

CHAPTER EIGHT

Catcalls, wolf whistles, and the moans of a stoned teenager followed Geri as she plowed through the mellow haze fogging the row of cells in the headquarters' basement. The prisoners were high again, and she had an idea of how they were getting there. But to firm up her suspicions she had to be careful. Damn, she'd broken up MacMaster frat parties where the grass wasn't so thick. She punched in the code to the heavy hall door and slammed it behind herself. The catcalls and wolf whistles stopped.

She didn't have a lot of time. If she was going to fish around about the grass and still get over to her former father-in-law's, she'd have to tread lightly but quickly. She went down the hall to where a light shined from the janitor's new "office," and where his favorite Ella Fitzgerald CD was swinging into "A Tisket A-Tasket." Under Geri's uniform shirt, where she'd hidden it, the receipt book from the August gun-turn-in scratched her breasts — another reason to get the little visit she'd planned with Satterfield over as quickly as possible.

She'd gone into the Ladies' Room, and seen the book on top of the trash the janitor had wheeled into his former broom closet. After checking for Kit Durham's signature verifying that Kit had indeed turned in a 357 and for her own forgery of Boyer's name, Geri'd buttoned the book under her shirt. Now she had to ask Satterfield about how it got into the trash, and find out about the grass.

"So, Mr. Satterfield, how's it going?"

"Well, Ms. Geri, for a Monday, I'm not doing too bad. Long ways to the weekend, though." He had his feet up on a gray, cast-off metal desk, and his red eyes glowed from his usual three-miniature-Monday—good, maybe he wouldn't notice how flat-chested the book made her look.

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"Heard your music and just wanted to say good night."

"Well, I appreciate that. I really do."

"And, Darnell? Things going all right with Darnell?"

"Oh, you know, that boy, they got him learning automobile repair. I think that's a fine thing. A young man should know automobile repair. Always going to need that."

A year before, Satterfield's fifteen-year-old grandson had been convicted of breaking and entering. His first offense so he was sent to a juvenile facility only seventy miles from New Bristol. Geri knew Satterfield and his wife, Cleo, drove those seventy miles back and forth twice a month, every month.

"Automobile repair, that's good," she said.

"He's a good boy, you know that, Ms. Geri."

"Satterfield, you know T-Do Hayes moved down to South Carolina, but now some people are saying that he's home again in New Bristol."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout that. That man is trouble walking. T-Do, don't make no difference where he is. He can reach for trouble and put it right down in front of you no matter where he is. South Caroline, New Bristol, makes no difference."

"Well, I'm glad Darnell is learning automobile repair. That's a good thing."

"Always will need automobiles. And as long as we got 'em, someone'll need to fix 'em."

She could see the janitor eyeing his miniature. He wanted to take another drink, but not in front of her. She decided to start with the easiest part first. "Satterfield, your trash can was in the Ladies Room again."

"Now, see, Ms. Geri, since they took that closet upstairs away from me, I don't have a proper place to store it."

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“I know. I just wanted to ask you, did Sergeant Boyer give you something to throw away?”

The janitor couldn't resist any longer. He reached for his miniature. “Sergeant Boyer, he gives me trash, same as everyone. He does his thing. I do mine.”

“But you didn't notice some old office-type book from him?”

The janitor cut Ella off in the middle of “Blue Moon” and put on Louis Armstrong. “Trash is trash. Sergeant Boyer's, everyone's . . . all the same. Maybe there was some sort of book. I don't know.”

“That's what I thought; Sergeant Boyer gave you a book to throw away. That's what I thought. Listen, I don't want to keep you, but don't stay here too long. Cleo will start calling upstairs. She'll be asking us to put out a missing persons. You know she will.”

Satterfield took a swallow but didn't look Geri in the eye. “Oh, that woman. Don't you know it, Ms. Geri? She'll get on my tail as sure as I'm sitting here. You take care, now, Ms. Geri. And you have yourself a good night, too, hear? The Lord, he's only giving us this particular Monday night just once.”

“Just one more thing.”

Armstrong swung into “It's a Wonderful World,” and the janitor's eyes sobered up.

“Funny thing. I could have sworn I smelled grass when I came through the cellblock just now.”

“Now, Ms. Geri, I don't mess with the prisoners. You know that.”

“Yes, I do know that. I didn't mean to imply that you did. But you haven't seen anyone down here? Maybe someone coming in from the garage? That new guy, Kenny, maybe, or Sergeant Boyer?”

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“I don't know what you keep goin' on about me an' Sergeant Boyer. I don't know where you get the idea somethin's between him and me. Besides the prisoners are all locked up. I don't even have the combination, Ms. Geri. I don't know what goes on with them. I really don't.”

“Well, good night, Mr. Satterfield. And that really is good news about Darnell.”

“It certainly is.”

A quarter mile from the Steam Room she pulled off to the side, took the receipt book out of her shirt and tossed it into her trunk. From a bed of empty beer cartons the teddy bear she'd taken from the monument held out its little plush arms to her. It had wide, guileless eyes and the cutest ears, yet, she knew, its path to the base of the monument was anything but innocent. She picked it up and read the note pinned to its pudgy tummy:

Just when I needed someone the most, there you were. I could say
“thank you” a thousand times for the magic you brought me and it
would not be enough. Teddy promises to keep you safe. And I
have it on very good authority that he is a bear of his word. So I
know he'll watch over you and bring you and our secret peace.
I'll love you forever and miss you always. Love, S.

The fool, she thought, the stupid fool. She'd seen Scotty in the football stands, staring at Ashley when everyone else was watching New Bristol at the goal line. And she'd heard the rumors. She didn't want to believe her former husband had killed the girl, but she'd been on the force long enough to know that given the right circumstances anyone is capable of anything. She dropped the bear onto the receipt book and beer cartons and drove to the Steam Room where two of every three pick-ups had a gunrack. When she opened the door, she felt the appraising eyes of

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the women in the booths and of the two at the bar: lady cop—dyke—no competition. The men weren't so fast. Some of them get really excited by the gun. It even had turned Scotty on. Once, she'd stepped out of the shower, and he'd asked her to strap it on. And she had—the highlight of their sexual adventures.

Over the bar a Remember Billy Reilly bumper sticker hung near a West Point pennant. She nodded to the bartender and saw Boyer down at the end looking like he'd found where he'd been heading all his life.

“How's it going, Marty?”

“Same as always.”

Martin Boyer, she knew, had nineteen years on the force, and a son down at York College. She knew, too, his daughter was in the same catholic high school she'd gone to and that Boyer was counting the years until the girl graduated so he could retire.

“How's Suzanne?”

“Did I tell you? She's in a play. ‘West Side Story.’ Next month. Big deal. Yesterday, she dyed her hair black. Would you believe it? Beautiful red hair like that . . . pitch black. She says she had to do it. She's playin' a Puerto Rican or something. Beautiful hair like that. Makes you wonder what you pay all that tuition for if a school makes a girl do that to herself just so she can play a Puerto Rican.”

“It will grow out, Martin.”

“I know. But geez.” He signaled for another beer.

“So, a big deal, I guess for Suzanne. ‘West Side Story’ and all.”

“How much you want to bet that Bushmiller has me work the weekend of the show,”

Boyer said.

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“Bushmiller giving you a hard time?”

“Does he ever not?”

Boyer's brother had been a volunteer fireman. Five years earlier, at a chimney fire in a MacMaster English professor's, he'd helped himself to the watch the professor's wife had given him for Christmas—how was he to know the wife came from money and that the Rolex wasn't a knock-off? When she filed a complaint at the Police Department, Boyer asked Bushmiller to make it go away. And he had. The only thing he demanded was Boyer's neck under his heel for however long Boyer remained on the force.

“He had you get rid of the receipt book?” she asked and took Boyer's long swallow as an affirmation. She didn't even have to go into the details of how she'd found it—Boyer had long since been so resigned to whatever bad thing came his way. “Why do you think he wanted to get rid of it?” she asked.

Boyer shrugged. On a little stage in front of the pinball machine, a woman in a red beret was adjusting the karaoke machine. Geri wanted to leave for her father-in-law's before the singing started—she didn't want anyone thinking she was going because she didn't like their version of “The Way We Were.”

“Do you know the mayor called today? Twice. I know they're focusing on that kid, the one who hit her,” she said.

“I don't know what the big deal was, call her calling him a name. But maybe that was reason enough to kill her. Who knows what those people think. They say the two of them had always been friends. Since they were babies.”

The lady in the beret tapped the mike: “Testing, one, two, three.”

“I got to go,” Geri said.

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Boyer leaned over closer, "You're in on this too, Geri, you know that. You should be glad he had me get rid of the damned book. You're in on this, too. Don't you forget it. You're the one who signed my name when that Durham woman came in, so you're up to your neck, too."

The guns that were turned in during the mayor's get-tough-on-crime campaign had been given to the state police to be destroyed, so the receipt book was the only record of who had brought in a weapon. The whole event had been a media circus, the *New Bristol News Dispatch* and the local TV station ballyhooing it, making it seem more effective than it was, and everyone on the force resenting having to play a role in a public relations gimmick. It was especially hard on Boyer who'd been in charge. Late in the afternoon, he came to Geri begging her to handle anyone who came in. She knew he had to go to Satterfield's "office" where he paid the janitor to hide a bottle. The only person who came in while he was gone had been Kit Durham who handed in a 357. Geri had forged Boyer's signature on the receipt, tore it off, and watched Kit shove it into her purse. She had a sparkly, showing personality, Geri saw, just the sort not to check the signature on the receipt. And just the type not to have any idea where the receipt was now.

"You think Bushmiller had you throw away the book just to make certain there's nothing around to prove that the kid didn't have a gun?" Geri said. Boyer grunted—they both knew that Kit Durham's was the same caliber as the gun that shot Ashley Grymes. They both knew that Joachim had fired Kit's 357 in July. And they both knew that Bushmiller had manipulated evidence in the Billy Reilly case. And that he wouldn't hesitate to do it again to get back at Larry Durham. Unless Kit could find her receipt, the only proof that she'd gotten rid of her gun was in Geri's trunk.

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"I got to go," she told Boyer. "Don't let Bushmiller get to you."

"The son of a bitch."

She left her half-finished beer on the counter and headed toward her father-in-law's.

She'd always liked Maurice. His snide wit had added some leavening to the leaden life she and Scotty lived when they were alone together. Right after they'd separated, whenever she'd bump into Maurice at Neusmann's Bakery or the Safeway, their meetings were awkward, but soon they both adjusted, and he became the same old Maurice: Always happy to see her. Always with something sly to say. She really wasn't surprised when he'd called and asked her if she would consider giving back her engagement ring—it had been his wife's and had great sentimental value. It seemed like a reasonable thing to ask, given that she wasn't the sort to get her diamond reset in a less engagement-type ring, something to sport on her right hand as a been-there-done-that trophy.

She heard Maurice shouting as soon as she rang the bell. "If you're here for Halloween, you're too early. Come back Wednesday. But otherwise, welcome, one and all." As soon as he opened the door she smelled shrimp, a Maurice Maas specialty. Some of her most comfortable times with Scotty had been spent in his father's kitchen. Beth had even come, once for seven-layer lasagna and another for a Bavarian tort. Less than a year ago, they had all sat around eating little Easter cakes with coconut icing and dumb bunny faces.

"Geri . . . Geri . . . Geri," Maurice waved a wineglass with a four-inch stem. "Scampi a la Maas tonight. Let me go stir."

She had come to the conclusion that behind his exuberant façade, her father-in-law hid a broken heart—the loss of his beloved Eleanor—his desperate love for and disappointment over

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Scotty. And if sometimes that façade needed fortification with alcohol, well, there were worse things.

“Sit. Sit,” Maurice said. He filled a glass, but Geri didn't touch it.

“I really can't stay, Maurice. I'm afraid Beth's getting too isolated. And Mom's not up to encouraging her very much. I really have to get home.”

“Oh, I know . . . I know you do,” he began measuring tomato paste into cream in a cast iron skillet — Maurice's own version of scampi.

“So, where's Scotty, Maurice?”

“Oh, he had to go to Harrisburg and meet with a flesh-and-blood professor about his online course. They work it that way. Sort of an advisor by proxy or some such thing. What can I say?”

Scotty's leaving Shippenberg State in the middle of his junior year was something both he and Maurice had regarded as a major failing, she knew, but it hadn't caused an irreparable rift. By the time she'd met him, Scotty had been working in the MacMaster library for three years and the only negative thing he ever said about his dad was his choice of videos.

Maurice began draining noodles. “You'd think Safeway would carry a better brand of fettuccini. These are cardboard, I swear. I pray I live to see the day New Bristol gets a real gourmet grocery. You think with all these MacMaster foodies around, it would be a natural.”

“I really can't stay, Maurice. I brought the ring. just wanted to drop it off. With the murder and all, there's a lot of pressure at work.” But he was already spooning the shrimp sauce.

“Oh, yes. Yes, that poor, poor child. At school, they can't stop talking about it. The faculty is as bad as the students. They've brought in grief counselors, you know. If you ask me,

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they just stir things up. Kids bawling their eyes out who never said one word to our little Ashley. And if they did, it probably was something vicious. They're like that nowadays."

"Did you teach her, Maurice?" She allowed herself a sip of wine. It tasted like serenity. Her hand froze to the stem.

"Well, they made me take one section of sophomores. What can I say? She was just in a regular section. She'd begged me to let her into A.P. biology. Can you imagine? I checked her freshman records. No way was she A.P. material. Now her sister Audra, that's another story.

"So you teach her sister?"

"Junior year . . . they all want to impress the colleges. But, I must say, Audra seems like the genuine article."

"What's she like?" Geri knew gossip was manna to Maurice, and she wanted a second person's reading on the Grymes family.

Maurice set a plateful of his special scampi before her. "Oh, as I said, Audra's right up there with the best of them, I must say. A very bright girl . . . very bright. They all want AP s, but Audra, she really can handle it."

"But, what's she like, though, aside from the schoolwork?"

"Polite. At least on the surface. Driven in that over-scheduled way they all are these days. She's very sweet unless you've marked something wrong. Then, like a bulldog for that extra point. You have the feeling . . ."

"What?"

"Well, let's just say she's mature beyond her years and leave it at that, shall we?"

"Okay we'll leave it at that . . . 'Mature beyond her years'." Twice in the last few months, on patrol, Geri'd seen a Porsche with a gray-haired man behind the wheel and a girl who

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might have been either Grymes girl beside him . . . they looked so alike and the car went so fast, she couldn't tell. Whichever sister was riding around New Bristol in a Porsche, Geri was certain of one thing: Whoever the grey-haired driver was, he wasn't the girls' father. The morning she and Bushmiller had gone to the Grymeses' house Richard Grymes's lank, brown hair had looked as soft as a prepubescent schoolboy's, and Porsche-man's was stony silver. She took a little blue box from her pocket and set it beside her plate.

"The ring, Maurice."

"Geri, Geri, eat. There's no rush." He held up the bottle, quizzed her with his eyes—she shook her head — and he refilled his own glass.

She took two more forkfuls of scampi, then said, "Everything tastes wonderful, Maurice, as always. But I need to get my beauty sleep. Parents' Weekend at the college is coming up. And Halloween is Wednesday. Everyone will be working. Mustn't have vandalism before Parents' Weekend. What will Mama and Papa think if they see wads of toilet tissue on the bandstand?" She nudged the little blue ring box toward him.

"What can I say, Geri? I regret . . . I feel just awful that things didn't work out between you and Scotty. I was so happy when he finally seemed settled. When he brought you home, I thought to myself, 'Now, she's what he's been looking for.'"

"It's probably more my fault, Maurice. Everyone is so happy for you, you don't want to disappoint them. It's easy to persuade yourself that it's right." Suddenly, she felt tired and wanted a bath. And she needed to spend some time with Beth. She got up.

Maurice took a long swallow, then said, "No. No. Sit. Sit. Please sit."

"I really can't, Maurice."

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He got up, too. "I can't thank you enough for bringing the ring back. It's really wonderful of you." He opened the ring and looked at it, "Just wonderful." He pushed in his chair so he could open the top drawer of the sideboard and withdrew a white envelope. "Scotty," he said, "well, the divorce has been tough for him, but he'll be okay. He's taking that course . . . finally getting his degree. He'll be okay. For a while, it seemed like he reverted . . . reverted to . . ." A picture of his wife holding the infant Scotty, her eyes, like her smile, tentative and shy, sat on the sideboard.

"Reverted to what, Maurice? High school?" She didn't mean to hurt him as much as startle him back to the present—she needed to know if he was as worried about Scotty as she was. But Maurice kept gazing at the picture of his wife and son, that long ago moment was the most real thing in the room to him. Then he sighed, reached for his wineglass, and looked at the envelope in his other hand. "I have to know, Geri. Are they talking about Scott down at the station? I'm no fool. I saw what was going on. He developed a crush or something about that girl. I tried talking to him. My lord, it was like he was reliving his teenage years through her or something."

"You know I can't tell you about an investigation, Maurice. I'm not officially on the case. That belongs to Bushmiller. But still I can't tell you."

He kept running his thumb over the envelope's flap. "But surely you hear things."

"I have to go."

He thrust the envelope at her.

"What's this?"

"Go ahead. Open it. Open it."

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Inside were eight five-hundred dollar bills. "I can't accept this, Maurice." The scampi, the wine, the ring, they had all been a ploy. She needed to get home. Still, the envelope was so light. To her, four thousand dollars had always been an abstraction. No one ever actually held four thousand dollars in their hands. How light it felt!

"It's for the ring. I should have given it to you before we sat down. I know how much that ring was worth back when I bought it for Eleanor, and in today's market — it's over a carat — what can I say? So don't argue with me. Take it. I insist. The ring was yours. You didn't have to give it back. You shouldn't deprive yourself of its value, too."

Four thousand dollars—enough to do what? Get a decent ramp built to the front door so Beth wouldn't have to struggle so. With what was left over, maybe a trip to Florida. Or explore alternatives to being New Bristol's only female police officer. Four thousand dollars—not exactly change-you-life money, but, still, not to be ignored.

"I can't take it, Maurice."

"It's for the ring, Geri. You were so good to give it back."

"I don't know what to say, Maurice."

"Don't say anything. Just take it."

She put it in her pocket. "Well, thank you. You know I would have given the ring back anyway."

"That's exactly why I gave you the money. Anyone else, they might have pawned my Eleanor's ring by now."

When she pulled out of Maurice's col de sac, she didn't know which way to go: up the logging road for a beer; or by the college for an easy arrest of some students in full pre-Halloween revelry—she was off duty, but, still an arrest was an arrest. She decided to give

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herself time. She drove out of the subdivision and along the depression at the base of the western mountains. . She needed to figure out if Maurice had been trying to bribe her or buying information. Maybe she shouldn't have taken his money, but was there any good reason not to? Still, what if the whole business about the ring had just been a ruse to get her take the cash? Then, if the case turned away from the Durham boy and toward Scotty, Maurice would have something to hold over her. She'd be in the same position with Maurice that Boyer was with Bushmiller. Maybe worse—Boyer wouldn't go down without taking Bushmiller with him—they were each other's checkmate—but Maurice would let her swing alone.

She turned toward her parents' and itemized what she knew about the case: she and Kenny had found Ashley lying face up in the Bledsoes' field. The top of her head pointed toward Stevens Road; her feet toward the Bledsoes' house. The priest had been kneeling over her as though he was praying. He said he'd found the body. He identified her. The doctor came—he was the one who'd called it in. Then Bushmiller took over. He made Geri go with him when he went to tell the Bledsoes. She'd followed Cynthia Grymes upstairs, watched her tearing Ashley's room apart, insisting that the police were wrong, that her little girl was somewhere, then going down the hall, screaming, "Where is she? Where's your sister?" to the girl rising from the covers, looking like the ghost of Ashley, until, she tossed her hair out of her eyes, and said, "What's Ashley done this time?" Contempt, Audra Grymes talks about her sister with contempt. What kind of a sister does that? Geri remembered thinking.

She pulled out her mental debit column and what she saw wasn't pretty: She didn't know if taking the bear or the book amounted to tampering with evidence. Didn't know how involved Scotty was with Ashley. Didn't know what to make of Maurice's money. And didn't know how

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it would feel to be known as the cop who'd had a murderer for a husband . . . if that's how the case went.

She pulled into her parents' driveway and parked alongside her mother's van, then opened her trunk. The bear with its insipid note looked up at her with pleading eyes, its little plush arms reaching out. Such stupidity. She took the receipt book, put it under her shirt, and slammed the trunk on the bear. When she opened the kitchen door, the smell of ammonia grabbed her throat.

Her mother was wringing a rag into the sink: "Your sister fell."

"Fell?"

"I had her walk like you said. But her braces got caught in that new throw rug by the table. She fell."

"Is she okay?"

"Yes, but I had a devil of a time getting her up. Your father, he's at Uncle Steve's—his garage door is stuck again. It took me twenty minutes to get her up. I almost called 911."

"Why didn't you call me, Mom?"

"I thought you had to work."

"If you had called 911, I could have come, Mom. That's what I do."

"I had a devil of a time. Her bag came off: It ruined the rug. I used all the ammonia cleaning it up. I'll have to get some at the Safeway tomorrow."

The hallway to Beth's room was narrow and dull green. Her door was unpainted and hollow cored. No light shined under it. Geri knocked: no answer. She opened it. The smell of ammonia, weaker in the hallway, came stronger here, mingling with a faintly medicinal scent

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that Geri had first breathed the day their mother had brought Beth home from the hospital, laid her in Geri's arms and said, "Be careful. You're always going to have to be careful with her."

"Are you all right, Beth?" Geri stayed in the doorway. The blinds hadn't been drawn and through them slatted moonlight fell on Beth lying in her bed with her face to the wall.

"Oh, sure. Everyone just loves having their colostomy bag come off."

"I'm sorry, Beth."

"Why do I have to be this way? I wish someone would tell me that. That's all. They're so good at telling me other shit. Like you saying I should meditate or exercise, or something. You don't know what it's like being me."

"You're right. I don't know. Believe me, if I could make it otherwise, I would."

"Well, you can't, so don't talk about it."

Geri sat next to her and stroked her hair. It was as fine as a three-year-old's and probably would never be any stronger. Beth turned from the wall and almost smiled.

"Listen," Geri said, "I was wondering if you knew the girl who was killed, Ashley Grymes."

"I was friends with her sister Audra for a while when I was in the fourth grade. She was older and sort of took me on as a project. The teachers would assign me to kids. They thought that was a great kindness, you know, letting other kids practice their kindness on me. I was the kindness guinea pig."

"What was she like?"

"Okay, I guess."

"And you knew Ashley and Joachim, too?"

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“Yeah. He was funny. He came out with all sorts of stuff that made you laugh. She was okay, too. But I haven't gone to school with any of them for a really long time, in case you haven't noticed.”

“I know, Beth, I'm sorry. I just want to ask you if you remember Sunday night when Scotty called. Do you remember what he said?”

“I already told you.”

“Try to remember.”

“He just asked if you were home.”

“That's all? He didn't ask about the murder or anything?”

“No. I'm tired now. Is Twenty Questions over?”

“Yeah,” Geri said. When she bent to kiss her sister's forehead, she smelled dampness coming from her pillow. All teenaged girls have damp pillows — Geri's had dried only when she found Gary. But Beth's tears sprang from something so much more serious than a boyfriend. Somewhere there had to be a magic doorway that would spring open and offer her mind a fulfilling universe. Geri just had to keep pushing.

Up, in her own room, on the highest shelf in her closet, her old sketchpads were stacked in descending order according to size. She had been best at perspective. Sister Mary Peter had even said so, but her mastery of perspective had come at the expense of spontaneity. Her color wheels were always labored. The variance between the yellow and orange, always greater than between the orange and the red. She'd never aspired to be a great artist. All she'd hoped for was to be an elementary teacher who showed bright eyes how to see their world differently, how to create art beyond a refrigerator-door-worthy creation. She shoved the receipt book between a pad of pen-and-ink sketches and one of watercolor landscapes.

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The art, like Gary, even like her skating, seemed to belong to a different person, someone who had never seen a dead girl lying in a field or heard a mother scream, "Where is she? Where is she?" The mayor had called the station, Bushmiller was huddling with the State's Attorney. It was no secret that the Durham boy was the prime suspect. The pieces were being twisted to fit, and from watching him during the Billy Reilly case, she knew Bushmiller would turn them inside out, shave off the edges, slant them whichever way he needed to in order to make them fit. Like Boyer, he was near retirement. What better way to go out than with a conviction of a Black boy for killing a white girl? He'd be New Bristol's hero forever.

The receipt book wasn't much, but at least it would disprove that Joachim Durham had access to his mother's gun. If she gave the book to the defense, her career would be over, Geri knew, but at least Joachim Durham wouldn't be convicted because she'd watched the pieces being turned and twisted and done nothing.

Besides, now she had four thousand dollars, and that gave her options. Maurice's envelope was still in her pocket. She took it out and looked at the bill, then put the envelope in her pocket and went downstairs. Her mother hadn't gone to bed as Geri thought she had. Instead, she was watching TV with the sound down low with a green and brown afghan over her knees.

Geri took a rubber band from the six-inch roll of them her father kept on the coffee table.

"What do you need that for?" her mother asked.

"Oh, I've just got something to wrap up."

"Want something to eat? Your father brought some fish 'n' chips from Philly. Not those frozen ones. He stopped in Philly."

"I'm fine, Mom, thanks. You know, I'm thinking of taking Beth to an art show at the college. It's free."

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“Well, good luck with that. I don't know what's worse. Her attitude. Or her braces and bag. I can take one or the other, but I'm getting too old to take both.”

“I know, Mom,” she said and gave her a kiss on top of her head.

“What was that for?”

“Because you work too hard.”

Up in her room, Geri rolled Maurice's envelope tight, wrapped the elastic around it, and buried it deep under the grains of fish food for Mary and Edgar. The goldfish hung at the surface, opening and closing their mouths, but not breaking the water's surface tension. A few grains of food clung to her palm and she shook them off, watching the fish dart for them. She ran a bath and thought about what she should do with the bear on its beer-carton bed. Somewhere, there had to be somewhere to hide that, too, but she was too tired to think. Fish food grains were floating out from under her nails and she thought they looked like sand, sand at a resort where you're treated very, very well if you have four thousand dollars to spend.

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