CHAPTER TEN

Two days back from Ohio, down in his home office the echolocator in Doug's heart pinpointed each member of his family in the kitchen above. They were all gathered for their regular Sunday night pizzas: Suzanne at the wall oven, Timmy at the table with Becca and Jack, and Skylar at the island. And they were laughing. Skylar had made some remark that set the others off, their laughter not raucous, but, still, as grating as fingernails on a blackboard to Doug. How could they be laughing when his head and heart were shredding to pieces? He felt isolated and afraid, for them, for himself. What if they were sucked into the rabbit hole of his past? What if he went down alone and never climbed out?

He finished backing up his notes from Steubenville on his computer, went to the ornate cabinet, and took out the little book with the worn red cover. The day before he graduated from the University of Dayton, his aunt Ginny had given it to him. "Not much of a graduation present, but I enjoy knowing the people I care about have a copy. I've found it very helpful over the years." Sweet, gentle Ginny.

The book contained daily spiritual quotes compiled by Tolstoy. Doug turned to a random page: *For the person who is already living for others, it is impossible to imagine he could live his life for only himself.* The abandoned boy within was about to kick through the façade of the steady man without, and he couldn't let that happen: people depended on him, even if they were laughing while he was roiling, they depended on him. He closed his eyes for three deep breaths, then went upstairs to his family.

A beer sat before Becca, two before Jack, who got up for a third— "Here, Doug, have a seat. Want a brew?" As if Doug hadn't bought the beer in the first place. Son of a bitch.

"Sure. A beer would be good." He took the chair beside his grandson who was working on a drawing of what looked like a red-eyed hyena. "That's pretty good, Buddy." But the boy didn't say anything.

Becca leaned over toward Doug. "Not a good day. The dentist tomorrow . . . a real challenge."

Suzanne took the pizzas out of the oven and began cutting. Timmy looked up from his hyena. "I don't like anything, Grandma . . . just cheese."

Suzanne kept cutting. "Just like you ordered . . . no anything but cheese."

The boy pushed away from the table, stepping on Doug's foot. "Let me see. I especially don't like mushrooms. Not even anything that touches a mushroom."

Suzanne handed him a piece. "See, just cheese. Put it on a plate, Timmy." But the boy didn't put the slice on a plate. Instead he clambered back to his place beside Doug and began biting off huge mouthfuls, scarcely bothering to chew before taking another—two weeks earlier he had choked, and Becca had had to pound his back, pizza chunks spewing all over the table.

Then, as now, Skylar had been working on his laptop on the island, scarcely noticing what was going on. Suzanne put a plate with three slices beside him, but he kept typing. "Hey, Dad, it's all over everywhere, about your parents. Did you know they're on Wikipedia?"

Doug took a long swallow of beer. "No, I did not know that."

"Well, Wikipedia's just the old stuff. The new stuff . . . hey, here's a picture of Uncle Pat's house . . . the new stuff is from online papers and other sources."

"Doug, do you want mushrooms or sausage?" Suzanne asked.

"This must be so hard for you, Dad," Becca said.

Jack put his beer down. "Yeah, damned hard."

Suzanne shut off the oven. “Doug?”

“What?”

“I asked if you want mushroom or sausage.”

Timmy finished his slice and began crawling under the table rather than asking Doug or his mother to move.

“Tim, that’s not acceptable behavior,” his father said, but he boy paid no attention. He sidled up to Skylar at the island.

Becca said, “Skylar, close that now.”

“Why?”

“Because you have a very impressionable child reading over your shoulder, that’s why. Now, Skylar! Close it now!”

As soon as his uncle shut the computer, Timmy looked at his mother with fury. “Now what am I supposed to do?”

Doug felt like he was trapped in a funhouse with the walls closing in. His family, the people he loved and who loved him, had become strangers. He no longer understood what they considered important. How could anyone think that mushroom or sausage was worth the breath it took to choose one or the other? Or that some code of “acceptable behavior” actually existed. Every one of them knew that Steubenville had proven there was no “acceptable behavior.” There was only outer darkness and the will to prevail against it.

The phone rang. Suzanne was closest. “It’s Lieutenant Donnelly.”

“I’ll take it in my office.”

At his desk Doug made himself write the date on the legal pad before picking up.

"The coroner's report came in, Mr. Sullivan. We had it expedited because, well . . . because we thought that best."

"And?"

"The remains that were found definitely are those of your parents'. I'm sorry."

Doug watched his hand write "Them," and frame it in a rectangle. "In a way, Lieutenant, it's a relief. Ever since you first called, I've been expecting this."

"I suspected as much. Like I said, I'm sorry."

"Can I have a copy of the report?"

"I'll check, but that's unusual in an ongoing investigation."

"Since the investigation's 'ongoing' I assume that means they were shot?"

Hesitation. Then, "I'm afraid so."

"And the police are reopening the case?"

"Technically, it's never been closed."

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"You're the next of kin. It's up to you."

"So I can have a funeral? They finally can be buried?"

"Yes, but if I can make a suggestion . . . "

"What?"

"Do it as quickly as possible . . . the media, they're a pack of wolves out here."

Suzanne carried a faceful of questions and a slice of pizza on a paper plate into his office. She didn't wait for his hand to finish hanging up before asking, "It's definitely them? That's why he called?"

"Yeah."

"What now?"

"A funeral, I guess. God, what a circus."

"There's always cremation."

"No. They wouldn't have wanted that. I know cremation is acceptable in the eyes of the church now, but I just feel they wouldn't want that. They'd want to be buried together."

. "What about your sister?"

"Melissa? . . . What about her?"

"Suppose, well, suppose they find her near where your parents were. You wouldn't want to go through this twice."

He tried connecting the woman standing before him, the woman with pudgy feet in orthotic sandals, and hair like an efficiency helmet with the vision he'd seen floating up the center aisle thirty-one years earlier, Father Larkin leaning over his shoulder, murmuring "Good choice, Doug." The link was still there, but it was being stressed way beyond the point of standard mid-marriage malaise.

Everyone had thought he was crazy to marry so young—twenty-two, his diploma from Dayton scarcely dry. But all through the years when his history teacher's salary scarcely covered rent and car payments, and, then, when the kids and a mortgage came and things were even tighter, somehow, Suzanne had stayed cheerful, optimistic, confident—laughing, almost joyful, the morning she found Becca "cooking" with a mess of broken eggs on the kitchen floor, and when Skylar's kicking baby legs soaked her when she bathed him in the sink. And laughing again when Skylar, four, dumped a bucketful of cold ocean water over her head on a rare three-day vacation to the beach. And then their tenth anniversary weekend when she'd arranged sleep-aways for the kids and came out of the bedroom wearing a silk camisole and tap pants.

Over time, things eased: his salary increased, she got her real estate license, the kids graduated, first high school, then college. Thirty-four years and the warmth radiating from her side of the bed was still the truest thing he knew.

But now everything could change. He had to finally give her the truth, because, like the abandoned little boy within, the truth was demanding release.

"Melissa is alive," he told her.

A sudden inhalation. "What?"

"Melissa, my sister, is alive. We can have the funeral now because the police won't find her . . . not her body. She's alive."

"What do you mean she's alive? How do you know?"

He opened the cabinet. From under the stuffed penguin he took the small, ornately carved box his Nonna Gianni had brought from Sicily. Inside were four plastic battleships, none bigger than an inch.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Ships from a game. When I was a kid, Battleship was my favorite game. I played it for hours. With Melissa a lot. I think she sent these to me."

"What do you mean she sent them to you?"

"I think they were her way of letting me know she was alive . . . that she missed me."

"You've known all this time?"

"Remember when we got married? How the Herald-Star wrote that you were marrying the former Doug Gianni, with all the stuff about my parents' disappearance? Anyway, about a month afterwards I got one of these in the mail. And I knew. I just knew that it was from my sister."

"And you didn't tell me?"

What could he say—that in his bifurcated life she represented sanity, and that he hadn't wanted to taint that? Or that he was afraid her response would be inadequate? Or that he didn't know which possibility was truest? "I knew, but only in my gut. I was never certain. And I'm not now either. I guess I was afraid. You married Doug Sullivan. Not Doug Gianni."

"I married you!"

Timmy had come down the stairs. He reached into the cabinet and took out the old stuffed penguin.

Doug ordered the boy to put it back, but the boy started rocking from side to side and stroking the toy.

"And now I don't know who I married," Suzanne said.

"How could you, when at the moment, I don't even know who I am?"

"All this time . . . "

"Years would pass and another ship would come, always from a different place. Sarasota. Cleveland. Georgia. I don't know if she was moving around or what. There was never any note or anything. Just a ship."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

His grandson was still stroking the stuffed penguin. "Timmy, I told you to put that down." The boy threw the penguin to the floor.

"Go to the police? Why would I do that? Timmy, pick that up."

But the boy didn't.

"Oh, Doug. You know what the police thought your sister did. And here you were, harboring her."

"Harboring her? How was I harboring her? I don't even know for certain that these came from her."

"What came from her, Grandpa?"

"Nothing. I told you to pick that up." But the boy left the penguin on the floor. He went to Doug's desk and began eating the slice of cold pizza.

Suzanne was coiled with such rage that even her toes had curled. "But now . . . if the police begin looking for her again and find out that you've known she's been alive all these years, they might say you were complicit someway. Or what if she tries to contact you now that your parents are in the news again?"

"And what if she does? Would that be so awful? She never did anything to our parents. Whatever happened, Melissa didn't do it. I know her."

Timmy had put down his pizza and was looking through the cabinet again.

"Oh, Doug, don't you see? The police might come after her, and if she contacts you, then you really will have to go to them. Otherwise . . . "

"Otherwise, what?"

"Otherwise, I don't know . . . won't that make you guilty?"

"Guilty of what? . . . living through a horror no child should? Of having a sister? My own flesh and blood?"

" All these years, Doug, I thought WE were your flesh and blood . . . Becca, Skylar, me, Timmy. I thought WE were your flesh and blood."

On the way back from Steubenville, Doug had managed to complete his mother's lanyard. But now Timmy had hung it around his neck and was thumbing through something that Doug cherished, but which he also regarded as somewhat odd. Along with the snickerdoodles

and sweatshirt his mother had sent him at camp, she'd packed her Sunday missal. And now his grandson was thumbing through it with sticky fingers. He wanted to tell the boy to put his great grandmother's missal down, to take off her lanyard and to pick up the stuffed penguin. But he knew how the boy would ignore him, and how that would only torque his own anger higher. "I need some air. Please, just leave me alone. I just need to be alone for a little while."

He slid open the glass doors, crossed his back yard, and sat down the top tier of his unfinished terrace. The late August night air carried a breath of autumn. And the crickets were grinding out that brittle song he always associated with the start of school and how that would mean a parade of middle schoolers marching into his office with their perceived catastrophes: someone wounded by a Facebook assault, or with a first encounter with failure, or by a head-on collision with the consequences of their own adolescent foolishness. So often, he'd think If only you knew . . . if only you knew what I had lived through.

The worst was the guilt, the horrible realization that aside from the pain of losing Melissa, he'd enjoyed his life with Ginny and Pat. It had been less chaotic than the one with his parents—more predictable, sustaining. Make your bed. Say grace before meals. Clear your place when you're done. Do your homework. Do your best. Always, your best.

His mother had tried for that sort of stability, but then his father would have some crisis with some project—a piece of heavy equipment broken, an accident, a lawsuit. And the anger would bubble over.

And then his mother had become involved with the church, always some meeting, some committee, Father Larkin calling, giving her books on Liberation Theology. And his father resenting the Sloppy-Joe suppers, stamping away from the table, leaving Melissa to wash the dishes and Doug to dry.

And then, in the evenings, when his mother was doing something at the church, Uncle Pat started dropping by, talking about Astro Construction. He remembered Pat and his father talking about Astro Construction the evening they unexpectedly took him and Melissa to the carnival, where Pat bought the penguins. After that night, Pat started coming over almost every evening—all those papers on the end of the dining room table, some big project Gianni Bros. was working on with Astro Construction. Doug never knew what, but his mother did. Right before he was sent to camp, she spent an afternoon poring over them, punching figures into a calculator—she always said how she wished she had taken the business track in high school. He remembered how it was almost suppertime when she called Pat, yelling at his secretary to "Get him . . . get him! I don't care where he is. Get him!"

And how she flew at Doug's father when he came home, screaming, "Sal will find out. He's not an idiot. He'll find out and you'll get yourself killed." And how Pat had come over and tried to calm her down. But she would have none of it, calling both Pat and Doug's father leeches on society, sucking the life-blood from the poor who paid for their greed. A few days later his father came home with a black eye. A work accident, he said. That night, after his father had gone over to Uncle Pat's, his mother had called Father Larkin and the next morning she'd sat on Doug's bed. "Guess, what? What do you think about going to camp? Just for two weeks. Doesn't that sound like fun? Don't you think that sounds exciting?"

"Is Melissa going?"

"No, she has to work."

"I guess it will be okay."

"Okay? It will be way more than okay. It will be wonderful!"

Then, his mother and Melissa had that terrible fight over Joey Kolpecki. And two days after that he went away to camp. He never saw any of them again.

The moonlight lay like lace over the stream running at the end of his yard. And flashes from fireflies spritzed the darkness. So far—he'd come so far—had so much to be grateful for, sometimes he thought his parents had reached down from wherever they were and smoothed his way, making certain that Pat and Ginny took him in, so that he didn't fall into the clutches of Ohio's Juvenile Services. And that he got into the University of Dayton. And that Suzanne bumped into his tray on that rainy afternoon in the cafeteria. And that the seller of this house had been so eager to move in with her boyfriend that she had shaved the price down. So much had gone so right that he'd let himself believe that he'd paid all the universe was going to demand of him back when he was nine years old.

"Dad?'

His daughter was coming across the lawn, her gauzy white blouse iridescent in the moonlight, and her tangly, honey-colored hair, a halo. And, too, the moonlight camouflaging the permanent furrow that worry about Timmy had etched into her brow. But now a lilt had sweetened her voice. These was an eagerness in her. "Dad?"

"What?"

"Timmy and Skylar have found something in your mother's missal. I think you should see it. They can explain it better than I can," a fib—his daughter oversaw a support staff of twelve in a top law firm—she certainly could explain whatever her brother and son had found if she wanted to. No, she wanted her father to come up to the house because she wanted him to see that his grandson was more than rude behavior and ignored instructions. She wanted her father to see there was hope.

When they reached the kitchen, Skylar had moved his computer to the table, and Timmy was beside him with the missal, flipping through its pages, calling out numbers and words.

"I think there's a code in here, Grandpa," he said.

"A code?"

"Didn't you ever notice how your mother had underlined certain words and numbers?" Skylar asked.

"No. Or if I did, I guess I thought that was because she thought those passages and prayers were significant."

"No, Grandpa. She marked a puzzle."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so."

"The markings are very slight. It's easy to miss them," Jack said. "But Timmy . . . he's got a real eagle eye."

"Here's one," the boy said. "On page 20 'Concealed riches of secret places' Isaiah Chapter 45, verses one to eight. Put it down." And Skylar typed.

Suddenly Timmy turned to Doug. "There's a message in here, Grandpa. And I'm going to unlock it. If it takes me forever, I'm going find it.