

CHAPTER FIVE

Everything felt wrong; he should be driving to Ohio, not to some damn baseball game. Doug knew his grandson Timmy needed “support,” but right now Timmy’s Pop Pop needed enough support to lift the fucking stadium out of the ground. And here he was fighting for a parking space—the Orioles were playing the Yankees, and Baltimoreans love hating the Yankees. Half the city was looking for a parking space.

“There,” Suzanne said.

“Where?”

“On your right, behind that white van.”

“I don’t think I can get over.”

“Too late, someone else got it.”

“I should have gone to Ohio.”

“I thought the police told you to stay here . . . that they’d call you.”

On the way downtown, he heard her phoning their children to tell them about the call from the Steubenville police. Even hearing her say, “the possible remains of your grandparents” had set his teeth on edge, made him feel as though his wife was standing on the shore of the sunny present, while he was caught in the riptide of his past.

Suzanne had been the only girl he’d ever met who hadn’t pulled away when he told her that his real name was Gianni, not Sullivan. The only one who hadn’t been scared off by his history. But, still, as he inched closer and closer to the stadium she seemed to be growing into a stranger. On an evening when his whole life was pivoting toward a new direction, his wife’s attention was on finding a parking space.

He found a space on the top level of a garage and as soon as they stepped onto the sidewalk, a bicyclist in a lime green helmet and jersey whizzed past them with one arm giving a sort of backward wave

“Skylar,” Suzanne said as the cyclist disappeared into the traffic heading toward the stadium. “Let’s hope it doesn’t go into extra innings,” meaning she was worried about their twenty-seven-year-old son cycling home alone.

Doug’s normal role, the role he’d been playing ever since Skylar was born, would have been to offer some reassurance, but, now he couldn’t summon the energy. If the cop on the corner hadn’t blown his whistle and motioned for the throng on the sidewalk to cross the street, Doug doubted he would have had the presence of mind to step off the curb.

Skylar had locked his bike in a rack and was waiting in the stadium’s plaza near the nine-foot silver 22, Hall of Famer’s Jim Palmer’s number. Becca and Timmy were with him, but not Becca’s husband.

“I guess Jack had to work,” Suzanne said.

Doug didn’t say anything. More and more his son-in-law seemed to have to work late. Or go to some sales conference. Or help a buddy get his boat in the water. Or into dry dock. More and more the questions of Jack’s absences hung unspoken and worrying, along with the issue of Timmy’s place on the autism spectrum, and Skylar’s living off the money Doug knew Suzanne slipped him. And now there were bones in Ohio and their lives were about to become infinitely more complicated, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about that.

Skylar had been ten and Becca twelve the Sunday afternoon he and Suzanne had sat them down at the kitchen island and told them their father’s history. He felt he was imparting something momentous, when he explained to them why their father had been adopted by his

uncle Pat and Aunt Ginny. And that his own parents and his sister had disappeared when he was nine and away at camp. That his real last name was Gianni. And that it had been changed to Sullivan when he was adopted.

But he might as well have been talking to the moon as far as Skylar was concerned—he had returned to his video game as soon as Doug was finished. Becca had stayed at the island only as long as it took her to say, “I thought you were going to tell us you were getting a divorce. All my friends’ parents are.” And then she’d gone off to finish her homework. By dinnertime that night the whole horror that their father had lived with since he was nine seemed as inconsequential as thick crust or thin.

Becca stepped away from the silver 22 and wrapped her arms around him. “Dad, oh Dad, this must be so hard. What a thing . . . what a horrible thing.”

And then Skylar gave him an awkward pat on the shoulder. “Wow, Dad. I guess you never expected you to find them after all this time. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing I can do, I guess . . . wait.”

“Nothing’s final until the coroner finishes,” Suzanne said.

To Doug, her remark sounded officious, as if the bones of his parents were a leaky roof in a house she was trying to sell, something to be fixed and finished. Certainly not something that could answer the chain of questions he’d been dragging behind himself through all the years of their marriage. The night he told her he was Doug Gianni she had leaned across the table in the University of Dayton dining hall and said, “You’re amazing. To be so normal after what you’ve been through. If that’s not amazing I don’t know what is.” He married her six months later.

After that, “normal” became his life’s foundation. A career in education, a thirty-year fixed-rate mortgage, a nice 401k, Mass on Sundays, Little League, Disneyworld, Christmas lights up the Saturday after Thanksgiving, down by Martin Luther King’s birthday—normal.

But now it felt wrong, *he* felt wrong. Forty-five thousand people in the stadium, and he felt he was the only one who didn’t belong. When they got to their seats Becca checked her phone. Then Suzanne was on hers. Then Becca again. And Skylar was showing Timmy how to keep score, the two of them lost in baseball’s numeric wonderland.

And then, the bottom of the fourth, and the Orioles ahead three to two, somewhere over right-field, the idiotic wave began. Doug watched it ripple around the stadium, through the center-field stands, then nearing himself and his family. Even Timmy getting into it, out of sync by a beat, but still doing his part. Doug alone couldn’t raise his arms. They felt leaden. He couldn’t breathe. He buried his face in his hands.

“You okay?” Suzanne’s voice in its detached realtor’s timbre. How could he possibly be “okay”? How could she be so stupid? He straightened up. “I have to get to Ohio . . . the hell out of here.” He began climbing over people, knocking someone’s beer to the ground —“Hey!” stepping on a foot —“Why don’t you break the other one while you’re at it?” And all the while hearing, “Doug! . . . Dad! . . . Where’s Pop Pop going? . . . Why’s he leaving?”

Suzanne caught up with him on the downward escalator. She looked wounded, frantic, “Doug, where are you going?”

“Ohio!” They had reached the main concourse. He was practically running.

“What? . . . no!”

“I have to.”

“Then, let me go with you.”

“No!”

“But why?”

“I don’t know . . . it’s just that.” But part of him did know—knew he was afraid that her presence would prove inadequate to fill up the sinkhole in his heart. Afraid that the price of finding his parents might mean the loss of her—that she would always be inadequate once he let himself feel the depth of his loss.

“I’ll take the car. Becca can drive you home.”

“I’m not worried about getting home. I can always Uber. Let me go with you.”

“No . . . it’s best that I go alone.”

“But why?”

“I should do this alone . . . that’s all. I’ll call . . . when I get there, I’ll call.”

She stopped trailing him. He was almost at the gate when he turned to see her retreating toward the escalator, her back in her stylish tunic, humped with hurt. “Suzanne!”

She turned. “What?”

“I mean it. I’ll call you.”

She stood on tiptoe so he could see her through the crowd more clearly and waved her arm back and forth as if it were a semaphore signal meant only for him. But he didn’t know the code.

He walked to the garage and calculated: almost nine o’clock now; an hour to get home and grab some things then a five-hour drive. He should easily reach Steubenville by early morning. He didn’t feel at all tired. Instead, he felt propelled by a strange energy, an excitement that didn’t match his circumstances. At the garage he got out his ticket, and looped five levels

downward. Then, at the ticket booth, he pulled up short. In front of the barrier Skylar was taking the front wheel off his bike.

Doug rolled down his window. “Get out of my way.”

“Come on, Dad. You know you shouldn’t go alone.” And then to the girl in the booth. “Lavonya, this is my father.” She had nails like jeweled talons, gold hoops almost touching her shoulders, and smiling, glossy lips—some sort of conspiracy between her and Skylar—Skylar could do that: forge a strong bond with a total stranger in half a minute.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Lavonya said. She took her time taking Doug’s ticket, making change, while Skylar finished removing his bike’s wheels.

Lavonya dropped some coins on the floor and disappeared within the booth to pick them up. The gate stayed down, and Skylar slipped under it with his wheels and bike.

“Come on. Open the trunk. Let me put these in.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Son, but, no.”

“Come on, Dad. It’s a long drive out there. Let me go, at least to navigate.”

From around the entrance to the garage, a guard appeared. “There a problem here?”

“No, problem, Officer,” Skylar said.

Lavonya stood up and started recounting Doug’s change into his open palm.

“Dad, come on, please.”

The guard was taking it all in and would be sure to find the marijuana Doug was certain his son had in his back pocket. A quarter fell from between Lavonya’s nails and rolled toward Skylar. He picked it up and brought it to Doug, leaning into the open window. “Listen, I promise I won’t be too much of a pain in the ass. I need to do this for my kids.”

“What kids?”

“My kids . . . Believe it or not I might have kids someday, and what am I supposed to tell them? That their great-grandparents disappeared, and when they were found I couldn’t help their Pop-Pop because I was at a frickin’ baseball game? Besides, the Yankees went ahead just after you left.”

Doug unlocked the trunk and Skylar put his dismantled bike inside. “Bye, Lavonya.” They drove in near silence toward the suburbs north of the city line. At the house Doug threw two days’ worth of clothes into a suitcase, and then some extra for his son—he had no idea what he was doing.

“Don’t forget your phone charger,” Skylar told him.

“It’s in my office downstairs.”

“Want me to get it?”

“No . . . no. I will.” When Skylar followed him down, Doug wished he hadn’t. In addition to getting his charger he had to do something he didn’t want to explain.

“And your laptop,” Skylar said. “You got a case for it?”

“On the shelf behind the desk.”

“Want me to put this in?” Skylar was holding the yellow legal pad Doug had taken his notes on.

“Please go make some coffee. Your mother has a thermos somewhere. And maybe see if she has some chips or something . . . anything. It’s going to be a long drive.”

Once he was alone, he went over to the ornate chest near the filing cabinets. He took out the worn book with the red cover and read: *You think “My life is always running somewhere, as if it is running away from me . . . Where can I find the truth?” You have an inner voice you should listen to. It is the truth of the voice that lives inside of you.*” Then he put the book and

legal pad into his computer case. On the cabinet's top shelf, a stuffed penguin lay beside a small wooden box, and a Catholic missal. He set the penguin and missal aside and took the box. Inside were four tiny ships and three plastic lanyards. He took out the two unfinished ones and zippered them into the computer case's inner pocket. He then set the box beside the penguin, shut the carved cabinet, and grabbed his computer case. Halfway up the stairs to the kitchen, he stopped and took out the legal pad. Beneath his notes from Lieutenant Donnelly, in big block letters he wrote: "Why did Uncle Pat have Fred with him? Had he gone to the house first? WHY?"

