

CHAPTER FIVE

Geri pushed open the door and inadvertently set the cleaning bucket rolling, its mop handle click-clacking against the tile wall. The janitor was pissed off again. Storing his cleaning bucket in the women's lavatory was Satterfield's way of reminding Geri that before it had been converted to a Ladies Room, the place had been his utility closet. She lunged for the mop, but the bucket hit a stall, and the mop toppled out, spewing bright, harsh fumes that actually made her feel better

No matter what, she wouldn't throw up. After the Grymes girl's shooting, she and Kenny had had to handle a gruesome accident near the interstate. A young couple gone. A baby, alive, barely. Now Geri felt nauseated. A bloody Mary—every corpuscle in her body craved one—that special vodka sting was the only sure thing that could slice through her sick feeling. She could almost feel the pepper sanding her tongue.

Some rich, drunk MacMaster smartass calling her Officer Dike, her lawyer calling about her divorce, her younger sister calling because she was bored, any random surge of stress summoned the need for a drink. But Geri watched herself. Other than one or two evenings a week at the Steamroom, the closest she came to letting herself go was having a few beers in her car before heading home.

Suddenly the vomit surged, splattering all over the sink, her hand and her uniform sleeve. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she almost didn't recognize the woman staring back, the haggard eyes, the grey complexion. On the force, puking was regarded as the ultimate weakness, and knowing others' weaknesses was Bushmiller's strength.

As soon as she left the Ladies' Room, he yelled, "Tossed your cookies, did ya, Jones?"

She gave him what she knew he wanted: a shamefaced little smile. She could have given him the dimpled one, but she knew the shamefaced one was the one that would make him feel truly superior. From Kenny's hang-dog look she guessed he had caught Bushmiller vitriol, too. The poor kid, on the force only four months and a fatal shooting plus an interstate smash-up within hours. She'd had to deal with the report for the Grymes girl, but Kenny had had to write up the one for the accident. Bushmiller probably had shredded it.

In her pocket, her personal cell phone vibrated, but she didn't pull it out. It was either her mother or her sister, and she didn't want Bushmiller catching her talking to either one. Personal calls gave him personal information to use as his personal ammunition.

"Jones, you got the report on that homicide? Kenny Boy here made Quilted Northern out of the one on the highway."

"It's not finished yet."

"Christ. Give me what you've got."

She felt as diminished as she had in ninth grade, standing by Sister Edith Mary's desk and watching a rat-a-tat-tat of red checks speckle her Latin quizzes. Bushmiller read her report aloud. "Present at the scene was Graham Malhouta, pastor of St. David's Episcopal Church in New Bristol. Mr. Malhouta said he found the body. Shortly after we arrived, Dr. Peter Farley, whom Mr. Malhouta had flagged down . . . *Whom!*" Bushmiller shouted. "What the fuck is this '*Whom*'? What the fuck is '*Whom*' doing in a police report? *Whom* the hell do you think you're writing for, Jones? The God-damned Queen of England?"

The station was nearly empty, just the desk clerk and another newbie like Kenny, typing at a gray metal desk, usually the domain of Martin Boyer, a nineteen-year veteran. No one

looked up at Bushmiller's remark, still it was hard to take. Especially since Geri knew "whom" was right.

"I'll change it," she said.

"Shit. Leave it. Leave the fucking 'whom' and finish the damn thing. And you, I need you to get the hell out of here," he said to Kenny.

She watched Kenny scurry out and wondered how long before he was keeping a few miniatures stashed behind the copier or the bottom drawer of that filing cabinet near the windows. Maybe he already was. The squad room was on second floor of station, which overlooked the square in the heart of New Bristol. She heard Kenny's footsteps echoing down the station steps to College Street.

As soon as they faded, Bushmiller parked a buttock on the edge of her desk and started teasing her Terry Bradshaw bobble head doll with his pencil. When he knocked off the Post-it stuck to Terry's helmet, Geri let it lie.

"So you think he did it, the Durham boy?" she asked Bushmiller.

"Don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Shit. The Durham kid is the one who's missing. As far as I'm concerned, he's the one who did it."

"You don't think someone could have taken him?"

"Shoot and leave her in the field for everyone to see and take him? Doesn't add up. No. He's hiding somewhere. And that means he has something *to* hide."

Bushmiller's tone dropped to a more confiding register. She sensed he was setting her up, but didn't know for what.

“Listen, Geri,” he said, “do you remember that gun turn-in dog-and-pony show we had to have in August for the fuckass mayor?”

Her phone vibrated again, but she ignored it. “The one Kit Durham took her gun to?”

“That’s her story.”

“Sergeant Boyer was in charge. Maybe you should ask him.”

“Boyer. That asswipe. This your first killing?”

She knew he knew it was. Wife beatings, muggings, date rape, robbery—New Bristol was a crime-of-opportunity town. But shootings were rare.

“The first one’s like getting laid,” Bushmiller said. “Always the toughest. After that, it’s a piece of cake. Finish the report and go home. Maybe your mother made some more cookies for you to toss.” He gave her a grin of shaggy mustache and yellow teeth, and went to his cubicle, the station’s only real boundary other than the cells.

She pulled out her phone and checked the number: her mother. She put it back, and then her desk phone rang: the doctor from that morning wanting to know if the police knew anything more about his brother. She didn’t know how much to tell him. She didn’t want to tell him that things grew more discouraging with every hour that passed, didn’t want to tell him that if he thought things were bad now, wait until his brother was found and Bushmiller started slapping together a case against him. She gave Terry Bradshaw a poke and watched his head wobble. “We’ll call you as soon as we hear anything about your brother, Dr. Farley.”

“Do you know if my brother was at a blowout on Luddy Mountain last night? I think Ashley was there.”

Again, “We’ll call you as soon as we hear anything, Dr. Farley.” Terry’s goofy grin smirked at her. She said good-bye and hung up.

The day she joined the force, her Uncle Steve had given her the toy, promising her it would keep her “loosey goosey.” But being a police officer had been like her marriage: a mistake. She couldn’t muster the detachment needed to face the misery she saw. And in the last week or two, that sadness seemed heavier, like a slow, midmorning snowstorm that’s grown so thick by afternoon you can’t look out the kitchen window and see the charcoal grill you’ve been meaning to put away all fall. She’d wanted to be a police officer because she thought it would be an interesting way to help people, but there was no help for most of them. The Wednesday before she’d answered a domestic disturbance call near the cemetery—a woman threatening to slash her wrists unless her boyfriend got himself into rehab. A little boy and girl were watching wrestling on a large screen TV and a shoeless toddler in choo-choo diapers sat on a torn butterscotch-colored leather couch beside a man cradling his head in his hands. Between the man’s splayed fingers Geri had seen a diamond stud.

In the kitchen, the woman held a knife over her arm stretching across the counter toward an open can of dog food. “You want me to do it, Bobby, you want me to? I swear to God. I can’t take it no more. I swear,” she’d said. She was maybe twenty-five, long-boned with a blotchy complexion and hair caught in a gray scrunchy. “I swear, Bobby, you got to straighten yourself out, or I’m gonna slash myself.”

There were so many possibilities in a situation like that, any of them leading to disaster. If Geri talked the woman into putting the knife down, would she leave it down once Geri was gone? If the woman was committed for evaluation, who would take care of the kids? — drug-addled Bobby? And if Geri called Social Services would the children end up in foster care? In the end, she had talked the woman into handing over the knife and seeing if her grandmother

could come over and help with the kids and told her as gently as possible she was going to call Social Service. “Just to let you know that help’s available.”

And she’d actually had called Social Services, but they never called back. Now the note reminding her to try gain lay at Terry Bradshaw’s feet where Bushmiller’s pencil had knocked it. She tried sticking it back, but it fell off again. God help her, it actually took an effort to tear off a piece of tape and stick the note back on again.

Her phone started vibrating again. “Hi, Mom.”

“I just wanted to know when you’re coming home. They had on the news there’s been a shooting.”

“I can’t talk about it, Mom.”

“So, it’s true.”

“Mom, I can’t talk about it. I’ve got to finish some reports. I’ll be home soon.”

“Should I hold your dinner?”

“I’ll be home in a while. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“I’ve got to get these reports done, Mom. Don’t worry about it.” When she hung up, she wondered if the temperature outside had dropped enough to cool the beer in her trunk. A year ago she wouldn’t have cared, wouldn’t have known how many cans she had left. Now those thoughts came automatically. She was trailing memories after herself like a clubbed foot.

Forty-five minutes later she had put her report on Bushmiller’s desk, and was driving to the abandoned logging road that whipsawed across the eastern mountains. Her headlights found the familiar little cutoff and she pulled in, the branches twanging against her windows. In a few

weeks, the snow would begin and she wouldn't be able to come. Even with four-wheel drive she might not be able to get out, and how would she ever explain herself if she had to be towed?

Once, in early March, she and her high school love, Ryan, had gotten stuck. When they had driven up, the afternoon had been warm and the snow slushy, but as the sun had set, the air had turned bitter cold, and the slush had become slick. When Ryan realized they were stuck, he had kissed her in that way he had of putting his hand on her throat — eighteen and already he knew to do that — and said, “Do this for me, Geri. Crawl over the seat and wipe my back window off. We fogged it up.” He had held up her panties. “Leave these off,” he said. “Leave them up here with me. Just go over the seat.”

And when she had done what he asked, he kept the panties in the hand he threw over the front seat so he could see while he jerked his car back and forth, slamming the gears until it finally skidded out onto the logging road.

He had grinned at her and held out her panties. “These are too cold now,” he said. “You need to warm them up. He wrapped them around his fingers and slipped his hand up the plaid skirt of her Catholic school uniform. She leaned her head against the passenger's side door and closed her eyes, white light dancing beneath her lids. She heard him unbuckle his belt with his free hand — fast — he could do things like that so fast. All the time his hand with her panties touching her. And just when she thought her pleasure couldn't get much higher, his free hand was beneath her, massaging her, maneuvering her.

“Geri,” he said, “spread your legs wider. Wider. I need to see everything.” She never opened her eyes. “Geri, oh, you're my girl. My beautiful girl.” She loved him more than breath.

Winter and spring had been their best seasons on that road. By the summer, he was eager to be off to Purdue. She'd cried for three days when he left, until her father said, "For God's sake, will you stop? Look at your sister. Crippled like she is, you don't see her moping."

The break-up with Ryan had been long and slow. Every time he came home, he brought less of himself back to New Bristol from Indiana.

His junior year he'd called, saying, "Look, I know I said I'd see you this spring, but a bunch of us are heading to Florida. Sun. Surf. All that good stuff." She was working in food services at MacMaster then. From time to time, she'd see his mother, who worked in the registrar's office, but they rarely spoke. His mother, he'd told her, didn't like Catholics.

She'd been inventorying number ten cans of stewed tomatoes the afternoon she turned around saw her mother in the doorway. "I just thought you should know," she'd said, "Ryan's gotten engaged to a girl from Minnesota. A biology major. We met her last weekend. We like her very much."

Two weeks later, Geri overheard her uncle telling her father that a policeman on the hockey team he played with had said that the force was making a push to recruit minorities and women — "Blacks and bitches." That night she'd asked her father to teach her to shoot. Every afternoon she took one of his rifles and a garbage bag of his beer cans into the woods. By the time she joined the force, she wasn't a bad shot. That was five years ago.

She opened her door against the branches and went around to her trunk. Two cans left. She opened one, took a swallow and concentrated on the cold sting traveling down her throat. She closed her eyes and listened. Everything around her was alive. Faint rustlings, stirrings, and the wind blowing relentless rhythms through the mountain crags. When she opened her eyes, my God, the stars!

She was twenty-six and felt older than the moon. She finished her beer and threw the can into the woods. She left the one in her trunk. Once the carton was empty, that would make six empty cartons in her trunk. They didn't have enough heft to toss into the woods, and she kept forgetting to throw them into a Dumpster somewhere.

She got back into her car and put on the CD of "The Secret Garden," the sort of music she had loved when she used to skate. She had been good. Confident and strong. On the ice, she always had known where her center of gravity was. And she had felt lovely

Her cell phone vibrated again. She turned off the CD.

"I thought you'd be home by now. It's nearly ten."

"I know, Mom."

"Beth is still up. She'll want to see you before she goes to sleep."

"I'm just finishing up."

"They had on the news that the girl who was shot was named Ashley something."

"Yeah, her name was Ashley."

"Was she from the west side?"

"No, Mom. She wasn't Black."

"My Lord, what's the world coming to? I don't have to tell you. I nearly have a heart attack every time you leave for work. Especially at night. I just lie awake worrying. I no sooner close my eyes than it's time to get up. Now I won't sleep a wink until they catch whoever did this."

"I've got to go, Mom. See you soon."

"Are you at work? It's so quiet."

"I'm just finishing my report. Why, what do you want me to get at the Safeway?"

“Just some buttermilk. I want to make one of those peanut butter cakes to take to the Spina Bifada Association Tuesday. And one for your sister, too.”

“I don’t know if the Safeway has buttermilk.”

“They do. I called.”

If they had been rich, or even MacMaster faculty, her parents’ little farm truncated by the interstate, might have been called a “farmette.” But they were neither rich nor educated, so they clung to their few acres because giving them up would mean they’d failed at the life they’d both been born to. So one worked at a hairdresser’s, and one drove a truck and both said they were farmers.

When Geri pulled into their drive, her Uncle Steve’s pick-up was still parked there. He and her father must be watching their third football game of the day. That could mean they’d been through at least two six packs each. Probably more. Steve wouldn’t be in any shape to drive home, but Geri knew she’d be helpless to stop him short of pulling her gun.

When she went into the kitchen, her mother had baking things all set out and was wrapping buffalo wings in aluminum foil.

“For Steve,” she said. “If I’d had the buttermilk — I thought I got it the other day—I’d have given him some of your sister’s cake. But he’ll just have to make do with these. I’ll have to bake tomorrow, I guess. It’s too late now.” Geri set the milk carton on the counter.

“I’m beat,” she said. She was hungry, but she knew if she stayed in the kitchen, her mother would have questions about the murder.

“Want a grilled cheese sandwich?” her mother said. “I’ve got some good ham I could put on it. It’s late, but grilled cheese doesn’t take long.”

Geri wanted to unbuckle her gun and soak in her bathtub upstairs.

“Just, let me have one of those wings, Mom,” she said.

“There aren’t even a dozen of them, and poor Steve. I don’t know that he eats anything all week. How about grilled cheese?”

Geri went down the hall to the little addition her father and Steve had tacked onto the house once it became clear that her sister wasn’t going to die as the doctors had said she would. Beth’s braces alone weighed forty pounds. Carrying her up and down the stairs had been too much even before their father’s back went out.

“Hey how’s it going?” Geri said to her. “I thought you’d be in there with Dad and Uncle Steve.”

Beth turned from her computer screen. “Beer farts. They both just let them rip.” Behind her thick glasses Beth’s eyes were almost liquid blue. Her skin, too, seemed unnaturally moist, as if the water on her brain were seeping through her pores. “I watched the Patriots and Ravens, then the Steelers until the third quarter. By that time, Dad and Steve weren’t even trying to cover up. Besides, we were out of nachos.”

Geri saw Beth’s wheelchair was still folded against the wall—good—that meant that Beth had gotten around all day in just her braces. In the last few months, it seemed that she wasn’t walking as much as she once had. Her muscles could weaken if she didn’t use them, Geri heard a doctor warn their mother.

“I’m beat,” Geri said. “I had to stop for buttermilk. Mom’s going to bake you a peanut butter cake.”

“Another one! I’m sorry I ever said I like those things.”

“Just eat it, Beth. It will make her happy. So who are you now?”

“Heather . . . I’ve got some guy here who thinks Monica Lewinsky is my grandmother.”

“Wow. You go, girl,” Geri said. She blamed herself that Beth spent three or four hours a day in chat rooms. If she hadn’t taken her for a manicure and hair styling in the mall outside of Harrisburg for sixteenth birthday glam photos, maybe Beth wouldn’t have sent her picture over the internet.

“Maybe I should go into the spanking ones,” Beth said. “What the heck, no feeling on my ass, so how could it hurt?” The damage to her spinal cord was severe, but fairly low, giving her more control than many people with spina bifida had.

“Do you need anything?” — code for whether Beth’s colostomy bag needed emptying.

“No. I’m fine. This guy wants to know if I do the same things Monica did.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him that I had a standing order for a dozen bananas a day.”

“I’m going to take a bath.” Geri looked at the scattering of yoga and meditation videos near Beth’s TV. The two of them had been trying to find a calm place together ever since Geri had moved back home. She had told Beth she needed the tapes to quiet her nerves after leaving Scotty, but the truth was she’d hope that doing yoga together would help penetrate Beth’s chirpy cynicism. Now the tapes were stacked exactly as they had been five months earlier. The topmost tape showed a blonde woman on a beach, wearing a white camisole and gauzy slacks. She sat with her legs bent like pretzels and a cupped palm resting on each knee. The bitch, Geri thought.

“Maybe we should try these again. What do you say?”

“Whatever. I think you should know, You-know-who called.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. Eight, maybe.”

“What did he want?”

“If you were home yet. Hey, this poor schmuck” — Beth pointed to the computer screen — “he wants to know if I have another picture.”

Geri went upstairs. All her furniture was the same as when she'd been a girl, only now it wasn't maple colored. The afternoon she finally had admitted her marriage wasn't working, even before she pulled into her parents' drive, Geri stopped at Bascom's Hardware and bought cans of almost iridescent white to provide the faintest contrast for the pearly beige she planned for the walls. If her life was littered with bad choices, at least she'd be surrounded by the soft, subtle colors she loved. Sister Catherine Mary used to tell her, “You have a wonderful sense of proportion, Geraldine, but you must be braver with your hues,” but the gentler colors still were the ones that appealed to her.

She unbuckled her gun, put the bullets in an old shoebox in her closet, locked her weapon in her dresser, then took the key and put it under the giant goldfish bowl on her nightstand. Three brilliant red geraniums and two golden fish were the only bright shades she needed.

In the distance a semi on the interstate honked. As a girl, she'd lie awake listening to the steady hum and think, Where are they all going? But even then she had sensed her future would be defined by the clump of Beth's braces and by parents who were becoming too exhausted to care for a handicapped child.

Even in here, her sanctuary, Beth was present. Until she asked the names of Geri's fishes, Geri had just let them be anonymous, but Beth had insisted they deserved names.

“Mary and Edgar,” Geri finally had told her.

“What are they? Philly Main Line alcoholics? That's what they sound like.”

“No, they’re impressionists.”

“Well, if they’re painters, they probably drink *and* shoot up. You’ve got some debauched fish there, Ger.”

She heard her Uncle Steve’s pickup pulling out and tapped the side of the bowl. Mary and Edgar came over and she gave them a few grains of food. Their water needed changing. She’d do it tomorrow.

She needed to start yoga and meditating with Beth. Needed to start skating again. Needed to exercise. Tomorrow. Tonight, a bath. She was filling the tub when her cell phone rang: her ex, the person Beth called You-know-who.

Five years on the force was enough to know whose rumors you could trust, and whose you couldn’t—the ones she was hearing about her soon-to-be-divorced husband and Ashley Grymes were too consistent to discount. And, then there had been that football game early in September that she and Kenny had patrolled and she’d spotted Scotty in the stands, beside his father, but keeping his eyes on Ashley Grymes. After that, every day she’d waited for Richard or Cynthia Grymes to come to the station and report him, but they never did.

She turned off the tap and hit the green button. “I’m tired, Scotty.”

“I won’t keep you. It’s just that”

“What?”

“Are you involved with the Ashley Grymes investigation? It was on the news.”

“I really can’t talk about it.”

“So, you are aren’t you?” —he could still read her—they were still that much married.

“I really can’t say anything. You know that.” She wiped the steam off the mirror and watched herself talking to him. After Gary, the few men she’d gone out with stopped coming

around as soon as they met Beth. The braces were enough. She never had to mention the colostomy bag.

Scotty, however, never seemed to mind. Between him and Beth burned a kindred flame; he never grumbled if Geri asked if they could take Beth with them to the mall or the movies. When she'd said that Beth, braces and all, was going to be her maid of honor, he'd said, "Terrific!"

Two years passed before she admitted that Scotty's accepting Beth wasn't enough of a foundation for a marriage. Even when he hadn't overdrawn the checking account or ignored the "check engine" light, they lived more like roommates than husband and wife. When she said it was over, he was back at Maurice's before Geri'd emptied the refrigerator.

Still, part of the blame was hers. Right from the beginning, she'd sensed they were mismatched but hadn't wanted to admit it. Especially when everyone had been so glad that "Geri had finally found someone."

She knew she should just hang up on him, but he still sent Beth birthday and Christmas presents. Once or twice he even stopped by to see her. For all Geri knew, they even texted each other. "Listen, Scotty, do you know anything about a big party last night?"

"Dad was there. At Kit Durham's."

"Not that one. A party on Luddy Mountain."

"On Luddy Mountain? No . . . no . . . I don't know anything about that. Listen, Geri, I just remembered that I got to proof my paper for my on-line class. I have to go."

He'd always been a lousy liar. She got into the tub and felt the waves in her hair shrinking tighter and tighter over her scalp.