

CHAPTER SIX

The house smelled funny. Like it was cold and dark, although the boy knew cold and dark weren't smells.

The blinds over the picture window were drawn, just like at night when his mother shut them. But it wasn't night now. The boy's eyes were as wide open as he could make them, but it didn't help him see any better.

When Detective Petrovic picked him up from his uncle's, he had told him, "Just see what's missing. When we get there, put your thinking cap on and look around. Tell me if you see anything missing." The boy had ridden in the back beside a woman named Mrs. Carroll; his uncle Pat was up front with the detective. Mrs. Carroll was a Negro lady and called him Douglas like the nuns at his new school did.

"Any time you want to leave, just say so, Douglas," she had said when they pulled into the driveway at his parents' house. Now, she stood on one side of his uncle Pat. Detective Petrovic stood on the other. The three of them were in the archway, watching him look around the living room.

"Got your old thinking cap on?" Detective Petrovic asked.

The boy had moved past the coffee table in front of the sofa. He turned. "Yes."

"Take your time, Douglas. There's no rush. We can always come back," Mrs. Carroll said.

"Pretend you're Sergeant Joe Friday, you know, 'The facts, Mam, just the facts'," the detective said.

"They cancelled that show," the boy said.

“Oh, right. Then how about “Starsky and Hutch”? That’s a good show. Who do you want to be . . . Starsky or Hutch?”

The boy shrugged. His mother was strict about TV. He didn’t get to watch it that much. “Starsky I guess.”

“Well, there you go. You be Starsky and look around and tell me if something should be there and isn’t.”

The boy walked to the television in the corner between the window and the fireplace and stopped. How was he supposed to see something if it was missing? That didn’t make any sense, but he couldn’t tell the detective that. His uncle Pat would think he was being a smart aleck. He went to the fireplace. On the mantle were pictures of his mother and father standing on the church steps after their wedding, of his uncle Pat in his football uniform, and Melissa in her first communion dress. And one of himself in his Cub Scout uniform. There also was a little box that his Nonna Gianni had brought with her from Sicily.

Propped between the two glass candleholders that Father Larkin had given his mother—they were supposed to have come from Ireland—was Melissa’s last report card: all A’s, except for a B- in Latin.

“Anything, Doug?” his uncle asked.

The boy shook his head. He walked softly, putting his heel down first, then the rest of his foot, the way he had when he went to see the new baby of Aunt Toni, his father’s sister. “I just got him to sleep, Dougie,” Aunt Toni had told him. “If you wake him, I’ll have to chop you up into meatballs.”

No one had told him to walk softly now; it was just something the boy felt was the right thing to do. “I don’t see anything.”

“That all right, Douglas,” Mrs. Carroll said. “There’s no rush.”

“Should I look in the dining room?”

“Ten-four, Starsky,”

Cramped around one end of the dining room table were four heavy chairs, two of them with arms. The boy, his sister, and parents ate at this end because his father usually kept his work papers spread all over the end by the double window. Sometimes his mother and father fought about that, and she would complain that a “big deal” contractor couldn’t even build his family a decent house with an office. Instead they had to live on top of each other.

“I don’t see anything here either,” the boy said.

“Take your time Douglas. Sometimes it’s hard to notice things.”

The boy turned toward Mrs. Carroll. The three adults had moved into the living room. They were standing by a cabinet that the boy’s father had brought from Nonna Gianni’s house when she died. The boy’s mother had called it “Guinea ugly,” and wanted his father to get rid of it. But he wouldn’t. The boy had never seen either of his parents open it.

“Sometimes my father had papers on the table.”

“Don’t you worry about those, Doug,” his uncle said.

“Your uncle’s right, don’t you worry about those, Stars. We’ve got them. You just concentrate on everything else.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“You sure?”

“Want me to look in the kitchen?”

“Sure.”

The kitchen was small, which was why his family couldn't all eat there together, like everyone did for breakfast and lunch at Uncle Pat's house, where there was a big breakfast nook. But here a little table with two chairs was jammed under the window by the backdoor. That's where the boy and his sister had eaten before he went to camp. Their father had been working, and Father Larkin had called their mother to help organize the library at St. Dominic's so it would be ready when school started.

So, he and Melissa had been alone, and then their mother called and told Melissa that she had to stay and help Father Larkin longer, so Melissa would have to make supper.

"What do you say to grilled cheese sandwiches, my frater?" Melissa had asked—ever since she started taking Latin she'd been calling the boy "my frater." He didn't mind.

"Your frater says 'Fine'."

He sat at the table. Before she cut slices from a brick of cheese, Melissa had turned on the stove under the frying pan, and splashed a drop of water onto it that sizzled. "That's how we test the grill at the Dairy Queen." The radio by the toaster was playing "Joy to World."

"Oh, I love this," she had said and took the thing she used to flip the sandwiches with and began singing into it like it was a microphone. "Joy to the fishes and the deep blue sea. Joy to you and me." When the song was through she flipped their sandwiches over. Then she slipped them onto plates and sat down on the other chair, the one closest to the door. "Next good song comes on, you sing. Okay?"

"I want to play Battleship."

"Battleship . . . Battleship . . . Battleship. That's all you ever want to play."

"It's a good game."

“You know, you can’t take Battleship to camp with you. They have their own games, there.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know . . . I’ve never been to sleep-away camp. Other games . . . But they’ll be good ones. You’ll see.”

His parents had decided to send him to camp only the week before. The boy was just getting used to the idea. He finished his sandwich. “I’ll go set up the board.” On the radio someone was singing about a woman named Maggie and “I couldn’t leave you if I tried.”

“Set it up in the living room. We’ll play on the floor.”

The boy had taken out his sister’s destroyer and she had his submarine when she grinned at him and started wagging her tongue back forth, singing “Volare, volare, contare.” He started singing, too. Then, as if someone had given them a silent cue, they each stretched out onto their stomachs and started rolling over the green carpet toward each other. When he reached her, the boy rolled up and over his sister, all while singing “Volare, volare, contare” until he was in front of her grid.

She had always played the “Volare” game with him, once even in the sand at the beach, but that was a long time ago. The game was just something between them. The last time their father had seen them do it, he had yelled “You’re too old to act like a couple of damn idiots.” So the boy had felt a little guilty when his sister started it now, but he felt happy, too, because it was so silly.

He could see she had been very close to taking his cruiser, so when they got back to playing, he took it out. And then her battleship.

“Want a milkshake?” she asked. “I can’t make them like at the Dairy Queen, because they have a special machine, but I think I can get close.”

“So, I win?”

“Sure, my frater.”

She took a silver shaker from the bottom of the china cabinet as they went into the kitchen. She wrapped ice cubes in a towel and began pounding them with a mallet, then she emptied them into the shaker along with vanilla ice cream, milk, and chocolate sauce. Some crazy song named “Chick-a-Boom” was playing and she began dancing around with the shaker. The boy could hear the ice inside keeping the beat. “Chick-a-Boom, Chick-a-Boom, Chick-a-Boom.” Milk began splattering out from the shaker, but she kept dancing until the song was over.

“Here,” she said, and poured the boy his shake. “How’s that?”

He tasted it. “Fine.”

“You bet it is.” She took one of their father’s liquor bottles from under the counter, and put her finger to her lips as if she was asking the boy to keep her secret even though there wasn’t anyone else home to tell. He watched her pour a little into the shaker, give it a couple stirs with a big spoon, and drink right out of the shaker. Then she said “Oh, shit.” The boy turned toward the back door. A skinny man was there. He’d seen the man before; he drove a bright red car. Once, when the boy was riding his bike, he’d seen Melissa riding in it with him.

She said “Oh, shit” again and took another swallow before letting the man in.

“He wants to see you, Melissa,” he said.

“I can’t, Joey. I’ve got my brother. I can’t leave him.” She kept drinking from the silver shaker.

“He really means it, Melissa. What am I supposed to do if I don’t bring you?”

“Joey, I just can’t.”

The boy had finished his shake, so she poured a little of hers into his glass. He held it in his mouth and let the liquor bite his tongue. On the radio someone was singing about “Spanish Harlem.”

“Melissa, for the love of God, please come. You know how he gets.”

“I can’t, Joey,” and then “Oh Christ.”

Their mother was climbing the back stairs. As soon as she opened the door, she glared at the skinny man, “What’s he doing here, Melissa?”

“I’m just going, Mrs. Gianni.”

Their mother ignored him. “Is this what you do, Melissa? I can’t leave you for a few hours and you have to act like a bitch in heat?”

“It wasn’t like that Mrs. Gianni.”

“Shut up and get out. I know what it’s like. Get out and don’t come back. If I see the red piece of crap in front of my house again, I swear I’ll take a baseball bat to it.”

The man hedged around the boy’s mother to the door. “I’ll tell him, Melissa.”

“I told you to get the hell out.” And then the boy’s mother spotted the shake splatters and the liquor bottle. And then he watched her grab his sister’s hair, and slap her face again and again, until Melissa twisted away, crying and screaming “I can’t stand it. I can’t stand it here anymore.” And she ran out the door.

That night the boy was sick to his stomach, but he still went to camp two days later.

“Do you see anything missing from the kitchen, Douglas?” Mrs. Carroll asked.

“No.”

“You looked like you were thinking about something.”

“I was just remembering, that’s all.”

“What were you remembering, Starsky?”

“Nothing. Just something.”

“You can tell us about it when you’re ready, Doug,” his uncle said. “No need to rush.”

The three grown-ups discussed whether the boy should check the bedrooms. He could tell that Mrs. Carroll didn’t think it was a good idea, but, in the end, she said that she “would allow it.”

Up in his parents’ room, he didn’t see anything missing. Over the bed was a wreath of dried flowers that his mother had made in a craft class at the YWCA, and in the middle was a blue throw pillow Aunt Ginny had given the boy’s mother when she and Uncle Pat built a new addition onto their house and they wanted to get rid of their old stuff. On the nightstand by the side of the bed where the boy’s father slept was a radio with a clock and a lamp. Another lamp just like it was on his mother’s side and a book that Father Larkin had given her. In the mirror of the dresser were stuck the boy’s first-grade picture and the one from Melissa’s eighth-grade graduation.

“My father’s got a gun.”

“What did you say, Starsky?”

“He keeps it here, in his closet. My sister showed me.”

Detective Petrovic looked at the boy’s uncle. Mrs. Carroll said something to the two men that the boy couldn’t hear, and then she took his hand and led him down the hall, to his sister’s room, the one between his own room and his parents’. He could hear his uncle and the detective talking, almost like they were arguing, about whether they should take the gun or leave in the

closet. He could hear them trying to keep their voices down, like they didn't want anyone to hear.

"Douglas, do you see anything out of place in your sister's room?" Mrs. Carroll asked.

"Fiona's been moved."

"Who?"

"Fiona, Melissa's penguin. She's usually at the head of her bed. Now, she's at the foot. My uncle Pat got penguins for me and her at the carnival when school let out. He took us with our father."

The detective and the boy's uncle joined them. "Do you remember anything about stuffed penguins?" Mrs. Carroll asked. "He says his sister's has been moved."

The boy looked up at his uncle. "I remember . . . our father tried to win them for us, but then you just paid for them. Mine's Fred. And Melissa's is Fiona. Now she's at the foot of the bed. That's all I see that's different."

The detective said, "Fifteen . . . kinda old for a stuffed animal."

"Lots of young girls sleep with stuffed animals," Mrs. Carroll said, but the detective and the boy's uncle didn't pay any attention.

"We used to put on shows with them. We called them the Fred and Fiona Show," the boy said.

"And what grade are you in now, Douglas?" Mrs. Carroll asked.

"Fourth."

"He had to switch schools, so Ginny doesn't have to drive so much. He goes to St. Katherine's with two of my kids. Molly's in fifth grade, Peter's in sixth. Steven's in the ninth at

Catholic Central.” The boy’s uncle ruffled the boy’s hair. “Think maybe he’s had enough for today.”

Mrs. Carroll told the boy he didn’t have to go into his room if he didn’t want to, but he said he didn’t mind. Once there he asked the detective if he could take his Battleship game and some of his Matchbox cars. “I sleep with my cousin Peter. He has lots of stuff he lets me play with, but I’ve got better Matchboxes.”

“Ten-four about the game and the cars, Starsky.”

On the way to his uncle’s house the boy mentioned his father’s gun again, but his uncle didn’t say anything.

