

CHAPTER SEVEN

Favorite things surrounded Harry Specter: a faceted glass with two fingers of scotch at his right elbow, Oscar Peterson playing behind his left ear, and best of all, his brown leather lounger supporting his back and butt. But none of them gave him any comfort; his mind fluttered from Dr. Lu's ordering him to cough again, to Brenda's pudgy fingers bouncing over her keyboard, to his biopsy appointment.

Only when it finally lit on the Giannis' did he feel his mind fold its wings and settle down. Funny how forty-three-year-old bones could give him temporary relief from recalling his visit to Dr. Lu not even twenty-four hours earlier.

The Gianni case could have made him, could have gotten him and Audrey and Carole Anne into something better than this crumby little house. If only he had solved it. That son of a bitch Petrovic had thwarted his every move. Everything Harry said, every lead he suggested had been ignored or ridiculed until he just shut his mouth and did whatever Petrovic told him to, which wasn't much. After about a year, the disappearance of the Giannis faded from being his ticket to a stellar career to an embarrassment. Over time, he'd closed a respectable share of cases, but the Giannis dogged him right up to the day he retired. Now he hoped it would distract him from bloody piss and whatever else was ahead.

He drained his glass, got a refill in the kitchen and went down into his cellar. Before his foot hit the bottom step, he felt the press of a lifetime of accumulated crap. Paint cans, pink for Carole Anne's room, blue for Bobby's, that awful green Audrey wanted for the kitchen. How many years now? Must be almost forty since he painted it, hoping a puss-green kitchen would make her happy. Hoping anything would make her happy. Funny how he didn't even notice the

kitchen color any longer, but seeing that can here in the basement brought back all the familiar marital tensions—how he had resented spending his weekend painting a color that made his eyeballs screech. But, desperate to make Audrey some sort of happy, he'd painted and painted, moving the refrigerator, getting up on the counter to get behind the stove, that puss-green getting all over his hands. Anything to appease her, all the while knowing nothing would.

In the corner, a tower of boxes leaned toward the washing machine. He hadn't opened any since packing them with the Matchbox cars, a train set, coloring books, a six-wheeled yellow dump truck, stuffed animals and an army of action figures, all from Bobby's room. Years ago, most of the toys had been brand new, tokens of another sort of appeasement, offerings he and Audrey had laid on the altar of the Great God Leukemia so that he'd spare their little boy. In the end, the Great God Leukemia hadn't wanted trucks, trains, or stuffed animals: he wanted Bobby.

Harry took a deep swallow from his glass, then set it on a metal shelf filled with black binders, the archive of his career as a homicide detective. He took out the only one labeled with a name, not a date like the others, the one labeled Gianni. Then he moved an old lawn chair under the bare bulb, took his drink, drained his glass before setting it on the floor, and opened the Gianni binder.

Two weeks after the Giannis disappeared, when that asshole Petrovic seemed to be going off in ten directions, Sid Grossman, a month from retirement had taken Harry aside.

"You gotta keep your own notes," Sid had told him. "Whatever you write for the department, it's gotta be clean, straight. But your own, you can put your impressions down. Know what I mean? You can't convict with impressions. Crap, you can't even arrest with impressions. Impressions ain't worth shit, except when they turn out to mean something. Except when they're right. So get 'em down. Don't let nobody see them. They should be like your

weapon, something you put away safe, so nobody sees them and starts blabbin'. You workin' with Petrovic?"

"Yeah."

"How's it goin'?"

"Okay."

"Right. Son of a bitch got one foot on a cow pie and another in the sewer, but you say it's goin' okay. Smart . . . play it that way if you want."

Two weeks after Audrey took off with Carole Anne, Harry had opened the newspaper and read that Sid Grossman had died; he didn't have the heart to go to the service.

Now, when he looked at his notes in the binder, he almost choked at the sight of his younger, stronger handwriting, no sign of the pinched chicken scrawl it had become. But the clearer handwriting told him almost nothing. He had been too new to homicide, and his "impressions" were practically meaningless. Petrovic had kept him away from the principal witnesses, sending Harry to interview friends and family, but not the one family member who really might have known something, not Patrick Sullivan, not the former star quarterback of Ohio State. Petrovic kept Patrick Sullivan for himself. He hadn't even let Harry come when he, Sullivan, and the social worker had taken the Giannis' little boy back to the house. Instead, he had sent Harry to interview Toni Santini, Frank Gianni's sister, on the unlikely chance she was going to reveal any Gianni dirty laundry

Harry looked at his notes about Toni: "Angry, very angry. Denies that her niece would kill her parents. "Unless that motherfucker Joey Kolpecki held a gun to her head."

Essentially, Toni Santini told him only what the police already knew: that her brother Frank owned his own construction company, Gianni Bros., except that there was no other brother—

Frank had only added the “Bros.” because he thought it made the company sound bigger, more stable. Mostly, Gianni Bros. did subcontract work for the big dog in town, Astro Construction. “Without Astro, my brother would starve,” Toni had said. It wasn’t in his notes, but Harry remembered how she’d held a squalling infant the whole interview and how she’d patted his little back with all the feeling of a robot with crimson fingernails.

The only time Petrovic let Harry near any of the principals was when they went to interview of Joey Kolpecki’s family. “This is going to be tough,” Petrovic had warned. “They already got one kid down in Corrections down in London, and now this. Let me do all the talking. And I mean ALL. You so much as sneeze, I’ll have your ass, got it?”

The hatred rising from Joey’s parents filled their shabby little living room with acid-air. Like hate-stuffed gnomes they sat on a nubby plaid couch, never even bothering to shut off the TV. Joey’s father did the talking while his wife, lank, grey hair tucked behind her ears, stroked a fluffy white poodle with a shiny studded collar on her lap, its plastic gems the only brightness in the room besides the TV.

No, the father said, him and his wife didn’t know nothing about their son Joey dating some girl named Melissa. No, him and his wife never heard of nobody named Gianni. No, him and his wife didn’t know where their son Joey was. From where he stood, Harry had been able to see into the kitchen.

He looked at his notes: “Stove . . . new? TV, too? Same for truck in driveway. Dog, at least, looks well cared for. Where’d the money come from?”

Suddenly he felt an urgent need to pee. He set the folder down and went to the commode behind the furnace. Not much blood, but the pain was so bad he had to spread his hands and brace himself against the concrete-block wall. Even when he was through, he

couldn't straighten up immediately. Instead, he lingered over the bowl and wiped his sweaty brow on his sleeve. After a few seconds he started back to the lawn chair, but the light from the single bulb was dim and he had forgotten about his glass on the floor. He kicked it and sent it skittering across the concrete and cracking against the base of an old iron birdbath. When he tried picking it up, it fell apart in his hand. Shit . . . shit . . . shit. And then his thumb started bleeding. Not a lot, but still down the front of his shirt, one of the last with the monogrammed cuffs he liked so much. Shit . . . shit . . . shit. He left the Gianni folder and gathered up the shattered glass as best he could, went upstairs and dumped the pieces into the trash under the sink. To stem his bleeding thumb he ran it under the tap, but it began bleeding again before he fished a Band-Aid out of the box in the medicine cabinet. He got the bandage around his thumb, but it was splotted with blood, practically useless . . . shit.

God, he needed another drink. Instead he took two Advils, shoved two more Band-Aids into his pocket and called Brenda Walsh. Forty-five minutes later she sat across from him in a back booth in Applebee's.

“How's that mojito?”

Brenda looked up from her drink. “Wonderful. How's your beer?”

“Good, fine.”

“What happened to your thumb, Harry?”

“Crazy thing, I was down in my basement, looking up some of my old Gianni files, and I accidentally knocked over a flowerpot . . . kills me. It was one of my mother's.” He held up his thumb to see if it elicited any sympathy.

It didn't; instead, Brenda took another sip of her mojito and nibbled an onion ring. "So, your old Gianni files? You just happen to call me after you were looking through them? . . . I'm not twenty anymore you know, Harry."

He waited a beat, then smiled. "Damn, coulda fooled me."

She smiled back. "All the boys say that."

A waiter came by and Harry asked Brenda if she wanted another mojito—he was going to have another beer.

"Sure, why not?"

"And how about splitting some wings?"

"Just what my girlish figure needs." She leaned back when the waiter left. "So your old Gianni files? More specifically, Melissa Gianni, what did I know about her, isn't that what this is all about, Harry?"

"Any impressions you had, Brenda, . . . anything at all." A sharp pain had burrowed into his lower back, and he hoped it was blanching his face ashen enough to remind her of his upcoming biopsy—another sympathy card. "The Giannis, they dogged my career. If I had cracked that, well, who knows where I could have ended up?" No need adding that maybe his wife would have stayed—that would be overkill. Besides, he didn't know when Audrey's leaving him might come in handy later.

Their drinks and wings came.

"Well, when I look back at it, I don't really think Melissa and Joey Kolpecki were an item, if that's any help to you," Brenda told him.

"You don't?"

“I mean I was only sixteen, so I could be wrong, but whenever Joey came to pick her up in that flashy Firebird of his, he hardly looked straight at her. They were like . . . I don’t know . . . brother and sister, maybe. No heat.”

“None?”

“Well, maybe. You have to understand: she was preternaturally beautiful . . . skin like porcelain, that black hair.”

“Wow, Brenda . . . ‘preternaturally’.”

“Harry, I’ll have you know I got an associate’s degree from Eastern Gateway, the best community college in Steubenville.”

She’d washed off the blue eyeshadow he’d found so unattractive earlier, or maybe Applebee’s dim light hid it, whatever it was, Brenda Walsh looked lit by some inner contentedness some old women develop. “Well, that’s one degree more than I got,” he told her.

“Did you know Melissa was only fifteen? Mr. Ray, he must have pulled some strings or something to hire her at that age. And she didn’t have many hours. He put her at the window, and mostly me and him filled the orders. But Melissa, he kept at the window. I didn’t realize it then, but I think he used her to draw people in . . . mostly men. Some of them came every night . . . even one priest . . . I don’t remember his name, but she knew him. Poor guys, they’re probably all dead from atherosclerosis from all those sundaes. They just wanted to see her.”

The wings were almost gone. Brenda agreed to split a Blue Ribbon Brownie with him.

“What was she like?” he asked.

“Sweet. She went to Catholic school, you know. Part of her looks, or more like part of her appeal, was sort of an underlying innocence. For someone so beautiful, she wasn’t full of

herself at all. I doubt if she realized that Mr. Ray kept her at the window to attract customers: I didn't at the time, either."

Harry felt himself settling into the type of police work he liked best, free-form police work. The sort that yielded impressions. Impressions may or may not pay off, but right now they gave what he needed most: distraction. "Melissa ever mention her parents?"

"Not really . . . she talked a lot about her little brother. One time he rode his bike to the Dairy Queen. I gathered this was a big no, no . . . like he wasn't supposed ride his bike that far from home . . . he was just a little kid. But Melissa was thrilled. I remember she introduced him to Mr. Ray and me, and then asked Mr. Ray to fix him something special."

"She never mentioned her mother or father?"

"You mean do I think she killed them?"

"That was the theory we went on . . . she disappears, the only guy she's ever been seen with, Joey Kolpecki, disappears. Her parents gone, leaving their little boy at camp. You remember what a crazy time it was. Sharon Tate . . . Charlie Manson. Did you know, one of those women of Manson's had been a frickin' homecoming queen. A homecoming queen and she slaughters people for no reason. For the hell of it. It was a sick, sick time, so thinking that Melissa Gianni and Joey Kolpecki might have offed her parents, didn't seem so outrageous."

His spoon reached for the same piece of brownie that Brenda's did. They hit with a metallic click. She smiled at him. "You know, I think I got married because I was terrified of all that craziness going on. I wanted steadiness. But after a while steadiness made me feel suffocated . . . so I stepped out and joined the party. At least for a while."

Harry felt his bladder filling up, but he didn't want to go through the agony of peeing in a public men's room. Didn't want some other asshole to see him pissing scarlet. He signaled for the check, but Brenda settled back.

"I remember one night, Melissa wasn't supposed to work, but she came running into the place. I could tell she'd been crying. She was very, very upset. She wanted Mr. Ray to give her more hours . . . she told him she needed some extra money . . . something about her mother."

"What about her mother?"

"I couldn't tell. Mr. Ray, he had a desk in the back, surrounded by cartons of cups and other stuff and they were talking there. I was the only one up front."

"You think her mother sent her to ask for extra hours? You think the mother needed the money?"

"I don't know. Could be . . . but?"

"What?"

"The way she was upset, like she was desperate. And something else. . ."

"What?"

" 'Away' . . . I think I overheard her telling Mr. Ray something about 'away.' You asked for my impression, Harry. And my impression is that she didn't want the money for her parents. I think Melissa Gianni wanted money because she wanted to get away."

