer right away, that he would realize that whatever he did could affect how New Bristol regarded him.

"Maybe we should talk to your father, Joachim," their mother said.

"It's just that there's a program. The printer needs to know. They hand out programs . . ."  
"Grymes said.

"I'll do it," Joachim said.

"Don't you think we should talk to your dad?" Peter asked.

"I want to do it. I'll do it."

"That would make us very happy. You're the one she would have wanted." If Grymes had picked up any suspicion about Joachim, he didn't project it. "I have to go," he said.

"Cynthia's sister, she's there, but, still, I don't want to leave Cynthia and Audra too long. Thank you, Joachim. It's what she would have wanted. Like I said, you may have had your problems, but you were always special to her. Thank you."

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

Grymes opened the door, then turned, studying the kitchen, the owl silhouette, the cake, as if they reminded him of a sweet but shifting memory. Then he just turned away and left, his flip-flops scuffing across the alley. Had he heard them all singing “Happy Birthday?” Peter wondered.

The cake and the robe looked forlorn. And somehow foolish. Joachim must have thought so too. He went up to his room and their mother started to clean up. Peter told her to leave everything; it was her birthday, she shouldn’t have to do anything. He’d take care of everything. “Just leave it.” He went up to Joachim’s room.

Joachim was holding the christening cup and staring across the alley.

“You know what’s funny?” he said, “When you were getting that cake, I went to call her. I wanted to tell her how you played the race card. How cool that was. She likes things like that.”

Peter put his hand on his shoulder. “So tell her anyway.”

“That’s stupid. She can’t hear me.” He turned to Peter. “I don’t really know what an eulogy is. I’ve never heard one. I don’t know why I said I’d do it.”

“It’s just a short speech remembering the person.”

“I don’t know what to write.”

“You’ll think of something. You’ll do fine.”

Joachim jerked away and sat on his bed. He kept pressing the cup, turning it in his palms, as if he could squeeze some meaning from it. He started to cry. “You’ve got to help me.”

“Sure, Joachim, the important thing about a eulogy is that you say what’s in your heart.”

Joachim looked like he was going to throw the cup at him. “Not about that. Not the eulogy. I need money. You’ve got to help me with money.”

“What?”

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Money. I need money. I saw those bill my father gave you. I need that other bill I saw in your wallet.”

“What for? What are you talking about?”

Joachim held the cup between his knees and peered into it. “I need it for Kensheena, for her brother. Kensheena and I, we messed up real bad last Sunday, getting into Anthony’s stuff. He was smoking some too. Now he’s short. He’s short big time, and Kensheena wants me to make good on my share. I need that money.” He looked up at Peter. “You got to help me.”

“Jesus, Joachim, what have you gotten yourself mixed up in?”

“It’s not me. It’s for Sheena. Anthony’s her only brother, and he’s mixed up real bad.”

“Who’s he mixed up with?”

“I don’t know.”

“Or you’re just not saying.”

“So.”

Peter thought of asking him why he didn’t give Anthony the bag of Kush from the kid at the college. Maybe that would make everything even Steven. But it also would catch Joachim in a spiral of trading grass. “Listen,” he said, “maybe for the time being, you shouldn’t hang with Kensheena.”

“Who am I supposed to hang with? Not Scotty. Not Kensheena . . .”

He put his arm around him. It felt awkward, stagey, but it was the best he could do.

“You could always hang with the Weird One.”

“Yeah. Just what I always wanted, a girl with purple hair.” Joachim got up and put the cup by the lamp.

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“This is an awful time for you. It sucks. Really sucks,” Peter said. He wanted to stay with him longer, but it was getting late and he needed to talk to their mother, and then go somewhere he’d been planning to since that morning. Plus, he was leaving at five in the morning.

Down in the kitchen their mother had put her robe on over her clothes. She sat stroking it. “This is so warm,” she was hugging herself. He saw she hadn’t listened to him: all the cake plates were away. And the box from Neusmann’s was on the counter by Nannie’s blue angel.

“I have to go out for a while, Mom. Don’t wait up. I’m leaving early.” He kissed the top of her head. “You’re a warm-hearted mama, you know that?”

“Yeah, an old, warm-hearted mama.”

He didn’t want to show her the poem from Joachim’s locker, didn’t want to watch her face crumple when he told her how Jeffries had been set to suspend Joachim. But the note in Joachim’s locker and his near-suspension, possibly signified a rolling snowball of “Guilty”; she had to be the one to keep Joachim in check. He almost wished they hadn’t given her the robe. Over her clothes, it gave her a heavy, shapeless look, as if whatever was vital and unique about her was losing definition.

He sat across the table and took both her hands in his. “I have something you should see.” He gave her the poem and watched her read it, her eyes skimming it twice.

“What this all about?” she asked. He explained to her about Jeffries and watched worry flood her eyes. Suddenly he hated what she hated: that she was facing fifty without a man.

“Larry will need to know about this,” she said. “The lawyer he’s hired called me today. Bruce Weiss; he sounds okay. I guess he should know, too. I’ll ask Larry. I need to look for that receipt again.”

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Mom, there’s something I have to ask you. Is something going on between Audra Grymes and Gordon Albright?”

She smiled. “You really have been away a long time. You’re about the only one who doesn’t know.”

“Jeeze.”

“I know. It’s crazy.”

“Yeah. More than crazy. Do the Grymeses know?”

“I’m not sure.”

He kissed her on the top of her head again and left, driving up Stevens Road, across Market Street, and past the side of the Ionia, then turned around and parked across the street from the Dumpster near the diner’s backdoor. He got out, walked to the corner, crossed Market Street, waited in the shadows of the doorway to Nannie’s Whatnots and watched the Ionia. He didn’t have to wait long. Ten minutes later, Anthony came out of the kitchen with a rack of plates.

Peter crossed back to his car and waited again. This time for thirty minutes. Anthony came out of the Ionia’s backdoor, dragging a trash bag toward the Dumpster. Peter took the broken hockey stick off the backseat, got out, and crossed Stevens Road. “Hey.”

Anthony had the lid of the Dumpster up and was about to toss the bag in. He turned, saw the hockey stick and kept the trash bag.

“We need to talk,” Peter said.

No answer.

“My brother says you’re pissed because he smoked some of your dope with your sister.”

Anthony eyed the hockey stick. “He messed me up.”

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

Peter didn't know what would be the most effective: money or fear. When he'd first decided to tell Anthony to leave Joachim alone back in the afternoon when Joachim had been afraid to go into the Ionia, he thought intimidation would work. But the guy was no fool. Joachim would tell Kensheena that his brother had gone back to Baltimore, and she would tell her brother. And Joachim would be as unprotected as he ever had been. Peter took out his wallet and gave Anthony the other bill from Larry.

The busboy looked at it. "Cool. Big brother comes to the aid of little brother. Cool."

Peter suddenly realized he'd made himself into a limitless bank. Whenever Anthony needed money, all he'd have to do is threaten Joachim. He swung the hockey stick into the trash bag, garbage spewing out. "Listen to me, you son of a bitch, if you so much as breathe the same air as Joachim, it won't be a bag of trash I split the next time. Got it?" Just to hear its deep, menacing twang, he slammed the stick against the Dumpster.

Anthony put the money in his pocket, opened the Dumpster and started tossing in the garbage, piece by piece. "Shit, now I got to pick all this up, or Gus'll have a fit." Peter hit the Dumpster again. "Did you hear what I said? Stay the fuck away from my brother."

A car pulled up to the curb. Not a police car, but it had a blue flashing light on its dash, and Geri Jones behind the wheel. She rolled down her window. "Everything okay, here?"

"Fine. Nothin' happen' here," Anthony said.

Peter didn't know what to say. He'd just given a dope dealer a hundred dollars to pay off his brother's debt. What did that make him? A buyer by proxy? A second-hand user? He didn't know. Geri Jones motioned him over to her car.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"Okay."

CHAPTER NINE TUESDAY

“Not here. Not now. Give me your number. I’ll call. Just tell it to me; I’ll remember.”

She repeated the number to him, then turned off her strobing light.

He watched her drive away.

