

Divine Intervention

1. Farmer's Market Saturday

Summer 2019

Thomas felt a small hand wrap itself around his pinky finger. He continued talking with Maria and looked down to see a small boy, with a sippy cup in his mouth, looking up at him and smiling. The boy had on a soccer shirt of bright yellow. His blue eyes and curly blond hair caught Thomas' attention as well as the fact that he was holding onto his finger.

“And who might you be?”

The boy looked at him and smiled. Thomas then noticed an older boy wearing the same color soccer shirt holding the hand of a handsome man. He guessed the boys to be about five and seven years of age. The father looked to be in his early thirties.

“Ahhh, there are two of you. Do you have names?”

The father spoke up and introduced his sons as Army and Robert. Army gave his father a quizzical look. He wasn't happy.

One of Thomas' hands was holding the bag of produce he had just purchased from Maria while Army was still holding the finger on his other hand. He normally would have shaken the father's hand but he didn't have a free one. Thomas looked him in the eyes and said his name. Thomas. Not Tom or Tommie but Thomas.

The father introduced himself as Mark. He pointed to the broccoli and said to Maria he wanted a bunch and also two squash. Maria bagged the purchase. The entire time Army was holding onto Thomas' finger.

“Well, it was nice to meet you Robert, Army and Mark.” He was prepared to walk away but Army would not let go. His sippy cup still held in his mouth and his eyes looking up at Thomas. Not pleading but clearly directing him to stay.

Mark turned to the next vendor and Army held onto Thomas as they followed. The Farmer's Market was not that big and he had some free time to wander on this Saturday morning. But why was Army still holding his finger?

They went to the next vendor and Mark said he needed a dozen eggs and a pound of sausage. Thomas stood patiently while the order was prepared.

Two more vendors were visited with Thomas accompanying the family of three. Mark would turn and look at him but didn't say another word. He just accepted that Thomas was with them for their shopping. Thomas saw a vendor on the other side of the aisle he needed to visit. As he walked away, Army held onto him.

“Where are you going, Thomas?”

“I need some cheese, Mark, it will only take a minute.” Robert came over and held Thomas’ bags while he paid Charlene. Thomas was a regular and knew all of the vendors by name and sometimes spent an entire morning chatting, drinking coffee, and eating one of the cinnamon rolls that George always sold.

Mark stood in the center of the aisle while Thomas completed the transaction. The three of them walked back to Mark and Thomas asked what else was needed. Mark looked at him and his eyes welled up with tears. He choked out, “Nothing, I think we have everything we need today.” Army did not let go of Thomas’ hand who was standing in the center of the aisle.

“Come on Army.”

The sippy cup fell from Army’s mouth, tears welled in his eyes, and he said, “Please don’t call me that name. I hate it. My name is Belinda.”

Mark, in a quiet yet directive voice said, “We are not having that conversation right now. It is time to go.”

At that point, Mark started walking out of the pavilion to the parking lot. Thomas followed with the boys on either side. When they got to the big Ford truck, Mark unlocked the back doors and Robert climbed up to his child safety seat that was fastened into the back seat. Thomas went to the other side and lifted Army into his seat. He fastened the safety belt. He closed the door and was going to speak with Mark but he heard the driver’s door close and the engine roar to life. He moved away from the vehicle as it backed out of the space and then moved forward heading out of the lot. The boys waved at him but Mark never looked over.

Well, that was quite queer thought Thomas. Totally unusual. Thomas could not make sense of what had just happened. Oh well, a new adventure on a Saturday morning. He chuckled to himself thinking about what Joe would say when he got home.

Thomas turned and saw a new vendor with fresh peaches and stopped to purchase a peck before pulling the wagon uphill to where he lived. Joe loved fresh peach cobbler and Thomas was going to make one especially for his husband.

Joe and Thomas had moved to Hillsborough the prior fall. Thomas was born in South Carolina but had spent the last thirty-five years working in Philadelphia. Joe was a native of the City of Brotherly Love. They decided to take early retirement and had packed two huge rental trucks with all of their worldly possessions and headed south. They had decided on Hillsborough. The town was just outside of the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area known as the Triangle. It was a small town filled with writers and visual artists. It seemed like a great place to settle. After touring several historic homes, they found a two-story home sitting on a knoll above the Eno River. It felt perfect. It was also within walking distance of the downtown area where the farmer’s market was located.

Each Saturday morning, Thomas would get his Red Flyer wagon and walk to the market. Some days the wagon would be filled with wonderful finds and other days it barely had anything in it. Thomas always left it at one end of the market pavilion where Becky and Alice would watch it for him. Thomas loved the fact that they were lesbians and would take out anyone who messed with their friends. They were very generous especially since they didn’t carry products that Thomas and Joe normally ate. They were purveyors of all things vegetarian. Certainly, Thomas and Joe liked vegetables but Becky and Alice had taken simple things

and done strange things to them. What was kombucha? What were these strange soured vegetables in jars with wild yeast? It seemed that everything they sold was somehow fermented.

On this Saturday morning, Thomas arrived home to find that Joe had prepared homemade biscuits, sausage, eggs, cheese, jams and jellies and lots of coffee. And rice. Always rice. Thomas grew up in the coastal area of South Carolina and insisted on this dietary staple. When Thomas entered the house with arms full of produce, he smelled the breakfast that Joe had cooked while he was shopping. It was one of the smells of home. It was just one of several smells that Thomas associated with home; others being beeswax furniture polish, Irish Spring soap, and 4711 which was Joe's favorite cologne. The best smell of all was when Thomas would lean over and put his face in Joe's hair. He didn't think the shampoo smelled the same on him but it didn't matter because he only wanted to smell it on Joe.

Thomas placed the produce on the kitchen counter and looked out at the cardinals in the backyard trees. Joe had thoughtfully placed Thomas' filled coffee cup on the counter so he only had to reach down for his morning beverage. They knew each other like clockwork. Each gesture was filled with love and a knowing of what pleased the other.

They sat at the gateleg table and smiled at each other. Then their smiles shifted to the bow window boxes that were filled with flowers. Bees and butterflies were hovering over each bloom. There was an over-abundance of blooms, bees and butterflies this morning so they enjoyed the view while it lasted. Life passed so quickly. They knew before long summer would end and they would be preparing everything for fall. Ahhh, that was another smell that Thomas associated with home; the smell of the first fire of the fall. Actually, he never tired of the smell and was thankful that their old home had working fireplaces. Home and Joe. Thomas felt complete and thankful.

Thomas told Joe about the strange experience at the Farmer's Market with Mark, Robert and Army who said his name was Belinda. He told the story with a sense of wonder about the meaning of the encounter. Thomas always believed that such encounters had an underlying significance. He knew to wait for it to be revealed. All of his years as a priest had allowed him to live into this time of transition between unknowing and knowing. In the early years of his ministry he would rankle when the reveal wasn't immediately evident. He chuckled and thought that when he finally mastered that part of his spiritual life was when he retired. Well, there was no such thing as retirement as he was often called on to celebrate Mass on Sundays for vacationing priests. It did provide him with an opportunity to go to most of the Episcopal churches in the area. The extra income also provided some niceties like shopping at the Farmer's Market and never balking at the prices.

Joe listened patiently. It was a virtue he had acquired from living with Thomas. He knew not to interrupt. Joe was a doer and wanted everything on the checklist marked and completed with a big check mark on the page. He would then move onto the next project. He was focused on the tasks and how to accomplish each one. He never spent time contemplating why he was doing the tasks. He took pride in the finished product. Usually, it was Thomas who had given him something to be done. His years as a master cabinet maker and carpenter had taught him to pay attention to detail and that everything had to be constructed a certain way. There was logic to what he was doing. Sometimes he would sit back in awe at the finished product.

An uneaten biscuit sat on Thomas' plate. On most days, he scarfed them down with locally churned butter and homemade blackberry jam. Thomas was also stirring the rice on his plate. He hadn't tasted the rice and it was a favorite. He was lost in thought and didn't hear the question from Joe.

Fall 1988

Joe had a bemused look on his face. He had lived in this territory with Thomas since they met in their early thirties. Thomas had called Joe for a repair that was needed on the altar at the church where he was priest. Joe arrived and immediately was impressed. Everything was so beautiful and old. Thomas removed the fair linen from the altar and showed Joe the damage. Joe told him it was easy fix. Thomas was relieved because the church was beautiful and filled with items that would be hard to replace yet the parish had fallen on somewhat hard times. This was happening everywhere with inner city churches. Thomas liked to think of himself as a caregiver of the building as well as being a shepherd to the congregation. Most of the congregation had moved to the newly developed suburbs. They tried to be faithful driving into the city each Sunday but he noticed that over time fewer and fewer made the trek. Thomas blamed the Bishop for building all of these churches in the suburbs that were closer to people. He actually didn't blame him because it was the practical, logical thing to do. Thomas was neither.

Joe promised to return the following Monday to start the job. He told Thomas it would only take three days. The timing was perfect as Thomas could hold the weekday services in the chapel. This filled a need to help the faithful congregants, who never wanted change, to rethink about heating the entire church for the 8 a.m. and noon services each day. It wasn't practical but tradition was tradition. Tradition was often capitalized, bolded and italicized in the Episcopal Church. For many, this was their little piece of England in the United States. Thomas smiled at that thought because he fit easily into the role of being an Anglophile snob. Living in the inner city, he was thankful to have this beautiful edifice to live and worship in. The church Close and garden were his favorite places. The noises of the city would be lessened when he sat on a wooden bench and contemplated how gifted he had been in life. He considered his time at St. Anselm a gift that was yet to be fully opened. He was still untying the bow even though he had been at the parish for three years.

On Sunday morning, Thomas announced that the repair work to the altar would start the next day. He heard clucking sounds from the congregation. He hadn't invited the head of the Altar Guild to meet with him and Joe. After the service the Junior Warden, who was in charge of the building, was in his face. Thomas had ready explanations and invited both of them to meet with Joe the next morning. Thomas knew that if he had included them in the earlier meeting with Joe the decision would be assigned to committees and taskforces and study groups and would take three years before they were ready to move forward. There was satisfaction in knowing that it would be completed in less than a week.

At seven a.m. on Monday morning, Thomas was introducing Joe to Mack and Anne. They had questions and Joe patiently explained what he was going to do. He had made drawings and written specifications for the small job. Joe liked to have the client understand the scope of the work and to sign off before he started. He was prepared. Thomas left the three of them talking while he set up for the 8 a.m. service. After the service, Thomas normally sat in prayer and meditation for an hour. It was part of his practice of his rule of life. His spiritual mentor had identified that Thomas needed time each morning for prayer and contemplation. Today, it was hard for him to sit for the hour. His brain was in overdrive wondering about the outcome of the meeting.

Finally, the hour was up and Thomas entered the sacristy to hang his vestments in their wardrobe and to put on his cassock. He always wore his simple black cassock when he was at church. He spoke to his secretary about any special needs that had presented. Heather smiled and said the phone had been quiet since she arrived. That was unusual but Thomas saw it as a gift and sign that he was needed in the church. He quietly entered the nave and sat in a pew. He expected to hear voices, rather all he heard was some humming and the sound of a hammer and chisel at work.

He didn't know why his heart was beating so fast. Maybe it was because of his working outside of the norm in hiring Joe. Maybe it was because of Joe himself. Joe definitely had a Scottish background. He stood tall with a head of ginger hair, a barrel chest, small waist and long legs. He had a bit of a burr to his voice. Thomas had been captivated with him when they first met. He thought Joe so handsome, it was hard for Thomas to pay attention to what the man was saying. Thomas was definitely English in background. The blond hair, pallid skin, ordinary features and his affinity to speaking in a voice rich with Received Pronunciation made it clear where his proclivities lay. Thomas didn't know that Joe almost melted when he heard him speaking.

Thomas stood from the pew, straightened his cassock and walked up the steps into the chancel. He revered the altar before continuing. He assumed a happy countenance given that Joe was actually working. Joe looked up and smiled. There was a twinkle in his eyes. Thomas got weak in the knees and returned the smile.

Joe had charmed Mack and Anne. They were in total agreement with the work to be done. They had insisted on signing off on the plans and specs that Joe had reviewed with them. Thomas smiled even broader. Thomas tried to engage Joe in conversation but somehow that effort was deflected in a manner that didn't leave hurt feelings. Joe said he was on a time schedule for the job and wanted to make sure that he finished on time and that the work was his best. Thomas left to take care of parish business.

Thomas kept thinking of the carpenter. Somehow in his brain on that Monday morning he thought of Jesus being a carpenter and conflated the scenario beyond its logical bounds. It didn't make sense but that didn't bother Thomas. He handled each of the day's problems with grace and aplomb. Even Heather said he seemed to be in a very good mood that day. It was late afternoon when Thomas re-entered the church. He was alone. Joe was gone. The church was filled with shadows as the afternoon sun was shining through the stained glass windows. An empty feeling filled Thomas. Joe had cleaned up his work area and the materials were stacked neatly to the side. All of the tools were gone.

Thomas sat in his altar chair and tried to picture Joe working at the altar. The rough hands, the broad shoulders, the head slightly bowed, and his haunches crouched so that he was directly facing his work. There would be a pensive look on his face as he paid attention to every detail. Thomas broke his reverie when he heard a noise from the nave. He looked up and saw Joe walking up the side aisle. A smile formed on his lips. Joe explained that he was looking for Thomas so he could review the work he had accomplished that day. Thomas nodded as Joe explained each and everything he had done. When he finished, Joe asked Thomas if he was pleased with the work thus far. Thomas said that he was more than pleased. Then Joe said good night, turned and walked out of the church.

It was a restless night for Thomas. He didn't hit on people. He wasn't seeking a sexual outlet but rather a partner in his life. If he was entirely honest with himself, he would admit that he was incredibly lonely and felt incomplete as a person. He had a congregation to take care of and they truly loved him but there was a void. During the interview process he made clear that he was a single gay man and was not looking for a relationship. The congregation was progressive and were somewhat relieved that Fr. Thomas was not going to be bringing men to the rectory. The treasurer did a quick calculation in his head about the reduction in cost for the benefits they were required to provide. That put a smile on his face. There was also relief among some that the single men in the congregation wouldn't ever think that Thomas was trying to have sex with them. That worked for the first two years and then members of the congregation thought that it was time for Thomas to find someone to spend his life with. They saw that he was lonely. All of a sudden all of the gay cousins, brothers and nephews of congregants were being paraded in front of him. Thomas would chuckle when he climbed the steps to the pulpit on Sunday mornings and would see another handsome gay man in the

congregation. They always looked a little uncomfortable because they knew they were on display. He was grateful but knew that when he met the man of his dreams there would be an instant recognition, a spark, a lightning bolt. He felt that when he met Joe.

There was a major problem though. Thomas didn't know how to date or make his intentions clear. He was a novice at this love stuff. Surely Joe wasn't gay. He was this macho looking carpenter. Yet, there was the spark.

Thomas gave a big sigh and walked through the church making sure that everything was secure for the night. He then returned to the parish house to lock everything away and turn off the lights. It was an unusual night because there were no church meetings. He yanked on the heavy oak door so it would shut properly and then put his key in the lock. He loved that the locks were original to the church and just the tumblers had been changed through the years when the doors needed to be re-keyed. He felt blessed to be part of the history of the church.

He walked through the church Close and up the steps to the rectory. The church, parish hall, and rectory encompassed an entire city block. He didn't mind 'living above the store,' as it were, and was grateful that he was provided an historic three story home. It was rather grand. It fronted on a different street than the church so even though everything was connected it felt like he had some privacy. It was built of the same granite as the church and the parish hall. Solid. Long lasting. Comfortable yet slightly intimidating. Some nights he would leave the parish hall and walk around the block to his home. He would climb the imposing granite steps and enter the front door into the large foyer. The staircase was to his left in the foyer and climbed to the third floor. There was a full basement but Thomas didn't count that as part of the house. In fact, he only went down there when there was a problem with the electrical panel. That hadn't happened but once in the three years since he moved in. The front parlor had tall windows that let in an abundance of early evening light. Behind that was the dining room, then the butler's pantry and finally the kitchen and food pantry across the back of the house. A library sat to the left of the dining room and was behind the foyer. It was Thomas' favorite room. There was a fireplace that was used on a regular basis; there were built in oak bookcases, oak paneling and a William Morris style wallpaper. Sometimes Thomas would put on a smoking jacket and sit in the library. He had a collection of antique pipes and would smoke on those evenings. Thomas hated the taste of the tobacco but felt that was secondary to the mood he was setting. He knew that he was being a snob and inauthentic to his clerical self and would always decide to repent in the morning. Usually he was comforted when he settled in the library after a light dinner at the kitchen table. That night he was restless and couldn't settle. He kept thinking about Joe.

2. Bottled Up Hurt

Fall 1988

After leaving the church, Joe drove to his walk-up apartment where he lived since his wife, Valentina, told him to leave. It had been a surprise when he arrived home one night and there were his suitcases in the living room. His wife had packed his clothes that day and said it was time for him to move out and move on with his life. They had married right out of high school and were as happy as he thought married couples were supposed to be. They had a routine. Sunday was for church and then lunch with Valentina's parents. The entire afternoon was spent at their home. Valentina's brothers, their wives and children were always there. The house was filled with people, laughter, and the men enjoyed a few beers in the living room while the women gossiped in the kitchen. They were working class folks. There were no pretensions about how hard life was. Valentina's dad was a cop as were two of her brothers. They would joke it was the family business. Another brother was a defector and became a fireman. They were all big brute Irish guys. Joe, being Scottish, was seen as an outsider. Plus, he worked with his hands doing carpentry. They didn't look down on him but rather thought that he didn't have the smarts to either be a cop or a fireman. They indulged him and he felt the slight every week. He didn't want to be indulged. He wanted to be treated as an equal.

Valentina's brothers had all married and had two kids each. Joe knew that if one of the wives got pregnant with a third kid the other two brothers would knock up their wives also. It was always an unspoken competition among them. They were always trying to one-up each other. But the reality was they couldn't afford to have more kids so Joe wondered how they kept their wives from getting pregnant. Hell, maybe they weren't having sex. That was something Joe could relate to. He and Valentina had not had sex in months. The last time he tried, Joe ended up on the sofa for the night. He had been so hard and needy and thought they could make it happen. They had gone out to dinner on Friday night which was the norm for them. Italian. They always ate Italian on Friday night. Joe ordered a bottle of wine. Business had been good and he decided to celebrate. He had signed a contract that day for a big job that would pay him lots of money. Valentina lightly sipped her wine. Joe encouraged her to drink up. The more she refused the more he imbibed. Luckily, the restaurant was within walking distance of their apartment because he was too drunk to drive. They walked home with Valentina supporting Joe when he would lean too far to the left or to the right. He would laugh and say it was a wonderful evening. He would also lean over and kiss her on the lips. She would push him away and say they shouldn't do that in public. He told her what he wanted to do to her in private. She turned scarlet red.

Valentina did not like sex, or more specifically, she did not like sex with Joe. She called him a sex maniac because unlike the rest of their life together he had needs that didn't fit a fixed time schedule. On some days, he would arrive home from work, walk into the kitchen in his filthy work clothes, drop his pants, pull out his cock and try to fuck Valentina while she was pushed back against the kitchen cabinet. She would beat on his chest and tell him to stop. She would resist at first and then her hips would start rocking and she would moan and tell him that he was ripping her apart. He kept up his assault, as she called it. Finally, he would deposit a man's load into her and smirk when he pulled his cock out and thank her for a hot fuck. She hated that word. She hated what it meant. She would flee to the bathroom and Joe could hear the water running in the tub. He knew it meant another night when he would eat alone at the kitchen table.

After arriving home from dinner Joe was amorous and needed to feel loved. He tried to kiss Valentina. He felt her small breasts. He tried to lift her skirt and she pushed his hand away. He kept telling her that he loved her and needed her. She called him a pervert, ran into the bedroom, closed the door and then locked it. Joe knew

he could easily break through the door but also knew that Valentina would be so angry he wouldn't get any. He passed out on the sofa, his turgid cock straining his pants. When he awoke Saturday morning, he noted that the apartment was quiet. Valentina wasn't there. He bathed and then fixed himself breakfast. Maybe she went shopping or maybe she had an appointment and he forgot. Maybe she had to go to her mother's house and he dismissed the idea at the time. He knew that he was lying to himself. He knew that she had left him alone because she could not stand being with him. She knew his deep dark secret and didn't want to carry the baby of a homosexual. God, he hated that word.

He thought it ironic that he was gay but was able to have sex with his wife. He was more than capable. Sometimes he wished that his cock would go limp with her. But it didn't. The more he tried to prove to himself that he was normal the more intent he became in fathering a child. He wanted a kid to prove to Valentina, her parents and brothers that he was a normal, red blooded guy just like them. He didn't make love to his wife, he was trying to breed her. He felt incomplete as a man without a little boy or two. Hell, with the contract he just signed they could afford three children. Ha! Let the Irish bastards keep up with him. He would sire a half dozen, struggle to pay the bills if he had to, just to outshine his in-laws.

They lived in silent combat for several months after that night. Joe slept on the couch since they only had one bedroom. They both were depressed and it showed on a Sunday when Valentina's brothers asked him what the hell was going on. They said he looked miserable and so did their sister. Joe told them it was a small problem and they would get it resolved. They told him he needed to man up. One of the brothers grabbed his crotch when that was said. They all laughed; except Joe. He came home that Monday and Valentina had packed his bags. When she told Joe to leave, all three brothers walked out of the bedroom where they had been waiting. They glared at him. Joe knew that she had told them. This was a set-up and Joe recognized he had no choice. He picked up his bags and walked down the steps of the apartment and placed them in the foyer. Joe went to the garage on the next block where he kept his truck, drove back to the apartment, picked up the bags and never looked back. One of Valentina's brothers found him one day, handed over the divorce papers, smirked and grabbed his crotch as he walked off.

Joe moved into a studio apartment. His work continued to expand and he found that he had very little time for a social life. On weekends he started to explore the gay world of Philadelphia. He hadn't known when he rented the apartment that he was in the middle of a gay neighborhood. All he had to do was to step outside and he saw gay men everywhere. He considered that it was a gift given to him. In his exploration of the neighborhood he discovered a coffee shop down the street from his apartment. On Saturday mornings, he would go there for breakfast. He would sit for hours drinking coffee, reading the newspaper, and looking at the patrons who would come and go. Sometimes he would read the "Philadelphia Inquirer" through twice while he watched men. He would catch the eye of a good looking man but then wouldn't know how to proceed. He was shy and unsure of himself. It took an assertive man one morning to make a move on him before he shared his bed. Afterwards, he thought he was in love. He lay in bed holding and kissing the man. He felt complete. The simple act of coupling left him vulnerable to the emotional roller coaster that became his life. He equated sex with love and didn't understand why other men didn't see life the same way. It took a few months before he had hardened his heart to the emotional toll that resulted from another erogenous encounter that ended with the man thanking him for the fuck and then walking out. He realized that he wasn't cut from the same cloth as those who were just out for a physical release. He needed someone who also knit the physical with the emotional. Joe wanted a partner. Someone to be with every day for life.

Joe thought he found that someone in Bob. Joe and Bob had been dating for two months when Bob lowered the boom. Bob told Joe that he was too possessive and he wanted to date around and see who else was

available. Joe had been thinking that they would get an apartment together and set up housekeeping. Joe had made a mental commitment to the relationship and saw them together for the rest of their lives. Such was Joe's view of how the world functioned.

After Bob's startling denouement, Joe decided he needed a break from dating. He was laser focused on his work and was even more successful. He was making enough money that he could buy a house, furnish it, buy a new work truck and take a vacation any time he wanted. He did none of those things. He put the money into a savings account and thought that someday when he needed a life change, he would have the money to make it happen. Joe also put his heart into a bank vault that he swore he wouldn't open and make available to anyone again. He couldn't stand the sexual transactions that left him bereft and incomplete.

When he met Thomas he had totally retrenched and wasn't interested in dating anyone. Much less a priest. He didn't know then that when Thomas saw something or someone he wanted, that he was persistent until he got what he wanted. They each carried a lot of hurt and were looking for the same salve.

Thomas had grown up in the low country of South Carolina. His father's family were transplants; meaning that they did not trace the family line back to the founding of the colony. The family had settled on John's Island after the 'late unpleasantness'. His great-great grandfather had settled in the area after the war rather than return to the harsh existence in Maine. He actually wasn't a carpetbagger as he didn't have the money but rather was a hard working man who built his small fortune from setting up a seafood distribution system for the fishermen. His business acumen paid off and the family settled in. His grandfather added to the fortune. The family was respected but never included in Charleston society. Thomas' grandfather had married a local beauty who was of Charleston proper. She moved herself and many family possessions to the plantation that Thomas' grandfather had purchased. He had restored the home, filled it with priceless southern furniture and married a local woman thinking that would buy him a place in society. He was wrong. It was after Thomas' parents married that the family was invited to the inner circle society events. Thomas was even invited to the St. Cecelia Ball each year. That was something his grandfather had striven for but had not achieved success in that pursuit. At last, the family had made it into society.

Thomas was an outstanding student. Tall, handsome and athletic. The local girls wanted to date him but it was the members of the football team who drew his attention. His parents wanted him to attend the Citadel but he decided he wanted to go to the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. It was while he was a student there that he decided he was called to a vocation in the church. He had attended St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Charleston faithfully while growing up but he was always attracted to the pomp and ceremony of the services plus the beautiful historic church that kept him going back Sunday after Sunday. His parents were disappointed that their only child had chosen a life in the church. He told them he was Episcopalian and not Catholic. He could marry when he found the right girl though Thomas knew there would never be the right girl. His mother was particularly upset wondering what would happen to the family furniture, the plantation, the family business. Thomas was somewhat cavalier with her which he regretted later in life when her will stated that everything was to be sold. He told her he chose God not the Chippendale furniture even though he loved the furnishings of the family home.

He finished his bachelor's degree and then entered seminary. He had settled into a beautiful apartment in Sewanee which his mother had decorated. Few of the students lived in such pleasant surroundings. When he completed his degree, he was ordained as a deacon and sent to a church in Nashville. Again, his mother decorated his house using family heirlooms. He lived in an older neighborhood near the University. The city gave way to a neighborhood with quiet streets and early 20th century houses primarily of Arts and Crafts

architecture. His yard was filled with pine trees and azaleas. It looked like home, it looked settled. The rooms were filled with light that reflected off the oak and walnut furniture, the oriental rugs and oil paintings. His den had oak lawyer bookcases filled with historic tomes and his current religious books. The leather Chesterfield sofa in a deep green looked old and well tended. The house felt like he had lived in it his entire life.

Being young and athletic he oversaw the youth program at church. It was difficult for him. The young men were tempting but Thomas knew to keep his hands to himself. He couldn't afford the emotional attachment or the scandal. Several of the young men let him know they would only be too happy to jump into bed with him. He was tempted but ultimately resisted. He continued at the church and was ordained to the priesthood. He was seen as a rising star in the church and the diocese.

It was after his ordination that he started venturing into the city life of Nashville. He discovered that Nashville was a big city but a small town. It didn't take long before the rumors started about him being seen in the gay bars in town. He immediately went back into the closet and stayed home except when he was at church. He didn't put himself in a position of being gossiped about. He even started dating women. Something he had not done since high school.

The call from the Bishop's office startled him. He was told that the Bishop would like to meet with him the following week. He started to build his defense testimony regarding the rumors. He prayed. The more he thought about his defense the worse he felt. His prayers turned into pleas with God to get him through this mess. He tried to bargain that he would never have sex with a man again. It was to no avail. He had made himself so sick that he was not able to preach that Sunday. He knew that his life could not continue on this pathway. What would happen if he told the truth?

He was in a daze as he drove to the Bishop's office. It was a pleasant enough meeting. The Bishop said he was following up with Thomas since his ordination and wanted his thoughts on where his pastoral career might take him.

"You are too talented to remain the assistant priest in a parish. Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Thomas was stupefied as he hadn't thought about that. He assumed he would continue in the parish until the elderly rector retired and then he would move into that position.

"Let me suggest that now is a good time for you to be looking for a parish. I think, perhaps, that Tennessee is too small for you. Too backwards. Too narrow minded....."

Thomas could only look at him and wonder what he knew.

"I think the Northeast might be good for you. They seem to be more liberal minded. Either that or the west coast. It is important that you be in a place where you can be yourself. You should not have to live a lie."

Thomas could only nod his head.

"Keep me apprised as you progress with your search. Our deployment officer will work closely with you to find a suitable parish. Do not sell yourself short. You have many gifts that parishes would love to have. But look at parishes outside of this diocese, please."

Thomas knew that the Bishop knew. He also knew the Bishop was conflict avoidant and was giving him a pass rather than confront the reality of Thomas being gay. Thomas undertook the search process with the same rigor he used in his studies where he was a Dean's list student. That led him to Philadelphia.

3. Mark and Children

Summer 2019

Mark pulled out of the parking lot from the Farmer's Market where they had just met Thomas and he held it together until he got to the stoplight at Margaret Lane and Churton Street. The tears were running down his face as he sat through a green light. He had his right turn signal on but he didn't take advantage of the light. Finally, the person behind him became impatient and was blowing the horn.

"The old bitch. She can fucking wait." Mark steered the Ford 150 Dual Cab around the corner almost hitting a woman pedestrian. The woman told him to be careful and he put down the window and apologized. As soon as the window was back up, he called her an old bitch.

"Daddy, what's a bitch?"

Robert had an amused look on his face. Robert knew the term and if he said those words he would have been sent to his bedroom. Army sat in his seat and was chanting, "old bitch, old bitch, old fucking bitch."

"Enough, in the back seat. Army and Robert please no talking until we get home." Army looked at his dad in the rearview mirror and said, "My name is Belinda. Remember? You promised to call me Belinda."

Mark sighed. How had he made that promise? His mother would say it was a bargain with the devil. His father would say to beat the devil out of the child. Actually, his father said that to him last Sunday.

It had started like most Sundays. He didn't want to get up and stayed in bed tossing and turning. He pretended that one of the pillows was Linda and he squeezed her and said loving words to her. Finally, he opened his eyes and had to deal with the fact that he was a single father with two children. He used to say two boys but lately had been saying two children. He avoided the conversations when he had to talk about the sex of his children. Sex or gender? He had learned the difference in a college health class that he was required to take. At this point, his children were different genders but both the same sex.

He looked up and saw Army standing at the bedroom door. His pajamas bottoms were wet. He had wet himself again. At five years old he was too old to be doing this. When he talked with the pediatrician about the problem, the doctor told him to not make a big deal of it. "Don't get upset. Don't make more of it than what it is. Just ask him if he needs help cleaning up. If he says yes, then do it and talk about how good it feels when he is clean. If he says no, then ask him to clean himself and then acknowledge afterwards that he looks nice." That made sense to Mark.

"Do you want to shower with me this morning?"

Army's eyes lit up and he said yes. He was excited. Robert came walking down the hallway and asked if he could get in the shower also.

"Great, let's make it a boy's locker room kind of morning."

Army's eyes glazed over and said he would take a shower in his bathroom. He turned and started walking down the hall way.

'Damn, I screwed up again,' thought Mark. Linda would know just what to do. It felt like all of the air had been sucked out of the room.

They were running late so Mark put some bread in the toaster and then poured cereal and milk into three bowls. Afterwards they finished dressing and got into the pick-up truck to go to church. They walked in during the opening hymn and saw his mother turn as she was looking for them. Army ran up the aisle and jumped onto the pew to give his granny a hug. He knew the words to the hymn and started singing with a clear, clarion voice. He knew that he had a beautiful voice and believed in the 'Sing out Louse' mantra. Mark and Robert slid in as his father looked at him and then at his watch. His father was the most punctual person in the world. Mark was not born with that internal clock. Mark mumbled through the rest of the hymn.

After the service his mother told Mark that they would be at his house in thirty minutes with lunch. Berta used to host Mark and his children for lunch but after Robert broke one of her Royal Doulton figurines, she decided she would cook at home and transport the food. Lord knows, Mark's house was bare bones. Linda had decorated it very nicely but piece by piece, Mark had removed things and put them away. It now looked like bachelor's quarters. It was clean because Berta sent her maid over once a week. Bonnie Rae reported to Berta about the food choices in the refrigerator, Mark's sticky bed sheets, and the urine soaked pajamas and sheets. Army's mattress had a plastic cover. Bonnie-Rae didn't miss anything important and duly told Berta that week about little girl's underwear in Army's dresser drawer. Berta knew that it was time to face Mark about his parenting skills if he didn't even know the difference between boy's and girl's underwear. For God's sake, all little boys wore white BVDs. If she had to, she would go to the local Target store and buy the boys some clothes. She knew it was hard working full time and raising two rambunctious boys. She remembered that it was easier to raise Mark than his sister, Faith, and she had always heard that it was easier to raise boys than girls.

Mark buckled Robert and Army into the back seat of his truck and pulled onto Rt. 70 to head home. His parents still went to the country church where they had been married thirty-five years before. Berta convinced Mark that the boys needed to go to church and that was a fundamental responsibility of a parent. It was easier going to church than arguing with his mother. His father had told him about not arguing with a spouse just before Mark got married. It was sage advice. Of course, he didn't get much practice before Linda was gone.

Big Mark, Berta, Faith and her husband Ben and their three kids arrived at Mark's house.

"Hey kids, I need help in the kitchen. Your cousins will be here in less than five minutes."

Robert and Army came running from their bedrooms just as the front door opened.

"Anybody home?" It was the typical greeting that his father used every time he came to visit?

Big Mark looked up and saw Army running through the living room in a dress. He had on make up and had a French barrette in his hair.

"What the hell is going on in here? Boy, why do you have on a dress?"

Mark was standing in the opening between the kitchen and dining room with a stack of paper plates in his hands. Belinda ran up to him and threw her arms around his thigh.

By that time, all of his family was standing in the living room. Robert was standing on one side of Mark, and Belinda was on the other. Everyone was staring at the three of them.

“I will explain. Now, Belinda why don’t you go put on some boy clothes?”

“But daddy, I am playing hostess and I need to dress up.”

“Army, look at me.” Belinda slowly raised her head and Mark saw tears running from her eyes.

“Robert, help your granny set the table while Belinda and I go have a talk.”

Mark hoisted Belinda in his arms and walked through his congregated family on their way to the bedroom. Mark closed the door after they entered the room.

Belinda was still crying. Mark held her.

“Okay, Belinda where did you get the makeup?”

Belinda looked at the floor and then the answer hit Mark like a ton of bricks. He had packed up all of Linda’s things and put them in a closet.

“Did you get it out of the closet?”

Belinda nodded her head.

“I suppose that is where you got that hair thing also.”

Again, Belinda nodded.

“Now, here is the difficult part of the conversation. When I bought you that dress what was our agreement?”

Belinda’s lower lip was trembling as she looked at her daddy. “I would wear it only when we were home alone and you said I could put it on.”

“Did you forget about our agreement?”

Belinda looked at Mark and knew there was no good answer so she decided to be absolutely honest.

“I feel pretty in my dress and I wanted to show it to granny.”

“You look beautiful in your dress but I would have preferred that you followed the agreement we had. I would like for you to wash off your make-up, put on your Army clothes, and come with me while we have lunch. Will you do that for daddy?”

“I will do it because I love you daddy. I am sorry that I hurt you. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I don’t like being Army. I am Belinda.”

At that point, Belinda threw herself in her daddy’s arms and started crying again.

Mark sat on the bed with his heart breaking. He realized that he was crying also.

“I think we both need to wash our faces. Come on, let’s do it together.” They walked into the bathroom and Mark saw Linda’s make-up on the counter top. He choked up and could barely breathe. He grabbed two wash clothes and handed one to Belinda. They set about their tasks and cleaned their faces. Belinda went back to the bedroom and when she looked like Army, Mark opened the door, grabbed his son’s hand and walked down the hallway. Faith and her brood had left. His parents sat in the living room.

“Robert, have you eaten?”

“No daddy, I was waiting for you and Army.”

Mark started walking through the living room holding Army’s hand when his father exploded.

“Enough of this horse shit. What is going on?”

“We are getting ready to eat lunch, dad. Have you and mother eaten yet?”

“Boy, you know what I am talking about. Why are you letting your son put on a dress? That is faggot stuff and I will not have it. It makes me want to puke. It also makes me want to punch you in the face for raising my grandchildren like that.”

Mark stopped walking and turned to his father.

“Dad and Mom, my children and I are going to have lunch. Would you like to join us? This is a no violence household and you have to promise that you won’t hit me and anyone else. Also, no more abusive language around my children.”

His father looked like someone had slapped him in the face. “What the hell is a no violence household? Is that some kinda faggot talk? I think you need to beat the devil out of your child. Your child is possessed by the devil.”

Mark’s mouth fell open and he then told his parents to leave. His voice was calm though his gut was in an uproar. He told his mother he would clean the containers and return them to her but it was important for them to leave immediately. Mark’s mother grabbed her pocket book, turned to her husband and told him to get up from the Lazy Boy so they could leave.

After the front door slammed, Mark’s shoulder’s slumped. He knew he had won the battle but the war was much bigger and he didn’t know how he would win that.

Robert asked his father if he was okay. “Yep, Skippy, I am fine. Let’s set the table and eat off of your mother’s dishes. Put those paper plates away.” On occasion he would use nicknames for his children and he needed that familiarity today.

They didn’t talk much while they ate Berta’s wonderful food. She had brought her famous 9-layer cake for dessert because she knew that Mark’s loved it. They each had a slice and Mark said they would save the rest for later. After they cleaned up, Mark told them he needed to run an errand. The boys were strapped in and the F-150 pulled out of the driveway. Mark headed to the Lowe’s in Durham. Normally, he would have driven

over to the Home Depot in town but he didn't want anyone knowing what he was buying. Instead of having the locks to the house re-keyed, he bought new lock sets for the front door, kitchen door and the side door to the garage. If he knew his mother, and he did, tomorrow she would be in the house going through everything in case Bonnie Rae had missed something. They returned home and Mark quietly went about his work while his children played a video game. They didn't need to know what he was doing. After he finished, they went into the yard and climbed into the hammock. It was one of Mark's favorite things to do – falling asleep in the hammock with a child on his side. He loved waking up and seeing his children still sleeping. It filled him with such pride.

They ate a BLT sandwich for supper. All three had mayonnaise running down their chins. They were all giggling while they crammed potato chips their mouths. The orange juice carton was practically empty when they finished. Mark and Robert then had a burping contest to see who could make the loudest eruption. Army was the judge. Mark thought it had been the perfect meal. The day had ended well.

The next morning, Mark dropped the boys off early at a summer day camp. He had to pay an extra fee for the early drop off but it was worth it. He arrived at the construction office before his dad. Workers came dragging in looking like they had a good liquor filled weekend. He assigned their work for the day and the office was empty when his father came in.

Big Mark said nothing. He grunted whenever Mark said something to him.

Mark decided to ignore the boorish behavior and went to his office. He called Army's pediatrician. He needed help because they were at a different developmental stage and he didn't know what to do. Army's doctor made a call to the child psychology program at the university hospital and got an appointment for that week. An appointment for Mark not Army. Mark was told that Army would need to come later but first they wanted to talk to Mark and Army's mother. Mark could barely squeak out that she wasn't available and that he would be coming by himself. Mark walked into his dad's office and told him that he had a medical appointment for Thursday morning. His dad asked him the purpose of the appointment and Mark told him it was to meet with child psychology at the university. His father nodded and didn't say another word.

Big Mark's behavior didn't change though he pitched a fit when Berta told him that she couldn't get into Mark's house to retrieve her Tupperware. Her key no longer worked. Mark didn't address the key issue but told his father he would drop the Tupperware off at their house that afternoon. On Wednesday afternoon, Big Mark asked Mark what time he would be coming to work on Thursday. Mark said he didn't know what time the appointment would finish. Big Mark nodded and asked him if he wanted to take the entire day for the appointment. Mark smiled and thought his dad was coming around and everything would be okay. "Just tell your mother so she gets the payroll right. You are being paid for a four day week since you are taking a day off. I assume this appointment has to do with your sissy son."

Mark cursed a blue streak when he left the construction office that afternoon. His father had never done anything so callous before. 'Win the battle and lose the war'. That was all that Mark could think of when he stopped to pick up his kids. They lived a comfortable life but Mark knew that was the first major volley and there were more to follow. He had worked hard to be both father and mother to his children, to provide them a comfortable upbringing and to make sure they knew their family. He had not done it alone. His parents had been very generous when Mark needed time off but he worked long work weeks so he figured it averaged out over time. He and Linda had bought an historic home in town and Mark had spent countless hours restoring

it. It was the envy of many of the neighbors. In Mark's mind he could hear a great sucking sound and thought it was his life going down the drain.

On Thursday morning, Mark took his children to the day camp and headed down Rt. 86 to Chapel Hill. He knew where the hospital was located and eventually found the parking garage and then walked over to the medical campus. After asking directions, he found the child psychology department. He looked around and saw some seriously disturbed kids. He was thankful that his children did not have serious mental illnesses. Only, his one child couldn't decide whether he was a boy or a girl. Mark paused as he had that thought. It seemed the Army had it figured out. The rest of the world was playing catch-up.

Initially, his appointment with the young psychologist had him feeling uneasy. He couldn't tell if Dr. Robinson was a man or a woman. Dr. Robinson was new on faculty and Mark hadn't looked up their credentials. Mark explained what was happening and received lots of affirmation about the path he was taking.

"But, we are at a new phase, or point, or step or whatever you call it. Army, now wants to be called Belinda and wants to dress like a girl. More than that, Belinda says she is a girl and not a boy."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I just want my child to be happy. Our pediatrician has been wonderful but I think Army is not going through a phase as Belinda but is Belinda. I am in over my head." At that point, Mark started crying. Dr. Robinson handed Mark a box of tissues.

"I guess you spend a lot of money on tissues."

Dr. Robinson just smiled.

Dr. Robinson asked more questions. Mostly they were about Mark and Robert and how they were reacting and handling the situation. Mark then talked through the Sunday explosion, as he now thought of it.

"I need to ask. Where is Belinda's mother? Does she know and what does she think?"

Mark teared up again.

"I have a hard time talking about this."

Silence ensued.

"Army's mother died shortly after child birth. They saved Army but not Linda." Mark sat looking at the floor. He heaved a deep breath. "Robert vaguely remembers his mother but of course Army has no memory."

Mark spent the next few minutes talking about her qualities and that he would ask himself how Linda would handle things. He was trying to make sure he was raising his kids the way his wife would want.

"She was a surgeon. Brilliant woman who was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer when she was pregnant with Army. She was determined that she was going to have the baby. She wanted a little girl but was just as thrilled when she found out it was going to be a boy. It was an incredibly wonderful, incredibly horrible week. I

brought a child home from the hospital and buried my wife. She never left the hospital after the birth. It was if she willed herself to stay alive until Army was born.”

Dr. Robinson asked if Mark had been to a therapist afterwards. He told her he didn't have time with a new born and a two year old. “If it had not been for my mother and sister, I don't know what I would have done. Work helped me focus on something else every day. It was hard but it was good. Everything was going well until Army told me that he was a girl. Linda wanted a girl. I guess we got one but I don't know how to do this.”

“You are extremely generous and kind, Mark. You have been through something that most people would not have survived without lots of therapy. Most fathers don't know how to make sense of gender dysphoria especially if it is a boy saying that he is a girl. And at such a young age. What that tells me is that you have an incredibly open and healthy relationship with your children. Belinda could not have told you that if she was fearful. You are to be commended. Now let's talk next steps.”

When Mark returned to work on Friday his father did not ask about the appointment. Big Mark said he needed to take the day off to go fishing and would see his son on Monday.

4. Noah and the Kitchen Faucet

Fall 1988

Joe woke on Tuesday morning thinking that he had put in a fair day's work on Monday and that he might finish the job early. His thinking was distracted by the swelling in his groin that was demanding attention. He knew that if he didn't take care of it before he left for work that he would be fighting erections all day. His mind turned to the handsome priest, Fr. Thomas, and he quickly finished the job at hand. He was surprised at the amount of output but chuckled as he headed into the shower.

He kept his apartment immaculate as there was so little of it. If one thing was out of place the entire place looked a mess. Joe finished his coffee, juice and cereal and washed the dishes quickly before he went down to his truck. He was smiling as he drove to St. Anselm's. He went to the Parish Hall to get a key and Fr. Thomas said he would unlock the church. Joe had told Fr. Thomas the day before that he would be there early to open the church. Fr. Thomas had already turned on the lights, checked the heating, and then said he had to leave for the morning service in the chapel. It was 10 o'clock when Fr. Thomas came strolling up the center aisle and asked Joe how the work was progressing. Joe smiled and told him that it was going well. He said that it turned out to be a bit more complicated than he originally thought but that he would finish it within the time frame specified. Thomas was concerned that Joe had underbid the job and told him that if it cost more quoted to let him know. Joe immediately countered that the price would not change and that he might finish a little early on Wednesday.

"If you finish early then I will feed you supper as a reward."

Joe looked at the priest and didn't know how to respond. He looked up and saw the tall good-looking man, and thought it might be nice to talk with him about the church. Joe then smiled and said they had a deal. He was then determined that he would finish earlier than he had planned. Thomas smiled also wondering what he was going to feed the good looking carpenter.

Joe had stopped attending the Presbyterian Church a few years prior when he married. He went with his wife to the Catholic Church but had never really participated in the service. The Catholic priest continued to harangue him about taking the Rite of Catholic Initiation for Adults classes so he could be baptized and confirmed in the church. Joe always hesitated. He had been raised in a Presbyterian household where Catholics were not held in high esteem. He decided he wasn't going to answer to some Pope in Rome. He wasn't too sure about the Archbishop of Canterbury either.

Just before lunchtime on Wednesday, Joe went to the Parish Hall to let Fr. Thomas know he had finished the work. Thomas was heading into the noon-time service and invited Joe to join them. Joe reluctantly agreed to go to the service not knowing what to expect. Since it was the mid-week service there were a good number of people in the chapel. Joe felt underdressed in his coveralls, flannel shirt and work boots. He decided to sit in the back. Fr. Thomas started the service and Joe followed along in the Prayer Book. He noticed that most people had the service memorized and did not need the book. He stumbled getting up and down but no one paid attention. Some people sat through the entire service so he didn't feel out of place. When it came time for communion, Joe didn't go up to the altar. He wasn't sure if he was allowed. Certainly, in the Catholic Church he was not allowed. His wife, her family and the priest had made that clear to him. He put his head down like he was praying and stayed in his seat. There was a final prayer and everyone stood as Fr. Thomas exited the chapel.

Joe gave him a few minutes and then went back to the office. Thomas walked out and said they should go inspect the work so that Joe could be paid. Thomas had already arranged for a check to be waiting for Joe. He didn't want him to submit an invoice, then wait for it to be sent to the Treasurer, then a check would be written and the Treasurer would bring it to the church on Sunday. That was all too time consuming.

They walked in the church and Thomas revered the altar. Joe nodded his head not sure quite why he was doing that. They looked at the work and Joe said that no one would know it had been repaired it was so good. It looked just like the original work. Joe smiled and said it was a real pleasure for him to work on something so special.

Joe agreed to be at Fr. Thomas' at 7 pm for dinner that night. As Joe was leaving, he turned to Thomas and said, "by the way, where do you live?" Thomas laughed and explained the layout of the church property and where his front stoop was located. Joe said he was looking forward to a good meal and thanked Thomas again for the work at the church. Joe wasn't sure if he would finish the work on time so did not have any work lined up for the next morning. He thought it would be nice to sleep in.

Joe was an adherent to the clock and rang the doorbell at precisely 7 pm. Thomas opened the door and invited him in. Joe had on a pair of chinos and a navy blue sweater over his white shirt. It was getting colder outside and he wasn't sure about the heat in such a big old house. Thomas also had on a pair of chinos and was wearing a button down oxford cloth shirt. The collar was open and Joe could see his clavicle. He caught his breath at the beauty of the man.

Thomas gave Joe a tour of the house except for the basement. The house was beautifully decorated but was starting to show some wear and tear from deferred maintenance. They were small problems but Joe knew they would turn into big problems if not corrected. They ended up in the library where Thomas poured them a drink. There was a fire in the fireplace which made the room toasty and inviting.

"Let me go to the kitchen to check on something and I will be back with some canapes."

Joe nodded his head and was looking at some historic maps hanging over the book cases. He heard the yelp and immediately set down his glass. He quickly moved to the kitchen where Thomas was trying to stop water from shooting out of the kitchen faucet hose. Thomas was soaked.

Joe dropped to his knees and opened the lower cabinet doors. He tried to turn off the water but the valve handles were frozen in place.

"Where is the water turn-off valve for the house?"

Joe looked like a deer in headlights. Water was still spraying everywhere.

"Wait here. It should be in the basement on the front wall."

Thomas heard Joe run down the basement stairs and then the water stopped. He stood in a huge pool of water. He heard the front door close. When the door bell rang Thomas knew that Joe had locked himself out of the house. Thomas was soaked and did not want to track water through the house so he stripped to his wet skivvies and walked to the door. Joe stood there and could not help gawking at the handsome, well built man in front of him. Joe had a tool box in his hand and said he could fix the problem in no time. He, too, was

soaking wet. They went back to the kitchen and Joe fixed the faucet as Thomas mopped the floor. He took his clothes and put them in the laundry. He was wondering what to do when Thomas asked him for a wrench. Thomas located it in the tool box and passed it under the sink to Joe. It wasn't long before Joe told him that he had fixed it but the entire faucet set was worn out and needed replacing. The water was turned back on and there was no spraying geyser. Joe looked at Thomas and turned beet red. The priest was standing in front of him and Joe could see the outline of his penis through his wet underwear. Thomas' hair was still plastered down from all of the water and there were droplets that ran down his chest. Thomas looked at Joe and saw a man drenched from head to toe. He suggested they go upstairs to take showers. Joe said he didn't have any dry clothes so Thomas said he could take them off and he would put them in the dryer. Joe nodded and proceeded to disrobe in the kitchen. Thomas could barely contain himself he was so taken by the ginger haired man standing in front of him. Joe dropped everything including his boxers. Thomas immediately boned up and turned his body so he wouldn't be so bloody obvious.

Somehow, Thomas got the clothes in the dryer and turned it on. He then returned to the kitchen to find Joe standing in the middle of the floor looking lost.

"Follow me."

Up the stairs they went with Joe looking at Thomas' underwear clad ass. The fabric was wet and clung to each cheek. Joe immediately dropped his hands in front of his junk to cover his erection. Thomas pointed to a bath and told Joe there were towels in there.

"I will get you a robe to wear while our clothes are in the dryer."

After they both had showered and put on robes they went back downstairs to the kitchen.

"Let's eat in the library in front of the fireplace."

Joe moved stacks of books and magazines off the table in front of the sofa. Thomas prepared their plates and then poured two fingers of scotch in each of their thistle embossed glasses. They sat on the comfortable sofa and ate the dinner that Thomas had prepared. There was little conversation as they couldn't figure out what to say. When dessert was served, Thomas poured them each a brandy. Thomas swirled the amber liquid in the glass and took a big sniff.

Joe could see that Thomas was cutting his eyes and looking at him. He started smiling. They both let out an audible sigh.

"Well, that's not what I was expecting to happen tonight. Thank you very much for saving me from the flood." Thomas looked over and noticed that Joe had stretched out his legs and was sitting with his back pushed back into the corner of the sofa. He looked slightly drunk.

"It is a good thing that I carry my tools in my truck. It wouldn't have taken long before some real damage happened."

A comfortable silence then ensued. Thomas heard the dryer complete its cycle but decided not to say anything. He was enjoying this time with Joe and did not want it to end. He kept looking into the fire and taking sniffs of the brandy.

He heard the chime from the tall case clock in the foyer. It was going on eleven o'clock. He looked over and saw that Joe was asleep. Thomas quietly cleaned up the library and crept upstairs to make sure the guest room was ready for company. He then went back downstairs and gently shook Joe's shoulder. Joe startled awake and apologized.

"You are sleeping here tonight. I have made up the bed in the guest bedroom. We can get up early in the morning so you can get to your next job. I will fix us breakfast since I am working from home."

They both climbed the stairs and Thomas showed Joe his room. He closed the door and then walked the hall to his bedroom. His deep desire was to invite Joe to sleep with him but he wasn't sure if his invitation would be accepted. He was so afraid of rejection that he didn't make the offer. Joe meanwhile was lying in his bed wondering if it was untoward to ask Thomas if he could join him. It had been awhile since he slept with anyone and he needed the human contact.

The men tossed and turned in their respective bedrooms. It was still dark when the alarm clock went off. Thomas got out of bed and then washed his face, cleaned his teeth and ran a comb through his hair. He quietly went downstairs and turned up the heat, then he went to the kitchen where he put on a pot of coffee. He opened a canister and started measuring flour for the raisin scones he was going to prepare. He reached into the refrigerator for butter and cut grapefruit marmalade. He had found a British shop where he procured all things English. As he turned to put things on the table he saw Joe standing in the doorway. He looked lost.

"Good morning, Joe. I hope you slept well last night. Here, let me pour you a cup of coffee."

Joe moved into the kitchen without saying a word. He sat at the table with his uncombed hair, his day old beard and a headache. He was not a drinker and just the bit from the night before had done him in.

"What do you want in your coffee?"

"Nothing, thanks."

The mug was set in front of Joe and he blew across the top to cool the beverage. He needed caffeine but didn't want to burn his mouth. Finally, he took a sip. Ahhhh, good coffee. He thought he might live.

Thomas was busy with the coffee, pouring juice and getting the scones from the oven. Joe couldn't remember the last time he had a scone. Probably when he visited his parents. His mum always made scones.

When they finished, Joe got up and started washing the dishes. Thomas grabbed a drying towel and before long the two men had the kitchen clean.

"My clothes?"

Thomas went to the laundry and pulled Joe's clothes from the dryer. They were wrinkled. He offered to iron them but Joe told them there was no need.

"Did you say you have the day off?"

"Well, not a day off but I work from home today. I will be here writing my sermon for Sunday."

“Fine, I will be back in an hour with a new faucet to replace that antique you have. Your name is not Noah and you don’t want to be dealing with another flood.”

Thomas started to object but Joe walked up to him and put his hand across Thomas’ mouth.

“No objections allowed. This is a gift for dinner and letting me spend the night.”

Joe let himself out the front door.

Thomas stood in the middle of the kitchen not sure what had just happened but was glad that Joe was returning.

An hour later, the front doorbell rang and Joe was standing there with a new faucet. He told Thomas it wouldn’t take long. He made himself busy with the work and within thirty minutes had completed the job.

Joe left and Thomas found himself at loose ends. The sermon would not write itself but he couldn’t focus on the gospel and writing another sermon. He went upstairs and picked up the pillow on the bed where Joe had slept. He held it to his nose and breathed in a fragrance he was not familiar with. It was Joe’s cologne. He went back downstairs, put a couple of logs in the fireplace and curled up on the sofa with a blanket and Joe’s pillow under his head. As he fell asleep, he was smelling Joe and he was at peace.

5. Peach Cobbler

Summer 2019

Thomas was rolling out the pastry for the peach cobbler. Fresh South Carolina peaches were part of his upbringing and he had many recipes to use this delicious fruit.

“If you keep rolling that dough, it will be so tough you could drive trucks on it.”

Thomas chuckled and said he needed to be kneading dough to get his frustration under control.

“Why are you frustrated, husband of mine?”

“I can’t figure out Mark and his family. They were not at the Farmer’s Market today. I wanted to speak with them. Something is going on.”

“What is your saying? In God’s time. You need to have patience.”

They both knew that wasn’t one of Thomas’ strengths.

At lunch time on Saturday, Thomas and Joe went over their schedules for the coming week. When they retired, their lives had been fairly simple. However, they grew bored with retirement and had started picking up work.

“I am at the Episcopal Church in Mebane tomorrow. The rector is on vacation and I am filling in for him during August. On Monday, I am in Chapel Hill for a Medical Ethics committee meeting. The agenda looks very full and the cases are fascinating this month. I will probably be there all day. Tuesday is clear except running errands in the morning and I have a meeting with a young gay priest in Raleigh in the afternoon. I will be mentoring him as he starts as a new priest in the diocese. On Wednesday I am doing a healing service at lunch time. If we have a big breakfast, we could have a late lunch/early dinner. On Thursday, I am meeting with faculty at Chapel Hill about a grant that will provide clinical services to transgender families. They want to talk with me about spiritual resources and whether I would like to be included as faculty. They think they can get me a clinical faculty appointment if I say yes. On Friday I am teaching my course at Duke on the Acts of the Apostles. Other than that, I have nothing to do.”

They both laughed.

“How did we go from retirement where we were going to sit back and do nothing to you being booked every day?”

Thomas laughed and said he had always been an overachiever.

“Okay, Mr. Carpenter, what are you doing this week?”

“I have an easy week. I am working on the insulation where we noticed air leaks last winter. I am working on the Mill House; it is getting close to being finished. We will have to decide what to do with it once I have finished the restoration. It is wonderful that we live on the property that once had an active water mill. Except that it is expensive to restore. It is not like we need to grind corn or wheat. We can afford it, but it will be

shame for it to sit empty. On Friday, I have a meeting with a construction company about future planning. I am enjoying being a consultant for SCORE. I never thought of myself as an executive but in the construction trade that is how I am viewed. A family business is looking at how to pass the business from a father to a son. I guess they are also wondering whether to sell the business instead of passing it also. That is smart thinking on their part. I will take them through all of their options. It will be hard work and it gets very personal. Very personal. I expect everything except fisticuffs. Hell, let me find my old boxing gloves in case they are needed.” Both men laughed at the absurdity of the notion of family fighting that would lead to something physical.

That Sunday morning, Mark and the kids ate their cereal and he said they were going to another church so they would need to leave extra early. Mark, Robert and Belinda drove to Mebane and Mark pulled into the parking lot of the Episcopal Church. He didn't know how this was going to play out but he decided that he was not going to fight with Belinda when she came out of her bedroom in a dress that morning.

They climbed the front steps of the church with Robert holding Belinda's hand. Mark was behind them. He felt like he was shepherding them up the steps. He also had their backs. They entered the vestibule and Mark was handed a bulletin. When they entered the sanctuary, Mark noticed that the back pew was already taken so he led his children about half way up the aisle and then they sat. This was not an entirely new experience for Mark as Linda had been an Episcopalian. In fact, they had married in an Episcopal church and Robert had been baptized in the Episcopal church. Linda had insisted over the objections of her in-laws. Army had not been baptized.

The opening hymn started and Belinda knew it. She stood on the pew beside Mark and started singing. People around were smiling. It was a surprise when Mark noticed the priest. He was trying to recall his name. He met him at the Farmer's Market.

Belinda knew immediately that it was Thomas. She smiled broadly and waved at Thomas. Slowly, Mark was remembering the order of service. Belinda was enthralled while Robert twitched and was bored. When it was time for communion, Mark stood as did his children. They walked to the altar rail and Mark knelt. Belinda and Robert did likewise. Thomas had the look of recognition on his face as he approached them. It made sense to Thomas. Army was Belinda. He gave the host to Mark who took it. Robert emulated his father and put out his hands. Then Belinda did the same only when Thomas offered the wafer, Belinda took his finger in her hands. Belinda smiled at Thomas. She then took the wafer and ate it.

When they returned to the pew, Belinda sat on the end toward the aisle. During the recessional hymn, Belinda slipped from the pew, took Thomas' finger and walked out with him. She was beaming. Thomas was looking down in amazement. They stood in the narthex as people were leaving. Belinda would shake their hands and thank them for coming. Everyone was absolutely charmed by this little girl. Mark and Robert made their way down the aisle and answered questions from curious people. Members of the congregation wanted to know if they were related to Thomas. This was the first time that Thomas had been a supply priest in their parish and they didn't know anything about him. Mark said they were acquaintances. Belinda was all graciousness when Mark and Robert approached. She was acting like a hostess at a party. Mark thanked Thomas for the service and told Belinda it was time to go. She said that she hadn't finished thanking everyone and she would come out in a few minutes. Mark shook his head wondering about his child. He and Robert walked down the steps and sat on a bench along the walkway. He could still see the entrance and was making sure that Belinda was okay. Robert was talking with him but Mark didn't comprehend what he was saying.

“Dad, it is okay. It is Thomas. We were with him at the Farmer’s Market.”

Just at that moment, Thomas and Belinda walked down the steps to where Mark and Robert were sitting.

“I am returning Belinda to you. How are you Mark? Robert? I didn’t know you were members of this church.”

“We’re not. This is our first time coming here. I thought we might want to go to a different church this morning.”

“Well, Joe is fixing lunch. Would you like to join us?”

“Yes, daddy, please.” Both kids were begging.

Mark looked at Thomas and said they would be pleased to join them as long as they were not putting them out.

“Let me go get out of my vestments and call Joe so he fixes lunch for five instead of two.” Thomas gave them directions to the house.

“Oh, you are the guys who bought the old Peterson house.”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, I know right where it is. We will be there in an hour.”

Mark decided not to go home because he thought his parent’s might stop by to ask why they weren’t in church. He wasn’t prepared to have that conversation.

After Mark and his kids pulled up in the driveway, Belinda undid her safety harness, opened the door and jumped from the vehicle. She ran to the house where Thomas had come out from the kitchen door. She took his hand and stood smiling as Mark and Robert strode up the slate walkway. Lavender lined the walk and creeping oregano was between the pavers. It gave off a wonderful scent. Joe was inside finishing the meal and putting the food on the table. Joe greeted them and told Belinda how beautiful she looked that day. She reveled in his compliment. Belinda decided she could trust Joe.

Any awkwardness disappeared as Mark and Joe talked about the construction trade. It didn’t take Joe very long to figure out his upcoming SCORE consulting job involved Mark and his father. He chose not to say anything. He became more discreet in what he revealed about his consulting work in case Mark’s father had not disclosed the upcoming visit. Mark did not mention it.

After finishing their peach cobbler and ice cream, Mark said they needed to go home though he was somewhat reluctant because he couldn’t deal with his parents on the off chance they would stop by. Joe said they had a wonderful hammock in the side yard and it was perfect for an afternoon nap. Robert grabbed Mark’s hand and said they were going to test it. Belinda said she wanted to try it out also.

Thomas and Joe looked out the kitchen window as the family of three settled in for a nap. They looked so peaceful.

“I’ll make something for a light Sunday night dinner. They don’t act as if they want to go home.” Thomas nodded at Joe’s insight and thoughtfulness.

Joe had been right, Thomas noted. Mark and his kids were in no hurry to go home.

For dinner, there was a platter of tomatoes, lettuce, cheese slices, bacon, ham, turkey and toasted bread on the table. A container of Duke’s mayonnaise was opened. Joe decided not to fancy things up for Sunday night supper. A bag of chips was opened. A pitcher of sweet tea and a carton of orange juice were on the counter. Everyone hoed into the food and made sandwiches. Thomas only put tomato slices and mayonnaise on his sandwich. He joked that Joe would build an elaborate sandwich. Thomas said there was only one proper way to eat a tomato sandwich which was bread, tomato and mayo. Nothing else except maybe some salt and pepper. He told Joe this was not a hoagie filled with different things.

Mark and the kids looked perfectly at home eating dinner with Joe and Thomas. They were relaxed after their nap and the tension that Mark had carried in his shoulders earlier in the day had disappeared. They finished off with lemon bars that Thomas had made. Mark and the children said they would clean up and wash the dishes. No amount of talking from Thomas or Joe could convince them otherwise.

It was practically dark when Mark told the kids to tell Thomas and Joe goodbye because they needed to go home. Belinda pulled both gentlemen down into a hug and kissed them on the cheeks. Robert held out his hand for a gentlemanly handshake. Mark did the same.

“It was a pleasure to have you here today. Remember that I will be at the church in Mebane until Labor Day. It would be nice to see familiar faces in the congregation. You might even be able to convince Joe to go with you.” Thomas winked at Joe as he spoke.

There was a discussion between the two gentlemen as they lay in the hammock after dinner. They knew that Mark was tense with worry. Thomas said it was about Belinda. Joe said it was about the construction business. They both agreed that whatever the problem it was weighing on the young father.

“Since we are talking about problems worrying a father, have you heard from Sean?”

Joe tried not to let Thomas know about his concern.

“I haven’t heard from him a few weeks. Cell phone service is inconsistent in eastern Europe. He will call us when he gets a chance.”

They both stopped talking and started ruminating about their son.

Mark lay awake in bed after getting his children settled for the night. They both said how much they liked spending the afternoon with Joe and Thomas. Belinda was especially delighted that she got to stand by Thomas in church and tell everyone to have a blessed day. Mark asked where she heard that language and Belinda said that Thomas was telling everyone that so she decided to do the same. Mark could only shake his head in wonderment at his precocious child.

6. Mark

Summer 2019

Mark awoke that Saturday morning and smiled knowing it was going to be a great day. He could already see the sun shining through the slits in the blinds. Yep, he and the kids would go hiking and cook out on the trail. He loved being out in nature. He just had to find his hiking boots.

“Okay, cowkids, up and at ‘em.”

Mark realized he would have loved living in an earlier time in the wild, wild west. He had seen all of the television shows when he was growing up. He could have lived on the Ponderosa or in the Big Valley. He admired all of the handsome guys in their chaps, riding horses, and eating grub. He always got a funny feeling in his tummy when they were shirtless. He didn't know why but he knew he wanted to look like them. He admired their easy camaraderie. He laughed thinking that as a straight man he could still admire other handsome men. He wasn't intimidated by them because he knew that he could hold his own. Men and women, many younger than him, let their eyes linger a little too long when viewing him. Especially when he was at the community pool. He had to be careful he didn't chub up. He knew Robert was going to be the same way. When he was born, the doctor looked at his genitals and commented on how blessed he was. Mark remembered laughing and proudly saying he took after his dad. Army was beautiful and blond like his mother. He was lithe and would be tall and slender. He too was blessed. The apple didn't fall far from the tree in terms of body DNA for either child. Mark was six feet of hunk. He had a furry chest, five o'clock shadow, a devilish grin and a twinkle in his eyes. He still exercised every day to keep his body in shape. His ego wasn't out of proportion to his body. He knew it was a gift and was glad that it had been bestowed on him. He went to the bathroom to relieve his snake before heading to the kitchen.

Robert and Army still had sleep in their eyes when they came in for breakfast. Mark had set out cereal bowls and was making toast. He didn't want to waste time by cooking a hot breakfast. After eating, they stacked bowls and Mark said they would wash them when they came back.

“It is going to get hot later today so wear layers. I can't find my damn boots. Have either of you seen them?”

Army shyly said they were in the storage closet. Mark knew what that meant. Army had been rooting around again. He was looking for things that were his mother's. Perhaps Mark had been wrong to pack away all of Linda's belongings when she died. It may have been better if he had left them out. When Mark opened the closet door, he could tell that boxes that held Linda's personal items had been opened. He decided that denial was the best route for the moment and looked through things until he saw his boots. Beside them were Linda's boots. They loved to hike together. They were convinced that Army had been conceived on one of their hikes. They were both romantic in that way.

It had been a hot sunny day when Mark and Linda had been on the Appalachian Trail for a weekend hike. Robert was with Mark's parents for the weekend. Both Robert and Linda were deeply tanned from spending so much time outside by the pool. They started hiking early Friday afternoon. On Saturday morning they crawled out of their tent and surveyed the valleys and hills in front of them. Mark knew they were hiking to a waterfall. He had plans. They ate their oatmeal and drank a

cup of Nescafe. It was nasty stuff but they didn't care. They were both in their underwear and Mark said it would be fun to hike in the nude. Linda gave him a look that conveyed, 'don't try it, buddy'. Mark asked about hiking in their underwear. Again, she was weighing the possibilities.

"This is what we are going to do then, Buster Brown. We will wear our swimsuits so when we get to the waterfall we won't have to change."

Mark smiled triumphantly. He knew that Linda was all about compromise so he started at the far end of the spectrum and knew that they would end up at the place he really wanted. Linda knew Mark too well and played along with his silly macho games. She could read him an oft-perused book.

After brushing their teeth, they donned their swimsuits. Linda wore a one piece while Mark wore his speedo. They both wore hiking boots. Luckily, their packs were fairly light weight since it was just a weekend hike. They trekked north along the trail. When they encountered other people, both would be ogled. Linda would chuckle because the men were not being able to look her in the face as their eyes were zoomed in on her bosom. She was as well endowed in her mammary glands as Mark was in his lower 48. When this was happening, Linda would start to pick something off of her swimsuit and then start rubbing at her breasts and Mark would rearrange his junk in his speedo. They would then laugh at each other and press forward with their hike.

They reached the waterfall around lunch time. They ate protein bars and then apples and oranges. They purified water to make lemonade.

"Last one in is a sissy." Mark laughed as he raced toward the lake at the bottom of the falls. Linda raced like mad. She was as competitive as Mark if not more so. That is how she became a neurosurgeon. She had fought like hell against prejudices from all of those old doctors. She had placed first in her graduating class from Medical School and had gotten exactly where she wanted on Match Day. They were staying in Chapel Hill.

Their lives had been a struggle, or so they thought. Their world view was of privileged kids with money and a good education who were on their own for the first time. Sure, they had to live in a one bedroom apartment when they finished undergraduate school. They both went to graduate school and worked part time. Mark worked for his dad and Linda worked in a clinical reference laboratory. Mark decided he was educated enough when he finished his degree but Linda knew she was on the pathway to her goal. She wanted to be a surgeon. She loved to take care of people. She was as passionate about that as she was about her love for Mark.

They were perfectly matched. They enjoyed the physicality of making love. Linda would goad Mark when he thought he was being too rough with her.

"Come on, wimp, give it to me. Pound me hard. Push me across the bed with your thrusts. Take me big boy." And he did, time and again. She was insatiable about enjoying every minute of life. She wanted nothing left behind when she died. He had met his match in so many ways. But it grew boring for Linda.

He clearly remembered one night after they had been dating for about six months. He was horny and making moves on her. He told her he needed her in the bedroom. She replied that she needed to get a

nail file. He didn't know what she meant. She looked him directly in the eyes and said that sex for him was a male dominant activity. She said she was tired of the missionary position with the lights turned off. The nail file was for her to do her manicure while he screwed her.

Mark was gutted because at 22 years old he thought he was good in bed. Linda could tell she had hurt his little boy sensitivities. She asked Mark if she could take the lead that night. He said yes but he didn't really know what she meant. By the time she finished with him that night he was a quivering mess. From that point on, she led their sexual experiments and gave him ideas to try. He willingly went along when she wanted to try new and different things. The tired missionary position was stricken from their list of possibilities. It was when she brought home a strap-on dildo that he thought she had gone too far. It was all black which made it worse for him. He was hidebound about certain things.

Linda started by making Mark lie on his back. She told him he couldn't assume another position without her permission. His hard cock was thrusting, trying to enter her but she wouldn't let it. She kept bringing him to the edge and then backing away. She licked his nut sack and when her mouth went lower Mark started making incoherent sounds and his hips were bucking. She pushed his hairy thighs onto her shoulders as her tongue continued to move south. When she entered Mark with the strap-on, he started yelling and cussing. He used language he never uttered around other people; most certainly not a woman. That night he let himself be taken three times. The third time he was riding cowboy while holding onto the headboard. The next day at work his father asked if he was okay because he was walking strange. Mark blushed and said his hemorrhoids were acting up. After that night both agreed that everything was allowable with two caveats: first, it was always just the two of them and no one else was invited and second, they both had to agree and when one of them said 'stop' the other would honor that. However, neither of them ever said 'stop'.

She taught him about sex, gender, romance, and sensuality. He taught her that he was a willing partner who loved and adored her and was willing to walk over hot coals for her. After he thought that he shuddered thinking that was probably also in her repertoire. After all, she had him understand the correlation between pleasure and pain and had him writhing while she chewed on his nipples. He then understood the short connection between his nipples and his cock. He had never considered a man's nipples as a sex organ. Linda, luckily disabused him of that notion.

Mark had stamina and could ride the wave for hours as they explored the fluidity of sexuality. One of their favorite activities was playing Crash Davis and Annie Savoy from the movie, "Bull Durham." The movie was set right down the road in Durham and they knew the scenes only too well. They would spend Saturday night putting the house back together after making love in every room of the house during the day. They never knew if Mark's parents would stop by after church on Sunday so they wanted it to be the house they expected to see.

It was a good thing his parents did not know what went on in their house when the draperies were closed. Mark knew that he and Linda weren't the first to try their veritable circus of sexual exploration but he couldn't conceive of his parents having the imagination and willingness to explore these uncharted territories. He remembered seeing his father peeing one day in the bathroom and the stream of yellow water went all over the wall as his father tried to hide his penis. His father yelled at Mark and told him that it was a sin for him to be looking. His mother always wore a housecoat that practically skimmed the floor. It was buttoned all the way to her throat. He had never

seen her in a bathing suit. His sister, Faith, went through a stage in high school where both parents were concerned that she was a slut because she was caught kissing a boy after a date. It was a sexually repressed home.

Their time at the waterfall was magical. She was The Lady of the Lake as she handled his sword. He was Odysseus who was home from a ten-year odyssey. Because they were both beautiful and gifted in their physical attributes, they took it for granted it would always be that way. They spent afternoons making love. They hastily put up a tent as the sun was going down and gathered some sticks for a fire. They made love in front of the fire. That night in the tent, Linda was a cowgirl until Mark told her he was chapped and needed some medication. She found some lotion and then she started again. Mark was amazed that he could get it up again the next morning before they hiked out of the mountain to drive home. But he did. Linda then fed him his own essence for breakfast. He was a little hesitant at first but Linda convinced him to enjoy this new adventure. Afterwards, Mark was so turned on by the taste of himself he convinced her to go one more time. Mark dove in afterwards with no asking or hesitation. He loved the taste of himself mixed with Linda.

It was the absolute freedom of their sex and gender play that allowed Mark to be open about Army saying he was Belinda. Linda had taught him about the range of sex and gender. His repressive childhood was gone and he was open to the limitless possibilities of the gifts of their love. God, he missed her so bad. She had given him an incredible gift and now he had no one to share it with.

Mark came back to the present and helped Army and Robert prepare for the hike. He said they were driving to the mountains because he had something he wanted to show them. Mark quickly gathered the equipment that hadn't been used in years and was so manic the boys didn't know what was going on with their dad. They were on the road and Mark was in a great mood. Both boys finally stopped asking 'how much further, dad' and fell asleep in their seats. When they reached a parking lot, Mark put on a pack and the three headed north on a trail. They arrived at the lake late in the afternoon. They were enchanted.

Mark set up the tent and then said they were going swimming. "Put on your swimsuits. We don't want the fish nibbling on our things thinking they are bait." The boys giggled. They walked in the water with Mark in the middle holding onto their hands. The bottom was solid and went they were out to Army's shoulders, Mark sat down and let the boys play. They had a splashing game and both boys tackled their dad. It was a magical time for them. They were fearless. Army was like a fish in the water the same as his mother. Robert was like his dad and plowed through the water like a tug boat.

They towed off when they got out of the lake and Mark built a fire in front of the tent. They were wearing their skivvies. He had put some hot dogs in a cooler and they roasted them on twigs. He found an old bag of marshmallows in the cabinet and had brought those also. As the fire died down, they looked up and saw the stars. It felt like they could reach out and touch them. When they climbed into the tent, they laid on Linda's sleeping bag that had been opened and Mark used his sleeping bag to cover them. The three of them slept intertwined. It was the most intimate thing that Mark had done since his Linda had died. He awoke and was at peace.

They had a peeing competition in the morning; Army said that it was unfair because Mark had such a big penis. He asked Mark if he could touch it because he had never seen it so big and hard. Mark

swallowed and said he could have one quick touch. Army touched it and then was totally disinterested. Mark wondered if he had gone too far with Army. He didn't want to be prudish but this was new territory. Robert kept asking if his was going to be as big as his dad's. Mark said that time would tell and they would have another peeing competition when he was a grown.

Mark pulled out packages of instant oatmeal and he made some instant orange juice. It was a quiet beautiful morning by the lake. They ate and talked about the good time they were having. Mark said they needed to clean up the camp site so they could head back home but first he had a story to tell them.

He then told them the story of Linda.

7. People Just Like Me

Summer 2019

“Well, you are brave this morning, Fr. Thomas.”

Thomas looked at the attractive elderly woman and smiled.

“How so?”

“You are wearing a pink shirt. When I was coming along men didn’t wear pink shirt unless they were....you know...” At that point, she did a limp wrist movement.

Thomas hesitated a few seconds processing what he had just heard. “I am....you know.....” At that point, he did a limp wrist movement. “Always have been, always will be.” He then gave her a big smile.

She stuttered. “I didn’t mean to offend you father.”

“I am not offended. No one should be offended to acknowledge who and what they are.”

Belinda stood beside him staring back and forth at the repartee.

Thomas smiled, wished her a blessed day and then said they had shopping to do.

The morning had started easy enough. Mark and the kids came over for breakfast and a trip to the Farmer’s Market. Joe had made blueberry muffins and coffee for an early snack. He said they would have breakfast after Thomas and Belinda made the trip to the market. He then said he had some carpentry to do in the Mill House before he started cooking. Mark and Robert asked if they could help. Joe, of course, smiled and said he could always use help. Belinda had grabbed the handle of the wagon to pull it for their shopping trip. Thomas knew once it was loaded, he would need to pull it back to the house.

Belinda was dressed in an androgynous way. Jeans and a t-shirt that was tied at the side. Her hair was coiffed in a girlish fashion with a pink French barrette. And flip flops. Her toe nails were painted pink. Thomas wore khaki shorts, a pink Izod and flip flops. He looked like an older man taking his grandchild to the market. He left the wagon with Becky and Alice and started walking down the aisle. Mark had given him a list of things to purchase along with a wad of cash. He had pulled it out of his wallet and said if that wasn’t enough to let him know and he could get more cash to pay me back.

“Let’s start at the far end and make our way back.”

Belinda held his hand as they made their way through people in the market. Just as they were approaching the end, they heard a woman call Army’s name. Belinda moved in closer to Thomas. A young, overweight, brightly made-up woman approached them and asked Army where her daddy was.

“He’s with Uncle Joe this morning.”

She looked at Thomas and asked who he was. Thomas introduced himself.

“Just who is Uncle Joe? I don’t think you have an Uncle Joe, darling.” Thomas could see the fear in Belinda’s face.

“Uncle Joe is in fact my husband. Mark and Robert are at the house helping him with a construction project while we are here shopping. We are also having brunch when we get back.”

Faith looked like someone had slapped her in the face.

“I ain’t having this.” She reached over and tried to grab Belinda as she moved behind Thomas. Faith’s dangly bracelets were tingling. She wore multiple bracelets and one got caught in Belinda’s hair.

“Oww, let me go. Help me Uncle Thomas.”

Thomas swooped Belinda in his arms. Faith’s bracelets were still caught in Belinda’s hair. Thomas automatically started to untangle them.

“Don’t touch me, you faggot. You need to give me my nephew right now or I will call the police.”

Becky and Alice walked up and asked Faith if there was a problem. She stared at them like they were not worthy to be talking to her.

Alice moved between Thomas and Faith. “Perhaps you are hard of hearing with that poofy hair of yours. We asked if there was a problem.”

Faith stared at them and said she would be right back. She started a fast walk to the Sheriff’s Department which was across the parking lot from the Farmer’s Market.

Becky and Alice asked if everyone was okay and Thomas assured them that they were. Alice decided to stay close by in case Thomas needed them while Brenda went back to their booth. Belinda and Thomas started making their way through the market when Faith returned with a deputy.

“Good morning, Father Thomas. How are you today?” Thomas saw that it was Deputy Cartwright whom he knew.

“I am well, deputy. How are you this fine morning?”

“I am doing pretty doggone good for a Saturday. Who is this with you this morning?”

Belinda reached out her hand and introduced herself. Faith flew into a rage.

“His name is Army and not Belinda. He is my nephew and I don’t know what this man has done with his father and brother. I demand that Army come with me right now.”

Belinda hung closer to Thomas who waited and didn’t respond.

“Father, can I talk with you over here?” He motioned to a quiet area away from the market. Thomas moved in the direction requested without putting down Belinda. He was afraid the woman would grab the child and

leave. Alice placed herself between Faith and the deputy, Thomas and Belinda. She wasn't going to let Faith get near them.

"Can I ask you what is going on?"

"Of course. Mark, who is Faith's brother, came over this morning for breakfast. He and his son, Robert, are at the house helping Joe with a carpentry project. We are restoring the old Mill House on the property. Belinda and I are here doing some shopping before the market closes. When we get back, we will have a late breakfast."

The deputy nodded that he understood.

He looked at Belinda and said he misunderstood her name.

"Belinda. My name is Belinda."

"Well, Miss Faith said your name is Army."

"I hate that name. My name is Belinda."

The deputy looked at Thomas not knowing what to do.

"I suggest you call Mark and he will tell you that Belinda and I are shopping. That should put an end to the mystery."

Thomas gave Deputy Cartwright the telephone number to call. Mark confirmed that his child, Belinda, was shopping with Thomas with his permission. Mark was concerned that something had happened to Belinda. The Deputy said she was okay, but his sister was causing a bit of a raucous at the market.

"Don't let my sister take my child. Thomas is there with Belinda. Oh hell, give me five minutes and I will be there to clear this up."

Belinda was in Thomas' arms and had her arms around his neck. "Don't let her take me, Uncle Thomas. Please don't let her take me."

The deputy spoke up and said no one was taking her and that her daddy was on the way.

Less than five minutes later, Mark, Robert and Joe were at the front of the market looking for them. Mark saw the deputy and started moving through the crowd. Most were shopping but also paying attention to the commotion that Faith had caused. Family fights among the 'nice' people in town almost never happened publicly and the people at the market wanted a front row seat of a fight in an old, established family in Hillsborough.

"What is the meaning of this, Mark?" Faith was in a high drama mode.

"Faith, quieten your voice and we can have a conversation."

“Don’t tell me to be quiet when some old queer has my nephew and turned him into a girl. This is an abomination. This is against God’s teachings.” Everything in the market had quietened as Faith ramped up.

“Come with me, Army. Your Auntie Faith will take care of you.”

Everyone could hear Belinda screaming as Faith grabbed Belinda’s arm. Belinda refused to let go and Thomas was holding her firmly in his arms.

Before Mark could intervene, Deputy Cartwright put his hand on Faith’s arm and told her quietly that she was not taking the child. “Please let Belinda loose so I don’t have to arrest you, Miss Faith.”

“Arrest me? How dare you? Do you know who I am?” Faith was screaming so all could hear.

“Yes, ma’am, I do know who you are. I also know Mark and this is his child. Unless he gives you permission to take his child what you are proposing to do is called abduction of a minor. I do not want to arrest you and take you to jail.”

“I’m not going to jail. He should be going to jail for turning his son into a queer. Look at these old queers. Mark, are you a queer also?” Gasps could be heard from other shoppers.

Mark had lost all color in his face. He stood stoic but couldn’t speak.

“Miss Faith, come with me. This is enough for today.” At that point, Deputy Cartwright walked Faith to the sheriff’s department.

Joe gave Mark a hug and told him they needed to finish their construction project. Robert grabbed Joe’s hand and then his daddy’s hand and walked them through the crowd and out of the market. The crowds parted as the three of them walked from one end of the market building to the other. Already people were whispering. Mark could only look forward; he knew if he looked to the side and saw someone give him a disapproving look he would cut them out of his life forever.

Thomas realized it was important to normalize everything for Belinda. He pulled out the shopping list and told her they needed to figure out what they had left to purchase. Belinda was starting to retreat into herself so Thomas made her talk to each of the farmers and tell them what was needed. She quickly perked up as they would smile and thank her for her order.

Cirese, at the bakery stand, gave Belinda a cookie. “This is Thomas’ favorite cookie but I notice he is getting a little chubby so I am going to give it to you instead.” Cirese smiled at Thomas in a way of asking forgiveness for her statement but also wanted Belinda to know that she was special. Belinda took one bite and her eyes rolled back in her head. A smile crossed her face.

“I know why this is your favorite cookie, Uncle Thomas. Miss Cirese, this is delicious. Can I have one to take to Robert?” Thomas pulled out the money to pay and Cirese just waved her hand as she pushed it away. “Free cookies for the children today. They are a gift in our lives. Take care of this special child.”

As they were leaving the market, Thomas heard a voice saying, “Father Thomas, you are a brave man. It is more than that pink shirt. If I ever need someone to be on my side, I am calling you. Bless you for taking care of this child today.”

Thomas and Belinda stopped and gave the woman a hug. Belinda kissed her on both cheeks.

Thomas had the wagon handle in one hand and Belinda's hand in the other as he pulled the wagon. Thomas hadn't realized how emotional he would be after the encounter. He was struggling not to well up and cry. It was difficult seeing a family being torn asunder and yet he knew that the fight was just beginning. He decided he and Belinda needed affirmations from others so he turned and walked toward North Churton Street.

As they approached the corner of Margaret Lane and Churton Street he saw protesters. They were carrying flags and placards. He stooped and picked up Belinda.

"Let me carry you through this crowd. Okay?"

"Yes, Uncle Thomas. Who are these people?"

There were protesters carrying Confederate Battle Flags at the corner. They were yelling racist remarks and he saw that several of them were armed. He felt better when he saw deputies coming out of the sheriff's department and heading to the corner. He thought he had made absolutely the wrong decision. Then he saw the group he was looking for. The rainbow flag was being waved on the other side of the street. There were placards. Then he saw the trans flag. He couldn't suppress the smile that was spreading across his face.

He and Belinda crossed the street and were surrounded by a colorful array of folks. Blacks, white, Asians, Hispanics, gays, straights, lesbians and then the trans community. Everyone wanted to say hello to Belinda. She reached out and shook everyone's hands. She was a star and people were enchanted. Thomas could tell some people were trying to figure out Belinda's sex. They knew her gender. That made him smile even more when he realized it really didn't matter. They wanted to be sensitive to this beautiful outgoing child.

They approached the group with the trans flags and Thomas put Belinda down so she could walk. Belinda approached a man and started talking with him. Others were bending down to talk with Belinda. Then Thomas heard, "Yes, my name is Armistead but my real name is Belinda. God got mixed up and gave me a boy's body but I am really a girl. My daddy is helping me fix this mess. It is a big mess. Uncle Thomas is with me today. My Aunt Faith just tried to kidnap me but I held onto Uncle Thomas until my daddy, Robert and Uncle Joe got there. The police took her away." All Thomas could think was, 'she has no filter on what she tells people' as he saw the group look in awe at this young child. Several were in tears. They all wanted to talk with her. She was admiring jewelry that a young woman was wearing. The woman took off a glittering pin and put it on Belinda's t-shirt.

"That is for you being my hero today." People were oohing and ahing over the brooch and told Belinda that she was beautiful. Thomas didn't think he had seen her smile more than she was doing at that moment.

"Belinda, we need to get home for breakfast." She didn't want to leave.

"I want to stay here with my friends, Uncle Thomas."

"I know, sweetheart, but Uncle Joe has cooked us some good food. We don't want to eat cold eggs. They are yucky." Belinda laughed.

As they were leaving Belinda wanted to kiss each of them on each cheek. She said she was feeling very French because she was wearing a French barrette. Several people laughed and kissed her back. She was the center of their attention. Belinda told them she would be back the next Saturday.

“Please, Uncle Thomas. We are coming back next Saturday. Please.”

Thomas laughed and said he might be able to arrange for them to come back.

A young girl walked up to Thomas and asked if they were going to Durham Pride Parade in September. Thomas said they were still learning the area and was glad to know when Pride was going to be held.

“The reason I am asking is that we elect Miss Gay Pride Durham. I am a contestant but I would like for Belinda to join us. I think I can get folks to agree to make her Little Miss Gay Pride Durham.”

“Do I get a crown?”

“And a sash, darling. And a trophy. You get the whole poupou platter. Plus, you get to walk the stage and wave to your fans.”

Belinda was beaming at the thought of having all of those things.

“Uncle Thomas, you need to talk to daddy and tell him we have to do this.”

“Okay, we will be back next week to get more information. I can’t speak for her dad.”

Belinda could barely get the words out over breakfast. She was so excited.

“I bet I get to ride in a car and I can wave at people. Pleaaaaase daddy, say yes.”

Mark was gob smacked and didn’t know how to appropriately respond.

“Tell me again, how did you and Uncle Thomas end up in the middle of the demonstration this morning.” He was looking at Thomas when he asked the question. It wasn’t a reproving look but he certainly didn’t look too happy. He knew it could have easily turned violent.

Belinda looked like she was pondering what he had asked, and then spoke. “I don’t know what a demostate is, but Uncle Thomas and I were walking up the street and suddenly I found all of these people who are just like me. Daddy, they are just like me! I have never met people like me before. Only some are girls who are really supposed to be boys. Do they grow pee-pees when they decide they want to be boys?”

Joe snorted coffee through his nose. Thomas was patting him on the back while he was choking and coughing.

“What is wrong Uncle Joe? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, my princess, you said everything right. My coffee just went down the wrong way.”

The rest of the meal was eaten while Joe, Mark and Robert talked about the final work to be done in the Mill House.

“I reckon that I can get an occupancy permit within the next few weeks. It is nice to have that project finished.”

Mark and Robert said they would come by every afternoon to help so that it would be finished. Mark thought that Joe had done a great job designing the interior so it was a house but you could still tell it had been a mill.

Thomas excused himself and said he needed to review his sermon for the next day. Mark and his children went into the backyard and climbed in the hammock where they fell asleep. Joe stood in the kitchen thinking about his life with Thomas and that they had always found the strays, the social misfits and those in need. He had met the most fascinating people because he was with his wonderful husband and it had changed their lives in a most fundamental way.

8. Unexpected Challenges

Summer 2019

“There are going to be some major challenges coming our way today.”

“How can you tell? Are you a priest or a clairvoyant? I should call you Marie Leveau except we aren’t in New Orleans. I know, you can be that Whoopie Goldberg character in ‘Ghost.’ If you start putting dead chickens on the door steps I am out of here; we will not practice Santeria. Just saying.”

Thomas smiled because he and Joe had this same conversation many times through the years. They almost had it scripted. It was Thomas who placed a Dammit Doll and a Voodoo Doll in the front window of their home when they moved it. When people would ask, Thomas would be forthright in claiming his belief in mysticism and the power of the supernatural.

They were seated at the breakfast table looking across their backyard toward the river.

“What do you see, Joey Joe?” Joe hated when Thomas called him that. It wasn’t mocking but it was said in a teasing voice.

“Well Tommy boy, I see ten million birds. To be clear, you are bankrupting us with the purchases of premium bird feed.”

They both laughed and leaned into each other for a kiss. Joe had been raised in the city and wasn’t used to seeing so many birds when he grew up. When they lived in the rectory, Thomas had put bird feeders and houses all around the church close. It had become a bird sanctuary in the middle of Philadelphia. Thomas kept a bird watching guide in the kitchen and they spent hours identifying all of the birds.

“See all of those cardinals. Each one of them is an angel in disguise. They are here to help or protect us. It will be revealed in time.”

Joe chuckled and said he loved Thomas even when he was his most mystical self. Joe knew that Thomas was connected to the universe in a way he never would be. Thomas had a sixth sense connection with the universe that went far beyond his vocation as a priest. Hell, he would probably have been burned at the stake during the Middle Ages for heresy. Whereas, Joe could make wood do remarkable things and could touch it and knew instinctively how to make art, Thomas would do the same to help people.

“Okay, Marie I need to get on with my work. What is your schedule today?”

“I actually have a free day. I know, I know. It is almost unheard of. Who told me that in retirement we would have days of lying in the hammock watching the world go by? I do have to write a sermon though.”

Joe laughed at Thomas who never viewed his priestly vocation as work. In some ways he should have been in a monastery because he lived his vocation 24 hours a day. There was never a time when he wasn’t taking care of people. Thomas as priest was his truly authentic self. Joe admired that and it was a major part of why he fell in love with the man. There was no pretense. He was totally who he presented to others. Joe worked hard though to provide balance in Thomas’ life so he would not burn out helping people.

Thomas was stacking the Spode breakfast dishes when there was a knock at the front door. Thomas smiled and looked at Joe.

“Put on your angel wings and go answer the door.”

Joe laughed and said he was more likely to wear horns.

“Go, and I will get these dishes washed.”

Joe walked down the hallway while smiling and thinking this had been his life since he met Thomas. He never knew who was on the other side of the door and which of life’s problems they brought with them. Perhaps Thomas was right, it did require the combination of the Dammit Doll, the Voodoo Doll and God to solve people’s problems.

He was surprised when he opened the door and found Mark standing there. It was Mark and it wasn’t Mark. The man on the front porch was weeping and hunched over. The handsome, collected Mark was nowhere to be seen. Joe grabbed Mark and pulled him into the foyer and then held him while Mark let loose with tears. Mark was a well-made man, but the person wrapped in Joe’s arms was like a child who needed comforting. When Mark pulled himself up and stopped crying, he just looked at Joe. Joe grabbed the Dammit and Voodoo Dolls and headed to the breakfast room with an arm thrown over Mark’s shoulder. Thomas looked up from the sink, saw Mark, walked over to hug him and then went to the liquor supply. Mark needed fortifying.

Thomas poured three fingers of Kentucky bourbon into a glass. He handed it to Mark.

“Knock it back. No sipping. One slug.”

Mark did as instructed.

They sat at the table and Mark shuddered. He squared his shoulders as he looked at the two men.

“I am sorry that I came without calling first. I had nowhere else to go.”

Joe looked at Thomas and waited for him to speak. He had learned over the years to follow his partner’s direction. Words were not always needed to communicate. He would know when his input was needed.

“I am glad that you considered this a safe place to come, Mark. Are you comfortable telling us what is going on? Would you like Joe to leave so it is just the two of us; or I can leave if you want to talk with Joe.”

Mark reached out and grabbed Joe’s arm.

“No, I need for both of you to be here.”

Mark then related how he went into work that morning and his father had essentially fired him. Big Mark had said that work had fallen off and he couldn’t afford Mark’s salary. Mark knew that to be a lie. Then to add further insult, Big Mark handed his son a legal document asking for the payoff of the mortgage on the house where Mark and the kids lived.

Thomas looked at the document and read the demand payment. He got a lump in his throat.

“At least, he gave me a severance package of two week’s pay.”

Joe cursed. That wasn’t a severance package. That was bullshit.

Joe stormed around the breakfast room. Mark sat quietly and said he didn’t know what he was going to do and where he and his children would live. Joe finally quieted and sat at the table. He looked at Thomas with pleading eyes to say something to make things better.

“Mark, I need to ponder this. Do you mind helping Joe at the Mill House today while I think through this? He needs someone to help him with some things.”

Joe gave him a puzzled look. He didn’t need any help.

Mark smiled and said it would probably be a good thing to work with his hands in a constructive manner so he didn’t go home and punch holes in the walls. He said he needed to calm and center himself before he picked up his children. Joe and Mark walked out the back door and the birds flew up around them. All Joe could see were the red wings of the Cardinals. He remembered that they were angels. They needed all of the help the angels could give.

Thomas stood at the sink brooding about how parents treated their children. He tried centering prayer which wasn’t working, he moved to the den and tried contemplative prayers and when that didn’t work, he tried consultative prayer. Prayer wasn’t working for him. He was still seething. He picked up his Dammit Doll and beat it against the counter top several times. That was the function of a Dammit Doll. It absorbed his fury and was still whole. He was devastated for his young friend. He realized that Mark was more than a friend, he had moved into the realm of family. People didn’t mess with Thomas’ family.

He was not completely centered as he started working on a sermon. Everything he wrote was filled with anger and rage. He kept at it and realized it was his outlet. He kept writing about injustice in the world. Seven times seventy. The return of the prodigal son. Turn the other cheek. Forgive your enemy. Love your neighbor. Love and trust God. Thomas kept writing and realized that this was more than a sermon. It was about forgiving and finding peace in ourselves. He had been pondering writing a book about caring for differently abled children and the injustices they often encountered in their lives. How many families had he worked with through the years where there was dysfunction and abuse? And that day another child, albeit, a grown man had come into their home after being abused by a parent. He knew that, in time, the answer would present itself.

He heard Joe’s voice in the kitchen.

“Are you fixing lunch or do we order in?”

The morning had flown by. Thomas jumped up from the computer and went into the kitchen. He reheated the tomato basil soup he had made and then built BLT sandwiches. There was always sun tea available.

Mark looked like the man he was. It was good that he and Joe had spent the morning together. They were a lot alike. Give them some wood and a job to do and they could focus on the work while processing. Joe was really good at listening; he didn’t need to talk. He was also good at formulating plans and steps to implement

them. And the bottom line was he had a heart of gold. Joe was an angel. The three men good naturedly fought over the last of the peach pie. They were laughing when Joe looked at Thomas and said they needed to talk. Mark stood and said he would excuse himself.

“Sit down, Mark. You are part of this conversation.” Mark did as Joe directed.

“Mark and I had a good conversation this morning. He and his children are moving into the Mill House. Mark will help me finish the last of the work so we can get an occupancy permit. He wants to be settled before the kids start school for the fall semester. That makes sense to me. He needs a job which will be difficult here in Hillsborough. I am suggesting either Durham or Chapel Hill. Maybe even Burlington; there is a lot of new construction happening west of us. Given his family, it may need to be further away. Anyway, this is the initial plan and it will be fluid. Thomas, what do you think?”

Thomas smiled at his partner and said it sounded perfect. They supported each other in every way possible. If Joe had doubted Thomas’ agreement, they would have had a private conversation. Thomas said he would check at Duke and UNC to see what jobs were available.

Mark looked at Joe and told him it was time to get back to work.

“We need to finish my new home.” Mark smiled as he said that.

Thomas knew jocularly would be intermittent with Mark. This was life changing but Mark had been through major life events already: the death of a young wife, a child who was identifying a gender that was different than her birth sex and now the possible loss of his birth family. What a huge load to carry but he watched Joe and Mark walk to the mill and saw Mark’s broad shoulders. He would be okay whether he knew it or not. Joe and Thomas would support him and the children during this transition.

Just at that moment, the telephone rang. It was a long distance call from Sean who was in Belgrade.

“Papa, you wouldn’t believe some of the icons I have seen.”

“How are things in Yugoslavia?”

“Papa, you are so out of date. It is now Serbia.”

“Okay, how are things in Serbia? I am an old fogey and can’t keep up with all of nation building and changes in Eastern Europe.”

“I plan to be back in the U.S. by mid-September. I have lots of work to do but I plan to come stay with you and dad over Christmas and into February. Is he available by the way?”

“He is at the Mill House. Let me go out the back door and call him. Maybe he will hear me.”

Thomas stepped out the back door and pretended that he was calling the cows in from the field.

“I just called him.”

“Yep, my ear drums are broken from your yelling. I hope he heard you.” Sean was laughing which brought joy to Thomas.

“You didn’t answer my question about Christmas.”

“Of course, my son, why would you think you even had to ask.”

“Well, I am no longer a little 14 year old boy.” His statement was cut short by a coughing jag.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course, papa. You are such a worrier but not as bad as dad.”

Joe and Mark came running into the kitchen. Joe looked stricken.

“What’s wrong, Thomas. Are you okay?”

Thomas handed over the phone.

“It is our son who needs to talk to you.”

Joe’s face lit in delight. Mark looked confused.

“You have children?”

“Child. A son, Sean. He is in Europe and is coming home soon.”

“How old is your son?”

“Let me figure this out. He came into our lives in 1988 when he was 14 years old. That means he was born in 1974.”

“Forty-five.”

“You are better with math than me. Yes, he is 45. He is an artist and lives in Philadelphia. He has been in Europe this summer studying Eastern Orthodox icons. He is a remarkable artist. Truly gifted, even though I am his papa and I must confess my prejudice.”

Joe took the phone and was sitting on the back stoop. He was animated in his responses to whatever was being said. Thomas then saw Joe get up and start walking circles in the backyard. That was never a good sign.

“If you don’t mind, how did he come into your lives?”

Thomas gave Mark an abbreviated version of the story of their shared lives.

Joe came crashing through the backdoor and walked up to Thomas and hugged him. He needed comforting. Mark sensed the need and said he would be in the Mill House until he went to pick up the kids.

Thomas held fast until Joe's body shuddered and he backed away. There were tears running down Joe's face.

"How about a glass of tea? We need to talk."

When they sat at the breakfast table, they looked out the window and Thomas smiled.

"What do you see in the backyard?"

"Angels. Thousands of angels in red winged robes."

9. Lord Posh v. Mr. Highlander

November 1988

It had been a few weeks since Joe did his work at the church and had then repaired Thomas' faucet. He had wanted to call Thomas but didn't know what to say. Suppose he got the brush off. He couldn't stand that. He was so lonely but realized that he only had to go down to the coffee shop on a Saturday morning and he would find someone to share his bed. He didn't want that either. He wanted someone to share his life. He knew there was chemistry between he and Thomas but couldn't decide whether it was possible to live as a couple with a priest. He wasn't going to sneak in and out and pretend it wasn't happening. He lived an honest life. Even when things were at their worst with Valentina, he honored the marriage and did not seek out sexual partners. His heart and mind didn't work that way.

Joe awoke on a Sunday morning and decided he was going to church. He hadn't been to a church service since he and Valentina had broken up. Actually, they hadn't broken up; she had kicked him out. He had gone to the Wednesday service when he was making repairs at St. Anselm but he didn't know if that counted since it wasn't on Sunday. He showered and took extra care with shaving. He didn't want to be seen as unworthy by those uppity Episcopalians. At least that is what his mother had called them. She was a solid, down to earth Presbyterian woman who couldn't tolerate those Church of England types. After all, she was Scottish and not English. She always thought of them as the invaders. How long had it been since the Battle of Culloden? It didn't matter even though she was now "American." That didn't matter either. She still lived as if she was in the bonny beinns of Scotland even though she lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

Joe got out his suit. His only suit. Church, funeral, wedding –he wore it to all of them. He did have two neck ties; one black for funerals and the other one red for everything else. He tried to remember the last time he had worn his suit. A flood of memories came flashing back and he saw himself standing beside the hole in the earth where his father's remains were lowered in a plain pine casket; the casket Joe had made after being given specific instructions from his father. There was another matching casket for his mother. That one was stored in the basement of the home where he had lived until he and Valentina were married. He had worn his black tie that day.

Joe tried to get his curly red hair under control that morning but that one lock still wanted to fall across his forehead. Let it be, he thought. His big hands fumbled with the necktie and he finally felt it was acceptable. He did not look into the mirror to see if he was presentable. He was not vain in that way. Mirrors held no fascination for him. He only wanted to look good for one person. He smiled when he thought of Thomas.

Joe parked his truck on the street two blocks from the church. It didn't seem right that a man would drive a pick-up truck to church unless he lived in the rural south and that was the only vehicle he owned. Joe didn't have a car; he didn't want or need one. That was the Scottish in him. He considered it a waste of money for a car to be sitting day after day while he drove his work vehicle. Let them look down on me, he thought. They were probably posh folks who could afford to go to such a big, fancy church. He frowned thinking that he had made a mistake to come to church that Sunday. When he first met with Mack and Anne from the church, he knew they were money people. There he was dressed in his work clothes and Mack was wearing a suit that probably cost more than he earned in a week. And Anne had on a silk dress and her fingers were covered in diamond rings. Yes, they were nice to him that day probably the same way they were nice to the trades people who worked for them. He hated being patronized because he wore work clothes and still had a bit of a burr in

his voice. He was an upstanding man who gave people a good value for the work that he did. So, what if he lived in a one-bedroom apartment, he had money in the bank and could move to someplace nicer if he wanted. He was always presentable. He paid his bills on time.

What Joe did not see about himself was the extremely handsome man he had become. He was tall and stocky with chiseled features. The shock of reddish hair offset his green eyes, his freckled cheeks and his sumptuous mouth. His hands were those of a workman. Big. Rough. Callused. Yes, he did have a secret habit which he found off-putting but was very helpful. Every Saturday morning he had a manicure. He had the little Vietnamese woman soak his hands in some sort of solution and then massage them before trimming the nails and taking care of his cuticles. It was an indulgence but worth it given that the winter weather was rough on a man's hands who worked outside for a living. His mother would have called him a Nancyboy if she knew. Only girly boys had manicures. Joe depended on his hands for his work and he saw it as an investment in taking care of his tools. The same way that he cleaned his hand tools before they were put away after each job, he took care of his hands. He looked down to make sure they looked like manly hands. He wasn't some gangster who wore clear nail polish. His hands were rough but clean; after the manicure he would always let them use a special lotion on his hands that made them feel good. The first time he went they used a scented lotion that made him think of a woman. The next time he asked if they had lotion that wasn't scented. He lied and told them he had an allergy to scents. He just didn't want to say to the woman he didn't like anything feminine. He wasn't girly and didn't want anyone to think of him in that way. The manicurist smiled and reached for a bottle of non-scent lotion. He never had to ask again; she remembered his preference. He bought some of the same lotion and put it on his hands every night after he had a shower. He had even considered getting a pedicure because wearing steel toed boots everyday had led to calluses on his feet. Nobody saw his feet and he had not considered it a priority. Maybe Thomas would want to see them so Joe had decided to book extra time for Ling to take care of his feet also.

Joe walked up the front steps of the church. He was nervous. He had been to Catholic church services enough to know what to expect. After being welcomed and handed a bulletin he stepped into the nave. He didn't see the baptismal font to dip his fingers and cross himself. Hmmm, maybe this was different. He revered the altar and sat in the back pew. On the end. Toward the aisle. He could sneak out if the service got too uncomfortable. No need to be closer and be conspicuous. He would hide out here.

The processional hymn started and Joe stood. He caught sight of Thomas as the procession passed him by. Joe wasn't singing, he didn't do that. Thomas was singing in a loud, clear tenor voice which sounded beautiful to Joe's ears. He wasn't knowledgeable about music but he knew what he liked and he liked hearing Thomas sing. Joe heard a slight catch in Thomas' voice as he passed by and saw him. A smile crossed Thomas' face and he continued to sing with gusto.

Joe relaxed and knew that he was going to be alright. Nothing was happening that he didn't understand. Thomas said it was Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. He then gave an inspiring sermon that made Joe smile knowing that it had been well received by the congregation. Joe was okay until it came time for the offering of the peace. People were moving over to shake his hand and welcome him. Joe felt like his feet were glued to the floor; he was unmovable. Joe saw Thomas approaching. He was shaking hands with people and smiling but would constantly catch Joe's eye. Joe didn't know what to do. Thomas was upon him and said, "The peace of the Lord." Joe parroted it back. Then Thomas was moving back up the aisle. At announcements, Thomas mentioned that the following Sunday started Advent. He then reminded the youth about the Christmas pageant and they would be unpacking everything to get it ready. He

also said they would be looking for volunteers because the scenery needed replacing after many years. Thomas looked at Joe as he said they needed a good carpenter to help them build the new scenery.

Joe knelt throughout the Eucharist. He thought he was not allowed to take communion even though Thomas said that everyone was welcome at the Lord's table. Joe knew he wasn't worthy; the Catholic priest had made that clear enough. The service ended with a recessional hymn. Joe quickly stood and just wanted to leave without talking with anyone. He wasn't fast enough and Mack came up and welcomed him. He also said they were so pleased with his work and asked if they could they call on him again if something needed fixing. Joe was happy to accept the offer of potential work. You never knew when a rainy day was coming.

Joe walked through the Narthex and saw Thomas standing at the door. Joe straightened his back and stuck out his hand. He was trying to figure out what to say when he realized he was standing in front of the man.

"Good to see you again, Father."

"Joe, it was good to have you here today. Can I ask a favor?"

"Sure. What do you need? Not another leaking faucet is it?" Joe smiled.

"No. Could you take a look at the scenery for the Christmas pageant and tell me what we should do?"

"Okay. When do you want to do that?"

"Are you free this afternoon?"

"I can be." Thomas gave a big smile.

"Well, you will need to change clothes because it is stored in the undercroft and it is fairly dirty down there."

They agreed on a time for later in the day and Joe left elated. He knew it wasn't a paying job but it might bring him back in contact with Thomas on a regular basis.

Joe went back to his apartment. He had washed his work clothes and they were in a stack in his closet. He had enough work clothes for each day in the week. Every Saturday he washed them. He had thought about buying more in case he wasn't able to wash one Saturday but that seemed like a waste of money to him. He put on clean work clothes and thought he might have to wash sometime during the week. He wanted to look nice for Thomas.

At 2 pm, Joe pulled up to the parish hall. The door was unlocked and Thomas was in his office. Joe walked in and Thomas just started grinning. Joe couldn't help himself and he started grinning also. They were moving toward each other when they heard a voice calling for Thomas. Joe froze like he had been caught doing something bad. It was the Elaine, Director of Christian Education, and her husband. They wanted to be present to find out what Thomas wanted to do. Afterall, she would direct the pageant.

"Elaine and Bill, meet Joe McKendry. He recently did some repair work in the church and at the rectory and he has agreed to look at the scenery. Hopefully he can help us figure out what to do."

Joe shook their hands and Thomas said it was time to go downstairs. They entered the church building and they went down a set of circular stone steps to the undercroft. Thomas found a light switch and Joe noted that the place could do with a good cleaning and straightening up. It was a mess and smelled dank. Joe helped Thomas move some things and there were the set pieces. They were made of plywood and had been painted. They were quaint in a late 1950s sort of way. All the pieces were outlined in big old-fashioned Christmas lights. Joe noted the frayed electrical cords. The center section was eight feet high and was hinged into a triptic; three pieces of plywood. There were also palm trees, a crib, painted animals and the Star of Bethlehem. The bottom of each panel was rotted where it had been setting on a damp basement floor. When they tried to set up the palm trees, one came crashing down and the trunk split into three pieces.

Elaine said they loved the quaintness of the design but it seemed that none of the pieces were good enough to work.

“If you want to recreate this, I can do that for you. You would have to find someone who can paint the sets. I can barely paint a room; I am not an artist.”

Elaine had ideas of updating the set and she and Joe talked. He told her to have sketches to him in a couple of days and he would spend the next Saturday building it.

“We only have one problem.”

Everyone looked at Elaine.

“We don’t have the money to build a new set. I was hoping we could repair the old one which wouldn’t cost much money.”

Joe looked at the floor for a few seconds, and then in a quiet voice said he would get the materials donated and that his time was a gift to the church.

“I will even get them to donate the paint if you tell me what you want.”

Thomas beamed. Elaine hugged Joe which made his blush. Bill grabbed Joe’s hand and was shaking it.

“Well, it seems like we have a plan. Let’s go over to the rectory and have a drink to celebrate.” They left through the back door, walked across the close, and entered the kitchen door of the rectory. Joe immediately took off his work boots. He didn’t want to muddy up the kitchen floor. The others followed Joe’s lead and removed their shoes. Joe made a mental note to purchase a boot tray to put beside the back door. He then thought he should get one for the front entrance also. They would be a gift to Thomas.

They went into the library and Thomas asked Joe to build a fire while he got everyone a drink. After the fire ignited, Joe heard Thomas call him from the kitchen. Joe hoped it wasn’t another water leak. Instead, he found Thomas putting together a tray of finger foods for them to eat. Joe carried the food tray while Thomas carried the drinks. It felt natural for them to be working together – they instinctively worked well together.

Thomas turned on the classical radio station and they listened to music while talking. Elaine and Bill wanted to know more about Joe. He gave them brief answers. He wasn’t used to sharing his private information with other people. When Elaine and Bill finished their drinks, they thanked Thomas for the drink and Elaine told

Joe she would have him the information by noon on Monday. Thomas let them out the kitchen door. Elaine had keys and could get into the parish hall and from there to the church parking lot.

Thomas picked up Joe's glass and went to the kitchen to refresh their drinks. When he returned they both settled into the leather sofa. Thomas moved a leather hassock in front of the sofa and put his feet up. Joe put his up there also. By the time they finished their second drink, they were playing footsies. They turned their heads and looked at each other. Joe's mouth became very dry. He knew he couldn't speak.

"I hope this is okay. I like you."

Joe nodded his head. They continued to look at each other and smile. Then Joe's eyes filled with tears. He could only see a blur. Thomas scooted over and pulled the man into his arms. Joe felt like a wimp. Maybe he was a Nancyboy. Thomas felt like the caregiver he was. Suddenly, Joe grabbed Thomas in an embrace and kissed him. Once the kiss ended, they became very tender as they continued to lean back into the sofa and hold each other's hands.

"Thomas, I like you mightily, I do. I don't know how to date a priest."

"The same as you date anyone else, I suppose."

"No, but you are a man of God. What would your congregation or bishop say? I won't disrespect myself or you by sneaking around. I am not made that way."

Thomas slid his body next to Joe and pulled Joe's arm across his shoulder. He liked being held by the man.

"My congregation knows I am gay. They are encouraging me to find a partner. The bishop is okay and knows that I am gay. He wouldn't be happy if I was sleeping around. If I started dating, I would let the Vestry and bishop know. I am open and transparent. I would like to tell them I am dating you."

Joe was startled by the statement. He wanted to date Thomas.

"I need to take this nice and slow, Thomas. I like you but I need to go really slow."

Joe leaned in and kissed Thomas again.

"I need to go. I have to get ready for work tomorrow."

Thomas held tight to Joe and wouldn't let him stand.

"Is that how we are going to end the day? Our big boys are rather prominent right now. They like what we are doing. When will I see you again?"

"I will stop by tomorrow to pick up Elaine's ideas. I will see you then. Think on it and let's plan to talk tomorrow about dating. I have to think with my head and not my dick. When my dick has made the decisions, they have often been wrong. I don't want it to be wrong with you. I like you, Lord Posh."

"Lord Posh, eh? Well, I like you to Mr. Highlander."

They both stood and hugged each other.

“Thomas you have to let me go so I can leave.” Thomas held on and then kissed Joe again.

“I know, but I am afraid you will disappear again.”

“Tomorrow. I will see you tomorrow. I will bring burgers for lunch and we can eat together.”

“Until the morrow, then.”

Joe put on his boots and Thomas walked him across the close, through the parish hall and out to the parking lot where his truck was ready to take him home. Thomas pulled him in for another kiss. Joe backed away with fright in his eyes.

“Joe, if we date, I mean to love you with my whole heart. I will not skulk around. I am not capable of hiding my love. We don’t have to do a lot of public affection but I plan to kiss you when we are parting and kiss you when we are greeting. Sometimes I will reach out and grab your hand and hold it.”

Joe stood for a minute looking at the ground. Thomas thought he had crossed the ultimate line in the sand and that Joe couldn’t live with it. Instead, Joe looked up, a smile crossed his face and he pulled Thomas into a kiss that made his knees buckle.

“That my lad, is how a Scotsman kisses.”

Joe got in his truck and drove off while Thomas stood immobile with a smile across his face.

10. Sean Becomes an Artist

December 24, 1988

Joe sat in the transept of the church tinkering with the light board. He had been fearless in agreeing to run the lights for the pageant. He couldn't stop himself. He had been consumed with this project for a month. What started as something simply as looking at the old sets to see if they were salvageable had taken on a life of its own. Joe was full steam ahead on any and all aspects of the Christmas pageant.

Joe asked the owner of the lumber company he used in his business to donate all of the materials for the set. He promised that there would be a big advertisement for the company in the printed program. The owner said yes to Joe because he knew that Joe did all of his business with his company and it was also for a charitable cause that involved kids. After agreeing to the advertisement, Joe realized he didn't know if there would be a printed program. He needed to talk with Thomas and make sure there was a program with the acknowledgement. Luckily, Thomas said yes. With a little bit of free rein Joe raced forward.

Joe went to a friend, Bugboy, who worked for a theater company in Philadelphia and asked how to light the show. Bugboy offered to loan the church the lights and lightboard and teach Joe how to run the show. After watching an early rehearsal, Bugboy asked if he could be stage manager. He was impressed with the kids and thought he could help ramp it up a notch or two. Thomas agreed.

Joe didn't know anything about fabric but boldly walked into a fabric outlet store and told them what was needed. He had a list that Elaine had made for him. Joe would never ask charity for himself but was bold when asking for the church. Again, he promised a free advertisement in the program. The manager told him to pick out what he wanted. Joe didn't have a clue so he called Elaine. She came to the shop and left with a car full of fabrics and trim. The manager kept piling on more fabric and said they might want to do a Holy Week pageant also.

Elaine called Anne, President of the Altar Guild, and said they needed people with sewing machines who would donate their time to make costumes. One area of the undercroft became the costume department. The women who were creating the costumes for the Three Kings were having a competition to see who could put the most sparkles on the costumes. These were kings, right? They needed to be heavily adorned. Old jewelry was donated and beads were handsewn on the robes. With a little light they would shimmer. Crowns were made out of metal, painted gold and jewels were glued to them. Someone donated an old mink stole to be cut up and used around the base of the crowns so they would sit gently on the kings' heads.

Elaine, Thomas and Joe became so excited about what was being created they decided that the undercroft was off limits to the church members. They wanted them all to be dazzled on the night of the pageant. The word was starting to spread because the kids would go home and talk about what an exciting rehearsal it had been but they refused to give away any clues. The parents could see a level of excitement about church life they had never witnessed in their kids before. Joe was having the time of his life. He loved kids and wanted them around him. This was great because he could spend time with them and then send them home to their parents. Thomas was excited because he got to see Joe every day and also because the congregation was coming alive. They were all talking about the

great things that were happening. Kids started showing up at rehearsal asking if they could be part of the pageant. Elaine and Thomas said yes to each and every one of them and then would send them to the costumers. By the time they finished there wouldn't be enough fabric for a Holy Week pageant. Luckily, some of the costumes would work for both.

What a month it had been. First, there was the set design. Joe had never done anything in the theater but he looked at the old sets and knew he could do better. He also wanted it to be a legacy set that would be used for many years. He laid out the panels and had Elaine approve everything before he made the first cut. He didn't want there to be an error and then him having to go ask for more donations. He asked Thomas to put together a team to clean out the undercroft so that he could use part of it for his workshop. He cut the shapes and then drew in areas where different paints would be applied. Joe went to the public library and checked out books on painting theater scenery. He asked Elaine to recruit kids that might be good at painting. Sean showed up for the first day of painting. He was in the eighth grade and looked small for his age. He was also very unsure of himself until he had the paint brush in his hand. He started painting and the other kids stood back in awe. They said they wanted to help but that Sean was fantastic and they wanted the very best for the pageant and he was doing it. Sean glowed from the accolades. When Sean said he needed four gallons of lacquer, Joe immediately went to the paint store and asked for it. He was grateful they donated it because it was expensive. Joe gave some of the kids other jobs to do in priming the sets so that Sean could put on the final coats. The sets were starting to look like Russian iconography.

One of the girls brought a cassette player and Joe gritted his teeth when he heard hip-hop blaring from the speakers. Damn, he hated that music. However, he looked and the kids were bopping around enjoying themselves while they were working. He kept his mouth shut. They started creating Christmas lyrics to some of the tunes. That made Joe begrudgingly smile.

Elaine was rehearsing the kids on their parts. It wasn't a complicated show, in part, because Elaine wasn't a complicated person. After Bugboy offered to help by being the stage manager he then slowly became the director. He kept offering ideas to Elaine and she finally asked him to take on the show while she made costumes. The kids loved Bugboy. They would sing his name and dance around him. He was down with them and suddenly a simple little Christmas pageant was becoming a big show. Bugboy was getting under their skin in a good way. He was always happy, open to hearing their ideas and then incorporating them into the show. He kept telling them it was their show and it was going to be world class. He believed in them and they believed in him. They were going to rock Philadelphia.

The church music director started off by having the kids singing Episcopal hymns as part of the pageant. Joe and Bugboy listened to complaints from the kids one day and offered to talk with Jim about his choice of music. The kids wanted things that were more contemporary. Jim scowled and then said he would try. Jim reminded Joe that this was an Episcopal Church, after all, and things were done certain ways. Bugboy asked Jim if he was going to be a help or a hindrance in putting together the best Christmas pageant in Philadelphia. Bugboy could be blunt in that way. He had allegiance to the pageant, not to the church. He worked in professional theater and knew how to cut to the chase when needed. He thought the kids had great potential and he didn't want it ruined by some old school church organist. At the next rehearsal, Jim asked the kids what songs they would like to sing. They gave him great ideas and some of the stodgy songs were reworked with a modern rhythm. Bugboy, stood at the side and smiled.

Sean would check in with Joe each afternoon when he arrived. Joe left his worksite and would immediately go to St. Anselm so he was always smelling of the worksite and his own particular manly odor. Sean would always lean into him and Joe would put his arm across his shoulder. The boy drew strength from being close to Joe. Thomas would have sandwiches he had made for the three of them. Sean would practically inhale his sandwich each day. Joe started offering Sean half of his sandwich which was duly refused until one day Joe didn't ask. He took the half sandwich and crammed it into Sean's mouth. Sean choked, then laughed and started chewing. From that day forward, Thomas made two sandwiches for Sean. Thomas also had a cooler of lemonade and an urn of hot chocolate for everyone because the basement was either hot or cold; there was no in-between. Joe gave Thomas some money and asked him to purchase some food to give to Sean before he left each night. He sensed that Sean's family was very poor and couldn't afford much food. Thomas bought the food and also went to the church's food pantry to supplement it. He then had an idea and put a food table in the undercroft. He piled it with food and told the kids to take home what they wanted. He was clear it wasn't about need but want. He didn't want the table to be seen as where the poor kids could get food. At first the kids were hesitant but quickly cottoned to the idea that nobody was judging them if they wanted the (much needed) food. The women who were sewing started bringing in desserts each night and declared that there would be a competition between them for the best brownies. The kids thought that was a great idea. Suddenly there was an intergenerational bonding at the church that had not occurred before.

One night, Sean sat between Thomas and Joe while they were eating. All of a sudden, he started crying and leaned into Joe who put his arm around him and pulled him in closer.

"What's wrong with my little buddy?"

"Nothing, I was suddenly sad."

"What are you sad about?"

"Nothing. I will get over it. Right? We all just have to get over it and get on with it. It's the way life is."

Sean jumped up from his seat and quickly walked to the paint cans and opened one so he could get started. Thomas gave Joe a look like 'what the hell?' Joe spent more time with Sean that night. He was always just a few steps away. Sean didn't say anything to the other people who were there. Joe would notice him get a hitch in his throat, pause, collect himself and then push onward. Normally, Joe would go to the rectory with Thomas when they finished but that night he offered to take Sean home. Sean said he could walk but Joe was persistent. He wanted some alone time with Sean to try to find out what was bothering him. They walked to the parking lot and Joe opened the door to his F-250. Sean started to climb up into the cab and Joe put his hands under his butt and lifted him. Sean turned around, grinned at Joe and told him, "thanks, daddy Joe."

Joe got in and buckled his seatbelt. Sean slid beside him. Joe said that if they got stopped then he would get a ticket because Sean wasn't wearing his seatbelt. Sean looked at him, smirked and told him not to drive crazy and they wouldn't be stopped. Sean leaned into Joe and fell asleep before they got to the apartment building where he and his mother lived. Joe woke Sean and asked if he needed help in carrying the bags upstairs. Sean was clear that wasn't necessary and he jumped from the seat

onto the pavement, reached up and grabbed the bags and told Joe he would see him the next night. Joe called his name and when Sean turned, he was given Joe's business card.

"My telephone number is on there if you ever need to call me. Don't hesitate. I love you little buddy and want you to know I am here for you."

Sean looked at Joe, smiled and then put the card in his shirt pocket.

Joe was unsettled and afterwards stopped by the rectory. He knocked on the door and waited for Thomas to answer. Before the door opened, he had removed his boots to be placed on the boot tray in the foyer. He then wrapped Thomas in his arms and kissed him.

"One drink and then I need to get home. These are long days for both of us. Luckily, my business slows down between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I basically am working full time on a Christmas pageant and in my free time doing emergency repair work for folks on the side. After New Year's I am booked through April so I get to enjoy this time. This is the most fun I have had in years."

Thomas knew that Joe was responsible for more than just helping. Joe's enthusiasm and skills were driving everything forward. He was functioning as the producer but wouldn't hear of such a title. Joe's modesty of who he was and the gifts he shared wouldn't allow that. He was totally self-effacing; there was no big ego that needed nurturing.

They went into the library where Thomas was opening a decanter of Scotch whisky. It was Joe's preferred drink while Thomas tended to drink Gin and Tonic. Joe said it made him sick on his stomach to smell that stuff. They each took a drink, kissed and shared their liquors between them. Neither got sick on the stomach.

"Thomas, I am treading into unknown territory but I need to find out more about Sean. Something is not right. I know it with every fiber of my being. A bunch of these kids are poor but he is more than poor. There is something seriously wrong. Where do I start? What can I do?"

They talked strategy and Thomas promised to try to find out more information. Sean attended church by himself. Neither parent came. His mother had signed all of the permission slips for Sean to participate. Each time that Thomas would call to schedule a family visit, Sean's mother had an excuse why it wasn't convenient. Little was known about Sean.

"I gave him my card and told him to call me at any time if he needs help. Is that okay? I mean, I am volunteering for the church right now and I need to follow your rules."

"Well, first thing after the holiday is over, we are going to have you complete the 'Safe Church Training' which specifies what you can and cannot do. You should not have driven Sean home tonight but I didn't want that conversation with you when other people were around. There should always be at least one other person. Never let yourself be alone with a child. My bad, because I let it happen and I know better. Let's approach this together. I am going to talk with Elaine to find out what she knows. He is a kid in need and he has identified you as someone he trusts."

They finished their drinks and Joe started to make ready to leave. Thomas reached out and grabbed Joe's arm.

"Joe, we also have to talk about us. We see each other every day. I like you more and more each time we are together but we aren't doing things for us. Can we have a date night? I would enjoy it just being the two of us alone and not surrounded by thirty some kids."

They decided that the week after Christmas they would go to dinner and then see a movie.

"Let me know which action flick you want to see."

"Action flick?"

"Well, I am not going to see one of those poncey foreign language films like you watch." They both grinned.

"Get out of here, big burly man. I love you and will see you tomorrow night."

Joe stood there with a look of amazement on his face. Thomas said he loved him. Just as part of an ordinary conversation. No pretensions, no flirting that would lead to sex, no ulterior motive. Just an ordinary statement. Joe smiled.

"I love you too, my English lad."

Joe and Thomas were both smiling when Joe put on his boots, turned on the outside lights and opened the door. Joe pulled Thomas onto the porch and kissed him for all of the world to see. They were both giddy as they parted.

The next day Joe got a call from Elaine with some information. Sean was an only child and his mother was a single parent and was not well. She had some type of chronic medical condition and was unable to work. Sean missed a lot of school because he too had some sort of medical problem. Elaine did not know what it was. Sean's mother was very proud and very private. Elaine's attempts to meet her were always deflected in a very gracious way. Joe thanked Elaine for the information and decided that he would continue to try to get information.

Everyone was pulling together for the big night. Christmas Eve was on Wednesday which forced Joe, Thomas and some of the bigger boys to put up the set after the Sunday service. Thomas locked the church doors after the service and said it was a "work space" until the pageant and no one except for cast and crew was allowed to enter the space. Bugboy had found a large scrim not being used at the theater and it was put over the set, in case someone came into the sanctuary. Jim had been rehearsing the choir in the church space so they could get used to time lag and echo. There were so many kids he had them scattered around the nave, in the balcony and even at the altar. The women in the church were kept extra busy making extra costumes. Not one of them complained because they knew they part of something special. Elaine went back to the fabric store and the manager gave extra material when she found out the number of kids involved in the pageant.

Jim called one of his friends, Chip, who was a percussionist and asked him to play for the pageant. In that big space it would help tremendously to have a rhythm section for the voices that were scattered near and far. Chip came to a rehearsal and decided to call in chits. Jim and Chip both frantically started writing charts for other instrumentalists. As their schedules allowed, the musicians would come in and watch rehearsals. The smiles on their faces were worth the added burden during their busy performance season. They were professional musicians and could work with minimal charts and rehearsal. Everyone involved was amazed at the generosity of people.

The night of the Christmas pageant, shepherds and sheep, borrowed from a farm west of Philadelphia, were in the narthex as people arrived. Thomas walked in and realized that one of the sheep had let loose with a big gas attack. People were affronted by the smell and then looked over to see lambs. The smell offended their sensibilities but the lambs warmed their hearts. The shepherds told the visitors this was what it would have smelled like when Jesus was born. There were a lot of people there who had never stepped foot in the church before. The kids had put posters all over the neighborhood and even had a radio station play ads for free. Thomas had arranged for the television station to interview a couple of kids. The sanctuary was packed and yet more people kept arriving.

When people walked into the nave they were stepping on straw. It clung to their pant legs. It clung to their hose. It was like they were walking through a stable. Some of the kids were poor beggars asking people for a warm place to put their heads for the night. They said it was cold in Bethlehem. They asked people if they could sit with them. They even asked if people had food they could share because they were on the way to Bethlehem and had run out of money and food. Many people didn't know how to respond. The kids knew their characters and were enjoying acting and reacting with people. They especially like to beg. They thought that was fun. Most of them got a piece of candy or a stick of gum. A lamb started running up the center aisle closely followed by an Anatolian, a Turkish sheep dog, that was trying to get the lamb back to his mother. The large dog was followed by a young boy who was being pulled along by the dog's leash. The boy stayed in character while some in the congregation snickered. When the lamb ran under a pew and between people's legs, the boy knew he was in trouble. The lamb came out in the center aisle and the dog took off again pulling the boy along. The lad started laughing and the congregation joined in his glee.

The seats filled. As they were getting ready to start, a camera man from a television station appeared in the narthex and asked if he could film the production. Thomas was clear that he could if he didn't use any artificial light and not cause any kind of disturbance. Thomas noted that the theater critic from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was in the audience. Everyone was welcome but Thomas wondered why was the critic was in attendance. Thomas had never seen him in the church before. Thomas noticed a photographer in the side aisle.

There was standing room only and the kids were showing people where they could stand along the walls. Most people were happy to do so but a few complained. One little shepherd boy looked at a church matron who was complaining and said there was no room in the inn. He said Bethlehem was full because of the census. She was brought up short by these words from the mouth of a child. She shuffled off to stand along the wall.

The lights dimmed and a hush fell over the church as the small orchestra started playing. Some hummed along with the familiar tune. Sheep were being led into the nave by the shepherds. The sheep went wherever they wanted...after all, these were real sheep and not trained in theater. There

was no attempt to make them actor sheep. Joe had promised Thomas that he would clean the church of any animal poop but that it was important that they do this the right way. The smell of the animals started filling the space. People were getting a sense of what it smelled like in a stable.

A spotlight came up on Sean who stood front and center on the steps leading to the chancel. Elaine had made him a cleric's robe from the Elizabethan period. He had a starched white ruff around his neck. His natural inclination was to pick at it as the ruff rubbed his neck but he followed Bugboy's direction and stood without moving. He took a deep breath, looked over to Joe, smiled and then started reciting the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. When he finished, he walked down the chancel steps and over to where Joe was working the light board. Sean sat beside him and put his hand on Joe's thigh and then leaned into him. Slowly the actors started pulling the scrim off the set piece as the lights came up. The actors were all in costume and they looked like shop keepers opening their stores for the day. There were gasps from the audience because the set was so beautiful. The use of rich colors enhanced with gold paint and then layered with lacquer gave the set an old-world feeling. Bugboy had guided Joe to create a lighting schema that enhanced the beauty of the set.

The drummer started with a rhythm track and the town of Bethlehem came alive. The space filled with dancers and vendors and singers. There was even a whirling dervish. This was a real place. People were selling and bartering. Country folk were entering the town from the side aisles and transepts. The entire nave became the town of Bethlehem. People were being turned away from the inn. People were drunk and lying in the gutter. The sheep were baaing and a calf was mooing. Joe smiled when the Anatolian started barking and everything quieted down. Perhaps one of the animals was trained. The sun began to set on the town of Bethlehem and a crescent moon and twinkling stars appeared above.

The congregation heard the noise before they could see anything. It was the clop-clop of horses from outside. One person turned and then another and then another. Soon all of the people were standing looking out through the Great West Doors. City policemen and horses were lined up facing each other and walking through the avenue they had created was a donkey with a young woman riding. A man held the lead as the donkey came up a hastily secured ramp into the narthex. While Joseph and Mary waited in the narthex, the horses peeled off and disappeared into the city night. Joseph then rubbed the donkey's head; told him it was not much further to Bethlehem and they started walking up the aisle. People stood in awe while Mary and Joseph approached Bethlehem. When Joseph helped Mary down from the donkey, the people quietly sat. Mary yelped in pain and the congregation gasped. They could see the pain on her face and the fear in Joseph's eyes. The singers quietly sang a reworked hymn. People knew they knew the tune but it was different and yet underscored the scene so as to not be distracting. The kids had taught the old choirmaster a thing or two about using music in a play. The town's people slowly faded into shadows as the inn keeper belligerently told Joseph there was no room in the inn. A sheep mournfully bleated at that moment and the angst could be felt by everyone.

An old looking man offered to let the couple bed down in his barn. Joseph tied the donkey to a rail and helped Mary into a comfortable position. As the light dimmed on the cattle stall the choir chanted a lullaby. The choir members were placed throughout the church and had on angel wings. Each of singers had lights attached to their belts that illuminated their wings. It felt like throngs of angels had filled the space. The song was interrupted by the gasp of pain from

Mary. People could feel the final push as she delivered the baby. Joseph was ecstatic that he had a son. He danced in front of the set. The orchestra was in full joyful mood as the clarinet soared and klezmer music filled the church. Joseph was joined by other boys who danced with him. They were celebrating. The town was alive with music and dancing while the stall lay in shadow. After dancing, Joseph bought milk and bread from a vendor and as the stall was illuminated the congregation could see Mary and Joseph eating with a newborn child lying in the manger. People swore it was a real child though Bugboy had put his theater training to use and created an animatronic baby that would move and cry on cue. Daylight ended and the Star of the East rose in the sky so that it was directly over the stable. Joseph and Mary were talking about completing the census and returning to Nazareth where they lived. The set went dark.

Sean was in a spotlight again as he talked about the Star in the East. The space filled with music and singing as he continued his narration. The clash of cymbals filled the narthex and a cacophony of music was outside the Great West Doors. Again, the policemen and their horses were lined in an avenue through which the Three Kings appeared. There was a horde of swirling dancers around them as they handed off a camel to his keeper. The congregation was on its feet trying not to miss anything happening. Instead of using the children from the congregation for the part of the Kings, Bugboy had asked friends who were opera singers to join the pageant. The basso voice of the first king sent shivers down the spines of those assembled. He made his servants bow to him. They prostrated themselves until their bodies were on the ground. He was majestic. The congregation bowed as each King walked up the aisle. The robes were magnificent and reflected the light; Elaine's sewing team was glowing with pride. As the third King came into the Nave, a Thurifer was in front of him swinging an incense boat filled with Myrrh. The smoke filled the air. When he approached the cradle, he incensed the entire stall filling it with holy smoke. The Kings presented their gifts to the Christ Child and the congregation. The three of them then sang a loud Hallelujah. The kids then joined in and sang an updated, street version of the "Hallelujah Chorus." It was hip-hop and Joe still wasn't sure he liked it but the kids were tearing it up. Some of the gymnastic kids were doing cartwheels down the center aisle. One boy jumped from the balcony into the aisle and then rolled and twirled as he approached the stall. There were angels singing in the loft with their wings lit. Everyone in the cast and crew had a role in performing this song. Even Joe sang along as he sat at the light board. Sean sat beside him smiling and singing. People were twisting and turning in their seats not wanting to miss anything. They loved the version and the orchestra and organ were going full blast. Even Jim was smiling as he wailed away at the keyboard. The congregation stood in unison and were clapping along with the kids. When the song finished, the Kings and actors bowed toward Jesus. The congregation followed their lead. The Kings then warned Joseph that he needed to leave for Egypt because Herod was looking for Jesus. The audience could feel the tension as Joseph and Mary pondered what to do. Instead of returning down the center aisle, the Kings turned to the South transept and departed Bethlehem using a different route. The audience gasped when the three stood at the closed door, turned and bowed to Jesus; when the doors opened a camel was standing there to take them back from whence they came. Quiet filled the space. The organist started the introduction to Silent Night and then a harpist played the song with the congregation singing along. They couldn't help themselves. It was supposed to be just instrumental but people felt compelled to sing. They were caught up in the narrative. They were more than mere observers. This was followed by absolute silence.

There was only one light on in the sanctuary. It was Joseph helping Mary and the Christ Child onto the donkey. In the dark a sign had been placed near the altar. It was a directional sign to Egypt. As

the lights dimly came up, Joseph led the donkey across the chancel in front of the altar and they stood at the door to the sacristy. A spotlight shone on them and caught the anguish in their faces before all of the lights slowly dimmed.

Borrowing from Leonard Bernstein's "Mass," Thomas stood in a spotlight circle on the floor in front of the altar, outstretched his arms and said, "The service is ended, go in peace."

The lights slowly came up as people started to stand. They didn't know whether to leave in silence or to cheer. When they quietly walked out of the Great West Doors they were confronted with a phalanx of policemen on horses and beyond them were all of the actors and animals. The roar of approval from the people outside could be heard in the cold night air several blocks away.

As soon as they could, the cast and crew started dismantling the set, raking the hay, and using incense to override the smell of animals. There was a midnight Mass and the church had to be ready by 10 pm when people started arriving. They all knew their tasks and efficiently put things away. The following week they would come together to celebrate and store things properly for the next year.

But tonight, Joe had arranged a feast at the Rectory for everyone involved in the production. He talked to some people he had met from his Saturday mornings at the coffee shop and they said they would arrange for food delivery and service. Joe gave them a budget and they agreed with that amount of money no one would leave hungry. Joe had told Thomas about the party, said it was a gift from him, but would not give him any particulars just that it was taken care of. Most of the people at the party had not been in the Rectory before. They thought it was beautiful as they moved from room to room. Thomas' family furniture made it a gracious setting. A twelve-foot tree stood in the front parlor waiting to be decorated. Boxes of decorations were placed around the room. A jazz combo played in a corner of the dining room. They had selected Christmas tunes and allowed some of the cast to try out their singing voices. The kids jammed and enjoyed themselves. Hearty food was strategically placed in each room. The bar was staffed by a handsome waiter in a tuxedo who was making festive drinks for everyone. Of course, they were all fruit juice or soda but they looked like grown up drinks. The kids loved it.

People moved through the front parlor and hung decorations on the tree. Thelma Whitehurst, a member of the Vestry had appointed herself as overseer for tree decorating so it would meet her standards. Thomas simply laughed and thanked her for taking on the task. Sean was at Joe's side the entire time as they moved from room to room chatting with folks.

Thomas had to get ready for the next service. He grabbed Joe and pulled him into the kitchen. He hoped they could have a quick kiss without too many people knowing. Just as their lips touched, they heard clapping. The jazz combo started playing "Falling in Love with Love." Then people started cheering. Joe's ruddy Scottish complexion turned a bright red as he tucked his head into Thomas shoulder. They felt a tug and Sean was holding onto their coat tails. Joe picked him up and he kissed both Thomas and Joe on their cheeks.

As Thomas was heading out the back door, Joe grabbed him and looked into his eyes.

"Tonight is the night."

Thomas didn't understand. Joe looked him square in the eyes.

"Tonight is the night for us to make love for the first time."

Thomas caught his breath and said it would be the quickest Christmas Eve service on record. As he was running across the church close, he was heard yelling, "yippee."

Joe stood at the back door and smiled. He went back inside and announced that since the boss had left, they could celebrate until the wee, small hours of the night. The party didn't last that much longer though because the cast and crew were exhausted. They had put in an incredible amount of time and had a physical let down after the show. Bugboy got everyone's attention and announced that he just had a call from a New York producer who wanted the show to open on Broadway. Everyone laughed and cheered. On a more serious note, he said it had been the most fun he had in theater in years and that everyone in the room should have an equity card because they were so good. He thanked Elaine for her graciousness in allowing him to help with the show. People were cheering Elaine. He let her bask in the glow of the production and rightly so because she didn't have to let him direct. When she turned it over to him, she supported him one hundred percent. It was a fortuitous collaboration for everyone.

Bugboy said he would give Sean a ride home and Joe thanked him but said there had to be two people. Elaine laughed and said he must have taken the Safe Church training. Joe grinned. Elaine and Bill said they would take him home. Sean pulled Joe down for a hug and didn't want to let go.

"You have my card, my darling boy. I will see you soon but if ever you need me you are to call me. Do you understand? I will be there anytime."

Sean smiled through his tears and told Joe he loved him. Joe then handed Sean a Christmas present from he and Thomas. It was a pair of pants and a shirt - something practical. They didn't want to embarrass him or for him to think a present was required in return. Joe and Sean hugged one last time before Sean left.

The catering crew made quick work of the clean-up. They had estimated right and there was little to be packed. The musicians were packing their cases and Thelma was putting the last of the ornaments on the tree. Joe asked her if she would like some sherry and her eyes lit up like the lights on the tree. He prepared her a glass while he poured himself two fingers of whisky. They sat in the library and had a pleasant conversation. She wanted to know more about him. Joe thought it important that he present himself in the best possible light because she could be an ally when Thomas presented his case to the Vestry. Thelma reached out and touched his arm.

"I can see how much you and Thomas love each other. Don't let him go much longer before you make him yours. He is afraid that some people will say no, but I can assure you I will be working the phone lines starting after Christmas. The two of you make a great team. Just be thankful you aren't a woman because then you would have to join all the women's groups in the parish and sit on the front row and wear a hat and gloves every Sunday. However, I need to say there are more pews than the one in the back. I would love for you to sit with me and Jimmy. Would you do that for us? Would you do that for you and Thomas?"

Joe was caught up in his emotions that this elderly lady had made this generous offer. He reached out and gently held her hand while he nodded his head. She leaned over and hugged him. He could smell her old lady powder and the scent of the lotion from the manicurist.

She said it was past time for her to go home but she wanted one last look at the tree. They both stood in the archway between the foyer and the parlor and smiled at the beautiful tree. The boys put away the ladder after she had directed their placing ornaments on the upper branches. She also had the boxes taken down to the basement. Joe walked her to her car and waited until she started it and drove down the street. He looked into the dark night sky and was thankful for the gifts of love that had been given to him.

Thomas arrived home to find Joe asleep on the sofa in the library. The fire had been banked, the lights dimmed and a quilt was covering his man. Thomas leaned down and kissed his forehead. Joe awoke smiling. They brushed their teeth and walked into the master bedroom. Thomas started putting on his pajamas while Joe was stripping off all of his clothes. They both stood and laughed. Thomas quickly dispensed with the pajamas and the two men got to fully see each other for the first time. Thomas could barely breath at seeing Joe's broad, hairy chest. Joe looked at Thomas and saw the perfect physical specimen. They were both excited.

Instead of frenetic grappling it was sweet and gentle love making. They both knew this was the first time of many yet to come. There was lots of passion without hurry. They fell into a deep sleep. They were wrapped in each other's arms when they heard the doorbell chime. It was just past four o'clock in the morning. Who would be ringing the doorbell? It sounded again. Thomas put on his robe and went downstairs to find a policeman standing at the door.

"Excuse me Father, would you know the whereabouts of a Mr. Joseph McKendry?"

"Yes, he is staying here tonight. May I ask what this is about?"

"A young boy named Sean McDaniel has been trying to call him. Sean gave me Mr. McKendry's business card and when he didn't answer his phone Sean said he might be here."

Joe was walking down the steps and asked the policeman if he knew what was wrong.

"The boy's mother is in the emergency room. It is unclear whether she will make it through the night or not. The boy is all alone and is asking for you."

"Which hospital? We're getting dressed. Let him know we will be there as soon as we can."

"Father, I will be happy to drive you. I can turn on my squallers and we will get there fast."

Both men ran upstairs and dressed. Out of habit, Thomas grabbed his chrism oil, communion kit and stole. He didn't know what he would be facing.

They jumped in the back seat of the police car and had a quick ride to the hospital. Joe had grabbed Thomas' hand and could not let it go. The lights and squallers were working their magic as cars cleared out of the way on the cold, clear night. As the police car was pulling up to the emergency

room doors, Joe opened the car door, took off and ran into the lobby. He couldn't wait for the others. Sean was sitting all alone in a plastic chair. Joe ran across the lobby, then dropped to his knees and slid up to chair where Sean was sitting. Sean threw himself into Joe's arms.

"I tried to call you; I really did try."

"I know, my son. I got here as soon as I could. Thank you for asking the policeman for help." Both were crying.

Thomas immediately went back into the clinic area where he found Sean's mother, Mary Agnes. He was struck by her emaciated appearance. She couldn't be as old as she looked. Thomas leaned over and told her who he was. Her eyes opened and she smiled.

"You are the priest who is so kind to my son. Is your husband here with you to see after my Sean?"

Thomas couldn't say those words so he nodded his head. He asked if she wanted communion? She said yes, but she wasn't ready to die so not to do last rites. Thomas asked the nurse to get Joe and Sean so they could have communion together. Joe came in with Sean holding his hand. Sean looked scared and would not let loose of Joe's hand. Thomas had set up his communion kit on a rolling bed table. He asked Sean to sit on the edge of the bed and to hold his mother's hand. Sean sat and pulled Joe next to him.

When Thomas communed them he placed the wafer on Mary Agnes' tongue, he did the same for Sean and his hand was shaking when he placed the wafer on Joe's tongue. This was the first time he had given communion to Joe. They looked at each other and then Joe said "Amen." Thomas then took the cup of wine and used a small spoon to place wine in Mary Agnes' mouth. He watched as she swallowed. He held the cup to Sean's mouth and he took a sip. When he lifted it to Joe's mouth, Joe took his hands and wrapped them around Thomas'. After sipping the wine, Joe leaned in and kissed Thomas on the mouth. Joe thought of it as a blessing of he and Thomas and their love for each other.

They sat in the quiet hearing only the noises from the breathing machine. Eventually a doctor came in and said they were admitting Mary Agnes for observation. They accompanied her to a room where she promptly fell asleep. The doctor looked at Thomas and said it was touch and go this time. Thomas nodded. The doctor then looked at Joe and said his wife wouldn't survive many more of the episodes. Joe asked the doctor what he was talking about. The doctor said that Mary Agnes had listed him as Sean's father on the admission paper work and he assumed they were still married. Joe stood there not knowing what to say so he was quiet.

"I think she will be asleep until after lunch. You can come back then. You need some rest also. She will be here a couple of days."

Thomas, Joe and Sean walked into the lobby of the emergency room and were about to ask that a cab be called to take them back to the rectory when they saw the same policeman waiting for them.

"Father, I heard about the beautiful pageant you did last night and the sergeant said for me to stay here until you were ready to go home. It made our department proud that you asked us to participate

in the pageant. We got more goodwill from that pageant than we have gotten all year. You honored us in unimaginable ways and we want to honor you.” He smiled, “I am hungry, let me take you to breakfast. I am starved and I think Sean is also.” Sean grinned at the man.

The policeman drove them to a Waffle House. Sean ate a huge breakfast while leaning into Joe who had no appetite and slid his plate in front of Sean. Sean laughed and said that food should not go to waste. Joe was amazed at the amount of food that Sean could consume. The sun was up as they pulled in front of the rectory.

“Did you bring the housekeys, Joe?”

“No, did you Thomas?”

They both started laughing. The patrolman made them promise not to tell anyone what he was getting ready to do. He disappeared over the wall into the church close and the next they saw of him he was opening their front door from the inside.

“Gentlemen, I am coming by next week to talk to you about a security system. That was too easy. Have a Merry Christmas.”

“Have a blessed Christmas, officer. Thank you for everything you did for us tonight.”

They wandered through the house and turned on the Christmas tree lights. There were several packages under the tree waiting to be opened. Joe had given Sean the package from them so there was nothing under the tree for him. They weren't going to open their packages when he had nothing.

Thomas said they all needed to shower and get ready for the 9 a.m. service. Joe and Sean looked at him like he was crazy.

“It will be a small congregation and I need your assistance. Any questions? We are three amigos and will do this together.”

They all headed to showers. Sean only had the clothes he had worn the night before but Joe promised to take him to his apartment in the afternoon to pick up clothes and things he would need while he stayed with them. Stay with them? Joe was startled that he was planning to live with Thomas? The statement just poured out of his mouth without thinking. He had some serious thinking to do. He smiled at Sean.

“Afterall, it appears I am your dad now.”

Sean's grin almost split his face.

They showered, dressed and were in the sacristy when Thelma came in. She was surprised to see the three of them and looked at Sean with a wondering gaze. She asked Father Thomas to help her with something at the altar. He knew it was a ruse. She quizzed him about why Sean was with them. Thomas explained the situation with Mary Agnes and that it was Christmas Day and the boy had no presents under the tree and he didn't know what to do.

“Let Santa Claus take care of it, Father. You do still believe in Santa Claus, don’t you?”

Thomas laughed and said he would always be a believer. Thelma smiled and said she needed to finish some Altar Guild work.

Joe was kitted out in a cassock and surplice as was Sean. They were given instructions and Thomas promised to prompt them during the service when certain things needed to be done.

They climbed down the stairs from the Sacristy and walked across the undercroft and came up a set of stairs in the Narthex. Joe helped Sean steady the processional cross. It was top heavy and he was a small boy. Sean smiled and said he had it under control. People kept coming into the doors which surprised Thomas. He was expecting just a few parishioners. Thomas saw the Bishop walk in and was even more rattled. They spoke briefly with the Bishop asking if Thomas had seen the morning paper? Thomas said he had not. The Bishop handed him a copy. The top half of the front page was a photograph of the set; it looked like a Renaissance painting. A picture of Sean was included in the article as the boy artist who had painted the set. There was also a poignant picture of Joseph, Mary and the Baby Jesus leaving for Egypt. The photographer was masterful in understanding composition and lighting. The Bishop then said there was a wonderful review of the pageant in the Arts Section written by the paper’s theater critic.

“Good work, my boy. Good work.”

When Jim started playing the opening hymn Sean led the three of them up the center aisle. They all operated on instinct. When it was time for the Gospel reading, Thomas revered the altar, picked up the Gospel Book, grabbed Sean by the hand and they walked down the aisle together. Thomas knelt down in the aisle and opened the book for Sean to see. He quickly pointed to the passage to be read. It was the same scripture Sean had proclaimed the night before. In a clear voice, Sean read the Gospel from Luke about Christmas. He barely had to look at the lectionary because he had memorized it for the pageant. He caught the Bishop’s eye and he was smiling. When he finished, Thomas stood and together they walked back to the altar. He depended on Sean to lead them because his eyes were full of tears. Thomas had not seen the Bishop’s reaction and decided if he objected to the boy reading the gospel lesson then let him bring it on. They bowed and then Sean took his seat. Sean gave Joe a thumbs up and smiled as Thomas climbed into the pulpit.

The three of them stood in the Narthex as people exited. Then, the most amazing thing happened. Mary Louise Edwards said to Thomas that by mistake she had cooked too many vegetable casseroles and would be bringing one by for them to have for lunch. Next, Edna Jenkins said she had ordered too many dinner rolls from the bakery and would be bringing a dozen over in a short while. Mr. George Whitmore, said he didn’t know how it happened but he thought he ordered one roasted goose for Christmas and the butcher brought him two. He said he would be bringing one by for them to eat. On and on it went. There was a steady procession of vehicles stopping by the rectory all morning. Everyone wanted to quickly drop things off and then hurry home.

The last to arrive was Thelma accompanied by Santa Claus. He had a bag full of games, clothes and art books that an eighth- grader might like. Sean was overwhelmed and kept crawling into Joe’s lap sniffing at the bounty. He had never seen so many gifts in his short life. There were presents for Mary Agnes also. The big Scotsman could barely control his emotions. Thomas stood behind them

with a hand on Joe's shoulder. Santa finished and said it had been a long night circling the globe and wondered if they might have a bite of food for him to eat. He said he especially like roasted goose. Then Thelma's husband removed his hat and beard, hugged everyone and wished them a Merry Christmas.

11. Mary Agnes McDaniel

December 25, 1988

Thomas decided to accompany Sean and Joe to the hospital to visit with Mary Agnes. They had finished the scrumptious feast provided by the members of the parish. They had the added pleasure of Thelma and her husband, Jimmy, at the table. Thomas had shown them where the “good Christmas china” was kept and Thelma asked Sean to help her set the table for lunch. Thelma offered many affirmations to Sean as he followed her instructions on how to set a proper table. He was a proud doobie as he held Joe’s hand during the blessing of the food and for those at the table. Sean had never seen so much food on a table.

Thelma and Jimmy never had children and in less than twenty-four hours it seemed they had adopted Thomas and Joe as their sons and Sean as their grandson. They certainly felt that they were at least their guardian angels. Sean took to them immediately. That, in and of itself, made Joe smile with gratitude.

Thomas carved the goose and served everyone the same as his father had done at all holiday meals. By the time they finished they were as stuffed as the goose had been earlier. The apple, cranberry, chestnut stuffing had been other worldly. They were not used to such wonderfully prepared food. When the mincemeat pie was offered for dessert, Joe dug in. Sean looked at it askance and sniffed the slice. He couldn’t decide whether he would eat it. Joe laughed and said it was payback time and he would eat it. Thomas disappeared and then came back with a sherbet glass filled with chocolate ice cream. Sean glowed and made the ice cream like it was a disappearing act. Thelma said it was good to see men with such hearty appetites. Jimmy patted his girth and said that he had a genetic disorder which made him hungry all of the time. Thelma laughed and said she remembered that he had a 29 inch waist when they married.

“It was all of your good cooking; it made my tiny waist disappear and the Santa Claus waist to come take up residence.” He leaned over and kissed Thelma. They were clearly still in love after many years of marriage.

“Father, why don’t the three of you go to the hospital to visit with Mary Agnes while Jimmy and I clean up the kitchen and put everything away?”

“We couldn’t ask you to do that.”

Thelma smiled. “I don’t remember you asking. I suggested what Jimmy and I were going to do. In fact, Jimmy will probably take a nap in your library while I do the cleaning. He is like a bull in the kitchen and I don’t want him to break up your good china.” Jimmy grinned and said he felt a nap coming on.

Joe and Sean said they were going to clean their teeth and comb their hair. Sean wanted to look good for his mother. Thomas grabbed his communion kit and stole. They left the house in Thelma’s capable hands and got into Thomas’ staid Buick and drove to the hospital. Sean insisted that he sit in the front seat between Thomas and Joe.

The hospital was very quiet. Most of the patients had been discharged for the holiday. After the first of the year, it would be bustling again. They walked to the nurse's station to let the staff know they were going to visit with Mary Agnes. Joe had an armful of presents. When they walked into the room, they thought there was a corpse lying in the bed. In fact, Sean let out a gasp that awoke Mary Agnes who started smiling. She was obviously very ill. Sean crawled onto the bed and hugged his mother while Joe and Thomas stood back. When Joe started handing Mary Agnes the Christmas presents that had been given, tears formed in her eyes. She had Sean open them for her. They were all practical gifts like nightgowns, bedroom slippers, and a house coat. There was also a bottle of perfume which thrilled Mary Agnes. She took the stopper out and put some on her pulse points. She smiled and hugged Sean.

"Father and Joseph, thank you for taking care of Sean while I am in the hospital. There is a Christmas present for him at the apartment. Can you take him by there for me? It is hard on a child when they don't get a present for Christmas."

"Yes, Mary Agnes we will do that."

Sean was about to tell his mother about all of the presents from Santa Claus when Joe shook his head. He understood that would hurt Mary Agnes' pride if she thought they were a charity case. Instead, Joe asked Sean to tell her about the different foods they had for lunch. She smiled and said she had never tasted roasted goose.

"It is something the parishioners did for me. It was so kind. They knew how busy I had been with the Christmas pageant. It was certainly better than the baloney sandwich on white bread I was going to fix for these men."

They all laughed and Mary Agnes closed her eyes. Thomas asked if they wanted communion and all agreed. Sean told his mother about carrying the processional cross that morning and she smiled that her son would have such an important role. He told her how heavy it was. He then said that Thomas asked him to read the Gospel and that the Bishop smiled at him while he was reading. Mary Agnes couldn't believe that her son had been allowed to read the Gospel and that the Bishop would approve.

"He smiled at me, mama, and told me afterwards that I did a better job reading than most priests. Of course, it is not hard to read better than Fr. Thomas. He has that southern accent and sometimes it is hard to understand him." Sean gave Thomas a sly grin.

Mary Agnes laughed and said their Irish accent was sometimes hard for others to understand. Joe then spoke a bit of Gaelic and Mary Agnes' eyes got big and watered. She reached out and grabbed Joe's hand.

"Blessed Mother Mary, I knew you were the right man for my Sean. God has a way of looking out for us. We Irish are a blessed people, you know. Father, could you take my Sean to get something to drink while I have a conversation with your Joseph?"

Thomas nodded and told Sean they would go to the cafeteria and leave the Irish to themselves for a few minutes. Thomas closed the door when they left. He was sure that an important, private conversation was about to happen. Little did he know.

Mary Agnes lay back in bed. It was obvious to Joe that the short visit had been exhausting to her. She then proceeded to tell Joe her story. Joe sat quietly and listened. When she asked the crucial question, he could only nod his head in agreement. Joe reached out and hugged Mary Agnes.

There was a knock at the door and then Thomas and Sean entered. Thomas opened his communion kit and put on his stole. He asked Sean to recite the Gospel for them to start. Sean stood at the foot of the bed, held his head up and started his recitation. He mimicked Thomas standing at the altar and raised his arms inviting the Holy Spirit into the room. By the time he finished, two nurses were standing in the doorway. They heard a voice and were drawn to hear its beauty and the familiarity of the Christmas scripture. Thomas invited them in to share in the Eucharist. He distributed the bread and asked Sean to distribute the wine. Sean had seen Thomas use the spoon of wine with his mother earlier in the day. He did exactly the same thing. Mary Agnes' eyes shone knowing that her son would be under the care of these two men. The nurses were touched that they had been included in the communion. Neither had been happy at the start of their shift because they had to work on Christmas Day but now felt a sense of joy for the gift they had received.

When they left the hospital, Thomas drove to the apartment where Sean lived. He was shaken by the paucity of what they found in the immaculately clean space. Sean got a paper bag from the kitchen and put his few clothes in it. He saw the wrapped package from his mother on the kitchen table. There was also an orange, an apple and some walnuts in a sock that was serving as a Christmas stocking. Then they stopped by Joe's apartment and he put a few clothes in a bag to take to the rectory. He didn't know how long he and Sean would be there. He could always come back to the apartment to get more clothes and to wash those that were dirtied.

When they arrived back at the rectory, they found Jimmy asleep in the library. He had built a fire, there was a glass of melting ice and scotch in a glass on the coffee table and Jimmy had a pillow under his head and a blanket covering his ample frame. Thelma was sitting in the front parlor reading. She smiled when they came in. After she inquired after Mary Agnes, she awoke Jimmy and said they would be leaving.

"It was the best Christmas we have had in many years. I would like to thank you for letting us join you." Jimmy was packing the Santa suit and Thelma was putting on her coat.

"Would you like to stay for some supper?"

"No, Father, we have appropriated enough of your life today. I think the three of you have some things to talk about. You let us know if you need anything, I mean anything."

"Thelma, you were an angel sent to us on this Christmas and I thank you and God for that."

Thelma was right. There was a conversation to be had and Joe realized that he had things that needed to be said but he didn't quite know how to start or exactly what to say. They were all exhausted and

decided that everything could be put off for another day. Then Joe realized that maybe it had to be done sooner rather than later.

“Thomas. Sean. Let’s sit in the library. I need to talk to both of you.” Joe could see the fear in Sean’s eyes. He could see the questioning look from Thomas but realized the three of them would have to process this together.

“How are you feeling, son?”

“I am okay. I am tired though.” Tears came to Sean’s eyes. “Where am I going to live?”

Thomas turned to Joe for the answer.

“We are all staying here right now.”

Sean got up from the chair he was sitting in and moved to the couch where he sat between Thomas and Joe.

“First, Sean. Your mother cannot go back to the apartment when she is released from the hospital. She will be sent to a nursing home.” Sean burst into tears. “That is, unless we let her come here. Hospice nurses would provide care for her. We could provide her a safe place to live here with us.”

Thomas knew full well that the rectory would be where she would die. She was not going to get better. When Joe said hospice nurses that meant one thing. Sean didn’t fully understand the meaning of that.

“Of course, we can put her on the second floor in the front bedroom. She will be able to look out at the world and see what is happening. We will put Sean in the bedroom next to her. You and I will have the master bedroom.”

Joe smiled at hearing Thomas talk about them living here.

“I will let the doctor know tomorrow morning. It will be a huge change for you, Thomas. It is like an invading army of people. Are you sure you can do that?”

“Yes. I am sure. I have lived alone in this big house for too long.”

“Sean is this okay with you?”

Sean nodded his head.

“Fine, tomorrow you and I will go close up your apartment and let the landlord know you won’t be coming back. Thomas will talk with the doctor and arrange for your mother to be brought here.”

“But where will we live when mother gets better?”

“One thing at a time. There are lots of apartments and when the time comes to find a place, I will help you find one. Maybe you can live in my apartment since it seems that I may be living here with Thomas.”

Thomas grinned and leaned over to kiss Joe. Sean was squeezed between them.

“Well, it seems the important things have been discussed. What say, we men go upstairs and get ready for bed?”

Sean could barely keep his eyes open as they climbed the stairs. Thomas showed Sean the bedroom he would use; it was old fashioned and fussy. Thomas said they would talk about how to redecorate so it looked like something he would enjoy. Sean nodded his head and he was asleep by the time Joe lifted him into the big canopy bed.

Thomas and Joe brushed their teeth, stripped their clothing, grinned at each other and climbed into another big canopy bed.

“Okay, tell me the rest of the story.”

Joe swallowed a couple of times and then pulled Thomas to his chest. “It is a sad story. Do you want a sad story before you go to sleep? It might give you nightmares.”

“Tell me the basics. With you beside me, I will have my Highland man to hold onto if I have scary nightmares.”

“Mary Agnes is a Traveller.” Joe looked at Thomas to see if he understood. He didn’t. “She is a gypsy. Specifically, she is an Irish Traveller. The Travellers were here for a summer sojourn up from South Carolina. They are settled out in Murphy Town in North Augusta but in the heat of the summer some of them took to the road. Anyway, she met a local boy and ended up pregnant. The king of the clan was furious and was going to kill the boy for impregnating Mary Agnes only she would not tell anyone who he was. The members of the clan had seen him but didn’t know his name. Mary Agnes convinced the boy to leave until the clan left to return to South Carolina. She knew that the king would find him if he was around. Mary Agnes became very sick while they were here and decided to stay in Philadelphia when the clan headed back south. The king was very angry about her staying and about her being pregnant. If the father of the child had been a member of the clan they would have married and everyone would have turned their heads about the baby being “early.” Mary Agnes decided not to return to South Carolina thinking she would reconnect with the father in the fall. He didn’t return and she moved into a tenement. She worked odd jobs to keep food on the table and to pay the rent. People did not want to hire a pregnant gypsy. She became sicker and sicker during the pregnancy and when Sean was born, he too, was sick. He was born with congenital tuberculosis. He almost died. Mary Agnes and Sean started receiving treatment.”

“Mary Agnes is now suffering from end stage pulmonary failure further complicated by after effects of a horrible case of syphilis from the father. Mary Agnes did not go in for health care during the pregnancy and didn’t see a doctor until she was delivering the baby. Sean was treated for congenital tuberculosis also. His lungs were severely damaged, he had congenital syphilis which was treated, and he was a failure to thrive baby. A Catholic Church helped provide food for a while but when

Mary Agnes would not have Sean baptized, they lost some of their enthusiasm for the mother and child. Mary Agnes was a fiery soul and told the priest where to shove it. So, how she is dying of respiratory failure complicated by the prior tuberculosis; she doesn't expect to live much longer. Weeks maybe. Sean was treated for the tuberculosis but has significant respiratory illnesses every winter. The doctors told Mary Agnes after Sean was born that he would have a fairly short lifespan."

Thomas was weeping as Joe pulled him into his arms. Joe held him close as they fell asleep. Thomas awoke sometime during the night and could not stretch out his legs in the bed. He realized that Sean was at the foot of the bed wrapped in a quilt he had brought in from his bedroom. Thomas nudged Joe trying not to awaken Sean. As Joe slowly came awake, he too tried to stretch and realized there was an impediment. After whispering to each other, Joe picked up Sean and took him back to his bed. When he came back to bed, Thomas handed him pajama bottoms to put on.

"We can't be walking around naked with a young boy in the house."

Joe, aware it was morning when the waft of brewing coffee came floating up the stairs into the bedroom, slowly opened his eyes. A figure appeared in the doorway. Sean held a mug of coffee for Joe. He brought it in and set it on the nightstand.

"Good morning, dad." Joe was startled at the ease with which Sean had said that word but he tried not to let it show.

"Good morning, son. How are you?"

Sean hung his head. "I got scared last night. This is a big house. I was alone and I was scared because I didn't remember where I was. I was afraid you would kick me out today."

"Not on your life. We are family."

Sean's smile lit up the room.

"Papa Thomas said for you to put on a bathrobe because it is cold in the kitchen."

"Papa Thomas?"

"Yes, he and I talked this morning while you were sleeping. We both agreed that was a good name. I could call him Father Thomas but that sounds like what I call him at church. He is now my papa and you are now my dad."

Joe got out of bed and Sean gawped at his muscular frame and hairy chest.

"Will I be big and hairy like you when I grow up?"

"Well, time will tell, time will tell. You need to eat breakfast to grow big and strong. Breakfast is important. I don't know what will make you hairy?"

"Papa said we're having Irish Oatmeal, bacon and toast with grapefruit marmalade."

“Did he now? Well, let’s go down and have some of Papa Thomas’ breakfast.”

While Thomas organized things on the home front, Joe took Sean to the hospital to see his mother. She smiled when they walked into the room.

“Mama, you are coming to live with Daddy Joe, Papa Thomas and me at the big house. Your room is really nice.”

Mary Agnes looked at Joe as he nodded his head. “Thomas is taking care of everything today. As soon as you are released from the hospital, we will have you with us. I am taking care of everything at the apartment.”

“I couldn’t impose.”

“The mother of my son is not imposing.” Both Joe and Sean smiled. There was a sigh of relief from Mary Agnes.

Thomas had called Thelma and asked if she could come for coffee. It turned out she was a hospice volunteer and gave Thomas advise on what room to use for Mary Agnes.

“Don’t put her in the front bedroom. After she passes, Sean would not want to go into that room. Let Sean have the front room and we can set up another room up for Mary Agnes.”

“Thelma, we also need an attorney. Do you think Jimmy has time to meet with us?”

“Of course, he does. I will have his schedule cleared to meet with you whenever you need. My husband generally does what I tell him.” They both laughed.

Thelma really was an angel who brought peace and understanding to her new sons and grandson.

12. Fortune Telling

December 30, 1988

“I see my men are ready to head out to work today and I won’t see you again until suppertime. Are there any special requests for food?”

“Whatever you fix is good to me, Papa.”

Thomas was looking at Joe and Sean, aka mini-Joe. Joe decided it wasn’t good for Sean to sit around the rectory or the church every day while he was home on winter break from school. Sean was now his assistant. His clients were absolutely charmed when Joe introduced his son as his helper. One of the repeat customers said she didn’t know that Joe had children. He and Sean looked at each other and started grinning. They were on day four of working together. Joe was teaching Sean what the different tools were and how they were used. On day two, Joe repaired a section of plaster in a house. The elderly man said he would have to find someone to paint that section because he knew Joe didn’t do that work so Sean offered to come back and paint it for him. The man was overjoyed. They were back at the ancient home the next day; Sean climbed the ladder and quickly dispatched the job. The man wanted to pay Sean for the work but Sean said it was a Christmas gift. He and Joe went on the next job; Joe was so proud of Sean for understanding that the man was probably living hand to mouth. The breach in the plaster was because of a leak and Joe had quietly repaired the leak without charging the man. Sean accurately assessed the situation and followed the lead of his dad in helping people.

At lunchtime, Joe and Sean sat in the truck and opened their lunchboxes. Thomas had packed them a thermos of soup, two sandwiches for Sean, one for Joe and chocolate chip cookies for dessert. After they finished, they moved onto the next job. It involved work in a basement. Luckily, they had worn safety glasses, face masks and gloves because their clothes were covered in dirt and mud. Sean had a look of satisfaction on his face because he knew what tools to hand Joe and felt he had earned his keep that day.

They arrived home to see an ambulance in the street. Sean groaned and slumped into Joe.

“It’s okay, son. I think your mom is home. Thomas said it might happen today.”

Sean jumped out of the truck and ran up to the ambulance as the medical transporters were pulling the stretcher with his mother from the back of the vehicle. Mary Agnes saw Sean and started laughing.

“What have you been up to? You are filthy.”

At that moment, Joe walked up and Mary Agnes saw he was in the same condition.

“My two men look like they have been working today.”

Sean grinned from ear to ear.

The stretcher was carefully lifted up the granite steps into the foyer and then up the house steps to the second floor. Thomas had taken Thelma's advice and had Mary Agnes in a side bedroom that overlooked the church close so she could see the gardens and birds.

"Come on, son, we need a shower. We don't want to track dirt and mud through the house."

"Too late, Joe, there is already a trail from the front door. The two of you get cleaned up and I will finish dinner. I think I will set up a card table in Mary Agnes's room and we can all have dinner together."

Joe and Sean headed to the shower in the master bathroom. Sean was still amazed at Joe's brawny body. He felt like a wimp beside him. Joe took note that Sean had pubic hair, a bush in each arm pit and that his testicles had dropped; he was on target developmentally. Joe washed Sean's hair then sat on the floor of the shower while Sean washed his. They toweled themselves and put on pajamas which they decided to wear for dinner. When Thomas came upstairs with food and saw his men in pajamas, he decided to change clothes and put on his pajamas also.

Sean enjoyed telling his mother about helping the elderly man by painting the wall in his foyer. He thought the basement was spooky, especially when Joe was telling him ghost stories. They were all laughing until Mary Agnes had a coughing fit. Thomas was very efficient in putting an oxygen mask on Mary Agnes and helping her breathe. He recorded everything in her medical chart. Joe didn't know that Thomas had been taking a short course in hospice care for the past four days. While Thomas was helping Mary Agnes, Sean climbed in Joe's lap and put his arms around his dad's neck. He looked scared. Joe soothed Sean and explained what Thomas was doing. He wanted to take away the mystery of home hospice. At 9 pm, they heard the doorbell ring and then someone walking up the stairs. It was Thelma who had come to give Mary Agnes a shot before she went to sleep. Thomas had given Thelma a key to the house and told her to come and go as she needed.

The next morning when Joe went to awaken Sean to go to work, he was not in his bed, rather Joe found him wrapped in a quilt on the floor beside Mary Agnes's bed. Joe rubbed his shoulder and told it was time to eat breakfast and go to work. He spoke to Thomas who said he would get a cot that day so Sean could sleep in the room with his mother. Sean was unsettled at work that morning and Joe let him live in that place of uncertainty. As they were eating lunch in the truck Joe asked Sean about fun times he and his mother had. By the time they had finished the chocolate cake that Thomas had packed for them, Sean was in a better mood. That afternoon, he spent more time needing hugs from Joe as he came to the realization that his mother would probably die at home with him, his daddy and papa.

On the night of January 5th, Thomas arranged for the cast and crew of the Christmas Pageant to come to the rectory for a Twelfth Night Party. Thomas and Joe planned lots of hijinks and fun for the gang. Out of deference, Thomas invited the Bishop who showed up as a Court Jester and his wife was dressed as the Merry Fool. Joe dressed in a kilt and was the Scottish hero, Robert the Bruce, while Sean dressed as a leprechaun. He was perfect for the role with his small stature, lean body, clear Irish skin, black hair and bright blue eyes. Ellen made him a costume and mask of green silk. Thomas dressed as the legendary Robber Bridegroom who roamed the bayous and low country of the American South. He looked appropriately dashing and enjoyed sweeping up unsuspecting girls at the party and telling them who he was. They were giddy because Thomas was so handsome.

The King Cake was cut and Bugboy won the hidden coin in his slice and was thus declared the King of Hijinks for the evening. It was perfect as he was dressed as a huge spider and could point at multiple people at the same time. He put on the crown and was riotously funny and full of mischief. The band that played for the Christmas pageant insisted on playing for the party and the kids heard Jim, the church organist, playing jazz and contemporary standards. They didn't know he had it in himself to be so cool. Different partiers sang with the band. Bugboy led some of the dancing even pulling Kurt, the boy who had played Joseph in the pageant, onto the dance floor. The two of them danced cheek to cheek. They finished with a kiss and walked hand in hand to the dining room to get something to drink. Kurt was a member of the congregation and a freshman in college and everyone thought it cool that he and Bugboy were dating.

Mary Agnes insisted that she wanted to participate in Old Christmas and came dressed as a fortune teller. She had rallied and looked wonderful in gypsy clothes. Joe made her a fortune telling booth that was set up in the library. All of the kids were enthralled that she was going to tell their fortunes. Mary Agnes had a crystal ball which she used with the kids. She made it fun for them and they all received good fortunes of love and wealth. When the Bishop went in for this fortune to be told Mary Agnes pulled out her Tarot cards. When he left the booth, he was pale and asked Thomas if he believed in fortune telling. Thomas said he did. The Bishop walked away looking completely bowled over. Mary Agnes had foretold what would happen to him; it was all good but the Bishop was not prepared to hear that from a gypsy fortune teller.

Bugboy thought it would be great fun and went into booth to have his fortune told. Mary Agnes looked at his aura and knew she had a difficult question to ask: did he want a fun fortune or did he want to hear the truth? He said he wanted the truth. He was joking around really thinking this was silly stuff; that no one could tell the future. She shuffled the Tarot cards and laid them on the table. When he came out, he was shaken and started crying. He excused himself from the party and left alone. Mary Agnes had told him what he knew to be true but didn't want to face. Bugboy now knew the future course of what would be a very short life.

Sean went in to ask his mother if she needed anything and she insisted on telling his fortune. She shuffled the Tarot cards and then laid them out on the table. She smiled and then frowned. She had always told Sean the truth and did again that night. They both laughed and cried. He was surprised when Mary Agnes told him that he would have a brother who love him unconditionally and that a young girl would save his life. He hugged her afterwards and she asked that Joe be sent in.

Joe came into the booth thinking it was a fun, carnival kind of thing to do. Mary Agnes shuffled the cards and laid them out. She sat back and gave a deep relaxed sigh. She smiled because she knew that her son would be taken care of for the rest of his life. Joe was somewhat shaken to have his future foretold; there was no guessing what was going to happen to him. He believed everything she said. Mary Agnes then asked to see Thomas. She went through her preparation and then smiled at the display of cards.

“You are destined to be with your Joseph for life. You will be happy and successful. You will have many children to raise. They will come to you and Joe in times of need. You are to care for them and they will then care for you. You will have a long, meaningful life. You will always be surrounded by love because you will offer it first. Your goodness will be felt by many.”

After reading the cards for Thomas, Mary Agnes said she was tired and needed to rest so Joe and Sean helped her upstairs to her bed. Joe realized that Mary Agnes' efforts that night had taken a lot out of her. She smiled and said she was at peace.

When Sean awoke the next morning, he went to give his mother a kiss and realized that her body was cold. He then walked into Joe and Thomas' bedroom, shook Joe's shoulder and told his daddy that his mother was dead. Joe and Thomas bolted from their bed and went into Mary Agnes's bedroom. She had a look of peace on her face. Thomas called the police department to report the death. When he opened the front door, Officer Kevin McCarthy was standing there. He was the same officer who had taken he and Joe to the emergency room on Christmas morning. Thomas led him upstairs where they found Joe and Sean kneeling at the foot of the bed saying prayers. Thomas and the police officer joined them in saying a prayer. Officer McCarthy asked which funeral home they wanted to use. Luckily, a social worker had helped Mary Agnes fill out all of that paperwork before she came home from the hospital so everything went smoothly.

Joe said he and Sean would get out of the way so that people could do their jobs. They went to the kitchen where Joe made fried egg sandwiches. Sean looked at the sandwich and said he wasn't hungry. Then Sean ran out of the backdoor of the house. Joe decided the boy needed his own time and sat in the kitchen until Thomas came in. Thomas ate the sandwich and kept looking out of the window trying to see Sean. He wasn't visible. Finally, Joe put on his coat and boots and went outside. He searched the grounds without finding his son. He was very worried about where he had gone. Joe assumed he had climbed over the wall and had disappeared. Thomas said they needed to search the church building and the church administrative offices. They found Sean sitting in the front pew of the church. He knew where Thomas hid a key for the building and had let himself in. Joe and Thomas sat on either side of him, holding his hands, without saying a word. Finally, Joe felt Sean slump against him and realized his son was asleep. Joe picked him up and carried him to the rectory where he put him in his and Thomas' bed. Both men leaned over and kissed his forehead. The house was quiet through the afternoon as Sean slept. Late in the day, Sean came into the kitchen still wearing his pajamas. He went up to Joe and hugged him around the waist and laid his head against his daddy's chest. He then hugged Thomas. He started grinning and asked them what a starving kid had to do to get fed. He was on the road to healing and wellness.

At the evening Epiphany service, Thomas made special mention of Mary Agnes's passing earlier in the day. Sean and Joe were sitting with Thelma and Jimmy. After the service, many people came up to the two and offered their condolences. A funeral service was held two days later led by the Bishop. He requested the honor of presiding, saying that Thomas needed to be with Joe and Sean.

Their life became routine as Sean went to school each morning, Joe headed out to worksites and Thomas continued his life as priest and shepherd to the congregation at St. Anselm. There was a bit of talk about Thomas and Sean living in the rectory but Thelma and Joe squelched any dissent. After paying another month's rent on an apartment he didn't use, Joe sat down with Thomas to have a discussion about them being a couple and living together. They agreed that they were partners and wanted to live together and raise their son. Jimmy worked his legal magic and Joe was now Sean's legal father.

Thomas met with the Bishop. He was prepared going into the meeting to leave the church if he had to choose between Joe and the church. He loved both but he loved Joe more...and Sean....and their

life together as a family. He felt complete. The Bishop did say one thing was absolutely necessary: he wanted to have a covenant service for Thomas, Joe and Sean as a family. It would be held at St. Anselm on a weeknight or a Saturday. The Bishop wanted the congregation to know this family had his blessing.

The Vestry proved a bit more difficult with the treasurer asking about paying health insurance on two additional people and the additional costs of utilities at the rectory with additional people there. Thomas was prepared and said that Sean was covered under Joe's health plan and that in exchange for rent, Joe was prepared to maintain the rectory which would ease the financial burden on the church. Everyone was in agreement; the treasurer thought he had won the argument whereas Thomas didn't see there was an argument to begin with. He could have forced the issue and possibly divided the vestry but he went in with a plan that took the legs out of the argument. He and Joe had worked on that strategy ahead of time anticipating some such action.

Joe thought they would just have a quiet covenant ceremony for the three of them. Thelma decided otherwise. By the time she finished, there was a full-blown ceremony and reception planned. She justified it by saying that this was the only wedding she and Joe would have for their children. Joe acquiesced and gave her permission to do whatever she wanted as long as he, Thomas and Sean were seen as a family by the church. Joe even agreed to the Bishop's request (demand) that Sean be baptized and that he and Sean become confirmed in the Episcopal church. All of the members of the church, the cast and crew from the pageant and Joe's friends from the coffee shop were invited to the ceremonies. The church was full to overflowing as the word had leaked out through the neighborhood. The members tried not to count the number of gay men who were present. Joe had made a general announcement at the coffee shop and invited everyone to the ceremony. The gay community heard there was a gay priest at St. Anselm and the Bishop was marrying him and his boyfriend. They all wanted to see for themselves if the Episcopal Church was really that progressive. The first part of the service was when the Bishop baptized Sean and Joe. Joe asked to be baptized again with his son as this felt like a new beginning in his life. Thomas assisted the Bishop. Thelma and Jimmy were their godparents. Sean was upset that the Bishop might pour water all through his hair after he had spent an hour trying to get it just perfect for the covenant ceremony. In fact, Sean talked to the Bishop before the service to help him understand how important it was for a teenager to look perfect. The Bishop chuckled and promised Sean that he would not mess up his hair. Sean grinned and hugged the Bishop.

Then, the Bishop confirmed Joe and Sean into the Episcopal Church. Elaine and Bill wanted to be the sponsors for their confirmation. Thelma and Jimmy said that was okay but they did not give up pride of place and stood with the pair as the Bishop confirmed them by laying on of hands. Joe and Sean felt several sets of hands on them as the Bishop asked anyone in the congregation who wanted to participate to come forward. The chancel filled with people who wanted to support them and there was a mass of people who were touching each other's shoulders as an extension of the first sets of hands. Thomas had never seen such a large reaction before and was proud that his partner and son were so well respected in the church. This was a simple service and the congregation was loudly affirmative in their responses to them being accepted as members of the Episcopal Church.

The third service that was the main focus of the day happened immediately afterwards. The three stood in front of the altar wearing tuxedos; Joe insisted on wearing a kilt with his tuxedo jacket. Sean wanted to copy his dad so Joe had one made for him. Physically they looked nothing alike except for

the big smiles on their faces. Even Thomas wore a large smile thinking how handsome his two men looked. Their exchanges during the ceremony affirmed their love as a family. The Bishop asked the congregation if they were willing to support them as a family. There was a resounding yes. All of a sudden, three men in the congregation stood and sang a loud Amen. This was followed by a reprise of the street version of the “Hallelujah Chorus” that had been sung at the Christmas pageant. Kids everywhere were moving out of their pews and singing in the aisles, at the altar and in the balcony. At the end, Jim sat at the organ and grinned; he had accomplished the coup without Thomas knowing. The Bishop smiled afterwards and said he was so thankful to hear them sing because he heard it was the best pageant in the diocese. The Bishop offered blessings, lifted up Thomas, Joe and Sean in prayer, and then the Bishop marked all three with chrism oil and declared them joined together for life. There were loud huzzahs as they walked down the aisle with their hands joined. Sean walked between his dad and papa with a huge grin on his face.

The reception was fun for everyone. The congregation enjoyed themselves as they ate a buffet dinner of Pennsylvania Dutch Country food. Joe had teased Sean about the food that would be served. He told him at the end of the table would be a huge hog head and that since they were going first in line, they had to take some of everything. He told Sean that he would take one eye ball if he would take the other. Sean was practically nauseous at the thought. Then Joe told him about Scrapple and Liver Pudding. Sean was told that instead of sweets they would be served Onion Pie or Flannel Cakes. Joe explained they soaked flannel in milk until it soured then rolled it in flour and oats before putting it in the oven to cook. Joe said it was a requirement that they eat flannel. The other dessert would be Tangle Britches where the women would take a pair of their britches and cut them up and soak them in vinegar and then use them in a pie. Sean realized he would be hungry after the reception because none of that sounded good to him and he definitely wasn't going to eat some woman's britches. When Thelma asked him if he was looking forward to the party, Sean told her he was not. When she asked why, Sean told her about how they made the different dishes. He said he didn't want to eat a hog's eye or women's britches. Thelma looked at Joe and said he was going to get a switching. Joe and Thomas burst out laughing.

Actually, Sean was overwhelmed at the dessert table. Finally, Joe told him that he could have nothing else to eat or he would be sick. When it came time for the first dance, the three men went into the center of the dance floor. Thomas had put on a kilt for the reception so all three were ready for a Scottish Reel. They had practiced for hours to make sure their steps were together. The crowd starting clapping along as they danced around the floor. At a predetermined point in the reel, all three grabbed women in the crowd and pulled them to the dance floor. Nobody knew that the women had been practicing also and were amazed how quickly they fit in. By the time the song was over, the dance floor was filled with people doing a pseudo-reel. They didn't care because everyone was going to be Scottish that night. Some members of the congregation swallowed hard and allowed that many of the male couples were the best dancers in the room.

The next morning in church, a hung-over Joe sat with a sleepy Sean as they listened to Thomas give a very short homily. He thanked the congregation for such a lovely ceremony and reception and then he said leftover desserts were in the parish hall for coffee hour. He thought there was going to be a mad stampede at that moment. Sean actually sat up and smiled when he heard there were more desserts. He loved the Shoo Fly Pie and planned to get a slice before it was all taken. He had a plan to leave the church as soon as he had taken communion so he would be first into the parish hall.

Love abounded in the rectory. Both Joe and Thomas said they were amazed at how right it felt. Sean was a loving son and craved attention from both of them. His grades improved at school and he was generally in a wonderful mood. Every now and again he would have sad thoughts remembering his mother but he was not depressed. Thomas had interred her ashes in the columbarium in the wall of the church close so Sean went out once a week and told her about his life. She was always close to him.

In early March, both Joe and Sean had birthdays. Thomas decided that a dinner out would be great since they rarely ate in restaurants. Thomas asked his men to decide where they wanted to go for dinner. Their answer surprised him but he agreed. On the first Friday in March, Joe picked Sean up from school at lunch time. He drove to the rectory where Thomas had the car packed. Joe got behind the wheel and said it felt like he was driving an old lady car. Sean snickered. The car did look funereal; Joe said they should get a more family friendly car that was a better color. Thomas said it was a waste of money as the only places he drove were to the hospital, the grocery store and funerals. They all laughed and it was decided that a SUV might be more fun. Thomas knew he was outvoted but kept his thoughts to himself.

They headed south on Route 13 until they were in Maryland and then east to Rehoboth Beach. Joe had been there a few times in the summer and thought it was great. It was a first for Thomas and Sean so Joe identified a gay B&B for them to stay in. It was an easy drive as opposed to summer weekend traffic. They got to the beach and all three wanted to walk on the sand so Joe pulled the car into a deserted parking lot and they got out. A wicked smart wind from the northeast was blowing the sand their way but they didn't care. They held onto each other as they walked north on the beach with their hoodies pulled down to keep sand from blowing in their eyes. After walking about a mile, they turned and headed back to the car. It was an easier walk with the wind blowing at their backs. The waves were fierce and pounding the shore as they walked along. When they got back to the car, all three were grinning. It had been fun even though they were the only people on the beach. Joe found the B&B and they grabbed their luggage and went in. Mike and Carl greeted them and seemed surprised that the third person was a boy. It was off-season and there was no nude sunbathing by the pool so they thought it would be okay. They typically didn't get gay families with underage kids.

That night the three found their way to a local restaurant which prepared fresh seafood. Thomas did not let Joe and Sean know he had preselected the restaurant. The restaurant was packed with locals who were out on a Friday night and at their reserved table were party hats, balloons and whistles for Joe and Sean. The atmosphere was laid back and the food was good. Joe ordered a bottle of wine for them to drink. When the waitress wasn't looking, Joe let Sean take a sip of his wine. Thomas tried not to be old maidish and say he wasn't old enough to be drinking; he kept his mouth shut. Joe and Sean grinned at each other; they had bonded in ways that neither would have predicted. They could both act like kids at times. Sean snuck another sip of the wine and then grinned at Joe when he was found out.

"I like that wine. What kind is it?"

"It is an Albirino which is great with seafood. Very citrusy."

"Papa, can you buy us some the next time you go to the grocery store?"

“No, your papa cannot.” Thomas knew he was being played.

Sean pouted in a cute way that had both Joe and Thomas laughing.

“It is your birthday and your daddy is letting you get away with things that I normally wouldn’t allow. You are now fifteen but the legal age for drinking is 21. So, you have a long time before you can drink.”

“Well, I drink wine on Sunday morning. How is that different?”

“That is the blessed wine that is used for communion. You only get a sip.”

“Wine is wine is wine, to me.”

“Fine, I will start pouring a chalice of Welch’s grape juice for you.”

Sean pouted and then smiled. He had both men wrapped around his little finger.

“I love you papa.”

“I love you son. I also love your daddy. Happy birthday to the two of you.”

Thomas signaled and a birthday cake was brought from the kitchen. Thomas had ordered it ahead of time and had it delivered to the restaurant. It was a 14”, three-layer chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. Sean’s eyes grew big as he looked at the cake.

“This is my favorite, papa. Thank you for ordering a single size serving for me. What are the two of you going to eat?”

They all laughed at his antics as Thomas sliced the cake. Thomas said they would take the rest of the cake back to the B&B. Thomas drove them back as Joe had consumed much of the bottle of wine. Sean was in a bedroom next to Thomas and Joe. After kissing them good night, Sean went to his room and Joe led Thomas to theirs.

Both men were ready for a night of loving making. Joe was aggressive and took Thomas in one thrust. Thomas let out a loud sigh. They both tried to be quiet but couldn’t help themselves as they wrestled each other in various positions most of the night. Thomas gave as good as he got. Neither got much sleep.

There was a knock on the door which woke the men. Joe told whoever it was to come in. It was Sean who came in, sniffed the air, smiled at the men and told them that breakfast was ready. He sniffed the air again and asked if that was what sex smelled like. Both men groaned and Thomas tried to hide under the covers. Joe told Sean to give them fifteen minutes and they would be in the dining room.

Sean had a smirk on his face as they sat down.

“How did my papa sleep?”

Thomas saw the grin.

“I slept well, thank you for asking.”

It was not the answer Sean was hoping for.

“Dad, how did you sleep?”

“I slept well, thank you for asking.” Joe parroted Thomas’ answer.

“Well, all I know is I didn’t sleep very well. There was all of this noise coming from the next room. It sounded like a herd of buffaloes on the range. They were roaring and snorting and shouting. I thought someone had gotten hurt a few times.

“Buffalos don’t shout, Sean.”

“Well, I heard them. Especially, when they were screaming ‘I love you. I love you.’”

“Can we change the subject, please?”

“Well, I need to learn about this because when I get a girlfriend and we are doing that kind of stuff, I need to know what to say.”

Both men were trying not to laugh at Sean who was obviously having a good time.

“Well, there is a lot to learn but it is kinda private.”

“There wasn’t anything private about y’all last night. I bet they heard you down on the street. It was fun listening to you smooch.” At that point, Sean put his lips together and started making smooching sounds.

Joe was bright red as he looked at Thomas who was smirking.

“It is obvious that I never took a ‘dad class’ because I don’t know how to have this conversation with my son.”

“Dad, I am fifteen now, you need to tell me about all of this stuff. I am practically grown.”

Joe and Thomas looked at Sean and sure enough over the past month he had put on weight, had grown an inch in height and had a light mustache on his top lip.

13. A Moving Day

August 2019

Robert didn't understand why they had to move. Mark was very circumspect about the details. It was a small town and the rumors were already rampant. He didn't want his children to tell anyone and he knew that their friends would be asking. Mark said they were going to live in an old mill by the river and how cool that was going to be. When they went to see it both Army and Robert were fascinated by the old building. They could hear water rushing under the floor and the turning of the paddlewheel. Joe had spent a lot of time restoring the paddlewheel. Mark told them stories about the purpose of the mill and the factories along the Eno river that depended on water power before there was electricity. They each claimed loft areas for their bedrooms. Mark told them that their old furniture would not work in the mill and that he and Joe were building them new furniture from some old lumber that was stored in the mill. They were excited when Joe showed them the renderings of their bedroom furniture. Mark had the downstairs bedroom for his own. The rest of the space was open. Joe had built a stone fireplace in one end of the mill. The firebox was extra-large so they could build roaring fires without the threat of burning the building to the ground, or the river, as was the case for part of the mill. Joe had put in large windows overlooking the river. They could always see the running water and wildlife that lived along the waterway. The space was ancient but felt remarkably new and modern.

Robert and Army had packed boxes with their most cherished possessions. Mark told them about storing things until they moved into a new house in the future. He said it would be a new start for them and they could pretend they were part of a wagon train heading west to start a new life. Mark had checked out books from the library on the life of pioneers. He read them to the kids as they started mentally constructing what their lives would be. Mark said they could sit on the river bank and fish and go wading. He romanticized the new house to convince the kids but also himself. This very easily could have been one more stab to his heart from which he might never recover but he had decided that he had support to make it a new beginning. Joe and Thomas continued to use positive speak with Mark which was then parroted to Army and Robert. Maybe it worked and maybe it didn't. Time would tell.

It was moving day and Robert didn't feel well. He lay on a cot in the bedroom where he had grown up and a tear ran down his cheek. He knew it was an important day for his dad and sister but he felt that once again he was forgotten in the new dynamics of the family. Why did they have to move? Why today? All his father talked about was the new house, cowboys, and being pioneers. He wanted to live in this house where he had lived all of his life. He felt safe in his bedroom even though all of his furniture had been removed. He couldn't figure out why his father wouldn't tell him the real reason why they had to move. He sniffled and felt totally sorry for himself. He was a nobody in the family now. Maybe he should start wearing dresses and then his father might pay attention to him. Maybe Uncle Joe would adopt him and he could live with Joe and Thomas. He hated what his life had become. He was openly crying at that point. He hated his life. Why did it have to be like this? Robert closed his eyes trying to block out the pain. He just wanted to curl up in a ball and die. Maybe then someone would pay attention to him.

He suddenly felt himself flying through the air. How was that possible?

“Happy birthday, Robert. Happy, happy birthday son!!!”

Robert realized his father had picked him up and was carrying him down the stairs of the house. At the bottom stood Belinda, Thomas and Joe. They were all singing Happy Birthday to him. Thomas noticed that Robert had been crying. He had wondered how Robert was coping with all of these changes and now he had a better idea. Not very well apparently. He would talk to Mark.

The dining room table was still in the house and in the middle was a big chocolate cake with candles on it. They were lit and he was told to make a wish. He looked at the others in the room and realized that they all loved him. Maybe life wasn't too bad, after all. But he still felt like his no one ever asked him what he wanted or needed. There were presents stacked at one end of the table. Maybe life would be okay after all. Maybe.

After eating cake, drinking punch and opening presents Mark told Robert to look outside where there was a new bike. It was the coolest bike he had ever seen. A smile broke across his face and he hugged his dad.

“I love you, dad. Thank you for remembering it was my birthday.”

“I love you, Skippy. You are so important in my life so I will never forget your birthday. I love you so much.” Robert hugged onto his father's neck and realized that maybe he had been wrong in his earlier thinking. It felt very real at the time though.

Robert jumped on the bike and started riding up and down the street. He waved at everyone he saw and told them he had a new bike for his birthday.

At the house, final decisions were being made.

“Is there anything else you want to take from the house?”

Joe looked at Mark.

“I bought all of the appliances and they are fairly new. They go.”

Thomas discreetly coughed. Mark and Joe turned and looked at him.

“Joe and I have purchased new appliances for the Mill House. If you leave these here, you will not have an argument with your father about taking something that he might think is his.”

Mark was hot. “They are not his. I fucking paid for them. Why should I leave them? The son of a bitch.”

Thomas stood in silence. Joe stood back and watched the scene unfold. Mark's countenance slowly moved from total anger to intense thinking to acceptance of what Thomas said. His body crumbled. He then sniffled, straightened his back, and looked at Thomas.

“I apologize for cursing. You are right. A stove and refrigerator are not worth a fight. I will not reduce myself to his level. Thank you for helping me understand what is important in my life moving forward. I have my children and they are more important than some stupid refrigerator.”

They went through the house and, of the things that were still there, they identified what was being taken, what was being given away and what was being left. Mark knew his mother would lay claim to everything she had ever given to him and Linda. So be it. It was stacked on a table in the house. He had already taken what she had given the children to the Mill House. He wouldn't deprive them. Everything to be moved was labeled and ready to be put on the trucks.

After it was agreed that Mark and the kids would move into the house, Joe had suggested that Mark put everything in storage except for their personal belongings and they would build furniture for the house. Mark had pondered that for a few seconds, smiled and said it was the perfect break with the past as they created a new life. Mark said he no longer needed the burden of all of the antique furniture. He had a spark in his eyes thinking of Frank Lloyd Wright designs. He and Joe had sketched out designs for some contemporary furniture that would fit into the house. Joe had all of the tools needed for furniture making and Mark had helped to build their new furniture. He understood he was studying under a master craftsman. They put their heads together and Thomas smiled as he pondered that Joe was building a relationship with another son. He was passing his knowledge and skills to another generation. This has been their lives with many young men through the years.

The moving day was relatively easy. When the last box had been put in Joe and Mark's trucks, Thomas gathered everyone and said it was time to say goodbye to the house. Thomas had borrowed a processional cross from the church and he had Robert carry the cross as he led them from room to room. Thomas asked Mark, Robert and Belinda to say something good about each room as they thanked the house for letting them live there. Only good memories were allowed. Robert and Belinda had silly remembrances of some of the rooms. They were giggling which made the adults do the same. They had good memories to take with them. When they got to the storage closet where Mark had stored all of Linda's possessions, he hesitated trying to remember something good. He usually thought of that closet as a bad memory. Mark opened the door, turned on the light, and started talking to Linda.

“The kids and I are moving. We have a great house on the river. You know that Belinda discovered you here. You already know that Army is Belinda. Robert is growing and strong. I love them and know that you would too. I promise that we are going to be alright. You would love Joe and Thomas. We need you to move with us. I don't know how you do that, but you were always the clever one and could figure things out when no one else could. Belinda has taken all of your jewelry to the new house. Robert has your hiking boots because they will fit him before too long. Joe framed pictures of you that we are putting in Robert and Belinda's bedrooms. Our wedding picture is already hanging in my new bedroom. I am taking your loving memory. I don't need “things” because you are still in my heart. We had a good time here and I will always think of you when I think of this house. See you soon in the new house.”

Both Belinda and Robert told Linda they would see her in the new house and that they loved her.

All of a sudden the light bulb in the closet went out. It was as if Linda was vacating the property also. Robert moved to his father's side. Thomas smiled and told Linda that it was good that she was

moving with them. Thomas asked Mark, Robert and Belinda to close the door while holding hands. They did as Thomas instructed.

Thomas said a prayer for the many good things and times that had occurred in the house and told them it was time to leave. As they exited, Thomas marked the door with the sign of the cross. He had an envelope that was addressed to Mark's parents. Mark put the house keys in the envelope and sealed it shut. Thomas said it was important for Mark to take it to the post office. Thomas knew that was a way for Mark to seal the past and open himself to the future.

Robert wanted to ride his bicycle to the new house. Thomas and Belinda walked beside Robert as they went from their old home to the Mill House. It was important for the children to experience moving forward on their own. They weren't riding with their dad but taking each step or pedaling on their own.

When they arrived at the Mill House, Thomas gathered them in front of the house. He had Joe prop a ladder against the door lintel. In chalk he wrote 20+C+M+B+19. He then said a prayer of welcome to the new house.

"Uncle Thomas what does that mean?"

"Well, Robert, on the Day of Epiphany or when you move into a new house you mark the entrance with the year, which is 2019 and the letters C, M and B which stand for Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, who were the three Kings who brought Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh. It also means *Christus mansionem benedicat* which means "may Christ bless this home." It is an ancient tradition in Europe, less so in the United States. Let's make it a tradition from now on. Maybe each of us can write a letter of numbers on Epiphany. Does that sound okay with you?"

Thomas told Mark to open the door and lead his two children into their new home. Joe and Thomas followed. Thomas then sprinkled water in each room and on each person. The kids giggled and asked why he was spraying them with water. He said he had collected the water from the river and blessed it. The water represented new birth and new life for each of them. They were starting anew as a family. The kids were surprised when they walked into their bedrooms where Joe had hung pictures of their mother. Belinda screamed with delight when she saw the picture of Linda wearing an evening gown, sash and crown.

"Your mother was a beauty queen. Along with being brilliant, she was beautiful and talented. She was a contestant in the Miss North Carolina pageant. I found the picture when I was cleaning out the closet for us to move. Belinda, I thought you would love to have that in your room."

The picture of Linda in Robert's room was of her hiking on the Appalachian Trail. She had a huge grin on her face as she pointed to the Hawk Mountain in the distance.

Joe said they were going to have a cook out in the yard to celebrate Robert's birthday. When they went outside, the yard was filled with cardinals. One flew in the open front door of their home. Mark was not happy with having a bird in their house. Mark was going to get a broom to try to knock the bird down and then throw it out the front door. Mark didn't want to clean up bird poop. Thomas suggested Mark wait to see what the bird was going to do. The bird flew around and then headed for

the front opening and then was back in the dogwood trees in the front yard. Thomas said each cardinal was an angel and that their lives were now protected by angels. He suggested that the cardinal may have been Linda who was getting her own tour. Robert and Belinda thought that was the coolest thing they had ever heard. The comment gave them all pause and they left the front door open as they walked to the patio for dinner. Maybe, other angels needed to visit the house.

Burgers, chips, baked beans, and all of the fixings were practically inhaled. Robert laughed and said he would be farting all night after eating beans. Belinda fell onto the ground laughing at her brother. Mark told him it wasn't polite to say such things at the table and then Joe let loose with a loud one. Robert laughed and walked around the table to hug Joe. Joe and Robert looked at each other and started laughing as Robert let one rip. Joe grabbed Robert and hugged him. Belinda pinched her nose and told them they were gross and being childish. Joe and Robert laughed and grabbed each other again. They were having a hard time breathing because they were laughing so hard. Mark stopped it all when he said they were not having a farting contest. End of story. Thomas gave Joe the evil eye. Joe said it was just boys being boys. Mark was unmoved by the statement. Joe and Thomas would laugh about it later but it was important for them to support Mark.

Belinda then said she wanted to play in the river. They all put on shorts, tee shirts and sneakers to wade along the river bank. The River Walk was by the Mill House and several people stopped to talk with them. There were many complimentary remarks about the restoration of the Mill House and people were pleased that Mark and the children were moving in. A few people gave them odd glances wondering why they were moving when they had lived in such a beautiful historic colonial house in town. Mark knew it wouldn't take long for the word to finish spreading. There was no need to send out change of address cards to the people in town. He figured by dinner time that everyone would know. Even his parents. He expected them to call demanding the keys to their old house.

As the sun was going down, Mark and the kids went to their new home. Belinda unpacked everything and put it away. She had her room perfect except for hanging some more pictures on the walls. Robert's room was a mess of boxes full of clothes and toys. He sprawled across the bed and fell asleep in his clothes. The room looked exactly like Robert. He had never been a neat freak.

Overnight, a weather front moved through and the old mill house filled with the sound of creaks and noises. The torrent of rain had the paddle wheel working overtime as the water level in the river was up. Mark awoke with two children in his bed. They weren't used to such noises and he knew it would take some time for them to understand how soothing it was to hear rain on the metal roof. When they got up, Robert said he wanted bacon and eggs for breakfast. It was rare that his son expressed a desire about what he wanted to eat so Mark paid attention. Usually, Belinda was the outspoken one. The bacon was sizzling in the iron frying pan, eggs were ready to be scrambled and the toast was buttered. When Mark said it was time to eat, he was surprised when Belinda came in wearing her church clothes. She said it was Sunday and they had to go to Mebane because it was Thomas' last Sunday at that church. Robert said he would find his suit if they were going to church. He said that maybe he could help hand out bulletins. He laughed and said that he could greet people coming in and Belinda could bless them going out. Mark would have been satisfied staying home in his gym shorts and sneakers instead he dutifully got dressed, gathered the kids and they headed to west to Mebane.

Mark started in his new job the next day and the kids went to school. He dropped the kids off as he headed to his new campus office. Earlier, he had met with elementary school personnel and told them that Armistead would be attending school as Belinda. There were a few tense meetings but after having staff from the university medical school meet with teachers and the principal it looked like it would work out okay. Thomas had been instrumental in helping Mark with the school negotiations while Joe spent time with Robert doing “guy things.”

On Monday night, dinner was riotous as all three were talking about their first day at school and work. They were excited about the possibilities and how this new life was working out wonderfully. After dinner, Mark got the children bathed and settled for bed before he went out to lie in the hammock. He thought about all of the changes in their lives as of late and how difficult it had been but it had worked itself out. He was happy with the move into their new house. He was enjoying the quiet in the hammock when he saw a vehicle come down the driveway. Deputy Cartwright got out of the car and headed to Mark. Mark got out of the hammock and had a huge smile on his face until he looked at the deputy.

“Mr. Harden, I am required to serve you with these papers.”

The deputy handed Mark an envelope. Mark opened the envelope in front of the deputy, read the contents, and nearly collapsed.

“Mark, I am so sorry. Who can I get to help you?”

14. All Rise

September 2019

“All rise. Court is now in session. The Honorable Jeffrey Woodward is presiding.” The bailiff called the court to order.

The judge walked into the courtroom in his black robe. He looked at both parties in the Harden v. Harden case.

“Counselors, please approach the bench.” Both attorneys walked up to the bench and the judge looked back and forth between them. He knew them because he was on a circuit and they had both appeared before him in other cases.

He looked at the plaintiff’s attorney. In a quiet voice that could not be overheard, he asked, “Ralph, can you tell me why the hell we are here today?” The attorney was startled by the question but then stated that his clients were concerned about the safety and welfare of their grandchildren.

The judge then looked at the defense attorney, Evan Glynfell, and asked him to tell him in one or two sentences why he should not grant custody to the plaintiffs.

“Mr. and Mrs. Harden are upset because they have a grandchild who may be transgender and their religion says this child has been taken over by the devil and the father has allowed that to happen. My client doesn’t believe that and is supporting and caring for his children.”

The judge looked at the men again and just shook his head.

“Is there a chance this can be reconciled between the parties without involving the courts?”

Both men shook their heads in the negative.

He looked at the plaintiff’s attorney and asked if he was really prepared to pursue the case.

“Yes, your Honor.”

He asked the defense attorney the same question and received an affirmation.

Both men returned to their seats. The judge looked at the audience and saw two men; one seated behind the plaintiffs and one behind the defendant. There was also a woman who sat in the back of the court.

“Since this is a family law court and what is discussed here is closed to the public, I would like to know who you gentlemen are and why you are here.” I know the lady sitting in the back. Welcome Ms. Tilley.”

The man behind the plaintiffs stood and said he was the pastor at the Living Waters Missionary Baptist Church and that the Harden family were members of his church.

“Why are you here today?”

“I came to testify about the devil taking over this child and how the child is going to hell unless we get him back on the road to God.”

“Thank you, pastor. We won’t be hearing testimony today. This is an initial hearing about the safety of the children and we will follow-up with a more formal hearing where each side may call witnesses.”

“You don’t understand your honor. This child is in danger today of going to hell. We need to immediately get him back to God. If something would happen and he would die this week he would go straight to hell. This child’s soul is in danger. You don’t want that on your shoulders.”

The judge didn’t appreciate being told that he didn’t understand and worked hard not to show prejudice in the case. He knew the Harden family and anticipated that whatever his decision, there would probably be an appeal.

“Thank you, pastor. I will take that in consideration.”

The judge then turned and asked, “Sir, may I ask who you are?”

Thomas stood. “Yes, your honor. My name is the Reverend Thomas Raverly. I am a friend and the spiritual advisor to Mr. Harden. I am here at his request but if you desire, I will wait outside.”

“Father, do you have a parish here in Hillsborough?”

“I do not your Honor. I retired here. I am, however, providing supply clergy coverage for the Episcopal Diocese, I am on the faculty at Duke Divinity School and have a clinical faculty appointment in the School of Psychology at UNC.”

The judge asked the attorneys if there was any objection to the men staying. Neither objected.

He then asked the plaintiff’s attorney to start. Ralph Parkinson started by introducing Mr. and Mrs. Harden and their daughter, Faith Hopkinson.

“Excuse me, counselor. Who exactly is asking for custody?”

“They all are, your Honor. Mr. and Mrs. Harden will have primary custody but will depend on Mrs. Hopkinson to assist them.”

“Thank you, continue please.”

The plaintiff’s attorney painted a lurid picture of the life led by Mark and his two children. The fact that he was allowing a boy child to dress as a girl and to have a girl’s name was beyond the pale and the attorney said his clients were concerned about the life long psychological damage that might result. He steered away from the pathway to hell verbiage because he knew the judge would likely have that stricken. The attorney then talked about unsavory characters that Mark Harden, Jr. had taken up with. “They are homosexuals, your Honor. My clients are concerned that these men will

molest these children. You know that you cannot trust homosexuals. In fact, one of these men recently took the child in question to a gay rights gathering right here on Churton Street and allowed the child to mingle with these people.”

“Do these people you are referring to have names?”

“Yes, your Honor.” The attorney hesitated a second. “One of the known homosexuals is in the courtroom today. I am referring to Thomas Raverly. The other person is known as Joseph McKendry, who is Mr. Raverly’s alleged husband.”

“So, you referring to Father Thomas Raverly?”

“Yes, your honor.”

Mark gasped, his eyes teared up and turned to look at Thomas. He mouthed, “I’m sorry.” Thomas smiled at Mark and nodded his head indicating that he was okay.

“Counselor, who will you be calling to testify about the children being in danger?”

“We are still working on the complete list your Honor, but certainly we will call the plaintiffs, we will call the good Reverend Johnson from their church, and he is identifying who else can come to speak about children who are forced to change their sex.”

“Anyone else?”

“No, your Honor. We can get a complete list to the clerk.”

“Thank you, counselor. You have five days to produce that list.”

Judge Woodward then turned to Mark’s attorney, Evan Glynfell, and asked him to proceed. At Thomas’ advice, Mark had gone to Raleigh to find an attorney. Thomas knew that living in a small town had advantages but also disadvantages. One major disadvantage was an attorney taking a case that might be seen as controversial in the community. Certainly, representing a family with a kindergarten transgender child was seen as out of the ordinary.

Mr. Glynfell started out by identifying that Mark was a widower who had successfully raised his two children and that recently one of the children had started identifying as female though born biologically male. He stated that Mark immediately sought medical advice from the child’s pediatrician. The doctor provided clinical advice that Mark had followed. More recently, the pediatrician had referred Mark to the medical center in Chapel Hill where he had faithfully been keeping all of his appointments. Mr. Glynfell then stated that it had been a difficult time for Mark and his children and he connected with Father Thomas through the Episcopal Church in Mebane that he and the children were attending. Mr. and Mrs. Harden both gasped when they heard that Mark and his family were attending an Episcopal Church.

Mr. Glynfell then stated that Mark and the children were all in family counseling as they worked through the changes that were impacting the child, Army, also known as Belinda. The attorney said he was prepared to call the pediatrician, members of staff at the medical school in Chapel Hill,

Father Raverly, Mr. McKendry, and a national medical expert from the Center of Excellence in Transgender Health located at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco.

The judge nodded and then said he wanted the complete list with contact information within five days.

“Your honor, I have another request.”

“Yes, Mr. Glynfell?”

“This may seem presumptuous and probably something you would do anyway, but my client has asked that a *Guardian ad Litem* be appointed to represent his children. He wants to make sure their voices are heard by the court.”

The plaintiff’s attorney jumped from his seat. “I object.”

“Mr. Parkinson, what is the basis of your objection?”

“It is normal in most cases for there to be a *Guardian ad Litem*, but my clients are asking for permanent custody immediately after this hearing. They are prepared to submit adoption papers immediately.”

“What is the basis for that request?”

“Mr. Harden, Jr has taken his children into the nest of these homosexuals. They are living with them. The children are subject to being sexually abused by this priest and his husband. There are lots of reports of priests abusing children that cannot be ignored. It is reported that Mr. Harden, Jr. was seen kissing Mr. McKendry. My clients are now questioning whether their son has been recruited as a homosexual.”

The judge sat up straighter in his chair.

“Mr. Glynfell, is this true?” Are Mr. Harden, Jr. and his children living with Father Raverly and Mr. McKendry.”

“Not exactly your honor. Mr. Harden, Jr. worked for his father in the family construction company until recently. Mr. Harden, Sr. indicated that work had fallen off and he was laying off his son until such time as more work came in. Then Mr. Harden, Sr., who held the title to Mr. Harden, Jr’s home, called for payoff of the mortgage loan. I will say that Mr. Harden, Jr was not behind on any of his monthly mortgage payments. Mr. Harden, Jr. does not have the money to pay off the loan and has been forced to seek alternate housing for himself and his two children. There is an old mill on the property that Fr. Raverly and Mr. McKendry own that had been renovated as a dwelling. The two gentlemen offered the renovated building to Mr. Harden, Jr. at no cost while he explored permanent, long term housing. An occupancy permit was issued by the county and then Mr. Harden, Jr. and his children moved in. If there are questions about the home, I would ask that the court conduct an inspection of the property to ensure it is appropriate for the family. I can also get you copies of all of

the permits for the renovation and the occupancy permit for the house. If the court deems that it is not sufficient, then Mr. Harden, Jr. will find other housing.”

“How is Mr. Harden, Jr. paying expenses for himself and his children if he has been laid off?”

The judge was clearly disturbed at finding out about Mark being laid off and left homeless by his parents who were now trying to take his children.

“Your Honor, with Father Raverly’s assistance, Mr. Harden, Jr. has acquired a position at Duke University as a senior manager in the facilities division. His salary and benefits will actually be more generous than when he worked with his father. In addition, Mr. Harden, Jr. has been granted free tuition and is enrolled in a Master’s program this fall. I have a copy of his contract with the University which will provide information on his salary and benefits.”

“How will the children be cared for while Mr. Harden, Jr. is in school?”

“A female counselor, Becky Evans, from the summer camp program the children attended has agreed to come to the home and prepare an evening meal and help the children with their homework until Mr. Harden, Jr. gets home from his class. He has one evening class during the week and the other courses are immediately after he finishes work and this same woman will stay with the kids until their dad gets home. Mr. Harden, Jr. is registered as a full-time student. He is working full-time with benefits. He believes that he can balance school, work and home life. He is looking at the long term and how he can be most successful in providing for his children.”

“Thank you, counselor. Is there anything else from either side? Seeing none, I ask that everyone please remain in the courtroom. I will return to give you my orders on this case. Ms. Tilley will you please come to my chambers?”

Mark turned to look at Thomas. Mr. Glynfell’s hand reached out to Mark’s shoulder to support him and the three gentlemen conferred quietly.

“What if he says they are taking my children? I cannot live without my children? I will die if my children are taken from me. They are all I have in life. I have no reason to live if I don’t have my children. I will want to die, I will die.”

“The Lord will do what is right, Mark. Do not be afraid. It may not be exactly what you want, but it will be alright.” Thomas tried to be reassuring but knew that Mark would be a broken man if the judge took away his children.

Mark shuddered and then felt Mr. Glynfell holding him up. Mark thanked him for his work during the hearing. “These are never easy cases, Mark. Let’s hope I convinced the judge that the rational thing to do is to have the children with you while we work through this process.” They sat in silence and waited. It seemed like it took forever.

“All rise.”

Judge Woodward entered the courtroom and sat behind the bench. Ms. Tilley did not return.

“I have heard things this morning that have given me great pause. The court has to take into consideration the safety of the children and whether their being on the property of a married homosexual couple will put the children in danger until such time as we have a full hearing. The court has to consider whether taking a son’s job and then his home put these children in danger. It is not part of this court’s jurisdiction to determine whether that action was right or not. That is not part of the legal question that has come before us and it should not be because all of those parties are majority age. It only impacts in that minor children are possibly made homeless by an action that itself was perpetrated by the individuals who are seeking custody of the children. The court has to look at the stability of the single parent and his ability to provide financially and emotionally as well as provide health care for his children. It seems that appropriate health care is a major concern in this case and I ask that the defense be prepared to present evidence on this topic in the hearing. The court has reviewed the facts as presented today. This order stands until we next convene in court thirty days from now. At that time, I may continue the orders, modify them or reach a verdict on this case which may make them null and void. Mr. Harden, Jr., would you please stand?”

Evan Glynnell and Mark both stood. Fr. Thomas sat behind them with his head bowed in prayer.

I hereby order:

The children, Robert and Armistead Harden, remain with their father while a home study is conducted.

The children, Robert and Armistead Harden, are to have psychological studies to determine whether they feel safe and in fact are safe with their father. I also order that educational tests be conducted to determine if their educational abilities and skills are age appropriate. Additional tests will be conducted if court officers feel they are necessary.

I have appointed Millie Tilley as *Guardian ad Litem* for the two children. Ms. Tilley will be in contact with Mr. Harden, Jr. and is the contact for any supervised visits.

The children, Robert and Armistead Harden, are to have supervised contact with Mr. and Mrs. Harden, Sr., and Mrs. Faith Hopkinson during this hearing period. The children shall have no contact with Pastor Johnson. The visits are limited to one hour per week in a place designated by the *Guardian ad Litem*.

The professional credentials of all witnesses are to be submitted to me directly when you submit their names to the clerk. If these individuals are licensed in this state or any other state, I would like a copy of their licenses. If any subpoenas need to be issued, please notify the clerk.

A criminal background check will be conducted on Father Thomas Raverly and Mr. Joseph McKendry. I want the background checks initiated today. If there is any indication of prior child abuse, Mr. Harden, Jr. and children will immediately vacate the property where they are living. When I say immediately, I mean immediately. Mr. Harden, Jr. you will report to me directly if you are required to vacate the property. That may change all of my orders if I feel the children are not safe.

Mr. Glynfell, I noticed that some of the paperwork submitted has the name of a child, Belinda. Please ensure that all future paperwork has the child's legal name. If there is a petition to legally change the child's name please submit a copy of that paperwork to me.

I am ordering this effective immediately. The clerk's office will have a copy of the order ready later today. This court is adjourned."

"All rise." Everyone stood while Judge Woodward left the courtroom. The only noise to be heard was wailing from the two women.

Mr. Glynfell hugged Mark and pointed to the exit doors. Thomas followed them out the doors and onto the sidewalk.

Mark offered to take them to lunch and Mr. Glynfell suggested they head over to Carrboro where there was less chance their conversation would be overheard and reported back to the Hardens.

Thomas called Joe to meet them at Weaver Street Market. Joe had Belinda and Robert with him. Mark had been afraid to have them in summer camp that day in case things did not turn out favorably. He didn't want either his parents or deputies arriving at the camp to pick up his children.

They arrived at the old Carrboro Mill parking lot at the same time as Joe. Mark tried to scoop both children into his arms. Robert and Belinda were confused about why their dad was crying and kissing them. They knew nothing of the court proceedings that morning. Thomas identified an outside table and suggested everyone get food and bring it back to the table while he made sure no one else sat there. He moved the table and chairs even further away from other people.

"Father Thomas can you say grace for us?"

Thomas looked at the attorney and nodded his head. He said a quick prayer for the nourishment of the food and blessings on children. They all ate and talked about how nice it was to eat outside. Mark said they would go to the Mill House and play in the Eno River. Robert then talked about climbing Occoneechee Mountain that morning with Joe. They were all amazed at the beautiful scenery from the top of the mountain. They finished and Mark shook Evan's hand and thanked him for his services. Evan told him they would need to meet and plan strategy for the next hearing.

Mark said the kids would ride back with him while Thomas climbed into Joe's truck. Thomas gave Joe a detailed accounting of the court proceeding including Mark's comments about having no reason to live if he lost his children. Joe had a hitch in his breath and his eyes started watering. Thomas told him to focus on driving and they could talk more when they got home. He reminded Joe that their son, Sean, was okay and it was nothing like what had happened to them.

15. April 13, 1989

April 13, 1989

Joe would always remember the day: April 13. Sean had been home for a few days with a bad cold; his cough was deep in his chest. Joe had taken him to the doctor and Sean was prescribed an antibiotic. It was 2:30 in the morning when Joe felt a hand on his shoulder. Sean was standing beside the bed looking at him. He could not form words and had trouble breathing. Joe immediately sat up and said he was taking Sean to the Emergency Room. Thomas started getting dressed. He looked over and saw Sean slump to the floor. Joe went into rescue mode and was doing CPR on Sean. Thomas grabbed the telephone and called 911. He ran downstairs to unlock and open the front door and then ran back upstairs to help Joe. Sean's finger tips and lips were blue. They heard multiple sirens. Thomas was fervently praying while helping Joe who had Sean on the floor continuing the CPR. The foyer filled with emergency personnel who then raced up the stairs. A technician ran back to the ambulance to get oxygen and another technician grabbed a stretcher. They strapped Sean to the stretcher and started moving down the stairs and out the front door. Joe wouldn't leave Sean's side. As the technicians were trying to get Sean situated, Joe felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Officer McCarthy.

“Joe, step back so they can do their job. Step over here with me.”

Joe didn't want to move. Thomas and Kevin McCarthy helped move Joe away. The street was lined with emergency vehicles. Firemen were pouring out of their vehicles and running toward the house. The world was a mix of blue and red lights reflecting off the buildings. Joe stood crying and his world was totally blurred as he thought the end time had arrived.

“Get dressed and I am taking you to the hospital. Father, remember to take your house keys.”

Kevin McCarthy was trying to relieve the tension by mentioning the keys. Joe was standing in the cold in just his pajama bottoms. He didn't feel the cold. He knew that his son was dying and he hadn't stopped it. He was already blaming himself. After Joe and Thomas dressed, they went downstairs to find Kevin McCarthy and a fireman standing there. The fireman, Michael, told them he would secure their home. He then said he would be praying for Sean. Thomas noted that Michael knew their son's name. Kevin turned on the squallers and once again they moved through the dark city streets. Joe was mute. He knew if he tried to speak, he would only scream.

They arrived at the hospital and Joe ran into the reception area. He was brought up short when he was told that Sean was being seen by a doctor and for him to take a seat. He couldn't sit while his son was dying. The rage started building. Officer McCarthy knew that when a Scotsman built up that level of anger it was dangerous; he sensed that Joe was about to explode. He looked at Thomas.

“Father, I need for you to go into the clinic area to assess what is happening and then come back and tell us.”

Thomas did not have on his Roman collar or have his hospital ID. Instead, he went to the reception desk and showed them his driver's license. He saw the receptionist key in some information, she smiled and told him that he could go back.

It took all of Kevin's skills as a policeman to keep Joe calm and distracted. They finally saw Thomas come back through the doors. He had lost all of his color and he was frowning. Joe anticipated the worst. Thomas told them that Sean was alive but he was hanging on by a thread. The CPR from Joe had kept him alive until EMS arrived. The next few hours would be telling.

"Who can I call to be here with you? I plan to stay but is there anyone else who should be here?"

"Please call Thelma and Jimmy. They are his grandparents."

Thomas was so happy that Joe viewed them that way. Joe gave Kevin the telephone number. He had it memorized. Kevin stepped away for a few minutes and when he came back he looked at them.

"Joe, they are on the way. Father, could you lead us in prayer?"

Thomas did. Thomas opened his eyes and saw his big man crying. He put his arms around his partner and pulled him in close. He lightly kissed his lips and said that he loved him. Thomas heard a commotion in the background but didn't have enough energy to care about it. Officer McCarthy stepped away and spoke to some people. He stood while they filed out of the waiting room. He wasn't going to put up with comments about these two men. He now considered them his friends and he wasn't going to allow anyone to say anything nasty about them.

Thelma and Jimmy came running into the waiting room. Thelma grabbed both men and hugged them. After Jimmy caught his breath, he hugged them and asked for an update. When Thomas said they didn't have one yet, Jimmy asked if they could pray. Again, Thomas led them in prayer. Thelma and Jimmy were holding onto Joe and Kevin wrapped Thomas in his arms. When they finished, Kevin asked Thomas to go in the back for an update. It seemed to all of them that Thomas was gone forever.

When he came through the doors he had a slight smile on his face. Joe was trying to read the meaning but needed to hear words. Thomas said that Sean had stabilized and was going to make it. He would be in the hospital for a few days. They all had tears of relief, even Kevin, the tough inner-city cop. Thomas told them that Sean was being moved to ICU and once he was there, they could visit him.

Joe started pacing again but the anger was gone. He was a father desperate to see his son. He stopped mid-pace, turned to find Thomas and then walked over and put his head on Thomas' shoulder and held him. The two fathers were exhausted and supported each other through the immediate crisis.

The receptionist called Father Thomas. He walked over and she handed him a piece of paper with Sean's unit number written on it. All five headed to the bank of elevators. When they arrived at the floor they were confronted by the nurse's station. They were told that only one person could visit at a time. A nurse wanted to know who each person was. Thomas introduced himself as Sean's father. So did Joe. The charge nurse was not happy. She was starting to question them when Kevin walked up.

"Sean has two fathers. Okay? Get with the program."

The nurse's lips flapped for a few seconds and then said she got it. She looked back and forth between the two men.

"Well, he has two handsome fathers. He is one lucky boy to have fathers who love him so much. There is not enough love in the world."

Kevin was grinning.

The charge nurse made an exception and allowed both Thomas and Joe in together. When Joe got to Sean's bedside he refused to leave. A nurse told him if he didn't leave she would have to call the police. Joe told her that the policeman was waiting by the nurse's station and to tell him. The nurse left in a huff. When she came back, she was not happy and gave Joe a look that would have scared most people. Joe was unaffected by her glare. Thomas left and then Thelma went back to see her grandson. Jimmy followed and kissed Sean's forehead and told him how much he loved him. Kevin was the last to visit and told Joe not to leave until he wanted.

"Don't let them scare you." Kevin handed Joe a stack of his cards and said to hand them to any nurse that threatened to kick him out. Kevin said he would let the other officers know about Sean being in the hospital and they would protect them.

Thomas didn't know what to do. He was allowed back into the unit to ask Joe about their plans.

"I am staying with our son. You go home and get things organized. I am not leaving here until we bring him back home."

Thomas kissed Joe, told him he loved him, kissed Sean and walked back to the nurse's station. He told Thelma, Jimmy and Kevin of Joe's resolve. Jimmy said it was time for breakfast and invited Kevin and Thomas to join them. They went to a local diner where they ordered food. Thomas only wanted toast. He said he wasn't hungry. Thelma told him he needed to keep his strength up to support both Joe and Sean.

"I will Thelma, but our lives just fell apart. I have a lot of thinking to do. I didn't understand how fleeting happiness could be. We have built our lives around Sean. It happened quickly but in every way it forced Joe and me to make a decision about our lives. We love each other but it was the responsibility of fathering Sean that made us process all of that very quickly and make some major life decisions. I love my son."

At that point Thomas started crying. Kevin reached over and pulled Thomas in to provide comfort. Thomas stopped crying, started laughing and thanked them for a safe place to cry.

"Joe will cry enough for both of us. He is this rough, tough Scotsman who is a big baby underneath that handsome exterior. I have to be the strong one with him."

Thelma knew that Thomas wasn't emotionally stable enough to be making decisions so she did what she did best: she appointed herself to make them.

“Okay, Father, you are not going into the office today. I will have Heather arrange for supply clergy on Sunday.” Thomas was starting to object when Thelma gave him her special look. Jimmy started chuckling.

“Okay, son, mama has taken over and you should just let her do it. It will make your life easier. I promise you. I know from experience.”

Thelma laughed and then punched Jimmy in his side. They looked at each other, leaned in and kissed. Jimmy and Thelma had dropped Thomas off at the rectory but Thomas couldn't decide what to do. Thelma was going home to change and then was going to the church office to take care of some things.

Thomas started cooking. It was what he did when he was in a muddle. He made a pot of soup. He got out starter mix to make bread. He loved homemade bread. He made gingerbread cookies: Joe's favorite. At noon, he packed a basket of food and headed to the hospital. There was a new shift of nurses and they were deep in conversation when Thomas approached the nursing station. He wore his Roman collar and a black suit. He looked appropriately clerical. He introduced himself and said he brought lunch for Joe McKendry. The nurse gave him a strange look.

“Are you Sean's father? Or are you a priest?”

“I am both.”

“I don't understand. Priests can't marry.”

“Actually, I am an Episcopal priest and I am Sean's father. Joe McKendry is my partner.”

The nurse looked at him not understanding.

“Well, while you ponder that I am going to give my husband some lunch. Has he left Sean's bedside this morning?”

The nurses shook her head. “He won't move. We have to work around him and it is not easy. Can you ask him to please let us get near your son so we can do our jobs?”

Thomas promised that he would talk with Joe. When he walked onto the unit, he saw Joe sitting vigil. The man looked exhausted. Thomas walked up and kissed Sean on the cheek and told him he loved him. He noticed some movement when he did that. Sean had leaned into the kiss. Thomas then kissed Joe on the mouth and said he brought them some lunch.

Thomas opened the thermos of soup and poured some in the cups he had brought. Joe told him how wonderful the soup smelled. He looked over and saw Sean's nose start sniffing. Of course, he couldn't smell the soup because he was connected to a ventilator but his body was having a natural reaction. Joe smiled. This was the first reaction that Joe had noticed from Sean. Joe took a bite and exclaimed it was the best soup he had ever eaten. He then said they were the best sandwiches that Thomas had ever made. When Thomas opened the container of cookies, Joe made a loud ahhh sound.

“Gingerbread cookies. My favorite. You know Sean loves them also. He could probably eat a dozen right now.”

They both looked and saw Sean’s nose sniffing. Joe took a cookie and put it on Sean’s cheek near his mouth. Sean’s head turned as he tried to get closer to the cookie and then he opened his eyes. Thomas couldn’t tell if Sean saw his fathers leaning over him. The eyes quickly closed again and did not reopen. It was like he fell back into a deep sleep. Thomas left the unit and went to the nurse’s station to let them know. The doctor was immediately paged. By the time he arrived, Thomas had packed up the food and suggested to Joe they step back so the doctor could examine Sean. Joe stepped back into Thomas’ waiting arms. The doctor told Joe and Thomas he wanted them to sit beside Sean and talk to him.

“Tell him you love him and that he is safe. Tell him to open his eyes and look at you. You may need to tell him several time. Tell him about the soup you made. I hear there were gingerbread cookies here. They are also my favorite. Do you have any extras?”

The doctor was smiling as Thomas pulled out the container. He took a cookie, walked over to the bed and told Sean he was eating a gingerbread cookie. Sean stirred in the bed.

Thomas and Joe sat on opposite sides of the bed and talked to Sean. Thomas rubbed his hair and told him that he loved him more than anything in the world. Joe talked about needing his help with a plastering project and that Sean was needed to paint a wall. Thomas asked Sean if he could smell the soup. Sean started sniffing.

“My darling son, open your eyes and look at your daddy and papa. We love you. We want to look at your eyes. You can do it, open your eyes and look at us.”

Thomas noticed the eyes flickering and then they opened. Sean looked scared because he was hooked up to a ventilator. Joe rubbed his arms as the doctor told him it was okay.

“We will remove the equipment so you can talk. Don’t try yet. Blink your eyes twice if you understand me.”

Slowly the eyes blinked twice. The doctor pushed a button on a machine and an army of nurses appeared at the door.

“We are going to extubate you, Sean. I need two nurses to help me. Joe and Thomas please stand back while we do this. The nurses stood on either side of Sean while the doctor removed tape and bands.

“Okay, Sean, I am going to take this out. If you understand please blink twice.”

Sean blinked.

“You may feel like you need to throw up. Please try not to do that. My wife hates washing my nasty clothes that have puke on them.”

He was smiling. He was distracting Sean by talking to him. In one swift move he pulled the tube out. Sean lurched in the bed. The nurses were rubbing his shoulders and helped him ease back down. Another nurse came up with a wet cloth and started washing Sean's face.

"My gosh, you are handsome like your daddies. Three handsome men in one room."

"Wait, are you saying I am not handsome?"

"Nope, doc. You don't count." She laughed. The doctor pouted.

"You know we swoon over you, you handsome devil, you."

The doctor pouted even more and said it wasn't fair. He then smiled like a Cheshire cat. Sean had a smile on his face by the time they finished the short procedure. The staff had a way of distracting patients while doing their work. They arranged Sean on the bed and said he was on the road to recovery.

After the nurses left, the doctor said he wanted Sean to stay in the ICU until the next day.

"I need for him to have this level of care until he is fully stabilized. He has pneumonia in both lungs and we are treating that. He is still very sick and while he is not in a crisis right this minute, it may happen again. I like to get patients off of ventilators as soon as possible. I find they heal faster that way. I read his medical history this morning and we are going to be rather aggressive in our treatment. He will not be going home until he is completely free of pneumonia and with his history that may take awhile. The social work department will notify the school system so they can send over a teacher to help Sean while he is here."

The men nodded in their understanding of what the doctor had said.

"How are you feeling, Sean?"

Sean could barely talk and whispered to the doctor that he was fine. The doctor gave him a skeptical look.

"I feel like shit."

Joe yelped. Sean grinned.

"I think that is a correct assessment. You will feel like shit for a few more days but I think a diet of homemade soup and gingerbread cookies may help."

Sean grinned.

"I'm sleepy, can I go to sleep?"

The doctor looked at him. "Can you try to stay awake for another 30 minutes? Let your dads talk to you."

As the doctor was leaving, he motioned to Joe who walked over to him. They had a brief conversation. Joe nodded his head in understanding. The doctor looked at Thomas.

“Remember that gingerbread cookies are also my favorite.”

Thomas grinned and said he would have a container of the cookies in the unit by suppertime.

Joe and Thomas talked to Sean and made him stay awake for two hours. It was not easy but the doctor had said the longer they could keep him awake the better it would be for him.

Thomas kissed Sean on the forehead and Joe on the lips before he left to make more cookies.

On Friday morning, Sean was not appreciably better and the doctor said he was bringing in an pediatric infectious disease specialist from the medical school. He then took Sean and Thomas into the hallway.

“Your son is very sick. His prior history of tuberculosis is complicating what we are doing. I don’t want to wait until Monday until we do something. I am not going to release Sean from the ICU yet. The specialist will be the lead provider moving forward and I will back him. I also need to notify the CDC of this case. They may send someone by.”

All of the air in the hallway was suddenly depleted. Joe realized that Thomas was holding him up. Thomas and the doctor got Joe to a chair where he sat and the doctor conducted an assessment of Joe.

“Joe, I think you need to go home to get some rest. You are not helping Sean or yourself if you end up in a hospital bed.”

Joe looked at the doctor like he had two heads.

“I can’t leave my son. He and Thomas are all I have.” Joe eyes filled with tears. He realized he was exhausted and couldn’t appropriately respond.

“Joe, I am going to call Thelma to come sit with Sean while we go home to take a shower, have a nap, and for me to make some more cookies. I need for you to say yes.”

Joe knew he had lost and feebly said yes. He was failing his son and his partner was complicit in the failing.

Thomas helped Joe back into the unit and then called Thelma. He told her of Sean’s love of gingerbread cookies. She said she knew a bakery that made them and would stop on the way to the hospital. Thelma arrived with a large bag of cookies. She never did anything half way. She dropped some at the nurse’s station, had a container for the doctor, and then waited for Joe and Thomas to come out to the waiting area. When she saw Joe, he looked like a shell of himself. She knew what to do.

“Son, Joe, look at me. Mama Thelma is here. I am going to look out for your son until you get back. I am not going to take no for an answer. You know me. I can be as tough fighting for him as

anyone in the world. I love him. He is my only grandson and I will go to my grave making things right for him. Now, I need for you to take care of yourself for a couple of hours. No questions. Do it now before I have to switch your bottom.” Joe smiled.

“Yes ma’am. You are a fierce grandmother. Please protect my son. Don’t let anything happen while I am gone.”

The nurses admired the men as they saw Thomas lead Joe to the elevators. They only wished that all fathers loved their children as much as these two men loved Sean.

Thelma had brought a book and sat beside the bed reading while Sean slept. Her intuition told her that he had opened his eyes. She quickly turned and looked at him.

“Hello, my darling Sean. Are you hungry? I brought gingerbread cookies.”

Sean’s eyes focused and he processed what Thelma had said.

He quietly said yes, he wanted a cookie. She poured water into a cup as these were bakery bought cookies and she didn’t know how dry they might be. He sat up, took a nibble of the cookie and then a sip of water. He laid back down. He then sat up and took another nibble. He took a sip of water and then put his head back down on the pillow. He didn’t want more. Thelma worked hard coaxing him to eat the entire cookie. It was hard work but she succeeded. After he finished eating the cookie, he closed his eyes and fell into a sleep.

The nurse came in to adjust his meds and asked Thelma if he had eaten anything. Thelma told her and the nurse wrote it in his chart. Thelma said she worked in hospice and knew how to chart; the nurse said that was great but she wasn’t allowed to chart in the hospital record. She did encourage Thelma to write down everything she observed and they would transcribe it into the chart. Thelma now had a job that would help Sean and she was happy.

Thomas undressed Joe, got in the shower with him, put him to bed and then went downstairs to bake cookies and bread. After baking everything, he went upstairs to find Joe sleeping soundly. He decided that the man needed his rest and so did he. They awoke when there was a call from the hospital. Joe panicked and Thomas took the call. The pediatric infectious disease specialist was at the hospital and wanted to meet with them as soon as possible. Thomas promised they would be there in thirty minutes. Thomas packed a container of gingerbread cookies for the nurses and doctors and also took them two loaves of bread.

The specialist confirmed what Sean’s doctor had told them. Their son was very ill. The treatment would be aggressive and difficult. He said that Sean would probably get worse before getting better. Joe swooned when he heard that. Thomas held onto him. The doctor said he would be Sean’s primary doctor at the hospital and in the future. While they were meeting, a CDC staffer arrived. She talked with the doctor and then with Joe and Thomas. She had lots of questions but the men had very few answers. She said she would research his medical records to try to determine what information she needed. She said that Joe and Thomas should wear masks when they were with Sean and that he was being moved to a negative-pressure isolation room immediately. Thomas couldn’t help himself

and teared up. He and Joe clung to each other. She also said she was taking TB titers on both of them and the health department would be measuring titers every six months in the future.

When they got to the ICU, they found Thelma sitting alone. She said orderlies dressed in gowns, masks and gloves suddenly arrived, grabbed Sean's bed and started moving him. They wouldn't tell her anything. They told her she could not come and had actually blocked her from getting on the elevator. She was furious with the staff and with herself. She felt that she had failed her two sons and grandson. She had tried to find out what was going on but nobody would tell her anything. She had actually screamed at a nurse.

They sat in a daze until a nurse came over and sat with them. She explained what was happening. She immediately established rapport and gave them all of the information she could. Thelma said that Sean was crying when they wheeled him out of the ICU.

"I will take care of that. That should not have happened that way. They should not have treated you that way. I apologize. They were scared but that is no excuse. Let me see if he is settled so you can see him. Just so there are no surprises, when you go to see him you will have to mask, gown and glove."

Thomas could see the fire in Joe's eyes.

"No. I will not do that. He is my son. That will scare him."

"It is to protect you."

"NO! I will not do that. Please make sure they understand."

"We will then have to mask him and you cannot touch him. We are concerned about transmission of TB to you. We are running cultures right now to see if he is infectious."

"NO! If my son dies with TB, then I will die with TB. Thomas, don't let them do this to our son. Please, don't let them do this."

The horror of the night ended when Jimmy and Thelma helped Joe and Thomas up the steps to the rectory. They came in for a brandy before heading home. All four were emotionally distraught and physically exhausted. Joe got drunk and passed out in the library. He slept on the Chesterfield sofa in front of the banked fire. Thomas was up and down all night checking on him.

Thomas realized his personal concept of hell was never fully formed until the following week. As the doctor had predicted, Sean suddenly got worse and he had to be intubated again. It was touch and go for several days. Joe said he wanted to die. Thomas knew that hell was living with a dying child, a partner who wanted to die and he knew for certain that he did not want to live if they died. He felt like his prayers were meaningless. He raged and screamed at God to hear him. He wrestled with the angels who hovered over his shoulders. He and Joe screamed at each other for the first time. They were both so horrified afterwards they didn't know how to talk about it or to each other. Their worst natures had come to the fore and they both knew how vicious and mean they could be. They were each living in their own private hells and not able to help each other because their pain was so

deep. The monitor in Sean's room continued to beep and beep and beep and beep. Their son was in an induced coma and they could only look at his small body as an extension of all of the equipment that was keeping him alive.

The Bishop showed up, looked at both men and was horrified at what he saw. Earlier, he had sent one of his assistants to visit with the men but the report he received did not accurately capture their pain and distress. He knew that there was a deep breach that needed healing. He sat with them for an entire morning, talking and listening, and joining in their plaintive lamentations. He then cried with them. For the first time, he understood the unfathomable love there was between these two men and their son. He knew the healing between the two men would take a long time if it was even possible.

Michael, the fireman, showed up and sat with them. He disclosed that his son had cystic fibrosis and he had spent many hours at the hospital, sitting, crying and wanting all of the pain to end. He told them how he and his wife divorced because of the pain that had reduced their love to a mere remnant of what it had been. His wife needed Michael to be superhuman and he could never meet her expectations. He said the most horrible parts of what they said to each other were not forgotten by either of them. He looked at Joe and Thomas and told them to support and love each other. His sobering message was received and heard. Both men, without speaking, decided that would not happen to them. Somehow, they would find a path forward. The hospital chaplain came to see them each day as did the Bishop.

On Friday morning, eight days after he was admitted to the hospital, Sean turned the corner and started getting better. He was extubated again. Joe and Thomas could only stare at the readings on the equipment to see if he would live without the ventilator. He slowly came out from the induced coma, opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He was non-responsive. Joe was startled thinking they had a son who would be in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. Thomas sat in a chair by the bed, held onto Sean's hand, and talked to him endlessly asking Sean to squeeze his hand if he heard him, to give them some sign. Any sign. To please give them a sign. None came.

Hours went by with both men talking to their son, holding his hand, stroking his cheek, and rubbing his hair. And crying. They went into the hallway to cry because they didn't want Sean to hear their anguish.

When they had given up hope and least expected it, Sean started talking to them. It was more like a whisper because he was so hoarse from the tubes that had been down his throat. He told them of horrible dreams where they had left him alone and that he wandered through forests looking for them. He would see them and then they would flee. He could hear their voices in the distance saying they loved him but he couldn't find them. One night he saw bright angels and decided he was now in heaven. He saw his mother, Mary Agnes, and she told him to go back; that he wasn't ready to die. She told Sean she loved him as did his daddies. Joe and Thomas remembered that horrific night when they thought he had died. The beeping had stopped and the screeching flat line filled the room until doctors and nurses came running in and pushed them out of the room. The two men huddled in a hallway corner like beaten animals. They clung to and supported each other in yet another moment of unimaginable horror. They saw more people running in and out of the room. Finally, all of the doctors and nurses filed out of the room and closed the door. Joe yowled in pain. Thomas held him while tears ran down his face. A nurse came to them, sat with them on the floor, hugged the men, cried with them and told them that Sean was alive. She said he had died but they had restarted his

heart. She couldn't promise the future but said he was alive right then. She said it would be one minute at a time moving forward as his heart had been damaged.

Now Sean was awake and talking. They prayed the darkness of the past week was gone. Sean continued to talk to them and then exhausted himself. He fell asleep with both men holding his hands. When Sean awoke again, he smiled and asked Thomas what a boy had to do to get a gingerbread cookie. Thomas and Joe grinned with happiness. Those were the magic words. Thomas called Thelma and within the hour she and Jimmy were standing in the room with a bag of gingerbread cookies.

Sean was moved to a step-down unit on Saturday afternoon. He was not infectious with tuberculosis so he was put on a regular unit. Michael showed up with his son, Todd, who had on a gown, mask and gloves because of his cystic fibrosis. Todd explained that he wore it out of habit when he came into a hospital. He couldn't afford to catch something from someone else. The two boys sat and talked while their dads went to the cafeteria to get some supper. They were the same age and each found a comrade to help the other through medical difficulties. They made a solemn promise to support each other.

The next morning, Sunday, Thomas brought his communion kit and the three of them celebrated Mass in the hospital room. Thomas realized he had missed two weeks of services and was concerned what the church leadership would think. Thelma called all of Joe's customers and explained why he had to miss their appointments; one and all sent their love and said they would wait for the work to be done because they didn't trust anyone else. The three were sitting in the room eating their lunches of homemade soup, sandwiches and cookies when the telephone rang in the room. Thomas picked it up and he was told to look out the window. The person who called hung up. Thomas was confused but walked up to the window. He burst out crying; what he saw pushed him over the edge. Joe jumped up from his chair to see what made Thomas cry. He looked and then started crying. They turned and helped Sean get out of his bed. Thomas held the IV pole while Joe helped Sean walk to the window. Outside in the parking lot was a firetruck with its ladder fully extended. Standing at the top were Michael and Todd holding a sign: "Get Well, Sean." Looking down they saw a parking lot full of people. Standing in front of the group was the Bishop. The telephone rang again and Thomas picked it up. All he could hear was people singing. The congregation from St. Anselm was in the parking lot. Joe opened the window and Sean waved to the crowd. They went wild with enthusiasm.

The group continued to cheer and cheer. Finally, the ladder was lowered and the crowd went home. Sean was a rock star at the hospital because patients throughout the building were standing at their windows being entertained. Thelma, Jimmy and Kevin walked into the room grinning. Joe and Thomas saw Thelma's hand at work. They stayed for a short while; when they were leaving Jimmy cryptically said, "Be sure to watch the news at 6."

Joe turned on the news. The first visual was the crowd in the parking lot. Reporters from all three local stations had shown up to film the event. The station showed the picture of Sean used in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at Christmas and a picture of the set he had painted. There was mention of the two fathers, Thomas and Joe, who had been at the hospital the entire time and had never left his side. Thomas knew that wasn't true but it made for a good story. Then there was a shot of the three of them standing at the hospital window waving at the crowd. The newscaster then said that a fund had been started to help the family with the medical expenses and that Joe was self-employed and

not been able to work for two weeks and it wasn't clear when Sean would get out of the hospital or when Joe would be able to work again. Finally, the Bishop appeared on the screen and said his office was collecting the money and for people to be generous.

Thomas, Joe and Sean made a pact during the last week that Sean was in the hospital. The three of them would be there to help other families in need. Mike's comments to Thomas and Joe had helped them realize how important their relationship was. Without that conversation Thomas wasn't sure that he and Joe would be sitting together. The Bishop's support had been useful but Mike's comments were more impactful; they talked with someone who had been on the front line. Todd's daily visits with Sean helped their son realize that he wasn't alone with his health struggles. He now had a new friend.

Two weeks later, Sean was sitting in a wheel chair as he exited the hospital. There was a group of doctors and nurses who were at the doors to wish him well as he left. They all joked and said they never wanted to see him again. They all laughed because generally there were too few laughs on their units.

Kevin had his police car ready to take them home. He helped the young man into the front of his car while Thomas and Joe sat in the back. Kevin showed Sean how to turn on all of the lights and sirens. Sean was fascinated and tried them out all of the way home. He couldn't wait to be home with his two dads. They pulled up in the front of the rectory and the street was filled with members of the congregation to welcome them home. Thomas knew they had been to hell and back and being back was so sweet and wonderful. He now truly knew what heaven felt like.

16. I Love a Parade

September 2019

Mark was very excited. He auditioned for the Duke Chapel Choir in September and accepted a position in the baritone section. Mark sang all through high school and college but stopped singing when he and Linda had started dating. There hadn't been time. Now that he was working at Duke, he was on the campus each day, and after all, he justified to himself, it was just one evening a week plus Sunday morning. He could manage the time because it felt so good when he was singing. Even after a tough two-hour rehearsal, he was smiling. Mark was trying to think of other things he did that fed his soul to such an extent. He couldn't think of any. Singing was pure, unadulterated pleasure.

On Saturday morning, when he and the kids were having breakfast with Thomas and Joe, Mark excitedly talked about singing. In truth, he was most excited about his new job and being back in school. He felt exhilarated about his life for the first time in years. He felt like this was heaven even though he was going through a hellish court battle with his family. He had support from Joe and Thomas and that meant everything to him. Then reality set in. He had two children who would need a baby sitter on Sunday morning.

Thomas and Joe smiled like indulgent proud parents the entire time Mark talked about his work and classes. They could feel his positive energy. He was practically bouncing off the walls. This was the first time they had seen him smiling so much.

"But daddy, where are we going to be when you are singing?"

"I don't know, Belinda, I have to figure that out. Are you happy that daddy is singing?"

"Yes, you have a pretty voice. You look happy. I like it when you are happy."

Mark made a puppy dog pouty face at Joe and Thomas as if he was a little boy.

"Can you take care of the kids tomorrow while I sing?"

Thomas spoke up and said he had to supply at a church the next day and wasn't available. He could have taken Robert and Belinda with him but he wanted Mark to do the work of figuring this out. It was too easy to just say yes. He and Joe weren't going to become the de-facto baby sitters.

Joe didn't have those reservations and said he would take the kids to the Chapel so they could hear their daddy sing. After the court hearing, he decided he had a new mission in life: he would protect Robert and Belinda the same way that he and Thomas had spent their lives protecting and nurturing Sean.

On Sunday morning, they were up early to get ready for church. Mark had to leave at 8:15 for the rehearsal to finish preparations for the 11 am service. Joe showed up at the Mill House at 9 am so he could help the kids get ready. Belinda was still in pajamas saying it was too early to get dressed. No amount of encouragement from Joe could convince Belinda otherwise.

“Uncle Joe, you can go back to the big house and then come back when it is time to leave. I promise not to get into trouble. I don’t want to wrinkle my outfit. I need to look freshly pressed.”

Joe shook his head and wondered about the precocity of the child. He reached an agreement with Robert that he would take care of Belinda until 10:15 when Joe would return. Joe tried not to act surprised when he pulled up to the Mill House. Belinda came out in the gown that she had chosen for her to wear in the Pride Parade. She had curled her hair and wore lots of bangles. There was a faint trace of lipstick that completed the look. After locking the Mill House, the kids got in the truck, and Joe headed to the west campus of Duke University. The campus was notorious for drivers getting lost and driving in circles. Mark had given Joe accurate directions to the parking lot behind the Chapel. Mark kept telling Joe to look for the towers on the Chapel to guide them.

Joe had a child on either side as he walked up to the doors of the Chapel. He hadn’t been in the edifice before and was immediately impressed by its beauty. They were each given a bulletin for the service. Belinda blessed each person who spoke to her. She then told them that her uncle was a priest and he had taught her to say that in church. She charmed everyone she encountered. They sat toward the front of the chapel. All three twisted and turned in their seats while enjoying the beauty of the building. Joe thought it looked like a cathedral and not a chapel. It could hold, at least, 1,200 people.

The organ, high above the doors on the west wall, started playing. All three turned around at the sound of the organ. The pipes went all the way to the ceiling. Joe chuckled, thinking he and the kids looked like tourists with their mouths hanging open. They could feel the vibrations when the 32’ organ pipes spoke. Belinda had a look of pure, unadulterated joy on her face the first time she felt the vibration. She then grinned and grabbed Joe’s hand. Robert smiled at Joe and gave him two thumbs up. Joe loved the kids and was so glad he brought them to church. Their sense of wonder at the space filled Joe with joy, and he remembered Sean sitting beside him in church and holding onto his arm or thigh when new things would happen during the service. Joe reflected on children and their willingness to live in wonder and joy.

The opening hymn started and Joe found the page in the hymnal. Belinda didn’t need it. She knew the hymn and sang in full voice. Robert had opened his hymnal and was trying to read the lyrics while sort of mumbling the hymn. He wasn’t a singer. Mark’s eyes grew large as he processed up the aisle and saw his children. He found it hard to sing and grin at the same time. He thought he would need to talk with Belinda about her clothing choices. She was waving at her daddy, and he winked at her and kept pace with the other choristers. He didn’t want to mess up on his first Sunday. When the choir sang, Belinda insisted on standing in her chair so she could try to see her daddy. She decided that the next Sunday, they would sit someplace else so they could better view the choir. Robert was trying to count all of the choir members and got lost somewhere about 75. He figured the number was close enough.

During the recessional, Mark walked by, and he received two thumbs up from Joe and Robert. Belinda blew him kisses. Members of the choir smiled as they saw the family of the new member being so excited about him singing with them. When the final clergyman walked by, Belinda jumped out of her seat and walked into the aisle where she took his hand. He was more than surprised. He looked down at the little girl who gave him a beatific smile.

Mark was horrified as the choir stood in the back singing the final verse of the hymn. Belinda was holding the hand of the Dean. As soon as the hymn finished, Mark made a mad dash to get his child. He found Belinda explaining to the pastor that her Uncle Thomas was a Pissypalian and he was preaching somewhere else that day.

“And my daddy is now singing in the choir. He has a good voice like me though I think mine is better.”

The pastor was totally captivated by this child and smiled at Mark as he approached.

“Belinda, we need to leave him to his job. Come with Uncle Joe until I get changed.”

Belinda looked at Mark in wonderment.

“Daddy, I have to give blessings to everyone who came today. I will be here when you come back. Please let Uncle Joe know.”

Mark and the Dean exchanged looks and reached agreement without saying a word. Belinda was already grabbing hands and telling people to have a blessed week. Mark found his way down the spiral staircase to the undercroft and then through a maze of rooms until he was in the choir area. People wanted to know about his beautiful children, especially his daughter. Someone wanted to know if she always dressed so beautifully when she came to church. Mark was trying to detect whether there was sarcasm in the question. He found none and said she wanted to dress up since it was his first Sunday singing with the choir. People were charmed. Choir members assumed that the children were either with their grandfather or that the handsome older man was Mark’s partner. None of them knew him well enough to ask.

Mark wound his way through the hallways and stairs until he found himself back in the nave. He walked down the aisle and found Joe and the kids standing in the Narthex.

“Daddy, this place is so cool. I want to come back next Sunday.”

“Well, we can’t expect Uncle Joe to be available every Sunday, so let’s see what I can work out. Poor planning on my part.”

Just as they were about to exit the building, a choir member walked up to the group.

“Hi, I’m Dan. I wanted to introduce myself.”

What was immediately noticeable was his accent. Mark thought he was eastern European but that was only a guess. Anyone who spoke with anything other than a North Carolina accent sounded foreign to Mark. Mark put his hand out to shake it, and when their fingers touched, an electric shock coursed through his body. Mark’s eyes flew open and he was speechless.

Dan Lillie introduced himself to the others while Mark stood with a smile on his face. He kept looking at the man’s handsome face and expressive golden eyes. Dan told Belinda that she was beautiful and that her dress was “the bomb.” He dropped to his knees, so he was looking directly in her eyes. Belinda told him it was for the Pride Parade the following Saturday. Mark’s cheeks colored

that Belinda was disclosing that to a stranger. Dan stood and surveyed the group; conjectured that Mark liked older men and that Joe was his partner. He was disappointed because he found Mark so attractive. As Dan walked away, Mark watched him and wondered about his story. Mark decided he would arrive at rehearsal early on Wednesday and maybe they could talk. The man was intriguing.

On the following Saturday morning, Belinda was up at daybreak. She woke her daddy and told him they needed to eat breakfast so they could get ready for the parade. Mark chuckled and said they had lots of time.

“No, daddy. I have to get there early so I can get my instructions about being on the float.”

Joe had a dually Ford 250 and decided they could all ride with him to the staging area on campus. Mark had gotten him a special pass for the day so that he could park anywhere on campus. Mark wasn't too sure about vandalism on the city streets.

It was a beautiful fall day. Durham held the parade in the fall when all of the students from the various colleges and universities were back on their campuses. The campus was in a full festival mode when they departed the truck and walked around looking for the float. Mark had been very clear with his children that they were to be with either him, Joe, or Thomas. He did not want them wandering off. Mark had agreed that he would walk behind the float to show support for the Royal Court. Joe and Thomas decided they would do the same. Thomas wore his vestments to show the world that some clergy supported the LGBT community. Joe wore a sandwich board that read, 'My Husband is a Priest,' and had an arrow pointing to Thomas, who marched beside him.

When they approached the float, there were cheers from everyone on the float. Mark picked up Belinda and helped her to her place on the front of the float. He was amazed at her comfort level being a part of the trans community, and that they had 'adopted' her. They all came up and kissed Belinda on her cheeks. One of the princesses of the Royal Court had made a cape for Belinda. She also had a crown and scepter. Belinda was beside herself in pretending that she was the Queen of the parade.

“We'll take care of Belinda. Don't worry.” The Queen of the Royal Court said to Mark. “You are an amazing dad. We all love you.”

Robert had insisted that he was going to be his sister's escort and had on a suit. With a little help from Joe, Robert climbed on the float. All of the women made a fuss over him and had him laughing. Any trepidation he felt earlier quickly disappeared. Mark stood back and looked at his children. Both Joe and Thomas had their hands on his shoulders supporting him. Achieving this level of comfort was a big step for Mark.

At noon, they heard a loud whistle blow, and then a band started leading the parade through the streets of Durham. On the float, Belinda stood at the front with her arm through Robert's. There was a sign in front of Belinda declaring her 'Little Miss Gay Pride Durham.' Belinda had studied videos of Queen Elizabeth waving and she had adopted the same wave. She had tried to train Robert to do the same but he just didn't get it. He found that he just loved smiling and waving at people. He was having fun.

Behind the float, Joe and Thomas walked hand in hand with Mark walking beside them. Joe and Thomas got many shout-outs and praise. Mark was trying to decide how comfortable he was, and wondered if people from Hillsborough were along the route. He kept telling himself that he was in the parade to support his children. There were thousands of people along the route, cheering them on. Mark was waving to people on his left when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and found Dan walking beside him. Dan was smiling and said that Belinda and Robert looked incredible. Dan then reached down and grabbed Mark's hand. Mark's natural inclination was to pull back, but Dan was smiling at him, and it felt good to be holding hands with this handsome man.

Mark introduced Dan to Thomas. Joe was whispering in Thomas' ear. Thomas then started smiling even broader than he had earlier in the parade. A burst of cheers went up and Mark saw a group of kids waving and cheering Belinda and Robert. A woman that Mark recognized as Robert's teacher was standing at the side with a group of kids. She was holding hands with another woman as she called out Mark's name and waved at him. Dan held up their joined hands in recognition. When he was lowering them, he pulled the joined hands to his mouth and kissed Mark's. Mark's emotions were all over the map, and he couldn't decide how to feel about this. Sure, he had talked with Dan on Wednesday night and found him absolutely charming. When he shook Dan's hand that night, he was jolted again by a shock of electricity. Dan had only smiled when that happened and now Dan was walking beside him and holding his hand.

The parade route was a big loop and an hour later, they were back at their starting place. When the float stopped, everyone wanted to give Belinda kisses, and they hugged Robert and told him that he was the perfect escort. Both kids were overwhelmed with all of the love they received. Belinda curtsied as the Queen stepped down from her throne, she punched Robert in the side, and he bowed. People in the crowd did the same as the Queen stepped from the float.

Mark and Dan noticed that many people were coming up to talk with Belinda and Robert. Mark didn't understand the group of men dressed as nuns. Thomas laughed and told him about the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Mark still didn't get it, but they looked like they might be a lot of fun. One nun was having a serious conversation with Belinda and kissed her on the cheek. Belinda gleamed and said they would be in touch. Mark was confused but decided that a bunch of men dressed as nuns were not the appropriate group for his young child to socialize with regularly. Hell, he was still processing the fact that Belinda was wearing a dress and crown and was riding in the gay pride parade. He wouldn't go near the idea that he, too, had not only marched in a gay pride parade but had enjoyed himself.

Mark stood in the crowd holding hands with Dan. He felt safer holding onto someone. Neither of them wanted to be the first to release the other's hand. Mark pulled Dan along as they strode to the float and lifted down the children. Dan dropped to his knees and told them that they were the best thing in the entire parade. Dan then went up to the float and took the sign for Belinda being 'Little Miss Gay Pride Durham.'

"This is for you, Belinda. I know there will be many more."

There was a general discussion about lunch choices until Joe said he had would grill out at home. Joe looked at Dan and said he was invited and that someone would bring him back later. Joe gave Mark a look, letting him know who that person would be. There was a discussion about seating

arrangements in the truck. Dan asked if he could carry his bike and that he would ride it home later. Dan and Mark decided they would ride in the back of the truck. Joe reminded Mark that it was against the law but Mark and Dan smirked at each other and said they would lie in the truck bed and no one would know they were there. They arrived back home, and Mark and Dan jumped out of the back giggling like schoolboys who had gotten away with something. Mark convinced Belinda to change clothes so she didn't drop food on her gown. She reluctantly went inside and changed but refused to take off her crown.

The lunchtime conversation was about everything they had seen and experienced during the parade. They were all finishing their meals when Joe said he had homemade peach ice cream. Belinda climbed into Mark's lap to eat her dessert. The conversation continued and Mark looked down and saw she was asleep. Her bowl of ice cream was about to drop from her hands into Mark's lap. He grabbed it and sat it on the table.

"I am taking my princess home for a nap."

"I'm not a princess, I am 'Little Miss Gay Pride Durham,' her quiet voice muttered. Everyone chuckled as Mark carried her across the lawn to the Mill House. Robert was leaning against Joe. It was a familiar sight to Thomas thinking of their son, Sean, who found solace leaning into Joe. Robert could barely keep his eyes open. Being an escort had taken all of his energy. He excused himself and said he was also going to take a nap. Mark heard him come into the house and helped him settle down.

Mark stood on the front stoop of the Mill House and wondered when Dan was leaving. Mark needed a nap also, but he was a good host, and would not do that while he had company. He walked across the lawn and saw Dan helping Thomas and Joe clean up the table. When they finished, Joe and Thomas said they were going to lie down. Dan and Mark stood just looking at each other.

"Well, I guess I will leave."

Mark looked at Dan and nodded his head.

"Well, it has been fun, but you probably want to be by yourself."

Mark just looked at Dan. They were trying to intuit what each other was thinking.

"The kids were great. You are such a tremendous father."

Mark looked at Dan and nodded his head again.

"I could use a nap before the long bicycle ride back to Durham. Thomas said I could nap in their hammock."

Dan reached and touched Mark's hand. The spark made Mark suddenly aware of how handsome he thought Dan was. Dan pulled Mark to the hammock and they crawled in together. Nothing was said. When Thomas went outside late in the afternoon, he found Mark spooned in Dan's arms. The

smaller man had wrapped himself around Mark. Dan had Mark's hands in his. A look of contentment was on both faces.

When Mark awoke, he was startled that they were spooning. He was even more startled that it was with another man. He collected his thoughts and decided that he would need to end this. Whatever it was, it needed to stop.

Dan awoke and leaned in and kissed Mark's neck. He squeezed Mark and said they both had needed the nap. Mark tried not to flinch at the physical contact. They got out of the hammock as both needed to piss. Mark said he was going to check on the kids and that Dan could use the bathroom at Joe and Thomas' house. Mark could not get away fast enough. He found the kids fast asleep and realized they would probably sleep through until the next morning. It had been a hot day on that float and told himself he needed to remember to give them lots of extra fluid the next day.

He walked back to the big house. Thomas and Joe were talking with Dan. Mark overheard Dan saying that he needed to get back to Duke because he had a rotation at the Emergency Department that night.

"I am a neurosurgeon in France and am doing a fellowship at Duke. They have developed some new surgical procedures that are of interest to me. One weekend a month, I have to do an ER rotation. I am on from 8 tonight until 8 in the morning. I go from there to the Chapel, and then tomorrow afternoon I will crash until I see patients on Monday morning."

Mark couldn't believe what he was hearing: Dan was a neurosurgeon. They hadn't talked specifics about work. Dan alluded to some type of fellowship at Duke, but Mark didn't fully understand what he had been referencing. Dan walked over to Mark and hugged him. Dan could tell that something was bothering Mark but didn't pursue it. Dan could be fearless and he realized that he had probably pushed Mark too far that day. He didn't know Mark's full story but thought that Mark was probably fighting the closet. Dan hoped for a romance while he was in the states but maybe that wasn't possible. Mark stood as the bicycle was pedaled down the street. He then turned to look at Joe and Thomas and thanked them for their support and said he needed to head home. Mark looked one last time at Dan and waved as the bicycle disappeared down the street. The older fellows could tell that their young friend was in a muddle, and they wisely chose to leave Mark to his own thoughts.

17. I Dreamed a Dream

Fall 2019

Mark went to bed that night but could not fall asleep. He kept pondering the person of Dan. How was it that he found Dan so attractive? Was there a sexual attraction? Mark had never thought of himself as gay. Sure, he had messed around in Boy Scouts and had done the typical circle jerk with his friends. Mark had enjoyed showing off at the pool to both males and females when he was in high school and college. He did the natural thing and compared his junk to other guys. Mark knew that he and Linda had been sexual beasts with each other and that she brought out a side of him that he didn't know existed. He liked the edginess of their exploits.

Mark decided he was just horny. He and his right hand had been best friends ever since Linda died. Mark realized that he had an unmet high sexual need, though his nightly routine had provided a level of relief. He had not dated because he had his children to look after. He wasn't willing to share them with anyone else. They were all he had. He had forced himself and them to live in this ongoing time of mourning. He hadn't thought of it that way until the past few weeks. He didn't want to acknowledge that being fired was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him. It had brought him up short at that moment, but now he realized how stifled he had been. His life had become a shrine to the memory of Linda, and he had not moved on. He was now excited about what life had to offer. He understood that his life was more than just being a good father to his two children. He deserved to be happy – this was a new thought to him. He had been so focused on the children that he hadn't considered his own happiness. Now he knew that he could do both.

Dan made him smile. He felt comfortable with the handsome man. The electricity, when they touched, was something undeniable. Mark considered the idea that he might be gay and did not entirely dismiss it because Linda had shown him how limited his perspective was about the gifts of sexuality. Perhaps he was gay. Perhaps he wasn't. If anything, the sexual exploration with Linda proved that he was open to different expressions of his body's need for attention and affection. Could he do it with a man? This attraction was not something he had considered. Would he even be able to get it up?

Mark pushed the sheet down his torso and then below his pelvis. He reached down and stroked himself. In the past, he would always think of Linda and their sexual cavorting, which would bring him to orgasm. That night he thought of Dan. He could only imagine what the man looked like under his clothes. He knew Dan was lean and fit. Dan's tee shirt rode up on his taut stomach that day, and Mark saw the treasure trail of dark hair disappearing into his jeans. Dan had talked at lunchtime about keeping healthy and fit. He said he only ate small portions and that everything in America was supersized. When Dan said that, Mark looked at his plate piled with food, and decided that he too should eat smaller portions. He was getting older, and his body needed more exercise to stay in shape. Mark lay in his bed making promises to himself about his eating and exercise habits while pleasuring himself. He made the promise to himself, hoping that it would please Dan.

Mark wondered about Dan's cock and how big it was. At first, Mark thought it didn't really matter, but then again, he felt that maybe it did. Mark wanted to know. Was it cuddled in the nest of pubic hair or was it pendulous and hanging down? Was Dan hairy down below? Was Dan's ass smooth or hairy? When he realized he was sexualizing Dan, Mark got even harder. He remembered Dan kissing

his neck while they were in the hammock and felt his body jerk. He imagined he and Dan being naked in the hammock with Dan's manhood wedged into his trench. Mark caught his breath. For the first time in years, he thought about the strap-on that Linda purchased and how much he had enjoyed the sexual play and her dominance over him.

Mark realized he was bucking his hips, thinking about Dan taking him. He was moaning Dan's name when he exploded. His hips dropped to the mattress, as he tried to regulate his breathing. Mark's right hand was covered in his seed; he brought his hand to his mouth and started licking it clean and immediately boned up again. Mark chuckled and realized that his sexual spirit was reawakening in a way that had been dormant since Linda's illness.

After producing a second copious offering, Mark drifted off to sleep. He was in a deep sleep when the alarm clock sounded. When he awoke, he had a smile on his face. He paid attention to that fact. His first thought of the day was that he was happy. Being happy and cheerful was a new feeling. He would need to get himself and the kids ready for church. He went into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. He desperately needed coffee to help himself awaken and focus. He put out cereal bowls, milk, and fruit and then went to awaken the kids. The sleep had restored their spirits, and they were excited about going to church again. Mark realized that he had not made arrangements for Joe to take them. Just at that moment, the telephone rang, and it was Thomas saying that he and Joe would take the kids to Duke Chapel with them. Thomas was adjunct faculty at the Divinity School and put in appearances at Sunday services now and again. Mark was relieved and promised himself that he would make better arrangements for the next week.

He dressed, kissed his kids, and was out the door. He drove like a mad-man to the Chapel, wanting to talk with Dan before rehearsal. He walked into the nave and saw the other choir members getting organized, but there was no Dan. Mark was distracted throughout the rehearsal while waiting for Dan to appear. When the choir members were climbing the circular stairs from the undercroft into the church to begin the service, there was still no Dan. Mark realized he was deeply disappointed not to see him.

Belinda was waving at Mark as he processed up the aisle. He smiled and winked at her. Mark sang well, but there was no glee in his voice or spirit. He chuckled as he remembered being in the High School Glee Club. He knew he was not happy because there was no Dan. The service went as expected, and the choir performed up to their usual standard. Mark then saw him as they were recessing. Dan was sitting with Thomas, Joe, and the kids. He looked exhausted and still had on scrubs. Mark immediately felt better when he saw Dan. Belinda stepped out from her seat and took the hand of the guest preacher for the day. Belinda told her it was alright because she was there to bless people as they left. The preacher was dumbfounded but thought maybe this was the way things happened at Duke Chapel. Members of the choir chuckled when they saw Belinda telling the preacher where the two of them were supposed to stand. Mark walked up the side aisle until he got to the row where his crew was sitting. He looked in Dan's eyes and saw sadness, so he instinctively reached out and hugged him. Dan melted into his arms and would not let go. Dan's arms were around Mark's neck, and his head was on Mark's shoulder. The doctor had found a place of solace.

Thomas was standing in the aisle, talking with the Dean. He introduced Joe and Robert. The Dean smiled and was asking Thomas how he was connected to the family when the light of recognition came on in the Dean's eyes.

“So, are you the Uncle Thomas that Belinda was talking about last Sunday?”

Thomas smiled and said he was one and the same.

“She is a special child of God. Already the people here love her.”

“Joe and I have become grandparents to Robert and Belinda. Mark is like our son. They have just moved into a house on our property.”

The Dean smiled, nodded his head, and walked down the aisle.

Dan was still holding on to Mark.

“Are you okay, Dan?”

“No. It was a horrible night in the Emergency Department. I didn’t get to sing in the choir this morning.” Dan gave a shy smile. “And I missed you.”

Dan’s stomach growled. Everyone laughed.

“I missed breakfast, also.”

“Well, let’s get you fed. Where would you like to go?”

Dan said that he needed to check in with a patient and wondered if it was okay to eat in the hospital cafeteria. Mark said it was an excellent choice and then turned to Joe and Thomas.

“We’ll get the kids and go home to get something to eat. That way, the two of you have time together.” Joe smiled, thinking he had said the right thing.

Dan’s reaction was immediate. “Please, can we all eat together? I feel like I am with family when we are together. I need family today.”

“Of course, lunch is on me. Let’s me get Belinda; then we can leave.” Mark was squeezing Dan’s hand as he headed to the narthex, where Belinda was holding forth. She smiled when she saw her daddy approaching. She excused herself and thanked the preacher for a good sermon.

They parked across from the main hospital, and Dan led them through the corridors to the cafeteria. When they went through the line, Dan helped Belinda choose what she wanted, while Mark helped Robert. Both kids had eyes bigger than their stomachs and wanted one of everything. It took a lot of persuading for the kids to select a reasonable amount of food. Dan also had a tray that he was using to put food for himself and Mark. Mark noticed they were all small size portions. They chose a table, and the men helped the children get organized to eat. Dan sat beside Mark and handed him a fork. Mark was confused.

“Which food is yours and which is mine?”

“Eat what you want. Is it okay if we both eat from the same dishes of food?”

Mark nodded his head while looking at Dan. Mark thought there was only enough food on the tray for one person, but he remembered his promise from the night before about reducing his eating. Now was as good a time as any to make that happen.

Thomas said the grace, and Mark chose a bite of scalloped potatoes. Dan then followed and ate the same. That was their pattern throughout the meal. It was slow, thoughtful eating with lots of smiles on everyone's face. Belinda was regaling them with her stories of blessing everyone as they left.

Dan looked at her in amazement. "Belinda, the Dean said you are a special child."

Belinda looked accusingly at Mark. "Did you tell the Dean about me?"

Dan was confused.

Mark was flustered, "No, Belinda. He meant that you are a wonderful, spirit-filled child of God."

"I didn't know if you told him how God made a mistake, and that we are trying to fix it."

Thomas looked at Belinda. "God never makes mistakes, my darling child. You are who God wanted to make, which makes you special."

"Well, God gave me a penis, and that was a mistake. Robert told me that my penis would be bigger than his. He said I would have a whopper when I grow up."

They all turned when they heard a plate crashing to the floor. A middle-aged couple was getting themselves organized at the next table, and Belinda's comments had startled the woman who dropped her plate. The woman couldn't believe what she had just heard while staring at Belinda, who was wearing her pretty pink dress. A waiter came over and helped to clean up the mess while the couple moved to another table. Mark suggested that the conversation could continue later. Robert was snickering, and Belinda was still processing what the Dean meant by his comments.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Out of the mouths of babies."

"Who is a baby, Uncle Joe?"

"Not you, darling. You are a fierce girl."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means that you speak truth."

"Well, daddy would spank me if I told a fib. I don't like getting spanked, so I try to tell him the truth even when it is not easy. I know that he will love me more if I tell him the truth."

Mark was starting to choke up, so Dan gently reached under the table and put his hand on Mark's thigh. The touch calmed Mark. He looked at Dan and knew that they would need to discuss Belinda.

“I need to disappear for a few minutes to check on a patient. Will you be here when I get back? The answer better be, yes.”

Mark laughed and said he would be there. Joe said they would take the kids home and get them down for an afternoon nap.

“I want to nap in the hammock. Can we, Uncle Joe?”

“Certainly, Robert. Maybe I will join you.”

“Well, Uncle Thomas and I will lie down inside away from the bugs. We don’t like bugs, do we, Uncle Thomas?”

“No, we don’t, missy. No bugs on me.”

Robert and Belinda giggled as they got up from the table. Dan leaned over to kiss Mark on the cheek. Joe and Thomas gave Mark a significant look, which made him blush.

Mark told Dan that he would get a cup of coffee and sit in the lobby until they were ready to leave.

Everyone scattered. Instead of coffee, Mark decided to get a large sweet tea to sip. The lobby was a fascinating place to people watch. He was startled when he saw his sister, Faith, rush in and go to the information desk. He almost went over to speak to her but decided he didn’t want to invite a difficult conversation. She ran down a hallway when she got the information she requested. A few minutes later, Mark saw his parents walk into the lobby. His mother was greatly distressed. Again, Mark decided that whatever was happening, they had not bothered to call him so he would let it go. Mark backed a little further into his seat behind a large philodendron. He didn’t know how long he had been sitting there with his heart racing when he felt a man walk up behind him and put hands on his shoulders. Mark abruptly turned around and looked in Dan’s face.

“What is wrong? You look like you have seen a ghost.”

“I have. Are you ready? Can we get out of here?”

Dan knew that they needed to leave immediately. They walked to Mark’s truck, and finally, Mark started to breathe easier.

“Do I need to take your blood pressure right now? My guess is it would be very, very high.”

“No, I am feeling better. Do you have to go back to the hospital today?”

“I would like to check on a patient this evening.”

Mark started the truck, drove over to I-85, and headed north until they reached Falls Lake. Mark took the exit from the Interstate and drove down a country road and then turned onto a dirt path that ended when they reached the lake. Mark got out of the truck, pulled a blanket from the back floorboard, and headed to the shore. Dan followed. A large loblolly pine tree was about ten feet from the shore, and

Mark spread out the blanket in front of it. He then leaned against the tree and patted the space between his legs. Dan sat down and leaned back into Mark's arms.

"I need to tell you a few things, and I came here so we wouldn't be interrupted."

Dan got up to turn around and looked at Mark.

"Dan, I might not be able to tell you everything if you are looking at me. Please trust me that this is best." Dan settled back down with his head lying on Mark's shoulder. Mark then proceeded to tell Dan about Army/Belinda. Dan would start to ask a question and Mark would gently put his finger on Dan's lips to quieten him.

"After I finish. Then you can ask all of the questions you want. I have more to tell you."

Dan settled and then Mark told him about Linda. He said that he fell in love with Linda, the person, not Linda, the female. When Mark was talking about Linda's illness, Dan squeezed Mark's hands and then lifted and kissed them.

"Now, about me. I am not gay. I just don't see myself that way. I think maybe I am bisexual. I don't know. I was Linda-sexual for sure. Even if she had a penis, I would have loved her. I am only able to be here today because of what she showed me and taught me. She freed me from the restraints of normalcy, whatever the hell that is. I think maybe I am Dan-sexual. I don't know. It is all too confusing for me. I think maybe I am willing to try."

"There is something you need to know: my life is an absolute mess right now. I warn you it is not pretty or easy. Without Joe and Thomas, I would probably be living in a run-down trailer on Rt. 86. They saved the kids and me. I will always choose my children first – over what is good for me or anyone else. That is an artifact of what happened with Linda. She was the love of my life, and now all of that love has been transferred to Robert and Belinda. Bar none. I am a broken man and am just starting to put myself back together again. I mean, it has been within the last month I have started trying to figure out my life. Everything could easily fracture and fall apart again. It is not fair for you to have to deal with that. I am finally starting to rediscover who I am and what I can be in life. You need to know that if we date."

They sat in silence.

"Am I allowed to talk yet?"

Mark laughed and said that he was.

"You are the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life. I don't mean physically beautiful though you are so very good looking. In Paris, with the right clothes, the right haircut, and the right attitude, you would be on the catwalks for different designers. You are that good looking. But it is your beautiful soul that has captured me. You are a good man, and I admire how you are raising your children. I never suspected that Belinda was physically a male. How is it that you are so willing to let her be herself? American men are not like that. She is a special child who speaks her mind, which

will probably cause untold problems for her, Robert, and Robert in the future. I guess that you will be in front of the picket lines fighting for your children. I would be proud to stand there with you.”

Dan felt Mark squeeze him and kiss his neck.

“Now, to the important stuff.” Dan laughed. “Sex.” Dan’s eyes twinkled when he said the word to Mark. He could feel Mark tense when he heard the word. “We can work it out. I am gay. I am unapologetically gay, and I am a doctor who happens to be gay. I took care of a little boy last night whose head had been stomped on by his stepfather because the boy was playing with a doll. The gay doctor would be calling a press conference to tell the world of the atrocity and to demand action. The doctor who is gay is doing everything he can to restore this little boy to health. That is what I do. The fact that the boy was playing with a doll doesn’t make him gay or straight. It means he is exploring life. I want to show the family and my co-workers that even amid such horrific experiences, the doctor in me is primary.”

Mark could feel Dan crying and hugged him tighter. Dan controlled his sniffles and laughed.

“I rarely get this emotional, but when I see a child who has been abused, it rips the very fiber of my being. That I could even tell you that, and receive support is amazing. Some of the staff said the stepfather should have just spanked him for being a sissy. They thought that was okay. I had to calm down after overhearing that conversation. I waited until the end of the shift and met with them and told them that I was reporting all of them to administration. They were shocked. That is where the gay doctor comes in. They believe it is okay to spank a child they thought might be gay. I will fight that with every bit of energy I have. I do not want to work with ignorant caregivers.”

“I want to share time with you and your children. I want to see if there is a place for me in your life. I cannot abide a secret affair where we meet on Wednesday nights after choir rehearsal and rent a hotel room where we have frenzied sex, and then we go our separate ways. I have more pride in who I am than to do that. I think you are like me in that regard or I wouldn’t be interested in you. I want to know more about you. I am utterly infatuated and want to see if it can grow into love.”

“Mark, can I ask you out for a date?”

Mark murmured agreement.

“Good, I am asking you out for Friday night. You will need to drive unless we ride on my bicycle.” Dan laughed.

Mark then slid his body down from the tree and wrapped Dan in his arms. They had their first kiss. When they came up for air, Mark realized that he loved kissing Dan. They leaned in for another kiss while rubbing their pelvises together. They could each feel the penis of the other, which drove them to a further desire for release. Dan was the first to reach orgasm, and he tried to catch his breath. His body was sensitive to touch, and while he needed Mark’s closeness, he also needed to lie back and breathe. Dan reached over and stroked Mark’s protuberance through his pants. Mark’s hips lifted from the blanket as he filled his briefs with a load of semen. They fell into each other’s arms, held on, and then they started kissing again. There was a dreaminess about their kissing. They were

both grinning at each other as they gave petite kisses. Neither was in a hurry to leave. Finally, Dan pulled back the string of his scrubs and looked at his crotch.

“There is a mess down there. I don’t think I have shot that much ever in my life.”

Mark looked at Dan’s beautiful penis lying across his abdomen. He took a finger and scooped up some of Dan’s semen and put it in his mouth. He smiled and said it tasted good. Mark then undid his belt and unzipped his pants. Dan immediately pulled back the briefs to get a look at Mark’s penis. He gave a whistle saying he knew where the children got their big cocks. Mark gave a knowing chuckle. Dan then took his fingers and scooped up Mark’s seed and ate it.

Mark hobbled over to the truck and found the rag he customarily used for cleaning his vehicle. He took it back to the blanket, and he and Dan cleaned themselves as best they could. Mark threw it in the back of the truck when they were leaving.

“Ice cream. I need ice cream.”

Dan gave Mark the fisheye as they drove to an ice cream/gelato store. Dan wanted gelato instead of ice cream and ordered a child’s small size. Mark was about to order when Dan said they would share what he had ordered. Mark then asked for a large sweet tea. Dan asked if, instead, they could get a cup of water. At that moment, Mark would do anything the man asked, even if it meant he would be hungry.

The chocolate gelato came in a cup, and there was only one spoon. Dan fed Mark the first bite and told him to hold it in his mouth until it had melted. Then Dan had a scoop for himself. They sat and slowly ate the gelato. Mark had always shoved down ice cream, but now he had an appreciation for the subtlety of the taste. He had something to learn from Dan about food.

A woman and her children sat at the next table, eating strawberry ice cream. The woman sniffed the air and commented that they were using bleach to clean the place. She said it was a good disinfectant, and probably whoever cleaned the space had put a lot of bleach into the water. Both Mark and Dan smirked.

It was late afternoon when Mark said he needed to go home. Dan asked if he could go home with him. Mark agreed and said they would ride into work together the next morning. They would sleep together and not have sex until after their date. Laughingly, Dan mentioned that he would sleep on the sofa if needed. Mark said he had enough self-control that he wouldn’t be pouncing on him during the night. Dan smirked when Mark said that. Time would tell.

18. We Need to be Angels

September 2019

Dan was restless. He had agreed not to have sex until he and Mark had a date, but he found it challenging to be in bed with the handsome, sexy man. When they undressed to go to bed, Dan gasped when he looked at Mark. Dan thought him the most beautiful man he had ever seen. They looked at each other and grinned.

Dan tossed and turned. He decided that there was only one solution. He got up, grabbed a quilt that was at the foot of the bed, and went into the living area where he curled up on the sofa. He then fell into a restless sleep. It was only slightly more comfortable than the bed in his furnished studio apartment, which Dan considered had the worst mattress in Durham.

The sound of someone in the kitchen woke him. Mark came over and kissed him on the cheek and told him it was time to get up. Dan smiled when he opened his eyes and saw Mark looking at him.

“Get up and take a shower. I have to get the kids ready for school.”

Dan pulled himself up from the sofa and realized his back would be screaming in pain all day. He dragged the quilt behind him as he walked to the bedroom. Dan didn't have any clean clothes, so he put on his scrubs from the day before. Mark's clothes were too big for his smaller frame. He would grab some clean scrubs when he got to his office. Normally, he would wear his chinos, button-down shirt, and tie when seeing patients in the office. After spending the night with Mark, he didn't care.

Robert and Belinda stared at him when he came out of Mark's bedroom after he had showered and dressed. He smiled and said, good morning. They both greeted Dan while chewing on their Cheerios. Mark smiled and said he cleaned up right good. Belinda was charmed that he was there for breakfast. Robert gave him a suspicious look. Mark asked if he could even walk after sleeping on the sofa. Dan grimaced and said he would live, but just barely. He then grinned to let them know he was joking. Robert kept looking at his dad, trying to determine why he wanted them to know that Dan had slept on the sofa.

Mark and Dan dropped the kids off at school and drove to the Duke campus. Mark had reached over and held Dan's hand after the kids got out of the truck. Mark turned onto Trent Drive and dropped Dan at the entrance to the medical office complex. As Dan was getting out of the truck, Mark stopped Dan and said he had forgotten something. Dan had a quizzical look on his face. Mark leaned over and kissed him, and a smile quickly lit up Dan's face. He then pulled himself into the cab and gave Mark another kiss. They were both grinning as Mark pulled his truck into the traffic circle.

Mark headed to his office on the East Campus, where he had a meeting scheduled. He couldn't help smiling. Mark was actually bouncing on the truck seat. All day long, he found himself daydreaming about Dan. Damn, he hadn't felt like this for many years.

At the end of the workday, Mark was at the entrance to the hospital and picked up Dan. They headed west to Hillsborough. He didn't have a class that night, and he and Dan were going to spend it with the children. Mark decided he wanted barbeque and asked Dan if he would eat this American

food. Dan laughed and said he was introduced to the Eastern North Carolina delicacy when he moved to the area. Mark couldn't tell if Dan was being sarcastic and decided not to have a debate about one of his favorite foods. Dan didn't understand the competitive nature of how barbeque was prepared and that each region had its own methods of seasoning, preparing, cooking, and serving the meat. He heard there was a similar competition among people who cooked "Brunswick Stew." He had joked that it sounded like a fun competition until someone disabused him of that notion. Southern people took their barbeque seriously. Dan had been told that the best barbeque in the state was at Parker's in Wilson. Other people swore by Bill's while many people in the down east said it was Wilber's in Goldsboro. They weren't traveling that night, so they went to Hillsborough Barbeque Company for dinner. While they were eating, Mark looked up and saw his parents, sister, and brother-in-law, walk into the restaurant. Belinda started waving at them. Dan saw them and had a quizzical look on his face; he knew who they were from the hospital. Mark was flushed. Robert sat back with an appraising look at what was happening. When Big Mark saw them, he stormed out the door saying something about damned faggots.

Mark pushed his plate to the center of the table. He had lost his appetite.

"Dad, eat your dinner. They shouldn't be able to spoil our dinner; please eat with us."

Mark looked at Robert and decided he was right. Robert then looked at Dan and knew there was something he wasn't saying. Robert decided that he would act grown-up that night because someone at the table had to take on an adult role. Mark looked across the table at Dan and realized that he was very distraught.

"I apologize, Mark. I didn't know they would be here."

Mark looked astounded.

"Dan, what are you talking about?"

"Those people who just came in. I had a fight with them in the hospital. The man said some fairly awful things to me, and I called security to have them removed from the hospital. The man told me he would kill me if I did something which I was required by law to do."

Dan realized there were three pairs of eyes on him. He saw their mouths hanging open.

Robert signaled the waitress and asked for the check. When she came, Mark gave her a credit card to pay for dinner. She packaged their uneaten food.

"Let's get out of here. This place has bad juju tonight."

Nothing was said as they drove across town to the Mill House. When they got home, Robert told Belinda they were going upstairs so their dad could talk with Dan.

Mark took Dan's hand, and they walked down to the bank of the river. He needed to be outside of the hearing range of the kids. Robert thought he already knew what his dad was going to say to Dan because of what he had heard at school. One of the kids in his classroom had told him that his dad

was queer. Robert had beat up the kid. The teacher told Robert she was going to have to call his dad. Robert was stricken with fear that it was one more thing for his dad to handle. Robert didn't think what was being said was true, but now he wasn't so sure. Belinda, being generally self-absorbed, thought it perfectly natural that her dad and Dan were together. She decided her dad was like her in some fundamental way. She had already fit Dan into her construct of their family life.

Mark took off his shoes and socks and dipped his toes in the water. Mark sat with tears running down his face; Dan realized Mark was broken in a way he didn't fully comprehend. Mark started by telling Dan that those people were his family. Mark then told Dan of his life over the past month, how his father had fired him, why they moved, and how his parents had sued him for custody of the children. When he finished, Mark realized that Dan had wrapped him in an embrace of love and compassion. Dan rocked Mark and told him that he would protect him. Dan held Mark until he felt the tension dissipate.

Dan then told Mark about the boy whose head had been kicked by his irate step-father. Dan was clear that the perpetrator wasn't any of those people that had come into the restaurant, but it was the younger man's brother. Mark said that the younger man was his brother-in-law, Ben.

"I am probably breaking confidentiality by disclosing this, but today your father said that he was upset that I had to report the case to Child Protective Services. I told him I was required by law to report the case, which would lead to an investigation. He told me he would find me, kick my butt, and would make sure I was fired from my job. He then said he would kill me if I did anything else. I called hospital security and had your family removed from the hospital. Your father called me racial and sexual epithets as security guards walked them out of the room. They are banned from ever returning to the hospital."

They both sat beside the river, stunned.

"Well, that is a smelly kettle of fish."

They sat and didn't say anything else; each was feeling sorry that he had pulled the other into his own dysfunction.

"I think I need to be held tonight. Please don't sleep on the sofa."

Dan smiled and said he was thinking the same thing. They kissed each other before grabbing their shoes, holding hands, and walking into the house where they found Robert sitting on the sofa.

"Dad, I need to talk to you about school."

Dan looked at them. "I will go shower."

"You probably want to hear this also. Can you stay here with dad and me?"

Dan didn't know what was going to be said but sat in a club chair. Robert was visibly upset.

"Dad, are the two of you boyfriends?"

Mark was startled by the question coming from his son.

“Well, son, I guess it is more accurate to say we like each other. We haven’t even been on a date. Why, what’s going on?”

“Billy Umphlette told everyone in class today that you were a queer. I beat him up at recess. Mrs. Reynolds is going to call you. I have detention and can’t have recess all week. Dad, are you gay?”

“No, I don’t think of myself as gay?”

“Then why are you dating Dan if you aren’t gay. Isn’t that being dishonest with him?”

Both Dan and Mark were startled by what Robert had said.

“I know I have to defend Belinda. She is my sister, and I will fight to the end of the earth for her. I didn’t know that my dad was gay, also. Am I the only normal person in this house? This is so fucked up!”

Robert jumped up, called them both queers, and ran upstairs. They heard his bedroom door slam. They sat with stunned looks on their faces.

“I think I should go back to campus.”

Mark was distressed that Dan might leave.

“I need you to be here. Please. Go take a shower while I talk with Robert.”

Dan was asleep when Mark finally left Robert’s room and came to his own bed. It had been an awkward conversation when Mark laid out his heart to his son. He thought it was entirely unfair that he was saying some of these things to his son, but in many ways, his children were very mature for their ages and Robert understood what Mark was saying. When Mark finished, Robert hugged him and apologized for calling him a queer.

“You need to apologize to Dan.”

“Can it wait until breakfast?”

“Yep, it can Skippy. I know you are upset, but I really, really, really hate that word.”

Robert asked Mark to stay until he fell asleep. Mark held his son until the regular breathing let him know that Robert had slumbered into sleep. Mark went to the shower before crawling into bed and then wrapping Dan in his arms. They slept soundly through the night. Mark awoke when he smelled coffee brewing. Mark looked over and saw that it was still five minutes before the alarm. He kissed Dan’s cheek and whispered that it was time to get up.

The kids were dressed for school when Mark and Dan went into the kitchen. Robert and Belinda had prepared breakfast. It was just boxes of cereal, milk, and fruit, but they had set the table for them to eat. Mugs of coffee were at Mark and Dan’s places while Robert and Belinda had juice at theirs.

“Dr. Dan, I apologize for what I said last night. I was angry, but that is no excuse for my language. Please forgive my bad behavior.”

Dan pondered this for about two seconds and then walked up to Robert and extended his hand.

“Apology accepted, sir. That required a lot of courage on your part, and I admire your bravery.”

They both realized it was their first man to man encounter. Dan treated Robert as an adult, as a peer. Robert knew the moment was significant, but he didn't fully understand the power and courage of what he had done.

As Robert was getting out of the truck at school, he asked his dad if he could visit with Joe after school.

“There are some things I need to talk about with Joe.”

Mark knew that the two of them had a special bond.

“Of course, be home by suppertime. You still have to do your homework. I'll call Kathy and tell her you won't be home after school. Make sure you do your homework. I have a class tonight, so I will be late getting home.”

When Mark called Joe later in the morning, Mark found his friend and mentor very distracted. Joe said he would do whatever was needed and to tell Robert that he would be home.

Joe had a reason to be distracted. He had received a disturbing telephone call that morning from Social Services. Joe and Thomas had applied and been approved to be foster parents when they moved to Hillsborough. They had not been called to foster a child until that very morning. When the caseworker explained the case, Joe told her that he would talk with his husband, and they would get back to her either later that day or at the latest, the following morning. The caseworker said to take their time because the little boy would be in the hospital for at least another week.

Thomas was working at the medical school that morning and was surprised when Joe met him at the driveway when he arrived home at lunchtime. Thomas had noticed that Joe was pacing the field as he drove up the street to their home. Something wasn't right. Joe opened the car door for Thomas. Joe looked in Thomas' eyes and then started crying.

“Is it Sean? Is something wrong with our son?”

“Nope, let's go in, and I will tell you. I fixed us some lunch.”

Thomas found sandwiches already made and a can of tomato basil soup on the countertop ready to be heated. Thomas chuckled, thinking that Joe had done well since the man was usually a disaster in the kitchen.

While the soup was warming, Thomas went to the bedroom and took off his clerical collar and put on a sweatshirt. When he returned, Joe was looking out of the kitchen window. Thomas put his arms across Joe's shoulders and asked what was on his mind.

“See that pair of cardinals in the yard?”

“Yes, I do, my love.”

“Those are you and me. We need to be angels.”

Thomas waited for Joe to continue. Joe had a hitch in his breath, said he was hungry, and they would talk while eating.

Thomas said the grace and waited for Joe to start.

“I had a telephone call this morning from social services. Remember that we were approved as foster parents in North Carolina. Well, they have a boy that needs a home.”

“Joe, do we have the time? You still have work to do on the Mill House. You are winterizing our home. Mark and the kids have just moved in. I have taken this faculty position at the medical school in Chapel Hill, I am on faculty at Duke, and I am committed to the diocese for several projects. We are no longer young men with boundless energy.”

Joe nodded his head in agreement. He finished chewing the bite of sandwich in his mouth and looked at his husband.

“Thomas, we are going to do this. I will do whatever it takes to convince you. I have even talked with your voodoo doll and your dammit-to-hell doll this morning. I beat that poor dammit doll to the point that I thought she was going to fly apart. I kept saying, no, no, no, we can’t do this. And the answer kept coming back that we must. That our answer must be yes.”

Thomas stopped and looked into Joe’s eyes. He paused because he knew that there was only one answer.

“I love you so much. You are the most caring, wonderful husband in the world. Tell me about our new son.”

“I don’t know a lot. He is in the hospital and will be there for probably another week. His step-father stomped him in the head. His mother is in jail for drugs. No one knows where the birth father is living.”

Joe pushed all of those words out of his mouth with one breath. Thomas didn’t say a word; he knew that Joe needed to get his thoughts together.

“It was touch and go at first, but it looks like he is going to be okay physically. The social worker said he has a brilliant doctor from France who has been obsessive about his care.”

At that point, Thomas looked at Joe, wondering if the doctor was Dan.

“The boy, Clay, was playing with a doll when his stepfather got angry and stomped him in the head. The mother screamed, and the man stopped. The mother took Clay to the Emergency Room in the middle of the night. When the hospital notified the police, a team went to the house and found a

drug sale happening. They arrested the man for assault and child abuse, and they arrested the woman for dealing drugs. This was the third time the woman had been arrested on drug charges. Neither of them will get out of jail anytime soon.”

“It turns out that when children come into the hospital who have been subjected to abuse receive a full examination for hidden or prior injuries. Clay not only had head trauma, but they found a broken bone in his arm that had healed incorrectly. He had never received care for that injury. They are going to operate on his arm to re-break the bone and set it. He also had bruises on his body. The poor boy has been through a living hell. Also, the boy does not speak. The staff suspect he can talk but is too traumatized at this point.”

“Joe, how old is Clay?”

“He is only four years old. He hasn’t attended daycare, so there was no one outside of the family to notice and report the injuries.”

“So, are we keeping Clay until a family member takes him in?”

“We will get details, but I don’t think there is any other family suitable at this time. Some extended family members visited the hospital, and the doctor had them removed from the premises. None of them were blood kin. Someone in the extended family threatened to kill the doctor.”

Thomas looked at the uneaten sandwich on his plate. He hadn’t taken a bite of his soup. Thomas lifted his glass of tea and took a sip. He needed time to think, and so he took a bite of his sandwich. Good manners dictated that he not talk when he had food in his mouth. Joe wanted an answer, but Thomas needed time to think about this proposal, so he slowly chewed the food.

Joe stopped eating and looked at Thomas. Joe had a pleading look that Thomas had not seen since they were dealing with Sean’s medical issues.

“So, the boy was playing with a doll?”

“Yes, the step-father called him a sissy-boy faggot and then told him he didn’t deserve to live.”

Joe knew what words to say to Thomas so that each of his compassionate care buttons was pushed.

“He told Clay he could live on the street or in a ditch because he wasn’t his daddy. He told Clay he hated him and that God hated him because he was queer.”

Joe had reached out and grabbed Thomas’ hands.

“Thomas, God is telling us that we have to do this. We have been on the list for over a year and never received a call. Why now? God needs us to protect this child.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. We have an appointment tomorrow morning at the hospital with the social services caseworker, the hospital social worker, the doctor, and some administrator. I have already looked at

your calendar, and you need to cancel the meeting you have tomorrow morning. Promise me you will do that.”

“Is our going to the meeting a commitment for us to foster Clay?”

“No, I told Mrs. Exum that we would need to have a conversation first, meet with them, and then make a decision.”

“What will happen if we say no?”

“Thomas, we both know about foster care systems. I don’t think North Carolina is different than Philadelphia.”

Thomas nodded his head, went to the telephone, and canceled his appointment for the following day. Joe walked up behind him and wrapped his husband in his arms. They found solace in each other’s touch.

Later that afternoon, there was a knock at the kitchen door, and Joe found Robert wanting to talk. Thomas stood at the kitchen window and watched Joe and Robert circle the field while talking. Robert was gesticulating as he talked and then would calm when Joe talked. They were both intense in different ways – Robert had intense anger that he was releasing. Joe had intense empathy for his young friend. Finally, they sat at the picnic table in the backyard. Joe had his arm across Robert’s shoulder and was comforting him. Thomas poured two glasses of lemonade and took them out to them. Thomas was sure their throats were parched. Robert’s manners came forward.

“Thank you, Uncle Thomas. I love you and Uncle Joe.”

“We love you also, Robert. Did Uncle Joe help you with your problem?”

“How did you know I had a problem?”

Thomas laughed.

“You are just like Joe. When he has a problem, he walks circles around that field, talking to himself, working out the problem, and coming up with solutions. It looked like both of you were doing that today. You are like two peas in a pod, as my granny would say.”

Robert blushed.

“Uncle Joe helped me a lot. I may need to come back again, especially if I get lemonade afterward.” Robert gave them a mischievous smile.

They laughed and Robert said he needed to head home to complete his homework.

Thomas and Joe went into their kitchen. Thomas looked at Joe, who just grinned and said he was trying to remember what life was like at that age. Joe, like Thomas, knew that some things were confidential and not to be shared. Joe’s conversation with Robert was one of those conversations.

The next morning, Joe put on a suit and Thomas put on his clericals. They arrived at the hospital and went to the designated conference room where they sat by themselves. Finally, Ms. Exum, the social worker, came in and apologized. She said the doctor had delayed them because he was adamant that his approval was needed about who the foster parents would be for Clay. She said that doctors generally weren't so insistent, but that this doctor felt a special connection to the child.

The door opened, and the nurse, hospital social worker, and administrator walked in. They said the doctor would be with them immediately but that he needed a cup of coffee as he had spent most of the night in the ICU.

Dan opened the door and walked in. His cup of coffee slipped from his hand when he saw Thomas and Joe. He immediately dropped to his knees and was mopping up the mess with a bunch of napkins. The front of his scrubs had caught most of the coffee. He apologized about the mishap and that he would clean up later.

"Thomas and Joe, why are you here?"

Joe and Thomas had decided that Thomas would take the lead in speaking because Joe would generally become too emotional.

"We are the proposed foster parents."

Dan smiled and said the meeting was finished.

"What do you mean, Dr. Lillie? We haven't even started."

Dan looked at the hospital administrator and said that if Joe and Thomas were the foster parents, then he approved of everything. After the haranguing that Dan had given them earlier that morning, none of the hospital participants could have anticipated such an outcome. Dan then asked that Joe and Thomas give him fifteen minutes to shower and change clothes because he wanted to take them to see Clay. Ms. Exum told the doctor to take his time while she talked about some of the challenges with the case. The administrator wanted to know how they knew Dr. Lillie. Thomas was purposefully vague in his response but mentioned his role as faculty in the Divinity School, and that Dr. Lillie sang in the Chapel Choir. Thomas also mentioned his faculty position at the UNC Medical School. He knew that the medical schools and hospitals collaborated, but were also competitors.

Dan returned thirty minutes later, dressed in chinos and a button-down shirt. He had showered and shaved. Dan was warm and gracious with the two men, but very formal with the others in the room. He made sure the hospital staff understood he was the doctor, and that Clay was under his care.

Thomas and Joe walked with Dan to the Pediatric ICU.

"I am keeping him in the ICU because he is still medically fragile, and I want to ensure he is watched very closely. In two days, he will have surgery on his arm. I have concerns about the anesthesia because of the head injury, but the orthopedic doctor has assured me that everything will be fine. I

will also be in that surgery. I do not have certification in orthopedics, but I certified in anesthesiology. I will monitor everything. No child should have to suffer this way.”

They walked into the room, and Dan said hello to Clay. Dan introduced the men. Clay looked at Thomas and Joe. He actually couldn't stop looking at Joe. A smile slowly crept across his face. Dan asked Clay some questions, but the boy didn't respond. Dan told Clay that he knew he could hear him, and it was vital for him to talk. Clay didn't say a word.

Joe asked if he could sit with Clay for a few minutes while Dan and Thomas went for a cup of coffee. When they were alone, Joe softly talked to Clay and told him about him and Thomas and that they had a son named Sean. He asked Clay questions, but the boy didn't answer. Joe continued to talk to Clay quietly. A nurse came in and said she had to take Clay's temperature and that they were doing it rectally since Clay wouldn't open his mouth for the thermometer. As she was turning Clay on his side, Clay let out a moan of discomfort. Joe asked the nurse if she could give them a few minutes. She said that she was swamped with other patients but would make an exception this time.

After she left, Joe asked Clay to point to where he hurt. Clay pointed, and Joe tried not to flinch. From his experience, he knew the boy had been sexually abused at some point in time or on multiple occasions.

Joe employed his best Scottish accent, which had a lilt that Southern American English did not.

“My darling boy, can I make a deal with you? When the nurse comes back, I will tell her that we both need our temperatures taken by mouth. I don't like things stuck up my butt either. I will let her take my temperature if you let her take yours also. Do we have a deal, my boy?”

Clay grinned and nodded. Joe reached out, and they fist-bumped.

When the nurse returned, Joe used his learned coercion skills and told the nurse they both needed their temperatures taken and that he was going first. Clay watched how the nurse held the thermometer in Joe's mouth. The nurse smiled and told Joe his temperature. Joe asked if he could put the thermometer in Clay's mouth. The nurse agreed, and Clay opened his mouth. Clay cooperated, and the nurse went on her way.

“Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?”

“It was okay because you helped me.”

Joe acted like the verbal response was expected and then continued his conversation with Clay.

When Dan and Thomas returned, they stood in the hallway and listened to Joe and Clay talking. Dan whispered that those were the first words that Clay had spoken since arriving at the hospital. Some of the nurses were concerned that he was mute.

Dan walked into the room to see Joe's hand supporting Clay's arm, where the surgery was to be performed. Clay was talking with Joe about the operation and how afraid he was.

“Would it make you feel better if I stayed with you until you had your surgery?”

Clay said yes and tried to crawl off the bed and into Joe's arms.

The nurse who had taken the temperature came in and said that visiting time was over. Joe looked at her and said he was staying overnight. Her mouth flew open, but she couldn't get words out.

Thomas smiled and said he was going home to bake some gingerbread cookies.

19. Dinner Date with Dan

September 2019

Mark pulled up in front of Dan's apartment. That afternoon he had taken his truck to the car wash and then had vacuumed the interior. It was during times like this that Mark wished he had a car; he didn't want to be seen as a red-neck pulling up in a truck on his first date. Mark saw Dan walk out of his apartment door, and he caught his breath. Mark had decided that Dan wasn't the most classically handsome man in the world, but there was an air of humility and serenity about him that was captivating. His features were symmetrical and his short brown hair complimented his looks. Mark didn't think he looked like anyone he had ever met. There was no Irish, Scottish, or English inbreeding with this man. His golden eyes sparkled. There was a grace about his gait as if he was touching the ground on every other step. There was nothing effeminate about him but he wasn't entirely masculine either. Dan was Dan. Mark decided he was exotic looking and absolutely beautiful.

Mark was wearing his best khakis, button-down blue oxford cloth shirt, navy blazer, and Weejuns, which was the typical dress-up fashion for men in his part of the world. Dan had on a pair of black slacks, a close-fitting white shirt, a multi-color tweed blazer that had the sleeves rolled up, a scarf wrapped around his neck, and he wore ankle boots. It was obvious he didn't purchase his clothes in central North Carolina.

Mark jumped out and walked around the front of the truck. He opened the door for Dan. Dan easily pulled himself into the truck and settled into his seat. Mark reopened the driver's door and got in. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face. He looked over and his smile was mirrored by Dan's.

"Okay, Captain. Where are we eating tonight?"

"Head down Route 15-501 to Route 54 and head east. I heard there is a good restaurant, so I called and reserved a table for us."

As Mark steered the truck onto Route 54, Dan pointed to his left, and Mark pulled the truck into the parking lot. Mark knew of the restaurant. It was one of the best steak houses in the area. When they got out, Dan grabbed Mark's hand as they walked across the parking lot. Mark was okay with Dan taking the lead. He grinned at himself, thinking that he was okay with holding Dan's hand in public.

The *maitre d* took them to their table, which was a two-top in a corner. This would allow the two men plenty of privacy during their meal. Mark looked at the menu and swallowed hard. The restaurant prices were some of the highest in the area. He and the kids didn't eat at such upscale restaurants. Luckily, he had a credit card with him. Mark ordered a bourbon and branch to start the night. Dan demurred and said he would just be drinking wine. Mark questioned whether he should have ordered his drink. After talking about the offerings and hearing the nightly specials, Dan asked if he could order for both of them. Mark said he would be honored if Dan would order. He then wondered if he would be hungry later.

The waiter appeared. Dan handed him the menus and then ordered Tuna Tartare, Filet Mignon, sautéed asparagus, mushroom ragout, and risotto followed by a baby lettuce salad with balsamic

vinaigrette. Dan then said they would do the trio of house sorbets to finish the meal. Dan ordered a bottle of French Bordeaux wine. The waiter clarified that they wanted two servings of each dish ordered. Dan apologized that he wasn't clear, but said they would be sharing each of the *a la carte* items. The waiter gave them an odd look, and Mark thought the waiter was calculating a smaller tip because of the reduced amount of food.

During the meal, Mark realized what a limited range of foods he had eaten in life. It started when the tuna tartare arrived. Mark waited for Dan to take the first bite of the raw fish. He watched Dan's face, and after he saw a smile, he decided to take a nibble. He felt so middle class at that point. A look of surprise, and then a smile came to his face after letting the fish settle in his mouth. Dan glowed. The plate was clean when the waiter returned. Dan had ordered the steak cooked rare. Mark was thinking about foodborne illness. His father had always grilled the steaks and they were dry and tough, but no one ever got food poisoning. Mark took the lead and shaved two slices for them. The Béarnaise sauce was the perfect complement. The pace of their eating was slow and thoughtful as they sampled each of the dishes. The mushroom ragout was a revelation to Mark. He knew he couldn't pick up the plate and lick it clean, but his desire was to do precisely that. The new tastes were overwhelming, and he felt himself opening to Dan, and expressing how much he was enjoying the food.

"You order for us from now on."

"Thank you. I hope we have many more meals together."

When the waiter placed the salad on the table, Mark thought that one ate a salad before the meal. His mother had always put lots of blue cheese dressing on the salad to cover up the taste of the greens. When Mark took the first bite, he realized how refreshing the salad was after eating foods with such complex flavors. He could only smile at the amazing man sitting at the table with him. Dan asked the waiter to give them a few minutes before he brought the sorbet so they could sit back in their chairs, relax, and digest the delicious food. They talked about how the chef had prepared the different dishes and the new taste sensations for Mark. Leisurely dining was a new concept for Mark. Dan caught the waiter's eye and nodded his head; a large white plate with the trio of sorbet was placed in front of them. They each tasted the choices. Mark said he wanted a gallon of each to take home. They laughed easily. Espresso and then Calvados Brandy finished the meal.

The waiter brought the check and handed it to Dan. Dan didn't flinch when he saw the total. He pulled out a credit card.

"Let me leave a tip."

Dan only shook his head.

"My treat tonight."

Mark was gracious enough to know not to argue. He figured that Dan, being a surgeon, made much more money than he did even though he was doing alright. Mark had always taken money for granted. There was enough for what he wanted, not thinking that his needs and desires had been

shaped by the money he had. Mark asked if he was ready to leave, and Dan smiled and said yes. When Dan stood, Mark pulled him forward, and they kissed. Dan leaned into Mark and smiled.

“Faggots. God damn, you can’t go out to eat without some faggots kissing in public.”

Mark was startled to hear such comments. He straightened, and looked at the man who had made the comments. Mark couldn’t decide whether to snarl at him or to melt into the floor. Dan grabbed Mark’s hand and started speaking to the man in French. Dan was imperious, and the man shrunk back even though he didn’t understand a word directed his way. Dan had become the aristocrat talking to the *bourgeoise*. In this French Revolution, the aristocrat won. Dan gently leaned in and kissed Mark again. Mark couldn’t get his feet to work as he wanted to flee, so Dan took the lead, grabbed Mark’s hand, and led him toward the door. The *maitre d* had not heard the comments and wished them a good night. Mark was shaking when they walked outside until Dan held him close and told him it was okay.

“Don’t let him ruin our beautiful evening. He is a swine. Tonight has been perfect; you are perfect. Look at me, Mark.”

Mark did, and then Dan leaned in and kissed him again.

“Can we go back to the lake?”

“Of course, it will be pitch black out there, but that is cool with me.”

Mark started the truck and drove a leisurely route through the city as he headed north. He had grown up in the area and knew all of the backroads. When they pulled up to the beach, Mark stopped the truck, grabbed a blanket, and took Dan’s hand as they walked to their pine tree.

Mark sat and pulled Dan back into his chest.

“Thank you for a wonderful meal. That was incredible.”

“You are welcome. It is nice to have a civilized night out. Tonight has been a rare occurrence for me since moving to Durham.”

“Tell me more about you.”

Dan pulled Mark’s arms tighter around his chest and sighed.

“It is not a pretty story, so I need for you to let me tell my story without you interrupting. Okay?”

“Turnabout is fair play. I promise to listen.”

They settled with Dan wrapped in Mark’s arms.

“I was born in Algiers. My father was a Pied-Noir and my mother was French. My father studied architecture in Paris; his family had money and prestige in Algeria, so he had access to the best education. He was in his senior year of studies at the Sorbonne when he met my mother. She was

smitten. My mother was a graduate student in archeology. They fell in love. My mother's parents were outraged that she was marrying an Algerian, and to make it even worse, he was Jewish. My father was from an ancient line of Algerian Jews, and my mother's family was old French Catholic. They married in France and immediately left for Algiers. The family reception in Algiers was not as welcoming as they hoped it would be. My father's sisters tried to exclude my mother from all family activities. After all, she was Catholic. Mother tells me that she and my father were very much in love. They were part of the emerging haute society that developed in Algiers after the country had gained independence from France in 1962. My father renovated a grand old home in a historic neighborhood by the sea, and they moved in and held parties. Having an invitation to one of their parties was coveted. Both native Algerians and French expatriates enjoyed themselves when my parents entertained. It was a very artistic, academic crowd.

My father's family begrudgingly accepted my mother when she became pregnant. It was essential to carry on the family line. My mother was more warmly received after giving birth to a boy. Heaven knows what would have happened if I had been born a girl. When I was two years old, my father flew to Cairo on business. The plane went down, and nobody survived. The cause was never determined. There was a lot of fighting along the coast as the North African countries threw off the shackles of European dominance. My father's sisters always alluded to some nefarious scheme that caused his death.

I grew up in a primarily matriarchal family. My father's mother and aunts were insistent that I be reared as an Algerian Jew. They fought with my mother, but she had the upper hand: she had her own money and was independent. She threatened to return to France, and then none of them would ever see me again. I remember they reached a point of détente when I was in my eighth year of school. My uncle, Samuel, my father's only brother, had grown weary of the catfights among the women. He was a quiet, mild-mannered man. He was a librarian and used all of his energy to rescue old Jewish and Hebrew texts and scrolls from synagogues that had closed across all of North Africa. The synagogues closed after the creation of the nation of Israel. Most of the countries kicked out all of the Jews, so the houses and synagogues were taken over by the government. I digress. Anyway, I liked my uncle. He wore these little glasses and always had on a black suit and a yarmulke. I think he probably wore his suit to bed. He met with my mother about my future, then met with the women in the family and told them what life would be like moving forward. He was a quiet-spoken man, and he only said things once. He was the head of the family, and thus they obeyed him.

When it was time for college, I went to Paris. I spoke Parisian French, but I didn't look French. I wasn't chic. I wasn't urbane. I was seen as a foreigner even though I had French citizenship. I was called Pied-Noir by the Parisians – they didn't bother to learn my name. My French grandparents tolerated me. I overheard my grandmother calling me unkind names to the maid because of my African and Jewish blood. They were very prejudiced. I depended on them and never let them know that I heard what they said about me. I was their only grandchild. I took their last name of Lillie when I was in France. I was Daniel Lillie L'Oranaise when I was in Algeria.

I finished school and then started medical school. I had a small apartment near university and rode a bicycle. It was during my senior year in college that my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She had always been a heavy smoker. She would sit on the patio and smoke pack after pack of those nasty Gauloises. I flew to Algiers and saw a shell of the woman who had raised me. She told me to go back

to Paris and to make her proud by being a surgeon. In her mind, a surgeon was much better than being just a doctor. She wanted my father's family to be envious of what I had achieved. She died the following summer. I went to Algiers, buried her in the Jewish cemetery beside my father, and closed up the house. I couldn't decide what to do with it – it was where I grew up and I could not get rid of it. I have someone living in the guest house, and he makes sure the property is not vandalized when I am not there. He works in the Casbah and has a free place to live. He and I have been quite satisfied with the arrangement.

I finished medical school. I had been so determined to make my mother proud that I finished top in my class. Immediately after graduation, I was offered a job in Paris. I was also offered a position in Algeria. My heart and brain were constantly fighting over what to do. I convinced the medical school to affiliate with a hospital in Algiers, to make it a teaching hospital, and I flew down for one week of every month to see patients and teach students. It was the best of both worlds. It helped that I was ploy-glot. My uncle, the librarian, made sure I knew Hebrew, Farsi, as well as Portuguese, French, Spanish, and English.”

“When the fellowship at Duke opened, I thought it was an opportunity to learn some new skills and new technology that we did not have in Paris. It also provided me an excuse to travel. My life had become so busy that I had no time to explore the world. The job at Duke was probably a step down in some ways, but I didn't care. I now have my grandparent's home in Paris, I have a wonderful home and my father's family in Algiers, and yet I live in a squalid studio apartment in Durham.”

Dan laughed as he said that.

“I still ride a bicycle everywhere. I don't need a car or a big truck. I take the Metro in Paris. I have a motorbike in Algiers. My life is good.”

They sat in silence.

“So, how long will you be here?”

“It is an eighteen-month fellowship, and I started on July 1st. I can leave before the eighteen months, but I will miss out on some important aspects of what I want to learn. I can extend the fellowship to a maximum of two years, but not beyond that. I have jobs in Paris and Algiers that are giving me time away, and they expect me to return and apply these newly learned skills.”

“So, we can only be together until you return to Paris. Dan, it will break my heart, and I can't deal with another broken heart. Belinda already loves you. I can't do this to myself, Robert, or Belinda.”

“You could always move to Paris and Algiers with me. I have money. I can support us. Robert and Belinda would love it. Any capital city has such much to offer – but both Paris and Algiers are remarkable. The international communities would be intriguing for you and the children. Belinda would be at her best in inviting those people to visit our home.”

Mark had not considered that as a possibility until Dan said it. Mark thought of Linda and all of the things she had taught him. He was a willing student. A new horizon opened for Mark that had never

been within his wildest imagination. They sat in silence. It was too early in their dating life for him to think about moving to Paris, much less Algiers. Mark changed the subject.

“So, now I know why your skin and hair are dark, but you don’t look African.”

“I am African. Through and through. I am more African than French. Does that bother you?”

“No, I don’t think so. I would describe you as Jewish looking or North African, not really African.”

“Are you going to be like my grandmother? Mark, I hope you are better than that.”

“I am fine. I like you, Dan, the person. Whether you are French or African or American or Asian, it doesn’t matter. I like you.”

Mark was unsettled but was trying not to let it show. He knew if they dated, the question would come up about Dan’s heritage and Mark didn’t know if he could say he was dating an African man. Perhaps we could say North African, which was viewed as less offensive in North Carolina. He wasn’t sure about the inherent racism that he carried. He never thought of himself as racist, yet his stomach was churning that he was dating a mixed-race man.

They left the lake and went to the Mill House. Dan and Mark made love for the first time, and they found each other willing and open. They instinctively knew what the other needed. Mark hadn’t conceived of the possibility that he could be so turned on by a man who had sharp planes on his body where with a woman, there would be soft curves. Mark thought he was wrestling with a very masculine angel who was his match. Dan wasn’t quite like Jacob, who wrestled with an angel all night. After all, Dan wasn’t God, but Mark was already putting Dan on a pedestal. How did one fall completely in love so quickly?

Dan fell asleep immediately after kissing Mark good night. He threw his arm across Mark’s chest and snuggled in close. Mark did not sleep for the rest of the night. He kept doing mental gymnastics about making love to a man, dating a man who identified as African, dating a Jew, and how to rationalize these issues to himself and others. He knew he was overthinking what was happening. Dating a man was so new yet satisfying. He craved Dan’s touch. The entire evening had been a revelation about possibilities. He thought about the man in the restaurant who called him a faggot. He remembered being upset with Linda when she bought a black dildo for them to use. He asked her if there were dildos that had skin tones, and she quickly told him that brown was a skin tone. He replied that she knew what he meant, and she was trying to twist his words. She didn’t scold him, but she took out her frustration while she worked his ass. He was begging for mercy that night, but he refused to say the safe word. She kept going until they were both covered in sweat. When he spontaneously ejaculated all over his chest, she climaxed, and they fell into each other’s arms. The second time they made love that night, he didn’t care about the color of the dildo. He was more worried about the simple act of walking the next day. Now he was dating someone who identified as African and was part Jewish and was a MAN. So went the tautological thought processes most of the night until Mark chuckled as he remembered the Principle of Occam’s Razor. It was like someone turned on the light switch for him. Attraction was a simple construct, and he was trying to make it painful and complicated. He turned on his side and pulled Dan to him. He kissed Dan’s shoulder blades and was finally at peace.

As the sun sneaked above the stand of trees in the east, Mark finally fell asleep. He awoke when he heard voices in the kitchen, and there was the smell of bacon cooking. The smell of bacon frying was like a siren's call that exploded in his senses. He stumbled into the bathroom and realized that he looked like hammered shit. He peed, washed his face, and cleaned his teeth. When he stepped into the kitchen, he found Dan and Belinda stirring pancake batter. Dan gave him a loving look, kissed him, handed him a cup of coffee, and told him to waken Robert so they could eat breakfast together.

Belinda led the conversation at breakfast. She and Dan laughed and joked with each other. They naturally took to each other; she giggled as she fed him a bite of pancake. Dan's joy was incredible. Mark's brain was too foggy from not sleeping to keep up with their joyful banter. Robert kept giving Dan and Belinda a sideways glance and would then glare at Mark. As soon as he finished eating, Robert excused himself and asked if he could visit with Joe. Mark saw the tears in Robert's eyes as he ran out of the front door. Mark started with his mental gymnastics again so he could explain things to Robert and then stopped his brain. He would be straightforward and simple. Mark didn't need to complicate things for his children when enough obstacles were being thrown their way. The simple truth was he found someone with whom he was falling in love.

20. Weekend Get-Aways

Mark found himself calling Dan off and on throughout the day. He needed to hear Dan's voice. They were very quick calls as Dan moved from patient room to patient room. Most often, Mark would get Dan's voice mail, leave a message, and then sit at his desk, twiddling his pencil, until Dan called him back. When Dan's telephone number would pop up on Mark's telephone, he would start smiling. It was an involuntary reaction.

Dan became a regular visitor at the Mill House. On Wednesdays, Mark and Dan would eat dinner at the Brodhead Center, which was a three-story dining establishment on the Duke campus near the Chapel. Mark would find them a table while Dan chose what they would eat. Mark was surprised at the international offerings in food choices, and he became quite enamored with Indian cuisine. Burgers and fries were no longer his go-to food choice. Every week they tried a different nationality's cuisine. Per usual, there would be one plate of food that was shared. Mark's idea of what constituted dining was rapidly changing.

Dan and Mark naturally took each other's hand while they were walking on campus. The choir members quickly realized that they were now a couple, and were thrilled at the love they saw in these two young men. On nights when Mark had class, Dan would automatically appear and walk Mark to class. He would then appear at the end of class and walk Mark to his truck where they would spend some time snogging before Mark would beg off and say he had to go home. Mark couldn't wait to talk with Dan again, and it was the norm for there to be a telephone call before the truck turned on Route 70. Mark took the slow route home so the two of them would have more time to talk.

This concept of dating was new to Mark. He had a girlfriend in high school and they broke up when she decided to head to California for college. Mark had refused to consider going to college so far from home. In college, he met Linda and they started dating and they quickly became a couple. Sure, he had wooed her and then they both worked hard to maintain their love. He had not dated since Linda had died.

Mark felt like a schoolboy in love. He was amazed at how silly he could be. Thomas and Joe noticed Mark's distracted nature and marked it down to puppy love. They didn't know how to describe it except that it was perfect. Joe wondered about Mark's attraction to men, but Thomas said he thought it was his sole attraction to Dan. Dan was handsome in the same way Linda was beautiful, yet it was completely different. They were both fit and athletic, were both surgeons and brilliant, and they both had an unerring sense of love and sensuality. Mark would let out a sigh when he thought of Dan's attractiveness.

Clay had been discharged from the hospital and moved into the house with Joe and Thomas. He became a younger brother to Robert and Belinda. Joe enrolled him in a daycare program because the young boy had not been socialized with other children. Clay would barely speak except when Joe was holding him. Even then, his voice would sometimes fail him. Belinda was a take no prisoners type of personality, as she helped Clay break through his shell. Robert treated him as a little brother who needed guidance and direction. The combination of approaches was instrumental in assisting Clay to crush the barriers he had built to protect himself. The director of the day school met with Joe and admitted her initial reticence at taking Clay into the school because of his deficits, but had

witnessed tremendous improvements in a short period of time. Clay adored his older siblings, and every day would he ask Thomas if Belinda and Robert could eat with them at the Yellow House. Joe had been teaching Clay the alphabet, numbers, and colors. Joe pointed to the house and told Clay it was yellow. After that, Clay called it the Yellow House. It quickly caught on with everyone else, and the two households now had names for their homes: Mill House and Yellow House.

It was often a struggle to separate the kids at bedtime. Clay would whine and cry when he couldn't spend the night at the Mill House. Joe would see Belinda and Robert whispering into Clay's ear about how to ask their daddies if they could spend the night with each other. It didn't take long for them to become the Three Musketeers. While still shy around adults, Clay would follow Robert and Belinda wherever they went. His short little legs would fly across the field as he ran to greet them when they got home from school. The full arm cast slowed him only slightly. The first time he tripped and fell while running, Joe almost had a stroke. He ran across the field and picked Clay up from the ground. Joe asked Clay if he was okay, received a nod, then Clay twisted his body to get back to the ground. He took off running again. Joe and Thomas were ecstatic that their foster child was blooming. Mark was fairly oblivious to what was happening with the children. He only had one person on his mind.

On Saturdays, Mark, Dan, and the kids would get in the truck and take trips to different places in North Carolina. If the outings were close to Hillsborough, they would invite Clay to go with them. Clay adored Belinda and Robert but was still a little hobbled by wearing the cast and sling on his arm. Dan knew that he could take care of any medical needs that Clay had, but he had his own particular need to build a family with Mark, Robert, and Belinda.

On Friday of Columbus Day weekend, they caravanned to Nags Head. Dan had rented a large house on the oceanfront for the weekend. They invited Joe, Thomas, and Clay to join them. The kids loved playing by the ocean on Saturday. Clay still had on a cast and was to have it removed the following week. Dan went to a pharmacy where he bought scissors, which he then used to cut off the cast. He attached a plastic splint to the arms and attached straps for stabilization. The brace allowed Clay more mobility, and he could play in the ocean with Belinda and Robert. It worked perfectly but could be dangerous if it accidentally hit anyone.

That morning as they were getting dressed, Dan put on a pair of Speedos. Mark was putting on his board shorts when he turned around and saw Dan. His jaw dropped.

"Dan, men in America don't wear that type of swimsuit."

"More the shame."

"Dan, I will have a hard-on all day if you wear those. They are almost obscene. I can see your penis."

Dan smiled and fluffed himself.

"Don't do that to me. We have to fix breakfast for everyone. Joe and Thomas are too old to see you in those. They may have heart attacks."

Dan felt like the air had been sucked out of the room.

“Mark, why are you ashamed of me?”

Mark was struck dumb by the honesty of the question. He blushed at his own prejudices.

“I apologize. I am being a backwoods, North Carolina ignorant ass, again. I don’t think I could wear them, though. You look delicious.” Dan fluffed his penis and laughed.

The men went to the kitchen to start cooking. Slowly, the kids appeared, and then Joe and Thomas followed. Thomas was like Mark and had on board shorts and a t-shirt. Joe had on box style shorts with his hairy chest on display. He wasn’t aware of the effect on Dan when he scratched his chest and tweaked his nipple. Dan couldn’t get up from the table until everyone cleared out of the dining room. Joe was a fine specimen of a man, and aging had not diminished his attractiveness. After eating, the kids raced across the dune to the ocean. Thomas and Joe had brought a beach umbrella, towels, a cooler with drinks, snacks, and reading material. Dan was the first one to run across the sand and dive into the ocean. The kids were hesitant to join Dan until Joe took them by their hands and led them into the water. Mark moved back and forth between the ocean and the umbrella village that Thomas had constructed. He felt bad that Thomas was alone on the shore. Thomas said that with his English skin, he would burn if he was in the sun for too long. He seemed satisfied to sit under the umbrella and watch everyone having fun.

They spent the morning in the water with Dan and Joe teaching the kids how to swim. Joe stayed extra close to Clay and helped the boy maneuver with his arm splint. Mid-morning, the kids needed refueling and headed to the umbrella. Thomas was busy fixing them snacks while Dan stood at the shore. Dan didn’t notice the man who was walking along the shoreline who had stopped and was staring at him. The man decidedly liked what he saw in Dan. Mark noticed and took off running until he reached Dan, pulled his lover in his arms, and kissed him. Dan grinned when he came up for air.

“What brought that on?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to kiss you.”

“Really?”

Mark turned his head to look at the man down the shore, who was rubbing his crotch. Dan barked a laugh and said there was no need to be jealous. Mark looked sheepish until Dan pulled him down onto the sand and kissed him. It was hokey, but Dan wanted to recreate the scene with Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster. It worked for Mark. When they got up, they ran to the house, telling Joe to look after the kids for a few minutes. They were naked by the time they got to the bedroom.

Luckily, they had closed the bedroom door because they fell asleep after making love. The knock on the door woke them, and they heard a voice telling them that lunch was ready. They hopped in the shower, compared their tan lines, put on shorts and tee-shirts, and ran downstairs. No one paid attention to the fact that they had been ensconced in the bedroom for almost two hours. Robert wasn’t enthused with their pairing, but he was growing more comfortable with them being a couple. He knew how hard Dan was working to make them a family, but he didn’t know that he wanted that kind of family.

Late that afternoon, they took a walk down the beach. Belinda and Clay led the pack and were holding Dan's hands. Robert followed, walking alone. Mark, Thomas, and Joe brought up the rear. Dan was telling Belinda and Clay about his house on the beach in Algiers. Belinda couldn't grasp the fact that Dan could walk out of his house anytime he wanted and go right to the beach. That sounded like heaven to her. Robert was intently listening though he feigned indifference.

"Can you see France from your house, Dr. Dan?"

"No, Belinda, the Mediterranean Sea is huge, so we can't see France."

"So, you have a house in Algiers and one in Paris?"

"That is correct. The house in Paris belonged to my grandparents. I inherited it when they passed away. I live there when I am working in Paris."

"I would love to live in Paris, that is where they make all of the pretty dresses."

"Yes, there are many couture houses in Paris."

Belinda's quick mind was moving on.

"How many bedrooms does the house have?"

"I think fourteen bedrooms."

"No house has fourteen bedrooms."

"Yes, my lovely daughter it does."

"So, we will have lots of room to have guests when we live there."

Clay had not said anything until that point.

"Can I come to visit, Uncle Dr. Dan?"

"Of course, Clay. You can have your own bedroom, so you always have a place to stay when in Paris. Robert gets to pick a bedroom first since he is the oldest, then Belinda, and then you. There will be bedrooms left after you pick. Maybe Uncle Joe and Uncle Thomas will want to pick a bedroom."

Clay didn't know where Paris was, but it sounded cool that he would have his own bedroom at Uncle Dr. Dan's house.

"Uncle Dr. Dan, where is France?"

Dan stopped walking, turned, and pointed east across the Atlantic.

"How do we get there?"

“Well, most people fly across the ocean, but some people take a ship, but that takes a long time.”

“I will tell Uncle Joe that we want to fly. I don’t want to take a long time.”

“That sounds like a good plan. I am always anxious to get home when I have been traveling.”

Robert, not being able to hear everything clearly, had moved up and held onto Belinda’s hand.

“Dr. Dan, we live here. Our home in here. If you and daddy stay together, where will we live?”

“Well, Robert, your daddy and I haven’t talked about that. We have only been dating a few weeks. There are a lot of things to consider. Maybe next spring, we can all fly to Paris to see the house. Then we could fly to Algiers to see that house. If your daddy wants, we can move there anytime you want. Maybe, we will have three houses: the Mill House you live in now, the house in Paris, and the house in Algiers.”

Robert wasn’t prepared to process them living in three places. He nodded his head, let loose of Belinda’s hand, and stepped back until he was beside his dad. Robert took Mark’s hand in his and looked east to the horizon. He was clearly unsettled but didn’t want to spoil anyone’s fun by speaking about his disquiet.

The next two days were repeats of the first. The weather was perfect for playing in the ocean, lying on the beach, and taking long walks. The kids interacted like siblings. Dan checked Clay’s arm each day to make sure that it was okay. They also did a tan line check where they would turn down the edge of their swimsuits to see who had the darkest tan. Dan made sure that Belinda or Robert won each day. Joe was always the loser; his red hair and white skin did not lend itself to tanning. They ate seafood each night while trying the different restaurants. All of the waitresses complimented Mark and Dan on the behavior of their children. There was an assumption that the gay couple had three children. The kids would call to Uncle Joe and Uncle Thomas, and the staff assumed they were Mark’s uncles. Belinda and Clay ate off each other’s plates. Robert was rather more protective of his food and did not share it with anyone. After lunch on Monday, Mark packed the truck to head east. Clay asked if he could ride back with Uncle Mark and Uncle Dr. Dan. Joe agreed. Then Robert said he wanted to ride back with his Uncle Joe.

The drive back was long and tedious. Belinda and Clay cuddled in the second seat and were asleep by the time they crossed the Alligator River Bridge. Dan related to Mark the conversation with the kids about the houses in Paris and Algiers. Dan noticed that Mark tensed. He nodded his head but didn’t say anything. Dan didn’t want to spoil the mood after what had been a magical weekend at the beach, so he changed the subject. Mark relaxed, and they spoke of the wonderful fresh seafood they had eaten and how everyone thought the three children were theirs. Dan undid his seat-belt and laid on the front seat with his head in Mark’s lap. Mark heard Dan lightly snoring as he ran his fingers through his lover’s hair. He was at peace and realized that he loved Dan.

They returned to Hillsborough, and life continued apace. On Tuesday morning, Mark dropped Dan at the hospital as he headed to his office.

“See you at dinnertime. I think I am going to be overwhelmed at the hospital after being gone for three days.”

Dan leaned over and kissed Mark on the mouth. They said the words at the same time: “I love you.” They both burst into laughter. Dan stood on the sidewalk with an enigmatic look on his face as Mark pulled into the traffic.

On Friday night, Robert asked where they were going on Saturday.

How about New Bern? We can tour the historic Tryon Palace. They enjoyed their day in the “New Bear” city. There were bear sculptures all over the town. Again, everyone treated them as a family. They couldn’t remember the name of the restaurant where they ate lunch; they knew the building was on a corner and that the dining room was upstairs. The waiter was over-attentive to Dan, which annoyed Mark. Dan treated it as his due; the waiter deferred to him since he ordered for each of them. Dan’s role had become their routine: Dan would ask each person what they wanted to eat, then he would make suggestions, and then place an order for the table. Dan was sensitive to Robert being less agreeable to a table of shared food and generally ordered him a meal. Even when Mark paid the bill, he would pull out his credit card and hand it to Dan. Maybe, Mark was more sensitive that day because he had seen Dan kiss a man outside the entrance to the medical offices as they were leaving the day before. It was a kiss on the cheeks, but it was still a kiss. Dan had waved at the man as he climbed into Mark’s truck. Dan then kissed Mark on the lips with the same lips he had used to kiss another man. Mark knew he was being ridiculous because people only had one set of lips. He fought the urge to reach up and wipe his mouth. Dan knew that something had upset Mark, but he had grown accustomed to Mark’s peccadillos and chose not to escalate something that would clear up on its own.

After leaving the restaurant, Mark was still miffed at the waiter and Dan. Dan had been too gracious and agreeable to the man’s attention. If Mark had been with a woman; he felt he would have had to protect her honor. Did he need to protect Dan’s honor? Dan sensed what was bothering Mark and decided to wade into the fray by saying that the waiter had been worrisome given his level of attention. Dan didn’t really believe that but thought the waiter’s attention was the crux of the problem and wanted to diffuse the situation.

“So, you noticed that he was almost sitting in your lap and feeding you lunch.”

“Yes, but I didn’t want to embarrass him by saying something. I knew that you would understand because you are the man I love. I chose to redirect him, but he wasn’t good at taking hints. I am so glad that you aren’t the jealous type when highly testosteroneed boys are out of control.”

Dan didn’t mention that the waiter had slipped him a note with a telephone number.

All of the steam was taken out of the argument, so Mark smiled and relaxed. They enjoyed the drive back to Hillsborough, stopping in Raleigh for a vegetarian dinner at the Irregardless Café. Dan loved the food and said he wanted to eat there more often. He noticed that Robert had stirred the couscous around his plate and not eaten it. Belinda asked Dan what he had ordered, and was told this was akin to the food they served in Algiers. Belinda smiled and said she loved it. Mark asked if they ever ate meat in Algiers. Dan said they ate camel at least once a week. He was smiling, and everyone knew

he was joking, or they hoped he was joking. Dan and Mark were learning each other's likes and dislikes. They found plenty to like about each other and learned to skirt the things where there was disagreement. Both weighed whether the differences were deal breakers and none were.

The last Friday afternoon in October, they left Hillsborough and drove to Asheville. Dan had secured them a large room in the original section of the Grove Park Inn. All four would be sharing the room, so Mark was stealth in trying to figure out how to make love to this man he adored. When they heard the children's breathing slow and regulate as they slept, Mark slipped his head under the covers. Dan had to put the pillow over his head to prevent his moans from being heard. Mark's moans were louder as he enjoyed making love to his partner. The next morning, they ate breakfast in the beautiful dining room. Mark had visited the Inn years before and had forgotten what a magnificent structure it was. He enjoyed describing the construction of the Inn to any willing person who would indulge his passion for construction techniques used with historic buildings. Belinda and Robert stood in one of the fireboxes in the lobby while Dan took their picture.

They packed their luggage and then drove over to the Biltmore Estate, where they spent the day. Dan was agog that such a place existed in America. He had taken many trips to tour the chateaus of France, and this would easily compete with any of them. Dan felt like he was in France, which led to moments of total despair as he realized how much he wanted the four of them to be together forever. He thought of them traveling through France and North Africa, exploring all of the sights. He wanted this time to be more than eighteen months; he wanted to live like this for the rest of his life. Mark grabbed his hand when Dan would gasp at another European artifact that had been transported across the Atlantic to end up in this house. The interior had a very French feel. How could it not: Napoleon's chess set was on a table. Limoges china was in the cabinets. The style was of the grand chateaus of France. Belinda acted as if she were the chatelaine of the house. Robert loved the lower level and felt perfectly at home as they toured the vineyards.

They ate lunch at the Stable Café. Robert enjoyed the café, thinking that was where the horses and carriages were maintained and where the real men who worked the farm would hang out. He had grown bored looking through the chateau; this was more his style.

It was practically dark when they pulled out of the long drive of the chateau to head east. Mark said they had to get home because he and Dan had to sing in the morning. Both kids were buckled into the back seat as they went through the McDonald's drive-through. Dan was unhappy about the food choice, but he had asked the kids what they wanted to eat. He knew that when he asked the question, he had to honor the response. Dan had ordered a salad and picked at it while feeding Mark a double cheeseburger, fries, and large sweet tea. Mark told Dan he could take a bite, which elicited a look of horror on Dan's face. Mark laughed at him. Mark insisted that he needed to drive while they ate. It was a long drive from Asheville to Hillsborough. Quietness pervaded the truck. Dan turned and saw that both kids were asleep. He collected their food wrappings and put them in a trash bag. He then reached over and held Mark's hand. It was an enjoyable weekend, and Dan had even made a few more inroads with Robert. The changes were incremental, but Dan knew that was how he would win over the boy. Bit by bit.

Belinda was the first to awaken and told her daddy that she needed to use a restroom. Mark saw a rest area sign and said to her that in five miles, they would stop. Mark asked Belinda to awaken Robert so they could all go in at one time. Mark pulled in, Belinda undid her seat belt, jumped from

the truck and ran to the restroom. Mark was right behind, chasing her on the sidewalk. Robert took off on a leisurely walk. Dan cleaned all of the trash out of the truck. He then went to the restroom. When he came out, Mark and the kids were standing at vending machines. They had done damage to Mark's wallet as they all had sweets and drinks. Dan inwardly groaned. He turned down the offer when Mark asked him if he wanted anything. Mark was holding a cup of some hot brown liquid that he called coffee. Dan knew that Mark didn't understand how great coffee could be. Coffee from a vending machine was pure slop and undrinkable.

After everyone buckled themselves in, Mark put the truck into gear, and they continued up the interstate. Soft music was playing on the radio, and Dan was getting amorous. He slid across the seat, smiled at Mark, and then slid his hands up Mark's thigh to his crotch. Mark caught his breath and then grinned. A zipper was lowered, and Dan's ministrations did not take long. Luckily there were napkins left from dinner. Mark was no longer anxious in his driving, and a smile took up a permanent position on his face as they passed through Greensboro. Another hour and they would be home.

Home. Dan now considered the Mill House his home though he maintained the lease on the studio apartment in Durham. He went by to pick up his mail and kept clothes there but spent most of his time at the Mill House.

After returning from Asheville, Mark professed his love to Dan after dinner that Sunday night. Sure, they had said, "I love you," to each other when greeting each other, but Mark knew that he was deeply in love. Mark had taken Dan to the Fearington House in Pittsboro for dinner. They dressed for dinner; Mark even wore a tie. Mark was nervous as they drove to the restaurant. The menu was ever-changing, depending on what was seasonally available from their local sources, so as usual, Mark asked Dan to order their meal. Dan ordered items for them to share; there were a variety of small plates on the table. The waitress explained how the chef prepared each dish. She would lean over Mark when she would put a plate on the table. Her breasts would brush against Mark's back and shoulder. Dan chuckled and Mark blushed. Finally, the waitress understood that she didn't stand a chance with these handsome gentlemen. The atmosphere in the restaurant was gracious and unhurried. After they finished eating, Mark ordered coffee and a split of champagne. Dan gave him a questioning look.

Mark reached across the table to take Dan's hand. The champagne was uncorked, and the glasses were filled. Mark raised his in a salute to Dan.

"I love you. There, I said it. I love you." Mark then started laughing.

Dan's eyes glistened.

"I love you, too."

"Good. Now we can talk about the future. I am still an absolute mess, but it seems that life is leveling out. I still have that upcoming court hearing about the kids, but I don't see any stumbling blocks. There has been no indication that there will be any problem with the court case ending and me moving on with my life. I want to start thinking of us as a family."

Dan could only nod his head in agreement. His eyes were pools of reflected love.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I don’t want to spoil a marvelous evening by blubbering at the table. I love you, Mark Harden, and always will. I want us to raise the children together. We can create a marvelous life. We have some hurdles to cross, but I think we can make this happen.”

They both stood, knowing if they continued to sit at the table, they would both be crying tears of joy. People around them had smiles on their faces.

They drove to the Mill House, and for the first time, Mark asked Dan to take him. Dan said he had never done that before, but Mark promised to coach him and that it would be fantastic for both of them. Dan’s breath caught several times as he made love to Mark. He couldn’t believe the responsiveness of Mark in this position. In every way, Mark was in control, and Dan gladly did what Mark asked. They were both moaning when Dan fell onto Mark’s sweat-covered hairy chest. Never had Dan felt so close to another person.

“I never knew that lovemaking could be like that.”

Mark kissed Dan sensuously on the mouth.

“You were perfect and gave everything. You are my love.”

Both men wrapped their arms around each other and fell into a deep, contented sleep.

Little did they know that their world would be upended the next day.

21. Millie Tilley

September 2019

Monday Morning

“Mr. Harden, I am sorry to bother you at work, but it is rather important that we meet today.”

“Ms. Tilley, of course. Is there a problem?”

“There are things we should discuss.”

“Should I have my attorney present?”

“It is not required since it involves my role as *guardian ad litem* for your children, but if you would feel more comfortable with him present, then I cannot forbid you to have counsel present.” She was actually hoping that Mark would bring his attorney, but she could not say that to him.

Mark instinctively knew he needed his attorney present. They agreed on a time pending the availability of Evan Glynfell, Esq. When Mark called his attorney, it turned out that he already knew of the situation.

“Mr. Parkinson sent photographs to the court this morning of your children on a float in a gay pride parade in Durham. There are also pictures of you with Father Raverly and his husband. There are pictures of Belinda standing on church steps shaking a man’s hand. Belinda is dressed as a girl.” Mark gave a deep intake of breath. “There are pictures of you with another man where he is kissing your hand. Then there is a picture of you kissing him in a parking lot. There is a photo of you and the same man wrestling in the surf. The man appears naked. There is also a picture of you and this same man climbing into the back of a pickup truck, allegedly to have sex. The background is fuzzy, so I can’t tell where it was taken. Your parents are requesting a review of the case and immediate transfer of custody of the children to them.”

“We weren’t having sex in the truck!”

“That is what your family is alleging.”

“Why did Ms. Tilley call me first? Why hadn’t you called?”

“I received copies of the photographs and court paperwork just a few minutes ago. The Judge has called for a hearing on Friday to determine whether to revoke or amend his original orders. Ms. Tilley will make a decision today on whether to ask the Judge for immediate removal of the children from your care.”

“Fuck, this is ridiculous. This is a fucking nightmare. I don’t fucking believe it. Fuck them. FUCK THEM.” Mark knew he was screaming through the telephone line, but he couldn’t help himself.

There was silence from the attorney. He let Mark calm.

“Mark, I can make myself available any time today.”

The men agreed on a time and Evan said he would call Ms. Tilley to let her know. The attorney did not trust that his client could have a productive conversation with the *guardian ad litem* at that moment.

Mark broke down and cried. He cried like he hadn't wept in many years. He was alone in his office and put his head down on his desk. After his body finally stopped shaking, Mark built up a fiery determination that no one was taking his children even if he had to leave the country. He decided that he, Dan, and the kids would flee to Algiers. He realized that his children did not have passports. Mark would get them immediately and pay whatever was required, so they were processed quickly. Hell, he would drive to wherever if it meant they could be had immediately. He needed to be ready. Mark was prepared to leave Hillsborough and everything he knew in life if it meant protecting his children. Mark called Dan and told him that something had come up and he couldn't pick him up after work. He said he would see him on Tuesday. When Dan pressed, Mark lied and said it was something to do with work, and they would talk later. It was the first time that Mark had outright lied to Dan. Mark hoped that Dan remembered that the children were first in his life. No matter what had been said or even done the night before, the children were first.

Late in the afternoon, Mark and Evan met at the Mill House before they went to the Office of Family Services. Mark had arranged for Joe to look after the kids. Thomas had offered to go with them, but Evan thought it might be counter-productive since there were pictures of Thomas and Joe walking in the Gay Pride Parade and kissing.

Millie Tilley was greatly disturbed while reviewing the materials on her desk. She wasn't upset at seeing the images. Rather, she was upset that the same thing could have happened to her and her partner. They had planned to get married, but Evelyn had cautioned her that it might end Millie's career as an officer of the court where she served as *guardian ad litem*. They had raised Evelyn's daughter and couldn't imagine the court taking Emilie away from them. Millie saw the love in the pictures. That, however, couldn't factor into her decision. She had to focus on what was best for the children. She knew the answer to that question but didn't know if an independent review panel would agree with her. Being a closet lesbian could be such a problem at times. She wanted to bust down the closet door and let it fly where it may. Evelyn had a good job and they could live off of her income. However, Millie had a solid reputation in the legal community, and she wanted to maintain her position. She loved her job helping children.

Her intercom buzzed and she was told that Messrs. Glynfell and Harden were present. Millie decided to meet with them in her office instead of the conference room. She wanted them to be as relaxed as possible. There was a knock at her door and a secretary escorted the two men into her office. She asked them to sit on the sofa while she pulled up a chair. She wanted it to be an informal conversation. She needed Mark to be honest but not too honest. If she could, she would offer that she understood his situation, but that also had the potential to backfire in the courtroom. She had to remain neutral about Mark and look out for the best interests of the children.

Evan had prepared Mark by showing him the pictures. He cautioned Mark about over-reacting to the photographs in front of Ms. Tilley. Mark was incensed that a photographer was stalking him. He knew who was paying for the pictures.

“Be neutral as if these are the most natural images in the world. You are supporting your children in this photograph. Both Thomas and Joe were cleared after the investigation into their background. In fact, they were seen as exemplary role models in Philadelphia. They now have a foster child. Now explain what is happening in these other photographs.” Evan worked with Mark until he had rationale, non-emotional explanations that didn’t sound either defensive or aggressive. Mark could give context to each of the photos. The men were as prepared as they could be on such short notice.

Ms. Tilley put the pictures on the table in front of the sofa. Mark started shaking. Evan reached out and told him it was all okay and for him to be relaxed and explain what was happening in each photograph. Ms. Tilley reiterated what the attorney said.

“This isn’t court, Mr. Harden. The plaintiffs have filed a motion. Judge Woodward asked that I follow up to determine what our next steps should be.”

Mark sat back and thought of negotiating with clients in his job. He decided to take the same approach. He then displayed a professional demeanor that was a surprise to both the guardian and his attorney. He was no longer the distraught father but a surprisingly strong advocate of his role and the decisions he had made. Mark had squared his shoulders, had a look of determination in his eyes, and stayed on topic. He gave the necessary information without babbling on incoherently.

Ms. Tilley was at a loss. She was used to dealing with highly dysfunctional parents, not someone who was so articulate and convincing. Under usual circumstances, she knew the decision she would make but this was not a typical case. Justice wasn’t always blind, especially in small rural communities. Both Mr. Glynfell and Mark were looking at her. She wasn’t backed into a corner because she had more power than either of them, but she wanted to be strategic in a way that leveled the playing field.

“There is only one thing that is bothering me. You are now dating a man, not that the court will necessarily count that as a deficit, but why are you dating a man right now? I assumed that you were straight.”

“I am dating Dan. He happens to be a man. That probably doesn’t make sense to most people, and I am not sure it makes sense to me. Why now? It just happened that we met at the University and we hit it off. If this is going to be a problem, I will stop dating him. My children are first. Always.”

Ms. Tilley was trying to figure out how to respond. The silence grew uncomfortable to Mark. Evan was used to such silences in court. She approached Mark from a lateral direction.

“What do the children think of Dan?”

Mark hesitated. He knew Belinda loved Dan but wasn’t sure about Robert’s thinking on any given day.

“They don’t know him very well. I don’t know. Like I said, if this is a problem, I will stop dating him.”

“The court has these pictures and the Judge is looking to decide custody. Your parents are asking that the children be removed immediately. If you were me, how would you respond?”

The meeting finally got to Mark. He burst out crying.

“Don’t take my children. Please don’t take my children. They are all I have.”

Mr. Glynfell and Ms. Tilley saw the man emotionally crumble in their midst. Ms. Tilley said she was going to get them something to drink, and pointed out the restroom to Mark. She was gone for ten minutes. Drinks were distributed and Ms. Tilley checked to make sure Mark was okay to continue.

“I have been thinking. I would like to talk with your children. Today. I need to know their thoughts. Where are they this afternoon?”

“They are home with Joe.”

“You have a choice. I can do the interviews here in my office or at your house. Which would you prefer?”

Mr. Glynfell suggested Ms. Tilley’s office, but Mark looked deep into Ms. Tilley’s eyes and knew the answer.

“At our home. They are most comfortable there.”

Ms. Tilley smiled. She knew he had nothing to hide.

When Mr. Glynfell and Mark pulled up in the drive, Belinda and Robert came running from the house, grabbed their dad, and gave him a hug. Ms. Tilley said she would like to talk with the children separately and then together. She asked which one wanted to go first. Of course, Belinda liked to be first in all things.

Belinda led Ms. Tilley to the riverfront where they sat on the bank and talked. Robert was really pensive. He asked his dad what he was going to be asked. Mark said he wasn’t sure but said it was probably about their home, their relationship, and whether Robert wanted to stay with him.

“Is she going to ask me about Dan?”

Mark was taken aback.

“Possibly, probably. Is there something we need to talk about?”

“If I tell her I don’t like you dating Dan, what will happen?”

Mark caught his breath at the depth of Robert’s anxiety. He was so caught up with Dan; he hadn’t fully considered how his son would react in this situation.

“Robert, if you don’t want me to date Dan or if you don’t like Dan, we should have that conversation. I would like for that talk to be between the two of us and not with Ms. Tilley. I cannot

forbid you from talking to her about that. Can this be between us until we get everything figured out?”

Robert nodded his head but would not look at his dad. At that moment, Belinda came up and said that Robert was needed. It took everything in Mark not to ask Belinda about the conversation; he didn't have to worry. Belinda told him everything that had been said, including the questions about Dan.

When Robert returned to get Belinda, he wouldn't look at Mark. Finally, Belinda and Robert were returning hand in hand with Ms. Tilley. She was also carrying her shoes. She said Belinda insisted they stand in the river while having the conversation. It was something about still waters running deep.

Ms. Tilley asked Mr. Glynfell to join her at her vehicle for a minute. She told him that she was not removing the children that day, but there would be a court hearing on Friday morning, and he should prepare his client for a rigorous attack. Ms. Tilley went back and explained to Mark that she would ask the Judge to issue an order in an hour that the children could stay with him temporarily and that there would be a court hearing on Friday. She stated that the children needed to be in attendance at the hearing. She asked Mark if he needed a subpoena issued to get time off from work. Mark told her if one was needed, he would let Mr. Glynfell know. After Ms. Tilley left, Joe suggested that he fire up the grill. Mr. Glynfell said he needed to go but would be in touch the next day.

“We need to prepare for the hearing on Friday. I think that we have been too reactionary, and maybe it is time for us to go on the offense. Let me think about this. It is a tricky situation, but if I can get you to testify to the Judge the way you spoke with Ms. Tilley, I think it will be a done deal. It is finding the right combination of being self-assured and forthright without coming across as arrogant.”

That night when Dan called, Mark didn't talk about what had happened that day. Instead, Mark asked Dan about the house in Algiers and whether they could all take a vacation to Algeria. Dan was over the moon with happiness. He didn't know Mark's ulterior motive. Mark went online and read the requirements for passports and downloaded the documents and started the process. He would drive to vital records the next day to get birth certificates for his children. Mark wasn't sure if he was being tailed all of the time and thought he would get Joe to take the children to Sam's Club to get their passport pictures taken. It would look like a regular shopping trip. Joe said he would also take Clay to raise fewer suspicions and have Thomas take the application package to the post office. Mark didn't want his parents to know what he was doing.

On Tuesday morning, Mark felt sure of his plan. He thought of his workplace mantra: plan the work, work the plan. He was actually happy after talking with Dan about traveling to Algiers. He was sitting in his office when his boss walked in and closed the door. Mike asked if they could speak. Mark knew that the question was rhetorical. Mike pulled out a folder and placed it on Mark's desk. He opened it and Mark saw pictures of him and Dan. Mike sat and looked at Mark without saying a word. Mark decided he wasn't going to speak until Mike asked something. Finally, Mike asked about the pictures taken on the Duke campus. He wanted to know who the man was that Mark was kissing. Mark explained that Dan was a doctor at the Duke Hospital and was his boyfriend. Mark called Dan his boyfriend. Admitting he had a boyfriend was a massive step for him.

“Why would I receive these pictures in my office yesterday afternoon?”

“I don’t know, Mike. Who sent them?”

“A courier delivered them as a priority package. I didn’t know you were gay. Don’t you have children?”

“Yes, I have children. I am not going to discuss my private life with you. I keep my personal life separate from my work life.”

“Except these things happened on the Duke campus. You work for Duke University. Some of these pictures look very personal. Anything that happens on campus becomes the business of the university. You are still a probationary employee, and I am concerned.”

Mark sat and didn’t say anything.

“Can you tell me anything about why I would receive a copy?”

“I am going through a rather nasty court battle where my parents are trying to take custody of my children. I think they hired a private investigator to take pictures of me. Pictures were also delivered to the Judge yesterday. I have been notified of a hearing on Friday for the Judge to let me know whether I will get to keep my children.”

At that point, Mike pulled out a picture of Mark with his two children at the Gay Pride Parade that started on the Duke campus. Mark didn’t say anything; he was waiting for Mike to ask the question which did not come.

Mark was on the verge of tears but decided he wasn’t going to give his boss the satisfaction of seeing him cry. He stared at Mike, not saying a word.

“Mark, I need for you to come with me.”

Mark knew he was being terminated. He decided he was leaving with his head held high. He would maintain his dignity. He got up from his desk, put on his jacket, and grabbed his briefcase. Mike opened the office door and led Mark down the hallway. When Mark entered Mike’s office, he saw the Director of Human Resources. He marshaled all of his inner strength for the inevitable conversation. Mike pointed to a chair for Mark to sit.

“Mike, are you satisfied with the explanation?”

Mike nodded his head at the question from the Director of Human Resources. They sat in silence.

Then Mike got up from his desk, walked across the office, took the pictures from the folder, and put them in the shredding machine.

“Mark, I have one more question. What can we do to support you and your children?”

It was at that point that Mark realized there were tears in his eyes. He wasn't used to such humanity and caring in the workplace.

"Mark, you are a new, probationary employee, but we know of your work in Hillsborough, and we were so glad when you applied to come to work here. We support our employees. Unfortunately, you don't have any accumulated vacation time. There is a provision in our employee handbook for senior managers, which allows the Division Directors to forward time to employees in emergency situations. I consider this such a situation. Mike has already made the request, and I am approving it right now. If you would like, take the rest of the week off to take care of your family business. If you identify who the Private Investigator is, please let us know because we can restrict his access to the campus. We are a private university, and we have a lot of latitude about who is on our property."

Mark could not believe what he was hearing.

"Now, let me ask the question a different way. What can we do to support you in the hearing on Friday?"

"I don't know. You would support me? How?"

The Director of Human Resources smiled.

"Give me the name of your attorney, and I will handle this."

Mark gave her the information.

"Just one more thing. We are investing in you because we believe you have a great future here. We hope that you will make us your employer for many years. We want to strengthen our relationship with such a promising star. Now go, shut down your computer, and you are off until next Monday. Be in touch if we can do anything for you and your children."

Mark couldn't believe an employer would be so supportive. When Mark left Mike's office, he heard the Director of Human Resources calling Evan.

Mark now had an even tougher call to make. Dan was in his office when the call from Mark was put through.

"Hello, lover. How are you today? Did everything get worked out?"

Mark caught his breath and told Dan what was happening, and it was best for Dan to stay in his apartment for the week. Dan disagreed, but Mark brooked no further discussion.

On Wednesday afternoon, Evan telephoned Mark with exciting news. Millie Tilley's report to Judge Woodward had just been forwarded to him by the Clerk of the Court. Ms. Tilley was recommending that Mark maintain custody of his children and that the Judge enter an order to end this time of review and examination. She recommended to the Judge that the lawsuit that Mark's parents brought for custody be denied. She suggested this be her final report in the case and that the children did not need a *Guardian Ad Litem* any longer.

On Thursday afternoon, Evan called again and said he had more good news. A Vice-President at Duke University who oversaw the division where Mark worked had sent Judge Woodward a letter supporting Mark. Mark did not realize that the Director of Human Resources was also a University Vice President. The letter suggested the university was looking into the work of the Private Investigator who was taking pictures of employees on campus. They had identified the Private Investigator and determined that he was not licensed in the state. The university was getting a court order banning the man from their campus; if he was found on campus, he would be arrested, and the university would proceed with a lawsuit.

Mark and the kids had dinner with Thomas and Joe that Thursday night. After they finished eating supper, Robert, Belinda, and Clay went into the field in front of the house to play hide-and-seek. Mark explained what he knew thus far. Thomas listened to everything being said. Joe was thrilled and said it was a slam-dunk. Thomas was more thoughtful and suggested that ‘pride goeth before a fall.’

“Don’t think this is all so neatly wrapped up, Mark. It is not over until it is over. There is still a court hearing tomorrow, and it could be brutal after observing your father’s tactics. Be careful.” Thomas looked at Mark before speaking again.

“What have you told Dan?”

“Dan and I had a conversation on Tuesday. This problem is mine to deal with; he will just have to adjust his expectations.”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but he is seeking spiritual counseling because he is so distraught. That is a safer avenue than mental health counseling, which would show up in his employee record. He is a mess right now. He has taken leave from the hospital. He doesn’t understand what is happening and why you won’t take his calls.”

Mark was infuriated.

“How dare he go to other people about my problems. I didn’t ask him to do that?”

“Mark, he is having a problem also. He loves you. Do you love him?”

Mark cried out and said his happiness didn’t matter. What mattered was whether he kept his children. He looked at them and said that every time in his life when he found happiness, something came along to ruin it.

Mark jumped out of his chair and walked to the back door. He slammed the screen door as he called his children to go home immediately. They started to object, and Mark screamed that he wasn’t going to tell them a second time.

Thomas and Joe stood at the door and looked at each other. Joe then went into the field to pick up Clay. Clay was shaking and couldn’t move. Clay had never heard Mark scream at him, Belinda, and Robert. When Joe asked Clay if he was okay, but the child couldn’t speak, he was shaking so hard. Joe wrapped Clay in his strong arms and told him that he was loved. Joe bathed Clay and sat on

his bed until he finally fell asleep. Clay kept whimpering and asking what he had done wrong. Joe thought all of the progress with Clay's socialization up to that day had just evaporated.

The next morning, Mark got his children dressed for court. Thomas and Joe said they were going to take care of the children during the hearing and support Mark. Joe had called and asked Kathy, who typically took care of Robert and Belinda if she would care for Clay that morning. She agreed.

Witnesses were lined up in the hallway outside of the courtroom. The Judge had compressed the timeline on the case because of the allegations inherent in the photographs, and asked that all witnesses be available. Dr. Bradford had caught a red-eye flight from San Francisco and was at the courthouse. She was testifying on behalf of the Center for Transgender Studies. Mark had the doctors from Chapel Hill on standby and would call them with an hour's notice to appear.

Evan had rehearsed and reviewed testimony with Mark until he felt his client was comfortable. Evan had another attorney practice cross-examination with Mark. Mark failed miserably; he was either defensive or aggressive with each response. The attorney worked with Mark late into Wednesday night on how to appropriately answer questions no matter how nasty and vicious they might be. It had been a rush job preparing Mark, but Evan knew not to ask for a postponement of the court date; it was clear the Judge probably wouldn't grant such a request anyway.

They were standing in the foyer outside of the courtroom when Dan walked in. Mark could barely breathe when he saw Dan, who was dressed in a black suit with a red silk tie. Mark had not seen Dan since Monday morning after their dinner at the Fearington House Restaurant. After they had expressed their love in both word and deed. After Mark did not want to separate from Dan as they went their separate ways on Monday morning. After he told Dan he couldn't see him all week. After not taking Dan's telephone calls. Yet, Dan came to support him. Dan looked devastated but put on his best face. He kissed Belinda and shook hands with Robert.

Dan had come to the courthouse on the off chance he was needed to testify. He didn't understand the American judicial system, but he understood that he needed to be there for Mark. Dan was dismayed when he found out he was not allowed in the courtroom, but choked back his feelings and said he would stay with Belinda and Robert.

As everyone was filing into the courtroom, Dan walked up to Mark, looked him in his eyes, told Mark he would always love him, and then kissed Mark on the mouth. Mark returned Dan's kiss and wrapped his arms around his lover. Mark Senior had a melt-down, screamed, and called them perverts. Big Mark then recognized Dan and screamed that he was going to kill him. Berta was crying. Faith was exclaiming that faggots should not be raising children. The Rev. Johnson was calling out for Jesus to smite the sinners. When they all assembled for the start of the hearing, they saw that Ms. Tilley had been sitting in the back of the courtroom. She had seen and heard everything but said nothing.

Thomas had been right with his astute advice. Judge Woodward constantly had to use his gavel to restore order in the courtroom. At one point, he threatened to find Mr. Parkinson in contempt of court. Mr. Glynfell sat with a bemused look on his face when his counterpart was called down by the Judge. He got his comeuppance before the day was over. The Judge was keeping strict control of the attorneys and the testimony from all parties. He grew increasingly severe as the day progressed.

The testimony was brutal, with each side digging into witnesses. Mark was thankful he had spent the week going through grueling hours of preparation. Judge Woodward had not seen such open animosity in his courtroom for a long time. Mark's attorney went on the offensive for his client; Mark was astounded at some of the information that his attorney elicited through aggressive questioning of witnesses. At times, Mark thought it was open warfare. Mr. Glynfell had heeded Miss Tilley's words of warning. The court broke for lunch, and Joe suggested they go to James' Pharmacy for some seafood. When Mark walked out of the courtroom, Dan was waiting and hugged him. Mr. Glynfell felt the trial was going in their favor but knew that things could turn on a dime. Mark was to testify when they returned after lunch, so he only ate a sandwich. He didn't want to hurl as he was testifying.

Joe asked if Mark wanted him and Thomas to take the kids home since the Judge had met with them earlier in the day. Belinda was adamant she was staying, and Robert followed his sister's lead. Joe called Kathy and confirmed that she would keep Clay for the afternoon. They went back to the courthouse, and Mark said he felt prepared. Mr. Glynfell shepherded Mark through all of the testimony so he could tell his story and the story of his children. When he finished, Mr. Glynfell asked the Judge to grant a short recess before cross-examination. The Judge called the attorneys to the bench and had a brief discussion with them. He was not happy but granted a ten-minute break. He knew ten minutes typically turned into 20-30 minutes. Mark and his attorney walked into the vestibule and found Mark's children, Thomas, Joe, and Dan. Mr. Glynfell asked that they pray for Mark and his testimony. He knew his client was ratcheted up, and unless he decompressed, he would explode on the stand. Dan put his arms around Mark. Thomas put his hand on Mark's shoulders, and Belinda took his hands. Thomas prayed, and then Belinda spoke.

"I bless you, daddy. You will say the right thing. You are a blessed child of God. God will speak for you today. Let God talk."

She then hugged her daddy. All of the tension that Mark had been carrying suddenly disappeared. He squared his shoulders, hugged his children, kissed Dan, and then walked back into the courtroom. The prayer and blessing had taken six minutes. When the Judge reentered the courtroom, he was surprised to find everyone ready.

Mark was centered and ready for the questions thrown his way. He was the perfect witness. No matter how much Mr. Parkinson prodded and poked, cajoled or sneered, Mark answered in a smooth, calm voice. He looked at the Judge or Ms. Tilley when answering. Mark even looked at his parents and sister. They wouldn't look him in the eye. Question after question was asked trying to trip him up, but he answered succinctly and honestly. Mark had even disclosed that Dan was his boyfriend. The ease with which he said that surprised Mr. Parkinson. The lawyer expected Mark to balk at the question. Instead, Mark looked at his parents when he confirmed that Dr. Daniel Lillie was his boyfriend. The sky did not fall. The roof of the courthouse did not collapse. Rev. Johnson was shaken to his core that a homosexual would so openly confess to that abomination in a courtroom. He wondered if those people had any shame.

The final witness was Ms. Tilley. She essentially read her report into the court record. She then answered questions from the attorneys. Mr. Parkinson's questions bordered on the rude and inappropriate. The Judge warned him about court protocol. Mr. Parkinson knew he was losing the case; he would toss a couple of softball questions and then would wind up the questions again before

the Judge would gavel him down. It was late afternoon when the Judge asked if there were any further witnesses.

Mr. Glynfell said he had no further witnesses unless the Judge wanted to hear directly from Joyce Jones, the Vice President of Human Resources, who had written the letter on behalf of the university. Mr. Parkinson said he would like to examine Ms. Jones.

“If you wanted her to testify, why didn’t you subpoena her earlier, Mr. Parkinson?”

“I thought the time had passed to subpoena witnesses, your honor.”

“Did you ask?”

Mr. Parkinson knew he had shot himself in the foot.

Mr. Glynfell could only see the upside to Ms. Jones's testimony and said he had no objection since he offered up her availability. Judge Woodward was growing crankier as each minute passed.

Ms. Jones made quick dispatch of her testimony even when Mr. Parkinson tried to get the upper hand. Ms. Jones had testified in many cases and knew her way around court hearings and desperate attorneys.

The Judge said it was fortunate that he had taken time mid-morning to interview the children as the other testimony took longer than expected – parts of it being meaningless in a court of law. He reminded legal counsel that this wasn’t a church revival tent meeting. He also said he used his gavel more in that one day than he normally would have used it in a week or a month. He said he had lost count of the number of times he had to bring the attorneys under control. He was not happy. He said it was late in the day, but he would render a decision before they left for the weekend. He asked that everyone reconvene in thirty minutes.

Evan led Mark into the foyer where the children were waiting. Both Robert and Belinda were sleeping in the laps of Joe and Thomas. Mark moved away from them, saying he didn’t want to awaken the children. He whispered to Joe that it shouldn’t be much longer, and then they would go out for dinner. Ms. Jones hugged Mark and told him she was leaving. She wished him well and wanted a full report on Monday. Dan gave Mark a hug and kiss before Mark disappeared back into the courtroom with his attorney.

“All rise.”

After being seated, Judge Woodward took a few moments and looked at the parties in the case. It was not a friendly or happy look; he appeared very angry.

“It has been a long day, so let me proceed expeditiously. If counsel on either side interrupts, I promise we will meet in my chambers tonight, a Friday night when my wife expects me to take her out to dinner. Gentlemen, you do not want to tangle with my wife.”

“Now, Mr. Harden, Jr. It appears that you have settled into your new job very well. It is highly unusual for an employer to go to the lengths that yours has today. You should be proud and humbled

by that. The reports from your professors are quite good. There is a letter from the Dean at the University Chapel detailing your spiritual life at Duke. It appears that your professional life, school life, and spiritual life are above reproach. The doctors spoke of your attentive nature regarding the care you and your children are receiving. I am pleased to hear that.”

The Judge paused and looked at his notes.

“I am not so happy, however, with your personal life, and this is critical in this case. You appear to be acting like a schoolboy. Was it so hard for you to keep your personal life together for thirty days? Haven’t your children been through enough changes recently without you deciding to go on a dating spree? And not only to date, but to date a man? I am not criticizing you if you are gay, but apparently, this is new information to others, and you alluded that this is new even to yourself. Is this going to be a regular pattern where you bring men into your home? What does that behavior signify to your children? Have you considered that? What is your message of not only being a promiscuous man but you then parade these men in front of your young children after a night sleeping together in your house? What are you thinking? Are you considering them? Is your home even a safe place for them to live? You even put your children on a float and paraded them with a bunch of men dressed as women through the streets of Durham. I am incredibly unhappy. You knew that the court had you under scrutiny for thirty days, but your hormones or testosterone or whatever it was, grabbed hold of you, and you decided that was more important than your children. I do not understand.”

Big Mark, Berta, and Faith were smirking as the Judge was talking. They felt that Ralph Parkinson had earned every cent of his exorbitant fees for representing them.

“I will tell you, Mr. Harden, Jr., that it is because of Ms. Tilley’s report that I have had to reconsider some of my thinking in this case. You may have fooled her, but you haven’t fooled me, young man. She and I don’t always agree, but there is a significant difference in our positions that I would like to make clear. Your attorney already knows this. Ms. Tilley works for me, but I am the Judge, and therefore I make the decisions.”

The Judge stared at Mark, who looked back. Mark wasn’t going to back down, but he didn’t want to challenge him either. Mark was already thinking of the emergency appeal he would have Evan Glynfell file immediately after the hearing.

The Judge then turned to the senior Hardens and their daughter.

“You have gotten your pound of flesh. Are you not satisfied until you suck the blood from your son’s body also? You took his job, you took his house, you tried to take away his dignity with these photographs, and you have continued to try to take his children. You claim rights as grandparents, but this is still a fairly new legal area without a lot of case law in this state. Grandparents have to show a compelling reason why they should have contact when a parent tries to stop that contact. Will you not be satisfied until you get control of Mr. Harden’s children, and he has no course but to end his own life? You heard him say if he didn’t have his children, he had no reason to live. Will you be satisfied then?”

The Judge stared at them.

“What parent does this to a child they profess to love? You said on the stand today that you loved your son. You said you loved your child, but you hated his sin. You said you were taking these actions because of his sin. My court is not an ecclesiastical court. You are in the wrong venue for that argument. We are not here to judge religious sin but rather to follow the laws of the State of North Carolina. I am sure that your attorney advised you on the difference between the two, but I have to question whether that message was understood. I also have to question your attorney’s competence in this area. What is your next step? Wiretapping? Drone surveillance? You have already employed a person who was nothing more than a spy. To what depths are you willing to go to destroy your son and your grandchildren? It was apparent in the interviews I had with the children that they love and adore their father. I believe it is safe to say that to separate them would not only destroy your son, but it would effectively kill your grandchildren. Would you be happy if your grandchildren were also dead? To what end are you willing to go?”

The Hardens were now looking at the tabletop, and all smirks were gone.

“I see some horrific cases in this court. It is an unfortunate aspect of what comes through these doors. My job is to work with families, the courts, law enforcement, schools, family services, and others to try to craft some type of solution for the safety of children. I have tried that with this case. I am disgusted, just outright disgusted, that a privileged family with money, prestige, property, employment, education, and name recognition in the community would bring such a case to this court. You have wasted the time of this court through your prejudice, hate, and pettiness. I have a responsibility to administer justice consistent with the law, and I am trying my darndest to do that today.”

The Judge took a deep breath while looking down at his papers.

“Mr. Harden, Jr., would you please stand.”

Mr. Glynfell assisted Mark as he tried to stand. Mark’s legs were like jelly. Already his eyes were filled with tears.

“Mr. Harden, Jr., it is the order of this court that you retain custody of your children for the next thirty days. The court petition of Mr. and Mrs. Harden, Sr. to obtain custody, is denied. That case is closed and will not be re-adjudicated in my court. However, I have just entered an order that you are to appear here in thirty days for the court to determine whether the state will assume custody of your children at that time. To schedule another hearing is an unusual step, but you led us down this pathway, and I cannot ignore it. Young man, you need to be prepared to show the court that you are capable of being a father who has the best interests of his children at heart. Excuse my vulgarity, but you need to think with your mind and not your penis.”

“Ms. Tilley will maintain her role as *Guardian ad Litem*. You will report to her twice a week about your family activities, more specifically your activities. I will meet with her regarding a list of items I want to be reported weekly. If your actions raise concerns, I will immediately order the children to be taken into state custody while we sort through the particulars. Understand when I say immediately, I will send deputies to remove them wherever they are. They will be in state custody, and you will have to fight to get them back or even to see them.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Harden, Sr. and Mrs. Hopkinson no longer have visitation rights with the children. I have ordered that a restraining order be issued to prevent them, Rev. Johnson, or anyone they hire to surveil you or to be within 100 feet of you or your children. They are not to call you, talk to you, mail you, in essence, if they try to communicate with you or the children in any way, please notify the court, and I will issue a warrant for their arrest. At Ms. Tilley’s request, I have also entered a protection order for Dr. Daniel Lillie, who was threatened in this courtroom today. Mr. Harden, Sr., you will be arrested if you violate that order. Further, you will go to prison if you harm Dr. Lillie. Both Miss Tilley and I will testify about what you said in my courtroom today, sir. I have no tolerance for such threats.”

“Mr. Harden, Jr., I hope that in thirty days, I see a reason for you to retain custody of your children and for me to end this case. It is all in your hands. You have to make decisions about your life and the lives of your children. You either make the right decision or the court will.”

“Court dismissed.” The gavel sounded like a rifle report as the Judge slammed it on the desk.

“All rise.”

Judge Woodward left the courtroom. Mark slumped in his chair. Evan Glynfell told Mark they needed to leave the courtroom. Mark looked up and saw his parents arguing with their attorney about filing an appeal.

Mark felt like he had just been diminished in a significant life-altering way while his attorney thought they had won a major legal battle. It was all a matter of perspective, but Mark knew he had to take an action that would rip out his heart – he had to tell Dan that their potential for a life together was gone. He had to say goodbye to Dan. Even worse, Mark knew that any opportunity for finding future happiness in his own life had just been ripped away. He hadn’t felt this empty and bereft since he walked away from Linda’s grave.

22. No, No, No

Fall 2019

Mark and Dan stood in front of the Mill House.

“No, No, No. Mark, we don’t have to do this. We have options. Don’t be stupid.”

“Dan, why are you saying “we”? I have to make decisions about my children. The choices are mine to make if I want to keep my children. I told you when we started dating that I would do anything and everything for them. I would deprive myself if needed so that they would be safe.”

“Mark, you are too stirred up after the day in court. We are both exhausted. Let’s talk about this later.”

“There is nothing more to say. What don’t you understand? Judge Woodward basically said I had to choose between you and my children. It was explicitly clear. Even I got it: the stupid one.”

Dan felt like he had just been slapped.

“I didn’t mean you were stupid. We love each other; we should not let the court decide what we do with our children.”

“The last I knew they were my children. You say you love me, and I believe you, but you are making assumptions about me. In fact, you are making assumptions about us being a couple. Let me be clear: there is no longer an “us,” there is only Mark and his children. There cannot be a Dan in that equation. An ocean and countries separate us. There are a judge and the courts who are separating us. I can no longer let you be in my life if I am to have my children. I am dying right now, and talking to you just makes it worse. I need you to leave. Good-bye, Dan.”

At that point, Mark walked up the steps and away from the man he loved.

He went inside his house and closed the door to the world. He then went to his bedroom and slid down the wall as he cried. Dan was right, but he couldn’t do what his boyfriend wanted. Hell, he had those very same thoughts earlier in the week and had ordered passports for his children. He had thought they could run away to Algiers. Mark realized that he deluded himself in believing that he could have a happy life. He had been childish. He was stupid, as Dan had said.

He hated that Judge Woodward had talked to him like he was a child. What did the Judge call him? A schoolboy. Mark balled his fist together and pushed them into his mouth to quieten his sobs so they wouldn’t scare the children. He had found love, and once again, love had been ripped from him. What had he done to deserve this punishment? Just as his life was going well, he was being punished again. He was destined never to have happiness in his life again. He was in so much pain he knew he could easily kill himself except he didn’t want to leave his children without a parent. They were the only reason he would fight to stay alive.

The dinner, after the day in court, had been a disaster. Evan Glynfell had excused himself, so it was Tom, Joe, Dan, the kids, and Mark in the restaurant. Mark kept evading the looks from Dan. He had even been rude when Thomas asked a question. Mark was overly attentive to his children and ignored the others at the table. He paid the bill, excused himself, and then he and the children left the restaurant. He walked the children home, one on either side. When they arrived back at the Mill House, there was a car in the driveway. Mark was startled and wondered who the fuck was there to bother him. Dan was standing outside the front door. Dan said he had rented a car because he didn't want to show up in court dressed in a suit that was sweaty after he had ridden his bicycle for twelve miles.

“It must be nice to have so much money. Houses all over the world. Rental cars whenever you want them. Fancy restaurants. Taking days off work when you want. You get to do what you want, when you want. I don't have that luxury, Mr. Rich Doctor.”

Dan told the children goodnight, said how much he loved them, and that he would see them soon. That was when he tried to have a conversation with Mark. He experienced complete mission failure. Mark was sad, angry, depressed, combative, and unable to hear anything Dan said. He acted as if all of the problems in the world were because of Dan.

Dan got into the rental car and drove to his apartment and hoped that by Sunday morning, he and Mark could have a reasoned conversation.

Mark heard knocking on his bedroom door, and Robert asked if he was okay. Mark pulled himself together enough to answer that he was fine and for them to go to bed. Belinda asked if they could come in, and Mark told her to go to bed. Again, Robert asked his daddy if he was okay, and Mark angrily screamed for them to go to bed. He then cried himself to sleep as he cowered in the corner of his room.

The next morning, at daybreak, he opened his bedroom door and couldn't walk out. His two children were in sleeping bags in front of the door. They looked like angels. He knelt down and quietly whispered that it was time to get up. He told them to get dressed because they were going hiking. He wanted to escape the house before daybreak. He quickly packed the truck, stopped at Hardee's for biscuits, juice, and coffee, and then drove west as the sun started shining in the rearview mirror. They arrived at the parking lot in the mountains, got out of the truck, and started the hike to the lake and waterfall. Mark walked in silence, and his children followed. No one spoke the entire hike. They arrived at the campsite, and Mark silently set up the tent. Robert and Belinda looked at their daddy, afraid to talk. They had never seen him like this. When Mark started to put on his swimsuit, they did the same. They followed him into the lake. There was no frivolity like the last time they were there. Robert held Belinda's hand as they waded through the water. Mark would look at them and not talk.

That night they ate some packaged protein bars for dinner before sitting at the edge of the lake looking at the stars. Neither child moved away from Mark; they didn't understand what was happening, but they knew he was not well as tears continued to run down his face. Mark was unhappy and afraid for his sanity. Finally, Belinda climbed into his lap and put her arms around his

neck and told Mark how much she loved him. Robert tucked himself under Mark's arm and put his arms around his daddy's waist. Mark was still crying. It was after they made themselves completely vulnerable to him that Mark eventually started breathing regularly. There were no more loud sighs, no more huffs or puffs, no more pacing around the campsite. There was only love between the three of them.

As on their previous camping trip, the three slept tangled together in the tent. It was early Sunday morning when they awoke. Mark stirred up instant oatmeal for breakfast. It was awful, but neither child commented. Finally, Mark spoke.

"This is awful. How are the two of you eating this mess?" He then smiled. "Come on; we are out of here."

They hiked to the truck, Mark turned the key in the ignition, and they continued to head west. They crossed into Tennessee, and Mark pulled into the parking lot of Dollywood. The three enjoyed themselves with the wonders of the amusement park. It was late afternoon when Mark realized they had to return home and be ready for school and work the next day. They ate an early dinner at a fast-food restaurant, and then he turned the truck east across the Smokey Mountains. It would be a long drive home, but Mark had no choice. He had created this mess, and he had to resolve it. When he stopped at a rest area to drain his hose, he awoke Robert and Belinda so they could also use the facilities. They bought food from the vending machines, and then Mark continued to drive. The kids were asleep. The last fifty miles were excruciating for Mark because of his fatigue.

When they pulled up in front of Mill House, Mark noticed that all of the lights were on in the Yellow House. Mark stopped the truck, picked up Belinda to carry her inside. When he went back for Robert, Joe had arrived, picked Robert up, and was carrying him to his bed. Joe never said a word as he took Robert upstairs, tucked him into bed, and walked back downstairs. Mark was standing in the doorway. Joe got tears in his eyes when he looked at Mark.

"We love you and the children so much. We were so worried that something bad had happened. Please, never do that again. Thomas has been a wreck all day. I have paced since early this morning. Clay knew something was wrong because his friends were gone, and we couldn't tell him where you were. You left yesterday. You weren't in church this morning, and nobody knew where you were. You had your phone turned off. We were so scared for you. We love you, Mark, we love you. We are not the enemy. Please remember that Thomas and I love you and the children with all of our hearts."

Mark nodded his head and closed the door as Joe started walking back to his house. He was stunned that Joe and Thomas unconditionally loved him and the children. Sure, they said they did, but Mark had not considered their feelings when he took off. To see Joe so overwrought and hurting gave Mark pause. He realized that his father had never told him that he loved him. Mark had only known love with Linda and the love he shared with his children. He had a glimpse of true love with Dan. Both Linda and Dan were gone. The thought that Joe and Thomas considered him worthy of their unconditional love was a revelation. Mark grasped that he had a treasure in his life, unlike any that he had experienced growing up with his family, and he had to figure out a way to let their love fully into his heart.

Early Monday morning was chaos. For the first time since moving, Belinda wet her bed. Robert wet his bed also, which had never happened before. Mark decided it was because they were so tired when they got home that they didn't use the toilet. He refused to consciously consider the emotional toll on his children from his behavior, though deep down, he knew that to be the true reason. They all showered, dressed, and Mark dropped them off at school before heading to the university. He was faux happy and polite to everyone. Mark met with Mike and Ms. Jones and thanked them again for their assistance, especially the letter from the university, and Ms. Jones testifying in court. When asked about the judge's decision, Mark lied and said that he was waiting for the judge's final decision. He thanked them again and said he had a lot of work to do. He realized that lies came too easily to his lips these days. Mark stayed on the east campus all day, which put him far away from the Chapel, the hospital, and Dan.

He sent an email to the choir director claiming an out-of-state family emergency, which had prevented him from giving prior notice before missing the Sunday service.

At dinner, Mark inquired about the school day. There was no warmth in his voice; it was taciturn and inquiring. Belinda and Robert looked at each other. Finally, Robert spoke and said it was okay. Mark asked if they had finished their homework. They both nodded their heads. The three sat in the great room watching television until Mark told them it was their bedtime. He tucked them in, went downstairs and wrote them a note which he placed on the dining room table, and walked out of the front door.

He stood under the stars and let the tears flow. Finally, he turned to look at the house where his children were sleeping, and he walked away. Mark took a step toward the river and stopped himself. He, instead, started walking up the driveway. He got to the end of the driveway and once again turned to look at the house. A cold chill ran down his spine. To counter the bodily chill, Mark tightened his core and stood up straight. The shivering subsided as Mark held his body rigid in the cold night air. He knew he was the liar. He had lied to himself thinking he could solve this dilemma. He was just a fucking, worthless liar. He wasn't worthy to have his wonderful children and their love. He wasn't worthy of the love from Dan. He wasn't worthy to be standing on the street looking at the house where he thought he had found love and peace. He knew what he had to do to relieve the pain. He kept walking. He knocked on the door of the Yellow House. When Thomas opened the door, he saw a man standing outside, crying, and broken.

"Help me, please."

Thomas pulled Mark into a hug, grabbed the Voodoo and Dammit Dolls, and walked him to the breakfast room. He poured Mark a slug of whisky and told him to knock it back. Mark finally chuckled and said they had the same conversation a few weeks before. He said he felt like a completely unworthy man. Thomas said he saw a smart man who knew that life's burdens were not to be borne alone. Thomas stood, reached out and pulled Mark to his feet, and then hugged him. Mark felt the pain draining away as his tears flowed down his face. Thomas refused to release his hold on the man even when Mark tried to back away. It was only when Mark totally surrendered himself to the hug, and Thomas felt Mark's body's shudder in relief that Thomas stepped back. Joe came downstairs after getting Clay settled for the night. He wasn't surprised to see Thomas holding Mark and hoped that something good could come from him being there.

Thomas poured drinks, and they went to the parlor. Mark started by telling them that he loved them, apologized for his actions, and then asked what he should do. Joe said they would address each item separately. Thomas talked about the dynamics and power of love and that we all deserved love in our lives. Joe thanked Mark for the apology and said all was forgiven. Joe was a planning expert and suggested they developed a plan for the next thirty days. Joe laid out an impersonal graphic representation of tasks to be completed. Mark understood the layout. He was an administrator and knew how to tick off boxes on a spreadsheet.

After finishing his drink, Mark thanked the men and said he needed to go home. When he opened the door of the Mill House, he saw his two children sitting at the dining room table reading the note. Belinda was about to speak when Robert put his hand over hers and simply said, "Welcome home, dad. Thank you for leaving us a note." At that point, Robert led Belinda upstairs. Mark went to bed. When he opened his bedroom door in the morning, his children were in their sleeping bags blocking his passageway.

His breath caught at the sight of his children lying there. They loved him and were trying to protect him. He shook their shoulders and told them it was time for breakfast. While they were eating their Captain Crunch, Mark said he was now okay, and they didn't have to sleep outside his door. Robert gave Belinda a look; they smiled and said they were glad that he was okay.

After checking in with his boss and suppliers, Mark closed his office door and called Milley Tilley. He was polite and asked what specific things she and the Judge wanted to know. Mark was good at creating measurable goals and helped Ms. Tilley reframe some of the amorphous ideas into measurable goals. He wanted to take the spreadsheet into court so he could show the Judge that he had met every expectation. When they finished, Mark asked Ms. Tilley if he could add supplementary measures to the spreadsheet. She was caught off-guard and asked him to explain what he meant. Mark provided a list of measures. She was taken aback at what he was proposing but then readily agreed. She chuckled to herself that she needed him when she was setting up goals with families. Mark knew how to measure what was important. After they finished the meeting, Mark hit the send button, and the list was on the way to Ms. Tilley. Each time they talked, Mark planned to pull out the spreadsheet and review each item. He expected to have a spreadsheet of checkmarks.

Mark created a spreadsheet for his life that covered the next thirty days. He wanted to be able to say what happened when. The list included everything except the time and quantity of his bowel movements. Mark even wrote out weekly menus in case questions were raised about whether the kids had proper nutrition. His level of detail equaled the schematics he used with his construction projects.

That afternoon, he had class and marked that off on his spreadsheet. He noted the time he got out of class and his arrival time at home. After reviewing the children's homework, he noted that on the sheet. Bath time, checkmark, bed, checkmark. Everything was there, and he would dare anyone to question its veracity.

When Mark awoke the next morning, he opened the bedroom door and was confronted by Robert asleep in a quilt spread across the threshold. At breakfast, he didn't have much patience when he told Robert not to sleep at his door again. The next morning, Belinda was curled up in a sleeping bag at the threshold. Mark realized that he needed help. He didn't know who to call, so he fell back to the

medical resources in Chapel Hill that were helping the family with Belinda's transition. Mark set up an appointment.

Dr. Robinson was taken by surprise when Mark broke down and told them how he was struggling. The doctor was qualified to work with transitioning families, but this was something completely different. Mark was triaged to another psychiatrist who saw him immediately. He was pleased that the doctor would see him off-hours. A series of appointments were established. Mark pulled up the spreadsheet on his tablet and entered the days and times. The psychiatrist just looked at him when Mark smiled and said he had everything entered. His behavior was about checking the boxes of the activities in his life.

That afternoon, Ms. Tilley called for a semi-weekly check-in. When she asked Mark how things were going, Mark told her that things were great, and then he directed her to the spreadsheet. He was all business as they reviewed each measure. She heard no joy in his voice. Checking the boxes was all he could conceptualize as being important.

Mark went to choir rehearsal on Wednesday night, fearful that he might see Dan. He was relieved when Dan wasn't present. Mark swore he already had an ulcer because of the knot in his stomach. Seeing Dan would probably have made him throw up.

On Thursday morning, he knew that a family meeting was necessary. Robert was sleeping in the doorway again. He didn't say anything about that as they ate breakfast, and he took them to school. His workdays were filled with meetings, inspections, and supervising site managers. He pushed and prodded them to ensure everything was completed on time. He wasn't hostile to them, but the joyous boss they had experienced earlier had disappeared. Mike met with him and asked if everything was okay. Mark showed Mike spreadsheets for the various projects and showed him that everything was either on time or ahead of schedule. It was all very business-like without a hint of emotion. Mark was the consummate project manager, except his responses lacked any warmth or humanity.

Saturday finally arrived, and Mark told the children they had yard work to finish. There was no time for a fun trip. They cleaned flower beds, put out mums in planters, and prepared the yard for winter. He was a workhorse and probably overworked the children that day. They were tired as they finished their dinner of cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, chickpeas, and grilled chicken on fried flatbread. Mark had cooked some rice and beans as an accompaniment. Dan had prepared that meal for them one day at the beach, but Dan had also made a delicious sauce that Mark didn't know how to make. When the kids asked about ice cream, he took them out for gelato. He didn't order any for himself but rather drank a glass of water.

Sunday was going to be a test. Mark arrived on time for choir rehearsal. When he looked over, he saw Dan sitting in the tenor section. Fuck. Why was he here? Wasn't he Jewish? Why was he singing in a Christian service? Fuck. Mark was on high alert and able to avoid contact with Dan until the end of the service. Dan was speaking to Belinda and the Dean. Mark stood to the side and waited for a break in the conversation, and he called over and told Belinda it was time to go. Mark had a laser focus that only looked at Belinda. He ignored the Dean and Dan.

Such was his life for the ensuing weeks. He lived by the schedule he had created. The children still slept on the floor outside his door each night, and he stopped talking about it. He spoke with Ms. Tilley twice a week. He invited her to see his home, not understanding that the well-disciplined order he had created in their world was antithetical to the warm, loving home she had witnessed before. Her interviews with the children were stilted as if they had rehearsed the responses. They did not stand in the river to talk. For their final meeting before the court hearing, Mark took Robert and Belinda to Ms. Tilley's office. She was sad to see the children safe and secure but obviously unhappy with their new world order.

Robert and Belinda also met with Judge Woodward. Mark had coached them for the interview; Mark had even told them the outcome if they failed. The children were scared. The Judge, however, was impressed with their answers. The kids responded the way that Mark had coached them. Ms. Tilley showed Judge Woodward the spreadsheet that Mark had developed. The Judge joked and suggested they should hire Mark to produce their annual reports. Every box was checked and double-checked.

The court hearing was pro-forma. Mark knew the results before he and Evan Glynfell stepped into the courtroom that day. The Judge saw a reformed man who knew how to live his life as prescribed by the courts. Ms. Tilley saw a broken man who fortunately was very high functioning despite what had been imposed on him. Thomas and Joe saw a friend and son who was barely keeping himself together for the larger world, and that was at a very high cost to himself. Robert and Belinda saw a father who had turned into a disciplinarian, who said he loved them but was very unhappy. Dan saw nothing. Mark had excluded Dan from every aspect of his life.

23. Chapel of Love

Christmas Eve 2019

Paul Merton was ill and could not sing in the quartet that was scheduled to perform for the Christmas Eve service. Mark received a telephone call earlier in the day that he was needed for an extra rehearsal with the replacement tenor. Mark had been so proud of the fact that he was singing in the quartet. He knew the Chapel was always packed for the service, and he would get to sing with three of the best singers in the choir. They had rehearsed extensively. They had the music memorized and would sing off-book. Now, there was a kerfuffle.

Preparing for the Christmas season had been crazy for Mark. His job took lots of extra time, as staff decorated each building on the campus for the holidays. Mark was on a team sent around to make sure that everyone was abiding by the fire codes. There were tough conversations when his staff had to tell people to take down decorations, live trees, and to unplug all of those extra extension cords that were connected to crock-pots filled with meatballs and other delicious foods. Everyone wanted to decorate and have a party. Mark was probably a little less sympathetic in his demeanor and responses than people expected during the holiday season. If he had his way, Christmas in 2019 would have been canceled.

There was a restoration project going on in one of the historic buildings, and Mark was on the university architectural/construction team. The contractor was rushing some of the work so the workers could take extra time for the holidays. Rushing led to errors, and it was Mark who discovered a major mistake on the fifteenth of December. Mark considered it a safety violation and shut down all work while architects, engineers, and contractors met with the Duke team. Mark received kudos from his boss for his diligence in catching the mistake. At first, the contractor took umbrage at Mark stopping the work until the issue was resolved, but after the engineers and architects had finished raking the contractor over the coals, he thanked Mark for finding the error before it was repeated and expanded, or worse, before someone had been injured or a building had burned to the ground. Mark put in a lot of overtime as it was in everyone's best interest to keep the project on schedule. His boss, Mike, knew that Mark was the right man for the job when he saw Mark not lose him cool when taking verbal abuse from the contractor. Mike thought Mark had grown tremendously in the few months he was in the job and was convinced that he had found his replacement when retirement came knocking on the door.

Leading up to Christmas, the choir had sung three performances of "Messiah," and Mark gave it his all each time. Each performance was sold out. Luckily, Mark didn't have any solos, but the rigor of singing those performances after working all day was tough. Then there was the filming of a performance of music that would be broadcast on Christmas Eve night. The technical rehearsal was grueling and went on forever but led to a flawless performance. As challenging as the singing schedule was, it was the only thing that allowed Mark to move outside of his well-ordered life, and it brought him a modicum of joy. He decided he would just have to look haggard. He internalized all of his angst and loneliness. Joe and Thomas reached out to help, but Mark knew this was his own personal hell to live through. He felt like he had brought the problems upon himself, as he struggled to find his way back to a normal life for him and his children. Mark had gotten through the extra thirty days of court review, and he had custody of his children, but he didn't trust that his parents

wouldn't come back with new allegations. He wasn't willing to subject himself or the children to more torture. He had decided he would be single until they were grown and on their own.

Mark shook his head, wondering how he had so wrongly assumed that he had time for work, choir, family, and school. He had three in-class exams. Mark stayed up late nights studying for them and felt that he had aced all three. For the spring semester, Mark decided he was only taking two courses.

And then there were the kids. Mark gave thanks to Joe and Thomas. They had been incredible. Mark and the kids had picked out a giant Christmas tree for the Mill House. Joe had built a stand so it wouldn't fall over. Mark thought the stand was over-engineered but knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Of course, the tree was 14 feet tall, and when Joe said the tree needed a lot of support, that is what it got.

After church on the last Sunday of Advent, Mark and the kids invited Joe, Thomas, and Clay over for lunch and tree decorating. They spent the entire afternoon hanging ornaments. Mark decided he would sit back and let them be holiday happy. Thomas and Joe also showed up with their son, Sean, who had flown in that morning from Philadelphia. All three laughed about never knowing if a flight would leave that airport in the winter.

"I swear the weather conspires against that airport. It was snowing and sleeting as I tried to get to the airport. Then we had to walk outside to the plane because of renovations in the terminal." Sean was a smallish, handsome man who spoke with an Irish lilt. He spent part of each year in Ireland in memory of his mother. Belinda was completely taken with him; the feeling was mutual. Sean, Joe, and Thomas kept laughing about a woman named Thelma and her Christmas tree decorating skills. It was apparent that the three men were extremely close and loved each other. Sean was never more than arms reach from Joe the entire afternoon. Sean became more centered and relaxed the longer he spent with his dad. Clay had attached himself to Belinda, and they giggled and laughed as they decorated the tree. Joe brought over a step ladder so they could reach the upper branches. When it was time for the star to be placed on top of the tree, Joe helped Belinda climb to the very top of the ladder and put it on the tree. Belinda was afraid she was going to fall, but Joe held her tight. As soon as Joe climbed down, Clay asked to be picked up and for Joe to let him look at the star. Clay held on and glowed in Joe's embrace. As the sunlight moved to darkness, Robert turned on the tree lights, and the room glowed. At that moment, they all felt that Christmas had arrived.

Mark made Oyster Stew for dinner, which he served along with warm French bread and salad. He had bought white chocolate brownies for dessert. While Mark was preparing the food, Joe and Thomas went back to the Yellow House to retrieve all of the Christmas packages to go under the tree. Sean sat wrapped in a blanket in the great room of the Mill House. He had gotten chilled earlier in the day, and while trying to put on a good show, he was starting to feel rather awful. Clay wrapped himself in the blanket also and hugged Sean. Belinda and Robert went to their bedrooms to get beautifully wrapped packages to place under the tree. Thomas had helped them wrap the boxes. Mark was the last to bring in packages that he had asked be wrapped in the stores where he had shopped. While Mark was working over the holiday, Joe had taken Robert with him as he did some home repairs for folks. It reminded Joe of taking Sean with him to work sites. Belinda stayed with Thomas and helped him and Clay bake cookies for the elderly. Thomas said something about an old family gingerbread cookie recipe. When he mentioned the cookies, Sean's ears perked up, and he said they were the best cookies in the world. Clay grabbed Sean's face, looked him in the eyes, and

said he loved gingerbread cookies. Sean rubbed noses with Clay and said they would make sure that Thomas baked some over the holidays. Clay giggled and hugged Sean again.

After dinner, Joe picked up Sean who was protesting mightily and carried him home. Joe laughed and told Sean he was never too old or too heavy for him to be his Daddy Joe. Sean was much paler and weaker than he had been earlier in the day. Clay giggled about Sean being in Joe's arms. Thomas held Clay's hand as they walked between the two houses. In the middle of the night, Mark was awakened by red and blue lights flashing in his bedroom windows. Emergency vehicles were in the driveway of Joe and Thomas' house. Mark was running across the field when he saw EMS personnel lifting Sean into the back of the ambulance. Joe and Thomas were standing there, not knowing what to do.

"Go with him, and I will be at the hospital shortly. Both of you. Go with Sean. I will take care of Clay. Go."

Officer Cartwright looked at Thomas and said for them to get dressed, and he would take them to Duke Hospital. They both ran inside while Mark spoke to the officer.

"Can you stay with them until I get there? I need to get the children dressed and will be there in a few minutes."

"Of course, Mark. I will stay, be careful driving tonight."

Thomas and Joe walked out of the house, got in the deputy's car, and Mark could hear the sirens fill the late-night air as they turned onto Route 70, heading to the medical center. Mark went upstairs to Clay's room and wrapped him in a blanket. He had on pajamas, and Mark thought they would suffice.

Belinda and Robert were confused after being awakened in the middle of the night to go to the hospital. When they arrived at the Emergency Department, they both ran to Joe and Thomas and hugged them. Mark put the sleeping child in Joe's arms. Both men had tears running down their cheeks. Belinda looked at Thomas and asked if she could say a blessing. Thomas could only nod as he hugged Joe. Belinda stood, and put her hands on Joe's and Thomas' heads and said a blessing for the two of them. The kids then climbed onto the sofa beside their grandfathers and promptly fell asleep.

Mark paced the reception area, continually asking the clerk if there was an update on Sean. Officer Cartwright sat in a chair beside Thomas and Joe. When Mark thanked him for bringing them to the hospital, he said he had taken off the rest of the shift and would stay there with them until they knew what was happening.

Finally, the sun was lighting the horizon, and Joe and Thomas were told that Sean was in a room. The doctor was waiting to give them an update. Mark and Officer Cartwright thought it was the perfect time to take the children to the cafeteria for breakfast.

Thomas and Joe were confused when the doctor was talking about waiting for Sean's medical records from a sanitarium in Europe.

“Didn’t Sean tell you he has spent the last few months in a sanitarium in Germany?”

Neither did.

“They are experimenting with some new treatments for people born with congenital tuberculosis and who developed active disease. Sean was there participating in a clinical trial.”

“Our son was in the hospital in Europe?”

“Yes, so to speak. Sean will be able to tell you more when he awakens. We will also have a better understanding of the treatment and the recommendations for what we should be doing.”

Joe and Thomas sat and were stupefied that Sean had not disclosed this to them, especially Joe, who felt that Sean told him everything. Sean had a high temperature and had trouble breathing but the doctor didn’t want to put him on a ventilator until his oxygen level were more critical. He was on oxygen so when Joe and Thomas arrived in the room, they were frightened seeing the mask on his face. A fine sheen of sweat was on Sean’s forehead and he had no color. He was sleeping which was good given the coughing spell he had in the emergency room cubicle. His entire body wracked with spasms as he coughed. The doctor had mainlined a medication to relax the muscles and reflex actions, he was also given medications to reduce the fever. That combination helped Sean sleep.

There was a movement at the door when Mark and a nurse entered the room. Mark was wearing a mask, and the nurse had them for Joe and Thomas. They looked at each other and were devastated.

“This is just a precaution until we know more. You should wear masks.”

Joe and Thomas took the masks, but neither would put them on.

Belinda and Robert stuck their heads in the door and asked if they could come in. The nurse told them ‘no’ because they were not wearing masks. Belinda gave the nurse a dismissive look because she thought her question was a mere formality; she wasn’t really asking permission. She then proceeded to walk up to her father and grabbed his hand.

“I don’t need a mask because Sister Mary Agnes said I am special, and I am fine just as I am.”

Both Thomas and Joe turned in amazement to look at Belinda.

“Who?”

“Sister Mary Agnes. I met her at the parade. She was dressed funny in some sort of black dress and had a strange thing on her head. Well, you know, she was a he. He had a beard and was wearing this dress thing. It was not as pretty as mine. But he said his name was Sister Mary Agnes.”

Thomas and Joe both knew of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

“Anyway, he said I have special healing powers. Do you want me to heal Sean?”

“You have special healing powers?”

“Yes, daddy. Sister Mary Agnes said so, and she told me how to do it.”

“How do you do it?”

Belinda paused for a few seconds like she was listening to someone. She then nodded her head.

“I am not allowed to talk about it, but can I show you on Sean since he is sick.”

Thomas and Joe looked at each other and then slowly nodded their heads in agreement.

“Okay, Uncle Joe and Uncle Thomas, I need for you to hold Sean’s hands. Joe was holding Clay with one hand while holding Sean with the other. Daddy, get Robert and Mr. Deputy.” Mark did as Belinda had instructed. “Robert, you hold onto one foot and Mr. Deputy you hold the other one. Daddy, I need you to wrap your hands around Sean’s head. Let me show you.” Belinda showed Mark exactly how to place his hands on Sean’s head. “Okay. You all have to hold on tight, so the devil doesn’t take him away. Now, I am going to whisper things in Sean’s ears. You are not allowed to hear what I say.” They did as Belinda directed them. She then bent over and quietly talked to Sean. Thomas was the first to see Sean’s eyes flickering. Belinda kept whispering to Sean. Joe couldn’t see anything because tears were running down his face. Robert and Deputy Cartwright held on tight as Sean’s legs started moving like he was trying to run. Belinda kept talking to Sean. Mark held Sean’s head down. Joe felt Sean squeezing his hand, and then Sean exhaled a loud breath. He opened his eyes and looked at everyone. Belinda kept whispering to him until Sean turned his head, looked at Belinda, and thanked her.

Everyone stood back in amazement. Thomas told Belinda she had performed a miracle.

“It was Sister Mary Agnes. She was whispering in his other ear. You saw her, right? She was talking in one ear, and I was talking in the other. I was here to help her.”

No one knew what to say.

Sean removed the oxygen mask and asked for something to drink. The nurses and doctor were going crazy, trying to figure out what had just happened.

Belinda sat in a chair, turned to the empty chair beside her, and said, “I think we did something good. Thank you for helping me. I am still learning.”

Sean smiled at Belinda and told her that she was an angel. He then looked at his dad and papa and asked, “What does a boy have to do to get a gingerbread cookie around here?” He then started laughing.

Joe and Thomas burst out laughing and crying at the same time. Mark stood back, not understanding what Belinda had done. She had performed a miracle which he couldn’t fully comprehend. There was no logical explanation. When Mark quizzed her, she said it was love at work.

“Love heals everything, daddy.”

Mark looked at Sean, Thomas, and Joe and saw a glow of love surrounding them. He couldn't rationalize what had happened. There had to be a scientific explanation. When Mark asked Robert what he thought happened, his son simply stated that Belinda said it was love, and they should believe her. Mark wasn't so sure, and that message didn't sound right coming from the mouth of the ever-practical Robert.

Over the next two days, Sean told his Daddy Joe and Papa Thomas everything. He said that the European clinical trial was to help extend his life beyond what was initially projected. He didn't tell them beforehand because it was all highly experimental. By all accounts, he should have already died. The medical records came from Germany and showed a slight improvement in Sean's overall condition, but the overall prognosis was not good. Sean told them that he was warned not to overdo anything for a few more weeks as he had just finished a treatment at a clinic in Philadelphia, but he wanted to see his dads so much that he had not followed their instructions. Sean was released on Tuesday afternoon with approval for only one outing: the Christmas Eve concert at Duke Chapel.

Mark had warned his group to arrive early since he had requested a special place for a wheelchair at the aisle end of the third row. Sean had been upset at Mark for treating him like an invalid, but Joe was thankful and told his son to accept the decision. Sean would have a wheelchair ride up the long aisle of the Chapel. Clay laughed and asked if he could ride with Sean. Sean smiled and said they could ride together and maybe do wheelies. Clay giggled and then grabbed Sean and told him he loved him.

Mark pulled into the parking garage, grabbed his music, caught his breath, and wondered how the quartet would sound with someone who had not rehearsed with them. He walked across the parking lot and then up the ramp to the staff door of the Chapel. The security guard recognized him and wished him a Merry Christmas. When he walked into the Nave, Mark saw a group huddled on the steps in front of the altar. He smiled and was glad that he wasn't late for the rehearsal. Then he saw Dan. His face froze. Surely, Dan wasn't the replacement tenor. Dan smiled at him. They situated themselves, and the organist started. Mark missed his entrance. The conductor asked if the group needed to use their music. They looked at Mark and he apologized and said no. The organist started again and Mark came in on cue though his voice wasn't focused.

"Mark, are you okay? Your voice sounds strained and off-kilter."

"No, I am good. I just haven't had time to warm up. It will be fine."

What wasn't fine was that he was standing next to Dan. The two men stood front and center on the chancel steps with the women standing on either side of them. They arranged themselves so they could hear each other's voices. They sang the aria through twice before choir members started arriving and the general rehearsal started.

He and Dan did not speak to each other. They looked at each other and sang, but didn't speak.

While vesting for the service, Dan came over and told Mark that he was glad to be singing with him. Mark said it was 'all good, no problem, everything was fine.' It obviously wasn't. When it was

time for the service to begin, the choir sang the introit from the Narthex. It was a Russian carol that filtered into the far reaches of the Nave. A soprano then stepped forward and started singing the first verse of "Once in Royal David's City." On the second verse, the choir started singing, and choir members paired off as they processed up the aisle. You never knew who your partner might be in the procession. There were extra people in the choir that night, and there were no logical pairs. Mark's voice caught when he realized he was processing beside Dan, who was singing in his full glorious tenor voice, which brought the first smile to Mark's face since he had arrived.

Belinda was waving at Mark as he approached the chancel steps. Mark's group was sitting together. When Belinda saw Dan, she blew him a kiss. Dan smiled and blew one in return. The singers filed into the choir stalls. Mark realized that he was in good voice now that he had warmed up. He was relieved and happy. The Chapel was full of people with every seat taken, and there were many standing along the walls. He reminded himself to focus on the music and not to be the fire marshal. The choir wanted to show off their prowess and meticulously followed each cue from the conductor. They were on-point and sang gloriously. It was time for the quartet to sing. Mark suddenly realized that he was extremely nervous, and his hands were shaking. The four singers exited the choir stalls and made their way to the chancel steps.

Mark looked stricken. He realized his hubris had caught up with him. He was going to be a blithering idiot if he tried to sing, and he fought back nausea. Luckily, there was an organ introduction so Mark could get himself prepared, but he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He then felt a hand take his. After the initial electric shock, it was steady. He looked at Dan, who was smiling at him. Mark's heart instantly filled with love, the fear disappeared, and Mark opened his mouth to sing. The aria was more beautiful than it had ever been. The duet between Dan and Mark in the middle section had the men looking at each other, holding hands, and trying not to smile as they sang. There was a hush in the congregation when they finished, and then there the sound of a pair of hands clapping. Then a second pair. The claps were coming from down front. Mark looked over to see Belinda and Robert standing and clapping. The congregation joined in applauding the singers. They all bowed and went back to their places. Mark looked across the chancel to Dan and mouthed 'thank you.' Dan just smiled before standing to sing the next piece of music.

The service was ending with one more major piece to sing. The Flentrop Organ voiced the opening to David Willcocks' arrangement of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." The Aeolian Organ joined in the cacophony. The sopranos sang the descant on the third verse, and then the choir members quickly moved out of their stalls, down the steps, and toward the back of the church. They anticipated the bombast of sound on the last verse. The tenors and basses usually split after they passed the last pew, to walk back up the side aisle on opposite sides of the Chapel, but Dan turned and walked behind Mark. Their voices blended as they belted out the final refrain. When Mark looked up, he saw Belinda walking down the center aisle hand in hand with the Dean of the Divinity School. Mark could only smile at his beautiful child. She had on a white dress and had a St. Lucia crown on her head. She looked like an angel. Mark was walking toward the Narthex when he felt Dan grab his arm.

"Merry Christmas, Mark. You were wonderful."

Dan was holding onto Mark as throngs of people were trying to get past. Mark grabbed Dan's hand, and they moved over to the side. People were still bumping into them. Mark pulled Dan to him and whispered thanks in his ear.

"It was because of your support that I was able to sing the quartet. Thank you."

"I will always support and love you."

They each leaned back, looked in the other's eyes, and then lunged forward as their mouths met. They lost all sense of other people in the Chapel as they clung to each other kissing. It was only when Dan felt a tap on his shoulder that he came up for air.

"Merry Christmas, Daniel."

"Joe, Thomas, Robert, Clay, Merry Christmas. How are you? I have missed you."

Joe introduced Sean, who gave high compliments on Dan and Mark's singing. Mark had his arm around Dan's waist and was not letting him step away. Clay wanted a hug from his Uncle Dr. Dan.

"Ummm, Dan and I need to change. Are we meeting back at the Mill House for late-night eggnog?"

"Yep, we will take the kids. Take your time. I will heat some food because you have to be starved after singing that service. It was phenomenal."

Just as that moment, the Dean delivered Belinda to her family. It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

"Belinda, I have a Christmas present for you in my office. Why don't we go there while your dad is getting changed?"

Joy radiated from Belinda's face. Thomas, Joe, Sean, Clay, and Robert followed Belinda and the Dean as they crossed the courtyard and then into the Divinity School building. The Dean gave Belinda a pectoral cross that was usually worn by a Bishop. She immediately put it on. He also handed her a certificate that made her an honorary member of the clergy at Duke Chapel. Joe said they would have it framed to hang in the house.

"I need to meet with you so that you can tell me about Sister Mary Agnes. I heard all about what you did at the hospital, and I would like to know more."

Belinda was beaming.

Most of the choir members had left by the time Mark and Dan went downstairs to change. They were holding hands.

"Will you come to the house for drinks and food?"

"Yes, but I can't ride my bicycle home tonight on dark roads."

Mark smiled. "Just as I planned. I have a Christmas present for you, and you will need to spend the night to get it."

As they were leaving the building, Dan took Mark's hand. They walked into the parking garage, and Mark took Dan in his arms and kissed him.

"We are probably on camera."

"Good, let them look. Let the entire world see."

Mark drove to Dan's apartment so that he could pack some clothes. Dan grabbed his bicycle out of the back of the truck and took it into the apartment. There were a few wrapped presents under a small tree in the corner. Dan put them in a pillowcase. Mark had been in the studio apartment before but hadn't realize how small it was until that night. They got in the truck, and Mark drove Route 70 to the house. He wasn't in a hurry to get home. He and Dan held hands in the truck before Dan unbuckled his seat belt, slid over, and put his hand on Mark's thigh.

"Merry Christmas. I am so glad that we are talking again."

Dan smiled, leaned over, and kissed Mark's cheek.

"Me too. It was killing me."

"It was killing me too. I almost dropped out of the choir because it hurt so much to see you each week."

"Well, no more about that. We are together tonight, and you are going to be here to celebrate not only today, but I hope all days after that." Dan was startled at the announcement, but he knew that Mark could sometimes be over-expansive in his statements. Dan knew he needed to protect his heart but he didn't know how. He knew that he would always love Mark.

When they arrived at the Mill House, Joe had built a roaring fire in the fireplace. The kids were jumping around and singing. Mark looked at Thomas and asked how much sugar he had given to them. Thomas looked sheepish.

"Okay, kids. There is a rule at Christmas. Do you know what it is?"

"No, daddy. What is the rule?"

"Well, Belinda, this is the rule. Santa doesn't come until all of the kids are in bed."

Robert grabbed Belinda's hand and said they were going to bed. Clay was dancing around and said he was spending the night with Belinda. Belinda told Dan and Mark how beautifully they sang together.

"Dr. Dan, I thought you were going to smooch daddy right there on the steps."

"I wasn't going to smooch your daddy."

“Well, it looked like it. I could see the love in your eyes. You were both so pretty.”

“Well, come here pretty-one, let me give you a smooch so you can go to bed.”

“Are you going to be here when we get up in the morning?”

“Yes, Santa told me to come here for my Christmas present. So, I am here.”

“Well, you better get in bed so Santa can give you a present.”

Mark blushed. Dan laughed and said he would be sure to do that.

After the kids were in bed, the menfolk sat in the front of the fire chatting. Sean told Mark and Dan about the magical Christmas pageant many years before. They were all misty-eyed at the remembrance. Sean sat on the sofa next to Joe, who had his arm over his son’s shoulder. Sean leaned into Joe and kissed his cheek.

“Magic happens at Christmas.” Everyone nodded at Sean’s comment.

Thomas and Joe quietly walked across the yard and got out all of the Santa Claus presents for the kids. Luckily, Joe had already put together everything that needed his skills. He had even bought batteries for all of the toys.

At last, Mark and Dan were ready for bed. They were suddenly shy and tentative with each other.

“We don’t have to do anything, Mark.”

“Yes, we do. Santa has to give you a present.”

Dan chuckled. “And what is that present?”

“Love. Santa is here to love you. Please forgive him and let him love you.”

Dan grabbed Mark’s hand and pulled him along as they raced to the bedroom.

24. Icons

Old Christmas 2020

Thomas acquiesced to Sean's demand that they observe Old Christmas on Sunday, January 5th. Sunday was actually Twelfth Night, but they knew it would be challenging to have a big party the next day. Sean said he had Christmas presents for people but hadn't found the time to finish them by December 25th, so he was giving them on Old Christmas, which was appropriate since they were Russian in style. Sean also said his illness had overshadowed their Christmas, and he wanted a day of celebration. He had disappeared for hours on end the two weeks after Christmas and would come downstairs to eat with Joe, Thomas, and Clay, and then head up the steps again to work on the gifts. Clay would put his head in the door, look at Sean working, and tell him everything was beautiful. Sean would ask him to come in and share a hug. Sean was slowly gaining the little boy's trust. Joe would knock on the door and tell Sean to open the window because the smell of varnish and paint was not good for his lungs.

On December 25th, Mark had prepared a meal for everyone at the Mill House. Thomas and Joe went to celebrate with their new family. Clay had spent the night with Belinda and Robert while waiting for Santa Claus. Mark had called the men at 6 a.m. to tell them the children were up and for them to appear post haste. Joe and Thomas didn't bother to change clothes but walked to the Mill House in their pajamas. They walked in the door, and Dan handed them cups of coffee. He looked appropriately disheveled, but the smile on his face was all that mattered. Clay was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room with tears in his eyes. Joe scooped him up and asked why he was crying. Clay sniffled and said he didn't know what to do. Belinda and Robert were in full-tilt playing with their toys, but Clay had never seen such bounty. Joe sat on the floor with Clay and helped him acclimate to the variety of toys. Belinda was particularly rambunctious, and she had scared Clay. Thomas, Mark, and Dan stood to the side, looking at the mayhem with Joe serving as the gravity force for the three kids. They wanted to show Uncle Joe each and everything that Santa had brought them. Joe had assembled many of the toys but delighted the kids when he acted surprised at everything that Santa had brought to them.

Dan then led them in singing French Christmas carols. He was so patient in teaching them to sing in French. The children had a natural affinity for the language, but the adults were more challenged. Mark let Dan take the lead and beamed as the kids enjoyed Dan's presence. Thomas and Joe took a cue from Mark on how to engage with Dan. They acted as if there had never been a breach. Robert was even affectionate with Dan because he realized his dad was happy again with Dan being in the house. Robert and Belinda had witnessed their dad over the prior weeks, and Robert decided if Dan brought happiness to his father, then so be it. He would like him also. If needed, he would defend them against the rest of the world.

Thomas thought that Mark was in a level of denial about how badly he had treated Dan. A casual observer would have been hard-pressed to believe there was anything between the two men other than a long-lasting, deep abiding love. The generosity of Dan's forbearance, willingness to be open to possibilities of being together with Mark and the children, and making himself vulnerable to hurt were perfect for a clinical case study for the healing power of love. Thomas chuckled at himself, thinking that not everything required an assessment through his clinical lens. He told himself to turn off his clinical brain and just enjoy the day.

Mark was very gentle with Dan and deferred to him on most issues that arose during the day. Dan's generosity of spirit and love at the Christmas Eve service convinced Mark that their love would make them invincible as a couple. Mark had pushed the man away once and decided that would not happen a second time, come what may.

Mark and Dan had prepared a buffet breakfast so people could fix a plate and sit in the great room. Joe was challenged to get Clay to eat any food as the boy had finally relaxed enough to play with some of the toys. Clay was happy, which also scared him because he was wary of being spanked if anything bad happened. In his life, there had always been something bad to happen, and he was always to blame. He was trying to be happy, but he also clearly unsettled. When Thomas said they needed to go home to shower and dress for the day, Clay was in a dither. He needed to be with his papas, but he didn't want to leave his toys. He kept looking back and forth between the opposing forces of his desires. Finally, Joe picked up a firetruck and said they would take that home and then come back for more. Clay smiled, extended his arms to be picked up, and wrapped his arms around Joe's neck. Thomas carried the firetruck as they headed to the Yellow House.

Sean went to the Mill House for the delicious meal that was served. He picked at his food and Daddy Joe kept encouraging him to eat more. Sean looked at Joe and reminded him that his young son was now a grown-up. Joe replied that when Sean was fourteen, he almost ate them out of house and home. Sean then headed back to his bed to rest. Sean had very little rest that day as Joe kept coming into his bedroom in the Yellow House to check on him. Sean would tell his dad that he was okay and to enjoy the day with Clay, Belinda, and Robert. Joe tried but couldn't do it. He was channeling back to what had happened thirty-one years prior. Sean could see it in his eyes; Joe was terrified.

Sean remembered the Twelfth Night party when he first lived with Thomas and Joe at the rectory. It was his mother's last day before she passed. Before Mary Agnes went to sleep that night, she told Sean how much she loved him and what a fantastic party it had been. She said that she was perfectly at peace with her life because she knew that Joe and Thomas would take care of her son.

All of these years later, Thomas planned a big party on Sunday afternoon where people could float in and out. The afternoon would conclude with a "family dinner." Belinda greeted guests as they came in the front door. Robert was in charge of taking coats and putting them in the downstairs bedroom. Mark and Dan served as bartenders. They giggled and laughed at each other as they tried to concoct various drinks that people requested. They spent almost as much time kissing as preparing drinks, or so it seemed. Thomas thought that over the past two weeks, they had caught up on all of the missed kisses from the time of their separation.

Joe had hired a caterer to feed folks so he and Thomas could enjoy their company. They had the added pleasure of introducing their son, Sean, to people. The Bishop and his wife were the first to appear as he was heading from one church to another. Thomas was pleased he stopped by. The Bishop was confused when he saw Belinda wearing a pectoral cross and asked her where she got it. She said that the Dean of the Chapel had given it to her, which perplexed the Bishop even more. When the Bishop asked Thomas, he was told there wasn't enough time that day to tell the story of Belinda. Accompanying the Bishop was Sidney Hofler, the young priest whom Thomas was mentoring. Sidney looked at Mark and Dan and thought he saw a connection. He smiled when he

saw Mark sneak a kiss with Dan. Sidney wanted that in his life. Not stealing a kiss, but having a handsome partner.

Merchants from the Farmer's Market started arriving. All of them bought food to be shared. The caterer found room on the dining room table to include their gifts. Brenda and Alice brought some of their vegetarian food, which was greatly desired by some of the guests. Cirese brought cookies with special packages for Belinda, Robert, and Clay. The butcher brought them steaks, and Mary Anne brought them a dozen duck eggs. Thomas knew the eggs would make a delicious souffle. A pair of Master Gardeners who staffed a table at the market arrived with potted plants for Joe and Thomas. Thomas received specific instructions on plant maintenance.

The house was filled with people who were enjoying themselves. Choir members arrived and started singing in the parlor as they stood around the piano. The Dean and clergy from the Chapel arrived and were pleased to be greeted by Belinda. She made sure that her certification was prominently displayed in the foyer that afternoon so all could see that she was honorary clergy at the Chapel. Mike, Mark's boss, and his wife appeared. Mike enjoyed looking at Joe's restoration of the house and then Joe and Mark took him to the Mill House to see the renovation. Mike was astounded at the level of master carpentry that went into the project. He asked Joe if he would consider being a consultant for restoration and renovation projects on some of the older buildings on campus. Joe said he loved that work and told Mike about the work he had performed on St. Anselm church and rectory in Philadelphia. Mike was thrilled that he had made that connection. Joe laughed and said it would give him something to do in his spare time; if he could find some.

Evan Glynfell arrived with his girlfriend. She was astounded at the beauty of the house and kept asking Evan how he knew all these people. Evan said they were clients, but he was clear that he couldn't talk about the legal work he did for them. Joe noticed that Evan had roving eyes when looking at some of the women who were present. He was a good lawyer and apparently also a hound dog. Joe chuckled, remembering his very brief hound dog days.

Millie Tilley and her partner, Evelyn, arrived and started talking with people. One day, while reviewing the Harden case with Judge Woodward, Millie decided to come out to the Judge. She was prepared for his reaction. Ms. Tilley told him that after closing out her caseload, she would be working for Judge Janet Melville. Judge Woodward was angry and asked why she was taking such an action.

"Your prejudice in the Harden case reinforced for me that I had failed not only that family but also other families that had appeared before you. I was concerned about how my peers would analyze my work if it were sent for a second review. I am so deeply sorry. I was afraid and hiding in the closet. I am a lesbian and in a relationship with a woman. She and I are rearing her daughter. I will no longer hide. Judge Melville is assigning me all cases that involve either gay, lesbian, transgender, or questioning youth or parents. She is also concerned about the institutional prejudice against people of color who are also queer. She and I will be working on that issue."

"I ask that you examine your own prejudices. We had a great working relationship except for that one major area. You are probably not aware of the number of cases that have come before you where there was a sexual "other" involved. Many of the kids you sent to detention or group homes were in court because the parents couldn't deal with the sexuality of their children. The cases of youth

suicide months after a court hearing were primarily because of their sexuality. My research paper on youth suicide in our county is being posted on the Department of Youth and Family Services website. I suggest you read it.”

At that point, Millie packed her briefcase, stood, and extended her hand to the Judge. He turned in his chair. He sat behind his desk and did not look up as Miss Tilley walked out of his office.

The following Monday, she received a letter from the Court Administrator terminating her work with Judge Woodward and that she was immediately assigned to Judge Melville. All of her current cases would be turned over to other workers. After she received the letter, Millie called Mark and told him that she needed to meet with him. Mark almost stroked when he heard what Ms. Tilley said. She apologized and said it was poor word choices on her part. She said that she needed to discuss something personal that was not directly related to the case. Although deep down, it was central to the experience of Mark and his children.

Mark and Millie met at a café directly off the Duke campus. Millie kept twiddling with her straw. She finally raised her head and asked for Mark’s forgiveness. Mark listened to her story and was angry at what he considered deception on her part. He was sympathetic about her living in the closet. Millie apologized for her cowardice. When Millie asked him about his relationship to Dan, a hardened look came across Mark’s face. She reached out to touch his hand and offered words of condolence. Before they finished eating, Mark invited Millie to the party. He hadn’t planned to do that but saw himself in Millie, someone who wrestled with life and finally had to decide on how to move forward with integrity. Mark was glad they were at the party. Millie and Evelyn lived in Durham, which provided just enough distance for Millie to have some privacy in her personal life. This party was the first social event in Hillsborough where she had brought her lover. They looked radiant and happy. Mark and Dan had hugged them when they walked in the door. Millie was surprised when she saw Dan. Before she left, she got Mark’s attention and held her hand up to her ear, signaling that she wanted to talk.

Sean spent a lot of the afternoon in the parlor. He had claimed the wing chair next to the fireplace; he made sure there were sufficient logs on the fire so that he stayed warm. He also took the gifts that people had brought and placed them under the tree. Clay was completely overwhelmed with the number of people in the house, so he planted himself in Sean’s lap or by his side for the afternoon. When Sean would see a wandering lost soul, he would invite the person to sit with him. He had a way of asking questions, which made people feel comfortable and included. Clay would just look back and forth between Sean and whoever he was talking without saying a word. He would have a slight smile on his face. People left knowing that they had been in the presence of a great artist who had the heart of a saint. They were charmed as he held the child in his arms.

At last, the final wave of people had arrived and were enjoying themselves. Thomas had invited people on the half-hour so that there was a constant flow in and out. Every time someone left, Belinda would offer her blessing. The sun was low in the sky and the temperature was dropping as was the energy level of the hosts. The caterers were starting to consolidate food trays and clean glasses and plates collected from around the house. In addition to the party food, they had prepared dinner for the family. Belinda bade the last person goodbye, and Joe secured the front door. It was another successful party given by the two men. They had entertained all of their years of living at the rectory in Philadelphia and enjoyed the social time with other people.

Thomas had invited Sidney Hofler to stay for dinner, which was gladly accepted. All of Sidney's social engagements for the holidays had been at the homes of parishioners. He was glad to finally be at a home where he could be himself: a handsome, young, gay man who also happened to be a priest and poet. His area of academic expertise was Russian poets from the late 1800s. He and Sean had a detailed discussion about the confluence of Russian art and writing from that time period. Sidney was in his first parish and didn't want to upset his parishioners by dating a man, so he was appreciative that the weight of his vocation could fall from his shoulders for a short period of time in the home of his mentor. He didn't have to measure every word or adjust his mannerisms. He could be who he truly was. Sean enchanted Sidney, and even though Sean was older than he wanted in a partner, Sidney found the man bewitching. A stray comment let Sidney understand that Sean was straight; Sidney was delighted, but also sad because he wanted this man in his life. He felt like he had found a soulmate. Sidney and Sean sat by the fireplace, holding hands, telling stories, and laughing. Sidney was such an extrovert and full of funny stories that he made Sean think of Bugboy. Sean gave Sidney a quizzical look, then shook his head, and thought it not possible.

The caterers had set the dining room table and put platters of food out for the family. Sean passed Clay to Sidney. Sidney kissed the top of Clay's head and told him that he was a handsome lad. Clay beamed and kissed Sidney on the cheek. Sean banked the fire in the parlor, and everyone gathered in the dining room. Thomas became very emotional as he looked around the room where he had everyone circle the table. They were all holding hands. Belinda had placed herself between Mark and Dan. Robert was between Mark and Joe. Clay was holding Sidney's hand. He kept looking up and smiling at the man.

“When Joe and I moved here, we thought we would be two old fogies who would live like recluses, and we hoped that one day we would meet some people. We knew that eventually, we would make friends, but it would take time. We didn't know God would give us a family so quickly. Many years ago, a certain fortune teller informed me that we would have many children in our lives. She was undeniably right. God has been good to us through the years, and tonight we remember Sean's mother, Mary Agnes. She passed into glory thirty-one years ago today. Tonight, we honor and remember her.”

Thomas gave grace for the bounty of food and friendship. Thomas then said they would go around the circle and each person had to say one thing they were grateful for in the past year. Thomas agreed to start and was naming numerous things; Joe reminded him that they were to say only one thing. Thomas laughed and said that his life had been so bountiful he couldn't stop at one thing. Everyone laughed. Sean laughed and said he might be cheating, but he was thankful for his daddy/papa. He said it as one word. Everyone agreed that it was okay for him to cheat a little. Joe said he was thankful for the continued love and support of Thomas, who had been his partner for thirty-one years. Robert said he was grateful to his sister, Belinda, because through her bravery, she had shown him how to be his true self. He looked at her and told her that he loved her. Mark was practically in tears at the heartfelt love between his children. Mark had a smile on his face and said he was thankful for the love and understanding of his family. He then leaned over and kissed Dan on the lips. Belinda looked around and said she loved everyone but was so thankful to have Sister Mary Agnes guiding her life. People were astounded by her answer. Dan smiled and said he, too, was happy to now have this family back in his life. He leaned into Belinda, Mark, and Robert and gave them a group hug. Dan was surprised when Robert kissed him on the cheek. Sidney said he was thankful to be mentored by Thomas, who was teaching him so much about ministry, and he was

grateful to be invited to share a meal with the family. Clay said one word: daddy. Everyone noticed that Clay looked at Sidney when he said that. Clay sat beside Sidney at dinner and would sneak food off of Sidney's plate. He would giggle when Sidney would catch him. It became their game. Before the meal was over, Clay was sitting in Sidney's lap while the priest fed him. It was a moment of grace and trust between the two.

Belinda walked up to Sean and said she wanted to sit beside him while they ate. Throughout the meal, Belinda quizzed him about his mother. She said that she had no memory of her mother, Linda, and wondered what it would be like to have a mother. Sean told her about his mother always protecting him and guiding him to be his best self. Belinda continued her questioning. Sean reached far back in his memory to talk about his mother. He said she was always mystical and very spiritual but not very religious. Sean said that there one principle his mother abided by: love. She was always a fount of love for Sean. Sean and Belinda both felt they connected through Mary Agnes.

After dinner, Sean said he had Epiphany gifts for everyone. They all said they didn't know they were supposed to bring presents. Sean laughed and said that was his plan because the party was all about him. The adults laughed while Belinda and Robert scratched their heads, wondering what that meant. Everyone settled in the parlor. Sean told them that it was the love of Thelma and Jimmy that had allowed him to live his life as an artist. They had named him as their heir, and he now lived in their Philadelphia home and had a studio in an old warehouse that had been converted into artist studios. He said the gifts were given in loving memory of Thelma and Jimmy Whitehurst.

Sean handed a package to Thomas and Joe. It was an icon that portrayed Thomas, Joe, and Sean. Joe had a halo around his head. Saint Thomas, the doubter, was standing to the side as he looked at Saint Joseph and Sean, a young boy. Sean was written with his chest opened, which exposed his sacred beating heart and his healed lungs. There was a ray of light that illuminated St. Joseph, who had carpenter's tools at his feet. Sean was leaning into St. Joseph wearing the Elizabethan ruff that Elaine had made for him those many years ago. Thomas was holding a Voodoo Doll, Dammit Doll, and a Cross in his left hand, and he had a beatific smile on his face. He was reaching out to Sean and Joe with his right hand while making a sign of peace. The angelic background was filled with the faces of the kids from the 1988 Christmas pageant.

Thomas gasped and then started tearing up while looking at the image. Joe focused on the sacred heart and healed lungs. The symbolism would be explored over time as Thomas and Joe moved deeper into studying the icon. Everyone complimented Sean on his mastery of painting. Sean smiled and thanked them.

“This is probably too esoteric and might not mean anything to you, but you do not paint icons, rather you write them. You write the story in images. Each icon is an important story that I wrote through imagery in oil on wood.”

Sidney shifted Clay, who was sitting on his lap and started reciting a poem from the great Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin. He spoke in Russian, and Sean was able to understand a few bits and pieces of the poem. The melodic rise and fall of Sidney's voice carried everyone to another place and time. It didn't matter that they couldn't understand the words. The emotions were easily conveyed.

Sean stood, looked at Joe, smiled the same way he had thirty-one years prior, and recited the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke. He still remembered the power of that reading. People sat in silence to reflect what had just happened. Joe leaned against Thomas, remembering the beauty of that night.

Next, Sean handed a package to Mark and Dan. Again, it was an icon. Sean wrote Mark as St. Mark, the Evangelist Lion, who had the sword of righteousness in his hand. Dan was the Old Testament Prophet Daniel, who had been put in the lion's den and yet lived through the night. In the image, the two men were holding hands. It was as if Daniel had proved his worth to Mark, or maybe Mark had accepted Dan for who he was. Both Dan and Mark had on Roman soldier's breastplates with the initials S & B engraved on them. They looked strong and fierce. Belinda and Robert had on battle armor as they prepared to fight for their life as a family. There were Russian words around the edge of the icon. Sean said the icon was dedicated to Saints Serge and Bacchus, who were two lovers who died for their belief in living and loving together as a couple.

"There is a lot of power in that icon. Notice that you are front and center with your children on either side. Behind you in the background are other pairs of lovers who fought side by side for their right to love each other. I believe in the power of icons, so always be careful with it. All of those lovers were written and know your written story and will be there to protect you. Pray to it when you have to fight for each other and your family. Your desires and needs will be granted. The background is an image of Algiers. You are destined to live a vibrant and fulfilled life in Algiers."

Mark was squeezing Dan's hand. Was it possible? Were he and the children moving to Algiers to live with Dan? Mark knew it was his deepest desire for it to be true; he drew a deep breath of acceptance and turned to Dan, smiled, and nodded his head. Dan hugged Mark and kissed his eyelids. They knew their lives together would be forever.

Sidney started reciting the "Liturgy for Sts. Serge and Bacchus." He closed his eyes and swayed during his recitation. Clay had fallen asleep in Sidney's arms, and his swaying was rocking the child. It looked perfectly natural that Sidney was holding the little boy. The only other sound was the hissing of the logs in the fireplace. When he said, "Amen," he opened his eyes and realized that everyone was looking at him in awe. They all said, "Amen" as a response.

Robert's icon was written as a man with a halo, riding on a white horse, carrying the banner of St. George of Jerusalem. Sitting behind him on the horse was a fair-haired maiden who had her arm around his waist. Upon closer inspection, Robert understood that it was Belinda. There were dragons around the horse that Robert had slain. An angel looked down from the firmament that radiated beams of light on them. The angel was Linda, their mother.

"Robert, you will always be protected, and you will always protect Belinda. Your entire life will be devoted to the protection of your sister and what she is called to do with her life. You, too, will have a very gifted and fulfilled life, but you will always be her protector. Your mother is your guardian angel and will always be by your side. Robert, your name translates as Azriel in Hebrew, and it means 'God is my aid,' so you have both God and your mother protecting you."

Dan looked at Mark, and they nodded their heads; they telepathically knew what the other was thinking. They started singing the John Rutter hymn of blessing, "God Be In My Head." Robert got

up from where he was sitting, crossed the room, and sat beside Belinda. He put his arm across her shoulder.

Sidney was enjoying himself as he looked at the beautiful icons. The feelings of love and caring among the family members filled the room with peace, love, and fulfillment that could only emanate from the divine. His own senses were overflowing with compassion and care for each person. He was grateful that he had been allowed to witness this miraculous family gathering. The sharing of the many artistic gifts was an added gift. He was amazed at Sean's mastery of technique and the power of the icons. Hearing Dan and Mark sing had moved him tremendously. Sidney was startled when Sean handed him a package. Sean said it was a gift for Clay. Sidney was setting it aside when Sean told him to open it.

The icon was the writing of Clay being presented at Temple as a twelve-year-old boy. Holding his hand as he was being blessed, was Sidney. Joe stood to the side and had a hand on Sidney's shoulder. Thomas was conducting the blessing. Sidney didn't know what to make of the icon but was awed by its beauty.

Thomas recognized the Temple as St. George's Chapel in Jerusalem. Joe stood, and in a halting voice, recited the Bishop's affirmation from the Service of Confirmation.

Almighty and Everliving God, let your fatherly hand ever be over Clay; let your Holy Spirit be with him; and so lead Clay in the knowledge and obedience of your Word, that he may serve you in this life, and dwell with you in the life to come. Amen.

Thomas was dumbstruck by Joe's recitation. He had no idea that his husband had memorized blessings from the Prayer Book. Joe had never told Thomas he had memorized the baptism, confirmation, and commitment services from thirty-one years prior. That day had been life-changing for Joe, and he had written the words of the blessings on his heart. He was now passing one of the blessings to Clay. The big burly Highlander continued to surprise his Lord Posh.

Sean then handed Sidney another package. Sidney was even more surprised when he looked at the icon and saw an image of St. Thomas leading a young man down a road. Thomas was dressed in a white robe and had a halo around his head. The young man was wearing a natural colored linen robe and was listening to what the older man was saying. They were both shod in sandals. Sidney realized the young man was him. How had Sean written him into both of these icons? He had not met Sean until that very afternoon.

Thomas stood and started reciting a reading from the Gospel of Thomas. His voice enthralled everyone. He finished by saying, "The Gospel of the Lord," and everyone voiced the response.

"Sidney, you have found your mentor/twin in Thomas. The name Thomas in Aramaic means twin. He is often called Didymus Thomas. Didymus in Greek means twin. So, you have met your twin in ministry. It is written in the icon. Not just for the present time, but for the rest of your life. Thomas is passing his knowledge of ministry and compassion for people to you. You are now part of our family, whether you like it or not." Sean grinned when he said that. "I think you have also found the son you have always wanted." Sean smiled, looking at Clay, who had nestled deeper into Sidney's chest. "Before she died, my mother told me I would have a brother. Sean, you are my

brother. I know that with every fiber of my being. She also said a young girl would save my life. Belinda, you recently saved my life. Tonight, the second of my mother's two prophecies is fulfilled. I am thinking of the Song of Simeon, but I hope I have a few more years left to live. Simeon saw the Christ Child and knew that the prophecy from God had been fulfilled and that he could die in peace. I would ask God for time, so I can get to know my brother."

Sidney was at a loss for words, which was rare for him. He knew that this was of God, and he didn't question why. Sidney also knew that he and Thomas had forged a bond that would last his lifetime, he had found a brother in Sean, and he had a long-desired son.

Dan had a sly smile and started singing "The Long and Winding Road." Others joined him, which lightened the mood. The song quickly dissolved into noise as the non-singers tried their best to sing. Everyone laughed as Dan pushed them through to the end. Everyone agreed it sounded awful, but they didn't care. Singing together had provided a nice emotional break, and they got up to find something to drink and eat. Sean put another log on the fire. They reassembled, knowing that the gift-giving was not finished.

Sean looked at Belinda and said he had a special icon for her. She opened the package and saw a kneeling woman taking care of a sick child who was on a stretcher. The young woman was Belinda, and the sick child was Sean. Belinda noticed something remarkable about the icon. As she turned it side to side in her hands, another figure was at the sick child's side. The person looked like Sister Mary Agnes when it was turned in one direction and then an unknown woman when she moved it. She kept shifting it back and forth. Belinda showed everyone the icon.

"Uncle Sean, who is the woman?"

"There is no woman, Belinda. I wrote her out."

"There is Sister Mary Agnes, and then I see a woman I don't know."

Sean gasped. He had written that part of the story three times. First, Sean had written his mother on one side of the sick child. It didn't feel like the fulfillment of the story, and he wrote her out; instead, he wrote the story of a man. Again, he didn't believe it told the full story, and then his hand wrote in a plain background where the figures had been. He moved next to Belinda as she moved the icon. He could clearly see the man and then his mother. He told Belinda that his mother was the woman and that her name was Mary Agnes. Belinda said that the man was Sister Mary Agnes, whom she had met at the pride parade. They handed the icon to the others, yet no one else could see the figures except for Sean and Belinda. Sean took Belinda's hand.

"You are destined to care for the 'others' in our community. You will be their voice. You will live an authentic life as an 'other.' You will help people understand the power and gift of living an authentic life outside the norm of society. You also have the gift of healing. You have a holy power for the healing of spirit and life. You brought me back from death. I can't explain the power of this icon, but this is the result when I tried to write an icon for you. It wrote itself when my hand followed the petitions of my soul. I owe you my life, and others will feel the same way over time."

Robert stood and started reciting Canto VI of “The Lady of the Lake.” Everyone sat in astonishment. The quiet, shy boy revealed another side of himself. No one knew he was a Sir Walter Scott fan. Robert read Scott because of his love and devotion to his Uncle Joe. Belinda stood and hugged her brother for his gift of the poem. Mark couldn’t speak because he was so emotional and proud; Dan hugged and kissed him.

Sean then said he had a group present. He held up a larger icon that included all of them, along with Thelma, Jimmy, Keith, and Bugboy. Sister Mary Agnes and his mother, Mary Agnes, were written as Jesus and Mary. They were on a mountain top along with the great prophets Moses and Elijah at a time of transfiguration. Belinda was at the center of the painting and was being transfigured. Her hair was like flames of fire. She had sprouted wings. She was levitating above the mountain top. She had her arms spread, and her fingers were giving the signs of peace. Her smile was radiant. There were rays of light emanating from the Bishop’s crucifix, which was centered on her chest. Joseph and Mary were standing to the side of the icon, smiling on as the proud parents. Everyone else in the painting was kneeling with looks of adoration and awe. Cardinals were flying above the assembled acolytes.

Dan started singing the “Nunc Dimittis” composed by Alexander Gretchaninov. Mark joined him. The beauty of the Russian anthem and their joined voices stilled the hearts and minds of all. After it finished, Sean moved and sat beside his new brother, Sidney. He took Sidney’s hand in his. They turned and looked at each other before hugging. Clay awoke and put his arms around each of the men pulling them close. He kissed their cheeks. Sean looked around the room and saw that everyone was paired. No one was alone. Sean looked at Sidney and Clay and knew that God’s prophesy for his own life had been fulfilled, and his newly found brother would not be alone in the future.

In his own way, Sean had written the lives of the people in his life. They had all been transfigured through their love and care for each other. Their lives, and those whom they loved, had been recognized for the goodness in their souls. The quietness of the night enveloped them as they sat reflecting on their lives found in Sean’s writing of the icons.

FINIS