

CHAPTER ONE

Doug picked up a stone. Nearly flat, he wouldn't need much concrete fill. One or two more like it, and he could call it a day. He'd have the terrace's third tier finished before school started, just as he'd promised Suzanne back in May. "We'd be better off redoing the downstairs bath," she'd answered, not even bothering to look away from her realty company's web site.

Still holding the stone Doug glanced up and saw her rushing across the lawn. Together thirty-four years, married thirty-one, he could read her walk. Something was wrong. He did a quick scan: Skylar, their son, now almost thirty, finally settled into web design; their daughter, Becca, doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances—that husband of hers, and her little boy, Timmy, on the autistic spectrum. But it wasn't their kids that had mounded Suzanne's shoulders into humps of anxiety. Only one thing could make her hurry across the lawn with her head down. And Doug knew what that had to be.

And he suspected that months, maybe years, would pass before he'd fit that nearly perfect stone into its proper place. He set it down, wiped his palms across his Orioles T-shirt and watched her approach, a middle-aged silhouette in slim jeans and tunic over a spreading mid-section.

"What?"

"A Lieutenant Donnelly called. From Steubenville. He wants to talk to you."

"Did he say why?" Stupid question. They both knew why.

"He . . . only that he wants to talk to you."

"He's on the line?"

"I asked him to wait. It's been so long he used the landline number. It's the only one they have."

“I’ll take it in my office.”

The light in her green eyes dimmed a little—he was cutting her out. His response had spilled out reflexively, almost instinctively. If he let her in, he’d worry that she’d be sucked into the morass of his past. Or worse, he’d be pissed because whatever she did would feel inadequate.

They crossed the lawn and she retired to the deck off their kitchen while Doug went into his office in the walk-out basement.

Beside the ten-year plan for Baltimore County Maryland Public Schools and a stapled copy of Responsibilities of Baltimore County Maryland Vice Principals, was a stack of legal pads. He took one, sat at his desk, and wrote the date and time in the top margin before picking up the phone. “This is Douglas Sullivan.”

“Did you say Sullivan? . . . Oh, I’m sorry. I spoke with a woman earlier and she said this is the home of . . . ”

Doug could almost picture the voice’s owner: ruddy, compact, bad haircut, Midwestern, mid-to-late thirties, self-importance not strong enough to hide insecurity. Doug knew the type: he dealt with it every day in the person of his new principal at Runyon Branch Middle School.

“You thought you reached the home of Douglas Gianni, am I right?”

“Yes. The woman I spoke with said”

“I am Doug Gianni, was Doug Gianni. When I was adopted, I changed to Sullivan.”

Even as he was saying it, he felt his forty-three years as a Sullivan slipping away.

“Oh, I guess I didn’t see that in the file. I’m Lieutenant Donnelly from Steubenville, and I’m calling to tell you there’s been a development.”

“What sort of development?”

“The remains of two people have been found.”

Doug wrote “Two” followed by a large question mark. “You do know . . . ?”

“Yes, yes. . . you had a sister. So far, we’ve only found the remains of two people. There are indications that they are your parents.”

“What sort of indications?”

“This is all very preliminary. Our investigation is in the early stages. We’ll have the coroner’s report in a few days. Also, depending on what he finds, we may have to send the remains up to Cuyahoga County. They have better equipment up there than we do, so it may take somewhat longer.”

Doug wrote down half--formed questions. “Indications?” “Where?” “How?” “When?” “Two?” “Certain two?”

“Lieutenant, can you hold for just a minute?” His office was large with neat bookshelves and filing cabinets lining the wall opposite his desk. The only thing not fitting in with the general appearance of rectilinear efficiency was a large, ornate cabinet carved with fruits and flowers. He went to it and took out a small, worn book with a crucifix embossed into its leather cover and a ragged purple ribbon marking each day’s reading. *If you are afraid to face the truth for your own good, you will never improve your situation, but make it worse.*

He closed his eyes, inhaled and exhaled a few times, then went back to the phone. “I’d like to come out there to Steubenville.”

“Well, it’s like I told you, the investigation is all very preliminary. I just wanted to give you a heads up. You know how it is with the social media these days; it’s harder and harder to control things. I didn’t want you to find out online.”

Doug adjusted his cadence so that every word landed like a searing laser beam.

“Lieutenant, do you know how long I’ve been waiting for this day?”

The lieutenant told him that he did know, that “believe me” he understood. But there was no way he could know. No one, not even Suzanne, could understand. Doug shifted into his non-threatening, folksy tone. “You know, I don’t believe I caught your first name.”

On the other end, silence, then, “It’s Rob.”

“As in Robert?”

“Robin, actually.”

“What?”

“Robin . . . but everyone calls me Rob.”

Doug scribbled a little bird with an open beak and sensed the young cop would tell him anything now so long as it deflected attention away from his first name.

“You mentioned there were ‘indications.’ Just what were they?” He could almost hear the struggle: the young cop’s weighing his better judgment about his career against his better nature.

“Rings. There were rings, Mr. Sullivan. That’s all I’m prepared to tell you at this time. With the remains there were rings. They looked like wedding rings.”

Doug watched his hand write “rings,” but the hand seemed to move automatically, as if by some volition other than his own. He watched this disembodied hand enclose “rings” in a rectangle, as if its fingers were reluctant to lay down the pen and pick up whatever task came next. “Where were they found, Lieutenant?”

“You have to understand. This is all very early stages. I’m only trying to give you a heads up.”

“Where were they found?”

“Out near where they’re putting in some test wells for more fracking. The family that owns the property lives in Rhode Island as I understand.”

“And when was it?”

“Yesterday morning.”

Doug watched the hand stop tracing. “And you’re just calling me?”

“We . . . well, the situation was delicate. And we wanted to be certain.”

“So, you’re certain it’s them?”

“Reasonably certain. We’ll know more when we get the final report.”

Every corpuscle in Doug’s body was urging him to get out to Steubenville, but he heard Suzanne coming down the stairs. When he looked up she was standing in the doorway, the empathy in her face at odds with the sweater and handbag she was holding. Doug had some vague recollection of agreeing to take their grandson Timmy to an Orioles game for his birthday. Timmy, on the autism spectrum, seven years old, no friends, but wanting to go to a baseball game, his doctor saying it was a good sign, their daughter Becca almost crying with relief when she told them.

Now all of them—Suzanne, their son Skylar, Becca, her husband, Jack, Timmy—all of them would suffer because of what had happened forty-three years earlier.

“Lieutenant, I have to go.”

“Right. I’ll keep you posted. As soon as I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

As soon as he hung up, Doug looked at his wife. “After the game, I’m driving out to Ohio. They’ve found Mom and Dad, but not Melissa. They haven’t found my sister.”

