

CHAPTER NINE

Through the rain-speckled windows of the slowing bus, Lisa caught a glimpse of Teddy. He was waiting beside Nino's black Navigator, a two-second sighting, but enough to twist her heart: her grandson wore worry like an old man wore a nubby wool jacket with a hole in its pocket. The boy probably had stuffed his babyhood's ratty plush rabbit into his backpack along with whatever else Nino told him to pack.

The bus doors sighed open, and she pushed ahead of two other women to step into the rain. Nino steered her grandson toward her across the lot, but her focus was on Nino, the one with the answers. "What's this all about?"

"The old man, he needs to see you."

"You told me that over the phone, but why? What's happened?"

"He'll tell you himself. I got your suitcase in the car."

"What do you mean you've got my suitcase? You packed for me? I don't even know where I'm going. How could you pack for me?"

"I did the best I could . . . socks, extra shoes, slacks . . . your bathrobe, the warm one. Anything else, the old man gave me a credit card."

The other women from the bus, heads ducked against the rain, streamed past. Teddy hadn't worn his waterproof windbreaker; he looked up with wet-puppy eyes. "I packed my bathing trunks and goggles, Grandma."

Nino still had his hand on the boy's shoulder. "We better get out there before Val's knock-out drops kick in."

She checked her watch: 6:30. "He doesn't get them for another hour. And then it's another thirty minutes before he's really out." Ever since early February, when the doctors made

it official that her so-called father-in-law's two-pack-a-day habit had caught up with him, she'd been Val's main caregiver. The one who knew how many mouthfuls of his morning crème of wheat he'd manage to swallow, how his skin felt as thin as tissue paper whenever she bathed him, and how he had tried to bribe Stel into giving him the whole bottle of morphine.

"They got someone new, someone from an agency. Stel told me."

"Just like that, Stel *hired* somebody? They don't need me anymore?"

"This new woman, she's the sister of his physical therapist. We gotta get out there, Lisa."

"I brought my workbooks, Grandma."

"That's good Teddy." But her voice was on auto-pilot. She would have told him "That's good, Teddy," if he'd said he was going to swim across Long Island Sound. Her yellow jacket squished when she climbed into the Navigator and turned toward the backseat—she had to give her grandson some of her scant attention because whatever was coming at Val's would whip their lives into a whirlwind. And Teddy, trusting, innocent Teddy, would be the sparrow caught in the spin. "All buckled up? That's my guy. You know, your mom told me to tell you that she misses you very much. I told her how well you're doing in summer school, and she's very proud of you."

"Grandma?"

"What?"

"Maybe I can write her a letter."

"You know, I think she'd like that a lot." She turned to Nino. An exchange like the one she'd just shared with Teddy usually gave the corners Nino's mouth a faint upturn, a signal he'd noticed the remark's bittersweet innocence. But not now. Except for his thick eyeglasses, Nino's profile looked like an aging Roman soldier's: eyelids and jowls weighted by weariness, skin

pouched and loosening. And beneath the weariness, granite-hard loyalty. The trumpet had sounded. Val LaMiaastro had called. Nino, the good soldier, had to answer.

She thought once again about trying to wheedle from him why her so-called father-in-law wanted to see her, but forty-three years had taught her that Nino's greatest pride stemmed from being a faithful soldier. Besides, whatever Val needed to see her for couldn't be discussed around Teddy, beginning with the fact that the man the boy regarded as his great-grandfather, wasn't his great-grandfather at all. Just as he wasn't Teri's grandfather, or Lisa's own father-in-law.

He'd never been any of those things because Val had never been the father of her husband, Johnnie DeNardo: he had been Johnnie's uncle. The uncle who, with his twin in Steubenville, raised Johnnie "like a son" after Johnnie's own father disappeared and nine years later, his mother died.

Johnnie may have been the cause of her living under Val's thumb for so long, but he wasn't the reason Val had summoned her now. She wasn't being driven through the rain because of her dead husband. This was about her dead parents.

Her phone rang. She reached into her pocket.

"Don't answer that," Nino said.

She fished it out, looked at the screen. "It's Stel."

"Okay. Stel's okay, I guess."

"Stel?"

"Where are you?"

"Almost there."

"I'm going to run out . . . what do you need?"

“I need to know why Val wants to see me. I need to know where I’m going.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean what do you need like to eat or maybe clothes. I put together some things: sheets, towels, blankets, some books . . . I don’t know how good . . . and some stuff from Whole Foods . . . pasta, coffee, and those lemon cookies Teddy likes. How’s he doing?”

Lisa looked over her shoulder at her grandson, his worried face strobed by the oncoming headlights. “He’s fine. Listen, Stel . . . “

“Oh, and I got a cooler, there’s a few steaks, some grapes . . . I can get you more fruit.”

“Stel, there’s one thing.”

“What?”

“Well, Teddy, he packed himself, and his windbreaker got wet. Can you get him a hoodie somewhere?”

“A hoodie? I don’t know. I was just gonna run out to Whole Foods again.”

“Well, then, forget it. Don’t put yourself out.”

“No . . . no . . . no. I’ll get it. I’ll get it. Bye.”

Lisa slipped her phone into her pocket and closed her eyes—impossible that just a few hours ago she had been worried about looking too stylish in her squishing yellow jacket—impossible that of all the people she loved, the safest one probably was her daughter in prison. Impossible that she had let herself believe that this day would never come. She felt the Navigator turn onto the exit for Black Rock, the peninsula hemmed by Ash Creek and the Long Island Sound on Bridgeport’s west side.

“What Stel want?” Nino asked.

“Nothing. Stel didn’t want a damned thing.”

Only on maps is Black Rock part of Bridgeport. The small peninsula has largely been spared the gritty city's post-industrial despair by styling itself after its more sophisticated neighbor to the west, Fairfield. The amalgam of old brick apartment buildings, newer condominiums, modest single-family homes from the 40s and 50s, had been discovered by people wanting proximity to New York plus water views—no place was more than five blocks from the sound or an estuary.

Two blue gazing balls sat atop the pilasters on either side of Valentino LaMiaastro's driveway. The pilasters were yellowish brick, the same as the five-foot wall running across the front of the property. Spiked iron fencing on top of the wall added another foot and a half of protection. The fencing echoed the style of the wrought-iron gate across the entrance to the drive. Nino entered a code on the keypad on the driver's- side pilaster and the gate swung open. Aside from an awkward third story whose large windows clashed with the paned style of the floors below, the house wasn't especially remarkable compared to its neighbors. Until the front door opened.

Inside, it had been transformed into someone's imagined Italian villa: honeyed parquet flooring, Corinthian columns delineating the living room from the solarium, and the light of Venetian chandeliers dancing in gilt mirrors.

The woman who let them in wore white nurse's shoes and a dull blue pants and tunic uniform. Her nametag identified her as Tonya. "He's waiting for you," she said to Lisa.

"How is he?"

"All right. He's upstairs."

"Can I see Grandpa Val, too?" Teddy asked. Lisa hadn't been prepared for this. She could see from the others' faces that they hadn't either.

Tonya ruffled the boy's hair. "Looks like you got a soaking. What do say you I drag you off to the kitchen, and we see about getting you something to eat?" Her smile spread to Nino, but stopped at Lisa. "You can take the elevator if you want."

"The stairs are fine. I always take the stairs," Lisa said.

Val had added the third floor because Anne had wanted to see the Long Island Sound from her bedroom. The view was especially beautiful in moonlight, but the rain had made it invisible tonight. Val's arm hair was swiveled away from the floor-to-ceiling windows flanking the fireplace and toward the TV.

"Fuckin' rain," he said and clicked off "Jeopardy." "You look worse than I do, and that's sayin' some. Take a load off," he nodded toward the damask-covered armchair on the other side of the fireplace and set the remote next to a half-empty glass of water on the table beside him. The surface was littered with magazines, pill phials and a small yellow bowl with walnuts and a silver hammer. The old man took a walnut and whacked it with the silver hammer. "Fuckin' thing."

Lisa didn't know if he meant the general situation or the walnut he couldn't crack.

"What's this all about, Val?"

"How's she doin' . . . Teri?"

"Okay, I guess, it's tough."

He kept at the walnut. "There's a guard up there. I'll make a call . . . she'll be okay. Don't worry . . . she'll be okay . . . she's my granddaughter."

"It's my parents, isn't it?"

His hammer missed a beat, then began again. "It's better you don't know."

"I know they're dead, Val. I've always known."

He looked up from his walnut. Who told you? Johnnie?"

"It was why I never could leave him . . . he even told me he'd testify against me. He said he'd swear I did it."

"Crazy bastard. Me and Sal, we tried to do our best for him because he was our nephew, but I don't know. Maybe our sister Vivian spoiled him too much. I don't know what it was with that kid. Sal and me, we never could get him straightened out."

"You know how he was . . . it took me almost a year to figure out that he was"

"Crazy?"

"I was pregnant with the one I lost . . . I didn't know what to do. I think he was afraid I'd leave him. We had a fight over some stupid thing, and he got so angry. I thought he was going to hit me. He began throwing all these newspapers at me. We were living up in that cabin in the Adirondacks . . . we lived almost a year, you know. No TV, no nothing. I have no idea where he got those papers, but they were all about me and Joey Kolpecki. That's when I knew why he'd never let me have contact with anyone. And I knew I could never go back to Steubenville. The next day I dyed my hair blonde like he'd been wanting me to."

Val shattered the walnut and began picking out the pieces. "Son of a bitch."

"But I didn't have anything to do with my parents. There was never even anything between me and Joey Kolpecki. He made a pass at me once, that's all. It was nothing. I was terrified about what the papers said. I didn't know what to do."

"I know . . . I know, you were just a kid. Me and Sal, we did the best we could. It was a crazy time." The old man slapped his hands against each other to brush the walnut bits from his palms. "Your phone got a camera?"

"Yeah, why?"

“Gimme. I’m the old-fashioned type . . . still use a landline. I want to take a picture of you here, then you can email it to me. Email I can manage.”

She showed him how to operate the camera and stood in front of the fireplace. The old man managed to hoist himself straight and take her picture. Then he turned to the little table, took his little silver hammer and shattered her phone in one blow.

“Val!” He’d just smashed her means of connecting to anyone outside his little empire. Without her phone, she was his prisoner just like her daughter was the State of Connecticut’s.

He threw the pieces into the fireplace. “This ain’t no joke!” He sank back down. “I know you, Lisa. I know you want to go back to Steubenville for the funeral. What the fuck . . . it’s only natural. You’re their daughter. But the fuckin’ cops will twist the story however they want. They twisted it back then; they’ll twist it now. Even if you don’t go, you can bet they’re lookin’ for you. Right now, you’re every cop’s wet dream.”

“But I had nothing to do with killing my parents. Why would I want to kill my parents? I was fifteen, for God’s sake. I never even knew what happened to them. I went off with Johnnie and they disappeared. I never knew what happened to them until he told me. Besides, I can’t keep hiding forever. . . not for the rest of my life.”

“Just for now. That’s all. Until maybe this blows over.”

“So, I was right . . . my parents *have* been found. They’re dead, right?”

“Like I said . . . better you don’t know too much.”

“Val!”

“I mean it Lisa, . . . no gettin’ in touch with nobody. Including me . . . that’s why no phone. Fuckin’ cops . . . who knows what they can trace these days? You see it on TV, how they

do it, findin' anybody any time, but who the hell knows if it's true. Nino will be with you. He's got a burner."

No use arguing, no use proposing an alternative—she didn't have one. But she could still throw him off balance. "Teddy wants to see you."

"What?" The old man's eyes suddenly softened, then skimmed the surfaces of the marble-topped chests flanking the bed, the three mahogany bureaus, the mantel. "I don't have nothing to give him. I want to give him somethin'."

"He doesn't need anything, Val. He just wants to see you."

"Well, okay. Bring him up."

Stel had come back from the store. In the kitchen Teddy sat at the marble-topped island, wearing an oversized Fairfield University hoodie, the tags still on it. Tonya was bent over, putting soup bowls into the dishwasher, and Nino was unloading the contents of Whole Food's bags into a cooler. "Here, take the milk," Stel told him. "Kids always need milk."

"Teddy, Grandpa says it's okay to see him," Lisa said.

"Can we take the elevator?"

Her heart lurched. Who knew when they be back again—Let the boy remember that his grandfather had a swanky house with an elevator. "Sure, why not?"

Tonya straightened up. "Please don't take too long. Mr. Val needs his drops."

"We won't." Lisa took Teddy down the hall to the elevator that Val had built into a closet when Anne got too sick for the stairs. When they went into the old man's room, he was working at another walnut, but he stopped when he saw Teddy. "Hey, Champ, how ya doin'?"

"Okay, Grandpa. I'm doing okay."

"Ya know, you're goin' away for a while, a little vacation."

“I know. And Grandpa?”

“What?”

“I want to write you a letter.”

“You want to write me a letter?” The old man’s left hand shook as it groped among the clutter on his little table. A phial of pills fell over.

“Yeah. Sister Mary Ambrose says that letter writing is a lost art. I’m going to write one to my mom, too.”

“Well, a letter would be fine. Yeah, that would be okay. Here, I found somethin’ for you.”

He handed the boy a little box. “Open it. It’s a St. Christopher medal. You know about St. Christopher?”

“Yeah. He carried Jesus.”

“Good. Well, St. Christopher, he’ll keep you safe. That medal, it was your Nonna Anne’s. You remember Nonna Anne?”

“Yeah, I remember her.”

“Teddy, what do you say to Grandpa Val?”

“Thank you.”

“Well, you keep that medal, and St. Christopher will keep you safe. And you write me that letter. I’ll be waiting.” Then the old man turned to Lisa. “Stel back?”

“She’s downstairs.”

“When you go down, tell her to remind me to call Larry Warnoff in the morning. I forget things . . . the chemo’s fried my brains, and I got to make sure that shyster’s set things like I want

them. Stel needs to remind me to call Larry Warnoff. And that new girl, send her up. I need . . . just send her up.”

Nino was loading up the car and Stel was in the butler pantry, her phone on speaker so her hands were free to pour herself a glass of wine. Lisa had heard the voice on the other end before; she'd even met its owner once or twice. Middle height.. Middle-aged. Everything understated: suits, shoes, haircut. Almost as if he wanted to pass unnoticed. And then he spoke. His voice as seductive as a midnight D.J.'s, roping you in, so that you could hear him in your dreams. “Remember, what I told you, Stella. Call me right away. I'll be waiting.”

As soon as she saw Lisa, Stel switched off speaker. “Gotta go, bye.” She slapped on a smile and thrust her glass at Lisa. “Here, have one for the road?”

Lisa took the glass. “Was that Paul DeMeo from Providence?”

“What?. . . oh, no . . . that was just just somebody . . . they all want to see Val.” Stel filled another glass, lifted it toward Lisa. “Salute. You know how it is. They all want to say their good-byes . . . vultures if you ask me.”

But Paul from Providence hadn't sounded like a vulture. He sounded as if he and Stel shared some secret understanding. Lisa sipped her wine. She was too tired to pursue what connection Stel had or didn't have with Paul DeMeo. “Val wants you to remind him to call Larry Warnoff in the morning,” she told Stel.

“What's he need Warnoff for at this late date? Everything's set out . . . his will . . . everything. What did you say to him, Lisa?”

“Me? I didn't say anything to him. Come on, Stel. I can barely put two words together with what's going on. You think I can manipulate him like that? Besides, when could anyone ever manipulate Val LaMiaastro? Is that even possible?”

Stel drank her wine. “Anne could.”

Poor Stel, too many gaudy rings, too many lifts and tucks, too many years waiting to be Number One. “But you’re the one with him now,” Lisa told her.

A wry smile. “Yeah, I guess I am. And Lisa?”

”What?”

“I’ll pray for you.”

“Thanks, Stel. And thanks for Teddy’s hoodie, too.”

“Sure.”

Lisa went out the kitchen door and around the side of the house to the circular drive where Nino and Teddy were waiting in the Navigator. She got in. They almost had reached the Blackrock exit onto the throughway before Nino spoke. “The old man, he didn’t ask to see me. Didn’t even ask. You, Teddy, but not me.” He didn’t look like a Roman soldier now. He looked like a big man on the far side of middle age with three hundred miles to drive through the rain before he could sleep in the middle of Pennsylvania, where no one could find either himself or his passengers.

“He’s very sick, Nino. Everything’s an effort for him.”

“That’s not it and you know it.” He swung onto the throughway’s southbound lane, the angle of his chin set on “pissed.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s Val LaMiaastro for cryin’ out loud. He knows everything that goes on. You think he didn’t know what you had me do? . . . that’s why he didn’t want to see me.”

“What did I ever have you do?”

“The things you had me mail for you. To your brother. Every time I went to play golf somewhere . . . ‘Here, Nino. Mail it when you get there.’ You think I didn’t know you wanted different postmarks, so your brother couldn’t trace you. But his name was always the same . . . Doug Sullivan. You think I didn’t know you were using me to contact him?”

“But how would Val know that unless you told him.”

“He’s Val LaMiastro. That’s how.”

