

JOCK DORM: *DAVID AND CONNER*



Loose Id

BOBBY MICHAELS

Jock Dorm 3:
David and Conner

Bobby Michaels



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Dedication

To all of you who patiently waited so long. To my friend Fred, who didn't live long enough to see my dream of being a writer come true. And to the three women who love me and make my life whole—Anne, Dawn, and Irene.

Special thanks for technical assistance to: Dr. Rebecca Colon, DO, and to her husband, a former member of the USMC, who would never read my books but gets a laugh out of his wife helping me.

~ * ~

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

—Anne Frank

The purpose of life is not to be happy—but to matter, to be productive, to be useful, to have it make some difference that you have lived at all.

—Leo Rosten

Chapter One

As I pulled into the rectory driveway, I could see the Gothic spires of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church reaching into the darkened skies next door. Those spires had pointed to heaven since 1892, when the church had been built by the Irish immigrant families that had populated the neighborhood surrounding the church for almost fifty years. The church is a magnificent piece of architecture, built with the blood, sweat, lives, and love of those early immigrants. They sacrificed to bring this symbol of their love for God into being, and it has stood as proof of that love for over one hundred years.

During the course of those hundred years, things changed dramatically both for the neighborhood and for the church. The neighborhood sank deeply into poverty during the depression of the 1930s and never really recovered. After World War II, when so many returning veterans of that war sought the greener pastures of suburbia, the church remained locked in the poverty that was the inner city. No attempts were made at gentrification, and so the spires of the church look down on a world of the homeless, the forgotten, and what many would call “the dregs of society.”

It was to this parish five years before that I had come as a young deacon to complete my last year of training prior to ordination as a priest. I have to admit that when I was told I would be going to an inner-city church, it filled me with great joy. I knew that the work I would be doing would be meaningful. It would not be a day-to-day social interaction of people in the middle- and upper-middle-class churches, nor would it be the social whirl in the few upper-class churches in the diocese. I'm sure that most of my class of deacons would see my posting to Our Lady of Perpetual Help as some type of punishment for some unknown violation of rules and regulations within the seminary, when in fact, it was to this parish that I had requested to be sent.

Speaking of this day, I was just returning to the parish after visiting my youngest brother, who had undergone surgery for testicular cancer several years before. Luckily, Tony—my next

youngest brother—already had two little boys, because Mama now knew that she would see no grandchildren from Vince. Not because of the cancer, but because of something I had known for quite a while. Vince, who had gone to college on a wrestling scholarship, was still living with his college roommate, Drew, who was a great deal more than a roommate.

I got out of the car and decided that I would go and check on how things were going down in the shelter we ran for the homeless in the basement of the church. I had been put in charge of it and the soup kitchen that we also ran when I had been assigned here as a deacon. Heading downstairs, the first person I ran into was Sister Joan, one of the Sisters of Notre Dame who served in the parish. I had no idea what we would do without them.

“Good evening, Sister.”

“Hello, Father. Welcome back. How are your brother and his partner doing?”

“Very well. In fact, Vince just got a job teaching at the local high school along with being the wrestling coach. So how are things going on around here?”

“As usual, we have a full house. Oh, we do have one new one you might want to talk to.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“He's a marine. Served in Iraq.”

“Another one of the walking wounded, huh?”

Since the start of George Bush's war, we had been seeing more and more young males wandering the streets, lost in their own personal hells over what they saw or did in the war. Guys who'd been forgotten or ignored by Bush's Veterans Administration. They had become a special interest of mine. It truly angered me that our government could ask these men to risk their lives in a foreign misadventure, then forget them and refuse to help them when they came home damaged and injured.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“So what's his name?”

“Tim. Tim Shelton.”

“Okay, I'll try to talk to him. Where is he?”

“I put him in the quiet room. I thought he would be more comfortable there.”

The quiet ward was actually a misnomer. It was the place we put men who were most likely to cry out in their sleep, reliving through dreams the horrible incidents in their lives that their conscious minds could not deal with. Most of the time these were soldiers returned from the wars in either Iraq or Afghanistan and suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder that the government refused to admit the existence of or provide treatment for. These men were not violent. The violence was all going on inside their heads. A repeating, violent hell they could not escape. I went to the other end of the large basement, where large pieces of canvas separated the quiet ward from the rest of the sleeping quarters, which were row upon row of cots donated by Catholic charities and the American Red Cross.

As I rounded the edge of the canvas divide, I noted that there were only three of the twelve cots filled. I knew immediately who the new man was, because he was just sitting on the cot, wearing an olive drab coat, combat fatigue pants, and combat boots. He was staring off into space and looking extremely forlorn. So many of these returning vets continued to wear parts of their uniforms rather than trying to obtain civilian clothing. I believe it helps them. It helps them to feel like they were still a part of something and they still had value in a world that seemed to value them less and less each day.

I held out my hand, and Tim very hesitantly took it.

“Tim, I’m David. I’m one of the priests here at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. We’re happy to have you with us this evening.”

He looked up at me in surprise at my welcome. “I wasn’t sure if you all would take me in. I’m not a Catholic.”

With horror in my voice, I slapped my hands to my face and said, grinning, “Oh no! Another heretic has sneaked in on us unawares!” And then I laughed.

At first, Tim actually looked frightened, but as he realized that I was only joking, his face actually showed a smile. I had a feeling it was the first one in a long, long time.

“We take anyone who comes to our door, Tim. We don’t care what religion you are or even if you have a religion. Unless I miss my guess, you’ve served our country somewhere overseas, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. Three tours in Iraq and two in Afghanistan.”

“My, you are a glutton for punishment. But that’s how it is with you marines, isn’t it?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” he barked out. In a quieter voice, he asked, “How did you know I was a marine, sir?”

“It's usually very easy to tell, Marine. First of all, there is the military bearing you all have. Second, you usually follow everything with the word 'sir,' and getting you to stop it is next to impossible, it was drummed so far into your head in boot camp. And if you don't want anyone knowing that you are a member of Uncle Sam's misguided children, then you need to stop implanting the symbols of the corps by needle and ink on your skin.”

I had already noted several Marine Corps tattoos on his arms. I was pretty sure that there were probably more in places his clothing covered. When I mentioned them, Tim looked at his tattoos and then up at me with a sheepish grin on his face.

“I'm not in any way suggesting that you should get them removed. I'm well aware of the deep sense of pride that each of you has in the Marine Corps. And there is a lot for you to be proud of.”

Tim raised his head proudly and smiled again at me. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Many of the males I had dealt with over the last five years here—especially those from the military—were obviously more motivated by an organ much farther south than the stomach, but each and every one of them, no matter what branch of the armed services they served in, could be easily reached by acknowledgment of the greatness of that branch of the military. And it was obvious that Tim was no different than the rest.

“How did you find yourself living on the streets?” I sat down on the cot opposite his, so that we could have this conversation face-to-face.

This was usually the most difficult question that I asked each man. Sometimes it elicited little or no response, while other times it opened up a floodgate of pain, rejection, frustration, and anger.

“When I came home after my last tour, everything had changed. It was like nothing was the same anymore.”

“What do you mean that everything had changed?”

“I don't know. It was like I didn't feel safe there anymore. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, and I kept getting these damn nightmares every night, with me waking up screaming and scaring everybody else in the house.”

“Did you try and find some help for this?”

“Yeah, I tried. I went to the VA and saw some doctor who gave me a bunch of pills. They made me groggy all the time. It was like I was living my life through a screen where I could watch everybody but I wasn't part of it.”

“Did you go back to the doctor at the VA and tell him how the pills were affecting you?”

“I tried to, but I kept getting the runaround. They sent me from one office to another, until I finally walked out and shit-canned those damn pills.”

“What happened after that?”

“At first I went back home. But I kept getting those nightmares and scaring the shit out of everybody. That's also when the headaches started. They were awful. I couldn't find anything to stop the pain except booze. If I drank five or six shots of bourbon, the pain would finally let up and I'd pass out. The last straw was when my wife wouldn't leave my kids alone with me when she had to go to work. She said I drank too much for her to trust me to take care of them.”

“How many children do you have?”

“Three of them. Three little boys.” I could hear the pride in his voice.

“How old are they?”

“Mikey's the oldest. He's five. Then there's Ben—he's three. Aaron's the baby; he's only nine months. He was born during my last deployment. In fact, all three of them were born while I was overseas on deployments.”

“When did you see them last?”

“About two months ago. Annie will let me see them anytime I want, but I don't like them seeing me like this. And it's too hard on me when they keep asking me to come home and crying when I leave.”

“Tim, I need to ask you a serious question.”

“Shoot.”

“How badly do you want to go home and be with them?”

“Father, I would do anything, anything at all, to go home.”

“Even if it meant being hospitalized for a while?”

“Fuck yeah!” he exclaimed, and then he blushed. “Sorry about my language.”

“Don't worry about it. It's not like I've never heard the fucking word before,” I said, grinning at him. And he smiled back.

“Look, I've got some connections. I think we can get treatment for you—treatment that will actually work—so that you can go home to your wife and family.”

“Father, if you can do that, then me and my wife and kids will be in the front pew of your church every Sunday.”

“You don't have to do that. Like I told you, we're here to help people, not to proselytize and drag people into church.”

At this point, I stood up and again offered Tim my hand. He took it in his, and this time the grasp was firm and seemingly more confident.

“I've got to go. There are other people I need to see. But I'll be back tomorrow morning, and we'll get started on this. In the meantime, if you need anything, just ask one of the sisters.”

“I don't know how to thank you for this. You've given me more hope than I've had since I got back.”

“That's what I'm here for,” I said, smiling as I walked back around the canvas curtain.

On the way back to the rectory, I stopped and had a word with Sister Joan.

“Our new marine needs to stay here in the morning. I've got some work that I need to do for him.”

“I'd already figured that out. After all, he's a marine.”

I looked at her curiously. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Father, you may not realize it, but you definitely have a thing for marines. Not that you don't try to help everyone, but when it's a marine involved, you seem to go above and beyond the call of duty.”

“I can't help it, Sister. I've always had tremendous respect for the Marine Corps. There was even a time when I actually considered becoming one of them. Unfortunately my vocation got in the way of that.”

“Not that I want you to leave or anything, but why didn't you become a Marine Corps chaplain?”

“Frankly, I didn't know if I could make it through boot camp.”

“But chaplains aren't required to go through boot camp.”

“Sister, there is no way that I could work with those men without having gone through what they went through.”

“No. I can't see you doing anything else.” And she smiled at me.

I decided to stop in at my office before heading back to the rectory. As I had feared, there was a huge stack of mail sitting on my desk, awaiting my attention. And if that weren't enough, I knew I'd probably have twice as many e-mails waiting for me as well. I was about halfway through the stack of mail when Sister Joan knocked on the door frame of my open door. Behind her, I could see a tall, strikingly handsome man of about my age.

“Father, this is Detective Conner McMahon of the metropolitan police. He is asking for information about one of our clients.”

I stood up as the detective maneuvered his way around Sister Joan and into my office.

“I'm Father David Colucci. I'm the curate here at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.” I offered my hand, which the detective took into a firm but not bone-crushing handshake.

Standing across my desk from me, the detective was even larger than he had appeared standing behind Sister Joan. He had dark, almost black hair, and the two most beautiful, deep blue eyes I had ever seen on a man. His face was handsome in a rugged way, and I could tell even with the heavy jacket he wore that underneath was a well-cared-for, muscular body. All in all, Detective Conner McMahon was a stunning figure of a man. I would bet that many a felon would give up after seeing just the size of him. I sat down, indicating one of the two chairs in front of my desk that he was standing between. He sat as well, but on the very edge of the seat, almost as if he was sitting at attention. I had seen this behavior before among the former marines I had dealt with in this very office.

“Well, Detective, I'm glad to meet you. Would you mind, before we get started, if I asked you a question?”

He seemed taken aback by my request. I guessed that he was more used to asking questions than answering them. But, I guess to be polite, he nodded his head.

“How long were you a marine?”

He gave me a look of shock before replying, “Ten years. How does that matter?” His answer showed annoyance.

"It really doesn't matter; it just helps me know you better. In my work here, I deal with a lot of former marines, unfortunately. Many of them whom have been deeply psychologically wounded."

"And I need to talk to you about one of those former marines."

"As you are probably aware, much of the work we do here is of a confidential nature, some of it under the seal of confession. So I'm not sure how much I can discuss with you. Is this former marine suspected of criminal activity?"

"No, I'm here to serve a material-witness warrant and take this man into protective custody. We believe that this man has vital information concerning the commission of a serious crime."

"So you do not believe that this man had anything to do with the crime?"

"No, Father. We do, however, believe that he has information that can lead us to the apprehension of the persons who committed the crime."

"What is this man's name?"

"Timothy Brian Shelton. Do you know him, Father?"

The name of our newest resident hit me like a blow to my solar plexus.

"Yes, I know him. He has only just come to us seeking help. I can tell you this, he is in an extremely delicate psychological condition. It is my intention to have him placed in a psychiatric hospital tomorrow for treatment of what is obviously PTSD, along with possible traumatic brain injury."

"Are you a doctor, Father?"

"I am a licensed clinical psychologist. That gives me the ability to diagnose his psychological condition and arrange for his hospitalization."

"Look, Father. Let me lay my cards on the table. I know that Mr. Shelton has been homeless for a number of months. He's been living on the streets and sleeping in an alley off Fifteenth Street. That alley was the scene of a recent murder. We believe that Mr. Shelton witnessed that murder and can tell us who committed it."

"Unfortunately, given his condition, without evaluation and treatment, his testimony would be completely useless in a court of law. Any defense attorney with even a modicum of

experience would shred any testimony he gave from a witness stand in open court. So it is truly in the interests of justice and the Metropolitan Police Department for you to let us get treatment for this man before you try to interrogate him.”

“Believe me, Father, we have no intentions of interrogating Mr. Shelton. We merely want to talk to him and find out if he knows anything about the murder.”

Detective McMahon seemed extremely earnest in his desire to track down the killer. I wondered why.

“Can I ask another question?”

“I'm from upstate New York and did my boot camp at Parris Island,” he said, smiling.

I returned the smile. Detective McMahon had a sense of humor, after all.

“Thank you. I'm learning more about you. More, actually, than I intended to ask. The question I wanted to ask is who was murdered in the alley. Obviously, it must be someone of some importance to bring a detective of your caliber here to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.”

“Actually, yes. The victim's name was Chang Wu, known on the streets as T.J. Chang. He was the leader of the North Side Dragons, a gang heavily involved in the manufacture, sale, and distribution of crystal meth on the north side of town. We believe that he was gunned down by the leader of a rival group calling themselves the Twelfth Street Crew who are trying to make a name for themselves and expand their own drug trafficking into the Dragons' territory.”

“Look, Conner. Is it all right for me to call you that?”

“Sure, Father. It's my name, after all.”

“And my name is David. About the only people around here who call me 'Father' are the sisters. I've tried to get them to just call me 'David,' but it's harder to change them than it is to get the former marines to stop calling me 'sir.’”

“I know. It took me six months after I got out of the corps to stop calling everybody 'sir.’”

“Okay, Conner. Now that we have that out of the way, I can let you talk with Mr. Shelton, but I need to be present for the interview.”

“Can I ask why, David?”

“Because, as I told you before, his condition is truly delicate. I've seen men in his condition put under stress, and it throws them right into a profound catatonic state. If that were to happen, it could take literally years to pull him out of it.”

“You've got to believe me. I don't want to see something like that happen any more than you do. First of all, because he's a brother marine. Secondly, because he's in the condition that he's in due to his service to this country.”

“You forgot the third reason, Conner.”

“What's that?”

“Thirdly, you need the information that he potentially has, and it could become locked away from you forever.”

“You're right. There is that.”

“Sorry. I'm just trying to keep this discussion honest.”

“To tell you the truth, I don't think I've ever in my life had an honest discussion with a priest before.”

“Just couldn't bring yourself to confess all the times you masturbated when you were a teenager, huh?”

At this, Conner's face turned a lovely shade of dark red, making him even more handsome, if that was possible.

“And I'm not about to now either. Besides, when I was sixteen, I figured out that I was gay and left the church for good.”

“Given that discovery and the way the church has dealt with young, adolescent gays, I don't blame you at all. Of course, I still don't tell the truth all the time either.”

“Well, unless you're messing around with the altar boys, that would be about all you'd have to confess.”

“Trust me, I have no interest in the altar boys. Besides, most of them are girls these days. But the days that I would have been interested in adolescent males disappeared when I grew out of adolescence.”

Conner's eyes opened wide at this statement. And I could almost see the gears in his brain moving and reconnecting until he looked at me and asked, "Then I take it that these days you are far more interested in grown men?"

Unfortunately, one of my character defects is that I allow my mouth to run before my brain is even in gear. Basically, I had just told a police detective that I was gay, if he was able to read between the lines. And given how obviously intelligent Conner was, along with what he did for a living, he didn't miss it.

"When I was an altar boy, it was the altar boys who messed around with each other. We neither needed nor wanted 'priestly involvement.'"

I said, "If any of that was going on when I was an altar boy, I never knew anything about it. And I would have been way too scared to get involved anyway."

"Well, that was an interesting little trip down memory lane. What do you say we go and have a little discussion with Mr. Shelton? And table this one for another time."

"You know, Conner, you are very good at your job. Too good. I feel like, if I talk to you any longer, I'm going to end up confessing things that I'll wish I hadn't."

"That's too bad. I was kind of hoping that we could talk some more. Maybe over coffee sometime or maybe lunch. I'd like that."

"Strangely enough, I'd like that as well."

"So I can call you?"

"Anytime."

We left my office, and I led the way to the quiet room, where we found Tim Shelton lying on his cot, coiled up in the fetal position. This was not in any way unusual, given the type of psychological hell that so many of our residents lived with on a daily basis. I walked over to the cot, leaned down, and gently touched Tim on the shoulder. He turned his head and looked at me, but it took several moments before any recognition appeared in his eyes.

"Tim, it's David. Do you remember me?"

"Yes. You're the priest who's going to help me get home."

"Yes, Tim. That's me. Tim, I've brought a friend who needs to talk to you. His name is Conner, and he's a police detective. He thinks you might have witnessed a crime, and he needs to

ask you some questions about it. Do you think you can talk to him? I'd really appreciate it if you would."

"Yeah, okay. I'll talk to him."

At this, Tim uncoiled himself and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Tim, I'm Conner. I can see from your tats that you were a marine. So was I. Where did you serve?"

"Iraq and Afghanistan both."

"I was in Iraq in the first war."

"So you know what it was like."

"Some, but I think you guys have it a lot tougher than we did."

"What is it you need to talk to me about?"

"I understand that you were sleeping in an alley off Fifteenth Street."

"Yeah, I was until the night some guy got killed and I moved to the roof of the old icehouse."

"It's the night that the guy was killed that I want to talk to you about. Do you remember that night?"

"I can't get it out of my mind. It caused me really bad flashbacks for a couple of weeks after it happened. That's why I came here. I heard on the street that maybe I could get some help here."

"Tim, did you see the guy get gunned down?"

"Fuck yeah. They were only about twenty feet away from the refrigerator box I was sleeping in."

"So you saw everything that happened?"

"Yeah, I saw it all. These two cars drove into the alley from opposite directions. One was a black Cadillac Escalade, the other one was some kind of big old sedan. Looked like an old Pontiac or Chevy."

"What about the guys? How many were there?"

"I only saw two. One was this Chinese-looking guy who got out of the Escalade, and the other was this huge black guy who got out of the sedan. They stood there arguing for a few

minutes, and then the black guy reached behind him, pulled out a gun, and shot the Chinese guy right between the eyes. Then the black guy got back in the sedan and hauled ass out of there.”

“What did you do?”

“I hauled ass out of there too. I didn't want to be there in case more Chinese guys came looking for the one who got killed, and maybe would want revenge. Besides, by that point I was so locked up in a flashback that all I knew to do was run.”

“You said the black guy was huge. What do you mean? Was he tall?”

“No, he wasn't no taller than me, but he was really fat. Guy must've weighed at least three hundred pounds.”

“Tim, you got a good look at him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you remember him if you saw him again?”

“Oh fuck! I can't get his fucking face out of my mind.”

“Thank you, Tim. You've been a big help. We might need you to testify if this thing comes to court. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yeah, I think I can. David, is this going to interfere with me getting help to go home?”

I looked over at Conner, who gave me a slight shake of his head.

“No, Tim. It's not going to interfere with getting you back to your wife and little boys. Believe me, that's the most important thing to me and to Conner.”

“Yeah, man. We want to get you home more than anything,” Conner assured him.

“Conner? Anything else?”

“No. I've got everything I need,” Conner said, closing the small notebook in which he'd been taking notes throughout the questioning. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“Okay, Tim. We'll leave you now to get some rest, but I'll see you in the morning just like I promised.”

“Okay. Uhh...David? Thanks again for helping me.”

“No problem. Thank you for helping Conner.”

“Yeah, buddy. Thanks for your help. And I hope you get well and go home really soon.”

With that, Tim lay back down on the cot and curled back into the fetal position once more. Conner and I walked back to my office. This time, rather than sitting behind a desk, I sat in the other chair next to Conner as we talked.

“I take it from some of your questions that you have a suspect in mind.”

“Yeah, I do. And Tim pretty well confirmed that. The leader of the Twelfth Street Crew is a guy named Marvin Johnson, better known on the street as 'Fat Marvin.' Like Tim said, Marvin comes by his name honestly, but I would guess him to be closer to four hundred pounds.”

“So you don't think all of this is going to interfere with Tim's treatment?”

“I don't think so. We've got pretty good forensic evidence, plus now, with Tim's eyewitness account, I think we can put Marvin away permanently. How long do you figure Tim's going to be hospitalized?”

“There's no way to tell. Each soldier or marine is different. It depends on what they went through and how it affected them. I figure Tim's probably worse than most, given he went through five tours of duty.”

“Five?”

“That's what he told me. Three in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. I figure he's going to have to spend at least six months in the hospital. But at least his wife and little boys can visit him.”

“How many kids does he have?”

“Three little boys. One is five, one is three, and the youngest is nine months.”

“Shit! His wife's got a lot to handle.”

“Yeah, my mom had trouble with the three of us, even with my dad around.”

“So you've got two brothers?”

“Yes, both of them younger than me. Tony, that's my next youngest brother, owns a garage and has two boys, while Vince, my youngest brother, just graduated college and got a job teaching high school and coaching wrestling. I just got back from visiting him today. He had to have surgery several years ago because he developed testicular cancer.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he's fine. I'm sorry. I'm rattling off about all this family stuff, and I'm sure I'm boring you to death.”

“No, not at all. I'm really interested. I am an only child. The only brothers I ever had were my brother marines.”

“I'll bet your parents are proud of you, what with your military service and being a police detective.”

“Yeah, except it's only my grandparents.”

“And do they know you're gay?”

“Fuck no! I never felt a need to tell them, especially since I don't have a lover or anything. Actually, the only place I'm out is at work. I got hired because I was gay. Ain't that a kick in the ass?”

“How did that happen?”

“Because of a lawsuit, the city was forced to put in this diversity-in-hiring program. That's how I got hired. I tricked with a gay cop one night, and he sort of recruited me, you might say. Of course, my time in the Marine Corps helped a lot too. It got me my gold shield, made me a detective earlier than most guys, because they count my military service as part of my seniority. Do your parents know?”

“No. There is nothing really to know.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Well, you know that priests take a vow of celibacy. No matter who I'm attracted to, I'm not allowed to do anything so it really doesn't matter if I'm gay or straight.”

“You haven't been a priest all your life.”

“I might as well have been. I decided I wanted to be a priest when I was thirteen.”

“You mean you've never had sex? Not even in high school?”

“No. I went to an all-boy Catholic high school. All I did was to drool over the other boys for four years. But I wouldn't admit I was doing that to myself, much less anyone else.”

“So you've hid out in the priesthood to avoid dealing with your sexuality.”

“No! It's not like that at all!” I could hear a lot of anger in my voice.

“No? Then what is it?” Conner practically growled at me.

"I love my work! I love helping people!" I could feel myself getting angrier and angrier.

"You could help people all you want. You don't need that dog collar around your neck to do that."

"There is more to it than that. I love God. I love serving him. I love helping people to learn that God loves them and accepts them no matter who they are or where they are on their journey in life."

"But what about *you*? Who loves *you*? Who puts their arms around you and holds you when everything around you turns to shit?"

"My faith and my God are of great comfort to me."

"What? God comes down and holds you in his arms? The last guy who told me *that* I was transporting to the state mental hospital."

"Oh, so now I'm not just a coward hiding out in the priesthood, I'm psychotic as well!"

"No! I didn't mean that!"

"Then what did you mean?"

"Don't you ever get lonely? Don't you ever want somebody around who you can share all the pain and heartache that this work brings?"

I looked into his beautiful deep blue eyes and saw more concern for me than I think I'd ever seen from anyone before. I couldn't bring myself to lie to him, no matter how badly I wanted to. It was like those eyes were looking deep into my soul and would know.

"Lonely? I get so damn fucking lonely sometimes that I curl myself up into a ball and cry myself to sleep. I told you I just got back from visiting my youngest brother. That's not the whole truth. I was visiting my brother and his husband. He's gay, and a couple of years ago he married his lover, who was also on the wrestling team."

"But gay marriage isn't legal in this state...yet."

"I didn't mean that it was a *legal* marriage. It was a religious one."

"You mean they found some clergyman willing to marry them?"

"Yeah. Me."

"*You* married them? Couldn't you get in a lot of trouble for that?"

"I could be thrown out of the church if the archbishop ever found out."

“Why did you do it?”

“It was because of the way they looked at each other. You could almost touch all of the love between them. How could I deny them God's blessing on their relationship? I truly believe that if Jesus were alive today, he would have happily performed the marriage for them.”

“Then I've got to ask you again—what about you?” This time, Conner's voice was gentle and loving.

“I don't know. I always figured it didn't matter. I figured I could never find someone who I could love that fully and who would love me. But what about you? Why don't you have someone?”

“I did. He was another marine. He was killed in a training accident. The helicopter he was riding in crashed, killing everybody on board. That's why I left the Marine Corps. I couldn't take life in the corps without him. I swore I would never fall in love again.”

“I take it you've kept that vow?”

“Yeah. Now I'm into deeply meaningful relationships of an hour or two's duration, names optional. Very optional.”

“That sounds as lonely as my life.”

“It fills a need.”

“No, it doesn't. Not really. Sex can be an expression of love, but it can't be a substitute for it.”

“This from a virgin. And a virgin priest, no less. What do you know about any of it? I've had love. It fucking tears you apart when you lose it. Pardon me if I choose not to ever go through that pain again.”

“I heard an old saying one time that there is no love without pain, but the greatest pain is to never love.”

“And on that note, I'll take my leave. I've got to get back to the station house before my shift ends, so I can write up my report and we can get an arrest warrant for Fat Marvin.”

“Yeah. I'm exhausted. I need to go to bed. I had a long drive getting back here, and it's getting late. I have to say Mass at six a.m.”

“Tell me something? Are you going to pray for me at Mass?”

“If you want me to, I will.”

“I guess it couldn't hurt. By the way, you still want me to call you for lunch?”

“Yes, but I'll make a deal with you. You don't question my vocation, and I won't question your sex life.”

“Okay. It's a deal.”

On my way to the rectory and to bed, I stopped into the church upstairs. This was the time that I liked being in it the best. Except for a three floodlights, one over the altar, one over the altar and statue of the Virgin Mary on the right side and the statue and altar of the Infant of Prague on the left side as well as the flickering vigil candles in front of each of them, the church was in complete darkness. I made my way up the long main aisle, genuflected before the tabernacle, and then went to the right to the side altar of the Blessed Virgin and began to pray.

Well, Mother, here I am again. I've got more people to add to my list again. Thank you, of course, for how well Vince is doing, and thank you for sending someone like Drew to be so good to him. I pray also for you to keep Tony and his family in good health and happiness. The same, of course, for Mama and Papa. Please help all the sisters who do such good work here to remain steadfast and constant in your love and protection. Tonight, I have someone special to pray for healing for. Please help Tim to heal from his wounds of war, and send him back to Annie and his sons, who love him so much. While we're on the subject of healing, I ask your healing and protection for Detective Conner McMahon, even though he'd probably laugh at me for taking him at his word and praying for him, but no matter what his sins, he's a good man who hurts because he loved too much. Take away his pain of loss and help him to find someone to love him again.

I took one of the wooden sticks and lifted one of the candles. I got up off my knees and made my way out of the side door of the church over to the rectory and then finally to bed. Even though I was tired, I couldn't fall asleep immediately. The thought of Conner and our discussion kept coming back to me. Something about it bothered me, but I just couldn't put my finger on what it was. Finally I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Morning came too soon, as it usually did. I got up, showered, and hurriedly dressed and headed back over to the church, using my key to enter the sacristy where I began vesting for Mass. Because it was the ordinary time of the church year, the stole and chasuble I put on were a deep green. I guess it was a good thing that I liked the color green, because it was worn more often than any other liturgical color in the church year. Only for the four weeks of Advent did I get to wear my favorite color—blue, which was the new liturgical color for that season before Christ's birth.

I'd almost finished vesting when I heard running steps on the staircase outside, and then the door burst open and the two O'Brien twins, Timmy and Tommy, bounded into the room.

“Good morning, Father!” they both exclaimed, almost at the same time.

“Good morning, boys. You'd better hurry and get vested. Mass has to start on time, or you know Old Mr. Miller will go complaining to my boss, and I'm not going to get in trouble because of two boys who spend too much time playing around on their way here.”

“Ahh, Father! It was Timmy who started it!” Tommy, who was the younger of the two by about ten minutes, complained.

“Was not!” Timmy asserted.

“Boys! Boys. I don't care who it was. The issue here is not *why* you were late, but *that* you were late, and that has to stop. Okay?”

The two boys hung their heads and very quietly mumbled, “Yes, Father.”

I reached out both of my hands and ruffled both of their heads of red hair, noticing how soft they were. A sudden, unbidden thought went through my head. *I wonder what Conner's hair would feel like? Would it be as soft?* I blushed as I wondered where such a thought had come from. Surely, I couldn't possibly be attracted to Conner McMahon! No way! Not with his cynicism and bad attitude!

The boys quickly vested, and I grabbed my chalice and pulled the hanging rope next to the door, which rang a small bell out in the church to let the congregants know that the priest was entering. The two boys preceded me to the altar, where we all bowed in obeisance before the tabernacle, and I stood behind the altar after setting my chalice on it and started Mass.

As I led the congregation in making the sign of the cross, I looked out at the five or six people who usually made up the congregation at these early weekday masses. That was, with the exception of the six Sisters of Notre Dame who worked in the shelter and were not here this morning for some reason. However, I was startled to see someone standing in a pew about halfway back in the long nave of the church—Conner. If you had asked me the one person in the world who I believed I would never see in a church, much less at six o'clock in the morning, his would have been the first name that came to mind. I had no idea what he was doing here, and to be honest, I suddenly felt butterflies in my stomach. Stage fright? I didn't know. But having Conner here made me nervous for some reason I couldn't even begin to explain.

Luckily, I'd said Mass enough times since my ordination so that it was pretty much automatic. The Mass flowed from the Collect of the Day to the readings and gospel through the offertory and into the Consecration. The Consecration was, of course, the most important part of the Mass. The time when I, as a priest, turned bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ while still it still appeared under the guise of bread and wine. It was after the Consecration that the bread and wine were distributed to the congregation in Holy Communion. I wondered what would happen then. Would Conner come forward with the rest of the congregation to receive Holy Communion from my hands? I had a fairly good idea that Conner had probably not been to confession for a very long time—if ever. Catholics, as a rule, did not go to Communion until they had confessed their sins and had received absolution from a priest. It was, in fact, considered a mortal sin to receive Communion while you still had an unconfessed and unabsolved mortal sin on your soul I had the right to refuse Communion to anyone who I knew was not in a “state of grace,” something I had never done. And since I did not know the state of Conner's soul, if he came to the railing desiring Communion, I would give it to him.

But the issue never came up. During Communion, Conner remained in his seat and did not come forward. This bothered me as well. Did he remain away because he felt himself unworthy or because he felt he wouldn't be welcome? I hoped we'd have a chance to talk about this, but

after I quickly unvested and hurried back into the church, he was gone. Very strange behavior for a man who obviously had little or no use for religion of any kind.

I went back to the rectory and found Father Henry Mason, the pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and my mentor, having breakfast.

“Good morning, David. I left your breakfast in the skillet, and there's coffee. Just pour yourself a cup.”

“Good morning, Henry. How are you feeling?” While, at forty-seven, Henry was a young man for a priest—most of whom were in their late fifties to early eighties—Henry had suffered a heart attack six months before.

“Fine, David. How is your brother?”

“Doing very well.”

“And his partner? What's his name again?”

“Drew. He's coming close to the end of his studies to become a nurse-practitioner.”

“I have to admit, there's one thing I don't understand about a relationship between two males. How do they put up with each other's need to dominate?”

“While I can't speak for all male-male relationships, from what I've seen with Drew and Vince, there just seems to be a very natural ebb and flow. At times, one will be dominant, usually because the issue is one that partner is better at, and then at other times the other will be dominant. Actually, the issue I think that causes males the most problem is not dominance but protectiveness.”

“Really? I wouldn't have guessed that.”

“If you stop to think about the fact that males nurture by protection, the problem comes when they are both trying to protect each other. However, that natural tendency came in very handy when Vince was so sick. The way that Drew cared for, nurtured, and protected Vince was incredible to watch.”

“Well, as you well know, I think the church is dead wrong in its definition of marriage. Marriage is not just for procreation. Without the love and nurturing of each partner by the other, there is no love to give whatever children may be produced. We surely have seen enough divorces to know that by now.”

“My problem with the church's stand is that I believe it is selfish.”

“What do you mean?” asked Henry.

“I believe that the church views marriage only as a means to procreation, because that's how they think they will fill pews. The more babies, the more 'pledging units.’”

“David, I'm surprised. I don't think I've ever heard anything that cynical out of you before.”

“I'm sorry. But it is what I believe. Especially after sitting in seminary classes about how to get money out of people. Oh, they might have sugarcoated it with biblical quotes, but it still came down to huckstering—pure and simple.”

“Yes, unfortunately the church is a business, and we have to run it like one, because otherwise there would be no beds in the church basement or food to feed to the men and families who end up there. That's the reality of trying to do God's work in a consumer economy.”

“All I know is that there has to be another way. A way so that the church doesn't end up being so hypocritical and mercenary.”

“I think, if you look closely at history, you will find that the church has always been somewhat hypocritical and mercenary, because so has society, and the church—purely human institution that it is—is part of the society in which it exists.”

“Maybe it's time for humans to start growing up. By the way, I want to ask you something. Are you at all familiar with the police detective named Conner McMahon?”

“Ahh...Conner. Fascinating man. A man with a very deep core of pain and anger that I have never understood. Brilliant, unbelievably brilliant, but I'm afraid his anger is going to get him killed someday. Why do you ask?”

“Because I met him for the first time last night. It seems that one of our new residents witnessed a murder.”

“That is most unfortunate. Is he in any danger?”

“He could be, but since I intend to get him admitted to Bennett Psychiatric Hospital, and Conner knows about this, I think he should be quite safe.”

“Yes, one thing I will say for Conner, he will keep that man safe, no matter what it takes.”

At this, I started to chuckle, remembering Conner's visit to early Mass this morning. Perhaps that was why he was there. I figured when I went down to the shelter to arrange for Tim's hospitalization, I would probably find Conner keeping watch over him.

"What's so funny?" Henry asked.

"I was just thinking about what you said, that Conner would keep him safe no matter what it takes, and evidently, that included showing up at Mass this morning."

"Who showed up?"

"Conner. He sat about halfway down the nave and he didn't come up to Communion, but he was there the entire time."

"That is indeed strange. I know for a fact that Conner has no use for religion. He's even sworn to me that there is nothing on the face of the earth that could get him to go to church—ever!"

"Well, there must be something on the face of the earth, because I promise you that he was there this very morning."

"Now isn't that the damndest thing I've ever heard of. Maybe we should have a roofer check the roof of the church for cracks."

"Why?"

"Because I would've bet my life that it would've collapsed on Conner as he sat there."

At this, Henry picked up his coffee mug, refilled it, and headed off to his office, chuckling to himself the whole time. As for myself, I finished my breakfast and put the dishes in the dishwasher, then headed over to the shelter. The first person I ran into was, of course, Sister Joan, who was manning the front desk.

"Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Sister. I noticed that none of you were at Mass this morning. Is something wrong?"

"Well yes, there is."

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry. I must've forgotten in all the confusion last night to tell you that I got a call from our motherhouse yesterday. Sister Lillian Marie, one of our oldest nuns, passed away, and we will all be attending her funeral this afternoon."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. How old was she?"

"She was ninety-three. She had been in the order since she was a young girl of eighteen."

"My God! She'd been a nun for seventy-five years!"

"Yes, we had just celebrated her diamond jubilee last month. Believe it or not, some of her family came here for it. A younger brother, who was in his seventies, from California, and a younger sister just a couple of years younger who came from Minneapolis. Her sister is a member of the Sisters of Mercy, and her brother is a priest in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles."

"It sounds as if she had a long and happy life."

"Indeed she did. She taught in a Catholic girls' high school for over fifty years. There will be at least twenty sisters there from a number of different orders who had been her students."

"It would seem that Sister Lillian had a talent for recruitment."

"On the contrary. Sister Lillian was extremely shy and withdrawn all of her life. A number of the sisters who had been her students came to visit her during the jubilee, and I had a chance to ask them how Sister Lillian had helped them to find their vocation. Each of them told me basically the same thing. It was not anything that Sister Lillian had said; rather it was the look on her face of almost total joy when she spoke of her life as a nun."

"The best way to lead—by example."

"Exactly. You know, I remember a priest who came to say Mass at the motherhouse when I was a novice. He made a statement that I have remembered all my life. He said, 'Be careful how you live. Your life may be the only Bible someone will ever read.'"

"How very true. Places a tremendous amount of responsibility on all of us. However, Sister Joan, I think anyone would be very blessed to ever read the Bible that is *your* life."

She gave me a shy smile, and I saw her blush, something I had never seen before. "Thank you, Father. But I think you could have said that of any of our sisters here."

"I certainly can. I don't think we ever express enough how blessed we are, how blessed our residents are, to have you all here."

“Speaking of residents, that police detective is back talking to Tim. He came quite early this morning.”

“Earlier than you think, Sister. He was at my early-morning Mass as well.”

“I was not aware that the detective was Catholic.”

“I wasn't either.”

I don't think Conner may have realized it either.

“Well, Sister. I guess I'd better go back and see what the detective is up to with our resident.”

I walked over to the quiet room and stuck my head around the canvas partition. What I saw brought great joy to my heart. There sat Conner and Tim, laughing and joking with each other, doing what most soldiers do together—telling war stories—though I could tell that most of the stories had more to do with carnal conquests than what went on during battle. It was the most relaxed that I had ever seen Tim or Conner. I wondered if I would ever be able to reach a level of friendship where Conner could relax that way with me.

“Sorry to interrupt, boys, but I need you, Tim, to come to my office. We've got some work to do about getting you placed.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?” Conner asked.

“Since I figure you will anyway, come right ahead,” I said.

“Now, I'm not *that* pushy.”

“Somehow I just don't believe that.”

“Okay, I am pushy at times, but it's kind of a hazard of the job,” Conner admitted sheepishly.

“Don't worry about it, Detective. I'm used to it. Many of our residents are quite pushy all the time.”

They both followed me to my office, where they sat down. I sat down as well and grabbed my phone, dialing the direct line for a social worker in the admittance office that I had worked with on numerous occasions. She answered the phone on the first ring.

“Admitting. Callahan.”

“Cassie. Good to hear your voice. This is Father David.”

“So, Father? What have you got for me today?”

“A young marine with PTSD and possible TBI and SA problems.”

“God! That sounds familiar. Like I don't have about twenty of them already.”

“That's because you all are the best.”

“Yeah, don't I know it. I take it he has no insurance?” Cassie asked.

“No, but I know how you guys squeeze the DOD.”

“Yeah, we've got them by the balls, and they know it.”

“He does have a family. A wife and three little boys. We'd like to see him finally get to go home. He's already had five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

“Probably should've been pulled from the line after the second tour.”

“You know it doesn't work that way in the Marine Corps.”

“Tell me about it. All that machismo, adrenaline, and testosterone and too fucking afraid to ever admit there might be something wrong.”

“You said it. So when can we get him in?”

“How critical is it?”

“Imperative.”

“Well, as usual, you are in luck. I just had a bed open up this morning. What's his name?”

I rattled off his full name, date of birth, and Social Security number.

“Okay. You'd better bring him over now. Empty beds get grabbed up fast.”

“We'll bring him right over. And, Cassie, thank you. You're a doll!”

“That would work better, David, if you weren't a priest and could date!”

She hung up the phone, laughing.

“Tim, you're in! Go grab your stuff. They want you there yesterday.”

Tim got up and rushed out of the room.

“Again, you don't mind if I tag along?” Conner asked.

“No, I don't mind. In fact, you can drive.”

“Just what I was going suggest.”

"I figured. Somehow I just can't see you being comfortable in a car being driven by a virgin priest." I grinned at him.

"Actually, any car being driven by anybody but me."

"Oh, one of *them*. I might have known."

"One of who?"

"Male control freaks."

"Remember, I'm a cop. Comes with the badge."

"And what was your excuse before you became a cop?"

"I was a marine."

"I give up. This one I'm not going to win."

"But you're awfully cute when you try."

I looked at him in consternation, but he just sat there grinning at me.

"I thought we put your sex life off-limits?"

"I wasn't talking about me."

"You know something, McMahon, you are incorrigible."

"And I think you like that about me. So tell me, what was all that alphabet soup you were spouting with the social worker?"

"What? You mean PTSD and all that?"

"I know what PTSD is. What was all the other stuff?"

"I told her that he had a possible TBI, that's a traumatic brain injury, and possible SA, or substance abuse, problems. When he was home and he would get headaches, he would self-medicate with booze until he passed out to get away from the pain. Self-medication with alcohol is typical for males. Unfortunately, it doesn't take away the problem and, instead, adds the additional problem of addiction."

"You really do know this stuff, don't you?"

"It's what I was trained for."

"I can't believe the church would spend all that money to train you to deal with homeless guys."

“The fact is, they didn't.”

“Who did it, then?”

“I did. I got my PhD before I entered the seminary. And the homeless are not my only job.”

“What else do you do?”

“I'm the therapist for all the priests in the archdiocese. Just like Dr. Chandler is the therapist for your police department.”

“Yeah, except nobody ever goes to him unless they're forced to.”

“And you think the priests come to me because they want to?”

“You mean they're ordered to come and talk to you. Why?”

“Typical problems. Loneliness that leads to alcoholism. Loneliness that leads to emotional and, sometimes, physical involvement. About the only thing I don't have to deal with is marital issues, but there is one married priest and his wife living in the archdiocese. I've never met them, and I sure hope I never have to see them professionally.”

“A *married* priest! How is that even possible?”

“He was originally ordained as a priest in the Anglican Communion, and when he converted to the Roman Church, he was allowed to remain a priest and to remain married.”

“I've never heard of such thing.”

“It's not very common. I would say in the United States there might be, at most, two hundred of them. All of them either former Lutherans, former Anglicans, and a few former Methodists.”

“Well, I'll be damned!”

“You just might be. Is that why you didn't come up to Communion this morning?”

“Yeah, I know the rules. I haven't been to confession since I was a kid, and I've done a lot of things in my life that I'm not exactly proud of.”

“You know, God doesn't give a damn about any of it. He loves you. You're one of his children, and just like a father's should be, his love is unconditional. You don't have to love him back. And he keeps right on loving you. The thing that people don't understand is that there is

nothing you can do to make God love you less. But there's also nothing you can do to make God love you more. That's what *unconditional* means.”

“You mean, even though I had another guy as a lover, God still loves me?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did God let Steve get killed? Why would he do that to me if he loved me?”

“God did not *let* Steve get killed. God doesn't sit there and decide who's going to live and who's going to die. God doesn't make decisions for us. He gave us free will. The right and responsibility to run our own lives, make our own decisions, make our own fuckups. And we are constantly fucking up. Especially when we start thinking that what we're doing, we are doing for God.”

“Don't you think that what you're doing, you are doing for God?”

“I'm not that egotistical. I don't believe that I have the strength or the level of faith necessary to help God with anything. What I do, I do for other people. I don't do it so that God will love me more, because I'm a priest and all. I do it because I love God and I know that he loves me. I just try to spread around a little of that unconditional love that God has given me. That's all I'm trying to do.”

“Well, you seem to do a good job of it.”

“Not as good as you might think. Sister Joan was telling me this morning about one of their sisters who in her life drew twenty other women to a life of serving God as nuns who she was not in any way charismatic. She was, in fact, very shy and retiring all of her life. But the women she drew to devote themselves to a religious life did so because of what this sister did—not what she said.”

“So? You haven't been at this all that long, have you?”

“No, I was only ordained a few years ago.”

“See. You've got lots of time. By the time you're done, I'll bet you will've changed thousands of lives. Hell! They'll probably make you a fucking bishop!”

“That, thank God, will *never* happen!”

“Why not?”

“Well, let's start with the fact that there are a lot of things that the church teaches that I don't believe in. Then add the fact that I am no kind of businessman. That pretty well knocks me out of the running, since the church is a business. A *big* business. And the only way to move up in it is to *love* running a business. And I fucking hate it!”

“Feeling the way you do, why the fuck did you ever become a priest in the first place?”

“I've already told you. I wanted to help people. That's why I'm happy doing what I'm doing. Why did you become a cop?”

“For really stupid reasons. I wanted to help people, too. I wanted to do something about seeing that people get justice in this world. But all I ended up doing is throwing scumbags in jail and watching them play the legal system, and they're back out on the street before I even get the fucking paperwork done on them.”

“Then why do you stay?”

“Because I need a job and I'm not trained to do anything else.”

“That's bullshit! You stay because somewhere deep down inside you, there is still a glimmer of hope that you can actually make a difference.”

“Trust me, there's nothing down inside of me except anger and pain.”

“Those are only there because you're too scared to open up and let somebody love you enough to heal all that anger and pain. Maybe you think you're not worthy of somebody loving you. Or you don't believe that there is anybody out there who would do that for you.”

“Don't you see the fucking long line of people who want to volunteer to do that?”

“You don't need a line. You just need one. And how the fuck are you ever going to find him when you keep pushing everybody away?”

“Are you volunteering for the job?”

“I can't. You know that.”

“Would you? If you could?”

Fortunately I didn't have to answer, because at that moment, Tim came back with all his stuff, ready to head to the hospital. Conner drove us in his city car. On the ride over, Conner didn't say a word. I talked with Tim about the kind of treatment that he would receive at the hospital. I think it helped to relieve some of his fear, which was only natural, given what he was

facing. When we got to the hospital, Conner parked right in front of the front door and then put this sign in the window of the car stating that he was an OFFICER ON DUTY.

"I wish I could get one of those. It sure would come in handy when I have to visit the sick." I smiled at Conner.

"Well, a badge and a gun come with the sign. Somehow I don't think you'd be comfortable wearing either one." And he wasn't smiling as he said it.

We got Tim inside the hospital, where we were met by Cassie Callahan. She briefly hugged me and then took Tim to her office to start filling out all the paperwork. Conner and I went back to the car and headed back to the church, with Conner, of course, still driving.

"Conner?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm just worried about one thing—will Tim be safe here?"

"What do you mean?"

"What about the guy Tim saw commit the murder? Do you think he might try to kill Tim? To keep him from testifying?"

"No chance of that. I guess I didn't tell you. Because of Tim's identification, we arrested the asshole last night, and he was to be arraigned this morning for first-degree murder. That automatically remands him into custody. No bail."

"So why did you come this morning? I thought you were guarding Tim to make sure nothing happened to him."

"No, I came to tell him that he had helped us get another bad guy off the streets. I wanted him to know that he didn't have anything to be afraid of from them. I also figured that it might make him feel better about himself. Help him think that he wasn't just some kind of mental case."

"That was very nice of you."

"I can be nice—when I want to." And with that, he gave me a wink and a rather-leering grin.

"I repeat, *you* are incorrigible!"

"Nope. I'm just a marine on a mission."

“And what mission is that?”

“No way. That would be telling, and this mission is strictly on a 'need to know' basis.”

“Okay, Marine. You keep your secrets. Just remember our deal.”

“Oh, I remember. Isn't going to matter, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“I just have the feeling that we won't need the deal much longer.”

I had no idea what was in his mind. The only thing I figured out was that his mission had something to do with me, and I had the feeling that it was going to make my life very, very *complicated*.

Chapter Three

For the next several months, Conner and I met for lunch at least once a week, and every once in a while, Conner would show up at my early Mass. He even got to the point that he would come up for Communion. I will admit, a deep thrill went through me the first time he came forward. Of course, having not been to Communion in what was evidently a very long time, Conner was not familiar with the changes the church had made in how Communion was distributed. Rather than the priest putting the wafer of bread on the communicant's tongue, they could now choose to receive Communion directly into their hands. That first day, when I reached Conner, he automatically leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth. Having never seen his eyes closed, I was struck by how long and beautiful his eyelashes were lying against his skin. However, I also quickly realized how horribly sinful it was for me to be noticing how beautiful Conner was and not thinking about my priestly duties. That had been happening more and more as Conner and I spent more time together.

During this time, my sleep was not peaceful either. Sometime in the night, I began to dream. It was the kind of dream I couldn't remember having since I was a teenager going through puberty. But rather than being, like those had been, indistinct people, this dream had only one person. And this person was not indistinct at all. I knew immediately who it was. In the dream I was lying in the arms of a beautiful, muscular, masculine man, and when I looked up into his face, it was Conner's. In the dream, he held me tightly to him and leaned down and kissed me, the kiss at first soft and gentle, and gradually growing more passionate. He gently slid on top of me, and I looked up into his face, which had an intense look on it, a look that was directed straight at me.

I love you, David, the dream-Conner said, his voice husky with emotion and desire.

I tried to answer him, but I couldn't. I found I couldn't speak at all. I reached up to touch his face, but suddenly it was like he began to levitate, his body rising off mine into the air, until

he was far away from me. Lying there, I looked down at my body and found myself dressed in the vestments that I wore to say Mass. I awoke with a start, tears of frustration streaming down my face and feeling hardness in my groin that I knew I would have difficulty getting rid of.

I was sweating profusely and knew that it would be a while until I could get back to sleep. I decided to take a shower and then went downstairs to the huge kitchen and made myself some tea. I sat there thinking about what had happened. I had known since puberty that those indistinct people in my wet dreams had been males, and somewhere down inside of me I knew what that meant, but I had pushed that knowledge aside. Because of my desire to be a priest, which meant that I would be celibate, it didn't matter whom I was attracted to. At least, at the time, I hadn't thought it would matter. Now, I wasn't so sure.

What the dream made very clear to me was that I was strongly attracted to Conner. Despite my naïveté, it was not just friendship I wanted from him. I wanted something more—something far more intimate and binding between us. And that was wrong! For so many reasons. First of all, I was a priest. I had no right to that kind of personal relationship. More importantly, I had no right to involve Conner in a relationship that could have no future—for either of us. I didn't know what to do. How was I to deal with these feelings that I'd discovered within myself?

The easiest way to deal with them was precisely how I had always dealt with them—push them down as hard as I could and try desperately not to think about them. However, spending so much time with Conner didn't make that at all easy. I thought that I was being more successful at it than I evidently was. That was proved the day that Conner and I came back from lunch and Mary Catherine Jones, my friend the Episcopal priest, was waiting for me. I introduced them, and I noticed that Mary Catherine gave him a funny look. Conner went off to his police duties, and I showed Mary Catherine into my office.

“Quite a hunk. He's a former marine, isn't he?” Mary Catherine asked.

“Yes! How could you tell?” I asked, amazed.

“Oh, two of my brothers are former jarheads. 'Once a marine, always a marine,' as they say. It's just something you learn to tell.” She laughed, and then she got serious and asked quietly, “How long have you two been in love?”

I looked at her in shock.

“Uhh...we're...we're not!”

“Okay. That was your natural defensive reaction. You're allowed one of those. Now, how long have you been in love with him?”

I hung my head. She was right. I'd lied to her, and that wasn't something I was proud of.

“Probably from the moment we met.”

“But you haven't done anything about it, have you.” She made it a statement—not a question.

Again, I looked at her in shock.

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I didn't waste all my time in seminary. I got a master's degree in social work first. Just the looks you two give each other tell me everything. So I take it you're the one who can't bring yourself to give in to your feelings?”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

This was, without doubt, the strangest conversation I'd ever had, not to mention the most uncomfortable.

“How long are you going to hold out?” she asked.

“I don't know how to answer that. According to the church, forever.”

“I've never met anyone who actually let the church tell them who to love, or how.”

“It would be a sin.”

“According to some people. Not according to others. To my mind, it would depend upon the desire and goal.”

“What do you mean?”

“If it was because two people were in love and wished to express that love in a physical way, the way that their physical natures all but demand, I don't find it sinful. After all, it was God who created our physical beings and nature. Now, if it was just for sexual gratification, which would be the using of another human being, that I would find sinful.”

“What about the belief that physical expressions of love are only permissible within marriage?”

“What about it? Your church doesn't offer marriage to two males, so how could you possibly express your love within marriage? Rather an unfair double bind, to my mind. You can

only have sex within marriage, but marriage isn't offered to you. I don't see that as something that God would create. Only humans—fallible humans—could come up with that nonsense.”

“Even if marriage were permitted, I'm a priest. I'm not allowed to marry.”

“Only because you're a Roman rite priest. Were you an Eastern rite priest, you would be.”

“Do you have an answer for everything?” I laughed.

“When it comes to watching two people being miserable, I do.”

“Okay, I'm not going to deny it. I don't know what to do. I love him. I want to love him fully and completely, but the only way I can do that is to leave the priesthood, and I'm not sure that I want to do that.”

“Well, actually, you don't have to. You just have to leave the Roman Church.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“You heard me. My bishop would welcome you.”

“Even with a male partner?”

“Didn't you hear? The Episcopal Church consecrated a bishop in New Hampshire with a male partner.”

“Yes, and now the entire Anglican Communion wants to disassociate from you and the Anglican Church in Canada from the group because of your Consecration and the Canadians' performing gay marriages.”

“Ahh! You do read the religious news. So what's that got to do with anything?”

“Well, what happens if your church decides to undo what it's done in order to stay within the Anglican Communion?”

“That will never happen. Besides, you can't undo a Consecration.”

“No, but you can depose a bishop and take away his faculties.”

“Only through a trial, and there must be cause for that. Even the presiding bishop can't go outside our strictures.”

“Okay. You win. But me? Leave the church? Convert? I don't think so.”

“Okay. I'm not trying to proselytize here. It's against our traditions. I just want you to know there's a way out, if you want it. Besides, right now you don't need it. You two can be lovers

without your leaving the church. You just can't marry, and the church won't marry the two of you anyway.”

“But sex outside of marriage is still a sin.”

“True...but stop and think for a minute. Sex outside marriage is sinful because it presupposes that two people are able to marry and choose not to. You don't have that option, and not just because of your priesthood. Because the church doesn't marry two people of the same sex. So I don't see anything the two of you do within the context of loving one another to be sinful. Besides, according to the traditional view, your desire to do so is already sinful.”

“Are you sure that was an MSW you got and not a degree in canon law?”

“Actually, I do have one. As well as a JD.”

I stared at her in amazement.

“You're a lawyer?”

“Well, I don't practice anymore.”

“When did you start college—at age eight?”

“No. I was eleven.”

I just stared at her.

“You're not kidding, are you?” I finally said.

“Nope. Graduated high school when I was ten,” she said.

“Oh my God! I knew you were smart, but...you're a genius. A prodigy.”

“Yeah, yeah. Please don't remind me. Let me tell you what it's like to be in grad school with people who are ten years older than you are. Seminary I really enjoyed, because I wasn't allowed to go until I turned twenty. So what are you going to do?”

“I don't know. I really don't. I know this can't go on the way it has. I think it's driving both of us crazy. I know it's driving me crazy. We try to hide it from each other, but...well...it's not helping me. However, there are two complications in this we haven't talked about.”

“What's that?”

“Family. Conner's grandparents, who raised him, have no idea that he's gay.”

“Hmm...and you don't know how they will take the son they raised being gay and sleeping with a priest. Yep, that's a sticky one, all right,” she admitted.

“That's only the half of it. Then there's my family. My parents are very traditional Italians. Leaving the church would be almost unforgivable to them.”

“Not to mention being gay and having a lover,” she said.

“No. That one wouldn't be such a problem. You see, my youngest brother is gay and has a lover. Actually, I guess the term would be 'husband,' since they're married.”

“Oh, they went to Massachusetts?”

“No. They aren't legally married. Only religiously. I married them.”

“Oh my God! You did that for your brother, but you won't do it for yourself? I don't believe you!”

“Well, I don't know a priest to marry Conner and me.”

“I'd do it! In a heartbeat!”

“Yeah, and if you were Roman, I might take you up on it.”

“Well, yes. There is that.”

“Look, Mary Catherine, I know that you're trying to help me, but I don't know that there is any help for this. It's something that I'm just going to have to work out.”

“Well, while you're 'working it out,' I want you to think about something. I want you to think about how often, in anybody's life, true love comes along. I want you to think about who it is who sends that love to us. You remember the scripture. In the Gospel of John, it says 'God is love and he who abides in love, abides in God and God in him.'”

“That scripture has been dear to me for a very long time, Mary Catherine. I do believe that all love comes from God, but...” I faltered.

“But what? God wouldn't send love to you? God wouldn't send love to you for another man? Do you really believe that?”

“No. I can't say that. Not without making myself a hypocrite. I've seen that love in my own brother.”

“Then why not you? Because it's inconvenient? Because you think it isn't compatible with your life? I have to tell you, I don't think God much cares about how inconvenient life becomes for us. His plans are often incompatible with our own. That's what faith is all about.”

“You almost sound like my making love with Conner would be some kind of sacred act,” I objected.

“And wouldn't it be? Think about it, David. Unfortunately, organized religion has a long history of antisexuality. Mostly because it's something that's uncontrollable, and if there is one thing that organized religion loves, it's control. It was not for fun that the founding fathers put that part in the Constitution about 'separation of church and state.' It was because they knew how much religion tries to control the life of a nation and its citizens. The church isn't just antisex; it's antidemocracy as well. They don't want people voting unless they vote the way they are told to vote. They want the 'inerrant word of God' to be the law of the land, not those laws made by legislatures. And of course, it's their individual interpretation of the word of God that they want enshrined in our national laws.”

“So knowing all of this, why did you want to become a priest?” I asked, confused at her seeming antireligious feelings.

“Well, first of all, because I don't think religion has to be that way. Mine isn't. Or at least, it's working on not being that way. Secondly, because I wanted to reach out and help people. Probably the same way you wanted that. Of course, there's always the part about wanting it because 'girls weren't supposed to do that.’”

“Yes. I figure that last one played heavily in your decision.”

“Not as much as you might think. So now, what are you going to do?”

“I don't know... Think about what you've said, that's for sure.”

“You might try praying over it, not just thinking about it.”

“Typical clergy response!” I quipped.

“Yep! What did you expect? I've got to get out of here. I've got so much to do, and then there's the evensong service tonight at six.”

“You guys still do vespers?”

“One night a week. It's such a quiet and beautiful service. Hey! Why don't you come? You could come without your collar, and you could even bring Conner with you.”

“I'll think about it, okay? I'll ask Conner if he wants to go.”

“Okay. No promises. I get it.” She smiled as she got up and headed for my office door. “Pray about the other stuff, David.”

“I will.”

She stopped, her hand on the doorknob, and turned back.

“In the 1970s, a man by the name of Gordon Merrick wrote a gay novel titled *The Lord Won't Mind*. The title comes from a line in the book where the two lovers' housekeeper states how she feels that God deals with the two of them loving each other. She says, 'If it's love, the Lord won't mind because there's so much hate already.'”

And with that, she was out the door and gone.

* * * * *

The next time we had lunch, Conner brought up Mary Catherine.

“Your friend, the woman priest, seems to be quite a character.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don't know, just a feeling I got when I met her.”

“You don't know the half of it. She started college when she was eleven, and has degrees in social work and law. As well as a doctorate in canon law.”

“Shit! I take it she's not married.”

“No, she's not. Why would you say that?”

“Because straight guys don't tend to marry extremely intelligent women.”

“Why not?”

“Because they spend their lives competing with other guys. They don't want to have to do that when they get home.”

“We don't compete with each other.”

“The hell we don't! We've been competing intellectually and verbally since the night we met.”

“That's not true. We're friends; we like to discuss things.”

“Yeah, as long as they fit within certain parameters. And you're always the one who sets the rules on what those parameters are. But I understand it. I know I scare the hell out of you.”

“That's not true! I'm not afraid of you. I don't think you have it in you to ever hurt me.”

“Bullshit! And I could prove that, except for your rule that we can't talk about your vocation.”

“What has my vocation got to do with anything?” I said angrily.

“It's got every fucking thing to do with it! Because of it, I'm too afraid to tell you how I feel and you're too afraid to give me an honest answer about how you feel!” Conner growled.

“I don't understand any of this! I have no idea what you're talking about!” I practically shouted.

“Don't lie to me! You know exactly what I'm talking about!”

We had gotten quite loud, and I noticed that almost everyone in the restaurant was looking at us. I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. I knew I needed to get out of there, to get away from Conner so that I could calm down. I got up and ran out of the restaurant. I started walking very fast toward the church. Not fast enough, however, because I suddenly felt a hand grab my arm and stop me. The next thing I knew, Conner dragged me into an alley and pushed me up against a wall with his hands on both sides of me, pinning me there.

“You are not going to run away! You're going to stand there for once in your goddamned life and listen to me!” Conner growled, his face only inches from mine. I could see the fury in his eyes, the blue darker than I had ever seen it. For the first time since I'd known him, I was afraid of him. I nodded my head, agreeing.

“I don't want to scare you.” Conner's voice and eyes softened.

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to tell you what I'm feeling. I didn't want this. I fought against it until I couldn't take it anymore. I swore I would never let this happen again. But no matter how hard I fight it, it just keeps burning inside me. Oh fuck it!”

And with this, Conner pressed his mouth to mine. I resisted at first, but when his tongue began licking at my upper lip, I couldn't help myself. I opened my mouth, and his tongue flowed into it. I reached up, putting my hands on his face, not to push him away but to hold him there. The kiss became deeper and more passionate. I could feel his body pressed to mine, our erections rubbing against each other through our pants. Finally, when we were almost completely out of breath, Conner pulled back and looked into my eyes.

“I love you. I love you so goddamned much, I ache inside.”

Looking into his eyes, I could see all the love he had for me. I couldn't bring myself to lie.

“I've been fighting this—fighting you. I don't know how to deal with it. I don't know what's going to happen. I swear to you I will try never to hurt you.”

“Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?” Conner said, grinning.

“You are an incorrigible asshole.” I laughed.

“But you love me that way, don't you?”

“I don't know. All right. Yes, I guess I do.”

“No more fighting, okay?”

“No. No more fighting.”

Conner leaned forward and kissed me. This time the kiss was gentle, but full of love nonetheless.

“I'll call you about lunch tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

Chapter Four

I waited for more than a week for Conner to call for us to go to lunch, but the call never came. I didn't know what to think about that. I had spent a number of long, sleepless nights trying to decide on how I was going to handle being in love and being a priest. It kept coming back to my vows, and I couldn't get past them to what I really wanted. I began to feel that Conner had decided that loving a priest was more trouble than it was worth. In the meantime, I spent my days working with the homeless, wounded veterans.

I had walked into the hospital that afternoon exactly one week to the day from when Conner had kissed me in that alley. Tim was sitting out in the family waiting room talking to a beautiful young woman with blonde, curly hair with a baby on her lap. A woman who seemed to hang on his every word and answer him most often with gentle, loving smiles. I knew immediately that this had to be his Annie. It was actually very easy to figure out because there were also two little boys running around and playing like little boys do.

“Hey! Father David, come on over and meet my family.”

I did as he requested, sitting down next to him on the couch. Immediately the two boys gathered and stood staring at me, I'm sure trying to figure out who and what I was. Since the family was not Catholic, I wasn't sure if the boys had ever seen someone dressed all in black and with a white clerical collar around his neck.

“Father, this is my wife, Annie.”

The young woman shyly offered her hand, which I took gently into both of mine. I looked into her worried, tired eyes and realized how heavily the stress of the whole ordeal of Tim being hospitalized, leaving her to work and take care of her three young sons as well as deal with all the medical and psychological complications of her husband's illness, had weighed on her.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you. I'd heard so much about you from Tim. However, when he described you, he did not do you justice. You are far more beautiful than he told me," I said gently. She gave me a shy smile and blushed at my compliments.

"Believe me, I'm the one who is so glad to finally meet you, so I can thank you myself for the miracle you worked for Tim."

"I didn't do anything except get him the treatment he needed and deserved. No marine, especially one who has been in combat, should ever have to sleep on the streets of this country—a country whose freedom he fought for."

"But no one else seems to believe that. When you go to them for help, you feel like you are bothering them or interfering with something they feel to be much more important."

"It is a great shame that people like that are allowed to work for the government and be paid with our tax dollars. They should never be allowed within fifty feet of any of our wounded soldiers. And when I am elected president..." I finished with a smile, and both Annie and Tim laughed at the joke.

"God, Father! I wish you were running for president. You'd sure as hell have my vote and probably the vote of every injured service person in this country."

"Unfortunately, there are still people in this country who hate Catholics. And Jews and Muslims as well. I doubt sincerely if I could get elected. And of course, there is that little rule that Pope John Paul II promulgated a number of years ago that said that priests were not allowed to run for or serve in political office. I guess he figured we have enough on our hands with our congregants. And while I don't agree with everything the church teaches, I think that is a pretty good rule. Priests need to be helping their parishioners face the challenge of day-to-day living. They need to be teaching and working for social justice, not political ends. I will climb down off my soapbox now, because I'm sure I'm boring both of you. So tell me, Tim. How are you feeling?"

"A lot better than I've felt in a very long time. The drugs they're giving me seem to help, and they don't make me feel all groggy like the other ones. I guess about the only thing that has surprised me is how well the people here take care of you. Every one of them has been more than nice. They are all very caring. And I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it is to be surrounded by a group of guys again who understand exactly what I'm going through."

“Tim has even made a couple of friends here. Other marines who are being treated for the same thing that Tim is going through,” Annie interjected.

“That is so good to hear,” I said. “I can see changes in you already, after only a few months.”

“Oh, I can too. In fact, one of the doctors said that if Tim continues to improve like this, they will let him come home for weekends.”

“The only thing I'm worried about is maybe having to testify in that trial,” Tim said, and I could see that it did upset him.

“Detective McMahon seems to feel that you're testifying probably won't be necessary. Have you asked him about it?” I asked.

“No, I haven't. I want to, but I haven't seen him to ask.”

“He hasn't been to visit you lately?” For some reason, this caused me a burning knot of fear in the pit of my stomach. This didn't sound like Conner at all. Maybe there was a good reason why Conner had not called me or visited Tim, but I wanted to know what it was. I did not have a good feeling about this.

“No, he hasn't. Not for over a week. I just figured he's got a lot more cases to worry about.”

“I'll tell you what, Tim. As soon as I leave here, I'm going to track him down and see what is going on. In fact, I'm going to go do that now, because I need to get back to the church.”

“Uhh, Father, there was one thing that Tim and I wanted to talk to you about,” Annie said.

“What is it?”

“None of the boys have been baptized. We were wondering if you would consider doing it?”

“Unfortunately, it's not that simple. When the church baptizes as an infant, it requires that the parents vow to bring the children up in a Catholic faith. Since neither of you are Catholic, before I could baptize the boys, I would have to bring you into the church, and that requires a course of study on the Catholic faith that you would both have to go through.”

“But that's perfectly fine with us, Father. Neither of us belong to any religion at all. In fact, there's a good chance that neither of us have been baptized either,” Annie said.

“Annie, what religion were you raised in?”

“Whichever one was closest to where we lived at the time, and we traveled around a lot.”

“What about you, Tim?”

“Pretty much the same thing, except my dad demanded that we go to a church where there was a lot of 'hellfire and damnation' preached. I grew up hating religion and wanting nothing to do with it because I hated all that guilt they tried to dump on you.”

“What about when you were in the corps? Did you go to any religious services?”

“Yeah, I usually went to either Catholic or Episcopalian. I kind of liked all the ritual, and nobody preached about guilt. Both the Catholic and the Episcopalian chaplains were really nice guys, and they seemed to really care about all the grunts.”

“Okay, Tim. I don't want you to think that I don't want you to convert to Catholicism, but I think you owe it to yourself to investigate both churches before you make a decision. I have a good friend who is an Episcopal priest. I'd like to send her to talk with you, so you can make a more informed decision.”

“*Her?* She's a woman priest?” Annie seemed to be very interested when she heard this. It made me angry yet again that the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century didn't treat women the way the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, and the United Church of Christ did. I knew women clergy who were tremendously spiritual who offered a ministry very different from that of males. If you're a woman, it would seem to me that you would be more comfortable discussing your difficulties in life with someone who most likely had gone through them herself. Just as I knew that the marines and soldiers whom I dealt with were more likely to open up to me because I was another guy and would understand where they were coming from.

“Her name is Mary Catherine Jones, and she's stationed right here at the Episcopal cathedral downtown. Now I really need to get back. I want to find out what's going on with Conner, and some of the residents are waiting for me to run a discussion group for them. So, Tim, you keep doing what you're doing, because it seems to be working. And Annie, you just keep loving him and coming to see him with the boys, because I can tell that's the best medicine for him.”

I then left the hospital, but before I got back in my car, I pulled out my cell phone and called the office number that Conner had given me. The phone was answered by another detective, and I identified myself and told him that I was looking for Conner.

“Well, Father, I'm sorry to tell you this, but Conner's not here and isn't likely to be for several more weeks. He's in the county hospital. He went and got himself shot by a suspect he was chasing.”

“Can you tell me what room he's in?”

“Uhh...it says here he is in room four fifty-one in the west wing.”

“Thank you, Detective. You've been most helpful.”

“You say you're a priest?”

“Yes, I run the shelter and the soup kitchen at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. My name is Father David Colucci.”

“Well, if you ask me, Conner could sure use a priest in his corner.”

“That's exactly where I intend to be. Thank you again.”

I closed the phone and got in the car and drove straight to County General. I think Conner would have approved of my driving on the way over there, considering that I was driving as fast and as recklessly as he seemed to.

As I entered the hospital, I said hello to some of the doctors and nursing staff whom I knew. Because I dealt with the homeless, they didn't have medical insurance, and so County General was the only hospital that they could be treated at.

I made my way to the fourth floor in the west wing and found Conner's room. I walked in and looked at him lying in the bed. He appeared to be asleep, and that gave me a chance to study him as he lay there. He was still an incredibly beautiful man, but it was obvious that something really bad had happened. He looked tired. His face looked drawn and just a little gaunt. I could see an immense number of tubes and wires running to machines that surrounded his bed and provided a constant beeping noise as background.

Since I already knew he had been shot, I looked to see where, and it quickly became apparent that he had been shot in the chest and in the leg. The chest was covered with bandages, and I could see surgical staples coming out from underneath the bandages, meaning surgery had

to be performed. His right leg was outside the covers and wrapped in bandages. I wasn't as concerned about the leg as the chest. I knew that surgery in the chest cavity was never a good sign, since the major organs sustaining life, except for the brain, were housed there. Either they'd had to operate on his lungs or his heart. I immediately reached into the pocket of my suit jacket and pulled out a small, leather-bound prayer book that contained the rite of the prayers for the sick and the rite that used to be called "extreme unction" or the last rites.

I reached into the other pocket of my jacket and pulled out a small satin stole that was reversible, with purple on one side and white on the other. From my inside breast pocket, I pulled out a small, round silver box containing a cotton ball drenched in the oil of the sick, so that I could anoint Conner as I prayed for his recovery.

I stood there quietly murmuring the prayers as I anointed Conner's forehead, then his chest, along with both of the palms of his hands. Coming to the end of the rite, I raised the sheets and blankets covering his foot so that I could make the final anointing of it. This, however, woke Conner up, either from the movement of the covers or perhaps because his foot was ticklish.

Conner looked at me, standing there with a small stole around my neck and the silver box of oil and the prayer book in my hands. I saw a confused look cross his face.

"Well, Father! I had no idea you had a kink for feet. I'll have to keep that in mind for later." His voice was rough, and he almost seemed to growl this statement.

"Well, I can see that you're doing just fine. Still as incorrigible as ever."

"Hey! It wasn't me who sneaked into *your* bedroom to play with *your* feet."

"I was not *playing* with your feet. I was anointing them with holy oil."

"What? You think I'm dying, so you sneaked in here to give me the last rites? Making a last-ditch effort to save my soul from going to hell?" He grinned impudently at me.

"For your information, we do not call it the last rites. Haven't for almost thirty years. You're a little behind the times, Detective. It's now called the "sacrament of the sick," and it's for anyone who has a serious medical condition. I guess getting shot twice falls into that category."

"For your information, I was shot three times. You must've missed the bandage on my upper arm, where one of the bullets grazed me."

I stood there staring down at him. I've always been good in a crisis. I can hold it together very well and do what I need to do. Unfortunately I have this tendency to fall apart after the

crisis is over, which is what, to my shame and embarrassment, I proceeded to do. I started sobbing uncontrollably, my body shaking and my knees growing weak. That was when I felt a hand grab my wrist as Conner pulled me toward him and down across him, until I could feel strong, muscular arms go around me as Conner held me while I cried.

I had no idea how much pain the weight of my body was causing Conner. I tried to pull out of his arms and once again stand away from him, but it was a futile effort. I knew that he was muscular, but I had no idea how incredibly strong he was. He not only wouldn't let go of me, but he proceeded to murmur comforting words in my ear while he gently kissed me all over the side of my face. Finally he took two fingers and forced my chin until I was looking directly at him. It was then, using his hand on the back of my head, he pulled me toward him until our lips met in a very deeply loving kiss. A kiss that started out gently but quickly became deeply passionate. Conner's tongue reached out and licked against my upper lip, and without thinking, I opened my mouth so that his tongue could invade and possess me.

The taste of him, the scent of him, flowed into me, and soon my hands were on his face so that he couldn't pull away. Not that it appeared that he wanted to. I suddenly noticed whimpers and growls. The whimpers from me as I gave myself totally to him—damning the consequences. The growls came from him and sent chills down my spine as he took everything I gave and possessed me in a way that no one ever had in my entire life.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the kiss ended, and I pulled back to look into his deep blue eyes. I didn't know what I expected to find there, but what I found rocked me to my core. Those eyes were totally filled with love and desire and were directed only at me. The emotions were so strong, I had to turn away because they were too much for me to deal with. Conner, however, was having none of my hiding. He reached up, took my face in his hands, and forced me to look again into his eyes. This time, however, they were filled with laughter and merriment as he grinned at me.

“Well, I guess that answers *that* question.”

“What question?”

“How you really feel about me. By the way, where the fuck did you learn to kiss like that?”

“I've never kissed anyone else like that in my entire life.”

“Hmm...your mouth has incredible natural talent. I wonder what else we could use that talent for?” He laughed to himself.

“Nothing! We can't do anything like this again.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because it's wrong, that's why!”

“Wrong for who? Wrong for you because you just found out everything you were missing? Wrong for you because some cop isn't good enough for you? Or maybe it's wrong for the fucking archbishop, because all he can get are altar boys?” Conner's anger was vicious and hot.

“It's wrong because I took a vow to God not to become involved with anybody.”

“That's a fucking lie right there. You took a vow, all right, but it wasn't to not get involved with anybody. It wasn't even a vow not to fall in love with anybody. It was a vow not to get married! Well, I've got news for you, sweetheart. Two boys ain't allowed to get married in this state, so you couldn't break your vow even if you wanted to—and I think, if that fucking kiss was any indication, you *really* want to smash that vow into about a million pieces right about now.”

“That's not true. I don't want to break my vow. I want to remain a priest.”

“Well, while you're being so honest, how can you say you are in love with me but you won't fuck me? ”

“*In love* with you? I'm not sure I even *like* you!”

“You don't have to like someone to be in love with them.”

“Yes. *I* do. I have to like them, but most importantly I have to trust them. About the only thing I can trust about you is that no matter what I do or say, you find some way to turn it into a sexual innuendo. Besides that, I've only known you for only a little while. How in the fuck could I possibly be in love with you in that short amount of time?”

“What? You've never heard of love at first sight?”

“That's just crap they write in romance novels. It's not real!”

“Are you sure? Because I swear I fell in love with you the very first moment I saw you. And before you come up with some nasty little retort for that, let me tell you something. Not only have I never had that happen in my life, but you are the only guy I've ever said I love you to.”

“What about...uhh...Steve? Didn't you tell him?”

“No. I was working up my courage to finally say something when he got killed... That's why the fuck I keep telling *you* now. I don't want something like that happening again. I got scared when I got shot that I would be the one dying this time and never get the chance to tell you.”

“Okay, you've told me.”

“Yeah, I've told you. So I guess you can turn around and walk out the door. You don't have to see me anymore. I guess it will take a while to get over you, but I will. See you around sometime.” He said this with so much pain and anguish in his voice that I wished that he had his gun and would just shoot me a few times.

Instead of leaving, I walked closer to his bed. I knew intellectually that I was making the biggest mistake of my life, so I was puzzled why it felt so right.

He looked up at me standing there. “I thought you had to run back to church and go to confession or something.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed and reached out my hand and gently stroked his cheek, feeling the prickliness of the several days of beard growth there.

“No other man in my life ever told me that they were in love with me. In fact, I fully expected *never* to hear those words. But I was always under the impression that if someone ever said that, they would be expecting an answer of some kind.”

“Pardon me, I figured you'd already given me your answer. You know, all those vows and rules and shit.”

“Let me ask you one *very* important question. When you told me you were in love with me, was that coming from your head or your heart?”

“It couldn't have been from my head. I take one look at you, and I can't think. My mind just goes blank.”

“Well...I sometimes have that trouble when I look at you. But the answer I gave you, that was coming from my head. It's how I deal with anything that's emotionally overwhelming to me.”

“So what does your heart say?” His voice was so soft, I could barely hear it, but what I could hear was the fear in it. It took Conner a lot of courage to ask that question. And his courage was something I admired tremendously.

“My heart keeps telling me that I am in big-shit trouble. That my entire life is about to have a hydrogen bomb land in the center of it, destroying everything around it. I don't know exactly when it happened, I just know that when you kissed me in that alley, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was in love with you. I don't know what in the fuck I'm going to do about that. I just know that's the truth.”

“Why do I have the feeling that was just about the hardest thing you've ever had to say in your life?”

“Oh, you mean like you asking me what my heart was saying?”

Conner grinned at me. “Yeah, just like that.”

“Of course it was. The only thing that got me through it was knowing that if I could just get the words out, my reward was that I got you.”

“Well, yeah! After all, I *am* quite the catch. Not everybody gets their own personal cop to love and protect them.”

“That's all well and good, but do you think you can keep yourself from getting shot anymore? I could do without having to give my lover the last rites all the time.”

“See! I told you that's what they were called.”

“No, they're not called that anymore, but let me make something very clear to you. I love you. I'm willing to give up everything I am, everything I love, to be with you. But I won't share you. I ever catch you with somebody else, and trust me, they will be your last rites.”

He reached out his arms and pulled me to him. Again, I felt the warmth and strength of him. “There are some bad things about me. I mean, I'm housebroken and all, but I'm not one for any kind of fucking diplomacy. I say what I think, and sometimes my mouth gets me in trouble, but I'm as loyal as a fucking German shepherd when it comes to somebody I love. However, I don't always play well with others, and I expect whoever says they love me to be just as loyal. Not that I think that's going to be any kind of problem for you. Am I right?”

“No. No problem whatsoever. After all, it took me twenty-eight years to find someone to fall in love with, and for me, love is the whole issue. I mean, not to inflate your ego, because it

certainly doesn't need any inflating, but I do find you incredibly physically attractive. I noticed that from the very first. Actually, I have to tell you that I still can't believe that someone as beautiful as you are would be all that interested in me."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Are you trying to tell me that you don't know what a fucking hunk you are? What? They don't allow mirrors in rectories?"

"No, there are mirrors. And I've looked in them. I know what I look like, and it's nothing like you."

Conner pulled me closer and kissed me. The kiss was strong and deeply passionate. Again, I gave myself to him as completely as I could, returning strength for strength and desire for desire. When he pulled back, I looked into his eyes, and there was no doubt in my mind that were this not a hospital and Conner were not here because of his injuries, he would have thrown me down on the bed, and I would no longer be the virgin priest.

"Do you believe me now? Do you believe how incredibly beautiful you are to me?"

I could hardly answer him because the kiss had literally taken my breath away.

"I only believe that I am when you hold me in your arms and look at me that way."

I was starting to feel truly like a fish out of water. I was someplace that I never expected to be. I didn't know what to do or what to say. I realized that if Conner were not as injured as he was, then there were physical things that I would expect to happen. I just didn't know what to do about them. Finally I figured out that since we didn't have that as a distraction, perhaps it was a good time for us to talk. We had already set one parameter on our relationship—that of fidelity—but there were other things that we needed to talk about as well.

"Conner, what are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About us, about our life together. I mean, I'm not even sure how much 'together' we can have. Your job involves a lot of responsibility, and so does mine."

"Well, the way I see it, we'll just have to be together whenever we can. And I guess most of our time together will be at my place. I mean, I can't see us fucking in the rectory." He grinned at this.

"No, the rectory is definitely out. The bed is way too small."

“Will it freak you out if I come hear you say Mass more often?”

“No. In fact, I would love it if you did. I just wonder, though, considering your well-known hatred of religion, if that won't give our involvement away?”

“Why should it? Maybe, after getting shot, I've had a change of heart about things. That happens all the time.”

“Yes, that makes sense. But let me ask you. What about your friends? Aren't they going to notice when suddenly all your time is taken up and you can't explain why?”

Conner looked at me sheepishly. “That would probably be true if I had any friends.”

“You don't have any friends?”

“No. Friends are dangerous for a cop. Unless it's another cop.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, you meet somebody and you get to know them. And then one night they ask you to come over and hang out, maybe watch a ball game or something, and your friend pulls out some weed and starts smoking it, or he cuts several lines of coke and offers you some. What the hell do you do? You know you should arrest him. You can't do the drugs with him. Trust me, it blows the friendship all to hell. At least with another cop, you know there's very little chance that he's going to pull something like that on you.”

“So, okay, what about cop friends?”

“Do you remember that I told you that I was out at work?”

“Yeah, I remember how envious I was.”

“Well, don't be so envious. That freedom comes with a price.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody comes near me. Nobody asks me to have a beer with them after work. Nobody asks me to come to their house for a cookout on the weekend. Hell! The only things I ever get invited to are funerals.”

“But why?”

“Because they're all so fucking afraid that somebody else will see us together and the rumors will fly all over the precinct that we're fucking each other. They're all shitting in their pants that someone else is going to think they're a fag. That's why.”

“But what about your partner? I'd always understood that cops were very close to their partners. That it was almost like marriage.”

“That's true. Except for the fact that I don't have one. Never did.”

“Why not?”

“Same reason. Nobody will ride with me, because then they'd be 'the fag's' partner.”

“Oh, I thought maybe it was because of your driving.” I grinned at him and gave him a little nudge in the ribs to show I was joking. Unfortunately I forgot he'd had surgery.

“*Fucking shit! Oh fuck!* That fucking hurts!” he screamed out, grabbing his side.

“I'm sorry! I didn't realize...”

“It's okay. I know you didn't do it on purpose. Do me a favor. Hand me that button thing that's clipped to the handrail.”

I found what he was asking for and handed it to him. He pushed the button several times, and like magic his face lost all the signs of pain, and he relaxed back on the bed.

“Thank God for Dilaudid. Best goddamned narcotic they ever invented. Here, put this back on the handrail.”

“Maybe you ought to hang on to it, just in case.”

“Why? You planning on beating on me some more?” He grinned.

“I said I was sorry.”

“I know you did, babe. Just go ahead and put it back. I can't use it again for fifteen or twenty minutes. It cuts off so you can't use too much of it and accidentally kill yourself from an overdose.”

“And yes, I noticed that 'babe,’” I said as I put the button back on the handrail.

Conner smiled at me sheepishly. “You did, huh?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Are you pissed?”

“Not as long as there's nobody else around. In fact, I kind of liked it. Just don't get carried away.”

“I promise. Scout's honor.”

“Were you *ever* a Boy Scout?”

“Sure I was!”

“Really?”

“Really! Uhh...for about twelve minutes; then I found out that what they meant by camping was sleeping on the ground in fucking tents and shitting in the woods into a hole you dug. No sequins! No chiffon! And no mascara!”

I was howling with laughter by the time Conner finished his recital. What was so funny was picturing this huge, muscular butch cop in chiffon, sequins, and eye makeup!

“I think that's the biggest reason I love you,” I said when I finally calmed down. “You always find a way to make me laugh. And that's one thing that's been missing from my life. There isn't a lot to laugh about in my work.”

“Hey! And you think there is in mine? You have to try really hard to find anything to laugh about when you're a cop.”

“Yes, I guess that's true. I guess you and I only see people when they're about at their worst.”

“I've got to tell you something. You were right. There is still a part of me that thinks I can make a difference.”

“Yeah, you were right too.”

“What about?”

“About me hiding out in the priesthood so I wouldn't have to deal with my sexuality. I knew from the time I was thirteen that only boys turned me on. And I knew what they called guys like that and how they treated them. I just didn't want that to be me.”

“Come here... Closer.”

I moved up closer to him on the bed again. He held me in his arms, my chin resting on his shoulder.

“It's like that for all of us, babe. I hid out for ten years in the Marine Corps. I enlisted in the corps because I knew that once I was a marine, nobody would ever dare call me a fag. Not and live. When Steve died, I couldn't even let myself cry, for fear of somebody thinking that we were more than buddies. I trashed the only real love I'd ever known because I was afraid of what other

people thought. When I left the corps, I swore I would never give a fuck what anybody else thought about me. And that worked for me until a few months ago.”

“What happened?”

“I met you. And what you thought of me became the most important thing in my life.”

And with this, he turned his head and kissed me very gently on the cheek. I was very glad that my face was pressed into the pillow behind him so that he couldn't see the tears pouring from my eyes. Tears of joy. Joy that a man like Conner, so beautiful on the outside and even more beautiful inside, loved me.

Chapter Five

I spent the rest of the day with Conner. He wouldn't even let me leave while he took a nap. He told me he wanted to be able to see me when he woke up. There was no way that I could refuse him anything, a fact I'd just as soon he not know, considering the rather prurient ideas he had already.

So I sat and read a magazine that one of the nurses brought me. He was asleep a couple of hours when I heard him cry out. I rushed over to the bed and saw his eyes opened in stark terror. I knew what this was; I'd seen it enough with the former service members who ended up at our shelter.

"Conner! Conner, it's David. I'm here, Conner."

He reached out and grabbed my arm so tightly, I winced in pain. He finally looked up into my eyes.

"I'm sorry. These damn pain meds give me terrible dreams." He loosened his hold, somewhat, on my arm. At least to the point that it wasn't hurting anymore.

"I don't think it's the meds."

"Of course it's the meds. What else would it be?"

"What was the dream about?"

"Somebody shot me."

"Uh-huh, that's just what I thought."

"Why? What is it?"

"Do you remember the closed-off section of the shelter where you met with Tim?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"We call that section the quiet room. It's where we put guys who cry out in their sleep, usually from flashbacks. That's true of a lot of PTSD guys."

“Are you saying I've got PTSD?”

“I wouldn't be the least bit surprised, considering what you've been through.”

“So what? Now I'm going to end up in the psych ward?”

“No. The reason guys like Tim end up in the psych ward is because they don't get treatment until long after the traumatic stress has happened. I do think you need to tell your doctors, though.”

“No. I can't do that.”

“Why not?”

“I can't have something like that in my medical records. They'll bounce me right off the force.”

“You're kidding!”

“No. I'm not.”

“They can't kick you off the force for that! It's not like you committed a crime or something.”

“Let me ask you something. How many of the guys in your quiet room would you trust with a gun?”

That brought me up short.

“Uhh...probably none of them.”

“And with really good reason, right?”

“Well, yeah. But more that they'd hurt themselves than someone else.”

“It doesn't matter. Either way you wouldn't put a gun in their hand, and neither would the city police force.”

“But what happens when you try to go back to work?”

“Probably nothing. I'm sorry to tell you this, but this isn't the first time I've gotten shot in the line of duty. It's the worst, but not the only. And I had the dreams the last time this happened. They went away in a week or two, and I never had them again.”

“So you mean loving you means I have to put up with you getting shot?”

"I'd like to sugarcoat it for you, but it's better that I don't. Getting shot or even getting killed is a reality that all cops live with, and all cops' families do too. So I guess if you can't deal with that, you should get out now before we go any further." He finished talking and looked dejected.

"Oh yeah. Give me an *out* now that I'm so far *in* that there is no way I'm going to walk away from you."

He looked up to see me grinning at him. Then he reached up and grabbed me, pulling me back into his arms.

"Oh God! I was so scared there for a second. I really thought you might be sensible enough to walk away. But I should've known that a man who believes he turns wine into blood and bread into flesh and believes that everyone can be saved couldn't be all that sensible."

"Hey! I don't make fun of your profession, don't you dare make fun of mine!"

He nuzzled my ear and, sticking out his tongue, began to gently lick inside it. I squirmed in his arms from the intense feelings.

"Oh, babe. I'm sorry. You've got to understand. I left the church a very long time ago. I figured out that I could go to church and feel guilty all the time just for being who I was, or I could kick the church to the curb just like it did to me."

"I'm sorry. The church is very wrong about a lot of things. And hypocritical about a lot of others. Did you know that the church used to actually marry same-sex couples?"

"No. You're joking, right?"

He let go of me, and I moved back so that I was sitting on the bed facing him.

"No, I'm not. It was back in the earliest days when Christianity was brought to Rome. It started out as a religion only among the slaves. In order to gain power, however, it had to somehow attract the upper classes. And by the upper classes, I mean males. Women had no power and were looked on as inferior. The church found its way into the upper classes by attracting the gay sons of wealthy and powerful men. But since the church, even then, considered sex outside of marriage a sin, in order to make these gay males acceptable, they married them to each other. Then the sex wasn't sinful, because it was inside of marriage. Of course, once the church gained power, they didn't need to do that anymore, and so they went back to condemning homosexuality as sinful."

"I don't see how you can know that and still remain a priest."

"I have to admit, it's hard at times. But I'm usually too busy taking care of people who need help to think about it. Just like I'm sure it's got to be hard to be a cop and watch people you've arrested, people you know are guilty, end up back on the streets because of some loophole in the law."

"Yeah, you can say that again. That's the thing, I think, that pisses all cops off the most."

Just then, an older man in a white lab coat walked in. I figured it had to be Conner's doctor. I got up off the bed to leave.

"No. Stay. It's okay," Conner said. "This is Dr. Franklin. The guy who patched me up."

"And did a really terrific job of it, if I do say so myself. So, Conner, I see you've called in the big guns. I wouldn't have figured you knew any priests."

"I'm Father Colucci of Our Lady of Perpetual Help."

"Oh, I recognize you, Father. I have treated any number of the men from your shelter."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that."

"I didn't figure you would. Your guys are referred to me for surgery from the triage clinic downstairs."

"Okay, Doc. What's up? When can I get out of here?"

"Under normal circumstances I would send you home in a couple of days, but I understand that you live alone."

"Yeah. So?"

"I don't think you realize how much damage you sustained. It is going to be a while until you can do things for yourself again. You need to have someone staying with you and helping you. I can't consider releasing you until that's arranged."

Conner turned and looked at me pleadingly. I knew what he wanted, but I was scared to think about us practically living together. On the other hand, I knew that Conner needed me, and I just couldn't let him down.

"That won't be a problem, Doctor. I'll arrange to have someone stay with him."

"Good. Then tomorrow we're going to get you out of bed and see if we can get you walking on crutches. That is, if it's okay with your orthopedic surgeon."

"I thought you were his surgeon," I said.

"No, I'm a thoracic surgeon. We needed an orthopod to put his leg back together."

"How much damage was done?" I asked.

"The bullet went through the lung and lodged itself behind the heart. Luckily, it didn't damage the heart, or he would have probably bled out before we could save him."

"Well, to be honest, I'm grateful to you for all you've done," Conner said.

"All in a day's work," Dr. Franklin said and gently patted Conner's leg. "I've got to continue my rounds. I have to see people who really need me."

After the doctor left the room, Conner reached out and took my hand.

"Thank you. Are you sure it will be all right for you to stay with me?"

"I'll work it out. Don't worry about it."

But I was worried. I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to explain to Henry that I was going to be basically moving out of the rectory and going to live with Conner.

"Conner, I'd better go. I need to get back to the shelter and arrange for things to be taken care of while I'm taking care of you."

"Okay, yeah. I understand. You'll come back, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

Conner reached out and pulled me down, sliding his arms around me and kissing me. The kiss started out gentle, but almost immediately our passion for each other got deeper and deeper, until it was all I could do to keep from crawling into the bed with him. I had never known this kind of desire, this need for the touch of another person.

Finally we broke apart, and I reached down and gently stroked his cheek with the backs of my fingers. He grabbed my hand and gently kissed my palm, licking it at the same time. It sent a thrill through me that caused my cock to instantly bone hard, just like I was some kind of horny teenager.

I had trouble walking out of the room, but once I was away from Conner, my hard-on subsided. I got in my car and drove back to the rectory, hoping to find Henry. He wasn't in his office, but I found him in the kitchen.

“David, how are you doing? Come have a cup of tea.” Henry got up and poured me a cup while I sat down.

“I'm doing fine, but I found out today that Conner isn't.”

“Conner, as in Conner McMahon?”

“Yes. He was shot three times by a suspect he was chasing about a week ago.”

“I take it the injuries were bad?”

“The thoracic surgeon told me that one of the bullets went through his lung and lodged itself behind his heart. He was very lucky. The doctor said that if the bullet had hit the heart, he would be dead.”

“Oh dear. I'll have to remember to keep him in my prayers.”

“The doctor also said that he could release him in a few days, except for the fact that Conner lives alone and he needs someone to take care of him, at least until he's stronger.”

“And you, of course, volunteered to take care of him.”

I looked at Henry in shock. “How did you know that?”

“Because I know you, David.”

“So it's okay with you?”

“I will remind you that I handled things around here for twenty years before you arrived. I think I still remember how.”

“Thank you so much. I didn't know what else to do.”

“Of course you didn't. The idea of helping people is what you are all about. That's why I agreed to take you on when you were a deacon. You might have noticed I had never agreed to take on anyone else. You were the first one who applied who reminded me of myself when I got out of seminary.”

“Yes, I knew I was the first...but I thought...”

“You thought I was getting old and tired, right?”

“Yes, I did,” I said, sheepishly.

“That doesn't surprise me in the least. The young, with all their energy, always think that there must be a better way than the way it's being done now. It takes them a while to figure out that the ones who came before them might have had some pretty good ideas after all.”

“Yes, that's true. It tells me I must've been a real pain in the ass for you when I first got here.”

“No. Actually not. I watched you very carefully, and I could see you carefully evaluating everything before you ever asked about making changes. And the ones you came up with were things that even I could see needed changing. But what I loved most about you, David, was that you didn't just come to me with a problem; you always came with a well-thought-out solution for it. Made my job a lot easier, I can tell you. Yes, David, I can see you as a real asset either in the church or in some of the helping professions. As I remember, it's actually *Dr. Colucci*, isn't it?” Henry asked.

“Yes, it is—but Henry, do you see me as leaving the church?”

“If this were forty years ago, I'd say that you would remain an active priest for your entire life. But with what's happened to the church over that time, I wouldn't dare say that about anyone who was under than sixty. I'm not saying this because I want you to leave. That would be a tremendous loss not just for this parish, not just all those men down in the shelter, but to the church as a whole. But, you know, not everyone is cut out to lead a celibate life. And maybe the church is wrong to hold onto such an ancient requirement that came about at a time no one understands anymore. Certainly our Orthodox brothers paid no attention to Rome's rules of celibacy. They just don't allow their married priests to become bishops. Where, with the Anglicans, including Gene Robinson, who's married to his partner, being married is practically a requirement to become a bishop. It seems to work for them. I don't know why those old men in Rome think it wouldn't work for us.”

“Henry, I have to say I'm shocked. I never knew you felt this way.”

“That's because you don't know about Veronica.”

“Veronica who?”

“I can tell you her name now. She's gone to heaven. Died of cancer while I held her in my arms. Veronica Fallon.”

“My God! Were you in love with her?”

“To be honest with you, to this day, I'm not sure. If I was, I didn't love her enough to leave the priesthood and be with her till the end came like she wanted.”

“She had cancer when you met?”

“Yes, and she was bedridden. I met her because I would bring the sacraments to her. It started out being once a week, but soon it was daily. I couldn't stay away from her. You asked if I loved her. I do know that she loved me, loved me in a way that I didn't think was possible—unconditionally. When she was in pain, I would get furious at the cancer, at the fact that I was powerless to do anything about it, furious at God for making her suffer this way. And she would always calm me down. She would let me know that there was no one to blame and that pain was a part of life, as was dying, the thing I was angriest at. She was a beautiful, vibrant, intelligent woman, and there has never been anyone else who I've felt like that about, nor who made me feel loved the way that she did.”

“I take it, due to her illness, you never broke your vows?”

“David, you either know nothing about cancer or you have that blind side that so many young people have that older people do not have sex. There were times when the cancer would go into remission and we would make love for days at a time. I smashed my vows all to hell. But in the end the priesthood won out. Can you believe it? I ended up officiating at the funeral Mass for the woman I had been in love with and lost.”

I reached over and covered Henry's hand, which was lying on the table, with my own as a gesture of comfort.

“I'm sorry for your loss. But why did you share this with me?”

“Because I want you to think about it and figure out if I made a mistake. Was I wrong for staying in the priesthood? Or was I wrong to not marry her for whatever time we had? You know the choice I made, but I think this is a question that you really need to find your own answer to. In the meantime, go and take care of your friend, Conner, and the sisters and I will continue to run things here until you decide where it is you need to be.”

“Thank you, Henry. As usual, you've given me a lot to think about.”

I decided to head back to the hospital, so I stopped on the way and drove through Dunkin' Donuts and picked up two large cups of coffee and two jelly doughnuts. After all, considering all the jokes about it, what else would you get a cop but coffee and doughnuts?

When I walked back into the room, Conner was awake watching CNN. I grabbed the rolling tray table and wheeled it over so that it was next to Conner's bed. I then put the two covered cups on the table along with the bag of doughnuts.

“Holy shit! Is that real Dunkin' Donuts coffee?”

“Not only that, but there are two jelly doughnuts in that bag.”

“A priest bearing gifts. I like that.”

“Well, there is one thing you're not going to like.”

“What's that?”

“One of those jelly doughnuts is mine!”

Conner started laughing, but then I heard what I knew was a groan of deep pain. I quickly handed him the button controller for his Dilaudid pump. He pressed it several times and then lay back on the bed as the narcotic took effect.

“Fuck! You know that old saying, 'it only hurts when I laugh'? Well...please don't make me laugh. It just about kills me.”

“I'm sorry. You know the last thing in the world I want to do is cause you pain. I was so afraid when we were kissing that the weight of my body against yours was causing you pain.”

“I won't lie to you. It did cause me some pain, but it was entirely worth it just to have you in my arms finally.”

“Well, don't do that anymore! We've got plenty of time to do that once you're well.”

“Babe, there are a lot of other things I want to do with you when I'm well.”

“And believe me, even though I don't know anything about them, I want to do them with you. I just want to make sure that we don't do anything to delay your recovery. I know how much you love being a cop, and I want you back out there doing what you love.”

“Even if it means that this could happen again?”

“Yes, even if it means this could happen again.”

“Get over here where I can touch you!” Conner growled at me. I was standing with the tray table between us, and so I moved to the other side of the bed.

“You mean here?”

“Right the fuck there.”

He reached out and pulled me halfway into the bed. His arms went around me, and his mouth sought mine. It seemed that each kiss became more intense, and this one was no exception. His tongue pushed its way into my mouth, and it was like he was counting my teeth

with it, making sure I had them all. I think he actually tried to find out if I still had my tonsils. What really surprised me, however, was the very hard lump I felt under the sheets, pushing up against me.

“Even with all those drugs, you can still get a hard-on?” I said in surprise, pulling my mouth from his.

“Babe, don't you get it? That happens anytime that I'm close to you. I love you so much, and I want you so much. I've got to tell you, I've got this thing for wolves. I really love them. There are some things about them that most people don't know. Like the alpha dog—the leader of the pack—chooses one mate for life. He makes love to her and marks her with his scent, and he will kill any other male wolf that tries to go near her. To be honest, I guess I like them because I'm so much like them. I'm pretty much an alpha male in my own way.”

“Yes, I certainly know that, the way you growl and give orders.”

“Some of that I learned in the Marine Corps.”

“What rank were you, anyway?”

“I was a master gunnery sergeant. And a real badass, if I do say so myself.” This last part was said with an obnoxious smile on his face.

“I'm sorry. I find it difficult to blame the Marine Corps for all of your personality defects.”

“Well, maybe not all of them. Some of them come from being a cop.”

“I know, I know. Big butch marine becomes big butch cop. Only trouble is, inside you're all mushy and soft.”

“Hey! Don't go spreading that around. You're the only one who knows that.” The smile was more sheepish this time. Rather like a little boy who got caught doing something wrong.

“Your secret is safe with me. Ever hear of the seal of the confessional? Priests have died keeping that safe and secure. If a priest breaks the seal of the confessional, the only person who can forgive that sin is the pope. And I sure don't want to have to go to Rome. You might also think about one thing: it's that 'mushy and soft' part of you I love the most.”

He pulled me back into his arms, holding me and gently running his hands up and down my back. He put his mouth to my ear and murmured, “Well, you just keep right on loving it, and you'll get to see a lot more of it.”

Chapter Six

We talked the rest of the afternoon away. Even though he was loath to talk about himself, I found out quite a bit about Conner. I learned that his parents had died in a car accident when he was eight. He then went to live with his paternal grandparents. They were the ones who signed the permission slip that allowed Conner to enter the Marine Corps when he was seventeen. He was very close to his grandfather, who had been a marine in Vietnam, which is why he chose to go into the corps. He didn't want to go to college for two very good reasons. One, there was no money to send him, and two, he had never been much interested in school and barely graduated as it was. Luckily, he was extremely athletic, and both the football and wrestling coaches somehow helped him to get through school.

Of course, I already knew about Steve, their love affair, and his death, but Conner, at my insistence, filled me in on the complete story. How they met, how they managed any time for intimacy, and what, besides sex, drew them together as lovers.

He seemed to relax after that. I sat on the bed next to him, and he put his arm around my shoulders.

"Can you stay the night?" Conner asked. "They'll bring a bed in here for you."

"I take it that's what you want?"

"More than anything. I want you to be the first thing I see when I wake up. That way I know that it will be a good day."

"Well, if I'm going to stay, I need to run back to the rectory and get some clothes and stuff."

"I've got a better idea. Why don't you go to my place? It's only a block from here. You could walk it. And since we're about the same size, you could just get clothes for both of us. And I really wish you'd bring my laptop. There's stuff I could be doing when I'm just lying here."

Conner reached into the drawer of the nightstand by his bed and handed me the keys. He then wrote down the address for me, and I could tell that he was right, this was only about one block away. Yes, I could walk it, but I thought I'd better take the car so I had someplace to put this stuff.

“Are you sure that all you want is your laptop?”

“I guess, for now. While I'm just lying here in bed it doesn't make any difference, because they're not going to let me get up.”

“Do you have a pair of house slippers?”

“Yeah, they should be by the bed.”

“When they give you physical therapy and start teaching you how to use the crutches, you're going to need them, so I'll bring them back as well.”

“Just hurry up and go so you can get back here. I miss you when you're gone.”

To say I was surprised by Conner admitting that he needed me would be an understatement. But it touched me and made me feel very warm inside.

“I'll hurry. You just be here when I get back,” I said jokingly.

Conner lifted his arm, showing all the tubes and wires he was attached to.

“Oh yeah! Like I can go anywhere.” I chuckled. Even though those things bothered me to no end, I wasn't about to let Conner know that.

I found Conner's place easily. It was an old brownstone town house. I figured that it had been broken up into apartments, but when I opened the front door I found an exquisitely beautiful foyer, with a carpeted staircase leading to the next floor. I looked to my right, and there was what appeared to be a library and study done in rich woods and brownish red leather. To my left were double sliding doors. I opened them to discover a living room with a fireplace. Again, the room was done in dark woods and leather, black this time.

I climbed the stairs to find another pair of double doors. When I opened them, soft lighting came on, mostly directed at the large bed sitting on a platform and covered with what looked like a black leather comforter and throw pillows. Behind the bed there was a large bookcase filled with books mingled with junk. I found his house slippers just where he had said they'd be, next

to the bed. There were several doors in one of the walls, and I figured one of them had to be a closet.

The first door I opened was the bathroom, all done in black marble with a huge whirlpool tub. There was a shower behind a wall of glass bricks that could hold four or five guys of Conner's and my size. Further exploration found both the sauna and a steam room, not to mention a plasma-screen TV over the tub.

I left the bathroom and tried the next door. It was the closet, but not like any closet I've ever seen. It was huge. It was bigger than my room at the rectory. There was row after row of clothes. Suits that I'd never seen Conner wear. Leather pants, leather jackets, and leather shirts. Hanger after hanger of jeans in drawers built into the walls. I discovered drawer after drawer of T-shirts.

I pulled a pair of jeans off the hanger and tried them on. Conner was right; they fit me perfectly. I pulled three more pairs, so that we would each have two, and then pulled out four T-shirts to go with them. When I had looked in the study downstairs I had not seen a laptop, nor was there one here in the bedroom. Outside the bedroom door, however, there had been another flight of stairs going up. I decided to go out and explore. The next floor was completely open, and the entire space given over to exercise equipment and free-style weight lifting. Again, no laptop. However, there appeared to be one more staircase leading up to a fourth floor. I went up it and discovered a media room with a huge projection-screen television and a comfortable rounded couch, again in black leather. Sitting on it was a laptop. I grabbed it and headed back downstairs.

I carefully locked the door on my way out. I wondered why Conner, of all people, who knew the rate of crime in the city, did not have some type of alarm system.

I drove back to the hospital, and when I passed by the nurses' desk, I asked one of the nurses about arranging for me to stay the night.

"Oh thank God! We'll move the bed in for you right now."

"Can I ask why you seem so overjoyed about my staying the night?"

"Just listen for a moment," she said.

I listened, but there was nothing but silence.

"I don't hear anything."

“That's the point. No screaming, no yelling—especially cursing. And no crashing from something being thrown against the wall. To say that Detective McMahon is a difficult patient would be a tremendous understatement. Your being here has quieted him down almost completely. Trust me, we want you to stay. We would hope you'd stay with him until he's released.”

“You've got your wish. I'm here until he goes home.”

“Well, the trays with dinner should be coming up soon. We ordered a tray for you. And for breakfast. Before lunch somebody from dietary will be around, and you can order your next three meals from her.”

“Thank you so much. Do all patients and families get this kind of treatment?”

“Absolutely. Having the family around usually makes the patient feel less afraid and more comfortable.”

I thanked her again and headed back to Conner's room. When I got there, I saw him sitting on the bed waiting for me. I could tell that he was very nervous about something, but I didn't know what. I laid the clothing on the foot of the bed. Then I went to Conner and handed him the laptop.

“This is the only one I could find. It was up in what looked like a media room on the top floor, on the couch. I hope it's the right one.”

“Yes, this is it. I sometimes sit up there and listen to music or watch movies while I work.”

“I found these in what appeared to be the master bedroom,” I said, holding up the slippers.

“Those are them... Aren't you going to say anything about the house?”

“It's a very beautiful house, Conner. To be honest, it wasn't at all what I expected. It would appear that detectives are getting paid quite well these days.”

“It's not like that at all!”

“Oh, and how is it that a detective can afford to live in a four-story town house? Is there another side to you that I don't know about?”

“Yes, and it's got nothing to do with theft, embezzlement, or larceny of any kind.”

“I, frankly, can't wait to hear this one.”

“Look, I told you about Steve.”

“Yes.”

“Anyway, there were a lot of things I didn't know about Steve. One was that he came from very old money. That kind of money where the Lodges talked to the Rockefellers and very few others. Well, Steve's family were ones that the Lodges and Rockefellers would talk to. Their money went back for five generations. Steve had a trust fund. It was a ridiculous amount of money. More money than a normal person could spend in their entire lifetime. What I didn't know was he had gone to the family attorneys and made me the beneficiary before he died. You should've heard his family screaming, especially the ones who had never supported him in any way. It felt really good to take all that money right in front of them before they could get their greedy little mitts on any of it.”

“So how do you handle it? I would think keeping track of that much money would be a full-time job.”

“It is, that's why I have this little accountant guy to take care of it for me. I don't use it for much. I paid off the mortgage on my grandparents' house and farm and gave them enough money to retire comfortably. I bought my house, as I always wanted to live in a brownstone. I bought a few toys. Nothing much.”

“So, if you don't mind my asking, how much is there in the trust?”

“The last time I looked there was about fifty million.”

“Oh shit! Conner! That is a fuck of a lot of money! What are you going to do with it?”

“Well, that kind of depends on you.”

“On me? Why on me?”

“I figure with most guys I'd have to worry about them wanting me for the money. With you, it's just the opposite problem. I figure you might not want to have anything to do with me now that you know I'm rich.”

“Conner, I'm sorry to undo your little fantasy, but when I told you that I loved you, I meant it unconditionally. Whether you've got money or not, I'm still in love with you.”

“So what about the house?”

“What about it?”

“What I want to know is, could you be comfortable there?”

“Yes, I can be.”

“Are you sure? It's not too much for you or anything?”

“Conner, I told you before, the fact that you have money is not going to make me love you any less.”

“I just don't want to lose you now that I've found you.”

“Conner, I promise you, you are not going to lose me over petty stuff like this. You will lose me if you do something to stop me from loving you. That's the only way.”

“That's exactly what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid I'll do or say something stupid and end up losing you.”

“You haven't so far, so stop worrying about it.”

I finally got Conner relaxed and lying down on the bed. To do this, I had to lie across the top of the bed so that he could rest his head on my chest with my arms around the front of him. I thought he would be too embarrassed to allow himself to be seen by the nurses who came to occasionally check the machines and his IVs, but I was wrong. Conner seemed to not give a damn who saw us in this warm and intimate embrace. I was just glad that I had changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt beforehand and was not having to lie there in my black suit and white dog collar.

“What's happened to you? All of a sudden you don't seem to care who sees us like this.”

“No, I really don't. After all, I'm the luckiest son of a bitch in the world. I've got you to love me. That makes me happier than I've ever been in my whole life.”

“Well, just to let you know, I feel exactly the same way, which just might answer the question that Henry asked me this afternoon.”

“What was that?”

“It seems that a long time ago Henry had an affair with a woman in the parish. A woman he evidently fell head over heels in love with. But she had cancer and died. I don't know how he did it, but he even celebrated her funeral Mass. Henry made the choice to stay in the priesthood rather than leaving and marrying her. Lying here in your arms, I know which choice I would make.”

“Uhh...which one?” Conner asked hesitantly.

“The only one that makes any sense to me. Being with you.”

Conner reached up and grabbed my hands, which were on his chest.

“Oh God! You scared me there for a minute. I thought you were going to tell me that you choose to stay in the priesthood.”

“Oh, I would. But they won't let me, not and live my life openly and honestly.”

“What about your family? How are they going to deal with this?”

“I don't really know. Of course, they know about Vince *and* Drew. Tony even came to the wedding. Mama and Papa have both pretty well accepted their relationship ever since Vince's surgery. My situation is different. I don't know how they'll feel about me leaving the priesthood. I'm afraid that Mama and Papa are going to be very disappointed in me.”

“How are you going to deal with that?”

“I don't know. There isn't a whole lot I can do. I can't change how they feel. I'll just have to live with it. But it truly doesn't matter, because I have you and that's enough.”

“Yeah, but am I *really* going to be enough?”

“You remember you asked me about your house.”

“Yeah. You said you liked it.”

“Yes, but I didn't say why.”

“Okay? So why did you like it?”

“Everywhere I went in the house there was the scent of *you*. I felt at home because the scent of you was there. They say, 'Home is where the heart is.' For me, home is wherever you are. It could be a tent or broken-down shack or even an abandoned building. As long as you are there, it would feel like a palace.”

Conner very carefully turned over so that he was facing me. His arms went around my neck, and he pulled my face closer to his. He gently pressed his lips to mine in a sweet and gentle kiss.

“After my parents died, I never really felt like I had a home. I've felt glimmers of that kind of belonging and acceptance in the corps and even to some extent in the department. But I have never felt it as strongly as I do with you. You are everything to me—my home, my mate, and eventually my lover.”

“I grew up in a home with love all around me. But none of that compares to what I see when I look in your eyes. Sometimes I see a love so all-encompassing that it frightens me and I have to look away.

“What frightens you about it?”

“I'm afraid that I don't deserve it or that I can't live up to it. But then you smile at me, and all my fears and doubts go away like smoke on the wind.”

“As good as this feels, and as much as I love lying here with you in my arms, that last pill they gave me was a sleeping pill, and it's made me extremely sleepy.”

“You look like you can barely hold your eyes open.”

I wiggled my way out of his embrace and helped him to turn over on his back while I fluffed his pillow for him.

“Are you going to tell me a bedtime story too?”

“You are kidding, aren't you?”

“Yeah, I guess I am,” he said dejectedly.

“No, you're *not*!” I said in surprise.

“My grandfather used to tell them to me so that I would go to sleep. I'd love to hear one again. But just let me remind you of something: if you ever tell anyone about this, just remember—I carry a gun.”

I laughed at the craziness of this. Telling a grown man a bedtime story and having him threaten my life over somebody finding out. Not knowing any bedtime stories, I had to make one up. I thought for a minute and then started.

“Okay. Once upon a time there were these two Indian braves named Running Deer and Gray Wolf. They knew each other almost from birth because Gray Wolf's father was the tribal chief and Running Deer's father was the leader of the warriors in the tribe. The two little braves grew up wanting to be like their fathers and to fill their fathers' moccasins. Of course, their fathers worked with them and trained them. They both learned what it meant to be a leader. And they learned how to hunt, how to fish, and how to fight. But as they grew, something strange began to happen between them. Neither one showed any interest in the maidens in the tribe. They seemed to only have eyes for each other. Both of their fathers worried about this because they

did not understand it, nor did they know what to do about it. Finally, they confronted their sons together. They asked their sons how they felt about each other, and the boys, having been raised to always tell the truth, admitted that they were deeply in love with each other. Their fathers, needless to say, were shocked by this. They decided to take the boys to the medicine man and see if they could be cured of this strange attachment to each other. The medicine man listened carefully to both fathers and both sons and then pronounced his verdict.

'Love cannot be cured, because it is not a disease. I have heard, that far to the north, there is a tribe that is made up entirely of men like your sons—men who love others of their own kind. If you truly love your sons and want to see them happy, the only thing to do is to have them journey north and join this other tribe, where their feelings for each other will be accepted and respected.'

“And so, because the fathers truly loved their sons, they allowed the two young braves to leave their home to find this place where their love would be accepted. The two young braves traveled for many days northward, until they finally found the tribe that the medicine man had described. They were welcomed with a feast, and all the members of the tribe rejoiced at giving a home to the two young braves who loved each other so very much. And the young braves lived out their lives among their brothers happily ever after. The end.”

“That was a beautiful story,” Conner said with a deep yawn.

I leaned over and gently kissed his forehead.

“Now go to sleep, love. I'll be here when you wake up.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Chapter Seven

Hospitals are about the worst place to get any rest. There is constantly noise and commotion in the hallways. Then there is the tyranny of checking “vitals.” This is where a nurse's aide wakes you up several times a night to see if you're still breathing, or have a pulse, or what your blood pressure is. By the final vitals that Conner had to endure, it was five a.m., and he was growling because he was so furious. Frankly, I didn't blame him one bit. I knew that he would heal better and faster at home. And I decided I was going to confront his doctors about releasing him that day. However, I got the surprise of my life when the doctor arrived right after the nurse finished taking the vitals.

“Good morning, Conner, and you too, Father Colucci. So tell me, Conner. You sick of this place yet? You ready to go home?”

“Does the pope shit in the woods? Are bears Catholic?” Conner said, grinning.

Dr. Franklin gave Conner a strange look and then chuckled.

“I talked your orthopod, Dr. Davidson, yesterday, and we both feel that since you have Father Colucci with you 24-7, there is no reason for you to be here. I've already signed the release papers, so you're free to go anytime. Now I should tell you that Dr. Davidson feels that since the last time we saw you in here was for getting shot in the leg that you should have no trouble relearning how to handle crutches. If you do, however, you can always come here for some outpatient physical therapy to work on it. In the orders I signed are several appointments for you to see Dr. Davidson and me on a regular basis until we release you for work. I don't think I have to remind you that it's our signatures that go on the form that say you're ready to go back to work.”

“Doctor, what about pain medication? Conner's still having quite a bit of pain.”

“As well he should, considering what he's been through. I'm sending him home with a script for Vicodin, which he can take when he is having pain, up to five pills a day.”

“Well, Conner, I guess we need to get you dressed and packed.”

“I'll send a nurse in with the orders and prescriptions and some large plastic bags that you can put clothes and stuff in.”

“Thank you, Doctor, for everything you've done for me,” Conner said, shaking hands with Dr. Franklin.

“It was my privilege. To have one of the 'Thin Blue Line' under my care is a proud responsibility for any doctor. I'm just glad that your case has turned out so well.”

The doctor and Conner shook hands once again, and then he left the room. His departure was quickly followed by the nurse whom I'd spoken to last night about getting a bed for me so that I could spend the night with Conner. She had a thick envelope in her hand as well as several large plastic bags with white plastic handles. She also carried a set of aluminum crutches. I searched through the closets and drawers to make sure nothing was left behind. When I opened one drawer, however, I called Conner over.

“What's the matter, babe?”

“Just look.”

“Shit! Those should've been in lockup! Fucking idiots!” Conner explained.

When I had opened the drawer, what I had found was Conner's leather wallet with his detective's golden shield in it, along with his service weapon, which appeared to be a GLOCK 9mm. Conner took them out, slipped his ID wallet into his back pocket, and attached his weapon and holster to the belt of his pants.

As I searched further, I found his leather jacket, which had a bullet hole in it and bloodstains on it. I turned to Conner, holding it up.

“Do you want to keep this?”

“Fuck yes! That fucking jacket saved my life. When it went through the jacket, the jacket slowed the bullet down, so I didn't get hit with the bullet's full force. The jacket's easily cleaned and repaired. I know a good leather shop where they do great work.”

“Is that where all the leather in your closet came from?”

“I figured you'd notice that.”

“Of course I did; you've got some really nice stuff. And besides that, I really love the idea of you in leather. It turns me on.”

Conner walked over, slid his arms around my waist, and pulled me to him—not an easy maneuver to pull off on crutches, but evidently his other surgeon was right. He did remember how to use them from the last time.

“If my being in leather turns you on, I may never take it off. That would, at least, make things fair.”

“What do you mean, 'fair'?”

“It doesn't matter what *you* wear, all I have to do is take one look at you and I'm turned on.”

I reached up, holding his face in my hands while I gently kissed him on the lips.

“You are all packed and ready to go. Let's go home and talk about this some more there. I'll go get transportation, because I know they're going to make you ride a wheelchair out of here.”

I went down to the nurses' station and told them we were ready to go. One of the nurses followed me back to the room with a wheelchair. I grabbed Conner's crutches and the two plastic bags and followed the two of them to the elevator and down to the main floor.

“Do you have your car here?” Conner asked.

“Hang out a second, and I'll go get it.”

I went and got my car, and the nurse and I helped get Conner out of the wheelchair and into it. I guess because it was a short distance, Conner didn't have time to complain about the fact that I was driving. I drove the block to Conner's house and pulled into the small driveway that led to a detached garage. I parked the car as close to the front door as I could and then helped Conner out of the car and onto his crutches. I still had the keys from when he had given them to me last night, so I went ahead and opened the front door. I hadn't noticed it the night before in the dark, but Conner's front door was beautifully carved with a pair of wolves each facing what appeared to be a family crest.

“I see you do like wolves.”

“I told you I did. I help support a shelter for injured wolves in the Northwest.”

I closed the door behind him and locked it. I came up behind him and slid my arms around him, holding him close with my face resting on his back.

“My alpha. Or should I be saying that on my knees in front of you?”

“You get on your knees in front of me, and a lot more is going to happen than just your claiming me as your alpha.”

I chuckled against his back.

“Like what?”

“Why don't you do it and find out?”

I walked around and knelt before him. I looked up, and it was like I could see fire burning in his blue eyes. Directly in front of me, I could see the front of his jeans bulging out and a small wet spot getting darker and larger where the head of his cock was. I reached my hand out and gently traced the bulge in his pants, causing him to groan loudly. He reached down and grabbed my head in his hands, running his fingers through my hair. I pressed my face into the bulge until I could smell him, the pungent scent of aroused, horny male. It was a scent that drove me wild with desire for him.

I probably would've remained there, on my knees, worshipping his body, but he reached down and pulled me up until I was standing in front of him.

“No, David. This is wrong. I can't take you like this the first time. Maybe later, if you want, but first I want to make love to you. I want to mark you as mine. I want this to be an experience you will never forget and will always think of with love.”

“Did they teach you how to read minds in the police academy?”

“No. I can't read your mind. I wish I could. I wish you could read mine, so that you would know how deeply in love with you I am.”

“It's just that you described exactly what I have dreamed of. I so want you to mark me as your mate.”

“I want it too, David. But I'm afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I want you as mine, only mine, no one else's.”

“I know that. How else can I tell you that I want the same thing so that you'll believe me?”

"I will not play *second fiddle* to the church. I can't fight against the whole fucking Holy Roman Catholic Church!"

"So what you're saying is, I have to choose between my vocation, my priesthood, and you."

"Yes, I guess that is what I'm saying."

At this point, I was wearing my clericals, because when I got up this morning I had put them on out of force of habit. I reached up to where the small, light, plastic tab created the look of the well-known dog collar at my neck. I pulled the tab out and then reached out, handing it to Conner. He looked at it lying in his hand.

"Are you sure?" Conner asked me quietly.

"As sure as the first day I put it on."

Conner let his crutches fall to the floor with a clatter while he reached out and gathered me in his arms.

"I swear to you, you will never regret this. I intend to spend every day of the rest of my life doing everything I can to make you happy."

"Do you know what would make me incredibly happy right now?"

"No. Tell me, babe."

"Take me to bed. I'm exhausted. I don't think I got even one hour of sleep last night."

"I got maybe two hours, but you're right. I'll be way more comfortable in my own bed, especially if you're lying in it with me."

"And once we sleep, we'll have the energy for you to do what you promised."

I reached down and got Conner's crutches for him. I was glad that his bedroom was on the second floor. As it was, it took quite an effort for him to make it up the stairs. When we reached the double doors, I opened them, causing the lights that were centered on the bed to come on.

"Pretty dramatic. Seems like the only thing you forgot was the mirrored disco ball."

"I'm having that installed next week." He chuckled.

"Okay, toughest question yet. This could make or break our relationship right here."

"Okay, hit me with it."

"What side do you sleep on?"

“That one.” He pointed, indicating the right side as we stood looking at it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner!”

“Uhh...I was...kind of hoping...”

“What?”

“That you would...well...”

“That I would maybe sleep curled up in your arms with my head resting on your chest?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

I smiled at his worried face. “My plan exactly,” I murmured.

His face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning looking under the tree.

“Uhh...I should tell you one thing. I have this one rule about my bed.”

“What is it?”

“Nobody's allowed in it with any clothes on.”

“So what you're saying is that you want me naked.”

“Exactly.”

“Not a problem.” And I quickly began divesting myself of all my clothing.

Conner sat on the bed, watching as each piece of clothing came off. When I was down to my briefs, I decided I was in a playful-enough mood that I wanted to give Conner a little show. I turned around and bent forward and began swaying my ass right and left while I slowly lowered the waistband of my briefs, giving him a gradual view of my ass. When the elastic waistband was under the cheeks of my butt, and I knew Conner could see it all, I pulled the briefs down until they were around my feet. I stepped out of them and spread my legs wider, bent farther forward, and reached back and grabbed the cheeks of my ass, spreading them open so that Conner could see everything, including the small hole he so desperately wanted to fuck.

I heard a deep growl behind me, which I was sort of expecting. What I wasn't expecting was Conner getting off the bed and falling on his knees behind me. Nor did I expect the feel of something wet and raspy sliding through the trench of my butt. Looking down between my legs, I could see Conner's chin tightly jammed into my ass, and I now realized that what I was feeling was Conner actually *licking my ass*! I certainly was not ready for this. In fact, I had absolutely no idea that anyone did this. But evidently, from the growls and groans I was hearing, this was

something that Conner loved to do. And I had to admit that as far as I was concerned he could do this to me for hours!

I rose up slightly and looked back, seeing Conner's eyes looking at me over the cheeks of my ass. I could see so much in that look—hunger, desire, and incredible love. I smiled back.

“Yes, lover, do me. It feels so fucking good!”

And he continued. Finally, my back began to ache from the position that I was in, and I had to pull away from his eager mouth and stand up straight to relieve the pressure. I turned around and looked down, and there was Conner on his knees before me just as I had been before him just a little while ago. I got down on my knees and sought his mouth in a deeply passionate kiss. I could taste myself on his lips and tongue and, while I had thought that this would be highly distasteful—on the contrary—it turned me on all to hell!

Finally we broke from the kiss, and I helped him back to the bed. I undressed him, which took a while, as I wasn't used to doing it and I also lingered over each beautiful part of him. When he was naked, I got in the other side of the large bed. He held out his arm, and I slid over to where his arm was around me, my head was on his chest, and I had one arm thrown across his abs. And just like I had imagined so many times, I went to sleep in another man's arms for the first time.

Chapter Eight

When I awoke, I had no idea what time it was, so I looked at my watch, which because of the military guys I worked with who were used to it, was in military time. It said it was 1930 hours, meaning 7:30 in the evening. I could feel Conner bunched up against me. Evidently we had turned over in our sleep, so now Conner was spooned to me. His arms were around me, and I could feel his soft breath at the back of my neck. It was obvious from the tempo of his breathing that Conner was still asleep.

I was glad.

Glad because it gave me a chance to really experience what it felt like to wake up in his arms. I had the experience of going to sleep in them, but I fell asleep much too quickly to experience much of anything except warmth and a feeling of safety. Now, however, I could lie here and compare the difference between how I'd woken up all my life. There was no comparison. Feeling Conner's arms around me, feeling his body shoved up against mine, even feeling his morning erection poking into one of my ass cheeks—it was all so incredibly wonderful, so much more than I ever expected and to know, on top of all of this, that Conner was in love with me, left me almost speechless with happiness.

I decided I didn't want to experience this happiness alone, so I slowly turned in Conner's arms until I was facing him. Looking at Conner while he was asleep produced, what was for me, a momentous discovery. It would appear that some males are more beautiful when they are asleep. This was certainly true of Conner. No matter how beautiful he was when he was awake—and he was that—when he was asleep, his face relaxed and all the cares and worries that he carried with him were erased. It was almost like I was seeing him as a small boy before the pain and anguish of life intruded.

I leaned down and gently pressed my lips to his. His arms immediately tightened around me, pulling me closer, bringing more of our bodies into contact. His hands began to explore my

back, moving up and down and going deeper each time until they were gently stroking my ass. Finally, one finger invaded the trench between my cheeks. I could feel it gently stroking until it reached the rosebud entrance to my body. I opened my mouth and groaned, which was evidently what Conner had been waiting for, because he immediately invaded my mouth with his tongue, seemingly to explore as to whether I had all my adult teeth.

I could feel his cock pressing against my stomach, and I could feel the wetness of his precum that he was leaving there each time he thrust against me. I knew that there was more to making love than what we were doing, but I was too ignorant and naive to know how to move on to other things.

“Conner, isn't there more we could be doing?”

“Yes, there is a lot more, but given the fact that you're a complete virgin, I figured we'd start out slow.”

“I thought you would want to fuck me.”

“Oh, babe! I want to fuck you so bad, I ache inside every time I get near you.”

“Then why don't you?”

“David, have you ever really looked at my cock?”

“Not when it was erect.”

Conner loosened his arms around me and pulled back so that I could see what had been rubbing so furiously against me. I couldn't help but gasp when I saw it. While it had been many years since high school and the furtive looks at other boys in the shower, I had never seen a cock as huge as the one attached to Conner's body. It was at least ten inches long and very, very thick.

“Now I want you to think about my cock going in and out of your tiny virgin butt,” Conner said quietly, pulling me back into his arms where our bodies were touching once again.

“But I want you to. I really do.”

“I know, babe. Just the same way I really want to fuck you. But you have to believe me, the last thing on earth I want to do is hurt you, and if we tried it now, without any preparation, that's what would happen. You're just going to have to trust me on this one.”

I put my arms around his neck and looked into his deep blue eyes. “I trust you in everything.” Then I kissed him.

A kiss that rapidly became deeply passionate as our bodies moved in unison, pressing our cocks against each other until, without warning, we were flooding each other's bodies with our seed while practically screaming out our pleasure into each other's mouths. We lay there coming down from our orgasmic high. It took a while, but we were finally breathing normally again.

“Oh my God! I had no idea... Way too wonderful for words... Love you.” I tried to explain what I was feeling and my gratitude for what Conner had just done.

Conner moved off me and then moved down to where he could begin licking up the cum that we had both shot all over my abs.

“Hey! That's not fair. Don't I get some?”

“I've got a belly full of it too. You can have all of that.” Conner turned his body to where he was almost lying on his back to show me all the cum he had gotten drenched with.

I moved over and began licking it all up. I've had people since then tell me that it is an acquired taste. I must have acquired it that night, because I loved it from the first taste. It was such an intimate thing to do, to lick the cum from each other.

As I continued to clean Conner's body with my tongue, I soon was facing his rehardening cock, which still had some cum on the head of it. While I had never sucked cock before, I was drawn too strongly to his beautiful, hard cock to pass up the opportunity with which I was being presented. I figured out on my own that I should cover my teeth to prevent them from causing pain or damage. I slowly opened my mouth as far as I could while I moved forward, taking just the head of his cock in my mouth.

I couldn't believe how wonderful it was. How wonderful it tasted. How wonderful it smelled. How wonderful it felt in my mouth. I decided I wanted to suck on Conner's cock for the rest of my life. The head of his cock was spongy as I pressed my tongue against it. The shaft was quite rigid but covered with the softest skin I had ever felt in my life. I felt a strong need to take more and more of his cock inside me; however, when I tried, the head of his cock hit the back of my throat and triggered my gag reflex so that I came off his cock coughing and nearly throwing up. It was not one of my more-stellar performances.

I immediately felt Conner's arms around me as he gently murmured in my ear.

“You don't have to take the whole thing, babe. Nobody has ever been able to do that. Just do what you were doing. That felt fantastic.”

I went down and began sucking him again, taking only as much of his cock in my mouth as I was comfortable with. That wasn't very much of it, but Conner said that it was enough. However, he also said that no one had ever been able to take all of it. Right then and there I swore to myself that I was going to learn how, and someday I would.

I was very happily lying there, sucking Conner's cock, when I learned, quite suddenly, that two could play at that game quite easily. I suddenly felt the warm wetness of Conner's mouth surrounding my cock. It was a very strange feeling to be sucked while sucking. It was almost like I was sucking my own cock. All the feeling was there, but still it was very different. Unfortunately, it felt too good for me to be able to last. Even though I had orgasmed just a few minutes before, I could feel the burning sensation low in my body that told me I was about to come again. I tried to scream as my orgasm overtook me, but the sound was almost completely muffled by having Conner's cock in my mouth. What it did do was to send all the vibrations into Conner's cock, which then triggered his orgasm, and I was soon swallowing down his load of cum. I continued to suck on him even after the flood of his seed stopped. Conner had to pull his cock from my mouth, explaining that it got too sensitive after he came for me to be sucking on it.

Conner moved around on the bed so that his head was where mine was. He took me in his arms, pulling me close, then gently kissed me. I could taste myself in his mouth, as I'm sure he could taste himself in mine.

"And before you ask, that's called '69,'" Conner informed me.

"Why do they call it that?"

"If you think of the two numbers and their placement, I think you'll get the idea."

I began to laugh.

"I think you got it!" Conner began laughing as well.

The two of us lay there laughing for quite a while. It was like we were two little kids in that bed together. Like a sleepover, only it wouldn't end. *So this is what it's like to really be with another guy. I really love this! For the first time, I'm really glad that God made me gay.* Conner finally stopped laughing and took me back into his arms and kissed me.

"Babe, I would love to lie here forever, but I'm starving. I've got to eat something."

"I guess the old saying is true."

"What old saying?"

“The one that says that guys only have two things on their mind—sex and food. If he doesn't have an erection, make him a sandwich.”

“Well, that's not true of me.”

“It's not?”

“No. It's not. I have three things on my mind—sex, food, and you. And the third one is the one I think about the most.”

“For that, I'll fix you anything you want.”

“You cook?”

“My mother is Italian; of course I can cook.”

“My grandmother was a wonderful cook, and I can cook too.”

“Well, this ought to be an interesting mix of cuisines.”

Conner went to reach for his crutches to get out of bed, but I grabbed them before he could. He looked up at me questioningly.

“Conner, I'm here to take care of you. Please, just lie there and the rest. I'll go fix you something to eat. Do you have any idea of what you want?”

“As long as it's filling, I don't care. Surprise me.”

I leaned down and kissed him and headed down to the kitchen. It wasn't until I got there that I realized I was still naked. I immediately thought of the guy on the Food Network that they called the “Naked Chef.” I guess that was going to be me.

I started looking around the kitchen, and the first thing I spotted on the counter was a panini maker. If Conner had the right ingredients, I had just solved what I was going to serve him. I looked in the refrigerator and found ham, some nice smoked Gouda, some onions, and best of all, some red peppers. I also found a nice round loaf of Italian bread.

I cut up the peppers and gently roasted them in the oven while I thinly sliced the onions and sautéed them until they were caramelized. I put four panini together and put them two at a time into the panini maker. They were soon done. I looked around the kitchen and found a tray and two plates that I put the panini on and carried them upstairs.

Conner's eyes lit up when I walked into the bedroom. I set the tray down on the bed and then crawled in on the other side of it. Conner grabbed one of the sandwiches and immediately started eating.

“Wow! This is really good.”

“It's just something simple I threw together. I saw you had the panini maker, so I thought I'd use it.”

“Is that what that damn thing is?”

“Didn't you know?”

“Fuck no! Somebody gave it to me for my birthday last year.”

“When you're better, I'll teach you how to use it.”

“Yeah, if it makes stuff as good as this, I definitely want to learn.”

When we finished the sandwiches, I took the tray and empty plates to the kitchen, then put the plates into the empty dishwasher. When I finished, I went back upstairs, where I found Conner sitting against the headboard of the bed while he gently stroked his hard cock.

“Ready for round two?” he asked with a seductive grin on his face.

“Actually, to be technically correct, it would be round three. And no. I am not ready for round three, nor do I think you are either, despite your hard cock. I didn't even hear the doctor say whether or not you were cleared for normal sexual activity. I don't want to risk a setback of your recovery. I think what you would be better off doing is taking a nap and letting your body rebuild your energy.”

“You, my love, are a spoilsport.”

“No. I'm just somebody who loves you and wants to see you get better so you can go back to work.”

“Oh, all right. But will you do me one favor?”

“What?”

“Will you lie here with me in my arms? I probably can't get to sleep without you.”

“I have no problem with that at all.” And saying this, I crawled into the bed until I was once again lying there with my head on his chest and one arm thrown over his abs. He put his

arm around me and began gently stroking my back. And in moments we gently drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Over the next several weeks, the only rhythm to our lives together was the rhythm we'd created for ourselves. Of course, a lot of these cycles had to do with Conner and the physical needs of his recovery, which seemed to be going well. We ate when we were hungry. We slept when we were tired. We made love just about anytime Conner wanted. He had called his surgeons, who had given him the exact same answer that he had told me they would—he could have whatever sex he could tolerate. I wondered if the doctors had any idea at all how much sex Conner could tolerate in a day. And since his recovery was going really well, who was I to say that the improvements had not come from the sex the way Conner vowed they had?

The one thing I was able to get across to Conner was his body's need for rest. That rest, however, had to always include me. To go to sleep, he always demanded that I be there, so that he could wrap his arms around me and press our two bodies as close together as was physically possible. Conner had a tremendous need for physical contact. My supposition about how this came about had to do with the very sudden and tragic death of his first lover. I guess in some ways he must feel that as long as I was in his arms, protected by his strength, nothing could happen to me. We had had a very long and intense hour or so of making love to each other and then curled up together and went to sleep.

When I awoke again, Conner and I were still wrapped in each other's arms, just the way we had gone to sleep. I looked at my watch and saw that it was just a little past midnight. My stirring around had evidently awoken Conner.

“What time is it?” Conner said, his voice rough from sleep.

“Just past midnight. Are you hungry?”

“Only for you.” And with this, he leaned forward and began to bite and suck on my shoulder, raising a large hickey on my skin.

“Marking your territory?” I groaned.

“How did you guess?”

“It's not very hard.”

“The hell it's not!” Conner said, shoving his very hard cock against me.

“Don't go getting any ideas. I really think that you've had enough for today. If you don't mind, I'd prefer not to have the experience of you fucking me and then dying on top of me in the middle of it.”

“Yeah, I see your point, but what a way to go!”

“Hey! I don't want you going anywhere. I've only just found out how wonderful it is to sleep in your arms, and I don't want to give that up for anything.”

“Trust me, babe. I feel exactly the same way.”

“So what do you want to do that doesn't include carnal behavior?”

“What I'd really like to do is to go upstairs and watch a movie. I'm just not sure if I can make it up there. I love this house, but dealing with all these flights of stairs is not exactly easy.”

“Now that you've gotten rid of the crutches and are just using a cane, I'm sure if we take it slowly, it shouldn't be any problem.”

I slid out of his arms and got out of bed, grabbing his cane for him. It took some effort to get him to the edge of the bed and then up on the cane. Once we had accomplished that, however, going up to the third and then the fourth floor of the house was not so much difficult as slow. I understood that just like so many other males I had dealt with, Conner hated any type of infirmity. It was as if his body were rebelling against him, and he was trying to force it to obey him. Of course, this was what I believed caused the increase in his recovery. Some patients are fighters, some are not, but the ones who are generally heal more quickly. And if there was one thing that Conner was, it was a fighter.

We finally got to the fourth floor, and I got him settled on a large leather couch. He tried to pull me down next to him, but I reminded him of why we were there.

“Why don't you let me grab a DVD and get it started? Which one do you want to see?”

He pointed at the large bookcase full of DVDs. “On the second to the top shelf there is a film called *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. If you haven't seen it, I think you'll love it. Just like I do. It's my favorite film of all time.”

“What's it about?”

“You'll see. Just come over here and sit with me.”

I put the DVD in the player and then walked back to the couch and sat down next to Conner. His arm came around me, and I rested my head against his shoulder. It felt so good, I wondered how I was going to be able to pay attention to the DVD at all. But when it started, I was so shocked by the subject of the film and the fact that Conner had said that it was his favorite of all time that I had no problem paying attention at all. The film was a retelling by Franco Zeffirelli of the life of St. Francis of Assisi, with a musical score by Donovan.

It was one of the most beautiful and spiritual films I have ever seen. It spoke to me on so many levels. Especially the scene where Francis and his brothers along with St. Clare and her sisters were bathing lepers in a stream, reaching out to the most feared and ostracized members of that society. As I sat watching, tears were flowing down my cheeks, and my heart ached for the shelter work that I had done for more than five years now.

When the film was over, I sat there overcome by my emotions. I couldn't speak, and I was trying to hide my tears from Conner.

“So? Did you like it?” Conner asked.

I nodded my head, unable to speak. Conner pulled me closer in his arms.

“David, look at me.”

I reluctantly turned and faced him.

“The first time I saw the film, I felt like I wanted to run away and join the Franciscans. I wanted to share this film with you so that you would know that I fully understand what draws you to the work you are doing. But I'm sorry, I'm selfish. I love you and I want you with me, and that cannot happen if you remain a priest.”

“As Mary Catherine said, 'if I remain a Roman priest.'”

“What does that mean?” Conner asked, confusion written all over his face.

“There are many branches of the Catholic faith. The Roman Church is just one of them. There are also the Orthodox and the Anglicans. She told me that her bishop would welcome me into the Episcopal Church as a priest, even with you as my partner.”

For a few moments Conner didn't say anything.

“Are you sure?”

“Well, as far as I know, Mary Catherine has never lied to me.”

“No, I don't mean that. Are you sure that you want to convert?”

“It is an answer to the problem of my priesthood.”

“Could you be happy there?”

“I don't know for sure. I think I could, as long as they would let me continue to do the type of work I'm doing.”

“Then I think you really need to explore this further. I told you, I want you to be happy.”

I was just about to thank Conner, when suddenly the phone rang.

“Who the fuck could that be?” Conner said as he picked up the phone.

From the conversation, I picked up that it was another homicide detective who was asking Conner about a case.

“If that's the case, we'll be down in the morning.” Conner then hung up the phone.

“Who was it?”

“It was Dearborn, one of the other detectives in my squad.”

“What did he want?”

“Actually he wanted you.”

“Me? What for?”

“I don't know a gentle way to ask this, so I'm just going to ask you straight out—do you know someone by the name of Gina Colucci?”

“Yes, I have a cousin by that name.”

“Then I'm sorry to tell you this, but she's dead.”

“Oh my God! Was she murdered?”

“No. We don't think so. Hers is what we call a 'suspicious death.' What they think probably killed her was an overdose of heroin. Do you know if she had any problems with drugs?”

“Yes, she did for quite a long time. I know her father put her in rehab three times, but it didn't seem to work for her. After her mother died when she was young, she withdrew into

herself. She later became very self-destructive. I didn't know that she was hooked on heroin, however.”

“It would appear that she was. Hopefully, not during her pregnancy, but you never know.”

“Pregnancy? Gina had a baby?”

“Yes. Evidently, several years ago, because they found a little boy about three or four years old whose name is Andreouccio. At least, that was the name painted on his crib.”

“Andreouccio is the Italian diminutive for Andrew.”

“And your family is Italian.”

“Very Italian. Gina evidently named the boy after her father's middle name.”

“Where can we reach her father?”

“You can't. He died six or seven years ago.”

“They need somebody to identify the body.”

“I could do that.”

“Are you sure you want to?”

“Yes, and while I'm at it, I'll arrange to have her funeral Mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In fact, I'll say the Mass myself. Are the detectives going to notify the rest of the family?”

“No. They've already contacted you.”

“How did they know I was here?”

“They called the rectory, and someone there told them where you were.”

“Oh God! I take it that means that everybody you work with is going to assume that we're living together.”

“I suppose so. But I don't give a fuck if they know.”

“No! You don't understand. If word gets back to the archdiocese, I'll be defrocked and thrown out of the church.”

“But we were just talking about you leaving the church anyway.”

“That's true. But that's by my choice.”

“Well then, I guess you'd better talk to Mary Catherine soon.”

“Are you saying that you're okay with me staying a priest?”

"Babe, when you're lying naked in my arms, you are definitely *not* a priest to me."

Conner gave me one of his leering and impudent grins.

"You are completely incorrigible. And I wouldn't have you any other way."

Conner pulled me close and kissed me, the kiss becoming more passionate with each passing moment. Finally, we both ran out of breath, and I pulled away.

"Before you start anything, I really need to call my family and let them know about Gina."

"Maybe you should wait till morning. It's almost three a.m., and you still have to identify the body."

"Yes. I guess you're right."

"After all, she'll still be dead in the morning."

"I take it that your being a cop makes you so blasé about death."

"Yeah, I guess it does. Especially after you've seen more than a thousand corpses."

"That many?"

"Actually, probably more."

"How do you live with all that death around you?"

"It was hard, until I met you. Making love to you allows me to get out of myself and forget all the pain and misery I see every day."

"You should've told me that before."

"Why?"

"Because that makes making love therapeutic and not just because you're horny."

"Oh yes, doctor! It is definitely therapeutic. Now let's go downstairs, and you can give me more therapy."

We both broke up laughing over this. But Conner quickly got himself off the couch and back on his cane. I followed him back to bed and was not surprised to see that he was already hard.

"Lie down on your back and spread your legs," I told him.

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"I want to go exploring. Just lie there and enjoy it."

“No problem! You explore to your heart's content.”

“I plan to.”

Kneeling on the bed, I crept slowly toward Conner's erect cock. When I reached it, however, I noticed a warm, pungent, musky scent that was one of the most alluring scents that I had ever experienced in my life. I wasn't sure where it was coming from, but when I leaned down, I discovered that it was coming from Conner's scrotum. Without even thinking about it, I pressed my nose against it and began to take deep breaths of the incredibly masculine odor. Smelling, however, was not enough. I knew what I needed to do was to taste it. So, I stuck out my tongue and began to lick all over Conner's hairy balls. Without even knowing it, I had evidently found one of Conner's erogenous zones, because he began to moan and move his hips suggestively as I continued to taste the sweat and musk of him.

I was licking all over his scrotal sac and down between the creases of where his legs met his groin. By placing his feet flat on the bed, Conner was able to spread his legs and give me access to more of him. As he did so, I became aware of a scent that was darker, richer, and far more pungent, but I had no idea where it was coming from. I continued to lick at his sac as well as farther down to that patch of skin between the back of the scrotum and the beginning of the crack of Conner's ass. That's when I discovered where the intense scent was coming from—his ass!

I remembered how Conner had gotten on his knees behind me and used his tongue to lick up and down the crack of my ass while paying particular attention to the rosebud opening to my body. I remembered how off-putting this was when he started, but how quickly it became the most incredibly intimate and erotic act that I had ever experienced. I remembered also Conner kissing me immediately after, so that I could taste myself on his mouth and tongue. I had never even thought of the idea of licking another guy's ass until then. I decided that now was a great time for me to experience this act for myself.

“Under normal circumstances, I'd raise my legs and pull them back for you. But since I'm still on a cane, I don't think that would be a good idea. How about I turn over and lie on my stomach for you?” Conner asked.

“That would work. Thank you.”

“David, you don't ever need to thank me for letting you do something I love and, hopefully, you will grow to love as well.”

“I already do love having you do it to me!” I grinned up at him.

“You know, making love is not about payback. Just because I do something to you doesn't mean that you have to do it to me if you don't want to,” Conner explained.

“Trust me. This has nothing to do with payback. It's got everything to do with the fact that I'm falling in love with your ass.”

“Then perhaps you will consider fucking it one day soon.”

I stared at him in shock. While I desperately wanted Conner to fuck me, I'd never even thought of fucking him. Frankly, I considered him far too masculine to engage in that kind of activity.

“Don't look so surprised. Did you think that you were the only one who was going to have the joy of being fucked in this relationship?” Conner grinned at me.

“Well...well...yeah, I did.”

“David! I never would've guessed that you were such a selfish little bastard!” Conner laughed.

“What do you mean?”

“Every guy is born having the desire to fuck a warm, dark, wet hole on his lover's body. For straight guys, that's pussy. And unless the girl he falls in love with has a large selection of dildos that she knows how to use, that's pretty much the end of it. He fucks her, he gets off, and except for the occasional excursion into oral sex, that pretty much sums up their sex life. But when it's two guys, there is an additional alternative that nature has provided. Every guy is also born with a prostate. An organ perfectly placed in a guy's body to provide him with intense pleasure if he can learn to relax and let another guy slide his cock across the it, hard. But most guys are too insecure about their masculinity to let another guy do to him what he does to the women he sleeps with. Believe it or not, a guy can get off just by having this done to him. I learned a long time ago how good it feels to get a hard cock slamming into my hole and hitting my prostate, and I don't intend to give that up. You've got a nice, thick, what looks like about eight inches that I'm very much looking forward to being slammed up my ass until I come.”

Throughout all this, my mind was whirling with the possibilities that Conner was talking about. Did I want to fuck him? My cock got harder every time I thought about it. I guess that was my answer. However, I had other things that I was much more interested in doing right then, and Conner very carefully turned over and presented the beautiful mounds of his butt to my vision.

I leaned forward so that I was now lying flat on the bed between Conner's spread legs with my face basically buried into the soft cushions of his butt. Having never done this before, I wasn't exactly sure how to start. I decided that I would give his butt a tongue bath to get things rolling. I proceeded to lick all over the cheeks of his ass, sometimes sucking and nipping at the skin. When his ass was gleaming wet, I reached up and grabbed the cheeks, spreading them open. The warm, musky scent immediately surrounded me and seemed to pull me closer to experience more and more of it. I opened my mouth and allowed my tongue to lazily trace the path of his ass crack from the back of his balls to his lower back.

“Oh yeah! That's it! Lick me! Eat my ass!” Conner growled, his voice heavy with need.

I continued as he suggested, licking up and down his trench, until finally, I began focusing almost entirely on his rosebud. The skin there was the softest and most delicate that I had discovered on his body. And as I pushed against it with my tongue, it began to slowly loosen and open so that my tongue could go deeper inside. The deeper I went, the darker and richer the pungent taste became. I was so lost in what I was doing that I didn't even notice that, thanks to rubbing my own hard cock against the bedcover, I was about to come. It was at that point that Conner reached back with one of his long, muscular arms and, putting his hand on the back of my head, pressed my face harder and deeper into his ass. That was all it took. I came, screaming into his asshole. I guess it was those vibrations from my orgasm that triggered Conner's.

“AHH! FUCK!...DAMN!...OH SHIT!” Conner screamed out as he also deposited his load on the bedcover.

Once I had my breath back and felt that I could move, I moved up Conner's body so that I was lying with my now-softening cock resting between the cheeks of his ass, and my mouth biting and sucking his shoulder, marking him as *my* territory.

I slid, finally, off Conner's back and lay next to him, exhausted. Conner rolled over to where he could look at me and then reached out, pulling me toward him. He gave me what I

thought, at first, was a very sloppy kiss, involving as it did a lot of spit and tongue. But then I realized what he was doing was getting all the taste of himself from my mouth that he could.

“Are you sure that you're a virgin?” Conner asked.

“Yes. I'm sure.”

“Except for the very first time, no one has been able to get me off just by eating my ass,” he said.

“Maybe it's the fact that no one has wanted to eat your ass as badly as I did.”

“No, I think it was because I never expected you to do that. I got the feeling that when I did it to you the first time, you were grossed out by it.”

“I might have been right at the beginning, but I was more shocked than anything. I had no idea that guys did that.”

“Oh hell yeah! There are even straight guys who like to do it to women and a very few women who like to do it to guys. It happens more between guys than anything. I think it must be the gay equivalent to eating pussy.”

“Thank you for that vision, which is now stuck in my head. It might be a long while until I do that to you again.” I then winked at him and smiled to let him know that I was just joking.

“So I take it, you really liked it?”

“Considering I came all over the bed, that would be a safe assumption.”

“Next time, it's my turn. And with my leg all fucked-up, we'll have to use my favorite position to do it in.”

“And what's that?”

“I'll give you a hint. Does the term 'sit on my face' have any meaning for you?”

And with this, he gave me one of his leering grins.

“I'm not exactly sure, but I can't wait to experience it.”

“David, you constantly surprise me.”

“I do? Why is that?”

“To be honest, I never expected you to be so eager about sex. I figured, with your rigid upbringing and going through seminary and all, that you would be a prude. And you are nothing like that at all. I love how eager you are. It turns me on all to hell. If I was the kind of guy who

believed in the crap they put in romance novels, I would truly start thinking that you and I were soul mates.”

“But don't you see—we are!”

“You're kidding, right?”

“No. I'm not. I believe that all love comes from God, and where we feel and know God is in our souls. When God sends love, especially love with the strength of how we feel about each other, it is God binding our souls together for life—and beyond.”

“If that's what you believe about love, how do you feel about two guys getting married?”

“Are we talking about two guys in particular or just guys in general?”

“No. Two guys in particular.”

“Do I know these two guys?”

“Ahh fuck it! Yes, you know them.”

“Based on your level of frustration, I would guess that we're talking here about you and me.”

“Yeah, genius! That's exactly who I'm talking about.”

“Well, since nobody's asked me to marry him, I don't know what I really think about that.”

With this, Conner started moving toward the edge of the bed, and the next thing I knew, there he was, down on one knee beside it. He reached over and took my hand, holding it with both of his.

“I never thought that ever, in my entire life, I would ever say this to anybody. David, will you marry me?”

“And I never thought that ever, in my entire life, anybody would ask this of me. Conner, there is nothing in this world that would make me happier than being married to you.”

“Okay, now that we've got that straightened out, we need to get some sleep or neither one of us is going to be able to function tomorrow. And you've got a lot to do.”

“Oh, yes. Gina. I'd almost completely forgotten. But you're right. We do need to get some sleep. At least a few hours.”

Conner got up off his knees with the help of the bed, which he then crawled back in. I got up and pulled the covers out from under him. He then held them open for me. I quickly got under the covers and slid over so that I was once again wrapped in his arms with my head on his chest.

“Good night,” Conner murmured.

“Good night,” I answered.

“I love you. You know that, don't you?”

“Yes, I know that. But it's still nice to hear the words occasionally. And I love you.”

And with this, we drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Ten

While in the course of my priesthood, I had been in number of funeral homes, but I had never been in a morgue. The following morning, Conner not only insisted on coming with me but on driving as well. After we got there, I understood why he was so adamant about accompanying me. You might think that you know what a morgue is like because you saw one on multiple episodes of *CSI*, but let me tell you the reality is nothing like television. First of all, on television you are protected from the smells—awful, horrible smells from years and years of decaying bodies. Secondly, the sounds of whirring saw blades cutting into flesh and bone are, for the most part, not really given the prominence that they have in reality. Luckily, I didn't have to go into the autopsy rooms. Conner left me in a waiting room while he went back to check with one of the medical examiners as to Gina's cause of death, or COD.

When Conner came back, he was able to tell me that their supposition had been correct, and she had died of an overdose of heroin. He then led me to a small room with a large viewing window. After a few minutes, one of the morgue attendants wheeled a gurney in front of the window with a body covered in a sheet on it. He very gently pulled the sheet back until only the face and head were visible. I looked down into the face of my cousin Gina. There was no doubt in my mind.

“Is that her?” Conner asked, putting one of his arms around my shoulders.

“Yes. It's her,” I replied.

“I'm sorry,” Conner said quietly and then reached up and pushed the Talk button on an intercom box on the wall, speaking to the morgue attendant. “The identification has been confirmed.”

Turning to me, Conner said, “Let's get out of here. This place always gives me the creeps.”

I followed Conner out of the building and back to the car. We had no more than started back to Conner's town house when I pulled out my cell phone and hit the Speed Dial button to call my mother. The phone was picked up after a couple of rings.

"Mama, it's David. I've got some bad news. Gina's dead."

"Holy Mother! What happened?"

"She died of a heroin overdose."

"She was always a very troubled girl. Maybe if her mother hadn't died when she was so young..."

"Mama, did you know she had a child?"

"Yes, a little boy, I believe. I only saw him once. Gina came to visit right after he was born. She seemed so happy. I thought that perhaps having a child would help her to turn her life around, but I guess it didn't."

"The state has him in custodial care. What are we going to do about him?"

"I don't know. We can't leave him with the state. He's family. Under normal circumstances I would suggest that we give him to Tony and Debbie, but they just found out that they're about to have another child."

"I have an idea. There are two people within the family who would desperately love to have a child. I suggest we give him to Vince and Drew."

"That's a wonderful idea, I'll talk about it to Papa. After all, there is nobody else. Papa and I are too old to be raising a toddler, and of course, you couldn't raise him in the rectory."

"No, Mama. I'm not in a situation to raise a toddler either."

I suddenly heard what sounded like the combination of a growl and a snort from the driver's side of the car. I looked over at Conner, who was vigorously shaking his head no.

"Mama, I've got to go. I'll call you later with the plans for the funeral. We'll hold the Mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Of course, I'll say the Mass for her."

With that, we said good-bye, and I closed the cell phone. "What was that? Are you telling me you don't like children?"

"I love kids. I just wasn't planning on having any. They scare the shit out of me."

"Why?"

“Because there are an awful lot of responsibility, and I don't think I'd make a very good father. I don't think I've grown up enough yet to be one.”

“That's very surprising to me, because I think you would make a wonderful father.”

“No, trust me on this. Cops make absolutely lousy fathers. Because of the hours we work, we are never around, and when we are, we tend to be too authoritarian. Plus, given the fact that I was a marine as well, my kid would probably end up hating me.”

“I don't believe that for a minute. I love you, and trust me, I clearly see all your faults.”

“Gee! Thanks a lot. I've got so many of them?”

“No. In fact, you evidently have a lot fewer than *you* think.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means that contrary to what you think, you would make a *wonderful* father, whose children would adore him. A father they would know they could count on to always be there for them, and a father who would always tell them the truth, no matter how difficult that was.”

I could see Conner turn deeper and deeper colors of red as I said this.

“This is a stupid conversation anyway, because nobody in their right mind is going to give you and me a kid to raise.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Let's start with the fact that we're two guys. The state is not going to let two guys adopt a kid.”

“I don't know why you think that. There is no law against it. In fact, if this works out right like I hope it will, my youngest brother and his lover will be adopting Gina's little boy.”

“I'm starting to get the suspicious feeling that you want to adopt a kid.”

“Well...not right now, because we have enough problems on our hands, but I don't want to rule it out for the future.”

“Okay, so let's not talk about this until we're at a point where you think we should do it.”

“Let me get this straight. Are you saying that you are not completely opposed to our adopting a child?”

“Let me ask you. Would adopting a child make you happy?”

“Yes, I believe it would.”

"Then that's your answer. I told you I will do anything to make you happy."

I leaned over and put my head against his shoulder and my hand on the inside of his thigh.

"I truly love you, Detective McMahon. Even though you can be a real jackass at times. I think you want kids more than I do. You just won't admit it."

Conner reached down and covered my hand that was slowly stroking his inner thigh.

"You know, I'm not going to be responsible for what happens if you keep doing that."

"I don't expect you to be. What I need is for you to take me home and fuck my brains out until I can get the picture of Gina lying on that gurney out of my head."

"That, babe, is exactly what I'm here for."

"I guess I don't tell you often enough what a really good man you are, Conner McMahon. How good you are, how much I need you, and how much I love you."

As I said before, I can hold it together really well during a crisis, but I tend to fall apart after the crisis is over. With my head pressed against Conner's shoulder, I started crying. Conner moved his arm until it was around me, with my face now pressed against his chest. The hand of the arm that he was holding me with was gently stroking my hair. Somehow realizing that words could not comfort me, Conner remained silent throughout the ride home. What I needed from him was his warmth, his strength, and the sense of belonging I always had when he held me. After pulling into the driveway of the town house, Conner rushed around to my side of the car and gently helped me out of it. I followed him into the house as he moved quickly on his cane. He headed directly to the second floor and to our bedroom.

Once there, he laid the cane at the foot of the bed and reached out to hold me in his embrace. As we stood there, he began to slowly undress me. Once I was revealed in all my nakedness, Conner began to move his mouth over my body, slowly licking and sucking on what I knew were his favorite parts. My cock was standing hard and proud, and I desperately wanted for Conner to stop the foreplay and take me to those places only he could.

"Conner! Please, dear God, would you finally fuck me?"

"No. I can't. I can't 'fuck' you. You aren't some guy in a dingy back room of a bar. I love you. You are my mate, and my whole world revolves around you. I can only make love to you and hope and pray that we can do this with as little pain as possible. I truly don't want to hurt you."

“You won't. If there is any pain, then that is meant to be. I'll just think of it as the price of finally becoming one with you. And that makes any pain totally worth it.”

“Okay, but we're going to take this slowly, and you need to do everything I tell you. All right?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I said, grinning at him.

“I just hope that you can still make jokes when this is over.”

“Conner, tell me why you're so afraid.”

“You want the truth? I've never done this before. I don't mean the fucking part. I've fucked plenty of guys. But never a virgin. And while I'm being honest, I have to admit that I want you to end up really loving this, because I love fucking and I know that I'm going to want to fuck you a lot.”

“You may not know this, but I'm scared for the same reason. I've wanted you to fuck me since the first time you kissed me. I want to be able to do this anytime you want to.”

“I've wanted to do this probably from the first moment I saw you, so let's get the show on the road. Pull your legs back until your knees are touching your chest—or as close as you can get them.”

I did exactly what Conner told me to do, and in a few moments, Conner's mouth was locked to the rosebud opening to my body, and his tongue was forcing its way inside. I tried to relax as much as I could, but it still took a while until Conner was able to get all his tongue inside me. He then began fucking my hole with his tongue, driving in and out and, basically, driving me out of my mind with pleasure.

“Oh God! That feels so good! Yes, fuck my ass with your tongue!”

And he did. He went in my ass like a man who was starving. Finally, when he had my ass as wet, sloppy, and open as he could, he pulled his mouth away and crawled up over me. At first, I didn't understand what he was doing, but I saw him reach into the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a bottle of lube. He went back to my ass, but instead of lying down on the bed as he had been rimming me, he sat upright with his legs crossed. I heard him give a small groan of pain as he put his legs into this position, but I didn't say anything because I trusted him to know what he was doing.

He took the bottle of lube and poured some on his fingers and then began to rub it into my ass. He then took his middle finger and began to slowly slide it inside me. The feeling I had is not easy to describe. It wasn't painful; in fact, the deeper he went the better it felt. What I felt was slightly full. But the next thing I felt was empty when he pulled his finger from my ass. I gave out a small whine, wanting his finger back inside me.

Conner gave a slight chuckle and said, "Don't worry, babe. I'm coming right back in. You might want to push out with your muscles. It'll relax you more and stop the pain. It also helps if you take long, slow breaths while I'm going in."

Taking Conner's advice, I pushed out with my muscles and felt him begin to slowly insert two fingers this time. However, rather than just insert them, he began to move them around inside me until one of them brushed over something that made me feel like I was about to come.

"Oh God! What was that?"

"That, my love, is the prostate that I was telling you about. It can make you come just by having something sliding back and forth over it."

"I believe you. I nearly came when you touched it."

"Any pain?"

"No. None at all."

Conner took his two fingers and began to fuck me with them, moving them in and out but avoiding my prostate because coming wasn't his goal at that point.

He finally slid those fingers out of me, grabbed the bottle of lube, and put more on my hole and his fingers. This time I felt him insert three of his fingers. Again, he moved slowly until all three were buried in my hole as far as they could reach. This time, rather than fucking them in and out of me, he used all three to open me up more by spreading them. I took slow, deep breaths and pushed out with my ass muscles, and I could feel the tight ring of my opening begin to really relax and open.

Again, he relubed me and then inserted four fingers inside me. I felt like he could add his thumb and have his whole fist inside me. What amazed me most was that throughout this there was no pain. In fact, I loved the feelings that I was getting, especially when he was fucking me with his fingers.

"David, you are as open as I can get you with my fingers. All that's left is the real thing."

I watched him lubing up his cock as he said this. He took the bottle of lube and this time shoved the top inside me and squirted a large amount of my ass. I grunted because I couldn't believe how cold it was.

"I'm sorry, babe. There's no way for me to warm it up, but trust me, it'll be warmed up very quickly."

Conner got up carefully on his knees and put my legs over his shoulders. He reached down, grabbed his cock, and lined it up with my opening.

"Now remember to push out. Do it as hard as you can."

I pushed down as hard as I could, and I felt the head of Conner's cock breach the opening of my body and begin to slide inside. He slowly pressed with his hips as his cock sank farther and farther into me. Finally, I could feel his pubic hair pressed against the outside of my opening, and I knew that he was all the way inside me. I looked up into his eyes and saw such joy and love that I was almost overwhelmed by them.

I expected Conner to start fucking me. But instead, he just held perfectly still. I didn't understand why until I began to feel the muscles inside me relaxing around Conner's cock.

"How do you feel? Any pain?"

"No. Not at all. I feel like you're a part of me, that I don't know where I stop and you begin. It's the most incredible thing I've ever felt."

"Well, just hang on. We're only getting started."

And saying this, Conner began to pull his cock out of my hole. I whined again at the feeling of loss, but Conner just grinned and pushed his cock right back in until it was all inside me once again. He then pulled out, farther this time, and shoved it back in quicker than he had the first time. He kept doing this until he was pulling out so far that only the head of his cock was left inside me. He began to pick up speed and power with his thrusts until he reached a rhythm that he seemed comfortable with.

He kept fucking and fucking me while I was lost in a haze of lust and pleasure the likes of which I had never known. It was like Conner took me to another world, a world of pleasure where there was just the two of us. I reached up and pulled him down until my lips could reach his. We kissed with a passion and fervor beyond anything we had done before.

"Fuck me! Please! Harder! Faster!" I manage to groan out.

Conner began to do exactly as I had begged, slamming his cock into my hole with all the power of his muscular body, which was so beautiful to watch as he sweated and worked his cock harder and harder into me.

All of a sudden, I could feel my balls draw up tight to the base of my cock and the tingle deep inside me that told me I was going to come at almost any moment. I looked up again into Conner's eyes.

“FUCK ME! I'M GOING TO COME!” I screamed out.

“YES! COME! COME FOR ME!” Conner screamed back.

As if my body instinctively followed Conner's orders, I was hit with the most massive orgasm I had ever had in my life. My cock began to shoot out cum; most of the first shots went over my head. But I continued to shoot into my hair, onto my face, my neck, and my chest. At the same time I could feel Conner's cock twitching deep inside me, filling me up with his cum until there was no more room for it and Conner's cock, so it began to leak out of my hole. Conner seemed as if he would come forever, but his orgasm finally came to an end, and he collapsed on top of me, gluing our bodies together with my cum.

We both lay there too exhausted to speak or even move. Having Conner lying there on me with his hard cock still buried in my ass made me feel connected to him on levels we had never reached before. I felt protected and cherished as his arms slid around me and held me tight to him. If it were up to me, we would simply stay this way forever. Conner finally moved his head from where it was buried between my neck and shoulder and, searching out my mouth with his, kissed me with such love and tenderness that it literally brought tears to my eyes.

Conner pulled back to look at me and saw the tears. I could see the look of fear and concern that crossed his face. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“No! I'm crying because I'm so happy and I'm so in love with you that I have no control over my emotions at all.”

Conner's face went from one of concern to a smile that melted my heart.

“I love you. I love you so very, very much. So much it almost frightens me,” Conner murmured.

And with this, he leaned down and once again kissed me. But this kiss was not one of passion or desire, but was gentle, slow, and loving.

“You're mine now. I've marked you. There is a part of me inside you that will stay with you forever,” Conner said as he pulled his mouth from mine.

“God yes! I truly feel like I belong to you now. And I only have one question,” I replied.

“What's that?” Conner said, looking at me questioningly.

“How long until we can do this again?” I said, grinning.

Conner chuckled, which caused his still-hard cock, buried inside me, to begin moving.

“I would love to fuck you from now until tomorrow, but since this was your first time, you are going to be sore whether you realize it or not. It may be a couple of days until I can fuck you without hurting you. I do have something, however, that can help to soothe you somewhat.”

Conner began to slowly pull his cock from inside me. Once it was out, he moved down to my ass and pushed my legs back up again.

“Hold them back for me, please.”

I eagerly grabbed them and did as he asked, even though I had no real idea of what he was going to do. But I soon found out. Conner once again locked his mouth to my hole and began to lick and suck at it. I felt his tongue going deep into my very relaxed ass. He seems to be after something, and then I realized he was eating his own cum from my just-fucked hole! He finally stopped and then moved back up my body. I let go of my legs and wrapped them around his hips. Conner brought his mouth down on mine, and I opened to him, expecting his tongue to invade me as usual. Instead, however, rather than his tongue, what he gave me was a large glob of his cum, which he had sucked from my ass. I eagerly swallowed all he had to give, and then my tongue went searching in his mouth for more. I know that there would be those who would think this gross and disgusting, but they would be those who had never experienced it.

But Conner was not done. Not by a long shot. He instead began to lick my cum from my face and neck, moving down until he reached my now-softened cock and took it gently into his mouth, cleaning off the last of my load. He moved back up my body and shared my cum with me, which I eagerly accepted.

Conner finally moved off me and lay down on his back beside me. I moved over so that my head was resting on his chest with my arm thrown over his abs and his arm holding me. I lay there, lost in the afterglow of something so far beyond just sex that I had no words for it. I could

smell Conner's scent, the scent of cum, the scent of our fucking, and even my own scent, all of which were utterly wonderful.

Conner's breathing began to slow down, as did mine. Both of us sated for the time being, we drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Since there would be no viewing for Gina, the next morning I called Henry and scheduled the funeral Mass for a couple of days later. I told Conner that I would be tied up with the family for most of the day and offered to try and find someone to come in and look after him, but he refused, saying he didn't want anyone around but me.

“Besides, I'm okay alone. I can get up and down the stairs on my own, and if I get hungry, I can just call out for something.”

“Yes, I have noticed how much better you're doing. I think you're going to be well enough to go back to work soon. Maybe we had better talk about that.”

Conner and I were sitting on the couch up in the media room, someplace where, now that Conner was getting better at making it up the stairs, we liked spending more time.

“What's there to talk about? So? I go back to work.”

“What there is to talk about is what happens to me.”

I got up off the couch and began pacing back and forth.

“What do you mean?”

“Once you go back to work, I don't have any excuse for staying with you anymore.”

“Why do you need an excuse? I thought you were going to talk to your friend about changing churches so that we could be together?”

“I was going to. I just haven't gotten around to it.”

“So maybe you need to do that now? Unless you don't really want to.” Conner looked at me, and I could see tremendous pain in his eyes.

“No! It's not that. It's just difficult, that's all.”

“You're going to have to explain this to me, because I don't get it. You tell me you love me. You tell me you want to be married to me. What's difficult?”

“You told me once why you felt that you had to leave the Marine Corps after Steve died. Did you really want to leave?”

“No, of course not. I'd decided I wanted to spend my life in the corps.”

“So it was difficult to leave?”

“Yeah, it was.” Conner went silent, and it was like I could see things coming together in his head.

“Okay, I get it,” Conner said.

“There's still a part of me that doesn't want to have to do this. Even though I know I have to. Even though I've got no other choice.”

“David. Please stop pacing and come here.” Conner patted the sofa next to him.

I did as he asked, and he reached out and put his arm around me.

“Look. I understand that this is difficult for you, a whole lot more difficult than it was for me to leave the church. And I wish I could tell you to just take your time about doing it, but like you said, we've only got a finite amount of time before you have to do one of two things—either leave the church or leave me,” Conner said.

“Believe me, of those two things, the church loses out, hands down.”

“Then don't you think that it's maybe time for you to call your friend?”

“Yes, you're right. I'll go call her now.”

I went downstairs to the kitchen, where I had left my cell phone, and gave Mary Catherine a call. I told her that I needed to see her, but she told me that she was tied up all day. I explained to her that this was kind of an emergency and asked if she could come over to Conner's place after she got off work at the cathedral. She said she could do that easily, and I gave her the address. She told me she would be there around six p.m. I thanked her profusely and then went back upstairs to where Conner was.

“I called her. She's coming over about six,” I told him, sitting back down on the couch next to him.

“I take it you want me out of the way while you talk to her?”

“Absolutely not! This is all your fault anyway.”

“My fault? What the fuck did I do?”

“You came waltzing into my office with your damned Irish charm and swept me off my feet.” I laughed.

“Oh, no! You have to put the blame on Fat Marvin for that one. If he hadn't murdered T.J. Chang in order to take over his drug trade, I wouldn't have had to come to the shelter looking for Tim.”

“I refuse to be grateful to a murderer. And besides, did you ever stop to think that I might need you there with me tonight?”

Conner wrapped his arm around me. He then put his lips to my ear.

“Babe, if that's what you want, you know all you have to do is ask,” Conner murmured and then gently kissed my cheek.

“Can I have anything I want if I ask?”

“Anything that's within my power to give you.”

“Good! I want to go downstairs and have you fuck me again.”

“Damn! You are awfully sneaky for a priest! I told you we have to wait a couple of days at least, so you're not sore.”

“But I'm not!”

“Not what? Sneaky or a priest?”

“No! I'm not sore. Not in the least.”

“Okay. I'll make a deal with you. You still haven't fucked me yet. You do that, and then we'll see about me fucking you again.”

“I can't do that,” I said, looking away from him.

“Why not?”

“I just can't,” I whined, still not looking at him.

I felt his fingers on my chin as he gently turned my head to look at him.

“David, why not?”

“Because I'm scared. Okay? I admit it. I'm scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I'm afraid of disappointing you.”

“How are you going to disappoint me?”

“Because I'm not like you. I haven't been playing around with guys since I was in high school. You told me that you liked being fucked. I've never fucked anybody. I'm afraid I'll disappoint you because I'm no good at it.”

Conner pulled me close.

“David, David. There's nothing to be afraid of. I hate to tell you this, but guys don't really have to learn how to fuck. Nature just kind of hardwires everything into your brain. Just like jacking off. You didn't have to learn how to jack off, did you?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“What do you mean 'not exactly'?”

“I overheard two guys after gym class one day talking about it. I had no idea that anybody did things like that.”

“I'll bet you went straight home and tried it, didn't you?”

“No! Well...not until the next time I got a hard-on that wouldn't go away.”

“But when you did it, it came quite naturally to you, didn't it?”

“Well...yeah, but then so did the guilt.”

“How old were you?”

“I was thirteen. I was a freshman in high school.”

“And you were already guilty? Did you even know what it was you were doing? That it was sex?”

“No, of course not. I didn't know what it was. I just knew that it felt good. But I was a good Catholic boy. I knew that anything that felt *that* good had to be a sin!”

“And you wonder why I hate the church so much?”

“No. I understand very well.”

“So, will you trust that if you fuck me, you'll do fine?”

“Okay, but you've got nobody but yourself to blame if you're disappointed.”

“I am not going to be disappointed. Did you forget about the fact that I love you? There is nothing you could do—short of falling out of love with me—that would disappoint me.”

We went downstairs to the bedroom. Since all we wore were sweats, we were both quickly and easily naked. Conner lay down on the bed, reached out, and took my hand, pulling me into bed with him. For a while, we just lay there holding each other and gently kissing. Of course, that caused both of us to become erect. I couldn't get close enough to Conner to where I could smell his scent without getting a hard-on.

"Somebody's horny." Conner chuckled in my ear and then gently licked inside of it, causing me to tremble with the feeling.

"Your scent does that to me."

"You like my scent, huh?"

"Yes. It's like the most divine perfume and aphrodisiac combined. I've always liked the scent of other guys, but no other guy has ever done to me what you do."

"You know I'm not wearing anything. It's just me that you're smelling."

"Oh, yes. I'm well aware of that. The few times I've been around you when you've had on something—either cologne or deodorant, I don't know which—it's interfered somewhat. It's not that I don't still like the scent of you, it's just harder for me to smell the real you."

"You are aware that I feel the same way about you, aren't you?"

"No! I had no idea. To be honest, I've always thought that my love for the scent of a man's body was some kind of weird fetish. I've never known anybody who felt the same way."

"I think there's an easy reason for that. After all, how many other gay guys do you know that you could talk about it with?"

"Well, there are really only four gay guys who I know well, and I couldn't comfortably talk to any of them about it."

"Who are they?"

"Well, there's my brother, Vince, and his lover, Drew, as well as Drew's brother, Gregg and his lover, Dar."

"If you ask me, that sounds like a pretty good already-made support group."

"Yeah, except for the fact that I've never been honest with any of them."

"Fucking dog collar got in the way, huh?"

“How the fuck do you know that? You know, it's scary sometimes how much you understand about me.”

“Babe, it's simply a case of been there, done that. Sergeant stripes on your sleeve or a badge on your chest can put up the same kind of barriers. Don't think for one minute that I've ever had somebody to talk to before I met you. Plus, you forget, I am a detective. I'm trained to observe people.”

“Yeah, but I'm trained as a shrink. I'm supposed to be able to do the same thing.”

“How many doctors do you know who would perform surgery on themselves?”

“Okay, I get it.”

“After all, you know things about me that I sometimes wish you didn't.”

“Uhh, like the fact that you're a control freak?”

“Nah, everybody knows that!” Conner chuckled.

“Yes, I guess you're right. it is the common trait of alpha males.”

“For me, it's true in most areas except one.”

“And that one would be?”

“Sex. It's the only time I'm able to give up control to someone else. But I have to either be incredibly turned on or deeply in love with the person in order to trust them enough to give up that control. I am so in love with you, and so fucking turned on every time I'm near you, that I want to relax and let you take control sometimes.”

“I never quite looked at it that way. I guess that's why I wanted you to fuck me so bad and why I loved it so much.”

“Yes. And that's why I want you to fuck me so bad.”

“When you put it that way, how the fuck could I say no?”

“Then are you over your fear of disappointing me?”

“Not entirely, but enough that I'll do anything you want.”

Conner let go of me and moved over on the bed so that he was lying on his stomach with his legs spread open. I got the hint and moved over to where I was lying on top of him with my cock resting between the cheeks of his ass. With my face over his neck and shoulders, I decided to start licking and nibbling down the length of his body. To be honest, Conner had an incredibly

beautiful, muscular back, which I rarely got to see. Being able to worship that part of him turned me on so much that my cock was leaking precum into his ass crack.

The slightly salty taste of his skin as I went from the back of his neck to his shoulders and down his back was like ambrosia to me. The taste of Conner seemed to be as much of an aphrodisiac as the scent of him. I slowly inched my way down his back until I reached a small patch of short hairs that covered his lower back. I don't think I had ever noticed them before, but now I did as I licked all over them, tasting the heavier tang of salt in them.

When I reached the start of the divide between his ass cheeks, rather than moving down it, I began licking and nibbling all over both cheeks of his ass, alternately. Moving back and forth, but each time moving closer and closer to the divide between them.

I put my hands on both cheeks and spread them apart. That's when I was hit by the scent of that most secret and protected place on a male's body. I think it was at that moment that I realized how much trust was engendered by what Conner was asking me to do. I also realized how much trust I had placed in Conner when I had begged him to fuck me.

I inhaled deeply of the dark, sweaty scent and buried my face between his buns. The scent seemed to drive me into some kind of crazy fuck-lust. A drive so intense that simply smelling the scent of him was not enough. I began licking and sucking up and down his trench, starting at the top near his lower back and ending down against his balls. I went up and down like this several times while Conner moaned and thrust his butt into my face, trying to drive me deeper and deeper.

Finally, I stopped moving and concentrated entirely on his soft, wrinkly hole. I flattened my tongue, licking, and then turned my tongue into a spear and pushed hard, trying to gain entry as Conner had done to me. I could feel his hole blossoming open somewhat like a flower, and my tongue slowly slid inside.

“Fuck yeah! Eat my butt! Fuck that butt with your tongue!” I heard Conner's deep growl of desire and did what he asked, spearing my tongue in and out of his hole like it was a small, wet cock.

I was overwhelmed by what I was doing. The dark, musky taste of his butt along with my own amazement that my tongue was deep inside my lover's body almost brought me to orgasm,

just from what I was doing. I also realized that not only Conner wanted me to fuck him, but I wanted—needed—to fuck him.

Conner must've realized the point of rut that I had reached, because he reached back, handing me the bottle of lube.

“Just lube me up and yourself really well and shove your cock slowly up my butt.”

I took the bottle of lube and began lubing up his ass, sending one and then two fingers deep inside him. I felt around for his prostate and found a very prominent bump inside him that caused him to groan deeply when I touched it. I figured that I had found my target. I already knew from my own experience what would happen if I were able to constantly massage that bump with my cock. Conner would orgasm without either me or him touching his hard-on.

I quickly lubed up, rising up over him on one hand, and pushed my cock down until the head was gently kissing his hole. I gave a gentle push with my hips, and nothing happened. His hole resisted opening to me. I tried again, this time putting more force behind my thrust, and his hole opened enough to allow the head of my cock inside of him. I had difficulty with how wet and hot Conner was inside. I wasn't sure that I could even get all my cock into him without coming. I continued to push until I was stopped by his ass cheeks, which seemed to perfectly fit the curve of my body at my hips. My cock was buried inside of him as far as it would go.

At this point, Conner reached back with both his hands and grabbed my hips, holding me tight against him. As the muscles inside of him slowly relaxed and I could feel his chute opening up to me, my intense desire to come began to lessen as well. Finally, Conner let go of my hips, letting me know that it was now time to begin fucking him.

I started slowly, just pulling back a few inches before sliding back into his wet heat. The feeling was unbelievable. I had never felt anything so good in my life. I couldn't believe that I had ever been afraid of this. Just as Conner had told me, my hips began the rhythmic process of withdrawal and entry without any conscious thought on my part. It was like my body had been waiting all my life for this opportunity. I could hear Conner groaning beneath me, which at first frightened me because I thought I was causing him pain. He soon put a stop to that idea.

“Oh, God! Yes! That feels so good! It's been too fucking long!”

And with this, Conner began pushing back, meeting my thrusts with his own. I felt beyond good that I was giving him the same pleasure he had given me. If I could pick a moment in time when I felt that I had finally become fully a man, it would be this one.

I continued to fuck Conner, praying only that I could last long enough to get him off before me. I could feel a tingling and slow burn down deep inside that told me that I was close, very close, to coming. I redoubled my efforts, slamming into Conner's hole harder and faster, knowing that I couldn't keep this up for very long, but hopefully long enough. Just as I felt myself beginning to let go and fall over the precipice into my own orgasm, I felt Conner's sheath begin to flutter around my cock, causing me to spray the inside of Conner's body with my cum. I thought that I had failed to get him off until I once again heard his groans beneath me.

“Fuck! Yes! Fuck my butt! Slam me hard! I'M COMING!”

I knew then that I had not disappointed him. Instead, I collapsed on his back enjoying the warm afterglow that comes from breeding your mate and breeding him well. Now, Conner was marked as mine just as surely as I was marked as his. More importantly, I found out that both emotionally and sexually Conner needed me as much as I needed him. Something that, up to this moment, I was not completely sure of because he always seemed so strong and alpha male.

As my cock softened, Conner's internal muscles finally pushed me out of him. I moved back off him, and leaning down, I once again spread open the cheeks of his ass to look at his hole, which had given me so much pleasure. The opening to his body was obviously looser now, and there was a small trickle of liquid coming out. At first, I didn't realize what it was, and then it dawned on me that it was my cum. I don't know what instinct made me do it, but I leaned down and began to, lick and suck at his just-fucked hole. I was surprised to find that the taste of my cum was very similar to Conner's. I could hear his gentle moans as my licking soothed his reddened tissues. Remembering what he had done, I gathered as much of my cum in my mouth as I could and, crawling up beside him, kissed him passionately, sharing my load with him. He eagerly swallowed everything that I fed him, and then invaded my mouth with his tongue, searching for more.

“You know, you fuck pretty good for a virgin priest.”

“I should. I learned it all from you.”

We curled up in each other's arms at that point and drifted gently off to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

When I woke up, I noticed that it was almost four thirty in the afternoon. I gently kissed Conner, and he slowly opened his eyes and looked at me.

“What's up? You ready for round two?” I was sure he noticed my erection, which was poking into his abs.

“No, as much as I would love to, it's getting late, and Mary Catherine will be here soon. I thought we could take a shower, and I'll fix us something to eat before she gets here.”

“Oh! A shower. Sounds like round two to me.”

“If you play your cards right, maybe it will be.”

Conner got off the bed and followed me to the bathroom. I noticed that he was moving quite well, even with a cane. It was a good thing I had invited Mary Catherine, because I could tell that it wouldn't be long until Conner was getting around just like he always did. To be honest, I had greatly missed that kind of lope, that sensuous movement of his when he walked. It reminded me of a healthy young animal.

We got into the large shower, and Conner adjusted all the spouts so that it was like we were in a rain forest. Conner reached out and pulled me toward him, wrapping his arms around me and sliding his hands up and down my wet body. One hand he slid down my back and into the crevice of my ass, where he gently began stroking his fingers against my sensitive hole. I groaned at the feelings that flashed through my body at his touch. Conner was right. The shower was rapidly turning into round two. I was especially aware of him gently nibbling at my ear while he said nasty and seductive things in a low murmur.

“Your hole is hungry. It keeps nipping at my fingers like it wants them inside. I want to slide my cock deep inside you. I want to coat the inside of your body with my cum. I want you writhing on my cock, begging me to push you to orgasm. I want possession of your body, mind, and soul.”

At that point, what the fuck could I do? I wanted him to take possession of me. I wanted to feel us once again joined as a single person. I groaned out my acceptance of his plans and desires. His hand on my shoulder pushed my body closer to the tiled wall, while at the same time, I was pushing my butt back, eagerly awaiting his thrust inside me.

When it came, however, it was not what I expected at all. I had expected a deep, quick thrust to bury him halfway inside me. Instead, the thrust was gentle and slow. It was as if he was determined to gain the surrender of my ass tissues to him. Slowly, gradually, I could feel him moving deeper and deeper inside of me. As was always the case, the size of him, the hardness of him, the deeply masculine power of him filled me in ways that I doubted anyone else ever could. He was, after all, my mate. The man who God had created for me to love and in whose arms I could find the peace and security that I had always sought.

His cock glided slowly in and out of me at a pace far less frantic than was usual when we coupled. I thought at first it was because he had just woken up. However, it soon became apparent that the tempo was deliberate. I could tell what he was doing. He was driving me crazy. I wanted so much to come, but this slow, gentle thrusting would not push me over the edge.

“CONNOR! PLEASE! FUCK ME! FUCK ME HARD!” I screamed out, begging for what I needed from him.

“All you need do is ask, my love. And you even said 'please.'”

And with this, he began slamming his cock into me with so much power, I thought for a moment he might push me through the tiled wall. But then he moved his hips and changed the angle of the way his cock entered me so that it slammed directly into my prostate, causing me to come, painting the dark blue tiles with ropes of my white cum.

“FUCK! YEAH! I'M COMING!” My voice reverberated off the tiled walls, and it almost sounded as if it was amplified somehow.

“That's it, babe. Come on my cock. Come from me fucking you. FUCK!” Conner growled the first part in my ear, but then I felt him jerking inside of me, and I knew I was once again made his and his alone by his planting his seed as deep inside me as he could reach.

I stood there leaning against the tiled wall, glad that Conner had his arms around me, or I surely would have slid down the wall and onto the floor.

“Did you like round two?” Conner murmured in my ear.

“Oh yes! I loved round two!” I replied. “But we need to get out of the shower and get something to eat, or neither of us will have the energy for round three.”

“Why do you think that there will be a round three?”

“Because you're already ready.” And saying this, I reached behind me and gently stroked his hard cock, which he had just pulled out of my body.

“Well, the desire is there, but you're right. I need fuel for another sterling performance like that one.”

I turned around and looked into his deep blue eyes. “Yes, that was quite a performance. I only hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.”

“I enjoyed it tremendously. What I enjoy most, however, is that little smile that you get on your face when I've fucked you well.”

“I do?”

“Yes, babe, you do. Of course, I'm the only one who gets to see it, so it is very special to me.”

He pulled me to him and kissed me deeply but gently before he opened the glass door on the shower and, taking my hand, pulled me out with him. He grabbed a large, fluffy towel and began drying me. However, as I stood there, I could feel his cum slowly leaking from my well-used hole and down the inside of my thigh.

“Conner, I'm leaking,” I said, grinning at him.

He looked down and saw his cum sliding down my leg.

“Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it.”

Conner immediately knelt down and began licking up all his cum that was leaking from me. He started on my thigh but very quickly moved up to where he could suck and lick at my hole, getting all his cum that he could find. He then rose up, and grasping my shoulders in his hands, he turned me around so that we were once again facing each other. He held the back of my head with his hand and kissed me deeply. His tongue brushed my upper lip, and I immediately opened for him. Rather than his tongue, however, a large glob of ass-flavored cum flowed into my mouth. I quickly swallowed all the pungent sweetness that Conner gave me, and then used my tongue to search his mouth for more.

Once I was sure that I had gotten as much as I could, I grabbed a towel and began drying Conner's body. This was always a joy for me to do. It gave me a chance to rub my fingers and hands all over his magnificent body, a body I was sure that God had created as an example of his very best work.

We went downstairs to the kitchen, and I pulled a couple of steaks out of the freezer and put them on the grill, which was a part of the countertop cooking array. I'd never seen anything like it before. It allowed you to grill just like you were outside, but the noxious and deadly fumes of the gas were drawn into vents that ran down both sides of the grill.

"Anything I can help with?" Conner wrapped both his arms around me and gently kissed my ear.

"You can make the salad. Everything is in the refrigerator for it. I'm going to do the baked potatoes in the microwave because they take too long on the grill or in the oven."

Conner went to the refrigerator and started pulling out veggies for the salad. He then reached into one of the drawers and pulled out a knife the likes of which I had never seen. I watched in awe as he sliced up the veggies with it. Each cut was swift and precise. It seemed that my lover was way better than a Cuisinart!

"What kind of a knife is that?" I asked.

"It's a KA-BAR. It's a weapon carried by almost every grunt in the field."

"I see that you were exceptionally well trained in its use. But then again, as a recon marine, you would be."

"And what exactly do you know about the training of a recon marine?"

"You would be surprised. I spent several hours on the Internet finding out all I could about what was so different about recon marines. I could hear the evident pride in your voice whenever you talked about being one. I wanted to get to know you better and feel closer to you. I hope you don't mind."

Conner looked at me, and there was a grin on his face that I had never seen before. Bashful, almost adolescent.

"No, I don't mind. In fact, I'm very flattered that you took all that time."

“Maybe it will give you some idea of just how important you are in my life. That's the main reason why I want you there when I talk to Mary Catherine. You are part of my life, and you should be there so you can know what's going on in it.”

We sat down to eat in silence. I knew that something was going on inside of Conner, but I didn't know what. I knew it wasn't bad, because all through the meal Conner continuously smiled at me, and whenever he got the chance, he would either gently stroke my hand or reach under the table and stroke my thigh. Needless to say, it was another in a long line of dinners that I ate with a hard-on.

I went upstairs and pulled on a set of sweats and then brought another pair downstairs for Conner. He had just finished pulling them on when the doorbell chimed. It had an odd tune that it played. It seemed very familiar, but I couldn't place it. I looked at Conner questioningly.

“The theme from *Dances with Wolves*. By the way, does she drink?”

“Gin and tonic. More gin than tonic.”

I pulled open the door, and there was Mary Catherine, dressed in a black skirt and clerical blouse. She had on a black trench coat and was carrying an old, beat-up brown leather briefcase that appeared to be stuffed to overflowing. We embraced.

“David, it is so good to see you again. But I have to admit I never expected to see you in this kind of surrounding. This place is absolutely gorgeous!”

“I'm glad that you like it.” I heard Conner's deep voice behind me. He moved closer to me and put his arm across my shoulders, whether in protection or possession—I didn't know which.

“Ahh yes. The marine turned police officer. It's Conner, isn't it?”

“Detective Conner McMahon, at your service, ma'am. Can I fix you a drink?” Conner asked.

“Yes, a gin and tonic if you have it?” Mary Catherine replied.

“No problem. I've got just about anything you could want in this house,” Conner said, and I could hear the pride in his voice.

As I led Mary Catherine into the living room, she remarked on how beautiful the house was. “However, most police officers I know don't have the money for this kind of house.”

Conner came in and handed Mary Catherine her drink. "My former lover died and left it to me."

"But I take it the money didn't do anything to alleviate the pain." I could hear the compassion for Conner in Mary Catherine's voice.

"No, the only thing that has done that is David."

And turning to me, Mary Catherine asked, "So? Why did you need to see me so badly, as if I didn't know?"

"I think you do know," I said.

"Why don't you tell me anyway?"

"I love Conner with all my heart. I can't live without him. But as soon as he's well enough to go back to work, I have no more reason to stay here with him."

"Actually you've already given me a very good reason for you to stay. It's just not a reason that the archdiocese is going to accept."

"No."

"I have to admit, after you called me I did little snooping. I called the rectory and talked to Henry about where you were. I guess you didn't know that Henry and I are old friends. He even came to my ordination ceremony. I had asked him to preach at it, and he did. When he told me about your living here with Conner, I put two and two together and went and talked to the bishop about you and your situation. As I told you before, he would be more than happy to welcome you and Conner into the Episcopal Church. He gave me permission to marry you, if that's what you want. And if you're interested, he even has a job picked out for you. He wants to make you a canon at the cathedral. Basically he'd like you to continue doing the same job in the Episcopal Church that you're doing in the Roman Catholic Church. He wants you to continue working with street people, especially those who are former military. He'd also want you as canon residentiary, helping other priests who get into trouble. While we don't have the same level of alcohol and drug addiction as the Roman Church, there still will be enough to keep you busy. So what do you think of that?"

"I think it's a dream come true, except for one thing. I haven't had to, up until now, deal with marital problems, but since most of your priests are married, I'm sure it comes up more

often than not. I don't know how good I could be at that, given the fact that I've never been married," I admitted.

"Bullshit!" Mary Catherine said, and I could see Conner trying very hard not to laugh. "First, what makes you think that you and Conner aren't married? Second, I know you had to have been trained as a therapist in couples counseling."

Conner reached over, put his arm around me, and pulled me close. Then he gently kissed me on the cheek.

"Babe, I think the cat's out of the bag," he murmured in my ear and then, turning to Mary Catherine, said, "That's exactly the way I feel. We've been married since the first night that we made love to each other."

"Conner, I was noticing those beautiful carved wolves on your front door. I also see all the photographs and statues of wolves around this room. I take it you have an attachment to them?"

"You might say that. Actually, I have more of an identification with them. After my first lover died, I felt like a lone wolf, and one who would be alone the rest of my life. But almost from the moment that I met David, I fell in love with him and, just like an alpha male wolf—who I identify most with—I want him as my mate, my *only* mate, for the rest of our lives."

"Then, David, I think you have a perfect background for dealing with marital issues. Certainly you have had more difficulty and had to make far more sacrifices for your love than anyone who is likely to come to you for help."

"Okay, okay! I surrender. There's no way that I can outargue both of you at once."

"David, I know that leaving the Roman Church is very difficult for you. It is for almost every priest who makes that decision. It is especially difficult because you really don't want to leave, but at the same time you have found someone who you love, I would bet, almost more than your priesthood."

I turned to Conner even though I was speaking to Mary Catherine.

"I do love him more than my priesthood. In the beginning I considered giving up the priesthood entirely. I will admit that there is a great deal of dogma that I don't agree with. But it is the church's lack of acceptance of what I am and the love I have found that makes me realize I can no longer stay there."

“I know. I’ve seen the pain in your eyes when we’ve talked about a number of issues. What I hope you’ve come to realize is that the Episcopal Church doesn’t hold to those dogmas and is in the process of finding a way to fully include gays in the life of the church,” Mary Catherine said.

“If I hadn’t come to that realization, I would have never called you. So what do we have to do? What does the process consists of?” I asked.

“The bishop has done something that, to be honest, I was surprised at. He’s allowing you to keep your faculties and function as a priest. Usually, the transition consists of a year of study of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, focusing on their history as well as their beliefs. Instead, the bishop has appointed me to take you through these studies while you continue to function as a priest within the church. There could be a small, simple ceremony after the Communion service on a Sunday. The bishop will shake hands with you and welcome you into the Episcopal Church. He will also bless you in the new ministry you are about to undertake,” Mary Catherine explained.

“When do we do this?” I asked.

“Anytime you want. It has to be done on a Sunday during the Communion service,” Mary Catherine said.

“What about the wedding? When and where will that happen?” I could hear a surprising eagerness in Conner’s voice.

“Conner, that’s really up to you and David. Do you want the ceremony in a church or here at home? I will tell you this, same-sex weddings are still controversial within the church so that might be more difficult. The bishop, in order to try and keep the peace between the two factions, has, as a rule, only permitted weddings to be held in private and not in church.”

“Okay, I can understand that. Is getting married here, at home, good enough for you?” Conner asked me.

“I suppose what’s important is the wedding itself, not where it’s held.” I answered him as I took his hand between mine.

“I’ll be honest with you—and I know you’ll understand this, David—I begged the bishop to allow me to perform your wedding. So many times I stood there and performed marriage ceremonies for people who I knew had very little chance of their marriage working. With you two, I will be marrying two people who I know are totally in love. I can see that love, and hear it,

every time you look at each other or speak to each other or speak about each other. If there were two people on this earth who deserved to be married, it's the two of you."

"Thank you, Mary Catherine. I'm very pleased that you will be performing the ceremony. I'm also happy that the bishop appointed you to take David through whatever learning he needs to do. I know how hard this decision has been for him. I can give him love, but that's all I can do. I'm glad to know that you will be there to deal with some of his fear in ways that I cannot," Conner said, wrapping his arms around me.

"Yes. The two best things that I see coming out of this decision are that Conner and I will be bound together for all time, and that you and I will have the chance to work closely together," I said to her.

"Well, I need to get home to dinner, and I've got a lot of work in that bag to do tonight." Mary Catherine indicated the overstuffed briefcase.

"I'm sorry that you have to go home and eat alone. Next time you come, we'll fix dinner for you," I promised.

"David, you don't have to do that. I'm not going to eat dinner alone. I'm going home to my wife."

"Your *wife*?"

"Yes. My wife. I met Elaine in seminary and fell in love with her. She's now a deacon and within a year will be ordained a priest."

"Then by all means, the next time we will cook dinner, and we hope that you'll bring her with you," Conner said.

Mary Catherine reached for her briefcase and stood up, preparing to leave. I walked over and gave her a hug.

"Thank you so very, very much. You have helped me in ways that you can't even know," I said quietly as I hugged her.

"Thank you for what you've done for David. I hope we will all become good friends. I know that David and I certainly could use some," Conner said as he also hugged Mary Catherine.

"Thank you, to both of you. You've given me great joy." And with this, she was out the door and gone.

“Well...you've done it. Any regrets?” Conner asked as he took me in his arms.

I rested my head against his chest; the scent of him surrounded me. The warmth and strength of his arms gave me a feeling of love and safety that I could not find anywhere else. I looked up into his deep blue eyes.

“My only regret is that we didn't meet sooner. But God has his own schedule; he doesn't live by ours. Now I remember someone mentioning round three?” I said to Conner, grinning.

Chapter Thirteen

Gina's funeral was a very sad event in the lives of the Colucci family; however, my heart was full to overflowing with joy and happiness when I saw Vince and Drew arrive with Gina's son in Drew's arms. Following behind them were Mama and Papa. I first got a hug and kiss on both cheeks from Papa and then the same from Mama. When I got to Vince, he gave me a bone-crushing hug and nearly lifted me off my feet.

"Hey, Padre! I want you to meet our new son, Andreouccio. Isn't he something else?"

"Vince, he is absolutely adorable," I said.

At this, the little boy who had his arms wrapped around Drew's neck released him and reached out to me.

"What does he want, Drew?"

"That's his way of saying that he wants you to hold him. Because of the neglect that he's experienced in his life, he doesn't seem to be able to talk much yet. However, Vince and I think that with only a very little time with us, we'll be able to make up for some of his developmental issues."

I reached out my arms and took the little boy into them. A feeling went through me that told me Conner had better get ready for us to have kids. And if holding him weren't enough, he wrapped his little arms around my neck and gave me a very wet and sloppy kiss on my cheek.

"You can tell he's Italian; he hugs and kisses everybody," Vince said.

"Only in this case, I think he's trying to say thank you for what you did for him and for us," Drew said.

"Me? What did I do?"

"We know that there was no way that Mama and Papa would have chosen us to raise him without your approval. It probably was your idea to begin with. I will never forget that, Bro. You

know I have difficulty talking about feelings, otherwise I'd tell you how much I love you and how grateful Drew and I are your fulfilling our fondest dreams. First the marriage, and now this. I don't know how I ever can repay you for what you've done, but if you need anything, anything at all, Drew and I will always be there for you.” And with that, Vince hugged me again, but not another bone-crusher. This was a hug of deep tenderness and affection. So much like what I was used to from Conner.

Just then, Tony and Debbie arrived with their two little boys, and so the three cousins got to meet.

“Well, Bro, I see you're keeping up with your duties to procreate. Congratulations, Debbie, on the happy news.” I hugged both of them and then got down on my knees to hug and kiss my other two nephews.

To my surprise, Dar and Gregg arrived next.

“We hope you don't mind us coming. We're not really family, and we didn't know Gina, but we felt that we could at least come and pay our respects,” Gregg said to me.

I reached out and hugged both of them. “I'm very glad that you came, and I'm sure that the rest of the family feels exactly the same way. And you are part of the family, so just get that out of your head that you're not.”

“Since I am the head of the family, I guess it's up to me to tell you officially that we consider both of you a part of the family—and don't you ever forget that,” Papa said, shaking his finger in their faces. He had evidently been standing close enough to hear my conversation with Dar and Gregg. Papa hugged both of them, then called Mama over to do the same thing and said they had adopted yet two more sons.

The time finally came for me to go and get vested for Mass. When I got back to the sacristy, I again found Timmy and Tommy, the O'Brien twins. This time, on time and fully vested.

“Good morning, boys. Thank you for being on time and, evidently, for volunteering to serve at this Mass.”

“We heard that the lady who died was your cousin,” Tommy said.

“Yes, that's true. Her name was Gina, and when we were young, we were very close.”

“That's why we volunteered. We both like you a lot, Father. We wanted to do something to help you get through this.”

I was completely taken aback. I could feel tears starting to well up in my eyes, but I got down on my knees and hugged both of them, something I had never done before. I then stood up, wiping my eyes with my handkerchief.

“And I love you. Both of you. Very, very much. Thank you again for volunteering. Believe me, if I had to choose the altar boys who I most wanted to help me with this Mass for my cousin, I would've chosen the two of you.” I stood there thinking that this was probably going to be the last Mass I would ever say at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Just then Tony walked into the sacristy. Timmy and Tommy made me aware of his presence.

“I just wanted you to know that they've delivered the casket and put that drape over it.”

“That drape is called a 'pall.' It has a very special function, especially today. We use the pall to cover every casket at every funeral. This is to bring equality to all the dearly departed. With the pall covering the casket, you cannot see how expensive or inexpensive the casket is. We are all equal in the eyes of God, and at death, the amount of money that you have means nothing.”

“Bro? How come you never became a teacher? You'd be really good at it. You explain things so that even a knuckle brain like me can understand them.”

“You are not a 'knuckle brain.' You are a very good man. You are a very good husband. And you are a wonderful father. And most of the time we don't really give you the credit you deserve. I'm just as guilty of that as everyone else. But I want you to know that I truly love you, and more than that, I respect you tremendously.” I then wrapped my arms around him and gave him a gentle, loving hug.

“I don't know what to say, Bro. You know I've always respected you.”

“Yes, but I somehow feel that you respect my collar more than me. That's going to change very soon, and I'm going to need all the love and support that you can give me.”

“You've got that. And from Debbie too. You know, I'm glad you're a priest and can't get married, because she really adores you, and I sometimes wonder if she doesn't think that she married the wrong brother.”

“No, Tony. She married the right brother, and she knows it. I see the way she looks at you. It's like she can't see anyone else. And the love for you that flows from her is so strong, you can almost touch it. I think we'd better go out now and send our cousin Gina on her way to her heavenly home.”

“Is that where you think she's going?”

“After the horrible life she led, she's already atoned for whatever bad choices she made. Her loving father in heaven will forgive her and welcome her home. I believe that down to the very marrow of my bones. If I didn't, I couldn't remain a priest.”

“You know, Bro. I really like how you believe. It sure is better than all that shame and guilt that they dumped on us in school.”

I sent Tony out before ringing the sacristy bell, announcing that the Mass was about to commence. I walked out, preceded by Timmy and Tommy. I revered the altar and then looked out at the congregation. The family, including the three children, took up the entire first row. There was, however, a young man of about Gina's age who sat in the farthest-back pew. I didn't recognize him, and he didn't come up for Communion.

After Mass, Vince evidently went and talked to him. It turned out that he knew Gina from one of the rehabs she had gone through, and had come to pay his respects. I wondered for a moment if he could possibly be the father of Gina's little boy, but he left without saying anything more, and I just let it go.

After Mass, I also got to meet the social worker who was handling little Andreouccio's case for the state's children and family services. We all got into cars and followed the hearse to the cemetery where I had purchased a plot for Gina. I said the graveside prayers, and then everyone took a scoop of dirt and scattered it on the top of the casket. I gave Gina a final blessing, calling on God to welcome her to her new heavenly home.

Then all of us got back into our cars and drove to Mama and Papa's home. That was where we all finally sat down with the social worker, a woman by the name of Dawn Wise. Drew, because of his medical training, asked a lot of questions about his new son's health. Vince made it clear that he and Drew were more than capable of providing for any needs their son might have.

I watched as Drew signed the papers that would give Andreouccio into their custody as a foster child. Ms. Wise said that she would do everything possible to push the adoption through the red tape of the system so that Drew and Vince wouldn't have to wait the usual year or more to finally adopt Andreouccio permanently.

After Ms. Wise left, we all spent time visiting and catching up on what everyone was up to.

"So, Bro, anything new with you?" Vince asked.

"No, why should there be? It's just the same stuff I do every day. Nothing all that interesting," I said.

Unfortunately, I wasn't ready yet to tell them what was really happening with me. I realized that it was so easy to lie to them. And because it was so easy, I clearly saw the walls that I had been building to keep my family from getting too close and learning the truth about me.

I left as soon as I could, claiming I was needed back at the parish. What I needed, however, was Conner. To be in his arms and to feel once again how much he loved me. I flew home, driving like I was Conner. I pulled into the driveway, got out of the car, and practically ran to the front door. I opened it and stood in the foyer calling out Conner's name.

"Conner! I'm home! Where are you?"

"I'm up in the media room. Come on up."

I flew up the four flights of stairs to find my lover lying on the couch dressed the way I love the most—stark naked. I quickly divested myself of all my clothing, and Conner moved over to make room for me to lie down with him. His arms came around me as he pulled me to him and kissed me deeply and passionately.

"Well, I don't have to ask how *that* went. How bad was it?"

"It was okay until we went back to Mama and Papa's house after the burial. Everyone was talking about what was new in their lives. Tony, my one straight brother, and his wife, Debbie, are having another baby. And of course, Vince and Drew signed the custody papers for their little boy. And all I could do was lie. The most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me is finding you, and I was too afraid to tell anyone about it. I now know that I have built a wall of fear between myself and my family. I've got to do something about it."

Conner tightened his grip on me, holding me closer. He then leaned down and gave me a kiss that was sweet and gentle and full of love. Then he looked into my eyes.

“Was there anything else that bothered you?”

“Yes, one thing. I watched my brother Vince with his new child and my brother Tony with his two little boys. I knew right then and there that I really do want a child with all my heart. I know it frightens you, but I think if you could just see Vince and Drew with Andreouccio, you'd want a child too.”

“I told you already, if us having kids would make you happy, we will have kids. I told you I will do anything, and I mean anything, to make you happy.”

“I just keep wondering what in the fuck I did to deserve you.”

“And I keep wondering the same thing. I don't know, maybe God brought us together to heal all the hurt that we carried around for so long alone.”

“That must be it! God didn't put us together because we deserved it, but because he knew how much we needed each other.”

“No wonder you priests are so sneaky. You work for a very sneaky God.” Conner laughed, and so did I.

“So what can we do to make this day better for you?” Conner asked with a lewd grin on his face.

“Oh, I don't know. How about we go downstairs and fuck each other's brains out?”

“Now I truly like that idea!”

“Yes, I know you do. Any time of the day or night you like that idea.”

“And you don't?”

“Yes, I like it too. I'm just amazed at your energy and stamina.”

“I've told you, that's because of you. I had a number of years when I couldn't make love to someone I was in love with, so I have quite a backlog.”

“Be sure and let me know when that backlog starts dwindling down.”

“Can't happen. As long as you're here, I'll keep making love to you.”

“So let's go and start working on it.”

"We don't really have to go anywhere. When I bought this couch, I figured with it being leather and all, cum and lube would wash right off with no stains left behind."

I started laughing uproariously, and Conner looked at me like I had lost my mind. I finally calmed down enough to tell him what was so funny to me.

"That is so *you*! You buy a couch not because of the color or whether it will fit into the decor of the room, but how easy it is to have sex on!"

Conner did have the good grace to look rather sheepish as he replied, "Well, people buy couches based on what they're going to use them for. Among the things that I wanted to use it for was having sex on it."

"Typical male. Thinks about sex before anything else. And since it's the other thing you think about, I'll bet you also realized how easily any spilled food would also clean up."

"Yeah. It's like a win-win situation. I got a couch that is great for taking naps on, nice to eat on when I'm watching a movie, and great for fucking on when I want to play right along with the movie."

"Okay, okay! You are a very practical man, and this was a very practical decision on your part."

"Hey! Why are you giving up so easy? What have you got up your sleeves?"

"If you will note, I am completely naked and therefore have no sleeves to have anything up. The reason I'm giving up so easily is quite simple. I want you to *fuck* me. So I sure hope this wonderful couch has some lube close by."

Grinning like a man who just won the lottery, Conner lifted up one of the back cushions of the couch and brought out a small bottle of our favorite lube.

"Do you mean *this*?"

"That is exactly what I mean."

"Okay. I think it's time that we tried something new. After all, we don't want to get bored with making love."

"*That* could never happen; trust me on that!"

"But it's always nice to have a large repertoire."

"Yes, that makes sense. So what are we adding to our repertoire today?"

“We'll begin with 'Sit on My Face' and finish up with 'Cowboy.’”

“We've talked about 'Sit on My Face,' and I've pretty well figured out what that is. But, what the fuck is 'Cowboy'?”

“Yeah, I figured you pretty well knew what the first one was. As to 'Cowboy,' what do cowboys do all day?”

“They herd cattle.”

“And how do they herd cattle?”

He had me stumped with that one. I thought and thought, and then it finally came to me!

“They herd cattle by riding around on horseback!”

“We have a winner!” Conner grinned at me.

“I'm sorry. I still don't get it.”

“Trust me, when we get there, it will all make sense to you. Now get up and move so that your feet are beside my chest.”

I did as he told me and found myself standing over him with my back to him.

“Now, all you have to do is squat down slowly until I can comfortably suck and lick at your hole.”

“Oh! I think I'm going to really like this one!”

“Yeah, it's really great. But wait till you're on the bottom. That's best of all.”

I slowly began to squat down, thinking to myself that Conner could be right, and that no matter how good this felt, being underneath Conner with his butt coming at my face could be incredibly arousing!

As I got close to Conner's face, his hands reached out and grabbed my ass, guiding it down into position. At first I didn't feel anything really. Just air moving across my hole. Then I realized that it was Conner taking deep breaths of my scent. After a while, his hands pulled me farther down, and I felt his mouth and tongue attach themselves to my openly spread ass. He began to lave my hole, getting it wet so that his tongue could slide inside of me more easily. At the same time, Conner's lips locked themselves to my hole and began to gently suck on it, assisting his tongue in getting it open.

I looked down as I felt Conner's tongue fucking my ass, going deeper and deeper with each thrust. I could see Conner's entire naked body laid out under me, and I noticed that his cock was bouncing around on his abs in the same rhythm that his tongue was reaming out my butt. As it bounced, it sprayed small jets of precum all over him. If I needed any proof of how much Conner loved eating my ass, this would be perfect evidence.

Conner ate my ass for a long time. I, of course, had absolutely no complaint about that. At last he tired of it or was so horny that he needed to fuck me, because he finally pulled his mouth from my ass and began lubing my hole. When he was done with that, he then issued more orders. "Okay, now I want you to stand up facing me, with your feet beside my hips."

I groaned as I rose up. The muscles in my thighs were aching from all the time they had spent holding me up while Conner ate my ass. I finally was able to stand and to get into the position that Conner had said he wanted me in. While I was doing this, Conner was heavily lubing his cock.

"This is going to be pretty much the same thing, but rather than your butt sitting on my face, it's going to be sitting on my cock. The position is called 'Cowboy' basically because it's like you're riding a horse. Especially if you can imagine a saddle with my cock sticking up through it. Now take it slow and just let yourself down. There's plenty of lube in your ass and on my cock, so this shouldn't be a problem."

I began to again slowly lower my butt until I could feel the head of Conner's cock kissing my hole. I pushed down with my ass muscles, and the head popped into my ass. But I didn't stop there. I kept sliding down until I could feel Conner's pubic hair tickling the outside of my hole. When I bottomed out, I looked at Conner and saw that his grin practically covered his entire face. I was grinning as well over the accomplishment of having done this. However, I was a bit confused on one salient point.

"Uhh...Conner...who moves? The 'horse' or the 'cowboy'?"

"Either. If you slide up some, I can slam my cock up into your butt. Or you can move up and down and fuck yourself on my dick."

"Which way do you want? Which way do you like?"

"To be honest, either way is fine with me, but I do love to do the fucking in this position because I can achieve really incredible speed at reaming your ass."

“You can, huh? Then let's try that one.”

I rose up so that I had about a half Conner's cock in my hole. He pushed up, kind of getting a “lay of the land,” so to speak. The next thing I knew, his cock was slamming up into my hole at a speed I had never felt before. He was riding my prostate hard, and tremors were going through my body from the incredible feelings that I was experiencing. I knew that this was not going to last long. I could feel myself getting very close to coming, and from the groans and the look on Conner's face he was getting close as well.

“CONNOR! I'M GOING TO COME!”

“YEAH! COME! COME FOR ME! I'M THERE TOO!”

As Conner continued to ream my hole with speed and power that I never knew he had in him, I could do nothing but scream as my cum began spraying out of my cock. The first volley hit Conner in the face, with the next painting his chest, and the rest covering his abs until I had no more to give. I could feel the tremors as Conner's cock unloaded inside of me. So much that it was being squished out of me every time he slammed in as far as he could. When he finally stopped, I slid down until I was resting on his groin. I felt his cum leaking, drowning the pubic hairs around the base of his cock.

I looked down at Conner, who was lying there panting for breath with this huge grin on his face. It was a grin that filled me with joy because I knew that I had pleased him as much as he had pleased me.

When Conner finally regained his breath, he gave me a really sleazy smile and one last set of orders.

“You want to know the best thing about this position?”

“Okay, I'll bite. What's the best thing about this position?”

“It's that when you're done fucking, you can look at your partner and say, 'Sit on my face!'”

I stood up slowly, allowing his still-hard cock to slide gently out of my ass. I turned around and again began to slowly lower my butt on Conner's face. He again grabbed my ass in his hands, but rather than just guiding my ass into the right position for him to eat it, he used his hands to hold me up and give me some place to sit without my thigh muscles having to work so hard.

Conner sucked and licked at my very open asshole. He was obviously enjoying it greatly, because he rimmed me almost as long as he had to begin with. But unfortunately, all good things must come to an end, and I guess Conner's mouth and tongue finally got tired, because he pushed me up away from him. I stood up and stepped down from the couch to the floor. Conner again moved over to give me room. Of course, as soon as I was lying there, Conner fed me some of the cum he had gathered from my hole in a deep and loving kiss.

I lay there in his arms, and I suddenly had the urge to pray. I prayed that life would always be like this between us. That we would always be able to find joy and love in each other. And then, without even realizing it, I gently drifted off to the scent of my lover's body and the gentle beating of his heart.

Chapter Fourteen

I was so happy that time passed quickly. But I realized Conner had long since been cleared by his doctors and the police department to return to a desk job. We had both quietly been accepted into the Episcopal Church one Sunday. It was time for me to have a talk with Henry and let him know what was happening. I drove over to the rectory and found Henry in the kitchen.

“David! And to what do we owe for the pleasure of your company this morning?”

“I don't think it will be all that pleasurable when you hear why I've come.”

“In that case, I would suspect that you came to tell me that you're leaving the church.”

“Yes, Henry, that, and to tell you that I figured out what your mistake was. I don't want to make the same one, so I'm leaving to be with Conner.”

“I'll be honest with you; this doesn't surprise me at all. I knew you were in love with him just from the look in your eyes whenever you would talk about him. So what will you do now, become a private therapist?”

“No. I was made an offer, which I accepted, to move to the Episcopal Church and continue with the same type of work I've been doing here. I wish I could just remain here and continue to work with you. My new bishop would have no problems with that, but I'm sure the archdiocese would.”

“Yes, I'm afraid they would. So Mary Catherine finally was able to drag you away. She's been wanting to as long as you've been here. She obviously has a great deal of love and respect for you.”

“It was more the fact that Mary Catherine offered me a way to remain a priest and continue to work with homeless vets without having to give up the incredible love that I've found.”

“So I take it you feel my mistake was remaining a priest rather than marrying Veronica.”

“No, Henry, I won't even try to put myself into your position and answer what you should have done. I can only answer for me. I love Conner with all my heart and soul, and he feels the same way about me. We want to build a family together.”

“A new family, huh? And how do you intend to obtain children for this family?”

“By adoption, the same way that my brother Vincent and his lover, Drew, did when they adopted Gina's son, Andy.”

“I was not aware that the state permitted two males, or two females, for that matter, to adopt children.”

“Henry, do you know how many adoptable children are in the state's foster-care system?”

“No, I can't say that I do.”

“It's between one and two hundred thousand. They are desperate to get children adopted and into homes and families, no matter how nontraditional those families are.”

“And of course with you being a priest and Conner being a police detective, that should present the adoption agency with the picture of two very substantial members of the community.”

“Yeah. They don't need to know what crazy fuckers we really are!”

Henry and I sat there and laughed over that one for a few minutes.

“I need your help in one thing. I don't know the procedure for notifying the archdiocese I've left the church.”

“Hmm! Now that is a sticky problem. Most of the guys I've known who left the church in order to be with someone simply resigned their priesthood. But you are converting to another religion and want to remain a priest. Once that conversion takes place, neither the archdiocese nor even Rome itself have anything to say about whether you remain a priest or not. That is up to your new bishop. I think perhaps the best thing is to write a letter to the archbishop saying that you wish to convert to the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church. You don't have to mention your desire for a relationship. Believe me, they will understand it quite clearly. After all, you're not the first priest to leave for the Episcopal Church, which allows its priests to marry. I'm sure, David, that you are more than aware of the shortage of priests in the Roman Church. The Anglican Communion, on the other hand, has a backlog of applicants for the priesthood.”

“Thank you, Henry. I've already handled most of this with those in my new Church, but I want you to know that this decision has not been easy for me. I've shed a lot of tears over it. I still find it incredibly painful to leave Our Lady of Perpetual Help and especially those guys down in the shelter. I will miss you and the sisters most of all. Anything of value that I become in my life, it is because of your mentoring of me.”

I stood to go, and Henry stood also. I walked over and hugged him for the first time in the five years we had known each other.

“Conner and I will be over in a few days to get my things. Not that there is much. I'll say good-bye to the shelter residents and the sisters then. My heart can only take one of these a day.”

“I do understand. And if you meant what you said about wanting to help here, then I want you to think about something. As you know, I'm the chair of the board for the foundation that runs the shelter. The board has already voted that these members not be Roman Catholics, since about seventy percent of the residents are not Roman Catholics. I've already asked Mary Catherine, and she agreed. I want you to think about being a new board member.”

“Thank you, Henry. I will think very hard about it. However, I think you should perhaps explore the possibility of offering that seat to Conner. I think he would be of immense help. He's a former marine and cares very deeply about the men in the shelter.”

“That's why I'm going to miss you so much. You're absolutely right. Conner would be good, and I never even thought of it.”

“Good-bye, Henry. God bless you.”

I left the rectory and started driving aimlessly. I didn't know where I was going, if anywhere. I had nothing to do. Conner was at work, and I didn't feel like just sitting in the big empty town house. Then my cell phone rang, and I checked the caller ID before answering and saw that the call was coming from the Episcopal diocese office.

“Hello?”

“David? It's Mary Catherine. Are you doing anything important right now?”

“No. Not a thing.”

“Good! The bishop wants the three of us to have lunch. Do you know Hayden's?”

"I know *of* it. I've never been there. Curates don't have the kind of money to afford a place like that."

"One of the things I'm sure the bishop wants to talk to you about is your salary, which will allow you to eat there. Can you meet us there in half an hour?"

"Yes, no problem."

"Uhh...it would be best if you were in your clericals."

"No problem. I have them on. I'm just coming from seeing Henry and letting him know what's going on."

"I take it he was heartbroken at your leaving."

"Yes. He even offered me a place on the board of the foundation. He told me he had offered you the same thing, and you had accepted."

"Yes. The bishop and I both thought that it would be an excellent way to build some bridges with the archdioceses. Did you accept?"

"No. I suggested that there was a much better candidate."

"Who is that?"

"Conner. He knows the streets. He knows what these guys have lived through. And don't forget, he's a former marine. He cares very deeply about our 'walking wounded.'"

"David, that is *brilliant*! You are absolutely right. He would be perfect for it. Do you think he'll do it?"

"I don't know. It depends on how many nights he wants to sleep on the couch."

We both chuckled over that.

"Look, I'm getting close to the restaurant. I take it the reservations are under the bishop's name."

"Yes, they are."

"Then I'll see you there."

I hung up the phone, and within a couple of moments I was pulling into the portico of the restaurant. A valet took my car to park it and handed me a ticket to retrieve it. I walked into the restaurant and was blown away by the beauty and elegance of it. I immediately felt very uncomfortable. This was not a kind of place that I was used to patronizing. I knew that, even

with all his money, Conner would feel the same way. I was approached by an older gentleman in a tuxedo.

“May I help you, Father?”

“Yes, I'm supposed to have lunch with my bishop, John Harrison?”

“Oh yes! Bishop Harrison. Please follow me.”

The maître d' led me down a corridor rather than into the restaurant's main dining area. We came to a set of double doors with an engraved brass plaque reading THE DUMAS ROOM. He knocked at the door and then pulled open the double doors to allow me to enter. I was surprised to find that the room was already occupied. Sitting at a beautifully decorated table was Bishop John Harrison, my new boss. He was dressed somewhat conservatively in a black suit and a reddish purple clergy shirt with the full white ring collar that most Episcopal priests wore. I could see, however, a heavy gold chain of his Episcopal cross, which was evidently tucked into an inside pocket.

“Hello, David. It's so good to see you again.” This was in reference to the only time that I had seen him previously—where we met at the cathedral when he accepted both Conner and me into the Episcopal Church.

He stretched out his right hand, and being somewhat nervous, I bent over and kissed his episcopal ring. He smiled at me, and the warmth of that smile was so real and genuine that I immediately somehow knew that this was a man I could respect and care about deeply.

“I guess I should've expected that. The Episcopal Church is a lot more relaxed than our Roman brothers. Generally, we just shake hands. However, I thank you for the unexpected homage to my position. And while we're at it, let's get something else straight. It is either 'Bishop' or 'Bishop Harrison,' none of that 'Your Eminence' or 'Your Excellency' crap. And when we're alone, like for this luncheon, it's just 'John.’”

I blushed. I could feel the heat in my face. I was embarrassed but also grateful for the graceful way that he had clearly let me know what was expected of me.

“Thank you...uhh...John.”

John looked around as if he was only just noticing that we were both still standing.

“Please, have a seat. We've got a lot of things to discuss, and I don't feel like waiting for Mary Catherine. How about a drink?”

John turned to the waiter and told him that he wanted scotch on the rocks and informed him that Mary Catherine would have a gin and tonic. The waiter then looked at me.

"I'll have a Bloody Mary—no vegetables. Just a wedge of lemon."

The waiter bowed and left the room.

"So, David, are you bored? I ask because I know we haven't really given you anything to do yet once you join us. And believe me, I am as uncomfortable with that as you are."

"I am, of course, at your service. If there is anything that you need me to do, all you have to do is ask."

"I have two very delicate situations that I would like you to look into. One is of a very popular pastor whose behavior in the last six months has indicated to me that he is in some kind of trouble. I strongly suspect alcoholism. But since alcoholism is never the root cause and only the tip of the iceberg, I'd like you to see what's really going on. The other is far more delicate. It seems that I have a young curate who has gotten himself romantically involved with a boy who is the son of one of the members of the diocesan executive committee. There is nothing illegal going on since the curate is twenty-two and the boy in this case is eighteen. However, the father is the leader of what might be seen as the more conservative members of the diocese."

"Conservative as in homophobic?"

"Exactly. Mary Catherine told me that you were bright. I can see she was right."

"That is a huge compliment coming from someone with the intelligence she has."

"That it is."

At that point there was a knock at the door, and the waiter entered with a tray holding our drinks, followed by Mary Catherine herself.

"We were just talking about you," John said.

"Did I miss anything good?"

"No. John just told me about a huge compliment you gave me," I said.

"Oh? And what was that?" Mary Catherine asked.

"He told me you thought I was 'bright.'"

"Well! You are. You would bore me to tears if you weren't."

"Ahh! The always-outspoken Mary Catherine." John laughed, and I joined in.

“Don't ever go to her for advice. It will be the best but the most painful advice you will ever get,” I said.

“But I was right, wasn't I?”

“Yes. You were. I don't think that Conner and I would be together without the advice that you gave me. I will be eternally grateful to you for that.”

“Conner is one of the things that I want to talk with you about,” John said.

My stomach suddenly felt like I was in a plane that had suddenly lost altitude. What was there to discuss about Conner? I guess John could see the sudden change in me, and he reached over to where my hand was lying on the table and covered it with his in a very caring gesture.

“Nothing to be concerned about. It's just that I try to get to know not only all my priests but all of their partners as well. I want you to call my office this afternoon and talk with my secretary about a date when you are both free to come to dinner. I know with Conner's job it might be a logistical nightmare. You wouldn't know this, but my father was a cop, so I know all about the hours and the overtime.”

“Can I ask you something—something personal but very important to me?” I asked.

“David, you can ask me anything. If it's too personal, I'll just tell you it's none of your business.”

“What was it like growing up with a father who's a cop? Did you and your father get along?”

“I will admit that there were problems. There were many times that I wanted him around when he was working. I know he had to work very hard to be able to attend sporting events I was involved in. I eventually learned that when he couldn't be there, it was not because he didn't want to be but because he had done everything possible and wasn't able to arrange it. Did we get along? I love and respect my father more than any man on the face of the earth. Now tell me why this was important.”

“Conner and I have talked a great deal about adopting a child. He's afraid because he claims that cops make the worst fathers. He thinks he would never be able to be there when our son needs him and because of his background in both the military and law enforcement, he would be too rigid and overbearing and our son would end up hating him.”

“He is absolutely right *and* completely wrong. What makes a man a good father has nothing to do with his job history. It has everything to do with the man himself. The only thing that a man needs to be a good father is the desire to be one. If he has that desire, he will find a way to counteract all of the things within him that he sees as negative. I think that I have a way to help Conner put away these fears. I think I will invite my dad to dinner as well. Let Conner see for himself what it's like between a cop father and his bishop son.”

“By the way, was your father disappointed when you became a priest?”

“Not in the least. The one thing he always told me was that all he wanted for me was to be happy. He didn't care doing what as long as it was legal.” John chuckled.

“I don't know how to thank you. You've allayed a lot of fears that I've had as well,” I said.

“And that brings up something I say to every new priest who is ordained or comes into my diocese. The role of the bishop is to be the shepherd of all the flocks in the diocese. Just as each priest is a shepherd to his particular flock. But my other job is to be the shepherd to all the other shepherds in the diocese. My door is always open to any of my priests who need to talk with me, no matter what it's about. I want you to remember that, David.”

“Thank you, John. I will remember it.”

“Now let's talk about the part of your mission that I am most excited about. Your work with homeless veterans. The diocese, through the will of one of our more-wealthy members who died last year, has acquired the old Carlson building. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I've seen it. It's a rather-large building on West Street.”

“That's the one. It's about four blocks from the cathedral. There has been a lot of discussion about what to do with it, including, I might add, selling it. I would like to hear what you think could be done with it,” John said.

“I have always had this dream of creating a veterans center. Not just a shelter, but a place where vets could come to do their laundry, take a shower, get fed, and have the opportunity to phone their families, wherever they are. It would also have counselors from the VA to help them access medical care, if they are eligible, and any other benefits they are due because of their military service. I want a medical clinic staffed by volunteer doctors to treat those who are not eligible to go to the VA clinic or hospital. It would also have a place for the vets to rest and talk with others. I hope that I get some volunteers from Bennett Hospital to run therapeutic groups.”

“My! You've really thought this out, haven't you? And how much do you think it would cost to create the center, staff it, and run it?”

“Depending on the building, necessary refurbishing and construction would run between one and two million dollars. Yearly cost of running it would run somewhere around half a million dollars,” I estimated.

“That is an awful lot of money. But I guess, to do this right, it probably needs that much,” John said. “The diocese, unfortunately, doesn't have that kind of money. We could probably raise it, but that may take quite a while.”

“I think that I can access all of the money that we'll need for the construction, furnishing, and operation for the first five years,” I said.

John stared at me in complete surprise. “Where would you get it?”

“I have a...a...friend who is extremely wealthy and cares very deeply about this issue.” I stammered my answer.

“I take it that this must be a very *close* friend,” Mary Catherine said.

“Yes, very close. And one who doesn't wish for his financial situation to be public knowledge,” I replied.

“David, if you can obtain the funding, the building is yours,” John said.

“I can let you know tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess that pretty much concludes what I needed to talk with you about, David. Mary Catherine told me that you could be a tremendous asset to the diocese, and as usual, she was absolutely right.”

“There are two more things that we need to discuss,” I said.

“What are they?” John said.

“First of all, we need an executive board to help with the running of the facility. I would hope, John, that you would be willing to serve as chair of the board. I would like to see as many people with military backgrounds and experience on that board as well. I further think that the board should include wives and families of vets, so that their needs have a voice at the table.”

"I agree with you completely, except for one thing. I don't think that I have the time to devote to this that it deserves. I think a much-better candidate for the chair of the executive board would be our resident genius, Mary Catherine. What do you two think about that?" John asked.

"As for me, the chance to work with Mary Catherine would be a dream come true," I said.

Mary Catherine looked at me and then at John and finally said, "John, you've asked me to do a lot of things. None of them, however, have given me the joy that this will. David, you know I love you as a friend. I am more than happy to also be your collaborator in this venture."

"David, you said there were two things that you wanted to discuss. What's the other one?" John asked.

"It's about the wedding. Mine and Conner's. You have to understand that growing up the way he did, Conner has some deep-seated anger against religion and the Roman Church in particular. I know you gave Mary Catherine permission to marry us. And we are deeply grateful for that. But that permission was given with the stipulation that the wedding not take place in a church. While at first we were happy with a wedding anywhere, can you understand how that feels—as if the church is still saying that our love for each other is somehow inferior? There is a beautiful small chapel in the cathedral that would easily hold the few friends and relatives who would come. I would ask you to allow Conner and I to be married there. We could hold the ceremony in the evening so that there would be less chance of any parishioners stumbling on it," I said.

"David, it would seem that I owe you and Conner a deep apology. I did something that I try never to do, to think about something politically without taking into account people's feelings. You are perfectly free to hold your nuptials in the chapel. In fact, if you want, you can hold them in the main sanctuary of the cathedral."

"Thank you, John. That means a great deal to me, but the chapel will be fine. As I said, there will probably not be a very large guest list. Neither Conner nor I have told our families about our situation. I plan to change that soon, but it still doesn't mean that they will accept what is happening between us."

"I want you to save two places on your guest list for myself and my wife. I would be greatly honored if you would allow me to attend your wedding," John said.

“Consider yourself and your wife invited. Conner and I will be greatly honored by your attendance.”

“Both of you stay and enjoy lunch on me. I've got to get back to the office, where I know there is a huge pile in my in-box, waiting for my attention. Thank you both for coming and especially for your plans for the veterans center. It and both of you will be in my prayers,” John said as he rose and got ready to leave. This time when he put out his hand, I shook it, and John and I chuckled together. Mary Catherine looked at us, and I could see on her face she was wondering why shaking hands would cause that reaction with us.

John shook hands with her, and I heard him tell her quietly to ask me about why we were laughing.

Chapter Fifteen

On my way home I decided to stop at the grocery and pick up the ingredients for one of my favorite dishes—beef Stroganoff. Since I make it from sirloin steak, I figured that Conner would like it. If there was one thing I knew about my new lover, it was that he was a major carnivore. Conner would probably eat blood-rare steak every night of the week and be perfectly happy. But I wanted to put a little variety into our diet.

In a drawer in the island in the middle of the kitchen, I discovered a large pile of incredibly beautiful tablecloths and napkins, all of which appeared to be handmade, many with trimmings of lace. I knew they were not in any way Conner's taste, so I figured they must have been either from his mother or grandmother. I put one on the small table where we dined when we weren't having dinner in bed or up in the media room on the couch. For me, this was a special night, and I wanted it treated as such. It took a while, but I finally found a pair of candlesticks and holders in another drawer.

I cooked the beef for the Stroganoff and then let it simmer in some beef stock and red wine. While the beef simmered, I sliced up the onions and fresh mushrooms to be added later. I also made a simple vinaigrette for the salad and prepared the rest of the meal.

I luckily didn't have to worry about dessert. I had stopped and purchased a wonderful Italian rum cake at the Italian bakery that my mother had been going to as long as I could remember.

Since Conner was still on desk duty for a month, as required by his surgeons, he got home a little after six. His eyes showed the shock of seeing the decorated table.

He took me in his arms and kissed me tenderly and lovingly before letting me go.

“So what's up with the table and the candles?”

“I hope you don't mind; I found the tablecloth and napkins in a drawer. I guessed by the look of them that they either had been your mother's or your grandmother's.”

“They were my mother's. My grandmother gave them to me in a box with other stuff of hers when I moved here. I don't think any of them have been used in over twenty-five years,” Conner said wistfully.

I thought, perhaps, that I had done the wrong thing. I slipped my arms around him.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any painful memories for you.”

Conner shook his head. “No. It's all right. I'm glad to see them get some use rather than just lying in a drawer. By the way, what is that I smell? It smells absolutely delicious.”

“That, my love, is dinner. And before you ask, we are having beef Stroganoff with poppy-seed noodles, salad, sautéed brussels sprouts, and a surprise for dessert.”

“So what's the occasion?”

“I had lunch today with the bishop and Mary Catherine. Several very good things came out of the meeting, but we can talk about that over dinner. Would you like me to fix you a drink before dinner? I was just about to fix myself a gin and tonic.”

“Fine. Make that two of them.”

I fixed two drinks, then handed one to Conner. He sat down on one of those stools against the kitchen island and watched me as I finished the Stroganoff. I asked Conner to put the dishes on the table, which he did.

“We can sit down now. It is all ready.”

Conner dug into the salad and then looked at me. “This salad dressing is very delicious, but unusual. I take it you made it yourself?”

“Yes, I've learned over the years that salad dressings are very easy to make and taste so much better when they are freshly made and not out of a jar or bottle.”

“I wonder why, then, so few people make their own.”

“They believe it must be difficult and don't find out that most dressings take less than fifteen minutes to prepare. It's the same reason there are so many McDonald's restaurants in the country. Everybody's in a hurry, and they treat food, which is going into their body and has a great deal to do with their health, like it's of no importance at all.”

“It would appear that it is of great importance to you.”

“Yes, it is. I love food. But I love *good* food. Food that isn't made in a factory and filled with chemicals and salt. And it's no harder to make this than to make Hamburger Helper.”

“Oh come on now. I think you're exaggerating a bit there,” Conner said suspiciously.

“Want to bet on that?”

“I would like proof that you're right.”

“Proof coming right up!”

I got up and went to one of his kitchen cabinets, where I remembered seeing what I needed. A box of Hamburger Helper Cheesy Macaroni. I brought it back over to the table with me. I began to read to him from the box.

“The first thing you do is brown a pound of ground meat, usually hamburger, which usually takes half an hour to forty-five minutes. While you're browning the meat, you make the cheesy sauce. A sauce that has no cheese in it at all, really. It's some kind of dry, processed cheese product—whatever that means. Next you add liquid to the browned meat, mostly water and milk, along with the cheese sauce and bring it to a low boil for another fifteen to twenty minutes. So, all in all you've taken over an hour to create a dish with nowhere near the flavor and protein goodness to make the Stroganoff, which takes just about the same hour.”

Conner asked for the box, and I handed it to him. He started reading the ingredients out loud and could barely pronounce half of them. He also noted the high number of milligrams of salt in the dish.

“Okay. Having made this dish any number of times, I guarantee you it tastes nothing like your Stroganoff. But what about all the other stuff?”

“I made everything else while the Stroganoff was simmering, and you saw, just at the end, I added the mushrooms, the sautéed onions, and the sour cream for just a few minutes.”

“And the salad and salad dressing?”

“The salad took me about five minutes to tear up the leaves of the lettuce and five minutes at most to make the dressing.”

Conner raised his hands as if in surrender.

“My grandmother always told me to marry a woman who could cook. She would say, 'Marry a good cook—fucking doesn't last, cooking does.'”

“A very wise, if somewhat-risqué, woman.” I laughed, and he joined me.

“So, I’m dying to hear. What about this meeting with the bishop and Mary Catherine?”

“It went really well. There was one thing that came out of it that I do need to talk with *you* about. You’ve got all that money from Steve’s trust fund just lying there. I need a little bit of it.”

“How little?”

“Oh, somewhere between four and five million dollars.”

Conner started choking on his salad, and I could hear the sound of his fork hitting the floor.

“*How much?*”

“Between four and five million,” I said, quietly and slowly.

“What in the *fuck* for?”

“Well...at first, I thought about calling it the 'McMahon Veterans Center,' but since I knew you really don't want people to know about the money, I decided to call it 'St. Michael's Veterans Center.' Because, after all, St. Michael is the patron saint of warriors.”

“I never knew that.” Conner looked at me questioningly.

“Conner, my love, there is a great deal you do not know about the religion you were brought up in.”

“Okay, David, now that my breathing and heart rate are back to normal, please explain what all this money is for.”

For the next half hour or so I gave Conner a brief rundown on the building that the diocese owned and what I wanted to do with it. What changes I would make and what services would be offered to homeless vets. I wasn't even halfway through my explanation when I saw Conner starting to get very excited about the project. I explained to him that I would be the CEO of the shelter, while Mary Catherine would be the chair of the board. I also told him that since so much of his money would be involved, and in fact, without his money there would be no center, I expected him to be a member of the board, as well as a member of the board at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, as I had discussed with Henry that morning.

“Well, you’ve been quite a busy boy today. You know me too well. You know I’m not going to turn you down if you bring me a project to help the wounded and homeless vets. Of course you can have all the money you’ll need.”

At this, I stood up and then rushed around the table, to end up literally sitting in Conner's lap, with my arms around him, kissing him passionately and gratefully. He returned the kiss, and I could feel something long and hard growing under my butt as I sat there.

I pulled back from the kiss and looked into those beautiful blue eyes and said, "Now about the wedding..."

He looked at me with confusion on his face. "When were we discussing the wedding?"

"We weren't, exactly. But I felt that hard thing under my ass, and it reminded me of it. The bishop and I also discussed the wedding. You remember that he had given Mary Catherine permission to perform it as long as it wasn't in a church? Well, I informed the bishop that this restriction was just one more way of the church saying that our love is not real, doesn't have the same value or intensity of a straight couple's. So I asked him to change his decision and allow us to marry in the small chapel in the cathedral."

"And how did he take that?"

"He apologized profusely to both of us and told me that we could use the main sanctuary of the cathedral if we wanted. I told him that there was only going to be a small number of people, so in the chapel would be just fine. He then asked if we would invite him and his wife, because he really wants to be there."

"I guess I'm going to have to get you a medal of St. Michael. My beautiful lover is quite a fighter. Especially when it comes to other people's rights and feelings, and I am truly very, very proud of him." For one of the few times since I'd known him, I saw tears falling from Conner's eyes. I again kissed him deeply and then gently licked the tears from his cheeks.

"So, are you ready for dessert?"

"Ahh yes. The surprise dessert. Does this, by any chance, have anything to do with us going upstairs?"

"No. We'll do that later. After all, what the fuck kind of surprise would that be?"

"Well, I guess it wouldn't. It's just that it's my favorite dessert."

"When you taste this, I think it will become your second favorite."

I got up off his lap, cleared all the dishes off the table, and went over to where I had hidden the rum cake. I brought it to the table a cake knife and two dessert plates two forks.

I set the cake in front of him and handed him the cake knife to cut it. He cut a small piece and placed it on his plate. He then took his fork and tasted it. He immediately grabbed the cake knife and cut another huge piece and put it on his plate.

“*Fuck!* This is incredible. Please don't tell me you made this too?”

“No, I only *wish* I could bake like this. It's from an Italian bakery that my mom has been going to since before I was born.”

“You were right. This is now, officially, my second-favorite dessert—after your butt, of course.”

I cut a piece just about the same size as Conner first had and sat down and started eating. However, I only got through about half of it when I stopped. I was crying, and it wasn't because I was so happy. Conner looked up and saw what was going on and made me get up and go to him. He pulled me down on his lap, put his arms around me, and asked what was wrong. At first I couldn't tell him. It was like the words just dried up in my mouth. But finally, after Conner asked several times, I looked him and said, “Every happy event that my family ever celebrated—no matter how big or small the occasion—we've had one of these cakes. I bought it today because I wanted to celebrate the veterans center. But then it hit me that I may never celebrate anything with my family again. There's a very good chance that they won't want me around anymore when I finally tell them what I've done.”

Conner wrapped his arms around me harder, pressing me against his body, and reached up and stroked my hair while my chin rested on his shoulder. “You don't know that. I can understand you being afraid, but what you're doing now is called 'catastrophizing.' You're taking all of the possible outcomes and choosing to believe that it will be the worst one. That's rarely the outcome. You haven't even told any of them yet. So you have no idea, really, how they are going to react.”

“Have you been spending time with Mary Catherine? You sounded just like her then.”

“No, babe, I'm just telling you the logical truth.”

At that moment my cell phone rang. At first, I was just going to let it go to voice mail, but when I looked at the number, I recognized it as Vince's. I had no idea what he was calling about, but I knew I had to answer it.

“Hi, Vince. What's up?”

"Bro, have you been praying for us again?"

"I always pray for you and for Drew and even for Andreouccio. Why? What's happened?"

"It's only been a few months that we've had him, and they've moved the date of the adoption up to tomorrow. Can you come? It's in the judge's chambers at one p.m."

"No problem. I'll be there at one."

"Check with the guards when you get there, but I'm pretty sure the judge's office is on the second floor."

"Don't worry. I'm sure I can find it."

"Great! Gotta go. I've got more calls to make."

"You go on. I love you, and I am so happy for you."

"Who was that?"

"It was Vince. They've only had Little Andy for a few months, and the adoption is going through tomorrow. I'll bet the whole family will be there. I wish to God that I could ask you to come with me."

"That is a *really bad* idea. The last thing I want in the world is to meet your family all at once."

"Yeah, you're right. But by all rights, if I had told them already, you would be a part of this."

"There are other things that I can be a part of. Don't forget, we need to start planning this wedding, especially now that it's going to be in the cathedral."

"Nah! I still want it to be simple."

"With your brothers, your parents, and your boss all there? No way. These people all have expectations of what a wedding is. And like it or not, ours needs to be something that will blow them away, so that they know that this is a *real* wedding and not just something we are playing at."

"Yes, I guess you're right. But that means a reception and everything."

"That's not a problem. We'll just cater everything. Besides, I want to add something to the reception. You don't know my taste in music really, but it's quite eclectic. I want live music at the reception."

“That sounds wonderful! But where are you going to find them?”

“Evidently, except for the wrestling team, you don't know very much about the university where Vince studied. Their music department has students who perform to make money on the side, so we shouldn't have any trouble.”

“At a gay wedding?”

“Yes. At a gay wedding. Trust me, they need the money, which makes them far less judgmental. Besides, you know yourself that there were at least four gay jocks on the wrestling team. Now what percentage of the music department do you think could be gay?”

“I think it's about time that I quit living in fear and silence. I think it's time for us to start meeting the families.”

“Are you sure? I told you I would leave that up to you. I wasn't going to tell you when to do it.”

“Yes, I'm sure. And it is my decision. I thank you for letting it be that.”

Conner and I went upstairs, and he got his favorite dessert. This is not to say that the second-favorite dessert was in any way neglected. Conner must have had the rest of it for breakfast, because when I got up the next morning, it was completely gone. And so was he. I picked up the phone and called him at work. “Detective McMahon.”

“Detective, I need your help. I was robbed sometime last night or this morning.”

“Can I ask what was missing?”

“From what I can tell, the only thing the thief took was the rest of the rum cake. He didn't even leave me a piece for breakfast.”

I heard laughter on his end of the phone.

“I'm extremely sorry. Unfortunately, I woke up very, very hungry, and it was lying there. I just couldn't stop myself. I'll tell you what. If you give me the name of the bakery, I'll pick up another one on my way home.”

“Figaro's on Washington Avenue. Maybe you should pick up two. I have a feeling we'll be going out tonight. And it's a nice gift for Vince and Drew to celebrate finally having a son of their own.”

“Two it is, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, Detective. That should solve the mystery.”

“I miss you. I love you. What I would really like is you naked on our bed when I get home.”

“I love you too. I will be exactly as requested when you get home.”

“You have a good day.”

“I figure you're going to have a *hard* day, anticipating the two desserts that will be waiting for you.”

“Yep! It's already happened. So good-bye. I'll see you when I get home.”

“To tell you the truth, it's already happened here too, so don't be late! Good-bye.”

I didn't know what to do with this hard-on that Conner had given me. So I decided to go take a shower and take matters in hand, so to speak. This was something I rarely did, which wasn't surprising, considering that Conner was around much of the time and all it took to get him hard was to let him see me hard as well.

I took a shower and relieved the tension in my groin. I then got dressed in my black suit with one of my dog collars, but when I looked in the mirror, I could see how tense I was. Each time I got together with the family, that tension inside of me got worse and worse. But until I opened up and talked to them, it was going to be this way, and there was nothing, short of telling them, that I could do about it. So I got in the car and headed downtown to the courthouse. I got there early and discovered that Vince was right. The judge's office was on the second floor. I went up and found Tony and Debbie and their two boys. Debbie looked *extremely* pregnant. As we hugged, I asked her how soon she was due.

“The way I'm feeling, any minute now, at least that's what I wish. I'd like to get this over with so that I can go back to my routine and be able to sit down comfortably and then get up again without having to ask for help.” She was smiling the whole time she said this.

I squatted down, and both their boys ran to hug and kiss me. I then got up and hugged Tony. The hug he gave me was very warm and loving.

“How are you, Bro?”

“Just fine.” I lied as usual.

“So how come you don't look like it? You look like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders. Debbie and I are starting to get worried about you. You know, if you're in any kind of trouble, you can come to us, and we'll do anything we can to help.”

“Thank you for that, Tony. There is something that I need to talk with both of you about, but it's going to have to wait for a couple of days. But I promise that I will call you and arrange a time for us to get together.”

“Just don't take too long. You know we both love you.”

“Yes. I *do* know that.”

At that moment, Dar and Gregg arrived. We went through all the hugging again, except when Dar hugged me he said to me, “You look like hell. What's the matter?”

“I'm just going through some rough shit right now. I'll tell you all about it soon.”

“Well, you'd better! After all, we are brothers now that your dad made us a part of the family,” Gregg said, joining his lover.

“I remember. And believe me, I'll be in touch.”

The next two to arrive were the ones I'd least wanted to see. Mama and Papa both hugged me, but it was Mama who then stood back and looked me up and down with that “mother's eye” that was able to see inside of me like those x-ray machines at the airport.

“David, you don't look good. What's the matter?”

“It's something I really don't want to talk about right now. I promise you that I'll come over and talk with you and Papa very soon.”

“See that you do, or so help me God, Papa and I will come see you.”

I almost laughed. My life was so secretive, so walled off from my family, that none of them realized that they didn't even know where I was living now.

Vincent and Drew finally showed up with little Andreouccio. Again, there were hugs all around, with Drew hugging me last. He, too, stood back for a moment and looked at me. Then he got very close to me and very quietly said, “What's going on with you? I've never seen you like this. It's like you're all tied up in knots.”

Vince turned around with Andreouccio in his arms to find Drew.

“What's up, Drew?”

"I was just telling David that he looks like he's all tied up in knots."

"Yeah, Bro, you look like shit. What's the matter? You know we owe you big-time for what you've done for us. Please, if there is anything we can do, let us know."

"I will. And I promise it will be very soon."

"Why not now?"

"I don't want to. It's too public here, and besides, this day is all about you and Drew and the celebration of your creating a family."

As if to emphasize this, Andreouccio reached out his arms for a hug and kiss from me. I took him from Vince and hugged and kissed him. The strangest thing was, the moment he put his little arms around my neck, I could feel the tension inside me lessening. He gave me one of his wet, sloppy kisses, and it was like the same feeling of love and acceptance that I felt from Conner. It was like my heart stopped for a second, and I again realized that, more than anything, I wanted a child of our own. A child for me and Conner.

Ms. Wise finally arrived, carrying not just her briefcase but a large accordion file filled with papers, which I figured must be Little Andy's official file. We all followed her into the judge's chambers and seated ourselves around the conference table, which was positioned perpendicular to her desk. We all introduced ourselves, and after a few questions to Vince and Drew, she signed the order making the adoption legal and final. At this, we all broke out in cheers and applause. We all left the chambers and went back out to the corridor where we had been before. With the family all gathered and celebrating the new addition, I finally spoke up.

"You know...there's only one ceremony left to perform," I said.

"What's that?" Vince asked.

"I don't know whether or not any of you are aware of it, but Andy hasn't been baptized," I said.

"Are you sure?" Papa asked.

"Absolutely, Papa. I checked the records of the archdiocese. I guess Gina never got around to it."

"She tried," Mama said.

At this, everybody stared at her.

“Gina tried to get the baby baptized. The priest she went to called her a whore and said he wouldn't baptize her bastard,” Mama said.

“How do you know this?” Papa asked.

“Because she told me,” Mama said sadly. “I tried to get her to go to you, David, but by that point she was so angry and hurt, she wanted nothing to do with the church.”

“Unfortunately, we have a lot of older priests who, rightly or wrongly, interpret church law in ways that are very harmful to people. I had no idea of this. Mama, you should have told me. I could have talked to Gina.”

“There was no time. It wasn't long after that she died. I thought that we could handle this within the family.”

“So what do you want to do, guys?” I asked Vince and Drew.

“We'd like to think about it, David,” Vince said. “Drew and I need to talk about it.”

“What is there to talk about?” Mama demanded.

“If they say they need to talk about it, they need to talk about it—and that's the end of it!” Papa said to Mama with that voice he had that brooked no opposition.

The family decided that they were all going to a restaurant nearby to have lunch to celebrate. I begged off, lying again. I told them I had important work back at the church that I needed to do, and, although I had taken off time to come to the adoption hearing, I now needed to get back. They all said that they understood, but I could see Vince, Tony, and Mama looking at me funny as I went to leave.

The truth was, I was exhausted from the tension of being around them and needed to get away somewhere where I could be alone and calm down. Since it was not far away, I drove to the Episcopal cathedral and went and sat in the little chapel where, hopefully, Conner and I would soon be married. That's where Mary Catherine found me about an hour later.

“Well, fancy meeting you...” Mary Catherine started and then stopped. “David, you look like hell. What's the matter? It's not you and Conner, is it?”

“God, no! Conner and I is the only thing going right in my life right now.”

“Then what is it?” she said, sitting down in the pew next to me.

"It's my family. Every time I get around them I get like this. And it keeps getting worse. I know I'm lying to them. I know I've built these terrible walls to keep them out, but evidently there's a price to pay for that."

"Of course there is. Anytime we allow our fear to overcome what our soul knows it needs, there is a terrible price to pay. We are slowly killing our soul and becoming someone who we don't even know."

"I guess I know that, which is why I can't go on like this. I have to do what I've been avoiding. I've gotten to the point where I'm sure enough if I have Conner and his love to support me that I no longer care if they accept me or not."

"That is a load of crap. The reason you're hurting so bad is that your biggest fear is losing their acceptance."

"God! You're like Conner. You can read me like a book."

"It's really not very hard. The pain you're in is far too visible to ignore. The question is, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go to them with Conner by my side, and I'm going to tell them."

"That is a very good idea, but ideas work better when you have an actual plan of how you're going to carry out those ideas."

"I've thought about this so much that I do have a plan."

"Do you want to tell me what it is?"

"I might as well. Knowing you, you'd find a way to get it out of me anyway." I tried to laugh, but it was almost like a moan that came out of me.

For the first time, Mary Catherine reached out and put her arm around me. I was surprised that even though she was usually intellectual and reserved, I could feel the warmth, comfort, and love.

"David, I really love you. You're like a brother to me. When you're in pain like this, it hurts me almost as much as you must be hurting."

"Thank you. I really need to hear that right now."

"Okay, so what's the plan?"

“Basically, the plan is to go to each of my brothers individually, starting with Vince, open up to them and let them know all the changes that have happened and why.”

“So you're leaving your parents until last. I think that's a very good idea. After all, I fully expect that your brothers will support you unconditionally.”

“And I'm sure that Papa will as well. It's Mama who I'm worried about. After her reaction to Vince's coming out, I'm afraid that I've done something that she will never be able to accept or forgive. I can see it now. She'll hate Conner, because she'll blame him for all of this.”

“I take it that the horrible thing you've done is converting.”

“Yeah. I think she could deal with Conner and I being married, but leaving the church, I'm afraid she'll never understand.”

“I want you to think about something. I want you to think about what you are to her. You're her firstborn. You are still, regardless of the conversion, a priest. Think about how important those things are to her. Your whole family pushed her into eliminating her mindless prejudices. If they'd do that for Vince, don't you think they will do that for you?”

“I don't know. This isn't about prejudice. This is about faith, about belief systems, about a war that has been going on—sometimes quietly, sometimes breaking open to actual warfare where thousands have died—ever since the Reformation split Christianity into thousands of sects, most with the belief that their form of commitment to God is the *one true way*, and all the others are basically spawns of the devil.”

“You're absolutely right. But isn't that, in itself, prejudice?”

“Yes, but it is seen by the believers to be a prejudice sanctioned by their own form of God. That's what makes it so dangerous. That's what makes suicide bombers believe that killing hundreds of people will make them martyrs, and God will take them to a higher form of heaven. It's what makes right-wing Christians believe they have the right to try and undermine the Constitution to bring laws into alignment with their own particular brand of belief. And to kill those who they see as a threat to this belief, for example, doctors who provide abortions to patients who legally have the right to ask for them.”

“Let me ask you something. Is your mother not accepting what you've done going to make you leave Conner and go back to the Roman Church?”

“Absolutely not! I love him too much to do something like that. I would take a knife and drive it through my own heart before I would do that.”

“David, I know you know this. If she cannot accept you as a gay man, if she cannot accept the man you have given your heart to, if she cannot accept that your love of God and other people put you in the position of having no other choice than to leave the church that would not accept you, then she does not love you. She loves only an image that she has of you and of what she thinks your life should be.”

“Yes, I do know that. Unfortunately, that doesn't make it easier to lose her love and acceptance. Eventually, it might, but initially it will do nothing to take the pain away. It would be almost as if she died.”

“You do know that I was not born an Episcopalian. Do you have any idea in what faith I was raised?”

“No, I have no idea.”

“I was raised in the Church of God Mountain Assembly. A church that is even more prejudiced against gays than the Roman Church. I grew up hearing in church on Sunday that Catholics, Jews, and homosexuals were the spawn of Satan. I was taught every Bible verse that supported these prejudices. Worse, I heard them repeated daily, because my father is a minister in that church. I didn't actually convert. When my father found out that I was gay, he and the congregation that I grew up in, who knew me from the time I was an infant, excommunicated me. Threw me out not just of the church but my home as well. The last words that my father ever said to me were that I was dead to him. Luckily, because of my high IQ, I was able to get scholarships, which not only kept me in school but allowed me to eat and have a roof over my head. I was only eleven when this all happened. I have been cut off from every member of my family ever since then. Not even my mother will have anything to do with me, because of her fear of my father, who I saw beat her on countless occasions.”

“I have got to arrange for you to meet my brother Vince's lover, Drew, and his brother, Gregg. They both grew up in almost exactly the same situation, except it was their mother who rejected them. Their father does whatever she says, while she verbally abuses him both emotionally and psychologically.”

“I'm sure that they and I would have a lot of similar experiences. I can also help them to heal some of that abuse.”

“They both seem to have healed themselves through the love of their partners.”

“Yes, much of my healing has come through my wife. Which brings us full circle back to you and Conner. No matter what happens, I know that Conner will be there for you. All you have to do is allow his love to heal whatever damage is done.”

I looked at my watch and realized that I needed to leave so that I would be home when Conner got there.

“Thank you, again, for your help and your love. Thank you for sharing with me parts of your life that I'm sure still hurt. I've got to leave now, because I promised Conner that when he got home I would be lying in our bed naked.”

“Oh!” Mary Catherine said, laughing. “TMI! Too much information!”

“Sorry! Sex seems to be the only thing that gay males are extremely open about.” I laughed as well.

We got up out of the pew and hugged. Then I left, and Mary Catherine went back to whatever she was doing before she found me.

I was lying naked on our bed slowly stroking my hard-on when I heard the front door slam and Conner calling my name. Then I heard his footsteps running up the stairs.

Chapter Sixteen

Conner bounded into the room but stopped at the foot of the bed. He just stood there looking at me with this huge grin on his face as he very rapidly stripped, his clothes going everywhere. I looked at him quizzically, wondering what was going on in that brain of his.

“You are so beautiful.” His voice, so deep with sexual desire, was close to a growl.

“When you say that, in that way, chills go up my spine, and I feel beautiful. You are the only one who has ever made me feel that way in my entire life.” My voice was trembling because I was on the verge of tears. Especially after today, I truly needed to feel beautiful and desired by my mate.

Conner walked slowly around the bed and then climbed onto it, his movements so sleek and muscular that they reminded me of films of panthers approaching their prey. He moved finally to where he was totally covering my body with his. He was fully supported by his hands and feet, so that no part of our bodies touched. He was so close, I could feel the heat from his body as he covered me. I reached up, my hands wrapping around his lats as I began to explore his muscular back. I pulled him down so that his body was finally resting on mine. Conner took the opportunity to kiss me passionately while his arms dug underneath me until he was holding me in them.

“Bad day, huh?”

“Awful. How could you tell?”

“There's this way you have of reaching out and holding me that has a deep feeling of need and desperation to it.”

“Okay, okay. I desperately need you right now,” I snarked at him.

“Hey, don't get defensive. I'm not putting you down. It is times like these that I promised you I would be there for. I want you to need me. Just like there are times when I need you. That's how a partnership works. We need each other because we aren't completely self-sufficient, even

though our egos lie to us and tell us that we are. And I ought to know; I've got the biggest ego in the Western world. In fact, I'm surprised at times there is room for the three of us in this big bed—you, me, and my ego. That's why it's so hard for me to ask you for help. These last months have been the worst kind of hell for me because I constantly needed your help, and everything that builds my ego was gone. My job, having sex, working out—all gone. And I need to tell you that you have been incredible through all of it. Even when I was mentally bitching myself out for being nothing and a loser, you did anything I asked and never made me feel beholden to you for it. Best of all, you would look at me in that way that you do that makes me feel like I'm a hero in your life.”

I tried to interrupt to tell him how wrong he was, but he put his finger against my lips to stop me.

“No. Please let me get this out while I still can. I truly love you. I truly love everything about you. I know that God made you for me and me for you. I just pray that I can live up to being the kind of man you see me as when you look at me like that. Now, I want to hear about today. I want to hear everything. I want to hear what happened that put you in this condition.”

“My family. As usual.”

“I figured that. Seems like the only time you get this way is when you're around them. What was it this time that set you off?”

“It wasn't anything that they did. It was me. Tony asked me if there was anything new in my life, and I couldn't believe how easily I lied to him. I deeply love both of my brothers, but I've put up such barriers around me that I'm hiding from both of them. I know far more about their lives than they do about mine. And I know that these barriers are made of fear. Fear that if they ever found out who and what I really am, they would reject me. I would lose their love and respect.”

“You tell me that these barriers are made of fear. Fear that you will lose them. But at the same time, you tell me you're using them to push them away. I would figure it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you keep pushing them away, if you keep hiding from them, you will eventually lose them—probably forever.”

“That, my love, is why we are going to visit Vince and Drew tonight. I am going to stop hiding. I am going to stop lying to everyone. Since I married them and helped them to adopt

Little Andy, I think they deserve to be told first. It also should clear up the problem of the baptism.”

“What baptism?”

“Gina never had Little Andy baptized. She tried to, but she ran into some old bastard of a priest who called her a whore and refused to baptize Andy because he was born out of wedlock. Vince kind of startled everybody when I brought up the subject by saying that he and Drew had to think about the baptism.”

“But you can do it for him now, can't you?”

“That's not the issue. I'm pretty sure I know what the issue is, and I now can waylay any of Vince's fears.”

“What's he afraid of?”

“The same thing I'd be afraid of if I were in his shoes. In all three of the so-called Catholic churches, in order for a child to be baptized, the parents must promise to raise the child in that church. From what I've heard from both Vince and Drew, I doubt sincerely that they want their child raised Roman Catholic, especially not with all the prejudice against gays in the church. That's one of the reasons that I want to tell them tonight, so that they know that there is an alternative.”

“So you're going to try and *convert* them? I don't know if that's such a good idea.”

“There is a tradition in the Episcopal Church of nonproselytization.”

“Non what?”

“Nonproselytization. It means the church does not actively seek converts. I just want to let Vince and Drew know that there is an alternative that I think would be more comfortable for them if they do want to baptize Little Andy.”

“When do we need to go do this?”

“I figure around eight o'clock.”

Conner leaned over and started nuzzling my ear, knowing there was not much else required to turn me on.

“We've got plenty of time, then.” And then he began licking my ear, and my cock was hard again almost instantly.

“Yeah, plenty of time,” I breathlessly said as Conner moved over on top of me.

He rested on my body; I spread my legs and wrapped them around his thighs. But evidently, this was not going to be a quickie. With Conner, making love almost never was. We were very similar in that aspect of our personalities. We both loved sex. And both of us obviously seemed to believe that making love to each other meant that the eroticism of the act needed to be fully explored.

Knowing this, I was not surprised when, after Conner gave me a very passionate and loving kiss, he then proceeded to move down my body kissing, licking, and nibbling on his favorite places. He eventually moved down far enough that he could gently lick and suck on my cock. But he did this for no more than a few seconds, because he didn't want to get me off that quickly or that way. He moved down so that his nose was pressed against my balls, and I could hear him taking deep breaths of my scent there. He then began to lick and suck them into his mouth. But he didn't stop there. I knew where he was going, so I pulled back my legs until my knees were almost resting on my chest, giving him full access to my ass—the place on my body he seemed to love the most.

He again breathed in a number of whiffs of my scent and soon was licking up and down my trench, then finally paying attention only to my hole. I pushed down on my muscles, which allowed him to work his tongue up inside me. He began to move rapidly in and out of me as he drove me crazy fucking me with his tongue.

“Oh, God! Yeah! Do it! Eat out my ass! Fuck me with that tongue of yours!”

I looked down between my legs and our eyes met, and it was clear that even though he had his mouth pressed to my hole at the same time, he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. Conner loved to eat my ass, and I loved having him do it. Especially because I knew what came next.

Fucking me was a lot easier now than it had been at the beginning. I'd come a long way from that very naive virgin priest. Conner no longer had to take what had always felt like hours to me opening up my hole so there would be no pain. Now, all Conner had to do was lube up my hole and his cock, and I was ready. He reached out his hand, his mouth never leaving my ass, and I reached over and grabbed the bottle of lube from the bedside table. We left it out all the time now because it was too difficult to go searching for it in the drawer when our lovemaking had reached this point. I put the bottle of lube into his outstretched hand, and he used it to first

prepare me and then himself. Before I knew it, his cockhead was pressed against my asshole, demanding entrance. I pushed out with my muscles, and using the power of his hips, Conner slid his cock almost completely inside me. The next thrust finished the job. Conner leaned down and kissed me passionately. I reached up, putting my arms around his neck, while at the same time I wrapped my legs around his hips, submitting fully to him.

Conner, as usual, started out slowly, withdrawing only an inch or two before pressing back inside. This continued, with him withdrawing farther and farther each time, until he withdrew to the point that only the head of his cock was still inside me. He then started moving faster and harder until he reached ramming speed.

“Oh, yes! Fuck me! Fuck me hard! I need it so bad! Please, Conner! Fuck me! Mark me with your cum! It's your ass! Only yours! Forever!”

Hearing these words from me drove Conner into the sexual frenzy I had intended. Conner knew all the buttons to push on me, but I knew all his as well. His identification with wolves was very strong and, just like an alpha male wolf, he was deeply possessive where my ass was concerned.

As he continued to slam his cock into me faster and faster, my cock boned so hard that it was almost painful, but I could feel the burn deep inside me that told me I was a second away from relief. I came, screaming his name. As usual, that feeling in the inside of my ass as I came triggered his orgasm as well.

“DAVID! TAKE IT! TAKE MY LOAD! I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!” he screamed as his cock exploded his load in my ass.

Conner collapsed on top of me. He just lay there trying to get his breath back as I stroked his hair, his face, anywhere on his body that my hands could reach. I knew that he fell asleep for a couple of minutes. This was one of my favorite parts of making love, holding him while he slept from the exhaustion of all the pleasure we had given each other. This time, still filled with the occasional aftershock from our orgasms, caused in me a gentle feeling of floating. A feeling that Conner and I were the only two people in the world. Nobody and nothing else mattered for that time. I was wrapped in the warmth of Conner's body and his love. What more could I ever need?

Conner finally began to stir. He raised his head and looked down at me with eyes full of love and a mischievous smile on his face.

“I know you're very satisfied, because I can feel the evidence of that gluing us together.”

“Yes, and I can feel the evidence of your satisfaction leaking out of me.”

“I have to do something about that. Can't let it go to waste.”

At this, Conner moved off me, took my legs, and lifted them up and back. I grabbed hold of them to get them out of his way while he lay down on the bed with his face again pressed to my ass and his tongue sliding in and out of me, gathering up as much of his cum as he could.

The feeling was soothing to my abused hole. I think that Conner felching me was one of the major reasons that I was able to train my ass muscles to relax and take Conner's cock so quickly.

After a few minutes, Conner had gotten all his cum that he could get. He moved up the bed, lying down beside me and taking me in his arms. His mouth opened against mine, and I began to eagerly eat all his cum that he offered me.

After all the cum was gone, I lay in Conner's arms, my head resting on his chest and his arm thrown across to mine. I was finally able to tell him all the misery I had been in all day. I told him about going to the cathedral to pray and my conversation with Mary Catherine. As usual, Conner agreed completely with her about the need for a plan. So I told him the plan I had developed. And without even knowing that Mary Catherine had already said it was a good one, Conner told me the same thing.

“Well, if I die and you feel like marrying a woman, Mary Catherine would be perfect for you,” I huffed.

“What the fuck kind of nonsense are you muttering about now?”

“Well, the two you seem to agree on everything. She said the plan was good too.”

“Babe, the only thing that Mary Catherine and I agree on is you, and that's because we both love you. Marry Mary Catherine? Are you out of your mind? Even if I *did* like women, I'd stay at least a thousand miles away from her!”

“Why? She's a wonderful person. Very loving and caring.”

“She may be that to you, but trust me, it would be a marriage made in hell. We'd do nothing but fight. Her ego and mine could not ever live in the same building. I'm surprised they fit in the same town. I told you once guys don't like to compete with their women.”

“And I remember telling you that we don't compete.”

“Only because we live in totally different worlds and come home so beaten up sometimes, it's like we're crawling to the other one to lick our wounds and heal us.”

“Just like today. You don't know how hard I had to work to have that hard-on when you got home, because I knew it's what you were fantasizing about. I didn't want you to see me crying the way I'd been for the hour before you got home.”

“Okay! That's one thing that's going to have to stop. You are not here to be my jack-off fantasy. If you're in pain, if you need me, I don't want you hiding behind some fucking fantasy you think I have of you. You are a human being, and humans hurt. God knows I see enough of it. Sometimes my whole day is filled with hurting people. It tears at my guts, and—*fuck*, I don't even know them. Maybe you'll understand how important it is to me to be there for *you*, the one person in my life who I know and love. Can you understand that?”

“But you don't understand. That's what I'm afraid of. You'll come home on one of those days when you see nothing but pain, and I'll be too lost in the crap of my own life to even be aware of it or have anything to give you. Then what?”

“Well, as far as I can see, we have two choices in that case. We can either take my backup service revolver and play Russian roulette, or we can just get good and fucking drunk and let the world solve its own problems for a night.”

“You are kidding about playing Russian roulette, aren't you?”

He gave me a very evil grin and then said, “Maybe.”

I picked up the pillow closest to my hand and smashed him in the face with it. That started it! I keep forgetting how strong and well physically trained he was. Within seconds he had me flat on my back on the floor, while he was slapping me with pillows in between tickling the life out of me.

“*Stop! Stop! I give up!*” I screamed.

Conner dropped the pillows but lay down on top of me with my arms and my legs locked in his and spread.

“David, you truly must be a lover, because you can't fight for shit.”

“Does that bother you? That I'm not very strong and I don't know how to fight?” I turned my head away so he couldn't see the tears that were starting to form in my eyes.

“David, I want a *lover*, not a *sparring partner*. I have plenty of those down at the damn precinct. I've told you from the beginning, you have things in your personality that are far nicer than a lot of mine. Why, in God's name, with all the wonderful things that you do for people—hell! The wonderful things you do for me—why would you think that I'm not proud of you? Personally, I think we maybe should take your bishop up on his offer to get married in the cathedral. I want to invite everyone I know—everyone I've ever known—so that they can see me walk down the aisle with you on my arm and eat their hearts out in jealousy for the wonderful guy who was crazy enough to say 'yes' to me.”

“Uhh...could you maybe let me up now?”

“Oh! Sorry,” Conner said and began to move off me, allowing me full movement again.

“I don't want the cathedral. I don't want a lot of people there. I only want the people who I know love us and support us. And if that means my parents miss another son's wedding, well that's just too fucking bad.”

“You really think it will be like that? Even with how they deal with Vince and Drew?”

“Vince is not a priest. At least as far as they know, Vince is not converting to another religion. I've left the religion that my parents have practiced all of their lives.”

“Yeah? And what did it get them? They almost lost one son over it, and in your way of thinking, they're about to lose another. That's why I hate fucking religion! It's all so stupid! Except maybe this new one of yours. I've been reading some of those books Mary Catherine gave you. The funny thing is, I haven't had the desire to throw the damn book across the room yet. As long as this new church makes you happy and lets us be together, that is all the fuck I care about.”

I was still sitting on the floor, and I found myself raising my hands to Conner just the way Little Andy had reached out to me to be held and loved. Conner saw my actions and reached down. With no effort at all, he raised me to my feet and wrapped his arms around me.

“I love you so much. Yes, you're outspoken, but you always tell the truth that needs to be heard. And you have the courage to speak the truth without worrying about any consequences

that may happen because of your courage. You find a great deal in the world stupid and very hurtful to others, and you are usually absolutely one hundred percent right. You are the one person in the world whom I know I can go to, to get a completely honest answer. Those are the best parts of your personality. Courage, honor, and loyalty. Believe me, I am not *better* than you in any way. We are just different, and we happen to respect those things in each other that we do well. Do you remember saying that I look at you like you're my hero?"

"Yeah. And it scares the shit out of me. It's a hell of a lot to live up to."

"Well, I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do about it, because you *are* my hero. And will always be so. That is your burden to carry. Mine is that look in your eyes of such total love that my first thought, when you look at me that way, is to run like hell and hide. I can't help it. It scares the shit out of me. So I'm sorry. It looks like we're stuck with each other and stuck with being the single most important human being in each other's lives. But it was my understanding that, between lovers, that's the way it's supposed to be."

Conner tightened his arms around me and kissed me. A kiss that was slow, gentle, and sweet.

"You know, most of the time being your hero isn't all that bad. In fact, it makes me feel really good to know that someone I don't feel worthy of possessing feels that way about me."

"And as far as those looks that make me want to run away, if I did, I'd come running right back for more of them."

"Shouldn't we think about getting ready?"

"Ahh! My always-very-practical lover. You keep me on an even keel. You keep my feet on the ground when I want to go walking around in clouds. You have no idea, do you, of how wonderful it feels to be watched over and protected by you?"

"I just know that we need to go take a shower, or we won't have to announce to your brother that we're lovers. They'll smell it from twenty feet away."

I started laughing uproariously, and Conner looked at me with exasperation written all over his face. The next thing I knew, he had picked me up and thrown me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. I was going to object, but I was getting such a beautiful view of the cheeks of his butt bouncing up and down as he walked. I was very glad he no longer had to use the cane, for

many reasons, including that. He walked straight into the shower and turned on all the faucets before he finally let me down. I just stood there, grinning at him.

“Hey! I really liked that. I got to feel the strength of your muscles, and I had a wonderful view of your incredibly gorgeous ass as you carried me in here. Can we do this every time?”

“I'd rather save this for special occasions,” Conner said, pulling me close.

As usual, the shower took longer than normal, but part of it found me on my knees, worshipping my alpha the same way I had wanted to do when Conner brought me home for the first time. And it was home. It felt like home from the first moment I entered it. I knew then that what I wanted most in the world was to be a part of Conner's life, and being in that house felt like I was a part of him. Everything in the house reminded me of him. Of course his scent, which permeated the house, made me feel he was there around me all the time—even when I was alone.

When the shower was finally over, I can guarantee that we were both meticulously clean. Every nook and cranny of our bodies had been touched, licked, and cleansed. We stepped out of the shower, and I quickly grabbed one of the thick, fluffy towels. Now came the ritual that we had begun during the first shower we were allowed to have together, that of drying each other off.

When Conner did this, it made me feel like a child again, and I could remember the way that my parents dried me after my baths. As I grew older, I would be required to help my mother in bathing my two younger brothers. This same type of affectionate drying off that I now used on Conner. I loved the way that something so simple and utilitarian could become a way to tell someone how much you loved them and how important they were to you.

We started to get dressed, and Conner asked me, “What should we wear? I mean, if you want I could wear a suit. God knows I have enough of them.”

“Or you could wear some of that gorgeous black leather you have back there. We could put a collar on me, and you could carry my leash. I don't think we'd have to do much explaining after that.” I giggled.

Conner looked at me in exasperation. “This isn't funny. This is something very important to you, and I don't want to embarrass you by the way I look.”

“First of all, there is nothing with the exception of full drag that would ever embarrass me if you wore it. Second, being wrestlers, they spend their lives in sweatpants, cutoff sweatpants,

and a T-shirts on top. This is how I've always seen them dress. Well...except for the court appearance today. I was actually shocked. It has been years since I saw Vince dressed that way, and I had never seen Drew in a suit. I have to tell you, they were both incredibly handsome. But as to what we should wear? The same thing we always wear to be comfortable. Jeans and a T-shirt."

"Okay! I'm beginning to like them already."

"There's something else about them I think you're going to like. When we knock on the door, it may take them a while to answer."

"Why would I like that?"

"We often have to take a while to answer the door while we're putting clothes back on. They are slow for the same reason."

"Oh! They like nudity too."

"Yes, and the same with Dar and Gregg, who live downstairs."

"What about Little Andy? Do they walk around naked in front of their kid?"

"I had a talk one time with Vince. It was back when he was going through the testicular cancer, and it brought up the subject of kids. That was when I learned that Vince really wanted to have a son. I jokingly mentioned his love of nudity and asked him if the child wouldn't put a crimp in that? Vince believes that children should be raised knowing about their bodies and being proud of them. I asked him about what would happen if he and Drew got affectionate with each other and became erect. Vince was quite clear that he wanted his son to see the love and affection that Drew and he have for each other, and getting an erection is just a natural part of their loving reaction to each other. They have no intention of having sex in front of the boy. But as Vince said, his son was going to grow up knowing that his two fathers loved him and each other. Which, by the way, is excellent psychologically, because it gives a child emotional stability."

"Do you want to do that when we have a kid?"

"Not if you're uncomfortable with it."

"I'm not. I just figured you might be."

“Conner, I seem to remember you telling me how proud you were of me because I wasn't the prude you had expected me to be. I'm still not one.”

“Okay, okay! Note to self—walk around naked in front of the kids when we have them.”

“Conner, do you realize that every time you talk about us having a child it's always plural? You always talk as if we would have more than one. Is that what you're planning?”

“Growing up as an only child was very lonely. If I have my way about it, I don't want our child experiencing that loneliness.”

“I agree completely. If you want more than one child, I'm perfectly happy to go along. Just let's keep it below the level of a basketball team and nowhere near a football team, okay?”

“Oh, damn! And here I had my heart set on duplicating the Pittsburgh Steelers.”

We both laughed over that one.

We were both dressed. I had on blue jeans and a T-shirt. Conner had on blue jeans and a T-shirt from the police department. However, when he looked at me, he started shaking his head.

“No. No, David. If you truly want to start tearing down walls between you and your brothers, you've got to stop dressing in black.”

What he was referring to is the fact that I had, without thinking, put on a black T-shirt just as I always did. But I understood what he was saying, and so when he went into the drawer and pulled out a nice forest green T-shirt, I thanked him and immediately changed.

“Now, that looks much better,” Conner said, and then he walked up close to me and began to sniff me around the neck and shoulders.

“Hey! I took a shower. I took it with you.”

“Doesn't matter. I was checking for something else.”

“What?”

“I can report that there is absolutely no smell of anything *clerical* about you.”

“Conner, you are an asshole!”

“Yes. And you love me that way.”

As usual, we got in Conner's car, and he drove like a maniac. What should have been a twenty-minute drive turned into a ten-minute lap at the Daytona Beach speedway.

We got to the old Victorian home where Dar and Gregg lived on the first floor, and Vincent and Drew lived on the second floor. We climbed the stairs and knocked at the door. As I predicted, it took a while until someone finally answered the door.

"David, what a surprise! Come in," Drew said.

"Hey, Bro! What's up?" Vince stood beside his lover and put his arm around Drew's waist. I could see both of them staring at Conner with curiosity.

"Drew...Vince...I'd like you to meet Conner," I said, smiling and putting my hand on Conner's muscular arm. "Conner, this is my brother Vince and his spouse, Drew."

"I'm very pleased to finally meet you. David's told me so much about both of you," Conner said.

"Well, let's not just stand here. Come in, both of you," Drew said.

Vince took his arm from around Drew, and they led Conner and me into the living room. Conner and I sat down on the couch very closely next to each other.

"Can I get you guys anything? Coffee?" Drew asked.

"No. We're fine," I answered for both of us. "We really stopped by because we wanted to talk to you, and I wanted Conner to see Little Andrew."

Vince was sitting in one of the chairs opposite the sofa, and Drew now sat down on the arm of it. Vince's arm went around his waist.

"I'm sorry. I put Andy down for a nap a while ago. He was really tired out from everything today," Drew said.

"That's all right. I think the talking we have to do may take a while anyway," I said.

I noticed that Conner was just sitting there, not saying anything. Instead he looked rather uncomfortable.

"What is it you want to talk about, Bro? As if I didn't know," Vince said.

"You know?" I asked. I'm sure that they both could see a look of shock on my face.

"Yeah. The baptism thing," Vince said.

"Oh! That. No, actually, I understand that. I realize that you don't want to raise Andrew Catholic. I completely understand why."

"So what do you want to talk about, Bro?"

"I don't know any other way to say this except to just say it. What I should have said when I introduced the two of you to him is that this is Conner—my lover."

"*Your what!*" Drew and Vince shouted almost simultaneously.

"My lover. And the finest man I have ever known."

Conner blushed.

"If you love him, Bro, that kind of goes without saying," Vince said.

"So how long has this been going on?" Drew asked.

"Conner, how long has it been?"

"Almost a year now."

"And we're going to be married next month, and we want all three of you there."

"Married? You mean, like you married us?" Vince asked.

"Kind of. Only this time I have the bishop's permission to get married."

"Wait a minute, Bro. How in the hell did you do that?"

"It was actually very simple. I've converted to the Episcopal Church, which accepts gays in the ministry and under certain conditions will permit its priests to marry same-sex couples."

"Then that's the church we should have Andy baptized in. And it sounds like the church we ought to belong to. And since there is already a priest there whom we know really well, I think it's perfect!" Drew said to Vince.

"After all you've been through, are you sure that you want to join a church?" Vince asked his lover.

"Why not? These don't sound anything like the people I grew up with," Drew answered.

"Well, it looks like you've got yourself three new members, Father." Vince smiled at me.

"Okay, just don't ever let the bishop know that I tried to convert you."

"Why not?" Vince asked.

"Well, you may not believe this, but the Episcopal Church has a tradition of nonproselytization."

"Of what?" Drew looked at me funny while Conner sat chuckling.

“Same question I had to ask him. And I live with him!” Conner and Vince were now laughing together.

“It means that the Episcopal Church does not try to convert people.”

“That's really weird! Hell, the people in my parents' church spend half their time trying to get people to convert. They even have a plaque on the wall with all the members' names and the names of the people they converted,” Drew said.

“Well, you'll never be asked to go out and bring in your quota.”

“So what about the services? Are they like the Roman Catholic services?” Vince asked.

“Vince, they are so much alike, I'll bet you can't tell the difference. Well...except for one thing,” I said.

“What's that?”

“Well...you know the part of the Mass called the Consecration, where the priest consecrates the bread and wine for Communion?”

“Yeah.”

“In the Episcopal service, right before the Consecration, the priest's husband, wife, or lover comes up to the altar, and they kiss over the bread and wine.”

I said this so damned seriously that for a moment Vince, Drew, and Conner stared at me with their mouths open.

“*Got ya!*”

“You bastard!” Vince said.

“And you have the nerve to tell me that I'm an asshole!” Conner growled at me.

The only one in the room who got the joke and was laughing uproariously was Drew.

“Okay. You got me good. But remember—paybacks are a bitch!” Vince said.

“So who else have you told?” Drew asked.

“My bishop, of course, and my closest friend, Mary Catherine, who is also an Episcopal priest. As to anyone else, you both are the first.”

“Why us, Bro?” Vince asked.

"I guess because I married you, I saw you through the cancer, and I helped you get the son you'd always wanted. Bottom line, I feel more connected to you than anyone else in the family. Plus, I knew you would understand what I'm going through—or about to go through."

"Oh yeah, Mama and Papa. How do you think they'll take it?"

"You two broke the barrier in terms of being gay and having your relationship accepted within the family, and I am unbelievably grateful to you for what you went through in order to do that. But as to how they'll take this? I have no idea. This isn't just about my being in love with Conner. It's all about leaving the church so that I can be with him. And that conversion may be extremely difficult for Mama and Papa to deal with—especially Mama."

"I've told you before that because of everything you've done for us, we will be there to help you in any way that we can. In fact, Tony already came up with a very good way," Vince said.

"Yes, I remember."

"May I ask what it was?" Conner interrupted.

"This was back when I was having my operation, and I'd never gotten around to telling Mama and Papa that I was gay and that I had Drew as a lover. Mama threw a fit and called Drew a faggot. I dragged Drew out of there, and we headed back to campus. After we left, Tony told Mama that he didn't want her anywhere near his children, because he didn't want them infected with her prejudices. Now, at that time, Tony was the only one who had kids. Now we do too. But better yet, Tony and Debbie are about to have a girl. The only one in the family, now Gina is dead. I think we need to have a little talk with Tony." Vince nodded to Drew, who nodded back.

"First of all, Conner and I need to go and talk to Tony and Debbie. They are next on the list. Then we will go talk to Mama and Papa. I think plans need to be placed on hold until we see what Mama and Papa's reaction is."

"I've got a better idea. I think when you and Conner go to see Mama and Papa, we all should go with you. And I'm including all the kids as well."

I was completely taken aback. I knew I loved my brothers, but I evidently had no idea how much they loved me. I sat there with tears pouring from my eyes to the point I couldn't see. They all noticed. Conner, being next to me, was the first to react. He put his arms around me and pulled me to him so I was crying into his chest. But suddenly, Conner let go of me and another pair of strong arms wrapped around me. By scent, I knew who it was who was holding me.

"I never knew..." was all I could get out.

"Knew what, Bro? That we love you?"

"No! How much," I managed to get out.

Another pair of arms went around me, and I knew it was Drew's.

"I once thought that I had lost Gregg's love. It was the worst feeling I've ever had, and I lived with it for three years. But just like you, I hadn't lost his love at all. It was still waiting for me. All I had to do was reach out for it."

Conner's arms once again joined Vince and Drew's.

"See, babe. No matter how cut off you felt, their love was still there waiting for you. You can stop lying now and tear down all those walls you built for no reason."

I don't think I have ever experienced that much love from that many people all at once in my life. However, it did somewhat surprise me when Drew and Vince pulled away. But in a moment I found out why. I suddenly felt these two very tiny hands stroking my face and kissing me all over it. I reached out and picked up Andy and held him to me. No person on God's green earth can give as much unconditional love as a child can. I looked at Andy, and he was smiling at me. I had no other response but to smile back.

"Hey, little guy. We came to see you, but you were asleep. Did I wake you up?"

He shook his head at me and then turned as if he was noticing Conner for the first time. He reached out his little arms to Conner.

"He wants you to hold him," I said to my lover.

Conner reached over and tenderly lifted Andy from my lap. I sat there looking at the most beautiful sight I had ever seen—my lover with a child in his arms. I suddenly was more determined than ever that we should have children. This man I loved needed to be a father. He needed to share his love with another little boy.

"You look so beautiful holding him," I said quietly to Conner.

"I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it feels to hold him. My emotions are in complete turmoil," Conner replied.

“I understand. I feel the same way. Conner, we need children—and soon. Regardless of what happens in either of our families. We have enough room in our hearts, and there are more than enough children out there who need the love we can give them.”

Conner looked at me, and I could see the glistening of tears in his eyes. “Yes. Soon.” That was all that he said. But it was enough.

Chapter Seventeen

A couple of days later Conner and I were working out in the gym on the third floor of the town house. I was doing cardio on the rowing machine, my favorite way to do it because it also worked a lot of other muscles, including the arms, the abs, and the glutes. Conner was using the free weights. Watching him do it, especially the way Conner liked to work out, in nothing but a jockstrap, was an erotic show. Especially the bench press. To watch the way the muscles in his chest and arms “popped” would give me an erection if I weren't working out as well. Sometimes I got one anyway. Let me tell you, they always recommend that if you're going to start a workout program, you should do so with a buddy. With a buddy like Conner to spur me on, I had no trouble getting up early to do this. Conner's encouragement, which usually came in the form of compliments about how my body had changed since we had started doing this together, kept me getting up as well.

There was one other thing I hadn't known before, although I bet my brothers did: that a good workout will make a male voraciously horny. Conner explained it to me, saying that all the activity produced hormones like testosterone that stimulated sex drive and also released endorphins, which was a natural high. So you end up very horny and feeling very good. Guess what comes next? Especially if your workout partner is also your mate.

He finished his last reps with the barbell that I could see was holding two hundred pounds, then Conner got up off the bench and walked over to where I was rowing, and sat down cross-legged on the floor.

“I've been thinking...” Conner began.

“Did it hurt?” I laughed.

“Oh, I see! It's your day to be the asshole in the family.”

“No, I won't take your title away from you. What were you thinking about?”

"I was thinking about the meeting with Tony and Debbie. I was thinking we should have it here. We can cook dinner for them and give them kind of a night out."

"I think that's a really good idea. I hereby withdraw and apologize for my previous snarky remark."

"What I'm trying to figure out is what to serve them."

"What do you think we should serve them?"

"I'm sure, having been raised in an Italian family, Tony likes Italian food. But if we do traditional Italian, it would be like competing with your mother. Now you told me that Tony used to be a wrestler in high school just like Vince."

"Yes. What does that have to do with anything? We're not going to cook him a piece of wrestling mat."

"No. What it has to do with is that I've never met a male athlete who wasn't a carnivore."

"Yes, that's true of Tony as well as Vince and Drew."

"And me. So I'm thinking, why don't we do a nice standing rib roast?"

"It's a good idea."

"Okay. Standing rib roast it is. Now the next question is, when do we do this?"

"It needs to be on one of your days off."

"Are you sure you want to wait that long?"

"Absolutely. You need to be there."

"Yeah, I suppose I do."

"Okay, so when are you off?"

"Believe it or not, Saturday and Sunday."

"Let's do it Saturday, and then we have most of Sunday to ourselves. I'm scheduled to do the eleven-o'clock Eucharist, but other than that I'm free. And you can just sleep in if you want to."

"Isn't the eleven-o'clock Eucharist the *big* one with all the music and stuff?"

"Yes."

"And isn't this the first time you've been scheduled to do it?"

“Yes.”

“And don't you get to preach?”

“Yes.”

“Then how in the fuck do you expect me to sleep in?”

“But I thought that you liked the earlier services because they were quiet and there were less people there.”

“It's not a question of what I'd prefer. Sunday's a big deal for you whether you admit it or not, and I'm going to be there to support you. Remember? That's my job. It's your job too. Our jobs are to support each other.”

Even though he was sweaty from working out, I reached over and put my arms around him, kissing him gently. “No. I remember. And thank you for wanting to be there.”

“So why don't you go call Debbie and invite them for Saturday night?”

“Yes. I'd better go do that right now. I don't know what their schedules are like, so I want to make sure they have Saturday free.”

I gave Conner a quick kiss on the cheek and then headed down to the bedroom where my cell phone was. I had both Tony and Vince on speed dial so I punched in the numbers for Tony at home. It rang several times, and Debbie picked up the phone.

“Debbie, it's David.”

“Hello! How are you? Tony's at work. You can reach him at the garage.”

“I'm fine. And it's you I want to talk to. What are you guys doing on Saturday night?”

“Not a thing. We're going over to your mom and dad's on Sunday, but we've got nothing scheduled for Saturday.”

“Well, you do now. I want you and Tony to come over for dinner.”

“Oh, David! We'd love to. I know Tony will be thrilled. It seems like forever since we've seen you.”

“Well, you saw me at the adoption hearing.”

“No. I mean when we've been able to sit down and really visit.”

“That's really my fault. I've been very busy lately, and I've had some major changes in my life. That's what I want to talk to you and Tony about.”

“Okay...” Debbie said hesitantly.

“Listen, Debbie, no bad news, I promise.”

“Well, whatever it is, it must be good news. You sound happy.”

“Believe me, I've never been this happy in my life.”

“Oh, David! That's wonderful! If anybody deserves happiness, it's you.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me. So Saturday. What time would be good for you?”

“Let's make it at seven o'clock. Is that okay?”

“That's perfect.”

“Then we'll see you on Saturday.”

“I'd better give you the address. You see, I'm not living in the rectory anymore.”

I heard her gasp in surprise, but I gave her the address of the town house and told her where to park. We said good-bye, and I clicked off the phone. I then went upstairs to the gym.

“Well? Are they coming?” Conner asked.

“They'll be here Saturday night at seven o'clock.”

“I take it you didn't tell her about any of the changes in your life.”

“Only that I wasn't living in the rectory anymore, and I gave her this address instead. I told her it would be okay to park in the driveway.”

“Yeah. That's fine. So what do you want to do now?”

“I don't care. I'll leave it up to you.”

“You leave it up to me, and you know what's going to happen.” Conner gave me a horny grin.

“Yeah, I kind of figured that.”

“Then we're wasting time!”

This must have been some kind of special occasion, because Conner squatted down and threw me over his shoulder again in a fireman's carry. I loved when he did this. First of all, I got that great view of his ass as he walked carrying me, and secondly, it felt like something primal. Like I was prey or like a mate he had stolen and was now taking back to his lair. There was a possessiveness to Conner's actions that thrilled me deep into my soul.

I have to admit going down the stairs was a bit scary, but I knew that Conner was very strong and would not drop me. He carried me all the way to the bed, where he rather unceremoniously dumped me. I felt myself bounce a bit, but quickly I could feel the bed move as Conner crawled over me, having gotten rid of his jockstrap. He then proceeded to divest me of mine, using his teeth to pull the elastic garment from me, growling all the time he did. We were on exactly the same wavelength, and he was in “alpha wolf mode.”

After he'd worked my jock down and off me, he again crawled up my body until we were face-to-face. He gave me a wolfish grin and then leaned down and began sniffing the scent of my sweaty body. He then began to lick at my neck and shoulders where he had been sniffing.

“You smell and taste so good I could just about eat you up,” Conner said, grinning down at me.

“Well, Mr. Wolf, you certainly have the teeth for it.”

“Nah! I don't have fangs to really do the job.”

“Why do I get the feeling that if werewolves were real, you would love to be one.”

Conner looked at me, startled.

“Would you still love me if I were?”

“Of course I would. I would love you no matter what.”

“Well, they aren't real, and I'm not one. But I've fantasized about it so many times. The fantasies have come more often since I met you. Before, I had to fantasize that I had a mate. Now I don't have to. I have you.”

“Just out of curiosity, when you fantasize, am I me or am I another wolf?”

“Sometimes you're you, but other times you are a beautiful red wolf.”

“You know that you're turning me on with this.”

“Yeah, I can tell. Your cock is as hard as a diamond, and it's leaking precum like a faucet.”
His hand slid down my cock while his thumb spread the precum all over my cockhead.

“Oh, fuck! You do much more of that, and I'm going to come before you even fuck me.”

“Oh, no! You don't get to come until I do.”

“Then you had better get to fucking me, because I don't know how long I can hold out.”

“No problem! Why don't you roll over on your stomach and let me get you ready.”

I turned over as instructed and spread my legs wide, knowing what Conner wanted. And within a couple of seconds I felt him parting the cheeks of my ass, and his tongue began licking me. I pushed out with my muscles to open myself fully to him. He soon was working his magical tongue up inside me. Unfortunately, I was not completely out of the fantasy, and I began giggling at the thought of what it would feel like if Conner had a long tongue like a wolf's—what it would feel like to be fucked by a tongue many inches longer than Conner's. When Conner heard me giggling, he immediately pulled his tongue from my ass and rose up.

“Can I ask what you find so funny?” Conner growled at me.

I looked back at him sheepishly.

“I was...I was...doing some fantasizing of my own,” I finally stuttered out.

“So what was the fantasy?”

“I got to thinking about what it would feel like if you were a wolf and you ate my ass with a tongue as long as they have.”

“You'll never know. I can't see my medical insurance paying for a tongue transplant.”

Now we were both laughing.

“Trust me. I've thought about the same thing. What it would feel like to go that far up you with my tongue, but unfortunately, my cock is going to have to continue to do that job for me. And I love the way that feels!”

“So do I! Oh, so do I!”

“So let me get back to work, and you'll feel it soon enough. Just one favor. No more giggling. I don't care what you're fantasizing about. It kind of deflates my ego when I'm making love to you and you're giggling!”

“I promise.”

And with this, Conner went back to eating my ass and fucking me with his tongue. I doubted that any wolf could possibly be more talented, no matter what its tongue length. I reached over to the bedside table and grabbed the bottle of lube. Conner saw what I was doing and reached out his hand to take the bottle from me. I very soon felt the coldness of the lube as he proceeded to work it into my hole.

I next heard the sound of Conner lubing up his own cock, and then I felt its blunt head pressing for entrance. Again, I pushed out hard on my muscles, and he slid his cock slowly so that all of it was inside me. Conner lay there on top of me for a few minutes, allowing me to relax and accommodate the size of him. Once I was open to his satisfaction, he made several slow, almost-tentative strokes in and out. When these were obviously successful, he leaned down and murmured in my ear. "Get up onto your hands and knees. I want to do you doggy-style."

"Don't you mean 'wolf-style'?" I murmured back.

"Fuck, yeah!"

Conner backed out a bit, allowing me to get up into the new position. The next thing I felt was Conner leaning over me, licking and softly biting my shoulders and the back of my neck. Then he rose up and grabbed my hips in his hands and pulled me back tight against him, so that every little millimeter of his cock was buried in my ass. Then he leaned over me again, his long arms sliding down against mine so they were touching. I could feel him moving into a crouch behind me with his feet next to my knees.

"Are you ready to be 'wolf fucked'?"

"I am so ready. I don't care what you do as long as you fuck me!"

"Here I come!"

Conner began to fuck me hard and fast, using the strength of his legs to rise up and down. The thrusts were harder and faster than he had ever fucked me before. The thrusts were so hard that I began to think he wanted to push his balls into my ass along with his cock! It was a masterful fuck, but I didn't think he could last all that long. However, from the burning sensation deep in my body, I didn't think he would have to. Conner's cock had lit the fire of my orgasm, and try as I might, there was no way I could stop it from overwhelming me.

"CONNOR! I'M GOING TO COME! I CAN'T HOLD IT!"

"Go ahead! Let go! I'm right there with you!" I could hear the strangled growl from his throat and knew that he was trying very hard to hold back until I came. And come I did! My cum jetted out of my body in long white stripes that covered the bed beneath me. I don't know how many spurts there were. I was screaming uncontrolled gibberish by that point. I did feel when Conner began to pound his load as deep inside me as he could get. I briefly thought that if I *were*

a woman, I would, without a doubt, be impregnated, and we wouldn't have to worry about where we would find children.

Finally, Conner collapsed on me, and I collapsed on the bed. We lay there quite a long time, experiencing multiple aftershocks from our fucking. Conner, eventually, moved down, spread my ass cheeks, and began to eat his load from my abused hole. When he had gathered all that he could, he moved up the bed and lay down beside me on his back, one arm covering his eyes.

“HOLY FUCK! That was fucking incredible!”

I moved over, crossing my arms over his chest and shoulder.

“It would seem that it is a powerful fantasy for you.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “I guess it is. I didn't hurt you, did I?”

“Are you kidding? I loved every second of it!”

“God! I love you so much. And I love that I could share that fantasy with you and you were right there with me every step of the way. You don't know how scared I was of your reaction when I told you.”

“Conner, you never have to be scared of sharing something with me that is important to you. I'm not going to put you down or laugh at you or, worst of all, tell you that it's sick or perverted. You are who you are, and I love who you are.”

“I was afraid that you'd see it as some form of bestiality.”

“That's why I asked you if you fantasized about me being a wolf too.”

“Why?”

“Because the definition of bestiality is a human being having sex with an animal. If we're both fantasizing that each other's a wolf, that's just some kind of role-playing. It doesn't fit the definition of 'bestiality' at all. I'll worry about it when you go out and buy a wolf and it ends up in our bed. Hell! Romance novels with shape-shifters and werewolves and even vampires and demons are very popular among women nowadays. I've even read a couple of them that I downloaded online just to see what they were like. Trust me. They can be very hot! So go ahead and fantasize away. I'm all for it, especially if it gets me fucked like that!”

“There's one more part of the fantasy I haven't told you about. When I came, I didn't think of you as a female wolf...”

“But you fantasized that you were impregnating me with your seed?”

“How did you know that?”

“Because, my wonderful alpha lover, that's exactly what I was fantasizing too!”

Conner took my head in his hands and gently kissed me.

“Of all of it, that's the part I wish were real.”

“Trust me, when God wants us to have children, we'll find them. And it will not be a struggle. It will be very easy, because it's God's will.”

He gave me one of his piercing stares—the kind that felt like he was looking down into the very depths of my soul.

“Do you really believe that?”

“With all my heart.”

“Well...I'm not sure that I can, but I utterly and totally believe in you. Is that enough?”

“Yes, love. That's enough.”

And with that, I turned over so that Conner's body was spooned to mine, and wrapped in his warm, muscular arms, surrounded by the scents of his body and our lovemaking, I drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The days until Saturday seemed to fly by. Before I knew it, Conner and I were busy fixing dinner awaiting the arrival of Tony and Debbie. I was nervous. It was one thing talking about this to Vince and Drew, who were gay and who understood clearly what Conner and I were going through. I could remember Tony and Debbie's wedding. It was a huge family celebration. Of course, their marriage was not unexpected. They had gone out with each other for a very long time. A relationship that was fully supported by both sets of parents, something that Vince and Drew did not experience and I doubted whether Conner and I would.

“Here, have a glass of wine.” Conner handed me a glass of Chianti. “Maybe it will help you calm down.”

“I'm sorry. I'm very nervous about tonight.”

“What are you nervous about? This is your brother. He already knows about Vince, doesn't he?”

“Of course he does. He was at the wedding.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“I'm afraid they won't be able to understand.”

“Why not? What are they, aliens?”

“No, of course not. But they are straight. They have no idea what it's like to grow up gay.”

“That's complete nonsense.”

“No, it's not. They have no idea what it's like to have to hide who and what you are from everybody. They got to go out on dates. With their parents' knowledge. And they got married in a huge church wedding that I'm betting both families went into debt for. Can you see that ever happening for us?”

“No, I honestly can't. But that doesn't mean they can't be sympathetic to what we're going through. Actually, what you're going through. This whole family thing is way more important to you than it is to me.”

“Oh, really? Then tell me this, if it weren't all that important, why have you never gotten around to telling your grandparents?”

“Because, quite frankly, I never considered it any of their business.”

“And just exactly how did you explain it to them when Steve left you all that money? Surely they must've wondered about someone who's only your *friend* leaving you an inheritance like that?”

“For your information, they never said anything about it. Didn't ask any questions at all.”

“And does that really make any sense to you? Come on. You're the detective. If the child you raised suddenly came up with an inheritance of fifty million dollars, wouldn't you be even the least bit suspicious about how that came about? Especially since it was another guy? I'll tell you what I think. I think they've already figured it out and are just waiting for you to tell them. Maybe that's why they didn't have any questions.”

“So what about you? Are you so sure that your parents don't know?”

“Unfortunately I am. That's the one protection that damn dog collar gave me. Even if they thought for one minute that I was gay, what did it matter? Supposedly I couldn't do anything about it. Now I've blown that all to hell.”

Conner walked over and took me in his arms, pressing my face with one of his hands into his chest.

“Stop this! Stop this right now! Now I get it. Now I know what you're really scared of. And no matter what your fear is telling you, you are not going to lose all of your family's love, nor mine, and end up alone. And fighting with me isn't going to help anything. It's not going to make it better.” Conner held on to me tight as he growled at me. And I knew immediately he had hit the nail on the head. He had every right to growl at me.

The next thing I knew, I was breaking down crying in Conner's arms while he gently stroked my head.

“Come on, babe. I'm telling you, it's all going to work out. Even if we're the only two people in that chapel with Mary Catherine, I thought that was what was important. The two of us saying those vows to each other.”

“Yeah. That's all we really need.”

“Now stop acting like one of those bridezillas on TV. I'm beginning to think you do have a wedding gown stashed away somewhere, and you want to make sure that everybody gets to see it.”

I would've slapped him, but I started laughing, just like I'm sure he'd intended.

“Go upstairs and wash your face so your brother and sister-in-law can't tell you been crying and start thinking I beat you or something,” Conner said, turning me around and gently pushing me toward the stairs. I stopped at the foot of them and looked back at Conner.

“I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to say those things about your grandparents.”

“It's okay. To be honest with you, I've wondered that myself.”

An hour later, after I had washed my face and had a couple glasses of Chianti to calm me down, Tony and Debbie rang the doorbell. I went and answered it.

“Hey, Bro! Long time no see!” Tony wrapped me in a huge bear hug.

“Yes, David, how are you doing?” Debbie asked, giving me a more-gentle hug.

I took her hands from around my neck and stepped back, spreading them while looking at her huge baby bump. "I think the question should be how are *you* doing?"

"About as well as any woman who is eight and a half months pregnant."

"Is what Vince tells me true, that it's going to be a girl?" I asked.

"Well...she's carrying different than either of the boys, high rather than low, so I have my fingers crossed. It would be nice to have a little girl to raise after the boys."

I turned to Tony and asked, "Well, Bro, have you bought the shotgun yet?"

"What shotgun?" Tony looked at me like I'd lost my marbles.

"You know, the one you meet all the horny teenage boys at the doorway with when they come to take her out on a date." I grinned at him.

"I haven't even thought that far."

"Better get on the stick, Bro. She'll be dating before you know it."

I could see Tony looking around the town house. "Really nice digs, Bro!"

Before I could say thank you, Debbie reached over and slugged Tony in the arm, giving him a dirty look as she did. I could not figure out what that was all about until a few moments later when I said, "Yes, it is a very nice house. But of course it's not mine. Let me introduce both of you to Conner McMahon."

Conner, who had been in the kitchen, came out as I introduced him. He went up to Tony and stuck out his hand. But Tony brushed it away and gave Conner a bear hug as well.

"You'll find out that in this family we don't shake hands. We're Italians, and Italians hug. And since, from what my wife tells me, you're going to be a part of the family, you might as well get used to it."

Then Tony did the oddest thing. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed Debbie a twenty-dollar bill. He then looked at me and said, "Never bet with your wife."

I would've laughed, but I was much too curious about one thing. "Debbie, how did you know? I didn't say anything."

Debbie walked over to me and gently put her hands on my face. "Oh, David. Haven't you ever heard of women's intuition? It was easy to tell. You sounded happier on the phone than I

had ever heard you, and it sounded like the time you called to tell us about Vince and Drew's wedding.”

“This time I really hope you can come to ours when we have it. We all missed you and the boys that day.”

“Don't worry, if the kids get sick this time, I'll just stick them in the hospital for the day. I am not going to miss another wedding. Tony isn't exactly the best reporter of what happens at social gatherings.”

“He told you that I married them on the wrestling mats in the middle of the circle, right? I thought it highly appropriate.”

“Yes, he did tell me about that. But not much else, other than the fact that he'd met Drew's brother and his lover. I got to meet them when Drew went in for surgery.”

“See! I told you everything,” Tony insisted.

“And he told you about the forty gorgeous, muscular wrestlers—every one of Drew's teammates—who came to the ceremony dressed in their singlets?”

“*No!* He conveniently left that part out,” Debbie said, giving Tony the evil eye.

“Bro, don't you remember the seal of the confessional?”

I looked at Tony. “Yes, I remember it. Just like I also remember how many times my brothers have been to me for confession—the total number now standing at *zero!*”

“Okay, before this gets nasty, dinner is ready. Let's go sit down,” Conner interrupted.

We sat down at the dining-room table, which was made for six. Tony and Debbie sat side by side on one side of the table, while Conner and I sat next to each other on the other side. As Conner began to bring out the dishes, Tony and Debbie were suitably impressed. Especially Debbie, who asked Conner for the recipes to a couple of the dishes.

“I'd be more than happy to comply, but you see, I don't have recipes for them. They are things I learned to cook by watching my grandmother. If you're willing to write them down, I can tell you how they're made.”

“Conner lost his parents in an automobile accident when he was eight. He was raised by his father's parents,” I said to Debbie.

“Conner, what do you do for a living?” Tony asked.

"I'm a detective with the Metropolitan Police Department. That's how David and I met."

"What did you have to arrest him for?" Tony asked, and Conner and I broke up laughing.

"Actually, I went to the shelter to interview one of the residents who we thought had crucial information in a homicide."

"So how did you finally break 'The Pope' out of his shell?"

"I went and got myself shot three times. While I'm lying in my hospital bed, I suddenly felt somebody playing with my feet. David's excuse was he was giving me last rites. I just figured he was kinky!" This time Tony, Debbie, and Conner laughed.

"So, Bro, I take it you've left the church. What are you going to do now?" Tony asked.

"I joined the Episcopal Church. I did it so that I could still remain a priest but still marry Conner. Conner and I are in the process of rehabbing a building that the diocese owns, turning it into a full-service shelter for homeless vets," I explained.

"So I take it that your bishop knows you are gay?" Debbie asked.

"You'll get to meet him and his wife. They're coming to the wedding," I said.

"David, this is absolutely wonderful! I am so happy for you," Debbie said.

"See! I kept my promise—no bad news." I chuckled.

"Yeah, Bro. This sounds really great. I don't have to ask if you're happy. It's written all over your face," Tony said.

"And we don't have to ask if you two are in love. I've seen the looks that you give each other, and I've only seen those between two other people—Vince and Drew. I promise you, every wife in the world would give anything to see that kind of love in the eyes of their husbands."

"You, dear heart, don't have to wish for that. I can see those looks in Tony's eyes every time he looks at you. You are, indeed, a very lucky woman," Conner said, gently and quietly.

Debbie blushed. I could see her eyes getting moist.

"Conner, I beg to differ with you. Debbie is not the lucky one. I am. Ever since she first told me that she loved me. I was over the moon, because I'd already figured out that I could not live without her," Tony said.

"My God, Bro! When did you become a poet? That was utterly beautiful."

“Thank you, Bro. I try to be a loving husband.” It was Tony's turn to blush.

“And you do a wonderful job of it.” Debbie put her hand on Tony's arm.

“So when is the big day?” Tony asked.

“We're going to do it on Saturday evening, the first of August. In a beautiful chapel in All Saints Cathedral. That's the Episcopal cathedral downtown,” I answered.

“What about the honeymoon? Where is that going to be?” Tony asked with a leering grin.

“The honeymoon, what little there will be of it, will be right here at home,” Conner said.

“That's a shame. You guys deserve a real honeymoon. After all, all the straight couples get them. Can't you work it out somehow?”

“I really wish I could, but after having been out already for so long months, I don't have enough leave accumulated to do it. Plus, summer is a very busy time for us. It seems like the heat makes people do stupid things.”

Looking at me, Tony asked the question I had been dreading. “Bro, have you told Mama and Papa yet?”

“No. They're next on the list, but I'm really afraid. You saw the fit Mama threw over Vince, and all he was doing was marrying another guy.”

“But that's what you're doing. What's different about it?” Tony asked.

“What's different is that I'm not just marrying Conner. I left the Roman Catholic Church in order to do it. That's huge. I'll bet I can say to them 'I'm getting married to another guy. Oh, and I'm leaving the church,' and they wouldn't even hear the part about me getting married.”

“I guess you're right. They are pretty old and set in their ways,” Tony agreed.

“And Mama is really going to hate me, because Vince and Drew are converting as well because they don't want to baptize Andy in the Catholic Church. Can you imagine what the church will tell Andy about his two fathers?”

Tony and Debbie looked at each other, and I could see something passed between them, but I had no idea what until Debbie dropped a bomb into the middle of the conversation.

“For the last year or so, we've been going around looking at other churches whose teachings are more in line with what we believe and what we want our children to believe. The

church we found that we were most comfortable with is a church called St. James-in-the-Hills. It's an Episcopal church not far from the house," Debbie said.

"Yeah, Bro. When we looked at how the church treated Vince and Gina, we realized that we could no longer stay a part of an institution that believes the things they do. We put off a final decision because we were afraid of what Mama would say."

"Oh, God! Well, I guess I'm going to get blamed for that one too." I groaned.

"No, you're not, Bro. I'm going to tell Mama that this is what we are going to do, and she has no say in it. And if she doesn't like it, then I guess she's not interested in seeing her grandchildren anymore. And that goes if she comments on you and Conner and your leaving the church, as well."

"Vince already told us that he's going to say the same thing to Mama about Andy," I said.

"Good! That makes it unanimous."

"But why, Tony? You're not gay. This isn't your fight," I said.

"I'm not, huh? And just exactly how do you know that?" Tony said.

"Well, for one thing, I'm sitting here looking at your very pregnant wife."

"Bro, you know that Pete, my partner, is gay. We've been friends since grade school. When we were about thirteen to fifteen, I used to have a lot of sleepovers at his house. Do you remember them?"

"Yes, I remember them."

"Debbie already knows this because I told her a long time ago. During those sleepovers, Pete and I did a lot of sexual experimenting. Pete learned to be a really good cocksucker. No offense meant."

"None taken," Conner and I said, almost simultaneously.

"Well, anyway, I sure loved it. There I was, a horny teenager with a cock that was hard 24-7, and my best friend was more than eager to take care of it for me literally anytime I asked him. But I learned something else, even though it was fun, and even though I got my rocks off, there was always something missing. I didn't know what it was until I met Debbie. I fell in love with her almost the first second I saw her. And I've been totally in love with her ever since. I have to admit it was very difficult at first for Pete and I to remain friends. But he began to meet other

guys, and things were good between us. We went back to being friends, just friends with no benefits. If you get my drift.”

“Tony, Bro, you make me very ashamed of myself. I cut you and Vince out of my life because I was afraid to let you know the truth. And you sit here, in front of your *wife*, and bare your soul to me. I need to tell you that I love you and I'm sorry, so very sorry, for pushing you away the way that I did,” I said with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes.

Tony got up out of his chair and came over to me. He took my hands and pulled me up until I was standing. Then he reached his arms around me and gave me one of the most tender and loving hugs I've ever had. He followed this by kissing me gently on both cheeks just the way Papa does. I clung to him, the tears pouring out of my eyes, and just like Conner, Tony gently stroked my head until I got myself back under control.

“You okay, Bro?”

“I will be.”

“Bro, you've got to know that I love you, and nothing in the world can ever change that.”

“It's not only the heat that makes people stupid. Fear does the same thing. I was so afraid of losing you and Vince that I pushed you out of my life. I promise, I will never do that again. It hurts too much.”

Tony let go of me, and Conner reached out and grabbed my hand and pulled me down into his lap, locking his warm arms around me while he gently kissed the back of my neck.

“That was so beautiful. I thank God I was here to see it. You know, there is one thing that I've never seen and always wanted to,” Debbie said.

“What's that?” I asked.

“I've never seen two guys kiss for real. For some reason Vince and Drew never kiss while I'm around. I think they are shy because I'm a female.”

“Well, we can fix that!” Conner moved so that we could kiss.

His lips approached mine, and I suddenly found myself being kissed very passionately. Of course, my natural reaction was to return the passion. When Conner kisses me like this, all thoughts of anything or anyone leave my head, and I am lost to anything except for the feel of his lips and tongue and the taste of him.

I'm not sure, exactly, how long the kiss lasted, but when Conner finally pulled back, I saw Tony and Debbie staring at us in what looked like awe.

Debbie was the first to speak. "That was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. It surprised me, though. I thought that because it was two males, it would be rougher or more savage in some way."

Thinking about our "wolf play," I chuckled. Debbie looked at me strangely. I said to her, "Believe me. It can be at times, but you will never see those times."

"That's okay. It's not my desire to intrude."

"Bro, I've seen Vince and Drew kiss. What I saw made me realize how deeply in love they were. The two of you have just given me the exact same realization."

Debbie looked at her watch and said, "This has been a wonderful visit, and we really have to do it again. Often. But we need to get going. Tony has still got to drive the babysitter home."

"Thanks for having us, guys. The dinner was wonderful. Next time at our house. Vince and David need to meet their new uncle Conner."

"We promise it will be soon. I have enjoyed this evening immensely. And I mean *all* of this evening," I said.

We all hugged and kissed each other, and then Tony took Debbie's arm and walked her to their car. Conner and I stood on the front stoop and waved as they drove away.

Conner put his arms around me. "Are you happy now? I hate to say *I told you so*, but things went way better than you thought they would, right?"

"Yes. They did. But it kind of blew me away when Tony admitted that he had sex with another guy. That never even entered my mind."

"That's what makes predictions almost impossible to make about people. Even if you live and sleep with them."

"I guess you're right."

"Are you ready for bed?"

"I'm not really sleepy."

"Who the fuck said anything about sleep?" Conner turned me around, threw me over his shoulder, and carried me back into the house.

Chapter Eighteen

The next day was one of the most wonderful days of my life. Conner and I woke up, both of us hard, and even though we had fucked most of the night, we still wanted each other desperately. I suppose my horniness somehow connected with my new feeling of freedom now that I had told both of my brothers.

When Conner and I thought we had exhausted our morning horniness, we got into the shower, only to discover that the combination of nudity and hot water reawakened our desires for each other. I found myself up against the tiles being fucked rapidly and thoroughly by Conner, who clung to my shoulders and kissed the back of my neck while we both tried to get our breath back. We then proceeded to tenderly and thoroughly wash each other.

After we were dressed, we went downstairs and made breakfast together. Then it was time to head for the cathedral for the eleven-o'clock service where I would for the first time face the bulk of the congregation of the cathedral. But I would not face them alone. Since our joint conversion to the Episcopal Church, Conner no longer sat in the back of the church. Instead he had moved forward to the front row just below the pulpit, where I could look at him and feel the love and support coming from him every Sunday.

The service was much longer than I was used to, because I was not used to having a choir, not that I didn't like it. In fact, I found myself enthralled by them. They sang a beautiful introit based on the Old Testament verse beloved of many gay men and women. It is the verse in which Ruth says to Naomi, "Whither thou goest I will go and thy people shall be my people and your God my God." It felt like a welcome, since it was well-known by the staff of the cathedral that I was gay.

When it came time for me to read the gospel and preach the sermon, the bishop rose from his seat beside the altar and formally introduced me to the congregation. He told them some of my background in the Roman Church as well as some of what my duties would entail now that I

was part of the cathedral staff. He did one other thing that almost gave me a heart attack. He also introduced Conner to the congregation as my life partner and announced that the next month we would be married in the chapel. What happened next completely blew me away. The entire congregation, several hundred people, stood and applauded at this announcement. It was the first time in my life that I stood at the altar with tears streaming down my face.

After the service was over, I *and* Conner—at the bishop's insistence—stood at the back of the church and greeted all the members of the congregation. I was shocked because I got to see a side of Conner that I had never seen before. Conner was never one for any type of formality. Yet he stood there and very graciously greeted each person and accepted their congratulations on our coming nuptials. When I had unvested, I went back out into the cathedral and found Conner, at the Communion rail, actually kneeling in prayer. I quietly knelt down beside him, bowed my head, and thanked God for sending this wonderful man to me.

Conner finally raised his head and reached over and ran his hand up my back until his arm was resting across my shoulders.

“Come on, babe. Let's get out of here. We've got a long way to travel this afternoon.”

“Where are we going?”

“How about I let you know when we get there?”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly. “Could we do one thing first?”

“What's that?”

“Could we stop by the house so I can change out of these clerical clothes and into something more comfortable?”

“I'd already intended to do that.”

We left the cathedral and returned home, where I quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a really nice turquoise T-shirt that I found in Conner's drawer. I had decided that he was right; I didn't have to wear black all the time.

We drove out of town into the more-rural areas that surrounded it. After about half an hour, Conner stopped at a diner in a small town. We went in and had lunch, which was all homemade and quite delicious. When we got back into the car, Conner continued on the road rather than going back to the city. I had the feeling that where we were heading was to Conner's grandparents' farm, where he was raised.

We drove along the two-lane road for several hours. During that time, the only words that passed from Conner's lips was his telling me how beautiful the service was and how much he liked my sermon. We laughed about the bishop announcing our wedding, and we both said how moved we were by the standing ovation from the congregation. I also told Conner about my reaction of shock when the bishop introduced him.

"I saw the look on your face. It was then I realized that you had no idea that he was going to do that."

"No, I had no idea whatever. I take it you're not angry?"

"No, it was no big deal. After all, I'm out where I work, and now I'm out where you work." Conner laughed.

"I'm so glad you feel that way. And I must compliment you on how you handled greeting the congregation after the Eucharist. I'd never seen that side of you before."

"Just because I don't like all that formal crap doesn't mean I can't do it when I need to. And I needed to today because it was for you."

I wrapped my arm around his and leaned over and rested my head against his upper arm.

"Thank you. That was probably the most loving thing that anyone has ever done for me."

That ended the conversation, and for a while I fell asleep leaning against him. I woke up with my head against his chest and his arm around me. What had woken me up was Conner slowing down to make a turn through the gates of a farm. I noticed the mailbox at the roadside. It was white with red letters emblazoned on it. The name said *McMahon*.

"Oh good. I had hoped we were going to your grandparents' farm."

"Well, do you remember what you said last night when you had your little meltdown?"

"Please. Don't remind me. I'm still terribly sorry for some of the things I said."

"One of them you were absolutely right about. If what I am is no big deal, then I do need to tell them. And I want you with me, I guess, for moral support as well as the fact that I want them to meet you."

"How do you think they are going to take it?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't have the faintest idea. I don't want to lose them, but at the same time, I'm not going to change for them."

From there, we drove up to a rather-large Victorian farmhouse painted white with bright blue shutters on the windows and the same color for the trim. Conner stopped the car in front of the front steps. I saw an elderly woman stand up from one of the rocking chairs on the porch. She came hurrying down the steps, and Conner hugged her, nearly picking her up off the ground. I slowly got out of the car, and I saw her look at me with curiosity written all over her face.

“Grandma, I want you to meet David.” Conner waved me over with his hand.

I approached the two of them and, not knowing what else to do, stuck out my hand to shake hands with her.

“Oh, for land's sake, child! We're not all that formal around here.” And with this, she pushed my hand away, stepped in, and hugged me just the way she had Conner.

I looked at him, over her shoulder, questioningly. He just smiled at me and nodded.

After she let me go, Conner walked over and put his arm around her. “Grandma, you remember my buddy Steve?”

“Of course I do. I also remember how torn apart you were when he died.”

“Grandma, I never told you the truth about Steve and me. We were in love with each other the way I guess you hoped that I'd fall in love with a girl.”

“Honey, we knew that. All the noise you two used to make up in your room left no doubt. But even without that, just the way you two looked at each other was enough. I may be old, but I can still tell when somebody looks at somebody else with love in their eyes. The same look, if I'm not mistaken, that I see in David's eyes right now.”

For the first time, Conner and I blushed at the same time.

“Now don't go getting embarrassed. I'm so happy that you finally found someone. The way you came back from the Marine Corps after Steve's death had both me and your grandpa very worried.”

“But you never said anything.”

“Neither did you. We figured you'd talk about it when you were ready, but you never did, and then you went off to the city to go to the police academy.”

“I was afraid that you and Grandpa would be ashamed of me.”

“Ashamed of you? What for? Because you fell in love with another boy? The way I see it, God makes some people one way and some people another, and it ain't my place to condemn somebody for being what God made them. Besides, when you came to us after your mama and daddy died, your grandpa and I decided that after all the pain you had in your life, all we wanted for you was to be happy. So are you happy?”

Conner got this huge grin on his face. “Grandma, I'm happier than I've been in my whole life.”

“Yes, child, I can see that you are. All the hurt and loneliness have gone out of your eyes.”

“Where is Grandpa?”

“Where you think he is? Where is he always?”

“Down in the barn.”

“You got it in one. He's down there working on that darned tractor again. Seems like that thing is always breaking down.”

“I told him to buy a new one and that I'd pay for it.”

“He feels like you've done enough for us.”

“I can never do enough for you. If it hadn't been for you taking me in, I don't know what would have happened to me.”

“Of course we took you in. You're the son of my son. Of course we were going to raise you. That's what family does. It was no hardship, particularly getting to see you grow up into such a fine man who looks so much like your daddy that when I see you, for just a second, I forget it's you, and I think it's your daddy come back to me.” With this, she lifted the edge of her floral print apron and dabbed at her eyes.

Conner reached out and took her in his arms again. “Please don't cry. I want us all to be happy.”

Conner's grandmother gently pushed him away. “You two go on now. Down to the barn with you. Your grandpa is going to be so happy to see you. You are staying for dinner, aren't you?”

“Are you kidding? I've been raving to David about what a great cook you are. Of course we're staying for dinner. Come on, David. Let's head down to the barn so you can meet my grandpa. We'll be up later, Grandma.”

As we walked around the side of the house and toward the barn, Conner put his arm around my shoulders.

“That went really well,” I said.

“Yeah, it did. But I still want to see how Grandpa's going to handle it.”

“But it looks like, from what your grandmother said, they've already talked about this.”

“Grandma pretty much likes to get her own way. And sometimes, in their discussions, Grandpa lets her win by keeping quiet, holding his real thoughts to himself.”

We finally reached the barn and went inside. If it'd ever held animals, it was many years ago. All I could smell was the scent of hay and grass. There was a large tractor with a man with broad shoulders bent over inside the engine, cussing a blue streak.

“You goddamned, motherfucking piece of crap!” He stood up and threw a wrench at the engine.

“Now you ain't supposed to cuss on Sunday,” Conner said.

He turned around and looked at Conner and me standing there. “Boy! I'll cuss any damn day I please!”

“Yeah, as long as Grandma doesn't hear it.” Conner grinned.

His grandfather walked toward us. He and Conner hugged while slapping each other on the back. Then his grandfather took Conner's shoulders in his huge hands and pulled back to look at him.

“So you finally found your way home? And looking more like your daddy every time I see you. So what brings you back?”

“Grandpa, I want you to meet David. David and I are together just like Steve and I used to be.”

Conner's grandfather looked me up and down and then said, “You sure you want to put up with this stubborn pain in the ass?”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Ahh, damn! Well, you sure can't be blinded by his charm, because he ain't got any.”

“No, sir. I'm not blinded at all. I love him more than I have words to say.”

“Yeah, I figured it be something like that. Is he treating you all right?”

“Better than I've ever been treated in my life.”

“Before you ask, he takes very good care of me. I got into a shoot-out a while ago, and David came to live with me to take care of me while I healed.”

“You've got to be more careful, boy. No matter what you think, you ain't no damn Superman. Bullets ain't going to bounce off you.”

“I know, Grandpa. I'm being more careful, especially now that I have David.”

His grandfather looked at me. “You must be a good influence on him.”

At this, Conner started laughing uproariously, and I stood there blushing. Conner's grandfather looked at him and then at me and then once again at Conner. Conner was laughing so hard, he had tears running out of his eyes.

“What the hell is the matter with you, boy? What's so damn funny?”

Conner finally came to himself and stopped laughing. “Grandpa, ask David what he does for a living.”

Conner's grandfather stared, questioningly.

“I'm a priest,” I said quietly.

“Holy sh—! Well, you done stepped into a mess of shit this time, boy!”

“I should explain. I'm not a Roman Catholic priest, even though I used to be. I'm an Episcopal priest now.”

“Well, I'll be damned. My ornery grandson goes out and, of all people, falls in love with a priest.” Conner's grandfather shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“Grandpa, you don't understand. David works with homeless vets, guys who are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan and their brains are all screwed up. They can't go home to their families, and they end up living on the street. People David works with take them in, and David sits down and talks to them, and he gives them hope that they haven't had for a long time. He makes sure that they get the best care, and he also gets the family involved so that the guys heal faster.”

Conner's grandfather scowled. "Ain't the federal government supposed to do that for them boys?"

"Yes, they are *supposed to*, but that doesn't mean they actually do. Congress has been cutting funds for treating wounded veterans almost since the start of the war. You must've heard what happened at Walter Reed hospital. The military's flagship hospital had veterans living in roach- and rat-infested billets across the street, while they received outpatient care there. Not only that, we're *still* dealing with the injured vets from Vietnam."

I could see Conner's grandfather getting angrier and angrier as I spoke. It was actually quite funny to watch, though I didn't dare laugh, because he looked like a thermometer. The red started at his neck and quickly moved up across his entire face.

"Fucking politicians! They send these young boys off for only God knows what reason, and when they come home hurt and injured, they don't do nothing for them! The whole lot of them should be taken out and shot for treason!"

"Grandpa, David *does* make sure those boys have somewhere to go, somewhere to sleep, and the right doctors to get the kind of help they need."

"I'll say this, my grandson has always been a hell-raiser, but as far as I know, he ain't never lied to me. Is that really what you do, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's something David's not telling you, Grandpa. The sisters told me that he always goes above and beyond if the guy needing help is a marine."

"That true, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know, Conner was a marine. The most squared-away, hell-raising marine who ever came out of Camp Lejeune. He was a marine who any marine would have been proud to call his son." This was said to me, but his grandfather's eyes never left Conner as he said it. Finally, turning to me, he asked, "Did you know I was a marine back in Korea?"

"Yes, sir, I know that. I also know that it was because of you and his father that Conner wanted to be a marine."

Conner's grandfather turned back to him with a look of shock on his face. "That true, boy?"

Conner hung his head, not meeting his grandfather's eyes. "Yes, sir. It's true."

"Young boys grow up wanting to be just like the male who has had the most intense influence on their lives. Especially the male who imparted to them the answer of how you become a man."

"He sure do talk pretty, don't he?" Conner's grandfather said to him.

"Uhh...I might have left out one thing about David. Along with everything else, he's a shrink. He does therapy with a lot of the guys that helps them deal with their issues and find ways to overcome them."

"I know what a shrink does! I may be just some old redneck ex-jarhead, but don't you go getting the idea, boy, that I'm stupid or ignorant. And even if I am, I married a real smart lady. Looks like you found someone real smart too."

"Grandpa! You know I didn't mean that. You're the man who taught me everything I know about life. There has never been a time in my life that I was unwilling to stand beside you and tell the world that I belonged to you. I was always afraid that you'd be ashamed of me, especially if you found out... Well...if you found out about..." Conner couldn't put it into words, and so he finished by pointing over to me.

"You were surrounded all your life by books on military history and tactics. If you'd read the books on history instead of constantly having your nose in the books on tactics, you might have learned something that would have prevented a lot of your pain. Boy, you ever hear of the Sacred Band of Thebes?"

"I think I heard them mentioned in a class on tactics once. I don't remember anything about them, though."

"They were probably the greatest fighting force in history. A force that could not be defeated. But there was a secret to their strength. A secret no army since has been able to copy, though the marines and the SEALs come the closest. You see, they were a force made up entirely of men who were just like you two. Pairs of men who were in love with each other. The idea was that no man would dishonor himself by cowardice in front of the man he loved. They were finally defeated by Alexander the Great, but he had to kill every one of them, to a man, to do it.

Alexander was so moved by their courage that he buried them together in a mass grave and put a monument over it that still stands there today.”

“Grandpa, why haven't you ever told me that story?”

“I meant to, but you would never tell me you were gay. I figured telling that to you might upset you. Might cause you to deny it all the harder and make it more difficult to come to terms with who you are.”

“That reminds me of what happened this morning. Because I had never officiated at the big eleven-o'clock service at the cathedral, the bishop introduced me to the congregation and then introduced Conner as my partner and our upcoming marriage. So Conner stood at the back of church with me and greeted the whole congregation—one by one. Because he knew it was important for me, he was more gracious than I had ever seen him be to strangers. He hates situations like that, but he made it into a generous and loving act. He was not going to see me fail, nor fail in front of me.”

“Son, let me tell you a little secret. It ain't easy to get a marine to love you, much less ever tell you that he does, but once he does, there is no more loyal or dependable man in this world. And on that note, we best be getting up to the house, before your grandma comes down here looking for us—then all hell will break loose.” We all laughed and started walking up to the house. Conner's grandpa turned to me.

“What's this you said about you and Conner getting *married*?”

“With the bishop's permission, the Episcopal church is starting to perform marriages for people of the same gender. Males to males and females to females. One of the reasons we came to see you was to invite the both of you to our wedding.”

“I don't think I missed it, but I don't think gay marriage is legal in this state,” Conner's grandpa said.

“It's not a legal wedding. It's a religious one. It allows Conner and I to vow our love before God and our families,” I explained.

“Boy, do you want me there for this wedding?”

“More than anything, Grandpa. I want you and Grandma both there,” Conner pleaded.

“I quit making plans without talking to her about it first a long time ago. You want her there, then you're going to have to ask her yourself, boy.”

“Don't worry, Grandpa. I intend to.”

Dinner that night was wonderful. Conner brought to the table one of the biggest slabs of corned beef I've ever seen in my life. This was accompanied by not just cabbage but all kinds of fresh vegetables that I assumed were grown somewhere on the farm. They insisted that Conner and I sit together next to each other just like the couple that we were. I could see the incredible smile on Conner's face when this happened. I don't think he had any idea that his grandparents would accept the two of us so easily.

The conversation was mostly about us. We told Conner's grandmother about my being a priest and the story of how we came to be together.

“David. You took care of him after he was injured and nursed him back to health?” Conner's grandmother asked me.

“Yes, ma'am. I did.”

“Child, does this church of yours have saints?”

“There are three types of Catholicism in the world. Roman, the Orthodox, and the Anglican. I'm part of the last one. And they all have saints.”

“Then you, child, should be nominated to be one. Males are the most cantankerous and ornery patients in the world. I used to be a nurse, and I hated dealing with male patients most of the time. Especially young ones. The ones who still had their head up their butts. About the only males I ever really liked nursing were the ones who were homosexual. They didn't try to get up your skirt, and I found that most of them were very kind and very polite,” she said.

Conner leaned over and murmured in my ear, “Grandma was a nurse during the Korean War and saved a lot of marine and GI lives. She's got this huge box of letters from them thanking her. I doubt you'll ever see it, though. She doesn't like to blow her own horn. But somewhere in that box of letters I found the Silver Star she was awarded.”

“The boys have something they want to ask you,” Conner's grandpa said, looking right at him.

“Yes, Grandma. David and I are getting married next month in a chapel in the cathedral. We both would love it if you and Grandpa would come.”

“I take it that this is part of the Episcopal Church's new attempts to integrate their gay members into the life of the church?”

I sat there looking at her in shock. “Yes, that's exactly what it is.”

“Don't look so surprised, child. I may be old, I may live out in the country, but I learned to read when you weren't even a gleam in your daddy's eye. And there is no way on God's green earth that I am going to miss my grandson's only wedding. It will be the *only* one, won't it?” She looked at Conner.

“Oh yes, ma'am! The one and only. God has blessed me with two wonderful men in my life who loved me unconditionally. There is no way that I can walk away from David's love. That would be like trying to give up breathing,” Conner assured her.

Turning to me, Conner's grandmother asked, “What about you, child? Have you ever been in love before? And even though I see what a good man my grandson is, for the most part he hides his light under a bushel. So how did you end up falling in love with him?”

“I'll be honest with you. The first time I met him, I didn't really like him all that much. He was pushy and arrogant, or at least I thought so. But the longer I knew him, he just kind of grew on me, which caused me no end of problems and soul-searching. I was a Roman priest. I wasn't supposed to have those feelings for anyone—much less another male. That part of me I kept well hidden since I was thirteen. The more I felt for him, the more scared I became, because I knew that he was going to totally disrupt my world. And he did. But he did it by forcing me to face the lies I told myself and the walls I had built around me. I knew on the the morning that I went to the hospital and saw him lying there with tubes and wires coming out of him everywhere. I realized then what a dangerous profession he was in, and what would I do if I lost him? Especially if I lost him without ever letting him know how I really felt.”

“He's still got the same job. How are you going to deal with it?” Conner's grandmother asked.

“By taking things the way we have for the few months. One day at a time. I love him more than I can say, but I only have enough love to love him for one day. Then, if I'm given another day, that love fills back up, and I give him all the love I have in that day as well,” I tried to explain to her.

“Yes, I can see that you really are a priest. It's strange to find wisdom in one so young. I love my grandson, but I know he can be a difficult man to deal with at times. For him to get

someone like you to fall in love with him means he let down his defenses and you got to see all the wonderful things about him that I see.”

“Believe me, I’m not all that easy to deal with at times either. Luckily so far, we haven’t both had ‘one of those days’ on the same day.”

And this caused Conner’s grandmother and me to laugh together. Soon after dinner, Conner told me that we had to leave because he had to work in the morning. We said good-bye to his grandparents, each of us hugging them and promising to return more often.

On the way home, I just sat there quietly letting Conner drive, worrying about the next visit we needed to make to my parents. I doubted sincerely if that meeting would go as well as this one had. Finally, after we had driven for about an hour, Conner turned to me.

“What’s wrong? Is it something about my grandparents?”

“Oh God no! I loved them. I really do want to see them again. They are just wonderful people.”

“Then what’s wrong? When you’re this silent, there’s a problem somewhere.”

“I was just sitting here thinking about my parents. I’m afraid that our visit there is not going to be as nice.”

“What were you telling my grandma about living one day at a time? Don’t go borrowing trouble; it will come soon enough.”

“I’ll bet you learned that saying from her.”

“Everything I know about being a man, I learned from Grandpa. Everything I know about living and loving, I learned from her.”

“This must’ve been very scary for you. I get it now. You always talked about them in such an offhanded way that it seemed you didn’t care all that much about them. Now I understand that you do that as a type of emotional protection, to keep people from knowing where your vulnerabilities lie.”

“It’s a good thing that I’m in love with you, because nobody is allowed to know me that well.” Conner reached over and slid his hand up my thigh.

“Yeah, you know me just as well.”

“Come here.”

Conner reached out his arm, and I slid over until my head was once again leaning on his chest and Conner's hand was gently stroking my right arm. That's the way we drove the rest of the way home.

Chapter Nineteen

I was still wondering what I was going to do about Mama and Papa. I knew I should tell them, but I dreaded the confrontation I saw coming with my mother. I thought I would have more time to plan out something, but two days after we met with Conner's grandparents, my cell phone rang at the cathedral offices. It was my mother.

"David, where are you?"

"Why? I'm at work."

"No, you're not. I called the rectory, and Father Henry told me you don't live there anymore."

"Yes, that's true. I don't live there anymore. Look, Mama, I'm very busy, and this is not a discussion we should be having over the phone. I'll come by tonight and explain it all to you. How about seven o'clock?"

"You could come for dinner."

"No. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because when I come, I'm not coming alone."

"You move, you don't tell me where you are, I have to call around to find you and then you refuse to explain. David, you've always been such a good son. I don't understand any of this!" she whined.

"You will after tonight. I'll see you then."

And I hit the Disconnect button. Probably the first time I'd ever hung up on my mother. I then hit Speed Dial and called Conner at the precinct.

"McMahon."

"Conner, we've got a big problem."

“What's wrong?”

“I just got a call from my mother. She found out that I'm no longer living at the rectory and I'm not working at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that what she found out was true, but I didn't tell her anything else. I didn't want to do it over the phone. I told her that we would come over tonight at seven.”

“So you told her about me?”

“Not exactly. She wanted me to come earlier to dinner, and I told her no, because I wouldn't be coming alone.”

“How did she take that?”

“I don't know. I hung up on her.”

“Smooth move, ace. That will do well for not alienating her.”

“I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to talk over the phone, and I know her. Her tactic is to keep coming back, over and over, until she gets what she wants. And I was not about to give in to her.”

“Okay, okay. I understand. So I'll sharpen up my sword since we're meeting the Dragon Lady tonight.”

When Conner said this, I suddenly had a vision of a huge, green-scaled dragon with my mother's face. Unfortunately, this time, Conner's attempt to get me to laugh instead scared the shit out of me.

“Are you going to call your brothers?”

“No. This is not their fight. I'm grateful that they're there and that, if the worst happens, I'll still have family I can depend on.”

“Okay, I'll be home around five.”

“Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you, babe. Trust me. We'll get through this.”

“I know we will. And no matter what happens, we still have each other.”

“Yeah, we will. Now why don't you go and have a little talk with Mary Catherine about this? I think she'll be able to help.”

“That's a good idea. I wish I'd thought of it. You know something, Conner McMahon? You're a really smart guy, but then again, you're a detective.”

The “dragon” line didn't work to get me to laugh. But this one had both Conner and me chuckling.

“Listen, babe. I've got to go.”

“You go on. I'll see you at home.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And having said that, we both hung up. And I got up and headed to Mary Catherine's office. I knocked at the door, opened it slightly, and peered around it.

“Come in, David. What's wrong?”

“How do you know there's anything wrong?”

“Because you look like you're being haunted by the hounds of hell. That's why.”

“No. Just one hound.”

“Oh...Mommy, huh?”

“As usual.”

“So what happened?”

“She called me up a little while ago. Seems she called the rectory over at Our Lady of Perpetual Help and found out I don't live or work there anymore.”

“Well, you knew it was going to come out sometime.”

“Yeah, but not so soon. We just met with Conner's grandparents Sunday.”

“And how did that go?”

“Better than I could've ever dreamed possible. They are truly wonderful people—loving and supportive. The kind of people you always dream about having as parents.”

“Well, that says something very interesting. You dreamed of having different parents?”

“Yeah, I guess everybody does.”

“No, not everyone does. Usually only those with parents who are abusive in some way.”

“My mother never abused me.”

“No? You spent twenty-eight years living your life for her. Trying to deny who you are for fear of losing her approbation. She manipulates you emotionally into living with guilt and shame. What the hell would you call that? I'd call it emotional abuse.”

I was stunned. I had never looked at my relationship with Mama that way before. I'd like to say that Mary Catherine didn't understand, didn't know what she was talking about, except I knew she did.

“So? What do I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Typical shrink answer. Always answer a question with a question.”

“David, if you want to go from A to B, you have to know where B is.”

“Okay, okay. You're right.”

“So what do you want? What do you see as an acceptable outcome?”

“For her to accept my marriage to Conner, my leaving the church for him, everything.”

“Okay. How do you think you can get things to turn out that way?”

“I don't know. That's what's tearing me up.”

“Okay, let's turn around and look at it from a different way. How do you perceive your mother reacting to everything? Worst-case scenario.”

“She'll cry. She'll threaten to have nothing to do with me. I'm sure she's going to pull out all the stops.”

“Let me tell you something that may help. People who use emotional manipulation and blackmail usually are scared to death that they're about to lose something that they can't live without.”

“Are you saying that my mother can't live without me?”

“Sounds that way to me. And what that means is that you're the one who has all the power in the relationship—not her.”

“You're not saying that I should use her same tactics on her, are you?”

“No, I'm saying you need to realize that you're walking in there with all the power. You are a free and independent adult male. And that if she cannot accept you as who you really are, then you really don't need her in your life. And notice, I said 'need' not 'want.' You may want her in

your life. But if she can't accept you, you don't need her. If you had the choice between keeping her or keeping Conner, which one would you choose?"

"Conner! Hands down!"

"Why?"

"Because I love him totally and completely. I cannot live without him."

"See! Right there! You cannot live without him. Sounds like you don't just *want* Conner in your life, you *need* him in your life."

"Okay, I understand."

"Now let's talk about your vocation. Is it yours? Or is that your mother's? Are you a priest because she wanted you to be a priest, or are you a priest because *you* wanted to be a priest?"

"I honestly wish I knew. She may have manipulated me in that direction, but I love being a priest. In fact, I love being a priest more now as an Episcopalian than I ever did when I was in the Roman Church."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Because in the Episcopal Church I don't have to deny who I am. I have the freedom to love anyone I choose. And I still get to do those things, like saying the Eucharist, that I love and are so meaningful to me."

"Good answer! And I think that's been the crux of the whole problem. Your priesthood in the Roman Church represented your mother to you. Or the other way around. Your mother and the Roman Church are so intertwined in your mind that you really can't tell which is which."

"But that means, for me to be happy, I have to walk away from her just like the way I did the church."

"No, what that means is, in order to have a loving relationship with your mother, you have to untangle her from the church. See her as she really is. Just the way you want her to see you."

"Do unto others, huh?"

"Hey! What can I tell you? That old book has a lot of wisdom in it."

"Thank you."

"Has this helped?"

"More than you'll ever know."

I went home a little early that afternoon. I spent the time up in the media room listening to Bill Evans CDs—music that could not only calm me down but could usually put me in a better mood. But not that day. I was too keyed up for anyone except Conner to calm me down. I forced myself to sit down on the couch and wait. That's where Conner found me when he got home. He dropped down on the couch next to me and pulled me over into his arms.

“Rough day, babe?” He gently kissed my head.

“God! You don't know the half of it.”

“Did you go and talk to Mary Catherine like I told you to?”

“Yes, daddy. I'm a good boy. I did exactly what you told me to do.”

“Smart-ass.”

“I did talk to her. She shocked the shit out of me.”

“How in the hell did she do that?”

“She thinks that my mother has emotionally abused me all my life.”

“Damn smart lady. That's why I told you to go talk to her.”

“You think so too?”

“Babe, I don't know about abuse, but I can sure tell emotional manipulation when I see it. And you live in constant fear of her. That's not normal. That's sick.”

“You don't mince words, do you?”

“Hey! You've known that about me since the night we met.”

“Yes. I have.”

“Look, I love you. How do you think it makes me feel to see you in a constant state of panic because of her?”

“Yeah, you're right. And that's affecting our relationship. No matter what, I have to put a stop to that tonight. From what Mary Catherine told me, I actually have all the power in the relationship, because for some reason Mama needs me, but I don't need her. The only person I need is you.”

“OOH RAH!” Conner shouted.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I guess because you weren't in the corps, you've never heard the marine battle cry.”

“No, I never have.”

“Marines also use it in celebration of anything good that happens.”

“So what good has happened?”

“You finally figured out what the fuck has been going on with you and your mother.”

“Has everybody been able to see this but me?”

“Anybody who looked at it. But that's because you're too close to it. Everybody else is looking at the entire forest, but you're dealing with it tree by tree.”

“I feel like an idiot!”

“You're no idiot, babe. In fact, you're one of the smartest guys I've ever known. I worried about that at first. I thought you might get bored with me because I'm not as smart as you are.”

“Now who's the idiot! I think you have a stunningly brilliant mind. Okay, so you didn't go to college. All college does is give you a vocabulary that makes you sound smart. It doesn't guarantee you are. I know an awful lot of people who got PhDs who I wouldn't trust to come in out of the rain. I'd trust you with my life.”

“I just pray it never comes to that.”

“Remember, you're my hero.”

I've said before that the way to a man's sex drive is through his ego. And it worked again this time, because before I knew it I was on my back on the couch with Conner on top of me kissing me passionately. We both undressed very rapidly—we wanted skin-to-skin contact so badly. Conner grabbed the lube from under one of the cushions, and within minutes we were fucking like minks, or rabbits—whichever you prefer. Personally, I prefer the way Conner fucks to anything.

When we had exhausted ourselves, we got in the shower, still kissing and touching each other. It was like we couldn't get enough of each other. Eventually, it came down to the two of us standing there under the spray of water with Conner just holding me, my head against his chest. I realized that this was what I had waited for and needed so badly—just Conner holding me and me feeling so safe, secure, and loved in his arms.

By the time we got out of the shower, it was time to head to Mama and Papa's. We got dressed, Conner in a beautiful Armani suit and me in my clericals with the new full ring collar that is worn by most Episcopal priests.

On the way over, Conner held my hand the whole way. He asked me at one point if I was nervous.

"I could chew the bumper off the car."

"Hey! You leave my car alone. What did it ever do to you?"

"It scared the shit out of me every time I'm in it."

"No. That's just my driving that scares you, not the car."

"You're right. Do you think next time you could get a Sherman tank or something?"

"I'd love one. With an 80mm howitzer on top to blow away anybody who gets in my way."

And as usual, Conner cracked me up and relieved some of the tension for a little while. Unfortunately, by the time I stopped laughing, we were at my parents' house. We walked up to the door and rang the bell. Luckily it was Papa who answered the door.

"David! How wonderful to see you!" Papa said as he hugged me and kissed me on both cheeks. As he let me go, he looked at Conner.

"And who is this?"

"Papa, this is Conner. Conner is to me what Drew is to Vince."

"So, David, you've brought me home another son. Welcome!" Papa and Conner shook hands, and Papa ushered us inside.

We went into the living room, and Papa had a seat on the couch. I noticed immediately that Mama was expecting company, because the plastic cover had been taken off the couch, the only time she did that.

"So what can I get you boys to drink?"

"I'll just have some water, Papa."

"I'll have a beer, if you've got one, Mr. Colucci," Conner said.

"Now we have to put a stop to that right now. If you're going to be part of this family, then you call me 'Papa' just like everybody else."

Conner smiled at Papa and said, "Okay, then I'll have a beer, Papa."

"A man after my own heart. I've got some Samuel Adams Scotch ale. If you've never tried it, you're in for a real treat."

"Thanks, Papa. Sounds great."

Papa went off to the kitchen to get our drinks, and as soon as he left, almost if they had planned it that way, Mama appeared.

"David!" she exclaimed. "How are you?"

She also hugged and kissed me, just like Papa. Then she pulled back, although her hands were still on my shoulders, and looked at me intently.

"You had me so scared! I was expecting the worst from the way you were acting."

Then she looked at Conner.

"So, David, who's your *friend*?" She raised her eyebrow. I knew that look. She wasn't happy.

"Mama, this is Conner. My lover."

Her face immediately became cold.

"I'm happy to finally meet you, Mrs. Colucci. I've heard a great deal about you from David." He held out his hand.

I caught the sound of his voice. It was the voice I imagined he used with suspects, letting them know that he was already on to them and their games. I'm not sure that Mama realized that.

"So, David, that's a very different collar you're wearing." She looked at me, ignoring Conner and his hand.

"That's right, Mama. It's new."

At that point, Papa came back with our drinks, and then there was a knock at the door, which Papa went to answer. We could hear a lot of commotion at the door, when in walked Tony and a very pregnant Debbie, followed by Vince and Drew.

"What a surprise!" Mama smiled at them. "But why didn't you call and let us know you were coming? I could've fixed dinner for everyone."

"No, Mama. We're not here for dinner," Tony said, his voice harsher and more serious than I'd ever heard it before.

"We're here for a family meeting. Only this time, we're calling it," Vince said.

“What do you mean? What for?” Mama stammered.

“You know what for,” Tony said.

“Yeah, we are sick and tired of something, and it's going to stop today. Right now!” Vince practically shouted at her.

“What are you boys talking about?” Papa asked.

“I'll tell you what we're talking about. There's somebody sitting in this room who has been nothing but a good and obedient son. Someone who's helped all of us at one time or another. But who has had to live his life for everybody else except himself. Someone who finally has found someone who loves him not for what he does, but just for himself. Someone who has been emotionally manipulated and abused by you, Mama. Now do you know what we're talking about?”

“I've never done anything of the sort! David, have I abused you?”

“When you base your love for me on my doing only what you want, you're damned right, that's abusive!”

“Give me one example,” Mama said.

“That's very simple. Up until recently, the only reason I had for staying in the priesthood was it made you and Papa happy. That's not a vocation!” I exclaimed.

“David, I never cared if you became a priest or not,” Mama said.

“Bullshit! I was your damned ticket to heaven!” I shouted.

“David! What are you talking about?” Mama started getting defensive.

“You know damned well what I'm talking about. I was maybe twelve when you started in with how wonderful it would be if one of your sons became a priest, because if a mother has a son who becomes a priest, it guarantees her a place in heaven. Which I realize now is the biggest bunch of crap I've ever heard. But it would figure, because it came out of the Roman Catholic Church, which is nothing but crap!”

“David, how can you say something like that about the church when you're a priest?”

“Because I'm not a priest in the Roman Catholic Church anymore.”

“But if you're not a priest, why are you dressed like one?”

"Look carefully, Mama. You've already noticed the different collar. It's what priests wear in the Episcopal Church. I converted not long ago," I announced.

"Oh, David. How could you go and do something like that?" Mama said.

"Because he had no other fucking choice, Mama!" Tony cut in.

"Tony! Such language!" Mama shouted at him.

"You'd better get used to it, Mama," Vince said. "Because you seem to forget that we are all adults. We don't live by your rules or your standards. And we are sick and tired of you thinking that you can still run our lives. Well, we're not only adults, we're parents. And if you don't want to ever see your grandchildren again, just keep up what you're doing."

"What are you saying?" Mama demanded.

"You heard Vince. You have a choice, Mama. You can either accept David, for once in his life, doing what's good for him. Or we are all walking out of here, and none of us will ever return," Tony said, his voice low and menacing.

"Boys! You can't mean that," Papa said, pleadingly.

"I'm sorry, Papa. We do mean it," Tony said.

"But why?" Papa asked.

"Because we warned her once! When she tried to pull this shit on Vince. And the day before he had to go into surgery! That is one selfish bitch of a move. And now she's trying to pull it again with David. You know, Papa. Vince and I have been doing a lot of talking. And we finally figured out that Mama doesn't love us at all! She only loves who she wants us to be. Well, Mama, we sure the fuck don't love you the way you are!" Tony was practically screaming by the time he finished.

Mama sat there crying.

"Don't waste the tears anymore, Mama. We're not buying them," I said. "It's just another attempt at manipulation, and you damn well know it!"

"I can't believe after all these years that my own sons would turn on me like this!" Mama wailed.

"I warned you, time and time again, that something like this was going to happen. But you wouldn't listen. You kept meddling, you kept judging, and you brought this all on yourself," Papa said.

"So what's it going to be, Mama?" Tony asked. "There's going to be another wedding next month. David and Conner are going to be married in the Episcopal cathedral, not in somebody's backyard. Do you want to come or not?"

"You're getting married? In a church?"

"Yes, Mama, and if you come, I'll introduce you to my friend Mary Catherine, who is a priest. I'll even introduce you to my bishop and his wife, who are also coming. Not only that, you'll have a chance to meet Conner's grandparents, who raised him," I said.

"David," Mama said, coming closer until she could touch my arm. "If this is what you want, if this will make you happy, I can accept that. I have to tell you, I'm not going to convert."

"Mama, I'd never ask you to. I don't believe in doing that. However, you might be very surprised if you ever came to one of our Eucharist services at how close to what you're used to they are." I covered her hand with mine.

"Mama, don't you think it's time to let go, to let your sons be the completely wonderful, caring, honorable men who they grew up to be?" Debbie finally spoke up. "You and Papa are responsible for that. But they are grown now. You don't have to worry anymore about how they're going to turn out. If you let go, if you stop trying to control them, then you can sit back and just bask in the love your sons and your grandchildren have for you. Think about how hard it was for them to confront you this way. They must love you, or they wouldn't have bothered. They would've just walked away, and you'd never have seen them again. But no, each of them in his own way wants you to love the men they have become, to accept the choices they've made in their lives, and just be happy with that, whether you agree with those decisions or not. They have each achieved happiness, which is all any parent should wish for their child."

"But I do! I love each of you, just the way you are. Who wouldn't? Each of you have filled my heart with such joy and pride that sometimes I'm overwhelmed with it. I just sit and cry because I'm so happy."

"I'm the outsider here, and you may think that I don't know much about what's going on here," Conner said, speaking up as well. "But I have sat and watched the incredibly loving and

compassionate man who I am so blessed to love and have love me. I have watched him go completely to pieces after just a phone call from you. He is so afraid of losing your love and approval that many nights I have had to hold him in my arms as he cried. I've also met both of your sons and found them to be, as Debbie said, loving and honorable men. Men who any parent should be proud of. Men who are trustworthy enough that they should be allowed to make their own decisions in life and not have to rely on being told what to do—or else. You don't have to agree with the decisions that they make, but to threaten to remove your love and approval of them *as people* is the worst kind of emotional blackmail I know of. The one thing I keep wondering here is, do you want your sons to love you like they could, or fear you like they do now? I also wonder why you would want them to fear you in the first place.”

“But I don't! I've never wanted my children to fear me. To be honest, I had no idea that they did.”

“Now, Rose, that's not true. How many times did I warn you? How many times have I had to step in and stop you from meddling in things in their lives that had nothing to do with you? And how many times have I watched you sulk and pout for days on end because you didn't get your own way? The only reason you don't know how your sons fear you is because you turned a deaf ear to everything I tried to tell you,” Papa said sternly.

“You are all making me out to be some kind of monster. I. Am. *Not*.”

“You're not? It might interest you to know my pet name for you is the *Dragon Lady*,” I shot back.

At that, Mama looked more stricken than I had ever seen her. I almost felt sorry for her, except for the fact that this was all the truth.

“David, you hate me that much?” Mama asked, her voice so low, it was almost a whisper.

“No, Mama. I don't hate you. I hate the things you do. I hate having to walk on eggshells around you for fear I'll do something that will send you into one of those pouts that Papa talked about. I'm afraid you'll start badgering me—over and over and over again—until I do what you want just to get you to stop.”

“We're all sick and tired of that!” Tony said. “That's the problem, though. We've let you get away with it for so long that we weren't sure how to stop it. But we are, tonight, in the only way we know how. If you still want to have sons and grandchildren, it all ends now! And we

mean it, Mama. We will walk out of here, and you will never see any of us again. Because, quite frankly, we've figured out that you need us. What you need to figure out is that we don't need you. It's not that we don't want you in our lives; we don't want you in our lives the way you are now."

Mama sat there, her head and shoulders drooping down, the picture of utter defeat.

"It's a terrible thing, to find out this late in my life that everything I've tried to do out of love for all of you has, in the end, turned you all against me and made you want to be as far away from me as you can," Mama said, her voice filled with remorse for the first time.

All conversations stopped as we watched Tony and Vince help Debbie out of her chair. She walked over to Mama and gently stroked her hair. Then she took one of Mama's hands and put it on her very extended belly.

"Mama? Do you feel that?" Debbie asked.

"Yes, I do."

"That's your new granddaughter you're feeling. She's going to come into this world needing a loving and caring family around her. More importantly, as she grows, you and I are going to have to teach her how to be a woman, because you and I are the only women in the family. It's going to be hard for her, what with five uncles, two male brothers, and one male cousin or possibly more, since I know that David and Conner very much want to have children. In that ocean of males, she's going to need us desperately. But what do we want to teach her? I want her to be open, loving, compassionate, and above all, accepting of others. The only way she can learn those things is to watch us, Mama. She has to see those things in us, or she'll never develop them on her own," Debbie said, and then she gave out a low groan.

There was the sound of liquid splattering on the floor, and Debbie looked helplessly at Tony.

"I'm sorry, but my water just broke. I guess our little girl wanted some say in this, because she's coming now!"

We all sat there, stunned because none of us knew what the hell to do. However, Tony and Papa and Mama had been through this before.

Mama got up and helped Debbie into a chair while Tony pulled out his cell phone and hit his speed dial for Debbie's ob-gyn. We all then hurriedly got in cars and headed for the hospital.

It was quite a parade of us when we arrived. Orderlies and nurses surrounded Debbie, got her into a wheelchair, and led her and Tony toward the delivery room. However, almost as soon as they started to head back there, Debbie stopped them. She turned around in the wheelchair and reached out her hand, pleadingly.

“Mama! Come with me! Don't you want to see the birth of your first granddaughter?”

We all looked at Mama to see what she was going to do. I could see tears of joy running down her face as she hurried to Debbie, and then they all went to the delivery room.

Luckily, one of the nurses stayed behind and told us where the waiting room was.

So there we all sat: Papa, Conner, and me, along with Vince and Drew. At first, nobody spoke, until Drew said to Vince, “I sure like our way of having kids a lot better. No hospitals, no doctors, and no *yucky* stuff!”

All of us chuckled at that.

“Yeah,” Vince answered. “Adoption's the way to go.”

“The only problem with adoption is, first you have to find a kid to adopt,” I told them.

“Any way that you can have a child is the most wonderful thing in the world,” Papa said. “Each one of you, my own sons and the adopted sons and daughter they brought home to me, has been a total joy to my heart. Even you, Conner, who I don't know all that well yet, brings me joy, because I can see the way you look at my son and he looks at you, and I know that there is deep love and happiness between you, which is all I've ever wanted for any of you.”

No one had anything to say to that, because each of us in his own way was so moved by it. Conner later told me that the only time he had felt that kind of love had been from his grandfather—a high compliment, knowing how much he loved his grandfather.

We sat there for several hours, drinking coffee and eating candy bars out of the vending machine, not because we were really hungry, but that gave us something to do. Finally, Debbie's ob-gyn came to the waiting room and told us that Debbie had given birth to a beautiful little girl, and that mother and baby were doing just fine. Her next statement, however, shocked all of us.

“The parents have decided to name the little girl Gina Rose.” And with this, she was gone back to the maternity ward.

“Gina Rose, pretty name. But wasn't Gina your cousin who died?” Conner asked.

“In Italian families, we tend to keep names through many generations. In this case, yes, Gina was the one who died and left Little Andy, while Rose is Mama's name.”

“I wonder, did they choose that name before she was born or did something happen in the delivery room between the three of them?” Vince speculated.

At that moment, Tony and Mama came out of the maternity ward. Mama was glowing with happiness, and I could see tears in her eyes ready to spill at any moment. Tony, on the other hand, looked happy and nauseated all at the same time.

“I think we're going to stop having children. I don't think I can take this again.” Tony moaned and then quickly hurried to the men's room.

Mama stood there looking at all of us and then started talking.

“We now have the most beautiful little girl in our family. A little girl who I sincerely want to grow up knowing that she is loved, just for herself, in a loving family, where everyone treats everyone else the same way. After tonight, I understand very clearly that I am going to have to make some real changes in order for that to happen. Let me start by apologizing to David for what I've put him through. I want to welcome Conner, who must be a very wonderful man, because my David would never love anyone less.”

I stood up and walked over to Mama. She reached out her arms, and I was quickly enfolded in her loving embrace. We were both crying, and for once, I wasn't the least bit embarrassed about it. Mama finally let me go and looked over at Conner.

“Please,” she said to him. “The Dragon Lady hasn't had the chance to hug her new son.”

Conner walked over to her and leaned down and hugged her. I could see that it was a loving embrace, which I felt in my heart meant that Conner had forgiven her for the pain she had caused me.

Papa got up and walked over to her. “Rose, I think I am more proud of you tonight than I have been in all our life together.” And then Papa walked Mama out of the doors of the hospital, evidently wanting to have some time alone with her.

“I swear something happened in that delivery room!” Vince said.

“But we won't know what it is until Tony stops barfing and gets out of the bathroom.”

We had to wait several minutes for that to happen. When Tony came out of the bathroom, he was still looking pale and somewhat unsteady. We got him into a chair, and Conner went and got him a cup of water from the drinking fountain.

"Things rough in there, Bro?" I asked gently.

"God! You don't know the half of it. Debbie was in there pushing and panting and pushing and panting, but the baby just wouldn't come. They finally had to do a C-section to get her out. And lucky me, I got to see all of it."

"But Mama seemed fine," Vince said.

"Maybe it's some kind of woman's thing. But then again, it could be what happened between Debbie and Mama."

"What happened?" I asked.

"When the baby wouldn't come, Debbie told Mama that it was all her fault. That the baby had heard us all fighting and didn't want to come out into a family like that," Tony said.

"Holy fuck! Did she really say that?" Vince exclaimed.

"She sure the fuck did!" Tony insisted. "Though you've got to remember, they'd already given her the pain medication. I think if the pope himself walked in there, she would've told him to fuck off!"

We all started laughing.

"So what happened when Debbie said that?" I asked.

"Mama started crying, and she begged Debbie to forgive her. Then Debbie told her that I was the one, along with you and Vince, that she needed to apologize to. And she fucking did. Right there, in the delivery room, in front of the doctor, the nurses, and everybody, she came over and took my hand in hers and kissed it. She said that was how she used to do it when I was a baby. And then she apologized and said she was going to do everything she could to change."

"No fucking way!" Vince said.

"I'm not shitting you, Bro. That's what really happened. I just couldn't believe it. You guys may have great lovers, but I have one fucking great wife!" Tony said with immense pride.

I patted Tony on the shoulder. "You certainly do, Bro. And trust me, we all know it, and that's why we all love her."

A nurse came in and walked over to Tony.

“Your wife is in her room now, and we'll be bringing her the baby shortly. You might want to go on back now and see her.”

Tony thanked her, and I turned to Vince.

“I think you'd better go get Mama and Papa. They're going to want to be there too,” I said.

Vince got up immediately and went outside. Within a couple of minutes he came back with Mama and Papa in tow. We all went back in the maternity ward, and a nurse at the desk showed us where Debbie's room was. We all walked in, and there was Debbie in the hospital bed with her baby in her arms. It was an absolutely beautiful scene. The only one I could think of that was more beautiful was the night I saw Conner with Little Andy in his arms. We all gathered around the bed, with Tony sitting next to his wife with his arm around her. Papa was with Mama close to the head of the bed. Debbie reached out and handed Papa the baby.

“Papa, it's your first granddaughter,” Debbie said quietly.

“Thank you, thank you so much. She's beautiful,” Papa said as tears rolled down his cheeks.

He then handed the baby to Mama, who held her and made those stupid baby noises that everyone does. I was shocked when Mama turned and handed the baby to Conner. No one was more shocked than he was, from the look on his face. However, I noticed that he knew how to hold a baby. He bounced her up and down gently, and she made cooing noises at him. Conner then handed her to me.

I looked down into her face with her sleepy little eyes. “You can coo all you want to, but you can't have him. He's mine.”

Everybody cracked up laughing at this, even Mama. I then turned and handed the baby to Drew, who with his medical knowledge, had no fear of holding her either. The only one who balked at holding her was Vince. However, Drew assured him that she wouldn't break, and he finally, reluctantly took the baby in his arms. After he held her for a very short time, he handed her back to Debbie.

“There! She's bonded with each and every one of you. She now knows where she belongs. She has a family. And that family loves her.”

“Darling, you look tired after all that. We're going to go and let you get some rest. But we'll see you tomorrow at home. Papa and I will go over and pick up the boys for tonight,” Mama said to Debbie.

“Thank you, Mama. These pain meds really have me very tired.”

We all walked out, leaving Tony and Debbie alone with their new baby. We went out to our cars, and Conner and I drove home.

“Well? Do you think she's actually going to try and make changes?” Conner asked me.

“We can only hope. But she did seem sincere. I really think that all of us, including Debbie, confronting her really forced her to take a look at herself and what she's been doing. It's going to be very hard for her to just go back to business as usual,” I said.

“I knew there was a reason I liked boys better. They don't bleed every month, and they don't get pregnant.” Conner chuckled.

“Yeah, but I'm sorry about that 'don't get pregnant' part. Like I said to Vince, the problem with adoption is finding kids to adopt.”

“I don't know. I just have this feeling that it's not going to be so hard.”

Chapter Twenty

The wedding was a couple of weeks away when Conner came to me at my office one afternoon.

“I just hired a wedding planner for the wedding. He's going to take care of everything.”

“Oh my God! That's wonderful! I didn't know what the hell we were going to do. We even don't know how many people are coming and I didn't know how we were going to pull this off.”

“We've got the cathedral hall reserved, right?”

“Yes, I blocked it out on the calendar, so everything is right on track.”

“I wanted to ask you something. The wedding planner asked me about colors, and I didn't know what your favorite color was—other than black.”

“Trust me, black is not one of my favorite colors. I wear it because it's part of my profession, but that doesn't mean I like it.”

“So what is?”

“Blue—what else?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you ask a hundred men what their favorite color is, about eighty of them will say blue.”

“Good! That's my favorite color too. So I told him to use that as the main color for whatever he was going to do.”

“What about the food?”

“No problem. He's going to take care of that, as well as the flowers.”

“Well...it's going to be a very small wedding. After all it's basically going to be my family and your family, along with the bishop and his wife and maybe a few more.”

“I told him that. He says it's not a problem. Now, there's just one more thing that we have to do on our own.”

“What's that?”

“We need to go and pick out rings.”

“I didn't know if you wanted rings or not.”

“Of course I do. What's the wedding without them? I need something on my hand to remind me that I've always got you to turn to.”

“I feel exactly the same way. I want something that says I belong to you.”

“Then come on. I took the afternoon off so we can go looking.”

We looked all over town and couldn't find anything that either one of us liked. Finally, we ended up in a small jewelry store in an older part of town. The store looked like it had been there for more than fifty years.

When we walked inside, there was an older man sitting at a table behind the counter with strong lamps focused on the table as he worked. His eyes were covered by magnifying goggles, and he appeared to be working on a watch. As we walked in, he lifted the goggles off and looked up at us. He spoke as he got up from behind the table and approached the counter.

“And how can I help you gentlemen today?”

“We want to see what you have in wedding bands,” Conner said.

“Congratulations! And which one of you is getting married?”

“We both are—to each other,” I said.

“Oh! I see. I'll be honest with you. I've heard of such things, but you're the first two men I've ever met who were getting married. But it doesn't matter. Love is love, no matter where you find it. I think I have a nice selection of what you're looking for.”

He led us over to a counter and pulled out a large open velvet box with a large number of plain wedding bands of different widths. There was one wedding band, however, that caught my eye immediately. The ring was made of gold, with filigree work and raised Hebrew characters around it. I asked the man what the ring said.

“That ring is very popular with my Jewish clientele. The Hebrew is from the biblical book Song of Songs, and it says 'This is my beloved, my beloved is mine.'”

“Oh, God! I love that! What do you think, Conner?”

“If you love it, it's good enough for me. Does it come in our sizes?”

“It should. It comes, usually, in a set for the bride and groom,” the man said.

The man took our measurements and said that, while he didn't have them in stock, he could get them in a few days. Conner gave him his card with his cell phone number on it and told him to call him when he got them in. He then went on and pulled out his credit card and paid for them.

“Well, I take it you're happy?” Conner said after we left the store and were in the car heading home.

“Very. Aren't you?”

“Yes, I am. But remember what I told you. My goal in life is to make you happy. I just need to check every once in a while to make sure that I'm doing okay.”

I hooked my arm around his and leaned over so that my head was resting against his upper arm.

“You do wonderfully. But all I need to be happy is you.”

* * * * *

The wedding itself came off almost without a hitch. One problem we had was that I wanted Conner to wear his uniform. He was not happy about this, but I told him how beautiful he was in it. He finally relented, to please me. Another problem was that even though the chapel was small, it still looked very empty with just the people we had invited. The worst part was that as we waited to enter, even though Conner had announced it at work, the only police presence that we could see was him. Conner didn't say anything, but I hurt for him.

It was about three minutes before the wedding was supposed to start when all of a sudden, this sea of blue crashed in on the chapel. Conner stood with his mouth agape. “Holy shit! Every guy in my squad, the chief of detectives, and the chief of police just came in! How are we going to feed them?”

“I ordered ten extra meals just in case.”

“Good thinking!”

All the officers were wearing their uniforms, just like Conner. They sat down, all in a row, about midway down. There seemed to be some confusion among them about which side to sit on. It dawned on me they were trying to figure out which side was the groom's. They finally decided

on the right, which meant somebody knew the traditional side for the groom. Sitting there together they all looked really nice in their navy blue uniforms and polished brass.

“See! I told you to wear your uniform.”

Conner had the good taste to chuckle as well. “Okay, okay! One point to you.”

The Episcopal Church's celebration and blessing of a marriage, including the nuptial Eucharist, takes about half an hour to forty-five minutes to perform. I'll be honest and admit that there's not a whole lot that I do not remember of it. I do remember that I had a difficult time getting through the marriage vows because my voice kept breaking and my eyes were running with tears, especially when Conner, so beautiful, so handsome, made his vows to me.

We walked down the aisle of the chapel hand in hand and then led everyone to the cathedral hall. There, we stood and welcomed each person individually. Conner introduced me to all the detectives he worked with and then to his chief of detectives and the chief of police. I thanked them all for coming, because I knew how much it meant to Conner.

We partied late into the evening. The wedding planner's arrangements were incredibly beautiful. I think he used every possible shade of blue somewhere in the hall. He had also hired a band, as he promised, but I could tell Conner had more planned. I asked Conner what that was all about, but all he did was look at me and smile. I immediately knew that he had something up his sleeve, but I had no idea what—not until after dinner and several toasts to our happiness. Then the band leader went to the microphone and announced to the hall that it was time for the first dance of the two grooms.

“Dance! I don't know how to dance! It never came up before,” I said, turning to Conner.

He got up from his seat and held out his hand to me.

“All you have to do is put your arms around my neck and move your feet back and forth slowly.”

Then he pulled me out of my seat and walked me out onto the dance floor that had been made in the middle of the tables. He took me in his arms, and the band started playing the beautiful song from *West Side Story* “Somewhere.” I think I cried through the whole thing. I danced with my mother as Conner danced with his grandmother, and then we both sat down.

“Thank you for that. How did you come to pick *that* song?” I said to Conner.

“I've loved that song ever since the first time I heard it, because it made me feel that somebody understood the problems I had in loving someone,” Conner replied.

“Not anymore. I think we've found our 'Somewhere.'”

Chapter Twenty-one

After the wedding, Conner and I spent several days barely ever leaving our bed, except to eat and to make an occasional excursion into the new hot tub, where we drove each other crazy making out like teenagers. Then, unfortunately, Conner had to go back to work. It seemed that crime, especially murder, never took a holiday. I went back to work as well.

It took close to a year after the wedding, but finally the day came for the grand opening of the St. Michael's Veterans Center. Conner headed up a detachment of uniformed officers and detectives for security at the ceremony since there were many dignitaries, including the mayor, two congressmen, both of the state's senators, and the secretary of defense expected to attend, along with a large number of church dignitaries.

I couldn't believe it took a year but there had been numerous obstacles to tackle, even with Conner's financial help.

For example, as I began to plan the center, I had one problem that I could not seem to solve—sisters. The shelter I had run at Our Lady of Perpetual Help would never have been possible without the wonderful help of the Sisters of Notre Dame. I didn't know how I was going to replace them, until, one day, I mentioned the problem to Mary Catherine.

“So what's the problem? Why don't you talk to some of the Anglican religious orders? There are plenty of sisters, brothers, and priests. I'm sure you can interest some order to take on this project as part of their mission.”

“The Episcopal Church has nuns? I didn't know that.”

“While it is true that Henry VIII and Elizabeth I disbanded all of the religious houses in England following the establishment of the Church of England, religious orders began again, mostly in the 1800s. Separate religious orders came into being in the Episcopal Church at about the same time. Today there is a healthy and active community of religious orders in the Episcopal Church. Some are for men, some are for women, and there are even communities with

both men and women—some even married to each other within the order.” Mary Catherine walked over to the bookcase that filled the wall of her office and pulled down a rather-thick book, which she handed to me. “This is a directory of all the orders. I’m sure if you start contacting them, you will quickly find someone who is interested in doing that type of work that you need.”

“Well, you’ve certainly opened my eyes. Thank you so much for your help. I’ll get on this right away.”

I began contacting religious orders for women and discovered that most of them were contemplative—living lives of prayer and study within convents usually only doing missionary work outside those convents on an individual basis.

I was finally able to interest one religious community to come and help us at St. Michael’s. Those sisters were from the Congregation of St. Margaret. We were able to provide them with a nice three-story home with enough bedrooms so that each sister had her own. Downstairs, we converted the living room into a small chapel for their daily prayer. They also used the larger chapel that we built in St. Michael’s.

But the opening and Consecration of St. Michael’s was a joyous day, not just for me but for Conner as well. He was finally getting to see the fruits of the legacy left to him by his first lover, Steve. If there was any question about the need for the center, the answer lay in the fact that within four hours of the bishop’s consecrating the building, every bed in it was full. I began to think that at this rate, we could well have to look at an additional building. Since the war in Afghanistan was heating up as the war in Iraq was somewhat cooling down, I realized that the number of vets who would need our help would continue to grow. I talked to Conner that night about all of this.

“Okay, babe. What’s the problem?” he asked.

“We may need another building with more housing and facilities,” I answered.

“That’s not a problem. There’s still plenty of money. As long as it holds out, I don’t want those veterans or St. Michael’s to want for anything. Besides, you can just take what you need out of your half of the money.”

“My half? When did I get a half of the money?”

“We are married, remember? Half of everything I own or have is yours.”

I sat there stunned, just looking at him. I was having a very difficult time wrapping my mind around the idea that I was now rich. Not only rich but rich beyond belief! Conner continued eating for a while and then looked up at me and noticed that I just sat there.

"I don't know why you're surprised. We talked about the fact that we want to have the same kind of marriage that your parents and my grandparents have. That means that we share everything in our lives," Conner said.

"Well...yes...but I never thought about that."

"Then you should think about it. And while you're at it, you should think about getting a new car. That piece of shit that you're driving not only pollutes, but I don't think it's very safe either."

"Why do I get the feeling that the only thing you think would be safe is a Hummer?"

"No. I like it when you give me a 'hummer,' but I really don't think you should be driving one." Conner gave a laugh tinged with raunchiness.

"Okay, so what would you suggest?"

"You really want my suggestion?"

"Yeah. I really want your suggestion."

"I think the best thing for you would be an F-150 with an extended cab. I guarantee you, you'll get a lot of use out of it hauling around stuff for the center."

"You know, you just could be right. It does sound like the kind of vehicle that would be useful in a lot of ways."

The next day, Conner accompanied me to a dealership, and before I knew it, I was the proud owner of a new extended-cab truck. Of course Conner saw to it that I got every bell and whistle that was available, including GPS navigation so I wouldn't get lost. I fell in love with the truck the minute I got in it. I followed Conner home, and he had me park it in the big garage behind the house. I couldn't figure out, at first, what he was up to when he closed the garage door after I pulled the truck inside. I got out of the cab and watched as he lowered the tailgate and then sat down on it.

"Come here," he said quietly.

I walked to the back of the truck, and Conner patted the tailgate next to him, indicating that I should sit down with him, so I did.

“Okay. And just what exactly is going on in that devious, dirty mind of yours?”

“I'm sure that eventually you're going to get out the holy water and stuff and bless the truck, right?”

“Well, actually, I was going to ask the bishop to do it. But yeah, of course I am going to have it blessed.”

“And that's okay. But there are other ways to kind of 'christen' a new vehicle.”

“Oh? And what might those be?”

“Well, we've almost done it for the house. I don't think there's a room in it that we haven't made love in yet.”

“Oh! You think we should make love in the truck, is that it?”

“Now you've got it,” Conner said as he reached over, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me closer.

“You're wrong about the house, by the way. There is one room that we've never made love in.”

“Which one?”

“The other bedroom across from ours. I don't actually know what that room is for. Is that some kind of guest room?”

“No. Not really. I figure that would be a perfect room for the kids.”

“I see. So maybe we should go make love in there to kind of hurry the process along.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when straight couples want more children, they make love. Since we can't have children that way, if we make love in the room that we intend for the children, maybe God will get the idea of what we want and send them to us.”

“Do you really think that could work?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But it would be a whole lot more comfortable than making love in the bed of a pickup truck!”

“You know, you might just have a good idea there. Come on!”

And with this, Conner took my hand, opened the garage door, and dragged me up to the house. From the eagerness he displayed, I realized that he wanted children even more than I did. It made me so happy, I was grinning all the way to the second-floor bedroom.

However, when we got there, I started laughing. I had forgotten that the only bed in that room was a set of bunk beds!

“Okay? How are we going to do this?”

“That's no problem. It's just like being back in the barracks. I never got to fuck Steve there, but I thought about it a lot.”

“Then I guess we're going to find out just how accurate your daydreams were. Just one thing—I want to undress you.”

“No problem! Just so long as I get to undress you.”

“Don't I always let you?”

“Yeah, you do.”

And with this, Conner reached out and began undressing me. He had become quite adept at taking off my rather-complicated clerical collar. Before I knew it, he had me down to nothing but a pair of black socks. Conner's clothing, as usual, was much simpler and easier to divest him of. After all, how long does it take to get out of a T-shirt, a pair of blue jeans, socks, and loafers? This is what he usually wore when he was on duty, along with a sport coat over the T-shirt. I figure he had watched *Miami Vice* too often when he was a kid and had been permanently fashion disabled by Don Johnson.

I lay down on the bottom bunk, despite the fact that I could tell that Conner wanted to do it on the top bunk. I don't like heights, nor was I interested in any acrobatic sexual performances that high off the floor. Neither of us were kids anymore, and if we fell, it would hurt!

I lay on my side, pushed back as far as I could against the wall. Conner got in the bunk with me and found that not only was it a tight squeeze, but it was too short for his very long legs. I giggled as I watched him trying to get comfortable.

“Trust me. Nobody likes an asshole!” he growled.

His growling only served to make me laugh louder and harder.

“Did you fit in the bunks in the barracks?”

“No. My damn feet stuck over the end of the mattress there too!”

“So how exactly are we going to do this?”

“About the only way I can think of is doggy-style. Missionary won't work, because my feet don't have room, and Cowboy would just have you hitting your head underneath the top bunk.”

“All right. I'm game. But first you have to promise me one thing.”

“What's that?”

“If we do end up having kids from this, you are *never, ever* to tell them about this!”

“Don't worry. I'm not about to tell them anything about our sex life. Besides, they'd know soon enough that we have one. After all, we aren't exactly quiet when we do it.”

“No. We're not. In fact, we might want to think about having our bedroom soundproofed, so we don't end up having to answer a lot of embarrassing questions.”

“I don't think we need to go that far. I want them to know that we love each other and are as happy as any other married couple. Maybe more.”

“Okay, but you get to answer the questions.”

I could tell that Conner had reached the end of his limit for conversation. He reached out and pulled me to him and began kissing me passionately as his hand gently began to stroke down my back and across my ass until his fingers were gently parting my cheeks and began to gently stroke my hole. I moaned at this, knowing what was coming. It seemed so strange to me that a male of his size was capable of the gentleness that he showed when we made love. I loved when Conner fucked me. I knew that, like most males, this was how he expressed how much he truly loved me. Except when I asked him to be otherwise, he was always gentle and caring.

He soon had me up on my hands and knees while he busily used his tongue to eat out my ass. We had done this so often that my hole relaxed and opened almost from the first touch of his tongue to it. He continued on regardless, because it was something that he so dearly loved to do, and it got his cock as hard as a rock.

Once he felt that I was sufficiently opened and lubed, I heard him spit on his hand and apply it to the head of his cock. He then rose up over me so that he, too, was on his hands and knees. His hands were next to mine, and I could feel his arms wrapped around me and extending down against my arms. This was another of my favorite positions because it made me feel so

safe, while at the same time, I had much greater freedom of movement. I could push back with my body so that each and every slam of his cock into my hole was increased by my own actions.

Once Conner was over me and, quite literally, completely covering me, I could feel the head of his cock unerringly find the entrance to my body. It nudged against me, and as I pushed out with my muscles, I could feel Conner applying enough pressure for his cock to gently glide inside me. He didn't stop until there was no more of him to press inside. He stopped all movement at that point. At one time, I thought he did this to allow my ass time to adjust to the size of him. I later found out that he did it to keep himself from coming too quickly. I realized when he told me this how attracted he was to me.

He slowly began to fuck me, his movements gentle and smooth as he pulled out and pushed in farther and deeper each time. Finally, of course, gentle and smooth were not what I wanted. I wanted fast and hard. I wanted Conner to let go and let the sexual animal that I knew lived inside him go.

“Conner! Fuck me! Fuck me HARD!” I exclaimed.

He leaned down until his mouth was at my ear. “All you had to do was ask.”

I quickly got what I wanted. Conner let go and achieved ramming speed very quickly. He was slamming into me so hard that I was afraid he might push me right over the end of the bed. But he reached down and wrapped his muscular arm around my middle and held me tight to him so there was no chance of my going anywhere. I didn't figure that this was going to be a long fuck, and I was right. Within moments we were both right on the edge of the precipice. Conner evidently decided that he wanted to get me off first, so he adjusted his thrusts so that they slammed directly into my prostate. That's all it took, and I was shooting my cum all over the bed below me. My orgasm, which caused my ass to tighten around his cock, set Conner off as well, and I could feel his cock trembling inside me as he unloaded stream after stream of his warm cum deep inside me.

Conner collapsed on top of me and gently rolled us both so that we were lying on our sides with Conner spooned behind me, his hand still gently stroking up and down my chest and abs.

“Think that gave God the right idea?” Conner's breathless voice came from behind me.

“If not, we'll have to send the message in braille and sign language,” I assured him.

* * * * *

I don't know how long we expected to have to wait to find a child, but the fact of the matter was, it had been more than a year and we still didn't have a child. We were so busy with our jobs and being newlyweds that time slipped by without our noticing. We talked several times about going to an adoption agency or one of those high-priced lawyers who handle private adoptions. Public agencies would only accept two males to be foster parents. The private agencies would not accept two males. Private adoptions required dealing with lawyers, and Conner hated lawyers like most cops do—with a passion. Besides that, doing an adoption that way felt too much like we were buying children at a rate of fifty to a hundred thousand dollars each, and we knew the money didn't go to the families of the kids.

Chapter Twenty-two

We were coming up on our second wedding anniversary, and I had planned a very romantic evening for just the two of us. I got the restaurant that catered the wedding to cater dinner for us, this time with a lot more leeway of time in which to prepare. I even contacted Conner's boss—the chief of detectives—and made arrangements for him to be off that night. Of course, cops can be on call even if they have the day off. We had barely made it past the appetizers and the soup course when Conner's cell phone began beeping.

“I'm sorry. I forgot to turn the fucking thing off. I'll just see who it is and let them know I'm not on tonight,” Conner said, walking into the other room.

I knew something was really wrong, though, because he spent a long time talking to whoever it was, and when he came back, he looked very upset. In the meantime, I had gotten up and walked over to the small table where Conner kept his gun and ID and brought them back to the table with me.

“You have to go, don't you?” I said, quietly.

“Yeah, I'm sorry. Something really horrible has gone down, and they want all of us there. The chief of D's told me to give you his apologies.”

“Thank him for me when you see him. Here is your gun and badge.” I handed them to him.

“I don't know how you can be so understanding. I really love that about you.” Conner leaned down and kissed me.

“Maybe it's all those nights I get called out because somebody's dying and needs me.”

“Yeah, unfortunately we're both in professions where, when people need us, they need us right the hell now.”

I got up from the table and went into the kitchen to talk to the catering staff.

“I'm sorry, guys. Conner has been called away on police business. So it looks like you'll be serving dinner for one. I want you to wrap up Conner's dinner and put it in the refrigerator. He'll probably come back very hungry when he gets back tonight—if he gets back tonight.”

After dinner I went upstairs to the media room and put on my favorite CD, *Bill Evans Alone*, and sat there listening to it for a while. While I was sitting there, I started to get a little lonely and decided to call the one person I knew who would understand and cheer me up—Mary Catherine.

“Hi. How are you?”

“David? What are you doing calling me? I thought you and Conner were having this big romantic dinner.”

“We were, until right after the soup course, when he got called away.”

“Well, I hate to say this, but you knew what you were buying into when you had to go and fall in love with a cop.”

“Yes, I know. And most the time it really doesn't bother me, because I know he's needed and I know he loves what he does. I just hoped we'd have one night together.”

“I take it the reason you called us is that you're feeling lonely. Do you want Elaine and I to come over and be with you?”

“I can't ask that of you. You do have your own life.”

“Yes, and part of that life is the fact that you and Conner are friends. And friends have every right to call on their friends when they're feeling lonely.”

“So you really wouldn't mind?”

“What I would really mind is if I found out tomorrow that you had sat there all alone and didn't call us!”

“Okay, okay! I get it. I'll put on some tea, and there's some lovely chocolate-raspberry cake left over.”

“Oh dear! Unfortunately, Elaine heard that, and she's dragging me out the door to get there!”

I laughed, remembering Conner's addiction to chocolate, the reason I had picked out that cake to begin with.

“Okay, I’ll see both of you in a few minutes.” And with this, I hung up the phone.

I had just poured boiling water over the tea to begin the steeping process when I heard the doorbell. I opened the door, and Elaine and Mary Catherine came in, each one hugging me and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

“So what happened that they had to call Conner in?” Mary Catherine asked.

“I don’t know, all he would say was that it was really bad. I don’t even want to think of what that means.”

“I would figure it means that there are multiple homicides, maybe some kind of shoot-out,” Elaine said.

“Darling, there are times I wish you had not been shore patrol in the navy,” Mary Catherine said to her wife.

“I don’t mean a shoot-out with the police. Sometimes gangs or drug dealers have a falling-out, and they all shoot each other. It’s not very nice to see, but it’s not dangerous for the cops, since they get there when everybody’s either dead or dying,” Elaine replied.

“Well, I won’t know what happened until probably tomorrow. With Conner called out that way, I’m really not expecting him to make it home tonight,” I said.

“Okay, so where is this chocolate-raspberry cake?” Elaine asked, reminding me of a junkie asking where the heroin is.

“You all go on and sit down in the living room; that tea is done, and I’ll bring it all in.”

I went into the kitchen and set up a tray with the teapot, the cream and sugar, and the cake, along with dessert plates and a cake knife, and then I carried it back into the living room and put the tray down on the coffee table.

“I’m going to be a lousy host tonight and make you serve yourselves,” I said to them.

“And this would be different from any other night, how?” Mary Catherine smirked.

“Come on. I’m not that bad a host,” I protested.

“No, but we have noticed one thing, you always serve Conner first—no matter what,” Elaine said, and she and Mary Catherine looked at each other and started giggling.

“Actually, we think it’s kind of sweet. You’ve been married almost two years, and you still act like you’re dating.”

"Maybe that's because we never dated. Well...except for all those lunches. But lunches aren't considered dates," I said.

"Who told you that?" Mary Catherine asked.

"I don't remember," I said.

"Well, whoever did was wrong! Especially with the number of times you two went out to lunch!" Mary Catherine assured me.

"So you mean they counted as dates?" I asked.

"Honey, trust me! They were dates. After all, they were the only kind of dates you two could have, what with your schedules and all," Elaine informed me.

"I'm sure glad I didn't know you then! If I thought those were dates, I would have been scared out of my mind!"

"This cake is to die for! It tastes just like the cake at your wedding," Elaine said.

"That's because it's from the same place that made the wedding cake," I said.

"Oh, David! That's so romantic," Elaine said.

"I didn't do it because of that. I did it because Conner asked me to. He really loves that cake! When I told him about the dinner, he made me promise to have them serve the cake as well," I said, trying hard not to sound like some romantic little gay boy.

"Well, for whatever reason, it was still a nice touch."

"Yes, and I see you've already eaten two pieces of it. I guess that makes it a doubly nice touch." At this, Mary Catherine and I laughed.

"So what do you guys want to do? We could go upstairs and watch a movie," I suggested.

"What kind of movie?" Elaine asked.

"How about I show you Conner's favorite movie of all time?" I said.

"Oh God! No! I can't take films with car chases and guns and things blowing up!" Mary Catherine said.

"Mary Catherine, you should be ashamed of yourself! You are prejudging Conner without knowing all that much about him," I said defensively.

"Are you trying to tell me that his favorite movie doesn't have one car chase, one shoot-out, or anything blowing up in it?"

“Absolutely not! Not one of those things occurs in the movie,” I avowed.

“*This* I have to see!” Mary Catherine exclaimed.

“Me too!” Elaine said.

I led them up to the media room, got them seated on the couch, and then popped in the DVD to *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. They watched it with hardly a word said between them. However, I could hear sniffles during the scene when Francis and his brothers, along with Clare and her sisters, washed the bodies of the lepers in the stream. When the film was over, they both looked at me.

“Conner has my deepest apologies. However, in my own defense, I have to say that he keeps this part of himself *very* well hidden,” Mary Catherine said.

“He certainly does!” Elaine said. “Now I can see why you are so deeply in love with him.”

I just smiled at them.

The next thing I knew, I heard noises downstairs that told me that Conner had come home. I was shocked, because I really expected him to be gone a lot longer. Mary Catherine and Elaine followed me downstairs, where I saw Conner leading two very thin little boys, with just about the biggest pairs of blue eyes I'd ever seen. If I didn't know better, they could have been Conner's natural children, with his same coloring and all. He had them sit down on the couch in the living room while he went out to the kitchen. He came back with a couple of plates and forks and began cutting slices of our anniversary cake for them. I saw the boys eyeing the cake with some trepidation, which was quickly replaced with grins of happiness when they tasted it.

“Conner, who are our guests?”

“Uhh...I know you're not going to believe this, but...this is Vincent,” he said, pointing to the older boy. “And this is Tony.”

“You're right! It is a little hard to believe. But who are they, and what are they doing here?” I asked.

“Ahh, I think we should go and get out of your guys' hair. You've obviously got some things to talk about,” Mary Catherine said.

Heading to the door, Elaine said, “Yes, we should be getting home. David, give us a call tomorrow and let us know.”

“Okay, I will.” Waving good-bye to them, I turned back to Conner. “Okay, what's up?”

“Well, you know I got called out, and I told you it was something big. Evidently, a war has broken out between two rival gangs over their drug business. A lot of people have been shot and killed tonight when one gang attacked the stronghold of the other. Tony and Vince were eyewitnesses to some of it. It seems their father was a dealer and was murdered by the rival gang right in front of them.”

“Oh God! How awful!”

As I said this, the older boy put his arm around his younger brother, who began to cry, very quietly, on his chest.

“I had to bring them here, because we weren't able to round up all the other gang, but Vince and Tony know what they look like. Unfortunately, the gangbangers also know what Vince and Tony look like and would kill them if they could find them. Since I've never had a run-in with either gang, the chief of D's figured they'd be safer here. Just for a few days, until we can round up these scumbags and put them behind bars where they belong,” Conner explained.

“Why do I think that you have another reason why you wanted to bring them home?”

“Who, me?” Conner said, looking all innocent—something he only did when he was lying through his teeth. “What possible other reason could I have?”

“I don't know... Their father is dead. Where is their mother?”

“She died of an overdose after Tony was born,” Vince spoke up.

“So they have no parents. What about other relatives?” I asked Conner again.

“They told me that they didn't know of any,” Conner said, somewhat sheepishly.

“Did you tell them about us?” I asked.

“You mean about you guys being gay and married to each other?” Little Tony piped up.

“Yes, Tony, that's what I wanted to know. If you guys know about that, how do you feel about it?” I asked.

“That makes you just like Uncle Darrell! And Uncle Darrell is always good to us!” Tony said.

“Yeah, Uncle Darrell is gay, and he was the only one who was really nice to us after our mom died. My mom told me that they had been friends since they were little kids.”

"So your father continued to let you spend time with Uncle Darrell after your mom died?" I asked Vince.

"Yeah. Well, Uncle Darrell was around a lot of the time, because he was buying stuff from my dad just like all the other people were."

"So, I take it that Uncle Darrell is a junkie too?" I whispered to Conner, and he nodded.

I saw Little Tony yawn.

"Conner, it's getting late. Don't you think it's time we took the boys upstairs and put them to bed?" I suggested.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Come on, boys. Time for bed," Conner said.

We took them upstairs for bed, stopping first at the bathroom. I got them both new toothbrushes and watched as they brushed their teeth. Next, they both went to pee, standing next to each other at the toilet since they were both too short to reach the urinal. I made sure they washed their hands and faces afterward. Conner and I showed them to the the second bedroom. They were very excited when they saw the bunk beds.

"Wow! Bunk beds! We always wanted bunk beds!" Tony exclaimed.

"What kind of beds did you have at home?" I asked him.

"We didn't have beds. We had couches," Vincent, the more-serious and quiet brother, stated.

"What do you mean?" Conner asked.

"Couches—you know. Tony slept on one, and I slept on the other," Vincent replied.

"You didn't have beds in your room?" Conner asked.

"We didn't have a room. Only Daddy had a room, and we weren't allowed to go in there," Tony said.

"Well, that changes right now! Boys, this is your room. These are your beds. As long as you stay here."

"Damn!" Tony exclaimed. Vincent grabbed hold of him, slapping his hand over Tony's mouth.

"I told you, no cussing! David is a priest! You don't cuss in front of a priest!"

"How come nobody fucking told me that?" Conner said with an evil smile on his face.

“Well, I figured that was going to happen,” I said.

“What's that?” Conner asked me.

“I figured I would end up having to raise *three* little boys!”

“Yeah, but you love me best, anyhow!” Conner said with this special grin he has that makes him look utterly adorable. I knew I'd lost this battle before it even started.

“Okay, boys. I'm going to ask you a question, and I need you to tell me the absolute truth,” I said.

“Okay,” Vincent said, somewhat hesitantly.

“Yeah, okay,” Tony chimed in.

“Do either of you still wet the bed?”

I watched as Vincent nudged Tony.

“Okay, okay!” Tony glared at his brother.

“Well, that decides it. Tony, you get the bottom bunk, and Vincent, you get the top bunk.”

“*Yay!*” Vincent exclaimed while Tony looked very morose.

“It's not fair! Vincent always gets the good stuff!” Tony said, practically in tears.

I got down on my knees in front of Tony and grabbed hold of his upper arms, forcing him to look at me.

“Tony, I know you don't understand why things have to be this way, but I want you to think of something. If you wet the bed, it's going to leak through and go all over Vincent. Now, that's not fair, is it?”

“No,” Tony said quietly with a look of shame on his face.

“This is not forever. We're going to take you to a doctor and find out why you wet the bed. And if I'm right, all it's going to take is you taking one pill a night that will stop the problem completely. Once it stops, we'll reassign the bunks, and you'll each get a chance to sleep in the top bunk. Okay?”

“Okay. Do you mean that? That you'll take me to a doctor, and he can fix me up?” Tony asked.

“Yes, I mean it. One of my brothers wet the bed, and my parents took him to a doctor who gave him a pill to take, and it stopped,” I assured him. “When was the last time that either of you went to the doctor?”

“We ain't never been to a doctor. If we would get sick, Daddy would take us to a free clinic or to the emergency room,” Vincent replied.

“Well, I think it's time that both of you went to a doctor. I'll call and make an appointment tomorrow,” I told them.

“Thank you!” Vincent replied.

“Yeah, thank you!” Tony echoed his brother.

“And I think we'll go shopping and get you some new clothes and shoes as well. You don't seem to have much in the way of clothes with you.”

“Guys, what do you usually wear to bed?” Conner asked.

“Nothing,” Vincent replied.

“Yeah, Daddy said that only sissies wore pajamas,” Tony piped up.

“Well, good! There are no sissies in this house,” Conner said.

“However, there is one rule. If the door is closed, you have to knock before you can go in. If there's somebody in the room, they have the right to decide if they want you to come in or not. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Just in case you guys are fucking,” Vincent said in a bored, worldly way.

I wasn't sure where Vince had learned that word or what it meant or what I should say. But Conner answered.

“Yeah. Just in case we're fucking,” Conner said with a grin and then winked at Vincent.

I, of course, went as red as a beet. I wanted to slug Conner in the arm for encouraging this kind of talk, but I had long ago realized that if I did, the only one it would hurt is me!

“Okay, time to get in your beds,” I said.

Both boys immediately started stripping, and naked as the day they were born, they ran for their beds. Since Vincent had to climb to the upper bunk, it took him a little longer, but not much. I was at a loss as to what to do now. I looked over at Conner and saw the same kind of stark terror that I was sure was showing on my face as well.

The decision was actually made by Tony, who lying in his bed, reached out both arms.

“Aren't you going to tuck us in?” he asked plaintively.

Conner and I moved toward the bed. I guess because he was the taller one, he tucked Vincent in and kissed him on the forehead. I leaned down to tuck the covers in around Tony. He reached up and wrapped his little arms around my neck, pulling me down so that he could kiss me on the cheek. I, in turn, kissed him on the cheek.

“Sleep tight, little guy. I'll see you in the morning. Our bedroom is right across the hall. If you need anything, or you get scared, you can come over and knock on our door,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said, but I could tell that he was nearly asleep.

Conner and I moved to the door, and then Conner threw the switch to turn off the lights. We left as quietly as we could. I thought I might go downstairs and throw some dishes in the dishwasher, but Conner had other ideas. He grabbed my hand and pulled me into our bedroom. No more had the door closed behind me, when I found myself pushed up against it and Conner's hungry mouth on mine. The kiss was passionate, but there was some kind of difference to it. Something underlying the passion.

When he finally pulled his mouth from mine, I could see tears rolling down his cheeks. I reached up and pulled his head down until his forehead was resting on my shoulder and my hands were gently stroking his hair.

It took him a few minutes to pull himself together, and when he looked up, I could see a look of overwhelming joy, happiness, and contentment in his beautiful blue eyes.

I asked, “Happy now? At least for the time being, you've got what you wanted. But I want to warn you. There is always a chance that the courts will place them with some other family. I don't think so, considering there appear to be no living relatives, and it's difficult to place two children who are related. Oftentimes, unless someone is willing to take both of them, the court reluctantly splits them up. That's what we really have going for us. We can provide a good home for both of them.”

“I know, I know. But I'm going to fight like hell to keep them. When Tony reached out and asked if we were going to tuck them in, it about tore my guts out. I want these kids. I want Vincent and Tony to be ours. To be our sons.”

“I know you do. I do too, but more than anybody in the world that I know, you deserve to be a father.”

Conner said, “Tomorrow, when you're making the appointment with the pediatrician, I want you to also make an appointment with the best fucking adoption lawyer you can find. I don't care what it costs. We've got plenty of money. All I want to do is make those kids ours.”

“We can give those kids two things that they've never had. A home and love.”

Conner reached out and pulled me to him, then bent down and threw me over his shoulder. He gently dropped me onto our bed, then crawled in on top of me. His mouth came down on mine, and I could feel even through our clothes our hard cocks rubbing against each other.

“You've got too many fucking clothes on!” Conner growled.

“If you didn't have to get all Neanderthal on me and carry me to bed like some kind of trophy wife, I could've taken my clothes off.”

“You are a trophy! The best-looking son of a bitch I know! And it's fun to carry you like that. When I've got you slung over my shoulder and can look at your ass, all that's going through my mind is *MINE*! Besides, I didn't want you getting undressed. I want to do it myself.”

“Then have at it! I'll tell you when that thought of you being mine happens for me.”

“When?”

“When that *huge* cock of yours is buried all the way inside me.”

“You're right there, babe. I feel it then too.”

That was the end of conversation. Conner started to practically rip my clothes off. I was naked in no time flat. Then he got off the bed and quickly got out of his own clothes before climbing back in bed on top of me. I raised my legs and wrapped them around his hips. When I did this, I could feel his hard cock nosing into the crack of my ass as if it was searching for the entry to my body. Within a few seconds, with just some slight movement from Conner, his cock found its objective, and Conner began to slowly push inside. I pushed down and relaxed my muscles, having learned that if he took it slow, we no longer needed lube.

Slowly but surely, inch by inch, Conner's cock slid inside me until I felt his pubic hair against the lips of my ass. Then I knew he was totally and completely inside me. He stopped for a moment to allow me to get used to him and for the muscles in my ass to relax.

“Holy fuck! How the fuck do you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?” I replied.

“How do you stay so tight? Every time I fuck you, it's just like the first time. When I slide into you, you're as tight as a fucking virgin.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Fuck no! I just want to know how you do it.”

“Sometime I'll show you the exercises, but for now, this will have to do.”

And saying this, I tightened down as hard as I could with my muscles, eliciting a deep, loud groan from Conner.

“Oh fuck! Don't do that again! I nearly came!”

“That's what you get for asking questions when you should be fucking.” I looked up at him with an evil grin on my face.

“Okay, okay!”

And with this, Conner began to fuck me with long strokes, pulling out until only his cockhead was in my ass and then gliding back in as far as he could go. He kept this up for quite a while, but finally his own needs made him begin to fuck me harder and faster without my even having to ask him. He was like a man possessed. Withdrawing sharply and slamming back inside. Finally, the rhythm of his fucking began to disintegrate, and I knew he was very close to coming. But then again, so was I. His large, thick cock had performed its usual magic, driving me over the brink of orgasm without either one of us having to touch my cock.

My explosion, and the subsequent rippling effect of the muscles inside me as I came, took him over the edge with me.

“Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!” Conner chanted over and over, as quietly as he could, as his cock was slamming deep into my ass and filling me with his warm cum. So much of that, in fact, I could feel some of it squirting out of me around his cock. There just wasn't room enough inside me for his cock and all his cum as well.

Conner collapsed on top of me, burying his face into the pillow behind my shoulder. I could feel his body continue to tremble as the afterquakes of his orgasm continued to reverberate through his body. His cock was still buried deep in my ass, and I could feel that it was still as

hard as a rock. I thought perhaps he would want to go for round two, but instead, he slowly moved down my body, allowing his cock to withdraw from my ass. I knew what he wanted, and I was not disappointed. He got down between my legs, which I pulled back with my hands under my knees to give him full access to what he wanted. The next thing I felt were his lips locking around my ass and his tongue eagerly digging out as much of his cum as he could find. His tongue soothed the ravaged tissues of my ass, eliminating any pain.

He moved back up the bed until he was once again on top of me. He put his mouth to mine and shared with me the cum that he had gathered from my hole. We kissed for quite a while, until not a remnant of his cum remained.

“I thought you might go for round two?” I asked.

“It's been a long, hard day, and I figure we're going to get woken up rather early. Kids have a lot of energy, especially boys. And they aren't at an age when sleeping in means very much to them.”

“I think you're right about that. We should get some sleep. You have to go to work, and I have to see about getting a doctor for them and also finding that lawyer you want.”

“You already know how happy I am. Please tell me you are too.”

“I am utterly and completely happy. Even though the responsibility for the boys is scaring the shit out of me. I mean, this is *huge!* Up until now, I've only had to worry about myself and you. Now we have two little human beings sleeping in those bunk beds who are totally and completely dependent on us. I suppose I'll get used to it. Most parents do. But right now it's hitting me like a ton of bricks. Luckily, we both have wonderful examples of how to raise children right. My parents and your grandparents did a really good job of raising us when we were small; I figure we should have learned enough to do it ourselves.”

“I know I don't say it a lot, because talking about feelings still is uncomfortable for me, but I love you. I love you more and more each day. I keep asking myself what in the fuck I did to deserve you.”

“Funny. I ask myself the same thing. I've never found an answer, so I just thank God for making us for each other.”

And with this, I turned over and snuggled back against Conner's body. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me even closer, and I could feel his body meld to mine. Within a few moments, we were both fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty-three

I was up early the next morning to start on the list of things that I needed to do. Before I could even get out of the door, however, there was a knocking that I almost didn't hear because Vincent and Tony were loudly arguing over breakfast, with Tony demanding frozen blueberry waffles. I put my arms around him to calm him down and explained that I didn't know that he would like blueberry waffles for breakfast, but that when we went to the store today I would be sure to pick up a goodly supply of them so that we would never be out of them again. Vincent just stood there, rolling his eyes at his brother's antics.

With that problem settled, there was some quiet—well, at least as much quiet as you get out of a six- and a nine-year-old. It was then that I heard knocking—actually more like pounding—on our front door. I opened it to find two rather-heavyset women, one Caucasian and the other African American, with briefcases and notebooks.

“Good morning, ladies. How can I help you?”

The Caucasian woman spoke first. “Are you Conner McMahon?”

“No, I'm terribly sorry, but he went to work a couple of hours ago. You can find him there. It's the twelfth precinct on Olivia and Main.”

Then the African American woman spoke. “Then you must be Reverend David Colucci?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I'm Elizabeth Tolliver,” the black woman said. “And this”—indicating the white woman—“is Margaret Palmer. We're social workers with the Department of Children and Families Services. It is our understanding that two boys, Vincent and Anthony Dalton, are currently residing with you. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that's right. Detective Conner McMahon brought them home last night. I understand from Conner that the boys are currently in protective custody.”

“That is our understanding as well. However, state law requires that before a child can be placed in a home, our office is required to do a home inspection. Because the police spent so much time interrogating the boys, there wasn't time for this to be done last night. That's why we're here now,” Elizabeth said.

I was starting to freak out. A home inspection? First thing in the morning? I hadn't even put the kids in the shower yet. I preferred to feed them first, since full stomachs would tend to slow them down some. I think Margaret was getting the message that this was all totally unexpected.

“Don't worry, Reverend Colucci. We've both had children of our own. We understand that this is a horrible time to just drop in unexpectedly. But quite frankly, because the police are involved, we decided to add you to our list today, and inspect your home first so that we can get the legal formalities out of the way as quickly as possible.”

“Well...I suppose I should be grateful to you for doing that. Why don't you come on in? The boys are in the kitchen having breakfast. Then you can go on with your inspection. Could I offer you a cup of coffee or tea?”

“No, that's all right. We already had breakfast on the way here,” Elizabeth said.

I led the two social workers into the kitchen, where the boys were sitting on stools at the counter eating like food was going to be rationed tomorrow.

“Vincent...Tony, I want you to meet some people. This is Elizabeth Tolliver and Margaret Palmer. They are social workers who work for DCFS.”

Vincent and Tony immediately stopped eating and looked at the two women with intense fear. I saw little Tony start to tremble, and then he reached out to Vincent, who immediately wrapped his arms around his brother and held him.

“You aren't going to take us away, are you?” Vincent said, his voice trembling. “We like it here. We've got our own beds and everything.”

“Your own beds, huh?” Elizabeth leaned over and put her hands gently on Vincent's shoulders. “How would you like to show me your beds?”

“Sure!” Vincent said, now all excited. This was a captive audience to show the bunk beds to and, just in passing, brag he had the top bunk.

Vincent led the way upstairs. He opened the door to their room and ushered Margaret and Elizabeth inside with the same almost-bored disdain of a docent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I could hear sounds of approval coming from the two women, and when I ducked inside, I saw both beds were meticulously made, and there was not a thing—not even clothes—out of place in the room. It was almost like the boys knew that the social workers were coming even when I didn't.

I took the women on a tour of the rest of the house. They stayed for nearly two hours, going from the basement almost to the attic, looking at everything, and finally taking the boys into their bedroom without me and talking to them for over half an hour. We ended up back in the living room, because I knew they would have questions, and I was more comfortable answering them there. I did make a pot of Earl Grey tea for us. Unfortunately, thanks to the three little boys who lived in the house—including the one who was six feet four inches tall and a cop—there was nothing left of the chocolate dessert from the night before.

They sat there with their notebooks open, looking for all the world like a pair of detectives about to interrogate a dangerous felon.

“Now, Reverend Colucci, it says here that you used to be a Roman Catholic priest, but that you converted to the Episcopal Church two years ago. What was the reason for that change? Were you asked to leave the Roman Catholic Church for some reason?” Margaret asked.

“I spent many years of my life hiding from myself and everybody else that I was gay. Conner, on the other hand, is very open about his sexual orientation. When I fell in love with him, he made it very clear that he would not involve himself in a relationship that was built on lies. I either had to 'come out of the closet,' as people say, or there would be no relationship between us. And yes, I wanted to be with Conner more than I wanted to be part of the Roman Catholic Church. I was not asked to leave the church. I knew that the church would never allow Conner and me to live together as a married couple. Believe me when I tell you, the choice was not at all difficult.”

“You do, however, remain a priest in the Episcopal Church, is that correct?” Elizabeth asked. It would seem that their interrogation was going to be a tag-team match.

“That is correct. I accepted an invitation from the bishop in the hopes of continuing my ministry to homeless veterans.”

“And were you able to do that?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, over a year ago we were able to open St. Michael's Veterans Center, where we work with homeless vets, trying to get them reintegrated into society and back with their families if they have any.”

“I must say, this is one of the more interesting investigations that I've ever done. One of you a priest and one a police detective, and both of you male,” Margaret said.

“Is any of that a problem?” I asked.

“No, on the contrary, you two are about the best foster-care placements I've ever seen in my twenty-three years of doing foster care. What do you think, Elizabeth?”

“I have to admit that when we were first assigned this case, I had some real problems. I didn't think that two males could offer the structured and nurturing environment that children need. I guess I have to admit to a certain degree of sexism, a feeling that a mother was needed in a family. I now see that what is needed is nurturing and love. The shock to me is how quickly these boys have bonded to the two of you. Oftentimes in foster-care situations, this level of bonding takes quite a while. Do you have any explanation for that?” Elizabeth asked.

“Only the one that Conner would give you if he were here.”

“And that is...?” she urged.

“That just the way he and I were meant by God for each other, these boys were meant by God to be ours.”

I saw the women look at each other with looks of both curiosity and consternation.

“Are you and Detective McMahon intending to adopt the boys?”

“Absolutely. And perhaps, eventually more children. I know it is Conner's dream to have a large family.”

“When you're ready to do that, please get in touch with us. We both have at least a dozen kids who we would love to see you two adopt,” Elizabeth said, and they both smiled at me.

“I would be more than happy to do that. However, we only plan to adopt boys. We know how to handle boys. Neither one of us has had much experience with girls in our lives.”

“Well, we can't blame you for that,” Margaret said. “Now, if you'll just sign these papers where we marked them, the boys are then officially in your custody.”

"You may think I'm rushing things, but my husband is not exactly a patient man, and I know he's going to ask, so I want to have an answer ready for him. How long do you think it will take for the adoptions to go through?"

"Usually anywhere from six months to a year is the normal time," Elizabeth answered.

"If we had an attorney, would that speed things up?"

"Oh, my heavens, yes! It could easily cut the time by three-quarters," Margaret said.

"I'm asking you because I figure you know, who is the *best* adoption attorney? And trust me, money is no object."

"Yes, we know that. Your...uhh...husband submitted your financials through his bookkeeper this morning. As to who is best? What would you say, Elizabeth? Carlton?"

"Definitely Carlton. That's Carlton Moore," Elizabeth said.

After reaching into her purse, she pulled out her day planner and started going through business cards. Finally she found the one she wanted and handed it to me.

"He was at one time an extremely respected family-court judge. He left the bench because he said that the only joy he got from it was doing adoptions, and so he went into them full-time. He and his wife have, in the meantime, adopted over a dozen children. Mostly ones who nobody wanted. Children who are disabled. Children who have emotional and psychological problems. Children with debilitating medical conditions. When you meet him, you will see just about the happiest man you will ever hope to see. He truly loves children."

"I guess he does to adopt twelve of them."

"And that was on top of the six he and his wife already had."

"*Eighteen children!*"

"Yes, he loves to joke about how much he loves baseball, so he adopted two Little League teams."

"Thank you both so very much. I'm going to go in and call him right now and set up an appointment. To be honest, I'm as anxious as Conner for these boys to be permanently ours."

"We'll go and get out of your hair. We'll be by once a month, just to see how you're doing and if there's anything we can do to help."

"I don't suppose this is the usual reaction you get from foster-care parents, but I will greatly look forward to it." With that, they left, and I went upstairs to find the boys. They were both curled up in the upper bunk, with Vince holding Tony in his arms while Tony cried.

Vince looked up at me. "How did it go? When do we have to leave?"

"That's what I need to ask you guys about. How would you feel about staying here for always?"

"What do you mean? You mean like adopt us?" Vince asked.

"Yes, Conner and I want to adopt you. But it's up to you. We want to make a home for you and for us to become a family, but you both have to agree to that or it won't work."

Little Tony finally raised his head off his brother's chest, where he had been crying. He reached out for me to take him in my arms, and so I did.

"I want to stay. We don't have a daddy now or a mommy. I guess you two would be that for us?"

"Yes, Tony. I guess we would."

"But how can you be a mommy when neither one of you is a girl?"

"I've come to believe that being a mommy or being a daddy has nothing to do with the sex you are. What it's about is the ability to nurture and love. To take care of your children and love them with all of your heart."

"But what about Conner?" Tony asked.

"What about him?"

"Well...you really love him, don't you? How are you going to love him and us too?"

"You love Vince, don't you? And you loved the uncle who was your mother's friend, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he answered tentatively, not knowing where this was going.

"Tony, the human heart is this funny organ. The more love you give to it, the more room for love that it has. There is no limit on how much or who you can love. I guess God made it that way because love is God's greatest gift to us and he wanted to make sure that we always had plenty of room for it."

"Oh, okay!"

The two social workers had been correct. With the help of the attorney, Carlton Moore, whom they suggested, in less than six months, Conner and I found ourselves in the chambers of Judge Robert Gray. There was barely enough room for all of us, because, of course, everybody in both our families wanted to be there. So there was Mama and Papa, along with Conner's grandparents and both my brothers and their spouses with their own children. And if that weren't enough, there were three more people who wanted to be included. The Right Reverend John Harrison, along with Mary Catherine and Henry, the pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Henry had heard about the adoption from Mary Catherine and wanted to be included in the people willing to stand up and say what good parents Conner and I would make. I was deeply touched by this.

At any rate, we all squeezed into the judge's chambers, and his staff even found chairs so that everyone could sit down. Except, of course, we all had to stand up when he came in.

"In my twenty-nine years on the bench, I don't believe I've ever seen this many people at an adoption hearing. Certainly there have never been as many clerical collars in the room as I see now. Why don't we go around the room, and everyone tell me who they are and what relationship you have to either the children or Reverend Colucci and Detective McMahon."

The two social workers were seated next to the judge and introduced themselves first.

"I'm Margaret Palmer, DCFS."

"I'm Elizabeth Tolliver, DCFS."

"I'm Anthony Colucci, Father David Colucci's brother."

"I'm Debbie Colucci, Father David Colucci's sister-in-law."

It went on like this through the whole room. I watched the judge. The only reaction he seemed to have was to Bishop Harrison, and I wondered why. The introductions ended with Conner, and then the judge spoke again.

"I'm Robert Gray, district judge of the Fourth Circuit. I must say that this is the first time that I will be fulfilling my role as a judge with my own bishop watching over me."

"Then you'll have to do a very good job, Your Honor," the bishop joked.

"Oh, I truly intend to do that." The judge chuckled. "Now, the first thing I need to hear is the report from DCFS. Which of you esteemed ladies is going to make the report for me?"

“We tossed a coin for it, and I won,” Margaret said. “But don't be surprised if Elizabeth puts in her two cents now and then.”

It was obvious that the judge had known both women for a long time. As Margaret spoke, she and Elizabeth were smiling at Judge Gray, and he was smiling back.

“It is the finding of DCFS that Father David Colucci and Detective Conner McMahon are not only fit guardians for these two children but are, beyond a doubt, the two best foster parents that we have ever seen in both of our careers. We highly recommend them for permanent guardianship and beg them to come back to us if they want any more children,” Margaret said.

“Somehow, Margaret, I think your report is far more personal and more glowing than the reports I usually hear from DCFS,” Judge Gray replied.

“Then put me under oath, and I'll say it all again, because it's the God's honest truth!” Margaret insisted.

“Elizabeth? Nothing to add?” Judge Gray asked.

“Just this—*ditto!*” Elizabeth said, chuckling.

“Well, Margaret, that was an excellent, though unusual, report. However, I do need to ask you one question. Was DCFS able to locate any living blood relative to the boys?”

I stopped breathing when the judge asked this question.

“No, Your Honor, we were not,” Margaret stated. Elizabeth just shook her head negatively.

“Well, to be honest with all of you, that's all I really need to hear. What I see here are two loving families and two men who obviously want these two boys and the responsibility for them, so I am signing this adoption order making Anthony and Vincent Dalton the children of David Colucci and Conner McMahon. By what surname do you want the boys known by?”

Before Conner had a chance to say anything, I addressed the judge.

“If you look before you, you will see six children. Four with the last name Colucci, two with the name Dalton, and none with the name McMahon. I think that the McMahon name should continue just as I am sure that the Colucci name will. I would ask, Your Honor, to make our sons Vincent and Anthony McMahon.”

I looked across the table, and both Mama and Papa were beaming at me, as well as Conner's grandparents. Particularly Conner's grandfather, who looked very much like the proud former marine he was.

"I take it that you agree with this, Detective?"

"Yes, Your Honor, I do." Conner was looking at me and not at the judge as he said this, and I could see tears welling up in his eyes as well as the deep love and affection he had for me.

"In that case, we are done here. Oh! Bishop? Did I do a good job?" the judge asked.

"Yes, Judge, you did an outstanding job, and you have made two people very, very happy," Bishop Harrison said.

"Not something that I get to do very often." And then the judge banged his gavel.

We all went out into the corridor outside the judge's chambers. There was much exuberance, along with a lot of hugging and kissing. Conner grabbed hold of me and held me very close while he talked softly into my ear.

"Are you happy now?"

"Happy? I didn't think I could ever be happier than the day of our wedding, but I think this one just might have that beat," I replied.

"I'm glad you said that, because basically I'm feeling the same way. It's not that I don't love you or want you by my side forever, but this brings everything full circle for me. My grandparents gave me a home and love when my parents died. Now I get to pay that blessing forward by giving Tony and Vince the same."

About that time, Bishop Harrison called for everyone's attention. "There is a reserved room at Hayden's for a luncheon celebration for everyone, on me!"

At this, we all headed downstairs and out to the courthouse garage to get our cars. Conner and I, along with little Tony and Vince had come in my truck, with Conner driving, of course. The extended cab had two jump seats in the back for the boys to ride in. It suddenly dawned on me that perhaps Conner had maneuvered me into getting this truck so it would have room for two children.

"Conner, did you by any chance have the boys in mind when you got me to buy this truck?"

“No. How could I? We hadn't found the boys yet.”

“You weren't, maybe, looking out for the future?”

“Now you know, I'm far too hardheaded and practical for something like that.” Conner said this, however, with his innocent grin, which told me he was lying through his teeth.

“Okay. Never mind.”

Conner looked at me in shock.

“You're going to let me get away with that?”

I could hear giggling from the jump seats behind us.

“On this day, when we finally achieved our dreams of having a family, I'll let you get away with almost anything,” I said, grinning back at the boys.

“Bet they're gonna kiss!” Tony whispered to his brother in that stage whisper that children have that can be heard across the room.

“Oh yes! We are going to kiss!” I leaned toward Conner over the truck's console.

“We really shouldn't be kissing while I'm driving, but—what the fuck!”

Conner whipped the truck into the parking lot at Hayden's, which I didn't even realize we had reached. Conner threw the truck in park, reached over and grabbed me, and gave me one of his deep, searing, passionate, hard-on-making kisses that left me breathless.

“Well, Father, let's go and celebrate the start of our little wolf pack!” Conner grinned.

And so we did.

~ * ~

“Family life is full of major and minor crises—the ups and downs of health, success and failure in career, marriage, and divorce—and all kinds of characters. It is tied to places and events and histories. With all of these felt details, life etches itself into memory and personality. It's difficult to imagine anything more nourishing to the soul.”

—Thomas Moore

“Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible—the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family.”

—Virginia Satir

“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

—Jane Howard

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Bobby Michaels

Red Heart Bowl
Rock Paper Scissors
Second Time Around
The Veteran
Treating Ty
Veterans: For the Love of the Corps
Weekend Leave

The JOCK DORM Series

Dar and Gregg
Drew and Vince
David and Conner

Bobby Michaels

Bobby Michaels lives in Fort Lauderdale with hundreds—nay! thousands—of gorgeous, muscular men (most of them Marines) running around in his mind. Some are memories of sexual encounters, some are the characters from his many Nifty stories and Loose Id novels, and some are characters from novels waiting to be written. So, though he lives alone, he is never lonely.

Bobby has been many things in his life. An actor, director, nightclub singer, professional female impersonator, a monk and, for twenty nine years, a social worker and grant administrator for local government. His government career ended in 2007 when a stroke caused the loss of the use of his left arm so that now all his writing is done by dictation through a voice recognition program called Dragonspeak.

But through it all Bobby has been first and foremost a writer, beginning his career writing stories for trashy romance magazines in the 1960s along with stories and poetry through the rest of his life. From the time he was five years old, Bobby has always dreamed of actually holding in his hands a book with his name on it as the author.

He's an avid reader, and his Kindle has hundreds of books in it. Most of them are male/male romances because he loves reading them almost more than he likes writing them.