

CHAPTER THREE

Harry Specter pressed his fingers hard into the wall and tried to study the photograph of a snow-covered mountain while he coughed. Behind him, the doctor said “Again,” and Harry coughed a second time. “Again.” Harry closed his eyes, a third cough. Seventy-four and never had he been asked to cough three times. The doctor took his finger out and snapped off his gloves. “You’ve been getting up to pee how many times a night, Harry?”

Harry straightened up. “Two, maybe three times.”

“Any blood?”

“A little, sometimes.”

“How long has that been going on?” Harry watched the doctor make notes on some sort of computer-type thing, almost as thin as the lids of those pie cartons at Rothman’s Bakery when Harry had been a beat cop. Old man Rothman sure knew how to treat a cop. “I don’t know. A month, maybe two.” Harry tucked his shirt into his favorite gray slacks.

“I want to order an additional test. Your PSA is a little high,” the doctor said.

“So you felt something?”

“It could be nothing. The prostate enlarges naturally as we age. It happens to all of us.”

The doctor gave a token smile. He didn’t look a day over forty, the age when you think seventy-four is fifty years away. Harry wanted to smack him.

He’d only been Harry’s doctor for three years, ever since Brian McCarthy retired. Now there was a doctor for you. Harry had known Brian since high school, had even dated one of Brian’s cousins. Kathleen McCarthy on the backseat of his father’s old Plymouth, God, what a wonder she’d been.

And now he had this Dr. Lu who carried around a doll-sized computer and smiled like a frickin' happy face. All mouth, no eyes.

"See Brenda out front," Dr. Lu told him. "She'll set you up for the biopsy."

"So, you think it's cancer, then?"

"We can't tell until we get the tests. That's why I've ordered the biopsy."

"A biopsy? I thought you said a test."

"That's what a biopsy is, just a test."

The doctor handed Harry a piece of paper. "Give this to Brenda. She'll set you up."

In the outer office Brenda was on her cell phone. She glanced at Harry, then at his paper but didn't hang up. She kept her phone cupped to her ear while her pudgy, white fingers reached toward her keyboard. "I gotta go. I'll see what they're saying online as soon as I take care of this," she said. When she hung up, she looked at Harry's paper as if she'd never had to type up a referral for a biopsy before.

She'd worked in the office ever since he and Brian had traded comments about her amazing breasts during Harry's examinations, but now it seemed that the easy efficiency Harry had admired in her all those years back had been short circuited. Her fingers moved over her keyboard in jerky, spasmodic bursts.

"Anything wrong?" Harry asked.

"No. That was my ex on the phone."

Harry knew about exes. He'd been the reason for at least two of them, three if he counted his own. "He bothering you?"

“No . . . no. He just wanted to let me know.” She stopped typing and turned toward Harry. “They’ve found the Giannis. He wanted me to know . . . after all these years, they’ve found them.”

Harry assumed his cop mask. Retired nearly fifteen years he still could make his face give away nothing. The Gianni case had dogged him throughout his career. He’d been on homicide less than three months when the Giannis disappeared, and although it technically wasn’t a homicide since no bodies had been found, there hadn’t been any other place to assign it. Clearly it wasn’t an ordinary Missing Persons.

When Brenda turned back to her keyboard, her fingers had found their natural rhythm. She moved her mouse and her printer whirred and spit out the referral for his biopsy. When she handed it to him her face held the same sort of pleading expression he’d seen on relatives of someone he was about to arrest . . . she had more to say.

Harry’s old partner on homicide, Stan Petrovic, had a bag of techniques to get people to talk. Tilting your head to the left, softening your features, and giving an encouraging little nod was especially effective if someone was vulnerable as Brenda seemed to be at the moment.

Harry gave the little nod, then added . . . “God, after all this time, the Giannis” keeping his voice low, sympathetic.

“Leonard wanted me to know,” Brenda responded. “We’re divorced, but we still watch out for each other. He didn’t want me finding out on the internet or something. I guess he knew I’d be upset.”

Harry took the referral from her hand and slowly slipped it into the pocket of his sportscoat. Everything would depend on what he said next. He gave her a little smile, not too

flirty. “You were so young when the thing with the Giannis happened, I’m surprised you remember.”

“It’s just that I knew her.”

“What?”

“I knew Melissa Gianni. That’s why Leonard called me. He knew I’d be upset.”

Harry rewound his memory to forty-three years earlier, but he couldn’t make any connection between Brenda and Melissa Gianni. All these years, once a year, sometimes twice, coming into this office and Brenda behind the same desk, and he never made any connection. How was that possible? Had he been that lousy a cop? But Brenda had never acted as if she had known the Gianni case had been his and Petrovic’s. And if she wanted to share something about it now, that was wasn’t because he’d been a cop, but because she needed to unload on another human being. He tilted his head to the left.

“We worked together at the Dairy Queen. Melissa and me, that summer. But you know what I think was weird?” Brenda asked.

“What?”

“In all this time no cop has ever talked to me. I mean I know I was only sixteen, but it wasn’t like I was totally blind. When I think back, I wonder why they didn’t want to talk to me. You were a cop, Harry, why do think that was?”

He looked at her closely, especially her eyes. Was she mocking him? Had she known that he had been on the Gianni case with Petrovic? Behind their frameless lenses, Brenda’s eyes were ringed with a pale blue powder, always a bad idea for a woman her age, worse at this time of day, late afternoon when everything begins to sag. But within their powdery circles her brown eyes held no guile. If they held anything, it was a supplication: Benda needed to unburden

herself. But he couldn't let her do that here. Seventy percent of what she had to tell would be reminiscences, foggy memories, and sorting what had been twisted by time from facts would take a special patience. And Dr. Wu could come sailing through the door at any time and shred everything to pieces. He'd have to play her like a fish on a line, reel her in, let his line play out a little. He took the referral for his biopsy out of his pocket and studied it. "This place he's sending me . . . Diagnostic Testing and Laboratories, they're good?"

"The best," she said. "It's probably nothing, Harry. Dr. Wu, let's just say he's cautious."

He had her now, had her sympathy, the best approach with most women. He folded up the referral and put it back into the pocket of his sportscoat. "Your ex . . . did he say where they found the Giannis?"

"Somewhere over near route 70 and 22. You know how it is these days with all this fracking, they're always widening something, building another ramp. Anyway, I think that's what he said. But as soon as he told me I got sort of rattled. She was such a sweet girl."

"Melissa?"

"Like I said, I worked with her at the Dairy Queen. I didn't know her very well. Just a few weeks that summer."

He didn't want her to go on. She'd spill what she knew, or what she thought she knew, and then it would become as hard and fast as concrete whether true or not. He was going to have to do a little spilling of his own.

"You know, I worked on that case?"

"On the Giannis, really? I never knew that. I knew you'd been a cop, Harry, but I never knew you worked on that case."

“I was just a rookie on homicide . . . took me years to work my way up, then two months on homicide, the Giannis go missing. They tossed it to homicide because they didn’t know where to put it.”

“Funny . . . when it happened, it didn’t bother me too much. Like I said, I didn’t know her real well. But over the years it’s grown. I can’t really say I felt haunted . . . haunted’s too extreme a word. More like there’s something . . . I don’t know how to describe it. I never believed what the news said about her . . . you know that she and Joey Kolpecki ran off together. That they killed her parents and ran off.” Brenda looked down at her hands. Three of her right-hand fingers and two on her left wore rings with bright stones but shallow colors.

“Well, that was all speculation . . . the seventies, it was such a crazy time . . . Sharon Tate, the Manson family, all of that, a crazy time.”

“She was a sweet girl. A sweet, sweet girl. For someone with looks like hers, she never lorded it over me.”

“Listen, Brenda, I was wondering if maybe I could talk to you sometime about Melissa Gianni. I want to dig out my old notes at home. Maybe there’s something in them . . . you never know.”

She gave him a little smile. “Or at least something to explain why no cop ever talked to me.”

He had her now. He smiled back. “That too.”

Outside, the sight of his steel blue Town Car sitting in the rain nearly knocked him to his knees. Just the week before, he’d been telling his daughter he was thinking about turning it in, and now, the biopsy. He knew what it would say—so much blood in his piss last night. God, is this how it was going to be from now on? All the things he liked, his favorite slacks, his camel

sport coat, the maple-leaf-shaped air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror, how the fuck was all that worth a rat's ass? Why had he bothered with any of it?

He slipped behind the steering wheel and closed his eyes. The pain was bad; he'd get home, take a few more Advil. Open that twelve-year-old single malt he'd been saving for a special occasion. What a joke! He thought about calling his daughter, but decided against it . . . she'd get all spastic. Time enough for that. Open that filing cabinet down in his basement and find his notes on the Giannis.

Such an awful thought, he was almost ashamed. But not really. Fuck, he didn't have anything to apologize for, so he let the thought play out: *Thank God for the Giannis. Thank God, they went missing forty-three years ago. And thank God the mother's and father's bodies just turned up.* Almost as if someone had thrown a switch, he felt his old instinct turn on, linking one clue to another. In the old days he'd allowed it to absorb all his attention, distract him from the troubles at home. And now, he felt it stirring again and knew how he was going to get through what he knew was coming. He was going to spend whatever time he had left doing what he'd been best at: being a cop. Being what made him feel most alive. He was going to find the Gianni's daughter and that little shit Joey Kolpecki if it was the last thing he did.

