

Chapter 3

There were two routes from the Bleachery Homestead to the high school. The shorter way was along the perimeter of the Bleachery grounds, follow the circular gravel road around to the southeast and to a break in the chain link fence, had to crouch way down or duck-walk to get through. On the other side it was woods, not real woods like what surrounded the town, those were tall, straight hardwoods. Here it was just short, gnarly trees with lots of brush and vines and it was marshy, stay on the higher ground, on the path beaten down by the generations of Bleachery school kids. Out of the woods was a ditch and a culvert and with planks spanning the ditch, and up a steep embankment and to a short street out to Third Street, actually, officially, Third Ridge Street, Third Ridge Street on the signs, Third Street to the locals. Go right on Third then left on Academy Street and to the high school, where Academy ended at a circular drive. There were hedges and a flagpole in the grass encompassed by the circle and beyond the circle, the front of the school, an imposing brick facade with plate glass windows, sandstone pillars, and with a large tapestry draped down from the balcony railing above the pillars. On the tapestry was the beefy silhouette of the Twenty-Sixth President of the United States and below the silhouette:

Hope Mountain High
Home of the Rough Riders

The other, longer way was out through the Bleachery gate, over the bridge and up the hill, Lower Main to Upper Main, and in front of Clydes' Place, onto Third, all the way to Academy.

The Bleachery boys mostly took the first route, the girls, in their miniskirts and stockings and clunky shoes and with their big hair, most of them, took the longer way. The girls went in packs and Bobby, watching out the Clydes' Place front window, saw a pack coming up the hill and seeing Judy in the pack, Bobby went out.

On the corner opposite Clydes' Place was a brick church and with the church lawn slightly higher than the adjacent sidewalk and street, there was a concrete retaining wall, shoulder high to a kid. Judy was leaning against the wall, waiting as Bobby crossed the

street.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi, Bobby,” she said and with a big happy smile.

He took her books, to carry them, along with his own.

“I had fun last night,” she said, walking.

“Me too,” he said.

“But Shar, honestly, she’s getting to be too much,” Judy said. “She’s not the same person since she started helping Miss Robespierre.”

“She should stop going to Miss Robespierre’s.”

“That’s what I keep telling her.”

“And she won’t?”

“She says I’m jealous and maybe I am but not because it’s Shar and not me who gets to help Miss Robespierre. Miss Robespierre took away my best friend and Shar doesn’t seem to care. And it’s way too weird, how Lottie showed up the same night as Shar tried to bring her up from the dead, and all the pieces fit, the dates on the headstone, Lottie’s age, her clothes. I keep thinking it wasn’t Shar we saw by the road.”

“Had to be, though, didn’t it?”

“And you know what else makes me think it wasn’t Shar?”

“How her feet didn’t touch the ground?”

“That, yeh, and what else,” Judy said, “remember how when she got to the road, remember how she stopped?”

“It was like she was afraid of the road.”

“Not afraid of the road because there might be a car,” Judy said, “but afraid to step on it, like she didn’t know what it was.”

“Think a girl from a hundred years ago wouldn’t know about blacktop?”

“Is it something Charlene would have thought about, or known about?”

“Seems like she thought of everything.”

“Seems like it, doesn’t it?”

“If it wasn’t Charlene, who was it?”

“Only one person it could have been.”

“Lottie Barrett.”

“From a hundred years ago.”

“And what about the rest of what those girls were saying,” Judy said. “How nobody threw eggs at her.”

“I’ve been going to the Swale on Halloween since I was little,” Bobby said, “and I’ve never seen anybody go all the way through without getting egged.”

Judy laughed.

“I got egged,” she said, “and I didn’t even go through.”

Bobby laughed too, since Judy did.

“A couple years ago the police car got egged,” he said.

“They’ll egg the police and they won’t egg a girl?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“It has to be some kind of joke.”

“So who was she,” Bobby said. “If she wasn’t a ghost?”

“Maybe she’s a new girl,” Judy said, “and Shar met her before anybody else and got her to go along with her stupid joke.”

“It doesn’t make sense as a joke,” Bobby said. “I mean, it only makes sense as a joke but it seems too complicated to be a joke.”

“If it’s not a joke,” Judy said, “I don’t want to know what it is.”

“You don’t think Charlene brought up a dead girl, do you?”

“Kind of seems like it, doesn’t it?”

Bobby scratched his head.

“That’s way too crazy to be true,” he said.

“Maybe, with Halloween over, maybe it’ll all just go away.”

“Let’s hope so,” Bobby said.

“Boys and girls,” Miss Wheatley said in homeroom and before the start of classes, “I want you all to say hello to our newest student, just arrived here in Hope Mountain. Class, Miss Lottie Barrett.”

Lottie, in her ankle-length yellow dress with its stiff white collar and white lace cuffs, was in the first row and directly in front of Miss Wheatley’s desk.

Lottie turned and smiled around the room.

Bobby and Judy gaped, first at Lottie, then at one another.

They hadn’t noticed Lottie when they’d first come into the classroom, she’d been already at her desk and with Bobby and Judy both toward the back, middle, of the room, and now it was

their first time seeing her up close and she was strikingly pretty. Most of the girls in Hope Mountain High plastered their faces with makeup, Lottie wasn't wearing any makeup and had pretty eyes and a light complexion. Her hair was auburn and was in tight braids coiled around the top of her head. On her feet were black lace boots.

"Hello, Lottie," the class said.

"Miss Barrett," Miss Wheatley said, "could you stand up please and say a few words about yourself to the class?"

"Well," Lottie said, standing and facing the class, "my name is Lottie Barrett and I'm not really new to Hope Mountain. Not so new at all." She laughed, a trill. "I've been here for a long time. Longer than most of you. Longer even than Miss Wheatley."

"Since Indian times," a boy said, "by the look of your dress."

"No, not so long as that," Lottie said, "and about my dress, it maybe looks funny to you but I think it's beautiful."

"My grandmother would think so too," a girl said, "except she's dead."

The class hooted.

"Class!" Miss Wheatley said.

"Is she up on the mountain?" Lottie said.

"Who?" the girl said.

"Your grandmother," Lottie said.

The girl was stultified.

"I...I guess so, yeh."

"Maybe I know her," Lottie said.

"You're weird," the girl said and the class hooted again.

The bell rang, the kids bolted for the door.

"Just a moment, Miss Barrett," Miss Wheatley said and with the exiting kids clogging the door, Bobby and Judy stayed just inside the classroom and listened.

"Yes, Miss Wheatley?" Lottie said.

"Whatever did you mean, with all that crazy talk?"

"I'm sorry," Lottie said. "I didn't mean anything by it and I'm sorry if I upset the class. It made me nervous, having to talk to all the kids and it was all just supposed to be a joke and jokes don't go so good if you're nervous."

“I’m the one who should apologize,” Miss Wheatley said. “I should have asked you first were you comfortable speaking to the class.”

“Oh, it’s alright, Miss Wheatley.”

Miss Wheatley smiled.

“You’re a good girl,” she said. “A fine girl, and I want you to succeed here at Hope Mountain High, and you need to understand, first impressions are crucial in a new school. You can’t go around talking that way without the other kids thinking there’s something, well, frankly, weird about you, and I know you don’t want the kids to think you’re weird.”

“Certainly not, Miss Wheatley.”

Miss Wheatley smiled.

“Get along now,” she said. “Don’t be late to class on your first day. It is your first day, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Lottie said.

Miss Wheatley noticed Bobby and Judy, still lingering inside the room. She took a step toward them, her foot coming down hard.

“Shoo!” she said.

Lunch, Judy sat with her friends, Bobby with his, and going out of the cafeteria at the bell, Bobby caught up to Judy and they moved along slowly with the rest of the kids.

“She’s in two of my classes so far,” Bobby said.

“You talk to her?”

“Didn’t get the chance.”

Judy nodded, anxious with her own news about Lottie Barrett:

“A girl at the table said Mr. Maloney was showing a movie in social studies and he asked Lottie to turn off the lights, she was the closest to the switch, and Lottie didn’t get up and he asked again and she still didn’t get up. Mr. Maloney got really mad, you know how he gets, and all the kids were snickering. They thought Lottie was playing the class clown and Lottie saw the kids were laughing and she laughed too, like she really was the class clown, and a boy got up and turned off the lights and in the middle of the movie, the lights started blinking on and off and it was Lottie. Mr. Maloney

said if it wasn't her first day and if she ever did it again, she'd get detention for a month."

"Nobody messes with Mr. Maloney," Bobby said.

"And the weirdest part," Judy said, "the girl said when Lottie was flicking the lights, she had this look of amazement, like she'd never worked a light switch before."

"Weird," Bobby said. "Did you talk to Charlene?"

"Charlene's out sick."

It all sounded ominous to Bobby, especially the last piece.

"We have to find out what's going on," Judy said. "OK, tell you what. Follow her home after school. Find out where she lives, then come back for me at four."

The final bell rang at 2:45 and it was a moment between the bell and the explosion of jubilant kids out of the exit doors. Bobby followed Lottie slowly along the hallways, Lottie's pace, she was reticent, intimidated by the boisterousness around her, and stayed close to the walls.

Bobby followed her outside.

The kids were piling into cars, the cars lining both sides of the street and all the way out to Third Street, and the kids were getting onto the buses, idling in the lot alongside the school, and mostly the kids were walking along the sidewalks.

Bobby followed Lottie along Academy Street and with plenty of kids between them and turning onto Third Street and with not so many kids now. It was about three hundred yards to the light in front of Clydes' Place and halfway there, it was just Bobby and Lottie and with Bobby a few steps behind.

She turned, smiled at him.

"Following me?" she said.

"I live on the other side of the light," he said, defensive.

She was smiling still and Bobby liked her smile and what else he liked was how the sunlight touched her. The sun was on the other side of the river and to the southwest and behind the kids, and with a low autumn slant to the rays. With nothing between the river and Third Street tall enough to block the light, it struck Lottie full in the face. It flattered her delicate features and it seemed to

Bobby as if the sunlight was hurting her eyes and like she welcomed the feel of it and even though it hurt. Hazel eyes, Bobby decided. She had a sprinkling of freckles around her nose, her eyebrows were the same color as her hair, only lighter.

She was squinting at Bobby, the sun over his shoulder.

“Want to walk the new girl home on her first day?” she said.

Bobby was flustered.

Walking her home wasn't in the plan and walking a girl and with a girlfriend was two-timing. But if he walked with her, he could pretend he really did think she was dead and get her talking and maybe she'd slip up, say something to show how she wasn't really dead. And even if she didn't slip up, he could find out more walking with her than following her.

She was smiling still.

“I won't tell Judy,” she said.

“How do you know about Judy?” he said.

“You kidding me?” she said. “It's all they talk about in school. Who's going with who. It's kind of annoying, actually.”

He walked alongside her and didn't offer to carry her books and they went without saying much and it was embarrassing for Bobby, he felt it was on him to say stuff and he couldn't think of anything. It was different with Judy. With Judy, Bobby had so much to say, it usually all just tumbled out.

Crossing beneath the light, he spoke:

“This is where I live. I'll drop off my books and walk you the rest of the way.”

“I'll wait for you in the park,” she said.

“Be right back,” he said.

He went into Clydes' Place, through the front door, and Uncle John, tall and with a salt and pepper goatee and wearing an apron with a front pocket heavy with quarters, was in the game room. He'd been staring out the big front window, idly swishing the quarters, the room nearly empty, the after-school crowd imminent. A pretty little thing, Uncle John had said to himself, watching Bobby and the girl cross the street. An old fashioned girl. Put a lace bonnet on her head, tie a bow under her chin and you'd have a Quaker or a Shaker. Or Little Bo Peep.

“That’s your girl?” Uncle John said.

“It’s somebody else,” Bobby said and Uncle John was impressed and why did Bobby sound so strident? It was like he got caught at doing something.

Bobby dropped his books in the kitchen and came out again.

Uncle John watched him curiously.

“Later, Unc,” Bobby said.

“Later,” Uncle John said.

Bobby walked into the park and Lottie was sitting on a bench and smiled over at him.

“Can we sit a minute?” she said. “It’s so peaceful here.”

He sat on the bench next to her and it was peaceful, and warm, too, sitting in the sunshine. It was Indian summer, even if just for a day. There was the golden sunlight on all those russet and yellow leaves on the ground, the hardwoods all mostly shorn, just the oaks had clumps of leaves, all the other hardwoods had their naked winter look.

Lottie’s face was kind of lifted and tilted, to absorb the warmth, her eyes closed. Bobby saw she was pale, more pale than he’d ever seen a girl, and what else, she seemed really appreciative for the warmth of the sun, especially grateful to have it on her face. And what Bobby thought, maybe dead girls were cold blooded, like lizards, and needed the warmth of the sun to keep their blood going.

They were quiet and Bobby had the feeling again, like it was on him to say something.

“Last night,” he said, “nobody threw anything at you.”

She opened one eye.

“I wish they had,” she said. “It made me feel like such an outsider.”

“How come nobody threw anything at you?”

Both of her eyes were open now.

“They were afraid I’d rip their throats out with my fangs,” she said, and she lunged at him when she said it, and he jumped back.

She laughed and opened her mouth so he could see inside of it.

“No fangs,” she said. “I’m not a monster, you know. I’m just a girl who died.”

“And came back?” Bobby said.

“That, too,” she said.

“Charlene told us you died from the fever,” Bobby said. “She said you were selling apples on Lower Main in a storm and that’s how the fever got into you.”

“Pencils,” she said.

“How’d Charlene know?”

Lottie shrugged.

“This is all pretty new and confusing to me too,” she said.

“What else Charlene said,” Bobby said, “she said when you died, your mom and dad left Hope Mountain.”

“They were too sad to stay.”

“Did it make you sad, to have them go?”

“You want the truth?” she said and with an impish smile.

“Yeh.”

“I was glad.”

“Serious?”

“I mean, come on. It would have been nice to have some family around to put flowers on my grave. Most everyone else had someone, but after a while it doesn’t matter. At the beginning, though, you want someone.”

“You were like an orphan up there.”

“An orphan, yeh,” she said, and smiling: “I did actually have someone, after I stopped caring about it.”

“Who?”

“Oh, a boy who liked me.”

“A boy from your own time?”

“Oh no, from years after I was dead. Crazy George. He lived on the farm across the road from us. George wasn’t right in the head, but he was sweet. All the kids made fun of him, which is why he started coming over to the graveyard. Nobody ever picked on him in there.” That was supposed to be a joke. “George sort of attached himself to me and it was because when he first started coming over, he and I were the same age.”

“Thirteen?” Bobby said.

“Yeh, thirteen. George would pick wildflowers along the side of the road and weave them into little bouquets and he’d place them on my grave and he’d sit there for hours, talking to me. Then, well,

then he couldn't come around anymore."

"How come?"

She shrugged.

"You don't want to know," she said.

"Yeh, I do," he said.

"George just kept getting more and more devoted to me and more crazy, and one night the fool boy tried to dig me up so we could run away together and they caught him at it and I never saw him again. I suppose they took him to Bedlam Prison. Anyway, it was a long time ago."

"You must have been sad when he went away, even though he was crazy."

"Not too bad."

"No?"

"It's hard, I know," she said, "for someone who's never been dead to understand how we feel and it's not like we don't care anymore and I really did appreciate George's devotion. It's just, well, we're detached."

"That's a good word for it," Bobby said. "Detached."

"We think so. It's like when my mom and dad went west. Sure, I was sad to see them go but I was glad too. It's hard to have people gloaming over you and you can't go down and comfort them."

"We should go," Bobby said. "If I'm going to walk you home."

"Walk me home so you can run and tell Judy what you found out about the dead girl."

"I have chores and homework before supper," Bobby said.

"Supper," she said. "I miss that."

"I thought ghosts didn't eat?"

"Oh, didn't you find me out, you clever boy," she said, "and you're right. Ghosts don't eat. We don't get hungry. Or thirsty or tired. I don't miss the food. Boiled potatoes and fish, boiled potatoes without the fish." She smiled. "Dad was Irish. What I miss is sitting down with my mom and dad. The talk. I miss the talk. Do you have a family, Bobby?"

"Course," he said. "My mom and my dad and my big sister."

"Maybe I could have supper with you and your family tonight, before I go back."

He shook his head. Supper with the family was reserved for girlfriends.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I probably won’t even be here for supper.” And after a moment: “They never even said goodbye.”

“Who?”

“My mom and dad. They didn’t come up to say goodbye when they left.”

“They were too sad,” Bobby said.

“Think I wasn’t sad?”

“They probably thought you were already gone to Heaven.”

She got up off the bench.

“Anyway,” she said. “I have to get back.”

“To the graveyard?”

“Where else?” she said. “And you don’t have to walk me the rest of the way.”

“I want to,” he said. “I mean, if it’s OK with you.”

“You sure?”

Oh, yeh, Bobby was sure. He had more spying to do and the talk about pencils and apples and about Crazy George had given Bobby an idea, a way to find out whether or not Lottie really was a dead girl from the graveyard.

They walked through the back of the park, beneath the elms, and past the pond and along a side street.

“There’s a boy up there who was on the football team a few years ago,” Bobby said, setting his trap as they walked. “Eddie. He got killed, a car accident, I think.”

“It wasn’t a car accident,” she said. “He quit school as soon as football ended so he could get into the army and he got sent to the war and got killed there.”

“You know him?”

“Eddie? Sure,” she said. “He couldn’t wait to get into the war. He thought it was another ballgame and now he laughs to remember how he was. How everything that seemed so important when he was alive turned out to hardly matter at all. Foolish reverence he calls it, when they come up on Decoration Day for taps and to shoot their guns and make speeches about him.”

Bobby mentioned someone else he knew up there:

“What about old Mr. Malcolm? Big fat guy with white hair.”

“You mean a little skinny bald guy?” she said.

“Mrs. Bascomb, you know her?”

“Big mouth. Her tongue never stops wagging.”

“Mr. Walthers?”

“Bushy sideburns, like the men wore in my day.”

“Miss Donaldson?”

“Never heard of her.”

Of course not. She wasn't dead yet.

“Eddie got blown up with a grenade,” Bobby said. “Is he still blown up?”

She smiled over at him.

“Is this still a part of trying to trick me?” she said.

“Well,” he said, “you're trying to trick me, aren't you?”

“Trick you, how?”

“By pretending to be dead.”

“You think I'm not?”

“Probably you're Charlene's cousin or something, from out of town.”

“About Eddie,” she said. “He's very...nice.”

They walked and without saying much and bearing north and going downhill, they traversed a number of short streets, heading the entire time toward the north end of Lower Main and the road out of town. The curbs along the streets were filled with leaves, some of the piles smoldering; the men, after they raked the leaves out of the yards and into the streets, tossed burning rags or cigarettes onto the piles. Lottie kicked through some of the leaves, the leaves not smoldering.

“Would you do something for me?” she said.

“What?” he said.

“Kiss me.”

Bobby was flustered.

“Please,” she said. “It would mean so much to me.”

“I can't,” he said.

“I already showed you, no fangs.”

“I have a girlfriend.”

“I know,” she said, “and I wouldn't ask you except, look, I

don't know how long it'll be before I have to go back. Maybe just the time it takes for you to walk me to the graveyard and I've never kissed a boy."

"It'd be two-timing for me," Bobby said.

"Not really," she said, "considering my circumstances."

He shook his head. Walking her home, OK, but kissing her? No way.

But the more they walked, the more he thought about it, the less shocking and wrong it seemed and the more disposed he was to doing it. It wouldn't be fair to Judy but what if Lottie really was dead and what if all she wanted was to kiss a boy before she went back? It'd be more unfair to Lottie than to Judy. It'd be like one of Miss Wheatley's tragedies in English lit, unrequited love, Miss Wheatley called it, Lottie going back into the ground without kissing a boy and after having been given a second chance.

And if he didn't do it, Lottie would maybe haunt him for the rest of his life.

Bobby decided to do it. Judy would understand.

He stopped, she did too, and she put her lips out to him, her lips, not her cheek, and she closed her eyes and he leaned forward and stopped. What if she had tomb breath, a stink that she could transfer into his mouth and that he could never get out. A curse so no girl would kiss him after Lottie kissed him.

She opened her eyes, looked at him.

"Pretty please," she said.

He kissed her, tentative, barely-touching kisses on her cheek, like she was his cousin, not Charlene's cousin, then her lips were on his and pressing hard and she was ardent and her breath was sweet, not foul, and he kissed her like, well, like she was Judy.

"How come you came to school?" Bobby said, walking. "Since you're a ghost, you didn't have to."

"I wanted to meet a boy," she said, "and it's Tuesday and I figured all the boys would be in school. I was so disappointed I didn't find a beau."

"A who?"

"A beau, you know, a boyfriend."

“Oh,” Bobby said. “It takes more than a day, usually.”

“And I was walking home,” she said, “and you followed me and I’ve been pretending you were my beau.”

“I kissed you and I’m walking you home,” he said, “but that’s all. I’m not your...beau.”

“I know,” she said, “and that’s enough to take back with me. That and your kisses. It has to be enough, doesn’t it?”

“I’m probably already in trouble with Judy.”

“You don’t have to tell her.”

“Yeh, I do.”

They walked along the streets and she felt for his hand and held onto it and it was OK and they stopped and kissed and that was OK too, something she could take back with her.

“I thought it was wrong,” Bobby said, walking, “for Charlene to bring you back.”

“You don’t like me,” she said, pouting.

“Course I do,” he said. “It’s just, your world is gone.”

She stopped, looked at him.

“So I guess I should be gone too, huh?”

“Back to your spirit world, yeh.”

“Boring,” she said and pouting again: “You think I’m cold and creepy and filled up with nasty old worms.”

“Well,” he said, “you’re dead.”

“You said Charlene was wrong to bring me up,” Lottie said, “but did you try to stop her? No. You helped.”

“I didn’t think it’d work. None of us did.”

“Big fat joke,” she said. “Let’s bring up the stupid dead girl.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Just dead.”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“I should kill Charlene.”

“Don’t!” Bobby said.

Lottie laughed.

“Think I could?” she said.

“I don’t know. Could you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried killing anyone before.”

Bobby could see ahead, to the end of the street they were on

and to the Hope Mountain Dairy, a low, modern building partially obscured by a grassy ridge and a big wooden sign and with some shiny milk tankers parked around. The dairy was on the other side of Lower Main, about where Lower Main became the road out of town, and when they got to the dairy, the end of the street they were on, they'd have to go either to the left or to the right. To the left, back into town, meant it was a trick and she wasn't a dead girl returned to life. Right was in the direction, still, of the graveyard, maybe yes, maybe no.

Bobby was walking on Lottie's left, on the outside of the sidewalk, and as they approached the intersection, he kind of allowed her to lead. They arrived at the corner and Lottie stopped.

"More kisses?" she said, puckering.

"No," he said.

"Pretty please?"

They kissed. Farewell kisses, Bobby figured. Kiss and back to the graveyard, dead girl.

She went to the right and he did too and now neither of them were talking and arriving at where the right-hand turn led up the hill and to the graveyard and with Lottie leading still, they went to the right again. Bobby thought it was the graveyard for sure and he was looking at her and she was looking to the side away from him and down and she was smiling and she turned toward him and her smile became a grin and then a hoot of laughter, loud and accusatory:

"You fell for it!" she said. "I told Charlene nobody could be so stupid. Wrong! Dead wrong, you might say."

Bobby just looked at her.

"You seriously thought I was a ghost-girl from a hundred years ago," she said.

"You're not dead?" he said.

She laughed.

"Did I feel dead when you kissed me?"

"Your lips were cold."

"Ice chips," she said and she showed him a paper cup, like what was in the dispensers alongside the water fountains at school. The cup was wrapped in a napkin and had been concealed in the side

pocket of her cloak, the side away from Bobby as they'd walked.

"I kept rubbing my lips when you weren't looking," Lottie said.

"So you're Charlene's cousin?" Bobby said.

"I'm not her grandmother."

He grabbed her left hand, it was cold too.

"Look," she said, "I'm Charlene's cousin and I'm staying with her and her mom for a little while and OK, my hands are cold but you know what, brain boy? It's winter."

"It's not so cold out today," he said.

"Maybe I'm from someplace warm and I'm not used to the cold."

"Florida?"

"Yeh, sure. Florida. Now come on. Finish walking me home."

And grinning and pointing back toward town: "That way."

She held out her hand.

He hesitated.

"Promise I won't suck your blood or anything," she said.

"Charlene liked me last year," Bobby said, walking, "and I didn't like her. Think that's how come she wanted to trick me and Judy?"

"Could be," Lottie said. "If she liked you and you didn't like her, it maybe got her mad."

"That's so mean."

"Mean, but funny."

"Charlene is supposed to be Judy's best friend."

"Maybe Charlene was getting sick of Judy."

"Nobody could get sick of Judy. She's too nice."

"Nice is annoying sometimes," Lottie said. "Oh, wait until this gets around school, how you guys went up to the graveyard Halloween night and thought you really did raise up a dead girl."

"Maybe you could keep quiet about it," Bobby said.

"I could," Lottie said. "I don't really care, but you think Charlene can keep quiet?"

Charlene Pendergrass, biggest blabbermouth in the school. Fat chance. Bobby understood he and Judy would be ruined. Tommy too. They'd have to run away.

“It’s going to be awful,” Bobby said and Lottie agreed:

“You’ll be so humiliated, but at least you’ll be with Judy in your misery. Until she hears you kissed me.”

They arrived at the door at the bottom of the stairs to the apartment and Lottie pecked him on the cheek and her lips were cold and she hadn’t been icing them on the way down from the cemetery road.

“See you later, cutie stupid,” she said and she ran inside and slammed the door and he could hear her laughing as she clomped up the stairs, the laughter and the clomping echoing in the enclosed stairwell.

Something had fallen out of her cloak pocket as she went toward the door and it was on the sidewalk now and he picked it up and it was the cup, wrapped in a napkin. Bobby opened the napkin and looked and there was no ice in the cup and OK, the ice was maybe all melted but the inside of the cup should have been wet and it wasn’t wet. It was dry.

Bobby scrunched the cup in his hand.

And what about all those dead people? How’d she know about them? What else had given Bobby the idea to try to trick Lottie was a guy Bobby had seen on TV. The guy was a magician, or like a magician, and what he did, he called people out of the audience and up onto the stage and he closed his eyes and pushed the tip of his finger against the side of the person’s head and guessed things about the person. He read people’s minds. But if Lottie had read Bobby’s mind and without putting her finger against his head, she’d read all the wrong things, which turned out to be the right things. She’d read his mind real good, zooming right past the lies and to the truths.

Bobby was back at school at four o’clock and Judy was waiting for him by the gym door with her books and flute case, and seeing the look on his face:

“It didn’t go so good?”

“We got took.”

“It was a trick?”

“Afraid so.”

“Lottie’s not a dead girl?”

Bobby had decided not to say anything to Judy about Lottie knowing those dead people. It seemed to Bobby as if Lottie had to be a dead girl, since she knew about the people in the graveyard, but he wasn’t sure about it and wouldn’t say anything until he’d had some time to think it over. There was plenty enough to tell without it.

“She’s Charlene’s cousin and it was a dirty trick,” he said, “and we went for it and they’re going to spread it all over school.”

“It was a pretty good trick,” Judy said. “Fooled us.”

“We’ll be ruined.”

“Maybe I can talk to Shar.”

“I don’t think she wants to be your best friend anymore.”

“No?” Judy said, not as surprised as Bobby might have expected.

“I’m thinking, since Charlene liked me last year,” Bobby said, “and I didn’t like her, it’s her way of getting back at us. She maybe got mad when I started going with her best friend. Did Charlene ever say anything to you about liking me?”

“She mentioned you a few times over the summer,” Judy said, “but what boy hasn’t she mentioned? I didn’t even think about it when I started going with you and anyway, Shar seemed happy for us.”

“Happy to be plotting her revenge,” Bobby said, “and something else.”

“What?”

Bobby hesitated.

“What?” Judy said again.

“I kissed Lottie.”

Judy’s eyes got real wide.

“You what?” Judy couldn’t believe it.

Bobby explained why he’d done it, that stuff about unrequited love, and toward the end of his explaining, Judy stopped him with some smothering kisses of her own, and with her face tilted up close to his and smiling:

“If you’re going to get fooled, might as well get fooled all the way.”

“You’re not mad?” Bobby said.

“How could I be mad at my adorable, gullible little two-timing boy?” she said, and following one more emphatic kiss, they continued walking.

“You don’t seem upset about any of it,” Bobby said.

“Two hours ago,” Judy said, “we were thinking Lottie was a dead girl and Charlene was some kind of, I don’t know, a witch or something, and now we know none of it’s true.”

“How’re you going to feel when all the kids start pointing at us and whispering stuff?”

“I’m Paul Diamond’s sister,” she said, something else Bobby hadn’t considered. Maybe they wouldn’t have to run away.

“Besides,” Judy said, “it’ll blow over sooner than you think.”