

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Peter Farley gripped his beer, burrowed further into his old chair, and considered the changes pressing around him. Sometime since his last visit home in June, his chair had been moved from his old bedroom to the corner of his mother's living room—that change he could deal with. The other was far more disturbing. His teenaged self was grabbing his insides and twisting them into an anguish of awkwardness at the prospect of getting out of his chair and mingling with his mother's friends.

He watched her work her party: a blue swirl topped by a silver-blond puff of hair air kissing her guests hello, making them feel privileged for a hug—her late October birthday always had been celebrated as a Halloween party. For maximum mystery, she held a feathered silver mask to her eyes, then would take someone's wrist and exclaim, "Fifty! Can you believe it? Why don't they just hang a sign on my chest proclaiming, 'Hag of MacMaster'?"

How she harvested the protestations, especially those of the men: "Well if that's fifty, come here and give us a hug, you witchy Kit." Their wives to the side holding little gift bags and tight smiles.

After two weeks of fifteen-hour days spent studying data sets of macrophages of bronchoalveolar lavage fluid, Peter would return to his little apartment in Baltimore and her waiting voice mails. "It's not about my birthday, Peter. It's really not. Your brother misses you, too. You haven't been home in so long. Please try to make it."

But it *was* about her birthday. Her fiftieth. And how she was facing it without a man.

Peter took a long, cold swallow and centered his can on one of the rings scarring his chair's arm. Time to show off Kit's son-the-doctor, all part of her surviving in the MacMaster

College food-chain. Twice-divorced, Kit Nowicki-Farley-Durham might be only a grant writer, but she'd been smart enough to raise a doctor, and in a degree-drunk town like New Bristol, that must accrue some stature. He sucked in his gut and hoped the stain on his shirt stayed below his belt. He should have gotten a haircut. And his brother should come downstairs instead of blasting music up in his bedroom.

The crowd was getting thicker. If he were lucky, he'd get through the evening without upsetting someone's drink or stepping on a foot. A woman with a stuck-on smile and a dress with flowers the same desperate red as her lipstick hemmed him in against his chair. She ran her hand over its frame as if its wood fed some hunger in her fingers.

"I'll bet it's a Stickley," she said. "Leave it to your mother to find a genuine Stickley. If I had half her style, I'd be rich, rich, rich."

Peter felt the woman's avian eyes hopping all over his face.

She held out her hand. "Nannie Albright. You probably don't remember me. You were already away at college when Gordon and I moved in. next to the Grymeses."

He couldn't tell if Nannie's hand was icy from her drink or if she had a circulation problem. His chair pressed against the back of his legs, and when he leaned forward to avoid plopping back, Nannie mistook it as encouragement. She had a shop, she said. On Main Street. Nannie's Whatnots. It had sounded clever when she thought it up. But Main Street! Impossible to park.

He searched for something to say, something witty so he could slip away without hurting her feelings, but his teenaged self had knotted his tongue. He could only watch as Nannie slowly spread the fingers on her left hand and wiggle them in front of his eyes like a bony fringe, so he could see the pale indent encircling her third finger, the telltale mark of an absent ring.

“Pretty soon I’ll be joining your mother in The-Fifty-and-Single Club,” she said.

He wasn’t completely surprised she’d told him. People revealed personal things to him all the time. He suspected it had something to do with his genes, his pudgy cheeks from his mother’s Polish side, his pipefitter’s nose from his father’s Irish. A potato face. That’s what a girl in high school once told him had, but he’d been so besotted with Cathryn Lebow he hadn’t cared. He hadn’t known what to say to Cathryn Lebow then and didn’t know what to say to Nannie Albright now.

He began throwing out platitudes until Nannie caught one, and they got a nice little volley going. She innocently mistaking that he was at Johns Hopkins, he cordially correcting her that he went to the University of Maryland. “I’ve interrupted my residency to do basic research for a year.” Then, her Allegheny Mountains to his Baltimore rowhouses. A nice little volley.

And then, Joachim ratcheted up his music so it was a hard-driving acid rain seeping through the ceiling. Peter rolled his eyes upwards. “My brother. There can’t be anything worse for a fifteen year old than having to meet a house full of his mother’s friends. I’m hoping to have him down to Baltimore as soon as my research feels more under control.”

“So you actually live there, right in Baltimore?”

“An area called Ridgley’s Delight,” he shouted.

Nannie’s eyes kept hopping over his face. “And is it that?”

“Is it what?”

“A delight. You know what I mean. Baltimore, the crime and all.”

Peter felt Nannie had just slipped a shiv through his ribs, using “crime” as code for “Black.”

The years his mother was married to Larry Durham hadn't been Peter's happiest, but they had been informative. Brilliant and Black, his stepfather had been a relentless denouncer of the code. Now this idiotic woman with her hopping eyes was completely oblivious to the fact that Larry Durham's Black son was raining music down on them. Peter turned from her, picked up his beer, and, before Nannie could wedge him in again, stepped away. If he was rude for abandoning her, fine.

He wove and dodged through the crowd toward the makeshift bar by the fireplace where a gnome of a man with three fingers of liquor flashed a grin, and raised and lowered himself on the balls of his feet, just as Peter remembered him doing at the blackboard in high school chemistry class.

When Peter addressed him as Mr. Maas, Maurice Maas corrected him. "No, no. You must call me Yo Yo, Peter. I insist. Just like you used to. You didn't think I didn't know, did you?"

"I have to confess that I thought up Yo Yo Maas to impress Cathryn Lebow. I'm afraid that's why I did a lot of things in those days."

"Actually, Yo Yo Maas was very clever of you. I've been called many things by my students, and, believe me, Yo Yo Maas is by far the cleverest."

Peter watched his old teacher drain his liquor, finger by finger. In New Bristol's social order, tenured MacMaster full professors rated a ten, while someone like Maurice Maas, a minor professional unconnected to the college, was no better than a two. Still, Maurice Mass with his boundless enthusiasm for science, and his patience with an awkward fifteen year old was the one who had transformed Peter's life. After that horrible summer when his mother's marriage to Larry Durham broke apart, and she'd tried to make Peter the man of the house, he'd walked into

Maurice Maas's classroom and discovered the wonders of the double helix. He'd been younger than most of the others, but bright enough to outshine them. And then he'd stay late after school, helping set up the lab for the next day.

By the time he'd leave for home, the hallways would always be empty of people, but alive with echoes. Basketballs thudding. The orchestra practicing. He'd listen to the violins, hoping to pick out Cathryn's. He never could. Outside, the yellow buses would be gone from the parking lot, meaning a cold, dark walk home. Maurice Mass had gotten him through that.

"Come on, Maurice," Peter said, "Let's get something to eat before the others lay waste to it."

"Sounds like a plan. Better fill our plates before these poor non-tenured types. You know, don't you, that they stuff their pockets for their starving tykes back home? Your mother had a Christmas party two years ago, and I swear I caught one filling his pockets with anchovy dip. Said it was for his cat." Maurice held up his glass. "Just let me top this off." Maurice turned toward the makeshift bar.

In the dining room, everything gleamed white and bright, Peter noticed. His Grandmother Farley's white tablecloth from Ireland. Cloth napkins folded in precise triangles. A silver slicer by a cake with a blue plastic 50 in its center. Scattered autumn leaves for color. And everywhere, flickering candles. Maybe his mother was hoping all the sparkle and light and would distract people from the spot on the ceiling with a pale center and a dark aureole, the sort of spot plumbers love.

He'd noticed other signs of neglect, too. A bulge in the border over the kitchen window. Two rusty rings on the cover of the living room radiator. A big, black splotch beneath. And, of

course, the creak in the second step on the stairs. She's waiting for someone to come and fix everything, he thought. She's waiting for a man.

Maurice came back with three fingers plus and feigned exaggerated horror at Joachim's music. Peter shouted a question about Maurice's son, Scotty, while Maurice reached for some pilaf. "He's fine. Fine. Scotty's doing very well. Actually, he's the reason I can't retire. It's best if I stay out of the house. Give each other space. Scotty's back with me for the time being, finishing his degree online. The new wave, this online business. What can I say?"

Peter piled his plate with buffalo wings. Joachim's music stopped—maybe he'd come downstairs now.

"So what's Scotty's getting?" Peter asked. "A master's or what?"

"A master's? No. No. This is his bachelor's. Elementary ed. You know how it is. Scotty got waylaid by marriage. I want to kiss whoever made this artichoke casserole."

"Scotty's married?"

"Was . . . was married. One of those starter marriages. What can I say?"

Peter calculated: his mother's marriage to his own father had lasted six years, the one to Larry Durham, five. Close, but not exactly "starter marriages."

"Let's go outside. I have something I've been mulling over," Maurice said. "Besides, I need to wash down this food with a cigarette."

On the back porch, Peter felt as if his eyes were seeing one thing and his mind another. Everything looked smaller than he remembered. The little metal gate to the alley. The Grymeses' house. Their old tree where a short piece of rope angled in the moonlight. When had everything become so weather beaten? He'd come home to an alien place. "You wanted to tell me something, Maurice?"

“It’s about your brother.” The old teacher raised up on the balls of his feet, and his longish, bald head blocked the second-story light in the Grymeses’ house across the alley. “Let’s just say Joachim’s not running with the crowd I would have expected. I’ve known your mother for ages, and she’s a quality person all the way. I couldn’t have gotten along without her when my wife was dying. And I know how good a student you were. How hard you worked. I would have expected Joachim to follow suit. Besides, you can’t live in New Bristol and not know that academic competition is in the very air. It’s so fierce, but Joachim? I doubt he has plans for the next hour, let alone the next two or three years.”

Peter felt he’d been hit with a sandbag. He’d interrupted his residency to work on a research project, and the hours were excruciatingly long. He didn’t have the time to be a father figure. His mother had tried forcing him into that role when his stepfather had left. He remembered those cold walks home, going the long way, past Neusmann’s Bakery on Market Street, then doubling back to Stevens Road, finally reaching the alley, dreading opening the backdoor and finding the thermostat dead, or a pipe frozen, or Joachim throwing a fit over a broken toy truck. And their mother with No Man! No Man!

He could imagine her putting Maurice up to this, her electric touch on the old teacher’s wrist and her saying, “Talk to Peter, Maurice. At my party. Mano-a-mano. Make it sound like it’s coming from you. If Peter would just get a little more involved with him, Joachim might get his act together.”

Across the alley, the light went out. Peter hadn’t noticed how benign it was until it was gone. He took another spoonful of potato salad. “After being an only child for so long, having a little brother was sort of a novelty. Joachim was cute. I got a kick out of him. But then I went to Penn State and med school, and I really haven’t been home that much. I don’t know what I can

do, Maurice. I'm leaving in the morning. And, besides, Joachim's fifteen. I was a total oaf at that age. A total horny oaf."

"Well, horny goes with fifteen. But you weren't such an oaf. You were just big."

"Well, Joachim is fifteen and Black," Peter said. "That's got to be twice as hard."

The door across the alley opened, and he watched the Grymeses carrying elaborate Jack O' Lanterns come through their own back yard and into his mother's. Hearty hellos and good-to-see-yous passed around, Cynthia Grymes telling him that being a doctor looked like it agreed with him, and Richard Grymes glancing up at the music thundering from Joachim's window: "Think you can take that racket back to Baltimore?"

Everyone filed into the kitchen, where Peter saw his mother dumping more beer into a cooler. As soon as she saw Cynthia's pumpkins she straightened up and clasped her hands together so that the sleeves of her caftan flapped like blue wings. Cynthia began telling her that carvings were masks of comedy and tragedy, the perfect expressions of fifty. Not that *she* knew anything about that. Laughs. His mother assigning Peter the task of finishing with the beer and then shepherding the Grymeses and Maurice toward the dining room, and then whirling around. "Get your brother to lower that thing," she ordered and vanished.

What was he supposed to do when the only word thundering from Joachim's room was "Pussy! Pussy! Pussy"? Whenever he called from Baltimore, Joachim could only squeeze out monosyllables to whatever he asked: "So what's going on in New Bristol?" "Nothing." "How's school?" "Fine." "Is Mom there?" "No." "Do you know when she'll be back?" "No."

Peter went upstairs with a beer and not much hope. In his brother's room, teenaged disaffection had muscled aside the remains of childhood. A rapper in a silver G-string on a poster

over the bed menaced the Mickey Mouse lamp on the dresser. And a jumble of electronics towered over scattered action figures.

Peter searched his brother's face for some trace of the six year old who had fallen getting off the school bus and sliced his knee, his mother at work and only a big brother home to wash and bandage it.

But that chubby first-grader had been subsumed into a shirtless teenager bent over an electric keyboard.

Peter sat on his bed and shouted over the music. "I was wondering. Did you get Mom a present?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Come on, Joachim. It's her birthday."

Joachim unplugged a microphone, tapped it a few times, and plugged it in again. "I don't have any money. Besides, her real birthday is Tuesday."

Peter told him how Tavon Little, one of his former patients, had come to see him that morning and how Tavon's father, a Baltimore police detective, had given him tickets to a Ravens game against Pittsburgh. "Maybe you could come down for it."

Joachim's "Whatever" told him he'd been away too long, too absorbed by tiny, damaged hearts to connect with this new Joachim. Besides, Joachim was so different from himself. His own high school years had been spent in his old chair, a bag of Doritos on one arm, a chemistry book on the other, weekends included. The only thing he'd looked forward to was Sunday morning pick-up hockey. Now all he had to offer his brother was a beer. He waggled it at him.

"What's that?"

"It's called a beer."

“Then, I better call the police.”

“What for?”

“Haven’t you noticed? I’m just a minor. And here you are, trying to corrupt me. What kind of doctor is that? Let me get those police.”

Peter got off the bed. “They’re probably already on their way. I’m sure that noise can be heard all the way to Market Street. If you’d lower it, you’d probably hear the sirens.”

“Then I guess I better turn it up.”

Peter tried a hockey move. A fake to the left, a feint to the right, he pulled the plug.

“Oh, man,” Joachim clutched his heart and collapsed onto the floor. “Why’d you do that?”

“This party’s important. A lot of the people Mom works with are downstairs.” Peter opened the beer and took a swallow. “I know it doesn’t make any sense, but they’ve got to like her. If they have a good time, maybe they’ll be less inclined to bitch to the higher ups if some grant she’s written doesn’t come through.”

“So why don’t you go down and tell her to be competent? And if you think her birthday’s so important, did *you* get her a present?”

“No chance. I was going to get something from the hospital gift shop but, like I said, one of my former patients came to see me.”

“Geez. That would have been impressive. Something from the gift shop. Big doctor like you. Maybe you could give her one of those Ravens tickets.” Joachim got off the floor, took the can and drank long, his eyes daring Peter to take it from him.

Peter lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. He’d been awake since four-thirty that morning and had had only four hours sleep before that. With the music off, Joachim’s room was

peaceful. Not the silence of solitude that he enjoyed in the lab back in Baltimore, but, at least, not the party's hot air bonhomie.

He opened his eyes to an apparition floating first one way, then the other, by the window over the back porch, flashing red eyelids and a halo of silvery blonde hair. Then it turned and pulled something onto the porch's roof. Next it pressed its face against the window and gave the pane a tongue kiss. And screamed at Joachim, "Open the damn window, you fucking big mouth. I'm freezing my ass off."

When she climbed in, Peter saw that the apparition was actually a very pissed off teen angel.

"Well, don't just stand there. Get the rope," she yelled at Joachim. "God, you've got the biggest mouth on the planet." She turned to Peter. "Well, hi. What's this? Big Brother come to watch?"

Only the hair was familiar. Peter remembered the two little Grymes girls. Audra and Ashley. Their new rabbit had gotten loose one Easter, and they had shivered with grief while he'd stuffed his mouth with marshmallow chicks and joined the hunt. When he found the bunny huddled under his mother's van, he became their hero.

But Teen Angel was which Grymes girl? How could she have been either and have turned into this creature with Bambi legs planted in combat boots, and a leather motorcycle jacket glittering with studs over a baby-doll dress barely to her thighs?

"Ashley, right?" he guessed.

"Yeah. If you were hoping for Audra, sorry to disappoint."

Joachim began tying a noose. "We got to get to the mountain. What took you so long?"

“I had to sew my sleeves on and wait for Audra to leave.” She tried slipping the noose over Joachim’s head, but he had made the loop too small.

He took it back and began refashioning it. The coiled rope kinked and slapped Peter’s ankle.

“You’re about to see Halloween history,” Joachim grinned at him. “Ashley and me, we’re really into political correctness.”

“Yeah, politically correct as shit,” she said. “For the lash marks, what if I scratch you? . Then we could use the lipstick to highlight.”

Peter stayed on the bed. He’d stay all night if he had to. That noose, it could be some sort of Halloween costume. Or not. One rotation in the emergency room had shown him the heartbreak a damaged teenage psyche could do. The sixteen-year-old star of “Romeo and Juliet” who’d gone home and brewed a deadly potion from her parents’ medicine cabinet. The fifteen-year-old who’d pulled his shot at the last moment, aborting his suicide but severing his spine

“That’s not a good idea, the lipstick on the scratches,” Peter said. “They could get infected. In fact, the scratches themselves aren’t a good idea. Even without lipstick they could get infected.” He rambled on about the dangers but suspected his brother and Ashley could see through his pretense about the risks of infection and into the heart of his horror: the rope.

“Look,” she said, “We’re not going to do anything foolish. We wouldn’t be letting you hang around if we were.”

She sounded so mature and reasonable, and that scared him the most. Suicides were frequently completely rational about the completely irrational step they were contemplating. On the other hand, maybe the two of them were just cooking up a totally creative Halloween costume. That’s what Peter wanted to believe.

“Two minutes, Joachim,” he said. “If you’re not down stairs in two minutes, I’m coming up and carrying you down to Mom’s party.”

He was in the hallway and about to go downstairs when Ashley came out of Joachim’s room and mumbled something. He asked her to repeat it.

She took a deep breath. “You’re a doctor, right?”

“Yeah, but right now I’m doing research. I’ve got a long way to go.”

“Whatever. So what do you know about babies?” The way she was almost twitching with anxiety made him look away. Down the stairs his mother’s blue swirl had engulfed Ruth Bledsoe, the therapist she had sent him to that horrible summer his stepfather left. He turned back toward Ashley. “What is it about babies you want to know?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering if you were that kind of doctor.”

“No, I’m not. Even when I begin practicing I won’t be. But if you want . . .”

“Forget it, okay? Just forget it.” She slammed back into Joachim’s room.

Peter stood in the hallway. Maybe he should go to her, try to help, but how? He was leaving for Baltimore in the morning, and Ashley Grymes obviously had serious problems he couldn’t hope to solve.

He went downstairs. The whole party was churning faster. He wanted to reach Ruth Bledsoe and tell her he was doing okay, only she was across the room, near her own mother, a renowned MacMaster classicist, so he waded into the party’s riptide of wit and wandering eyes. All these bright, well-degreed people. Undergraduate diplomas from the Ivy League. Ph.Ds., from fine Midwestern schools. How long did it take before they realized they were trapped at MacMaster and to a mortgage for one of New Bristol’s little brick duplexes, the bedrooms

needed for the kids, so their own study having to be relocated to the basement where they worked and prayed for tenure.

People were coming up to him, taking his hand, saying they remembered him when He gave them what he thought they wanted. Yes, he was training in Baltimore. No, not Johns Hopkins. The University of Maryland. He hoped to specialize in pediatric cardiology.

Some of them would never be as smart as once they had expected to be, he knew. None would ever be as young. They seemed to be coming to him to touch that twenty-seven-year-old part of their former selves. Maybe awaken it. The MacMaster students were impossibly young, but to these people, at the dawn of middle-age, twenty-seven was within easy memory. They held one drink too many in their hands and envy in their eyes. What could he tell them? That all he had at twenty-seven was bone-cracking tiredness, decades of desperate parents of young patients ahead, and a mountainous medical bureaucracy? Not to mention loneliness.

He kept plowing toward Ruth, but was intercepted by her husband, a MacMaster musicologist whose eyes brimmed with misplaced sentimentality. "I studied in Baltimore, you know," Warren Bledsoe said. "The Peabody Conservatory. God, those times! Mount Vernon, one of the great public spaces, in my humble . . ." Then, Warren Bledsoe stared at the stairway, whatever he saw quashing his boozy reminiscence.

Peter heard the air go out of the party. Even the ice cubes stopped tinkling. People were turning toward the stairs, all of them and all of their degrees undone by what was coming down.

Like royalty, Joachim and Ashley descended. Not even the creaking step detracted from their impact. Joachim's neck was in the noose, the rope's other end, in Ashley's hand.

"Hi, everybody," she said. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Hi, Dr. Beldsoe, the lady. Dr. Bledsoe, the music man. You all havin' a bitchin' good time? Or should I say a lynchin' good time?"

On the landing, Joachim began turning slowly. Red lipstick stripes laced up his back, and — son of a bitch, she *had* scratched him, Peter saw.

“Twistin’. Twistin’. Twistin’ the night away,” Joachim began singing in his unique falsetto, a sound as pure and fluid as liquid silver.

His brother could always do that, Peter realized, could always create soundwaves of utter innocence and profound longing, casting one flawless note after another to undulate the air, purify it. Joachim’s every “Happy Birthday,” every “Silent Night,” made all other singers stop. Even with the horror of his song still in their ears, Peter sensed as much awe as revulsion in the partygoers behind him. He turned and looked. Their carefully composed visages of civility and good cheer had been unmasked, leaving the bare realization that they’d been overmatched by a couple of teenagers.

Then came Ashley’s turn. She licked a finger, touched a lash mark, then licked her finger again and began her song. “Mmmm, good. Mmmm, good. Klan-made stew is mmmm good. Mmmm, good. Mmmm, good.”

She bent from her waist and lifted the hem of her baby doll dress to show a pair of MacMaster boxer shorts worn back to front. Then, turning and watching the partygoers from over her shoulder, she wiggled her hips. From the boxers’ slit, dangled the raccoon tail that once had hung from Joachim’s handlebars. Teen Angel sashayed her hips making the tail sway in front of Peter’s face.

Then fifteen-year-old Ashley Grymes, face like an angel, hair like a halo, spotted his old teacher. “How about you, YoYo?” she said. “Wouldn’t you like a little coon tail? Or you, Dr. Bledsoe, the music man, you old tickle pants, you?” She shrieked and she and Joachim kissed. Then the two of them ran through the party and out the kitchen door.

No one moved. Peter saw his mother. Beside a table full of bright birthday bags, her face was collapsing into merciless fifty.

Slowly the crowd stirred, but nothing could resuscitate the party. Ruth Bledsoe was the first to say she had to leave — “Mom’s getting a little tired.” And then the others. Peter saw a few trying not to look embarrassed for his mother, but none succeeding. Each parting air kiss, each goodbye, seemed to age her. She held the stick of her mask like he’d seen older patients hold tissues, something clutched for the sake of touch. One of its feathers had fallen and Maurice, the last to leave, stepped on it.

Peter steeled himself for the moment the door closed and he’d be alone with her. She would whirl at him, demanding to know what had driven his brother to humiliate her so, and why hadn’t Peter stopped him. Their old familiar dance. She expecting her oldest son to play a role, and he with no script to follow.

But when the door shut, she just turned and picked up the fallen feather. He watched her make a halfhearted attempt to jam it back into her mask, then toss the whole business onto the makeshift bar. He wished she’d yell and become the person he recognized.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he said. He didn’t know for what, but appeasing her felt normal.

“I’m going to bed,” she said and then when she reached the landing, she turned. “I’m too old for this. Just too old.”

“No, you’re not, Mom. Fifty’s not old.”

“Yes I am. For your brother, I’m just too old. I can’t do it. I just can’t.”

After she had gone upstairs he tried cleaning up, but he didn’t know what she wanted to keep or throw away.

Every bad and good thing about himself had originated in this house, but now he couldn't find his way around. Where had that silver cake slicer come from? And where did it go? He'd never seen that blender before. Did his mother always keep it on the counter? Or store it somewhere? He sat in his old chair and turned on the TV.

He wanted to throttle Joachim, to make him see that he had to shape up.

And what was this business about a baby? Had the two of them cooked up that little act to distract themselves from a reality of a baby they couldn't face? Or had they done it to let everyone know that they could handle whatever they could conceive? He didn't know. He just didn't know. If his mother was too old for Joachim, what would she do with a baby she'd probably have to raise? Assuming it was Joachim's. Damn Joachim. What had he done?

