

CHAPTER SIX

Peter watched a classic stoner's smile slither over his brother's face—his Penn State roommate had one just like it until second semester midterms when it and the roommate were gone.

Slumped in Peter's old chair, Joachim grinned and ignored the coffee their mother thrust at him. "What are we going to do?" she demanded of Peter. "He's in no shape to talk to the police. And we have to call them; you heard Gil. And Larry's coming. He'll kill him if when he sees him like this."

"Where's he been all day?"

Joachim giggled, "Where'd you think? With Kensheena."

Peter felt he wanted to hug him with one arm and smack him with the other.

"You haven't told him about Ashley?" he asked their mother.

Her hands found her hair. "It didn't seem like, well . . ."

"What's Ashley got to do with anything?" Joachim asked. "And why's my father coming?"

Peter hoisted him out of the chair and started propelling him toward the door.

"Where are you going?" their mother asked.

"There's no surefire antidote for this, but sometimes food helps."

"But where are you going?"

"The Ionia." He maneuvered Joachim into his car and drove toward Market Street. Better to lay some sort groundwork of brotherly togetherness, maybe even of trust before telling him about Ashley. The streetlights threw yellow haloes onto the sidewalks, and in one a

couple stood holding hands, the woman in silhouette; she was pregnant. All their world contained in a splotch of yellow light. Lucky . . . they were so lucky.

A police car was parked in front of the Ionia. Something Peter hadn't considered. If Joachim walked in, would the cop warming one of the diner's stools know who he was? Would he question him right there? Maybe even arrest him? Peter parked and told Joachim to wait.

"We goin' in there?"

"Yeah. Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothin' Just do me a favor . . . see who's sweepin'. If it's a Black dude, let's go somewhere else."

"Why?"

"Just someone I rather not see." Peter looked down at his brother and saw that his snarkiness was ebbing. Too bad, he thought, armor-plated snarkiness might help Joachim withstand learning about Ashley.

"I'll be right back," he told him and walked toward the diner.

In New Bristol's endless struggle between town and gown the Ionia was neutral territory. At its red Formica counter, carbohydrate fixes were served up to chemistry professors and cops alike. Peter did a quick scan: a MacMaster kid hunched over a laptop; a middle aged couple in windbreakers at the counter; a wispy-haired waitress. But no cops. And no Black sweeper. He took a deep breath: the grease smelled sweet and familiar. He got Joachim and steered him to a booth behind the McMaster kid. Joachim started twirling a little plastic pumpkin filled with sweetener packets. Peter could imagine the pumpkin sailing off the table, the packets flying all over. He considered asking Joachim to stop and wondered if he

should bring up the time their mother had taken them to the Ionia when Peter was a senior. He'd come home to a blizzard of Ivy League rejections, and at the Ionia she'd let him plow through a French fry mountain and two double cheese burgers. "Ninety percent of those kids who get into the Ivies," he remembered her saying, "have fathers who endow something. Some of the ones celebrating today, they'll have cretins for offspring. Trust me." Joachim had been five and spilled his milk, so they'd gone home before Peter could order a milkshake. Peter wanted to ask Joachim if he remembered that too, but the boy was busy twirling the plastic pumpkin.

The hair of their waitress was so thin Peter wondered if she suffered from a vitamin deficiency. Even her ghost earrings bobbed as if they were desperate for something fortifying.

"Gus Christopoulos still own this place?" Peter asked her.

"I don't know who owns it, but his son, Gus Junior, runs it now." She took their orders, tucked her order pad into her apron packet and scooted away.

Across the table, Joachim had stopped twirling the pumpkin, and Peter took it as a possible opening.

"So, you and Kensheena, something goin' on there?"

Joachim looked at him as if he were disgusting. "We get stoned together if that's what you mean."

"Mrs. Albright said you come to see her when she's working at Mrs. Albright's shop."

"That's not anything. Just something to bug her."

"Who? Mrs. Albright? Or Kensheena?"

Joachim smiled. "Both, I guess."

The ferret from the hockey game came out of the kitchen with a broom, and said something to the waitress. Their same doughy complexions and flat cheekbones made Peter wonder if they were related.

The ferret spotted him and came from behind the counter, grinning. “You know that whole game, I was trying to figure out where I knew you from. Then it came to me, tenth grade woodshop.” He shifted his broom and held out his hand. “Tim Weir,” he said. “We made a bookshelf. Remember?”

Peter shook Weir’s hand. “Peter Farley,” he said, “tenth grade is something I just as soon forget.”

“Yeah, high school, shit,” Weir said. “But, I still got mine.”

“Your bookshelf?”

“Yeah. My mother keeps Beanie Babies on it . . . thought they’d be worth somethin . . . big joke.”

Peter introduced Joachim to Weir and watched Weir’s eyes compute Black brother—white brother, that old momentary beat of confusion Peter’d experienced when he first took Joachim to the community pool. Joachim had been three and the guard called their mother to double check. Whatever Weir thought about their Black-white bond, he tucked away, and Peter was grateful.

The waitress rushed by with a tray, and Weir nodded toward her. “My cousin, Doreen. I just come in and help out here weekends. Anthony, the regular guy, he’s off weekends.”

“That’s what I thought, Anthony’s off,” Joachim said.

“He’s the one you’re avoiding?” Peter asked.

“Sorta.”

“I just help out,” Weir repeated, “so Gus Jr. don’t make Doreen sweep plus wait tables. “
She came over and told them their orders would be ready soon.

“What about the lemon meringue pie?” Peter asked.

“Oh, you don’t want that,” Weir said. “It’s been there since Easter. Every morning Gus
dusts the mouse turds off. I swear.”

“Will you shut up?” Doreen hissed.

Across the table, Joachim laughed. “You want to try the pumpkin?” Peter asked
him. Joachim shrugged and Peter took it as a yes. The waitress flipped her order pad and
went to the kitchen. Weir nodded toward her again. “With her and her car, it’s always
something. Now it’s her brakes. She can’t afford to piss off the boss. She used to type
tapes for that shrink in that big old farmhouse where they found that girl, but that gig
ended a few days ago.” Then Weir shifted his broom and leaned in toward Peter, and
Peter felt sick. He saw the awful result of his taking Joachim to the Ionia hurling at him
like a train down a trestle, but nothing could stop it, not even kicking Weir under the
booth.

“Crazy thing about that, huh Pete, that girl . . .” Weir said.

Joachim reached for the plastic pumpkin. “What girl?”

Peter kicked Weir again, but he still didn’t take the hint. “You didn’t hear? Some
young girl’s been shot. Killed. Where’ve you been?”

Across the booth Joachim held the pumpkin and looked at Peter hard. “What’s he
talking about?” he asked, and Peter knew that whatever he said next would change Joachim’s
life forever. He’d watched other doctors make phone calls, send text messages, flirt with

nurses, do anything than drag bad news about a pediatric patient down a corridor to the child's parents. "Joachim, something terrible happened to Ashley."

"What?"

"She's been shot. Ashley's dead."

Joachim still clutched the pumpkin of sweeteners. "What do you mean she was shot?"

"I saw her this morning. I played hockey, that's how I know Tim. I was driving home, and someone stopped me. A priest walking on Ruth Bledsoe's field. He found her."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

The woman in the windbreaker turned around and glared.

"It was Ashley," Peter said, "she'd been shot. In the Bledsoes' field. She's dead, Joachim. The police want to talk to you."

"What the fuck to you mean?" Joachim slammed the pumpkin against the wall, and it ricocheted across the tabletop, onto the floor, spewing pink and blue sweetener packets all over. He stepped on them as he got out of the booth. "You're full of crap, you know that?" he barked at Peter.

"I'm sorry, Joachim. I saw her."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Ashley's not dead. She's pregnant. She's just pregnant, that's all." He slammed passed a group of MacMaster kids coming through the door.

"Jeez, I thought he knew," Weir said.

"Yeah, well . . ." Peter got up and followed Joachim outside.

The moon over Market Street hung orange and full. In the apartments over the shops, a few lights shone. But there was no traffic, and the shops themselves were dark. The whole

street felt like a conduit of absence. Except for a dark figure crumpled in front of Neumann's Bakery. The closer Peter got, the more anguished Joachim looked, his dreadlocks veiling his face, and his shoulder heaving. Peter took him and turned him toward his own chest, feeling dreadlocks drape the back of his hand. "I'm sorry, Joachim. I'm sorry . . . so sorry that you had to find out like this." He rested his cheek on top of his brother's head and held on. The middle-aged couple from the Ionia passed them; the woman sniffed and looked away. Bitch.

Joachim pulled his face away. "You saw her?"

"Yeah, I did. Someone shot her."

"But I was just with her last night. You saw . . . at the party."

"I know. But, it's true. She's dead." His kept arm around Joachim, steering him to the Mazda. They passed in front of the diner and Peter asked him to wait outside—he just wanted to pay the waitress.

Inside, she wasn't around, but Weir was still fishing packets out from under the booth with his broom. Peter gave him a couple of twenties. "Here, give this to your cousin, okay?"

"Well, look, you probably have some change comin'."

"No. It's okay. I gotta go."

"Well, thanks."

"Listen, that shrink your cousin used to type for, do you know if she's the same woman whose field that girl was found on . . . Dr Bledsoe?"

"Yeah. Doreen used to type reports for her patients. I used to have to drive her out there sometimes . . . that car of Doreen's . . . always somethin'."

"Yeah, well, just give her the money."

“You want Doreen to pack your order to go?”

“No. We’re fine. Thanks.” He went out and found Joachim rooted exactly where he had left him, as if a single step in any direction was too risky.

“Come on,” Peter said. “We should get you home.” But Joachim looked too wounded to say anything meaningful to the police, so Peter drove toward the college, and then through a warren of streets past the campus’s East End, and finally back onto Market Street. If Joachim noticed they’d just looped around the main MacMaster quadrangle, he didn’t say anything. He seemed to accept going anywhere he was taken, but Peter felt the silence between them somehow growing natural, as if, out of fathomless pain, they’d come to a tacit understanding.

He didn’t want to puncture it, but there was something he needed to be certain of before Hasting Street. He waited until he was two blocks from the corner and then asked, “When you said Ashley was pregnant, well, I wasn’t surprised. Yesterday, she’d asked me if I was a baby doctor, so I suspected maybe she was going to have a baby. But I have to know, were you the father?”

“Jeeze, I hope my stepmother has a boy. I sure could use one brother with some brains. It wasn’t like that with Ashley and me. We were friends. That’s all.”

“Sometimes friends are friends with benefits. And sometimes one of those friends gets the other friend pregnant.”

“Well, then those friends are stupid.”

Good, Peter thought, be cynical, Joachim. Be cynical and angry. Be anything you need to be to get through this. Up ahead he saw his stepfather’s golden Lexus. He drove past it

and didn't find a space until they were four more houses down the block. He put his hand on Joachim's shoulder and they walked back toward their mother's house.

"Remember that Halloween you went as a hockey player?" Peter asked him.

"Don't remind me."

But under his hand Peter could almost feel the current of that memory coursing through Joachim's shoulder. Neither of them would ever forget the Halloween their mother needed to work and hadn't had time to get her five-year-old a costume. When Peter'd called her and asked her what to do, she told him, "Just put anything on him; it doesn't make any difference. He just wants the candy. If you get stuck, call Cynthia Grymes. She's good at that sort of thing."

But it *had* made a difference to Joachim: no way was he going to wear that pink blouse and say he was a gypsy. And being a ghost was just dumb. In the end, Peter had called Cynthia and together they had concocted something from one of Peter's old hockey jerseys. Cynthia pinned up its bottom, and Peter broke off an old stick so Joachim could carry it. Making the helmet fit had been a problem until they tied a pillow on Joachim's head and squashed the helmet down over it.

How patiently Cynthia's little girls had waited in the papier mache ladybug costumes their mother had made, their spindly legs sticking out from their hard, orange carapaces. Peter'd felt so aggrieved that his mother hadn't even bothered getting a crumby store-bought costume that he'd sulked in his chair with his chemistry book while Cynthia took the children door to door. Then he'd raided the best stuff from Joachim's cache.

They were almost at their mother's steps before Peter halted, "Listen," he said, "for what's it's worth, I don't think she was pregnant. I saw her. There was blood. It could have

been menstrual. I'm not certain. Or she could have miscarried." He didn't know how much detail he should go into, didn't know if menstrual blood was taught in sex-ed.

"You know, you better get into a different line of work because if you're a doctor an awful lot of people are going to die. What kind of doctor doesn't even know if a girl has her period?"

They were going up the steps. There wasn't much time. "It was Scotty, wasn't it? Ashley thought she was carrying Scotty's baby" –no sense telling him about the Teddy bear he'd seen Scotty with on Luddy Mountain.

Joachim turned to him. "You can't tell anyone. You've got to promise. You can't tell anyone."

"Joachim, there's nothing to tell. I don't think there was a baby. No baby . . . no father. That's the way it works."

"Still you can't tell."

"Okay . . . okay."

Inside, their mother and Larry were sitting at the dining room table scattered with coffee mugs and plates of birthday cake.

"So, how was the Ionia?" Their mother's cheeks had caught some of her sweater's brightness, but her eyes were watchful, gauging what Joachim knew and how he was handling it.

"We didn't get anything," Joachim said. He sat down at the foot of the table; Peter sat at the front—each in his old seat, his place in the family constellation.

Peter explained how Joachim had lost his appetite when he heard about Ashley.

Their mother got up, hugged Joachim, murmuring, rocking him back and forth, then went into the kitchen.

Joachim took a napkin and began shredding it. “So,” Larry said to him, “you want to tell us where you’ve been.”

“The Ionia. You heard,” Joachim said.

“Don’t get smart with me.”

With every rip, the napkin made little plosive sighs. And when there was nothing left, Joachim reached for another. His mother set a piece of birthday cake in front of him, but he just kept ripping.

“Joachim, I’m waiting,” his father said.

Joachim told how he and Ashley had had a fight, how he’d come home and gone out the window, and how he’d spent the day with Kensheena, “smoking a little.”

“Great,” Larry said. “ ‘Smoking a little’ should impress the police. What did you and Ashley fight about?”

“Nothin’.”

Peter watched Joachim reach for another napkin. His face was twisted with the effort to keep Ashley’s supposed pregnancy secret, Peter thought. But no

“N word,” Joachim said.

“What did you say to me?” Larry got up and shoved his hands into the back pockets of his grey slacks. “What did you say?”

“N word, she called me N Word, so we had a fight.”

“You mean she called you nigger?”

“No. N Word, like she was making fun of ‘nigger’.”

“Jesus, this just keeps getting better and better,” Larry said.

Peter checked his watch: twelve thirty. His brain was mush. The others’ had to be, too.

“Do we have to call the police now?” he said.

“Yeah, we do, or else it will look like he’s got something to hide. I’ll call,” Larry said.

“Joachim, you go take a shower. It will help you wake up.”

When the others left him alone at the table, Peter felt like a bystander in his own family. He helped his mother clean up, then went upstairs. Joachim was standing at his bedroom window overlooking the backyard. He wore jeans but no shirt and had a towel wrapped around his dreadlocks.

“You okay?” Peter said.

“Yeah. No. I don’t know.” He turned from the window, and Peter saw the christening cup in his hand. “I thought I’d see her light on. I always watched for her light.”

“Oh, Jeez, Joachim. I’m sorry.”

Joachim looked down at the cup as if he were trying to fathom some secret from it. “She wanted me to be godfather.”

“Oh, Joachim.”

“That’s what she thought of me. She wanted me to be the godfather . . . me! It’s something important to be a godfather. The baby has to be able to count on you. You have to remember its birthday and stuff.”

“So that’s why you got the cup?”

“Yeah, I was going to go back and get its name put on it when they knew if it was a girl or a boy.”

“Did Scotty know you were going to be the godfather?”

“No. . . I don’t think so. But how’d you figure out Scotty was the father?”

“I went to Luddy Mountain. I saw him with a Teddy bear. He said something about it being for ‘her.’ It wasn’t hard to piece together.”

“You went to Luddy?”

“Joachim, we were going nuts worrying about what had happened to you. I went there looking for you. I thought, I don’t know, that maybe I could retrace your steps. Sounds crazy, I know, but it seemed better than doing nothing.”

Joachim set the christening cup on his bureau by his Mickey Mouse lamp and started to cry, wiping his tears with his fist. “She told me that I’d be a good godfather.” The face he turned toward Peter was all hot rage and grief. “That’s what she thought of me, that I’d be a good godfather. That I’d remember to buy the baby presents. Why doesn’t her light come on? If you’re so smart, that’s what I want to know. Why doesn’t her light come on?”

Peter hugged him. Such a paltry, inadequate gesture, but all he had. “Is that why she called you blabbermouth last night?” he asked “Because you had told Scotty about the baby?”

“Yeah.”

“So that’s what the real fight was about, wasn’t it? Before she called you the “N” word. I guess that makes me a N word, too.”

“No, that just makes you a nigger’s brother.”

The front doorbell rang.

“Joachim, come down,” Larry called.

“Put on a shirt,” Peter said. “Something preppy . . . dorky.”

Joachim put on a rugby shirt with orange and blue stripes. “Dorky enough?”

“Very dorkmeister.”

When he went downstairs, Bushmiller’s attitude reminded him of those amputees he’d seen who love their missing limbs for their shock value. Only instead of dragging around an absent leg or arm, Bushmiller’s grotesquery was a fetid world weariness challenging you to say you’d seen half the awfulness he had. Between him and Larry, a negative force field sparked.

His mother was sitting in Peter’s old chair watching the two of them. God, she had crappy taste in men, he thought, and when Joachim came down, he stood beside him on the bottom step.

Who was Joachim’s legal guardian, Bushmiller wanted to know. Would it be you, Kit? Or you, counselor?

From the chair came, “I am.”

Then Bushmiller turned to Joachim. “I hear you had a real set-to.”

“A real what?”

“A fight, Joachim. You and Ashley had a fight. Tell him about it,” Larry said.

“Counselor, if you don’t mind.”

“Not much to tell. We had a fight. So?”

Peter could almost hear Bushmiller rummaging in his arsenal, pulling out another weapon: “Why’d ya hit her?”

“You didn’t tell me you hit her!” Larry said.

“Counselor, I’m warning you.”

“I hit her. She hit me. We had a fight. Not much to tell.”

Peter leaned into Joachim, hoping to signal him to drop the tough-guy act. Hoping he'd show some of the wounded teenager Peter'd seen upstairs. But Joachim slouched and glowered until Peter felt like giving him an elbow in the ribs. Their mother got out of the chair. "He's exhausted, Gil. He's not thinking straight."

"Just a few more. Just tell me what happened after the fight."

Joachim said he just hung around at the party and after a while he got a ride home from some girl and her boyfriend.

"And who was that?"

"I don't know the girl. But her boyfriend everyone called T-Do."

"So, you're hanging out with T-Do Hayes. Now ain't that sweet. I guess what they say is true: what goes around comes around. Am I right Counselor?"

Peter watched his stepfather thrust his hands into his back pockets and stare at the ceiling—somewhere there had to be a calming angel.

"Then maybe you should be talking to Hayes, not my son," he said.

Joachim sat down on the bottom step. Peter sat down beside him, the negative energy caroming around the room flashed like black lightning. He sensed the animosities of the older generation had nothing to do with the murder— that it was just wind fanning flames the three adults had lit long ago.

He closed his eyes and reimagined a video he had watched on the formation of the human heart, from cluster of angiogenic cells to endocardial tubes that fuse and fold into the bulbobventricular loop. Christ, he wanted to get back to the lab and his work. New Bristol was just too small for all the irresponsible people calling it home.

“Stand up,” he whispered to Joachim. “You’re at a disadvantage sitting down. Bushmiller can look down on you.” Joachim gave him an like-I-care look, and Peter stayed with him on the step. It didn’t make any difference anyway; Bushmiller’s job was done. He was triumphant. He’d thrown them all into a stew of high anxiety and could afford to be magnanimous, thanking them for their time, apologizing for keeping them up, saying he’d be in touch if he needed anything else. He had his hand on the doorknob before he fired his weapon from the morning: “You find the receipt yet, Kit?”

“No, not yet.”

Larry turned toward her. “What receipt?”

“Well, I see you two have a lot to talk about.” Bushmiller smiled and closed the door behind himself.

“What receipt?” Larry said again, and then to Joachim, “Why the hell didn’t you tell me that T-Do Hayes gave you a ride home?”

Please, God, don’t let him give a smart-assed answer Peter prayed.

“I didn’t think of it. He knew you. He said he’d be honored to give the son of Lawrence Durham a ride home. That’s what he said: ‘honored’.”

Peter checked his watch. “It’s almost one-thirty. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m exhausted. ”

His mother flicked him a look of gratitude, but Larry seemed to be just warming up.

“What receipt?” he asked.

“There was a gun drive. I turned mine in. After the Fourth of July I told you about, it seemed best,” she said, She was crossing the living room. She started up the stairs, then turned at the landing. “You remember where the linen closet is?” she said to Larry. “There’s

sheets and a blanket in there. I have to get to bed. You should, too,” she said to Joachim and he went up behind her. Peter wanted to go, too, but realized he was too agitated to sleep.

“You want a beer?” he said to his stepfather when they were alone.

“Sure, why not?”

Peter went into the kitchen, got the beers and looked out the back window. Across the alley, the Grymeses’ kitchen light was still lit, and whole landscape looked icy moon blue. *So what do you know about babies?* — why hadn’t he stayed? Talked to her more? He pressed a beer to his forehead. From now on, he was going to pay more attention more. Damn it, he was!

When he went back to the living room, his stepfather was on front porch. “I needed some air,” he said when Peter came out

Peter handed him a beer. The wind was splattering the last sycamore leaves across the sidewalk and onto Larry’s golden Lexus.

“How’s Avril-Bey?” Peter asked.

“Okay. We’ve had some false alarms. Braxton-Hicks . . . I know they’re not anything, but, still, they rattle her. She’s waited a long time for this baby.” He bent from the waist, rested his elbows on the porch railing and stared at his car. His hair was greyer now, Peter noticed, but still full. And he was a still sharp dresser. A razor crease in his slacks, shirt sleeves rolled back to show a rugged watch. Naval Academy ring still on his right hand.

Peter remembered the night his mother’d gone to a reception at the college for the young Justice Department attorney who’d given MacMaster’s annual Martin Luther King lecture.

“He said he saw me from the stage,” she said, stomping the snow from her boots and

beaming. The fact that Larry was Black and she was white only seemed to add to the fission that Peter suspected found its best release in sex.

But toward the end of their marriage, the fission had turned toxic and anything could ignite it. His mother having to go back to the college after dinner. Larry backing out of a vacation because he had to prepare for a trial. Or Joachim throwing a fit because his peas had rolled into his potatoes.

“Mom says Avril-Bey’s in her third trimester,” Peter said. “If she’s gotten this far, she’ll probably be fine.”

“Let’s hope. You know your brother drives her nuts. He doesn’t come to Philly a lot, but when he does, all he talks about is you. ‘My brother-the-doctor this . . . my brother-the-doctor that.’ Avril-Bey says you’d think no one else had ever gone to medical school.”

Peter drank his beer. “That’s odd, because whenever I call him all I get are grunts and growls.”

“That’s more than I get. Can you stay here tomorrow?”

“I really need to get back. I’m working on this research project and having a hard time getting my footing. My boss . . . I’m not sure what she’s after.”

Larry turned around so that his backside rested against the railing. Peter followed his gaze and caught his smile triangulating off the security panel’s cracked pane, a crack that now was what? . . . fourteen? . . . fifteen -years-old? Created the night of a blinding snowstorm when Larry had picked Peter up from a hockey game and they’d come home to Joachim screaming from an earache, so that Larry had to go out again, this time to the drugstore, if one was even open, and he brushed past Peter who was too cowed by the marital

rage around him to get out of the way and tripped over his own hockey stick cracking the pane.

“I blew it,” Larry said. “And your brother’s going to pay for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“That son of a bitch, Bushmiller. He hates my guts.”

“Because you married Mom?”

“More because of the T-Do Hayes trial. Bushmiller was the worse witness the prosecution could have put on the stand: arrogant, defensive, inconsistent. I thought because I made mincemeat out of him once, I could do it tonight. But I hadn’t prepared. Worse, I hadn’t prepared your brother. If he had told his story differently, if I had coached him, he wouldn’t have given Bushmiller T-Do. Christ, I forgot the first rule: control the situation. The sin of overconfidence. It will get you every time.”

“You think it’s going to get that bad?”

“Bad enough so that while you were getting these beers, I called a lawyer. Bruce Weiss. Three hundred dollars an hour. That bad. Your brother hit her. A lot of people saw that. And his alibi is T-Do Hayes and this Kensheena girl. It could all turn on the gun. The police have a slam-dunk as far as motive, and depending on what T-Do and Kensheena say, they may even say you brother had opportunity. But where’d he get the gun? Bruce’ll be in touch with your mother.”

Peter felt a question festering in his mind and had to ask it. “You don’t think Joachim did it, do you?”

His stepfather let out a long breath. “Your brother’s not that good an actor. Even though he always says he did fine on his latest algebra quiz, I always can know when he flunked.

Just by the sound of his voice, I know. I'm a lawyer. I talk to other lawyers. The guy I told you about, Bruce Weiss, he told me he once defended a stockbroker who killed his wife, then cut off her legs. He cried like a baby because he wanted to buy shoes to bury her in. People do crazy things all the time. But do I think your brother killed Ashley Grymes? No, I don't."

A black pickup truck turned off Stevens Road and roared toward them up Hasting Street.

Three men rode in its bed. As they passed the house, they gave a rebel yell

Larry took a deep drink. "Christ, now we've got to put up with every yahoo in the whole damn valley. I'm the Black bastard who got T-Do Hayes off for killing their golden boy Billy Reilly. Now the word's around that my own son was with a girl who was murdered. They're loving it. For them it means hunting season just started early."