

CHAPTER EIGHT

Skylar made the car swerve just as Doug was trying to thread a green plastic lace through the red lace's loop. He missed it—he'd never get his mother's lanyard finished, let alone his father's. He'd switched to the shotgun seat once they passed Pittsburgh, but Skylar drove exactly like who he was: someone who owned an eight-hundred-dollar bicycle, but no car. Thank God, the traffic was pre-dawn-light.

Doug tried threading the lace again. "Funny, how things come back to you. I remember buying these things at the camp store, and the woman, Miss Sally, saying I'd chosen really nice colors, but that finishing three of them in two weeks would be really ambitious. She was right."

"Jeeze, Dad, you kept those things all these years . . . on some level you must have known your family would be found. You're amazing, know that?"

Please, God, Doug prayed, don't let him call me a hero, because then I'll have to smack him and we'll crash for sure. He saw a sign for Wheeling . . . good. "You know, I could use a pit stop. How about you?"

"I've been dreaming of a pit stop and a mountain of hash browns under two eggs since we left Maryland. And we should refill the thermos." Skylar started fishing for his phone and the semi behind them honked. "I'm just Googling some place to stop in Wheeling."

"Give me the phone, Skylar. I'll find somewhere. There's got to be an all-night diner. Wheeling's such a happening town."

"Really? I did not know that."

"Actually, nothing's happened this side of the Alleghenies since the flood."

"And with global warming, for river towns like Wheeling, it's only going to get worse."

"I meant Noah's flood, Skylar."

“Oh.”

Doug was scrolling through twenty-four-hour places when a picture of the Dairy Queen outside of Wheeling Jesuit University stabbed him in the chest. Of all the things to come up. Every time he drove past a DQ the memory of his sister washed over him like a North Sea wave. He felt his heart constrict. To breathe took effort.

“Dad, find anything?”

“No . . . nothing. . . except a McDonald’s where 70 and 470 split. It’ll have to do.”

Twenty minutes later they were in a back booth. Doug took a swallow of coffee and picked up his mother’s lanyard.

Skylar looked up from his second Egg McMuffin. “How did you do it, Dad?”

“Do what?”

“Turn out so normal.”

“Who says I’m normal?”

“Come on, look at you . . . steady job, long-term marriage, own your own home . . . the American dream. Even for someone who didn’t go through what you did, attaining that kind of life would be tough. Many aspire to it; few achieve it.” He’d wiped the last crumbs off his face and looked bereft.

Skylar ate like he did everything, Doug realized: avidly, devouring whatever it was without truly assimilating it before passing on to his next passion. He threaded the green lace underneath the red one and wished someone would tell him what hell was normal about weaving together streams of plastic in the back of a McDonald’s at three in the morning so that two sets of bones twenty-five miles up the Ohio River could be buried with tacky lanyards.

“Well, your great uncle Pat and Aunt Ginny helped tremendously. After what happened, growing up in the Sullivan family with my cousins, and the regularity of that family life, I guess was as close to normal as you could get, without getting all Brady-Bunchesque.”

“So, you going to see Uncle Pat while you’re there?”

“I expect to, but it depends on what my cousin Molly says. When your mother and I saw him at Christmas, it was obvious he was failing. I should have asked the police if they were going to call him . . . my mother was his sister, after all. I wouldn’t want him to find out from the TV,” Doug said.

The nearer Steubenville got, the more out of place he felt . . . there were so many aspects he hadn’t considered, including what finding his parents’ remains would mean for his uncle Pat, and for his aunt Toni on his father’s side. Maybe Lieutenant Donnelly had been right. Maybe he should have stayed in Baltimore. “You know, if you spot a place with a vacancy, I think we should take it. I’m beat. I could use a little sleep.”

“Sleep is good.”

They checked into a Hampton Inn, but five hours of sleep only fogged Doug’s mind more ; he took his computer, left Skylar snoring flat on his back, and headed toward the northeast part of town. Some relentless force had driven him deep into a past he’d spent forty-three years trying to suppress.

The crimped shrubs, the buzz-cut lawns, the inscrutable brick houses—he felt he was seeing them for the first time. Everything so desperately neat. And behind the picture windows, judgment. He could almost sense someone now, her housedress zippered up, a clean cloth in her hand as she dusted her venetian blinds and watching. “Is that him? Is that the Gianni boy? You’d think he’d let his big-deal uncle handle whatever needs to be done, instead of coming

back himself. I guess some people are suckers for punishment. That's what I say . . . suckers for punishment."

He turned the corner and there it was: home. His home with the little walk leading to the three steps to the front porch. He'd been how old? Six? Seven? When he tried jumping over them and cracked his forehead—ten stitches. The dormer of his parents' room. Below it, the too-high, too-small dining room window—the two of them at the table the week before he was sent to camp. The two of them arguing about Salami Astro. It had made no sense—Salami Astro, but still that's what he remembered his mother shouting. And his father shouting back. And himself, in his room upstairs, thinking he should get his father's gun, and order the two of them to stop fighting.

His phone rang: Suzanne. "So, the two of you made it there safely?"

"Yeah, we reached Steubenville about four and checked into a motel. Skylar's still there."

"So, where are you, now?"

He didn't want to tell her that he was parked in front of his old house—no response from her could soothe the turmoil in his soul. And even the strongest marriage could corrode under accumulated shortfalls. "On my way to the police station."

"I just wanted to let you know that your cousin Molly's called, and she's as mad as hell."

"She knows, then?"

"Apparently someone posted on Facebook that your parents have been found, and she's furious that the rest of the family hadn't been notified. I told her that you'd gone out to Steubenville . . . that it all happened very suddenly."

"What did she say to that?"

"I think she's still pissed. You better call her."

“I will.”

“And guess what? . . . the Orioles won last night. Timmy kept score the whole game. He really enjoyed himself . . . he even wants his Pop Pop to take him to another.”

“Well, that sounds great. Listen, I have to go. I’ll call Molly.” He took the battered little book from his computer case and read “*We should live in our spiritual life and truly devote all our efforts to it. This is similar to having the wings of a bird.*” He closed his eyes and thought “Volare.” Then he drove to the police station.

Lieutenant Robin Donnelly hardly took his eyes off the screen: “Title of favorite childhood book.”

“*Johnny Tremain.*”

“Name of first grade teacher.”

“Sister Mary Patricia.”

“Name of first pet.”

“Shelley . . . a turtle I got when I went to live with my uncle and aunt. I never had any pets before that.”

“You have to understand, Mr. Sullivan, I have to ask these questions. Anyone can walk in here, claiming to be you. We’ve had calls as far away as Liverpool, England. Nuts always come out of the woodwork and the Internet has only made things worse . . . a hundred times worse.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Want some coffee? . . . we’ll talk someplace more private. And you parked out front? Better give me your keys.” Doug handed them over, and the lieutenant tossed them to a young cop, telling him to move Doug’s car to the secure lot in back of the station. “I don’t want the media spying your Maryland plates . . . they’d be on you like melted mozzarella on thin-crust.”

Lieutenant Robin Donnelly was older than Doug had imagined—closer to forty than thirty. Doug let him get the coffee and settle himself across the table, a man clearly in his element. But whatever evidence of twisted human nature Lieutenant Robin Donnelly had had to face in this little room, he never had to face the father of a star eighth-grade basketball player who was being recommended for the school system’s Support Services because the boy had posted a picture of castrated testicles on Instagram—that kind of blind rage, the lieutenant had never had to face, Doug was certain. He took his pad from his computer case, wrote the date and drew a box around it. “How were they killed, Lieutenant?”

“I told you, Mr. Sullivan, we’re still waiting for the final report.”

“But they *were* killed? There were indications?”

“I can tell you this much: there was some evidence of trauma.”

“Shot?”

“Trauma. We’ll have the Coroner’s report soon. You say you were nine years old at the time.

Doug sensed the lieutenant trying to take control. “Right, nine. I was away at camp . . . two weeks.” He needed to ask the question he already knew the answer to. But for Melissa’s sake, he had to ask it. “Any sign of my sister?”

But before the man answered, the cop who had moved Doug’s car opened the door. “Lieutenant, you should take a look at this.” Doug followed them to a TV where a young blonde reporter slathered in canned gravitas stood in front of a two-story red-brick colonial with four columns reaching to the roof. Uncle Pat’s house. The one where he and Molly lived alone since Steven and Peter moved to Texas and California respectively and where Ginny died. And the one where Pat and Molly were waiting for Pat’s diseased heart to stop beating. Doug could imagine

the two of them trapped there at this moment. His fault. Not really, he knew, but his blood still ran rich with self-accusation: if only he had done better in school, if only he had behaved better, if only he had told his mother he didn't want to go to camp. Forty-three years later, he was still making trouble. This time for Pat and Molly.

He thanked Lieutenant Donnelly, called Skylar, and told him to check out—he'd pick him up in twenty minutes. Then he called Molly and apologized for not calling sooner.

"I guess Suzanne told you that I wasn't very civil to her."

"This is all so crazy . . . civility can be too much to ask for. I'd like to come over if that's okay."

"You know, the media's camped outside."

"I saw that reporter."

"Now there're two."

"They're multiplying.? Got to be either a virgin birth or mitosis . . . your choice, Mol."

Forty-five minutes later, in his uncle's kitchen, he watched Pat stretch his arms around his edematous belly to set a cup of tea on the table. Pat's voice rose from his chest like a fading campfire's last smoke, thin and wavering. "I never thought I'd live to see it . . . all these years. Are they sure it's them?"

"They wouldn't say absolutely. But they didn't discourage me either," Doug said.

"Cops . . . who's handling it? I guess the original ones are all gone . . . forty-three years . . . I never thought I'd live to see it."

"A Lieutenant Donnelly . . . Robin Donnelly."

"Never heard of him."

And he's probably never heard of you, Doug thought. He watched his uncle, the former star quarterback who once could find a receiver forty yards down field, struggle to raise a teacup.

Everything in the house seemed to be leaching away. The only reminders of the warm, homey atmosphere his aunt Ginny had so carefully cultivated were dusty tchotchkes and overgrown houseplants. Even Molly's curly blonde buoyancy had dulled, buried under fifty added pounds. When he picked up Skylar, he'd almost said something about his son's not shaving—the Sullivans had always marched into church all spit and polish. But now Skylar's day-old scruff fit right in with the general atmosphere of decline.

"The original guy was named Petrovic, as I remember," Pat said. "I think I read that he passed. There was another. . . Specter, I think." He pushed himself away from the table.

"Dad, where are you going?" Molly said.

"To my office. I want to talk to Doug alone."

As soon as his uncle stepped into the paneled room off the sun parlor, his step quickened. He motioned Doug to the leather armchair, took a bottle and two paper cups from his desk's bottom drawer, poured and handed a cup to Doug. "Tea . . . Molly, God love her, thinks she can cure anything with damn tea." He saluted Doug, then sat down. "So, did the police say anything more?"

"I asked how they died."

"And?"

"Not definitive, yet, but if I told you they'd been shot, I don't think I'd be wrong."

"No gun?"

Built-in bookcases framed a window overlooking the back yard. The hoop where his cousin Steven had practiced for hours, now a winter away from falling off the garage for good.

“You mean a murder, suicide?”

“Not necessarily.”

“I didn’t think to ask . . . you know, all these years, I never considered that, a murder-suicide. It never even crossed my mind. But I guess it had yours.”

“All sorts of things crossed my mind. Anything about your sister?”

Doug raised his glass but didn’t let the liquor pass his lips. He couldn’t let decades of careful silence be sacrificed for a swallow of good Scotch. “This Lieutenant Donnelly didn’t say anything about her. I don’t know if they’re still looking where they found my mother and father. Or somewhere else.”

“You mean somewhere like where she went with that shit, Joey Kolpecki?”

He’d never known what his uncle thought about his sister Melissa. Now he did—his uncle subscribed to the same theory as the police: Melissa and Joey had killed her parents and run off. “Do you remember the night you picked me up at camp?”

“Right . . . you were the last kid there.”

“Well, you had brought my stuffed penguin. How come? I mean, did you go over to the house and get it?”

“I don’t remember anything about a penguin.”

“But”

“Forty-what years . . . the memory plays tricks. Get older, it gets worse. What I remember is how scared you were. And how Ginny wrapped you into our family as sure as if you were her own.”

Backlit by the window, his uncle was a silhouette. He realized he'd only ever seen the outline of the man. The details, the nuances, the truth, those he'd filled in to create the uncle he needed. Now he could allow himself to take a swallow. Together, they talked about Peter's data-mining firm in Marin and Steven developing apps in Houston, and whether or not Pat should call them—yes, he should. And about how Suzanne liked selling real estate, and the unappreciated job of being a middle school vice principal, and half dozen other things, none of them having anything to do with the two sets of bones uncovered a hundred yards south of Route 22.

Skylar opened the door. "Dad, another television truck's just pulled up. If you want to get out of here without being trampled, maybe we should leave now."

He said his good-bye to Pat, and ten minutes later they'd left the phalanx of reporters behind and were heading toward Gibbons Funeral home.

Skylar was in shotgun. "Molly said to ask for Sandra Salmateo. She said she had gone to school with her and that Sandra had been very helpful when Aunt Ginny died. She also said that Sandra had dated your cousin Steven for a while."

Please, God, make him shut up, Doug prayed. Doesn't he realize what I'm about to do? No one on earth should ever have to do what I'm about to do. He hadn't even thought of arranging his parents' funeral, but of course Molly had because Molly had always been the arranger, making place cards for Thanksgiving dinner, checking over Doug's application to the University of Dayton, going with him to pick out a ring for Suzanne.

At Gibbons Funeral Home he told Skylar to wait in the car. "Google someplace east of Pittsburgh for us to stay tonight. I can't make it back to Baltimore."

Sandra met him at the door. "Molly called and told me you were coming . . . I'm very sorry." Sandra's trim, efficient poise—black pantsuit, understated, good gold jewelry—Sandra

Salmateo was what Molly might have been if her own identity hadn't been subsumed first by caring for her mother, and now her father. If her two brothers hadn't taken off for Texas and California, leaving her to limit herself to seasonal tax preparation and freelance accounting.

Sandra led him to her office.

"You have to understand, the police aren't certain . . ." he said.

"Oh, I know, Mr. Sullivan. Molly explained when she called. But the media can be very, very intrusive, so you're smart to try to settle this now."

"What if it's not them?"

"Then we'll adjust. It won't be a problem." She had that same appealing way of twisting her mouth that Suzanne did. "Shall we go and see what we have?"

But he hadn't been prepared for the display of six open coffins, their silken, padded, inviting interiors. Suddenly oceanic grief overtook him, doubled him over and washed his face in a surge of tears. A handkerchief miraculously appeared in his fist, and a chair behind him. He lowered himself down. "I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry."

Sandra Salmateo was crouched before him. "Not at all. It's to be expected."

He closed his eyes and took two deep breaths. . . . "*We should live in our spiritual life*" . . . and took another deep breath. When he opened his eyes Sandra Salmateo was standing up.

"Do you want to do this another time?"

"No, now." He picked out two medium-sized cherry caskets. "I have something to ask you . . . it's crazy."

"At a time like this, well, nothing can really be considered crazy."

"I was at camp when they disappeared. In crafts, they taught us to make lanyards, and I didn't get theirs finished."

“And now you want to put them in with them?”

“Nuts . . . I know.”

“You just send them to me. Personally. I’ll see those lanyards go where you want them.”

Sandra was so kind, so understanding he almost hated using her to plant the possibility that his sister had been killed too. But after hearing Pat say that for all these years he had suspected Melissa just like the police did, something had to be done to make Joey Kolpecki the sole suspect.

He told Sandra Salmateo to order a third casket and hoped that somehow the news would leak out. And that media became persuaded that Melissa, too, was dead. And that nobody looked for her. Not anywhere. Not ever.

